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## A Review of Some Current Poetry

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## A REVIEW OF SOME CURRENT POETRY

- The Earth-Bound, 1924-1944*, by Janet Lewis. Aurora, N. Y.: The Wells College Press, 1946. \$3.50.
- Slow Music*, by Genevieve Taggard. New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1946. \$2.00.
- The Bridge: Poems 1939-1945*, by Ruth Pitter. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946. \$1.50.
- Poems 1938-1945*, by Robert Graves. New York: Creative Age Press, 1946. \$2.00.
- Lord Weary's Castle*, by Robert Lowell. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946. \$2.50.
- The Burning Mountain*, by John Gould Fletcher. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1946. \$2.75.
- Man and Shadow, an Allegory*, by Alfred Kreymborg. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1946. \$5.00.
- A Man in the Divided Sea*, by Thomas Merton. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1946. \$2.50.
- XII Poems* by Francis Coleman Rosenberger. New York: Gotham Book Mart, 1946. \$1.00.
- Ultimatum for Man*, by Peggy Pond Church. Stanford University, Calif.: James Ladd Delkin, 1946. \$1.50.
- Sonnets to Orpheus; Duino Elegies*, by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Jessie Lemont. New York: Fine Editions Press, 1945. \$4.00.
- A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry, English and American*, edited with an Introduction by Oscar Williams. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946. \$3.50.
- The Poetry Society of America Anthology*, Introduction by J. Donald Adams, edited by Amy Bonner, Melville Cane, Gwendolen Haste, Alfred Kreymborg, Leonora Speyer, A. M. Sullivan. New York: Fine Editions Press, 1946. \$3.50.
- Nothing Is a Wonderful Thing*, by Helen Wolfert. New York: Venture Press; Simon and Schuster, 1946. \$2.00.
- The Feudalist*, by Woodridge Spears. New York: Fine Editions Press, 1946. \$1.50.
- Release the Lark*, by John Black. New York: Fine Editions Press, 1946. \$2.00.
- The American Prometheus*, by Francis Blake. New York: Fine Editions Press, 1946. \$3.00.
- Against the Furious Men, Poems 1938-1945*, by James E. Warren, Jr. Emory University, Ga.: Banner Press, 1946. \$1.50.
- Borrowed Laughter*, by Syd Turner. Boston: Bruce Humphries, Inc., 1945. \$2.00.
- An Oregon Interlude, a Narrative Poem*, by Anna Holm Pogue. Boston: Bruce Humphries, Inc., 1946. \$2.00.
- Take It to the Hills, a Novel in Verse*, by Zella Varian Price. Boston: Bruce Humphries, Inc., 1945. \$2.00.
- Poems of the Family Circle*, by James Peter Warbasse. New York: The Island Press, 1945. Price not indicated.
- Symphonic Poems*, by Salvatore Cutino. Published by the author, Los Angeles, 1946. Price not indicated.

Anyone who watches the poetry published in magazines and in anthologies will have identified Janet Lewis as one of our finest women poets. Publication of *The Earth-Bound* gives the opportunity of estimating her work of twenty years. There are thirty-six poems in a finely printed volume. The poems are of remarkably even quality, and that quality is extremely fine; yet the poems vary from the broad themes of "The Earth-Bound," "Country Burial," and "The Manger" to occasional poems addressed to a child, on presentation of a gift, and quatrains to friends. The sensibility which informs the poems is always alert, perceptive, and managed with a warm feeling and admirable judgment. The product is a minor poetry of the first order. "Country Burial," although possibly inferior to a half dozen of the other poems, is quoted because of its indicative method and because it struck me anew with the power of the ending:

After the words of the magnificence and doom,  
 After the vision of the splendor and the fear,  
 They go out slowly into the flowery meadow,  
 Carrying the casket, and lay it on the earth  
 By the grave's edge. The daisies bend and straighten  
 Under the trailing skirts, and serious faces  
 Look with faint relief, and briefly smile.  
 Into this earth the flesh and wood shall melt  
 And under these familiar common flowers  
 Flow through the earth they both have understood  
 By sight and touch and daily sustenance.  
 And this is comforting;  
 For heaven is a blinding radiance where  
 Leaves are no longer green, nor water wet,  
 Milk white, soot black, nor winter weather cold.  
 And the eyeless vision of the Almighty Face  
 Brings numbness to the untranslatable heart.

New books by two other women poets are considered next for useful comparisons and contrasts. Genevieve Taggard's *Slow Music* continues one of the more distinguished, and also one of the more quiet, careers among our women poets. This volume holds some disappointments: it is casual, as if Miss Taggard were not, here, doing all she has demonstrated she can do; and there is a little sense—one would hate to see it confirmed in later books—that she has given up on more ambitious work and settled into the casual, momentary vision, the poems which are almost starts or pieces of better poems which the author could write. The result is a volume which best shows one side of a versatile and capable talent, in this case some good poems of irony, whimsy, and occasional fine social comment.

Ruth Pitter has a deft but minor ability. Her themes and subjects are quite broad, varying from the occasional to the mystical. One admires the sensible, resourceful manner in which she works within a narrow range of feeling and technique; within a full book, a certain facility and an occasional lapse (for example, this line from "The Cygnet": "And loud within life undefeated answers") become a little appalling. Both her very good virtues and her limitations are illustrated by this stanza from "The Sparrow's Skull," a poem written on the fall of France:

Even so, dread God! even so, my Lord!  
 The fire is at my feet, and at my breast the sword,  
 And I must gather up my soul, and clap my wings, and flee  
 Into the heart of terror, to find myself in Thee.

In Robert Graves' new volume there is a considerable amount of poetry devoted to the casual, ironic situation such as delighted Hardy in his "Satires of Circumstance." Occasionally the interest goes beyond the ironic to the bitter and sensational, as in "To Lucia at Birth":

Outrageous company to be born into,  
 Lunatics of a shining age long dead . . .  
 Hark how they roar; but never turn your head.  
 Nothing will change them, let them not change you.

But the irony reaches the urbane, well-balanced level which we expect of Graves, and which makes him a significant poet in "Instructions to the Orphic Adept" and some other poems in this valuable volume.

*Lord Weary's Castle* contains seven poems from Robert Lowell's first book, *Land of Unlikeness*, plus well over thirty new poems. Lowell has moved rapidly and well in the two years since that volume. Gone is much of the strain, the image which becomes a "sport"; and we have a surer density of writing. Occasionally still there is a strained image (notice, in speaking to the Virgin Mary, "Your scorched, blue thunderbreasts of love," an image which surely can be explained in some sort of exegesis, but which won't be made to work as a line of poetry, I'm afraid, with any exegesis), an uneasy violence in communicating religious feeling (arising, I'm sure, not from the quality of the experience so much as from the method of tackling it in poetry), a bowing to fashionable style, and a common harkening, like Eliot, to other poets in style, image, and symbol (in this case, Yeats shows up strongly). But in this second book, I'm convinced that these are manners fairly close to the surface and that Lowell has a good chance to slough them off. In fact, the imitations have seemed to help him from the extremities of the first work. His talent is really fine, and when it moves directly on its subject, as in "Christmas Eve under Hooker's Statue" and other poems in the collection, it produces some beautiful lines and finely managed poems. Lowell has one of the significant talents among the younger poets, and a record of work and advance which would shame some of the others.

For some years I have been aware of a very fine interest John Gould Fletcher has taken in some of the younger and lesser-known poets. Knowing of this, and reading the first poem of *The Burning Mountain*, a poem entitled "Shadow on the Prairie," I looked forward to completing a volume in which Fletcher would show a broadening and a deepening of his poetry. What I expected, I think, was a certain abandonment of the surfaces Fletcher has customarily worked with in the past, an increased thematic ability, including an increased social awareness, and a tightened verse texture. In terms of these expectations, *The Burning Mountain* was mostly a disappointment. The tendency in all these directions is apparent in the volume, I am sure, but not successfully concluded. Poems showing these tendencies are side-by-side with the "symphonies" and similar poems which place an excessive sentiment upon place and surface; they are similar to those which provide

much of Fletcher's reputation in the past. Fletcher is a considerable poet, with virtues few but real, such as his awareness of oral qualities, a management of moods. If I am right in reading this new book, we are witnessing an effort which, if Fletcher can do it, will place him yet among the front rank of our modern poets.

At first look, Alfred Kreymborg's *Man and Shadow* is a book much too bulky for its apparently slight conception. Essentially, the pattern is that the poet walks through New York's Central Park for a day and puts down impressions, conversations, and thoughts evoked by meeting people of all qualities during the day. The slightness of conception is overcome in good taste, for Kreymborg makes the occasion a chance to get down a great deal about himself, his ideas, other people, covering an immense range. One wouldn't go around hailing it as a major poem and a masterpiece, but it makes a recommended book.

Thomas Merton's talent can be more adequately assessed now with the publication of *A Man in the Divided Sea*. The book contains the former *Thirty Poems* plus a larger number of new ones, many providing a developmental background for the latest work. Merton started with some methods from the objectivists, fortified with an engaging wit; to these were quickly welded a Symbolist sense of violence and sin beneath innocent-appearing surfaces:

But only where the swimmers float like alligators,  
And with their eyes as dark as creosote  
Scrutinize the murderous heat,  
Only there is anything heard:  
The thin, salt voice of violence,  
That whines, like a mosquito, in their simmering blood.

One presumes that this sense of lurking sin provided the basic motivation for Merton's conversion to catholicism and acceptance of monastic life. But when, after this change, Merton writes direct religious poems, most of the technical accomplishment he had achieved, minor but interesting, disappears, and no really adequate substitute is found. Merton has been hailed as the best Catholic poet in English since Francis Thompson. One hardly knows whether this is to be taken seriously, is an error in judgment, or is a reflection on the quality of Catholic religious verse. Surely it is an error in judgment; but Merton has ability and has a real chance to make it a good judgment.

Two attractive and good pamphlets are those of Coleman Rosenberger and Peggy Pond Church. Half of Rosenberger's *XII Poems* are concerned with the past of Virginia or with Thomas Jefferson. They are fine efforts in the assessment of history and of an important man in history. The other poems are more immediately topical, varying from the irony of "Notes for a Portrait" to "The Goats of Juan Fernandez: A Note on Survival." These also are done with care and taste. Peggy Pond Church has been impressed by the destructiveness of modern war and by the atomic bomb; her "ultimatum for man" is one of urgency: "Must I not pay / with my living breath?"; "Man . . . is master only of death, of death"; "Love is . . . the unequivocal ultimatum." Several of the thirty-four poems are movingly informed with this urgency. The only trouble is that, most of the poems being alike thematically, some suffer in comparison with the best and present a little too much of the same thing.

Jessie Lemont was the first sponsor of Rilke in English translation, and she continues to add to the number of Rilke's works she has made available. Newest of the books is one volume containing both the *Sonnets to Orpheus* and *Duino Elegies*. I am not a judge of the problems involved in translating Rilke, but inspecting the English poems which are a result lead me to think that Miss Lemont acquits herself well.

*A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry* is a better job of editing than Oscar Williams did with his *New Poets* volumes. I am inclined to think there are two main reasons for this, that it provided more space in which his taste could make itself felt, and that in covering older poets a body of critical work gave him leads and corrections for his own taste. It is remarkable indeed that he doesn't go outside that body of criticism to lead us to good work among the older poets who are not widely recognized. When Williams gets to the younger poets, he is as erratic as ever. Of the younger American poets, only John Berryman and Delmore Schwartz are substantially represented (Berryman with as many as, or more than, and Schwartz always with more than Thomas Hardy, Marianne Moore, E. A. Robinson, and Wallace Stevens), and many are not represented at all. On the other hand, heavy weighting goes to such English and Empire poets as Roy Fuller and John Manifold, among the youngest group. Oscar Williams is a special case, apparently, since he is represented by as many poems as William Carlos Williams, Robert Penn Warren, Yvor Winters, and Mark Van Doren all put together; and Gene Derwood has more than any of these and as many as Winters and Van Doren together. Others who get comparatively little representation are Louise Bogan and Hart Crane, besides the eight mentioned above; and some who get the largest representation are W. H. Auden, George Barker, E. E. Cummings, Robert Frost, Archibald MacLeish, and Dylan Thomas, besides those mentioned above.

This may seem little more than a parlor quibbling game. An editor must be allowed his taste, and of course any critic can find many poems or people whom he would want represented. Williams guards against this criticism in his introduction by saying that he has picked the poems which stirred him and not to give a critical selection of modern poetry; that is the reason he calls the book "a little treasury," although the publishers add "The best poems of the 20th century." One's retort is that Williams in that case convicts himself of inadequate taste or insufficient industry in coming in contact with much work he should know. In addition, the book is unfortunately arranged by topics rather than according to individuals, critical divisions, or chronology. In the end the book has a good place, for its only competitor is Louis Untermeyer's more inadequate anthologies; and the book is handsomely produced by Scribner's. However, the serious matter is that the faults of the editing keep this anthology from being the contemporary one the poets and the readers deserve. We are likely to await that book a long time, since the cost of producing such anthologies permits only one or two per decade.

The anthology of the Poetry Society of America is of interest mainly to members of the society, which is not broad enough in membership to represent modern American poetry with any completeness. Naturally the book suffers from inclusiveness; an organization of this sort has poor as well as good poets. However, it makes an interesting volume to pick over.

The remaining books, on a comparative basis, must occupy but a few sentences.

Helen Wolfert's *Nothing Is a Wonderful Thing* reports snatches from a day in the life of a young girl. At the local color level, the reports are frequently interesting; but the verse texture is slight and unimportant. Woodridge Spears I associate with Byron Herbert Reece and Howard Ramsden, two other young Southern poets who are working in the romantic method and doing good work. Spears, coming more recently, naturally sounds like an echo of the others; his work is inferior and needs to get its distinct voice, but he evidently has ability and may be able to manage it. Two other books from the Fine Editions Press are *Release the Lark*, by John Black, and *The American Prometheus*, by Francis Blake. Both are worthwhile volumes. Black is most interesting for an effort to get the boisterous language of the Whitman tradition into the sonnet and quatrain stanzas. The attitude behind the verse is humanistic, liberal, engaging, although the verse isn't particularly well realized. Blake's narrative is symbolic, with New England representing science and Mexico as an opposite; the attitudes are analogous to those of D. H. Lawrence, and the poem is decently executed. James E. Warren, Jr., writes quite a good poem in "Tarawa" and a few others; most of the time his verse is too vaguely and stiffly executed to be of any real interest. Syd Turner's verse is impressionistic, best when concerned with paradoxes in our culture. With the exception of a half dozen pieces which might have made an attractive little pamphlet, it is a question whether the book should have been published at all. Anna Holm Pogue's *An Oregon Interlude* is a tale of young Phil, later General, Sheridan, when he was stationed in Oregon. It is not done well. Zella Varian Price's novel in verse is concerned with the adjustment of the returned, crippled veteran. It is poorly written. Peter Warbasse presents a book of verse culled from a lifetime of writing poems for members of his family. The verses are homely, but only infrequently rise above that level, mainly in the poems addressed to the young children. Salvatore Cutino's *Symphonic Poems*, a pamphlet, lacks any of the textures we expect of poetry.

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