

UNPACKING HEARTS WITH WORDS

By Conrad Aiken

THERE is only one thing to be said in favor of the "group review" of books of verse, especially when the group is as miscellaneous as the present one; and that is the fact that nothing can be so well calculated to sharpen anew one's sense of the predicament which any contemporary poet must face. Here are these five poets—Mr. Robinson, Mr. Jeffers, Mr. Coppard, Mr. Sandburg and Mr. MacLeish; and their very dissimilarity, which is striking, suggests, a good deal, that the contemporary poet is in a sense a lost man. Tradition, which in other ages was precise and dictatorial, is now overwhelmingly complex. Which, of all the traditions he inherits, shall our poet obey? Or shall he endeavor to combine several of them, and of the combination to make something new?

The situation is a difficult one, at best; and one is aware of the difficulty when one reads these five volumes of verse. They are all of them good books, very much above the average. But one feels of all of them that they lack that ultimate power and directness and rootedness which seems, unfortunately, to accrue only to those works which are produced at a time when tradition is great and single and even, perhaps, *simple*. That these five poets feel the *need* of some such sustaining certainty and simplicity is at once obvious. A. E. Coppard, for example, in his *Collected Poems* (Knopf, \$2.50) deliberately goes back to the seventeenth century for his quality, and very charmingly he does it, too. His formal lyrics are admirable: they have the genuine freshness and neatness, the dexterously naive mingling of conceptual and sensory view, which one associates with the best of Cavalier and metaphysical poetry. He has wit, too, and an engaging lustiness. But in thus retreating to an earlier period, he admits himself to be lost; and *how* lost betrays itself in his

other and more modern poems, which as a rule are loose and unsuccessful.

E. A. Robinson, whose collected *Sonnets: 1889-1927* (Macmillan, \$1.50) are now presented to us, plays a little safer, chooses a tradition less remote and odd: his roots are in the nineteenth century; and perhaps his closest congener, in that era, was Meredith. He treats the sonnet formally, a little abstractly, at a low pitch of intensity; he is not much gifted on the sensuous side; there is a kind of Puritan bleakness in him, which rather fortunately blends with his intellectual irony and dry Yankee humor; and if his sonnets never glow, or become radiant, or *melt* into a sort of white-hot integrity, as one feels the best sonnets should, they are nevertheless excellent. One reads them with a genuine pleasure and with a feeling (rare enough in poetry) that one's mind is being employed; but one fails, afterward, to remember them particularly. They are just a little colorless.

Carl Sandburg is another matter. His roots, clearly enough, are in Whitman. On the technical side, in fact, he is the chief of Whitman's disciples; he endeavors to bring Whitman up to date. He has a rich feeling for slang, for the jazz rhythms of the age, a fine "voice", a splendid gusto; if he fails on the whole to satisfy us it is because his *range*—mental or spiritual or emotional, or whatever one wants to call it—is so narrow. He is too persistently sentimental, crooning, nostalgic, yearning. And while he achieves very often a charming effect by his mixture of neologism or slang and sentiment, he does so with insufficient sense of variety and selection. His poems wear out comparatively quickly—partly because they are all too much alike; too much in one key, and partly because, for all their "thickness" (in William James's sense), they contain so little "idea". Of his new book, *Good Morning, America*

(Harcourt, Brace, \$3.00), one can only say that it seems to be as good as the others, and very like them.

Our two remaining poets are in a way more exciting. Robinson Jeffers is a remarkable poet: there is no dodging that fact. One may not like him; one may feel him to be uncouth, overstrained, hyperbolic, too laboriously and unintermittently violent; but of his power there can be no question. Is he, too, lost? He has evidently been at pains to transplant Sophocles to California; and the effect is a little queer. His consequent grandeurs become at times, unfortunately, a little grandiose; his tragedies lie too close to the horrible; attempting the stark and awful, he too often, like D. H. Lawrence, revels in the merely and rawly abnormal, and with a kind of cruelty; his poems are always blood-shot. But his new poem, *Cawdor* (Live-right, \$2.50), a kind of nightmare novel in a loose prose-verse (like a semi-prose semi-verse translation from the Greek) is, for all its monstrosities and absurdities and excessive use of symbolism—his wounded eagles and shot lions—a very impressive thing. His people are vivid, psychologically true. If at the outset one feels an extraordinary unreality in the whole affair, disbelieves in these farmer folk who talk like Clytemnestra at one moment and like a Henry James or Dostoevski character the next, one soon finds oneself being swept off one's feet by the sheer force of Mr. Jeffers' creative power. He seems to be developing something of Dostoevski's ability to take one bodily into an unreal world so unified and consistent and apprehensible that one ends by believing it against one's will. That is a rare kind of power: if only Mr. Jeffers can hold himself down a little, be a shade less drastically and humorlessly melodramatic, one feels that he might give us something pretty astonishing. Even so, *Cawdor* is a fine thing, despite its bad lapses. He is a poet to be watched enviously by his fellows.

Archibald MacLeish is perhaps the most fascinating psychological problem, among

contemporary poets, which is at our disposal. On the technical side, there is no living poet to whom he need take off his hat. He has technical genius. He can say things with a cunning, a brilliance, a suppleness, a power, which any living poet might covet. But he, too, is a kind of slave of tradition: with the difference that the traditions which enslave him are contemporary ones. He seems unable to throw off the influence of T. S. Eliot, of Mr. Stevens, of various French poets of the last quarter century; an influence which is so deeply pervasive that it seems to have affected even his way of thinking and feeling. His new poem, *The Hamlet of A. MacLeish* (Houghton, Mifflin, \$1.50), is again, like *Pot of Earth*, a kind of brilliant *pastiche*. It is full of beautiful things. There are passages which move one, or hurt one, deeply. But, also, the poem is so full of echoes as to be positively prismatic with them; not only prosodically and verbally, but even in the very frame of the idea, the approach. Why must Mr. MacLeish keep us in such a despair about him? If he could free himself—if he could get down to the *Ding-an-sich*, the thing which is himself—if he could make *this* discovery, which is the final discovery of any artist, and mine *this* material—one feels that the result might be dazzling. Meanwhile, one perpetually notes, in his work, a kind of falsity of tone, a falsity which seems to result from the fact that he is always, in a sense, playing a part, a part which is not wholly natural to him. For a passage or two, at any point, he can maintain the tone admirably; but sooner or later he is betrayed into that sort of overstatement which the parodist and the imitator equally achieve, but with a different purpose. He appears to *think* his way into attitudes which are not, unfortunately, native to him. Just why he should do this, with so tremendous an ability at his disposal, one cannot guess. Nor can one be wholly sure whether his "echoes" might not, by a future generation, be actually preferred to the things they echo.

ASPECTS OF THE WAR

By John Carter

THE official theories of "war-guilt" die hard. So indispensable were they to enthusiastic popular participation in the world war that it is extraordinary that they should even take to their beds during the life of the war generations. "Germany began it" was so thoroughly drilled into the minds and consciousness of the allied and associated peoples that it will be a generation at least before a contrary theory is widely held and even longer before such a theory influences our political conduct. Yet on the face of documentary and official proofs now available, it appears that Germany was not solely or even principally guilty. This fact was suspected as early as the Treaty of Versailles which, however, incorporated a confession of German guilt in one of its clauses.

Who, then, *was* responsible for the war? The answer seems to be that every major European nation was responsible, that every major European statesman collaborated in making an explosion inevitable. From 1870 to 1914, Europe stumbled along, patching things up, postponing decisions, arriving at rule-of-thumb agreements, hoping to postpone conflict and striving to heap up armaments which would make the cost of conflict prohibitive. Some of the "revisionists" have gone so far as to say that France and Russia, or rather Poincaré and Izvolsky, were solely responsible for the outbreak in 1914; but surely this is a fable of an imbecility equal to that which represented the Entente powers as all virtuous and the Triple Alliance as utterly wicked. As the returns come in, it seems clear beyond peradventure that the entire European system of balance of power and alliances, backed by armaments and intensified by political and economic ambitions, is to blame.

This does not absolve the powers directly responsible in 1914 for the outbreak of hostilities. Austria-Hungary's intransigent at-

titude towards the provocative Serbs set the ball rolling, and it was Russia which, by mobilization, made a war inevitable. Russia and Austria-Hungary have paid the historic penalty. France and Germany ought to have exerted greater influence over their allies in the crisis, but temporized in the name of treaty obligations until it was too late. If Sir Edward Grey had spoken clearly and made it plain that England would or would not go to war in defence of France, war might have been prevented at the eleventh hour. In this respect it is worth while quoting the considered opinion of the foreign editor of the *Journal de Genève*.

"England was, before the war, in more or less the same position as America is to-day. It is certain that if a country were to declare war the United States could neither assist nor remain indifferent. By refusing to bind herself in advance, she encourages, without wishing to do so, the aggressive tendencies of certain countries and endangers the peace of the world and her own peace with it."

Yet this is not entirely true of England in the decade which intervened between the Entente Cordiale of 1904 and the fatal year of Sarajevo. England let herself be bound in advance by military and naval conversations which left Sir Edward Grey helpless to do anything but follow the French lead. Worse still, the vague obligation of an *entente* made the British Foreign Office reluctant to take any steps towards healing the breach with Germany. That, in fact, was one of the saddest aspects of pre-war Europe. Nations were, in fact, prepared on numerous occasions to settle outstanding problems but feared to do so lest it should seem to leave an ally in the lurch. If Russia and Germany agreed on a single point, France and Austria became frightened. If Germany and England came to terms on the Bagdad railway, France and