

It must be softened and subverted by propaganda. It must be starved and enfeebled by blockade. It must be remorselessly bombed from the air. Its morale must be undermined to a point where its capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened. Only then, with swift armoured thrusts, can the *coup de grâce* be delivered. The vast tomes of Clausewitz and his disciples were removed to the lumber-rooms of military libraries, their place being taken by the works of Douhet, Mitchell, Fuller, Liddell Hart. The Art of War had outgrown Passchendaele. It was almost ready for Hiroshima.

## Poets & Places

**Five American Poets.** Edited by THOM GUNN and TED HUGHES. *Faber*, 21s.

THERE IS HONOUR among thieves and reputation among poets. Public fame, of course, is another matter: in the United States to-day, the Great and the Near-Great are taught in schools, the middle-aged creep into the appendices of college texts with a poem or two apiece, and the young are known of rather than actually read. But poets know, and read, each other, and they have private opinions of each other's work that are by no means so simple a matter as that of an inside-dopester reversal of the orderings of renown. They may know each other over long periods of time, which helps to wreck their critical standards; they may be envious of each other's fame (rather than accomplishments), which also helps. But in being acutely aware of each other's careers and what they have cost and brought, fellow-poets have in most cases a sense of continuity, of an *œuvre*. And they are sensitive to the problem of getting better, certainly a more viable version of the moral life than the early Poundian injunction to write well and damn the rest (even if it meant going mad trying to imagine a world in which writing well matters more than it does). Finally, there lurks uneasily in the public mind the model of the poet as discoverer (here, again, Pound, and again influential out of all proportion to his accomplishments): the poets other poets admire will turn out to be important, because the pure concerns of craft alone will tell.

The voice of humane philistinism heard throughout the Age of Experiment tempered this view by saying that even good poets could have bad taste. Sophisticated, mid-century American literary rhetoric might put it better by saying that everybody has his hang-ups. In

any event, there always remains something authoritative and something suspect about in-group poetic reputations, whether made public or not.

Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes, who (along with Philip Larkin) are the younger British poets most highly thought of in America, and who both know the United States rather well, have made a selection of five American poets whose work has not appeared in book form in England. Aside from the jacket-copy's assurance that all of these poets surely deserve to be better known over here, there is little in this volume to help the British reader answer his initial question: Why these? The informed American reader might at best be expected to say "Oh, these," by which he would mean many things. The collocation of Edgar Bowers, Howard Nemerov, the late Hyam Plutzik, Louis Simpson and William Stafford is neither representative of the American literary scene nor a gathering of new, young voices (the youngest of them is thirty-nine). None of these poets has erupted into either public fame or coterie glory, nor do they have the inflated readership of the so-called beats. Nor are they all of equal renown in America: Simpson and Nemerov are the two best known of the five, and Bowers is esteemed most highly among a group of poets. On the other hand, these five seem to have enough in common to allow already well-sharpened critical axes to be ground on them as a group. One reviewer here, always ready to praise what he feels is a generation that has come out the other side of a forest of experimentation, saw in their work the consolidation of a kind of plain style. Again, all these poets are (as was Hyam Plutzik) professors.

More significant, perhaps, is the question of school or faction. American poets have for the past five years or so been split into two rival anthologies, each of which seems systematically to exclude writers included in the other. The first of these, edited by Messrs. Pack, Hall and Simpson, has been called academic; the other, edited by Mr. Donald Allen, is for the beats. But these epithets don't really mean too much. The academicism of what Robert Lowell has called the "raw" poet (as opposed to the "cooked" school—and again, this doesn't pinpoint matters either) is as tiresome in the *lumpen* beats as in the boring parts of the other anthology. Despite all of the avant-garde cant about form growing spontaneously from the material of the poem, indeed, from the material of life itself, the less interesting free-verse poets are as committed to a preconceived poem format as anyone else. The question is merely whether Pound and W. C. Williams are to provide the model, or, in the other case,

John Crowe Ransom or the later Auden. At its most ludicrous extreme, the beat academicism extends to younger poets who spell should and would, sh/d and w/d in their poems because Pound did so in his letters. Another point is about the academies in the literal sense: certainly poetry in America to-day is a culture of the universities, where poems are studied, books are bought, readings by contemporary poets attended and the bards themselves frequently employed. But this is true of the poets of both schools alike, and a surprising number of the names in both anthologies could be found in undergraduate lists at Harvard, Columbia, Amherst and Princeton in the nineteen-forties.

To observe, then, that all five of these poets would be associated with the "academic" anthology might or might not be significant. As it is, their proximity to the stereotype ranges from Edgar Bowers, with his almost Augustan chastity of form, through Howard Nemerov's mandarin facility with the novelistic *aperçu*, to Louis Simpson's gradually fermenting war, most clearly seen in his later poems, with the condition of being American. Mr. Bowers is something of a retiring figure, a former student of Professor Yvor Winters (who seems to believe that the clear, short lyric that makes the world seem relatively uncomplicated is the highest form of literary achievement). Mr. Simpson, who wrote in an early book what I think are some of the very best American poems to come out of the war, was at Columbia during those early post-war years that were so extraordinarily fertile for literature. Learning these facts after reading their verse comes as no surprise: both in the rhetorical and metrical format of the poems themselves, and in their differing senses of what needs to be said about what they know, these two poets display the influence of widely differing pressures and commitments.

Thus Mr. Bowers, at the end of a reflection on the ruins of Aachen:

*Despair shall rise. The dragon's gore  
From off the torn cathedral floor  
Forces his mind's dark cavity:  
His sleep has been his innocence,  
And his malignant growth shall be  
Monstered by lucid violence.*

THIS IS TRADITIONAL as much because of the imaginative mechanisms used to control and represent elusive feelings as because of the form. Mr. Simpson, on the other hand, moves from a far greater initial dependence upon allusive form and rhetoric (his early war and love poems are full of both Cavalier and Byronic impulses) to an unabashed confrontation of the wounds of peace—the crippling sense of history of an

educated American sensibility. He makes much of his recent removal to California; he writes of the coastal redwood trees waiting for an imagination sufficiently powerful to cope with them:

*O if there is a poet  
let him come now! We stand at the Pacific  
like great unmarried girls,  
turning in our heads the stars and clouds,  
considering whom to please.*

Some of the power of his recent poems comes from his not being at all sure that he is up to the task. An easterner's first visit to San Francisco can be shocking: he sees the great, unbelievable bay as the pioneer must have seen it, after months of journeying, and at the same time can read the recent landscape of the buildings piled up on the hills against the sea as having been thrown westward by the push of history. Mr. Simpson broods about this still:

*We cannot turn or stay.  
For though we sleep and let the reins fall slack,  
the great cloud-wagons move  
Outward still, dreaming of a Pacific.*

Mr. Simpson now lives in a place where the local poets (led by some of his Columbia friends) belong more to the faction of the Other Anthology, and this cannot help but reinforce for him the significance of his arrival there. The sense of place is terribly important in American poetry, and poets' identities tend to become confused in a country where travelling westward, into the setting sun at the end of the movie, is such a natural symbol for moving into the future, whereas what should be the *Morgenland* of Europe is much more of the black night of the past and its dreams. Whitman, Stevens and Hart Crane all depended in their different ways upon temporal and spatial mappings of the self in American landscapes; more recently, Robert Lowell, in his first book, might almost be said to have turned his own life into a replica of the city of Boston by converting to Catholicism, and his apocalyptic poems about Boston are really the first of his *Life Studies*. The legacy of all this is apparent among the poets selected by Messrs. Gunn and Hughes. A very high proportion of their poems concern landscape, and what to do with it. Mr. William Stafford tries to penetrate the Pacific Northwest in which he lives with native implements, rather than with Eastern guidebooks, and he feels the world to have been more authentic before the frontier swamped it. *It is people at the edge who say / things at the edge: winter is toward knowing*, he writes at the beginning of an aboriginal gnomic poem. Mr. Nemerov's poem about night

clouds, on the other hand, treats more explicitly the way nature seems to threaten intelligence:

*Some shapes cannot be seen in a glass,  
those are the ones the heart breaks at.  
They will never become valentines  
or crucifixes, never. Night clouds  
go on insanely as themselves  
though metaphors would be prettier;  
and when I see them massed at the edge  
of the globe, neither weasel nor whale,  
as though this world were, after all,  
non-representational, I know  
a truth that cannot be told. . . .*

IF THESE POETS are academic, then, it is because they have all been to school with the same, sad teacher. As a selection that needed to be made, this one leaves something to be desired. Even assuming the part of the literary scene to be covered, it is surprising to find Anthony Hecht and J. V. Cunningham missing (I will forgo the remainder of the usual *ad hoc* list of the unanthologised), and the selection of Louis Simpson's poems should probably have included more of his early lyrics. But if there seems to be something arbitrary about the final result, if it is hard to be convinced of its rightness, there is surely something revealing about the choice. These are all American poets of a certain skill (I suppose I personally admire Messrs. Nemerov and Simpson most, but that may be irrelevant), talking the same language and equally aware of the responsibilities they have incurred by taking up their own and other people's time in observing, moping, hoping, fussing or explaining. (They seldom, if ever, dance, giggle, harangue or pull the chair out from under one—there are splendid poets in the United States to-day who do.) Whatever the complex reasons for the selection (personal friendship, regional loyalties, perversity or justice of taste always seem to be at work in situations like this) the result is by no means a bad or beguiling book. For the British reader who wants to become familiar with the literary scene, or to acquire names to drop, it will not be of much use. But as a set of recent illuminations of "the complex fate" and as a sample of what a lot of American poetry is like, it will do more than serve. And again, for the appearance of Louis Simpson and Howard Nemerov in England I am vicariously grateful.

*John Hollander*

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## Satire and Melancholy

**Nervous People, and Other Satires.** By MIKHAIL ZOSHCHENKO. Edited with an introduction by Hugh McLean. Translated by Hugh McLean and Maria Gordon. *Gollancz*, 25s.

"THE GREAT 20th-century satirist," it calls Zoshchenko on the jacket. Well, is he? I feel as if I'd been asked to write a security testimonial for an old friend, and suddenly realised I'd no idea what his politics were. I've been reading Zoshchenko's stories with pleasure ever since I knew enough Russian to make sense of the vulgar colloquialisms in which they are written. When I was an undergraduate I tried to copy his deceptively simple throwaway style—even to the point of imitating the rhythm of his prose, sawing my sentences off short and filleting them of all unnecessary pronouns and articles. (Was chic. I thought. Others—not. "What's this," they said, "for Christ's sake? The Chinese water torture?") But in all that time I never really stopped to consider what attitudes or intentions lay behind his humour. No doubt Zoshchenko left them ambiguous partly for political reasons. All the same, after the sheer grinding boredom of what passes for satire these days, I'm beginning to think that humour, like the humorist, is not necessarily the better for having the bones that support the body visibly sticking through the skin.

I just thought Zoshchenko was funny. In this I was not alone; he was more popular in Russia between the wars than any living author apart from Maxim Gorky. He was born in 1895 into a genteel artistic family, brought up in St. Petersburg, and saw a good deal of action during the Great War as an officer in the Tsar's army. But in 1918 he threw in his lot with the Bolsheviks (though he seems never to have become one), and joined the Red Army, after which he became, among other things a policeman, a book-keeper, a cobbler, an aviculture instructor, a telephone operator for the border police, a detective, a court secretary, and a government clerk. When he began to write his success was immediate, and endured until 1946, when he was attacked by Zhdanov for "cheap hee-hawing at Soviet reality," and proscribed. In 1956, two years before his death, he was republished, presumably rehabilitated. All the same, when I was in Leningrad in 1956 and asked if I could meet him, I stirred up such marshes of steaming abuse that I thought it might be best not to press the matter, and to spare him the embarrassment of a Western visitor. Even radically Leninist friends assured me that he was an obscene and worthless writer.

Zoshchenko's technique is in essence the technique of Wodehouse or Damon Runyon—a particular colloquial speech-pattern stylised to the point of self-parody. The colloquial idiom he starts with is what one might call working-class Sovietese. He cuts it like a clown's suit, at once too short and too baggy—monosyllabic where it ought to be expansive ("And on the way the general over-ate, and died of dysentery"), heavily padded with euphemisms and so-to-speaks where it should be terse ("On the one hand, sometimes it would seem more advantageous for us not to be alive. But on the other hand, so to speak, no, thank you very much"). He exaggerates that curious Russian obliquity and inconsequentiality which lend such an indissoluble air of Russianness to even the best translations of Russian novels, and he laces the mixture with misapplied scientific terminology and plonking Party clichés. Armed with this superbly inappropriate piece of linguistic equipment he sets out to describe love, birth, and death, and to elucidate the finer points of Soviet manners. It's like a clown performing a surgical operation with a giant collapsible rubber knife and fork, and a lot of the pleasure comes from watching the delicacy and ingenuity with which he wields his preposterous instruments.

Is he a satirist, though? Well, he makes fun of the shortcomings in Soviet bath-house administration and the supply of electric light bulbs. So do the writers in *Krokodil*. The staff of *Krokodil* do it because they want inefficient bath-house personnel to mend their ways. Zoshchenko does it because he thinks it's funny that human beings who aspire to run an ideal state cannot even run a bath-house properly. Again and again he slyly measures the grandiose pretensions of political optimism against the scale of man—and a small man at that. In all his stories he reminds us that men are moved by greed, harrowed by idleness and fate, bound by the squalor of their circumstances, preoccupied with the trivia of daily living. He remarks on these things ostensibly to help bring reality into line with the ideal, in fact to cut the ideal down to the size of reality. His superficial ambiguity is both part of his comic technique and his political protection. In the long run, of course, it was not ambiguous at all, and he was silenced.

I don't know whether telling in jest truths that may not be told in seriousness is to be a satirist. I suppose you might say his stories are all in a sense satires on the tone of official Soviet attitudes. But I can imagine people saying that anyway he wasn't a *real* satirist—he didn't mimic Stalin's accent, or call Beria an old fool, or write skits on the purges or the labour