

Thus My Dreams

(From the Spanish of Roberto Lievano of Bogotá, Colombia)

By THOMAS WALSH

A nightingale with silver flourish told
Of thine approach, high in the lemon-tree,
And lo! before me rises dreamily
Thy form upon the lily paths of old.
How thy hands tremble as with light! How cold
The starry glisten of thine eyes on me!
How lightly stir thy breasts (in them I see
Twin doves that whisper love where branches fold).

The breeze is sifting through the grove; it shakes
The sacramental lemon-trees in flakes
Of snow upon thy breast and silken hair;
Dawn rises, veiling thee in mist that seems
To take its whiteness from thee; thus my dreams
Behold thee, flowerlike in thy bridal wear.

Books

Wisdom and Irony

The Three Taverns. By Edwin Arlington Robinson. The Macmillan Company.

MR. ROBINSON has never learned the arts by which some verse men can lighten three or four serious poems with trifling pieces until they will float a volume. Every volume he publishes is packed; and every poem, as such things go in the world, is perfect. After his two longer poems "Merlin" and "Lancelot," he now returns to collecting certain brief pieces written in the intervals of the last few years. Separate enough in themselves, they yet stand with respect to each other in a sort of pattern, like the monoliths of a Druid circle. Like those monoliths, too, these poems seem to be more than mortised in the underlying granite; they seem to grow out of it in the mere course of nature. And like the Druid stones they wear each an air of ominous, enormous mystery, themselves substantial enough to the casual eye and yet hung about with dim memories and unargumentative though powerful significance. What holds them in the pattern is that tone of mingled wisdom and irony, that color of dignity touched with colloquial flexibility, that clear, hard, tender blank verse and those unforgettable eight-line stanzas and dramatic sonnets which go to make up one of the most scrupulous and valuable of living poets.

Five of the larger poems in "The Three Taverns" are episodes based upon history: Rahel telling Varnhagen of the adventures of her heart before her marriage to him; Hamilton and Burr in 1795 at the not quite conscious parting of their ways; Paul at the Three Taverns, to which the brethren of Rome came out to meet him, greeting them with his doctrine; John Brown, on the eve of his execution, defending the revolution he had attempted; Lazarus, back from the tomb, shaken by his return and able to say no more than that he forgives the Master for bringing him to life again. These characters, as so often with the characters in whom Mr. Robinson interests himself, appear at some moment of transition from an old order which they have outlived to a new one about which they are uncertain but which they face with a courage born of humility—humility toward the ungovernable flood of destiny on which they ride.

If the world
Were not a world of aches and innovations,
Attainment would have no more joy of it,
says Paul.

When our eyes

Have wisdom, we see more than we remember;
And the old world of our captivities
May then become a smitten glimpse of ruin,
Like one where vanished hewers have had their day
Of wrath on Lebanon.

* * * * *

But think you not the world is ashes yet,
And you have all the fire. The world is here
Today, and it may not be gone tomorrow;
For there are millions, and there may be more,
To make in turn a various estimation
Of its old ills and ashes, and the traps
Of its apparent wrath.

Again and again these poems, and others in the volume, recur to the pains of change, now tragically, now with a caustic lightness:

Longer ago than cave-men had their changes
Our fathers may have slain a son or two,
Discouraging a further dialectic
Regarding what was new;
And after their unstudied admonition
Occasional contrition
For their old-fashioned ways
May have reduced their doubts, and in addition
Softened their final days.

Neither conservative nor revolutionary can take excessive comfort from a poet who unites the fullest courage of innovation with the unhurried wisdom which the most exciting movement of the current day cannot excite out of an aloof and profound reflectiveness.

It is not, of course, by being topical that Mr. Robinson achieves his immense pertinence to the moment. He speaks only by indirection of actual events, but almost every line bears acutely on the times. The False Gods is a magnificent epigraph on the evanescence of trivial ideals. Demos, a pair of sonnets, says nearly all that can be said on the high ground which Mr. Robinson takes, as a friend of democracy, between its fanatics and its foes. In *The Old King's New Jester*, with the stern seriousness of a poet and the whimsical grace of a man of the world, he unforgettably advises all those who out of discontent with the new wrongs of the world turn back to approbation and acceptance of the old wrongs. It is these same persons whom Mr. Robinson symbolizes in *The Wandering Jew*, a quiet comment upon that strange folk-figure as if he had been met in New York and heard reviling the world for its pitiful emptiness.

For now the gloom that hid the man
Became a daylight on his wrath,
And one wherein my fancy viewed
New lions ramping in his path.
The old were dead and had no fangs,
Wherefore he loved them—seeing not
They were the same that in their time
Had eaten everything they caught.

* * * * *

Where, then, was there a place for him
That on this other side of death
Saw nothing good, as he had seen
No good come out of Nazareth?

* * * * *

Whether he still defies or not
The failure of an angry task
That relegates him out of time
To chaos, I can only ask.
But as I knew him, so he was;
And somewhere among men today
Those old, unyielding eyes may flash,
And finch—and look the other way.

The penalty of looking and flinching and turning away is worse than death.

Such moments of blindness furnish Mr. Robinson with one of his most frequent dramatic themes—the contrast between a woman who sees and a man who does not, as in *The Evangelist's Wife*, *London Bridge*, *Tact*, *Rahel to Varnhagen*; or between one of them who sees what the other cannot bear to see, as in the vivid little tragedy, *Late Summer*. And it is a blindness as regards the world without and an "invidious insight" as regards oneself which characterizes the actionless protagonist of *Tasker Norcross*, the most memorable poem in this volume. He is nothing, and he has no illusions.

He knew, and in his knowledge there was death.
He knew there was a region all around him
That lay outside man's havoc and affairs,
And yet was not all hostile to their tumult,
Where poets would have served and honored him,
And saved him, had there been anything to save.
But there was nothing, and his tethered range
Was only a small desert.

* * * * *
"Art," he would have said,
"Is not life, and must therefore be a lie";
And with a few profundities like that
He would have controverted and dismissed
The benefit of the Greeks. He had heard of them,
As he had heard of his aspiring soul—
Never to the perceptible advantage,
In his esteem, of either. "Faith," he said,
Or would have said if he had thought of it,
"Lives in the same house with Philosophy,
Where the two feed on scraps and are forlorn
As orphans after war." He could see stars,
On a clear night, but he had not an eye
To see beyond them. He could hear spoken words,
But had no ear for silence when alone.
He could eat food of which he knew the savor,
But had no palate for the Bread of Life,
That human desperation, to his thinking,
Made famous long ago, having no other.

It is difficult to determine, Mr. Robinson seems to say, whether it is worse to see and not suspect the truth, like the Wandering Jew, or to suspect it without really seeing it, like *Tasker Norcross*. The supreme tragedy of human existence is

That earth has not a school where we may go
For wisdom, or for more than we may know;

and yet there is no cure and no hope except in wisdom. In this uncompromising position may be found the secret of Mr. Robinson's failure ever to catch the hasty ears of his generation—and the secret of his power over all who have taken the pains to understand him.

C. V. D.

Youth in America

Youth in Harley. By Gordon Hall Gerould. Charles Scribner's Sons.

Prologue. By Phyllis Duganne. Harcourt, Brace and Howe.

IN the days when the election of Grover Cleveland made good New Englanders feel that the country was headed for destruction, a Litchfield youth named Stephen Quaid, having graduated from Harvard College, became principal of the academy in Harley, Massachusetts. He remained just one year, during which he became engaged to Cynthia Darnell and determined to study law and become a force in the affairs of the nation and the world of men. The story of that year is the subject matter of Mr. Gerould's novel. He writes with none of the disdainful tension, lapsing into grisliness, of his wife, Mrs. Katherine Fullerton Gerould. His style is amorphous within and fuzzy without. But he, too, is by implication a violent anti-modernist

and intent on showing the strength, serenity, and comeliness of an older order of American life.

A great and impassioned and tragic novel could be written on that theme. The passing of things venerable and long loved has all but the highest spiritual and literary values. Yet the efforts of the praisers of things past among us seem always to miss those special values altogether. Is the fault in themselves or in their theme? We expect Mr. Gerould to show us plain living and high thinking; he shows us dull living and no thinking at all. We expect Emerson and are put off with a future party-politician. We wait for a flicker of the spirit of Thoreau and get discussions of the "unsettling effects" of "Robert Elsmere." Mr. Gerould, if we are to trust his report, appeals to the wrong period. The old New England hardihood of thought had died out. Stephen Quaid, one may be sure, was a corporation attorney in 1914 and is now a war millionaire and a reactionary, and weighs nearer two hundred pounds than he likes to be told. The great New England, the immortal New England, was as tameless and as revolutionary as the world which now fills Mr. Gerould with dismay. It was unbelieving and radical; it was full of heretics and abolitionists—enemies of the dominant order in matters of convention and property. How do people as clever as the Geroulds miss that essential point? To appeal to the barren and prosaic nineties is mere self-stultification. Revolution is the note of a great age even as change is the note of life itself. Mr. Gerould's Stephen Quaid is an ugly little materialist; Cynthia has no vision, only stubbornness and bad temper. Among the village elders an older and a better tradition faintly glows. But youth in Harley was opaque and stodgy; it knew what it wanted and wanted nothing worth having. It was not austere, only strait-laced; not self-mastered, only pig-headed; not even, in a deep and fine sense, conservative, but only profitably correct.

One can imagine Stephen Quaid and his Cynthia aghast at Rita Moreland, the ultra-modern minx of Miss Duganne's "Prologue." Consider Rita's excessively visible silk stockings, bobbed hair, and one-piece bathing suit. Consider, furthermore, that she was kissed by half a dozen men between her sixteenth and her twentieth year and that she very nearly went to live with one of them. No wonder, since in her middle teens she read "Mlle. de Maupin" and Marie Bashkirtseff and George Moore's "Confessions of a Young Man." She had her Oscar Wilde period before she proceeded to Shaw and Wells; she fore-gathered with radicals and labor people; she worked in an editorial office, discussed sex, and drank cocktails, and quoted Karl Marx. And yet, if Margaret Fuller could come back from the other shore, and see Cynthia and Rita, to which of the two would she feel herself more closely akin? The question is a pretty one. For one thing is indisputable: Rita is the one who is spiritually by far the more alive. She is giddy, careless, raw. But she seeks vision. She starts out with a pagan clearness to discover the nature of things. She accepts their reality—the character of her mother—for instance—with an honesty not untinged by sadness; she is self-centered and yet capable of a sane detachment. There is flexibility in her and sympathy and hope. If one could expose today the inner history of the marriage of Stephen and Cynthia, one would probably find a good deal that is furtive and cruel, ugly and tyrannous. Its outer show has always, of course, been beyond criticism. Rita marries, too. "All the things that I could not have alone," she says, "that I do not want alone, are waiting for me now. I think that marriage is less fair to a man; for me it means freedom, all the things I desire. But for Donald there is a certain amount of restraint, of responsibility. But he says that he doesn't care. I shan't let him care; I shall make life and marriage very beautiful for him." How wise the minx is and how those kisses seem actually to have made for a fundamental decency and honesty and justice in her view of human relations. Miss Duganne writes with a clear, staccato, bird-like note; she visualizes men and things with cool precision.