

Between the Sirens and the Muse

By DUDLEY FITTS, *editor of the Yale Series of Younger Poets*

I DON'T know what song the sirens sang, but I think John Ciardi has studied voice with them. "The Poetry Quarterly," he says; and although it is an exercise that neither one of us believes in—a coarse, necessarily hasty glance at the far too many books of verse produced during the last few months—I yield once more to his beguilement. The man out-trills Parthenopé.

Here are some thirty books: poetry, verse, metered language, impassioned paralysis, passionless linotype constructions; a few "Collecteds" with the usual additions; several monographs anatomizing the Great Dead; and the customary effluvium of narcissistic or vanity-press idleness, neither better nor worse than it always is. At least half of the thirty will receive no identification, let alone further comment, in the hit-and-run discussion that follows; and if the reader misses one of his favorites, he must assume either that the pearl was not cast before me, or that my deficiencies blinded me to its worth. So we shall avoid empty wounding and save space: economy abetted by humility.

It is a pity that two of the books remaining should owe some of their force to death. Posthumous printing raises questions that are, or ought to be, irrelevant—sentimentalities, perhaps, like those that surround a man's personal possessions the morning after his funeral, vain divinings, speculations as to the artist's awareness of the approaching end. When death was sudden, we know that the book was left open, so; the pen or the pipe or the spectacles put aside, with no consciousness of ending, certainly with no symbolic design; yet it is difficult to contemplate these objects without reading into them more of an intention than we know they can bear. This spacious pathos attaches itself particularly to the last utterances of a good poet unexpectedly taken by death, and there is a danger that it will color one's judgment. If it were possible, one would assume that E. E. Cummings will be writing his poems through all the predictable future—as, in a sense, he will be—and that Louis MacNeice has given us merely his latest book, not his last. Regarded so, Mr. Cummings's 73



Poems (Harcourt, Brace & World, \$4.50) repeats his usual form: four or five poems of a beauty and a power that annihilate objection, accompanied by a number of minor pieces in which wit and eccentricity oscillate between illumination and confusion. At least one of these lyrics, "now does our world descend," will be remembered with the best of his work—the unembarrassed overtiness of speech, the intricate variations of tonality and rhythm culminating in the last eight lines:

therefore despair, my heart
and die into the dirt

but from this endless end
of briefer each our bliss—
where seeing eyes go blind
(where lips forget to kiss)
where everything's nothing
—arise, my soul; and sing

(The meter demands *no thing*. I had almost said "of course," but there's no "of course" about it: a learner could do worse than spend a long time thinking about that final couplet.) There are three excellent sonnets as well: "your homecoming will be my homecoming," "if in beginning twilight of winter will stand," and "enter no silence in the blood whose flesh"; and one epigram worthy of Minnermos:

wild (at our first) beasts uttered human words
—our second coming made stones sing
like birds—
but o the starhushed silence which our third's

One can only say *Ad multos annos*. The serious weighing of E. E. Cummings began more than thirty years ago, with Richard Blackmur's magisterial and friendly attack in *Hound & Horn*, and there has been nothing of equal value since then. Now we must have the reassessments.

As of Louis MacNeice—although it must be confessed that this very appealing poet has hardly been assessed at all. *The Burning Perch* (Oxford University Press, \$3.75) has about it even less of the posthumous aura than the interrupted poetry of Cummings. It is graceful, deliberately slight and underplayed, disdainful of the great and general audience:

. . . for whom Lares, Penates,
And all their kind are nothing but
rhetoric,
Funerary urns from the supermarket.

MacNeice was one of the Auden constellation that sailed into our ken early in the Thirties, and many of us thought at the time that he was the most promising of them all. Yet he never won the recognition that Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis have enjoyed, though neither of them, at first, was predictably his superior. Like John Wheelwright and John Peale Bishop in our country, he seems to have missed fire, to have become a poets' poet, a rumor among poets, though no less ponderable for that. A classical scholar—a gifted amateur, at any rate—he has always been at his best in the humanistic tradition: one remembers the two fine Eclogues from his first book; later, his tender evocation of the animal epitaphs from the Greek Anthology; his craggy, sonorous rendering of the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus and his exuberant translation, certainly the best in the language, of Horace's "*Solvitur acris hiems*." His last poems are more casual, more "tourist" in tone, than any of these; yet there is a serious playfulness here that is wholly his own, a mode that I find especially touching (the death-pathos again?). And there are brilliant pieces, too: "Children's Games," for example; "The Introduction," a savage requiem for youth and age in love; and the harsh rhetoric—funerary, perhaps, but by no means from the supermarket—of "Ravenna":

What do I remember of Ravenna?
A bad smell mixed with glory, and the
cold
Eyes that belie the tessellated gold.

As a collection *The Burning Perch* is not particularly significant: an *ad interim* book, one would say. It acquires its weight from the unhappy fact that the interim is forever.

So much for elegy. We must turn

now for a briefer glance at some of the other books. Three of them are collections of earlier work, with or without additions: Kenneth Rexroth's *Natural Numbers* (New Directions, hardbound, \$4.50, paperback, \$1.75), Elder Olson's *Collected Poems* (Chicago University Press, hardbound, \$6.50, paperback, \$2.45), and Babette Deutsch's *Collected Poems: 1919-1962* (Indiana University Press, \$4.50). These names are familiar to anyone who reads contemporary poetry at all, and it would be idle in a review of this nature to do more than call attention to them, noting that the civility and accomplishment are substantial but regularly disturbed by a sort of hollow portentousness.

IT is the prophetic fuss, the preternatural solemnity during the emissions of symbolic cliché, that makes the tone hollow. I find it so more often than not in Mr. Olson's academic verse; and even Miss Deutsch is capable of this kind of portentousness, exemplified by the opening of "The Song," which she reprints in her collection:

Oh, bitter-hearted me, thrice-parted
me,
What Pythagorean discipline will
wring
From discord, harmony?
And where, out of this quarreling
breast
Shall peace be found?

Fortunately Miss Deutsch is not always so Pythagorean, and it is to the more relaxed pleasures of her work that readers will turn for comfort.

Natural Numbers is subtitled "New and Selected Poems," but one hopes that the "selection" is only *ad hoc*, for it is ruthless in its rejections and revisions of poems long and gratefully remembered. Possibly the new poems were felt to be too slight to stand by themselves, and indeed they only mark time, not an advance; but it was wrong, I think, to fill out the necessary number of pages with the *disjecta membra* of so much that was superlatively good in its original context. At best, this collection will serve to send new readers back to the bold, varied, amorous, lyric didacticism of Mr. Rexroth's extensive work already in print.

The African Boy, by E. N. Sargent (Macmillan, \$3.95), is the strangest of these new books and one of the more disturbingly provocative. It is a lyric, or series of lyrics: anthropological—African, primitive; ritual—circumcision, female; ecstatic—the rite is evoked in the consciousness of the participants themselves. There is a brief but impressive bibliography of learned sources, ending with the Ministry of Education of Ibadan, Nigeria. There are clarifying

drawings of ritual tattoo signs. The author is named but in no way particularized. So far, one would say, so bad: primitive poetry, like primitive music—African, American Indian, Bedouin, Mongolian, anything else—is generally the hollowest of all possible amens, the quintessence of boredom, except (of course) to the anthropological and other experts involved. *The African Boy*, however, is an exception of another kind: the primitive material has been transmuted by lyric and dramatic art. How "authentic" Mr. (or Mrs., or Miss) Sargent's scholarship may be, I have no way of knowing; but I am perfectly willing to go along with him in this poem because the depth, the color, the passionate impetus of the writing move independent of questions of authority. There is always the danger of being had, certainly, of being dazzled by sheer virtuosic hocus-pocus. All orgiastic writing—think of the choruses of the *Bacchae*—risks the sudden laugh that will deflate the whole apparatus. The Sargent poem works, nevertheless, in all its terror and physical repulsiveness, and works towards a powerful affirmation of love.

For a variety of reasons (especially the fact that, as editor of the Yale Series of Younger Poets, I introduced his first book), it would probably be better taste on my part to refrain from saying anything at all about Alan Dugan's *Poems 2* (Yale University Press, hardbound, \$3.50, paperback, \$1.25), and I shall content myself with asserting

again that this is a major voice in contemporary poetry and that it becomes more compelling as the new evidence accumulates. Let others assess that evidence; my concern now is with Miss Carrier, Miss Miller, and Mr. Rago.

Constance Carrier's *The Poems of Propertius* (Indiana University Press, \$4.95) is a complete translation of that difficult and tormented Roman poet, and it is a handsomely persuasive accomplishment. Our ideas about Propertius, assuming that we have any at all, are likely to be colored by Ezra Pound's "Homage"—a splendid poem on its own terms, but remote enough from the Propertius it pretends to recreate. Miss Carrier's work, scholarship and poetry combined, brings us closer to a real man than Pound's romantic pastiche allows us to get. He is seen, of course, through her eyes, as he is expressed by her art; and I suspect that the feminine pronoun is important in this situation. A man may translate Sappho, and without more loss than translation always involves, because Sappho exists chiefly in fragments; but a woman translating Propertius, who has come down to us relatively intact, is almost bound to impose her femininity upon the male sensibility of the poet. The matter is undeniably erotic; the manner, in Latin, could hardly be more male. Miss Carrier has not consciously altered or heightened anything in the text, and she has given us a body of love poetry that is psychologically as engrossing in English as it is in the original language;



"One of us is an impostor."

but there is a softness in her poems, a kind of winsome liquescence, that suggests Cynthia rather more than Cynthia's lover. I do not intend this as more than an observation, certainly not as a complaint. Indeed, my only serious complaint is technical: that the elegiac couplet of the Latin is distorted by Miss Carrier's x-a-x-a rhyme scheme, which dilutes the distich by enforcing quatrains, even though the quasi-stanzas are not typographically divided. It would have been better, I think, to avoid any reminiscence of the Latin structure.

Henry Rago's poems, *A Sky of Late Summer* (Macmillan, \$3.95), are brought together here in a distillation of the work of the last ten years. It is a quiet and graceful collection, especially effective in its disposition of melodic nuances:

The willow shining
From the quick rain,
Leaf, cloud, early star
Are shaken light in this water:
The tremolo of their brightness: light
Sung back in light.

A fragment only; but one perceives that the poet knew what he wanted to do and did it, which happens less often than you would think. The fact that I prefer another way of doing—Dugan's, for instance, or MacNeice's, or Rexroth's—is only of autobiographical interest. Pure music has its praise, too; and that is what the best of *A Sky of Late Summer* is.

Vassar Miller's new poems, *My Bones Being Wiser* (Wesleyan University Press, \$1.45), reiterate the fusion of sensual and spiritual love that has been celebrated with insistent power in her earlier work. The mode is decadent, certainly, and at times her handling of it would excite the professional interest of Mario Praz; but her intensity, when she is not merely enlarging upon a conceit or indulging in *delectatio morosa*, makes poems that persist in the mind. She is indiscriminating as well as sensational, however, and there are occasions when any platitude will serve:

Popes and silly girls have visions,
but me, lost in the desert of myself,
Christ and His holy angels
have left severely alone.

And I must leave, "severely alone," the remaining evidence of John Ciardi's largesse. None of it, I think, presses upon the heels of any of the work that I have mentioned. Much of it is from or for the supermarket, funerary or otherwise. Some of it is inert. And some of it, I'm convinced, doesn't exist at all: a mirage in the spume that surrounds that siren on the rocks, your poetry editor.

The Saving Remnants of Grace

Extreme Magic, by Hortense Calisher (Little, Brown, 260 pp. \$5), comprised of eight short stories and a novella, scrutinizes the stitching in the patchwork of human relations. David Boroff, who teaches English at NYU, concentrates as a critic on contemporary American fiction.

By DAVID BOROFF

THE RHYTHMS of literary recognition are hard to fathom, but there seems little doubt that Hortense Calisher's reputation is in the ascendancy. For some years now she has been writing stories and novels marked by firm integrity of purpose and scrupulous craftsmanship.

Miss Calisher can be "placed" in two ways: as a *New Yorker* writer (though she is not abundantly represented in the pages of that magazine), and—without even the faintest pejorative intent—as a woman writer deriving from the tradition of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather. In the *New Yorker* manner, she offers the small tilt of awareness rather than the explosive revelation, vignettes of grace under pressure

rather than existentialist travail. As a woman writer, she is concerned with those junctures of experience in which the amenities of our civilization are threatened, and with the sad, shabby, sometimes ennobling ways in which the patchwork of human relationships is somehow maintained. It is easy to say, therefore, what Miss Calisher is not. She is no hipster goddess, no cheerleader for sexual epiphanies, no architect of new novel forms designed to end the novel. She writes in a humanistic tradition, which seems spacious enough for her needs and which she has significantly enriched. The intensity of her commitment is also reflected in her prose. She is an immaculate stylist, a precisionist of the utmost rigor, and an arresting phrase-maker. If the compass of her writing is fairly narrow, there is an admirable consistency about her work.

Extreme Magic consists of a novella—the title story—and eight short stories that have appeared during the past decade in a variety of magazines, including *The New Yorker* and *Harper's Bazaar*. One or two are little more than extended anecdotes, like the opening story, which is a spoof on the study of phonetics. But the modesty of Miss



"Oh, stop sizing everyone up and come join the fun."