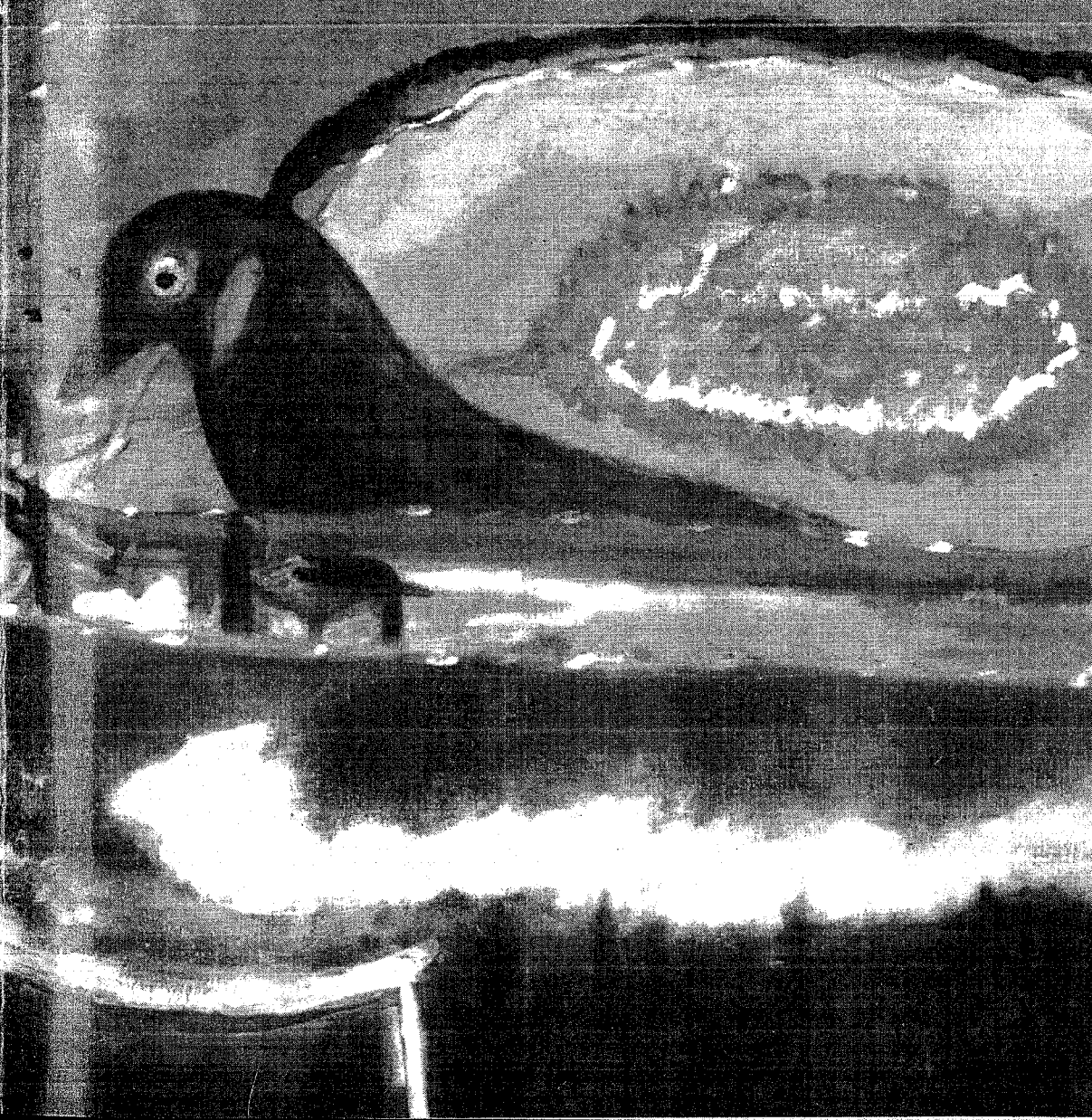


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exile, and those who are not usually offer the stance of an internal emigré. The vicious official censorship system prevents publication of the fiercest oppositional verse by exiles, but there is still a strong sense of self-mutilation, as if the poets are scrutinizing the shackles which link them to the exigencies of dictatorship. As the much-censored Garton Sandifolo puts it, 'Should I, perhaps, sew my lips/ With wires and tie my legs with chains?' *The Haunting Wind* shows effectively, and often movingly, that it is still possible to be in exile while remaining physically at home.

HERBERT LOMAS

Old Soldiers

Collected Poems by Henry Reed (O.U.P. £20)

A Time for Fires by Vernon Scannell (Robson Books. £10.95)

The Man with the Night Sweats by Thom Gunn (Faber. £5.99 & £11.99)

I wish I liked Reed's poems more than I do. During World War II I rejoiced like everyone at 'Naming of Parts' – that diagram of the tedium of soldiering. I loved the impersonation of Eliot in 'Chard Whitlow', and later the toxic apotheosis of Elizabeth Lutyens as a difficult Tablet to swallow in the radio plays.

This fun stands up. In his 'Introduction', however, Stallworthy attempts to compare Reed at his solemn best to

'Little Gidding'. The argument is sometimes persuasive enough to make me ready to reconsider my 1946 impression that *A Map of Verona* was boringly written. But no: Reed is simply not interesting enough linguistically.

E. M. Forster was inspired to write to Reed after hearing his Christmas Eve poem, 'The Return', on the BBC in 1944. He saw in the poem 'the idea that the only reality in human civilization is the unbroken sequence of people caring for one another'. The sentiment must have made him overlook the clichés and doggerel:

We have been off on a long voyage, have we
not?
Have done and seen much in that time, but
have got

Little that you will prize, who are dancing
now
In the silent town whose lights gleam back
from our prow.

Reed simply and surprisingly doesn't write well. Every noun must have its adjective, sometimes two, and the adjectives and adverbs are not even interesting. In passages chosen for praise we find 'the reluctant leaden air', 'a mature unsullied grace', 'dim in the dusk and high, / His mansion is proudly set', or 'the sun and the shadows bestow / Vestments of purple and gold'. Sub-Auden these are, perhaps, but they'd be unacceptable even in prose: no sentiments can redeem such defunctness. At his best, Reed writes like this:

And surely (and almost now) it will happen,
and tell me

This is one of the best poems of sad exile: in living Reed used a Sitwellian impersonation to disguise – a surprise to me – his working-class background, and

I read
the language of imprisonment and fear

boy's' and 'So when you gnawed my armpits' – sit oddly with the would-be Yeatsian, metaphysical, but dingy pretension of feebly-translated Cavalcanti:

*Love takes its shape within that part of me
(A poet says) where memories reside.
And just as light marks out the boundary
Of some glass outline men can see inside
So love is formed by a dark ray's invasion
From Mars, its dwelling in the mind to make.*

The title poem has some rhythm and feeling in it but is not verbally adroit – 'world of wonders', 'my flesh reduced and wrecked', 'I cannot but be sorry', and so on – and the only images are a running one of a shield, of all things, and a final mention of an equally unfocussed avalanche. But 'Seesaw', modelled on a Blake song, could almost be by Blake:

Days are bright,
Nights are dark,
We play seesaw
In the park.

And 'An Invitation' – to his brother – has the pleasant easyspeak of a chatty epistle by Auden.

'A Sketch of the Great Dejection', too, is surprising in its dignity, for here the poet is facing his own 'inner and outer famine' without subterfuge. Even here the poet is 'without potent words, inert', as the protagonist admits: phrases like 'marshes of privation', 'the uneven lands were without definition'. But the speaker recognizes in this graveyard, sterile both emotionally,

imaginatively, and verbally, the only place of healing:

I fared on and, though the landscape did not
change,
it came to seem after a while like a place of
recuperation.

I found the close looks at animals, plants and down-and-outs potentially to my taste, but it puzzled me how someone who could track so precisely and concretely, in 'Yellow Pitcher Plant', a fly's ingestion and digestion by an insectivorous plant, could write so leadenly elsewhere, as in the clichés and abstractions mined for this mocking bird:

... And almost mounting to
Fulfilment, thus to give
Such muscular vigour to a note so strong,
Fulfilment that does not destroy
The original, still-unspent
Longings that led it where it went
But links them in a bird's inhuman joy
Lifted upon the wing
Of that patched body, that insistence
Which fills the gardens up with headlong
song.

A bar reverie like 'In Time of Plague' is not only prose but dull prose; and the most emphatic rhythms often seem recollections of well-known poems one can't quite place:

The blank was flesh now, running on its
nerve,
This fair-topped organism dense with
charm,
Its braided muscle grabbing what would
serve,
His countering pull, his own devoted arm.

Is this the dampening influence of Yvor Winters, or the American environment's easy acceptance of portentous verbosity? Or is it that Gunn is not really interested in his subjects, merely going through the motions?

Distinctly more life returns with the elegies for dead friends, and these are the best poems in the book. 'Lament' for a friend, evidently one of many dying of AIDS, acquires a patient strength through attentiveness and convincing concern. An Elizabethan lilt gets into the trochees of 'Words for Some Ash'. Many of the elegies are reports rather than poems, but, as such reports can do, they waken fellow-feeling and commiseration; and, when Gunn is more deeply engaged, the few best of these threnodies justify the book and are reminders that Gunn is an outstanding talent.

Selected Books

ALAN SEYMOUR

Gossip

Almost a Gentleman by John Osborne (Faber. £14.99)

My John Osborne has always seemed to be different from most people's John Osborne, and that is entirely to do with an Australian upbringing. All societies have their hierarchies; Australia, like the U.S., tends to grade people according to the status consonant with their

type of work and/or money. That some have more clout than others is undeniable, but age-old divisions according to class and caste don't – for historical reasons, can't – exist to the still observable extent that they do in Britain, especially England. In the mid-'50s we'd read about Britain's 'Angry Young Men' (one crusty old critic referred to them as 'Petulant Boys') and when, as an up-and-coming local writer, I was invited by the Sydney Morning Herald to write a feature article on the phenomenon, I tried to do justice to it from my readings of the British press. *Look Back in Anger* was performed in Sydney within, I think, a year of its Royal Court premiere, but produced no controversy. Jimmy Porter was saying nothing we hadn't said a thousand times – except that out protest was directed at the moribund Menzies political Establishment and Cold War conformity. The energy of the rhetoric was exhilarating, but some of Jimmy's protest we thought superficial and vulgar. 'No more great causes?' At a time when millions were deeply anxious of the possibility of terminal wipe-out by nuclear war?

Only when I came to London in the early '60s and observed with a certain shocked fascination the depth and extent of class divisions and the adroitness with which they were maintained (the working classes apparently happy to connive at the convention), to say nothing of the limitless range of petty snobberies, did I begin to comprehend why Osborne's play had had such an effect. Then, sharing a literary-discussion platform with John and