End of an Impulse

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NEW WRITING
AND
DAYLIGHT

SUMMER
1943

THE HOGARTH PRESS
37 MECKLENBURGH SQUARE
LONDON, W.C.1

FIRST PUBLISHED JUNE 1943

This book is produced in complete conformity with the authorised economy standards

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY THE GARDEN CITY PRESS LIMITED
AT LETCHWORTH, HERTFORDSHIRE

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Millions fated to flock
Down weeping roads to mere oblivion—strike me
Dumb as a rooted rock.

Here humanity is represented in the dark infinite which surrounds it and which belongs to it. The poets who were trying to embrace the complete man in their works, have now discovered his metaphysical depth. For them now Man is more than a mere physical, psychological and social reality; he is also a metaphysical one. And that makes him infinite. Infinite as his solitude, or eternity.

This new image of man is now to be found not only in Cecil Day Lewis's poems, but also in Stephen Spender's recent poems—in the end of *The Ambitious Son*, in *Fates*, and in the all-embracing *Elegy*—and with a disturbing and powerful suggestiveness in John Lehmann's last poems. In his prose poems *Vigils*, the person addressed is seen "out there, in that black, heaving desert of the sea," or "among the white skulls and sandstorms of Africa," in the terrifying emptiness surrounding man's life. This empty space and the greatness of man in it, of man who fills the boundless void with the boundlessness of his solitude and despair, are suggested with the most haunting power in *Summer Story*. Here are the last lines of the poem:

. . . Those comrades from the citadel

One afternoon of dust and songs
Turned and were swallowed in the glare;
Yet still goodbye, though few remained
Grew a weed of rank despair,

Till I was left alone to meet
(As I had always known must be),
In the damp house, at summer's end,
The dark Lieutenant from the sea.

The poetry of the 'thirties has not been in vain, since it led to this new land, which, although it is not the country this poetry was dreaming of, is a space in which man is seen in all his greatness. No one thinks that Colombus failed because instead of discovering the route to Cathay, he discovered America. The poets we have considered here started their voyage dreaming of a new man. They did not find this man in flesh, but, instead of him, when one night they stranded upon the rock of necessity, an image of man that exceeded in greatness all they had ever dared to dream of, was revealed to them. Their failure was their success.

HENRY REED

THE END OF AN IMPULSE

WHENEVER our art declines, we are tempted to blame history for it. Yet it would be unreasonable to blame history for the present decline of the lyric and the short story, for these appear to be earnestly bent on their own decline, and to have chosen carefully the paths it shall take. Little remains of the short story but its shortness; it has become increasingly its habit to have so little story in it that now, if its action spreads over more than a day, one wonders if it is not trespassing on the domain of the novel. This static quality is rarely compensated for by the one thing that can justify it, penetrating observation of the point at which the story stands still. There is a parallel to this atrophy in the disintegrated form and the trivial content of many contemporary lyrics. "Decadence" is a word with unfortunate and often ridiculous associations, but it can be used literally of the present state of poetry, since one can point to certain definite things, once healthy and promising, which have decayed; and one can trace the process of decay. It is of a surprisingly thorough-going character, for not only has technical accomplishment degenerated; the general morality of the poetry-producing class—it is big enough to-day to be called a class—has degenerated with it. And though there are several young poets writing who possess, in varying degrees, individual voices and, assuming that such a thing is possible, a sense of objective dedication, they are vivid exceptions in their generation.

If one attempts generalisations about lyric poetry, superb misfits are apt to prove one wrong. But tentatively one may remark how much good lyric poetry seems to derive from a background of consciousness which is fairly coherent to the poet himself, and how much bad lyric poetry is the journalistic exploitation of a bright idea or a private reaction. We observe that the best work of a good poet of our own time, Mr. W. H. Auden, is fairly consistently and naturally related to a background of consciousness whose area each poem does a little to enlarge. It is not easy, perhaps, to define this background; but one may say of Mr. Auden that this work is concerned with the building up of a vision of behaviour which shall take account of the limits to our freedom of will; it is accompanied by an increasing curiosity about ethics, and an increasing religiousness. One is thinking here only of Auden's best; that this vision is in recent years

presented more and more mechanically, does not alter its validity. He may at times paraphrase his sources woodenly :

> Nowhere else could I have known
> Than, beloved, in your eyes
> What we have to learn,
> That we love ourselves alone :
> All our terrors burned away
> We can learn at last to say :
> " All our knowledge comes to this,
> That existence is enough,
> That in savage solitude
> Or the play of love
> Every living creature is
> Woman, Man and Child."

But at his best, even when introducing his favourite concepts (Eros, the Just) rather glibly, he can express his vision movingly :

> Defenceless under the night
> Our world in stupor lies ;
> Yet, dotted everywhere,
> Ironic points of light
> Flash out wherever the Just
> Exchange their messages :
> May I, composed like them
> Of Eros and of dust,
> Beleaguered by the same
> Negation and despair,
> Show an affirming flame.

This relation to a background, or a vision, or whatever we choose to call it, and the gradual development of it, the sense of a dedication to something outside the mere fact of writing, is outstandingly not true, on the other hand, of many of the younger poets whose work is sufficiently voluminous and striking for us to judge, nor is it true, in my opinion, of the later work of such a poet as Mr. Stephen Spender. The mere indulgence of strong emotions is not particularly profitable in poetry ; private suffering is only tolerable in art when it is related to a general penetrating insight into human consciousness. It is true that many poets are to-day depicting things about themselves which are perhaps tragic and are at least sad, and which happen in the lives of a few other people. But universality seems to be as little a part of their aim as it is of their achievement. And the most lasting impression one gets to-day is of poets drifting from one moment of inspiration to another, and from one poem to another.

The exhalations from this situation provide the characteristic climate of poetry to-day.

It was not, it seems to me, the climate in days, more buoyant than our own, when the Auden-Spender-Day Lewis group began to publish. And if we are to understand much that is distressing in the condition of poetry in the present year it is to the early 'thirties that one must turn. I belong to a younger generation than the group of writers who emerged at that time ; I share a good deal of the disappointment which most readers feel at what has happened in the later work of some of them ; and I believe their later work in some cases explains and extends defects in their earlier work.

Yet it is fitting, first to pay homage to these writers, and next to try to understand and to focus them, for their influence has been widespread and protracted, and to this influence may be traced things in later poetry with which they are only unwittingly connected. In trying to focus them we shall not—how indeed should we ?—get much help from the poets themselves, though we may at other times be glad of their efforts to interpret each other. But it is always important not to take a group of writers at its own assessment. And this group seems steadily and always, to have misinterpreted itself as a group of *rebels*. This conception seems to have been prompted by nothing more substantial than the transient ebullience of political enthusiasm. In connection with their idea of themselves it is interesting to note their idea of their forerunners. Mr. John Lehmann, writing in 1940, says of " the giants of the 'twenties " :

> " . . . however much they fell out of fashion with the vanguard of the intellectuals in the next decade, and however much they may be neglected by the general reading public in years to come, it is difficult not to conclude that their achievement was very great, and that in the eventual perspective of history it will be recognised as such."

Yet to any approaching modern literature during the 'thirties, the " giants of the 'twenties " still seemed the outstanding figures of the time. The completest and most important works of the 'thirties were *The Waves*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion*, *Finnegans Wake*, and the later plays and poems of Yeats. And growing up in their shadow were admirable smaller buildings of which any generation in its first decade of writing might be proud—Auden's *Poems* (1930) and *Look, Stranger !* Spender's *Poems* (1933) and *Trial of a Judge*, MacNeice's *Poems* (1936), *The Earth Compels*, and his translation of the *Agamemnon*, Isherwood's *Lions and Shadows*. That is how in skeleton form the

'thirties seem to me to look now ; put on the end of the 'twenties, that is how they gradually emerged into one's view.*

These later works, however far from perfect, however provincial the youthful vision of some of them appeared when contrasted with that of their mature contemporaries, were positive accomplishments ; and there was much more that was promising by them and by writers associated with them. As late as 1937 it was still possible to feel a great interest in their future ; and to feel that MacNeice in his apologia, *Modern Poetry : A Personal Essay*, published in 1938, was writing about a movement of great vitality. Yet looking at the relevant pages in John Lehmann's *New Writing in Europe*, published a few years later, one felt that though Mr. Lehmann's comments were equally detailed and penetrating one was reading about ghosts.

If one considers the developments of certain of them, one may see why. Two only of the poets of the time seem to me to have followed a normal line of progress : Mr. MacNeice, though he has never extended his range very far, has never lost his characteristic poise, and the best lyrics in his last volume *Plant and Phantom* have all the old radiance, music and colour ; Mr. Charles Madge, a poet of limited output, and oddly neglected, published in 1941 his second volume, *The Father Found*. It contains the most difficult poetry of our day, yet the simpler poems are of an eloquence unsurpassed by his contemporaries, and even in his most impenetrable moments he strikes one by his assurance of language and rhythm.

It is the later work of Day Lewis, Auden and Spender that is surprising. It is only in recent years that Day Lewis has become as considerable as his contemporaries. His "New Country" period now appears as a prolonged effort in a mistaken direction ; and if one wanted a parody of that period it is to Mr. Day Lewis's work that one would go. Lately, however, his work has found naturalness and grace, and his latest poems are remarkable for their beauty and warmth. The later work of Auden and Spender—infinitely the most spectacular of these writers in their beginnings—has been, in the opinion of some even of their more generous contemporaries, quite extraordinarily disappointing. Auden's *New Year Letter*, indeed, casts light on unsatisfying features always apparent in his work. Quite apart from his gifts as a poet, he has always been an extremely brilliant versifier ; though perhaps less brilliant than some of his colleagues suggest, for when writing in

* To these books should, of course, be added works of distinction by less widely publicised writers : Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, for example, and Miss Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*, by writers whose position between these two generations reminds one of the absurdity of such a division.

difficult verse-forms taken from earlier writers or traditions, he regularly simplifies them in some way (an example of this is the *Letter to Lord Byron*, a notable exception the brilliant *sestina* in *Look, Stranger !*). Auden's frequent adaptation of other writers' manners leads him to be regarded favourably as a virtuoso, unfavourably as a *pasticheur*. The former is, I think, nearer the truth, but the effect of his particular kind of virtuosity on his later work has been disastrous. His own idiom is individual, recognisable (and sadly imitable), but he has developed only its potentialities for jocularity, sentimentality and preaching. Consequently the poetic instrument fit to synthesise the different aspects of his thought and vision and to explore them further has never been satisfactorily fashioned. In *New Year Letter* one is greatly struck by the inadequacy of the medium of expression to the frequent grandeur of the ideas : he has taken the light rhyming couplets used in Butler's *Hudibras* and elsewhere, rendered them invertebrate by the extirpation of their characteristic cæsura and applied them to philosophical subject matter which they merely render banal. The result, though the intellectual sources might have enabled such a writer to produce his first great work, is a poem which only duty compels one to read twice.

> Yet our equipment all the time
> Extends the area of the crime
> Until the guilt is everywhere ;
> And more and more we are aware,
> However miserable may be
> Our parish of immediacy,
> How small it is, how, far beyond,
> Ubiquitous within the bond
> Of an impoverishing sky,
> Vast spiritual disorders lie.

The sonnets in *Journey to a War*, though one may discover moving ones among them, show a similar misapplication of another poet's technique : the manner of Rilke, emerging from a different experience, is grotesquely unsuited to this field of exploration. (One is reminded of the questionable uses to which certain prose writers have put Kafka.) It is as an artist, as a maker of poems, and not as a thinker, that Auden seems to fail in his later works. One may, for example, share, as I do, his belief in the theories of Groddeck ; yet his versification of these—as in the opening of the poem *Pascal*—can induce (to parody Coleridge) an *unwilling suspension of belief*, a "poetic distrust."

Mr. Spender is a more difficult poet to deal with, and I have

already hinted at some of the reasons for the disappointment one feels with *Ruins and Visions*. Others I deal with later. His most successful works, since the fine concluding poems of his first volume, are his play, *Trial of a Judge*, and his novel, *The Backward Son*: the more exacting a form is, the longer it has to be worked on, the more successful he is with it. Both works are highly disciplined and well executed, and the novel, apart from its choice of epigraph, displays here and there the merciful gift of humour which sometimes breaks into Spender's reviewing. When one reads them one sees more clearly that the principal damaging factors to Spender's lyric verse have been his self-pity, his lack of a self-critical faculty, and his assumption that his private life must interest all.

I have dwelt on these developments, because they contribute greatly to the picture of to-day. In the 'thirties, as we have seen, writers who had already great achievements to their names, continued to increase their range. Of these only Mr. Eliot remains; he is still the most interesting writer of our time; but his presence does not compensate for the absence of flourish in poets who are in their thirties. And "history," or the war, cannot account for this.

What, we may ask, has gone? I spoke earlier of a background, a coherent reference, in the work of Auden. If we return to the early 'thirties we shall notice that the young poets of that time *all* actually had, however fortuitously, something in the nature of a background. It was perhaps accidental, it was certainly impermanent and incapable of development, but it gave their work as a whole a coherence which the obscurity of occasional separate poems did not destroy. It was a background of shared ideas: they were, with the exception of MacNeice, communists, though rarely of an orthodox kind, or of a kind tolerable to orthodoxy.

The common background their political beliefs provided seems to have deputised for a truer background of apprehension and understanding. And it gave them, when their work began to be published, the appearance of being fully armed from birth. Their ideas also provided a foreground: their work was by no means uniform in style, diction or form; but their imagery and scenery inevitably had a great deal in common, and a parallel to the list of quotations which Mr. Lehmann has recently compiled as representative of to-day's poetry at its most "pooled" could be compiled from the anthologies "New Signatures" and "New Country." The common lingo of that time is no longer sufficiently living to give pleasure, though it seems to me more satisfying than the common lingos of to-day; can it be that

it is already sufficiently dead to induce nostalgia? A foreground and background were not all that these men had in common. There was the deeper background of their own position in society—again it was something they shared, a common upper middle-class origin, and this seems to have held them together even more effectively than their opinions. One is, throughout their early work, enormously conscious of their origins. Perhaps their world seems doubly solid as compared with the world which has succeeded it, for its more sensitive members were drawn together by a knowledge of its impending collapse. It is less easy to-day to reach out across the rubble and the fallen masonry; and perhaps it does not greatly matter.

The effect of this group on the subsequent generation was appalling, for in addition to the purely poetic influence which it was destined to have on its successors, its moral influence was extreme. Unity and success: these were what the younger generation noticed particularly about their predecessors; and to these things must be added the obscurity which was the characteristic of them most widely commented on; it was an obscurity which Auden would later describe as being due partly to inability and partly to swank; it was also partly due, one imagines, to indifference to an audience from which the artist was financially independent. Consciously or unconsciously, these things were involved in the ego-ideal of the young writers who followed. The latter had neither the common bourgeois background of the Auden-group, nor, it seems, the same amount of inter-communication; and communism was no longer attractive or was too exacting; certain poets seemed to decide that a background, a common aim, must therefore be artificially faked to hold people together. And at least one association grew up —they called themselves the Apocalypse—which seems to have been held together by no stronger bond than the fact that six people can shout louder than one. The myth that the Auden-group were rebels had been sedulously fostered by the Auden-group themselves; it was therefore necessary that the newcomers should be rebels also, this time (it was almost a dialectic process) against the politically-conscious, over-intellectualised writers of the early 'thirties. It was not much of a rebellion. It took mainly the form of an occasional cautious dip into the pre-conscious, and was expressed by means of an imagery which dealt with hearty robustness in wind, blood and bones—though never with anything distasteful enough to be interesting. It affiliated itself to a poet of strong and vital gifts, and almost no organising power, Dylan Thomas; its work bore as much relation to his in vitality and daring as that of Fiona MacLeod

does to that of Yeats. Its flowering was brief; and again its writers have found themselves forced back on the problem of earning their own spiritual living.

This has been the nearest approach to anything that could be called a movement since the Auden-group. Possibly the war has prevented the formation of others. But there is a more striking thing which has emerged in recent years, which one feels is a consequence of the flamboyant success of the Auden-group, though the Auden-group is not to be blamed for it; this has been the astonishing increase of competitive spirit in a sphere where competition is the most ravaging of evils. Though there is no reason—as I said at the beginning of these remarks—for inclusive condemnation, one can not unfairly say that some younger writers of to-day recall the struggles to reach the sun that are found among overcrowded vegetation. It is forgotten that art may be produced in the dark, and that advertised argument is not inevitably a sign of virility. In considering a poet's work it is better to ask "Wherein lies So-and-so's magic and power?" than to ask "Who is better than Whom?"

The latter question is the one most often asked to-day. It finds its most perfect enunciation in these grotesque sentences from Mr. Francis Scarfe's *Auden and After*, a study in poetic enslavement:

> "W. H. Auden will also be an important poet. He is a poet who is destined to miss greatness, but who might achieve importance by his synthesis of the typical thought and practice of poetry of his own time. But Spender might yet prove a greater poet: while the place of 'important' poet might well be wrested from him by T. S. Eliot. Eliot is unquestionably a finer poet and a better craftsman, with better taste, a more sane sense of proportion and a firmer control of language. Indeed, Auden owes many of his best qualities to Eliot. Auden has no individual poem which can rival 'Prufrock,' 'Ash Wednesday,' 'The Waste Land,' 'East Coker,' 'Dry Salvages,' unless it be his poem 'Spain,' which would give Eliot a score of five to one against Auden. This is a crude method of assessment, but any reader knowing the two poets will agree that with this quantitative estimate are implied also the great variations of method and style which are covered in Eliot's five poems. Nor has Auden done anything in the drama which, to my mind, Eliot has not done."

That is a fair sample of the literary morality of our day. Poets have been so much interested in the growth and state of their

reputations that their poetry has been left to fend for itself. And if we examine some characteristic points in the technique of modern verse we shall see that the later period has been one of drift.

Young poets, I have suggested, look to their living elders, especially to their immediate predecessors, for sanctions as to what is to be allowed. And the mannerisms of young poets may frequently be licences derived from misinterpreted actions of their forerunners. Two great characteristics in the poetic habits of to-day illustrate this. The first is the well-loved trick of near-rhyme. The effect of this on English poetry has been catastrophic. Yet it began well. In many poems Wilfrid Owen made singularly beautiful use of what have been vaguely called assonance and dissonance. But it is clear that Owen's rhymes set him a problem which only effort, application, a conscious testing of sound, and a perfect ear solved. His near-rhymes are a clear, definite musical *gain*. They are limited in their resource, and one feels that Owen was consious of this. Yeats, who was also using near-rhymes as early as 1916, achieves equally satisfying effects.

There are poems in Auden's first volume which use this device with equal care; it is an irritating device if it becomes a semi-conscious habit, and the rhymes give a definite pleasure in this book, especially in satirical poems such as "Will you turn a deaf ear," and "We made all possible preparations." But after a time the device clearly became—and has largely remained—simply a means of making the writing of verse easier, a great boon to any writer whose principal desire might be to slip down on paper anything that came into his head and to leave it at that. In Auden's second volume of lyrics, *Look, Stranger!* the poems are much more formal, with a corresponding increase in the demands of the rhymes. And we find that the more complex rhyme-schemes are rarely managed perfectly. There is often a vaguely distressing raggedness, due sometimes, one suspects, to the fact that one's ear may be retaining an unsatisfying mixture of resolved and unresolved harmonies, which a casual placing together of true and false rhymes produces, and which a more cunning organisation would avoid. One does not notice this in MacNeice, whose ear is far more certain. One rarely finds in MacNeice, what is common in Auden, a feeble and disappointing succession of rhymes at the climax of a poem, as at the end of the lovely poem "Fish in the unruffled lakes":

> Sighs for folly said and done
> Twist our narrow days,
> But I must bless, I must praise
> That you, my swan, who have

All gifts that to the swan
Impulsive nature gave,
The majesty and pride,
Last night should add
Your voluntary love.

There is usually enough accomplishment in Auden to compensate for this sort of gaucherie ; but elsewhere the development, or rather desiccation, of rhyme in English is one of its dreariest pages. The rhymes in the later poetry of Spender and the first poetry of some of the younger poets litter their work like dead leaves or scraps of used paper. "*Tomb*," Mr. Auden has said somewhere, "in English is a rhyme for *womb*." An age which finds it an *indiscriminately* appropriate rhyme for team, bomb, therm, farm, limb, Shem, Ham, norm, climb, home and bum, as well as for the plurals of these, is getting near the point where reaction may be wistfully hoped for.

A second and much more serious disintegration has taken place in rhythm. English is a language which, being strongly accented in itself, gives enormous licence to its poets ; its firmness and its pliancy are such as to render rhyme totally unnecessary in poems of any considerable length. It can also juxtapose successfully, without regular pattern, unrhymed lines of different length without the rhythmic impulse being submerged. This fact, discovered in the later days of Shakespeare, when poetry was still being spoken on the stage, was forgotten soon after and not rediscovered till the early days of Eliot. It is essentially a dramatic device, and we see it exploited again in the dramatic meditations of Mr. Eliot's *Gerontion*, and in *The Waste Land*. The elasticity and variety of Eliot's poetry opened up possibilities to the 1930's poets. We find its influence at its most satisfactory in the later poems in Mr. Spender's first volume—it is doubly satisfying because Mr. Spender's diction and material in no way derive from the same source. Mr. Spender has rarely equalled the force and beauty of those poems :

Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields
See how these names are fêted by the waving grass
And by the streamers of white cloud
And whispers of wind in the listening sky.
The names of those who in their lives fought for life
Who wore at their hearts the fire's centre.
Born of the sun they travelled a short while towards the sun,
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.

As his work has gone on one has noticed that the danger implicit in free blank verse has materialised with overwhelming effect.

That danger is the absent-minded insertion of prose, the disappearance entirely of an already liberal pulse ; it is a danger to which unrhymed irregular short lines are even more exposed than long ones. In Mr. Spender's later verse, and in the verse of many young poets, that pulse has vanished, and inevitably the destruction of rhythm has affected the sonority. The disappearance of horizontal melody has been accompanied by the disappearance of vertical counterpoint ; and a fatally nagging note has entered :

In the theatre,
The actors act the ritual of their parts,
Clowns, killers, lovers, captains,
At the end falling on the sword
Which opens out a window through their hearts
And through the darkness to the gleaming eyes
Of the watching masks slightly bored,

Of the audience
Acting the part of their indifference,
Pretending the thrusting pistons of the passions,
Contorted masks of tears and mockery,
Do not penetrate the surface fashions
Covering their own naked skins.

In many poems of recent years unrhymed and casually-rhymed non-strophic verse has tended to become a series of arbitrarily divided prose statements.

The mechanics of poetry are as absorbing and fascinating as those of music, and it would be interesting to trace the brief florescence and atrophy of other innovations ; it would be interesting, for example, to follow the trail of Auden's unrhymed regular stanzas into the work of other poets. It would be interesting to trace the debasement of certain elements in diction. And when poetry reacquires stature, and criticism reacquires detachment, this will be done. At the moment, except in the work of a few independent spirits such as I have named, one has continually a sensation of declining devotion and assiduity, of valuable treasure and discovery debased.

A writer's criticism of his contemporaries is bound to have at best only doubtful validity, for consciously or unconsciously he may be doing little more than devising tests which his own work passes or tries to pass, and which that of others does not. Or he may, in assessing the work of others, be defining the territory in which he himself wishes to work.

There are few writers, however, who have offered definite *advice* to other writers, as Rilke does in his *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*. In these letters, Rilke offers counsel to a younger writer who had submitted poems to him and who is now hardly known save as the recipient of these replies. It is small wonder indeed that Herr Kappus is almost unknown as a poet, for he appears to have taken Rilke's advice almost literally, advice which includes this: "Withdraw into yourself; seek out the necessity that makes you write, and see if its roots push down into the furthest reaches of your heart; and say honestly if you would die if you were forbidden to write. This above all: ask yourself in the deadest hour of your night: *Must* I write?" This is a question so exacting that few poets will ever have the courage to ask it of themselves, and fewer still to answer it. And indeed there is something as amusing and outrageous as it is wise and charming in what Rilke, already the author of a dozen published volumes, says to this young and unhappy man. In his first letter Rilke had said, among other things:

> "You ask me if your verses are good. You ask *me*. You have already asked others. You send them to literary journals. You compare them with other poems and are upset when certain publications send your efforts back. Now (since you allow me to advise you) I beg you to give all this up. Your eyes are turned towards the outside world, which above all you must avoid. . . . Don't write love poems."

This, and much more, Rilke, beloved of modern poets, tells his junior. His advice is difficult, and few will ever take it. But who could call it unhealthy? One thinks of the minor gangsterdom of some contemporary literary life, of the metropolitan literary pubs—and of Rilke gravely counselling *Einsamkeit*; one thinks of the scramble for publication and notice—and of Rilke's *Sie sehen nach aussen;* one thinks of publicly advertised private relationships—and of Rilke's *Schreiben Sie nicht Liebesgedichte*.

But no one will ever pay much attention to warnings so hurtful to the *amour-propre*. The only thing one can hope for, if the decline of poetry is to be stemmed, and if the amount of bad verse published is to decrease, is the gradual resumption of very much higher standards of judgment and criticism. It is observable that young writers of to-day tend more and more to think that literature consists of their own generation and the one immediately before it; if they happen to write of Shakespeare or Milton or Wordsworth, they show signs of being under the impression that they are unearthing a long-neglected master. And our critical standards have come to be based on memories, not of the "best that has been thought and said," but merely of the latest. With our example before them, we may confidently expect that in 1953 young writers will be reading only each other. If so, they will provide themselves with their only audience.

MAY SARTON

TWO AMERICAN POEMS*

Down on the Delta

It's a watery world down on the Delta below
New Orleans where the tourists never go,
Land rich as black gold that the giant river
Has stolen from America, old thief, great giver,
Who brings Kansas, Illinois, Louisiana as a present
To that ocean woman for whom they were not meant,
Creates a tropic tongue under a Flemish sky
Where marshes drip with hyacinth and egrets fly,
A thick explosion of life from the dripping mud—
The river surges through it like a placid god;
Unseen behind the dykes, unseen but near, it shakes
The roots of the small houses and sometimes wakes
Millions of wild geese where the lighted liner passes
Sending a rush of wings up from the shaken grasses,
A god who feeds the plump sleek otter and the hunter,
The trees of golden apples and the anxious planter
Who pays the nigger children to crack whips
Over the greedy rice-devouring crows—a land of ships,
Where the wild fishermen can take their "cajun" gals,
And drink their liquor up and play the slot-machines,
It is a land of great skies and of tropic greens.

But the birds have French names and this is the queer thing
That in the night a song your mother used to sing
May sound out of the darkness and make you weep,
"Au clair de la lune" or the one about the sheep,
And now in evil days for France a bird called "Tricolore,"

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