

A time and a place

ROBIN SKELTON: *Poetry of the Forties*. 269pp. Penguin. 5s.

Mr. Skelton's Penguin anthology *Poetry of the Thirties* was an ingenious compilation backed by an extremely simple thesis: that the decade opened under delusions of left-wing commitment, but the better poets eventually realized the moral and aesthetic errors of their ways. Some bad political poems (mostly about Spain) and some good non-political ones, arranged under appropriate headings, ramméd home this novel and instructive contribution to the history of ideas. Apparently satisfied, the publishers have now invited Mr. Skelton to enter the next decade's promised land. He brings some old quarrels with him:

The mountains and landscapes of Auden are allegorical, and serve as fictive environments for the intellectual quandary; the landscape tends to derive from the concept. Alun Lewis's jungle and Norman Nicholson's Cumberland exist as truths of experience, and their actuality gives rise to speculation and philosophy.

As a judgment on Auden's work, this is inaccurate. Like all poets, he is weakly unspecific at times, but some of his landscapes are as sharply and empirically observed as Lewis's or

Nicholson's — let alone Dylan Thomas's or George Barker's. As an implied characterization of Forties poetry in general, it is also inaccurate. Nobody was reader to meander loosely about the "significance" of places than the overseas soldier or the invasion-fearing civilian. George Bruce's "Kinnaid Head", one of Mr. Skelton's selections, follows twelve lines of description with:

O imprecipitate and very ancient rock
Rejecting the violence of water,
Ignoring its accumulations and strategy,
You yield to history nothing.

The rock comes first and the political metaphor second; but the image is as wrenched, as thin and as arbitrary as any exhibit from the Stalinist chamber of horrors. It is simply a bad poem.

The idea that to write about a specific place is to write specifically dies hard. Mr. Skelton adds a much nuttier notion when he praises the Forties poets' attempt "to grapple with that strange love of one's own place which alone gives meaning to the generalized rhetoric of the politicians". Alone? There is a passion for justice as well as a taste for landscape, and the first is not self-evidently a poorer motor for poetry. In the Thirties many people faked it,

which was very wrong of them. In the Forties they kept quiet about it, partly through distrust of earlier faking. But those who thought they were defending certain political rights and freedoms were not necessarily less wise (either as poets or as people) than those who thought they were defending Welsh hills or English pubs.

It is Eliot's view of history that operates now [i.e., then] and not the view of Marx or Engels. Mr. Skelton blithely remarks apropos of F. T. Prince's "Soldiers Bathing". With such gigantic oversimplification the gods themselves fight in vain.

One can turn with relief from the introduction to the actual selection of poems. The first, after all, is only 16 pages to the second's 210. And Mr. Skelton has done his work very thoroughly. The dating is scrupulous (though he hopes readers will cooperate in the production of an even fuller second edition). The reading behind his choices is obviously wide: this is no mere cobbling together of anthology favourites from a much anthologized period. There are many good poems here, and many others which qualify as interesting specimens. But the overall effect is tendentious.

One can justify, on grounds of space, the decision to exclude those

whose major reputations had already been made by 1940. (Edith Sitwell, after all, wrote some of the best dispatches from the home front). Since this axe spares us Roy Fuller, Dylan Thomas, George Barker, and David Gascoyne, no great distortion has been done. One can also justify the presence of a few "Apocalyptic" poets on the grounds of historical accuracy. The editor is at pains to keep his distance from Trecce, Heath-Stubbs and Fraser in their wilder moods. But his principles are not mere aberrations, any more than Auden's were. One is continually forced back to his opening remarks.

Is it a preference for "love of place" over "wilful pedagogy" that includes Mervyn Peake and excludes Norman Cameron; or that prefers Bernard Spencer's picture-postcard "On a Carved Axle Piece from a Sicilian Cart" to "Frontier" and "Behaviour of Money"; or Bernard Gutteridge's "Tamaris" to "Enemy Dead"? The two Durrell poems here ("Phileremo" and "This Unimportant Morning") are conventional, as is the choice from Keynes, Lewis and Douglas. Henry Reed's "Lessons of War" are there, of course; but the only other work by this neglected writer is that minor prettiness "The Wall", where some-

thing from "The Desert" would have been apter as well as better.

For a man who professedly prefers technique to content (and speaks of the Forties as a return to the "main road" of English poetry), Mr. Skelton is prepared to give much room to technically unadventurous, and sometimes downright incompetent stuff. One of the overriding impressions given by this book is that the Forties saw the total collapse of metre; between loose Eliotesques and laboured brevities there was disastrously little fertile ground. For the first, we have Ruthven Todd's "Personal History":

O my heart is the unlucky heir of the
ages,
And my body is unwillingly the secret
agent

Of my ancestors. . .

For the second Kathleen Raine's

"Woman to Lover":

I am fire
Stilled to water,

A wave
Lifting from the abyss.

The body, Mr. Skelton oddly asserts, returned to English poetry in this decade. From this anthology one might think that the ear had left it, and the mind packed its cases to depart. Fortunately the truth is more curious, more incorrigibly plural, than that; or than this anthology shows.

Pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold

ARNFRID ASTEL: *Notstand*. 119pp. Wuppertal: Peter Hammer. DM 8. HANS PETER KELLER: *Panoptikum aus dem Augenwinkel*. 65pp. Wiesbaden: Limes. DM 6. PETER LEHNER: *ein bisschen mies im kredit*. 80pp. Steinhilber: Anabas. DM 8.40. ROLF DIETER BRINKMANN: *Die Piloten*. 114pp. Kiepenheuer & Witsch. DM 12. HEINER BASTIAN: *Beobachtungen im Luftmeer*. 60pp. Munich: Carl Hanser. DM 9.80. WALTER RICHTER-RUHLAND: *Eine Reise, ein Tag, eine Rose*. 78pp. Wiesbaden: Limes. DM 8.50. VOLKER VON TÖRNE: *Wolfspejel*. 69pp. Berlin: Klaus Wagenbach. DM 5.80. FRITZ VON OPEL: *Zwischen Schatten und Licht*. 63pp. Wiesbaden: Limes. DM 7.50.

Eight collections by little-known poets, one of the best being a professional engineer. They are a mixed bag, in every sense, variously inspired by Pop Art, Papa Brecht, Uncle Sam, and Mother Nature. But half of them are good in their very different ways.

Arnfrid Astel has hitherto been known chiefly as founder-editor of the excellent poetry magazine *Lyrische Hefte*. Like so many other interesting young poets, he made his debut in Peter Hamm's anthology *ausichten* (1966), which included some of the poems in this first collection. *Notstand* is a book of mostly satirical epigrams; many of them are very good indeed. Mostly of three, four, or five lines, though a few are longer, they are worthy successors to Brecht's *Buckweger Elegien*. The Japanese-style three and five-line

poems at once put the reader in mind of Brecht, as do the technique and style. If *Notstand* tends to become somewhat monotonous when read straight through, Astel is wise to stick to what he can do very well. His epigrams are certainly far more striking than the no less satirical grotesques in Peter Lehner's new collection (his sixth since 1955). *ein bisschen mies im kredit*, or the epigrammatic "fragments" of Hans Peter Keller's *Panoptikum aus dem Augenwinkel* (his sixth collection since 1958).

Peter Lehner is probably best known as co-editor of the Swiss anthology *ensemble* (1958); most of his previous collections have also come from small presses. His new book is attractively produced, with four gouaches by Irene Thiele-Peschick, but what it contains is much more "Wort Sport" (the subtitle) than poetry. The author appears unable to leave well alone, is apparently too determined to be clever, so that while several poems have the making of effective epigrams, they suffer both from a sort of verbal clowning, and from not stopping in time. The result is that what is intended as satire too often reads as mere sarcasm.

The prefatory note in Rolf Dieter Brinkmann's *Die Piloten*, for all its echoes of Benn and Brecht, is most refreshing; his attack on the formalism and wilful obscurity of much contemporary German lyric poetry is fully justified. He himself now seeks to produce "public poetry" (and not public poetry, as the gaudy Pop cover of his book suggests). His second collection, *Die Piloten*, is clearly in part a reaction against his first, rather weak one, *was fraglich ist*

wofür. The dedication to Frank O'Hara suggests that he has recently discovered the New York School of Poetry; but *Die Piloten* with its use of the comic strip (and the comic strippers on the cover) also reflects the current Pop Art craze in Germany. These new poems are described as snapshots of the here-and-now, which is fine in theory. In practice they are rather disappointing: a poetry of the little moments which Brecht did so much better in poems like "Entdeckung an einer jungen Frau". The whole ambience of these poems is an updated version of the early Brecht's mythical America: once again German poetry repeats itself. Brinkmann's factitiousness and his eye for significant detail were far more successfully employed in his latest novel, *Keiner weiss mehr*.

Heiner Bastian was one of the poets who read their work at the October 1967, meeting of *Gruppe 47*. He recently spent some time in San Francisco, translating Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and some of the younger American poets; a selection of his translations appeared in the periodical *Azete* (no. 4, 1968). *Beobachtungen im Luftmeer* shows that he has learnt from the William Carlos Williams school of American poetry, apparently via Hans Magnus Enzensberger's *blindenschrift* (1964) and translations of Williams. If this is the case, he has learnt to some purpose, for this is a highly accomplished first volume by a poet who is still only twenty-six. His subject too is everyday reality, but—unlike Brinkmann, whose snapshots for the most part remain pre-poetic material—thanks to his clarity of vision, his logic and

self-discipline, and his eye for striking images, he has produced a book of remarkably even and rewarding poems. He makes the reader work hard to share his discoveries, but the effort is well worth while. *Beobachtungen im Luftmeer* is one of the best first collections to appear in 1968.

Walter Richter-Ruhland's first collection contains poetry of a not dissimilar sort, except that his chosen mentors appear to be Günter Eich and Johannes Bobrowski. In referring to his "lyrische Stenogramme"—the term applied to August Stramm's poems by Herwarth Walden—his publishers are implicitly asking for his work to be judged by the highest standards. *Eine Reise, ein Tag, eine Rose* is a good example of contemporary German poetry, for if one's first reaction is to admire the highly competent, neo-imagistic technique of these poems (German first collections tend to be technically competent), it is not long before one begins to realize that the images do not in fact convey very much—they tend to remain what Kafka called (mere) "Konstruktionen". In short, one wonders whether the poet really has much to say, and whether, if he finds more to say, he will be able to say it in this form. But even if he seems to have his priorities wrong and to be suffering from formalism, this is still a better-than-average first collection.

Very different is *Wolfspejel*, Volker von Törne's fourth collection since 1962, which contains many forms of poem (ballad, *Moritat*, ode, &c.), all of which have the same satirical aim. Which brings us back to Brecht—compare the programmatic "Gegen Verführung". The collection is

uneven; the best things in it are those written in the last year, or so. At his best Volker von Törne is masterly; in the field of savage political satire he has no equal among poets of his generation. Twelve years after his death Brecht's influence and relevance is greater than ever. *Wolfspejel* is as good as any of the neo-Brechtian volumes published in the past decade; but it is not the poetic achievement and advance on Brecht that Enzensberger's *blindenschrift* was.

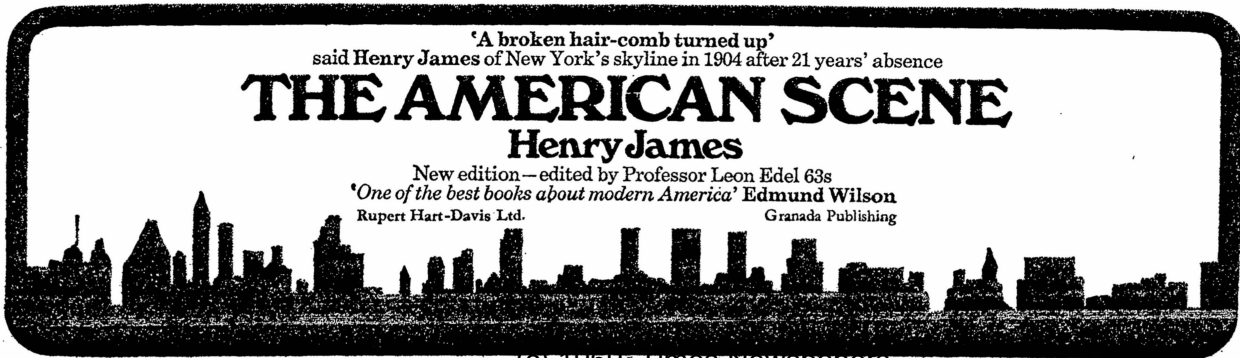
Last, but by no means least, is Fritz von Opel's *Zwischen Schatten und Licht*, a remarkable first book of poems by a distinguished engineer. While it is ironical that a technological pioneer should write in steam-age poetic forms, it is also refreshing to find common prejudices (technocrats don't write poetry; iambic pentameters are out) so convincingly exploded. For the fact is that *Zwischen Schatten und Licht* is another of those poetic exceptions which disprove the rule. The collection includes (another surprise) translations from Rupert Brooke; but it is rather Alun Lewis's "single poetic theme of Life and Death . . . the passion of Love, the coldness of Death" that his own work recalls, for Fritz von Opel's poetry begins where his work as engineer necessarily leaves off. He has something to say, for he is contemporary man par excellence responding to the challenge and remaining mysteries of life; and his style is as timeless as his themes. This is a book which is not only memorable in itself but which ought to put many "professional" poets to shame.

'A broken hair-comb turned up'
said Henry James of New York's skyline in 1904 after 21 years' absence

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