WOOD, OPPENHEIM, AND OTHERS

By William Rose Benét

MY first distinct impression, upon turning over these books, is that Clement Wood has gained in poetic strength while James Oppenheim has lost. Ruth Comfort Mitchell, it seems to me, does adequately what she sets out to do: write narratives in verse, well knit and of considerable human interest. Babette Deutsch and Avrahm Yarmolinsky continue their thorough and sensitive work as translators. To Harcourt's European Library they first contributed "Modern Russian Poetry", and they now add "Contemporary German Poetry". Such adequate translations and well chosen collections are a service to American critics, for purposes of comparison, and a service to the poetic art throughout the world in enlarging our knowledge of its contemporary development in other countries. As for Vachel Lindsay, "Going-to-the-Sun" is a comparatively slight and a somewhat disappointing volume, but it indicates certain interesting things about Vachel.

But first, to return to Clement Wood. Some of his Eagle Sonnets mark his highest present attainment in poetry. They are impressive. They are clearly and courageously reasoned. With all their direct reality they touch exaltation of mood. Lyrically Clement Wood is most uneven. There is a great gulf fixed between his worst and his best. "The Black Rose" is possessed of actual magic. The long poem "Canopus" is richly wrought. Yet often, elsewhere, his taste in words and his ear for cadence somehow fail him. He goes excruciatingly wrong.

There is emotional power and intellectual honesty in "The Tide Comes In" — and just because of these qualities in the book the blunders and blemishes cause acute exasperation. But if there has been a loss in exuberance in this latest of Mr. Wood's volumes, there is also a notable strengthening of fibre. As a pitcher of planets his speed is slackening — but he has a lot more control!

Once James Oppenheim and Clement Wood seemed proceeding along much the same road poetically. Their paths have parted. Under the influence of Oppenheim's work Wood often wrote at his worst. Oppenheim, in that period, was at about his best, however. In the days of "Songs for the New Age", he was trenchant and memorable. Wood has now turned somewhat away from the mere celebration of ecstasy, just at the time when Oppenheim has found a new ecstasy — an ecstasy he celebrates in "Golden Bird", averring that this is the one book of his he would give to those who wish really to know his work.

I shouldn't. I should give them "Songs for the New Age", of the period before psychoanalysis set in. The present book is sometimes sonorous, often pungent with semi-biblical exhortation. But it is far more rhetoric than poetry. The only rhetoric it distinctly challenges is the rhetoric of King Solomon; and King Solomon could take it on with his eyes blindfolded and one hand tied behind him. That is the whole trouble. King Solomon, and the rest of the Old Testament in the King James version, have come to us through translators who were positive geniuses.

Yes, I know that the meaning and the message of "Golden Bird" is something entirely different. Granted. And I think it is often mere inflation. James Oppenheim has power and passion as a poet; he can command beautiful rhythms, but this celebration will never be another Song of Songs, and that is its direct attempt. I remember it only as a vigorous chanting — that failed — and the words are gone. Oppenheim will again do better. "The Mystic Warrior" seemed to me of far more interest.

These opinions are offered merely as my own opinions, perhaps stated too emphatically. Prolixity and inflation of attitude threaten both these poets. But Clement Wood seems to me to be turning aside from the danger to his poetry and Oppenheim, for the moment, to be encountering it. That is all. And it is merely one opinion.

I have myself written a prefatory note to Ruth Comfort Mitchell's book and perhaps I may refer readers to that as my fairly succinctly expressed personal opinion. I feel that she possesses unusual powers of sympathetic intuition and a very chivalrous nature. She has an ability in graphic narrative, though I often differ with her ideas of the proper technique.

Vachel Lindsay is turning from poetry — he has resented the label of "jazz poet" (a rôle he abhors!) — to his first love, pictorial art. "So Much the Worse for Boston" is the best poem in "Going-to-the-Sun", but the evidences of a return to drawing pictures and a turning to the Egyptian hieroglyphic are the significant things about the book. These aren't Vachel's best pictures — but I shall treasure forever those of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Queen Victoria.

I cannot follow German poetry in the original, so whether or no the Deutsch-Yarmolinsky translations are entirely accurate I cannot avouch. All I can say is that they are most inter-

esting to read and that poetic experimentation in Germany seems to be flourishing. For anyone whose interest in poetry extends beyond poetry written in English both of the Deutsch-Yarmolinsky volumes, "Modern Russian Poetry" and "Contemporary German Poetry", should be valuable. They are translations exhibiting the skill of an able linguist and the inspiration of a fine poet.

Golden Bird. By James Oppenheim. Alfred A. Knopf.
The Tide Comes In. By Clement Wood. E. P. Dutton and Co.
Going-to-the-Sun. By Vachel Lindsay. D. Appleton and Co.
Narratives in Verse. By Ruth Comfort Mitchell. D. Appleton and Co.
Contemporary German Poetry, An Anthology. Chosen and translated by Babette Deutsch and Avrahm Yarmolinsky. Harcourt, Brace and Co.