EIGHT BOOKS OF CONTEMPORARY VERSE[1]

In a recent volume of his poems Vachel Lindsay has some verses in celebration of the fugitive songs hidden in odd corners of newspapers, those bits of flying star-dust which glow for a moment of swift passage through the firmament and vanish, having no home among the eternities. For some have charm and some have feeling and some have a hint of true beauty and some have a magic lilt; but few or none have the imagination and the original underived individuality which, linked with technical skill, make the poetry which lasts. So he celebrates their single bright instant, recognizing that the tentative and the imperfect have, at times, a loveliness which the world would be the poorer without.

It is in this spirit that the reviewer of an armful of books of verse must deal with their fragile contents, judging by abstract standards only when the poets themselves rashly claim that by such standards they be judged; since it is not to posterity that he recommends this poem or that, but to the reader who runs. He will find much that is lovely and memorable.

From the A. E. F. in France comes a collection of poems which will be of profound interest to those unfortunate beings who, by circumstance and those "hostages to fortune" of which Bacon speaks, are, much against their will, left three thousand miles from the front. These "Songs from the Trenches," crude and sterile as many of them are, without much imagination or real poetic impulse, do bring before the wistful Elderly Person at home a bit of the essential spirit of the American Army in France. They are in many keys, from the "lofty and impassioned," known to the trade as "the big bow-wow," to the sentimental and jocose; and though none of them are great as Seeger's "I Have a Rendezvous with Death" is great, there is scarcely any which does not shed some light on the complex psychology of an army fitting itself for a colossal task. The poems were contributed to a prize competition. It is noteworthy that, as usual, the prizes were awarded to the compositions that "sound big" but are made of wood, and withheld from the simpler and truer poems which have wings.

That abomination of honest men known as "literariness" ought to die in the trenches, but it evidently does not. It struts self-consciously through every page of the "Poems" by Geoffrey Dearmer, who—God help him!—was at Gallipoli and the Somme and can still utter the literary mouthings of a dead past:

> "The moment comes when thrice-embittered fire
> Proclaims the prelude to the great attack,"

and so forth. In the face of the eternities, the poet makes phrases in imitation of Pope and Addison. It seems incredible. If Gallipoli could not knock the deadwood out of a man's being, one wonders aghast what can.

There is more "literariness" in "Memory: Poems of War and Love," by A. Newberry Choyce, Lieutenant in the Leicestershire Regiment; but there is here and there a vibrant note which comes near to being the ring of true poetry. "Until You Pass," with its simple, quiet first stanza:

> "And when you search through wounded France
> To find the cross that marks my rest,
> I think the grass will hear you come
> And tell it to my silent breast,"

is not easy to forget; and "My Father" has a courageous simplicity born of a deep emotion:

> "My father was a very simple man;
> I never heard him say a clever word.
> But oh! his heart was warm. I think his voice
> Would be the kindest sound you ever heard. . . .
>
> The only sort of learning that he had
> Was just the names of country flowers that grow
> And animals and birds. He did not seem
> To miss the wisdom other people know."

Anthologies of war poems are plentiful these days, and most of them have one great defect—their editors, being lazy men, have been content to cull from other anthologies, with the result that the same poems by the same poets appear and reappear, and other poems equally memorable languish in obscurity. The editor of "War Verse," "increasingly impressed," as he writes in a prefatory note, "with the fine quality of the war verse contributed by writers unknown or little known," has drawn the poems in his collection from the English newspapers and magazines. The anthology he presents is fresh and copious. "Wireless," from "Punch," has a perfection of its own which no writer of light verse on this side of the Atlantic seems at the moment able to attain:

> "There sits a little demon
> Above the Admiralty.
> To take the news of seamen
> Seafaring on the sea;
> So all the folk aboard ships
> Five hundred miles away
> Can pitch it to their Lordships
> At any time of day.
>
> The cruisers prowl observant;
> Their crackling whispers go;
> The demon says, 'Your servant,'
> And lets their Lordships know;
> A fog's come down off Flanders?
> A something showed off Wick?
> The captains and commanders
> Can speak their Lordships quick.
>
> The demon sits a-waking;
> Look up above Whitehall—
> E'en now, mayhap, he's taking
> The Greatest Word of all;
> From smiling folk aboard ships
> He ticks it off the reel:—
> 'An' may it please your Lordships,
> A Fleet's put out o' Kiel!'"

Arthur Guiterman is of all American poets the one who comes nearest to the English standard in this form. His new volume, "The Mirthful Lyre," has infinite gayety and charm, with a technical adroitness which is a joy to the lover of absurd and complicated rhymes. His "Camouflage" is, or should be,

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[1] Songs from the Trenches: A Collection of Poems by American Soldiers in France. Brought together by Herbert Adams Gibbons. Harper & Brothers, New York. $1.25.
Poems. By Geoffrey Dearmer. Robert H. McBride & Co., New York. $1.
Memory: Poems of War and Love. By A. Newberry Choyce. The John Lane Company, New York. $1.
War Verse. Edited by Frank Foxcroft. The Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York. $2.
The Mirthful Lyre. By Arthur Guiterman. Harper & Brothers, New York. $1.25.
The Grass in the Pavement. By M. E. Buhler. J. T. White & Co., New York. $1.
Songs to A. H. R. By Cale Young Rice. The Century Company, New York. $1.
Twenty. By Stella Benson. The Macmillan Company, New York. 80c.

famous; "The Curse of the Antique" is a joyous romp; "Literature"—

"Ram Chundar, the lyrical Hindoo,
Who dresses as most of his kin do,
In picturesque chuddar and turban,
Is worshiped by circles suburban,"

and so forth, is excellent satire. There are children's poems of grace and tenderness and out-of-door poems in praise of simple pleasures under a clear sky; and mock seriousness which is altogether delicious, as in "Elegy:"

"The jackals prowl, the serpents hiss,
In what was once Persepolis.
Proud Babylon is but a trace
Upon the desert's dusty face.
The topless towers of Ilium
Are ashes. Judah's harp is dumb.
The fleets of Nineveh and Tyre
Are down with Davy Jones, Esquire,
And all the oligarchies, kings,
And potentates that ruled these things
Are gone! But cheer up; don't be sad;
Think what a lovely time they had!"

"The Grass in the Pavement," by M. E. Buhler, is a collection of delicate, spiritual verses, rather diffuse and lacking in vividness, and full rather of poetic feeling than of poetry. "Currency," having for its motto Theodore Roosevelt's "Let us pay with our bodies for our soul's desire"—incidentally one of the most imaginative bits of poetry the war has wrung out of America—has rare dignity and beauty:

"O high of soul, flesh doth not overwhelm,
But is the means wherewith all things to buy!
It is the coin current of the realm
Wherein we live and die.

Upon our far, strange journey to that home
From which we are astray,
The Providence that destined we should roam
Gave us wherewith to pay.

We shall arrive if nobly we aspire,
And, spending flesh to buy the spirit free,
Pay with our bodies for our soul's desire
For perfect liberty."

Cale Young Rice has published many books of verse, among them a short play, "A Night in Avignon," which has a warmth which his lyrical poems lack. "Songs to A. H. R." reveals once more the same fluent technique, marred by such monstrosities as "soul-profound," "highmost," "night's vastity," and the same verbal excitement untouched by imagination. The love songs are tender and conceived in a high strain, but they fail altogether to kindle in the reader a sympathetic tenderness. For the awful suspicion is not to be eradicated that, like Mr. Dearmer at Gallipoli, Mr. Rice, face to face with the eternities, is thinking of the turning of a phrase.

Whatever else one may say against Stella Benson and her volume of poems entitled "Twenty," one cannot accuse them of literary pose. They are both young, but they are distinctly, insistently modern, with no patience for shams; going on no great flights, but in every word unmistakably sincere. The poet looks about and finds life grave and perplexing, a place for high adventure; and she faces it with knitted brows, puzzled, fascinated, exalted. "Twenty" is not an exciting book, but it is bound to be a sympathetic one to readers who are conscious of "an age that is dying" and "one that is coming to birth." "The Cornishman" has a poignancy that will be felt these days not alone in Cornwall:

"At sunset, when the high sea span
About the rocks a web of foam,
I saw the ghost of a Cornishman
Come home.
I saw the ghost of a Cornishman
Run from the weariness of war,
I heard him laughing as he ran
Across his unforgotten shore.
The great cliff, gilded by the west,
Received him as an honored guest.
The green sea, shining in the bay,
Did drown his dreadful yesterday.

Come home, come home, you million ghosts,
The honest years shall make amends,
The sun and moon shall be your hosts,
The everlasting hills your friends:
And some shall seek their mothers' faces,
And some shall run to trysting places,
And some to towns, and other yet
Shall find great forests in their debt.
Oh, I would siege the golden coasts
Of space, and climb high heaven's dome,
So I might see those million ghosts
Come home."

These eight books of contemporary verse are none of them great, in any sense. But none of them is without importance, not even the book of the man who was able to be "literary" anent Gallipoli. For that book furnishes, in the first place, a horrible example of the most approved sort, and, in the second, an opportunity to repeat the ancient platitude that in literature, as in life, it is the sincere who shall inherit the earth.