FOUR POETS

By Louis Untermeyer

LET us say the worst about Herbert Gorman's poetry at once, for its defects are so obvious that, unless they are granted and disposed of first, they are likely to obscure the very definite qualities that distinguish "The Barcarole of James Smith". The worst thing is this: almost half of the work is frankly imitative. Gorman, it is evident, has worshiped at the dissimilar shrines of E. A. Robinson and T. S. Eliot, and a great part of his book is a record of his efforts to join both gods — and free himself from them. The first page is all Eliot, or rather a mirthless parody of his mordant idiom.

> In Ethiopia, the sun
> Shines forever. Cinnamon
> And aromatics spice the air,
> And Candace is black and rare.

Several of the succeeding poems acknowledge the identical influence; even the titles are in precisely the same key as the one developed by the author of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Instead of Eliot's "Sweeney among the Nightingales" or "Bleistein with a Cigar", we have Gorman's "The Melody of Patrick Murphy" and "Einstein Practises". The Robinsonian indebtedness is more deeply felt though less pronounced; it is sensed rather than seen. Only in one or two of the lyrics and in one lengthy blank verse monologue is the reader forced to recognize the obligation. Robinson's famous "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford" is the most eloquent portrait of Shakespeare ever written in verse. Gorman, in exactly the same form, writes a long soliloquy entitled "The Son of Dawn" and attempts to do the very thing for Christopher Marlowe.

So much for the debits. The credit side of the ledger shows a decided balance in Gorman's favor. Here is something positive — a lyric strength coupled with an intellectual intensity that is the poet's own. "The Mandrake Root" and "Rainy Night" are two particularly illuminating examples. Some of the verses reprinted from his first collection, a tentative but searching pamphlet called "The Fool of Love", are on a similarly high plane. I regret that I have not sufficient space to quote three or four of them; from one, at least, I must detach an illustrative quatrain or two. This is the beginning of the sharply conceived, sharply executed "Love's Fanatic":

> Well, here it is: you call for me: I come,
> But with an eagerness not quite my own,
> Propelled by that decisive martyrdom
> That pleased the saints upon their faggot-throne.
>
> You see them smiling in the cruel flame
> That exquisitely licks their willing limbs.
> And finding some sad pleasure in the game
> Not quite embodied in their lusty hymns.

"The Barcarole of James Smith" has in it the power as well as the performance of poetry. And, in spite of its patent borrowings, it promises greater achievements.

John Dos Passos's influences may be less obvious but they are no less disturbing. Time and again, he seems to be uncertain which tone to adopt, which gesture to use — and succeeds only in making a compromise that expresses neither him nor his intention. The echoes, experiments, and variations of form lead me to believe that Dos Passos is a poetic writer rather than a poet, that, being first of all a novelist, he attains in his prose a rigor and clarity absent from this volume. But his pictures of travel, the best of which have the quality of a vivid improvisation, are never program-pieces, seldom overelaborate, always stimulating. There is almost as much color and movement in "A Pushcart at the Curb" as in a legend by Amy Lowell. Because I prefer his kaleidoscope prose in the high spirited "Rosinante to the Road Again", it is not to be inferred that I do not find sections like "Winter in Castile" and "Nights at Bassano" alert with something of the moving brilliance that Dos Passos, with amazing versatility, has put into his water color cover. I appreciate his swift sensitivity — and wait for its sublimation in the forthcoming novel, "Streets of Night".

The Masefield of "Salt Water Ballads" dominates Milton Raison's "Spindrift", a mixture of dexterous rhythms and awkward measures, of emotional candor and borrowed sentimentality. The imitative strain is not unnatural. Like Masefield, Raison (who, I believe, is not yet twenty) gathered his material for his first book on board ship, and many of his verses that deal with nautical experiences are, to filch a phrase from McFee, "like the melodious whistle of a boy on a fine summer evening". The first section, "Sea Sketches", is the book's principal exhibit; it is, in fact — pun or no pun — its *Raison d'être*. Here, simply drawn but with something of the etcher's incision, are portraits of the lookout, the old wiper, the ship's butcher, the messboy, and a dozen others.

Raison's other verses are less interesting. He is willing to offer banalities that should have been killed as soon as he saw them in print. His execution is erratic. He sets down (and repeats) a crude couplet like

> There is no other man I know
> Resembling a schooner so,

forcing the reader either to trip over the second line or to supply an extra syllable for its first word. But Raison has courage; that is proved by the table of contents alone. It takes a certain unabashed trust for a poet to include, in his first book, two sections of junvenilia. A humor not, I suspect, altogether intentional adheres to these two groups which Mr. Raison, still in his nonage, has entitled "Early Verses"!

With "The Black Panther", John Hall Wheelock regains his poetic stride. In spite of the inaccuracy of his "unbroken progress" emphasized by an unfortunately exaggerated jacket, this volume marks a return to the lyrical realism of "The Human Fantasy" and "The Belovèd Adventure" with a deeper if somewhat darker ecstasy. The ground lost in the two immediately preceding volumes is more than made up by such poems as "Vaudeville", the sweeping solemnity of "The Fish-Hawk", the spiritual radiance of "The Secret

One". Even the short lyrics reveal Wheelock's recapture of his first power and his new restraint. The title poem and "The Lion House", which act as prologue and epilogue to the book, are excellent examples of Wheelock's growing mysticism — a mysticism that, fused with passion, never sinks to routine or loses itself in rhetoric.

Perhaps Wheelock is so preoccupied with the soul of man that he occasionally loses himself in his own metaphysical rapture. But his music often sounds a spaciousness which the words only suggest. And if his exaltation sometimes stammers with its very vehemence, it is something — and, in a period of passionless virtuosity, no small thing — that it is, at least, exalted.

The Barcarole of James Smith and Other Poems. By Herbert S. Gorman. G. P. Putnam's Sons.

A Pushcart at the Curb. By John Dos Passos. George H. Doran Company.

Spindrift. By Milton Raison. George H. Doran Company.

The Black Panther. By John Hall Wheelock. Charles Scribner's Sons.