A GOLDEN (10 KARAT) TREASURY

By Louis Untermeyer

Mr. Untermeyer's article is the seventh of a series in which various of our younger critics will attempt to express the reactions which well known books of an earlier generation would arouse in them, were those classics newly published today.

IT must have been some Biblical Braithwaite who moved one of the first reviewers to complain, "Of the making of anthologies there is no end." The ancient quotation needs nothing more than the addition of the words "in sight" to bring it sharply up to date. Every day disturbs us with new rumblings, with hourly messages from a chaos which is always just around the corner, with fresh crimes against humanity and, with appropriate regularity, the publication of another collection of verse. The latest example before me is a somewhat more expansive (and expensive) volume than the others of its genre, but it too seems — if I may be allowed to paraphrase the advertiser's cliché — to need a long filled want.

Briefly, although Mr. Couch's collection is less local than Mesdames Monroe's and Henderson's "The New Poetry" and more universal than Mr. Flinch's "Lyrics of Long Island", it suffers from other defects which must be irritating to any but an editor of "The London Mercury". For, to list the chief limitation at once, the editor is insufferably insular; judging by his rigid exclusion of almost everything except that which glorifies "these Islands", the compiler might well be the patriotic editor of the Encyclopædia Britannica. Mr. Couch has evidently heard nothing of the American renaissance; for him, the last word in American poetry seems to have been written by Bliss Carman — and Carman was born in Canada! But, not to hold him to account for his résumé of this generation alone, what are we to say to his treatment of earlier Americans? What of the famous New England group? Little is left of it but one poem by Longfellow, one by Whittier, and three by Emerson. Bryant, Lowell, Holmes, Aldrich disappear altogether. Of Emily Dickinson there is not a trace. Not as much as a line from Bayard Taylor, James Whitcomb Riley, James Byron Elmore. The vigor of Whitman is represented by two short unrepresentative poems (one of them being that favorite of the Third Reader, "Captain! My Captain!"), while page after page is devoted to the treacle dripping, lace valentine mandolin music of Edward Robert Bulwer Lytton, The Hon. Roden Berkeley Wriothesley Noel, Aubrey de Vere, and Christina Georgina Rossetti.

But one observes equally grave defects when one turns to the purely English poets whom Mr. Couch has discovered. The first of these — at least the one to whom the editor devotes the greatest amount of space — is William Shakespeare. Mr. Shakespeare's name is known to many of us through quotations and references in the theatrical section of the New York "Times". It is rather a pity that Mr.

Couch has not devoted a few of the twenty five pages given to this playwright to a scene from one of his recent successes such as "Cymbeline". Instead, the anthologist quotes several adequate lyrics and part of what is evidently a sonnet sequence. Now, sonnet sequences, at the best, are severe tests of a reader's interest — and a haphazard detaching of an uneven twenty does not make matters easier for the appraiser. Obviously, it is unfair to judge an entire work by a disjointed segment of it, but what evidence is here leads me to conclude that these sonnets suffer from: 1, their form, which is an absurd perversion of the true Petrarchan, a mere set of three loose quatrains with a ding-donging couplet tacked on to them; 2, their philosophy, which is a curious mixture of arrogance, sickening adulation, and fatalism; 3, their plot, which is so disintegrated and vague that it is difficult to tell most of the time whether the object of the poet's passion is a man or a woman. But it would be unjust to dismiss Mr. Shakespeare because of his evident failure as a sonneteer. There are, indeed, signs that this writer has recognized his true medium; and the songs intended as interludes in his plays will, in all probability, be very effective when set to music. As they stand here, they reveal an agreeable lyricist and a craftsman of no mean order.

There is little to hold us in the next twenty five pages. Messrs. Nashe, Campion, and Ben Jonson (the latter reported to be a close friend of and, not unnaturally, influenced by Mr. Shakespeare) are, technically speaking, Elizabethans; but they might just as well be Georgians in their preoccupation with the traditionally plover haunted, curlew calling, idyllic English countryside. It is only when one comes to John Donne that one sees what a great fish Mr. Couch has caught and how little he has appreciated his catch. In this poetry we have the spirit struggling to be free of the flesh — a partly physical, partly metaphysical passion that has much in common with the intellectual tortures of D. H. Lawrence and Elinor Wylie. Yet this blaze of sensual awe is reduced by Mr. Couch to a flicker of amiable ironies; there is no record here of such concepts as the tremendous Elegies, or the three condensed Divine Poems, or that magnificent document "The Will". But, though one may forgive the omission of such masterpieces (one looks here in vain for that colossal conceit, "The Flea"), it is impossible to excuse Mr. Couch's liberties with the text. For example, he quotes "The Ecstasy" — and stops after the line

> And we said nothing all the day.

Incredible as it may seem, Mr. Couch has thus not only omitted fourteen of the nineteen verses but he has left out the most important lines, the carefully planned climax and, incidentally, the *raison d'être* of the poem itself. There may be reasons for quoting only fragments of an epic or even of a long ballad; but what is one to say of an editor who malforms a lyric — especially when his vandalism robs us of quatrains as memorable as:

> To our bodies turn we then, that so
> Weak men on love revealed may look;
> Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
> But yet the body is his book.

Such intensities as Mr. Donne's weaken our interest in those who, following him, seek for a similar quality. One admires the subtleties of John Webster, the troubled flippancy of George Wither, the amatory religiousness of Francis Quarles, the ironic banter of Andrew Marvell; but one

turns from them as from charming but redundant echoes. It has all been Donne before.

The latter half of Mr. Couch's collection is still more uneven. Mr. A. Pope has a neat way of polishing his couplets; Mr. Samuel Johnson (possibly because he is the author of the Dictionary and a book by Boswell) is awarded a place and appears with two bathetic sermons; Mr. Christopher Smart just fails to achieve greatness with his "Song to David"; and Mr. Gray has written an "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" which is not at all like Mr. Masters's and which contains almost as many familiar quotations as Mr. Eliot's "The Waste Land".

The recently defunct "Lake School" makes, on the whole, an excellent showing, although one wearies quickly of the prattling *fausse naïveté* of William Wordsworth when contrasted with the fiery innocence of William Blake. But it is Mr. Samuel Taylor Coleridge for whom the extremes of verse have been reserved. Possibly two of the best lines in this book and indubitably the worst line in all poetry have been written by him — and in the same poem. It seems impossible that "Kubla Khan" (whose meaning is far from clear) should, in the midst of its demonic magic, enshrine such a howling, awkwardly crammed absurdity:

> As if this earth in short thick pants were breathing.

Walter Savage Landor is another whose charm is dissipated by a too close scrutiny. His fluent grace becomes cloying; his pseudo-Hellenisms are wax figurines which have been "too long i' the sun" — especially if one remembers the Greek marbles of "H. D." And could any but the most sentimental lovers of parlor ballads ever have relished the blanc mange insipidity of

> Ah, what avails the sceptred race!
> Ah, what the form divine!
> What every virtue, every grace,
> Rose Aylmer, all were thine!

It would be unjust to conclude without a word concerning some of the younger men whom Mr. Couch, with great catholicity, has included. The selections from P. B. Shelley and J. Keats show, indeed, more than the proverbial promise. Although the latter has evidently been influenced by the works of the late Madison Cawein, his success with the antiquated ode suggests the possible revival of that form as a medium for interpreting modern life. R. Browning is another who, excellent craftsman though he is, betrays his sources. It is evident that Mr. Browning has been reading the anthologies, for what else is

> O to be in England
> Now that April's here

but a distorted paraphrase of Rupert Brooke's well known patriotic sonnet? . . .

But one should be as grateful for large favors as for small ones. And "The Oxford Book of Verse" (1,084 pages including the index) is a mammoth brass, silver, and golden treasury, even though the base metal too often reveals the alloy.