STRAINED INTENSITIES

By Louis Untermeyer

NOTHING in recent literature is more remarkable than the suddenness of the swing from a romantic realism to a calculated æstheticism. Distrustful of the value of human relations, of experience, of life itself, many of the younger — and, let it be admitted — singularly gifted poets have sought escape not merely in art but in an obscure and circumscribed approach to it. The vigor, the direct regard, the passionate concern have been sacrificed for a tired evasion, for a preoccupation with the superficials of form and structure. What, in the major artist, is a powerful devotion becomes a pale detachment; the æsthete of 1924 observes a bleeding world only to study the colors of its bruises. In a recent number of "The Freeman" John Gould Fletcher, who with "H. D." and Amy Lowell made Imagism famous, adds a valuable postscript to this revival of æstheticism. Sorrowfully, he concludes, "Whether this state of affairs has resulted from the European war, or whether the Imagists with their blind dislike of didacticism have been mainly responsible, future historians will have to decide. What is certain is that . . . many of the poets of the present day are proudly displaying all the signs of a premature senility."

But even more apparent than this æsthetic disillusion is the sense of strain by which many of these artists achieve their effects. Instead of a natural individuality of speech — the verbal ease which has not prevented men like Frost and Lindsay and Sandburg from commanding their own distinguishing idioms — we have a presentation of distorted nouns and verbs, eruptive particles, and (is not even the comma sacred to this generation?) tortured punctuation. E. E. Cummings, who has enlivened various issues of "The Dial" with his peculiar patterns, is easily the most interesting of his type. His is a mind which is, in quick succession, witty, lyrical, fantastic, grotesque, pathetic, savage. Even in the verses which, like "Orientale", are obviously a hang over if not a record preserved from imitative adolescence, one discerns a richly distributed imagination. But even more evident than the poetry is the strain. A phrase, sufficiently interesting in itself — "I was considering how, within night's loose sack, a star's nibbling infinitesimally devours darkness" — appears on the printed page as:

i was considering how
within night's loose
sack a star's
nibbling in-

fin
-i-
tes-
i
-mal-
ly devours

darkness

And, in one of Cummings's merely pretty pictures, the charming cadence ("a tall wind is dragging the sea with dreams") is spaced in this pretentious manner:

a tall
wind
is dragging
the
sea

with

dream

-S

Why, one inquires, such distortions? Why in an otherwise smoothly flowing line, the incongruous attenuation, the absurdity of the disjointed capital, the emphasizing of arbitrary syllables to the destruction of the inner pattern? Are the phrases, in themselves, not provocative enough? Mr. Cummings's fellow Secessionist, Gorham B. Munson, supplies the answer. "Most writers could profitably take lessons in arresting attention from American advertising experts. And American advertising experts can take lessons from Cummings." But it is precisely when Cummings is least interested in arresting attention by visual eccentricities that he is most himself. The accents of Sandburg and Eliot persist, unstrangled by the malformed calligrams, in Cummings's disorganized advertisements. Where the poet feels he can afford to be typographically conventional, he sings with a clean and distinct voice. The high notes of the volume are certain of the sonnets, several of the love songs, and the delightfully archaic "Puella Mea" — all of which are as much the product of yesterday as they seem. Mr. Cummings's orthodox couplets remain couplets, even though he wedges white paper between them, and his catalogue of his lady's charms loses nothing by appearing in a form as regular as Villon's.

Apart from his typographical tricks, this poet communicates a genuine if disintegrated lyricism. It would be a pity if the irritation aroused by Cummings's delivery were to render the reader deaf to phrases as persuasive as, "Thy fingers make early flowers of all things", "the bulge and nuzzle of the sea", "thy mouth is a chord of crimson music", "thy forehead is a flight of flowers", "In the street of the sky, night walks scattering poems", "thoughts more white than wool". It would be, I repeat, a pity if Cummings's natural grace were disregarded because of his attitudinizing. For the author of "Tulips and Chimneys" is a curiously whimsical, even a sentimental lyricist, although he tries to disguise the fact by shouting his songs in a syncopated staccato, punctuating the syllables with a cracked tambourine.

The jacket of Maxwell Bodenheim's new volume startles one by its critical acumen: "His poems never sing and rarely charm, but they stab with a blackguard sincerity." If the blurb writer is to turn honest, there will be no need for the reviewer and the millenium may be expected at any moment! Beyond the accuracy of the quoted sentence, there remains chiefly a record of exaggerated intensity through forced associations. One has a picture of Bodenheim as ring master, cracking his savage whip over the heads of cowering adjectives and recalcitrant nouns, compelling them to leap in grotesque and unwilling pairs over the fantastically piled barriers of his imagination. It is a good show — particularly for those who have not seen it too often. But

to those who have observed the development of Bodenheim's performances, there is insufficient variety to his program. His verbal couples trot through their accustomed paces with the same expression of mutual distrust and the ring master himself begins to grow tedious. He is still — if I may take my metaphor out of the circus — the sardonic euphuist; his irony leaps, with fascinating transilience, from one image to another. But, after completely mastering his technique, he has become a slave to it. He is no longer guilty of figures as absurd as the earlier address to "Track-Workers", in which the perspiring laborers with "yellow spit raining down their faces" were called "the living cuspidors of day"! But, for all his intellectual alertness, the total effect is an acrobatic monotony; what started as a manner is degenerating into a mannerism.

The spirit in which Bodenheim's later work is written may have something to do with the reader's eventual resentment. Most of this poetry is written not out of love but out of hate. Or, if not out of hate, out of suspicion, anger, scorn. It is, at least, an aptly named volume that Bodenheim flings at the public. It is not only "Against This Age" but, in its supercilious disdain, against the reader.

In D. H. Lawrence's intensity, the strain is the result of a too torrential rather than an overintellectual passion. It is a lack of restraint, an absence of æsthetic control, that permits him to use his gifts so prodigally — and often, one regretfully observes, so wastefully. Technically, there is scarcely one satisfying poem in "Birds, Beasts and Flowers", although there are half a dozen that almost achieve greatness. This approximation appears to satisfy Lawrence; he seems little interested in the perfection of image, the condensation of phrase, the final clarity which is the function of art. In fact, it is as an artist that Lawrence is incomprehensible. It is difficult to understand how a craftsman so critical of the deficiencies of others can be so wholly uncritical of his own untempered, slag covered and half finished work. The communication of emotion, the almost physical force are evidently enough for Lawrence. He is, today, so little of the conscientious artist that he can write lines as carelessly commonplace as:

> The proper way to eat a fig, in society,
> Is to split it in four, holding it by the stump,
> And open it, so that it is a glittering, rosy, moist, honied, heavy-petalled four-petalled flower.
>
> But the vulgar way
> Is just to put your mouth to the crack, and take out the flesh in one bite.

In the midst of passages of sheer genius — passages which throw their twisted heat from the page like a living flame — there are the most amazing lapses, dull statements, cheap localisms, frenzied reiterations. For example a poem, "Bare Almond Trees", begins with an attempt to fix the object visually:

> Wet almond trees, in the rain,
> Like iron sticking grimly out of the earth.

But this is not enough. Lawrence retreats a few steps, squints at the trees again, and says:

> Black almond trunks, in the rain,
> Like iron implements, twisted, hideous, out of the earth.

Again he goes off, cocks his head, and adds:

Almond trees, curving blackly, iron-
dark.

And once more:

Almond tree, beneath the terrace rail,
Black, rusted, iron trunk . . .

And so on — "sensitive steel in the air", "iron branching", "rusted like old, twisted implements" — worrying the slight figure to death.

There are several explanations for Lawrence's recent verbosity. My own conclusion is that his conversion to free verse has almost ruined the poet. In the earlier, more formal poetry (especially in "Amores" and "Look, We Have Come Through!"), the poet not only showed the power of his emotion but made his imagination vivid. Had he written "Bare Almond Trees" five or six years ago, the very limitations of his structure would have forced him to find the one firmly shaped, completed image for his iron trunk and black branches instead of threshing about among experimental repetitions. Freed from the demands of a concise structure, relieved of the necessity of fusing all the variations of any figure into the thing itself, Lawrence is merely free to turn what should have been white ecstasy into sputtering loquacity. To carry him through, he trusts neither art nor taste, only his power of emotion. And it is a proof of Lawrence's genius that, in spite of everything, he so often succeeds.

Tulips and Chimneys. By E. E. Cummings. Thomas Seltzer.
Against This Age. By Maxwell Bodenheim. Boni and Liveright.
Birds, Beasts and Flowers. By D. H. Lawrence. Thomas Seltzer.