"Second April" (An October View)

SECOND APRIL. By Edna St. Vincent Millay. New York: Mitchell Kennerley.

DOGTOWN COMMON. By Percy Mackaye. New York: The Macmillan Company.

BREAKERS AND GRANITE. By John Gould Fletcher. New York: The Macmillan Company.

POEMS NEW AND OLD. By John Freeman. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe.

"SECOND April" is the right title for Miss Millay's second book. It is April over again, not May. In a word, the book decides nothing; it leaves Miss Millay where it found her —among the vivid possibilities. After all, it is much to be among the vivid possibilities. Who has ever found April unlovable?

There are three or four poems in this book which would be conclusive if they were thirty or forty, instead of three or four. I quote four stanzas from "Elaine."

Oh, come again to Astolat!
I will not ask you to be kind.
And you may go when you will go.
And I will stay behind.

I will not say how dear you are,
Or ask you if you hold me dear,
Or trouble you with things for you
The way I did last year.

So still the orchard, Lancelot,
So very still the lake shall be,
You could not guess—though you should guess—
What is become of me.

Save that, a little way away,
I'd watch you for a little while,
To see you speak, the way you speak.
And smile—if you should smile.

That is lovely verse; that is beauty and heartbreak. Tennyson's whole idyll is less touching; Tennyson is lavish of the sugar. In Miss Millay's poem, though the woman is gossamer, the pathos has body. A like note is heard, not quite so distinctly, in "Alms" and "Song of a Second April." All three poems paint an aging grief, a grief that, without becoming mild, has become still. The sentiments throughout the volume are prevailingly sad or bitter; only they are erect in their sadness or bitterness. This "only" is important.

The longer and more conspicuous poems in the book affect me less, or affect me only in particles. There is an "Ode to Silence" which leads everywhere and—by natural consequence—nowhere. That the praise of Silence should be vocal I concede; praise demands a voice even more strongly than silence forbids one: but Miss Millay is almost loquacious in its praise. In "The Poet and His Book" the poet asks people to read him after his death. He will take immortality as an alms. Nor do I care much for the long, devious, supramundane allegory, "The Blue Flag in the Bog," though the idea that a world in ruins should supply the one thing that makes heaven in its perfection habitable is a strong idea. The poems reveal invention and fertility, but their motives are far-sought. This points to a dearth of neighborly or doorstep themes. We do not visit Egypt for grain when the harvests are plentiful in Canaan.

Miss Millay is sometimes remote even in the treatment of a near, sharp actuality. A group of poems on a dead friend read like threnodies for Gallus or Fidele. But in odd contrast with this removed and desultory grace is the practice of familiar allusion to the homely order of middle-class or humble life. The symptom is auspicious and surprising. Where did Miss Millay learn about barrels for catching rain, about broomstraws for bookmarks, about trunks with hingeless covers? There is more savor of reality perhaps in such allusions than in the dedication of whole poems to such themes. A theme with its dependencies may be the object of a mere excursion, but an allusion is like flour or cobweb on one's coat; it smacks of habitat.

What strikes one finally and cheeringly in Miss Millay's verses is the sway of art. That sway is vigilant, omnipresent, masterful. With most of us what we say is a compromise between our abilities, our inabilities, and the force of circumstance. Miss Millay possibly cannot do all she wills—that would be arduous for Shakespeare—but she wills all she does. Her art is both daring and solicitous; it is exigent without being dainty. I wince personally at part of its daring. "I scratched the wind and whined" is not poetry for me, nor am I either solaced or appeased by the succeeding line in which the poet "clutched the stalk and jabbered." A "sweet bone," used of one's own bones after death, might be useful if one's audience were canine. But Miss Millay is open-eyed in these excesses; these things are in her work by invitation. Moreover, her taste finds harborage for old and new alike. She is not afraid of plain, sheer, downright melody; she will also write verse in which the accent is a hammer:

May sleep the sleep of blessed things
The blood too bright, the brow accursed.

But, by a contrary process, she can give to the processional and courtly sonnet a reach and a spring that suggests the uncoiling of a lariat. There are also beautiful imaginative phrases, "the friendly mumbling rain," or "where helpless mortals drink the bitter sea," or "there dumbly like a worm all day the still white orchid feeds."

In sum, Miss Millay, with all her limitations, is a highly observable person. There is the imaginative and realistic force shown oftener in bits than in poems; there is the ripeness of the art in sharp contrast with the general, though by no means universal, immaturity of the sentiments; and there are the poems, few but noteworthy, in which we stand in the presence of achievement. Some day her part in our literature may be vital; thus far it is only animating.

"Dogtown Common" is a verse-narrative of early New England life in which the niece of a reputed witch who is loved by a clergyman kills herself to save him from embroilment with his congregation. So far-reaching is romance. Even on plain Cape Ann girls who found themselves impediments to their lovers magnanimously hanged themselves. Neither the story nor the characters, however, are the noticeable thing in "Dogtown Common." The visible thing, the effacing thing, is the style. It may be commended to teachers of rhetoric as an example of style in exacerbation. By "exacerbation" I do not mean "acrimony"; I mean that the style is whetted,—whetted until every syllable cuts and shines. Mr. Mackaye plies us with the concrete and the picturesque until we hanker for words like "indivisible" and "consubstantiality"; he gluts us with condensations till we pine for verbiage; he feeds us with originalities till we hunger for "blushing morns" and "gentle zephyrs"; and he pelts us with sonorities and muscularities till we look back longingly to Hannah More and Felicia Hemans. He is not repelled by the rude, the violent, or the odious. He sees flashes of lightning, and they look to him like worms (so privileged are poets), and because worms live in graveyards the sky looks to Mr. Mackaye like a charnel, and because worms also eat dead bodies the fading light of day in the west looks to the poet like a corpse (page 98).

"Dogtown Common," superb as mere gymnastic, is written on a wrong principle. It is as if the poet said to himself that his tale was dull and his reader was dull, and bound himself by an oath at any cost to make dullness exciting to dullness. Accordingly he applies the goad to both, and in the end both are reduced to that impotence which results from too long and harsh an application of the goad. It is good to be interesting, but it is possible, and it is ruinous, to push the fear of not being interesting to the verge of hypochondria.

I will not, however, take leave of the author of "The Scarecrow," for which profound and deeply touching poem my respect is indestructible, in a mood of rigor. Let me quote one of the happier interludes in "Dogtown":

Between late August and the equinox
Hovers a dreamy season frail and fleet:
Then slender-falling water is very sweet
To hear among great rocks,
Tinkling in golden tones the calling catbird mocks

Beside a pool where willows sway to meet . . .

Opening "Breakers and Granite" at random, I come upon this: "Restless hammers are carving new cities from the stagnant skies." Mr. Fletcher is the man who *sees*, who writes poetry from and for the retina. He *means* this particular sentence; he repeats it four times in one poem as a *leitmotif*. In this volume he is very fond of *leitmotifs*, which, like the ribs of an umbrella, divide the poems into equal sections. I may venture to add in this place that the book divides the United States into sections, and describes the geography of each in a fashion that recalls Drayton and his sturdy "Polyolbion." But to return to my point. I ask myself what this specialist in vision sees when he writes this sentence about restless hammers. Does he see a hammer carve, and does he see it carving stagnancies?

Mixed metaphor has lost its terrors for the younger generation, but the obligations of imagism in this point are quite peculiar. Imagism implies precision in visuality, and the last man who may ask me to see what I cannot see is the imagist. Take Mr. Fletcher on another page:

A tinge of russet, purple, blue; vague heights,
Ribbons of turquoise threaded with russet-brown;
A sail of thin silk quivers like a butterfly,
By chimneys and a long squat bulk with towers.

This is normal imagism. The expert, almost the pedant, in vision is instructing me, and I feel at the same time an awe of the expert and a recoil for the pedant. I am bored, but respectful, as I might be at a technician's explanation of a dynamo. With my eye on my watch I murmur "Admirable." But I am disconcerted, I am almost scandalized, when this sober gentleman addresses me as follows: "Screaming and flickering like loosened floods of flame, the streets run together amid the houses that huddle and leap and lower over them." It is as if my technician had a fit of hysteria. Somehow one does not permit hysteria to technicians. Mr. Fletcher's strong point is, or should be, visual knowledge. Why, then, in his flickering streets and leaping houses does he turn to the vague personifications and hyperboles which the man who paints streets and houses without seeing them employs to dissemble his blindness?

It is true no doubt that sincere excitement may voice itself in figures as extreme as Mr. Fletcher's. Floods have clapped their hands and valleys have shouted for joy in a psalmody which the ages sanction and revere. But is Mr. Fletcher really excited? These violences are units in a programme, in a plan, and there is a broader design which Mr. Fletcher follows with something like the diligence

of a gazetteer. One test of excitability is a man's behavior during and after an explosion. Read the lines which follow (italics mine):

And a girl in a black lace shawl
Sits in a rickety chair by the square of an unglazed window,
And sees the explosion of the stars
Softly poised on a velvet sky.

There could not be a more placid explosion; the stars have not winked, neither has Mr. Fletcher. Obviously, we have entered a world where convulsions and detonations need not be taken seriously,—nobody minds a trifling cataclysm; like Macbeth we will sleep in spite of thunder.

The book contains some good writing, is full of industry and of misguided conscience, and its experiments in polyphonic prose with casual interior rhyme will have an interest for versifiers. But it is a tedious book except for persons who are infatuated with the new, and who do not mind the beginnings of age in their novelties.

I have said more of Mr. Fletcher's poems than I shall say of Mr. John Freeman's, though Mr. Freeman writes by far the better poetry. It is hard to name a poetical virtue that the Englishman lacks. He has music and phrase and narrative and landscape and feeling and analysis and thought and elevation. He has a taste that in our time is rarely found in company with the stronger qualities that give it value. Yet the effect, though good, is not proportioned to the outlay. Mr. Freeman's high traits appear to us perhaps too much in the light of equipment or equipage, as if nature had scrupulously met an exacting order in his case. The remark savors of the ungenerous, and I should not make it but for the need of some tentative explanation of the failure of Mr. Freeman to interest me keenly. I will quote three stanzas of real poetry from "Lambourn Town" (italics mine):

Within we heard the gurgle-glock
In the pipe, the tip-tap on the sill
Like the same ticking of the clock:
We heard the water-butt o'erspill,

The wind come blustering through the door,
The whipped white lilac thrash the wall;
The candle flame upon the floor
Crept between shadows magical . . .

In the black east a pallid ray
Rose high; and sweeping o'er the down
The slow increase of stormless day
Lit the wet roofs of Lambourn town.

Even this, vivid as it is, does not impress me in the measure of my abstract sense of its impressiveness. The poem as a whole seems rather directionless. There is one question indeed which Mr. Freeman's poems do not always put to themselves, the question, "Whither?" His claims upon our regard are large, but claims which one can neither dispute nor fully pay are apt to make one a little peevish with the claimant. I confess to something of this unworthy fretfulness in the case of Mr. Freeman.

O. W. FIRKINS