

By William McFee

IF memory, backed by the conventional criticism of twenty, thirty, and even forty years ago, be accepted as a guide, the invariable defect of youthful poetry was a lack of simplicity and a sense of direction. One had a tendency, it is remorsefully remembered now, to write of things of which one knew nothing and in a style entirely foreign to the experience and temper of one's age. This, no doubt, was to be expected of young people who lived, for the most part, very secluded lives without telephones, automobiles, magazines, or cinemas; their actual knowledge was microscopic, and the demesnes of their fancy untraversed by the highroads of modern learning. It was the first duty of every guide, philosopher, and friend of youth to warn them against writing of distant places and far off romantic periods, in imitation of Scott and his school. Write of what you know, was the ceaseless cry of the sage seniors to dreamy-eyed youth, who of course knew nothing and so could not profit by this valuable advice, but went on dreaming and constructing impossible romances (like Shelley's "Zastrozzi") until in most cases they fell in love and discovered things for themselves.

Today, youth knowing everything, the problem is not the same. For them there is no longer any danger of loi-

tering palely in the anterooms of romance. They do not need recalling from fantastic journeys into preposterous principalities, nor are they discovered aping Keats, with his "magic casements, opening on the foam of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn". There is even a doubt in the present writer's mind whether they ever fall in love any more (in the old foolish, dreamy, meal-missing sense). . . .

And herein lies the interest in modern verse. It may not tell us very much about art or life, but it ought to tell us something about the young people who write it. Whether they know it or not, they are living in a very remarkable age. How remarkable, only those of us know who can remember the 'eighties and the 'nineties. And while their reactions to this age are not necessarily entirely embodied in verse, there is sufficient demand and encouragement for poets nowadays to accept their efforts as authentic manifestations of the Time Spirit.

For this reason it is to be regretted that so few of these young people reveal any appreciation of the technical problems involved in poetry. So far from resembling a company of polite young romantics gathering posies in a beautiful garden, they convey, in their modern *vers libre*, an unhappy impression of a gang of hoodlums smashing and uprooting, and sinking their heavy heels in the choicest flower beds as they bawl to one another their favorite æsthetic anthem: that they

* This article, written as an introduction to the forthcoming collection of poems by Milton Raison ("Spindrift"), proves to be a penetrating study of young poets in general, which the editors feel will be of special interest to BOOKMAN readers.

know not where they are going, but they are on their way. If one does not know that, there is nothing to be gained by making a virtue of it. The sleep walker and the anarchist have the same justification for their behavior. One has only to imagine the votaries of any other art proclaiming the same impudent doctrine, to perceive the unwisdom of it. It is highly desirable in all the arts to know where one is going, and it may even prove a sound policy to halt awhile and find out.

In the verses now under consideration the young author has advanced no such foolish contentions. If many modern poets remind one of a noisy syncopating orchestra, these brief pieces are like the clear melodious whistle of a boy on a fine summer evening. It was early discovered by the present writer that one of the most difficult things to accomplish in any art is outline. And here you have it. There is a Latin sharpness of mentality manifested in these clearly, sardonically etched portraits of a ship's crew. The whimsical humor revealed in final lines is a portent, in the present writer's opinion, of a talent which will probably come to maturity in a very different field. Indeed it may be—though it is too early to dogmatize—that these poems are but the early efflorescence of a gift for vigorous prose narrative. This is scarcely the place to go into the intricate and interesting question of literary origins. Some men begin, as did Shelley, by designing enormous and macabre romances, and find their true metier in great verse. Some, like Thomas Hardy, achieve fame as novelists and develop late as minor poets. Others, and these from the main body of literature, sing in lusty minor verse for a year or two, and then, ceasing as

suddenly as though their poetic voices had broken, use the prose form for the rest of their lives.

The opinions of men diverge sharply upon the question of the best environment for the development of a man of letters. Milton Raison has settled for himself, with engaging promptitude, that a seafaring career provides the inspiration he craves. The influence of Masefield is strong upon him, and some of his verses are plainly derivative. As already hinted, it is too early to say definitely how this plan will succeed. In his diary, kept while on a voyage to South America, a document remarkable for its descriptive power and a certain crude and virginal candor, one may discover an embryo novelist struggling with the inevitable limitations of youth. But in his simple and naive poems, whether they give us some bizarre and catastrophic picture of seamen, or depict the charming emotions of a sensitive adolescence, there is a passion for experiment and humility of intellect which promises well enough for a young man in his teens.

The story is told of one of our greatest living writers, that at the height of his spectacular career, his father could not be induced to voice the almost universal praise. When pressed, the latter admitted laconically that his son's achievement was "credit-able". From this position of extreme moderation he refused to be moved.

Here is a very valuable anecdote. There is too much meaningless and unauthenticated enthusiasm in evidence these days. It is highly desirable that the young be protected from dangerous adulation. Let it stand, therefore, in this case as "credit-able", and neither poet nor panegyrist will have occasion in future years to regret his modest claims.

TO MY LADY

There is more comfort in your slightest
touch
Than in soft-colored, placid sceneries,
Or in the gentle motion of the seas
Rocking the ships like cradles of tired men.
The peace your cool skin brings to me is
such
That robbed of you I shall not feel again.
There is more beauty in your curving lips
Than ever lingered in the poise of ships,
Than ever grew in music or in flowers;
And I can sit and watch your face for
hours,
Listening as you raise your voice from
where
Amid deep, soothing harmonies it lies,
Touching your hand and playing with your
hair,
Finding new lights and colors in your eyes.

THE HOLD

There is a treasure trove aboard all ships,
That gathers beauty to its ample fold,
Like a huge goddess with kind, smiling lips:
We sailors know it as the after-hold.

The sun spreads on its top a cloth of gold,
And there, the spare hours in the day we
spend;
We play our games, and have our fun, and
lend
A mortal aspect to the silent hold.

At night we gather on its boards and sing,
And sprawl around and talk of life and
death;
And what a wealth of narrative we bring!
What song rides forth on agitated breath!

And there are wondrous cargoes in its deeps,
From silks and furs to simple ballast sand.
The air of musty memories it keeps
Is opened to us every port we land.

Somehow I feel, when we're asleep below,
The stars come down to dance upon the hold,
A ghastly moon makes whiter than the snow
That covers it like fur when it is cold.

I like to lie upon the hold and watch
The lovely squirmings of a restless sky —
And see a star go out, just like a match,
And wish my soul went that way when I
die.

RHYTHMS

Upon the pillow lies my head,
Under the blankets lies my torso;
The one seems motionless and dead,
The other more so.

I do not move my limbs nor flick
An eyelash as I wait for sleep,
But slowly, subtly, tick on tick,
The rhythms creep.

The east wind rattles on the panes
With an uneven sort of beat,
And I must listen how it rains
With pattering feet.

The clock ticks loudly in the room,
Incessantly and manifest;
Like darts of sound shot through the gloom,
It pricks my rest.

My heart beats on its ribbed wall,
Thump — thump — thump — thump —
And does not seem to cease at all
Its rhythmic jump.

My breast heaves with my steady breath,
In and out, in and out,
In goes life and out comes death —
(O turn about!)

Then I remember if I prick
My heart, my breath will also cease,
My ears will deafen to the tick,
And I'll have peace.

But thinking of a way to die,
I quite forgot that rhythms creep
To twist my rest and mind awry —
And fell asleep!

TO A FRIEND

What will you know of me when I am dead?
I do not ask because I am concerned,
Nor yet with sudden wisdom is that said
To puzzle you, who are profoundly learned;
But just half-humorously as I've lived,
And with a crooked smile upon my lips,
For how this startling query is received
And what remorse or sympathy it grips
In you, who've known me through these
many years.
And then you'll think: you've never known
my tears,
My thirsts, my loves, my little tragedies,

My little colored days of grey and blue —
All that you've known of me did but appease
The calm, unruffled, thoughtless side of you.

THE SILENT

I

She was as fragile as silence,
And her beauty was as far-reaching.

Her wiles were profound as the quiet
That creeps on the city at midnight.

Her very presence was formless,
Intangible, confidence-breeding.

But one felt all this could be shattered
With a single resonant word.

II

She, being woman, was subtle;
Speech, she claimed was futile —
So walking the longest while,
We did not say a word
That would provoke a smile
Or bring us quiet fears.
She thought such talk absurd,
There was no need to jest,
No need to probe to tears;
Silence between us was best,
The pregnant silence that hovers
In the eyes of lovers.
But I know, being wise,
If we do not use our breath
On talk, but just our eyes —
We will soon be bored to death.

But she, being woman, was subtle,
And that was sufficient rebuttal.

BROTHERS

I never saw your face before,
And probably will not again,
Yet in the glance, I saw that more
Was given you than other men.

I recognized your like to me,
The troubled eyes, the pallid skin,
Yet more of you I would not see
Because we are so much akin.

THE LAST NIGHT

I shall be lonesome for you, ships and sea,
And many are the nights I'll lie awake,
Straining my ears to hear the water break
Against the hull that kept it back from me.
Watching the ship's nose split the wind
that bled

Fine spray on deck and me and everything;
The daring moon dance up the sky and shed
Her many-colored veils in clambering;
The nude sun, shorn of rays, dive in a wave;
The burly clouds swinging their hordes to
storm —

These things I may not see before the grave
Again, but certain I shall ever warm
To their remembered beauty — yet not above
The beauty of the one who waits my love.

FOG

Flowing in its sombre, sluggish beauty,
The river lay under the spell of the mist;
Squatting barges, squarely-built and sooty,
Lost their angles in the amethyst
That veiled the ancient, long-enchanted sun.
Bridges spanned the stream like things
untrue,

Or spiders' webs glittering with the dew.
A ship returning from its far-flung run
Crept up the river as though it had been
snared;

Doleful sirens sounded through the haze
As though the fog had crept into their
throats.

Why does this beauty come so unprepared
To break into the pattern of the days —
Forgetting men, to drift among the boats?

TWILIGHT MOOD

I think there is no greater thing than dusk
That steals shamefacedly around the town,
And peeps between the buildings, looking
down

Upon a world grown dim. It doesn't frown,
Nor does it gather grandly as would musk
Upon men's senses; — just a slender tusk
Of color, curving silently between
The day and night; a droop of wings scarce
seen.