HILDA AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

POEMS BY A LITTLE GIRL. *By Hilda Conkling. 12mo. 120 pages. Frederick A. Stokes Company. New York.*

THIS, as has been remarked in various degrees of profundity, is the era of the child. For several years an army of professional educators, statisticians, eugenists, psychologists have been busy charting the child's power of absorption, adaptability, mimetic desires, and all that has been conveniently lumped under "potentialities." And now, in the midst of being thumbed and analyzed, the subject suddenly stops being a creature and becomes a creator. First one and then another country exhibits its infantile prodigies; *wunderkinder* blossom in every art gallery, oust their elders on the concert platform, run rapidly into large paper and fourteenth editions. Truly, the child has come into its own—and other people's—royalties. Austria begins with Erich Korngold, the infant Richard Strauss. Italy offers Romano Dazzi, the fourteen-year-old Steinlein. France counters with the haunting designs of Denise. Not to be outdone, England presents a pair of popular successes in two fields: Pamela Bianco, for whose Botticelli-like drawings Walter de la Mare has written verses, and the classic Daisy Ashford. Without waiting for the rest of our allies to add their quota, America has rushed into the fast-filling breach with Opal Whitely (whose fame has spread from the Atlantic Monthly to the Pacific weeklies), Horace Atkisson Wade (George Ade's young visiter), and—most gifted of them all—Hilda Conkling.

Hilda is not quite ten years old, the daughter of Grace Hazard Conkling, a poet. Hilda began to write poems—or rather, to talk them—at the age of four. Since that time she has created more than one hundred little verses, many of which are astonishing in exactness of phrase and vision, none of them sinking to the plane of polite mediocrity attained by the majority of her more mature

confrères. Hilda "tells" her poem and her mother makes notes or copies it down from memory, arranges the line-divisions, adds the title and reads it afterwards to the child for corrections. In this process there is, of course, the possibility that certain modifications, certain subtle refinements may result; it is even more probable that a tentative and half-conscious shaping has already taken place. But, conceding the natural impress and occasional preconscious echoes of the mother, the quality which shines behind practically all of these facets of loveliness is a directness of perception, an almost mystic divination. It is its own stamp of unaffected originality, a genuine ingenuousness.

HAY-COCK

"This is another kind of sweetness
Shaped like a bee-hive:
This is the hive the bees have left;
It is from this clover-heap
They took away the honey
For the other hive!"

Turn, from such a quiet glorification of a nature-fact, to this more sweeping figure:

MOON SONG

"There is a star that runs very fast,
That goes pulling the moon
Through the tops of the poplars.
It is all in silver,
The tall star:
The moon rolls goldenly along
Out of breath.
Mr. Moon, does he make you hurry?"

Here is an abrupt breath-snatching fantasy, with the child's voice asserting its peculiar treble in the last altogether child-like line. And here, with uncanny assurance and technical balance, a lesson in elementary physics is turned into sudden and surprising poetry:

"The world turns softly
Not to spill its lakes and rivers.
The water is held in its arms
And the sky is held in the water.
What is water,
That pours silver,
And can hold the sky?"

Here we face the twisted problem of the child as artist. What force impels it? What supplies it with backgrounds that the child has never known? What directs its candour, sharpens its edges, illumines its clarity? . . . The answer, I believe, lies in its very immaturity. It is still the emotional primitive, still free of superimposed patterns, drawing its substance directly from the unconscious. The child knows beyond knowledge, tapping that vast source of intuitive wisdom. "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings" was written by one who was not only a prophet but a biblical psychoanalyst. Is this to say that every child is therefore an embryonic painter, poet, musician? Precisely. Did the world so desire, it could have a race of artists in one generation. That it prefers to starve or "sublimate" the creative hunger, to direct this expressive energy into channels of more efficient industry is one more cause of man's growing neuroticism, his wavering allegiance to the modern world, his failure to adjust. Civilization has broken down almost all his individualistic resources. When it first took away his art, it left him, as a substitute, his craft. But now, lost among his own machines, he turns in upon himself —a disillusioned and defeated child.

Only the artist escapes—the artist who is a child that has reached maturity without having its vision distorted or its contact with the subconscious made difficult by prejudice and pressure. But where the child pierces the subconscious from beneath, the artist sounds it from above. The great danger lies in reaching the dead level of reason and remaining there; getting stuck fast in tradition, education, and all that is derivative and conscious is what happens to ninety-nine per cent. of us. Even in this extremely first book one sees it happening to Hilda. It is ridiculous to talk of the

"stages" in the work of a ten-year-old child and yet the verses conceived between four and seven are more vivid, seem more spontaneous and less—absurd as it may seem—sophisticated than those written between seven and nine. Literature and an almost domesticated sapience rather than the child's naïve wonder take hold of her "later" poems. A line like

"Windmills wake and whirl"

is too workmanlike to be convincing; her satiric The Tower and the Falcon and One Morning-Glory that Flowered betray influences even beyond a precocious sense of irony. There is an unnaturally canny symbolism in certain of the concluding poems that might have come straight from the pens of our best imagists. It is no wonder that Miss Lowell is enthusiastic about so Amy Lowell-like a picture as

POEMS

"See the fur coats go by!
The morning is like the inside of a snow-apple.
I will curl myself cushion-shape
On the window-seat;
I will read poems by snow-light.
If I cannot understand them so,
I will turn them upside down
And read them by the red candles
Of garden brambles."

But this child not only feels and listens with the concentration of a child-artist, she sees and hears with the extraordinary sensitivity of a master-craftsman. She hears the chickadee talking

"The way smooth bright pebbles
Drop into water."

The rooster has a comb "gay as a parade," he has "pearl trinkets on his feet," and

"The short feathers smooth along his back
Are the dark color of wet rocks,

Or the rippled green of ships
When I look at their sides through water."

And again:

"Tree-toad is a small gray person
With a silver voice.
Tree-toad is a leaf-gray shadow
That sings."

Hilda learns much besides her geography from the trees:

"Hemlocks look like Christmas.
The spruce tree is feathered and rough
Like the legs of the red chickens in our poultry yard."

She imagines, with amazing precision, that the father of an Indian papoose has a voice

". . . like ice and velvet,
And tones of falling water."

She observes

"The water came in with a wavy look
Like a spider's web."

It will be the next phase that will show many things. Is she going to develop along her own quaint lines? Or, moulded by well-meaning teachers, is this to be the end of Hilda? Irrespective of what other obligations the mother may have, Mrs. Conkling's duty to the world of letters is clear. She should lock her library, resign from all the Poetry Societies, and pack Hilda off to Tahiti. The subconscious is going to have a hard time of it if it remains too close to poets, professors, and publishers.

LOUIS UNTERMEYER