

Garlands of Verse

A Review by C. S.

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IN this volume, the third of a biennial series, are contained seventy-two poems, only a few of which have appeared in magazines or elsewhere, by seventeen American poets. They represent the latest work of that representative group which is generally regarded as containing the most significant writers of verse in this country. The book is not an anthology in which the taste of the editor determines what poems shall be chosen for preservation. Rather, it contains the choice by each poet of his own work. By this ingenious plan we get the poet both as creator and self-critic.

Of so varied a volume it is difficult to formulate any general appreciation. The diversities of subject and treatment confuse the reader; he cannot say, "American poetry is this or that thing," or blithely ticket its tendencies. This collection is not the work of a "school," the product of a "movement." Whatever interrelations, borrowings, and lendings may be indicated in these poems, it is only fair to consider each poet as an original and genuine creator who dips from the common pool only as all must do who work in a common medium.

Intellectual or objective poems seem to outnumber the subjective lyrics which one usually expects to find in the majority. Without daring to state that the modern American poet is a worker in decoration, one cannot fail to recognize how many poems are deliberately decorative, or to be unmindful of the skill with which colors are laid on or contrasted and grouped. Miss Amy Lowell and others have acquired a genuine virtuosity in this sort of composition — a charming, brittle art, smacking at times of preciosity, but delightful where it succeeds. In Mr. Wallace Stevens' work it becomes something more than a delicate burlesque of itself; there is a slight odor of decay about his exotic imitations of imitation flowers. He observes the ocean from silken couches, through the smoke of a thousand poppies:

. . . a pale silver patterned on the deck

And made one think of porcelain chocolate
And pied umbrellas. An uncertain green,
Piano-polished, held the tranced machine

Of ocean, . . .

Mr. Conrad Aiken contributes some sharp slices of drama, implying profoundest questions. And then comes a

most satisfying poem in so different a key as to make bright discord — "Whale" by William Rose Benet:

*Rain, with a silver flail;
Sun, with a golden ball;
Ocean, wherein the whale
Swims minnow-small;*

*I heard the whale rejoice
And cynic sharks attend;
He cried with a purple voice,
"The Lord is my Friend!"*

*"With flanged and battering tail,
With huge and dark baleen,
He said, 'Let there be Whale
In the Cold and Green!'*

*"He gave me a water spout,
A side like a harbor wall;
The Lord from cloud looked out
And planned it all!*

.

*"His is a mammoth jest
Life may never betray.
He has laid it up in his breast
Till Judgment Day.*

*"But high when combers foam
And tower their last of all,
My power shall haul you home
Through Heaven wall.*

*"A trumpet then in the gates,
To the ramps a thundering drum,
I shall lead you where He waits
For his Whale to come."*

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*Then the Whale careened in the sea,
He floundered with flailing tail
Flourished and rollicked be,
"Aha, mine Empery!
For the Lord said, 'Let Whale be!
And There Was Whale!"*

H. D.'s verses, delicate, restrained, hark back by direct descent to the Greek Anthology. Mr. T. S. Eliot is not too happily represented by three slight songs nor Mr. John Gould Fletcher by one long and three shorter poems. The poet attempts too much in his interpretation of Lazarus as the risen Christ; it is ingenious, it is effective, but it is not adequate for the subject. Mr. Alfred Kreymborg's intricate, stuttering muse is unappreciated by this reviewer.

MR. VACHEL LINDSAY has at least one poem to his credit in "These Are the Young." Who are these, he asks, with intrusive ways, speaking an alien tongue, "obeying their own captains, and to no man tame?"

*"Girls most bewitching,
Boys most untamed,*

*Hotly praised and preached at; hotly,
very hotly blamed.*

*Who are these? What is their aim?
What is now their game?
What is their spiritual name?
What, indeed, is their aim?"*

*"This is a chosen people,
This is a separate race,
Speaking an alien tongue —
These are the darlings of my heart,
These are the young."*

MISS AMY LOWELL'S late work is illustrated by several poems that by no stretch of imagination can be called poems, and by one splendid poem, "Apotheosis," which is animated by the most deeply poetic spirit and expressed in strong, vivid phrases:

*The words were faint as is the jar
Of air behind a falling star
Felt in a forest where ghosts are.*

.

A sword was now become a thin

*Long line of ants, who crawled and went
With the strange, multiple consent
Of myriads working one intent.*

Miss Edna St. Vincent Millay hardly does justice to her distinctive and distinguished talents with the few childhood poems in this volume. Neither Mr. John Crowe Ransom's nor Carl Sandburg's selections strike this reviewer as important. Mr. Edward Arlington Robinson's finely worked and thought-out sonnets have distinction but no fire, and Sara Teasdale deserts her happiest manner when she, too, turns to the decorative panel poem. Louis Untermeyer in "Song Tournament: New Style" has written a successful satire on much of modern poetry. Elinor Wylie has several poems, all effective and all different. Her ballads are sharply cut.

Altogether, a volume full of serious thought and equally serious affectation; a volume of achievement rather than of promise. There is little to indicate that these poets will progress to definitely higher levels in their art. One feels they have, to all intents and purposes, arrived at their various goals. Certain of these goals are clearly worth while; none is unworthy or quite insignificant. These men and women enrich modern life working bright or dark beauty into its metallic texture, deepening the shadows and bringing out the high lights in its seemingly superficial surface. This volume does justice to their current effort. Therefore, it is worth while.