

Poets in a Diminished World

PEGASUS and Other Poems, by C. Day Lewis; Jonathan Cape, English price 10/6. *VISITATIONS*, by Louis MacNeice; Faber and Faber, English price 10/6. *THE INHERITORS*, Poems of 1948-55, by Richard Church; Heinemann, English price 10/6. *THE STONES OF TROY*, by C. A. Trypanis; Faber and Faber, English price 10/6. *THE DESCENT INTO THE CAVE and Other Poems*, by James Kirkup; Oxford University Press, English price 12/6. *THE SENSE OF MOVEMENT*, by Thom Gunn; Faber and Faber, English price 10/6. *UNION STREET*, by Charles Causley; Hart-Davis, English price 12/6.

(Reviewed by James K. Baxter)

THESE seven new books can fairly be regarded as representative of the best recent poetry published in England; and a New Zealand reader may be forgiven for having opened them with something of that anticipatory joy reserved by most of his fellows for race meetings. Is it churlish to record, after a month's reading, chiefly an obscure but real sense of dissatisfaction? Louis MacNeice and C. Day Lewis are continuing to produce those well-made poems which one has learnt to expect from them, exploring the dusty corridors of middle age, one juggling oranges with renewed Irish energy (*Visitations* has much more grit in it than *Autumn Sequel*), and the other humming old nostalgic tunes. If the juggling seems a trifle mechanical, if the tunes are from a music-box, can one legitimately complain? Both poets are coping courageously with the unanswerable questions of a diminished world. Richard Church, an older man, writes with the freedom of one who knows that most of his life

is behind him; he also displays an unflinching courage. With rhetorical gestures stripped to the bone, he records truthfully the loves and insights of advancing age. Yet in many of its phrases his poetry demonstrates a tendency apparent also in the work of five of the six younger writers—a tendency to substitute "reporting" for interpretation—

A kingcup or two is all that I've seen
In this cold spring world, with its easterly
hiss . . .

The first line and a half are entirely relevant to the central meaning of the poem; but the "easterly hiss," unexpected, exact, yet for all that adding no new dimension to the poem, is in accord with this disturbing tendency. Church, a sincere and passionate writer, displays it only a little, by unconscious assimilation. But let us interrogate his neighbours—

Gunn: I paused to watch the flymarks on
a shelf,
And found the great obstruction of
myself. . .

MacNeice: And here the cross on the win-
dow means myself
But that window does not
open. . .

Day Lewis: By the glim of a midwinterish
early morning
Following habit's track over
comatose fields. . .

Trypanis: It can become a habit every
morning
To drag broad Hector's body
round the tomb. . .

Kirkup: Those three young workmen have
it up again—
The drain that is the secret of my
garden. . .

One notices first that these extracts exhibit poetry of a very low intensity.

Any idea, any fact, any state of feeling, can be contained within the hold-all of a poem. One has also the sense of being invited to share a confidence ("You know what happened to me on Wednesday?") expressed in casual language, a flattering sense of being allowed to look into the disarranged cupboards of the poet's mind. Yet there follows an aftertaste of having been cheated. From where does it come? MacNeice and Day Lewis are both poets with valuable intuitions to transmit; Gunn has, in his bluntest Yeatsian poems, a genuine metaphysical force; Trypanis, though very much a scholar, can at times re-animate the stones of Troy; Kirkup possesses the shrewdness of a magpie as well as its liking for any bright metallic object. I suggest that one's dissatisfaction rises from contact with the view of reality which prevails at present in English literary circles. The poem is regarded primarily as an artifact. Perhaps by a false application of psychoanalytical theory, both poets and critics tend to accept as adequate any symbol which reflects closely the processes of a mind occupied with itself. Thus the barren mystery of self-naming becomes the centre of each man's work. The link between poetry and significant action is snapped.

In contrast to prevailing literary fashion, the poetry of Charles Causley is concerned chiefly with the mysterious relation of sailors to the sea. His major overt theme, the significance of homosexual love, is shared with at least two of the poets under discussion. Repetitive barrel-organ metres and excessive use of internal rhyme restrict him from formal experiment. But despite irritating mannerisms his poems have a solidity and immediate force which guarantees the authenticity of his experience—

In his eye the shell-pink blossoms,
On his tongue the ilex tree;
His hair, the corn with yellow thunder,
Holds the headland from the sea.
Never more he comes, Signora,
The looping fountain silent stands.
He lies stiff in the bragging cliff,
The blue sea-holly in his hands.

The shadow of *Waiting for Godot* has not yet fallen on his verse. One could conceive him, however, waiting for God.

OVER FERN HILL

LEFTOVER LIFE TO KILL, by Caitlin Thomas; Putnam, English price 18/.

THIS is the unhappiest book I have read, thereby fulfilling the promise of its title; but it is not a good book, as sad books often are. The widow of Dylan Thomas is stylistically as well as emotionally embroiled in her bard,



CAITLIN THOMAS

From the portrait by Augustus John

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Natural choice
for every
occasion . . .

Natural brewing from wholesome ingredients produces the bright lively flavour and extra sparkle that your guests so much enjoy in Pilsener.

