

Mr. Landau's generalisations point to the super-excellence of John Smith, and all the John Smiths who read this book will feel instinctively the desire to be as quixotically honest, as mentally lazy (but determined in action, of course!), as brilliant an amateur, as sportive in old age, and even, perhaps, as vaguely religious, as Mr. Landau's version of themselves. At five shillings the book should sell well, for if there is one thing John Smith enjoys, it is to be able to read in private a confirmation of his own beliefs about himself.

CEDRIC BURTON, O.P.

THE FABER BOOK OF COMIC VERSE. Edited by Michael Roberts. (Faber; 8s. 6d.)

'The frontiers of comic verse are, at the best, shifting and uncertain,' says Mr. Roberts. Perhaps it is best that they should stay so: in other spheres where frontiers count, experience certainly suggests that the artificial boundary is worse than none at all.

We are told in the *Poetics* that 'the aim of comedy is to exhibit men worse than we find them; that of tragedy, better.' It is odd—and possibly fortunate—that literary theory has done very little more to reach the roots of the comic spirit. By to-day, the connotation of the 'comic' has become so loose that it includes almost the whole range of the unserious—from the jocular-sportive to the subtle. 'Funny,' 'humorous,' 'witty,' 'satirical,' 'light': there are infinite gradations, and the present anthology is the better for being arbitrarily confined to 'nonsense, parody and comic satire.' Such a limitation, even so, will include Lear and Carroll, 'intellectual' limericks and Bentley clerihews, the Belloc of 'Lord Hippo suffered fearful loss' and the Chesterton of *Songs of Education*, the ruthless rhymes of Harry Graham and Don Marquis's *archy and mehitable*.

Yet however confused its territory may be, comic verse generally retains something of Aristotle's sense of comedy as a criticism of life, exploiting all that is ridiculous in a man; a comedy that evokes laughter indeed, but the laughter at a face in a distorting mirror; laughter at a man caught out. Even the usual funny story has that for its point: it 'exhibits men worse than we find them' in that its purpose is implicitly satirical. The stockbroker slipping up on a banana-skin can make us laugh because the conjunction of the two is in itself ludicrous; it is still more so when we see a man's self-importance suddenly deflated. We know that the stockbroker is *more* than that: he may be just, courageous, pious. But for the moment the relevant thing is that he is rather less than the total of his virtues. He is 'worse' than we find him—and we laugh. It might not be too much to say that humour is one of the guardians of humility.

The Comic, too, presupposes a fully human situation. We do not, strictly, laugh at animals or scenery unless they are given some human participation. Our laughter is a continuing recognition of

human limitations (of limitations, that is, which do not altogether overwhelm, for then tragedy is near).

This may seem a solemn account of a book that is meant for laughter. But there is scarcely a page of it that does not suggest the question 'Why is this comic?'; and the only common denominator for the whole is just that quality of a man caught out. Mr. Roberts's selection has, naturally enough, a literary bias where this quality will be more obvious. Thus there is much excellent parody, such as *Chard Whitlow* in the manner of the later Eliot ('As we get older we do not get any younger') or Ezra Pound's *Winter is icumen in*; there are Occasional Lapses, such as Alfred Austin's

'Winter is gone, and spring is over,  
The cuckoo-flowers grow mauver and mauver,'

and there are donnish exercises in Latin-English and similar products of (one supposes) academic boredom.

I hate scarce smiles; I love laughing,' said Blake, and much of the wittier material in the anthology belongs to the no-man's land of occasional verse, with its delayed-action of effect, where 'scarce smiles' are all that will be expected. But there is much more that is just funny, humanly funny, from *Bring us in good ale* to William Plomer's *Headline History*, and the conclusion must be that if good comic verse is indeed a criticism of life, then the English are blessed in their laughter.

I.E.

THE BOOK OF MENCIOUS (abridged). Translated from the Chinese by Lionel Giles. (Murray; 3s. 6d.)

The best of the Chinese sages is that they can really be depended on to be sage, and these hundred pages from Mencius abound in aphorisms of the authentic kind.

'When a kingdom of ten thousand chariots smites another of equal size and the inhabitants welcome your army with food and refreshment, it can only be because they are anxious to escape from the fire and flood of their own government.'

'The men of to-day cultivate the nobility of Heaven only with an eye to the nobility of man, and when that has been won they cast away the other.'

Yao and Shun were naturally good. T'ang and Wu assimilated goodness. The Five Dictators put on a semblance of goodness; and after they had worn it long enough, who should know that it was not their own?'

'To feed a person without loving him is to treat him like a pig. To love without respecting him is to treat him like a domestic pet. Honour and respect come before the presentation of gifts.'

Rival states cannot wage punitive wars against each other.'