

THE LONELY TOWER. Studies in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats. By T. R. Henn. (Methuen; 21s.)

Mr T. R. Henn holds that the prose and dramatic works of W. B. Yeats link his poems into a unity, and that the verse cannot be understood without a consideration of them and of the poet's life, background and beliefs. His chapters on the development of Yeats's poetic style and on the images and continuing symbols of his poetry do much to justify this approach; early and late versions of certain poems are fruitfully compared and recurrent symbols are shown to illustrate the changing mind of the poet at different stages of his career. 'No single symbol, taken in isolation', writes Mr Henn, 'gives up its full significance.' He thus tends to treat Yeats as a poet who wrote the epic of his own mind, rather than as a lyrical poet whose individual poems carry their full significance within the limits of their individual forms. This is one of the dangers of the 'total approach' to lyrical poetry; we are advised so well of the motion that we no longer marvel at the play of puppets.

Those readers who are interested in Yeats's esoteric philosophy and in the sources of the symbols of his later poems will find much to interest them in this book, particularly in the chapters on myth and magic, on painting and poetry, and on Yeats's own explanation of his 'system' in *A Vision*. Mr Henn presents a simplified version of this last, but one still feels like Byron on Coleridge:

Explaining metaphysics to the nation;  
I wish he would explain his explanation.

Mr Henn follows Mr Stauffer, rightly I think, in believing that Yeats believed in his system only in an heuristic sense; 'a little wisdom to take the place of the passion I once had'. Mr Henn's discussion of Yeats's debt to such historical writers as Toynbee is as stimulating as Mr Hough's indication of his correspondences with Jung. In both cases one is conscious that the 'system' was really a poet's springboard. In his later years Yeats was a mixture of Cassandra and the Playboy of the declining Western World.

Yeats has suffered somewhat from the fulness of his biographers. Mr Henn compensates for this by using many of their facts in a revealing way. At other times he is hampered by weak judgments of the Irish scene. He underrates the strength of Celtic mythology in Irish oral tradition. Yeats's reference to the Fat Fool of folklore, which Mr Henn cannot trace, is a case in point. The Fat Fool is the *Giolla Deacair* (Hard Servant) of the Fenian Cycle, a popular figure of Irish oral tradition, who figures also in James Stephens's story *The Carl of the Drab Coat*. Irish oral tradition also contains the answer to another query of Mr Henn; Parnell's remark to the 'cheering man' of Yeats's poem is a variant of a folk-tale about Daniel O'Connell. The 'total approach' to

Yeats demands more understanding of Irish history, literature and folklore than has been brought to it so far. Mr Henn's book is yet a stimulating work, vitiated in places by diffuse speculation, but containing many good judgments. The illustrations are excellent, and so is the general format.

ROGER MCHUGH.

SELECTED POEMS. By Thomas Merton. (Hollis and Carter; 12s. 6d.)

A good test, though not a perfect definition, of poetry is that given by W. H. Auden and John Garret in *The Poet's Tongue*: memorable speech. Despite certain gifts and with some exceptions, Fr Merton's poems do not pass this test well. To begin with, though there is much accurate description and striking imagery appealing to the mind's eye, there are few of the qualities that catch the ear, whether of the formal order of stanza and rhyme, or the more subtle but still auditory and sensual appeal of more 'free' modern verse, qualities which, as Eliot has said of himself, are frequently antecedent to the idea and the imagery in the genesis of the poem. This 'taste' of a particular poem is the foundation of its memorability, and is that which catches and compels the attention of the reader, drawing him to re-read it and conquer, if necessary, its obscurity; and this fundamental attraction is lacking in Fr Merton's poems. Not that they are particularly obscure—it is, paradoxically, this lack of obscurity which causes the first uneasiness, at any rate in regard to the specifically religious poems, for it gives the impression that they have been 'thought' out and only later turned into verse. Nor is the imagery, which is perhaps his best gift, controlled by a sufficient critical sense: the impact of a particular image, however interesting in itself, is worthless if it adds nothing to the poem as a whole, worse, if it detracts from its integrity. An example may help, the opening lines of a poem called 'The Greek Women':

The ladies in red capes and golden bracelets  
Walk like reeds and talk like rivers,  
And sigh, like Vichy water, in the doorways. . . .

These are criticisms which can be made of poems throughout the book, the earliest poems of which appear to have been written in 1939. But a more serious one must be brought against those later poems which are explicitly religious in theme. Mr Speaight in his Introduction is able to say, 'Nowhere. . . is there a falsification of experience, nowhere a trumped-up emotion.' But the impression left by too many of these is that they have been written out of a willed and not a felt assent, that they are about what the poet wants, or thinks he ought, to feel, rather than about what he does feel. This is often and rightly brought against much religious verse, for it seems to require years of conscious effort and unconscious assimilation before the truths of faith