

SONG FOR A BIRTH OR A DEATH, by Elizabeth Jennings; Andre Deutsch; 10s. 6d.

Miss Jennings has been faulted in the past for over-smoothness and introspection, the price she pays for her technical competence and her honesty. Both qualities are present in her new volume of poems, but the promise of a deeper note of passion, of involvement, which some poems in *A Sense of the World* suggested, seems now to be being fulfilled:

Yes, but I have an aching thirst

Which can't be quenched by a cool mind.

The technical competence is still there, the words and phrases, compressed, illuminating, seem to fall naturally into rhyming stanzas without strain or searching; the numbers come, but one feels that a great deal of hard work and ingrained skill must have gone into the invitation.

It is her honesty which is so impressive as to be alarming, her complete truthfulness about so many aspects of existence which most of us would hide or disguise—conflict and failure, and sometimes success, in prayer and love, pain and fear:

The fitful poems come but can't protect . . .

She seems peculiarly sensitive to pain, in others as well as herself, and yet has the courage to explore it and make poems out of it. This has its dangers for the reader whose temptation is to ask personal questions, following not the path into the world through her experience but the backward path towards the writer's personal life. It is for this reason that I am happier (as a critic) with the poems where some symbol other than her own person focusses the feeling—the sequence of six poems called *The Clown*, for example, subtle and moving poems recalling the acrobats and clowns of Picasso and Rouault, the *Duino* Elegy too that Picasso's inspired, but still unmistakably her own:

And yet his helplessness,

His lack of tragic gesture, tragic mood,

Remind me of the abject beast we press

Our own despairs on, Christ nailed to the wood.

There are more ways to make a wilderness

Than we have understood.

Reading her poems we do begin to understand some of the ways in which we make a wilderness, but she is capable also of conveying something of the oases that God lays out in it, as in these opening stanzas of another sequence, *Notes for a Book of Hours*:

Kneeling to pray and resting on the words

I feel a stillness that I have not made.

Shadows take root, the falling light is laid

Smoothly on stone and skin. I lean towards

Some meaning that's delayed.

BLACKFRIARS

It is as if the mind had nervous fingers,
Could touch and apprehend yet not possess.
The light is buried where the darkness lingers
And something grateful in me wants to bless
Simply from happiness . . .

BENET WEATHERHEAD, O.P.

EVERY CHANGING SHAPE, by Elizabeth Jennings; Andre Deutsch; 25s.

This book is concerned with the relationship between the making of poems and the nature of religious experience. Versions of certain chapters originally appeared in various reviews, and this fact may in part account for the uneven quality of these studies; but only in part. The author is dealing with a theme of the greatest importance: the difficulty of living the life of prayer with the equipment of the artist. The peculiar anguish of this tension has been expressed (yet expressed in triumph) by St Augustine and by St John of the Cross, and it is not perhaps surprising that the chapters on these two writers should fall far short of studies which required less ambition, notably those of Simone Weil and Hart Crane, which seemed to me the most rewarding in the whole series. A certain verbosity mars other chapters: dismaying, because her prose appears to lack the very qualities which most distinguish her verse, the quiet power of understatement and the spare controlled line. One could hardly believe that she would so frequently use stock phrases such as 'effectively', 'depicts vividly'. The weariness of writing books about books has seeped into her style. If she had been moving in her right element, verse, she would have found a mode of expression at once more astringent and more vivifying.

Lovers of silence can acquire a reputation for garrulity when they go on talking to their neighbour out of charity. This situation has its anguish, too. Curiously, a kind of charity may lie behind some of the more diffuse chapters in this book, the charity that a silent man learns to show towards his own loquacity.

In the study of Simone Weil, the author, in a penetrating analysis, achieves the concentration, freshness and quiet energy of someone who is at last moving freely in a strange element. In Simone Weil's asceticism there is a kind of self-humbling which can appear to sail dangerously close to the most deadly and subtle spiritual pride. Elizabeth Jennings, in a phrase of clearest insight, says something which, so far as I know, has not been said before about Simone Weil: 'It was not humility that she lacked but rather that she possessed the wrong kind of humility'. That is to say, she assigned to the moment of prayer 'the kind of anxiety which, in human experience, is only proper to the artist—the anguish of the poet, whenever words seem to fail his experience'. Gustave Thibon put his finger on the root of this conflict when he said that there was a terrible self-will at the heart of her self-stripping; the inflexible desire that this stripping should be her own work and should be accomplished in her own way. Again, Elizabeth Jennings brings out in an arresting way the Jewish need