

REGIONS OF POETRY

Some Recent Verse

A SMALL anthology¹ from the region of Cardiff claims to be of Anglo-Welsh verse. How can one tell Anglo-Welsh from Anglo-English verse? The blurb suggests 'a Celtic sensitivity for the pattern of word and image', but this seems to me to be taking refuge in the undefinable. This kind of sensitivity, without which a poet is not a poet, is the same the whole world over and what determines it is the extent to which his mind is moulded by the language and past of his people or moved to write by the problems of their present. In the context, as an example of the first, that is of a poet whose imagery and language seem to continue the life of Welsh poetry, I would give Vernon Watkins, who does not appear here and must be outside the terms of reference; and of the second, R. S. Thomas whose verse in the wider technical sense is hardly more Welsh than Edmund Blunden's but who is concerned deeply with the scene and the soul of Wales. If the meaning I have tried to give to the term is accepted, in this anthology the poems of Glyn Jones fall into the first category, 'Nonconformist' by Robin Moffet into the second, but the majority could have been written by Englishmen in England. I sound harsher than I mean to: there are some good Anglo-English poems among them. There are more Anglo-Welsh poems in Mr Conlan's volume² from the same publisher and they are the best ones in it. Some are set out in Welsh verse-forms, though without, as far as my ear can tell, the complicated internal patterns of *cynghanedd*, some are concerned with the problems of modern Wales:

'Consider the land: Welsh cupidity
Still on the up and up, and the television
Aerials spoking the landscape like a bed of reeds
When the swamp's half out. A powerful signal
It is from England these days; and the visitors
Enjoy it in the parlour on wet nights,
Ten shillings extra. . . .'

The field now widens and becomes Anglo-English or even Anglo-European, though this does not mean that I think that the poetry necessarily improves. Of the remaining six poets whose work I want to consider, Dom Moraes is by nationality Indian, but English is his first language and his poems are moulded entirely by English tradition; George Seferis is the pen-name of the Greek Ambassador in London, but his poems have been so well translated by Rex Warner that they bear inspection as English poems;

¹ *Dragons and Daffodils: An Anthology*. Edited by John Stuart Williams and Richard Milner. (Christopher Davies Ltd, Llandybie, Carm., 7s. 6d.)

² *Formal Poems*. By Anthony Conlan. (Christopher Davies Ltd, Llandybie, Carm., 7s. 6d.)

and John Peale Bishop was an American, but a Southerner and as such half-easily, half-uneasily related to Europe. Even so, but remembering that it is always dangerous to categorize poets, it is possible to distinguish them by their approach to one of two poles—either poetry which rises from personal or social experience of the present and remains expressed in personal symbols, or poetry which though it rises from personal experience is related to a wider historical or cultural concern.

Mr Moraes has already won the Hawthornden Prize with his first book of poems, and this is his second.³ As I have said, his poems are moulded by the whole tradition of English verse; there is nothing specifically contemporary about them technically, though even on the merely technical level they are most accomplished; only a genuine and confident poet could now rhyme 'love' and 'dove' twice in three pages and make us like it. Though there are a few poems which are purely symbolic, they are made mostly of memories of childhood, friends, someone loved, a journey to India and the border of Tibet, where

'The invaders walk under the eaves of night,
Leading their mules, their slanted foreign eyes
Following a star above our waterfalls.'

It is the simplicity and deep honesty with which he writes about himself and the freshness which he brings to every image he uses which make his poems so attractive. Miss Nott's⁴ are a thornier slope to climb. They are meditative, their syntax involved, their imagery austere, often the working out of a single image from the natural world, an overlapping of intuitions, and the reader has to work hard all the time. Although she writes mostly in so-called free verse, it is truly verse, having a movement and a harsh music of its own which is essential to the whole poem. When she writes in a more strict form, as in 'What a Piece of Work', simplifying and tautening the syntax, she writes very powerfully indeed. Mr Sillitoe⁵ writes much better when he is using stricter forms. The main work, the title poem, 'The Rats', is a fierce piece of invective against those who run and those who passively accept the Welfare State: it is a disturbing poem, not by reason of the attack it makes, but because attacking from the angle he does, the crushing of the personal in the collective, he seems to go weak as soon as he has to suggest the good in the name of which he is protesting. But I suppose one should not demand too much; the invective is stirring even if no one will admit to being a Rat.

It is the three remaining poets whom I find most interesting, even if not always more successful. Mr Lyle's book⁶ is made up mainly of two sequences, 'Heroic Elegies' and 'Orphic Elegies', and the underlying themes of both are the crisis in the heart of mankind, fate, death, suffering, possible triumphs. The 'Heroic Elegies' are expressed largely in the figures and symbols of classical antiquity, rather as though the Iliad had been reworked

³ *Poems*. By Dom Moraes. (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 10s. 6d.)

⁴ *Creatures and Emblems*. By Kathleen Nott. (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 12s. 6d.)

⁵ *The Rats and Other Poems*. By Alan Sillitoe. (W. H. Allen, 15s.)

⁶ *Poems from Limbo*. By Rob Lyle. (The Bodley Head, 10s. 6d.)

by St John-Perse; both language and verse seem at first to be too loose, but the total effect is coherent and not without power. The verse of the 'Orphic Elegies' is tauter, the symbolism, drawn from wider sources, including Chinese, more tightly bound together. Both sequences are impressive, but there still seems to be lacking some punch, some density, which would make them as powerful as they ought to be.

George Seferis⁷ and John Peale Bishop⁸ are both major poets. It is rash to say this without having the space to enlarge and quote. Seferis first: you can hardly, as some English poets have found out, go wrong with images taken from the scenery of Greece, but in Seferis' poems the land lives, the figures of Greek myth and history speak, and through them (or is it they through him?) he makes his subtle questing explorations of reality, of personal relationships, his symbols and encounters with their clear outlines and ambiguous depths. George Seferis must be, in his own tongue, of the stature of Eliot or Claudel.

John Peale Bishop died in 1947 or 1944, the blurb says the first, a pre-fatory note in the book the second. Whichever it was, it should not have taken more than a decade from his death for the first volume of poems by him to be published in England. He has affinities with Allen Tate, who has written a short introduction, and with John Crowe Ransom, but nevertheless a strongly individual feeling, born of the conflict in him of New England and Southern blood and of the effort not only to hold these together but in focus against the European sources of American life. It is impossible to quote from a longer poem and to quote a short one would not do him justice, but this is quite certainly a book which anyone who takes poetry seriously ought to buy.

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REVIEWS

LE MILIEU DIVIN. By Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. (Collins; 18s.)

This book may be called an approach to the study of what St Paul called the *Plerôma*, that mysterious ultimate Plenitude to which the Christian Revelation bids us look forward. In the previous book the author, writing as a palaeontologist, confined himself, first, to what was strictly 'observable' and did in fact observe within a limited area the evidence for upward changes in phenomena, from the less to the more highly organized, culminating in the 'phenomenon of Man', a self-conscious being. But while he clearly could not invoke knowledge granted by a 'supernatural revelation' (such as redemption from sin, or Grace), neither he nor anyone could be forbidden to speculate and form hypotheses; and Fr Teilhard suggested

⁷ *Poems*. By George Seferis. Translated from the Greek by Rex Warner. (The Bodley Head, 15s.)

⁸ *Selected Poems of John Peale Bishop*. With an Introduction by Allen Tate. (Chatto and Windus, 12s. 6d.)