

NOTES ON SOME YOUNG POETS

I am looking at an old snapshot of Robert Desnos in his youth. Head propped on a morocco rug, eyes tightly shut, mouth agape, he looks like a death mask for Manolete. He is not sleeping. Hypnotized or drugged instead, perhaps he is spouting automatic verse.

Despite the tomfoolery and show, one cannot help admire the spunk of Desnos and the other young surrealists. At their best, they were embarked on a voyage of the spirit. So much recent American verse, on the other hand, seems soporific and enervated.

In fact, reading some of the recent Yale younger poets, the Lamont prize winners, and, say, an anthology like Mr. Richard G. Stern's tidy, judicious *American Poets of the Fifties* (*Western Review*, Spring 1957), one becomes spooked by the image of the young poet prematurely corseted with alderman, thinning hair, tenure, and routine no-nonsense sex life. Cozy middle-aged verse. Absent are most of the expected vices and virtues of the young poet: no technical howlers; no tears for a lost garden of earthly delights; no ranting and raving against the established society; no bumptiously imperative subjective moods. Able, academic, anemic verse instead.

Mr. Carroll, whose work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry* and many other magazines, is the guest poetry editor of *Chicago Review*. He is working on a book of poems.

However, to dismiss this young gray-flannel poet as a quiet technician, a mere worker in filigree, would be, cautions Mr. Stern, foolish if not presumptuous.

One is hard-pressed to do otherwise.

Of these gray-flannel poets, Mr. W. S. Merwin seems most representative, as well as the best.¹ I had better say right now that I consider him a fine poet. Not since the young Auden has a beginner exhibited such intimacy with, respect for, and command of, his technique. What his work wants, on the other hand, is adventure. No steps through the looking glass for Merwin: to catalogue its reflections is all he seems to ask. Bland, faintly ironical, mildly loving, he is committed to nothing that would perturb the tobacco clouds and gossip of a *PMLA* cocktail party. The things of this world are his real familiars. Too often there is the suspicion that Merwin's poems, as well as those of his fellows, were composed out of an old-fashioned Anglo-Saxon sense of duty: for God, Mother, and American Letters; certainly not for the joy or the hell of it.

Still, perhaps the time has come for this kind of alexandrianism. To polish bits of the precious achievement of the past 40 years in American poetry; to be curator, as it were, of the wealth of technical and spiritual accumulation: this, possibly, is the young poet's job today.

But other kinds of verse are being produced in the States today. Not surrealism, to be sure. But poetry at least outside the pale of classroom, cocktail party, anthology, garden party, and editorial desk.

Toughness, a certain hard-bitten spiritual adventure, is what Mr. John Logan, for one example, has. His poems—witty, emo-

¹ To list the best: Edgar Bogardus, *Various Jangling Keys* (Yale); Philip Booth, *Letter from a Distant Land* (Viking); Donald Hall, *Exile and Marriages* (Viking); Anthony Hecht, *A Summoning of Stones* (Macmillan); John Hollander; Daniel G. Hoffman, *An Armada of Thirty Whales* (Yale); Donald Justice; James Merrill, *First Poems* (Knopf); W. S. Merwin, *A Mask for Janus* (Yale), *The Dancing Bears* (Yale), *Green with Beasts* (Hart-Davis); and Howard Moss, *The Toy Fair* (Scribners).

tionally complex, brainy, at times embarrassingly personal—in-sist on wrestling with angels, interior ones as well as those of the lower air. Occasionally Logan even seems to ask too much. Some of his *Cycle for Mother Cabrini* (Grove) smacks of a kind of poetic gnosticism: as if, having experienced “truth” through poetry alone, he would take up residence in the house that Plato built. Still, he never bores.

Mr. Paul Blackburn, for another, has done fine work in matters of technique, speech rhythms, and language.² With vigor and grace he has translated the troubadors; and in some cases even improves poems originally Englished by Pound. Having the best ear among the young poets, Blackburn also has, in contrast to Merwin, the best natural sense of poetic form. His adventure in technical matters is more than antiquarian fiddling: he tackles technique with the same gusto that Logan does complicated experiences. Whether he will write original poems as good as his translations, however, remains to be seen.

A recent Yale younger poet, Mr. John Ashbery, shows, despite a temptation for smart-alec ironies, the beginning of what could be an interesting exploration into the landscape of myths and dreams.

It would be asinine, of course, to blare out predictions for these young poets. Who could have anticipated from Rilke's early innocuous tunes the later invocation of terrible angels? I am not even sure that it was honest, or even useful, to have pigeonholed so many into the one gray-flannel school; or to have tried to bully good, if pedestrian, writing into being something else. Seldom can poets choose the poems they write: poems choose them.

That more adventure, guts, even gaudiness will in the future accompany our young poets' commendable respect for technique, is, however, a legitimate wish.

² *Proensa: translations from the provencal* (Divers. Palma de Mallorca), and *The Dissolving Fabric* (Divers). His anthology of troubador songs will appear soon.