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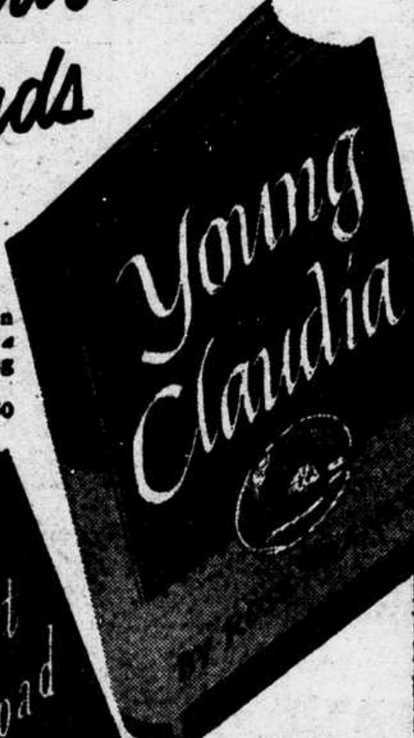

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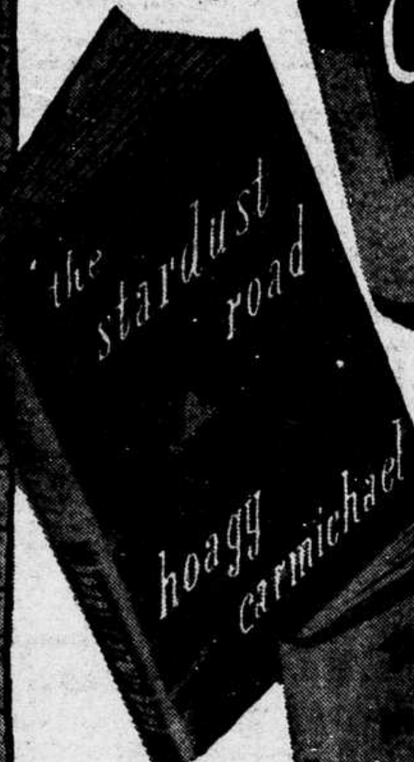

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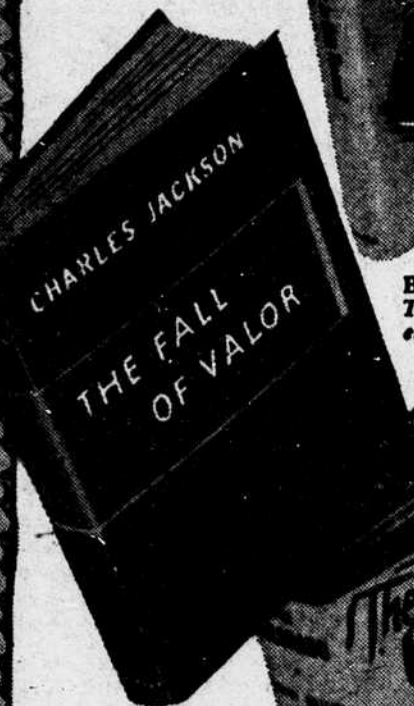

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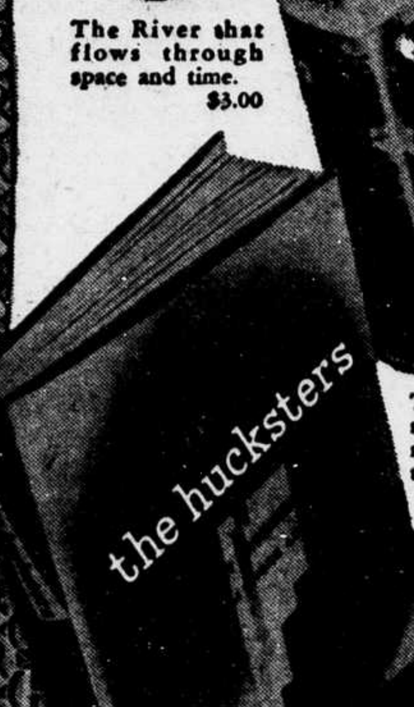

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Poetry of the Year

By Dorothea Kingsland

Dorothea Kingsland, a graduate of Bryn Mawr College, has been a reviewer for the Saturday Review of Literature and for the New York Times Book Review. Her article on the poetry of 1946 was written exclusively for The Star.

—Sketch by Newman Sudduth.

WHEN the United Nations Conference opened in 1945, "The New Yorker" commented: "Poets would make better delegates. . . . Poets have been singing this stuff for years uncounted, and they are still singing it. . . . Someday people will put faith in poets, who saw things centuries ago in perfect clarity."

The poetry of the year 1946 has been notable for the concentrated attention it has paid to the problems of the present earth. The poets who have published volumes during this year seldom evince any desire or even unconscious straining to escape from their own nations into countries of self-satisfying imagination. They look upon contemporary horrors pityingly but unflinchingly. The experienced poets are in a measure reconciled yet gird themselves for an unknown future. The younger poets are angrier and more gloomy but equally courageous in their determination to see life and see it whole.

* * * *

Raymond Holden, whose "Selected Poems" mark him once again as a mature and meditative poet, has voiced the prevailing thought in his double summons: "Unable to die, come, Man, and study life. . . . Unable to live, come Man, and study death." Holden sees the world as "This flattened world of hope, This dish of agony." Never forget the day, he says:

When, from the forest, man,
the wild one, came
With knowledge pointed in his
mind like flame,
Able at last to choose to save
or slay.

These quotations are taken from a section of previously unpublished poems entitled "War Behind the Brow." In the selections from Holden's earlier published work, such as "The Puppet Flesh," "Leda and the Swan," and "Chance Has a Whip" there is perhaps greater felicity of expression but they cannot match his most recent poems in intellectual content.

* * * *

A challenge similar to Holden's is uttered by Ruth Pitter, the English poet, and she has risen above her usual withdrawn and somewhat sentimental character in the title poem of her book, "The Bridge". Her attunement to the tragedies of war is again reflected in "The Sparrow's Skull" and in "Passion and Peace" with its opening line, "Poetry, like all passion, seeks for peace"—these two being among the finest poems in her book.

Another English poet, Robert Graves, has, perhaps because of his large historical perspective, expressed his current reflections with a calm obliqueness in his "Poems: 1938-1945. In "To Lucia At Birth" he writes:

. . . Outrageous company to be
born into,
Lunatics of a shining age
long dead . . .
Hark how they roar; but
never turn your head.
Nothing will change them, let
them not change you.

* * * *

Another poet who is unwilling to surrender all joy in the face of the threats of history, is the American, Genevieve Taggard. Her new book, "Slow Music" is rewarding both in its expressions of delight in earth's landscapes and in its examinations of earth's more political aspects. In such a poem as "Demeter" with its beautiful lines, "Study the art of seeds, The nativity of caves," in "Gilfeather Again," and in "Hymn to Yellow" there is refreshment for the imagination.

A versatile poet, writing a more formal verse but holding her own by the practised sureness of her technique is Leonora Speyer. Her new collection, "Slow Wall Together With Nor Without Music" including some new poems and some previously published, reveals her encircled by many literary and religious traditions.

An even closer adherence to tradition is to be found in the "Dublin Poems" of Semuas O'Sullivan, presented to American readers with an enticing introduction by Padraic Colum. Seumas O'Sullivan is and will probably remain best known for his line written many years ago at the time of the Celtic Revival:

Twilight people, why will you
still be crying,
Crying and calling to me out
of the trees?
For under the quiet grass the
wise are lying,
And all the strong ones are
gone over the seas.

Nothing in this wide selection from his work quite comes up to that. But his "Dublin (1916)" is a fine stirring thing and many of his rather pictorial verses on Irish places and people evoke nostalgia.

* * * *

Experienced experimentalists as well as practised traditionalists have marked the year with their poetry. Chief of these is William Carlos Williams presenting the first portion of his new poem "Paterson." Taking a slice of his native New Jersey, he has viewed it air-plane fashion, for its geography, its history, its indefinable atmosphere.

Another experimental poet but one who has perhaps by now lived past this characterization is John Gould Fletcher whose new book, "The Burning Mountain" adds two dozen long poems to the weighty mass of his output. Fletcher, like most of his contemporaries, is deeply affected by current history but his poems vary widely in time and place. The scene shifts easily from the Santa Fe Trail to the woods of New England, beaten by hurricane, to the "Steel, smelted out of rock, Rock, riveted to steel" that is New York. There is a certain monotony in Fletcher's long, undisciplined rhythms, a monotony that is not necessarily unattractive and that receives an apotheosis in his skilful "Symphony of Snow."

* * * *

The year of 1946 brought a special benison in the shape of a handful of poems by Stephen Vincent Benet, which are appearing posthumously in a volume of short stories called "The Last Circle." The most memorable of these is his "Little Testament." Mrs. Benet relates in her introduction: "He wrote it in June of 1941, when he decided to re-make his will. He said he wished to make another will—of intangible, not tangible, things. . . . He laughed and said he would leave it to speak for him after he died. But I think he thought it would be a long time." It seems unjust to tear asunder a poem which flows so inevitably from part to part but perhaps this stanza will illustrate its quality:

. . . My people were soldiers for
the most part—they had
Spain and Ireland in
their shroud;
I was a coward and afraid,
yet I have not shamed
them, I think.
I have not refused the drink
when there might be
venom in the drink.
I have written the verse for
my pleasure, not for
praise or money or the
crowd.

Of the newer and younger figures on the poetic horizon, far and away the most remarkable is the poet, Robert Lowell. Coming from the Boston milieu that his name implies, he has at once digested it and cast it off. "Lord Weary's Castle" (its title taken from an old ballad) is his first book to receive a full edition. It has undeniable power. Lowell employs rime and metre and alliteration but uses them entirely for his own ends. There is no question as to his originality. His thought is the thinking of a young man bitterly enraged at the state of the world and championing with intellectual passion the Christian ethic.

Another new poet, not quite comparable to Lowell, is the young Irishman, Dennis Devlin, whose first book, "Lough Derg" (Reynal & Hitchcock) has just been issued in this country. Devlin is likewise a poet of intellectual passion.

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Noteworthy among the other newer poets whose work commands attention this year is Henry Trease, the English author, whose revolt against the schools of Spender and Auden has been consummated in his somewhat mannered "Collected Poems." Back in America, the Yale Series of Younger Poets has brought to the fore "Family Circle" by Eve Merriam, a clear-eyed reporter of life.

The League to Support Poetry has noticed, by its yearly Award, the sensitive and carefully wrought work of Eve Triem in her "Parade of Doves." Owen Dodson, the Negro writer, has spoken vigorously and honestly for himself in his book "Powerful Long Ladder." Josephine Miles has continued her concise, staccato observations in "Local Measures." Byron Vazakas has received for his first book, "Transfigured Night," the enthusiastic accolade of William Carlos Williams.

A surprising culmination to the poetic year has come in a book of one of the most familiar, at least by name, and most discussed of all contemporary poets, E. E. Cummings. For Christmas, 1946, Cummings has abandoned his more abtruse methods and written straightforwardly of what weighs upon his heart. His new book, "Santa Claus," is subtitled "A Morality." Though this brief play in verse runs only for a few pages, Cummings touches in it more accurately, more penetratingly the sore spots of our civilization than many analytical historians have done.

His characters are Santa Claus, Death, a Mob, a Woman and a Child. The play opens in medieval style with a dialogue between Santa Claus and Death. Santa Claus is bewildered because people do not accept his gifts:

Santa Claus: "But, surely nothing could be simpler than taking something which is freely offered?"

Death: "You're speaking of a true or actual world. Imagine, if you can, a world so blurred that its inhabitants are one another—an idiotic monster of negation: so timid, it would rather starve itself eternally than run the risk of choking . . . a world so lazy that it cannot dream; so blind, it worships its own ugliness: a world so false, so trivial, so unso, phantoms are solid by comparison. But no—you can't imagine such a world."

Santa Claus: "Any more than such a world could imagine me."

Death then explains to his companion that he, Santa Claus, is offering the world "understanding," but it only wants "knowledge," "science." He suggests that Santa Claus try to sell the people a "wheelmine"—(which, it turns out, has no existence). At first the Mob is wild with excitement over the wheelmine and then it grows furious with rage because there is rumor of an accident in the wheelmine. Meanwhile, the saint has changed masks with Death, who fancies that he would be more attractive to women in the other's guise. The Mob threatens to kill Santa Claus, but actually hangs Death. The Woman turns to Santa Claus in Death's mask because:

Knowledge has taken love out of
the world
And all the world is joyless, joyless, joyless.

The Woman wants death. But revelation comes when Santa Claus removes Death's mask and shows his inner, youthful self. Thereafter the Woman and the Child are united with him in a time of joyful harmony.

On this high note the poetry of the year 1946 concludes, despite what man has made of man during its course.