

## All's Well in the World of Verse

By JOSEPH SLATER, *who teaches English at Rutgers.*

THIS quarter's catch of poetry and books about poetry, many of them bearing the imprint of university presses, is abundant and varied: a volume a week, almost, of new poems; three volumes of criticism; three editions of the classics; and paper-bound reprints of the collected works of two of the most important of contemporary poets. The reprints, especially, indicate that things go well in the province of poetry. News that Theodore Roethke's "Words for the Wind" (Indiana) and William Empson's "Collected Poems" (Harcourt, Brace) are now on sale in every American bookstore—and some cigar stores—for \$1.75 and \$1.15 is worth sending abroad.

The three classics are all of the nineteenth century. Goethe's "Faust" (Doubleday, \$4.50) has been edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann. It includes all of Part I and Acts i and v of Part II, with the German and English on facing pages in numbered lines. The introduction is lively and irreverent. The translation is in the strict German tradition of line-for-line, meter-for-meter, rhyme-for-rhyme correspondence, a method which in this case has produced more accuracy than poetry. "Swinburne: A Selection" (Harcourt, Brace, \$5.75) is the work of Dame Edith Sitwell. It consists of the poems usually found in sophomore anthologies and an introduction which, although it is written in her usual manner, makes some valuable, craftsmanlike comments on the subtlety of Swinburne's sound-patterns. Melville's "Clarel" (Hendricks, \$6.50), a vast, gnarled narrative of nineteenth-century pilgrims in the Holy Land, is made truly accessible for the first time in a scholarly edition by Walter E. Bezanson. Maps and explanatory notes set forth the geographical, historical, and theological context of the poem. A sophisticated and eloquent introduction relates it to Melville's life and his other works and revealingly turns on it the insight of modern critical analysis.

The three volumes of criticism were all originally lectures to general audiences; they are now addressed to the common reader. The only one at all specialized or recondite is "Language

and Poetry" (Harvard, \$5.50) by the Spanish poet Jorge Guillén, and it demands merely a curiosity about the exotic and an interest in the nature of poetic creation. Guillén examines with a close critical eye and the sympathy of an artist poems by Berceo, Góngora, San Juan de la Cruz, Bécquer, and Gabriel Miro, and concludes with a sensitive reminiscence and evaluation of his own poetic generation, the last of pre-Fascist Spain.

Stanley Edgar Hyman in "Poetry and Criticism" (Atheneum, \$4) sees literary history as the movement of a dialectic in which a great poem becomes the *standard* for its age, begets a body of descriptive-prescriptive criticism that serves as the age's *poetics*, and finally provokes a dissident and heretical work which is a *challenge*. The *challenge* requires a critical *sanction*, and these two become in their turn *standard* and *poetics*. Hyman applies this scheme with lightness and learning to four literary revolutions and demonstrates the great usefulness of schematic simplification. He is an imaginative critic as well as a historian—most notably in his reading of "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," the *challenge* to the *standard* of Milton and the *poetics* of Arnold—and he writes with complete freedom from the gobbledygook that has afflicted so much of modern criticism.

Archibald MacLeish takes as his texts for "Poetry and Experience" (Houghton Mifflin, \$4) some critical dicta of Lu Chi and a few poems of Li Po and Tu Fu, and by repeatedly referring to them the works of poets as remote in time as Donne, Keats, and Rimbaud, he establishes the universal-

ity of certain essential poetic values: the meanings of meaningless sounds, the power of ellipsis and juxtaposition, the trapping of heaven and earth "in the cage of form." MacLeish's sensitivity is catholic and true: he brings illumination to every poem he writes about; but his book is clearly a part—and a valuable one—of the composite *poetics* of this age.

Of the ten volumes of new poetry, the one that most urgently demands comment is Abbie Huston Evans's "Fact of Crystal" (Harcourt, Brace, \$3.75). That a poet so distinguished as Miss Evans could have reached the age of eighty without fame and almost without praise is cause for coast-to-coast embarrassment. But it is not inexplicable. She has been a traditional artist in an age of innovation, and she has written remarkably little. Her first book was published in 1928 and her second in 1938; this, her third, contains only forty-eight pages. That handful of poetry, however, is so freshly imaginative, so taut, so successful in its limited undertakings, that it seems certain—now—of a place in our anthologies and our histories.

Her imagination is geological. She sees beneath the pasture green to the "fiercer stuff" of earth's core. Holding basalt pebbles in her hand she can "sense duration" and "the depths/Bared when the moon tore free." She phrases these perceptions with precision and daring: "the lapidary sea"; "Orion's chill, washed subterranean glitter/Wheels up from under"; "conglomerate glory/Inrolled, constricted to one nub of fire"; and she shapes them into aphorisms and meditations that express a quiet, religious confidence about man's place in a fire-and-basalt world. Her title poem, an extraordinary transmutation of science into art, finds images and metaphors for the million-year growth of a crystal and sings at the end a hymn to form and purpose: "How landfall-like august form stands delivered!/ Here's most diffuse, most pointed, peaked, compacted, /Here's most amorphous grappled into jewel."

Robert Baggs ("Madonna of the Cello," Wesleyan, \$3.50) has the makings of a poet. That is evident in parts of his title poem and in two or three pretty lyrics of fleshly love. But he is a young man—Amherst '57, the jacket says—and he has published too soon. Most of the work in this volume he will one day think of, with regret, as his juvenilia. About two-thirds of the book is narrative: recollections of the pranks and traumas of a suburban boyhood, the pains and ecstasies of the Phi Psi house. He intends these tales to "cast a subliminal spell," but they do not. Their pentameter plods; their language

