

Some New Poetry

The Burning Perch, by Louis MacNeice.
New York: Oxford University Press, 1963.
58 pp. \$3.75.

The Moving Target, by W. S. Merwin.
New York: Atheneum, 1963. 97 pp.
\$3.95 (\$1.95 paperbound).

O Taste and See, by Denise Levertov.
New York: New Directions, 1964. \$1.50
(paperbound).

THE UNTIMELY DEATH of Louis MacNeice last year robbed English poetry of one of its steadiest and shrewdest practitioners. His career ran its sharp course from the very late 1920's on, and he has been associated in readers' minds since then with the other young revolutionary poets of the 1930's, Auden, Spender, and Day Lewis. But MacNeice remained more distant than some of his contemporaries from the temptations of political commitment and propagandistic writing. One of the most notable features of his verse is a kind of clear-headedness, which nicely complements his wit, irony, moral toughness, and his deep human concern.

MacNeice was a very productive poet, and he had great gifts as a translator (of Goethe and Aeschylus) and also as a dramatist for the BBC. His *Collected Poems*, which covers work up to 1948, was belatedly published here a year or so ago, but there are a number of volumes that have appeared since 1948, the last of which is *The Burning Perch*. MacNeice has, particularly in *Autumn Journal* and *Autumn Sequel*, experimented with longer poems; yet I think we catch the true flavor of his work in short pieces of the kind that compose this new book.

Though the mind and vision of MacNeice clearly identify each poem as peculiarly his, he manages to achieve a distance, an objectivity, that set apart the poetic experience from its author. Much of what he takes for the material of his verse is drawn from a penetrating observation of present-day life. The changing atmosphere and the increase of building in London that involves the demolition of the past in favor

of the fashionably new elicit pointed criticism and Biblical comparison in "New Jerusalem":

Bulldoze all memories and sanctuaries: our
birthright
Means a new city, vertical, impersonal,
Whose horoscope claimed a straight
resurrection
Should Stimulant stand in conjunction with
Sleeping Pill.

As for the citizens, what with their cabinets
Of faces and voices, their bags of music,
Their walls of thin ice dividing greynesses,
With numbers and mirrors they defy mortality.

So come up Lazarus: just a spot of make-up
Is all you need and a steel corset
And two glass eyes, we will teach you to
touch-type
And give you a police dog to navigate the
rush hour.

With all this rebuilding we have found an
antidote
To quiet and self-communing: from now on
nobody
Strolling the streets need lapse into
timelessness
Or ponder the simple unanswerable questions.

Wheels upon wheels never moving, Ezekiel
Finds himself in a canyon of concrete;
Cage upon cage, Daniel goes feeling
From one to the next in search of a carnivore.

But, that Babel may rise, they must first work
downward
To sublimate previous and premature
foundations.
Bulldozer, dinosaur, pinheaded diplodocus,
Champ up forgotten and long-dry water-pipes.

The general character of this volume can be found in an underlying vein of grim speculation and in the allegorical quality which gives the matters MacNeice describes the suggestion of universal applicability. Very few of the poems, in spite of the variety they display in other ways, escape a darkening view of a world dominated by dehumanizing technology, substituting at every turn the spurious thing for the genuine. The poem "In Lieu" treats just such substitutions; and in "The Suicide" MacNeice depicts the loss of privacy, the shameless prurience of a public so obviously catered to through mass communications, by presenting us with a speaker who conducts a tour through the office of a man recently dead by his own hand. In "Flower Show"

thousands of plants and flowers, of every conceivable kind, gathered in a "canvas cathedral" for exhibition keep a nervous spectator "in their blind sights." His terror is great, the poet implies, because these flowers, like the man, have been uprooted from the organic world of nature to which they properly belong. The final stanza indicates the redemptive possibilities of this disturbing situation, for he may at least be granted a last vision of what he abandoned, the life he traded for a living death. We also need to know that this spectator came to see the flower show and was inadvertently—or was it purposefully?—locked in after closing time:

So bandage his eyes since he paid to come in
 but somehow forgot
 To follow the others out—and now there is
 no way out
 Except that his inturnd eyes before he falls
 may show him
 Some nettled orchard, tousled hedge, some
 garden even
 Where flowers, whether they boast or insinuate,
 whisper or shout,
 Still speak a living language.

The allegorical element is again quite plain. While these late poems of MacNeice do not often aim for the lyricism we find in some of his earlier writing, they are nonetheless representative of his high accomplishment. *The Burning Perch* is a fine book; let us hope that Oxford University Press and Faber and Faber will now plan a complete collected edition of the poems and the plays to make the entire range of this poet's work accessible.

W. S. Merwin's fifth and latest book shows him to be, as are many other younger American poets, involved in a new mode of poetic endeavor, one which draws heavily on sources lying beyond consciousness in dreams or images of preconscious and unconscious origins. This strong influence of the irrational has long been evident in modern French, Spanish, and Latin American poetry; it has also appeared in different ways in the work of such American poets as Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell. But Merwin's use of subliminal materials is different and not, I believe, as successful.

That Merwin is one of the more gifted poets to appear in this country since the war goes without saying. His earliest books demonstrated a technical brilliance, precision, and virtuosity hard to match; the themes of his work at that time were very often drawn from mythology and

legend. Their chief weaknesses are a coldness and a lack of conviction; the poet is too remote from the materials of his poetry. Merwin then moved on to poems in which immediacy of experience replaced the employment of ancient or mythic experience reworked through a dazzling mastery of his poetic means. *The Drunk in the Furnace* (1959) pointed the direction this latest book has taken but is, I think, the better book for not having gone so far.

While there are some poems in *The Moving Target* which seem to me very satisfactory, poems that really attain the effects they seek and sustain their particular manner throughout, I do find that, considered altogether, the book creates a general feeling of sameness, of monotony, which is quite unrelieved. Because the scheme of the majority of the poems is both illogical and private, one soon gives up trying to decipher them and looks for compensation in the imagery or rhythm, but these, too, become disappointing. Sometimes I think that passages from one poem might just as well be placed in the midst of another as be where they are; at other times I am reminded unpleasantly of that deluge of English translations of French Surrealists like Breton, Eluard, and others, that flooded the pages of little magazines in the 1930's and 1940's. Yet these thoughts, while I know they are manifestly unfair to a writer of Merwin's talent, will not be stifled — not, at any rate, in this reader. Let me pick passages from a couple of poems simply to illustrate the qualities I have been talking about. Here are some lines from "The Present":

The walls join hands and
 It is tomorrow:
 The birds clucking to the horses, the horses
 Doing the numbers for the hell of it,
 The numbers playing the calendars,
 The saints marching in,
 It seems only yesterday . . .

And so forth. Here are more lines, this time from "Recognition":

The bird of ash has appeared at windows
 And the roads will turn away, morning.
 What distances we survived, the fire
 With its one wing
 And I with my blackened heart.

Several of Merwin's contemporaries, notably James Wright, Louis Simpson, Robert Bly, and James Dickey, have introduced into their poetry

imagery of a preconscious and subjective order and have proceeded to mold it into some startlingly beautiful poems which are not only quite various but also avoid as a rule the willful and cryptic privacy that mars so many of Merwin's efforts in the present collection. Obviously enough, Merwin has been searching the past few years for a different approach to his experience; those explorations, of course, testify to his integrity as a poet, to his desire to fulfill himself imaginatively. Yet this book doesn't appear to me to be the answer he is looking for. Though I hope Merwin progresses beyond most of these new poems, I should like to name several which I believe are genuine successes and therefore evade the tendencies discussed or turn them to advantage: "Home for Thanksgiving," "A Letter from Gusie," "In the Night Fields," "Air," "Daybreak."

Denise Levertov is one of the true joys of recent American poetry. She is, to my mind, the best young woman poet writing here or in England. Though she came originally from England, where her Russian-Jewish father had become an Anglican clergyman, her real literary education and poetic development apparently occurred through her exposure to the work of certain American poets like Pound, W. C. Williams, H. D., and Kenneth Rexroth. Miss Levertov is married to the American novelist Mitchell Goodman and lives in New York. *O Taste and See* is her sixth collection and consists of poetry written in the last two years in addition to her first short story, "Say the Word," a lovely extension into prose of the kind of experience she examines in her poems.

If she has learned a great deal from those senior poets I mentioned. Miss Levertov has always been true to herself; her poems unfailingly enter the boundaries of her individual life as a person: her thoughts, dreams, visions; the things and happenings of the world as she meets them; her relationships with others, with her husband, her son. The experiences she conveys are formed with an eye to craftsmanship that never wavers. The most unnoticeable things, Miss Levertov discovers, are feasts for the imagination, as in "The Crack":

While snow fell carelessly
floating indifferent in eddies of
rooftop air, circling the black
chimney cowl,

a spring night entered

my mind through the tight-closed window,
wearing

a loose Russian shirt of
light silk

For this, then,
that slanting
line was left, that crack, the pane
never replaced.

Miss Levertov occasionally writes poems on the theme of artistic creation, a not uncommon subject for modern poets; yet there is nothing precious about her treatment of such matters for she sees the act of creation as something requiring the strictest discipline of mind and language, as well as the infusion of imaginative power. In "September 1961" she pays tribute to Pound, Williams, and H. D., her mentors:

They have told us
the road leads to the sea,
and given

the language into our hands

And in the poem "Claritas" the figure of the "All-Day Bird" symbolizes the artist at work; the bird's odd name links it to the poem's title and thus to the idea of art as the result of conscious labor. Here are the first three parts of the poem:

I
The All-Day Bird, the artist,
whitethroated sparrow,
striving
in hope and
good faith to make his notes
ever more precise, closer
to what he knows.

II
There is the proposition
and the development.
The way
one grows from the other.
The All-Day Bird
ponders.

III
May the first note
be round enough
and those that follow
fine, fine as
sweetgrass

prays
the All-Day Bird.

Among the other remarkable sorts of poems Miss Levertov gives us here and elsewhere in her work is the personal reflection, the focus of which is not outward — the mind playing upon external objects or circumstances as in "The Crack" — but visionary and inward — the exploration of self in hallucination or image. The poem "In Mind" is a striking example of this interior venture; Miss Levertov comes upon two different selves inhabiting her inner universe, as far apart and yet as strangely intimate with one another as sun and moon, consciousness and unconsciousness:

There's in my mind a woman
of innocence, unadorned but

fair-featured, and smelling of
apples or grass. She wears

a utopian smock or shift, her hair
is light brown and smooth, and she

is kind and very clean without
ostentation—

but she has
no imagination.

And there's a
turbulent moon-ridden girl

or old woman, or both,
dressed in opals and rags, feathers
and torn taffeta,

who knows strange songs—
but she is not kind.

One could go right on quoting poem after poem from this new collection by Miss Levertov. Her work, from *Here and Now* (1957) to these latest poems, merits our full attention: it is a body of poetry, always developing, which we can continually turn to with fresh pleasure.

Reviewed by RALPH J. MILLS, JR.