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CLEARING THE AIR

BY H. E. BATES

NEW WRITING, unlike some other publications which pretend to discover new authors but never do, goes on being exactly what it says it is. The folio for *Spring 1941* (Hogarth Press, 5s. net) contains not more than three names known to any but a minute fraction of the population of the country. Side by side with *New Writing* comes Mr. Auden's *New Year Letter* (Faber, 10s. 6d. net) and a reprint of D. H. Lawrence's *Ship of Death and Other Poems* (Faber, 2s. 6d. net): two publications not without significance, I think, since Auden appears to have reached, or to have been pushed into, something of the Saviour-of-the-New-World position occupied by Lawrence during the last war. "Had he (Lawrence) remained with his people, and the miners," says Mr. B. L. Coombes in *New Writing*, "he might have been a greater writer." Auden has chosen too (I realize for reasons by no means wholly political) not to remain with his people. The reaction to this act of Auden's among what may be called the literary domestic interiors has been such as to suggest that it is Auden, and not Hitler, who rocks the world. Do we get a little out of perspective? Ought we not perhaps to remind ourselves that there are several million persons who are ordinary and not Audenary folk, and to whom *New Year Letter*, with its rather laborious and strained notes to the text, will have no meaning? Those who struggle for liberty under the old A.R.P. helmet, fortified by a

cup o' char and a slice o' bread an' marge, may find that "the concept of freedom presupposes the existence of a composite group and is concerned with the relations of the different members of that group to each other and to the whole which they collectively form, and that this relation is a two-way relation (note to line 63)" is a philosophy with little bearing on

BOOKS REVIEWED

- FOLIOS OF NEW WRITING, Edited by John Lehmann (*Hogarth Press, 5s. net*).
NEW YEAR LETTER, by W. H. Auden (*Faber, 10s. 6d. net*).
THE SHIP OF DEATH, by D. H. Lawrence (*Faber, 2s. 6d. net*).
SELECTED POEMS, by R. M. Rilke, Translated by J. B. Leishman (*Hogarth Press, 2s. 6d. net*).

the present bloody issue. Pass the salt! For it seems to me that we need a pinch of it here and there in Mr. Auden's letter, marred as it is by that hasty mixing which has always been Auden's fault, so that there is some really tripping versification, and made rather suety by the self-conscious annotations. Every decade produces a writer or two who, through persecution, obscurity, neglect, or self-alienation, becomes the little god of snobbery. This happened to Joyce, Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Eliot; it has happened to Auden. At such times it seems to me that a good, honest, respectful, and at the same time unmistakable raspberry ought to be blown. And if I blow it at Mr. Auden's *New Year Letter* it is not to clear the air of Mr. Auden, but rather to clear the air about Mr. Auden. We may then, perhaps, begin to see him a little better.

New Writing is not bitten by the Auden bacillus, and it is refreshing. It stands somewhere between the ordinary and the Audenary extremes: intelligent without the pose, ordinary without the patronage. Four writers, John Lehmann, B. L. Coombes, Edward Upward and Louis Mac-

Neice, discuss Mrs. Woolf's essay *The Leaning Tower*, the star-piece of a former number. Simply, it was Mrs. Woolf's contention that the writers of the 19th century were inoculated by complacency, and that the writers of the generation after Mrs. Woolf's (i.e. that of Coombes, MacNeice, Pritchett, and my own) flogged dead horses, "because a living horse, if flogged, would kick them off its back." In a very good essay, MacNeice exposes a certain facile quality in Mrs. Woolf; he admits a certain self-pity in the work of his generation, but declares that at least we "put some salt in it," and ends, "as for the Leaning Tower, if Galileo had not had one at Pisa, he would not have discovered the truth about falling weights. We learned something of the sort from our tower too." Of this issue's short stories, V. S. Pritchett's *Aunt Gertrude* is a small masterpiece.

On the showing of stories like *The Saint* and *Aunt Gertrude*, Pritchett is rapidly making a place as a social humorist, a sort of Cruikshank in words. Other good stories come from really new writers: Jean Howard, Donagh MacDonagh, and A. H. Teece. Henry Green contributes a good piece, and is himself very intelligently discussed as *An Artist of the Thirties* by Walter Allen.

In Lawrence the poet, it seems to me, there was always a touch of Ella Wheeler Wilcox. Tolstoy said somewhere that the English trouble more about the sound than the sense; it is a remark of considerable truth, and in the poems selected to make up *The Ship of Death* you can see Lawrence struggling with the sticky chords of words, hanging on to the sounds, repeating himself, losing the shrillness and the moon-melancholy of his own voice. It is all very soulful, rather yearning; page after page is remarkable for the use of what you might call substitute

words, the words which have little or no meaning themselves, but which substitute easily those of firmer definition: pale, dark, darkness, strange, spirit, flame, and on; Lawrence, always loved then, *The Ship of Death* has been reprinted I take it, as having some significance to-day ("And death is in the air like a smell of ashes"); yet it seems utterly out of touch. In the last war Lawrence hid himself away; his contribution to the period between the wars was a mystical foaming at the mouth which, in its instability, its easy exhaustion of patience, its evidence of persecution mania, and its Nordic worship, was very much like what we now call Fascism. Perhaps for this reason the Lawrence of these poems, with the sticky, opiate words, the swollen seriousness, the high-pitched repetitions, the unchecked, almost unconscious use of the pathetic fallacy so condemned years ago by Norman Douglas, is very hard on the stomach to-day.

Perhaps it need hardly be said that Rilke is the finer poet. In Lawrence, who beats his breast, preaches, yearns, screams, and most significantly dictates his message, you get the uneasy feeling that what matters most, ultimately, is Lawrence. Rilke's is the stiller, smaller, and yet greater voice. Not easy to translate, I imagine, he has been given justice by Mr. J. B. Leishman, who contributes to this selection of early, middle, and late poems a sound introduction briefly tracing Rilke's transition "from a dreamy, sometimes sentimental, sometimes silly, often charming romanticism" (in which incidentally one sees a hint of the Lawrence touch) to the "more objective, realistic, and, at the same time, characteristic attitude to life and to the world," which somehow Lawrence never achieved.

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By PAMELA H...
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