

THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
 Volume 5 - Number 4 Summer 1955

CONTENTS

MILLEN BRAND	The Church in the Heart	1
	(excerpts from "Local Lives")	
OPINION		25

A Note on THE CHURCH IN THE HEART:

The Schwenkfelders are a group of religionists who follow the thought of Caspar Schwenckfeld von Ossig, a Silesian knight of the sixteenth century, one of the guiding figures of the Protestant Reformation. The Schwenkfelder movement is still a living force in Pennsylvania where, at Pennsburg, its followers have built a library to preserve the records and documents of the sect. The following poems from **Local Lives** (in preparation) are drawn in part from contemporary oral sources and in part from Volume I of "The Journals and Papers of David Schultze," translated and edited by Andrew S. Berky and published by The Schwenkfelder Library in 1952.

THE CHURCH IN THE HEART

Squire Frank Benfield and the Old Days

"When I was five or so,
 I and my brother, Seneca —
 my brother was two years older —
 we were water boys

2

for the Colebrookdale railroad, being built.
In 1869 my father
bought the farm and the old mill here,
so we lived here from then on.
How much all has changed from the old days!"
His mind now goes back.
It is living into former time:
"Take the lights that we had then.
In those days we had the 'Smutzomsel,'
such a little oil lamp
that stayed always in one place.
Like a hand, the fat was in the palm
and the wick came out the end.
Even such a well-fastened lamp
we were afraid of because of fire.
To make fire, we had no matches,
but rubbed stones or shot a fire schloss.
Schloss, such a lock that snapped.
When my mother, Lucinda, was a girl,
when fire would be out in the morning —
she told me this — she would be sent
across the meadow to a neighbor's
to fetch a little shovel of coals.
Listen now how they lived then.
She went barefoot and, when there was frost,
across the length of that long meadow
she walked back by the same track she had come,
for there the frost was melted.
We do not know now what it was,
we do not know how our fathers lived.
No, we have no idea of it."
He leans on his hand. Below his eyelids
his eyes are darkened with his thought.
Yes, they are in shadow now.

The Last Families in the Cabins

At a bend of the Bally-Dale road,
an unused log cabin still stands,
its timbers adzed even and weathered
into black bars between the mortar,
and some of the bottom logs thrust out
pushed by emptiness and frost.
"There are few cabins left in these hills,
none lived in at the present time."
Reverend Johnson tells of his young days
when he worked his uncle's flour route:
"There was four poor families on the route
lived in cabins. I got orders,
my first day with the wagon, to give them flour.
When I would come to such and such a cabin,
I was told, a woman would come out
and would have with her a receptacle.
She would say how much flour she needed.
As I was told, so it happened.
I came to a cabin, the woman came out.
She reckoned, so many loaves of bread,
and the children would like a taste of sweet,
a cake, so she explained how much she needed.
If I gave her more, she would refuse.
'Only so much,' she would say.
Then she'd say, 'I don't have money.'
'It's no matter,' I'd say as I was ordered,
and close the wagon up and drive away.
Because people could not pay
was no reason why they should not eat."

4

Across the Wall

(Dr. Elmer Ellsworth Schultz Johnson)

"I was born on Wednesday,
June twenty-sixth, eighteen seventy-two,
in the small brick house, called the 'bake house,'
next to the larger brick house
of our family farm in New Berlinville.
My grandmother, Elizabeth, did some spinning,
and would let me turn the reel for her.

When I was four, she died.

I sat outside the large house as she died,
and I recall my father coming down
with a basin — so the spinning
passed on with her old hand.

That same summer my mother bought me
my first pair of boots, with bright leather tops.
I wore them to my other grandparents' home,
that of Amos and Elizabeth Schultz.

My Aunt Elizabeth had recently married
Josephus Gerhard, who was then working
for my grandfather, and who was there.
Before dinner Josephus sat down with me
on a step of the rear staircase,
he gently touched the new shoe top
and said, 'Ei was schoene Stiwel.'

He has been my well-beloved uncle
for more than seventy years.

"My grandfather, Isaac,
told us about our name, how Johnson
was the English of Yansen, or Jansen,
and that Johnsons were in Pennsylvania
since sixteen eighty-four.

My great-great-grandfather, Isaac's grandfather,

saw Washington at Germantown.

"Schooling has been much of my life,
and the first experience was early.

It came about through another person.

Before I was born, my grandfather
took into his home a boy to raise,
Ferdinand Hoffman, son of a minister
at Falconer Swamp. We grew close.

One day before I was five,
Ferdinand took me for a day to school,
or maybe it was a half day.

There I sat between two boys,
Ferdinand and another boy,
yes, I heard them spell,
so that world opened. At five,
by permission I went to school,
carrying my own green-covered primer,
my ABC's.

My mother, Susannah, helped me much,
much of my life as it is I owe to her.

Our family have long, in the struggle to live,
rested upon a firm belief

in the preeminence of Christ,
the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount.

We believe in that and we believe
in taking the utmost scruple
to preserve individual liberty.

My mother told me the stories of our faith,
the story of Schwenckfeld and the church,
and so I had my first church history.

When I was eleven, my mother died,
she who had always said

she would see I got an education

6

I lost hope then, yes, before long
I left school and worked on my father's farm,
then I helped three years at my uncle's mill.
It was there I drove the flour route.
One day after the many hours of work
and after sweeping up the mill,
I happened to open two books on the floor.
I sensed somebody was looking at me.
I looked up — my uncle was there,
the one from an adjacent farm.
I tried to hide the books under some bags,
but he insisted on seeing them,
and, so, they were school books,
they were a geometry and a Latin.
He said, 'Elmer, do you want to study?'
I said I did.
He said, 'I'm afraid we've neglected you.
Your mother prayed you might go to school,
and you are going to go.'
He called my other uncle. Together
they went to my grandfather. The next day
my grandfather called me at one o'clock.
He said he had heard of my work at the mill,
he said the years of work were not wasted.
I was mature, I knew what life was,
and I would study so much the better.
'Here behind the wall of the hills
we are still provincial.
We need now one to go out,
and bring the world back to us.'
He said I should have ten years' education,
and as he would not live to see it through,
he put the money in my hand.
He told me where I was to go:

so many years in Perkiomen Seminary,
 then Princeton was a good school
 with good men to study under,
 I should go there, he said.
 And last he spoke of New England
 and its different religious ideas.
 'You go there, you'll be safe.
 Go to the Hartford Theological Seminary.'
 So he laid out the work.
 Three years later he died.
 I faithfully carried the work through."

Ten years of study, ten years more in Europe,
 where he did Schwenkfelder research,
 then home, back from beyond the hills.
 At home he took a local pastorate,
 the Reformed Mennonite Church in Bally,
 there to serve the rest of his life.
 He built a house in the valley
 and lives there still.
 Around him are Bibles, psalters, hymnals,
 the personal family Bibles of the valley,
 the valley that he knows and loves,
 the people of his faith.
 He went beyond the wall and returned.

Dr. Johnson in Germany

"Some wonder that here in Bally
 I have as a friend the local priest
 and that I have the privilege
 of going anywhere in the Catholic church,

8

that shrine of Pennsylvania Catholics.

“When I first went to Germany
to do research on Caspar Schwenckfeld
and to help get Schwenckfeld’s writings published
in a complete edition. —

all is published now, in fifteen volumes —
I was most afraid of the Catholic hierarchy.
I feared they would block my labors
by closing to me the doors to documents,
preventing me from finding needed facts.

“It was with this fear I went to Breslau,
to Cardinal Bertram, then Archbishop, young,
two years younger than I,
a most learned Catholic scholar.

I said, ‘I’m a Schwenckfelder, from Pennsylvania,
residing in Wolfenbuettel,’

and so I gave him my credentials.

Immediately he opened to me
the Episcopal Archives with its documents,
letting all know I was to use them.

The Privy Councillor, Canon Jungnitz,
said, ‘Thrice welcome, thrice welcome,’

and there was assigned, to help me,

a priest named Griepenkerl,

a man of a beautiful character
who devoted himself to me.

So I remained three weeks

and it opened a world locked to me before.

The priest Griepenkerl is dead,

the Privy Councillor is dead,

and Cardinal Bertram is dead,

but the memory is not dead.

In the years following, a bond sprang up

between me and that Catholic,
 a fellowship in bond so thick
 that it lasts yet.
 He wrote once a line in a book for me:
 'Der Zweck all unsers Forschen
 muss die Wahrheit sein.'
 'The purpose of all our research
 must be to find the truth.'
 "Then I went to Bavaria,
 so full of Catholics, the place
 of Schwenckfeld's exile for thirty-nine years.
 From Ulm, one day I was to go to a certain village.
 I took a train at five-thirty to Erbach,
 then walked six hours westward
 on the north bank of the Danube, close to the river,
 and came to the little village of Oepfingen.
 When I reached it,
 it was empty, chickens and pigeons the only life,
 not a soul to be seen.
 I went toward the church which stood
 high above the Danube's sweep—
 and a woman and a boy appeared
 obviously on the way to the church
 to receive the priest's closing blessing.
 The woman said, 'Gesegnet sei Jesus Christus.'
 Just then the whole village dropped out of church,
 and I went aside, not to disturb them,
 then went to the parish house.
 A sister fetched the 'Father.'
 He stood in his cloak with folded arms,
 'What can I do for you?' he said.
 I said I was a Schwenckfelder from Pennsylvania
 and he said, 'Then I know what you want.'

10

and took me to the church altar
and said, 'Behind that altar —'
'You would say, "Behind that altar stands Schwenckfeld,"
I said, 'but it is not so.'
I drew out then a pen sketch I had
of a handsome black marble statue
of Schwenckfeld's most eminent patron,
Lutz von Freyberg. It was the statue.
The Priest admitted the error,
and so we began to talk.
The priest invited me to dinner,
but I said my time was limited
and I must continue on my way.
The priest then refused to leave me.
He walked two hours in his gown.
When I said his soup was getting cold,
he said, 'My soup I can eat tomorrow.
You I can only have now.'
When at last we parted, he stood watching me
with his hand raised in farewell,
and as long as I was in sight,
his hand was raised.

"Another priest, from the village of Justingen,
took me to see the ruins
of von Freyberg's castle which Wallenstein
destroyed in sixteen twenty-six,
at the same time, it may be,
destroying Schwenckfeld's library.
The ruins were on a rocky cliff
in an immense park now a cow pasture.
We could see fragments of wall,
trees that were once ornamental trees,
traces of roads and paths.

We sat on the ruins, among walls and arches,
and watched the sun go down.
Below in the tops of trees
we could see the outline of the railroad
on which I must return. Night came.
We talked together till midnight
of religion, church history, such things
as would come to us on such a night,
then the priest took my hand
and led me by the light only of stars
down the precipice to the meadow below,
taking care that I should be safe. Then:
'Here our ways part. Mine goes back up the mountain
to my village and my people —
yours goes toward the light and the railroad station
and at last home to your Schwenkfelder people.
It may be our ways will never again
cross, but I am convinced
we will meet in the life hereafter.'

"The Catholics sometimes said to me, about Schwenckfeld,
'We can never make up for what we did to him.
He condemned our errors, not our church.'

"In all religions is a common something —
what it is exactly I do not know —
but it is greater than the differences.
Unless I believed that, I would believe nothing.
Although for years I held a Mennonite pastorate,
I never united in that church,
but stayed, as before, a Schwenkfelder,
believing it to be the right thing.
What my mother and my people taught
was in my heart, so I kept to it.
Others keep to their own."

12

Josephus Gerhard

Butter Valley has been the steady dwelling
of this man, Josephus Gerhard,
between the two hours, the hour
that scraped the first wail, and the last
rise and fall, rise and fall.

"I was ninety-five July sixteenth.
Yes, old." He sits straight in his chair
across whose arms his tan stick lies,
a carefully placed bar.

His voice is burred but clear.

"Old. My eyes see less each year,
and I hear less and get weaker.

Yes, the going is down, though slow."

His skin is the lace shedding of a locust
but with no new locust under the web.

"I was born on a Friday, yes.

I have an almanac of that year,
eighteen fifty-three. Down below Millside,
on that farm where the barn is or was
so close to the railroad. Burned down now.

I went to school in Palm,
in Stump Hall — other places.

I didn't like school, I didn't like to study.

Some like to work with the head,"
he touches his shrunk, fine head,

"not me.

I left school in spring, then worked
on my father's farm for a time.

"When I was twenty-two, I married.

Yes. I married Elizabeth Schultz.

You know, down there," his finger gives one flick,
"the Chester Schultz farm near the mill,
there she was born and raised.

I never thought to have her for life
until I was grown. Then the idea grew.

Yes, at her place,

there was a strawberry patch. One day
we went to the end of that patch

and 'my wife' gave me some strawberries."

His voice becomes detached, it goes back,
it becomes detached with distance.

"Well, so I wrote her a letter.

Yes, that's what I did. I didn't say it.

I wrote a letter. So it happened. So it came.

"Two years later we took this farm."

He indicates up the hill the buildings
clotted close and white under the pines.

"It was a farm left, ignored, abandoned
for over a hundred years.

A hundred seventeen acres and
ten acres of woodland yet.

It was washed, nothing growing but weeds.

Gullies. Washed off, it was terrible.

I said I was afraid we couldn't make a living.

'Well,' my father-in-law said, 'you try it.'

So we started.

The fields were all scattered with stones.

They had that much that we piled them in heaps
like you piled manure in the old days.

With them we filled the gullies.

Some gullies you could drive a horse through.

There were so many tree stumps!

I pulled them and threw them in,

14

I don't know what I put in,
but I filled the gullies and made ground.
Horses helped. I always knew horses,
once I had
twenty at one time in the barn,
so instead of stones, manure.
So we made crop, we improved.
Farming, always farming.
It was so much different then.
No grass mowers. We mowed all by hand,
by scythe, and grain by cradle.
As a man, then, would mow,
a woman was needed to bind.
She'd make a band out of a straw,
grab a bunch of it, make a twist,"
his hands work quick in the air,
following the far woman's hands,
"stick it under, and that kept the grain together.
Yes, rye, that was so long
you didn't have to make a double band,
but the wheat, that was shorter,
that needed two skeins for it."
In his voice and in his life
the hand work of history comes to an end.
All pours up to him in the lines of the reapers
crossing the fields, and so stops.
"I always had good help to help me.
I had one man eight years,
another thirteen. Ralph Berky's father,
a painter by trade, a school teacher by knowledge,
loaded my hay and grain twenty-two years."
He turns his stick so that it points away
out of the web of his hand,
out to the acres of the hill,

out to the ground his son now farms in "new ways,"
but which his own life reclaimed.

"I was at the barber's
and they were talking about communities.
I said in ours we loved one another.
One said that could not be said
of any community anywhere.
I said, 'Well, ours is that way.'"
As he thrusts his strong stick out,
he repeats, "Yes, ours is that way."

The Voyage

Count Zinzendorf's Herrnhut,
that little babel of the sects,
poorly honeyed, yet that had been hope,
failed them. The driven Schwenkfelders
found no hope there, and turned west.
Sunday, April 19th,
seventeen hundred and thirty-three
they left at noon for the Elbe,
thirteen souls. Three days later,
they engaged for their river passage,
so down the river in two boats
past the ropes of the vines with their early
tendrils like horns of snails singing
loss, loss, and rapture: Deo gratia.
Delays on sandbars, always sand,
always shallows as if the grudging **fluss**
had not enough water, merely that,
to free them. Sometimes on the sandbanks,
they got off to lighten the boat,

16

sometimes stayed on in hope and haste.
So the curving land went past.
Pirna, Dresden fortified,
and always forts and castles
rising along the occasional cliffs,
each prolonging a cliff face
with terror. To Torgau
and on Sunday ("Jubilata")
to Wittenberg, fifteen miles.
The next Sunday ("Cantate") in the afternoon
they passed Schnakenburg, rinsed with flame,
flat with its ugliness
since four years before
when with a roar echoing war,
it fell down in its own heat.
And now May lifted its heat
and spread it out in a mist,
the only fire that always comes with love,
floating like a cup of flowers
out to them on the water. Quiet.
Then wind. Either no wind
or too much wind. The sails hummed,
and in the narrow river limits
the steersman could not keep the course.
One mile above Hamburg
they caught again on a sandbar
and had to wait for high tide. Night.
Now four boatmen coming from Altona
out of the low morning mist
and the diffused city. The Van der Smissens,
"incomparably noble-minded people,"
gave them kindness, food: of bread
16 loaves, 2 Holland casks,
2 pots of butter, 2 roasts.

From Hamburg they took a vessel going to Amsterdam, so they met the first coasts of the sea. David Schultze wrote in his diary: "May 14th . . . we sailed toward the sea and reached it in the afternoon. They sailed on through the entire night. Now the first sea sickness, the prelude of the deeper sicknesses that came from the slowness, the cobalt gloom, the contagion of close air rising from the wood, from the clothes, from the presence of so many "souls" in the dark crossing chamber. Melchior Krauss died May 28th **vero ad finem**. True to the end. Yet belief. Yet strength and trust and belief. At Amsterdam, the Dutch port, they stopped in the joyful morning of the nodding sky-net of masts, and disembarked, loading the baggage on a Treckshuyt or draw-boat which went behind slow-gaited horses to Haarlem, to their friends there. Six Schwenkfelders joined them there. At Haarlem, Cornelius Van Putter who had a pleasure garden, entertained them with wine and tea; a second benefactor among the Dutch "mercantiles" whose memory followed them west, a round face among the screens and bright-red bricks. June 16th they left Haarlem, sailing all night on the Haarlem sea, and as the early morning raised

18

thin lights behind the shore,
they passed by Leyden and the Hague,
and came in the afternoon to Rotterdam.
They, who all their lives had been at home,
floated now from city to city,
with reefing, unreefing, calling
doubt along the reefing ropes.
At Rotterdam they boarded a final ship,
the **Pennsylvania Merchant**, English captained,
sprung large and gorged:
155 tons cargo
and over three hundred passengers.
The great sides worn and heavy,
the great hollow took them in.
The Gravendeel pilots, boarding,
were not pleased at the overcrowding
which perhaps had weighted the ship so
that it stuck on a sandbank
like the river boats, setting out.
July 5th, they reached the ocean
and everybody began to vomit.
Now wind and wind and wind.
Now the dependence on that element
that emerges from the variable sky
angry, sudden, occasional, steady,
sweet-stealing, shy, most abominable,
flat-handed, whistling death.
The water ran hard with its white crests,
and when, July 9th, the wind blew harder,
they went further backwards than forwards.
The next day still hard wind
abating a little, but not much.
And the next day the first child died
even before Plymouth.

Early in the morning, about two,
a nine-year-old little one died.
Its body was enclosed in a sack
and in the sack they put some sand,
that pursuing fringe of the sea,
and so with the singing of a hymn
the sack slid down and out of sight.
"Nun lasset uns den Leib begraben."
At Plymouth they had to stop,
an English ship to pay the English toll.
While they waited in port there,
there was a good following wind,
but when they wanted to leave,
the wind was contrary. So they pitched,
so they tacked into a N. W. wind.
When the wind was favorable,
they hoisted twelve or thirteen sails
and swept rapidly along.
On August 3rd, Johannes Naas
got up an hour before day
"in order to see how it was going."
David wrote: "he fell off of the ladder."
What happened was that Johannes
wanted to watch the compass,
to keep track of it each day,
so he wanted to climb up to the deck.
All the passengers were still asleep
and one had a cover lying against the ladder.
Furthermore there had been a little rain
and it was slippery under the trap-hole,
and when Johannes reached the top,
and was about to climb on deck,
the people in their bed stretched themselves
and, pulling on the coverlet,

20

knocked the ladder from under his feet.
He fell down from the top
and with his left side struck on the rungs,
and lay a long time half conscious
before he could get up. He could not walk
for two weeks, but stayed in the hold
on his back in the swaying dark.
So to this Naas whom David Schultze knew
time lengthened and the sea became
the steady sounding board of the air,
voices of the continual sun
scanned in its broken, living reflections
through opened portholes and windows,
and even the voice of the crisscross moon.
Wind: at night "it lulled again."
Ships were seen in the distance.
Occasionally if one came near,
the Captain spoke through a megaphone
so there was a call and inquiry,
and sometimes one ship rounded another
in close circles of the wind
again and again with the violence
of friendship on the sea
where to be friend means, no enemy.
August 4th: "our sailors" caught a fish
large, resembling a hog in body,
entrails and flesh, and even in the snout,
not a true dolphin. Calm.
A tack-wind, but not too strong.
Some women walked heavy with child,
exercising across the deck.
Several babies had already died.
At night lullabies sounded
of creaking cordage and running keel.

And life cradled, rocked itself, and slept.
Long tacks pushed toward the west
morning to night and night to morning
through the blue ocean shelves.
The 26th, in late afternoon,
they passed by a mast standing fast,
the point a half yard above the water
with rope still attached to it.
They passed, luckily, at a rod's distance.
The Captain had been drinking tea.
All saw the impossibility,
the fixed pole immovable
in the middle of the curling waves.
The dark came running as if on the water
tenderly after the sun
where it went so roundly down,
and the stars flashed out and in their frost
lifted before and sank behind,
calling the snows and foam of distance
over the one small, upraised finger.
More strangeness: the following night
the ship rolled as if in a great gale
although it was calm. Wide flats
and phosphorescent points of light
spread like the night meadows of home
off in the dark. Increasing wind.
"We saw great flocks of birds."
September 7th. Toward evening,
the Captain caught with a great iron hook
"a fish that is called a shark."
September 10th. The Captain and the boatswain
had a boxing-match. The Captain won,
knocking the boatswain on the deck.
Three days later the boatswain's wife died.

22

There were other fights, of anger.
Strong N. W. wind. At dinner
the cook poured sea-water on the fire
to put it out, and the fumes
went all over the ship.
The people thought it was on fire.
Such a great "furor" arose
that the Captain and all the men
were frightened. Blaze of spilled fat,
any blaze in a bandbox of sails
that lie in their folds or stream up
wallsides of tinder against the air
aborts the breath. A land bird.
A portent after long weeks
of edging to the north and south.
Now from ahead a large vessel.
It slowed. Both ships slowed
and the Captain lowered a boat,
rowing on the pews of the waves
toward the newcomer. The word:
only four days from land!
The word was enough for rejoicing,
a ship four days from Rhode Island,
but more — half a bag of apples!
The Captain brought the apples up the side
and the sight of that freshness, that red,
that blessed new world to be eaten
maddened all. He threw one.
They fell in heaps. They fought to get it.
He threw another and they rushed and fought,
they screamed for the beautiful apples.
The next day "Winter's wife" died
and in the darkening evening
was buried in the sea.

Storm clouds. Rain and thunder,
and after thunder, heavy waves rose.
All sails were furled, and the rudder fastened.
A burst of sea broke some shutter bolts
and shouted in, wetting beds,
loud in the dark. Stopped and again
loudened outside. They lay in dark,
captain, crew, and passengers,
wet in the wet bedclothes.
In the morning, David looked out
and to him it seemed the waves
were "as though they sailed among high mountains
covered with snow." On deck only one sailor
tied fast to watch by the rudder.
And roar and roar and shudder.
A day later the storm went down
and in the following calm
the Captain ordered a kettle of rice
so the smell of its hot steam
comforted the people. They ate.
Now a good breeze, stiff and steady,
carried them to the west.
At midnight, the 22nd,
the first soundings for land were made,
150 rods and no bottom.
The next morning 55 rods,
then 20, but still no land in sight.
At four in the afternoon,
afraid of the coming dark,
afraid of the "stream called Delaware"
with sandbars in its mouth,
as the night came on,
the Captain reefed and lay by,
waiting for morning to go in.

The great sails sea-rent and mended
lapped on the spars. Few slept.
Many even sang in the dark,
sending their voices toward the land
and breathing over the last gap of water
lassitudes and hungers, and prayer.
Auf Seel, auf, auf, was zauderst du.
This was the half-understood home,
strange land, uncertain hope,
this was where God had carried them.
Now at their feet tide water moved
and with it, the earth-tinged shadings
of the quieted waves. The dark shook.
In the morning, fog spilled toward them
smelling of the continent behind,
and they advanced in the fog
under the slow push of the wind
and at noon saw land.
The pilots came out to them.
Yet before the entry of the river
they were held by a last storm
sudden in coming and sudden in going,
more terrible than any before
so that it seemed an augury of terror
before a land dreamed of as peace.
Yet the water no longer had
its former power of the deep,
and unknown they had reached salvation.
The 25th, they sailed gently in.
They had ended their journey
across "the very big sea."
Yes, it was "The Eynde with God."
So they sang. So they wept.

OPINION

The Moral Circus. By Edwin Honig, Baltimore: Contemporary Poetry. Contemporary Poetry Series, edited by Mary Owings Miller. \$3.00.

THE motion picture, not poetry, has been the landscape of my recent presumptions. Leafing through Edwin Honig's 'slim volume', I look for clues to a critical way in, recalling the principles and terminology of the "graduate discipline" whereby one was dressed against confusion or dishevelment, equipped to **overcome** the difficulty of reading. I find myself rehearsing the austere code of the seminar shoguns, which involved such aids to definition as **core and texture, experiential immediacy**, the utility of the **pseudo-statement, influence and diffluence, organic form** and the **authentic voice** — and that odd assumption of the California gentleman who breeds Airedales that you could decide the morality of a poem by the sound of its bark in the penultimate lines.

I'm not sneering. I am anxious to please (but whom? The poet? His publisher? The editor of this journal? My readers? (professors? students? non-combatants who just like to read poetry criticism? — a likely story!) myself?) — I want to illuminate the character of these poems so that men of good heart and sound minds (let's say) will read them, too, but I want to do so without borrowing matches from the keepers of the flame.

The film-watcher's vocabulary is some help, perhaps. Browsing, I note the **panoramic shot** — "Nude and tall the morning sang/The clammy beach, the rustling foam;/ Striped green and tan/The morning swam/The rusting air, the ravelling sand." — the **marriage de contour** and

26

the **dissolve** — “That moment the tree, bird-loaded, broke/
into a cloud. When we awoke,/Her smile in mine and
thigh to thigh/The yellow pond involved the sky”. — the
tracking camera — “Sympathies like ashen chessmen pass/
From hand to hand and crumble in their cold/And queasy
grasp, until to rockers creaking/Like the chomp of axes
ghostly waiters/Come with shawls and razor smiles to cut/
Them off, neck by windy neck.” . . . And so on, through
the closeup, the multiple exposure, the overhead shot and
the iris. By no means an unfailing analogy, it serves to
differentiate the qualities of movement and perspective in
these poems, which are splendidly various.

Something can also be done at a first reading, when
you see and hear only fractions (to return later and ex-
perience their sums) by observing that Honig’s favorite
season, here, is Winter or its approach, and that his colors
(hues) are generally low-keyed — “violet”, “willow
white”, “paintless”, “pale greeting”, “iced moon”, “smoky
shadows”, “olive swivelling”. He likes “honey-eyed” and
“wine-dark” especially, but one poem, “Sleepers”, is lit
infernally by “glare”, “bloodied”, “lightning”, “burning”,
“birth-red” and “blazing”. The poems mostly have a fall-
ing inflection, and in over half of them the last line smells
death or moral isolation:

“Sermon on the mount of one’s own requiem.”
“. . . smiling passion frozen in our death of will.”
“. . . the tiny new opening rose of death.”
“. . . When I turned, the house/Had turned its
face, gray as a man’s.”
“trip on dead root, the imagined worm.”
“And swallow our tongues in a bier.”
“dust-enshrouded mosses, like my grandpa.”
“You should be alone on your holiday.”

Poems may be summarized by tone, I think (these are
largely Neptunian, rooted as Sargassum weed is said to
be rooted, on itself — in a destructive element immersed?),
but it’s easier to characterise a volume than to judge the
separate poem which is — of course, of course! — a “ra-
tional structure” and a “moral statement” — and a figure

of speech making its own rhythmic, pictorial and intellectual laws.

On pages 18 and 19 two poems, "The Moral Circus" and "Walt Whitman", face each other. Perhaps they centralize Honig's duality: i.e. of private necessity and fraternal courtesy. One gave its title to the volume. Why? (Except that you could scarcely call the book, "Walt Whitman" — or, to go further, "Do You Love Me?" — or "Summer: University Town", or "A Man"). But was this title employed by the publisher to attract or by the poet to exemplify? The poem, surrealist in vision (though not in form) is an image of cosmic dislocation (blind clowns in a spangled tent) that would have been inaccessible to the poet commemorated on the opposite page. (The distance between 1855 and 1955 is no explanation.) Since more of the lyrics than not in this volume relate to a Moral-Circus world, Honig's acute empathy for Whitman is remarkable (My enjoyment of the poem is in inverse ratio to my total lack of sympathy for its subject; therefore I read and reread with the greater care!) — remarkable because, (without going into other aspects of the matter) Whitman constantly takes one everywhere but into his poems, whereas Honig, as a good modern exempt from the apostrophes of public address, forces you back into the poem, attentive to his integrity of composition. His celebration of Whitman may be an act of wistfulness — no less noble for that — a self-corrective like the sophistication-guilt of Auden whose accent, in this case, it resembles:

Prophet of the body's roving magnitude, he still
commands

A hope elusive as the Jewish savior — not dying,
Not yet born, but always imminent: coming in a
blaze

One sunny afternoon, defying winter, to every-
one's

Distinct advantage, then going on to Eden, half
sham,

Half hearsay, like California or Miami, golden."

Adulation is not Honig's prime mover. Although he is

28

blithe in "Walt Whitman" and more so in "First Morning", "Ditty to His Love" (a gull of a poem!) and "Thirtieth Year", his prevailing temper is of exile and deprivation (the Contents move from "First Morning" to "Last Act"), gravely, even wryly represented — but not a whimper — erupting violently in the poem, "Sleepers". I am naturally beguiled by his fun with the cinema: the mock-Homeric simile, "As a great prince after the hunt comes stomping," etc., and then his **rapid cut** to "So we inhabit a drowsy movie dark,/Amid love's trophies deliberating self-content,/Moist anticipants of the overplayed crescendo" — and the felicitous inaccuracy of "And pulsing reel relaxes to a still." (I could never get away with that) . . . Elsewhere, I admire "Hamlet", a closely-packed adaptation that rises to mordant eloquence in the last stanza; "Corrida", not consistently effective in diction, but a sanguinary embodiment of its subject; "The Man Who Died," a word-perfect irony of progression from legend to ghastly translation; "Ancestors", in which the conception is blocked in at once — "On the slouch-roofed porches of the green/Hotel, guests from rock-ribbed centuries/Sit erect, playing at regrets;" — and a half-dozen swift images consummate it: a cogent interfusion of ghosts.

But the most impressive 'organization' to my taste is the 6-stanza "Do You Love Me?": inside and outside of the situation counterpoised by the inside and the outside of the setting ("the candid night blue room") wherein the casuistic drama is enacted. Every image in the poem is action, every action character. Three themes are purposefully announced, developed, resolved: the question (the hook), the crime of answering (the catch and the killer), the ambient world of the crisis (winter beyond the window). And in the final stanza the continuity comes to rest ("relaxes to a still") as the suspended images complete their sardonic task. I won't quote the poem out of context, since its structure is antiphonal and cumulative. It's the most refined performance in Honig's circus: the equilibrist, under water — eyes enlarged to discern forms and forces in the frosted light.

Vernon Young

Songs for a New America. By Charles G. Bell, Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 80 pp. \$2.75

AT Princeton University in 1946 Charles Bell was a teacher and I was a student. I knew him as a scarf-trailing cyclist of winter streets and as an energetic teacher of English, until one evening, leafing through one of his notebooks, I discovered he was also a poet.

The poem I opened upon, though not included in the present volume, is one I still remember. Concerned with the search for a world-view of renewed dignity, it told how the poet, mirroring in himself the history of man and living through the increasingly destructive escapades of Western idealism, comes at last to what was referred to as "the wasteland," the world of the modern. The poem closed with a somewhat desperate assertion that the destroying quest itself, if pressed far enough, fashions this dignity of its own ruin.

In this way a poet's dedication was declared to one who from that time forward did not doubt its eventual fulfillment. The subject was to be the flowering of Western life, the conception the mode of high tragedy, the viewpoint increasingly involved. I am told that the only other significant poet of our time to undertake a comparable task was Hart Crane who, so wrote Yvor Winters in a 1930 issue of **Poetry**, had demonstrated "the impossibility of getting anywhere with the Whitmanian inspiration." No writer, Winters went on to say, is likely to attempt a similar theme with Crane's disaster in sight. In **Reactionary Essays** Allan Tate added: "Crane not only ends the romantic era in his own person; he ends it logically and morally. Beyond Crane no future poet can go." These typical forewarnings, along with the popular notion of "wasteland," made it seem in advance, especially to the more conservative professors, that Charles Bell's ambition was so bold that it would overleap itself. Yet it was certain, especially to the better teachers and students on the campus at that time, that Bell was a person of deep intelligence and wide learning. Whether or not his endowments could match his task, however, was a question very few would leave open.

30

For those who did, the poems written prior to 1946 certainly did not resolve the question in his favor. Though never mere wails of complaint, yet they were generally of a gloomy sort, as sombre in expression as in feeling and philosophy. Their resolutions of the problems of evil often seemed harsher than the problems themselves. Sometimes Bell withdrew into an almost mystical nihilism, dismissing the world as corrupt on the one hand, and the objects of faith as illusory on the other; yet between the two somehow attributing residual value to the religious act itself. In "Balsumum," of 1945, the poet calls the traditional God "a putty idol" and renounces the Messianic hope. How then is one to redeem the suffered years? The answer is characteristic:

To have lived
And suffered is enough.
In dearth and suffering
To have worn faith,
Eyes on the stars,
Is and becomes guerdon . . .

Without the backdrop of the later poems, this light appeared to be darker than darkness.

But now **Songs for a New America** has appeared, collecting twelve years of poetic effort. From that early pessimism the extent of Charles Bell's removal is clear. A look at the sonnet sequence from which the book takes its title reveals the nature of the change.

In these "Songs for a New America" the waste of our lands by nature and commerce, the brutality of our cities, our loneliness, the poor lives scattered on prairies and deserts, the engulfing formlessness into which all effort ultimately dissolves — are seen clearly and painfully. There is no easy sweetening or, Crane's weakness, merely verbal incantation. Yet without losing sight of evil, Bell discovers our human and national greatness, our redeeming energies and dreams in the transcendent yet imminent beauty of life itself, the God moving in all things. Now, reread, even the early pessimistic poems fall in as parts of the eventual fabric of this world-view, the philosophic resolutions of the late pieces being required and even, as

we look back, implied by the early.

The ten title sonnets are written as an airplane flight from New York to California. After a first celebration of New York, here seen as a symbol of triumphant freedom, the reader catches sadder glimpses: the Quaker retreated from cities and civilization in the Pennsylvania woods, the poet's own sympathetic turning inward and away from the brute world, the monster Chicago, the land dying of erosion, then the farmers of the plains poignantly marooned. In the waste of country, this isolation of lives is seen with a universal and tragic compassion.

The opening sonnet, in its air-view of Manhattan, had heralded a country of greatness:

This beauty no man planned, clean beyond nature,
A crystal of explosive energy . . .

Through the next six we look vainly for the promise fulfilled, until the eighth sonnet turns the poem: Salt Lake City in the time of a presidential campaign, the lowest point of the continent, the "dead center." We saw and felt, earlier in the poem, the turning inward and away, that we should now understand the magnificence of the other motion. Suffering does not tempt to the renunciation, nor does acceptance require ignorance of the suffering. The act of faith, now embracing the temporal as the field and only expression of the eternal, no longer is a desperate guerdon, but itself is the life-affirming act.

Put in political terms, the discovery is different from easy patriotism. The "coming of our fathers' dream" is perceived in a lighted moment, a brief brushing of wings of ideal and real, never an actual coincidence. While the ninth poem describes the upward climb of the pioneers, who came up and over into the Western valleys where "in goblets of wheat and vine we drink the god sun," the last sonnet, after these nine glimpses, is a veiled return, among fog, redwoods, the "white-skinned eucalyptus," and the melting sunset, into formlessness again:

So cloud and rain
Close the curtain, as banking we descend —
Cycles of rise and fall — where crashing waves,
As slow as heavy, gather weight and pound

The splintered granite of the coast range: — O land,
O cities; and down to the salt sea again.

No other poet of our time, I believe, has written of the American country and of the tragic ground by which our dignity is renewed, this resilience of spirit, with an equal combination of philosophic intelligence, responsible faith, compassion, and honesty.

In this book there are some bad poems and a number of excess and unfinished passages. Other critics have pointed out some of these flaws. But not one of the poems is mediocre, slick, imitative, or fraudulent. They are deeply felt and honestly rendered. The best of them, "Songs for a New America," "Diretro al Sol," "Chestnut Tree," and especially the beautiful "Flowering Peach," demonstrate that what is called the "Whitmanian inspiration" or the "Romantic tradition" is not exhausted. It is fashionable now to write in some sort of role — as "myth-maker," or as a child, from daemonic irony, or from a psychoanalytic couch — and to think of philosophic poetry written from the wholeness of one's personality as a reversion to the Victorian modes. But for a true poet, a turning back is always a going forward. The effort to write of great subjects, directly and sincerely, as a whole, remains the central effort of genius, and the successful achievements in this effort, the triumphs of poetry.

I see this book, which rounds to a close a significant period of change and growth in Bell's work, as the record of his discovery not only of his philosophic viewpoint, but of his poetic voice. To what future use this voice will be put one cannot exactly say: new tasks are less chosen than given. The short lyric form, however, at least as Charles Bell now uses it, is too restricted for the materials out of which the greatest philosophic statements can be made. If in a succession of lyrics or in a longer form, Bell can strip his style of its superfluity and looseness and bring his diction to the same economical precision as his thought, and up to the standard of diction of his best poems, I for one look for him to produce a philosophic work the rival of which our time is not likely to see.

Galway Kinnell