The Poems of Ridgley Torrence

By **PADRAIC COLUM**

RIDGLEY Torrence's poems are the rare creations of a rare spirit, and, though one of their characteristics is clearness, one has to re-read until one is familiar with them. This poet had a world of his own, and a reader had to create some exaltation in himself before he could enter that world.

What could not be completed in this is completed in a world over against it. Even to the most discerning of the sons of Adam that world is inaccessible. But glimpses of it come to awakened men, sounds and sights from it come into their world, enhancing it. It was the enhanced world that Ridgley Torrence spoke about in his poems. The sense that this enhancement can be lost to men through their violence and cruelty makes his poems more dramatic than if they had come out of simple humanitarianism. That the world is the day-by-day world, all its enhancement shed, makes that early poem of his, "Three O'Clock," strangely dramatic. It is three o'clock in the morning when the world is at its dull end or its dull beginning:

> On high the candour of a clock
> Portions the dark with solemn sound.
> The banners of the steam unfold
> Upon the towers to meet the day;
> The lights go out in red and gold
> But time goes out in gray.

Ridgley Torrence always looks toward a world from which comes the enhancement of this world. In that noble poem "Light" he broods on "the light at light's heart, the unfading, the light without shadow," and he comes to know that the broken lights of this world have first to be accepted:

> With rays on footholds gaining to summits more proud,
> And won more surely than under a sky without cloud.

The earth on which the nettle grew with the vine was the place for Adam's race, and by ardor and understanding he would bring nobility out of earth's growth:

> Deep then, in my broken earth
> I'll bring other seed to birth,
> Out of it I'll seize and shape
> Life the vine and love the grape.

The apples tasted by the young poet and found bitter as he stood in the city square could not be recovered, but he has his vision:

> . . . at the street's end there how it deepened at last
> Into garden fed by song and stream,
> So his vision had brought one thing from the waves he had passed
> For his eyes held fast to the fire-like seed of his gleam
> He had brought that back for the fruit of a better dream.

As I read Ridgley Torrence's poems again I am impressed by their fullness and find I have to move slowly into them. They are poems that create a mood in the reader. We have poets who aim at exciting us about dreadful wrongs in the world or about possibilities of making the world nearer the heart's desire. Ridgley Torrence does an incomparably harder thing: he incites us; he creates a mood in which we know that certain things are so inhuman, so dishonorable, that we have to turn away from them, or there are things which belong so much to the spirit that we have to engage in a struggle to maintain them. The mood is created slowly, fully. On one side take such a poem as that on the opening of the hunting season—a beautiful poem—"Threnody." It begins with a verse that places the reader in a universe in which man is no more privileged than the birds and beasts:

> In the middle of August when the southwest wind
> Blows after sunset from the upper air
> And through the dusk, Antares towards the west
> Leads down the smouldering Scorpion to his lair.
> After the longer days have crossed the sky
> And left new sadness on the evening shores,
> When the loud pageant of the year's high noon . . .

Gravely the poet shows us that what leads us to destroy the birds and beasts is a pre-human urge:

> Hates, cruelties still following from the trees
> To which we clung with hearts too dark for love,
> Shames we have had all time to rid us of,
> Outworn enslavements, blood-thirst never slaked,
> Recalled, revived, and waked,
> Unmeaning quarrels, and the clutch and thrust
> Of snarling greeds from our old home, the dust.

AGAINST the destructiveness that is in "Threnody," there is "Sea Dream" which creates in us a mood in which we can entertain the thought of liberation from all that is backward in humanity. The poet notes the findings of biochemistry that the blood of man is close in composition to the primal ocean, and he can sing of the long journey "through the lands that lie in men" until:

> Those hidden seas increase;
> And lit with dawn from the eternal spaces
> Break on the mind with surges soft as fleece;
> Fill it in silence from a tidal fountain,
> Until the coming day shall gleam
> When the wells of hate are sealed,
> Buried in the shining mountain
> On the day of the heart's overflowing
> When the earth is washed and healed,
> And the lovers with the dream,
> From ocean and to ocean going,
> Shall lift at last into the living peace.

Although he never spoke about that thing which is so tiresome when spoken about—a dedication—Ridgley Torrence knew that a poet has a task that demands a spiritual energy that is next to the saint's. A sensitive spirit, by his wit, his friendliness, his good humor, he was removed from the complaints that the sensitive often make. In his poetry there is a quality that should be remarked, a dramatic quality that gives tension to his lyricism.

He was gifted as a dramatist. He wrote plays that the theater, alas, had little use for, plays about Negro life. An article could and should be written about his work in the field of Negro life: his interest in the Negro people did not come altogether from indignation or a protest against injustice: something in the soul of the black people appealed to him—a pensiveness, a sense of displacement, and so his poem about a lynching, "The Bird and the Tree," has what is beyond humanitarianism—a sense of identification. What we look for in the work of many poets of today, and look for in vain, is in Ridgley Torrence's poetry, vision and wisdom.

Old-Fashioned Radicals

By **HARRY SERWER**

I NEVER did figure out how I got messed up with such a gang of characters. Here they were, smack in the middle of the Catskills, back in 1910, when the hills were kosher and really oozed borscht.

And where were these characters? In a non-kosher boarding house, run by that no-good renegade Mrs. Silberblatt who turned to Christian Science just because the headaches were driving her crazy. That's an excuse? She not only featured bacon and eggs for breakfast, but, to drive the Almighty into a frenzy, she also served the hindquarters of beef for dinner—fried in the butter churned from its own milk yet!

And here were the characters, riding the surrey into town on the Holy Day, passing the strictly orthodox Mrs. Goldstein and leering at her. No wonder Mrs. Goldstein spat and warned: "God will strike you dead one day."

Four of these ten characters were of devout Jewish families. Two were reformed German Jews from Yorkville; but that didn't count: a reformed German Jew was like a goy in those days — only worster. These six proudly identified themselves as "intelligentsia" and publicly decried the "archaic" Mosaic Law.

They shopped and carried money on the Sabbath. They ate leavened bread on Passover. They served meat in dairy dishes. And Martin even put great gobs of sour cream on the brustdeckel.

These characters did not play tennis, did not play baseball, and rarely went swimming. Instead, they rocked on the porch and jabbered away about such serious matters as the destruction of religion by Darwin. They jabbered about Prince Kropotkin, Tolstoy, Meyer London, the bloodsuckers and murderers of Wall Street, Eugene V. Debs (you never omitted the "V"), and that super-Kronos of the exploited workingman, Karl Marx. There was nothing militant about Marx or his followers. Oh, no, he was just a benign, lead-kindly-light prophet to the initiated. But what was he to the laboring hordes to whom he had ostensibly dedicated his life? Just a Russian blend cigarette with a pre-Parliament tip.

You name your favorite pie in the sky and the characters would slice it up by the hour. That is why the problems of the world were such a push-over: what they didn't know about all matters social, political and esthetic you could shove in your right eye.

Lemme tell you how smart they were. In 1908 William Howard Taft ran for President. He made a speech in Cooper Union, and one lug upped and asked: "What should a man do who wants to work and can't get a job?" Since we were painfully pulling out of the 1907 depression, Mr. Taft quite honestly answered, "I don't know." Just for that the characters never forgave him.

Louise sneered, "And such a dope became President! Had we elected Eugene V. Debs instead, everything would now be hunky-dory."

They discussed literature as one pours milk out of a twenty-gallon can. They "knew" all the significant, currently popular books. As a matter of fact, the whole gang of characters was just getting over a case of hives called "The House of Bondage." It was strictly out of the cracker barrel, but they called it daring and socially significant, though it was a jerker on white slavery, deliberately angled to seduce dollars into the book till — and it did. To Louise it was the greatest thing since chastity belts. She said, "It will bring about woman suffrage, as Uncle Tom's Cabin brought about emancipation. It will inaugurate the single standard, and then decency and honesty will reign supreme in America."

HOWEVER, there was another dame in the group —a trained nurse originally out of the New England sticks. Inhibition was not in her glossary. Nobody in her gang suspected that Margaret Murphy needed very little nudging in the impenetrable gloom of a moonless night. Indeed, her favorite but highly secretive comeback was, "You seduced me into it." For my chips, she had more brains