

A book review by Aleister Crowley from the September 1915 edition of The International.

The Lyrical Work of Joseph Bernard Rethy. Smith & Sale, Publishers, Portland, Maine.

"The Song of the Scarlet Heart and Other Poems" is the title of Joseph Bernard Rethy's first book of poems. This adorably produced volume is to be read. There are certain minute flaws, the result of youth; one might instance the use of "Cherubim" as if it were singular. There is also a sad misjudgment in a reference to that very fifteenth-rate poet, Oscar Wilde, as if he had serious claims on our consideration. Mr. Rethy is himself far better as a poet.

Where, one may ask, can one find in Wilde so good a line as this?:

"Appalled by some gigantic gloam."

"Gloom" is as unexpected as "crowd" in Blake's "Mad Song." It has all the force of some titan of another element, another plane.

Yet Wilde's sole strength was in the bejeweling of single lines. We look to him in vain for any idea. "To an Old Man," "Invective," "In the Silence of the Summer Night," to chose only three at random, have this dramatic and intensely deep-seated quality. They live.

Mr. Rethy is in many ways at his best, though, in invective. His demolition of Billy Sunday is magnificently complete. It is done with intense dramatic power, and a fullness of scorn such as poets rarely attain to express until the world has filed down the gold of their souls with its rasp of experience. The suspense at the end of the poem is complete; it is a master-stroke of passion. Nothing less was expected than the sudden blotting-out of the ranter in his thousand-dollar fur coat, and the vision of that wretched man in whose name he robs the poor.

In all these verses there is very little of such simple lyric outpouring as Shelley's. That is natural to poets who, as a rule, are so vain that they see nothing but themselves, and care for nothing but themselves. The result is pure subjectivity, which is not always interesting. Mr. Rethy has been schooled better; he escapes these pitfalls.

For in his verses one perceives an objectivity and an actuality which are indeed rare in so young a writer. Mr. Rethy has not borrowed his outlook on life from books, as Wilde did. Wilde's poems are merely Flaubert, Gautier, and Keats made over. There are traces here and there of literary taint, but no poet escapes this; for the most part the point of view is derived from genuine experience of life. The sentiment is accordingly original – for the soul of a man is always unique – and the treatment is simple and virile. There is no attempt to clothe the thought in extravagant trappings; the splendor of the language is natural, and free from all false ornamentation. As a rule, too, the poet keeps his mind on the external verities, as a true poet must. The exception is the two poems to Roosevelt, who is not worthy even of one; and the lamentable recantation which Mr. Rethy was obliged to make should be a lifelong warning to him never again to try to enshrine tin gods in marble mausoleums.

Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis; but poetry, if it be poetry at all, must be rooted in Truth, and free of Time and Space, and all the other illusions.

There is not only achievement in this book, but promise; if Mr. Rethy continues single-souled, ambitious to do yet more important work, he may yet do much to create a reputation for American literature.