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ECLOGUES

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No. 98.

ECLOGUES

A BOOK OF POEMS

HERBERT READ

CONTENTS

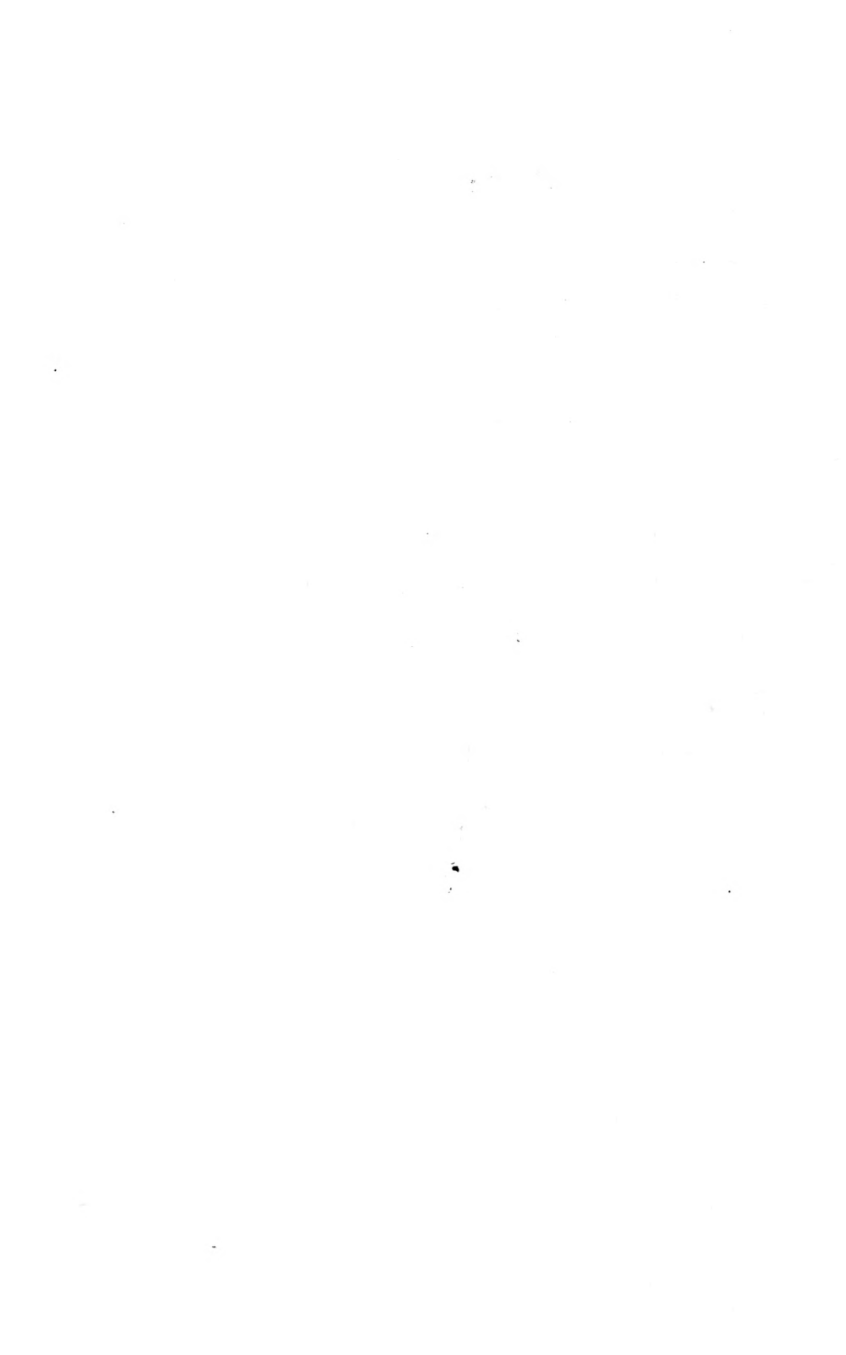
	Page
THE MEDITATION OF A LOVER	
I can just see the distant trees	9
WOODLANDS	
Pine needles cover the 'silent ground :	10
PASTURELANDS	
We scurry over the pastures	11
THE POND	
Shrill green weeds	12
THE ORCHARD	
Grotesque patterns of blue-grey mould	13
APRIL	
To the fresh wet fields	14
THE WOODMAN	
His russet coat and gleaming axe	15
HARVEST HOME	
The waggons loom like blue caravans	16

CONTENTS

	Page
THE AUTUMN OF THE WORLD	
As a host of bloodflecked clouds . . .	17
CURFEW	
Like a faun my head uplifted . . .	18
CHILDHOOD	
The years come with their still perspective,	19
ON THE HEATH	
White humours veining Earth, . . .	23
GARDEN PARTY	
I have assumed a conscious sociability,	24
ROOFS	
Above the vibrant town, . . .	25
ÉTUDE	
That white hand poised . . .	26
CHAMP DE MANŒUVRES	
This hill indents my soul . . .	27

CONTENTS

	Page
NOCTURNE	
I will make this girl a bed of ferns . . .	29
WINTER GRIEF	
Life so brief	30
PROMENADE SOLENNELLE	
We walked mutely	31
THE SORROW OF UNICUME	
Fresh in the flush light gleam . . .	33
NIGHT	
The dark steep roofs chisel	35
COLOPHON	37



To Evelyn



THE AUTUMN OF THE WORLD

AS A HOST of blood-flecked clouds
 skim the golden sky
 and melt in the vermilioned vastness
There comes borne on a wind
 from the infinite womb of chaos
 the dank wafture of decay.

Over the eternal waters of the sea
 that weep and find no solace of their cares
Lethargic vultures flock and swirl
 and fill the echoes with their gloomy cries.

Cold winds from arctic zones
 betray
 the transient things of earth :
The last yellow leaves
 fall on the iridescent sward :
The wind dies
 and the summer voices are forever quiet.

CURFEW

LIKE A FAUN my head uplifted
In delicate mists :

And breaking on my soul
Tremulous waves that beat and cling
To yellow leaves and dark green hills :

Bells in the autumn evening.



CHILDHOOD

I

THE YEARS COME with their still perspective, enveloping the past in the light of romance.

The old elm trees flock round the tiled farmstead and their silver-bellied leaves dance in the wind. Beneath their shade, and in the corner of the green, is a pond. In winter it is full of water, green with various weeds: and in Spring a lily will open in its centre.

Childhood I

The ducks waddle in the mud and sail in circles round the pond, or preen their feathers on the bank.

But in Summer the pond is dry, and its bed is glossy and baked by the sun, of a beautiful soft colour like the skins of the moles they catch and crucify on the stable doors.

On the green the fowls pick grains, or chatter and fight. Their yellows, whites and browns, the metallic lustre of their darker feathers, and the crimson splash of their combs make an everchanging pattern on the grass.

They drink with spasmodic upreaching necks by the side of the well.

Under the stones by the well live green lizards curious to our eyes.

And the path from the well leads to a garden door set in the high wall whereon grow plums and apricots. The door is deep and narrow and opens on to paths bordered with box-hedges ; one path leads through the aromatic currant bushes, beneath the plum-trees, to the lawn where grows the wonder of our day-dreams, the monkey's-puzzle tree. On the other side of the

Childhood I

lawn three fir-trees rise sharply to the sky, their dark shades homing a few birds.

And beyond is the orchard, and down its avenues of mould-smitten trees the path leads to the paddocks, with their mushrooms and fairy-rings, and to the flat-lands stretching till the girding hills complete our vision.

But on a hill-top, cut clean against a sunrise, is the figure of a child, full of an impatient gesture.

CHILDHOOD

II

THE FARM is distant from the high-road
half a mile;

The child of the farm
does not realise it for several years ;
He wanders through the orchard,
finds mushrooms in the paddock,
or beetles in the pond.

But one day he goes to the high-road,
sees carts and carriages pass,
and men go marketing.

A traction-engine crashes into his vision
with flame and smoke,
and makes his eager soul retreat.

He turns away :
The huntsmen are galloping over the fields,
Their red coats and the swift whimpering hounds,

ON THE HEATH

WHITE HUMOURS veining Earth,
The lymphic winds of Spring
Veil an early morning
When on the hill
Men in cool sleeves dig the soil,
Turning the loam or acrid manure
With gripes that clink on stones.

Silently horses speed on the sandy track.

Lithe in white sweaters
Two runners lean against a fountain.

GARDEN PARTY

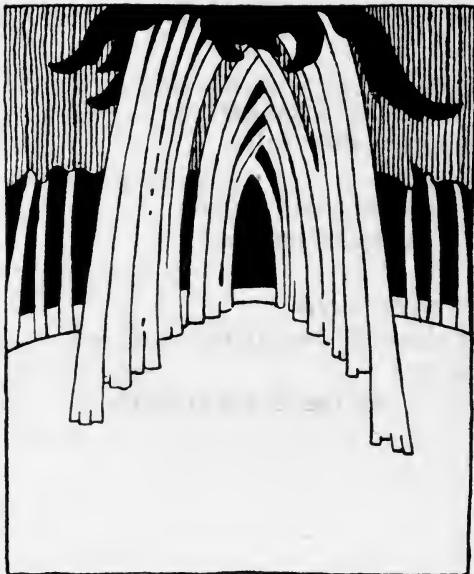
I HAVE ASSUMED a conscious sociability,
Pressed unresponding hands,
Sipped tea,
And chattered aimlessly
All afternoon,

Achieving spontaneity
Only
When my eyes lit at the sight
Of a scarlet spider
Running over the bright
Green mould of an apple-tree.

THE MEDITATION OF A LOVER
AT DAYBREAK

I CAN JUST SEE the distant trees
And I wonder whether they will
Or will not
Bow their tall plumes at your passing
In the carriage of the morning wind:

Or whether they will merely
Tremble against the cold dawnlight,
Shaking a yellow leaf
to the dew-wet earth.



WOODLANDS

PINE NEEDLES cover the silent ground:
pine trees chancel the woodland ways.

We penetrate into the dark depths
Where only garlic and hemlock grow
Till we meet the blue stream
Cleaving the green
Twilight like a rhythmic sword.

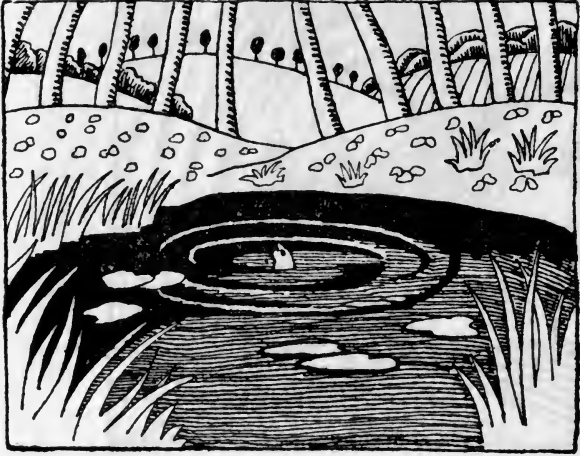


PASTURELANDS

WE SCURRY over the pastures
chasing the windstrewn oak-leaves.

We kiss
the fresh petals of cowslips and primroses.

We discover frog-spawn in the wet ditch.



THE POND

SHRILL GREEN WEEDS
float on the black pond.

A rising fish
ripples the still water

And disturbs my soul.



THE ORCHARD

GROTESQUE patterns of blue-grey mould
Cling to my barren apple-trees:

But in spring
Pale blossoms burst like little flowers
Along black wavering twigs:

And soon
Rains wash the cold frail petals
Downfalling like tremulous flakes
Even within my heart.

APRIL

TO THE FRESH WET FIELDS
and the white
froth of flowers

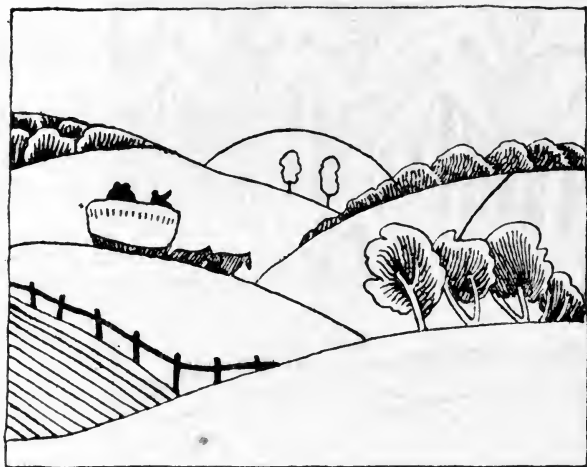
Came the wild errant
swallows with a scream.



THE WOODMAN

HIS RUSSET COAT and gleaming axe
Flit
In the blue glades.

The wild birds sing;
But the woodman he broods
In the blue glades.



HARVEST HOME

The waggons loom like blue caravans in the dusk:
They lumber mysteriously down the moonlit lanes.

We ride on the stacks of rust gold corn,
Filling the sky with our song.

The horses toss their heads and the harness-bells
Jingle all the way.



ROOFS

ABOVE the vibrant town,
Above its dull clamour,
Roofs like ragged blades
Break into the moist golden glow
With mosaic of lustreful tiles
And slates that gleam
metallic.

The first pale stars will soon illumine
The dying scene till sole
Ethereal silhouettes pierce the gloom.

ÉTUDE

THAT WHITE HAND poised
Above the ivory keys
Will soon descend to
Shatter
The equable surface of my reverie.

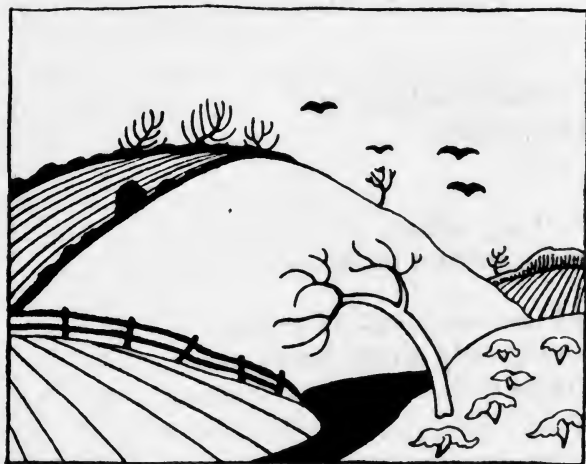
To what abortion
Will the silence give birth ?

*Noon of moist heat and the moan
Of raping bees,
And light like a sluice of molten gold
On the satiate, petitioning leaves.*

*In yellow fields
Mute agony of reapers.*

Does the metallic horizon
Give release ?

Well, higher,
 against the wider void the immaculate
 angels of lust
Lean
 on the swanbreasts of heaven.



CHAMP DE MANŒUVRES

THIS HILL INDENTS my soul
So that I sag
Like a silver mist about its flanks.

I dwell
In the golden setting of the sun,
While on the plain
The illumined mists invade
Leaf-burdened trees. . .

Champ de Manœuvres

And then
The silent tides of melting light
Assail the hill, imbue
My errant soul.

Mine empty body broods
One with the inanimate rocks . . .

The last red rays are fierce and irritant.
Then wakes my body on the lonely hill,
Gathering to its shell my startled soul.

NOCTURNE

I WILL MAKE this girl a bed of ferns
Beneath the trees,
And she shall come to me naked and shy in the
starlight,
And when I kneel to kiss her body
Faunish I will be aware of its human scent
Mingled with the resin odours of the shrouded wood
As salt in tears.

We will be silent in the world ;
And if she think good
We will go down to the green pool
To lie with our bellies on the cool grass
And drink together.

The flying beetles and the bats
And the birds drowsy in the branches
Shall be our companions.
The sheep in the open fields
Shall see our white bodies
glimmering in the woodland dusk.

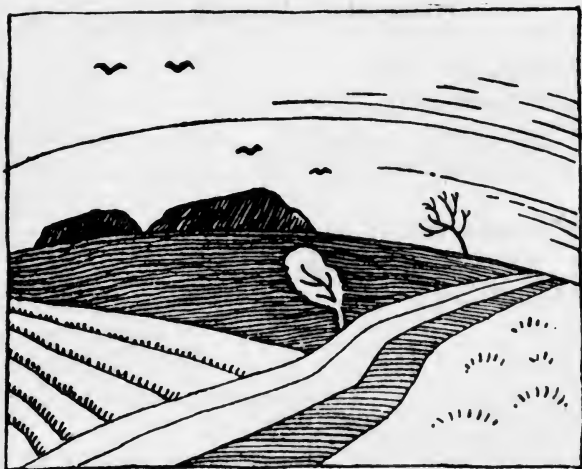
WINTER GRIEF

LIFE SO BRIEF . . .

Yet I am old
with an era of grief.

The earth unveils
a sad nakedness
And her hills
droop round my sorrow.
Into the stillness
living things scream,
And only the nerveless dead
get tranquillity.

From the funereal mould
Late asters blaspheme.



PROMENADE SOLENNELLE

WE WALKED MUTELY
over black moors
where gray walls crawl
Sinuously into still horizons.

I was mute—
a stickybud
only to unfurl
In the germination of your mood.

Promenade Solennelle

But you called gray rain
to slake my heart :
You called gray mist
over the black moors.

We passed black altars of rock,
Two mute, processional, docile Christs
Amid the unheeding
Bleakness.

THE SORROW OF UNICUME

I

FRESH in the flush light gleam
the slape new furrows :
ride the clean horizon rib
lithe Unicume and his roan team.

Man moulded with Earth —
like clay uprisen :
his whistling mingles
with the throstle's this even.

Inward from furtive woods
the stretched light stains :
end-toil star now broods
deeming resthaven due.

Unyoked the roan team
garthward he leads :
hooves beat to harness clink ;
the swollen sun bleeds.

II

When alone, Unicume
seeks his darkening dale.
Yon my white garden-rail —
Heart's tomb within !

The Sorrow of Unicume

He lifts latch to the quiet room
where yet it seems she breathes :
he kneels to take her stark hands
in caress mute with the gloom.

*“ Draw the casement ; let me see
last light without.”*

Ah, fierce the white, white stars to hurt,
their beauty a wild shout.

Retch of flower scent, lush decay
among time-burdened shrubs.
And near and shallowly buried lay
love once enfleshed, now fled.

III

*Harsh my heart is,
scalded with grief :
my life a limp
worm-eaten leaf.*

*White flower unfeeling,
you star the mould :
evolvd calmness,
my livid heart enfold.*

NIGHT

THE dark steep roofs chisel
The infinity of the sky :

But the white moonlit gables
Resemble
Still hands at prayer.

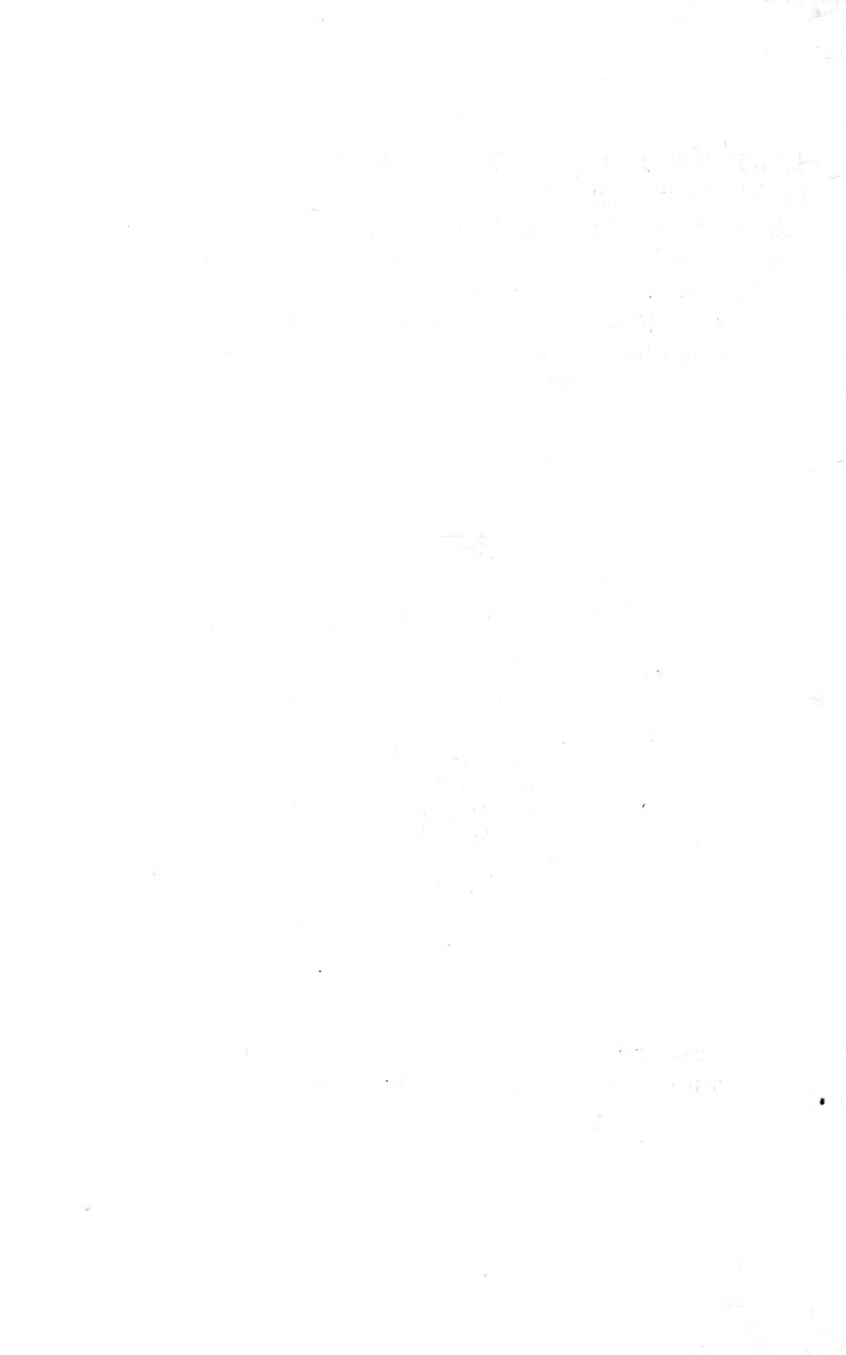


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