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REPORT ON VOLUMES OF POETRY SUBMITTED FOR THE PULITZER PRIZE, (1956-57)

Of the more than thirty volumes submitted, at least half are unworthy of consideration. Of the remaining fifteen, not more than two or three are top-ranking candidates for the award.

One of the books is in a category by itself. This is POETS OF TODAY: III. As the title indicates, this is the third in a series instituted by John Hall Wheelock and published by Scribner's. Each volume is made up of the work of three different, little known poets, usually experimental rather than traditional. It would be pleasant if some kind of citation could be given to this enterprising venture but, although all three contributors are poets of integrity and some accomplishment, not one has yet attained what could be termed prize-winning stature.

The same critical reservation should be applied to John Berryman's bizarre HOMAGE TO MISTRESS BRADSTREET (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy); Katherine Hoskin's piquant and often persuasive VILLA NARCISSE (The Noonday Press); John Ashbery's SOME TREES (Yale University Press), a more than usually promising first volume in the Yale Series of Younger Poets; Reed Whittlemore's AN AMERICAN TAKES A WALK (University of Minnesota Press), a witty combination of serious ideas and tongue-in-cheek ironies; Kenneth Rexroth's acrid IN DEFENSE OF THE EARTH (New Directions), some of which was, the author declared, "written for jazz orchestra" and some of which is Villonesque nose-thumbing; Robert Fitzgerald's IN THE ROSE OF TIME (New Directions), a semi-pastoral, semi-philosophical and altogether mannered collection; and Lenore G. Marshall's OTHER KNOWLEDGE (Noonday Press), sensitive and slightly

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metaphysical meditations. ³ Marianne Moore's LIKE A BULWARK and Peter Viereck's THE PERSIMMON TREE are extremely commendable, but they cannot be reckoned among their authors' best works; they certainly cannot be compared to the volumes which won for ^{each of} them a previous Pulitzer Prize.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh's THE UNICORN AND OTHER POEMS (Pantheon) turned out to be one of the curiosities of the season. It leaped at once into the best-seller lists -- the only book of poetry to attain that profitable distinction in years -- and became the center of an angry controversy. Although it scarcely merited the harsh opprobrium which it received in certain quarters, it is, at the best, a bundle of earnest soliloquies, pretty sentimentalities and pathetic fallacies.

The three books which we believe deserve the most careful consideration are Rolfe Humphries' GREEN ARMOR ON GREEN GROUND (Scribner's), John Hall Wheelock's POEMS OLD AND NEW (Scribner's), and Richard Wilbur's THINGS OF THIS WORLD (Harcourt Brace & Company).

Humphries' book is important not only because it brings over into English a considerable body of Welsh poetry but, written in "the twenty-four official Welsh meters," because it is also a work of beauty and great technical skill. We would hesitate, however, to award it the prize, for it is a series of translations or adaptations, and not a really original work.

It is doubtful that a more worthy candidate for the Pulitzer Prize has appeared in years, and the choice of Wilbur would unquestionably maintain the high standard of previous awards.

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Although a collection of considerable substance, Wheelock's assembled poems just fail to elicit unreserved enthusiasm.

The early poems are lyrical and often passionate, but they tend to fall into a rhetorical pattern, a kind of plangent but persistent weltschmerz which, in its diminishing accents and low-keyed music, grows monotonous. The later poems are less traditional, more thoughtful and, curiously enough, lighter in tone. All are good, but they lack something which would make them the very best of their kind. Moreover, the book as a whole does not achieve a unity -- it presents many sides of a poet but not a completely focussed personality.

This leaves Richard Wilbur as the outstanding candidate. THINGS OF THIS WORLD is Wilbur's third volume and, in our opinion, his best. Both preceding volumes were praised with equal vigor by his colleagues and his critics. At thirty-six Wilbur is considered one of the best, if not the very best, of his generation. (He received a Fellowship for the American Academy in Rome as well as other honors.) His work is precise and fastidious -- "elegant" is the adjective most often applied to his poetry -- but there is emotion and even force not altogether concealed behind the finesse. There is also a great sense of reserve. Wilbur exemplifies Whitman's "glory of the commonplace" in his half-wondering, half-whimsical way -- a washline, a turkey, a morning newspaper, a park statue, a child digging, a railway station...such ordinary subjects are translated into a highly personal poetry, witty and grave and intellectually provocative. It is doubtful that a more worthy candidate for the Pulitzer Prize has appeared in years, and the choice of Wilbur would unquestionably maintain the high standard of previous awards.

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