

works of fiction and nonfiction) brings the novelist's eye, the disciple's devotion, and the medievalist's hoary zest to a biography that may, he surmises, even be accurate: Records of the poet's life are few and scholars quarrel over what facts remain, although Chaucer's way of looking at things seems "clear as an English April day." A royalist in evil times and a free-thinking Christian who read Boethius and cultivated a taste for the bawdy, Chaucer emerges as a man who would take matters seriously if he must but humorously if he could, serenely fathering English verse in his spare time.

WALLACE STEVENS:
The Poems of Our Climate
 by Harold Bloom
 Cornell, 1977
 413 pp. \$17.50
 L of C 76-55482
 ISBN: 0-8014-0840-7

Harold Bloom examines the work of one of the foremost American poets of the 20th century. He quarrels with the prevailing critical view that Stevens' poetic self is engaged in exploring possible confirmations of selfhood in the face of the loss of traditional certainties. Instead, Bloom argues, Stevens' return to the "First Idea," urged in his "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942) is the poet's central theme, conveying his will to repudiate the past, first by shedding inherited modes of perception, then by refashioning reality in a poem that affirms the authority and control of the poetic self. Central to this process is Stevens' struggle to escape the influence of such strong precursors as Whitman and Emerson. Not an easy book to read, but not one for students of poetry to overlook.

THE BOOK OF MERLYN:
The Unpublished Conclusion to *The Once and Future King*
 by T. H. White
 Univ. of Texas, 1977
 137 pp. \$9.95
 L of C 77-3454
 ISBN 0-292-70718-5

For reasons that Sylvia Warner Townsend's introduction fails to make clear, this intended final chapter to Britisher T. S. White's retelling of the Arthurian legends was dropped at the time *The Once and Future King* was first published (London, 1958). *The Book of Merlyn* was written in 1941, while White was living in Ireland and wrestling with pacifist scruples over joining England's war for survival against the Nazis. Delivered to his editors just before he enlisted, the book is heavily didactic and, here and there, transparently autobiographical. But White's original grand design is interesting: to take Ar-

thur, old, tired, sad, and sick of war and treachery, back underground for more instruction from the animals who, at the beginning of the story, helped the wizard Merlyn to school the young king-to-be. The furry tutors' talk about fascism, communism, and capitalism is dreary, and Arthur's experiences when he is magicked into an ant have no sparkle. But when he becomes a wild goose migrating in freedom with the plump Lyólyok, whom he loves "more than Guenever, more than Lancelot," that old White magic again casts its spell.

FIVE TEMPERAMENTS:
Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery
by David Kalstone
Oxford, 1977
212 pp. \$10.95
L of C 76-42655
ISBN 0-19-502260-2

HOUSEBOAT DAYS
by John Ashbery
Viking, 1977, 88 pp.
\$7.95 cloth, \$2.95 paper
Lof C 77-9978
ISBN 0-670-38035-0
ISBN 0-14-042202-1 pbk

David Kalstone, professor of English at Rutgers, here considers the uses of autobiography in the work of five contemporary poets, including the late Robert Lowell, who did as much as anyone to gain critical acceptance of the use of *specific* autobiographical detail in American poetry. Few of us do not know, by now, the minutiae of Lowell's life; the story is in the poems (see page 154). Kalstone explores how much of such autobiography poems "can bear and handle." All five poets have found ways to build their lives into their work; Bishop in her later poems using "less geological, less historical, less vastly natural" time and space, more interior landscapes; Merrill recognizing a preference for the first-person present "with a veil drawn"; Rich by thinking, as she wrote in 1968, "how we can use what we have to invent what we need." In his last chapter, Kalstone greatly helps the reader to understand John Ashbery, a daring, difficult writer whose work confronts "how little" poetry can do in the face of life's complications.

"The past slips through your fingers, wishing you were there," John Ashbery once reminded us. His latest volume, *Houseboat Days*, 39 poems written since the 1975 publication of *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (which won a Pulitzer) continues exploration of the personal darkness that many American poets experience. "I cannot . . . pick up / where I leave off / . . . the truth becomes a hole, something one has always known / . . . a randomness, a darkness of one's own."