

BOOKS

A poet remembers her loves

A WORLD OF LIGHT

by May Sarton

W.H. Norton, N.Y., 1976, \$8.95

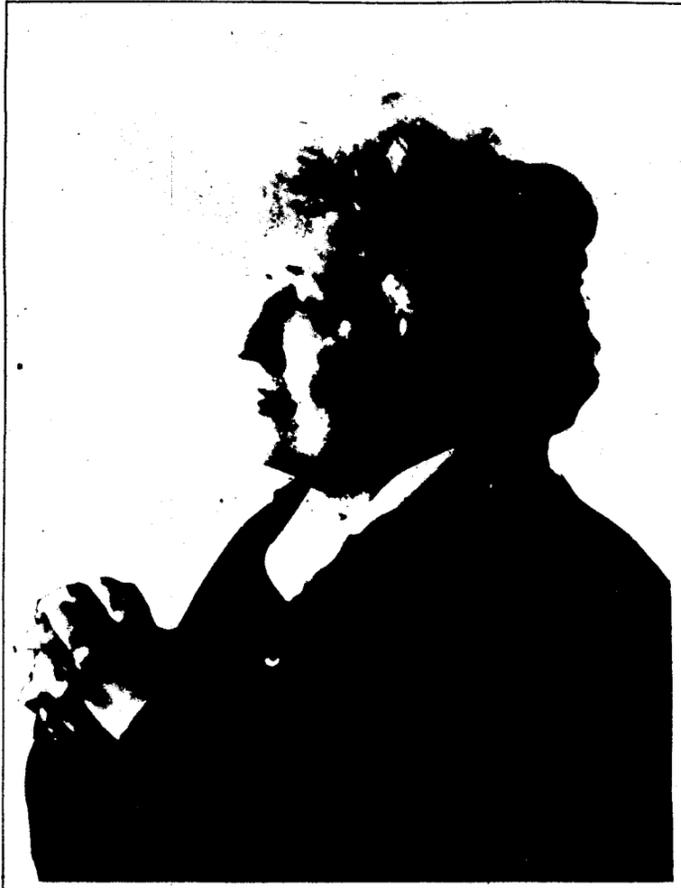
One's sixties are a time for remembering and evaluating, more so for poets perhaps than for others, since the poet's own experience and emotion are the material with which he or she works.

May Sarton is one of America's leading poets—as well as a distinguished novelist and essayist—and over the last 20 years she has given us three volumes of autobiography: *I Knew a Phoenix*, *Plant Dreaming Deep* and *Journal of a Solitude*. Her latest book, *A World of Light*, fills in some of the chinks between those recorded experiences.

It is a collection of 12 portraits and "celebrations" of the people who have most influenced her. But the chapters are so interwoven with her own development as a human being and an artist that they also create a kind of self-portrait.

Sarton, who never admitted her lesbianism while her parents were alive, has chosen to write only about those she loved who are dead and cannot be hurt. This leaves some exasperating gaps in the personal world she is describing. But in general the plan has worked well. She can assess her people—their faults and failures as well as their talents and endearing qualities—with honesty that is only possible when a relation is closed and complete.

Sarton aficionados may be moved to reread one of her previous books after a first reading of this one. This study of her parents, for instance, may send some people back to *I Knew a Phoenix*. Other may turn to *The*



May Sarton

Bridge of Years or *The Single Hound*, or *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* for more insight into Celine Limbosch, or Jean Dominique, or Edith Forbes Kennedy and Marc, the Vignon. Other chapters will send readers back to the letters and journals of Katherine Mansfield and D.H. Lawrence, or the poetical works of Louise Bogan and the prose of Elizabeth Bowen.

But more important, the echoes of Sarton's own poetry throughout the book will move readers to read or reread her *Col-*

lected Poems (Norton, 1974).

A World of Light is an evocative book that awakens memories of times and places through which its subjects move. It is a good introduction to one of America's major writers to those who have not read the body of her work; a must for those who have.

—Valerie Taylor

Valerie Taylor is a published poet whose work was reviewed in *In These Times*, Dec. 20, 1976.

POETRY

New York poets call *Review* racist, sexist

The *American Poetry Review* is the country's leading publication in its field, if one is to judge by circulation, impact on the art and the exceptional support provided by Federal funds.

Last week *APR*'s editor-at-large, David Ignatow (who is also the recipient of this year's Bollingen Prize for Poetry), announced that he was resigning his post for reasons that "go to the root of [its] literary decline ... from its original prospectus—to encompass and to advance the cause of American poetry in its most varied and vigorous forms, in the Whitman spirit of the free embrace of life and art."

At the same time a group of more than 50 New York poets—young and old, beginners and established poets, male and female, black, white, Asian and Hispanic Americans—published a statement on the editorial policy of the *American Poetry Review* that charges that the policy is racist and sexist and "shocking in its gross consistency."

According to the statement, an analysis of 23 issues of *APR* with a total of 648 individual contributions, turned up "only 19 contributions by black, minority, or third world writers." "Moreover," the statement continues, "in the five years of *APR*'s existence, the editors chose to publish the poetry of only one Afro-American writer," and the magazine's record with regard to Asian, Hispanic and Native Americans is equally dismal.

Of the 628 contributions only 116 were by women. Almost four times as many men as women were published. The group also notes the *Review*'s reluctance to publish women poets whose work emerges directly from female experience, including lesbian exper-

ience. "In general, the *APR* tends heavily toward the established and away from the new/the unknown," they say.

Spokespeople for the New York group summarized their views in this way: "We do not accept that there is an antithesis between social justice and excellence of any sort. We argue for an implacable commitment to excellence and to the varieties of American artists. It is depressing to acknowledge that some people believe that the passion for social justice is inimical to the passion for beauty and for grace and for the truth. We judge such a tenet to be indefensible."

The statement concludes with four demands that would rectify this history of neglect, disregard, and aesthetic suffocation:

"1. Representation: That a serious and continuing attempt, and clear and continuing evidence of such attempt, be made so that a proportional number of highest quality men, women and minority poets shall be published in the pages of *The American Poetry Review*."

"2. Small presses: Since *APR* received federal funds as a member of the small press community, it must visibly and with regularity represent the activities and offerings of that community."

"3. Revolving editors: That a revolving editor be assigned to each issue from one of the female and/or minority poetic communities, who will be asked to choose, at his/her discretion, poems for at least one-third of the total space devoted to poetry, per se."

"4. Young writers: That *APR* consistently publish and review work by young, beginning writers."

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BOOKS

How socialism worked in U.S.

...When more than 1,200 held municipal office...

SOCIALISM AND THE CITIES

Edited by Bruce M. Stave
Kennikat Press, 1975, \$13.50

This collection of historical studies of Socialist party administrations in the U.S. should be read by all who are debating the problem of how to connect rank and file organizing with electoral politics today.

The period covered begins with the elections of Socialists to office in Milwaukee in 1910; and then in Schenectady, N.Y., in Passaic, N.J., and in Bridgeport, Conn. Each of the essays has new and valuable information of some aspect of that experience.

Possibly the most startling contribution—at least to those who remember Walter Lippman only in his pontifical years—is his letter of resignation as Executive Secretary to the Socialist mayor of Schenectady. The issues Lippman raises as criticisms of the electoral policies of the Socialist party in 1913 are still central to the building of a socialist movement in the U.S. and still plague us.

Writing at a time when more than 1,000 Socialists held municipal office, Lippman warns that elected officials are only as powerful as the constituencies they represent. "The great danger is to have the externals of power and none of the substance."

"Our greatest task, to which politics is entirely subordinate, is the organization of labor so that it understands its possibilities and learns how to apply the power it possesses.... This is the first work of the Socialist movement. If it is well done, our political action will reflect it. If it is neglected, no amount of fuss over the size of our vote will cover it up."

Oh, hear him on how to link immediate demands to socialist objectives: "Take the municipal ownership ... of subways. We believe in it, and we should welcome it.... But we do not stop there.... It is our business to draw the distinction between the reformer's policy and ours.... Reformers propose to use the profits to reduce taxes; Socialists pro-

pose to spend the profits socially ... [to] pay for things that the people need.... Municipal ownership is a reform we endorse; Socialist municipal ownership is what we demand."

And finally, on the question of dogmatism: "A man standing on a soapbox has to be cocksure. But about the tactics of a revolutionary movement only a fool is convinced that his is the last word."

An essay that has particular relevance for readers and staff of a socialist newspaper is James R. Green's "The Salesmen-Soldiers of the Appeal Army." Analyzing the influence of *The Appeal to Reason*, the weekly newspaper for which Eugene V. Debs wrote, Green emphasizes the contribution of 495 activists, part of the 80,000 "salesman-soldier" brigade that traveled around the country selling the paper, organizing study groups and setting up Socialist party locals. "The effectiveness of [the] weekly," Green concludes, "depended as much upon its salesmen as it did upon its editors."

Socialism and the Cities is important working-class history. Each of the essays merits its own review. Space permits only a listing here.

Sally M. Miller describes the German-born American workers of Milwaukee, whose "class consciousness, not characteristic of native Americans" provided the power that built the Federated Trades Councils and the Socialist party there.

Kenneth H. Hendrikson Jr. describes the internal struggles between right and left in the S.P. of Schenectady. Aaron Burbank writes about the experience in Oklahoma City, where the fight against "bread and butter unionism" merged with the building of the S.P.

Editor Bruce M. Stave has a chapter on Socialist mayor Jasper McLevy (of Bridgeport) and his "fiscally conservative socialism." Michael Ebner reports on Passaic, where structural "reforms" were used to disperse working-class electoral strength. And William C. Pratt's chapter on Jimmy Higginses (rank-and-file activists) shows the complete cultural life provided to the membership at this time.

—Dorothy Ray Healey

Dorothy Healey was formerly on the National Executive Committee of the C.P. U.S.A. She is presently a member of the National Interim Committee of the New American Movement.

Moynihan Report gets coup de grace from Gutman's *Black Family*

BLAMING THE VICTIM (revised, updated edition)

By William Ryan
Vintage, 1976, \$2.45 (paperback)

THE BLACK FAMILY IN SLAVERY AND FREEDOM, 1750-1925

By Herbert G. Gutman
Pantheon, 1976, \$15.95

It is no small irony that William Ryan's *Blaming the Victim* was re-released the same year that Pat Moynihan was elected Senator from New York. Moynihan,

a Ph.D. and professor from Harvard, first reached national attention in 1965 when he authored a government report on the black family, which singled out "the deterioration of the Negro family" as the chief cause of "the tangle of pathology" engulfing Afro-American life. Moynihan argued that the allegedly weak, disorganized black family developed out of a matrifocal (mother-centered) culture and a pattern of family breakup caused by slavery.

To Ryan, this explanation serves as a classic example of the "blaming the victim" thesis: "justifying inequality by finding defects in the victims of inequality." Moynihan either ignores or downplays issues of class, power and institutional racism, calling on blacks to "heal thyself." If he had looked at urban black and white families at identical income levels, he would have discovered that the groups have nearly similar rates of "male-absent households." He would then have had to focus on structural questions about the economy like unemployment, low wages and poverty.

Ryan systematically exposes the same victim-blaming ideology in commonly held views on education, health, housing and criminal justice. The Coleman Report, for example, is subjected to the same critical attention. James Coleman, another Ph.D. not as yet a Senator, is faulted for blaming low school achievement on poor children, black children and their families. The school is exonerated and the surrounding social system is not examined. The concepts of "culture of poverty" and "cultural deprivation" are code words of liberal victim-blaming. Ryan also attacks Edward C. Banfield, a leading victim blamer, for his *The Unheavenly City*. In this book, Banfield urges us not to fret so much about the poor because it is fruitless to try to raise the lower classes from their squalid way of life, since we are dealing with people who would live in squalor and misery even if their incomes were doubled or tripled."

American ruling elites eagerly accept these cultural misinterpretations and reward their adherents. Note Moynihan's high government posts in both Democratic and Republican administrations; Banfield's chairmanship of President Nixon's Advisory Committee on Model Cities; Coleman's appearance before the Massachusetts Legislature and the wide press coverage accorded him since he began pushing his latest anti-busing "white flight" thesis.

The new introduction and appendix to this edition of *Blaming the Victim* brings us up to date on all the areas he covers, including recent Jensen and Herrnstein gen-

etic version of victim-blaming. It's unfortunate that Ryan chose not to integrate the new material into the body of the book. But the basic analysis remains as vital as it was when it was first published six years ago.

Although Ryan and other critics have been punching holes in the Moynihan Report for years, it may have received its coup de grace in a long, scholarly work by historian Herbert Gutman. In *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* Gutman examines U.S. census records, plantation record books, marriage applications, slave letters, and testimony to government officials. Not only does he find that the two parent family was the statistical norm among slaves, but also that it was an integral part of Afro-American culture, and one which the slaves went to great lengths to preserve. Despite the violence of slavery and the oppression of the post-slavery period, the black family "did not disintegrate following emancipation, and it did not disintegrate as a consequence of the great migration to northern cities prior to 1930."

Afro-American slave culture strongly supported long and stable marriages, extensive kin networks, marital fidelity, and naming practices reflective of the key role of family descent. Black Americans created that culture out of their African past and American slave experience and did not simply absorb it from white society.

Gutman, a fluent and compassionate writer, reaches the conclusion that lower classes and oppressed groups possess a way of life, a culture, which allows them to fight and to adapt, to survive and to grow, even in the face of severe constraints. Moynihan, who starts with a view of black Americans as a *problem* to be explained, or explained away, is never able to approach the depths of Gutman's analysis.

Interestingly, Gutman cites Moynihan as one of a group of people who read part of his book in pre-publication form. Perhaps Moynihan learned something. Perhaps.

—Maynard Seider

Maynard Seider is a sociologist, presently living in Massachusetts.

MUSIC

1976 music: the major key is detachment

1976's popular music was for the most part unremarkable. No music explosion occurred this past year, nothing that startled recognition and plunged us forward the way the best music of the '60s often did. The music—most often jazz—that is continuing on the path of technological experimentation and refinement is no longer aimed at shaking us up. Instead it's helping us cope. It says: be cool; there's comfort to be found in detachment. But this trend isn't the only one around. It's balanced by the survival of the folk-talk-rock tradition, which insists on the centrality of human experience in narrative lyrics that often overpower the musical accompaniment.

The quintessential example of the new music to cope by is *Romantic Warrior* by Return to Forever. There are few musicians

around better than the members of this quartet: Chick Corea on keyboards; Stanley Clarke, bass; Lenny White, percussion; Al Di Meola, guitar. They utilize a full variety of instruments, both acoustic and electric. Corea alone plays acoustic piano, Fender Rhodes, Honer Clavinet, Mini Moog, Moog 15, Micro Mini Moog, ARP Odyssey, Yamaha organ and Polymoog. If you find this slightly mystifying, you'll probably find the music equally esoteric. The multitude of electronic sounds serves to mask the relationship between individual sounds and the instruments that make them, creating an otherworldly and mysteriously inhuman perfection. This is enhanced by the minutely orchestrated arrangements used. The definitiveness of the orchestral arrangements became obvious to

The music ... is no longer aimed at shaking us up. Instead it's helping us cope.

me when I heard the group in concert, where they repeated the album note for note, without a hint of departure from the original.

Overall, *Romantic Warrior* appears a curiously passive reworking of the small-group jazz tradition, which, epitomized in the "jam session," originally emphasized individual spontaneity within a collective musical framework. *Romantic Warrior* offers instead the illusion of escape from the mundane world (em-

phasized by titles like "Medieval Overture" and "The Magician") while replicating the technological and organizational rigidities that keep our everyday lives mundane.

At the opposite end of the musical spectrum are Bob Dylan's *Hard Rain* and Jackson Browne's *The Pretender*. This music is technically crude, but emotionally complex. Although Jackson Browne, at 28, may be too young to speak with full authority on all of his subjects (death, suicide, parenting, the decline of the '60s counterculture), his seriousness carries him a long way. His songs, like Dylan's, document the human power to survive. I can say about him what I can say about no other musician except Dylan: I look forward to growing old with him.

The form of Dylan's music, as well as the content, is an assault against technological supremacy. Dylan's flat vocal delivery, his uncomplicated guitarwork, the fact that his back-up group seems to be learning the music as they're recording, and the poor quality of the "live" recording all deny the equation between technological finesse and musicianship. More importantly, by deliberately remaking old material (none of *Hard Rain* is in a strict sense new), Dylan denies any worshipful relation to his own past recordings—thereby beginning to break down the relationship between "song" as a human activity and "song" as a technological product.

—Kent Jacobson

Kent Jacobson teaches American Studies and film at the Univ. of Montana.