THE IMPOSSIBLE

Stanzas in Meditation, by Gertrude Stein. Introduction by Donald Sutherland. Yale University Press. $5.00.

This is the latest volume in the series of the unpublished writings ot Gertrude Stein which the Yale University Press has been bringing out regularly for the last decade. It will probably please readers who are satisfied only by literary extremes, but who have not previously taken to Miss Stein because of a kind of lack of seriousness in her work, characterized by lapses into dull, facile rhyme; by the over-employment of rhythms suggesting a child's incantation against grownups; and by monotony. There is certainly plenty of monotony in the 150-page title poem which forms the first half of this volume, but it is the fertile kind, which generates excitement as water monotonously flowing over a dam generates electrical power. These austere "stanzas" are made up almost entirely of colorless connecting words such as "where", "which", "these", "of", "not", "have", "about", and so on, though now and then Miss Stein throws in an orange, a lilac, or an Albert to remind us that it really is the world, our world, that she has been talking about. The result is like certain monochrome de Kooning paintings in which isolated strokes of color take on a deliciousness they never could have had out of context, or a piece of music by Webern in which a single note on the celesta suddenly irrigates a whole desert of dry, scratchy sounds in the strings.

Perhaps the word that occurs oftenest in the Stanzas is the word "they", for this is a poem about the world, about "them". (What a pleasant change from the eternal "we" with which so many modern poets automatically begin each sentence, and which gives the impression that the author is sharing his every sensation with some invisible Kim Novak.) Less frequently, "I" enters to assess the activities of "them", to pick up after them, to assert his own altered importance. As we get deeper into the poem, it seems not so much as if we were reading as living a rather long period of our lives with a houseful of people. Like people, Miss Stein's lines are comforting or annoying or brilliant or tedious. Like people, they sometimes make no sense and sometimes make perfect sense; or they stop short in the middle of a sentence and wander away, leaving us alone for awhile in the physical world, that collection of thoughts,

flowers, weather, and proper names. And, just as with people, there is no real escape from them: one feels that if one were to close the book one would shortly re-encounter the Stanzas in life, under another guise. As the author says, "It is easily eaten hot and lukewarm and cold / But not without it."

Stanzas in Meditation gives one the feeling of time passing, of things happening, of a "plot", though it would be difficult to say precisely what is going on. Sometimes the story has the logic of a dream:

> She asked could I be taught to be allowed
> And I said yes oh yes I had forgotten him
> And she said does any or do any change
> And if not I said whom could they count.

while at other times it becomes startlingly clear for a moment, as though a change in the wind had suddenly enabled us to hear a conversation that was taking place some distance away:

> He came early in the morning.
> He thought they needed comfort
> Which they did
> And he gave them an assurance
> That it would be all as well
> As indeed were it
> Not to have it needed at any time

But it is usually not events which interest Miss Stein, rather it is their "way of happening", and the story of *Stanzas in Meditation* is a general, all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars. The poem is a hymn to possibility; a celebration of the fact that the world exists, that things can happen.

In its profound originality, its original profundity, this poem that is always threatening to become a novel reminds us of the late novels of James, especially *The Golden Bowl* and *The Sacred Fount*, which seem to strain with a superhuman force toward "the condition of music", of poetry. In such a passage as the following, for instance:

Be not only without in any of their sense
Careful
Or should they grow careless with remonstrance
Or be careful just as easily not at all
As when they felt.
They could or would would they grow always
By which not only as more as they like.
They cannot please conceal
Nor need they find they need a wish

we are not far from Charlotte's and the Prince's rationalizations. Both *Stanzas in Meditation* and *The Golden Bowl* are ambitious attempts to transmit a completely new picture of reality, of that *real* reality of the poet which Antonin Artaud called "*une réalité dangereuse et typique*". If these works are highly complex and, for some, unreadable, it is not only because of the complicatedness of life, the subject, but also because they actually imitate its rhythm, its way of happening, in an attempt to draw our attention to another aspect of its true nature. Just as life is being constantly altered by each breath one draws, just as each second of life seems to alter the whole of what has gone before, so the endless process of elaboration which gives the work of these two writers a texture of bewildering luxuriance—that of a tropical rain-forest of ideas—seems to obey some rhythmic impulse at the heart of all happening.

In addition, the almost physical pain with which we strive to accompany the evolving thought of one of James's or Gertrude Stein's characters is perhaps a counterpart of the painful continual projection of the individual into life. As in life, perseverance has its rewards—moments when we emerge suddenly on a high plateau with a view of the whole distance we have come. In Miss Stein's work the sudden inrush of clarity is likely to be an aesthetic experience, but (and this seems to be another of her "points") the description of that experience applies also to "real-life" situations, the aesthetic problem being a microcosm of all human problems.

I should think it makes no difference
That so few people are me.
That is to say in each generation there are so few geniuses

And why should I be one which I am
This is one way of saying how do you do
There is this difference
I forgive you everything and there is nothing to forgive.

It is for moments like this that one perseveres in this difficult poem, moments which would be less beautiful and meaningful if the rest did not exist, for we have fought side by side with the author in her struggle to achieve them.

The poems in the second half of the book are almost all charming, though lacking the profundity of *Stanzas in Meditation*. Perhaps the most successful is *Winning His Way*, again a picture of a human community: "The friendship between Lolo and every one was very strong / And they were careful to do him no wrong." The bright, clean colors and large cast of characters in this poem suggest a comic strip. In fact one might say that Miss Stein discovered a means of communication as well-suited to express our age as in their own way, the balloons (with their effect of concentration), light bulbs, asterisks, ringed planets, and exclamation marks which comic-strip characters use to communicate their ideas. In *Winning His Way*, for example, she experiments with punctuation by placing periods in the middle of sentences. This results in a strange syncopation which affects the meaning as well as the rhythm of a line. In the couplet

Herman states.
That he is very well.

the reader at first imagines that she is talking about a group of states ruled over by a potentate named Herman; when he comes to the second line he is forced to change his idea, but its ghost remains, giving a muted quality to the prose sense of the words.

Donald Sutherland, who has supplied the introduction for this book, has elsewhere quoted Miss Stein as saying, "If it can be done why do it?" *Stanzas in Meditation* is no doubt the most successful of her attempts to do

what can't be done, to create a counterfeit of reality more real than reality. And if, on laying the book aside, we feel that it is still impossible to accomplish the impossible, we are also left with the conviction that it is the only thing worth trying to do.

OHN ASHBERY

PROPHET WITHOUT HONOR

The Loyalties of Robinson Jeffers, by Radcliffe Squires. University of Michigan Press. $4.25.

To the younger generation of poets, those who have learned perhaps too well from the New Critics to lisp in urbane Alexandrian numbers, and, much like The Rhymers' Club, to assume a gloomy silence before any display of grandiloquence in poetry, or any parade of didactic or vaticinal Ideas, the work of Robinson Jeffers has generally seemed, if not downright boring, at most a period piece from the Twenties, a blusterous, cranky, self-conscious hoarding of supplies against the Armageddon to come. In his photographs, with the open shirt, the styx-cold eye, and taut ironic sneer, Jeffers certainly looked the poet. But only damage, it was felt, could come to the young poet who went to school to him. And, except for a handful of fine short poems, the bulk of Jeffers' poetry is not among those works that we usually revisit to read and to enjoy.

Ours is a snobbish attitude, to be sure. To correct it, Radcliffe Squires has written a book, the first in over twenty years on Jeffers. Eager undergraduates might possibly get something out of it; but on the whole, it is the usual kind of tidy, dispassionate, well-written criticism. Still, the book must be commended for one thing at least. Squires does clearly show that the case for or against Jeffers must be argued on the highest level: either Jeffers is a major poet or he is not.

Both in his life and work, Jeffers has always been the antithesis of the academic minor poet so much the vogue today. And reading Squires, it