ELIZABETHAN POETRY: A Study in Conventions, Meaning, and Expression by Hallett Smith
Harvard University Press, 1952
Reviewed by Charles M. Coffin
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If Hallett Smith were not a member of the faculty of the California Institute of Technology, his book Elizabethan Poetry possibly would go unnoticed in Engineering and Science. But Hallett Smith is a member of that faculty, and there is the big

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The
bility,” Professor Smith’s handling of the pastoral and the heroic poetries is illustrative. As he demonstrates, fundamentally important polarities of experience, both of the community and of the person, are rendered in these kinds; respectively, the mode of human behaving which is associated with poise, or with man and nature and man and woman in agreeable composition—in short, with otium, or the life of contentment; and, the other, which respects action, not aimless, but directed and controlled according to the richest sense of what is purposeful.

“Heroic poetry, then,” as he puts it, “points to an ideal comparable to that of pastoral with the difference that the desired state must be earned, must follow the achievement of fame and glory through action. The resolution is therefore on a higher level. The guiding and predominating motive was that of Virtue.”

Terms like “pastoral” and “heroic” admittedly are quaint to our sense of what is purposeful. In examining the nature of their “creative process,” he makes clear that the products of this process were indeed “earned”—through study, practice, and imitation and, possibly above all, through delight in the “search for vitality” in the art of language.

Although it is no part of the purpose of the book to show us how we may regain what we may have lost, Professor Smith has so well interpreted the creative process as a response to the fundamental human demand that, if we will, we may hope to improve the ordering of our own experience through the appropriation of some part of our large heritage of Elizabethan letters, much as the Elizabethans themselves took advantage of their own inheritance.

Between the chapters on the pastoral and the heroic, Professor Smith treats the sensuous, Ovidian poetry, the sonnet, and satire. The section on the sonnet more than any other comes to close grips with the texts under discussion, notably some of Shakespeare’s best-known sonnets. But throughout the middle ground of the book the reader is kept in connection with a range of literature, not, I should say, so directly symbolic of the larger motions of human behavior as the pastoral and heroic are concerned with, but those reflecting the intimate motions of the individual and of his immediate social and political environment.

While in the laboratories we are studying the responses of rodents and arthropods for whatever illumination of the human situation we may get, we may profitably reckon with the enormous documentation of this same situation, which Professor Smith here reminds us that the arts are always giving. It is good to know that the large provision of the California Institute of Technology includes the humanities “laboratory” where the reckoning is being made under such able direction.