

REVIEW AND COMMENT

Kenneth Fearing: A Poet for Workers

THE evolution of the author of *Angel Arms* is amazing, and his place in American literature is not so easy to define as a glance at his book would immediately suggest. So close to America, he is actually more in the tradition of the French Symbolists. There is very much in his life, temperament and talents that recall Tristan Corbiere. His fantastic patterns of slang and speech, "reasoned derangements of all the senses," his gargoylish diableries, are those of a Tristan Corbiere, torn out of context and place, but a Corbiere with Marxian insights. *Angel Arms*, published in 1929, was a slender but gifted volume of lean ironies, acid portraits of Woolworth shopgirls and New Yorkese cadences of doggerel lives.

In his *Poems* he has succeeded in inditing the sleazy cinema dreams, the five and dime loves and frustrations, the mystery pulp heroism and furnished room microcosm of the pulverized petty bourgeois. And this he has done with a novelist's technic; for besides being poems they are, in effect, short novels, with all the day-to-day thickness of incident, smell, dust, walls of the French nouvelles.

The poems have also the narrative development of the novel: at the beginning, there are close-ups of the bought magistrates, the disincarnated radio voice, the swivel-chair magnates, heard in private monologue and seen in "unrehearsed acts." The theme unscrolls and the "bargain heroes" stalk across the screen: the Will Hayses, the Gene Tunneys, the Al Capones—and "the ectoplasm" of the "profitable smile hovers inescapably everywhere about us."

By now the venal movie-cathedral mores have been established; the fatuity and "steam-heated grief" of the dividend-rulers, with their covert, nasty sense of guilt have been witnessed. The actual horror-show then begins, but the most profoundly moving cinematographic horror-show in contemporary poetry. Stephen Spender's "The city builds a horror in his brain," is an etiolated abstract statement the specific truth and spectre of which is to be found in Kenneth Fearing's poems.

The tinfoil hopes, the thwarted aspirations and hollywoodesque ikons of the hopeless lower middle class are disclosed. It is a crushed procession of recumbent rooming house souls soaked in mazed, sanitarium dreams but forever being awakened by evictions and hunger. "You were decorated forty-six times in rapid succession by the King of Italy, took a Nobel Prize. Evicted again, you went

downtown, slept at the movies." They listen to the obscenely unctuous Radio Voice, seeking "the rib of sirloin wrapped in papal documents."

The poet interweaves comments done with a news-reel eye but with inexorable Marxist interpretations: "All winter she came there begging for milk. So we had the shacks along the river burned by fire." "The child was nursed on Government bonds. Cut its teeth on a hand grenade. Grew fat on shrapnel. . . . Laughed at the bayonet through its heart." Here is the entire cycle of life and death today; and here are lines from a deeply imagined poem which make a perfect slogan.

Fearing is relentlessly tortured and for a moment it would seem as if despair were in the ascendancy. There is a funerary cry: "Something must be saved . . . from the rats and the fire on the city dumps; something for warmth through the long night of death." But in "Dénouement" a poem which, were it extended, would be a major piece of our times, the poet, looking beyond the horizon toward a socialist civilization, a Vita Nuova of the workers, sings out:

Sky be blue, and more than blue; wind, be flesh
and blood, flesh and blood, be deathless;
walls, streets, be home;
desire, of millions, become more real than warmth
and breath and strength and bread.

Kenneth Fearing's irony is very special, unique in the history of American poetry.

Were it not freighted with pity and a gnarled, pulsating tenderness it would be a leer. But here is one of the most perfect examples of satire in literature in its truest light, that is, in its most tragic hue. It is as if Satire had ironically disrobed herself.

His names, symbols, Beatrice Fairfax, Jesse James, Aimee Semple McPherson, selected with uniform intention, are to make use of his own words, Rialto Equations. Thus the apostrophe to Beatrice Fairfax becomes clear: she is a reversed Dantean Beatrice in a Paramount moving picture Vita Nuova. And this is as near to Rimbaud's hell as any mortal would care to approach.

Behind these equations, these "reasoned derangements," is satire turned upside down, that is, horror and revulsion. Underneath the "death-ray smile," anguish and torture. The reader must reverse every ironic comment and title to uncover the true intention.

The poet's outlook, which in *Angel Arms* was like an elliptical recollection of the laugh-

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ing gas of rodents in a dismembered dream, becomes something very positive in the *Poems*. Here the intuitions and picture are an accusation and a foreshadowing of the doom of the whole capitalistic society: "Maggots and darkness will attend the alibi." And as the poems in their chronological progression become more incisive and attain Marxian lucidity, the caustic comments rise; expand into an affirmative Communist statement.

We should pause to sample the kind of telling irony in the poems, as in, "What if Jesse James Should Some Day Die?"

Where will we ever again find food to eat,
clothes to wear, a roof and a bed, now that
the Wall Street plunger has gone to his
hushed, exclusive, paid-up tomb?

How can we get downtown today, with the
traction king stretched flat on his back
in the sand at Miami Beach?

Compare this with a passage in a somewhat similar vein out of Cecil Day Lewis' *The Magnetic Mountain*:

As for you, Bimbo, take off that false face!
You've ceased to be funny, you're in disgrace.
We can see the spy through the painted grin;
You may talk patriotic but you can't take us in.

Lewis and Auden, gifted poets, Oxonians and sincere Communist sympathizers, are uneasy whenever they fall into colloquialisms; their satire has a platitudinous glitter—rhythm also becomes pedestrian. Their uncertainty and banality in direct communication has a very definite class basis. In the use of pasquinade and the speech of the masses in poetry Fearing is not only at his best but has no peer either here or abroad.

Examine the texture of bitterness, and elegiac tenderness for the oppressed, in "Lullaby," almost entirely wanting in the bohemian poet of *Angel Arms*:

are the trees that line the country estates, tall
as the lynch trees, as straight, as black;
is the moon that lights the mining towns; dim
as the light upon tenement roofs, grey
upon the hands at the bars of Moabit, cold
as the bars of the Tombs.

Or in his "and let the paid-up rent become South Sea Music," a song of the unemployed.

Doubtless, some of the cash-register columnists will utter: "Mean streets and sordid lives in verse." For whenever a writer has revealed what is ghastly true in present-day society they have dismissed his book with this sort of cant headline. But the poet here can reply: "Did I create these mean streets, this hunger, this dollar sordidness?"

Kenneth Fearing's poems are never precious or esoteric. In essentials, they are close to the mood of the oppressed.

Kenneth Fearing is a poet for workers; his poems are deeply incarnadined in evictions, strikes, homelessness, protest; but his appeal is not restricted to his class. His poetry, for those who are still wavering, is one more piece of documented evidence of the horrible mutilation of human dreams and nobleness under capitalism. In very truth, such a fecund talent belongs especially to us.

EDWARD DAHLBERG.

Studs Lonigan in Conclusion

JUDGMENT DAY, by James Farrell.
Vanguard Press. \$2.50.

THE last volume of a trilogy is a sure test. *Judgment Day* should illuminate the first two volumes for those who persist in thinking of the story of Studs Lonigan as an isolated history of a Chicago neighborhood tough. Reviewers who have tried to push away the implications of Farrell's work on the ground that its concern was with adolescents and Irish-Americans and therefore not widely representative, can do so no longer. Harry Hansen may substitute a harangue on whether it is or is not art but it reminds me only of the kind of criticism leveled at Balzac by the contemporary critics of his day. The terrific impact of the Studs Lonigan material comes to so splendid a conclusion in *Judgment Day* that it can only escape the reader nervously bent on escape.

Studs Lonigan is now thirty. Since the night of the New Year's Eve brawl on which the second volume ended, he is no longer the strong figure he once was. He is a weak little runt with a bad heart, who seems to be getting the sour grapes of living. The opening chapter of *Judgment Day* is one of the soundest beginnings of any work of fiction that I know of. It is a perfect example of the relevancy of the apparently "irrelevant" and Farrell's method never had a more triumphant vindication. Studs Lonigan and some of his old Fifty-fifth Street gang are returning from the funeral of one of their number. They are riding in a train back to Chicago and through their conversation, given photographically if you like, the implications of the first two books are closely tied to *Judgment Day* in the only convincing way such an alignment can be made, through details falling naturally and inevitably into place through conscious selection from larger masses.

It is no accident that Studs Lonigan, sickly and nervously fearing defeat, braces himself here in a determination to be healthy and outlive them all. The failures of his old pals are too plain before him; men out of work or on small time jobs. Only one of them seems to be on the road toward success in the role of puny politician. As the train rattles on, the old gang try to pump up confidence with nostalgic remembrances of past exploits of drinking, fighting and whoring and through this chapter the tragic hope of Studs to be a big shot is coupled with a sense of doom that death will trip him first. It is no accident that Studs in one of the fine natural pieces of dialogue about death that this chapter contains, hopes in words that one feels were transmitted to him through the movie or fiction, that, when he dies he "will go out like a light." One need only to compare his actual death with this passage to realize the extent to which Farrell ties up the threads.

The year is 1931. Where the orgy of the New Year's Eve celebration coincided with the fall of the stock market in 1929, the per-

sonal decay of the boys of the old gang coincides with the ravages of "Old Man Depression." Studs, fitfully working for his father on papering and painting jobs, begins a battle to win back after the attack of pneumonia following the orgy. His personal hope has no firmer basis than have the reassurances given the world at large by press and radio that "prosperity is around the corner." He begins his struggle weakened by excesses. His one rock of Gibraltar, savings of two thousand dollars, is invested in Insull stock. The stock slips, he tries to bolster himself to a sense of the solidity of living by an engagement with a girl who is not the enchanting Lucy of his younger days. Through a series of small events, saturating the reader with a full sense of the remorseless conflict between the individual and the society he is up against, the deadly poison of defeat for Studs drops with sure premonition.

It is no accident that Studs loses in a humiliating tussle with his younger brother, that at the lodge initiation he fails to register as a leader, that in an effort to show off while swimming he gets only a heart attack and in the very caption of a movie, "Doomed Victory," picturing the defeat of a gangster type on whom he formerly patterned himself, he fearfully senses his own finish. His hope that he may still pull the royal flush from the deck of life is so moving and makes for so terrible a suspense because it is the American hope.

This hope never had a surer background in fiction than here, where it falls on such barren ground, where the noble wish to be somebody can find no happier expression than in dance marathons, drinking bouts, aimless strutting and fights. Studs, "dreamily listening to sugar-sad music, feeling lousy" is pretty much all America. It is the America of the small shopkeeper, the not yet class-conscious worker who listens to Coughlin and Huey Long on the radio and to whom "Red" talk is not anathema, but just plain "nuts."

It is significant that two parallels are developed sure-footedly in *Judgment Day*. The doom of Studs, presaged drop by drop in minor defeats that culminate in the last sacrament of the priest, is put into its final category by the drop-by-drop consciousness of the counter movement, the rise of the working class as the fabric of the present society disintegrates. It is not by chance that the triumphant Red parade follows the mumbo-jumbo of the priest called to Studs' deathbed.

Paddy Lonigan, the father, stands watching the parade, aware that he is an unhappy man and that the people in the parade were happy, happier than he was, yet he cannot reconcile it with his Catholic religious past and resolves his misery in a bar. The mother must not only bear the death of her son but the miserable knowledge that her son's sweetheart will bear his child and the shameful presence of a drunken father and a drunken brother in the house of death. The reality of this family is positive. They come to such conviction