



Seven Voices

M. L. ROSENTHAL

THE JACOB'S LADDER, by Denise Levertov. *New Directions*. \$1.55.

KADDISH AND OTHER POEMS 1958-1960, by Allen Ginsberg. *City Lights Books*. \$1.50.

ALL MY PRETTY ONES, by Anne Sexton. *Houghton Mifflin*. \$3.

POEMS, by Alan Dugan. *Yale University Press*. \$1.25.

VIEWS OF JEOPARDY, by Jack Gilbert. *Yale University Press*. \$1.25.

PREFACE TO A TWENTY VOLUME SUICIDE NOTE, by Le Roi Jones. *Totem Press and Corinth Books*. \$1.25.

THE OPENING OF THE FIELD, by Robert Duncan. *Grove Press*. \$1.45.

A GOOD DEAL of interesting poetry has appeared in this country during the past year or two without, it seems to me, receiving the attention it deserves. Restraining as much as possible the urge to make generalizations about the state of American poetry today, I would like to call attention to seven of the new works, if only to indicate some of the directions in which our best talents are moving.

Let us begin with Denise Levertov's *The Jacob's Ladder*, a poetry of intense personal excitement striving at the same time for a self-contained, concentrated order. "A Solitude," about seeing a blind man on the subway, is characteristic:

A blind man. I can stare at him
ashamed, shameless. Or does he know it?
No, he is in a great solitude.

O, strange joy,
to gaze my fill at a stranger's face. . . .

When the man rises, the poet helps him out of the subway and across a street, guiding him by the hand. She has touched the awesome, blessedly unconscious presence of another being. She presents herself as all but voyeuristically greedy for the man's essence, needing the readiness of his strange hand more than he needs her guidance, risking a discovery of mere vulgarity at the heart of it all. The blind man, "his thoughts on his face like designs of light" that are "flickering on water," seems at first indifferent to the woman's offer to help, yet his hand goes out in response to her "instantly." The two hands come to "know one another" independently of their owners, in a childlike transport. The poet's debt to Lawrence and Buber, and her independent use of what she has learned, are self-evident.

In another poem, "A Sequence," we have a veiled narrative, through dialogue and oblique suggestion, about a husband and wife's effort to regain significant touch. The opening lines are deliberately subdued—a dim picture of a mechanically changing environment. Then a storm of bitter emotion overtakes the language and the poem grows violent for a moment in its struggle to overcome some failure of sympathy (a struggle that will be resolved in the relaxed joy at the end):

A changing skyline.
A slice of window filled in
by a middle-distance oblong
topped by little

moving figures.

You are speaking
flatly, "as one drinks a glass of
milk" (for calcium).

Suddenly the milk
spills, a torrent of black milk hurtles
through the room, bubbling and
seething into the corners.

These lines that begin "A Sequence" propose, of course, a very large issue. "Objective" and anti-human energies force us apart; will and passion are required to leap the widening gap. Miss Levertov's most ambitious attempt to meet this issue is her three-part sequence "During the Eichmann Trial." She builds it around bafflement at the meaning of Eichmann: his ideas of obedience and responsibility, his connection with the "spring of blood" that "gushed from the earth" during a mass burial, his killing of a boy slave-prisoner who stole fruit from his garden. The final poem of the sequence, "Crystal Night," omits reference to Eichmann himself, however. It is about the night of the wholesale smashing of Jewish shops and homes and the cruelties and killings that went with it. Not Eichmann but the empty horror he embodied now becomes both enemy and subject. Eichmann is transcended by the impersonal destructiveness epitomized in an imagery of flying fragments of ice and glass:

a polar tumult as when
black ice booms, knives
of ice and glass
splitting and splintering the silence into
innumerable screaming needles of
yes, now it is upon us, the jackboots
are running in spurts of
sudden blood-light . . .

The issue is harder to state than to resolve, and the victory of man over the forces his energy releases still harder to envisage. But we must admire the manner, at once dauntless and unpretentious, in which Miss Levertov goes at her work.

ANOTHER moving book published not long ago is Allen Ginsberg's *Kaddish and Other Poems*. Perhaps the chief accomplishment of his first book, *Howl and Other Poems*, was to give maddened voice to the more depressing statistics of the day—the rise in mental illness, drug addic-

tion, and homosexuality—and to the morally anarchic mood that came in the wake of the war and the cold war, of McCarthyism, and of the Bomb. Now the long poem *Kaddish* lays open the personal experience behind this voice. In accordance with the Hebrew meaning of the title, it is both a hymn of praise to God and an elegiac incantation inspired by the death of the poet's mother. Using the actual names of people in his family and describing presumably actual events, the poet reveals the lives of the Ginsbergs as unbearable long before he himself was born. Naomi (he calls his mother by her given name throughout) was one of thousands of Russian-Jewish immigrants who brought to this country a revolutionary social idealism and a deep belief in the redemptive powers of education. For many the going was so hard they never broke through to enjoy their new land's wider and sunnier possibilities. Naomi became a Socialist and later a Communist, and also suffered a series of hysterical and paranoid seizures. *Kaddish* is dense with traumatic memories. We see mad Naomi being taken by her twelve-year-old son Allen to a "rest home" from which they were "kicked out" when she "hid behind a closet—demanded a blood transfusion." We see Naomi hideously incontinent; Naomi kicking her bedridden, dying sister in a frenzied effort to get information from her about "spies" and "poisoners"; Naomi displaying her operation-scarred, deteriorated body to her sons. Mr. Ginsberg is merciless in presenting what would normally be the secret wounds of family life.

Still, it is a tender, affectionate poem. The form, even the syntax, is improvisational—piled-up notes on Naomi's habits and sayings and on particular incidents, interwoven with echoes of Hebrew prayer and with the poet's own insights, prophesying, dreaming, and praise of life in the face of the horror. *Kaddish* does not lend itself to brief quotation. One has to stick with its thirty-six pages to feel its qualities beyond the hasty composition of long sections, the impressions of maudlin bawling and exhibitionism, the *disgrace* on which the whole thing is premised. Gradually the finer tones emerge: the pity of wasted life en-

ergies; the gray unhappiness of the father, painted so palely and gently that the restraint is itself a kind of violence; the view of Naomi as beauty made ugly by a world that is far too much for her. One passage may give some hint of this side of the poem. Naomi is speaking as it begins, Allen as it ends:

"Yesterday I saw God. What did he look like? Well, in the afternoon I climbed up a ladder—he has a cheap cabin in the country, like Monroe, NY the chicken farms in the wood. He was a lonely old man with a white beard.

"I cooked supper for him. I made him a nice supper—lentil soup, vegetables, bread & butter—miltz—he sat down at the table and ate, he was sad.

"I told him, Look at all those fightings and killings down there. What's the matter? Why don't you put a stop to it?

"I try, he said—That's all he could do, he looked tired. He's a bachelor so long and he likes lentil soup."

Serving me meanwhile, a plate of cold fish—chopped raw cabbage dript with tapwater—smelly tomatoes—week-old health food—grated beets & carrots with leaky juice, warm—more and more disconsolate food—I can't eat it for nausea sometimes—the Charity of her hands stinking with Manhattan, madness, desire to please me, cold undercooked fish—pale red near the bones. Her smells—and oft naked in the room, so that I stare ahead, or turn a book ignoring her.

Despite sentimentality, unnecessary allusions to his own literary clique and to private matters irrelevant to the poem, and grandiose mannerisms, Ginsberg does realize something unspeakably touching and provocative of anger against the way things are. When the language comes through, accurate in its phrasing and passion and right in its cadence, his poem becomes the most daring of love poems and the most telling of cultural indictments. There are times, as well, when he speaks in quite conventional but touching terms of the sadness of change.

ANNE SEXTON's poetry, comparable in its pain and deep disturbance and frankness to *Kaddish*, is far different in tone. Her one previous volume, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, had a number of pieces about her mental illness, which ran its course and was treated under far better conditions than Mrs. Ginsberg's. To

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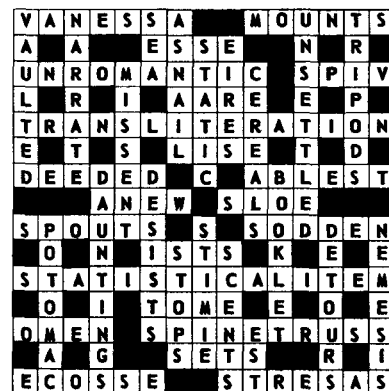
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note this tact is unjust for obvious reasons, yet it reflects one crucial difference in the worlds of these authors and the styles that express them. It may be silly, too, to argue that being poor and neglected makes it harder to go mad with any dignity, but reading these books forces this pathetic truth on us and forces us to recognize how important a writer's life experience is to his whole method, not just to his subject matter. Be that as it may, Mrs. Sexton's present collection, *All My Pretty Ones*, is still shadowed by the bitter melancholy of the earlier volume. She takes for granted what Mr. Ginsberg feels he must prove, the significance of the psychic breakdown about which she writes, and can "afford" simply to show what she has been through and to use a certain restraint. Her manner, learned from Robert Lowell and W. D. Snodgrass, is at once confessional and understated. A line like "Father, this year's jinx rides us apart" might easily have come from Mr. Lowell's *Life Studies*. I make this comment sympathetically, and do not mean to deny that Mrs. Sexton comes through strongly in her own thoroughly feminine way. The problem does exist, though.

A number of the new poems center on the deaths of Mrs. Sexton's parents, neither yet sixty, within a few months of one another. She evokes some of the same terror of the flesh that we feel in *Kaddish*, and as in that poem the emphasis (with love) is on parental weaknesses that were crucial in the poet's early unhappiness. A great difference is in the ultimately more clinical, self-analytical character of Mrs. Sexton's elegies (or anti-elegies) and other poems. Another is the exquisite lyric purity she achieves over and above her energetic self-pursuit and self-exposure. "The Starry Night" is one instance:

The town does not exist
except where one black-haired tree slips
up like a drowned woman into the hot
sky.
The town is silent. The night boils
with eleven stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die.

She can show a wry wit too, more precious than rubies when it appears, as for a moment in "The Operation":

Clean of the body's hair,
I lie smooth from breast to leg.
All that was special, all that was rare
is common here. . . .

The poetry of self-analysis is always in danger of making the poem's real object simply the clarification of the poet's literal personality, and of making the basis of its aesthetic form his purgation through confession or through discovery of hidden keys to his present condition. While Mr. Ginsberg tries for the main chance through the expense of spirit in a waste of language, Mrs. Sexton often gets the poem out of her private orbit through brilliant phrasing and an instinct for form. Both are more striking than Miss Levertov at first reading, but neither of them has yet matched her fulfillment of her potentialities by way of a form at once original, organic to her voice, and controlled.

ALAN DUGAN, winner of the Yale Younger Poets award in 1961, and Jack Gilbert, the 1962 winner, both have relatively high boiling



points and do *not* give the private game away. In an age that has been cultivating the art of a crisis of personality, their writing may seem to many promising but peripheral. Mr. Dugan's *Poems* bears some resemblances to Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* in its extroverted vigor, free vernacular, liberalism that is sometimes fresh and individual and sometimes only fashionable, and artistic unevenness. "Portrait from the Infantr'y" and "How We Heard the Name" will especially suggest the comparison by their clever anti-militarism from an insider's viewpoint, as it were. But the gently erotic romanticism of "On an East Wind from the Wars" (though it begins marvelously and then trails off) and the sexual exuberance of "Poem" and "On an Old Advertisement" will do so in other ways. Mr. Dugan's poetry comes as close as any we have to a sensitive expression of the normal male intel-

ligence, with its sardonic but hardly revolutionary notation of the discrepancies between inner impulse and ideal values on the one hand and the way things are on the other. The poem about the prize fighter Hurricane Jackson is not his best but will suggest what I mean:

Now his nose's bridge is broken, one eye
will not focus and the other is a stray;
trainers whisper in his mouth while
one ear
listens to itself, clenched like a fist;
generally shadow-boxing in a smoky
room,
his mind hides like the aching boys
who lost a contest in the Pan-Hellenic
games
and had to take the back roads home,
but someone else, his perfect youth,
laureled in newsprint and dollar bills,
triumphs forever on the great white way
to the statistical Sparta of the champs.

Mr. Gilbert is not entirely outside this rough world, but he seems a stranger there. His realm is largely that of preoccupation with love and desire, with pure sensation, and with the rigors of a poet's art and the question of his relation to an audience. If this makes him seem less "modern" than Mr. Dugan, I do not mean it so. His best poems have a heavily weighted, Keatsian sense of the pull and burden of sexuality. One of them has Don Giovanni as protagonist, defending his career as a pursuit not of "recreation" or of the grossness of "the impersonal belly" or of wild self-loss in "heart's drunkenness" but of the literal existential mysteries it has led him to discover, mysteries within himself and within the "archipelagoes of person" of the women he has known:

. . . . O, through the underwater time
of night,
Indecent and still, to speak to her
without habit. . . .
I wish I could tell you how it is
in that dark
Standing in the huge singing and
the alien world.

A number of the poems in Mr. Gilbert's *Views of Jeopardy* express revulsion at the sated aftermath of irresistible lust, an extension of the thought in a poem like Keats's "Ode on Melancholy." Mr. Gilbert is quite conscious of this literary ancestry and shows it in his "Letter to Mr. John Keats," which assumes an

oversimplified spokesperson for that poet. He is better when less conscious of himself as a literary footnoter, and is most Keatsian in a twentieth-century way when he sees his sensual involvement as partly a compulsive pattern rather than a pure value. In general, he seems to me very much on the right track both in the way he catches his own voice and in his disciplined freedom of cadence and diction. He can be intellectually rigorous and acidly satirical. Yet he is, with one or two other possible rivals, the most romantic and melody-making new poet I have read recently—and a crackling, sardonic realist at the same time.

LE ROI JONES's *Preface to a Twentieth Century Volume Suicide Note* is close to the spirit of modern jazz. Like Ginsberg, he improvises form and structure; but the principle is different. He tries something out, expands on it, repeats effects, drifts dreamily along wispy spirals of suggestion, grows tedious, pulls himself up short and does a beautiful solo for a minute or two. He has a natural gift for quick, vivid imagery and spontaneous humor, and his poems are filled with sardonic or sensuous or slangily knowledgeable passages set down on the run. If he can take his cleverness and facility in making momentarily vivacious effects a little in hand, he may acquire some of the character and incisiveness he now lacks. Meanwhile he represents an attractive current of youthful poetry that makes good use of the sparkling chatter and directness of his generation.

IHAVE LEFT Robert Duncan's *The Opening of the Field* for last out of cowardice. I have not wanted to face discussing it in a paragraph or two, for this book requires painstaking exploration. But let me at least note emphatically that while Mr. Duncan sets up various interferences to immediate rapport with his readers, he seems to me now the "experimental" poet with the richest talent we have. On the scene for a number of years, he has come into his maturity still relatively unknown because of the difficult, collage-like character of much of his writing. Five or six of the poems in the new

book are much more available to new readers than the others, and I would suggest beginning with them. The opening poem, "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow," is one instance. Lovely in its sound modulations, nostalgic in its tone, it is remarkable for its flexible adaptations of line and stanza from early Italian conventions. Mr. Duncan here as in so much other work is at once piercing and unsentimental, and simultaneously conveys a feeling and explains the motivation of his conception and method. Another poem, "The Natural Doctrine," compares the radiance of the sun with that of words (I reduce the thought to barest bones, and without the marrow) as sources of joy and elements of the "actual language" of existence beyond all images. The sun holds a pre-intellectual meaning that antedates words, though words can help us toward that meaning and away from the trap of self-entmeshment. "A Poem of Despondencies" and "Out of the Black" take us to the other extreme of this thought, to the dark sense of desolate reality with which mystic and visionary dreamer alike must come to terms. The transcendent state of awareness that Mr. Duncan cultivates is perhaps most clearly projected in "Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal*":

To throw ourselves down
helplessly, into happiness,
into an age of our own, into
our own days.
There where the pestilence roars,
where the empty riders of the horror go.

Where this poet carries us from such relatively simple and concentrated beginnings, to what ramifications of aesthetic theory and excursions into symbolic association, will depend in large measure on our readiness to accept his leadership for a bit and to trust the intensity and authority of his style. His imagination is worth such trust.

The importance of the self that is assumed in so much current American poetry is pursued beyond solipsism and confession in the best poems of Robert Duncan. He is the rare poet who can at least occasionally touch that humanistic reconciliation with life toward which all art tends.

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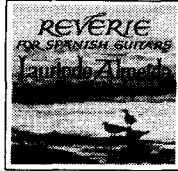
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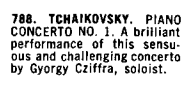


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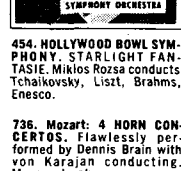
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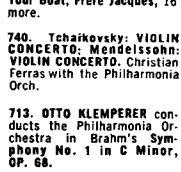
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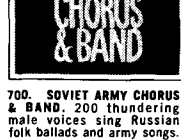


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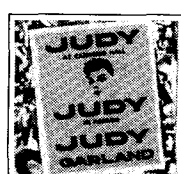


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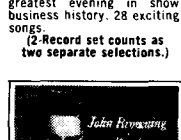


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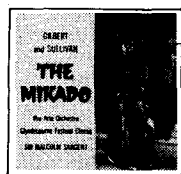
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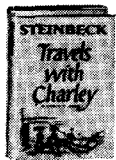
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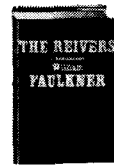
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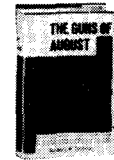
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