

Poetry. Every new generation of poets rebels against certain of the manners, methods, and phraseological practices of its predecessors. Such rebellion results in experiment, sometimes effective and sometimes merely nonsensical. Dudley Fitts, who specializes in modern poetry, here shows that he can keenly discriminate between the two. Other new poets, and older, abide more by tradition. Whether or not "influences" are present, they proceed with comparative safety, yet sometimes lack the spark of wild but fortunate phrase struck out by the more daring. The books of poems discussed below provide examples of this variety of expression, both from special presses and established publishing houses; the latter being just as likely today as the former to espouse a modern trend.

Rare Felicity and Infelicity

POEMS BY WILLIAM JAY SMITH. New York: The Banyan Press. 1947. 31 pp. \$2.50.

DEATH IN A ROOM. By Michael Fraenkel. Waco, Tex.: Motive Book Shop. 1947. 52 pp. \$1.25.

THE TIME BY DIALING. By Myron H. Broomell. New York: William Morrow & Co. 1947. 62 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by DUDLEY FITTS

THE LORD, *mediante* Bill Benét, hath delivered into my hands the poems of William Jay Smith. It is several years now since I first read his "Hotel Continental" in one or another of Oscar Williams's numerous anthologies; but the rhythm which seized me that day:

O I feel like the kinks in the paws of the Sphinx!
O I've got those negotiable knees!
On goes the phone with a tone all its own:
P—lease! P—lease! P—lease!

has obsessed me ever since, more compulsively even than Mark Twain's "Punch, brothers, punch with care: Punch in the presence of the *passen-jaire*" obsessed him. Reason for literary manslaughter, one would say; yet bloodily predisposed to revenge though I am, I can report only that this beautifully made little book is an engaging and sometimes impressive contribution to contemporary poetry.

For once, a publisher's puff hits the mark: "a permanence, a rare felicity," writes Miss Marianne Moore of "Cupidon"; and the phrase might be applied with equal propriety to other poems—"The Massacre of the Innocents," for instance, or "The Diving-Bell" ("Lost is the voice of the dark in dark dissolving, / Lost in the somnolent surf, the summer-swell"), or the deceptively fragile "The Closing of the Rodeo." (The suicidally

inclined will find "Hotel Continental" on page 7.) Mr. Smith's verse, even in so doomed an Empsonian exercise as "Villanelle," is always controlled, lucid, rhetorically and sonally responsible; one looks forward to a deepening of emotion, to a wider range of connotation than all but two or three of the best of these poems achieve. Meanwhile, here is a salutary first book.

I must risk being Odious. Unassuming as it is, Mr. Smith's "Poems" makes the work of Michael Fraenkel in "Death in a Room" seem very jejune indeed; and this becomes the more embarrassing when one reflects upon the excellence of Mr. Fraenkel's prose in "Bastard Death" and in the two "Hamlet" volumes written in collaboration with Henry Miller. Of that authoritative, deeply-felt style there is scarcely a trace in the present book.

Spattered down the page, the sparse, disjunct lines move, when they move at all, with a creakiness all too evocative of Louis Zukofsky; but generally they do not move. A strophe: "My wife has gone to her room / and left the woolen bed jacket for me and the slippers / she is waiting for me." An infelicitous syntax, surely, that thus clothes "me and the slippers" in a woolen bed jacket! and an equally insensitive ear, that can accept so prosy a twitching! The sterility, the lack of inventiveness, together with the lugubrious inconsequentiality of what Mr. Fraenkel is saying here, results in a kind of constipated muttering that can be most trying. Verse is clearly not his *métier*.

With "The Time by Dialing" we emerge into the realm of light and motion again, but it is also the realm of nothing much more than good fun. Mr. Broomell writes with ease—in deed, the lilt is constantly breaking

into a lope—and he can be amusing, sharp sometimes, agreeably wistful; but I cannot discover that he has anything but commonplaces to say. Read "How Was the Show?," "The Death of the Body," "Of Providence." Read, above all, "The Defection," a kind of scoutmaster campfire come-come-buck-up speech to a conscientious objector, appropriately cast in rigid octosyllabic lines and decked out with the drabest tropes and the weariest imagery that a well-pawed-over tradition affords. "No man but houses in his blood / The slain assailant clutching mud"; (one wants to improvise in the vein: "No man but longs within his bust / To see his enemy bite the dust"). "The Time by Dialing" is perfectly representative of so much of the verse that I have frequent occasion to discuss in *SRL*: deft, tricky, whimsical, false.

Reflective Mirror

AEGEAN ISLANDS AND OTHER POEMS. By Bernard Spencer. New York: Doubleday & Co. 1948. 60 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GERARD PREVIN MEYER

IN APPROACHING a poet like Bernard Spencer, it is not enough to admire the moral stance—*against* war, the power of money, the chicanery of nations—for simple, hard-working, life-loving folk and love. Nor does it seem too important to recognize the accuracy of his swift impressionism on the one hand, and on the other to deprecate the careful-carelessness of his metrics. As for his all-too-evident helplessness before the "rising wind" of our times, before Time itself—we have all been touched with this paralysis of the will, more or less; at least, he has not made a virtue of it.

And it is all too easy to say that Spencer sounds like Hopkins ("Pulling through nations, fountained further than thought"), or Auden ("what's to become of the world if Money should suddenly die?") or Eliot ("The sour doorways of the poor" and "April comes as Beast-smell . . .") or Spender ("Being the shadow of the shadow of a war"). Spencer edited "Oxford Poetry" only a few years after Auden and Day Lewis performed this chore, and he has been published in the same magazines and anthologies; and, after all, the others are no mean learners themselves. (He appears, no doubt from temperament, to be less susceptible to the later deviations of Dylan Thomas and the "neo-romantics.")

As is proper for one who has wan-

dered Aegean shores (Spencer was in His Britannic Majesty's Service in Italy and Greece and, apparently, in Egypt as well), there is often a spareness and austerity about his work, recalling classic style. But though he looks for classic serenity, he fails to find it even in its place of origin; his excavations, seeking "things which have . . . less of the earth's weight," turn up only "Stubble of conquests":

—And I suddenly discover this discovered town,
The wish of the many, their abused trust,
Blows down here in a little dust,
So much unpainted clay;
The minimum wish
For the permanence of the basic things of a life,
For children and friends and having enough to eat
And the great key of a skill;
The life the generals and the bankers cheat.

This "minimum wish," with its simplified accusation (recalling "Maunderley"), shows Spencer as spokesman for the average man. In fact, this poet is a mirror, leaning to the passivity that the image implies—unblurred, delicately communicative,

Love, Hope, War, Life

VARIATIONS ON A THEME. By Dorothy Quick. New York: The Fine Editions Press. 1947. 94 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by I. L. SALOMON

WHEN a poet has been published for twenty years, a sixth volume ought to show a maturing in the poet's art, particularly when one has earned a tribute from no less a writer than James Branch Cabell, who regards "Dorothy Quick as a true poet" and as "a superb critic." The suspicion arises in this reviewer that Miss Quick is a true enough but not altogether discriminating poet.

If Miss Quick had been content to publish only the last two sections of

LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

1. Thorne Smith. 2. James Hilton. 3. W. S. Gilbert. 4. Bernard Shaw. 5. Charles Dickens. 6. Robert Sherwood. 7. Rudyard Kipling. 8. Mark Twain. 9. Alfred Tennyson. 10. Joseph Conrad. 11. Somerset Maugham. 12. Sinclair Lewis. 13. Victor Hugo. 14. John Steinbeck. 15. Eugene O'Neill. 16. Edna Ferber. 17. William Makepeace Thackeray. 18. Robert Browning. 19. George Eliot. 20. James Cain. 21. Arnold Bennett. 22. William Shakespeare. 23. James M. Barrie. 24. Sinclair Lewis. 25. John Galsworthy.



but a mirror. Nevertheless, the reflections in this mirror are often compelling; both "Egyptian Dancer at Shubra" and "Part of Plenty," to cite two of his successes, achieve the immediacy, the merger of the poet (and his readers) with the moment which seems to be his aim as an artist. One hopes that this talent, a genuine one, will surmount the despair which rises like a sea about these "Aegean Islands"—and sometimes, as in "Egyptian Delta," leads him to near-sur-render.

"Variations on a Theme," she would have had a much better book. The lyrics under the variations "Of Love" and "Of Hope" are not comparable to the best love songs of our time; in communicable and unimaginative symbols, they are personal but unrealized. In the sonnet she works with a surer hand as is evident in "Riders of storm exult in rains that write/Their signature of silver on the land." Her attempt at a monologue by Isolde plumbs no depth and brings no tears; some of the lines are good, but the slight narrative has nothing in it to compel wonder or admiration.

The poems in the variations "Of War" and "Of Life" are stronger. There are a dozen that stand above anything else she has written. Such poems as "Underground," "America," "We Will Not Fail," and "Victory" are all to the good. The writing in these war poems is objective and direct. In the last section, "Benison," with its felicitous line "The lovely certainty of things that grow," and "Sand," with its metaphysical kinship to Blake's "Auguries of Innocence," are among the best in the book.

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