

"All Being Is on the Spin"

POEMS, 1940-1947. By Theodore Spencer. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1948. 117 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by ROBERT HILLYER

THEODORE SPENCER'S poems are unified in philosophy, diverse in technique, and beautiful throughout.

The shorter poems include those published in two previous volumes, together with many later pieces. The title of the first group, "The Paradox in the Circle," is symbolic of the lyric impulse prevailing in these pages, wherein all being is pictured as rotating within a fixed law of change. Thus refrain and echo make an effective method of communication.

All being is on the spin. The rhythm swings around a circle back to the refrain and with new impetus starts out on another revolution. Each time it recurs, the refrain has accumulated new significance. The circular movement, like the magnetic swirl of the cosmos, picks up all things in its orbit and sweeps them along: children playing, gentlemen and ladies dancing, lovers and their songs, philosophers, and time itself.

The contemptuous "Epitaph" and elegiac "The Day" succumb momentarily to the lure of nihilism, but the more sustained thought is of the struggle of the individual against the barriers of Death. In "One Kind of Advice," the individual revolts against "cruel mind" itself, which summons the dark thoughts of change, and tries to escape through the door of the emotions. Yet when that door is opened, there is still only the frightening range of the prancing stars. But



—Peter Rossiter.

Theodore Spencer: "If the call comes, who answers?"

the whirl in the dark need not end in despair. There is the possibility that the hurrying circles, less confused than inexorable, will be arrested by the opening of another door into perpetual Light. But where? But when? Much of the power of the lyrics derives from these two questions that haunt the spirit of man. In "Joshua and the Suicide" the sudden stoppage of life's dizzy sun is a fearful jar. Now the questions have to be answered. And they cannot be answered. As the poet says later, in "Problem of Immortality":

If the call comes, who answers?
If the answer comes, who calls?

Among the longer poems the noble music of "The World in Your Hand" suggests the solutions for the questioning soul in the return to earthly simplicity, the mastery of oneself, and the consciousness of companionship. The poem is Tennysonian in its assured Quietism. The first poem in the book, "The Phoenix," is not free from philosophical doubt, but it concludes with an implication of faith in destiny—even individual destiny—beyond mere chance and change. It is, at least, a rift in pessimism, like the concluding lines of Thomas Hardy's "Darkling Thrush." Taking "The Phoenix" and "The World in Your Hand," it would seem that Theodore Spencer arranged his circling queries between two solid affirmations.

The exuberant ornamentation of "The Phoenix," as well as the symbol, suggests the Elizabethan muse, who is amiably present in the poet's background, especially in the many-voiced refrains, the statements, and echoes. The grave pastorals of Raleigh, Sidney, and Webster come to

mind, and the love lyrics in the present volume would not be out of key in a program that included Campion and Fletcher. To be able to invoke such names in connection with a thoroughly modern book is a happy augury. These poems may have been composed in the study, but the windows were wide open to the sunlight and pageantry that we now behold.

Wings of Intimation

NEW POEMS: By Mark Van Doren. New York: William Sloane Assoc. 1948. 135 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HOWARD GRIFFIN

IN A WAY that is quite his own, using sly suspensions, interjected words, and a kind of runic austerity, Mr. Van Doren in these poems explores phases of emotion, areas of speculation, as well as phenomena of nature and weather. With sharp insight he examines himself in relation to time but he shows equal wit in transfixing ordinary characters against the extraordinary backdrop of their relation to the universe. Ultrasensitive to metaphysical ironies, Mr. Van Doren even when concerned with the simplest things—a camp fire, a copper thread, the progress of snails—is always concerned with much more but that more is never ponderous: it remains the lightest wing of vast intimation. And yet for its very lightness the vision is the more haunting. That the minimum of means brings into being so much only adds to the wonder. It gives one pause—to touch on a matter of technique—that the simplest words placed one to another can be made to achieve huge adumbration. With conscious effort Mr. Van Doren not only restricts his vocabulary but confines his manner to a deceptive casualness, an informality that is never colloquial.

This delicacy, this resonance of tone,—it is not at all common to modern poetry. To equal it precisely one must go back, I think, to the seventeenth century, to Vaughan, Donne, and Herbert. Not that these poems seem in the least derivative. No, although thoroughly individual, one senses that their roots have been enriched by vast reading.

One finds here an advance over "The Seven Sleepers"; these poems are less abstract, more astringent, and yet no one poem is more beautiful than "Our Lady Peace."

Although this poet's subject matter always had breadth, throughout the years he has increased his power over the line and is now able to make the

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FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT: No. 248

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 248 will be found in the next issue.

MAT GEEQ IKD K YEEL GEEQ.

KD GEEQD YE; KCL KD GEEQD

YE DAT ITCM.—DKQU.

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 247

No human being, however great, or powerful, was ever so free as a fish.

J. RUSKIN

The Saturday Review of Literature

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The Perils of Poetry

MUCH modern criticism of poetry, some little magazines, some new anthologies, have furnished me food for thought. I can understand much, but not all. It seems to me that certain modern critics are perilous to poetry. I take an example from the past. The astonishing rhetoric of the late Hart Crane left me much colder than it left the erstwhile Paul Rosenfeld or the extant Waldo Frank. Yet an article by the former, which I once read, I am sure, in *The New Republic*, plunged me into deeper obscurity concerning this fervid and fated poet than did his poems. And still, today, critics expel much vaporous and inconclusive language concerning poetry.

In reading such criticism, and the poetry, one finally finds oneself in a country of incertitude approaching nightmare; for everything, as you look at it, becomes, or is in process of becoming, something else. Every word, for instance, spreads ripples of connotation, and images blend into other images like the patterns of glass fragments in a twirled kaleidoscope. There is an exhilaration to this; but there is no rest for a mood. And then, too, there are perceptions, in serious long poems that I have read with entire seriousness, seemingly so sensitive that several rereadings fail to reveal what the whole thing is about. For example, R. P. Blackmur is a highly literate writer, but when, in a long modern poem, he speaks for a prisoner in the dock prior to sentence, we are never apprised of the charge, of the circumstances, or, indeed, of anything concrete. All that I gathered at last from the far too many words was the intimation that all of us human beings are really in the same boat and

that nothing much can ever be done about it—a conclusion I have seen stated before with more memorable lines. It was all very elusive. And so often one finds, in such vaguely evocative poetry, that one is only thinking that one is thinking. Then there is another kind (that of Hart Crane and his followers) in which there is a constant cross-fertilization of epithet, where allusions and references, as shy in ambush as wild creatures, stare and vanish at a glance. When one becomes acclimated to this kind of writing, grammar, syntax, the precise meaning of words, the direct communication of ideas, are made fleeting misapprehensions. When a sad heart is called “the gymnast of inertia,” and one hears that “orphic strings, sidereal phalanxes” leap and converge to “thine Everpresence, beyond time, / Like spears ensanguined of one tolling star / That bleeds infinity,” one finds this rhetorically impressive; until, upon emerging from the trancelike dance, the mixture of metaphor falls like a heavily lutestringed sledge (or am I doing it myself now?), and the first quotation recedes into a contorted statement of the merely obvious. By that time one has hit the pipe just once too often!

On the other hand, in modern poetry's defense, this first verse from John Malcolm Brinnin's “Every Earthly Creature” is admirably exact and clear, though the poem thereafter wanders into rather too much of a muchness:

The shifty limpet on his rocky shore
Contrives a conch to make life possible,

Young Rawley*

By Bryher

ORINOCO,
sad river,
whispering a name—
“remember young Rawley?”

“If he be
one of the young thousands
who never came
from their journey
what is it to me?
Let him lie with his English memories
under the cannibal leaves,
we all die somewhere.”

With humming-bird gentleness
the river dirges,
“forget if you will why they went,
forget young Rawley,
can the leaves alter my banks,
Man obliterate glory?”

*Sir Walter Raleigh's son was killed on the last expedition to Guiana. According to West Country tradition and most authorities, the name was pronounced, and often written, Rawley or Rawleigh.

And the unbelievable giraffe achieves
A dainty salad from the lissom tree;
Pretending he is flora in the pond,
A silly fish will emulate a frond
To trick the appetite that savors him;
A rabbit in the snow will do the same.

But since I am speaking of the perils of poetry, I must give citations, and I do so neither invidiously nor in order to hold modern poetry up to ridicule; but solely in the interest, as I conceive it, of better writing.

When a young poet whose work is often brilliant avers:

Trudging towards snowtime, I could
weep for hours
To think of birds, the birds I leave
behind.

I wonder at his unrecognition of bathos. And when another entreats:

Dear visionary, gloss the awkward guest
Abashed by plants and trees and foliage things . . .

I remember Shelley's “Sensitive Plant” as considerably more rugged by comparison. Yet when a rather swaggering ruggedness expresses itself in still another, whose work is considered in the modern forefront:

Thus in the classic sea
Southeast from Thessaly
The dynamited mermen washed
ashore . . .

I take it up with the conjured ghost of old Michael Drayton, who “gets the idea” but expresses himself as mildly horrified. Also he ventures the correction that mermen likewise wash at the bottom of the sea.

In a new poet of parts, I find:

Last night I slept in the pits of a tongue.
The silver fish ran in and out of my special bindings . . .

while one who is perhaps our most salient playwright of the hour reminds us:

You know how the mad come into a room,
too boldly,
their eyes exploding on the air like roses . . .

One acclaimed a genius by a large coterie, produces:

There was no antelope on the balcony
And Thomas had not yet appeared
At the barred window above the precipice.

Obviously a mystery story, but no story follows. Any more than in

Seven was Rudie's number but the twist
Twirled him ninecircles down . . .

which I have just made up myself. Come to think of it, it's pretty good! In the parlance, “twist” is a woman, and twist is also of the wrist in shooting crap. The Dantesque descent (ninecircles written all as one word

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