

the sense of hidden suffering and of shared anguish—was actually what gave it the complex, ambiguous rich tone.

But all that is left here is the scab and the pus, as it were, of the true insights. The suffering and anguish are a mark of superiority, not of human communion; the double identification in Hemingway's best work with both the hunter and the hunted has been resolved into the code of the snob and the killer. This is a cosmos of jerks, this is Winner Take Everything, this is to Have and to Have and to Have. There are still good things in "Across the River and Into the Trees," and it is possible that the novel will serve as an emotional release for an intricate and tormented talent, very much as "The Torrents of Spring" did in the earliest phase of Hemingway's career.

But surely this, to use his new lingo, is not the work of the man who was there. Nor did Walt Whitman's original phrase of compassion—"I was the man. I was there"—mean what Hemingway now means.

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Crops by County Agent

By Ben Lewis

NEW crops can grow upon this barren ground,
Though it will need some doing. You can see
How taking without giving left the tree,
This tenth-year autumn, lean as a hungry hound.
The moss spreads fast; when yonder field is dry,
I'd plow for tilth and test for sour land;
Then fertilize and sweeten for a stand
Of clover in the spring—or likely try
One-season crops, the kind that root above
Unweathered clay. Before I'd tempt the frost
With pale perennials like married love,
I'd strew a bit of kindness so it flows
Into the subsoil—where it won't be lost
As surface sand with every wind that blows.

Degeneracy in East Texas

THE HOUSE OF BREATH. By William Goyen. New York: Random House. 181 pp. \$2.75.

By OLIVER LA FARGE

IN THE last few years there have appeared a number of novels written around the theme of male homosexuality, or tinted with it. One group of these consists of straightforward narratives dealing with the effects of a homosexual tendency in a main character upon himself and the other characters. The conclusions generally are those of the loneliness and unhappiness of the earlier, female precursors such as "Well of Loneliness" and "Dusty Answer." These novels do not form a school; they are united only by a common theme.

The second group bids fair to be a school. In it the theme is elaborated through mandarin and gothic writing; a sensitivity approaching the morbid and an elaborate symbolism surround an often sensuous treatment of the sexual element, with undertones of horror. These novels have a repulsiveness and a fascination which suggest a blending of George Grosz's more extreme caricatures with the smoothness, dream shock-effects, and implicit sexuality of surrealism. Whether, in its influence upon the future, this school will be more fertile than its theme remains to be seen.

"The House of Breath" belongs in the second group. It is explicitly a loving study of a degenerate family of East Texans all of whose members come to a bad end. Explicitly, the narrator, Boy, finds them all beautiful. All of them one visualizes with exposed guts or their bodies partly rotted; some of them are physically so described, in others one feels it as the expression of their souls.

The narrator is wildly sensitive. Like the only two men whom he admires, Follie and Christy, he is homosexual although (it is unclear) perhaps not actively so. The bi-sexual men of the book are all miserable creatures.

There are women in the story, even beautiful women, but their beauty is coldly described, and bi-sexual matings are recorded merely as historical fact, plus one description which shows the act as an ugly rutting. The one exception is the beautifully told spiritual union between Christy and his drowned wife when he brings her body up from the bottom of the river.

It is the men who are sensuously described, if only in the brief, effective phrase, "... and met a trapeze



William Goyen—"real talent gone astray."

man with thighs in black tights; and stayed and went away with the circus early in the morning." It is the unions of men, symbolically handled, which have sensuality and beauty.

That the incident with the drowned wife should be not gruesome, but beautiful, and lie within the realm of acceptable, serious fantasy, shows that the author has real capacity. That capacity is held under now by over-reaction, repetitious symbolism, and false reaching for poetic effects, which in combination with what is really good keep the reader teetering between absorption and annoyance. It is also defeated by a failure to distinguish between the beautiful and the fascinatingly hideous and by an effect of sick sensitivity and love of the morbid.

What I mean by false reaching for poetic effects is a common vice of this kind of writing when the writer falls into the error of thinking that involving a sentence merely for love of involvement makes for strength. Take two lines on page 18: "Christy and I were floating like separate (but bridged by some secret underwater island) lands." Strike out the parentheses and "but," let the rest of the parenthetical phrase follow "lands," and one has a clear statement of a poetic conception, instead of gobbledygook.

Here is a real talent gone astray, one hopes merely in a youthful desire to be "special." All Mr. Goyen needs to realize his own abilities is a little simplicity.

No False Steps

THE PRODIGAL HEART. By Susan Ertz. New York: Harper & Bros. 305 pp. \$3.

By ELIZABETH JANEWAY

ANYONE who has been exposed to English literary history must remember Virginia Woolf's description in "Orlando" of the cold mist of Victorianism as it spread over England. The passing of Victorianism has attracted less attention, save from that embattled generation now well into middle-age, that cut the throat of the old order; and today the free verse of the 1910's and the novels of the Twenties seem almost more dated than the Victorianism they were attacking.

Joyce Cary, however, has found in the contrast between Victorianism and its aftermath one of his major themes. Both in "To Be a Pilgrim" and "The Moonlight" he explores the passionate romanticism of the Victorians and, also, the more cautious, perhaps more anxious, smaller-sized emotions of the generation of today to whom Victorianism is not even a memory.

Now Susan Ertz, in this good, solid, in many ways distinguished novel, has felt and written on much the same subject. She is herself a little cautious and in the end she reduces some of her emotion to sentimentality (as the Victorians were more apt to do in literature than in life). But her book is a pleasure to read, the precision of her writing is a joy, and her characters are full of those delightful surprises that make one read a book not merely for the drive of the narrative, but also for the page-by-page enjoyment of each well-created scene and passage.

This is the story of Medwin Blair, who is thirty-two years old in 1948. Her family situation is at once individual and typical of the woman caught by affectionate obligation, supporting dependents while her life goes by. Not that Medwin is a spinster. She married during the war, had two weeks with her husband, and bore him a daughter after he had been killed in the Middle East. A job with two elderly ladies, doers of good deeds, gives Medwin a chance to come to London and break out of her hopelessly narrow circle. The tugging and hauling, the family arrangements and family feuds that make it possible for Medwin to take her job begin the book, and they are so real that one can almost feel the bitter comment on the sister-in-law ringing in one's ears, and pray for patience as one struggles not to say the unforgivable.

Medwin does get away, but in Lon-

don she finds anything but a peaceful professional position waiting for her. Her employers are gracious, thoughtful, generous. One of them is charming. But how possessive they are! How jealous! The charming Miss Lyddon is a conductor of passion as a lightning rod is a conductor of electricity; and her colleague, Mrs. Gresham, has a talent for hysterics and pathos. In between them Medwin attempts to pursue an even course, to be fair to both, to draw back from intimacy, to keep herself uninvolved—to preserve, in the words of her generation, her own integrity.

Between the two women this might be possible, for neither has really made a successful emotional claim on her. But there is another character involved. This is Miss Lyddon's nephew, whom she has never seen; the son of a brother with whom she quarreled forty years before—quarreled so bitterly that lives were ended, lives were broken, and the edges never healed. Medwin meets Robert Lyddon believably, by nothing so sloppy as coincidence, and she falls in love with him believably. And now she is faced with the necessity for really holding on to her integrity, for living by principle, for refusing to scream and grab and hurt—as Miss Lyddon had, one can only feel, and has continued to do. For Robert Lyddon has a wife and a son. True, his wife has been unfaithful to him and may still choose to leave him and go to her lover. But the boy has done nothing, the boy must not be hurt—and Medwin succeeds in taking from Robert only what she can take without hurting them. She acts on principle, she does not grab; perhaps she is cautious, but she is unselfish as well. She is not Miss Lyddon, not a passionate Victorian romantic.

She is also, alas, not completely believable to this reviewer. Medwin is deeply in love with Robert. It is hard to believe that she could have been quite so unselfish as she is. Or, at any rate, that she should have achieved her unselfishness without a bit more of a struggle than Miss Ertz allows her. The end of the book has the slightest flavor of manipulation, quite absent from the beginning; as if, in order to prove her point—that Medwin can be herself, delightful, in love and still unselfish—Miss Ertz has condemned her heroine to suffer too much, and a little unnecessarily. When I was a little girl in Brooklyn there were still stock companies in the theatres; and I can remember the impulse which urged one to lean out of the balcony and howl to the heroine, "Don't do it!" It was useless. She always did do it, take the false step. That feeling clouded the end of Miss Ertz's otherwise enjoyable book.



Serpent in Eden

THE SPANISH GARDENER. By A. J. Cronin. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 263 pp. \$3.

By LON TINKLE

THE NEW novel by the author of "The Citadel" and "The Keys of the Kingdom" is a compact and neat parable whose simple moral is well worth restatement for our times. The sermon, so to speak, in "The Spanish Gardener" is one already familiar to Dr. Cronin's readers: namely, that simple, direct affections and honest acts can be corroded and destroyed by distrust and by too much introspection. Or, put more aphoristically and a little less exactly, to the impure in heart all things are impure.

Dr. Cronin begins his story with a firm discipline, in a tone as dry and detached as Somerset Maugham's. Throughout, "The Spanish Gardener" is in fact as attentively carpentered as any novel by Maugham himself. But the detached mood soon disappears: Dr. Cronin has targets to scourge and no intention of remaining above the strife. His story is as predictable as the resolution of a given algebraic equation.

To a seacoast town in Spain come a disgruntled American consul and his sickly young son. Unrewarded in his career, forever getting dull and routine assignments, the consul has had the same bad luck in private life. From a vague flashback we learn that his wife has enigmatically abandoned the marriage, rebuking her husband for his overdosage of vanity and possessiveness. Presumably her urge to freedom is bequeathed her son, upon whom all the consul's affection is now centered.

An unexpectedly lovely villa, engaged as his residence, soothes the consul's temper. Father and son are briefly happy together in the prospect of redeeming the villa's weed-grown but promising gardens. The consul hires a handsome young gardener whose simple, peasant joy in living is like a tonic for the son; the frail