

gled progress, but he has a little wearied of it.

I see that what I have written may seem to the wary reader a trap sneakily devised from Mr. Thomas's own words and readied to fit him in and throw him away. But no; I think him a very remarkable poet. I am not ready to join Philip Toynbee in calling Thomas "the greatest living poet in the English language," for Thomas at his age is not ready for such magnitude. I think, rather, that he has written two or three of the most beautiful poems of our century (how many poets accomplish that?) and, his gifts and limitations being thus far what they are, his eventual place in the hierarchy of poetry depends on what he can or cannot do after forty.

The two poems I feel certain about are "Poem in October" and "Fern Hill." There are enough other fine poems to star the careers, as the saying goes, of half a dozen other poets.

Dylan Thomas's subject matter is pretty simple and unvaried: he gets his poems from a few vividly felt intimations of mortality—time and change, death existing in the seed, death itself. The poems therefore are memoir poems, sexual poems, elegies. Sometimes they bear religious overtones, sometimes not; he is more impressively sensual than spiritual. His "Collected Poems," indeed, could nearly be all parts of one poem, as Thomas Wolfe's novels (there are resemblances) are really all one.

When in poetry the ear is the prime creator, one phrase begetting the next, the inevitability is a poetry personal, arbitrary, private. In the hands of so original a poet as Thomas, the musical effects are stunning, the "meaning" often difficult and sometimes not comparably existent. The reader is assaulted. Thus a poetry of this kind, though magnificent, is more impressive for ten pages than it is for two hundred; repetitiousness begins to weigh the poems down and even a seeming self-imitation. What at first was a marvelous free flowing of language becomes in time a forced piping.

This book shows such limitations. Its evidence of growth in the poetry is, nevertheless, present. The most recent poems do not confirm it—they are too often either forced or imitative—but the culminations of such a poem as "Fern Hill" are a growth toward simplicity. In other words, Thomas has exhibited a will to ride his gale of words, not just be tossed about—however spectacularly—by them. Fine frenzy has to be reined with responsibility. As no doubt he knows. He has, after all, unmistakable genius.



Kingdom of the Heather

COLLECTED POEMS. By Edwin Muir. New York: Grove Press. 196 pp. \$3.50.

By GERARD PREVIN MEYER

THE process of poetic creation is endlessly mysterious, the more so because such sharply divergent views of it exist among the poets themselves. But—roughly speaking—the two poles are form and spirit. In the greatest poetry the form and the vision are one; in all poetry that reaches towards ultimate answers (or questions), there is a push towards this mystic union, from one pole or the other.

Some years ago, in reply to "An Enquiry" addressed to poets by the editors of *New Verse*, Wallace Stevens said that for him "the immediate impulse is verbal." The course of Mr. Stevens's later career—which has had so profound an influence on younger poets—has emphasized the accuracy of this self-analysis. At the other extreme was Edwin Muir, who wrote: "I generally start from some visual image, and I think that when that happens my poetry is likely to be better than when I elaborate some phrase that has caught my fancy."

Mr. Muir has also had a poetic career—though his activity as a critic, and as a translator of Kafka *et al.*, has tended to obscure his practice in the "creative" art and to lead Stephen Spender, for example, to call him "one rather neglected poet." (I believe, also, that Mr. Untermeyer, after carrying him for some years, dropped Mr. Muir from his anthology of "Modern British Poetry" in its latest edition.) But the appearance this year of his "Collected Poems" should be a quiet, yet pointed reminder that poetry can still start out from the opposite pole of vision and yet reach its goal.

This Scottish poet, looking upon time (and eternity) from the archaic, rock-strewn distance of the Orkneys, has, properly enough, been compared with that poet of vision, William Blake, with whom he has certainly a closer affinity than with that other poet of time-and-timelessness, T. S.

Eliot, because he bears testimony neither to success nor to failure in the classic struggle with "Time, the great antagonist."

It is true that, in his earlier poems at least, during the period when he wrote and published "Variations on a Time Theme," Mr. Muir might well have been charged with a "decorous defeatism." There has, however, been a deepening—a development in vision, if not notably in form—in recent years. While this hardly compares with the later development of two other elder poets, Yeats and Miss Sitwell (with which, however, it has been compared), it nevertheless establishes the author of these "Collected Poems" as a poet to be reckoned with.

As for the exact quality of Mr. Muir's poetry, it can scarcely be extracted by the process of slight quotation. Like the Orkney scene, of which the poet has written in both prose and verse, the reader of these verses "will not come to know much about the place unless he lives there for quite a long time, habituating himself to the rhythm of the life." Nevertheless, here is a sample of that rhythm which may go some way to suggest why those who have been impressed by this poetry (among whom this reviewer now includes himself) incline to believe it will get and keep the attention it deserves:

Unshakeable arise alone
The reverie and the name.
And at each border of the land,
Like monuments a deluge leaves,
Guarding the invisible sheaves
The risen watchers stand.

Poetry Notes

NOSTALGIA AND ACCEPTANCE: The Noonday Press of New York which has since published a rare novel and some philosophical works, made its debut over a year ago with a small book of poems, fine in appearance and fine in content. Cecil Hemley's "*Porphyrus Journey*" (\$2), is a collection of twenty-
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An Old Antagonist

TELFORD TAYLOR

IN "The Return of Germany,"* Norbert Muhlen has written both a valuable and a dangerous book. It is valuable because the author has written what is, for me, the most perceptive and articulate account of of the postwar German Geist that has yet appeared in public print. It is dangerous because the author adopts and repeats meretricious clichés about the American Occupation and the purposes of those who framed its policies. Fortunately, the values outweigh the dangers by a considerable margin.

Mr. Muhlen, the jacket tells us, is a German-born scholar and journalist who has been covering Germany for *The Reader's Digest*, *New Leader*, *Commentary*, and *Commonweal*, and his book was written under a grant from the Foundation for Foreign Affairs, which also subsidized Freda Uteley's "The High Cost of Vengeance." Presumably, English is not his native tongue; nevertheless the writing is graceful, forceful, and often distinguished. The book is well-organized, and the thought sequences are logically tracked.

Of many illuminating passages, the most brilliant are those analyzing the role of democracy in German life and thought. We have recently read in the press about the election to office of the former Storm Troop Leader Schepmann; of the prevalence of former Nazis in the German Foreign Office and the teaching profession; of the ugly eruptions of onetime Wehrmacht generals such as Ramcke and Remer. We rightly regard these things as danger signals, yet no careful observer will use them as a reliable thermometer to check the patient's temperature. We note that Western Germany has a "liberal" Constitution and representative government, that extremist parties have had scant success at the polls, and that the percentage of Germans who exercise their franchise puts the United States to shame. So far so good, but we rightly hesitate to conclude that the mere workings of the governmental machinery prove that Germany has a stable democratic life or an effective democratic government.

Over the years, as Mr. Muhlen puts

it, "the real reason for the failure of democracy in Germany was . . . the fact that the large majority of Germans did not feel responsible for 'their government,' which was above them as a super-personal state." I think he is right. The key word in his diagnosis is *unpolitische*—the "unpolitical" German, the *Privatmann* who wants most "to be left alone in his privacy." And so, "Whatever else the state did was none of their business, if it only left them alone and insured the conditions of their private security and prosperity."

This gulf between citizenry and government lies at the root of many German questions, past and future. "Politics were made by the *Obrigkeiten*, as the authorities are called in German. . . . Like the weather, politics and public life made by the *Obrigkeiten* appeared to non-political minds as ever-changing, unpredictable, eternal sequences of better and worse days." This goes far to explain the answers to a recent and much-publicized questionnaire, which revealed a superficially surprising and truly alarming number of Germans who would "do nothing" to prevent the return of Nazism. It also exposes the chief hazard to the future of democratic German government. "Since the totalitarian order threatens their sacred privacy, the *unpolitische* ma-

jority does not view with favor the return of Nazism. Yet while they dislike totalitarianism, they are, nevertheless, the ground on which the totalitarian minority can grow and strive and rule. The Communists in Russia as well as the Nazis in Germany came to power and ruled on the foundation of a non-political majority."

Here, too, we are enabled to penetrate the riddle of the attitude of the "average German" toward the atrocities of the Nazi era. These were the doings of the *Obrigkeiten*. The atrocities are commonly referred to today by Germans as "excesses"—a term which, as Mr. Muhlen shrewdly points out, "shows that the 'non-political ones' did not gain an insight into the essentially terroristic nature of . . . totalitarianism." For they were not "excesses", they were part of the deliberated scheme of things. And for the Germans as a whole, Mr. Muhlen observes, "collective guilt" is a misnomer. It was their "collective responsibility" in a civic sense which they failed to discharge, and of which they should have been reminded.

OF Western Germany, Mr. Muhlen has written much that has escaped the vision of others. In Eastern Germany, he sees what many others have seen, and his contribution is perhaps less unique. The "Red Reich" is painted in vivid and terrifying hues, with a wealth of apparently valid detail.

It is a nightmarish and joyless world, where reason is a dangerous faculty and the pursuit of truth a heinous crime. "What is so unbearable is that we have to lie all the time—I can't go on lying forever."



"Double Panic"—a British view.

—Punch.

*THE RETURN OF GERMANY. By Norbert Muhlen. Chicago: Henry Regnery Co. 310 pp. \$4.50.