

A Handful of Living Flowers

"Collected Poems," by Edna St. Vincent Millay, edited by Norma Millay (Harper. 738 pp. \$6), brings together most of the lyrics and sonnets of a minor poet who cut a bright swathe in the Twenties. Winfield Townley Scott, whose new narrative poem "The Dark Sister" will be published later this year, is our reviewer.

By Winfield Townley Scott

WHEN we return after many years to poems which excited us in our youth we hope to find the excitement again, as fresh and tingling as when we were seventeen or twenty. Amidst the satisfactions—such as they are—of the presumably profounder judgment of middle age we should not surely list a self-congratulation upon having seemingly outgrown poems which once had us babbling in the streets by night; not surely, not always; for the losses of immaturity are not invariably fortunate. No loss of any kind of happiness can be altogether fortunate.

The greatest poets more than reward our hope. Because they spoke with the deepest concentration their lines shine for us all our lives; and we "find" things in them at, say, forty-seven which meant little or nothing to us at seventeen. As there is more to us, still more to them. It is among the minor poets—God must love them, he made so many of them—that our return is treacherous; certainly, that is, among those who as our elder contemporaries loomed so much larger size than time and death will let them stay. Like every artist, they must wither into truth, and where we remembered a garden we are liable to come upon desert or, at best, a few flowers such as may be found in Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Collected Poems."

The permanent question (which we are probably still too near this poet to answer correctly) is: Which poems? The temporary question (which now, unhappily, involves our youth) is: What happened to all the others?

This stout, handsomely printed volume omits her plays and translations, her lengthy "Conversation at Midnight," many—but alas not all—of her

war poems; it collects her lyrics and sonnets, among them fifteen poems not hitherto brought to book and worth it only as a completion of the record. The lyrics, with a very few tangled-in sonnets, are the bulk of the book. One hundred and seventy-eight sonnets are piled up for the rest of it. This is unwise editing, for the sonnets would have benefited by being left as interludes among the lyrics and not amassed to a long section of repetitious form.

The book begins with the lyrics, and so we can return at once to the actual beginning:

All I could see from where I stood
Was three long mountains and
a wood;
I turned and looked another way,
And saw three islands in a bay. . . .

The lines of "Renascence" are as familiar as though we had thought them up ourselves and so long ago we cannot recall when we didn't have them by heart. And so for most of that poem. Touches of archaism, of "literary" inversion, of childish overstress, may trouble us here and there; even more, a touch of insincerity—for surely this Maine girl talks of God by the book; but on the whole the poem maintains its simplicity, its directness



Edna St. Vincent Millay—"...a poignancy."

and meaningfulness. If with hindsight we find "Renascence" contains the germs that marred or ruined most of the subsequent poems, they are incidental within this poem, which is a triumph still. The insincerities of young poets are not so much abominable as touching, for they are self-deceptions. We must only inquire if the poet can outgrow them or if the poet will be laid waste to weeds.

TWO characteristic lyrics which create a revelatory contrast are "Song of a Second April" and "Rosemary." Both lament in three stanzas a dead or departed lover. The first contains:

There rings a hammering all day,
And shingles lie about the
doors;
In orchards near and far away
The gray wood-pecker taps
and bores;
And men are merry at their
chores,
And children earnest at their
play. . . .

And the characteristics of the second are thus:

Many things be dead and gone
That were brave and gay;
For the sake of these things
I will learn to say,
"An it please you, gentle sirs,"
"Alack!" and "Well-a-day!"

The second is meaningless posturing. The first has the specific eloquence of exact detail—those shingles!—which Miss Millay mastered as well as anybody ever did, and it illustrates, no less, her mastery of the music of verse. The trouble is her mastery is intermittent; riddled, we may suspect, in her prime by utter confusion of poetic standards and toward the last by utter helplessness. The childlike voice of "Renascence" could not continue its nakedness because it wasn't quite genuine; where it might have developed into a whole poetry it flickers only here and there, and the poet has deliberately donned singing robes and has turned grand and false. For one poem as gravely beautiful as "The Return" (her best poem) we must plough through two dozen pitched to the high-school pageantry accents of "Love me no more, now let the god depart. . . ." For one as memorable and controlled as that beginning "I drank at every vine" there are pages

of overburdened plants, birds, snakes, weathers, apostrophized in earnest, in collapse of poetic management, and in vain.

Still, in coming back to a body of poetry and finding it sadly shriveled we need not forget that the point about Edna St. Vincent Millay's work is the eternal point about all poems: most poems are mortal, it is only the other kind that count. Half a dozen of her lyrics and half a dozen of her sonnets seem to retain a poignancy as fresh as ever; in every instance—save "Oh, sleep forever in the Latmian cave," where sonorous grandeur is certainly achieved—these survivors belong to the simple, direct tongue in which she first was heard. I mean those I have already cited, and such a romping lyric as "We were very tired, we were very merry," and such a touching sonnet (her one good poem of her last decade) as "Those hours when happy hours were my estate."

Of course she was talented—but not *differently* talented from the countless contemporaries who tried to write the same sort of thing but who, unlike her, could not manipulate their deri-

vations with such conspicuous aplomb; as also, like her, they could not advance them. Even her delightful vogue as a campus commotion was not unique. It had happened just before with Rupert Brooke, and just before that with Richard Hovey and Bliss Carman; it has happened since.

LET us put aside the famous legend of the bewitching girl who burned the candle at both ends. It had much to do with the glamor that coated these "Collected Poems" when we and they were young. It is no longer relevant; it had faded well before Miss Mallay's death. The real irrelevancy is deeper and is in her verse. It is a bookish verse, drawn from the Romantic tradition (Shakespeare to Keats) in general and variously influenced by Francis Thompson, Gerard Hopkins, A. E. Housman, Elinor Wylie, and Robinson Jeffers. It has amazing facility at times but small intelligence, captivating knacks, but only the similitudes of authority. It was loved at once for the worst of reasons: it had no difficulty. But a poetry lack-

ing difficulty when new after awhile takes on the fatal difficulty of facing the question Why?

Toward the end she thought she looked into a familiar garden from which she was now barred:

I smell the flower, though
vacuum-still the air;
I feel its texture, though
the gate is fast.

It was she who made the gate. But within it and despite it there is a handful of living flowers.

THE POET'S QUEST: Neil Weiss's first book, "Changes of Garments" (Indiana University Press, \$2.75), is in delightful contrast to the intellectualism of much American poetry. Paradoxically his media are the oblique and connotative. Employed out of a bizarre imagination, the effect is one of intense enjoyment by the poet and a kind of celebration of poetry. From "Euterpe's Visit": "A tear fell; then came a woman / in its place who struck a gong / with clenched fist and the rhythm / so bent the room it sang in myself."

The title of the book, taken from a



Marcel Marceau, French pantomimist, captivated New York audiences.



Thomas Dewey helped GOP harmony by enthusiastically okaying Ike-Nixon ticket.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT (or at least vast improvement) seems to be the moral of the short but extremely active career of a firm called Year Inc., whose sole *raison d'être* is the production of text-and-picture histories. In the eight years it has been in business Year Inc. has published pictorial histories of the world, America, religion, and flight. The mainstay of the enterprise, however, has been the creation of a picture record of the year's news. The eighth annual volume, "Year 1956 Edition" just out (\$10), carries the story from September 1955 to August 1956. The first volume, back in 1949, bore many of the earmarks of the work of enthusiastic amateurs, but by keeping diligently at it the editors this year have become thoroughly professional. In a thousand pictures and 75,000 words the story of the twelve months in twenty-six fields (from science to fashion) at home and abroad (from Algiers to Mexico) is skilfully reported. For good measure there are special sections on juvenile delinquency, the international geophysical year, the GOP's hundredth anniversary, and other topics. In the latest issue the pages are smaller but the book is thicker, making a volume that is easier to handle. The photos on this page are examples of the way "Year 1956" illustrates twelve months that are literally only yesterday.



Malenkov had a friendly reception in England where he toured power installations.



Kabaka of Uganda returned from exile in England to wild rejoicing of his people.