

*THE BURNING CACTUS*, by Stephen Spender (Faber and Faber, 7/6).

This first collection of Mr. Spender's short stories is of little interest. The mood common to all five is one of frustration and defeat. The themes are tenuous and are concerned with familiar abnormal types. Mr. Spender endeavours to convey the suffering which this civilization may cause these types, but he does not succeed because the characters fail to emerge, let alone convince, nor does he create an adequate impression of their surroundings.

The themes, the characters and their reactions are blurred or almost obliterated by the emotionalism which is the predominant feature of the book, obtruding itself to such an extent as very soon to disperse any interest the reader may have formed. In all the stories continual striving after effect and conscious heightening of sensibility appear as mere exaggeration on the physical plane, and as spuriousness on the emotional plane. This makes the co-operation of the reader of short duration, he is repulsed either in irritation or amusement.

The following quotation from the first and longest story entitled 'The Dead Island,' is a characteristic example. During an evening walk a woman hears two nightingales singing, their songs are likened to 'white satin streamers against the corkscrewing cypresses,' then:

'She seemed to lose herself in the ecstasy of sound, and then, from the darkness, her own identity drifted back to her: she was eclipsed by the physical consciousness of her naked self: her black hair, her wide too-ponderous hips, her thick thighs tapering with relief of the knees to the small feet, her small hands, which were her only really ugly feature; now all the defects seemed part of the richness of her whole being, they paid tribute to her delicate ears, the fine nape of her neck, her firm breasts. While the birds were still singing, she pressed both her hands to her neck, and, feeling the silky fall of her hair in the darkness, seemed fulfilled. This experience satisfied her more than her three marriages: she counted her losses, and one which she now accepted was that, spiritually, she had never ceased to be a virgin.'

To comment on this passage is tempting but unnecessary, it speaks clearly for itself, all too clearly.

Mr. Spender has not yet obtained control of his prose, it is weak and undistinguished, and this fact is not hidden by the false glitter of the many startling and curious metaphors with which it is heavily decorated. He has a lively imagination in this respect and will no doubt receive full measure of praise for the poetic thought his metaphors suggest but do not in fact contain. They are not an integral part of the thought or emotion but are applied ornament and, therefore, do not deepen or enlarge the first statement, they only repeat it in a louder and frequently jarring voice.

‘ After the first flat common words had been laid down like a table-cloth between them . . . ’

‘ She noticed that the hair of his beard was reddish ; his dark brown eyes, shot with the red blood smeared across their whites, were threatening like the light of street lamp discs struggling redly through yellow fog.’

Similar examples are found on practically every page.

Mr. Spender has the merit of having experimented with the short story, but he has many difficulties to overcome before he can achieve artistic success: the most important step being to learn to subdue his cleverness by imagination.

E. S. HUELIN.

*AN ENGLISH TECHNIQUE*, by Roy Meldrum (Macmillan, 6/-).

In so many books about education and teaching, one feels a curious abstraction, vagueness, remoteness. The arguments may be plausible ; the ideals, of course, are always most uplifting ; but still, the subject remains dim and foggy. There are a good many reasons for this: we don't know how the mind works ; we have no technique for education ; we haven't decided what sort of beings we want to produce, though we often pretend all these things. We feel, perhaps, that because we are schoolmasters, we are inferior beings, of no real standing in the commonwealth,