A CROP OF SPRING VERSE

By Herbert S. Gorman

GROWTH in poetry might be called three dimensional. That is, most development takes one of three courses which may be defined as height, breadth, and depth. In the case of Edwin Arlington Robinson's "The Man Who Died Twice", it is comparatively easy for a follower of his work to note the considerable development in breadth here. This narrative poem, the story of a composer who wastes his days in dissipation but who is eventually saved from spiritual destruction when the great symphony he was born to write floods his mind (though he is too weakened ever to put it down in notes), has more implications than appear in a casual reading. In the first place, it is technically constructed in actual symphony form. Secondarily, there are macabre touches in it that not even "Avon's Harvest", with its eery overtones, ever suggested. And thirdly, as the pastor saith, the unfolding of the analytic theme clutches the mind of the reader so that a painful intensity is produced. Here is undoubtedly the best of Mr. Robinson's narratives of modern life, a more inspired revelation than "Roman Bartholow" and a subject more pregnant with objective color. Take, for instance, the rat orchestra that appears in Fernando Nash's delirium shortly before the symphony comes down out of heaven to him:

. . . . . the coming through the keyhole
Of a slow rat, equipped in evening dress,
Gold eye-glasses, and a conductor's wand,
Soon followed by a brisk and long procession
Of other rats, till more than seventy of them,
All dressed in black and white, and each of them
Accoutred with his chosen instrument,
Were ranged in order on the footworn carpet
That lay between Fernando and the door.
Having no chairs, they stood erect and ready,
And having made obeisance to the master
Upon the wall, who signified his pleasure,
And likewise to the man upon the bed,
They played with unforseen solemnity
The first chords of the first rat symphony
That human ears had heard.

If Mr. Robinson continues to grow in certain ways, so much can hardly be said for Arthur Davison Ficke. "Out of Silence" is a volume compact with that grace and celerity of adaptation to various moods manifest in previous books by this poet; but there is no lift to greater heights, no increasing breadth, nor any particular depth. Mr. Ficke's work continues to be surface work, a matter of musical lyrics, a quite definitive excellence in the sonnet form (although there is nothing here so good as "The Sonnets of a Portrait Painter"), and the usual Chinese influences. His candor is suspect. The reader has the uneasy suspicion that most of this matter is too conscious and so weakened by a brittleness that no technique may remedy.

Joseph Auslander is in the same predicament, but "Sunrise Trumpets" is a first book and he may hardly be judged as yet. If any one trait is predominant in Mr. Auslander's book, it is ecstasy; because this is so his growth may be prophesied as one of height. There is a Shelleyan ardor in him, and his astonishing use of color and striking image is an excellent adjunct to this passion. The varicolored world flows through him and reveals itself in his poetry to such an extent that the reader fairly feels the water flowing, hears the birds singing, sees the barbaric vision of bright hills. Here is atmospheric poetry of a high order, and if one is troubled at times by a suggested consciousness, an emphasis a little too emphatic, it may, perhaps, be laid at the door of a passionate urge that will express itself through any subterfuge. A poet who can handle images so beautifully as this deserves watching:

INTERVAL

Water pulls nervously whispering satin
across cool roots, cold stones;
And a bird balances his soul on a song
flash, a desperate outcry:
These are the minor chords, the monotones;
This is the undefeated gesture against an
armored sky.

The moment is metal; the sun crawling over
it a fly
Head down on a bronze ceiling; the hot
stillness drones:
And you go sliding through green sea shafts
and I
Am an old mountain warming his tired
bones.

Just what William Alexander Percy will eventually contribute to American poetry is an unforseen quantity, for "Enzio's Kingdom", like his two previous books, appears to be a matter of accidents. He is indubitably surcharged with poetry which pours out of him, but the receptacles wherein he catches the divine substance are only too often broken pitchers. His sense of form is crude and he overwrites, yet in spite of these failings there is always apparent that constant touch that is authentic and that constrains the reader to pray fervently for the time, the place, and the technique all together. When Mr. Percy does hit upon those moments (and there is no reason why he shouldn't) he is apt to produce more distinguished matter

than many a more finished poet. As it is, his book is filled with excellent lines, thoughts, stanzas, enough to render a complete reading of it a delight even though that delight be tempered at times. He is essentially a lyricist: the shorter pieces in "Enzio's Kingdom" are more memorable than such extended efforts as "A Letter from John Keats to Fanny Brawne" and "Enzio's Kingdom".

In "The Enchanted Mesa" by Glenn Ward Dresbach and "The Skyline Trail" by Mary Carolyn Davies the reader is face to face with two volumes of western verse. Mr. Dresbach runs to splashing colors and Miss Davies expresses herself in musical metres. Neither book is particularly distinguished as poetry; this being so, it is hardly apropos to search for height, breadth, or depth. Of the two, I should say that Mr. Dresbach is more the poet, that his sensitivity to his surroundings impels more natural reactions, and that he has his moments (they are not big moments) when the bright intangible mantle falls upon him. Miss Davies is more obvious. She can grow topical and newspapery in such stanzas as:

Ride 'er, Cowboy! Let 'er buck!
Keep your reins and trust to luck!
Keep your seat and keep your nerve!
Let 'er rear and kick and swerve!
Though the fight may jar and shake you,
Break your hoss, don't let it break you!

The advice here is good but the poetry is questionable. Mr. Dresbach is less muscular in his poetry and more attentive to the suggestiveness of color and stillness and the mystery of western lands. He is not so much the observer (as Miss Davies nearly always is) as the active participant. In other words, he plunges into the rich color of his beloved west, Texas and Arizona and New Mexico, while Miss Davies is more objective in her delineation of Oregon. Of course, she writes of a colder clime, and this may have something to do with it.

The Man Who Died Twice. By Edwin Arlington Robinson. The Macmillan Co.

Out of Silence, and Other Poems. By Arthur Davison Ficke. Alfred A. Knopf.

Sunrise Trumpets. By Joseph Auslander. Harper and Bros.

Enzio's Kingdom, and Other Poems. By William Alexander Percy. Yale University Press.

The Enchanted Mesa, and Other Poems. By Glenn Ward Dresbach. Henry Holt and Co.

The Skyline Trail. By Mary Carolyn Davies. The Bobbs-Merrill Co.