

Repeat Performance

By HARVEY BREIT

WHATEVER the problems of the reprint houses and reprint subsidiaries of the trade publishers, and whatever the villainies they perpetrate and perpetuate (the counterfeit), it has become increasingly apparent that at one end of the spectrum they have been doing an excellent job. Merely allow your reprint shelf to go neglected for a couple of months and you are confronted—after you have gingerly removed the dross—with an embarrassment of riches. What it means, quite simply, is that good books are getting reprinted and all one needs in order to possess them is resoluteness before the twin sirens of Trash and Trivia.

Out of what promises to be, I believe, a distinguished roll-call, I would single out first **A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS**, by George Orwell (Anchor, 95 cents). I doubt that any contemporary writer managed so beautifully an objective tone and attitude while so subjectively engaged. I have opened the book to one of the less familiar essays in the collection; it is called "England Your England," and this is the first sentence: "As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me." Or the opening sentence of "Shooting an Elephant": "In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people—the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me." One cannot say enough about the honesty, the independence, the intelligence, the clean writing that is to be met with here, on every page, in every paragraph of these fourteen essays.

AMONG other new Anchor entries are two books in one, **FEAR AND TREMBLING** and **THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH** by Soren Kierkegaard (85 cents). S. K. has been a significant influence on contemporary thought and it is sound publishing that he should be made available in an inexpensive reprint. I am aware of the dramatic center in his thinking, the theatricality that is apparent even in his most abstract passages, that is, the sense in the system that a momentous disclosure is on its way, or almost on its way. It is both genuine and a deception, I think—though I can never be sure. Logic, the passage from one point to another, is both dramatic and revelatory; 2 and 2 make 4, 4 and 4 make 8, is dramatic and revelatory, but it can also be deceitful and absurd. For example: "The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but that the relation relates itself to its own self." We cannot say with conviction that such Kierkegaard formula is Olympian gobbledegook or anachronistic Stein, but we are sure this



Detail from Persian decoration. Late 13th century.

is not the sort of thing Blake had in mind when he wrote, "One thought fills immensity."

We know Nietzsche strained at thought quite a bit too, but he never fell into the grip of the System and never stopped trying to be concrete. **THE PORTABLE NIETZSCHE** (Viking, \$2.50), edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann, is an extraordinary buy, containing four complete works and selections from a dozen other books, as well as notes and letters. We urge a reading of this Portable if for no other reason than to remedy the vague notions we have of the superman thing. For example: "Hatred of mediocrity is unworthy of a philosopher: it is almost a question mark against his right to philosophy. Just because he is the exception, he must protect the rule, and he must encourage self-confidence in all the mediocre."

Enough of philosophy. There is some first-class poetry about and one of the first is 1 X 1, by e. e. cummings (Harcourt, Brace, \$2.75). A slim volume, it came out ten years ago, and it holds some of Cummings' wittiest and wonderful excursions. Cummings has written, "there's nothing as something as one," and that goes at least double for one times one.

THERE is a fantastic amount of good poetry in **THE POCKET BOOK OF MODERN VERSE**, edited by Oscar Williams (Pocket Books, 50 cents). Williams has selected the best poetry (as he thinks it) in the English language, from Whitman to Dylan Thomas, and includes Melville as well as Coventry Patmore, Hardy and Joyce, the two Cranes (Stephen and Hart), lots of unanthologized Wallace Stevens, and all in all is an old-fashioned bang-up collection.

Turning over the poems of Hafiz in **PERSIAN POEMS**, an anthology edited by A. J. Arberry (Everyman, \$1.65), and seeking in vain for my favorite Hafiz poem, I nevertheless came on the following lovely line: "Earrings suit better thy small ears than reason," and it struck

me that if one were to change the "thy" to "your" and transpose "better," it could have been Auden in "The Tempest" vein. The anthology begins with "Omar Khayyam" and ends with the epic poet Firdausi. Most of it is pretty archaic-sounding, but some of it is a lot of fun.

THE title **GREAT STORIES OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT** (Garden City, \$2.50) doesn't sound fresh enough or different enough. What one must respect about this collection, however, is the fact that it is edited by a man who has been dedicated to publishing stories of quality most of his adult life and has always been fighting to nourish writers and bring their best work into public life. I am speaking about Whit Burnett, and he has not failed us in this particular labor. Mr. Burnett has broken his anthology down into eight sections and you couldn't ask for a better gang: the editor has made room for Peretz and Kafka, Hemingway and Rilke, Exupery and Huxley, along with others who are amiable surprises. Do not be taken in by the title; in spite of it, you will find first-class reading.

I would suggest that before looking into a fine book that has just come along—it is **THE JOURNALS OF ARNOLD BENNETT**, edited by Frank Swinnerton (Penguin, 85 cents)—that one get hold of a sketch of Bennett by Osbert Sitwell. It is one of the best and full and subtle portraits I know. I think after that one can read the Journals with a feeling of fun and friendship. You would then be able to put in proper focus such a remark as "Shannon, in chair, très élégant." But Bennett gives you decent remarks of this sort too: "Tonight I finished 'Le Rouge et le Noir' for the second time. Nothing to beat it for solid truth anywhere, and nothing outside Russia to beat it as a special novel in the grand manner." It may be taking the long way home. Mr. Bennett is a man who liked the solid truth and was made of solid stuff.