

# A Narrative Poem and Some Lyrics

**A WEST WIND RISES.** By Bruce Cutler. Illustrated by David E. Bernard. 105 pp. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. Cloth, \$3; Paper, \$1.60.

**CAIN AND OTHER POEMS.** By Walter Kaufmann. 190 pp. New York: Doubleday & Co. \$3.95.

**THE QUIET WARS.** By Samuel Hazo. 95 pp. New York: Sheed & Ward. Paper, 95 cents.

By WINFIELD TOWNLEY SCOTT

**B**RUCE CUTLER'S "A West Wind Rises" is a narrative poem of the famous massacre in Kansas, 1858, of some Free Staters by a gang of slave owners and their sympathizers. As material, the story is good tragic Americana. However, such prosaic mayhem as Mr. Cutler performs in the name of blank verse just won't do. Here is a sample of Mr. Cutler's style; I open at random:

*But there had been a day  
five years before  
when Eli Snyder sat in the  
Trading Shack  
and malletted his words at a  
New York  
journalist, swearing in even-  
handed  
strokes to kill Charles  
Hamilton forthwith*

And so on, throughout.

The long poem in general and the narrative poem in particular are much on the defensive these days. There are many critics quick to maintain that such poems should no longer be done. I disagree, for I distrust any proscription seeking to limit any of the arts. But to justify in story-telling the use of verse instead of prose there must be necessities far beyond chopper-up (bad) prose.

By its nature, a long poem cannot—probably should not—

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sustain everywhere a high poetic energy; it is allowed to slacken, to fall and rise. Yet it must at least do this: it must, like any kind of poetry, say more than the words say; there must be overtones and emotional depths; there must be a peculiar, unmistakable style. To put it simply: if you so much as glance at the narratives of E. A. Robinson and Robinson Jeffers, or at such long poems, also of our time, as Pound's "Cantos" and Williams' "Pater-son," you know at once who wrote the page.

This is what is indispensable to genuine poetry—the peculiar ear, or what I like to call the stain of personality. A poet's difference is the essential point. Without it we get merely verse, amateurish as in Mr. Cutler's case, or accomplished, as in Walter Kaufmann's collection, "Cain." Mr. Kaufmann, a distinguished translator of Goethe's "Faust," in his own poems ranges from trivial observations of weather to deeply intended Biblical portraits. We get maxims and moralizings and

sometimes rhetoric, usually metered out correctly; but the fundamental lack is fatal, and for all the evident intelligence, can admit such matter as this (about the Cross):

*... a shadow lined  
with edges of scarlet that  
spread like diseases,  
infecting the heathens'  
barbarian mind.  
The graves were opened—  
for the people of Jesus.*

There is some versifying, too, in Samuel Hazo's "The Quiet Wars," but there are also signs of a particular poet developing. He tends to write of circuses, sideshows, city streets, of autobiographical things. An uneven book, but his best poems are fresh. They have a nervous immediacy, a significant descriptive skill, new juxtapositions of words. To illustrate him fairly I should have to quote more than space allows; instead I shall make a simple-minded statement: his poems are more impressive as you reread them. A simple test indeed, but I don't know of a better one.



Samuel Hazo.



Walter Kaufmann.

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