

There's Poetry in a Ragged-Hitch-Hiker: IT CATCHES MY HEART IN ITS ...

By KENNETH REXROTH

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IT CATCHES MY HEART IN ITS HANDS. By Charles Bukowski. 97 pp. New Orleans: Loujon Press. \$5.

RYOANJI. By Tim Reynolds. 58 pp. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World. \$3.95.

THE AFRICAN BOY. By E. N. Sargent. 77 pp. New York: The Macmillan Company. \$4.95.

SEQUENCE, SOMETIMES METAPHYSICAL. By Theodore Roethke. Illustrated by John Roy. 12 pp. of text and 12 wood engravings. Iowa City: Stone Wall Press. \$15.

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CHARLES BUKOWSKI suffers from too good a press—a small but loudly enthusiastic clique. Down in New Orleans, where they publish a magazine called *The Outsider*, the local advance guard seems to consider him the greatest thing since Homer. He is not. However, if you put aside his volunteer public-relations experts, he turns out to be a substantial writer.

I suppose the academicians would call him the most recent representative of naturalism and anti-literary revolt. His friends are always comparing him to Hemingway. This is not a fitting comparison. Hemingway, with all his virtues, was a literary figure and socially part of the élite of celebrities. Bukowski might well be the outsider for whom the magazine is named. He is certainly far less with it—it being the

established rat race—than Colin Wilson who invented the current use of the term “outsider” and who was immediately co-opted into the Establishment.

No Establishment is likely ever to recruit Bukowski. He belongs in the small company of poets of real, not literary, alienation, that includes Herman Spector, Kenneth Fearing, Kenneth Patchen and a large number of Bohemian fugitives unknown to fame. His special virtue is that he is so much less sentimental than most of his colleagues.

Yet there is nothing outrageous about his poetry. It is simple, casual, honest, uncooked. He writes about what he knows—rerolling cigarette butts, cashing in the neighbor's milk bottles to get two-bits for the morning visit to the book-maker, the horse that came in and the hundred-dollar call girl that came in with it, the ragged hitch-hiker on the road to nowhere, the poignant, natural real scene around him where the last ride set him down.

Bukowski is what he is, and he is not likely to be found applying for a job with the picture magazines as an Image of Revolt. Unlike the Beats, he will never become an allowed clown; he is too old now, and too wise, and too quiet. More power to him.

It is curious that Tim Reynolds, whose life, to judge by his poems, resembles Bukowski's not at all, should yet strive for the same disengage-

ment, for that special accent of truculence the French have taken to calling *ressentiment*, narrowing the meaning of the word in critical trade jargon to mean “like Céline.” Does Reynolds seek it or does it just seep through his artful complexities?

What is wrong shows up most clearly in the translations and imitations of Sappho, Plato, Meleager, Ronsard, Horace and the Japanese. There is just too much contrivance. So many elaborately tied knots destroy conviction. This is rhetoric that shields reader and writer from all decisive impacts, all final realization.

WHEN you finish the book, you feel that there were poems there, but so swaddled in anti-poems that you never found them. It is not that Reynolds is very literary, though he is. The excessively literary can have its own pity and terror and immediacy. It's that literature is used to dodge the issue—while Bukowski, on the other hand, never heard that the issue was something you were supposed to dodge.

E. N. Sargent's “The African Boy” is one of the most successful manifestations of *négritude* to appear so far in American writing. In fact, it sounds like a translation from the French of Sedar Senghor, Diop, Césaire, Nigér, or some other African poet committed to the restoration of native idiom and tradition. It is certainly the equal of most contemporary

African verse in technical mastery and convincing air. Presumably, most of the material comes from anthropological reading rather than experience, yet the reader never doubts the reality of the poems.

One can realize just how hard a job it is to make this material widely believable by comparing the long and dubious history of the anthropological ballet. Even when it comes from Guinea, much less when it originates in New York, it never manages to be plausible. “The African Boy” which, in fact, is about what it means to be a tribal African girl, is more than plausible; it is so convincing that it is startling.

I have no wish to review Ted Roethke's book in the common sense, but to praise it. He was my friend, and his early death was an especially serious loss to literature because he was still in middle life, growing as a poet, growing in joy, insight and nonchalance—he was becoming always a wiser man. We have little enough writing now that is joyful and wise, but these posthumous poems are and in full measure. They are graceful poems, too; their skillful workmanship is hidden; they seem so easy, the bright, casual utterance of a knowing man. The publishers and the illustrator have conspired to make a handsome memorial to Roethke—when I think of Ted and look at the book on my shelves, I will feel only pleasure. And that certainly is what a memorial should do.

Mr. Rexroth is a poet, translator and critic. His books include "In Defense of the Earth" and "Bird in the Bush."