

basts "large gas-balloon phrases like 'the century's despair'" (p. 202). His pet hatreds include the false culture-vultures on the governmental committees who in one year spent \$14 million on the Sydney Opera House but only \$10,000 on feeding hungry poets like himself. In particular he is offended by "people who don't know what Poetry is" and "people who don't like poetry." On this subject he pontificates, "Both disabilities are common, of course, and nowhere more so than in the universities" (p. 196). For universities are not for Mr. Murray venerable bastions of light and truth, but the privileged palaces of parasitic urban mandarins (read professors of literature) who run their humanities departments like anaemic draculas sucking the lifeblood out of the living word and perverting the young with pompous jargon. Inspired by a fine Celtic rage and a not unreasonable grievance at the grossly disparate income earned by poets and scholars of literature, Mr. Murray fires his outrageous slings and arrows at universities because "they demand more self-consciousness and justificatory self-theorizing than may be healthy for any artist, but also because many of them shelter Marxist cadres" (p. 34). And so Mr. Murray fights the good fight of the pastoral, poetic wombats who are closer to nature, to life, and to spirit against the academic fat-cats who are corrupted by their specious intellectuality and their materialistic wealth. Thus he says: "Poetry has frequently been a courtier art, but no despot of the past ever made us perform contortions half as severe as those demanded by the kings of our new academic cities-of-refuge" (p. 197).

But I perceive that I am doing Mr. Murray the injustice of presenting him as "a Bohemian, a licensed buffoon, a disruptive element expected by Platonists of all persuasions to threaten the public order, usually pretty harmlessly, and to generate new styles of behaviour and adornment" (p. 182). This is according to Mr. Murray an Athenian image of the artist on which he frowns. To this urban, intellectual satirist, Mr. Murray opposes the rural Boeotian poetic "craftsman with some remnant of priestly dignity" (p. 182). I think it would be a fair judgement to say that Mr. Murray is an Athenian when he writes prose and a Boeotian when he writes poetry. The prose pieces collected in this volume *The Peasant Mandarin* are composed of an astonishing variety of reviews written in his capacity as "Sydney Morning Herald Queer Books

Man" (p. viii) and some longer essays for Australian intellectual journals on such radical themes as the ethical right of contemporary Australian poets to public financial support, and the failure of Australia to proclaim itself a republic. The excellent features of Mr. Murray's book-reviews are that he has the talent to approach the most arcane of subjects with contagious cultural enthusiasm and that without forcing the issue he is able to perceive problems from diverse cultures in challenging contemporary contexts. Writing on modern Indonesian poetry in translation or Egyptian drama of religious ritual dating from 1200 B.C., on Ezra Pound, PSI, or the whiskies of Scotland, Les Murray unites his diverse themes into a *Weltanschauung* that constitutes a cogent revolt against the arrogance and greed of techno-industrial society and a crusade for a spiritual renaissance to be found in poetic and religious sensibility, especially when this sensibility is stimulated by Scotch whisky.

David A. Myers

DELMORE SCHWARTZ

In Dreams Begin Responsibilities and Other Stories

Ed. James Atlas

New York: New Directions, 1978.

Pp. 202. \$10.95.

In the "Foreword" of *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*, Irving Howe credits Schwartz with providing "both voice and metaphor for our own Jewish-American clausal-but intense experience" (p. ix). James Atlas, editor of the collection, suggests that Schwartz was "the great commentator" on the Jewish immigrant experience: "His family's claustrophobic milieu, constricted by longing for assimilation in conflict with an ineradicable sense of estrangement from the dominant values of American life, has never been written about with such imaginative force" (pp. xix-xx).

These and similar judgments suggest the principle of selection underlying *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*. With the exception of

"The Track Meet," the stories Atlas has chosen illustrate Schwartz's achievement as voice and interpreter of the fate of Jewish immigrants and their children in the New World. Unfortunately, Schwartz's understanding of that fate is not clearly indicated by Atlas, who restricts himself to an appreciation of the author's close observation and skillful representation.

The lives of the immigrants were determined essentially, according to Schwartz, by the "deity America"—by the false, inevitably destructive hope of escape from the entanglements, frustrations, and failures of the past; by the presumption that happiness is a right and tremendous success not far away. Schwartz saw the immigrants blindly embracing the bitch-goddess Success—the vulgarized American Dream—and begetting endless miseries. There is no escape from the past, Schwartz declares time and again. The reality of American life is exile—deracination and alienation.

At least two stories in the collection are masterpieces. "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" is primarily a complex demonstration of the immortality of the past. The narrator of this story dreams that he is in a theater viewing his parents' excursion to Coney Island on the day of his father's marriage proposal. He is increasingly distressed and at last loudly protests, "Don't do it! It's not too late to change your mind, both of you. Nothing good will come of it, only remorse, hatred, scandal, and two children whose characters are monstrous" (p. 6). "The narrator's outcry," Howe suggests, "is not so much a protest against mistakes as a protest against life itself, inconceivable without mistakes" (pp. viii-ix). It may be argued that the narrator protests against neither "mistakes" nor "life itself," but rather, against frightful irresponsibility. His parents' marriage is contracted not in Heaven, but in Coney Island—the fantastic amusement park of the American Dream.

In "The Track Meet," Schwartz employs again the device of the dream and an "escape" setting (a sporting event). His principal aim is to illustrate the crisis of modern Western man, who, having lost the governance of traditional institutions, is condemned to a chaotic and devastating "scrimmage of appetite" or to anguished, futile protest. The history of modern man, in Schwartz's view, is the history of his fall from the biblical order into a hell of egoistic

ambition. God and his hosts of ideals have been deposed; the new reigning deity is "Mother," whose throne is the id, whose wisdom is science and cynicism, and whose will is success—at whatever cost.

Schwartz was a child of fantastic expectations, an American dreamer who, like many of his characters, came in the end to desolation: No matter how one judges his vision of the modern condition, one must respect the courage and intelligence with which he struggled to understand the modern ethos of egoistic ambition.

Theodore Hall

KATE STIMPSON

Class Notes

N.Y.: Times Books, 1979. Pp. 225.
\$8.95.

Kate Stimpson, literary critic, feminist scholar, teacher, and editor, has written a witty first novel about growing up in Washington state in the 1950's. *Class Notes* carefully narrates the adventures of Harriet Springer, the convincingly vulnerable innocent, would-be intellectual, middle-class daughter of Big George and Eleanor. Harriet, sensitive but inept, goes through a series of cruel rites of passage—home, school, and life in New York. The incidents of rejection, embarrassment, and insult, are often sharply drawn in brief dialogues and scenes. Harriet acts and is acted upon swiftly, in situations from the age of sweaters, pleated skirts, saddle shoes, and preoccupation with marriage.

Class Notes, although it centers on Harriet's lesbianism, is not a novel of erotic sexual exploration, like the work of Rita Mae Brown, nor is it Utopian, like the work of Marge Piercy. Instead, it's about America and American cultural attitudes, a book about who we are and where we are. Harriet's particular experiences, as a large "handsome" girl who admired Elizabeth Taylor, are redolent of the experiences of an entire generation of women who encountered stereotypes that limited and bewildered them.