

Verona, Under the Still Lamplight

A MAP OF VERONA And Other Poems. By Henry Reed. 92 pp. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock. \$2.50.

By HARVEY BREIT

IT is a pleasure indeed to pick up a book of contemporary verse and to recognize instantly its excellence. For verse today has its difficulties. Some of the best of our modern poets are "difficult": Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, W. H. Auden are examples. At the same time that the reader of poetry recognizes the necessity from which these difficulties arise, he nevertheless relishes the simplicity of the older Yeats and the middle-aged Eliot. He is aware, too, that these "simplicities" are not based on simple-mindedness; he recognizes them as products of complex minds, won and wrought from complex experience.

Thoughts along these lines are bound to take shape for most readers who look into Henry Reed's first book of verse, "A Map of Verona." The reader will be immediately struck by the directness and clarity of this English newcomer's verses at the same time that he will experience them as emotionally and intellectually adequate to his sense of the complex scene and times.

*But I remember, once your map lay open,
As now Verona's, under the still lamplight.*

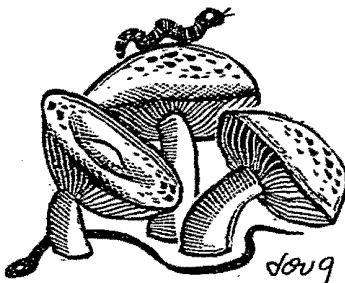
*I thought, are these the streets
to walk in in the mornings,
Are these the gardens to linger in at night?*

*And all was useless that I
thought I learned.*

*Maps are of place, not time,
nor can they say
The surprising height and color
of a building.
Nor where the groups of people
bar the way.*

It is with these verses, part of the title poem, that Mr. Reed opens his book. And the reader may gather from them an emphasis—or, rather, a de-emphasis—that has been gaining momentum among our poets. There is no rhetoric in the lines, nor embellishment of them. The demagogic, extra-appeal to the senses is shunned. There is even an unwillingness to be clever, and, in an obvious sense, no "invitation to the dance."

AS a matter of fact, there isn't any dance; and the invitation,



subtle and spare and severe, is to the reader to take up residence, as it were, within the poem itself—in its bare structure and hummed music, in its certain vision of uncertainty and its ironic familiarity with novel events.

The de-emphasis consists in the deliberate muting of the instru-

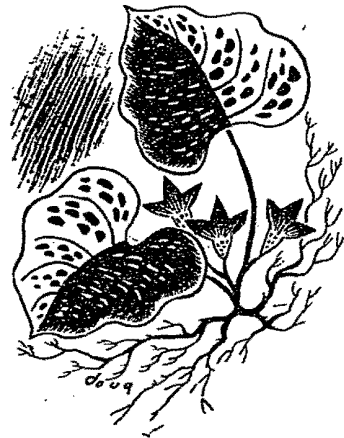
ments of song—because the instruments that sang too well are of another time and another chaos—in an effort to create a machine of language that is new, and truer, and of our own conjunctures.

*Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But today,
Today we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glitters like coral in all of the neighboring gardens,
And today we have naming of parts.*

are lines from "Lessons of the War," Part I ("Naming of Parts"), in which the poet ironically states the experience; as he does in Part II ("Judging Distances"), but in which he concludes by ironically reinstating the novel experience into a familiar context:

*There may be dead ground in between; and I may not have got
The knack of judging a distance; I will only venture
A guess that perhaps between me and the apparent lovers,
(Who, incidentally, appear by now to have finished),
At seven o'clock from the houses, is roughly a distance
Of about one year and a half.*

There is something to be said for the deficiencies in the verses: they are not robust (though the flatness and tiredness are deceptive); they take on life, but it is



often tentative; the poems are somber, and the sense of continuous and inevitable improvisation, the impact of fertility are absent.

BUT there is more to be said about Mr. Reed's verse on the other side: how right its long line strikes us—a line that rises and falls as naturally as the surf's rhythms, and as punctuated with surprises (if one listens carefully); how unostentatious are its images that telescope cleanly a complex of experience; how scrupulous is its language; and how direct is the whole experience of the poem that cancels out what too often exists falsely in a poem: the container (the form) and the thing contained (the content).

But, still, even these virtues are not so important as the quiet effort of the poet to be honest within the poem and to make of it an efficient and moving articulation of experience.