

Books

Hank Malone

1967

a review of

Where Is Vietnam? a Collection of Poems—an Anthology of new work by 87 Poets, edited by Walter Lowenfels, NYC., Doubleday and Co., 160 pages, \$1.25.

A friend of mine once said that the only good reasons for reviewing a book were (1) to sell the book, or (2) to publicly kick the author in the ass. In this case I hardly know where to begin.

I like good poetry, and don't much care in the long run, what "school" it comes from. There are fine "academic poems"—like Henry Reed's "The Naming of Parts." And there are fine, let us call them "non-academic poems" like Allen Ginsberg's "America."

In short, I make distinctions, not between current styles of poem-but between what I regard as good and bad poems, a chronic habit of mine that I notice is recently out of fashion. The spiritual "teeny-boppers" (who range in age up through 40) can frequently tell the difference at a sniff between had Syndicate grass and Zacapotec #10, but generally do not care to tell a good poem from a Reader's Digest article on hernia operations.

After reading the poems here I am convinced that the publishers and editor (and to some extent the poets) had something rid quite apart from compiling a collection of good so-called "anti-war poems." I suspect, as the Cinephile said in a recent number of the *Fifth Estate*, that someone is out to "make his boodle off culture." In this case the "culture" consists of those young people and elder-liberals who are against the war in Vietnam, and have little other means of making their protest known except to gather in angry and frustrated troops, or by purchasing each and every book of various sorts which verbally abominates the war effort. Poetry is damned difficult to sell. In one sense, since most everyone writes it (badly) these days, it is (or a reasonable facsimile thereof) as common as dirt.

Nobody buys dirt. And we have come to regard poetry, for various reasons, as one of our least significant kinds of public self-expression, preferring late-night TV and Uncle Russ' light shows.

Good poetry is as hard to find nowadays as a sabre-tooth tiger. If you're going to "sell" poetry you've got to have some sort of a gimmick—you've got to market it on the basis of a probable audience picking it up because of a famous reputation, or on the explicit guarantee of some sort of psychedelic or pornographic revelation hidden between the lines.

Walter Lowenfels (the editor of *Where Is Vietnam?*), who the old folks will recognize as the Carl Sandburg of the Trotskyists, has returned like Dracula to hard-peddle his honestly-felt but hopelessly inappropriate 1930-ish vision of the Common Man. But now he has the cover of his very Establishmentarian paperback, trying to cop everybody's mind with huge red and purple names emblazoned across the cover "Dickey (who I think endorses the war effort), Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, Kunitz, Levertov, Lowell." Wow, if that doesn't get everybody into the buying act then I don't know what will. Talk about your cultural hidden persuasion!

Despite the fact that some of the poems are quite good (and frequently have nothing to do with the war in Vietnam) the collection as a whole is an editorial disaster reflecting the imaginative and political limitations of its cre-

ator. The best poems are few in number—poems by Khat Hanh, Olga Cabral, Serge Gavronsky, George Hitchcock, Gallway Kinnell, Dennis Knight, Stanley Kunitz, Thomas Merton, Saint Geraud (the same as in the pornographic novel?), and a few others.

Poetry should not lie. There's no money in it, so one can afford to be absolutely honest. This collection is, however, miserably castrated and generally dishonest—its vision is truncated by a heavy-handed moral vision of modern war and modern life. From reading these poems one would never suspect that most of these poets were contemporaries of Konrad Lorenz or Werner Heizenberg or any of us. Their response to the twentieth century seems incredibly naive—at best a simplistic fire-and-brimstone rhetorical morality superimposed upon a political, economic, and social reality that is incredibly complex.

The book is knee-deep in polemical bullshit, and when poets lie that is important. These 'unacknowledged legislators' have generally failed in their nerve—their narcissistic anti-war whoops shed little or no light on the intense meanings of this Great Napalm Happening.

In the long run these poets emerge as a pack of "white liberals" howling at the moon, making a fast poetic buck at the expense of their integrity, weeping huge crocodile tears over the dead children of Vietnam.

In lacking the vision that recognizes that men and women inhabit a myriad of disparate universes at the same time, I hereby accuse most of them of murder. As Goya said, "El sueño de la razón producera monstruos."

It also makes for bad poetry—a weeping without wisdom.

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