

1937

Smoke Talk

University of New Mexico Press

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Recommended Citation

University of New Mexico Press. "Smoke Talk." *New Mexico Quarterly* 7, 4 (1937). <http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol7/iss4/16>

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Smoke Talk

459 Poets—And a Preface

By OMAR BARKER

FROM THE press of Henry Harrison, New York, there comes now an anthology under the title: "Contemporary American Men Poets"—459 of them! That number somehow reminds me of a little political *junta* at Tecolotenos when the late Senator Cutting was a candidate for the Senate. An earnest native orator declaiming against the Senator because of his great wealth, said, in Spanish: "How will he represent the poor, this son of the rich, who counts his wealth at *forty thousand million dollars?*" No one even so much as batted an eye at this fabulous figure—no one, that is, except little old grizzled, gooseberry-nosed Alejandro Fresquez, a former school teacher. With a quiet twinkle in his eye, Alejandro leaned down to where I sat cross-legged on the pine floor of the school house. "That's a lot of money, Omar!" he said.

Four hundred and fifty-nine is a lot of poets, too, not to include Santa Fe's leading triumvirate, Bynner, Long, and Fletcher. One wonders why, for it is not a "vanity" volume. At least I snuck in a couple without agreeing to buy the book, and the cover lists among the 459 contributors such recognized poets as Glenn Ward Dresbach (formerly of Grant County, N. M.), Robert Frost, Robinson Jeffers, John Hall Wheelock, William Ellery Leonard, Lew Sarett, Robert P. Tristram Coffin, Howard Willard Gleason, Max Eastman, and many others who need not purchase their printing in any anthology. Martin J. Maloney, student poet of the Normal University at Las Vegas, is present with "Mexican Battle Piece," a stirring ballad of Pancho Villa.

In short there are a lot of good poets among the 459 and a lot of fine poems, regardless of names. Frankly, I was

“right smart set up an’ admirin’ my shadder” when the editor, Mr. Thomas Del Vecchio, wrote me that he would use two of my verses.

Now, however, I have read Mr. Vecchio’s preface and I am “right smart let down.” Even in such a numerous round-up of poets as this, I am ashamed to appear in the same volume with this piece of pure propaganda which Mr. Del Vecchio presumes to call a preface to poetry.

Quotation of a few of the stereotyped,* dogmatic phrases running through the preface will serve sufficiently to identify the ax Mr. Del Vecchio has to grind—at the expense of the poetic art. Here are some of them: “the class struggle,” “endless luxury for the few and poverty and virtual servitude for the mass,” “social force,” “a vicious privileged class,” “circumvented with starvation, ostracism and imprisonment,” “social realists,” “the revolutionary movement,” “the roar of suffering multitudes,” “a great and powerful union of poets,” etc.

This page is no place to discuss the so-called “social revolution” and communism. Suffice to say that I, personally, am “agin it,” lock, stock, and barrel, particularly so far as America is concerned. But when Mr. Del Vecchio prostitutes the preface of an anthology of poetry to propaganda in an attempt to identify the art of poetry in America with the so-called “social revolution,” somebody should call his hand.

“The failure of artists,” says Mr. Del Vecchio, “to realize their potentialities as a class accounts for their low estate.”

“Artists as a class”—phooey! By their very nature artists cannot constitute a class and remain artists. If the artist, poetic or otherwise, is not individuality to the nth degree, he is nothing.

To quote further: “punctilious poets, scrupulously polishing their pastel couplets, may gasp in maidenly horror at this, but the manly poet will realize that the day of the lone,

delicate riders of Parnassus is past, and that only in union can poets regain their artistic birthright."

Regain my eye! Since when have poets lost their artistic birthright in America? What is a poet's artistic birthright, anyhow? Nothing more nor less than to write what he wishes to write—and find an audience for it if he can. Where else in the world can he do this so freely as here in America? It is beside the point to whine, as Mr. Del Vecchio does, that "social realists" among poets can find little or no audience. This, to begin with, is not true; but even if it were, must poets be reminded that the reader-as-audience also has his birthright—to read what he chooses? What Mr. Del Vecchio proposes, in effect, is "a great and powerful union of poets" to compel a free people to read their so-called "social realism," in the guise of poetry, whether they like it or not.

Mr. Del Vecchio wants the poet to be "the champion of truth"—Del Vecchio's truth, of course—with an organized union to specify just what that truth is. It is here that his tirade becomes suspect as a preface to poetry and reveals itself as clever communistic propaganda.

Truth is strictly an individual matter for each poet to decide upon in his own heart. It is that individual vision of truth that makes the artist, be he poet or painter. How then, if he belongs to a Poets' Union dedicated to a dogmatic "social realism" with which he cannot agree?

"All artists," says Mr. Del. Vecchio, "are propagandists *per se*. And when the time demands, art becomes the inflammatory substance that kindles action, levelling one social system that a better might supplant it."

All right, if the poet wants to go around kindling action with the fire of his poetry, let him. In this country, at least, nobody is going to stop him. But let him furnish his own fire, not borrow a torch from the bonfire of organized social or political propaganda, lest both poet and poetry, birthright and all, go up in smoke—the stifling smoke that must inevitably rise from the ashes of individualism sacrificed

upon the false altar of mass inspiration and "unionism" for poetic art.

That's a hell of a hot figure of speech, I know, but because, to my shame, I happen to be among the contributors to a volume of poetry prefaced by propaganda, I consider the indulgence justifiable.

Yes, 459 is a lot of poets—but not too many, so long as each is his own separate voice. Despite the preponderance of Mr. Del Vecchio's misnamed "social realists" in the volume, let it, in fairness, be said that the editor has given space to a wide variety of viewpoints. Anthologists today can do this—pending the organization of a Poets' Union to dictate otherwise.

S. OMAR BARKER.

What Makes Fall Worth While?

A. A. Milne once observed that autumn came with the celery—the fresh shoots in the bowl beside the cheese, the tender crackling in the mouth, the pipe, and the flames in the grate. Keats has something about "mists and mellow fruitfulness," but we too have our consolation for winter snow, the ache of incipient colds, the figures in the budget for furnace coal. Keats never knew the comfortable lounge where the sunlight idled through a golden tree in the patio, the cigarette curled its smoke into the darkened vigas, and the little cabinet at your elbow chatted: "Second down for Nebraska and a yard to go . . . There's the ball back to McAlrainey who fumbles and it's four to go . . . Nebraska comes out of the huddle . . . It's Johnny Howell who goes over his right guard . . . He's up to about the forty-four . . . Nebraska fourth down and two to go . . . Oh! Oh! there's a Nebraska player down. It's McAlrainey, the fullback from Tecumseh, who's been playing such swell ball today. Coach Biff Jones is taking him out of the game. He gets up to shake his hand and the whole Cornhusker team gets up to greet him like a long lost brother. He may be a brother, but he certainly hasn't been lost. There's tricky football here today. They

say Texas has a monopoly on it, but they have it back at Colgate and we have it here today . . . An we have to remember it started back in Carlyle when Jim Thorpe used to carry the ball. You remember the time he ran for the winning touch-down against Harvard back in 1907 with the football tucked up under his Jersey and his arms swinging free. It was that play that brought about the rule making that sort of thing impossible . . . Well, here we go again . . ."

Fiesta in Santa Fe

You cannot report all of a fiesta and sometimes the part of anything is greater than the whole.

A group of Indian boys were talking excitedly in the washroom at La Fonda. One of them began to sing. "It goes like that; only the drum beats faster." "Uh-huh" from some of the others. "We're going to dance here. Wait till you see us dance" from the singer. "You'll be surprised."

The group shifted around a little and one of the Indians said, "I just came back from New Yawrk."

The first speakers went on. One said, "Did you see White Bear dance at Gallup?" "Yes." "Sure." "He's fine." "Sure." "Yes."

The same voice from the listeners. "I just came back from New Yawrk." This time he had attention, but he paused for proper respect. "I been teachin' there." "Dance?" "Oh, everythin'; dances and everythin'. I'm goin' back to New Yawrk."

The singer again: "You fellows ought to go down dance in Colorado or Texas. You'd make money." Protest: "We can't go down there." "You'd make money, lots of money. Two thousand dollars a month. No, wait. Two hundred dollars a month. I've seen people reach in their pockets and take out a handfull of money and give it all to Indians dancin'. Twenty dollars a night. You make lots of money."

Cultural fusion is almost getting beyond us in New Mexico. In the specialty dances at La Fonda acculturation ran rife: the Taos hoop dance to Thurlow Lieurance's

"Land of the Sky Blue Waters"; the Comanche War Dance to "Cielito Linda"; and another thumping dance with "Ranchera" spaced and accelerated, to meet the tempo.

"El Dia de Los Ninos y Los Burros" is the most genuine thing in Fiesta. Everything that children do springs from genuine impulse like the ingratiating antics of the animals who come along to be a part of the show, costumed like their owners and about as tired and yet excited, too.

Did you see the tiny girl in white satin and lace mantilla who pushed the doll buggy holding a white rabbit? The rabbit wore a little palette trimmed with colored sequins, and seemed to know that with all the dogs and cats running around it safety went with the costuming and parading on "The Day of the Children and the Burros."

It is a day of miracles! Wire-haired terriers ride handle bars in front of their masters on bicycles; collies go international (without singing the Internationale) by biting a flag-rest holding Mexican and American flags; ordinary hounds go dandified with ribbons, charro hats, or Swiss hats with purple feathers; a miniature circus wagon imprisons a tame kitty with a red bow, quite unexcited by the St. Bernard sniffing outside the bars. Noah must have herded his troublesome crew into the Ark on "El Dia de Los Ninos y Los Burros," for on such a day the animal world seems to be friendly with its own kind and with a stranger race which doesn't always accord it such consideration.

OTHER NOTES:—The famous anthropologist who did the Turkey Dance in the living room of a lovely home—the home all luminario lit—the dance with what appeared to be a marvelous gobble at the end! The schottische danced in the studio with the polished black floors, the black bancos like Santa Clara ware, and the hearth and fire-place outlined in black polished earth centering the height of wall below carved beams! The patient burros at the Parrion Analco, pleased with their little journeys about the Market and the light freight they bear! The woman costumed with her Navajo blouse and a Pocahontas feather! The costume of

the two men who looked like priests of Pele, completely covered with feathers of pastel hues and the conversation between them: "I wanted to come entirely unique in costume and almost gave up for an idea when my eleven-year-old daughter suggested this. It's all right, but I haven't been able to smoke a cigarette all evening or get near one!" and "You haven't anything to worry about! What about my hay fever! I've been sneezing ever since she put these feathers on us, and this night may be the end of me yet!"

MATT PEARCE.

Star Caravan

By ALICE GILL BENTON

High in the heavens the circling planets glow
And gleaming caravans of stars, serene
And stately, keeping step, measured and slow,
Move like an oriental palanquin,
Crossing the wide blue desert of the sky,
In great magnificance and glittering show
Of wealth. Swiftly the crescent moon slips by
On silver shoes, gliding softly, as though
Afraid of this display of pomp. She hides
Behind a great high dune of clouds, there in
The west, to watch this opulence that rides
The heavens. Where did this caravan begin?
What distant port is beckoning? Who guides
It surely on, what wider skies to win?