August 7, 1972

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by James Ashbrook Perkins entitled "An American Rhapsody: The Poetry of Kenneth Fearing." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Vice Chancellor for
Graduate Studies and Research

AN AMERICAN RHAPSODY: THE POETRY OF KENNETH FEARING

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Graduate Council of

The University of Tennessee

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

---

by

James Ashbrook Perkins

August 1972

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JAMES ASHBROOK PERKINS

August 1972

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DEDICATION

To my wife, Jane, who has endured a lot and who also helped me through this paper.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee, Dr. B. J. Leggett, Dr. Richard Kelly, Dr. James Falen, and Dr. F. DeWolfe Miller, for their ability to remain excited about Kenneth Fearing for nine, long months. I would like to thank the staff of the library of The University of Tennessee, especially Miss Helen Hier and Mrs. John Bell of Inter-Library Loan and Miss Eleanor E. Goehring of Reference. Finally, I would like to thank Mrs. Frank D. Allen, Jr. for leading me through a whirlwind day of research in The Library of Congress.

ABSTRACT

The poetry of Kenneth Flexner Fearing (1902-1961) has received little critical attention because his subject matter, his style, his diction, and his tone are intentionally "unpoetic" and may be unacceptable to critics whose experience has been with the romantic-agrarian mainstream of American poetry. Most of the critics who have dealt with it have classified Fearing as a Proletarian poet or as a Communist poet. A complete analysis of his poetry suggests that such classification is simplistic.

Fearing's early poems, those he wrote in college, are highly imagistic and imitative. Beginning with the poems in Angel Arms (1929), Fearing's work is dominated by the sights and sounds of New York City. His second book, Poems (1935), contains most of the poems cited by critics who class him as a Communist, and it was written while Fearing was closely associated with the New Masses, Partisan Review and the John Reed Club of New York.

Fearing's third volume, Dead Reckoning (1938), and his fourth, Collected Poems (1940), expose his search for poetic direction following the collapse of the leftist dream. Collected Poems contains the poetic credo which was the result of Fearing's search. This credo emphasizes excitement and clarity in poetry and suggests that to achieve these ends, Fearing discarded "the entire bag of conventions and codes usually associated with poetry" and created "instead more exciting forms . . . based on the material being written about."

Fearing's fifth volume, Afternoon of a Pawnbroker (1943), and his sixth, Stranger at Coney Island (1948), were written in a period when the author was drifting away from poetry and beginning to write novels, and these volumes are dominated both in theme and technique by the style of The New Yorker which after 1940 was Fearing's chief magazine outlet for verse. His last volume, New and Selected Poems (1956), contains only four new poems (written at the request of Indiana University Press) which are outcries against the McCarthy era and suggest a return to the militantly optimistic attitude of Poems.

Considered as a whole, the poems of Kenneth Fearing comprise a great American Rhapsody, one man's enthusiastic, if sometimes highly critical, utterance about the America he knew. Although the voice of Kenneth Fearing is outside the romantic-agrarian mainstream of American poetry, he has created an alternative poetic vision which may be able to provide a light along the endless urban hallway that is modern America.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	KENNETH FEARING, NEGLECTED, AND MOURNED BY NONE	1
II.	COMING TO NEW YORK	27
	Early Poems	27
	Angel Arms	48
	Poems	68
III.	THE BREAK WITH THE LEFT	88
	Dead Reckoning	102
	"The Agency" Section of Collected Poems	115
	Changes Made in Earlier Works for Collected Poems	127
IV.	THE MOVEMENT AWAY FROM POETRY	139
	Afternoon of a Pawnbroker	149
	Stranger at Coney Island	161
	"The Family Album" Section of New and Selected Poems	171
	Changes Made in Earlier Works for New and Selected Poems	178
V.	KENNETH FEARING'S AMERICAN RHAPSODY	181
BIBLIOGRAPHY		186
APPENDIX		205
VITA		211

CHAPTER I

KENNETH FEARING, NEGLECTED, AND MOURNED BY NONE

Kenneth Flexner Fearing (1902-1961) was an American poet and novelist whose working life encompassed some of the most desperate years of the twentieth century. The first of his seven volumes of poetry[1] was published in 1929, the year of the stock market crash and the first year of the great depression. His last volume of poetry appeared in 1956, two wars later, when the country was in the midst of the McCarthy Era. Although his poems appeared in Poetry and other magazines of wider circulation from 1930 until 1948,[2] although a number of his poems have become staple items in anthologies of American literature,[3] and although he is considered by some to be one of the three most important poets of the thirties, no monograph study of his poetry has appeared[4] and only a handful of serious articles have dealt with Fearing's poetry.

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[1] Angel Arms (New York: Coward-McCann, 1929); Poems (New York: Dynamo, 1935); Dead Reckoning (New York: Random House, 1938); Collected Poems (New York: Random House, 1940); Afternoon of a Pawnbroker (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1943); Stranger at Coney Island (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948); New and Selected Poems (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1956).

[2] See the Bibliography for an alphabetical listing of the first serial publication of the poetry of Kenneth Fearing.

[3] See the Bibliography listing of first serial publication of Fearing's poetry for an indication of the number of times each poem has appeared in anthologies.

[4] Sy Kahn is under contract with Twayne Publishers to produce a book on Fearing, but he stated in a letter dated 27 September 1971 that it will be "a couple of years" before he can complete the project.

There are probably several reasons for the lack of scholarship on the poetry of Kenneth Fearing. His subject matter, his style, his diction, and his tone are intentionally "unpoetic" and may be unacceptable to critics whose experience has been with either the general romantic stream of English-speaking poetry or the more recent learned and esoteric poetry of Eliot and Pound. Curiously enough the only prior poetry in English with which Fearing's work can be readily compared is the satiric poetry of the early eighteenth century, but that poetry was, like Fearing's, written by men who thought that man could be reasoned into a just solution of the problems being presented by urbanization. Like the poets of the early eighteenth century, the young Kenneth Fearing, under the rosy influence of the many brands of socialism that permeated the New York of the late twenties and early thirties, faced the depression with the belief that man was perfectible through his own efforts or through the movement of a social organization which he could create.

From a review of the scholarship presented below, it is clear that Kenneth Fearing did not write in the mainstream of American letters and that, for the most part, he has been criticized by writers who either failed to discover what he was attempting in his work or who understood it and were hostile toward it for one reason or another. He did, however, develop a unique poetic style which enabled him to expose the hopes, foibles, and tragedies of the urban America of his time. Since urbanization is increasing in our own time, since we continue to have wars, economic failures, and massive unemployment, since we

continue to fear invasions of our privacy by investigators of one kind or another, perhaps it is time to consider seriously one viable alternative to the main-stream, agrarian-pastoral-romantic tradition in American poetry, The American Rhapsody of Kenneth Fearing.

In general histories of American literature, Kenneth Fearing is dealt with in a single sentence or in part of a sentence. "Among the poets who began to be known in the thirties, Horace Gregory added to Crane's city a serious knowledge of our public issues, and Kenneth Fearing used the freest of rhythms for a harsh staccato satire. . . ."[5] In more specific studies, histories of the literature of the thirties, or histories of the Proletarian Movement, Fearing receives more notice. Babette Deutsch, in Poetry of Our Time (in a section on the poetry written between the wars), devotes an entire page to Fearing and says in part:

> The image of our civilization as a "hoard of destruction" is mirrored repeatedly in the blistered glass of Kenneth Fearing's verse. He attacked the violence peculiar to a profit economy in violent parodies of the voices of the high pressure salesman, the insurance agent, the public relations counselor, the radio announcer advertising whiskeys, wars, crises, and cosmetics with the same unctuous glibness. . . .[6]

Granville Hicks saw Kenneth Fearing as a part of a great tradition in 1935 and compared the Fearing of Angel Arms to the Fearing of Poems:

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[5]Robert E. Spiller et al., Literary History of the United States: History (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), p. 1354.

[6]Babette Deutsch, Poetry of Our Time: A Critical Survey of Poetry in the English Speaking World (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1963), pp. 397-98.

> His chief concern six years ago was the contrast between American reality and the romantic dreams manufactured and sold across commercial counters. But whereas then there was nothing to qualify his hopelessness except a kind of temperamental defiance, today defiance is enforced by courage and hope. He has become a superb ironist, and his shuddering sensitiveness to the madness of our civilization has developed into a sharp satiric weapon.[7]

Fearing is seen as the first important poet of the Proletarian Movement,[8] and often during the thirties, when poets discussed the plight and future of their craft, Fearing was used as a standard and an example.[9]

In The Thirties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama, edited by Warren French, which presents an overview of the writing of a decade in America, Sy Kahn surveys the themes and forms of Kenneth Fearing's poetic works.[10] This article, while valuable for what it suggests, is too brief to be satisfying. Much is suggested; little is fully developed.[11] Kahn

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[7]Granville Hicks, The Great Tradition (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1967), pp. 325-26.

[8]Allen Guttmann, "The Brief Embattled Course of Proletarian Poetry," in Proletarian Writers of the Thirties, ed. David Madden (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), p. 252.

[9]See, for example, Horace Gregory, "Revolution and the Individual Writer," Partisan Review, 2 (April-May 1933), 52-58; Edwin Rolfe, "Poetry," Partisan Review, 2 (April-May 1933), 32-42.

[10]Sy Kahn, "Kenneth Fearing and the Twentieth Century Blues," in The Thirties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama (Deland, Fla.: Everett Edwards, Inc., 1967), pp. 133-140.

[11]It is assumed that this article will provide the basis for Dr. Kahn's proposed book on Kenneth Fearing and that the ideas presented will be developed more fully then.

recognizes the basic continuity of Fearing's themes--"The sense of the ominous is a dominant feature in all of Fearing's books of poems, though the face and shape of the threatening spectres shift."[12] He also solves the problem of communism in Fearing's poetry: "Both before and after the highest point of communist enthusiasms in America, Fearing was indicting, it seems to me, not so much an economic system but some basic failures in human imagination and sensitivity, attacking human fear, weakness, and cruelty, marking the ironic distances between aspiration and conclusion, hope and despair."[13]

The most useful discussion of Kenneth Fearing in a history of literature is a critical biographical sketch entitled "The Critical Realism of Kenneth Fearing"[14] by Fearing's lifelong friend Horace Gregory. As the title indicates, this essay is an attempt to place Fearing in the Proletarian Movement in poetry. It does much more. It gives the most complete biographical sketch of Fearing available, and it briefly characterizes Fearing's strengths and weaknesses as a poet.

One name stands out from among the small group of critics who have studied the poetry of Kenneth Fearing. Macha Louis Rosenthal, sometime poetry editor of The Nation, wrote a dissertation at New York University in 1949 entitled "Chief Poets of the American Depression: Contributions of Kenneth Fearing, Horace Gregory and Muriel Rukeyser to

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[12] Kahn, p. 134.

[13] Ibid., p. 138.

[14] Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska, A History of American Poetry 1900-1940 (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1942), pp. 462-67.

Contemporary American Poetry."[15] Rosenthal devotes about one hundred pages to Fearing and discusses Angel Arms, Poems, Dead Reckoning, "The Agency," and Fearing's first novel The Hospital.[16] The overall approach of the dissertation is comparative, but Rosenthal makes many useful comments about individual poems. Although this dissertation has not been published, the essence of Rosenthal's comments about the poetry of Fearing was published in Poetry.[17] His comments also appear in a greatly reduced form in The Modern Poets.[18] In addition to the articles derived from work on his dissertation, Rosenthal is the author of some of the most perceptive book reviews of Kenneth Fearing's later volumes of poetry.

Most of the book reviews of the seven volumes of Kenneth Fearing's poetry are essentially observations of publication. Although some of them suggest interesting avenues of critical approach, they are, for the most part, too brief to develop any serious critical position. Because of the limitation of space and because so many of these reviews

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[15]Macha Louis Rosenthal, "Chief Poets of the American Depression: Contributions of Kenneth Fearing, Horace Gregory and Muriel Rukeyser to Contemporary American Poetry," Diss. New York University 1949.

[16]Although his dissertation was submitted in 1949, Rosenthal used 1940, the end of the depression, as the cut-off date for his discussion of Fearing's poetry. This means that he does not discuss Afternoon of a Pawnbroker or Stranger at Coney Island.

[17]Macha Louis Rosenthal, "The Meaning of Kenneth Fearing's Poetry," Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, 64 (July 1944), 208-223.

[18]Macha Louis Rosenthal, The Modern Poets, A Critical Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).

are valueless, only representative reviews are considered here to suggest the various approaches that have been taken toward the poetry of Kenneth Fearing; however, all of the reviews consulted are listed in the Bibliography.

The book reviews can be classified in the following categories: (1) brief notices, (2) comparative studies, (3) politically biased reviews, (4) thematic and stylistic studies. These categories are not mutually exclusive, but the purpose of this section is to examine the general flavor of the reviews of the volumes of Kenneth Fearing's poetry over the twenty-seven years of his career as a publishing poet, not to analyze the reviews themselves.

The brief notices generally attempt to catch the essence of Fearing's poetry. Sometimes they concentrate on theme: "Kenneth Fearing's Poems . . . are bitterly insurgent and corrosive in their attack on lower middle class decay in urban America."[19] Sometimes they combine theme and style: "Dead Reckoning, by Kenneth Fearing. Crisp, merciless shafts at the American setup, using, satirically, the jargon of advertising and headlines."[20] Sometimes the review concentrates on discovering an audience for Fearing's poetry: "Poems selected from four[21] published volumes with new ones that have appeared only in

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[19]John Chamberlain, "Current Books," Current History, 42 (July 1935), vi.

[20]"Verse," New Yorker, 14 (7 January 1939), 47-48.

[21]"800 Literature," Booklist, 37 (15 December 1940), 150. It should be noted that Fearing had published only three volumes of verse prior to the publication of Collected Poems.

magazines. Untraditional and modern but not obscure, the vigor and current idiom will appeal to readers who do not insist on the conventional." Sometimes a brief notice compares Fearing to Fearing: "Kenneth Fearing's book is neither a victory nor a defeat, but more like a failure to engage the enemy. Mr. Fearing, who at one time seemed so exciting and brought up to date the nineteen-twentyish type of free and loose verse, is here overdoing."[22] Sometimes style alone is the chief concern: "Long lines that swing like country hammocks carry Mr. Fearing's suave ironies and warm affection for New York from which he insulated himself. This is his sixth book of verse and a very good one. He has a genius for tipping his poems toward stories, yet never anecdotally."[23] Sometimes, especially in the later years, the reviews are nostalgic: "Returning to 'New and Selected Poems' by Kenneth Fearing . . . The Fearing jukebox tunes still pack the punch. It's really the old, honest, radical jazz out of the side of the mouth and the wearin'-o'-the-gimlet grin. His cracked record blues continue to penetrate deeply with his favorite themes--'excitement' and 'understanding.'"[24] The brevity of the short notices forces their authors to create some very memorable lines, almost aphorisms, but this same brevity eliminates the possibility for developed criticisms. It is

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[22]Oscar Williams, "The Poets and Their War," Tomorrow, 3 (March 1944), 54.

[23]T. H. Ferril, "Books," San Francisco Chronical, 13 February 1949, p. 15.

[24]N. K. Dorn, "Books," San Francisco Chronical, 8 September 1957, p. 29.

curious and perhaps a comment on the nature of the general survey of literature that, brief as the brief notices are, they are usually much more informative than the items about Fearing in the histories of literature discussed above.

There are two types of comparative studies in book reviews. One is a useful review in which the reviewer compares the themes, style, or tone of the book under review to the works of known poets in an attempt to lead the reader from the known to the unknown; the other is a less useful review, a child of necessity, the catchall review in which the reviewer, by comparing one unknown quantity to another unknown quantity, can kill several contemporary poets by having them throw stones at each other. This second method of comparative book reviewing is a common way of handling poetry, which after all does not make up much of the trade book market; it is an especially popular way of handling books published in the same series.

Through this type of review it can be discovered that Fearing's verse "lies somewhere between Auden and Ogden Nash"[25] and that he is "one of the harder-bitten sons of Walt Whitman, a more mordant Masters or Sandburg, a poetic Lardner of wider scope,"[26] but the limitations of space in the review keep the reviewers from ever developing fully

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[25]Seldon Rodman, "New Verses by Kenneth Fearing," New York Times Book Review, 24 October 1948, p. 18.

[26]Macha Louis Rosenthal, "Don Kenneth and the Rackets," Nation, 184 (19 January 1957), 64-65.

the implications of these provocative juxtapositions.

Kenneth Fearing's Angel Arms, a collection of twenty-seven poems, was published by Coward-McCann as part of their series Songs of Today. All of the reviews of this volume consulted deal with three or more of the volumes in Songs of Today, and their emphasis is on the impact of the series, which they welcome because of the attractiveness of the volumes and the low price, one dollar per volume. With such an emphasis it is not surprising that little of lasting critical worth is said about the poetry of Fearing in these earliest reviews. Rolfe Humphries, in The New Republic, compares Fearing's work to the other volumes in the series:

> "Angel Arms," by Kenneth Fearing, is more authentic, unified, and genuine, but honestly dull. Here is a city satirized, a prowling dump of Undertaker and Junkman, "where stars are chips of fallen lime, Bleached and dry." This world of rubble and orts, in which people jerk by without fury or purpose, is dead and alien to generation; its poet lacks a sense of "the heat and speed of the earth."[27]

Ironically, Humphries, in his attempt to set the book aside, has praised the elements which Fearing sought to attain, authenticity, unity, and genuineness, and he has discovered a theme central to Fearing's entire poetic career, "This world . . . dead and alien to generation."

Kenneth Burke, in an essay for The New Republic, compared Fearing's Poems to Ezra Pound's No Thanks.[28] He acknowledges superficial

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[27]Rolfe Humphries, "Songs of Today," The New Republic, 59 (12 June 1929), 104.

[28]Kenneth Burke, "Two Kinds of Against," The New Republic, 83 (26 June 1935), 198-99.

differences and then goes on to point out that they share: "an exceptional gift for the satirically picturesque," the use of rhetorical devices "that keep their pages vivacious almost to the extent of the feverish," and the mastery of "suggesting the subjective through the objective."[29] After exhausting Fearing's affinity to Pound, Burke offers another comparison of which other critics are fond.

> An inverted Whitman, Fearing scans the country with a statistical eye; but where Whitman sought to pile up a dithyrambic catalogue of glories, Fearing gives us a satirically seasoned catalogue of burdens. Whitman, the humanitarian, could look upon a national real-estate boom and see there a mystical reaching out of hands. Fearing conversely would remark upon the "profitable smile," the "purpose that lay beneath the merchant's warmth." This method leads at times to the mechanical device of indictments held together by a slightly varied refrain, but for the most part the poet is as ingenious as he is sincere.[30]

In what is perhaps the best single example of the useless comparative criticism, R. P. Blackmur reviewed Dead Reckoning along with the works of eight other poets in Partisan Review.[31] Although dealing with nine authors he used comparisons only as a means of transition saying, "Mr. Kenneth Fearing's Dead Reckoning is not nearly as good reading [as The Collected Poems of Laura Riding]."[32] Whatever the value of that lucid comment, Blackmur later contradicted it by saying, "one would rather read any poem by Fearing than any poem by Riding. . . ."[33]

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[29] Ibid., p. 199. [30] Ibid.

[31] R. P. Blackmur, "Nine Poets," Partisan Review, 6 (Winter 1939), 108-115.

[32] Ibid., p. 109. [33] Ibid.

Most reviewers recognized the importance of the appearance of Collected Poems. "'The Collected Poems of Kenneth Fearing' is a high point in the serious poetry of American literature of this decade. . . ."[34] This recognition led most reviewers to avoid comparative criticism and to deal at length with the unique craft of Fearing alone. One who chose to compare it to another work explained his decision at length in his opening paragraph:

> Politics yokes diverse talents. Miss Taggard and Mr. Fearing are unlike in subject matter, in technique and, if cadences do not lie, in temperament. It is their political faith that justifies the conjunction of their books in a single review.[35]

But after a superficial comparison of the two poets ("he writes like a revolutionist who is aware that he is a poet; and she, like a poet who is impelled by conscience to be a revolutionist"),[36] Flint settles down to the real theme of his essay, "a consideration of the actual or possible relations between propaganda and poetry."[37]

With the publication of Fearing's brief poetic credo on the book jacket of Collected Poems, most comparative critics began to judge his poetry by it. When Afternoon of a Pawnbroker appeared, it seemed enough that Fearing was consistent with his own philosophy of composition. "The nice thing about this little manifesto is that it

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[34]John Holmes, "Poems and Things," Boston Evening Transcript, 21 October 1940, p. 11.

[35]Flint T. Cudworth, "Two Party Poets," Kenyon Review, 1 (Spring 1939), 223.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid.

jibes with the poetry Fearing writes. Packed in this new collection, as in the preceding ones, is the excitement of contemporary living told in terms that are strictly contemporary, and strictly Fearing's."[38] When the next book appeared, however, many critics compared Fearing to Fearing and found him the same. "It is not that these poems shouldn't be written, or that anyone writes them better than Kenneth Fearing, but that one expects, or at least hopes, after six volumes of it, for more."[39] "Mr. Fearing's new book resembles Mr. Fearing's old books, so much so that I scarcely know whether to credit him with an individual style or to catch him red-handed with a formula."[40] Such criticism had an effect on Fearing, who by the time it appeared had already published his last serial poetry and was beginning a period of silence, which was broken only at the insistence of Samuel Yellin of Indiana University Press.[41] In a letter discussing the date by which Fearing could produce some new poetry for the proposed New and Selected Poetry, Fearing wrote to Yellin, "I feel sure I can come up with ten new poems by that time, and I hope they will be not only new, but some of them fresh."[42]

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[38]Leo Kennedy, "K. Fearing's Striking and Uneasy Verse," The Chicago Sun Book Week, 26 September 1943, p. 9.

[39]Seldon Rodman, "New Verses by Kenneth Fearing," The New York Times Book Review, 24 October 1948, p. 18.

[40]R[eed] W[hittemore], "Reviews," Furioso, 4 (Winter 1949), 69.

[41]See Chapter IV for a discussion of Fearing's movement away from poetry.

[42]Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 15 September 1954. This is one of a series of letters obtained from Indiana University Press concerning the publication of New and Selected Poems, hereafter called Indiana File.

When New and Selected Poems appeared, however, the critics still found sameness.

> After a while, the impression is that you have read the same poem over and over until discriminations blur and curiosity is put to sleep. . . . And there is no suggestion from poem to poem of a fresh approach to a fresh experience. A deadening consistency is the result.[43]

> His art of brilliant surfaces and quick contemporaneity seemed more daring once, as a poetic configuration, than it does today, though the best poems keep their early lustre. In response to the new textures of an age, perhaps his greatest daring would be to change.[44]

Against other poets Kenneth Fearing was able to hold his own in the comparative reviews; against his own early work, the older Fearing fared less well.

With the growing economic crisis in the United States in the late twenties and early thirties, and with the organized attempt by the Communist Party in the United States to influence the direction of American letters following the Kharkov Conference of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers,[45] politics became a convenient standard by which to measure and classify writers, especially writers who were determined, as Fearing was, to face the age and its realities.

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[43]Leonard Nathan, "Three American Poets," Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, 90 (August 1957), 327.

[44]Stanley Kunitz, "Private Eye," Saturday Review, 40 (29 June 1959), 26.

[45]For a discussion of the Kharkov Conference and its results see Deming Brown, Soviet Attitudes Toward American Writing (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 45-48.

It does not seem to matter that Fearing once wrote: "Political convictions: a mystery to me."[46] Critics seem to have been determined to align authors in one political camp or another. Two reviews of Angel Arms serve to establish the ground rules for the struggle about the politics of Kenneth Fearing. Ida Lou Walton ended a brief, knowledgeable review with the statement: "The volume is alive and democratic in outlook."[47] Fearing's friend Horace Gregory began his review:

> If you are interested in contemporary poetry, and the particular kind of literature rising out of This Quarter [,] transition [sic] and The New Masses, here are two poets that represent points of view already made distinctive by Ernest Hemingway and Morley Callaghan.[48]

Miss Walton pointed out that Fearing's "lyrics and dramatic studies are of street characters" and that he "is a poet of the city who has no sentimental longings after meadow or barn."[49] Horace Gregory, who in 1929 was a thoughtful communist, made no secret of the background and feelings of Wallis and Fearing:

> Both Kenneth Fearing and Keene Wallis are natural products of the American post-war environment. Theirs is the background of big cities, I. W. W. strikes and gang war, gunmen, gin and

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[46]Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, ed., Twentieth Century Authors, A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1942), p. 444.

[47]Edna Lou Walton, "Dollar Poetry," Nation, 129 (3 July 1929), 22.

[48]Horace Gregory, "Hard Poets Are Hemingways of Modern Verse," New York Evening Post Books, 27 April 1929, p. 10.

[49]Walton, Nation, 22.

> cabarets. Their work is deliberately unliterary in its immediate associations. It is written in revolt from the credos of the usual "poetic" attitudes.[50]

Gregory in this paragraph presents a formula for proletarian poetry and a credo for the poetry of the revolution. Allen Guttman, discussing poetry in Proletarian Writers of the Thirties, says, "proletarian poetry as an American literary movement of permanent importance began in 1929, with the publication of Kenneth Fearing's first book."[51]

The publication of Kenneth Fearing's Poems in 1935 added fuel to the political controversy surrounding his writing. Poems was published by Dynamo, a small New York press which also published Dynamo, a literary outlet for the John Reed Club of New York. In the introduction to Poems Edward Dahlberg stated:

> Kenneth Fearing is a poet for the workers; his poems are deeply incarnadined in evictions, strikes, hunger; but his appeal is not restricted to his class. His poetry, for those who are still wavering, is one more piece of documented evidence of the horrible mutilation of human dreams and nobleness under capitalism.[52]

The New Masses[53] reprinted Dahlberg's introduction verbatim as a review, and Partisan Review, on whose editorial board Fearing was sitting at the time, praised the book's rich expression of ". . . the dialectic both

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[50]Gregory, New York Evening Post, p. 10.

[51]Guttman, p. 252.

[52]Edward Dahlberg, "Introduction," to Kenneth Fearing, Poems (New York: Dynamo, 1935), pp. 13-14.

[53]Edward Dahlberg, "Kenneth Fearing: A Poet for Workers," New Masses, 21 May 1935, pp. 24-25.

of hatred and love, love of life, of country, of the masses and of the future they shall create."[54]

The right was quickly heard from. William Rose Benét, writing in The Saturday Review, said, "'Poems' by Kenneth Fearing . . . has taken its inspiration as to binding and typography from Random House's presentation of the 'Poems' of Stephen Spender. That book, however, was blue, and this book is red, naturally enough, as Mr. Fearing is a communist poet."[55] Not to be accused of judging a book wholly by its cover, Mr. Benét continued:

> A good deal of Mr. Fearing's work reads like nightmares induced by New York newspapers and modern American civilization. . . . Do you call it poetry? I doubt it; but it is an interesting running commentary on American characteristics.[56]

After an international congress of writers in Paris in June 1935, and after the formation of the League of American Writers in 1935, the Communist Party in the United States sought to accentuate the common interest between itself and the capitalist system, the defeat of Fascism,[57] so the ideological division which had marked the

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[54]Obed Brooks, "Dialectic of Love and Hatred," Partisan Review, 2 (July-August 1935), 61.

[55]William Rose Benét, "Phoenix Nest," The Saturday Review, 12 (15 June 1935), 18.

[56]Ibid., p. 19.

[57]Brown, Soviet Attitudes, pp. 51-52.

criticism of the late twenties and early thirties ceased to appear.[58] Both New Masses and Partisan Review praised Dead Reckoning, but they did not enthusiastically herald it as a vanguard of the coming revolution. The only overt mention of Fearing's political attitude in reviews of Dead Reckoning does not align him with the left: "Nor does Fearing permit himself the vulgar optimism of those poets who fly from the headlines in the morning newspapers to the altar of Marx and the arms of Stalin."[59]

By 1940 when Collected Poems appeared Kenneth Fearing was writing steadily for The New Yorker, and he had effectively broken his ties with the Left.[60] The result of this break is evident in the book reviews that follow it. The New Masses review of Collected Poems begins, "The unveiling of the Collected Poems of Kenneth Fearing comes as a sad ceremony to the younger militant poets who regarded Mr. Fearing as the poet who best caught the mood and tempo of their time up to September 1939."[61] Perhaps more revealing of the leftist attitude toward Fearing is the fact that Partisan Review planned to run a review of Collected

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[58]For an analysis of the writing of the Left in the late thirties see Philip Rahv, "Proletarian Literature: A Political Autopsy," The Southern Review, 4, No. 3 (1939), 616-28. Rahv states, "If at present proletarian writing in this country is in the last stages of dissolution, it is largely because it is under political orders to commit suicide," p. 625.

[59]Babette Deutsch, "Flooded with the Immediate Age," The Nation, 149 (19 August 1939), 202.

[60]See Chapter III for a discussion of Fearing's break with the Left.

[61]Alexander F. Bergman, "Fearing's Poems," New Masses, 19 November 1940, p. 25.

Poems and then dropped it when it became necessary to print a two-page section of a short story deleted by accident in the preceding issue.[62] This omission coupled with the tone of the New Masses review clearly shows that Fearing had become a "lost leader" of the Leftist movement.

When Afternoon of a Pawnbroker appeared in 1943, the New Masses and Partisan Review met it with silence, and politics was introduced in other reviews only as a way of explaining elements of Fearing's technique.

> He may have omitted such a significant and necessary trait [the evidence of nobility in the average man's life] because he has not completely overcome the singleness of outlook of the socially conscious group of writers and artists, of whom he was originally a part, who used their art as a means of pointing out the ills of society, and of urging society to purge itself of those ills.[63]

By 1948 when Stranger at Coney Island appeared, the political issue was used as a device for placing Fearing in the context of American poetry and as a means of comparing Fearing to himself:

> For the Fearing of 1948, more suave, more skillful, and certainly more sophisticated politically, is not the Fearing of "Poems" (1935), angry, naive and brashly Marxist. . . .
>
> Yet Fearing is a curiously typical man of his generation, almost a caricature of him, who seeing the light (of disillusionment with leftist faith) stepped backward into the negative cynicism of the Lost Generation rather than forward into any reappraisal of democracy, socialism or the human spirit.[64]

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[62]The table of contents of Partisan Review, 7 (1940), 484, lists a review of "Collected Poems of Kenneth Fearing" by W. T. Scott, but the review never appeared.

[63]Ruth Stephan, "Fearing and the Art of Communication," Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, 63 (December 1943), 165.

[64]Rodman, New York Times, p. 18.

Again New Masses and Partisan Review avoided comment about the volume.

New and Selected Poems was designed by the editor that handled it for Indiana University Press to be "a kind of summing up"[65] of the poetry of Kenneth Fearing. Most critics of the book took its appearance as an opportunity to sum up the career of the poet. Therefore, most mention his political affiliation as an historical note. Curiously Mainstream, the successor to New Masses, found it difficult to discuss Fearing's politics:[66]

> Fearing may for the most part still be advancing on the propulsion he got in the early '30's. Then he was one of the avant garde poets who published in New Masses and other radical magazines--one of the many poets of that day influenced by the so-called proletarian or Marxist currents.[67]

A review of the politically biased criticism shows that as a vital force politics ceased to affect the criticism of Kenneth Fearing's poetry after the publication of Poems (1935), but the tag of proletarian poet continued to haunt the criticism and cloud some critics' perception of the poetry through the publication of his last volume.

Most of the reviews of Fearing's poetry that concern themselves with his themes and his style do not vary greatly from the publication

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[65]Samuel Yellen to Kenneth Fearing, 27 December 1952 (Indiana File).

[66]This amusing discomforture was no doubt caused by the vision of rampant investigation that was over the United States in the mid-fifties. The communist witch hunt was one of the chief forms which the investigation took.

[67]Walter Lowenfels, "Three Decades of Poems," Mainstream, 10 (May 1957), 52.

of his last book of poetry New and Selected Poems (1956). Throughout, the reviews are permeated with the notion that Fearing's style descends either in a straight line from Walt Whitman or by means of a slight detour from Whitman through Carl Sandburg. Occasionally reviewers break out of this pattern to make perceptive comments on his style: "Fearing's poems are, indeed, like flashes from the news-reel . . . the typical form of Fearing's poems--[is] a form based entirely on parallelism of line and phrase."[68] "The repetitious, hypnotic rhythms punctured by shocks of surprise, the rapid shifts of perspective, the cinematographic fadings and fusions of characters, all contribute to the effect of a grotesque and convulsing dream. . . ."[69]

Through the publication of Dead Reckoning (1938), some reviewers saw development in Fearing's style. "Technically, Fearing is at once surer of himself than formerly and less dependent on certain stylistic devices which he tended to over-work. I refer particularly to his use of the jargon and clichées [sic] taken over from the tabloids, the movies, the comic strips, advertising, etc."[70]

With the publication of Collected Poems (1940) the reviewers' discussions of Fearing's style developed the characteristic which

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[68]Edna Lou Walton, "Fearing, Poet of a Transformed World," New York Herald Tribune Books, 7 July 1935, p. 5.

[69]Philip Blair Rice, "Fearing's Metrotone News," The Nation, 141 (31 July 1935), 138.

[70]T. C. Wilson, "The Real Thing," Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, 54 (April 1939), 28.

dominated such discussions throughout the rest of his poetic career. With this book they began to feel that Fearing was not developing; they began to accuse him of repeating himself. "Now when he repeats the pattern, the same formula, using the identical tricks and codes, to me he becomes suspect."[71] Dudley Fitts delivered a eulogy over the publication of New and Selected Poems:

> It is stubborn in its Old Guard attitude, stubborn in its technique; so unfashionable, indeed, in its resistance to the prevalent obsession with metrical vacuity, that a well-bred young neo-classicist might regard it as almost theatrically conservative. And here, of course, is precisely the place where we came in.[72]

The times had changed; the public's taste in poetry had changed, but Kenneth Fearing had not changed. Fearing reacted to the review quoted above in a letter to Bernard Perry, the director of the Indiana University Press. "I suppose you saw the reviews of both myself and Neil Weiss in last week's Times. Personally, I'm pleasantly dazed at making Old Guard."[73]

It is generally accepted by reviewers that Fearing's style suffered from repetition and that he copied his successes. They began to note this especially after he aligned himself with The New Yorker in the late thirties. In 1940 one critic wondered: "Is Mr. Fearing

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[71]Ruth Lechlitner, "Poetry Must be Exciting," New York Herald Tribune Books, 17 November 1940, p. 27.

[72]Dudley Fitts, "Out of Love, Anger and Conviction," The New York Times Book Review, 17 February 1957, p. 4.

[73]Kenneth Fearing to Bernard Perry, 21 February 1957 (Indiana File).

willing to be the cocktail pet of the middle-class sophisticates whom he has so often satirized, or can he give us more poems like his best earlier ones. . . ."[74] Fearing, like many other poets, worked within a limited poetic style; perhaps close analysis of the whole range of his poetic production will show that he was infinitely more varied than the reviewers have given him credit for having been.

If Fearing's style seemed consistent to most of his reviewers over the years, his themes seemed concrete. "In his sixty pages of poems Mr. Fearing has caught much of the modern city in his net of words."[75] However much the reviewers may have missed the nuances of tone or the variety of style in Fearing's poetry, they were always sure of his subject, the city.

> The world of Fearing is nothing if not metropolitan. . . . There is no relief or escape from the city, from the "profitable smile invisible above the skyscrapers," "the loud suburban heroes," "the lunch-box boredom," "the street that sleeps and screams" "where only desire and profit are real."[76]

And as critics of his style attacked him for his repetition, reviewers of his themes noted, "New York is a dead planet. And Fearing persists as the laureate of the lost."[77]

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[74]Lechlitner, Herald Tribune, p. 27.

[75]F. E. Hill, "Five Modern Poets," New York Herald Tribune Books, 28 July 1929, p. 10.

[76]Weldon Kees, "Fearing's Collected Poems," Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, 57 (January 1941), 265.

[77]"Laureate of the Lost," Chicago Sun Times Book Day, 6 September 1948, p. 48.

While most reviewers saw Fearing's themes as consistent, a few noted a subtle change in them. The change began with Collected Poems (1940) about the time that Fearing began to write his poetry almost exclusively for The New Yorker, about the time that he broke with the Left, and about the time that he began writing long fiction.

> There are 20 new poems, under the title "The Agency." With this Fearing indicates a growth: he has come from fearfully accurate, drearily expert and angry reporting of city life as individuals see it to a larger view of twentieth-century American mankind. This type is harried now by larger and more terrible enemies than boredom of streets and advertising.[78]

The actual subject matter of the poems in "The Agency" and the poems which followed it is not radically different from those that preceded them. What John Holmes felt as growth in the poet was probably the critic's sensitivity to change in America. The Proletarian Movement of the twenties and thirties was a cultural struggle centered almost entirely in New York, but the depression and later World War II made the pressing problems of New York the pressing problems of the whole country, and advances in electronic communications systems began to break down regional distinctions. All these factors served to make Fearing's verse seem to develop "a larger view of twentieth-century American mankind," and served to make the kind of spirited, ironic, questioning verse that had once been the staple diet of New Masses acceptable to The New Yorker.

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[78]Holmes, Boston Transcript, p. 11.

Much of the commentary about the poetry of Kenneth Fearing discussed in this chapter is perceptive, but it is also scattered and underdeveloped. While I am indebted to the writers of histories of literature, dissertations, book reviews, and obituaries (especially to M. L. Rosenthal), and while I synthesize and reprint below selections of the more perceptive critical comments, there remains a need to study the whole poetic career of Kenneth Fearing and a need to analyze Fearing's complete poetic works.

Considered as a whole, the published poetry of Kenneth Fearing comprises a great American Rhapsody, one man's enthusiastic, if sometimes highly critical, utterance about the America he knew. The focus of this paper will be an analysis of that poetry. The growth and decline of the poet's craft will be observed through a chronological discussion of his published poems (1922-1956), of the poems he never republished, and of the redactions he made in poems from one printed version to the next. The analysis will concentrate on Fearing's major themes; it will consider his use of images and the forms of his poetry. A great deal of effort has been expended compiling here for the first time a factual, but sketchy, public biography of the poet with an emphasis on the development of his poetic credo.

This work is divided into five chapters. The second chapter, "Coming to New York," will consider the background, education, development, and writing of the poet up to the publication of Poems (1935). Since in 1936 Fearing began to find an audience for his work outside the narrow leftist coterie of New York, that date is used to begin

the third chapter, "The Break with the Left," which will consider the problems of the Proletarian Movement in the late thirties, discuss Fearing's reaction to those problems, and analyze the poetry written during this time of stress and reevaluation which culminated with the publication of Collected Poems (1940).

With the publication of The Hospital (1939), Fearing began to turn toward fiction as a means of expression. He wrote two more novels after Collected Poems before his next volume of poetry, Afternoon of a Pawnbroker, appeared in 1943. Therefore, Chapter IV, "The Movement Away from Poetry," will consider Fearing's poetry published after the appearance of Collected Poems until he ceased writing poetry in 1956.

Chapter V, "Kenneth Fearing's American Rhapsody," will consider the whole of Kenneth Fearing's poetic career as the creation of an American Rhapsody to show that, although the voice of Kenneth Fearing is alien to the mainstream of American poetry, he has created an alternative poetic vision which may be able to provide a light along the endless urban hallway that is modern America.

CHAPTER II

COMING TO NEW YORK

Early Poems

Kenneth Fearing was born in Oak Park, Illinois in 1902. His father was Harry L. Fearing, a successful corporation lawyer in the city of Chicago,[1] and his mother, who deserted her husband when Kenneth was quite young, was Olive Flexner of the well-known Flexner family of New York.[2] As a youth Fearing attended the Oak Park public schools, wrote classical and romantic verse,[3] and then went to the University of Illinois. On March 14, 1923 he transferred from Illinois to the University of Wisconsin where he entered with fifty-eight credits toward a Bachelor of Arts degree.[4]

Fearing's academic interests at the University of Wisconsin were rather ordinary. He pursued a major in English literature. Of the twenty-one courses he took at Wisconsin, nine were literature courses--two in comparative literature and seven in English. His other courses were general courses in languages and the humanities.[5]

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[1] Kunitz, Twentieth Century Authors, p. 444.

[2] Horace Gregory, The House on Jefferson Street (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 121.

[3] "Microphone Girl," Newsweek, 38 (6 August 1951), 86.

[4] T. H. Hoover, Registrar, The University of Wisconsin, to James Ashbrook Perkins, 21 February 1972. This is one of a series of personal letters from various persons concerning Fearing gathered during research for this paper, hereafter called the author's file.

[5] Ibid.

During his undergraduate days he "was by no means unaware of E. E. Cummings, Wallace Stevens, and T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land."[6] He then "read the poetry of Sidney Lanier with distaste, the poetry of E. A. Robinson with sustained admiration, and the monthly numbers of H. L. Mencken's Smart Set with undisguised enjoyment."[7]

> At the University of Wisconsin, undergraduate literary circles were divided between those who read The Dial (under Scofield Thayer's editorship) and those who read The Smart Set; Fearing read The Smart Set, but his friends (including Margery Latimer . . .) read The Dial.[8]

Fearing worked on the staff of the Wisconsin Literary Magazine, a student literary publication. He was an editor from February 1923 to June 1923 and was editor-in-chief from October 1923 to March 1924.[9] It was in the Wisconsin Literary Magazine that Fearing's poems first saw light. He published ten imitative verses, only two of which, "Moral" and "Moral (OP 2)," he later republished. Investigation of these ten early poems confirms the fact that Fearing read "the poetry of E. A. Robinson with sustained admiration." Fearing's portrait "Scottwell" reminds the reader of many of the sharper portraits of Robinson.

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[6]Gregory, A History of American Poetry, p. 464.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid. While at Wisconsin Fearing met and became friends with Margery Latimer, the short story writer, who later used him as the model for one of her characters in the novel, This Is My Body.

[9]J. Frank Cook, Director, University of Wisconsin Archives, to James Ashbrook Perkins, 21 February 1972 (Author's File).

Scottwell could project his soul
Into incredible grandeur
In five minutes dreaming.

Unfortunately, he could also
Watch the sublime trajectory of himself
From the ground.

That is why Scottwell shot himself--
With a superb, ironic frown,
And an apologetic giggle.[10]

These early poems also indicate that Fearing was experimenting with poetic forms. The poems include a "Villanelle of Marvelous Winds," two variations on the Italian sonnet, "Sonnet to a Prominent Figure on the Campus" and "Blair and Blair's Friends," "Secret," which is written in triplets, as well as a few brief experiments with free verse, "Ashes" and the two Morals. Perhaps the best of these early poems, which as a whole are not spectacular, is "Ashes," which foreshadows Fearing's own gift at the acid portrait more than it suggests his avid reading of Robinson.

A cigarette burning--
The paper curls back, and disappears,
Revealing delicate, finely-wrought flakes and strands
Of grey ashes.

Hampton's face was like that--
Life had stripped it stark
And left intact the old lines of himself--
Grey ashes.

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[10]The first serial publication of this poem is located in the Bibliography. The reader should check both the Bibliography and the Appendix under the title of each subsequent Fearing poem cited in the text. Many of the poems discussed in the early part of this chapter will appear only in the Bibliography because they only appeared serially. Beginning with the analysis of Angel Arms the text cited, unless otherwise noted, will be the first text printed in book form located in the Appendix.

As editor-in-chief of the Wisconsin Literary Magazine, Fearing attempted to raise the magazine above its traditional accepted standard of campus mediocrity. His opening editorial set the tone of his campaign:

> Rearward and rearward, as far as memory and old copies of the magazine on file in the library extend, with every first number of the school year--a declaration of the general aimlessness and heaven remitted policy of the Lit. This year's high intent then, to be as abrupt as possible, is to war on stupidity, and to publish good literature without succumbing to mere literary sogginess.[11]

The brunt of Fearing's critical attack was leveled against "poems by sophomore women and whimsical essays by graduate students in theosophy" which were likely to contain "sentiment."[12]

The introduction of unconventional writing and the attack on the sentimental view of poetry did not go unnoticed on the Madison campus. By the time the third issue of the Lit appeared, its editor-in-chief was in the middle of a literary war attempting to explain the position of the new writers.

> Come now two or three writers in our first Lit who strike the same theme, same details, same canvass--but in an entirely different manner of procedure. They are not working with the blunted weapons of an established school, but with the sincerity of their own urges and artistic theory. Result: Such writing is--at first introduction--vividly alive and convincing.[13]

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[11] Kenneth Fearing, "Fog-Bound," The Wisconsin Literary Magazine, 23 (October 1923), 10.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Kenneth Fearing, "Fog-Bound," The Wisconsin Literary Magazine, 23 (December 1923), 10.

It seems that as early as December 1923 Kenneth Fearing realized that the true artist must create his own poetics and not depend on those handed down to him. His stay at Wisconsin and his major in English seem to have convinced him that literature was dead in the groves of academe and that "the future of American letters" lay with the writers in New York.

> That the least dirty-collared column-a-week hack in New York carries more weight in casting the future of American letters than the average hosts of professorial dignitaries, their Great American Novels (infinitely unpublished), and mighty dramas (undramatized) buried in old trunks, and with their official ignorance of a "Laus Veneris" or a "cynara"--consoles.[14]

Brief biographies of Kenneth Fearing usually state that his poetic career was launched when he won a fifty-dollar poetry prize at the University of Wisconsin.[15] Fearing did win a prize at Wisconsin, "the William F. Vilas First Prize for Essays,"[16] for an essay in appreciation of the poet James Gibbons Huneker.[17] He was probably introduced to the works of Huneker by Vincent Starrett, a Chicago journalist and bibliophile, "who loved to wander through old bookstores

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[14] Ibid., p. 11. Fearing's contempt for universities did not dull with age. His most searing prose satire, "A Note on a Note in Poetry," Tiger's Eye, 8 (15 June 1949), 10-13, holds up English departments in general and explicators in particular to the light of ridicule.

[15] See, for example, "Kenneth Fearing, Author Was 59," The New York Times, 27 June 1961, Sec. L, p. 33; "Feverish," Time, 34 (4 September 1939), 52; James Nelson, "Introduction," in Kenneth Fearing, The Big Clock (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968).

[16] Hoover to Perkins, 21 February 1972 (Author's File).

[17] Gregory, A History of American Poetry, p. 464.

in the city, rediscovering 'buried caesars' among forgotten poets and prose writers."[18]

Before and during college, Fearing was himself for a brief time a reporter as well as a salesman and a millhand,[19] and he enjoyed visiting Starrett, whom Horace Gregory calls "Fearing's first teacher,"[20] and his co-editor Otto McFeely to discuss poetry. Vincent Starrett remembered those early visits: "Certainly we had many, long talks together; he used to sit up half the night with me talking poetry."[21] Starrett describes the Kenneth Fearing that he knew as "a sad-eyed, unpublished, minor poet,"[22] who gave a great "impersonation of a tavern poet of genius"[23] and recalls that Fearing sometimes showed his own verse to McFeely and him. Those ". . . early poems were not at all like the poems we now associate with the name Kenneth Fearing. They had to do with 'silver dragons in the rain' and suchlike fancies."[24]

It was Otto McFeely who suggested that Fearing go to New York,[25] and Fearing, threatened by his father with a career in the law,[26] did

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.; Kunitz, Twentieth Century Authors, p. 444.

[20] Gregory, A History of American Poetry, p. 464.

[21] Vincent Starrett, Born in Chicago: Chapters from the Chicago Renascence (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 221.

[22] Ibid., p. 217.

[23] Ibid., p. 195.

[24] Ibid., pp. 220-21.

[25] Ibid., p. 221.

[26] Ibid., p. 220.

go to New York shortly after his graduation from the University of Wisconsin in 1924.

In New York in 1924 Kenneth Fearing at age twenty-two voted for president for the first time. Perhaps to underline his break with his middleclass background, perhaps because he was impressed by a fellow mid-westerner, perhaps because he sincerely believed in the Progressive Party platform, Fearing forecast his later socialist leanings by voting for Robert M. LaFollette, Jr.[27] But Fearing's basic interest in New York in 1924 was in staying alive and writing. His dedication impressed a fellow writer.

> Perhaps no poet of Fearing's generation has devoted himself so exclusively to the demands of "free-lance" writing in New York than he. When he arrived in New York from Wisconsin in 1924, he had the youthful charm and something of the appearance of a latter-day Ernest Dowson; his early efforts at writing novels and short stories for a living were never attended by great success. But he never relaxed his determination to earn his living by writing alone.[28]

Once in New York, Fearing was introduced by his college friend Margery Latimer to Horace Gregory, who had left the University of Wisconsin the year Fearing entered.[29] Gregory remembers those early days:

> She and Fearing were great friends; they shared at least one meal of the day, and when we walked out arm-in-arm, they made an incongruous, if not uncharming pair. Fearing's dress was shabbily urbane: he was thin, dark-haired, dark-skinned, and a cigarette hung from his lower lip; his brown eyes gazed

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[27]Kunitz, Twentieth Century Authors, p. 444.

[28]Gregory, A History of American Poetry, p. 465.

[29]Gregory, Jefferson Street, p. 120.

> at the world through hornrimmed owlish eyeglasses. Though tall as she, beside her he looked like a bright, naughty, small boy being led away from the pool hall by a protective parent.[30]

Fearing's first success in publishing poetry after leaving Wisconsin was not in New York but in The Double Dealer, a little magazine in New Orleans which has the questionable distinction of having also published Ernest Hemingway's first professional poetry.[31] The Double Dealer published two of Fearing's poems, "Moral (Op. 1)" and "Moral (Op. 2)," in its November/December issue in 1924. These two poems had appeared previously in The Wisconsin Literary Magazine, but they represent Fearing's first professional publication of poetry.

Horace Gregory suggests that Fearing's early success in publishing, as well as his own, was due to a misconception held by New York editors. "It was she [Margery Latimer] who persuaded editors of magazines to print his poems, as she did for me, while the editors, not thinking of the poems they accepted, thought of the girl, and were certain that she wrote them, and that my name and Fearing's were her pseudonyms."[32] During his first years in New York, 1924 through 1928, Fearing published poetry in a number of small magazines. Although he published a number of poems in the New Masses, no single periodical

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Frederick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen and Carolyn F. Ulrich, The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1946), p. 13.

[32] Gregory, Jefferson Street, p. 120.

dominated this period of his serial publishing career as later the New Masses and Partisan Review dominated his middle years and The New Yorker dominated his later years as a poet. He placed one poem in The New Yorker in 1926 and four in Poetry in 1927, but most of the periodicals that published the early poetry of Kenneth Fearing, Menorah Journal for example, are now lesser known.

Albert Halper, in whose memoirs a glimpse of Fearing's early days in New York can be caught, met Fearing at a staff party in the offices of Menorah Journal.

> Next to me sat Kenneth Fearing silently chainsmoking cigarettes down to their ends. Born in Oak Park, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, he said at last, neighborly,
>
> "Welcome to the fold, Halper. How long you been east?"
>
> "Five, six months."
>
> "I've been here two years."
>
> Lighting a cigarette, Fearing lapsed into silence. Thin and pale, taciturn and with a dry wit, he looked about the table balefully.
>
> "I hear you're one of Cohen's [Elliot Cohen, editor] favorites," he muttered out of the corner of his mouth. Then he locked himself up tight for the rest of the evening.[33]

Being one of the editor's favorites was important in those early lean years. It meant a chance to write book-reviews for which the reviewer was paid, and it meant getting a review copy of the book, which he could later sell. Fearing wrote reviews for the Menorah Journal and other magazines, but his main sources of income during his early years

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[33]Albert Halper, Good-bye, Union Square: A Writer's Memoir of the Thirties (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), p. 43.

in New York were commercial work and pulp stories written to help him stay alive. He took a humorous look at the business of trying to write poetry for a living in a little parody of "The House that Jack Built" called "Business as Usual," which appeared in The New Yorker in 1926:

This is the poet
Who wrote the sonnet
And was paid three dollars
And sixty-five cents.

This is the artist,
The man who has drawn it
(For twenty-five bucks)
A margin of nymphs--
The nymphs in the sonnet
That earned three dollars
And sixty-five cents.

Here is the printer
Who published the page
(Clearing upon it
A hundred or so)
Of nymphs, and the sonnet
That earned three dollars
And sixty-five cents.

This is the empty
Bottle of gin
That cost three dollars
And sixty-five cents
That enabled the poet
To write the sonnet
That earned three dollars
And sixty-five cents.

When Fearing's poetry first appeared in the New Masses, a note on the contributors stated that Fearing's work had previously appeared in Telling Tales and Whiz Bang.[34] These two pulps, one the famous

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[34] "Notes on Our Contributors," New Masses, 11 September 1926, p. 3.

Captain Billy's Whiz Bang, are typical of the outlets that Fearing found for his short fiction. For Fearing, pulp writing was evidently not a serious interest but a means of living. He told Albert Halper, who later used Fearing as the model for Jason Wheeler, the drunken poet in Union Square, "Anytime you want to earn an easy buck, let me know. I'll introduce you to a couple of Street & Smith boys, they pay a cent a word upon acceptance."[35] Fearing summed up his early writing career in Manhattan when he told Time that it "consisted of writing verse and pulp stories, of writing home for money."[36] Halper remembers Fearing in those hard days:

> Now and then, walking along 14th Street in the evening I met Kenneth Fearing, a cigarette invariably dangling from his lip. He always greeted me casually and looked at me warily. Though he was grinding out fiction for the pulps to make his rent, his poetry, published in the small magazines, continued to be as true, as steely as ever.[37]

As early as 1927 word of Kenneth Fearing's "true and steely" poetry was getting around. Edmund Wilson in an article, "The Muses Out of Work," made what is probably the first published critical reference to Fearing's poetry:

> . . . I should like to call attention to the very individual work of Mr. Kenneth Fearing which has been appearing in the New Masses. Mr. Fearing seems the most promising hard-boiled poet of the younger generation. He has an original flavor and accent and what seems a true intensity. One hopes that he will soon publish a book.[38]

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[35]Halper, Good-bye, p. 92.

[36]"Feverish," p. 52.

[37]Halper, Good-bye, p. 92.

[38]Edmund Wilson, "The Muses Out of Work," The Shores of Light (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, Inc., 1952), p. 205.

Prior to the 1929 publication of Fearing's first book Angel Arms, his publisher Coward-McCann published Our Singing Strength: An Outline of American Poetry 1620-1930, in which the author Alfred Kreymborg praised the "blunt poems" of Kenneth Fearing "directly concerned with the evils and buncombe of Manhattan."[39] Kreymborg compared Fearing's work to that of Dorothy Parker and Samuel Hoffenstein, and said that "these brilliant journalists have been surpassed by such poets as J. M. March, and the lesser known Kenneth Fearing."[40]

Fearing was aware of his status as "the lesser known Kenneth Fearing." In 1929 his friend Margery Latimer got several publishing offers from firms that had once rejected her work. She was inclined to refuse their present offers, but Fearing argued against rejection; as she reports in a letter to a friend: "Kenneth says very bitterly that I'm not successful enough to be so high hat about it. . . ."[41]

On the eve of the publication of his first volume Kenneth Fearing may well have been bitter. Five years in New York had seen the publication of forty-two poems, but only sixteen of them were considered good enough by Fearing to be published again in Angel Arms. More importantly, five hard years in New York had seen Kenneth Fearing begin to develop "an original flavor and accent and . . . a true intensity."

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[39]Alfred Kreymborg, Our Singing Strength: An Outline of American Poetry 1620-1930 (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1929), p. 619.

[40]Ibid., p. 584.

[41]Gregory, Jefferson Street, p. 123.

That Fearing came to New York with an already developed sense of irony can be seen in the first two poems he published professionally in The Double Dealer in 1924.

Moral (Op. 1)

It does no good
To call life a bad coin
And thump it loudly on the table.

Slip it to some one quietly
With pious fingers
Covering the hole.

Moral (Op. 2)

Read, as the dreamer reads,
Only between the lines.

Everything else is indubitably
A misprint, a devilish misprint.

These two poems, the only survivors from the published poetry of his college days, which Fearing never again republished, can serve as introductions to an understanding of Fearing's later poetry. Even during his closest affiliation with the Leftist movement (1929-1935), he did not write "agit-prop" poetry. There can be no doubt that he was concerned with life in America and with the values held by Americans, but he did not write tirades of denunciation like those which shared space with his poetry in the New Masses. His was a subtler craft. He preferred to assume an aesthetic distance from his subject greater than that possible for a writer of propaganda. He preferred to "Slip it to some one quietly / With pious fingers / Covering the hole." The second poem, which is almost an epigram, is perhaps even more important to an understanding of Fearing's life work. It shows an early example of the

mistrust of the printed word which culminated in his essay "Reading, Writing and the Rackets." It suggests that what has been written simply cannot be trusted, and it introduces a character, the dreamer, who appears again and again in the poetry of Fearing.

Before Fearing could use his sense of irony to his best advantage, it was necessary for him to go through a period of apprenticeship during which time his work was imitative and his subject matter was suggested by the poetry of the first two decades of the twentieth century. In themes the early poems vary from the story of a maddened lover who murders his beloved in "Carmichael,"[42] to a simple anti-war lyric in "Old Story," to complex and allusive cynical observations on history in "Hell," which pictures Danton, Marat, and Robespierre listening to Napoleon recount what he has done with the revolution.

The figurative language of the early poems is dominated by allusions to historical personages in "Hell," "Triumph," and "Night of the Jew," to mythological figures in "Medusa," "Rain," "Bracelet," and "My Mermaid," and to historical events in "Triumph" and "The Afternoon of Colonel Brady." Many of the early poems depend heavily on metaphor, but the metaphors are usually fresh and shocking and evidence an

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[42] This poem, except for the form, which is narrative instead of dramatic, reminds the reader of Browning's "Porphyria's Lover." Other echoes of Browning can be found in Fearing's work. "Readings, Forecasts, Personal Guidance," for example, presents a medium who distrusts his own profession and reminds the reader of "Mr. Sludge the Medium." Perhaps Browning's influence on the portrait and the dramatic monologue has been so pervasive that it can be easily overlooked; although several critics have linked Fearing to E. A. Robinson, none has noted the shadow of Robert Browning.

artistic mind already in search of alternative patterns of poetic expression. The third stanza of "Butterfly Arras," while untypical of Fearing's usual subject matter, is an example of his striking use of metaphor:

> It would take nine years to log
> The scarlet boats that go
> Away with wisps of fog
> Returning a flake of snow.

So tightly constructed is this description of autumn that the entire meaning of the stanza explodes only after the reader has solved the riddle of the metaphor describing the falling leaves.

Many of the figures of speech or patterns of imagery which were to become a distinctive part of Fearing's later poetry were already present in these early poems. Dreams and dreamers, life beneath the sea, the sky, the dark abyss, the night, mechanical voices, posters, and the street are all present in these poems but they are not in so clear a focus as they are in the later poems of Angel Arms, and they seem somehow intrusively out of place.

The form of the early poems is probably the most distinctively non-Fearing quality that they possess. Over half of the early poems are rhymed. One, "Medusa," is even in a variation of the Italian sonnet form. Most of these poems are dominated by a short line, but two, "George Martin" and "The Afternoon of Colonel Brady," preview the long verse paragraph, reminiscent of Whitman, which Fearing used almost exclusively in his later work.

In some of the early poetry there is a voice so unlike the later Fearing as to be unrecognizable. In "Alan Strache" Fearing

describes a falcon:

> The falcon is a star that broods of plunder
> Or he wakes, and pivots to the spire of height.
> Space gathers and spins under his cold rise,
> The spread of his wing is a cry of wonder.
> . . . . . .
> The falcon, who is the javelin's edge of flight,
> A vertigo unleashed by silent skies.

The falcon, a bird out of the middle ages or the poetry of Yeats or Hopkins, was surely not germane to the ghettos and garrets of the New York of the late twenties. The city, its people, and its effect on the people were to emerge as the major themes of Fearing's poetry, but for a while he still wandered in the twilight realm of imitation where a poem entitled "Rain" could begin "Dragons love the world of rain."

In this early poetry, despite the rhymes and allusions, there are lines and images that foreshadow the later Fearing. The shadows and the darkness that permeate Angel Arms are present as is the recognition that the tinsel of the advertising world is a bright facade to a world of "thin cries" and "numb pain." Two poems, "Death and Transfiguration of Fourteenth Street" and "George Martin," both published in the New Masses, capture "The malign anemic whoop of Fourteenth Street," the "Fear and death and money and rags"; but the first is highly allusive and the second lacks the control of Fearing's later portraits.

Finally, in two of these early poems can be seen a suggestion of the direction of the artistic struggle within Kenneth Fearing as he sought to arrive at a subject matter, a point of view, and a style

wholly his own. The first poem, "Anton Rubin, Artist," is a portrait in the form of an interior monologue. Both forms, the portrait and the interior monologue, were later used extensively by Fearing, but what is said or suggested in this poem is as important as the form.

> In me slumber the strong secrets
> That play behind all men and dreams.
> The royal desires and bleak regrets
> Men walk among bewilderedly--
> Slumber in me in broad streams,
> Immaculate, and warm, and free.
> Prison'd in sleep, they slip away,
> Yet I will waken them, some day.
>
> What will the people think of me?--
> My forms, to mirror and transcend
> The pathos and stark futility
> Bred in the hollow of all bone?
> Calm rivers I must knot and bend
> To strange, bright shapes that are my own . . .
> Horizons I shall re-create . . .
> Will they applaud me? . . . Call me great?

Fearing used the artist as a persona again and again. Here the artist recognizes that his subject will be the "pathos and futility," "The royal desires and bleak regrets," that are a part of all men; and he realizes that to "mirror and transcend," his forms must be strange, bright shapes that are his own.

The second poem, "Old Men," a descriptive narrative portrait, can be juxtaposed to the positive statement of "Anton Rubin, Artist."

> They are the raw, monotonous skies,
> The faded placards and iron rails
> Passed by in narrow streets of rain.
> Theirs are the indistinct thin cries
> Heard in a long sleep that fails
> In strange confusion and numb pain.

But old men have their deep dreams
They follow on quiet afternoons
At intervals, through distant streets.
Their lives come near them in warm streams
Of tonic hope. And orange moons
Shine magically on stark defeats.

By the time he wrote this Kenneth Fearing had discovered the power of the city and its force of life. He was content to let the old men dream on and to follow "At intervals through distant streets." He had discovered that his own poetic path lay not in the dreams of old men but in the present on the streets of New York. He could not accept their "tonic hope," their "orange moons," their "stark defeats"; he had to challenge the past in America both in life and in poetry both content and form.

Fearing recounted the moment of his poetic conversion for a Newsweek writer in 1951. The amount of detail in the story indicates that it is probably true; certainly it explains, at least in part, his change from highly imitative to ruggedly individualistic poetry, but it has some of the characteristics of a well-plotted story designed to answer the inevitable question: What caused you to turn to the city as a metaphor for the expression of your ideas?

> One day he was walking along Bank Street near the Ninth Avenue El, polishing in his mind the last two lines of a sonnet about Caeser's centurions, when an El train roared overhead, and this sudden intrusion of contemporary reality on his classical mood led him to determine to give up formal verse from that moment thenceforth, and to work on something closer to the life of the times.[43]

43"Microphone Girl," pp. 86-87.

The noise of the El train then, according to Fearing, turned him away from poetry that "had to do with 'silver dragons in the rain' and such-like fancies," and turned him toward "the vigorous satirical verse by which he is now remembered."[44]

Fearing's break with poetic convention was not unique. As Charles A. Beard noted in America in Mid-passage, many of the writers of the late twenties turned away from the themes and forms that had dominated and sustained literature during the first two decades of the twentieth century in America.

> "Contact with life"--with the vernacular, perduring or ever renewed--was the clue to the new writing. In no corner of the literary world did writers wholly withdraw from this vitalizing relationship to copy old masters, refine, whittle, and polish inherited models, to play with convention and tradition in a spirit of literary affectation. Even when they resorted to what was recklessly and often falsely called "escapist" fiction, they did not shine entirely by reflected light.[45]

Two directions that the experiments in literature were taking in the New York of the late twenties are now known as Proletarian literature and Surrealism. Fearing's relationship to the Proletarian Movement in American literature has long been accepted and his relationship to Surrealism has been suggested, but neither has been examined critically.[46]

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[44] Starrett, p. 221.

[45] Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, "Mainsprings and Ranges of Letters," America in Mid-passage (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939), p. 664.

[46] Kahn, p. 138.

That Kenneth Fearing wrote proletarian literature there can be no doubt.[47] Likewise there can be little doubt that many of the poems in Poems have in them what Edward Dahlberg called "Marxian insights."[48] But evidence of a party membership or of close ideological ties between the Communist Party and Fearing are wholly circumstantial. Jason Wheeler, the fictional ex-poet of Albert Halper's Union Square, is also referred to as an ex-communist.[49] This is perhaps only a fictional link, but it is a fact that Fearing associated with the staff of the Menorah Journal and was himself on the staff of both the New Masses and Partisan Review. Whether or not Kenneth Fearing was at one time a party member is less important than that he, like other good writers, did not let his political feelings or the ever-changing literary ideals of the party influence his work. Phillip Rahv attested to this in a re-evaluation in 1939:

> The better writers, of course, such as Josephine Herbst, Grace Lumpkin, Robert Cantwell, and Kenneth Fearing avoided these fantasies by sticking to what they knew. But proletarian literature as a whole, here and abroad, followed the party in predicting and celebrating the victory of the revolution in a period when it was actually losing every battle.[50]

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[47] Unless, of course, one believes that there is no such thing as proletarian literature. Allen Tate, Sixty American Poets 1896-1944 (Washington: Library of Congress, 1954), p. 41, said, "If there could be a proletarian poetry, Fearing would write it, and it would be poetry."

[48] Dahlberg, "Introduction," p. 11.

[49] Albert Halper, Union Square (New York: The Viking Press, 1933), p. 61.

[50] Rahv, "Proletarian Literature," p. 624.

There is a little of the "shoulder to shoulder" comradism of Marxism in Poems, especially in the long poem "Denoument [sic]," and there are proletarian sympathies evident in some of the poems of Angel Arms, especially in "Ballad of the Salvation Army," the poem that Jason Wheeler hums throughout Union Square. For the most part, however, Fearing's proletarian sympathies are submerged in an attempt to deal with what he knows, the city.

Kenneth Fearing's association with Surrealism both predated and survived his association with the Proletarian Movement. While at the University of Wisconsin he wrote, "We should not doubt the allotted events of life; our realities come. Only the way we have gnawed, gnawed, gnawed at them before they come, with teeth of dreams and anticipation--until our realities assume grotesque proportions, and often the qualities of total unrealities."[51] The Surrealists' interest in dreams, in the dream world, and in the nature of reality became a constantly recurring theme in Fearing's poetry. Their concern about the way things (machines, possessions, and institutions) destroy man became a consuming passion with Fearing.

After the brief liaison between Surrealism and Communism in the early thirties, after both forces had spent their energy in American poetry,[52] Fearing continued to refine this single theme of Surrealism.

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[51] Fearing, "Fog-Bound," October 1923, 11.

[52] Surrealism in American poetry is most evident in the work of Kenneth Patchen, who was writing for the New Masses and Partisan Review at the same time Fearing was associated with those magazines.

Even his last poems "Family Album" decry the fate of the individual caught in the merciless hands of the institution; but by 1956, the institution, which undergoes many changes throughout Fearing's career, has become The American Investigation, McCarthyism.

Surrealism and the Proletarian Movement were both forces active in literature in New York during the late twenties and early thirties. Kenneth Fearing was no doubt influenced to some extent by both, but the greatest influence on his work was the city itself.

Angel Arms

The city and the effect of the city on the people living in it are the themes of Kenneth Fearing's first volume of poetry, Angel Arms, but he does not approach the subject in a simple descriptive way. Rather he portrays the dichotomy between appearance and reality in Life in the City, the dichotomy "between American reality and the romantic dreams manufactured and sold across commercial counters,"[53] the dichotomy between the glamor of advertising and the tawdriness of lives lived. This dichotomy creates a tension which each of Fearing's characters must deal with, alone. The book is peopled with characters who, whether oblivious to the dichotomy, escaping from it, or struggling against it, are alone. Two of the poems in Angel Arms, "Green Light" and "Nocturne," seem to capture this dichotomy in broader terms than the other poems. Both poems are permeated by an aura of unreality or surreality. "Green Light" develops this unreal aura through the indirection

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[53]Hicks, The Great Tradition, p. 325.

of predicate sentences,[54] while "Nocturne" describes a world "steeped in ether" and "motionless vapor."

Because of Fearing's use of predicate sentences, the reader is never sure what the subject of "Green Light" is. Only actions are presented, and actions without subjects, actions without objects are meaningless.

> Bought at the drug store, very cheap; and
> later pawned.
> After a while, heard on the street; seen in the
> park.
> Familiar but not quite recognized.
> Followed and taken home and slept with.
> Traded or sold. Or lost.

Whatever it is that is "Familiar but not quite recognized," it is "Strange and yet ordinary / Sad, but true." It is Life in the City that Fearing captures in "Green Light." He captures the dichotomy of its glamor and its violence, of its appearance and its reality, and he captures the meaninglessness created when the people of the city try to buy or sell, love or hate, or simply understand it.

"Nocturne" presents an unreal city[55] that contains no sound, no motion, no heat, a city that is endless and changeless in a night that does not end, in a night where "There is no time." There are men in the city, but they are not of the city; they are not its builders. They

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[54]Rosenthal, "Chief Poets," p. 260.

[55]Although Fearing is alone among modern American poets in his constant depiction of the city, others have dealt with the idea of the "unreal city," especially and importantly T. S. Eliot in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and in "The Waste Land." Both Eliot and Fearing, no doubt, derived the concept from Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du Mal.

stare at it like those first explorers must have stared at the great pyramids, and they know they are not part of it. "Men cough and walk away."

Fearing, interested in the tension created by the dichotomy of Life in the City, presents three general patterns of response to the tension in Angel Arms: Acceptance, Escape, and Struggle. Nuances are created within the treatment of each of these responses by the author's shifting distance from his subject and by the characters' shifting awareness of the situation in which they are caught.

Minnie Spohr, in the poem "Minnie and Mrs. Hoyne," lives in the present and actively accepts the reality of her drab world of mops and pails. She has her own set of values: "Get the money!" and she does not understand people who do not believe that a street is what it appears to be. Hard-headed and insensitive, Minnie Spohr believes that politicians, advertisers, lovers, and poets are "Crazy liars, all of them. . . ." Universal progress is a myth to Minnie; like McTeague's wife in Frank Norris' novel, Minnie has contracted her life and her human possibility into a rapture of acquisitive emptiness, and "She could die laughing sometime, / Alone in the broom closet on the forty-third floor." It is the ultimate irony that Minnie Spohr denies society's illusions but craves its chief illusion, money.

The persona of the poem, "Now," like Minnie Spohr, sees the dichotomy between appearance and reality, and like Minnie he actively accepts what he believes to be an illusionless life:

Now that we know life:
Breakfast in the morning; office and theatre
and sleep; no memory,
Only desire and profit are real;
Now that we know life in our own way,
There is no war, no death.

While the reader was protected from the nihilism of Minnie Spohr by the objectivity of Fearing's portrait and by the marked delineation of her social class, these barriers are removed in "Now" by Fearing's use of a second person narrator whose routine is vaguely middle class.

The persona accepts the public pronouncements that Minnie branded a pack of lies. "There are no doubts, no terrors, and we make no mistakes." He recognizes that there is a past, but he lives in the present. "There is a forest of bones in the earth but above it, now there is peace." For this Fearing character The War To End All War is a fait accompli, and he portrays the world in psychopathic miniature:

The world is quiet and green.
Bubbles rise in the waters of swamps.
Bubbles of gas rise and break among the reeds.
The reeds are green.

He does not pause to reflect that the bubbles of gas rising in the swamps must be caused by the decaying past.

The decaying past, "deep canyons choked with men," haunts the first person narrator of "The Drunken Fly," who accepts the spiritual defeat implicit in the dichotomy of Life in the City in a highly imagistic soliloquy.[56] The soliloquy is a description of the city at

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[56]Rosenthal, "Chief Poets," p. 267, accepts the "fly" of the title as "the image of the poet as a drunken fly that is the helpless creature of all impressions that happen along. . . ." While the "fly" is obviously a poet, Rosenthal's leap to the metaphorical level avoids

night. "Only silence lives at night, / Silence and fear." There is "something warm as melody / Ringing through distant streets." These distant streets are the past that Fearing described in "Old Men," but there is no tonic hope for the drunken fly; he "cannot go near" the "something warm as melody" because he is blown by the wind of the present.

> Then there is nothing, anymore
> But rags and bits of glass in corners,[57]
> And the sound of dust
> Softly raining on an iron door.

The most positively presented character in Fearing's gallery of those who accept the dichotomy of Life in the City is Harry, the lover in the four part poem "Aphrodite Metropolis." He is not introduced until the second part of the poem. The first section sets the scene for love in the city and establishes that the modern offspring of the goddess of love are "Hydras . . . / Fabulous with misery, / Searching love in the steppes of night, / Or among their Lorelie."[58] Harry, who may remind the reader of Eliot's Sweeney, rejects poetic seduction:

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the connotative suggestion of "barfly" implied by the juxtaposition of the word "drunken." It also overlooks the fact that this poem was first printed under the title "Nathan Schaffrin."

[57]It should be noted that the scavenger "fly" to some extent parallels the rat in T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men." Fearing used the rodent image several times in Angel Arms, and both poets seize upon broken glass as an image for the destruction of human ambitions.

[58]Fearing changed the order of these four sections after their first serial publication. Originally the first section appeared third and acted as a contrast to the unromantic seduction in section four. By moving it to the beginning, Fearing created a frame through which the poem achieves a unity as a contrast between old-fashioned, romantic love and love in the city.

> Harry loves Myrtle--He has strong arms
> from the warehouse,
> and on Sunday when they trolley to emerald
> meadows he doesn't say
> "What will your chastity amount to when your
> flesh withers in a little while?"

He and Myrtle read the Sunday paper. Harry does not read the Ziggin's Ointment advertisment to Myrtle, although it is a fine twentieth-century advertising reduction of the carpe diem theme.

> No, Harry says nothing at all,
> he smiles,
> and they kiss in the emerald meadows on the Sunday paper.

Love in the city must survive in bold juxtaposition to the illusions, so "Myrtle loves Harry" must be written ". . . on a bill-board that stands / under the yellow light of an 'L' platform / among popcorn wrappers and cigarette butts. . . ." Since love in the city is real, neither myth nor dream, Harry was not disturbed by the illusion of the lights of Broadway or the beckoning of bell buoys in the dark bay beyond the night he ". . . got it from Myrtle / in a room. / Harry was nobody's fool."

In contrast to these creatures, who are to a greater or lesser extent aware of the emptiness of Life in the City and who accept it, Fearing presents a range of characters who are passive victims of meaninglessness. The second person narrator of "Andy and Jerry and Joe" recounts the futile attempt of four men to fill up an evening. The cold wind of the present buffets the four men on the corner, as it did the fly. Although there are hints of a world beyond, "There were liners at sea . . . and songs in the halls," although

There were a million stars, a million miles, a
million people, a million words,
A million laughs, a million years.

the four men stand on the corner and wait ". . . staring at the bottles in the restaurant window," and ". . . looking at the women on the boulevard." Dulled by the meaninglessness of their existence, the narrator concludes, "We didn't know what we wanted and there was nothing to say. . . ."

A similar portrait of futility is found in "They Liked It." Here Fearing presents a group of men entertaining themselves by watching the lights of the city coming on. As they watch the streets below light up "Like topaz necklaces on black silk," Blake retells, in variation, a story about his attempts to seduce a Swedish whore who will have nothing to do with him. The men listen; then one of them breaks into the narrative:

"You lying half-wit, the last time you told that
story the girl was a wop.
Before that she was Irish.
Make her a nigger next time."

The men know that Blake is lying, but he at least has the imagination to lift them for a moment out of themselves. They do not want him to stop telling the story, for he at least, unlike Andy and Jerry and Joe, has something to say.

They liked to feel the city, away below them,
stretch out and breathe.
They liked the Metropolitan's red eye, and
Broadway.
They like to hear liners in the harbor scream
at the sky.
They liked it all.

Unlike Harry in "Aphrodite Metropolis," who was not interested in the lights of Broadway or the sounds of the bay, the men in "They Liked It" have found a sense of peace, a stay against meaninglessness, in the repetition of Blake's imaginative lie and in the routine of watching the city's nightly struggle against the oncoming night.

The speaker in "Jake," a curious dramatic monologue in which the listener interrupts the speaker, pauses momentarily to reflect on the tawdriness of the routine of Jake's life and death; but he realizes "We all must come to it some day," and he accepts his part in the routine--"See you at Joe's next Saturday night." This acceptance of Life in the City is panoramically presented in "Saturday Evening."

Using the cinematic technique of montage, Fearing juxtaposes scenes of a night-clubbing couple, a prize fight in Madison Square Garden, and a political rally to present a kaleidoscopic picture of the people in the city following routines of meaninglessness to avoid seeing that they are walking streets where "crowds have struggled and lied and screamed. . . ." Max and the lovely Charlotte are bored at the "Blue Swan," but they go on to the "Parakeet" to drive the dullness away. At "10:38 P. M. / Battling Bolinska sleeps on the canvas mat" before the packed house of delirious fight fans, and the entertainment of Senator Horgan's speech is over. "11:45 the great leveler" comes "On penny arcade and gin palace / And senator alike." It is raining as midnight approaches and the poet has to remind himself that to his characters "That is rain water on the shiny street / Not eyes, not blood, not fingers, nerves, rags, glass, bones. . . ." Saturday night rolls on

and Max and Charlotte "Roll on into the big silhouette of gaiety," but the dichotomy, of which the poet is aware, remains.

In one sense, the imaginative lie of Blake, the mad revels of Max and Charlotte, and the entertainments of the fights and the political rally are escapes, but Fearing presents in Angel Arms another group of poems that more clearly exposes characters who escape the dichotomy of Life in the City. They escape through drink, through madness, through sleep into a surrealistic world in which reality fades and illusions become more than real.

"Evening Song" presents a third person narrative portrait of a down-and-out bum named McKade who is falling to sleep on the pavement of Fifth Avenue. The narrator proposes a series of possible dreams to McKade. In the first, which is perhaps closest to reality, McKade is "a grey mouse under a tall building" running behind the walls. In the next dream scene he is urged to kill a lunatic and win a girl. Then it is suggested that he is a Wall Street broker, "a personal friend of the mayor," an acquaintance of the Queen of Roumania. How unlike Minnie Spohr, who laughed at the notion of Mrs. Hoyne meeting the Queen of France and, being practical, tried to get a pair of bloomers out of the absurdity. Finally, the narrator, who is aware of the absurdity of McKade's dreams says,

> Then go to sleep.
> Be a dog sleeping in the old sun.

Be a dog dreaming in the old sun by the
Appian Way.
Be a dog lying in the meadow watching soldiers
pass on the road.[59]

Here again Fearing presents a warm dream of a distant street dreamed by an old dog. McKade escapes into sleep, but even in sleep his dreams are punctuated by some of the standard Fearing images of ominousness, pursuit and darkness.

Feldman, the lover in the title poem "Angel Arms," escapes the dichotomy presented by the clash between the ideal and the real by dreaming of the ideal and living in his dream. He dreams of his girl, "The pure angel in his sleep, / With skirts blowing back over stark, bright thighs. . . ."[60] He dreams of "A Bible angel smiling up at him from a starched bed, / Telling him to be a good, pure Feldman. . . ." Unlike Harry in "Aphrodite Metropolis," Feldman is a Prufrock who places his woman on a pedestal and is unable to act. He can only imagine and plan.

Some day he is going to kill all the morons,
Be applauded by crowds,
Praised in the churches,
Cheered by the gang,
Be smiled upon by the little pink mouse, his faraway star. . . .

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[59]These lines are all that remain of Fearing's early poem "Triumph." That poem contained a narrative description of the return of the victorious Caesar's troops. In this poem Fearing uses the same marching army, but he shifts the point of view to that of an old dog sleeping in the sun, which reminds the reader of the dreamers in the afternoon sun in "Old Men."

[60]Fearing's only other use of the word "thigh" in Angel Arms is in the first section of "Aphrodite Metropolis," where he describes "Hydras from the matchless thigh / Of the smiling Aphrodite"; here the use seems parallel. The Bible angel that Feldman has dreamed up is as out of place in the modern city as the real Aphrodite would be in Metropolis.

In the meantime, he can only suffer "His smiling angel with her soft angel arms / Jerking the barbed wire caught in his bones."

The suffering of William Lowell in "Portrait" is, at least for a time, over. "William Lowell is drunk again," and through his drunkenness William Lowell escapes the "vacant streets," "the hundred forces seeking to destroy him," the "skulls following him in roaring tunnels. . . ." William Lowell in his drunkenness is convinced that "there are reasons for having lied and betrayed and cringed." There are reasons "for his thousand failures, vows, treacheries, lies, escapes. . . ."

Like William Lowell, the four men of "The Drinkers," drinking gin in Gonsetti's basement on McDougal Street, escape from "the street that sleeps and screams," from the "black, tremendous sky that crawls." They escape as the gin creates four new men in their brains who are beckoned by "a thing" from beyond the wall of Gonzetti's basement "To follow through streets, and nights, and days" to some new alcohol-inspired image of the future.

In "The Cabinet of Simplicity" Fearing presents the ultimate escape from the tension of Life in the City, "from violent streets." Doctor Barky (the name is perhaps a pun on Bishop Berkeley whose philosophy of the non-existence of matter is accepted in the poem), through a sequence of surrealistic scenes commits murder, dies and is reborn.

> These and other severe but pointless experiences
> Have whetted in Doctor Barky a need to arrange
> the world so that he can understand it,
> And still more, to create a fixed world.

What Doctor Barky creates is a cabinet, a magic box which projects the universe and reduces "life to its simplest terms-- / That is no dream." All this Doctor Barky does in a darkened room before an excited audience. The idea that the cabinet projects the universe and reduces life to its simplest terms before an audience in a darkened room suggests the art of the film. The title of the poem suggests a 1919 German film "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari." Both the film and the poem deal with a man of science gone mad; both employ surrealistic settings. In his cabinet Doctor Barky has collected the refuse of his life:

> Spices, gems, perfumes, fruit-rinds, nails,
> Mottos for all family occasions,
> A government investor's guide for the year 1857,
> And half a deck of playing cards said to have
> been used by John Brown
> On the night before he was hanged.[61]

These bits and pieces of the Life in the City, which could be the subjects of the predicate sentences in "Green Light," are placed in the cabinet, in "the mechanical heart that tames chaos." Doctor Barky leaves the "large upper-chest" empty "for the public's convenience." Barky is aware that the audience will bring bits and pieces of experience which they will place in the cabinet to interact with his. With this interaction the art will be complete, and art resolves all dichotomies:

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[61] Angel Arms appeared in 1929 at the tail end of the postwar economic boom. Fearing is suggesting the possibility of disaster by including "A government investor's guide for the year 1857." That year the nation was seized by an economic panic set off by land speculation. Also 1857 ties rather neatly to the next line since that was the year that John Brown led the first of his successful abolitionist raids in Kansas. Neither the guide nor the half deck of cards were very useful to those that owned them.

The doctor has finished.
He steps back into the shadows forever.
Tall candles burn before the magic box.
Inscrutable and still, the mechanical heart
draws into itself
The veins and arteries of chaos.
Earth, time, and space, with a gesture,
Are wound and set again in motion.

The audience then sits like the captives of Plato's cave and watches the artfully created reality. So long as they never leave the cave, so long as they accept the reality of the art, the chaos of the dichotomy of Life in the City is resolved. Ending the poem, Fearing parodies Whitman[62] and carries the surreality of art one step further:

Comrade, this is no poem,
Who touches this
Touches Doctor Barky's patented magic
cabinet of certified, strictly guaranteed
simplicity and truth.

In Angel Arms Fearing also presents many characters who reject and struggle against the dichotomy. Some of them are destructive; some are creative. Louie Glatz, "cross-ey'd Louie the rat," the protagonist in "St. Agnes Eve" has been denied his share in The American Dream. In an attempt to rediscover the lost America of equal opportunity, he "holds up the cigar store and backs out with $14.92." This new Columbus kills officer Dolan and then runs "like a crazy shadow on a shadowy street / With five policemen off that beat / Hot on his trail. . . ." Louie is killed by the police, and the lover foreshadowed in his American Dream on St. Agnes Eve is death. The promise of hope for adventure

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[62] Rosenthal, "Chief Poets," p. 276.

remains as "The vibrant throats of steam-ships hoot a sad defiance at distance and nothing." The promise, however, is not for Louie, whose "soul arose through his mouth in the form of a derby hat / That danced with cigarette butts and burned matches and specks of dust / Where Louie sprawled." Fearing maintains distance in this poem by using a cinematic technique. Interspersed throughout the narrative are the technical details of a shooting script which allow for quick transition and which suggest mood. "Soft music. Violins moan like weeds swaying far underwater."[63] "Close-up of Dolin's widow. Of Louie's mother. / Picture of the fly-specked Monday evening and fade out slow." The surreality of the "fly-specked Monday evening" is reinforced by the description of the gun fight that Peter Wendotti hears when he is awakened from his St. Agnes Eve sleep and rolls away from his wife "Listening to the stammering syllables of instant death / Met on secret floors in the big vacant galleries of night." Louie's death is not romantic; it is violent and real, but real only to Louie's mother and perhaps to Dolan's widow.

Likewise the death of Jack Knuckles is real only to Jack. The reader of "Jack Knuckles Falters But Reads Own Statement at His Execution While Wardens Watch" is presented Jack's verbatim statement, which is a denial of his guilt and a plea for another chance. Juxtaposed

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[63]Fearing often uses the image of life beneath the sea to suggest unreality. His use of it is not unlike that of T. S. Eliot in "The Waste Land" and in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," in which the drowned life is explored as a metaphor for the meaninglessness of modern industrial life.

against this pathetic narrative are the bare notations of a reporter whose job is to reduce the scene to the inoffensive headline of the title. The event will be tomorrow's headline, and then it will be forgotten. As Fearing tells the reader in "Nocturne," "Yesterday has shrunk to a news bulletin." Even as Jack approaches the electric chair, the reporter's mind wanders and he jots down a sentence of romantic escapism, "Will Roumania Prince wed again?" And even before the reader hears the end of Jack's statement, the reporter has written, "Smoke rolls from mouth as current kills." Jack's defiance serves only to jolt the reader and expose the simplistic approach that each man takes to troubles not his own.

The Proletarian Movement's simplistic approach to the problems of art is the victim of Fearing's irony in "Cultural Notes." After professor Burke's symphony "Colorado Vistas" is played, "snapshots of the localities described in music" are passed around and the audience checks for accuracy. This comic scene presents the nadir of the critical realistic approach to art, but Fearing enlarges on the scene by presenting an argument between "Maurice Epstein, twenty-nine, tuberculosis, / Stoker on the S. S. Tarboy," advocate for Max Nordau and "Otto Svoboda, 500 Avenue A, butcher, Pole, husband, philosopher," advocate of Karl Marx. In two rapid comical scenes it becomes clear that these two proletarian critics can measure anything, Professor Burke's symphony or a brief talk at the Browning Writing League, by their own limited view of art:

Otto Svoboda, butcher, Pole, husband, philosopher,
Spoke in reply: "Shut your trap, you!
The question is, what about Karl Marx?"

In opposition to this comic picture of what is done to art by social realism taken to its extreme by those who know only its catch phrases, Fearing asks quite seriously in "lithography" what the future of poetry will be. "Hey? Of what doth the noble poet brood / In a tragic mood?" The speaker in the poem leads up to that question by presenting a picture of the people of the proletariate on the march:

These are the live,
Not silhouettes or dead men.
That dull murmur is their tread on the street
Those brass quavers are their shouts.
Here is the wind blowing through the crowded square.

The dead hand of the past does not stay these crowds; they are not shadows. The revolution is coming.

Here is the violence and secret change.
And these are figures of life beneath the sea.

Under the sea, amidst the unreality of the dichotomy of Life in the City, there are real people possessed of "The heat and speed of the earth." The speaker exhorts the poet to creatively capture them and forget the "tragic mood."

John Standish in "John Standish, Artist" is aware of the dichotomy and well aware of the masses, the millions who are awake and "moving like a sea," the millions whose "wants are confused,[64] but implacable." John Standish realizes that theories about them such as Marxism are

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[64] See, for example, the futility and meaninglessness of the lives presented in "Andy and Jerry and Joe."

useless and that propaganda art based on them is not art. John Standish knows that if he is to survive, if he is ". . . to live, or be in the studios, / . . . be in the quiet halls and clubs; / Quiet at tea;"[65] he must "Pick one and follow him . . . screaming as he does . . . till he sleeps, and kill him with a stone."[66] The artist here chooses to ally himself, at least for a time, with the proletariat but he only mimics their screams; he does not accept responsibility for their implacable but confused wants, and ultimately he plans their murder. There is further distrust and distaste for the proletariate presented in Angel Arms in "Reveille," which pictures the masses, whose faces are not cooked enough, shrinking away from the "morning eye" of a new day. "They shrink from the sun's adroit rapier, / And the smoking street, a shattered torch." Even in "Ballad of the Salvation Army," which Jason Wheeler hums in the novel Union Square, the proletariat is viewed with suspicion. While "sweating angels split their throats, / Marching in burlap petticoats," God is reduced to "a ten car Bronx express," and "Heaven is a free amusement park."

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[65]This character is much like Eliot's Prufrock. It should be noted that however violent his plans, they are but plans designed to bring him peace so that he can continue to measure out his life in coffee spoons.

[66]Perhaps this poem exposes some of Fearing's feeling about his own association with the Proletarian Movement. The artist must involve himself with the proletariat if he is to be alive, but his involvement must be ultimately destructive. Fearing certainly followed the Proletarian Movement until it slept, but his break with it was not as overt or as violent as "John Standish, Artist" suggests. Certainly the New Masses did not read the poem in this light when they gave it first serial publication in 1928.

Far from being convinced of the value of the Proletarian Movement, Fearing in Angel Arms views it as another facet of what is occurring on the street, and it is viewed from the same ironic stance that the other facets are viewed. The street is the central image of reality or of the present in Angel Arms, yet Fearing is subtle enough to present variations on this theme. The street of the present may be a screaming street, a shadowy street, or a violent street. Often, as in "Green Light," Fearing introduces the blowing wind, the wind of the present, to make his image clear. In addition to the street of the present, Fearing also presents the "distant street," such as the one in "Old Men." The distant street represents the past. The future is represented by "endless streets" or, as in "Nocturne," by "corridors that have no end."

Past, present and future are also presented by Fearing through images of sound, heat and light. The past is associated with melody and warmth. There is the relaxation of old men dreaming in the sun; there is the tonic hope of magical orange moons; there, too, are the days of blue skies, when William Lowell was a "Child reaming under broad pillars of sunlight rising beyond the clouds." Fearing's present is generally dark, under a black sky that crawls; most of the poems of the present are set at night, but Fearing's present daylight sky is raw and monotonous. A cold wind blows through the street of Fearing's present. In "Nocturne" the endless night of the present is a cold blue, and the marble walls of the city are "blue, icy walls." Except for the screaming, the gun shots, and the hoots of the steam ships in

the harbor, which hold out promise to unattainable adventure and romance, Fearing's present is silent, for there is nothing to say. "Men cough and walk away."

The future, which in many poems is connected with the promise of the proletarian future, is presented in terms of brightness, the noise of bugles and the singing of comrades, and the heat of the morning eye, as in the poem "Invitation": "It will be morning when the air grows warm."

Often Fearing combines his images of sound, heat and light with his basic image, the street. For example, in "Reveille" he turns an ordinary street, an image of the present, into an image of the future by combining it with an image of the heat of the rising sun. "They shrink from the sun's adroit rapier, / And the smoking street, a shattered torch." In "Nocturne" he makes the future bleak by having the vapor of the present on the vacant street muffle the barren cries for the distance of the past and drain "the heatless lamps that stretch away forever" into the future. By making the lamps heatless and by having the mist of the present dim them, Fearing has created an image of a less promising future.

The image of the dream and the dreamer, the image of vapor, and the image of life beneath the sea are used by Fearing throughout Angel Arms to present the surrealism of the present and the basic absurdity of the dichotomy of Life in the City. In the poem "Invitation" Fearing makes a statement which could well be the motto of Angel Arms: "Here we will be urged by reality confused with dreams."

Shadows and silhouettes provide Fearing with another set of images to present the dichotomy between appearance and reality. Louie Glatz, in "St. Agnes Eve," "ran like a crazy shadow on a shadowy street." Max and the lovely Charlotte "Roll on into the big silhouette of gaiety" in "Saturday Night." In "Invitation," Fearing presents a woman who "walks with head turned back to watch the shadows following through dim streets." This line also contains the basic ingredients of another image that is so fully developed that it may be called a motif, the motif of following. This motif allows Fearing to bring ominousness into the present. McKade in "Evening Song" is both the follower and the followed as he is urged to "Follow the girl who beckons" and to "Run from the man with the dagger. . . ." Skulls follow William Lowell in "Portrait." The speaker in "John Standish, Artist" decides that he must follow and eventually kill one of the distressed millions. In "Green Light" the follower takes on more character and becomes "the agent" instead of just a nameless dread:

> Carefully observed one night by a secret agent
> of the Greek Hydraulic Mining Commission,
> in plain clothes, off duty.
> The agent, in broken English, took copious
> notes. Which he lost.[67]

Kenneth Fearing uses these images in Angel Arms and uses them consistently to expose to the reader the human fears and tensions

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[67]The agent, who makes his first appearance in this poem, becomes a central figure in Fearing's later poetry. Here the figure is humorous and reminds the reader of Kenneth Patchen's "Careless Little Spy," but later on in Fearing's work the agent becomes more and more ominous.

created by the division that exists between the American Dream and the reality of American life, between the advertising image of Life in the City and the reality of Life in the City.

Poems

The three years following the publication of Angel Arms were lean for America and even leaner for the poet, Kenneth Fearing. He published only seven poems through 1933, and these all appeared in leftist-oriented magazines. This decline caused his friend, Albert Halper, to describe Fearing fictionally as an ex-poet when he used him as the model for the character, Jason Wheeler, in the novel, Union Square, in 1933.

> Jason headed east, reached the tenement, and started climbing up the five flights of stairs to his quarters, "ex-poet's abode," as he jokingly wrote in his "memoirs," which were the backs of rejection slips he received from various magazines.[68]

It seems that Jason Wheeler was provided with a lot of paper stock for his memoirs by various publishers.

> Jason climbed the five flights to his room. One of the letters was a rejection from a sex-story magazine, the other was a second request from a non-paying poetry journal for material. Jason had stopped writing poetry over a year ago; he laid the letters aside.[69]

While the fictional Jason Wheeler gave up poetry and turned exclusively to grinding out sex-story magazine shorts to keep body and soul alive during the first terrible years of the depression, Kenneth Fearing was more diversified. He continued to write poetry, although he had little success with it, and he turned out sex stories for Street and Smith.

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[68] Halper, Union Square, p. 31.

[69] Ibid., p. 55.

In May of 1930, he became a contributing editor for the New Masses. He held that position, writing book and movie reviews until September 1933. He appeared on the editorial board of Partisan Review with the January-February issue in 1935 and became an associate editor with the February 1936 issue. His last appearance on the Partisan Review masthead was in June 1936.

Throughout this period Fearing continued his association with Elliot Cohen, the managing editor of the Menorah Journal, which "by the end of the 20's . . . had absorbed the radicalism that was beginning to influence other publications in New York."[70] The high water mark of the Menorah Journal "group's commitment to the communist cause came in 1932 when, together with many other intellectuals, most of the group supported the candidacy of William Z. Foster for president."[71] Kenneth Fearing, following the liberal political stance that he had taken in 1924 when he voted for LaFollette, was one of the New York intellectuals who voted for William Z. Foster, the Communist Party candidate.[72]

Another writer who was somewhere on the fringes of the leftist movement in literature was Edward Dahlberg. Dahlberg later bitterly denounced his former friends, who he thought had deserted him.

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[70]James Burkhart Gilbert, Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1968), p. 166.

[71]Ibid.

[72]Kunitz, Twentieth Century Authors, p. 444.

> My loneliness was impermeable; a Prometheus I was shackled to my buzzard. I had not one friend brave enough to stand alongside me except Alone. The Flock of Lasdicea who were neither hot nor cold and who had feigned to be my admirers--Edmund Wilson, Waldo Frank, Lionel Trilling, Horace Gregory, James T. Farrell, whom when obscure and hungry I had fed and helped, Kenneth Fearing, neglected and mourned by none, whom I aided to get published. . . .[73]

Dahlberg did manage the collection of money for Fearing's second volume of poetry, Poems (1935), but he remembers the event somewhat vaguely.

> Sol Funaroff, a young communist, and I published Fearing's first book of poems.[74] Funaroff designed the volume and took care of the type and I raised the money from editors of publishing houses and magazines.[75]

Dahlberg's job, raising money for a book of poetry during the depression, was a difficult one. He recalls a meeting with the leftist novelist Josephine Herbst.

> I met her one day when I was collecting money to bring out Kenneth Fearing's poems. She told me of her riches, adding that they had a large yacht. When she mentioned this, I asked her whether she couldn't give some money to help publish a book of verse by Kenneth Fearing. At that the yacht was reduced to a rowboat.[76]

Fearing's own comment on the publication of his second book of poems seems to be consistent with the struggle that Dahlberg recounts. He

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[73]Edward Dahlberg, The Confessions of Edward Dahlberg (New York: George Braziller, 1971), p. 252.

[74]It is difficult to determine why Dahlberg considered Poems Fearing's "first book of poems." In his "Introduction" to Poems, Dahlberg discusses in some detail Fearing's previous book Angel Arms.

[75]Dahlberg, Confessions, p. 282.

[76]Edward Dahlberg, Epitaphs of Our Time: The Letters of Edward Dahlberg (New York: George Braziller, 1967), pp. 197-98.

says simply, "my second [book of poems] bankrupted me."[77] Poems, the volume that resulted from Dahlberg's financial work and Funaroff's design, was to be the first of a projected series from Dynamo which would present the work of proletarian poets. The series was evidently not designed to reach the masses, as the first and only edition of Poems was limited to a thousand copies.[78] Poems contained nothing new for the avid Fearing reader. All twenty-one of the poems published in the volume had appeared in leftist-oriented little magazines in the greater New York area between 1930 and 1935. What Poems did provide was a compendium of the poetic development of the best poet writing proletarian verse in the mid-thirties.[79]

While in Angel Arms Fearing took as his theme the dichotomies present in Life in the City and presented three viable patterns of response to them, acceptance, escape, and rejection, in Poems he denies the first two patterns and adopts a more militant stance of rejection and struggle. This stance was no doubt fostered by his long association with leftist publications. Horace Gregory, discussing the state of revolutionary writing in America, wrote: "Fearing, from the very beginning of his career, has been a revolutionary in his intentions; so far as I know, the Communist Party and the activity surrounding it,

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[77]"Feverish," p. 52.

[78]Peter Monro Jack, "Books of Poetry," The New York Times Book Review, 3 November 1935, p. 15.

[79]Ibid.

has always been the source of his material."[80] The activity surrounding the Communist Party gave Fearing a stable point of view in Poems which he lacked in Angel Arms. In his first volume, he was a poet bringing Life in the City to the front page; in his second volume, he presents his material on the editorial page. But, in keeping with the advice given to young partisan writers by Joseph Freeman, Fearing's communist political leanings, however strong they may have been, are always subordinated to his art.

> "Stop thinking of yourselves," he [Freeman] said, "as poets who are also revolutionists or as revolutionists who are also poets. Remember that you are revolutionary poets. Then work hard at your poetry. The rest will follow.[81]

By adopting a stance Fearing was able to see his enemy more clearly in Poems, and his satiric attacks are not leveled against the nameless dreads of Angel Arms but against capitalism and against individuals within the system. But if these attacks are specific, the suffering that brings them on is general, for Fearing's "attention is focused on collective rather than individual man."[82] In his early poems and in Angel Arms Fearing repeatedly used the portrait form, polished to perfection by Edwin Arlington Robinson whose works Fearing openly admired. In Poems although there are brief, pointed, satiric biographical sketches of real people, Fearing does not use the portrait

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[80]Horace Gregory, "Revolution and the Individual Writer," Partisan Review, 2 (April-May 1933), 53.

[81]A discussion with Joseph Freeman quoted in Edwin Rolfe, "Poetry," Partisan Review, 2 (April-May 1933), 38.

[82]Rosenthal, "Chief Poets," p. 287.

form at all.[83] Individuals like Max, Charlotte, and Harry have become meaningless against the agony of the masses. In Poems Fearing presents a surrealistic gallery of general villains and victims.

The opening poem in Poems, oddly entitled "Conclusion," is an extended apostrophe, which along with the dramatic monologue is a form Fearing adopted with increasing frequency. In this form, as in the dramatic monologue, it is necessary to establish the speaker and the auditor. In "Conclusion" the speaker is a revolutionist, and he is speaking to an average, well-fed, middle-class, uninvolved citizen. This citizen might well be the persona of Fearing's earlier poem, "Now," who, having settled into his rut, is undisturbed by death and poverty. The revolutionist, employing a parody of The Lord's Prayer as a refrain, informs the citizen that his complacency makes him as guilty of death and poverty as the magnates and the killers. He suggests that on the intellectual level the citizen is an egalitarian, but on the emotional level he is a class-biased bigot:

> Always, more than wise, you will be found
> with the many resolved against the few;
> but you will be a brother, on second thought, to all men.

The revolutionist suggests that the citizen is indifferent to the millions, that he has to study to create an alarmed reaction to the horror depicted in the journals, that he is unconcerned by the lies told by the statesmen. In the last line, the reader discovers the reason for

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[83] Ibid., p. 288. Here Rosenthal suggests that "Dirge" is a portrait. It contains a portrait, but it is clearly a dramatic monologue.

the title as the revolutionist tells the citizen that he will be killed by the system and that because he has been placid for so long he will be unable to cry out against it even in death.' "You will be grateful for an easy death, your silence will praise them for killing you." The attack here is not directed against a person who is doing something that the revolutionist dislikes; rather it is directed against a person who is wasting his human potential, robbing himself of his individual freedom, by acquiescing to the system.

The same kind of citizens are spoken to in "Winner Take All." The dying, the bought judge, the unfaithful wife, the business failure all claim that they are innocent, that they had to do what they had to do. The speaker ironically consoles all of them by saying,

> . . . you are innocent of what has to happen,
> innocent, when they put you out on the street, when they
> look at you and laugh, when you grow old and fade
> away, when they strap you in the electric chair,
> tell them all you are innocent;
> What if they don't listen and there is no escape?
> Still you are innocent, and brave, and wise, and strong.

The lines quoted above remind the reader of Jack Knuckles' pitiful defense, and the irony of the last line is perhaps the strongest irony in Poems. Because they have been complacent, because they have held themselves innocent of the problems of their society, because they have played within the safe confines of the system, they are not innocent, brave, wise, or strong. They will be destroyed nonetheless.

The theme of the guilt of the complacent is continued in "1933," in which the revolutionist outlines the history of the year. He exposes again the statesman who lies and introduces a lady, perhaps Miss Liberty,

whose virginity is constantly "paid for, certified, and restored." With Du Pont stocks up, the revolutionist remembers the calls for disarmament. The whole poem shakes with the power and irony of John Dos Passos' portrait of the House of Morgan:

> (Wars and panics on the stock exchange,
> machinegunfire and arson,
> bankruptcies, warloans,
> starvation, lice, cholera and typhus:
> good growing weather for the House of Morgan.)[84]

Finally the revolutionist lays the blame for all the events of the year at the door of the citizen. "These are the things you saw and heard, these are the things you did, this is your record, / You."

Perhaps the same complacent citizen is interrogated again in "As the Fuse Burns Down." The title suggests the coming revolution, and the revolutionist questions the citizen's ability to withstand the coming storm:

> What will you say, when the sun lights all the avenue
> again, and the battle monument still reads: These
> dead did not die in vain?
> When night returns, when the clock strikes one, the
> clock strikes two, three, four, when the city sleeps,
> awakes, when day returns, what will you
> say, feel, believe, do. . . .

The revolutionist asks the citizen if the answers can be found in the tabloids, in "a Lydia Pinkham ad," in the bank sign that glares out over the ghetto, or in the words of the statesman "who speaks for peace and moves for war." But the overwhelming question is, "What will you do? What will you do? What will you do?"

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[84] John Dos Passos, "The House of Morgan," 1919 in U. S. A. (New York: Random House, Inc., 1937), p. 340.

"Dividends," another poem with an ironic title, brings the end of those who count on the system into even ghastlier focus. The wages of sin are totaled up in the last stanza:

> Burke of cancer. Jackson out at the secret meeting of
> the board. Hendricks through the window of the
> nineteenth floor.
> Maggots and darkness will attend the alibi.
> Peace on earth. And the finer things.
> So it is all devised.
> Thomas, the car.[85]

These were the men, two suicides, one man ruined in business, one dead by cancer, who seized the advantage, prepared an escape against the evil day, read the "statement for the third month," waited for time to make things better, and planned.

The theme of the horrible end of the man who depends on the system and believes in it is continued in "Dirge." This dramatic monologue is directed as a warning to the "executive type":

> O, executive type, would you like to drive a floating power,
> knee-action, silk-upholstered six? Wed a Hollywood
> star? Shoot the course in 58? Draw to the ace,
> king, jack?
> O, fellow with a will who won't take no, watch out for
> three cigarettes on the same, single match; O,
> democratic voter born in August under Mars,
> beware of liquidated rails. . . .

To the executive type, whose dreams of success are as commercial as those denounced by Fearing in "20th Century Blues," the speaker tells

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[85] Jackson should have read "Dear Beatrice Fairfax . . . ," Fearing's poetic parody of an advice to the lovelorn column. Had he done so, Jackson would have learned that the thieves of the system have no honor, that "it takes a neat, fast, good, sweet doublecross / to doublecross the gentleman who doublecrossed / your doublecrossing, doublecrossing, doublecross friend."

the story of the bad luck of another who played the system's game:

> 1-2-3 was the number he played but today the number came
> 3-2-1;
> bought his Carbide at 30 and it went to 29; had the
> favorite at Bowie but the track was slow. . . .

Twelve o'clock, the great leveler, arrived just once too often, "And wow he died as wow he lived. . . ." He was buried by people who cared nothing for him. He was a cypher like Jake in Angel Arms, but here even the brief moment of compassion present in "Jake" is gone and is replaced by an onomatopoeic rejection of those who caused the meaninglessness of his life:

> Wham, Mr. Roosevelt; pow, Sears Roebuck; awk, big
> dipper; bop, summer rain;
> bong, Mr., bong, Mr., bong, Mr., bong.

Fearing's attacks on those in power, his accusations that they are responsible for the plight of the masses, is not always so blatant. In "American Rhapsody (1)" he creates a fictional character for Franklin D. Roosevelt: "That popular ghost, Franklin Devoe, serial hero of the current magazines, / the exact, composite dream of those who read. / An artist in innocence. . . ." This poem, the first of a series that Fearing wrote under the same title, juxtaposes pictures of the villains and their victims, the oppressors and the oppressed. Beside Franklin Devoe the speaker introduces "The breadline," the movie queen, the senator, and "That genius, that litterateur, Theodore True." True is a devastating portrait of T. S. Eliot, whose poetry Fearing enjoyed. It must be assumed that Eliot's politics were unacceptable to Fearing, who parodied Eliot's famous description of himself by writing,

That genius, that litterateur, Theodore True,
St. Louis boy who made good as an Englishman in
theory, a deacon in vaudeville, a cypher in politics. . . .

After a series of quotations from both the villains and victims the poem ends with a slow fade-out reminiscent of the tone of "Now" in Angel Arms:

These are merely close-ups.
At a distance these eyes and faces and arms,
maimed in the expiation of living, scarred in payment
exacted through knife, hunger, silence, hope, exhaustion, regret,
melt into an ordered design, strange and significant,
and not without peace.

The speaker is aware that anything, no matter how horrible, will become comfortable and bearable if the mind can achieve a proper distance from it. He is suggesting again that the citizens who allow their rage to be blunted and muted are guilty.

Fearing, rather than distancing himself from the victims of the system, presented many grotesque images of them and their suffering in Poems. "Resurrection," a poem in the extended apostrophe form, directed at the anonymous "you" representing the individual within the mass, catalogues items that the citizen will remember as he works, and sleeps and talks, and laughs, and dies. The happy memories will be few and vague, but the horrors will be more distinct. "You will not forget compassion that glittered in the eyes of the moneylender, refusing you, nor forget the purpose that lay beneath the merchant's warmth. . . ." Other memories will include the bought judge, the statesman, the fool, billboard happiness, the casual love of magazine and novel, and "the breadloaf in the hand of the ghetto wife." It was this type of

catalogue of the nation's griefs and burdens that led Kenneth Burke to call Fearing "an inverted Whitman."[86]

Certainly the whole nation had problems in 1935, and in a few poems Fearing attempts to transcend the limits of the city and deal with the problems of the whole country, problems that were out of his ken. In the poem "Lullaby" Fearing comes as close as he ever really comes to a lyric description of external, green nature:

> Wide as this night, old as this night is old and young as
> it is young, still as this, strange as this,
> filled as this night is filled with the light of a moon as
> grey;
> dark as these trees, heavy as this scented air from the
> fields, warm as this hand,
> as warm, as strong. . . .

What seems to be at most a stanza in praise of the health and vigor of an honest, hardworking laborer is in fact just a descriptive backdrop for the hammering question of the second stanza:

> Is the night that wraps all the huts of the south and folds
> the empty barns of the west;
> is the wind that fans the roadside fire;
> are the trees that line the country estates, tall as the
> lynch trees, as straight, as black;
> is the moon that lights the mining towns, dim as the
> light upon tenement roofs, grey upon the hands at
> the bars of Moabit, cold as the bars of the Tombs.

No one has suggested that Kenneth Fearing was a nature poet, but he was one who could capture and transmit with credibility a description of the city at night in "Nocturne." Surely it is more real than this description of the southern fields. Even within this poem the description

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[86]Burke, "Two Kinds of Against," p. 198.

becomes more specific and powerful as Fearing returns to a description of the cold bars of the Tombs prison in downtown New York.

The same descriptive vagueness creeps into "American Rhapsody (2)" in the line: "Mountains or plains, crossroads, suburbs, cities or the sea. . . ." But the power of the poem lies in Fearing's descriptions, half descriptions, and suggestions of the futility of the lives of the victims he presents. These victims are in search of anything that will keep them alive in the city of the clinic, the pawnshop, the breadline, and the jail. They are beaten up by yard dicks when they try to steal a little coal in the railroad yards; they are victims of lockouts; their homes are destroyed; they know the futility of unemployment forms, and so they search for it, for something to keep them alive,

> out beyond the lunatic asylum, in the city; dump on
> the junkheap past the bank, past the church, past
> the jungle, past the morgue. . . .

And they wait for death in any of the shapes it can assume in a dehumanized, mechanistic society.

In "Obituary" Fearing presents a victim who no longer has to wait for death. Fate has provided for him in the form of a ten-ton truck that came roaring out of the night, and now there is nothing left but the body, the stains on the street, and the contents of the dead man's pockets. In Angel Arms in poems like "St. Agnes Eve" and "Saturday Night" Fearing pictured blood on the street and violent death. But the problem in Angel Arms seemed to be a problem of accurate and effective description. The violence was of no real concern to the

reader. In Poems through the use of second-person, direct address, the descriptive wall is removed and the reader is involved in the poem. The body on the street in "Resurrection" is made unforgettable: "you will remember your laughter that rose with the steam from the carcass on the street / in hatred and pity exactly matched." The reader of Poems is allowed none of the delusions of Max and Charlotte. That the stain on the street in "Obituary" is blood, there is no doubt; and the reader must watch as the speaker goes through the pockets of the dead man and, in the manner of a twentieth-century Mark Anthony, gives over the dead's assignables to the honorable men and institutions that brought about his death. A dollar and a half goes to Standard Oil. "It was his true-blue friend." A pawn-ticket goes to the People's gas. His socks are given to the Guggenheim fund, and a collection of bills and racing tickets are held by the House of Morgan. To Mr. Hoover goes his pint of gin. All of these honorable men and institutions claimed to have a sincere interest in the plight of the poor, yet, of course, none of them knew this one, poor gin-head, whose true-blue pal, the man willed two cigars, is the driver of the ten-ton truck that took him out of the rat race forever. That he is more than a man, that he represents a whole class of people is seen in the ironic order given about the disposition of the body. "Pick up the body, feed it, shave it, find it another job." Of course an undertaker will shave it, feed it intravenously, and employ it as a sort of subterranean gardener, but the line suggests the system's attitude toward the general problem of unemployment, the attitude of the villain toward the victim.

If the world of Poems is divided into villains and victims, where is hope to be found and what can one do to remain sane in the face of such a dichotomy? In "20th Century Blues" Fearing moves by a method of indirection, reminiscent of "Green Light," to picture the ultimate emptiness of the lives of those who accept the illusory and worthless goals of the system:

> what have you won, plunger, when the 20 to 1 comes in,
> what have you won, salesman, when the dotted line is
> signed, True Confession lover, when her eyelids flutter
> shut at last, what have you really, really won. . . .

And he asks the bobsled champion, the soldier, the movie star, the number one man on the Saturday night poker squad, and the hot-tip addict,

> what is always just missed, picker of crumbs, how
> much has been lost, denied, what are all the things
> destroyed,
> Question mark, question mark, question mark, question
> mark. . . .

In Angel Arms Fearing found acceptance of and striving toward the manufactured dreams of society a viable pattern of response to the contradictions of Life in the City. In Poems such a response is unacceptable, and he denounces it boldly:

> and you, fantasy Frank, and dreamworld Dora, and
> hallucination Harold, and delusion Dick, and
> nightmare Ned,
> What is it, how do you say it, what does it mean, what's the
> word,
> that miracle thing, the thing that can't be so, quote,
> unquote, but just the same it's true,
> that third-rail, million-volt exclamation mark, that ditto,
> ditto, ditto,
> that stop, stop, go.

Dreams and dreamers have no place in the world of Poems. As Fearing shows in "Sunday to Sunday," dreams, Hearst cartoons, and serial movies only serve to divert the citizen's attention from the horrible facts of life. "Meanwhile it is Infant Welfare Week, milk prices up, child clinics closed, relief curtailed." While a woman is evicted in Flatbush, a serial love continues, and an envoy places "an after-luncheon wreath" on the grave of a soldier amid rising stock prices and rumors of drought and war. Reality and dream fade in and out of each other throughout this poem, and the reader is reminded of a line from "Invitation": "Here we will be urged by reality confused with dream."

Escapist fiction is attacked in "$2.50." The Southern writer of anti-bellum elegance and the lady writer of romance are told that the dreams that they spin are not substantial enough to hold together "when a General Motors dividend is passed," or "when the national guardsmen fix those cold, bright bayonets." Other public dreams and diversions are denounced in "X Minus X," in which the speaker says that when the illusions of radio, magazines, tickers, boulevards, dancehalls and theaters are gone, the realities of dismay, laughter and desire, good, solid, human emotions will remain.

The private dreams of lovers and their pretenses are proven futile too in "American Rhapsody (3)":

> Shall we meet at 8 o'clock and kiss and exclaim and arrange
> another meeting as though there were love,
> pretend, even alone, we believe the things we say,
> laugh along the boulevard as though there could be laughter,
> make our plans and nourish hope, pretending, what is
> the truth, that we ourselves are fooled?

After suggesting a series of possible pretenses or romantic dream escapes, the speaker says, "you be a rat; I'll be the trap; or we can be maggots in the long black box. . . ." The only acceptable dream is the one that McKade had upon falling asleep in "Evening Song," a dream of rats which captures the reality of the life of the victim. Escapist dreams are unacceptable; all citizens are responsible for what is going on, and only Steve, the side-show robot in "No Credit,"

> knows content; only
> Steve, the mechanical man in love with a photo-
> electric beam, remains aloof; only Steve, who sits
> and smokes or stands in salute, is secure;
> Steve, whose shoebutton eyes are blind to terror, whose
> painted ears are deaf to appeal, whose welded breast
> will never be slashed by bullets, whose amateur
> soul can hold no fear.

The only viable answer to the oppression of the victim is revolution as expressed in "What if Mr. Jesse James Should Some Day Die?": "No more breadlines. No more blackjacks. No more Roosevelts. No more Hearsts."

"Denouement," the long poem that concludes the collection, presents the theme of the coming revolution, through which the hungry will be fed and the needy taken care of, as the only acceptable resolution of the tension between the villains and the victims. The longest poem that Fearing ever wrote, "Denouement" is divided into three sections. The first section is an imperative appeal for the new age to come:

> Sky, be blue, and more than blue; wind, be flesh and blood;
> flesh and blood, be deathless;
> walls, streets, be home;
> desire of millions, become more real than warmth and
> breath and strength and bread;

clock, point to the decisive hour and, hour without name
when stacked and waiting murder fades, dissolves,
stay forever as the world grows new. . . .

The entire first section of the poem is one, long, imperative sentence, but it is not the imperative of command; it is rather an imperative of prayer or supplication.[87] Even while the long sentence prayer rolls on, the speaker tips his hand by using the film, an escape, as an image for the new world. "Magic film, unwind, unroll, unfold in silver on that million mile screen, take us all, bear us again to the perfect denoument [sic]." It should be remembered that in "The Ballad of the Salvation Army," the poem in Angel Arms most sympathetic to the proletarian cause, the new world was pictured as a free amusement park. The overall attitude toward escape presented in Poems precludes the idea that the first section of "Denouement" is to be taken seriously. It is rather a parody of the "triumph easily defined by the rebel savior" that Fearing describes in "Resurrection."

Reality and a summation of the struggle between the villains and the victims is the subject of the second section. All the characters are present: the dead body of the victim, the disembodied voice of the president coming over the radio, the agent come to take the furniture away, the suicide, and the strike organizer. Also present is the clearest statement in Poems of what is being lost in the struggle between the villains and the victims:

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[87]The reader of this section of "Denouement" may be reminded of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "I Am Waiting." Fearing is considered by some critics (Gregory, House on Jefferson Street, p. 121) to be one of the true fathers of the Beat poetry of the fifties. However, Kenneth Rexroth, "Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation," New World Writing, No. 11 (New York: The New American Library, 1957), p. 39, denies Fearing's influence on the growth and development of Beat poetry.

But the pride that was made of iron and could not be
broken, what has become of it, what has become
of the faith that nothing could destroy, what has
become of the deathless hope,
you, whose ways were yours alone, you, the one like no
one else, what have you done with the hour you
swore to remember, where is the hour, the day, the
achievement that would never die?

The third section of the poem, which Edward Dahlberg praises as the work of "the poet looking beyond the horizon toward a socialist civilization, a Vita Nuova of the workers,"[88] balances the lyric opening of the poem with a cold, realistic look at the leftist movement. The movement is split by internal dissension; it contains graft and corruption; it is being defeated in the streets by the police red squad. The outlook is bleak. Those whose signs read "They shall not die," are murdered in the streets and "do not arise, arise, unite. . . ." The individual and collective desire to be free remains, but "Denouement" and Poems close with a harsh picture of repression:

all along the waterfront, there, where rats gnaw into
the leading platforms, here, where the wind whips
at warehouse corners, look, there, here,
everywhere huge across the walls and gates "Your
party lives,"
where there is no life, no breath, no sound, no touch,
no warmth, no light but the lamp that shines on a
trooper's drawn and ready bayonet.

If "Denoument [sic]" is the summary of Fearing's statement in Poems, it also represents his freest and most complete use of imagery in the volume. The lines quoted above contain the light and dark, heat and cold, sound and silence imagery that he used effectively in

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[88] Dahlberg, "Introduction," p. 13.

Angel Arms. Here also is the wind of the present whipping at the corner of the street. But the street does not dominate Poems as it did Angel Arms because the description of place has become secondary to the depiction of event and the delineation of social class. There are a few consistent images that tie Poems together. The book, the radio and the movie are used to represent escape. The rat is the natural slum-bred symbol of the victim of society. The agent, who was ineffective in Angel Arms in the poem "Green Light," is in Poems more frightening and effective as the man who comes to take the furniture away. He, along with the bulldozer, the bayonet, and the truncheon, becomes the chief image of the villain in Poems. But there is not the pattern of imagery in Poems that existed in Angel Arms. In Poems Fearing, using a Whitmanesque, long line, piled image upon image, event upon event, horror upon horror in an attempt to capture the flavor of the time. This cataloguing technique lends itself to comparison with Whitman, but it owes more to the bustling urban environment out of which it came and to Fearing's sense of juxtapositional irony than to Walt Whitman, or, for that matter, to Hemingway or to Dos Passos, contemporaries of Fearing who sought to capture and preserve the present by a similar cataloguing of facts, events, and portraits.

CHAPTER III

THE BREAK WITH THE LEFT

It is impossible to state exactly when Kenneth Fearing became disillusioned with the politics of the left. He was never really interested in politics; in answering a questionnaire sent to him by the compilers of Twentieth Century Authors, he wrote, "Political convictions: a mystery to me. I voted for LaFollette in 1924, for William Z. Foster in 1932, and passed on most of the other dates."[1]

If the political life of the fictional character, Jason Wheeler, parallels the political life of Kenneth Fearing, some interesting conclusions can be drawn. In Union Square Albert Halper describes Wheeler as an ex-communist as well as an ex-poet. The fact that "Jason, because he had once been a Party member, knew very well how the meeting went"[2] may have come out of the creative imagination of Albert Halper rather than out of the life of Kenneth Fearing, but it must be remembered that at the time that Halper knew Fearing, both were closely associated with the Menorah Journal group and with the John Reed Club, which was established in 1929 by the New Masses as part of its "program to develop promising artists of the proletariat. . . ."[3] There

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[1]Kunitz, Twentieth Century Authors, p. 444.

[2]Halper, Union Square, p. 61.

[3]Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left, Episodes in American Literary Communism (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1961), p. 213.

can be no doubt that the Kenneth Fearing that Albert Halper knew in the early thirties was a developing writer; and, no doubt, like many other young writers, Fearing gravitated to the left because the New Masses showed some interest in him. Horace Gregory, another writer in whom the New Masses showed interest in the late twenties and early thirties, remembers the times and tries to explain his stance:

> Since my feelings toward Communism are today the reverse of what they were in 1925, I find it difficult to say why I read the New Masses with such eagerness. Today I would say, "What foolishness most of the writing was, what transparent lies were told, how amateurish its approach to art and letters was, how blatantly political it showed itself to be." Like others who were then young, I believed the New Masses to be the place where new writers could be found, and for a brief time this was partially true.[4]

After the New Masses became firmly established as the radical voice in New York it developed the John Reed Club as a training ground for young radical writers. The Kharkov meeting, the Second World Plenum of the International Bureau of Revolutionary Literature, in 1930, ordered the John Reed Clubs in America to sponsor publications.[5]

> Many young writers and artists, who were unable to find their way into print, established magazines through their local Reed Clubs devoted to a new literature. Because their writings were crude or revolutionary (politically), many of these writers had not, as yet, secured access to larger publications--even to the New Masses. By 1934 the clubs could boast a number of radical publications including Left Front, Left Review, Leftward, the Cauldron, Blast,

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[4]Gregory, Jefferson Street, p. 168.

[5]Aaron, p. 221.

Dynamo, the Anvil, Partisan Review, the Partisan, and the Hammer.[6]

Fearing was directly connected with only two of these John Reed Club publications,[7] Partisan Review and Dynamo.[8] His poetry appeared in both magazines, and he was for a time an editor of Partisan Review.

While he was associated with Dynamo, Fearing no doubt developed or honed many of the ideas which were merging into his poetic credo. How these ideas developed is difficult to discover, for "Dynamo published no formal manifesto nor made an explicit statement of its purpose . . . and found its function is directing the proletarian sensibility by means of a new poetic technique."[9] The Dynamo group avoided

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[6]James Burkhart Gilbert, Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1968), p. 108.

[7]This writer has investigated the volumes of each title available in the New York Public Library and the Library of Congress. Perhaps because of the origin of the material or because of its contents, the officials of the libraries seem to have been negligent in acquiring and maintaining these ephemeral leftist publications. A foundation that would underwrite the acquisition of a complete collection of leftist material would be doing a great service to future scholarship.

[8]Aaron, p. 135, shows perhaps why Fearing was connected with these two publications. "From the first the Partisan Review had a special relationship to the new League of American Writers. One indication of this was the special pre-Congress issue of the magazine, combined with the Dynamo (another small left literary publication) for the purpose of 'presenting a united creative front on the eve of the First Congress of American Writers.'" When this combined issue appeared, Fearing was on the editorial board of Partisan Review, and one month later his poem "Denouement" appeared in Dynamo. Then, of course, Dynamo published Poems in 1936.

[9]Estelle Gershgoren Novak, "The Dynamo School of Poetry," Contemporary Literature, 9 (Autumn, 1970), 526-27. Novak, besides proposing that the poets associated with this short-lived little magazine be called a school, suggests that the school is to be associated with

the agit-prop poems being produced in free verse by their contemporaries; "rather, in an attempt to reproduce the machine-like qualities of the city, they tended to mix traditional with industrial imagery. Fearing accomplished this by juxtaposing names of industrial magnates and advertising slogans in the line pattern. . . ."[10]

The life of most of the leftist literary periodicals was brief. By 1934, the Communist Party in America had reevaluated the literary scene and decided that its interests would best be served by inducing established writers to involve themselves with the Party as "Fellow Travellers" rather than by supporting and guiding fledgling writers.[11] In the fall of 1934, at a meeting of the John Reed Clubs in Chicago, Alexander Trachtenberg, an important official of the Communist party, suggested the organization of a National Writer's Conference. The first "Congress" was held in New York in 1935, and in the time between the Chicago meeting and the first congress most of the John Reed Clubs were dissolved. This shattered the Proletarian movement in American literature for it destroyed the rather shaky financial underpinnings

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Futurism (p. 527). Other than the group's rejection of the past and their use of the machine as a source of imagery, traits shared also by Surrealism, there is no reason to muddy the critical waters with yet another term borrowed from a foreign movement in the plastic arts. Novak seems to have no real information about the poetic theories of Kenneth Fearing during the time he was associated with Dynamo. Her two examples (p. 532) bracket the period nicely; one is from Angel Arms (1929); the other is from Collected Poems (1940).

[10] Novak, p. 527.

[11] Brown, pp. 50-51.

of the many radical little magazines that had encouraged the unestablished young writers who had populated the Clubs.[12]

With the elimination of the radical little magazines, Kenneth Fearing was bereft of the only market his poetry had had for several years. But Fearing's literary horizons were brightening, as his receipt of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1936 attests.[13] Soon he found a new market in The New Yorker, and since the Communist party sought a detente with capitalism in the mid-thirties in an attempt to unite all the world's forces against the growing threat of Fascism, Fearing's move from the New Masses to The New Yorker represents less a change in the poet than a change in the mood of the nation.

In fact, if the characterization of Jason Wheeler can be trusted, Fearing's questioning of the principles and objectives laid down by the Kharkov conference preceded the party's own reevaluation. Jason Wheeler's attack on the Communist party was a rational one. Although he was in favor of social revolution, he saw the Communist Party in America as a pitiful tool for such a revolution.

> The first thing Jason did was to inquire about the membership. How many comrades had the Party now?
> "Ten thousand," answered Leon.
> "All right. Let's make it twelve thousand. With this handful you're going to overthrow capitalism here. Fine. Now, comrade, a few questions. Is it true or isn't it, that every year forty per cent of the comrades drop out? Is it true, or isn't it, that there is such a big turnover?"

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[12] Gilbert, p. 134. See also Aaron, pp. 280-83.

[13] Kunitz, Twentieth Century Authors, p. 444.

No answer.

"Is it true, or isn't it, that most of the membership is among the foreign-born workers? Is it true, or isn't it, that these comrades are located in New York, most of them, in the most European city in America? Do you really think Comrade Leon Fisher, that a movement appealing to the American masses can be successful as long as the agitators of the movement are not Americanized themselves and have not de-Russianized the propaganda they're trying to hammer into the heads of American labor?"[14]

The same general argument against the party is found in the sordid picture of political infighting in the third section of the poem "Denouement" in Poems.

Near the end of Union Square, Jason Wheeler attends a poetry reading among a group of middle-class intellectuals where he is asked to judge the readings since he was "at one time one of the most promising poets of the last ten years. . . ."[15] Jason denounces the poetry he has heard as bilge and goes on to say:

> A great many of you here are no more proletarian writers or painters than I am the pilot of a zeppelin. Think you, O comrades, that because you have aligned yourselves with the communist movement that instantly all your work becomes proletarian and stems from the masses? Think you, O comrades, that because you have a few Marxist slogans . . . and a few other catchwords that automatically you become heralds of a new "workers" art? . . . all of us here are nothing more or less than parasites, we're barnacles on the bottom of a boat. The Revolution doesn't need us at all, what it needs is militant workers, militant, intelligent workers.[16]

While Jason Wheeler's statement is consistent with the dogma of the Communist party following the Kharkov conference, it should be noted that in the only autobiographical sketch that Fearing ever prepared

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[14] Halper, Union Square, pp. 62-63.

[15] Ibid., p. 282.

[16] Ibid., p. 286.

he carefully kept his proletarian papers in order by noting that he once worked as a millhand.[17]

Although Horace Gregory maintained that Fearing had gotten his material from the Communist movement and the events generated by it for so long as he had known him, it seems evident that Fearing was not a true believer. Such a conclusion is supported by the fact that his name appears only in a footnote in Daniel Aaron's Writers on the Left,[18] and such a conclusion is consistent with Aaron's contention: "In most cases one suspects that most of the writers who went Left did so because of the social and political crisis, rather than because of party persuasion."[19]

Along with many other more or less established writers, some who had travelled with the Left before and some who were newly enlisted, Kenneth Fearing lent his name to the call that went out for the "first Congress of American Revolutionary Writers, which launched the League of American Writers . . ." in New York on April 24-27, 1935.[20] Fearing's name was not listed in the call for the Second Congress which was held in New York on June 4-6, 1937.[21]

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[17]Kunitz, Twentieth Century Authors, p. 444.

[18]Aaron, p. 433.

[19]Ibid., p. 230.

[20]Eugene Lyons, The Red Decade (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1970), pp. 145-47.

[21]Ibid., p. 318.

Throughout the period from 1935 to 1939 there is evidence of an increasing tension between Fearing and the journals of the Left. In Chapter I the reaction of leftist critics to Fearing's break with the Left is outlined. Fearing was aware of the criticism from the Left, and he felt that the poor treatment accorded to Dead Reckoning by the Partisan Review was politically motivated.[22]

Fearing not only signed the call for the Third Congress, which was held in New York on June 2-4, 1939,[23] he also reported on "the poetry craft session" for Poetry.[24] Throughout this period, Fearing continued to denounce Fascism. "Ad," the last of his poems to appear in the New Masses, is a scathing parody of an employment advertisement requesting men with no hearts, brains, or souls to apply to middle Europe for immediate employment in the coming profession.

The coming war, for which Germany had been practicing for years in Spain, dominated the New York literary scene in the closing year of

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[22]Kenneth Fearing, "The Situation in American Writing," Partisan Review, 6 (Summer, 1939), 34.

[23]Lyons, p. 320.

[24]Kenneth Fearing, "Poetry at the Writers' Conference," Poetry (April, 1939), 228-30. The accuracy of Fearing's article for Poetry may be questioned as he sent the following undated note along with his draft: "Miss Amy Bonner asked me to get out this brief report of the poetry session held this morning. Unfortunately it was not suggested until after the meeting, and so I had to rely on my memory. However, this is the gist of what proceeded. If you wish to edit it, that will be O. K." This is one of a series of letters obtained from The University of Chicago, hereafter called University of Chicago Modern Poetry Collection: Kenneth Fearing Letters and Mss.

the decade of the thirties, and if there was a bright spot in the year for Fearing, it was probably because his Guggenheim Fellowship was renewed.[25] In the summer of 1939, Fearing went on record, in answer to a Partisan Review questionnaire, as being opposed to the war against Fascism into which The Popular Front was trying to lead America. Partisan Review's questionnaire read:

> Have you considered the question of your attitude toward possible entry of the United States into the next world war? What do you think the responsibilities of writers in general are when and if war comes?[26]

Fearing told Partisan Review that if the coming war duplicated the pattern established in Spain, American writers should duplicate the aid they offered to Spain and that if "a 1914 war should eventuate . . ." the United States should materially aid every enemy of the Axis powers. In answer to the second part of the question he wrote:

> . . . the fate of the world does not hang upon whatever word comes from my typewriter . . . it is clear that the writer's responsibility is to tell the truth as he sees it. And that means, today, that if democratic processes are to be preserved and extended (there is no guarantee that they will be) writers and artists are the decisive factor in their defense and development. The literature of today controls at least some of the guns of tomorrow. And finally, any writer who promotes the concept of freedom of thought and action for larger and still larger masses of the people is loyal to the democratic idea, while any who distorts, disrupts, or denies it is a traitor to it.[27]

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[25] Kunitz, Twentieth Century Authors, p. 444.

[26] "The Situation in American Writing: Seven Questions," Partisan Review, 6 (Summer, 1939), 26.

[27] Kenneth Fearing, "Situation," p. 35.

Fearing's anti-Fascism continued, and on August 14, 1939 his name along with four hundred others appeared on an "open letter" which attacked the Fascists and denied that Russia could ever come to any agreement with Germany.[28] Nine days later the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact was announced. "The Nation published the Open Letter of the 400 and news of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in the same issue!"[29] Whatever force and organization was left in the Proletarian movement after the dissolution of the John Reed Clubs in 1935, was destroyed completely with the total collapse of the Popular Front, and every writer associated with the Left was forced to sort out his values alone. Fearing responded with an essay on the writer's responsibility in war for Poetry. In his earlier answer to the questionnaire in Partisan Review he had strongly supported "any writer who promotes the concept of freedom of thought and action. . . ." In "U. S. Writers in War," Fearing openly denounces the socialism of the U. S. S. R.

> But the socialism that is so far taking outline in our century, both in Germany and, less efficiently, in the U. S. S. R., displays as it unfolds characteristics that grow increasingly unappetizing. It does not resemble the kind of socialism that any college debating team that I was ever on or ever listened to promoted, and its only connection with what passed for socialism among advanced trade-union circles at the beginning of the century is one of direct opposition. It had been generally held that socialism meant: shorter working hours, more pay, better living conditions, more leisure and more culture, greater individual liberty, more equal justice, and the brotherhood of man--peace, in short. Yet the apparition that

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[28] Lyon, pp. 347-50.

[29] Ibid., p. 351.

> confronts us--and it is not a temporary one--represents: longer working hours with less pay, no leisure and less culture, no liberty, living conditions and justice suitable for healthy slaves, and war without end.[30]

In addition to this evaluation of the world socialist movement, Fearing presents a pessimistic view towards the writer and the war. He feels that the individual writer can do nothing positive. ". . . I have never heard of a lone literary crusader who seized the stream of history and started it moving in an opposite direction."[31] He states that it is enough if the writer can keep from committing negative acts. "It will be enough if the writer can refuse to lend himself to the prodigious lies that mushroom in times like these."[32] Many writers, Kenneth Fearing among them, refused any longer to lend themselves to the lies of the League of American Writers after the Nazi-Soviet Pact. The Fourth Congress, held in New York June 6-8, 1941 "was a dismal and emaciated affair."[33]

After World War II, and after the Communist party had been established as the chief bogeyman in The American Dream by Congressman Martin Dyes, and later by Senator Joseph McCarthy, Fearing's former association with the Left made him quite aware of the investigations. The investigation and the investigator became one of his chief subjects,

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[30]Kenneth Fearing, "U. S. Writers in War," Poetry, 56 (September, 1940), 321-22.

[31]Ibid., p. 322.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Lyon, p. 369.

and he developed a habit of secrecy about his personal life that later bordered on paranoia. As the public sentiment toward dare-devil communism changed, as the war with Spain began to look like a dress rehearsal, as the purges developed in Stalin's Russia, Fearing's public flamboyance disappeared. In 1944, when he received a thousand dollar award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters, he responded to a request for a biographical sketch for press release by listing his publications and honors and said: "If you feel it is necessary to have additional information I shall be glad to come in for an interview and supply what I can, though I feel the above data can scarcely be added to."[34] By 1956, when he had joined his fight against The American Investigation in "Reading, Writing and the Rackets," his introduction to New and Selected Poems, he became even more careful.

> . . . I forgot to ask, in my letter, that the Press let me see, in advance, the descriptive, promotional, and advertising copy that will accompany publication of the book. This is in view of the possibility that the book may provoke personalized reprisals, and I see no point in making that easy.
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> The copy that accompanies the book for promotional purposes could, as a precautionary measure, stick to the contents of that book and my previously published books, and not venture far outside of my literary life, save in the most generalized terms.[35]

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[34]Kenneth Fearing to Margaret Carson, 23 April 1945. This is one of a series of letters obtained from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, hereafter called American Academy of Arts and Letters File.

[35]Kenneth Fearing to Edith Greenberg, 6 September 1956 (Indiana File).

During the period of the investigation, it became popular for citizens in all walks of life to admit and renounce their former ties with the leftist movement. Fearing, as Mainstream, the successor to the New Masses, proudly noted in his obituary, never renounced his feelings.

> Kenneth Fearing never backtracked, even if he never transcended his high-water mark. He wrote detective pot-boilers to make a living. But, essentially, he never compromised with the neanderthalian forces of our times, and he did not ask that his poems be removed from the libraries because what he wrote in the Thirties became absolute truth in the Fifties. He did not fear his own prophetic vision and remained true to it.[36]

Perhaps since he had never been really vocal in his support during the thirties, he did not feel that a retraction was necessary. He made it quite clear in correspondence with his publisher, Indiana University Press, that he wanted nothing to do with Mainstream. Charles Humboldt, editor of Mainstream, wanted to publish "Reading, Writing, and the Rackets" as an essay.[37] Fearing refused permission and wrote to Humbolt:

> The chief reason for this refusal, as you ought to and perhaps do realize, is that I cannot afford the extra, futile hazards, beyond those already inherent in writing as I do write, of appearing in a press so heavily mined and rigged for dubious exploitation.[38]

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[36]"Kenneth Fearing: 1902-1961," Mainstream, 14 (August, 1961), 27-28.

[37]Charles Humboldt to Kenneth Fearing, 5 February 1957 (Indiana File).

[38]Kenneth Fearing to Charles Humboldt, 11 February 1957 (Indiana File).

In a letter to his publisher Bernard Perry, he expanded on his feelings toward Mainstream.

> Theoretically, my work is for re-publication by anyone who will pay for it and reprint it as it is written. But this request does not involve mere re-publication, as you doubtless know. It is dangerous, to the point of suicide; nor can it result in a wider audience for my poems, or foreword. To the best of my judgement, "Mainstream" has few readers, except for scholarly agents of the Investigation; whether the editors know it or not, it exists as a rather fatal decoy.[39]

Although Fearing never made a public confession of his innocence, Horace Gregory, who in 1935 testified to Fearing's loyalty to the Communist party, managed to confess for both of them and to defend his friend. "Of Fearing's friends, I was one of the few who knew that his readings were never as wildly Left as some supposed them to be; he read far more of H. L. Mencken's counterblasts in The American Mercury than he listened to all-night back-room talk of Marx."[40]

Tracing the rise and fall of an author's connection with an ideology and movement which he never publicly endorsed or denied is a difficult task, and the results are tenuous at best. It is a far easier task to note the change of direction in the poetry of Kenneth Fearing beginning with the poems which appeared in Dead Reckoning in 1938.

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[39]Kenneth Fearing to Bernard Perry, 6 February 1957 (Indiana File).

[40]Gregory, Jefferson Street, p. 168.

I. DEAD RECKONING

Dead Reckoning was published in 1938 by Random House, a much more established publisher than Fearing had dealt with previously.[41] Of the thirty poems in the new volume, sixteen had been printed in magazines which ranged from the New Masses to The New Yorker and which presented a much broader spectrum of exposure for Fearing's work than it had previously received.

The poems in Dead Reckoning, written in a period of growing disillusionment, exhibit a change in attitude from the works in Poems. There is much less hope for the future; the socialist dawn which occasionally could be seen in Poems is totally absent, and Fearing presents rather a future concealed behind answerless questions and a present as stark, cold, and lifeless as the present in Angel Arms. Rosenthal suggests that in Dead Reckoning, Fearing returned "to a mood apparently most natural to him."[42] In Dead Reckoning he is no longer trying to establish the fine line between villain and victim which occupied much of Poems. Although he never accepted the easy answers proposed by those in the leftist movement, in Dead Reckoning Fearing no longer seems to believe that there are answers.

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[41] Of Fearing's five publishers, four are still in business; of those four, only Random House has failed to respond to this author's request for letters to and from Kenneth Fearing. Their failure is particularly disturbing because Collected Poems represents the zenith of Fearing's poetic craft and contains his only extant poetic credo. The letters which lead up to that publication would be most helpful in understanding both phenomena. Perhaps someday they will be made available.

[42] Rosenthal, "Chief Poets," p. 350. This, of course, suggests that the poems which are most leftist in Fearing's canon are in fact aberrations and that his major poetic drive lies clearly outside the Marxist ideology.

There is no apparent subject in Dead Reckoning, although a wide range of American life is scrutinized and considerable attention is paid to the gap between the American Dream and the reality of American life. A consistent subject would give direction to the volume, and, as the title Dead Reckoning indicates, this is a volume in search of direction. With the world coming apart in 1938, with Fearing beginning to disassociate himself from the influence of the Dynamo school which had given him a Marxian direction, Dead Reckoning exposes the poet searching for a viable direction, a viable metaphor and finding that direction and metaphor in the search itself; however, the subject matter is not as important as the tone of helplessness, hopelessness, and ominousness that results from Fearing's inspection of America. This tone of ominousness toward the impending disaster is increased by an increased sense of lost time.[43]

The time lost, the nearly ten years between Angel Arms and Dead Reckoning, had seen the world change greatly and remain about the same In 1929 it stood on the brink of total economic disaster; in 1938 it was well on the road to war. The socialist dream was turning into a nightmare in the Moscow trials; massive federal programs had done little to reverse the trend of economic chaos; appeasement was the order of the day in Europe. With all the conventional navigation signs

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[43]The increased tempo of events intruded into the world of Poems; "Dividends" contains the question: "What is swifter than time?" But answers were still possible in 1936, and so the passage of time was not so ominous.

destroyed, Fearing tries to find direction in Dead Reckoning through the presentation of a series of poems from a time without hope. He used at least three identifiable devices to create a sense of ominousness in Dead Reckoning, conditional clause structure, ambiguous pronoun structure, and interrogative structure.

The past can offer no hint of direction because the past and the premises on which the past was constructed no longer exist. A sense of loss, a tone of elegy, is established in the opening poem "Memo," where a lover remembers "a glittering hour" and thinks that there must be some monument, some fragment to remind the world of the love he felt:

> (There must be, there has to be, no heart could beat if
> this were not so
> that was an hour, a glittering hour, an important
> hour in a tremendous year). . . .

The speaker remembers that it was raining when they stood and talked "of life and love, of logic and sense . . . character and fate, pain and revolution, victory and death." He is sure that some shadow of those events must remain "on tonight's damp, heelpocked pavement. . . ."[44] But the "glittering hour" belongs to the past; it cannot be recaptured, and nothing remains of it. Only the street on which they stood remains, and it is confused by shadows "that stop for a moment and then hurry past the windows blurred by the same warm, slow, still rain." The same sense of disbelief in the idea that the past can

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[44]"Escape" in Poems raised a similar plaintive cry for memorial: "But something must be saved from the rise and fall of the copper's club; something must be kept from the auctioneer's hammer; something must be guarded from the rats and the fire on the city dump. . . ."

completely disappear is expressed in "Requiem." As in "Jake" in Angel Arms, friends part after discussing the death of a comrade, but here they part, each "feeling, if it were I, instead, would that be all / each wondering, suddenly alone, if that is all, in fact."

The remoteness and inaccessibility of the past is underscored in the poem "Tomorrow." In lines that remind the reader of "Now" and "The Drunken Fly" from Angel Arms, Fearing states that the past and those that made up the past are gone forever "and the river of minutes between you widens to a tide of hours, a flood of days, a gulf of years and a sea of silence." Any questions that remain unanswered, any problems that might have been solved by "the shapes that still move and speak, inaudibly, in the empty room . . ." must now be directed to and solved by the enigmatic symbols of the present, the corner newspaper dealer, "the tireless hammer and pulse of the subway," and "the sign that creaks above the stationer's door." This poem does not deny the memory of the past; the shapes still move. But it does deny that the memory is of any use in the present.

In Dead Reckoning the past has lost, for the most part, the rosy glow that it had in Angel Arms. It is presented instead in terms of the devastating effects that it has had on the present. This change is understandable. The immediate past in Angel Arms covered a period of post-war peace and prosperity, while the immediate past in Dead Reckoning contained the heart of the depression and the ominous clouds of European war.

In "Flophouse" Fearing elegiacally shows the results of the past. They are piled up before the reader's eyes in a series of conditional clauses, which lead the speaker to the illogical conclusion that the past can somehow be changed.[45] People with education and skill (clerk, surgeon, and engineer) are impersonally and fragmentally presented as "the last remnants of skill and the last fragments of splendor," which must be "fanned to warmth and light" so that there may be "one more day, one week, month, season to be pieced together. . . ." The image of the victim of the economy being pieced back together is reminiscent of "Obituary." But the bitter tone of Poems is here replaced by a much more plaintive strain.

"Debris" is a poem which presents what must have faced the William Lowell of "Portrait" in Angel Arms whenever he sobered up. It views the past as the time which the auditor in the poem got roaring drunk in order to forget. Now it is morning, and in a wonderful display of irony, Fearing paints a "faintly blue and gold" morning which suggests the promised proletarian sunrises of Poems. Neither the morning nor the fact that "somewhere, in fresh, green hills, there is the singing of a bird" has anything to do with "this life, this life, this life, this life. . . ." It is "this life," the horrible present and the unknowable future, that is the central concern of Dead Reckoning.

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[45] Conditional clauses also form the basic structure of "Hold the Wire" and provide the structure of the interruptions in "Happy New Year."

A few characters, such as the girl in "Pantomime," can still escape the present by drifting into a dreamworld, "through which the night-time ragman of the street / below moves in a stiff and slow ballet / rhythmic from door to door, hallway to curb, and gutter to stoop, bat's eyes bright, ravenous, ravenous for the carrion found and brought by tireless fingers to unreal lips. . . ." She is "deaf to every footfall, every voice / midnight threats . . . gunfire, screams, the sound of pursuit. . . ." The street below is alive with the violence which marks streets throughout the poetry of Kenneth Fearing, but the girl "sleeps, dreaming that she sleeps and dreams."

Escape, which is possible for many of the characters in Angel Arms, is reserved for a very few in Dead Reckoning. "Portrait" presents another dreamer. This one, a product of middle-class values, is a Surrealistic collage, a man made up of his possessions. Fearing attacks this character and his value system through the ironic repetition of the statement that his soul is his own. The nameless character would freeze the effects of time by using his money to offset them. He is last seen driving his Plymouth 6 obliviously "with his soul (his own) at peace, soothed by Walter Lippman, and sustained by Haig & Haig." The escape into a hectic life of pleasure which was pursued by Charlotte and Max in "Saturday Night" is no longer available. In "Happy New Year" Fearing presents a dialogue between a couple[46]

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[46]Rosenthal, "Chief Poets," p. 327, inexplicably suggests that this is a monologue interrupted by "the voice of knowledge." This is denied by the text. After the woman's first statement, the man tells her to recount what happened at bridge and the grocer's. These are hardly the things one would ask "the voice of knowledge."

preparing for their annual party. "Speak as you used to make the drinks and talk while you mix them as you have so many times before. . . ." The man, who is aware of change, wants to stick to a set routine and ignore the change, ignore the passage of time, but the woman insistently interrupts his instructions with a series of conditional clauses:

IF IT IS TRUE THAT THE WORLD IS FOR SALE
. . . . . .
BUT IF IT IS TRUE THAT THE NERVE AND BREATH
AND PULSE ARE FOR SALE
. . . . . .
BUT IF IT IS TRUE
. . . . . .
BUT IF IT IS TRUE, IF IT IS TRUE THAT ONLY LIARS LOVE TRUTH. . . .

These inconclusive interruptions insure that this couple will have a more disturbing evening than the one that Max and Charlotte enjoyed in 1929. The man tries to stifle the woman's serious thoughts by saying, "Then say it, say it once and forget it, drop it, tell how it was at bridge. . . ." He has the last word and what he says shows that he is well aware of the futility of the situation:

> Pour the cocktails
> it is late, it is cold, it is still, it is dark
> quickly, for time is swift and it's late, late,
> later than you think
> with one more hour, one more night, one more day
> somehow to be killed.

Most of the characters in Dead Reckoning are wide awake and aware of a chaotic world full of ominous and unanswerable questions.

The interrogative poetic structure, which "As the Fuse Burns Down" introduced in Poems, dominates Dead Reckoning.[47] This structure, a series of unanswered questions directed at the auditors in the poems, is a variation on the extended apostrophe form. Because of the inconclusive nature of an unanswered or unanswerable question, it achieves the same indirection that the predicate structure of "Green Light" achieved in Angel Arms. Indirection is, of course, central to Dead Reckoning. In the poem "Devil's Dream," Fearing asks:

> But what if it is, what if it is, what if it is, what if the thing that cannot happen really happens just the same
> suppose the fever goes a hundred, then a hundred and one
> what if Holy Savings Trust goes from 98 to 88 to 78 to 68, then drops down to 28 and 8 and out of sight
> and the fever shoots a hundred two, a hundred three, a hundred four, then a hundred five and out. . . .

The source of the ambiguity and the indirection in this poem is the fact that "it" has no clear referent[48] as well as the fact that the questions in the poem are not answered. The poem, however, ends with a positive statement which is reminiscent of the psychopathic ending of "Now." The events of the world deny the optimism of the statement, and the last word of the poem shows that the irony was well planned:

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[47]See the following poems for examples of the interrogative structure: "Memo," "A Dollar's Worth of Blood Please," "En Route," "If Money," "Hold the Wire," "Devil's Dream," "Longshot Blues," "A Pattern," and "Requiem."

[48]The ambiguous pronoun structure can be found also in "Lunch With the Sole Survivor," "Happy New Year," and "Bulletin."

Because it is not, will not, never could be true
that the whole wide, bright, green, warm, calm
world goes
CRASH.

In "A Dollar's Worth of Blood Please" a different question is posed. Fearing tries to discover the final word, the indelible word, the word possessed of never-failing strength, the word known by all regardless of class, the word that should be used as the final memo. The poem ends with the poet screaming in bold-faced caps:

SAY THE LAST WORD, YOU LONG STRAIGHT
STREETS
SAY THE LAST WORD, YOU WISE GUY, DUMB GUY, SOFT GUY,
RIGHT GUY, FALL GUY, TOUGH GUY
SAY THE LAST WORD, YOU BLACK SKY ABOVE.

Unlike the ending of Eliot's The Waste Land, only silence follows the scream at the ending of this poem. Neither the thunder nor anything else says anything that can give answer or direction to the questions and the directionlessness of the times. In what is perhaps the most Surrealistic poem in Dead Reckoning, "Radio Blues," Fearing suggests that the answers to the hard questions of the time are unknowable.[49] The speaker asks, "what program do you want at midnight, or at noon, at three in the morning / at 6 A. M. or at 6 P. M. / with the wind still rattling the windows, and shaking the blinds [?]" In his attempt

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[49]Rosenthal, "Chief Poets," p. 355, observes that "This poem is one of Fearing's most successful attempts to match his private sense of loss with some objective image which would be typical of our mechanical age and yet susceptible to the kind of distortion that would give it a significance beyond its own practical meaning. We have seen him using theatre programs, newspaper advertisements, telephones, and other familiar phenomena. But the radio image is literally manipulable in a manner superior to any of these others, and Fearing is able to play on that expectation of the miraculous which the very nature of such an instrument creates in us."

to find something "just right to match the feeling that you want," the speaker turns the dial to higher and higher frequencies, past the range of any but a surrealistic radio, and finally he says, "would you like to tune in upon your very own life, gone somewhere far away." Such a radio would answer the questions of the present, but such a radio does not exist.

In fact, in "Q & A," Fearing makes it quite clear that the answers

> Will not be found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John
> nor Blackstone, nor Gray's, nor Dun & Bradstreet,
> nor Freud, nor Marx
> nor the sage of the evening news, nor the corner
> astrologist, nor in any poet. . . .[50]

The poem ends with an implied affirmation of faith in the rightness of unprovable things. As the poet states, no cause can be named for "why the sun should rise tomorrow / nor how the moon still weaves upon the ground, through the leaves, so much silence and so much peace." The beauty and peace of the moonlit night seems out of place in Fearing's world of unanswerable questions. There seems to be no reason for the sun to rise, for the earth to continue to exist. Just as silence follows the screaming demand for answers in "A Dollar's Worth of Blood, Please," a sunrise, perhaps undeserved and unexpected, certainly unexplainable, will inevitably come; the earth will continue; there will be a future.

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[50]It should be noted that Fearing here tells the reader that Marx holds no answers, but at the same time he denounces all other verities both new and old.

The shape of that future is suggested by Fearing in three poems, "Bulletin," "Lunch With the Sole Survivor," and "American Rhapsody (5)."[51] Set in the very near future, "Bulletin" employs the ambiguous pronoun structure in presenting a world in which "armies march and cities burn," a world where there is "nothing bid for dreams." Such a world was a logical extension of the real situation in the late thirties, and it became the real situation in the early forties. Fearing's projection into the more distant future in "Lunch With the Sole Survivor" is quite surreal. Here, in neatly juxtaposed imagistic paragraphs, Fearing compares the contradictory feelings of the last man on earth. On the one hand, he feels like a big winner for having survived, "exactly like the giant in a Times Square sign making love across the sky to a lady made of light."[52] On the other hand, he feels the sadness of being alone, the sadness of "the last long whistle of the midnight train as it fades among the hills."

"American Rhapsody (5)" also looks to the future and attacks those who promise quick and easy solutions to the problems of the

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[51]Fearing also discusses the future in two other poems in Dead Reckoning, "The Program" and "Ad." These, which lack the subtlety and indirection of most of the other poems in this volume, are the two least successful poems in the volume because they are too obviously clever parodies of other media. In both Fearing did too little of what he generally does so well. Usually he molds the cliches of advertising and the lies of politicans into his own form which is created by and for a particular poem. In these two verses he allows the form of a theatre program and the form of a help-wanted advertisement to dominate the poems.

[52]This description reminds the reader of Steve, the mechanical man in "No Credit," who is "in love with a photo-electric beam."

present. When this poem appeared in 1938, the New Deal had not brought the country back to health. It could be toward this failure that the poem is directed, or it could be toward the quick solutions and easy answers proposed by the Left which Fearing had attacked in "Denouement." The problem with the new successes promised for tomorrow (the watchword of the depression was "Prosperity is just around the corner") is that they merely provide "a bright, shimmering, silver veil stretched everywhere, tight to hide the deep, black, empty, terrible bottom of the world where people fall who are alone or dead. . . ." The insane silence of the present will be broken by a tremendous sound that "will shatter the final unspoken question. . . ." This wondrous new tomorrow will arrive in a silver-winged, nonstop monoplane and have with it "a few simple instructions and a bona fide guarantee."

Just as the longest poem in Poems, "Denouement," recapitulates the major themes and exhibits the major images of that volume, "Manhattan," the longest poem in Dead Reckoning, repeats the theme of the volume and exposes many of the major images. It serves also as a sort of summary of Fearing's thoughts on urban life and as his most complete tribute to the source of both his themes and images, New York City.[53] The first two stanzas are written in the extended apostrophe form and contain descriptions and images that are commonplace in Fearing's prior works:

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[53]Compare the celebration of life in this poem to the dead description of a mechanistic city in "Nocturne" in Angel Arms.

relax, plan, struggle, succeed, watch the snow fall and hear the
rain beat, know the liner's voice, see the evening plane,
a star among stars, go north at the scheduled hour. . . .

The image in Angel Arms of unreachable promise, the lines are in Dead Reckoning supplanted by the more novel airplane. It is "a nonstop monoplane" that will bring the "bona fide life" in "American Rhapsody (5)." Here in "Manhattan" old and new are met.

Most of the escapes which Fearing exposed in his earlier volumes are presented: phone calls, cocktails, cards, the radio, adultery, and hysterics. Certainly a summary of the reasons for escape is presented in a beautifully lyric passage:

Deep city
tall city, worn city, switchboard weaving what ghost horizons
(who commands this cable, who escapes from this net,
who shudders in this web), cold furnace in the sky
guardian of this man's youth, graveyard of the other's, jailer
of mine
harassed city, city knowing and naive, gay in the theaters,
wary inthe offices, starved in the tenements
city ageless in the hospital delivery rooms and always too
old, or too young,in the echoing morgues. . . .

The third stanza adopts an interrogative structure, and the city is asked if it remembers the violence on the streets, the graft, the excitement, the mystery, the good deeds, the people, the events that have taken place in it.

The fourth stanza describes the city in terms of light and heat which were used so consistently in Angel Arms and generalizes the questions of the third stanza into terms which remind the reader of "Memo":

City, city, city
eye without vision, light without warmth, voice without mind,
pulse without flesh
mirror and gateway, mirage, cloud against the sun

do you remember that, that year, that season, that day, that
hour, that name, that face
do you remember. . . .

The city's answer comes in the last stanza, but the answer is indirect like the affirmation at the close of "Q & A." Evidently the city has very little memory:

Only the day, fulfilled, as it burns in the million
windows of the west
only the promise of the day, returning, as it flames on the roofs
and spires and steeples of the east.

II. "THE AGENCY" SECTION OF COLLECTED POEMS

By the time Fearing gathered the poems he had written after the publication of Dead Reckoning and prepared them for publication in "The Agency" section of Collected Poems, many of the unanswered or unanswerable questions of Dead Reckoning had been or were about to be answered by rapidly unfolding global events. As the poem "Pay-Off" indicates, the news is known, the headlines are on the street, the world has suddenly settled "to this new, strange axis upon which it will turn. . . ." Fearing had noted in "The Program" that "the Rome-Berlin Theatre has no exits"; here he indicates that the play has begun. The conditions governing the conditional clauses in "Hold the Wire" are now visible, and Fearing responds to the signing of the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression treaty with an unrealistically lyric lament in "Pact," which ends:

And we will fight for all of this again, and if need be again,

> And on that day, and in that place, we will try again, and this time we shall win.[54]

Much more in keeping with Fearing's general tone is the poem "A La Carte." In response to the disbelief expressed at the end of "Devil's Dream" in Dead Reckoning ("Because it is not, will not, never could be true that the whole wide, bright, green, warm, calm world goes CRASH."), the speaker in this poem says, "This is not the first time, nor will it be the last time the world has gone to hell."

The events of 1938, 1939, and 1940 provided the facts which could only be guessed at in grim conjecture in Dead Reckoning. There is direction in "The Agency," and the ultimate destination of all flesh is accepted in the poem "Net."

> It is as certain as the fall of summer rain,
> Sure as the return of winter snow and certain as the symmetry of every flake that falls,
>
> That the flesh of infidel, heretic, and faithful is equally weak and fails, falls, dies, rots,
> Certain that each is forever doomed and lost, and there where he lies is forever damned, and damned, and damned, and damned.

That everyone is eventually caught in the net of death is seen in "Class Reunion" where the lives of various members of a graduating class are followed from dream to denouement:

> White mice, running mazes in behavior tests, have never displayed more cunning than these, who arrived by such devious routes at such incredible ends.

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[54] We have discussed above the nature and extent of Fearing's leftist sympathy. This poem is too soft, too sentimental not to be seen as irony. It might be considered another attack on those who proposed easy solutions to the difficult social and economic problems of the day, a lament by an ardent supporter of lost causes.

> For it is the end, surely? We knew the story to be working toward an end, and this, then, is in fact the end?

Like those characters in "Dividends" (from Poems), who played the odds and planned for the future, everyone in the class will "meet a figure on a dark street, and hear from the shadows a familiar but unwelcome voice. . . ."

These lyric expressions of the shape of things to come are interspersed in "The Agency" among dramatic portraits which capture the methods that the people in Fearing's world employ to avoid facing the future and hearing the "unwelcome voice." These portraits of escape represent a return for Fearing to the method of Angel Arms, but in "The Agency" he "reveals a harder more polished technique than before. . . ."[55] Because the method represents a return, some of the subjects, some of the methods of escape, some of the portraits seem familiar. In "Love 20¢ The First Quarter Mile," a character, perhaps Max from "Saturday Night," perhaps the man who argued with his girl in "Happy New Year," rolls through the night in a taxi cab with his girl. The gaiety of "Saturday Night," which once veiled the meaninglessness of life, is gone. The unanswerable questions of "Happy New Year" have driven the couple apart, and now the man pleads with the girl to come back to him. He says that everything will be different and hopes that everything will be exactly the same.

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[55]Rosenthal, "Chief Poets," p. 361.

Come home. I will agree to forget the statements that you issued
so copiously to the neighbors and the press,
And you will forget that figment of your imagination, the blonde
from Detroit;
I will agree that your lady friend who lives above us is not
crazy, bats, nutty as they come, but on the contrary
rather bright,
And you will concede that poor old Steinberg is neither a drunk,
nor a swindler, but simply a guy, on the eccentric side,
trying to get along.
(Are you listening, you bitch, and have you got this straight?)

The speaker's parenthetical question, which is not vocalized, betrays (to the reader) his lack of sincerity. The reader is not, therefore, surprised by the striking changes in the repetition of his pleas in the last stanza.

Come back. We will have a celebration to end all celebrations.
We will invite the undertaker who lives beneath us, and a couple
of the boys from the office, and some other friends,
And Steinberg, who is off the wagon, by the way, and that insane
woman who lives upstairs, and a few reporters, if anything
should break.

Clearly this speaker, like the speaker in "Happy New Year," wants to reestablish a relationship from which he derived a sense of security, a relationship through which he was able to escape from the meaninglessness of his life.

In "American Rhapsody (4)" Fearing presents the female side of the argument seen in "Love 20¢ The First Quarter Mile." A semi-detached narrator exposes the emptiness of the American Dream, the ultimate blandness of the life style of the agency. The voice in the poem, although she uses the third person, seems to be talking about herself. This unusual presentation fits the sense of the poem because the speaker is trying to tell the auditor how life drives a person crazy:

> (They say, you know, that first you hear voices. And then you have visions, they say. Then, they say, you kick and scream and rave.)

Like the girl in "Happy New Year," this girl is aware of the sham and tries to break through it, but the agency life is pervasive.

> Then the doorbell rings. Then Peg drops in. And Bill. And Jane. And Doc.
> And first you talk, and smoke, and hear the news, and have a drink. Then you walk down the stairs.
> And you dine, then, and go to a show after that, perhaps, and after that a night spot, and after that come home again, and climb the stairs again, and again go to bed.

She too, however, has questions about the routine of her life. They are not as earth-shaking as those asked by the girl in "Happy New Year." They are more personal, more individual: "Is this, baby, what you were born to feel, and do, and be?"

The girl in "American Rhapsody (4)" questions the validity of her life style, the life style of the agency. She questions the significance of the relationships developed in it. A man with similar questions is seen in "Gentleman Holding Hands With Girl." This interior monologue exposes the conscious cerebrations of a young Prufrockian lover who is trying to decide what subject to begin with: "Of you, both the known and unknown qualities, but more especially, of those unknown / Of the mysteries of the arches and the ligaments, the question of the nerves and muscles, the haunting riddle of the joints. . . ." The memory of "perfume and of lace" brings something up from the unconscious, which the speaker tries to flatten out into a discussion of Freud or Krafft-Ebing. But the overwhelming question remains: "Is it like stepping into a looking-glass, or like flying through space?" His

desire to know the feeling of the sex experience is cerebrated into even more ethereal subjects:

> Of the beginning of life, and of its indubitable end,
> Of the mirage within a mirage. . . .

Finally, the last phrase, "With all of the daughters of all the daughters summed up, at last, in you," indicates that like Feldman in the poem "Angel Arms," this character has so abstracted his love that no meaningful relationship can develop. He has escaped into an old fashioned romantic dream.

Another portrait of an escapee which seems to have ancestors in Fearing's former works is "Discussion After the Fifth of Sixth." This dramatic monologue in which a drunk talks about his sober self reminds the reader of the William Lowell of "Portrait" as well as of the poor sufferer in "Debris." The drunk tells of "one whose first awakening voice is a hoarse, barbaric blast (you know against whom), who damns the excess (however moderate), deplores the extravagance and winces (as he reaches for the aspirin) at the smallest memory. . . ." But the drunk admits that his sober self has to drink "(drinking he says, is just an escape)" because like William Lowell "he searches daily, down a thousand familiar avenues, for an escape that simply does not exist. . . ."

Most of the other portraits in "The Agency" merge into a composite picture of an institution.[56] "Just what the institution is, it would

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[56]See below a discussion of the changes made in the first serial publications of the poems in "The Agency." The changes mold the poems into a thematic unit which did not exist before the changes were made.

be hard to say. One would probably be justified in thinking of it as a deliberately amorphous image for any organization of authority, even the universe itself under God."[57] It can be as clear as the literary agency seen in "Yes, The Agency Can Handle That" and as vague and obscure as the agency in "5 A. M." whose products wait on a siding in Butte. The institution or the agency, however, provides the characters who accept their validity with goals and rewards, with tasks to fill up the time, with reasons not to answer the ominous knock at the door.

As in Angel Arms, here Fearing presents a range of characters who are to varying degrees aware of the fact that they are "white mice, running mazes in behavior tests." Some understand and reject the agency; some understand and accept it; some live in blissful ignorance of it; some make their living helping others adjust to it.

"Portrait of a Cog" presents an average member of the agency who finds himself living in an hour he does not fully understand, in "a fantastic situation repeated so often it is commonplace and dull," and the poem suggests that a thousand years from now when the persona is dug up by an archeological expedition he will be considered a "man typical of the times, engaged in typical affairs." He seems to be caught in a plot, a conspiracy which he helped to start, but over which he no longer has any control.[58] He is promised that the moment of

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[57] Rosenthal, "Chief Poets," p. 359.

[58] This idea is the essential plot of Fearing's last novel, The Crozart Story (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960).

malaise will pass if he just sticks to his routine, which involves dictating a memo showing the emptiness of his life: "No (overwhelming) passions. No (remarkable) vices. No (memorable) virtues. No (terrific) motives." This recitation of blandness is almost as bitter a satiric thrust as the mumbling of the agency man reading his appointment calendar in "Engagements for Tomorrow":

> Business of forcing a showdown.
> Hit this hard, and take no excuses.
> (Stuff about expenses. Business about the risks. Stuff about overhead.)

The day proceeds, filled with "business" and "stuff" until it reaches a climax.

> And finally the big stuff.
> (Make a note of this, must think it all out.)
> Stuff about the reason for all the other stuff.

This character, too, is haunted by the sneaking suspicion that something is wrong, but in his jargon-padded mind (where he deals only with "straight stuff") the troublesome thought passes quickly on "Because, after all. / And so on, and so on, and so on, and so on." The insignificance of the agency life (worrying "about the reason for all the other stuff," wondering if this is really "what you were born to feel, and do, and be?") creates a whole new industry.

Fearing considers the top and bottom of his new profession in "The Doctor Will See You Now" and "Readings, Forecasts, Personal Guidance." The seer in the latter poem deals with the more usual forecasts. His clients come to him in faith and hope with "a need more moving than the damned dirty dollars . . . that form the pattern of their larger

hopes and deeper fears." The psychiatrist in "The Doctor Will See You Now" knows that "In every case the problem is to exorcise these devils." Like a true Skinnerian behaviorist the doctor desires only to adjust the patient to his problem, "adjust the person to his gods, and to his own estate, and to the larger group." The doctor notes that some of the adjustments may take a little longer than others.

> Adjust to the present, and to a longer view.
> To cities shining in the sky tonight, and smoking in dust tomorrow.
> Adjust the mothers. And the husbands. And the fathers. And the wives.
> Adjust to the sons, once resolute, now dead. And to the daughters, living but mad.

He begins the last stanza with a comment that ties his profession to the agency: "Madness, never obsolete, grows fashionable." To adjust to the present madness and to try to know the future madness the members of the agency employ the services of a strange pair of professionals, the seer and the psychiatrist.

The speaker in "Any Man's Advice To His Son" knows that there will be times of trouble, times when his son will have to "steer by dead reckoning." He offers some non-professional advice. His advice to his son is a complete inversion of the Golden Rule, but it is good advice for survival in the agency.

> . . . remember this: Trust no man fully.
> Remember: If you must shoot at another man squeeze, do not jerk the trigger. Otherwise you may miss and die yourself, at the hand of some other man's son.
> And, remember: In all this world there is nothing so easily squandered, or once gone, so completely lost as life.

Values are generally inverted within the agency. In two poems, "Homage" and "Yes, The Agency Can Handle That," Fearing shows the relationship of art and genius to the institution. In "Homage" Columbus, Shakespeare, and the Wright brothers are heartily congratulated on their accomplishments (the discovery of America, Hamlet, and the airplane), but they are asked to show a practical, dollars-and-cents use for them. Like Mark Anthony, the speaker characterizes those who asked the questions:

> And they were good people, too. Decent people.
> They did not beat their wives. They went to church.
> And they kept the law.

They were, in short, members of the anti-intellectual establishment who knew the price of everything and the value of nothing. Perhaps this sort of treatment can be expected from non-professionals, but the professionals in Fearing's agency treat art and creativity no better.

The poem, "Yes, The Agency Can Handle That" presents an average New York City literary agency peddling the product of an artist to the highest bidder and accepting the changes demanded by that bidder no matter how outrageous. Fearing, in one of his very few disclosures of the actual events behind a poem, tells what led up to "Yes, The Agency Can Handle That" in the introduction to New and Selected Poems, "Reading, Writing, and the Rackets."

> I see that I attended a story conference in 1940, or a little before, and in the course of it we faithfully performed all the steps of subtraction necessary to make some heartbreak series exactly the same as the cycle that preceded it. The poem, "Yes, the Agency Can Handle That" attempts to dramatize the process of the story conference in which, I suppose, two or three executives, probably with my help, beat every last shred of plausibility

> out of one of those moving, true-to-life sagas. I was rather gloomily fascinated by the skill and care taken to weed out every possible sales deterrent, and so I wrote about it.[59]

Any change in the author's manuscript that the sponsor requests is made because in the world of the agency there is no room for artistic integrity and the big jackpot is the sale, the big sale.

The poem "Jackpot" is tied closely to the first serial version of "Portrait of a Cog"; it suggests that after all the accounts are settled at last, the auditor will hit the jackpot, win the agency game. Although many others have tried and failed, the auditor will win.

> Now, with harvest in, at last, and the moon finally new and full, the tide is at its height.
> Now, with the motors warm, the direct wire open, the weather clear and the track fast.
> Now, O. K., you can write your own ticket, straight down the line it is all yours.

This promise of winning suggests two things. It suggests "Twentieth Century Blues," from Poems (1935), where the speaker asks:

> What have you really, finally won;
> . . . how much has been lost, denied, what are
> all the things destroyed. . . ."

It also suggests, through the title "Jackpot," the poker game going on in the basement of the mortuary in "Payday at the Morgue." In this poem a stranger, one unknown to the poker players, comes knocking at the door. This stranger (in this case death, but usually a shifting value in the poetry of this volume) is the new element in the poetry of "The Agency." The concept of the"secret agent" which started with the

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[59]Kenneth Fearing, "Reading, Writing, and the Rackets," New and Selected Poems (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1956), p. xxiii.

ineffectual agent of the Greek Hydraulic Mining Corporation in "Green Light" is brought to vague fruition in Collected Poems, and the new sinister figure "the stranger" is introduced. The stranger appears also in "Portrait of a Cog":

> Perhaps you are really in league with some maniac partner whom you have never met, whose voice you have never heard, whose name you do not even know.

He appears also in "5 A. M." as "the mysterious Mr. X."

Only one character in the whole section seems to have the moral strength to denounce the machination of the agency. Agent No. 174 in "Agent No. 174 Resigns" quits his job simply because he recognizes that by allowing someone else to govern his every move, he has forfeited his right to live as an individual. Finally he can stand his job of shadowing the suspect no longer and he says,

> There is no law compelling any man on earth to do the same, second hand.
> I am tired of following invisible lives down intangible avenues to fathomless ends.
> Is this clear?
> Herewith, therefore, to take effect at once, I resign.

With poetry as with life, in this volume Fearing seems intent on stressing that each circumstance, each event demands its own form and its own unique interpretation. Finally Agent No. 174 is able to ask the ultimate question, the question cleverly dodged by most of the characters pictured in "The Agency": "And then, whose life am I really leading, mine or his? His or the blonde's?"

In "The Agency" section of Collected Poems, Fearing adopted the agency as a metaphor for the meaninglessness of life. This metaphor moved

the setting for most of the poems indoors, away from the streets of Fearing's former poetry. Perhaps Agent No. 174 spoke for the author when he said, "I am tired of following invisible lives down intangible avenues to fathomless ends." With the settings generally inside and generally less important in "The Agency," the nuances of language, the use of repetition, and the building of tone with dialogue instead of setting become more important. Whereas in Poems upper middle-class people, the solid business folk, were presented as villains, in "The Agency" they are seen as victims of the machinations of institutions, machinations which in many cases they themselves began. Images are generally much less important in "The Agency" than is any of Fearing's former work because of the move indoors and because of the tight focus on the interaction between individuals and the agency. "White mice, running mazes in behavior tests" are not likely to create images; the agency is a poetically sterile place where the widest dream is that someday man will be able to fly and deliver eggs.

III. CHANGES MADE IN EARLIER WORKS FOR COLLECTED POEMS

Kenneth Fearing liked the book Collected Poems, and when Indiana University Press approached him with the idea of putting out an edition of his works, his immediate reaction was to authorize a re-issue of that volume.[60] Later on, when discussing how any new book would be created,

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[60]Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 29 May 1952 (Indiana File).

he explained the process by which the 1940 collection was put together. "What does matter is that in the six books of poetry I have published there are some clinkers I don't want to re-publish. The 'Collected Poems' of 1940 was such a selection, in fact, and the next re-issue would have to be somewhat similarly weeded."[61]

Certainly Fearing did some weeding in Collected Poems. Of the seventy-eight poems which had appeared in his first three volumes, he chose only sixty-nine for re-issue in Collected Poems.[62] M. L. Rosenthal suggests a possible reason to the deletion of these poems: "As much as possible Fearing avoids the first person singular. Most of the rejected poems . . . tend to be direct personal expressions of a romantic or sentimental sort."[63] Certainly there is evidence, as far back as his college days, of Fearing's hostility toward sentiment. However, Rosenthal's statement suggests a negative reason for the deletion of the poems, and a good positive one is available.

In 1940, on the dust jacket of Collected Poems, Fearing published his only known statement of poetic theory.

> The idea underlying my poetry, as well as anything I write, is that it must be exciting; otherwise it is valueless. To this end it seemed to me necessary to discard the entire bag of conventions and codes usually associated with poetry and

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[61] Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 15 November 1954 (Indiana File).

[62] See the Appendix for a table showing Fearing's process of selection.

[63] Rosenthal, "Chief Poets," p. 274. The problem with Rosenthal's simplistic reason for Fearing's deletions is that some of the poems dropped are not written in the first person, and many of the poems re-issued, many of his better poems, are in the first person.

> to create instead more exciting forms which, in all cases, are based on the material being written about. Besides being exciting, I think that poetry necessarily must be understandable. Everything in this volume has been written with the intention that its meaning should disclose itself at ordinary reading tempo.[64]

It seems reasonable to assume that the poet, who broke with the Dynamo school and struggled to find his own method of poetic expression, his own credo, probably applied that credo to the poems to be included in the volume in which it appeared.

Clearly some of the early poems ("The Drunken Fly," "Reveille," and "Aphrodite Metropolis (1)" which appeared in Angel Arms) were dropped because they are highly dependent on "the entire bag of conventions and codes usually associated with poetry. . . ." "The Drunken Fly" is highly imagistic and is marked by a disconcertingly unorthodox rhyme scheme.[65] "Reveille" is dominated by alliteration (the least subtle of all poetic devices) and by simile. "Aphrodite Metropolis (1)" contains classical allusions which are out of place in the non-heroic, machine world of Kenneth Fearing.

"Aphrodite Metropolis (4)" is dependent on simile and metaphor and contains the worst pun ("the bell bouys laughing among themselves") that Fearing ever published. "The Cabinet of Simplicity" also contains

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[64]This credo was published in full in a number of the reviews of Collected Poems; it was also reprinted, again on the book jacket, in New and Selected Poems.

[65]See Chapter II for a discussion of Fearing's deletion of early rhymed poetry.

a number of poor puns, but a more likely reason for its deletion from Collected Poems is that it does not have that structural unity, developed naturally out of the subject being written about, that most other Fearing poems display.

"The Ballad of the Salvation Army" and "Lithography" also lack structural unity, but perhaps they were dropped from Collected Poems for personal reasons. A line from "Lithography" ("The heat and speed of the earth") was used by Rolfe Humphries to denounce Fearing's poetic vision in one of the most caustic reviews of Angel Arms.[66] Fearing suffered from the characterization of Jason Wheeler in Union Square, and Albert Halper had Wheeler hum "Ballad of the Salvation Army" throughout the novel. This poem is clearly also a strong expression of proletarian sympathy, and in Collected Poems there is evidence that Fearing attempted to remove all vestiges of such sympathies. This attempt may further explain the removal of "The Cabinet of Simplicity" which ends with the lines:

> Comrade, this is no poem,
> Who touches this
> Touches Doctor Barky's patented magic cabinet of
> certified, strictly guaranteed simplicity and truth.

It certainly explains the deletion of "American Rhapsody (2)," the only poem from Poems that was completely removed from the 1940 re-issue.

Aside from the deletion of these nine poems, the most apparent changes in the presentation of the poetry from earlier volumes to

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[66]Humphries, p. 104.

Collected Poems are the changes in format involving line placement, spacing, capitalization, and punctuation. The poems reprinted in "The Agency," the poems written after the publication of Dead Reckoning are not really affected much by these format changes. They appeared originally, for the most part, in The New Yorker, and they are written, in spite of an occasional long line, in a rather conventional manner with most sentences beginning flush left with a capital letter and ending with some form of punctuation. Generally they are marked by some sort of stanza demarcation. These poetic formalities, a standard practice for The New Yorker, are consistent with the new material presented in "The Agency."

However, when Fearing went back into his former poems and imposed his newly developed format on them, he violated the theory of organic composition which he presented in Collected Poems, because the forms he adopted and imposed on his older poems were not "based on the material being written about."

There is considerable evidence that throughout his career Kenneth Fearing was very conscious of and very concerned about what happened to his work when it went to the publisher. He was concerned about the mistakes editors make, and he was concerned about the mistakes reviewers make. In 1936 the following item appeared in The New York Times under the title "Thunderous Kiss":

> May I ask the courtesy of your columns to correct a misstatement concerning my poetry made in THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW? Edna Lou Walton attributes to me the phrase "thunderous kiss," which she declares is "a little absurd," as indeed it is, since she coined it herself. No doubt it is an accidental

> vulgarization of some more accurate usage of mine, but the phrase she quotes cannot be found anywhere in my poetry.[67]

Miss Walton's response was printed two weeks later:

> I should like to apologize to Mr. Fearing for misquoting a phrase of his from a poem which as a whole I liked and praised in my review. My more commonplace mental associations made a "thunderous kiss" out of his "thunderbolt kiss."[68]

There the battle ended. Miss Walton printed the correct image but did not retreat on her statement about its absurdity. Fearing was evidently satisfied to see his work correctly quoted.

Fearing had a similar battle in May of 1936 when "Longshot Blues" appeared in Poetry. As the extant manuscript of the poem clearly shows, a hand, not Fearing's, changed the punctuation of the poem after it was received by the magazine.[69] Fearing noted the changes and responded in a letter dated May 4, 1936:

> Concerning the issue, may I say that in spite of Horace Gregory's hard and relatively successful work in collecting poetry for his anthology, and his excellent article introducing it, the presentation was marred, for me at least, by the stupid, presumptuous editing that my own and several of the other poems underwent. I cannot imagine whose clumsy punctuation was superimposed upon my poem, but whoever did

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[67]Kenneth Fearing, "Thunderous Kiss," The New York Times Book Review, 29 November 1936, p. 34.

[68]Edna Lou Walton, "Letters to the Editor," The New York Times Book Review, 13 December 1936, p. 32.

[69]Kenneth Fearing, "Longshot Blues" (University of Chicago Modern Poetry Collections: Kenneth Fearing Letters and Mss.).

it was evidently maintaining, successfully, the oldest and best traditions of "Poetry: A Magazine of Verse."[70]

At a much later date Fearing and Indiana University Press exchanged a series of letters concerning proposed changes in "Reading, Writing, and the Rackets," and in that exchange, Fearing fought hard (he even broke his contract once) to maintain his exact wording.[71]

From the available evidence it can be assumed that Fearing rather closely followed his books through the various stages of their production. Lacking specific evidence concerning the source of the numerous changes in Collected Poems (1940), it can be assumed that Fearing was aware of and agreed to the changes made in the format of his earlier poems when they appeared in Collected Poems. Whoever made the decision to standardize the presentational format of the earlier poems, much was lost. It might have been Fearing's decision, working under the influence of the standard poetry format of The New Yorker; it might have been a suggestion made by a Random House editor. But whoever made it, the decision effectively hid Fearing's legitimate

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[70]Kenneth Fearing to Poetry, 4 May 1936 (University of Chicago Modern Poetry Collections: Kenneth Fearing Letters and Mss.). When "Longshot Blues" appeared in Dead Reckoning, Fearing followed, with only minor changes, the form of the unedited manuscript. He rejected Poetry's attempt to make the poem syntactically clearer. Perhaps his rejection was due to anger; perhaps he saw that a syntactically vague poem better fit the tone of his proposed volume.

[71]See Greenburg to Fearing, 31 August 1956; Fearing to Greenburg, 5 September 1956; Perry to Fearing, 13 September 1956; Fearing to Perry, 15 September 1956 (Indiana File).

linear ancestry to the Beat Poets of the fifties.[72]

In his credo Fearing discussed the organic development of the form of each individual poem. Allen Ginsberg, the Beat guru, discussing the problem of the long line in poetry said:

> But how to sustain a long line in poetry (lest it lapse into prosaic)? It's natural inspiration of the moment that keeps it moving, disparate things put down together, shorthand notations of visual imagery, juxtapositions of hydrogen jukebox . . . one stream of single word associations summing up. Mind is shapely, Art is shapely. Meaning Mind practiced in spontaneity invents forms in its own image and gets to Last Thoughts. Loose ghosts wailing for body try to invade the bodies of living men. I hear ghostly Academics in Limbo screeching about form.[73]

The format changes in Collected Poems not only hid Fearing's relationship to later experimental poetry, they also depressed the revolutionary spirit of the poetry he wrote during the twenties and thirties, and they stand as mute evidence of the fact that Fearing may not have clearly understood the formalistic implications of his own poetic credo.

The other changes in the earlier poems, redactions involving revision, additions or deletions, or word changes are more understandable and have a more positive effect on Fearing's poetry. He rewrote or reorganized several of his early poems to make their meaning clearer before publishing them in Collected Poems. For example, the opening

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[72]See above, Chapter II, footnote 87.

[73]Allen Ginsberg, "Notes written on finally recording 'Howl,'" in Thomas Parkinson, ed., A Casebook on the Beat (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1961), p. 28.

lines of "St. Agnes Eve" in Angel Arms is unclear because of Fearing's misuse of the words "dramatis personae."

> The dramatis personae include a fly-specked Monday evening,
> A cigar store with stagnant windows,
> Two crooked streets,
> Six policemen and Louie Glatz.

The revision of this poem in Collected Poems clears up the ambiguity.

> The settings include a fly-specked Monday evening,
> A cigar store with stagnant windows,
> Two crooked streets:
> The characters: six policemen and Louie Glatz.

The ending of the poem "Now" is similarly made clearer by revision.

In Angel Arms the poem reads:

> The world is quiet and green.
> Bubbles rise in the water of swamps.
> Bubbles of gas rise and break among the reeds
> The reeds are green.
> The frogs are loud, the water is warm where the bubbles rise.
> The reeds are still.
> The reeds are green, the water is warm, the sky is blue.

The revision in Collected Poems reads:

> The world is quiet and green--
>
> As it is where bubbles rise in the waters of swamps;
> Where bubbles of gas rise and break among the reeds;
> And the reeds are green;
> And the frogs are loud, the water is warm where the bubbles rise;
> The reeds are still;
> The reeds are green, the water is warm, the sky is blue.

Fearing, operating under the influence of his own statement "that poetry necessarily must be understandable," made numerous revisions in his earlier poetry to insure that in Collected Poems the "meaning should disclose itself at ordinary reading tempo."

Fearing seems to have made word changes in Collected Poems for a variety of reasons. Some of the changes result from the fact that

he could not spell and Edward Dahlberg and Sol Funaroff were not good proof readers. In "American Rhapsody (1)," "blond" becomes "blonde"; in "Denouement,""denoument" becomes "denouement"; in "American Rhapsody (2)," "grey" becomes "gray."

Of the word changes in "The Agency" section of Collected Poems, one type dominates and seems to have been dictated by a desire to create a sense of unity in the section. The change involves the insertion of the word "agent" in several poems. When "Agent No. 174 Resigns" appeared in The New Yorker, it was called "Operative No. 174 Resigns" and it contained the line: "And shortly after that a small black pooch, obviously lost, attached himself to your operative's heels." In Collected Poems the line reads: "And shortly after that a small black pooch, obviously lost, attached himself to your agent's heels." In "The Doctor Will See You Now," "Mr. B, in Wall Street, is disturbed by numbness of the joints . . ." becomes "Mr. B, in Wall Street, is everywhere pursued by a secret agent. . . ." In "Portrait of a Cog," the phrase "and none of your accounts have been brought up to date" becomes "and one of your trusted agents has suddenly resigned." This change not only introduces the figure of the agent, it also serves as an allusion to the section's opening poem. Finally the title of the poem "Yes, The Serial Will Continue" becomes "Yes, The Agency Can Handle That." Through these and other similar changes Fearing was able to create a sense of unity among poems written over a two year period and published in various magazines.

Much more interesting and illuminating are the changes that resulted from updating the poems. Some of these changes were similar to changes Fearing later informed Indiana University Press about: "I have a few more changes, very slight, to make in the body of the poetry; I forgot to update subway fares, and telephone charges, which may look too odd."[74] In the poem "Conclusion," a "speakeasie" becomes a "tavern"; in "Winner Take All," a "talking picture" becomes a "motion picture"; in "Aphrodite Metropolis (2)," a "trolley" becomes a "bus." These simple changes reflect technological advances or the public's acceptance of them. Other updating, however, reflects a change in the political situation in the world and Kenneth Fearing's shifting attitude toward that situation.

The most subtle of these politically motivated changes is the deletion of the word "scream" from many of the poems that appeared in Poems. Perhaps in 1940 the scream of the deprived no longer could be heard, or perhaps Fearing was no longer sensitive to it. Other politically motivated changes are not that subtle. By 1940 Fearing saw Franklin Roosevelt in a new light and so he obscured his caricature of him in "American Rhapsody (1)" by changing the name "Franklin Devoe" to "Allen Devoe."[75] In "1933" the phrase "A New Deal" becomes "Unconstitutional." The next to the last stanza of "What If Mr. Jesse James

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[74]Kenneth Fearing to Edith Greenberg, 5 September 1956 (Indiana University Press File).

[75]Rosenthal, "Chief Poets," p. 291.

Should Some Day Die?" is rewritten and defused considerably. The version in Poems reads:

> No more breadlines. No more blackjacks. No more Roosevelts. No more Hearsts.
> No more vag tanks, Winchells, True Stories, deputy sheriffs, no more scabs.
> No more trueblue, patriotic, doublecross leagues. No more Ku Klux Klan. No more heart-to-heart shakedowns. No more D.A.R.

The revision in Collected Poems reads:

> No more breadlines. No more blackjacks. And save us from the sheriffs, the G-men and the scabs.
> No more heart-to-heart shakedowns. No more Ku Klux Klan. No more trueblue, patriotic, doublecross leagues.

The most interesting politically motivated redactions involve the elimination of words which have Marxian overtones. In the strongly Marxian poem "Denouement," a "section comrade" becomes an "organizer," and the phrase "Your party lives" becomes "Your brothers live." In the poem "No Credit" a "Communist" becomes a "rebel."[76]

The changes in Kenneth Fearing's poetry from earlier printed versions to Collected Poems indicate that the poet had become more conscious of his craft, that he was interested in his public image, and that he had indeed moved to a new and more traditional form of poetic expression by 1940.

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[76]Weldon Kees, "Fearing's Collected Poems," Poetry, 57 (January 1941), 267-68, noted some of these changes but drew no conclusions from them.

CHAPTER IV

THE MOVEMENT AWAY FROM POETRY

By the time Collected Poems appeared in 1940, Fearing had already begun to drift away from poetry. Never throughout his career was Kenneth Fearing only a poet. Much of his work, written under pseudonyms, was "purely commercial."[1] During his early years in New York he wrote for the pulps to pay for his rent, and later in his life he devoted most of his time to his novels. He wrote seven novels by himself and collaborated with the well-known pulp writer H. Bedford-Jones in writing an eighth. Fearing's first novel, The Hospital, appeared in 1939, the same year his poetry became a standard feature in The New Yorker. In an interview with a reporter for Time, Fearing explained, at least in part, the reason for his movement away from poetry: "Printing poetry is not only expensive, but dangerous; it marks you as a public enemy. My first book disgraced me; my second bankrupted me; after my third one I was lucky to get away with my life."[2] At least one of the prime reasons for writing novels was money. Fearing did not abruptly drop poetry, but he did continue to turn out novels rather rapidly. In a letter to George Dillon at Poetry,

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[1] Kunitz, Twentieth Century Authors, p. 444.

[2] "Feverish," p. 52.

Fearing indicated that he did his writing in blocks, first in one genre and then in another. "I plan not to write any more poetry for some time and there isn't much use, therefore, in holding the material of mine that you have for a larger representation."[3]

After his first novel, which developed a general dramatic situation and studied the effect of that situation on the characters, Fearing turned to psychological thrillers. The Dagger of the Mind appeared in 1941, and Clark Gifford's Body followed in 1942. The problem of which genre to work in remained protean. In 1943, Tom Boggs reported that Fearing was "now, fed up with prose, preparing a fifth book of poems."[4] That fifth book of poetry, Afternoon of a Pawnbroker, was published by Harcourt Brace in 1943. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich has no letters on file which might throw light on the development of the volume. "It is possible, of course, that negotiations for this book were made in meetings with Mr. Fearing and his editor here at Harcourt."[5] Evidently Fearing did not discuss the formation of the volume with Harcourt at all. Diarmuid Russell, Fearing's literary agent, recalls:

> . . . what he did was to bring in the ms. and we would do some talking about possible terms and I would send to

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[3]Kenneth Fearing to George Dillon, undated (University of Chicago Modern Poetry Collection: Kenneth Fearing Letters and Mss.).

[4]"Notes on the Contributors," in Tom Boggs, ed., American Decade, 68 Poems for the First Time in an Anthology (Cummington, Mass.: The Cummington Press, 1943), p. [94].

[5]Rita Vaughan to James A. Perkins, 22 February 1972 (Author's File).

publisher and then call him about what had been settled.[6]

Fearing's most successful novel, The Big Clock, was published in 1946. In 1947 John Barry appeared over Fearing's pseudonym Donald F. Bedford. The movie version of The Big Clock[7] was released in 1948, the same year that the last of Fearing's poetry appeared in The New Yorker and that his last individual volume of poems Stranger at Coney Island was published by Harcourt Brace. Fearing, evidently unable to write his new novel for Harcourt, proposed the volume of poetry:

> I trust we can have that proposed lunch pretty soon, although I must say that if you think you are going to get a definite deadline from me about my next novel it is no use, you will find me a trifle evasive. But, let's try anyway. I'll call you sometime this week. How about a book of poems?[8]

Davis responded a month later and accepted the proposal.

> As to the book of poems, I told you long ago, when you were in acute suffering over the success of THE BIG CLOCK, that we were expecting with relish a new volume.[9]

The contract for the volume was signed in late March.[10] The book was published in the fall and Harcourt was very pleased with it. They

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[6]Diarmuid Russell to James A. Perkins, 16 February 1972 (Author's File).

[7]Kenneth Fearing to Lambert Davis, 15 January 1948, contains Fearing's reaction to the film: "Speaking of dramatizations, I saw one of my own a couple of days ago. There was a preview of The Big Clock, and I doubtless will be mulling it over for the rest of my life." This is one of a series of letters obtained from Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, hereafter called Harcourt File.

[8]Kenneth Fearing to Lambert Davis, 15 January 1948 (Harcourt File).

[9]Lambert Davis to Kenneth Fearing, 18 February 1948 (Harcourt File).

[10]Lambert Davis to Kenneth Fearing, 29 March 1948 (Harcourt File).

informed Fearing that he had at least one important admirer: "Incidentally, I presented a copy of STRANGER AT CONEY ISLAND to Carl Sandburg who likes it tremendously."[11]

The rest of Fearing's writing career was devoted to commercial work and to his three remaining novels, The Loneliest Girl in the World (1951), The Generous Heart (1954), and The Crozart Story (1960). Although critics agree that his fiction is inferior to his verse and that he evidently wrote his novels to earn money,[12] Fearing's friend Horace Gregory, who agrees that the fiction is inferior, suggests that his reason for writing novels may not have been money: "Fearing's prose lacked the distinction of his verse, but unlike Ernest Dowson, he placed a higher value on the writing of it than on his poems."[13] Perhaps lack of public acceptance of his poetry caused Fearing to move away from the genre. Curiously enough it was during the period of his movement away from poetry that he began to receive some recognition as a poet. Perhaps his former political connections retarded his justified notice. For although he received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1936 and had it renewed in 1939, it was not until November of 1940 that he received an outright award for his poetry. The announcement of the award

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[11]L. J. to Kenneth Fearing, 13 September 1948 (Harcourt File).

[12]Donald Heiney, Recent American Literature (Great Neck, N. Y.: Barrons Educational Series, Inc., 1958), p. 545; Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 25 November 1952 (Indiana University Press File) stated "And all of this is just too damn much of a headache, to sell the customary 943 copies, or possibly this time, a grand total of 1,873."

[13]Gregory, A History of American Poetry, p. 467.

from Poetry and the Friday Club read:

> The Guarantor's Prize of one hundred dollars, for a poem or group of poems published in Poetry during its twenty-eighth year, is awarded to KENNETH FEARING of New York, for THREE POEMS printed in the May 1940 issue.[14]

Fearing was pleased by this late recognition, and he wrote to George Dillon: "Thank you and the staff of Poetry Magazine and the Friday Club for awarding me the Guarantor's Prize of this year. It is very nice to have won."[15]

Four years later the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters awarded Fearing one thousand dollars in recognition of his creative work in literature, and to further his efforts in that direction.[16] The vague phrasing of the citation was probably standard for the language of the award, but it was certainly appropriate to the changing direction of Kenneth Fearing's creative work in literature.

By 1952 Fearing was aware of his drift away from poetry, and he was forced to face it when Samuel Yellen of Indiana University Press proposed that he write some new poems for a volume of new and selected poems that the press wished to publish in its newly launched poetry series.

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[14] "Announcement of Awards," Poetry, 57 (November 1940), 156.

[15] Kenneth Fearing to George Dillon, undated (University of Chicago Modern Poetry Collection: Kenneth Fearing Letters and Mss.).

[16] Van Wyck Brooks to Kenneth Fearing, 22 March 1944 (American Academy of Arts and Letters File).

> I haven't written a line of poetry since that last volume appeared, and while I keep my licence [sic] to do so still in force, don't plan to write any for some time.[17]

In August of the same year, Fearing was invited to contribute to an anniversary issue of Poetry, and his response was negative: "Thank you for your invitation to contribute to your forthcoming anniversary issue. I would certainly like to do so, but I have not written any poetry for four or five years, and have nothing on hand."[18]

Fearing suggested that Indiana might just re-issue his 1940 volume of Collected Poems, but both Samuel Yellen and Bernard Perry wanted some new material in each book in their poetry series, and Yellen urged Fearing to write "five or six new poems."

> That would help us to promote the book with greater success. And it would also, Kenneth, make it a better book in bringing your slant on American life right up to the present time, and thus cancel any notion that your criticism concerns the past time and not the present. Of course I know that you must be busy with other ideas. Nevertheless, let me persuade you to flash your license and do several new poems.[19]

Fearing answered from Saratoga Springs where he was staying at Yaddo "designing, starting, and tearing up a novel," which he was doing under contract for Harcourt Brace. He approved of the notion of having new material, but he had reservations: "The only trouble is, finding the time and the frame of mind in which to write some more poems." He

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[17] Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 29 May 1952 (Indiana File).

[18] Kenneth Fearing to Karl Shapiro, 14 August 1952 (University of Chicago Modern Poetry Collection: Kenneth Fearing Letters and Mss.).

[19] Samuel Yellen to Kenneth Fearing, 8 June 1952 (Indiana File).

was also worried about the number of new poems Yellen wanted: ". . . when you mention five or six new poems, could that by any chance be a euphemism for three or four?"[20] Negotiations with Indiana dragged on. Fearing attempted to wrap up his novel and tried not to think about poetry. "At the moment, I feel very doubtful, however, that I will ever get into a mood to re-open the subject of poetry."[21] When he did take some time off from his novel, it was not for poetry but for "large gobs of commercial work of one sort or another . . . variegated and interesting, but also time consuming." He felt that novel writing and poetry writing were two psychologically different mediums and could not see himself "unwinding, psychologically speaking, from the novel medium, then rewinding on poetry . . . and finally shifting back to the novel, repeating the whole wear and tear."[22]

Finally in November of 1954, with his last novel for Harcourt Brace behind him and agog from Yellen's suggestion that "with a collected poems just about this time, you'd be a likely candidate for some of the honors and prizes which you certainly deserve," Fearing, although still very much aware that he had not used his poetic license in some time, agreed to try some new poems: "I feel sure I can come up with ten new poems by that time, and I hope they will be not only new, but some of them fresh."[23] On July 15, 1955, Fearing was sent the counter-

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[20]Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 14 June 1952 (Indiana File).

[21]Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, August 1952 (Indiana File).

[22]Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 25 November 1952 (Indiana File).

[23]Samuel Yellen to Kenneth Fearing, 7 November 1954; Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 15 November 1954 (Indiana File).

signed contracts for his last book of poetry by Bernard Perry, director of Indiana University Press, and on January 28, 1956, Fearing sent the first draft of his introduction, "Reading, Writing, and the Rackets," to Samuel Yellen. In a covering letter, he suggested: "There may be some misgivings at Indiana University Press about publishing it. . . ."[24] There were certainly misgivings about Fearing's frontal attack on the American Investigation. Indiana felt that the introduction bore "little immediate relation to the poems," and they thought Fearing should "drop the introduction completely."[25] Fearing's response to this was immediate; he cancelled his contract with Indiana.[26] A soothing letter from Yellen forced him to reconsider; he rewrote the foreword so that it was "neither shorter nor longer; merely tougher." He added a fifth section to it to tie the introduction to the poems, and in a covering letter he defended the introduction.

> There are a lot of reasons why "Reading, Writing, and the Rackets" does belong in this book, and at this time. Without it, the book would receive the silent funeral these days accorded all creative books; with it, the blast may at least serve notice it has been published, and eventually reach the eyes of a new generation of readers. (I am aware the blast may dislocate my neck; but that is exactly what is going to happen, anyway.) Then, readers already familiar with my poetry will wonder where I have been, during the blizzard of arsenic; these customers should be told, without ambiguity.[27]

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[24]Bernard Perry to Kenneth Fearing, 15 July 1955; Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 28 January 1956 (Indiana File).

[25]Samuel Yellen to Kenneth Fearing, 18 February 1956 (Indiana File).

[26]Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 21 February 1956 (Indiana File).

[27]Samuel Yellen to Kenneth Fearing, 3 March 1956; Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 5 March 1956 (Indiana File).

Finally Fearing sent Indiana his new poems and in a covering letter said:

> I am sorry to be so late with this; but I haven't been merely procrastinating. The difficulty has been writing the new poetry; despite perennial optimism about it, I find that I don't write any faster than usual, which is about a poem a month. And I am sorry that the new material, the "Family Album" series, has only four of them in it. But I can hope that with "Reading, Writing, and the Rackets," the customers will feel they are getting their money's worth of fresh text.[28]

The press was disturbed about the title New and Selected Poems being misleading, and Yellen asked Fearing for seven or eight more poems.[29] Fearing restated his belief that the introduction provided substantial new material and suggested alternate titles for the volume. "There is no reason why a new title should not verge upon novelty: 'American Rhapsodies,' 'Portraits,' 'Family Album,'--novelty, that is, applied to a mixed selection of this sort."[30]

Indiana was already committed to the book, and despite the fact that New and Selected Poems would be larger than the other books in their poetry series and have to be sold at a higher price, they went ahead with it because Samuel Yellen thought "there might be some chance of a Pulitzer Prize on this sort of thing."[31]

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[28]Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 9 June 1956 (Indiana File).

[29]Samuel Yellen to Kenneth Fearing, 13 June 1956 (Indiana File).

[30]Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 18 June 1956 (Indiana File).

[31]Edith Greenberg to Bernard Perry, 26 June 1956, note written on Fearing's letter to Yellen, 18 June 1956 (Indiana File).

New and Selected Poems did not win a Pulitzer Prize; it was nominated for The National Book Award.[32] Looking back nearly twenty years on the publication of the book Samuel Yellen remembers:

> Fearing finally agreed to write six new poems. But as the months went along, he could only manage four new ones. . . . Actually the new poems were not up to his usual standard, and he knew it as well as I did. . . . Furthermore, he himself made the selection from his various books, and I was dismayed to see how wrong his judgement was. . . .[33]

Yellen makes some attempt to explain the poor quality of Fearing's work and finally blames himself. "Well, we did do the book. It was a disappointment, both in quality and in its sales. The quality could have been better if I had been my usual tough self as editor."[34]

A complete study of the Indiana University Press file of letters to and from Kenneth Fearing exonerates Samuel Yellen. He may be guilty of sending a bad book to press because he thought the press might win the Pulitzer Prize, but he is not responsible for Fearing's last four poems. Fearing had moved away from poetry by the time the negotiations for New and Selected Poems began. His last four poems and the introduction, "Reading, Writing, and the Rackets," were Fearing's unsuccessful attempts to deal with "the blizzard of arsenic," the McCarthy era. The American Investigation was the subject of his last novel, The Crozart Story, and reading it suggests that the "Family Album" and the

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[32]Kenneth Fearing to Bernard Perry, 11 February 1957 (Indiana File).

[33]Samuel Yellen to Bernard Perry, 16 January 1957, Indiana University Interdepartmental Communication (Indiana File).

[34]Ibid.

introduction to New and Selected Poems were notes on a work in progress, that Fearing was really by 1956 no longer able to unwind psychologically from the novel medium. But before this psychological paralysis overtook him completely, Fearing continued to vacilate between novels and poetry, and in the period from 1940 to 1948, he produced the forty-three poems contained in Afternoon of a Pawnbroker and Stranger at Coney Island.

I. AFTERNOON OF A PAWNBROKER

Fourteen of the twenty-one poems in Afternoon of a Pawnbroker appeared elsewhere before they were collected into this volume. Nine of those fourteen appeared in The New Yorker, and The New Yorker format and a subtle, cynical New Yorker humor dominate the volume. Although Fearing has been accused by critics of becoming increasingly bitter in his later volumes,[35] this volume contains more humor and more word play than Dead Reckoning. Perhaps the critics who have failed to understand Fearing's later cynical humor have also failed to consider the audience for which much of his later poetry was written.

In "The Agency" section of Collected Poems, Fearing used a vague and ominous corporate body as the metaphor for the meaninglessness of human existence in the mechanized environment of twentieth-century America. In 1943 he moved to a much more generalized presentation of a more specific theme. Afternoon of a Pawnbroker presents a kaleidoscopic view of American life and exposes a new metaphor for meaninglessness, repetition. Repetition is at the heart of the poet's attack on

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[35] Rodman, p. 18.

the agency. Dullness and boredom have been targets in Fearing's world since "Andy and Jerry and Joe" in Angel Arms. Agent No. 174 resigned because there "is no law compelling any man on earth to do the same, second hand." The life in the agency is dull because it is repetitious. New ventures and creativity either are not understood there or are considered dangerous. In Afternoon of a Pawnbroker Fearing makes the background, the setting, less corporate so that more Americans, more readers of The New Yorker, can identify with the dullness and meaninglessness of life in a mechanized society.

"Continuous Performance," the poem which opens the volume, presents a lengthy simile in which life is compared to a movie which runs again and again.

> The place seems strange, more strange than ever, and the times
> are still more out of joint;
> Perhaps there has been some slight mistake?
>
> It is like arriving at the movies late, as usual, just as
> the story ends. . . .[36]

America, in 1943 when this poem was first published, was engaged in a war which was supposed to make things better, which was supposed to give meaning and direction to the drift of the preceding decade. But

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[36]This poem is full of literary allusions. These lines remind the reader of Hamlet I, v. Later on there are allusions to Sisyphus Tantalus, Hydras, and "Kubla Khan." It seems that Fearing did not "discard the entire bag of conventions and codes usually associated with poetry." Although this use of allusion is not typical and although Fearing did exclude earlier allusive verse from the 1940 edition, in his last two individual volumes Fearing explored several mythologies in an apparent attempt to give universal significance to contemporary banality.

the time is still out of joint. Fearing suggests that life is a cycle. As viewers of a film, America will ". . . stay to see Hydra's head cut off, and grown again, and incredibly multiplied, / And observe how Sisyphus fares when he has once more reached the top, / How Tantalus again will nearly eat and drink." The Hydra is not given a local habitation and a name; it could be war; it could be violence; it could be poverty; it is cyclical and repetitious.

The cycles of life, the roles men adopt, the games men play, are presented in "Public Life." The poem even begins with "then," a word which suggests that, as usual, the picture has already begun.

> Then enter again, through a strange door, into a life again all strange,
> Enter as a rich man, or perhaps a poor man,
> Enter as a beggarman or thief, doctor or lawyer or merchant or chief,
> Enter, smiling, enter on tiptoe, enter blowing kisses, enter in tears. . . .

Many, many roles are suggested. Many entrances and exits are described before the poem ends:

> Enter again to a different scene,
> Enter again, through a strange door, into a life again all new and strange.

By itself this poem might seem to be an affirmation of the wonderful protean nature of the human personality, a rhapsody of man's ability to adjust to changing events. But coming as it does in the context of Fearing's presentation of repetitious meaninglessness, it becomes heavy with irony. The roles man chooses to adopt become lines from a

nursery rhyme, and life is neither new nor strange.[37]

Similarly, because life is neither new nor strange, but a repetitious pattern of entrances and exits, there is no joy in the life of the character in "The Joys of Being a Businessman." With his paperwork at ten, his bills at eleven, his shave, and then his glass of vermouth at exactly twelve o'clock, the proprietor of the Riviera Cafe is a lineal descendant of the character presented in "Portrait of a Cog."

Life is so predictable that in "Model for a Biography" a formula for writing the agency man's life history is presented. What he did, where he lived, where he went--all this is irrelevant; it was all preparation, all experience. Every event in life is both a means and an end.

In "Statistics" Fearing reduces human existence to the numbers of the actuary. When seen as figures crawling inexorably across a life insurance table, a seemingly meaningless life becomes completely meaningless. The poems ask how all these incontrovertible figures can be balanced because "the need for an answer that is correct is very great," but there the poem ends. No answer is provided. Only the cycle, the repetition of human misery is presented. The statistical approach in this poem links it to "Cracked Record Blues," in which Fearing compares the mind trying to understand the times to a phonograph record that

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[37] In "Certified Life," Fearing presents a variation on this same theme by exposing a group of characters who have created within their lives patterns of repetitious meaninglessness through the adoption of hobbies and other diversions.

"falters, and repeats, and repeats, and repeats. . . ." He says, "There is nothing in this world that should bother the mind."

> Because the mind is a common sense affair filled with common sense answers to common sense facts,
> It can add up, can add up, can add up, can add up earthquakes and subtact them from fires,
> It can bisect an atom or analyze the planets--
> All it has to do is to, do is to, do is to, do is to start at the beginning and continue to the end.

Any grade-school child knows that apples cannot be added to grapes; neither can fires be subtracted from earthquakes to produce meaningful results. The figures in "Statistics" are not meaningful, just necessary. The poet says in this poem that meaning could be reached if the mind could "begin at the beginning and continue to the end." "Continuous Performance" shows, however, that it is usual to arrive later after the story has begun.

The juke-box presented in "King Juke" is able to "seize its thoughts between fingers of steel, / Begin them at the start and follow them through in an orderly fashion to the very end." In fact the juke-box can do just about anything any man can do and do it better, louder, clearer. The juke-box can tirelessly without hangover, regret, or sleep follow cycle after cycle from beginning to end, but it cannot listen, cannot interact. "BUT IT'S A PROVEN FACT, THAT A JUKE-BOX HAS NO EARS." There is, in this poem, a clear, if somewhat weak, affirmation that life, however directionless and meaningless it may appear to be, is better than non-life, and that man, however inadequate he may

appear to be, is better than his machines.[38] Man has ears and the juke-box can hammer his nerves, stab his heart, and beat his soul. He has ears and can be bombarded as in "Reception Good" by media inputs that are so numerous that they become finally repetitive, incomprehensible, and meaningless.

> Such are the new and complex harmonies, it seems, of a strange and still more complex age;
> It is not that the reception is confused or poor, but rather it is altogether too clear and good.[39]

Again the mind is compared to a machine, and it is seen "piecing together fragments of a flashing past with clouded snapshots of the present and future. . . . Somehow creating hope and fresh courage out of ancient doubt." Again the man overcomes the machine.

Two other poems in Afternoon of a Pawnbroker probe aspects of man's relationship to machines. "Suburban Sunset, Pre-War, or What Are We Missing," one of the least successful poems in the volume, is actually a blatant attack on the advertising profession, but it closes with a picture of a suburbanite who is prostrate on his patio and on his

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[38]Fearing stopped writing poetry before the advent of sophisticated computers, but they play a considerable role in his novel The Loneliest Girl in the World, and in that novel as in this poem, machines are considered inferior to men. In The Big Clock the image of a giant clock running and grinding man in its gears, which is reminiscent of Chaplin's film Modern Times, dominates the book. Fearing's last novel, The Crozart Story, depicts the moral bankruptcy of men who use machines (tape recorders and other snooping devices) to destroy other men. Like most artists connected with Surrealistic movement, Fearing distrusts machinery completely.

[39]This reminds the reader of "We hear you well enough, but we don't like what you're saying" in "Hold the Wire."

back after an unsuccessful encounter with a new television set. This poem is certainly a good example of New Yorker humor, certainly something the middle-class American consumer could identify with, but it lacks the strength of "Travelogue in a Shooting-Gallery." This poem presents a Times Square penny arcade where

> There is a jungle, there is a jungle, there is a vast, vivid, wild wild, marvelous, marvelous, marvelous jungle,
> Open to the public during business hours,
> A jungle not very far from an Automat, between a hat store there, and a radio shop.

This jungle is a civilized jungle where men, the New York natives, come to take out their frustrations by shooting at

> Rows and rows of marching ducks, dozens and dozens and dozens of ducks . . .
> Ducks as big as telephone books, slow and fearless and out of this world. . . .

This is a jungle where "Leanfaced men with windswept eyes . . . arrive by streetcar, auto or subway, taxi or on foot, streetcar or bus. . . ." Short of quoting the entire poem there is no way to describe the masterful use of rhythm and the word play achieved in "Travelogue in a Shooting Gallery." But technique is subordinated to theme, and the reader is aware that the men who come to the penny arcade move on well-oiled, ball-bearing, endless, endless rotary belts as surely as do the ducks they come to shoot.

One or two of the characters in Afternoon of a Pawnbroker become aware of the cyclic, repetitious patterns of their lives. The speaker in "Continuous Performance" shows such an awareness when he makes the comparison between life and the film. The speaker in "Confession

Overheard in a Subway" becomes aware, during his dramatic monologue, of the cyclic nature of things.

> I have heard the same confession many times since, in
> different places.
> And now that I think of it, I had heard it many times before.

However, his major problem is the expiation of his guilt, and in this curiously inverted parable of responsibility, the revelation of the cyclic repetition of life's events is overlooked.

The pawnbroker in the title poem of the volume does not overlook the repetitive dullness of his life; it is the subject of his monologue.[40]

> Still they bring me diamonds, diamonds, always diamonds,
> Why don't they pledge something else for a change, if they
> must have loans, other than those diamond clasps
> and diamond rings,
> Rubies, sapphires, emeralds, pearls,
> Ermine wraps, silks and satins, solid gold watches and silver
> plate and violins two hundred years old,
> And then again diamonds, diamonds, the neighborhood diamonds
> I have seen so many times before, and shall see so
> many times again?

The pawnbroker, looking back, remembers that once he had Gabriel's horn, Satan's apple, Aladdin's lamp, Pandora's box, a magic carpet, the Fountain of Youth, the Holy Grail, and an invisible man. He wonders now in the midst of his diamond dullness why he did not think the former time a strange one. He wonders why, while the chance was his, he did not open the box or drink from the fountain. His reveries are interrupted.

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[40]Again in Afternoon of a Pawnbroker as in Angel Arms, Fearing placed the title poem at the end of the volume. Perhaps it is so placed in this volume because it offers the consolation of memory and myth to counteract the repetitive dullness of reality.

But here comes Mr. Barrington to pawn his Stradivarius.
And here comes Mrs. Case, to redeem her diamond ring.

Perhaps in "Afternoon of a Pawnbroker," Fearing is returning to the imagery of one of his earliest poems and this time showing instead of telling the reader about it. This dramatic monologue captures the sense and spirit of "Old Men." Fearing once turned away from these ideas and excluded "Old Men" from Angel Arms. In this and other later poems, he seems to recognize the truth of those early lines: "But old men have their deep dreams / They follow on quiet afternoons."

Some of the futility of the repetition and cycle of human existence is captured in "Elegy in a Theatrical Warehouse." The play is over; the many entrances and exits suggested in "Public Life" are finished.

The telephone is gone, the phone that rang and rang, and never
did connect with any other phone,
And the great steel safe where no diamonds ever were,
They have taken down the pictures, portraits of ancestors lost
and unclaimed, that hung on the massive walls,
And taken away the books that reached to the study ceiling,
The rows and rows of books bound in leather and gold with
nothing, nothing, nothing inside--

All the props are put away, the props that were used to convey again and again the actions which are also gone. "Almost everything is gone, / Everything that never held a single thing at all." This dismal suggestion, in this poem, of the meaninglessness of life's repetitive action is brought into sharper focus by Fearing in "Finale," a poem which contains familiar Fearing imagery.

How cold, how very cold is the wind that blows out of
nowhere into nowhere,
Winding across space and uncalendar'd time. . . .

This cold wind is the wind of the present, which Fearing used as early as Angel Arms, and in "Finale" he explains that it will continue to blow "out of nowhere into nowhere," carrying "away to nowhere and to no place the very especial sins and virtues that were once ours. . . ."

Balanced against this bleak forecast is another poem which suggests a brighter future. "Art Review" is basically a parody of a newspaper art column. In the poem the critic evaluates the recent "showings" of graffiti around the city and finds that the newly drawn Vandyke on the face-cream girl "lacks the brilliance shown by the masters of the Elevated age."[41] All of the graffiti are called "simple thumbprints on the throat of time." They are attempts by the little people of Fearing's world, men buried under meaningless jobs, to make a mark, and the poem ends with the affirmation that the graffiti will continue to appear.

Fearing seemed to feel that the future could not be known, except that the disasters of the past could be expected to repeat themselves. In the closing poem in "The Agency" section of Collected Poems he allowed a fortune teller to unmask himself. In Afternoon of a Pawnbroker he continues his attack on that trade in "End of the Seer's Convention."[42] The seers that Fearing presents can do nothing about the

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[41] This reminds the reader of the blonde lady with the penciled mustache on a placard by the L Platform in "Aphrodite Metroplis (2)" in Angel Arms.

[42] In "Thirteen O'Clock" Fearing ridicules seances by suggesting, in a dramatic monologue spoken by a ghost, that they provide the opportunity for the living to haunt the dead.

growing evil of the police; they cannot fight against skepticism; they cannot "seize power" from those common sense men who license them; they can in fact do nothing to help themselves. They are able only to prophesy war.

> "Trite," was the comment of a crystal-gazer from
> Miami Beach.
> "Any damn fool, at any damn time, can visualize
> wars, and more wars and famines and plagues."

Perhaps the prophecy is not trite, but it is certainly predictable, as predictable as the figures in the actuary's tables in "Statistics."[43]

Predictable also are the actions of some few individual men. In the only clearly drawn political attack in the volume, "A Tribute, and a Nightmare," Fearing attacks Representative Martin Dies, who, even before Senator Joseph McCarthy, began to crack down on those who during the thirties had had leftist affiliations or sympathies. The poem is poor because it lacks any subtlety, but it is important because it contains and sustains the theme of cyclic change.

> You wonder, sometimes, but more often worry, and
> feel dismayed in a world of change.
> Seeing landmarks vanish, old bastions fall, and you frequently
> question what Fate may have in store for you--
> But you really need not--
> Whatever else it holds, it holds the changeless and eternal
> Martin Dies.

The figure of the stranger, which first appeared in "The Agency," appears in this poem and also in "Beware," a poem which suggests the direction

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[43]Here again, as in "The Agency," Fearing juxtaposes two similar professions. In "The Agency" they were the psychiatrist and the fortune teller. Here they are the actuary and the seer.

that Fearing thinks the world may be going.

> Someone, somewhere, is always starting trouble,
> Either a relative, or a drunken friend, or a foreign state.
> Trouble it is, trouble it was, trouble it will always be.
> Nobody ever leaves well enough alone.

The word "always" indicates the repetitive nature of trouble. Trouble, as the poem points out, can come from anywhere. It can come from doorbells or telephones as it did in "Hold the Wire"; it can come from knocks at the door as it did in "Pay Day at the Morgue"; it can come from the voice of a stranger in the shadows as it did in "Class Reunion"; it can come from strangers and from innocent remarks. The American Investigation, which dominated Fearing's imagination in New and Selected Poems, was beginning to take shape when this poem was first published in 1942, and the stranger, the surprise witness, was just beginning to make a living by recalling innocent remarks. With the portent of a coming ice age, or just a cold war, Fearing ends the poem with a general warning:

> Beware of everything,
> Damn near anything leads to trouble,
> Someone is always, always stepping out of line.

The dull repetitions of life are the theme of Afternoon of a Pawnbroker, and mechanical repetitions such as the cracked record and the marching ducks are used as metaphors of that dullness. The form of many of the poems supports the theme through the use of syntactic and verbal repetition. Verbal repetition is expected and explained in "Cracked Record Blues," but it becomes more meaningful in "Travelogue in a Shooting-Gallery" where there are "endless, endless rotary belts,"

and in "Public Life" where people "Enter, smiling, enter on tiptoe, enter blowing kisses, enter in tears. . . ." The repetitions in Afternoon of a Pawnbroker become meaningful because of "the wind that blows out of nowhere into nowhere, / Winding across space and un-calendar'd time."

II. STRANGER AT CONEY ISLAND

In the mid-forties Fearing was writing novels. The Big Clock appeared in 1946, and Fearing's collaborative effort John Barry was published under a pseudonym in 1947. He continued to sell poetry to magazines during this period; eleven of the twenty-two poems in Stranger at Coney Island appeared first in either Poetry or The New Yorker.[44] However, the idea of bringing the poems together into a new volume of poetry seems to have been born out of Fearing's inability to get to work on a new novel.[45] The resulting work is Fearing's final statement about the loss of individualism to the impersonality of the machine age, about the failure of some personal immortality to overcome the inexorable passage of time, about the meaninglessness of modern life.

Meaning as well as a kind of immortality can come from memory. In his poem, "Memo," which opens Dead Reckoning, Fearing suggests that

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[44]Lambert Davis to Kenneth Fearing, 29 April 1948 (Harcourt File), indicates that three other poems, "Castaway," "Mrs. Fanchier at the Movies," and "Long Journey" were sold to Tomorrow, but they were never published.

[45]Kenneth Fearing to Lambert Davis, 15 January 1948 (Harcourt File).

some memory of former events must remain: "There must be, there has to be, no heart could beat if this were not so. . . ." In this volume in "4 A. M." Fearing suggests that no lasting memory is possible: "The booth where last night's love affair began, the spot where last year's homicide occurred, are empty now, and still."

The power of memory, the power of monuments against the relentless power of the passage of time is considered in a series of poems in Stranger at Coney Island which deal with past, present, and future memories. "Lanista" is a dramatic monologue delivered by Arius, the chief lanista or trainer of gladiators in a Roman coliseum. A former fighter himself, a man who has known nothing but the struggle of the games, Arius has killed twenty-eight men, and now he wonders at the rumor that this day's games will be the last ever held. The rumor attacks everything he has been trained to believe in; it calls into question everything he has ever known,

> As though the fight between the women and the dwarfs had
> been for nothing,
> And the combat between the crippled and the blind, had that
> no point?
> Is it not good that the race shall ever behold itself with
> pride and disgust, horror and fright?--
>
> So they say this may be the last of our little games--
>
> Well,
> We shall see.

Fearing presents here the cyclic nature of human events. Of course, Arius is right; the decree of the Emperor is not going to rid the world of its violence; there will always be games to be played by men trained in death. But what about Arius, the trainer whose image was seen "on

the lamps, the vases, the matron's gems"; he is forgotten.[46]

"Minutes from the Chamber of Commerce" notes that another "vintage ancestor has been dug up in Crete, thirty ruined cities beneath the ruins on top, / The archeologists are digging, still. . . ." Juxtaposed against the setting of a modern chamber of commerce meeting, this line suggests the futility of the actions of any individual or any age. "Elegy" also presents the buried past.

> Cherubs of stone, smiling, wait and watch above the grave of the Greenpoint child,
> Arrowheads still lie at his hand, ready to serve the Dakota man, and bowls to refresh him after the long hunt,
> Trusted sentinels, open-eyed and leaning on their spears stand guard before the airless tomb of the immortal King of Egypt, Lord of the earth, favorite of the heavens--

Fearing suggests that the memorials wait and lie and stand for no reason.

> And when will the King arise from his prolonged rest, to pursue the ancient enemy in his chariot once more,
> When will the hunter again return from the chase, to seize his bowl,
> When will the Greenpoint child once more go out, and attend to his serious play in the sun?

The monuments of the past are useless against the power of time, and the plans of the present are no more meaningful.

"Spotlight," a poem that might be read as part of Fearing's attitude toward his own craft, suggests that man cannot hope to be remembered through his art because the art cannot transfer personal emotions and because "the spotlight, in fact, falls elsewhere. . . ." In

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[46]Arius has become obsolete in his society. The fear of obsolescence pervades the mechanized world of Kenneth Fearing. In "M. D." a patient speaks whose only complaint is that he is not a machine, and because of this, he fears that he "shall never be able to compete. . . ."

"Bryce & Tomlins" Fearing attacks those who make plans for personal immortality through trusts and insurance.

> Offering maximum safety
> (at 5%)
> Full protection against change and chance, rust, moths, and
> the erratic flesh
> (trusts in perpetuity. Impartial executors of long-range wills)
> Year after year, security in spite of the treacherous currents
> of impulse, yours and others',
> Despite the swiftest tide of affairs--

The amassing of a personal fortune, even in barns where moth and rust do not corrupt and thieves do not break in and steal, will not insure memory, will not keep man from losing his individuality to "impartial executors."

The reporter in "Newspaperman" delivers an anguished plea to be remembered: "You will remember me? / Do not forget a newspaperman who kept his word." The newspaperman has spent his life trying to insure the memory of "Big John Marino, the terror of his district," of "the fabulous bankrupt," and of "an heiress, flashlit favorite in a season that cannot fade," because he made a promise to do so. "This charge was laid on me long ago: Do not forget; / Remember these lives, that the world in turn will not forget. . . ." Now facing death himself, the newspaperman realizes how fragile is the immortality that his memory has bestowed on others, yet reaches out and asks the reader to remember him. Ironically, however, he never mentions his name.

In the poem "This Day," Fearing shows how the world will continue to turn uninterrupted after a particular individual is no longer alive. The poem seems to be a companion piece to "Public Life" which appeared in Afternoon of a Pawnbroker. The metaphor of the world as

a stage and the auditor an actor is repeated. The house lights fade,

> As though this long by crowded day, itself, could sometime fade,
> Had in fact already slipped through the fingers and now were gone, gone, simply gone--
> Leaving no one, least of all yourself, to enact the unfinished drama that you, alone, once knew so well,
> No one to complete the triumph, to understand or even believe in the disaster that must be repaired,
> No one to glimpse this plan that seemed, at one time, must, must, must be fulfilled.

As the newspaperman knew, death is the end of the individual. And the plans, hopes, and dreams of the individual, which were important, the motivating factor in his life when he lived "in a numbered house on a street with a name" become unimportant in death. They serve only to reiterate the senselessness and futility of life.

In "Museum" Fearing exposes what use future memory will have for present man. The agency man is presented in a "taxidermist's frozen version of actual life."

> There is the Executive in his office; he is serious, but pleasant; a man of great importance in and to his day
> (See the telephone? And the ashtray and the desk pad, to the very life).

This executive was warned that someday he would wind up like this in "Portrait of a Cog":

> Yes, when they dig you up, like this, a thousand years from now,
> They will say: Just as he was in life. A man typical of the times engaged in typical affairs.
> Notice the features, especially, they will say. How self-assured they are, and how serene.

"Castaway" is a similar warning to the executive type to "Send messages now, press many buttons and make phone calls, seek the best advice and speed, speed the telegrams for aid. . . ." This must be done because

the executive type is "a trifle anxious in this impersonal place, a little worried in these fiery times," but he is holding securely to his solid reef, his job, his function. He is certain that he will rise in the morning as strong and young as he is today. His reef, of course, is not solid; time is passing (as it always is in Fearing's world) and he is passing time in an impersonal place. Soon he too will be marooned "in some quiet office, park, or decent hotel." He too will be swept away by time and forgotten.

There is no power that can stand up to time. In "Once Upon a Time," Fearing lamentingly admits this fact and shows how time and age tend to distort man's memory and create "golden ages."

> Ever, ever, ever, ever, ever so long ago,
> In a land very far, terribly far, very, very, very far away--
>
> Youth was bolder, and age more just,
> Love was everlasting, not the matter of caprice it is today,
> (Ask any dean of college, pulpit, radio, or newspaper, he will
> tell you the same)--
>
> Learning was respected then, the arts were truly glorious in
> those mightier times
> (Even the youngest student, today, will say this is true)
> Leaves were greener in springtime than they are now, and
> redder in autumn, while in winter the trees were
> straighter and taller and whiter with snow,
> Laughter was the rule, then, rather than the exception, and
> tragedy, when it befell, transfigured simple grief
> (No one ever argues these familiar facts)--
>
> And why should this be even sadder than it sounds?--
>
> It was such a long, long, long, long, long time ago,
> In a place that was so far, so very far, so terribly far away.

This poem presents Fearing's ultimate statement on the loss of the past and the use of the past. He presents again the dreams of old men who,

on warm summer afternoons, can escape to a time less hurried and more colorful. In earlier poems Fearing suggested that such dreams provide no viable pattern of response to the pressures of life; here he suggests that the greener, brighter, happier times never existed at all and that any variation in the repetitive dullness of life is indeed only a dream.

The dream is only one form of escape, and man is imaginative. Fearing first dealt with forms of escape in Angel Arms. In Stranger at Coney Island, he again probes and exposes various escapes employed by the citizens of his mechanized world. Some apply a hair of the dog that bit them. In "The Juke-Box Spoke and the Juke-Box Said": Fearing displays a group of automatons who narcotize themselves from the repetitious dullness of life by listening to the same song over and over and over and over again ("Play it again, Sam").

Others employ more conventional means of dulling themselves to the dullness of their existence. In "4 A. M." Fearing presents a speaker for whom liquor is unfortunately not working. The speaker is horribly aware of his situation.

> And soon, too soon, it will be closing time, the door will be locked,
> Leaving each of us alone, then, with something too ravaging for a name
> (Our golden, glorious futures, perhaps)--
>
> Lock the door now and put out the lights, before some terrible stranger enters and puts, to each of us, a question that must be answered with the truth--

Here as in the earlier poem "Payday at the Morgue" the stranger must be death. Even liquor cannot keep the speaker from thoughts of him.

For the "fifteen gentlemen in fifteen overcoats and fifteen hats holding fifteen glasses in fifteen hands" in "The Face in the Bar Room Mirror," the liquor seems to be working more effectively. Like the men drinking in Gonzetti's basement in "The Drinkers," they drink and climb or descend crystal stairs "into fifteen unseen heavens or hell," and like fifteen cogs on a wheel they come to bar to "stand and wait, and wait, and wait, and wait. . . ."

> Fifteen magicians,
> Masters of escape from handcuff and rope, straitjacket, padlock, dungeon and chain,
> Now planning escapes still more dazzling,
> And fifteen times more terrible than these.

The most unusual method of escape presented in Stranger at Coney Island is madness. Francis L. Regan, in "Higher Mathematics," is a photographer

> Who has a definite social security number, and whose lodge dues are paid to date,
> Whose hobbies, habits, likes and dislikes are not noticeably strange,
> Who lies in a solid house on a tangible street--

But Mr. Regan is absolutely mad, and he is the self-appointed photographer of the dead. Mrs. Fanchier, in "Mrs. Fanchier at the Movies," is also mad, but her madness is a more common variety madness. She simply believes that the shadows that she sees on the movie screen are real, and she would like to talk with them. But she has lived so long among the shadows, out of contact with reality, without living friends, that she fears that she may no longer know the right word or even have a voice with which to speak to the shadow.

A final form of escape explored in Stranger at Coney Island is myth, which Fearing presents in "Long Journey." The scene is a bus rolling through "the green and chilly suburbs on a late Spring afternoon." The rain of the present is streaking the windows, but those inside are unaware of the rain or the chill because they are borne away by their separate myths. One boy, not believing but spellbound, reads about Captain Wonder, while a fellow traveller reads the sports pages and "hears neither the wet tires nor the exhausts, / Only the roar of thousands across a sunswept field. . . ." The poor driver, who has no myth to escape into, drives the repetitious cycle of his route.

> The driver simply reverses his illumined signs,
> Singly, the passengers descend and resume, resume their
> separate ways--
>
> Disillusioned (and used to it), alone and self-absorbed,
> Unaware that Sinbad the Sailor has descended with them,
> and that Cyclops, Cinderella, the Princess of the
> Diamond Isles in love with Captain Wonder,
> And Jack the Giant Killer have all been companions of
> theirs--
>
> And that each of these has still a long, much longer way to go.

Some of the poems of Stranger at Coney Island extend the Kafkaesque directionlessness of Dead Reckoning. The humorous poem "Sherlock Spends a Day in the Country" shows the intrepid investigator wandering through a snow-covered woodland unable to enjoy the beauty of it because he is trying to interpret the clues and see some pattern in the events. While the members of the investigation turn the simplest deer tracks into the footprint of the Devil, the victim of bureaucracy,

presented in the poem "Decision," like Joseph K, spends hours, days, weeks, trying to get to see the right people. The right man listens at last, and then it turns out that he is not the right man to see. But the victim caught in the endless tangle persists:

> You have given the correct password, he the proper countersign,
> And tomorrow will be a different, even more decisive day,
> There, before another assistant secretary, in a leather-cushioned room at the other end of the other long, white marble hall.[47]

The settings are now indoors; the background is now richer; but the characters in Fearing's world are still wandering aimlessly down endless streets.

Even in the realm of law, that most precise and ordered of institutions, chaos reigns. In "The People v. The People," Fearing presents a lawyer who describes the "invisible member of the panel," the "thirteenth juror," who is "forever looking out of the window, secretly smiling, when you make your telling point," who is "wide awake when you think he is asleep. The man who sleeps with his eyes wide open." Even the lawyer, who is obviously paranoid, knows that the system is running out of control, that there is no direction, that there are many questions without answers, and he is convinced that it is all the fault of a stranger, an enemy of reason.

In "Stranger at Coney Island," Fearing suggests that the answers, the reasons, the key to order may be found if only man can find the stranger. Where better to search for him than on the beach of man's

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[47]This reminds the reader of the signs and countersigns given in "En Route" from Dead Reckoning.

ultimate desire, the outward symbol of the chaotic pleasures of the twentieth century, Coney Island.

> Is this stranger somewhere among you?
> Perhaps sprawled beneath a striped umbrella, asleep in the sand,
> or tossing a rubber ball to a child,
> Or even now awaiting us, aware of our needs, knowing the very
> day and the hour.

The ominous figure of the unknown, which is central to Fearing's poetry, in the endless streets of Angel Arms, in the ringing telephones of Poems, in the unanswered questions of Dead Reckoning, in the figure knocking at the door in "The Agency" section of Collected Poems, in the stranger listening to innocent remarks in Afternoon of a Pawnbroker, is in this poem for the first time sought out instead of avoided. It appears that finally Fearing feels that only in death will the questions be answered, the reasons be made clear, and the order restored.

Although Stranger at Coney Island provides some resolution for the long struggle which Kenneth Fearing exposed in his poetry, the volume itself is not up to the quality of Fearing's former work. It is particularly weak in form. Only a few poems seem to have arrived at the form that their content demands; most of the new poems seem to be new variations on old ideas poured thoughtlessly into old forms. It should be remembered that after the publication of this volume, Fearing did not write another poem until urged to by Samuel Yellen of Indiana University Press.

III. "THE FAMILY ALBUM" SECTION OF NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

The long period of negotiation that preceded the publication of New and Selected Poems has been considered above. The book that

resulted from those negotiations was a disappointment for its editor Samuel Yellen, who thought that Fearing had not selected his best poems for the volume:

> Furthermore, he himself made the selection from his various books, and I was dismayed to see how wrong his judgement was, at least so it seemed to me. Again I couldn't bring myself to do more than hint at other possibilities of choice. . . . And it is true, as Perkins says, that many better poems out of his earlier books were left out.
>
> Why did Fearing make the selection he did? I can only guess, though it may be that he offered some reasons in the correspondence between us, reasons that I have forgotten. I have two possibilities in mind. One is that he was weary of the poems which had appeared again and again in anthologies (really his better ones) and that, like many writers, he rather favored the ill-treated and less-favored children. The other is that in his despondency he finally realized that he was not writing any good new poems and he just wanted to get an unpleasant task over with as soon as possible.[48]

Perhaps there is some truth to Yellen's second supposition, but his first is not borne out by the facts. Of the forty-one Fearing poems that had been anthologized through 31 December 1955,[49] only seven were deleted from New and Selected Poems. One of these, "Rain," he never published in book form at all. Another "Lithography" was dropped in 1940 when Fearing took the clinkers out of Collected Poems. "Ad" a poem which was prophetic when it appeared in Dead Reckoning was, by

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[48] Samuel Yellen to Bernard Perry, 16 January 1972, Indiana University Interdepartmental Communication (Indiana File).

[49] Raymond J. Dixon, ed., Granger's Index to Poetry, 4th ed. (Morningside Heights, N. Y.: Columbia University Press, 1953, p. 1498; Raymond J. Dixon, ed., Granger's Index to Poetry, Supplement to the 4th ed. (Morningside Heights, N. Y.: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 363; Tom Boggs, ed., An American Anthology (Prairie City, Illinois: James A. Decker Press, 1942).

by 1956, clearly dated. "Lullaby," which appeared in Poems, was one of Fearing's few attempts at describing nature, and it was not successful. Perhaps similar reasons could be established for the deletion of "Evening Song," "They Liked It," and "Public Life." The reason Fearing gave to Samuel Yellen is quite general. "Of exactly 141 poems of mine in book form now, there are about 90 I would like to see still in print."[50] There are, including "Family Album," the four last poems, exactly 100 poems in New and Selected Poems. It must be concluded from the evidence available that the 96 selected poems represent what Kenneth Fearing "would like to see still in print."

Of the 48 poems in his first two volumes, Angel Arms and Poems, Fearing selected 20 poems or 42 percent. Of the 50 poems in Dead Reckoning and "The Agency" section of Collected Poems, he selected 41 or 84 percent. Of the 43 poems in his last two individual volumes, Afternoon of a Pawnbroker and Stranger at Coney Island, he selected 34 poems or 80 percent. These figures seem to indicate support for what was suggested in Chapter III, "The Break with the Left," that Fearing reached the zenith of his interest in poetry between 1936 and 1940. They also lend some support to Yellen's second supposition.

Yellen also thought the four new poems were not up to Fearing's usual standard. He remembers that Fearing was quite depressed in 1956.

> It is quite hard for me to be sure of my memories about that time, but my chief feeling was that Fearing was in

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[50] Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 15 November 1954 (Indiana File).

> a depressed mood because of his writing. I make this point, because it helps to explain some of the things I did do and did not do later on.[51]

The chief thing that Samuel Yellen did not do was criticize "The Family Album." He did not think these four poems, which were evidently written between 5 March and 9 June 1956, were good. "Actually the new poems were not up to his usual standard, and he knew it as well as I did. But considering his state, I couldn't bring myself to say so and to urge him to drop them."[52]

Actually three of the four poems are quite good.[53] They represent a radical change from the tone of Fearing's New Yorker poetry and a return to the tone of Poems. Even while Fearing was a member of the communications establishment writing for The New Yorker, he kept up a running fight with those who would weaken the power of the writer and the printed word. Three volumes of his poetry contain attacks against those who would package sentimentality and retail mindlessness.[54] The problem of the integrity of the artist, which can be seen in Fearing's poetry as early as the humorous poem "Business as Usual," merged, in the fifties, with the larger problem of the general freedom of the

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[51] Interdepartmental Communication (Indiana File).

[52] Ibid.

[53] The fourth poem, "The Boat," is very closely tied to a news item to which Fearing reacted, and, therefore, does not have the universality of the other three.

[54] See "$2.50" in Poems, "Literary" and "Scheherazade" in Dead Reckoning, and "Yes, The Agency Can Handle That" in Collected Poems.

individual, which was the subject of both Afternoon of a Pawnbroker and Stranger at Coney Island. The result of the merger was Fearing's increased interest in the "death of communications." This interest led him to write "Reading, Writing, and the Rackets" and led him to make The American Investigation the subject of his last four poems.

> Perhaps I am hyper-sensitive on the subject of the death of communications; I have nearly always been in it, close enough that I have been forced to see the way the racket has taken it over, and to know what the result may be.[55]

With the four new poems in the "Family Album," Fearing returned to the idealistic fighting spirit of Poems; these poems represent a fulfillment of the promise made to "fight for all this again" that appeared in the melancholy poem "Pact." Perhaps Fearing was aware of the grey flannel drabness that had seeped into his own work through his long association with The New Yorker when he wrote:

> I do indeed want to bring out this book, and I hope I can convey some of the enthusiasm of poetry in this new section; it's a mood that, in the communications industry, itself, has been unknown for many years.[56]

The four poems in "The Family Album" are written from the point of view of a character looking back, through the family album, to the events of the fifties in America. The values of the American future which Fearing presents are a total inversion of the values cherished by those who founded America. Thus "Family Album (1) The Pioneers," extols the strangers, the secret agents, and the informers, who during

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[55]Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 5 March 1956 (Indiana File).

[56]Ibid.

the fifties in America made a living by denouncing former friends and acquaintances and by remembering in graphic detail any innocent remark.

> For thus they freed that raw, mid-century chaos of little empires
> from the pestilence of false thought;
> Helped write, and signed, many of the Magna Cartas in use to
> this very day;
> Issued the first crude registry of licenced [sic] Truth;
> Sought (and received) patents for the better types of logic,
> durable humour, authentic taste. . . .

A strong connection between these pioneers and the earlier pioneers, in the same field, is suggested.

> God sometimes spoke to them on sleepless nights (as they told us,
> often), and they took down every word,
> Revised and edited the counsel in the morning, making sure the
> names and addresses were correct,
> Then gave it to the world, stamped: <u>For Immediate Release</u>--
>
> They were not Gods, nor did they claim to be;
> They were human, and fallible, content to be just what they were:
> God's public relations.

"Family Album (2) Granny" presents a closeup of one of the pioneers, "Hi-Fi Sue," who was named America's Sweetheart of the Year by <u>Think</u> for her undercover work.

> She is twenty-five, here, in a frock typical of those
> innocent but turbulent times,
> And we cannot tell, from the picture, whether she is armed--
>
> Armed and equipped to perfection with the weapon she gave the
> sorcery of her special art,
> The recorder snuggled in its holster, the holster concealed in her
> handbag, her girdle, sometimes her brassiere,
> (With the listening microphone hidden--where?
> The guilty, for all their cunning, never dreamed)
> While the steadily turning reels, winding in compact silence,
> caught every guilty nuance of every guilty phrase. . . .

Granny gave a special sorcery to her art, and the pioneers were linked to the witch hunters of Salem. The characters in "Family Album (4) The Investigators" are linked to yet another witch hunt, the Spanish

Inquisition, the attack on the first scientists, the alchemists.

> Look what we found when we almost caught him, and he nearly confessed again and again,
> Stacks and heaps of flagons and flasks and tubes and coils,
> "Secret" it says on the door. . . .

The investigators do not know what "secret" means; the word is not in their working vocabulary. They bumble through the laboratory daring each other to sample some of the evidence.

> Could it be, no doubt an alchemist lived here once,
> (Whoever knows how, it's easy to transmute lead into pure, solid, genuine gold)
> But why does it look so tasty,
> Perhaps you don't rub it on, you drink it instead,
> It must be the essence of eternal youth and truth, beauty and health and duty and wealth,
> Or at least second sight,
> What are we waiting for, how will we ever find out until somebody tries?

Throughout the poem in capital letters run the questions of The American Investigation:

> WHO DO YOU, WHO DO YOU, WHO DO YOU, WHO?
> WHOM DO YOU KNOW, WHOM DO YOU HEAR ABOUT, WHO DO YOU SEE AND MEET IN YOUR DREAMS AND DAYDREAMS?

By 1956 the American daydream was under full scale investigation by the Congress of the United States, and these hard-hitting and humorous poems represent Kenneth Fearing's attitude toward The American Investigation. Perhaps due to the temper of the times the humor of these poems was missed by their editor and by the reviewers of the volume. Samuel Yellen also failed to see that these poems tied up loose ends in Fearing's earlier work, but he clearly saw that they were connected to the introduction.

We plan to put the four poems of "Family Album" at the end, to round out the attitudes and ideas presented in your introduction "Reading, Writing, and the Rackets."[57]

IV. CHANGES MADE IN EARLIER WORKS FOR NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

If the fighting stance of "Family Album" represents a return to the spirit of Poems, so do the few changes made in the text of the poems reprinted in New and Selected Poems. To prepare the text for the Indiana press, Fearing used three bound volumes, Collected Poems, which he had to buy from a finder,[58] Afternoon of a Pawnbroker, and Stranger at Coney Island. In these bound volumes he marked revisions.[59] Then he sent them to be used as copy by the printers.[60]

Although, following Fearing's suggestion,[61] the poems in New and Selected Poems are presented in chronological order, there is no mention at all of his former works, and there is no way for the student of poetry to discover where or when any individual poem first appeared. This may have been done by Indiana University Press in an attempt to conceal the slim section of "new" material in the volume. Fearing

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[57] Samuel Yellen to Kenneth Fearing, 7 July 1956 (Indiana File).

[58] Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 9 June 1956 (Indiana File).

[59] Ibid.

[60] Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 18 June 1956 (Indiana File).

[61] Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 9 June 1956 (Indiana File).

requested that all former dedications be deleted,[62] and later explained the reason for the request:

> As I said in my letter with the material, please remove all dedications. I have some friends, and they're not all dead, but they might not thank me for including them in the target area the forthcoming book will probably be.[63]

In the text of the poems themselves the changes were few, but useful and interesting. In "Afternoon of a Pawnbroker" the apple, which had been bitten but once in the first edition, sustained another bite to bring it into line with the accepted version of the Fall. Subways in 1940, when Agent No. 174 first resigned, cost a nickle. By 1956 the fare had increased and Fearing thought that "nickle" might "look too odd,"[64] so he changed it for a "token."

Three changes, each involving a single word, were made to improve the rhythm of individual lines.[65] Two of these three changes occur in

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[62] Ibid.

[63] Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 7 September 1956 (Indiana File).

[64] Kenneth Fearing to Edith Greenberg, 5 September 1956 (Indiana File).

[65] In "Travelogue in a Shooting-Gallery" the line "To the sound of tom-toms, equipped with silencers, beaten by thousands of savages hidden there" is changed to "To the sound of tom-toms, equipped with silencers, beaten by thousands of savages there"; in "Denouement" "Clock point to the decisive hour and, hour without a name when stacked and waiting murder dissolves, stay forever as the world grows new--" becomes "Clock, point to the decisive hour and, hour without a name when stacked and waiting murder fades, dissolves, stay forever as the world grows new--"; and also in "Denouement" "How will you know us through ringed machinegun sights as we run and fall in gasmask, steel helmet, flame-tunic, uniform, bayonet, pack," becomes "How will you know us through ringed machinegun sights as we run and fall in gasmask, helmet, flame-tunic, uniform, bayonet, pack. . . . [italics added]."

"Denouement," Fearing's longest poem, and the poem which Edward Dahlberg hailed as the song of the unemployed in 1936. In the 1940 edition, "Denouement" was toned down considerably. All references to Communism were removed along with an entire paragraph of the poem which suggested that the socialist dawn would eventually break even if it took years. Fearing put that paragraph back into New and Selected Poems:

> Who are these people and what do they want, can't they be
> decent, can't they at least be calm and polite,
> Beside the time is not yet ripe, it might take years,
> like Mr. Kelly said, years--
>
> Decades black with famine and red with war,
> centuries on fire, ripped wide--

Fearing also reintroduced a leftist tinge to the poem with the phrase "'Your comrades live.'" In Poems the phrase read: "'Your party lives.'" In 1940 in Collected Poems it read: "'Your brothers live.'"

Clearly in this last volume of poems Kenneth Fearing was attempting to engage the enemy. He took care to get his friends out of the way of any danger. He adopted a pugnacious stance in his introduction and made alterations in the text of his poems which could not have been designed to put the House Un-American Activities Committee to sleep. When the book appeared, however, there was no explosion. There were only polite statements about Fearing's long service to the craft of poetry and not a few yawns.

CHAPTER V

KENNETH FEARING'S AMERICAN RHAPSODY

Kenneth Fearing died of lung cancer in New York on 26 June 1961. At the time of his death he had not written a single poem since the publication of New and Selected Poems in 1956 and had written only the four poems in "The Family Album" since Stranger at Coney Island in 1948. The New York Times, in an obituary notice, made some attempt to establish his place in American letters: "As the author of six volumes of poetry, Mr. Fearing was regarded as a significant voice of twentieth-century American poetry."[1] Although his death caused several magazines to take notice of the passing of a poet, a silence as complete as that at the end of "A Dollar's Worth of Blood, Please" soon followed, and no one has determined the reason for the significance of Kenneth Fearing's voice in American poetry. Most literary historians have used either his supposed political feelings or the period in which he did most of his writing to classify him as a Proletarian poet, a Communist poet, or a poet of the American depression. These classifications are all too general to be of any real value in attempting to establish the significance of a writer whose work (although it was influenced by all of these movements and events) was, from its beginning

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[1] "Kenneth Fearing, Author Was 59," The New York Times, 27 June 1961, sec. L, p. 33. Later on in the article Fearing's "six volumes" are listed, and New and Selected Poems, his seventh volume, is omitted.

to its end, a surrealistically crazed mirror in which he tried to capture a picture of the dehumanizing monotony and sterility of life in urban America, a picture of the American Dream turned nightmare.

As much as any poet of the twentieth-century, Kenneth Fearing sang of America. In 1956 Rosenthal said: "I don't think a poet can be much more American, in the psychological if not the Fourth-of-July sense, than Kenneth Fearing."[2] When considered at close range Fearing's volumes exhibit a variety of themes: Angel Arms, the dichotomies of Life in the City; Poems, the struggle and contrast between the villains and victims in the great American depression; Dead Reckoning, the search for direction in America following the worst years of the depression; "The Agency" section of Collected Poems, the insignificance of life in the corporation; Afternoon of a Pawnbroker, the repetitious meaninglessness of life in general; Stranger at Coney Island, the loss of individualism to the impersonality of the machine age; "The Family Album" section of New and Selected Poems, the sinister face of The American Investigation. Yet, from a wider perspective, it can be seen that from the first poem in his first volume, "St. Agnes Eve," to the last poem in New and Selected Poems, "Family Album (4) The Investigators," there is a single theme, the American Rhapsody of Kenneth Fearing.

The American Rhapsody of Kenneth Fearing is a counterpoint rhythm, a counterstatement to the advertised lyric of American life. Louie Glatz, in "St. Agnes Eve," went out in search of America, in

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[2]Rosenthal, "Don Kenneth and the Rackets," p. 64.

search of his share of the American Dream, stole $14.92 from the corner cigar store, and was shot by the police. The investigators in "Family Album (4)" are praised ironically for having destroyed the last vestiges of personal freedom in the America of the fifties. Between these two poems, between 1929 and 1956, Fearing played many variations on a single theme, the failure of the American Dream.

Since failure and loss are dark subjects, the counterpoint rhythm of Kenneth Fearing's American Rhapsody is flat, repetitious, and uninspiring; its music is a harsh combination of the voices of the machines, which threaten to make man obsolete, and the jargon-filled voices of the streets; its imagery is torn from the urban sprawl and from the institutions through which man tries to create meaning for himself within the urban sprawl. Both its form and its imagery are developed organically out of an attempt to make the theme as concrete as the crowded, lonely, boring streets which spawned the theme.

Centering on such a subject and being convinced that form and technique must develop out of the subject being written about led Kenneth Fearing to create forms and to adopt images which are alien to the mainstream of American letters:

> The elimination of the customary "codes and conventions" has led to the creation of untraditional patterns, of rhythms that are governed by the accents of current speech (including the intonations of slang) and not by the orthodox rules of metrics, of the style that depends for its variety on the adroit handling of cliché and reiteration. Since most of the material presented is metropolitan in its setting, its tone, and its spirit, the texture of the poems is sometimes as garish as the electric display of Times Square, sometimes as flat and drab as a row of east-side tenements, sometimes as sodden and stale as a Second

> Avenue saloon on a Sunday morning. But always it belongs to the material, always it has the right dramatic fitness to the theme.[3]

Throughout his career, Fearing was working with a donnée, the American Dream. He sought always through irony and satire to show that every cloud has some rain in it, that every dream is someone's nightmare, that the search for America must continue.

Fearing wrote five individual poems entitled "American Rhapsody." Each of these is a study of the frustrations of those who accept the huckster's packaged version of the American Dream, "a satirical commentary on the futility, the crassness, the boredom of certain familiar aspects of the American scene, a condemnation of the platitudinous routine of obedience to the moment."[4] In 1940 John Holmes said of these poems: "One hopes that out of the fragments called 'American Rhapsody,' will come before long a longer and still more powerful poem than any of his single poems in this very remarkable volume. All signs point to it."[5]

Fearing, too, realized that the "American Rhapsody" poems, or at least their titles, were central to his poetic view. In 1956, when Indiana University Press was worried about their proposed title for New and Selected Poems, he suggested "American Rhapsodies" as a possible

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[3] C. D. Abott, "The Poetics of Mr. Fearing," University of Colorado Studies, Series B2 (October 1945), 383.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Holmes, "Poems and Things," p. 11.

alternate title.[6] The change was not made; however, such a change would have aided critics to see Kenneth Fearing in a truer light as a man who was at once deeply in love with the ideals of his country and deeply distressed by the realities of life in it, and as a poet attempting to discover a technique, not dependent on the romantic-agrarian American tradition, that could capture the pulse and power, the comedy and tragedy, the essential inhumanity of life in twentieth-century urban America.

The evils against which Kenneth Fearing spoke out have not decreased. Although they may have changed names and altered appearances slightly, the forces that would deny the true fruition of the American Dream remain. For this reason the ironic and anguished poetry of Kenneth Fearing's American Rhapsody is as poignant and as necessary today as it was when it was written. As the urban crush increases and the possibility of achieving the life-style on which the romantic-agrarian American poetic tradition is based decreases, the poetry of Kenneth Fearing, as well as that of T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, Ezra Pound, and E. E. Cummings (who also explored, to some extent, the morass of urban America), will become increasingly important. As James H. Billington said: "Man's power to sing spontaneously and implausibly may well provide his only path to dignity and self-respect in an age of calculation, deception, and spiritual isolation."

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[6]Kenneth Fearing to Samuel Yellen, 9 June 1956 (Indiana File).

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

KENNETH FEARING'S PROCESS OF SELECTION

	Title	Angel Arms	Collected Poems	New and Selected Poems
1.	St. Agnes Eve	x	x	x
2.	Minnie and Mrs. Hoyne	x	x	x
3.	The Drunken Fly	x		
4.	Andy and Jerry and Joe	x	x	x
5.	Cultural Notes	x	x	x
6.	John Standish, Artist	x	x	x
7.	They Like It	x	x	
8.	Jack Knuckles Falters But Reads Own Statement At His Execution While Wardens Watch	x	x	
9.	Aphrodite Metropolis (1)	x		
10.	Aphrodite Metropolis (2)	x	x (1)	x
11.	Aphrodite Metropolis (3)	x	x (2)	
12.	Aphrodite Metropolis (4)	x		
13.	Jake	x	x	
14.	The Drinkers	x	x	
15.	Reveille	x		
16.	Lithographing	x		
17.	Portrait	x	x	
18.	The Cabinet of Simplicity	x		
19.	Ballad of the Salvation Army	x		
20.	Now	x	x	x
21.	Green Light	x	x	x
22.	Nocturne	x	x	
23.	Breakfast with Hilda	x	x	
24.	Saturday Night	x	x	
25.	Evening Song	x	x	
26.	Invitation	x	x	x
27.	Angel Arms	x		

	Title	Poems	Collected Poems	New and Selected Poems
28.	Conclusion	x	x	x
29.	Winner Take All	x	x	x
30.	Resurrection	x	x	x
31.	Obituary	x	x	x
32.	American Rhapsody (1)	x	x	
33.	Dividends	x	x	x
34.	X Minus X	x	x	x

	Title	Poems	Collected Poems	New and Selected Poems
35.	1933	x	x	
36.	Dear Beatrice Fairfax	x	x	
37.	American Rhapsody (2)	x		
38.	Sunday to Sunday	x	x	
39.	As the Fuse Burns Down	x	x	x
40.	No Credit	x	x	x
41.	Dirge	x	x	x
42.	What If Mr. Jesse James Should Someday Die?	x	x	
43.	Escape	x	x	
44.	$2.50	x	x	
45.	American Rhapsody (3)	x	x (2)	
46.	Lullaby	x	x	
47.	20th Century Blues	x	x	x
48.	Denoument (Denouement)	x	x	x

	Title	Dead Reckoning	Collected Poems	New and Selected Poems
49.	Memo	x	x	x
50.	A Dollar's Worth of Blood, Please	x	x	x
51.	En Route	x	x	x
52.	Happy New Year	x	x	x
53.	Literary	x	x	x
54.	Q & A	x	x	x
55.	Lunch with the Sole Survivor	x	x	x
56.	Devil's Dream	x	x	x
57.	Hold the Wire	x	x	x
58.	Pantomime	x	x	x
59.	Longshot Blues	x	x	x
60.	SOS	x	x	x
61.	A Pattern	x	x	x
62.	The Program	x	x	
63.	American Rhapsody (5)	x	x (3)	x (1)
64.	Portrait	x	x (2)	x
65.	Flophouse	x	x	
66.	Debris	x	x	x
67.	Bulletin	x	x	
68.	Tomorrow	x	x	x
69.	Requiem	x	x	x
70.	C Stands for Civilization	x	x	x
71.	Ad	x	x	
72.	Take a Letter	x	x	x

	Title	Dead Reckoning	Collected Poems	New and Selected Poems
73.	Radio Blues	x	x	x
74.	If Money	x	x	x
75.	Dance of Mirrors	x	x	
76.	Manhattan	x	x	x
77.	Scheherazade	x	x	x
78.	How Do I Feel	x	x	x

	Title	Collected Poems	New and Selected Poems
79.	Agent No. 174 Resigns	x	x
80.	Pact	x	x
81.	The Doctor Will See You Now	x	x
82.	Homage	x	x
83.	Gentleman Holding Hands With Girl	x	x
84.	Portrait of a Cog	x	x
85.	Any Man's Advice to His Son	x	x
86.	Jackpot	x	
87.	A la Carte	x	x
88.	American Rhapsody (4)	x	x (2)
89.	Yes, The Agency Can Handle That	x	x
90.	Net	x	
91.	Engagements for Tomorrow	x	x
92.	Class Reunion	x	x
93.	Payday in the Morgue	x	
94.	Love, 20¢ the First Quarter Mile	x	x
95.	Discussion After the Fifth or Sixth	x	x
96.	Pay-off	x	x
97.	Five A. M.	x	x
98.	Readings, Forecasts, Personal Guidance	x	x

	Title	Afternoon of a Pawnbroker	New and Selected Poems
99.	Continuous Performance	x	x
100.	Art Review	x	x
101.	Cracked Record Blues	x	x
102.	Statistics	x	
103.	Travelogue in a Shooting-gallery	x	x
104.	Thirteen O'Clock	x	x
105.	Certified Life	x	
106.	Reception Good	x	
107.	Confession Overheard in a Subway	x	x

	Title	Afternoon of a Pawnbroker	New and Selected Poems
108.	Suburban Sunset, Pre-war, or What Are We Missing	x	
109.	King Juke	x	x
110.	Beware	x	x
111.	Elegy in a Theatrical Warehouse	x	x
112.	Piano Tuner	x	x
113.	Model for a Biography	x	x
114.	End of the Seer's Convention	x	x
115.	Finale	x	x
116.	The Joys of Being a Businessman	x	
117.	Public Life	x	
118.	A Tribute, and a Nightmare	x	x
119.	Afternoon of a Pawnbroker	x	x

	Title	Stranger at Coney Island	New and Selected Poems
120.	Stranger at Coney Island	x	x
121.	Spotlight	x	x
122.	4 A. M.	x	x
123.	Castaway	x	x
124.	Higher Mathematics	x	x
125.	M. D.	x	x
126.	The Juke-Box Spoke and the Juke-Box Said	x	x
127.	Lanista	x	x
128.	Newspaperman	x	x
129.	Bryce & Tomlins	x	x
130.	Sherlock Spends a Day in the Country	x	x
131.	Mrs. Fanchier at the Movies	x	x
132.	The Face in the Bar Room Mirror	x	x
133.	Decision	x	
134.	Once Upon a Time	x	
135.	The People v. the People	x	x
136.	Irene Has a Mind of Her Own	x	
137.	Elegy	x	x
138.	Museum	x	x
139.	Minutes from the Chamber of Commerce	x	x
140.	This Day	x	x
141.	Long Journey	x	x

	Title	New and Selected Poems
142.	Family Album (1) The Pioneers	x
143.	Family Album (2) Granny	x
144.	Family Album (3) The Boat	x
145.	Family Album (4) The Investigators	x

VITA

James Ashbrook Perkins, born in Covington, Kentucky in 1941, received a B. A. degree in 1963 from Centre College, Danville, Kentucky, where he was a Jacob Price Scholar. He received a M. A. degree in 1965 from Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.

He accepted an instructorship in English at Memphis State University and taught there from 1965 until 1967 when he accepted a teaching assistantship and entered the English graduate program at The University of Tennessee. In 1969 he became Chairman of the Department of Communications at All Saints' Episcopal School, Vicksburg, Mississippi where he served until 1971.

He has published in both scholarly and creative journals, and, in 1971, he received the Mississippi Arts Festival Senior Poetry Award. He is presently writing a television script for the Mississippi Authority for Educational Television, and he hopes to combine creative writing with a continued career in teaching.

He is married to the former Jane Allen of Jackson, Mississippi, and they have two sons, James Allen (7) and Jeffrey Ashbrook (2).