

Moments of Masquerade

THE DEAD LECTURER. By LeRoi Jones. 79 pp. New York: Grove Press. \$3.50.

By RICHARD M. ELMAN

THE poetry of LeRoi Jones favors many disguises. Chiefly it wishes to seem uncultivated: "I wanted to kiss/dead middle class visitors." But sometimes a rude irony will emerge: "I am inside someone/who hates me." Or he may boast: "Let my poems be a graph of me." Or he may even turn sheepish: "Who am I to love/so deeply?" Or girlish: "My soul, a/quick note, settled/in the flesh." Always the poetry pretends to be the poet's voice. Rarely does Jones allow his fantastic masquerades to get the better of him for long. His method—if it can be fairly said that he has any—is to move by a violent free associa-

tion of imagery and reference and a rather derivative disconnectedness of language toward certain embarrassing moments of solecism: "In the world, the sad/nature of/myself. In myself/nature is sad."

At its best this kind of poetry argues similarities with improvisational jazz. But, beyond Jones's posturing of negritude, his ability to "riff" in a rough approximation of the manner of Whitman, Ginsberg, Pound, Williams, Yeats, Thomas, even Eliot (and, of course, the San Francisco school of Duncan), beyond his putting down of white folks, an occasionally flashy phrase, some extremely leaden cadences, and the general sense one gets that Jones sees something especially poignant in beginning a poem with small letters or interrupting it for a parenthesis, the jazzing goes nowhere. It is, rather, an elaborate pastiche. Not only is Jones unable to sustain a thought or a mood for longer than a boast, but he seems en-

tirely baffled by the stubborn conceptual basis of the language out of which he tries to fashion a blues. In an oblique memorial to Williams's Pater-son he writes: "I came here/ from where I sat boiling in my veins. . ." A neat trick!

Occasionally, though, Jones may forget that he is supposed to keep his verbs active, his language surreal, his imagery physical, his sentences broken, and his stance *engagé*. Then one has a brief recognition of poetic talent, however unformed the talent may be. "It does not happen," a farewell love poem begins, "That love, removes/itself . . . Removes/itself, as rain, hard iron rain/comes down, then stops. . ." But, just as one is about to say bravo, the voice of the poet intrudes: "I am what I think I am. You are what/I think you are." Which is meant to resound, I suppose, but reads a bit like a sentence in McGuffey's First Reader.

It is in those moments when he comes closest to poetry that one is also able to confront what

Audubon, Drafted

(for Linda)

I does not happen. That love, removes
itself. (I am leaving, Goodbye!

Removes

itself, as rain, hard iron rain
comes down, then stops. All those
eyes opened for morning, close with
what few hours given them. With tears,
or at a stone wall, shadows drag down.

I am what I think I am. You are what
I think you are. The world is the
one thing, that will not move. It is
made of stone, round, and very ugly.

—From "The Dead Lecturer."

is so prolix, so wrong-headed, so ludicrous, about LeRoi Jones's self-advertisements that he must be "completely free"—free, presumably, to do whatever he wants to do in his poems. The fact is he doesn't know enough to be free. He is only free now to be pretentiously banal, and occasionally trite. Obviously he has read a lot of good and some rather

mediocre poetry because he is an extremely agile name-dropper and line-dropper and phrase-dropper, but he has, apparently never bothered to study his craft—and he doesn't have the necessary cultural prerequisites to be primitive. The voice he presents as his own is really an echo chamber full of distortions. Will the real LeRoi Jones bother to come forward?

Mr. Elman's reviews of poetry and fiction appear in several periodicals. His second novel will be published shortly.