

TILL NO LIGHT LEAPS. The Selected Poems of James  
Magner, Jr. The Golden Quill Press, Frankestown,  
N. H., 1981. \$8.00 (cloth) 208 pp.

This substantial volume comprises the author's  
choice of his best work from five previous books of  
poems, and includes seven new poems. Some of the  
poems have previously appeared in literary magazines.  
TILL NO LIGHT LEAPS, therefore, is the work of a sea-  
soned and established poet, but it allows us to trace  
the evolution of his skills and major themes through  
a whole career.

Magner is no poetaster or versifier. Though capable of writing poems with a light touch, his taste inclines toward meditations and reflections on the ultimate questions of life--the natures of God, belief, love, redemption, and death. Like his favorite writer, Herman Melville--and like Melville's Ahab--Magner attacks these questions almost in defiance of their awesome size. He brings a large fund of experience and reading to bear on these questions, and a lifetime of theological study is often evident in his treatment of them. But his poems are intensely personal at the same time that they draw on theological, historical, or literary kinds of knowledge. The result is a kind of poetry that teaches its readers without lecturing them.

The title poem, for example--"Till No Light Leaps"--combines the personalities of Melville, Hesse, and Augustine, who represent for Magner the humanist, Eastern, and Christian approaches to grappling with the mysteries of fate, into the metaphor of a mountainclimber who is ascending the north face of the Matterhorn. What Magner admires is not the success or failure of the climb, but rather the "independent principle of the heart/asserting its life/against the unutterable coldness of the wind." Despite "sullied aspiration/and crippling age," the climber perseveres until death, in which no light leaps, and which he meets with "chillblained (sic) hands wound with rope," signifying his willingness to continue.

Magner frequently addresses his poems to other writers--Melville most often, but also Lowell, Ginsberg, Lorca, Montale, Jeffers, Hopkins--and pays tribute to their efforts to "tongue the radical limit of death," as he says in a new poem, "Letter to a Writer." His purpose is partly to pay tribute, but also to articulate what it is that that writer has given him, how that writer has helped him see deeper into his own life--and we are the eavesdroppers who benefit from

this exchange. Magner's "Letter to Kazin," which appears in this issue of the *Mickle Street Review*, is his latest and one of his best efforts to articulate the value of another writer's life and work.

Magner's attack on the ultimate questions of life is neither reckless nor desperate, yet many of the poems reflect the bitterness of failure. He has, after all, offered us no trite or easy or dogmatic answers, so in a way the failure is reassuring. Always, however, there is a resolution to persevere. His later poems reflect a growing strength, both in intellectual resources and technique, and suggest that his grasp is becoming nearly equal to his ambitious reach.

Geoffrey Sill