

**RHAPSODY**

Author: Michael Fitzgerald

Published by: Piccadilly Press, 1990, 44 pages

**GOD'S WHIMSY**

Author: Michael Fitzgerald

Published by: Rainbow's End Books, 1990, 99 pages

**PLANET DREAMS**

Author: Michael Fitzgerald

Published by: Writers Co-op, 1991, 71 pages

Michael Fitzgerald's poetry encompasses both the mundane, everyday world—"this oblong world" as he calls it in one poem—and the vast world of the spirit. It is the world of burger joints and of divine rapture. The link between these two worlds, for the poet, is his "song of planet dreams," in which he recounts the miraculous manifestations of God in the midst of our "average day." The book-length poem *Rhapsody* explores this fusion of human and divine love, a theme that recurs somewhat modulated in *God's Whimsy* and *Planet Dreams*.

Throughout Fitzgerald's poetry there is a sense of the poet, in the tradition of Whitman, celebrating and illuminating the life of the average people. The poet inhabits cafes, burger joints, twenty-four-hour delis and diners, and speaks often in a representative voice, seeking communion with those the poet meets and recognizing their common humanity, while cherishing the poet's own gift that allows one to live in "the ample room it is / to be a thinking person" (*Planet Dreams* 38), where one perceives "the lions, / witting, unwitting, named, unnamed, / the lions of God, roaring like sun-stars—" (*God's Whimsy* 6). Fitzgerald's world brims with the possibilities of transformation, of miracles. Particularly in *God's Whimsy*, one has a sense that Fitzgerald shares Walt Whitman's sense of the largeness of the world, as well as Whitman's zest for it. While Fitzgerald's short lines do not look much like Whitman's on the page, the presence of Whitmanesque catalogues and one of Whitman's favorite devices, anaphora, suggest an influence on Fitzgerald, as do phrases such as "ear to ground listening" (*God's Whimsy* 17) and descriptions of the poems as "gusts of God's wind-songs" (*God's Whimsy* 21).

But there is another side to Fitzgerald's work, one which emerges more in *Planet Dreams* than in the two previous volumes. Here the voice seems to become more personal, self-revelatory at times. We have the sense of a poet who is intensely self-reflective, grappling at times with personal pain as well as bewilderingly expansive spiritual themes. "I resist easy answers" (35), he says, "searching my heart, / this various heart" (34).

Fitzgerald is also reflective about the theme of communication, pondering "how to speak through," how to make "connections" through his poems. To

assist him in his "speaking through," he often appropriates blues and jazz vocabulary and uses conventional nature imagery.

One of Fitzgerald's greatest strengths as a poet is his ability to convey a sense of intimacy with God, as seen in the following lines from "Jerusalem Street," in *God's Whimsy*:

My Lover God, heal us with your ardor, your heat,  
for our light is dim-lit love songs for ourselves,  
knowing only our faceless visit to your planet,  
knowing only ourselves in the faces we see,  
seeing you only in those bidding sultry balms  
dear Lover God, that you send like ebony and ivory. . . .  
(23)

In "Logos," also from *God's Whimsy*, the speaker makes another such intimate connection with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This expression of intense personal spiritual exploration and of intimacy with the divine recalls the work of Robert Hayden, another Bahá'í poet—a resemblance that carries through poems such as "Logos" in lines like: "I am impelled toward the divine in this, / and toward the new real in the world . . ." (34). Compare Hayden's lines, at the end of "Words in the Mourning Time": "I bear Him witness now: / toward Him our history in its disastrous quest / for meaning is impelled." And Fitzgerald's appellations for 'Abdu'l-Bahá, such as "O mystery, O logos, / music of the divine . . ." (35) also remind me of Hayden's appellations for Bahá'u'lláh as "Logos, poet, cosmic hero, surgeon, architect / of our hope of peace" ("Words in the Mourning Time" *Angle of Ascent* 61).

Fitzgerald's world is one where it is "difficult bliss" to know one's Creator, and in the journeys of the soul recounted in *Planet Dreams*, the reader finds more of a sense of the fragility of life than in *God's Whimsy*. Here, there are more shadows. For example, in the poem "Shadow and Stone," the speaker says:

I leaned into the shadows  
the mind cast off—  
losing whole histories of myself—  
but found a larger God than before. . . .  
(*Planet Dreams* 24)

But while there are shadows, the poem is not, by any means, unrelievedly dark; it moves toward a positive resolution as the speaker continues:

there in the darkest place of all,  
the shattered soul,  
I discovered the quirky God  
who could laugh with me. . . .  
(24)

Laughter, it seems, is an important element in Fitzgerald's work. Throughout, there is a strong sense of wit, as in the arresting possible definitions of God's whimsy, in the poem of the same name, and gentle irony (often self-directed) as in the poet's definition of himself as "God's favorite nobody" (*Planet Dreams* 20). In "The Wild Side," Fitzgerald confesses:

I am thought to be a wild sort—  
down at the tavern late at night—  
but they do not know that I am drinking diet coke

sipping a club soda—  
a little squeeze of lime to make it exciting—  
(*God's Whimsy* 26)

Even in the darker moments of the poems, such as that found in "The Daily Grind," the speaker's ironic play on an image from Blake, "spinning my nose on a grain of sand," serves to rescue the poem from self-indulgent melancholy.

The poems in these volumes are accessible but not simple. They are rewarding journeys to make with the poet. At their best, they present arresting images and turns of phrase, although there are also occasional definitions of faith that sound awkward and contrived, occasional uncomfortable juxtapositions of images, and some topical references that will not wear well. On the whole, however, as Fitzgerald writes in "The Struggle for Meaning,"

each poem releases energies—  
each thought is a sacred gift from out there—  
each hazardous duty done is a martyrdom. . . .  
(*Planet Dreams* 45)

Fitzgerald must be applauded for undertaking his poetic journey, the hazardous duty of writing poems of belief in an age where their audience is limited. In essence, his journey is the one we all make, and his articulation of this journey is welcome.

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