

then this: "At a time and place in which passions were brief and unions fleeting . . . Scott and Zelda would give the world of the Roaring Twenties, despite their incessant quarreling, a lesson in anachronistic constancy, of a love that was forever threatened, forever reborn." We are no sooner free from that syrupy passage than we find the couple spending long evenings on "the Sayres' clematis-shaded porch talking endlessly of love through the hot evenings, analyzing their feelings, tripping all the levers of charm and enticement." The adverb in that passage almost took my breath away, and the final clause left me in a

swoon. I had to read the following sentence twice before deciding that Le Vot was not pulling my leg—at least intentionally: "[Fitzgerald] tried to cut down on his beer intake—he had been swilling as many as thirty-seven bottles a day—

which kept him from eating properly and made him logy."

But these are minor distractions, which I remark only to forewarn the reader. No one with the least interest in FSF can fail to be enthralled by this splendid work. □

CONNOLLY'S LIFE

Ralph McNerny / Atheneum / \$13.95

John R. Dunlap

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Ralph M. McNerny, professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame since 1955, has been a minor Catholic novelist since 1967, when he published *Jolly Rogerson*, a *Lucky Jim*-like foray into the tacky realm of academia. Since then he has written 14 more novels, including seven thus far in his popular Father Dowling mystery series. Over the past 16 years of his steady literary production, critics have been divided between a minority who find McNerny's fiction boring and not one damn bit funny and a majority who find his fiction informative, charming, and often hilarious. Needless to say, his is a fiction with a message.

The message is a bit hard to pin down, exactly. For as an authority on St. Thomas Aquinas and a top-flight scholar, McNerny seems to have

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picked up the Angelic Doctor's penchant for dogged clarity and, with that, a quiet unconcern for the amassing of debater's points. His scholarly work is not only readable (a wonder in itself) but downright graceful. Then, too, his fiction is true to its form: it pleases and instructs without insisting; above all, it is faithful to the complexity of human experience. And this may partly explain why the critics who don't like McNerny's fiction dislike it so vehemently. The message, hard as it may be to pin down amid the tangled plots and whimsical dialogue, is blunt and discomfiting: that our world, always complex and often incalculable, nonetheless is fundamentally intelligible—and that the dreadful and hilarious creature man is responsible for the intelligibility.

That sounds like the sort of message you'd get from a self-conscious Thomist. But this Thomist writes novels, and the novels are not merely cerebral. Let us cast the message in a syllogism:

Major Premise: Humans owe it to the fundamental intelligibility of the world not to act like jackasses.

Minor Premise: Yet humans often act like jackasses.

Conclusion: Therefore, humans are in arrears to the fundamental intelligibility of the world.

McNerny's fiction is entertaining and funny because it centers on the minor premise; whimsical and bitter-sweet because it leaves you blinking ruefully at the conclusion; unobtrusive and serious because, like a modest enthymeme, it implies the major premise. That the logic is impeccable is only incidental.

In his latest novel, *Connolly's Life*, the message is served up with a laconic refinement bordering on the precious. The main character is the first-person narrator Jim Clark, a middle-aged American writer living abroad in Italy in a self-imposed exile from his native Wisconsin, writing in the first person now, feeling futile, and shackled up in his Roman apartment with a neurotic American girl half his age . . . and if your teeth are starting to itch, relax: I've just exhausted the clichés; most of *Connolly's Life* is poignant and spell-binding.

In fact, it is appropriate for Jim Clark to appear somewhat as a cliché. A hugely successful writer of boys' adventure stories ("good wholesome stories, too"), he is nonetheless a self-styled, indeed self-made, loser. As in McNerny's previous novels (notably his 1973 best-seller *The Priest*), *Connolly's Life* has for its backdrop the turmoil of post-Vatican II Catholicism, and Jim Clark, self-made loser, has lost his Catholic faith. He has also lost his wife, Nancy, to the charms of his best friend Michael Connolly; he has lost his self-respect to his erratic passion for a succulent 20-year-old airhead named Maria; and he almost loses his life to the fury of Maria's psychopathic boyfriend, Austin. Clark is thus the common vertex in a double love triangle which, given the cultural milieu of the novel, is just preposterous enough to be plausible: there is little of love in either triangle and much of a highly cultivated self-delusion in both.

We learn all this in a tight blend of flashback and narrative progression. The novel opens with Clark learning from a newspaper in Rome that Michael Connolly, the title character, has been killed in a plane crash back in the States. The late Father Michael Connolly, we are given to know, was a "dissident" Catholic theologian, a prominent chinwagger among the

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avant-garde Catholic intelligentsia, a darling of religion editors for the secular media—and, back during the excitement of Vatican II, the seducer of Nancy in a spell of Roman fever. Clark himself had been a Vatican correspondent for a liberal American Catholic magazine and a close friend of Connolly's (they had been to seminary together); but that's all years past now as Clark, settled in Rome and hung up on his bitterness, reads of Connolly's death.

Clark flies back to the States to attend the Washington funeral, a splash celebrity affair offered up by McNerny complete with cameo appearances by such real-life glitterati of the American Catholic intelligentsia as Daniel Berrigan, Garry Wills, Avery Dulles, Michael Novak, and Malachi Martin. Clark and his former wife Nancy slip away from the august gathering to have dinner, but they can't avoid fencing with each other. Their marriage long ago annulled, Clark is still a bit wistful about Nancy but remains stung by memories of being cuckolded; Nancy, for her part, has acquired a middle-aged chic, having evolved into an ecumenical groupie who wears her sunglasses perched on top of her head and is concerned about the Third World. In other words, they are both losers, packed with guilt about their personal failures and living off the residual capital of a basic decency acquired in their strict Catholic upbringings—but, let it be said, profoundly without blame for one shared loss: years before, they lost their two-year-old son Gregory to a childhood disease. That loss seems to account, sadly and bewilderingly, for some measure of their fine-tuned asininity.

A few days later, after attending Connolly's burial, Clark is astonished and then angered when, dreamy-eyed, Nancy tells him that she has seen Connolly alive, in her Washington apartment.

Back in Rome, Clark accepts a commission to write Connolly's biography; he needs the money and, after all, here is his chance to take some post-mortem revenge on the "sonof-a-bitch." He plans to examine what Connolly has been and done "in the clear light of the Christianity he had tried to obscure." Although Clark—evidently an old-fashioned sourdough Catholic liberal of the Sheed-and-Ward variety—has long ago lost his faith, the loss is just one more reason for his resentment of Connolly's easy hermeneutics: "I wanted to be as clear as possible about the content of the faith I had repudiated. Connolly would let me go on reciting the Creed and not meaning a word of it."

That's the kind of irony and gray humor you'll keep running into in *Connolly's Life*. Nor does McNerny play favorites when he delineates the features of a spent culture. McNerny calls himself "an uncomfortable conservative," and he's clearly no more comfortable with weather-bitten reactionaries than with idiot liberals. In *Connolly's Life*, therefore, you'll encounter modern Catholics with little sense of history for whom the word "relevant" somehow defines an absolute, as well as the type whose "idea of benefiting humanity is to hire planes to dump holy cards on the Congo." And Jim Clark, by the way and without spoiling the novel for you, is ultimately denied his revenge. What with his half-wit wench Maria pouting for his attention it's difficult for Clark to get any writing done, but things start getting very complicated (and somewhat chilling) after Maria tells Clark that she too has seen Father Connolly alive, in Clark's Roman apartment.

The dustcover of *Connolly's Life* describes the novel as a "theological thriller," but you don't have to be Catholic to take it as a clever mystery, a shrewd psychological enthraller, a moving and sympathetic portrait of Catholicism in crisis—and, by extension, of Western culture in a tailspin. That's your culture too, whether or not you're Catholic, and Ralph McNerny, minor Catholic novelist and major Catholic scholar, is a wry, clear-sighted, genial witness to its dissolution. □

STILLMAN/RAWSON

(continued from page 28)

ing the presents, although custom exempted gifts of food or liquor which could be consumed within 24 hours.

"A lot of thought went into these presents," my father remarked. "I'm concerned that our friends might be seriously offended when they find out that we couldn't keep them."

Throughout Georgetown, Cleveland Park, Silver Spring, and McLean in the weeks immediately before and after Christmas, impromptu parties were thrown to dispose of the consumables. A sensation of bloatedness rarely left us during those days.

On Christmas morning I was surprised to receive a set of oversized soldiers with unfamiliar uniforms and insignia. "Made in Czechoslovakia" markings cleared up some of the mystery. It was slightly insulting to get such a juvenile present, but I suppose I was grateful for the thought behind it.

In February our next-door neighbors told my parents that two FBI agents had questioned them on my parents' personal habits, such as whether they had any drinking problems, gave loud parties, or had unusual visitors. My parents were actually pleased to hear of these inquiries, as a pro-forma FBI check usually preceded any important promotion. My father was anxious to be free of the Hatch Act's oppressive anti-politicking provisions, from which officials on the Assistant Secretary level and higher were exempt.

What the neighbors did not know was that I had developed a drinking problem from finishing the leftovers after my parents' parties. While my parents' social life continued the same as before, I had begun to view it from a far more critical perspective. In the social arena political Washington's rigid class system became bluntly apparent. What most disturbed me was that my parents

participated in this system rather than rebel against it. When senators, senior diplomats, or a cabinet secretary came to one of their parties they were delighted; if not, they were far less pleased.

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still revolved around the big roller-rink birthday parties. The Parents Council of Washington's *Social Code* did not even contemplate evening parties for our grade. But these were the 1960s and in romantic matters we were maturing faster than the

established institutions recognized. School activities such as square dancing, previously considered "finky" and intended to be that way by the school authorities, now seemed less so. Miss Shippen's dancing classes took on a new, more interesting dimension. The nature of interestingness itself changed. This caused some soul-searching. At Virginia Country Day the Republican girls were far more attractive than their Democratic counterparts. Neither were attractive in personality terms. The exceptions were girls from CIA families. One, Sarah Sheridan, lived nearby in Georgetown. In exchange for help on homework she introduced me to Top Forty music as interpreted by WEAM, the capital's leading rock 'n' roll station.

Democracy in Deadlock
Summer 1963. Civil rights was on everyone's mind, particularly on Martha's Vineyard, where future

trends were incubating and sometimes hatching. Activist friends of my parents took us to a meeting in Oak Bluffs of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee or SNCC—the "Non-violent" of the title later acquired threatening overtones—and afterwards to a Vineyard Haven screening of Jean-Luc Godard's movie *Breathless*. The summer of 1963 also brought President Kennedy's moving "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech. The ecstatic reception given Kennedy in Berlin seemed to be the New Frontier's high point thus far.

By September, however, back in Washington, a contagion of pessimism had spread through the Administration. Virtually the entire Kennedy legislative program still remained to be enacted. Copies of James MacGregor Burns's *The Deadlock of Democracy* were in every living room. It was Burns's thesis that under the present congressional system it was impossible for a liberal legislative program to gain passage—and for over eight months his thesis held.

The Unraveling

One afternoon after school my mother asked my sister and me to take seats in the living room as she had some grave news to tell us. She said that Anne Post Turner, the Cincinnati newspaper heiress who was one of her closest friends, had died from an accidental overdose of sleeping pills.

"It's terribly sad," she said. "I was aware, though, that she had an awful insomnia problem."

Next she told us that their friends the Leffingwells were getting divorced, but out of regard for them only gave us the broadest outline of what had happened.

That summer Mrs. Leffingwell had given a job in her Nantucket wicker shop to her friend Polly Fisher, who was in a difficult position financially. Mrs. Leffingwell had planned to play with her husband in the yacht club tennis tournament, but at the last minute could not, so Polly Fisher took her place. Several weeks later, giving some odd excuses, Mrs. Fisher left her job and the island. After Mr. Leffingwell, pleading work, stayed in Washington over the next two weekends, his wife flew home. In her bedroom she found several objects belonging to Mrs. Fisher.

Incidents such as these were another aspect of the New Frontier period. Conservatives saw the rising divorce and other rates as evidence of the country's moral and social fabric unraveling. In fact, the United States was on the eve of an onslaught of social change.

Things were beginning to move

quickly. *Life* magazine published a profile of a girl who at eleven years old was already "going steady." In Washington the Parents Council's *Social Code* emphatically warned: "'Going Steady' should be discouraged." But the old rules did not always apply anymore. At *Social Code*-approved parties (which began for us that year) I found myself spending more and more time with Sarah Sheridan, who was always in high spirits and the only girl in the class shorter than I.

In October 1963 Cameron Whittaker Williamson, the ultra right-wing author of *Capital Coverup*, published a successor volume, *District Dossier*. In the new book Williamson returned to his earlier theme of corruption and Communism in the federal government, but now explicitly linked them to international finance. In a chapter entitled "Treachery at Treasury" he gave his lengthy analysis of how the Administration's international financial policies were in the exclusive interest of the Communist Bloc countries and the big New York and London banks, with the Rockefellers, Warburgs, and Rothschilds cited by name.

Williamson's sole concession to the libel laws was to identify the officials he accused of corruption or disloyalty only by a single letter of the alphabet, chosen at random. But, for anyone who cared to, their true identities could be triangulated easily from his descriptions. To make identification even simpler it was Williamson's idiosyncrasy to include precise descriptions of his subjects' cars. A key part of the Treasury chapter went as follows:

R, a senior official in Treasury's international operations hierarchy, has made no secret of his close relations with Communist Bloc diplomats, often joining them at their small after-parties following an evening of diplomatic receptions. Ostensibly to reciprocate, R has invited the Eastern Europeans to parties in his home, where they have been free to make contact with high-level government officials. He has accepted expensive gifts from the Communist diplomats, including lavish Christmas presents for his children.

Conventional wisdom holds that no one dealing secretly with the Communists would associate with them openly—but the Communists are familiar with this line of reasoning, too . . .

During his college years R associated with H, whom R himself has described as "interested in the ideals of Marxism-Leninism." The Marxist folk singer Peter Seeger was a member of R's college class. R himself was an officer of the Harvard Student Union, a left-wing political group. He attended lectures at the Fogg Art Museum.

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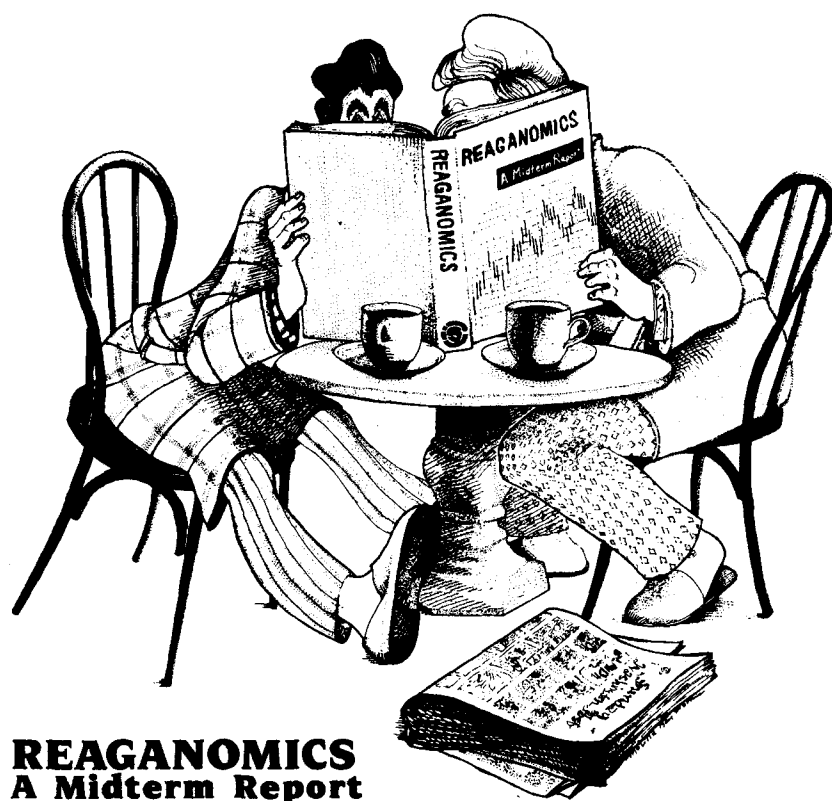
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Before joining the government R lived on Manhattan's Lexington Avenue, where intimate contact with members of the international banking community came as a matter of course. His wife's younger brother was Vice President of the Chemical Corn Exchange Bank. R's Wall Street law firm counseled the powerful Kuhn, Loeb investment banking house, which has been linked to London's Warburgs.

The culmination of R's audacious career has been the international financial policies of the Kennedy Administration...

R drives a green 1962 Plymouth with New York license plates. The dark green interior is cluttered with a backrest, Kleenex box, small plaid blanket, garden implements, first-aid kit and other objects. Front and back bumpers carry political stickers endorsing Democrat "Morgenthau for Governor"—violating the Hatch Act's restrictions on partisan political activity by government employees. R's flaunting of this statute is an indication of his astounding disrespect for the democratic system which enacted it...

What immediately stood out in Williamson's fantastic attack was that the car he described was not my father's—a silver Chrysler New Yorker—but the station wagon my mother drove. My father speculated that on the day Williamson or his surrogates did their "research," he must have driven the station wagon to work. My mother was upset at the idea of strange men poking around her car, examining the clutter inside.

After consulting lawyers my father decided not to give *District Dossier* the recognition of a libel suit, which would have meant first identifying himself as "R" and then laboriously rebutting all Williamson's ridiculous charges and innuendoes.

He was far more concerned about the apparent leak of his classified report on Herb (Williamson's "H")—this was a national security violation. The fact that H himself held a sensitive intelligence post was, he noted, strangely omitted from *Dossier*. Evidently Williamson's source had leaked only what could be construed as damaging to my father, the least significant part of his report.

"Weil is the only person with a motive for this, and he has access to Secret Service documents," my father confided to my mother. "But it's hard to believe he could do anything so foolish. Leaking classified information to a crank like Williamson is something no one will defend. This should end Weil's career in government."

My father also saw *Dossier* as a sign of the growing virulence and irrationality of the country's rightist fringe. He braced himself for possible violence. But the first and, for a time, the only response to the book came from an entirely unexpected quarter.

My parents were abruptly dropped by the popular Eastern European diplomatic set. "I'm surprised," my father said. "I thought they had become real friends."

Then the incidents began. One afternoon my mother came back from a downtown shopping trip utterly shaken. She prided herself on never getting any traffic citations—at least she hadn't gotten one in years. That day, three weeks after *Dossier's* publication, she got two parking tickets in the space of a few hours. The implication seemed clear. Birchers or other right-wingers on the District police force had recognized her car from Williamson's description.

"In this kind of climate anything can happen," my father said. "The police have evidently spotted your car. What if some right-wing nut with a bomb does, too?"

"There's nothing we can do," my mother said. The incident had pushed her into a profound depression.

"I'm not going to take any chances. We'll sell the car."

Meanwhile at Treasury the situation was becoming intolerable. Weil continued to ride high. My father heard no more talk of promotions. He was deeply disappointed by what he felt was the Kennedy camp's ineffectiveness or lack of interest in taking care of its own people. In contrast, Johnson gave protégés like Weil his full backing. My father had not yet said anything about the security leak and he was beginning to be concerned that someone might interpret this as negligence. Finally he sought a private meeting with Secretary Dillon and Undersecretary Roosa to try to confront the tension in the department directly. It was scheduled for December 3rd.

On Friday, November 22, 1963, the New Frontier came to an end. Even today, wherever adult Americans gather, the question is asked, "Where were you when you heard that President Kennedy had been shot?" I was in the front hall at Virginia Country Day waiting for my mother to pick me up to take me to the psychologist with whom I was supposed to talk about my drinking. During the drive the radio in her new Ford country wagon carried continuous reporting from Dallas and before we arrived it was reported the President had died. Nearby the bells of the National Cathedral began to toll.

In the days that followed members of the Administration looked around for an explanation for what had happened and found one in the climate of hate fostered by the far right and

associated with Dallas since a hostile crowd mobbed Lyndon Johnson there during the 1960 campaign. Arthur Schlesinger commented that while Kennedy, like every President, was subjected to satirical attack, "in the domain of the radical right it all became much sicker and nastier. Not since the high point of the hate-Roosevelt enthusiasm of the mid-thirties had any president been the target of such systematic and foul vilification." Schlesinger cited the printed cards Dallas businessmen were passing out at cocktail parties earlier in the year. "I miss Ike," the front of the card read. On the back it said: "Hell, I even miss Harry!"

To my parents it was this atmosphere of hatred which killed Kennedy. They were particularly disgusted by the story of a Dallas fourth grade class applauding the news of Kennedy's assassination, my parents' assumption being that the fourth graders were probably just naively expressing the prevailing adult sentiment. From my experience in school I thought there was a simpler explanation: fourth graders tend to be really stupid.

On the Sunday following the assassination, examining a newspaper photo of Lee Harvey Oswald being escorted down a Dallas jailhouse corridor, my father recognized one of the bystanders as his college acquaintance "Herb." Herb's presence in Dallas that day struck him as very odd, or, at least, extremely peculiar. Later when he mentioned it in con-

versation with someone connected with the Warren Commission, they asked him to put everything he knew about Herb into a long memorandum. When the Warren Commission's findings were published he was surprised to find no reference to Herb by name or otherwise in the entire multi-volume report.

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In early January, 1964, my father was selected to lead a major trade mission aimed at expanding the level of U.S. exports in key markets abroad. Quite a few Administration officials associated with the Kennedy camp were given similar prestigious special assignments. He stepped down from his Treasury post to prepare for the six-week, ten-nation tour. Luxembourg, Yugoslavia, Monaco, Nepal, and Fiji were among the countries visited.

Upon his return he started interviewing for a more demanding federal assignment. The name of Tom Gimbel, who coordinated personnel matters for Johnson, began to crop up more and more often in my

father's evening conversation, finally dominating it completely. However, it seemed impossible to find a "good fit" for his interests and capabilities within the upper rank of the new administration. After several months he decided that he could really accomplish more working in the private sector.

I welcomed the prospect of returning to New York at the end of the school year. Washington's power-based class system, its sterility as an urban center, a growing suspicion of the futility of politics, and weekly beatings in school had soured me on the city.

The hard part, of course, was leaving Sarah Sheridan behind. The 280-

mile separation was to be quite a strain, especially as neither of us would be eligible for a driver's license for years. Our relationship finally did not work out. I was sad, but at the same time felt capable of handling it. Since Christmas I had shot up three inches in height and sensed that my social horizons would be broadening.

Epilog

Upon leaving Washington my father accepted a senior post in the international division of a well-known New York bank, soon rising to the position of Executive Vice President—International. Still later he would devote his energies to a nonprofit foundation

dedicated to the lessening of world tensions.

Robinson Weil was appointed Assistant Secretary of the Treasury. My father's college acquaintance Herb rose to the third top position in the Central Intelligence Agency, finally retiring in 1975. He died in a Chesapeake Bay boating accident later the same year.

Cameron Whittaker Williamson, the author of *District Dossier*, developed a writer's block and never completed *Executive Exposé*, the promised next volume in his Washington series.

—Wade Rawson, Jr.
Woodstock, New York
May 1980-September 1983

SPECTATOR'S JOURNAL

THERE WILL ALWAYS BE ENGLISH

by Peter Shaw

For some years now the protagonists of the most interesting English plays have been living in the past. Typically an elderly, superannuated gentleman meanders along expressing nostalgic and retrograde opinions that somehow charm us as reminders of better times. The tone of reminiscence has sometimes grown bitter, as in Harold Pinter's recent *No Man's Land*—which concerned two superannuated old gentlemen. But in Simon Gray's *Quartermaine's Terms* the regret is again mild. The elderly protagonist, however, has been replaced by a man in middle age. Possibly because this new character has been exposed to the present egalitarian society of England for a larger proportion of his life, he has trouble recalling just exactly what the country has lost.

The action of *Quartermaine's Terms*, which has been running for over a year in New York, nominally takes place in the early 1960s, though the time might just as well be the present. The mannered, mild title character retains little more of the past than the habits, gestures, and speech that define an Englishman. The scene is the teacher's room of a small school located in Cambridge at which English is taught to foreigners. The staff of five is

made up of middle-aged nonentities permanently installed at the very bottom rung of the academic ladder.

Their talk is of spouses and children, elderly parents, evenings at the movies, babysitting, weekends—some appropriately think of going to see *The Cherry Orchard* on Saturday night—and vacations. The action takes place in this same room over nearly three years, in the course of which one of the school's directors ages visibly, and the other dies. One teacher has a baby; a second, who is

a spinster, is shaken at the death of her sick mother; a third suffers through his teenaged daughter's mental breakdown, long illness, and death. A fourth is left by his wife and children, then finally completes the first draft of an obviously inept first novel. The new part-time instructor, a nervous, accident prone young man, marries a girl reported to suffer from a speech impediment; she is nevertheless hired to teach at the school, and they have a baby.

St. John (pronounced "Sinjun")

Quartermaine, the last member of the staff, is a vague, middle-aged bachelor who cannot tell one foreign student from another. Out of kindness the aged school directors have kept him employed despite his growing more absentmindedly incompetent from term to term. (These are the "terms" of the title.) Reviewers have taken Quartermaine to be a virtually clinical case of mental debility. And yet both his concentration and memory function perfectly when it comes to inquiring in detail about the domestic doings of his colleagues' numerous spouses and progeny—he visits, loves, and is loved by the children.

Quartermaine and his colleagues have been reduced to supplying foreigners with the country's last salable commodities: English language and culture. Quartermaine is not alone in having lost touch with the historical sources of these. His colleague, Henry Windscape, the brightest of the group, comes in shaken after trying to teach his class on British Life and Institutions something about "our parliamentary system."

I had the whole lot of them dismissing it with contempt—the three or four from the Eastern bloc, all the ones from Fascist countries, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the South Americans—the French were the loudest, as always—but even the Japanese.

Henry cannot tell what went wrong with the class: "usually it's perfectly



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