

## COMMENT

God keep you safe from fire and steel and contemporary literature. . . .

—Léon Bloy

The old aphorism that one picture is worth a thousand words sometimes reaches a level of startling profundity. A photographer at the Jewish Museum's Robert Rauschenberg retrospective in 1963 captured a scene that transforms the aphorism into manifest truth. An elegantly coiffured woman in an exquisite mink coat peers intently at Rauschenberg's *Monogram*, obviously determined to force the work to disgorge its deepest meaning. Not an unusual sight in an art museum, but for one small matter: *Monogram* is composed of a stuffed Angora goat with an automobile tire around its middle. Has the art fancier discovered the 20th century's answer to Michelangelo's *Pieta*? She may not be sure, but one thing is certain: if the cognoscenti say this is art, then art it is. No one wants to be left on the platform when the Avant-Garde Express rolls out of the station.

Not to be outdone, American novelists have produced their own *Monograms*; an embarrassment of riches exists, here: Mailer, Vonnegut, Updike, Heller, Brautigan, Vidal, Doctorow, Irving—everyone can supply his own candidates. What these gentlemen write may not be great literature—or even literature, for that matter—but if it bears the imprimatur of the *New York Times* or *Time* magazine, then the philistines in mink will clamor to read it. Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, James, Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Faulkner might as well step aside gracefully, for the era of dwarfs has emerged with a simper and a smirk. In this day of aesthetic democracy anyone with a typewriter and a carefully exploited glandular disorder can call himself a novelist, in the process acquiring a bank account that the president of General Motors would envy.

How is it that writers whom Faulkner would have made go around to the back door have won positions of honor in the contemporary republic of letters? Eschewing the tempting explanation of mass idiocy, we must lay the blame at the feet of the high priests of the Liberal Culture. These literary taste-makers—ensconced in the pages of *Time*, *The Nation*, *Village Voice*, *The New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*—have formulated the criteria with which to judge contemporary literary achievement. They beat the drums for those writers who play the game according to their rules.

These rules are not very esoteric; it requires no arcane knowledge to discern the secrets of literary success. One begins with a modicum of writing talent; this requirement bars few candidates from admission, for does anyone believe that Kurt Vonnegut actually brings anything new or commanding into the contemporary art of writing? Style matters little; what counts is correctness of content. Chief among

these key elements is a well-chiseled rejection, or even a thoroughgoing hatred, of all things American, especially anything that bears the stigma of the despised middle-class ethos, cultural values, normative principles. From *Book of Daniel* to *Loon Lake*, Edgar Doctorow has worked this vein with a crazed single-mindedness. It helps enormously if the writer exhibits a flagrant contempt for such grotesque, or just laughable, concepts as honor, duty, patriotism and virtue. But he need not attack these attributes directly; if he prefers, he can ignore them and crawl into his own navel, there to celebrate his special solipsistic vision, free from the trammeling concerns of real people in a real world. Whining self-pity goes a long way as well, for how else can one explain the critics' insatiable hunger for feminist abuse of empirical knowledge and rudimentary common sense disguised as novels? Last—but certainly not least—sexual acrobatics have become *de rigueur*. Incest, pederasty, bestiality and the solitary vice as exemplifications of self-realized "humanness" command the highest prices, but, if one is old-fashioned, random heterosexual coupling will do. Mix these elements together in the proper proportion, and the writer may find himself part of a Big Literary Event; if the gods bestow their full bounty upon him he will grace the cover of *Time*.

Although a novelist ignores this formula at great risk to his career, this does not mean that a writer who goes his



own way will relegate himself to obscurity; the literary taste-makers are too smart to ignore a Saul Bellow—besides, even the daftest of critics occasionally snares a stray insight. The real problems lie elsewhere. The Liberal Culture ignores or derides writers of exceptional talent who cannot command the recognition that a Bellow does. Andrew Lytle, for example, has, over the course of his long lifetime, written four superb novels, one of which—*The Velvet Horn*—weaves symbol and myth into a story of such complex grandeur that a John Cheever or a William Styron would hang his head in shame if he honestly compared his own paltry endeavors to Mr. Lytle's work. Robert Drake, Marion Montgomery and Madison Jones have written fiction that goes unread, while the mob clamors for Erica Jong and John Irving. And what of John O'Hara, America's closest response to Balzac, or James Gould Cozzens, a man who spoke of honor with something other than derision?

Even worse than the way in which the taste-makers treat the work of these men is the Liberal Culture's glorification of literary dwarfs whose books become cynosures which are proclaimed as evidence of American cultural achievement. To write a *Ragtime* or a *World According to Garp* is the tormenting dream of every callow undergraduate English major who longs to transmute his endocrinological urges into the Great American Novel. Like fleas on a coonhound's belly, the land crawls with aspiring writers who lust to see their dreary scribbles in print, and, given the state of the publishing industry, a good deal of this rubbish will eventually appear between hard covers.

The discriminating reader can be forgiven if the contemporary American literary scene drives him to the bottle. The thought of posterity judging our culture by a Norman Mailer or a Gore Vidal is almost more than a decent man can bear. But despair is the most grievous of sins, so one must have faith that time will take its toll on the reputations created by the Liberal Culture; as white-haired Southern ladies like to say: "Breeding and class will tell." When the dust has settled on our era, the fakers and poseurs will have been forgotten, and the *real* writers will be honored. But this may not be consolation enough for those who are condemned to live in this age of drivel. We need not stand by helplessly, though, for we can act without waiting upon posterity to separate the weevils from the cotton. We must uncover the sham, the phoniness, the sleaziness of the fiction glorified by the Liberal Culture. We must strip the cloak from the poseur and reveal the tawdriness of the artist manqué. Much of the literature of our time will then stand exposed for what it is: The Monumental Literature of Dwarfs.

—James J. Thompson, Jr.

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A new book has been written by a professor of literature at Cornell University—a lady with peculiar taste and lopsided irony. It is exactly the impenetrability of her message and style, the lack of distinction between what the authoress finds amusing and what she considers an enlightening insight, that destines her *oeuvre* to become a triumph among fashionable circles. It's called *The Language of Clothes*, and it's must reading for anyone who expects to hold his/her own during animated conversations in the lofts of Soho, Central Park West salons, East Side penthouses and Malibu cabanas. Literacy is not required, as the volume abounds in illustrations. Here is a representative excerpt:



Psychologists say that the walking stick or rolled umbrella is a male symbol when it appears in dreams; and in waking life men can often be seen using these symbolic objects to poke and prod or to signal for taxis in a way that bears out this interpretation. Walking sticks are now rare except among men who really need them, but the umbrella remains popular. As might be expected, the male version tends to be large and heavy, and to gain prestige from a capacity for instant deployment. A shabby, small, or—worst of all—ill-functioning umbrella is a source of shame which often seems excessive unless some erotic meaning is presumed. Of course, when the umbrella is actually unfolded it assumes a less phallic shape—which may be why upper-class British males often keep theirs tightly rolled even in a heavy drizzle.

The male hat too has been considered a sexual symbol. . . .

And on and on it goes, with the same coy certitude, the charming seriousness of a major research statement. We felt perplexed at first—we've been to England countless times and have seen a staggering number of upper-class British males with *unfolded* umbrellas during even a light drizzle. Were they all hermaphrodites?



## Things He Believed In

*The Eisenhower Diaries*; Edited by Robert H. Ferrell; W. W. Norton & Co.; New York.

by Allan C. Carlson

Academicians of any orthodox persuasion have always been uncomfortable with the legacy of Dwight Eisenhower. When his second Presidential term came to an end in early 1961, they joyfully dismissed him as an intellectual lightweight, a mere West Point graduate, an aging warrior whom time had passed by, while his administration was coolly mocked as "the bland leading the bland." The professors were eager to get on with reshaping the nation and the world in the heroic images drawn by Rostow, Galbraith and Schlesinger. The 1950's—an age characterized by bourgeois dullness, an obsession with business and family matters, an abiding mediocrity—had gratefully come to an end; the great adventure could begin.

Nearly two decades later, the orthodox academicians raised their bruised frames above the moral and intellectual ruins, contemplated the failed Presidencies and social decay of the 1960's and 1970's, and concluded that Eisenhower was in fact a great leader. Yet the transformation required a few alterations in the Eisenhower image. According to these revisionists, for example, Ike really wasn't much of a conservative. In fact, he appears in retrospect to have been something of a closet liberal. As described by scholars such as Fred Greenstein, Robert Divine and Burton Kaufman, Eisenhower was a "politically astute and informed" leader who applied a carefully honed concept of leadership to the conduct of his Presidency. They portray Ike as incessantly battling the obscurant wing of the Republican Party, pressing for an internationalist foreign

policy, defending the New Deal reforms, backing the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Topeka* decision, quietly yet purposefully undermining Senator Joe McCarthy, distrusting Nixon, fighting the Pentagon to hold down defense costs, using John Foster Dulles as a front while himself directing American foreign policy towards peace and rapprochement with the Soviet Union, keeping the U.S. out of Vietnam and guiding the foreign-aid program away from an obsession with military security and Western Europe and toward economic purposes and the developing nations.

One can understand the professors' anxious efforts to transform Eisenhower into one of their own, and there are elements of truth in most of what they say. Recently declassified foreign-policy documents from the 1950's, for example, have provided a more complex and flattering perspective on Eisenhower's role in that period. Moreover, the discovery and publication of a series of diaries kept by Eisenhower intermittently from 1935 until his death in 1969 have provided fresh insight into the mind, attitudes and world view of an exceptionally "private" public figure.

Yet the effort to rework Eisenhower into a minor hero in the liberal pantheon simply won't work. The Eisenhower diaries do provide a common denomi-

nator to Eisenhower's life, philosophy and political program, yet it is one in which most of the professors can personally take little comfort. As the diary entries make clear, Eisenhower believed fervently in traditional moral and family values, in the concepts of duty, honesty, personal responsibility and patriotism, and in the justice and efficacy of the free-enterprise system. His greatest fears focused on communist expansion internationally and on creeping statism, immorality and personal irresponsibility at home. The diaries, quite simply, portray the Eisenhower most persons would expect, a prototype of the contemporary conservative temperament.

Such traits were a legacy from Eisenhower's family experience, particularly the example set by his father. In 1942, on the day of his father's funeral, Ike sat in his wartime office at the Pentagon and wrote: "He was a just man, well liked, well educated, a thinker. He was undemonstrative, quiet, modest, and of exemplary habits—he never used alcohol or tobacco. . . . His word has been his bond and accepted as such; his sterling honesty, his insistence upon the immediate payment of all debts, his pride in independence earned for him a reputation that has profited all of us boys. . . . My only regret is that it was always so difficult to let him know the great depth of my affection for him." Emotional reticence characterizes the diaries. Yet it is significant that Eisenhower's few other recorded flights of feeling—e.g. during a 1938 trip with his father to Yellowstone or on the pending arrival of his first grandchild—centered on family-related events. Eisenhower, in fact, saw his own family as an example "of what this country with its system of individual rights and freedoms, its boundless resources, and its opportunities for all who want to work can do for its citizens. . . ."

Eisenhower's loyalties are also transparently simple. In 1939, he wrote that,



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