

jective (e.g., Johnson, according to Boswell, on Rousseau: "Rousseau, Sir, is a very bad man. I would sooner sign a sentence for his transportation, than that of any felon who has gone from the Old Bailey these many years. Yes, I should like to have him work in the plantations"). Johnson is a support of the structure of Western civilization. Writes Racevskis, "Foucault . . . intends to disrupt the power mechanisms that obtain in Western societies." Such power mechanisms—things like humanistic and scientific discourses, which Racevskis calls "the principal modes of domination and subjection in Western societies"—are used to claim that certain things are good and others bad, some things diseased and others healthy. All of this is inverted in Foucault's approach. He seems to have an attachment for all of those outside of the structure: the mad, the criminal, the sexually deviant. Thus, in his terms, Sade would be a more appropriate referent from the 18th century. Foucault grants Sade a great deal of respect, which is curious, given Foucault's comment about the "writer" in "Language to Infinity": "If we asked to whom the words of Sade were addressed (and address themselves today), there is only one answer: no one." Given Foucault's answer and the notion that literature is supposed to convey at least a modicum of meaning to another person (the old Jakobsonian author to reader), Foucault's iconoclastic allusiveness begins to appear in another guise: as pseudosophisticated nonsense.

Johnson and that particular episode were selected for the first paragraph for one reason: to make the point that certain intellectuals deserve a well-placed, physical or metaphysical, kick instead of fawning adulation.

While such blows would undoubtedly be an unexpected disruption, there is a more ominous threat looming. To be a French intellectual in the late 20th century means to risk the enmity of motor vehicles. Think of Camus. Notes Jonathan Culler in his workmanlike, succinct, valuable introduction to *Roland Barthes*, "in February 1980, coming out

of a luncheon with socialist politicians and intellectuals, Barthes was knocked down by a laundry truck while crossing the street in front of the Collège de France." Barthes died one month later. Is it tasteless to be so flippant about men, in Tennyson's phrase, "crossing the bar," or in Foucault's, "transgressing the limit"? Yes and no. Yes for most civilized people. No for French (and now American) intellectuals who, in Blanchot's formulation, are concerned with "death's space."

Maurice Blanchot is a French writer who is little known in this country, though he made minor waves in France: Barthes, for example, used him in *Writing Degree Zero*, a book in which, as Culler describes, Barthes takes on the old guard: Sartre. The recent once-swelling tidal wave of interest in all things French that engulfed select American academics caused Blanchot to be hoisted in essays by the likes of Edward Said (a man who is very obsequious to Foucault in his *Orientalism* [Pantheon, 1978]). *The Space of Literature* was originally published in 1955 by Gallimard as *L'Espace littéraire*. The translation should cause a

ripple around those who, like Lemert and Gillan, have fallen "into the strangeness of [Foucault's] language and thought." For example, the first sentence of Foucault's "Language to Infinity" is: "Writing so as not to die, as Blanchot said, or perhaps even speaking so as not to die is a task undoubtedly as old as the word." "Writing so as not to die" is a major concern for Blanchot; his essays—to define them in a generous manner—become rather funereal as he presents Kafka, Rilke, and others vigorously, suddenly, scribbling away so that they will transgress death's limit, leave a monument beyond their corporeal existence. However, this isn't exactly the same thing as drawing up a will; those involved in the task, if Blanchot is correct, are terminal adherents to something along the lines of Sacher-Masoch. That is, Blanchot rhetorically queries: "For isn't the writer dead as soon as the work exists?" *Work*, of course, means *complete* work: no one is done until he is done. That is a rather banal observation, yet it seems that cryptically clothed banality is in vogue nowadays and is to be accepted *à bouche bée*. □

Waiting for Locusts

William Kennedy: *Ironweed*; Viking Press; New York.

by Stephen L. Tanner

William Kennedy is putting Albany on the literary map. *Ironweed* is the third in a cycle of novels treating his home town, a trilogy Saul Bellow has called "memorable" and "distinguished." The May issue of *The Atlantic* contains Kennedy's article on Nelson Rockefeller's Albany Mall. That is the ostensible subject; the article is really about the kind of city history and colorful characters that go into his novels. His work of nonfic-

Dr. Tanner is a frequent contributor to Chronicles.

tion *O Albany!* is scheduled for fall.

It is the underside of Albany life during the 1930's that most interests Kennedy. His novels are peopled with gangsters, whores, show girls, pool hustlers, gamblers, bookmakers, bartenders, barflies, bums, cogs in the corrupt political machine, and newspapermen at home in such company. More respectable members of the Irish Catholic community appear, though only on the fringes. Family relationships, particularly between fathers and sons, are central to the psychological conflicts, but the main characters are seldom presented with their families. Instead, they are exhibited in bars, poolrooms, cafés, and the haunts of vagrants.

Kennedy makes this unsavory milieu

come alive, primarily because he seems to capture so accurately the various idioms. The slang, sarcasm, profanity, and Irish intonations have the stamp of authenticity and are woven into engaging characterization and narrative. He conveys a period flavor by including the movies and songs of the era, and he recreates old neighborhoods and city landmarks with an obvious tincture of nostalgia. Any prominent figure associated with the city receives mention: the James family, Thomas Dewey, Jack "Legs" Diamond. Fortunately the period material is handled with restraint. He avoids the excesses of Doctorow's *Ragtime* and Joyce Carol Oates's *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, in which period trivia is scattered about gratuitously and the fictional family comes into contact with every headline personality of the age.


Legs (1975) is a fictional biography of Jack "Legs" Diamond, the flamboyant gangster who was shot in an Albany rooming house in 1931. Reading it is like watching one of those movies of a criminal's personal life that subtly entices your sympathies until, with an unsettling realization, you find yourself wanting the police to lose. The story is told by Marcus Gorman, an Albany lawyer who foregoes an opportunity for a political career in order to work for Diamond. He sees Jack as "a singular being in a singular land, a fusion of the individual life flux with the clear violent light of American reality." What particularly attracts and fascinates him is Jack's "electric animation" or "luminosity": "You felt something had descended upon him, tongues of fire maybe or his phlogiston itself, burning its way into your own spirit." As one character puts it, he had the right to steal from us: "He was magic. He had power." This irrepressible energy or vitality receives pointed emphasis in the first and last sentences of the novel. In the first, Marcus says, 43 years after Jack was gunned down, "I really don't think he's dead." In the last, Jack is imagined after death saying, "I really don't think I'm dead."

What Kennedy seems to be suggest-

LIBERAL CULTURE

Cheaper by the Dozen

According to the *Chicago Tribune* report, the woman, who is in her 20's, is "bosomy, blond." The photograph accompanying the story shows an attractive woman sprawled on a bed as she "pores over cookbooks." Clearly, this woman is a rare find in the 80's, given her predilections. Things, of course, are not what they



seem. The woman is one Paula Parkinson, a former Washington lobbyist who two years ago was, the report says, "in the middle of an ugly . . . sex scandal involving six married congressmen." In addition to her other traits and abilities, Ms. Parkinson is a mathematician of morality. Reviewing her reaction to the public disclosure of her involvement with the men, she said:

I don't think that having sex with six men in two years is that bad . . .

With its inimitable sense of style, *Chicago Tribune* profiles Ms. Parkinson in depth:

She could cook well, enjoyed entertaining, parties, conservative politics.

The use of verbs by the *Tribune* writer strikes us as somewhat odd, but after a moment of reflection we could finally grasp how one can "enjoy" conservative politics. □

in man, the instinct for play and games. And this archetypal impulse is one of the novel's two main concerns. The other comes into focus with Martin Daugherty, a newspaperman who mediates between Billy and the political boss. Martin is psychologically tormented by his relationships with his father and his son. His situation, involving a compounded version of the usual Freudian triangle, raises questions about authority, domination, and exploitation in father-son relationships. A recurrent Abraham-Isaac motif is used to signal this theme. In the end, Martin is able to reconcile Billy and the reigning political family by pointing out Billy's peculiar kind of integrity and magic—the same two qualities the narrator of *Legs* finds admirable in Jack Diamond.

Billy's father, Francis, who appears briefly in *Billy Phelan's Greatest Game*,

ing is that Jack lives on in a mythic dimension, embodying a repressed desire in the American consciousness for unrestrained, lawless energy. The central preoccupation of the novel is with our paradoxical tendency to enshrine sensational criminals in the same hierarchy with royalty, heroes, and movie stars, seeking their autographs on one occasion and then crying for their blood in a paroxysm of righteous indignation on the next. Kennedy provides no explanation for this phenomenon, probably because he himself is so infatuated with Diamond as mythic figure.

Billy Phelan's Greatest Game (1978) is set in Albany in October of 1938. Billy Phelan, a young pool hustler, bookmaker, and all-round gamester, becomes persona non grata in all his regular haunts when a powerful political boss suspects Billy is implicated in the kidnapping of his son. Billy represents the eternal child

is the main character in *Ironweed*. This third novel is set in the same time and place as the second; the same background events and characters appear in both. Francis is a bum whose life is a pattern of death and flight. As a talented young baseball player, he was involved in a trolley strike and killed a man by using his skillful throwing arm to hurl a baseball-size stone. He runs. Later he returns and marries, but when he accidentally drops and kills an infant son, he runs again, deserting his family. Now he returns after more than 20 years of drinking, violence, and vagrancy. During Halloween and All Saints Day, the dead he has known appear to him in random encounters; he talks with them the same way he does with other chance acquaintances.

The novel begins in a cemetery and ends with Francis apparently killing another man, this time using a baseball bat on a cop during a raid on a hobo jungle. And on the same night, the woman and man he had teamed up with die. Francis is surrounded with death: "Bodies in alleys, bodies in gutters, bodies anywhere, were part of his eternal landscape: a physical litany of the dead." He has had "a lifetime of corpses." He is plagued with guilt for some of these deaths, and he ponders the question of responsibility: the deaths, his desertion of his family, and the shape of his life in general. He sees himself as "a man in whom there would never be an equanimity of both impulsive and premeditated action," and he is convinced that he lived in "a world where events decided themselves and that all a man could do was to stay one jump into their mystery." He concludes, "My guilt is all that I have left. If I lose it, I have stood for nothing, done nothing."

At the conclusion, Francis is in a boxcar headed out of town again, reverting to the same old pattern of flight described earlier in the novel: "Francis began to run, and in so doing, reconstituted a condition that was as pleasurable to his being as it was natural: the running of bases after the crack of the bat, the running from family, from bondage, from

destitution of spirit through ritualistic straightenings, the running, finally, in a quest for pure flight as a fulfilling mannerism of the spirit."

Kennedy's writing is slightly reminiscent of Steinbeck's in its portrayal of the beautiful little people, the lovable bums, of the 30's. There is also the flavor of Steinbeck's nonteleological or "is" thinking: things are the way they are because that is the way they are. *Ironweed*, we are told in an epigraph, is a member of the sunflower family, receiving its name from the toughness of the stem. The title seems to signify that Francis is like the ironweed, undesirable but tough, and part of an abundant species. His life as a bum is repeatedly linked with

sleeping in the weeds. What are the implications of this? Weeds are as much plants as are flowers and vegetables. In fact, the definition of weed is problematic, because some weeds may not be universally recognized as such. The definition really derives from what particular people consider useful and desirable rather than from some inherent characteristic of a plant. Kennedy may be suggesting that people like Francis are weeds, yet they have as much purpose and dignity in the human sphere as weeds do in the scheme of plant life. Weeds, after all, are usually the hardiest of plants.

These Albany novels are characterized by a nonjudgmental attitude; this passes for compassion in contemporary fiction.

In the forthcoming issue of *Chronicles of Culture*:

Qualitative Living in a Quantitative World

"A strong case can be made that Western culture began to define itself with the remarkable conjunction of art and philosophy which emerged in Periclean Athens during the fifth century B.C. Arguably, also, the 'decline of the West' began—or at least accelerated—with the development of modern psychology as a popular pseudoscience during the current century. . . . The classical attempt to *understand* man's complex relationships to the mysteries of nature and life was crudely transformed into an effort to *explain* . . . that has turned into the bizarre Theater of Contemporary Psychology . . . [which] may well have produced the ultimate Frankenstein monster, a self-consciousness that paralyzes instead of liberates and which finally destroys the very phenomena it seeks to explain."

—from "Tales of the Unknown"
by David A. Hallman

Also:

Opinions & Views—Commendables—In Focus
Perceptibles—Waste of Money
The American Proscenium—Screen
Art—Music—Correspondence—Journalism
Liberal Culture

There is an overt antagonism toward moralism. Religion has a prominent place because most of the characters are Irish Catholics, but it is treated as a cultural phenomenon of essentially negative consequence. The question of moral responsibility is toyed with, but the impression left is that the lives of men and women are largely determined by forces outside their control. There are passages near the end of *Ironweed* in which Kennedy seems to be on the verge of illuminating in a profound way the tangled riddle of moral responsibility; ultimately his treatment is ambiguous. The values that animate his artistic vision are an indiscriminate tolerance and a fondness for energy, vitality, and the instinct for play in human personality. Integrity is important, but it is defined as adherence to the values just mentioned.

Despite the many admirable qualities of Kennedy's fiction, his moral vision is at times astonishing and unsettling. For example, the narrator of *Legs* says he is "bored by people who keep returning life to a moral plane, as if we were reducible, now, to some Biblical concept or its opposite, as if all our history and prehistory had not conditioned us for what we've become. . . . When we get off the moral gold standard, when the man of enormous wealth [moral wealth?] is of no more importance to anybody than the man in rags, then maybe we'll look back at our own day as a day of justifiable social wrath." He calls Jack Diamond a pioneer, likens him to Prometheus, and says, "I don't want to trivialize Jack's achievement by linking him to lesser latter-day figures such as Richard Nixon, who left significant history in his wake, but no legend; whose corruption, overwhelmingly venal and invariably hypocritical, lacked the admirably white core fantasy that can give evil a mythical dimension." Or consider the climax to the Abraham-Isaac motif in the second novel. The slogan "free the children" comes into Martin's head like a war cry: "Stop the fascists." He concludes: "To free the children it is necessary to rupture

the conspiracy against them. We are all in conspiracy against the children. Fathers, mothers, teachers, priests, bankers, politicians, gods, and prophets. For Abraham of the upraised knife, prototypical fascist father, Isaac was only a means to an enhanced status as a believer.

Go f [—] yourself with your knife, Abe."

Matthew 13 tells us how the wheat and tares grow together in this life. If Kennedy were one of the reapers during the great time of harvest, one wonders where he would apply the match. □

Sense in a Savage Society

Blanche Bernstein: *The Politics of Welfare: The New York City Experience*; Abt Books; Cambridge, MA.

Joseph Sobran: *Single Issues: The Human Life Press*; New York.

by Allan C. Carlson

The *New York Times* once labeled her "an acerbic, unsentimental, highly schooled critic of government welfare policies." *Amsterdam News* dismissed her as "anti-poor." In fact, Blanche Bernstein proved to be one of the few defenders of the poor remaining by the late 1970's with a clear enough head to recognize some of the disastrous consequences of the welfare policies pursued during the preceding two decades. As New York State's deputy commissioner for income maintenance (1975-78) and chief of New York City's sprawling Human Resources Administration (1978-79), Dr. Bernstein worked to turn matters around. She believed that the system could be run both efficiently and compassionately, that fraud could be reduced, and that the integrity of welfare programs could be restored by vigilance and close attention to administrative detail. Before being pressured out of office by the cabal of welfare professionals, "minority leaders," civil libertarians, and political hacks that make up the "welfare community," she managed to prove her point. *The Politics of Welfare* is her testimony and prognosis for the future.

Dr. Carlson is editor of Persuasion at Work.

Bernstein moved into social service administration at the tail end of a quantum jump in the level of welfare dependency. As late as 1960, there were a mere 3 million recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the largest Federal welfare program. True to original congressional intent, a hefty portion of even these recipients were widows and orphans. By 1976, however, 10.8 million were on AFDC, all but a handful being unwed or divorced mothers and their offspring. Similarly, the food-stamp program, recast in its current form in 1964, claimed 9.4 million recipients in 1971 and 22 million in 1980.

What lay behind this vast expansion in the scope of welfare in America? At one level, the system simply fell captive to bands of activists determined to redistribute income, and the more the better. The quadrupling of the welfare case load in New York City during the 1960's, Bernstein notes, was for minority leaders, radical clergy, welfare workers, and liberal politicians "less a cause of concern over the evidence of increasing dependency than a cause for rejoicing that justice was finally being done." Among caseworkers, "it became something of a badge of honor . . . to manipulate the regulations to build the largest possible grant for a client." Food-stamp advocacy groups, working through the regulatory agencies and the courts, promoted "the broadest possible interpretation of the laws and regulations" to increase the number of recipients, "no matter what the results were in administrative complexity, costs, and potential