

ing power of the free will a sacrosanct tenet. Because he abhorred all aesthetic or political theories which denigrated either of these doctrines, Dostoevski parted company with the leading Russian critic Vissarion Belinsky, a materialist, and unsuccessfully warned his countrymen in *The Possessed* about the spiritual emptiness of political radicalism. Even Tolstoy's professed belief in the determinism of historical "forms" should not, Rzhevsky demonstrates, obscure his conviction that personal free will gives those forms their cognitive "content." Pierre's groping search in *War and Peace* for the meaning of life, concluding in the bourgeois satisfactions of family life, is manifestly a spiritual exercise of the will.

As important as the individual is in Russian literature, the ego is nonetheless measured against the Christian standards of humility, love, and service. Without these guides, Dostoevski's Father Zossima explains, evil follows:

Everyone strives to keep his individuality, everyone wants to secure the greatest possible fullness of life for himself. But meantime all his efforts result not in attaining fullness of life but self-destruction, for instead of self-realization he ends up by arriving at complete solitude. . . . This terrible individualism must inevitably have an end.

This is a prescient indictment of modern American culture, where "terrible individualism" has not yet had an end, though meaningful fiction almost has. Of course, great literature has virtually disappeared in Russia, too, for a different reason, though not as different as is sometimes supposed.

Many Western critics believe that 20th-century Russian literature is moribund because it is "too ideological." On the contrary, Rzhevsky demonstrates that the fault is that it is too *little* ideological. That is, because communism does not permit anyone to think and feel independently, artists cannot express "the active and honest involvement of their own thought and emotional com-

mitments." Hence, "it would be more appropriate in this regard to speak of the ideological hypocrisy, rather than the ideological enthusiasm of Soviet fiction." It would seem appropriate, too, to ascribe the decline of the Western novel not to the predominance of bourgeois values but to the absence of *any* meaningful ideology, in Rzhevsky's sense, though here the philosophical vacuum is often openly confessed, even perversely affirmed as a positive good. Through "original" and "self-assertive" characters, modern American authors try to convince themselves and their readers that the autonomous self need bow to no suprapersonal imperatives. But the repeated failures of such soulless and egotistic creations to establish any significance in their existence or to form satisfactory relationships with anyone

else, including the reader, manifests the aesthetic and moral falsity of such a view.

Rzhevsky is understandably heartened by the sporadic revival of Russian fiction through the work of men like Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn. By reasserting "the religious sense of communion with a transcendent order of things," these men act as a "reminder of values and beliefs that have been eroded or completely lost in the West as well as in the Soviet Union." Indeed, if Dostoevski, Tolstoy, and Solzhenitsyn are correct in believing that spiritual regeneration must precede any major social or cultural advance, then Russians and Americans of every social and economic class must rediscover the truth dramatized in the poignant conclusion of *Crime and Punishment* when the murderer Raskolnikov opens the Bible and begins to read. □

## Sentimental Fool?

**Aram Saroyan: *William Saroyan; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; San Diego.***

**William Saroyan: *My Name is Saroyan; Coward-McCann; New York.***

by Mark Royden Winchell

Aram Saroyan tells us that in the aftermath of his parents' unsuccessful try at marriage, his much-abused mother threw a typewriter at her husband.

"I don't want it," she yelled. 'It only writes one thing anyway.'

'What's that?' Bill asked.

"I love people . . . I love people . . . I love people . . ." Carol chanted at him.

Unlike Jonathan Swift, who detested mankind but got along tolerably well with individual persons, William Saroyan was a famous humanitarian whose swinish behavior toward family, friends, and

casual acquaintances makes him a case study in liberal sentimentality. Although Saroyan himself has long since been relegated to a minor niche in the literary history of the 1930's, many of his attitudes toward life and art are still very much with us.

In 1957, Edmund Fuller characterized the self-righteous amorality of Saroyan and company as the "new compassion." Such a view of the world amounts to a canonization of ethical relativism, or—more properly—ethical populism; for here good becomes an inherent property of the social outcast and evil is a term to describe only the rich and powerful. This sensibility, according to Fuller, "may be the most unwholesome and dangerous single symptom in modern literature, for as there is nothing more appealing than the cloak of compassion, there is nothing more treacherous when it is false."

To find a credo for the new compassion one could hardly do better than to look at the saccharine preface to Saroyan's most celebrated play, *The Time of Your*

*Dr. Winchell is author of William F. Buckley, Jr. (Twayne).*

*Life*. Written in the imperative mood of a street-corner harangue, this preface enjoins *you* to: "Encourage virtue in whatever heart it may have been driven into secrecy and sorrow by the shame and terror of the world." In such a world *you* should have "no shame in being kindly and gentle, but if the time comes in the time of your life to kill, kill and have no regret." The climax of Saroyan's play occurs when a kindly and gentle fraud who "looks as if he might have been Kit Carson at one time" kills the jack-booted cop who has been terrorizing Saroyan's pantheon of saintly drunks and two-dollar whores. The new compassion is never having to say you're sorry.

At his best, and in *The Time of Your Life* he is surely at his best, Saroyan exerts a subversive appeal which cannot be simply dismissed in a fit of moral pique. Like that later sentimentalist J. D. Salinger—whom Norman Mailer once characterized as "the greatest mind ever to stay in prep school"—Saroyan remained an ingenuous adolescent in the first glow of puberty long after senility had set in. As such, he is a writer who—like Salinger and Thomas Wolfe—can seem a seer and savant to sensitive kids just beginning to experience the mysteries of literature. There is a time in our lives when our moral maturity and social grace are incommensurate with our capacity for wonder. It is at just such a time that we are most vulnerable to the new compassion.

Saroyan was nothing if not prolific. In a 1934 letter to *STORY Magazine* editor Martha Foley, Saroyan confessed: "I very much dislike letting a day go by without writing a short story." As if to back up his claim, he sent Foley a new story every day for a month after she had bought his initial submission, "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze." With such a prodigious output, he took to writing under several pseudonyms (when Foley asked him about a certain Armenian from Boston, which turned out to be one of his own identities, Saroyan replied that the man was a cousin who had been taking manuscripts out of his wastebasket).

### *Raspberries for the Common Man*

**Raymond Carver: *Cathedral*; Alfred A. Knopf; New York.**

Raymond Carver uses short sentences. Not like Hemingway. Sort of like Vonnegut. But Carver isn't trying to be amusing. Perhaps profound. It's hard to tell. Maybe he suffers from writer's cramp. Or the margins on his typewriter are set too close. It's hard to tell. But it works for him. It gives him his style. It's compact. Not like a foreign car. More like an old Rambler. They don't build Ramblers any more. It's just as well. Few bought them. Plenty buy Carver. His style, not his books. He isn't a best-seller. Not yet. Nowadays critics are his market. It will get bigger later. What will readers find? Short stories written with short sentences. Like: "It's cold out, but not too cold. It's a little overcast." He lets the reader add "But not too overcast." It's common sense. Many things in his stories are like that. Commonsensical. Characters say things like "A wink is the same as a nod to a blind

man." Is Carver alluding to the original: "Say the word; a nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse"? It's in Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794). No, he's probably not. It just has a folksy sound to it. Like a man's description of his wife: "Fran's a big tall drink of water." Folks say things like that. And folks are big nowadays. Not like they were in the 1930's and 1960's. Then they had political significance. In the 1980's they represent little things. Better things. No AIDS or herpes.

Some critics say Carver's a minimalist. Mainly because of his style. His subject matter helps, too. Form and content. But the critics forget something: ideas. There are emotions in Carver's work. Gross ones. None of the nuances Faulkner and Ralph Ellison wrote about. So the folk in the stories can be treated like they were when they had political significance: like museum pieces. Rustics. Curios. Inhabitants of a sideshow. But inarticulateness doesn't mean arrested development. Consider the critics. They're eloquent—like mad. □

Although he produced an average of a book a year from 1934 through 1979, much of Saroyan's work was never collected in his lifetime, and some has escaped the scrutiny of even the most sedulous bibliographers.

**T**o separate such a personal and self-indulgent writer as Saroyan from his work is no more possible than to separate the dancer from the dance. For that reason, Aram Saroyan's recently published biography of his father holds interest for both critics and voyeurs. The usefulness of this book is limited, however, by both its brevity and its bias. "Aram" (who, in the true egalitarian spirit, refers to everyone—including his parents—by his or her first name) was not close enough to "Bill" to give us a potboiler in the lurid tradition of Christina Crawford and Gary Crosby, so he takes the "high road" and writes the sort of psychobiography that appeals to persons whose idea of an intellectual is Dr. Joyce Brothers. Nevertheless, he does manage to convey some

interesting information.

Despite his own grand literary pretensions, or perhaps because of them, Saroyan felt threatened by cleverness or intellect in women, and he almost broke off his courtship with Carol Marcus when her letters showed signs of both. She was able to redeem herself in his eyes only by admitting that those letters had been plagiarized from ones which her friend Oona O'Neill had received from her beau Jerry Salinger. (Oona would later become Mrs. Charles Chaplin and Jerry the author of *The Catcher in the Rye*.)

The Saroyans' first marriage ended when Bill discovered that Carol was Jewish. Responding in shock, he tore the covers off her naked body. "Look at you," he told his wife, "all white and pink and perfect. Do you mean to tell me that you're Jewish? How can that be possible? Come on, kid. You're not Jewish. How could someone as beautiful as you be Jewish?" Although Aram thinks that Bill was angered more by his wife's independent spirit than by her genealogy and



that his anti-Semitism was more a function of Armenian pride than of race hatred, it is a bit more difficult to rationalize Saroyan's characterization of Hitler as "a great zealot." Indeed, this liberal humanist, whose typewriter was so in

writing. It may be that his incredible prolixity was an attempt to cheat death of its final victory. In *The Time of Your Life*, a learned longshoreman named McCarthy suggests that would-be writers need "more magazines. Hundreds of

sense of the comic and an occasionally lyrical feel for language, Saroyan was at his best when he stayed close to his roots and wrote of California's immigrant Armenian population. When he attempted the avant-garde, as in the stream-of-consciousness collage in the first paragraph of "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze," his work seems simply forced and dated.

Given his own subsequent experience, it is more than a little ironic that some of Saroyan's most engaging fiction should deal with old men facing death. In "The Explosion," for example, an old tailor turns to farming in order to be close to the soil in his declining years. When he contracts consumption, the old man kills a cow for a final communal meal, and—even though it is winter and the trees bare—decides to dynamite the hardpan in his orchard. Fearing that he might not live until spring, he longs for a bang not a whimper.

Saroyan's greatest failings were an inability to control and nurture his modest talents and a view of the world which stressed sentiment at the expense of morality. Even when he is entertaining, he reminds one of what Queen Victoria said of a three-hour Good Friday service—that it was altogether too much of a good thing. And in helping to spawn a later generation of fashionable sentimentalists (Salinger, Vonnegut, et al.), he has given us altogether too much of a bad thing. In *The Time of Your Life*, a barroom metaphysician identified only as "The Arab" pronounces Saroyan's best epitaph when he says of things in general: "What. What not. No foundation. All the way down the line." □

"... the book becomes a philosophical statement, about birth, about life."

Joel Oppenheimer  
The New York Times Book Review

love with people, was actually somewhere to the right of Ezra Pound.

Nor was Saroyan's disingenuousness limited to his racial views. Although he grandly refused the Pulitzer Prize for *The Time of Your Life* (arguing that "commerce had no business patronizing art"), he was not above claiming half-credit and half-royalties for Rosemary Clooney's hit song "Come-on-a-My-House," even though it had been almost entirely written by his cousin Ross Bagdasarian.

Aram Saroyan's book is not entirely exposé, however; he attempts, in the end, to redeem both himself and his father with the obligatory deathbed reconciliation scene. Accompanied by his daughter Cream (younger sister of Strawberry), Aram visits his cancer-ravaged father in the hospital, where the elder Saroyan bravely faces death without the aid of painkillers. As they weep and embrace, William Saroyan paraphrases the title of his most famous play by telling his son: "It's the most beautiful time of my life . . . and death." However noble this final gesture of love might have been for the emotionally scarred Saroyan, his will made no provision for his family, but instead established and funded a foundation to bear his name and house his papers. That he did not realize that those papers might have commanded a good price from a private collector's library is evidence more of naiveté than of humility.

William Saroyan's ultimate significance is not as a troubled and Dionysian personality, but as an artist who was singularly dedicated to the vocation of

them. *Thousands*. Print everything they write, so they'll believe they're immortal." (Saroyan's own official last words, which he phoned to the Associated Press a week before his death were: "Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case. Now what?") It is therefore fitting that two years after Saroyan's death James H. Tashjian should edit a new collection of his work, consisting largely of pieces never before published in book form. Retrieved from the files of three Armenian periodicals located in Boston, these stories, poems, and plays may not be—as the jacket blurb claims—the "literary find of the decade"; but they will surely help to confirm Saroyan's reputation as a gifted, if minor, writer.

With the exception of *The Time of Your Life* (which, almost by default, remains one of the great comic plays of the American theater), Saroyan's métier was the short story and the personal essay. His bag of tricks simply was not sufficient to sustain a full-length novel. Saroyan's short pieces, however, were not the sort of well-crafted world-in-a-window artifacts which are so popular among teachers of "creative writing." Essentially a raconteur with a broad



# Bicycling Through Europe Wearing Blinders

**Wright Morris: *Solo: An American Dreamer in Europe: 1933-34*; Harper & Row; New York.**

by James H. Bowden

Those unfamiliar with Wright Morris's fiction probably won't read this book; if they do, they no doubt will be puzzled by a vision that could be called nonjudgmental by educationists, laid-back by the intellectually lazy, sketchy by a writing teacher, and any number of other bemused epithets. I choose *detached*.

"This wacky episode has a wonderful, unexpected ending . . . any reader can savor this wise and whimsical little book."

Jim Miller  
*Newsweek*

"... the best I've read since Frank Conroy's 'Stop-Time.'"

James Atlas  
*The New York Times Book Review*

Some might see that vision as benign, but I don't think so, though Morris does seem to be a photographer manqué, one of the sort who is even more of a voyeur than is ordinary for practitioners of that craft. For one thing, there is the seemingly absolute precision of recall: when this partial autobiography begins he is leaving California for his *Wanderjahr* and after an ex-professor of his drops him off in Utah he hitches eastward till a couple of farmers pick him up, they being interested chiefly in whether he can read. A college almost-graduate (Pomona, 1930-33, but he doesn't say so in *Solo*), he can indeed read. He interprets a Listerine label for them, and they apply it for a palliative to the rump of a gelded horse; all is recorded dispassionately, meticulously, and all quite immediately—we are there. But the only interpretation offered is that Morris has to lie in the cool grass face down to steady him-

self after seeing the swollen horse. That is as involved as he gets.

He passes through Central City, the Nebraska town in which he grew up, but little is said of it or his family, or of the world prior to 1933. Very American, for Morris there is no sense of one's being in medias res; there is no Hebraic grammar of man caught between what was accomplished and what is yet to be done. It is always Now. Yet there is little mystery in this; it is only a black and white snap of how it is.

After working a summer to get his

And that's about it for Sol. Morris says that until he met two on the ship who spoke German and until he "had some long talks with Sol Yellig, I thought there had to be something special between people who spoke the same language. I found that there was. The dislike they had for each other was more refined than that for people in general." Maybe that's precise enough.

Interestingly, as an endorsement for his craft, when he experiences a storm at sea, he wanted to know the difference between it and Conrad's storms. Docking in Antwerp he sees first of all their famous whores, whom he avoids for fear of picking up a nail. He avoids nonwhores too, though one muses on how matter-of-factly such encounters would have been recorded had he indulged. Indeed, though he must have read Freud, he seems not to have paid it much mind. Perhaps his sexual circumspection was the result of his having a girl back in the states whom he was to marry upon his return: he doesn't want her to read about any youthful peccadillos. But the marriage was dissolved nearly three decades later, so each condition (divorce and time lapse) is sufficient to permit truth now. But the truth seems to have been chastity, which probably was only slightly less rare then than now. And in the book

stake—\$360—in the Schlitz Garden Café at the World's Fair in Chicago, a job gained him by a fraternity brother (that's as much detail as is given about brother, job, Chicago) he's off to New York. From there he sailed on a freighter to Antwerp, meeting on the trip one Sol Yellig, of Brooklyn, who, when sailing past the Statue of Liberty remarks, "What a joke."

## In the Mail

***Vietnam Heroes III: That We Have Peace*** edited by J. Topham; American Poetry Press; Philadelphia. Heartfelt words by the men who are almost forgotten and those near to them.

***A Guide to Bird Behavior, Volume II***, by Donald W. Stokes and Lillian Q. Stokes; Little, Brown; Boston. More than taxonomy, an ornithologist's field-day field guide.

***The Case for Character Education*** by Frank G. Goble and B. David Brooks; Green Hill Publishers; Ottawa, IL. Ethics in public schools are like the janitors: somehow there and necessary, but little evident. Herein is a call to up the image of ethics.

***The Holy Fool*** by Harold Fickett; Crossway Books; Westchester, IL. The novelistic treatment of an L.A. preacher; a comedy that transcends the quotidian.

*Dr. Bowden is author of Peter De Vries: A Critical Study (G. K. Hall).*