

that, off and on, in this latest of his productions. So the first thing to say is that if you're looking to be entertained, then Amis's *Memoirs* is quite a treat.

Now I've put it that way so that I will feel quite free—as a devoted fan of Kingsley Amis—to grumble about these same disappointing *Memoirs*. The book's a toot, but it's also lazy and evasive, a ragbag that doesn't cohere, containing as it does an uneasy mixture of sentimentality, meanness, philistinism, snobbery, complacency, and coarseness. Is it possible that this inchoate assembly might have some point or overriding idea, other than the ineffable superiority of the Amisian view? If so, it is not stated, though I think it might be intuited.

I believe I can isolate two themes either left undeveloped or else avoided by the author that hint at the structure of a real book—the one the author withheld. One of those items is intellectual, the other spiritual. The first is the story of a novelist and academic; the second is the tale of a man uneasily in search of love—a man who found sex and booze instead of soul. There simply isn't much here about the novelist. Instead there is this careful disclaimer: "Who would want to read about the time I had thinking up and writing one book and what I felt about its reviews, sales, translation into Catalan, or about how I spent my summer holidays in 1959?" The calibrated disingenuousness of this preemption shows just how thoughtfully its author has considered his avoidance of the curiosity of his public. And the humor of its expression characteristically beclouds the anxiety of the writer, who may be a bit worried that his readers might notice his contempt for their intelligence. After all, they have been put in the position of saying, "We're not interested in how a writer writes. We know writers don't care about their work or its reception, and we don't care either." And they will later see that they have also been put in the position of saying, "Tell us the dirty stuff. Tell us the naughty bits about dead people who can't answer back. Above all, no ideas please—just lots of drinking stories."

So there isn't much here about writing, though there is rather a great deal about the creative superiority of Kingsley Amis, who never "lost it"

even though he seems to have processed as much alcohol as all those who did. There isn't much here either of the academic persuasion, and on this point I must say that though Amis taught for years, there is hardly a word in his *Memoirs* that would convince anyone of his academic background and experience. Two of the worst chapters are about his academic sojourns in the States, but these only go to show that he shouldn't have bothered. The author of *I Like It Here* should have stayed there, since he seems to have a blind spot where the U.S.A. is concerned. His notion of a nice bit of Americana seems oddly chosen, and is phrased with all the elegance with which he has graced this volume: "[A]ny one who walks up Fifth Avenue (say) on a sunny morning without feeling his spirits lift is an a--hole." Add to that his representation of Nashville and Vanderbilt—which emerge as something of a cross between a KKK gathering and an episode of *Hee Haw*—and we must conclude that Colonel Blimp is not much to be preferred to the Ugly American. Even a brilliant novelist is only a human being after all, and there is something about this country that turns Sir Kingsley into Fred Scuttle. In short, his reflections on the colonies and their culture are dumb and even (as on the battle of Nashville) nasty.

No, the literary and historical stuff isn't Amis's strong point, though I daresay it could have been if he had been interested. Instead there is a thread of inverted spirituality in these memoirs that hints at the book that didn't get written. The resentful portrait of Malcolm Muggeridge suggests to me a jealousy of Muggeridge's faith—a faith denied to and by an author who shows his fear of death in his last chapter. Amis's postmortem barbs cut both ways: "... he developed an amazing capacity for investing platitudes with an air of novelty and freshness: 'What we all have to realise,' he would say, screwing up his face in the familiar way that meant something important was coming, 'is that we live in an increasingly materialistic society.'" But Amis himself has not avoided similar platitudes, as for instance in his treatment of Elizabeth Taylor—the English novelist, I mean, not the American whatever.

Complacency and whiskey may make a fine breakfast, but they constitute a bad supper. Avoiding the important stories of his life—of his marriages, of his novels, of his political enlightenment, of his study and knowledge of English literature—Amis has devoted most of his energies to relating trivia about hangovers, hanky panky, booze hounds, and famous or not so famous dead people he has known. After the tittering has subsided, some readers may agree with me that the book leaves a bitter aftertaste—the sense of having been stiffed. But look again: for perhaps no one has been so shortchanged by Kingsley Amis as he has been by himself. The aggressive ego that peeps between the lines—that fires the male libido and the novelist's stamina, and that is cloaked in comic gestures—here has hidden itself in the novelist's disavowal, in the satirist's "modesty." The focus on others shrouds a twisted self-love; all the laughter muffles a scream in the dark. Though these memoirs are spirited and spirituous, they aren't spiritual. They weren't written in the right spirit.

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The Craft of Flesh and Blood

by Gregory McNamee

The Middle of Nowhere
by Kent Nelson

Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith;
208 pp., \$18.95

Language in the Blood
by Kent Nelson

Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith;
260 pp., \$18.95

The landscape of American fiction is a bleak and dreary place these days. It wends through the somber back lots and blue highways of rural America, tends toward the grimy streets of crumbling cities, populated by somewhat dim and desperate characters whose main goal seems to be making it to another day. Call it realism, call it world-weari-

ness: the actors in our contemporary short stories and novels, bastard offspring of Raymond Carver's deconstruction of Chekhov, are as unthinking and uninteresting as the bulk of humankind.

From the days of *Don Quixote* until very recently, the fabulist's stock had been to place extraordinary characters in ordinary circumstances, or, even better, to place ordinary characters in situations that require ennobling—or at least unusual—actions. This charge has withered into the now-standard, tedious minimalism of writers like Richard Ford, the bleak nihilism of Bret Easton Ellis and the New York school of spoiled-rich-kid *artistes* who seem to dominate publishers' catalogs. Their art is a mirror reflecting life. But that life is shaped by television, illiteracy, junk food, and nothingness—hardly the stuff of a masterwork, or even of third-rate fiction.

If only because it restores something of the ordinary person's ability to rise to morally informed judgments in the

face of adversity, Kent Nelson's work is to be commended. His fictions are also extremely well made, written by an artist in sure command of his craft. Nelson bucks the minimalist trend while appropriating some of its less noxious elements, and he creates a believable fictional landscape of characters one would not mind encountering in the checkout line or stranded on a roadside. They have something to say, and what they have to say matters.

Nelson's aptly titled, baker's-dozen collection of stories, *The Middle of Nowhere*, takes as its setting places that test one's mettle: the deserts of Arizona and northern Mexico, the unsettled highlands of Colorado, prisons, East Coast back alleys. The title story, among the strongest in a strong suite, centers on a young man's coming of age in that most American of locales, a garbage-strewn trailer park on the edge of a large Western city. Echoing Bernardo Bertolucci's luminous film *Last Tango in Paris*, Nelson's humble story searches out the aftereffects of loss, the

grief of parting, and the addictions that so often accompany them.

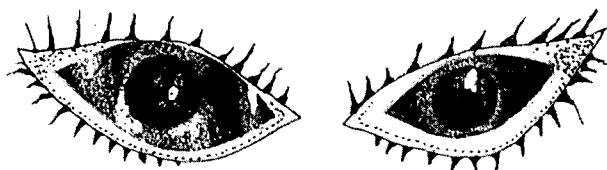
For all the brilliance of the desert sun, Nelson's story partakes of a bleak atmosphere and a hard vision of working-class realities. Yet his protagonists respond by refusing to accept quotidian defeats; his young narrator salvages meaning from life by marching steadfastly away from the slough of despond. "The Middle of Nowhere," like Nelson's other tales, is far from inspirational, but his characters, who are as real as the faces we meet daily, are suitably heroic in the mere act of taking responsibility for their lives.

Language in the Blood, Nelson's third novel, returns to the familiar setting of the desert Southwest. His narrator, Scott Talmadge, a young avian biologist drafted to take over an ailing professor's university courses, is a typical thirtysomething casualty of the Me Decade: nervous, uncertain, shy of emotional commitment and even emotion itself, certainly not to be relied on in a pinch. He avoids the old friends who shaped his past life in Nelson's fabulated Tucson until he begins to bore himself, one drunken evening after another; then he seeks out his elusive alter ego, a trust-fund hippie whose days are spent alternately patching a fortress-like adobe house and disappearing into remote corners of the desert, from which he returns with carloads of mysterious *indios* who have trudged northward from the killing fields of Salvador.

Our protagonist takes a few chapters to rise to the occasion, for he lacks the natural machismo of fictional characters past. Still, he is eventually drawn into the sanctuary network. In the course of aiding that very real underground railroad and of suffering yet more losses, Nelson's narrator attains a sort of natural nobility; by merely having acted, just once, to do something right, his deflated character reacquires a humanity that had abandoned him long before. It's a neat trick, and Nelson packs a good measure of suspense into Talmadge's growth. He tells it in moving tenor:

Years later, when all these events come to mind, I see those faces first. The faces. Perhaps the police become inured to seeing suffering in the

LIBERAL ARTS



EUGENICS IN CHINA

With the aim of improving "population quality," China is currently sterilizing mentally retarded persons who wish to marry. The punishment for failure to observe the law, meaning an illegal pregnancy, is obligatory abortion. According to the *New York Times* last August, this eugenics law was first adopted by the Gansu Province in 1988, and has resulted in the sterilization of five thousand mentally retarded people. Five other provinces have followed suit. Prime Minister Li Peng favors such controls because "mentally retarded people give birth to idiots" and "they'll be detrimental to our aim of raising the quality of the people." A national eugenics law is currently being drafted, but criticism from the West and from the United States in particular has delayed this legislation. The laws as they exist in the provinces have few if any guidelines, except in the Gansu Province, where mental retardation is defined as an IQ of 49 or lower. Administration of the law is often left up to the discretion of rural doctors who typically have little more than a high school education. There are between five and twelve million Chinese who are mentally retarded.

human eye, or maybe in war, soldiers become accustomed to faces in pain. But not I. These were children's faces . . . filthy, hungry, bruised, scared, oil stained, burned. But alive.

As are Nelson's fictional creations, at a far remove from the unfeeling, unreflective, wraith-like ciphers who inhabit so much of American writing. His stories are an antidote to despair, a proper restoration of some of the worthier aims of storytelling. His voice is very welcome indeed.

Gregory McNamee is the author of the recently published collection of short stories Christ on the Mount of Olives (Broken Moon Press).

Theses and Antitheses

by Alan J. Levine

The Rhetoric of Reaction
by Albert O. Hirschman
Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press; 197 pp., \$25.00

American liberals have long been troubled by a sinister force lurking in our society, namely conservatism. Albert O. Hirschman's motive in writing *The Rhetoric of Reaction* is to explain this phenomenon to his fellow liberals. He refrains from psychoanalyzing conservatism; instead, he argues that conservatives, regardless of personal quirks, are bound to certain forms of argument. Hirschman seeks to analyze those forms, not the contents of contemporary conservative argument. In doing so, he comes off as an old-fashioned liberal and seems to regard as one of the prime differences between right and left the latter's supposedly greater faith in humanity.

Following the lead of British sociologist T.H. Marshall, Hirschman suggests that citizenship in Western societies has developed in three stages. The first of these was the development of civil rights (e.g., freedom of speech and of religion and equality before the law), which he associates with the Enlight-

enment and the French Revolution. The second was the development of full-scale political democracy and universal suffrage. Finally, the concept of rights was extended to include social and economic rights in the 20th-century welfare state, which, as far as American society is concerned, he identifies with the Great Society reforms. Each of these three stages of triumph elicited a bitter reaction aimed at undoing its progress, and in countering all three phases conservatives or reactionaries developed three brands of argument (Hirschman is awfully fond of triplets). First is the "perversity thesis," which he rightly deems the strongest weapon in the arsenal of the right, and which suggests that a proposed reform will actually hurt the group it is supposed to help. Burke's philippics against the French revolutionaries are a classic case, while Charles Murray's *Losing Ground* is the outstanding contemporary example of the perversity argument in the present day. The "futility thesis" argues that basic social laws will prevent a reform from succeeding or insure that it will actually aid some group that is already well off. The arguments of Mosca and Pareto that universal suffrage would actually strengthen the grip of the old upper classes in Italy and present-day suggestions that welfare-state measures really channel money to elements of the middle class are examples of the futility argument. Hirschman argues, not entirely convincingly, that the perversity and futility theses are contradictory.

Third, and perhaps least impressive, is the "jeopardy thesis," which holds that some present proposed reform will undermine some previous progressive achievement. Arguments against the extension of the suffrage in the 19th century on the ground that democracy would destroy liberty, and those made today against the welfare state on the ground that it will destroy democracy, are examples of the jeopardy thesis. To Hirschman, the fact that earlier charges of perversity, futility, and jeopardy were false (or seem so to him) suggests that the present-day "versions" are also false or at least wildly exaggerated—although one can occasionally glimpse, in this book, a hint of admiration for the sneaky right-wingers who conjure them up.

Some of Hirschman's arguments are

simplifications, while others, being more complex, are difficult to follow. Nor is it quite clear that "perversity" and "futility" theses are mutually exclusive, as far as the modern welfare state is concerned. Hirschman argues that the perversity effect, so well described by Charles Murray, requires that transfer payments actually *reach* the poor to derange their vital decisions, while the futility effect asserts that they go somewhere else. I am not so sure, however, that these arguments are really contradictory in practice. No one would suggest that transfer payments are big enough to lift the poor into the middle class; after welfare, Harlem is still Harlem, not Rego Park, much less Park Avenue. The enormously expensive welfare machine does, in fact, divert much money into the hands of its middle-class administrators. Moreover—and here we find futility with a vengeance—it does not seem to reach the very worst off, as witness the people roaming the streets of our cities.

That the mere extension of bureaucratic authority is likely to erode both traditional civil rights and the effectiveness of democracy eludes Hirschman. In fairness, however, it should be stressed that he does not assail right-wing illusions only. There are, he notes, roughly parallel arguments on the left; although "progressives" like to suppose that liberty, democracy, and social reforms are neatly compatible, this is not, Hirschman admits, invariably the case. He also discusses the left's counterpart of the jeopardy thesis, the "imminent danger" argument—that reform is the sole way to avoid imminent disaster. That, of course, is sometimes true. The rueful contemplation of Chiang Kai-shek in exile on Taiwan, of his failure to institute land reform on the mainland, testifies to a fine example of "imminent danger" ignored. In fact, both "progressive" and "reactionary" theses have foundations in reality, although not necessarily to an equal extent. Hirschman insists that over the years the right has made many silly predictions concerning the inevitable results of liberal ideas. The chief problem is that the left has usually managed to live down to them.

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