

Versailles-on-Hudson

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

"Our high respect for a well-read man is praise enough of literature."

—R.W. Emerson



Anna Mycek-Wodnicki

My Silk Purse and Yours: The Publishing Scene and American Literary Art

by George Garrett
Columbia: University of Missouri Press; 316 pp., \$29.95

The Sorrows of Fat City: A Selection of Literary Essays and Reviews

by George P. Garrett
Columbia: University of South Carolina Press; 343 pp., \$34.95



A critic who tries to stay abreast of the literature of his time, in any time, deserves respect as well as sympathy from less heroic readers content to pick and choose from among the deluge of titles that sends one literary year after the next spinning away down the ceaseless cascading indiscriminate flood. "I read all the time, then," George Garrett says of himself as a boy,

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and I still do. And after I became a teacher and then later a certified (by finally being published) writer, I did not put away childish things, but just added to them. I have for thirty-some years judged countless contests and grant applications and prizes. And I have edited poetry and fiction, too, for various magazines and presses. And I have reviewed books all the time, individually and in clusters for chronicle reviews and in mountainous caches, over the last few years, for the annual "Year in Fiction" essay for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook* where in ten or twelve thousand words I try to do my best to report on a calendar year's worth of American fiction. At this time I am still doing at least some of all of it, and I think it would be perfectly safe to say that I read more fiction, at all stages of its development, than anybody else in this country. . . . And I am not a bona fide speed reader, either ["The

Star System," *My Silk Purse and Yours*].

In these two volumes alone, which must account for a small fraction of his critical production, Professor Garrett assesses at length the merits and demerits of work by Norman Podhoretz, B. S. Johnson, Fred Chappell, Mary Johnston, Shelby Foote, James Jones, Reynolds Price, Madison Smartt Bell, Bobbie Ann Mason, John Barth, Hillary Masters, Paul Fussell, David Slavitt, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Joyce Cary, James Gould Cozzens, John Ciardi, Robert Penn Warren, John Cheever, Saul Bellow, Wright Morris, and William Faulkner, as well as by many other writers in "short takes"—and considers also such vasty topics as the star system in contemporary American letters, the publishing business and its effect on American literary art in the late 20th century, and the state of Southern literature in the present day. Does the man never have any fun at all?

Yes he does, and an astonishing amount of it he seems to take from reading books. My almost sole reservation

regarding Garrett's criticism, in fact, is that it too often gives the impression that the author has never met a book—a novel especially—he didn't like. Where Professor Garrett (in my opinion) errs, he is led astray chiefly by melo-low over-generosity: George Garrett emphatically is not the John Simon of contemporary literary critics. The phrase "one of our very best writers" comes too trippingly at his call, while his assessment of Bobbie Ann Mason (for instance) as "an artist who is beginning to show a potential for major accomplishment" is ludicrous. (A single sentence quoted by Garrett from Mason's "Private Lies"—"Now they were called hairdressers, or better still, cosmetologists, which sounded like a group Carl Sagan would be president of"—tells you all you need to know about the "art" of Bobbie Ann Mason.) How can a critic with so rare a literary palate recommend Ms. Mason's work even as an *aperitif* to the 12-course meal prepared by his literary hero, William Faulkner? The answer is precisely that you *do* have to have some fun at this game.

In addition to being a critic, George Garrett is a novelist, playwright, and teacher, busy with wider occupations that have naturally and inevitably set their stamp on the criticism itself. Garrett's critical writing is never academic in the usual and pejorative sense of the word, substituting as it does a poet's imagination and intuition for the desiccated pedantry of the literary scholar. It is, however, pedagogical, meaning that the motivating intent of the critic is identical to that of the professor—to make the subject of discussion as interesting as possible to an audience most of which can be safely assumed to have little or no prior concern for the material. No latter-day professor of English or creative writing can permit himself the luxury of restricting the syllabus to good authors and valuable literary work; the *Zeitgeist* compels him to include the popular and the topical even when it is meretricious, or at best mediocre. But if you must teach Barth and Vonnegut and Mason and Ann Beattie, you cannot do it without gusto and enthusiasm, no matter how false and auto-inspired. And it cannot be easy, when class is over, simply to shut off that enthusiasm in the privacy of your study, face-to-face with a typewriter and a deadline.

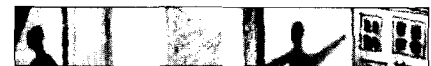
What matters, since Garrett appar-

ently has no ambition to reconstitute the Western literary canon on his own, is not that he is capable of overpraising undeserving writers but that he is a brilliant exegete of the work of good and superior ones, as well as of those whom he professes "the masters." His essay "A Matter of Style in *The Great Gatsby*" ("Thus behind its seemingly bland and polite surface, *Gatsby* is, in many ways, a wildly experimental novel, a trying out of what would become familiar, if more various, strategies of our serious literature and, especially, of the range of our literary language") is a freshly original piece of criticism that should interest Matthew Bruccoli, while M. E. Bradford might be suitably impressed by Garrett's "The Influence of William Faulkner," as well as by his essays concerning Faulkner's early poetry and literary reviews. Perhaps the virtuoso piece of the two volumes is the result of a first-class literary sensibility applied to a second-class literary work that is nonetheless the product of a genuine writer. "My Silk Purse and Yours," originally published in 1968 by the *Hollins Critic*, is a lengthy essay-review of *Making It*, the notorious autobiography of the youthful Norman Podhoretz that in retrospect appears to have been a prophecy of the cult of literary celebrity that prevails in America today and that has become the *sine qua non* of artistic reputation and commercial success. "Though *Making It* appears to be a simple-minded *fabliau*," Garrett concludes,

it is more complex and more fabulous. The "real" Norman Podhoretz, the author of the book, has created an allegory of pilgrimage. But it is a *false* pilgrimage. The protagonist arrives at what is clearly Babylon and is fooled by the "Welcome to Jerusalem" signs. There he is, up to his knees in the Slough of Despond and trying to make the best of it because all the maps say this is the Delectable Mountain. In his innocence he wants to believe and do right. Innocence is the key to character. He is the bumbling naif of great satire.

"Ladies in Boston Have Their Hats" (*My Silk Purse and Yours*), having described WASP humor as "complex, incorporating many of the primal WASP assumptions and attitudes . . . even as

it ridicules much that is most characteristic of WASP society," goes on to identify Tom Wolfe's work as the reaction of an upper-middle-class Southern WASP to the vulgarity and hypocrisy of New York City. The insight is important beyond its immediate critical validity, since Garrett—in "The Star System" and "Once More Into the Breach, Dear Friends, Once More"—presents an essentially Wolfian view of the New York publishing and literary world that Wolfe himself has so far not shown the courage to write about, though he long ago dispatched the New York art establishment from which he stands at a safe remove. If George Garrett had qualms about razzing the dispensers of his own contracts and advances, it doesn't show. The "stars" of contemporary American writing, he insists, are generally speaking no better—and no worse—than the run of their unsung and unpaid fellow writers, being more or less the beneficiaries of luck, publicity, and aggressive hype by their editors and publishers. And in "Southern Literature Here and Now," he attacks the "system of artificial celebrity which no longer describes a real condition in the literary world . . . [i]f it ever did . . . [but which] coincides with the commercial and self-serving aims of publishers and the whole periphery of professional intellectuals around them." Garrett even argues that "the *concept* of the master artist" is exactly that, a conceit from which the writer himself acquires a model and the scholar an image, while "the critic accepts the notion of a few masters, surrounded by a crowd of apprentices and journeymen, because it makes public



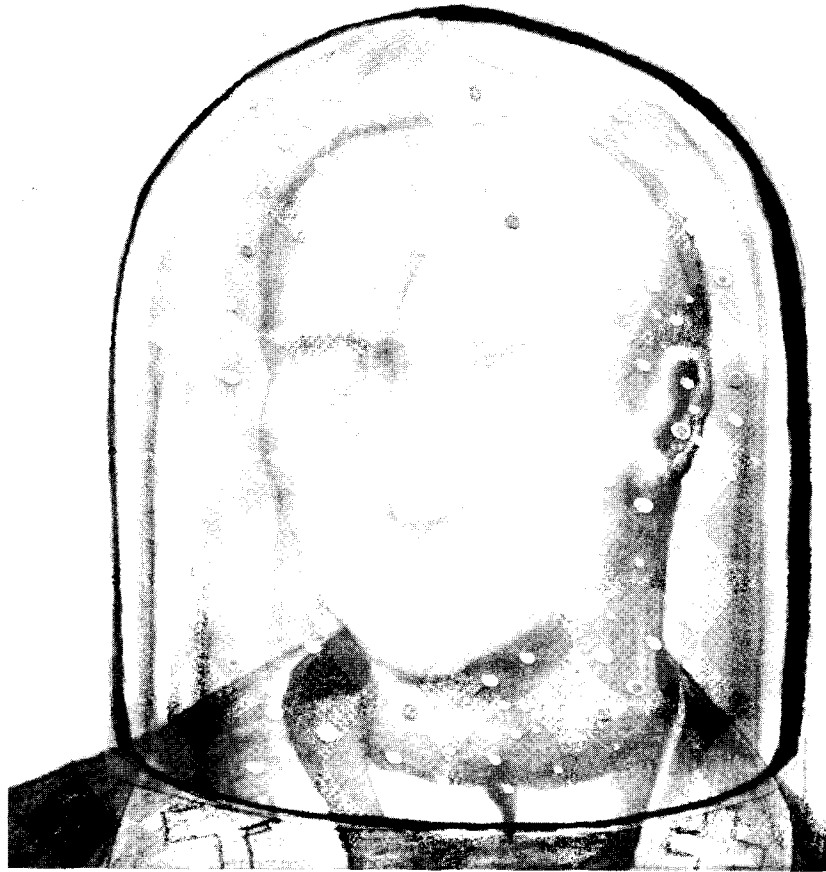
criticism, as it is understood, possible."

The process by which the old Republic of Letters has been supplanted by the new literary Versailles-on-Hudson is simply another of the many examples of how America in the past century has been transformed from a democracy into an oligarchy under cover of a rhetorical blanket celebrating "democratization." George Garrett—Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Virginia and recipient of many prestigious literary grants and awards—is enough of an establishmentarian to have witnessed the process firsthand, and enough of a republican at heart to denounce and deplore it. c

Doing Well; Done Better

by Llewellyn H. Rockwell, Jr.

“These monstrous views, . . . these venomous teachings.”
—Pope Leo XIII on socialism



Anna Micek-Wodrecki

Doing Well and Doing Good: The Challenge to the Christian Capitalist
by Richard John Neuhaus
New York: Doubleday;
312 pp., \$22.00



According to the jacket copy of *Doing Well and Doing Good*, Richard John Neuhaus is “one of the most prominent religious intellectuals” of our time (which helps explain our time). Neuhaus argues that while “Christianity has had nothing to say” to businessmen, now “the spirit” is calling on them “to make a buck.” That is why he—a Lutheran minister who became a Catholic priest—decided to write about

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the “spirituality of economic enterprise” in a book based on John Paul II’s encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. The idea might have made an interesting work, but, despite the breezy blasphemy, this isn’t it. Much of *Doing Well and Doing Good* consists of a truncated version of the widely available encyclical and a pedestrian, if largely unobjectionable, commentary on it. In the introductory and concluding chapters, however, Neuhaus proclaims the good news of the democratic welfare state and of its avatar, Martin Luther King, Jr.

“It was a grace of my life,” says Neuhaus, “to work personally with Dr. King for several years as a liaison between his Southern Christian Leadership Conference and other social movements of the time.” What social movements those were, Neuhaus having been an open leftist in those days, or why King keeps his ill-gotten doctor-

ate in death, Neuhaus doesn’t say. Instead, we are asked to believe that King was “above all a Christian minister” whose “I Have a Dream Speech” was “a powerful and almost perfect articulation of the Puritan-Lockean Synthesis.”

This is nonsense, Neuhaus counting on his readers being unfamiliar with the literature which demonstrates that King: one, stole virtually every word he “wrote,” from high school to his last sermon; two, rejected the central claims of Christianity in graduate school and never returned to them; three, had a sex life worthy of Magic Johnson; four, advocated racial redistributionism; five, called himself a Marxist in private; and six, coordinated his schedule, finances, speeches, publications, and strategy with members of the American Communist Party. Far from right-wing revisionism, this is standard history as found, for example, in David Garrow’s Pulitzer Prize-