

Inhibition and Innocence

JACK JONES

The Contenders, by John Wain. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1958.

Afternoon of an Author, uncollected stories by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Arthur Mizener, ed., New York: Scribner's, 1958.

THROUGHOUT JOHN WAIN'S new novel, *The Contenders*, there runs an odd refrain: the birthplace of the protagonists is always "the town I musn't name." At first the refrain seems only tasteless and mildly irritating, but one gradually begins to feel a deeper though involuntary meaning. In this tale of rivalry among three young men of the Welfare State, their ambitions—even their characters—are those of convention, not of desire, and what might be their real concerns are buried so deeply

that they never get dug up or even "named."

The absence of this dimension, also that of serious writing, prevents this novel from being more than light entertainment but on this level there are some good things. Mr. Wain writes clearly and swiftly. The competition begins in school with "Bloater-baiting"—Bloater being a tyrannical master (and also, no doubt, "the Establishment") emotionally indifferent to the boys, wrapped up "in some intricate figure that left him no energy to spare in saving lives." Robert, the artist-to-be, torments the Bloater with his imaginative flair (quotations from non-existent sources); Ned, the future executive, with cold organizational efficiency (he actually puts together a class textbook upon the subject) while fat Joe—the ordinary joe—looks on passively and admiringly. Robert and Ned half-relish, half-hate each other's mode of talent. When Ned leaves school to start a pottery factory, Robert serves for a while as "chief genius"

but soon quarrels with Ned's hack designer and leaves in disgust for the bohemian quarter of London. Ned later, in a display of one-upmanship, follows him to offer financial aid which by this time Robert badly needs. In anxiety over this coup, however, Robert hysterically squanders all of Ned's money in an expensive restaurant.

The war intervenes; after it Ned has become a big-time manufacturer, and Robert is apparently a complete failure, down-and-out, starving but still refusing Ned's help. Suddenly Robert's paintings are successful and he shoots upward. It is Ned's turn to make a scene in an expensive restaurant (to the Englishman, no doubt the acme of embarrassment.) "The bad times had started," Joe (the narrator) remarks. "The one big shot among us was the one big shot no longer." Robert tightens the screws on Ned further by obtaining Myra, a lovely Mayfair fashion model, "the publicly accepted emblem of success . . . I thought, as I watched her, that she probably had little gold stars for nipples. She laughed daintily, the sort of laugh a budgerigar would give if it could laugh." But Ned gets to work, "with his money-man's tone of directness and cackle-cutting," and soon pries Myra away from Robert. "She worships power and is ready to love anyone who embodies it." At first hamstrung, Robert pulls himself together and goes to Italy where he finds Pepina, an *au naturel* girl, "real in all the ways Myra was artificial . . . take one vertebrate mammal, and *don't spoil it.*" To savor his victory, Ned had arranged a second wedding for Myra and himself—at which Robert appears disconcertingly with Pepina. But unable to convince himself that he had won, Robert abandons Pepina and pursues Ned and Myra to Paris. Joe then takes over Pepina. "Let them get on with it," he thinks, "with their endless search for an emblem of their own importance."

There are, however, inconsistencies of tone and characterization which prevent *The Contenders* from achieving the Wode-

housian unity of comic effect. For the kind of animal faith which is the essence of the comic, Mr. Wain knows a trifle too much and he is not sure what there is that he believes. By his ending Mr. Wain indicates that the contenders exhaust and defeat themselves, and the meek inherit the earth. This is a perfectly acceptable theme, to be sure (as old as the Gospels, and as recent as the writings of Boris Pasternak) but on the level of *The Contenders* it belongs to popular fiction. (Even for this the ending is a little crude: "Where are we going?" said Pepina, in English. And in English I said 'Home.'") The artistic possibilities dormant in the material are hardly touched—the vision is averted whenever they are approached. Throughout the novel there are sometimes surprising—and hardly comic—outbursts of hostility upon the part of the characters toward the parents who are always either dead or useless, and it is clear that these spring from the deeper layer of feeling. (Ned "reigned over a bunch of down-trodden female relatives, including his old mum," while as for Robert's mum, deserted early by his father: "Don't ask me if she died of a broken heart or anything. For all I know she died of joy at seeing the back of her husband. There are plenty of ways people can die. . . . Don't ask me why there was never any money.") Art, however, has to ask some of these questions. *The Contenders* does not do so, and the comedy is disturbed by the knowledge that they exist. "But at the mention of the town I musn't name, Robert suddenly fell silent. 'It's impossible,' he said, and when I tried to get him to explain he just shook his head."

The songs of experience are sometimes badly inhibited by the experience. In a certain sense the problem of experience is always to recover something of the quality of innocence. It may be partly the recognition of this problem which accounts for the Fitzgerald revival, which began in the middle forties and is still alive in this

fascinating collection of the outstanding Fitzgerald remnants, supplementing and completing the earlier one edited by Edmund Wilson (*The Crack-Up*). This new book is invaluable for the appreciation of Fitzgerald, especially for the final phase where he began to speak with "the authority of failure," and some of the selections are also of literary merit in their own right. There is an introduction by Arthur Mizener, who also wrote the biography, *The Far Side of Paradise*, and he furnishes each of the twenty stories and essays with a "headnote." These are informative, sometimes excessively so. From a culinary point of view, it is doubtful if the "explication" should precede (or even accompany) the fact or work of art itself. Even when—or rather, especially when—it is good. And Mr. Mizener's comment upon "The Cabinet-Maker," for example, is very good indeed.

The anthology is not all "afternoon"—it is divided into four parts, one from each Fitzgerald "period." Roughly, these were the adolescent-college experience, or the stories of innocence; success; disillusion; and then the "crack-up," which Fitzgerald reported with an almost medical objectivity (and of course much more than that) in his notorious *Esquire* series. His life, as a whole, and in its parts, is touching and tragic in a way that nearly all contemporary fiction, including *The Contenders*, is not. For with Fitzgerald the deepest losses are named precisely and unflinchingly, as well as what happened to him therefor. There can be no tragedy unless the hope also goes down to bedrock, as it did with him.

In Fitzgerald this total—that is to say, "childish"—hope retained a "magical glory." Although this was immanent, as with nearly everyone at first, in girls, fame, money, etc., with Fitzgerald it had also the independent Ariel-like creative force. It is perhaps Fitzgerald who, far more than Henry James, comes closest in essence to Proust: the theme of both was "the loss of those illusions which give such color to the world as you don't care if they are

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true or false." (In Hemingway's case, it might be noted in passing, the illusion took the form of a belief in physical rather than emotional omnipotence.) The truth of illusion is that so long as it "works" it is true. But the time came for Fitzgerald when it didn't work any more. The magic which, as Proust also saw, is a quality of the observer rather than the observed, faded—and as "the author" comments in one of Fitzgerald's *Esquire* essays, "You adjust yourself and become a little crazy. Part of you gets dead." Though once Fitzgerald's heroines, he sadly recalls, "were all so warm and full of promise" now "who could care what happened to the girl, when the sawdust was obviously leaking out of her?" The Fitzgeraldian *Zeitgeist* collapsed. Zelda went crazy (all the way) and Scott took to drink. He spent the rest of his life

trying to come to terms with disillusion. "But even though he now knew at first hand what came next, he did not think he could go on from there." Fitzgerald did, however, manage to go on and in the year before he died was trying to accomplish a new major work, which might have begun his "fifth period."

A new period is what the contemporary novel and novelist badly need—the surviving practitioners of the twenties and thirties having also fallen upon many evil days (and most of the "young angries" and "beats" are not even aware that there *were* better days.) This impotence of contemporary art is related, of course, to the *Zeitgeist*—to the increasing listlessness of the Western ideology, which no longer believes in its formulas or in their ability to solve the totalitarian enigma.



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Rabelais

WILLIAM MCCANN

Doctor Rabelais, by D. B. Wyndham Lewis. *New York: Sheed and Ward, 1957.*

TWO IMPORTANT AMERICAN writers, Albert Jay Nock and John Jay Chapman, had in common with the author of this rousing critical essay on François Rabelais the prickly obstinacy, the eccentric genius, and the confident learning that are in such short supply, unfortunately, in both British and American intellectual life today. It is curious that the works of Rabelais had a similarly abrasive effect on all three men. This effect was cogently expressed in a letter of Chapman's to his wife in which he said, "This Rabelais will burst me open. I shall be left like a broken vessel behind him and not care—it was only to meet this that I was born. He seems physically to fill the room, to stretch his arms out through the windows. I go wading in Rabelais bored to death, wondering why his volume comes down to posterity, disgusted, and then suddenly there grins from some farrago of learned nonsense and obscenity a humor so

profound, a mockery so wholesome, so far reaching, so vital, so beyond books, the human thing that never gets into books, that I seem to be in the clutches of the greater myself."

D. B. Wyndham Lewis' surrender to Rabelais is appreciably more conditional and grudging than Chapman's, and Lewis strikes us now and again in the volume as a man who, in Rabelais' words, "would make three bites of a cherry." But Lewis still "would rather be run aground by [Rabelais], still laughing, than be brought to strange ports by some of his soberer contemporaries."

With a modesty that quickly and happily deserts him, Lewis pictures himself in his book's introduction as an "amateur with no pretensions to scholarship" who wants to be pardoned for adding "to the pile of paper already heaped on Rabelais' cenotaph." Coming from the author of the admirable volume *François Villon* (1928), this in itself is a gratuitous and Rabelaisian protestation. But it is a substantial truth, with which Lewis is amply familiar, that in undertaking a work about a giant such as Rabelais, or Montaigne or Pascal, the critic is likely to reveal more of himself than of