



# Ephemer

BOOKS ART CINEMA THEATRE MISCELLANY



## LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Ed,

I am immensely embarrassed that you should consider publishing Max Geismar's article on me at all, since it really looks bad to have one Senior Editor writing so laudably about another. I hope you will not do this, Ed, if you can gracefully get out of it. If you should decide to, then *please*, for that issue take my name off the masthead. This piece, with our two names on the masthead, looks too much like mutual back-slapping.

Please, no kidding, if you can gracefully get out of it, don't run this Geismar bit . . . it is too generous and embarrassing.

John [GRIFFIN]

Dear Ed,

You know, the interesting thing about the whole discussion about printing that piece on Howard Griffin in *RAMPARTS* is that it never occurred to me that it would be wrong, or that there was any kind of back-scratching involved here—since I don't think there is. John and I have nothing to gain from each other, in any personal sense whatsoever, except for each of us to gain some kind of insight and support in the areas of our own writing, and that's it.

*so infatuated  
each other . . .*

Of course, conventionally, he is altogether right: it might look bad in any conventional magazine for two Senior Editors to be so infatuated with each other—at least, on my part, in my high regard for John Howard Griffin as an artist. But this does not prevent, I think, my own kind of objectivity about his work: my regard for that makes me, in a sense, almost too severe about his *not* writing, as the piece says, for even the worthiest of moral causes.

And *RAMPARTS* has never been a conventional magazine, and John Howard Griffin is not a conventional writer, and I hope to god I have never been, am not, and never will be a conventional critic.

*. . . such prudish  
qualms . . .*



JOHN GRIFFIN,  
PLEASE  
COME HOME

by Maxwell Geismar

So this problem just never occurred to me, and *RAMPARTS* is the logical place for this piece—which I am proud of—and I hope you will print it . . . I could add that I have never been a Senior Editor of another magazine, and never hope to be one, so that maybe I don't understand the etiquette about all this.

What I think is, you should decide the problem, as editor-publisher, and I will abide by your decision, and then, if it is negative, try to publish the piece somewhere else.

I have no qualms about it, as I also feel proud of my friendships with other contemporary American writers, and of the fact that I can be helpful to them. It seems to me that the Russian, French, Italian, etc., critics behave this way; it is only in America we have such prudish qualms about an open friendship of this type, when all the time there is so much hauling and backing, touting and pimping among mediocrities in the commercial areas of literature . . . So I say let it be printed, but will also accept your final judgment. And, of course, Griffin's. Let me know.

Max [GEISMAR]

Dear Max,

Relax, relax, relax.

I just got a letter from temperamental John who says, "I cannot stand up against two OLDER and HIGHER men, so do what you will!" Ergo, we will publish the piece.

With best wishes, I am

Ed [KEATING]

Sitting here in my Adirondack study—while in Washington the best of our students and the boldest of their professors are protesting the evil war in Vietnam—I have been reading over my earlier essay on John Howard Griffin.

It is not too bad, really, and what I am most proud of is that this was probably

the first critical essay to acknowledge a powerful new talent in this country — a talent which is still largely ignored by the prevailing literary establishment in the United States. But this is as it should be, of course, for our Establishment of teachers, critics, editors, composed of Cold War Liberals and refugees from communism and from McCarthyism alike, is dedicated to “safety” and to mediocrity: to such writers, I mean, as Saul Bellow,

Philip Roth, John Updike, J. D. Salinger, etc.

There is nothing of the safe, the innocuous, the formalistic or the mediocre in John Howard Griffin's work, or in him. He reminds me of a Texas Balzac at times, who returns the American novel and the American novelist to the great tradition. But also note, as I said around 1958, that he is an absolutely original voice in this tradition; we have had no-

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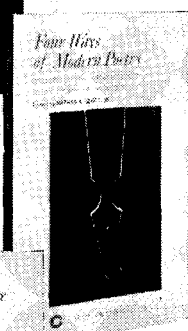
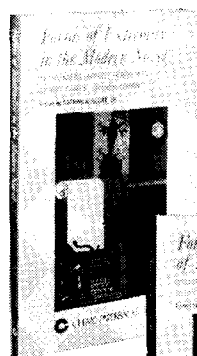
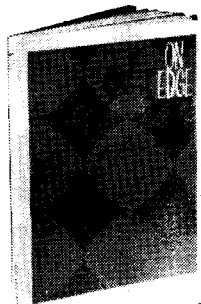
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all its demonic  
undertones. . .

body before like John Howard Griffin. I came across *The Devil Rides Outside* in a curious way; it was sent to me in a rather ugly paperback edition by Herbert Alexander, the editor at Pocket Books. The original work, as I learned, had been printed by the Smith Brothers in Dallas: not really the cough-drop kings, but some local oil-millionaires seeking southern culture. Partly as a result of this the *Devil* had never had national recognition in the commercial press. I read this extraordinary novel as though it had dropped from heaven—for all its demonic undertones—and with Edmund Wilson's "shock of recognition."

People keep asking me: what does a critic *do*? and sometimes I am glad to give them Mark Twain's ready answer: "I don't know." I have met a score of persons who, after reading the Griffin essay in *American Moderns*, have gone out to get *The Devil Rides Outside*, and among these readers I have never met one who was not as astonished by and impressed with the book as I was. That particular book of mine, *Moderns*, is my critical "best-seller," running up so far to seven or eight printings—so that I assume there must be many more unknown readers and admirers of Griffin's first novel, even though it has not yet been reprinted in a hard-cover edition, which is the point of this paragraph.

a remarkable  
musicologist . . .

I remember too that what I most clearly felt and said at the time of reading the *Devil* was, according to my more provincial prejudices, the lack of both a social context and more specifically an American identification. (I did not know then that Howard Griffin had been almost entirely educated in Europe, that he was a Catholic convert, that he had trained to become a doctor, that, fascinated by the Gregorian chants, he was a remarkable musicologist, and that, while then relatively unknown to this country, he was on intimate terms with some great figures in European philosophy, art and music. Names both esoteric and celebrated, such as Poulenc, Reverdy, Arthur Loulié, Jacques Maritain, Braque.) So that, while I had all the enthusiasm of discovering an "original," John Howard, on his part, calmly entered upon a dialogue of minds which has, gratefully for me, continued to the present time.

But for the American "thing," Griffin's second novel, *Nuni*, was apparently not much more of a help. The story of a pro-



. . . mysterious  
missions of aid . . .

fessor cast out among a savage tribe of South Sea blacks, written in a series of nightmarish episodes almost like horror-slides thrown upon a white wall—Griffin was still then in his period of blindness—this little fable becomes more and more impressive to me every year. (It is not yet even in paperback, where it should obviously be; and I remember some of Griffin's sedate New England publishers shaking their heads dubiously over this fantastic charade.) For *Nuni*, written as I've suspected, in the depths of Griffin's spiritual despair, recorded the desperate effort of an isolated human being to remain himself in the midst of an absolutely dehumanizing society or culture. Was this parable also, and so deviously, directed at modern life (perhaps even American society)? And these dark fantasies of the heartless, capricious and savage black tribesmen—did they perhaps reveal something of the true Southern unconscious, even the expatriated Griffin's, about their Negro kinsmen?

In an odd way, as I have come to see now, *Nuni* was the true antecedent, the necessary revelation, almost the forming force of *Black Like Me*—the book and later the movie that finally brought John Howard Griffin into the national consciousness.

And this famous book, which started out as a journalistic "stunt" almost, and which ended up as a paperback best-seller, with sales of over a million copies as I have been told, and then became known all over Europe, and then became famous as a movie, inaugurated almost an entirely new phase in Griffin's career. Traveling through the South as a Negro, doing an article for a Negro magazine, he had, through the dramatic power of his concern and his talent, created a powerful chronicle—and a chronicle which in turn led to the deep involvement of John Howard Griffin, during these last years, with the cause of the Negro in the South at perhaps its most explosive point in history.

These were years of lecturing, at an incredible pace, all over the country, but in the turbulent South in particular; years, too, of mysterious missions of aid and relief, and of horrifying revelations about the true conditions down there. John Howard Griffin was going "American" with a vengeance, and I can think of no other contemporary novelist, except perhaps Truman Nelson of Massachusetts, who has, in this way, committed his total being, his whole life, to what is the pri-

... I often rebuked myself...

mary internal crisis in the national life today. But Griffin was still, and also primarily, a *writer* in my eyes, and *there* was the old question. While approving entirely of his moral fervor, and conscious of what a store of information he was gathering about his native scene, and also concerned to see how generous he was, even recklessly so, as was his nature, in the giving of his health, his time, his talent, and yes, his personal safety, to the Negro cause in the South — well, I often rebuked myself for wanting him to finish the three books which he has had in progress during this whole period of crisis.

... muttering under his breath...

I had seen a chapter from *Scattered Shadows* in *RAMPARTS*. This was the autobiographical account of the period of his blindness, and nothing could be more fascinating as a subject, and nothing could have been better than the chapter I read. But where, oh where, was the finished work, which Howard said vaguely, needed some revision — this was some years ago. (I even had a somewhat baroque interchange with his publishers, when Griffin said they had this manuscript, or another one, in their files, and they returned saying they had it not, and John Howard then, with Christian charity, saying perhaps they didn't, while muttering under his breath that they still had it.) And a while before *Scattered Shadows* I had also seen, in the now-defunct *New World Anthology*, another chapter from the novel called *The Street of the Seven Angels*, which was, to say the least, very handsome writing. But what, in turn, had happened to this novel altogether? And meanwhile there was still a third book, *Passacaglia*, about which I had even less information.

John Howard Griffin, then, was an original voice and a major talent in our fiction, and I had already planned to include him in the company of Henry Miller and Richard Wright for the fifth and final volume of my series of books on the modern American novel. But to do a major study of a major novelist you must have a major body of work. The truth was that during the past few years of John Howard Griffin's active involvement with the race problem today and the civil rights movement — which I think also now must link itself inextricably with the protest movement on the war in Vietnam — that during all of this, admiring Griffin's activity as I did, and perhaps even somewhat jealous of it, and disturbed by my own passivity and remoteness — that I had still

... in a rage of haste...

wanted him primarily, and even had been urging him, to finish the three books which have been so long delayed in his literary career.

Any two out of these three would be bound to be good, I suspect, and even in Griffin's most journalistic work — which he sometimes throws out in a rage of haste and temper — there are passages which remind you of the journalism of a Zola, say, not to mention Balzac again. It is almost impossible for this writer to write badly; the problem is how to get him to write at all. And yet I resigned myself by thinking of those novels — like *Huckleberry Finn*, say, or the tale called *The Mysterious Stranger* — which Mark Twain laid away in his literary storage-racks until the impulse compelled him to take them out again, and to finish them. Very often the best books are written in this fashion; and meanwhile the great writers go out to waste and to gamble away all their talent and time until they are on the very edge of disaster — and writing remains as their single salvation.

This was no more true of Dostoevski than it was of Twain, Ring Lardner and Scott Fitzgerald and perhaps even Hemingway; all we can do in the end is to be grateful for what they did achieve. I do not mean this to be a kind of nostalgic epitaph to John Howard Griffin's literary career — on the contrary, it is written as a sort of foreword for the three books due from him which I have mentioned above. Just the other day came one of his marvelous letters, saying it was such a joy just to be working at the typewriter again, to be alone once more, to think and brood and muse and "moon about," as Theodore Dreiser said — and to create!

... this spiritual corruption...

For the writer who does not write, all his life is a slow form of poison; and every good writer knows this, and every writer who is afraid of this spiritual corruption must, finally, come back to his writing. John Howard Griffin has no other choice, really, and it is time for him to resume that solitary destiny of art which Melville once called the "Hostile Necessity."

In the same letter which I have described above, moreover, Griffin has started talking about his two future novels. (I believe that *Scattered Shadows* is almost ready for publication.) *Street of the Seven Angels*, he says, is based in Paris and deals with the problem of "goodness" — with the malicious doings of a group of religiously-oriented women out to clean up



... the  
unctimonious  
serpents ...

the St. Jacques quarter of Paris of all forms of filth. Hidden in there somewhere at the core is "the demonstration of the self-defeating hypothesis involved in the idea of the compulsory return of the Kingdom of God!"

The novel, though never stating the thesis as such, but merely personifying it in the characters and action, thus will deal with the mentality of censorship — "the book-banners, the guardians of public virtue, the 'sanctimonious serpents,' as Gerald Vann called them. Underlying this, counterpointing it, though the two themes never really touch (but in alternating scenes serve to contrast and point up), is another subsidiary plot and list of characters, an essentially somber one. This book is almost entirely written in scenes with very little introspection. It lays the foundation for *Passacaglia*, which comes right out with the idea that morality is an unamiable goal in itself, that it can calcify the soul of the man who aims at the perfection of 'routine Christian morality,' or 'routine Jewish morality,' etc. (This is developed in *Street* this far, carried on much more massively in *Passacaglia*.) I think that morality of this sort castrates man, prevents him from becoming fully functioning man, and that in fact it is an obscenity; and that in order to move above this routine morality, he must undo the damage, the concretization of soul that can neither grow nor dilate into those areas that in theology one calls sanctity, in psychology integration, in art genius.

The whole thesis of these two novels, so Griffin adds, was first conceived as part of a theological structure, and then translated into the form of an artist, a concert pianist, keeping the parallels exact. "*Street* has a large cast of characters and is a brief book in the classical form; *Passacaglia* has a small cast of characters and is a lengthy book in a massive, contrapuntal, continually developing form. Both are novels in which all the themes are hidden in the fabric and structure . . ."

I never talk  
about my  
works ...

And, as Griffin adds, he has actually been working on *Passacaglia* for nine years, and is still absorbed in it — and furthermore "I never talk about my works." And there you are. For when you can get a writer to talk about his own writing, he is always fascinating to listen to, or to read. All that remains now is to get the books into print.

## Books:

### PUTTING THE COLD WAR ON ICE

Reviewed by  
Joseph S. Clark



... coexistence  
between rich and  
poor ...

AFTER 20 YEARS: ALTERNATIVES TO THE COLD WAR IN EUROPE by Richard J. Barnet and Marcus G. Raskin. New York: Random House. 223 pp. \$5.95.

Richard J. Barnet and Marcus G. Raskin are two perceptive and intelligent young men who worked both in the White House and the Department of State before joining the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington. Their views on American foreign policy, as expressed in this book, will be too rich for the blood of their former immediate superiors both on Pennsylvania Avenue and in Foggy Bottom. The Federal bureaucracy of which the White House staff is, of course, a part, is not noted for its receptivity to other than conventional thinking about past, present and future trends in foreign policy. There is a tendency in high places to sniff with mild distaste at the unorthodox.

And *After 20 Years: Alternatives to the Cold War in Europe* does not rely on the conventional wisdom. It suggests that our major objectives of the last twenty years — to build an Atlantic Community and to win the arms race with Russia — are both obsolete and dangerous. It urges an end to the "great confrontation between East and West over the future of Europe." It advocates "a more rational set of relations between the United States, the Soviet Union and Europe." It argues that such a détente "is a prerequisite for dealing with the far more difficult problem that already threatens to overwhelm us: coexistence between rich and poor nations on a planet of limited resources."

A brilliant opening chapter, sure to cause pain and suffering to the molders of State Department policy since World War II, reviews the events which led "the Atlantic designers" to promote the "symbols of unity" among "a selected group of states in North America, West Europe and Asia Minor" without determining with whom and for what unity was desirable. "America promoted federalism in West Europe in the hope it could control the direction of European politics and determine for itself the extent of its own involvement in European affairs. But the consequence has been involvement without control!" One need only recall the present status of relations with the Common Market, the growing dependence of the British economy on American support of the pound, the tohubohu over the American-promoted multilateral nuclear force with its adverse impact on the