

# Three B's or Not Three B's?

## A Dialogue in Dissonance

MARYA MANNES

THEY WERE sitting around, eight of them, listening to records of contemporary music. One was a composer, one a pianist, two a man and wife dedicated to the support of modern American music, one a teacher of composition, two students, and a woman with a troubled look. When the last record had ended and there was a pause punctuated by low murmurs of appreciation, she said, "Do you think we could play a little Mozart now?"

They turned to look at her, jarred. "Still unconverted?" said the pianist, smiling.

"Don't worry about Mary," said the patron-host. "She just likes to graze in old pastures."

"I don't know if I care for that image," said the woman, "but frankly, I don't think I can take any more of what we've been hearing."

"What do *you* think we've been hearing?" asked the teacher.

"Wanderings," said the woman, "interminable wanderings in sound, interrupted now and then by excursions into noise."

"How about a drink, everybody?" said the hostess cheerily, rising. "What'll you have?"

The rest gave their orders and split into intense little analytical groups. The woman was left alone—exiled, she felt—with her trouble, until the composer came over and sat next to her.

"It's strange," he said, "how liberals can be so conservative about music." He went on to speak about a certain music critic on a magazine that espoused liberal causes who was consistently inhospitable to most modern music, especially American.

"I think that's a weak generalization," said the woman. "It's no more true than to say that reactionaries love modern music. But if you're going to include me in this blanket charge, I think I can come up with at least one explanation of the paradox."

### Longhair vs. Wildhair

The composer looked at her expectantly, genuinely curious as to why such a block (his definition of her attitude toward modern music) could exist in one of her intelligences.

"The active liberal," she said, "lives in an atmosphere of flux and tension and doubt. There is much chaos and little pattern in the political world. It is atonal, dissonant, explosive. Because of this he craves order and harmony in art. After a day of headlines he needs Bach, not Sessions. In an age of constant change, he needs classic reaffirmations of constant values. In an age of violence, he profoundly desires peace. Surely whatever other qualities modern music may have, peace is not one of them."

"I think you're confusing peace with cessation," said the composer. "Status quo. And as for form or pattern, do you honestly believe that because you do not find it in Sessions or Krenek it does not exist? Do I have to bring up that old chestnut about artists misunderstood and vilified in their time now being popular and crystal clear—like, say, Stravinsky?"

"He may be clear as crystal," she said, "and I admire him very much. But I still maintain that after a day of Rhee or Knowland I am much less inclined to put 'The Rites of Spring' on the record player than 'Don Giovanni.'"

"If you must know," she said, almost visibly buckling on her armor, "the one common quality I find in most modern music—and I am talking only about the 'abstract' composers, not men like Barber or Copland or Menotti or Dello Joio—is that it is disruptive and disturbing."

"You mean it makes you think, it shakes you out of your cozy familiar preoccupation with Bach, Beethoven, Brahms?"

The woman remarked that most

modern music did not make her think of anything except the composer's poverty of soul and the end of his piece, should that ever arrive. She said that if she suspected talent running through his incoherence, she was angry because of the effort involved in discovering it. If there was no talent—merely a pretentious use of the most rigid modern idiom—she was even angrier.

"In other words, you find it disturbing because you simply do not understand it."

"If so," she said, "I am in a formidable majority—a much greater majority than those who still flinch at Picassos and Légers. *Your* audience," she said, "consists of a dedicated band of modern music practitioners and lovers, augmented by a slightly larger band of people who find it fashionable to pretend they understand it."

### The Private 'I'

"In the absence of Gallup polls on the subject," said the composer, with an edge to his voice, "I can only say that this majority of yours must be obtuser than I thought."

The woman, calm until now, exploded. "There we go again! The calm assumption by avant-garde painters and composers and poets that people must learn *their* language—never that *they* must first learn to speak to people! This is the supreme arrogance of the Private 'I': 'Here is my cipher, boys, come and decode it.' I used to believe that art was a form of communication."

THE COMPOSER tried to be patient. "Just what do you expect a young composer writing today to do—turn out little copies of Schubert and Chopin? What can he do but reflect the world he lives in?"

"Reflect?" she said. "Not exactly. I think I expect any artist to do two things: accept the past and fuse the present. If there is chaos, it is up to him not merely to reflect it but to give it meaning and shape; or rather, to find the central core momentarily obscured by chaos. The sky, for instance, may be a raging vortex of clouds, but the structure of the universe remains unchanged."

"Forget the vortex," said the composer, "and concentrate on the pretty little stars."

"You can hardly accuse the great classic composers," she protested, "of avoiding the vortex. If anyone has translated deeper passions and greater conflicts into sound than Brahms and Beethoven and Bach, I would like to hear him."

"What you are really saying, you know, is that there should be no change in musical form or expression from the Three B's."

"Certainly there should. But not just because they are new or different. If a man doesn't know what he wants to say, or has nothing to say, no chorus of typewriters, dinner gongs, steam drills, and squash gourds is going to help him. Neither is a beat wholly outside the range of human experience."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said the composer. "What would you call a 'beat *inside* the range of human experience?'"

### Dum-De-Dum

The woman paused for a moment, searching for clarity. "Well, the beat of the heart, the rhythm of breathing. There they are, in everyone; definite, regular, inevitable. This beat, this breathing, must have its echo in music."

"Dum-de-dum-de-dum-de-dum," said the composer, scornfully.

"Don't be silly. Why are great melodies never forgotten? Because they take flight on the wings of breath. They are, literally and figuratively, man's aspiration. It's the same with great poetry; it has the cadence of the heart. But take so much of contemporary music, modern music. It is a pant, a stutter, a stammer. The nearest image I can relate to it is the walk of a spastic. You people seem to have some sort of disease of the soul. Your progression in music is one of fits and starts; it stumbles and wavers, gibbering as it goes. And even when it has a clear direction, it is so often one of assault—a series of jabs and punches designed to shock the ear into attention."

"Pretty images," said the composer, grinning. "You must come and hear my latest composition some day!"

The woman smiled too. "Thanks. I am always open to a new experience, even if I don't like it when I have it."

## Thirteen Who Mutinied: Faulkner's First World War

IRVING HOWE

A FABLE, by William Faulkner. Random House. \$4.75.

SUCH BOOKS as *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* gain their breadth of interest from Faulkner's mastery in recording the modes and gestures of local behavior; their larger meanings are always anchored in concrete incident and depend upon unforgettable images of human character.

During the past ten years, however, Faulkner has gradually been shaking himself loose from the inspired compulsions of his imaginary world. As his interest in the portraiture of individual character has lessened, he has turned to speculations about the nature of man—a dangerous subject for a writer who likes to dress up romantic platitudes about Honor, Courage, and Endurance as philosophical universals. All too often Faulkner has come to rely upon the high-flown phrase instead of the precise description, and sometimes he has quite surrendered himself to the lure of high-falutin' rhetoric.

His new novel *A Fable* is a remarkable mixture of strength and weakness. Audacious in its choice of subject matter, which is nothing less than a vision of the Second Coming, *A Fable* is a difficult book. It is written not merely with Faulkner's usual involuted time sequence but at a pitch of frenzy so unrelieved that one's first, though not last, reaction is simple weariness. Nonetheless, anything coming from Faulkner's pen merits respect and consideration; we do not have many like him.

### A Regiment Has Had Enough

The setting is France, a few months before the end of the First World War. The troops are exhausted. At the front a corporal and his twelve men persuade their regiment to disobey an order to attack. For some time now this mutinous platoon

has been spreading the secret word of peace not merely among the Allied troops but also, mysteriously, among the Germans; every private at the front knows of the corporal's message, yet the officers are kept in almost total ignorance. Faulkner is extremely shrewd in observing the mute solidarity which binds enlisted men against their officers.

Once the regiment refuses to attack, the Germans in the facing trenches also drop their guns. In a few hours the front is quiet; the troops have made their own peace. Quickly the mutinous thirteen are thrown into prison, and the Allied and German staffs hold a hurried consultation, at which they decide that ordinary soldiers must not be allowed to conclude a war at their own will.

Meanwhile the French marshal who commands the Allied forces begins his investigation. In a remarkable conversation, this marshal—he combines elements of Foch, Pontius Pilate, and the Grand Inquisitor—offers the corporal his freedom on condition he renounce his martyrdom, an offer which the corporal immediately rejects. Nor does the marshal really desire that the offer be accepted. Both men are driven by a sense of impersonal destiny, both feel that they are *re-enacting* a great drama. The corporal senses that the very principle of his existence requires a refusal of freedom, while the marshal knows that only if the corporal refuses can the principle for which he will be martyred receive its vindication.

A last supper is held in a jail cell; a Judas is revealed; a disciple named Piotr denies the corporal and later, weeping, falls before his feet; two women named Marthe and Marya wait patiently for the moment of agony; the corporal is thrust into a cell with two thieves and then shot between them.

This, in skeleton, is the main plot