

very springs of one's being." This is surely a curious observation from a man who must have believed himself to be a humanist. Why should he have taken it for granted that anything a human being can achieve is unworthy of passion? There is one obvious answer. Russell's sense of logic made it impossible for him to accept such irrational concepts as the Christian dogma of original sin or the Victorians' vision of God. But all the evidence in this book goes to show that, unconsciously, he never stopped believing in the one or missing the other.

## A Critic Looks Back

RICHARD KOSTELANETZ

**A PRIMER OF IGNORANCE**, by R. P. Blackmur. Edited by Joseph Frank. Harcourt, Brace & World. \$5.95.

*A Primer of Ignorance* is a collection of Blackmur's lectures and essays, posthumously assembled, according to Blackmur's plan, by his literary executor Joseph Frank, himself a critic of note and currently a professor at Princeton, where Blackmur taught for twenty-five years. Some of the pieces discuss literary works in the scrupulous detail and diligent style that established Blackmur's reputation as a major critic, but the majority are general analyses of contemporary culture, as Blackmur saw it reflected in both literature and his own experience.

This is an oppressively sad book, whose favorite source of wise quotation is Montaigne, and sometimes, as its title suggests, an embittered one, heavily informed by that particular nostalgia which older American critics almost in unison feel for the days when modern literature and criticism were first making their way. The personal essays that comprise the book's middle are records of Blackmur's travels, often under government auspices, to audiences of European and Oriental literati and incipient literati. They are

full of tokens of recognition and yet feelings of loneliness. *A Primer of Ignorance* conveys an aging man's awareness that both he and his sponsors were exploiting an excellence he would probably never be able to achieve again. The nostalgia for the culture of a past time becomes a background to the personal plight.

THOSE of us who have admired Blackmur's justifiably famous close readings of the modern poets will probably find the cultural essays disappointing, primarily because the exponent of careful analysis and hard scholarly work offers, instead, a series of excessively abstract, inadequately researched, feebly supported general remarks about the world scene. Blackmur's analysis is full of the 1950s' pieties about the elimination of poverty and the negative character of industrialization and yet neglects problems more immediate to his life as a professor—the individual's role in a bureaucracy and the teacher's relationship to his students. (Oddly, students are mentioned not at all, although Blackmur's style reveals those indulgences an eminent man allows himself before an eager, not to say captive, audience.) The author of the remark "many reviewers and critics (for the two are not the same)" here functions more as a reviewer, whose commentary is more a succession of "notices" than a thorough critique.

I would classify the most satisfactory essays in *A Primer of Ignorance* as orthodox literary criticism—the lengthy discussions of Henry James's stories about artists and several aspects of Henry Adams, all of which, indicatively, were published in the early 1940's. Blackmur's writing here is considerably smoother than his later prose—particularly immune from the clumsiness that subsequently became his primary affliction (and the sore rubbed by Frederick Crews's malicious parody in *The Pooh Perplex*); free of that "faulty relation between language and sensibility" he once identified as a sure mark of bad poetry.

In these better essays, he establishes his uncommon capacity to probe below the obvious surface of art's work—to perceive obscured but essential strategies, to make acutely

fine but necessary discriminations, and to discern coherences where inferior critics find chaos. At this kind of "critic's job of work," Blackmur at his best operates as thoroughly as anyone can. My primary complaint here is that in his concern with Henry Adams as an artistic sensibility, Blackmur fails to mention what I think was Adams's most extraordinary intellectual innovation—the adaptation of ideas developed in the new sciences to defining the pattern that history makes.

THE BUTT of Blackmur's bitterness is ignorance—"the new illiteracy" of "fragmentation and specialized knowledge" which, he says, has swept American intellectual life and practically made the traditional man of letters extinct. Yet Blackmur himself hardly achieves the coherent and evenly measured breadth he so highly admires. The modes of experience significantly covered in the book encompass no more than literature, personal adventure, and architecture; and only in the first area does he transcend the mass of reviewers. Painting is mentioned here and there, and the remarks about dance, in this case on the New York City Ballet, display a solipsism and abstractness that a more scrupulous New Critic would have condemned: "If there was a unity in their dancing it was the American unity which is achieved by cutting away; unity by privation or deprivation; unity by technique—by action precipitated in the Kaleidoscope and learned in the muscles which would operate without the pressure of the person." This statement reminds me of the best aphorism in the book, "All minds should contain several vocabularies," precisely because Blackmur's primary problem here is an inability to find a vocabulary appropriate to the experience he describes.

Nonetheless, Blackmur's ideals have an enormous relevance today, as our culture continually becomes more multifarious; for he suggests that audiences, as well as critics, should be not monoliterate, which is to say specialists in only one field, but polylliterate, familiar with the "vocabularies" and traditions of several fields. However, where Black-

mur was an advocate of the second style, in practice—as in this book—he exemplified the first.

I wonder if Blackmur's later position, as well as the change in his critical style, did not imply a rather rigorous critique of the New Criticism and its specialized devotion to "poetry" as the primary mode of higher knowledge; for I think that such a critique, had he initiated it, would have provided a far more significant summation of his fifties thinking than his book.

## Et Caesar

## Et Nullus

HENRY A. KISSINGER

THE THINGS THAT ARE CAESAR'S, by Milton Katz. Knopf. \$4.95.

If history teaches anything, it is that all political structures have hitherto proved ephemeral. Philosophers and political scientists have found many causes for this state of affairs. None is more important or persistent than the gap that almost inevitably arises between the requirements for reaching high office and the qualities needed to exercise it. When the gap is narrow, the political structure flourishes; when it widens, decay is inevitable.

Professor Katz, in his wise little book, addresses himself to this strangely neglected problem. He traces, through a number of historical examples, the relationship between winning power and governing: Sulla and Caesar; the French Revolution and Napoleon; the Congo; the British accommodation; the Prussian-German fusion. Finally, he shows how the American governmental élan is exposed to the danger of being arrested and how its political structures can be revitalized.

It would be idle to underestimate the magnitude of the task, and Professor Katz would be the last to do so. Reaching power has always required single-mindedness, ruthlessness, and a certain amount of egoism. The more bitter the struggle

# Give Europe a whirl!



With the **HOLIDAY MAGAZINE TRAVEL GUIDES** at your side



Fact-filled, fun-slanted, picture-studded guides by the editors of HOLIDAY Magazine. There are books on Britain, France, Hawaii, Israel, Italy, London, Mexico, Paris, Spain, Rome, The Riviera and Southern France, Scandinavia, Switzerland, Venice, Florence & the Hill Towns. Pocket-sized, with maps and useful phrases in each language, only \$1.45 each.

Now at your bookstore. **RANDOM HOUSE**



## MOVING?

If you are changing your mailing address, please be sure to let us know *at least* four weeks in advance. That way, we can be sure you'll not miss an issue of **THE REPORTER**—and you'll be sure to get them all on time.

**Important:** Please send us both your *old* and *new* addresses plus the *date* you would like the change made. (A copy of your address label clipped to your notice would help.)

## THE REPORTER

660 Madison Avenue  
New York, New York 10021

"Adds a new chapter to the history of World War II."

— Publishers' Weekly



## A MAN CALLED LUCY

by **Pierre Accoce and Pierre Quet**

Told in full for the first time—the incredible story of master spy Rudolf Roessler (code name: "Lucy") who destroyed Hitler's armies in Russia and made Stalin look like a military genius.

"Fascinating." — Book Week

"The brilliant account which the authors have unfolded is that of an all but incredible intelligence feat, proving once again that the 'impossible' is always to be expected in war."

— GENERAL MATTHEW B. RIDGWAY

Photographs • 3rd Large Printing

\$5.00 from your bookseller

**Coward-McCann, Inc.**