

The Boot & the Sickie

THE TIME OF THE ASSASSINS. By Godfrey Blunden. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co. 375 pp. \$3.75.

By NATHAN ROTHMAN

JUST TWO days ago, as I write, *The New York Times* carried a Paris dispatch headed: "Opposition Groups in Ukraine Crushed—Soviet Police and Army Have Crushed Nationalist Bands, Current Data Indicate." The data may indeed be conclusive this time, but in the light of recent history, and particularly in the light of Mr. Blunden's novel about the ordeal of the Ukraine during World War II, it is possible to place this data in perspective as the latest, rather than the final, word. The Ukraine had been occupied successively, during World Wars I and II, by the Germans and the Russians, and both occupying forces had bent their energies to the extermination of nationalist patriotism. The Czar, the Kaiser, and the Bolsheviks in turn devoted themselves to fierce repression. It is interesting to note that the Ukrainians were able, in the process of surviving one bludgeoning after the other, to discover which club they hated the most; for it is reported in this novel, as it has been elsewhere, that the Ukrainians, fresh from the Bolshevik embrace, welcomed the Nazi invader. They were disillusioned only by the stubborn and senseless brutality of the German S. S. men. It is exactly here that Mr. Blunden begins his story, as the Germans move into Kharkov in 1941, and he ends it two years later with the Russian "liberation" of the city.

Liberation is of course a euphemism, and meant to the Ukrainians the application of a force colder, crueler, and even more destructive (because it was more systematic) than that of the S. S. For the Communists grew and thrived, so to speak, in the bowels of their enemies. In the Nazi-occupied cities, in the forests filled with patrols, inside the army and the S. S. itself, there were disciplined cells of Communists, waiting, enduring, storing up dossiers on those citizens who even hesitated in their choice of masters as well as those who made the bold third choice of independence. Under this dual pressure, as between the arms of a nutcracker, the Ukrainians might well be expected to crumble and degenerate. Mr. Blunden shows us many of these—those who disappear into the Nazi or the Communist machine, to inform or collaborate; those who attempt to wear two coats at once, changing hue at every approach and forgetting at



Godfrey Blunden—"dark figure."

last what to say to which inquisitor; and those who hang limply, unable to move or choose, like the mouse in the maze. Yet the real protagonists are the totalitarians, the non-sentimental and amoral men whose individual and collective portrait Mr. Blunden has given us in the young Communist Fomin: a youth forged in fire and death of incalculable stone, moved by a logic that is not ours and an ethic alien to humanism.

This novel, then, may be read for its study of the Ukrainian tragedy, or for its definition of the characters and tactics of the destroyers from east and west. One important footnote must be mentioned here that may well carry a significance as great as anything else in the book. It is a passing reference to the change of loyalty that has been observed so often in the beleaguered areas such as the Ukraine, the satellite states such as Czechoslovakia, in Germany itself. Stalinists have become ex-Stalinists and anti-Stalinists, shirts have changed from red to black, Communists have joined the Nazi bands and Nazis have become Communists. Men have asked, how can this be? just as one of Mr. Blunden's characters asks: "It is not, then, a matter of principle?" He is answered, "They embrace the principle because it justifies the method. It is the method which attracts." I have not seen this set down before. It substitutes—for the accepted belief that men are driven to embrace horrible means by virtue of an end they believe in—this: that men may actually be in love with the horrible means themselves, first and foremost; that any end, any party or shirt or program, will do provided it offers practice upon the dark figure of the enemy, in this time of assassins.

Home Base: 12th Street

AMERICAN VANGUARD 1952. Edited by Don M. Wolfe. New York: Greenberg Publisher. 325 pp. \$3.50.

By MAXWELL GEISMAR

THERE is something like a little literary renaissance going on quietly at the New School in New York City. Besides the representative work in this anthology, which is of unusually high quality, the writers in the group include four or five young novelists who have already published—William Styron, Leonard Bishop, Sigrid de Lima, George Mandel, and John Burrell. I would guess there are just about as many more writers at this Athenaeum of Twelfth Street who are ready to be published.

It is a high percentage of professional talent—superior in numbers as well as in range of material to most of the better known colleges and summer schools of writing—and the selections in "American Vanguard" tell us something about the conditions which have produced this activity—real stories, novels, poems, and not theories of criticism. The contributors range from Helen Upshaw, born in Louisiana in 1928, and Diana Howe, born in Boston in 1931, to Mark Fisher, born in North Carolina in 1904, and Emily Burke Anderson, born in Chicago in 1899. There are at least three generations of writers at work here—some of them are just about to get married, and some have married children. Their backgrounds are immensely varied—Louis Chu comes from Toishan, China, Belle Dovbish from the Ukraine, Hillel Frimit grew up in Canada. Nothing could be more cosmopolitan than this collection—and nothing more American, if one may still use the word with pride in this period of restrictive immigration.

One more thing. The social-economic pressures and conflicts—out of vogue among the more fashionable young novelists and critics today, who cling to Henry James in the epoch of social revolution—are evident in these writers and their work as a natural part of life. J. Ernest Wright's excerpt from a novel deals with the Pittsburgh coal miners. Jacob Mevorach's story deals with a lower middle-class house-

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wife who celebrates her birthday with a cheap abortion. Cynthia Johnson describes an absolutely mad interlude in the poverty-stricken hinterland—this story has a wild vitality that sets off the general tone of sobriety in the volume, perhaps too much so.

I miss, too, the thing you would think most natural among young—or anyhow new—writers: stories of love. Elizabeth Ashley has a nice, ironic tale of this type among rather elderly, church-going citizens. Charlotte Miller has an intelligent study of a deserted wife, abandoned to her fantasies. That is about all, and I have come to the conclusion that young people know least about the conflicts of passion—which is really perhaps a special province for the middle-aged.

I should mention Nelson Appet's "The Test" among the stories of childhood, however. It is typical of this volume—and of the New School environment—that another section of it deals with Americans in foreign lands: Italy, Costa Rica, Spain, New Guinea. Daniel Stern's "Conversation in Prague" is a particularly good piece in this area. The editor of "American Vanguard, 1952," Don Wolfe, contributes an interesting introduction to the third of these excellent New School anthologies.

Mad Rigors of Society

HEAD AGAINST THE WALL. By Hervé Bazin. Translated by W. J. Strachey. New York: Prentice-Hall. 255 pp. \$3.95.

By HENRI PEYRE

FOUR YEARS ago, a young novelist, the scion of a very conservative and Catholic family from western France whose great man had been the very academic academician René Bazin, erupted into French letters. Hervé Bazin stood in revolt against all the social and ethical values of the French bourgeoisie and, with his brilliant and cruel "Viper in the Fist," depicted an unkind mother, fiercely hated by her sons. As usual, critics awaited his second volume, wondering if the new ascending star of French fiction would be more than a fleeting meteor.

His second novel, "Head Against the Wall," reveals that Hervé Bazin is a superbly gifted story-teller with a rich store of observation and a swift, staccato style. He prefers incisiveness to emotion; he eschews sentiment and moral preaching; he is, like many of his compatriots, much too intellectual and acidly ironical. His book seeks to

provoke and it provides a bitter sort of entertainment. Its verve is admirable and his style has the lively alertness of the best eighteenth-century tradition.

Arthur Gérane, the son of a staid provincial magistrate, one day steals the car and the money of his father, wrecks the car and himself in an accident, and is sent by his family, fearful of the scandal, to a lunatic asylum. He escapes, is caught again after having committed other burglaries. His mother, in whom ran a strain of madness, had long ago committed suicide. His sister Roberte, the only person for whom he has any genuine affection, loses her reason during her pregnancy and dies in another asylum. Arthur at times seems like a normal individual in revolt against society and against his father's conventionality and selfishness. But he also suffers from curious fits of violent temper and a recurring and understandable temptation to escape from the prisons and prison-like asylums where he is confined. He marries a peasant girl one day, the only lovable character in the book. When he is once again arrested, she devotes herself unreservedly to him, but does not succeed in having him released. He escapes during the days of the French defeat and joins the refugees on the road, only to be captured again later. Since he has become paralyzed from a fall while eluding the police, he is left, as the book closes, a pitiful and decrepit victim.

The plot of "Head Against the Wall" is very slight. The portrayal of one more French family living in conventionality, mutual suspicion, greed, and hatred is hardly original in 1950. The characters are hastily if vividly sketched, and we never penetrate deeply into any of them. The humor of Bazin lacks the geniality of Marcel Aymé.

Nevertheless, this book throws light upon the way in which justice is rendered in a democratic and civilized country; a father, and then a family council, can condemn a son to confinement in a mental hospital merely to avoid scandal. Psychiatrists hardly come off better than magistrates, and only the minor officials in French asylums seem to have some humane sympathy left in them. In a sense, the book is closer to journalistic reporting and to factual description than to an imaginative work of literature. But the author succeeds in creating the atmosphere similar to that which Kafka's or Graham Greene's novels of hunted men have made typical of recent fiction.

The Earth Goddess Invokes the Autumn Instant

By Peter Viereck

THEN touch the park; the leaves are stained to lure you.
The leaves are spread on winds they fan before you.
They drained the summer, and their veins prefer you,
Dark with the season they are keening for.

Then bring the heavy dying they prefer.
Each painful fruit is hanging heavier.
Why pause when loveliness grows lonelier
And love is just as melting as it looks?
There's but one touch that all the ripeness lacks:
You are the instant; you are waited for.

Then never wait when flutes of foilage bear you
Home on the homeward tune they always bore.
Fear not at all the twigs of flame they bear.
These never meant to be a barrier.
The lovely are as lonely as their gleam,
The lonely just as loving as they seem,
The fruits as melting as they always were:
There is a fondling they are furtive for.

Then touch the park. The leaves have spread before you
The green they drained, the darkness they prefer.
Come to the leaves, reach out and touch them all.
Bring to the smoldering year, that hovers for you,
The hovering instant love is dawdling for:

There's not one blade that does not long to fall.