

tive. The book may appear at first to be "notes toward" a novel, but on second thought we realize that it has found its uniquely apt formula.

Although the book's *tableaux* are in chronological order—extending from May, 1860, to July, 1883, with a kind of post-mortem epilogue in May, 1910—the author has received his lesson not from conventional historical novels but from a conception of narrative literature patterned on the process of evocation of things past. This establishes a special, subtly appealing connection between the narrator and the hero; the book is both historical and, in a sense, autobiographical. It would be obvious even if we did not know it for certain from the book's Italian discoverer (Mr. Giorgio Bassani, who published it with Feltrinelli of Milan) that the initial idea was to write a memoir of one of the author's ancestors. This subtle connection gives the book its tone. As much as its theme implies the permanence of certain indestructible traits and of the futility of change, equally present is the sense of the ravagings of time and of physical decay and death. The book's most significant and unforgettable images tell of the passage of life—from the soldier's corpse in the garden in the first chapter to the beautifully ghostly finale, which follows by many years the death of the Prince himself. If we remember that the author died shortly after writing this memoir, again the historical and the autobiographical hauntingly mingle. This is the particular, limited, sharply lingering flavor of the book—a lyrical essay rather than a novel. Its fascination comes not only from the explicit, but also from its evocation of a world and a time past.

## FICTION

# Rhapsody in the Northland



Agnar Mykle—"a passionate poet and a naked realist."

*"Lasso Round the Moon," by Agnar Mykle; translated by Maurice Michael (Dutton, 459 pp. \$4.95), introduces to American readers a Norwegian novelist whose talents have been enthusiastically hailed in Europe. Ben Ray Redman frequently comments on contemporary literature for SR.*

By Ben Ray Redman

WHEN WE meet Ash Burle, he is boarding a sleeping car in Oslo, Norway, to go home for the first time in twelve years. He is also preparing to conduct a rhapsody of his own composition, entitled "Lasso Round the Moon," immediately after his return to the city. For reasons which readers must discover for themselves he plans to spend only a day in the house of his parents. The year is 1950. A few pages enable us to share Ash's thoughts as the train carries him through the night, but we are not permitted to understand them.

After this opening scene we are taken back to the year 1936, when Ash at the age of twenty is leaving his home in southern Norway to spend a year as principal of a small business school in the north. We are at the beginning of a journey during which we shall come to

understand Ash's thoughts on the night train, for we gradually learn of the experiences, the ordeals, the joy, and the suffering that made it possible for him to compose his music.

The little town, called Inner Pool, to which Ash goes to teach lies at the head of a fjord that is reached through a cleft in the "dark, closed, frozen, sterile mountain wall" of the Norwegian coast. He leaves home, like many a young man before him, with the intention of conquering the world. Departing from his father and mother, and his tiresomely affectionate younger brother, he feels like an eagle that has escaped from a cage. But he is not long in Inner Pool before he finds himself trapped in another cage; ensnared by a woman, Gunnhild, a young waitress and a tramp, to whose sexual demands and his own awakened desires he becomes a slave. Gunnhild begins his sexual education and the price that he finally has to pay for her instruction is high; but it is Siv, after he has moved to Outer Pool, who completes his schooling by introducing him to variations of the amatory art of which the simple Gunnhild apparently never dreamed. And it is Siv, a charming, beautiful little woman twice divorced, who teaches him the meaning of love. Here again the price is high, but not because Siv demands it.

The jacket blurb says that Agnar Mykle has been "hailed by critics as 'the most tremendous talent that has appeared on the Nordic scene in years.'" There is no reason to use the limiting word Nordic. Mykle's literary talent is one of the greatest that I have encountered in forty years of reviewing. He is a passionate poet and a naked realist, and he can speak with the organ tones of a prophet. Every page, every sentence one is tempted to say, pulses with life. His knowledge of man's nature is profound, and in the depiction of character he is a sorcerer. His description of sexual acts matches in vividness anything that can be found in American novels, and in one passage he has dared to do what no American novelist has, so far as I know, hazarded. But the descriptions of which I write are integral parts of Mykle's whole design, and it would be a pity if they distracted any reader from the novel's power, beauty, and truth. Maurice Michael's translation can only be assumed to be masterly.

### FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT NO. 880

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 880 will be found in the next issue.

D FGEFZPMT GQ D  
NCPQML CBSADRCB  
ZCWMLB FGQ  
GLRCXXGECLAC.  
-ZPDLBCP YDRRFCTQ.

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 879

The only time people dislike gossip is when you gossip about them.

-WILL ROGERS.

# Intellectuals Among the Ivy

**"The Party at Cranton,"** by John W. Aldridge (McKay, 184 pp. \$3.50), examines the flora and fauna in the world of the literary intelligentsia. Harvey Swados, who teaches at Sarah Lawrence College, is a critic and novelist whose most recent book is *"False Coin."*

By Harvey Swados

JOHN ALDRIDGE's "After the Lost Generation" (1951) gained distinction as the first book-length examination of the work of the new wartime and postwar novelists by a sympathetic contemporary. Recently, however, his criticism has become waspish, intent more on stinging than on pollinating. Perhaps this very fact inclines one to take up his first novel with sympathy for the courage, or at least nerve, with which such a critic exposes himself to all who may be presumed to lie in wait—not only his academic colleagues, but the novelists whom he has praised insufficiently, ignored, or attacked.

Cranton is the name of a New England town, a university, and a literary review. The party honors Dorothy Murchison, who is spending a year in Cranton as a lecturer in classical literature, and who "was the author of three definitive works on the literary culture of Greece and Rome, and held all the requisite degrees as well as a high French military decoration for having allowed herself to be parachuted repeatedly into France during the dangerous days of the German occupation." She has also been "well and widely slept with." Richard Waithe (he might better have been called Wraith), one of her former lovers and the man through whose eyes we view Cranton, matches her up with Buchanan, gray eminence of the Cranton intellectuals, and founder of the *Cranton Review*.

Buchanan had been a brilliant poet in his youth, a leader of the Southern agrarians and the Fugitives. With the breakup of his camp he has had a personal breakdown, and draws his exile's satisfaction from bourbon and from the young faculty wives who sit breathless at the feet of this dispenser of publications, grants, fellowships, and promotions. The sexual collision between him and Dorothy ends, as it



John Aldridge—"may provide a season's entertainment for graduate students."

must, in violence and exhibitionism, with Dorothy disrobing to display her wounds at the hands of Buchanan, whom she charges with being a sadistic, impotent ex-poet.

These goings-on are observed not only by Waithe (the book is without dialogue, spun out of his reflections and those of his confidants), but also by Miriam Hornblower and Lester Fleischmann, rival campus novelists. "Together they constituted—albeit with ferocious unwillingness—a sort of bicephalous Louella Parsons of the intellectual life." They too are engaged in a love affair in which each attempts, like a mating spider, to disembowel the other, for one is uncertain as to which is the male.

With this novel about novelists writing novels about each other, its author has tried, and tried hard, to best Hornblower and Fleischmann—and their originals, for all these minor monsters have their obvious real-life counterparts—at their own game. An odd ambition for a denouncer of literary teratology. In any case, Mr. Aldridge locates his ghastly campus in American space by describing with some pains the ghastly town of Cranton and its ghastly environs; and here too he gives himself away. For just as he has been gulled into appraising the Hornblowers and Fleischmanns on their own terms, that is, simply with venom and spite, so here he has been taken in by a *Life*

magazine view of American Life. "The typical Cranton male . . . was a four-martini, two-car man, father of three and a fraction, an Ivy League college graduate . . ." His wife "still had the figure with which she had been graduated from Radcliffe, and her face was the kind that keeps its youthful contours and tends with time to wrinkle rather than sag . . ." The captions have been changed in this desperately sophisticated attempt at satire, but the photographs remain straight out of *Life*—and the novels Mr. Aldridge has himself attacked.

Although I believe the words love and understanding are used, none of these wicked, unhappy people is seen with anything approaching compassion. Nor can this first novel be regarded even as a courageous failure, for Mr. Aldridge has covered himself by polemizing unremittingly against just those who would be expected to mock at his fiction. It may provide a season's entertainment for graduate students and those palpitating on the fringes of the literary world, but it can only be regarded by others as a profoundly depressing performance, distinguished only by the lack of moral distance between the author and those whom he professes to scorn.

**PILLSBURY'S BEST:** Here's a recipe for that very tasty dish called "best-seller" as gleaned from the pages of *"Chautauqua"* (Putnam, \$3.95), written by Day Keene and Dwight Vincent:

Take one whole town in the year 1921—let's call it Radford Center, Iowa—and slice off the top to get at the following juicy ingredients: 1 ex-chorus girl turned prostitute; 1 cuckolded husband dying of tuberculosis; 1 adorable child, dimpling away under the cloud of her mother's reputation; 2 middle-aged lovers separated for years by the memory of a disastrous affair; 1 nymphomaniac; 1 young man back from the wars with a head full of nonsense about the future of flying machines.

Carefully drain off all character development and substitute such flavor-some clichés as *Mother Love* and *Heart-of-Gold* for the prostitute, *Self-sacrifice* and *Forgiveness* for the cuckolded husband—and any other handy chestnuts. Season to taste with as many frigid females and oversexed males as the plot will hold.

Let everyone stew for awhile, then baste the town with 1 tent Chautauqua for color and excitement. Stir all the ingredients together as rapidly as possible, bake under a hot summer sun of heat-wave proportions and wait for the crust to break open. Garnish with a sprig of attempted rape and a pinch

(Continued on page 37)