

Reflections of a Renaissance Man

"Assays," by Kenneth Rexroth (*New Directions*. 239 pp. Hard-bound \$4.50, Paperback \$2.25), offers some of the views and judgments of a disciple of H. L. Mencken who displays a magnanimity that his master lacked. Emile Capouya, editor with a New York publishing house, has contributed numerous essays to literary journals.

By EMILE CAPOUYA

OF THE men who earn their living by writing for more or less popular magazines, Kenneth Rexroth is one of the few (David Cort is another) who have the knowledge, brains, and style to turn literary journalism into literature. In Mr. Rexroth's case, the knowledge is distilled from an erudition so various as to make the reader feel intimidated or exalted, depending on his temperament. For my own part, when I caught a misstatement in "Bird in the Bush," an earlier collection of essays, I was greatly cheered: Mr. Rexroth identified *Simplicissimus*, the German satirical weekly, as a journal that flourished before the First World War, whereas it lived on, under the spirited editorship of Franz Schoenberner, to be to Adolf Hitler what the *Canard enchaîné* is nowadays to Charles de Gaulle.

As for the character of his ministry, Mr. Rexroth admits that he is in the tradition of H. L. Mencken. The identification is fair enough, except that the Stupor Mundi of San Francisco has remarkably little of the bully about him. Magnanimity, that quality mysteriously denied to some men of the greatest capacities, like Johnson, and granted to others no less talented, like Hazlitt, appears to me to be among Mr. Rexroth's gifts. In this world the writers with blood in their veins are apt to be bloody-minded, but it takes a lot to provoke Mr. Rexroth—Professor Leslie Fiedler, say, announcing that "Huckleberry Finn" is really an unconscious allegory of homosexual love.

Mr. Rexroth does seem to have strong feelings about the professorate in general, the honorable estate to which many who read these words might, but for the grace of God, have been called. What does he have against the ill-paid academics, and, indeed, all the treason-

ous intellectuals? Just that they are the engineers, or more often the mechanics, who keep the Social Lie humming. In any other age such an accusation would be criminal, because the Social Lie is also the Common Life, in our case what politicians and honest men alike refer to as Western Civilization. But in 1962 the Social Lie has got us cornered at last, and is advancing on us to crack skulls, for all the world as if mankind were but a French citizen to be clubbed to death by cops at the mouth of a *métro* station.

Magnanimity, courage, honor—what has any modern government to do with these? And who but the well-educated, led by the professors, make it possible for governments to carry on with their moldy threats of universal destruction? It was no hillbilly that worked out

Governor Rockefeller's and President Kennedy's bomb-shelter schemes, or drew up the specifications for the hopeful little kilns, or estimated the probable effect of the program on steel, cement, and construction shares.

The present collection is accurately entitled "Assays." Mr. Rexroth conceives it to be his function not only to give information but to make judgments: judgments on the moral meaning of the Kabbalah, on the literary grandeurs and servitudes of Lawrence Durrell, on the spiritual significance of the student protest movement, on the importance to the West of classical Chinese culture, on the influence of modern French poetry on American poets. Often, in the cases in which the unspecialized reader can form an opinion, Mr. Rexroth's views seem at once illuminating and idiosyncratic—but that is another word for original, and is what one expects of an extraordinary mind. The essays in this new volume gave me again and again the supreme pleasure of listening to a man who concerns himself with what is important in life and in art, of learning from a man who knows how to teach.

Anatomy of U.K. Mass Culture

"England, Half English," by Colin MacInnes (*Random House*. 208 pp. \$4), collects some of the Australian author's essays on contemporary British mores, especially those of teen-agers. Robert Halsband, who has spent considerable time in England, is an interested student of its cultural landscape.

By ROBERT HALSBAND

ARTICLES published in monthly magazines must be pretty sturdy to survive transplanting into hard covers. Colin MacInnes, an Australian novelist, has been brave enough (and his publisher broadminded enough) to collect this mixed bag of nineteen separate essays published during the last six years, mostly in *Encounter* and the now defunct *Twentieth Century*. He has brought some of the pieces up to date by adding footnotes labeled *later*, and this adds a lively touch of self-criticism and hindsight. For American readers the fact that Mr. MacInnes writes mainly on English subjects may make the book seem parochial, but to balance this he puts his subjects into a wide context.

On the topic of teen-agers the author is at his most fervent. They are a phenomenon unmatched in any other period of history, he contends, because for the first time they have become a coherent economic and cultural force. They have a lot of money to spend, and so whole industries cater to their taste in clothes, soft drinks, music, hair styles, cosmetics. All this he discusses with the seriousness, though not the impartiality, of a sociologist.

Popular music, so heavily patronized by teen-agers, is one of Mr. MacInnes's main enthusiasms. Not jazz, not crooning, but pop music. (Readers of Grove's "Dictionary of Music" will search in vain for these distinctions.) "Warming to my theme," he writes, "I'd like to say I think the abysmal ignorance of educated persons about the popular music of the millions, is deplorable." His own crusade in favor of what he calls a "second Children's Crusade" embraces not only the tunes but the idols who sing them—particularly the English Tommy Steele. Our own Elvis Presley is neatly ticked off, from his "baleful, full-lipped Neronic glare" to his "over-expressive sharkskin slacks"; and Tommy wins for his greater dignity. I don't know how many converts among the educated Mr. MacInnes will re-

educate (or de-educate) to like pop music, but at least one reader who loathes it has enjoyed his eloquent defense.

In his anatomy of mass culture Mr. MacInnes also goes to work on three popular comic strips in a leading English newspaper, with conclusions that are ingenious even if they leave the reader with the feeling of "So what?" The force of his argument would be greater if he distinguished between qualitative and quantitative appreciation, and between audience inertia that allows "art" to be imposed and audience interest that directly stimulates it.

Whether he is discussing private drinking clubs or Negro immigration into England, his Aunt Trix or his travels in Nigeria, Mr. MacInnes writes with uncommon verve and interest. At his best he has an Orwellian flavor—direct, vivid, keen. The variety of his interests is beautifully sustained—the novels of Ada Leverson, Australia's peculiar horrors and beauties, the unique talents of the English art historian Dr. Nikolaus Pevsner.

Most of these pieces deserved being rescued. But why doesn't Mr. MacInnes write a book about what seems to be his most persistent interest—the teen-ager? He has all the requisite gifts, except that by the time he finishes it his teen-agers will have aged a few years, and then where will he be?

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Anisfield-Wolf Awards

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publication Mr. Griffin was burned in effigy in Mansfield, Texas, where he now lives, and a cross was set ablaze on a hill above his house there. The book is his account of a trip he took through the Deep South as a Negro—a transformation he was able to bring about through sun-lamp treatments, the use of dye, and the help of a New Orleans dermatologist. In a review for *SR* (Dec. 9, 1961), the Negro writer Louis E. Lomax—who was, coincidentally, one of last year's Anisfield-Wolf winners—said: "The real merit of this book, at least so it seems to me, is that a Southern white man became so involved with his own conscience that he became a Negro . . . and has published his frightening discoveries for his friends and neighbors to read. . . . 'Black Like Me' is a moving and troubling book written by an accomplished novelist."

Describing the origins of his book, Mr. Griffin told *SR*: "I decided to make this experiment because years of study convinced me that our 'race problem' was really a problem of racism. I was a student in Europe in my teens when Nazi anti-Semitism grew into the terrible racist calamity it became. I saw it develop, saw decent humans perverted into consenting to the destruction of other humans. As an American who had been formed by the maxims of freedom, justice, respect for human person, and respect for privacy of conscience, the tragedy of racism burned me. . . . I could not help noticing that we were developing many of the same symptoms in the

growing domination of racist groups in the U.S. The values we had been brought up to hold supreme were being trampled. We were being led to believe that in order to preserve our liberties we must consent to the deprivation of these liberties for a large segment of our population—and eventually, of course, for all."

His journey through the South was motivated by the hope, he said, that if prejudiced people could not be persuaded through logic, they might be approached through their emotions.

The effects of racism, Mr. Griffin continued, proved to be "much more hideous than I had dared suspect, because it showed clearly that we consented to the terrible blight of lives wherever men were defrauded of their human and civil rights." He wrote with feeling about some of the results of his experiment as a Negro—of the threats, the terrorization of his family, and "the need to hide like a criminal from the avengers." And he wrote, too, of a totally different reaction when he learned that "Black Like Me" had won an Anisfield-Wolf Award, a reaction proving that literary recognition can be considerably more than money, more than the flurry of congratulatory telegrams, more than the honor it brings:

"After two exhausting years of turmoil in our lives, such an award comes as a great balm to us. It brings sunlight into lives that have been made somber by the fury and incomprehension of segregationists. This is a personal reaction, but for the moment it is the one we feel. In other words, I am glad that my children and those other people who are dear to me, including my friends, have something like this for a change."

