

The Unfinished Artist

"The Window of Memory: The Literary Career of Thomas Wolfe," by Richard S. Kennedy (University of North Carolina Press. 480 pp. \$7.50), follows the development of the creative process in a nontypical novelist. Robert E. Spiller, a literary historian, has written much on twentieth-century American literature.

By ROBERT E. SPILLER

THE STORY of Thomas Wolfe's creative agonies has been told many times. Wolfe himself was the first to attempt it, in "The Story of a Novel." Among others to contribute their versions are his two editors, Maxwell Perkins and Edward Aswell; his literary agent, Elizabeth Nowell, and numerous biographers, critics, members of the family, and friends. Why, one might ask, submit the public to another review of these painful facts when the case is surely not typical of the way a novelist works?

The answer is that, although Wolfe was a great artist, he was never a finished one, and, to evaluate his work fairly, the critic should judge it as a growing organism. For this kind of judgment, he must know all that can be known of the creative process that produced it, and never before has the evidence been so carefully sifted and presented. This is the scholar's workbook for all future study of Wolfe.

Mr. Kennedy's approach to his task is almost wholly dispassionate and objective. He uses no Freudian analysis or Jungian myth to bind his facts together; he takes no sides on issues of hurt feelings, law suits, and misunderstandings; he merely lets the story tell itself, with an occasional summing up of how much and what kind of development can be deduced from the evidence. The result is a series of revelations as to details, a sense of continuous although devious artistic growth, and a satisfying conviction of full knowledge such as only sound scholarship can convey.

We know now that, even in the earliest work, Eugene Gant is not Thomas Wolfe, that the people of Asheville had forgiven their erring son long before he mustered courage enough to return and face them, and that the biggest

problem for the maturing artist was his effort to shake off his self-imposed dependence on his father- and mother-substitutes, Maxwell Perkins and Aline Bernstein, rather than any rift for which either he or these good friends could be blamed. We know these and many other things about Wolfe's growth from boy to man; but, more important, we can now trace in detail each step in the progress of the artist, from a wholly romantic and emotional involvement in his material to a developing comic and tragic perspective. The influences of Professors Greenlaw, Koch, and Baker are seen as laying the foundations of his esthetic life at the same time they channeled it into drama and delayed its movement out into a larger and more flexible form.



Thomas Wolfe—not Eugene Gant.

Then in 1930 came the climax, after the first novel and before the second. According to Mr. Kennedy, "The year abroad had been a time of conception for a whole scheme of novels, it had been the seed time for most of the details that would enrich them, it (Continued on page 74)

The Author as Actor

"The Example of Melville," by Warner Berthoff (Princeton University Press. 218 pp. \$5), dissects the stylistic qualities that made the author of "Moby-Dick" unique among writers. Charles Boewe teaches American literature at the University of Pennsylvania and is executive secretary of the American Studies Association.

By CHARLES BOEWE

IT TAKES courage to produce yet another book on Herman Melville. Even more courage to cite the *Times Literary Supplement* to the effect that no adequate general account of Melville yet has been written, and then offer to repair the oversight, as Warner Berthoff does. A critic must be bold to deal with Melville at all; it was the author of "Moby-Dick" himself who reminded us that "no great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be who have tried it."

Equally courageous is the title of the Berthoff book—no mere publisher's stab at sales appeal, for it is alluded to again and again throughout the text.

The example of Melville as a writer: not as a thinker, not as an artifact of his society, not even as a source of "scripture" for the exercise of exegesis. It is Melville the "master of expression" who is the subject, and in this sense the book is indeed a general study—adequate within its established limitations. The peculiar flavor of words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters; setting and characters; and particularly those special characters who function as narrators—all are examined with insight and care. But the outcome of it all, which Mr. Berthoff never quite gets around to stating, is that Melville, both at his best and his worst, is exemplary as a stylist of nothing but Herman Melville. It is, after all, the uniqueness of expression that makes his writing prized, the unmistakable Melville signature on everything he wrote, including the ludicrous "Pierre" and the tedious "Confidence-Man." This book, in part, is the graphological analysis of that signature.

Mr. Berthoff, however, is far too good a critic to be content with a mere schoolmaster's parsing of sentences. He includes two chapters on Melville's career, where biographical information is brought to bear on Melville's problems as a writer; he includes a chapter

that analyzes "Billy Budd" and another concerned with the tradition of Melville's storytelling—additions which soften the sharp focus of the book but which are individually valuable nonetheless. That dealing with Melville's manner of telling a story is especially needed as a corrective to much recent criticism.

Historically, it makes no sense at all to judge Melville's fiction by the criteria for the well-made novel devised by Henry James and, sometimes, practiced by him. Rather, as Mr. Berthoff is at pains to point out, Melville's storytelling is more in the manner of Mark Twain's oral tradition, which is actually the first tradition in English literature—where we sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings. In this kind of fiction the narrator knows from the beginning how the tale is going to turn out and, as a character in his own story, is both bound and freed by its conventions. In the best of Melville's earlier work—"Typee," "Omoo," "Mardi," and "White-Jacket"—as well as in the best of his later novels, where the author's own voice speaks candidly in "Benito Cereno" and "Billy Budd," the writer had honed the fine edge of a technique that slashed with such deep effect in his masterpiece, "Moby-Dick."

Almost in passing, Mr. Berthoff notes that it is in his first-person narratives of adventure that Melville fits into a pattern which has dominated much of the most notable American fiction, from many of Poe's tales through "Huckleberry Finn" to "The Great Gatsby" and on to "The Catcher in the Rye." Howells and James, and the realists and naturalists who followed in their wake, make up the loyal opposition in this republic of letters. As James's faction saw an analogy between the art of the novelist and the art of the painter, it may be said that Melville's sees one between the art of the novelist and the art of the actor. An incidental but important achievement of this book is that finally the example of Melville is thus discovered under a proscenium spacious enough to fit the play.

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—Halsman, NYC.

Max Lerner—"no inherent doom."

"The Age of Overkill: A Preface to World Politics," by Max Lerner (Simon & Schuster. 329 pp. \$5.95), analyzes each of the five major forces that characterize the times in which we live. Michael Curtis wrote "Great Themes in Political Theory."

By MICHAEL CURTIS

IN THIS intelligent and ambitious introduction to world politics, Max Lerner is manifestly troubled and in a somber mood, but he does not end on the far side of despair. Reluctant to accept Freud's pessimistic thesis of the struggle between Eros and Death working itself out in the human species, but aware of the deep nonrational drives of the life-force, Lerner thinks in terms of "a stoic and tragic possibility" in which there is no inherent doom. He asks us to look again at international relations and discard familiar ideas, beliefs, and concepts that are not particularly meaningful for contemporary understanding.

The New York Post columnist sees the times as the Age of Overkill, in which there is a surplus of power rather than the power scarcity that marked the classical era of world politics. The premises and principles of the classical era—power as the ruling passion, the world seen as composed of enemies

and allies, a group of nation-states each claiming sovereignty and acting on the basis of national interest, the belief in the balance-of-power principle, the acceptance of war as a political principle—are no longer appropriate. Today power is powerless when it is charged with overkill; a world of nation-states on classical lines is no longer a viable one.

The Age of Overkill is characterized by five major forces: the spiral of nuclear weapons in which rapid obsolescence creates a new generation of weapons every few years, the emergence of two world-power clusters, alongside of which exists a group of unaligned states, the world-wide struggle of ideas, the impact of nationalism and Socialism on the newer nations, and the existence of the United Nations as a forum and a force.

Mr. Lerner analyzes each of these forces with varying success. He has little original to say on military affairs, but shows how escalation, obsolescence, threats, boasting, and blackmail have been interacting elements in the missile-fear spiral. Politics is continual irony. A condition of symbolic war now exists in which each advance in nuclear warheads and missile delivery systems is known, even made known, to the enemy. The peace is kept by both sides threatening each other with nuclear weapons. But a salutary warning is needed: deterrence only works if all agree to the rules of the game.

For the concepts of imperialism, alliances, coalitions, and blocs, which students of international relations have always used, Lerner substitutes the term "power cluster" to mean a loose grouping of nations around a "power center." But the semantic difficulty produced by Lerner's terminology does not seem warranted by its contribution to an understanding of the relations between the two great groups in the world. Lerner is on surer ground in his brief but useful analysis of neutralism, which he sees as often little more than a rationalization of a difficult geographical and political position in which it would be dangerous for a nation to choose between the two great power clusters.

Lerner is at his best in his analysis of the Communist system and the Grand Design, the over-all Communist purpose, which is a theory of history,