

Fiction

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Moravia's tireless campaign, his strenuous defense of the worth of the novel, and his quasi-Machiavellian strategy (which played both on his international reputation and on the fact that some of the judges did not read Italian) that he was able to "deliver" the precious votes of the other five participating countries. It was learned from authoritative sources that the Italians had strongly favored two young and exciting writers, Lucio Mastronardi and Luciano Bianciardi, whose maturity of style, universality of themes, and seriousness of vision they specifically singled out as deserving the special recognition of an award designed "to encourage—and to provide an international audience for new writing."

But no matter: the past is now behind us, and what the present offers us in the competent translation of Frances Frenaye is an uncomplicated, amateurishly written, and banal tale about a seventeen-year-old girl's love affair with a somewhat older and irresolute law student, who is seeking pleasure and security but is unwilling to pay the price for either. As presented by the author, Enrica is certainly representative of a generation that is unable to find meaning in life or new values in a world robbed of its dignity and humanity by too many blunders, too many wars, too many betrayals. The evidence presented in the novel speaks eloquently to this point: we have become incapable of enjoying even the rawest physical pleasure; we are unable to find a sense of purpose in the futile struggle of everyday living; finally, we have allowed ourselves to be turned into neurotic automatons. In that sense, the novel's characters reveal the sickness of our condition. Enrica's mother is preoccupied with marrying her off to someone from a better social sphere than their own; her father spends all his free time building complicated wooden bird cages nobody wants to buy, and by so doing expresses his alienation from a world he no longer comprehends; Cesare does not hesitate to telephone his fiancée while he is still in bed with Enrica; and the middle-aged countess, who gives temporary shelter to the latter, confesses that she is beyond the point of caring about anything or anyone.

Even from such a fragmentary account, it is easy to see why the novel should have attracted the sympathy of Alberto Moravia. It is his own early novel, *The Time of Indifference* (1929), that has considerably influenced Miss

Maraini's sensibility, and it is Moravia's cold, semiclinical, grayish style that the young author has made her own, ably using it to depict the monotony of her sordid, hopeless world.

Miss Maraini does on occasion succeed in creating interesting "types" and in conjuring up recognizable climates; she fails, however, to illuminate the ambivalence, the desiccation and degradation we recognize as the worst,

and most prevalent, features of our era. Nevertheless, despite the notable lack of compassion and depth that clouds the author's vision, Miss Maraini has given us a valid, if all too fleeting, portrait of faceless people who, unable to communicate even a small part of their misery and anguish to their brothers, are doomed to spend the rest of their existence in the hell of loneliness and fear.

Postscript to Plutarch

Pericles the Athenian, by Rex Warner (*Atlantic-Little, Brown*. 240 pp. \$4.75), concentrates on the political history of an extraordinary era. Books by Robert Payne include *"The Splendor of Greece."*

By ROBERT PAYNE

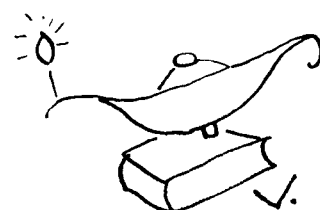
A STRANGE fatality hovers over the historical novelist. Knowledge, skill, dramatic sense, even imagination, are never anulet enough. What is needed above all is the prodigious leap into the past and the capacity to remain there, unflinching there, in the enclosed world where the laws of the world we know and even the simplest words and ideas may be stripped of their present-day meanings. It is a task for a giant, but only a few giants have attempted it. Even *Salammbô* fails at times, and *War and Peace* shows signs of describing the society of a whole generation later than the one it is intended to depict. The pitfalls are endless, and only a man of strong nerves can walk through the dangerous and unknown roads of the past.

How dangerous the journey is we know from the wrecks of historical fiction that lie scattered all around us. We have no novels about ancient Greece to rival the best on ancient Rome. *God Was Born in Exile*, *Marius the Epicurean*, and *I, Claudius* accomplish their purpose wonderfully well, perhaps because the leap into the Roman past is less demanding. Robert Graves performed miracles for Claudian Rome, but failed lamentably when he attempted a story on Hercules. The Greeks are quicksilver. They vanish when we attempt to hold them. They are too subtle for us, too Oriental, too innocent altogether to be understood by our guilt-ridden minds. And then—perhaps this is the crux of the matter—how on earth does one write about a

people who produced more geniuses in fifty years than the rest of us have been able to bring forth in two and a half millennia?

Rex Warner has done his best with Pericles. He has labored over the sources, arranged the known facts in the proper order, and very sensibly told the story through the lips of the philosopher Anaxagoras, who was one of Pericles's teachers and therefore might be expected to have a fund of knowledge about his pupil. But there is no leap, no attempt to recreate the society in which Pericles lived. The sources for a life of Pericles are admittedly few, the most substantial being Plutarch's long essay. Mr. Warner clings to Plutarch like a drowning man. He rarely tells a story that is not taken boldly from *Parallel Lives*; in fact, he rarely tells a story. Page upon page describe the politics of Periclean Athens as they might be found in some nineteenth-century textbook. Aspasia, Socrates, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Thucydides receive passing mention; they are never allowed to come to life. There is half a page on the Great Plague, which Thucydides described with wonderfully effective detail; but Mr. Warner is not concerned with effective detail. Anaxagoras rumbles along, a man in his dotage, concerned more with the alliances of Athens than with the Athenians, and poor Pericles vanishes under the weight of the author's laborious prose.

It is all very puzzling. Mr. Warner is no novice, he knows ancient Greece, he has made excellent translations from Xenophon and Euripides. But he never raises the dead. One has the feeling that he never even tried.



Reds, Whites, and Revolution

Eighty-Seven Days, by Andrew Angarsky (Knopf, 640 pp. \$6.50), chronicles the first White Russian attempt to unseat the Bolsheviks in 1918. Ivar Spector, of the University of Washington, is the author of "An Introduction to Russian History and Culture" and "The Golden Age of Russian Literature."

By IVAR SPECTOR

THIS novel, by a Russian expatriate scholar who died in the U.S. in 1960, deals with the abortive uprising in 1918 of the anti-Bolshevik "Union for the Defense of Motherland and Freedom," in which Allied intervention was expected. The eighty-seven days span the period from late April—when the group was organized in Moscow under the leadership of the Social Revolutionary terrorist Boris Savinkov and the ex-czarist Colonel Perkhurov—to its collapse in July at Yaroslavl on the Volga. No individual heroes appear among the many characters, real and fictional; the actual hero is the "Union."

Angarsky has tried to present objectively the underlying reasons for the defeat of the White forces. The former czarist officers, rich merchants, and noblemen who formed the nucleus of the organization are depicted as more concerned with the restoration of their status, wealth, and property than with the salvation of Russia. According to the author, it was they who plotted and launched the White Terror that provoked the Red Terror of the Bolsheviks. Claiming to be *Herrenvolk*, they alienated the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionists who initially supported the movement. In this novel, the Soviets begin with a carrot and end with a club, while their opponents first wield the club and resort to the carrot only when it is too late to change the course of events. The one feeling common to both Whites and Reds was unmitigated hatred of Alexander Kerensky, prime minister of the Provisional Government which had been overthrown by the Bolsheviks.

Well-written and smoothly flowing, the book reads at times like a stenographic record. The manner of presentation is strongly reminiscent of Alexei N. Tolstoy's novel of the revolution

and civil war, *Road to Calvary* (*Khozhenie po mukam*), though Angarsky's story lacks the epic proportions of the latter.

Unusual in a novel by an expatriate Russian is the generally favorable portrayal of well-known Bolshevik leaders, especially Lenin and Felix Dzerzhinsky, chief of the Cheka, as well as Trotsky, Maria Spiridonova, and Nadezhda Krupskaya. Indeed, there are instances in which Angarsky presents the Soviet case *vis-à-vis* the Whites more articulately than Soviet writers of fiction have yet done.

Encounter in a Gondola

The Birdcage, by John Bowen (Harper & Row, 208 pp. \$3.95), combines satire and romance in a story about modern London's misplaced generation. David Dempsey is a veteran critic for SR.

By DAVID DEMPSEY

ON THE jacket of this novel, the author, John Bowen, is compared to Angus Wilson, Iris Murdoch, and "prewar" Evelyn Waugh. A reference to E. M. Forster is also smuggled in, which makes it a dusty jacket indeed. Inevitably the reader who scans the not-so-fine print on the label will be disappointed, for *The Birdcage*, whatever its merits, is hardly the champagne cocktail we have been promised.

Norah Palmer and Peter Ash have been living together for nine years—"semi-attached" is Mr. Bowen's term—when something happens during a vacation in Italy to break up the arrangement. Norah declares that she can no longer "respect" Peter, and, for his part, Peter has a mysterious little encounter in a gondola; we are not told much about this, except that it has a profound effect on Peter, who decides to break off with Norah. She agrees, rather too willingly for a woman.

The two go their separate ways in London. Peter's way is that of an interlocutor for a series of movie shorts called "The Living Arts," in addition to which—but we will come to that later, Norah's way is employment in

the script department of a commercial television network. Shortly before they separated, their landlady gave them a wicker birdcage and two parakeets. Norah has kept one bird, Peter the other. Away from one another the creatures languish, as do Peter and Norah. Mr. Bowen is not blind when it comes to symbols.

We feel that eventually the couple is going to be reunited in sin, and that it will do them both good. Mr. Bowen's problem—indeed, it is every novelist's—is what to do with his characters in the meanwhile. A great deal of Norah's time is spent trying to discover the whereabouts of a retired civil servant who wrote a play in 1904 that was praised by G. B. Shaw. The script has been lost and the author has dropped from sight. While searching for him, Norah continues to grieve for Peter, who she realizes can't, or at least shouldn't, live without her.

Peter takes up with a bouncy policewoman—on her off-hours, that is—but he soon tires of this and starts roaming the streets at night. And now we discover what it was that took place in the gondola to change Peter's attitude. Until he met Norah nine years before, he had been a "practicing homosexual." A young Italian passenger in the gondola reawakens the old urge in him, and not by singing *O Sole Mio*. Peter is back where he started. In a long and rather unpleasant chapter called "The Night People" we follow him through the haunts of homosexual London, where he is at the mercy of those who prey on his kind.

Up to this point *The Birdcage* has been a lighthearted, satirical comedy that gets in most of its licks by exposing the pseudocultural pretensions of the popular arts in England. But now, three-fourths of the way through the book, Mr. Bowen changes gears. *The Birdcage* becomes an altogether different novel, freighted with a completely new set of intentions. Mr. Bowen makes it plain that for people of Norah's and Peter's temperament—the "semi-attached" who are incapable of committing themselves wholeheartedly to a genuine emotional relationship—life is a drag. And so, unhappily, is the last quarter of Mr. Bowen's novel.

