

Editor's Last Stand

Summer Storm, by Charles Angoff (Yoseloff 569 pp. \$5.95), portrays a cynical, Mencklenlike editor and the decline of his magazine. Daniel Stern frequently comments on new fiction.

By DANIEL STERN

FOR THE past twelve years Charles Angoff has been constructing a mosaic of novels intended to form a definitive picture of Jewish life in America. Starting with *Journey to the Dawn* he has chronicled the career of the Polonsky family, who migrated from Russia to the United States in the first decade of the century. With *Summer Storm* Mr. Angoff has reached the 1930s. Here his protagonist, David Polonsky, is ensconced in New York, where he acts as a kind of mirror for the events and meanings of that disturbed decade.

The chief action of the book revolves around the decline and death of a magazine, *The American World*, on which David is employed. (This is a lightly disguised version of the old *American Mercury*, on which Mr. Angoff served as managing editor.) As emotional and intellectual spokesman for the author David gives us his portrait of the cynical, boob-baiting editor of the magazine, Harry Brandt (for whom read H. L. Mencken).

Given this confrontation, an exciting clash of ideas seems to be impending between Angoff the humanist and Brandt-Mencken the avowed Nietzschean. Unfortunately, *Summer Storm* is suffused with warmth but gives little light. The reason is, I think, that the subject matter Angoff tackles here is not responsive to the kind of self-indulgent emotionalism that comes to him too easily and too often. The problem of sustaining social or religious belief in the midst of an apparently crumbling society needs a more disciplined understanding, as well as a controlled artistic presentation.

This is also true of the question of Jewishness which Angoff's characters debate frequently but without any deepening of insight. The result is usually something like this one-sentence monologue by David:

... and David listened and marveled and filled in and he was dazzled and appalled and bewildered and repelled

and attracted, and as he listened he was glad and sad and exhilarated and depressed and mystified by the ways of life among all people, and especially among the Jews, for it occurred to him, as he listened . . . that perhaps Jews were really more alive and more human than other people, and perhaps this was what was meant by the phrase, "The Chosen People" . . .

It is not fair, of course, to judge a book by one sentence. But disturbingly similar passages occur in every chapter, all marked by equally imprecise thought and style. Strangely, within such painful limitations, Angoff's people can be appealing. They have what is well expressed by a unique Jewish

word: *menschlichkeit*, which can be roughly translated as decency, maturity, responsibility. Without this quality there can be no major writing; but in the creation of interesting and meaningful characters it is, by itself, absolutely inadequate. (The one exception here is Brandt, the Mencken paraphrase. He is, as was his original, sharp, salty, slightly salacious, and real.)

In *Summer Storm* we are given the atmosphere and occurrences of the Thirties, featuring the demise of a once-vital magazine. One knows Angoff was there; one knows it all happened much as it is presented. Yet the feeling is inescapable that the one thing missing is, in Hemingway's simple and perfect phrase, "the way it was."

Angoff is attempting the enormous and valuable task of interpreting American life from the Jewish angle of refraction. What his new book proves is that sympathy needs an accompanying tough spine of detachment and insight. Compassion alone is self-defeating.

Disastrous Liaisons

Elective Affinities, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, translated by Elizabeth Mayer and Louise Bogan (Regnery. 305 pp. \$5.95), offers a new English version of a classic novel about the elemental power of love. Joseph P. Bauke is an editor of "Germanic Review."

By JOSEPH P. BAUKE

"I AM sorry that you do not like it, it is my best book," Goethe said to a lady who disapproved of *Elective Affinities* on moral grounds. Published in 1809, when Goethe was sixty, this classic novel about the elemental power of love resumes the theme of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the work of the youthful author, but its mood and outlook are totally different. Werther, with his caprices and sentimentalities, would be quite impossible in the rarefied air of the country estate where the story of the fateful affinities unfolds.

Here all spontaneity is sacrificed to ritual and routine, and decorum is maintained when all other conventions collapse. With an infinity of detail, *leitmotifs*, and subtle parallelisms, Goethe captures the particularity of atmosphere and, from the first, throws a lugubrious light on the scene that forebodes catastrophe. The title, borrowed

from a chemical treatise, indicates that natural forces beyond man's ken or control play a decisive role in this extraordinary and unforgettable novel.

If the four characters and their shifting alliances are complex, the plot is not. After humdrum marriages of convenience Eduard and Charlotte, friends in their youth, have finally married and live the idle and formalized life of the landed gentry. Their guests are the Captain and Charlotte's foster-daughter Ottilie, a lovely and mysterious young girl who gradually acquires the severe dignity of a tragic heroine. The affections ending in disaster run alongside ordinary life before they swell into a tide that cannot be stopped. The hostess and the Captain manage to escape from each other, while the other couple experience the agonies of a passion that grips them like a disease.

The disintegration of a marriage is the ostensible theme, and on one level *Elective Affinities* belongs to the European tradition of the novel of manners. There are the expected setpieces: the clandestine tryst, the parties, the amusements, and the *ennui* beneath the polite conversation. But not far below this surface the work is concerned with the acceptance of life's vicissitudes, with renunciation and death. Who can tell what is choice and what is destiny, what compulsion and what free will?

This new translation, equipped with

an excellent introduction by Victor Lange, is ingenious in its handling of the difficult prose of the older Goethe, which assumes presence and modernity in the hands of Miss Mayer and Miss Bogan.

Reading it for the first time is an austere joy; rereading becomes an act of contemplation.

Agony on the Playground: The more than prolific English teeny, Miss Caroline Glyn, poet and artist, has written a novel and designed its jacket; for all we know this unique talent also set the type and served as her own agent. She is, indeed, a remarkable child, and having from my salad days upwards spent many an hour grading countless compositions from the pens of little ladies a few years her senior, I can testify that Miss Glyn writes shockingly well and proves herself a gifted, perceptive, and clever girl for her age. Her age, by the way, is fifteen—though if truth must out, *Don't Knock the Corners Off* (Coward-McCann, \$3.95) was started a year before, when she was fourteen.

Miss Glyn's heroine-narrator, Antonia, a lovable, precocious girl, is introduced to us aged nine, and we follow her scholastic adventures for a few years as she suffers the indignities of three English schools. Antonia, as a type, is immediately recognizable; we have seen and heard her on this side of the Atlantic performing a little too loudly at Schrafft's. She is a bit too bright, a bit too set on conquering an adult world.

Antonia's first school is a blackboard-jungle horror, and for a while we can almost believe we are in Alan Sillitoe country.

Antonia is caught between the attractions of her artsy-craftsy parents and the need to be accepted at school. Father, who talks and behaves like a child, is a painter; Mother, who hates to cook or think, collects live goldfish and plastic pink elephants. The family is run Summerhill style, the schools aren't. And, as Antonia grows, she must resolve this tension between permissiveness at home and authority in the classroom.

There is nary a trace of Lolita in our heroine, no Humbert Humberts smirking and drooling in the background ready to pounce and ravish. Nor is this novel akin to Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*, for we constantly accept Antonia on her own terms. She is what she is, a young girl of intelligence who writes what she sees, who sees well, and who is beginning to understand herself. Perhaps Antonia is Miss Glyn, perhaps not; in any case, this is an attractive, interesting work, and we can only hope that the young novelist continues to create for us. —CHARLES SHAPIRO.

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WRITERS AND WRITING

Six Who Came to Praise

E. M. Forster: A Tribute, With Selections from His Writings on India, edited by K. Natwar-Singh (Harcourt, Brace & World. 145 pp. \$4.50), is a gift of loving appreciation from six Indian writers to the novelist on his eighty-fifth birthday. Bradford Smith, who wrote "Portrait of India," recently published *"Meditation: the Inward Art."*

By BRADFORD SMITH

ONE OF the graces of India's culture is the high value it sets upon friendship, which implies a deep, almost an exclusive devotion. This quality comes through in the six essays of appreciation that make up the first half of this birthday tribute to E. M. Forster.

The relationship of the younger person to the older has special status in India, where the *guru* (teacher) has from ancient times been regarded with peculiar veneration, rather like a super-father with divine qualities. To these half-dozen Indians E. M. Forster has been such a friend, and the warmth of their love and admiration somehow dignify the whole spectrum of human relations. This, we see with quicker beating of the heart, is how people might be—

this is what they might mean to one another. What miracles could occur in our own automated civilization if our young might be so stirred!

These six, of course, happened to be very gifted young people when first they met Forster. All of them (K. Natwar-Singh, Ahmed Ali, Mulk Raj Anand, Naravana Menon, Raja Rao, Santha Rama Rau) are writers, so that Forster, as the most renowned writer about India in English, was indeed their *guru*.

These essays are therefore works of love for both the man and the writer. This very affection often produces excellent critical insights, such as Santha Rama Rau's praise of Forster's treble vision "as the sharp-eyed critic, the creative artist, the subtle social philosopher." Others find his special qualities in his sense of the sanctity of human relations and of the misunderstandings so often generated, in his "tender regard for everything human," in his perception of truth, his ability (in *Passage to India*) to see a country whole—high and low, noble and dishonest.

Inevitably, in such a book as this there are repetitions; but, after all, this is an accolade, not a critique. It is especially valuable to have the opinions of these sensitive writers on the authenticity of Forster's few works about India. By contrast, the illustrative selections



"How many times must I tell you—don't blow trumpets for every peddler that comes to the door."