

A Nice Day for a Funeral

To an Early Grave, by Wallace Markfield (Simon & Schuster. 255 pp. \$4.50), takes as its "semi-hero" a Jewish-American who belongs neither to the ghetto nor to suburbia. Charles Shapiro teaches English at Briarcliff College in New York State.

By CHARLES SHAPIRO

JEWISH-AMERICAN novelists are, at present, producing a good deal more than their fair share of our best contemporary fiction; and nipping excitedly at their heels rush the predictable pack of critics gratuitously explaining this literary phenomenon for us in terms of sociology, psychology, and *hutzpuh*. Often the novel itself, the created work of art, gets lost in the endless discussion of minority groups in flux and fiction.

Younger J-A novelists, as these critics have more than once pointed out, confront their heritage from a distance, either glorifying the lives of their ancestors on the Lower East Sides all over America, rhapsodizing over a beauty and courage they never personally witnessed, or, at the other and more fashionable end of the spectrum, satirizing the vulgarities of a middle-class suburbia they have no desire to join. Wallace Markfield's novel immediately delights and surprises in that he has placed at the dead center of his wacky book an assortment of sad, incompetent Jewish intellectuals, men whose claims to integrity keep them from being residents of either yesterday's antediluvian ghetto or today's New Rochelle.

Morroë Rieff, the semi-hero of *To an Early Grave*, is recognizable as the familiar guy who is always at the periphery of any group, who tries too hard to be accepted, who is rejected, who fumes and broods, and who, inevitably, comes back for more of the same. "His large glasses shrank his eyes and, with his way of squinting—as though for him all things were in grey outline—gave him a bluff uncomprehending look."

Morroë learns of the death of a former friend from bohemian days, the proclaimed leader of a gang of faded writers and critics, a chap characterized as "a secondary talent of the highest order." Morroë, forgetting past slights, organizes an expedition to the funeral

in Brooklyn. On the drive from Manhattan the assorted phonies reveal themselves, selfishness and pomposity abound, and Morroë returns home unchanged. Not exactly a Leopold Bloom, he has learned very little about himself during the sad day, but we have been able to see a good deal. And, in the process, we have had a joyous time.

For this curiously cruel book, featuring the antics of some potentially worthy men, is tremendously funny, salted with wisecracks that, believe it or not, actually work. The predictable platoon of Yiddish words are used and overused by the literary chatterboxes as their Volkswagen heads for the funeral parlor. Vanities are exposed:

After Gregg, a Lonely Dread

Leah, by Seymour Epstein (Little, Brown. 308 pp. \$4.95), tells of a lonely, thirty-seven-year-old spinster trapped in a banal existence. Daniel Stern wrote "Who Shall Live, Who Shall Die," among other books.

By DANIEL STERN

TO FACE the fact squarely: the novel is the prime bourgeois art form. It has always provided the reader with that delicious sense of being at the center of the universe. In poetry, nature or the gods occasionally threaten to overwhelm us; in music we hear an exquisitely untranslatable abstract language; some of the finest painting of our time has eliminated the human form entirely. But, in the novel, man matters.

Of late we have been offered the anti-novel, the novel of "things." Yet, paradoxically, the portrayal of ineffectual—almost nonexistent—man, overcome by a dense, oblivious world of objects, becomes an author's inadvertent attempt to master the "thingness" of modern life. Often in spite of itself, the novel enters its plea on behalf of the human condition.

In *Leah*, his third novel, Seymour Epstein has portrayed with subtlety and grace that most difficult of all things:

"There is a possibility . . ." Levine pressed his right side and blew a tormented breath, " . . . well, a strong likelihood, that I shall be giving a popular culture course this fall. From 'Little Nemo' to Li'l Abner."

A stir of unbelief went through Weiner.

"Something wrong, Barn?" said Levine, with a sudden tightening of his lips. "You are, ah, perhaps, displeased, old sport?"

"I? I?" Weiner said softly. "Nah-risher kint! Except . . ." He scratched behind one of Levine's ears. "Gaah, I don't know. Is that for you? Is it, like they say, your *métier*?"

His color deepening, Levine answered, "My piece on John Ford has been twice anthologized. Twice!"

This is, quite possibly, partly a *roman à clef*; but since I no longer live in New York City I am unable to identify any of the characters. Which, after all, might be to my advantage. Periodicals mentioned in *To an Early Grave* include *Portent*, *The Naysayer*, *Second Thoughts*, and *The Mizrakh Monthly*. No mention of *The Friday Review*.

a human being who matters. And he has done it against all odds. He has chosen to tell the story of a typical (not ordinary) woman, a secretary, who has led a banal existence and who is caught on the edge of a chasm of terrifying loneliness.

But here banality is left behind. Epstein has managed to take a thirty-seven-year-old spinster, endow her with intelligence and wit, and then confront her with a despair as existentially profound as that experienced by many more self-dramatizing characters. Leah is an attractive woman and a strong one. All her life people have relied upon this strength. The parade is long and sad: a lover whose sanity proved hopelessly fragile; the boss whose business could not function without her; her estranged parents, who can communicate only via their daughter; a Negro co-worker who is tortured by jealousy of his wife. Their extravagant needs and Leah's simple ones (a man to love, children) clash again and again. Each encounter leaves Leah more deeply enmeshed in her loneliness. Isolation is, in fact, the theme. And it is presented so naturally that it is a while before one recognizes the artistry that is at work.

The events themselves all border on the cliché. Leah's boss offers her an
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—Seymour Linden (Simon & Schuster)
Wallace Markfield, author of "To an Early Grave."



— Alfred A. Knopf.

Heimito von Doderer, author
of "Every Man a Murderer."

Novelists in the Book News

—Fred W. McDarrah.



—Kal Weyner.

(Above) Seymour Epstein, author of "Leah."
(Left) John Clellon Holmes, author of "Get Home Free."

“arrangement”; a man she likes but doesn’t love proposes marriage; a man she *could* love proves to be a hopeless task of reconstruction. All of these occurrences are artfully shaped into a sort of Everywoman tale of modern city life.

Yet, extraordinarily, Epstein escapes the traps implicit in his material. (Many a Paddy Chayefsky has failed where he succeeds.) Perhaps it is the humorous detachment, possessed by both Leah and the author, that saves the day. Make no mistake, the abyss that

stretches beneath these lost Manhattanites is the same one explored by Beckett, Burroughs, and other specialists in contemporary despair. Only the specific terrain is more familiar here.

Epstein’s achievement is somewhat marred by an overly neat linking of personality and action. A dangerously easy Freudian rationale seems to hover in the wings. But this is, in context, a minor flaw. Skirting sentiment, the author has made a fresh, unique human being out of universal materials.

From Sherlock to Self

***Every Man a Murderer*, by Heimito von Doderer, translated from the German by Richard and Clara Winston (Knopf. 373 pp. \$5.95), written more than a quarter-century ago, assumes the guise of a detective story to expose a larger reality than is apparent in everyday existence. Claude Hill is head of the German graduate program at Rutgers.**

By CLAUDE HILL

IT WAS the *London Times Literary Supplement* that discovered Heimito von Doderer for the Anglo-American world a few years ago. Although the newspaper’s assessment (“the most formidable German-speaking novelist now living”) seems questionable after the emergence of Günter Grass with *The Tin Drum*, there can be no doubt that the author of *The Demons* is one of the major figures in German literature today. Now close to seventy, Doderer did not gain serious critical acclaim until the end of the last war. Mostly influenced by Proust and indebted to Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, and Hermann Broch (all of whom he rejects), he stands in the tradition of the great European formalists of modern fiction. One of the most iconoclastic theorists of the novel in recent years, he is primarily concerned with the shrinkage of “real” reality in the contemporary world. If I interpret his rather diffuse notions correctly (expressed before a Paris audience in 1958), then the main task of the novelist is a kind of reconstitution of universality (à la Goethe) and reconquest of reality. Most men spend most of their conscious lives in a thin reality (jobs, traditions, classes, taboos) and, unless they break out of it, they will suffocate from lack of spiritual oxygen. They never actually live. It is the novelist who can make them

aware of their hidden—and often lost—selves.

Since *Every Man a Murderer* is a minor book written twenty-six years ago, it might be argued that Doderer’s theories do not apply to his earlier fiction. It seems to me, however, that they do. Other imponderables must be weighed, too, and it might very well be that the author found it politically expedient to operate behind the safe veil of a detective story in 1938. The hero, Conrad Castiletz, a young business executive, marries the daughter of his boss and, after learning that eight years previously his sister-in-law was found murdered with her jewelry missing, gradually becomes obsessed with solving the case. Since I do not wish to give away the plot, let me simply say that the solution turns out to be ingenious and convincing. It is not until page 348 that the murderer is named, although a retrospective check reveals that the decisive clue was given early in the book.

This brings me back to Doderer’s theory of fiction as remembrance of things past (Proust). The death of Conrad’s sister-in-law is only the triggering device that starts him on the road toward himself. At the end of the journey one of the characters sums it up for him: “You have traveled with unusual success upon that longest road which heals all evils . . . Those who follow this road to the end and win the wreath obtain possession of something granted only to an infinitesimally small number of persons: the knowledge of who they really are.”

It should be obvious by now that this seemingly innocuous tale of mystery and suspense operates on two levels. My criticism is that the two levels are incongruous. Although basically logical, the surface plot is dependent on some minor improbabilities: Conrad instinctively—or accidentally—finds the exact spot where jewels had been thrown from a moving train in southern Ger-

many eight years ago; a subway conductor who had once seen him for about an hour near Stuttgart recognizes him eight years later on the platform of a Berlin station. While these improbabilities are disturbing to the connoisseur of “regular” detective stories, the reader of “serious” novels is annoyed by many gaps he would like to have filled by the author: Conrad’s relations with his parents, his two years away from home in a textile manufacturing town, his feelings toward his wife, to name only a few. The same imbalance prevails in the description of localities. Dostoevsky and Agatha Christie won’t mix. It is Doderer’s ponderous notions that get in the way of his considerable narrative skill, at least in this earlier novel.

Stony Fields and Hearts: *The Land of Youth* (Dial, \$4.95) in this first novel by Richard Power is also a land reminiscent of J. M. Synge—the islands off the western coast of Ireland, where a lifetime among fields of stone give men hearts scarcely less hard. Here live fishing families, made distrustful of one another through their isolation from the mainland; dominated by ancient custom, they are at once envious of a changing world, yet reluctant to join it. The perfect locale for a native’s return.

The native in this case is young Barbara Nora, back from three years in the States. She has not been home long when she falls in love with Padraig Mahony, the seminarian son of a widow who runs the local store and pub. For Barbara, Padraig abandons his vocation, but the affair breaks up when she goes to Dublin pregnant with another man’s child. Padraig remains behind, eventually to take over the store and grow embittered. When Barbara returns, years later, to marry another man, the old memories settle like inflictions on both of them, for this is an unforgetting island, and an unforgiving one, too.

Mr. Powers’s characters are well realized, and they are by no means apparitions out of Synge. Nevertheless, they suffer from a curious self-determination that everything shall come out wrong in the end. Trapped, they spend their lives settling old scores. Names such as Coilin, Mairead, and Sean give the book a properly Gaelic touch, and a little peat, poetry, politics, and poteen make it very, very Irish.

Yet it all seems as remote as Imish-keever itself—a story of doom viewed through a mass of black clouds. Sensitive told, if not particularly original in concept, *The Land of Youth* is a novel for those willing to take one more walk through the Celtic twilight.

—DAVID DEMPSEY.

Bedding and Boozing: A young couple in a loft apartment, with mem-