

Things Seem as Bad as They Seem

Hod-Carrier: Notes of a Laborer on an Unfinished Cathedral, by Gerald W. Johnson (Morrow, 211 pp. \$3.95), looks at the mortar of American democracy and finds most of it sturdy. Emile Capouya's column *The Real Thing* appears regularly in SR.

By EMILE CAPOUYA

GERALD W. JOHNSON is one of the three good reasons for reading the *New Republic* nowadays, and his very existence raises this question: Can our era be as bad as mostly it feels to us, can it be so insalubrious for the human spirit, if it produces men of his caliber—men, moreover, who are not passionate for radical change? After all, such men are as much products of the times as any less estimable persons you care to name. The fact that Mr. Johnson is as distinguished for intelligence, good grace, and good will as our favorite politician is not, does make him something of a rarity, but a rarity is still a reality. Indeed, Mr. Johnson, expressing dismay at the possibility that President Eisenhower in the U-2 incident, and Ambassador Stevenson in the invasion of Cuba, knowingly lied to save their country, shows a spirit in closer touch with reality than those of the President and the Ambassador. In politics, a lie is good for the short run only—in the cases cited, less than twenty-four hours. And to lie with several hundred million people watching is a piece of romanticism on the level of the Children's Crusade. Then who is to say that Mr. Johnson's realism is not as typical of the age as Mr. Eisenhower's and Mr. Stevenson's belief in fairies?

Typical or not, whether he redeems the age or not, the man who represents himself, in this collection of topical essays, as a hod-carrier working on the unfinished cathedral of American democracy is a journeyman worthy of his hire. We are forced to take seriously his judgment that our times are not intolerable.

For a sample of Mr. Johnson's workmanship, here is his contribution to the buttress of civil rights that is designed to support that grand fabric of decency and dignity sketched in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence: He reminds us of C. Vann Woodward's

thesis that, ten years after the Civil War, the Negro enjoyed substantially equal political status with the white man, and that Jim Crow had to be invented and perfected by the patient work of generations before the Negro was reduced to second-class citizenship, and sometimes near-peonage, again. Mr. Johnson suggests—and herein is his originality—that the regression to underprivileged status was the Negro's own fault.

At first sight, the theory may seem wrongheaded as can be, but rightly understood it contains an enormous compliment to the Negro people, one, moreover, that their recent conduct has fully earned. Mr. Johnson's formula blithely ignores the great forces opposed to the Negro's effort of self-emancipation, but it does so in order to put the emphasis where it belongs—on men's ability to raise their political, social, cultural, and moral level by an effort of will. Mr. Johnson says that the Negro fell short of his own possibilities between 1875 and 1942; thereafter he began to rise to his own level, and he is steadily winning his freedom by steadily deserving it. The best way of deserving it, I would add, is to demand it. I exult when I see my Negro fellow citizens doing just that and fulfilling

their civic responsibilities thereby. Not least because it gives me hope for the vast underprivileged majority to which I myself belong, the affluent poor—whites, those helots, servants, and sutlers of the modern state. With the example of the Negro before them, there is hope that they too will read the Declaration and the Constitution, take heart of grace, and determine on organizing their public business in a manner more nearly manlike.

If, though, we are to judge our times in the light of Gerald Johnson's virtues, we must in consistency examine them too in the glare—not light, but rather darkness visible—of his one conspicuous failing. I know not what name to give it, but I can report its symptoms. Mr. Johnson writes, "I have never been one of those Americans who seem to be haggard by guilt over Hiroshima"—thus allying himself with President Truman, who, as we know, has never lost a night's sleep over the affair. "Given the state of mind of the Japanese high command on August 6, 1945, I believe that Hiroshima actually saved more Japanese lives than it destroyed—to say nothing of our own prospective losses." The only suitable comment is that of the Irish patriot who remarked that there are some things a man must not do to save his country. It would follow that there are things a man must not do to save Japanese lives, and obliterating Hiroshima and Nagasaki might be among those things. In that case, the fact that a man as decent as Mr. Johnson finds those things acceptable must mean that our times are truly as dreadful as they seem.

A Common Ground for Diversity

Fire-Bell in the Night: The Crisis in Civil Rights, by Oscar Handlin (Little, Brown, 110 pp. \$3.50), argues that integration alone is not enough to solve our present racial problems. Roger Baldwin was a founder of the American Civil Liberties Union.

By ROGER BALDWIN

NO WHITE man could review this white man's book from the perspective of a Negro—not even one who, like myself, served for a quarter of a century on the board of the National Urban League and fought for years for total racial equality. However fair and sympathetic Oscar Handlin is, I suspect

that most Negroes would dissent with passion from his essential argument that "properly speaking, not integration but equality is our genuine objective."

While this may suggest "separate but equal," Professor Handlin repudiates forced separation; he argues rather for the voluntary choice of association that has enabled other ethnic groups to preserve their identities, and claims that contrived integration will tend to suppress the Negro's own identity, since "it assumes that any kind of separation involves elements of inferiority."

Handlin views the problem as primarily one not of integration but of joint participation, on the basis of personal ability, in the common tasks of a democratic society. Of this goal he says, "We shall avoid disappointment if we

realize how little will be gained by equality alone. We shall avoid tragedy if we realize how much will be lost without it."

His appraisal of recent events is not encouraging. The decade since the 1954 Supreme Court decision he regards as "ten years of frustration." Whatever advances may have been made have been negated by white resistance, by the increase of race separation leading to the polarization of extremes. We now have equal rights at law, of course; but how shall they be made a reality? According to Handlin, Negroes, in considering integration the only cure, ignore the fact that this alone will not overcome prejudice. The author contends that only equality of opportunity to choose without preferential treatment is the "common ground on which we all can stand."

The more concerned Negroes become with integration, the more they see the country as divided between black and white. Society is not so divided; it is composed of people with diverse interests who must work together. In time racial equality should lead to the acceptance of men for what, not who, they are, and strengthen them in selecting their own associations.

Professor Handlin is surely provocative, and Negroes reading his book will surely be provoked. For in the struggle for equality the fight for integration as a tactic assures recognition, whatever its ultimate validity for the union of equality with freedom.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For a further examination of this topic, see "Education in America," which begins on page 65.



Simonne Jacquemard—"perfect control in her sense of rhythm and . . . melodic refrain."

Where the Candle Burns Brightest

The Night Watchman, by *Simonne Jacquemard*, translated from the French by *L. D. Emmet* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston. 142 pp. \$3.95), reveals a world very different from the one we think we live in. *Leon S. Roudiez* is editor of the *French Review*.

By LEON S. ROUDIEZ

FOR THE past twelve years or so *Simonne Jacquemard* has been writing poems, short stories, and novels that have appealed to those readers in France who value quality and depth of experience and have little regard for literary fads. Ten volumes of hers had quietly come off the presses before the present one was, almost by accident, splattered with the notoriety afforded by a major literary prize—the *Renaudot*.

The Night Watchman is no realistic story teeming with likely characters, either attractive or picturesque. There is no conventional hero; there is no plot to speak of. Like many of the better contemporary novels, this is fictional prose raised to the level of poetry. At first, however, the reader may be trapped into believing that the usual ingredients of fiction are present; or, perhaps, he may think the author is a more lyrical disciple of *Robbe-Grillet*. For there does appear to be a main character: a night watchman living in an unnamed small town, probably in Normandy. He has been arrested, but at first we do not know for exactly what crime. Brought before a judge, he chooses to remain silent, although there is a stenographic record of a previous interrogation during which he made statements that will be used against him. Sketchy details concerning his crime and the life that led to it are thus gradually revealed, always tantalizingly incomplete. Although it might look as if the traditional element of suspense were being introduced to ensnare the reader and eventually lead him to the "true message" of the novel, this is not the case at all. The device is an organic part of a book that strives to reveal the distorting and paradoxical nature of appearances.

The watchman is called *Simeon Leverrier*. He must surely have been named after the astronomer who discovered the planet *Neptune* without

ever looking at the sky; perhaps he is a "black" *Leverrier* (Cf. *Acts*, 13: 1) who discovers Light while working in darkness, who discovers Good through doing evil and obtains spiritual rewards as a consequence of seeking material gain. *The Night Watchman* describes a world in which opposites blend, where the account of a crime dissolves into a mystical inner quest. Readers familiar with the French literary scene will by now have identified the author's allegiance: she is devoted to surrealism and to the search for a truer reality than that afforded by the mere observation of the surface of things.

Mme. Jacquemard's craftsmanship is extraordinary; her style achieves engaging lyrical effects with a remarkable economy of words. She exhibits perfect control in her sense of rhythm and what I would call melodic refrain: those words and, occasionally, sentences that are repeated, with or without minor variations, to insure unity of theme and mood, thus keeping the reader's focus on the emblematic nature of the book.

At this point, however, I must emphasize that I have been writing about the French text of *The Night Watchman*. The English translation is scandalously bad. It evidences no understanding of Mme. Jacquemard's purpose, no feel for language, and little knowledge of French. Where the author described one character running away with *Bolsheviks* hot in pursuit, the English text shows him "running with the *Bolsheviks* behind the lines"; where she has another say something like "yeah," the English text reads "ouf"; where she refers to men who will come and deprive the main character of everything he has, the English text states that they have just done so—and I could fill several pages of *SR* with a list of infelicities and outright errors. The translator apparently thinks a *boulangère* is a butcher; I think he has butchered this book. Nevertheless, I hope there are enough discerning readers who will glimpse a work of art beneath the rubble of the English version.

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