

Child's World Without Wonder

The Opoponax, by Monique Wittig, translated from the French by Helen Weaver (Simon & Schuster, 256 pp. \$4.95), conveys a sensory, insensible child's-eye view of the world. Anna Balakian is a professor of French literature at New York University.

By ANNA BALAKIAN

IT WAS inevitable that the *nouveau roman* would breed heirs. Young Monique Wittig, who won the 1964 Prix Medecis for her first novel, *L'Opoponax*, undoubtedly read the new novelists at an impressionable age and fell in love with their way of writing, as previous generations found their inspiration in Flaubert and Proust. The disciple exaggerates what the master does, and as a result the world of "innocent" childhood that is presumably revealed here is fragmental in the extreme, precise but incoherent, brilliantly sensual and thoroughly insensitive. Mlle. Wittig has been acclaimed by Marguerite Duras, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Nathalie Sarraute; more pertinent for the American public, Mary McCarthy has also hailed her.

Monique Wittig's tremendous power over words comes through unimpeded, thanks to Helen Weaver's magnificent feat as translator. The vivid canvas of colors, forms, and movements conveys an immediacy of sensation in which every attempt has been made to avoid perception. Everything happens in the present tense from the time the group of children first enter primary school until we find them lodged in a boarding school, amid pastoral surroundings and under parochial jurisdiction. Although their frame of reference has evolved from penmanship exercises and games to the orbits of geometry and the writings of Pascal and Baudelaire, their view of life remains basically unchanged.

The assumption which underlies the uninterrupted flow of words is that children see but do not judge, feel nothing save sensory states—physical pain and the fear of a supernatural force, here an "opoponax" that hovers in the dark and haunts their moments of solitude:

You can't describe it because it never has the same form. Kingdom, neither animal nor vegetable nor mineral, in other words indeterminate. Humor, variable, it is not advisable to frequent the opoponax.



Monique Wittig—"tremendous power over words."

The "you" by which the French *on* is translated has a disconcerting tendency to involve the reader. You are asked to believe that when a child is spanked he feels the pain but not the humiliation, that youngsters can be exposed to a series of funerals of persons close to them, and yet not shed a tear, that they can view the sorrow of their elders and not connect at all, that they can constantly observe actions in the most minute and vivid manner without feeling the need to put some meaning into them, that to them nature is as impersonal as the fossilized fauna and flora scrutinized by a geologist.

I am willing, sadly, to accept *The Opoponax* as the world of a particular, arid conscience. But what is disturbing is the implication that this is the way youth sees the world. Is this indeed the testimony of a shell-shocked generation? Has childhood lost its universal and marvelous meaning, its power to animate nature, to discern more than the poet and more than the mystic what an earlier writer about childhood, Alain Fournier, called "the magic glow" of the world?

Basically, once the novelty of the *nouveau roman* wears off, we are faced with an enormous paradox. When the surrealists sought to express in the arts an increased acuity of the sensual experience, the intent was to enrich thereby the gamut of sensibilities, to strengthen the bonds between the physical world and the psyche. But taking

this lead, the new novelists seem to arrive at the opposite pole; sensations are acting like a drug that numbs the artist instead of releasing a series of affective illuminations of his universe. The *nouveau roman* is hatching Calibans instead of Queen Mabs.

It must have been difficult for Monique Wittig to stay on the surface of consciousness; it is to be hoped that in the future which stretches before her so promisingly she will cease to distort her obvious talent for writing, and, by providing richer sustenance to her keen powers of observation, steer clear of the literary wastelands.



Revelations in a Primitive World:

Just before World War II, Frederic Prokosch came into fashion as the creator of the "geographical" novel; *The Asiatics* and *The Seven Who Fled*, the first two in the genre, enjoyed great popularity. However, since then literary fashions have changed. Prokosch has not. Faithful to his own particular vision and his own distinctive style, he has produced a total of fourteen novels, as well as much distinguished poetry. The brilliantly precocious Prokosch of the Thirties has become in the Sixties a novelist who has not only preserved and perfected his gifts but added to them a depth of insight into the nature of man.

Like the early Prokosch novels, *The Wreck of the Cassandra* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$4.95) is concerned with the natural world and man's relation to it. However, whereas in the initial books nature overwhelmed man, here it is man who dominates the reader's interest. The story, a strong one that can be read simply for itself and the beauties and horrors it contains, is of a group of people who survive a shipwreck and are sent to meet their destinies in the natural (or primitive) world. For Lily Domingo, an outrageous but likable American millionairess, this means destruction at the hands of an innocent—but not before she has achieved, without realizing it, the one thing she had really wanted. For Penelope Eccles, the fanatic butterfly hunter, who is interested only in perfection, it means a strange but logical martyrdom. For recriminatory Laura and Tony, it means an ordeal that should and may resolve the ordeal of their marriage. For Baron Hugo, it means the ultimate acceptance of evil, of a kind that made the Nazi holocaust possible. For the true hero of the tale, Professor Shishnik (does the name derive from Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin?), it means that the meek must inherit the earth.

Although Prokosch has been labeled a romantic, he is, in fact, a profound realist, intent on seeing the world for what it is and man for what he is. It is his subtle revelations of the various as-

pects of man and nature that make this novel so exciting, but it is his awareness of mysteries, which he imparts to us, that makes it so moving.

—VICTOR CHAPIN.



Wehrmacht Hardy with Heart: When a first-person journal is offered to the reader as fiction, it is natural to wonder about the author's background. Normally, it isn't cricket to go beyond the book or book jacket. But this one merely says that Michael Mott's first novel was *The Notebooks of Susan Berry* and that he lives with wife and twin daughters in London. His second novel, *Helmet and Wasps* (Houghton Mifflin, \$3.95), is a far fictional reach from this sparse personal note. For the author's "I" is a young German officer living in a requisitioned villa when the American forces begin to move north of Rome in the Second World War. Inquiry discloses that the author is an Anglo-American too young to have seen the wartime he writes about. Thus, projecting himself inside the mind of a Wehrmacht hardy is a double burden and, as it turns out at the end of this short novel, an impossible one.

Yes, there have been novels written by nonparticipants who have come to major events, military and otherwise, long years later. But it takes something akin to genius to write a *Red Badge of Courage*. And even in those empathic historical novels about ancient warriors, it has been necessary to establish a link between author and a fictional character's thought processes.

Mr. Mott's German captain is an enigma. He lives in a twilight villa, surrounded by *opera buffa* Italians. The gardener scrapes and bows like Henry Armetta. The housekeeper is delighted that her dishes are so well received by the occupying Germans. Fellow-officers click their heels. Widows and housewives in the small town pay court to the corporals and privates. Several heavy German superiors all but have Heidelberg dueling scars.

A young Italian woman falls in love with the rigid captain. At the age of nineteen she herself is given to long and terribly wise silences. An incident occurs at the villa involving several hidden Jewish children. Previously the captain has turned in an old Jewish woman. This time he helps to save the children.

The novel turns around this small incident. Although the author has written *Helmet and Wasps* with a certain elegance, the reader cannot help feeling that the writing is a substitute for interior development. But then Mr. Mott gave himself an almost impossible fiction assignment to begin with.

—HERBERT MITGANG.

SR's Check List of the Week's New Books

Anthropology

STRANGER AND FRIEND: The Way of an Anthropologist. By Hortense Powdermaker. Norton. \$6.50.

Crime, Suspense

THE BY-PASS CONTROL. By Mickey Spillane. Dutton. \$3.95.

THE WIDOWMAKER. By M. Fagyas. Doubleday. \$3.95.

Current Affairs

THE ECONOMICS OF AIR POLLUTION: A Symposium. Edited by Harold Wolozin. Norton. Hardbound, \$5. Paperback, \$2.95.

INQUEST: The Warren Commission and the Establishment of Truth. By Edward Jay Epstein. Viking. \$5.

MARTI ON THE U.S.A. By José Martí. Southern Illinois Univ. Press. \$5.95.

NEIGHBORS TAKEN FOR GRANTED: Canada and the United States. Edited by Livingston T. Merchant. Praeger. \$4.95.

THE NEW CONGRESS. By Stephen K. Bailey. St. Martin's. \$3.95.

Fiction

THE BLUE PAVILION. By William Buchan. Morrow. \$4.75.

BRING MY SONS FROM FAR. By Ralph Lynn Lowenstein. World. \$4.95.

EXIT. By George Deaux. Simon & Schuster. \$4.95.

MASTERS' CHOICE: The Best Science-Fiction Stories of All Time. Ed. by Laurence M. Janifer. Simon & Schuster. \$5.95.

THE OLIVE FIELD. By Ralph Bates. Washington Square Press. \$6.95. (Reissue.)

THE STRANGER IN THE SNOW. By Lester Goran. New American Library. \$4.95.

History

THE BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN. By Mari Sandoz. Lippincott. \$4.50.

CLIMAX AT BUENA VISTA. By David Lavender. Lippincott. \$4.50.

THE FIERCE PAWNS. By Patrick A. Macrory. Lippincott. \$7.95.

THE FIRE AND THE ROSE. By Sir Arthur Bryant. Doubleday. \$4.95.

1812. By Anthony Brett-James. St. Martin's. \$6.50.

HITLER'S SOCIAL REVOLUTION: Class and Status in Nazi Germany, 1933-1939. By David Schoenbaum. Doubleday. \$5.95.

THE WORLD WE HAVE LOST. By Peter Laslett. Scribners. \$5.95.

Literary Criticism, History

THE ACCENTS OF PERSUASION: Charlotte Brontë's Novels. By Robert Bernard Martin. Norton. \$6.

FROM HELL TO PARADISE: Dante and His Comedy. By Olof Lagercrantz. Washington Square Press. \$4.95.

GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO IN FRANCE: A Study in Cultural Relations. By Giovanni Gullace. Syracuse Univ. Press. \$6.25.

INNOCENT VICTORIAN: The Satiric Poetry of Arthur Hugh Clough. By Michael Timko. Ohio Univ. Press. \$5.

MODERN OCCASIONS. Edited by Philip Rahv. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$6.95.

RIMBAUD. By Wallace Fowlie. Univ. of Chicago Press. \$6.50.

RIMBAUD: Complete Works, Selected Letters. Edited by Wallace Fowlie. Univ. of Chicago Press. \$12.50.

THOMAS HARDY'S PERSONAL WRITINGS: Prefaces, Literary Opinions, Reminiscences. Edited by Harold Orel. Univ. of Kansas Press. \$6.

Miscellany

ADVENTURES IN GREEK COOKERY. By Stella Kopulos and Dorothy P. Jones. World. \$4.95.

THE CHEMICAL WARFARE SERVICE: Chemicals in Combat. By Brooks E. Kleber and Dale Birdsell. Office of the Chief of



"I have news for you, soldier. You were left-handed."