



Books

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LITERARY HORIZONS

The Undergraduate Faust

IN VIEW of what Marlowe, Goethe, and Mann have made of the Faust legend, it takes nerve to attempt an up-to-date version, but that is what John Hersey has done in *Too Far to Walk* (Knopf, \$4.95). His hero, a sophomore at Sheldon College, is named John Fist ("Fist" is the English translation of *Faust*), and the villain, playing the role of Mephistopheles, is another student, named Breed. (I'm sure the name must have some significance, but I don't get it.) There is a pact between the two, which Fist signs and then seals with his blood.

In Marlowe's play Faust, having mastered divinity, medicine, and law, is bored and turns to magic, summoning Mephistopheles and bargaining with his soul. John Fist is no great scholar, but up to this point he has enjoyed his studies and done well in them. (He may even have been that dreadful thing, an overachiever.) Now even his favorite professor seems dull, and yet he scorns his roommate's enthusiasm for football and another student's passion for civil rights. He grows slovenly in appearance and slack in his personal habits. Almost his only remaining friend is Chum Breed, who impresses and frightens him by his cold superiority to everyone and everything.

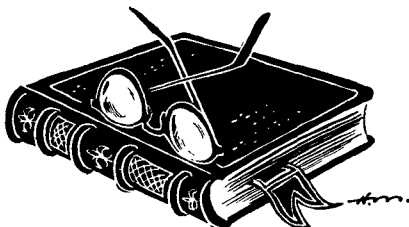
Faust seeks new powers and new experiences. Fist, when Breed asks him what he wants, tries to formulate an answer:

He wanted to *feel*, to push his personal feelings out to the limits of the galaxies, and inward to the molten pit in the center of the earth. Awareness of the entire works was what he wanted, and to encompass and understand it all! . . . The thing was to build up a stock of experiences, of events of the senses of every kind and sort, of every possible degree of importance—soak them in, drink them all in, so that one could really get in touch with the solid hardpan reality that must underlie all the crap, the dirt, the billboards, the shrubbery. But it wasn't just a matter of going through motions—he wanted to experience a breakthrough, a whole

series of real breakthroughs, so marked that you'd inwardly hear each time some sort of loud crack, sonic boom. . . . And above all, above all: to have this with some person, with a girl. Fusion, a feeling of such closeness that one person would *become* the other.

"I'll give it all to you," says Breed. "Every bit of it." So Fist signs. At first Breed seems slow in delivering the goods, but he does produce a girl whom Fist wants, whose name inevitably turns out to be Margaret. They go to a motel together, but all they do is talk and talk, until Margaret falls asleep. Then there is Mona, a high-class whore, who is a self-confessed witch and who is somehow identified with Helen of Troy. She competently helps Fist to lose his virginity, and then accompanies him on a visit to his parents, whom he is determined to humiliate.

By now Fist has become what David Riesman would call "an anomic type." "The anomics," Riesman has written, "include not only those who, in their character, were trained to attend to signals that either are no longer given or no longer spell meaning or success. They may also, paradoxically, be those who are overadjusted, who listen too assiduously to the signals from within or without." They are the Nay-sayers. Breed, when queried by Fist, says, "I'm the Spirit of Playing It Cool." Under Breed's influence Fist denies more and more of the values he once accepted. When his mother calls him a beatnik, he says, "I despise beatniks. . . . You're miles out of touch. Beatniks went out five years ago; the fourteen-year-olds have taken it up now." He participates in a demonstration against the college rule that each student must select a ma-



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for subject during his sophomore year, and gets into jail.

Throughout all this Fist is more or less actively unhappy, and he reproaches Breed for falling so far short of his promises. Breed says he has been waiting until he was sure Fist was ready: "You've put yourself really at my mercy, you know, John, because you've rejected a whole set of rules for life without finding anything to take their place. We'll go look for a new set. O.K.?" Breed's first project for John is a dangerous and pointless crime, from which John gets a kick but something short of what he had hoped for.

So Breed gives him LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), and the chapters that follow are the most impressive part of the book. First there is the euphoria that users of this and similar drugs have described, the strange distortion, confusion, and extension of the senses; and then there is anguish, in which Fist tries to say to Breed, "Heaven isn't worth

Hell." A series of visions follows: in one Fist is a beach bum in Mexico; in another he is a soldier in Vietnam; in a third he is a patient in a hospital. Finally he takes part in a true Walpurgis Night.

At last Fist has learned his lesson, and it is not too late for him to refuse to renew his compact with Mephistopheles-Breed. "I've come to see that there can't be any shortcut to those breakthroughs I yearn for." At the beginning he decides not to go to a lecture because it is "too far to walk." Now, in his new state of mind, on a beautiful day in May, he asks himself, "How far would be too far to walk on this particular day?"

I should take the novel less seriously than I do if I had not known, or known of, many young men and young women who have gone through essentially the same crisis as John Fist. At some point each of them has found that the motives that have carried him thus far are no longer operative. Students who got A's in their first year have flunked out in their second; some have almost literally gone underground, like the beach bums of John's vision. Hersey knows the symptoms very well, and if blaming the trouble on the devil doesn't get us very far, neither do the theorizings of the psychologists and sociologists.

There are more serious questions to be raised on literary grounds. As *The Marmot Drive*, *The Child Buyer*, and *White Lotus* show, Hersey is fond of allegory and parable. Sometimes it has seemed to me that he hasn't really trusted his story and has felt that it must be given a greater significance by being related to some legend or fable or symbol. In this instance the legend has little to contribute, and Hersey, whose understanding and skill I respect, could have done better without it.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT No. 1180

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1180 will be found in the next issue.

ZVX BJ DLQ FXGR VXBZVG DLVD

OCSJLQJ. FT XQQUJ DF.

—ZVTM DNVBX

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1179

Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree. —EZRA POUND.

LETTERS TO THE Book Review Editor



Ammunition

I HAVE JUST BEEN SHOWN Joseph Bauke's review [SR, Jan. 22] of my translation of Peter Faecke's *Firebugs* (Knopf) . . . My translation has been treated most generously in this country—the *Observer* called it "beautifully Englished" and others were no less complimentary. Perhaps they were too kind, but surely a reputable journal should not print accusations of distortions, inaccuracies and outright mistakes without adducing even the slightest shred of evidence. It is easy to snipe at a man's work—in my case the product of fifteen years' experience—but to do so with your reviewer's slovenly lack of ammunition is to hit a new low in literary criticism—if I may borrow his words.

ARNOLD POMERANS.

Essex, England

IT WAS NOT LACK of ammunition that kept me from elaborating on my charges. On the contrary, the stockpile is so overwhelming that a flat judgment seems entirely in order. There is no need to invoke fifteen years' experience or the authority of the *Observer*; anyone with a semester of German to his credit and a dictionary in his hand can see how I arrived at my evaluation.

The following distortions and mistakes are random examples of Mr. Pomerans's Sanforized transmogrification of Peter Faecke's fascinating first novel, *The Firebugs*. Original: . . . *auf dem Lenkrad seine Hände, die sie, wenn sie nicht sitzen-geblieben wäre, bedenkenlos geschlagen hätten*. Translation: . . . his ruthless hands grasped the steering wheel. Correct: . . . his hands on the steering wheel . . . if she had not remained seated he would have hit her ruthlessly. Original: *Kopfstein*. Translation. concrete. Correct: cobblestone. Original: *eine Scheune*. Translation: a vil-lage. Correct: a barn. Original: *Hawe trank . . . gab das Zeug aber . . . wieder von sich*. Translation: Hawe took a pull on the flask. Correct: Hawe took a slug, but threw the stuff up.

J. P. BAUKE.

New York, N.Y.

Chapters for Middle-earth Lore

IN REFERENCE TO the letter of Frank Skillman about the existence of "hobbit-warrens" [SR, Feb. 19]:

The Tolkien Society of America is an active organization devoted to discussion of Middle-earth lore, Tolkien's writings as such, and other authors such as C.S. Lewis and George MacDonald. Membership totals about 400 nation-wide, including Professor Tolkien and W. H. Auden. There are meetings (see *The New Yorker*, Jan. 15) in New York, and plans are under way to establish chapters in several areas, including San Francisco. The T.S.A. publishes the *Tolkien Journal*, a quarterly containing

current Tolkien news and articles of interest to hobbitophiles. Prospective members should contact the Tolkien Society of America, 159 Marlborough Rd., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11226.

As for the term "hobbit-warren," I refer Mr. Skillman to WNI II, which defines "warren" as "a piece of ground for the breeding of rabbits, etc.," or "a densely populated dwelling, slum, or quarter." No self-respecting hobbit would stand for anyone's use of the term "hobbit-warren."

RICHARD PLOTZ, Thain,
Tolkien Society of America.
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Name Straightening

VICTOR WOLFSON mentions Sir Winston Churchill's inability to get his male nurse's name straight between 1958 and 1965 in his review [SR, Feb. 26] of Roy Howells's *Churchill's Last Years*. But then he—or a typographer—boo-boos on Churchill's one-time secretary, Sir Edward Marsh, which comes out "Edwin." Sir Edward, of course, was also the editor of the Georgian Poetry anthologies.

RICHARD J. STONESIFER.
Madison, N.J.

Twain Scored Scott

I MUST TAKE ISSUE with Marghanita Laski's statement in her review of *The Romantic Way* [SR, Feb. 26] that America never took, "except trivially, to the sentimental, chivalric Romanticism fathered by Byron and Scott." At least one social critic of the nineteenth century, Mark Twain, felt otherwise. In *Life on the Mississippi* he explicitly (and in *Huck Finn* implicitly, though no less savagely) condemns the effects of Scott's Romanticism:

[Scott] did measureless harm; more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any individual who ever wrote. Most of the world has now [1883] outlived a good part of these harms, though by no means all of them; but in our South they flourish pretty forcefully still. . . . [We have] practical, common sense, progressive ideas, and progressive works; mixed up with the duel, the inflated speech, and the jejune Romanticism of an absurd past that is dead. . . .

Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war. (Ch. XLVI)

And Faulkner and others add contributory evidence that denies the trivialness which Miss Laski asserts.

PETER L. HAYS.
Columbus, O.