



Books

SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR

LITERARY HORIZONS

A Dream of Revenge

THERE are so many varieties of nonrealistic fiction these days that one hardly knows how to distinguish among them. There is the novel based on myth, such as Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*, Frederick Buechner's *A Long Day's Dying*, and John Updike's *The Centaur*. There is explicit allegory, such as John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*, and implied allegory, such as Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. There is satire carried to the point of absurdity, as in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. There is the surrealism of John Hawkes in *The Lime Twig* and *Second Skin*. And there are the many novels in which realism and fantasy are closely blended, such as Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, Bruce Jay Friedman's *Stern*, Peter Beagle's *A Fine and Private Place*, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, to say nothing of Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*.

This is a rough-and-ready classification that I offer as suggestive, not definitive. I have drawn it up chiefly in order to point out that Harry Mathews's *Tlooth* (Doubleday, \$3.95) fits no category that I can think of. The author's second novel it is the first book published in Paris Review Editions, an arrangement for the publication in book form of the kind of experimental work encouraged by the avant-garde *Paris Review*.

Ordinarily it is unwise of a reviewer to tell more of the plot of a novel than is necessary to give the public some idea of the character of the book and to support his contentions about its merits and defects. Since, however, *Tlooth* has no plot and hence no climax that can be spoiled for the reader, and since the only way of describing it is to list some of the happenings out of which it is built, a summary is called for.

The beginning of the novel is set in a prison camp, about which the narrator tells us: "The camp, in which I was completing my second year, had kept its pre-

revolutionary structure through historical, ideological, and geographic change. Established during the Holy Alliance for the internment of heretics, it had since the Eighties received offenders of every sort. Recently it had been moved to its present southerly location at Jacksongrad." (The interestingly named Jacksongrad, we learn later, is in Siberia.) The prisoners are arbitrarily classified as Americanists, Darbyists, Defective Baptists, Fideists, and Resurrectionists. (All this, I suppose, is intended to suggest that theological heresy and political heresy are much the same.)

The narrator, a dentist, appears to be a woman, and, though I didn't catch on to this until near the end, I shall have to refer to her as "she." She begins with an account of a baseball game between the Fideists and the Defective Baptists, and lists as shortstop for the Fideists "Evelyn Roak, surgeon, [who] supplied human fragments to a delicatessen and was arrested for scandalous amputations." There is a footnote: "For example, removing, together with a troublesome spur of bone, the index and ring fingers of my left hand. I was then a violinist." It is the narrator's desire for revenge that gives the book as much of a central theme as it has. When Evelyn Roak comes to bat, the narrator, who is serving as catcher, puts into play a ball that contains a bomb. But the plot fails.

The narrator has tried other schemes against Evelyn; once, for instance, she surreptitiously fed her candy that had been chemically treated so as to rot her teeth. Then there is some obscure business concerning "an unsigned letter of about seven hundred words, composed in a farrago of tongues." (The author, a learned young man, concocts a document that fits the description.)

We are now told about an elaborate scheme to ship maple syrup from Jacksongrad to Western Europe which has become mixed up with a plot to smuggle

- 26 Check List of the Week's New Books
- 37 "Tlooth," by Harry Mathews
- 38 Letters to the Book Review Editor
- 39 The Publishing Scene
- 40 "Winston S. Churchill, Vol. I," by Randolph S. Churchill
- 43 Autumn Books for Young People
- 55 "Paul Blanshard on Vatican II," by Paul Blanshard
- 56 "The New Theologian," by Ved Mehta
- 61 "Dissenter in a Great Society," by William Stringfellow; "The Social Gospel in America, 1870-1920," edited by Robert T. Handy; "The Fifteenth Ward and the Great Society," by William Lee Miller; "God's People on the March," by W. M. Bekkers; "Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy," edited by Ian T. Ramsey; "Christian Social Ethics in a Changing World," edited by John C. Bennett
- 62 "The Birds Fall Down," by Rebecca West
- 63 "La Chamade," by Françoise Sagan
- 64 "The Notebooks of Captain Georges," by Jean Renoir. "Ess, Ess, Mein Kindt," by Harry Golden
- 65 "De Gaulle," by Jean Lacouture

into Italy a drug effective in the treatment of baldness and impotence. Since Evelyn Roak is one of the prisoners released to take part in this activity, the narrator decides to make her escape from the prison camp, along with three companions. The escape is achieved with prodigious ingenuity, and the fugitives wander through Asia, beset by dangers. They have remarkable adventures and some of them tell of previous experiences. When they reach civilization, they are informed by a Soviet official that the four of them would have been liberated if they had waited a few hours longer.

I am afraid that I am making the novel sound more straightforward than it is, but I must get on with the summary. In Venice the narrator meets a Count, who asks her to write the scenario for a pornographic movie he proposes to produce. For several pages the scenario and the narrative are mingled. At times the script is written in a kind of Joycean language. (The title is a word of the sort used.) The obscenity, which is pretty thick, is made even less quotable by this device. When he has fin-

ished reading the scenario, the Count says, "It's interesting. But where is the character development? . . . And then it is a *leetle* old hat. No, my dear, I'm afraid it won't do."

The narrator goes to India, still in search of Evelyn Roak, and survives a devastating flood. The pursuit leads her to Tangiers and then to Rome. Later, after she has been married and has become an assistant in a dental clinic, Evelyn Roak comes to see her, and the narrator has her revenge, though there is a suggestion that she too may regret her enemy's visit. The book ends with a description of a print of an Arabian port; it is beautifully done in a formal way but serves no purpose that I can discern.

I am sure that Mathews had fun writing the book, and I have had some fun reading it. He can write uncommonly well when he wants to, and he keeps his charade going, whatever it means. He creates one outrageous situation after another, and most of them he carries off effectively. In his inventiveness and erudition he is like Pynchon, Barth, and William Gaddis, but he seems less concerned with coherence than any of them. It is amusing that the Count calls the narrator's deliriously wild script "a *leetle* old hat." Nobody is going to call *Tlooth* even a little old hat. Mathews wants to be farthest out, and for the moment he is. Whether his indubitable talents might have been expended in some more fruitful way is another question.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT No. 1214

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1214 will be found in the next issue.

RWOVO FVO BFHA JWU KFVO
HUR LYEE RWOBTOEMOT QUV
QOFV UQ JWFR RWO HOYSW-
CUVT JYEE TFA.

—IUHHUEEA

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1213

Those who do not feel pain seldom think that it is felt. —DR. JOHNSON.

LETTERS TO THE Book Review Editor



"JFK in Dallas"

JUDGE ARNOLD L. FEIN ["JFK in Dallas," *SR*, Oct. 22] asks, "Is it naïve to suggest that the truth is the best way to dispel a rumor?" In the context of his question, the "rumor" was that Oswald was on the FBI payroll at \$200 a month, under the informant number "S172." The allegation originated with Dallas Deputy Sheriff Allan Sweatt, who was not called before the Warren Commission to testify to its truth or lack of truth. The possibility thus remains open that the rumor was founded in truth. If so, the truth would not be damaging to the nation—but it would be damaging to the FBI and to J. Edgar Hoover.

Judge Fein acknowledges that the Commission failed to make an independent investigation, as it had decided to do, and that it relied "largely" ("solely" is more accurate) on FBI disclaimers. But, he says, that does not support a conclusion that the Commission intended to dispel the rumor whether it was or was not true. Perhaps Judge Fein would venture to suggest some other reason why the Commission disregarded its own decision and relied upon denials which its members had recognized as inadequate, if not meaningless (according to Gerald Ford's book, *Portrait of the Assassin*, which was not reviewed by the judge)—and why, to boot, it withheld from the Warren Report and from the hearings and exhibits the information subsequently disclosed by Ford and by Edward Jay Epstein in their respective books?

Judge Fein seems more anxious that the boat not be rocked than that we should be fully satisfied as to the truth about the assassination.

SYLVIA MEAGHER.

New York, N.Y.

JUDGE FEIN DID ALL AMERICANS a service by carefully and objectively examining some events surrounding the assassination of our late President. It is shameful that various detractors of the Warren Commission should advance theories which turn out to be so completely unsupportable, except by guesses, hearsay and half-truths. Judge Fein demonstrated with complete clarity how the theories of many Commission "second guessers" are illogical and unfounded. For this I commend him.

However, there is still one point of overwhelming importance that needs additional clarification. . . . What happened to the bullet that penetrated the skull? Did it fragment? If so, where did the fragments exit? What happened to that bullet or to those fragments? Turning now to the other bullet (the one that entered the neck), what happened upon entry? Did it fragment? If so, what paths did the fragments follow? Where did they exit? And finally, what about the controversy surrounding the bullet wound lower on the President's back? Was there an

entry hole of some kind, or was this an error made by FBI representatives?

DAVID A. SCHWARTZ.

New York, N.Y.

ONE OF THE THINGS that distinguishes *Whitewash* from other books is that it comes exclusively from the official evidence, to which it is exhaustively referenced. Not a single word of this formidable evidence that I mustered does the learned judge-reviewer quote or address. I do not suggest the reason—I declare it. He dare not, and he will not. I challenge him to debate it—in your columns or elsewhere. Instead, he pretends none of it exists and twists a few comments that he then presents in other than their intended meaning. . . .

Soon history will write the answer, and it will not be in the dreamstuff solidified in your type. Shame on those who insist that a President can be murdered and consigned to history with such a dubious epitaph, who believe that there may remain unanswered questions that it is within the capacity of man to answer, without jeopardy to our institutions, and who substitute personal abuse and vilification for fact in disgraceful and unreasoned assaults upon those who seek the truth, the recapture of our honor, and the upholding of our principles and beliefs!

HAROLD WEISBERG.

Hyattstown, Md.

MY ARTICLE COPYRIGHTED 11/27/63 was the first article to appear on Kennedy to show a hoax. The article caused President Johnson to form the Warren Commission—he said so as per *Time* magazine. All of your listed authors got their basic idea from my article.

WALDO PHILLIPS.

Waco, Texas

THE GUN FOUND in the Texas School Book Depository was called a German Mauser by an expert on guns, or one who should be, yet Oswald's gun had the name of the Italian maker plainly on it. It seems to me this evidence alone makes it highly unlikely that Oswald could shoot the President and Governor with his own gun. The evidence points to at least one more assassin and possibly two.

CAROLYN BAUMAN.

San Diego, Calif.

Add Five Dollars

IN CRIMINAL RECORD [*SR*, Oct. 29] you give a very kind review to Murray Teigh Bloom's *The Man Who Stole Portugal: The Greatest Swindle of All Time*, but unfortunately list it as a paperback priced at 95¢. It is a hardcover volume of 320 pages with lots of illustrations, and is priced at \$5.95.

Edward White,

Charles Scribner's Sons.

New York, N.Y.