

MY PEOPLE, MY AFRICA

by Credo Vusa'mazulu Mutwa

John Day, 257 pp., \$6.95

WHAT DO AFRICANS THINK about themselves? What values do they attach to the cultures of their past? How do they see themselves in relation to the rest of the world? It is nearly 200 years since Olaudah Equiano set the ball rolling in this particular debate with his *Interesting Narrative* about the mid-eighteenth-century life of Iboland, today the central part of eastern Nigeria; rather more than a century since J. Africanus Horton and his friends set forth their views on the subject in several unforgotten books, and at least twenty years since African historians and other African scholars began getting to the roots of the matter. Today we have a host of well-considered answers, and a great deal of factual information. Neither the one nor the other will be found in Credo Vusa'mazulu Mutwa's contribution. In a list of nonfiction *My People, My Africa* is more or less completely out of place, and the best one can hope of its publishers, who appear to offer it as a serious work, is that they have been taken for a ride. The self-styled "incredible writings" of Mr. Mutwa are just that.

All the same, they have a value, though not the one that was evidently intended. Characteristically South African in provenance, *My People* offers a study in cultural impoverishment. It mirrors a picture of South African blacks — and by implication of all blacks — that is always vaguely and often aggressively present in the minds of South African whites. Here is a blurred reflection of black peoples whose minds work "strangely," whose deeds have "puzzled, disgusted and shocked the world," and whose truth, as Mr. Mutwa goes on to explain, is bound to "anger many people" who hold a different picture. Old stuff, of course, when said by South African whites; but what's interesting here is that we now get it from a South African black. In this respect, Mr. Mutwa's book may be a portent: as such, it is worthy of some attention.

Mr. Mutwa is not unknown in Johannesburg for his writings. He may be perfectly sincere. His aim, he tells us, is to win more understanding and tolerance for Africans. Calling for light in the servants' hall, he holds out his own torch. Unfortunately it is one that can only make the darkness darker still. Africans, says Mr. Mutwa, may be a peculiar and savage lot, but they have a history of their own. The history he recounts, however, has nothing

to do with the facts and probabilities now established by research, of most of which Mr. Mutwa appears completely unaware. What he shows, intentionally or not, is that whites were and are right when they affirm that any civilization there may have been in black Africa was in fact the work of white immigrants, even in very distant times.

So we have the "rediscovery" of a great Phoenician empire somewhere in the middle of black Africa. "Songs are still sung and told around village fires" about those glorious invaders of long ago, while "badly rusted and crumbling swords of ancient Greek manufacture, old gold coins and parts of bronze shields and helmets, bronze spears and Egyptian battle axes" remain "in the secret possession of witch doctors," not just here and there but "throughout southern Africa." We are even treated to a drawing of one of the ships in which these invaders, no doubt brandishing their Greek swords and Egyptian battle axes, sailed up the Zambezi around 500 B.C. And then, of course, there is the celebrated rock painting known as the "white lady of the Brandberg." This turns out — had you guessed? — to represent none other than "one of the five great emperors who ruled the African Empire" of the Phoenicians, "a strikingly handsome young white man" who, Mr. Mutwa is positive, was "Karesu II, who succeeded Karesu I, the Fire-Beard, the first emperor."

All this is nonsense, but it retains its interest as a "mirror picture." And it goes on in much the way one would expect. The Boer (Afrikaner) folk hero Piet Retief naturally emerges as a perfectly splendid fellow and not a raiding settler or a cattle thief, while Dingaan, the Zulu king in Retief's time, is just as predictably the ruthless megalomaniac of white tradition. The tragedy that hit the Xhosa of the eastern Cape back in the 1850s, when they slaughtered more than 150,000 of their cattle in response to their prophet Mhlakaza's promise that the ancestors of the Xhosa would then return and sweep invading whites from their homeland, is told with agreeable elaborations. But the real culprits, we now learn,

were three agents of the British governor, Sir George Grey. One needs to hold no brief for Grey, undoubtedly a tough imperialist, in order to consign this piece of "hidden history" to the realm of the Phoenicians.

The question really is, why do white men in Johannesburg promote this stuff, why do they publish it? (*My People*, one notes, is a compilation of three previous books by the same author, each published in Johannesburg). In speculating on the answer, one may well remember that the whole drive of white policy in South Africa is towards the foisting on black populations of a second-class citizenship in "Bantustans." These are to be little client "states," incapable of any real autonomy much less independence, whose task will be to continue providing the whites with supplies of cheap and subservient labor, just as the "Native Reserves" do today.

Many of Mr. Mutwa's fellow "natives" have suffered bitter persecution in protest against this fate. But clearly there are going to be some Africans who accept it, if only from despair of an alternative. Such Africans will need some kind of "education," some appropriate cultural furniture. White writers in South Africa have long fostered historical myths for white men, such as that whites and blacks arrived at the same time, the first by sea and the second by land, so that whites may claim an equal right of possession. It seems to me that the promoters of Mr. Mutwa's books must have in mind the creation of corresponding myths by black writers who, as well as continuing to soothe the whites, will also help to mystify the blacks. No doubt they hope that as time goes by the denizens of the "Bantustans," fed with appropriate rubbish, will even come to believe it, and, accepting that their minds work "strangely," will agree that if left to themselves they would all too probably "disgust and shock" the world. They will thus recognize that the whites of today, like the Phoenicians of old, are the proper folk to rule them.

I must say that for my part I do not believe any such result will be achieved, though there may well be whites in South Africa, a confused place at the best of times, who take a different view. What really puzzles, I suppose, is the appearance of this book in the United States. No other country has so squarely and generously taken up the challenge of understanding Africa. Seen from that admirable standpoint, Mr. Mutwa's farrago is not even funny.

Basil Davidson

Basil Davidson's latest book is "Africa in History."



Fiction

FURTHER CONFESSIONS OF ZENO

by Italo Svevo, translated from the Italian by Ben Johnson and P.N. Furbank

University of California Press, 302 pp., \$5.95

POSTERITY HAS BEEN KIND to Ettore Schmitz, the disillusioned bourgeois of Trieste who chose to call himself "Swabian Italian"; it has more than atoned for the stony indifference of his contemporaries. With the sole exception of Giovanni Verga there is no other Italian prose writer of the turn of the century who can speak with familiarity and authority to readers of today. If the sponsorship of Joyce was crucial in bringing Svevo to the attention of the literary world, his survival is nevertheless due to his own merits, well exemplified in the book before us.

Of the six items that make up *Further Confessions of Zeno*—an omnibus title to suit the nature of the harvest—five are bits of narrative prose in which Zeno speaks for himself. The sixth is a play—the only one Svevo has left us—first published some ten years ago, three decades after the author's death. To students of Svevo it may well be the most fascinating item in this interesting anthology. The plot hinges on the "rejuvenating operation" which a seventy-year-old man is persuaded to undergo and its effect on him and his immediate circle. It is a persuasive comedy with surprisingly good dialogue (surprising because the normal Svevo opus runs to monologue and is not particularly noted for its handling of conversation), first-rate character delineation and, above all, a more outright humor than is apparent in most of Svevo's work. The sober, bourgeois background makes one think of Ibsen, but there is more than a touch of Chekhov and even a hint of the melancholy mischief of Pirandello. (This is said not to suggest "sources" but merely to indicate the tonal ingredients of the play.) "Regeneration" reads very well and might, I suspect, even act well.

But the play is not necessarily the best of the items in the book. The others are, as the editorial note tells us, "surviving fragments and drafts of the sequel to *The Confessions of Zeno* on which Svevo was working during the last years of his life," and they are excellent indeed. It is a pity that *Further Confessions* was not finished; on the evidence of these fragments it might have been Svevo's finest work.

The central figure is the same old Zeno, indolent, rather cowardly, not particularly admirable, but acute in

his perception of his own nature and the circumstances of his life. "What a vast importance distant things take on when compared to those of a few weeks ago," the old man muses, thus summarizing the problems and pathos of age—and something of its poetry too. In "An Old Man's Confessions" he describes his well-intentioned efforts to establish a happy relationship with his son (a parable for 1970 no less than 1920); in "Umbertino" he makes us understand why no such efforts are needed to enjoy the company of his grandson. As for the Indian summer liaison described in "A Contract," one can only admire the sophistication of the writer who can portray at one and the same time the sordid and the downright funny aspects of a senile *affaire*.

But perhaps best of all for its poetic insight is the little ten-page opener of the book, "The Old Old Man," in which the brief sight of a girl on the street—recognized or merely evocative?—leads to the observation: "Time is an element in which I am not able to move with absolute sureness . . . [It] wreaks its havoc with a firm and ruthless hand, and then marches off in an orderly procession of days, months and years, but when it is far away and out of sight, it breaks ranks. The hours start looking for their place in the wrong day and the days in the wrong year."

Proust could hardly have put it better. Zeno will write no more confessions for us, but Ettore Schmitz has a long life ahead of him.

Thomas G. Bergin

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THE TRAITORS

by John Briley

Putnam, 441 pp., \$6.95

NEVER MIND THAT JOHN BRILEY'S first novel must ultimately be put down as a great lost opportunity. He has had the nerve to try something terribly ambitious and, if he does not succeed fully, he has given the reader much to chew on; too much, in fact. First, with all respect for David Halberstam's *One Very Hot Day*, a tight, deliberately limited battle-character study, Mr. Briley writes so well about men under fire that around page 50 one finds oneself thinking, "At last, the big war novel out of Vietnam." He moves his soldiers across rough, contested ground in a way that calls to mind Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* and James Jones's *The Thin Red Line*. In addition, he has decided to take on nothing less than the moral—or rather, immoral—underpinnings of



our involvement in that Southeast Asian country.

It is a tall order, and in the end the narrative fails to do the job. But it's an honorable failure. The basic story echoes dispatches one has read in recent years, in such disparate media as *The New York Times* and Liberation News Service, about unidentified occidentals—white and black—serving with NLF or North Vietnamese units, doing everything from actually shooting at American troops to posing as artillery spotters and radioing for howitzer fire on American positions. The reports usually included speculation that these "traitors" were renegade Frenchmen or Moroccans or American deserters.

Whether the dispatches triggered Mr. Briley's thinking or not, he uses just such a situation to pose an interesting and even daring question: What would make a half-dozen captured Americans fight with "the other side"? Brainwashing? Threats? Torture? Bribery? According to Mr. Briley, none of these.

In the novel, an American patrol walks into a well-laid trap, prisoners are taken, and then they find themselves in a North Vietnamese prison camp. There several enemy officers and one American who has already gone over to them simply explain—fairly, patiently, and (unfortunately for the book's pacing) endlessly and repetitively—what is really happening in Vietnam. They do so in the belief that no decent-minded American could continue to play a part in the rape of that agonized land if he knew what was going on and why. The aim is to get some of the prisoners—especially a lieutenant who is a helicopter pilot—to volunteer to take part in a raid on a prison camp in South Vietnam, which will significantly shorten the war by freeing a respected North Vietnamese "dove" who could change minds in Hanoi if only he were there.

Here, of course, the book founders. The discussion of U.S. acts and motives in Vietnam is conducted at the lowest possible intellectual level. As Mr. Briley himself says about the persuasive efforts of the American turncoat, "He couldn't keep the patronage out of his voice—an intellectual making the obvious clear to the neighborhood beer drinkers . . ." The talk soon becomes tedious to anyone with a lively intelligence. Nor is it likely to persuade the mass audience Mr. Briley