

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

is apparently aiming at: most Americans, after all that has been reported about Vietnam, still cannot perceive that the war there is wrong—unproductive, perhaps, but don't talk right and wrong about stopping Communism.

Furthermore, Mr. Briley ignores the ability of human beings to acknowledge explicitly the wrongness of their participation in some larger social process, such as a neo-colonial war abroad or racism at home, and yet go right on participating for reasons of personal advancement, or out of fear of ostracism or worse.

But read Mr. Briley for his explosive accounts of jungle warfare and for his moral passion; the lack of nuances does not get in the way of those worthwhile qualities.

Gerald Walker

Gerald Walker is a novelist and an editor of The New York Times Magazine.

FAT CITY

by Leonard Gardner

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 183 pp., \$5.50

LEONARD GARDNER'S FIRST NOVEL registers not so much the presence of a new literary voice as the absence of one. It is an exercise in the extinction of personality, despite the urgent call for auctorial comment that seems to come from his two principal subjects, boxing and farm labor.

Of all our body-contact sports, boxing must be an ultimate symbol for the arbitrary cruelty that men have devised in the name of games and play. Of all forms of day labor, work in our massive orchards and vegetable farms must be some last word for the deliberate exploitation that men have justified in the name of economic necessity. Surely there are other, deeper connections between these two varieties of blows to the breadbasket. But if such tie-ups exist, Gardner is silent about them; or, at any rate, his fiction leaves them as barely implicit suggestions. His book is neither a protesting exposé nor an attempt to pinpoint blame. Symbolic organization is not his forte, and his style, as dry and crude as the lives he portrays, is purely functional. His approach is not to interpret, moralize, or reform, but simply to document some burnt-out ends of our society.

His scene is Stockton, California, a port city on the San Joaquin River delta, and he catches it meticulously through the exclusive viewpoints of boxers, gas station attendants, fry cooks, fight managers, winos, and field hands. Trudging through a sleazy wasteland of smelly gyms, run-down

motels, and endless acres of crops come two main characters. Ernie Munger, still in his teens, is a Far Western Studs Lonigan growing up defeated by his thwarted desires—for money, for satisfaction of his body lusts, for independence, for the most basic kind of self-respect. Billy Tully, on the other hand, is near the end of his life at thirty, a lush deserted by his well-stacked wife, his boxing career long over, a man hardly fit now for chopping onions or for whaling away at walnut trees with a great pole. The two men drift, meet fleetingly in training rings or on hiring lines, then drift again. The novel drifts with them. The only line of plot and direction is their steady spiral downward, like fish seen belly up and slowly sinking, who never know how or why their stream was polluted, or what they might have done about it.

If all of this sounds grim and depressing, it is, and yet Gardner's complete surrender to his material gives *Fat City* whatever gripping power it has. In this respect it is reminiscent of another first novel, Steven Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. Though it is impossible ever to push beyond the limited thoughts and feelings of these people, they have a raw attraction the more one learns about them. Unexpected complexities unfold like twirlings of a cabbage, particularly when the two heroes are with their women, loving them when least accessible, hating them when they are close and most demanding. Dialogue seems taped and then transcribed to print; background and action are as precise as in good film. What it is like to be there, to feel so low, to be numbered among the disfranchised with nowhere to run—these are Gardner's best effects.

"He has got it exactly right," says one of the testimonials gathered on the book jacket in praise of this first effort. Gardner undoubtedly has. But accuracy in this case can only result in weariness and pain for a reader, as if he too had been working in the fields all day for ninety cents an hour,



Leonard Gardner—"an exercise in the extinction of personality."

or had been hit repeatedly by hard lefts to the jaw. As a result, like this reviewer he may yearn for some more transcendent exploration; or for perspective, perhaps, from a voice saying that the agony of these characters is not just self-created, that their conditions are not inevitable, irremediable, and that our best tales are about men strong enough not simply to endure but to fight back—and sometimes almost to win.

Robert Maurer

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LOVE, ROGER

by Charles Webb

Houghton Mifflin, 188 pp., \$4.95

CHARLES WEBB BELONGS TO NO CULT, puts forward no philosophy, and probes no psychologies. His new novel begins when its title character, Roger Hart, talks his way into a big Boston department store at closing time. On his departure a few minutes later, he sees an unconscious girl. By the time he revives her the two are locked in for the night; they make cheeseburgers at the lunch counter and go to bed together in the furniture department.

Adventures like this typify Roger, a college dropout in his early twenties who is working as a travel agent while thinking about the future. He seems to have little control over the major decisions of his life. Nor is he happy when he does try to act. At the store, at the travel agency, at the dog races his attempts at honesty and kindness cause everyone involved a good deal of pain and embarrassment.

Does all this add up to another anti-novel about an anti-hero? It does not. Webb feels for his characters and invites the reader to follow suit. Instead of using his settings as microcosms or symbols, he plants his characters firmly on the page and moves them around rhythmically. He makes us want to know what they are going to do next. *Love, Roger* is a human novel about fallible humans trying to get together humanly.

As in *The Graduate*, Webb's uncannily realistic dialogue carries most of the weight of the book's theme. He makes speech a living process. He catches the hesitations and the stoppages, the repetitions and the missed meanings of everyday talk. Characters speak for reasons other than communicating information; they try to protect themselves, to unburden themselves, or to touch each other. Often a remark does not answer the one that went before it. Nevertheless,