

so remote from turmoil and marked by such comfort and normalcy that it seems almost exempt from those forces. The setting is Mendoza, California, a small, obscure town in the hills east of San Francisco. The narrative voice—modest, exact, and lyrical—reminisces about her own early adolescence, when “life rolled on smoothly, as it was meant to.” Suse lives in a neighborhood which is “neither rich nor poor,” surrounded by a family for whom she feels affectionate loyalty, and she whiles away her days climbing trees, resisting schoolwork, and desultorily wondering about the existence of God.

The utter security of this tranquil childhood is disrupted when World War II, at first no more than a rumor from a faraway part of the world, impinges directly on Mendoza. After Pearl Harbor and some air-raid alarms, Suse becomes obsessed with the war. She begins to understand that a *Life* magazine photograph of a Polish family buried in a potato field is real, and that catastrophe can threaten even her safe and well-loved sphere. She starts to feel burdened with an awful knowledge of pain and cruelty, and she turns her fear, shameful and imminent, into a resolute hatred of the nearest available enemy—the “Japs” who inhabit Martinez Valley.

But in spite of this dark theme, the novel is not a disquisition on growing up absurd, or a symbolic parable on the loss of American innocence. The story Ella Leffland tells—a story of initiation into the full range and complexity of experience—is richer and more subtle. The news headlines and radio bulletins that announce the progress of the war in *Rumors of Peace* are interwoven into a tapestried narrative of commonplace but vividly colored events. Suse meanders through friendships, feels the baffling stirrings of sexuality, places herself under the tutelage of an older girl who fashions herself as the resident “genius,” reads *Madame Bovary* five times, falls in love with Egon, a German Jew in

whom she feels the intensity and depth toward which she herself is striving. She writes letters, thoughtful and ingenuous by turns, swims until her hair turns green, and basks in the sensuality of sunny days and starry nights.

These moments, the undramatic stuff of Suse’s experience, are at the heart of the novel, and Ella Leffland writes about them in precisely nuanced language, with an unerring delicacy of feeling. Each situation, each cameo portrait is etched with pointilistic clarity and each moment expands, without strain or overheating, into deep emotion or intimate discovery. A taunt thrown at a dimwitted, slatternly girl turns into a private lesson in the pangs of embarrassment and guilt; a performance of a “European” symphony, composed by a local high-school teacher, builds, in spite of the amateur orchestra, into an occasion of unassuming beauty.

Eventually, Suse begins to reconcile rumors of war with rumors of peace, to include them both in her picture of the human condition. The war is a moral quandary posed by history that she must confront if she is going to penetrate “the truth” she so urgently seeks. But the other, less extreme textures have their own validity, and they must also be compassed by her consciousness.

Suse is an extremely engaging character, and somewhat of an anomaly in the American literature of adolescence. For all her casual tomboyishness and the homely Americana details in the novel, she is more like Tolstoy’s young Natasha than like Huck Finn or Holden Caulfield. The classical American adolescents are wise naifs whose innocent vision serves to foil and highlight the corruption and hypocrisies of adult society. But Ella Leffland does not romanticize innocence or denigrate maturity as a lapse from the natural state. Suse is neither a disingenuous waif nor a rebel without a cause. Her evolution is presented as an almost organic accretion and an enlargement of insight, judg-

ment, and discrimination. She grows into complexity, rather than into disillusionment or rejection. She learns by savoring ideas, poetry, music, people, and the familiar features of her world, by discerning fine modulations and ambiguities as well as large evils. She observes with disappointment as her friend, Peggy, a charmingly lackadaisical urchin, turns into a fashionable social butterfly; she wonders about the fate of Peggy’s aunt, a ruined beauty who ends up committing suicide; and she faces the difficult realization that Egon’s love for her has existed only in her own imagination. As she adds more pieces to the mosaic of her experience, Suse sloughs off her moral absolutism and her uncompromising hatred of the enemy. “How much do you want?” Egon asks her at the culmination of the novel, just after they’ve heard the news of Hiroshima. She decides she wants it all.

Leffland’s attempt—rare in American writing, which so often dwells in the extreme regions of the spirit—is to retrieve and illuminate the dappled variety of ordinary reality while acknowledging the existence of death and horror. Tragedy can be incorporated into a pastoral, she seems to say, happiness can be affirmed without an evasion of modern *angst*. Such a synthesis cannot be achieved through rigorous logic, and Leffland doesn’t try. If she succeeds, it is because of her gift for capturing the rhythms and nuances of emotion, and for culling from ordinary moments a significance which convinces us that the middle landscape of daily experience is the true, the common human ground.

Eva Hoffman, freelance writer and critic, is working on a book of cultural commentary of the Sixties and Seventies.

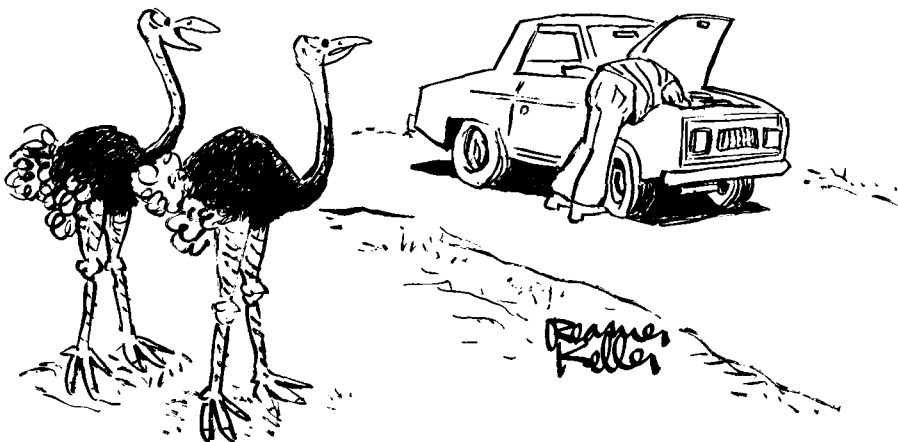
Books in Brief

Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet

by Richard Gilman

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 180 pp., \$8.95

IT WAS LATE Roman historians and poets, nostalgic for a somewhat imaginary Golden Age, who bequeathed to us the idea that civilizations, like organisms, sink into a natural decline and decay. Gilman thus makes them his first target, arguing that Rome did not subside and die, but was “murdered” by a more powerful culture. Decadence, Gilman generalizes, is not an inevitable phase of civilizations, but rather a term of disparagement wielded by spectators and survivors unhappy with vicissitudes of culture. While this contention has the ring of truth, meta-historical theories can’t very well be established on the basis of the quick survey of commentary



“I never did know why they stick their heads in those things.”

by scholars and disgruntled contemporaries that Gilman supplies.

He enjoys greater success in his second, and central, claim, which is that "decadence" has been so loosely applied to any deviation from the norm that it no longer means anything. Much of this portion of the argument is devoted to rescuing decadence's twin standard-bearers, Wilde and Baudelaire, from the miasmal swamp of carnality and sensationalism in which both their enemies and disciples have plunged them. Gilman's treatment of Wilde is especially thoughtful. Without dismissing Wilde's almost suicidal bouts of perversity, he depicts the writer as an intentional *poseur* who "helped to break up the frozen moral world by inciting its hysterical outrage."

Gilman's argument will probably cause the reader to repent any past uses of this "portmanteau stuffed with emptiness." It may also make him wonder why the author devoted an entire book to a subject of such dubious though topical significance, especially since the survival of the word proves its invulnerability. Gilman may provide a clue at the conclusion, when he waxes wroth at the modern fashion of dignifying sleazy self-indulgence with the implicit philosophy of the word decadence. Gilman's real beef is not with the word but with the decadence—pardon, hedonism—of the society that celebrates it.

—JAMES TRAUB

Solo Faces

by James Salter

Little, Brown, 220 pp., \$8.95

RHETORICALLY, *Solo Faces* brings joy, its strong, sensory style generating a rare immediacy and excitement. Socially and morally, the novel flags badly, mirroring itself in adolescent notions about male heroics to the point where even its sharp style loses its edge. Like Whitman, Salter believes that the physical exploits of men are bracing and wholesome. Like Hemingway, he believes these exploits mean more when undertaken away from women and at great bodily risk. That he believes in little else makes his world of mountain climbers in *Solo Faces* a poor show.

The stoicism observed by his fanatical mountaineers as they plan and execute their climbs leans quite heavily upon literary stereotypes from Whitman and Hemingway. Any show of feeling violates an unspoken code of manly honor in the novel; of a towering slab that nobody has ever scaled, a climber says, "That is some piece of rock."

Salter's cultist elitism and the bleak technical exactitude on which it relies foster snobbery; even within the brotherhood of climbers, moral hierarchies exist. Scaling mountain walls doesn't

prepare Salter's overtrained puritans for life in the valley of human involvement below. For one thing, the women in the book exist merely to provide sex for their climber-lovers and then to be dropped. When asked when he'll be back, one mountaineer, preparing to indulge his real passion, climbing, tells his live-in sweetheart nonchalantly, "I don't know. In a year. Maybe two."

Disposable relationships like that one disjoint the novel, breaking it into a series of fragments, thus destroying its unity. The daredevil exploits recounted in *Solo Faces* don't gauge or test manhood so much as dwarf it.—PETER WOLFE

Bay of Pigs

by Peter Wyden

Simon & Schuster, 327 pp., \$12.95

THE AMERICAN government's abortive schemes to overthrow Fidel Castro must be included among the most sordid episodes of the Cold War era. Peter Wyden's *Bay of Pigs* is a comprehensive account of the worst of those episodes, the attempt to invade Cuba in April 1961. Wyden's vivid narrative amply documents the immaturity of the Kennedy administration and its betrayal of dedicated Cubans who naively believed that the United States would support their bravery with its military power.

By basing his account on the experience of individual participants, however, Wyden achieves dramatic effect at the expense of narrative continuity. He lacks the genius required for writing first-rate narrative history, but his exhaustive research, including interviews with planners and combatants, and his ability to create a sense of immediacy qualify *Bay of Pigs* as an important contribution to contemporary history.

Wyden thoroughly exposes the fatuity of the invasion's planners. Richard Bissell, the CIA's deputy director for plans, presided over the debacle. He relied on personal brilliance, the support of the Joint Chiefs, bureaucratic momentum, and Cold War bravado to overcome President Kennedy's misgivings. Incredibly, American planners expected the Cuban people to rally to the invaders' standard.

Whether describing the training camps of Guatemala or recounting the deliberations of American leaders, *Bay of Pigs* exudes a barracks atmosphere. President Kennedy and most of his advisors had come to manhood on the battlefields of World War II and to power during the Cold War. They did not question their goals or methods because their adult experience had been formed in the midst of righteous conflict. *Bay of Pigs* ably recalls the spirit of an adolescent empire in the course of discovering its moral and political limitations.

—DENNIS WILLIAMS

The
Iowa Review
308 EPB The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242
Begin a subscription with 52 pages of
previously unpublished
WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS
and more stories, essays, poems
Four issues / Seven dollars

TOM MIDDLETON'S
brow-furrowers can
GENERATE enough
POWER to fill your
"THINK-TANK"
without consuming
anything but
AUTOCHTHONOUS
ENTHUSIASM!
CONSERVE ENERGY!
Use coupon power to
bring your copy of
SIMON AND
SCHUSTER'S
CROSTICS 81

To Your Bookseller, or
SATURDAY REVIEW
Dept. SS
1290 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10019

Please send me _____ copy (copies)
of Simon and Schuster CROSTICS 81
(24793). I enclose \$2.95 per copy, plus
applicable sales tax, plus 50¢ for handling
and postage. Add 10¢ postage for
each additional copy.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

I missed the previous collections. Please
also send

☐ CROSTICS 80 (24412) \$2.95

☐ CROSTICS 79 (23021) \$2.95

Please allow 4 weeks for processing and delivery.