

JOHN  
GARDNER



On Writers  
& Writing



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# On Writers and Writing

John Gardner

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# “Bartleby”:

## Art and Social Commitment

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IN “BARTLEBY, “MAN LOOKS AT MAN, ARTIST looks at artist, and God looks at God. To understand that the narrator is at least as right as Bartleby, both on the surface and on symbolic level is to understand the remarkable interpenetration of form and content in the story. Most Melville readers have noticed that on one level, Bartleby can represent the honest artist: he is a “scrivener” who refuses to “copy,” as Melville himself refused to copy—that is, as he refused to knock out more saleable South Seas romances. But if Bartleby is the artist, he is the artist manqué: his is a vision not of life but of death; “the man of silence,” he creates nothing. A better kind of artist is the lawyer, who, having seen reality through Bartleby’s eyes, has turned to literature. Nor is he the slick writer: “If I pleased,” he says, “[I] could relate divers histories, at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep.” That is, popular fiction. The phrase “If I pleased” is significant: “please” is the narrator’s substitution, later, for Bartleby’s infectious “prefer.” Like Bartleby, the narrator does what he prefers to do—but within certain reasonable limits. The reader may weep or smile at Bartleby’s story, but the narrator’s chief reason for choosing it is that he is seriously concerned with “literature.” Close reading reveals that the story he tells is indeed a highly organized literary work, a story that is as much the narrator’s as it is Bartleby’s, ending with the narrator’s achievement of that depth of understanding necessary to the telling of the story.

An important part of what the narrator at last understands is the conflict between the individual and society. The individual feels certain preferences which, taken together, establish his personal identity; society makes simultaneously necessary and unreasonable demands which modify individual identity. Thus the individual’s view of himself and the view others have of him can become two quite different things separated by a substantial wall (communication is difficult); thus, too, the socialized man’s identity and his view of his identity can be walled apart (self-knowledge is difficult). And man’s dilemma cannot be resolved, for if one insists on one’s own preferences and thereby affirms one’s identity, one finds oneself, like Bartleby, walled off from society and communion with other men; and on the other hand, if one gives in to the necessary laws of social action, one finds oneself, like Bartleby’s employer, walled off from active obedience to the higher laws of self and, in a sense, from reality. Wall Street is the prison in which all men live.

The conflict between the rule of individual preference and the necessary laws of social action takes various forms in “Bartleby.” Conflicts arise between individual and social impulses within each of the first three scriveners, Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut, and also between individual traits in the scriveners and the necessary requirements of their employer, whose commitment is perforce social: for he must do his job well to survive. But for the action of the story, the most important conflicts are those rooted in the relationship of the lawyer and Bartleby, that is, the conflicts between employer and employee, between the lawyer’s kindly nature and his recognition of the reasonableness of society’s harsh demands, and between Bartleby and the world.

In many ways the lawyer and Bartleby differ. The lawyer is a successful, essentially practical man with highly developed feelings for social position (he mentions coyly that he was “not unemployed

by John Jacob Astor), the value of his money (the office of Master in Chancery is “pleasant remunerative”), “common usage and common sense,” and above all, as he tells us John Jacob Astor has observed, “prudence” and “method.” Bartleby, on the other hand, is merely a clerk with an obscure past, a man little concerned with practicality in the ordinary sense, and apparently quite uninterested in social position, money, or usage and sense. He is totally lacking in prudence—he courts dismissal at every turn—and for method he relies on “preference,” often preference “at present.” The narrator first cannot understand Bartleby, for good reason, and Bartleby prefers not to understand the narrator or the society the narrator represents. At the same time, the two characters are in some respects similar. Early in the story, the narrator tells us, “I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best”; and Bartleby shares the narrator’s profound conviction: what he cannot share is the narrator’s opinion that the easiest way must be socially acceptable, or even “reasonable.” The narrator is also like Bartleby in that he does not seek “public applause”; but Bartleby goes further, he does not avoid public censure. Finally, the narrator is decorous and “eminently *safe*”; so is Bartleby: the narrator is positive that Bartleby would not copy in shirtsleeves or on Sunday, and the narrator has “singular confidence in his honesty.”

Perhaps partly because the narrator and Bartleby are both different and similar, the conflict between them triggers a conflict within the narrator’s mind. He knows that as employer he has the authority to make demands of a scrivener, whatever the scrivener’s preference, for if employers cannot function as employers, society cannot work; but despite his knowledge, the narrator cannot bring himself to force Bartleby to obey or get out. When Bartleby first refuses to comply with a request, the narrator merely thinks, “This is very strange ... What had one best do?” and, being pressed by business, goes on with his work. When Bartleby refuses to comply with another request, the narrator is shaken and for a moment doubts the assumption behind employer-employee relations. When Bartleby uses it as a *modus operandi*, the narrator’s opinion that “the easiest way of life is the best” conflicts with his equally firm opinion that the laws of social action are of necessity right; and in his momentary uncertainty the narrator turns to his office, a miniature society, for a ruling. Even their ruling is not much help, however, for to act on it would be to become involved in unpleasantness, and this the narrator would prefer to avoid in favor of some easier way—if any is to be found. Once again he avoids the issue, in the socially approved way, by turning his mind to his work.

Bartleby’s unconventional insistence on his preferences, and his indifference to the demands of his social setting, the office, leads the narrator to wonder about him, that is, to want to understand him. He watches Bartleby narrowly and finds him more enigmatic than before. Bartleby never seems to leave; he exists on ginger nuts, and in the miniature society of the office his corner remains a “hermitage.” Judgment cannot account for the man, and though imagination provides “delicious self-approval,” it too fails to provide understanding. The conflict in the narrator’s mind between acceptance of Bartleby as enigmatic eccentric, on one hand, and insistence on Bartleby’s position as employee, on the other, leads to no action while the narrator is in a charitable mood; but when he is not, he feels a need to force Bartleby into revealing himself actively, not just passively—that is, to make himself vulnerable by showing “some angry spark answerable to my own.” The narrator’s goading excites the other scriveners, but it cannot reach Bartleby. At last, for the sake of keeping peace in the office, and also because some of Bartleby’s preferences coincide with the preferences of society (“his steadiness, his freedom from all dissipation, his incessant industry”), the narrator comes to accept Bartleby, and the narrator’s internal conflict is temporarily resolved.

When the narrator learns that Bartleby lives at the office, the internal conflict reawakens. As he looks through Bartleby’s things, the narrator’s judgment hurls him onto the truth: Bartleby is “the

victim of innate and incurable disorder,” in a word, he is mad. Common sense demands that he be gotten rid of, for, as the narrator sees, the practical fact is that “pity is not seldom pain,” and one cannot work well (as one must in this world) when one is suffering. The narrator gives his scrivener one last chance: he asks Bartleby to tell him about his past; if Bartleby will answer like a sensible man, the narrator will keep him on. As he asks it, the narrator insists, sincerely enough, “I feel friendly towards you.” And the effect is interesting: Bartleby hesitates a “considerable time” before answering, and for the first time his composure breaks—his lips tremble. “*At present*,” he says (and he is using the phrase “at present” for the first time), “I prefer to give no answer.” It seems that the narrator has cracked the wall between them; but if so, he does not know it at the time. The narrator’s common sense goes deep and now, when he is on the threshold of his scrivener’s secret self, self-delusion saves the narrator from what, as he rightly sees, cannot help Bartleby and can only hurt himself. Misinterpreting what has happened, he feels “nettled” and says, “Not only did there seem to lurk in [Bartleby’s manner] a certain calm disdain, but his perverseness seemed ungrateful, considering the undeniable good usage and indulgence he had received from me.” Even so, common sense is not quite triumphant: “I strangely felt something superstitious knocking at my heart, and forbidding me to carry out my purpose [of firing Bartleby], and denouncing me for a villain if I dared to breathe one bitter word against this forlornest of mankind.” Instead of sensibly dismissing the mad scrivener, the narrator chooses mercy, not justice, and humbly begs Bartleby to promise to be a little reasonable “in a day or two.” Bartleby’s answer, of course, is as delightfully mad as the request: “*At present* I would prefer not to be a little reasonable.” And Bartleby, or the will of the individual, wins. Indeed, individualism is doing very well: Everyone in the office is saying “prefer” these days. Societal dicta become polite suggestions waiting upon the individual’s taste (“If [Bartleby] would but prefer to take a quart of good ale every day...”); legal etiquette becomes a matter of individual choice (the narrator is asked what color paper he prefers for a certain document). Bartleby’s success is complete when, preferring to do no more copying, and preferring to remain in the office, he gets the narrator to prefer to put up with him.

In voluntarily choosing to accept Bartleby as “the predestined purpose of my life,” the narrator makes a choice which, unfortunately, he is not free to make. From the point of view of society, the choice is odd, unacceptable (like Colt’s choice to murder Adams—a choice Colt would not have made if the narrator says, if the two of them had not been alone). Bartleby is such an oddity in the office that at last the narrator must choose between Bartleby and his own professional reputation. As the sane man must, the narrator chooses society and denies Bartleby: he moves out of the office. When moving out proves insufficient—for society holds him accountable—the narrator reluctantly goes the whole route: he would not have acted with the cruel common sense of the landlord, but preferring to choose the inevitable, he gives the testimony requested in the landlord’s note. The betrayed Bartleby pronounces the judgment: “I know you.” Even now the narrator feels friendly toward Bartleby, and certainly he cannot be blamed for his action; nevertheless, betrayal is betrayal, and both of them know it.

The sequel provides us with an insight into the background of Bartleby’s derangement and provides the narrator with belated understanding of his scrivener. As the narrator understands the matter, and we have no reason to doubt his interpretation, Bartleby’s former occupation as dead-letter clerk heightened the natural pallid hopelessness of Bartleby’s character by giving him a queer and terrible vision of life. The narrator thinks, as Bartleby must have thought before him, “Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men?” Letters sent on missions of pardon, hope, good tidings—errands of life—end in pointless flames; and the dead-letter clerk sees no other kind of mail (if, in fact, there is any other).

kind). What he knows about letters he comes to know of man. The bustle of activity, scrivening, clerking, bartending, bill-collecting, traveling—all tumble at last against the solid wall, death. Bartleby prefers not to share the delusions of society. For him, the easiest way of life is the best because whether one spends one's time "not unemployed" by John Jacob Astor or spends it "sitting upon a banister," one dies. He is not "lunatic," as Ginger Nut thinks, but mad. Estranged from the ordinary view of life (he does not even read the papers), Bartleby perceives reality; thus whereas the narrator, when he looks out his windows, sees at one end a wall "deficient in what landscape painters call 'life'" and at the other end "a huge, square cistern," Bartleby sees, respectively, death and the grave.

Except at that moment when he is tempted to feel affection for the man who feels friendly toward him, there is within Bartleby no conflict at all. He is dead already, as the narrator's recurring adjective, "cadaverous," suggests. Whatever the exigencies of the moment, he cannot be made to forget the walls enclosing life. He has walked for some time in the yard "not accessible to common prisoners," for the yard in the Tombs is life itself: "The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sounds behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by birds, had sprung." But though Bartleby suffers no conflict within, he is engaged in a conflict more basic than that in which the narrator is involved. The narrator wishes to avoid unpleasantness—and if possible, to do so without loss of self-respect. Bartleby wishes to shape his own destiny, at least within the little space between the walls of birth and death. The narrator, when he has "looked a little into 'Edwards on the Will,' and 'Priestley on Necessity,'" slides into the persuasion that his troubles have been predestined from eternity, and he chooses to accept them, voluntarily relinquishing his will to "an all-wise Providence." But Bartleby insists on freedom. When the narrator suggests that he take a clerkship in a dry-goods store, he answers, "There is too much confinement about that." The narrator's reaction: "why, you keep yourself confined all the time!" misses the point, for confinement, if one chooses confinement, free agency, and circling the world, if required of one, is not. Melville makes the point dramatically. When Bartleby will neither tour Europe with some young man nor live in the narrator's home, the narrator flees from Bartleby, the landlord and the tenants who may again besiege the law office. He runs from the building, up Wall Street toward Broadway, catches a bus, surrenders his business to Nippers, and turns to still wilder flight, driving about in his rockaway for days. In his restless flight he is less free than the man on the banister.

But in the end, no individual, not even Bartleby, can be free. The freedom of each individual curtails the freedom of some other, as poor Colt's freedom curtails the freedom of Adams (murdered men have no preferences), and as Bartleby's freedom curtails that of the narrator. Thus the limitations imposed upon freedom by the laws of Nature are narrowed by the laws of society: Bartleby must be jailed. Inside the prison, "individuals"; outside, "functionaries." Betrayed by the narrator and the society he represents, confined in a smaller prison and, as he says, knowing where he is, Bartleby has only one freedom left: he may prefer not to live. And he does.

Melville suggests in various ways that the conflict between Bartleby and the world (and the conflict within the narrator's mind) is one between imagination and judgment, or reason. Judgment supports society: ethical law is the law of reason; imagination, on the other hand, supports higher values, those central to poetry and religion: moral law is the law of imagination. Ethical law, always prohibitive, guarantees equal rights to all members of the group, but moral law, always affirmative, points to the absolute, without respect to the needs of the group. Thus ethical law demands that scrivener



proofread their copy; but the narrator says, "I cannot credit that the mettlesome poet, Byron, would have contentedly sat down with Bartleby to examine a law document of, say five hundred pages. . . . And when the narrator sees that Bartleby is mad and must be dismissed, that is, when common sense bids the narrator's soul be rid of the man, the narrator cannot bring himself to go to Trinity Church. Reason and imagination also divide the narrator's mind: each time Bartleby's stubborn preference forces the narrator into thought, the narrator thinks in two ways, by imagination (when he sees in poetic or religious terms) and by reason (when he works out logical deductions after studying facts); and the results of the two ways of thinking differ sharply. Reason tells the narrator that Bartleby exists on ginger nuts but somehow does not become hot and spicy; "imagination," explaining "what proves to be impossible to be solved by his judgment," tells the narrator that Bartleby is a "poor fellow" who "means no mischief" and "intends no insolence." When the narrator examines Bartleby's belonging to imagination leads him close to an understanding of Bartleby the individual: as he detects, through empathy, the loneliness of Bartleby, he sees that he and Bartleby are "both sons of Adam," and he begins to suffer "sad fancyings—the chimeras, doubtless, of a sick and silly brain." He adds, "Presentiments of strange discoveries hovered round me. The scrivener's pale form appeared to me laid out, among uncaring strangers, in its shivering winding sheet." Reason, however, leads the narrator in a different direction. He sees that the man is mad (a social judgment) and that, after giving Bartleby a fair chance to prove himself sane, he must fire him. Throughout the story, the narrator's generous impulses, as well as his attempt at self-justification when common sense fails to drive out the sense of guilt, take religious form: by leaps of faith, or imagination, he understands Bartleby, and when he is considering doing harm to Bartleby for the sake of his own reputation, he consoles himself with words like "charity" and "love," allowing himself to believe that what he plans is after all for Bartleby's good, not his own. (The narrator is self-deluded, not hypocritical, for as he tells the story now he understands and, usually, acknowledges the mistakes he made at the time of his Bartleby troubles. Mistakes he does not acknowledge openly he treats in comic terms, as he treats his ethical perversion of the moral injunction "that ye love one another.")

If the narrator's interpretation of Bartleby's madness is correct, imagination, presenting a metaphor which relates dead letters and men, is the basis of Bartleby's plight. In other words, he is a man who has seen a vision and, holding true to his vision, can no longer operate in the ordinary world. In this sense, he is a queer sort of fanatic, operating on the basis of a religion of his own.

Obviously the conflicts in "Bartleby," together with the germs of symbolic extension of meaning, are rooted in character; and the legitimacy of the conflicts, whether they are seen as conflicts between the individual and society or between will and necessity, is equally clear. Thus the story is not a melodrama (between, say, the stupid reviewer of *Pierre* and the pure, heroic author) but an honest fictional representation of a dilemma which, in ordinary life, cannot be resolved. In the end the narrator understands. Learning that Bartleby was a dead-letter clerk, he achieves Bartleby's vision: he sees by a leap of imagination exactly what Bartleby must have seen—dead letters, dead men, limited human freedom. This vision is the terrible outcome foreshadowed earlier: "And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way. And what further and deeper aberration might it not yet produce?" From the beginning the narrator has been imaginative—in fact, like Bartleby, has been given to "fancyings" and "chimeras"; but unlike Bartleby, he also possesses judgment. When he needs to, he can control his fancies. Unlike Bartleby, he creates: he originally created his practice, he has created "recondite documents," and he is now creating a work of art. Reason must impose order upon the chaos of imagination.

Symbolism in "Bartleby" supports this view of scrivener as visionary and narrator as creator. The

religion of ordinary scribes is the routine of the law office or the will of the lawyer: the narrator speaks of Turkey as the “most reverential of men,” values his “morning services,” and cannot get him to give up his afternoon “devotions”; and the narrator tells us that Turkey eats ginger nuts as though they were “wafers.” Bartleby is another matter: his arrival is an “advent,” there is nothing “ordinary human about him,” he is full of “quiet mysteries,” and when the narrator leaves Bartleby alone in the office Bartleby stands “like the last pillar of a ruined temple.” He dies at last among “murderers and thieves.” And whereas Bartleby is Christ-like, the narrator is Jehovah-like: the voice behind the story like the voice behind *The Confidence-Man*, is mythical, for the speaker here is God, the story of his reluctant change from the legalistic, tribal deity of the Old Testament to the God of Love and Justice in the New Testament. As Melville treats the material, Christ is not a son of God but (as the Old Testament Jehovah sees him) an “incubus,” thus not a revelation sent by God to man but rather a nightmare creature who drives God into self-knowledge (as, on the literal level, Bartleby drives the lawyer to self-knowledge).

The narrator and Jehovah are linked in numerous ways. The narrator is officially “Master” of the Chancery. Like Jehovah, he keeps out of the public eye and works “in the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat.” The narrator’s first scrivener, Turkey, is the militant archangel Michael. His nickname is possibly meant to suggest not only the red-necked, irascible fowl emblematic of thanksgiving but also the terrible Turk. He has a face which “beams,” “blazes,” and “flames” like the sun, and he considers himself, rather insolently, the narrator’s “right-hand man.” He uses his ruler as a sword and is in charge of the narrator’s forces, marshalling and deploying “columns” (the narrator speaks later of his “column of clerks”), and charging “the foe.” His “inflamed” ways are always “worse on Saturday (the Sabbath). The second scrivener, Nippers (pincers),<sup>1</sup> is symbolically linked with Lucifer. He is a “whiskered, sallow, and, upon the whole, piratical-looking young man” who suffers from “ambition as well as indigestion. He is impatient with the duties of a mere copyist, and his ambition is evinced by “an unwarrantable usurpation of strictly professional affairs, such as the original drawing up of legal documents.” (The Devil is famous for making pacts: consider poor Faust.) His indigestion (spleen) is “betokened in an occasional nervous testiness and grinning irritability, causing the teeth audibly grind together..., unnecessary maledictions, hissed, rather than spoken, in the heat [inferno] of business...” He has his own kingdom, for the narrator says, “Among the manifestations of his disease was a fondness he had for receiving visits from certain ambiguous-looking fellows in seedy coats, whom he called his clients.” He is “considerable of a ward-politician,” occasionally does “a little business at the Justices’ courts,” and is “not unknown on the steps of the Tombs.” As gods and would-be gods control willful men, so Nippers jerks his desk about as if it were “a perverse voluntary agent and vexing him.” The third scrivener, Ginger Nut (Raphael, perhaps—for Milton the messenger and sociable angel), is official cake (or “wafer”) and apple (forbidden fruit?) purveyor for the establishment.

Much of the humor in “Bartleby” depends upon the reader’s perceiving the symbolic level, for the comic effect arises out of the tendency of surface and symbolic levels to infect one another: the narrator, an ordinary man, is comic when he behaves like God, and God is comic when he behaves like man. And other tensions between surface and symbol (Turkey—Michael, Nippers—Lucifer) work in the same way. Ground-glass folding doors (through which, presumably, we see darkly) divide the narrator’s premises into two parts. “According to my humor,” the narrator says, rather pleased with himself, “I threw open these doors, or closed them.” He also takes pleasure in his clever disposition of Bartleby: Bartleby sits inside the doors (all others are outside) but sits behind a screen “which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice.” Puns frequent

contribute to this humor. The words “original” and “genius” work as they do in *The Confidence-Man*. And when the narrator becomes resigned to Bartleby he says, “One prime thing was this—he was always there...” (Melville’s italics). When the scrivener’s being “always there” proves a not unmixed blessing, the narrator says:

And as the idea came upon me of his possibly turning out a long-lived man, and keep occupying my chambers, and denying my authority; and perplexing my visitors; and scandalizing my professional reputation; and casting a general gloom over the premises; keeping soul and body together to the last upon his savings (for doubtless he spent but half a dime a day), and in the end perhaps outlive me, and claim possession of my office by right of his perpetual occupancy... I resolved to gather all my faculties together, and forever rid me of this intolerable incubus.

Ere revolving any complicated project, however, adapted to this end, I first simply suggested to Bartleby the propriety of his permanent departure... But, having taken three days to meditate upon it, he apprised me, that his original determination remained the same; in short, that he still preferred to abide with me.

(The funniest barrage of puns in the story is *keeping soul and body together to the last upon his savings*.) But the effect of the symbolic level is not always—and is never entirely—comic. When the narrator abandons his office to Nippers at the time of Bartleby’s arrest, one is more distressed than amused. One is moved, too, by the rich final line of the story: “Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!” A man who behaves like God may be queerly admirable. The narrator puffs up his chest like God, but he is also capable of infinite compassion, he is dedicated to the spirit of the law (he will not get rid of Bartleby by laying an essentially false charge on him), and he can survive.

The lawyer-turned-artist is creative, like God, because he has judgment. He has imagination like “the mettlesome poet, Byron,” but unlike Byron (Melville seems to suggest) the lawyer has the judgment to see that the commitment of art is to man. One reason for the social commitment of art, we have seen, is that society cannot operate without voluntary or involuntary diminution of the individual will. But Melville offers, in “Bartleby,” another reason as well. The final line of the story is both an equation and an opposition: “Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!” Man lives on a walled-up street where the practice of law flourishes and justice is operative only in the mind. If justice is to be introduced into the ordinary world, if man is to receive recompense for being stopped in mid-action by dry lightning (like the narrator’s man from Virginia), justice must come either as a Christian afterlife or as a transmutation of purely conceptual experience—that is, as art. The first seems no longer certain: the office of Master in Chancery is now defunct, “a [damned] premature act.” We must find some other pleasant remuneration. The betrayed Bartleby gets justice and mercy at last, though; for Bartleby, whose freedom was limited in life by the inescapability of death, is now transmogrified into eternal life in art. Before Bartleby, the office was governed by law; but the recondite document in his hand is a New Testament of sorts, at once ethical and moral. It insists upon law in this world, but it also provides justice. Though life must of necessity be characterized by limited freedom, voluntary self-diminution, there will be, after life, art. The artist rolls the stone away—that is the narrator’s creative act—and man escapes from the Tombs.

## NOTE

I. For suggestions concerning the names “Nippers” and “Ginger Nut” I am indebted to E. M. Glenn of Chico State College.

# An Invective

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## Against

## Mere Fiction

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AS EVERYONE KNOWS, THE WHOLE TENDENCY of modern life and thought is against the absolute. Metaphysics is out, “alternative conceptual systems” are in. Kings are out, pluralism is in. Relativity is all. But however useful relativism may be as a way of running daily life—keeping fascists out of power, keeping tea parties civilized—it has nothing to do with art. Relativism denies those finalities toward which man’s spirit has always groped. To admit that there are no finalities is to put the spirit out of business; to say that finalities are a matter of personal assertion is to make the spirit’s business insignificant.

Despite the vogue of relativism, good painters and composers continue to make absolute affirmations, but they do so in spite of their critics, their happy, horn-swoggled audiences, and the richly rewarded hacks who call themselves painters or composers. As for literature, the two most important of the established novelists in America are that great gossip Saul Bellow, with his “personal vision,” and that master of illusion, prankster, puzzler, Vladimir Nabokov. Both are solid writers, but neither is so vulgar or obsolete as to admit his fiction (as Chekhov said) “tells the truth.” The fact is that, despite their protestations, Bellow and Nabokov do tell the truth, insofar as they are significant writers— Bellow clumsily, Nabokov with careful craftsmanship.

To put it another way, writers work out in words their intuitions— their private certainties—of how things are. Good writers have right and significant intuitions, and they present their intuitions into the world by means of masterful technique. To deny the possibility of absolute intuition is either to scrap the art of fiction or to look patronizingly on the fool who works at it. Ultimately, the critic or publisher’s abnegation of the absolute turns weak but serious writers into hacks and promotes the publication of books by natural-born bus drivers.

I am not really saying that only one book should have been published this season—*Omensetter’s Luck*. I approve of books on chess, stories about boys and dogs, and one or two other things. What I mean I must say by examples. Before I do that, though, I must add one truism more. In the absolute world of fictional truth, the novelist speaks of what might be, *In Cold Blood* notwithstanding—speaks of people and events about whom the reader is not likely to feel any violent urge to disagree, though sometimes he ought to. The critic, on the other hand, declaims the truth about an actuality, a book waving the old flag of Absolute Taste in the face of all common sense. To the relativist’s rhetorical question “Who is to judge?” the critic leaps up, red beard flying, banging his crutches, screaming “Me!” Laughter. Tentative applause. If the man has any brains, any dignity, he soon learns to speak of demonstrables like Form, as if construction in a novel were far more important than what the novel is constructed to do. Or he learns to speak of Personal Vision, becoming sideshow barker for freaks. Since novelists are people too, the critic learns to make careful distinctions between the work and the man who worked it out, as if a man who thinks and feels like Capote *could* have written like Graham Greene this time, unfortunately, he didn’t. What is important to notice here is that the capitulating critic is right. Art is not all that important, or anyway most art. Nevertheless, it may be observed of clowns, especially red-bearded, bespectacled clowns who bang their crutches—they persist.

Now to the examples and what I mean about Fiction and Information and Escape and Truth. My object, I should explain at once, is to comment on everything in this enormous hodge-podge stack of books I've been sent by the editors of *The Southern Review* and make of the hodge-podge a clear demonstration of what distinguishes fictional truth from mere fiction.

When Peter Faecke published *The Firebugs* in his native Germany—he was then twenty-three—he was “hailed by leading literary critics,” according to the jacket, “as a writer of startling originality and proven artistic achievement.” The tale, told backwards and inside-out, concerns (1) town guilt, (2) a man in search of lineage, (3) racial conflict and guilt (Jews and Germans, not whites and Negroes), (4) an idiot, (5) an all-knowing detective-lawyer-uncle, (6) sawmills, (7) arson. Faulkner reheated, a thick and bitter brew. From an absolutist's point of view, Faecke is a hack.

Usually the pandering of writers and publishers does not come to outright fraud, however. One finds, for instance, young writers who are devoutly sincere, like Marilyn Hoff (*Dink's Blues*) and Gertrude Horowitz (*Home Is Where You Start From*). Miss Hoff has written a college novel that sounds like a college girl's letter home, full of ellipses and girlish opinions about civil rights and free will and imagination, in the obscene popular magazine style: “The next day was Friday, November 22. When it happened [my italics] I was grabbing lunch in the snack bar.” Shock of recognition? Book also has symbols. Horowitz's book—much better written—is about the generations, how the younger can learn from the older, how no two people can communicate, and so on. Horowitz is good at rendering scenes from New York Jewish life, and as a sociological study his novel is interesting. The trouble is that sociology is not, itself, interesting. It deals with the moment, as Kierkegaard would say. It provides mere information. Horowitz wallows in trivial detail, having neither the barbaric wisdom of Melville, who scorned such stuff, nor the philosophical insight of Tolstoy (or, in a smaller way, Peter Taylor), who can make gossip significant. Perhaps because his experience is limited, perhaps because he has been taken in by fashionable nonsense, Horowitz's attempts at universalizing come to nothing. However popular it may be to assert that each generation must learn on its own, the assertion is false. If a second generation can't learn from a first, the reason is that the second generation has a basic and uninteresting fault: it lacks the ability to empathize or think and thus understand. Great writers deal with problems which confront a healthy, intelligent man, however grotesque the fiction. They are representative; small writers deal with social or physiological traps. (Captain Ahab may be mad, but he's a piece of Melville, by no means a fool, a weakling, or merely a victim of social conditions.) Marilyn Hoff got published because the racial question sells. Mr. Horowitz got published because alienation is in. Neither writer has clarified the human situation, though both make a youthful, feeble attempt. Both have been encouraged to market simpleminded opinions and undisciplined talent.

The pandering of grown-up writers is more troublesome. Take, for instance, Margaret Lane (*A Night at Sea*). A love triangle—husband, wife, mistress. Husband and wife go to the old symbolic sea and ruminate among the usual poetic-sounding nautical fittings for two hundred pages. Wife decides she should kill herself, the Christian thing to do. Takes pills while piloting the boat, despite the arguments of common sense and a ghostly voice. Boat is wrecked, husband dies, and wife finds that life is, for mysterious reasons, worth living after all. The writing is professional, and the analysis of characters is subtle, so that the immortality of the argument has effect. Infidelity is justified because we ought to be “free,” ought to “fulfill ourselves,” according to Miss Lane. And as everyone knows, nothing in the world is really satisfying but sex. Or take Willard Motley (*Let Noon Be Fair*): a sad story—annoyingly well told, in its slick way—of American exploitation. It used to be that in beautiful natural Mexico girls fornicated for free on the beach, but then came the gringos, paying the girls, on one hand, preaching to them, on the other. Now Mexico is dirty and rotten and guilt-ridden and

capitalist, like America. Motley, like Miss Lane, makes money on fashionable lies, in this case the lie that Americans are basically hypocrites and fools and every other country in the world is nice. Motley is wrong, as wrong as any Bircher, and his publisher (Putnam) should be trounced. One might say the same of the Trident Press, publishers of Don Tracy's maudlin and would-be sensation *Bazzaris*, except that a book so extremely clumsy can have no effect whatever. The probably unwitting social and moral thesis is absurd, the technique embarrassing.

I am of course not saying that every book must be significant, but only that a man who thinks he is significant—thinks himself an artist—had better be right. Helen MacInnes's *The Double Image*, a tale of intrigue and espionage, is good entertainment, though not art and never meant to be. Alexander Fullerton's *Lionheart* is now and then moderately entertaining, though hardly as exciting as Fullerton thinks, unless the style is pure desperation. Even the writers of entertainments have to be trivially honest, that is to say, convincing. MacInnes usually is, Fullerton isn't, but the imperfection of his craft is not bothersome. One does not judge a lemon drop by the same standards one uses in judging a lifeboat.

On the other hand, the mere intent to be amusing and insignificant is no guarantee of success for the entertainer. Consider Jean Stafford's *A Mother in History* (not a work of fiction but a handy example). It is tasteless to write unimportantly of important matters—the assassination of a President, the background of an assassin. Miss Stafford's original object was serious enough, however unpretentious: to seek an intuitive, feminine understanding of Oswald's mother. But Miss Stafford has sold out to the snobbish, complacent, chattering ladies' magazines. For instance: "Accustomed as she was to public speaking, Mrs. Oswald did not seem to be addressing me specifically but, rather, a large congregation ... Taking advantage of my anonymity in this quiet crowd and of the fact that her back was turned, I looked around the room in the snoopy way women do when they are in other women's houses..." A moment later Miss Stafford speaks of "a writing desk where orderly piles of papers were laid out to which my Paul Pry eye would be bound to stray." Throughout her narrative, Miss Stafford superciliously calls attention to Mrs. Oswald's grammar, her pronunciation, her vulgarity. Mrs. Oswald is straight out of Flannery O'Connor, but at least her demonic stupidity is honest. Miss Stafford, who used to write serious fiction, has taught herself to be what Longinus calls "frigid"—emotionally trivial.

I have an ulterior motive for dragging in Jean Stafford. I want to make a distinction between art and entertainment, one in which "fiction" in the old sense has no place. I have said that great writers avoid mere social or physiological traps and that entertainers—that is, writers of spy stories, animal stories, amusing interviews, and other books to escape with—are successful if they amuse without offending our sense of what is fitting. These were convenient simplifications. Good writers do deal with trivial problems and trivial people. When they do, however, they recognize the triviality of their material and force the reader—perhaps for the first time—to recognize it too. Mere entertainment, then, provides escape from the way things are; entertaining *art* clarifies. Entertainment fails when consideration inside or outside the work force the reader to muse soberly on Truth—not the truth of fact, but the truth of human values. Entertaining art, on the other hand, fails whenever it turns into pure entertainment (shooting in the wrong direction) or whenever it falls into error (a shot in the right direction, but a miss). From a technical point of view, both entertainment and art require craftsmanship, but since style is one of the chief devices for liberating truth, it should be obvious that the richer the language, the worse the entertainment. Or to put the thing neutrally, entertainment requires cleverness, art richness. Needless to say, neither art nor entertainment very often get what they require. It is also hardly necessary to mention that most books are neither art nor entertainment.

but a mixture of the two—Bellow's *Herzog*, for instance: part vision, part prattle. Nevertheless, the distinction is right and useful, and books which violate the distinction are unsatisfying, like music from a French horn that leaks air on certain notes.

Entertaining art does get its due in Anthony Burgess, even in his relatively slight first novel, *Vision of Battlements*, belatedly published last winter. The comedy is lighter than that in Burgess's later books, but the artistic focus is the same. Characters who are not trivial, or wouldn't be if the world were put together right, find themselves entangled in the triviality of the world—in this case the world of military system. The central character is a serious composer whose noble but ineffectual attempts to manage where a Truth-man does not fit throw comic light on both the impossible ideal (which we all the more earnestly affirm) and the social realities which keep the ideal out of reach. Not that the tale is a melodrama. The army is all too eager to be a friend of art, education, and all that: it joyfully makes lists, sends out directives, studies the appropriate and inappropriate regulations; but it is as hard for military system to adapt to art as for art to adapt to military system. The hero's name is Ennis, his story a burlesque of Virgil's epic. No empire has been founded yet when the book ends, but Ennis is still at it, laboring like the insects in Burgess's splendid final paragraph. The language in *Vision of Battlements* is not as ingenious as in the later Burgess novels, but it is sufficient, often very funny, rich in images which are at once clever and grimly appropriate.

And pure entertainment, of a sort less formulaic than the usual spy story or animal story, gets its due and then some in *Soft Soap*, the first of William Elsschot's *Three Novels*, superbly translated by A. Brotherton. *Soft Soap* is the story of a wise swindler named Boorman, managing director of *The World Review of Finance, Trade and Commerce, Industry, Art and Science*, a publication with no subscribers. Most of the story consists of Boorman's half-Dostoyevskian, half-Dickensian talk about the world. His *Review* is a device for extorting money from other swindlers (the whole world), and the novelist's excuse for the talk is that Boorman is breaking in a new managing director. What makes the book so delightful is that, though Boorman believes all the world to be crooked, Boorman is no whining cynic. He has enormous admiration for crooks:

“Look, you do it like this,” and he flicked open a thick directory and read out:  
*Washington Hotel—1100 rooms—electricity—bathrooms—lifts.*  
*Telephone 16305, 16306, 16307, 16308, 16309, 16310.*

“You can see at once that the Washington Hotel is something for the *World Review* ... The word the advertisements so that the innocent reader has visions of some immense labyrinth where he'd get lost without a guide. Then those phone numbers. They could just as well as have put on six-three-o-five, a hyphen, and ten, but with each number printed separately you can hear a chorus of phones jangling as you read the advertisement. They know a trick or two!”

*Soft Soap* “exposes” everything under the sun—from politicians to funeral directors to unions to fat sick ladies, and the inventiveness of the thing is amazing. *The Leg*, the second of the *Three Novels*, is shorter and almost as funny. Boorman grows remorseful and struggles to atone for his earlier swindling of a fat lady who now has a wooden leg. To no avail, of course. The swindled shall inherit the earth. The third novel is sadly disappointing—a moral tale, full of heavy-handed symbolism and all the virtuous emotion Elsschot poked fun at so cleverly in his earlier pieces. What has gone wrong here is interesting, or at any rate supports my thesis on art vs. entertainment. The longing and disillusionment which characterize all of Elsschot's work can make excellent entertainment, for the Elsschot mock-soberly takes patent illusion as his clown-hero's premise of reality and does not claim

to say how things really are. But when, in an attempt at art, Elsschot describes the human situation as a sad case of longing and disillusionment, he mistakes a half-truth for truth, and the result is one more whimpering modern novel. At the same time, the very cleverness which makes the earlier short novel delightful is hollow and out of place here, while the attempt at richness introduced by symbols (mainly the sea) fails because the symbols are easy and awkwardly introduced.

I object on these same stylistic grounds to Heather Ross Miller's *Tenants of the House* and, more strenuously, John Nathan's translation of Yukio Mishima's *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, which is probably no better in Japanese. Miss Miller's widely acclaimed style consists of "poetic" diction (houses are "dwellings"), high-falutin' sentences designed to intensify everyday situations, and trite bits of irony. By high-falutin' I mean: "But it didn't turn out that way. The vision that burned under the carbide lamps of the Carolina farmers as John Murdoch stood in their kitchen and talked of his church, his Mission, burned in the lamp of Destiny with a different blaze struck by another match." As for trite irony, take the chapter-opener, to be found in a hundred ladies' novels: "Summer came to Johnsboro in spite of the war." One might point to numerous instances of such sentimental writing in Miss Miller's novel, and I am tempted to do it if only from distress at the high praise her style has generally been given. But I won't. Three things should be said in her favor. First, though she writes with a gilded shovel, she does not trade in patently moronic ideas or gossip for its own sake. Second, her symbols are more or less original and sometimes interesting. And third, the novel is infinitely better than its dust jacket—a picture of Poe's Miss Usher, with a green face and stormy blue hair.

As for Mishima's novel, the dust jacket is excellent. The prose, if one can isolate it from what it carries, is lean and spare, classical, like all Mishima's writing. The trouble is, there are brutal, obvious stock symbols, intended ironically, in part, but nevertheless purveyors of untruth. The novel is about the sea and the land, youthful ambition and middle-aged disillusionment and compromise. The plot is as spare and classical as the prose: and the danger in a strictly classical plot which ends unhappily is that the doom must be inevitable as the plot and must be, at the same time, significant enough to justify the torture the reader must endure. Mishima tells of a sailor who once believed—and secretly believes yet—that he is set apart from the rest of mankind and will someday achieve some sort of glory. He becomes the idol of a group of schoolboys who have the same vague yearning for the extraordinary and the same conviction of personal superiority. The boys for unconvincing reasons train themselves in the heartlessness of a Nietzschean superman. For instance, in one powerfully upsetting scene, they murder and cut up a kitten. When the schoolboys discover that their hero is an ordinary man, compassionate, befuddled, gentle, like any common landsman, they resolve to destroy him exactly as they destroyed the kitten. The novel ends with the sailor drinking drugged tea, mumbling of his dream of glory, about to be liquidated: "Still immersed in his dream, he drank down the tepid tea. It tasted bitter. Glory, as anyone knows, is bitter stuff." We have heard before that glory is bitter—heard it so often we need to question the opinion. Mishima's division of humanity into landsmen and seamen, compromisers or wrongheaded glory seekers, is melodramatic, and the plot melodrama is completely unrelieved. Every character who figures in the story stands on one side of the neat dichotomy: an actress who pitifully misses the Oscars year after year; a landlady unwillingly compromising in her double role as land-rooted mother and mistress to a sailor; and on the other side, the sentimental sailor, the murderous boys. But there *are* in this world some who succeed, some who, as W. H. Gass says, "know how to be." As a psychological thriller Mishima's tale might be successful (though psychology for its own sake is no more interesting than sociology); but when accidental psychological limitations are elevated to cosmic verities by an awesome rumbling



symbolism, the result is falsehood and thus unsatisfying drama. In Mishima too, one may as well add sex has much to answer for. The murderous son, Noboru, gets his great vision of the mysterious glow which is his supposed Destiny from peeping while his mother and the sailor make love. And as for the sailor:

To a man locked up in a steel ship all the time, the sea is too much like a woman. Things like her lulls and storms, or her caprice, or the beauty of her breast reflecting the setting sun, are all too obvious. More than that, you're in a ship that mounts the sea and rides her and yet is constantly denied her. It's the old saw about miles and miles of lovely water and you can't quench your thirst. Nature surrounds a sailor with all these elements so like a woman and yet he is kept as far from her as a man can be from her warm, living body. That's where the problem begins, right there—I'm sure of it.

Captain Ahab, I think, would spit.

If entertainment provides a moral holiday, whereas art tells the truth about human values, one must make up a third category for works which, fictional or not, deal frankly with mere fact. Both Frank Coenen's *The House on the Canal*, translated by James Brockway, and J. Van Oudshoorn's *Alienation*, translated by N.C. Clegg, published together in the Classics of Dutch and Flemish Literature series, one essentially non-fictional, the other a work of fiction, are successful accounts of non-universal fact. *The House on the Canal* is the chronicle of a real house and the family which actually lived there. The book is a sociological-historical piece, interesting because it is Dutch, well-researched, and gossipy; it is legitimate, as Gene Horowitz's book is not, because Coenen abstains from moral comment where there is none to be made. *Alienation* is a grueling psychological analysis, a painstaking clinical record of mental breakdown as seen from inside. The book has an effect much like one common effect of what I have called art: the reader is torn to bits. But the murder of the reader has no broader philosophical implications. If the madness of the central character has its basis in puritanism, the cause is not presented as anything more than a special case. One reads in the way one reads about the emotional problems of Siamese twins. An excellent book, for its kind; neither art nor entertainment but an illustration of what the *Scientific American* could be if scientists let loose. A book of information.

Finally, as I said at the start, great literary artists give right answers to the right questions and do so with masterful craftsmanship. Such writers are rare, and a glance at the writers who have come close shows why.

Take May Sarton first—*Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*. Miss Sarton is a careful craftsman with considerable intelligence, but she is shallow. Her novel concerns an old lady poet passionately dedicated to “getting down” the truth, to understanding, and so forth. Unfortunately, the lady we are supposed to admire is a posturing, self-pitying phony. She talks to herself in the staccato manner of an elderly lesbian (which she is): “Old thing, it's high time you pulled yourself together. Or again, “ 'trapped by life,' Hilary muttered.” And Miss Sarton, for understandable reasons, can't see through her. Two interviewers (lovers, to make a plot) are on their way to ask Mrs. Stevens about her life and work, and half the time while she waits for them Mrs. Stevens worries about the Meaning of Life, half the time dallies in (we are supposed to believe) characteristic feminine distress: “This room, too, gathered together a huge complex of living and harmonized it, all focused on the small intimate glimpse of the sea cut through scrub and brush, framed in French windows at the end. But would they disdain the flowered chintz on the sofa as old-fashioned? Would they register the two Impressionist

paintings as not quite first class?" Besides a room which is really a poem she has the fond memory of a dead husband named Adrian, his mother, named Margaret (who used to bring one perfect rose in a glass), and a precious young homosexual friend named Mar (fussy names all). To Mar Mrs. Stevens shows her poems, with the following tiresome result:

It was salutary to pit the new poems against someone so young and intransigent—so ignorant to—~~who~~—who would have none of her hardwon virtuosity, who forced her back and back to the essence who brought out the crude, original person. They fought bitterly, sometimes over a single word. Often she was in a rage when he left but the rage shot adrenalin through her, gave her the strength to begin a poem again, tear it apart, make it harder and stronger so she could hurl it at Mar the next day in triumph. She had not imagined that she would be so fertilized by a human being again.

And there are others, a brilliant cast of fops, mostly gay. Mrs. Stevens teaches people that "We have to dare to be ourselves." One wonders if such people *ought* to be themselves. Great writing requires a great person to do the writing. Miss Sarton leaves us with fine craftsmanship and a trivial view of man and—the real subject of the novel—poetry.

John Updike's *Of the Farm* is not much better. Again, the craftsmanship is impressive, but the people, like Updike in his present stage, are hypersensitive whiners. Every expert line tremulously whispers that the world is very sad: "Now in cool air I kissed her and her face felt feverish. Fall, which comes earlier inland, was present not so much as the scent of fallen fruit in the orchard as a lavender tinge in the dusk, a sense of expiration. The meadow wore a strip of mist where a little rivulet, hard as a creek, choked by weeds and watercress, trickled and breathed. A bat like a speck of pain jerked the way and that in the membranous violet between the treetops." The characters—an ad man, his mother, his wife and step-son—spend three days telling grim stories, quarrelling, feebly patching up, and above all, watching each other, scrutinizing emotions. Everybody is jealous of everybody, and listening to their conversation is like listening to cross young lovers who'd be better off home in bed. The book is not mere sociology or psychology, however. It has a clear and driving moral, a kind of affirmation by default: vicious and self-centered people have to be moral to keep from killing each other. In short, the limitation of the novel is that its morality is grounded—as the Sartrean epigram warns us—on a squinting and cynical vision, that is, a mistake. This streak in Updike has not always been quite so obvious, and one hopes he will get past it, whatever the cause.

Stylistically, Elizabeth Jane Howard's *After Julius* rings truer than May Sarton's book, and the analysis of characters is for the most part nearly as convincing as Updike's. Miss Howard's advantage is that she is wiser, emotionally healthier than the other two writers. She too enjoys scrutinizing motives, nuances of meaning in common speech, psychological interplay; but Miss Howard and her characters are not all inconvenienced at having been born. Take the character Daniel, for instance, at this point a stranger listening to a lady's sudden outpouring of grief and indignation:

He listened, and nodded—more to show that he was listening than to indicate agreement or even understanding. He understood that she was not happy, all right, and of course, if people feel like that, they spent nearly all their time trying to find the reasons for it, and he knew that he wasn't there to find the reasons *for* her, just to provide comfort—a little ignorant warmth in the awful life of hers, jam-crammed with ideas and disaster and with no man to account for it or take her mind off herself.

When she had no more to say she asked him what he thought. He thought.

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The story is a kind of allegory in which three dissimilar women achieve their moral identity by means of what for them amounts to a private myth—Julius, killed at Dunkirk. The prose is smooth and serviceable, more clever than rich, not painfully self-conscious; and the controlling idea is worth the writer's trouble. What limits this pleasing novel is that, allegory or no, the book is merely a ladies' book, Miss Howard merely a ladies' novelist. If we read for escape, the serious theme distracts us from the pleasant chatter, the pretty scenes, the touching sentiments; once we are caught by the emerging idea, the gossipy detail stirs a tingle of impatience and we wish to get on to what counts.

The distinction I have made between art and entertainment is borrowed from Graham Greene, and I would be ungrateful to use it against him. Put it this way, then. Relatively speaking, *The Comedians* is a fine novel, especially for reading on a train. Greene himself has provided the standard. Near the start of the book the narrator says in passing, "I tried to read a novel, but the heavy foreseeable progress of its characters down the uninteresting corridors of power made me drowsy, and when the book fell upon the deck, I did not bother to retrieve it." The novel Brown is reading has some things in common with *The Comedians*, but Greene's book has nothing heavily foreseeable, no uninteresting corridors. *The Comedians* is partly informational (Totalitarianism in Haiti), partly entertainment (a well-plotted thriller). It also makes a casual pass at art, that is, Truth-telling, but here as almost always in Greene Truth rides easy and manages not to be distracting—for two reasons. First, for all that has been made of it, Greene's Truth is—and has always been—comfortable and familiar, a piece of the plot. It has far less to do with the Catholic's problem (as Greene himself has insisted) than with the ordinary human problem, that of maintaining faith in and commitment to those absolute values—justice, freedom, loyalty—which for Greene seem increasingly remote from actuality. Greene's thesis is one that warms the heart, like sad, pretty girls and well-described exotic landscapes and amusing minor characters—a pair of devout vegetarians, for instance (as in this book). Second, Greene's form and manner are insistently popular. When serious art borrows a popular formula, the very manner forces one to recognize that the formula is for once being taken seriously. Consider Faulkner. An odd and striking technique, one which forces the reader again and again away from the formula to its inner meaning, is worthless if that meaning is trifling or thoroughly familiar, and Greene is right to adopt the form he does. But if the artist's vision is significant and exceptional it demands unique expression.

On the other hand, Crawford Power's *The Encounter*, which after fifteen years has now appeared in an Avon paperback, is a serious and original work of art held back from the first rank by Power's choice of conventional technique. Even so trifling a thing as the writer's way of beginning and separating chapters can limit the effect of a novel. The book opens *in medias res*, with a piece of conversation—a beginning which requires incredible skill to bring off. It is one of the two stock openings of spy stories, ladies' novels, and who-done-its, the other being *in medias res* description. Power's handling of chapter and episode, sometimes the individual sentence as well, call up the same unlucky associations. The whole effect of the conventional and popular technique—broken only by Father Cawder's meditations—runs counter to the main force of the novel, an impressive exploration of the idea of goodness. Power's central character, Father Cawder, is a Christian in the old-fashioned sense, a humiliator of the flesh, an uncompromising servant of God. He is an embodiment of goodness of a certain kind—as is almost every character in the novel. And his goodness, like that of the people around him, is both admirable and deadly. The central encounter is between Father Cawder and an acrobat named Diamond, who at first seems Cawder's opposite in every way: a sensualist, apparently uncommitted, finally a murderer. But in fact Diamond is Cawder and Cawder Diamond. No one in the

novel is normative. The norm emerges as an impossible ideal at the imaginary center of the circle of characters—an ideal of human love as wise as God's. Father Cawder is no more capable of such love than is any other man. His tragedy is that he will not be satisfied with mere forgiveness, confession. He ends brooding on the image given him by his alter ego, the plunge into death and the divine radiance; but that death he cannot choose. Breaking off from his prayer of forgiveness, he becomes, Power's brilliant close, a grim parody of the saintly martyrs of his faith, still mortifying the flesh but also turning—as imagery has suggested throughout—to stone.

Before I can turn to what seem to me the two most important novels published in the last few months—the last two novels in my stack—I must add to what I have said already one further observation about what makes art. Excellent craftsmanship is the limit of an intelligent and wise man—Graham Greene among entertainers, Anthony Burgess among what I am calling artists. The great artist, the “genius,” to use an old-fashioned word, is the man who sees more connections between things than an ordinary man can see and has, moreover, a peculiar and *absolutely unerring* feeling for his medium. “Style” is as inadequate to describe this feeling for the writer's medium as “church” would be to describe a cathedral. (Part of the difference between a church and a cathedral is that the man who lives in a cathedral is a bishop.) Some men, beyond all doubt, have words bubbling in the holy wells where the rest of us have mere blood. In desperation one snatches at ludicrous phrases like “magical language.” Fraudulent writers like Herr Faecke steal their magic from somebody good. Bad writers, only dimly aware of the mystery, trump up a style. (Strange to say, all bad writers come up with the same style, though its elements may be differently distributed from writer to writer.) Intelligent writers like Burgess in his later works (and Nabokov, too) painstakingly construct a style and pump into it artificial flavoring in the form of puns, anagrams, and other material not organically related to the thing being said. (Joyce engaged in this, but with a propriety his imitators miss: up to *Finnegans Wake* Joyce's books are tales of the artist told by the artist; the linguistic tricks are the traces or signs of the speaker, comparable to—and directly suggested by—the linguistic manner of the Holy Ghost as patristic exegetes understood him.)

Only two novels in this group are extraordinary for breadth of mind and verbal genius. One is Marguerite Young's *Miss Macintosh, My Darling*; the other is William Gass's first novel, *Omensetter's Luck*.

Miss Young establishes at once (p. 4) the central question of her enormous epic of mind:

What was the organization of illusion, of memory? Who knew even his own divided heart? Who knew all hearts as his own? Among beings strange to each other, those divided by the long roarings of time, of space, those who have never met or, when they meet, have not recognized their own the other heart and that heart's weaknesses, have turned stonily away, would there not be, in the vision of some omniscient eye, a web of spidery logic establishing the most secret relationships, deep calling to deep, illuminations of the eternal darkness, recognitions in the night world of voyager dreams, all barriers dissolving, all souls as one and united? Every heart is the other heart. Every soul is the other soul. Every face is the other face. The individual is the other illusion.

The book is too big and too leisurely to read or judge in the usual way—a vast city of associations, classical and modern, in which floating spirits interpenetrate and external realities of time and place break down to become a startling myth of the archetypal human life. One recalls, for many reasons, the Joycean archetypes, Father, Mother, Son, Daughter, Poet. It is directly to Joyce, I think, that Miss

Young is speaking, and she is saying No. No to the Aristotelean view of life as a conflict of generation, corruption, and re-creation; no to the Joycean theory of history, and, above all, no to the theory of love as constraint. Like Joyce, Miss Young knows what tales are worth telling—she has carloads of them, as does Joyce—and like Joyce she tells her tales with highly conscious, highly artificial style. The great difference, from which all further differences sprout, is that Miss Young is a thoroughgoing Platonist—a startling thing to encounter in our time. Thus while both boldly seize their theme “Everything,” the word means more (quantitatively) to Joyce than to Miss Young. Joyce offers a metaphysical explanation of the alphabet; Miss Young is not interested in the alphabet as such but only in the fact that spellings, right or wrong, reflect some remove from the Idea. Joyce is interested in particular responsibilities of specific kings and statesmen as well as the generic idea of Kingship (the crown and scepter, hat and cane), and he relates these to the responsibilities of the father, son, and poet. Miss Young leaps at once to Kingship as love, with hats and cane-like objects (also cloaks, capes, robes) functioning as Freudian symbols. Her allusive style alludes always to the same eternal forms in their infinite disguises; her symbols all center in the same idea. And so, where the length of *Finnegans Wake* is justified by the density of the book, its analyses of particulars—places, occupations, institutions, rituals—the bloated length of *Miss Macintosh* is an effect, simply, of the system. The manifestations of recurrent embodiments of the Idea might, in one sense, be broken off at any point: they dramatize a vision which is just as clear and possibly even as convincing in the abstract. The book lacks the emotive power of compression, in short; but I am not sure the idea admits of compression. If so, Platonism pushed to its limit is not artistically viable. And if this is true, I must nervously report, Platonism is false.

The trouble with Platonism as a basis for art is that the realm of forms is a museum, and the world where forms find their expression is a junk shop. It is impossible for a thoroughgoing Platonist to love or respect the gew-gaws of actuality: he sees the actual as curious garments from an old trunk, and since people and places are all dim representations, emblems, signs—and signs, moreover, which he understands beforehand—he very naturally slides into finding greatest interest in the signs which are the most grotesque.

We had passed, on this journey, many curious pieces of rural architecture, an enormous coffee urn with its lid opened against the sky, a wigwam nightclub where, under a denuded oak, a melancholy buffalo was tethered, incongruous as the faded washing on the line. We had passed a windmill, a leaning tower, Noah's Ark, the old woman who lived in a shoe, but these were miles back, and there were now no buildings but those of the amorphous distance, little, low-roofed houses, small as ruined birds' nests, a child's face at some near window, the individuality blotted out by the watery greyness of the Middle West, the train as small as a toy train crossing a trestle bridge.

At the same time, Platonism has its advantages, not the least of which is the freedom it gives to poetical fancy:

There had been these seas of silk spun by martyred cocoons, silks so delicate that they might be drawn for miles through a wedding ring like clouds through the gold hoop of the absent moon, gossamers which might have been enclosed inside that casket which was a nut's shell, lacquered which seemed to melt, to dissolve at a touch, ribbons crumbling into fog and bands of silk disintegrating into dust and silks flowing into water as if water were their counterpart and moon

stained satins with torn skirts and white rosettes which might have been lying for years under the dust or in the waters of a grave—many bridal gowns and no bride's slippers—for this bride had lost her slippers long ago—many flounces, ruffles, skirts, underskirts—bridal gowns of all vintages and perhaps of that vintage which never was on earth, porous silks so thin that the least touch might cause them to fall into nothingness as snow might fall into a crucible of burning gold where a long-haired angel walked with folded wings and eyes which stared at Mr. Spitzer.

*Miss Macintosh, My Darling* presents the world as a glittering moonlit ruin, a dream; as death (“for were we not already dead, we who breathed and walked about, our breath like frozen plumes upon the winter air, our eyeballs cracking in the cold?”). Miss Young has put the best years of her creative lifetime into this book, and her craftsmanship, even genius, is impressive. But the book is fiction.

*Omensetter's Luck*, on the other hand, is true. It is an imperfect book, finally unsatisfying, but the work of an extraordinary mind. Whereas Miss Young's poetry is necessarily incantatory, all voices becoming one voice, and whereas her imagery is necessarily antique-shop imagery, Gass's language and imagery come from particular, real people and places closely observed—observed with intense love but also with that comic detachment which comes from the knowledge that all men are, like oneself, slightly ridiculous. It is a poetry made up of real people's turns of speech:

Now folks today we're going to auction off Missus Pimber's things. I think you all knew Missus Pimber and you know she had some pretty nice things. This is going to be a real fine sale and we'll have a real fine day for it. It may get hot, though, later on, so we want to keep things moving right along. And now I'm going to begin the sale with the things back here by the barn. You've all had a chance to look at everything so let's bid right out for these fine things and keep things moving right along...

And poetry made up of the real world's images:

The fire and the lamp made pairs of crossing shadows, one steady and firm, one leaping and vague. Her shadow spotted the wall and disappeared, drawn magically back beneath her chair as she rocked, then darting forth to climb the wall rapidly again. He found himself marking the height. Incredibly swift, it bent itself up from the floor, passing the picture, the long head reaching a mark in the paper and covering a cluster of leaves while the lengthening finial that followed behind struck a rose...

Gass's handling of language is unerring. And as a fictional strategist he is one of the best since Faulkner. Stripped to its thematic bones, *Omensetter's Luck* is a book about mind. The apparent hero, Brackets Omensetter, is a man who seems to have escaped that bane of our human existence, self-consciousness. He knows river currents, can whistle like the birds, makes love with joy and no sign of “desire in the ordinary sense.” The apparent villain, Reverend Jethro Furber, a grotesque, tin-snail spiderlike man, is pure consciousness and both hates and envies Omensetter. The battle between them is the ancient battle of intellectual vs. “natural man,” reason vs. faith, intellectual control vs. “luck,” but in Gass's novel the battle has a wide field: within the individual heart, within a town, within a nation, within all civilization.

The truth is that man must be conscious, at those times when it matters; must make moral choices when it matters; must sometimes rise out of his material nature into mind: Jethro Furber is right and Brackets Omensetter self-deluded. But it is also true that to know “how to be” one must love and mu-

have some measure of faith (in Gass's universe of Chance, a willingness to trust one's luck); and in this arena the intellectual is always a ridiculous creature. He is a "liar" in the sense that reason can support nearly anything, if it lacks what the natural man possesses, the certainty of the heart; and the intellectual is, as Jethro Furber rightly calls himself, "a dirty old man," for his very distance from his material nature makes him lust after it. On the other hand, the appealing natural man is wrong about himself, for he does possess consciousness, and his pretense to himself and others that he does not makes him dangerous.

For dramatic development of this idea, Gass takes two great American archetypes—the heartless frontiersman (Omensetter) and the hell-fire puritan preacher (Furber). In the first section of his novel, "The Triumph of Israbestis Tott," he shrewdly loads the dice—as they have always been loaded—for Omensetter: Israbestis Tott is a thoroughly likeable old man who admires Omensetter, hates Furber (as the section ends, Tott is squashing spiders). As local historian, Tott is the consciousness of the town of Gilean ("And how would [the boy] learn his history now? Imagine growing up in a world where only generals and geniuses, empires and companies, had histories, not your own town and grandfather, house of Samantha—none of the things you'd loved"). But though he understands town consciousness—his own town's history and geography—he does not understand either individual human consciousness or the history (or geography either) of the World. "Cats know how to live. Cats beat us at it bad. Now Bracken Omensetter, though—" In his role as individual, Tott is himself a natural man. The novel's second section, "The Love and Sorrow of Henry Pimber," on the surface supports but on a deeper level undermines the initially favorable view of Omensetter. Henry Pimber, who has affinities both with nature and with mind—lockjaw once made him outwardly a stone and inwardly a jangle of consciousness—loves Omensetter and looks upon him "almost as a personal savior." (Omensetter is a real name but also ironically suggests "the one who sets the omens," a good Omensetter is a New Testament figure of faith and love; he contrasts with the Old Testament figure of reason and justice, Jethro.) In the end, because Pimber cannot qualify as a natural man (he lacks faith in Pimber's luck and Omensetter's love)—and because the loving but partly unconscious Omensetter fails to realize Pimber needs him—Pimber sinks toward despair and suicide. Still we view Omensetter favorably; the fault seems Pimber's. The third section, the bulk of the novel, concerns Gass's comitragic hero-and-villain, Furber: a lying, scheming preacher who lusts after women and writes outlandish dirty verses but also preaches—and thinks—brilliantly. He is consciousness fully developed, fully educated, but uncommitted: a mocker and despiser of the world and of himself, an actor once comic and dead serious representative of the archetype poet-priest. Gass's theme becomes fully explicit the morning Furber preaches on the Creation story, making it a parable for our everlasting human desire for simplicity, a return to an animal-like state:

God created always by division, taking the lesser part, transforming it into its opposite, and raising it above the rest. So should we change our worst into our best.

Furber snapped his fingers. There was a good one. That was the kind of thing they liked. Should he say it again? But he was losing the thread.

There is everywhere in nature a partiality for the earlier condition, and an instinctive urge to return to it. To succumb to this urge is to succumb to the wish of the Prince of Darkness, whose aim is to defeat, if possible, the purpose of God's creation.

But Furber himself cannot believe it, the words are mere words, a clever descant on his text. "Like a waterstrider, Furber rode a thin film of sense." Yet Furber is right, as he understands at last

Omensetter allows his own child to die of pneumonia—trusting to nature, Omensetter says; but Orcutt, the M.D. who should have been called, sees through him: “You and your damn fool theories.” Recognizing his mistake, Omensetter becomes remorseful; and Furber becomes more like what is best in Omensetter. In his final gesture, Furber shows himself the one man in the novel who fully understands “the secret—how to be.”

Gass is always dead right in his choice of which characters to use, how to treat each character, which scene to put first; he’s dead right too in his handling of minor structural devices for the large poetic rhythm of the novel. For instance, Omensetter’s visit to Furber, late in the novel, is verbally (and convincingly) parallel to Furber’s earlier visit to Omensetter’s best friend—to whom Furber hissed monstrous and ridiculous lies about Omensetter. The recognition inherent in the device gives poetic force to a more important recognition, for it is in Omensetter’s visit to Furber that we come to see what could only be suspected before, that Omensetter too is doomed to consciousness and lying. He reads books sometimes, he tells Furber, but not in the winter, “bad for the eyes.”

Or praise the novel this way. *Omensetter’s Luck* avoids every mistake I’ve had a chance to mention while discussing other novels in this review. Gass’s novel is “informational”; life in rural Ohio a century and a half ago, the progress of madness, the hatred of the world inherent in puritanism (from Plotinus forward); but here every line functions, and the meaning found in the material is there. The novel is funny in places, moving in places, but nowhere merely entertaining. And Gass steals from no one. The suggestion of one reviewer that Gass is a “jejune Joyce” is mere impudence. When Gass uses comic nonsense language it is strictly that; it has nothing to do with *Finnegans Wake*. And when Furber alludes to Empedocles he makes his allusion by fundamentally different principles from those in, say, *Ulysses*. One might point to Samuel Beckett, for equally striking and original comic tragic vision as well as for similar delight in the absurdity of reason unchecked by commitment; but in *Omensetter’s Luck* one finds only a few heelprints to signal Beckett’s having passed through. Beckett may have given Gass his ideas of the world as circus or music hall, but Gass has his own experiences of circuses and music halls and his own ideas, different from Beckett’s, on what makes those places real. Soon we may say Gass is “influenced” by the comic strip and animated cartoon. Furber, Omensetter, Tott, and the rest are straight out of Al Capp except that they are convincingly human and not involved in paltz satire. And Gass’s settings—a chair rocking in a firelit room, two men pacing before a forge, a snow-covered mountain in a shadow of birds—are the settings of a Disney movie come to *life*, as Disney settings never do. Gass’s symbols (weather, a man skipping stones, a hanging man pecked by birds) are also strikingly original and are at the same time so firmly imbedded in the action that their force comes in the reader’s blood, not merely into his head. Needless to say, given Gass’s control of style and structure, nothing in the plotting and nothing in the treatment inadvertently call up associations with a kind of writing the book is not.

The novel’s faults are not failures of truth but failures of discipline. Gass dwells too long on Furber’s thought. The first two sections, absolutely flawless, set up a dramatic action which jerks to a stop with the introduction of Furber in meditation; and when the action gets moving again it lacks its old power because Furber’s thought has made the theme and symbols too explicit. In a great novel the action reveals its inner meaning like a stray, maybe dangerous mongrel taken in off the street. In *Omensetter’s Luck* the action becomes too obviously the vehicle of ideas. Gass is right when he establishes connections poetically, without comment—for instance, the dissimilar reactions of Omensetter and Furber to weather—but wrong when, for instance, he again and again comments authorially on Furber’s idea-spinning as “lying,” forcing into the reader’s head the relationship between the intellectual and the vicious gossip. Not that Furber should not think. The reader must see



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