

BOOKS & THE ARTS

The Outskirts of a New City

OPERATION BURNING CANDLE. By Blyden Jackson. *The Third Press*. 232 pp. \$6.95.

THE RELUCTANT RAPIST. By Ed Bullins. Harper & Row. 166 pp. \$6.95.

IN LOVE & TROUBLE. By Alice Walker. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 160 pp. \$6.50.

JERRY H. BRYANT

Inside the hall in New York City where the Democrats are nominating their Presidential candidate for the coming elections, a secret group of "battle-hardened" black Vietnam veterans, at a prearranged signal, draw their weapons and gun down a dozen United States Senators. Not all of the assassins escape alive, but enough do to make the operation a success and maintain a basis of a continuing underground army.

Their aim is twofold. First, they are after the chairmen of the key Senate committees, nearly all of whom are Southern. These are the men who have been controlling the political machinery of the country for the last generation. As Southerners, they are "the last link to the system of slavery, segregation and inferiority that had been imposed on black people throughout their history on the continent of North America, who because of their power in the Senate blocked all legislation that might redress the great harms done to black people by that system." Second, the daring act of political violence is intended to be "collective psychotherapy." The traditional image of the black still controls the collective unconscious of American society and hence the conscious attitudes of the races toward themselves and each other. Only through "cleansing violence" can the collective unconscious be purged of its destructive tendencies, of those degrading values so long internalized by blacks and whites alike. Through the deaths of the Senators, "the chain would be broken, the catalyst effected, the symbolic uprising accomplished and black children freed forever."

This is the melodramatic action, the

oversimplified thinking, and the pedestrian style of which Blyden Jackson's *Operation Burning Candle* is made up. The novel is an obvious appeal to that recently discovered black audience that likes to see whites bloodied and killed by black heroes. "They're killing the honkies! They're killing the goddamn honkies!" shout hundreds of Harlemites as they watch the massacre on TV. It also appeals to a dream that has persisted at least since World War I: black combat veterans returning to white America and creating an army to fight for democracy in their own neighborhoods.

Operation Burning Candle has spy-thriller formulas in it—inside information about police undercover work, orchestrations of plans as complicated as battle maneuvers, close escapes, and a hero of superior intellect, physical strength and command of the "martial arts." It also employs the romanticized clichés of black revolutionary rhetoric. The hero who leads the brave guerrilla band loves Harlem and its rich life, its lovely black women, and its concerned black parents. He sees himself as a savior of his people, who lives to die for their liberation. He barks orders—"Move out!" "Take it!" "Let's go!"—like a black Walter Mitty. In this world, every white man we meet spends most of his waking hours thinking about blacks and about the ways to keep them in subjugation.

But though we've seen and heard all this before and though it comes in on what seems to be the tail end of a fashion, *Operation Burning Candle* is a very readable novel, slickly organized, with scenes of violence, sex and propaganda occurring in just the right rhythm. It has enough mystery to keep the reader interested, and the author doles out information in tantalizing snatches until the action and the explanation climax in the blood-soaked ending. It does show the distance traveled in sophistication and technique from its cruder and less imaginative antecedent, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, which was published six years ago.

The other two works I'm reviewing have no resemblance to *Operation Burning Candle*, except for the fact that their authors are black. Ed Bullins is well known as a playwright, whose main

work began to be produced in the late 1960s. He has written some prose fiction before *The Reluctant Rapist*, most of it collected in the 1971 volume entitled *The Hungered One*. This is his first novel. Alice Walker is nearly unknown, though she has been lavishly honored with awards and fellowships, which have allowed her to write a couple of volumes of poems and a novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*.

There is a negative relationship between recent books of these writers and *Operation Burning Candle*. Jackson's novel comes from one of those ephemeral veins of subject matter relying exclusively upon novelties that temporarily engage the attention of the public. *The Reluctant Rapist* and *In Love & Trouble* arise from the imaginations of two rich and genuine literary talents, for whom fashion is a minor consideration. Mr. Bullins and Miss Walker have unusual powers of observation and an unusual command of language and image. In *Operation Burning Candle*, Mr. Jackson writes in the semi-documentary tradition of Eugene Burdick, bound by literary formulas and political stereotypes that prevent him from penetrating any deeper into his subject than newspaper headlines and wire photos. Bullins and Walker are artists at work on their own styles, probing for the hitherto undisclosed alpha and beta rays of black existence.

My initial reaction to the first several stories of *In Love & Trouble* was negative. Miss Walker's search for ways to be new and different struck me as too willful and strained. I felt the same way about her earlier novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, whose style seemed too fine for the rough subject—the way two black men, a son and a father, try to degrade and destroy each other. But as I read on through these thirteen stories, I was soon absorbed by the density of reality they convey. They contain the familiar themes and situations of conventional black political and sociological fiction. There are black revolutionaries who read books and meet in small study groups, radical lady poets who read before black student audiences shouting "Right on!" and sharecroppers victimized by white landlords. But we see all these from genuinely new angles, from the point of view of the black woman or man totally absorbed in the pains of their inner life rather than the

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point of view of the protester or the newspaper headline.

The subtitle of the collection, "Stories of Black Women," is probably an attempt by the publisher to exploit not only black subjects but feminine ones. There is nothing feminist about these stories, however. Neurosis and insanity, hatred and love, emptiness and indifference, violence and deceit—that is what they are about. A dapper young man appears in the life of a would-be woman writer, offers her the understanding she never gets from her insensitive husband, steals one of her best story ideas, and disappears, sending the woman to an asylum and causing her to try to kill her husband. A sharecropper discovers that his daughter is in love with a white man, and in an incestuous rage, he beats her, mutilates her, and shoots her with a shotgun. A

young black boy steals a gorilla from the zoo to worship the animal in a parody of both Christian ritual and back-to-Africa nationalism, but the beast kills him for the burnt bread used in the "mass."

But what I like most about these stories is what Miss Walker seems to like most about her people, the ones who are themselves, naturally and unself-consciously, and live by putting what they have to "everyday use," the title of one of her stories. She is best, therefore, not when she is depicting revolutionary consciousness or sophisticated awareness of the most recent rules of race relations, but when she is getting inside the minds of the confused, the ignorant, the inward-turning character, when she lets stand the mysterious and the ambiguous, and gives up explaining by doctrine the nature of her

characters' lives. She can put a lump in the reader's throat even when she is a little sentimental. But what she can do most powerfully is make me feel the heat of her characters' lives, smell their singed bodies going up in literal and figurative flames of their own making. That is when I lose touch with myself as critic and interpreter and enter Miss Walker's created world of love and trouble.

In the title story of Ed Bullins' *The Hungered One*, there is a weird beast, a cross between a featherless bird and a rodent. It slashes and tears with its razor-sharp claws and beak. Fiercely aggressive, always hungry, it is maddened by blood. But it does not bleed itself. Even when its skull is split and its brains begin to ooze out, it retains its

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Student Poetry Award Winners

First Prize in *The Nation's* first Student Poetry Contest was shared by Ricardo da Silveira Lobo Sternberg of the University of California at Los Angeles for "Poem from a Line of Rubén Darío," and Jean Feraca of the University of Kentucky for "Heart-Attack."

POEM FROM A LINE OF RUBEN DARIO

... Da al viento la cabellera.—Rubén Darío

*with no dissenting votes
to the winds*

we gave her hair.

it was blown back

into their sources.

it brushes your cheeks.

now it brushes mine.

to the bee and to

the hummingbird:

her honeysuckle breasts.

we envy them

the heavy sweetness

that will be gathered there.

both her feet belong

to the ocean.

they will become

two inseparable

incredible fish

who may come out to leave

strange prints

beckoning bachelors

to walk into the sea.

we gave the ocean

both her feet and

we warn you.

many claimed her hands:

—a tree wanted them

for fruits that would

be eager, for fruits that

would not wait but pull

a stranger to their lips—

—a flock of birds

petitioned for her hands

claiming that poetical justice

would be served were

the feet in the water

to be echoed by

the hands in the air.—

we agreed with their logic

and give instead to the tree

her ears

that it may hear itself

stretch and grow.

Ricardo da Silveira Lobo Sternberg

HEART-ATTACK

*You greet me from the sunken box
of the old chair. Arms*

slack on the cracked leather.

Rags of your face strung on lines,

drying. Owls

in round caves of your eyes.

Father, I know you: You dream,

staring into a ditch that

fills with mud and slow water,

your trousers dangle,

shredded from the waist, the pockets

slashed, the money gone.

I want to bite my hands and tear

my cheeks,

to be fifteen and lie face-down

in the darkest corner of my room,

shuddering at every thud

below of oak

*chairs knocked to their knees, flung
against the wall.*

I want you back again, tyrant.

I want to watch you foam again

in the climb up the hard tide

that all but killed us both.

Jean Feraca

dangerousness and its yellow eyes keep their malevolent glitter. In his plays, Bullins is like the "hungered one." It is not conventional revolution that we find in dramas like *Goin' a Buffalo* or *In the Wine Time* but wounds laid open in black as well as white flesh by those pitiless slashing claws.

In *The Reluctant Rapist*, a different Bullins is at work, one who is strongly autobiographical and reminiscent, personal, quietly honest. The novel has the tone and the content of the 19th-century *Bildungsroman*, in which the youthful protagonist—in this case Steve Benson—is educated from innocence to experience. In the classic tradition, Steve is a loner, an outsider, and finally an outlaw. He rapes, dimly off in the background to the main action, but is "reluctant" to rape a woman he cannot love. Indeed, the reader is asked to believe that a mystical union is effected by that violation of another person's will, and that some of the women are bound to him for life.

Bullins is an earnest, even humble quester here. He has Steve Benson wander from his South Philadelphia ghetto to the eastern shore of Maryland, then to Los Angeles and San Francisco. He goes to sea and journeys through Europe, the Mediterranean countries, South America. But nothing he learns is unequivocal. He feels his aloneness, his anomalous position in America and in the world. He discovers that blacks become unfeeling out of a need to protect themselves, and in doing so turn their backs upon their own people, cheat and lie to one another. The only solution to this state of mind is a kind of personal apocalypse. "One must lose faith, for faith is never quite enough. One must throw away belief, for belief is held by every black fool. One must be blown apart by all that one has been taught and reassembled in the vacuum of ignorance to form the vessel of new experience."

This is the closest thing to a working thesis that Bullins has formulated. *The Reluctant Rapist* is a handbook to the plays. As a playwright, Bullins rips, tears, rapes, he blows apart black life. As a novelist, he explains what the ripping, tearing and raping are all about. They are the acts of a lover in deep need of blasting away the conventional laws and customs, the traditional faiths and beliefs to expose the truthful, irreducible center so that he and "his beloved may at last be free. Steve Benson the rapist is a metaphor of Ed Bullins the playwright. And Steve's story is a reassembling of the bits from the exploded bombs and tearing beak. It is done through a recon-

stitution of time and a renewal of sex. Time unrolls and unwinds in this novel, opens out and folds back on itself, stops and starts. Pieces of Steve's life loom up before us as if cut loose from chronology. But the conventional order of events is one of those beliefs that has to be destroyed. And Bullins is successful in destroying it, in fusing the past with the present, in giving us the feeling of living the past again from the standpoint of the present and seeing the future infuse the past.

Sex pervades the novel. It is lazily pleasurable, even the rapes. And in spite of the prurience of the setting, the sex seems innocent rather than lewd or lascivious. Sex, indeed, seems to be the first stage of the new experience. But the notion of sex embraces more than intercourse. It takes in the whole range of sensation. Bullins' attention is focused upon the details of consciousness, of waking—the sensation of erotic play, the shock of fists in the mouth and feet in the groin, the smell of sperm

in pubic hair, the feel of wind in the evening, the taste of cheap wine drunk in an alley. There are long passages of reflection, and there are references to books and authors. But this isn't a philosophical novel. It is a novel of the felt texture of living, especially of living black. This is what we get back to after the holocaust.

While others have been talking of a revolution in black literature, of the creation of a new experience, Ed Bullins and Alice Walker have been making revolution and creating new experience. What I find in them that I haven't found in many recent novels I have read is not only an easy mastery of technique but also a confidence in themselves as writers, in what they perceive as observers. They have set out on their own trails, lighted by their own talents, and they are very sure-footed. The two works I have been writing about here certainly do not make up a new city. But I hope they are the outskirts of one. □

Destroying the Individual

WILLIAM SAROYAN

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

The slogan makes sense for desperados like politicians, businessmen and other hustlers. It is meaningless to people who neither need nor want other people to do some, most or all of their work, especially lawyers, accountants, tax experts, public relations experts, spies, detectives, ghost writers, procurers, false witnesses and similar trash.

I am not thinking of any fragmented portion of the national political, economic, social and ethical reality, I am thinking of the whole thing. The Americans in action.

What are they doing?

Well, of course all but about 2 per cent of them are carrying on in abject enslavement—and it may be that they are glad to, although nobody has gone to the trouble of documenting the truth about that.

These millions are far more cleverly and totally brainwashed than the people of Russia, and there is no comparison between the quality of identity of the Chinese and the lack of any order of definiteness in the identity of the American.

The Chinese knows he is not free in any irrelevant and meaningless way,

William Saroyan's latest book is Places Where I've Done Time (Praeger).

which the American is. The Chinese loves the national (not international, not Marxist, not even Maoist) program in which he is involved because it has brought him the basic physical necessities and given him enormous spiritual wealth, like employment, hope, family and home.

The American has total freedom—to do nothing except join. And he does. Even the long-haired young men who twenty years ago seemed to be refusers are in fact also joiners, not of one another and the program of escape but of the government—by making themselves charges of it. Sooner or later they all get groceries and cash and medicine and services from the government—because that's where it's at, as they like to put it.

Everybody joins, in fact, or is sent for, as I was as a drafted private in the Army in 1942, to tell a Major why I had not taken GI insurance. This nagging continued for two of the three years I was in the Army. I didn't take GI insurance because I had a choice. I was drafted because I didn't have a choice (although anybody knew that if anybody was willing to be clever about it, he could very definitely avoid being drafted).

Taxes are a constant call of joining. You pay them because everybody pays them, and because if you don't pay them you find yourself needing a lawyer, who is

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