

longed to the world that is nearly lost: the world of peasants, farmers, craftsmen, traders, with their kings, noblemen, and priests, the world that stretches from the first cities in the river valleys 7,000 years ago to this century.

In spite of the immense diversities of human experience, the myriad varieties of personal and public morality, I suspect that in a few more decades this era will seem to possess an underlying unity, an age of man as clearly marked and defined as the age of hunting and fishing which preceded it. In this age religion, constantly revitalized, permeated all life for good or ill as did history itself, for man was caught up in the drama of his living gods. Life began, reached its crisis in the life and death of the Savior, and its apocalyptic end was always close at hand. Man was involved in this drama, which could be explained only by history. Religion and history were one. But the grip of religious history loosened in the eighteenth century, to be replaced for a time by the need for national history, which justified a nation's "manifest destiny." Often this was little more than religious history in a secular guise, just as apocryphal, just as myth-ridden, just as enclosed as what it replaced.

Now "manifest destiny" is fading, and nations require explanations of the past less and less. The result for history is a loss of emotional force, and so it dwindles into social nostalgia, entertainment, and academic professionalism. Explanation for society and its problems is sought elsewhere—through science, statistical sociology, economic models. This, at least, is true of the West. For Russia somewhat and for China emphatically, history is still a powerful social force, explaining and justifying belief, but we in the West are witnessing the death of the past.

Two professional books, both scholarly and wise, added force to these views—Peter Gay's *A Loss of Mastery* (University of California Press, \$4.50) and Patrick Collinson's *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Jonathan Cape, London, 63s). Compared with our puritan ancestors, whose ideas both authors skillfully trace, we have certainly lost our sense of the past or of man's personal involvement in the drama of history.

Paradoxically, the world may gain. History that has been more myth than truth has always been a danger to man, too often a cloak for tyranny, persecution, and subjection. Yet there is one cruel loss. A sense of purpose in man's unfolding destiny becomes more difficult to sustain when, in the light of eternity, the individual's life becomes as brief and as pointless as a gnat's. How to get it back into a world wiped clean of myth is our greatest need.

—J. H. PLUMB.

Was This the Promised End?

Herakles: A Play in Verse, by Archibald MacLeish (Houghton Mifflin, 91 pp. \$4), places the mythical Greek hero against a foreground of modern Athens. Louis Untermeyer wrote "Lives of the Great Poets."

By LOUIS UNTERMEYER

APART from his other accomplishments, Archibald MacLeish has occupied himself with revitalizing classic legends and historic happenings. There was *Conquistador*, based on Bernal Díaz's *True History of the Conquest of New Spain*. There were *The Trojan Horse* and *The Fall of the City*, plays intended for radio or for reading without scenery. There was the controversial *J. B.*, a modern morality play paralleling the Book of Job. There was even *The Hamlet of A. MacLeish*. And now here is a half-mythical, half-modernized treatment of the last days of the broken but still defiant Herakles.

MacLeish's versatility, sometimes rising to virtuosity, has from time to time been held against him. He had to absorb a diversity of influences before he achieved a sound and style of his own. Overtones of Pound, Eliot, and the French Symbolists are present in the early *Pot of Earth*; echoes of Aiken and Robinson are heard in the somewhat earlier *The Happy Marriage*; a Whitmanic-Sandburgian voice filters through the declamation of *Colloquy for the States*. It took *New Found Land*, which contained the sometimes elliptical but eloquently lyrical "You, Andrew Marvel," "Memorial Rain," "Epistle to Be Left in the Earth," "Immortal Autumn," and "Not Marble Nor the Gilded Monuments," followed two years later by *Conquistador*, a dexterously built saga-poem, to convince critics that a major poet had arrived, although murmurs of dissent persisted. Here and there a reviewer objected to MacLeish's "loose rhetoric" or found fault with the "unrhymed" cadences in *Conquistador*, whereas that poem was strictly built on an adaptation of *terza rima* freshened with a mixture of full rhymes and assonantal half-rhymes; barren-narrowly-Aragon; things - wind - insolent; say-naked-awakening.

As a public figure MacLeish was all the more vulnerable for being conspicuously successful. More than a few librarians protested the choice of a creator rather than an expert technician when

he was appointed Librarian of Congress. Conservatives scoffed at his "socio-economic grafts" on poetry when he became chairman of the National Congress of American Writers in its war against Fascism and wrote *Air Raid* and *Panic*. Members of the Radical Right were even more incensed when, as one of President Roosevelt's chief advisers, MacLeish directed the newly created Office of Facts and Figures. He had to suffer the slings and arrows of certain colleagues for his outrageous good fortune when he received the Pulitzer Prize for the second time upon the publication of his *Collected Poems: 1917-1952*, a volume that also won the National Book Award and the Bollingen Prize. Six years later the much-debated *J. B.* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

Herakles is neither as spectacular nor as searching as *J. B.* In *J. B.*, MacLeish took the biblical past and brought together in a circus tent not only Job and God but also Satan. In *Herakles* the poet places the mythical Greek hero against a foreground of modern Athens complete with tourists and a guide.

There are two short acts. The first is little more than a rather puzzling prologue. It takes place in the drawing-room of an elegant Athens hotel suite with a view of the Acropolis. Enter the world-renowned professor Hoadley; his wife, "a handsome haunted woman in her thirties"; his daughter, Little Hodd, "a spoiled girl of thirteen"; Miss Parfit, a British governess, and the hotel manager, who, honored by the visit of the famous prize-winner, keeps quoting passages from Hoadley's Stockholm acceptance speech. Hoadley is delighted; he abets and encores him—"Good, wasn't it?"—but Mrs. Hoadley, who has heard the well-groomed sentences too often, is less pleased. She does not share her husband's glamorous picture of "those wonderful old Greeks." Hoadley, she maintains, is the victim of a childish imagination, "that innocent optimism of the ancient mind."

She mocks her husband, drinking glass after glass of champagne; while he compares himself to Theseus she continues to taunt him with phrase after phrase from his speech. When she asks why they came to Greece he mentions



Herakles, and she laughs. "So that's it! . . . You wanted Herakles to play with!" "I wanted . . . time," Hoadley replies, "the timeless time."

Men don't live their lives in history. They live their lives in the eternal tale, the oldest story: the heroic mutinous, revolted man who will not eat his bread in suffering, will not get his kind in suffering . . . will not tolerate in God the terrible, slow, cold sloth of suffering.

The dispute goes on. It culminates in a bitter quarrel concerning what Herakles had accomplished—"there must be something else beyond the doing," cries Mrs. Hoadley. "Let's find out . . . We'll go tomorrow and we'll find the stones. They'll tell us how the end goes in the story." Hoadley prefers the dream to reality, the dream of human perfection, the power of the triumphant mind, and drags her toward the window to look at the marble columns on their hilltop, "Our signal to the stars, our purest, proudest signal." When he continues to twist her toward the window, she throws her wine in his face. He sits "grinning up at her, the wine shining on his face," and drops out of the play.

The second act opens on a deserted hilltop with marble ruins scattered about and a huge closed door between stubs of enormous columns. The instructive Miss Parfit informs Mrs. Hoadley and Little Hodd that this is the *adyton*, the door to an oracle, and that it was to this oracle that Herakles was supposed to come after he had completed his twelve labors. Here he was to receive the promised gift of immortality. Little Hodd, who has learned part of her lesson, recalls some of the tasks imposed on Herakles, whereupon the customary professional guide comes on the scene to explain the place and round out the story. Although no shift in time is indicated, Megara, Herakles's wife, appears among the stones, "a fine woman in the full of life," not unlike the sophisticated, man-wise Mrs. Hoadley. She is waiting for Herakles, who has been away for years; he is bound to come here to learn his promised future from the oracle. Megara says:

He has his oracle.
We all have, every one of us: we'll die
but not quite yet, and in between
we have the sunlight on the green a
little.
warmth beside us in the bed at night,
hands that touch hands, our little,
leeward
lifetime where the cold sea wind
that blows the world down will not
blow—
not yet . . . not quite.

Herakles lunges in, "a great, battered, tattered, bearded, time-scarred, tri-

umphant man." Somehow he suggests Professor Hoadley, not only because their names bear the same initial but because they share the same sense of self-seeking and self-satisfaction. Herakles has performed all the labors required of him. He has slain invulnerable monsters, killed ferocious flesh-devouring birds, man-eating mares, and the hundred-headed hydra; he has cleaned out the Augean stables in a single day by diverting a river so it flowed through them; he has conquered the dragon that guarded the treasure of the Hesperides and has come back with the golden apples; he has descended into hell, challenged Death itself, and has tied up and carried away Cerberus, the watchdog of Hades. He has shouldered the sky and made over "the mucking world." But where's his welcome? He expected

screaming trumpets,
roaring crowds, ascending eagles
circling into sun, the god-thank
spoken and the hero home.

Instead he has found nothing but an apathetic city with dogs and dust as usual, and all his enemies "leaping, laughing, big as bullocks in the blundering light." He calls upon the oracle for justice, for his reward. Although he hurls himself against the enormous door, he cannot force a reply. Megara urges him not to demand the answers.

Come with me! Oh, come away!
We need the edge of ignorance to live
by,
the little, ignorant unknown of time
that lies beyond and can be
anything . . .

But Herakles persists. He rails until the huge door buckles and, on a golden tripod, an old woman sits, blinking at the light. She has no reward, no happy oracle for him. On the contrary, he learns that the fancied enemies were his own sons, that he had killed them

when he was struck with madness in punishment for committing excesses and assuming the privileges of a god. Herakles refuses to defend himself. "A man is made for anger, isn't he?—to stand up, strike back." He shouts, "By god, I'll give the oracles myself! I'll see and say and say and say . . ." The play ends on a note of bitter desperation as the forlorn Mrs. Hoadley-Megara cries:

Let me go back to my life wherever
my
life was or is or will be waiting
wandering up and down from the one
morning to the other morning,
from the one despair to the next, from
the hope in
this day to the hope in that one . . .
Oh, release me from this mortal story!

As a play *Herakles* is as uneven in plot as it is in poetry. There are moments of great intensity as there are spasmodic bursts of eloquence. MacLeish has always had a mastery of suspense. Sometimes the suspense has been taut and intensified in so small a compass as the sonnet "The End of the World." Sometimes it has been accomplished by suspended rhymes, broken images, unfinished implications, and a mounting series of interrogations. *Herakles* combines MacLeish's manners with his mannerisms and, in its interrogatory suggestiveness, prompts nagging questions.

As with *J. B.*, is the "meaning" sufficiently conveyed or sufficiently convincing? Is the tragic end compatible with the almost trivial beginning? Is *Herakles* an invention, a new vision, or is it merely a revision, a rearrangement of a familiar tale? Is it an important contribution to the drama, or is this dramatized myth-fable-parable a play at all? Whatever it may be, it is an ambitiously conceived revaluation, an idiosyncratic and unflaggingly interesting re-creation.



"Well, of all the narrow-minded, bigoted, stuff-shirted little editors! He published your letter."

Critic's Choice

French Novelists of Today by Henri Peyre (Oxford University Press. 484 pp. \$10), ranges from Proust and Gide to the "anti-novel." Thomas Bishop teaches contemporary French literature at New York University.

By THOMAS BISHOP

HENRI PEYRE has long been one of the most astute, keenly intelligent, and readable critics of French literature in this country or, for that matter, anywhere. His numerous books and articles encompass with consummate ease widely diverse aspects of French writing into which they afford a wealth of meaningful insights. Nowhere has Professor Peyre's contribution been greater than to the field of contemporary letters, and particularly to the novel.

His *Contemporary French Novel*, published in 1955, was universally hailed as an exceptional analysis of a half-century of French fiction. The present volume is a new version of that work, updated to include titles of the past dozen years, and containing revised appraisals of earlier writers. With these changes, *French Novelists of Today* is even better than its predecessor. It is a superb book, an absolute must for anyone even remotely interested in modern French literature.

The strength of Mr. Peyre's work is contained in his formidable command of his subject, the precision of his judgments, and his willingness to express definite opinions. Mr. Peyre is not one to throw praise around indiscriminately; he approaches the great names of the modern French novel without awe but rather with refreshing iconoclasm and a determination to re-evaluate even the most revered figures. This is all to the good, since it serves no useful purpose to perpetuate attitudes that may now seem out of all proportion, even if merely because they were accepted by previous generations.

In a general first chapter Mr. Peyre ranges over the past and present of the French novel, with frequent comparisons to British, American, and Continental literature. His frame of reference is dazzling. Refusing to imprison himself in any one system of criticism, he opts for a pluralistic approach that avoids both dogmatism and obscurity; it rests on the author's understanding and urbane taste. Not every reader will

find himself in agreement with Mr. Peyre. Quite on the contrary; it is more likely that most readers will disagree with this or that judgment, but they will generally appreciate both the strength of the conclusion and the point of view that leads to it.

Thus, for instance, one need not necessarily share Henri Peyre's great admiration for Jean Giono to value the entire chapter devoted to him as a representative of an era's dissatisfaction with modern society. Nor should the most faithful admirers of Camus be shocked to find him treated here as less than a messiah. If Mr. Peyre is not convinced by Camus's philosophical positions and is somewhat skeptical about his permanent niche as a novelist (he acknowledges *The Stranger* as only a "minor masterpiece"), he recognizes his greatness as a *moraliste*, struggling with his own doubts and fully sincere in his total commitment to his age.

The author's highest admiration is reserved for Sartre. Perhaps because he refuses to become enmeshed in overly obscure analyses of existentialism, Mr. Peyre succeeds in appraising Sartre's contribution as a creative writer while not forgetting that he is also "at his best . . . the most superb essayist of our age." Like many others, Professor Peyre considers *Nausea* and some of the short stories of *Intimacy* (*Le Mur*) as masterpieces; unlike many, he claims that *The Age of Reason*, *The Reprieve*, *Troubled Sleep*—the three oft-criticized novels of the unfinished tetralogy *Les Chemins de la liberté*—are among the outstanding novels of the midcentury. For him, the originality of Sartre's fiction is in its language as well as its opposition to Naturalism and Proustian analysis, and in its basic optimism (despite the fact that some nearsighted critics have mistakenly considered Sartrean existentialism pessimistic).

NO one can accuse Mr. Peyre of being a blind follower of trends. At a time when Céline's literary star is on the rise, only a part of a chapter of *French Novelists of Today* is devoted to him, and they are scathing pages in which Céline's works are assailed as merely the monotonous and artificial vituperations of a mythomaniac exhibitionist. Nor is Professor Peyre overly kind to the current vogue of the "new novel," to which he devotes most of the long last chapter entitled "Main Trends Since World War



II: The 'New Novel' (the most useful chapter of all, since it brings the reader completely up to date). He is not insensitive to these "anti-novels," but he is dismayed by what he considers excessive claims made for them by idolizing critics. He recognizes Robbe-Grillet's virtuosity but bemoans the very cleverness of his technique for hiding lack of substance. He is more appreciative of Michel Butor and Claude Simon. But among all the recently published novelists he prefers J. M. G. Le Clézio, author of *The Interrogation*, and Violette Leduc, who wrote *La Bâtarde*; the former is on the fringe of the new novel and the latter not at all concerned with innovation in technique.

SINCE *French Novelists of Today* covers the years 1920 to 1965, the author naturally had to make a series of choices as to which writers should receive a whole chapter, part of a chapter, be barely mentioned, or left out entirely. Mr. Peyre's judgment in this difficult task has been almost unerring, though I do regret that he did not include Samuel Beckett. But this one lapse is more than made up for in a unique fifty-page section entitled "Panorama of Present-Day Novelists," in which he discusses, briefly but with great incision and with the admirable wit evident throughout, scores of novelists whom he could not treat in the main body of the work. Together with the extensive general and chapter bibliographies, this "Panorama" will be an invaluable reference help. Both the non-initiated and the specialists will find *French Novelists of Today* accessible, interesting, and extremely valuable.



Pamphleteering Poet: It's easy to understand why Jacob Axelrad found Philip Freneau fascinating enough for a book-length study. Freneau (who was born Fresneau in New York in 1718) was one of America's first satirists, the poet of the American Revolution, and for many years the pamphleteering voice