

Fiction

THE TIMID ADVENTURES OF A WINDOW WASHER

by Georges Michel, translated from the French by Helen Weaver
Doubleday, 192 pp., \$4.95

ALL WE REALLY KNOW about poor Gus is that he is short, puny, and cannot get rid of his dandruff, but we recognize his sort right away—the eternal sad sack, the schlemiel, introduced into French literature during the Depression by Céline in *Voyage au bout de la nuit* and featured in countless novels since. Poor Gus (his name in this book is actually Gugusse) has become Mr. Everyman, a modern Christ-figure, the victim of technocracy, of capitalistic exploitation, of a universe in which God is dead. Adapted to the particular preoccupations or capacities of each author from Jean Cayrol, Jean Genet, Henry Miller, and Samuel Beckett to the most recent of epigones, he is, par excellence, the hero of the modern novel or, as we say after Sartre, the anti-hero of the modern anti-novel.

As anti-heroes go, Georges Michel's Gugusse is an appealing sort. He gets up every morning cussing his life, uses the sink rather than go down to the W.C. in the courtyard, shaves, has breakfast, and rides off on his motorbike to wash shop windows all day. He lives in the congenial Paris slums where something is always happening. So traffic accidents, sidewalk salesmen, and pretty girls distract Gugusse and make him chronically late. The sights and his fantasies fill his life, which just goes on and on. This is not literally true; there are some story features. Once Gugusse gets himself a girl and has several Sunday dates, until she finds somebody better. He becomes involved with some protest instigators and is even roughed up by the police in a demonstration. Also he loses his job. But he finds another; and all these episodes, which might be high points in another kind of novel, melt down and away in Gugusse's daily routine of getting out of bed, going to work, and returning to eat supper in front of the window—in France, the poor man's television screen.

Gugusse is excruciatingly lonely, but he bores hell out of everyone whom he manages to corner for conversation. Or else he sticks his foot in it: what he offers as a funny story about seeing the police haul off an Algerian almost costs him the only companions who will tolerate him—the social agitators in the café. So as not to lose them he posts their bills and participates in an aggravation and a riot. But his social conscience is nil; he

would settle for a transistor radio and a well-built babe. He is too timid to approach the latter and too poor to acquire the former. On his pay, all he can do is keep body and soul together. Yet he sings on his job, the way the sparrow that he rescues chirps, and counts his meager blessings. A man who keeps writing in for literature on how to succeed socially, how to develop biceps, or how to grow mushrooms in the cellar can never really know despair.

The pathos and humor that characterize the life of Gugusse the timid window-washer is conveyed by the interior monologue that runs from cover to cover of this book—a monologue in the popular, spoken language that was another "first" with Céline. It is no longer a great novelty, but it is still an effective device to tune us in on the character, and put event and emotion in the character's own perspective. Perhaps it is overdone here, however; protracted to the length of a book it can grow tedious. If Gugusse's days are depressingly alike, so are the pages of this novel. But we do get the point.

At least, I think the point is that Gugusse has a stupid life and that life is like that. In spite of incidental jabs at the establishment and a finale eloquent in irony, the work does not add up to a social indictment. Gugusse would be a loser no matter what side he was on. If any social verity is demonstrated, it is that a man can become a revolutionary just to keep from spending his evenings alone.

Laurent LeSage

Laurent LeSage is co-author of a recent volume in French, "Dictionnaire des Critiques littéraires."

WIT TWISTER #119

Edited by ARTHUR SWAN

The object of the game is to complete the poem by thinking of one word whose letters, when rearranged, will yield the appropriate word for each series of blanks. Each dash within a blank corresponds to a letter of the word.

Who are they, _ _ _ _ _
than the fog,
That _ _ _ _ _ and moan
beside the lake?
Pale midnight flowers of the
bog,
They _ _ _ _ _ when we
mortals wake.

—A. S.

(Answer on page 51)

**DEATH DANCE:
Twenty-five Stories**

by Angus Wilson
Viking, 406 pp., \$6.95

HERE ARE STORIES from Angus Wilson's *The Wrong Set*, *Such Darling Dodos*, and *A Bit Off the Map*—masterful, concise, rather macabre tales of post-war England. The collection is aptly named, for most of the characters in this volume are involved in dances of death of one kind or another, consciously or unconsciously celebrating the doom of their civilization.

Wilson is a master of what we now call the Chekhovian short story: beginning with an immediate involvement in the consciousness of a central character, giving us details which, like dabs of color in an impressionist painting, suggest a whole that is never quite seen but is fully sensed. Wilson's people are generally well-educated, middle-class Anglo-Saxons, human enough but at times rather cruel, sterile, played-out.

The earliest stories in the book deal with characters whose sense of themselves is theatrical and whose attempts at living, especially at love, are fraudulent. The hard-drinking, overly sophisticated, shallow Tories of "The Wrong Set" engage in spiritless defamatory remarks about "Reds and Jews," drift through the years immediately following World War II, and feel that "Life was hell anyhow." In "Saturnalia" a New Year's Eve party at a private hotel mixes tenants and staff in a sleazy comedy of pseudo-amorous gestures. "Crazy Crowd," a looser, more extravagant story, deals with the relationship between a young woman and her lover, who is brought with her to visit her "crazy" family. Occasionally, when Wilson descends into the human, the colorful, for its own sake, his stories read like Frank O'Connor's, though his unique touch of wit is always present, rather ominously.

These stories, written in the late Forties and Fifties, demonstrate Wilson's increasing awareness of his craft. Though the concern with individuals as actors, acting out rather pathetic, vapid roles, is still uppermost in his imagination, Wilson gradually warms to his characters, giving us an increasing sense of their human dilemma. But even in so familiarly moving a story as "Mother's Sense of Fun," which presents a bachelor-professor's terrible loneliness after his mother's death, Wilson cannot resist a macabre pun. The story concludes: "My poor boy will be lonely," she had said. She was dead right.

"Totentanz," which lends the col-

lection its title, brings together various obsessions—the snobbery of these icy Anglo-Saxons, perhaps too well-educated for their own good fortune; the capriciousness of fate (an inheritance that promises much but brings little); the morbid conclusion of an ostentatious reception. Thomas Mann himself would not have imagined so preposterous an illustration of bourgeois decadence as the “Totentanz” costume party, celebrating various aspects of death: a fireplace got up as a crematorium, waiters dressed as skeletons, guests as corpses, hearses to carry them back home. The grotesque deaths of three prized guests follows immediately, perhaps logically.

Violence and death, the attraction toward disintegration and dissolution, the loss of vitality in even the young—these are Wilson’s preoccupations. In the fine story “After the Show,” published first in 1957, the eerie dissociation of human beings from their feelings, even their feelings about love and death, is explored in terms of theatrical events, with an attempted suicide as a kind of act, an event that fails but fails even more mysteriously to involve true feelings. Wilson’s “younger generation” are contemptuous of their elders, anxious to break free into their own adulthood and into power; but a kind of premature paralysis limits them. Their imaginations are as narrow as their parents’ after all:

They had discussed it so often, schooled themselves for the task of leadership which would fall to their generation—leadership out of the desert of the television world, out of the even more degrading swamps of espresso-bar rebellion. They had fed themselves on high purposes and self-discipline . . . Now for the first time he was called upon to control a situation . . . and yet the situation seemed to drift by while he stood like a night stroller . . . He was emerging not as the hero leader but as that feeble figure, the *homme moyen sensuel*—the “hero” type of all the literature that he and his friends most despised. And he saw no way out of it.

And indeed there seems no way out. These decent godless people know all the right words; they are witty, civilized, attractive connoisseurs of what is left of their world; they are perhaps more in control of their lives than they should be if their lives are to be real, and yet they are obviously failures. Their obsession with death points up their essential failure. And when they actually die, their deaths are troublesome rather than tragic.

Joyce Carol Oates

Books by Joyce Carol Oates include the short-story collection “Upon the Sweeping Flood.”

AT NIGHT ALL CATS ARE GREY And Other Stories

by Patrick Boyle
Grove, 256 pp., \$4.95

I FIRST CAME ACROSS Patrick Boyle in the annual British short-story anthology *Winter’s Tales*, where his “*Meles Vulgaris*” was reprinted from the *Irish Times*. Later, I read his only novel, *Like Any Other Man*, published last year. It was clear from these two examples that Boyle, who is not a young man and is a bank manager by profession, writes well and quite unlike anyone else in Ireland today. Now, with the publication of this volume of stories, my impression of him as an important addition to Irish letters is confirmed.

Working within the tradition of the modern Irish short story, he has freed himself of the gentle pathos that became Frank O’Connor’s hallmark; he avoids, too, Sean O’Faolain’s generally cheerful outlook on his countrymen. It is as though he wanted to dig deeper into a vein already well mined. Boyle’s is a more somber disposition; a realist who rarely softens the edges of life, he is closer to the Joyce of *Dubliners* than to his contemporaries. But, although he shares Joyce’s fascination with words, they are not so much the talismans that Joyce eventually made them as tap roots linking his characters to the deeper, inarticulate realities of their lives. If some of the writing seems overdescriptive, what results is nevertheless a sense of authenticity and a conviction that the author chooses not to trade the harshness of his world for stylistic facility. In his best stories some bleak truth is pried loose from its hidden depths and floated to the surface. And it is here that Boyle’s meticulous observation pays off.

In “*Meles Vulgaris*” he uses the theme of brutality to define both heroism and cowardice. The strength of this story is in the long, detailed description of a forced “match” between a captured badger and a pack of dogs. Since Boyle is not describing the event for its own sake, we know that it symbolizes some level of human experience. What this is becomes apparent when a married couple recall the excitement of the match years later, with a mixture of pleasure and bitterness. In the man’s memory “the voice

of the dying badger refused to be silenced”:

For all these years it had resounded in his memory with the urgency of a trumpet call—the wild defiant shout of an animal ringed about with enemies. He had thought to cast himself in this heroic mould. To be a maverick. Forever in the ranks of the embattled minority. Instead there had been a slow erosion of ideals, a cowardly retreat from one decent belief after another until at last he found himself in the ranks of the majority. The ring of craven curs that hemmed in and crushed the unruly, those few who dared cry: “*Non serviam!*”

This is the kind of story that is usually resolved through sexual reconciliation and self-pity. For Boyle, that is too easy. It is pain that lasts. The man has become morally disincarnated, and his awareness of it is unbearable.

In most of these stories betrayal is the name of the game, at times putative (“Suburban Idyll”) or imaginary (as in the title story). In “The Lake” an IRA outlaw betrays his oath and is in turn betrayed, but the events are too spare to make this one entirely successful, and the idea is hackneyed. “At Night All Cats Are Grey” is a compromise between art and storytelling and, entertaining though it is, it suffers from a pat and predictable ending. Here is a case where it is better to let the reader supply his own interpretation. But perhaps this is asking too much of the writer.

Boyle can be funny. “Myko” is a wild folktale about a tinker who outwits a bartender-undertaker by returning an unwanted coffin with a corpse inside. (This is one of the few “typically Irish” stories in the book.) “Square Dance” gets its bite from the combination of innocence and of malice that controls the characters’ actions; for, generally speaking, Boyle’s humor is not to be laughed at. Or, at least, it’s no joke. The prevailing mood is gloomy—the tear without the smile, or (if we may mix our nationalities) the *Weltschmerz* without the schmalzt. Boyle seldom tries to redeem his people by padding them with spiritual falsies, and in his really downbeat stories—“Oh Death Where Is Thy Sting-aling-aling” or “Go Away, Old Man, Go Away”—the people are cleansed in a lye that all but dissolves them.

These are not pleasant stories, and we come away from them as we might from some natural catastrophe, grateful that they happened to others.

David Dempsey

David Dempsey, who writes SR’s column The Publishing Scene, is especially interested in Irish literature and has visited Eire a number of times.

