

# BOOKS & THE ARTS.

## Leviathan

JOHN LEONARD

OUTERBRIDGE REACH. By Robert Stone. Ticknor & Fields. 409 pp. \$21.95.

**C**all him Ishmael. Robert Stone returns from Melville and the raptures of the Deep to tell us that God and history are both dead, America is sinking fast and manhood itself may be terminally diseased. America and manhood have always been his texts, through which he looks, with a burning eye, for watermarks of larger purpose, coded meanings. Stone might leave the country (for Vietnam, for Central America, even Hollywood or Antarctica), but it's America confounded that he finds wherever he goes. And although there are plenty of women in his novels, they are doped to the gills, or tortured to martyrdom, or hang themselves and drown, while a man stands around con-struing his failure to heroize. It's as if this erstwhile Merry Prankster book by book were working his way backward, out of Mailer and Hemingway, until, of course, he arrives at Melville's *Isolato*. Like Ahab, Stone hounds God—and discovers His absence. According to Owen Browne, the Pilgrim of *Outerbridge Reach*:

we are enslaved to these strange stories. Hidden voices, bought and paid for, endlessly repeated them. . . . Someone was always being played for a fool. The very process of telling the stories was a game of withholding. Every narrative was reversible and had its outer and its inner side. They were all palimpsests. . . . Again and again these demands for blind trust. Jump, leap and he may or may not be there. And you—spread-eagled over the ocean—may or may not fall and sink when the wind is contrary. When the wind is boisterous and the sea so big and the boat so small. Endless games. Deception without end, infinity to one, all against all. And on the wind, amplified through the stratosphere, stories to give it form. To keep us absolutely fast in the ice and darkness. Stories like false dawns. But ice, darkness, boisterous winds, and false dawns were all true things that had to be lived out.

Owen Browne is someone new to Stone's fiction: Northeast Middle-Class Normal, Dick Tracy Square, Wonderbread WASPy, as if wandering in from a

Cheever or an Updike; monogamous husband, worried father, Navy pilot, sailboat salesman. He seldom drinks, never drugs, and listens to the music of Russ Columbo. "He believes," says his wife, Anne, "in all those things people used to believe in," like the Fourth of July and Vince Lombardi. Why should such a man want to sail around the world alone, in a perilous publicity stunt for the Hylan conglomerate that owns him? Because he thought "the heroic age of the bourgeoisie was over." Contemplating the homeless and the hustlers in Penn Station, the "No Can Do" Polish shipwrights at the boatyard, a stock market in freefall and his rugged face in the promotional videos for the yachts he sells, Owen feels himself to be a stranger in his own country and his own bed, "beside his own woman—a stranger but without a stranger's freedom. On the other side of darkness, he imagined freedom. It was a bright expanse, an effort, a victory." To one of his old Navy buddies, he cries out: "You have no idea how shitty my life has been. . . . How fucking pedestrian and dishonorable."

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Anne, a writer for a yachting magazine, subscribes to these same despondencies. The only time they seem ever really to have been happy was in the Navy, in Vietnam, with "the deliciousness of youth and the feeling of fuck the world, the proud acceptance of honor, duty and risk." And what has become of them now in the big house built by the owner of a clipper ship? She drinks, he mopes and their daughter listens to Megadeath: "The fall [Anne] feared was deep and dark, more frightening than the empty space between her cliff-top and the sea. For a moment she was paralyzed with nameless dread." Anne and this Name-

less Dread curl up together with a bottle of wine and a copy of *Middlemarch*.

*Characters in Stone are always reading books, like The Martian Chronicles, Nicholas and Alexandra, Calderón, B. Traven, Rubén Darío and Kate Chopin, even Jurgen. This is very nineteenth century. Besides Middlemarch, Anne reads the New Jerusalem Bible, with its Tolkien translation of Genesis, Nien Cheng's Life and Death in Shanghai and, for a second time, Brideshead Revisited, while listening to National Public Radio. On Owen's bedside table, with the naval histories and a National Geographic Atlas, there is a copy of Melville's White-Jacket. When he sails, sailing with him, along with Beethoven, Elgar, Sinatra and Samuel Eliot Morison, will be John Donne, Robert Frost, Ernest Hemingway and Look Homeward, Angel.*

Enter Strickland, a documentary filmmaker who's read everything, including Neruda, been everywhere, including Vietnam, and knows how "to work the silences, the white noise and dark frames." Strickland is that self-marginalized, by-standing know-it-all who shows up in every Stone novel: Rheinhardt in *A Hall of Mirrors*, the spiteful alcoholic newscaster; Converse in *Dog Soldiers*, the heroin-smuggling tabloid journalist; Holliwell in *A Flag for Sunrise*, the drunken anthropologist "forever inquiring of helpful strangers the nature of their bonds with one another"; or Walker in *Children of Light*, the coke-wasted Hollywood screenwriter. Besides quoting Yeats (and Nietzsche), these know-it-alls can be counted on to do more damage than the freaks with whom they traffic, to whom they condescend. Knowing doesn't save you.

Strickland is between Third World gigs. In Nam, where he went to make an anti-war film, resentful grunts tied him up overnight in a tunnel man-trap, to a stake smeared with human shit. He has just returned from revolutionary Nicaragua with footage of political rallies and religious processions, chopper shadows and flamingos, which he will edit for public television into a film with the obligatory "left-liberal coloration" that also contains "a few home truths for the private delectation of that tiny band of perceptual athletes whom Strickland regarded as his core audience." In Managua, he made fun of "internationalists" in their wire glasses, *bandas rojas* and overalls: "You probably went to progressive camps. Cookouts with

food-from-many-lands . . . folk-dancing . . . interracial sing-alongs." Strickland is his own Third World.

*Characters in Stone carry around a surprising amount of left-wing baggage they'd just as soon be rid of. In a New Orleans bar, Rheinhardt screams: "You're a dirty Lovestoneite . . . you killed Sidney Hillman!" And Rainey rides to his martyrdom with a crazy old stormbird, flying a red flag, singing out loud of "Haymarket Square, Gene Debs, Henry George—yeah, and Daniel De Leon, Hilstrom, Big Bill Hayward, Huey!" Marge, in Dog Soldiers, grew up in a family of left-wing Irish vegetarians and "Hudson River Bolsheviks" and went to National Guardian parties "with all the folksingers and the tame spades." Holliwell in A Flag for Sunrise was taught to sing the "Internationale" by a newsstand vendor, and meets with the C.I.A. the day Paul Robeson dies. And Sister Justin, besides reading To the Finland Station, has already done time in a Mississippi jail, with Folkways Records, for having served in the black voting rights campaign. In Children of Light, besides Lu Anne's Long Friends, those "Sorrowful Mysteries" with the dragonfly wings, the ghosts of the Hollywood blacklist also gather in the Mexican night.*

Anyway, Strickland is hired by Owen's parent company to film for posterity a circumnavigation of the globe by its resident tycoon, Matthew Hylan, a Ted Turner/Bill Buckley type who is also, alas, a "Captain" Bob Maxwell type; he does a bunk. The P.R. people talk Owen into substituting in the race for glory. Strickland is pleased by the Brownes; they are precisely right for his savaging. Like all the other "pilgrims" and "sleepwalkers" he has filmed, they will impale themselves on his camera. Owen, he says, is "this dorky fucking citizen, for Christ's sake."

Browne agonistes, representative of man the measure. . . . The polite yachtsman, out there for the insulted and injured, the losers and the lost. They could track him in their atlases day by day, the disappointed, the misled, the self-sacrificers, as he bore their wounds away and washed them in salt. They should all feel for Browne, Strickland thought, the soft, wet people of the world. They should all honor and admire him, the Handsome Sailor, their charioteer.

As for Anne . . . well: "Her bright silky hair was braided behind her head. The color of her eyes was nearly Viking blue, but with a Celtic shadow. Her face was strong, willful and austere, wonder-

fully softened by her smile. It was a brazen, faintly androgynous pre-Raphaelite beauty, daunting, almost more than he thought he could handle." But Strickland will try.

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## Why don't we see novels with heroes like Johnny Appleseed? Quaker oats, not Spanish bull?

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And so, as a cure for his despondency, Owen goes to sea alone. And as a cure for hers, Anne goes to bed with the Third World. And as a cure for ours—because Owen and Anne aren't really interesting enough in their privacy to sustain us through the first 200 pages—we tune in on Strickland's malice and cynicism, his Mephisto style. And that's most of what you need to know, except that the Brownes, objects of Stone's conditional sympathy and targets of Strickland's scorn, aren't aristocrats. However WASPy, they don't own this nation; they're indentured to it; they bought a package tour, the Vince Lombardi "narrative," like one of Owen's videos. Owen's father may have thought he was a "tragic exile" instead of a lowly immigrant from England, but he worked as a servant on a country estate on Long Island. Anne's "Newfie" father fought his way up from the docks. (Strickland, naturally, never had a father; he was brought up by his mother, among circus performers, in welfare hotels: the Other America.)

Despite appearances, the Brownes are still on probation, the unfinished children of Outerbridge Reach, that Valley of Ashes down Arthur Kill into a backwater of moldering tugs, gutted ferries, "hulks . . . scattered in a geometry of shadows. The busy sheer and curve of their shapes and the perfect stillness of the water made them appear held fast in some phantom disaster. . . . Thousands of immigrants had died there, in shanties, of cholera, in winter far from home. It had been a place of loneliness, violence and terrible labor. It seemed to Browne that there was something about the channel he recognized but could not call to mind. On the dark shore, the junkyard hound kept barking as though it would go on forever."

*We've been to such boneyards before in Stone's novels: a graveyard shift at a soap factory. With Rainey among machetes and sugar cane, when women screamed for Jesus and smoking tar ran from an oil drum on the smoldering rocks of the trash pit, and a figure like a voodoo doll emerged with a rope around its neck. With Hicks, in the L.A. canyons where "shit creeps out of the night under those sundecks, and they know it," or dying in the desert. With Holliwell underwater, when the coral strikes: "As he pedaled up the wall, he was acutely aware of being the only creature on the reef that moved with purpose. The thing out there must be feeling him . . . its dim primal brain registering disorder in his motion and making the calculation. Fear. Prey." With Lu Anne, courting the Louisiana dead: "where the living and the dead are involved in mixed entertainments. And are not tucked away in the ground but dwell among us. Their hair grows and their fingernails and they go on getting smarter in those ovens under their angels."*

We are ready now for the last couple of hundred pages of *Outerbridge Reach*, as dazzling as anything in American literature. Once Owen's under way, it almost doesn't matter why he went, but here are a few of his reasons: 1) "a good fight or the right war—something that eased the burden of self and made breath possible." 2) "The way to recoup. A good way. A clean way" (a Heming-way!). 3) "I think most of us spend our lives without ever having to find out what we're made of. . . . In the present day, a man can live his whole life and never test his true resources." 4) "His fear was not of being overcome but of *failing* from the inside out. Discovering the child-weakling as his true nature and having to spend the rest of his life with it." 5) "All good men have physical courage. Without physical courage there is no other kind."

Such Papa Normanizing, Mailerway. Why is it that when men in American novels feel despondent about their manhood, they invariably abandon their wives and children—Pablo, in *A Flag for Sunrise*, even shot his dogs—for some sort of Aboriginal walkabout to kill other men, or fish, to bag a unicorn and waste a hippogriff? Why don't we see any novels with heroes like Walt Whitman or Johnny Appleseed or Charles Kuralt? Instead of Spanish bull, Quaker oats? But in Robert Stone, while Rheinhardt doesn't really, on purpose, deal death to anyone, he more or less co-conspires at a race riot,

not to mention the staving in of Bingamon's skull with an ax handle; Hicks, imagining himself a samurai, piles up quite a body count from Berkeley to Mexico with an M-70 grenade launcher; Holliwell is the only anthropologist I ever heard of who stabs a man to death in an open boat; if Walker had stayed in Hollywood, Lu Anne might still be alive; and Owen goes to sea to kill his father, and harpoon himself, and remember Vietnam.

I'm about to suggest that the father Owen seeks to kill is really the Author of Us All—the Great Signifier. I've gone off the deep end before, reviewing Stone. Ten years ago I got so excited tracking down Gnosticism in *A Flag for Sunrise* that I skimmed on the rest of the novel: the C.I.A., the Comintern, the Mafia, liberation theology, Vietnam as paradigm. I'm doing it again because Stone fessed up to this Gnosticism in a radio interview on WBAI. He has been arguing with God in all his novels ever since he left the Marist brothers at Archbishop Molloy High School in Manhattan and, like Melville, went to sea instead of college. And what Melville discovered, rounding Cape Horn, in the Marquesas, or the Galápagos, among castaways, deserters, "mongrels," "cannibals," tortoises and slaves, is what Stone has discovered in such seething "green places of the world" as Vietnam and Central America: Imperialism. Not God in History but History as God; not "the just rule of the Lord" but "poverty and revenge . . . cooking oil, excrement, incense, death."

Because Stone's God-hounding has so often been confused in the past with the alcoholic deliriums and drug hallucinations of his characters—e.g., Rheinhardt's "yellow liquid terror," his "White Light" and his "Whirlies"; Marge on Dilaudid and heroin, hoping to "seal some chaste clammy intimacy . . . while their noses ran and their light bulbs popped out silently in the skull's darkness"; Hicks on speed and Dr. Dope, in his Jungian cave, chemically levitating; Father Egan on rum and reggae seeing Gnosis, and Pablo stoned on Dexedrine seeing "death's-heads, swastikas, the ace of spades" and a drunken Holliwell telling his Latin audience "Mickey Mouse will see you dead"; Walker, on Scotch, vodka and cocaine, seeking "fire, motion, risk," while Lu Anne on Quaaludes is chewed on at her fingertips by infant teeth in the shaven skulls of "blue-baby-colored" dragonfly Long Friends—we

tend, in reviewing him, to scant his obessional interest, his itch for the metaphysical. Yet some sort of Christ is nailed to almost every other page.

In *A Hall of Mirrors*, Rheinhardt quotes Dante and finds himself in a graveyard at a latticed gate, from which "a small, iron Christ stared down in a wide-eyed rusty death from the gibbet of a green, oxidized cross"; Rainey hears voices of "the dread procession of God's stricken world"; and Geraldine in a dead-baby dream recalls the Bible verse about "the terrible bright blossoms of the almond tree . . . where the fears were." In *Dog*

*Soldiers*, under Dieter's bell tower, facades are painted with biblical scenes of the serpent with rattles tempting Eve, and Christ in judgment wearing the feathered headdress of a cacique, and martyrs carrying their heads in their hands; a lamb is crucified. Even in *Children of Light* there's a fire-blackened crucifix, a "seared Christus figure"; Lu Anne looks up to see "that the hanged Christ nailed to the beams had become a cat. It was burned black as the figure had been, its fur turned to ash, its face burned away to show the grinning fanged teeth." And of course *A Flag for Sunrise* can't be read

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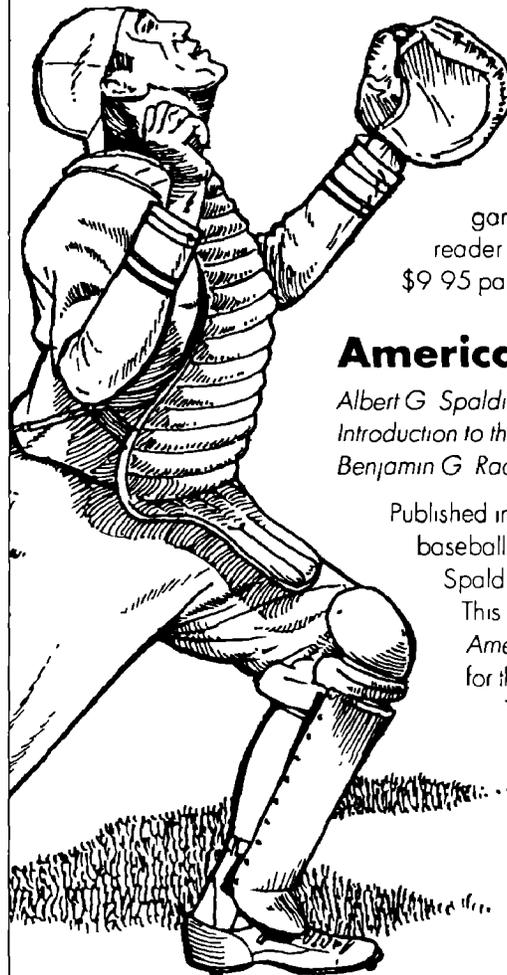
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without this stuff: St. Ursula and her virgins put in an appearance almost immediately. Jesus Christ, in a glass coffin, looking like Che Guevara, reappears throughout. Holliwell himself was Jesuit-trained, and seeks in Tecan "people who believed in things, and acted in the world according to what they believed." Sister Justin may have given up her Savior—"the Holy One, the Hanged Man"—for the Revolution, but he appears to her anyway, when she's tortured. Father Egan, the "Christian humanist witness in a vicious world," traffics instead with heresy. Near a jungle pyramid, in front of Toltec stelae depicting human sacrifice, he speaks of "Errant Sophia, the whore of wisdom, who in her foredoomed passion to comprehend the Holy One, underestimated the depths of the Abyss and became lost"; of each man's sundering from his own true self, a "mismaid" God we must reassemble from buried sparks and particles of light, angelic messengers and a Demiurge.

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*It's almost as if Stone had scourged himself in his first novels. Evil, maybe; God, no.*

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Stone has also whistled tunes in the bare ruined choirs of most other world-religions, too. Rainey consults a copy of the Gita: "He opened it and turned to the transfiguration of Krishna, God's self-litany in the war chariot . . . : 'I am the Man-Consumer, spewer of skulls/I am the cunning of Dice Play/I am Time, waster of the Peoples.'" Converse is familiar with the Ramayana and Hicks is a student of Zen, as well as bodhi swasha, T'ai Chi and your basic Kundalini herpetology. Showing up at sunrise in Tecan, besides Toltecs, are also Olmecs, Incas, Mayans and Aztecs, with jade animals, bone carvings, chacmols, hieroglyphs and Rain God Seven.

Shia is mentioned in *Outerbridge Reach*, and Calvin and Luther and the Plymouth Brethren, and the name of Owen's personal boat is Parsifal. But there's no more weight to these mentions than to similar nods at Tolstoy and Ayn Rand, until at last Owen braves the Atlantic. It's almost as if Stone had scourged

himself in his first four novels: Evil, maybe; God, no. He seems also to be just saying no to drugs. Strickland's use is strictly recreational. Maybe Stone sobered up himself after all the self-destructiveness in *Children of Light*. (One good reason for never going to Hollywood is that then you don't have to write a novel about it.) If movies aren't poetry, then neither is dope, a snuff movie of the mind. Heroin was never an apt metaphor for the disintegration of American culture, anyway. Smack had no more to explain to us about greed and racism than the opium pipe in any way symbolizes Tao or Nirvana; it was another sort of Demiurge. We now see what Hicks saw, at the end of *Dog Soldiers*, in the vibrating mountains:

You know what's out there? Every god-damned race of shit jerking each other off. Mom and Dad and Buddy and Sis, two hundred million rat-hearted cocksuckers in enormous cars. Rabbits and fish. They're mean and stupid and greedy, they'll fuck you for laughs, they want you dead.

Put this together with what Holliwell sees at *Sunrise*: Positive Thinkers dealing death "in the name of God or Humanity or some Larger Notion. . . . How could they convince themselves that in this whirling tidal pool of existence, providence was sending them a message?"

Seeing visions, hearing voices, their eyes awash in their own juice—living on their own and borrowed hallucinations, banners, songs, kiddie art posters, phantom worship. The lines of bayonets, the marching rhythms, incense or torches, chanting, flights of doves—it was hypnosis. And they were the vampires. The world paid in blood for their articulate delusions, but it was all right because for a while they felt better. And presently they could put their consciences on automatic. They were beyond good and evil in five easy steps—it had to be O.K. because it was them after all. It was good old us, Those Who Are, Those Who See, the gang. Inevitably they grew bored with being contradicted. Inevitably they discovered the fundamental act of communication, they discovered murder.

Holliwell had one last thing to tell Sister Justin, whom he loved: "God doesn't work through history. . . . That's a delusion of the Western mind." He had several things to tell himself: "When I decide what happened, I'll decide to live with it." And: "The absence of evil was the greatest horror." Finally: "A man has nothing to fear . . . who understands history." (By which he meant: History is

meaningless.) This is seeing through everything. And with such ferocious eyes, like Strickland's, we now examine the pilgrim of *Outerbridge Reach*.

It's not enough that Owen's never done this sort of thing before. He must be wounded in the foot, like Achilles, before he even leaves harbor. It's not enough that the carpenter dismantled his cabin after a fight about Vietnam. Anne, with her beef jerky, forgot about his solar panels; and his fiberglass cracks into "spider-webbed craze patterns" in the first storm: "Bad workmanship and sharp practice. Phoniness and cunning. . . . Sold our pottage, overheated the poles, poisoned the rain, burned away the horizon with acid. Despised our birthright. Forgot everything, destroyed and laughed away our holy things. What to do for our children's terrible laughter?" Nor is it enough that he seldom eats, can't sleep and is monitored day and night by transponders signaling from his mast, a ship-to-shore telephone and a shortwave radio. He will also on this radio be propagandized by demented missionaries, with their Bible lessons in Cantonese, Korean and Tagalog ("Listeners may remember that when our Lord was pursued by His enemies, Saint Matthew tells us that He went by ship into a desert place apart"); by equally demented particle physicists, babbling on about "absolute future," "absolute past," "absolute elsewhere" and "imaginary time" and by a pun-making, chess-playing, teenaged ham operator who turns out to be blind; and by the ghost of his dead father, quoting the drowned Shelley. None of this is enough, because God gangs up on Owen.

Imagine a plague of insects, "pale yellow and black, with delicate spotted wings folded against the thorax," infesting the wind, covering the cabin windows, crawling up mainsail and mast, smothering the surface of the water "as though the swarm had displaced the ocean." And a great strange cloud that obscures the sun just before the shadow of an enormous shark appears, "its dorsal fin . . . silently shearing an inch or so of the breathing world." And a blue sky suddenly assailed by curving bands of violet and dark green light, an aurora "beyond the compass of the human will," reminding Owen of tracer rounds and parachute flares in the Song Chong Valley, in Vietnam, in 1969. And a towering "mystical" iceberg embellished in shapes "unknown to geometry, beautiful but useless in any sort of measurement . . . a psychological prin-

ple." And the pilgrim lashed inside his bubble, through whistling gales and slackening shrouds, surfing into vertigo as if the vessel had been scalded, riding green walls into black waves, freezing rain and "ghostly wands of foam," hearing "the stone annihilation, the locust's shriek magnified from the abyss." And this Flying Dutchman, "outside randomness" after the engine fails and the masthead light winks out, seeing in a pale blue shimmer "something inexplicable": "In the center of the glow" toward which a petrel leads him "was what appeared to be an inverted mountain range. Peaks hung upside down like stalactites, their points barely touching the surface of the sea." And when at last he finds this island right-side up, it proves to be treeless, volcanic, with black gulls, screeching skuas, seething penguins and an albatross; with a lagoon in the crater of the volcano, to which, through winds like "music out of stone," he penetrates by Zodiac; from which, on foot, he passes to a black sand lava beach, where, under a black sky beside a smoky sea, he spies "white shapes. . . Ice, he thought at first. Coming closer, he saw that the white shapes were not ice. What they might be confounded him. At first they seemed meaningless and without form; closer up, they assumed a geometry with which he was somehow vaguely familiar." Among these shapes, penguins wander "like the citizens of a town." These are the bleached bones—"fin bones like skeletal wings, head-high pelvic bones and mandibles of peg teeth the size of fists," "cages of five-foot ribs . . . piled like the tiers of a stylized prison to a height beyond reach"—of thousands of dead whales.

Instead of God: Darwin.

I'm not even going to tell you about the charred porch, the bright silk dress, the Cape Cod rocking chair, the Mozart and the braided human hair. Nor, in a shattered mirror, a face "dark brown and bearded, wild-eyed, like a saddhu's. Or a dervish's . . . the face of a man in the grip of something powerful and unsound." No wonder Owen shuts down his radio and telephone, discards his transponder, lies to his journal, "chopping the cup of sea and sky into imaginary angles." As if he'd listened to too much particle physics, what he sees instead of a sun is misshapen disks, a limitless perspective "extended forever, to infinity, in a universe of infinite singularities. In the ocean, they suggested, there could be no measure and no reason. There could be neither di-

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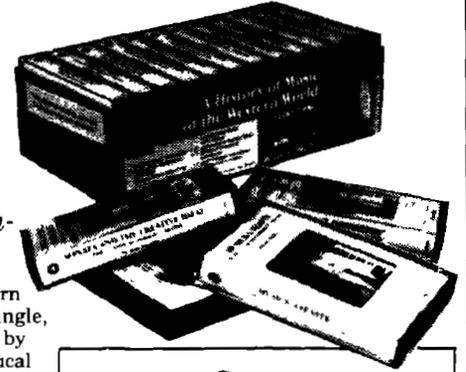
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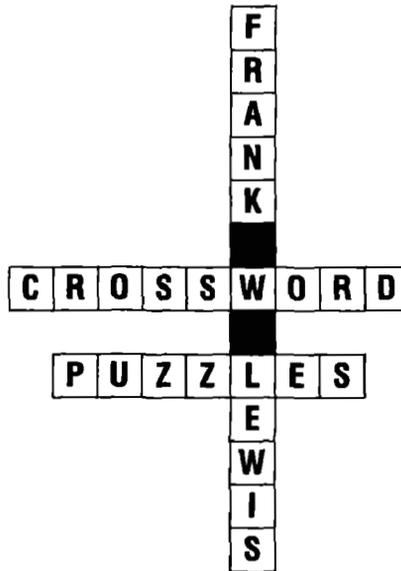
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rection nor horizon. It was an ocean without a morning, without sanity or light."

Yes, the shade of Joseph Conrad also hovers, and I suppose in a sense that Strickland is Owen's Secret Sharer; but so was Fedallah Ahab's Secret Sharer six years before Conrad had even been born. "Annihilation" was one of Melville's favorite words. Owen reads *White-Jacket* prior to setting sail.

Of course, this is a passage into Melville. The original "Handsome Sailor" was Billy Budd, and Owen's also mad Pip off the Pequod. As in *Moby-Dick*, Prometheus haunts this novel, too. (The medallion Strickland wears around his neck depicts a man tied to a stake with a vulture eating his eye; Strickland says it is the Mayan god of discomfort, from the Grijalva. Maybe so, but then the Mayans must have met Prometheus; besides, like Owen, Strickland is remembering Vietnam.) Not only will we meet so many whales, all of them dead, but we will also encounter, with Owen, Melville's own motto: BE TRUE TO THE DREAMS OF YOUR YOUTH. And when Owen at the bottom of the globe, on bone hooks, swings free "in the ancient deasil motion," whirling clockwise and "congruent" with the sun and stars, "at varying angles to the blue horizon," singing his way into "the interstices" and the "algorithmic Sun Dance," feeling himself attached to "the central pole, the axis of the world," any reader should be reminded of the fate of Ishmael:

Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, like another Ixion I did revolve.

But if *Outerbridge Reach* is a passage into Melville, along the standardized lines of any epic quest—Vedic or Homeric, the Nibelungenlied or the Lay of Igor, an Edda or a Doon—it also has the language and shape of another ancient narrative line. It feels like all great mystic journeys, from St. John of the Cross to William Blake to the flight of the Sufi lapwing. (Note Owen's dervish. Doris Lessing isn't the only novelist to have noticed parallels between Rumi's Persian poetry and modern molecular physics.) As always, Stone's realism picks up speed as it whirls, like a cyclotron, until matter itself explodes into something surtextual. The pilgrim, of course, is the soul. The storms, of course, are symbolic. This is the ultimate migration. In any mystic voyage toward harmony, equilibrium,

grace, Union, Marriage, a "geography of the invisible" or the annihilation of the self, there are ravens and hounds, voices and visions, a Dark Night and a River of Light. Fasting and insomnia are recommended. The sea talked to St. Catherine of Siena, too. It's amazing how everybody on these journeys—Heraclitus and Siddhartha, Jakob Böhme and William James, Gnostics and Kabbalists and Indian ecstasies—agrees, corresponds, with their synonymous detachments and amazements, their ecstasies and trance, their awe and apparitions, their self-abandonment and "saving madness," their eyes and roses and magnets and fish. Logos! Godhead!

It's easiest to understand Owen as symptomatic of a corrupt American ruling class. After all, in this race, he *cheats*. Yachts and Vietnam: among boat people, first class and steerage! But such a comprehension fails to explain why we like him more, even so, than Strickland,

the adulterer and voyeur. Having cheated, he then behaves every bit as much like a samurai as Hicks, except this time Stone is talking about despair instead of honor. Owen is empty when he goes to sea, and there he finds emptiness. To the abyss, he brings his built-in precipice. The pilgrim self-destructs, devolves. And there's nothing left in this or any other world in which to believe. I'm reminded one last time of Melville:

Though nominally included in the census of Christendom, he was still an alien to it. He lived in the world, as the last of the Grisly Bears lived in settled Missouri. And as when Spring and Summer had departed, that wild Logan of the woods, burying himself in the hollow of a tree, lived out the winter there, sucking his own paws, so, in his inclement, howling old age, Ahab's soul, shut up in the caved trunk of his body, there fed upon the sullen paws of its gloom! □

## Pater But No Familias

CAROLYN COOKE

THE LOST FATHER. By Mona Simpson. Knopf. 506 pp. \$22.

My mother never lost her faith in men, but after years, it became more general. She believed a man would come and be my father, some man. It didn't have to be our original one, the one we'd prayed to first as one and only. Any man with certain assets would do.

In this we disagreed, but quietly. I was becoming a fanatic.

What does a girl miss, growing up without a father? Is it maleness in general, the obverse of Mother, a bright yang to her shadowy yin? Or is it the father in particular, the "one and only," destiny made manifest by the arch of his feet and the set of his chin? The father quest is archetypal, old as the oldest stories. (Robert Bly take note.) Homer has Telemachus sail to Pylos not to find Odysseus but to look for him. The quest triggers a dormant gene and transforms Telemachus from a mama's boy into his father's son. (Is it different for a girl? Is a girl her mother?) Mythic (absent) fathers don't raise children; in the eternal conflict between loyalty to home and the world, the best and the worst of men al-

ways seem to choose the world. Agamemnon dupes his wife and kills his daughter just for a clear day of sailing for Troy. Mohammed—"John"—Atassi, the Lost Father of this novel, may be among the best men or the worst—a compulsive gambler, a womanizer, a prince, maybe the John F. Kennedy of Egypt. He abandons his wife, daughter and a professorship at a Midwestern university. He disappears, into America probably, leaving no forwarding address or phone.

*The Lost Father* is Mona Simpson's second novel. It is a sequel to her first, *Anywhere But Here*, in which a young protagonist named Mayan Atassi Stevenson chronicles her peregrinations across America with her preternaturally loyal mother—a Penelope with wanderlust—who weaves plans instead of shrouds, first plans of finding and winning back the lost father, and later of winning anyone at all "with certain assets." Her suitors, who include an ice-skating pro and a "goofy" orthodontist, appall Mayan and her mother with their ordinariness. Searching and waiting for "real life" have purified them and gotten them hooked on abstract men—mysterious, mythic, transcendental. As Mayan puts it, "All you have to do to be somebody's God is disappear."

What this novel does best is capture the stale hurt of the fatherless, the impulse toward self-perfection and self-denial

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