

“The Intolerable Wrestle”

A Walk to the River, by William Hoffman, Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1970. 336 pp. \$5.95.

WILLIAM HOFFMAN is one of the writers indicted in Floyd C. Watkins' *The Death of Art: Black and White in the Recent Southern Novel* (University of Georgia Press, 1970). Professor Watkins' thesis, simple to argue, is that the fictions of Hoffman, Carson McCullers, Elizabeth Spencer, Harper Lee, Jesse Hill Ford, Peter S. Feibleman, and others, including even William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren in some of their late work, fail both on the side of truth and on the side of art in their

representations of the South according to liberal stereotypes. Hoffman's first novel, *Trumpet Unblown*, is an example, says Watkins, of the way these writers "usually reject the entire Southern tradition." In *A Place for My Head*—praised by *The Saturday Review* because "it points up the bitterness, the blindness, the stubborn pride, and the fear gripping the modern-day South"—"white and black are both so evil that little good can be found to praise in either race. . . . 'All that's left in the world,'" one of the characters says, "is bastards."

In *A Walk to the River*, however, Hoffman affirms the Southern tradition, insofar as that means reverence for the land and loyalty to family and to place. At the conclusion of the novel the narrator-protagonist is shocked to realize that his young son has turned the family store into an imitation of the junky, and not quite scrupulous, Progress Store up the street:

"I was running this store before you had bat brains," I said. "So was my father and grandfather. And if we can't have dignity here, then by God we'll go out of business. . . . We're LeJohns, and our people been living in this town for almost two hundred years. We'll go to the poorhouse before we whore to make money." . . .

As I became calmer, I started to feel guilt. Because if he didn't know any better than to whore himself, it was my fault. I failed to teach him.

Hoffman's central theme is more ambitious than that, however; it is theological, rather than sociological. The novel to compare Hoffman's novel to is Warren's *All the King's Men*. Like Warren's narrator-protagonist Jack Burden, Jackson LeJohn is at the beginning of the novel "a dead man," by his own description, on whom is placed the burden of a responsibility he does not want. The minister of his church in Black Leaf, Virginia, has been accused of assaulting the wife of the town's most prominent citizen, the church's chief benefactor; as chairman of the board of officers, Le-

John must conduct an investigation, which leads him into a detective's kind of research, like Jack Burden's, into the minister's past.

The minister cannot deny the disparity between his past life and his present vocation: "If you believe your own religion," he tells the church officers, "you must accept the fact that thieves, whores, and murderers can be saved." And he is not in a position to disprove the present charge against him, which is false. Finally he can only ask to be believed on faith. The officers and the congregation are unable to believe him, or, in some cases, do not want to believe him; and he and his family are forced to leave Black Leaf.

"Nothing goes past theology," the minister tells LeJohn early in the novel. By the end of *All the King's Men*, the various interests—personal, political, philosophical—merge in the theological, all in terms of Jack Burden's growing into knowledge. But Hoffman's novel does not achieve that ultimate merger. There is LeJohn's detective search, which allows Hoffman to practice his considerable skill at minor characterization and comic incident; there is LeJohn's relationship with his son; and there is his relationship with a young woman teacher from the North, whom he courts as a stepmother for his son. It is hard to say what the two subplots have to do with the problem of belief that the dismissed minister dramatizes; they conclude rightly, but their movements and their conclusions are independent of the main action.

Hoffman is a serious novelist, but he fails here to imagine an action that can dramatize his full intention. More seriously, he does not commit himself to a language that can take him very far beyond his first intention—into the kind of knowledge that the writer does not know he has. (A good poet knows the experience; the difference between verse and prose is of degree rather than of kind.) Henry James, writing in 1886, wondered at William Dean Howells' idea that style in fiction was coming to matter less and less. "Why less and less? . . .

The style of a novel is part of the execution of a work of art; the execution of a work of art is part of its very essence, and that, it seems to me, must have mattered in all ages in exactly the same degree, and be destined always to do so." Hoffman's style is of a very simple order, a matter of laying sentence upon sentence, sometimes in the way that a freshman composition student might do it:

The buildings lay alongside the river. Around the property was a high wire fence. A silver water tank stuck up like a great tulip. I turned in at the gate and drove to the parking lot in front of the office. I opened the car door for Sutter.

Five consecutive simple sentences, with the only variation in the compound predicate of the fourth. Such a style keeps the pace fast, even when it might be more appropriate to slow it down. No detail of scene, or character, or action is dwelt upon long

enough to induce reflection and to yield the further meanings that hover about our sensible world—the "other echoes," in T. S. Eliot's words, that

inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?
Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
Round the corner. Through the first gate . . .

The way is through language, "the intolerable wrestle/With words and meanings."

I am glad that Hoffman in his new novel does not seek his meanings in the current sociological abstractions. But when we think of those abstractions as perversions of our language (see Orwell), we realize that their opposites are not different abstractions, but the precisions we win our way to, temporarily, in the "intolerable wrestle."

Reviewed by ROBERT BUFFINGTON