

orientation points for understanding the many dimensions of the struggle. They even render it possible for twentieth-century pilgrims to see themselves as making the same journey as countless others in ages long past and cultures astonishingly diverse." To try to develop oneself spiritually is one of the permanent aims of our human race.

Reviewed by JAMES COLLINS

Chevalier at Scribners

Max Perkins: Editor of Genius, by A. Scott Berg, *New York: Dutton, 1978.* 498 pp. \$15.00.

WILLIAM EVARTS, maternal grandfather of Maxwell Perkins, defended Andrew Johnson at his impeachment and was considered the greatest constitutional lawyer of his day; Charles Perkins, the editor's other grandfather, had similar credentials as America's first art critic. As Scott Berg maintains in his biography, these bloodlines converged to help produce the judicious senior editor of Scribners—"Perkins aestheticism and Evarts discipline" providing a blend that had salutary effects on that near-quorum of American novelists over whose work Max Perkins presided.

If there was a fund of good judgment to be inherited by Perkins, there was also a catalytic event that helped the man realize his own character. At seventeen, he returned to a foundering boy who'd lost his nerve swimming—Perkins had first abandoned him—and was able to save him. Whereupon he judged himself unremittingly: "and I then made the only resolution that I ever kept. And it was, never to refuse a responsibility." Usually a biographer's intention to pin down formative experience (or to sum up, for that matter, inherited tendencies) fails to con-

vince when baldly set down in such fashion. But this biography is the exception: both the anecdote of the rescue and the account of ancestry ring true, as they throw light on Max Perkins' character. The reason may be that Perkins knew more about himself than most men can be credited as knowing—also disguised less. As for that resolution not to be remiss again, there was no priggishness about it—Perkins was so self-critical that he would have spotted the flaw of setting up as a "Mr. Responsible" in a world of sliders-by. The great thing about his sense of duty was its chivalric base.

True chivalry is not comparative. Perkins did not do the things he did so as to shine in comparison with others. He did them because his self-imposed standards simply could not allow him placation otherwise: his mind could not have known peace had he defected—from answering (frequently inane) correspondence, or reading (often impossible) manuscripts, or remaining approachable and responsive to a wife and friends whose claims and fretfulness would have soon drained another man's patience. Chivalry was a way of not deciding where blame might lie; a way of acknowledging depths of others' needs. Perkins did not seek his near-confessor's role, but accepted it rather than disoblige—the fact that he might be pressed "beyond the call of duty" hardly occurring to him. (One small ruse he did employ: he wore his hat in the office, and that sometimes could put off a stranger wanting advice about some manuscript—since the editor would seem on the point of departing.)

Perkins' difficult marriage was not compromised by another woman, but he did have a platonic affair—in keeping with his knight-errantry—with a woman named Elizabeth Lemmon. Having her confidence from miles away (they almost never met) meant more to Max than anything but, perhaps, the welfare of his daughters. A friend of Max's wife as well, Elizabeth wrote her after her husband's death, saying how "Max poured strength into

people"—and such was his gift, that most were left not needing to depend on him, having absorbed what he could give them.

To show that the term "chivalry" is not farfetched, one might consider two letters from Perkins to his daughters Peggy and Bertha. On reading *War and Peace* to his girls, he would set out matchsticks to represent Russian and French troop deployment, and to Peggy he once gave the reason: that Tolstoy's Prince Andrei was "the best man that ever was written about, except Hamlet...I wish each of you, if you *must* marry, would find a Prince Andrei for a husband." The letter to Bertha may not sound so much that of a chevalier. He is reporting an evening's editorial stint. "I have been trying to tell a writer...how he should write. Isn't that funny when I don't know how to do it myself? I even told him a story to write that I made up—and he was delighted with it." The point here is that the daughter addressed is only eight years old. Perkins shows no condescension, taking her at her communicative worth. He assumes she'll agree on how "funny" it is for him to set up as expert over something that's beyond him. In explaining his job to the girl he gives off an air of extraordinary insouciance, as though a kind of Childe Roland heart did beat under the broadcloth.

Perkins improved the work of so many writers between 1920 and 1945 that a word like "quorum" ought not seem facetious. The best part of a whole generation of prose writers prospered because of him, with names like Marquand and Lardner, Edmund Wilson and Van Wyck Brooks, Erskine and Taylor Caldwell, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings to be added to the famous triumvirate of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Wolfe who were filially beholden to him (like the "sons" of Ben Jonson; for he served as their judging intelligence).

Max shines in each relationship—occasionally serving as buffer (his office "the clearinghouse for much of the emotion going back and forth" between Hemingway and Fitzgerald)—but more often showing

writers where their right direction lay when they seemed to have gone wrong. To a probably unmatched degree, he literally invented scenarios for his bogged-down godsons. Conversely, he would hold the line for them when they'd gone right, and other editors, unable to anticipate profits, had momentarily placed these writers in jeopardy. As he told Fitzgerald (at a point when Hemingway was teetering between Harcourt and Scribners), "I believe that as compared with most others, Hemingway would be better off in our hand because we are absolutely true to our authors and support them loyally in the face of losses for a long time, when we believe in their qualities and in them." Fitzgerald did not need to have this proved, standing as he did as exhibit A himself. He and the others, as complicated as their lives were, felt anchored to something where a Scribners letterhead, undersigned *Max*, was concerned, and they craved to hear from him. But this was also because, with no aspirations toward self-expression, he was on their par as a writer. The reader of this biography never feels that what graces it is the correspondence sent to Perkins. The subtitle *Editor of Genius* correctly implies a gift for language that is borne out in what Perkins writes his "sons" in return.

At the same time the biography delivers many succinct portraits of men and women on tenterhooks, waiting for the wet ink of print to dry. Writing so often to Max just before their work is about to appear, they are understandably vulnerable. Of the three "biggest" Scribners authors, two unsuspectingly turn out to sound rather similar. Perkins tampered least with Hemingway's writing, and most by far with Wolfe's; nevertheless, Hemingway and Wolfe sound much alike in the way they unburden themselves in the mail. Thinskin, they are also obsessive about what they're accomplishing, to a degree where the existence of other practitioners is felt as threatening. (The idea that Perkins owes them something like undivided time, while not expressed, is inferrable here, so that one gets the notion they are involved in a

contest.) In complaints from both Hemingway and Wolfe, Fitzgerald figures as a rival not deserving equal billing, as it were. The unpretty part is that Fitzgerald was in decline. Mr. Berg notes, "There was something in Hemingway that preyed on the weaknesses of others," many letters to Max showing him sniping at the downed bird. Wolfe was as bad from a more squeamish direction. In a letter (not to Perkins) describing Fitzgerald, Scott is judged "impotent and alcoholic now, and unable to finish his book and I think he wanted to injure my own work." Fitzgerald himself betrayed no such small-heartedness, but it certainly dogs the others. When attacked by critics, they sound like twins in revealing their hurts to Perkins. The occasions are the appearances of *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Death in the Afternoon*, when Wolfe and Hemingway say they have a mind "never to publish another damned thing" (Hemingway): "I have stopped writing and do not want ever to write again" (Wolfe): all because of the "tricksters" (Wolfe) who make up the "racket" that passes for book reviewing (Hemingway). Both sound dead serious about wanting to pick up their marbles and go home.

The best writer of the three, Fitzgerald, was the only one of Max's sons to have in plenty what Max had and the other pair were deficient in—chivalry. He once ended a letter on a note very different from those above: "I'm ashamed of myself for whining about nothing and never will again." To which Perkins answered, "As for the last sentence of your letter, it ought not to have been written. You never did it so far as I know. You have always been to me the very model of courage."

A feeling of parity is realized in the Fitzgerald-Perkins relationship. Both escape pettiness: not, incidentally, because Berg would seem to be setting it up this way, for he grinds no axes. He arranges the record; has begun with the conviction that he has a great man to reveal to us; discerns a kindred spirit in Elizabeth Lemmon who will be the lady to whom Max consecrates

his exploits; and permits Scott Fitzgerald to emerge as the one liegeman every hero is entitled to—who can mirror largeness with largeness returned.

Perkins was a man who especially helped young writers. It is fitting that he should be so convincingly characterized by Scott Berg, who spotted the largeness of his subject and was able to show it confirmed by Max's contemporaries. There cannot be many "born" biographers, but Berg seems to be one, which is also fitting. Perkins could detect masterpieces in the as-yet-un-carved granite of men in their twenties; here is a book about him, itself a masterpiece, done by a man unaided, himself in his twenties.

Reviewed by JOHN RUSSELL

Rational Orthodoxy

The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795-1860, by E. Brooks Holifield, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1978. x + 262 pp. \$14.75.

APART FROM occasional references in the histories of congregations and denominations, brief notices in the biographies of Sprague and Taylor, and inferences drawn by intellectual historians like Eaton, W. J. Cash, and R. B. Davis, the contribution of southern preachers and professors to American theology lies largely unexamined in numberless published sermons, treatises, and seminary announcements, and in a voluminous and neglected theological periodical literature. Allen Tate, whose "Remarks on Southern Religion" (his contribution to *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930) first called attention to the nature of antebellum religious experience, was a literary critic who spoke from recollection, ignoring the regional theological