

esoteric and democratic, but that is the burden of *American* tradition" (emphasis added). This is very odd. Not only has Bloom never argued such a position before; he also forsakes it at every important moment in *Agon*, as when he turns to Freud, to Nietzsche, to Gershon Scholem, and to Walter Benjamin.

How, then, to account for the strange inconsistencies, the lapses, and evasions of *Agon*? The problem may be seen to lie in the way he wishes to limit the conflict between reader and text. The conflict, for Bloom, has always taken place between poetic fathers and sons; the Jacob of the present moment wrestles the angel of the past: Whitman wrestles with Emerson, Stevens with Whitman, and Bloom with Wimsatt or Brooks. Bloom's entire critical apparatus is built upon this one single, unchallenged premise; and there is no place in the apparatus (the argument) for the possibility that the real *Agon* is aimed at one's siblings, one's brothers in the written word (there are no sisters, and indeed no women at all, in Bloom's intellectual pantheon).

It is true that Bloom refers, at various moments throughout the book, to a number of siblings, but he always casts the relationship in suspiciously compatible terms: thus, Geoffrey Hartman is called "my constituent," Neil Hertz "a not wholly unfriendly critic," and John Hollander, quite simply, "my friend." If, at one point, he concedes that "Paul de Man is the critical theorist who [after Nietzsche] wounds me the most," we can only reply that de Man's wounds must be very superficial indeed, since there is no evidence of his thinking to be found anywhere in *Agon*. And yet Bloom is wounded, so wounded that he can barely bring himself to name the real sibling. It is his colleague Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher of language and literature who has troubled the waters of almost everyone for the past fifteen years. The symptoms of that wound are everywhere and quite impossible to summarize in a brief review.

If *Agon* were just another instance of academic rivalry, there would be little cause to celebrate it, or even to read it. But the book is more creative than that. In the first place, Bloom is too astute to be totally blind to the problem. There are moments in his discussion of other writers when he entertains the possibility of a sibling conflict: Thus, refer-

ring to Hart Crane's reaction to T. S. Eliot, Bloom allows that "there is usually a near-contemporary agon as well as a struggle with the fathering-force of the past." Bloom then drops the point; but he develops it elsewhere, and obliquely, by way of a psychosexual terminology that is in fact a terminology of attack and retreat. Whitman and Ashbery are described as essentially "auto-erotic," while Hart Crane, in a truly sinuous chapter, is described as "homoerotic," and more precisely as anal-erotic. Where the poet's "chart of being" was once regarded as complicated negotiation between fathers and sons, it is now to be seen as an equally complicated negotiation between lovers and rivals. And as with the poets, so too with Bloom. Thus, in the midst of a veiled attack on Derrida, he declares that "it is no concern of mine whether anybody else ever comes to share, or doesn't, my own vocabularies...." A little further on, having

alluded to Derrida's extensive work on Heidegger, Bloom "suggest[s] that we abandon Heidegger for Valentinus and Luria," advice that Bloom proceeds to ignore by repeatedly citing Heidegger!

In sum, the great beauty of this book is the fact that it recognizes, entirely against its own wishes, the emergence of a truly powerful "near-contemporary." The greater the reluctance, the more compelling the testimony. One could hardly expect Bloom, in the manner of Carlyle, to urge us to "put down your Bloom and pick up your Derrida." But this is just what *Agon* says in its agonizing fashion. Magnanimity, even when reluctant or partially blind, is certain to bear fine fruit in the course of time. **WV**

## THE TRUANTS: ADVENTURES AMONG THE INTELLECTUALS

by William Barrett

(Anchor Press; 270 pp.; \$15.95)

Brian Thomas

This memoir of the *Partisan Review* in its heyday has the strengths of a good novel. William Barrett was present much of the time William Phillips and Philip Rahv were piloting the journal to preeminence in America's postwar intellectual life and, from his intimate vantage point, he observed well.

The book has its flaws. But what Barrett delves into has rarely been told with such charm and immediacy, and his conversion from a fire-breathing leftist who scoffs at liberals to a neoconservative who scoffs at liberals has not affected his writing skill or soured his sympathy with his subject. Even when Barrett gossips, he still reveals plenty about his subjects. He remembers Cyril Connolly nibbling at Diana Trilling's proudly prepared chocolate mousse, lighting up his cigar, and then stubbing it out in the dessert. She never forgave him. Or Edmund Wilson reading in a Milan bookstore's window the Italian word for scholastic as "socialist" and building up a dire theory about the suppression of the Left in Italy.

Rahv and Delmore Schwartz are the emotional poles of *The Truants*. Barrett has mostly appalling details of Rahv: the man's unbelievable rudeness, his constant seeking of sordid motives, his dogmatic Marxism, his combination of bluntness and devious wire-pulling, his

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inner life of *bêtes noires*. Rahv routinely gloated over his friends' misfortunes, for instance Lionel Trilling's discomfiture at witnessing E. M. Forster camp outrageously at a gay party. Yet Rahv clearly exerts a fascination that gets the better of Barrett's disapproval. In a judicious blend of exasperation and guarded affection, Barrett recognizes Rahv's demonic energy and verbal brilliance.

The decline of Schwartz is a sad story indeed, and Barrett's words add their gloomy weight to James Atlas's recent biography and to Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*. Schwartz's worsening lunacy is made more poignant by the fact that he gets off some of the best one-liners in *The Truants*; and since Barrett was his best friend for a while, we see Schwartz up close, everything from his habit of following modern poets "as intently as a stockbroker watches the ups and downs of the stock market" to his "point-blank impishness" while he was sane.

A moral that emerges from the book is the danger of a coterie, like the *Partisan* circle, sapping the will of anyone who wants to write seriously. Barrett reflects that "The writer is always seeking some seduction from the painful loneliness of his desk. The excitement of ideas and intellectual talk are potent temptations." Hence his praise for Bellow's dedication to his muse and his wariness of the New York scene. In a rueful admission to Barrett and to Schwartz, William Phillips put the risk more trenchantly still: "I pissed away my life in talk." Even so, I'm glad Barrett was such a ready ear in that circle of manic loudmouths, and even gladder that he was not seduced from his desk.

## Correspondence

### ON CONTAINMENT

To the Editors: I read with great interest Wilson Carey McWilliams's Under Cover column, "The Public and Limited War," in the April, 1982, edition of *Worldview*. Naturally, I was especially interested in his comments about *On Strategy*.

I take it that he received his impressions of my book from Drew Middleton's column in the 7 February *New York Times*. Through what, I am sure, is an unintended and inadvertent choice of words, Middleton unfortunately created the erroneous impression that I advocated an invasion of North Vietnam and the destruction of the North Vietnamese aggressor. As McWilliams correctly points out, such a position would have been a repudiation of our national policy of containment.

In fact, what I did advocate was that the military should have applied its resources in pursuit of containment—as President Johnson put it in 1968, "...to provide a shield behind which the people of South Vietnam can survive and can grow and develop." *On Strategy* specifically repudiates the notion that victory could not be achieved within the constraints of the national policy, for we had more than sufficient means to accomplish that task....

While I must disagree that my "real aim is the theory of containment," McWilliams is correct that that aim was "the practice of limited war." I believe that the greatest fallacy of the limited war theorists was that the American

Army could be committed to sustained combat without the support of the American people. Our Founding Fathers specifically created a "people's Army" that would be responsive to the will of the American people, and the Vietnam war merely revalidated the soundness of that decision.

I think McWilliams is right "that the U.S. public is the greatest limit on our capacity to wage limited war." But I also think this is as it should be in a democracy and that the strategist must factor this reality into his analysis.

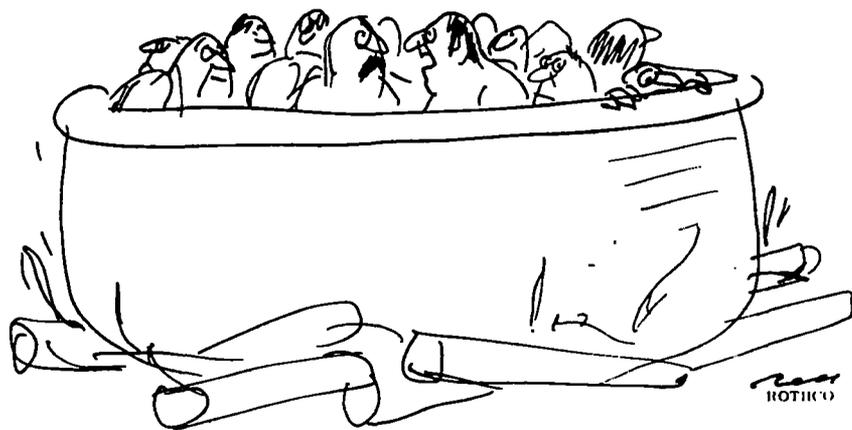
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*Wilson Carey McWilliams Responds:*  
For any injustice to Colonel Summers's argument, I apologize. Nevertheless, I see, as Drew Middleton apparently did, a logic in Colonel Summers's position that leads in the direction of expanding limited wars. Colonel Summers and I agree on the main point—that the American public limits the capacity to fight any war. Colonel Summers applauds this as democratic; so do I, most of the time. Democracy is admirable when the people act wisely and not so praiseworthy when they don't. Our leaders need to recognize that democracy has limitations, that there may be desirable policies that one cannot persuade the public to accept. On the evidence, the price of public support for limited war is—Colonel Summers's intent aside—to strengthen the tendency to wider war.

In Korea, the American Government set out to mobilize mass support but found that the logic of its persuasions worked in favor of those who believed that "in war, there is no substitute for victory." In Vietnam, Johnson avoided that problem and its attendant difficulties, but wound up with too little public support to sustain the war. In both wars, the popular position was "win or get out," and since winning wasn't worth the cost, we had to accept less than desirable settlements (though the Korean armistice was an honorable one).

The American public has not been willing, so far, to sustain prolonged combat for limited objectives. Our leaders need to know, consequently, that such goals are probably beyond our reach.



"Remember, we're all in this thing together."