Book Review

The Fallacy of Heresy*

By LEONARD CASPER

Part II

IT WAS the modest assumption that a novel or poem experiences itself more perfectly than any reader can which, freeing the Fugitive critics at Vanderbilt from romantic self-importance, made them serviceable as employees of art. Similarly, it was the mutual tolerance of their diversity which helped them survive. John M. Bradbury's **The Fugitives** is valuable for exploring the vast distances which have separated John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren at the dark and far corners of their elliptical paths around common foci; and during seasons of change in their now New Agrarian, now New Critical thought. What these three learned from each other came seldom by agreement, and rarely by imitation. Since in no exact sense did they ever constitute a school but have been most ditsinguished because distinct, Bradbury's account suffers somewhat from being unable to shake off the minor Fugitives (the majority of the Vanderbilt group, actually, including Merrill Moore, professed author of 50,000 inconsequential sonnets). This defect in discrimination, however, is at least overcome by the kind of judgment passed on the work of these others who, to their credit, it must be said were not really coattail-riders but have only been made to seem so for the convenience of historical critics.

The same impulse to prove a homogeneity, in spite of his own prefatory warning makes Bradbury find Eliot under

* John M. Bradbury, *The Fugitives* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1958).
Hugh Kenner, *Gnomon* (McDowell-Obolensky: N.Y., 1958).
Robert Penn Warren, *Selected Essays*, (Random House: N.Y., 1958).

every Fugitive bed; and in two lines of Warren's poetry some instinct tells him which word shows Tate's influence, which Eliot's, and which Ransom's! Such examples of over-reading (unfortunately not rare) perhaps were designed to compensate for all the neglect these figures have suffered previously from more opaque sensibilities. Far more objectionable in the unintelligible random-shuffle which distributes the contents neither according to writer (Tate, Ransom, Warren) nor according to genre (criticism, fiction, poetry). The suspicion is bound to occur that here is another academic field hastily posted, because already being quartered by someone else's hounds. The impression is unfortunate because Bradbury's may be a standard book for years, perhaps even after the authors involved have been studied individually and more thoroughly, to the modification of present readings.

OF ALL these books, Hugh Kenner's **Gnomon** is most likely to become an interim volume. What were originally reivew-articles have been expanded inadequately, and without cross-reference. Nor is their sequence suggestive of any unswerving grand swing through human space. Partially, this would seem to be reckoned carelessness on Kenner's part: the book is offered as preliminary footnotes to a major unfinished work, presumably about the remains of literature's latest Vortex to which Kenner sometimes alludes with the air of a smug hostess making the pudding go around. No one could fail to respect the manner of his discovering "implications by collocation," in Yeats' poetry; or the archival quality of Pound's **Cantos**; or the purely American grain in William's **Paterson.** But Kenner is reluctant to make clear yet exactly what these, his heroes, have to do with chapters on college textbooks (is it because no one has created an equivalent to the Chinese Book of Odes which Pound makes sacred for him?) or Freud's Victorianism or Empson's method of studying literature by mathematical formulae. The gnomons' shadows, supposed to steer the seasons, overlap under light from too many undifferentiated sources.

Unless such sketches are preliminary diagrams only, for a later geometry, their incompleteness may well be germane to Kenner's so-far uncritical admiration for Pound, Williams and Yeats. His talent for exegesis is not matched by judicious evaluation, but turns rapidly to enthusiasm. Because he under-

stands the workings of difficult art, he seems compelled to accept it; as if to do otherwise were somehow to deny his initial efforts. Both faults may be attendant on his excessive love for things-as-they-happen-to-be: not truth earned by induction, but the dogmatic assertion of simplified essence which his favorite ex-Imagists contrive. Hence, the cocksureness of his style, the occasional indifference to proof by argument. One backhand swipe removes the late Conrad, a shrug nudges T. E. Hulme to the rear of the crowd, a dented eyebrow says Eliot is too European to notice. . . . Shortage of space is the curse of reviews; but the limitations of Kenner's expanded "essays" are his own.

IN THE preface to his **Selected Essays,** Robert Penn Warren speaks of "the variety and internecine vindictiveness of voices" among today's critics. Personally, he denies any part in the multiplicity of new orthodoxies; and he refuses to believe that electronic computers will ever replace the necessary uneasiness of human decisions, literary or otherwise. Appropriately, therefore, his collection is oriented by the famous lecture-essay, "Pure and Impure Poetry," which first repudiated mandarin detachment as the artist's ideal. The human condition and the condition of art are noticeably one: a poem has to live with itself, just as a man must live with the utmost self-knowledge permitted him. The great appeal to Warren of Conradian immersion in the awful responsibilities of life is clear in the succeeding essay, on **Nostromo.** In terms of that commitment, the attempts in the fiction of Faulkner and Hemingway to accept the existence of evil, sin and error without being overwhelmed, by drawing up rules for human conduct in battle, are considered. The successful management of complex experience, not quite at the level of world vision, is traced in Frost and Katherine Anne Porter, and various degrees of failure in Welty, Wolfe and Melville. The essay on Coleridge's **Rime of the Ancient Mariner** is kept for last not only because of its length, but also because its interpretation of elements met in communion, both substantially and implicitly, in the poem epitomizes the function of art for Warren. It offers a means to human redemption, by its power to found a myth stronger than any history, which will explain man's presence and aspirations to himself. The final words of the essay echo the preface: poetry's "symbolical reading of experience" reconciles "the self-devisive internecine malices which

arise at the superficial level on which we conduct most of our living." Criticism rises above daily spite and special pleading as it recognizes a resemblance between its own nature and other fictions.

Warren's own criticism has always had to live with his novels and poems; because of their frictions they have rubbed individual features into each other. The importance of these essays to the understanding of Warren's method and canon, however, does not detract from their being major commentaries on the literature more directly involved. They are eminently readable—the authentication to which myths in any form aspire.

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Wrong Track

TWO JEWISH race-track addicts met on the way home from Belmont, and one began immediately to bemoan an unbroken streak of miserable luck. The other boasted, "Not me. I've gone right back to fundamentals. Every morning now I pray for 15 minutes at the synagogue, and since I started not a day has gone by that I haven't picked at least two winners."

"What have I got to lose?" said the unfortunate one. "I'll try your system."

Three weeks later they met again. "I followed your advice," began the steady loser. "Not only did I pray every morning, but every evening as well. All day Saturday I spent in the synagogue, too, not to mention a couple of holidays. And in all that time, believe me, not a single winner I picked."

"I can't understand it," said his friend. "What synagogue did you pray in?"

"The one on Grove Street," was the answer.

"No wonder, you schmo," shouted the friend. "That's for trotters!"

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Francoise Sagan: White Thunderbird

In France, no speed limits

WHEN FRANCOISE SAGAN brought her tousled head to New York a few years ago to arrange for her first two novels to be made into movies, she carried her leopard skin coat slung over her elbow and posed delightedly with the white Thunderbird hired for her use. "In France you may drive as fast as you like. My car will go 140 miles an hour," she explained. "But here, I understand, you have speed limits."

Her first novel, **Bonjour Tristesse,** was written in a month. Her others have required a little more labor but sold more rapidly. Only four weeks after its Paris publication, her third novel, **Dans un Mois, Dans un An,** had sold three-fourths as many as her second, **A Certain Smile,** had sold in a year and a half. Total sales have already run into several millions, an ironic victory for a young defeatist, counterpart of America's Deadbeat Generation which has become spokesman for the multitudes simply by being louder than they were. The words which Sagan uses most often in her third novel (**Those Without Shadows,** in its translated version) sum up critical opinion of her: "What a mess!" she keeps saying; "a dreadful feeling of waste." In April of 1957, the 22-year-old girl had turned over her fast Aston-Martin on a road where five others had died; and the critics could not have cared less, but the readers loved her as movie-goers had loved Jimmy Dean for dying in a hot-rod.

Curled up on her bed of pain, she cried, "God deliver me from my physical sufferings. I'll take care of the moral ones." Perhaps she should have asked for more. Having convalesced, she continued to live and write as she had before.

* An exclusive *Panorama* feature.