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My Silk Purse and Yours: Making It, Starring Norman Podhoretz

George P. Garrett

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The Hollins Critic

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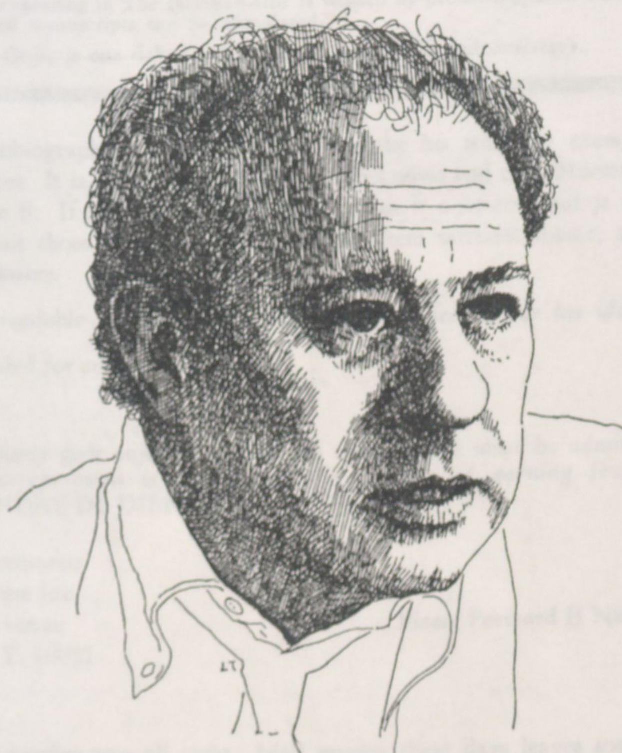
My Silk Purse and Yours: *Making It*, Starring Norman Podhoretz



I desire that all men should see me in my simple, natural, and ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice: for it is myself that I portray. — MONTAIGNE

I.

Norman Podhoretz's *Making It* is a fascinating piece of work. Candid as he can be, he lifts the long Victorian skirts of that lady sometimes called the Bitch Goddess of Success and once upon a time known as Dame Fortune. He sneaks more than a peek. Framing his anatomy of ambition and the American lust for success in the

The Hollins Critic

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form of an autobiography, Podhoretz seeks to make his story an *exemplum* of the gospel he preaches. It is a story of and for here and now; and only Norman Podhoretz could have done it. If it raises more questions than it answers, that is the purpose: to make us admit those questions exist, to meet them without shame, and to grope with him for answers.

A highly readable account of one young man's search for his identity.

Recommended for adult readers.

II

> *Not many girls enjoy posing in the nude and it must be admitted that co-operation is mostly for the purpose of earning fees.*
> — ANDRE DE DIENES — *BEST NUDES*

Mr. Norman Podhoretz
% Random House Inc.
457 Madison Avenue
New York, N. Y. 10022

Please Forward If Necessary

Dear Norman,

Hope this reaches you all right. Mail service these days leaves something to be desired. And you never can tell about publishers. Here today and merged with Dow Chemical or something tomorrow.

I enclose blurb from *The Hollins Critic.* Not that you need it. Your book seems to be getting attention in the right places and mostly they are good reviews. Except maybe that one in *Life* where John Aldridge came on laughing and scratching and slipped you a mickey in a cup of good cheer. But you know old John. He's still trying to top Daniel Defoe's *The Shortest Way With Dissenters.*

So anyhow you are getting reviews. Sure they are riddled with reservations, but they add up to praise in the end which is better than the end of a boot. And, ironically, this is a tribute to the kind of power you have learned to live with as the Editor of *Commentary*. Of course people in power have to put up with a certain

amount of flattery, even if it's only the dubious flattery of being taken at face value. But it's like saluting officers which they taught you in Basic Training. Now that you're an officer, too, don't sweat, you've got it made. The time to worry is when they stop saluting. When that happens, it won't be subtle. You'll know.

Not that I am making a big deal about this review in a humble organ of limited circulation and modest means. I am not in favor of humility or false modesty any more than you are. The meek are the real secret troublemakers. All they want to do is inherit the earth. But, let's face it, this is the provinces, the sticks, the boondocks. Far from the bright amazing center of culture you write about, the pleasures of court life, masques and masks. Take it for what it is, then, a "get well" message from the remote reaches of the Empire (o far from the Empire City!). At least maybe you'll be amused. And if, between parties sometimes, you get hung up in idle or in pensive mood, remember what the hangman says when he slips the noose over somebody's head—"Wear it in good health."

You may be wondering. Maybe you have even asked yourself: "What's with this crank whom I have never met coming on with a big, fat, cheerful 'Dear Norman'?" I am glad you asked that question, Norman. It is true you don't know me from the Man in the Moon. And I don't know you from Jason Epstein or even Jason Podhoretz, a minor comic character in a novel called *The Exhibitionist.* Of course, I have read some of your work. And even way out here I have "heard things." But I never pay attention to malicious gossip. I could argue, if I felt hostile, that as a self-confessed celebrity, you have got about the same right to privacy as, say, The Playmate of the Month. But don't get me wrong. My reason for the unwarranted familiarity is that it seems like the thing to do in a literary way. It seems fitting and proper, decorum as it were, to call you Norman in response to the experience of reading your life story. Not that I really feel I know you any better than I did when I picked up the book, admired the prestigious jacket, good cloth binding and paper (excellent production job) and the photograph on the back. But I feel like I *ought* to know you better. Sort of a poor man's Categorical Imperative . . . But there is a more relevant reason. It is a literary allusion. You like to play with literary allusions too. I can tell from your book. So maybe it is a bad habit and tends to stunt intellectual growth, but we both had the same kind of liberal arts education and can't help ourselves. Anyway, years ago I ran across an article by Diana Trilling. I recall it began with "Dear Norman" too. Man, was I out of it! I was half way through before I figured out it wasn't Norman Vincent Peale.

So it is with a glow of nostalgia that I am bold to address you by your first name. Please, sir, do not misconstrue it as an attempt to pretend to a familiarity it is not my privilege to possess. Be big about it and don't let it bug you. At least I didn't call you "Norm."

Best wishes. Have to run now. Have to write a review of *Making It*. Say, if you want to read some really *good* recent books I recommend: *Feel Free* by David Slavitt, *Killing Time* by Thomas Berger, and one you should take a good look at—*A Bill of Rites, A Bill of Wrongs, A Bill of Goods* by Wright Morris.

Yours truly,
George

P.S. Is it true that Bennett Cerf thinks he is the Alfred Knopf of publishing?

III.

They had always known that I would turn out to be another Clifton Fadiman. — MAKING IT.

Making It is described by its publisher as "a confessional case history." In one place the author says it is "in a way, a letter," and in another he says that it is "a frank, Mailer-like bid for literary distinction, fame, and money all in one package . . ." All these descriptions are helpful in defining the qualities of this book. It is a confession in the form of a case history, with some of the ease of the epistolary style. The confessional quality is adroitly established by a series of allusions to St. Augustine. This, too, purports to be a story of conversion. The realm of confessional literature, from the Epistles of St. Paul to such recent examples as Norman Mailer's works and George Plimpton's *Paper Lion,* is explicitly alluded to and used functionally in much the same way as certain writers have used the epic tradition in mock heroic works. The book is addressed to several groups of readers: one personal to the author and beyond critical scrutiny; one semi-personal, the named and unnamed figures of the New York Literary Scene whom the author designates as The Family, the real wheeler-dealers, shakers and movers of the intellectual *Milieu* to which the author belongs; and last, the larger group, you and me, Reader, to whom the book must be addressed if the author is going to get all the fame and money he says he is after. He wants distinction, too, though whether anyone can give him that is debatable. He seems to feel distinction is the inevitable handmaiden of the other two, tripping along like Charity with Faith and Hope. He also seems to feel that power in America exists as a result of the coupling of fame and money. No question about that, I suppose, unless one starts wondering if power can be conferred at all in the same way fame or wealth can be inherited, stolen, earned, or received. In any case, the book is simultaneously addressed to several audiences. Since the apparent form of the book is non-fiction, this presents some artistic difficulty for the author. Consider the problem of exposition. Members of the elite, The Family, can be expected to know most of the details of their own history and, as well, the author's part in it. He runs the risk of boring them to distraction, a risk he compensates for by offering his original interpretation of the meaning of The Family and its history. No doubt this is of considerable interest to that group. And he even makes it interesting to us who have no knowledge upon which to evaluate the merit of his notions. The passages concerning The Family offer some of the most energetic writing in this book. Added to the author's enthusiasm for the subject is the explicit sincerity of his belief. He cares about them and he shows this. Therefore the larger audience is invited to care too, insofar as they can care about the narrator.

In autobiography there is always a problem of the credibility of the chief witness for the defense—the author. When matters of truth and innocence, fact and guilt are involved, the reader necessarily arms himself with a device for which Hemingway had another name, here called the divining rod of skepticism. Unlike Norman Mailer in *Advertisements For Myself,* the author does not include representative examples of his literary work. Perhaps he assumes a widespread awareness of them, but this is unlikely, for it would indicate a very advanced stage of self-delusion. Maybe he decided this rhetorical risk was less than the danger of losing the attention of The

Norman Podhoretz

From the Brooklyn neighborhood of Brownsville, Norman Podhoretz at age thirty-eight has reached the inner sanctum of New York's literary circle. Born of immigrant Jewish parents, the editor of *Commentary* attended Columbia University, where he was awarded a Kellett Fellowship and a Fulbright. At Cambridge's Clare College he worked with the critic F. R. Leavis. With the plume of an article in Leavis's journal *Scrutiny*, Podhoretz in 1953 became a monthly contributor to *Commentary*. He has been at *Commentary* ever since, except for two years in the army. He was named editor-in-chief of the magazine in 1960 at the age of thirty. The author of another book, *Doings and Undoings: The Fifties and After in American Writing*, he has also contributed to *The Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and *Show*. He is married and has four children.

— TUNSTALL COLLINS

Family. But I am inclined to credit him with the bold intent of "making it," this book, all on his own and by its own merits. Nevertheless we still have the problem of the "credibility gap." In fiction the reader is free to believe, disbelieve, and to suspend disbelief. This freedom, acknowledged, becomes a strength for the novelist. But in non-fiction we are less free. We can take it or leave it. Thus autobiography starts at a disadvantage, because no man, be he ever so loathesome and evil, is not without some self-esteem. Even Crabby Appleton, the villain of *Tom Terrific*, enjoys the cackling self-deception that he is the meanest man in the world and "rotten to the core." But this hyperbolic estimate is not fully shared either by Tom or by Mighty Manfred, The Wonder Dog, despite Crabby's assaults upon their sense of justice and fair play. Meaning that all confession is assumed to be a statement by the author of his own case in the light that pleases him most. We automatically mark that this book is not the work of an elder who can prop his weary shanks upon the pillows of a lifetime's reputation. This young man still has a lot to lose. He is most vulnerable by his own admission. And he asserts that he cares a great deal about being a winner. The Family, though depleted and dwindling in power, is still alive and kicking. His own admiration for that group and pride of belonging would incline one to doubt that he would risk their wrath while he retained a measure of sanity. He has plenty of reasons for being untrustworthy.

IV

> *Slum child, filthy little slum child, so beautiful a mind and so vulgar a personality, so exquisite in sensibility and so coarse in manner.* — MAKING IT.

This book does not exist in abstraction from literary tradition or the scene which it proposes to celebrate by paradoxical encomium. I asked the best critic of American Literature I know of, William R. Robinson, to give me a one paragraph statement on the background of American autobiographical writing. Robinson is able to take a dare, and here is what he wrote:

"Mythic autobiography, the major indigenous narrative form in American literature, originates in the Puritan diaries, where divine intellect regarding an indi-

vidual's spiritual destiny is sought amid the obscure omens of personal events within the physical world. Melville generalized this focus upon the juncture where the divine manifests itself through nature into a theory of art when he asserted that art is a meeting and mating of opposites. But this theory and such inside narratives as *Billy Budd* and *Moby Dick* issuing from it had been preceded by Emerson's Transcendentalism of the Puritans' symbolic drama within the single, separate person; and they were later philosophically justified by William James' vigorous defense of the "I", the interior life, as the only true place where we can find real fact in the making. As James saw it, then, the American imagination grabs hold at the precise moment where the transformational event takes place, which occurs from the inside out, so its truth can only be observed there, inside, while, miraculously, existence erupts from being. It bears witness to and exemplifies creation, the individuating process whereby, having gathered its powers at its source, purified of whatever would weigh it down, whether matter, guilt, or egotism, the imagination leaps free. Thus, whether practiced by Cotton Mather, Thoreau, Whitman, Hemingway, Henry Miller, or William Carlos Williams, to mention only the established literary figures, this form affirms as the supreme value for man the individual liberated from necessity and free to act joyfully and for good in the world. Without a doubt and vigorously, it indeed celebrates fact in the making."

The tradition of "mythic autobiography" persists. But in the present situation all the forms of non-fiction thrive while the novel keeps on dying and dying like the lead soprano in certain Italian operas. From *In Cold Blood* to Paul Holmes' *The Candy Murder Case: The Explosive Story The Newspapers and T.V. Couldn't Tell;* from *Paper Lion* by George Plimpton to *My Own Story: The Truth About Modelling* by Jean Shrimpton; and not to forget that the more successful works of fiction in our time base much of their appeal upon "authenticity." For example, there is much in common between *The Exhibitionist* and *The Confessions of Nat Turner,* both best sellers. In terms of popular appeal, both are blessed with the illusion of authenticity. In one we are led to imagine that we are privvy to the inside story of Jane Fonda. In the other we are encouraged to think we are getting the lowdown on the Walter Mitty dreams of James Baldwin. The essential difference in the two books lies in the fact that some people enjoy the titillation of "bondage" stories and violence while others prefer simple sex; that some prefer to escape the problems of the present by blaming them on the past (thus sharing their problems with the dead, practicing, as it were, intellectual necrophilia) while others escape from their own hangups by reading about movie stars who have hangups too.

In short the literary situation could not be better for *Making It*. The distinctions between fiction and non-fiction have become meaningless. It is possible that nobody can distinguish between truth and fiction any more and nobody cares. In which case this autobiography with its large credibility gap is well-timed. I prefer, however, to take a more charitable view of both the author and the public. I am a Democrat and cautiously egalitarian. Even though Norman Podhoretz makes a shattering assault against any possible equality among men, I like to imagine that the public is not so stupid as it allows its manipulators and managers to assume. If we ever let them know that we know the score and have been keeping it all along, our leaders might become subtle and dangerous instead of being merely mischievous. It is possible

Books by Norman Podhoretz

DOINGS AND UNDOINGS: THE FIFTIES AND AFTER IN AMERICAN WRITING

New York: Farrar, Straus, 1964. $4.95
New York: The Noonday Press, 1964. $1.95 (pa.)

THE COMMENTARY READER (ed.)

New York: Atheneum, 1966. $12.50

MAKING IT

New York: Random House, 1967. $6.95

— C. R. C.

---

that the public has simply recognized that the *only* mode of our times is fiction. From Walter Cronkite to Walter Lippman, from Norman Vincent Peale to Norman Podhoretz, all are equally purveyors of entertainment, more or less entertaining.

Therefore *Making It* is, in truth, a modern novel and should be treated as such. When it is treated as a work of fiction, it becomes a more interesting book. And it is spared from the greatest danger that besets the author of his first confession. As Henry Sutton puts it: "The confessional pretends to candor but generally misses the mark: X confesses to pederasty and Y to treachery and deceit, and we forgive them these sins, and easily; what we cannot forgive—X, Y, or anyone—is the sin of boring us." By examining *Making It* as fiction we at least mitigate the circumstances of *ennui*.

V.

> *I was supposed to be endowed with exceptional intelligence, and yet it took me hours to learn how to lace up my new combat boots efficiently, it took me days to learn how to reassemble my rifle in the required time, and I never learned how to adjust a gas mask properly. What was my kind of intelligence worth then?*
> —MAKING IT.

Making It brings together a number of kinds of fiction. Basically a classic example of the *bildungsroman* of the 19th Century, it includes such diverse contemporary types as the Jewish novel, the College novel, the Army novel, the American-in-Europe novel, with lesser elements from the novel of espionage, the *roman a clef*, the works of Horatio Alger, to name only a few. It is then extremely *literary*, which is perfectly in keeping with the concerns of the protagonist. There is clever use of the conventions of the Pornographic novel; for the protagonist asserts that the hunger for success has replaced sex as "the dirty little secret," and by imagery and analogy he keeps this notion continually present in the story. Not that the protagonist *sublimates* his sexual energies. He refers to any number of girls, in passing, with whom he has enjoyed some intimacy. He mentions a wife and children too, though most often in the Baconian sense as "hostages to Fortune." There is one girl who stands out from the faceless crowd of others, an English girl

whom we learn is blond. The protagonist admits that he loved her for a time. Otherwise, however, love does not enter into this story at all.

The protagonist, now a successful literary critic, remembers his life and adds some commentary to show its meaning. He tells how he grew up in Brooklyn, went to school and got along fine until a teacher, Mrs. K., whose unpleasant motives he now understands, pushed and prodded him towards "achievement." She wanted him to go to Harvard, but he went to Columbia (while simultaneously studying in the Jewish and traditional Seminary College) and then to Clare College, Cambridge. Blessed with the benefits and cursed with the deficiencies of the best in liberal arts education, and having acquired some good "connections" through such of his teachers as Lionel Trilling and the irascible F. R. Leavis, he set out to be a critic. He was beginning to make his mark when he got caught in the Draft. Basic Training was a horrible shock, but he managed to survive and wound up with a soft berth overseas. Once he got back, though, things moved along swiftly. He made a name for himself, writing things for *Commentary, The New Yorker,* and other magazines. After some ups and downs he finally made it as Editor of *Commentary.* Along the line he was taken in, almost formally, by The Family. As the book ends he has got it made and is glad of it.

The life described, while enviably tranquil, would hardly seem of interest to anyone except the protagonist himself. He never has much trouble and never fails to get what he wants. Probably the nearest thing to a crisis (excepting Basic Training which he sees as a *trauma*) came when he wrote a sassy review of *The Adventures of Augie March* by Saul Bellow. This could have caused him real trouble, but, ironically, it served to his advantage. It was his key to membership in The Family who, it turns out, were just waiting around for someone to give Bellow a bad time. In short, *outwardly,* there are no problems and no suspense unless you happen to *be* the protagonist. And at the time he is remembering all this, in comfort and security, he knows how it will all turn out anyway.

Yet it is not a simple and straightforward Success Story because the protagonist is not a simple man. Inwardly it is a story of turmoil and a series of "conversions." Simplified, his dilemma is: what to do with his success? His own background rendered him more or less unable to aspire to the things of this world. Overcoming inhibition, he went on to get an excellent education and to win prizes, awards, and the first and best fruits of it. Only to discover that the principles cherished by the liberal arts rendered him unfit to *do* anything in the world and especially rendered him unable to enjoy the ends of ambition when they came to him; for both success and ambition were suspect, particularly in terms of the egalitarian ideals that the society paid lip service to. Through some soul searching he finally came to an adjustment, realizing that riches, fame, and power are not in and of themselves bad and that everyone else is "doing it" and "making it" anyway, no matter how piously they otherwise pretend. And, as a critic, he was able to turn his own discipline to work for him, to come to an understanding as to why this conflict in his own mind, a *typical* American conflict as he sees it, came to be there. The epiphany for which he had prepared himself came when he went to a conference of Big Shots at a place named Paradise Island by its wealthy owner. Symbolically, *it,* too, had been converted from its original status and name—Hog Island. There the protagonist saw and felt, helped by good rum and the pleasant surroundings, the true

Pocahontas In London

Pocahontas, daughter of King
Powhatan of the Virgin Virginia forest,
Dazzles London with eyes like dark fish
Glittering in the unpolluted James.
The King of Scotland, Britain and the western
Prize extols a proud neck
Rising from the latest fashion in ruffs.
The ladies are jealous of her dancing feet,
The lords confused. She is all the
Rage, but the rage in her heart is
Homesickness, Jamessickness, malaise for the
High masterful trees
Trailing wild grape charged with a secret juice,
For a free run in a buckskin skirt
Under a burn of unimprisoning blue
Where fierce-eyed eagles soar to salute the sun.
Her tobacco-planting husband loves her better
Than tobacco springing rich from twelve inches of topsoil,
Her handsome son will grow up to tend a
Handsome reputation,
But in London she wilts
Like tobacco pulled out by the roots
And having come a long way for the event
Will die at Gravesend just as the boat which brought her
  and is taking her back
Embarks.

— Virginia Moore

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meaning of The Good Life. And he saw that it was good. And he resolved never again to be ashamed of wanting it, any more than he would be ashamed of his sex drives. The understanding which he reached, concerning the egalitarian ideology and its consequent negative view of success, has broad implications. It is more than the hypocrisy of the living. It is a deliberate confidence trick, fine print in the complex social contract of the U. S. A., designed by the WASPS to keep the post-Civil War immigrants and their descendants at a decent distance from the banquet table. Now, however, thanks to him and others, the word is out, the con game is exposed. Thus the protagonist can hope his story may serve to inspire others. In this sense there is conflict in the story and some narrative suspense. A suspense not ending with the book, for the protagonist having committed himself to his goals, becoming as the Elizabethans would have said "a child of Fortune," is ripe and ready for whatever the future may bring. Since Dame Fortune is reputed to be fickle, that could be anything. The possibility is left open for further adventures as he rides the Wheel of Fortune up or down.

But *Making It* is more subtle than that. There is another level to be considered. And this requires some examination of the first-person narrator. We must consider whether he may not very well be an example of that figure who haunts the pages of contemporary fiction—the Anti-Hero.

As the protagonist sees himself, his gifts are intellectual. There is no indication that he has the slightest doubt concerning his intellectual accomplishments. This makes him a very positive character. Of course it is "in character" that he would not bother to demonstrate the rock-foundations of his certainty. Nevertheless, there are certain clues. Evidently trusting in the power of redundancy, the protagonist *tells us* over and again that he is an exceptionally smart fellow. And to doubters and shruggers he can point to certain accomplishments which have won him applause. And from time to time he offers us some examples, in synoptic form, of his critical judgment at work. Unfortunately these are not always dazzling examples of mental acrobatics; indeed, as presented here, they are uniformly unimpressive. Sometimes we are given examples of his reasoning powers. Not even the most sympathetic reader will be as pleased by these examples as the protagonist is. His views of history, the arts, modern life, etc., are a string of cliches, largely derived from the authority of rather well-known popular books, brilliant, if at all, only in the way that the signals formed by ships' flags are brilliant to behold. In this sense, there is a redeeming thread of humor running through the whole book, though the protagonist himself is nothing if not serious minded.

Led on by these clues we begin to notice that the protagonist has other serious flaws. One of these is that practically everything in the story is *abstract* to him. Even his physical descriptions of things and places, which are all too rare, are clearly out of books, perfunctory and lifeless. The protagonist is presented as immune to all sensuous affective experience in life as well as in the arts. He would appear to have experienced little or nothing of the joyous dance of the five senses and, it would *seem,* doesn't know what he is missing. Always (perhaps a true seminarian, despite his "conversion") when faced with a new experience he cites the authority of books. And when he feels that the books did not prepare him for an experience, he blames the books. There is a touching innocence here, for it never occurs to him that he may have read the wrong books, or that he could have read them without understanding or imaginative engagement. A superior example: He notes that while waiting for his Draft Notice to arrive ("Greetings, Norman!"), he busied himself preparing the now-celebrated Bellow review. One of the books he read was *Dangling Man.* Which, though he offers no evidence of knowing this, is *about a man waiting to get drafted.* In one ear and out the other? Not quite . . . In another place he offers some observations upon the limbo of waiting to be called. Anyone familiar with *Dangling Man* will see where his "original" observations came from. With few exceptions all the books he mentions are widely known, indicating nothing special about his reading habits as compared with anyone else's. In fact, on the evidence he gives us, it would be impossible to conclude he is "well read" at all. Perhaps this is merely a rhetorical device; he alludes to those things he can be sure his reader will know. On the other hand it may be a wonderful sort of *style.* One thinks (to be bookish) of Jay Gatsby who never descended to the vulgarity of cutting the pages of his elegantly bound sets of books.

Beyond that, with the exception of a very few who have briefly captured his admiration, people are merely names when they are named at all. There are some golden names all right, and well-dropped; but the protagonist will allow them no life. They are objects to him. Even his parents are given short shrift, and the death of his father serves mainly as an occasion for him to defend continuing on at the Seminary, not out of belief, but out of a deathbed promise which he eventually breaks in any case. Girls are just "girls"; sex is just "sex." He shows an ability to analyze the motives of others, almost always to their disadvantage; and he is especially sharp in perceiving the dark and unpleasant motives of his "friends" and any who have done him a good turn. Conversely, when subjecting his own motives to scrutiny he is willing to acribe the best and most favorable interpretation. Though he subjects himself to rack and thumbscrew, he always comes out smelling like a rose. He is, in fact, without awareness of the point of view of other human beings. The sentimental attribution of motives is, after all, a very different thing than consideration of another's point of view.

This becomes downright peculiar when we consider his endorsement of the uses of power. Power is predicated on self-interest and depends upon the exquisite awareness of the self-interest of others. Power cannot afford to be sentimental. It becomes unstable, dangerous, and ceases to be power at all. It becomes evident that he means *privilege* when he speaks of power. And there is a startling irony in his drive for fame and all that the Elizabethans called "honor." As the protagonist presents himself, he has no concept of honor whatsoever, a lack which would seem to preclude the possibility of achieving any kind of stable fame. He is at great pains to prove that he is a phoney and so is everyone else around him. Phoneys in a Barnum and Bailey world. But, paradoxically, there is no relief from self-doubt here. Instead of rejoicing in the Brotherhood of Phoneys or the Phoneyhood of All Mankind, he still feels somehow "different" from, *alienated* (to use his word) from everyone else.

And though he is a writer and writes with some perception about the mysterious process of writing, he opts for only one *kind* of writing, the product of pure and simple inspiration. Just as "research" and scholarship are pejorative terms and, in his view, inhibitions to intellectual excellence, so labor and skill in writing are contemptible to him. He mentions *skill* in opposition to "authority." "Authority in writing need not be accompanied by consumnate skill or any other virtue of craft or mind, for like the personal self-confidence of which it is the literary reflection, it is a quality in its own irreducible right, and one that always elicits an immediate response—just as a certain diffidence of tone and hesitancy of manner account for the puzzling failure of many otherwise superior writers to attract the attention they merit." The way I understand this is that the protagonist comes out for invoking the Muses and winging it. Which is great unless, like the protagonist, you want to be a *professional*. Because a professional can't afford "writer's block" or he is out of business. Like Bart Starr, he has to play in bandages. But our hero, here in *Making It*, suffers long and hard, he says, from writing blocks. *He* sees this book, his confession, as a big breakthrough. Well, it has its ups and downs, but the Muses conned him if they let him think it swings. As for *authority*, well the protagonist has got the words, but he can't carry the tune in a galvanized bucket.

All this adds up to an extremely unreliable narrator. Who can neither be trusted nor trust himself. And thus it brings immediately into question his bigger assertions. Like the fact that he ever had any experience of "conversion" at all. What *I* see is that at every stage he hedged his bet, by leaving himself as a hostage behind. Therefore there are many of him—a boy in Brooklyn, a Seminarian ("sermons" is a word he uses again and again), a Student still hoping that Trilling or Leavis or Hadas or please *somebody* will give him A+; a poor, bewildered, uncomfortable Draftee being yelled at by a mean old Sergeant, a Cambridge gentleman, sipping tea while his Gyp builds up the fire, etc., etc. The book, intended to exorcise all his ghosts, in fact invokes and summons them.

In any case, we have a protagonist who knows neither himself nor the world, who seems crippled in *feeling*, vulnerable in pride and arrogance, able only to love himself, and *that* in moderation. Almost blissfully unaware, you might say, maybe able to be *happy* because his self-deception is almost total.

Even in this, the covert level of his character, we are not yet near the naked truth of him. The protagonist gives every indication of seeing himself in this same unflattering steel glass. And, like a patient under analysis, reveals most by that which he tries to conceal. He is, then, desperately, urgently insecure. He wants to feel joy, but cannot. He wants to be able to love and to be loved, but he cannot because he despises himself and feels unworthy of love. He wants to be a poet, his long lost childhood dream, and is unable to convince himself that he has any right or "authority", and has managed to stifle the poet by creating insurmountable frustrations. He says he wants fame, power, wealth, and, even, social position. But it is painfully clear he does not want these because he is deeply terrified of responsibilities and dangers. Truly powerful men love danger. And they love to gamble. Even as the protagonist commits himself to Fortune at the end, he tries to hedge his bet, in full, certain and sad knowledge that Dame Fortune is always most cruel to those lovers who mock her by this transparent device.

VI

I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream: it shall be called Bottom's Dream because it hath no bottom.
— A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM IV, ii

What does all this have to do with the real live Norman Podhoretz in person? It is not only possible, but also necessary, to distinguish between the character of the man in the book, which can be known, and that of the man who wrote it, which cannot. We make this distinction with no difficulty in the works of Henry Miller, never really crediting the author with the sexual exploits of the character, Henry Miller. Podhoretz asks us to do the same thing. The result of this divorce is to make for a much more interesting and praiseworthy book. For, without denying the literal sense of the book, one is directed to consider the *sentence*, in the Chaucerian use of that term. The Medieval literary critics, taking their model from St. Augustine (just as Podhoretz does) were extremely sophisticated. They recognized that all literary work has meaning, its own form of *allegoria*. Their basic three-level reading of a work is helpful here. The first two levels of the character of the protagonist are so contradictory as to approach *enigma*. Enigma, as a figure, indicates that the mean-

ing of the work is outside of literal interpretation. Thus, though *Making It* appears to be a simple-minded *fabliau,* it is more complex and more fabulous. The "real" Norman Podhoretz, the author of the book, has created an allegory of pilgrimage. But it is a *false* pilgrimage. The protagonist arrives at what is clearly Babylon and is fooled by the "Welcome to Jerusalem" signs. There he is, up to his knees in the Slough of Despond and trying to make the best of it because all the maps say this is The Delectable Mountain. In his innocence he wants to believe and to do right. Innocence is the key to the character. He is the bumbling *naif* of great satire. Echoes of *Candide, Rasselas, Joseph Andrews,* etc.

The meaning is then clear: "Take a perfectly ordinary innocent guy, a guy like me (or you, hypocrite reader) and let him believe in the ideals of the society and do his best to live by them, and look where he ends up—*Nowhere!* And look what he becomes—either a figure of fun or a pathetic Frankenstein monster."

Put it this way. In selling Norman Podhoretz a sow's ear and letting him think it is a genuine silk purse, the society conned him. Just as Huntington Hartford tried to con the suckers by calling Hog Island a Paradise. It is a shell game, ladies and gentlemen, and (he's *so* right) you can't win even at the charity bazaar booths run by art, religion, education, etc. The whole society is one big seamless garment. And the goals of all, by definition, look exactly like sugar lumps, but turn to bitter ashes on the tongue. Even the man who is lucky enough to find out before it is too late that he is supposed to be a winner and that it is "all right" to win, even *he,* laurels of victory on his brow, is revealed to be another loser. Either a pathetic bum of the month or a clown in cap and bells. Take your pick. Nobody wins. There are only alternative ways of losing.

Unless . . .

Unless a man can learn this and has the courage and ability to play both roles at the same time. To clown it up (like the Fool in *Lear*) or to put on sackcloth and ashes and then, amazing, begin to dance for joy in memory of Isaiah's truth, that the oil of joy is for mourning.

As a child Norman Podhoretz dreamed of being a poet. The protagonist tells us he failed. Perhaps the real Podhoretz succeeds, though. For the truth of this book, disguised as it is from the protagonist, is poetic, a statement of the eternal paradox of man's goals in the only world he knows for sure, the one he lives in and will die in. As the protagonist of *Making It* is always saying, if he had not come along, we'd have had to invent him.

And so we just did.

— George P. Garrett

With this issue Louis D. Rubin, Jr., the "onlie begetter" of *The Hollins Critic,* becomes a contributing editor and George P. Garrett replaces him as co-editor.

For Ezra Pound

Publisher's Note to *Confucius to Cummings*: *The emendation of his (Pound's) proportionate estimate of authors in world literature accessible to him can be summarized . . ., in his phrase, as 'dress (in the military sense) on Sophokles.'*

What voice is this, and in Greek, speaking to
judges of inheritance?
We young must live, Ezra. We young, as Falstaff
said for us, must live!
Good men and true, degreed, with notations declare
pretense of grandeur: otherwords, "insane."
What judge hears *Colonus*?

Who would go down into that swart ship is touched
by a wild god, will hear no confession,
bed no spent glories of torn dreams.

Mad! Mad! Mad!

Hearing no Greek, let us worship our diseases.

—Marion Montgomery

Brief Victory

At your soft word my night
shimmers a moment
in a rinse of light,

and for a breath's suspense
I walk the waters
of your innocence.

My will one heartbeat lingers,
a wash of sand
winnowed by your fingers.

—Vassar Miller

The Camel

Ah, yes, we have come upon soulless, bitter lands—
It is a place for the desert pirate in blood-stained burnoose
With slave girls as the only spangled weight to murderous,
wandering bands.

Yes, we have come, as if by instinct, in blood and milk
ambivalently clad—
The cruel, ironic glance of the shaggy-lipped camel
Greets this devastating horde, this ultimate nomad.

Oh, yes, there will be, under clear stars, the musk of an embrace,
Reaching into the captive body as toward a last oasis,
Hearing the bracelets clank, the veils torn to show the belly
like a vacuous face.

All this mingled with the smell of camel's urine, camel's dung:
Nothing could have carried us here but an animal which looks like
a cutthroat
Who would lap up the last liquid of blood with his thick, black
tongue.

There he stands, fringed round with ragged girls and boys,
Humped up, an odious but implacable dune of flesh,
As the bodies croon in the hot tents or ejaculate abuse.

I know him, you know him, we crouch on his saddle in an arid,
bright room—
We made cutouts of him as exotic and wandering children,
We tether him nearby and give him the drouth of the heart
for his violent home.

—Charles Edward Eaton

Lines Composed a Few Miles Below Princeton Junction

Sleepless in my sleeping car,
Pulled horizontal over railings
Which are twisting, jerking, throwing light
fantastic sparks
To the shuffling earth,
I discover all dark's eyes as being
either red or white;
Nothing blue or green in this night
betrays the day.

At some small hour and place
beside the tracks
A mobile home on cinder blocks
rolls and rocks
To beats and wailings witheld from me,
As I pass soundless in compartmental dark
those sleepless faces
and blazing windows
Where others less inclined than I
Are dancing, dancing,
dancing out the night.

—Jim Seay

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