

Confrontation at the Shore Line

"A Holiday by the Sea," by Gerald Brenan (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 254 pp. \$3.95), weaves an intricate and erotic web of human relations, with a primal element of nature serving as catalyst. Ihab Hassan is the author of "Radical Innocence."

By Ihab Hassan

FOR SOME centuries now the novel has submitted with characteristic forbearance to changing theories of fiction, but it has always managed to instruct and entertain us all. Now in our anxious age the novel seems to have assumed a new responsibility; it has undertaken to lighten our guilt. This it does by mediating between the instincts of man and his civilization, and by indulging his better consciousness. Acquainted with violence from the start, the American novel grew in the shadows of life. The English novel has also become versed in the dark ways of the self.

Brenan's "A Holiday by the Sea" testifies to this fact. As an English novel it is naturally aware of certain social traditions, and a world of ideas that the characters can express mordantly if not always share. Moreover, besides being witty, the book is an intelligent and poetic work. Yet it is ultimately as perverse as only the self can be, and its hero, Tom Fisher, a writer who does not deign to publish, owes more to Dostoevsky's man from the underground than to any characters of Fielding or Dickens. But Fisher remains above all a latter-day Prufrock, egotist and self-hater.

This is a book rich and subtle in its texture, fluent in its emotional undertones. It is clearly dominated, however, by two forces that remain opposed. One is the consciousness of Fisher himself, acerbic, lucid, and incestuous, encased in its own dreams and insufficiencies—a little grotesque, perhaps, like an Uncle Toby fetched down from the mantelpiece, or a fish flopping around in a mud pool. The other is the sea: primal, ubiquitous, changeable yet eternal, a healer of men and a destroyer. "Others, motionless for hours above the tide line, dreamed Aesculapian dreams of healing and fulfilment. But the eucharistic rite was immersion.

Then, blinded by the waves and shivering from the cold, their guilt washed off them by the salt water, the communicants returned to put on their clothes at peace with themselves." If Fisher is the Self, the sea is the wholly Other.

Between them the flimsy, corrupt fabric of society, of language itself, lies. The plot of the novel takes its shape from the confrontation of various characters with the sea, and their return to their homes, changed or unchanged, healed or shattered. This is their sad holiday from the world, by the sea.

The web of human relations is intricate and erotic; the characters are mostly mad or shriveled. There is Fisher's half-sister, Dora, his first and perhaps only love; and there is her suicidal,

schizophrenic husband, a Utopian Communist who resents the human race. There is Eleanor, an insane Venus, wrecker of lives, particularly her own. There are others, comic or pathetic people, deprived both of vitality and meaning. Their failures—and Fisher's is the most intriguing, the most ambiguous—are defined by the use they make of their seaside vacation.

If the novel seems finally more limited or elusive than it should be, that is, first, because its plot does not express or control the intentions of the author; and, second, because the characters seem too feeble to carry the burden of meaning imposed on them. For that meaning is nothing less than the dissolution of our world, apprehended by an aging man in those bleak years of the *entre guerre*. "Intelligence is a weapon of escape. Civilization began ten thousand years ago with estrangement from Nature and the sea is still too elemental not to produce in us upheavals of stupidity and fear." Brenan has written a charming and also profoundly intelligent novel on a major theme, but he has rendered it in a minor key.

Pundits on Stoops and Curbs

"Notes from a Dark Street," by Edward Adler (Knopf, 219 pp. \$2.95), presents a vivid array of jaunty lower East Side New York sages. Eugene Goodheart teaches literature at Bard College.

By Eugene Goodheart

BEFORE we are aware of anything else in "Notes from a Dark Street" we are acutely conscious of its language. The old women of the lower East Side are "makeshift, amorphous, possessing no logic of genesis." One of the ladies is "acackle with credulity." The hero and narrator, Barney Yago, is portrayed in a letter "under a tide of hyperbole." And in a description of Judge Merchant we get a pithy summation of the characteristic rhetorical effect of Mr. Adler's first novel: "Dapper, high collared, powerfully cuffed, he was given, in this day and age, to sleeve garters, to buttonhole sprouts and piped lapels, a magnifying glass on a ribbon, a platinum chain and pendant, Melachrinos, a snuffbox under a seal of justice . . . an Indian head

on a quadrangular ring, fingernail moons and bayrum, tweed spats, etc." The catalogue is endless. The novel is an exhibition of rhetorical virtuosity. Unfortunately, Mr. Adler's technique is uncertain and his "notes"—to shift the metaphor for a moment—are played on an instrument badly out of tune.

The characters conform to a special type. They are all plagued by an incurable jauntiness, which immediately expresses itself in the curious speech of the novel. (The jauntiness, the eccentricity are particularly infelicitous because they are not animated by humor.) The Talmudic scholar who had suffered in Auschwitz, the indescribable Irish janitor, the owner of the iron-works plant speak the same language in the same tone of voice as if the supposed differences in temperament and background were outmoded conventions of characterization.

Nor is the "dark street" present in any significant way. The filth and reek of the street, the cramped apartments, the combustible atmosphere: they are finally irrelevant to the garrulousness of Mr. Adler's sages. And without exception his characters are sages. Baron, the ironmaster, exclaims with typical

philosophical irrelevance: "Do you know what youth is? Panic and arrogance. That's all we ever get to know about being young. Panic and arrogance. Which is nothing." The novel tries unsuccessfully here and elsewhere for the note of pathos. From time to time there is an outcry of indignation about the inhumanity of the city; a Utopian plan is conceived to transform it into a human and natural place. But the indignation and the Utopian dream are without any genuine emotional resonance.

I have said nothing of the story, and indeed this is one of Mr. Adler's main troubles. He is still the novelist in search of a story (what we have here are notes), and until he finds the story that he must tell it is doubtful that we will get anything more from him than the rhetorical bric-a-brac or debris that he has given us in this novel. His information, acquired in various jobs as fur worker, technical writer, draftsman, grocer, etc., is considerable, but it doesn't become art until it has been animated by imagination. There is an occasional scene that almost makes it—for instance, the description of Helm teaching his dead son blade-grinding—but such scenes are the promise of something better than the novel offers.

DRIFTING INTO MURDER: Al Dewlen's "Twilight of Honor" (\$4.95)—the January Book-of-the-Month-Club selection and a winner of the McGraw-Hill fiction prize—concerns the motel-murder of a solid citizen by an unsavory young drifter. The culprit is captured, "worked over" for a written confession, and duly subjected to the town's fury. Idealistic lawyer sides with the underdog and puts up the good fight.

Mr. Dewlen enriches the courtroom-fiction formula by injecting some eloquent asides on the grandeur and the meanness of the law, and by populating his court with colorful characters. These include a prosecutor of the boisterous brimstone school; a retired criminal lawyer of the Darrow stripe, who helps the defender with his strategy, and a judge who alternately dozes, peeks into the *National Geographic*, and makes disturbing extra-legal comments on the proceedings.

This well-plotted novel, with its many pages of staccato testimony, is in a class with that recent best-seller "Anatomy of a Murder." (It incidentally takes full advantage of the theory that crime is more deliciously criminal if there is plenty of sex.) The trial verdict strains my credulity a bit—but if I were bluntly challenged on that statement, I would have to admit that I have seen real juries behave just as capriciously as Mr. Dewlen's. —WALT McCASLIN.

USA

The Vices of Our Virtues

"The Beer Can by the Highway: Essays on What's American About America," by John A. Kouwenhoven (Doubleday, 242 pp. \$4.50), finds much less either to deplore or applaud in the U.S. than most of the students of this country's *gestalt*. Sydney J. Harris writes a syndicated newspaper column and is the author of "Last Things First."

By Sydney J. Harris

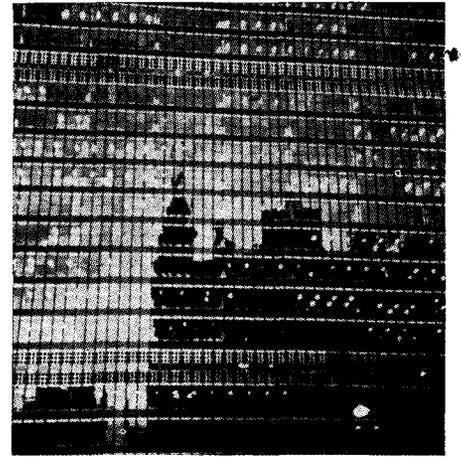
THIS is a pleasant, literate, lucid, and coolly written book, containing a number of detached insights that carry truth and conviction. It is also a rather unpleasant, middle-brow, confused, and argumentative book, containing a number of premises and conclusions that seem to me specious and false.

In a real sense, therefore, Mr. Kouwenhoven's light-fingered treatise on "what's American about America" suffers from all the ambiguities and paradoxes that are inherent in any treatment of the subject. For America itself is one vast ambiguity: proud and yet not secure, immensely prosperous but defacingly pockmarked with poverty and slums, inordinately patriotic and yet uncomfortably self-conscious about its identity and direction, generous and greedy, social-minded and anarchic, sentimental and cynical, wildly idealistic and coldly pragmatic.

This is only the latest in a spate of recent books trying to analyze, define, and place our peculiarly American *gestalt*—the phenomena of our television, advertising, automation, design, education, architecture, city planning, and our nervously introspective concern about them all.

Mr. Kouwenhoven, in this sometimes amusing and often pungent series of *aperçus*, finds much less to deplore in America than most of the professional deplorers, and a great deal less to applaud than the professional applauders. A cultural middle-of-the-roader, he seems somewhat proud of his inability to be as shocked as the deplorers or as self-deceived as the applauders.

He sees America as a "process," rather than as an artifact or an "immutable ideal." We are, to him, an "open-



—From the book.

Manhattan Skyline—ambiguities.

ended society," past, present, and future, and thus we display all the vices of our virtues. The social and economic "waste" (as well as the beer can by the highway) that the deplorers point to are calmly accepted by him as inevitable by-products of our commitment to democracy and our achievement of abundance.

Perhaps because of his special interests, Mr. Kouwenhoven is most persuasive in his essays on architecture and design—fields in which I happen to agree that the American genius is pre-eminent. He refuses to become exercised about the tail-fins on cars, and carefully points out that the so-called "functional" in design is as much a psychological as a mechanical matter.

His forays into the dangerously booby-trapped terrain of television, advertising, and industrialization are not nearly so successful—but it would take a book nearly the length of his to refute his contention that what we are watching is a "free society" at work. Without enforced responsibility, "freedom" is simply a euphemism for the law of the jungle.

At any rate, "The Beer Can by the Highway" is a professionally put-together job by a man who knows what he wants to say, and knows how to say it—which is a comparatively rare publishing achievement these days. Our disagreements with his thesis may be many—too many to itemize in a review of limited space—but at least it has the virtue of stating its position in an intelligible manner that makes disagreement a pleasure rather than a burden.