»BOOKS·ARTS·MANNERS«

The Lachrymose Mr. Manchester

GARRY WILLS

Yes. It. Again, and at this late date; we shall be digging our way out for years from this avalanche of detail sluiced tearfully down on us. There is much here worth remembering:

—How the President's stricken buddies of the "Mafia" stood watching the funeral on TV, and lifted a champagne toast to the passing caisson. If Kennedy's spirit haunted his own obsequies, it was surely from this vantage point—which is the real secret of his very real charm.

—How Mrs. Kennedy, who had dealt rather coolly with the Boston pols around her husband, turned tough and angry when he was killed and—on the plane back to Washington—finally joined the Mafia. It was like a second marriage—she shared even more of his life at the moment of his death—and it makes her far more appealing.

—How D.C. marshals were called on to guard Robert Kennedy in the tense aftermath of the assassination—and all ninety marshals volunteered. How New York policemen paid their own way to Washington to help out local officers on the hectic day of the funeral. How Secret Service agent Clint Hill kept Mrs. Kennedy from falling off the car, and Rufus Youngblood threw himself over Lyndon Johnson, in the path (as he supposed) of spraying bullets.

***The Death of a President*, by William Manchester. Harper, $10.00**

—How Johnson's first act as a ruler was to obey. Youngblood whispered over him, "When we get to where we're going, you and me are going to move right off and not tie in with the other people." The new President's response was "O.K., partner."

—How Patrick Moynihan took the news of Kennedy's death: "I don't think there's any point in being Irish if you don't know that the world is going to break your heart eventually. I guess we thought we had a little more time. So did he."

—How the Kennedys, who are good at winning but had been hurt where they were most wound-able (in the family), became even better at losing. John F. Kennedy's funeral day was John Jr.'s third birthday—and the Clan gathered that night to give the boy a cake-and-ice cream party.

—How that same John Jr. gave a brisk military salute to his father's coffin.

But these episodes are submerged, here, by a lachrymose inclusiveness that dims their outline. This raises a real doubt about the quality of Mr. Manchester's caring. Everything is soaked in pseudo drama, suggesting that he does not trust the real drama of the central facts to carry their weight. If he understood the tragic nature of his material would he call Oswald's rifle fire "a barbarous obbligato"? Would he stop, in what he takes to be a heart-rending confrontation, to get cute with us this way?—"[Ken O'Donnell] uttered a swart oath recommending monogenesis." Things eloquent in themselves he cheapens with a gaudy parade of his own rhetoric—as when he clucks and coos over the fact that John Jr.'s salute had, for its underpinnings, "his knees dimpled and his blunt red shoes side by side."

He cannot believe that the story is important unless he is, every minute, screaming and gesticulating its importance at us. In his frenetic style everyone "darts" (or, even worse, "dartles") or "prances" or "lunges." A man does not grow tense—he "gathers his million muscles." And—sure sign of the high school editor aiming at sprightliness—people never say things when they can cry them: though Kennedy, for instance, is at one point standing in his sleepy wife's bedroom, "'Gosh, look at the crowd!' the President cried, peering down." (Almost everyone else swears in this book, but Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy say "Gosh!") Apocalypse is on every page. Capella obligingly rises over Boston on November 22, and shadows are forever being cast in all directions (even some *invisible* shadows): "Warp and woof, the pattern of fate, cast invisible shadows." Mrs. Kennedy is to "give the country a finer final last memory of her husband" in the funeral. Finer than *what* the context does not tell us—nor does it tell us how a final *last* memory differs from a final one or a last one. This is just the kind of dance he shuffles into when he wants to impress us.

Every twitch or stifled cry of those harsh days, all the odd behavior, is collected in a wormy mass. The author tries to get inside every shattered nerve system, to join his voice to every shriek. He is with the Secret Service, using their code (in which Kennedy is "Lancer"). He is inside one circle calling Mrs. Johnson "Bird" (which causes unpleasant echoes when, later on, Lieutenant Samuel Bird is referred to over and over by his last name). Then he is in another circle referring to General Godfrey McHugh as "God." He uses Dallas language—the scornful word "libs"—when he is in Dallas. He has a compulsive insiderism as he traces the pathology of this nationwide grief: "For three days men were to be transparent. Dur-

ing that week, which they would afterward seal off in the attic of their minds, they were artless, whole-souled and, for once, unashamed of emotional display." Manchester crawls up into those thousand mental attics and violates a thousand privacies, morbidly collecting pain—not Kennedy's pain, not even that of the individuals, but the widespread pain that focuses finally—where? A terrible suspicion grows as one turns the pages.

He has a taste for attics. He ends this book in one, staring at Mrs. Kennedy's blood-caked dress. He ended his first book about Kennedy (*Portrait of a President,* 1962) in another closet, liturgically fingering Kennedy's war uniform. In other ways, too, *Death of a President* cannibalizes *Portrait of a President.* That early book looks harmless enough—gossipy and worshipful. It told us what Scotch the President liked (Ballantine), what cocktail (daiquiris), what cigars and tailors and movies (he saw *Casablanca* four times); what nicknames he was given by his brother ("Johnny"), his wife ("Bunny"), his crewmen ("Shafty"). We were told that Mrs. Kennedy preferred pink and that she was a connoisseur who made Presidents Truman and Eisenhower "look like Hottentots, if not outright clods." Yet Manchester, a journalist who regularly refers to himself (as well as to Kennedy) as "a scholar," thought he must "document" that bundle of fluff by "depositing my files in the Olin Library, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut" (scholars always give complete citations). Now we know what those pretensions signified—but the Kennedys had every reason to think they were merely getting a literate Maude Shaw when they called Manchester in.

The links between *Portrait* and *Death* are now clear. In the former we were told, in various places, that Kennedy's "key is still C major," that he had "the profile of a Lindbergh," that his critics wanted "a leader who will give the world a kick in the old kazzazza." Five years later, in *Death,* we are told that Kennedy's "key had always been C major," and "his Lindbergh profile was still lean," that Dallas was angry because "Kennedy refused to give the world a kick in the old kazzazza." We get the same stories—how young Senator Kennedy charmingly grumbled to a reporter named Bouvier that Senate pages looked older than he did. Here is *Portrait* (p. 95):

> Blaming the President is an American custom almost as old as bundling. He is, after all, the biggest target in the land, and the formation of every Presidential cult is followed by the congealment of an anti-cult. "Remember," Woodrow Wilson warned his daughter when his first Administration was sailing along smoothly, "the pack is always waiting to tear one to pieces." Andrew Jackson was portrayed as an adulterer, Lincoln as a baboon, Harry Truman as a haberdasher. Thomas Jefferson was "Mad Tom," and even Washington was scarred. "I am accused of being the enemy of America, and subject to the influence of a foreign country," he wrote Mad Tom, "and every act of my Administration is tortured, in such exaggerated and indecent terms as could scarcely be applied to Nero, to a notorious defaulter, or even to a common pickpocket."

And there is *Death,* too (p. 46)—the whole passage, word for word, the serpent swallowing its tail.

MANCHESTER closes his circle with finality in the *Look* defense of himself which describes his agony. His. That is the key. He spent years, he tells us, pooled in blood—not Kennedy's but his: "I was gripping my Esterbrook so hard that my thumb began to bleed under the nail. It became infected and had to be lanced three times." If you have any doubt that the lancing in this passage is meant as an appropriation of Lancer's wounds, turn back a little in the *Look* piece to this horrible pun: Manchester describes his emotional reaction to the news of Kennedy's death as "lancinating." Appropriation—Mrs. Kennedy's memories become *his.* He is not inside all the separate circles, using their jargon and nicknames. They are inside his system, they are ganglia in that nationwide nervous web that centers finally in William Manchester, the one *complete* mourner. No Maude Shaw here. The onanistic mournfulness stirs a different memory—the egotistic tearfulness of all those half-read copies of *The Prairie Years* and *The War Years* that clutter up our attics (where, no doubt, Manchester stumbled on them) and library shelves. The final cruel irony, the capping parallel with Lincoln—not only assassinated, but sandburged!

Manchester has grown to like the taste of his own tears—his own lancinations over Lancer, his fulminations over Dallas, his spitting hatred for the haters. Among the latter he includes Jack Ruby (who becomes, in this book's jig-style, "the horn-rimmed humbug"). Manchester tells us that Ruby did not really care about the President (only Manchester *really* cares): the humbug does not deserve to be mentioned along with the hero—which was precisely Ruby's attitude toward Oswald. Indeed, Manchester has more in common with Ruby than he realizes. He writes of Oswald: "Noticing him, and even printing his name in history books, therefore seems obscene. It is an outrage. He is an outrage. We want him Out." So did Ruby.

Perverse Peer

PETER P. WITONSKI

The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, **1872-1914. Atlantic-Little, Brown, $7.95**

IT HAS BECOME a veritable commonplace to speak of Bertrand Russell's lofty position among twentieth-century intellectuals. In the past those quickest to sing his praises and invoke his genius have often not done him the justice of reading his important and difficult philosophical works, contenting themselves with scanning his more exiguous writings. His greatest work, *Principia Mathematica,* written over a ten-year period with Alfred North Whitehead, is an immense and extremely brilliant treatise on the logic of mathematics, which is both the culmination of the great tradition of British empiricism, and the foundation of modern logical analysis. How many of those ardent advocates of Russell's genius have ever even attempted to read this