

Hermann Deutsch

'Last Word' Ruins
Manchester Image

EVEN THOUGH the tumult and the shouting have died, one looks in vain for what Kipling's Recessional prophesied as the sequel: "A humble and a contrite heart."

It seems to me that both Look Magazine, and William Manchester have diminished their stature by the effort of the author to have the last word, an effort which traditionally, or perhaps "supposedly" would be the better term, is the prerogative of feminine disputants. After reading and rereading it, his article in the current issue of "Look," and after having read the four installments of the condensation of "The Death of a President," I think both Look and Manchester have very substantially worsened their respective images, and made their positions in any dispute less tenable than before.

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IN THE FIRST (and possibly worst) place, Manchester has magnified and overemphasized his actual physical as well as his psychosomatic sufferings in so mawkish a way as to go beyond what is reasonable. He seems ridiculously like an awkward squad rookie telling himself: "Just look. Everybody's out of step but me." For example, he writes:

"One morning after I had turned in the manuscript, my editor telephoned me. He had also been John Kennedy's editor, and he was obviously distraught. 'I put it aside and went to bed at three o'clock,' he said. 'I couldn't stop crying, but I couldn't stop reading, so I got up again.'"

I've known a great many editors, including the redoubtable George Horace Lorimer of the Saturday Evening Post's golden age, and gentle Grant Overton, one of the swiftly changing editors of Collier's. I have matched my culinary skill, such as it is, with Alfred Knopf, and put in an entire evening with Bennett Cerf.

But if a cordon of archangels assured me unanimously that they had to stop reading because they were crying and then couldn't stop reading, crying or no, I'd have replied with one short monosyllable like "Nuts!" If that sentence of Manchester's isn't overwritten, I'll eat my dog-eared copy of Roget's thesaurus, hard covers and all.



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BUT POSSIBLY YOU BELIEVE THAT the editor did cry, seek sleep and then get up to read and weep some more. Very well. Would you, as Maxwell Smart would say, believe: "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. Still I couldn't quit; I swathed the unsightly pulp with gauze and scribbled on, marring the manuscript pages with blood . . . It was time briefly to bow out of the arena while I could exit with grace."

Frankly, I boggled at swallowing that statement, either because of its factual content, or because it is my conviction that the wife of the leading grain and feed merchant in Halitosis Haven, Ariz., reading to her culture club a paper on "My Visit to Niagara Falls," could scarcely have been guilty of so amateurishly mixed a figure of speech.

I have "past" over Manchester's self-quoted statement from a letter he wrote Sen. Robert F. Kennedy to the effect that "the time for intermediarie has past." That may well have been a proofreader's gaffe. But certainly the following is not:

Relations between RFK and Manchester must have deteriorated very badly when, as Manchester recalls, RFK beckoned Evan Thomas aside "and held a whispered conversation with him, glaring meantime at me." And here Mr. Manchester drops what he obviously regards as a blockbuster, when he characterizes the incident as "distinctly unnerving," adding: "Besides, I had been brought up to believe that whispering was improper. Gentlemen, my father said, never did it. He hadn't mentioned senators."

Author Manchester surrenders to a seeming weakness for "faine" writing. When he seeks to convey the information that matters were proceeding smoothly, he says: "Throughout that glorious spring, however, the sky continued to be blue and serene." When he refers to Robert Kennedy's emotional reactions to the manuscript he says: "Bob couldn't read the book. He couldn't offer constructive suggestions. He could only thrash about in the riptide of his unresolved grief." Or, after referring to one unnamed Kennedy confidant's suggestion as "a sane voice in an insane chorus," he adds: "By now the arena was so turbid with dust, sweat and blood that one could scarcely breathe."

If that isn't greeting-cardy sophomores, I have wasted too many of my nearly 80 years without finding an arena so bloody one could scarcely breathe.