

The Oswald Family

Elizabeth Hardwick

The Warren Report appears, as if it were the last chorus of a tragedy by Euripides: "Many things the gods achieve beyond our judgement. What we thought is not confirmed, what we thought not, god contrives. And so it happens in this story." In the fading light the Report sums up: "Out of these and many other factors which may have molded the character of Lee Harvey Oswald there emerged a man capable of assassinating President Kennedy."

From the shades of their anxious, obscured obscurity, the calamity brought forth to view some of the most disquieting people we have ever encountered. We are given lives and desires we would not willingly have confronted, and we have seen a sort of nakedness we were not eager to acknowledge. Oswald: There is about him a special invisibility, a peculiar opacity. Those few persons who remain in doubt about his guilt are perhaps reinforced by the impenetrability of this disturbing figure. He does not seem equal in mania or intensity of idea to the catastrophic deed. He had made the most dramatic and awful efforts at self-definition but even so he remains buried, unyielding. He is pale, rancorous, with a special sul- ten turning whose dimensions are im- possible to measure. Odd words occur to those who remember him: he is all sniffs and mutterings, silences and unresolvable changes. We see him nearly always in some mood of strained, self-conscious chagrin. Not laughter or joking; only sly, reticent or arguements.

Oswald is a ghostly anachronism in a cast of characters completely caught up in the fusts of the 1960s. How hard it is to believe he was born in 1939, that he had just barely turned twenty-four when he died. Most of all he is a De- tached when he and his mother seemed to have been friendless, isolated, and con- fused. The seers are quick to put the blame on the mother. She is self-con- cerned, neglectful.

Oswald's hopes for himself are intel- lectual rather than practical. He is not concerned with acquiring skills or a trade but rather with an effort to solve his problems by ideas. The striking as- pect of this is Oswald's paralysis with words. The "Historic Diary" published in *Life* magazine is just barely on the border of literacy. Books are taken out from libraries, but there is every evi- dence that Oswald was incapable of systematic, careful reading; about Com- munist or anything else. When he ap- plied for admission to the Albert Sch- weitzer School in Switzerland he gave as his favorite authors, Jack London, Charles Darwin, and Norman Vincent Peale. The incongruity of the list points to his ignorance of all three. Yet it is pretension, the projection of his ambi- tions and hopes in ideological terms that stay in one's mind as a puzzle. He seems a good deal like those *lumpen* intellectuals of the early Thirties in Ger- many and Austria, empty, ignorant, root- less men, without any gifts or skills but still with a certain conceit that made them want to make from the negative of their personalities some sort of pro- grammatic certainty. There is nothing in Oswald's letters or in his papers that shows any comprehension of radical polemics. His interest in Communism and the Soviet Union is of the sketch-iest kind. "I am a Marxist, but not a Leninist-Marxist," he says, whatever that may mean. His pathetic "Historic Diary" is completely free of generalizing power or political observation. He seems to know nothing about Russia; his discus- sions there are not intellectual or moral but mundane, day to day.

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President Kennedy as his victim.) He made the extreme commitment when he asked for Soviet citizenship, but he could not carry this to completion. Even his most daring decision, before he be- gan to shoot, could not give form to his formlessness. He tried Russia for a while and then changed his mind.

Oswald seemed to feel his defection could be erased, when it suited him, washed off with a sponge. No doubt he felt this because he had been so little changed by it. Indeed he was soon back where he had started. In a letter to Governor Connolly he gives a startling indication of the way his mind worked. The letter was written from Russia, protesting the change of his Marine discharge from honorable to dishon-orable. He speaks of himself and his situation as though they belonged to someone else. He calls himself "a case," and then makes the impenetrable sug- gestion: "this person [himself] had gone to the Soviet Union to reside for a short time (much in the same way E. Hemingway resided in Paris.)" In some sense Oswald, even after he returned, wanted to be "this person" who had been to the Soviet Union. But of course he stopped short of Soviet citizenship and even residence and came back home with nothing accomplished except that a Russian girl had married him.

We are told that he was arrogant, but he could make little use of this be- cause in the end there was always the problem of his great ignorance. His arrogance was only a part of his strike- ing puritanism. The positives he might have built upon were really negatives: he did not care, apparently, for luxury or possessions and his indifference to these is another way in which he was out of touch with the 1960s. He spent a good deal of his slim earnings paying back the State Department and a loan from his brother. These were genuine acts of sacrifice and planning, a little unexpected in a drifter like Oswald and again more like the poor man of the

the nettle danger, Marina had deli- cately plucked the flower, safely. Adaptability so accomplished is perhaps singular. She is like some convert, freshly lifted up; she knows us better than we know our- selves. Marina seems to have been born for her new life, even born for the American Southwest. But what an un- propitious coupling with Oswald — the boring, disintegrating zealot. This young woman, as current as today's weather, must have been fortified in her decision by the whisperings of destiny. She her- self gave voice to the whisperings when she said somewhere that she would not have married Oswald if he hadn't been an American. In him, she seems to have seen her chance to live in fact what she was in spirit. And no sooner was she in America than she apparently began to feel about Oswald much as those con- temporaries of his in high school had felt—a complete distaste for the "loner," the turtle-like Oswald who didn't "mix," and who "kept to himself." And Marina, modern girl, demanded her right to sexual satisfaction we are told; it was what she had expected, like a washing ma- chine.

Marina Oswald has not only shown a readiness to tell the truth about her husband, but a talent for the exploitation of sub-plots. Hardly a week passes with- out some bit in the tabloids. She busies herself and divides with her helpers the profits of recollection. One of the most interesting actions of Marina's—equal to Oswald's sudden inspiration of his likeness to Hemingway—was her or- gination to a television crew to cover the baptism of her daughter, Rachel. Father, what shall I do to be saved? First yourself on TV, my child, and all will come. The television baptism is one of those instinctive transcendental moments with the over-soul. But, indeed, what other course was left? Rejection, indig- nance, a bleak, Russian, lower-deck self-fering would otherwise have been the lot of the Soviet wife of a presidential assassin. Marina salivates when the bells

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and the Soviet Union is of the sketchiest kind. "I am a Marxist, but not a Leninist-Marxist," he says, whatever that may mean. His pathetic "Historic Diary" is completely free of generalizing power or political observation. He seems to know nothing about Russia; his discourses there are not intellectual or moral but mundane, day to day.

Just as he listed Darwin and Norman Vincent Peale, so he holds up in his fascinating photograph—that profoundly interesting self-portrait he has left to posterity—two guns and two newspapers, the Communist *Daily Worker* and the Trotskyist *Affiliate*. There he stands in the midst of his iconography, his composition of himself surrounded by his weapons and his emblems of Idea.

Along with his ignorance, his failure with words, Oswald does not seem to have had any general capabilities. His tragic achievements—including the sure marksmanship that killed President Kennedy—can be explained only as accidental, statistical. He was fired from his job in a photographic shop, but he had learned just enough to forge, by tricks of photography, a Selective Service card for his alias, A. Hidell.

So far as we can tell, it was not so much laziness that made Oswald such a poor worker as a lack of capability and no doubt the same impatience and shallowness that appear in his intellectual efforts. His nature is secretive, but if the Report is telling us all it knows his secretiveness is more disabling than efficient. (In so far as any detective-story aspects of the case still remain after the Warren Report, the most mysterious questions about Oswald's activities are the visit to Mexico, his letter to the Soviet Embassy in Washington, and the awful choice of

ing puritanism. The positives he might have built upon were really negatives: he did not care, apparently, for luxury or possessions and his indifference to these is another way in which he was out of touch with the 1960s. He spent a good deal of his slim earnings paying back the State Department and a loan from his brother. These were genuine acts of sacrifice and planning, a little unexpected in a drifter like Oswald and again more like the poor man of the Thirties than the giddy installment buyer of today. No matter, from what angle we view him, Oswald remains narrow and shrunken. And we are not surprised when, upon the release of the Report, sex makes an entrance into his drama. We are told he was a poor performer there, too.

Above all, Oswald was a pre-television spirit. Perhaps only a person somehow immunized to TV by the iron of his nature could actually kill Kennedy. The President and his wife were magical beings, spectacularly favored, and engraved like a tattoo on a national psyche because of their position and their natural pre-eminence as television personalities. By assassinating President Kennedy, the embodiment of the 1960s at its most attractive, Oswald suddenly cast light upon the Sixties at its most distressing. Out of the darkness there appeared Marina Oswald, a revelation we can hardly interpret. But who can doubt the coming Americanization of Russia after he has studied this young girl from Minsk? History, or events, exposed her to us in a series of frames: first, shabby, reserved, a proletarian with a tooth missing in front; in the end, on the day the Report was made public, a "famous" person, with eyelids darkened over in "Cleopatra" fashion, hair teased high, the gap in the smile filled, a people's capitalist, a success. From

violation to a television crew to cover the baptism of her daughter, Rachel. Father, what shall I do to be saved? Get yourself on TV, my child, and all will come. The television baptism is one of those instinctive transcendental unions with the over-soul. But, indeed, what other course was left? Rejection, indifference, a bleak, Russian, lower-depths suffering would otherwise have been the lot of the Soviet wife of a presidential assassin. Marina salivates when the bells ring: the country feels reassured. Her story must mean something. How to decipher the code? A news account carries her further: a collaborating writer resigned from her employ saying, "I quit because Marina has come to believe she is as important as the President of the United States."

Oswald's mother comes to us in the most desolating light. One can only picture her. About her, too, there is the hint of Queen for a Day, the hand waving outside the studio in the early morning, the testimonial to percentages guarded by judicious purchase; but if her son is somehow pre-television, she is, for all her readiness, a television failure and comes off as a villain. The psychics chorus had damned her in any case aggressive, self-centered, neglectful, ineffectual. "We warn you, Clytemnestra, Orestes will return from exile. You will die by the hand of your son."

Mrs. Oswald tent to mount a defense at just the moment a prudent person would withdraw or acquiesce. She defended her son against the doctors, social workers and she refused "government." Now, after his "conviction" the assassin of President Kennedy, previously neglectful as we have been told, stands almost alone in her innocence upon his innocence. But the assassin's son, not as a young man like or and likewise free of guilt, but as a

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counter-intelligence agent, an historical
 personage—by which she means, no
 doubt, a "celebrity." Her son has jump-
 ed out of the mass of the looking into
 the company of the looked at. And call
 her as they will The Terrible Mother,
 the catastrophe, still she too has her
 story, the Marguerite Oswald story. She
 has the great disposition to "appear,"
 so common in this case. She realized
 that it was her turn now to rise up from
 the studio audience.

Jack Ruby and his sister, Eva, held a
 sort of instant wake as they sat sobbing
 before the television set at the time of
 President Kennedy's death. In his book,
Dallas Justice, Melvin Belli tells us that
 Ruby, turning away from his usual
 struggle to diet, rushed out and bought

ten dollars worth of kosher delicatessen
 food. "We cried but we ate," he said.
 Ruby, like Oswald, had had a miserable
 youth, observed and recorded by the
 angels of the state. He had been in foster
 homes, and was the damaged son of
 damaged parents. But he is the opposite
 of Oswald. Ruby cannot keep out of
 the way. He is hyperactive, chaotic,
 talkative. He spends and he owes; he
 is stingy here and prodigal there; he is
 sentimental and sadistic. In a rage he
 nearly beats to death a troublesome
 visitor to his nightclub, but he cries
 easily. He seems to be held together by
 bravado and there are no brakes on his
 feelings. One doctor spoke of Ruby as
 "in love" with Kennedy. The ravening
 lust for publicity would make Ruby

with the Commie rat was his tribute to
 the cops, the reporters, the TV gods,
 and the beloved Kennedys. Even after
 he was given a death sentence he could
 think of himself only as a celebrated
 person, a figure in a wax museum.
 "Burn my clothes," he begged his lawyer,
 fearful lest they be put upon his eternal
 waxen image.

The Warren Report tells a sordid
 story of greeds too fierce to measure.
 The greatly favored and the greatly
 crippled suffer out their destinies. Yet I
 feel they have been together on the
 stage for a long time. It was only that
 the light had not shone in the dingy
 corners before. There these impatient
 people, longing for immortality, were
 waiting to tell us something. □

Art Nouveau

Art Nouveau
 by Robert Schmutzler,
 translated by Edouard Roditi.
 Abrams, 322 pp., \$25.00

John Richardson

"It smells like a vicious Englishman,
 a Jewess addicted to morphine, a Bel-
 gian scoundrel, or a nice salad of these
 three poisons." Arsène Alexandre's
 sneer (*Figaro*, 1895) reveals that even
 at its height art nouveau was thought
 to be decadent, vulgar, immoral, and,
 worst of all, foreign. Each country dis-
 owned it. In England and America it
 was dubbed "art nouveau," in France
 "modern style," or "yachting style,"
 and in Italy "Liberty style" (after the
 London store). Only the Germans in-
 vented a word for it in their own lan-
 guage: "*Jugendstil*," but they also nick-
 named it "*Bauhausstil*" (tapeworm
 style).

True, art nouveau does tend to be
 decadent, precious in style, and perverse



a serious historian like Dr. Schmutzler
 should have had little difficulty in com-
 piling a definitive history of the move-
 ment. Alas, he has not heeded Jacobus's
 admonishments nor taken full advan-
 tage of Madsen's conscientiously laid
 foundations. Instead of presenting us
 with "the extended thematic develop-
 ment" that Jacobus rightly called for,
 Schmutzler has relished his doctoral
 thesis and served it up piecemeal, coun-
 try by country, artist by artist. As well
 as being inappropriate to a subject as
 anomalous, confused, and changeable as
 art nouveau, this bitty approach pre-
 vents the author from setting the move-
 ment in an international context. The
 more is the pity, for the later history
 of art nouveau has to be charted
 through a series of international exhibi-
 tions—Paris in 1889 and 1900, Brussels
 in 1897, Turin in 1902, and Milan in
 1906—which not only provided artists
 and shop-windows for the style but were
 the chief means of its propagation and
 cross-fertilization.

Schmutzler passes over this crucial