

## THE PAST CATCHING UP

IRWIN SHAW: *Two Weeks in Another Town*. 414pp. Cape. 18s.  
NADINE GORDIMER: *Friday's Footprint*. 236pp. Collancz. 16s.  
H. E. BATES: *An Aspidistra in Babylon*. 239pp. Michael Joseph. 13s. 6d.

Unlike the dramatist, the writer of novels is not obliged to respect any formal rules concerning time or place, but it is significant how often the expert novelists choose something approaching an Aristotelean discipline, while most beginners allow the subject to spreadeagle "naturally."

Mr. Shaw is an expert writer, and his new novel, as the title *Two Weeks in Another Town* suggests, is enacted within purposely tight limits. Like many of his fellow American novelists, Mr. Shaw is clever at producing a dramatic synthesis out of all the promising (and conflicting) elements of a situation—doubts, memories, violence, sex, picturesque setting, philosophical reflections—as though everything the reader might query can be summed up with a flourish, all the pieces of the jigsaw put in place for entertainment and instruction, all interdependent and significantly typical. The unkind word for such writers is "glib." But Mr. Shaw is too dynamic and intelligent a writer to be dismissed thus, and if his new novel seems slightly "phony" it is largely because too much happens to be convincingly packed into a fortnight in the life of one man.

Jack Andrus—alias, twenty years earlier, James Royal the film-star—is a decent family man (third time lucky) doing a decent job with N.A.T.O. in Paris. In response to an urgent request from his old friend Delaney, the famous film director who is unsuccessful nowadays, he goes to Rome to dub the role of Delaney's dipsomaniac star. From the moment he arrives and is knocked down by a drunken stranger Andrus is filled with foreboding. And justifiably, for the past unsettles him at every turn; in the shape of a luscious young Italian girl who seduces him within an hour of meeting, in the shape of her lover, a violent, gifted young American who is what Andrus once was (and also a timely substitute for the hostile son in America), in the shape of Carlotta, his second wife, who offers briefly the memory of their passionate idyll.

It is all very exhausting, what with Freudian nightmares which deprive Andrus of his very few hours of sleep, and his temptation to escape from bureaucracy to Life. Because of Mr. Shaw's intricate and professional treatment this novel is less melodramatic than it sounds, but the fact that summarizing adjectives spring to mind shows how disappointingly unskillful it is for so gifted a writer, at this stage in his career.

Miss Gordimer, both of whose published novels have won high praise

in spite of a certain looseness of form, is pre-eminently a short-story writer, and there is no doubt that this discipline stimulates her best work. It is Miss Gordimer's virtue to portray a South Africa we hear little of, the ordinary European citizens of Johannesburg and the veld, whose dramas are not often racial, whose attitude is political only by implication. Many of the stories in *Friday's Footprint* are about the sudden appalling discovery which dissolves innocence—the child made aware by a nasty young cousin of her parents' hatred of each other, the widow in the title story who has fooled herself for years that her young second husband is contented, the humourless wife who is suddenly out of it at a vulgar celebration, the small boy overwhelmed by squalid gossip at dinner. The longest, though not the most telling, of the collection, "An Image of Success," spans the decline, after a disastrous marriage, of a businessman into a down-and-out, and the narrator, now himself prosperous, is suddenly unsure which of them has chosen the way to freedom.

Miss Gordimer is a soft-hearted analyst of our failings, and there is a new mellowness in this book, visible in more of the delicate descriptions at which she excels, in more explicit reflectiveness than before. But her wit and precision make nonsense of that overworked adjective "sensitive," and there is plainly no limit to the pleasure she can provide from her minute observation.

As always, Mr. Bates has produced an immensely readable, uncomplicated and expert book, this time a return to his favourite *novella* form. There are four stories, linked, as the publishers say, only by contrast in theme—yet undeniably Batesian in every phrase. The first story, "An Aspidistra in Babylon," acquires its exotic title from the unexotic situation of the narrator, a spinster recalling her youthful heartbreak. Her mother, who let rooms in a garrison town, used to say "Keep away from that Babylon"—referring to the going-on in the army camp.

Much less obvious is the story about a middle-aged couple holidaying on an Italian lake, touchingly sure they are "just good friends" but playing the game of pride and jealousy like young lovers. There is little to recommend the tense earthiness of the last story, set in the Fiji, or the rather pathetic picture of the apple-grower and his vulgar wife, coolly observed by a faceless acquaintance. But Mr. Bates is assured of his readers, and this assurance gives a comforting air of ease to even hackneyed material.