

BRIEF MENTIONS

MATT COHEN

Night Flights: Stories New and Selected

Toronto: Doubleday, 1978. Pp. 180. \$7.95.

Matt Cohen is perhaps the most versatile of Canada's younger fiction writers. In *The Disinherited* he has written a massive novel of deceptively conventional appearance, in *Wooden Hunters* a romance of haunting and sharply detailed magic realism, in *The Colours of War* a quasi-political parable with apocalyptic overtones, and experimental novellas in *Korsoniloff* and *Johnny Crackle Sings*. Now, in *Night Flights*, he gathers some fifteen short stories which constitute the greater part of his work in that genre, and which range over his moods and modes from dreamlike fantasy to the combination, in some stories, of verisimilitude in presentation with disconcerting incongruities in action. I have read reviews of Cohen's work which mark some of it off as surrealistic and some as naturalistic, but if—as I think we must—we take surrealism to mean a naturalism suffused with the arbitrary, a plausibility that outrages our sense of the probable, then I would say that all of Matt Cohen's stories are surrealistic, for life in them is never as ordinary men live it except in the awesome reality of dreams or daydreams.

The stories included in *Night Flights* suggest the various phases into which Matt Cohen's short career (*Korsoniloff*—his first book—was published as recently as 1969) has fallen. Four of them have appeared already in an earlier collection of short fiction, *Columbus and the Fat Lady* (1972). Of these the title story, of a fairground performer who trades on his psychoses by living out on the stage a tranced fantasy of having been Columbus and who dies in the middle of his performance, is typical of one kind of Cohen story, in which the power of psychosis to control physical life is explored. In such stories the characters move to and fro from delusion into observed existence and back, and the even tone of the narration gives the two states an equal weighting which casts doubt, not on the daydream, but on the objective reality.

"Assurance will be the means," begins "Janice," another story. "I will walk into the room calmly, my weight well back and settled into myself. I will not notice her; she will not notice me. For a while, mutually oblivious, we will entertain ourselves with others. And then, at the exact accidental moment, we will come together, the three of us, and stand in a small triangle in the center of the room."

The narrator—Robert—and "she"—Janice—come together as *three*, and the third in the triangle is Nicholas, the lover who is drowned, survives to marry Janice, then becomes "Nicholas someone" as he fades out of recognition, and is, clearly enough, Robert's double, the feared other side of himself that must be destroyed.

There is an irrational fatality about the stories of this kind. The *deus ex machina* coming from outside is replaced in Matt Cohen's vision by the deity within, the dark chthonian presence which creates the compulsions that destroy a man, no matter how he may try to evade them. Sam Vogel, in "Vogel," tries to escape from death by self-renewal through health programs and middle-aged sexual adventures, but merely changes the form of his death. He dies really from the division between his original self-image, the unchanging inner self represented in his mind by the graduation photograph which physically he hardly resembles after twenty-five years, and the other redemptive self which he creates after his doctor warns him he must become athletic if he is to survive. This new image "existed solely in his mind and was not something that could be seen. It was a sensation. The feel of his own body in flight, running; one foot on the ground, taking his whole weight and springing it back, while the other kicked out front, confidently reaching." In this new self, Vogel goes back beyond youth to infancy, so that when he sleeps in his young mistress's bed he is curled like a tiny child. He does not escape death, but dies differently than he would have done. "And it was in the middle of such a stride, confident and exact, when his back was straight and his muscular legs were pumping, that he felt a fast and sudden gripping in his chest, and before anyone could reach

him he was curled up like a baby on the special composition surface of the track." His death is like a journey into birth.

There is no sequential connection between the stories in *Night Flights*, yet Cohen is the kind of writer whose books tend to grow out of each other, and the curious reader will find interesting links between some of the stories—even the earlier ones—and his most recent novel, *The Colours of War*. The wife of the man who calls himself Columbus bears the same name—Felipa Perestrello—as the wife of the guerilla leader in *The Colours of War*, and this fact must be joined to the many internal hints in that novel which suggest that we should avoid regarding it as a naturalistic picture of a likely future.

As I have said elsewhere, *The Colours of War* is in fact a book in which everybody is seeking to get back to the past by way of the future, and fragments of that sought-for past appear in three stories of *Night Flight* which are among the most naturalistically rendered items in the volume. These are "Glass Eyes and Chickens," "Country Music," and "Brain Dust," all of which concern the Frank clan of drink-rotted agrarian degenerates who live in the Ontarian countryside near Salem, the hometown to which Theodore Beam escapes as civilization collapses in *The Colours of War*. The Franks are dead of their debauches long before the future in which Beam makes his journey with the guerilla Perestrello and his gang, but they are remembered and one character from the stories, Kitty Malone who was Pat Frank's mistress, survives to give Theodore a shelter from his pursuers. Yet in a significant detail the stories anticipate the novel, for Pat Frank, who is really their central character, is an auto mechanic who believes that drink is shrinking his brain and the empty spaces it leaves in his brain are filling up with dust. That, monstrously expanded to fit a civilization, is really what happens in *The Colours of War*, in which the collective mind of man seems to be turning into dust, as individuals seek escape by retreating into the past, into the aged childhood of the race, as in "Vogel" and other stories of *Night Flight*: the childhood where the death they evade lies waiting.

George Woodcock

JOHN STURROCK

Paper Tigers: The Ideal Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.
Pp. 227. \$12.95.

Jorge Luis Borges writes his purely ideal fictions in a vacuum—isolated, immobile, distracted from the real world—while his Spanish-American contemporaries wallow in reality and scold him for his lack of attention to the world in which at least his body, lives. They can tie him to the real world only by interpreting his work as a reflection of an idealist or agnostic philosophy.

We are so contaminated with the notions of romanticism and realism, and with the idea that art of any kind reflects real life, that John Sturrock finds it necessary to hammer insistently on the point that Borges is a classicist to the core and must be understood as such. The harder he hammers, the more method he discovers for us in the seeming madness of Borges's mind-swamping stories.

An author is called a realist in the degree to which he keeps an eye on the real world while he makes up a fiction. Concentrated world-watching began with the romantics, who had tired of the classicists' abstractions and universals and wanted to write of the concrete and particular. The classicists cared far less about the particular and sought the archetypal forms of things. They lived in an intellectualized, orderly reality of human making, subsuming under abstract headings the great mass of details out there in nature. They saw clearly that nature is chaos and that art is order, and they never confused the two. So now we understand that art about nature is realism and that "art about art" is literature which may radically substitute the rules and requirements of art for natural law.

Borges replaces nature's laws with the rules of fictional narration, and his characters obey these rules, often "writing" the stories of which they are part. Sturrock, steeped in narrative theory, interprets Borges's plots, symbols, and artifices from this appropriately "unreal" viewpoint with persuasive force and in gratifying detail. He does much to establish the validity of minute symbolic-allegorical (that is, structural or systemic) interpretation of Borges's fictions.