

Fall 1975

on D. M. Fraser

John O'Neill

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Recommended Citation

O'Neill, John (1975) "on D. M. Fraser," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 5 , Article 39.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss5/39>

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Graywolf Press is to be commended for the publication of this beautiful chapbook. Not only is the level of craftsmanship remarkable, but there is something magical about an editorial staff with the good sense to give us these poems, poems that cohere not only to each other but to our lives as well.

Rick Newby

. . . AND SOME FICTION

CLASS WARFARE

Selected Fiction by D. M. Fraser

Pulp Press, 1974, \$3.00

"We can justify any apologia simply by calling life a successive rejection of personalities."

Thomas Pynchon

Which stories should we choose to remember and then recount in an ambience already glutted with messages from the dead, silent reproaches and writing on the walls, the consciousness of dreams that have gone awry? Which doors should we put the shoulder to in a display of strength and conviction? Which passageways, with either the suggestion of different scenarios or familiar landmarks that can be seen from a different angle, should we explore?

There is such a thing as heartbreak, and we have all at least once seen the flaming sword, and nothing beyond. And how many of us have lived off the

glory of it, fattening, telling the tale again and again, trading it for regrets
we'd thought we were immune to . . .

By using Gerard Macklewain's recognition as a point of departure, *Class Warfare* can be approached as a fictionalized documentary of the past decade, a decade that contains a major transition from an active revolutionary stage, where bombs were detonated in the middle of the night, hostages held for political leverage, and even internecine clashes where a friend must be executed because "he allowed himself to become a conspicuous personality", to an overly introspective stage in which a reassessment of these earlier actions turns inward upon itself and becomes the self-consciousness of culpability; that is, these "selected fictions" derive both their narrative and thematic continuity from Fraser's notion of history and personality and, without insisting upon the validity of cause and the viability of effect, the ways in which they affect an individual's consciousness. This mode of operation not only provides Fraser with an insight into the machinery that produces the infamous sequence of events, but it enables him to anticipate advents such as the female-urban-guerilla before it becomes a new typology or the property of the front page. Moreover, the sense of loss and impending personal disaster that multiply in a geometric riot of Malthusian illogic from the opening chapters to the wasteland of Lonesome Town are conterminous with the tension generated between ideals and what are taken to be the existential realities in a post-ideological age.

We were aboard ship, indeed, in our innocence, in the merciful night, toot-toot and then gone, and who remembers the manic jazz-loud parties there were, whooping and hollering in every bottle-strewn stateroom, every streamered corridor, love in the lifeboats, everything allowed, the band swinging into the Muskrat Ramble now, and why not, dance you buggers get it on yeah, and every bleery eye blind to the icebergs, the treacherous heaving water, fog sneaking up closer and closer with none of that pretended majesty of final, absolute things . . . It didn't last long. We were children in those times.

Structurally, the collection is divided into three sections—The Intricate Designs of the Bourgeoisie, *Class Warfare*, and Lonesome Town. These numbered sections correspond to the different levels of involvement as they are portrayed in the collection. In the first section Santa Claus drops out of the business, renounces his old clients, and proudly proclaims himself to be a Republican; Marie Tyrell, the literary Patty Hearst prototype, refuses absolution and the mouthpiece of Extreme Uction. In the second section, the state of siege, the narrator vacillates between paranoia and a strong conviction in the Movement's policies. In the third section, the setting of withdrawal, the watering hole of down-and-out dissidents, Jamie

McIvor, who becomes a recognizable voice, is worked over by feelings of guilt that ultimately lead to extended monologues of misplaced faith and tape recorded professions of passion.

In one of the early chapters, entitled "The Sweetness of Life," there is a discussion centering around "the efficacy of love" and the stability of ideals in a world speeding towards entropy, pulling the metaphoric rug from beneath the gentry's feet. This concept of "the sweetness of life" is a mere abstraction, in that, it "lusts constantly after equilibrium, a stasis amidst the flux". Fraser juxtaposes this chapter with the penultimate section of the collected fictions. This section, which can be read as a journal, an evolving manifesto, or an apologia, presents its own system of beliefs and ideals. There is, however, the same compulsion to somehow capture the fleeting moments that precede the day of reckoning, to indulge in a feeling of uniqueness, to evoke the personality amidst the rumble of group actions.

Enough, enough. How can I explain, justify to the collective, the compulsion under which I fill these pages? It is surely no more than foolishness, no more than presumption, to expect that an arbitrary arrangement of words—words no other eyes than mine may ever see—will in some fashion advance our cause. I know better. Even Alex, toward the end, knew better. What was it he said? We were walking home from an incident, a rally we'd done our best to disrupt; it was raining; I had been holding forth on Revolutionary Art, the need for it, the function it could perform in the pre-revolutionary state. All at once Alex stopped walking, and turned on me: 'Ah you dumb bastard you think you're so fucking tough such a brilliant hardliner and you're soft as a baby's arse. Admit it. Look at yourself, sitting up scribbling your pretty words in the middle of the night, digging every moment of it, that's the way to fight for the masses, sure it is. Do you imagine they love you for it? Or care at all? Who're you trying to kid? Do you seriously believe you're defending anything, liberating anything, redeeming anything, inciting anyone to action, feeding one empty belly except your own? Some shit-hot revolutionary you are, yapping all the time about your precious Art, just like any other faggot lackey, as if a goddamned word of it is ever going to change a thing on earth. Ah yes, wonderful, isn't it. People are out there working and dying like animals while you sit on your ass and dither about Style, about aesthetics, world without end amen. That's great, you're just what we've all been waiting for, a raving comsymp who writes Nice Prose. With all the punctuation in the right place, too. Next you'll be telling us the story of your life: How I Forsook the Bourgeoisie And Became a Fearless Urban Guerilla. Big deal, buddy. When are you going to wake up to what's going down in this world? When are you going to wake the fuck up? I had heard the argument before: in the revolutionary society there would be no artists, no need for them. Come the day, I'll have to accept it. . .

Acceptance rides over enthusiasm, the sense of a viable change is lost amidst "expedient adjustments". The breadth of an individual's ideals, whether they be an approximation of a new age or merely the reflection of a middle existence, is unimportant. Ideals too easily accommodated—the car in the garage, the kids tucked in, the table cleared of the day's waste—and those that erode in the wake of an ever changing situation produce the same basic effect of alienation.

Everywhere I looked I saw ordinary life, ordinary travail, assembly lines of men, women, little children, all of them doing what was there to be done. Whatever they were doing, they were absorbed in it, as spilled fluids are absorbed, soaked up, by commercial tissues. I couldn't speak to them. . . My friends fell away, one by one: some to wives, some to jails, asylums, the stringencies of the working world. They made their excuses, and went. At the farewell parties, the best of them blushed and grinned, promised an early return. . . but who's returned, and from what? Eh? . . . One day I alone remained, awake and frightened, in a universe of strangeness. I'd missed the boat. I heard the weeping then, louder than ever, and I knew it was aimed at me. It was a summons. Summoning me here (Lonesome Town), perhaps. To this, to you. I should never have asked you to help me.

John Updike, in *Rabbit Redux*, addresses this same problem of endangered ideals and desires that exist outside any theoretical framework, but in an entirely different manner. Not only is the tone, and what I suspect to be his sympathies, at odds with Fraser's outlook and treatment, but, more importantly, the irony of *Rabbit Redux* results from information denied the reader following Rabbit's reunion with his wife at the motel. In this sense, Rabbit only encounters what Jamie McIvor and Marie Tyrell must confront head on in *Class Warfare*; a heritage sustained by quick recognitions and the ability to act before the moment collapses upon itself, adding to the list of what are known as historical casualties, those plagued by poor timing or the impedimenta of a conscience or sentimentality. Even the lyrical passages, the snatches of song provided by "Gladys Gorman and the Gamins" in a tremulous shuffle, the upbeat of favorite anecdotes, and the camp humor throughout the collection fail to unhinge the trap of relevance, a decade's password that parodies itself in an altered situation with its own demands and center of gravity.

Class Warfare is not, however, merely a theoretical collection or the anatomy of a revolutionary. Fraser does not insist upon a

philosophical position in order to account for the mood of paranoia and the desperate tone that undermine the creative spirit and prefigure the withdrawal to Lonesome Town. Its mythos is grounded more in phenomenology than propaganda, in a "history that seduces (us)" rather than determines us.

You'll be cold, shivering, if the wind comes off the sea. It often does. You'll sit there, or stand, chilled to the bone, cursing no doubt the history that seduced you, that drew you to that destination. And then you'll hear the weeping, a sound like no other, the weeping of the lost.

"Dream Visions" are shattered and, in the process, the implosion of solipsism is reinforced.

An analysis of *Class Warfare* necessitates a catalogue of different impressions. It is concerned with the consciousness of a decade and the destiny of its survivors' spirit; it is concerned with the alienation of people from old friends and the environment they live in. These basic concerns direct the mythos of the collected fictions, a mythos Fraser describes as "a movement and a rest". It is a train trip or spiritual odyssey through the white wastes of the government subsidized art program called "Canadian Content"; it is an interrogation of a critical consciousness that has boxed itself in by way of sidelong glances, the conjugations of the past tense; it is the dialect of poor connections, broken speech, and impersonal serenades; it is the emptiness of symbolic living where occupation and place define an identity; it is the sound of "last epoch's bell-bottoms colliding." But more than anything, it is the feeling of suspension and energy derived from invocations, the lyrical prose and lucidity that sketch Fraser's signature.

DON'T SING YET: we have a situation developing here. It's a good night for situations, a good night for tramping about the streets, disturbing the peace. Midwinter drizzle, a smear of fog, this tubercular chill in the air: all the ancient, appropriate ingredients. By all means let's look menacing, if we can; it shouldn't be difficult, in these shadows. . .too bad there's not a saxophone playing somewhere, just down the block. The lady would appreciate that. But never mind, here she comes now; button up that overcoat, buddy. . .

As for me, I take delight in commas, which hark of unfinished things, of memories still aborning, but I find comfort in the period I shall someday place, a token ring upon a beloved finger, at the certain and only end. . .

Pulp Press is a small, anarchist collective operating out of Vancouver, B.C. They "do not wish to be respectable, and heavily

subsidized, and quoted solemnly in the pages of the national magazines." They publish works of drama, fiction, poetry, and discursive prose. And their bi-weekly magazine bears the title, "3¢ Pulp"—the world's only three cent magazine. They welcome any correspondence and their address is: Pulp Press, Box 8806, Station Bentall, Vancouver, Canada.

John O'Neill

OF PLACES THAT NEVER WERE

PAGES FROM A COLD ISLAND

By Frederick Exley

Random House, 1975, \$7.95

This is a journey through the various drunken landscapes that contained the presence of Frederick Exley in 1972. A little background: Exley's first novel, *A Fan's Notes*, was published in 1968. By many accounts, it was one of the strongest statements to come out of the Sixties. Although it was not a big seller, it did receive several prizes and was nominated for the National Book Award. In *A Fan's Notes*, a "fictional memoir," Exley takes the reader a long painful way through the mind of a man who is always perilously close to destruction. In that book he relates a series of unfortunate involvements with his father, his wife, various lovers, jobs, and the omnipresent bottle. Besides the fact that it is a great book, *A Fan's Notes* must be recognized for the courage it took to write. To quote