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A TITLE MORE TITILLATING, A STORY MORE SORROWING – *THE SEE-THROUGH REVOLVER*

Craig McGregor, *The See-through Revolver.* University of Queensland Press, 1977. pp. 207. $5.95 Cloth $3.50 Paper.

Of course Craig McGregor's title was not designed to catch the eye of the browsing voyeur, and in any case such a voyeur would be sadly disappointed. He would find the novel, as one southern critic did, boring; although a northern reviewer denounced its "public parade of indecencies and abominations".

The title of *The See-through Revolver* correctly sums up the theme of the novel which is the flimsiness of life, relationships and honour in the violence of New York's multi-racial Manhattan to Harlem districts, mainly from 116th to 123rd street. The time is the last years of the Vietnam war, and McGregor's protagonist, Arthur Middleton, is a teacher at Columbia University.

The novel is largely based on McGregor's experience of New York during his two years there on a Harkness Fellowship. Far from purporting to be a lampoon of urban American society, as the northern reviewer alleged, the novel is in many respects a sober report of the racked society that McGregor saw in New York. One major incident, at least, the shooting of the Puerta Rican drugstore manager, was published in his prose and pictorial record of his visit, *Up Against the Wall, America.* (1973).

As far as fact goes, of course, *all* America is *not* like this, but *some* of it is, or perhaps one may say with more hope, some of it was like this during the worst years of national disorientation. And allowing for the usual time-lag of ten years or so, Australia eventually catches something of all that is worst as well as something of all that is best in American society. McGregor's novel is connected with Australia only by the flimsy plot device of making the lover of Arthur Middleton's wife an Australian theatre director who returns briefly to Sydney, thus providing an explicit, but perhaps unnecessarily explicit, connection between the two societies. Almost everything in this novel is flimsy, and the reason why Arthur Middleton dies from a bullet fired by Jerry Davis, a black pianist with a soul group, is the flimsiest chance of all. Yet the novel convinces us that such a death is credible.

Only the pain and fear and helplessness of all the people who inhabit this book are strong. This novel, I think, was written in fear – in fear that pain and fear and helplessness may eventually be strong enough to destroy even those who have courage enough to confront fear, as Arthur Middleton, in all his weakness, does confront it. Such fear is not a flimsy reason

for writing the novel, and the novel itself is not flimsy.

The See-through Revolver has a shadowy but compelling allusion to the legend of King Arthur as told by Malory, who also lived in a disintegrating society. Like the *Morte d'Arthur*, this story is set in a ravaged and barren landscape, harried by marauders from inside and out. Men challenge and attack as compulsively as a pair of mediaeval knights coming together from opposite ends of the same road, only to find when both are mortally wounded and the visors are down, that they are kinsmen or sworn brothers. Adultery is as inescapable and as cheerless as a last coupling of Lancelot and Guinevere, and Arthur, betrayer of responsibility, betrayed and self-betraying, makes a lone and futile stand in the Dark Tower of the condemned tenement. His Merlin, the implacable crusader Merrilan, leads him to the Tower of the tenement, but fails to arm Arthur Middleton against the fear from without that Merrilan himself can only meet with a rifle on the window ledge as he watches his children cross the road to and from the local public school.

Arthur is not a hero. He waddles, he masturbates in childish regression, he seduces, or is seduced by a girl student, he fails his children. But in realizing at some moments the strength of his feeling for his children he catches a glimpse of the love with honour that so far his life has kept from him.

The novel is a denial that these people and this society have any maturity. The figure by which Arthur inspires himself to make a last attempt to capture the stronghold of a life with honour is the children's rhyme about Incy Wincy Spider climbing the water-spout. His chastening texts are the graffiti on the walls of New York classrooms, subways, lavatories and condemned buildings. He fears his manhood will be devoured by the consumer-mother figure of his wife, and he turns to Kenneth Slessor's womb-imagery to express his fear and his regressive desire that this might happen:

> Then I shall bear you down my estuary,
> Carry you and ferry you to burial mysteriously,
> Take you and receive you,
> Consume you, engulf you,
> In the huge cave, my belly, lave you
> With huge waves continually . . .

But his wife, Tania, is not the enemy. Tania, for her part is still shackled "by her mother's God-fearing puritanism", and she carries her physical gift of a sensual beautifully opulent body with guilt. She expresses her consciousness of her sexual role in terms of A.D. Hope's poetry, itself an expression of guilt: "sly as the snake she loosed her sinuous thighs". Tania also has not reached maturity or self-understanding. Her adultery is flimsy, unsatisfying.

(A word here on poetry. Although we might like to think educated Americans quote Australian poetry to themselves at critical moments, it's probably unlikely that they do. But willingly suspending disbelief for the

sake of the narrative, I find it interesting that Arthur and Tania should quote two of our best poets whose poetic achievement partly consists in their expressing an essentially *boyish* comprehension of sexual experience. As a critic, A.D. Hope is undoubtedly a philosopher, but in much of his sexual and satiric poetry he expresses brilliantly – and intends to express? – the clever incomplete comprehension of the bewildered but brilliant adolescent. Slessor's best poetry flashes with the boyish apprehension of life of Rabelais or Surrey. See, too, where Arthur, feeling powerless, "a bystander, a watcher, a mute animal waiting for the world to split to the marrow and turn mere white", articulates his helplessness in face of the inexorable change of seasons – and the apparently inexorable decline of civilization – in Hope's wish that he might be "the Eater of Time, a poet and not that sly anus of mind the historian". Hope, and McGregor's Arthur Middleton, thus reduce Aristotle's distinction between the poet and the historian to a schoolboy's jibe. The poetry of Hope and of Slessor derives much of its distinctiveness from its expression of *the eternal boyishness* that remains in even the most mature of minds. I think McGregor's characterisation of Arthur Middleton through these quotations was probably unconscious, for Hope is also quoted in McGregor's first novel, *Don't talk to me about love*. Nevertheless our definition of Arthur Middleton and Tania, as we read, is shaped by the poetry they recall. Incidentally, other poets are also quoted, for example, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King.*)

The central figures in the novel in whom we are most interested are the Middletons, Jerry Davis and the Jewish girl student Judith Zimmerman. They do not seem to expect help from others or from society. Each is conscious of being alone and is aware that all effort must come from the self. Each feels helpless. One of the achievements of the novel is that McGregor does not talk about isolation and alienation yet this becomes a pervasive theme in the book. But the word "helpless" and the idea of helplessness and feebleness do occur frequently. Every sexual encounter is joyless and is described as a draining of energy, not as a release of tension. These scenes do not bore one with the solemnity of the amateur pornographer, they have the pathos of rejected friendship. Arthur Middleton's one friend is the tough and wary Merrilan who has learnt to exist in this world of purposeless violence by exercising eternal vigilance. But he cannot teach Arthur the skills of survival. When Arthur Middleton and Jerry Davis decide to take definite action against their helplessness, their decision brings them into a meaningless, fatal collision.

McGregor's Middletons and the New York they inhabit are not decadent: they are disintegrating because they have grown too fast and have not learnt enough. *The See-through Revolver* is not written as a cultural thesis, and the novel does not offer a thorough criticism of society. I think the southern critic who found the book tiresome complained of a lack of that authorial irony by which many authors make explicit their criticism of the society and the people they depict. McGregor sees the ravaged suburbs with horror and is conscious of the irony of the ghastly streets spread

at the feet of Columbia University. Often he writes like an observant and reflective journalist of the best order. His personal love and expert knowledge of contemporary music give the novel an extra dimension as they did in *Don't talk to me about love*. But McGregor is not very good at narrative. Perhaps this is because he does not detach himself sufficiently from his characters.

It is part of the tragedy of these characters that they cannot see themselves in ironic perspective. These are frightened, gauche, struggling people but people who struggle because they are dimly conscious that there are better ways of living, that some social and personal honour should be possible. However the author accepts his creations exactly in their own terms, he does not explicate their puzzled apprehension that things could be different, and too often their bewilderment sounds only like self-pity condoned by the author. He tells about them in their own terms. And since they are uncertain, there is something uncertain too about the narrative. Clearly McGregor knows what he wants to show but I do not think he has yet managed to show it. These people need better advocacy than they can give themselves.

The See-through Revolver is not a flimsy work, but it is thin, and the implied pun does not constitute an aesthetic justification. In some way the book lacks an author. McGregor's New York and his people are serious creations, created from life by a writer with an urgent and humane intention. I repeat, these people need better advocacy than they can give themselves. Perhaps while McGregor identifies so thoroughly with each character he does not give himself a fair chance of achieving the dexterity of the artist who can do justice to such characters and such intention.