

My Newfoundland

IMAGINE a silent, unpeopled New York, its famous skyline a million empty windows lit by the afternoon sun," the deserted canyons of its avenues lined up with golden sand—El Dorado. This is the scene at the beginning of J. G. Ballard's *Hello America*, and it is brilliantly done. He postulates a vacant continent, a hundred cars hence: when the oil ran out, the population gradually re-migrated back to Europe, abandoning their trucks and motor cars like dinosaurs' skeletons on the overgrown highways.

America's European re-discoverers—a small group that includes one woman, a blonde physicist—each has his own fantasy of what America was and should be; as with the original settlers, "their only loyalty was to their own dreams." And as with the original settlers, America turns out to be not totally uninhabited. There are scattered tribes of illiterate survivors who use brand names as personal names (all women of the Executive tribe are called Xerox "because they are good copiers," i.e., they have babies). This is an adventure story, a pastiche Western, and the baddies are the Gamblers, a tribe based in Las Vegas under the leadership of a lunatic who calls himself Charles Manson. His bodyguards are the mythical figures of Hollywood—huge laser-projected images of John Wayne and Mickey Mouse striding across the sky.

The working-out of the fantasy is inevitably not so exciting as the setting-up; but there is a final battle that involves a locust-cloud of glass aeroplanes

and a procession of robot ex-Presidents programmed by a mad scientist to smash the baddies. Lots of scope here for political and technological jokes of great ingenuity. But the best bits are the lyrical descriptions of skyscraper cities overrun by desert or, more creepily, by vegetation. It's a dream that rings true; "Hello America" is a collage of prevailing themes and nightmares from literature and film. It's not that J. G. Ballard is, like Xerox, a good copier; he has the wit to feel the tug of kites flying in the common imagination, to pull on the strings and haul them in.

Ignatius O'Reilly in *A Confederacy of Dunces* is huge, fat, smelly, flatulent and lazy. He is a graduate in medieval studies, and lives with his mother, a whining alcoholic virago with maroon hair, in a New Orleans slum. He lies in his airless room, covering paper with invective for his magnum opus until his mother sends him out to find a job. Wherever he works—in a pants factory, on a hot dog stall—he applies his solipsistic world view and the values of Aquinas and Boethius, and causes chaos thereby.

Ignatius is a shambling, brilliant misfit in revolt. His picaresque progress through the city's underworld unearths a fast-talking cavalcade of minor characters—deprived blacks, whores, gays, spongers, pathetic little clerks and a parrot. He also has a girl friend called Myrna who is into protest move-

FICTION

HELLO AMERICA by J. G. Ballard/Cape £6.50 pp 224
A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES by John Kennedy Toole/Allen Lane £7.95 and £2.50 pp 338

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ments and social awareness. She is a very terrible girl.

It's a big comic novel about universal failure; never were the varied accents and postures of inadequacy so adequately transcribed. It is also about a hundred pages too long, like many people's lives, but not its author's. John Kennedy Toole killed himself in 1969, after this book had been turned down by several publishers. He was 32. Years later his mother pestered novelist Walker Percy until he read the smudged manuscript which has been, on his recommendation, finally published to great critical acclaim. A happy-unhappy ending, made all the more ambiguous by a remark thrown out by Ignatius to Myrna as he prepares to leave home (his mother is about to have him committed): "These are all my notes and jottings. We must never let them fall into the hands of my mother. She may make a fortune out of them. It would be too ironic."

Both these books are unexpectedly exhilarating in spite of their macabre aspects, and I think I know why. For too long now literary novels have tended to look inwards, exploring private sensibility through thoughts, memories, associations, emotions. It was exciting once. But the streams of consciousness, trapped in individual skulls, have grown stagnant and begun to stink. There is no fresh air now in literary introspection, as there was none in the room where Ignatius lay on his frowsty bed making twitchy ineffectual love to a rubber glove.

But how then can you write about what you feel? What these two writers among others do is to record their characters' behaviour and perceptions, looking not inward but outward, through the distorting lenses of their eyes. The unique schizophrenic skew with which someone reacts to and perceives things and people and the relation between them tells you just as much about him and his experience as do his interior musings, as well as lighting up the outside world in a way that is funny or frightening.

J. G. Ballard writes that his group's true safari is "across their own skulls," in search of "the special 'America' that is in each one of us": how much less full and less fun his book would have been had he not projected the fantasies so far out into space and time. There is no doubt a way all this could be expressed in philosophical terms. And I've no doubt overstated the case against introspective fiction. But I'm sure that there's a case to be made.