least demanding and most familiar bourgeois literary conventions.

What the apocalypse in any of its forms has not paid heed to is character. Out where the blue begins everybody is simply kooky. Character exists of course, but it exists in the Old World and is impossible and is not part of the action after page one. Character is a sort of infirmity of Consciousness Two; it is an immature psychological condition, a deficiency of understanding, so that a family such as the family in the new novel by Madison Jones may be regarded as Neanderthal. It is a Southern family – a mother and two sons, surrounded by relatives and the past – in which each character is programmed to the inevitabilities, to use a fancy phrase, of his characterological destiny. The game of the novelist in such a novel – and it is a serious game – is to present the particular configurations of each character, together with background and context, and let 'er rip, that is, let each character respond in his necessary way to the game's occasion. On the dust jacket of *A Cry of Absence* one critic finds the spirit of Thomas Hardy in Madison Jones. True, but it is also the spirit of Aristotle; and when the spirit is strong and good it produces moments of great tension (known in ancient days as drama) between the characterological possibilities. The apocalypse is beyond drama. People just talk instead – and move whimsically about in free open places.

A Cry of Absence, then, is an old-fashioned novel about that old-fashioned place, the South, which is several thousand miles and many decades away from Tom Robbins's rain forest. The scene is a small town where the murder of a reformist black, "the one been stirring the trouble up," is given us as the occasion in which we may see the differing characterological responses of mother and sons to the racial thing, and their common familial and cultural resentment of a force that has so long well served Southerners as a manifestation of cruel destiny: Northern liberalism. The several humanitarian Northerners who play at being fate in the novel are blustery purists, sociological types who think the South is a savage place and glibly define race relations there as inhuman (it is of course the Northerners who are, in the novel's context, inhuman). The Southerners are impure and relentlessly driven to violence; they have varying allegiances; they are torn and troubled – and ultimately doomed – but even as murderers or bigots they have a clear spiritual edge over the Northern doomsters. Hence the drama of the novel is not primarily between North and South but between the members of the family. *There* is the holy center that the apocalypse has impiously abandoned, and that destiny has decided to destroy. *A Cry of Absence* is about the destruction of that center. It is another novel saying farewell to the Southern Way.

In its relentless fatalism the novel has a kind of flatness to it that sometimes makes one yearn for the zaniness of the rain forest. When characters have been rigorously pared down to their destinies by a dedicated fictional craftsman they are seldom affable bedtime companions.

This is a forbidding book. Its toughness is perhaps a bit too admirable, but admirable it is. And, oddly, there is a tenuous but I think significant spiritual connection between the resilient but vanishing South of the Jones novel, and the not vanishing but perhaps never quite existing rain forest where Robbins does his thing. The chief connection emerges in their sharing of the common bourgeois enemy. Hating middle-class morality has produced unlikely literary bedfellows for the whole century, but the contemporary significance of these uneasy alliances is that the enemy is now wearing new ideological clothing, is full of good works, from integration to clean air; he is not just the old get-ahead chamber-of-commerce set. Fighting the Good in the form of social progress and abstract humanitarianism is a cause that the Old South has always been extremely eloquent and sensible about – and in an odd way the bright young escapees to the rain forest seem now to be heading in the direction of a similarly negative view, searching for an acceptable gospel of limits. At the moment Robbins, as an instance, seems to be telling us in his comic way that even to entertain idly any notions of substantial social reform is stupid; one would do better to go fly a balloon (which is what Robbins's hero *does* do). I don't know what lies in store for Robbins as a novelist as a result, any more than I know where the firm traditionalist Madison Jones will go now that he has *done* the end of the Southern family; but it seems at least evident that in both cases what is left as available material is isolated humanity, North and South, battling the old inhuman in the form of modern mainstream America.

Reed Whittemore

Dyed Whiskers and Ginger Beer

Lord Palmerston
by Jasper Ridley
(Dutton; $12.50)

Some men are born great and some have greatness thrust upon them by their admiring biographers. Palmerston, a British cabinet minister under the Tories and Whigs and a Prime Minister who died six months after Abraham Lincoln, has had greatness thrust upon him by Jasper Ridley, but may not deserve it. In any event Palmerston in his own lifetime had clear-cut ideas about greatness. A great king, he argued, dealt his cards from the top of the deck, especially when treating with ordinary people. And he cited the case of Prussia's Frederick II, who began to build a palace at Sans-Souci only to find his plans ignored by a cottager. This hard-headed peasant refused to sell his minuscle piece of land and his cottage was standing, surrounded by palace, decades later.

The democratic slant of this story shouldn't deceive us about Palmerston.

Until his last years, when mellowness crept in on him and he became the masses' idolized "Old Pam," he was one of the most arrogant figures in public life. "I like power: I think power very pleasant," he wrote, and he used power with a latitude and condescension just as irritating to royalty as to government clerks. He rarely let Victoria in on his plans and he bypassed Queen and Prince Consort alike when a crisis turned up demanding gut decisions. Handling foreign VIP's as diffidently as if they were embassy clerks, he kept an outraged Talleyrand waiting two hours to see him. Tactics like these finally drew from the Belgian Minister the quip that he'd read the whole of *Clarissa* while he cooled his heels in Palmerston's anteroom. All right, says biographer Ridley in effect, the man was an egotist, a skirt-chaser even when he was sixty, a spendthrift whose creditors repeatedly hauled him into court, and a liar who edited documents for the "benefit" of Parliament – yet "a great Foreign Secretary"!

Looking at Palmerston's career – he made a beeline for the political life when he graduated from Cambridge, and bowed out of politics and life together just before his eighty-first birthday – a cynic would say that to become a national hero you have to work hard at being an international villain. German verses, for example, insinuated that Palmerston was the son of the Devil, and Victor Hugo castigated him as a play-actor and fraud. A Russian princess, and a supposed authority on his bedroom habits, declared that "Europe depended upon which leg . . . he put out of bed first." His political principles were in fact a tuttifrutti of prejudices. He bullied Mexico, Spain, Portugal, and Greece, even blockading Greek ports until the government agreed to pay an alleged British citizen for property demolished by a rampaging mob. He abridged the dispatches of a British agent in India and, as a result of these distortions, the agent was branded a traitor by fanatical Afghans and killed in one of their uprisings.

Palmerston cast his shadow where no gunboats could sail and forced Switzerland to expel its Polish refugees. And where the British navy could strike, he played his scare tactics like a virtuoso, backing English merchants who smuggled opium into China and setting off the barbarisms of the Opium War. Generations after Napoleon had threatened to invade England, Palmerston revived alarms that France would pull the trigger this time if Britain napped. He used pretty rhetoric about England's big-brother relationship with Denmark but refused to raise a finger when Prussia and Austria ganged up and dispossessed her of Schleswig-Holstein. Nations for good or ill have long memories. His inaction in this instance was a go-ahead signal to Prussian militarists and a source of some of our twentieth century disasters.

How did such a man ingratiate himself with the British public until millions accepted the fiction that "Pam" could do no wrong? Did the arrogance that colored his treatment of foreign governments change to loving-kindness at home? Hardly. As Home Secretary he offered a mixed bag of minor reforms and schemes for keeping the rich and the poor in their places. Believing education would cut the crime rate among the poor, he talked hawkishly about priorities and decided it was more important to spend John Bull's monies on weaponry than on schools. The man's popularity, it is clear, rested less on what he did than on his image – part of it a newspaper concoction that he owed to friendly journalists.

He was tall, jaunty, and handsome despite his dyed whiskers. Though gossip found rich pickings in his private life, the masses were far from straitlaced toward tales of his misconduct. It amused many that this "Lord Cupid" invited scandal long after age should have toned him down. Enemies, of course, declared him vicious rather than naughty and one remarked that this superannuated Regency beau looked like a retired croupier. "At best," said Disraeli, he was "ginger beer and not champagne." But the public admired the Palmerstonian ginger, delighted in the way Pam snubbed foreign kings and applauded him for playing "ce terrible milord" toward benighted governments that wouldn't adopt the English system.

Faced with a real-life character as picturesque and boisterous as any in Dickens, Ridley accepts Palmerston's greatness as unanswerable fact. To be sure, a politician who climbs to Prime Minister at seventy and is still performing at eighty has the epic hero's virtue of durability. But durability is not statesmanship; nor is gunboat diplomacy proof of resourceful, creative leadership. For all his agility in ducking

ARE AMERICANS WHAT'S WRONG WITH AMERICA?

America's troubles – from Vietnam to our ravaged cities – might be better restated as *The Trouble with Americans.* So says former managing editor of *The New Republic* Alexander Campbell, a Scot who chose to live in the United States. He accuses us of being confused, hypocritical, paranoiac, myth-oriented, and poorly educated – and somehow still manages to leave us laughing. By re-examining every one of our national ills in the light of these deficiencies, Campbell provides what may be the best basis for solutions offered to date. *The Trouble with Americans* is first-rate medicine, made the more effective by the author's rare talent for keeping it palatable.

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trouble, Palmerston got England into four minor wars and failed to keep it out of the Crimean fiasco. Even in his own day he was criticized for jingoism and brinksmanship. During our Civil War, disclaiming any intentions of meddling, he declared that Britain would "support other nations in their struggles to obtain for themselves institutions similar to those which have been described as forming the boast of this country." He looked forward to a Confederate victory and pressured English newspapers into cranking out hate propaganda against the Northern cause. This was the Palmerston, note, who had for years laid it on red-hot whenever he spoke of the slave trade. But Palmerston and the majority of English conservatives were unhappy at the prospect of universal freedom in America and the possibility that this freedom was a step toward a classless society.

In summing up what he thought of class and caste, Ridley observes that Palmerston sympathized neither with Oliver Twist nor Jean Valjean. As owner of a large estate near Sligo, Palmerston had at least a talking acquaintance with the Irish peasant. Moreover, when Home Secretary he visited English prisons and managed to pare solitary confinement from eighteen months to nine. Not ignorance of the poor but loyalty to his own class seems to have governed Palmerston's views of social legislation.

Opportunism and the lack of a historical vision – which caused Palmerston to shuttle unpredictably between conservatism and radicalism and to fix his place as a second-rater – don't diminish his fascination. Europe and Palmerston himself were undoubtedly victims of his supercharged ego, but it was an ego like no other. To Lytton Strachey he summarized everything England stood for. To Harold Nicolson he was an enigma – which Nicolson was sure he had the key to. Favorable and unfavorable critics have recognized that when Palmerston laid aside the mask of the sardonic Regency lord, he showed charms few could resist. In his chapter on the charms and idiosyncrasies of "old Pam," Ridley is at his best, giving himself the elbow room that portrait painting demands when the subject is many-sided. But it is as a rich and thick slice of international history that *Lord Palmerston* makes its argument for survival. Though Ridley's style is clear and concise, it is unexceptionable at best; at worst it suggests the assembly line. To say that Ridley abounds in minute facts is to acknowledge the earnestness of his scholarship while questioning whether he has the skill, or artist's instinct, for selecting and rigidly screening out. More subjectivity, a freer use of personal judgments and cogitations, a more frequent search for meaning even if it plunged the author into risks alarming to the scholarly conscience – these might have given *Lord Palmerston* the precious virtues that stretch the life of a literary work.

James Walt

A Rich Parable

Being There
by Jerzy Kosinski

(Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; $4.95)

When I first read *The Painted Bird* some years ago, I knew nothing of the author. Part way through I looked to see who had translated this strange and powerful book, but it had been written in English. The name Jerzy Kosinski – the first name more than the last – had suggested a non-American Pole, but even more, I could not believe that someone who wrote with such justified assurance would simply appear unheralded on the American scene. Beyond that, and more important, was the nature of the novel itself. There are, in both English and American literature, works which attempt to communicate horror, brutality, violence – all that man can inflict on man. But the awful vision that is communicated by this story of a small boy swept from one East European village to another during World War II has no close parallel in our literature.

By the time I read *Steps*, Kosinski's second novel, I had learned something about him, about a life that seemed in some of its aspects as bizarre as elements in *The Painted Bird*, and as alien to American experience. There was an evident relation between the author and his works. There was also a relation between the two books, some scenes from *Steps* having family ties with those in *The Painted Bird*. But however disturbing these scenes were, and however successful the author in achieving his purpose, no one who had read the earlier novel could encounter these scenes with the same shock and surprise they first evoked. The sledgehammer could still swing at the pit of one's feelings, but the force was lesser.

All of which is apropos of Kosinski's most recent novel, *Being There*. Though we like to elevate the autonomy of the individual work, we anticipate on the basis of the writer's past performance; we seek, in the new work, his individual stamp. "Is it there? Does he still have it?"

Being There represents a significant departure for Kosinski. The place is America, the time is now, and the literary genre is the parable. One could describe both *The Painted Bird* and *Steps*, label them, relate some incidents, but only faintly communicate what is central in those works. But what is central in *Being There* is the narrative, the parable, which could be adequately related in about five minutes. Less adequately like this: Born retarded, Chance works for years in the rich man's house as a gardener, shut off from the outside world, depending for nurture on the garden and the TV, from which he gets his notions of how people act. When the rich man dies he is thrown into the world. As the result of an accident, he is introduced into the home of a wealthy, powerful man. His simpleness, his silence, his references to gardening which sophisticated people read as subtle metaphor, his lack of any known background – all conspire to allow people to credit him with what they want to see. These people include the wealthy man's young wife, the President of the United States, the Secretary General of the UN, the Soviet Ambassador, a German count, a masochistic homosexual, publishers and editors. Because Chance depends for the forms of his behavior

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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