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Harvey Fergusson and the Crossroads

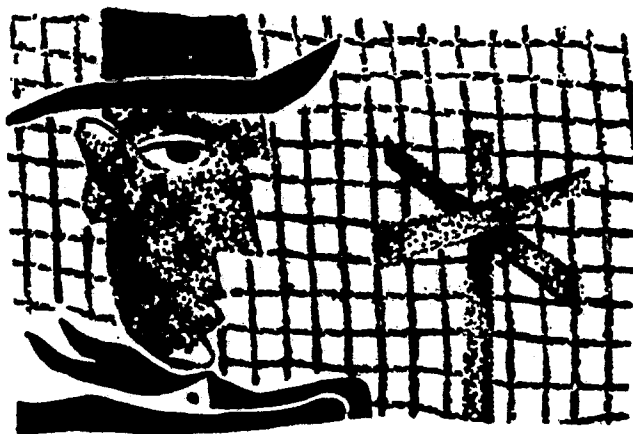
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Lorene Pearson

HARVEY FERGUSSON AND THE CROSSROADS

THE CONFLICTS of the writer, caught in the contradictory maze of the individualism of our time, have been a major preoccupation of contemporary literature. If he was born into the Southwest, as was Harvey Fergusson, the first and foremost novelist native to New Mexico, he had an alternative offered, if he would but perceive it; for along the Rio Grande, the invading pioneers encountered, as in no other region of the vast hinterland, a thriving civilization centuries old, a civilization persistently inimical to egocentricism. With his new novel *Grant of Kingdom*, Harvey Fergusson rounds out the tragedy of the course that the artist in man, torn by the exigencies of the intellectual, may travel—if these conflicts are not resolved.

Conflicts may be resolved, as the enduring literature of the ages attests; they may never be evaded, as the burial of suicides at the crossroads of the old world so grimly remind those who hesitate to choose between two ways. The new world was so long a wilderness that the thought of other paths than that of conquest made no impression, except along the Rio Grande where the upthrust of

a strong Indian culture from the South gave pause to the movement westward. Here, at the crossroads of the continent, the Indian and his conqueror live in subtle but crucial opposition.

The bulk of Harvey Fergusson's work is native to the strife between individualism impelling toward devastation and a communalism striving for survival. Having been born of one alignment and reared in the other, Fergusson has known a sundered loyalty as have few, if any, of the other regional writers of the United States. Whether there has been issue in works of art—given this parentage—or in stillbirths has depended upon which adversary was permitted triumph. It has not always been clear to Fergusson that there is, of course, but one side on which the artist can operate and survive. In his thirty years as a producing writer, he has been able at times almost to resolve his peculiar heritage. But he has been finally unwilling, as he demonstrates in *Grant of Kingdom*, to see that the lone hunter never won a battle, that he has recourse only in escape, that even if he survives he must remain forever the misfit in established life—the compromiser, not the creator.

It is currently popular to insist that a creative work be judged without reference to time and place, without reference to the artist in fact, as if, indeed, the work were produced by immaculate conception. To judge a work without reference to the nature of art is to assume that it is something apart from life. Without clay the artist's hand cannot fashion anything at all; the clay may be transformed—must be—but it can never be rejected; form and content are as inseparable as the man and his work. And since a work of art is such by virtue of its uniqueness, not its duplication, there can be no standard, no absolute outside itself by which to judge it. It is the degree to which the artist has been able to integrate *himself* in time and place, to synthesize disparate elements into a whole and living thing *outside* himself—at once singular and universal—that he may be said to have created a work of art. One that does not fuse the regional and the national, the national and the international, man and mankind, the concrete and the

abstract, is a misbegotten thing; it is kept alive, if at all, by coteries of the elect or by local boosters, depending upon whether the personal or the impersonal is exclusively worshipped; but it is not art.

Harvey Fergusson, as a novelist, was aware of ambiguities, and he sought always, as an artist, to synthesize them; but as a distinguished intellectual he found it necessary to see these components of the artist's world as dichotomies, and in striving to incorporate them into something entire, fell victim to the expedient of compromise. Of the published works of Fergusson, nine have been novels and four nonfiction. The proportion indicates the strong will towards the poetic in spite of the dominance of a culture devoted to analysis. For Fergusson is rooted deeply in the ambivalence created by the opposition of his observations as an artist and a New Mexican, and his formal education.

In his autobiography *Home in the West*, 1945, the most bitter note is that concerned with the frustration and bewilderment that accompanied his academic experiences. "Much of what I was taught," he wrote, "was sheer prejudice and error and I had laboriously to revise or reject it." If, indeed, one ever wholly or even partially exorcises the catechisms of one's training—or of one's observations—if one is willing to trust them, as an artist always must. In the first ten years of Fergusson's career as a writer the artist was in the saddle and he was able to produce a series of novels of which at least two are artistically successful, all are assuredly a contribution to American literature, and one, *Wolf Song*, may add to the accruing literature of world significance.

Fergusson, like many of the writers coming to maturity in the decade of the twenties, saw the corruption in our world that the stalemate of World War I had made so painfully clear; he, like many of the others, felt the need to understand what had happened. In his Albuquerque boyhood Harvey had seen the coming of the railroad into a subsistence area that had survived for centuries by careful attention to reproduction and conservation; he could not avoid seeing that the overgrazing of the range lands to

supply livestock for an outside market had already upset the ecological balance, that *laissez faire* was unleashing the desert sands, the age-old enemy of the settlements, to encroach upon them and to choke the source of life, the river. Life, he sensed with the others, was in jeopardy.

Ferguson's first book *The Blood of the Conquerors* is the story of Ramon, a descendant of the feudal Spanish Dons who were the first to intrude the relationship of lord and vassal into the collective economy of the Rio Grande; it is the story of the conqueror sinking down finally to the peasant his forefathers had created, because he himself compromised with the new conquerors, the Americans. Ramon is described as the end of a line of aristocrats and the first of his family to need to face the new invaders with only his two bare hands. Ramon however has a still wealthy uncle, and he has just finished his training in law. He was brought up in a culture that from the beginning had been able to merge public law with private law. So, instead of going forward to compete, he invokes the past to aid him. He adroitly encourages an old aristocrat who had been reduced to poverty through the double-dealing of Ramon's uncle to act in revenge, and thus Ramon comes into an inheritance. He does not align himself with the struggle of the Spanish-Indian peasantry, a class he had been educated to despise; he merely uses them under pretext of friendship, and suffers the fate of the egoist: he indulges an infatuation for a blonde woman of the new conquerors whom he hates, but also secretly admires (as conquerors are always admired by a decaying aristocracy). He loses, in his romantic pursuit of her, almost all his patrimony.

The Blood of the Conquerors was published in 1921, an era of burgeoning regional literatures, an era that too soon tired of facing the irreconcilable elements in our society that the closing of the frontier had set in antagonistic conflict. Avoidance rather quickly took either of two major directions: one evaded entanglement by denying any kinship at all with so confusing and disgusting a mess; it got off to a good start through debunking, and often-

er than not ended in withdrawal to Europe; the other major direction took the critical but sympathetic approach so well travelled by Faulkner. Harvey Fergusson came rather near joining the former group in *The Blood of the Conquerors*, for there is no felt identity with Ramon, no searching into the psychology of the man. The novel quite ably combines excellent observed detail of the Spanish American and a fine sense of appropriate form, but it is an intellection. There is, even so, the beginning of a sympathy for people caught in the overpowering way of life which had come to be labelled "American," and Fergusson makes some fine thrusts at this tyranny through the hostile eyes of Ramon.

Fortunately, for the Southwest and for American literature in general, Fergusson did not join the exodus. In a spirit of criticism and increasing sympathy he set about the task of examination; he searched out the pattern of the woof as well as the warp of the society into which he was born. He finally discovered the whole fabric, and during his creative period lost the need of ferreting out scapegoats, the singular diversion of those who turned to debunking or glorification as a means of striking out against the disciplines demanded by maturity.

It was in this period devoted to detached observation that he wrote two books set in the East, the scene of his university life and first working years as a newspaperman. In the first of them, *Capitol Hill*, 1923, Fergusson presents with a good deal of taunting scorn the corruption of our nation's capital during World War I. *Capitol Hill* has no hero but rather a central figure, Ralph, and again it is a character with whom he is not in sympathy. There is also an odd book-reading character, Henry, who does not seem to fit into the structure of the capital where "somehow the idealization of woman and acquisitiveness work out . . . better than honest love and a desire to do something for society." Henry is almost irrevocably enmeshed in the protagonist's political world when the war comes along and Ralph is involved in the larger corruption. "The war," says Fergusson, was "a potent pervasive spirit

working variously for various men. To those who held the power of property it was a shower of blood that nourished the gardens where money grows, bringing forth huge crops almost overnight. For some it was a great moral crusade, suddenly making murder holy in the light of a beautiful dream. For some it was misery and horror and madness."

Henry provides throughout the book a small but persistent counterstatement to the things for which Ralph stands. There is in *Capitol Hill* an excellent presentation of dichotomies as meaningful today as in 1923, but Fergusson is protesting at something within and without that had not found integration. The novel is not itself a whole and living thing.

Included in the general theme of conflict between predatory wealth and the common people, between the big fellow and the little fellow in *Capitol Hill*, is the related theme of the conflict of sex in this antagonistic setting, a theme which was to occupy Fergusson in the six succeeding novels. The problem of the baffled male was dealt with in *Capitol Hill*. Fergusson states it thus: "In every American male there is something of primitive woman-worship—a thing of ancient origin preserved and strengthened by the feminine domination to which every American is subjected from childhood. It produces men who can revere woman as an ideal and despise her as an instrument of sin, but who can seldom comprehend her as a human reality."

It is upon this theme that the next novel, *Women and Wives*, is predicated. By the very title the shift in approach is well indicated. Fergusson begins to look at woman, not as an antagonist or competitor merely—as the emphases of our age insist for her—but as something more, a force, as she has always been in the ancient cultures persisting along the Rio Grande: life itself. Catherine, furthermore, is the first of Fergusson's characters to develop autonomy; she learns through the idleness of a marriage dedicated to romantic love something about herself, about desire, about life, and she has, finally, the courage to end the monotony of an im-

possible dream; she leaves it and sets out upon the adventure of creative living. Jim, her husband, remains throughout caught in the determinism of an ideal; he is, however, a character for whom we have sympathy; pity is perhaps the better word. Above all we begin to see the twenties—*Women and Wives* was published in 1924—as an era in which there may be growth as well as decay. When Jim is finally freed from the drudgery of making a living that had stultified him, he is at once filled with regret and with exhilaration. He realizes that he and Catherine were “by necessity of race and time, egoists seeking a personal fulfillment, rather than devotees of a social order. . . .”

Catherine had been economically independent, and because of this independence she had had the leisure to develop. But there was something else on Catherine's side that was implicit from the beginning, an ability, a tendency to grow away from the romantic and static toward the living and real. She seems to know instinctively that only when love becomes a means *to an end* does it survive and grow; desire must be a resource if it is to give freedom. For Jim love never becomes more than an end in itself; he is enslaved by desire as a miser is by his gold.

Is the basic dichotomy of the human world responsible for the plight of man? Is that why so much that is promising in ideal becomes so distressing in reality? In *Women and Wives* Fergusson gives an answer by a distortion in form that is not implicit in his understanding of either Jim or Catherine. The success of a work depends perhaps, during the first period of its life, upon the general tenor of that time: whether it is aligned with destructive forces or life-giving forces. But to survive, it must certainly not imply defeat, no matter what the status of the artist in the society of his time. *Women and Wives* has all the fine perceptions of Fergusson embodied, this time, in living characters and excellent situations; but why, when the author began the book with Catherine, did he choose to end it with the chapter in which Jim comes to a full realization of defeat? Not that defeat of Jim was not im-

PLICIT from the beginning and justified, given his training and character; but the impact of Catherine's triumph is lost in this arrangement of the end, and the defeat of Jim is somehow predicated upon her escape. The dichotomy is falsely maintained, not synthesized. There has been the intrusion of a partisan into the conflict; and the partisan, incensed, often rightly enough, with injustice to others or to himself, is inclined to follow out his argument rather than submit to the subtler and ultimately more convincing and certainly more enduring demands of art.

In *Hot Saturday*, 1926, a seemingly trivial story on the surface, Ferguson achieves his first full-bodied success. He returns to a New Mexico setting where the predatory and the creative are clearly locked in struggle. This time the man is the one who releases the woman. But before we discuss *Hot Saturday* there are two other novels that precede it, not in sequence of publication, but in point of time and development of Ferguson's general theme. *Wolf Song*, 1927, and *In Those Days*, 1929, are concerned directly with the origin of our unresolved conflicts. Outwardly, these books give a vivid account of New Mexico from the days of the first Anglo invaders, the mountain men, through the coming of the traders and the railroad, to the period just preceding the twenties of *Hot Saturday*.

They tell the story of the frontier period "when the free wealth of the wilderness had either been squandered or hoarded and men had had to learn the difficult and cunning technique of taking things away from each other without the aid of firearms," and men became, as Ferguson describes a mountain man and an Indian in a death struggle over possession of a horse, "antagonists by accident." *In Those Days*, which Ferguson has subtitled *An Impression of Change*, is not a novel in the strict sense of the term, but is rather a kind of journal: an excellent one, filled with much good writing and the development of several unforgettable minor characters. There is comment upon all the themes he has examined in his other novels, and by way of a theme of its own, there

is the positive one of the liberation from inhibitions built by the main character's New England upbringing. But running counter to this development is the story of frontier licentiousness that had not been trained in inhibition and of the near ruin bequeathed by it to posterity.

Wolf Song is probably Fergusson's finest work. It is a poetic re-creation of the mountain man, the egoistic impulse to go it alone, to avoid above all entanglement in society and hence responsibility, the impulse to live the adolescent slogan, "a mountain man goes on until he's rubbed out." It is the same impulse that troubles the competitive world in the thousand ingenious ways it seeks to avoid cooperation with its fellow men. But Sam Lash, like all the lone hunters, hadn't taken into account the unavailability of sex, and therefore the unavailability of settlements to which woman is inextricably bound. Lash had grown up on the fringe of the frontier where you took what you wanted and thought no more about it; you got by if you were strong and cunning and ruthless. He even thought he could get away with stealing himself the daughter of a Mexican Don in Taos. But something happened to him; he rode away, but he could not escape the tangle of her long black hair, and something else. This woman knew civilized life. There he had made his mistake; so long as the things he took were raw and unprotected, he could get by with plunder. When he met his match, he began to consider life not as merely to be spent, but to be conserved as well, to be propagated. Still he tried to catch up with his trapper friends who had grown tired of waiting and had gone on. In his preoccupation and his real aloneness he is surprised by a young Indian, the nomadic Indian everywhere pushed backward by the invaders, out to steal horses by the dicta of *his* tribe that he might prove himself worthy of the girl of his choice. In Sam Lash's long chase to recover his horses he knows that he will find death if he does not succeed; he goes into the hand-to-hand struggle with the Indian, an opponent whose guiding impulse is the same as his own had been; neither

can leave without the horses. Only by accident is Lash the one to survive; he sees plunder for what it is—the blind pitting of two forces without hatred for one another in a struggle that means annihilation for someone in the end; next time it could easily be himself. And so he makes his way back to the girl. When he reaches her she will have him only if they are married by the



priest and only if he accepts the responsibility of a ranch of her father's in a near-by valley. And so the two become "antagonists who could neither triumph," struggling "in a grip that neither could break." But it was a struggle from which life could issue, not just death.

I know of no novel of the frontier that faces the romanticism of the lone hunter and brings it to the conclusion of *Wolf Song*. Of course no other region offered the alternative to this particular impulse toward suicide, perhaps. But the greatness lies in the significance it has for this time and all time. Fergusson was writing of how a child becomes a man; of how the law of nature cannot

suffice for the law of man; of how survival of the fittest is misapplied outside the animal kingdom.

Yet *Wolf Song* did not receive an understanding appraisal of the story implicit in its pages, for nowhere else in this land was the philosophy of expansion as a rightful and determined thing given even the slightest rebuff. The Southwest did not escape the flood of hunters that followed the mountain man, seekers after any manner of gold that could be taken without accounting. They came in hordes impossible to challenge, as impossible to deflect as the sudden storms of summer, and they gutted the country as flash floods gut it, stripping away the rich soil that centuries had been needed to produce; and when the bare unproductive rock was reached, they turned upon the settlements. Denied a wilderness to exploit, the hunters seized the only quarry left and made it theirs. Chauvinism was the new weapon; the home town booster clubs the hunter's rendezvous.

Main Street became an epithet in the twenties. Some tried to understand it, but even Willa Cather contrasted the sterility of the town girls to the life-force in the country girls. Fergusson had the insight to choose the town girl and to look at her predicament. In his most realistic study, in his Main Street of the twenties, *Hot Saturday*, he makes of her a symbol. He sees her as the prey of thwarted adolescence.

Hot Saturday is the story of woman—the old “enemy”—as now a cherished creature. She is given leisure, but she is denied freedom to use that leisure. The town's Lions, Moose, and Elk had pawed Ruth because she was full of pent-up life, but they had no intention of marrying her, of assuming responsibility for an energy they could only admit in pornographic terms. Yet when they see she might escape them, they set out to “protect” her by reverting to the pack and warning the visiting rich young man against her. In great distress Wilbur deserts her at a dance.

Seeing her hope for escape gone, Ruth dances with the lunger

from the East whom she had constantly been warned against because he was a foreigner, because he was a kind of artist at living, and artists have a way with women and they do not "belong." "Ruth was the perfect embodiment of the town. She had its blind energy, its unawareness, its painful conflict of impulse and ideal." Now she was caught in the mechanistic drive to aggrandizement of self, the old impelling drive of the hunter. Sensing the crushing power of this possessive madness that despises as it imprisons, Ruth instinctively flouts the conventions set up by it; she does the forbidden, she embraces life; she makes a gift of herself to the only one who understands—the "bum"; she becomes what she is reputed to be. And the morning after "was a morning strangely new, clean and clear" for Ruth. She could idle contentedly on the front porch at home, for she "had fulfilled her destiny." It is in this mood that she sees the young man Wilbur returning to her; he had been wandering about all night. "I don't believe a word anyone says about you," he blurts out, and he adds, "Ruth, I know you're good."

And so Fergusson's small town woman came of age and escaped Main Street where man is possessor merely. She was free to try that only less precarious jeopardy of the city of man and woman as supposedly equal, where, sadly, the escape amounts to acquisitions of electric percolators and little more. The city is no answer, but it is better than the small town. For her. But the man must find this out, too, and Fergusson does a really fine job of pricking the romantic dream of the West as an answer to everything man yearns for still in *Footloose McGarnigal*, published in 1930.

McGarnigal, not footloose in the beginning, had listened to the yarns of a Texas uncle when he was a boy; now he is a highly trained New York draftsman tied to "blue prints and a crick in the neck and good prospects far ahead." Through the old man's death he receives a small bequest, enough to test his dream of living away from a society that would discipline him.

With a survey crew, he is isolated on a mountain top in New Mexico. All in the party "... were in some sort romantic adventurers. ... All of them were looking for something they couldn't quite find and all were a little bewildered to discover that life here too was hard work and monotony and that their dreams now all went back home." The inevitable topic of conversation was woman. "The longer they went without her in the flesh the more vividly she was present to their imagination, demonstrating, as she always does, that to flee her is never to escape."

At the end of the summer McGarnigal goes down to Taos briefly and encounters there the other extreme of the romantic urge, promiscuity in the art colony. But there is a girl artist in the group, a New Yorker like himself, who has come to the Southwest to work seriously. Watching a pueblo dance together they decide that the Indians are a "fragment of a lost world" and that they won't last much longer, and yet that "they're more at home on earth than any of the rest of us." It is she who first gives up expecting to find answers for herself in a culture alien to her own; she returns to the city, but McGarnigal, more stubborn than she, returns to the woods for yet another try. He takes the solitary job of fireguard in the mountains; he learns what it is to be absolutely alone for days, and he knows when his job is over that this is no direction for him to take. This is a beautifully poetic section with remarkable insights into romantic individualism faced with its own romance.

In the first concession to return to humankind he becomes a temporary forest ranger and has a chance to become part of a village. He makes love to Lucretia. The whole community comes to know about the affair, and a male relative threatens him. Was this the country of his dreams? "Sitting alone in his shack he felt like an outlaw camped on the edge of a settlement. He was no part of the place and he had no stake in it. Here he was only a marauder." As perhaps the romantic always is: his dream is forever that he will find the spot where the marauder needn't think of himself as the enemy, where he may take what he wants without paying for it.

Bitterly disillusioned not only with his dream but with the betrayer of his dream, McGarnigal rides aimlessly away into the blackness of the night. And a train comes, "cutting the dark with swift fiery purpose, rushing unerringly through the black un-human chaos of the mountain night toward great cities of light and order. It shouted to him with the rich metallic voice of the machine—a voice of challenge and purpose, of conquering human will riding on steel and fire. It clove the dark muddle of his mood with a long sword of light, filling him with desire, pointing him a direction." The city "was everything he wanted now, everything he lacked."

And so the romantic becomes the realist in this novel at the close of the twenties when the machine had seemed to triumph and the old culture of the Indians along the Rio Grande had seemed to be dying out. The book was an artistic triumph, a triumph so convincing that the artist himself fell victim to its logic and gave himself over for the most of the next two decades to "light and order," to the analysis of society, to philosophy and autobiography, to what was termed in the thirties the "frontiers" of the mind. Ferguson turned to nonfiction with *Rio Grande* in 1933 and *Modern Man, His Belief and Behavior* in 1936. It is not easy to classify these books, for they are strongly creative; they attempt to draw within their covers the complexities of all the material related to the central subject. There is great need, of course, to describe the structure of our world, to organize it so that we might have a better understanding of predicaments. But there is something beyond that, the step that takes one beyond nonfiction limitations; it is the concern with values that only the artist can extract from this mass of evidence, evidence to which he is always deeply indebted. It is understandable that within the closed circles of logic and reasoning Ferguson concluded that man was deluding himself when he assumed that he had any choice in his destiny; that the most he could hope to achieve was an "ethic of balance," a state "lying between spontaneous desire and the fear that natural-

ly accompanies any important action"; no more, briefly, than compromise.

The practicing artist in Fergusson knew better than this, as *Footloose McGarnigal* so well illustrates. The novel becomes meaningful by an act of will. McGarnigal could have stayed in the West—which was not, it should be noted, the place of his upbringing—and could have disintegrated with his dream, but he chose to go back to a struggle he was fitted for and therefore had an obligation to compete in.

So long as the artist trusts the artist in himself there is choice, there is the possibility of some measure of synthesis. Fergusson had chosen the particular clay out of which McGarnigal emerged; once chosen, he was obliged, as an artist, to follow out the insights thus determined. But before that choice is made the writer stands always upon a crossroads where the dominant expression of the time is intersected by life, by erotic purpose if you will. And he sets out upon the road that seems to promise a way out of this chaos of crossed impulses.

The way for Fergusson in this era was the path well marked out for him by his academic education, the way he had abandoned earlier by choice. He turned his energy and his excellent experience as artist-observer to nonfiction, at least one book of which, *Rio Grande*, comes near being creative art in spite of the new choice of medium, because, in fact, of his choice of subject. For Fergusson was not McGarnigal; he was not a New Yorker, and he was not an academician by birth, but only by training.

The major conflict of the American writer, whether he was born in the hinterland or in the city, arises from the expectancies of a culture still geared to frontier exigencies. On all frontiers the artist is suspect. In an age of specialization, of being the lone hunter seeking out the properties of one component in a chemical formula, of examining the appearance and disappearance of a comma in the various editions of *Macbeth*, of digging up all historical material between the years 1200 and 1202, of becoming an au-

thority—in an age of busyness bent upon acquisition, the artist sitting quietly in the plaza intent upon the meaning of life is the enemy. How can he who is dedicated to the contemplation of past, present and future have a credible message for a world dedicated to the moment, to a *way of doing*? Better to scorn him and clear the plaza for business.

So Ferguson took up the weapons chosen by the challengers—if that was what it took to keep a place in the heart of the community. He wrote *Rio Grande*; he gathered together in one book the history, geography, sociology and anthropology of the region; he organized the book as an artist organizes; everything is there for the imagination to create an almost living thing, if the reader can become the catalyst. *Rio Grande* is the best single book on the region for the newcomer or for the awakened resident who feels the need to know something of the structure of this crossroad; but for those who want interpretation and meaning, the novels go far beyond the informational intention of *Rio Grande*. All of the novels, that is, with the exception of *The Life of Riley*, 1937, and *Grant of Kingdom*, 1950, which are novels of this crossroad that never got away from the intersection.

Modern Man was published in 1936 and may account for some of the irresolution of the problems evoked in these last two novels. It is conceivable that giving in to the medium most highly applauded, he damaged the creative spirit. For Ferguson *The Life of Riley* expressed an eclipse, for the time, of the artist. From this novel Ferguson felt impelled to turn to straight autobiography. In *Home in the West*, 1945, he explains that he had done so because he could not say all that he wished to say in the novel form. If the early novels are read before *Home in the West*, which recapitulates much of the material, we are struck with how much more effectively Ferguson presented the experiences and insights fictionally. It is the difference between reading a poem and reading an explication of it. Still another nonfiction work, *People and Power*, appeared in 1947. It is a provocative book as are all of Fer-

gusson's; it urges inquiry, revaluations of the world in which we live; but it is analysis preoccupied with the acceptance of compromise as inescapable. The painful dilemma of himself as artist in a society committed to a distrust of the creative is clearly manifest.

There are unforgettable minor characters in all of Fergusson's novels. In those of the twenties oftener than not these are artists, by temperament or trade, who serve an important function in the matrix of each novel. In *The Life of Riley*, the artist is not a minor but a central character; he would be an artist at living, but in this novel he is a failure, as a man, and as a synthesizing agent. What we have is a curious confusion of the impulses to destroy and to give life.

Riley, Fergusson tells us, "was not a fumbling, undisciplined man." In his autobiography, Fergusson remarks that this generation had learned that no longer could it "live by luck and hope but only by skill and discipline." He does not say what sort of skill or discipline to what ends. Riley was an expert with women; and so the lone hunter of frontier days becomes the wolf of the twenties and thirties; he becomes in this age the specialist. Sex for Riley was not a purposive act, a creative thing; it was an end in itself. The story of Riley is the story of the women with whom he had relations. And we have a fine series of portraits of women in response to *a way of doing*; the romantic concentration is explored in all its aspects; only one woman, the last one, young Shirley, is encouraged to go on to something that perhaps will not find the end in the means. She did not really want to leave a relationship that Riley—now old and practiced—had made his masterpiece, but Riley made it easy for her by stepping aside, by quelling the possessive that he had always felt to be the destroyer of love. And in so doing Riley found himself bereft and near to suicide. Yet by that act he expressed the most important value of the romantic spirit in the struggle for all manner of freedom, the understanding of the evil in possessiveness. Too often, as with Riley, the impulse

was predicated upon an unwillingness to assume responsibility. A lifetime concerned with maintaining his own freedom betrayed him. Sex for him had been an isolated thing, unrelated to the whole of life. Instead of entering the struggle toward freedom through cooperative effort, Riley like most romantics reverted to concentration upon individual perfection, the skill and discipline necessary to the lone hunter. Survival depends, however, individually and collectively, upon more than discipline, for the armies of men are highly skilled; it depends upon discipline for some end.

Flight into the desert, away from the source of life along the river, toward, ever toward the enchanting mirage of trees and water where there are none, is fatal, as Ferguson tells us in all the early novels. Sam Lash learned that there are disciplines that lead to growth and maturity, and even though the knowledge irks him and he beats upon the limitations of man's destiny as a procreator, still he does not evade it. What then is the Riley of the thirties? He had "painfully experienced the fact that life fails men above all as a mode of growth." He had not of course failed life. "Like any lost man he had travelled in a circle." He came to see that his life was not a passion or a tragedy after all. "It was just a compromise." Is he a son of pioneers who could not or would not face "the morning after"? Or is he merely a victim of a philosophy inert in the arms of mechanism? Compromise is but an armed truce that ends oftener than not in annihilation. Differences, accepted as differences, are the dialectic out of which synthesis can come, out of which children may be born, out of which a new and living thing, wholly unique, can come.

Following Ferguson through the thirteen years of analysis of human behavior, his own and others, there was some eagerness to see the artistic result in *Grant of Kingdom*, 1950. Hope ran high that now at last the direction from the crossroads would be clear, that all would have been made ready for the blazing of a trail to the Cities of Cibola.

The first section of *Grant of Kingdom* promised much. It be-

gins where *Wolf Song* left off, in Taos of the 1850's; there is a gringo mountain man who "had been on the move for thirteen years, because he lived in a moving world, but he had always felt sure he had a destination, that his time would come to settle and build." Fergusson tells us that "he had no conception of money as a form of power," yet consciously or unconsciously Ballard manages to marry the daughter, not of an humble Mexican—many of whom he had lived with—but the daughter of a Don, a wealthy landowner.

It is significant that this part of the novel is titled "The Conqueror." Jean Ballard, Fergusson says, "... was never lost. His sense of direction seemed never to fail him." The Don gives him an old parchment which to the Don was worthless; it was a grant of a vast wilderness of land, a hunting ground of hostile Indians. Ballard, of course, was exactly the person capable of subduing this virgin earth. "For what had fallen into his hands was not merely a place to live and cultivate. It was the vital heart of a whole region, a place where men would gather as surely as he made it safe, a place to be ruled as well as owned, a means to power as surely as he had power in him."

"The Conqueror" is up to anything he had produced before, in unity, in writing, in conception and presentation. There is one more brief section toward the end in which the author treats of the problems of the "spiritual" son of this autocratic father, a Daniel Laird, with artistic intention. However, what Ballard does with this virgin earth and the effect of his "benevolence" upon those he came to have at his mercy, both during his lifetime and after—the rest of the book—is in essay form.

But the most disappointing aspect of this last novel is the author's insistence upon an interpretation that is not in the material, either as presented or as inherent; and of something else, not unrelated, the open glorification of the strong man as hero, of the heroizing in fact of a vanished way of life that can neither be repeated nor that leads anywhere but down a blind alley. Fergusson

has given in to the nostalgia of the idealist, to the sentiment that sees in the mountain wilderness the illusion of changelessness, "with not a human habitation visible to *mar* [my italics] the beauty of the long forested ridges falling away to the prairie." For all idealists pull toward the absolute, the static, the past, which is complete and without the possibility of change. One can try to escape change—growth—by going into the past and staying there; he can try to escape into the self, the moment, through absorption in a way of doing, into glorifying individual power. Ballard had chosen feudalism for his pattern, not because he was thinking of posterity; "he didn't in the least believe anyone else could take over his kingdom and rule it." Least of all his most devoted follower, Daniel Laird, the axman, the keeper of the peace, the preacher of the Bible on Sundays, the idealist.

And yet Fergusson tells us over and over that Ballard was a great man; it was change—the bugaboo is now in the open—that was destroying all he had created. But Ballard had his opportunity to create something lasting—the earth was virgin; feudalism might be said to be a stage above the lone hunter, but not when it is made to serve the lone hunter instead of the future. Ballard merely lived out his destiny as a mountain man, on a rather grandiose scale, in the manner of big business with which Ballard's empire was contrasted because no one went hungry in Ballard's kingdom. Certainly, as first exploiter, it was no problem to live lushly off the untouched wilderness. The mountain man, it seems, is but the archetype of all the exploiters; he is perhaps the extreme individualist, and when he comes into real power it is instructive to see what he does with it. Ballard used it to live lavishly to bankruptcy. Bankruptcy was an ideal, the thing that drove the men back to plunder, for "a mountain man goes on until he's rubbed out." Fergusson would have us believe that Ballard was ruined because he knew nothing of business and finance, even though he had organized a smoothly running little world that depended upon trade with the big outside world. Fergusson chose as a theme for

this novel an atavism—benevolent autocracy; and not to give us some insight into the unworkability in the modern world, of uncontrolled individualism but to re-create it for a moment that we might sentimentalize over its passing; even more than that, to suggest that a way of doing is the only thing of importance, a rule to live by.

Daniel Laird, "The Prophet" of the last section of *Grant of Kingdom*, is a fitting heir of unresolved conflicts; and he is presented, only briefly from the pen of the artist and extensively in exposition. Laird, when he was under the rule of Ballard, "had persuaded himself once that he loved his fellow beings." But in the chaos following Ballard's death, he learns to hate them for being sheep enough to assist the new rulers to help run him out of town. The prophet's wrath rises in him. He wanted to get away from everyone, yet "... he didn't truly want to run, either. He wanted to stay and fight—to defy and denounce and destroy." He withdraws from his kind, however, into the mountains alone and the Lord becomes his shepherd. But he comes eventually to feel the need of his kind again, and since he will not return to Dark River he makes the almost suicidal effort to cross the mountains to the other side with winter upon him. The section dealing with this feat is nowhere else excelled in Fergusson's writing of such feats. In a blinding snowstorm above timberline Laird knows that "a man who has no bearings always feels that he is traveling in a straight line but he always in fact . . . will finally travel in a circle." But there are no bearings in this isolation and he almost gives up to the urge to easeful death. Yet he "also wanted to defeat the storm, to elude the circling, treacherous snow." It is the old see-saw, the inability to take sides permanently. Once across the mountains he "felt curiously sure he would never become the same kind of man again—one who stood apart and addressed his fellows and commanded them."

When Morgan, the first person narrator, visits Ballard in 1906 he comments that Laird was now a prosperous rancher, but he was

also an "uncompromising radical." "He was always," writes Morgan, "thundering in his mighty voice against the trusts on Wall Street, predicting the day when humble men who worked with their hands would rise in their organized power and smite the mighty";—he was in the Colorado legislature—"he was the same old Laird, the born champion of lost causes."

"A man," Morgan says, "with a touch of genius who had never found the means of his own development."

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