

BOOKS

George Eckstein

Apropos In Cold Blood

IN COLD BLOOD, by Truman Capote. New York: Random House. 343 pp. \$5.95.

Truman Capote's meticulous story of a quadruple murder on the Kansas plain, its instant success, and some of the critical reactions to it raise a number of thoughts and questions. To take the success first, can it primarily be attributed to skillful merchandising? Doubtful; if that were so, more books—or, for that matter, toothpastes or movies—would be successful. There must be *some* kind of merit in the "product" for it to have caught on. Now unquestionably the writing is very skillful, but I submit that the major reason for the appeal of this "nonfiction novel" lies in the particular way in which its subject matter is treated. This treatment reflects a new attitude toward crime, toward murder, that has developed during the last two decades and most significantly during the last few years. In various guises, we can trace this attitude in quite different cultural documents; it has been perhaps most conspicuous in the fields of film and literature. It is, obviously, behind the James Bond vogue, and behind many of the New Wave pictures (*Breathless*, *Don't Shoot the Piano Player* to name just a few). It manifests itself, in different ways, in Camus' fiction and in

those works of the concentration camp literature which manage to handle their terrible subject with fierce matter-of-factness (e.g., Jorge Semprun's *The Long Voyage*, Piotr Rawicz's *Blood from the Sky*). The same attitude makes Claude Brown's "non-fiction novel" *Manchild in the Promised Land* so much more effective than its numerous predecessors.

The most striking quality of this new attitude is its curious detachment: the "cool" approach, unsentimental, almost beyond cynicism, yet far from indifferent. There is a notable absence of outright moral judgment, a clinical curiosity, at times mixed with childlike wonder, at others with worldly knowledgeability.

Like war, crime has, in this attitude, become a "job" to be judged by the competence of its execution; it evokes neither sociopsychological justification nor moral reprobation. Technique and organization take over, and it all tends to become an exercise, a game, like the value-free mathematical exercises of our strategists of deterrence. The interposition of ever more technical and organizational apparatus increases the distance between the victim and his killer, who becomes more

and more a technician or a bureaucrat "doing his job." In this general atmosphere surrounding the exercise of violence in our time, the element of estrangement enters also into those cases where the killing is done on an intimate scale.

Another typical feature is *gratuitousness*. This lack of cause or justification was the dominant feature of the Kennedy-Oswald-Ruby chain or, rather, the sequence of events. The careful planning that went into the murder of the Clutter family cannot erase that same element from *In Cold Blood*, and the sordid "happening" in Dallas, which highlighted the extent to which violence had become part of our lives, is probably to some extent responsible for the appeal of Truman Capote's story of a murder. In both events the accidental features provide a good part of the dramatic shock, and Capote's skillful "cutting" between the stories of the murderers and that of the victims puts a strong stress on the gratuitous.

Related to the gratuitous is the *incongruous*: it probably never has been quite absent in similar deeds. But today we dwell on it, because in a way it has become our mode of existence. Perry Smith solicitously placing a pillow under Clutter's head not long before slicing his throat and preventing his companion from raping the doomed girl; the laughing fit after the deed that had lost its entire *raison d'être* since there had been no safe with cash—did we not encounter the same kind of incongruity with the S.S. doctors who treated prisoners for frostbite or handed out candies to the kiddies before sending them to the gas chambers? Do we not find it closer

to home, in our alternation of aid and defoliation in Vietnam? The list is endless. Our time (and our daily *Times*) is full of examples.*

Little wonder, then, that the old moral attitude toward crime and criminals has been eroded. Maybe we ought to maintain it, when it comes to the destruction of human life. But, in the context of our time and society, there is something grating about that slightly superior moral attitude shown by some commentators toward the two murderers, and about their reproaching Capote for "making them too human." In such a view of the criminal and the crime there is still reflected the concept of the neat separation of "good" and "bad," of "their" world and "ours," both in the social and the psychological sense. There is also implicit in such an attitude that ominous view of the other as a being of a different kind (Jew, murderer, Vietcong, Negro, White) against whom ultimately anything is permissible.

We may excuse these murderers up to a point because of their "tough luck," but we lack the imagination to realize what it means to live in abject poverty, in utter frustration; and sixty-six years after *The Interpretation of Dreams* we still like to close our minds to their own abysses. Nor do we like to be reminded, by a Truman Capote or by a Hannah Arendt, of the deeds of which man is capable.

* Closely connected to incongruousness is the victim's inability to realize that his persecutor means business and, just as many Jews were incredulous about their own impending extermination, so Clutter was unable to believe that Smith and Hickok were actually going to kill him.

Capote succeeds superbly in making us "know" these two young men precisely because he does not draw any conclusions from the facts he has unearthed about their lives, and—what is more—because he comes to them free alike of moralizing and of pity. But if we no longer condemn these men for moral reasons, it has also become too pat and too simple to blame it all on "society." Society, by way of poverty and deprivation, is unquestionably playing a large part, but we do not expect murder to disappear along with poverty. The deepest lesions and frustrations may not necessarily stem from material deprivation after all.

Must we then accept these men as they are? In a way, yes; at least in the sense that we cannot reach them at all unless we do so, and that we can-

not begin to do something about their condition; and ours, until we have reached that point. By then it becomes relevant to have a closer look at the nature of their crime, and at the two criminals, and then it becomes clear that their crimes differ radically.

Perry Smith, the Irish-Indian outcast, son of vagabonds and a vagabond himself, deeply hurt and frustrated in his repeated attempts to form genuine human relationships and to rise out of utter poverty; his crime is an act of rebellion *against* his society. Dick Hickok, on the other hand, from a good middle-class family, the con man, is the salesman in a society of salesmen; his motive is greed, easy riches, just like his society's. His crime is the crime *of* his society: "trying to get away with murder."

On the Genesis of Stalinism

POWER AND THE SOVIET ELITE: "THE LETTER OF AN OLD BOLSHEVIK" AND OTHER ESSAYS, by Boris I. Nicolaevsky; edited by Janet D. Zagoria. New York: Praeger. 275 pp. \$6.95.

In the 1930's, when it became unwise—even dangerous—for Soviet historians to concern themselves with Russian revolutionary history, the custodianship of this profession passed to a dwindling group of emigrés. The greatest representative of the exiled historiography is Boris I. Nicolaevsky—historian, journalist, archivist, and Social Democrat (Menshevik). The extent of Nicolaevsky's influence and the impact of his research is immense. It is reflected in dozens of Western studies, many of which owe a large

part of their achievement to his knowledge and private archives. This volume is a small selection of his writings on Soviet politics, or, more properly, on Stalinism, its rise and departure.

Two of the items are really historical documents. One is "The Letter of an Old Bolshevik," a narrative describing events within the Soviet leadership between 1932 and 1936, written on the basis of conversations with Nikolai Bukharin in Paris in 1936, and reprinted here after almost thirty