

"Lelchuk's *Inferno*"

REPORT BY WILFRID SHEED

THE campus novel has come a long way since the days of Dink Stover and Frank Merriwell. Man's oldest nightmare, the snake entering the playground, has found a fresh setting. Frank Merriwell now takes greenies to get up for the big game, and Dink is down in the cellar making bombs. It isn't just real life that has changed but imagination itself, the kind of myths a generation wants and believes. And Mr. Lelchuk has produced a whole mythology, a book of beasts, that anatomizes the new imagination with bloodcurdling fidelity.

The result is a genuine document, something for the space capsule, a Sears Roebuck catalog of Revolution. Readers who miss it will miss (besides, as warned above, a feast of squalor) not only an extraordinary new writer but a report from the Ivy Lower Depths that rings imaginatively true. Such a book must by definition be obscene, because obscenity is the official language down there. In fact, the inhabitants have been known to insist on it. The setting of Lelchuk's *Inferno* is Super-Campus near Cambridge, Massachusetts, a glittering Arab bazaar of the mind, where the best of human thought and art have been gathered, and where the student body screams for the worst, for dirt and death. In the name, of course, of Revolution.

Lelchuk grasps this irony until it hurts: the new revolutionaries do not know what or whom they are really killing. They imagine that their actions are purely political. Since the bourgeoisie can be reached through their art objects, our young Lenins set to trashing museums and libraries and even to sacrificing a certain well-known author. (Of which indignity more in a moment.) But as they warm

to their work, we see how bitterly they resent all this beauty and truth they've been offered, how much they think it demeans and even annihilates them.

Our guide through this underworld (or Underground) is one Lenny Pincus, a divided soul pulled apart by a million books, a sensitive Jewish boy and gee-whiz Dodger fan hell-bent on being a Dostoevsky character. Lenny stumbles into Revolution as the latest campus game, only to find that desecrating paintings has spiritual consequences. Unlike the other vandals, he really likes art. Yet a revolutionary must become a new man, mustn't he? Lenny concludes that he must burn the art and beauty from his own soul, like a monk renouncing his possessions. He solemnly decides to go all the way with degradation, debauching a young girl and even killing his favorite author, or literary father, Norman Mailer.

BUT instead of a new man, he becomes more and more a frightened child. For rebirth proves harder than it looks. To begin with, he still prefers milk at bedtime to LSD, and there's nothing much Dostoevsky can do about that. Then again he can't really change his age: however hard he tries, he is still a kid playing at Revolution, to the amusement of his hardened (mostly black) colleagues, who play for blood. Some vestige of Dink Stover lives on. Worst of all, he retains plenty of bourgeois competitiveness, wanting to be the biggest revolutionary of them all, and angling constantly for the spotlight without even knowing he's doing it.

Pincus is not funny. Self-educated at one of our major universities, his head bulging with

undigested Nietzsche and other teen-age favorites, he personifies intellect in the act of destroying itself. Another old nightmare come back to haunt us: the tower built to reach God, and God's vengeance on it. In this case, Babel is the University and the confusion of tongues comes from the teachers. Pincus is a pure academic product, whether he likes it or not, and he destroys his nest in the name of ideas he learned there.

IT SAYS much for Lelchuk's gifts that Pincus can wade through some scenes of broadest satire without ever becoming a cartoon figure or walking symbol. His ideas are the best available, and the level of argumentation is exhilaratingly high. He also has a real emotional life, based on a search for his father which Lelchuk is never so clumsy as to mention by name. Pincus Senior was a Communist, and little Lenny repudiated him early in life for loving Russia better than America. Now Lenny can make it up to him.

Lenny's second father is his favorite teacher, Dean Bernie Kovell, an exotic square. When Pincus discovers an erotic diary of Kovell's, his disgust is out of all proportion to the fact, as if he had caught a literal parent in adultery. Lenny is at heart a puritan, like many famous rebels. Since Kovell embodies the best of bourgeois rationality, and since his private life is sheer chaos, it follows that Western civilization is just one big Kovell. Classic "true believer" reasoning to keep Pincus from facing his own confusion.

Luckily Dean Kovell is well able to speak for himself. His big speech to the student rebels is good enough to make you wonder which side the author is on (admirable strategy), and his love life, while certainly frantic, is not confused at all but a model of organization. It is also, as expressed in his diary, an exercise in liberal altruism. Each of his women is the better for knowing him. Can Lenny's say the same?

The fight is not fixed. Mr. Lelchuk seems to be lodged between the generations and to feel strongly for and against both of them. He even manages to change his voice slightly for Pincus and Kovell, and wildly for a group of distinguished intellectuals he rounds up at the end—a fine stretch of intellectual farce and mimicry. The Mailer shooting incident, which has stirred some aimless publicity, is another good imitation and just about justifies itself in the context. The real-life Mailer is one of the ancestors of murderous student violence, although it was just talk in the old days, and he is here confronted with his child—Pincus waving his pistol and hoping the older man understands. (Mailer handles himself pretty well, considering.)

This scene may be the key to the author's own feelings. For Pincus' nervous pistol points also at all the armchair nihilists and blood-talking teachers who prattle about murder and violence and revolution but have never stopped a bullet or seen a man die. My own guess, judging from this and from the electrifying horror of the museum-trashing scenes, is that the author hates and fears violence. But in any case, the effect of *American Mischief* is strongly counterrevolutionary, and the author is too intelligent not to know it.

HOWEVER, Lelchuk's intentions are not finally important. The bad dream remains, whether he is for or against it. That Americans should have such dreams at all is horror enough. And even though no students I know of ever did anything half as bad as Lelchuk's in real life, enough of them thought they could, and enough other people thought they could too, for the Myth to make all the mischief in American life that even a Pincus could ask for. Luckily the subject has now found itself an author with the explosive verbal energy and bizarre, feverish imagination to render it in all its colors and at full temperature.