

BOOK REVIEW

Dan Campion

Slouching Towards Kalamazoo, by Peter De Vries. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983. 241 pp.

TO BORROW A trope from his colleague Thomas Pynchon, there is a trajectory to Peter De Vries's comic novels. They are launched by Little, Brown with tasteful ads in the *New York Times Book Review*, attain apogee with at least a score of glowing reviews, and then subside mysteriously, inscrutably, while our ears ring with the reports of much heavier wits crashing into the best-seller lists.

Slouching Towards Kalamazoo shows why. It is as wry and quirky as Sandburg's "Sins of Kalamazoo," and as erudite and ambiguous as Yeats's "Second Coming," but these are not the materials from which blockbuster paperbacks and movies are made. De Vries has been shooting for altitude since his first novel in 1940, though, and his readers experience a satisfying vertigo on his latest flight. If Pynchon is our Rabelais, De Vries, although he has spoken nearly all his life in prose, may be our Molière. The farce of *Slouching Towards Kalamazoo* entangles a fifteen-year-old eighth-grader named Anthony Thrasher with his teacher, Miss Maggie Doubloon, in a secret romance during his class's study of *The Scarlet Letter*. Although Anthony, who reads Nietzsche and Kierkegaard instead of memorizing the chief products of Venezuela, cannot "master the difference between a pistil and a stamen," his affair with his teacher results in pregnancy. As this faux pas occurs in 1960 in a remote North Dakota hamlet known to us only as "Ulalume," the consequences are dire.

The consequences for society, that is, not for the transgressors Dimmesdale/Thrasher and Prynne/Doubloon, nor the offspring, Pearl/Ahab. (There is no Chillingworth. There are no more Chillingworths; Doubloon's proto-hippy "former boyfriend" has run off to Nepal, leaving behind only the redolence of incense in her apartment.) It is De Vries's whimsical conceit to attribute the sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s to a rebellious North Dakota elementary school teacher and her existentially jaded pupil—a pupil who "chews gum while he makes aphorisms," is flunking basic math, and

whose favorite line in Coleridge is "We were a ghastly crew." Hawthornian anxiety is turned inside out in De Vries's parody of twentieth-century angst: the "just rewards" meted out to De Vries's principals surpass even the optimism of a Fruitlands community.

Miss Doubloon (from Spanish "double," as in money) makes a mint manufacturing and selling imprinted T-shirts, whereas Hester Prynne (OED "preen"; "to sew; to stitch up") merely patched up her peace with Boston. Doubloon emigrates to Kalamazoo to have her baby and set up her business, and it is in that direction her adolescent paramour employs his "slouching-towards-Bethlehem-gait," which he has practiced in front of a mirror. Anthony doesn't fare badly, either—no hideous blot on his escutcheon, only a few bruises from Doubloon's elbow-in-the-ribs joker of a grandfather, Stubblefield. A new romance blooms between Anthony and his love-child's nursemaid, Bubbles Breedlove, whose father takes a fancy to Miss Doubloon as the Molièrian complications double and redouble; the variations played on *The Scarlet Letter's* plot, characters, and theme remind one of *Le Médecin malgré lui's* blithe relocation of the human heart, "We have changed all that."

De Vries doctors up his slouching plot and commedia dell'arte characterization with an antic subplot: a lovers' triangle in which Anthony's minister father must defend his marriage, if he can, from Mrs. Thrasher's infatuation with the village atheist, who is also the family's dermatologist. The showdown is a theological debate between the antagonists in the "Ulalume" high school auditorium, and it would be helpful to have the insight of a Monsieur Dupin to foretell the outcome, and that of the inevitable rematch. The results read something like *A Cool Million* out of *Wise Blood* by Men, Women, and Dogs—a mixture too rich for some blood, but the right stuff for loyal De Vries readers and a fillip to those meeting him here for the first time.

Some characteristic De Vriesian touches are a lady lodger "so tiny that on all fours she would have made a nice trivet" and an Airedale named Chuck who can sniff out not only people's fear, but their *Weltschmerz*. Anthony has plenty of the latter, which he takes out on others with such puns as "Don't you think the important thing when you're freezing to death is to keep your cool?" and on himself by guiltily recalling his habit as an infant of mashing bananas in his fists and flinging the pulp at the inspirational mottoes hanging on the walls, evidence that contributes to the opining of the dermatologist (to whom Anthony believes himself allergic) that "I think you're the antichrist." Setting grandiose conclusions against trivial evidence is one of De Vries's favorite ways of ridiculing fundamentalism of all kinds, from Freudianism to Moral Majority zealotry. He deflates literary pretentiousness, too, by means of burlesque—as when the "antichrist" falls asleep while reading in bed the story of Jezebel in a big heirloom Bible that then falls from his hands and cracks two ribs.

Such devices are traditional comic and satiric cues, and De Vries manages them with a juggler's aplomb, a *New Yorker* cartoonist's urbanity, and his own tact and civility. What holds many of De Vries's readers, too, I think, is his audacity. His allusions run the gamut from Homer to André Breton, his diction from "dumb-dumb" to "titubation," his philosophizing from cracker-barrel to technical. But diffused through the whole is a tincture of what Thoreau called "the wild," Breton "the marvelous" in literature: the dreamlike incongruousness of a boy falling behind in his grades because he's "moving toward a Manichaeian dualism" in his thinking; the fortuitous juxtaposition of a "hammy" reading of *Snow-Bound* "in which Pop was unmistakably doing Whittier as Marlon Brando," with, on the following page, a discussion of Nietzsche. Energizing the cosmopolitan De Vries there is a powerfully volatile element of discovery, of recombination. And backing up the avuncular humorist is a spirit of experimentation that, in tune with the state of the art, toys with the notion of making *Slouching Towards Kalamazoo* something of a self-consuming artifact by referring on seven occasions to the "coining" of words, naming its heroine "Doubloon," and ending the novel with a multi-level, multi-stage pun inflicted on a wealthy amoralist named Mrs. Thralling.

Slouching Towards Kalamazoo is perhaps Peter De Vries's most successfully sustained novel since *Madder Music* (1977), and it ranks with such vintage De Vries as *The Mackerel Plaza* (1958) and *Let Me Count the Ways* (1965). It lacks only a one-liner to compare in silliness and review-closing serendipitousness with Mr. Shrubsole's in De Vries's previous book, *Sauce for the Goose* (1981): "I have premises to keep and miles to mow before I sleep."