Books of The Times

Fictions Within Fictions

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

THE HAIR OF HAROLD ROUX. By Thomas Williams. 373 pages. Random House. \$7.95.

In "The Hair of Harold Roux," Thomas, Williams seems to have succumbed to the anxieties and malaise that afflict so many writers in our times. "Aaron Benham sits at his desk hearing the wrong voices," reads the opening of Mr. Williams's fifth novel. "The human race he has been doomed to celebrate seems to be trying to

prove to him that nothing is worthwhile, nothing at ... And yet it his work to seek meaning and On the shelf just above his desk are his five books in their editions various translations, and each full of words he has painfully arranged in orged in or-And so he der.' continues to write stories, short fables for his children, a novel in called



Thomas Williams

"The Hair of Harold Roux." And he tries to be a helpful friend—to a former student named Mark Rasmussen who has dropped out into the drug culture, and to one of his colleagues, who, though a popular and successful classroom teacher, is about to lose his position because he refuses to finish his doctoral thesis. And Mr. Williams, who in his earlier novels was wont to give us long, conventional narratives about life in his beloved fictional town of Leah, N.H., has made of Aaron Benham's fictions and acts of friendship what for him is a highly experimental novel.

Moral Subtleties of Life

Actually, Aaron's acts of friendship are abortive. He gets in touch with Mark Rasmussen and persuades himself that Mark is in no serious trouble, but he cannot persuade him to come out of hiding, and he cannot bring himself to inform the boy's distraught mother that her son is at least alive. He spends time with his recalcitrant colleague and offers comfort to the man's wife, but he cannot dig to the bottom of his friend's problem and he cannot bring himself to lobby with the appropriate committee for an extension of his friend's thesis deadline. Aaron is bemused by the moral subtleties of life. Like most writers, he sees too many sides of the issues. He feels guilty. He writes.

And actually, what he writes is uneven. His best work is represented by a fragment of fiction he reads to his colleague's class—a powerful rendering of interlocking

paranoid systems that depicts the author as the passive victim of antagonisms he has in real life provoked—and a beguiling bedtime story he has composed for his son and daughter in which their fictional counterparts play heroic roles. But the novel within the novel—the book called "The Hair of Harold Roux" that Aaron is writing, which takes up over half of the book called "The Hair of Harold Roux" that Mr. Williams is writing—is not so successful.

It concerns a group of post-World War II college students, at the focal point of which are two friends—Allard Benson, who is the persona of Aaron Benham, and Harold Roux, whose peculiarly finicky sense of honor and romance has led him at the age of 23 to wear a toupee. But while there are effective scenes in this novel within the novel—in particular the passages in which Allard woos and seduces a lovely, devout Catholic girl, as well as those that conjure up a miniature village called Lilliputown in which the novel's violent climax occurs—on the whole, it suffers from the faults that have marred some of Mr. Williams's previous fiction. The violence seems far too excessive for the events that lead up to it, and borders on absurdity. The evil characters lack motivations for the bad things they do, and tend to be caricatures.

Effectively Ironic Comment

Which is perhaps why it is a good thing that Thomas Williams has succumbed to the anxiety of our times and produced what for him is an experimental novel. For despite the shortcomings of its parts, the experiment as a whole is successful. The mere contrast between the world of the novel within the novel and the frame outside of it makes for an effectively ironic comment on the difference between the student worlds of the nineteen-fifties and the sixties—the difference between acting out the violence of the imagination and escaping the violence of reality, for instance; or the difference between the rigid systems of honor we agonized over in the fifties and the cultivated spontaneity of the sixties. In sum, the difference between Harold Roux's hairpiece and Mark Rasmussen's drugs.

And despite Aaron Benham's failure to act effectively, he is the most interesting character that Mr. Williams has yet created in his fiction. For Aaron is absorbingly complex. He shows us how the man of inaction transmutes his paralysis into a fiction of action. He shows how one era may produce one kind of art while another era creates a wholly different kind. And he shows us why it is neither no more nor no less heroic for a writer to put on a story than it is for Harold Roux to don his ridiculous hairpiece. In short, if "Aaron Benham sits at his desk hearing the wrong voices," nonetheless he records them in a combination that says something right.