

unalloyed in ‘Dying’, where Bottrall celebrates his more personal subject:

Twenty years ago Margot lay still in bed
At Rio de Janeiro’s finest hospital.
She smiled without a care, at peace with all.
I sensed no fears or grievous harms ahead . . .

. . . I wandered in a haze round Rio’s crowded ways
Marking the merry faces. Margot has not been
So happy or serene since those brooding days.

Few float out of their bodies, survey the scene
And come back to earth in a shower of praise
As if sickness were a song dressed in green.

‘Dying’ is a poem where Bottrall’s uneven gifts seem apt to their intimate concern, and where metrical variety provides a counterpoint to the exploration of line. The poem can in fact be relinedated as a kind of trimeter in which the word-groups click off like worry-beads. Although this is dubious critical procedure, it provides one way of discovering the real sensitivity of Bottrall’s ear.

Other high-spots of the collection include ‘The Ballad of Auntie Mabel’, a long poem which in range of dramatis personae and metrical infelicity seems to apologise to McGonagall; ‘Ironed Out’, an intriguing miniature; and ‘Belfast’;

You put out a hand to reach a friend.
Before you can reach him
He has exploded into fragments.

Bottrall, as might be expected, hates reviewers. ‘Ultimately it doesn’t matter what noise/You make so long as you’re one of the boys’ (‘Butter Reviewers’). That being so, my conclusion may be taken with a large pinch of Cornish salt: *Against a Setting Sun* seems an unsatisfactory collection; Bottrall has taken a haphazard road into the West. He appears to have dropped many of these poems hastily *en route*.

Elizabeth Bartlett writes of a more precise locale:

He lay on the floor covered in shit,
as he had done all night on his fitted carpet.
It could have been a prison cell or torture room
but it was in fact the biggest flat in town
as he often boasted, pointing out the Bristol glass,
the original prince of Denmark Hill, brought low.

(‘999 Call’)
Strange Territory is a well-chosen title for this collection, Bartlett’s second. It is a measure of her art that this territory of medicines, suicides, cigarettes, and the dead weight of days (‘Hang like dead chickens, days do.’) does become strange, invoked by a tough intelligence and an equally rigorous technique:

I am Charlotte. I don’t say hello
to people and sometimes I bite.
Although I am dead I still jump
out of bed and wake them up at night.

This is my mother. Her hair is blue
and I have drawn her with no eyes
and arms like twigs. I don’t do
what I’m told and I tell lies.

(‘Charlotte, Her Book’)

This reads as a kind of *contredanse* around a wound, and it is the wound and the process of wounding that interest

Bartlett, from the tiny malignancy of the cell (‘Red Cell Precursors’) to the bundle of stains and the

. . . multiple fractures,
a cracked heart saying no,
I can’t, cuckooing in and out
of psychiatric wards,
a baby crying.

(‘Multiple Fractures’)

These fine poems celebrate ‘the plainsong of reality’. Less successful are the group of poems that conclude the volume, poems that question the validity of package-tour criticism, ‘The Dissection of Thomas Hardy’ and others. The concluding piece, ‘Front Door’, is a poem about writing poems, using ‘tools/like para-rhymes, instruments of feeling, medicines/to purge the soul, tapping out words on worn-out keys’. Although the image of the poet as a picker of verbal scabs seems apt given the wider context of Bartlett’s work, the ‘writing’ poems seem to lack the energy of the ‘sordidly social’ pieces. I suspect that this is because of the idea of Poetry as Social Catharsis is too uncritically accepted. What does come across is that Bartlett would have little patience with the GHT; but out of that equally strange territory, it is salutary to be confronted with a talent that slaps one across the face.

Laurence Lerner’s *Selected Poems* — a Poetry Book Society Recommendation — contains work from six previous collections. The starting point is formed by a group of poems from *Domestic Interior* (1959): ‘Most of these poems are “efficient” and well-argued, in a sense which reminds one of the best ‘Thirties poetry . . .’ wrote one reviewer, a comment to which I have little to add beyond remarking that the work from this collection which most clearly evidences the direction in which Lerner’s stylistic resources will take him has been omitted from the *Selected Poems*. ‘These ‘stylistic resources’ are seen more clearly in later work, which typically approaches its subject through the creation of different protagonists. *Selves* (1969), for example, includes a group of monologues ‘in which various victims of human cruelty — a laboratory rat, a monkey involved in a feeding experiment . . . — comment on their situations with grimly humorous logic’ (see ‘Welcome to the Maze’ and ‘Poor Monkey’). This is not a question of the exhausted poetic faculties casting around and coming up with suitably anthropomorphic personae, since it is these same faculties that have created *A.R.T.H.U.R.* (1974) and his feminine terminal *M.A.R.T.H.A.* (1980). I find the poems selected from these two collections inventive, and underpinning the invention is a deepening of the questions posed in the cited poems from *Selves*: is Arthur a victim or a vice? Is he controlled or does he control?

Metal people aren’t allowed to procreate;
All their decisions are questioned; they can’t even vote.
Movers have all the power. Do you think that is right?

(‘Introductory’)

But although the verse is inventive, and although the questions of Control? and Communication? benefit from their change of perspective, I find the poems too many and — ultimately — too much of a piece. It may be that the ‘invention’ is not one of poetic resource but one simply of novel subject-matter. And although computerspeak raises a smile the first time around, by the time Arthur and Martha have tied the wiry knot, lines like ‘But now at least I’ve told you that others have touched my terminals./Others have fingered my keyboards, others have fed me facts’, from ‘Martha has a Past’, have become irritating. The controlling

intelligence has pressed too many buttons; we know the next moves. This prevents me recommending these poems as wholeheartedly as I would like, although doubtless Arthur and Martha would go down well on A.P.R.U.V.L. — At Poetry Readings, Uttered Very Lovingly.

The verse from Janet Caird’s *A Distant Um* is reflective and has moments of great elegance, but certain of the poems show a self-conscious poeticism:

Why weep for Fergusson
dead long ago?
Or mourn Mary Stuart’s
long-since cancelled woe?
Is there not present sadness
to wring tears?
Why beam sorrow’s searchlight
down the dark years?

(‘Rehearsal’)

It is possible that ‘Rehearsal’ is informed by an unhealthy-close acquaintance with Shakespeare, since the kinship is made apparent in ‘After Reading Shakespeare’ and the two poems seem to come from the same stable. Like others of the collection, much use is made here of poetic figures — the kites and flowers of the reflecting mind. The consequent impression is that of an artful symbolism; but the consequent danger is of over-writing, of slipping in the unnecessary adjective or adverb:

. . . the neighbours cluck disapproving tongues . . .
. . . Confused, very confused, the neighbours smugly
mutter . . .

. . . the cosy comfort of a rotting fence-post;
his vast excitement putting out a tentative horn
to test the weather . . .

(‘Confused’)

(‘Snail’)

Tessa Ransford’s work is more formally ambitious than that of Caird. *Fools and Angels* begins with a sonnet sequence, proceeds through a series of odes and on to the metrically-miscellaneous pieces of the third section of the volume. Ransford’s technique is impressive but indiscriminate; this means that there are inevitable failures, not least where a given metre forces clumsy inversions. Where this occurs with an antique diction, the effect is expense of artfulness in a waste of effort:

Patroclus and his horses, gentle-eyed,
drove to a death intended for another
to rally those who feared or turned aside,

yet his stallions mourned him as a brother —
So fled my soul when all its reins were loose,
the horses rearing on without a driver . . .

(‘Platonic Soul-Study’)

More successful are the poems that do not try as hard, where the poet casts a shrewder, more prosaic eye:

Oldish women in walking-shoes,
saris, coats and spectacles,
with wealthy, westernised sons
Indians
living in modern bungalows —
how much of yourselves have you had to lose?

(‘Indian Women at Windermere’)

It is curious that both Caird and Ransford invoke, respectively, ‘an austere style’ and ‘a season of austerity’,

since both practise an ornamental art. Because the GHT supplies me with a corrective throat-clearing at this point, I hardly like to write that both works seem to ask for more of that sordid social smackery. But I shall hope that a smidgin or two of Eagleton’s Tonic is evident in later collections from these two poets. It is in fact one of the great merits of the GHT that a reviewer can wish six things of that kind before breakfast.

CHRIS MCCULLY

lives & letters

THE DESTRUCTIVE ELEMENT

Michael Hamburger, *A Proliferation of Prophets* (Carcanet Press) £14.95

By now it has become conventional, even in Britain, to acknowledge the importance of the translator. Yet in practice the difficulties they face hardly appear to have diminished: the more excellent the translation the more we are inclined to take it for granted. This new collection of Michael Hamburger’s essays on German literature makes clear the commitment which sustains his work; at their best they transmit to the reader Hamburger’s own conviction of the importance of this distinctive literary tradition.

Hamburger is especially sensitive to where the roots of this distinctiveness lie. As the book ranges over subjects from the life of Nietzsche to the *diaspora* of German writers under the Nazis, it returns repeatedly to question the nature of the characteristic German response to modernity. Not that Hamburger treats the matter in a reductionist way — ‘Any author worth writing about deserves to be written about as a special case’, he believes — and he is properly critical of simplistic attempts to reduce culture to politics. Nevertheless, he is aware of the force of tradition and believes that, rightly nuanced, the relationship between literature and politics remains a central problem.

These concerns emerge most acutely in the essay on the black-romantic figure of Gottfried Benn, a writer whose pro-Nazi enthusiasm (at least in the initial period after the takeover of power) was notorious. As Hamburger explores the poetry he reveals Benn’s sensibility as one which, if not strictly speaking Nazi (it is hard to imagine anyone at a further remove from their tawdry cult of cleanliness, conformity and moral uplift), certainly presented no point of resistance to Nazism.

Benn combined Nietzschean nihilism ([He] accepted nihilism as one accepts the weather’, Hamburger says) with a poetic style whose drastic imagery and eruptive rhythms are clearly Expressionist in origin. The result is poetry permeated by a kind of nauseated solipsism:

Brown as cognac. Brown as leaves. Red-brown.

Malayan yellow.

Express train Berlin–Trelleborg and the Baltic Sea resorts.

Flesh that went naked.

Tanned to the very lips by the sea.

Deeply ripe for Grecian pleasure.

And yearning for the scythe: how far the summer seems!
Almost the end of the ninth month already!

Stubble and the last almond thirst in us.
Unfoldings, the blood, the weariness,
The nearness of dahlias confuses us.

Man-brown hurls itself upon woman-brown:

A woman is something for a night.
And if it was good, for the next night too!
O! And then again this being by oneself!
'These silences!' This letting oneself drift!

(from 'D-Zug')

The poem evokes an intoxicated drive towards self-dissolution without any trace of lyrical exaltation. The observer stands detached, not as autonomous or self-sufficient, but, rather, as if afraid of his own ambiguous emotions towards what he witnesses. Lacking a sense of the independent value — indeed of the independent existence — of other people, all of Benn's writing carries this note of misanthropic destructiveness, which can hardly be unrelated to his attraction to Nazism. Hamburger suggests very plausibly: '[It is possible] that what Benn responded to at this juncture was the catastrophic extremism that underlay the "law and order" of the new regime, the promise of a clean sweep that would stop at nothing, not even self-annihilation.'

The inability to acknowledge boundaries to the self's activity is, however, an emotional, not a logical consequence of nihilism: somehow German intellectuals proved incapable of creating a modest, livable humanism to replace shaken religious faith. The tensions are evidently present in Nietzsche, whose desire 'to be everything he was not' Hamburger discusses with sympathy, and in the 'proliferation of prophets', the pretentious crew of philosophic poets and poetic philosophers who give the book its title.

Yet this refusal to abandon the religious perspective even when the basis of religious faith had been eroded led, too, to a poetic efflorescence which, in Hoffmannsthal, Trakl and Rilke, produced work of the greatest brilliance and subtlety. Although it is possible — particularly in Trakl — to find images of human degradation to rival Benn, they do not carry Benn's sense of contempt. In a poem such as 'Das Herz', the charnel-house imagery is used to confront and transform what might otherwise be the sentimental clichés of lyricism (dove, elm-trees, sunset, pale moons) into an intense presentation of the reality of suffering:

The wild heart turned white in the wood;
O the dark fear
Of death when the gold
Died in a grey cloud.
November evening.
By the bare gate of the slaughterhouse there stood
The crowd of poor women.
Into every basket
Rank flesh and entrails fell;
Accursed fare!

The blue dove of nightfall
Brought no atonement.
Dark trumpet call
Rang through the elm-trees'
Damp golden leaves,
A tattered banner
Steaming with blood,
So that wild in his sadness
A man gives heed.
O brazen ages
Buried there in the sunset red.

From the house's dark hall there stepped
The golden shape
Of the maiden-youth
Surrounded with pale moons
Of autumnal courtliness,
Black pine-trees snapped
In the night gale,
The steep-walled fortress.
O heart
Glistening away into snowy coolness.

('Das Herz')

Even in Hamburger's translation it must be apparent that this is a remarkable poem, quite unlike anything that could have been written in English. Using purely symbolic means it develops a profound sense of spiritual turbulence; harrowing, certainly, it is anything but brutal. It is only one of the many deeply impressive poems presented in these essays.

If it is the task of the translator to make such works available at least, the context provided by this book enormously increases our capacity to appreciate them: for both reasons Michael Hamburger places us in his debt.

MICHAEL ROSEN

THE NATURE OF DARKNESS

Erich Heller, *In the Age of Prose* (Cambridge University Press) £20, £7.50 pb.

This latest installment of Erich Heller's lifelong meditations on German literature and philosophy is marked throughout by his inimitable grace and cultivation, and by if anything a broader range of reference than he demonstrated in *The Disinherited Mind* (1952), *Thomas Mann*, *The Ironic German* (1958), *The Artist's Journey Into the Interior* (1965) and *Kafka* (1974). His singular interpretation of modern German literary culture over the past three decades has been hugely illuminating for the English-speaking world (and for Germans: see J. P. Stern's contribution to the Heller *Festschrift*, Heidelberg, 1976). Beyond that, he has provided a reading — almost a vision — of modern literature which, once encountered, must take a place in any reader's mind as a permanent source of clarifying stimulation in agreement and dissent.

'Literary and philosophical essays' says the subtitle, and the subjects are, as ever, Rilke, Nietzsche and Thomas Mann; also Karl Kraus, Freud, Theodor Fontane, Knut Hamsun and Wilhelm Busch. But the collection doesn't permit of division in terms of a literary or philosophical approach. Just as he is a bridge-builder between German and Anglo-Saxon cultures, so he continues to mediate between separate fields of study by making philosophy uncondescendingly accessible to non-philosophers. What Heller has done before for Wittgenstein and Nietzsche, he does here for Heidegger in the essay 'Thinking about Poetry', and one hopes that his unaccountably omitted article on Schopenhauer (*TLS*, 10 October 1975) will be included in a future edition.

There are three essays on Mann, two of which seem to this reader somewhat heavily derivative of arguments in *The Ironic German*. The third, apropos Mann's *Diaries*, shows Heller's typical essentiality and ability to cover a startling amount of ground: he investigates the diary-keeping impulse, and its implications of anxiety about the self's identity and privacy. Heller moves smoothly from the work in view

to the larger concern; the piece on Kraus, for example, contains fine reflections on satire and style. It's a tendency that helps to make the essays on Hamsun, Kraus and Fontane elementary in the best sense: no better introductions, combining specific insights with attention to the whole spirit of an *œuvre* and its cultural context in fifteen pages, could be found.

The disadvantage of Heller's generalizing is an intermittent feeling that he overlooks the details too soon, in his hunger for grand perspectives — a feeling most acute when he embarks on such roll-calls as these: 'it could have been said, and *has* been said, by Schopenhauer or Nietzsche or Thomas Mann or Rilke or Valéry or T. S. Eliot . . .'; 'the poetic world of Rilke, which with possibly equal right we may call the world of Yeats, George, Hofmannsthal, Benn, Valéry, or, going back a little in time, of Mallarmé and Rimbaud . . .'. Another habit is his quoting fragments of poems in illustration of general themes: he's not fastidious about the minute integrity of form. So it is now all the better to have the essay on Heidegger and Hölderlin with its marvellously tactful and effective reading of *Hälfte des Lebens*. It is one of Heller's best essays, *showing* what he has often before proposed: 'the oneness of thing and word, which is the essence of great poetry'. It fulfils too the promissory sentence that prefaced *The Disinherited Mind*: 'In a way, it is even true to say that the silent centre of this book is Hölderlin.' Heller has always seen poetry as a 'making real', but has never before paid such attention to successful achievement, tending to dwell on later literature which, in his own historicist theory, operates in a culture wherein 'rational thought, religion and philosophy, Mind's highest activities, [have superseded] the creations of art as messengers of truth; and art [shows] its decline by becoming more and more anarchic.'

This Hegelian version of what Heller calls the 'logical course of literary history', according to which modern art must resort to ever dizzier spirals of extremity to make any contact with truth, lies at the heart of Heller's work. It explains the ambivalence in the long, early essay on 'Rilke and Nietzsche, with a Discourse on Thought, Belief and Poetry' which prompted Michael Hamburger to such strong disagreement in *The Truth of Poetry*. 'There is a kind of falseness', he says in that essay,

which, quite legitimately, affords the most refined aesthetic pleasure: at the point, that is, at which consistently sustained artificiality assumes the semblance of spontaneity, and the most elaborate magical procedure the appearance of the naively miraculous. In this sense both Rilke's poetry and his ideas show the intrinsic falseness of a self-created reality and a self-induced love for it. In defending a sense and vision of reality different from Rilke's, the critic implicitly upholds, often against his explicit intentions, standards of poetry by which the poetic work of Rilke's mature years stands judged as too eccentric to be really great.

The later Rilke has Heller's admiration but not — as *Hälfte des Lebens* has it — his full assent, too dependent as in his view it is upon 'dazzling acrobatics of soul and mind', however brilliant and brave, however necessary in the face of inevitable historico-linguistic circumstances. One remembers that Hofmannsthal's Chandos letter is a favourite text, and that Heller's introductory Tribute in *The Ironic German* praises Mann as having somehow 'for a blessedly long moment of creation' refuted Lord Chandos — and therefore, history. So Heller does not follow his own theory

dogmatically, though he speaks of 'the inescapable dictates of the *Zeitgeist*', and the 'present phase of the English language'. His spirit sympathises with Hegel's interpretation of cultural history in the *Aesthetics*, but he has moral objections to its concomitant deterministic verdict on human and artistic possibility. This is a potentially confused position, the benefit of which is an especially sharp eye for the excesses of other systems. His essay on Spengler in *The Disinherited Man* gets its weight from Heller's fierce rejection of Spengler's determinism being not quite at ease with, and perhaps more emphatic because of, his evident sympathy for particular observations. Here, the sharpness is present in the trio of essays on Freud and the (in)applicability of psychoanalysis to literature. 'Psychoanalysis and modern literature' is, again, an excellent introduction to a vast subject, and the exonerating critique of a recent psychoanalytic examination of Kleist is superb. Heller is not fair to Freud himself, who freely acknowledged his enormous debt to the nineteenth-century novelists, and, it so happens, spurned an earlier analysis of Kleist, by Isidor Sadger in 1909, as 'repellent'. Heller's case, of course, is that the age demanded psychoanalysis, and he gives a telling account of its premisses and language, and the predilection to psychoanalyse. This is a fine extension of Heller's role as mediator, of his insistence on tracing the human and artistic consequences of systems and their languages.

So deep is Heller's involvement in the work he writes about, and so fluent is his style, that the reader can be hard put to perceive the boundary between the critic and the criticized. For example: 'we cannot, isolated as we are, "make use", as Rilke's First Elegy puts it, of either Angels or human beings . . .'. What exactly are we getting here? It's usual to require a critic to keep his rhetoric more clearly distinct from that of his author, and this degree of insinuation can doubtless lead to sleight-of-hand; D. J. Enright, reviewing *The Ironic German*, thought that 'the commentator does push his subject, however gently, along a discernible political path — the way of conservatism. Heller clearly has a great deal to say, and one may wish, with Enright, that he did not shelter behind his subjects; yet Heller is not a philosopher *manqué*: he does think *through* his authors. Like Leavis on Lawrence, but much less partisan, he writes from within their work rather than towards or around it. Nevertheless it seems to me that in these essays he speaks out *in propria persona* more clearly than before, and emerges as a distant heir to the writer with whom he has the closest affinity: Karl Kraus. His stance towards Freud is very much that of *Die Fackel*, and his language, preferring metaphor to abstraction, echoes the richness of Kraus's own — as in this remark on psychoanalysis: 'It is impossible to learn anything about the nature of darkness by throwing light on it.' The chapter on Kraus contains many perceptions equally applicable to Heller himself: he too works 'from a firm centre of belief, and for him too language is 'the touchstone of morality'. Like Kraus he rejects 'the unfortunate aftermath of symbolism and expressionism in literature that, with disrupted syntax and words that have shed the burden of meaning, threatened to cover with strange weeds the lands on which poetry used to grow.' He shares Kraus's pessimistic cultural conservatism, and a preservative urge that seeks to defend, in Leavis's phrase, 'necessary words'; he speaks up for truth ('it would be misleading to avoid it'); 'reverence, piety, respect for the individual person'; quality, virtue, and most prominently, shame, which he claims as intrinsically necessary to humanity. The high-mindedness can, with such a mentor, be high-handed, in his scattered comments on the current