

or Shelley reflected the common scene.) Browning's rhymes, his colloquial cadences that put him so much in advance of his time, were anticipated by Hood. The Rossettis, variously, are all in debt to his verse, both the freakish and serious kinds. So, very evidently, was W. S. Gilbert. The relationship of *Miss Kilmansegg to Our Mutual Friend* can hardly be questioned: *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* reverberates with the doomed, metrical hammering of *Eugene Aram*:

That very night, while gentle sleep
The urchin eyelids kiss'd.
Two stern-faced men set out from Lynn,
Through the cold and heavy mist;
And Eugene Aram walk'd between
With gyves upon his wrist.

Poe, who admired and imitated the older poet (there were ten years between them) was particularly interested in the headlong movement of his verse. Hood's "marked originality," he wrote, lay in "a glowing grotesquerie, uttered with a rushing abandon vastly heightening its effect."

If Hood gives pleasure to curious readers to-day, it may well be for reasons akin to Poe's. It may be too that the element of prose fiction in his verse (later, an element in the works of most Victorian poets) appeals to us, as, also, we enjoy its parallel—the element of poetry in the great Victorian novels. But if Dr. Reid's suggestions are carried to their close, we take our Hood to-day through William Plomer, and sometimes Louis MacNeice, through "sick" humour, and black surrealist comedy on the stage. This is a selective reading of an author who still has something of genuine interest to offer a diligent reader as well as a reminder that every age has from an author no more than it desires or deserves.

Naomi Lewis

Western Approaches

Speculations about Jakob. By UWE JOHNSON, trans. Ursule Molinaro. *Cape*, 25s. **One Fat Englishman.** By KINGSLEY AMIS. *Gollancz*, 18s. **The South.** By YVES BERGER, trans. Robert Baldick. *Weidenfeld & Nicolson*, 16s. **The Sun's Attendant.** By CHARLES HALDEMAN. *Cape*, 21s.

GERMAN NOVELISTS think about other things as well as the *Zeitgeist*, English ones about other things as well as conduct, and French ones about other things as well as language. Still these seem to be the first associa-

tion the word "novel" has for them, a point which my present batch illustrates nicely. The novel with real stature is Uwe Johnson's *Speculations about Jakob*. Uwe Johnson has a kind of rigorousness which is extremely characteristic of German fiction. Having chosen the blueprint of his form (and the form in German fiction tends to be "mechanical" or "scholastic" as opposed to natural and organic) he executes it with the most dogged and uncompromising single-mindedness. The tedious bureaucratic thoroughness of the German mind? Not in the least. For in fact his form is in the most sensitive possible relationship to his material.

THE JAKOB of Johnson's title was a model citizen of the new East German order, a director of traffic at an important railway junction on the East-West border, young, humane, mature, politically committed. When the book opens (it is the time of Hungary and Suez) Jakob has just been run down and killed by a train. Was it accident, suicide, or murder by the secret police? The novel is one continuous flux of speculations and narrations by various speakers (it sounds like one voice, as they all use the same speech-rhythm) and from it the pattern of Jakob's last few days gradually, minute detail by detail, and never finally, emerges. Jakob had come under suspicion politically; and everything that ensues, the following of his movements by the secret police and his own desperate, unobtrusive manoeuvres to extricate himself and family and friends, takes on the quality (like that of the book's own form) of pure mechanism. If Jakob is in a politically compromising position, then that is as serious (indeed it is just the same) as if he were really guilty of a political crime. The objective truth of things is not really at issue, for who is going to be interested? (When Jakob and the agent exchange Communist jargon, they don't expect to be taken literally.) Jakob's life becomes a dossier, an accumulation of *soi-disant* facts which by its own inertia destroys him and others. And the novel itself, with its anonymous chorus of fragmentary reports (one is often in doubt for a moment who a given "he" "she" or "they" refers to) is only a dossier used for other ends.

The central symbol of the book is Jakob's job. He, in his tower, with Olympian knowledge, marshals and controls trains, frames and alters schedules, and altogether exercises God-like control of events—a situation the very antithesis of his (and his pursuer's) hapless political plight, as it is also, apparently, of Uwe Johnson's own view of the novelist's possible role. "Where does the author stand in his text," he

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asks in an essay, *Berlin, Border of the Divided World*.

Attitudes of omniscience are suspicious. . . . How can the author who first has to invent and assemble his text squat on a stool high above the field like a referee during a tennis match, how can he know all the rules, all the players, and unerringly observe them besides, intervene supremely at any time he chooses and even change places with his characters and look into their hearts as he rarely manages to look into his own? The author ought to admit that he invented what he tells, that his information is incomplete and imprecise.

One can make criticisms of the novel. There is some romanticisation in the conception of the heroic Jakob, and some thinness in all the characterisation. These are limitations rather than positive flaws, I think, for they don't damage the essential quality of the book, its extraordinarily powerful rendering of a general situation by strictly formal expressive means.

WHEREAS Uwe Johnson has invented his own form, Kingsley Amis, in *One Fat Englishman*, has adapted one of the most basic forms of English fiction, the one which prepares its hero (or heroine) for, and then exposes him to, an ethical crisis, leaving him thereafter on the path to salvation or damnation. (It's remarkable just how many English novels, from *Emma* to *Room at the Top*, do have this structure.) Amis' vessel of wrath is an English publisher visiting America. He is the perfect antithesis of Martin Green's ideal Englishman—gluttonous, snobbish, anti-Semitic, irascible, lustful and unloving. He is also (this is the mainspring of the plot) getting very fat, so that the fact that he is temporarily less unloving than usual may not be going to have its reward. America proves an excellent place to cultivate what is on the whole his favourite sin, anger, in. He sees much to reprove—the American habit of hanging up an Audubon print wherever they feel like it, that “curious American way of taking notice of their children,” the American way of saying “this” when they mean “that” and using the preterite when they should be using the perfect. He is as outraged as previous Amis heroes at what some refer to as Nature but he prefers to call “whatever there was outside”—meaning things like squirrels who glance about with “affected curiosity” and turtles who simply have no right to be there.

The reward for loving is finally offered him: the Scandinavian philologist's wife whom he has been pursuing does at last, for a variety of honourable reasons, go to bed with him. He

is tender with her and, for a moment, not awful at all. However, in the middle of things, he receives both a telephone call and a telegram, bringing messages from his two very favourite enemies. It is a temptation to really satisfying anger which is simply not to be missed—especially by someone just now in such good training in anger. He dresses and applies himself to it seriously, alienating his bedfellow and postponing his salvation for ever.

This is not half so good a novel as *Take a Girl Like You*; it belongs more with *I Like it Here*, though better polished, and there are flashes of pure Wodehouse in the prose-style—but perhaps there always were. Still, it is Amis all right, the most didactic of our funny writers, and nearly the funniest.

AND IF English novelists instinctively think of the novel as having to do with ethics, French ones think of it as having to do with language. It is not exactly that they take language seriously, so much as it never occurs to them that they might, like English novelists, simply ignore it. Increasingly, in the present century, they *don't* take it quite seriously, and fall into a sort of straight-faced game with eloquence, a secret parody of the traditional virtues of French rhetoric, with its elaborate scaffolding of syntax and showy research after the *mot juste*. The note is audible even in translation:

as the evil of each day is sufficient to that day you exult at having trapped three hundred words but think of those that remain and remember that the corpses in your perforated memory, once they have recovered the frenzied life of their myriad meanings, can always slip out, where you may catch them or not. . . .

That “perforated” hits the quality I mean exactly. And the point is particularly relevant, since *The South* is really a *jeu d'esprit* about language and the cult of the Word. The plot is that a well-to-do Provençal landowner and solicitor decides that human life reached the perfection of which it is capable, the ideal balance between nature and civilisation, in Virginia in 1842 (it is a mythical Virginia, without planters or slaves, and not very precisely located). He accordingly lives in this Virginia as far as possible (though he comes to regret having tried to recreate it physically on his own estate—one must above all beware of *things*) and he brings up his son, the narrator, to do likewise. Their idyll (endless readings about that golden year and place) is intruded on by the narrator's elder sister, who temporarily gets him away from the father and tries, to the extent of having an incestuous relationship with him, to drag him into the actual

world. She fails, and he returns for ever to his Platonic Virginia.

When the book is describing the father the sentences are endlessly long—there is no need for them ever to reach a full stop, for while *things* perish and are renewed, words subsist unchanging and eternal, and Virginia is the heaven of the word. The sister is on to this point. She encourages her brother to write a book, but insists “keep the sentences short.” This puts him in a dilemma. He really can see no point in full stops; on the other hand he feels it a kind of infidelity to her to sleep with her without putting some in; he compromises, grudgingly he puts in two or three—Berger’s own loving relationship to the Word places him with the brother. This marvellously ingenious and delightful, if light-weight, book is a joke at the expense of the Aesthetic tradition with its artificial paradises (the father, in the manner of Huysmans’ *des Esseintes*, has read three hundred volumes on one American tree); but Berger is on the tradition’s side—and when we read the narrator’s manuscript it turns out to be identical with Berger’s own book.

IN *The Sun’s Attendant* a new American novelist, Charles Haldeman, also dabbles in language, as he does in various Joycean and cinematic devices, but not to much effect. The trouble with this novel, as with a whole class of bad American novels, is that the novelist is too much in love with his own image. There he sits between us and the described experience, with his self-conscious, cosmopolitan tone, his self-dramatising posture, his *jabber*—what other word is there for this kind of prose?

City and forest, sophistication and crudity were stamped heads and tails on him: the alloy of his character lay in between, hardened in an auto-erotic dream of immolation.

The novel follows the life of Stefan Brückmann, orphaned son of a Hungarian gipsy and a middle-class German woman, from an unwanted childhood, through concentration-camps, tragic friendships and several love-affairs, to initiation into art and a final attainment of maturity. The best thing in the novel is Stefan’s relationship with the American naturalist Moon (a suppressed homosexual) who adopts him after the war. Haldeman has seen Moon in some depth. He has hit off the connection between his being a naturalist—which for Moon means opting against society—and the boyish unrealism which proves fatal to him. But even here, Haldeman bullies the episode. He makes it end with a “big” piece of violence.

It seems to be there, like everything else, to prove what big experiences Stefan has gone through and by corollary what a big emotional range the author possesses. This often seems to be the motive behind such American “wander-literature” (“I moved on and on, through infinite depots and aisles...”). You are meant to think the items order themselves into a pattern, and in fact they just add up like a score.

P. N. Furber

AUTHORS

S. Fischer in Frankfurt has just published a second volume of Thomas Mann’s *Briefe: 1937–1947*, edited by Erika Mann. Readers will recall our selection from the first volume in *ENCOUNTER*, December 1962. We hope to publish a further selection later this year. . . .

Nora Beloff is on the staff of *The Observer*. Her views on the European question are developed in her revised epilogue to *The General Says No* (Penguin, 3s. 6d.), which is to be published in France by Plon—General de Gaulle’s own publishers next month. . . .

For readers who have been inquiring: **Nigel Dennis** will be resuming his Theatre articles next month. . . .

Naomi Lewis is a well-known writer and essayist, who reviews regularly for the leading British weekly and Sunday journals. Her collection of essays, *A Visit to Mrs. Wilcox*, is published by the Cresset Press.

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