

BRIEF MENTIONS

ALDEN NOWLAN

Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien
Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co. Ltd.,
1973.

Alden Nowlan is one of Canada's most respected poets and short story writers. Now, with *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien*, he has produced a novel — or so his publishers claim. On its title page the book is described as "a fictional memoir," and this definition would appear to be Nowlan's. Certainly this work is nakedly autobiographical, and the fictional devices used by the author do not disguise the fact; nor do they seem — to this reader — to have reshaped experience imaginatively enough to make this book a true novel. However, conventional views of what a novel is or is not have been under dispute for years, and there can be small satisfaction in agonising over whether *Various Persons* is a novel: what it clearly is is a powerful and memorable accomplishment.

Kevin O'Brien, Nowlan's protagonist, returns as a visitor to the poverty-stricken Nova Scotia village which he grew up in and escaped from. Through his reminiscences and present experiences, a place, a way of life, and the inner lives of numerous persons are revealed to us. The place is a mean backroad settlement; the life of the place is sour with gruelling physical labour, loneliness, and cruelty, and is devoid of visible beauty; but the inhabitants — O'Brien's kinsmen, acquaintances, enemies — sometimes transcend their sordid rootedness, and one is moved to admiration by Nowlan's evocations of the loyalty, the pride, the vigor, and the occasional inner beauty of these men and women.

However, as the title implies, Nowlan wants most of all to define the growth and self-knowledge of one man, and although the structure and the narrative

voice of the book are not consistently persuasive to this end, he does create, in the reflective O'Brien, a character of compelling psychological complexity. No matter how far we go in other directions, no matter what we become, we are also what we were, Nowlan is saying; and we were, and were shaped by, many persons. We cannot escape this fact, and only if we come to terms with it can we begin to fully comprehend ourselves. Kevin O'Brien's travels into the past and the encounters he has when he goes home again are bound to enhance the already impressive stature of Alden Nowlan.

WILFRID SHEED

People Will Always Be Kind
New York: Farrar, Straus and
Giroux, 1973.

This is an unusual and provocative novel. It is often compelling, intuitive and funny, yet, in the outcome, one is uncertain as to its purpose and development. It is difficult, in short, to decide whether it is a book about politics or one about the effects of illness. Perhaps it is both.

In part this uncertainty stems from the book's division into two sections: the first, and longer one, concerns the personal development of Bryan Casey, a typically athletic, sixteen year old Irish-American, catholic, sociable, unknowing. His illness and subsequent paralysis place him in the role of an observer — of his parents, his relatives (mostly foolish), his friends, the medical profession. In his description of Casey's new life, Sheed patiently develops the notion of strength in weakness — for Casey, paradoxically, is strong on account of his knowledge of the weakness and failings of others, of where and when they are vulnerable. As the desperation of his efforts to regain the use of his limbs fades, he comes to terms with his condition as best he can, leading a "normal" college life, discussing the Great Issues with his new and more intellectual friends, struggling through sexual encounters made that much more ghastly by his condition. In all of this, however, he differs from his peers in his maturing knowledge of the real world which derives from his personal

battle with his illness, and in which he never forgets the ultimate strength of his condition — his awareness that people will always be kind.

The second section jumps ahead a generation. It is narrated, moreover, in the form of a memoir, by Sam Perkins, a young, liberal establishment, mildly left and New Politics oriented assistant to Senator Casey, presidential aspirant. Through the memoir Mr. Sheed gives us a slightly overdrawn but brilliant account of the fascination and squalor of politics. Senator Casey (made to resemble in some detail every President from Franklin Roosevelt on?) is the paradigm of the democratic (perhaps Democratic) politician. In drawing out the essence of the politician, in its humor, satire, and ultimate anguish, Mr. Sheed's book is brilliantly contrived, a *tour de force*. It makes one wonder whether, in terms of the individuals who operate the system, pluralist, liberal politics are any less nightmarish than the patterns of totalitarianism with which we have been presented since the thirties in the writing of Koestler, Orwell and others whose communist idealism turned into disillusionment and dismay. In this sense, *People Will Always Be Kind* is indeed a political novel for our times.

The problem is that the book itself has acquired some of Bryan Casey's mystery. Is it, in fact, a political novel exploring the psychological make-up of *this* politician in *this* political context? Does it, in other words, seek to give us a particular explanation of a generally interesting question, namely, what psychological characteristics and experiences account for the development of the politician, given the morally debilitating pressures which are placed upon such an individual? If this is the case, then the long exploration of Casey's adolescence and coming of age shows us how such characteristics might develop, and his illness is a spectacular (and symbolic?) catalyst. Or, is it an exploration of the traumatic effects of an illness which, in this case, leads the victim into politics, and ends with the imposition of his trauma on the political scene? In either case, the linkage of the parts of the book is uncertain unless, of course, in his cleverness Mr. Sheed intended it to be so.

DANIEL CASTELAIN
"An Unlikely Meeting," *Sentimental Talks*

Translated from the French by
Patrick Bowles
New York: Red Dust, 1970. Pp.
120. \$4.95.

A She, a first He, a second He and different I's (one of them is the writer himself) are tossed into a world of "would-bes" and "could-have-beens." They ramble from realities to dim "images and memories of older images" (p. 30) that "go out" (p. 13), "reappear, grow dim again" (p. 17) and then disappear. The writer presents them sometimes beside each other or after each other but mostly through each other.

In this story Daniel Castelain takes a very close look at the complex process of creative writing and examines some of the endless possibilities of dealing with one simple situation. The situation is nothing more than a meeting that could have taken place or could take place between three persons. The writer watches them from every possible point of view. He describes what he sees or could have seen and records what the three of them could say or could have said to each other and tries to give the reader an exact account of this probabilistic and inconsequential incident.

After he is through with this difficult task, he starts all over again with the process of arranging and rearranging what has been or could have been thought, said and done. But when we feel lost amidst these "plain" (p. 14), "possible" (p. 34) and "depicting" (p. 59) realities and begin to wonder "whether what was happening had ever happened, was ever over, had ever even begun" (p. 54) and if the whole thing is nothing more than "a supposition to start from" (p. 43), or a writer's "working hypothesis" (p. 43), we find that the writer himself is willing to accompany us on a few of these many forward, sideward, and backward driftings and to give us from time to time a hint or a clue.

NAJIB MAHFUZ

Hob Taht al-Matar (Love in the Rain)
Cairo: Maktabat Misr, 1973. Pp. 196.
Plasters 30.

In short (4 pp.) and very short (2 pp.) dramatic scenes, Najib Mahfuz depicts a very bleak picture of Egypt after the military defeat of 1967 and the philosophical bankruptcy of its "glorious" revolution. The main characters of his story are young university graduates striving for a better life. Because of the political deadlock and the military stalemate they are confused and troubled. They are completely lost amidst unfeasible materialistic goals, an unworkable social structure and irrelevant moral codes. In their search for a way out of their dilemma, they try love, marriage, and even prostitution. They resist, revolt, and surrender. No matter what they venture, they always end up bitter and disenchanted. The representatives of the older generation, handicapped by their physical debility and moral deficiencies, indulge themselves in old lies, secondhand dreams, and exhausted memories. They are, therefore, unable to give the younger generation any support or guidance. With the explosive military situation and the despondent political condition in the background, the story moves rapidly from one gloomy scene to another till it comes to a halt without reaching any end.

The skill and artistry of Najib Mahfuz, who is undoubtedly the greatest narrative writer in the history of Arabic literature, is due to the fact that, although he deals with many social problems and tackles earnest moral issues, he is always aware of his function as an amusing storyteller and beguiling fabulist. Never does he sacrifice the development of plot in favor of philosophical question or a political argument. His style, which is always plain, lucid, and unaffected, is another reason for his extreme popularity. Compared with the classics of Egyptian fiction like Muhamad Husayn Haykal's *Zaynab*, Taha Husayn's *al-Ayam* or al-'Aqqad's *Sarah*, known for their lofty and florid style, all Najib Mahfuz' twenty novels would seem offhand and extemporaneous. But because of his unequivocal style, the consistent and coherent plots, Najib Mahfuz always succeeds in capturing the attention of both intellectuals and moderately educated readers.

MARK INSINGEL

Reflections

Translated from the Dutch by
Adrienne Dixon
New York: Red Dust, 1972. Pp. 77.
\$4.95.

Reflections, optical as well as psychological, are the theme of this extremely experimental and highly artistic poem in prose. It is a collection of related impressions and interwoven images. In an elegaic tone the author tries to reproduce blurry childhood memories, murky adulthood reminiscences and foggy future visions.

Mainly because of its immoderate subjectivity and demanding style, Mark Insingel's book would not appeal to the reader of traditional novels, the reader who usually appreciates clear and coherent plot, simple extrinsic structure and moderate intellectual content. Other than in narrative and dramatic works, lyrical poetry does not tell a story, construct a plot or describe an action; it merely conveys impressions, recalls moods or expresses feelings. And this is exactly what Mark Insingel does in his first novel. But in addition to this, he also tries to depict certain incidents and describe specific actions, even if he reduces his story to a sequence of hazy pictures and "abstract[s] the text to the very bone," as he himself admits in an interview with Lidy van Marissing.

The successful fusion of its lyrical and narrative attitudes is one of the things that make this work exceptionally amusing. A thorough examination of this book reveals some fascinating aspects. One notices, for example, that its extrinsic structure resembles that of a well planned and precisely executed poem.

The book consists of thirteen chapters, or stanzas, if you wish to call them that. The first and last stanzas complement each other. They are nearly of the same length (55 and 58 lines) and have the same peculiar style. Also the central motifs of these two stanzas are very similar (*Revolving* and *A Circle*). Aside from these two, one also notices that the stanzas become shorter (355, 299, 247, 183, 134, and 102 lines). After the seventh stanza they

start to get longer again (117, 184, 253, 316, 377). Each stanza, with the exception of the seventh which could be regarded as a caesura or a diaeresis, has its counterpart.

Intrinsically one could also observe that each stanza has its own central-motif; once again, with the exception of the seventh. These central-motifs, which are capitalized and incorporated into the text are: 1 REVOLVING, 2 A KNOCKING, 3 THE LETTERS, 4 THE OPENINGS, 5 A SLIM YOUNG LADY, 6 COFFINS, 7 8 A ROTTING CORPSE, 9 A HANDSHAKE, 10 THE STREET, 11 THE PUZZLE, 12 A CAR, 13 A CIRCLE.

Leitmotifs and leitsymbols (the grandfather, the dog, Mr. and Mrs. Candlemaker, the net curtains, mirrors, photographs, the girls Janna and Marina, loneliness, shyness, conventional phrases of greetings, doors, windows, coffins, a sports car, death, fire, tennis, cigarettes, gravel, pond, shadows, and of course "the vicious circle of never clear meanings," p. 56) hold the intrinsic parts of this prose-poem together and make it one complete unit. Because of the perfect interconnection between form and content, between extrinsic and intrinsic structures, Mark Insingel's book is one of the most challenging and interesting works of modern fiction.

HECTOR LIBERTELLA

Aventuras de los Miticistas (Adventures of the Myth-Makers)

Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, C.A., 1971. Pp. 190

The Argentinian H. Libertella, author of three novels and winner of three awards, is not yet very well known outside his own country. Since *La Híbridez* (Hybridism), published in 1965, he has been a controversial and aggressive writer lacking, nevertheless, that special touch of popularity which characterizes such authors as Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes and others. For many of his readers and critics Libertella is still a complex and disturbing phenomenon in the world of Spanish-American fiction, *rara avis* condemned to whirl in that kind of limbo which precedes either fame or oblivion.

Aventuras de los Miticistas is, up to a point, the result of the apocalyptic and ritual imagination governing many a work of art today. Its plot and structure imply a violent attack against Western rationalism and traditional narrative forms. By reviving old surrealist formulas and combining them with recent pop-art codes, Libertella seeks to demolish our easy, hypnotic, and "logical" perception of daily life so we can experience the ironic and bitter freedom of Chaos. His novel gradually becomes an anti-novel which shakes our sense of reality and fiction. The confusion of planes in the characters' conscience, the narrator's shifting point of view, the anarchy of verbal tenses, the abolition of boundaries between facts and fantasy are profusely exploited in order to present the psychology and action of equally chaotic beings: a group of young men, thoroughly disillusioned and overwhelmed by urban living, decide to experience a new life — a life that must begin with the cure of their own past, a sort of purification and moral redemption before attempting the quest for the Absolute, Utopia or, as they name it *Mitilandia* (The Land of Myths). Their flight from civilization takes them to the antipodes: the vastness of the Argentinian south where they dream of founding a monastic community. Here they try to heal the wounds of modern alienation but they fall prey to old dreams and mystical fantasies which, ironically, bring about a more hermetic alienation. Outside reality loses consistency and becomes pliable. The adventurers *see* what their imagination dictates. When their need for a medieval castle as headquarters for the community arises, they *discover* such a castle in the middle of the pampas, in an environment with neither Middle Ages nor castles. Further on, as they set out in search for *Mitilandia* through the cold and rocky regions of Patagonia, one of the leaders, Ferdinando, is frozen to death — "his death was the most human thing that had happened so far," acknowledges the author. But Stanley, another member of the group, transmutes his death into magic: Ferdinando did not die; he only "disappeared as do the semi-gods."

Libertella's characters are quixotic, although they lack Don Quixote's candor. They go from failure to failure driven by a bookish idealism made up of ancient legends and archetypes. They want to rehearse a mythical age forgetting, or so

they pretend, that myths cannot be revived at will and that self-inflicted hardship and monastic discipline, without faith, are wasteful. Thoughts, gestures, ambitions, temptations, sins, repentances, love, death, all are grotesquely parodied until finally they become tragi-comical. Fantasies turn into a labyrinth of madness where the Myth-Makers seem to lose themselves hopelessly.

In line with the story, the author's style is fantastic and hyperbolic. He stocks exaggerations, absurd situations, incredible episodes with both a caustic sense of humor and a subtle compassion for the fate of the protagonists. Libertella's style serves the same purpose as the plot: the destruction of the mythical imagination. Nonetheless, he is not deceived: he knows that man needs to spin myths from time to time in order to liberate himself. He is also aware of that irrational, unconscious and incurable thirst for plenitude and total happiness. Libertella also sees that *logos* has failed, that modern rationalism has made man an alien in his own land. It should not be surprising, therefore, if an underlying nostalgia shows behind every attempt to destroy the myths. After all, myths meant for men of the past — they still mean for the primitive of today — some kind of meaningful existence, a certain harmony with nature, the others, and the cosmos. So, in spite of his parodies, Libertella allows his wretched characters to return to the starting point, the plains of Patagonia, the medieval castle in the pampas where they "will have to start once more, again and again, the farce of their adventures."

STEFAN THEMERSON

Special Branch (a dialogue)

London: Gaberbocchus, 1972. Pp. 94.
£.1.

Stefan Themerson has published more than a dozen books; some he calls novels (*Professor Mmaa's Lecture*, which includes a preface by Bertrand Russell; *Cardinal Pölätio* and *Tom Harris*), some stories (*Wooff Wooff, or who killed Richard Wagner?* and *The Adventures of Paddy Bottom*), and others are simply called essays (*factor T*, *Jankel Adler*, *Kurt Schwitters in England* and *Apollinaire's Lyrical Ideograms*).

He also wrote an opera in two acts entitled *St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio* or *Brother Francis' Lamb Chops*.

In most of his works Stefan Themerson is more interested in exploring fundamental human problems and examining different ethical and aesthetic aspects of life, art, and science than in entertaining or amusing his readers. He is the kind of writer one should never take along to the seashore on a beautiful summer day. He is problematical, demanding, and stimulating; he will never grant his readers a moment of repose and relaxation even when he is only juggling with terms, concepts, and abstractions. His latest book *Special Branch (a dialogue)* begins like humorous Science-Fiction but rapidly develops into ponderous and lumbering "Logic-Fiction" (p. 52).

The story starts with detective superintendent Watson from the Special Branch of Scotland Yard visiting a "bloody communist" in order "to see what sort of chap he is" (p. 92). "As if this wasn't what he really wanted to ask" (p. 7), he asked his host if he had read Dr. Good's paper on the Ultra-Intelligent Machine, a kind of invention that will lead to an "intelligence explosion" and "transform society in an unimaginable way" (p. 8). When he gets an affirmative answer, the superintendent tries to find out how a machine like this should be programmed in order to make *her* understand the world and not develop into a vicious monster. His host advises him "1— not to build any ought-arguments into her; 2— not to let her have any beliefs or intentions; 3— not to impose our way of classifying things on her" (p. 73).

The two men examine different possibilities and analyze many aspects of this complex question. They reach the conclusion that "when unnatural philosophers want to examine Nature as she determines men to judge how things ought to be, they do *not* start by observing other persons, (How can they know that other persons exist?!), they try to observe their own selves, their own states of mind, their 'inner cases.' As if their own existence were more self-evident than the existence of the outside world" (p. 88).

From their dialogue the superintendent discovers that this "bloody communist" is

in reality a very skillful thinker and a wise, witty philosopher. Therefore he can do nothing but to agree with him when he says: "Human existence is a philosophical problem if you consider it in the 1st person singular. It is not philosophy at all, it is knowledge when you consider it in the 3rd person, singular or plural" (p. 90). This is the kind of book that will doubtlessly appeal to philosophers and serious thinkers.

CLAUDE OLLIER

Law and Order

Translated from the French by Ursula Molinaro
New York: Red Dust, 1971. Pp. 126.
\$4.95.

Law and Order is a story that does not yield to a specific narrative concept or submit itself to a definite logical pattern. It is an extremely experimental novel. The point of view is always changing, the tempo is never constant, and the style is ever varying. The characters are insufficiently exposed, the motivations hardly explained, and the incidents rarely commented upon. But nevertheless, the receptive reader would easily get all the impressions, feelings, and ideas he usually expects from a well plotted, exactly executed, and traditionally written novel on crime and violence.

Since all motifs and leitmotifs, hints and clues, lead to no satisfying explanation or rational interpretation, the reader should not start the game of guessing and analyzing; he should be content with perceiving the images and beholding the impressions that are abundantly included. Here are a few examples:

The footsteps of the two men echo on the stoop, in the hall, outside the janitor's door, finally on the bottom stairs. The elevator cage begins to vibrate; its long metal stems vibrate all the way up to the seventh floor; the door of the room vibrates, the walls vibrate, the windows, the entire house front is vibrating, from the wrought-iron entrance door all the way up to the seventh-floor windows... But it was only a trick. (p. 12)

One could see women and children moving about among the Gourbis, lugging buckets, earthen jugs, kettles, bundles of wood. A child sat on a sand pile, scratching his scalp with his nails, another child, astride a barrel, was rubbing his fly-covered eyes. Garbage was heaped up in the middle of the alleys, dogs lay stretched out on their sides, men squatted in the shade; some turned their heads at the sound of the motor. (pp. 97-98)

The first road on the right started zig-zagging down the hill, between rows of villas, through wide, not too well banked curves, spindle-shrub hedges, mimosas and big shady trees, sumptuous houses, nestling in greenery, a rapid succession of well-ordered images, some across the full width of the wind-shield — the asphalt road unraveling at top speed, gravel sidewalk, low walls, traffic signs rising up to meet the hood —, others higher up, in the little mirror above the windshield, as though on a small-scale movie screen — the same objects, fleeing at top speed in the opposite direction, growing smaller, flatter, running over each other, sliding, disappearing to the left, to the right, escaping the tiny frame . . . the reflection of the American car in the rear-view mirror, still halfway around the curve, a Buick, at least five years old, with rust stains on the hood, windshield removed, a dent in one fender, the man beside the driver half asleep on the seat, hands behind his neck; he sits up straight, puts on dark glasses, leans against the door. (pp. 104-105; this one sentence has more than 400 words!)

After finishing this novel the reader should lean back in his chair and let this unorganized scenario of spying, fear and intimidation, conspiracy, terror, and endless waiting roll in front of his mind's eye and he will undoubtedly experience a very exciting story.

OMAR ÉBY

A Covenant of Despair

Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973. Pp. 220.
\$5.95.

A Covenant of Despair is set in Tanzania six years after its independence from

Britain. The protagonist, Ashley Crofton, a young American missionary, himself the son of an American missionary in Africa, and a teacher of history in a mission school, returns, after the death of his wife and his child, to the area where he was born.

The novel is written in the first person and is concerned with the moral education of the young teacher. Because Crofton is a missionary and the author is a Mennonite, the book has overtones which go at least as far back as Bunyan and Defoe. For example, the journey by motor-bike through the African landscape, with which the novel opens, becomes very obviously a spiritual journey back "home." This early tendency continues throughout the novel and is so much a part of the style as to make quotation of single examples pointless. The Defoe-like quality is evident in the way the protagonist is apt to view "happenings," or lack of them, as manifestations of Divine Providence.

The novel has a very traditional structure but the themes remain diffuse for the book is closer to a confession than to an artful novel and the author is attempting to express numerous aspects of Africa, and perhaps of his personal life, which have disturbed him. The best criticism afforded by the novel is the protagonist's own criticism of a "religion which was entirely preoccupied with the inspection of the personal experience" (p. 83). The personal experience of the novel is certainly not embodied in well-rounded characters and dramatic situations and so we are left with little more than the personal reflections of the author/protagonist. Thus, the center of interest tends to be thin because it is so diffuse and everything acquires equal importance. The novel seems equally concerned with Africanization after Independence; the difficulties faced by African boys studying history for the Cambridge examination; the general ingratitude of the natives; the breakdown of peasant culture in the face of imposed, alien, middle-class values; the bigotry and hypocrisy of the teachers in the mission school plus the sexual guilt and religious crisis of the protagonist. Such diffuseness is never resolved. Certainly not by the conventional imagery of limited optimism with which the novel "concludes."

ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN

We Never make Mistakes

Translated by Paul W. Blackstock
New York: Norton, 1971. Pp. 138.
\$1.35.

For both the initiated and the uninitiated reader of Solzhenitsyn, "*We Never Make Mistakes*" is a rare and poignant literary experience. Two short stories, "An Incident at Krechetovka Station," and "Matryona's House," comprise the volume, whose title was chosen by the translator from the closing conversation between the Security Investigator and the protagonist, Lieutenant Zotov, at the railroad station.

"An Incident at Krechetovka Station" is an exploration of Soviet bureaucracy. It is, concurrently, an indictment of the very essence of Communist Party ideology. The key statement, "We never make mistakes," well-suited as a title for the first part of the book, but a bit too ironic for the second, marks the end of Zotov's search for the righteous path in life. Zotov has first explored socialism; as a student, he attempted to read Marx, and was disappointed at being advised that he would do better to study a watered-down textbook. He also explores love and friendship, but salvation does not appear to be found easily. He finally transfers his quest to the realm of bureaucracy and justice, when he encounters Tveritinov who enters his office and purports to be a straggler from a transport. At first, he is faced with the problem of deciding whether the straggler is not really a saboteur in disguise. The very lives of both men are at stake: the Soviet penal system will inflict severe punishment upon Tveritinov should he be proven to be a saboteur, and much of Zotov's future career will depend upon his report. The lieutenant, although he only realizes this much later, will never be able to live at peace with himself because, alas, he makes a fatal mistake, thus revealing both poor judgment and general distrust of mankind. By the end of the story, both the reader and Zotov doubt very much that Tveritinov is anything but a man who accidentally lost his way. Thus Solzhenitsyn has once again criticized sharply not only the Soviet system of justice, but also one of the primary elements of Party-cell structure: autocriticism.

"Matryona's House" is, in part, autobiographical. It can be considered a sequel to *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. The story, narrated in the first person, concerns the return to normal life of Ignatich, a former prison camp inmate. The ex-prisoner searches for the essence of Russian life in an isolated village in the bog of the lowlands. Here he hopes to regain that part of himself from which "the ten-year stretch" in prison camp had alienated him. Through his life as a math teacher in the village, and as a boarder in Matryona's house, he comes to understand, although only after her death, who is "the righteous one without whom, according to the proverb, no village can stand." Matryona is close to Christ, the one who knows that worldly possessions lead man to greed, to harshness, and finally, to death. Yet, with all this insight, Matryona is unable to effect changes in the souls and hearts of the villagers, for no one will listen to her. Only Ignatich is eventually redeemed by her death.

Here it is neither a system nor an ideology that is placed under scrutiny, but the way of life of modern men. In contrast to "An Incident," whose universality seems, in the author's intent, to be limited to the Soviet Union, in the second novella, the protagonist finds his salvation when he ponders how Matryona lived and died. Ivan Denisovich, whom we had given up as lost, for years engulfed and devoured by the Soviet prison system, unable to resist the temptation to fall into that system by taking pride in the work he was doing "for them," has now been redeemed. The reader, who had completed "An Incident" in a dispirited mood, in the second novella is given cause to hope for resurrection. And those who have been wondering if Solzhenitsyn's talent was forever to be limited to the recounting of the errors of the Soviet penal system in general and that of Stalin in particular, can feel reassured. These two novellas are the work of a very talented writer who has profoundly penetrated the Russian soul, has known how to transmit his perceptions to his reader, and who realizes and dares to say that the end of the age of Stalin did not eliminate the causes for disenchantment in the Soviet Union, and that despair prevails the world over.

HAROLD ELVIN

The Incredible Mile

London: Heinemann, n.d. Pp. 263.
\$10.95.

In *The Incredible Mile*, Harold Elvin tries to bring something of the novelist's art to bear on the travel book — to do with this genre what Mailer claims to be doing with history in *The Armies of the Night* and with biography in *Marilyn*. The journey which took the author from London, across Siberia, to Vladivostok, and back by way of Mongolia is presented not so much through the eyes of the travel writer who observes place and superficial social customs but through those of the novelist who places his emphasis on character, poetic description, and memory. Unfortunately, Elvin's attempt fails because, despite the circular form provided by the journey itself, *The Incredible Mile* lacks any real shape and hence disqualifies itself as a work of art: In the opening chapters Elvin establishes some inner coherency by playing off his memories of war-time Russia against the present, and several episodes are constructed around an aesthetically pleasing pattern of contrast between his former journey out of Russia and his present journey in. Later, however, lacking the courage of a Norman Mailer, who would have sacrificed factual accuracy for artistic truth, he is forced to abandon the memory element because his journey takes him beyond familiar locales.

The character sketches and descriptive passages also fail because Elvin lacks the true novelist's sensibility and control of language. The characters are all dull and tedious and the descriptions are often embarrassingly cliché-ridden: "snow . . . as pure as a nun's heart, fiords below as clear as a baby's eyes, a paradise per mile."

Perhaps because he senses his limitations as a novelist Harold Elvin does not break entirely with the traditional travel book and the overall impact of *The Incredible Mile* is further diminished by repeated comparisons of the cost of living in the USSR and Great Britain and, towards the end, by endless accounts of the activities of Jenghis Khan.

SVEN HOLM, ED.

The Devil's Instrument and Other Danish Stories

Translated from the Danish by Paula Hostrup-Jessen

London: Peter Owen, 1971. Pp. 266. \$10.

This is a well balanced collection of modern and extremely modern short stories. Some are very short (5 pp.), others are relatively long (24 pp.), but all are challenging and rewarding.

The writers differ in generation (Albert Dam was born in 1880, Sven Holm in 1940) as well as in themes and styles. Some of them are moderately realistic, like Anders Bodelsen. His story "Success" is an exact account of the last three hours of a working day. In it the author describes how a man who lives in our modern environment is compelled to "overtake" the others simply because everyone behind him twinkles "his headlights in order to make him increase speed" (p. 209).

Some of the writers, like Tove Ditlevsen, are only experimenting. His "Modus Operandi" is a bizarre sketch that has to be re-read before one shares the feverish woman's discovery that "a person can lose of himself without losing the capacity for function" (p. 160-61).

Others are surrealistic like Svend Aage Madsen. His story "The Judge" is a detailed account of a murder investigation that forces the chief constable, who is also the judge, to dig in the ground, search the sea, and climb trees in order to find the non-existing murderer and discover the reasons behind the killing of the man who shared the isolated island with him.

GERTRAUD MIDDELHAUVE, ED.

Dichter Europas erzählen Kindern

Köln: Gertraud Middelhaue, 1973. Pp. 304. DM. 22.

In 1966 the German firm Gertraud Middelhaue published *Dichter erzählen Kindern*, a collection of 36 stories written for children by distinguished German writers like Heinrich Böll, Peter Hacks,

and Wolf Biermann. The great success of this collection has encouraged the same publishing firm to launch a bigger project. The second book, *Dichter Europas erzählen Kindern* contains 46 short stories by 44 writers representing 17 European countries. The editor apparently regards it as a continuation of the first book, since this is the only justification for not including any stories by German writers. Readers who are not acquainted with the first book and who might wish to discover the peculiarities and characteristics of German literature by comparing the successors of the Grimm brothers, Heinrich Hoffmann, and Wilhelm Busch with their contemporaries in other European countries will miss the German section. However, this does not change the fact that it is one of the best collections of short stories that has been published lately.

The common themes in most of the stories are children and their fantastic world. Sometimes the style is too sophisticated and the intellectual content ponderous and demanding, especially in the French section. Nor was it a good idea to put Jean Thibaudeau's cumbersome manifesto for young readers at the beginning of this book. It is true that children's books should not be shallow and trivial, but this does not necessarily mean that they should be obscure and arduous; children should be taken seriously, but they should never be excessively strained. Teachers and parents would be well-advised to spend some time with their children in order to usher their unfledged minds into this beautiful collection of short stories.

ALBERTO MORAVIA

Bought and Sold

Translated from the Italian by Angus Davidson

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973. Pp. 222. \$6.95.

This is a collection of thirty-four stories about lonely, eccentric, and desperate women. Seven of these stories have been published before in different magazines including *Playboy*. Although the longest story does not exceed ten pages, this accomplished craftsman and excellent psychologist knows how to move skillfully and gracefully within this very limited space. His figures do not need many words to

reveal themselves and tell the shocking and sometimes repulsive stories of their lives. Recurring themes are boredom, frustration, and the frantic search for outlet or fulfillment even if it is aberrant and perverted.

It is easy to notice that the author has written these stories with nothing in mind other than to entertain and amuse his readers, and this he does, and in the best way. It is therefore understandable that Moravia has been often compared with great and beguiling storytellers like Maupassant and Somerset Maugham.

Four Chinese Short Stories

Chinese Literature

No. 2, 1973,

Peking: Yu Chou Hung

"Cipher Officer" by Ting Tzu-ping (9 pp.). This is a story of the heroic deed of a young Chinese girl named Liu Hsiao-lan during the fighting against Chiang Kai-shek's army. A fourteen-year-old soldier who witnessed this legendary incident describes how Liu prevented her code-book from falling into the hands of the enemy by hiding it in her wound: "With an effort she indicated the wound in her belly, a big gaping wound, and from it we drew a blood-stained roll — the code-book safely wrapped in cellophane! Not one of us but shed tears when we saw this" (p. 12).

"The Commune's Choice" by Wang Shih-mei (11 pp.) is the story of an idealistic student whose name was defamed and unrightfully deleted from the list of students "recommended by the units at grass-root level" (p. 22), to join one of the socialist colleges of China. An investigation carried out by the Party secretary of the county reveals that what was suspected to be a story of miscreancy and corruption is in fact a very sincere and touching situation. In the nick of time, the secretary intercedes and adds the young man's name to the list of students who will "study hard for the revolution, for the cause of the proletariat" (p. 25).

In "Ninety-Nine and One" (pp. 9), Tsou chung-ping describes how the Eighth Anti-aircraft Artillery Battery selected its best gunner to join a training course run

by the Division Headquarters. Two competitors, a veteran gunner named Wu and his young friend Lei have to undergo an aptitude test before a decision can be reached. During the competition each of them makes a mistake; Wu due to his "lack of foresight" (p. 32), and Lei because of his "lack of combat readiness" (p. 33), as they both graciously admit. Because of their "unreserved self-criticism" (p. 35), and "real revolutionary spirit" (p. 35), a final decision cannot be reached and the "members of the Party branch committee are, at the time of writing, still holding a serious discussion in the light of the views of the masses" (p. 35).

"When the Party Secretary Showed Up" (pp. 10), by Yao Keh-ming shows how a young woman, Miao Chun-min, who is deputy secretary of the district Party committee, discovers that she, in spite of the cultural revolution, has "failed to go deep among the people to see what new things are cropping out" (p. 41). Instead of blaming others, she criticizes herself courageously, corrects her mistakes and promises never to "forget the Party and the people who have raised [her] and educated [her]" (p. 44).

These are four heavily political stories that do nothing but glorify the Chinese revolution and propagate communist ideology. The characters are naive embodiments of heroism, zeal, and self-sacrifice. Whatever they say and do, they are always inspired and guided by the teaching of Mao Tse-tung. (Each story includes at least one quotation from Mao's speeches.) Young or old, all the characters are noble, conscientious, and dedicated; not one of them is weak, hesitant, or ill-tempered. And this lack of human fragility is what makes them cold, lifeless, and unconvincing. The unrealistic white and white projection of people and incidents gives these stories their exemplary nature and thus shifts them from the realm of belles-lettres into pure propaganda. Readers who admire the great classics of Chinese narrative literature like *Shui Hu Chuan*, *Kim Ping Meh*, and *Hung Loh Mong* will undoubtedly miss the realism and the vital characters of the first work, the intimate atmosphere and the artistry of the second, and the deep symbolism of the last. When one compares these stories with the works of modern writers like Lu Hsün, Mao Tun, and Pa Chin, one notices

how greatly Chinese contemporary literature has suffered because of the government-sponsored concept of socialist realism.

SAAD ELKHADEM

Zur Geschichte des deutschen Romans

Berne: Herbert Lang, 1973. Pp. 45.

Professor Elkhadem considers the ambiguous situation of the German novel in world literature. His short but comprehensive survey propounds the theory of a split inherent in every German novelist who vacillates between the following alternatives: either gaining instant but often impermanent popularity by catering to a broad public, or alienating the readership at large by an excess of depth, moralising trends, and pedantry. The author traces the history of the German novel from the dawn of European fiction to this day. Starting with medieval times, Mr. Elkhadem notes that when German authors imitated foreign models the success of often mediocre works was instant, yet when they wrote original pieces filled with lofty spirituality their readers were often repelled. Such a factor would be due to a basically uneven blending of the three ingredients essential to a novel: plot, style, and spiritual substance.

Mr. Elkhadem illustrates this theory by alluding to the paucity of German fictional masterpieces from the Middle Ages through the Baroque and Enlightenment eras. Only in Goethe's *Werther* does he perceive a true masterpiece due to its simplicity and its avoidance of national pitfalls such as heaviness and a didactic purpose which provoke boredom in the general public. Amongst nineteenth century novels he is at a loss in selecting one which achieves excellence in the genres of realism and naturalism which were flourishing in France, Russia, or England. Only in the next wave of writers does he find masters of the caliber of Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse. Although Mann displays a great deal of intellectualism his irony mitigates his spirituality. Mr. Elkhadem considers novels of the Absurd, such as conceived by Kafka and Peter Weiss, as atypical and likely to alienate the reader, yet he concludes his study by viewing the works of a last group, comprising Günther Grass and Heinrich Böll, from a favorable-angle.

These authors, according to him, have finally reached the stage of equilibrium by partaking of the European and American fiction tradition without relinquishing originality of form. A very useful seven page Appendix gives a bibliography of significant novels from the Middle Ages until the present day. This is preceded by a key to a classification of these works into: (1) *man-novels*, (2) *time-novels*, and (3) *event-novels*.

GRACIELA MATURO

Claves Simbólicas de Gabriel García Márquez (Symbolic Keys to G. García Márquez)

Buenos Aires: F. G. Cambeiro, 1972. Pp. 194.

After the publication of *Cien años de soledad* (1967), that surprising dénouement of the narrative cycle on Macondo that was begun a decade earlier by the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, a multitude of Latin-American and European critics felt called upon to decipher his work with an ardent enthusiasm that has often contained more enthusiasm than critical rigor. Of the most recent batch of essays, *Claves Simbólicas de Gabriel García Márquez* by Graciela Maturo is, perhaps, one of the more consistent within the limits of its approach. Miss Maturo starts from premises based on structuralism, both in criticism and in anthropology (G. Genette, C. Lévi-Strauss, P. Ricoeur, etc.), in order to unravel the formal structures of the tales of García Márquez, which, according to her, are caught in a net of symbols and allegories cast into the nature and history of Latin-American man. By tracing these allegories and symbols back to remote times, one can arrive at the mythical core or unity of meanings.

In the Introduction, Miss Maturo reminds us of Dante's classic distinction between the various levels at which one can read a literary piece. These are literal, allegoric, moral, and analogical (=symbolic). She also relates the works of García Márquez to the symbolic traditions of East and West. With a method that is both objective and subjective (analysis and re-creation) the authoress proposes to reveal what lies behind the literal meaning of the stories; that is, the multiplicity of *significances* which emanate from the charac-

ters, the anecdotes, and the realistic images.

In order to avoid any suspicion of arbitrariness, Miss Maturo has arranged the essay into two parts: the first, "Mito y Literatura" (three chapters), is purely conceptual and theoretical. In it, problems of hermeneutics in relationship to structuralism and mythical consciousness are examined. Symbolic language in the Western tradition is also examined, as is the relationship between myth and novel. The second part, "El Lenguaje de los Símbolos en la obra de Gabriel García Márquez" (eleven chapters), studies the author and his works: *La Hojarasca*, *La Mala Hora*, *El Coronel no tiene quien le escriba*, *Cien años de soledad*, and *El relato de un naufragio*.

With an erudition that is overwhelming, and sometimes tiring, Miss Maturo discusses in great detail metaphors, images, descriptions, dialogues, episodes, and protagonists, all of which build up, in one way or another, her central thesis. After each story there appears a scheme, or mythical pattern, which is the "núcleo significativo" where all the components and levels are resolved. Every moment is projected to a universal and timeless plane. Thus, the

first three tales — *La Hojarasca*, *La Mala Hora*, *El Coronel* — are dominated by the idea of death and rebirth; *Cien años de soledad*, which stems from a combination of various mythical codes (Hellenic, Hebraic, Alquimist, Christian) contains an eschatologic vision of man and history, whose centre is Christ, the joining point of providence and liberty. All the works of García Márquez have, according to Miss Maturo, a deep religious significance, without being sectarian.

Only time will tell to what degree this essay is revealing and convincing for readers of the Colombian novelist. In criticism, as in other humanist disciplines, to begin with a theory which is too elaborate is to be tempted to prove that theory at the expense of the author and his works. On the other hand, the excessive myth-hunting which is being practiced today, entices one into the trap noticed by Philip Ravh some time ago: "The critics captivated by this procedure are inclined to take for granted that to identify a mythic pattern in a novel or poem is tantamount to disclosing its merit — an assumption entirely false, for the very same pattern is easily discoverable in works entirely without merit."

DISCUSSION AND COMMENT

The readers of the IFR are invited to express their opinions and to comment on the articles and reviews included in this issue. Letters should not exceed two typewritten pages.

BOOKS RECEIVED

FICTION

Benton, Kenneth. *Spy in Chancery*. New York: Walker, 1973. 160 pp. \$4.95.

Biernath, Horst. *Ein Mund voll Glück*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1973. 192 pp. DM 20.

Böll, Heinrich. *Gruppenbild mit Dame*. Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1971. 400 pp. DM 25.