

he has wrapped round himself in his reclusive withdrawal so that he can achieve freedom, but he will never do so.

Hodgins is preoccupied a good deal with the way people withdraw from life, the pain they suffer in the path to which they have condemned themselves. In "After the Season" Hallie Crane hibernates in the winter after the tourists have gone, at a remote camp with a man called Morgan. He enjoys the seasonal routine of a mating dance followed by sessions in which they behave like rutting sheep. Only when a schoolteacher unexpectedly intrudes on their seclusion does she have to face what she has settled for. The ending in which the schoolteacher drowns reverberates in the mind. We are led to the edge of a complex awareness of how a chance encounter can shake up lives in ways that the characters themselves dare not fully understand. Again and again Hodgins shows us people crying out for human contact and yet fearful of making it. "The Trench Dwellers" is a marvellous study of the effects an extended family clan has on the individual. In this story Gerry Mack finds the relentless attentions of his kin so overwhelming that he flies off into total isolation. All those alienated urbanites who have sentimental views about those wonderful, warm, rooted rural families which give everyone a sense of belonging should scrutinize this story carefully.

"Three Women," a tale in the Gothic vein, is the best story in the collection. Hodgins has a wicked ability to pinpoint the pompous pretensions of the self-righteous rural snob. In Mrs. Wright we have a devastating picture of one woman's conviction of her superiority in all things and of the contemptible vulgarity and banality of all those among whom she is unfortunate enough to live. The concept of "otherness" is totally beyond her. When confronted with other styles of life she assumes people are not bright enough to live the right way—*her* way. By presenting the story through three narrators Hodgins can show us how much we are locked out of each other's lives, how in guarding secrets we can destroy ourselves and others. Like Spit Delaney we each have our own island. We may have fantasies of going up into the mountains or dreams of plunging down into the seas, but what we are always both yearning for and fearing are the bruises and the caresses of human contact.

The whole book seems to work variations on John Donne's theme of "No man is

an island." We meet people who, even though they live together are essentially alone, there are others who, in their isolation still strive in their minds to live with others. Some characters who cannot live alone resent those who try to do so, yet others fear both the problems of living with others and the questions they will have to face if they live alone. Vancouver Islanders and Mainlanders stare at each other across the gulf. Hodgins incorporates this sense of separation into the texture of everyday life. The stories are not all equally convincing but in each one he strives to give us a poignant sense of the struggles involved when people succeed or fail in bridging the gulfs that divide them.

Anthony Brennan

## NKEM NWANKWO

*My Mercedes is Bigger than Yours*  
London: Heinemann, 1975. Pp. 171.

This is Mr. Nwankwo's second novel to appear in this distinguished series. It relates how a young Nigerian wizz-kid returns to his native village after an absence of fifteen years, the proud possessor of a gold-colored Jaguar car which brings him immediate and easy success with the local girls. Unfortunately after a particularly active night in which at least three women succumb in turn to his charms on the back seat of the car he crashes it down a ravine. He borrows—or more accurately embezzles—money to hire a crane to pull it out, only to find it a heap of wreckage since it has been "cannibalized." Onuma is broken with grief and only emerges from his depression to become an electoral agent. Now deeply compromised and corrupted, he is beaten up by the thugs supporting one of the candidates, a local man of substance whom he has (in so far as there can be any honor among thieves) double-crossed by working for his political rival. At the eleventh hour Onuma repents, sees the error of his ways, and determines to "re-order his priorities" and "find a different kind of idyll to love and care for" (p. 169).

This is no Victorian morality story, however. Mr. Nwankwo who, the biographical note tells us, is studying for his PhD

in comparative literature at Indiana, has evidently meditated the example of Flaubert. The influence is not only stylistic, although this fine passage bears the stamp of the master: "The tenor of his life, especially over the recent months, stood out in sharp focus, all the stages through which he passed from a star of enormous charisma and energy to a futile disposable extra" (p. 169). The very tone and substance of Faubert's irony, as diffused through another savage satirist of contemporary mores, T. S. Eliot (the chapter-headings are quotations taken from *The Waste Land*), inform this enormously intelligent and sophisticated novel. For Onuma's apparent conversion to a saner and healthier way of life does not turn out quite like that. His new beginning takes the form of a brutal murder and theft: he shoots a relative and steals the Mercedes he is driving. Once again Onuma has possessed himself of a powerful and beautiful car. For him it is much more than just "one of the most elegant products of human craftsmanship in modern times" (p. 59), which is how the narrator unironically views it; it is in his eyes a voluptuous mistress who responds to his every whim. Indeed, his delight in motorcars is more erotic than his feelings for the many women he has possessed and cast aside.

A thoroughly amoral hero fails to get his richly deserved comeuppance, therefore. Mr. Nwankwo's book is hard and even bitter under the often dazzling comedy of the situations he creates. It is not difficult to discern his particular *bêtes noires*: they range from European businessmen who exploit Nigeria, illegally export their untaxed profits and keep an army of prostitutes busy, to the black politicians who corrupt and are corrupted, living in idle luxury while the peasants struggle to keep starvation at bay. What kind of world is this, Nwankwo seems to be asking accusingly, in which one man can ride around in a de luxe Mercedes while another makes perhaps £10 a year? The answer, bleak enough in all conscience, is that is is a world in which a beautiful butterfly like Onuma, a rogue and a scoundrel straight out of the picaresque tradition, can prosper and flourish, blazing a brilliant and gawdy trail, and leaving in his wake discarded lovers, wrecked automobiles, dud checks and even a few corpses. But worst of all, he leaves the tattered shreds of "his essential honesty, his loyalty, his love for people, [and]his compassion" (p. 169). The spec-

tacle of Frédéric Moreau defiling with Rosanette the bed intended for Madame Arnoux, or T. S. Eliot's typist smoothing her hair with automatic hand after the hasty departure of her carbuncular lover, is not so sad as that of the material success and moral failure of Onuma Okudo, wheeler-dealer extraordinary.

John Fletcher

### MIKHAIL ZOSHCHENKO.

*Nervous People and Other Satires*  
Translated from the Russian by  
Maria Gordon and Hugh McLean  
Bloomington: Indiana University  
Press, 1975. \$4.95. Pp. 480.

Both bold and foolhardy, Mikhail Zoshchenko chose to practice the sophisticated art of satire in a climate particularly unsuited to it—Russia in the throes of its experimentation with communism. To the considerable success he achieved in this endeavor in his own time and country, as well as in the tradition of Voltaire, this generous collection of his writing attests; *Nervous People and Other Satires* contains three novellas, forty-seven of the *feuilleton* in which he excelled, and an excursion into autobiography (an abridged version). The title is aptly chosen, since it emphasizes the basic component in Zoshchenko's satire, his concept of human nature as an eccentricity in an ordered universe, particularly in one ordered by communist doctrine. In one of the sketches (p. 185) he summarizes the personal and political *Weltanschauung* which underlies his work: "While we are solving all sorts of responsible problems about collective farms and the Promfinplan together, life continues in its own way. People arrange their destinies, take wives or husbands, pursue their personal happiness, and even, some of them, swindle and speculate. Of course, it's rather difficult to speculate nowadays. But all the same, there are citizens who manage to think up something fresh in this department."