

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."

In the three novellas the emphasis is on the foolhardiness of all human endeavor rather than on the perversity of man in the face of a political amelioration of his lot. They are love stories, although progressively less so. While the first, "What the Nightingale Sang," takes a wry look at the transitoriness of a deep, abiding love and the second, "The Lilacs Are Blooming," has already subordinated an account of its hero's love affairs to a history of his chequered career, the last novella, "Michel Sinyagin" (cf. the titles), considers the entire span of a man's life, in which love and marriage play an important but not climactic part. Michel is a would-be poet who never becomes one because the time is out of joint and, in the fashion of Hamlet, he lacks the ambition to set it right, or, in the fashion of E. T. A. Hoffmann (one of Zoshchenko's forebears), he adapts to the busyness of modern life by assuming the schizophrenic role of the outsider. As a matter of fact, *Before Sunrise*, Zoshchenko's venture into the field of autobiography, tells a similar tale of a split personality, half an eager participant in fashioning the turmoil of a changing society, half a melancholy recluse. Zoshchenko's exploration of the dark side of his personality which takes him from the events of his early maturity back to those of his adolescence and finally to those of his childhood and infancy leads him to a conclusion, which, as the critic Edward J. Brown indicates in his summarization of it, is simplistic: melancholy is a general human condition.

The shorter pieces (most of them three or four pages in length) provide Zoshchenko with just enough room to make this kind of wry comment effectively; they do not permit belaboring the point or embellishing it with whimsy. They are proper satires of life in Russia, then escaping from the tyranny of power into the tyranny of the dispersal of power: the wife-swapping which ensues when marriage and divorce become *pro forma*; the mismanagement which ensues when every man is a manager; the chicanery which ensues when the destruction of a sense of duty and obligation in favor of party affiliation leaves a void. Basic in Zoshchenko's documentation of human fallibility in a socialist Eden is the humor without which satire is flawed. Zoshchenko's sketches evoke real laughter and sentences such as this almost adulation: "We're so overcrowded [in this hospital] that we haven't got time to release any patients" (p. 261).

The fact that the translation reads well and does not dilute the effectiveness of the satire establishes the talent of the translators Maria Gordon and Hugh McLean, who also has provided a brief but trenchant introduction. The translators were, however, faced with a problem to which there is no solution, the duplication of slang. Although Zoshchenko's claim that he is unique in Soviet literature in employing everyday Russian in his work has been proven false by a close linguistic analysis of his style, his work has a Damon Runyanesque quality which is an insurmountable obstacle for the translator. The appearance of "noggin," "bean," "mug," "the old geezer," "his missus," etc., does not produce the desired effect of modernity and immediacy, but rather one of quaintness. In spite of such encumbrances, *Nervous People and Other Stories* draws the reader into an obscure realm of recent history, which it illuminates with the probing but never destructive light of satire.

Kurt J. Fickert

THOMAS WISEMAN

The Quick and the Dead

London: Jonathan Cape, 1968.
Pp. 443.

The Quick and the Dead, Thomas Wiseman's third novel (*Czar*, 1966; *Journey of a Man*, 1967), a tale of the ironic relationships, psychological, aesthetic, and political, between a narcissistic Viennese Nazi and an intellectual Viennese Jew, has much to offer the mind. It leads the reader beyond Erich Fromm's pleas for sanity in *Escape from Freedom* into a world of profoundly equivocal meditations, suggesting Marlow's Buddha-like disinterestedness in *Heart of Darkness* or Arthur Koestler's moral