

BOOKS

A GREAT AUSTRIAN NOVELIST

THE scarcity of German novels, realistic novels especially, that can bear comparison with the English, French, and Russian masterpieces is as notorious as the scarcity of great German comedies. Only recently the matter was raised again by Professor Roy Pascal;* and the distinguished Swiss critic Max Rychner† has answered, and partly confirmed, Professor Pascal's complaint. As long ago as 1778, Herr Rychner recalls, Goethe's friend J. H. Merck wrote a treatise on "The Lack of the Epic Spirit in Germany." Like Professor Pascal, Merck was most scathing about the incapacity of German writers to get to grips with external reality; and this before the metaphysicians and æstheticians of the Romantic movement had turned solipsism into an all-embracing system.

Neither Herr Rychner nor Professor Pascal mentions a living Austrian novelist who has all the qualities of whose lack they complain, and a great many more besides. Heimito von Doderer has that "passion for human beings"—rather than for ideas invested with a basic minimum of flesh and blood—which Herr Rychner demands; and the "vividness," "liveliness," "adventurousness," and profusion of incident on which Professor Pascal insists. His grasp of large, small, and minute realities is equally firm. His mind is not only deep, but wide as well. He has "world enough"—and time.

If so many good German novelists strike the foreign reader as provincial, it is not because they lived in the provinces or wrote about them; nor even because the German-speaking countries had no capital worthy of the name. There was always Vienna; but not a single great novel dedicated to her *genius loci* throughout the 18th

and 19th centuries. What was lacking was a writer with the capacity to transform his particular province, or capital, into the centre of the world. Heimito von Doderer's novels celebrate Vienna as she was never celebrated in the days of her imperial glory; yet not so much by showing her to have been the geographical, cultural, and political centre of Europe at a particular time, the 1920's, as by making her the setting of a "world theatre," a stage on which universal passions and obsessions are acted out.

HEIMITO VON DODERER was born at Weidlingau, in Lower Austria, in 1896. He spent his youth in Vienna. "At the age of 19 he wore what has long been a historical costume, with its gay colours, red and blue: the uniform of an Imperial Austrian officer of the Dragoons. At 23 he was a lumberjack deep in the virgin forest of Siberia; at 24 a printer; at 25 he wandered through the Kirghiz Steppes on foot; still in the same year he became a student of history in Vienna. At 29 he had put this, too, behind him, as well as the publication of his first books."* These first books were a collection of poems, *Gassen und Landschaft*, and a short novel, *Die Bresche*. Two other books followed in 1930; but it was not till 1938, with the publication of his novel *Ein Mord den Jeder Begeht*, that Doderer became widely known. His next novel, *Ein Umweg* (1940), is set in 17th-century Austria, but it is as much a psychological novel as the other.

During the last war Doderer served in the German Air Force, once again on the Russian front and in several other countries. Since his return he has lived in Vienna and devoted himself to writing. "Already he had made what has

* *The German Novel*. By ROY PASCAL. Manchester University Press. 30s.

† *Vom Deutschen Roman*. By MAX RYCHNER. *Merkur*, No. 106, December 1956.

* From the autobiographical sketch appended to Doderer's story *Das Letzte Abenteuer*. Stuttgart: Reclam. 1953.

remained his most important discovery, bearing both on the mechanics of the mind and on outward events: that of the indirect way; that of making thought conform to life, as opposed to the attempts, made all around him incessantly, to make life conform to thought; attempts that inevitably led to dogmatism, to reformism, and finally to the totalitarian State. . . ."

Doderer's *magnum opus**—great in every sense of the word—was published last autumn, on his sixtieth birthday. Its less ambitious prelude, *Die Strudlhofstiege*†—a mere 909 pages long, compared to the 1,345 pages of *Die Dämonen*—has been in print since 1951. Though each is complete in itself, the two works are complementary in that some of the main characters are common to both; and chronologically, too, the action of *Die Dämonen* is a sequel to that of *Die Strudlhofstiege*. Since the author worked at the longer novel for twenty-five years, *Die Strudlhofstiege* is, in a way, the later of the two; it therefore alludes to themes and events which are treated more fully in *Die Dämonen*. A shorter and much slighter novel of Doderer's‡ is entirely devoted to one of the minor characters in *Die Strudlhofstiege*, the civil servant Zihal, who "grows human" after his retirement by developing, and finally overcoming, a mania for peeping at female neighbours from the windows of his flat—with a meticulous and compulsive thoroughness taken over from his former profession.

This comic and seemingly trivial episode in the life of one of his minor characters points to Doderer's most constant and serious preoccupation, and to one of his major distinctions as a novelist. His peculiar psychology—or demonology, to give it its correct name—is so fascinating that it would be worth studying in its own right; and Doderer has, in fact, written a separate work on the subject, due to be reprinted in the near future. The great merit of Doderer's psychology, as opposed to the various orthodoxies which he describes as "disinfected demonology," is that it embraces the whole individual in relation to his environment, not merely one mechanism called sex or self-assertion or what-have-you. It is a humanistic psychology, not a clinical one. In choosing a title for his new novel he was influenced by his wish to pay tribute to Dostoevsky; but there's more to it than that. *Die Dämonen* applies Doderer's demonology,

* *Die Dämonen. Nach der Chronik des Sektionsrates Geyrenhoff.* Munich: Biederstein Verlag. DM 38.

† *Die Strudlhofstiege oder Melzer und die Tiefe der Jahre.* DM 22.50.

‡ *Die Erleuchteten Fenster oder die Menschwerdung des Amtrates Julius Zihal.* DM 7.50. Both Munich: Biederstein Verlag.

which is quite different from Dostoevsky's, to a great variety of characters. None of these becomes a "case," or even a type. The demons that possess them may be quite pleasant to live with—for a time; but they create a "second reality," a cage in which some, at least, of their victim's faculties become atrophied.

Doderer's realism, therefore, is essential to his purpose; for his characters develop by breaking out of this "second reality" and liberating themselves. Yet they need no therapy other than the moment of self-discovery that may come when they least expect it, a shock treatment provided by life itself; most often by a word, an image, or a smell that unravels a whole complex of past experience. Here Proust's *madeleine* comes to mind. Doderer's sensibility is akin to Proust's and Henry James'; but his sympathies are wider, less fastidious and more robust.

The hero of *Die Strudlhofstiege*, for instance, is a soldier; a soldier uncommonly dumb—without being an ox—unread, conventionally decent, awkward, inhibited. Doderer shows the gradual awakening of Melzer's "civilian sense," which not only unties his tongue but releases him from a vicious pattern of frustrated love. Far from recoiling from such a character, Doderer's sensibility is at its finest where he retraces the pattern to an incident in Melzer's early life, his visit to Vienna on leave and his meeting, on the train that will take him back to Bosnia, with the superior officer whose friendship becomes a compensation for Melzer's failures as a civilian and as a lover. Melzer's lovesickness and the promise of a bear hunt in Bosnia fuse and conflict during the journey itself; the bear hunt, with all its associations, wins.

This becomes Melzer's "second reality," symbolised by the bear-skin rug, his trophy, which he takes back with him into civilian life after the war. *Die Dämonen* presents some thirty characters more or less securely trapped in their various "second realities." These may be sexual, political, ethical, or even linguistic, relatively harmless or utterly destructive of others or themselves. The novel is more ambitious, too, in giving an account of the whole of Austrian society at a critical period and, by implication, of the dangers that threaten this civilisation. If the book can be said to have a hero at all, he is none of the three main characters—Geyrenhoff, Stangeler, and Schlaggenberg—who embody certain phases or aspects of the author's own life. Geyrenhoff, a retired civil servant with a private income, is the principal narrator. René von Stangeler, the young historian who spent several years as a prisoner of war in Siberia, was already prominent in *Die Strudlhofstiege* and in Doderer's early novel *Das Geheimnis des Reichs* (1930). Doderer himself studied history and

two would-be witches by one of Herzka's remote ancestors.

In other instances, the "second reality" is overtly political or ideological. Imre von Gyurkicz, a talented artist and caricaturist, is driven to political action and to his death by his inability to come to terms with his bourgeois, perhaps partly Jewish, descent, which he tries to conceal by assuming an implausible Hungarian title. Gyurkicz, too, keeps trophies of his past, but he tells lies about their provenance, even to himself. The action of *Die Dämonen* culminates in a political event, the burning down of the Vienna *Justizpalast* on July 15th, 1927. Gyurkicz is shot while inciting the crowd to violence. On the extreme Right there is the retired German cavalry officer, Baron von Eulenberg, who slides from conservatism into reaction. Geyrenhoff's nephew, Körger, has the cynicism and the ruthlessness of a younger generation that will take up the Nazi cause. On a different plane, the thief and murderer Meisgeier, who also dies horribly on July 15th, shares their hatred of the old order.

But there is no great division between the different forms of possession. A sexual fixation may crystallise into an ideology, and *vice versa*. The "second reality" of Charlotte von Schlaggenberg, Gyurkicz's mistress for a time, consists in her compulsion to become a professional violinist, though she suffers agonies in forcing herself to practise. Her conversion to reality is a sudden one. Others, like Stangeler, have to experience many little changes of direction—*tropoi*, Doderer calls them—detours and setbacks to arrive at their true selves.

spent four years in Siberia, but he can no more be identified with Stangeler in the new novel than with Kajetan von Schlaggenberg, who resembles him in being a novelist with a brilliant and original mind. The most exemplary characters in the book may be far removed from their creator's circumstances; Prince Croix, for example, and Leonhard Kakabsa, the young working man who studies Latin and becomes librarian to Prince Croix.

Schlaggenberg's "second reality" takes the form of an obsession with corpulent ladies; he "collects" them, follows them in the street, advertises for them, compiles statistics of their weight, measurements, and other particulars—in search of the perfect, the ideal fat woman. But every ideal, like every ideology, is suspect to Doderer—not excluding Plato's Republic. Schlaggenberg, of course, does his best to pass off this mania as a joke, as a merely cerebral protest against the current fashion in women's figures; yet he is half aware of its connection with his broken marriage and his unhappiness. Another character, the wealthy businessman Herzka, is obsessed with the trial and punishment of witches. Doderer interpolates a complete "document," in 16th-century German, relating the capture, trial, and punishment of

THE few personages and motifs I have picked out of Doderer's novels do not amount to anything like a review. Only extensive quotations—not of sentences, paragraphs, or pages, but complete episodes—could convey any idea of his style and scope, his power to evoke every social and topographical setting by dialogue or description and—more striking still—the blending of disparate atmospheres, past and present, memory and perception. In a work that rests on the conviction that reality is not something given to us ready-made, but something each must discover for himself, no detail is insignificant: whether a man wears braces or a belt, and why, a lamp installed in a certain place, a cup of tea drunk or not drunk before a party.

Yet, for all his originality, Doderer doesn't strike one as an experimental writer. Experiment, in the arts as elsewhere, implies an element of hit or miss; but, as Stangeler says in *Die Strudlhofstiege*, "no intellectual act is wholly practicable except on an absolutely con-

servative basis." Since Doderer doesn't keep up the Naturalist pretence of non-intervention—summed up in Flaubert's definition of the novelist as being "like God in his universe, present everywhere, visible nowhere"—it is permissible to guess that he would agree with the gist of Stangeler's remark. But Doderer's conservatism is of that generous, catholic, and liberal kind to be found in other Austrian writers, from Grillparzer to Hofmannsthal, and perhaps only in Austria. It is a principle, a way of life, and a cast of mind that has nothing to do with class or party, far less with material interests, nor with the insistence on an ideal *status ante* or *status quo*; that would be ideology. Since it aims not at exclusiveness, but at integration, it is the very opposite of snobbery. The only crushing social snub that occurs in *Die Dämonen* is administered by Prince Croix to a middle-class youth who has sneered at Leonhard's working-class origin; but the youth is the son of Mary K., whom Croix treats as his equal. What he snubs is Hubert K.'s snobbery, not his class.

Uniqueness, in most of the best writers of our time, goes with eccentricity, if not one-sidedness. It's because he is so civilised, so sane and balanced a writer that Doderer seems somehow unmodern. Balance, of course, is no virtue in itself, if there's nothing on the scales, or only mass-produced wares and standard weights. Doderer imposes order on a pandemonium. His scales are laden with such a preposterous assortment of people, forces, and events that his balance becomes positively heroic; and this applies to the composition of *Die Dämonen* as

much as to its inmates. Because all his circles are concentric, and he is sure of his centre, Doderer can explore every periphery and lunatic fringe of human life, every linguistic tangent, without waywardness or eccentricity. Diplomats, doctors, factory workers, financiers (crooked and straight), policemen, prostitutes, lawyers, soldiers (commissioned or otherwise), musicians, hall porters, the proprietor and manageress of a shady café, an American lepidopterist, historians, landladies, and a whole crowd of adolescents—all these and their worlds Doderer weighs up, co-ordinates, and illuminates; and never by the merely conventional lights to which Balzac, for instance, resorted when his experience and imagination gave out.

It is regrettable, but understandable, that there will be no sequel to *Die Dämonen*; there, too, Herr von Doderer differs from Balzac, and with good reason. Without that distance of thirty years between the action of the novel and its completion, it would not have become what it is. That distance is one of its dimensions, as important as its spatial structure. *Die Dämonen* is not a topical novel or a political one, though it clarifies the most vital issues of our time, including the political. Like Proust and Joyce and Musil, Doderer is concerned with the nature of reality and experience, not with the reproduction of specific historical events. Above all, his book is a vindication of reality, and the possibility of fully inhabiting it; but in order to live in the present, one must be at peace with the past. Hence the need for those thirty years between the concept and its realisation.

Michael Hamburger

BIBLIA ANTI-BIBLIA

IN ONE of his most famous essays Lamb discusses.

books which are no books—biblia a-biblia—Court Calendars, Directories, Pocket Books, Draught Boards bound and lettered on the back, Scientific Treatises, Almanacks, Statutes at Large: the works of Hume, Gibbon, Robertson, Beattie, Soame Jenyns, and, generally, all those volumes which "no gentleman's library should be without": the Histories of Flavius Josephus (that learned Jew), and Paley's Moral Philosophy.

"With these exceptions," he adds, "I can read almost anything."

I wonder whether, if he were alive today,

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Lamb would not add a second and more heinous category: *biblia anti-biblia*, the books which are against books, the volumes which not merely masquerade in the coats and colours of literature, but secretly struggle to usurp them. I have just wound my way through seven works of criticism, which partly accounts for this jaundiced observation: for, although it has become a truism to remark that certain critics are failed creators and take their revenge, conscious or not, in subtly undermining the creations of others, it is none the less also true. This is an Age of Criticism (at any rate the critics have called it that), and probably more "highbrow" criticism, bulk for bulk, peels off the presses