

That is why I would take a less dim view than Le Roy Ladurie does of the earnest suggestion made by Maugiron to the Estates of Dauphiné, meeting at Grenoble, that they should end their acrimonious deliberations with a general embrace all round: the holy kiss, the *pax* of the Mass and the marriage rite. He did not think this would be an “ultimate solution” to class or other conflicts rending the people of Dauphiné: there was no ultimate solution except in the next world. What he did think was that, if the people claimed to be Christians, they must on some particular occasions ritually present themselves as one before the Lord, just as on

others—a Carnival, a meeting of Estates—they would ritually present themselves according to their native separations. The normal occasions for this would be Easter or Corpus Christi, the *Fête-Dieu*, and while it is not likely that there was much oneness going on in Romans at Easter or the *Fête-Dieu* of 1580, it is a bit lop-sided to leave them out altogether. Le Roy Ladurie might like to have a go at that subject next time. On second thoughts, even if you have read *The Peasants of Languedoc*, you will learn quite a lot that is new from *Carnival*, though you will probably need to skip the statistical parts in order to find out what it is.

Lifescapes

New Novels—By PENELOPE LIVELY

BEHIND THE TEXT of Kingsley Amis's *Russian Hide and Seek*,¹ suggested but never stated, there lurks a presence: the vanished landscape. There are only young trees (eucalyptus, poplar, Douglas fir) in this England of Russian occupation where transport is mainly horse-drawn; the old ones have long since gone up in smoke. The stately home occupied by Petrovsky (Controller for the Northampton area) is furnished with Russian imports (a caged siskin, a stuffed brown bear) and the memory of its yew hedges, statues, trees is preserved only in a photograph. Camomile and pimpernel flourish in the Doric temple (“Some kind of summer-house, I imagine”) but since Alexander Petrovsky, the bored amoral young Russian ensign who for lack of a better word one has to call the book's hero, doesn't know the name of anything, or care, that is neither here nor there. He cannot particularise; he gazes rather than looks; he observes a row of modern (in our sense) houses with respect and awe because they date from the legendary Pacification; “There was no one to offer him the opinion that they were offensive to the eye and the mind.” Oak and ash and elm have never been mentioned, nor has a great deal else but one of the skills of this closely written novel is to present passion without hammering the reader on the head. “And that will be England gone, The shadows, the meadows, the lanes, The guildhalls, the carved choirs”; Philip Larkin's apprehensions in a different vein keep coming to mind as one reads the book.

Because of course the landscape is the least of it. There is nothing else left either; 31% literacy, no

history, no culture. The English lurk on the fringes of the novel, speaking only occasionally through the amiable mindless girl who (among others) services Alexander sexually, and the ageing clergyman who is coerced into putting on a church service to suit the purposes of the Cultural Commission who are restoring to the English various things they neither remember nor recognise such as religion and Shakespeare. “You poor ignorant illiterate incurious nitwit”, says Glover, the clergyman (in English, which the occupying forces barely understand, except for catchphrases—piss off, old customer, well I'm buggered, have a good day). It is the Russians who are the matter of the novel: their ignorance and incuriosity, their boredom, their apathy, their amorality. They have no creed; Marxism is dead. The young liberal revolutionaries who plan a preposterously ramshackle coup to restore England to the English under cover of the Cultural Commission, and are chillingly trapped by the security forces, don't really know why they're doing it. For something to do, as much as anything. Vanag, the security chief who has rounded them up, gleefully explains to them their own inadequacies:

“I realise I'm very lucky, in that I know what to do. I have something to live by—the values and rules of the institution I'm part of and have been part of for many years. Traditions, if you like. Now some of you may argue that those rules and traditions leave a certain amount to be desired, and there may well be something in that. But for me, for us, for these guards, they're better than nothing. Which is what you've got.”

Most Russians don't even know about the Pacifica-

¹ *Russian Hide and Seek*. By KINGSLEY AMIS. Hutchinson, £5.95.

tion, or care. Vanag leaves us in little doubt what happened (resistance—"It had been said earlier that they had gone soft. If they had, I'd be interested to know what they were like before") and why ("There had been disorders here, runaway inflation, mass unemployment, strikes, strike-breaking, rioting, then much fiercer rioting when a leftist faction seized power"), and jeers at his prisoners for their ignorance: "Because you don't know how to live in the present you haven't the slightest interest in the past." There is a curious resemblance between Vanag and Glover.

There is also a tempting parallel to be made with the Roman occupation: the bored, stranded occupiers importing their comforts (vodka, dill-flavoured Ochotnitscha), playing military games, fucking the local girls. But it stops there; these invaders are disorganised uncultured shamblers compared with the Romans. One of them tries to define it—"The essence of the Russian character, in fact as well as in fiction, has always been theatricality." The game played by the young officers is to go out into the darkness and blast off at each other with pistols: to devastating effect. You think of the scene in *War and Peace* in which Pierre and André climb out on to the parapet and

get drunk: suicidal and meaningless bravado. The Russian characters get pretty short shrift, from the egotistical Alexander to the appalling Mrs Korotchenko whose sexual boorishness is too much even for him. Bleak lives in a landscape scoured of memory, in which nobody cares about anything because nobody knows about anything. And if occasionally one is left in some doubt as to whether Kingsley Amis intended an apocalyptic warning or the fast-moving thriller which the book becomes in the final third, there is no resisting the accuracy of the world he creates. I, for one, shall feel a certain queasiness next time I pass by Kettering or Northampton. Moreover, I suspect the obvious reading of the novel won't do. The death of language, of enquiry, of conviction; the triumph of self-interest and compliance. I don't think Kingsley Amis is just writing about what will happen if the Russians come; *Russian Hide and Seek* can also be taken as a fable of what might even if they don't.

SETTING THE WORLD ON FIRE is Angus Wilson's richest, most complex novel,² if, in the last resort, one of the least satisfying. Yet, that being said, the dissatisfaction seems unjustified; all the Wilson skills are displayed, all that imaginative power and reflective insight that makes him, for me,

² *Setting The World On Fire*. By ANGUS WILSON. Secker & Warburg, £6.50.

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RUSSIA AND WORLD ORDER

Strategic Choices and the Laws of Power in History

GEORGE LISKA

In *Russia and World Order*, Liska subjects the political civilisation of America and Western Europe to a searching critical inspection that prompts questions about the source and identity of the chief threat to the West. Does the threat lie with the military power and geo-political ambitions of the Soviet Union? he asks. With the economic exactions and resurgence of nationalistic values in the Third World? Or with the waning civic virtues and political realism of the West itself?

To those who are already familiar with George Liska's works, *Russia and World Order* will be of special interest. It should also appeal to those concerned about the moral dilemma facing the West today.

208pp, £8.75.

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS

Ely House, 37 Dover Street, London W1X 4HQ

possibly the greatest English novelist of the post-war years. So what has gone wrong? It is a deeply symbolic novel, operatic in its symbolism and deliberately so, and perhaps it is just this that is unsettling even for the most devoted Wilson reader; you think regretfully of the calmer texture of *Late Call* and *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot*. The opulence of the conception seems to blur the more unobtrusive but crucial novelistic crafts for which Angus Wilson is distinguished.

The central symbolism is architectural. Tothill House, the mansion owned by the Mosson family which occupies a vast tract of central London stretching from Westminster Abbey to St John's, Smith Square, was built by Sir Roger Pratt, a marvel of classical regularity; within the very centre of the house was inserted, in violent contrast, Vanbrugh's Great Hall, a triumph of baroque flamboyance which carries upon its walls and ceiling Verrio's painting of the Phaethon legend. The Hall, the painting, and Lully's opera *Phaethon* (originally written for production in the Hall itself but never performed) are the essential matter of the novel: the story that is told is the story of Piers Mosson's ambition—eventually and tragically realised—to stage the production at last.

The secondary symbolism lies in the dispositions of the two heroes—the Mosson brothers, Piers and Tom. They are small boys when we first meet them in 1948 in a powerful and enormously clever scene which at once introduces us to the house and the family and states the novel's theme and direction. Tom, aged six, is weeping with fear in the Great Hall, oppressed by its size and implications; Piers, slightly older, is exhilarated and intoxicated, embarked on his obsession with the place and its subject. Sir Hubert Mosson, the present heir to Tothill, consoles his nephew in the level-headed language with which he has already explained and diminished the myth:

"But we don't have to worry, the world isn't all Phaethons or Vanbrughs. The men that keep it safe and in order are the Pratts, the men who know how to keep themselves in hand, the blokes who do things well and regularly. If it wasn't for them, the ice *would* break, the flames *would* fly up into the sky."

Ice and fire, order and irregularity; Pratt and Vanbrugh; Phaethon ("tragic, wayward, ambitious living humanity") and Jove ("noble, ordered, smug, dead statuary"). The statements of contrast are threaded through the book, a rich, intricate and heady pattern. The brothers are set in apposition; the worthy, unimaginative Mossons, Hubert and Jackie, his American heiress mother, are complemented by their fiery, dashing Tothill ancestors and by the wealthy Italian, Marina Luzzi, whom Hubert intends to marry, carrying on the family tradition of injections of external wealth when it

seems expedient. Marina Luzzi is a central figure, as crucial in her way as the Mossons themselves. The trouble is that she remains flat upon the page when so much else—the house, the Great Hall, most of the large cast of characters—shapes so satisfyingly to the mind's eye: the garden, the rooms, the paintings are seen, the rapid chatter of the boys' poor silly widowed mother Rosemary is heard. But Marina is given a grating idiom that does more to inter her than bring her to life, try as you may you cannot hear it: "Oh! that boaring Lesbian. . . I don't 'ave deals with freaks, I told 'er. It was vulgar, but you 'ave to be. These bourgeois Lesbians are like coarse-skinned—'Ow do you say?—navvies."

"Chaos is the only exciting thing left", Marina says, "I adore chaos. Throwing all the rules out of the window at the old bores. That's what art is about. Exciting art. . . ." But she is trounced and driven out, in one of the novel's several fine dramatic scenes, by Jackie ("Regularity and elegance. They are the important things. Especially when chaos is trying to take over. Keeping beautiful things going. . ."). And so is Rosemary, offending against the family's dignity and sensibilities by her intention to live with her lover. The boys, in the sixth form at Westminster by then, loyally propose to follow her, sacrificing the inheritance that will come to Piers eventually, but the Mosson sense of continuity, stated by dying 90-year-old Grandfather, cannot have that. There is reconciliation, of a kind, and in the last act (theatrically and rightly the novel divides thus) we find Piers, ten years on and by now the internationally famous producer that we have always known he will become, master of Tothill and at last about to stage the production of *Phaethon* that was first proposed when he was a schoolboy.

THE END IS UNEXPECTED, shocking and entirely successful. It is not there that the uneasiness lies. Rather, I think, it is with an internal discord between the grandeur of the imagery and the presentation of some of the characters—notably Marina Luzzi but to some extent also the even more vital figures of Tom and Piers, Pratt and Van as they call each other in recognition of their oppositeness. In the long central act of the novel their conversation seldom sounds like that of 17- and 18-year-olds—too measured, too considered surely even for clever public schoolboys with Oxford scholarships. It is as though the all-pervading symbolism has at this point been allowed to obscure the characters through whom it must be presented. They have drowned in it.

And yet, saying this, and it has to be said, one feels a carping wretch. Because there is so much to praise: the accuracy and economy with which we are taken from 1948 to 1956–7 to 1969; the wit;

the dramatic force; the neat Wilsonian touches like Rosemary's cultivation of species roses in the late 1950s (Sir Angus has always been a dab hand at the sociology of gardening). The novel gives pleasure—and excitement—on almost every page. Read it and see for yourself. My reservation is simply that the mixture is too rich, the fumes obscure the taste. Maybe such a criticism is in harmony with the language of the novel: structure against flamboyance, coherence against abandon.

MODERN NOVELISTS are often accused—with some justice—of not presenting the world of work. This charge certainly can't be levelled against Margaret Drabble. Kate, heroine of *The Middle Ground*,³ is a professional women's lib journalist (we are never told what paper she works for, except that it is about to go on prolonged strike) and her daily grind is charted as meticulously as her emotional life. We know what she writes about, how she finds her material, what she thinks about it all. And equally her friend Evelyn, with whose husband Kate has had a lengthy affair; the author evokes all too tellingly the social worker's trek from Day Care Centre (swarming polyglot children, Playdo, Wendy House, runny noses, inadequate mums) to valiant stoical old woman to the brawling household in which she is almost blinded by a demented Rastafarian and ends up in hospital.

Violence haunts the book and erupts, thus, from time to time. Hugo, Kate's long-time platonic friend, has lost an arm as war correspondent. Kate's state of mind is savaged by the abortion of a spina bifida baby, a late baby, an unintended baby, Ted's child. But the most apparent violence is the lurking threat of London in the 1970s: the footsteps behind you in the Tube, the crop-headed young tricked out in leather and safety-pins, the brawls, the gangs, the thefts. And the landscape of last week, last year (for the book is filled with a sense of the passage of time, of inexorable change) is described with almost documentary accuracy:

Pock-marked sooty bricks, mica-chipped cement, corrugated iron hoardings plastered with posters . . . subterranean pipes lagged in strange khaki grease-covered rags. Soft bulging plastic surfaces stood side by side with rigid ribbed grey dustbins.

This is a detailed precise landscape, firmly tethered to time and place by description, by dialogue, by reference. It is the world of the Equal Opportunities Commission and the DHSS and COHSE and NUPE; what a godsend Margaret Drabble is going to be to social historians of the 21st century.

Kate is forty and at the mid-life crisis. Tough.

³ *The Middle Ground*. By MARGARET DRABBLE. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £5.95.

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independent, muddled, opinionated; the trouble is that you want to dislike Kate and can't, which is a tribute to her creator's skill. She is a nice woman, is Kate, and if her voyage of self-analysis is sometimes maddening it is never tedious and always thought-provoking. She is a child of the times, and her crisis is to do with her own realisation of this: "...as everyone else got more interested in Women, she became less and less so. . . . She was sick of opinions, slogans, ideologies, factions, causes. . . . She had brought up three children on views." And yes, at one point someone even suggests that she should go off and do a degree in sociology. Mercifully, she has the good sense not to. Because good sense she does have, as well as niceness, and it is this that will pull her out of the mire in the end and enables the novel to end on a note of optimism, of the triumph of persons over circumstances.

Circumstances are the crux of the book, and what people make or fail to make of them. The narrative proceeds—with a curious pleated effect, as each retrospective filling-out of a character colours and changes what we already know—by a process of recollection. The past is everywhere: Kate's childhood in a dismal London suburb, Evelyn's middle-class background ("reared on notions of thrift, prudence, propriety"), Hugo's irritated reflections that "everything one does is weighed down with history . . . modern life is in some mysterious way too fragmented to be comprehensible . . . modern consciousness is so burdened with its own past that it has worked itself into a state of paralysis", Ted's ponderings on the infidelity of memory, the quality it possesses of enlarging and even faking happiness. Ted is a microbiologist (we learn how he spends his time, too). His affair with Kate peters out, leaving unharmed Kate's solidier relationship with Evelyn; friendships, in this confused and confusing landscape of the '70s, often do last better than love. Family bonds, too: Kate's marriage to Stuart has long since foundered, but she loves and is loved by her children. She is worried by "the newly forged code of feminist guilt"; amid all this uncertainty about how a woman should be, how she should respond, whether she needs a man or doesn't, what remains is the timeless and unperplexing comfort of friends and children.

I must admit that I'm not absolutely clear what the author herself feels about Kate. A disadvantage of this documentary, chronicling approach to fiction is that there is a certain distancing effect as well; we watch Kate unfurl as a character, admire the accuracy of it all, but remain uninvolved. And the uninvolvedness has something to do with an authorial ambivalence: as though commitment to a

character, be it positive or negative, has been sacrificed in favour of commitment to an historical landscape. But the landscape itself is painstakingly created and Kate herself, emotional, impulsive, entirely credible, remains in the mind long after the book is finished.

JULIA FERNDAL is 47, widow of an army officer, living with her mother in comfort, though not affluence, in the Gloucestershire village of Stone St Martin. Doris Smith is a little younger, the alcoholic mother of illegitimate Joy, working in an Oxford Street shoe-shop and inhabiting a fly-blown flat in the more disagreeable part of Fulham. The second half of *Other People's Worlds*⁴ is concerned with the relationship between this incongruous pair of women: the significance of the title becomes apparent, and the chapter headings—Julia's, Doris's, Doris in Julia's, Julia in Francis's.

One of William Trevor's strengths has always been the portrayal of the banality of evil. Nowhere has he done it better than in this novel; from the first vaguely disconcerting moment at the end of the first chapter when we realise that Julia's fiancé Francis Tyte is not all that he appears to be the horror mounts, almost casually, moving from one small revelation to another. Francis is a fine creation, a bit-part actor (distinguished chiefly as the pipe-smoking hero of a TV tobacco advertisement, a nice touch which perfectly establishes him for the reader) whose entire life is founded on fictional structures which crumble beneath him as he moves from one victim to another. Charming, plausible, he seeks out and fastens himself to people, extracts what he needs, and moves on leaving behind him the wreckage of those who shudder at the sound of his name. Julia, abandoned on her honeymoon after the smiling, almost reasonable revelation that he is in fact already married and actually only wanted her jewels, is the latest in this tragic procession. It is a measure of Francis's particular evil that the jewels are not especially valuable. Francis is mad, of course, but with a madness so ordinary, so undetectable that only occasionally, it is hinted, has he been rumbled. "'You're a nutter, Francis', a girl he'd thought to be sympathetic had pronounced . . . 'You're sick the way you cry, old boy', a man once said in Dieppe."

Francis has a bit-part in a television dramatisation of the life of Constance Kent, the 16-year-old murderess. He becomes obsessed with the murder; so, at a second remove, does the pathetic Doris, mother of his bastard daughter, who has adored him for 13 years and is driven literally distracted by her suspicions of his infidelity with the actress playing the part of Constance Kent. One of the elegancies of the novel is the compelling accuracy with which William Trevor gives us the assorted

⁴ *Other People's Worlds*. By WILLIAM TREVOR. The Bodley Head, £5.95.

worlds through which his characters move—somnolent village, seedy London—while at the same time ensuring that every page is shot through with the sense of menace that has been there since Francis sits on the bed in the spare room in Julia's house, removing "the traces of make-up which he always inconspicuously wore." We know that violence is going to be committed: but by who, and against whom? Meanwhile, the narrative takes us from one self-contained world to another, from the Gloucestershire hairdressing salon to the Pizzaland at which Doris and Joy have their occasional treat to the drill-hall in which the television rehearsals take place—"Without being crass", the director began, with smiles and stabbing gestures, 'we're into a conflict situation where Constance is concerned. . . . Without being simplistic . . . there's a stench of lechery beneath the scent of lovely English roses.'

Francis, Julia and Doris are, in equal measure, the leading figures. If there is any structural uncertainty it is perhaps in the disappearance of Francis only half-way through the book—except that this in itself is in context: it is, after all, the effect of Francis that is the matter of the plot, the havoc that can be caused by mindless amorality. We are left then with Julia and Doris, with Doris's crazed alcoholic wanderings and Julia's reluctant, agonised and moral involvement. For Julia is a good woman, the antithesis to everything that Francis is; good, vulnerable, and in the last resort helpless against the anarchy of evil. This seems to be the bleak suggestion: that the rationality and purpose of those directed by such qualities as compassion and fairness and consideration are no match for the maverick perversity of the wicked. And if at the end there is a hint that Julia's conscience and charity may salvage something from the mess, it is an uncertain hint, to be taken or left as you think fit.

ALICE THOMAS ELLIS's second novel, *The Birds of the Air*,⁵ is brief and very good indeed. She is one of those admirable economical writers who can reduce characterisation to a line, a phrase, an action, and use the same words to tell a story, point a moral and set a scene. Nothing wasted; every word essential. Mrs Marsh, widowed, has visitors for Christmas: her daughter Mary, who has recently lost her child, and her other daughter Barbara, who has just discovered the infidelity of her academic husband Sebastian (a memorable creation of a man locked within impermeable egotism). Barbara's children, Kate and Sam

⁵ *The Birds of the Air*. By ALICE THOMAS ELLIS. Duckworth, £6.95.

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(another splendid character—an adolescent whose alienation from the adult world is so total and logical as to compel awed respect), complete the resident group. The arrival of Christmas Day guests helps to bring about the disintegration of the surface calm and attention to seasonal requirements that Mrs Marsh has been so determinedly fostering. The wit is deadly; the accuracy is unswerving. People's behaviour at parties is nailed, and the way the Queen talks, and the alarm

engendered by those who grieve. Because—oddly, for a book that makes you laugh so often—grief is what *The Birds of the Air* is about: the bleak plateau inhabited by the bereft. Mary, sitting at the window while events swirl around her, waits, quite simply, either for the resurrection of the dead that mourners have to believe in, or for her own death. Her detachment is as total as that of the selfish Sebastian or Sam with his albatross burden of adolescence, and a great deal more bitter.

Going Concerns

New & Collected Poetry—By ALAN BROWNJOHN

THE CUSTOM of publishing collected editions of poets' works in their lifetimes—to be distinguished from "complete" editions after their deaths—is a more recent phenomenon than most people suppose. One would guess that it stems largely from the habit of letting individual volumes go out of print: most poets with half-a-dozen books behind them, and with an increasing rather than a declining reputation, find that most of their work becomes unobtainable, since their fairly short print runs will have been exhausted within a couple of years of publication.

The "collected works" are therefore a useful way of restoring the poetry to the readers, as well as gathering up all the elusive, uncollected poems to which they would like to give permanence—and offering a larger volume on which critics and readers might like to pronounce a considered judgment. But the earlier a collected edition is assembled, the more the poet and his publishers seem to be asking for an *interim* judgment: the implication may be that there is more, perhaps much more, to come, even if the Collected is a rigorous and much-meditated offering of the work by which the poet wishes to stand or fall. In short, it's a greater risk, since that judgment *might* be unfavourable: so the poet has to balance the advantage of being once more obtainable against the danger of his life's work up to that point not finding absolute approval.

To minimise that danger, he needs to be sure that he has established not only his credentials with the reading public but also his personal trademarks, his

warts and obsessions, with both readers and critics: collected editions can't be honourable but faceless, or they secure no more than one or two statutory notices and a one-way ticket to remainder counters—the bigger they come, the harder they fall. The most hopeful recipe for a worthwhile Collected includes ingredients like: a gradually increasing recognition and affection among poetry-readers, a number of well-known and well-loved poems tucked away in out-of-print volumes, an unmistakable style, a gift for keeping in the public eye with new work and public appearances, and an air of being very much a going concern. If the poet has all or most of these, he can publish his Collected (even with the mild apprehensions Vernon Scannell¹ expresses in his introductory note) and await the interim judgments without too much foreboding. He might even hope, as Robert Garioch² could not be blamed for hoping, that years of acclaim in his own country (Scotland in his case) might at last be balanced out by a little appreciation in England for a body of work that has been among the most varied and technically accomplished, the most witty, delicate and moving in our time, and from which English readers have been too well protected by a fence as thick as the Lallans glossary in the enterprising Carcanet edition.

BOTH VERNON SCANNELL AND GAVIN EWART³ are heirs to that gentler sort of English modernism which paid its respects to Eliot (though not to Pound, or any insistently American or European modernism), took root in the early Auden and most of MacNeice, and branched out in individual ways in the work of poets like Roy Fuller and the late A. S. J. Tessimond. It is a poetry which embraces the immediate, wears and describes the scars of

¹ *New and Collected Poems, 1950–1980*. By VERNON SCANNELL. Robson Books, £3.95.

² *Collected Poems*. By ROBERT GARIOCH. Carcanet New Press, £3.95.

³ *The Collected Ewart, 1933–1980*. By GAVIN EWART. Hutchinson, £10.00.