

about the writing. I am glad Mr Wilson has told me this story, and I found it sobering to read of an execution at which even the most dedicated opponent of capital punishment can scarce forbear to cheer; but I cannot see that it forms any part of a life of Milton.

When one of our wittiest younger novelists writes a biography, you would expect him to be a bit tendentious. It wouldn't be much fun if he wasn't. Mr Wilson is not sparing of controversial asides—from which I learn that he dislikes revolutions, progressive education and (so it seems) both modern Christian apologists and agnostics (see pages 126, 143, 206, 209). He also dislikes Cromwell intensely, and one element in Milton he cannot stomach is his apocalyptic enthusiasm for the Puritan cause.

On this he is less scrupulous than usual. He quotes the famous sentence "Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks"; and follows it with an atrocity story of how Cromwell burst in on a very old clergyman called Wilson (an ancestor, perhaps?), abused him, and tortured his son. Now I share Mr Wilson's dislike of revolutionary bullying, but there is no reason to connect this story in any way with Milton; and no justification whatever for saying twenty pages later that "Cromwell's torturing of aged clergymen seemed to Milton a certain sign that God was revealing himself." At this point I wish Mr Wilson did regard 17th-century politics as more of a shard or a blurred hieroglyph.

## Eastern Approaches

### *Recent Fiction—By CLIVE SINCLAIR*

WHAT'S IN A briefcase? Mine bulges with the five novels I have chosen to review. Read in rapid succession they displace my own life, substituting a strangely consistent fiction, which tempts me to turn out a sixth volume, a distillation of them all. Occasionally, when composing my stories, I encounter the very characters I am writing about. No sooner do I begin this review than I bump into Malcolm Bradbury at the University of East Anglia, Russell Hoban at the London Book Fair, and D. M. Thomas at a Writer's Day organised by PEN. I begin to make those familiar connections between literature and life that would be called paranoid in anyone other than a writer.

At the same time I am fully aware that this isn't my story at all. A similar thing happens to Petworth, the aforementioned Bradbury's un-history man in *Rates of Exchange*<sup>1</sup> (not to be confused, as he often is, with a different Petworth in the same author's *The History Man*). Our Dr Petworth is a teacher of linguistics, a scholar and a diplomat, forever flying to arcane corners of the world on behalf of the British Council. Now he is in Slaka, that mysterious satellite of the Soviet Union, waiting in the airport for his guide, waiting for the familiar story to begin:

"... a story not of frontiers and guardposts, spies and imprisonments, beatings and treacheries, but a simple story, commensurate with his talents

and limitations, a story of small hotels and large lecture-rooms, of faculty lounges where grey professors talk about incomprehensible educational reforms . . . and of occasional evening receptions where, drink in hand, Petworth can chatter brightly on about matters of common fascination, Hobson's Choice and Sod's Law, birds in the hand and frogs in the throat, a story of, in short, everyday life."

Bradbury, not le Carré. But stay! Who is that guilty-looking fellow with the fat briefcase who slouches so reluctantly through the customs as he leaves Slaka? What has happened to Petworth? And what is in his briefcase? He has met Katya Princip, magical realist novelist, with whom he has had a passionate fling. As a result his briefcase contains more than his innocent lectures; within is Princip's latest manuscript, an illicit thing. Once he has spirited the typescript out of the country he is required to deliver it to a publisher in Paris, collect the royalties at a later date, change them from francs to dollars and smuggle them back into Slaka upon his next lecture tour, whereupon Princip will slake his thirst. The unpublished book is thus the story of requited love, and its publication will authorise Petworth's transfer from a comic English novel to a continental fantasy. He is saved by a fortunate mischance when his briefcase is offloaded at Frankfurt and detonated by the security police as a suspected bomb.

A YEAR LATER in another part of Germany—

<sup>1</sup> *Rates of Exchange*. By MALCOLM BRADBURY. Secker & Warburg, £7.95.

Freiburg, 1982, to be precise—another briefcase is detonated by the bomb disposal squad. With good reason, this time, since it is le Carré (*The Little Drummer Girl*)<sup>2</sup> not Bradbury. The briefcase, formerly the possession of Professor Minkel, an Israeli dove, has been doctored by Charlie, the little drummer girl, and the Arab terrorists she has infiltrated on behalf of the Zionists. Charlie, however, is neither a terrorist nor a Zionist but a red-headed English actress, a Vanessa Redgrave on the make. So why is she carrying such a hot briefcase? Because, like Petworth, she has fallen into someone else's fiction.

Le Carré wants us to believe that he is actually a reconstructionist, in the manner of those who write popular histories. By using sentences such as "The thing that struck everyone afterwards was the soundlessness of the operation", he is clearly hinting that he has chewed over the events described with various informants. No, the real author, the man who declares on page 47 that "the fiction . . . could begin" is Kurtz (a.k.a. Schulmann and Spielberg), a man well acquainted with the heart of darkness. Thereafter it is he who creates imaginary lives and loves for the characters in his thrall.

Now, one look at Katya Princip will convince even the most dubious as to why Petworth acted so impetuously, but what persuaded Charlie to take the part Kurtz had specially written for her? It is true that as an actress she might be supposed not to have a fixed character, but was the glamour of a starring role in the theatre of the real sufficient inducement for her to risk her life? Perhaps, like Petworth, she did it for love? Certainly she was infatuated with Gadi Becker (a.k.a. Joseph), romantic henchman of Kurtz. And le Carré does acknowledge the power of emotion. "The Zionists kill for fear and hate", proclaims Khalil (the terrorist whose death will end the pantomime), "Palestinians for love and justice." It is a distinction that le Carré seems to endorse. His Israelis are a hateful bunch; Kurtz, for example, is "possessed by a deep and awesome hatred", while the dark eyes of another burn with "rabbinical anger" (though this seems a bit hard on rabbis). In addition they all possess the cunning of Mephistopheles. They are, in short, stage Jews from the Victorian age.

Like her more virginal ancestors, Charlie is mesmerised by these brainy, bullet-eyed men; for Kurtz and Becker owe more to the likes of Rider Haggard than Conrad. Meet Jacob Meyer, evil genius of *Benita*, "a man of about forty years of age, not over tall, slight and active in build, with a pointed black beard, regular, Semitic features, a complexion of an ivory pallor which even the African

sun did not seem to tan, and dark, lustrous eyes that appeared, now to sleep, and now to catch the fire of the thoughts within." Despite this not unpleasing appearance there was something in Meyer's character that repelled Benita. "She felt that he was filled with unsatisfied ambitions and desires, and that to attain to them he would shrink at nothing." Nevertheless, when he spoke it was in a voice that "compelled her attention." Later Benita realised that she could no longer "control her mind and imagination", and that she had somehow become "interwoven with the objects of his life, and was henceforth necessary for their fulfilment, as though she were someone whom he had been seeking for years on years." For Meyer read Kurtz, for Benita read Charlie. What chance had she against a man whose voice contained an "animal force that had so overpowered . . . countless other unlikely collaborators"? How else could le Carré successfully disguise the soft centre of his novel? It discloses an antiquarian rather than an anti-Semite or even an anti-Zionist. There is no reason to doubt the warmth of his thanks to the many Israelis—"in particular, certain past and serving officers of the intelligence fraternity"—whom he mentions but does not name in the Foreword.

THIS FOREWORD SEEMS to belong to a more academic tradition, one that respects fact above fiction. Not only is there a conscientious listing of sources, there is also, in the words "of the Palestinians, some are dead, others are taken prisoner", a suggestion that history has merged with his fiction, that the blood his characters spill is real. Fact is his inspiration. Inspiration took Russell Hoban by surprise, also in Israel. He describes the moment thus in the Acknowledgements at the beginning of *Pilgermann*.<sup>3</sup>

"It was my daughter Esmé and her husband Moti who on May 15th, 1980 took me to the ruined stronghold of Montfort in Galilee, built in the twelfth century by the knights of the Teutonic Order of Saint Mary. . . . The look of the stars burning and flickering over Montfort, those three stars between the Virgin and the Lion with their upward swing like the curve of a scythe, the stare into the darkness, the hooded eagleness of the stronghold high over the gorge, the paling into dawn of its gathered flaunt and power precipitated Pilgermann into his time and place and me into a place I hadn't even known was there."

The movement described here, from a precise delineation to a vaguer time and space, nicely captures the spirit of the book, which is a series of meditations upon brilliantly defined incidents. Pilgermann, now nothing more than waves and particles,

<sup>2</sup> *The Little Drummer Girl*. By JOHN LE CARRÉ. Hodder & Stoughton, £8.95; Knopf, \$15.95.

<sup>3</sup> *Pilgermann*. By RUSSELL HOBAN. Cape, £7.95.

inhabited a man's body toward the end of the eleventh century. But being a Jew he was not a history man, nor is *Pilgermann* a historical novel. "Why are you weeping?" asks Bembel Rudzuk, his Islamic comrade. "I am suffering from an attack of history", replies Pilgermann.

Both Petworth and Charlie are enticed into history's spotlight, but *Pilgermann* remains as much a spectator as his Jewishness will allow. Being the narrator, such an attitude obviously controls the direction of the text, which deliberately eschews the captivating story. Pilgermann explains:

"My perceptions are uneven, my understanding patchy but I have action; I go. I can't tell this as a story because it isn't a story; a story is what remains when you leave out most of the action; a story is a coherent sequence of picture cards: *One*: Samson in the vineyards of Timnah; *Two*: the lion comes roaring at Samson; *Three*: Samson tears the lion apart. That's a story but actually the main part of the action may have been that there was a butterfly in Samson's field of vision the whole time. The picture cards don't show the butterfly because if they did they would have to explain it. But you can't explain the butterfly."

Though Hoban tries. He writes like a cabbalist, turning immaterial concepts into sensuous images. Pilgermann sees a beautiful woman through an open window. Her name is Sophia, which means wisdom. He climbs a ladder and is accommodated. In the *Zohar* the Torah is described as a woman who draws men to her with signs of love until she has "uncovered all her mysteries, neither keeping back nor hiding any single one." Unfortunately Pilgermann takes this metaphor literally and mistakes the seduction of Sophia for the getting of wisdom, the goal of life, as a result of which he is castrated by her irate husband, an anti-Semitic tax-collector.

Bradbury's Katya Princip is also an educator who makes a similar connection between sexual and textual possession:

"Well if you don't have me, you have my book. . . . And if you open it very carefully, and learn the words very slowly, and look for the hidden places, the corners that are secret, then in a certain way you can have me. Perhaps, now you know me, you will have me much more like that than if we decided to be silly and go and make some love."

In the end, all Petworth gains is sexual experience without the after-effects suffered by Pilgermann, so that his life is not changed, and he misses the opportunity to embark upon the pilgrimage after which the latter is named. While Hoban's hero lies unmanned in the dust, Christ pays a visit. Inspired, he sets off for Jerusalem, another materialisation of ineffable wisdom, but fails to arrive. His companions on this impossible journey include a succulent

pig, the headless corpse of the tax-collector, a slaughtered bear, and Death on his horse (figures that have also danced through the imaginations of Bosch and Bergman), the last-named being responsible for Pilgermann's present incorporate state. Which is, of course, his inevitable destination; the meeting at infinity. Attempting to anticipate this posthumous knowledge, Pilgermann, with the cooperation of his friend, Bembel Rudzuk, contrives to design a floor that is "contiguous with infinity." Before long, however, miracles are ascribed to this wonderful pattern and monetary offerings are cemented into the tiles, transforming it from an abstract equivalent of the divine into something like the Golden Calf. Subsequently Antioch, where Pilgermann is becalmed, is besieged by the Crusaders. Atrocities are committed upon the floor (christened "Hidden Lion" by Pilgermann), and the tiles are drenched with blood, including that of its creators. By then, however, Death is a welcome guest.

ON THE FIRST EVENING of Pesach, when Jews sit down to meditate upon the escape from Egypt, an extra place is laid at the table for Elijah. At some point during the Seder meal the door is opened and an invitation extended to the invisible prophet. Whether he comes or not, the last line of the prayers



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is always the same, "L'SHANAH HABA-AH BIRUSHALAYIM", "Next Year in Jerusalem", although it was for long a secret hope that redemption would come once again on Passover, Elijah being the herald of the ultimate deliverance. Thus, locked in a cell on his last night on earth, Pilgermann imagines that his slop-bucket is Elijah's cup, even though it is the mid-summer month of Tam-muz, when the temple walls were breached by Titus and Nebuchadnezzar. Whereupon the doors to cell and city alike are flung open by the treacherous Firouz, and Antioch is also breached. Like parallel lines, all meet upon the magical tiles:

"And here is Questing the death-hound, here is Elijah for whom Firouz has opened the door, here is Messiah following on Elijah, here is the giant Bohemond foul and stinking with excrement that stains his scarlet cross as he stands on Hidden Lion lifting his sword vertically with both hands and plunging it down again and again like a man breaking ground for a post-hole. All around him are broken tiles and among them are heaped the gold and silver coins that were mortared into the tiles."

Brandishing his sword, this fearsome Frankish hero ("my world and my Jerusalem") becomes the Angel of Death, and Pilgermann passes over from the here and now into immaterial space and time, wise after the event.

A DOOR IS ALSO OPENED to admit Elijah at the end of Joseph Roth's *Job, The Story of a Simple Man*,<sup>4</sup> and once again the call is answered, but not by Death. On the contrary, Mendel Singer, the simple man, is restored to life by the reappearance of Menuchim, his long-lost son, formerly an idiot, now a musical genius. Foul-breathed Death re-emerges, however, in D. M. Thomas's *Ararat* as the repulsive Finn, veteran of Moush, Erzindjan, Baiburt, Trebizond, Kharput, Babi Yar, Dachau, Birkenau, Belsen, Auschwitz, Sobibor, Maidanek, Treblinka and, more recently, Indo-China; butcher of Armenians, Jews, gypsies and everyone else. But when *Job* was first published in 1930 it was still possible to imagine a happy ending for a European Jew, even if it did occur in America.

You'll recall that the afflictions of the original Job were occasioned by a wager between God and Satan. Job was an upright man who feared the Lord. Sure he loves you, said Satan, you've built a hedge around him. Give him *isuris* and he'll soon curse you. I bet. You're on, said God, all that he

hath is in thy power. So Satan did his worst. And thus poor Job suddenly found himself the subject of a Book, providing Roth with a ready-made plot. Mendel Singer, like his prototype, was innocent of any wrong-doing, but that never was a guarantee of security. And he too got afflicted. First his two healthy sons were conscripted. Jews regarded this as a calamity, according to Rider Haggard, "since in soldiering there is little profit." Actually *shtetl* Jews like Mendel considered conscription a sentence of death, or defilement at the very least. Mendel's wife, Deborah, a more worldly person, begs a fixer to rescue her boys, but she only has enough money to save one, a dreadful choice that pre-dates Sophie's by some years.

Thus Shemariah was saved, only to be killed fighting for Uncle Sam in the Great War, destroying also the new life the Singers had made for themselves in America. For Shemariah had prospered, and was able to offer his parents passage to the promised land. They accepted reluctantly on account of their daughter, Miriam, who was giving the Cossacks what they were accustomed to taking. But poor Menuchim was too sickly to travel. Nevertheless, they were content, until the catastrophe none foresaw occurred: Shemariah killed; Jonas, his brother, missing; Miriam insane; and Deborah dead of grief. Heartbroken Mendel plans to sever all remaining relationships, including that with God. He builds up a fire, meaning to burn his prayer book, *tallis* and *tefilin*, but though he curses God with his tongue his hands will not follow suit. (The Nazis had no such compunction; on 10 May 1933 they burned all Roth's books.) Mendel's friends come to comfort him, but he will accept none. They suggest he is being tested, like Job, but Mendel sees only the blind cruelty of an *ispravnik*, a Russian official. Then, at Pesach, a miracle occurs: Menuchim returns. The ancient story has repeated itself.

The Book of Job must have offered a tempting model for European Jewry between the wars, and it must have caught Roth's fancy during one of his more optimistic moments. But pessimists like I. J. Singer wouldn't allow its triumphant ending to erase the memory of the ferocity that preceded it. Who could afford to put their trust in such a whimsical Creator? Certainly not the Jews. When the Book of Job appears in I. J. Singer's masterpiece, *The Brothers Ashkenazi*, it is full of foreboding. While Max is sitting *shiva* for his murdered brother he reads from it, and he is clutching it when he dies. There is no reconciliation in *The Brothers Ashkenazi*, only the chilling realisation that everything the Jews had got was built upon sand.

<sup>4</sup> *Job, The Story of a Simple Man*. By JOSEPH ROTH. Translated by DOROTHY THOMPSON. Chatto & Windus, £7.95.

THERE ARE MANY BOOKS that describe what happened when the sand finally shifted, D. M.



Thomas's *The White Hotel* among them. Clouds of history drift through his new book,<sup>5</sup> but the rock at its centre is Ararat itself, symbol of inspiration.

At the aforementioned Writer's Day Thomas spoke eloquently of himself as a poet turned novelist. He composed his books not in a relentless schematic way, he said, but as a series of improvisations upon given images, which gradually develop a self-perpetuating momentum, like Pilgermann's journey. But while Pilgermann progresses from life to death, buying wisdom with parts of his body, *Ararat* behaves like an amphisbaena, for a story within a story must end where it began. It begins with a Russian poet, Rozanov by name, being asked to improvise a story on the theme of inspiration. He imagines a competition between three writers, each of whom must produce a variation upon Ararat, though each is also a version of Rozanov's life and loves. At which, a pause: just as Rozanov fears to exchange his vision of Ararat for the reality, so it is difficult to describe the book of the same name without making it sound like a Chinese puzzle. And that would be a pity, for it deals with that delicate relationship between the written and the unwritten word.

Thomas's Author's Note lists a number of books which sustained his own. Hoban acknowledges religious scholars, le Carré thanks spies, Bradbury is grateful to "those members of the British Council English Studies seminar who, over several summers, in various long rooms in Cambridge colleges, helped me in more than one sense to invent a language", and Roth, had he bothered, would have thanked God. Let us now imagine how some of these writers might react when faced with the *mot juste*: Hoban would fall upon it like a demented rabbi, eager to extract its invisible essence; le Carré would prod it carefully with his pencil lest it be booby-trapped; Bradbury would try to improve upon it; and Thomas would experience a thrilling tingle of recognition, for had Pushkin not used that very word?

Yes, Thomas is a bookish writer. Several times within *Ararat* scribes sit down with their virgin notebooks, only to discover that the story they intended to write has been begun elsewhere, either in a book or a biography, leaving them to tease out new endings. So Surkov (in the first improvisation within the improvisation), having already taken on the role of Pushkin in a feverish fantasy, sets about completing that poet's unfinished fragment, *Egyptian Nights*; and Rozanov, having entertained his latest conquest until dawn with his improvisation, anticipates "the rapture of silence and inspiration" when he would open "the white book, pick up his pen; and, as madonnas and goddesses gazed

down at him, he would go on with his long, secret poem about Meyerhold and his wife Zinaida."

The latter is still unwritten, but Thomas offers two possible endings for the former. In the first the Italian *improvisatore's* song of Cleopatra's sanguine love life leads step by step to Pushkin's inevitable duel with d'Anthès. Feeling personally responsible for the poet's death, the author quickly supplies a second ending, in which the *improvisatore*, having told how Cleopatra offered her would-be lovers a night of bliss in exchange for their heads, himself experiences a night of unprecedented carnality, only to be accidentally beheaded the following morning.

Both these versions offer complex examples of the relationship between the word and the world; either fiction is making history, or it is anticipating reality. But both cases are deeply embedded in a labyrinthine text, which seems to be saying that beyond language is nothing, that even the holocausts visited by Finn were literary events. However, le Carré, while using the same ironic device of having fiction become fact, as when Charlie meets the brother of the man with whom she had a non-existent affair, and clothes really do get ripped off in a passionate frenzy, concludes vice versa: the world is real, language but an unsatisfactory substitute. Hoban isn't sure about either. "Not only is storytelling denied me but history also—" observes Pilgermann, "I may well be reporting nothing more than spiritual images and metaphysical illusions."

*RATES OF EXCHANGE* is an ambitious novel, for language not only sets the limits of its world, but also suggests a world beyond. In order to achieve this independence for Slaka (from the book, if not from Russia) Bradbury has invented Slakan, examples of which may be found throughout the text. This language, like everything else in Slaka, is subject to inexplicable changes; disorienting for solid, occidental Petworth. In short, there is no fixed rate of exchange for anything; everything is subject to barter, and therefore a risk.

Bradbury also has taken considerable risks with this novel; not so much formal (he is no Katya Princip), but emotional ones. For in the volatile East, where God's wager with Satan still seems to be in progress, the traditional defences of the English novelist seem more like evasions than ever. So Bradbury deliberately lets them drop, allowing events (and some people) to conspire to make Petworth a character of emotional—though never historical—importance. *Rates of Exchange* is essential reading, not only as a guide to Slaka, but as a compass directing the English novel eastwards. This is vital; for, as these books show, the best stories rise in the East.

<sup>5</sup> *Ararat*. By D. M. THOMAS. Gollancz, £6.95.

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# LETTERS

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## Misreading the ABC

EVEN AFTER READING Mr Frank Offenbach's shocking descriptions in the April ENCOUNTER, one cannot but feel that Israel is too much in the highlight. He may have used Western news reports on the Lebanese War only to bemoan the death of objectivity among correspondents, yet he did not choose Malaysia or Thailand but a case concerning Israel. There were three pieces about us in the same issue. Should we not be left alone a little?

For an Israeli this country is, naturally, the centre of his world. We are not more provincial than others; but it would be artificial for us to think preponderantly of nuclear disarmament when threatened with being driven into the sea by conventional methods. It is easy for Mr Patrick Seale, among the mists of an English winter, to dismiss this threat as old nonsense. Yet the PLO—which he seems to equate with “the Palestinians” and European governments accept as their true and only representatives—stubbornly refuses to delete it from its basic document.

Lest I am misunderstood I'd better declare that I am a convinced “dove”, and I consider the official policy of Israel to be wrong. (Mr Seale's attributing this policy to Mr Begin's government and absolving the Labour Party only shows his self-confident lack of knowledge of the local political scene.) I consider this policy wrong for fear of “contaminating the Jewishness of the state”—not for reasons dear to liberals and leftists. They think the PLO is right and the Palestinians are “underdogs.” I do not.

It may have been wrong to start the Lebanese War. What Israel shall get out of it will depend on the results of peaceful Palestinians having blown to smithereens the first post-War president of Lebanon, Mr Bashir J'mail and on the kind of pressure Mr Shultz will exert to achieve an American foreign-policy success. But it is not for Mr Seale to decide whether Israeli troops freed the Lebanese population from PLO terror. They did; and the fact has nothing to do with the original war aims. The then current military situation may not have justified the war, but Mr Seale is exaggerating in calling the situation “peaceful” after the murderous attack of one of the PLO groups on the Israeli ambassador in London. A lull is anyway irrelevant. For years there was not a shot fired across the Syrian border before the Syrians attacked us in 1973 and we only managed to stay alive by the skin of our teeth. Israel is condemned by the rules of a heads-you-lose, tails-I-win game. If you prove in fact that you are stronger, this in itself shows you were not in real danger.

Mr Seale is less than knowledgeable in denying new opportunities created by the war (and, for that matter, by other execrable steps taken by the Begin government). The gentlemen of the Israeli Peace Movement argued for long that PLO threats were not to be taken seriously, that Mr Arafat is reasonable and prepared to negotiate. They even tried for years to meet him—in vain. He was driven out of Beirut, his military power broken, and—lo! he received them. He even kissed a child in their presence.

The many “Arab peace signals” Mr Seale has seen amounted to nothing—Egypt excepted. The Egyptian example tends to show that, contrary to his opinion, Mr Begin is not always afraid to make concessions in return

for peace. Some of us are afraid that though new opportunities were created by the war, the Palestinians for some reason will never exploit them. Thus they will compel Israel to remain in all the territories. Israel—Western war-reporting notwithstanding—is democratic to the marrow. The Palestinians, in the end, after two or three generations, will be represented according to their numbers; and Israel will become the technologically most advanced Levantine state.

WE ARE NOT harbingers of “salvation for all.” Mr Seale quietly reproaches us that Israel invaded Lebanon not in order to give back “Lebanon to the Lebanese” but in the pursuit of national interest as perceived by Mr Begin. Undoubtedly. Is it not exasperating to be reproached for such egotism? Which Western nation, under liberal or even socialist rule, went to war to give Ex back to the Exese? If it will satisfy Mr Seale, he can have signed statements of Israelis that we do not have wings.

It is galling to be taught Middle Eastern realities by one who does not do all his homework. “The fact is that this particular Ashkenazi [he writes of Mr Begin] climbed to power by deliberately exploiting and giving voice to the grievances of Israel's emerging Sephardi majority. This is the ABC of Israeli politics.” Mr Seale seems to have misread the ABC—perhaps because we use the right-to-left Hebrew alphabet. What he is sure about is certainly *not* a fact. Whatever the Opposition might have said about Mr Begin's “ethnics” during the 1981 elections, they never dreamt of accusing him in the 1977 elections. I am sorry to have to correct Mr Seale's ABC, but 1977 was the year when Mr Begin “climbed to power” in elections as democratic and honest as in the best of Western lands.

Few Israelis think that foreign observers should forfeit their right to say anything about what is happening here. It is only that we should not be told *ex cathedra* silly things about which we know better. Also, we are not the navel of the world.

BARUCH BER

Tel Aviv  
Israel

## Germans? Austrians?

In your May issue, Mr Richard Mayne gave a good appreciation of Czechoslovakia's murdered Foreign Minister, Jan Masaryk. While not holding a brief for the disruptive policies of Czechoslovakia's Sudeten Germans between 1918 and 1938, I must object to the slipshod historiography of Mr Mayne. He states:

“Its people [i.e. the population of the Czech and Moravian border regions] had never been Germans but citizens of Austro-Hungary. To Austrian-born Hitler, of course, this was a distinction without a difference.”

Indeed, it was even a distinction without a difference to myself and to many others, especially on the Left in German pre-1938 politics. For all the Austrians and all the Germans of Bohemia and Moravia (“the lands of the Czech crown”) had been subjects of the German King-emperors from times immemorial.

It had only been the upstart Prussian kings and their mountebank Prime Minister, Otto von Bismarck, who,