

Tragedy Wears a Funny Face

Three: 1964. "Going the Other Way," by Robert H. Robinson; "Mister Jack," by Eleanor Widmer, and "The Coming of Monsieur Alazay," by Egon Pohoryles (Random House, 276 pp. \$4.95), suggests, through the work of a trio of diverse new writers, that tragicomedy is the natural mode of expression for our time. Hennig Cohen teaches American literature at the University of Pennsylvania and is editor of *American Quarterly*.

By HENNIG COHEN

THE PUBLISHER underscores the distinctive qualities of each of these three novellas by claiming talent as their only common denominator. At the same time the packaging and labeling, though perhaps intended to be merely neat and tidy and in no way ulterior, suggest the possibility of other similarities. Such uncertainty reflects obvious differences in subject matter and style among the three, combined with a suspicion that fundamental correspondences may exist somewhere beneath their surfaces—which indeed they do.

Robert H. Robinson's *Going the Other Way* is an account of a summer day in the life of Bro (for Ambrose) Williams, a sixteen-year-old with a sense of the impending end of his own inno-

cence. He indulges in a series of whimsical, wayward, and wildly romantic escapades, which he relishes for their own sake but which he also uses as a means of clinging as long as possible to the golden present. He is, in brief, a rather sweet and somewhat simple example of the Huck Finn species. He lives in a little town on Chesapeake Bay (cf. Hannibal and the Mississippi); he has an eighteen-foot sailboat, modified as a square-rigger and adorned with a mermaid figurehead (cf. Huck's raft). With a guitar-strumming Negro preacher and chicken thief named Hercules—for the Hercules Powder Company, so help me—Bro gets involved in situations that are supposed to be funny and sometimes are (cf. Nigger Jim). When as a result of the pressures of the adult world things get too complicated, he climbs aboard his sailboat and heads her so that he is "going the other way" (cf. Huck's lighting out for the Territory).

Likewise concerned with the process of growing up, Eleanor Widmer's *Mister Jack* presents immaturity and irresponsibility as something to be exorcised rather than cherished. It is a bitter, intense, and deeply human story. The setting is Division Street on the New York East Side. Mister Jack is a cutter of ladies' dresses, skilful but so irascible that he can't keep a job and so egocentric that he looks on his family as a mere

extension of himself. His wife is a "saleslady" on commission in a cheap dry-goods store. His son is a pallid, ineffectual stammerer. His mother is a worshipful drudge. Only his daughter has sufficient vitality to withstand the force of his personality. She chronicles the tale of his tyranny and charm and her own responses to him, beginning with adoration and ending with angry rebellion. The fact is that in his pride and perversity Mister Jack approaches the diabolical. No wonder he beguiles or overwhelms everyone he encounters, or that his daughter, years later and thousands of miles away, is still not entirely free from his spell.

The characterization of Mister Jack makes this story something more than a sociological document of considerable interest and a gusty, unsentimental period piece (both of which it is). But it is not enough to round out the structure or sustain the theme. Mister Jack, though static, is so utterly engrossing that he upstages even his daughter, and while her narrative, related in the present tense, has an air of immediacy, the final impression is that an important part of the story remains to be told.

The Coming of Monsieur Alazay is far removed from adolescent growing pains, Southern or East Side. It is a carefully controlled and rather brittle fable such as Anatole France might have written. Egon Pohoryles's theme is the illogical consequences of logical behavior. Born an Alsatian Jew and reared in an orphanage, M. Alazay determines that it is reasonable for him to seek a career in the civil service and not particularly reasonable to inconvenience himself by remaining a Jew or encumbering himself with a family. He becomes a highly successful bureaucrat, with one eye firmly fixed on his subordinates for the first signs of ineptitude and the other cocked in the direction of the main chance. His first crisis is his effort to comprehend the logic of his compulsory retirement at the age of sixty, when he is at the peak of efficiency. From the logical resolution of this crisis he is led to conclude that he is the Jesus Christ of the Second Coming. And, to prove his divine immortality, it logically follows that he should cast himself down from the Eiffel Tower. All things considered, this short novel is a deft and captivating performance.

These three novellas are alike in their egocentric focus and their concern with moral issues. Perhaps even more significant is a tone they share despite their differences. All three derive from the tragedy (or at least the pathos) of the human situation, yet in their language, incident, and characterization they are never far from comedy. In their respective ways these three writers imply that tragicomedy is the mode for the times.



"They keep renting them there and leaving them here!"

Sing a Song of Sorrow

The Thirtieth Year, by Ingeborg Bachmann, translated from the German by Michael Bullock (Knopf, 187 pp. \$4.95), bespeaks the mood of the young who live in the "aftermath of horrors." Joseph P. Bauke is editor of *Germanic Review*.

By JOSEPH P. BAUKE

ABOUT a decade ago Ingeborg Bachmann received the prize of the avant-garde "Group 47," Germany's most prestigious literary honor, for a slim volume of poems that has since become a popular success. Another collection of poetry and a radio play with a Manhattan setting enhanced her reputation, and Miss Bachmann is now ranked among the leading figures of the postwar literary revival. She is Austrian by birth and education, a fact that underscores once again the rich contribution which that country has made to German letters in this century. Though she may not be the peer of Rilke or Kafka, there is no denying that her work has an almost charismatic appeal to the new generation of Central Europeans. Her sad and sober lines bespeak the mood of the young who are more and more aware that they live in the "aftermath of horrors."

Good poets are not necessarily great prose writers, and Miss Bachmann's stories are best when they are closest to poetry. "Undine Goes" is a lyrical monologue of the water sprite who could become mortal only by marrying a human being. But her lovers have proved unfaithful, the earthly romance was a mistake, and she must return to the sea. The monsters named Hans, in turn, have charmed Undine, who is torn between love and despair. In a few splendid pages Miss Bachmann turns the folk tale into a modern myth and gives a muted voice to the ultimate ambivalence of life. The dreamlike evocation of "Youth in an Austrian Town" tells of disorder and sorrow in the lives of children born with resignation in their bones. The quest is stifled before it begins, and "you abandon the attempt to find a reason for everything."

These hauntingly beautiful prose poems flank five more realistic stories. In them, too, Miss Bachmann avoids the particular and the individualized in favor of the archetypal. Her charac-

ters are curiously anonymous and seem to be projections of mood and gesture rather than creations of a storyteller. They remind one of those modern portraits in which the face is blurred or missing. The hero of the title story, panicking at the thought of turning thirty, is burdened with all the problems that men in their late twenties have, or are said to have. While his ruminations may be typical enough, the man himself remains an X-ray image. His philosophizing, to boot, is on the freshman level and, I'm afraid, painfully Germanic: "He had always loved the absolute. . . . At all moments when this extreme image floated before his eyes . . . he became a prey to fever . . ." Fortunately, in the wake of an accident, manhood wins out over adolescence, and the search for the "extreme solution" is over. The not-so-young man faces reality. Is this a parable about the Germans' coming of age?

One of the stories is called "Every-

thing." This title typifies the author's sweeping manner of narration and her attempt to lay bare the very roots of human existence. A father reviews "everything" in the light of his fatherhood and reconciles himself to being Chronos, who devours his children, and Lear, who is deceived by them. If this story succeeds, it is not because of its concern with life and death and good and evil, but in spite of it. It is the triumph of Miss Bachmann's artistry that the humdrum events of the tale can be made to yield profound insights. "A Step Towards Gomorrah," an account of a relationship between two women, shows Miss Bachmann at her best. Social comment, verses from Sappho, modern psychology, and memories of Joan of Arc are fused in a cameo of perfection.

Intellectualized creativity such as Miss Bachmann's is, of course, always in danger of becoming overtly philosophical. Indeed, "Wildermuth's Passion" for "truth" reads like a paraphrase of Wittgenstein, on whom the author has written a learned treatise. Heidegger's praise of being and Camus's revolt have also left their mark. But in her best stories Ingeborg Bachmann writes with a poetry and a passion all her own. Like her characters, she plays for high stakes, and she is impressive even when she loses.

We Exit Wondering

My Heart Is Broken: Eight Stories and a Short Novel, by Mavis Gallant (Random House, 273 pp. \$4.95), deals with persecuted people who know more about the needs of life than do their oppressors. The latest novel by Elizabeth Janeway is "Accident," to be published next month. She is also the author of "The Walsh Girls," "The Third Choice," "Leaving Home," and a number of juveniles.

By ELIZABETH JANEWAY

SHORT story writers are like gardeners. Though every gardener produces his own effect, in general there are two kinds. The first prefers the pruned and formal effect, the second chooses the natural and wild. Mavis Gallant is very much a "wild" gardener. Her stories are full of experience and events, clearly recorded and massed in the memories of her characters. There is intention in the grouping of events; we know it at once by the way they "compose." But having clumped her plantings, Miss Gallant

leaves them to speak for themselves. She will not generalize. She will not force a pattern.

As an example, let us take Jeannie in the title story, which, like several others, including a hitherto unpublished short novel, "Its Image on the Mirror," is laid in Canada. This is an unfamiliar Canada, a road-construction base in the drab tundra of the North. Jeannie has just lost her husband his job for the second time in the five months that they've been married. She has done it by getting herself raped.

Mrs. Thompson, an old hand at communal living in the wilds, has dropped in to say good-bye, to commiserate, to snoop, but chiefly to point out to Jeannie that she had it coming to her. What was a man to think of a girl who got dressed up, even to high heels, and went for a walk alone? Wasn't she asking for trouble? Wasn't she to blame?

And this, of course, is the turning point of the story. Is Jeannie just a silly girl, or is she a lost innocent? What value are we to assign to human warmth and the desire for companionship? Who was wrong? Jeannie, who thought everyone