

Beyond Rational Reaches

The Island: Three Tales, by Gustaw Herling, translated from the Polish by Ronald Strom (World, 151 pp. \$4.95), assembles a triptych of stories on religious themes. Robert L. Stilwell teaches comparative literature at the University of Michigan.

By ROBERT L. STILWELL

THE THREE extended narratives that comprise this volume are "tales" in the senses creatively defined by Hoffmann and Tieck and Kleist, by Poe and Hawthorne and Melville, by Gogol and Flaubert, and, on a flimsier rung of artistic achievement, by Isak Dinesen. Romantic in backdrop, extravagant in event, mannered and heightened in prose style, they thicken with obsessive symbols and constantly teeter on the verge of portentously hinted allegory.

Their design, clearly, is to render areas of experience and meaning that lie beyond the secular and rational reaches of most contemporary short stories. Yet it is manifestly difficult to revivify fictional modes no longer generally cultivated. Perhaps only an authentic master can do so without seeming to have posed himself the task of deliberately producing faked-up museum pieces. At any rate, *The Island* heartlessly demonstrates that the eminent Polish man of letters Gustaw Herling has not succeeded in such a revivifying, despite a cluster of bookjacket reminders that in 1965 he received the Polish Millennium Literary Prize and that his novel *A World Apart* won superlative praise from Bertrand Russell, Edward Crankshaw, and Ignazio Silone.

In old modes or new, after all, some kind of gift for the art of literature had better be displayed; but reading the collection at hand makes one wonder whether Herling has ever heard that not unreasonable axiom. The title story, which occupies more than half the book, constitutes a case in point. Set on a Capri-like island in the Bay of Naples, it seeks to fuse past and present into timelessness, through combining a history of the island's monastery with an account of the particularly terrible twentieth-century fates that bind together a young stonecutter named Sebastiano, an island girl called Immacolata, and a priest, Padre Rocca. Unhappily, everything has been handled with a truly monumental lack of structural skill, and the result is

that portions of "The Island" resemble chapters from some ill-written guide-book (replete with statistics), while the remainder emerges as fictional narration of the most rambling and creaking sort ("It is time to describe Sebastiano's appearance," Herling decides on page 35). One does get a certain tactile impression of locale—of the sea, the sunlight, the rocks—and of the passions and sufferings that doom the characters. Still, to convey such an impression is no very dazzling accomplishment; and for the most part "The Island" seems wastefully diffuse and diffusely wasteful.

So does the next story, "The Tower," which derives from De Maistre's *Le Lépreux de la cité d'Aoste*. Perhaps "derives from" is too mild a way of expressing matters. Herling's narrator, evidently the author himself, begins by describing how during the summer of 1945 he came upon De Maistre's tiny book in a house amid the Piedmontese hills, and thereafter he lavishes no fewer than fourteen consecutive pages on an inch-by-inch summary of its contents, frequently using the same words and phrases employed by the earlier writer. Herling's principal addition consists in some pages devoted to investigating the life of the late occupant of the dwelling where he encountered the De Maistre work. That work is not particularly memorable, being little more than a rather sentimentalized record of De Maistre's admiration for the patience and quiet resignation of a leper whom he found subsisting in an abandoned tower near the city of Aosta in 1797. And Herling's paraphrase constitutes a trudgingly uninspired stretch of prose by anybody's standards, besides carrying the disadvantage of being absolutely superfluous.

With "The Second Coming," the last and briefest of the stories, Herling recites a darkly tortured legend from the Middle Ages. The scene is thirteenth-century Italy during the early years of the Black Plague, when city and countryside swarm with death and with processions of Flagellants. The jaggedly disjointed plot involves an unnamed priest who doubts the doctrine of transubstantiation and dies of torture, a miracle in which the Eucharistic

wafer begins to drip blood, and the return of Christ, not as final judge but as a saddened and unspeaking visitor who merely stirs the ashes of burned Jews and heretics. Now and again the exposition comes to rest on the enigmatic figure of Pope Urban IV, and one wistfully supposes that here at last the events have attained their unifying presence, their center of perception. But it soon becomes painfully obvious that even Urban is simply another costumed stick and that he possesses no discoverable connection with any of the goings-on that he witnesses. Amorphous and unfocused, freighted with *kitsch* medievalism, "The Second Coming" probably represents the weakest panel in Herling's triptych—although its competition for that distinction is punishing indeed.

Certainly there is no satisfaction to be gained from belaboring these ungainly but, finally, quite innocuous narratives. It should be pointed out, however, that they will strike most readers as curious and ultimately profitless experiments in the revival of old-fashioned forms, experiments conducted without much power and with only the most rudimentary semblances of shape and economy. One may hope that Mr. Herling will expend his energies on giving us another novel comparable in quality to *A World Apart*, which wasn't nearly so good as most reviewers appeared to think but which was incomparably better than anything in the present volume.



Uncle's Career as Poor Relation: Ved Mehta's first bound fiction (it isn't a novel even if the jacket says it is) is entitled *Delinquent Chacha* (Harper & Row, \$3.95). A gentle, noncommittal, politely uncritical report on the pranks of a peculiar relation, it's a quiet amusement with a point of view humorously deferent and tolerant, set forth in understated prose that is soft and smooth and dear and sweet. Since all the 115 wide-margined pages of Mr. Mehta's book have previously wound a tighter columned way through *The New Yorker*, perhaps you've already chuckled over this slight tale of an irascible but innocent delusionary, a harmless and possibly charming nut—already found in *The Most Unforgettable Character You've Ever Met* (albeit more elegantly worded, more sedately punctuated than any you're apt to have become acquainted with in another, smaller magazine).

My uncle was without question the greatest failure in the memory of our family [Mr. Mehta tells us on page 1]. As if he were born with a foreknowledge of the role he was destined to play, he thought up the appellation



"Delinquent Chacha" for himself—"chacha" means "uncle" in Hindustani—when he was eight years old and his eldest sister had her first child. Throughout his years at British College, Lahore, instead of slaving over books, he chain-smoked and played poker, and he achieved the notoriety of scoring the lowest marks in the college. Though all my other uncles had successfully competed for government jobs and had become important, he worked for his living only once, as a master carpenter, in a shop my father bought him. By the end of the first week Delinquent Chacha had mortgaged the establishment, lost the money in one hand of Five Card Draw and started on his long and successful career as a poor relation.

Before the young narrator, Mohan, leaves New Delhi for Oxford, he has brunch with the Delinquent Chacha, a great admirer of British rule, who expresses his intention to visit England also, to attend the Ruskin Delegacy for Adult Education: Oxford. The Delinquent Chacha inveigles passage to England with a film company on promise of a film part, which falls through; and so he winds up working as porter for the All-India Taj Mahal Curry, Chutney and Soup Restaurant. The D.C. then visits an English club, signing himself C.M.G. (Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George). As C.M.G. he is invited to participate in a Model United Nations at Oxford. When he purchases clothing on credit he is discovered to be not a C.M.G. but only a p.o.r.t.e.r., and not to be worth much on credit. The apparel house sues him and, with all the persuasiveness and tilting logic becoming a most agreeable, aging eccentric, Chacha wins his case.

Undeniably, first to last, the story, the characters, the tone of voice put forth a relentless and unassailable charm. Perhaps that is what makes it seem to me so trite.

—LOUISE ARMSTRONG.



Deflating and Sobering Alliances: "Stories," that well-known writer-professor of mine used to drawl, "are about people"—always taking care to mention that he was quoting a far more famous writer than himself. By this single criterion, as well as by its obvious concomitants, *Winter's Tales 12* (St. Martin's, \$4.95) is a gratifying collection of stories. In it A. D. Maclean has brought together a group of writers, all either English or Irish, whose concern with people and their interrelationships is the very soul of their writing and has produced, through its eloquent communication, moving, beautifully conceived and developed short stories.

With the exception of Anthony Powell, whose "A Reference for Mellors"

achieves its irony primarily on the basis of a familiarity with *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, each of these writers has been impelled, not by a single idea that incidentally bred its characters, but by an understanding of people, by compassion for the deflating and sobering alliances of personality and fortune through which small triumphs and great disappointments are inexorably ordained.

Many of them deal with marriage: Tom MacIntyre, lyric and gently humorous, in "Epithalamion," a tale of temporary honeymoon impotence at an overbearingly appropriate Irish castle; Margaret Drabble, in "Hassan's Tower," the story of an unnerving holiday in Morocco, in which a possibly doomed union is brightened by a kind of personal epiphany; Celia Dale, in "Something to Take Back," whose sensual evocation of an idyllic Italian vacation setting is merely contrapuntal to a perceptive examination of middle age—its sense of loss, its sudden compensatory sexuality, its final capitulation to the defeating knowledge that something will always be missing and the lost remnants of self will forever elude us; Janice Elliott, whose "The Perfectionist," reminiscent of Maugham but entirely her own, is an exquisitely executed if somewhat contrived account of how the title character, having secured as his final acquisition an apparently perfect wife, comes to terms with a serious flaw in her physical condition; V. S. Pritchett, whose charming tale, "The Nest Builder," is about an interior decorator and his partner, who unexpectedly and amusingly constructs his own unlikely nest.

If occasionally potent, "A Winter's Day," by Penelope Bennett, loses its power in the pitfalls that beset the writer looking through a child's eyes. Muriel Spark, though familiarly strong, is curiously metaphysical in "The House of the Famous Poet." However, in "Innocent Pleasures" Olivia Manning's fine nostalgia is affectingly tinged with regret for the mysteriously abstracted dentist of her childhood. Also perceptively spent is Frank Tuohy's compassion in "A Special Relationship"—that between a soldier and the woman who once nursed him. These stories, like the others, are the work of writers whose driving involvement with humanity matches their articulate professionalism.

—NANCY G. CHAIKIN.



A Passion for Puppetry: "Everything can be turned into a puppet," Jean Paul, the exotic stranger who has moved in next door, tells nine-year-old Ania in *A Ride on the Milky Way*, by Marguerite Dorian (Crown, \$4.95). This is a miracle that Ania can believe in. Hasn't she just watched her parents' delightful guest

take a napkin and a crust of rye bread and suddenly make a dry little old woman stand on his left hand? And so the enchanted summer in prewar Bucharest begins, and with it Ania's love for puppets and the puppeteer.

But Jean Paul's charm extends beyond puppetry. Who else would dress up and pretend he was a Gypsy? Who else would invite Ania to an elegant dinner to celebrate the exact moment of the end of summer? Even if, before ten in the morning, he sits on his front steps, sleepy, rumpled, with a few white hairs on his chin, which Ania tries not to look at, he has a gift for transmuting the ordinary into something wonderful. He makes the summer a turning-point in Ania's life. She discovers a vocation in puppetry and falls under Jean Paul's spell. In delicate, poetic images Miss Dorian, herself a native Romanian, recreates the sensuous richness of that childhood time: of strudels "generously powdered with sugar, wearing the beauty marks of dark raisins like a French royal favorite"; of ruffles fresh from the iron, tremulous and beautiful; of Tatiana the maid's smell of mountain cheese.

With the departure of Jean Paul for Paris at the end of the summer Miss Dorian breaks her story, resuming it after World War II. Ania, still cherishing at nineteen her feeling for Jean Paul and her dream of learning puppetry from him, comes to work in a children's summer camp in the Maritime Alps to earn money for her studies. When she reaches Paris she finds that Jean Paul has forgotten her. And then their roles are reversed—it is she who is the miracle-maker.

There is almost a folktale universality to this novel, although some characters, like Ania's lover Mark, remain shadowy and unreal. But from the old, predictable story of a girl growing up Miss Dorian has fashioned a glowing first novel, transforming ordinary details by the freshness of her point of view. This is the kind of miracle Jean Paul himself would applaud. —ELIZABETH EASTON.

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