

LIVES AND LETTERS : SOME RECENT GERMAN STUDIES

GERMAN LYRIC POETRY, by S. S. Praver (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 25/-).

DIE NEUERE DEUTSCHE LYRIK, by A. Closs (Erich Schmidt Verlag, Berlin, DM. 5.70, bound DM. 7.60).

RAINER MARIA RILKE, by Hans Egon Holthusen (Studies in Modern European Literature and Thought, Bowes and Bowes, 6/-).

RAINER MARIA RILKE : HIS LIFE AND WORK, by F. W. van Heerikhuizen (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 25/-).

LETTERS TO MERLINE, 1919-1922, translated by Violet M. Macdonald (Methuen, 10/6).

FROM THE REMAINS OF COUNT C. W., by R. M. Rilke. *The German text with an English Translation and Introduction* by J. B. Leishman (The Hogarth Press, 8/6).

Mr. Praver's *German Lyric Poetry* is an exercise in literary history and taste through *explication de texte*. He conducts a detailed critical analysis of nearly forty poems ranging from Klopstock to Rilke (they include six by Goethe, three by Heine, two by George and three by Rilke), relating them generously to other work and, sometimes over-simply, to the artistic and social conditions of their age. He starts from the fundamental difficulties of a teacher of poetry :

'It is only, if at all, through the actual experience of poetry that we can become convinced of its value. We must therefore begin by close reading of actual poems: in order to end, not with mere "information about" poetry, but with the capacity to respond to it more readily and more intelligently than before'.

His procedure, as the author remarks, is often elementary, for he has in mind a comparatively large and unsophisticated audience. Sometimes he throws a floodlight on what, even so, must be self-evident, but his exposition of the means whereby good poems *do* what they say is often cogent. Readers of this journal may be aware of a certain indebtedness in approach :

'If we prefer—as we surely must—Hölderlin's poem to that of Lenau, it is because the former achieves a poise which the latter lacks . . . Hölderlin's grief seems so much the stronger, so much the more genuine than that of Lenau, because he records *resistance* to it, an effort to contain it'.

(This comparison of *Herbstklage* with *Lebenslauf* is particularly instructive).

Mr. Prawer does not entirely escape the dangers inherent in the method. At times he explains too much, or the commentary grows visibly interested in itself and he verges on a 'purple passage'. Thus his admiration for Hölderlin carries him away:

“‘Der Weltsinn’, ‘der Gebrauch’—these are not simply abstractions, they are *seen*, become a monstrous actuality crushing the lovers with the iron tread suggested by the rhythm; the tread which comes down three times on the word “ändern”, suggesting the remoteness of these monsters from the laws of true gods. Their law, their code, is “ehern”. The word describes at once the nature and the object of the world’s worship. It suggests on the one hand the juggernaut inexorability already noted; and on the other a worship of brute power, of heathen idols . . .’.

This finely lucid poem needs no such ‘programme-music’ notes.

Bröger’s *Lied der Arbeit* is not worth analysing, even as a dreadful example of ‘stock-response’, and when Mr. Prawer—in his desire to approximate to historical continuity—examines Paul Heyse’s *Treueste Liebe* as ‘an epitome of Munich poetry at its worst’—

Ein Bruder und eine Schwester,
Nichts Treuers kennt die Welt etc.—

we feel that a lot of heavy artillery is being turned on a particularly frail butterfly:

‘How obviously untrue to experience; how inappropriate the image to the main statement! We can all think of plenty of brothers and sisters who do not “go together as faithfully as earth and moon”.’

No doubt such work has to be done. There is a place for it, and that the place is the lecture-room rather than a book suggests a possible source of irritation to the reader. For in front of an undergraduate audience, Mr. Prawer’s technique, with his apt quoting from English writers, would be wonderfully effective and valuable.

A more serious criticism is that the method at times seems mechanically applied. Thus, of the mountain image of Rilke’s *Ausgesetzt auf den Bergen* . . . Mr. Prawer remarks,

‘the reader . . . finds himself *with* the poet, who points out to him the landscape of these heart-mountains.

. . . Siehe, wie kléin dórt,
Siehe . . .

From heavy stress to heavy stress we seem, in these short phrases, to be climbing away, higher and higher . . .’

True enough. But it might be said of

A bänner with the strange device—
Éxcélsiór!

that it took the reader up the mountainside by laborious steps, ending with a triumphant scramble to the top. Mr. Praver tends to stop short in his *explication*, so that the qualities that make for greatness in poetry, and the qualities that distinguish one great poem from another, are not always made clear.

But the most important aspect of this study is that the author is ready to indicate his preferences and those preferences are healthy and well defended. If he sometimes suffers the usual disadvantages of writing 'from the heart', then it is because he is not merely making an academic living. And if it is easy to parody the style and procedure, the fact remains that this book is a brave and stimulating attempt to fill a gap which more restrained and scholarly writers tactfully ignore and to which teachers commonly close their eyes—no matter how many of their students fall through it.

Professor Closs, in his account of the German lyric 'vom Barock bis zur Gegenwart', is under the necessity of giving a great deal of sheer information; yet he manages to include no small amount of textual analysis, and his habit of referring to specific poems gives his comments on an author's work a reality which is rarely present in literary surveys of this ambitious nature. The guiding principle of the book is salutary, and especially so in a history of this range and breadth—that every successful work of art obeys the laws (and only the laws) which it sets itself. Professor Closs is deeply concerned with the problem of 'inner form': the way in which 'content' and 'expression' merge into the one thing. We are reminded of Goethe's remark (quoted by Mr. Praver): 'If the content of the *Roman Elegies* were propounded in the tone and the verse-form of Byron's *Don Juan*, what I have said there would sound quite depraved'. Professor Closs's frequent reference to other European literatures would do much to remove the persistent feeling that, outside a favoured and fashionable few, German lyric poetry is really rather provincial. Rilke is treated at greater length than any other individual writer, followed closely by Goethe ('Jede neue Generation, jeder Deutsche, ja jeder moderne Mensch muss sich seinen Goethe erst erringen'), Schiller and Klopstock; while considerable space is given to the work of Hölderlin, George and Trakl, and there is an extremely knowledgeable section on 'Gegenwartslyrik'. In a sense, this book and Mr. Praver's complement each other; both deserve to be widely used.

Herr Holthusen's short study is an eminently healthy introduction (and more than that) to Rilke's later poetry. Implicitly it is one long rebuke to Herr van Heerikhuizen and others:

'Many of Rilke's ideas are apt to exercise a baneful influence on muddled minds, and certain lyrical and supremely harmonious cadences of his are as sweet poison to many poetasters'.

Herr Holthusen, who seems equipped to deal in philosophical fashion if he would, is a poet himself (he takes pride of place in Professor

Closs's section on contemporary poets), and prefers to begin his investigation at the other end—with Rilke's handling of language:

'Rilke's new discoveries and inventions in the world of words amount to an unparalleled extension alike of sensibility and of the capacity for expression'.

This is an austere book which, in view of its size, restricts itself overmuch to technical analysis of verbal structure—often simple and valuable, as when *Sonnets to Orpheus*, II, vii, prompts the remark,

'The poem is a call to the object, to the thing, to unfold itself in language; and this effect is achieved by means of an intricate and delicate system of participle-constructions, small relative clauses and appositionally used nouns . . .'

—less simple when phrases such as 'hypotactic development' and 'paratactic co-ordination' are employed. What Herr Holthusen says occasionally sounds more difficult—and less relevant—than it really is, but he writes lucidly when he comes to the topic which circumstances have made predominant in Rilke-criticism: the 'philosophy'. Rilke's myth, he writes, 'is ultimately a myth of the artist, of the aesthetic experience of man . . . the ideas of this orphic doctrine are pre-eminently "poetic" or rather "poetological" ideas . . . in fact an aesthetics of human existence'. (Cf. Closs: 'Rilkes Schau ist im Ästhetischen verankert . . .'). The significance of this definition will be indicated if we think of all the other terms which have been used where the word 'aesthetics' stands in that last phrase.

Pursuing the enemy into their own territory, Herr Holthusen states plainly,

'Once abstracted from the concrete liveliness of their metaphorical language, from their aesthetic context, and regarded as philosophical doctrine, Rilke's "ideas" are wrong'.

That can do with repetition; for the tendency in our age of self-conscious anxiety to look 'through' the metaphor instead of at it—as if it were an ever-thinning tissue paper around the gift of illumination and truth—does not seem to be decreasing. Very rightly, Herr Holthusen follows up with a careful, honest consideration of the implications:

'The mystery of the beautiful cannot be solved by conceptual thinking . . . On one hand we are entitled to challenge the poet as a bearer and propagator of ideas, on the other we must give up our critical attitude and humbly accept the beauty of his productions'.

Much remains to be discussed—and ultimately the reason why, because Rilke's myth is a myth of 'the aesthetic experience of man', it is more than that. But this little book marks out the boundaries within which exploration and speculation can be profitable.

Considering that Herr van Heerikhuizen's book is (he tell us) 'a testimony to a great emotion which, but for Rilke, would never

have entered my life. For it arose from contact with one dead who for years had been more alive to me than many of the people around me', one is relieved to find it no worse than it is. The style (for which the English translators cannot be wholly responsible) robs it of any insidious power; it opens thus:

'The nineteenth century, shortly characterized, can be seen as a time of shattered structures, of centrifugal forces, of sharp contrasts in immediate juxtaposition'.

Moreover, the author makes no claim for Rilke as a systematic thinker and even admits, on the last page, that 'Rilke-adulation has its dangers'. Unfortunately one realizes that Herr van Heerikhuizen considers systematic thought a little vulgar and is far more interested in the kind of 'mysticism' which its presence would preclude. This book contains much portentous generalization about man and society and life, and a largely unhelpful and sometimes confusing commentary on Rilke's letters and poems (particularly the earlier ones), while the nearest we come to literary criticism is in this comment on the *Duino Elegies*:

'It is the drama of a soul which, in its perplexing wealth, consistency and purity, mysteriously became the mirror and pattern of cultural occurrence in its entirety'

—which is not very near.

Herr van Heerikhuizen's bias is indicated all too plainly in this statement:

'The life of Rainer Maria Rilke has not the appearance of a twentieth century life; it was lived in Biblical and Dantesque proportions. And is it not of such poets and of such men that our century has so great a need?'

It is quite true that Rilke's life has not the appearance of a twentieth century life: it hardly has the appearance of a life at all. It looks much more like a piece of poetry—frequently an inferior piece and, when it approaches what most of us think of as 'life', even distasteful.

Letters to Merline, which surely ought never to have been published, bear witness to this. They illustrate, with a wealth of painful detail, a remark of the Princess von Thurn und Taxis concerning Rilke which is quoted by Herr van Heerikhuizen—'how anxiously he has been asking whether I do not believe that somewhere exists a loving being, ready to withdraw the moment the voice calls? . . . The woman who gives her whole heart, while demanding nothing for herself—that is all he asks for!' 'Merline', unfortunately, could not quite manage to demand nothing, and the greater part of this correspondence is a protracted and irresolute fending-off—more tactfully, a 'postponement of love'—heavily disguised under layers of poeticality and sensitive feeling. Rilke's words flow with a shocking ease. Shocking because we realize that 'Merline', although herself a painter, simply wanted to live an ordinary kind of life, neither Biblical nor Dantesque. Shocking,

too—even though we know how desperately Rilke needed solitude and freedom from responsibility, especially when he was ‘waiting for’ the ‘voice’ of the *Elegies*, and how well his withdrawal was rewarded—because of the lack of common humanity which his refined talents cannot always hide—

‘And if like J . . . I admire you, like G . . . I fear for you, if you are taking morphia to make yourself sleep. My loving Friend, instead of that, put this letter on your eyes to serve them as eyelids . . .’

These letters—‘perhaps the most intimate and revealing which have yet been published’, as Mr. Leishman describes them in his introduction—reveal what many of us would rather not see and what, in any case, lies outside the proper relationship between artist and audience. Even if we forget that they were written to a real woman, they contain nothing (except perhaps a perceptive technical comment on the ‘great goddess’ rhyme) which other letters do not give us, in a less ambiguous context. We knew already—and Rilke’s marriage provided a forcible illustration—with what painful intensity he felt that ‘the life of any man who has reached a certain point in his obligation to art, undergoes distortions which, in a certain direction, make him almost a maniac. One needs so much fearlessness in art itself that in other things the artist often shows a ridiculous pusillanimity’. And what should we say to this, if it had been written by anyone whose life and letters were less sacrosanct than Rilke’s?—

‘I still have the little handkerchief that was saturated with your tears; I carry it on me as a symbol that, on my heart, all your tears will be dried, always, Friend, all your tears . . .’

‘Er war kein Heiliger, kein “Seraphico”’, Professor Closs says of Rilke, ‘anderseits war er auch nicht nur der Meister der Nuance’. If the last book assures us of the former, the next may make us doubt the latter. *From the Remains of Count C. W.*, printed together with translations and an introductory essay by Mr. J. B. Leishman, is a piece of mystification, another meaty bone for the hungry devotee, The First Part of this cycle of poems came into being during November, 1920, and the Second Part during February, 1921, while Rilke, at Schloss Berg, was hoping for the *Duino Elegies* to complete themselves. Only one of the twenty-one pieces appeared (anonymously) in Rilke’s lifetime, and the complete cycle was not published until 1950. Rilke disowned them: they had been ‘dictated’ to him, he insisted, by the ghost of a former inhabitant of the château, ‘Count C. W.’. To Frau Wunderly-Volkart he wrote that the Count, as a poet, was ‘often clumsy, often all-too-clever’, though ‘in some few “hits” he has gained my approval, even, to be honest, my envy’; and to Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis that ‘if most of it disappoints you (dilettantisms, banalities, etc.) just remember: *it’s not me*’. Yet so much of the writing is peculiarly *typical*. Why, then, this reluctance to put his name to it?

Mr. Leishman, who considers these poems 'among the most beautiful, and . . . the most characteristic, that he ever wrote', favours Herr Dieter Bassermann's 'elaborate and subtle explanation' (*Der späte Rilke*)—in short that, ashamed of his failure to bring off the *Elegies*, Rilke invented 'Count C. W.' to bear the responsibility for what arrived instead:

'The chief merit of this hypothesis is that it enables us to regard Rilke's attempt to dissociate himself from these poems, not as the result of a total rejection of their style and tone and content, but as the result of an almost immediate recognition that they were not what had really been required of him, not what he ought to have been writing at that particular time: that they were, in fact, the record of what had been in some sort an escape from his real task'.

Though we have learnt to respect Mr. Leishman's opinion and to value all his work in this field, it seems to me that Rilke may have had a less 'subtle' reason for disclaiming the *Remains*, and a better one. In the *Sonnets to Orpheus* style and content are at one, but *both* are present; in the *Remains* what is overwhelmingly present is style, 'manner', very nearly in a void—'Count C. W.', with all Rilke's verbal technique at his ghostly fingertips, is saying very little. He is, indeed, 'all-too-clever', dangerously so, since here and there we have the impression that what we are reading is a remarkably clever parody of Rilke's characteristic use of words, brackets, dots and dashes. Thus, I, iv—

Statt zu reiten, Olga, statt zu jagen,
kniet ich bei dir, während jeder ging
kniet ich, Seidenes um mich geschlagen,
das von deiner Gnade niederhing

(While they rode or hunted, I was kneeling
there beside you, Olga; while they all
took themselves away, I knelt on, feeling
round me there your favour's silken shawl)¹

—the italicized repetition, with its air of whispered portentousness—
as if to say, 'now this is very fine feeling, though only the *élite* will understand'—reminds us uncomfortably of passages in the contemporaneous *Letters to Merkle*. A reference in I, vi,

hat mich ein im Tod getrübter
Knabe nahe angeweiht?

¹Mr. Leishman seems less at ease in this volume than in his other translations. It is as if he had found little to get his teeth into but insubstantial verbal devices, mannerisms and 'significant' gestures—which he consequently tends to exaggerate, for 'Count C. W.' was too clever for 'imbueder . . . reneweder' and 'the lief down-lier' to be fair translations of what he actually wrote ('eingeflösster . . . grösster' and 'das willig Liegende', I, ix and x).

(was it some in death desponding
boy imploring me for aid?)

is a rather debilitated variation on a theme which is used magnificently elsewhere, and calls to mind the sentimental decadence of Rilke's early writing (Rilke told Kippenberg that when to his surprise he found himself reciting one of these pieces, he said 'But these sentimental verses cannot be yours!').

The lines in I, ix,

denn der Tod war nie der Antipode
dessen, was sich hier dem Schein
dieser Sonne gab und ihn begehrte . . .

(death was never the uncompromising
opposite of that which here became
wholly to this earthly sun converted . . .)

state explicitly what in so many other places is *involved in* poetry, and there is a sense of anti-climax about its sheer nakedness, something which almost amounts to giving the game away. Similarly we might suspect a light-hearted self-mockery in I, v—

Kummer?—Tante, oh, ihr hattet ihn!
Und ihr littet gut—, ihr wart nicht weichlich

(Trouble?—oh, great-aunt, you had it too!
And the strength to bear it you could muster).

While two lines of II, x, might seem to be parody of the finest, wickedest kind—Mephistopheles putting his finger on the very point where the sublimely difficult becomes the easily ridiculous—

Im Halse des Erstickten ist die Gräte
so einig mit sich selber wie im Fisch

(The fishbone in the throat it suffocated
is quite as much at home as in the fish).²

Moreover, the reference to the gates at Karnak in I, vii—

Und jetzt, für unser ganzes Leben,
die Säule—: jene! War es nicht genug?

(And then, for a whole life-time's meditation
did not the Column bring enough and more?)

²Mr. Leishman's reference to these lines encourages me to disagree with his general estimate of the collection: 'a friend of mine rightly remarked, when he first read them, that were they to be recovered in some remote future as a fragment of our atomised civilization, they would be sufficient in themselves to prove that at some time during the twentieth century an incomparable poet had been alive'. It is true, though, that great parody usually implies greatness in its victim.

—though Rilke says nothing about ‘meditation’, bears a closer resemblance to a common tourist observation than to a saying of the ‘unsayable’ if we take it on its own merits and without bringing in the Egyptian appearances of the *Sonnets* and *Elegies*. Yet this is an attractive poem, if rather superficial and slack by Rilke’s own standards,³ and it contains some excellent lines—

Zerstörung gab ihr recht: dem höchsten Dache
war sie zu hoch. Sie überstand und trug
Ägyptens Nacht

(Ruin vindicated it: it would have been
too high for highest roof. It stood and bore
Egyptian night).

For it is true that this collection varies considerably in quality, within the same poem and between one poem and another. My own impression is that they are in fact ‘remains’—remnants from those other works which the poet had created, or was to create, at red heat. There are some impressive passages, and brilliant images, as in the stanza on music, II, xi:

Ach, du auch weisst am Ende nur zu rühmen,
gekrönte Luft, was du uns schön versagt

(You too at last are only celebrating,
crowned air, what you so beautifully conceal).

This poem, indeed, would not be out of place among the *Sonnets to Orpheus*. But to re-read the *Sonnets* directly after this cycle is a cheering, as well as necessary, exercise: the cogwheels which the *Remains* display in all their gyrating virtuosity fall unobtrusively into their proper places, style is married to content, and the self-consciously ‘unsayable’ gets itself said quite decently. This contrast of shadow with substance reassures us that at his best Rilke is solid, flesh and blood, human, after all.

‘Rilke-adulation’ has reached that state of frenzy in which it cannot fail to cut its own throat. There are clear signs that a reaction against the poet has set in, and one is tempted to applaud it. We have to remind ourselves, therefore, that the *Letters to Merline* were not intended for publication and that, by Rilke’s account, the *Remains* were the property of ‘Count C. W.’—and, more important, that Rilke himself wrote the *Elegies* and *Sonnets* and a good many other poems, for publication and free from mystification.

D. J. ENRIGHT.

³In the letter to Frau Wunderly-Volkart, written directly after the composition of the First Part, he says, ‘No, to speak seriously, I couldn’t understand what it was up to, this trifling,—it was charming and its charm led me on—(incidentally the whole thing was the work of three days and done like knitting—I imagine) . . .’.