

Gloomy Clouds Over All

MODERN GERMAN POETRY: 1910-1960. An Anthology With Verse Translations. Edited with an introduction by Michael Hamburger and Christopher Middleton. 418 pp. New York: Grove Press. \$6.50.

TWENTY GERMAN POETS. A Bilingual Collection. Edited, translated and introduced by Walter Kaufmann. 305 pp. New York: Random House. \$5.

By H. R. HAYS

WITH the publication of "Modern German Poetry, 1910-1960" (a galaxy of 56 authors), the general reader is able to form some idea of what expressionism has meant in German verse and to assess its continuing influence on the post-World War II generation.

The volume "Twenty German Poets," translated by Walter Kaufmann, covers a wider field (from Goethe and Schiller to Georg Trakl) and endeavors to sketch the character of German poetic tradition for the English-speaking audience. The 20 poets included overlap to some extent those in the Hamburger-Middleton anthology and in some case supplement it. Thus, the Christian Morgenstern poems in the Kaufmann volume illuminate the tradition of satire that has been carried on by contempo-

Language

MOST of the best German poems had always stayed surprisingly close to the spoken language. Not only Heine, Meyer and Nietzsche are cases in point, but even much of Goethe's, Schiller's, and Holderlin's verse. As a result, Rilke did not face the problems confronting Eliot, but could write in an idiom that is at the same time strikingly poetic and extremely close to good prose. — "Twenty German Poets."

rary writers. Likewise the early poems of Gottfried Benn here chosen are extremely significant in relation to the Expressionist movement.

"Modern German Poetry" is especially useful in providing a perspective for both Rainer Maria Rilke and Bertolt Brecht, who are perhaps the only recent German poets widely publicized in the United States and Britain. The mood of expressionism is tinged with a romanticism that is innately Teutonic. Indeed the Kaufmann anthology clearly shows this romanticism to be a continuing strand in German verse; it appears in Hölderlin, Novalis and Nietzsche. Only in the poetry of a few fantastists (in "Modern German Poetry"), such as Hugo Ball, Hans Arp or Joachim

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Ringelnatz, does the light-hearted dance of the images dispel the gloomy clouds.

The American imagists worked to identify precise observation of the external world with emotion; their German contemporaries sought to externalize precise observation of their inner worlds and these worlds were colored by hatred of war, the anarchy of economic disorientation and a kind of premonition of the melodramatic megalomania that was to come. It is because of so much personal melancholy that the revolt of Bertolt Brecht has stood out so clearly; his own early poetry represented the nihilism he rejected.

OF the poets of the last two decades, Gunter Grass and Hans Magnus Enzensberger are particularly interesting for their intellectual irony. (Indeed an entire anthology devoted to the post-World War II poets would be well worthwhile.) Hamburger and Middleton might have chosen more than one example from the work of Theodor Daubler, and although these editors feel that Franz Werfel's verse is dated, careful scrutiny would certainly have unearthed more poems worth including than the single example they cite. Curiously enough, although calling him the most important German expressionist, Kaufmann also includes only one example of his work. Hamburger and Middleton admit they are not well acquainted with the East German poets and have not bothered to include more than two. This is a serious omission in a book labeled "Modern German Poetry."

The facing translation in the latter volume are accurate and, like most translations, varyingly successful. A poem is, after all, an integrated experience. How does one capture something of this wholeness? Inevitably a dilemma of compromise arises, loss of rhythm to preserve accuracy, loss of sound to keep sense, distortion to keep rhyme. For instance, "Stumm singt die Nacht ihr namenlose Lied" is rendered "the night dumbly sings its nameless song," which preserves the rhythms at the expense of softening "stumm." So it goes; no one will ever be satisfied with anyone else's translations. In the case of the Kaufmann versions there is less felicity of style: too much adherence to German word order produces a graceless effect in English.

To be completely successful "Twenty German Poets" would need to be a much bigger book. Heine has not nearly enough space, while Goethe and Schiller, most fully represented next to Rilke, still emerge as pompous and prosy. "Modern German Poetry" is a valuable pioneering job with an interesting introduction. This volume should be a welcome addition to the library of anyone interested either in poetry or more generally in European culture.