

FOUR GERMAN POETS

Goethe's Faust, Part I and sections from Part II. Translated and edited by Walter Kaufmann. Doubleday. \$4.50.

Hölderlin, translated and edited by Michael Hamburger. Penguin Books. \$1.25.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Poems and Verse Plays, edited by Michael Hamburger. Bollingen Series XXXIII-2, Pantheon Books. \$6.00.

Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke, edited by Harry T. Moore. Doubleday. \$1.45.

After he finishes praying for imagination and skill, a writer, especially if he is a poet, should pray for good translators. There is not much point in envying the good fortune of the painter and the composer, both of whom can communicate to an international audience without a mediator, yet it is a fact that a writer's reputation in a country other than his own depends almost entirely on the taste and ability of his translators, provided anyone is interested in undertaking the thankless labor of love at all. Lack of taste—coupled probably with lack of ability, since it is much easier to translate a mediocre writer than a good one—has frequently resulted in strange gods and false heroes and, in general, caused non-native writers to be represented haphazardly. (Recently I received a catalog from an importer and seller of German books in this country; in this case it included a list of contemporary American novels in German translation. The roster of "great modern American writers" made me wince and, among other odd things, I noticed the curious selection of novels by Faulkner: *Pylon*, *Sanctuary*, the very early ones were there, as well as *A Fable*, but the novels of the middle period were virtually missing.) Then there are the other factors that influence translators: prejudices of time and place, the personal fortunes of a writer. Byron is an example of a poet whose personality so captured the popular imagination that translators rushed to make him famous in Germany, while Shelley and Keats are for the advanced literature classes. Wilde is another writer whose fame, in Germany, exceeds his merit. On the other hand, there are those famous cases of good luck, the Tieck-Schlegel translation of Shakespeare and the Voss translation of Homer, which are apparently unrivaled by translations of Shakespeare and Homer into any other language.

Obviously, German literature in this country has had to cope with a similar sea of troubles, although for the most part it has lain full fathoms

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five in oblivion, until the advent of our own translation-conscious age. The four poets under discussion here have been fortunate in their translators. Walter Kaufmann knows what he is after in his rhymed version of *Faust*; not only is he determined to do away with the undue solemnity which the play has suffered at the hands of its Victorian translators, who ignored its earthy humor and introduced inexcusable archaisms, but he also has a very definite conception of the nature of the play, and this gives style and shape to his translation. He sets forth his ideas in an excellent introduction: Goethe himself admitted, he says, his inability to write a "true tragedy" in the Greek or Shakespearean sense; his temperament and philosophy would not allow it. The deepest tragedy in the play is Gretchen's, not Faust's; his suffering is mild, as tragic heroes go, and his salvation is a foregone conclusion, simply because he never gives up. To strive may be to err, but it is precisely because of this striving and erring, this laboring to liberate knowledge, enlarge experience, sharpen and redeem vision, that Man is worth saving. Kaufmann advises us to read the play as an epic, constructed episodically rather than threaded tightly toward a climax. The profuse variety of the poetry (all scenes but one are in rhyme) is the delight of delights: metres shift, pure lyric songs follow long reflective speeches, there are quatrains and terza rima sections. Dramatically, the variety is equally great: there is, for example, the haunting and terrifying last scene of Part I, in which the mad Gretchen resists Faust's attempts to rescue her from her dungeon; there are the dialogues between the romantic Faust and the far more brilliant, cynical, witty Mephisto; there is the wild, bacchanalian Walpurgis Night scene, in which noise and color exceed literal sense—all balanced beautifully against each other.

There is the famous anecdote about Goethe, which every German school child knows: that of his dying words, which supposedly were "Mehr Licht!" Whether or not he really said them and, if he did, whether they were anything but the cry of a human being at the edge of darkness, does not matter. The story illustrates well enough Goethe's meaning to us as a prince of light, a believer in the power of reason, an avower of the full, worldly life, one of the greatest, and last, apostles of Man.

Friedrich Hölderlin was Goethe's contemporary, but the difference in outlook and temperament could not have been greater. The recent Hölderlin issue of the *Quarterly Review of Literature* includes an essay by Norbert von Hellingrath, a twentieth-century editor of Hölderlin's works, in which he states that he does not wish to play off Hölderlin

against Goethe, but in fact takes Goethe to task for being the well-favored man, frequent lover, and eclectic writer he was, setting against this Hölderlin's parochial childhood, his seminary training, his one ideal and abiding love affair, his rejection by society, and his final, thirty-six-year-long madness. The very circumscription of his circumstances and his poetic vocation, Hellingrath says, causes Hölderlin to unfurl "so magnificently the riches of poverty" makes him "the greatest example of that hidden fire, that secret kingdom, that still, unnoticed imaging of the divine kernel of flame". In this new Penguin volume, Michael Hamburger presents us with a fair and generous selection of Hölderlin's poems and, as in all the volumes in this series, the translation is in prose, below the original. "If these versions have any merit," says Hamburger, "it can only be because even the bare prosaic bones of such poetry have a quality greater than all the resources of elegance and euphony." And right he is, for the bones of this poetry are large and heavy, weighing on us with lament and prophecy, and a rhythmic, elevated prose style is a fairly satisfactory solution to the problem of translating this highly rhetorical diction which builds and builds the vision: the obsessive myth of a natural kingdom lost and another, even greater, kingdom to be realized at such a time as gods and men will once again recognize and complement one another. Hamburger includes all the famous expansive poems from the middle period which develop this theme over and over, largely in Greek metres and using a Hellenic setting. It is in these poems that the diction—unlike that in such shorter, sparser, elegiac pieces as *Hyperion's Schicksalslied* and *Als ich ein Knabe war*—becomes extremely difficult with its inverted syntax, incremental appended clauses, and ambiguous usage of single words: it is as though Hölderlin's struggle with his vision, the exertion it took to wrench it loose from the unpromising world around him, had entered the language itself.

Hamburger is also the editor, and one of the translators, of Hofmannsthal's *Poems and Verse Plays*, a handsome volume in the Bollingen Series, containing most of the lyric poems and a number of the early plays. The original and translation are on facing pages (as is true of the *Faust* volume also). The various translators do an able job with the unrhymed material, but often run afoul of rhyme and metre, when they try to reproduce it in English. Hofmannsthal frequently uses rhyming verbs, and since the verb, in German, normally occurs at the end of a clause or sentence, this works out well, but carried over into English, it produces an effect of awkward inversion and "poetic" rhetoric. Then, too, in a perfectly scan-

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ning translation, there is always the need to add words to fill out the line—German words generally requiring more syllables than the corresponding English ones—and these extra words, usually adjectives, are at least superfluous and sometimes confusing.

What to say, in a few words, about a man like Hofmannsthal, a writer of such versatility, such broad concerns? At the age of eighteen, he was already famous as a lyric poet, and by the time he was twenty-five, he had practically abandoned this genre and was writing for the stage. Then there is his prose fiction and the essays; Pantheon has already published a volume of prose and plans to issue a selection of his later plays. The present volume represents his most youthful phase. The short verse plays seem intended for reading; they are contemplative, rather than dramatic. The exception is *The Marriage of Zobeide*, in which the romantic illusions of a high-minded young woman in love with a scoundrel, and her subsequent disillusionment and suicide, are presented in terms of action, not through reflection. Accordingly, the language of this play comes closer to ordinary speech than that of such earlier pieces as *Death and the Fool* and *The Emperor and the Witch*. These, bridging the distance between the young lyricist concerned with problems of transience and reality and the dramatic symbolist of the Max Reinhardt Theatre, might be called morality plays: the secondary characters exist solely for the purpose of mirroring the protagonist to himself; they are the means by which he learns to see himself and his previous life in its wrongness, its poverty, its lack of human engagement. The plays share with the poems Hofmannsthal's luminous language, the even, flowing cadences (he rarely uses enjambment) and his extraordinary capacity for capturing the atmosphere of a given moment in time, as though he had put salt on its tail and so bewitched it long enough to seek out and evoke its essence. An example from one of the poems may give some idea of this special quality:

Those hours! when long we stare into the sea
All blue and clear, when death does not amaze,
Grave without awe we stare, as fearlessly

As little girls who pale in the light haze
Feeling the chill of dusk, wide-eyed and slim,
Dumbly one evening stand still and gaze,

Knowing that life now from each drowsy limb
 To trees and grasses travels like a flood,
 While faintly smiling they look proud and prim

Like a young martyr shedding her saintly blood.

(*Stanzas in Terza Rima*)

When it comes to Rilke, whose *Selected Letters* we now have, thanks to Harry T. Moore's translation, I wish I could just quote, quote, quote. One should not write *about* a poet who speaks for himself so eloquently, even in letters. By and large, these fall into two categories. The first contains letters of interest primarily to readers of Rilke: love letters (strange ones, to numerous women, which for all their excessive ardor plead for, demand even, the solitude and freedom from attachment that was Rilke's greatest need); comments on those contemporaries and near-contemporaries whom he deeply admired (Tolstoy, J. P. Jacobsen, Verhaeren, Baudelaire, Valéry, Gide, Strindberg; Rodin, Picasso, Cézanne; Freud); passages illuminating the intentions and backgrounds of his works, as well as acute assessments of them. In the second category we have those miracles of insight and evocative language which we would expect from the author of the *Elegies* and *Malte Laurids Brigge*, in whom empathy, that grasping and distilling of essences in all and common things, reached what must surely be its absolute peak. Let me quote only one passage from a letter to Lou Andreas-Salome, his lifelong friend and confidante, about his reaction to spring in Southern Italy:

As it would for a lung in a stuffy room, so it became difficult for my soul in an exhausted world into which nothing new comes with the spring, nothing distant and incalculable. I felt the great poverty that lies in richness: how with us a flower, a little first flower that struggles and comes, is a world, a happiness, to participate in which is infinitely satisfying,—and how here herds of flowers come without anything stirring in one, without anything participating and feeling akin and sensing its beginnings in other things. Here everything is given over to the easy, to the easiest side of the easy. Flowers come and blossoms, anemones bloom and wisteria, and one says it to oneself and says it again, as to someone hard of hearing. But it is all so ensnaringly sham and make-believe; colors are there, to be sure, but they always subordinate themselves lazily to some cheap shade and do not develop

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from out of themselves. The Judas tree bloomed, bloomed, and bloomed, its redundant unfruitful bloom welling even out of its trunk like blood-sodden mesentery, and in a few weeks everything: anemones and clover and syringas and starflowers, everything was purple with its purple, for God knows what reasons—from laziness, from accommodation, from lack of original ideas . . .

There is much more; the book is worth buying for this letter alone.

LISEL MUELLER

MACHINES AND THE POETIC IMAGINATION

The Poet and the Machine, by Paul Ginestier. Tr. by Martin B. Friedman.
University of North Carolina Press. \$5.00.

The subject matter of this modest-sized book is as vast as the cosmos and as long as the history of the cosmos. If, by its title, it professes to study the advent of the machine age and the corresponding enrichment or bewilderment of the poetic imagination, it studies at the same time, because it would be impossible to avoid this, the poet of every age. The poet is the artist exercising all of his faculties and who is integrated with in all the currents of his day.

And even that is not all. The most persistent theme of this short treatise is the relationship between the images of the machine age, the reality of the world visible to the contemporary poet, and the images at the heart of the great myths of man. The fire of a blast furnace does not lack analogy with the fire of Prometheus and the Pentecostal flames of the Holy Spirit. The cosmic is in the factory as well as in the cosmos. The mine-shaft was once called Moloch. The ancient myths of earth and fire are today joined in the consciousness of the poet. The saga of the machine, in the verse of Kipling, is a new canto in the epic of conquest.

The poets of every age have sung of the achievements of man and they have at the same time, in the same poems, warned of the dangers of such achievements. Science brings what the world calls progress, but it also