

New novels

Chaos and Night. By Henry de Montherlant. Translated by Terence Kilmartin. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 25s.

Nexus. By Henry Miller. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 25s.

Albert Angelo. By B. S. Johnson. Constable. 21s.

The Garrick Year. By Margaret Drabble. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 18s.

The Grudge Fight. By John Hale. Collins. 18s.

CELESTINO MARCILLA, whose decline and death is the subject of Henry de Montherlant's novel, is an eccentric of a kind more continental than English; his absurdities derive from political attitudes rather than quirks of temperament, from ideals, not humours. A Spanish exile in Paris, he still sees everything in terms of the civil war in which he fought as an anarchist Republican. Like Don Quixote (to whom the author compares him), Celestino never sees things as they are, but only as they are refracted through the distorting medium of his political obsessions. Not until the end of his life, after his disastrous return to Spain, do black and white begin to blur and merge; he then realizes that life is 'confused, incoherent and unstable'—chaotic, in fact—and that fixed absolutes belong to the night before and beyond man.

The early part of the book, dealing with Celestino's increasingly alienated life in Paris, is harshly comic in tone, but in later sections the farce becomes savage, powerfully grotesque, but also portentous. A 'car-fight', in which Celestino as a pedestrian matador baits Parisian motorists by flourishing his gabardine at them and attempting to 'pass' their cars, is later paralleled by a mediocre bull-fight in Spain where the symbolism is laid on much more heavily. There is more violence but more abstraction too, and I preferred the detached and mordant style of the opening chapters—though perhaps to shy away from having the significance so clearly spelled out is too English a reaction. But *Chaos and Night* is clearly the work of a distinguished writer.

Though Henry Miller is hardly likely to join M. de Montherlant as a member of the Académie Française, he is, for many, scarcely less of a classic. *Nexus*, now issued here, is a characteristically resilient account of his life in New York immediately prior to his departure for Europe, and I found it far more readable than the celebrated *Tropics*. There is less autodidactic delirium, very little rhapsodic sexuality, and much more about other people. Some of the characters come off the page with a splendid if hardly respectable vitality, and

he manages to embody, not merely assert, their anarchic authenticity. There is a genuine hilarity about such episodes as the family Christmas dinner, and the whole diffuse, digressive chronicle has an unforced and relatively unsordid gaiety. The tendency of his prose rhythms to become ocean rollers of turbid metaphysics is held in check, while the eternal monologue which can become so tiresome in his other books gives way, intermittently at least, to dialogue in which others besides the hero-author can have their say.

The remaining three titles are all second novels by writers whose first offerings were well received. Anyone who has been a supply teacher in a rough district will feel some anguished sympathy for B. S. Johnson's Mr Albert, and the collection, which the author includes, of pupils' compositions describing the hero with varying degrees of illiteracy could only too plausibly be taken from life. We eventually learn, however, that this material is only by way of illustration: the book is really 'about being a poet in a world where only poets care anything real about poetry, through the objective correlative of an architect who has to earn his living as a teacher'. An engaging authenticity turns into a rather specious analogy. Why not write about being a poet in the first place—especially as Mr Johnson is one? Since the life of Mr Albert is only filled in for the purposes of argument, the book, though lively on the surface, remains essentially static. Mr Johnson gets up to a good many formal tricks to keep things going, but too many of them are derivative: turns of phrase recall early Beckett, there is some Pinteresque use of demotic speech, faint echoes of Joyce even, as well as some larky typography. But it is hard to feel that the experimental aspect of the book is validly related to the material. The writer has obvious talent, but here his attitude to the novel seems, in the end, frivolous.

The Garrick Year also attempts, though to a lesser degree, to earn its living more by manner and address than substance. Miss Drabble's subject is an unenthusiastic affair

between a producer and the wife of a leading actor during a season at Hereford; it finally collapses in the face of the unexpected strength of what would otherwise appear to be a not particularly stable marriage. The narrator, Emma Evans, feels that an actor's life is not really for her, and she has some crisp things to say about its irritations and vanities. Emma, however, embraces the triviality and shallowness of her life in a way that hardly seems compatible with the clear, sharp tones in which it is described; perhaps she likes to be more intelligent than she lets on. But the feeling that the author may not quite be in control of her narrator persists, Emma too often seems to be defining herself; we are not enough allowed to deduce her character, nor are we given enough material to enable us to do so. And yet Emma is certainly 'there', and her lucid evasiveness and prickly egotism are oddly memorable.

John Hale's *The Grudge Fight* is technically the most accomplished of these last three. A grudge fight is an officially sanctioned scrap in which personal feuds can be settled, and the novel traces the origins and developments of hostility between two boy apprentices in a naval training establishment in the early days of the war. Brooks, with a tough working-class background, is soon at home in the camp, but Pyke, middle-class, with a posh accent, and secretly atoning for the court-martial and suicide of his officer father, feels out of it; the one fits and is popular, the other is isolated, different. The juxtaposition of various time levels is very adroitly managed, and the writing economically and tersely evokes the smells, speech, and brutality of service life. There is no special pleading for the more sensitive hero, and only the conclusion, in which the grudge fight itself is interrupted by an air raid, seems a slightly facile way of resolving the conflict. The author resists the temptation to tease out the general implications of his specific situation, but they emerge all the more forcefully for that, and this disciplined restraint is typical of Mr Hale's impressive competence.

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