

## HUBERT GERLACH

*Wenn sie abends gehen*

(When They Leave in the Evening)  
Rudolstadt, German Democratic Republic: Greifenverlag, 1973. Pp. 295. M7.60.

To make boring incidents and monotonous happenings amusing and interesting is what Thomas Mann and Arthur Schopenhauer regard as the secret of storytelling. And this is exactly what Hubert Gerlach does in his second novel (his first novel *Die Taube auf dem Schuppenschendach*, 1970, is "just" a mystery story). In *Wenn sie abends gehen* Hubert Gerlach (born 1927) watches a group of East German workers very closely; he describes how they spend their working hours in the factory and what they do "when they leave in the evening."

Although it has been noted that most of the writings that takes place in socialist (read communist) countries is completely dedicated to political issues and social questions, and that "The unrealistic white and white projection of people and incidents gives these stories their exemplary nature and thus shifts them from the realm of belles lettres into pure propaganda" (*IFR*, 1 [1974], 75), this could not be said about Gerlach's novel, simply because he keeps the ideological aspect of his society in the background of the story and devotes himself to describing the inner and outer life of his characters who do not lack originality and individuality. He does not shun from touching the many negative sides of the people around him because he realizes that they do exist not only in his, but in every other society. With honest realism he describes their collective activities during the day as well as their very private life with all its hopes and worries.

In doing this Gerlach resembles the West German writer-worker Max von der Grün who, although only one year older than Gerlach, has succeeded in his four novels (*Männer in zweifacher Nacht*, 1962; *Irrlicht und Feuer*, 1963; *Zwei Briefe an Pospischiel*, 1965; and *Stellenweise Glatteis*, 1973) in detailing the everyday life of the workers in West Germany, especially of those in the mining industry, and without being either boring, argumentative, or bathetic.

Therefore, it will be of great interest to see if Gerlach will cling to the theme,

style, and people he knows best, as Max von der Grün does, or if he will substitute them with new characters, forms, and subject matters. However, one thing is evident, whatever he writes in the future, it will undoubtedly be amusing and beguiling and that is because he has demonstrated in this novel that he already knows the "secret of storytelling."

S.K.

## TERENCE DEVERE WHITE

*The Distance and the Dark*

London: Gollancz, 1973.

A frequent note sounded in the chorus of postmortems on the contemporary novel is that the social sciences, in their own crude way, provide a better picture of contemporary man and woman. Not only does non-fiction see more astutely, or "scientifically," but it sells better too. As a writer in the *New York Times* recently put it, pop sociology, *The Naked Ape*, *The Hidden Persuaders*, etc., are to our age what the three decker novel was to Dickens'. This folly, we would aver, is challenged by Terence Devere White's most recent novel, *The Distance and the Dark*, which deals with the current generation of violence in Northern Ireland, and provides the insight that only a novel can. There are no street scenes from Belfast, no simulated interviews with stunned bystanders; instead White concentrates on a sensitive man of conscience who is miles from the bombing, Everard Harvey.

Like author White, Everard Harvey is a member of the landed, Protestant, and Anglo-Irish gentry of the Republic of Ireland, which, the papers tell us, is removed from the violence in the Six Counties. As a member of the ascendancy, Harvey is a horse rider and fox hunter and lives at Mount Harvey, the hamlet founded by an English ancestor in the seventeenth century. Mount Harvey, we learn, is not as remote from the present as its master would have it; the Great House is built alongside the main Dublin-Belfast road at the juncture with the River

Boyne, that sacred river of the Celtic past which is yearly commemorated by Orangemen as the site of King Billy's victory over the Catholics in 1689. Yet with all things considered, Harvey is proud of his family's heritage in Ireland: "If we had settled in America we'd be a monument," he asserts. One of his ancestors supported the brief home rule under Grattan's parliament before the Act of Union in 1800, and even now, Everard, as the current master of Mount Harvey, does battle at the dinner table for the oppressed of Belfast and Derry, much to the pained annoyance of his unfeeling friends in neighboring manors.

Yet man, as *The Distance and the Dark* reassures us, does not live by politics alone. The oppression and violence of The North almost recede into the background as Harvey is caught in the swirl of his deceptively leisured life. He is intermittently estranged from his dumpy, unmarriageable daughter, and he is frequently bickering with his English second wife, the "lily-slim" Sally, who is twenty years his junior and disapproves of what she considers his Irish gaucherie. His first wife was the "magnificently frumpish" Kate, whom Harvey had chosen from the Catholic underclass, and he would like to relive her memory in Aileen, the wife of his neighbor, an indifferently beautiful woman who was loved and lost in youth.

Far from being a love story, *The Distance and the Dark* (the title is from Browning) is generically a comedy of manners. As a member of the privileged classes Everard Harvey spends much of his time in polite conversation while eating and drinking. In some of the most brilliant passages of the book, author White makes Harvey the Clausewitz of the strategic digression, the apropos *bon-mot*, and the bold-faced equivocation. At table he can always best his opponent, especially when she is bombastic Bertha, the tweed-suited maiden lady who equates Catholics in the North with the filthy wogs who destroyed the Empire.

While Harvey's humanitarian liberalism is victorious at the cocktail party, it is impotent in the face of the rhetoric of bombs and guns of the revolutionaries. After unwittingly discovering the identities of a local cadre allied with the I.R.A. Provos, Harvey is a marked man. When a car-bomb intended for him kills his son instead, he is morally paralysed. He fears that revo-

lutionary socialism is the revenge for the Stuart and Cromwellian Plantations some three centuries late. Timorously he stalks his son's murderer to a rural cabin where, after peering through a dirty window, past rows of empty beerbottles, he sees a poster of the author of his undoing, James Connolly, the Irish socialist martyred in 1916.

Although it is never likely to be required background reading on the problems of Northern Ireland, *The Distance and the Dark* is by far the most distinguished of the fifteen or sixteen novels now available which deal, one way or another, with the subject. Fittingly, he is the only Irishman who has developed the theme in the novel. As literary editor of *The Irish Times* he is, ironically, a journalist as well as an artist of fastidious attention to style. His *The Distance and the Dark* is the kind of novel that E. M. Forster might have written about Northern Ireland.

James MacKillop

## SAROS COWASJEE

*Goodbye to Elsa*

Toronto: New Press, 1974. Pp. 152.

The autobiography of Tristan Elliott, a fictional Anglo-Indian, concerns those whom he betrays and those who betray him during his thirty years of restless living. He is an assistant professor of history at a Canadian plains university who has come to realize that he must leave his overweight wife Elsa and ugly infant son through suicide. His recent loss of sight in one eye is symptomatic of his fear of loss of his other physical and mental faculties. To explain his projected suicide to Elsa, he reviews his lifetime of relentless capers with vivid details characteristic of but more realistic than Vonnegut's cryptic exhibits. The crispness of the rapid telling brings pictures of macabre and exciting incidents many of which portray in graphic forms the sights, sounds, and smells of his many sexual encounters. One of these involves his mimicking a lusty dog with chokingly humorous ardor.