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Fiction

By H. E. BATES

An Altar in the Fields. By Ludwig Lewisohn. (Hamish Hamilton. 7s. 6d.)

Haunting Europe. By Montagu Slater. (Wishart. 7s. 6d.)

Even Such is Time. By Doreen Wallace. (Collins. 7s. 6d.)

This Way to Heaven. By Caradoc Evans. (Rich and Cowan. 7s. 6d.)

An Altar in the Fields and *Haunting Europe* are both novels with a strong background of contemporary political and social history, and their authors have both used an economic crisis—in Mr. Slater's case a violent one too—as a means of heightening the emotional crisis of the small group of characters with which they are concerned. Indeed the economic crisis and emotional crisis have in each case been synchronized, so that the depression which strikes America occurs at the very moment when the bitterness and disillusionment of the Beldens' married life is at its lowest depths, and the rise to power of Hitler in Germany at the identical moment when Kurt Robert, the Nazi, seduces the lover of his Communist brother.

In no case, however, can these two authors be accused of trickery. This synchronization of emotional and political unrest must in fact have been so common in the life of America and Germany during recent years that thousands of young Americans will be able to see themselves and the tragedy of their married lives in Mr. Lewisohn's novel, just as thousands of young Germans, should the book ever by some remote chance be translated, will read into *Haunting Europe* the bitterness of their own political and emotional experiences. The books resemble each other in one other thing: although they are both concerned with a restricted group of lives and the internal history of a particular country, they are in no sense insular. Both their characters and the tragedies through which they pass are universal.

Here their similarity, except on superficial points, ends. For whereas Mr. Slater's book resembles as much as anything a high-speed film full of shots of laconic and nervous drama, Mr. Lewisohn's is a leisurely, cultured, almost urbane document, a piece of quiet emotional exploration done with extreme reverence and delicacy. Much of the virtue of contemporary American fiction springs from the return of its authors to indigenous scenes and atmosphere: they have come to ignore and even despise the European influences which rendered much of their contemporaries' work until recently devoid of freshness and inspiration. Such work is seen at its best perhaps in the novels of writers like William Faulkner, Elizabeth Madox Roberts and Erskine Caldwell. European influences have clearly no effect on such writers. Mr. Lewisohn, on the other hand, is very much indebted to European influence, so that his novel, if compared for example with *The Time of Man* or *Light in August*, seems almost artificial, having none of the rich, milky, indigenous taste of the work of writers who, like the Beldens, have returned to their native soil.

The Beldens are nevertheless alive and their story is rich in interest. Dick Belden is a writer, rather a dilettante sort of writer, who, with a private income, lives in a New York boarding-house and writes uninspired articles and struggles with a novel that will never be finished. He is rather what Turgenev would have called a superfluous man. He meets "in the decent publicity" of the boarding-house a young and ambitious dancer whom he subsequently marries. They are at first happy, and then extremely unhappy. Finally, like the American writers of that same period, they go to Paris for a solution to their emotional problems. The woman behaves with detestable cynicism, a cynicism softened however by the fact that we are shown it only through Belden's forgiving eyes, and the man reaches the lowest depths of disillusionment and misery. Here Mr. Lewisohn effects the synchronization I have previously mentioned, and subsequently the Beldens, having lost not only their money but their former selves in the crash, return to America.

The book ends on rather too sublime and elevated a note, and one visualizes the Beldens having many babies and rearing many chickens in their idyllic look-we-have-come-through kind of life on the farm. It robs the book of much of its

conviction, though the ultra-sublime, deviating into the sentimental, is a fault into which Mr. Lewisohn's cultured and rather lofty manner is very apt to lead him. That fault can never be found in Mr. Slater's book. Its faults indeed are to be found at the other extreme: in ultra-cynicism and in laconic facility. The book begins in a sensational filmic fashion with the death of a racing-car ace for whom Kurt Robert, the principal figure, is mechanic. These early chapters set the time and pace of the whole book, which is one of heightening unrest and faction and suspense. The book, however, never degenerates into melodrama, or into propaganda. Mr. Slater, too detached a writer and too far removed, I take it, from both Nazi and Communistic influences, is intelligent enough to see that the ready-made political crisis must never overshadow the emotional crisis of his own creation. Hitler himself must be subordinate to Kurt, who is representative not only of his class but of his generation, just as Marx must be subordinate to Max, Kurt's younger brother, who is representative not only of his class and generation but of youth in all classes or generations. Mr. Slater has given a clever and subtle twist to the whole central situation of the book by allowing Kurt to seduce his brother's lover and by turning the racing-ace's widow, whom Kurt once fancied, into an emotional and political comrade for Max. It is a situation which in its crazy irony is in perfect keeping with the atmospherical background of political madness.

Mr. Lewisohn's influences are clearly European, but Mr. Slater's are elusive and so slight in any case that they need not trouble either the critic or the reader. The question of literary comparisons and influences is, in any case, a dangerous one. Many a writer has been surprised to see himself compared with Poushkin or Henry James, or to be told that those writers have influenced him when he has, in fact, never read a word of them. And very probably Miss Wallace was astonished to see herself compared by Miss Rebecca West with Trollope. *The Portion of the Levites* may very well have been a vastly different book from *Even Such is Time*, but there is certainly nothing which in the faintest degree recalls Trollope in this story of Benedict Lee and his metamorphosis from a Cockney to a countryman. Nor is there anything to justify the publisher's assertion that Miss Wallace allowed her gifts to come to perfection before rushing into print. Her gifts seem to me still, in her fourth novel, in an immature and imperfect state. The shallow conversations, the almost school-girlish lapses of style and the stock characters carry no conviction, and after Mr. Lewisohn and Mr. Slater the book seems extremely undistinguished and lacking in both strength and delicacy.

Even so, Miss Wallace has at least aimed at an interpretation of life and at the creation of characters, even though with undistinguished results. Not so Mr. Caradoc Evans, who has always been held up as the arch-devil of Welsh literature, a powerful and repulsive writer of the most demonic realism and satire. What then has happened to him? *The Way to Heaven* is as innocuous as a Sunday School treat. The formula for the satirical mixture is roughly in the ratio of 50: 1 of water and acid; furthermore, the figures on whom this shrivelling stuff is to be poured are figures of sawdust. It is Mr. Evans' purpose to shock us as he pours the devilish liquid in eggspoonsfuls on the despicable and wicked heads of these religious fiends, while he relates the story of their insidious lives in a semi-biblical chant. Thus:

"She languished for the sight of her man. How on earth could she find peace without him? How in Heaven could she find God without him? She was a fainting maid and he her kingly guide, who by day would embolden her heart and by night consecrate her sleep. Yet she was more maidenly than maiden ever was, and she knew not the why or wherefore of love. . . . And Ruth was guilt-sick that she looked upon forbidden men. Her heart pangs shook the blooms from her cheeks. Grinley inquired of merchants the cause and not a merchant was acquainted with the malady; of his physician he inquired, and the physician counselled an occupation, and of John Daniel and John Daniel spoke God's will."

The general effect of three hundred and more pages of this is to leave one wondering not so much how Mr. Evans gained his reputation as how he will sustain it.