

THE HORSEMAN ON THE ROOF

by Jean Giono

(North Point Press, San Francisco; 426 pp.; \$10.50 [paper])

Christiane Berkowe

Known in the 1920s by a mere handful of disciples, hailed in the '30s as an advocate of the "true riches" born of the soil, catapulted to international fame by the film versions of *Harvest* and *The Baker's Wife*, briefly imprisoned as a pacifist at the outbreak of World War II and imprisoned again after the liberation of France as an alleged "collaborator"—Jean Giono has not only regained his popularity but acquired an even wider audience.

André Malraux called him "one of the greatest writers of our generation." For the *London Times Literary Supplement* he was "one of the most important novelists in Europe." Unfortunately, his works (more than fifty volumes) were until recently rarely available, and rarer still in English. This is why the handsome, elegant edition of *The Horseman on the Roof* published by North Point Press (which has already given us *Joy of Man's Desire*, *The Song of the World*, and *Blue Boy*) is indeed most welcome.

Horseman, almost unanimously applauded by critics and public alike at the time of its French publication in 1951, is a combination adventure novel-travelogue-love story. And despite the author's explicit renunciation of any claim to "sending a message," it deals with one of the most crucial problems, if not *the* most crucial, facing us today.

The year is 1838. Angelo Pardi, a young Piedmontese colonel, a carbonaro fleeing his fellow-conspirators as a consequence of an unfortunate duel, endeavors to get back to Italy, where he plans to continue fighting for the liberation of his country. To do so he must ride through southern France, which is ravaged by a cholera epidemic. Striving to avoid the quarantines imposed by the authorities, the horseman meets now with tragic, now drab, now homeric, now picaresque situations, all enlivened by a gallery of truly splendid characters. Especially memorable is Giono's wonderful cigar-smoking nun, "round as a barrel" and sporting a little black moustache, who hires Angelo to help wash the bodies of the dead—so they'll be presentable on Judgment Day.

Angelo himself, whose personality dominates the book, is the perfect hero for such adventures: splendid in full uniform ("a gold crescent on a black horse"), handsome even when in rags, of aristocratic if somewhat mysterious birth, a fierce individualist, a liberal without any illusions about the merits of his own class (though less and less enthusiastic about the virtues of the people). In some respects he is the brother of Fabrice del Dongo, the protagonist of Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*, a point many critics have made, noting as well the generally Stendhalian quality of the overall novel.

The country through which Angelo pursues his eventful ride is, of course, Giono's native Provence. But it's a far cry from Marcel Pagnol's endlessly sunny landscapes of *Fanny* and *César*, or even the somewhat less carefree region depicted in Giono's earlier novels. Instead, Angelo faces a land that is harsh, arid, hostile. Melons and tomatoes, the fruits of the soil, have now become dangerously contaminated. Trees stand stripped of their leaves by voracious caterpillars. From the "chalky sky" a pitiless sun dries up wells and streams. The light itself—the glorious Mediterra-

nean light—has turned eerie and cruel. And the birds—the sinister, carnivorous birds feeding on the rotten flesh of the dead—sit perched on the clotheslines like "black wash" in a truly Hitchcockian atmosphere. Could it be that Giono was by then so embittered that he lost faith in the goodness of the earth? Or does he mean that men are responsible for this desolation?

Angelo succeeds in reaching Manosque, where his creator was born, lived, and died. It is there that, escaping a mob intent on lynching him, the horseman takes refuge on the town's golden-brown roofs, over which he will roam for several days while followed by an oddly faithful cat. Here he meets the beautiful, intrepid, enigmatic Pauline de Theus—Pauline of the green eyes whom he will lose and find again, and who will finally become his companion for the rest of a difficult journey. Will the naive soldier and the chaste Amazon become lovers? We leave to the reader the pleasure of discovering the outcome of their complex and symbolic relationship.

It is also at this point in the novel that we begin to discern more clearly its deeper meaning. Angelo's main adver-

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William Morrow 

sary is not the ferocious men and beasts that he finds on his way but the cholera whose hideous effects Giono depicts with a realism too often bordering on sadism. What a difference from the sober, restrained description of the bubonic plague we find in Camus's celebrated novel.

Like Camus, however, though even before him (the first chapters of *The Horseman* were completed in 1946; *The Plague* was published in 1947), Giono uses an epidemic as a metaphor for all the scourges of mankind. The reader will easily discover throughout the novel direct references to World War II and even a few allusions to the author's personal difficulties in the mid-1940s. But the allegory has yet another and wider dimension. The old doctor who gives shelter to Angelo and Pauline toward the end of their odyssey develops his own theory of the cholera: It is, in reality, a manifestation of the will to die, the lure of the abyss that, at certain times, seems to invade the hearts of men. The victims of cholera do not simply resign themselves to the frightful contagion. They rush to embrace it, experiencing a sort of horrible satisfaction as they await the final paroxysm and the coming of death. For the others, still untouched by the infection, the cholera becomes a fascinating, mesmerizing spectacle. "It does not spread by infection, but by proselytism." It produces a "delirium of uselessness." Giono, a veteran of the First World War, a witness of the Second, speaks from experience: There exists in many of us a fatal attraction for the apocalypse.

Despite these somber thoughts, *The Horseman* is a heartening novel. Both Pauline and Angelo are firm in their will to live. True, Pauline hears the call of the abyss when, attacked by a disease-bearing yet beguiling crow, she longs for a moment to yield to "its deadly lullaby." But ultimately she shoots the bird. And Angelo, walking over the rooftops, is seized by a symbolic vertigo. But he deliberately ignores the "gulfs that the inner courtyards suddenly open before him." In contrast to Stendhal's Fabrice, he is not a powerless witness of his time. The *mal du siècle* has not infected him. Like Doctor Rieux in *The Plague*, and similarly without any hope of success, he fights the epidemic, tends the sick, and rubs their icy-cold limbs until the end. But unlike

Camus's hero, he refuses to dwell on "the enormous joke played on mankind," The Absurd. Instead, he makes the pursuit of happiness the guiding principle of his life, and liberty his greatest pleasure.

In the end it is Angelo's *joie de vivre*, his *élan vital*, or perhaps more simply his instinct for self-preservation that triumphs over fear and despair. For readers in our Thermonuclear Age, Giono's theme may have an especially strong resonance.

Despite a number of the inevitable minor errors to be found in almost any translation, Jonathan Griffin renders more than adequately the robust, sober, almost classic style mastered by Giono in his later works. Only in those passages where Giono remembers that he was once a poet does the translator sometimes fail to capture the lyricism of the original French. But then, who can translate poetry? |WV|

THE SAFETY NET

by Heinrich Böll

(Alfred A. Knopf; 314 pp.; \$13.95)

Brian Dauth

In Heinrich Böll's world men and women are never simply good or bad; they are all victims, victims of a society gone crazy with progress. In *The Safety Net*, Böll tells the story of one such victim, Fritz Tolm, newspaper publisher, president of the "Association"—a group of businessmen who are the country's economic decision-makers—and thus a likely terrorist target. Having been hoisted "to the most endangered place, the most dangerous position, which no one expected to suit him" (and in fact having been given the post to lend the group an aura of respectability), Fritz Tolm finds himself at the center of an ever-expanding security network that comes to embrace family, friends, colleagues, and even innocent onlookers. In Tolm's new universe "there was to be no more rest, no pause, no relaxation, no private life for him...he was to be hounded to death, protected to death."

Complicating matters are the members of the Tolm family. Käthe, his wife, has a penchant for eluding security and for "a somewhat too generous hand" in helping to finance leftists opposed to the Association.

Tolm's sons, Rolf and Herbert, are both part of the Left, Rolf having at one time set fire to cars, thrown rocks, and served time in prison. His daughter, Sabine, too is a victim of security, being not only a Tolm but married to the affluent and influential Erwin Fischer. Rolf's wife has joined the terrorist underground and Rolf's mistress, with whom he lives, is a Communist. Böll fastidiously examines the lives of these characters, the great stress placed on them by almost absurdly rigid security measures, and the unavoidable involvement, exposure, and even destruction of anyone who happens to come in contact with any of the Tolms.

The landscape of *The Safety Net* is littered with cigarette packages that detonate upon opening, birthday cakes that explode when sliced, booby-trapped bicycles, children programmed for violence with a "bomb in the brain." Despite these vivid details, however, the world Böll creates is remote and lifeless. Each chapter presents the situation from the point of view of one of the characters, and as a result, most of the action is merely recalled. Böll's diffusing technique also fails in establishing a strong focal point for the novel.

Fritz Tolm sits at the center of this safety net of precautions, but he never elicits any genuine interest from the reader. Böll's inability to generate concern for Tolm renders the ending hopelessly anticlimactic. Tolm confesses to Käthe that he has "never been interested in newspapers, only in you, the children, their friends, in Madonnas and architecture, in trees and birds" and that "my sons are right: I did not succeed in fooling the system, the system has fooled me." But these revelations pass almost unnoticed, as do Käthe's observations of "a newly determined Tolm" and of "how easily Tolm walked up the stairs, hardly using the bannister at all." Worst of all is Tolm's supposed political epiphany: "You know I have always loved you...some form of socialism must come, must prevail." Böll presumably regards socialism as an environment highly conducive to the proliferation of gross non sequiturs.

The most disappointing aspect of *The Safety Net* is its lack of humor. In *Group Portrait With Lady* a nun predicted futures by way of bowel movements. In *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* events followed one another with