

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

chilling and comic irony. Whatever ironies occur here are commonplace and minor, such as Fritz and Käthe's being forced to write notes to each other to avoid the ever-present microphones in their own home.

Böll it appears is too concerned here with establishing the humanity and dignity of his people. He provides an abundance of motivation but has forgotten about motivation's natural outgrowth, plot. A safety net that destroys is an intriguing idea, but Böll fails to breathe life into the idea and, like Herbert Tolm, is guilty of too much philosophizing and not nearly enough action. |WV|

CHIRUNDU
by Es'kia Mphahlele

(Lawrence Hill & Co., Westport, Conn.; 158 pp.; \$9.95 [paper])

Martin Tucker

Is it possible for a South African author to live and write in his country without avoiding or compromising the central issue? Can a South African writer remain in his native land and avoid social and governmental pressures or the torments of self-condemnation? Although such questions are not the theme of this second novel by Es'kia Mphahlele, a widely respected African critic of African literature, it is difficult to avoid them when reading it. For South African writers, black and white, these questions are at the heart of a basic dilemma: whether to stay or to exile themselves from their homeland and face the inevitable erosion of feeling and vision.

The voluntary exile option has been addressed, and responded to, in a number of ways by various South African writers and intellectuals. Nadine Gordimer, now the white South African writer most popular in the U.S., journeys to the United States and England periodically and is unflinching in her attacks on apartheid; yet she returns home because she feels it essential to remain there. Doris Lessing left South Africa more than twenty-five years ago, returning only once for a brief visit years back. Alan Paton, under house arrest some years ago, made no attempt to leave but smuggled his writings out of his home. These writers, all white, have a privileged position in South Africa. Although their freedoms are



curtailed, they have had an easier time than their black, brown, and Coloured compatriots.

Mphahlele states his own history of pain and of wandering in an autobiographical preface. He left South Africa twenty-five years ago when the pressures of the color bar and pass laws became unbearable. Twenty years of exile failed to mitigate his need for living among the roots of his life. In 1977 he returned to South Africa, took a teaching job at a university, and has lived and worked there since.

"I got to know, when I was in the United States, that an academic can, if he likes, lose himself in intellectual pursuits, move only in the university community, and be insulated from the larger community out there, safe, cozy, contented. I didn't want that to happen to me. I didn't want my self-respect to hang on the thin thread of long-distance commitment.

"I also realize the longer I was away from here, the angrier, the more outraged, I felt against the sufferings of people here. Out of sheer impotence. In a sense, my homecoming was another way of dealing with impotent anger. It was also a way of extricating myself from twenty years of compromise, for exile itself is a compromise. Indeed, exile had become for me a ghetto of the mind. My return to Africa was a way of dealing with the concrete reality of blackness in South Africa rather than with the phantoms and echoes that attend exile."

Mphahlele does not deal in his

preface with the compromises with which he must live in South Africa today. For him, apparently, they are not as degenerative as those attending exile. And, indeed, the present novel is concrete proof that Mphahlele can work—that is, write—in South Africa. His novel, then, must be seen in at least two contexts: as sheer fiction and as testament of a writer's faith.

Mphahlele's story, about the self-made Chimba Chirundu, minister of transport and public works in an imaginary African country, is well crafted. The atmosphere conveys a sense of momentum; life is on the tracks in Mphahlele's fictional land, and the characters, while momentarily blocked by subterfuge, disappointment, or deception, do not lose their spirit. Chirundu is arrested on a charge of bigamy brought by his first wife. He defends his second marriage on the basis of Bemba tribal law. He has divorced his first wife because both realized their marriage was not working and because they have lived apart for some time. With this situation Mphahlele comes to grips with issues of modernism and tribalism, of new and old Africa, of individualism and communal responsibilities. He invests Chirundu with ambition and passion, even with a reluctant admiration for his Medea-like first wife.

Mphahlele tells his story through several narrators: The "I" sequences are written by either of two exiles in the same prison as Chirundu and also by Chirundu and his inimical nephew,