

THE HAZARD OF MODERN POETRY. By Erich Heller. (Bowes and Bowes; 6s.)

On the whole, people do what they enjoy doing. The enjoyment sometimes takes perverse forms—delight in grumbling, in being ill, in reforming other people's lives, in contemplating disaster—and in such cases the enjoyers will deny that they draw any pleasure from these activities; but the pleasure is discernible none the less.

In this essay, Professor Heller undertakes an analysis of the poet's situation today, tracing, through the history of ideas since the Reformation and Renaissance, through Pascal, Hölderlin, Goethe, Nietzsche, Rilke, the Symbolists, and Mr T. S. Eliot, the present hazard of poetry as he conceives it, dogged by 'the persistent closeness of despair', where 'our faith and our physics are fascinated by the vast voids inside and outside everything that exists', and 'uncertainty alone is ineluctably real', the last phrase recurring in the dialogue between Speaker and dissenting Listener with which the book closes.

Nothingness or nihilism has, as Professor Heller emphasizes, had a good run. Yet in so far as artists or thinkers (which is perhaps the same thing) worship it as Mallarmé did, or shudder away from it in fascinated horror as Pascal did, or explore it like Nietzsche, or exhibit it like Mr Eliot, they are not victims of their time, as Professor Heller seems to suggest. They are enjoying themselves perversely. To hang by his heels over the abyss is not a useful pleasure for the poet; nor for the critic either. Among the intellectually aware, connivance at pleasure in nothingness (of which Valéry interestingly accuses Pascal) is the root of the problem, and it is this which Professor Heller's essay does not touch, so busy is it in recording the dark emptiness of the modern scene. The result is that the work has considerable verbal brilliance and a striking insubstantiality (in this it resembles *The Cocktail Party*) which in its preoccupation with nothingness make it seem already slightly out-of-date. Other forms of enjoyment in poetry seem to be breaking out in various places; perhaps nothing is not so important after all.

ELIZABETH SEWELL

LE LIVRE DES ANGES. By Erik Petersen. Translated into French by Claire Champollion. (Desclée de Brouwer.)

Angels sang at the birth of Christ; and they grieved with him in Gethsemane. They guarded his tomb when he rose from the dead and spoke his epilogue when he rose into heaven. Angels fell, say some theologians, because he chose to become a man and not one of them.

But, of course, in becoming a man he becomes a creature; and once that is said, the Incarnation appears significant to those creatures who