

theological asides or even appraiser of Count Arco's kick, but music historian and critic. The author of a book on harpsichord music comes to the fore in the pages—perhaps the most original in the book—in which he discusses for what instrument Mozart's early keyboard sonatas were written. Here he gives us something valuable, found nowhere else. And when his asides concern the character of Mozart's music and not his father's ethics or religion, e.g. the contrast with Haydn and the *rapprochement* with Purcell (p. 106), his recognition in our hero's music of a 'tangible, . . . immediate, tactile' quality (p. 165), a source of 'magic' which some of the greatest composers do not possess at all, and this definition of the conditions for a music's survival: 'If we ask of music that it should survive, we mean that it should still be of use to us. It is not only sheer merit which keeps a work "immortal" . . . but also its powers of adaptability to a constantly changing musical scene' (p. 163), we regret all the more that he should waste his time and talents, as Hoffmeister told Mozart to do, on 'writing popular'.

He goes most deeply into the essence of his theme in the following passage which shows him at his best:

'This abortive love for Aloysia Weber may have made a greater mark on Mozart because of his early death. That is to say, the proportion of his days clouded over was the greater in that the total of them was smaller. Composers who lived past forty had time for their personalities to absorb the stresses of the past. . . . Mozart was as resilient as any, much more so than some. But even if the thorn in his heart was there for no longer than was proper for a Trollope hero, it was there for a greater proportion of what was only a short manhood lived in circumstances which forbade his ever forgetting' (p. 162).

We would give much of the 'Ruritanianising' and musings on moral matters for a few more reflections like these.

The illustrations are numerous, unconventional and excellent.

C. M. GIRDLESTONE

THE REVELATIONS OF MECHTILD OF MAGDEBURG. Translated by Lucy Menzies. (Longmans; 18s.)

For those who only know her writings from the brief excerpts which have from time to time appeared in English, *The Revelations of Mechtild of Magdeburg* will even at a first reading provide a moving and exciting experience. Hitherto her book has been treated as if its chief interest might lie in the possibility that it was known in the contemporary Latin translation to Dante, and that Mechtild was the *donna soletta* to whom he so tenderly alludes in the *Purgatorio*: this may be so, and very often the daring sweep of her visions of heaven and hell call to mind the Divine Comedy. Living in the same age, both writers were drawn to the same

speculative philosophers, and both saw the anguished labours of Christendom as the pangs which heralded the monstrous birth of Antichrist. But Mechtild is no mere precursor of Dante, and her little book reveals her as a many-sided genius. Her humility and her impatience with her own daily shortcomings will often recall the great Teresa: 'When I refrain from a smile which would hurt no one, or cherish some sourness in my heart, or feel impatient at my own pain, my soul becomes so dark and my senses so dull and my heart so cold that I must weep and lament piteously, long greatly and humbly make confession of my lack of virtue. Then only does grace come again to my soul, and I creep back like a beaten dog to the kitchen.' Book VI of her work, as we have it, is much such a 'Mirror for Prioresses' as St Teresa might have written: she might have likened our Lord to a vial of chrism, herself to a crock full of vinegar; and she might have given us the same dry, terse account of how an unruly sister of her house was visited, as divine graces, with loss of sight and speech, and have ended with the same 'Alleluia!'

Mechtild's literary and intellectual gifts, however, are of a quite different order from those of St Teresa. She only attained to her command of ideas and language after long training and discipline, whereas Mechtild seems to resemble, rather, certain of the symbolist poets of our own times. So far as we can tell, in early life she was granted a vision of ultimate reality and of the Divine Nature, and at the same time she was granted the power to achieve an extraordinary fusion of the ideas and symbols of the worldly poetry of courtly love and of the pseudo-Dionysian mystical theology: she seems to begin as a lyric poet, with the songs of her vision tumbling from her lips, each perfectly formed in and mysteriously veiled by her symbols and allegories. As are all symbolists, she is essentially concentrated and brief: we are told that her writings were made on single sheets, and it would seem that she herself took no care to order them, still less to impose any formal pattern or sequence upon them.

This must be provisional and conjectural, for we can today only guess at the order in which her book was written. No manuscript of her original Low German has been found: and in the best surviving manuscript of the High German recension, the Einsiedeln codex upon which this translation is based, there are numerous indications of faulty arrangements and editorial interpolations which seem to be due to Mechtild's own amanuensis. It was probably he or another early editor-scribe who provided most of the Latin tags with which the text is adorned: although Mechtild was reasonably well acquainted with the text of the Scriptures, her book is, for the work of a professed contemplative, singularly lacking in evidence of a devotion to the Latin liturgy.

Instead, what seems to be her first compositions are informed by the language and the mystique of *Minne*. Christ is the knightly wooer of the

soul, nor is there any sweeter death than to die of the wounds given in the lists of love. At times her use of the language of courtly love is dangerously ambiguous, as when, expounding the doctrine that all grace comes to us through Mary, she writes 'Her Son is God and she is goddess; no one can win like honour'. Happily, in another context she writes of human nature, 'Had Lucifer remained in his place of honour, she should have been his goddess', to show us that in neither context should we understand more than 'queen', 'sovereign lady'; but even so the expression is enough to make us understand why she was accused by her enemies (who seem to have been many) of heresy and blasphemy, charges of which she sought to free herself in glosses on her earlier visions.

The courtly aspect of her writings is, on the whole, unremarkable: nor can her 'revelations' themselves say much to us today. Some are strongly reminiscent of those of her successor, St Birgitta: in her own small way Mechtild too was a great reformer of her times, and throughout her visions there runs the theme of the order of 'Preachers' who shall bear the last witness and shall suffer martyrdom by Antichrist. But just as her divine poems are at times too plainly derived from worldly love songs, so her visions are too much the projection of merely visual imagery. The scene which gave scandal to her contemporaries, the High Mass in Paradise where she received the Lamb as Communion at the hands of St John Baptist, might be the description of another Van Eyck altarpiece.

Yet even in her earliest writings, Mechtild has a sublimity which transcends all her limitations, partly because she realises what an obstacle to mystical union her limitations and imperfections make. The best example is the wonderful debate-poem between the Soul and the Senses: one by one the Soul rejects all the exercises of the intellect and the consolations of the affections as insufficient, as barriers between her and God:

Fish cannot drown in the water,  
 Birds cannot sink in the air,  
 Gold cannot perish  
 In the refiner's fire.  
 This has God given to all creatures  
 To foster and seek their own nature,  
 How then can I withstand mine?

Again and again she writes of the rapture in which the soul loses the earth and all knowledge and feeling of self, and of the anguish of the soul's return to itself: 'the soul which is caught up into the Holy Spirit cannot stay at such a height, it must always humble itself before all earthly comfort and any delight in such comfort'; and then she goes on in words which might be Ruysbroek's, 'but the soul caught in its own pride inclines eagerly to earthly things'.

But one of the most attractive and characteristic features of Mechtild's

spirituality is her conception of the contemplative as a lowly, serviceable instrument of intercession and expiation for the sins of the living and the dead. 'Our Lord said: "If one cannot capture wild animals any other way, one drives them into the water. If a sinner cannot be converted any other way, he is driven by the prayers of good people into the tears of their hearts".' In Book VI, in the section entitled 'When thou art about to die, take leave of ten things', with moving simplicity she writes 'I take leave of all those in Hell and thank God that He exercises His righteousness on them. Were I to be longer here I would wish them well.' Often we are reminded of Julian of Norwich's 'All shall be well':

I say to thee by My Divine fidelity  
That there are more in Holy Church  
Who go straight to Heaven  
Then go down to Hell.

We shall not find in Mechtild's writings the sensuous gloatings over the torments of the damned which disfigure so many medieval spiritual autobiographies. Often harried and persecuted in her lifetime, she seems to preserve always a candid charity and self-denial: she can write almost affectionately of one of her detractors as 'My Pharisee'; and she says of Compassion, 'She is very perfect; she has taken my righteousness from me'.

To all those who love the Middle Ages and the mystics, the *Revelations*, or, to give them their better alternative title, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, will come as an enrichment; and this translation is marked by a modesty and sincerity which serves Mechtild well.

ERIC COLLEDGE

TRAGEDY AND THE PARADOX OF THE FORTUNATE FALL. By Herbert Weisinger. (Routledge and Kegan Paul; 21s.).

This is an attempt to solve the problem posed by the contradictory experience of tragedy, in which we receive pleasure from the contemplation of pain and suffering. The nature of this tragic pleasure has attracted the investigator from Aristotle onwards, and most of the theories propounded have been glosses on the *Poetics* rather than original guesses. Mr Weisinger's approach to the inquiry is a curiously roundabout one: he proceeds by a detailed survey of the theme of the dying god and his rebirth in the myth and ritual of the ancient Near East. It is easy in this part of the book to see how much the author's imagination has been seized by the confident, synthesising sweep of Frazer, even to the extent of setting out from a particular point of ritual, the lighting of the Paschal candle on Easter Saturday, and finally leading the inquiry back to this same point. But, in what must inevitably be a largely second-hand presentation of material relating to Egyptian, Sumerian, Canaanite and Hebrew beliefs, he has availed himself of a wealth of more recent research; the