

is only available to those accused of murder appears to be contradicted on page III. A more serious defect is that he does not discuss the principles of punishment, or (to be more concrete) of sentencing policy. This is surely a crucial issue. Speaking of capital punishment, Mr Rolph remarks sardonically that a common sense view 'starting from the assumption that the death-penalty had its uses, would require that it be used on the kind of criminal who was thought to be beyond all help'; and this would mean putting to death many petty thieves, sex offenders, and habitual drunkards, but not murderers, since few of them are beyond help. But such a policy, he says, 'would involve the abandoning of any pretence that punishments are made to fit criminals and not their crimes'. Would it? Both these theories are utilitarian. The former claims to be for the good of society, the latter for the good of the individual criminal. But if once we say, 'to fit criminals and *not* their crimes', we are abandoning the only objective criterion of guilt, desert and punishment, and giving those in authority a free hand in deciding what will 'fit the criminal'. They may be genuinely concerned with his best interests: Mr Rolph certainly would be. But what of an unpopular authority—in South Africa or Algeria, say—which has to deal with those it regards as trouble-makers? The theory that punishments should 'fit criminals and not their crimes' is open to misuse—it might have been invoked by the Gestapo to justify 're-education' in concentration camps. And if once we start talking about the 'uses of the death-penalty', instead of whether it is morally justifiable, we are surely well on the way to regarding it simply as an instrument of social hygiene. Mr Rolph never really discusses principles: he seems to have taken the 'common sense' of his title as implying that the treatment of the subject should be practical, down to earth, and strictly pragmatic. And his conception of Christianity is very odd indeed: he speaks of the 'innate contradiction between English law and the Christian faith on which it was supposed to have been founded, namely that the law presumed every man innocent until he was found guilty, while Christianity presumed him sinful and damned until he redeemed himself by his own efforts'. This is an informative, humane and compassionate book, but it needs to be supplemented by (say) Lord Longford's *The Idea of Punishment*, or by the more rigorous philosophical analysis by K. G. Armstrong in the October 1961 number of *Mind*.

AUSTIN GASKELL, O.P.

RILKE'S DUINO ELEGIES : an interpretation by Romano Guardini, translated by K. G. Knight; Darwen Finlayson; 30s.

There are some writers who embody in their work not only their own personal problems and conflicts but also the tensions of the particular time in which they lived; it is as if the mood, the atmosphere of their age were not only part of their most intimate experience but also moulded into the very fabric of their work. Rilke is such a writer. As a man, he was a bundle of contradictions—

misunderstood yet sheltered and even cosseted, introspective and subjective yet eager for an external truth and authority, possessed of a highly sensitive awareness of abstractions but also gifted with a strong, precise and concrete power for creating images. All Rilke's poetry, and especially his *Sonnets to Orpheus* and *Duino Elegies*, are attempts to discover the truth about the meaning of life and the significance of man's existence. Briefly, he asked and attempted to answer the sort of questions that have become rather unpopular in the poetry that is being written today. Rilke was prepared to risk an over-emphasis on the cerebral, a movement among abstractions, and even an occasional suggestion of solemnity, if only he himself could arrive at certainty and truth.

Guardini's commentary on the *Duino Elegies* is not only a detailed examination of the poems themselves but also an attempt to isolate what is true in Rilke's work in the light of revealed religion. As Guardini himself says, 'The question to be answered here is not whether Rilke's message commands respect, but whether his pronouncements are true in themselves: whether his impressive account of life and death, of humanity and personal relations really corresponds to the truth'. Such an adamant undertaking is, however, relieved by Guardini's constant assertion that the *Elegies* are essentially religious and even prophetic poems and that '... the *Duino Elegies* ... sprang from depths of the mind which are apparently remote from anything in rational experience. Indeed the reader of the *Elegies* must try to imagine the poet being guided by a "spirit" which presented him with images and ideas as he wrote'.

Guardini's concern with the objective truth of Rilke's subject-matter does not, then, prevent him from *giving* himself entirely to the poems, from doing far more than 'willingly suspending his disbelief'. His book consists of ten closely argued chapters which expound the *Elegies*, together with an Introduction and a Postscript. Thus the chapter dealing with the First Elegy explains Rilke's ambivalent attitude towards subjective experience and objective truth. Guardini asks such cogent questions as 'Can words or images or statements which have a specific meaning be taken *merely* symbolically?' He also declares quite unequivocally that 'God is present in the background of the *Elegies* but hardly breaks through into the text'. This remark may perhaps be misunderstood unless we read Guardini's qualification that '... so many things that Rilke says can only be understood aright if we imagine earlier Christian experience that has been transposed into secular terms'. This remark seems to me to be the very heart and centre of this valuable book. Indeed, my only quarrel with Guardini as a critic is that he occasionally allows his own theological orthodoxy to blur his literary insights. He is far indeed from the vulgarity and dishonesty of those critics who twist and distort what they read in order to make it fit their own personal convictions, but he is, nonetheless, sometimes a little too anxious to point out what is heretical or non-Christian in Rilke's poems.

On most of the *Elegies*, however, Guardini is very good indeed. He understands perfectly the god-like qualities with which the Angels are invested, and

he also illustrates admirably the innocence and timelessness which Rilke found in the state of childhood. On what was probably Rilke's central problem—his fear of reciprocated human love—he is also very sensitive and perspicacious. He recognizes, too, that the tremendous tension in the *Elegies* is provided by Rilke's knowledge that only by giving love can man fully receive it. On this matter, Guardini comments, 'In this way his inner self will become part of external reality. The world will acquire an extra dimension and he will realize his true self, being freed now from the entanglement of the Ego'. Furthermore, he recognizes that the following lines are some of the most crucial in the *Elegies*, the expression and definition of their ultimate message:

' the most visible joy

Can only reveal itself to us when we've transformed it, within'.

The *Elegies* are both a celebration of life and also an inquiry into its meaning; in this sense, the poems are profoundly philosophical. And yet, paradoxically, they are never dry, abstract or merely cerebral. Always Rilke is attached to concrete imagery, and pursues his most elusive ideas with the help of brilliant similes and vivid metaphors. His angels, children, dolls, acrobats, heroes, birds, and so on are not simply counters for a preconceived metaphysical concept; they are localized and particularized in the poems and thus felt to be an essential part of the very process of the poet's questionings and discoveries.

Guardini himself is uneasy about the philosophic content of the *Elegies*. After admitting that 'what Rilke says contains much truth', he adds, 'Can the experience which Rilke describes in fact outweigh the real terrors of such an existence? Is this not a variety of aestheticism? Does this message not simply secularize a Christian idea and thus deprive it of content? It is certain that one single moment of true contact with God can outweigh a life which has been wasted. But can there be any connection between an experience of "existence" in Rilke's sense, however profound, and such frustrations as this (the *Seventh Elegy* describes? Is "existence" not invested here with a power of meaning which it can never have, except for God? Such ideas as these . . . draw sustenance from a religious faith which has been abandoned and thus they become merely "literature".'

Several important points are raised here. Firstly, Guardini seems to be forgetting that the *Elegies* represent one particular man's vision of life and interpretation of that vision; these poems are not a manifesto or an encyclical. Whatever we may think about some of Rilke's more esoteric notions, we have to admit that they are valid within the context of his own work. Here we are, perhaps, on difficult and dangerous ground since Rilke is one of those twentieth century poets whose chief subject-matter depends as much on personal ideas as on personal experience. Myself, I would be inclined to say that the *Duino Elegies* represent the various stages, however unorthodox, towards a mystical union with God that forever remains unattained. His own dilemmas about subjective and objective reality, his inability to form satisfactory relationships with other people—these are only two of the difficulties which the *Elegies* depict. But the important point is that they *do* depict them; Rilke's poems are

not disabled by his own personal problems but nourished by them. His honesty will not permit him either to omit or to simplify his perplexities. And the soaring eloquence, the dazzling imagery of the *Elegies* would be nothing without this honesty.

Guardini's commentary is perceptive and probing. At times, certainly one does wish that he would be more audacious, but there is, nevertheless, no doubt at all that he has come very close indeed both to Rilke's personality and to the spirit of his poetry. If he is sometimes over-cautious in his examination of the poet's ideas, he also never forgets that a vision, however idiosyncratic its form may be, is something to be shared and experienced, not merely to be dissected and discussed.

ELIZABETH JENNINGS

THE EDGE OF SADNESS, by Edwin O'Connor; Max Reinhardt; 18s.

'This story at no point becomes my own'. The opening sentence of Mr Edwin O'Connor's new novel expresses its subtlety, told by 'the friend of the family', 'the invited intruder', who none the less sees these things happening from the recently won fortress of his own self—ruined but restored. Father Hugh Kennedy has returned to Boston—the name is never mentioned, but the place is plain—to take charge of a parish in a broken-down slum. He is middle-aged, sensitive, and wholly without illusions now. His trouble was drink, of course, but he is an infinite distance away from the whisky-priest of usual fiction. The alcoholic situation is somehow a symbol—and may it not be the unsober effect very often?—of the alienation that loneliness brings: a sacrifice which has grown flat with custom, isolated, with none to share its daily renewal. Now he has learnt to be alone.

But the story is not his, though it would be of little account if he were not there to tell it. Father Kennedy is linked by the inexorable fact of his Boston Irish upbringing with the rumbustious, brogue-joking, unscrupulously rich Charlie Carmody. Old Charlie is busy as ever with his little schemes: the great practical joker, who, as the novel opens, telephones Father Kennedy at six in the morning to invite him to a birthday party—his eighty-first, though perversely he insists that he is eighty-two. Family and friends are gathered in the hideous Victorian house, with the marble bust of Daniel O'Connell, The Liberator, in the hall ('Somebody gave it to him', Charlie's son, John, explains): it is Hugh Kennedy's first re-appearance, and there is a thrill of expectation as he refuses the sherry. Charlie's children are there—John, the successful pastor of St Paul's, cold, intransigent, driven on by contempt for all that his father embodies, Mary, the unmarried daughter who has become her father's house-keeper and convenient butt; Helen, married to a pleased-with-himself doctor; Dan, the black sheep, the remittance man with slick schemes for wealth without work. There, too, are Helen's son, Ted, and his wife and children: they reflect