unavailable in 'Dying', where Botrell cultivates his more personal subject:

Twenty years ago Margot lay still as a bed At Rio de Janeiro's finest hospital. She smiled as if she were in care, at peace with all. I sensed no fear or grievous harm ahead this.

I wandered in a haze round Rio's crowded ways Marking the merry faces. Margot has been not so happy or serene since those brooding days.

Few float out of their bodies, survey the scene And come back to earth in a shower of praise As sickens was a sick man about to reach a green.

'Dying' is a poem where Botrell's unuttered griefs seem apt to their intimate concern, and where metrical variety provides a counterpoint to the exploration of line. The poem can in fact be read as a description of a body in which the word-groups click off like worry-beds. Although this is dubious critical procedure, it provides one way of discovering the personal sensitivity of Botrell's ear.

Other high-spots of the collection include 'The Ballad of Aunt Mabel', a long poem which in range of dramatic personae and metrical inflexibility seems to apologete to McGonagall; 'Ironed Out', an intriguing miniature; and 'Belfast';

You put out a hand to reach a friend. Before you go another has found you. He has exploded into fragments.

Botrell, as might be expected, hates reviewers. 'Ultimately it doesn't matter what noise/You make so long as you're as much of a poet as I am/1959.' Most of these poems are not, of course, a conclusion may be taken with a large pinch of cornflour: Settling a Scent

Against a Scenting Sun seems an unsatisfactory collection; Botrell has taken to road into the West. He appears to have dropped many of these poems hastily on route.

Elizabeth Barrett writes of a more precise locale: He lay on the floor covered in shit, as he had done all night on his fitted carpet. It could have been a prison cell or torture room but it was in fact the biggest flat in town as often boasted, pointing out the Bristol glass, the original prince of Danish Hill, brought low."

Strange Territory is a well-chosen title for this collection, Botrell's second. It is a measure of her art that this territory of murderers, suicides, cigarettes, and the dead weight of days (which I used to call the 'thickies, days do.') becomes strange, invoked by a tough intelligence and an unusually rigorous technique:

'I am Charlotte. I don't say hello to people and everyone just likes me. Although I am dead I still jump out of bed and wake them up at night.

This is my mother. Her hair is blue and I have drawn her with no eyes and arms like twigs. I don't know what I'm told and I lie.

(That, Her Book)

This reads as a kind of counterevidence around a wound, and it is the wound and the process of wounding that interest

Barlett, from the tiny malignancy of the cell (Red Cell Precursors) to the bundle of stains to the...

... multiple fractures, a cracked heart saying no. I can't, larcenizing in and out of psychiatric wards, a baby crying.

(Multiple Fractures)

These fine poems celebrate the plenitude of reality. Less successful are the group of poems that conclude the volume, poems that question the validity of package-tour criticism, The Dissection of Thomas Hardy' and others. The concluding piece, 'Front Door Prose' results from writing poems, using 'tools like para-rhythms, instruments of feeling, medicines/to purge the soul, tapping out words on worn-out keys. Although the image of the poet at the end of the verbal scale seems apt given the wider context of Bartlett's work, the 'writing' poems seem to lack the energy of the 'soddenly vacant sentences, is because the idea of Poetry as Social Catharsis is too uncerntically accepted. What does come across is that Bartlett would have little difficulty in finding the space or the time to write in the usually strange territory, it is salutary to be confronted with a talent that slaps across the face.

Laurence Lerner's Selected Poems - a Poetry Book Society Recommendation - contains work from six previous collections. The starting point is formed by a group of poems from Lerner's first, 'The Mariner's Mirror' (1959). Of the poems are "efficient' and well-argued, in a sense which reminds one of the best Thirties poetry..." wrote one reviewer, a comment to which I have trouble in adding even too much that the work from this collection which most clearly exposes the direction in which Lerner's stylistic resources will take him has been omitted from the Selected Poems. 'These stylistic resources' are seen more clearly in later work, which typically approaches its subject through the creation of the poet's part protagonist in it. (Of the poems included in Selected Poems, for example, includes a group of monologues 'in which various victims of human cruelty — a laboratory rat, a monkey involved in a feeding experiment, and a group of air field workers with their situations with grimly humorous logic' (see 'Welcome to the Maze' and 'Poor Monkey'). This is not a question of the exhausted poetic energies facing cater and coming up with suitably anthropomorphed personae, since it is these same faculties that have created A.R.T.H.U.R. (1974) and his feminine terminal M.A.R.H. (1980). I find the poems selected from these two collections inventive, and underpinning the invention is a deepening of the questions posed in the cited poems from Strange Territory: Are Arthur a victim or a vice? Is he controlled or does he control? Metal people aren't allowed to procreate; All their decisions are questional; they can't even vote. Mowers have all the power. Do you think that is right? (Introductory)

But although the verse is inventive, and although the questions of Control? and Communication? benefit from their change of perspective, I find the poems too many and ultimately too much of a piece. It may be that the 'invention' is not one of poetic resource but one simply of novel subtextual matter. And although computerspeak raises the smile the first time around, by the time Arthur and Martha have tied the wry knot, lines like 'But now I've at least I've got a dictionary of my terminals, (Others have fingered my keyboards, others have fed me facts', from 'Martha has a Past', have become irritating. The controlling intelligence has pressed too many buttons; we know the next moves. This prevents me recommending these poems as wholeheartedly as I would, although doubtless Arthur and Martha would go down well on A.P.R.U.V. at Portobello.

The verse from Janet Craig's A Distinct Um is reflective and has moments of great elegance, but certain of the poems show a sophisticated position:

Why weep for Ferguson dead long ago? Or Mary Stuart long since cancelled woe?

Is there not present sadness to wring tears?

Why beam sorrow's searchlight down the dark years?

(Rehearsal)

It is possible that 'Rehearsal' is informed by an uncannily close acquaintance with Shakespeare, since the kinship is made apparent in 'After Reading Shakespeare' and the two poems seem to come from the same stable. (like others of the collection, much use is made here of poetic figures — the kites and flowers of the reflecting mind. The consequent impression is that of an arthritic symbolism, but the consequent danger is of over-writing, of slipping in the unnecessary adverb or adverbial:

... the neighbours cluck disapproving tongues....

... Confused, very confused, the neighbours smugly mutter.

(Confused)

... the easy comfort of a rotting fence post; his old arm is still putting out a tentative horn to test the weather...

(Snail)

Tessa Ransford's work is more formally ambitious than that of many of her contemporaries. "And Angel begins with a sonnet sequence, proceeds through a series of odes and on to the metrically-misceles pieces of the third section of the volume, and the result is impressive but indivisible; this means that there are inevitable failures, not least where a given metre forces clumsy inversions. Where this is not a matter of the actual distribution, the effect is expense of artlessness in a weary effort:

Patriots and his horses, gentle-eyed, drove to a death intended for another
to rally those who feared or turned aside,
yet his stallions mourn him as a brother —
So flayed my soul when all its nerves were loose, the horses rearing on without a driver...

(Platonic Soul-Study)

More successful are the poems that do not try as hard, where the poet castra a twentieth century body:

Oldish women in walking-shoes, saris, coats and spectacles, with wealthy, westernised sons Indians living in modern banglades — how much of yourselves have you had to lose?

(Indian Women at Windermere)

It is curious that both Craig and Ransford invoke, respectively, an 'austere style' and a 'season of austerity', since both practice an ornamental art. Because the GHT supplies me with a corrective threat-clearing at this point, I hardly like to write that both works seem to ask for more of that sorid social smut. But I shall hope that a smudgion two East Anglia's showing in later collections from these two poets. It is in fact one of the great merits of the GHT that a reviewer can wish six things of that kind before breakfast.

CHRIS MCCULLY

lives & letters

THE DESTRUCTIVE ELEMENT

Michael Hamburger, A Proliferation of Prophets (Carcanet Press) £14.95

By now it has become conventional, even in Britain, to dismiss the GHT as a vehicle for the translation. Yet in practice the difficulties they face hardly appear to have diminished: the more excellent the translation the more we are inclined to take it for granted. This new collection of Michael Hamburger's essays on German literature makes clear the commitment which sustains his work; at their best they transmit to the reader Hamburger's own convictions of the importance of this distinctive literary tradition.

Hamburger is especially sensitive to where the roots of this distinctive literary tradition lie. The book ranges over subjects from the life of Nietzsche to the diaries of German writers under the Nazis, it returns repeatedly to question the nature of the characteristic German sense of modernity. Not that Hamburger treats the matter in a reductionist way — 'Any author worth writing about deserves to be written about as its own book' is the way he put it — he is probably critical of simplistic attempts to reduce culture to politics. Nevertheless, he is aware of the force of tradition and beliefs that are rigidly inculcated, the relation between literature and politics remains a central problem.

These concerns emerge most acutely in the essay on the black-figure statuettes of ancient Greece. Bens, a westerner, pro-Nazi enthusiasm (at least in the initial period after the takeover of power) was notorious. As Hamburger explores the problems of the figurine's meaning as one which, if not strictly speaking Nazi (it is hard to imagine anyone at a further remove from their tawdry cult of cleanliness, conformity and efficient manhood), certainly presented no point of resistance to Nazism.

Bens combined Nietzschean nihilism (He accepted nihilism as one accepts the weather), Hamburger says, with a poetic style whose drastic imagery and erupitive rhythms are clearly Expressionist in origin. The result is poetry penetrated by a kind of poetic despair, Brown as cognac. Brown as leaves. Red-brown. Malayan yellow.

Express train Berlin-Trelleborg and the Baltic Sea.

Pleasure that went naked. Tasted to the very end by the sea. Deeply ripe for Grecian pleasure. And yearning for the scythe: how far the summer seems! Almost the end of the ninth month already!

Snubble and the last almondthumb in us. Undiffused the English word or the negroes. The nearness of dahlias confirms us.
There is no text in the image.