

Of Terror

MR. THEODORE MUNDSTOCK. By Ladislav Fuks. Translated by Iris Urwin from the Czech, "Pan Theodor Mundstok." 214 pp. New York: Orion Press. \$4.95.

By RICHARD M. ELMAN

CONVENTIONAL fiction treats terror with a language appropriate to pornography. One is made acquainted with quickening pulses, bulging eyes, cold sweats, hot flashes, tremblings, nightmares, daydreams, strangled cries, copious sighs. Even in Poe, for example, terror—being entirely a literary creation, like some novelistic versions of orgasm—transfigures and transports. Conveniently enough, then, the terrified figure ceases to function, which provides the excuse for his author's melodramatic psychologizing.

Consider, though, that actual terror may often come upon a man as cold and factual as the meeting of my hand with the wooden top of this desk, and then one must learn, as they say, to live with it. In Ladislav Fuks's brilliant novel, "Mr. Theodore Mundstock," a Prague Jew awaits his deportation in the year 1942; with pedestrian care he tries to go about the business of living, bungles his cooking, mutters to himself, pays visits to old friends, buries a pet; and the casual effect of imminence, as well as horror, that is created mirrors beautifully his absolute and paralyzing terror.

The very fact that Mundstock carries on, behaves as usual, refusing to be dehumanized by the threat of which he is all too aware, makes the trap he is in all the more absolute and terrifying. Mundstock's response to his murderers is complete incredulity; because he chooses to believe in life, one is devastated, along with him, by such a faith.

But Ladislav Fuks's novel is not just another pious holocaust book; it is acute, unsentimental, and unsparring, a work of intricate but compassionate narrative art, as if Kafka's K had literally confronted the crematoria. Indeed, Mr. Mundstock's imaginative block is somewhat reminiscent of Kafkaesque subjectivity, but lacks his sometimes formulary psychotic sneering and condescension, being a wholly original creation of love which enlists us through a kind of licit sympathy.

Fuks has given us a lover of humanity caught in an inhuman era, astonished, poignant, obsessive, a simple man, a domestic putterer. Throughout much of the novel, Mundstock, while arguing incredulously with Mon, his shadow, a post-terror acquisition, finds himself seek-



Painting by Fred Meyer. Courtesy Midtown Galleries.

ing to reassure the dwindling members of his community that all will be well.

Mundstock, in short, is a man who has chosen to live as if, rehearsing his fate in order to deprive it of its illusion of terror; he can, consequently, be labeled a passive daydreamer and a pretender (and to gentile and Jewish specialists in non-resistance he may even seem a figure of contempt), except that Fuks makes it so vivid that he has never surrendered to despair. To see Mundstock as any of the above categories is, therefore, to transgress against his mortality and entirely miss his pathos. Mundstock's failure to surrender hope is not blindness but a gesture of resistance, the only kind of resistance, perhaps, which such innocents were capable of achieving. As Fuks, in the role of narrator, points out: "The future was a compact of horror. For all his skill as seer he [Mundstock] did not as yet know what it would be like."

"Mr. Theodore Mundstock" succeeds, as few European novels of late, in affirming human possibilities even as it describes the most inhuman of events. Neither cynical nor sentimentalizing, it succeeds as craft, as a work of fiction, partially, I suspect, because of its eloquent English translation, but also because its artfulness, though always functional, is never permitted to victimize the humanity of Mundstock.

We are made to see him most of

the time, as if actually partaking in his hallucinations, but what we are only being forced to see is a small, gentle, Jewish *petit bourgeois*, formerly of the rope and rag trade but now, officially, an unemployed "Jewish swine," forced to sweep up tram tickets for his survival. We watch him puttering about dusty rooms, chatting aimlessly with neighbors with an eye out for the informer Krönk, or walking friendless streets in a dark overcoat with a gold six-pointed star sewn across his chest, a vision out of Kafka or Gogol confronting a terror that is far worse than mere poverty or imaginary humiliation. It soon becomes clear that it is the terrifying quality of the pedestrian, the homely, the commonplace, which makes this victimization seem so hallucinatory, so ultimate, for us, as well as for Mundstock himself.

This, then, is a novel about the banality of goodness. Nobody hates Mundstock, but he must die; and, though his love of his fellow man ties knots in his throat, he is powerless to do anything save reassure those who are scheduled to suffer along with him. "These people have lost their reason," Mundstock is told by his old friend, Mrs. Stern, "and believe the exact opposite of whatever they are told." The question which Fuks poses through his moving and intelligent novel is whether it was actually possible to do otherwise and remain a human being.

MR ELMAN'S new novel, "Lilo," will be published later this year.