

THE EXTREME OCCIDENT. By Petru Dumitriu. Translated by Peter Wiles. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. 378 pp. \$6.95.

"... As she came closer I realized that she was so beautiful that I could hardly make out her features," the narrator in the first chapter of Petru Dumitriu's latest novel reports, while sitting in a sidewalk cafe in an unnamed port of an unspecified northern European city. It would seem that Mr. Dumitriu would prefer to leave his existentialist allegories anchored in the indefinite. A few years back he received some attention for a work called *Incognito*. It was about a disillusioned CP functionary in Stalinist Rumania seeking to subvert power with love. Although some critics hailed this as another *Dr. Zhivago*, it was mainly an apology for Rumanian excesses; and *The Extreme Occident* is hardly even that coherent. Not only are many of the characters so blurred that they truly seem incognito, but what one does learn of them is a mixture of plumbing reports and *welt-schmerz*. It is all boozy hysteria, barbiturates, manipulation, and violence. We learn most of this from the narrator who, like Dumitriu himself, is an exiled Rumanian with a CP background. By day he works as a public relations writer for a giant industrial cartel. By night he waxes poetic over fine wines and beautiful women when he is not producing works of hagiography as a hobby. Here is the rest of his soft focus first glimpse of Annerose Brant, who is to be the chief focus of the book: "All I could see was whiteness, pinkness, and blonde hair with huge curls spilling over the left eye and covering the cheek, and beyond this golden veil, a big blue eye, shining gaily."

Probably it is a fault of the translation, but all I get from such an erotic word picture is a description of a female Cyclops. Later, it emerges that Annerose Brant is the estranged wife of a ruthless European technoparl, that she is also the sometime mistress of an Islamic revolutionary, and that she is the protege of the confusing Axel Oevermans, one of those saintly fools who, apparently, must be assassinated precisely because they are so insufferably good. For such an

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unspeakably beautiful woman Annerose is just about the unluckiest creature alive in her choice of men. "Every moment that I spend with him," she says of one lover, "fills me with hatred and revulsion and contempt for himself." To another she declares: "Thanks. I don't need you. I'm falling apart myself." Which encourages the poor fellow to court his own assassination.

Just what is the matter with all these people? It's not as if Annerose needed to suffer. Not only are there plenty of wealthy sugar daddies in the wings, but she is also an extremely successful *coutourier*, envied by all the rich and fashionable ladies of wherever-it-is that the book takes place. But alas, this is the decadent West; so not only is Annerose portrayed as frigid but she is also said to be barren. But, again, it is all left very indefinite. Our narrator and his wife tend to believe the real problem is that Annerose is selfish, which she clearly isn't because she allows Octavio to mutilate her. Octavio, it seems, is a cynical but prosperous jet-set merchant who strangles little Mexican street walkers for his amusement, but he has been in love with Annerose for ever so long—only not in the usual way. He believes she is just "too beautiful" and she thinks he is an evil sick man. But just so long as he murmurs "forgive me," Annerose swooningly consents to mastectomy.

But what is the matter with her barbarism is in

Perhaps such barbarism is in keeping with all the rest of Mr. Dumitriu's cornmeal mush about mercantile intrigues, revolutionary nihilism, and bourgeois world weariness, but it would seem to be a special triumph of his narrative art that, whereas he is merely pretentiously silly and vague when allegorical, he is additionally vulgar, tedious, and confusing whenever he seeks to descend to the specific. Thus, after going into great detail about the amputation of Anne-rose's breasts, our narrator says he is not even sure the deed took place. Even later, reunited with this pair of lovers on the Greek Island of Mykonos, he catches himself trying to decide whether the breasts are beneath her sweater or whether she is simply wearing a padded brassiere.

The poetry of the man's thoughts. Just a few pages later on, we find this same Balkan Baudelaire questioning his faithful wife, Isolde: "Has she got breasts, or hasn't she?" I murmured cautiously.

"I don't know and I don't want to know . . ."

For myself, I agree with Isolde.