
PAPERBOUNDS

ARABIAN SANDS. By Wilfred Thesiger. Penguin, 1981. 347 pp. \$3.95

In southern Saudi Arabia sprawls a desert within a desert, nearly a half-million square miles of such desolation and emptiness that even Arabs dismiss it, calling it the Empty Quarter. There, for five years in the 1950s, lingered the English traveler and author Thesiger, in the company of a few Bedouins, living the merciless code T. E. Lawrence earlier called "a death in life." Filled with danger and every form of discomfort, these were the happiest years of Thesiger's life. The book that he was finally persuaded to write about this time is a masterpiece, recording a way of life that otherwise would have passed away unnoticed. Human life in the Empty Quarter was tested in the extreme—seared by an inhuman heat and stripped of all supports except camels, rags, and maybe a cooking pot. Out of this hardship, the Bedouin minted generosity, good humor, courage, and loyalty. Thesiger predicted that future authors would one day write more interesting books on Arabia. But none shall know what he knew: the feel of the land and the spirit of the Bedouin who inhabited it.

THE BOOK OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING. By Milan Kundera. Penguin, 1981. 228 pp. \$4.95

In 1968, novelist Kundera became a "nonperson" in his native Czechoslovakia. Only 20 years before, he had been a bright-eyed believer in the world promised by Karl Marx. Something happened on the way to Prague Spring: Kundera, like the Protean narrator of his novel, broke from the circle of true believers. His reasons, which provide the thematic

center of the novel, are bound not simply to local politics but to the fundamental question behind any political vision: the nature of man. Out of his experience, Kundera conceives a fictional world peopled by two necessary, antagonistic types. On one hand are the angels, idealists who always forget; on the other are the demons, who, unable to forget, must always laugh. Superficially a series of unrelated tales—some surreal, some autobiographical, some historical (a Czech politician, for instance, disappears from an official photograph, leaving a tell-tale trace)—the book slowly divulges its subtle unities of theme and voice. Kundera mocks both angels and demons, though it is clearly with the latter that he casts his lot. But his final point is deadly serious: Angels, who persist despite all experience in their notions of perfectability, can be dangerous—at least if their holy zeal goes unchecked by unholy laughter.

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG. By Charles Rosen. Princeton, 1981. 113 pp. \$4.95

For the death of "pretty music," Schoenberg (1874–1951) deserves much of the credit or blame—depending on one's ear. Controversy surrounded the life and career of the Austrian Jew who fled to the United States in 1936. Rosen, a professor of music at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, notes the hostile reception that conservative Viennese audiences gave to what they considered Schoenberg's violation of the "natural laws of music." Whether or not tonality is "natural," it had long provided a means of distinguishing musical sense from nonsense. Rosen argues that the "breakdown in tonality" is a fiction. What Schoenberg

actually banished was the possibility of using large "blocks of prefabricated material in music." Schoenberg insisted that music be written note by note. Between 1908 and 1913, in works such as *Evar-tung*, the composer renounced both the tonal frame and the thematic form. The point of rest and resolution lay no longer in the sounding of the tonic chord but rather in filling out chromatic space by sounding all twelve tones in the chromatic order determined by the composer. Rosen suggests similarities between the composer's art and work by contemporaries in other media: Experiments by Matisse and the French Fauvists with "pure" colors strikingly parallel Schoenberg's efforts. He also provides a lucid, accessible explanation of Schoenberg's aesthetic and achievement, both of which have figured prominently in 20th-century music.

BANDITS. By Eric Hobsbawm. Pantheon, 1981. 181 pp. \$4.95

That Hobsbawm, the noted London University historian, should have devoted a book to bandits is neither whimsical nor surprising. Considered with his earlier books, such as *The Age of Revolution* (1962), it reveals an abiding preoccupation with seekers after justice and freedom. Here, Hobsbawm surveys ballads, legends, and historical records of outlaws who fought to relieve oppression and exploitation, from Shanghai to Sicily. He discerns three persistent types: "noble robbers" such as Jesse James and Robin Hood; "avengers" such as the 19th- and 20th-century Brazilian *cangaço* (morally ambiguous because of their violence and cruelty); and *haiduks* such as the 17th- and 18th-century Zaphorzhe Cossacks, who, with their political and organizational sophistication, were pro-

totypes of modern guerrilla resistance and liberation movements. Bandits may lead larger revolutions, but the unsuitability of "social banditry" for more than small group operations constitutes its "tragedy." Yet bandits remain more important to their people than do the Bismarcks and Napoleons. Real or imaginary, these avengers "noble as falcons, cunning as foxes" reflect the eternal longing for justice.

GRAMSCI: An Alternative Communism?
By Luciano Pellicani. Hoover, 1981. 136 pp. \$8.95

When the Italian Communists split from the Socialists in 1921, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) became a leader of the fledgling PCI. In 1926, he began nearly a decade of imprisonment, during which he wrote his massive *Prison Notebooks*. Emphasizing gradualism and accommodation with liberal political parties, *Notebooks* supplied the ideological foundation for Italian communism and also, later, for the larger "Eurocommunist" movement. Rejecting Lenin's notion of the forceful revolutionary cadre, Gramsci proposed instead to educate the working class. Once aware of how bourgeois culture obscures economic injustice, workers, he believed, would seek, through primarily democratic means, their own class interests. The danger of Gramscian Marxism, argues Pellicani, professor of political sociology at the University of Naples and theorist for the Italian Socialist Party, is that it depends on a "priestly" class of leaders whose blueprints for the ideal state remain drearily totalitarian. Pellicani locates Gramsci's error in the fundamental difference between communism and socialism: The former seeks a perfect state; the latter, only a better one.