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0521274958 - In the Age of Prose: Literary and Philosophical Essays - Erich Heller

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IN THE AGE OF PROSE

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Literary and philosophical essays

ERICH HELLER

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FOR PAUL AND LIESE HELLER

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PREFACE

I would, of course, like to think that the friends, listeners and readers were right in urging me over the years to gather the following essays and lectures into a book. Here, then, it is, more conveniently accessible than the various journals or anthologies where these pieces – some of them enlarged now or otherwise edited – originally appeared.

I have called the volume ‘In the Age of Prose’ – ‘The poet in the age of prose’ is the title of one of the essays – because all its chapters are concerned, in one way or another, with the fate of art, literature and thought in an epoch that is dominated by prose; and prose, as the title essay puts it, ‘implies not merely a manner of writing, but a style of comprehension’. This means that the poetic (the word denoting more than simply poetry) has been assigned a kind of Cinderella role – with the fairy tale’s happy ending unhappily in suspense.

It is, perhaps, unfortunate that it was Hegel, in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, who allotted to this development a most important place in his panorama of history – unfortunate for me who is not only no Hegelian but highly critical of the philosopher’s notion of historical inevitability. Yet it is, I think, impossible not to make perfect sense of Hegel’s diagnosis and brilliant description of the ‘age of prose’ – his age and in this respect still ours – when ‘poetry finds itself involved everywhere in manifold difficulties’ to the point of having to struggle for its survival by melting down and then pouring the prosaic matter that constitutes our reality into very different moulds. Indeed, it has to do so even with the very stuff on which it lives: language. If poetry was still to win victories in the age of prose, it had to discover, and take possession of, new lands of the verbal imagination that had not been frozen over yet by the chills of the prosaic. This is what the poet of the *Four Quartets* meant when in the fifth section of ‘East Coker’ he spoke of the poet’s difficult task to recover what has been lost; to assert poetry in unpropitious and ‘always deteriorating’ linguistic

Preface

conditions. It would amount to special pleading if I said that this is the theme that all the essays here have in common, but its reverberations are, I am sure, discernible throughout the volume and give it the unity it may modestly claim to possess. I have grown so allergic to words like ‘Rilke-Forschung’ or ‘Kafka scholarship’ that I was rather negligent in providing references, a rather tiresome way of proving one’s ‘scholarliness’; but partly also because of my – possibly overambitious – wish that these essays should be read as essays rather than be looked upon as sources of learned information.

If I were to list all the providers of assistance I have had in publishing these essays – that most enlivening help that is given by intelligent response and criticism – I would have to produce a long register of names. Although I cannot do that, I beg them to be sure of my gratitude. But I must mention my student Gregory Maertz without whose energetic initiative this collection would never have been assembled, and David Relkin whose alert and witty intelligence transformed the tedious business of proof-reading into sheer pleasure (which unfortunately is no insurance against persistent errors). The book owes its final form to the perceptive advice of Michael Tanner, Fellow of Corpus Christi College at Cambridge, and to my thoughtful editors at the Cambridge University Press, Jonathan Sinclair-Wilson and Penny Souster.

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E.H.