

nerian bleakness, but also eager to embrace the jolly areas of life—like most of us—not to see this new work as a symptom of a kind of authorial auto-immune disease, in which, as it were, the body politic becomes allergic to itself. That is in fact the structure of the novel.

Like the infinitely more sophisticated *Hôtel du Lac*, which by comparison positively throbs with life, *Fraud* opens with a mystery: in this case, the disappearance of Anna Durrant, a 50-year-old spinster (Brookner's novels are the last non-avowedly "romantic" ones where the term is appropriate). The essential facts set up, the novel gracefully subsides into flashback, with particular emphasis on the immediate past: the pitiless autumn, winter (encompassing one of the most pathetic Christmases on record) and delayed spring that preceded Anna's fugue. Finally we discover her now, crying "Fraud!" to her previously false self, utterly changed and empowered to help others to do so. Nothing has prepared the reader for this abrupt and hectic turnabout that makes one want to level the same charge at the author.

For in Anna Durrant, Brookner lays on passivity, loneliness, helplessness, spiritlessness and that unattractive blind cheerfulness used to mask despair more relentlessly than ever before. Though providentially supplied with a private income, Anna is without man, work or—with one faraway exception—even a friend.

She has devoted her life to caring for her mother, a sickly widow who died a year before the novel begins. We don't quite learn the cause of this devotion, for the mother-daughter rapports, represented in typical fashion as idealised yet destructive of the daughter's will, are described rather than demonstrated.

It seems that the dead mother was rather more lustrous than the daughter and—again the characteristic formula—also more self-ish and sexual, so that at a great age she entered into an explosively erotic relationship with a new husband. The man, who was discovered to be a crook, and their marriage, revealed as bigamous, constitute the first thematic "fraud" of the novel. It also renders bogus the love between mother and daughter, formerly based on chastity and exclusiveness.

Anna's sole friendship, with a Parisian of 60 who has given her own life to caring for her father, is largely epistolary, couched—if Anna's example is anything to go by—in letters of excruciatingly arch and dishonest stoicism. Anna sees the Frenchwoman as "like a saint in her acceptance of her reduced share of the world's delights": a kind of ghastly role model.

"What united them was a long habit of celibacy": until Marie-France surprisingly becomes engaged, sexually active and—this goes with the territory—rather silly. The fiancé is seen as a fraudulent roué. The one man drawn with any precision or affection is a masculine version of Anna—though better-looking and, being male, sexual. Lawrence Halliday is the Durrant family doctor. On his weekly visits to Anna's mother, a rapport

grows between daughter and doctor that is seen by the two women and, when it is too late, by Lawrence, as some sort of natural prelude to marriage.

It is broken by Lawrence's coupling with the histrionic, rapacious but sexy Vickie, whose father behaves in quaint Brooknerian fashion by pushing him into marriage. The description of the couple's cramped, nouveau-ruched Chelsea cottage and the nightmare results of Vickie's cooking during a barbed evening made me laugh aloud. It suggests that Brookner may now be more at home in writing social satire than in tunnelling deeper into the well-mined pits of her outdated *Eleanor Rigby* world.

"Life had typecast her as the wise virgin," says the author of the heroine; but in the real world there are no wise virgins, only fools. Wisdom requires joy, pain and stink. Man-like, Brookner persists in dividing women into madonnas and whores: respectively the sufferers and the exploiters. There is something suicidal in the extreme self-effacingness of her later heroines, of whom her perceptions are now savagely ambivalent. One hopes that Brookner will now turn that savagery to better cause.

The God-shaped hole

ON THE HEIGHTS OF DESPAIR
E M Cioran (translated by Ilinca
Zarifopol-Johnson)

University of Chicago Press, £18.95

ANATHEMAS AND ADMIRATIONS
E M Cioran (translated by Richard Howard)
Quartet, £6.95

Guy Mannes-Abbott

In his 1973 book of aphorisms, *The Trouble With Being Born*, E M Cioran wrote that: "The one sincere confession is the one we make indirectly, when we talk about other people." That becomes particularly pertinent from this Romanian-born philosopher-aphorist, whose work is characterised by polemics with himself. When he outlines a case for the reactionary Joseph de Maistre's "incomparable art of provocation . . . rich in enormities . . . that unfailingly seduces and exasperates", Cioran's sincerity is unmistakable.

Writing directly about himself in the *Admirations*, he declares that: "I want to write only in an explosive state, in a fever or under great nervous tension . . . to avoid a crisis." Cioran offers de Maistre again as an "accomplice to our smiles", who helps to elevate his own lyrical fervour above mere nihilistic obsession.

On the Heights of Despair was written by the 22-year-old Cioran in 1934, under the constraints of suicidal insomnia. Cioran's thought arrives fully, if messily formed here,

as he declaims his "monopoly of suffering . . . suspended over the abyss". All his metaphysical expressions of renunciation, his identification of sickness with knowledge, and his belief that "each subjective existence is absolute to itself" gather in this youthful volume.

In her introduction to his collection of essays, *The Temptation To Exist*, Susan Sontag famously placed Cioran in the autobiographical, anti-systematic, philosophising tradition of Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nietzsche. The latter's shadow gives Cioran's thought its tone of belatedness. While his early writing is defined by Zarathustra's "poses", it lacks the acrobatic "fore-shortenings" he later admires.

Cioran embraced Parisian exile in 1937, publishing his first French language book, *The History of Decay*, in 1949. In *Anathemas and Admirations*, which contains writing from the period 1970 to 1986, he writes of inhabiting a language rather than a country. A deep scepticism towards his century of Marxism and Freud parallels an expert enthusiasm for exiles; from the desert mystics to de Maistre and Henri Michaux. To him, exile means Michaux' solitary "longing to attack the inconceivable, to force it, to break it open, to go beyond".

Anathemas and Admirations alternates typical Cioran aphorisms with a remarkable and perverse collection of essays extolling diverse writers. They form a merry band of honorary mystics; from Beckett, Borges, Edward Fitzgerald and Michaux, to Caillouis, Valéry and Cioran's Romanian friend and early idol, Mircea Eliade. Writing of Eliade, he describes his own inclination towards "a formula without revealing the path . . . to the final expression". It places Cioran in the company of fragmentary moralists such as Lichtenberg, La Rochefoucauld and Pascal, in contrast to the "unfolding" thought admired by Eliade.

Central to Cioran's rejection of the Modern is his acceptance of language as a meaningful whole that offers unproblematic access to a "unique reality". Faced with its obstructive limits, a propensity for extremity propels Cioran to his lyrical peaks. He concedes that in his effort to reveal and exceed, and to "designate what comes after", he prefers the language of God to "the inconceivable". Sartre's criticism of "theological impotence" in Mallarmé's thought is equally appropriate to Cioran's.

The Cioran of the *Admirations* is a different man, engaged in an exploratory burrowing. Here too he realises that textual multiplicity can breach the Absolute, demonstrated in his tribute to Borges' "encyclopedic smile" of "universal curiosity".

Writing of his friend Samuel Beckett, Cioran recognises that his invention of a language at its aporetic limits "enriches by undermining it". The small intimacy of their attempt to coin a French word to match Beckett's own "Lessness" is one of many paradoxical pleasures in *Anathemas and Admirations*. It contains incisively majestic writing with a lightness that recasts Cioran's customary God-shaped hole.