

The Situation Was Hopeless but Far From Serious

THE DEVIL'S AGENT. By Hans Habe. Translated by Ewald Osers from the German, "Im Namen der Teufels." 406 pp. New York: Frederick Fell. \$4.50.

By ANTHONY BOUCHER

It is a German byword that a Berliner says, "The situation is serious, but far from hopeless"; a Viennese says, "The situation is hopeless, but far from serious." Hans Habe, born in Budapest but educated in Vienna, proves his Viennese culture by looking at today's world through the eyes of a

Mr. Boucher, a student of crime in fiction and out, conducts the Criminals at Large column for the Book Review.

secret agent, finding the situation bitterly hopeless, and—with a deftness that may startle admirers of his more serious novels—writing an intensely funny book about it.

George Droste is the descendant of an aristocracy of Viennese head waiters, with all of a waiter's shrewdly contemptuous evaluation of mankind. In the bleak post-war days of 1947 a countess, who is charmingly prodigal with what are known as her favors, asks a small favor of him: the delivery of a trifling package to a friend. In no time Droste is in the thick of espionage: he learns that the favor is a job for the Russian secret service. He finds it more

profitable and safer to work for the Americans as well; and before the task is over he is also unofficially an agent for the only secret service to impress him as reasonably competent, that of the Vatican.

Pleased with him, the Americans send Droste to a training school for spies in Maryland, and his new skills enable him to parlay his next assignment into a four-way deal with profitable results for the Americans, the Russians, the German nationalists and Droste himself. And so the tale continues through countless episodes (including an ironic explanation of how overefficient counter-intelligence caused the Korean War), until Droste's multiple

crosses combine with a half-hearted reformation to cause his death.

This is the ultimate and wondrous picaresque novel of the secret agent. In essence it is a serious book (at least in the sense of the French *sérieux*) and a frightening one in its picture of espionage as an elaborate and costly game whose objectives are, in approximate order of importance, to justify one's expense accounts, to give one's political superiors the reports they want to hear, and to score off the opposition. But its surface is that of a vastly entertaining story, as long as two or three standard spy novels yet never flagging for a moment, cynical, inventive, meldo-

dramatic, farcical—and as shrewd in the handling of boudoir episodes as anyone since Casanova (who might himself be awed by Droste's best performances).

Ewald Osers' translation is highly readable; and even its few traces of un-English idiom fit agreeably into Droste's first person narration (if not into the translations of American speech). Here is as amusing a thriller as the season is apt to provide . . . and one that will leave you pondering for some time over the need and function of espionage today.

Fiction Reviews
Continued on Pages 38-39

THE DEVIL'S AGENT. By H
Translated by Fald Osei
German, "Im Namen der
406 pp. New York: Free
\$4.50.

By ANTHONY BOUR

It is a German bywoi
Berliner says, "The
is serious, but far fro
less"; a Viennese say
situation is hopeless,
from serious." Hans H
in Budapest but edu
Vienna, proves his
culture by looking at
world through the ey

Mr. Boucher, a sh
crime in fiction and
ducts the Criminals o
column for the Book Ra

SEPTEMBER 7, 1951

Faultner, and the Principle of
Uncertainty in modern physics.
All of these developments, in his
view, reveal the growth of a
new conception of human expe-
rience and a common conviction
that the traditional categories
and ideals of abstract reason
are insufficient to place men in
touch with reality.

Existentialism, Mr. Barrett
argues, has captured this cen-
tral theme. It expresses the
realization that there are "sub-
terranean forces of life" with
which pure reason cannot deal
and that reason itself has its
roots in these irrational forces.
Existentialism wants a new con-

Mr. Frankel, Professor of Phi-
losophy at Columbia, has con-
sidered contemporary beliefs
and attitudes in "The Case for
Modern Man."

6

about art, science and culture,
"Irrational Man" makes it plain
that Existentialism is not just
a fad and that it reflects devel-
opments in our society profound-
ly challenging the ideal of the
life of reason.

The book is all the more use-
ful because Mr. Barrett is him-
self "engaged" and "commit-
ted," and has offered his own
Existentialist interpretation of
modern Western history and
culture. Whatever we may think
of his position, it is good to read
a philosopher who thinks that
philosophy should have some-
thing to say about the anxieties
and dilemmas of ordinary men.

Nevertheless, the position for
which Mr. Barrett has chosen
to argue is much less than per-
suasive. Because the "subterra-
nean forces of life" are unaware
of the laws of logic, he argues
that we too should keep logic

1958

