

# Poems for people who don't read poems

Hank Malone

1968

a review of

*Poems for people who don't read poems* by Hans Magnus Enzenberger, Atheneum Press, NYC. 1968. \$2.95.  
177 pp.

Hans Magnus Enzenberger, in case you forgot, is Germany's greatest living poet. This is the first collected translation of his work in English. The English versions, translated by pros like Michael Hamburger and Jerome Rothenberg (and sometimes by Enzenberger himself) are absolutely brilliant.

As the book-blurb rightly suggests, the poems go well out beyond their borders. They are poems more attached to life than to literary business. poems designed to provoke and point an accusing finger as well as delight. Here's an example.

what am i doing here?  
in this country  
to which my elders brought me  
intending no harm?  
native but comfortless  
absently i am here,  
settled in cozy squalor  
in this nice, contented hole.  
what do i have here? what business  
in this bean feast. this never-never land  
where things are looking up but getting nowhere...  
where in delicatessen shops poverty, white as chalk,  
with stifled voice gasps through whipped cream  
and calls out:

things are looking up!

There is a great kinship in these poems with the blunt and outraged poetry of Bertoldt Brecht, and a comradeship to the Nietzsche who said: "I contradict as has never been contradicted before and am yet the opposite of a no-saying spirit."

Enzenberger, 39, speaks essentially as an artist in the world of Realpolitik. His subject matter, the New Germany, is the subject matter of The New America, and the International New Left. His work is a marvel not only because of its intrinsic achievement, but for the fact that it retains a personal integrity in the midst of a political maelstrom that would usurp a lesser spirit and co-opt his language into the easy formulas of one or another kind of political hack.

Here's an example of such art fused with integrity.

...he's twenty-nine.

idealistic.

sleeps badly and alone

with pamphlets and blackheads.

hates the boss and the supermarket.

communists, women,

landlords, himself

and his bitten fingernails

full of margarine (because

it's so delicious), under

his arty hairstyle mutters

to himself like a pensioner.

that one

will never get anywhere.

wittler, i think, he's called

wittler, hittler, or something like that.

The book is a substantial collection of the work of a career which began during the German post-war period (what post war-period?), a career which continues energetically in its confrontation to this very day, this very hour.

Though the confrontation of the World by an artist appears less and less relevant in the midst of the multifaceted activist confrontation of our period, I am always reassured by its appearance (when it's genuine), for the artist is still perhaps the best and most resilient bullshit detector of any era.

I would certainly hesitate to throw in my lot for a confrontation that was designed only for guns and screaming, a confrontation which lacked poetry, sensibility and the pre-political confrontations of self.

I admire a poet like Enzenberger who has the brains, in our period, to defend the wolves against the lambs. For too often, the lambs love to be torn limb from limb.

# fifth Estate

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