Fiction

A Thorn in the Heart. By T. O. Beachcroft. (Bodley Head. 12s. 6d.)

Love for Lydia. By H. E. Bates. (Michael Joseph. 12s. 6d.)

Jabadao. By Anne de Tourville. (Britannicus Liber. 10s. 6d.)

Return to Ithaca. By Eyvind Johnson. (Thames and Hudson. 25s.)

If the course of true love never did run smooth, at least it did once look as if it might. As Odysseus struggled on his way to Penelope, it was only the gods who held him back, and they might have relented in less than twenty years. In Georgian England it was mainly bad luck that separated Tom Jones from his Sophia, and his luck might have changed in less than two hundred chapters. But now, in the twentieth century, when we have gone so far towards clearing the course of gods and mischance, the prospects look gloomier than they ever did. The trouble, we discover, the delays, the retreats, the detours, are to be traced to the hearts of the runners, where they are less easily combated than as obstacles outside in the broad daylight of the course.

Mr. Beachcroft bares the hearts of both his lovers to us in their childhood, and we see a thorn go into one while a process of disruption attacks the other. These catastrophes, which are either not noticed or not recognised as catastrophes by the parents, lie in wait to distort and bedevil their love-relationships when they grow up. Mr. Beachcroft is much too considerable an artist to let this framework show itself. The childhood scenes, which make up the first third of *A Thorn in the Heart*, have that bewildering richness and variety which make it quite impossible in real life to prophesy what will come out of the muddle. The story is deeply exciting, illuminated by that brilliance of emotion which only a major talent can impart. But thereafter, when Mr. Beachcroft faces the adult consequences of his two childhoods, he holds us less powerfully, and there are times when he seems to move too slowly.

It may be that Mr. Beachcroft's failure with the latter part of his novel has no wider significance than a Homeric nod ; or alternatively it may lead us to an essential problem in the twentieth-century novel. For if chance and the gods have been turned off the course of true love, and if the only difficulties to be contended with are laid down immutably in childhood at the beginning of the story, what thrill can be left to sustain our interest to the end ? I am not sure that Mr. Beachcroft gives any very convincing answer.

If Mr. Bates shows himself more professional in *Love for Lydia*, it is not because there is more integrity in his approach. It is rather as if he had weighed up the attractiveness of his talents, the tastes of his audience, and arrived at some kind of balance between the two, while uneasily aware of a third party whose demands were too faint to make themselves clearly heard. We are rewarded with exquisite scenes from the Midland countryside, with as many twists and turns in a love-story as the eighteenth century could provide, and with a somewhat perfunctory attempt to derive these events from the character of his heroine. But since Mr. Bates gives priority to his settings and the turns of his plot, it is not surprising that his heroine seems to lack an independent life of her own. Lydia moves, as it were, under orders, and when Mr. Bates is not actually posing her she subsides like an empty pillow-case.

Jabadao is a Breton love-story, and its deeply provincial setting allows the author to take us naturally and without strain into a world of magic and superstition where values are as simplified as in Grimm or Andersen. We are back under special licence on the territory where the love of good men and women has only to surmount the obstacles which evil puts in its way. They are enormous obstacles, but only because the strength of the lovers is equal to them. To most readers of novels *Jabadao* will seem as refreshing as a trip to a country where M. Sartre has not yet been heard of.

To describe a book as " the Odyssey retold as a modern novel " is surely a sign of surprising *naïveté* in an author whom his publishers describe as "one of the greatest—some say the greatest—living writer in Scandinavia." Mr. Eyvind Johnson settles down to his task like an overgrown schoolboy, believing that some kind of sanctity resides in the general outline of the story, but that elaboration is needed to make it convincing in places, while in others the chance should not be overlooked of drawing parallels with modern politics. The main weight of the plot is transferred from the adventures of Odysseus to the campaign of the suitors on Ithaca, "the Progressives," who meet an ugly but comparatively unexciting end owing to the omission—perhaps for semi-hygienic reasons—of the avenging Athene. It is clear that Mr. Johnson is more certain about his own talents than those of Homer. *Return to Ithaca* is priced at 25s. and is a monument of the kind that the Parthenon would be when rebuilt as a cinema.

TANGYE LEAN.