New Fiction

IRIS MURDOCH: The Italian Girl. 214pp. Chatto and Windus. 21s.

Miss Iris Murdoch's new novel, The Italian Girl, is again subtle, quirky tale, brushed everywhere with the fabulous, and set in a richly pictorial scene. The setting time is a house and great garden, dominated by a magnolia forest, somewhere in the north of England. Lydia, the aged grandmother, has died, her son Edmund returns in the moonlight to pay his last reluctant respects—and his return launches everyone connected with the house, children and grandchildren and servants alike, on a vivid new phase in their fortunes.

Faithful readers of Miss Murdoch will find some of her earlier themes here in a new disguise, like the pursuit of the nymph who in fact has nothing to offer the pursuit (Edmund after his absence in the magnolias); or the stately, intractable exchange of roles between people (the aforesaid nervous and patient Edmund, whose most common remark is "Not much,") lighting on a great and unexpected passion: his brother Otto, the wild and impulsive sculptor, seeing his snobbish mistress burn before his eyes, and turning into a man who watches and waits.

But the reading is as fascinating as ever. All emotion may be softened and idealized in this near-dream universe; but Miss Murdoch knows what she is doing, and a wrinkled not of hard truth is to be picked, at least, out of every one of her shapely and exotic tableaux.

The Single Man. Mr. Christopher Isherwood's new novel, offers a plainer realism. We follow George, a professor of English at a Los Angeles university, through a day of his life, and George's personality sets the mood of the book. He is 58, very aware of age, death, dirt, prejudice, inconsistency, and meanness, not least in himself—but contentedly homosexual, witty and tender, and undefeated. In the course of the day George retrieves in agony the death of the boy who shared his home with him, and ends an hour of unsatisfying happiness talking and eating a Borneo stew with a plump and lovely lady; gives an excited lecture on Aldous Huxley to an unappreciative audience, and reads Rilke to help his bowels; dreams of wild and comic revenges on American land-lodgers, newspapermen and senators, goes for a midnight bath with a student, offers a bowl—unaccepted—of blood to the student and his Japanese girl-friend; drives along Californian highways, argues, loses his temper, stops, forgives, sleeps again. Lucid and lightly elegant though the prose is, there is something here like Joyce's Ulysses, and not only in the time scheme; it is in the feeling that the book conveys that a man can be quite insignificant to the world at large, and bested by all the sins and ills of humanity, yet still live an intensely acceptable life.

Mr. John Cheever's The Wapshot Scandal is a sequel to his successful The Wapshot Chronicle; but it is disappointing. Whereas Mr. Isherwood looks at the colourful Pacific coast with a gently acidulous eye, The Wapshot Scandal is a hectic jizz-up—and a bitter-sweet spurting—of life over in New England. Mr. Cheever brings plenty of interest to the life of the old Wapshot cousin Honora, and the two Wapshot boys and their wives—some of the more extraordinary scenes are those in which

Covered Wapshot surreptitiously analyses Keats's vocabulary on a Missile Research computer, Honora Wapshot grandly snubs two fellow-passengers on a liner who have gone round the world worrying where to wash their woollen clothes, and Moses Wapshot's wife's boy-friend is pursued by scores of housewives in their nightdresses when he is out distributing prize-containing eggs on a publicity campaign. But there is a strained air about much of this long book, and Mr. Cheever does not give his characters much chance to come alive, so strong his hold, wet breath is in one's ear, whispering continuously how funny and how awful this over-mechanized American life is.

Mr. Anthony Burgess's short, jolly story The Eve of Saint Venus also suffers a little from its author's obtrusive presence. Based on an anecdote by the Melancholy Burton, it tells how the weekly son of Sir Benjamin Drayton put a ring on the finger of a statue of Venus in his garden on his wedding eve, and how Venus, after first almost breaking the marriage up, set it off finally on a much more successful erotic course. But Mr. Burgess does not feel free to try any of its verisimilitude to his little comedy. He has turned all his characters into excreta for him to indulge his love of waffly words.

Mr. H. E. Bates has gone back to the war in A Moment in Time. No one will learn anything about the war from it, certainly not if they were not in it, and even less if they were not yet born; but he has skimmed the top off its drama, its weather and its style, and in this story of a girl who marries an Air Force pilot during the Battle of Britain it has stitched them together with great skill as a background to a slice of light romance.

Stormy Life

LAWRENCE AND ELIZABETH HANSON: Prokofiev, the Prodigal Son. 243pp. Cassell. 30s.

A politically unprejudiced interpretation of Sergei Prokofiev's life and work is certainly much needed by the English-speaking world. Political equilibrium is one outstanding feature of this study by Mr. and Mrs. Hanson, who have cast their net wide in eastern and western waters, and drawn up a rich catch. They are firmest condemnation of Zhianov, but in other respects take a clear, by no means biased look at the influence of Soviet Communism on Prokofiev's stormy and finally melancholy life.

Prokofiev's orchestral symphonic works are more fully discussed than his piano music or stage work—here the authors show some prejudice, not adequately supported by reasoning, against Prokofiev's dramatic talent. Their preferences among his works, reveal an extensive study of his output, though not always, their critical comments suggest, a very deep one: the fourth symphony, the opera The Fiery Angel, Romeo and Juliet, and the seventh piano sonata, for example, are all more satisfactory, surely, than the Hansons' designations may lead a tiro to infer.