Consoles and torments

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

Esther Freud

MR MAC AND ME
304pp. Bloomsbury. £16.99.
978 1 4088 5718 2

Charles Rennie Mackintosh, or "Toshie" as his wife Margaret calls him, is a mysterious figure. He is not like the other tourists who arrive at the start of summer in Walberswick, a small fishing village in Suffolk, with their watercolours, easels and cotton smocks to paint the dunes and local sailors – one sailor, old Danky, stands on the village's Japanese-style bridge dressed in full garb (cord cap, fisherman's boots, dark jacket, white beard), "and accepts payment from anyone who might like to use him in one of their paintings". It is 1914; war has just been declared and the residents see "Mac" – "at least that's what they call him when they whisper his business in the bar" – in a black cape walking along the beach with binoculars most evenings.

Esther Freud's *Mr Mac and Me* is based on the year the architect, designer and artist stayed in Suffolk, with his wife, to recuperate from illness and professional frustration ("The Spook School, some Glasgow critics called them, hobgoblins in the cupboard"). He was later arrested and briefly imprisoned in 1915 on suspicion of being a German spy. Freud's version is narrated by the fictional Thomas Maggs, an imaginative thirteen-year-old boy, whose father and mother run the local Blue Anchor Inn. When Thomas meets Mac for the first time, the strange Scottish man has "a gruff voice, low and hard to understand, with rolling Rs and sudden lifts and burrs", he observes. "This man is dark, with a stern, pale face, and eyes as black as bark."

There is an outsider's affinity between the two. Like Mac, Thomas has sisters and is the only surviving son (he feels the weight of his male predecessors who died when they were "just babbies": "I close my eyes and trace the shapes of my brothers' names. William. William. James. William. James. And that other, earlier Thomas . . . . What would they have looked like?" – an omen for the impact of war on the community). Like Mac, Thomas also has a maimed foot (caused by one of his father's drunken outbursts, usually directed towards his mother); and an obsession with drawing.

Mac encourages Thomas's sketches of ships, most of which start as doodles in the margins of his schoolwork; these annoy his teacher, Mr Runnicles ("Neat and tidy, that's what he wants from me, without a single picture of a boat"), who doggedly, and perversely, runs his pupils through recent battles: "Ground taken. Ground regained. Regiments in action. Regiments replaced . . . . Battle of Liège. Battle of Mulhouse. Battle of Haelen. Invasion of Lorraine". Thomas finds sanctuary in making art at the Mackintoshes' lodgings:

> There's a thick, warm silence as we work. I've sensed that silence, when I used to watch them, but now that I'm inside it, it's as solid as a coat. If it was flax you could twist it into rope, and I glance at Mac, growing the centre of an aster as if he's God himself and just created it, the way he sits so still and fierce in his dark suit . . . . When I next look up, the afternoon is gone.

This is a novel, appropriately, though not always successfully, saturated in *ekphrasis*. Having stolen a "creamy pamphlet" from the Mackintoshes' possessions, Thomas looks at photographs of the Glasgow School of Art, "brick walls and giant black-framed windows . . . shooting up into the sky", "wide black doors that open like a flower"; of Hill House, Helensburgh, "the bed is white, as wide and deep as a hayrick, and the mirror at the foot of it has arms that curve out in an embrace"; of paintings and gessoes by Margaret and her sister, Frances Macdonald, "the picture I look at till I have it off by heart is of a girl shrouded in a cloak so wide she could hide herself inside it . . . along the top, as if they were trees, are the white faces of women. Are they ghosts?" Blacks, whites and flowers generously recur – a reflection of Thomas's limited vocabulary and the monochrome photographs, perhaps, but it means these descriptions sometimes fall short of conveying the vivid intricacies of the designs and artworks. Thomas spots German words in the pamphlets ("*Hertz am Rose*", "*Dekorative*", "*Wiener Rundschau*"), but his worry that Mac is connected to the enemy is outweighed by the couple's kindness to him, which includes honey sandwiches and the gift of a paintbox, "the colours smooth as glass". I wonder what those colours are.

Curtain design by Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868–1928)

When news arrives that HMS *Formidable* has sunk, with some of the village's men on board, Thomas blames his drawing of the ship "by imagining her to be made of such fragile things as wood and rope and canvas I had a hand in her downfall". His sister, Ann, whose fiancé is one of the missing sailors, is unable to function. Freud gives us a striking account of how Ann clutches at Thomas's back in their shared bed, makes the sheets wet with tears and vomit, working herself into a coma. Staring at her body, Thomas thinks of the haunting picture he has encountered – "*The Sleeping Princess*", who is "a girl as beautiful as anything I've seen . . . for all Frances Macdonald's insistence that she is sleeping, it's hard not to think she's dead". Art here consoles and torments the characters. Much like the poem on the war poster pinned outside the town hall: "It is far better / To face the bullets / Than to be killed / At home by a bomb".

Walking to Paris

KATE WEBB

Nellie Hermann

THE SEASON OF MIGRATION
244pp. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $26.
978 0 374 25547 3

It is the spring of 1880 and a man walks through the countryside of southern Belgium, making his way to the French border. Shabbily dressed, with a knapsack on his back, he tramps long hours, stopping only to sleep at night among the haystacks, or sometimes, when his eye is caught by a light in the trees, to take out pencil and paper from his bag so that he might catch its impression. The drawings and a bundle of unsent letters to his brother are his only possessions, and as the rain falls he worries that even these might wash away. When he calls at a bar for a cup of coffee, the owners are so concerned by the sight of his swollen feet they give him clean socks and patch up his boots with cardboard. He repays them with the only thing he has to offer, one of his sketches; but being a keen student of art (previously he worked as a dealer in The Hague and London), he is ashamed of the rough marks he makes on paper.

As he walks on, an accusation keeps ringing in his ear: is he a changed man, as his brother suggested at their last meeting? The letters he carries, like the drawings, are attempts to overcome his eccentric appearance and show "all that is in my head, all that I have seen". They contain descriptions of life in a small mining village in Borinage, where in the last nine months he has gone from being an evangelical missionary to an unemployed idler, living in an abandoned hut. For his bourgeois family this decline into poverty and obscurity is a source of alarm, signalling their son's failure to find a path in life, but for him it represents something truer and more sacred than all the sermons he once preached: a communion with fellow humans condemned to live beneath "thick, dark coal smoke that covered the light of the sky". From boyhood he has felt the need to draw. Now among people whose hardship is unwitnessed, suffering unknown, his evangelism finds new expression: he is compelled to portray what he sees in their sooty faces, their bent backs, and their miserable dwellings, so that the world might know it, too.

A Season of Migration, Nellie Hermann's novel about a pivotal moment in Vincent van Gogh's life, takes advantage of a gap in the artist's correspondence to imagine what happened in Borinage, suggesting how his struggle there might have led to his decision to become an artist. She alternates chapters written in the third person, describing the long walk to see his brother Theo in Paris, with ones made up of letters spanning his time among the miners, which also reflect on the many failures of his earlier life. This double approach is like a narrative safe bet, yielding the authority of the omniscient narrator as well as the authenticity of the first person (it is only through an Author's Note at the end of the book that we learn Van Gogh's "I" is invented). The story is written in a straightforward, realist manner, as if innocent of the rest of Van Gogh's life.

Hermann borrows a lot from Van Gogh's real letters, going so far as to begin and end her book with fictionalized versions of the letters he wrote before and after his period of silence. She is also indebted to many biographies and earlier fictional accounts: Irving Stone's novel *Lust for Life* (1934) is cited among the sources. But unlike much recent historical fiction, there are no nods to the reader about the fictitiousness of such an enterprise, and no acknowledgement of her pastiche. Rather, with a good deal of skilful technique, she sustains the illusion of being sunk in a life.

With Van Gogh as a subject, the temptation of directness, of appearing to cut through the myth-making to help the reader experience him anew, must be particularly powerful. Yet despite Hermann's wish to present him as alive and forming as an artist, without the undertow of fate, there are elements in the story that hint at later paintings (those boots, for example). For the main, however, the valuable contribution made by *The Season of Migration* is to reimagine Van Gogh not as an isolated genius but as a social and historical man, horrified by the poverty of the Borinage miners and his impotence in the face of the death, maiming and disease the mine inflicts on them. Inspired by his reading of Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*, he gives away his belongings and ventures into a solidarity of suffering. But during meetings at night, sketching a young woman miner who has never been out of the village, he understands that what she wants from him is worldliness not asceticism. She craves his talk of foreign cities, of books and paintings; most of all she wants him to give her portraits of the many different people he has met.

So while Van Gogh is represented here as the man of legend – religious, visionary, tormented – these characteristics are rooted in his experience, and it is primarily as a witness that he emerges from these pages, an artist forged in rage at what is done to people and the callous unknowing of those who refuse to see:

> How do you represent horror? . . . In the aftermath of the mine explosion I saw a man's face drip off him, his skin a kind of liquid that pulled from his eye, which stared up at me, unblinking and dead, like the eye of a fish. Have you ever seen anything like that Theo? . . . Has mother or father or Anna or Lies? Do you think the men of the evangelism committee have seen such things? God sees such things, Theo, God sets them in motion and then lets them live, those moments, those images – they live on the inside of those who see them. What have you seen? What lives in you?