

## Europe and Two Irish Ladies\*

HERR Doktor Spengler was right, if we are to believe these two Irish woman novelists. European civilization is dying and the West is in its evening phase: so goes the story told by many mouths. These two new novels — much advertised, much touted, and, one supposes, about to be much read — are delicate embroideries on a familiar theme. They have much in common: wit, subtlety, elegance, and facility. So much for the credit side of the ledger; the black marks also apply to both books. For both Miss West and Miss Bowen have written beautiful trifles on a much-celebrated theme, and both have fallen prey to the weaknesses of the feminine novelist: they are both over-concerned with the neurotic side of a woman's mind, both allow their style to run away with them, and both, even in their most Freudian moods, give way to the romantic sentimentalism which the world has long branded as Irish.

Miss West's long-awaited novel, her first in seven years, attempts to do much the same thing as Robert Briffault's *Europa* and is rather more successful than that book of over-inflated reputation. Her Isabelle, the thinking reed of Pascal's definition of Man, is a rich, charming, young American woman whose life has been upset from its normal foundations by the tragic death of her aviator husband. She lives in Paris and allows herself to be buffeted around the three points

\* THE THINKING REED by *Rebecca West* (VIKING PRESS. 431 pp. \$2.50).

THE HOUSE IN PARIS by *Elizabeth Bowen* (KNOPF. 269 pp. \$2.50).

of a triangle formed by a wealthy and charming member of our old Southern aristocracy, a caddish but handsome Parisian *flaneur*, and a wealthy industrialist who has fought his way up from the bottom of the French social ladder. The world she moves in is that which transfers itself from the French Riviera to Le Toquet, from Paris to London, in a fruitless effort to overcome the boredom of its unreasoning and useless life. She is too intelligent to be fooled by the surface glamor: the titles (there are some Russian princes and princesses and some English milords in this book who are far more plausibly ridiculous than Mr. Briffault's social stooges), the gambling for high stakes, the luxury, and the gay irresponsibility. But she is weak enough to yield to the pressure of her station and to be lulled by luxury.

The book is a comedy of manners, an indictment of one European world, and a study, often profound, in feminine psychology. But Miss West has been too lavish with her talents: the book is like a rich cake which can only be nibbled at unless indigestion is to be invited. There is too much brilliance, too many flashes of wit, too much neat turning of phrases: the pyrotechnics hide the warship from which the rockets are fired, and the reader finds that one can only take so much of this at a sitting. And then one has the definite impression that Miss West is too intent upon maintaining her reputation for wit to give proper attention to her theme and its implications. This book suggests that Miss West is the feminine version of that other Irish wit, Oliver St. John Gogarty, the Buck Mulligan of *Ulysses*.

Miss Bowen's *The House in Paris* is a far less in-

telligent book. It is much more run-of-the-mill fiction, neatly done with some stylistic success. Here the main concern is with feminine and child psychology, and the society in which these people live (and by which they are formed, at least partially) is not treated, satirically or otherwise. The book deals with a young child of mixed blood and illegitimate parentage, and with the people of another generation who made his young life tragic. The child's father was in love with two women; one was to become his wife and the other was to conceive his child when he, torn by his divided passion and by his Jewish neuroticism, committed suicide and got himself out of the mess but left his collaborators in a worse one. This tragic situation becomes more intense years afterward, when the child is about to meet the mother whom he has never seen but encounters instead the man who is now her husband and the other woman. Miss Bowen handles this matter delicately, and occasionally rises to something like Miss West's sensitive brilliance of style. But there is not the same power in this book that there is in *The Thinking Reed* and there are ineptnesses of which Miss West would never be guilty (e.g., the clumsy flashback technique and the artificial neatness of the plot structure). Miss Bowen, however, has created two children who, while they are disgusting little prigs and implausibly precocious brats, are somehow flesh and blood and as hopelessly tragic figures as Jean Cocteau's *enfants terribles*.

These two books lead one inevitably to certain judgements on the woman novelist of the day. Both Miss West and Miss Bowen have won high tribute from the newspaper critics, and the stigmata of great-

ness are detected in their works by many. But these are only clever, sensitive, and skillful books — Miss West's to a far greater degree than Miss Bowen's — and the adjective "great" does not fit them. To revert to Herr Spengler, the chosen prophet of both these writers, the modern age bears certain alarming signs of parallelism to the Roman Empire in its declining years, and such books as these, which are elegant trifles, strikingly resemble the literature of the late Roman period. The popularity of such books is an even more alarming sign to those who have felt that Spengler was wrong in lumping America with Europe in his song of woe and doom.

MASON WADE