

THE GOTHICK NORTH by *Sacheverell Sitwell* (HOUGHTON MIFFLIN. \$5.00)

MR. SITWELL has, as he would be the first to admit, written a fascinating and refreshing book on the Middle Ages. With his customary dread of the obvious and banal, he has ignored Notre-Dame and the other hackneyed examples and gone to strange sources for his material. From old tapestries lying forgotten in church lofts and from miniatures painted on manuscripts by unknown monks he has re-created the whole panorama of medieval life with vividness and clarity. The scene is crowded with people and color. The hunting-horns bray, the noble ladies walk in the gardens, knights fight in their unwieldy armor, peasants gather the crops; and one sees them and is with them. The miniatures are more quiet and peaceful, yet they echo all the brilliance of the tapestries.

All of this is written in prose that is almost perfect. It sings, it glides, it glows. Yet, unlike his verse, it is never marred by mannerisms nor the suggestion of a precious style. Sacheverell Sitwell here, as in his earlier book, *Southern Baroque Art*, proves himself a consummate artist who handles words with more than magic power. He has not only achieved a style but has definite things to say.

For from all this confusion of the Middle Ages, the author draws his conclusion that, like a theme, weaves itself throughout the book. The Gothick man, just out of barbarism, who acknowledged no antecedents, was a force not equalled since. All art and architecture mirrored him and the chivalry he created to justify himself. His influence was felt over all the known world. Even the Renaissance artists, who later overpowered him, were so impressed by him that his type came to be their ideal of beauty and truth. This Gothick aristocrat was tall and slim, with tapering fingers, and he had long fair hair.

It may not be altogether beside the point to observe that this is also a description of

Mr. Sitwell and his sister, Edith. For the book, if it were only a brilliant mirror of the Middle Ages, would be merely the success that many other men have grasped at. But Mr. Sitwell is a personality and an individualist. His very pattern is unique. Between the sections devoted to the tapestries in the castles and the miniatures in the monasteries is a modern interlude. Its presence is justified by its use in comparing our lives and that of the Gothick Knight. But it would justify itself by its own strangeness. It is the portrait of Sacheverell Sitwell, today writing his book. There is a violent and hypersensitive dislike for the modern day that is overpowering. And there is an extraordinary fictional romance that is Gide in method and Proust in manner.

PAUL ALLEN

CYRANO: SWORDSMAN, LIBERTIN, AND MAN OF LETTERS by *Cameron Rogers* (DOUBLEDAY, DORAN. \$3.50)

IN *Cyrano*, Mr. Rogers has grafted the modernist's preoccupation with the psychological well-springs of action onto the biography of as picaresque and romantic a hero as ever was conceived by Dumas or Henry Fielding. Mr. Rogers deals with Cyrano as a man become the victim of his mental image of himself. His psychology is dominated by an ungainly nose; and because of his sensitiveness on this score, like that Don Quixote he despises, he is forever jousting with windmills. But for a nose, the first sword of France might have become a noted scholar and man-of-letters. The swaggering and often pathetic figure moves against a brilliantly drawn background of seventeenth-century France.

Perhaps the finest scenes of Mr. Rogers's book are those laid in the taverns. The Libertin Society, a famous literary coterie of the time, foregathered in the common tap-room. In the fold of this society the real Cyrano—not the man of violence but the man of thought—found himself at last. His efforts as

a dramatist were noteworthy enough to inspire plagiarism from such a one as Molière. That the latter's *Les Fourberies de Scapin* is the well-known play, instead of Cyrano's *The Pedant Made Game Of*, is only another aspect of the tragedy that dogged the man his whole life through.

It is difficult to conclude without at least some slight comparison with Rostand's famous play. One can only say that between the heroes of the realist Rogers and those of the romantic Rostand, there is little in common but a nose.

FRANCES BURKE HALEY

THE TRAGIC ERA by *Claude G. Bowers*
(HOUGHTON MIFFLIN. \$5.00)

THIS reportorial history of the intrigues after Lincoln has both the faults and the virtues of journalistic writing. Fortunately, the virtues predominate; they make Mr. Bowers's book an unforgettable record of an unforgettable period in American history. There are several intervals of dull and difficult reading; on the other hand, there are many stretches of excellently written passages, in which the significance of the facts presented does not obscure the quality of the author's work.

The intrigues begin while the nation is waiting for the expected word of Lincoln's death. As North and South voice their realization of the loss they have suffered, political figures in Washington move in the night to countermand the policies of the dying President through the unwilling hand of Andrew Johnson. The reader finds himself caught up in the various political cross-currents, rubbing his elbow against the shoulders of the period's leaders, who turn out to be men of mean stature and meaner motives. Names slightly stressed in the conventional history of the era are given the emphasis here which their activities at that time merit. Stevens, Sumner, Stanton and Chase, Ben Butler, Trumbull, Welles and Morton, are acidly etched by the

author. Johnson, Lincoln's successor, is presented in a friendly light which his frustrated impeachment never shed in other chronicles of the Reconstruction era; Grant is pictured as a man accustomed to take orders, and, when thrust into a position of authority, lost because he attempts to give commands of his own. The General who saved the Union under the direction of more capable minds shrinks to the puny figure of a President incapable of initiating improvements, directing political forces, selecting official (and unofficial) advisors.

Mr. Bowers's documentation is novel and thorough; scarcely a page passes without its foot-notes. One wishes that he had given a little more attention to the North during the tragic era; one wishes that his research had included a more frequent reference to periodicals and newspapers of the South which might have reflected conditions north of Washington as adequately as the New York papers quoted seem to have pictured the situation in the South. Despite his slightly one-sided panorama, Mr. Bowers's work stands forth as a merciless indictment of men and affairs too long whitewashed by historians.

IRVING ASTRACHAN

THE PLAYS OF FERENC MOLNAR
With a foreword by David Belasco (VANGUARD. \$6.00)

MOLNAR can depict with equal ease and familiarity boarding-house and law court, shop and theatre, royal palace—and, for that matter, heaven and hell. This is not to be wondered at when we remember that royalty and religion, whatever else they may be, are glorified dramatic spectacles. But Molnar indulges in no glorification; he speaks always in an ordinary tone of voice and thus lends to all his work an air of intimacy and familiarity. In other respects his plays may be very diverse: sometimes they are stark realism in a narrow sense, as in parts of *Liliom* or *The Glass Slipper*; on the other hand they may