

O.K. COLONEL

An American Critic and the World

By

Geoffrey Grigson

Expression in America.

By Ludwig Lewisohn. 21s. (Thornton Butterworth.)

The negative uses of inept criticism are enough to earn this large book by Mr. Ludwig Lewisohn more notice than it deserves. For pervasive folly on the big



Ludwig Lewisohn.

Photo: Keystone View Co.

scale it surpasses even "Science and the Literary World," by Mr. Max Eastman. Yet superficially it is a learned book. It reveals wide reading (wrongly applied) and thinking (wrong thinking) to a degree which makes it more impressive, and so more dangerous, than the smaller books written by journalist-novelist-critics in England.

Mr. Lewisohn, moreover, has a theory explicit from end to end of this long survey of all American literature. One begins to think seriously of him as a serious minded person when one reads in the introduction that:

"Man both as a living and experiencing creature, and therefore as a listener or reader, has undergone changes which have transmuted the very groundwork of his character and outlook."

There is truth in this exaggerated muddle; but doubts grow of the value of his seriousness when he declares of the novel to-day that "no form in any age has spoken to men so widely and profoundly," and of contemporary verse that "the poet no longer chooses the ballad metre for a balladesque subject nor blank verse or hexameter for an idyll. He literally did that once."

Six pages more and the theory unfolds:

"Economic flexibility and the gradual breakdown of dogma and churchly authority were accompanied by a slow growth of moral freedom. The varieties of human experience increased in number, and heresy and travel and love and speculation became vivid possibilities to ever widening classes and groups. Hence while, for reasons I have pointed out, the number of [literary] artificers has increased in modern society, the number of true poets necessarily shows a comparable growth, and many an intense small novelist has more to communicate concerning man and nature and human life than . . . even the great Dante."

What a blind, dumb, and deaf complacency for one who attempts to evaluate the whole corpus of American verse and prose! What a naïve ignorance, a quick revelation of the adolescent approach to the major difficulties of the mature artist! God's out of His heaven, all's right with the world!

Yet one might pardon such an exhibition of ineptitude if thereafter Mr. Lewisohn had any valuable fragments of criticism to offer in the vast bundle of his words. In detail, he proves as foolish as in theory. "It was inevitable . . . that I should use the organon or method of knowledge associated with the venerated name of Sigmund Freud." [Of Dryden] "the smooth and mechanical couplet." "No, Melville is not even a minor master." Whitman is America's "most highly endowed poet." Mark Twain, "in his small and homespun way," is linked "to Homer himself, who also raised into the immortal realm of the imagination the life and conflict of obscure villages among the otherwise forgotten Ionians of the

isles and the Asian shore." Vachel Lindsay is a mystic poet "in the direct tradition of Blake." Edna St. Vincent Millay has "assured her place . . . among the major modern lyrical poets of the English language." "Edgar Masters is one of the few writers of his period who have style." "Since the emergence of the writers of the middle generation Ernest Hemingway alone has struck an important new note—a note at once human and, in the ultimate sense, philosophical in American literature."

So Mr. Lewisohn continues; and since all ways pass eventually through T. S. Eliot, one finds at last that in Mr. Lewisohn's view, "The future will doubtless assign him a definite place among the minor poets and characteristic phenomena of the post-War period." Eliot, that is to say, will be forgotten while the fascinating curiosities of Vachel Lindsay, the prosy little yarns of Edwin Arlington Robinson, the manufactured passion of Miss Millay, and the protesting flabbiness of William Ellery Leonard are deeply satisfying our sons and our grandsons.

Mr. Lewisohn's contemptuous rejection of Eliot (and also of Ezra Pound, whose "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly" he seems not to have read) agrees directly with his critical theory of the advantage of moral "freedom," but it has only been achieved by a wilful perversion or a genuine and gross misunderstanding of Eliot's position as a poet. It does not seem believable, after Eliot has directly contradicted such views in all his poems (and explicitly in his "Brief Introduction to the Method of Paul Valéry"), that a critic can still write of poets who "feign to themselves like T. S. Eliot or Paul Valéry, that form is all significant, substance of no import, and that works live by the amount of intelligence with which their outer and visible technique was wrought." This is followed by a good example of what the victim has called "peering lasciviously between the lines for biographical confession." Mr. Lewisohn remembers the venerated Sigmund Freud:

"It all amounts to an involuntary definition of a despair of meanings, to a confession of aridity of heart, of which the proof came in good time through Eliot's flight, paralleled in many periods by those who had pitched their expectations of life too high and could not bear their adolescent disappointment, into the bosom of a fictive father-image and force—in this case Royalism and Anglo-Catholicism."

And for the young Eliot's example is damned as Mr. Lewisohn returns once more to glory over God pitched from His heaven:

"The creative imagination is at one with life and its procreative processes, and withers both in the desert of despair and in the refuge of blank authority. . . ."

(The dots are Mr. Lewisohn's.)

It is evident that Mr. Lewisohn (who thinks that psychology is psychoanalysis) sees nothing amiss with the world but a post-War disillusionment, nothing dangerous in the world when religious certitude is being replaced by scientific certitude and the emotions are being left without focus, when humanists and others (Mr. Lewisohn among them) are attempting to "hold themselves up by their own hair." Mr. Lewisohn believes in poetry or literature as religion. Put that way his views are not utterly foolish; but if there are critics who believe that poetry can help to satisfy us emotionally where religion once sufficed, that is the limit beyond which no one can go. Least of all can distintegration be made valuable by christening it "freedom," or such chaotic "freedom" be taken as the stimulus to personal order, the manured soil for growing a personal religion.

Such an agricultural fool's paradise can please no one except Mr. Ludwig Lewisohn.

"A very human portrait of a great and lovable man"

MAZZINI

PROPHET OF MODERN EUROPE

BY

GWILYM O. GRIFFITH

'This is *a fine book*.'

Times Literary Supplement

'A detailed, judicious and vigorous study of *a remarkable man*.'

News-Chronicle

'*Readers* who wish to understand something of the great revolutionary movements of the last century *should not miss this book*.'

Compton Mackenzie in the Daily Mail

'Mr. Griffith's careful and competent study of him should be read. He has got the facts, and *the "prophet" stands out vividly* from an historic background that is boldly and skilfully drawn.'

Sunday Times

'A valuable addition to the literature of the Risorgimento . . . It is *immensely erudite*.'

John O' London's Weekly

'A *fine biography* and a notable contribution to the history of that period.'

Irish Times

'Mazzini: the very name holds music, fire, and the resonance of a bugle call . . . The work is *admirably done*, full of colour and movement. The artist, for it is *an artistic piece of work*, has commanded his stage with all its properties as a master. There are rare touches of literary power, and uncommonly good writing throughout. It is *the pure art of biography*.'

British Weekly

'But who was Mazzini? Let him read Mr. Griffith's book and he will understand why the name of Mazzini used to be in the mouth of every democratic idealist. In these vividly coloured pages that remotely pure spirit becomes clothed with warm Italian flesh, and the whole stirring scene of the Italian Risorgimento lives again for our wonder and inspiration . . . *The story has held me enthralled*.'

Christian World

'A very human portrait of *a great and lovable man*.'

Church of England Newspaper

'A *fine piece of work*. Unless I am greatly mistaken, this study of Mazzini will become the standard and will remain so for years to come.'

Baptist Times

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The Collector

EARLY TRANSLATIONS FROM THE RUSSIAN

By E. A. Osborne

IV—NIKOLAY VASILEVICH GOGOL (1809-1852)

Nikolay Gogol, father of the Russian realistic novel, author of the first great (and some say greatest) novel in the language, and of the best and most popular comedy in the Russian Theatre, was born at Sorotchintsy, in the Government of Poltava in the Ukraine, on March 31st, 1809.

His father was a landed proprietor of some culture, who produced Little Russian plays of his own composition in a private theatre on his estate, and his grandfather, who had held an important position with the Zaporog Cossacks, was a spirited raconteur of tales imbued with the recent Cossack past. His mother, who gave birth to Gogol when she was but fifteen years old, is said to have been pious and extremely superstitious. She thoroughly spoiled Gogol and smothered him with love and religion. This, together with his father's hypochondria, goes far to explaining the religious mania, introspectiveness, egocentricity and hypochondria which steadily grew in Gogol and resulted in his fantastic last years.

He received his first education at home. Then he went to school at Poltava and thence to the Gymnasium at Nyezhin. Like many another exceptional intellect, he was a bad pupil, but distinguished himself in painting and private theatricals, composed some comedies and edited a manuscript periodical. Socially he was a failure. Like Lermontov, unprepossessing in appearance, thin, small, awkward, nervous and sensitive, he was shunned by his schoolfellows, who dreaded his sarcastic tongue and labelled him "the mysterious dwarf." Thus he was thrown more and more in upon himself, and his predisposition towards introspection and self-analysis accentuated. How clearly he realised his social deficiencies and mental isolation is shown in this extract from a letter written to his mother in 1829: "I often wondered how it is that God has created a unique and rare heart, a soul which is full of ardent love for all that is lofty and beautiful—and why has he enveloped all this in such a rough exterior? Why has he combined all this with such a terrible mixture of contradictions, obstinacy, insolent conceit and base humility?" This mental self-portrait, written at the age of twenty, is as accurate as any of the many that were written of this complex character.

He seems to have felt no leanings towards a literary career. His ambitions was for the control of power and he dreamed of being a great statesman. So at the conclusion of his studies at Nyezhin (1828) he announced his intention of going to St. Petersburg to take up jurisprudence. Arrived there, he found that the dream was easier than the achievement. Vainly he sought even the humblest of clerkships. Then he made an attempt to get on the stage, but his voice was so weak that he had to abandon the idea. He was forced to attempt a literary career to earn his bread. He had brought with him from

Nyezhin a sentimental poetic idyll, an extremely feeble work, *Hans Küchelgarten*. This he had printed and published at his own expense under the assumed name of Alov. The thing was mercilessly castigated by the few critics who deigned to notice it and, dispirited and depressed, he gathered together the remaining copies and burned them. Desirous only of escaping from the scene of his wretched failure and with no definite plans for earning a living, he appropriated a sum of money belonging to his mother and fled to Germany. When his money was

almost finished, he was forced to return to St. Petersburg and take a very minor post in the government service. To supplement his pitiable salary he again attempted authorship and, finding that folk-tales were fashionable, put the stories he had heard from his grandfather to good use, publishing articles and narrative fragments on Little Russia in the Press. Through these he came in touch with Zhukovsky, Pletnev and Pushkin, and Pletnev obtained for him a post as teacher at the "Patriotic Institute." Here he eked out his still inadequate salary by the drudgery of private coaching, and Count Sollogub has given us a very vivid account of his first sight of Gogol engaged in tutoring the half-witted son of Sollogub's aunt.

During this period of drudgery he wrote the two parts of *The Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*: Edited by Rudy Panko, *Bee-keeper* (1831-32). The eight stories in these two volumes are the first flowering of his genius, and were hailed by Belinsky, the foremost critic of the day, as masterpieces. They are filled with details of Ukrainian life and folk-lore, for which he constantly applied in his letters to his mother. His success was tremendous, and

Aksakov, the famous author of *The Family Chronicle*, has given a portrait of him which is well worth detailing: "The external appearance of Gogol was not in his favour at that time; a crest of hair on his head, carefully clipped kiss-curls on his temples, clean-shaven lips and chin and an enormous over-starched collar gave an artificial expression to his face; there seemed to be in him something crested and cunning. In his costume pretensions to dandyism were noticeable. I remember he had a bright motley waistcoat with a big watch-chain. On the whole, there was something in him which restrained me from any sincere enthusiasm and warmth, in which I so often indulge. At his request I took him to Zagoskin. On the way Gogol surprised me by complaining about his own diseases and even said he was incurably ill. As he seemed to be in perfect health I looked at him with wondering and incredulous eyes. 'What is wrong with you?' I asked. He answered vaguely that the cause of his ailment was in his intestines." Aksakov quotes too his own son's remarks about the unfortunate impression that the conceited Gogol made upon most people.

HOME LIFE IN RUSSIA.

BY

A RUSSIAN NOBLE.

REVISED

BY THE EDITOR OF

"REVELATIONS OF SIBERIA."

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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The first appearance of "Dead Souls" in English.