

## LIFE, LETTERS, AND THE ARTS

### THE FRENCH STAGE CENSURED

CRITICS like St. John Ervine and theatrical managers like Basil Deane have been complaining off and on all winter that the English stage of the moment has reached its nadir of mediocrity, uninventiveness, and tameness. Their jeremiads have had a ring not entirely discordant with those that Mr. Shaw used to thunder forth in his reviewing days back in the nineties, and, as that decade was followed by one in which such figures as Mr. Shaw, John Galsworthy, Granville Barker, Sir James Barrie, and Mr. Ervine himself emerged, it is perhaps not unreasonable to expect that the English stage may be on the verge of another fruitful epoch.

At any rate, it appears now that the English stage is by no means the unaccompanied Cinderella of the European drama. Unsympathetic outsiders have more than once observed that the contemporary French theatre was the least animated scene in the whole cultural life of France — bustling and vigorous enough in the domain, for example, of the novel. These critics have objected to the monotony with which French playwrights continue to exploit a single subject, interesting and dramatic in itself, but in no sense the central subject of all human life. They have lamented similarly the willingness of many French playwrights to be content with the rather mechanical technique of dramatic writing worked out by authors like Sardou at the end of the nineteenth century — believing as they do that many important values

are sacrificed to mere technical adroitness.

No doubt there have been plenty of Frenchmen all along who have agreed, articulately or tacitly, with them. One of these detached spirits, M. William Speth, writing in the *Revue Mondiale*, takes his theatrical countrymen to task in good ringing Shavian terms. His immediate inspiration is a play by M. André Birabeau at the Potinière, entitled *Plaire* — ‘To Please.’ Without singling out this pleasant comedy for special chastisement, M. Speth cannot refrain from observing how emblematic its title is of the French theatre of today. To please, he says, — and to please at any cost, — seems to be its whole purpose. Everything serious, painful, important, must be banished from the boards in order that nothing may defeat the conspiracy between the playwright and the audience to see human life through rose-colored spectacles to the accompaniment of charming and empty music.

This decadence M. Speth attributes to the unwillingness of French audiences to watch patiently and appreciatively the efforts of young authors to work out a genuinely serious and responsible dramatic style. They exact of all plays a mature and expert finish that they would not think of expecting in all novels; and as a result there is no atmosphere for experiment. Under the circumstances, it is foreign authors of established reputation who attract the really cultivated playgoers.

'Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* and the comedies of Pirandello were applauded throughout long and successful runs. Why don't French playwrights offer their audiences plays of comparable value? Who would dare to assert that there is n't a public in Paris and the provinces eager to see new, original, and serious work? Of course the "house" would frequently enough revolt — but what of that? For how long was the modernistic school of painters, now so triumphant, ridiculed and scouted? Yet the Picassos and the Utrillos stuck to their lasts, and now their confrères envy their fame and try to estimate their profits. But we should not forget that their success was purchased at the price of long years of disinterested labor; these artists loved their art, they believed in their genius, and they were willing to suffer and work in obscurity. As a result, they have created a new artistic mode that corresponds to the intellectual mood of our time.

'Our novelists too have given us books written in a difficult and unfamiliar style, and success has crowned the daring of Paul Morand, Joseph Delteil, and Francis Carco.

'Yet, while the painters and the novelists are creating new forms, the playwrights are marking time; to distract and flatter the public, they throw together their ingenuously perverse and excessively sentimental light comedies. They give us factitious and incomplete plays; their comedies recall the chromos and the very accomplished pictures that are sold at the great department stores to housewives who are looking round for hairbrushes, brooms — and an oil painting or two. Of course the reactionary type of artist, like the over-ingenious playwright, is lacking neither in talent nor in skill; he is witty and inventive enough; we only wish he were also courageous and persevering.'

#### STRACHEY, JOYCE, AND GREAT PROSE

WHAT is the chief quality by which a great prose style may be most surely recognized? Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, in his preface to the new *Oxford Book of English Prose*, holds that the difference between verse and prose is that the cardinal virtue of the one is Love, of the other Persuasion — and that prose is greatest when it is most persuasive. This is a somewhat cloudy distinction, and an anonymous reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* protests that the difference is not one of purpose but of stylistic technique, quoting with approval the statement of a recent French critic: 'In prose each phrase creates for itself the law of its rhythm, while in verse each phrase creates for itself a personal reason for submitting to a law which already exists.'

The virtues of great prose, then, are not essentially dissimilar from those of great verse, according to this writer, and they are a matter of the use of language: a great prose-writer uses words that call up fresh and clear-cut images that correspond with a kind of sharp inevitability to the ideas or emotions he is recording. An inferior writer is content with words and phrases that suggest worn and familiar images, whether they correspond closely to his idea or not. To illustrate this distinction he quotes two passages — the first from Mr. Lytton Strachey, of course:

When, two days previously, the news of the approaching end had been made public, astonished grief had swept over the country. It appeared as if some monstrous reversal of the course of nature was about to take place. The vast majority of her subjects had never known a time when Queen Victoria had not been reigning over them. She had become an indissoluble part of their whole scheme of things, and that they were about to lose her appeared a scarcely possible thought. She herself, as she lay

blind and silent, seemed to those who watched her to be divested of all thinking — to have glided already, unawares, into oblivion. Yet, perhaps, in the secret chambers of consciousness, she had her thoughts, too. Perhaps her fading mind called up once more the shadows of the past to float before it, and retraced, for the last time, the vanished visions of that long history — passing back and back, through the cloud of years, to older and ever older memories.

The other passage is from Mr. James Joyce: —

The grainy sand had gone from under his feet. His boots trod again a damp crackling mast, razor-shells, squeaking pebbles, that on the unnumbered pebbles beats, wood sieved by the shipworm, lost Armada. Unwholesome sand-flats waited to suck his treading soles, breathing upward sewage breath. He coasted them, walking warily. A porter-bottle stood up, stogged to its waist, in the cakey sand dough. A sentinel: isle of dreadful thirst. Broken hoops on the shore; at the land a maze of dark cunning nets; further away chalk-scrawled back-doors, and on the higher beach a drying-line with two crucified shirts.

Without denying the virtue of clarity in the first of these passages, the *Times* reviewer points out how full it is of half-visualized or wholly unvisualized and reminiscent images: 'astonished grief,' 'the course of nature,' 'an indissoluble part,' 'divested of all thinking,' 'the secret chambers,' and 'the shadows of the past.' 'Now examine,' he says, 'the second passage: there is not a single phrase that does not evoke — that does not force the mind to evoke — the image it expresses. Art, after all, is a question of effect; and does anyone give a second thought to the death of Queen Victoria as our author has described it? But merely to read of Stephen Dedalus walking on the beach is to have come into contact with the vibrating reflex of an actual experience.'

#### A NEGLECTED ITALIAN PROUST

Is an elderly business-man in Trieste named Italo Svevo one of the great Italian writers of our generation? Is his comparative obscurity — though he published two novels in 1893 and 1898 respectively and a third, *Zeno's Conscience*, only in 1923 — an example of unmerited neglect scarcely paralleled in our time? Something like this is maintained by Mr. James Joyce, the author of *Ulysses*, who is a great student of the Italians, and also by two French critics, Valéry Larbaud and Benjamin Crémieux, to whose attention Mr. Joyce called the Italian's work. As might be expected from the literary doctrines of his sponsors, says Giulio Caprin in the *Corriere della Sera*, Italo Svevo is a laboriously analytical and psychological novelist, who has been strongly influenced by the theories of Freud and his followers.

The incidents that Zeno relates from his own life are purposely commonplace and inconsequential; the author seems to shrink from any plan that would hold him to a central idea or preëstablished design. The book is a notable performance, no doubt, and throws light into obscure corners of our psychological mechanism. But, to do this, was it necessary to subject the reader to such a tiresome sequence of details without any relief? Has everything in life the same expressive value for art? To paint the tree as it is, must one outline every single leaf? Or may not this intention of perfect completeness be itself an illusion? Even the analysis that undertakes to preserve the continuity of life is forced to select its moments — only it selects them, if the expression be permitted, unselectively; for the artifice of constructive writers, the analytical writer substitutes another artifice and one that is frequently more tedious.'

This judgment by one of his countrymen serves at least to indicate what are Italo Svevo's literary affiliations, and the reasons why he may very well become a favorite author of a generation that has made the reputation of Proust and of Mr. Joyce himself. Signor Caprin tells us enough of his third novel to suggest that it is at least worthy to be mentioned in the same breath with *À la recherche du temps perdu* and *Ulysses*, and if he objects that it is, in the stylistic sense, 'badly written,' that is no more severe a charge than has been brought against the other two authors by their French and English critics.



#### THE STRATFORD THEATRE FIRE

THE only serious regret expressed in the British press for the loss of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford by fire was the regret uttered by the *Manchester Guardian* that it should have occurred on the day of the funeral of Sir Sidney Lee, — the biographer of Shakespeare, — who was thus denied the knowledge that an architectural *bête noire* had at last been laid in ashes. 'If fire from heaven had descended long ago and consumed it,' says this paper, 'the fact would have fortified Paley's famous "evidences" of design in the works of creation in the department of providential provision for practical art-criticism of the most caustic kind.'

'It was not a beautiful building,' says Mr. St. John Ervine more moderately in the *Observer*; 'indeed, an irreverent person once described its architectural style as "late Marzipan." Nor was it a convenient building. There seemed to be a great deal of it, but inside there was congestion of the most irritating sort; little space in which to work, and a lot of space wasted on decoration.' 'It will be generally admitted,' remarks the *Times*, 'that the new theatre might well be larger; and it could certainly be

made safer and more comfortable.' There seems to be no uncertainty about the prompt rebuilding of the theatre, at any rate, and it is hoped that it will be ready for the birthday festival in 1927.

An inquiry conducted by the *Westminster Gazette* into the views of prominent theatrical persons on the nature of the new theatre brought to light considerable divergence of opinion. 'We want the most modern theatre possible,' said Mr. Henry Ainley, an eminent Shakespearean actor — in at least apparent conflict with Miss Sybil Thorndike, who said, 'I should like to see an Elizabethan theatre, with an apron stage, which would be interesting also as a monument.' Perhaps these views are reconciled by the pronouncement of Mr. Ernest Law, a trustee of Shakespeare's birthplace: 'It should be a thoroughly modern theatre, but Elizabethan in style.' Surely Mr. Law must have used the phrase 'in style' in a somewhat Pickwickian sense.



#### ERNST TOLLER'S NEW PLAY

ERNST TOLLER has satirized the romantic attitude of the German nationalist bourgeoisie toward the old régime in a play entitled *Wotan Unbound*, written during his imprisonment and recently produced in Berlin. The hero is a sentimental barber who organizes a colonization movement of dissatisfied citizens with an imaginary Brazil as his goal, and after gathering a huge following is frustrated by the firm opposition of the actual Brazilian Government. This quixotic Figaro is then forced to appeal to the police for protection against the ire of his disenchanted followers. German critics have applauded the satirical vigor of the sketch, without admitting that Toller has outdone such other playwrights as Georg Kaiser and Carl Sternheim on their own ground.

## BOOKS ABROAD

**The Europa Year Book for 1926.** Edited by Michael Farlman, Ramsay Muir, and Hugh F. Spender. London: Routledge; New York: Harper and Brothers. \$5.00.

[J. Ramsay MacDonald in the *Observer*]

THIS survey of Europe in 1925-1926 is worthy of a hearty welcome. Its scope is comprehensive, ranging from Finance and Debts to the Arts and Sciences, from Industrial Conditions to Disarmament problems, from the League of Nations to Trade-Unionism and Political Parties, from a 'Who's Who' for the European nations to calendars of the chief events that have happened in each; and the inclusion among its contributors of men like H. G. Wells, Nansen, Joseph Redlich, Sir Josiah Stamp, and Dr. Beneš is ample guaranty of authority.

The note is one of high hope and endeavor. The writers seem generally agreed that the future of Europe depends on whether the nations succeed or fail in organizing to secure peace. If they do, then Europe can continue to lead in human civilization, can continue at the head of the influences making for righteousness and social wisdom. But Europe's mind must be changed. Its power can no longer be of the nature of dominance, but of influence. With this in view, Russia, under the guidance not so much of the Soviets with their Communist administration as of the Third International with its revolutionary propaganda, is an impediment. European problems are not by any means all within European boundaries. The only Europe that has any meaning for practical statesmen is Europe in relation to the world. Asia therefore comes in, and the Pacific, and Africa. This is what enables a nation like Russia, actively engaged in a world propaganda of revolution, to thwart the best intentions of States and irritate their nerves.

The article by Dr. Beneš on 'The New Conditions in Central Europe and Their Significance' is the most important of those dealing with political details. Dr. Beneš defends the creation of independent nationalities carved out of the old military empires, and points out that their existence will render the policy of 'balance of power' abortive. While supporting that view, however, two reflections must be made. The first is that these States may form military

alliances and become pawns in the game of large States; and the second, that the military coercion that the shattered empires had to use to keep unwilling subjects in subjection may have to be used, with all its evil consequences, by the small States, unless their borders are drawn as near as is humanly possible round acquiescing citizens, and also unless minority rights are strictly observed. The two succeeding articles on 'Austria and Europe' and 'Germany and Poland,' by Dr. Redlich and Hellmut von Gerlach respectively, are weighty footnotes to Dr. Beneš's chapter; and others on Finland, the Balkans, the Baltic States, and Ireland follow.

Some wise words on the League of Nations are written in the section devoted to that subject. The League must fail unless its spirit is observed, and that spirit is frankness and mutual confidence. If nations combine into groups in the League, if alliances determine votes, if logrolling is practised, if important nations withhold confidence and pick and choose what they are to carry out and what they are willing to impose on others but not on themselves, the League will only nurture conditions that will end in war. The paper on 'Italy and the League' is of consequence from this point of view, and the sections on disarmament are well done.

Then comes a set of exceptionally able articles on debts, reparations, and finance, a conspicuous contribution being that on 'The Dawes Plan in Operation,' by Sir Josiah Stamp. Many people still think of this agreement as being one merely to make Germany pay certain sums. It was far more than that, for among other things—like stabilizing currency and balancing the Budget—it was designed to test how reparations could be paid, if at all. Germany thus far has carried out its obligations, but it still remains to be seen how much and in what forms the Allies have to pay for the reparations they receive, and how much and on what side of the ledger the net receipts will be.

This is but a sampling of a book too full of concentrated meat to be reviewed from board to board. It is the first attempt, I believe, that has been made to give a summary, but sufficiently detailed, view of the social and political life of Europe to-day by masters of the various subjects, and no one dealing with, or interested in, the ebbing and flowing of European affairs can overlook it either as a guide or a book of reference.