

## Ursula Trent

*Ursula Trent*, by W. L. George. New York: Harper & Bros. \$2.00.

WHAT one likes about W. L. George is his courage. A man like Flaubert could write about the female heart, but how circumspectly and how haltingly. He proceeded with *Madame Bovary* as if he were a surgeon engaged in a beautifully delicate operation, and he gives one the sense that he makes no move, not the slightest, without faithfully sterilizing his instruments. How different is this later heart specialist. Observe him as he breezes into the intimacies of Ursula Trent. He regards it as sheer pedantry even to wash his hands. A pleasant odor of hair oil and stale cigarette smoke saturates the theatre in which he operates, and he expertly starts his carving with a knife that has recently been used for opening oysters. Does his subject squirm a little? He slaps more chloroform into her and pauses to light a cigar. The ashes that fall into her wounds he removes with a dextrous thumb, while he pauses to delight his audience with a witty anecdote. Then, in the light of countless probings and note-takings, he reveals what poor Flaubert had barely suspected—that every woman, God bless her, is at heart a rake, and that a new rake sweeps clean. This amazing disclosure, picked up from the manicure set and the prostitute set and the movie set and the night-lifers, proves how much the novel has advanced since it acquired some of the snappy characteristics of the topical review.

You must realize that Mr. George speaks in the first person singular of a modern aristocratic young Englishwoman, lapsing into the third person only when Ursula Trent of Ciber Court apostrophizes herself. "Yet, what a thing to happen to Ursula Trent, of Ciber Court, Burleigh Abbas," "Ursula Trent of Ciber Court, at the sight of her lover, lost all the instinct of an English gentlewoman," "Ursula Trent of Ciber Court couldn't borrow money from a man." You are not permitted to forget that the piquant adventures which Miss Trent narrates in detail happened to a—well, a baronet's daughter, not a clergyman's daughter. Of course she is unconventional. "You see, I'm not a nice girl, not really. I'm excommunicate." But Ciber Court, and the baronet, and "my people" in the Home Counties, are never quite allowed to fade out of the reader's hungry heart.

It is decidedly in Mr. George's line that he should inform us of his heroine's underclothes, but he does it with that happy humor which one misses so sadly in Flaubert. "I changed my underclothes much more often than a virtuous girl needs." The light touch! Preceded in the previous sentence by another light touch, in the perfect manner of the well-bred English girl: "Oh, cod's roe! I'm a pig, I can't help it; it's one of my forms of sensuality." These are the lifelike intimacies in which Mr. George abounds. His Ursula denies us practically no information, and omits no "honest" detail of the gay life. "There was no doubt about it. I had a head. . . . Still, I got up. One's heart may break, empires may totter, but one must get up all the same, wash, eat, to sustain the life one doesn't prize." The ultimate truths.

But what elevates Mr. George as an interpreter of the female heart are the large generalizations with which Ursula sprinkles the book. "Now I was a woman again;

I was material, and loved a thing or a man more than an idea. . . . Grapes when I'm ill, hats when I feel better, mille fleurs when I go out, and kisses at all times." The man is uncanny in his insight. "A woman finds it harder not to be wanted by a man than a man to be rejected by a woman." And why does a woman find it harder? "That's partly because she can't make advances, or thinks she can't. Also because a man, as a rule, can console himself with somebody else. A woman's too particular."

These are fair samples of Mr. George's wisdom. But his poignancy is partly in his verbal expressiveness. Ursula loves a male frock-designer, an irresistible Apollo, and she pours out her heart about his physical attractiveness. (It is still powerfully original to say that the male physically attracts the female). "Oh, I did love him; I couldn't help it. I know it was physical, but when he held me like that I couldn't resist him. Perhaps his beauty enthralled me even when I found him base. Even today, when I remember the smoothness of those golden waves under my hands, when for a moment a ghostly memory takes on a material form, and lips forgotten, but still fresh, seek mine, moist and desirous, carrying upon their firm lines a faint aroma of Egyptian tobacco, I tell myself that I love him still, wayward demigod, accidental demon. Lots of women go to their grave without loving, but I know what it's like. It's like having a fish-hook in one. It hurts, but you can't get it out."

Those who have never had a fishhook in them are usually interested in those who have been fishhooked, and this is the main explanation of *Ursula Trent*. Mr. George is engaged in telling the hungry hearts what it was like for Ursula to lose her virginity, to take a lover, to become pregnant as a great surprise, to find that her man-milliner is unfaithful, to escape, and at last, at thirty, to become "a young wife who loves her husband, who has emerged into happiness after much misery." "I love him enough to smile at him, to understand that he is my child. Every woman has a child on her wedding day." (Another example of what it means to Harper and Brothers to be "a noted feminist who has an uncanny understanding and knowledge of what women think and feel.")

Ruskin, Browning and the rest of the oracular Victorians must chiefly be thanked for the sort of thing that Mr. George purveys in *Ursula Trent*. When Ruskin wrote *Ethics of the Dust* he contemplated diamonds: "Well, those are the fatal jewels; native here in their dust with gold, so that you may see, cradled here together, the two great enemies of mankind,—the strongest of all malignant physical powers that have tormented our race. . . . Was any woman, do you suppose, ever the better for possessing diamonds? but how many have been made base, frivolous and miserable by desiring them? Was ever man the better for having coffers of gold? But who shall measure the guilt that is incurred to fill them?" After such monumental twaddle from the prosperous Ruskin, it is scarcely any wonder that the Georges come along with their knowing leer and smilingly tell an edified world that "most marriages are merely evidence that the girl has held out"; or "mainly I regarded him as a man who gave seats at the theatre, flowers, crystallized fruits; a woman must have that sort of man. What are we to do? We most of us have many desires and little money"; or "a day is so long without kisses"; or a

life is so impossible without furs. This novel, in which the opium party is only one tid-bit, in which clothes are an obsession and a bore, elects to give its own Ethics of the Dust in a spirit which runs completely counter to Victorianism. And starved spinsters, I have no doubt, will read it avidly, feeling that this is Life.

It is as Life, at any rate, that Mr. George presents it, and not as art. As art the book is out of character and out of focus. It begins with the evident intention of portraying Ursula Trent as an English lady forced by her modernity to leave the restraints of Victorianism and learning the ways of life as an outcast. But the Ursula Quin of London is not a person of tradition striking out a new line. She is a glib Cockney with a journalistic twang and a style that is like a parody of H. G. Wells. By failing to convince one as a created character, nothing remains but the spicy subject-matter and the view of life. The view of life, as I have aimed to show, is diverting. The subject-matter is probably the best part of the entertainment. One learns a great deal about manicure girls and flats in Dover Street and the habits of Jewish movie magnates and the ways of a romantic architect. But the architect says that "in Botticelli's time people didn't swarm over Cimbuë and Giotto," and the angry Ursula calls her lover "you cur! You little curled puppy? With your pretty ways and your lying tongue." So even here Mr. George is palming off pretentiousness on the stay-at-home hungry heart.

FRANCIS HACKETT.

## Dante and the Modern Reader

*The Vision of Dante, translated by H. F. Cary. New York: Oxford University Press. \$1.75.*

*Britain's Tribute to Dante in Literature and Art. A Chronological Record of 540 Years, by Paget Toynbee. London: Published for the British Academy.*

THE six hundredth anniversary of the death of Dante has brought forth a great deal of writing about Dante, but no indication that Dante himself is extensively read today. The Oxford University Press has sent us on this occasion a five-year-old copy of Cary's translation of the Comedy, well printed and admirably illustrated with Flaxman's quaint drawings. Cary's translation is now over a century old and it has rightly been ranked as an English classic since Macaulay's judgment that it is difficult to determine whether Cary "deserves most praise for his intimacy with the language of Dante or for his extraordinary mastery of his own." Men as diverse as Coleridge and Ruskin have admired it immensely and it has the honor of having been the only book that Keats took along with him on his journey to Scotland. But though Cary's language is genuinely poetical, it is not always clear and direct, and his notes are certainly diffuse and sometimes obsolete. It is a pity that the Oxford University Press could not have had those notes revised by some competent editor and printed at the bottom of the page, to help the reader over the numerous difficulties of the text.

Mr. Toynbee's book is just a bare catalogue of English (excluding American) adaptations, translations and important references to Dante, and of paintings that draw their themes from his work. It is a revelation of how

impressive a mere catalogue can be. It certainly gives one an increased sense of the power of Dante to learn that he could stir men as diverse as Chaucer and Spenser, Sidney and the author of the Book of Martyrs, Milton and Gibbon, Gray and Byron, Shelley and Landor, Macaulay and Carlyle, Tennyson and Browning, and that painters as diverse in genius as Reynolds, Blake, Watts, Rossetti, Flaxman and Walter Crane could find their themes and inspiration in the Divine Comedy. No other foreign classic has found anywhere near a quarter as many translators. Yet despite all this and despite the numerous popular editions of the Comedy in the past, there are indications that Dante is today the exclusive possession of the few. Outside of Italy, where he occupies a national position, similar to that of Homer in ancient Greece, there is no evidence that he is read except by learned commentators, students of the past, or those engaged in the diverting but futile task of reading modern ideas into the work of one who was a rigid and narrow adherent of the mediaeval world-view.

I do not for a moment depreciate the value of those commentators whose philologic and historical research has helped to make the text of Dante more intelligible to us. But just as the labor expended by fond parents makes them apt to see too much in the wisdom which drops from the lips of their children, so the labor of fond commentators makes them hardly the soundest judges of the inherent wisdom in the text which they try to elucidate. Philologic and historic research do not guarantee sound literary taste or great moral insight. Thus it is not strange that passages of Dante are held up to our admiration which, to those who have not spent much labor digging them out, seem quite ordinary; and he is likewise held up as a great spiritual teacher because of doctrines as to the nature of sin and punishment, which are from the modern point of view most revolting.

The modern reader, whose interests are not primarily historical, and who wishes to see for himself the truth and beauty of the Divine Comedy, certainly has serious obstacles to overcome. The modern reader finds it difficult to enjoy the learned artificialities of the allusive or indirect style according to which things are described in charades the solution of which requires a knowledge of ancient mythology, astronomy and geography. (See the beginning of Paradiso XXIX or Paradiso IX, 82 ff.) Dante wrote in the vernacular but not for the populace. He wrote for the learned who could be supposed to have the myths of Ovid at their finger tips. His readers must recognize "the consort of old Tithonous" and what is meant by

I straight conceived  
Delusion opposite to that which raised  
Between the man and fountain, amorous flame.

Dante has indeed been praised for the directness and concision of his style; but the reader can judge for himself by comparing the original of the Lord's Prayer with Dante's elaboration of it. (Purgatorio XI.)

Even if we master Dante's own language and with the aid of commentaries, unravel the hundreds of obscure references to ancient and mediaeval Italian places, persons and events, we have not removed the fundamental obscurity of the text due to Dante's preoccupation with allegoric meanings. The modern reader does not like allegories, or writings in which every passage is to be taken in several senses.