

The Significance of Plato

DIALOGUES OF PLATO. Translated by E. V. Rieu. Revised Edition. New York: Oxford University Press. 5 vols. \$25.

Reviewed by COUNT HERMANN KUNZ

Author of "The Travel Diary of a Philosopher"

WHEN I first met that witness to French philosophers, Gustave Le Bon, he asked me: "Do you believe that Napoleon ever existed?" and gratified by my bewilderment, he went on: "There is a strong probability that he did not. Modern research has proved beyond doubt that the more witnesses there are of an event, the less does it seem possible to ascertain what really happened, for almost everybody affirms to have seen something different. Now there are so very many who pretend to have known or heard of Napoleon."

At the bottom of Le Bon's joke is a profound truth, and this it was, of course, that he really meant to convey: humanity does not recognize mere facts as values, and history is, therefore, anything but a record of past events. History really is a pageant of living symbols. Psychoanalysis has shown that no dream ought to be taken literally—its facts always are the mere outward expression of underlying significance. In exactly the same sense humanity remembers from the past only such facts as can act as symbols of an everlasting present. This is the reason why in the early ages only myths were remembered at all and why even today every personality of importance gradually becomes transmuted, in the popular mind, according to the laws of mythology.

If this is so, there never is any need at all to dive into the depths of the past in order to understand the significance of a great man: his greatness, if permanently recognized, means permanent significance.

This leads me to Plato. No philosopher ever so quickly became a myth as he. Almost everyone of his disciples and followers interpreted his teachings in a different way, so much so that the facts already appeared obscured a short time after his death. A little later his legend developed into two complementary opposites. On the one side was the image, so often found recorded in sculpture, of Dionysoplaton, where the philosopher appeared fused with the God of reckless vitality; on the other hand Plato was chiefly thought of as the inventor of so-called platonic love. Later still the most Greek and therefore pagan of thinkers became one of the pillars of Christian thought. Nor did the mythological transformation stop there. In our days we find Walter Pater transforming Plato into the ancestor of the modern art-critic and aesthete, and Paul Natorp into the forerunner of latter-day critical philosophy. To Natorp Plato's "idea" is almost identical with the modern concept of a natural law. With all that, Plato's writings are there. And they certainly do mean something definite, just as every living person is something quite definite for himself, whatsoever other people may think.

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Well, Plato is still alive, and more so than any other philosopher in history, just because everybody may understand him differently according to his own needs. This is the point. No one really cares for anybody else than himself. The lover of humanity differs from the egotist only in this that his own self is a greater and wider entity. Poems are being read, because the art of the author evokes feelings in the readers which are theirs potentially, but which could never become conscious without help. Just so Plato has been, and always will be read, because the synthesis of his personality, his mind, and his art means a unique "evoker" of the philosopher in every man.

Plato is unique firstly, because he is the greatest writer among philosophers. Secondly, because he is of all thinkers the greatest poet and therefore appeals to feeling as much as to thought. Thirdly, because he is, among philosophers, the most accomplished man. Whosoever reads Jowett's translation of Plato's works, the best in existence, will realize this at once. But even all this would not suffice to make of Plato one of the greatest figures in history. Plato is able to call to life, as no one else can, the philosopher in each and all, because he is the most archaic of articulate thinkers. This

seems paradoxical, yet it is so. What we call original in life and art corresponds not to an adult state, but to the state of the child. The great outlines of everything are there, on the one hand, in the clear form of a sketch, and on the other hand, every single thing that may later develop is present in the form of a germ. In what appears to be simple all possible complexity is therefore involved; archaic art is the one all-inclusive art. Now in Plato we find foremost the general outlines of every possible philosophy in the western and modern sense. But in the concrete his philosophy represents that vital synthesis of thought, feeling, myth, imagination, critique, poetry, romance, and simple expression of life, which lies on this side of all possible differentiation; it represents not the ultimate, but the primary synthesis; its perfection corresponds to that of the child. And what new perfection ever came from anything but a new childhood? Whosoever understands Plato perfectly, comes into touch with the creative child within himself, which, as it develops, enables him to look at the world as a philosopher himself.

Catherine the Little

CATHERINE THE GREAT. By KATHERINE ANTHONY. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1925. \$4.

Reviewed by WILBUR CORTEZ ABBOTT
Harvard University

THE biographer of Margaret Fuller has turned her talents to a figure so different from that of the Boston priestess of Transcendentalism that one may be permitted to wonder not only at her versatility but at the catholicity of her sympathies. The present volume is described by its publisher as a "picture that is historically authentic and psychologically sound" written "in a sophisticated but sympathetic manner." It is, at any rate, a lively piece of narrative. Its subject—to quote the publisher again—"one of the most striking egoists among that supremely egoistic class, the feminine sovereign," lends herself to picturesque biographical writing. The rise of the petty German princess to the throne of Russia has few parallels in literature since Cinderella, and the author makes the most of it. Indeed the early part of the volume seems in many ways the best; and, like many good stories, it becomes of less interest in its later pages.

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To history, in the sense of an addition to the mass of facts and conclusions relating to the past, it can hardly be claimed that this book offers much of a contribution. Everything in it has, to all intents and purposes, been known before. The labors of Waliszewski in his "Roman d'une Impératrice" and its companion volumes have so lightened the labors of his successors in the field of the biography of Catherine II that it is hardly to be expected that Miss Anthony could go much beyond his researches. But his books are now some thirty years old, they were written in French, they are obviously not at the immediate disposal of those into whose hands her work is likely to fall, and it would thus seem not inappropriate to issue an English account of the Empress.

The present volume is scarcely to be regarded as a history of the life and times of the Empress in any large sense. It is rather personal than political; and if one reckons the pages which concern themselves with Catherine's "lovers" beside those which relate to the one thing which makes her life of any importance to the world, her share in the politics of her time—that is to say if Catherine is to be considered important not as a rather disgusting old woman but as the ruler of a powerful state in a great period of history—he may possibly be disappointed. It seems unfortunate to one reader at least that the author's undoubted talent for narrative should be expended upon the gossip and far from edifying intrigues of an immoral woman who happened by a curious chance of fate to occupy the throne of Russia, than upon the larger issues of the time and the influence which she had upon them. That, however, is a matter of perspective—and perhaps also of taste, concerning which, we are told, there is no disputing.

More Page Letters

THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF WALTER H. PAGE. Edited by BURTON J. HENDRICK. Vol. III. New York: Doubleday, Page & Co. 1925.

Reviewed by BAINBRIDGE COLBY

THE third volume of the Life and Letters of Walter H. Page completes this highly interesting series. Like its predecessors, volumes I and II, it reflects great credit upon the literary craftsmanship of Mr. Burton Hendrick and the book fabricating of Doubleday, Page & Company.

The letters, somewhat sententiously reserved until the deaths of Mr. Page and President Wilson, to whom most are addressed, have the discursiveness, the vivid personal quality, the constant and shifting interest which the reading public now associates with the work of Mr. Page. He could write. There is no question of that and he had that combination of journalistic sense and literary flavor which is found in the best periodical literature. Ample praise has been bestowed upon the Page letters in these respects and the final volume contains nothing that demands qualification of or recession from the highly favorable estimate with which the earlier volumes were received.

The question which now looms upon the horizon in estimating this important work is how it will be judged from the standpoint of history. As readable and saleable miscellany its position is assured, but the point which strikes the reader in the final volume is that the letters, interesting as they are, were unanswered. It is a uni-lateral correspondence. Mr. Hendrick on page 259 says: "In the whole course of the war, Page received only thirteen letters from Mr. Wilson; several are extremely brief, introducing friends; others, also brief, concern merely routine matters. Only occasionally does the President make any reference to public questions, and not once does he discuss them in any detail."

This tells, if not the whole story, a large part of it, and it brings up that interesting consideration, the position of a War President with relation to his excellent and zealous subordinates who from the best of motives wanted to tell him what to do. I know something of this phase of the war. I saw much of it. I was in close contact with the President during some dramatic and critical moments in the course of the War. I remember, one time in a moment of relaxation, the President said to me: "You know, Colby, I have come to the conclusion that the chief duty devolving upon the President of the United States in war time is to keep his shirt on." And in the great assemblage of the nation's capacity and experience, which was effected regardless of partisan considerations, it was amusing to see the wholesale grocer, or the leading lawyer, or the foremost steel maker from Muskegon, or Ottumwa, or Sedalia, or Kansas City, or Denver, or Seattle on receiving an invitation, or I might say a summons, to put their experience and trained capacity at the service of the Government, come to Washington. They came on the first train. They rushed from the station to the hotel with a bustle of importance and with that egotism which not only afflicts man, but so often explains his success and survival. They felt that they had been called none too soon. The call was "from country." Their capabilities, at least they fully appreciated. They were going to change things in a jiffy. They had the ordinary business man's feelings that government was a mass of red tape and imbecility. They would alter that and they would reform it out of hand. But then, *mirabile dictu*, they encountered something, something they had never met before. They ran head on into a great, big, immitigable and time built face—"government," or if you will, call it Washington.

There was a sense of the public hanging over Washington—a sense of public opinion. There was the politician's reaching for support. Washington was not a mass of origins. It was a sounding board which registered the repercussions of the people's thought. The men in Washington momentarily gripped the thought of the people, but the energizing vigor and power of the people's thought had deeper and remoter springs than Washington. There was a long period before the country was ready for war. There is more to

"preparedness" than Plattsburgh camps and massed guns and assembled aeroplanes. There is a preparedness of insight and perception and of resolve and of responsibility. That was the field of preparedness in which the President of the United States, almost alone, performed his labors. He was no drill master. He did not head a commissariat charged with the mobilization of material. He was drafting and assembling and unifying the nation's spirit and its purpose and those deep lying forces of the will that underlay and animated the material side of the country's effort.

Page was an amateur Ambassador,—let me hasten to add, a very good one. Let it not be understood that I speak, in the least degree, in his disparagement. But he had read the histories of diplomacy. His conception of an ambassador was that of a representative of his sovereign, who in turn had the right of free access to the sovereign to which he was accredited. This is all very pretty. It is in accordance with history and tradition but it is a survival of conditions that no longer exist. There was a time when ambassadors were sent on sailing ships to their posts. There were no telegraph lines to their home capitols. The news gathering agencies were unborn. Mr. Page, and he is not singular in this respect, had an idea that he must acquaint his Chief of State with things that were whispered and things that were half uttered, with things that were only half revealed, which happened at the capitol to which he had been sent. He did not realize that the hundreds of despatches which are daily received from the diplomatic and consular agents of the United States are far beyond the power of the Secretary of State to daily read and digest and that they are turned over to subordinates for the purpose of winnowing the occasional and intermittent grain in the mass of chaff.

The knowledge of the war's progress from hour to hour, reported upon the minute and flashed upon the sun, was contained in the Associated Press reports and those of other organized agencies of news collection and distribution. Furthermore, Washington in some respects was the foremost capital of the Allied world during the war. The best informed Frenchmen and Italians and Englishmen were stationed in Washington. They had free access to the President. He knew what he should know. He was not groping in the dark. He was the busiest man in the world and had no more time for ambassadorial miscellanies than he had for Macaulay's Essays or Bagehot's treatises on public finance.

Mr. Page forgot this or at least he was not sensible of it, and while his letters make a pretty literary legacy and will fill a comfortable niche in many a library, they fell in their coefficients far below the plane of Presidential attention and concern during the war.

Page had the good fortune, and also the misfortune to be sent to the Court of St. James. There is no foreign office in the world so mature, so experienced, with technique so perfect as the British Foreign Office. The Prime Minister of England is denied by his very position the luxury of principle. When he gets up in the morning, the questions that greet him are so multi-fold, so various, that all he can do is to hope to get through the day without disaster.

They involve the religious questions of Asia. They involve questions of caste in India. They involve questions of racial predominance in South Africa and then there are a host of minor questions arising in the distant longitudes of the Straits Settlement, China, Persia, Egypt, to say nothing of the highly sensitized local prejudices of the Dominions, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. There is the alliance between the transport workers and the miners in England, the occupied area of Germany, French susceptibilities, Irish susceptibilities, Asiatic susceptibilities, South American trade, Anglo-American solidarity, the English Speaking Union and whatnot. If he can retire at night and feel that no tower has toppled, no structure been razed, no vista closed, no possibility of beneficial result to the British Empire blocked, he has done a good day's work. And then they have over there, the pomp and circumstance and consideration of ancient and well tried habits and comely usages, to which our men are unaccustomed and fall ready victims.

I had occasion during one of the darkest hours

of the War to visit England on an official mission and when I took my leave of the President at the White House he said to me: "Now be an American. Our men only last about six months in England and then they become Anglicized." The President referred to that subtle and encompassing and penetrating charm which is English. I think Page fell a victim to it. He took absolutely the English view of the controversies that arose during the War about our neutral rights. He saw with the vividness of close proximity the great issue of freedom as opposed to autocracy. It impaired his intellectual refraction. It distorted the angles of his vision. His sincerity is beyond question and his popular success in England was unmistakable, but he had ceased to be a serviceable spokesman of the President or a dependable Ambassador of the United States.

Hence Colonel House and his unofficial mission. Hence the estrangement of Page from the President,—and a Presidential silence that was considerate but knowing; followed by a course that was independent of his Ambassador, but right.

Hindenburg's Officer

THE WAR OF LOST OPPORTUNITIES.

By GENERAL VON HOFFMANN. New York: International Publishers. 1925. \$3.50.

Reviewed by MAJOR T. H. THOMAS

THE appearance of General von Hoffmann's book is interesting first of all as an exception to a general rule. English and American publishers have left severely alone war books by subordinate but highly competent German officers, venturing only upon general works by more eminent figures. As a result our reading public has had a surfeit of propaganda and apologia, but hardly a taste of the more accurate and matter of fact works which have appeared on the Continent during the last few years.

General von Hoffmann's book, it must be confessed, belongs only in part to the latter class. The "lost opportunities" which provide his rather pretentious title, prove to be largely a set of somewhat off-hand personal judgments on the larger strategical questions of the war: his method is to note the plan adopted in every instance, and then to argue that a directly opposite decision would have saved the day. This retrospective wisdom is a very common quality, and leads to the familiar arm-chair strategy by means of which any one could have won the war. Briefly stated, the author's general thesis is that of an out and out "Easterner." He blames Falkenhayn for not adopting the Hindenburg-Ludendorff notions during 1914 and 1915, while after that the Great Pair were to blame for not following his own. This whole case rests indirectly on judgments of the situation on the Western Front, and as von Hoffman was never there his judgment is of little value and even of little interest.

On the other hand, the author's narrative of what actually took place in the East is first-hand evidence of great value. Here he was on his own ground: trained as a specialist in Russian affairs, he had a thorough knowledge of the Russian army and of the problems to be met on the Eastern Front. When war came he was senior General Staff Officer to Von Prittwitz in East Prussia, and continued in his post under Hindenburg. When the latter was given the Supreme Command in 1916, von Hoffman succeeded Ludendorff as Chief of Staff on the Eastern Front. He came into the public eye as the military member of the commission which forced the peace of Brest on the Bolsheviks; and his account of this episode is highly entertaining. Von Hoffman opposed the German reply to the Russian proposals "because at bottom it was a lie",—and furthermore opposed the whole programme for the annexation of Poland. For this Ludendorff turned on him and demanded his dismissal, but the Kaiser after yielding on Poland managed to cover von Hoffmann.

Von Hoffmann's frankness puts more than one familiar event in the East in quite a new light. He states bluntly that von Hutier's famous attack on Riga, which has always been taken as the technical inspiration for the offensive of March 21st, proved to be a mere manoeuvre. "The crossing was effected almost in play. . . . Already long before our attack the Russians had evacuated,

of their own free will, the western part of the Riga bridgehead, and they evacuated the remainder with feverish haste when the attack began. . . . He revises even more drastically the traditional account of Hindenburg-Ludendorff arriving (Sheridan's ride fashion) just in time to turn disaster into victory at Tannenberg. Although the aged von Prittwitz had lost his nerve and actually ordered a retreat behind the Vistula, his Staff convinced him that he could not make the retreat without first giving battle to Samsonov. "Accordingly, orders were given on the evening of the 20th (some days before Hindenburg's arrival) which formed the basis of the battle of Tannenberg." Moltke, however, had been notified of the first decision but not of the change of plan, and promptly relieved Prittwitz. Hindenburg arrived to find the Army assembling for battle, instead of in full retreat as he expected; he approved the orders already issued and carried them through. The author does not regret that Hindenburg took von Prittwitz's place, but in fairness to the latter he ventures the opinion that a victory would have been won at Tannenberg even if there had been no change of command.

Much of General von Hoffmann's text has obviously no meaning to his translator; and regulation military terms of the German original are often merely guessed at. At the very start we come face to face with the most comic of these blunders: in the process of rendering his full name, poor old Prittwitz—Generaloberst von Prittwitz und Gaffron—is split into two: "the Colonel Generals von Prittwitz and Gaffron"—and thenceforth referred to in the plural as "they". Evidently the translator jumped to the conclusion that on the Eastern front twin Commanders-in-Chief were a special provision of nature.

Drugs and Genius

GENIUS AND DISASTER. By JEANNETTE MARKS. New York: The Adelphi Co. 1925. \$3.

Reviewed by CARTY RANCK

MISS JEANNETTE MARKS is Professor of English at Mount Holyoke College and for many years she has made a close study of the psychology of drug addiction. Several years ago she contributed a provocative paper to the *Yale Review* in which she attempted to show the effects of drug addiction upon the work of Edgar Allan Poe and other writers of genius. Now, in "Genius and Disaster" she elaborates her theories regarding the effects of alcoholism and drugs upon creative genius and gives the reader penetrating studies of Poe, Swinburne, Thomas De Quincey, Coleridge, Rossetti, James Thomson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Francis Thompson.

Let us state at the outset that we are not in sympathy with Miss Mark's views. It is our conviction that all these writers mentioned would have written the same sort of literature if their daily diet had been peanut butter or milk chocolate. They were by nature morbid and moody and the fact that their work contains nightmarish patches of horror and stark tragedy is no more due to drugs than it is to the natural reaction of all thoughtful natures to the grim relentlessness of life. Some of them, it is true, tried to get more out of life than there is in it—but does this point to opium or alcohol? Surely there is no saner writer of English than Thomas Hardy and yet his work is packed with the sense of impending doom. Every thinking man and woman feels the futility of life and its stark tragedy. Then how much more poignantly does the drama progress for the man of genius who sees with clairvoyant vision the end of the play?

In speaking of James Thomson's fine poem "The City of Dreadful Night" Miss Marks says: "Several are the evidences of opium-taking in this great poem. That sense not only of the dragging foot of misery but of the endlessness of time is one of the mental stig-mata of opium addiction."

Come, come, Miss Marks, this is a bit far-fetched! Thomson had a vivid imagination, he was keenly sensitive to suffering, and, God knows, the poor devil suffered enough, but to say that his graphic description of the horrors of insomnia was due to opium is no more convincing than to say that a newspaperman must be a potential murderer when he writes a convincing account of a murder.