

Petrarch in English

By CHARLES HALL GRANDGENT

TO Americans unfamiliar with Italian, the year 1930-31 offers unprecedented opportunities for real contact with Italian literature. For the last twelve months have witnessed the publication of Joan Redfern's translation of De Sanctis's "History of Italian Literature," Jefferson B. Fletcher's superb rendering of the "Divine Comedy," and now this welcome interpretation of Petrarch's Sonnets* by Joseph Auslander. As a general thing, we read translations as a matter of duty, because we feel that in the interest of culture it is our business to have some knowledge of such and such a foreign masterpiece. Real enjoyment, aside from the satisfaction of enlarging our outlook, we scarcely expect. The glamor has to be supplied at second hand, from our faith in other people's appreciation, from our imagining on that basis what the effect of the original must be. In the cases now under consideration, however, the allowance we have to make is reduced to a minimum: we are brought very close to the state of an Italian reading the works in his own language. In fact, we are scarcely conscious that we are dealing with a foreign reproduction; and, when we bring that fact to our consciousness, we have the conviction that we are perusing verses that Petrarch, for instance, would have written, had he been an Englishman of a later day.

For a prose work, such as De Sanctis's masterly discussion of Italian civilization and letters, the achievement, though difficult enough, seems less marvelous than the task of turning one's self into an English Dante or an English Petrarch. Confronted with these greatest of poets, the very reputation of the originals is almost enough to strike one dumb with fright. To produce on the English reader an effect comparable to that produced on an Italian by the Italian poet—that is the desideratum—a goal to be attained only by a real poet thoroughly at home in both languages. How few translations have been made by real poets! And so often the work is not really good, even assuming that inspiration is not required! So often the current is rough and jolting, indicative of the throes of difficult production. With Petrarch such a defect is peculiarly irritating; for Petrarch is essentially smooth. He has indeed an habitual smoothness hardly found before him and seldom found again until the days of Ariosto and Tasso. In this respect he reminds one of the English verse of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. His evenness, together with his continual use of the sonnet form, may give one a superficial impression of monotony. Yet how mistaken such an impression is! How many different moods are voiced in the easily running sonnets, from the airy fancy of *Erano i capei d'oro all'aura sparsi* to the sensitive melancholy of *Solo e pensoso i più deserti compi* and the stately remorse of *Padre del cielo, dopo i perduti giorni!* These varying moods are caught and faithfully reflected by the sympathetic Mr. Auslander, who has verily made his own the spirit of the poet. As we read his lines, then we follow close upon the varied turns of Petrarch's emotional course.

An intricate road it is to follow; for Petrarch, unchanging in his love of beauty, is forever changing in almost every other respect. Petrarch is frequently called "the first modern man," a designation justified, it would seem, on more grounds than one. Conspicuous among his "modern" characteristics is his complexity. He strikes us distinctly as a person of many more facets than any of his predecessors. He cannot be enclosed in a formula, nor in a considerable series of definitions. Possibly this impression is to some extent illusory. Perhaps his apparent complexity is due in part to the fullness of our knowledge of him. His verse, rich as it is in contrasts, shows us only a

restricted number of his sides. For a closer acquaintance we must turn to his very copious correspondence. Not until we come to really modern times do we find another great man who has so frankly and abundantly revealed himself. And the many-sided human being there exhibited is expressed in some measure in the "modernity" of his kaleidoscopic verse. Even more violent contrasts, to be sure, are visible in the lyrics of Dante. Would he seem to us as "modern" as Petrarch, had he been a daily and intimate letter-writer?

However that may be, Petrarch has left us sufficient evidence of his own complexity. Not all of this complexity, indeed, crops out in his poetry; and, in his poetry, some features of it are reserved for poems other than sonnets. Only the sonnets are to be found in Mr. Auslander's volume. The ingenious *sestine* and the majestic *canzoni* are lacking. One almost wishes they had been included, notably the famous *Spirito gentil*, so long associated with Rhenzi in the mind of readers. Even more desirable, perhaps, is the *Chiare, fresche, e lucide onde*, so enticing and so puzzling. This last characteristic suggests, perhaps, a valid reason for their omission: the rendering of the *canzoni* would have involved the answering of many important and hotly debated questions—many more than are involved in the sonnets. Even in a text without annotation, some lines would have stirred the critical reader to animosity. This thought, while reconciling us more or less to the exclusion of a series of superior poems, suggests another question: would it have been better to add a few explanatory notes—about as many, for instance, as Leopardi furnished, aside from his discussion of problems? Such notes surely would have facilitated understanding of some sonnets whose subject is not fully elucidated by their titles, on the other hand, it would have been next to impossible, in the simplest annotation, to avoid controversial interpretation, and controversy evidently lay outside Mr. Auslander's purpose. Let us, then, be content, and more than content, with what he has chosen to offer us: to wit, Petrarch the Sonneteer—an English sonneteer, published without display of erudition or presentation, as Petrarch himself no doubt would have preferred.

That the English sonnets tell the same tale as the Italian ones can be said without reservation. And they are good English sonnets. They do not try to ape too closely the Italian model. We are often told that English verse never can give the same kind of pleasure as Italian, because English rhymes are normally monosyllabic, whereas the Italian language runs naturally to rhymes of two syllables. The translator's aim, however, must be to cause a certain reaction in the English reader, a reaction corresponding to that caused in the Italian reader by the original. Now, to the English reader, a long series of dissyllabic rhymes does not give the mellifluous impression that it gives the Italian, whose language naturally lends itself to such a flow. Aside, then, from the prohibitive difficulty of creating such a monstrosity in English, the product, if possible, would not serve its purpose. Some years ago, I read a version of the first canto of Dante's *Commedia in terza rima* with all the rhymes feminine. Not only was the result harrowing esthetically: it was achieved only at the expense of introducing a lot of extraneous concepts, since not one of the rhyme words corresponded in sense to a rhyme-word of the original. On first opening Mr. Auslander's book, one fears that he has attempted such a trick; for the first sonnet there is all in feminine rhymes, and so is the octave of the second. After that, however, normal English verse prevails, the dissyllabic rhyme turning up only occasionally, as it might with an English author.

Mr. Auslander's sonnets, however, are of the Petrarchan type, as one would nat-

urally expect. In fact, in our day, even in English, we hardly accept any other. Nevertheless, the sonnet form has undergone manifold modifications. From the moment of its invention by the early Sicilian poets, probably by Giacomo da Lentino, it was subject to considerable variation. We have the *sonetto candato*, the *sonetto rinterzato*; Dante has left us two examples of the latter type. In the arrangement of the rhymes, too, there has been some uncertainty. Fundamental, in Italy, has been the division into two parts, one of eight lines, one of six. To be sure, the Elizabethan sonnet, in England, departs from this model, transforming itself into three quatrains plus a couplet, thus sacrificing the peculiar effect of the original model—the effect of a longer air in a major, followed by a shorter one in a minor key. In the earliest output the scheme seems to have been, in the octave, simply two alternating rhymes; in the sestet, either a similar arrangement of two new rhymes or a pattern *abc, abc*. The scheme now familiar, however, was not long in appearing, and won the preference of Dante, who used it beside several others. Petrarch's preference, when he appeared on the scene, was still stronger—so strong that it established this one type as the standard; for Petrarch was for centuries the model lyric poet, imposing not only his excellencies, his delicacy and smoothness, but also, and especially, his faults—his tendency to conceits and his weakness for puns. Can the latter be reproduced in an English version? For an answer, one turns with curiosity to Mr. Auslander's text; and there one finds strict renunciation, the *laura* and *laureta* being either ignored or simply transferred, with no attempt at translation—doubtless the only wise course.

It is curious, by the way, to compare Dante's estimate of the sonnet with ours. For us, of course, it is a courtly form of verse, essentially literary and conspicuously difficult. This opinion has certainly prevailed since the day of Boileau, who voices it in his "Art Poétique." In Dante's judgment, on the other hand, the sonnet is an inferior type, on a distinctly lower plane than the *canzone*, and far less exacting. The immense vogue of Petrarch was required to exalt it to the pinnacle it now occupies, an eminence on which Mr. Auslander's art will help to maintain it.

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Boies Penrose

POWER AND GLORY. The Life of Boies Penrose. By WALTER DAVENPORT. New York: G. P. Putnam. 1931. \$3.50.

Reviewed by ROYAL J. DAVIS

AS coarse as if he had sprung from a gutter instead of from an old and highly respected Philadelphia family, unscrupulous and domineering, "Matt" Quay's successor, the last of the "great" party bosses, is presented in these pages with the vividness of a moving picture. The author spends almost no space upon trivial matters like political issues, his object being limited to making his readers see and hear Penrose—to startle them with his grossness, his epigrammatic cynicism, his poise, his uncanny attainment of success and power. To this end there is much quotation of remarks by Penrose and there is also a large number of stories about him, both the remarks and the stories being supplied by persons who knew him. The result is a fairly accurate portrait, although an ill-concealed desire to astonish if not to scandalize results in a tendency to exaggeration. Incidents of importance, such as Penrose's apparently spontaneous winning of Quay's confidence in his first term at Harrisburg, are told in melodramatic style, but also with melodramatic unreality. Omission of dull details sharpens the story, but leaves it incomplete. Penrose is too much a man of magic instead of a human being of certain extraordinary qualities. His decline, however, is set forth as crisply as his rise. "It was romantic," says Mr. Davenport, "to read that from his cell of a room in his Philadelphia home he had

dictated the nomination of Harding, but it was also untrue." The paradox of his character was reflected in the paradox of his career—he could be elected Senator by popular vote, but he could not realize his pet ambition, to be Mayor of Philadelphia. Between him and that goal stood the foulness of his private life. And for the boship of Philadelphia he had to bargain with the Vares. Power he had, but "glory" is a strange word to associate with Boies Penrose.

Christmas Poetry

(Continued from page 389)

fruitful field uncultivated. They could write—

Star-led philosophers,
What rustic imperative,
By ox, ass, sheep,
Heads bowed,
Thoughts wild,
Conquers sophistication?

Or phonetically (style of Joyce), where a great belly of connotation stands upon tiny legs of denotation:

Hark, the armorial fishes sing
Tidings of the Newgate ring.
Nunc dimittis, Noël viva el rey.

Or anarchistically (style of Gertrude Stein)—

Coming Merry Christmas and hope
having gifts. Turkey, turkey, turkey,
tree tinsel. Sing Noël happy, coming
Merry Christmas, and hope having gifts.

Speaking personally we shall stick to the good old wares for our Christmas. There will be two kinds of cards on our mailing list. One will show a pink huntsman in a tavern, above a motto—

In the jolly Xmas time

I greet you with this little rhyme,
and the other will have two angels in white gowns and blue ribbons suspended above a snowscape with camels, sheep, negroes, and shepherds, and it will say—

Christmas comes but once a year
So may you have the best of cheer,
And Happy New Year that comes after
I hope may find you full of laughter.

And just to give that hint of distinction which the advertisements say is so important, each card will bear in sparkling mica letters the word Noël (pronounced Nowell), which means Merry Christmas. What a world!

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*THE SONNETS OF PETRARCH. Translated by JOSEPH AUSLANDER. New York: Longmans, Green & Co. 1931. \$2.50.

Three Sisters

THE ALMOND TREE. By GRACE ZARING STONE. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company. 1931. \$2.50.

Reviewed by TAYLOR SCOTT HARDIN

GRACE ZARING STONE'S new novel is concerned with the relationship between three middle-aged sisters, born and reared in the Middle West and transplanted to Washington, D. C., after their father, James Gentry, becomes a Representative. The story opens on July 10th in the late 1920's at dinner in the Gentry house. The parents have been long dead, but the eldest daughter, May, has carried on in the house, an old maid. The occasion, her fifty-fourth birthday, marks the first reunion of the three sisters for ten years. The second daughter, Susan (forty-six), is a pseudo-fashionable divorcée who since her domestic débâcle has been living alone in a small house in the capital. The youngest daughter, Leda, (forty-four), has just returned from Europe with her sixteen-year-old daughter, Marise. Leda's husband, a petty official in the Diplomatic Service, has recently died in Paris, leaving his wife nearly penniless.

All these details (with countless others) are woven retrospectively into the fabric of the narrative. Besides these passages consecrated to gathering up the past, there are also character-exposés of the *dramatis personæ* which are sometimes annoying in that they bring the author downstage in person, her omniscience pinned upon her front like a bouquet. We'd rather have her leave the boards entirely to the actors, with not even a puppet-string to show for her part in the doings. These exposés are often from the author's point of view; but often they are from that of one of the characters. The following example is typical:

I'll help get her (Marise) something to do, she (Susan) thought. If she were a little older I'd start her out for herself. But she is too young for that. Too young for love too. Poor little wretch! She is like a bird that hasn't got all its feathers yet.

Now I am aware that this form of exposé serves a twofold purpose: it tells the reader something about the character who thinks the thoughts, and it also tells him something about the character at whom the thoughts are directed. But to resort to this primitive kind of analysis immediately brings up the questions: Is the exposition necessary, and if so, is this the best method? In most cases in "The Almond Tree," my answers are negative. Mrs. Stone does not do half with dialogue that she might. Granted that the conversations between such dull people as are in the book are bound always to be dull, the writer's job is to select those fragments from it which will throw the most light upon the speakers. Too often Mrs. Stone fails here. And in addition, too often the dialogue seems stilted, unreal.

Between retrospects and exposés we get the story, sandwiched in with broken continuity. It's a dull tale, significant only as an example of the devastating effect which middle-class morals can have on human actions. Nothing happens in the book except that Leda marries a man younger than herself, whom her daughter is in love with. The last chapter rounds off the architecture of the novel; for the set is the same as that of the first chapter—another birthday dinner on the tenth of July: the three sisters and Marise, waited on by the same old colored butler. Leda, just back from her wedding trip, is the pivot of the emotional tension. After dinner, she has a heart attack and dies on the sofa.

If Mrs. Stone has not been altogether successful in carrying out her idea in writing, the reason must be attributed far more to the difficulty of the task she has imposed upon herself than to any literary incompetence. Though the story itself is dull and though it may at times seem to be unraveling clumsily, the idea behind it is extremely interesting—especially to those who happen to be interested in novel technique. Her theme, in a nutshell, is the interplay of reactions between three sisters who, when they are no longer

young become reunited, after each has developed through her particular past experiences an individuality and a set of tastes distinctly different from the others'. The interest lies in the portrayal of human tension resulting from character rather than from action. For the purpose she had in mind, Mrs. Stone was obliged to tell her story (and she does it with a great degree of success) in the way a bud unfolds rather than in the way a stem grows. The chronological method is all right for straightforward narrative, like Defoe's; but it is no good for stories which do not begin at the beginning and end at the end—for stories like Conrad's "Nostromo," for instance, or Henry James's "The Golden Bowl." "The Almond Tree" is a psychological study which starts when the three sisters are reunited after their long separation. In order to get the story on from this point, the novelist naturally has to go back in time for the sake of explaining the reasons for the tension which is to follow. It is a difficult task, and Mrs. Stone has done it not with felicitous brilliance but with a very decent competence. The shortcoming of the book is merely that it seems stiff, as if the author were too conscious of the difficulty of her task and not sufficiently at her ease to do it with great facility. Incidentally, "The Almond Tree" is the November choice of The Book League of America.

attitude toward divorce. The three decades witnessed the growth of religious indifference, making an additional alteration in the lives of Chester and Fannie, and the increasingly compulsive force of advertising that created new needs and turned luxuries into necessities. All this accompanies Chester's rapid rise in business, and the period of expansion is also marked with the growth of doubt and hesitancy. Fannie's education, for example, is based on simple maxims of right and wrong, but it is clearly brought out that she approaches the problem of the education of her own children in a spirit of inquiry; that she observes them, rather than attempts to force a code of morals upon them. The war enters the story, partly as another financial opportunity, and partly as a psychological disturbance. The false armistice of November 7th is described at length, an ironic symbol on a tremendous scale, and Mr. Whitney writes of the hysterical celebration with the interest and detachment of a scientist observing the antics of some primitive tribe.

The great achievement of "Time Exposure" is the work of clarification it performs in dramatizing the shifting impulses behind American social movements. And dramatizing these impulses gives them a reality that is too often lacking in the generalizations of economists



WOODCUT, BY OLIVER WARD HUNT, FROM "MODERN BOOK ILLUSTRATION" (RUDGE).

Portrait of America

TIME EXPOSURE. By PARKHURST WHITNEY. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1931. \$2.

Reviewed by ROBERT CANTWELL

CHANGING manners, and the changing ideology of the American middle class, make up the bulk of Mr. Whitney's amusing evocation of the past three decades. The alterations in belief he records (with the noteworthy exception of the changing attitude toward sex) are usually presented by their more obvious results—the growth of advertising, the growth of the automobile industry, the rise of the middle class to affluence. The story begins with the marriage of Fannie Troup to a young photographer, and proceeds, with a wealth of detailed description, to their eventual success in the years after the war. Poverty disturbs them, at first, and the antagonism of Fannie's mother, and later on there is a complication in Fannie's resistance to her husband's ardent advances—a resistance that causes his infidelity. But the conflicts are unimportant, one feels, or at most merely excuses for bringing in additional information on the times. It is the enormous fund of scrapbook, picture-album history, the forgotten slang, the lost fads, that stimulates Mr. Whitney's imagination, and it must be said at once that he writes this history with humor and with a photographic accuracy.

Sex is represented in the changing ideology by Fannie's discarding of the ideals of her parents, and by the change in the

and sociologists. Inevitably, "Time Exposure" suggests the work of Sinclair Lewis, but Mr. Whitney's aims are different, although both writers employ the same methods. He is less satirist than explorer, and he analyzes social movements, not to criticize them, but to present their importance in the daily life of the individual. Occasionally the details of his novel fight with the characters for significance, and in many cases one feels that Chester and Fannie act as they do because the action serves to bring out some picturesque aspect of the America of the past generation. When they visit the Pan-American Exposition on their honeymoon, for example, the visit is not a dramatic episode in their lives (and a singularly tense one, it would seem, for the one genuine conflict of the novel is the result of Fannie's inability to surrender herself to her husband), but an elaborate and engaging description of such forgotten glories as the House Upside Down, the exposition buildings, the fashions of the time. Even the assassination of McKinley, which occurs during their visit, is presented as a picturesque detail, without social significance. But these evasions are dwarfed by the data on American customs Mr. Whitney has succeeded in dramatizing in a timely and entertaining novel.

The Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon is nearly finished and, unless something unforeseen happens, it will be opened on Shakespeare's birthday, April 23, 1932. The inaugural play has not yet been chosen.

The Soldier Mind

THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE. By STEPHEN CRANE. New York: Random House. 1931. \$15.

AN edition limited to 900 numbered copies, printed by the Grabhorn Press and illustrated with capitals in red, with military figures in black, by Valenti Angelo. A broad page, a dignified black-face type, and excellent illustrations make an edition indicative of its classic content. For "The Red Badge" is classic. The subjective study of war, what might be called the soldier's mind at war, which swelled into a whole literature after 1914, is only a full development of the theme sounded by a journalist in this extraordinarily prophetic book. "Maggie" and many another of his stories, once famous for ruthless realism, seem a little tawdry now, but "The Red Badge of Courage" holds its high place in American literature, perhaps because, in spite of its honest realism, it is at heart romance, and in accord, not at clash, with the deepest instincts of the period when it was composed.

A Stilted Tale

UNDER THE BRUTCHSTONE. By J. M. DENWOOD and S. FOWLER WRIGHT. New York: Coward-McCann. 1931. \$2.50.

THE publishers inform us on the jacket of this book that its author followed for many years the calling of a poacher among the hills of the border country—an occupation not unlike, in social standing, that of minor bootlegging in this country—and that in consequence of the rigors of that trade he is badly broken in health. He appears to have gathered a respectable education at some point of his career. On internal evidence one might guess that not a little of it came from a perusal of the books of Sir Walter Scott during those periods of leisure that come at times to

to put his view of life into a novel. "Under the Brutchstone" is a long, involved, and stilted tale somewhat unskillfully constructed on early nineteenth century lines. It is the story of Red Ike and his friend Will Moffatt, two heroic young men who gain their living by the illicit snaring of game and fish at night on the preserved estates of their more wealthy neighbors. Red Ike, after an initial disillusionment at the hands of the wanton Peg, becomes the lover of Jael, the beauteous gypsy. Will's tender sentiments are directed to, and reciprocated by, Jean, daughter of the *parvenu* land owner, John Lynd. Now, this Lynd is a fiend in human form. The extent and perseverance of his malignity are equalled only by its frustration as, through 300-odd pages, he and his corps of associate villains pursue Ike and Will with shot and club, with knife and rock, with leaps in the dark, with unjust accusations and with many another time-tried device of the dastard.

The book resounds with the creaking of plot and counter-plot. Jael, and not Jean, is the rightfully legitimate daughter of Lynd, and there are letters to prove that point which appear, disappear, and reappear like a conjuror's deck of cards. There are secret passages, caves (furnished by Red Ike with literature and littered with MS. poems), graves at full moon, elaborate gypsy staffs, and much other machinery of romance. And from that machinery, ever and anon there leaps a god or goddess to save our heroes just in time from death by assault or hemp.

None of the characters is more than a puppet, with the exceptions of Red Ike, Jael, and the disreputable Peg, and even these are hardly realized. The style is stilted and unnatural, save for that in the opening chapters, where one detects the artful hand of Mr. Wright sprinkling Anglo-Saxonisms as thick as millet on a field. Nevertheless, the tale, for all its awkwardness, moves with an undeniable pace. Its naively involved incident runs with the untutored swiftness of a mountain runner.