

A Letter from Italy

By SAMUEL PUTNAM

THE London representative of a New York publisher took occasion to interview the present writer the other day on the state of contemporary Italian literature. He was, naturally, interested from the publishing point of view; but he was an unusually intelligent agent for a perhaps more than usually intelligent house.

After remarking that modern Italian as a whole was practically a sealed literature for the outside world,—and this is especially true for America,—my interviewer went on to inquire if there was a literature of proportions in the peninsula; and however intensely interesting one may find current writing south of the Alps, there seemed to be no other reply than a negative. There is a strenuous effort to create a literature, yes,—much the same effort, to hoist one's self by the bootstraps, that is to be found in Fascist politics. There is a certain spirit of "We will create masterpieces"; but as my visitor astutely observed, this is more likely to produce bulk than it is to give birth to a great work of art.

Of all this, discerning Italians are themselves aware. Professor Camillo Pellizzi already has been quoted in these columns on the subject.

Looking at the thing from the publisher's point of view, the only likely or even possible best-seller that one can see is Bontempelli. There is one other book which, in all probability, would not sell, but which any publisher well might add to his "luxury list"; and that is Signor Leo Ferrero's "Leonardo, o Dell'Arte," which likewise has been mentioned here before.

Turning to the war book. Italy, it would seem, has not as yet produced her great war book, assuming that she is to produce one. She has produced many records of the struggle, in poetry and in creative prose, but no writer who stands out as do Remarque and Zweig in Germany, or Barbusse and Dorgès in France. Perhaps, all in all, G. A. Borgese's "Rubè," which was published in English translation something like a decade

ago, stands up as well as any work of its kind.

In Italian poetry, the war has left many stirring traces. There is Franco Ciarlantini, the soldier-poet, who began by publishing a book, "L'Anima del Soldato," on the psychology of the combatant which has been not unjustly compared to "Le Feu" and "Les Croix de Bois." This book, published in 1916, was followed by two poetical volumes of war impressions, "Angolo-morto" (1917) and "Nuovi Appunti Lirici" (1918). One of the poems from the latter collection may be quoted. It is entitled

ASPHYXIA

*Silent the village: one big trench.
Into my bones, into my heart, drop by drop,
creep the dark and the cold.
Women, run to your doors, do not be afraid!
I would know if I am alive, or if I am
dreaming, or if fate is playing me a
trick.
Give me at least a little light, O women!
I am going to sing a song that comes back
to me;
a man who sings in the night,
all alone,
is thinking of his mother or of his first love,
and he is well-intentioned.
Not a door opens,
not a window lights up.
And I cannot scream out my despair,
for the night, drop by drop descends,
ever darker and ever colder,
into my bones, into my heart,
and I am stifling.*

Ciarlantini is not the only war poet. Nicola Moscardelli, in his "Tatuaggi" ("Tattooings"), published in 1916, has given us the impressions of a wounded man. And there is Piero Jahier's swinging "First Alpine March," full of a martial rhythm and the spirit of the mountaineer.

The Italian touch is something lighter and more delicate than either the Teutonic

or the French. Indeed, one of the verse volumes that have been mentioned, or an anthology of war poems, might give the English reader a better conception of the influence of the war on Italian literature than would any prose work.

One of the latest war books is Giovanni Comisso's "Giorni di Guerra." Comisso is a comparatively young writer, and his volume is one of the most artistic that has come out of the conflict. He reminds one of Hemingway at times, but he is less theatrical, more poetically impressionistic. His prose seems as careless as that of some of our own "advanced" young writers, but is really being very carefully manipulated, with an eye to effect; it is possessed of a certain modern fluid quality that is never permitted to degenerate into bad writing. Comisso is one of the most promising of the younger men; but the English reader—especially the American—might find his "War Days" to be lacking in that drama, and in that often melodramatic attitude toward the sordidness of the war, to which we have become accustomed. One of the stories from this volume, entitled "The Home-Coming" ("Ritorno a Casa"), was published, in the English translation of Samuel B. Beckett, in the recent Italian number of *This Quarter*.

Speaking of Mr. Hemingway, is it not possible that, after all, it is he who has written the Italian war novel?

Italy's spiritual-political problem in connection with the war was the same as our own, though given a different shading by her geographic propinquity to the theatre of events—namely, that of intervention or non-intervention. This theme will be found running through practically all of the war literature; it constitutes, it will be remembered, one of the motives in "Rubè."

As for the members of an older generation, that generation which is now in its forties, and which was actively in the lines in 1916, the war with them is fast becoming a memory, a memory softened by distance. It creeps out now and again, as in G. B. Angioletti's recently published collection of tales, "Il Buon Veliero"; but it will be found to have been reduced to the dimensions of an incident. It is an incident that has left a gap behind it, a gap of which

these older writers appear to be only half-conscious. This is that "lost generation" of which Mr. Ford spoke some years ago.

As for the younger men, those who have come up since the war, and more or less within the past five years, they are, rather, concerned with rebuilding what is left of a war-shattered universe. The word "universe" is employed deliberately, for it is in terms of the universal, if only as a translation of the Fascist nationalistic impulse, that the young Italian of today is inclined to think. This is evidenced in such writers as Alberto Consiglio, Filippo Burzio, and others. The former's "Itinerario Romanico" attempts to come at the world and the problem of reconstruction through a criticism of that theory of romanticism and mysticism which has been elaborated by Ernest Seillière in France. Some of the things that Consiglio has to say concerning racial mysticisms and the mysticism of energy or of violence are extremely pertinent. In the course of his book, the author erects his own theory of *terrestrià*, and the "Apocalyptic Discourse" with which the little volume ends provides a lively spiritual portrait of a generation.

Burzio is occupied with the problem of the "Demiurge," which, high-sounding as it may seem, is so real and vital for the Italian of today; and his "Discorso sul Demiurgo" should be read by any one who would gain an insight into what is going on in the minds of the intellectuals under Signor Mussolini's régime.

A New Viennese Novelist

ZODIAK. By WALTHER EIDLITZ. Vienna: Paul Zsolnay. 1930.

Reviewed by JAMES F. MUIRHEAD

WALTHER EIDLITZ of Vienna is a writer of novels and romances, whose works have for some time been arousing the interest of the press and public of Germany and Austria, winning the approval of such authorities as Thomas Mann, Arthur Schnitzler, Sigrid Undset, Romain Rolland, and Emil Ludwig. His previous publications have been somewhat slender volumes, but all have been marked by a poetic and historic imagination and by real fertility in invention.

"Zodiak" may be called his first full-sized novel. Its theme is the modern conflict between man and machinery, developed in the story of Gambo, a young Greek of Asia Minor, "evacuated" with the rest of his village to Athens, as a result of the last war between Greece and Turkey. The story of the march of the villagers to Smyrna, herded by Turkish soldiers, is told with great vividness. Gambo's grief at leaving his home is largely compensated by the thrill he feels at the prospect of visiting the Greek capital. On the way, however, he is nearly persuaded by the village priest to accompany him to Patmos and embrace the religious life. At Athens his patriotic and intellectual interest is eclipsed by his introduction to the wonders of modern machinery, which reveal to him a hitherto unsuspected bent and talent. Beginning humbly as an assistant in a garage, he makes himself an efficient chauffeur, and eventually becomes a member of the crew of an Air Line Express, serving Brindisi, Athens, and Constantinople. This leads to association with a rich American, whose mysterious business turns out to be the supplying of bombs and other baleful ammunition to European revolutionaries. Escaping from this at Cairo, he manages to smuggle himself on board the monster Russian airship *Kodak*, where he is finally accepted as a machinist. Gambo has, however, merely transferred himself from the frying pan to the fire, for the mission of the *Kodak*, organized by the League of the Godless Warriors, is nothing less than to prepare for the outbreak of a World Revolution by subjecting the whole world to a rain of "Red" leaflets. In the course of the voyage it reaches New York, where Gambo seizes his opportunity to leave it by parachute. He thus lands in America, his new Mecca, badly injured but still alive, while the airship explodes and comes down to earth a mass of ruins.

The book is, however, by no means the mere narrative of melodramatic adventure that this outline might suggest. Its psychological interest is at least as remarkable as its dramatic imagination. The development of Gambo's character is handled with great discrimination and acumen; and a charming though pathetic love story adds the element of personal romance. A hint is, however, given that a happier experience of this kind may await Gambo in the New World; and indeed the book seems to call for a sequel describing the future career of the very youthful hero. It is to be hoped that an English translation may be forthcoming.

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The New Books

The books listed by title only in the classified list below are noted here as received. Many of them will be reviewed later.

Belles Lettres

SHAKESPEARE'S PROBLEM COMEDIES. By WILLIAM WITHERLE LAWRENCE. Macmillan. 1931. \$3.

During the last fifteen years or so students of Shakespeare have found it necessary and agreeable to give attention to Professor Lawrence's clean-cut statements of the effect of traditional plot outlines and character types upon Shakespeare's dramaturgy, especially upon the disputed group of plays known as "dark comedies." Professor Lawrence's attitude, which has points of affinity to those of Professor Stoll and Professor Schücking, is definite, consistent, and modern. It is historical rather than biographical, and in that as in many other respects voices a challenge to the nineteenth century critics, such as Dowden and Sidney Lee. That is, Mr. Lawrence, faced with an apparent irrationality in plot such as Posthumous's wager in "Cymbeline" or apparent aberrations of character like those of Bertram in "All's Well" or of Angelo in "Measure for Measure," seeks explanation not in the poet's mood or personal circumstances, but in the story patterns which he believes Shakespeare and his audiences accepted from their medieval ancestors and enjoyed without the realistic appraisal to which the modern reader subjects them.

A medievalist himself, Mr. Lawrence is able to present this thesis with much learning and persuasiveness. It has essential validity no doubt and is helpful as a corrective against the romantic folly of viewing Shakespeare *in vacuo*, beating luminous wings, sometimes in vain. Primarily the book is a study and defense of that portion of Shakespeare's mature work which is perhaps least generally admired today, "All's Well that Ends Well," "Troilus and Cressida," "Measure for Measure," and the Posthumous-Iachimo part of "Cymbeline." It gathers together and usefully expands what the author has said separately in various earlier essays published in learned places. An excellent new introductory chapter and a concluding sketch of "Later Shakespearean Comedy" round out the book.

THE ROAD TO CULTURE. By Charles Gray Shaw. \$2.

WIT AND WISDOM OF MOROCCO. By Edward Westermarck. Liveright. \$5.

THE ENGLISH BIBLE AS LITERATURE. By Charles A. Dinsmore. Houghton Mifflin. \$2.50.

THE EARLY ESSAYS AND ROMANCES OF SIR WILLIAM TEMPLE. Edited by C. C. Moore Smith. Oxford University Press.

FINDING LITERATURE ON THE TEXAS PLAINS. By John William Rogers and J. Frank Dobie. Dallas: Southwest Press.

Fiction

STORIES WITHOUT WOMEN. By DONN BYRNE. Century. 1931. \$2.

The many admirers of the late Donn Byrne will be glad to learn that his first published collection of stories, "Stories without Women," first published sixteen years ago and long unobtainable, has just been reissued. It is surprising, considering the author's popularity, that this book should have been allowed to remain so long out of print, for it deserves a place, at least, among the better half of his work. It is made up, as may be guessed, of tales of boxing, of the late war, of the Foreign Legion (comparatively unknown in 1916), of the New York underworld, and similar adventurous settings, and contains, along with a few conventional stories, a number of excellent ones. The author's style is in this book not so hauntingly mellifluous as it became in "Messer Marco Polo," but it must not be thought that this is merely a collection of exciting adventures and nothing more. In one or two of the stories, notably "The Wake," Byrne shows all his power of evoking atmosphere. And in this book there is nearly always present a grimness which is always in evidence in his best work and which combined with his romanticism to produce what is probably his best work, "The Wind Bloweth," and then almost vanished (except for sporadic incidents) out of his writing, leaving "Destiny Bar" pretty and romanticized without it.

OLD SHIP. By LENNOX KERR. Macmillan. 1931.

This novel scarcely fulfils the promise of its delightful title. It is a conventional story of a fore-castle full of unfortunate sailors living in squalor, and a brute of a captain. It departs from the customary model, however, in portraying the softening of the captain's fibre as a result of the almost complete inactivity of the merchant skipper at sea. Hard Case Busby becomes

a Nancy with a shelf full of cosmetic bottles in his cabin.

The author who obviously loves the sea, is one of those perverse sentimentalists who find their pleasure in making things out a little worse than they are. We find it difficult to believe that any ship's company was ever so hopeless as that which put to sea on the *Hillhouse*. The author knows his ship better than his human nature. One quickly gets the feel of the rusty old tramp, and conceives an affection for her too, notwithstanding the horrors that take place on board, but the actions of officers and men are bewilderingly capricious and hysterical. We always had the notion that sailors were rather steady fellows on the whole. Not this lot.

VENUS ON WHEELS. By MAURICE DEKOBRA. Macaulay. 1931. \$2.

It is apparent that the potentialities for civilized farce were promising in this latest Dekobra novel, but the author has developed them with a touch so laborious and tiresome—the proverbial Gallic wit is here in evidence at its inane worst—that the entire book misses fire. The initial situation discloses a young Parisian wife of the upper bourgeoisie, estranged from her husband because of his infidelity. With the intention of reforming the happy outcast, she salvages a cocotte from a Montmartre dive, takes the girl into her own luxurious home, and proceeds to carry out the benevolent experiment with eventualities which are more surprising and exciting for the various characters concerned than they can possibly be for the reader. A considerable portion of the story is told in pseudo-cynical, worldly-wise dialogue, dimly ornamented with faded wisecracks on sex which are introduced with the probable intention of disguising the essential thinness and mediocrity of the story.

BEGGAR'S CHOICE. By Patricia Wentworth. Lipincott. \$2.

WHITEY. By Carroll and Garrett Graham. Vanguard. \$2.

LIFE AND LINGO. By Marie MacKenzie and Trix MacKenzie. Stratford. \$2.50.

OFFER OF MARRIAGE. By Berta Ruck. Dodd, Mead. \$2.

RATTUN THE REEFER. By Edward Howard. Edited by Captain Marryat. Everyman's Library. 90 cents.

THE MYSTERIOUS CORPSE. By Tiffany Thayer. Fiction League.

THE LIGHT THAT NEVER WAS. By Katherine Fullerton Gerould. Scribners. \$2.

A LADY QUITE LOST. By Arthur Stringer. Bobbs-Merrill. \$2.

SPORTING YOUTH. By McKinley Bryant. King. \$2.

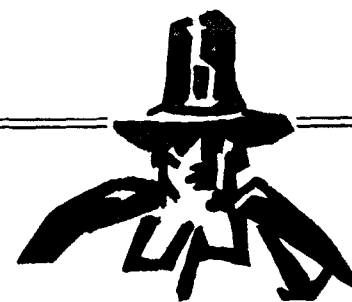
History

A MODERN HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH PEOPLE, 1880-1922. By R. H. GRETTON. Dial. 1930. \$5.

The publishers of this volume have placed students of contemporary England under a heavy sense of obligation. Here within the covers of a single modestly priced book are the eleven hundred odd pages which originally appeared in three volumes. The contents stand in no need of a reviewer's commendation. Mr. Gretton's history is not the sort that the scholar fifty years hence will write, but it has merits, which, one fears, will be lost by that time. The author has sacrificed any retrospective advantage that he might have possessed and has written of the events of each year as they appealed to living Englishmen. It is an image of the English people as they are reflected in the sedate pages of the *Times*, in that distorting but oddly revealing mirror *Punch*, in the plays that they see, and in the music halls that they crowd. The story proceeds as a chronicle, with the events of each year usually comprising a chapter. In 1909-1910, for example, Mr. Gretton deals successively with wireless telegraphy, a famous murder, the Poor Law Report, Labor Party developments, the naval race with Germany, the Cook-Pearry controversy, flying machines, and motor cars. From such ill-assorted materials he has fashioned a work that for most readers will be worth several dozen neatly documented monographs. Any lack of unity in subject matter is more than balanced by the completeness of the picture and by the sense of reality which it conveys. It is a fascinating book, amorphous, to be sure, but no more so than is the period that it covers.

A HISTORY OF SOUTH AMERICA. By Charles Edmond Akers. Dutton. \$5.

THE WORLD CRISIS. By Winston Churchill. Scribners. One volume edition. \$5.



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