

History and Program

HISTORY OF ITALIAN LITERATURE.

By FRANCESCO DE SANCTIS. Translated by JOAN REDFERN. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1931.

Reviewed by GIUSEPPE PREZZOLINI

THIS work can be understood and appreciated by American readers only on one condition: that they do not take it for one of those manuals bristling with dates, facts, titles, and bibliographical indications, which present-day readers prize so highly; nor for one of those books so dear to the heart of students which claim to liberate them from the necessity of reading the classics and furnish them with the pretext of fighting shy of the very subject matter to be studied. In short, that they do not look upon it as a repertory, an encyclopedia, a summary, an outline, or one of those wonder-working and at the same time abominable skeletons which the cocksure, simple-minded propagator of our contemporary, superficial, helter-skelter culture, would stand in place of living beings, vital ideas, personal viewpoints, and independent opinions. It is something quite different. Italians of the last few generations, since the advent of Benedetto Croce, have studied it as a history of the Italian mind of the past and as a prophecy of the mind of the future, as a history book and at the same time as a program that proposes a line of action, written with the ken of the astronomer and the seer.

Works of this kind are destined to have a troubled existence,—now to be placed on a pedestal, now to be trampled in the dust. A generation ago in Italy one mentioned De Sanctis only to poke fun at his errors (which, after all, boil down to a few erroneous attributions in the first chapter) and to single him out as an example of that "fantasia" which the budding scholar, trained in the rigid, scientific, so-called German method so extolled at the time, ought to shun.

The generation which pretended to measure the human mind with a yardstick and weigh it in a chemist's balance, affected a supercilious attitude toward De Sanctis and held as of small account the pages in which he had poured forth the rich stores of an acute and critical mind.

With the dawn, however, in Italy of a new day of vigorous literary and philosophical criticism following upon the activity of Croce and Gentile, collaborators in the new militant review, *La Critica*, all the writings, major and minor, of De Sanctis, which had long been lying neglected, were brought to public notice. As a result, several new editions and countless reprints of his works appeared. And today, in the secondary schools of Italy, De Sanctis is deemed of capital importance.

When De Sanctis wrote his "History of Italian Literature" he had uppermost in his mind the political plight of Italy which, at this time, had just emerged from her struggle for independence. Rid at last of the foreign yoke, the country seemed to pause, wearied by the conflict, with no great minds capable of guiding her destinies, a prey to uncultured, greedy generations, frequently corrupt and unquestionably devoid of the lofty ideals which had animated Mazzini and Cavour in their crusade for national unity. De Sanctis's work was a chronicle of the "formation" of the Italian spirit during the centuries of religious and civic fervor of the communes, and of its "disintegration" during that period of feverish striving for the universal that was the Renaissance; of its lethargy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and of its renaissance under the influence of the champions of modern literature, men who at last linked thought with action, joined the pen with the sword, the brain with the heart, as did Parini, Alfieri, Manzoni, Leopardi.

But as has happened in many a similar case, while the aims De Sanctis recorded were of the time the work he created belonged to eternity. Columbus set out to find a new and shorter passage to the Indies but discovered instead a new continent; in the same way, De Sanctis attempted to educate and "reform" the

Italians of his time, and ended by demonstrating how the literary critic had to approach a work of art.

Was this approach of De Sanctis to the study of literature indeed a new one? To us it may seem age-old; yet at his time it was not only new but revolutionary. New it was and it still remains unsurpassed. He did not set himself the question whether a literary work must conform to an accepted ideal or academic model; he did not ask the writer he was examining what his ideas happened to be; rather he sought to put himself into that author's place, to identify himself with his spirit, and see whether he had actually succeeded in doing what he had set out to do, whether he had been able to give adequate expression to the world he felt stirring within him, whether a poetical coherence and logic knit the various parts of the work into a harmonious whole. And he asked nothing more of the poet than that he be a poet, of the artist than that he be an artist, laying down as a fundamental canon the independence of a work of art from the ethical or the practical in life.

Examining, one by one, the works of Italian literature, from the early Sicilian poets of the thirteenth century to the Italian poets of the nineteenth, he revealed to the reader the very soul of each of them, and as if by magic, he displayed them in all their beauties and all their defects. Thus, "recreating" each individual work from "within" and not simply judging it from its conformity to an abstract model of beauty, De Sanctis pointed out the parts that continued to live and those that were dead, the organs which were vital to its existence and the artificial ones which had been grafted in by the indiscriminating writer. In this manner, the writers of Italy are "re-created" by his pen: we feel them pulsate with life, the heartbeats of their emotions are transmitted to us, and the barrier of gone-by centuries no longer prevents us from making their spirit our own.

De Sanctis's style is swift, vivid, incisive. He was accused by pedants of being too journalistic and of not writing a "pure" Italian. But his spirit thirsted for "concreteness." Never do we find in him a superfluous word, an empty idea, a silly remark. One reads him with pleasure, but not with the sort of pleasure with which one reads writers of facile style. One reads him with profit because he always treads on firm ground.

Francesco De Sanctis lived in an age of turmoil. First among his passions was his cult for liberty, and under the Bourbon domination, rather than renounce this ideal, he did not hesitate to suffer persecution and go into exile. An exile, at Zurich, he was forced to teach. When the golden dream of his youth was realized and he could once more set foot in his country, he entered public life and was successively journalist, deputy, and minister of Public Education. He felt duty-bound to strive for the best interests of his country and did not allow himself, as did Mazzini, to be disheartened by the inferiority of his own compatriots, nor did he make them the butt of his jibes as Carducci was wont to do.

He had a number of disciples, even during his lifetime, but full recognition came to him only after one generation had gone by. Benedetto Croce, taking over the problems which De Sanctis had approached without having been able to discover their roots, and appropriating what were sound suggestions on the part of the latter, though often contradictorily applied, presented them in strictly scientific fashion and with logical precision in his "Esthetics"—a living monument to the memory of Francesco De Sanctis. Thanks to Croce the intuitions and contributions of this writer, who has had no recognition save in Italy, have now become the heritage of the whole cultured world.

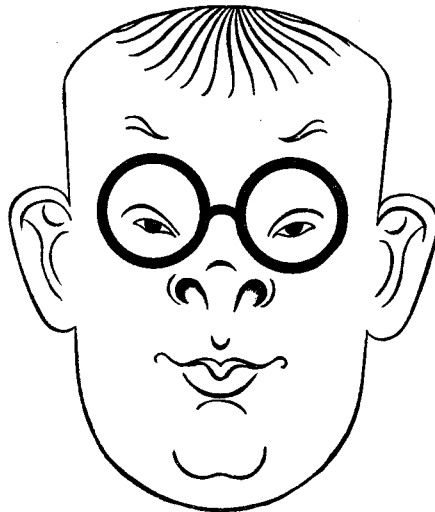
The *Bulletin* of the John Rylands Library in England recently contained three articles, one containing twenty-eight hitherto unpublished letters to and from Dr. Johnson, another printing for the first time three "dialogues" by Mrs. Thrale, and the third examining the Burney family in view of the letters in the Piozzi collection.

"Little Phil"

SHERIDAN: A Military Narrative. By JOSEPH HERGESHEIMER. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1931. \$4.

Reviewed by A. HOWARD MENEELY

ONE is not able to discover from reading Mr. Hergesheimer's book why he undertook a study of General Sheridan. He has not been able to contribute much new material about his subject, and there was little in the personality of the man that might be expected to appeal to the author of the fascinating vignettes in "Swords and Roses." In many respects Sheridan was the very antithesis of the renowned



JOSEPH HERGESHEIMER.

From a caricature by Eva Herrmann.

Confederate cavalymen, Stuart and Forrest, whom Mr. Hergesheimer has so interestingly portrayed. Although probably no less able than either of them, Sheridan was utterly without the picturesque and striking qualities that added to their fame. Whatever romance there is in his life story has been injected by the poets, and Mr. Hergesheimer accepts it for no more than it is worth.

In the main he offers us a rather sober military narrative centering in engagements in which Sheridan participated. The portrait of the general that emerges from the painstaking account of maneuvers is for the most part indistinct and, despite some fine literary passages, a somewhat drab one. The personal element is decidedly subordinated. Sheridan's early life is briefly sketched in a Foreword and his career after Appomattox is omitted entirely. In the treatment of the Tennessee campaign in 1863, a section which occupies nearly a third of the book, Sheridan at times is little more than a shadowy figure. For pages and pages his name is scarcely mentioned.

The author emphasizes that Sheridan was strictly a professional soldier. He had no patience with "splendid chances" and persistently refused to gamble his men against elusive stakes of military victory. "He was, in war, all that a brilliant and transient amateur was not . . . he did not exist to win . . . at too great a price, single engagements, but wars." He would fight at proper moments with desperate courage, but when the time seemed inopportune he had no hesitation about withdrawing or seeking more favorable circumstances under which to strike the enemy. His caution, which was sometimes mistaken for timidity, together with his constant solicitude for the comfort and welfare of his forces, doubtless goes far to explain his record of successes and the splendid confidence that his men had in him, a confidence that he was able to turn to good account at critical moments such as that at Cedar Creek, when his appearance on the field after the "ride" was enough to halt a panic-stricken army that was taking to its heels. His men knew that he never called upon them to enter futile encounters and that he had never come out of a battle defeated.

Mr. Hergesheimer is generous in his praise of Sheridan's gifts as a cavalry commander, but he is candid in drawing attention to the shortcomings of the general and points out how large a part good fortune and the favor of Grant played in Sheridan's career. He tells us that the general's action in his first major engage-

ment, Chickamauga, brought down upon him severe censure from informed critics of that battle, that the charge up the face of Missionary Ridge was dictated by expediency and was excused by Grant simply because it succeeded, and that the distinction he won at Cedar Creek was the result of chance aided by "his magnetic and resolute character."

Perhaps if Sheridan had remained with the armies of the West he might have sunk back into the comparative obscurity that was his lot until 1863. But good luck and the confidence of the new general-in-chief, Grant, gave him his great opportunity when, late in March, 1864, he was assigned to command the cavalry corps of the Army of the Potomac. The record of what followed justified the opportunity. Within twelve months he defeated "Jeb" Stuart, crushed Early, devastated the Great Valley, and after a magnificent running fight, intercepted Lee as he fled westward through Virginia in a desperate attempt to escape the inevitable. It was this rapid succession of achievements that lifted "Little Phil" from mediocrity to greatness and made him truly "worth his weight in gold" to the Union cause.

A Suicidal Society

DOCTOR KERKHOVEN. By JACOB WASSERMANN. Translated by CYRUS BROOKS. New York: Horace Liveright. 1932. \$3.

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT

"DOCTOR KERKHOVEN" is the promised sequel to "The Maurizius Case"; it takes up the story of Etzel von Andergast, the boy who, by uncovering the miscarriage of justice for which his father was responsible, alienated himself from his parents, wounded his soul against the baseness of the world, and yet was not much help to the wrongly imprisoned Maurizius, who was irremediably broken by his sufferings. Readers of "The Maurizius Case" were left waiting to see how Etzel was to be reconciled to life in general, and to his mother in especial. "Doctor Kerkhoven" attempts to provide these solutions; but it is a novel by itself, which can be read without its predecessor, and is far more than the story of Etzel von Andergast. Etzel indeed does not appear until the second of the two parts (separated by the Great War) into which the book is divided. The first book is concerned with the friendship of Kerkhoven, an obscure and unambitious doctor with certain mystic theories of health and medicine, and Johann Irlen, a man who has spent his life and ranged the world in search of an answer to the problems of his time. Irlen's influence awakens Kerkhoven; Irlen has the insatiably seeking spirit, Kerkhoven the ability; and when Irlen dies of the infection of sleeping-sickness he has brought back from Africa, he hints at his belief (a Persian belief) that a part of his soul may enter Kerkhoven. After that time Kerkhoven is a superman, making cures which are quite literally miraculous.

There are many other figures in the book, and innumerable incidents. The complicated story is told in a most laborious manner, constantly casting forward and backward, introducing new characters and pausing to relate their previous histories, continually interrupted by conversations in which the speakers, who all speak with the same accent, seem to be explaining not so much themselves as Herr Wassermann. The method has all the involution of Proust, without his clarity; in spite of the annoying frequency of signposts like "As we shall see" and "As we have seen," it is hardly possible to be sure always where one is in reference to the time-plane of the main story, or at what point one diverged from it.

This extreme turgidness has after all a certain value, although it makes the book at times almost unreadable: it does convey the impression of enormous difficulty, like Pope's heaving lines about Ajax; one thinks of the characters as fighting a monstrous battle up to their nostrils in water, struggling mortally, and yet hardly able to stir from the mere weight of the scheme of things. So much certainly emerges

from the book. We get an overwhelming idea of the author's *Weltanschauung* (as we did in his earlier books, but yet more strongly). He sees the world as full of sick souls, so that the whole race is infected, as the sound cells of a body suffer with the unhealthy. He sees sorrow and sin alike with the keenest pity and without horror. He seems to have no belief in human responsibility, and yet to have some hope for the future. It is a terrible view of life, but one consistent and great.

This is much, but it is not enough for the author's aim, nor enough for the reader's reward for reading so long and difficult a book. Herr Wassermann has weighted his story down with philosophy, and has attempted a solution of the tragedy he feels in the race. These are his peculiar offerings in this book; and for them not so much can be said as for his psychology. Of the parenthetic philosophy that runs throughout the book, example



JACOB WASSERMANN

is the best criticism. Take for instance the first conversation between Etzel and Kerkhoven; Etzel, to cover his embarrassment, begins playing with Kerkhoven's watch, and the author comments:

He felt rather like a father from whose pocket his little son takes something to play with. At the same time, he had a strange feeling as though, when his watch was taken from him, he was set free from time, the tyrant that compelled him to divide up day and night, and to divide the parts into still smaller parts, producing so much pettiness, producing mass instead of fullness.

It may be the fault of the translation—whether or no, it is a fault that appears everywhere—but that passage is partly incomprehensible, and wholly unconvincing; and it is a fair sample of the cloudy ideas with which the book is filled.

Kerkhoven's solution, and Etzel's reconciliation, are unconvincing in a different way; they are matters of faith, and the author has not succeeded in producing an atmosphere in which we accept faith, as he has succeeded in making us accept despair. Kerkhoven, the supernaturally prepared, is a prophet without a prophecy; he talks a great deal of mystic medicine; "The body," he says, "never falls ill until the soul has accepted illness"; and he makes cures by the sheer force of his personality. Now Kerkhoven's theory is of the kind that is important if true; but since it is not supported by argument, but only by miracles occurring in a work of fiction, it remains fictitious and a little annoying. The end of Etzel's story is even more incredible; he becomes the lover of his adored Kerkhoven's wife, the affair is discovered, and then, with a want of analysis that contrasts startlingly with the exhaustive character study earlier, in eight of the six hundred and fifty pages of the book, we are told that after a period of near-insanity he returns to his mother, whom he had not seen since "The Maurizius Case." To believe in this reconciliation requires, strictly, an act of faith; it is like the faith demanded by the book of Job or the "Prometheus Bound," that, though the world seems wholly evil, yet it is good. Whether those books could command the faith necessary is an open question; "Doctor Kerkhoven" certainly

cannot. We believe in the almost unbelievable wickedness and wretchedness of the book, because of the author's power; but we never believe in the hopes held out. In the knitting of narrative and portrayal of a suicidal society, "Doctor Kerkhoven" succeeds admirably; but in its philosophy it is no more than a fine failure.

Creative Eros

THE GOLDEN VASE. By LUDWIG LEWISOHN. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1931. \$2.

Reviewed by ROBERT HERRICK

THE belief that man's highest creative energies are best stimulated by woman and that woman's true function is to be the incentive and sympathetic assistant of man in his creative efforts, which is the theme of "The Golden Vase," is not a new one. In practice at least, especially among those males who devote themselves to the arts (arrogating to themselves more particularly the glamorous epithet "creative"), the thing is common enough, although the justification of their amorous conduct may not be so elaborately and fervently formulated as it is by Mr. Lewisoohn's middle-aged New England novelist, "John Ridgevale, Esq. of Boston and New Milford, Conn." This is his account of the affair:

Ridgevale had long known the secret that Eros opens the heart. Had he not communicated himself even to Dagmar, the Greenwich Village maiden, and told her the story that he was afterward to write? He was, considering his origin and tradition, to both of which he clung, an adept of mysteries wholly hidden from his fellows, who either treated the senses with a cheap unfairness and a feigned or real disgust or else in this looser era with a vengeful, stupid, barren carnality. . . . There must be many, he supposed, who lived the mystery of which his mind and body were theoretically aware. Shelley begot his poems on the flesh of women. Not that he liked Shelley greatly; the man was too loose and wavering in his tastes, too vague and libertine in hectic seeking. . . . But Shelley, too, had been an adept of the mysterious sacrament of the creative Eros in which from the beautiful flesh of woman, as fruits and flowers from the earth our mother, spring the immortal works of the human imagination. Ah, beautiful flesh was not enough! The women must invite not only passion and delight, but affection and a kind of reverence. For they were the sacred mother-womb of both minds and bodies, of both works and the race, and men their lovers and children, men the creative but the born of women, must be able to rest their foreheads against the lovely knees of their mates not only aware of beauty, but aware of constancy and tenderness and mothering kindness. No, beauty was not enough. But what it wanted could not be supplied by a meddling and prying intellect, at best an imitation of a second-rate man's, unwomaning the woman of her divinity, etc., etc.

Whether women are content with the subordinate and ministering role of the creative Eros is another matter: latterly they would seem eager to adventure on their own initiative and subordinate men to their own ends. Which is one of the complaints of Mr. Lewisoohn's hero with his wife Katherine, a graduate (and Ph.D.) of Radcliffe and Harvard, and sometime instructor at Mt. Holyoke college. He has many other complaints of our modern world and of the treatment therein accorded to creative artists. He is especially severe about the literary critics of his works. Having undertaken a voyage to Europe to recover from a nervous breakdown he finds nothing better to do on the steamer than to peruse the newspaper reviews of his works. (One might think that a serious writer like John Ridgevale Esq. who had attained a tolerable success after thirty years of publication would have learned to ignore the fleabites of our journalism!) Those critics who hold that his books are not novels irritate him above all others, also "the stony youths," and "the irritated ladies."

Whether a given book should be classed as a novel or not is no great matter, perhaps, but at the risk of being included among "the stony youths" and "the irritated ladies" the present reviewer does not hesitate to say that "The Golden Vase" is not a good novel, from any point of

view. An idea, a theme, no matter how sound or how beautiful or how fervently proclaimed does not make a novel—or a novelette which Mr. Lewisoohn's brief tale more properly should be called. In the first place the somewhat ponderous (and unctuous) style is that of the essayist or propagandist rather than of the novelist, as is the discursive and philosophical method, the excursions into Freud and philosophy, generalizations about racial tendencies, etc. But what is far more important, for a poor style does not necessarily kill a true novel, is the fact that Mr. Lewisoohn fails to create his chosen theme in terms of interesting and significant personalities. The instance he has taken of a peevish and aging novelist is neither appealing nor convincing. Nor is the figure of Lisl Schönbrunn (who calls him Master), in spite of her reiterated physical charms, her youthfulness and fervor, even when seen dancing on the shore, a sublime impersonation of the "creative Eros," at least to another than "the Master."

The Singermanns

THIS MAN IS MY BROTHER. By MYRON BRINIG. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1932. \$2.50.

Reviewed by CLINTON SIMPSON

THOSE who read Myron Brinig's earlier novel, "Singermann," and found it interesting will be pleased to know that he has returned to the colorful Singermanns and their affairs in this book. "Singermann" was the author's most attractive and, on the whole, his most successful book up to this time. "This Man Is My Brother" has some of the former book's attractiveness, and is more expertly written. It lacks a little of "Singermann's" vigor and movement.

The author spends the earlier chapters of this book (as he must) in re-introducing the Singermanns. Sol, David, Louis, Harry, Michael, and Rachel Singermann—the second generation of the Singermann family, whose experiences were previously dealt with at some length—are all present again, as is also their mother, Rebecca, who was perhaps the outstanding character in the earlier book. The wives and husbands of Rebecca's children, and her children's children—particularly the latter—are among the other characters.

The grandchildren of Rebecca and Moses Singermann, the Rumanian Jews who immigrated to New York and Minnesota, then to "Silver Bow," Montana, have now become quite acclimatized to life in this country. They are almost typical Americans, in fact, and have been influenced by all the social and intellectual currents of the past few years. Michael is a novelist who reads Proust, Nina allows herself to be dazzled by a football hero and seduced, Sylvia marries a "goy," Ralph develops a persecution mania and goes insane philosophizing about Jews and machines.

Among the older generation, Daisy, a Christian Scientist and wife of one son, becomes a Hollywood fan. Harry, whose decadent tastes were evident in "Singermann," is now definitely a homosexual.

There was little story, in the conventional sense, in "Singermann," and there is less here. The earlier book had movement and a vigorous succession of events that gave it a real sense of progression. This novel is more loosely held together. There are only three lines of movement: Michael goes home from New York to visit his family; his mother dies; and Harry commits suicide after an unsuccessful attempt to keep the friendship of his nephew.

Brinig is a writer whose stories give the impression of being quite personal. He does not always objectify his material. For instance, in this book Rebecca and Daisy alone are real characters. The author's prose is good—too good to be used merely for atmosphere and color, as it often is in this book.

In the review of Thornton Wilder's "The Long Christmas Dinner," and other one act plays recently published in the *Saturday Review*, the statement was erroneously made that "The Long Christmas Dinner" had recently been produced by Professor George Pierce Baker and his students at New Haven. As a matter of fact the play was produced by the Yale Dramatic Association and the Vassar Philaletheis both in New Haven and at Vassar.

Its Promise Was Good

RICHARD HUGHES. AN OMNIBUS. New York: Harper & Bros. 1931. \$3.

HIS publishers have brought together between two covers sixteen stories, thirty-one poems, and three plays by Mr. Richard Hughes, the author of the brilliant and extraordinary "Innocent Voyage." The present collection is interesting, but its interest is rather as showing the development of Mr. Hughes than in itself. Almost everything in the volume has the strangeness and clarity of perception, and the distinction of style that appear in "The Innocent Voyage," but almost everything also is either marred by some obvious fault, or else is clearly an experiment. In one case, indeed, we are shown the same plot treated in two ways, as a short story, scarcely more than a sketch, and then as the three-act "Comedy of Good and Evil"; for the general reader they are unfortunately arranged, since the sketch comes first, and rather diminishes the effect of the play; though no doubt the student or devotee of Mr. Hughes will be glad to trace the elaboration of the idea.

The two most ambitious pieces in the book are plays, the "Comedy of Good and Evil" already mentioned, and "The Sis-



RICHARD HUGHES

ters' Tragedy." Both of these show the delighted interest in the directness of children, and almost in the cruelty of children, that gave such poignance of revelation to "The Innocent Voyage." In "The Sisters' Tragedy" a girl of ten kills her brother, who is blind, deaf, and almost idiotic, because she has decided that he would be better off dead. The play is undeniably powerful, but is marred by the insistent accumulation of horrors which is characteristic of the undergraduate age at which it was written. "A Comedy of Good and Evil" has the opposite fault; it has a tendency to degenerate into mere cleverness—without being quite clever enough. Its postulate is a little girl-devil for whom good and evil are reversed; who sets out, full of holy, vicious zeal and faith in Lucifer, to damn a Welsh minister, but is constantly tempted into the paths of virtue by his good example. The minister, knowing her for a fiend, takes her in; a damnable action in itself, and yet the extreme form of the virtue of loving one's enemies. It is not quite clear whether the author is seriously suggesting that God is beyond good and evil, and that there are beings (like the children of "The Innocent Voyage") whose good is not ours, or whether he is merely aiming at Gilbertian topsy-turvyism; but in either case, before the three acts are out the contradictions in terms have become word-chopping.

Probably the pieces which are most valuable in themselves are the less ambitious ones, those that give glimpses of strange countries and the author's adventurous life in them. "Lochinvarovic," for instance, a romantic-ironic tale told with a full sense of the absurdity of the Byronic Balkan code, and a hint that that code is no worse than another, is a joy; and so are the autobiographical introduction and the diary "Steering Passenger." If one had not read "The Innocent Voyage," one would set this down as a volume of remarkable promise; since one knows already how that promise has been fulfilled, it makes one the more eager for Mr. Hughes' next book, but in itself it does not satisfy one's expectations.