

# Philosophy in Balance

*TOWARD A PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY.* By José Ortega y Gasset. New York: W. W. Norton. 1941. 273 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by CRANE BRINTON

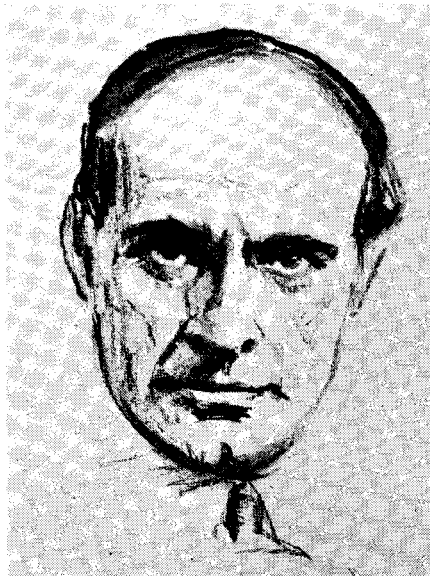
THESE essays represent a glean- ing from some of Señor Ortega's more recent writings. Though composed against the tragic back- ground of recent Spanish history, and in spite of exile and serious illness, they bear no trace of self-pity and self-righteousness (which are often forms of the same thing.) Though concerned with the fate of our civiliza- tion, they have nothing in common with the yammering prophecies of doom, the neurotic jeremiads so many of our incurable illusionists are tossing off to quiet the nerves they call their consciences. It would be unfair to Señor Ortega to accuse him of so Ele- atic—and un-Spanish—a virtue as se- renity: but balance, moderation, con- trolled imagination, all qualities rare among contemporary philosophers of history, he displays throughout these essays.

In content, at first sight the volume looks like a collection of incidental writings. "The Sportive Origin of the State," a rather earlier essay, advances the suggestion that the co-operative process out of which came the state was not begun by men seeking wealth, or security, or any other utilitarian aim, but by young men, athletes, banded together to win fame, loot, and women. "The Unity and Diversity of Europe" insists that the notion of the balance of power in Europe was no mere politician's shibboleth, but the living necessity by which the endlessly varied, experimental, "liberal" civili- zation of that continent was made pos- sible. "Man the Technician" traces briefly, and with certain excursions in- to philosophy—specifically, ontology— further clarified in the next essay, the ways in which technology and the phys- ical sciences have made men masters of material things. "History as a Sys- tem," the most important of the es- says, argues that what we call "scien- tific method" cannot be applied suc- cessfully to the study of man; that the "idealistic" philosophical reaction to "materialistic" science is equally in- effective in the study of man, since its concept of "spirit" is a disguised naturalism, static and purely intellec- tualised; and finally that man is only what has happened to him, that his- tory is the only possible ontology. The last essay "The Argentine and the Ar- gentinian State" contains Señor Or- tega's philosophical responses to the new environment in which he has

found a refuge. *Mutatis mutandis* (and that means a lot of changes), he sounds delightfully like a nineteenth- century Englishman lecturing in nine- teenth-century New York.

As a matter of fact, these essays are more closely integrated than they seem to be in a brief report. To their varied factual stuff Señor Ortega brings a firm and well-formed mind, made up but not closed, and already familiar to us from his "The Revolt of the Masses." It is to be hoped that in his South American haven he will be able to carry to completion the more systematic works he has already begun. In the meantime, "Toward a Philosophy of History" is a first fruit worth having. The metaphor is, how- ever, misleading; there is a great deal of highly concentrated nourishment and very little water in this fruit.

Señor Ortega's philosophy is too subtle and many-sided to be fairly analyzed in a concluding paragraph. Briefly, he would seem to share with Whitehead, Bergson, and many other moderns a distrust of the intellectualist traditions of Western philosophy, which he here traces back to the Eleatics. He also distrusts natural science, but only when it goes beyond what he thinks its necessary limits, that is, study of "nature." For what science has done and can do he has the high- est respect, and he never voices ro- mantic dislike for science and scien- tists. He will have no maunderings



José Ortega y Gasset

over *Geist*. "Thinking is too easy. The mind in its flight rarely meets with resistance. Hence the vital importance for the intellectual of touching con- crete objects and of learning discip- line in his intercourse with them." But science (*la razón física*), a revelation to Galileo, is no longer such.

This last looks like a surrender to unreason, but Señor Ortega promises us that it is not. In a future work, he will disclose in "historical reason" a rigorous and exigent form of think- ing that can do for the study of man what physico-mathematical reason has signally failed to do. Significantly—and perhaps ominously—he ends with a quotation from Auguste Comte.

## The Law of the Americas

*HANDS OFF, A HISTORY OF THE MONROE DOCTRINE.* By Dexter Perkins. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. 1941. 455 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by HUBERT HERRING

THE British be thanked for think- ing of it, James Monroe and John Quincy Adams be thanked for putting it on paper, Theodore Roosevelt and Dexter Perkins be thanked for making it interesting—so much for the Monroe Doctrine, which now in its 118th year appears to be the liveliest conviction in the Ameri- can credo.

Mr. Perkins proves what should be abundantly clear to everyone save pro- fessors of history and Henry Ford—that American history is exciting. He draws upon none of the juggler's tricks made familiar by the popularizers. He does not lay on color for the sake of color, he plays no favorites, he in- vents no villains. He tells the simple story of the way in which Foreign

Secretary Canning called in Minister Rush and broke the news that British and American interest were now iden- tical; he tells how James Monroe, checked by John Quincy Adams, put down the words on paper, and of the train of events which ensued.

After careful scrutiny of the do- ings of the masters of the Holy Alli- ance, supposedly plotting reprisals in the New World, Mr. Perkins comes to the conclusion that "the message of 1823 was directed against an imag- inary menace." The United States was warding off attacks from gentlemen who had no slightest intention of at- tempting rescue of the Spanish Bour- bons' scattered empire. The Doctrine now has more point. A new Holy Al- liance is contemplating the sins pre- maturely charged against the older Holy Alliance.

The Doctrine changed little current history. The English belatedly learned that the Doctrine might be used

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# A Soldier on Leave

*THIS ABOVE ALL.* By Eric Knight.  
New York: Harper & Brothers. 1941.  
473 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by RAY B. WEST, JR.

IT seems pretty clear now that such books as "A Farewell to Arms," "Three Soldiers," and "All Quiet on the Western Front," could not, as it was hoped in the 1920's, do much to prevent a repetition of 1914-18. On the other hand, their influence is likely to be felt in another direction, that is, the setting up of new standards for war fiction, particularly those novels produced while the war is actually in progress. It is too early to predict that the market will not be flooded with romantic, propagandistic drivel such as was issued in America during the last war, with its accompanying prodigious sales, but it is heartening to find so honest and meritorious a work as this novel by Eric Knight among the first on the lists.

That is not to say that "This Above All" is the perfect novel. It is obviously a hurry-up job to take advantage of the current American interest in the war, and it is in many respects inferior to the author's two earlier excellent books. However, it is written with the same sincerity and skill (if not polish), and it reflects the same critical attitude toward Britain's philandering pre-war government, its bungling social reforms, and its Tory decadence. Above all, it presents a picture of England's wartime development from dazed bewilderment to stoicism—from Dunkirk to the first devastating London air raids—in a manner which digs deeper than newspaper bulletins or politicians' diaries.

Eric Knight knows modern warfare (he served through four years of the last war); he is British, but has lived for many years in Canada and the United States. As a result, his view is

both objective and sympathetic, his approach to his subject varied.

The plot is concerned with a soldier on leave, a hero of the retreat from Douai to Dunkirk, Clive Briggs, who becomes involved with a young war worker, Prudence Cathaway, daughter of a famous London surgeon. By developing the background of these characters, we are introduced to several levels of English society. Clive, as the illegitimate son of a poor working woman, presents his story in frequent, illuminating flashbacks. With the members of the Cathaway family, the book is more directly concerned. Pru's relatives are high army officers, London lawyers, doctors, and one is sent as a government emissary to purchase supplies in the United States. Her grandfather is a retired general of Yorkshire stock, a veteran of four wars, who chafes under the inactivity of retirement. These figures appear as strands continued simultaneously, and, for the most part, smoothly.

The one serious lapse in the book occurs when Clive reveals that he is determined not to return to the army. His reasons (as well as the arguments of his friends who oppose him) are delivered in long passages of rhetoric. The information is good, at times interesting, but fatal to the characterization. Clive and Pru become, for the time being, orators instead of people. The story lags. This is material that should have been given in some other manner; preferably, through the action of the characters themselves, as, indeed, it is throughout most of the book. The American section is skillfully told in brief sketches, and it is almost complete in itself, though not quite adequately woven into the central action.

On the whole, "This Above All" is a much better book, as a novel, than we have any reason to expect, coming as it does so early in the war. It is difficult to judge it as a work of art, yet it is not propaganda. It seems to me to be a sincere, but hurried piece of work by an admirable writer, and a British patriot.

## Novel within A Novel

*AMIEL.* By Myrtle Johnston. New York: D. Appleton-Century. 1941. 383 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by RICHARD A. CORDELL

THIS extraordinary novel proves that there is, after all, something new under the sun—in novel—in writing. Myrtle Johnston takes the familiar pattern of a novel within a novel and gives it a fresh and exciting treatment. The book is divided into nine sections, which alternate between the novelist-protagonist's adventures and chapters of the book he is writing. The two parallel stories are equally absorbing, although tantalizingly incomplete. Both the novelist and the "hero" of his novel have undergone shattering experiences which have resulted in a physical and mental breakdown, and both fight a losing battle to regain what they term "ordinariness." The novelist might have won, had a senseless accident not prostrated his wife and an equally senseless war marked him as certain victim.

Michael McClane, confined in a sordid pension with his injured wife, who is nearer dead than alive, is writing his novel "Amiel" in a frequently bombed city—the author firmly refuses to tell us where—and under the most excruciating circumstances. The city is raided and fired; there is no heat, little food; the wife has been struck down before a painful domestic misunderstanding could be cleared up; a protracted phys-

ical and mental illness makes writing all but impossible; the certainty of final defeat grows as the invading army approaches. McClane's Amiel, half Scotch and half Russian, is a bogus explorer who is in reality an ex-convict (political) from Siberia. He has been brutalized and quite unmanned by unspeakable hardships, which have defeated him partly because of his enormous self-pity and the thinness of his spirit. He marries a sensitive, aristocratic Irish girl, and their fight to save him is the theme of the novel. The two parallel stories balance each other and not only give a grim unity to the book but double the anguish of the reader as his interest in the two *misérables* mounts.

Miss Johnston's earlier fiction had some of the moodiness and wild energy of Emily Brontë's stories, but "Amiel" has the quieter, concentrated power of Julian Green's first novels. Like "The Secret Garden" it bores into the reader's sensibilities with a dentist's drill; however an occasional flash of the author's Irish wit or ironical observation keeps the book from becoming unbearably harrowing, without vitiating its powerful unity. "Amiel" is a novelist's novel, but it will be enjoyed also by those readers who are able to stand up to their reading with the same fortitude and spirit they summon for the anxieties and afflictions of real life. It is an unusual book, adult, tensely dramatic, and expertly written.

Eric Knight

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