

## Two Fall from Grace

THE MELODRAMATISTS. By Howard Nemerov. New York: Random House. 1949. 338 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by HARRISON SMITH

IT is with some trepidation that the conscientious reviewer opens the first novel of a young American who has won some recognition for his poetry and for short stories and essays that could not have been published in any of the mass-circulation magazines. As an editor of the magazine *Furioso*, he might be considered one of the leaders of that group of youthful writers whose doleful and angry approach to the American scene and whose obsession with despair have been attacked by several critics, including the writer of this review. On the jacket of his book Mr. Nemerov asserts that he is "dignified, commonplace, and thoroughly middle-class," but there is certainly nothing commonplace either in his manner of thought or in his talents as an entertaining and somewhat satanic satirist of American life and morals.

"The Melodramatists" is, in fact, the kind of novel we have been hoping for a long time would finally emerge from one of our new writers. It is inevitable that it will be compared with some of the work of Evelyn Waugh and Aldous Huxley, though Mr. Nemerov is by implication more serious than the first writer and less abstruse than the second, at least as Mr. Huxley is revealed in his later books. It should be stated at the outset that "The Melodramatists" is an unblushingly shocking novel, though none of its more carnal scenes are visualized, and it might well be considered profane by those who think that religion or the science of psychiatry are not proper subjects for high comedy.

The story, apart from its grotesque and delicate embroideries, can be easily summarized. It has to do with the fall from grace by separate paths of the two daughters of Nicholas Boyne when that head of a large and opulent Boston mansion was sent away with the girls' mother to an institution for the elderly insane. In the first chapter Nicholas's son vanishes by joining the Canadian Army, and does not return until the end, when he finds his dignified home turned momentarily into a brothel and his adulterous wife in the arms of his best friend.

This leaves Susan and Claire to pursue their separate paths, unhindered by advice or chaperonage. Susan, sleek and beautiful, had the self-sufficiency of a tame cat. With ease and

rapidity she was seduced by her amorous and elderly psychiatrist, Dr. Einman was a charlatan, to be sure, but there is enough resemblance between his lush verbal use of the more abstrusely morbid sins of the flesh and the conversational byplay of a few living psychiatrists in their unguarded moments, to give this repulsive and loveless man a sort of pathetic reality.

Her more saintly and perhaps frigid sister, Claire, contemplates Susan's downfall with horror, and the sight of the doctor leaving her sister's bedroom after midnight leaves her in an emotional state that induces her to find a more intellectual ecstasy in prayer. Since she is attracted to the Catholic faith by the conceptions of divine love, sin, and redemption, she accepts a scholarly priest as her tutor. The Bishop himself finally takes notice of this lonely and wealthy convert and uses the almost empty house to the advantage of Christian charity. The charity that is unhappily selected, the correction and salvation of "fallen women," leads to the satirically tragic ending, which is as absurd and as naughty, since the reader has been absorbing discourses and arguments on virtue and piety, as can be imagined.

"The Melodramatists" is true satire, written in the spirit of comedy, and it deals with sacred and profane love in terms that are not unfamiliar to the readers of many modern novels. Mr. Nemerov perhaps discourses sometimes at too great length on his store of knowledge of almost everything from music to religious literature and black magic. But his display of verbal fireworks, or mental gymnastics, if you please, cannot disguise the essential humanity and brilliance of this book.



—Paul Weller.

Alfred Hayes—"images of wind, cold, and loneliness."

## Italy and Its Liberators

THE GIRL ON THE VIA FLAMINIA. By Alfred Hayes. New York: Harper & Bros. 1949. 215 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by SIEGFRIED MANDEL

ALFRED HAYES'S new book repeats the scene and, in a large measure, repeats the success of his first novel, "All Thy Conquests." Again wartime Italy and her swaggering conquistadori are at odds.

In the background are soldiers of all the various armies representing the Allied Forces, and a confused people with a disorganized government. From this familiar pattern there comes to life, in a brief and poignant fashion, several simple people who can only helplessly watch things happen; for they cannot fight back at something which is too big and complicated for them even to understand.

As one character comments, all that is left to do in Italy is to drink, to make love, and to survive. Many individuals survive on the barest minimum, some by black-market deals, and still others by selling their bodies. But, no matter how brutal their life has become, the people somehow continue to cling to it, almost apologetically. There are few avenues of escape from the dismal present, and the pretty girls dream of marrying an American knight in khaki who will take them away from the darkness and misery of Europe to live happily ever after in the United States.

Lisa is an Italian girl who finds that her very last resort is an arrangement with Robert, an American soldier. This private yearns for a clean room and a clean girl to sleep with in exchange for his PX wealth. However, unsuspected complications develop, not the least of which is Lisa's sense of guilt and shame.

A kind of nostalgia seems to debilitate every character in this novel. The old people pine for their world which has been washed away, while the younger generation has little on which to base a faith in the future. Mamma Pulcini, the landlady of the house on the Via Flaminia, tells Lisa to escape if she can. We learn little about Lisa's past but the indecencies and humiliations which the present heaps upon her are shocking enough. The wounded Antonio, Mamma Pulcini's son, who had fought with the defeated Italian Army, looks on with impotent anger as the foreign liberators make themselves at home with his country's women and the city's

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**Belles-Lettres.** Two of the most picturesque figures in our literature are featured in books of the week. Gertrude Stein, whose posthumous *"Last Operas and Plays"* is reviewed below by Ben Ray Redman, was always a baffling but amusing enigma to her fellow Americans. Did she perpetrate a gigantic fraud on a gullible following, or did she have a genuine talent and something to say to her generation? Mr. Redman offers some comments that will help readers answer those questions for themselves. The equally fabulous GBS is celebrated in *"Sixteen Self-Sketches"* and *"Days with Bernard Shaw,"* two books that will add to the already large body of Shavian lore. Because of the delight they find in regarding Shaw as a colorful and superbly witty nonagenarian, Americans run the danger of forgetting that he is also one of the greatest writers in the history of English literature.

## Word-Intoxicated Woman

**LAST OPERAS AND PLAYS.** By Gertrude Stein. Edited and with an introduction by Carl Van Vechten. New York: Rinehart & Co. 1949. 480 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by BEN RAY REDMAN

HERE are nineteen "operas and plays," written by Gertrude Stein between 1917 and 1945, and printed from manuscripts "in the vast collection of Steiniana in the Yale Museum." Donald Gallup, curator of the Collection of American Literature in the Yale University Library, is "responsible for the collation of the typed copies of these plays with the original manuscripts," while Carl Van Vechten, in his role of master of ceremonies, has provided an introduction which briefs us on Miss Stein's playwriting career and, so far as they are known and interesting, on the originating circumstances of the individual works which this volume holds.

We have here, in short, a book that has been put together with scholarly and loving care, with complete seriousness, and a belief that the doing of the job was well worth while. Yet it is a safe bet at almost any odds, I think, that all but Miss Stein's most devoted admirers will condemn this collection as a scandalous waste of paper, printer's ink, and binder's cloth. And there are strong reasons for such a judgment; reasons that can, indeed, be countered only by oblique arguments. It is true that the bulk of the writing in this book is, in the most exact meaning of the word, nonsense. It is true that Miss Stein was never more wilfully, more brazenly nonsensical than she was while writing most of these pieces. It is true that, with the notable exception of "Yes Is for a Very Young Man"—and in-

cluding "Four Saints in Three Acts," the complete text of which is now published for the first time in America—these so-called plays and operas are nothing of the sort. But, even so, the waste of substance and editorial time may not be complete. The volume before us is well made. It will survive, surely, as a literary curiosity; and such things are worth having for their own amusing sake. But it will also survive as an important document in what may well come to be known as The Strange Case of Gertrude Stein,—the case of a born writer, a word-intoxicated woman, who exerted an important influence on other and more successful writers, but who seldom came upon subjects that really interested her sufficiently to make her submit her beloved

and wayward words to rational discipline.

It is probable that no one else has ever written so much, while saying so little. But she proved at the beginning of her career, with "Three Lives," that she could write clearly enough when she had something to say, when she wished to communicate; and she proved it again, towards the end of her life, with "Wars I Have Seen." Reviewing the latter book in these pages four years ago, I said that Gertrude Stein's great virtue, despite her fame as an obscure and difficult author, was "her simplicity, her amazing, utter simplicity. Few writers have ever dared to be, or have ever been able to be, as simple as she. As simple as a child, pointing straight, going straight to the heart of a subject, to its roots; pointing straight, when and where adults would take a fancier way than pointing, because they had learned not to point." Time has not changed my opinion. But, of course, the simplicity of which I spoke has literary value only when it is rational and comprehensible. There is plenty of verbal simplicity in "Last Operas and Plays." There are innumerable direct statements, made with an appearance of childlike candor. But the sum of them is irrational and incomprehensible, whenever we try to add them up into either large or small units.

Miss Stein possessed, to a remarkable degree, what T. S. Eliot has called "auditory imagination . . . the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word . . ." But she was content as a rule to let this imagination fol-

## Summer, Be Slow

By Dilys Bennett Laing

SUMMER, be slow to stifle this perfection.  
The bare woods are so beautiful, and show  
through the thin grille of twigs, in each direction.  
the sliding distance and the hill of snow.

The wood now is a birdcage in the breeze.  
Its stripped, frail netting lets the eye, as much  
as any bird, go searching through the trees.  
The wood has August at its fingers' touch

yet holds through April to the rim of June  
wedges of winter: snow that binds next summer  
to last December, so to importune  
time not to toss all to the latest comer.

Sun's warmth we crave—illusion of the south  
on north-chilled flesh. But nothing of July,  
though it cram strawberries in the willing mouth,  
can feed, as April can, the starving eye.