

Belles-Lettres. *Too many of the younger generation of fiction writers, it is frequently complained, have little to draw upon for the stuff of their tales save the experiences of their own childhoods. But as Graham Greene reminds us in the title essay of his new volume of literary papers, "The Lost Childhood" (reviewed below), the work of virtually all the great writers of the past was materially influenced by their early years. Others of Mr. Greene's highly opinionated but always engrossing pieces, as well as Eileen Bigland's fascinating biography of the Victorian novelist "Ouida" (page 29), will help complement the discussion of the perplexities of authorship that leads off this issue. . . . ¶ The classic collection of miraculous tales, bawdy stories, and bloody adventures known as Apuleius's "The Golden Ass" has been given a fine new rendering into English by Robert Graves (see page 29).*

Reflections on Men & Letters

THE LOST CHILDHOOD AND OTHER ESSAYS. By Graham Greene. New York: Viking Press. 191 pp. \$3.50.

By HARVEY CURTIS WEBSTER

IT IS only when one is young, Graham Greene says, that books influence us deeply; "in later life . . . we are more likely to find in books merely a confirmation of what is in our minds already: as in a love affair it is our own features that we see reflected flatteringly back."

In his own lost childhood, Mr. Greene read Marjorie Bowen's "The Viper of Milan" and discovered the pattern Catholicism seemed to confirm and that all his books illustrate: "perfect evil walking the world where perfect good can never walk again, and only the pendulum ensures that after all in the end justice is done." From this insight Mr. Greene's first collection of essays derives a partiality, a perceptiveness, and a candor highly unusual in contemporary criticism.

Apart from the title essay and the illuminating autobiography of "The Revolver in the Corner Cupboard" the best of these pieces are those about writers whom life wounded early. As Mr. Greene sees him, Henry James's "evasion" of service in the Civil War that ruined two of his brothers caused him to see "evil as an equal force with good," compelled the novels of his major phase, enabled him to pity the most blemished of his characters and become "as solitary in the history of

the novel as Shakespeare in the history of poetry." Dickens's unhappy childhood gave him the ability to portray evil skilfully and good unconvincingly, for it made him suspect the world was made by Satan rather than God. Mr. De la Mare's early preoccupation with death governs the symbols and permits the excellence of his fiction and poetry. Samuel Butler's "crippling childhood" maimed everything he did. Kipling and Saki never escaped the "burden of their childhoods." Nor did many of the other writers Mr. Greene illuminates by creating them after his own image. "Every creative writer worth our con-

sideration is a victim: a man given over to an obsession."

Whether one agrees or not, Mr. Greene's brilliant presentation compels thought. His two pages on Saki and Kipling suggest as much as longer essays, even books, have said. Kipling's characters "rattle down a conveyor belt like matchboxes." Saki "protected himself with epigrams as closely set as currants in an old-fashioned Dundee cake." Leon Bloy's characters are presented "only deformity-deep." The vicious Baron Corvo "narrowly evaded sanctity."

There are times, it is true, when Mr. Greene's ingenious partiality compels strong disagreement. The characters of Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster do not wander "like cardboard symbols through a world . . . paper-thin." There is too much about why James almost was a Catholic; there is a one-sided view of the eighteenth century "when politics for the first time ceased to represent any deep issues and religion excited only the shallowest feeling."

Still Mr. Greene always supplies the basis for his own discounting. He never pretends to objectivity. Except in a few unexpected and delightful humorous essays (such as the one about the psychic dog of Weimar), he is serious about writers and books because they reveal the nature of man and the universe to him and may to his readers. He can be excessively intolerant or intolerably narrow, but he does not exalt his own cleverness nor does he forget the writer he is criticizing.



—Harper's Bazaar.

Graham Greene—"illuminates by creating them after his own image."

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A Classic Revised

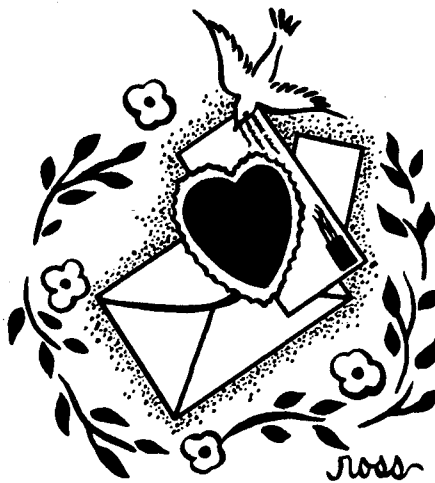
THE GOLDEN ASS. A New Translation by Robert Graves from Apuleius. New York: Farrar, Straus & Young. 293 pp. \$3.50.

By BEN RAY REDMAN

THE tale of how a young Numidian gentleman was transformed by Thessalian magic into an ass—and how after many extraordinary adventures, he was made a man again, thanks to the gracious charity of divine Isis—has delighted modern readers ever since it was conveyed from its original Latin into sixteenth-century Spanish, Italian, French, and English. William Adlington did the job for the last language, in 1566, with many assists and misdirections from his French predecessor, Guillaume Michel; and his version has held the field against more scholarly successors. Now Robert Graves gives us a new translation that is most welcome. It lacks Adlington's Elizabethan picturesqueness, confusions, and obscurities, but it is also innocent of his errors, and it offers clear sailing to the present-day reader.

Mr. Graves has been wise, probably, to make "no attempt to bring out the oddness of the Latin by writing in a style, say, somewhere between Lyly's 'Euphues' and Amanda Ros's 'Irene Iddesleigh'"; but it is a question whether he is right when he argues that, "paradoxically, the effect of oddness is best achieved in convulsed times like the present by writing in as easy and sedate an English as possible." He has achieved no effect of oddness, but a very pleasing clarity. And he raises another question when he says that Apuleius was parodying the verbal extravagances of the Milesian storytellers; for the generally held opinion is that Apuleius's style was a fine, characteristic flower of the African School, and that, in combination with the archaizing tendencies of this school, as J. Wright Duff has remarked, not a little of the Latin of Apuleius and Tertullian is due to the way in which people talked their Latin in Africa." However, this is a subject for experts.

"The Transformations of Lucius Apuleius of Madaura," much better known as "The Golden Ass," is a far-rago of miraculous tales, bawdy stories, horrifying incidents, bloody adventures, and one beautiful immortal fable—"Cupid and Psyche." It has been saluted as "a beginning of modern literature," and, more specifically, as the forerunner of the picaresque novel. Its author offered it to his readers as "a string of anecdotes in



the popular Milesian style," and for centuries it was generally enjoyed as nothing more. Indeed, it still is. Mr. Graves is undoubtedly right when he says that it is unlikely that many readers ever spent much time on the story's edifying close; that, "The book's popularity, ever since it was written, has rested almost wholly on its 'pleasant and delectable jest,' especially the bawdy ones." Yet it is hard to believe that there were not, even from the first, at least a few discerning persons who saw the book for what it really was—a sincere story of religious conversion, in which the hero is, as the High Priest tells the throng, spiritually reborn, in accordance with beliefs that were commonly held by pagan religions long before Christianity claimed the process of spiritual rebirth for its very own.

Apuleius may have attracted his audience with the stock phrase, *Assem para et accipe auream fabulum, fabulas immo* ("Pay a penny, and I'll tell you a golden tale—yes indeed, even several"). He may have held his audience with the heroic love-bouts of Lucius and Fotis, with the lubricities of the effeminate priests of Cybele, with magic, murder, sadism, and bestiality. But the end towards which he led that audience was his celestial vision on the beach at Cenchreae, his awakening to a world that "seemed filled with delight," his release from a living death, his priestly initiation into the mysteries of Isis and Osiris, and his ceaseless adoration of those inseparably linked deities. Never elsewhere is he so eloquent as he is in his closing pages. For, as Mr. Graves says in his introduction: "His greatest desire was not applause: it was to show his gratitude to the Goddess whom he adored, by living a life worthy of her favor . . ."

All of which, of course, does not mean that "The Golden Ass" will not continue to be read, with keen appetite, for the usual reasons.

Better Than Fiction

OUIDA: The Passionate Victorian. By Eileen Bigland. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 272 pp. \$3.75.

By ROBERT HALSBAND

IF nobody reads Ouida's novels today, almost everybody read them as they appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century. "What I admire in Ouida," a contemporary reader remarked, "is that Vice is Vice and Virtue is Virtue." With her morality so comfortably designed, no wonder her books delighted! She offered other, more titillating satisfactions. In the early tales her tinselled picture of high life as lived by dashing hussars and mysteriously titled ladies thrilled the drab Victorian maiden; then her later animal stories—"The Dog of Flanders," the best known—encouraged her readers to a good virtuous cry; and her last group of novels, about the hardships of the Italian peasantry, stirred the socially conscious to indignation—at least in the cozy remoteness of England. This progression gives, roughly, the subjects of Ouida's novels, and it also charts the decline of her popularity. Why it came to an end along with the century is an idle question; what is certain is that although she may have influenced more substantial writers—James and Firbank, for example—her books are as outmoded today as anti-macassars.

Yet by some ironic law of compensation her life seems to us far more artful than her fictional art. There is, first of all, its epic design. A beginning: as the plain-faced Maria Louise Ramé, in an English provincial town, who scribbled her frustrations into best-selling novels that carried her into opulent flower-filled bowers in London. A middle: as the resplendent Ouida, dressed by Worth, surrounded by fawning lapdogs and Guardsmen, and then as the Lady of the Villa Farinola, caressed and feared by Florentine society. An end: as the recluse of San Alessio, starving and forgotten. The frenetic course of her life has all the suspense she tried to infuse into her fiction. What will she do next? we wonder; and then we see that although her actions are madly unpredictable, they are entirely credible and esthetically satisfying to us—for her peculiarities were so large and expansive that the whole unhappy pat-

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