

"Fermentative" French Thinker

"The Embattled Philosopher: A Biography of Denis Diderot," by Lester G. Crocker (Michigan State College Press. 442 pp. \$6.50), is the first twentieth-century study of the editor of the famous French Encyclopedia. Below it is reviewed by J. Salwyn Schapiro, professor emeritus of history at the City College of New York, author of "Condorcet" and other books.

By J. Salwyn Schapiro

ENFIN! A new biography of Diderot, the first since that by John Morley, which appeared seventy-five years ago. Its name: "The Embattled Philosopher." Its author: Lester G. Crocker. The many-sided, often contradictory Diderot belonged to that species among writers now known as the "intelligentsia," which had its origin in the *philosophes* of eighteenth-century France. Then, almost for the first time, a literary movement appeared that placed social problems in the very forefront of man's intellectual life. The writings of the *philosophes*, one and all, were animated by a hatred of the social and political order of their day, the "Old Regime," and by an ardent desire to establish a new order based on reason, freedom, and equality. Diderot in the judgment of the author ranks with the more famous Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu as an outstanding figure of the *philosophie* movement.

Why? Although Diderot wrote voluminously and on many subjects he did not write a single book that has become a "must" for readers everywhere. Neither did he formulate his ideas and organize his knowledge in a coherent system of thought. His "characteristic mode of expression," states the author, "was in loose-jointed thoughts or tightly knit, brilliant dialogues." Entertaining, suggestive, and frequently original, Diderot scattered his ideas in a profusion of pamphlets, articles, dramas, novels, letters, and imaginary dialogues. Mr. Crocker has managed to capture the brilliant flashes, the vagrant moods, and the half-expressed insights of Diderot and present them in compact, coherent form. No mean achievement that.

The author devotes considerable

space to Diderot's personal life. "The Philosopher," as Diderot was generally called by his associates, emerges from the book what he was in real life: the bad husband, the good father, the inconstant lover, the gay bohemian, the *beau sabreur* of controversy, the rationalist with a "tendency towards weepy sentimentality." Every facet of this extraordinary character—and he had many facets—is described and judged by the author in a spirit of charity tempered with justice. Diderot never achieved domestic happiness, either in his marriage or in his many affairs of the "heart." Always when running to one woman he was running away from another. "If there was anything Diderot was fanatical about it was virtue, and yet how often did he deny its very existence!" Not altogether an admirable figure but a very lovable one.

Diderot was up to his chin in the intellectual life of his time. "To whatever quarter he turned," wrote Morley, "he caught the rising illumination." And the illumination of the Enlightenment caused his mind to work in reaction, like an anvil. "Each time it was struck by the hammer of some outside stimulus," writes Mr. Crocker, "ideas flew off like sparks." Essentially Diderot was an experimentalist; whatever his position he remained always open to alternative possibilities. In his "Letter on the Blind" he espoused the philosophy of materialism, repudiating all religions, especially Christianity. At the same time his inborn idealism reacted against dogmatic atheism, causing him to reject "religions but not the religious spirit." Because Diderot saw the impossibility of adhering consistently to any system of ethics he remained continuously in a state of moral dilemma.

DIDEROT has been described as the "fermentative" thinker of the Enlightenment, whose "role was greater than his work." There was not an ear more open, an eye more curious, or a tongue more talkative. The most loquacious of the *philosophes*, Diderot flitted from subject to subject with the greatest ease and with seeming coherence. He was at his best in his ability to turn abstract ideas into concrete formulas, often with a prestidigitator's art of precipitating a theory into a fact. As a stylist Dide-



—Culver.

Diderot's "ideas flew off like sparks."

rot cannot be compared with his great contemporaries. He had neither the compressed clarity of Voltaire, nor the poetic eloquence of Rousseau, nor the serene elegance of Montesquieu. His was the provocative style of the vivacious, intelligent journalist, ready and able to turn out a "piece" at short notice.

What then makes Diderot an outstanding *philosophe*? It is according to the author his editorship of the French Encyclopedia, the greatest rationalist work of the Enlightenment. Diderot "alone was responsible for the conception of the great work, for its continuance, and for its completion." He succeeded in raising editorship to the height of a creative art by making the Encyclopedia the collective work of famous specialists and by including articles dealing with science, agriculture, commerce, and industry. These innovations became a model for the general encyclopedias that followed. For twenty years he worked on it at a low salary, neglecting his health and risking his safety. "It is my life," he declared, "my rest, my happiness, my health."

The Encyclopedia had another significance. It was a giant "siege gun" with which the *philosophes* attacked the evils of the Old Regime. Directly or by implication articles written by them condemned religious intolerance, despotic government, restrictions on commerce and industry, feudal exactions, and violations of personal liberty. Before long it fell foul of the four established censorship, that of the Church, the Government, the courts, and the Sorbonne. "Around the Encyclopedia," comments Mr. Crocker, "the greatest and the most crucial fight of the century was

waged." And the hero of this fight was Diderot. Almost alone the embattled philosopher defended the Encyclopedia against its powerful enemies. And he won a great battle in the never-ceasing struggle for freedom of thought. With Heine Diderot could say: "Lay on my coffin a sword for I was a brave soldier in the war for the liberation of mankind."

Mr. Crocker has done an outstanding job in presenting a vivid account of this most vivid of the French philosophes and a penetrating analysis of his contributions to the ideas of the period of the Enlightenment. Although he gives few references, and no bibliography, the author's mastery of his subject is plainly evident to the reader. What he presents is the result of knowledge fully digested.

Brighter Futures

BETTER AND BETTER: Several years ago, in a New Year's Day editorial, a metropolitan newspaper remarked that no one today hopes for progress any more. Each of us is now content if, at the turn of the year, we have succeeded in holding our own. So melancholy an observation, however appropriate to our own period of history, would hardly have been made at the turn of the century or indeed at any time up to World War I. In those halcyon years everyone read Herbert Spencer and everyone believed in progress. Every day in every way everything was getting better and better and would continue to do so into the distant future. Much has happened since to disabuse us of this comfort and the idea of progress accordingly requires a new evaluation.

This "revaluation" is the task which Morris Ginsberg sets for himself in a little book called *"The Idea of Progress"* (Beacon Press, \$1.75). Mr. Ginsberg, who is Martin White Professor of Sociology in the University of London, discusses here in his usual lucid fashion the forms which the belief in progress has taken, the various theories of perfectibility, the idea as it appears in such writers as Comte, Hegel, Marx, and Toynbee, and the relationship between evolution and progress.

Mr. Ginsberg concludes with the cautious view that by taking thought and by constructing a rational ethic men can even now find some justification for the idea of progress. Progress is not a necessary consequence of history but rather a movement toward the attainment of ethical ideals. The conclusion raises questions, of course, but as a sociological essay in the English manner Mr. Ginsberg's book merits the attention of the American reader.

—ROBERT BIERSTEDT.

FICTION

Potpourri of Destinies

"Face Value," by Robert Standish (Doubleday. 253 pp. \$3.50), offers twenty-two well-plotted yarns, with settings in Asia, old-family Britain, and random spots throughout the Empire.

By James Kelly

IT IS A fascinating if unrewarding pastime to dwell on the queer chains of causation set up by apparently unrelated events, for nothing illustrates better the incalculable chances that seem to govern human destinies. The story I am about to relate could never have been written but for . . . This little observation opens one of the twenty-two stories contained in Robert Standish's *"Face Value,"* but it applies equally to all of them. On the evidence here presented, most readers will agree with the word "fascinating" and will demur at the word "unrewarding." On firmer and more tillable ground than in cinematic novels such as *"Elephant Walk,"* *"Follow the Seventh Man,"* and a half dozen more, Mr. Standish seems entirely at home in the narrower focus of the literary conundrums brought together in his latest volume.

For this is old-fashioned storytelling, with beginning, middle, and snapper ending. Plot rests unabashedly on Fate, red herrings, and the supernatural, rather than upon character prognosis. As in those old *"Mr. Tutt"* tales in *The Saturday Evening Post*, wily humans depend upon their (and the author's) ingenuity to get out of desperate predicaments. Perhaps the Standish stories are too engineered, assembled, mechanized, and tricky for some tastes. As a one-man cheering section for mendacity, venality, and protagonists who get away with murder if need be, Mr. Standish may run afoul of prejudices here and there. But nobody can say that this is saccharine stuff, and not many will deny its spell. The author's acid (sometimes hilarious) wit and crisp, delicately modulated style are equal to the occasions that arise.

Whether set in Asia, modern feudal England, or random outposts of Empire, the stories carry authority of place and mood. None more so than six amusing, nuanceful Oriental embroideries, three of them about Chi-

nese lawyers who specialize in the framed alibi, the legal loophole, and the wider vistas of blackmail. Another tells of a thoughtful Soochow magician who used twins (one of them expendable) to duplicate the old Houdini escape act. A diminutive masterpiece called *"Thieves' Justice"* tells of the poetic, remorseless justice meted out to an inept pupil in a school for crime; and there is a farcical note of a cuckolded ancient whose young rival saves the day by donning a beard and tampering with oracular justice.

COMING home to the drafty family seats of England, there are four or five folk items dealing diversely with the common problems of evading the estate tax and coping with the black sheep younger son or brother who has been to America and returns as a mysterious Big Success. These pinpoint the fierce family pride and musty ways as only a participant could do it.

Of the stand-alone titles one called *"The Eye of the Beholder"* may be the most poignant and sentimental piece in the book as it pictures the triumphant inner beauty of a grotesque French girl married to a blind man who suddenly regains his sight. And there are two W. R. Burnettish gangster notes: about a young Italian smuggler who comes to America to join the big time before returning (suspensefully) to marry and settle down; and about a falling out among smugglers and the eventual murder which put the narrator where he is, in the death house.

As pointed out above, Mr. Standish may seem bearish on human nature and repetitious in his themes and format. But *"Face Value"* assays high in that hen's-tooth rarity: entertainment.

