

Transcending the Congruous

"The Dark and the Light," by Elio Vittorini, translated by Frances Keene (New Directions. 182 pp. \$3.75), brings together two short novels that demonstrate the poetic development of their author. Sergio Pacifici is professor of Romance languages at Yale University.

By Sergio Pacifici

ELIO VITTORINI, born in Syracuse, Sicily, in 1908, is, despite his slim literary output, one of the genuinely exciting voices of contemporary Italian fiction. Like his contemporaries Moravia, Pratolini, and Silone, he has managed to reach an international audience (receiving accolades from no less than Ernest Hemingway) without, however, becoming "popular." The highly poetic and symbolic quality of his books and the elusiveness of his tales have made him far less accessible to the easily satisfied reader than his "neorealist" confrères. The matter is to be regretted, for Vittorini is, beyond any doubt, one of the most significant and influential writers Italy has produced in the past twenty years.

"The Dark and the Light," translated with consummate skill by Frances Keene, enables the reader to sample two different "veins" of Vittorini. Beyond its worth as creative writing, the volume is an engrossing document that makes clear the poetic itinerary followed by its author during his crucial formative years. "Erica," the first of the two stories comprising the book, was actually composed in 1936. It was left unfinished when certain political events (chiefly the Spanish Civil War) changed Vittorini's concepts about fiction. His personal experiences (including a trip to Milan, from which he came back "enamored of places and names, of the world itself"), coupled with an intense period of translation from the work of American novelists (Sartre, Faulkner, and Cain) sharpened his desire to forge his own style, for which he became justly renowned. Likewise, his larger involvement in anti-Fascist activities was accompanied by the discovery of a vision that was felicitously dramatized, for the first time, in the allegorical novel "In Sicily" (1941).

"Erica" is the story of an adolescent girl in the slums of a Northern city, who is left to care for her younger brother and sister when her mother joins their father, who works in a distant town. All goes smoothly until the little money and few supplies of food and coal run out. Unable to face the prospect of being exploited by her neighbors or having to ask for charity, Erica prefers to become a prostitute so that she may continue providing for her little charges. The painful experience, described in touching and restrained terms, does not change her wise heart. Quite the contrary: precisely because she has grasped the meaning of her condition, which is one of quiet agony, Erica remains as limpid and as honest, in a deeply human sense, as she had always been.

If "Erica" seems too unsophisticated and naïve even as an account of human misery and hypocrisy, "La Garibaldina," with its inventive setting, is a diverting treatment of what is, *in fondo*, a similar situation. The controlled rhythm of its prose, the agile pace of the whole narrative, and the beauty of the descriptions should persuade the reader that with Vittorini the novel, in Italy at least, has been brought back to poetry. The novella (completed in 1950) reminded me of some instructive observations on fiction and the opera made by the author some years ago in a little-read essay on his own work. He wrote then that the "opera, in making us see a reality that transcends our sense of congruity, in suppressing this very sense of congruity in us . . . brings us to grips with an awareness of a higher reality and provides the constant possibility of expressing the maximum amount of pathos or comedy in every atom of the real." These remarks illuminate not only the distinctive qualities of Vittorini's recent fiction but, indeed, they make evident the numerous affinities of the present tale with his previous novels.

Like them (especially "The Twilight of an Elephant"), "La Garibaldina" can hardly be called a conventional novel on thematic, stylistic, or structural counts. Its two protagonists are an eccentric, colorful Signora Baronessa, Leonilde, who is going to Sicily to supervise the harvest on her farm, and Innocenzo, a sharpshooter who is going home to Terranova on a precious leave.

Little happens in the book, most of which relates the wonderfully fresh conversation between the two. What gives the tale its uniqueness is the manner in which the author turns into a symbolic tableau of the human condition a number of seemingly fantastic and preposterous "encounters" (where historical events are superimposed and chronology magically evaporates). Precisely because the events are sparse and relatively unimportant we grasp the fact that Vittorini's purpose is less to dramatize psychological or social situations as such than to give us a feeling of a great drama being enacted on the stage of twentieth-century history. Every reader will, I suspect, come to personal conclusions or speculations about the nature of such a drama. For me it is that of a society moving toward and desperately searching for universal fellowship and a life of dignity, peace, and work.

Two generations and two ideologies, a new and an old one, come to a momentary but powerful confrontation in the story. By describing it with serenity and sensitivity, Vittorini has been true to what he considers the task of literature, that "of making visible the human motives of a revolution." He has also demonstrated, in his own brilliant way, how novelists, and not politicians, are the true barometers of their age.



Elio Vittorini—"genuinely exciting."

A Question of Guilt

"Town Without Pity," by **Manfred Gregor**, translated by Robert Brain (Random House. 241 pp. \$3.95) expresses the conflict between younger and older generations, as well as between occupied and occupiers, in a story of the trial of American soldiers for raping a German girl. Claude Hill, head of Rutgers University's graduate program in German, regularly writes on modern German literature.

By Claude Hill

AMONG the "young" authors of post-war Germany (who are usually in their forties or older) Manfred Gregor occupies a special position. He was only twenty-nine when he submitted his first novel three years ago. Thanks to a brilliant motion-picture adaptation, "The Bridge" was not only widely acclaimed in Germany but was translated into more than a dozen languages. It should, therefore, not surprise us that his second novel, "Town Without Pity," has already been made into a movie also. Its release in September, plus the publisher's blurb ("a novel about American crime—and punishment—in postwar Germany"), will no doubt assure the book a certain amount of attention. Gregor, whose first novel was somewhat autobiographical, clearly proves that he is not a one-book author, as some critics suspected. He has chosen a pertinent theme and told a reasonably suspenseful story with narrative skill and commendable economy. The result, though not great literature, is a terse, exciting, and at times even gripping novel of more than average interest.

A sixteen-year-old girl has been raped by four American soldiers on a sultry summer day. The ensuing military trial, staged with exceptional care and fairness in the little German town, forms the core of Gregor's novel, which develops in a kind of counterpoint fashion the theme of German-American relations and that of conflict of generations.

The central figure is a Russian-born American captain, whose distasteful job of saving the guilty defendants from the death penalty forces him to incriminate the innocent German girl. The Germans generally conform to often observed stereotypes: the hard-working, unbending, honor-obsessed former Nazi and authoritarian family patriarch; the obedient wife and meek mother; the

good-natured but ineffective priest; the Jewish lawyer who miraculously survived extermination and still carries on a sentimental love affair with the Fatherland.

The Americans in the novel are also composites of popular fiction and Hollywood, but they emerge a bit more as individuals. Although it is undoubtedly easier to differentiate between a few soldiers of a local garrison than to convey the complexity of a whole town, it remains a curious fact that the young German author has presented his Americans with more imagination than his countrymen.

Gregor's intentions become clear when we ask ourselves: who is the real villain in the story? The rapists? The fact that Germany is being occupied? The author has the assaulted girl commit suicide, not because she could not get over the shock of the brutish attack but because her German environment failed her. As the title of the American edition indicates, there was no pity, and, more precisely, there was no pity from the world of the adults. Gregor indicts the older generation as nearly all young Germans do today, and traditionally have done since the "Storm and Stress" movement of the eighteenth century. The whole tenor of post-war German literature overwhelmingly shows that the intellectuals are deeply distrustful of their current "economic miracle" society. In book after book they blame a heartless materialism that restored their towns without reforming their people. Gregor is no exception. However, instead of being ponderous, like so many of his fellow writers, he has wrapped his moral in a highly readable and entertaining novel.



Manfred Gregor—"Not a one-book author."

Next to the Last Life

"The Silver Pilgrimage," by **M. Anantanarayanan** (Criterion. 160 pp. \$3.95), an episodic tale in the Indian tradition, tells of a wandering prince's encounters with dancing girls, tax collectors, and goblins asking about the meaning of life. Robert Payne is the author of numerous books about Asia, including "White Rajahs of Sarawak" and "The Barbarian and the Geisha."

By Robert Payne

INDIAN storytellers are never happier than when they are recounting, with innumerable happy digressions, the picaresque adventures of some Indian prince wandering across the length and breadth of the land. Then, almost by definition, the story vanishes in the digressions, with the storyteller assuming the disguise of the prince. It is a good way to tell a story if the adventures are sufficiently colorful and calamitous. It is a horrible way to tell a story if the adventures repeat themselves.

Mr. Anantanarayanan has avoided most of the problems of the picaresque novel. He has invented a credible prince who partakes in a credible pilgrimage, encountering on the journey a great number of credible ghosts, goblins, saints, dancing girls, and income tax collectors. He writes with wit and distinction, and if the adventures sometimes repeat themselves, that is, I am afraid, what happens in picaresque novels; at any rate, the repetitions are reduced to a minimum. Instead of sprawling over 2,000 pages, the author has contented himself with 160. The miracle is that in such a brief work he has succeeded in conveying a sense of the panoply of medieval India.

During the last years of the reign of King Simha, Prince Javasurya falls ill of the disease of indifference, followed by pneumonia. To cure himself of his afflictions, he decides to go on a pilgrimage to Kashi. This is not the great pilgrimage to the Himalayas, which confers major benefits, but a comparatively minor one, which does however possess the virtue of reducing future births "to a single digit, from a reckoning of hundreds." Happy in the knowledge that only one more life is left to him, the prince engages with the mortal enemies who waylay all pilgrims. An enormously loquacious tax collector nearly brings about his death from boredom; a terrible-looking