

**'Mid Pleasures and Palaces:** Mario Praz's *An Illustrated History of Furnishing* (Braziller, 396 pp., \$20.95 until Dec. 31, then \$25) is more than the ordinary history of home decorating. This entertaining and enlightening study is illustrated with 400 paintings, drawings, and prints by artists, some famous, many lesser known who were commissioned to portray the families of the times in their most familiar surroundings. The author's lively commentary is arranged to keep pace with the format of the illustrations which range from early Renaissance to the 20th Century. Black-and-white and color.



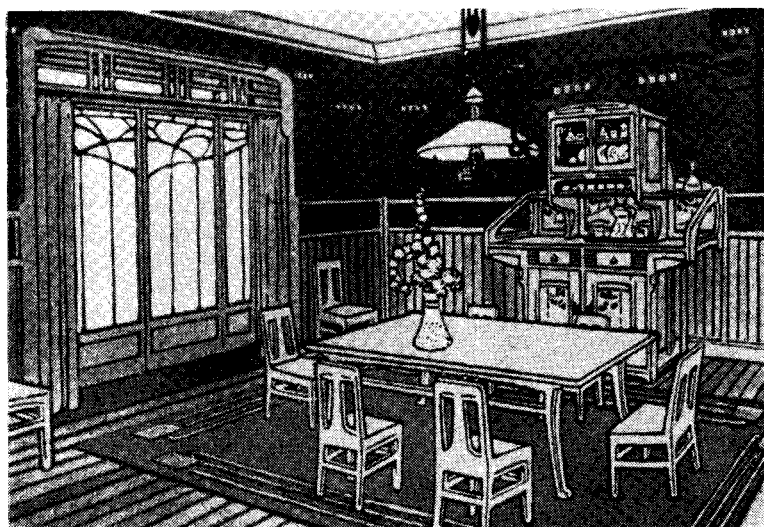
—Galleria Borghese, Rome.

Reading by Lamplight, c. 1645, by Wolfgang Heimbach.



—Russij Musej, Leningrad.

Cerniesov Brothers in their Barge, 1838, by A. Ivanov.



—Bibliothèque Doucet, Paris.

Project for a Dining Room, by L. Cauvy.

## Remembrances from Ricci Palace

*The House of Life*, by Mario Praz, translated from the Italian by Angus Davidson (Oxford University Press, 360 pp. \$10), retraces an intellectual career passed in milieus not of wealth but of elegance. Robert J. Clements is director of comparative literature at NYU's Graduate School.

By ROBERT J. CLEMENTS

**F**EW MEN as busy as Mario Praz, professor of English Literature at the University of Rome, have the time to pause during full maturity and creativity to retrace their life and assess its meaning. Few householders have as elegant a framework on which to weave their remembrance of things past, a *palazzo* furnished and decorated to reflect their own taste and personality. Few students of letters are familiar with so many parallels to their own vicissitudes in literature, texts that heighten their joy or purge their sorrow. Borrowing his title from Rossetti's sonnet sequence, Praz promises to tell the story—at least *his* story, of Ricci Palace in Rome on “serenely silent” Via Giulia, one block away from the traffic-ridden Lungotevere.

He conducts us from one room to the next: the entrance hall, the dining room, the drawing room, the boudoir, etc. Each room is haunted by memories, faithfully recounted. Each art object inspires an essay on the people, times, and places associated with it. A bust of Byron recalls Praz's evolving judgments of this Romantic poet; a bust of Laura by Canova sends his memory racing back to the English countryside; an Empire portrait summons up a happy Christmas with his fiancée. Praz's lingering memory enables him to fill in the cross-hatchings and *sfumature* of these faraway events, the main outlines of which he recorded in a rather full diary, sometimes quoted. Some of the memories are painful, but Praz does not hold back. As Xavier de

Maistre decided when writing his own *Voyage autour de ma chambre*, "No, I shall no longer keep my book in *petto*: here it is, sirs, read!"

Praz's things past include contact with such literary figures as Pater, Croce, Romain Rolland, Montale, Mathiessen, Svevo, and many more. Of cities: London, Manchester, New York, Florence (aristocratic and *gentile*), Bologna, Naples, and, of course, Rome, especially the Rome of Piazza Ricci and Piazza Navona. In sum, a life of the intellect set in milieus not of wealth but of elegance.

Readers of Praz's scholarly successes, *The Romantic Agony*, *The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction*, *Seventeenth-Century Imagery* (all translated into English), will receive a curious shock as the vertical pronoun intrudes into his pages and takes over. This will be especially true as Praz recreates the gallery of women in his life. (Rossetti's *House of Life* is dedicated to an absent wife.) This man, as unhappy in love as those Romantics of whom he writes, claims to have "one of those temperaments that are lazy in human relationships." Yet he paints surprisingly penetrating portraits of his women; were he not in his very marrow a scholar, he might demonstrably be an able novelist.

The book is rich in the praise and lore of Praz's great "manias": Empire furniture (acquired when his stepfather first gave him a chest of drawers), emblem books (of which Praz has given us the definitive bibliography, a point he modestly omits), wax sculpture, the Russian language (he reads an hour of Russian literature every morning), and dolls.

As one who makes an annual pilgrimage to 147 Via Giulia, signing the visitor's book, drinking tea or *Campari*, enjoying intelligent people and talk, I derived pleasure from the original Italian version of this book. The English version is splendidly done by Angus Davidson. Seated in the drawing room, one is struck by the harmony between master and manor, a concord fully demonstrated in the book.

Although still in his prime, Praz has already become a legendary figure. Events of his personal life are retold at dinner parties as though they were part of the *mythos* of a Theban drama. His presence and personality become magnified with accretions akin to those eventually taken on by Vergil, Paracelsus-Faust, Hans Sachs, and others. One of the amusing legends is that Praz is possessed of the Evil Eye, an attribution that apparently affords him private amusement. ("About me, too, sinister reports were circulated, just as they said of Merlin that he was a 'son of the Devil.'")

In his sensitive book Praz shows that he has had to combat the great afflictions

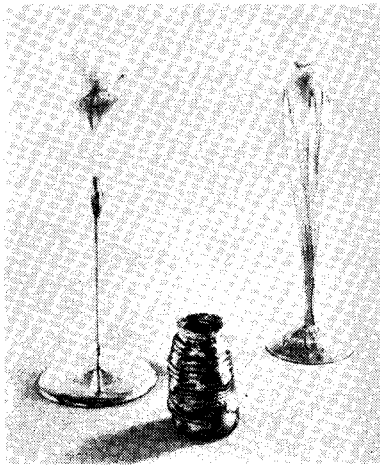
which have beset lesser men: loneliness, fear of death, betrayal, inarticulateness, misunderstanding. Without preaching, he showed us that there is a solution, his own: develop several absorbing interests and strive to master them.

Need one be an egotist to undertake an autobiography? To some extent, yes, of course. Yet here is Praz's final paragraph, typical of the blending of erudition and sensitivity in this fascinating book:

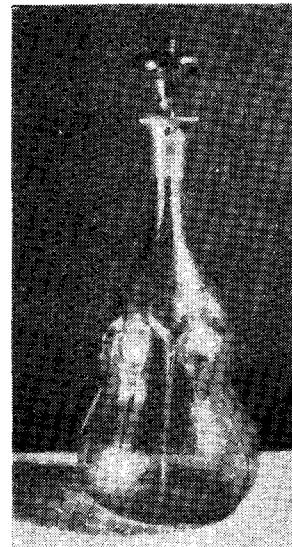
This person who looks into the mirror is myself, and this book that I have written is like a conspectus, in a con-

vex mirror, of a life and a house. And when I reflect that in Giovanni Bellini's Allegory it is Vanity who gazes at herself in a convex mirror, am I to conclude that what you now have before you is merely the monument of an unparalleled vanity? I would say rather that, at the end of this journey, . . . I see myself as having myself become an object and an image, a museum piece among museum pieces, already detached and remote, and that like Adam in the graffito on the marble floor of the Church of San Domenico at Siena, I have looked at myself in a convex mirror, and have seen myself as no bigger than a handful of dust.

Robert Koch's *Louis C. Tiffany: Rebel in Glass* (Crown, 246 pp., \$7.50) recreates the life and work of the man who called himself America's "first industrial artist" and whose name was, in the space of a generation, venerated, derided, and finally revived. As the family nonconformist, Tiffany confessed little interest in the affairs of his father's Fifth Avenue firm and early devoted his life to the arts. A painter, decorator, architect, and landscapist, he eventually focused his artistic energies on the opalescent glass medium and is best remembered for his innovations in the manufacture and use of stained glass. The "Tiffany craze" of the Nineties is elegantly recalled in over 350 black-and-white and color illustrations.



—Museum of Modern Art.  
Tiffany vases.



—Victoria and Albert Museum.  
1901 decanter with applied lily-pad decoration.



Left—J. L. Lefebvre's oil, "Girl Reading", copied by Tiffany in glass (right).



# Comments to Vex Mankind

*If You Don't Mind My Saying So . . .*, by Joseph Wood Krutch (Sloane, 402 pp. \$5.95), offers some elegant and impertinent essays on man and nature, by a master of this literary form. Peter Farb is a naturalist whose books include "Face of North America" and "Living Earth."

By PETER FARB

WHEN Joseph Wood Krutch published his first natural history book, the *New York Times* reviewer dismissed him as "just another Broadwayite doubling as a Connecticut Yankee." The reviewer was, of course, referring to Mr. Krutch's many occupations—theater critic for *The Nation*, literary biographer, professor at Columbia University, and, in his senior years, ardent naturalist. I have never met Mr. Krutch (although for the past dozen years we have both been working the nature beat), but I feel that the *Times* reviewer was unjust. Mr. Krutch should have been compared rather to Thoreau, who lived simply near a pond yet stole off to town for Sunday dinners and lofty

conversation. Like Thoreau, Krutch writes elegant essays, views man as part of the natural rightness of things, and asks impertinent and embarrassing questions of his generation.

We are fortunate that Mr. Krutch has grown old cheerfully and articulately (he will soon be seventy-two). He has scrutinized our century with uncompromising logic and presented his findings in nineteen previous books, articles in several anthologies, and numerous essays for such publications as *The American Scholar*, *The Nation*, and *Saturday Review*. A sampling of the best essays—sixty-one of them, written between 1936 and 1964—has been brought together to make this volume. They add up to an irreverent commentary on muddled thinking in our time by the last great practitioner of the essay form.

The first part of the collection, headed "Manners and Morals," presents Krutch measuring several fashionable stances—political expediency, fact-worship, patriotism, and so forth—against his own yardsticks of common sense and uncommitted individualism. Then comes a section on "Writers and Writing," wherein Krutch makes some

shrewd observations on the essay (he declares it dead without issue), the occupation of book reviewing (he finds it the most widely cultivated and least often esteemed of literary forms), the use of the cliché (he leaps to its defence, so to speak). And in this section, too, it is a delight to find again his memorable imaginary conversations with Thoreau and Samuel Johnson.

The third part consists of fifteen essays on the theater, and the final section is concerned with nature, or what Krutch calls "The World We Didn't Make." These concluding essays show him at his most poetic (as in the small masterpiece, "The Miracle of Grass") and his most exasperated (when he examines the cavalier treatment we dish out to nature and at the same time, unwittingly, to ourselves).

Whenever pieces of occasional journalism are given permanence in book form, a question should be asked: Was the collecting worth it? Here the answer is "Yes." These are enduring essays. They are also a reminder that the essay can often come closer to truth than the polemical article or the ponderous "study."

Let me cite just one example, "Through Happiness with Slide Rule and Calipers," Krutch's devastating appraisal of the methods of the social scientist. Under specific analysis is the sociologist's pretension of setting out "to define the indefinable, to measure the unmeasurable." In doing battle with sham and pretension the essayist has a decided advantage. Pretension is a flimsy thing, bolstered only by passing fashion; the essayist is armed with 5,000 years of civilization's choicest insights, wit, and ridicule. Thus Krutch can remind the sociologist who it attempting to measure happiness statistically of Samuel Johnson's line: A small drinking glass and a large one, may be equally full; but the large one holds more than the small." And Krutch can continue to fire salvo after salvo from the Bible, Horace, Pope, Shaw, and others. As a change of pace, he can direct attention to a particularly pretentious statement by the mere use of slang ("This is a real beaut.").

Krutch the essayist is also in the luxurious position of being able to profess ignorance of sociological techniques, and then to ask embarrassing questions of the data. His ingenuous appraisal of the statistics reveals that the sociologist has "come up with conclusions that are either not demonstrated at all or, quite as frequently, so obvious that they need no demonstration."

Like Jonathan Swift, Krutch has put together a book "not to please mankind, but to vex it." At the same time he has given us good cause to lament the passing of the essay.



"I love you because you are trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent."