

The Critic Alone with His Text

The Spirit of the Letter: Essays in European Literature, by Renato Poggioli (Harvard University Press. 366 pp. \$9.95), departs boldly from previous readings in the topics treated by the late, highly respected scholar of Slavic and Comparative Literature at Harvard. The most recent book by Robert J. Clements, director of Comparative Literature at New York University, is "The Poetry of Michelangelo."

By ROBERT J. CLEMENTS

IN ROME during 1961, a year after he had become an American citizen, Renato Poggioli seemed to miss the U.S. more than the rest of us, enthusing over its treatment of scholars and talking of projects awaiting him there. It is fitting that Harvard should issue one of these projects, a florilegium of literary essays which he published during the quarter-century after he left Florence. As he wrote in his intended preface to this volume, "Whatever their pretext or their source, these writings reflect some of the lines of work I have been pursuing since the time I chose America as my home and English as my vehicle." Fluent in Italian, English, Russian, and Polish, able to read still other tongues, Poggioli

developed, as Professor Harry Levin writes in a nostalgic preface to this volume, "a style that was too much his own to be tamed by copyediting."

The sixteen essays, dealing with European and comparative literatures, make absorbing reading. They are composed with an authoritative, almost authoritarian, talent. Poggioli was less interested in integrating his ideas with those of earlier scholars and critics treating of his topics than in clearing an autonomous approach. He appends few footnotes. He attacks the text itself in a personal duello. When in 1947 he writes a general appreciation of St.-J. Perse, he pays no heed to the pioneer studies of Thibaudet, Larbaud, Hofmannsthal, Roger Caillois, Alain Bosquet, and the rest; nor does it matter to him that Saint-John has by that time replaced the short-lived St.-J. This single encounter with the text and his own vivification thereof are apparently what is implied by the book's title. For if the title is, as Levin suggests, a translation of Ortega's *Espíritu de la letra*, both derive from 2 Corinthians: "for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life."

Certainly the topics chosen by Poggioli are of enduring interest. Just when French scholars were beginning to rediscover Pascal as baroque rather than neoclassical, Poggioli countered this trend in 1947 with his piece on "Pascal's Classicism." The long essay on the Igor

Tale comes most timely in the wake of Arthur Lord's summarizing book on the oral creation of epic poetry. "The Death of the Sense of Tragedy" (1946) pioneered in an area of theorizing currently much in vogue. Poggioli's essay on the anti-Fascist drama *Angelica* by Leo Ferrero (like himself an Italian exile killed in an automobile accident in the American Far West) may rescue that now unavailable allegory from extinction. Other essays of especial interest deal with Tolstoy, Pirandello, and Trotsky.

Poggioli's essays, like the man himself, were bold, energetic, incisive. But occasionally their abandonment of "the foot of the letter" may be regretted. Perhaps I can illustrate this most simply by taking three consecutive paragraphs from his essay on Dante's Francesca and Paolo, an episode subjected to more *lecturae Dantis* than others, and on which it is difficult to depart from universal readings in search for new ones. Soaring from the foot to the spirit of the letter, Poggioli overreads the text to suit his interpretations. Thus, he says of these ill-starred lovers, "Unlike their fellow-sinners, they go together." Nothing in the canto says that the other sinners do not go in couples; generations of commentators and illustrators have read it that way. Then Poggioli affirms that Dante's outcry to these lovers, "'O wearied souls,' could be applied to all the spirits in the flying crowd, so that we may easily imagine that it was accompanied by a gesture." Neither half of this premise is a necessary assumption. Then, in the same paragraph Poggioli writes, "Even here the poet follows his steadfast rule according to which the name of God is never uttered in Hell and chooses to replace that name by the vaguest possible term." The word God appears twenty-five times in the *Inferno* alone and has been uttered just before by Vergil (IV, 38).

Renato Poggioli was one of the leading literary comparatists in this country, as Harry Levin claims in his preface. Poggioli's breadth of interest and study gave him the imposing command of several literatures and periods of which the preface is justly proud. In this field of comparative literature there is a particular obligation to utilize the researches of those who have remained in the narrower vineyards. One may suppose that Poggioli might have caught some of these minor points had he lived to undertake a final revision and see the book through press. The title itself cautions us to raise our attention from the foot to the spirit of the letter. Poggioli's great merits of originality, inventiveness, and empathy, again displayed here, leave us hopeful that his other two *inedita*, a book on pastoral and one on decadence, will be as devotedly prepared and as handsomely printed.

Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich and David M. Glixon

AT THE ROOT OF IT

It's no secret that the currant is the raisin of Corinth, or that *cole slaw* is from the Dutch for *cabbage salad—salad*, of course, stemming from the Latin word for *salt*. Now try your etymological teeth on the other comestibles listed by E. Edward Rehmus of San Francisco, who asks you to match the words in the first and third columns with their ultimate roots as translated in the second and fourth columns. For the linguistic details, consult your dictionary; meanwhile, dinner is served on page 42.

asparagus ()	1. cow-cheese	mustard ()	10. moss
bread ()	2. seedy apple	omelet ()	11. thin plate
butter ()	3. salt	pomegranate ()	12. sprout
celery ()	4. milk	sausage ()	13. brew
chowder ()	5. worms	spice ()	14. new wine
goulash ()	3. kettle	steak ()	15. shepherd
lettuce ()	7. water of life	vermicelli ()	16. stick
meat ()	8. sharp wine	vinegar ()	17. breast
mushroom ()	9. parsley	whiskey ()	18. assorted goods

CORRECTION: In the October 23 puzzle, "Poets Plagiarized," the fourth poet should have been Landor, not Hood.

From the Big Lie to the Half-Truth

Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes, by Jacques Ellul (Knopf. 320 pp. \$8.95), and **Propaganda Comes of Age**, by Michael Choukas (Public Affairs Press. 292 pp. \$5), diverge in their estimates of the roles of the mass media and education as defenses against public brainwashing. John Hohenberg's next book, "The New Front Page," will be published early in 1966.

By JOHN HOHENBERG

WHILE propaganda is being used increasingly in democratic societies, sometimes for such progressive social purposes as birth control in overpopulated countries, it remains an essentially anti-democratic force. Its least desirable effects, when used in the interest of totalitarian ideas, are by no means confined to the masses; the literate individual, even the intellectual, is a much more vulnerable target under certain circumstances than the unlettered villager or slum dweller, whose illiteracy is a partial shield. Nor can it be assumed that propaganda is always based on lies, little or big; it is most dangerous and effective when it is based on truth, although not necessarily the whole truth.

This, essentially, is the meaning of modern propaganda as it emerges from two new studies: *Propaganda Comes of Age*, by Professor Michael Choukas, chairman of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Dartmouth, and *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, by Professor Jacques Ellul, author of *The Technological Society* and since 1946 professor of the history of law and of social history at the University of Bordeaux. As a one-time propagandist in the Office of Strategic Services during World War II, Professor Choukas writes in the manner of a former practitioner and includes many illustrations to document his text. Professor Ellul's work is the more academic of the two, and also the more challenging to knowledgeable students in the field.

Like other writers on propaganda, the authors of these two works disagree on a number of points, beginning with definitions and analyses. But when they consider propaganda in relation to a democratic society, they are in accord. "Modern democracy is confronted with

a serious problem by the unbridled and extensive use of propaganda within its social system," writes Professor Choukas. "No other system faces such a problem, for the values and standards of no other system clash so violently with the immediate as well as the indirect effects of propagandistic activity." Professor Ellul comments on the same point: "With the help of propaganda one can do almost anything, but certainly not create the behavior of a free man or, to a lesser degree, a democratic man. A man who lives in a democratic society and who is subjected to propaganda is being drained of the democratic content itself—of the style of democratic life, understanding of others, respect for minorities, re-examination of his own opinions, absence of dogmatism. The means employed to spread democratic ideas make the citizen, psychologically, a totalitarian man."

There are, of course, defenses, and here the writers diverge in their estimates of the vulnerability of democratic

man. Professor Choukas believes the schools and the mass media are reasonably stout defenses as long as they are devoted to the spread of truth and diversity. Professor Ellul concedes that the free press and the mass media in general do constitute a defense: "Where film production, the press, and radio transmission are not centrally controlled, no propaganda is possible." And while he pays his respects to education, he points out that the educated man is the first to swallow a superior propagandist's opening gambit: i.e., propaganda generally has little effect. "Because he is convinced of his own superiority," Professor Ellul argues, "the intellectual is much more vulnerable than anybody else to this maneuver, even though basically a high intelligence, a broad culture, a constant exercise of the critical faculties, and full and objective information are still the best weapons against propaganda."

These studies are scholarly works, on the whole. Both are welcome additions to the literature of propaganda. They display most of the advantages of books based on scholarship, including careful documentation and thorough organization. But they also have the principal drawback of many an academic text—the ponderous use of the written word. It is a bit of a struggle to get through them, but the effort is worth making.

Psychology of the Radical Right

The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays, by Richard Hofstadter (Knopf. 315 pp. \$5.95), sees the Radical Right as a pseudo-conservatism based on status politics. "Presidential Government: The Crucible of Leadership," by James MacGregor Burns, will be published in January.

By JAMES MACGREGOR BURNS

THE RECENT candidacies of Barry Goldwater and William Buckley have sharpened the old question: What is modern American conservatism? Does it seek to conserve such early American principles as a prudent sense of man's inherent failings, a hostility toward mass democracy and majority rule, faith in a natural aristocracy of educated and talented men? Is it the rugged individualism of the 1880s and 1920s, with its competitiveness and materialism? Is it the sheer opportunism that enables politicians like Dwight Eisenhower to continue social welfare programs even while denouncing big

government? Or is it something quite different—a radical conservatism that rejects the main tenets of the old American Right?

Observing the Radical Right in the mid-1950s—the Indian winter of the McCarthy era—Richard Hofstadter remarked that the conservative leaders of the time had cut themselves off from



Richard Hofstadter—"lucidity."