

# European Literary Scene

**Giuseppe Berto's** *Male oscuro* (Dark Evil) proved a 1964 sensation as Italy's most authentic psychological novel since Italo Svevo's *Zeno*. (Knopf published it here as *Incubus*.) His new Freudian novel on love, *La cosa buffa* (The Ridiculous Thing), has just been issued by Rizzoli to similar plaudits. It traces the psychic or sentimental education of a young man, Antonio, during his first two liaisons. His love for the student Maria acquaints him with the masculine vacillation within himself. The second affair, with the Hungarian Marica, shows him, as in a brief coda, passing through the same doubts, dissatisfactions, and frustrations even though Marica is much more mundane than Maria. This tale, unlike *Incubus*, is told in the third rather than the first person, but the narration is again free-association with the flow, rhythms, and syntax of a psychological confession. Berto demonstrates how women of different types accede easily to their love affairs whereas the male remains guilt-ridden about consequences.

This novelist, who spent over two years as a prisoner-of-war in Texas, is reported to have many more readers among women than men. Berto is praised for sounding and uniquely understanding the depths of feminine psychology. His forthcoming novel will be called *La Vedova* (Widow). It will carry as a prefatory epigraph a passage from Proust which Berto recalls more or less as "In the life of most women, everything, even the greatest pain, starts with a fitting at the dressmaker's."

**In a sophisticated theatrical mecca** where this season Ionesco, for example, has drawn crowds to the Français, the Athénée, the Théâtre de France, La Bruyère, and of course the tiny Huchette, the last play one would ever expect to see on the billboards of the Comédie Française would be that outdated chestnut *Le voyage de M. Perrichon*. Incredible? Yet there it is. Americans of a certain age, as the French delicately puts it, will undergo a moment of *déjà vu*. Thousands of American students of French long ago moved from their first-year grammar course to a reading class featuring a textbook edition of this 1860 play by Eugène Labiche. The lesson of the comedy is perhaps cynical enough for today's audience; a man will like you more if you convince him he's saved

your life on an Alpine peak than if you actually saved his. Perrichon *redivivus* is proving a hit. Gabriel Marcel (who obviously finds it a relief after *Marat/Sade*) says that rediscovering this comedy is like finding a favorite childhood trinket in the back of a drawer.

**On 19 May, 1966**, Spain promulgated a law governing the press which granted "to all Spaniards the inalienable right of freedom of expression." Yet in July on the streets of Madrid I saw police not only confiscate copies of the conservative daily *ABC*, but actually remove the newspaper from the hands of pedestrians who had just purchased one. Still we all continued to nurture a hope that this law would be beneficial to literature. A few years ago the young writer Isaac Montero agreed before the publication of a prize-winning novel to make the few cuts required under the former press law. Before May 1966 he completed a second novel, *Alrededor de un día de abril* (Around an April Day). The censor this time required twenty-four deletions, reducing the novel by seventy pages. Rebelling, Montero had his second novel published at his own expense without any cuts. He added a prologue about censorship and justified his refusal to abridge his work. He even had printed an advertising poster that concluded, "The author is publishing his text intact and invites you to meditate on freedom of expression." The stocks of the book were promptly seized, and Montero was sentenced to prison and fined. He has appealed and is at latest intelligence at provisional liberty.

What is this "obscene, anti-bourgeois, and pessimistic" book about? About an American couple residing in Spain who decide to adopt a Spanish foundling, it appears. Since no one is allowed to examine the text, we are unsure where the obscenity lies: with the author, the book, the American foster parents, or the fictional priest who approves such an adoption.

**Turning to more happy subjects**, did you know that the protagonist of Camus's *L'Étranger* (Outsider), who didn't like difficult movies he had to explain to his friends, is going to be a movie hero himself now? Whereas the Swedish director Bergman had wanted to undertake this film, it is the brilliant Luchino Visconti who is busy in Algiers at it. Young Meurseault is played by none

other than the protean Marcello Mastroianni. Since additional dialogue is needed to transpose the brief novel into a picture, some is being borrowed from the version of this tragic narrative which Camus was adapting to the theater when he died, and more is being provided by his friend Emmanuel Roblès.

**I have not been in Romania** recently (although my next column will be written in Budapest), but I try to keep up on literary developments in Ionesco's homeland in various ways, which include a scrutiny of *Romanian Books*, the quarterly bulletin of the Central Office of Romanian Publishing Houses and Bookselling. New narrative fiction and poetry come off the presses of Bucharest in abundance. Yet the one type of literature now almost exclusive to the Balkans is oral epic, whether in prose or verse. Indeed, Yugoslavia and Romania are justly famous for having preserved their ancient epics through vocal tradition as well as printing. Some Romanian ballads like *Miorita* (The Ewe Lamb), *Mesterul Manole* (Master-Builder Manole), and *Miu Haiducu* (Miu the Outlaw) have remote origins. Lest these lose their pristine character, the Romanians are getting them safely into print. In past months several important collections of folklore have appeared.

Ovidiu Birlea's *Antologie de Proza populara epica* is a three-volume corpus of 153 items representing a dozen years of research on animal tales, fantasy, and legends by the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore of the Romanian Academy. Two volumes of folktales from Transylvania appeared in 1962—stories which may have inspired Bram Stoker's thirsty Transylvanian vampire of 1897. Two new volumes of this vast project now appearing are *Folklore in Oltenia and Muntenia*. When this extensive series of folkloric tales, romances, carols, doine, and other songs is published, it will complete an enterprise for which the collecting started in 1885. A complementary volume is *Balada populara Romana*, a scholarly history by G. Vrabie of the origins and spread of folk epos in his country. Romania can boast of modern poets like Tudor Arghezi and perhaps young Stefan Lures, but one must concur with her philosopher Lucian Blaga that "the permanent source of creativity in Romanian literature remains the popular culture and especially the anonymous creations born of the orthodox soul of the people and of their myths and heresies."

**We have mentioned** in these columns (6 Aug., 1966) the unexpected results when the computer of the University of Besançon had completed its concordance of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*. The words of highest frequency (in order: eye, heart, heaven, beautiful, great, soul)

made the satanic poet seem like a peddler of sweetness and light. The Centre d'Etude du Vocabulaire Français has fed Racine's *Phèdre* onto the intake tape. The eight most common nouns in order are: eye, god, son, seigneur, heart, father, amour, blood, and hand. It is obvious that, despite their disparate temperaments, Baudelaire and Racine approached vocabulary eye to eye.

**It was our unhappy task** in July 1965 to report the demise of the famous *Mercur de France*. We now record the disappearance of an equally venerable literary review, *Les Cahiers du Sud*. The *Cahiers*, launched in Marseilles fifty-three years ago as a schoolboy journal by Marcel Pagnol and Jean Ballard, has published in its 391 issues the great writers of Europe and brought glory to France's second city. More than a journal, it was an intellectual sanctuary that protected such refugees as Zweig and Eluard during World War II. The dedicated Jean Ballard, now over seventy-three, feels unable to continue the exhausting task. As he wrote to my colleague Anna Balakian, "You will be sorry to learn of the folding of the *Cahiers*, but you would be sorrier to learn of my death." I am pleased to report that the New York University Computer Center is now preparing a collective index of every one of the 391 issues, a research tool which will be made available to scholars at minimum cost.

**Ever since the days** of the spirited literary discussions in such coffeehouses as the Griensiedl and the Central, Viennese have talked proudly of their local writers. If one is to judge by the splendid journals now coming out of Vienna, Austrians honor their literature more than ever. The periodicals contain critical essays, literary history, narrative, poetry, plays, and book reviews of a high seriousness. Especially attractive are *Literatur und Kritik*, *Oesterreich in Geschichte und Literatur*, *Wort in der Zeit*, *Protokolle* (a yearbook), and the distinguished theater monthly *Die Bühne*, which covers drama, opera, and ballet not only in Austria, but in Switzerland and Bavaria. An important newsletter is published by the Austrian Society for Literature.

Austria can certainly take pride in its literary honor roll during this century: Broch, Buber, Hofmannsthal, Kafka, Musil, Polgar, Rilke, Schnitzler, Werfel, Zweig, and so many others. The journals mentioned above will do well not merely to honor these writers, but to keep them identified with Austria itself. For of the great writers I have enumerated (strange and unhappy statistic!) only three did not emigrate or suffer exile from Austria. —ROBERT J. CLEMENTS.

## Victorian Party Man

**Disraeli**, by Robert Blake (St. Martin's. 819 pp. \$12.50), draws a full-length portrait of a man who, though he had few real political ideas, became one of Britain's greatest and most influential prime ministers. Edwin M. Yoder, Jr., is associate editor of the Greensboro (N.C.) Daily News.

By EDWIN M. YODER, JR.

**ALTHOUGH** easily the most fascinating of British prime ministers, Benjamin Disraeli has remained strangely inaccessible to the modern reader. Exoticized by Lytton Strachey and André Maurois, or entombed in the forbidding lengths of Monypenny and Buckle, he rarely appears in all his dimensions, living and breathing.

This magnificent biography by Robert Blake of Oxford University rescues "Dizzy" at last from the clutches of the storytellers. Without ignoring the romantic hue in Disraeli's character, Blake has portrayed him for what he was—a great party leader, the architect of an instrument of power that still survives.

Mr. Blake is a master not only of the quirkish Disraeli himself but of the mid-Victorian period, roughly 1850-80, when this intriguing figure ascended the "greasy pole" of power. It was far from the W. S. Gilbert stereotype: every boy and girl was *not* born a little Liberal or a little Conservative. Many allegiances were unformed, many were changing, and the great prize of power would go to improvisers like Disraeli who could fit the pieces together. Patronage, the old glue of political parties, was vanishing; mass enfranchisement, which both interested and frightened established politicians, had not yet supplanted patronage as a power base. The Tories were split over agricultural protection, the Whigs were enervated, the Liberal Party as yet unformed.

Into this atmosphere, where the great question was the survival of landed England's political power, stepped Disraeli, a baptized Jew, the son of a London literary anthologist, a novelist proposing to lead the gentry in their fight for survival. This faintly foppish writer would set himself up, complete with a country estate bought by his lordly patrons the Bentincks, as the savior of the landed aristocracy. Never indeed has

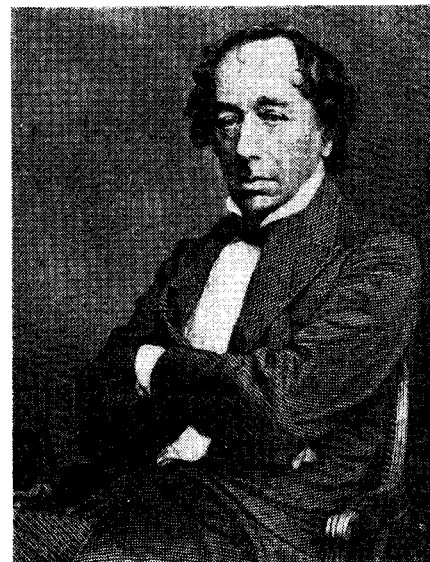
the ability of "county" England to assimilate the unfamiliar been more powerfully (or usefully) shown.

Disraeli seems to have felt no conflict in playing the role. He had, with his fellow romantics, the quality of willing suspension of disbelief; he could concoct, as Mr. Blake's researches show, a suitable personal myth. He saw himself as a Sephardic aristocrat and Christianity as a fulfillment, not a negation, of Judaic faith. The shaky historical basis of these beliefs disturbed him not at all—if, indeed, he was aware of them.

To his mission Dizzy brought a powerful, pictorial mind, a romantic dedication to the "aristocratic settlement," as he called it, and a strikingly modern (and hence for his time unconventional) view of the political game.

What made it unconventional, Mr. Blake shows, was that politics remained, to a gentleman's way of thinking, very much cricket in another form. Except for some of the Irish and the Radicals, few played for keeps. Most of the conventional party leaders of the time lacked what we would now call "the instinct for the jugular"; but this Disraeli had. Mr. Blake writes:

Disraeli was perhaps the first statesman systematically to uphold the doctrine that it is the duty of the Opposition to oppose. . . . Whatever proposal the Government put forward, whatever its merits, you could always



—From the book.

Dizzy was a modern.