

## Book Reviews

Amongst other things it is interesting to find an essay on Pushkin by one who can read him in the original. To those of us who are inclined to regard the adulation of Russian literature with suspicion it is reassuring to learn that Pushkin really was a great poet, whether or no he were among the greatest. It is interesting to learn, too, how much he was influenced by Byron.

In the essay called *Punch and Judy* Mr. Baring discusses the perennial question of how to satisfactorily produce a play (Mr. Baring likes split infinitives). Most people will readily agree with him that the purpose of scenery is not served by trying to create the illusion of reality. They will concede, too, in general that 'the play is the thing,' but many will be found to contest the fact that a play can act itself. However real may be the danger that the personality of a great actor will overlay the part that he is playing most people will prefer to see a great part greatly played. Failing this the preferable alternative is to read it for oneself—Charles Lamb's way out of the difficulty.

Mr. Baring has some penetrating remarks on both high-brows and low-brows, but let anyone who doubts the equipoise of his own artistic judgments note the following comment on the love-sick maidens in *Patience*. 'The twenty love-sick maidens are with us still. They read Freud and they paint cubes, and listen with rapture to the music of Scriabin, and the more unintelligible they find it the better they like it. This doesn't at all mean that the art that they admire is sham, any more than the art of Whistler and Rossetti was sham in the eighties, but it means that every school of art has always had, and always will have, foolish disciples who imitate and exaggerate the faults of the master without being able to emulate his excellencies.'

F.G.S.

THE VEIL OF VERONICA. By Gertrud von Le Fort. Translated by Conrad M. R. Bonacina. (Sheed & Ward; 7/6.)

The publishers claim so much for this book that at first I was daunted in criticising it: perhaps it is entirely a matter of taste and that they are right in thinking it a work of 'faultless art'; I can only disagree. To begin with, I find little of the conflict between 'the majesty of paganism and the intimate life of grace' that I looked for in the heroine's mind and soul; her ebullitions of Roman rhapsodies, obscured by abstract gropings, suggest no difficulty about materialism and still less about paganism. In fact, as far as *Veronica* is concerned, I see no

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conflict at all—only a sleek self-satisfaction horribly reminiscent of her mother's grey cats. And in regard to technique I feel that a writer who depends so much on the magnification of trivial instances and who lays so much stress upon their ultimate consequences, may learn much from a closer study of, for example, Conrad, and condense as much as concentrate: here there is so much building up of ideas and images, so much emphasis and tittivation, that tones and half-tones are lost, merging into a monotone that nevertheless carries one along inexorably, while little things become ponderous and big things meaningless. That there is here evident remarkable literary power is clear from the violent antagonism roused in the reader by the central figure. It seems fantastic, though, to assert that she 'effaces herself to give first place to her grandmother'; on the contrary we find every other figure and the glory that is Rome subordinated to herself, and even the story of the terrible spiritual retrogression of *Aunt Edelgart* is robbed of its forcefulness by *Veronica's* megalomania.

But if you want an absorbing psychological study, here it is. *Veronica* is sixteen, a complete egotist, with the possessive instinct disproportionately developed. She centres her devotion in turn in her grandmother, *Enizio*, her aunt, and, presumably, finally in God, and it is devotion of that supremely selfish order that demands everything and gives nothing. It never occurs to her to relieve *Jeanette* or *Edelgart* of some of their burdens, and in return for her aunt's selfless nursing she complains, when *Edelgart* is herself ill, of 'the obligation of nursing my aunt.' She cannot be excused on account of her youth, for in no other respect does she show any of its natural limitations. She is unscrupulous enough to listen and record without shame or apology conversations never meant for her ears and a confession that she had no right to know about. She notes minutely and condemns the actions and their implications of others and never considers the possibly deplorable effects of her own conduct. Even in her occasional self-denunciation she exalts herself in excuse. Her nickname *Spiegelchen*, is appropriate, for she is indeed a little mirror—of self-conceit. She appears in the guise of an avenging angel, discovering 'guilt' in all those whose sole concern in one way or another has been her welfare, and it is with condescension that she accepts Grace. Her penetration into the motives and considerations of others produces four outstanding pen-portraits, but they would be of greater value were they drawn in their own interest instead of hers. All this she calls her tale of her soul's history with God

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'curiously woven . . . a simple tale that follows its own straight path,' and she declares, 'I do not propose to reveal God's secrets with my soul.' She reveals everyone else's secrets, however, and that with immoderate candour, and she writes about herself with deplorable lack of restraint. It must be remembered that the disclosure of intimacies of the soul can be more indelicate than intimacies of sex, and for that reason this book would be far more acceptable were it written in the third person. To write it so powerfully as a piece of fiction is indeed a *tour-de-force*; if it really were autobiographical I should be sorry for its publication—except for the excellence of the translation.

It has occurred to me that perhaps after all I have been very dense and that the whole thing is a cunning and deliberate exposition of the ugliness of spiritual pride, a stupendous satire on priggishness; but that is too much to expect. R.R.

SIDELIGHTS ON NEW LONDON AND NEWER YORK, and Other Essays. By G. K. Chesterton. (London: Sheed & Ward; 6/-.)

In this collection of essays Mr. Chesterton gives us his contribution to that ever-growing library of criticism of Modern Youth and the New Age. Its manifestation in the civilisation of the West is dealt with in a series of eight essays on New London, followed by fourteen essays under the title Newer York, criticisms based on his own personal observation of the recent developments of the New Age in the New World.

With his customary penetration and cheerfulness Mr. Chesterton succeeds in persuading his readers—and let us hope, his victims—that he is neither a Nonconformist preacher nor yet one of those 'Dear Old Things who understand the Modern Youth.' If he sees gate-crashing as a sort of sacramental and mystical denial of the first principles of cultured society, he does, on the other hand, find a sympathetic and winning excuse for it in a masterly analysis of 'The True Victorian Hypocrisy.' Cocktails, too, provide a reason for the lash, and their wide popularity is shown up as a modern vogue for the facile and shallow as compared with the more mature and deeper pleasures of the beer and brandy of an older civilisation. The declining cigar trade can console itself with the contemplation of this point, or even consider its advertising potentialities.

The value of such criticism, however, must be appraised with an eye on the fact that so few can breathe for long, or at all, the rarified atmosphere of Mr. Chesterton's viewpoint. Not