

## LIVING CONTINENTAL CRITICS.

## VII.—FERDINANDO MARTINI.

It has often been said that Italy has not yet had her Sainte-Beuve, and in spite of the "Latin Renaissance," which M. de Vogüé has so widely heralded, the statement still holds true. Every student of contemporary Italian literature must be impressed with the fact that it numbers among its writers no leading critic, none whose name carries with it such weight as that, for instance, of Ferdinand Brunetière in France, or even of Andrew Lang in England, and whose verdict can make or mar the fortune of a book. That this is not due to the lack of critical acumen in the Italian temperament is evidenced by the encouraging tentatives of a score or more of writers, who only need more favourable environments to come to the front. The real explanation must be sought in the same causes that are responsible for keeping Italian letters as a whole at a low ebb: the lack of social and political unity; the absence of uniformity in the literary language, and the want of a literary centre, such as London or Paris, toward which men of letters would naturally gravitate, and in which success would ensure a national reputation. There is another reason, and one which is often of more practical weight—namely, that with the exception of the drama, literature as a profession is distinctly unprofitable in Italy. It is the exception and not the rule, when a book gets beyond its second thousand, while a seventh or eighth edition is high-water mark, even for a writer like D'Annunzio; and such sales as attend Zola's works in France are practically unknown on the other side of the Alps. Where popular novels are so poorly remunerated, still less is to be expected from volumes of critical essays, and few writers can afford the luxury of devoting themselves exclusively to this higher form of letters; indeed, the universal tendency among Italian writers is to work along several different lines successively, and many an author begins by publishing a collection of verses, then drifts into journalism, and after publishing a few novels and editing, perhaps, a volume or so of memoirs, is

pretty sure to round out the list with a drama. Indeed, the profits of a successful play are so alluring, that we see writers like Verga and D'Annunzio abandoning, or at least interrupting a brilliant career as novelists for the greater reward that awaits the playwright.

Among those writers who have earned this title to the name of critic, it is hard to pick out a single one who is in any broad sense representative. Much of the best and most careful work has been done by professors of literature in the various educational institutions of Italy—men like Angelo Solerti, of Bologna, Giovanni Mestica, at Palermo, or Camillo Antona-Traversi at Rome, whose respective writings on Tasso, Leopardi, and Ugo Foscolo have brought them well-deserved fame. Their work, however, is largely specialised, and has a distinctly academic flavour. Among those who write in a more popular vein, Molmenti, Masi, and Nencioni are all prominent, while the poets Carducci, Panzacchi, and even Ugo Fleres are all able and discriminating essayists. But while many of these writers possess the critical instinct to an equal and perhaps higher degree, there is none of such general interest, none whose name will hereafter stand for so much in the history of Italian letters as that of Ferdinando Martini, whose recent appointment as Civil Governor of Italy's African possessions has brought him prominently into public notice.

Martini began life with the single advantage of being a Tuscan, to all intents and purposes, indeed, a Florentine, having been born in the adjacent town of Monsummano, famed for the birth of the poet Giusti and for its grottoes, and where he still has a favourite villa. Beginning his career as teacher in an obscure technological institute, Martini owes his subsequent advancement primarily to his pen, and his surprising versatility has led him successively into almost every department of literature, even to editing at one time a children's periodical, the *Giornale dei Bambini*. Later he helped to found another jour-

nal, the *Fanfulla*, writing, under the pseudonyms of "Fox" and "Fantasio," a series of articles, the best of which were afterward collected into a volume under the title *Fra un Sigaro e l'Altro* ("Between One Cigar and Another"). He is an industrious contributor to the leading periodicals, and the most important of his writings have appeared in the *Nuova Antologia*, which is the *Revue des Deux Mondes* of Italy. Ferdinando Martini was born a statesman still more than a man of letters, or, as a fellow-countryman said of him, "He is a diplomat who has strayed aside into literature," and it was inevitable that he should sooner or later find his way into politics. He has served several times as Minister of Public Works, and once as Deputy to the National Parliament, where he soon made himself felt by his quick grasp of complicated situations and his clever treatment of delicate questions, and he was always listened to with attention. It was during his term as deputy that he was appointed a member of the royal commission sent out to investigate the status of affairs in the African colony of Eritrea; and his *Africa Italiana*, which was the outcome of this voyage, and is one of his most successful publications, is largely responsible for his recent appointment as Civil Governor.

Although not profound in his critical judgments, Martini has the much rarer quality of unerring good taste, while in point of style he possesses much of the delicate charm of Anatole France, without the latter's erudition. It matters little what he writes about; he has the happy faculty of infusing the same genial interest in all his pages, whether they treat of darkest Africa or of his favourite among Goldoni's comedies—that inimitable *Locandiera*, which Duse has so admirably interpreted. His language possesses at all times a limpidity, a refinement, and a finished ease which constitute his real service to Italian letters. He belongs to that narrow coterie of writers, including such names as De Amicis, Fogazzaro, and D'Annunzio, who, working independently, are striving to invigorate the literary language and raise it from its present amorphous state. It is, however, precisely this term "literary language" to which Martini objects, believing that the resources of the spoken language are quite sufficient

for literary purposes. "Pray, what language do we speak?" he is quoted as saying, in a recent interview. "As far as I know, you are now speaking to me in Italian, and I am answering you in Italian. And even outside of calm conversation, even in moments of passion, cultivated people do not end by speaking in dialect;" a remark which holds true for Florentines like Martini himself, but not at all for the large proportion of writers from other parts of Italy, from Venice, Milan, or Naples, for instance, who, however wealthy or cultured they may be, regularly use the local dialect in their own homes, and whenever they try to give a vigorous tone to a passage, instinctively relapse into the ruder, but more expressive phraseology of that dialect. Similarly Italians explain the lack of eloquence in their national parliament on the ground that a majority of the deputies are to all intents and purposes speaking a foreign language. As a result, however, of his theories, Martini's style forms a happy medium between the studied, almost bald simplicity of Verga and his school, on the one hand, and the eloquent artificiality of D'Annunzio, on the other, and at the present day it would be hard to find a safer model for finished Italian prose. Yet his methods are not uniformly successful; his most recent dramatic work, a one-act comedy called *La Vipera*, which supposedly embodies his latest ideas, was recently brought out in Turin, where it received much applause from the public, and from the critics what the Italians, like the French, designate as a *succès d'estime*, although the verdict of more than one was that his characters spoke Italian as it undoubtedly ought to be spoken, but not as it ever had been, or was likely to be, in actual life.

In criticism as in politics, Martini is strongly conservative, and in the former, at least, shows a vein of distinct pessimism, which he confesses is to some extent instinctive, although, reason as he will with himself, he cannot throw it off. He expresses his ideas in part as follows:

"I do not know, I do not see the causes of the present decadence; I observe the effects, that is all. We are on the slope of a sharp declivity, and everything is rolling downward. I do not perceive the first causes of the move-

ment, but only the movement itself. And I am not speaking of Italy alone. Look at France, which so long took the lead. Since the generation of 1830, since Balzac, Hugo, Renan, Dumas, Flaubert, who has come? Zola? Bourget? But what would they and the other genial writers of to-day have been without the powerful support of their predecessors? I am far from meaning, however, that art will die. No; art is at present held in abeyance, but it is a necessary social function, and cannot die.'

His pessimism is, however, darkest in regard to Italian literature, of which he questions the very existence. If we credit him, Italy has as yet had but one dramatist, Goldoni, and only one novel, Manzoni's *The Betrothed*. In regard to literary schools, Martini has scant patience. "So long as a work of art is born," he says, "posterity, which is to keep it on the throne, will trouble itself but little whether it be naturalistic, realistic, psychological, or something else. All these different methods, which have aroused so many useless discussions, have a common defect: they take one's thoughts away from the story itself. Above all, I hate the introduction of the problem into art, I hate Ibsen, and—to put the thing in a nutshell—I am not a Socialist. Still," he adds, "art ought to think, and lead the reader to think. It ought to point the way, even if it does not demonstrate."

Of the present outlook of literature in Italy, Martini thinks that that of the drama is the most hopeless; for the romance, he admits that there are "comforting tentatives, from Gabriele d'Annunzio to Matilde Serao," but reserves "his judgment or . . . his condemnation." In poetry, however, he admits that his race has a "good lyric tradition," and that "on this single side the blackness of his pessimism lightens."

It is, perhaps, worth citing, as a peculiarly characteristic instance of Martini's conservatism, that, contrary to the accepted usage, he persists in spelling Africa with two f's throughout his *Affrica Italiana*, because "all Italian prose writers so wrote it, from Machiavelli to Leopardi, and he more willingly stands with them than with those who dance attendance upon the new orthography."

Ferdinando Martini is to-day fifty-six years of age, having been born in 1841. He is described by a contemporary as



FERDINANDO MARTINI.

still young and elegant, with a pale complexion, which harmonises well with his light brown mustache and hair just tinged with gray. The accompanying portrait is said to be an excellent likeness, although it seems scarcely to do justice to his "habitual subtle smile," of which so much has been said.

*Frederic Taber Cooper.*



*Yours truly*

*John G. Schiller*

AMERICAN BOOKMEN.

XI.—WHITTIER AND LOWELL.

The scholar in politics is familiar enough in other lands, but here he has never quite lost a certain strangeness of aspect. The poet in politics is almost an anomaly everywhere, and if any jus-

tification were needed for bringing together the names of Whittier and Lowell, it would be found in the fact that they won their first conspicuous laurels in devoting their Muse to the service of