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Books of Special Interest

Chekhov Letters

LETTERS ON THE SHORT STORY, THE DRAMA, AND OTHER LITERARY TOPICS. By ANTON CHEKHOV. Selected and edited by LOUIS S. FRIEDLAND. New York: Minton, Balch & Co. 1924. \$4.

Reviewed by LEO WIENER
Harvard University

LETTERS of a great writer have not only a fascination as giving an insight into his inner life, which is generally disguised in his literary works, but they also throw a flood of light upon many activities connected with his authorship, which otherwise would remain hidden from the reader's view and would distort the actual facts into wrong perspectives. In the first case a well-chosen selection, especially in a translation from a foreign tongue, easily accomplishes its purpose. Thus, Mrs. Garnett's admirable selection from the six volumes of Chekhov's letters, which appeared in 1920, fully satisfies the reader's curiosity. Apparently Mr. Friedland wanted to do justice to the scholar's desire for documentary proof in issuing the present volume, in which a larger amount of material is brought together. It remains for the critic to ascertain how he has acquitted himself of his task.

The constant solecisms in Mr. Friedland's translations do not raise any hope that the renderings are exact or even correct. Moscowite for Muscovite, Sokolonits for Sokolinetz, Russkoye Bogatsvo and Russkaya Bogatsyo for Russkoe Bogatstvo, Lvo and Lvov for Lev (Tolstoy's son), kalie bromatie for potassium bromide, etc., are irritating enough. His worst offence is quoting Mrs. Garnett's translation *in toto*, without even once giving her credit for the text. Such passages may be found, with an occasional change of a word, on pp. 10, 11, 16, 19, 20, 21, 24, 27, 29, 35, 40, and so forth. The following passage from p. 11 in Mr. Friedland's book as compared with Mrs. Garnett's translation, will illustrate his method:

<p>Mrs. Garnett's Translation</p> <p>"I begin a story on September 10th with the thought that I must finish it by October 5th at the latest; if I don't I shall fail the editor and be left without money. I let myself go at the beginning and write with an easy mind; but by the time I get to the middle I begin to grow timid and to fear that my story will be too long: I have to remember that the <i>Syeverny Vyestnik</i> has not much money, and that I am one of their expensive contributors. This is why the beginning of my stories is always very promising and looks as though I were starting on a novel, the middle is huddled and timid, and the end is, as in a short sketch, like fireworks. And so in planning a story one is bound to think first about its frame-</p>	<p>Mr. Friedland's Translation</p> <p>"I begin a story on September 10th with the thought that I must finish it by October 5th at the latest; if I don't I shall fail the editor and be left without money. I let myself go at the beginning and write with an easy mind; but by the time I get to the middle I begin to grow timid and to fear that my story will be too long: I have to remember that the <i>Sieverny Vyestnik</i> has not much money, and that I am one of their expensive contributors. This is why the beginning of my stories is always very promising and looks as though I were starting on a novel, the middle is huddled and timid, and the end is, as in a short sketch, like fireworks. And so in planning a story one is bound to think first about its frame-</p>
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*A letter by the author of this volume replying to the reviewer's criticism will be found on page 654.

work: from a crowd of leading or subordinate characters one selects one person only—wife or husband; one puts him on the canvas and paints him alone, making him prominent, while the others one scatters over the canvas like small coin, and the result is something like the vault of heaven: one big moon and a number of very small stars around it. But the moon is not a success, because it can only be understood if the stars too are intelligible, and the stars are not worked out. And so what I produce is not literature, but something like the patching of Trishka's coat. What am I to do? I don't know, I don't know. I must trust to time which heals all things."

One cannot condemn Mr. Friedland too much for the literary atrocities perpetrated by him.

On India

ETHICS OF INDIA. By E. WASHBURN HOPKINS. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1924. \$3.

Reviewed by KENNETH SAUNDERS

IT is strange that the Western world has had to wait so long for books upon so great and important a topic. And now almost simultaneously have appeared two books, "Hindu Ethics," by Dr. McKenzie of Bombay, and "Ethics of India," by Professor Hopkins of Yale; the latter tells us that he had claimed to be the first in this field only to discover that Professor McKenzie's volume was already out. The books are written from a somewhat different point of view. "Hindu Ethics," a member of the well-known Quest of India Series, has a missionary purpose, and while it seeks to be fair is much more critical than "Ethics of India." This is in a sense a continuation of Dr. Hopkins's well-known "Religions of India," and follows the same historical method. It traces the development of Indian ethical ideals from the Rig Veda to modern days and shows how much more ethical content Indian religion has than is usually recognized. In a concluding chapter he attempts to evaluate some of these, and deals specially with India's challenge to the Western world in her great doctrine of Ahimsa, now voiced by Mr. Gandhi. He holds that Hindu ethics surpasses that of the West in its compassionate spirit towards bird and beast and even towards the plant world.

And we, who are only beginning to hear that trees and flowers have life and feeling comparable in weak degree to our own, and condone, if we do not inflict, so much of the misery suffered by dumb animals, may properly, as we learn to be less cruel, turn back with some humility to the time long before the Christian era, when so good and perfect a doctrine was not only preached as an ethical ideal but was accepted by millions of people as the normal rule of life for every good man, and confess that, however excellent our ethics may be, India has taught us something better than we know.

If this is true in the sphere of plants and animals how much more true is it in that of men. Today when it is regarded as a dangerous doctrine in the West the essentially Christian teaching of the power of love and of the duty of non-resistance is being embodied in a movement which is shaking all India and arresting attention everywhere.

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A Letter from England

By EDWIN MUIR

THE English novel has been showing more and more diversity in the last two or three years. There are no longer streams of tendency as there were in the time—now apparently buried—of Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy. On the contrary, we see the spectacle, hard to credit, of innumerable tributaries and no river. In other words, there are many artists wandering in lonely byways, but no main road. These artists at intervals appear surprisingly out of the void and pass unaccountably into a future which may with equal plausibility be the disguised shape of oblivion or of fame. We simply cannot tell. There are novelists like Mr. Lawrence, so individual that they can have few imitators and no colleagues. There is Mr. David Garnett, whose field is so narrow that two in it would be a crowd. There is Mr. T. F. Powys, as narrow as Mr. Garnett, more peculiar than Mr. Lawrence, and in himself forbidding enough to scare away the most hardened of those who insist on being influenced. There are Mr. E. M. Forster and Mr. Stephen Hudson, masters of their *métiers* and therefore in no danger of being imitated. There is Mrs. Virginia Woolf, a very fine intelligence and a very intelligent sensibility, whom writers lacking her rare fusion of gifts will imitate at their peril. These writers do not swim in the same stream of tendency, and none of them incarnates "the modern consciousness" as Mr. Wells did for a little twenty years ago. There is indeed only one writer of accredited rank in England in a stream. That is Mr. Aldous Huxley, who if he does not incarnate the modern consciousness at least incarnates something modern: an attitude, a pose, or it may be a necessity of the mind. He alone of the more considerable figures writes in the same vein as a great number of writers in England all inferior to him and as a small number of writers in France who are his superiors. But one can hardly take these writers seriously, whether they are represented by Mr. Huxley or by Paul Morand. Mr. Huxley himself—if he can be separated from almost everything he has written yet—one can take seriously on account of his admitted gifts, chief of which is a graceful style. But what he says, describes, implies—his whole attitude to existence—is so senseless if it is genuine and so pointless if it is not that there is a sort of charlatanism in admiring it, as several young writers and old critics seem to do. The modern attitude of smart disillusion and up-to-date despair is not unlike the spurious romanticism of a century ago. Modify Mr. Huxley a little and he has a remarkable resemblance to Alfred de Musset. He "scorns" life as the romantics did, only in different phrases, and he cannot be exempted from the charge of trying to work all his reactions, disagreeable as well as agreeable, into a picturesque pose. But what value has that pose? And what relevance has it to art? The relevance which de Musset's romanticism had to his poetry. It made poetry fashionable for a time, and unfashionable ever since.

Several of the chief English novelists have published new works this year. There has been Mr. Huxley's "Those Barren Leaves." Mr. T. F. Powys is represented by a novel, "Mr. Tasker's Gods," in which the leaves are still more barren than Mr. Huxley's and the fruit more bitter. Mr. J. D. Beresford has repeated himself very conscientiously in "The Monkey Puzzle." Mr. Stephen Hudson's "Myrtle" has appeared, the most beautiful achievement thus far of his fine and economical art. In addition there have been two considerable novels by new writers. Mr. Geoffrey Dennis, whose "Mary Lee" made a stir in 1922, has followed it with "Harvest in Poland," which will probably make even a bigger stir, though its very considerable merits are not chiefly literary. Far more interesting as well as far quieter is Miss Marjory Strachey's first novel. It is entitled "The Nightingale" and it is an imaginative reconstruction of the life of Chopin. The theme is obviously difficult. One can imagine the life of Chopin being treated with the devastating sentimentality which English writers seldom avoid in approaching such themes, the sentimentality, for example, which makes unreadable every criticism, long or short, written on Francis Thompson. One can imagine it, again, being treated with that light English satire which is almost always too heavy and almost never wise. Miss Strachey avoids both sentimentality and satire: she renders the romance of Chopin's life, surroundings, thoughts, while strictly avoiding the romantic. She shows a rare sympathy, a rare objectivity.

The description of the composer's early life is firm and beautiful; the scenes at Nahant between Chopin and George Sand's son, the interiors of that queer and sordid household, are full of unflinching truth and economy. And the final scene is not merely very skillful in what it omits; it is intensely moving. Miss Strachey is not so good in her love scenes; she is at her best in describing the first and the last years of Chopin's life, his years of almost pure happiness and almost unalleviated suffering. Throughout she sticks closely to the actual story of Chopin's life; and like M. Maurois's "Ariel" the book is both novel and biography. There are great possibilities in this new field for the novel, and, it is not unpleasant to think, great dangers. None but writers with a certain minimum of intelligence will be able to undertake, the *métier*.

Of Mr. Dennis's novel, "Harvest in Poland," it is difficult to write. The author has not acquired any command over his art; he is full of tricks and devoid of technique; he writes very well, very badly, and always too much; and he is consistently melodramatic, a sure sign of a failure in artistic expression. But he has imagination; he sees life originally, though not so originally as he tries to make out; and one or two of the characters in the novel are real creations on the border-line between life and fantasy. The horrible and fascinating Sebastyan is magnificently imagined. If the novel were on the plane of art it might conceivably be great art. But it is not on that plane. There is Mr. Dennis's stiff problem.

The last novel of note—Mr. Hudson's "Myrtle"—is also the best. It is Mr. Hudson's fifth book, but it is in no sense a repetition. Each of this author's novels has had a separate form, has been the solution of a fresh artistic problem. The articulation of each has been determined by the problem; the novel has been the concrete answer to that. It has been, in other words, an aesthetic creation; the question has been answered on the plane of art: the novel has had an aesthetic necessity—and that is a rare thing for an English novel to have. For

when the aesthetic quality is present in a novel it means not merely that a segment of life is being faithfully described, but that the presentation has an interior unity, that the novel is a world the forces of which alone create the characters and destinies of the figures in it, their actions, reactions, interests, everything. This world is autonomous and complete; the characters do not stray into it from the actual world, as, for example, Mr. Huxley's characters do; nor are they concerned with specific problems carried over from the actual world, as Mr. Galsworthy's characters are. They live in this completely evoked world of art; they are a permanent part of it. It may be said of Mr. Hudson's characters that they do this. His novels are aesthetically realized.

Thus it is almost impossible to write of the state of the novel in England today. The novel has no type at present and it is not in one state but in several. Seen from one angle the position seems hopeless. The conventional realistic novel, psycho-analytical or not, with or without sociology, has been turned out for such a long time and in such abundance that there seems no meaning in turning it out any longer. Mr. Lawrence's very exciting books are hardly contributions to the novel; they open no new doors, though they have broken most of the windows. Mr. Huxley, having begun as an original variation, has made up his mind to vary no more. Mr. Garnett writes of animals in eighteenth century prose, and does it excellently. The picture could be enlarged—but that is the English novel today. It seems to be advancing in all directions; it has no leader; it has attained no synthesis, and there is probably nobody living who could synthesize it. The most encouraging sign in all this anarchy is that more and more attention is being given to the aesthetic side of the novel. By their themes, their style, their vein of inhumanity, Mr. David Garnett's stories, for example, are made to rely, as no stories have relied in England for a long time, on their aesthetic appeal. Mr. Hudson's appeal, too, is chiefly aesthetic. And one could mention three or four other names, without dragging in "Ulysses" (certainly the grand feat of our generation), which has had very little influence on the English novel. At any rate, the sociological-psychological novel is dead. Although it is still being written, it has been found out.



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