

Book Reviews

V. S. Pritchett, *Balzac*. Toronto, Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin; London: Chatto and Windus, 1973. pp. 272. \$17.95.

Another biography of Balzac? one asks, politely stifling a yawn. But when it is signed by that excellent novelist and short-story writer, critic and autobiographer, V. S. Pritchett, there is cause for joyful anticipation. Regretfully to say, the book, though it has undeniable merits, is on the whole disappointing.

We have hardly reached the end of the first page of the text (p. 15) when we encounter an unfortunate mistranslation of a famous remark by Balzac about Napoleon: "What Napoleon achieved by the sword I shall achieve by the pen." The original French reads "Ce qu'il n'a pu achever par l'épée, je l'accomplirai par la plume." Pritchett's error, repeated in his paraphrase of the same remark on p. 68, is all the more surprising since he has apparently made use of Stefan Zweig's fine biography, in which the chapter on Balzac and Napoleon begins with a correct translation: "What he began with the sword, I shall consummate with the pen." César Biroteau, the hero of Balzac's novel by the same name, is not "old" (p. 199), but going on forty. However, these are peccadilloes. Pritchett, unlike many "popularizers," whom we are never sure we can trust, cannot seriously be faulted on the accuracy either of his translations or of his facts. He has based his account on reliable sources and knows his subject well. Too well at times? One wonders how he knows that on the road from Saché Balzac "was trying to work out how to raise the money for the journey [to Aix-les-Bains]" (p. 123), or that Balzac's landlady-mistress Madame de Brugnol "screamed at him 'You love no one but yourself'" (p. 235); but one assumes that Pritchett in these instances, as elsewhere throughout the book, is simply making use — and very skillful use at that — of Balzac's copious correspondence. He has a good feel for the Paris of Balzac's time, excels in linking the novels with Balzac's own experience, and recounts his life with wit and vitality, with the right mixture of critical detachment and sympathy, of irony and respect, the right blend of the grotesque and the tragic. Not the least of his merits is to have assembled and coordinated so masterfully with his text the remarkable collection of illustrations that add to the book's attractiveness (unfortunately also to its price) — a veritable *exposition Balzac* for one's coffee table.

In Pritchett's portrait of Balzac as a likeable monster, a genius driven on by devouring ambition but retaining to the end a "core of common sense," there is little seriously to dispute. The whole book, however, — and this I consider its most serious failing — is lopsided in the amount of attention it gives to Balzac's life at the expense of his work. Pritchett shows well how Balzac drew on his experience in order to write his

novels, how "the manias of the man fed the novelist"; he fails to show, though he drops a hint here and there in what seem to be brief digressions (!) on selected writings, how the work *transcends* the life. His observations on Balzac the writer are seldom original and for the most part superficial. He is content to perpetuate the old chestnuts about Balzac's inferiority to Stendhal as a prose writer and a psychologist, about his not being a "poet," about the tediousness of *Séraphita* and the "failure" of *Le Lys dans la vallée*. In a manner typical of what I would call his biographical bias, he seems disappointed that *Le Lys dans la vallée*, a great novel despite its flaws, is not a more faithful mirror of Balzac's love affair with Madame de Berny. Less insistence on Balzac's furnishings, turquoise cane and other possessions, business enterprises and debts, mistresses (as important as all these are), and more attention to exploring those qualities which have made the *Comédie Humaine* both a supreme work of the imagination and an uncannily truthful historical witness to its era, would have strengthened the book. We hear too much about Balzac's carpets and not enough about his mind. As a small but significant detail that I find symptomatic of Pritchett's tendency to neglect Balzac's mind, I note that at one point he calls him an atheist, only to remark later that he had always been a Catholic. A Catholic atheist, perhaps? The type is common enough in France and other "Latin" countries; one would have liked to hear Pritchett on this subject.

The lopsidedness of the book extends also into the Select Bibliography, which is strong on "lives" (Gaëtan Picon's *Balzac par lui-même* should nevertheless have been included), but deficient precisely in certain essential critical studies that help one to reach a greater understanding of Balzac the artist and thinker. It is commendable that Alain, Bouteron, Curtius, Hunt, and Marceau are included, but where are Bardèche on the early novels, Béguin on *Balzac visionnaire*, Geneviève Delattre on Balzac's views of other writers, Donnard on economic and social realities in the *Comédie Humaine*, Guyon on *La Pensée sociale et politique de Balzac*, Fargeaud on his search for the Absolute, Laubriet on Balzac the esthetician?

In conclusion, a highly readable and handsomely illustrated Life in the well established English tradition. But hardly the extraordinary book that certain inflationary reviews are already touting it to be. But is it not unfair to object to a very competent biography simply because it is not something else — a major critical study? I can only reply that the objection would never have been raised if the perceptiveness of Pritchett's earlier essays on the novel (some of the finest of them, on the French novel) had not led us to expect from him a more substantial *Balzac*.

RICHARD M. CHADBOURNE

Peter F. Morgan, ed., *The Letters of Thomas Hood*. University of Toronto: Department of English Studies and Texts 18. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973. pp. 702. \$15.

There has been a substantial reevaluation of the literary and social significance of the writings of Thomas Hood in the last twenty years. J. C. Reid's biography (1963), John Clubbe's *Victorian Forerunner* (1968) and the dissertations and articles of, to name only two scholars, Alvin Whitley and the editor of the volume under review, Peter Morgan, have all helped to establish that Hood was a good deal more than a belated, minor Romantic poet who turned into a rather tiresome comic punster. Auden has put on record in the introduction to *19th Century British Minor Poets* his extremely high opinion of Hood as a comic artist:

When Hood (whom I, by the way, consider a major poet) tries to write a serious poem, at best he produces an imitation of Keats, but when he is writing as a comic poet, he is like nobody but himself and serious in the true sense of the word.

In this reevaluation, Hood's extensive correspondence, both published and unpublished, has been of primary importance, but scattered as it was in the rare book and manuscript sections of dozens of libraries in Great Britain and the United States, it was only available to a handful of scholars. The University of Toronto Press and their editor are to be congratulated, therefore, on the production of this handsome, indeed sumptuous edition, of Hood's letters. With the constant changes of fashion in literary scholarship, and with the possibility of new material turning up in this age of assiduous collectors, one hesitates to call any piece of scholarship *definitive*. 1873 saw the final version of *Memorials of Thomas Hood* appear in Vol. X of *The Works*: this was the first extensive use of Hood's letters; 1973 sees this first *collected* edition of these letters. One might predict with safety that this edition will still be useful in 2073. Its primary value at this point in time is that it does, as its editor claims in his introduction, enlarge and clarify the view of Hood and his world presented by earlier biographers. The general reader receives from these letters a strong and abiding impression of the sensitivity, humour and heroic determination of the continuously ailing Hood. Such a reader cannot fail to be attracted towards Hood's letters to such close friends as the Dilke family and his letters to children in his own family circle. The literary scholar, on the other hand, will welcome the wide range of information on Hood's multifarious literary activities contained in his letters to his publishers and editors and such literary and artistic friends as Charles Dickens, Charles Lamb, John Leech, Douglas Jerrold and Mark Lemon.

Morgan's awareness that he is editing these letters with very different classes of readers in mind has clearly affected his editorial procedures. He states his aim thus: "to present the letters as authentically as possible, at the same time avoiding obstacles which can stand in the way of the reader's apprehension of the writer's intention." The letters are divided chronologic-

ally by year, and into three major sections: *At Home, 1815-1835; Abroad, 1835-1840*; and *At Home Again, 1840-1845*. The editor permits himself "a little silent correction . . . when there is an obvious slip of the pen or omission of punctuation," and when Hood corrects himself, he reproduces only the correction, or second thoughts, and not the original form. Rather to my surprise, the editor also takes it upon himself to alter emphasis: "Hood frequently underlines for emphasis; where necessary, I have extended the corresponding italics over the relevant sense group or word." These editorial procedures, along with the decision not to number the letters and the *discreet* nature of the annotation are clearly intended to make the *apparatus criticus* interfere as little as possible with the general reader's enjoyment of the letters as literature. The careful design of the typographical layout, with its unjustified right hand margins and typographical ornaments, and the decision to include a few of Hood's own engravings as illustrations, are also clearly intended to enhance the "readable" quality of the edition. Compared with the more rigorous editorial procedures and more comprehensive view of scholarly annotation used, for example, in the Yale *Walpole Letters* or the Baton Rouge *Percy Letters*, this is clearly a compromise, but probably a justifiable compromise in an effort to make these very readable letters better known. One editorial decision which I do not approve of is the one to omit letters "certainly intended for publication." One consequence of this is that the reader has to have access to a file of *The Athenæum* to read Hood's letters published there in 1837, 1840 and 1842. The edition, nevertheless, includes a letter to the editor of *The Sun* and actually published in that journal.

Provided one is willing to accept the editorial principles and procedures, Morgan's actual editing is extremely scholarly in a modest and unassuming way. Hood's letters in the Dilke papers were edited by Leslie Marchand in 1945 and re-issued by Octagon Books in 1972. A comparison of Morgan's readings with those of Marchand does no discredit to the Toronto edition, and Morgan's annotation is superior. The annotation of the letters is generally of a very high order of competence. One occasionally feels that further genealogical research in the Public Record Office and the Scottish Record Office *might* have produced such useful results as the names of Hood's aunts and Morgan sometimes writes footnotes that stimulate but do not inform. E.g. he tells us that Hood's Swiss friend at St. Andrews, Samuel Messieux, "achieved a certain fame in the history of golf," but he does not tell us what that fame was, nor does he give a reference to C. T. Carr's article on Messieux. These minor flaws, however, do not detract from the overall impression of attractiveness, utility and excellence in this example of Toronto scholarship.

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Books Received

- BOWKER, ALAN, ed., *The Social Criticism of Stephen Leacock*. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1973. pp. 145. \$3.95.
- CARRINGTON, CHARLES, ed., *The Complete Barrack-Room Ballads of Rudyard Kipling*. London: Methuen, 1973. pp. 176. £2.00 (hardbound) £1.00 (paperback).
- COWLEY, MALCOLM, *A Many-Windowed House: Collected Essays on American Writers and American Writing*, Piper, Hendry Dan, ed. Don Mills: Burns & MacEachern; Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern University Press, 1970. Arcturus Paperbacks, 1973. pp. 261. \$3.50 (paper).
- DAY, FRANK PARKER, *Rockbound*. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1973. pp. 292. \$4.50.
- DI GIOVANNI, NORMAN THOMAS; Halpern, Daniel and MacShane, Frank, eds., *Borges on Writing*. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin; New York: E. P. Dutton 1972, 1973. pp. 173. \$7.95 (hardcover), \$3.50 (paperback).
- EVANS, GARETH LLOYD, *Shakespeare V. 1606-1616: Writers & Critics Series*, Jeffares, A. Norman, ed. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973. pp. 120. \$2.25, 60 p.
- FARQUHAR, GEORGE, *The Recruiting Officer*, Jeffares, Norman A. ed., Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973. pp. 152. 75 p.
- HIBBERD, DOMINIC, ed., *Wilfred Owen: War Poems and Others*. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin; London: Chatto & Windus, 1973. pp. 158. \$6.50, £1.75.
- HOWE, JOSEPH, *Poems and Essays*. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1973. pp. 341. \$4.95.
- KINKEAD-WEEKES, MARK, *Samuel Richardson: Dramatic Novelist*. London: Methuen, 1973. pp. 506. £5.20.
- MOTHER MARIA, *Amos Prophet of God*. Leighton Buzzard: The Faith Press, 1973. pp. 76. 90p.
- MOTHER MARIA, *The Psalms: An Exploratory Translation*. Leighton Buzzard: The Faith Press, 1973. pp. 304. £2.00.
- O'BRIEN, JOHN, ed., *Interviews with Black Writers*. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin; New York: Liveright, 1973. pp. 274. \$3.50.
- PUTNAM, MICHAEL C. J., *Tibullus: A Commentary*. Don Mills: Burns & MacEachern; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973. pp. 210. \$5.75.
- ROWLAND, BERYL, *Animals with Human Faces: A Guide to Animal Symbolism*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1973. pp. 192. \$10.75.

- SHAHANE, VASANT A., *Rudyard Kipling: Activist and Artist*. Don Mills: Burns & MacEachern; Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University, 1973. pp. 157. \$8.00.
- SHANNON, JOHN, *Each Soul Is Where It Wishes To Be*. Milwaukee: Membrane Press, 1973. n. pag. \$1.00.
- STANFORD, DEREK, ed., *Pre-Raphaelite Writing*. London: Dent, 1973. pp. 207. £2.95.
- STAPLETON, LAURENCE, *The Elected Circle: Studies in the Art of Prose*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973. pp. 297. \$11.00.
- STEAD, ROBERT J. C., *The Homesteaders*. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1973. pp. 347. \$4.50.
- SUCH, PETER, *riverrun*. Toronto/Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin, 1973. pp. 145. \$5.95.
- WELLS, WALTER, *Tycoons and Locusts: A Regional Look at Hollywood Fiction of the 1930s*. Don Mills: Burns & MacEachern; Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University, 1973. pp. 139. \$8.00.