

## A NEW FRENCH BOOK.

L'ILLUSION HEROIQUE DE TITO BASSI. By  
Henri de Régnier. (Mercure de France; 3 fr.  
50.)

In the preface to his latest novel, "L'Illusion Héroïque de Tito Bassi," M. Henri de Régnier makes a kind of apology for publishing an unwarlike book during the war and is careful to explain that it was written in the spring of 1914. One wonders why it should be necessary for so distinguished a member of so cultivated a race to make such an apology. Had our ancestors refrained from creating works of beauty while their nations were at war, we should now have no art at all.

It is the "business" of an artist to defend his national culture—if indeed "culture" be national and not cosmopolitan—by creating new art, as well as by fighting for it or laboring for it. The English poet, Frederic Manning, is publishing a book of singularly beautiful poems, written for the most part on the battlefields of France. There are many other artists of the belligerent countries who have "carried on" in equally desperate circumstances, and, since this is so, what reason is there for denying the use of a fine talent even to a mere civilian, simply because we are all at one another's throats? French culture is not now in danger from Prussian arms but rather from an over-patriotic zeal, a kind of bellicose puritanism which forbids us to whistle as we work! If M. de Régnier had written his book during instead of before the war, one would have felt it to be a real vindication of the deathless spirit of French cul-

ture. Perhaps, though, it is only the young who can still dream of beauty under the guns.

"L'illusion Héroïque de Tito Bassi" is one of those purely imaginative tales M. de Régner loves to tell himself—and us—of eighteenth century Italy. "La Double Maîtresse" is his supreme achievement—Tito Bassi is a kind of elegant pendant, an afterthought, a midsummer night's dream in Vicenza, city of palaces and dark streets and firefly haunted walks!

You will find people who cannot enjoy such work, who say: "Yes, I see it is beautiful, exquisitely written, clearly rendered—but what is its significance?" One can only shrug and reply: "The same significance as a flower, a silk gown, a Chinese painting, anything that is 'merely' beautiful."

Yet there is another significance, a kind of moral in these tales of M. de Régner, something which relates them to the imaginative drama of Mr. Yeats. I mean that they express the impotence of the human soul to reach its desire, the thwarting of a fine, impossible ideal by the rigid bar of destiny. The lovers of Mr. Yeats's dramas are unhappy—when lovers should be happy; his dreamers achieve nothing; his warriors fail. And the same feeling of the impotence of those who strive toward any noble end, which Mr. Yeats expresses in his tragic, serious verse, is also expressed by M. de Régner in his serene, ironic prose.

For Tito Bassi is a poor Italian who dreamed of performing heroic deeds, who dreamed also that he was a tragic actor, but who was in reality only a moderately good comedian. And the tragedy of his life is that no one will see him as anything but a comedian; no one, not even his wife, can understand his aspirations and bitter sufferings. He is always trying to live in the grand style and is always being brought down to the homely. His last and most desperate deception is ironically cruel; he has been condemned to death for having, as he thought, murdered his wife. He goes to the scaffold gladly, triumphantly, a tragic figure at last—and finds the cloaked hangman is his wife, while all Vicenza roars with laughter at its comedian!

Life is not so unlike that, nor art either. We are all Michelangelos until we begin to do drawings for the magazines; all Shelleys until we find out the difficulty of writing even the humblest prose article. Perhaps its vanity is the tragedy of mankind—mankind which not so very long ago claimed to be a "microcosm" and now presumes to judge the weight of the planets! We are all first cousins to Tito Bassi.

Ignorant people ask: "What is the use of art?" And like Pilate do not wait for an answer. Perhaps there is none to give; as well ask: "What is the use of life?" since art is simply a means of multiplying our personality, refining upon our instincts and passions, deepening experience, of giving life a simulacrum of immortality, of discovering the universe.

This may sound very pompous, yet in certain situations one feels the necessity of defining one's "of course's." Tito Bassi is nothing to me, nothing to you; yet M. de Régner's art forces us to live the life, experience the passions and torments of this human soul he has imagined. Henceforth the life of Tito Bassi is part of our own.

This desire to multiply one's personality is in all people, in a Michelangelo studying Dante just as in some "mechanic knave" gaping over the commonplace murders and rapes of the Sunday newspaper. Journalism gives us a coarse, trivial, vulgar multiplication of personality; it is the business of art to achieve this result ironically, if you will, but beautifully, nobly, with refinement.

Perhaps that is what Aristotle meant when he said that tragedy was a purging of the soul by means of terror and pity.

RICHARD ALDINGTON.