A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

NARCISSUS AND ECHO

By Raymond M. Weaver

THE European moderns are all *trying* to be extreme. Two modern literatures have, however, come to a real verge: the Russian and the American. And by American is not meant Sherwood Anderson, who is so Russian; the old people, rather: Hawthorne. Poe. Dana, Melville, Whitman. These last reached a pitch of extreme consciousness, as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Artzybashev reached a limit on the other side. The great difference between the extreme Russians and the extreme Americans lies in the fact that the Russians are explicit and hate eloquence and symbols, seeing in these only subterfuge, whereas the Americans refuse everything explicit and always put on a sort of double meaning. The artist usually sets out — or used to — to point a moral and adorn a tale. The tale, however, points the other way, as a rule. Two blankly opposing morals, the artist's and the tale. The proper function of the critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it. Such is the thesis of D. H. Lawrence. And in "Studies in Classic American Literature" he comes forward in the rôle of a friendly Egyptian princess to lift out the swaddled infant of truth that America spawned among the bulrushes some time back. "Now we know the business in these studies: saving the American tale from the American artist."

The soul of man, as seen by Mr. Lawrence, is a dark forest. The known self can never be more than a clearing in the forest. Gods, strange gods, come forth from the forest into the clearing of the known self, and then go back; and it is good to have the courage to let them come and go. "There", Mr. Lawrence proclaims, "is my creed. He who runs can read. He who prefers to crawl, or to go by gasoline, can call it rot."

The dark forest of Mr. Lawrence's mind is exuberantly peopled; and in this last book of his, strange gods pounce into the clearing to do a stout menagerie prance of self ostentation. Nor is the freedom of what Mr. Lawrence calls "my own Holy Ghost" hampered by information. His ignorance of American literature is comprehensive and profound. Raleigh improved his years in prison writing a "History of the World" — from his imagination and fantastic sources. Mr. Lawrence's industry has been more casual; his egotism is more brilliant, his impertinence more epic. He has probably in some manner examined a little of Franklin; "Letters from an American Farmer"; some of Cooper's novels; some Poe tales; "The Scarlet Letter" and "The Blithedale Romance"; "Two Years before the Mast"; "Typee", "Omoo", "Moby Dick", and my life of Melville; "Leaves of Grass". And this is about all. But this has been ample for Mr. Lawrence's purpose. He wanted a springboard upon which to prance his "spontaneous Me". And in "saving the American tale from the American artist" he can cut amazing capers upon a very narrow footing. In Fenimore Cooper he discovers profound

erotic mysteries; in "Moby Dick" "the last phallic being of the white man".

These "Studies", so called, of American literature of the last century, by a Britisher, are countered by "Studies in Victorian Literature" by Stanley T. Williams, assistant professor of English, Yale University. The antithesis is striking. While Mr. Lawrence has gone beating about in the dark forest of his mind scaring up the inmates of that jungle, Professor Williams has been cultivating his quiet little garden. Within the literature of the Victorian Age, Professor Williams — unlike Mr. Lawrence — has read extensively. But beyond this there is little range to Professor Williams's scholarship: he has too evidently "specialized in a period".

"Both Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold", Professor Williams writes, "were wont to speak of the many and confused voices of the nineteenth century. My essays are, I hope, true echoes of those voices, — echoes that may help to clarify the confusion." The echo is more obvious than the clarification. "This group of essays does not aim to subvert established judgments or to determine, in such criticism, new principles." It is an orthodox echo. "I have written them as an expression of the belief that one may learn much concerning an age by haunting its bypaths." And it is an optimistic echo. So Professor Williams writes fifteen essays — of which two are on Carlyle, four on Arnold, besides "Clough's Prose", "Newman's Literary Preferences", "Kingsley's 'Yeast'", "Landor and His Contemporaries". "In the criticism of literature", Professor Williams states, "something may be said for the art of overhearing. In this way indeed unexpected values may be established." It may be. Professor Williams's essays are certainly the result of "overhearing": it may be of overhearing the demand of sterile scholars that a professor must "produce". The "unexpected values" are an unrealized hope.

In speaking of "The Forsaken Merman", Professor Williams writes: "Arnold's poem is touched with the magic of life in the sea-deeps; we dream, almost believing, of the mysterious life of sea-beasts, of marine flowers, of the quiver and gleam of spent lights. Arnold stirs the imagination by occult sights and sounds. Red-gold thrones shine faintly, and through the secret windless abysses is intoned the tintinnabulation of a ghostly bell. All this is definite, yet mystical — boons for the inner eye and ear." Those who like this sort of thing will find Mr. Lawrence "hot, dizzy trash". But barbarian souls are likely to discover Professor Williams atrociously harmless, insipid beyond human tolerance. Let such hail Mr. Lawrence. He is as good as an Armenian massacre.

Studies in Classic American Literature. By D. H. Lawrence. Thomas Seltzer.
Studies in Victorian Literature. By Stanley T. Williams. E. P. Dutton and Co.