



Odell and Willard Shepard—"pastiche on a monumental scale."

and George Oglethorpe, founder of the Colony of Georgia.

The Shepards have explored these records with thoroughness and relish, producing out of them a fine welter of battle scenes, wrecks at sea, mutinies, ordeals by famine and fire. They seem to have left out no conceivable crisis of the human body, mind, or spirit. The way in which the stories are woven together is no doubt ingenious. To the Gothic twilight of Horace Walpole's house at Strawberry Hill the authors imagine that many of the great figures of these dramas might come for a discussion of the War of Jenkins' Ear. It is appropriate that they should assemble in that place, for Horace Walpole was the son of the much-tried Prime Minister who was edged out of office and into the aristocracy by the disaster. The younger Walpole becomes the chronicler of the accounts recited, rather as were the lusty tales of Chaucer's *Canterbury Pilgrims*, on the succeeding days of a week spent in the country.

Before the responsibility of admitting that this is by no means all that the Shepards have crowded into their book the mind reels. It can be added only, in a weak effort to suggest the relentless copiousness of the novel, that another thread of narrative has to do with an imaginary last visit to England of the Young Pretender and

of the reasons for his renunciation of his claim upon the throne.

The difficulty with so ambitious an effort is that it tends to fall apart for lack of a real center of interest. To overcome the difficulty the Shepards have offered the mind of Horace Walpole as a digester of the material. But the mind of Walpole as re-created by the Shepards is curiously arid. There is little nourishment to be found in an intelligence made up of poses, pretensions, mincing niceties, and confusions. Many of the people of the Strawberry Hill round-table discussion are historical figures: Catherine Clive, the actress, Byron and Adair, the adventurers and explorers. But in the end so many notable persons of eighteenth-century history crowd into the scene that the pageant tends to become a burlesque of itself.

Max Beerbohm once wrote a wicked piece called "Savonarola Brown" in which he delicately but disastrously undermined forever the structure of this kind of panorama view of history. One scene is laid in the public square of Florence. The stage directions call for the appearance in the crowd of all the better-known figures of Italian history. A fine assortment of Medicis, Gorgias, Guelphs, and Ghibellines cross the stage. Finally, as Beerbohm was superbly inspired to imagine, "Pippa passes."

The spirit of Pippa passes here, too.

## Momism Française

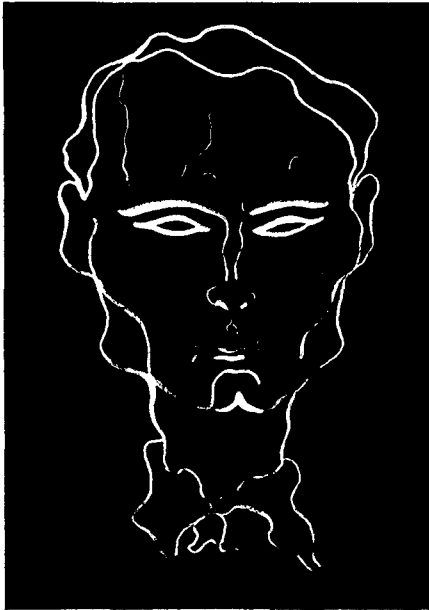
VIPER IN THE FIST. By Hervé Bazin. Translated by W. J. Strachan. New York: Prentice-Hall. 183 pp. \$2.75.

By HARRY SYLVESTER

THAT mass discovery of the silver cord made during and since the war has given us not only the term Momism but almost a whole category of novels of which the main or subordinate theme is the anguished awareness of the young novelist that his parents have been not altogether good for him. But in none that I know is there such intricate and exhaustive detailing of the ways of an evil parent as in this novel by a young Frenchman. Hervé Bazin brings to his unlikely task many of the virtues we associate with the French novel: great honesty, insight uncomplicated by sentimentality, the implication of juxtaposed incidents, and a sharp-edged clarity of description.

In the 1920's the Rezeaus belonged to the upper strata of the *bourgeoisie*. Their country home in the Craonnais is a half-modernized chateau in which the mother spies on her children, intrigues with tutors against them, feeds them badly, and clothes them worse. The house, its surrounding fields, the peasants, still half-serf, the scholarly, ineffectual father, the hierarchy of relatives are fully realized and altogether believable. But Bazin's real feat is Madame Rezeau. For all her unmitigated darkness of character she has a horrid validity in which the reader is compelled to believe. From the moment when returning from abroad she knocks down the two older sons running to embrace her until the children's attempt on her life and eventual outmaneuvering of her nothing she does but must be believed.

Bazin's accomplishment is all the more remarkable because he offers little to explain her. The title suggests a heavily Freudian motivation, but the only explicit cause offered is Madame Rezeau's gall bladder; yet even after the offending organ is removed no special change occurs in her character. Of course, her Catholicism is of the sort Bernanos excoriated in his *devots*, one in which form has so far overshadowed meaning as for there to be no longer any faint resemblance to the religion Christ founded. It is perhaps by implication that Bazin is suggesting the mother's drives. If so, he owes it to his readers to be a little more explicit on the misogyny and misogamy a few people seem to find in the Church. Because the second son, Jean, who tells the



—Madeleine Chapsal.

Hervé Bazin—"moments lyrical."

story, associates his mother with her religion and because the succession of tutors, seven in all, is about as inept or egregious a group of ecclesiastics as one might encounter in a decade it is natural that Jean's loss of faith should proceed by way of that anti-clericalism the French find so natural and we so scandalous.

The novel has its moments lyrical and amusing. The boys' tour with their father gives the reader opportunity to see common things anew; the visiting entomologist rushing to chlorophorm a hedgehog in a chamber-pot to obtain its fleas is not untypical of the humor. Bazin offers no salvation for his children. Jean's growing interest in the Left could hardly have proceeded farther than Socialism, for the mental policing to which Communists accede would have outraged him because it resembled his mother. Bazin is sometimes flip and sometimes cute, but his book is impressive. The publishers have given the work a real production, with extraordinary line drawings by Madeleine Chapsal and a stylish translation by W. J. Strachan, but it seems a pity they could not have found a proofreader to go with them.

Harry Sylvester's novels include "Golden Girl" and "Moon Gaffney."

## Fiction Notes

**OUR SPOONS CAME FROM WOOLWORTH'S.** By Barbara Comyns. Holt. \$2.75. "Self-portrait of a silly woman" might be the subtitle of this novel, for Sophia tells her story herself. Secure in her happy second marriage, she recalls her first love and its unhappy consequences. She was twenty years

old and working in London as a model when she and Charles met and fell in love. Charles's family, who were separated, could agree only too well on opposing the marriage. There was no support in view for the feckless pair, never any money and always endless bills. From the beginning it was obvious that Charles was not only a very mediocre painter but a selfish and thoroughly worthless young man. When Sophia had a baby Charles's family were surpassed in their disapproval and annoyance only by Charles himself. Poor Sophia, who remained through all misfortunes an elfin child at heart, clung to her wide-eyed simplicity with a grim determination (which channeled otherwise would certainly have made her a place at the top of some heap) and managed to survive a good many years of the egocentric Charles's neglect. She learned far more about love from another, more solvent man than she ever had from her husband, and after the death of her second child, the beautiful little Fanny, she parted with Charles forever. A cook-housekeeper job in the country for an eccentric family of well-to-do farmers provided a refuge for herself and her son, Sandro. In the end another artist, not the least of whose attractions were a pleasant house, a maid, and an assured income, wrote a happy ending to the pathetic story.

I have an idea that Miss Comyns intended to create in Sophia another of those beautiful, amoral, irresponsible, and altogether beguiling women whose finest flower in contemporary fiction is for my money Joyce Cary's magnificent Sara Monday. That she does bring her to life is admitted, for I longed to shake her violently on almost every page. But to make a thoroughly silly woman attractive is difficult indeed. Much is, of course, forgiven a great beauty, but if Sophia is intended to be such Miss Comyns has failed to project the spell. Sophia emerges sloppy, undoubtedly arty in dress, and lacking the animal warmth and native shrewdness which might have made her bearable.

—PAMELA TAYLOR.

**DOMINICK DRAGON.** By Charles Norman. Bell Publishing Co., Drexel Hill, Pa. \$2.50. By the end of the first page of this book the reader knows it will be enchantingly written, and by the end of the tenth he has begun to suspect that, unfortunately, it isn't going to matter much.

Charles Norman, whose second novel this is, has written a small bookful of balanced, soft-focus prose in which the comings and goings of a dozen quaintly-named characters are

This "story  
of the  
ecstasies  
and  
cruelty  
of  
married  
love is his  
best yet...  
a little  
masterpiece"  
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