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98 STUDIES

OF THE

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY IN ITALY.

BY

VERNON LEE.

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STUDIES OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY IN ITALY.

INTRODUCTION.

THIS book is at first sight heterogeneous and anomalous : heterogeneous, because it treats two subjects which are rarely treated by one individual, and never treated under one binding, literature and music ; anomalous, because it is far from dealing with all that goes to make up the Italian Eighteenth Century, while it deals with not a few men and things belonging to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Why not deal exclusively and completely with either music or literature ? Why not study the satirist Parini by the side of the playwright Goldoni, rather than study the composer Jommelli, who seems to have no connection with him ? Why examine the comedies of the time of Salvator Rosa and pass over the tragedies of Alfieri ? Why linger over forgotten composers and singers while scientific and philosophic writers, whose works are still read and discussed, remain unmentioned ?

The book is seemingly most incoherent in subject, and most incomplete and digressive in treatment. But the apparent incoherence of subject is in reality unity of treatment ; and the apparent incompleteness and irrelevance of treatment is in reality completeness and restriction of the subject. The book deals both with literature and with music, because the point of view of the writer is neither exclusively literary nor exclusively musical, but generally æsthetic ; because the object of the writer has been to study not the special nature and history of any art in its isolation, but to study the constitution and evolution of the various arts compared with one another ; and the arts whose constitution and evolution can be studied in a work on the Italian Eighteenth Century happen to be the drama and music, just as the arts which might be studied in a work on the Athenian fifth century B.C. would be the drama and sculpture. The writer of this book is neither a literary historian nor a musical critic, but an æsthetician ; and both literature and music belong to the æsthetician's domain. Thus far concerning the incoherence of subject : now with respect to the incompleteness and irrelevance of the treatment The book

does not treat of all that is contained in the Italian Eighteenth Century because much of this does not belong inherently to Italy, but is merely a portion of the universal character of the century itself, a character far more spontaneous and strongly marked in other countries; and it treats of many things belonging to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, because all that was really national in the Italy of a hundred years ago, the great musical and dramatic efflorescence, has its roots deep hidden in Italian character and civilization, and germinates slowly throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The notion of there having been a spontaneous efflorescence of national art in Italy during the eighteenth century may amuse some persons and will doubtless astonish many; but efflorescence of national art there was, nevertheless—an efflorescence of national art which has remained hitherto unperceived because the Italian Eighteenth Century has, as a rule, been not only not studied, but not even seriously considered as a reality, except by a few specialists who could see nothing but antiquarian details; for, with regard to the Italian Eighteenth Century, we are at present much in the same condition as our ancestors of the days of Montesquieu and of Robertson were with regard to the Middle Ages in general. They knew that the middle ages had existed, they knew that certain wars had been carried on and certain laws enacted during that period, but that the middle ages had had any civilization of their own, much less any art, never entered their minds: the word suggested a blank, and no one cares to investigate into a blank. So also is it with the Italian Eighteenth Century. There is a general notion in other countries that the eighteenth century did exist in Italy, though the fact has never been brought home to any one. There is also a vague knowledge of the fact that a certain number of writers—some, like Goldoni and Alfieri, still read—others, like Metastasio, remembered as names, belonged to the Italy at that period; but what was their connection with that time, or what was the civilization which surrounded them, is a question which seems to occur to no Englishman, Frenchman, or German, as indeed it occurs to very few Italians. The very few Italians who do trouble themselves on the subject are either laborious bookworms, who find broken and minute fragments of the eighteenth century as they do of every other century, but are unable to unite them so as to constitute any definite shape; or else they are philosophical historians, who are interested in the eighteenth century only inasmuch as it contains germs of the nineteenth; who study Parini, Beccaria, Verri, and Filangieri because they view them as precursors of the social, political, and literary movement of our own day, but who turn aside with contempt from Metastasio and Carlo Gozzi because they see in

them no political forerunners of the present, and are incapable of recognising in them the artistic product of the past. To foreigners, therefore, the Italian Eighteenth Century is covered with an historical mist, to be rent and dispelled only by shock of the cannon of Montenotte and Lodi. Any amount of artistic life may be safely hidden beneath that mist from the English, French, and Germans who think it their duty to be well versed in the art and literature of the Italian Middle Ages and Renaissance; who are intimately acquainted with the exact pictorial character of Liberale da Verona and Ugolino di Prete Ilario, and with the literary value of Ricordano Malaspini and Giannozzo Manetti, but who do not know that Metastasio wrote opera texts or that Marcello composed psalm music; who know very exactly whether Agnolo and Taddeo Gaddi were or were not father and son, but who are not sure whether Pergolesi and Paisiello may not have been the same person. The philosophical Italian historians, on the other hand, take notice only of philanthropic poets and of economic writers; all that is art entirely escapes their notice.

Now it so happens that, inasmuch as it was a forerunner of our own civilization, the Italian Eighteenth Century was poor, weak, and uninteresting, because in all this it was a mere insignificant copy of the English and French Eighteenth Century. The political and philosophic tendencies of the days of Montesquieu, of Voltaire, of Hume, and of Smith, did indeed exist in Italy, both because they were naturally produced there as elsewhere by the preceding civilization, and also because they were largely imported from other countries; but they were so comparatively feeble that Italian civilization would never have spontaneously made the stride which it did, would never have got to its modern point, had it not been borne along by the whirlwind of the French revolutionary invasion. Parini, Alfieri, Beccaria, Filangieri, interesting and valuable though they are in themselves, are wholly uninteresting and valueless considered as the products of a spontaneous Italian civilization. They are essentially cosmopolitan and eclectic. To understand them we must not seek in the remoter layers of Italian life; we must look round at the general character of the eighteenth century. Without Pope, without Rousseau, without Montesquieu and Diderot, they are unintelligible; by their side they gain in intelligibility but they lose in importance. Italy in the last century got her philosophy and philosophic poetry, like her dress and her furniture, from Paris and London; but Italy in the last century got her drama and her comedy neither from Paris nor from London, but from her own intellectual soil, where they had been germinating for centuries; and Italy, in the eighteenth century, gave her own spontaneous national music to the whole of Europe.