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Theodore Dreiser

BY GRANVILLE HICKS

TO APPRECIATE Theodore Dreiser's posthumous novel, *The Bulwark*,¹ we must see it in relation to his life and the body of his work. Certainly it is not the best of his novels, but it is a remarkably appropriate climax to his career. Taken by itself, it would add little to his reputation as a novelist, but it compels us to revise upward our estimate of the man.

The Bulwark is the story of a Quaker boy who grows up in the outskirts of Philadelphia, works hard, prospers in the banking business, marries the girl of his choice, raises a family, and wins an enviable position in the community. Only as his children approach maturity is this Solon Barnes confronted with problems to which the moral code of the Friends seems inadequate. One son and one daughter achieve conventional success, but Solon is too astute to believe that they have found the inner peace known to himself and his wife. The other three children are overt rebels, and all of

them have their difficulties, with the youngest blundering into tragedy. Solon's faith is assailed by these disasters, but in the end doubts are dispelled and faith triumphs.

Although the emphases and conclusions seem almost startlingly new, the theme is that to which the whole of Dreiser's career was devoted. His great problem was always the problem of values, and, in particular, the problem of the inadequacy of the middle-class morality of the nineteenth century. He had been taught by his sternly Catholic father to work hard, live austere, and expect his reward in the hereafter. In the world of his young manhood, he quickly discovered, most people did not live by these standards. What standards, he asked himself, did they live by, and what happened to them in the end? The questions never ceased to fascinate him.

Dreiser's contemporary, Lincoln Steffens, always talked about "my life of unlearning." Every generation has its share of unlearning to do, but per-

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haps Americans born in the 1860's and 1870's had more than ordinary difficulty in reconciling the world they grew up in with the account their parents and preceptors had given them of the world as it should be.

At least for public purposes Lincoln Steffens regarded the process of disillusionment as comedy. To Dreiser it was almost unmitigated tragedy. There was a difference in the economic situations of the Steffenses and the Dreisers, and a striking difference in the relations between parents and children. Perhaps, too, Steffens' study of ethics and philosophy helped to soften the shock. Dreiser had to make his own philosophy out of experience and accidental reading, without the straw of formal education. It is not surprising that the confused materialism at which he arrived seemed to him less satisfying than the emphatic certainties of his father's generation.

In *The Bulwark* Dreiser did something that he had never tried to do before and that psychologically he could not have done until time had completed his emancipation. The book, that is, portrays the values of the older generation from its own point of view. Because of this, the first part of the story is quite new. Here is a Dreiserian hero who believes what his parents teach him and sets his feet firmly on the path to respectability and wealth. Solon loves but once, marries the object of his love, and cherishes her until her death. A quiet, earnest, untroubled boyhood leads to a purposeful and, for some years, happy maturity.

In the second part of the novel, however, all the familiar motifs appear. The girls re-enact, in milder versions, the rebellions of Carrie Meeber and Jennie Gerhardt. Stewart, the youngest child, has all of Clyde Griffiths' longing for excitement and luxury, and, like Clyde, is the victim not only of his passions but also of an ironic and Hardy-esque accident. Certain of Solon's business associates are cut from the same piece of goods as Frank Copperwood, and Etta's lover is blood-brother to Eugene Witla. Here, in short, is the unvarying Dreiserian drama: arrayed on one side are the ideals of pious, moralistic parents, who do not understand their children; on the other are the temptations of luxury and the consequent urge to get money by ruthlessness or dishonesty, together with the temptations of sex.

Dreiser's sympathetic portrayal of the older generation endows the conflict with a poignancy that one cannot feel in his earlier novels. His climax, moreover, goes beyond mere neutrality. Throughout most of the latter part of the book, Dreiser emphasizes Solon's narrowness, and the reader takes the side of Etta and even Stewart against their father, but the conclusion redresses the balance. When Solon sees a beautiful fly eating a beautiful bud — an episode that must have been intended to remind the reader of Copperwood's famous meditation on the lobster and the squid — he is overcome with awe and wonder. "Surely," he thinks, "there must be a Creative Divinity, and so a purpose, behind all

this variety and beauty and tragedy of life." In his business life Solon has remained true to his ideals at no small cost. In his relations with his family he has failed, but he faces his failures and tries to learn from them. Dreiser knew that the central problem remained unsolved, but he was nevertheless determined to make us appreciate Solon's personal triumph. Solon's faith is stronger than ever at the end, and the dignity of his death humbles the more sensitive of his children.

II

Did Dreiser get religion before he died? Those who were close to him in the last year of his life say that, in some sense or other, he did. There is something warmly personal in his description of Solon's reaffirmation of faith, and one gathers from Mrs. Tjader, his secretary, that Dreiser originally intended to have Solon die a disillusioned man and decided to restore his hero's faith only as his own was awakened. What he believed in is difficult to say, but the novel suggests that he had arrived at a kind of pantheism that he found emotionally satisfying.

Dreiser, as he once observed, was always confused. Although for many years he thought of himself as a materialist, there is not a clear statement of materialism in any of his books, and there are dozens of passages that are quite irreconcilable with any form of naturalism. His political career was a succession of inconsistencies, crowned by the farce of his joining the Com-

munist Party a few months before he died. Every book in which he attempted to give a formal account of his views, from *Hey Rub-a-dub-dub* to *America Is Worth Saving*, is a congeries of contradictions.

In spite of all this, however, Dreiser came close to the root of several important matters. In the first place, he sensed more deeply than any other novelist the psychological consequences of the growth of large cities in America. Few writers have felt more keenly the excitement of the great city, or yearned more passionately for the urban fleshpots, and yet it is pre-eminently Dreiser who shows us the city as the destroyer of values. He knew as well as anyone the faults of the small communities, but he also knew that in such communities men had developed a way of life that brought some degree of security and satisfaction. The theme is developed early in *Sister Carrie*, and it recurs in every novel thereafter. Again and again Dreiser said in effect, "I cannot live by these standards, but men have lived by them, and it remains to be proven whether there are other standards that make a fruitful life possible." Because the industrialization and urbanization of America are such vast phenomena and so pervasive in their influence, we tend to ignore them as we ignore the climate, but they constitute the great revolution of modern times, more important than any political change, and Dreiser felt the impact of this revolution in every corner of his being.

In the second place, despite his failure to formulate a clear statement of naturalism, he never got very far away from the crux of the naturalistic problem. If one disregards all the verbose nonsense about "chemic forces" and the rest, one finds a resolute attempt to see human life as an integral part of a vast and only partly comprehensible natural process. The early materialists sought to reduce psychology to biology and biology to chemistry, and in his vocabulary and sometimes in his thinking Dreiser borrowed their concepts, but he was never satisfied, and though his dissatisfaction often led him into extravagant mysticism, it also kept his attention focused on the human being as such. There is a passage in *Sister Carrie*, muddy but interesting, in which he struggles with the problem of freedom of the will, and in the upshot agrees with the best of the naturalistic philosophers that freedom lies in the understanding of necessity. Dreiser felt strongly and portrayed fully the power of the inner and outer forces by which men are pulled this way and hauled that. His own life was not a life of reason, and few of his characters are reasonable beings. Yet they are always more than the total of the forces that drive them.

Finally we must say a word about Dreiser's humanitarianism. During his lifetime he supported a variety of causes, and, whatever mistakes he may have made, his indignation against injustice did rest firmly on his sense of the dignity of the individual human

being. There are no contemptible persons in Dreiser's novels. Although at times he professed a Nietzschean scorn of the masses, and stated as a biological fact that less than 3 per cent of the population was capable of thinking, his sympathies were quickly roused, and he instinctively made the best case possible for any person he wrote about. Perhaps one reason why he made Solon Barnes a Quaker is that the Friends have always been the most generously humanitarian of the Christian sects. At any rate the quotations from John Woolman's *Journal* do not seem incongruous on Dreiser's pages. One could no more ask Dreiser for a program of reform than one could ask him for a system of philosophy, but he did have charity.

"I catch no meaning from all I have seen," Dreiser wrote some twenty years ago, "and pass quite as I came, confused and dismayed." Perhaps he changed in the last year or two, and felt both less confusion and less dismay. I am not sure, however, that too much importance should be attached to his conversion. What is important is that, in spite of all his vagaries, he remained true in essentials to the insights that were vouchsafed him.

III

Dreiser was a bewildered man, but he had the strength to bear his bewilderment. There is nothing new to be said about his style, for everyone recognizes its faults and almost everyone knows that they grew out of the man's

basic qualities. Most novelists, if they have any skill with words, are tempted to say more than they know, but Dreiser, whose least encounter with the American language took on the appearance of a wrestling match, stubbornly refused to go beyond himself. I am not trying to suggest that good writing is a vice, but merely that Dreiser's awkwardness was integrally related to his tremendous honesty. Even his banalities do not seem the product of laziness but, rather, the desperate gestures of a man for whom mere words will never suffice.

The Bulwark has all of the old clumsiness, but what is the essentially Dreiserian style is somehow exhibited in a purer vein than ever before. The writing is so commonplace that it becomes austere and even dignified. There are plenty of the old trite phrases, and there are a few pretentious passages, but for the most part the novel is written with a simplicity that begins by being annoying and ends by being impressive. Dreiser never told a story better than in *The Bulwark*.

Yet I have said that *The Bulwark* is not the best of his novels, and in some ways it seems to me the poorest. Certain of his qualities are heightened in the book, but one of the most important of his attributes scarcely makes itself felt, and the novel suffers sharply as a result. What one misses is the sense of a time and a place. Can anyone forget the description of Fitzgerald and Moy's bar in *Sister Carrie* or the account of the Green-

Davidson Hotel in *An American Tragedy*? Dreiser's documentation was laborious, and he relied on the piling up of detail, but he got his effect. In *The Bulwark*, on the other hand, the background is invariably a little vague, whether the scene is Solon's bank or Isobel's college or Etta's Greenwich Village. It has always been easy to make fun of Dreiser's concern with trivialities, but the truth is that the commonplace was not commonplace to him and that he could make it fresh and vivid to us. One came to know his people through the minutiae of their lives, and it is strange to read a book of his in which the figures are almost as removed from the vulgar circumstances of place and time as the characters of Henry James.

The explanation lies, at least in part, in the way in which the book was written. Mrs. Tjader tells us that it was begun as early as 1910 and that there were four or five early versions. When Dreiser took up the story again in the winter of 1945, he and Mrs. Tjader pieced the first part of the novel together out of the various fragments, and he then wrote and dictated the last third of the book. As a result, there is a very real uncertainty as to the period in which the action is taking place. The incidents of the latter part of the story are said to occur in the twenties, but there are a hundred details that belong to the years before the first World War. Even, however, if Dreiser had completely revised the novel or had

written it afresh, I doubt if he could have documented it as he documented the earlier novels, for by the twenties he was the great American novelist and no longer immersed in the life of the people.

The Bulwark, at least in its final version, was the work of an old man, and its most moving pages portray the old age and death of Solon Barnes. Dreiser has portrayed pathetic old men before now. Solon, however, is not merely pathetic; he is meant to be and is a triumphant figure. As he rises above the vicissitudes of fate by virtue of his inner resources, one believes in his triumph whether or not one believes in the Inner Light.

Whatever its philosophical implications, *The Bulwark* is certainly a rejection of naturalism as a literary theory. Dreiser, it is true, occasionally uses such characteristic phrases as "the import of sex as a force" and "the chemically radiated charm of her," and he even talks about Solon's "psychic religiosity," but these are mere matters of habit or, more probably, vestigial remains of an earlier version, for there is no serious attempt to explain anybody's behavior in terms of physics, chemistry, or biology.

The Bulwark might, indeed, be regarded as the death knell of literary naturalism. It was always a misbegotten theory. However enthusiastically Zola endorsed the formulas of Claude Bernard, he never in practice limited himself to them, and he would have been a mere parody of a novelist if he had. Dreiser owed more to

Balzac than he did to Darwin, Spencer, and Haeckel, and even if he had had a more extensive and accurate knowledge of nineteenth century science, he still would not have been able to make great practical use of it. The theorists of naturalism held that the novel could become scientific, but the novelists, fortunately, knew better. Some of the wiser ones took from science what proved to be useful, but they found in science something to add to their art, not a substitute for it. In this country at least naturalism was chiefly a justification of a frankness that was not palatable to middle-class morality. Now that that battle is won, there is not much need for further talk about naturalism.

Dreiser in any case could never be brought comfortably within the naturalistic fold, no matter how hard academicians tried, and it is perhaps as well that *The Bulwark* has come along to make the attempt obviously futile. Even *The Financier* and *The Titan*, which he probably thought of as naturalistic, are Nietzschean rather than Darwinian.

Dreiser was Dreiser and not the exemplar of some theory. He was the lost, bewildered man of the turn of the century, caught between science and faith, between city and town, between the economics of monopoly capitalism and the economics of small-scale competition. With the most painful honesty he set forth the dilemmas of his generation and, by stating what he knew about men, said something about man.

THE CHECK LIST

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PUBLIC AFFAIRS

POPULATION AND PEACE IN THE PACIFIC, by Warren S. Thompson. \$3.75. *Chicago*. This is two different books at once. It is a calm survey, chapter by chapter and locality by locality, of the economic and demographic situation throughout south and east Asia, Australia, and Oceania. It is also a disturbing interpretation of that situation in terms of future peace. About his abundant data, graphs and tables, this distinguished authority weaves a somber argument. The people of India, China and Japan are entering an era of unprecedented population expansion. In the next four or five decades their numbers will multiply far beyond the potential means of industrial or agricultural support. Combined with gradually increasing economic power, this explosive population pressure may well set off another war. Mr. Thompson argues cogently for liquidation of colonialism and asks that the overcrowded peoples be permitted to migrate to some of the currently underpopulated colonial areas. Of course, this is not a lasting solution: he acknowledges that such migration cannot reach adequate proportions. A book of major importance.

SUCCESS ON THE SMALL FARM, by Haydn S. Pearson. \$2.50. *Whittlesey House*. The core of this book is that with ten fertile acres, a small amount of common sense and six months concentrated work a year, a man can work up a tidy \$3000 annual income. Set in a solid matrix of don'ts, the text gives general instructions for selecting a farm and the laying out of diversified crops. The author believes firmly in the value of several small specialty crops and a roadside stand to dispose of them.

THE GREAT RETREAT, by Nicholas S. Timasheff. \$5.00. *Dutton*. The hard and fast dic-

tatorship in Russia today, the strictly ordered caste system, the state-controlled industries which refuse to do business with capitalist firms — all these according to Mr. Timasheff are manifestations of a Soviet program aimed at an eventual democracy. "The great retreat" of the title is the retreat from Marxism, through dictatorship, to national congeniality and proportional representation. The significance of the author's undoubted scholarship and thorough job of documentation unfortunately suffers somewhat from his questionable optimism.

THE CASE AGAINST THE ADMIRALS, by William Bradford Huie. \$2.50. *Dutton*. Mr. Huie makes a vigorous plea for "a single, flexible, progressive war organization, supersensitive to scientific development, if we are to safeguard our nation in a restive world." The Navy is now the chief obstacle to unification, says Mr. Huie, and he points out in considerable detail that Navy obstructionism is an ancient problem — Navy brass opposed the development of strategic air power before and after Pearl Harbor, and it "insisted upon, and thus [was] at least partially responsible for, the outmoded, wasteful and inefficient dual organization with which we entered and fought the war."

VALUES FOR SURVIVAL, by Lewis Mumford. \$3.00. *Harcourt, Brace*. A collection of papers on such subjects as the corruption of liberalism, the responsibilities of teachers and the resurrection of German democracy. Mr. Mumford is out for nothing less than a moral reawakening of a civilization which he is inclined to consider on the verge of spiritual bankruptcy and physical annihilation. Technology, specialization, social irresponsibility and utopianism are a few of the dragons at which he aims his lances, usually with telling effect. Yet behind his fervid exhortations for a moral regeneration, it is hard to find