

ALIAS OLIVER ALLSTON

Dorothy Brewster peeks into the world of Van Wyck Brooks. The pilgrimage of a distinguished historian of our New England literary heritage. His place in American culture.

OPINIONS OF OLIVER ALLSTON, by Van Wyck Brooks.
E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.

IT IS no secret that "my friend, Oliver Allston, who died last year in his early fifties" is Van Wyck Brooks. The disguise was adopted when some of the papers collected in this volume first appeared in the *New Republic* and the *Yale Review*. Mr. Brooks, for some reason or other, must have felt freer to talk about himself and his opinions in the third person, to hold himself off for examination, after the manner of Henry Adams. Some readers will find the effect produced one of disarming modesty; others will be put off by what seems like rather self-conscious pretense. To such readers—your reviewer is in this second group—the Allston device, however it was meant, tends to magnify Mr. Brooks, and minimize the things he says. And so, when in the later chapters I found myself agreeing more often than disagreeing with much of what he has to say, it was a case of the triumph of matter over manner.

Allston followed an old American custom in keeping journals, in which he wrote down the thoughts and impressions of the moment; and upon these—"dozen volumes bound in stout grey canvas"—all the chapters draw for material. When the journal was not available, Allston jotted his thoughts on scraps of paper. One chapter is just "Notes on Style"; another is "A Final Miscellany"; two chapters gather reflections on American scenes and people, under the headings of "American Traits" and "More American Traits." Explanatory passages forming a running commentary connect the extracts from the journals. There are two possible sources of interest in such a compilation: the personality behind the opinions, and the opinions themselves, as a body of social and critical doctrine. What may be called sometime in the future the "ordeal" or the "pilgrimage" of Van Wyck Brooks must wait till the record of his career in American letters is complete; and this review will confine itself to such glimpses as the book affords of "the world of Van Wyck Brooks."*

Many things have interested him: painting, human nature, the world of business (which he rejected from the start—"there was nothing I feared more as a young man than making money"), theories of political and social organization, and, of course, literature first and



"Oliver Allston"

foremost, and the literary life. In comment and speculation on these themes, Allston insists on his dislike of theorizing, on the extreme concreteness of his mind, on his making no headway with abstract thinking. Yet the book is full of theorizing and of such abstractions as "the American psyche" and the "psyche of Europe." Discussion of expatriation and its effects upon writers contains speculations like this: aristocrats such as Turgenev never lose their racial traits—a lifetime of expatriation cannot "erase their inherited form"; and this is true also of men like Ibsen "who spring from an ancient rooted unmixed stock." But, if one has a concrete mind, one learns from the biographers and the encyclopedia that Ibsen had not one drop of pure Norse blood and that the Norwegian commercial patricians who formed his racial background were Danes, Dutchmen, Scotch, Germans, and Norse.

Psychology, says Allston (perhaps recalling Van Wyck Brooks' psychoanalyzing of Mark Twain), tends to destroy one's feeling for values, turning one's attention to the cause of things, whereas the significance of things is what really matters. And a writer should disregard possible consequences, writing always in the belief that, so far as he writes the truth, the effects will be good. But how can one appraise truly the significance—the meaning, the import—of anything, without taking into account both causes and consequences? Mr. Brooks himself, certainly the most distinguished living historian of our New England literary history and heritage, will have his

significance estimated eventually by putting him in his temporal and psychological place and tracing his influence on the critical thought of his era. And, as a matter of fact, in his later chapters on the generally negative aspects of the literature of the twenties, he says that Allston sought light on the negative feelings themselves by studying their consequences. In short, when he gets going on the concrete facts, in his most interesting passages, the theories go overboard.

He talks much about free will, and notes that the Marxists did not respect him because he believed in free will. Yet he says that in the end we think as our constitution obliges us to think. He calls himself—or Oliver—a predestined writer, a critic by predestination, who had evolved from his own past and could have no other evolution. He hates all dogmatists; yet in discussing the practice of criticism, he declares that taste exists in the sense of a virtually absolute standard in minds properly qualified. Such a "properly qualified mind" is his own—though it had not always been so, his judgments having wavered in the past—but now "some impersonal standard, call it reality, call it truth, was literally operating in me," a principle of authority in matters of taste, "that is not mine, but that I merely represent and that is obviously inherent in the nature of things." And again, "my only concern was to give the best, and the best declared itself through me." Is this not the equivalent of a Papal Bull *De Gustibus*? To the reader of the *Opinions* it is disconcerting, when Allston talks of distaste for theorizing, to be confronted by abstractions and hypotheses; and when he talks of free will, to be confronted by predestination. Perhaps, though, he is really talking of free will as the appreciation of necessity?

Inconsistencies will, of course, appear in journals covering a period of years—seeds that never sprouted, speculations later disproved by the event. For that reason, in justice to himself, Mr. Brooks should have given more frequent indications of the times and circumstances under which he wrote things down. Dates do play some part in the earliest chapters, which are sketchily autobiographical. Later, when the dates attached to certain reflections would help us to trace the development of his ideas, they are missing except as implied in the title of a book or some well known event. The chapters on "Socialism," "Communism," and "A Business World," and on "Criticism—Theory and Practice," suffer especially from this time vagueness. It is hard enough to track the twistings and turnings of one's own views about contemporary

* To borrow Oliver Allston's footnote habit; the reviewer seems to be referring here to critical studies by Van Wyck Brooks:—*The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, *The Pilgrimage of Henry James*, and *The World of H. G. Wells*.

movements in the swift pace of our world, and it can only be done with some clarity when the changing judgments are related to the changing events. You can assume, if you wish, that all your thoughts are above the battle, floating in a timeless serenity, and this works pretty well when you are just reflecting upon human nature, or upon a writer's irritations (which seem to have been pretty much the same down the ages), or upon a vast theme like expatriation, where you can dip here and there in history for examples to prove practically anything you like. (One recalls that Mr. Brooks proved to his own satisfaction that expatriation was ruinous to Henry James' later work, whereas Edmund Wilson proved to *his* satisfaction that not only was James' later work, some of it, of the finest vintage, but that the qualities that Brooks instanced as showing deterioration due to deracination, were really the natural accompaniments of old age.)

But when you come to contemporary politics, dates count. "Paris has lost its charm and Moscow is losing its charm, with our growing sense of what Washington has come to stand for." When did Allston feel that way, and just which of Washington's policies had he in mind? "I pity the writers of Russia almost as much as those who call themselves writers in fascist countries." Does he pity Sholokhov and Gladkov and the rest now? Allston saw Communism and fascism as "almost equally interchangeable" and was almost equally opposed to both, though he had once found much to admire in Communism. But "when these movements joined hands to fight against the ideal of freedom, he closed his ranks and fought them both." Is the reference to the "pact" of blessed memory? And was he fighting them both a short time ago, when he sponsored the meeting called by the Council for Soviet Relations to celebrate the anniversary of the recognition by the USA of the USSR? I am listing these opinions only to establish my point that, if duly dated, they might mark evolution. Contradictions and inconsistencies in opinion are everywhere as thick as the famous leaves in Vallombrosa these days. They should be faced, if, as Mr. Brooks says, "a writer's first duty is to fight for his own clarity." There is for Mr. Brooks, as for most of us, a great deal of fighting ahead. Dates and correspondences with events will help.

In the chapters on "Literature Today," "Primary Literature," and "Coterie Literature" (the most recently written, apparently), most of the journal entries are relegated to long footnotes—some of them very amusing, like that on Gertrude Stein and Ford Madox Ford; and the discussion proceeds, in consequence, in a more steady and consistent manner. The emphasis in these later chapters is on the negativism of T. S. Eliot, Joyce, Hemingway, O'Neill, Faulkner, Dos Passos, Ezra Pound. "Faulkner and Dos Passos seemed to delight in kicking their world to pieces, as if civilization were all a pretense and everything noble a humbug. For Robinson

Jeffers, the human heart was vile and humanity was 'the mold to break away from.' Ezra Pound's odyssey touched at every known shore and found no men who had not been turned into swine; and the heroes of most of the others were gunmen or moral cripples, human jellyfish or hobbledehoes. . . . They had turned literature into a sort of wailing wall from which nothing rose but the sound of lamentations and curses. They made the present contemptible and the future impossible."

They contributed technical novelty and formal originality, but what of their contribution to life? Rather they represented the death drive, the will to die, said to exist side by side in our minds with the will to live. "Defeat and unhappiness can reach a point where we accept them and embrace them and rejoice in our enervation and disintegration." From these negative writers—who, even when they cared for justice, wrote "as men without hope"—Mr. Brooks turns to the affirmers of life, to the Frosts and Sandburgs, and Tolstoys, with their confidence in human nature, and their sense of the heroic in the human adventure. "The great themes are those by which the race has risen, courage, justice, mercy, honor, love." He quotes Gorky on the "planetary role" of literature—"the role of the power which most firmly and intimately unites the peoples by the sense of their sufferings and longings, by the sense of the community of their desire for the happiness of a life that

is beautiful and free." Writers whose work fulfills this role are those who draw their strength from the consciousness of human needs and longings; and their ultimate value is to be determined by the measure in which they respond to these longings and needs.

Thus, Mr. Brooks goes all-out for primary literature, and in this connection, he defines and reaffirms the American tradition. A sense of our group history is of the first importance, if only as a means of entering other groups. It was his conviction of the importance of an American memory that drove him into historical writing. "The sense of the past behind them is the tap-root of American writers, the sense of the achievements of their group; and, behind this, they must have a sense of the life and achievements of all mankind, a sense of the collective effort of the human race. . . . Such was tradition, Allston repeated, the great sustainer of primary literature, the sum of the literary wisdom which the race has kept, the embodiment of those traits which humanity needs for its survival and perfection."

One's roots—around which Mr. Brooks digs so anxiously—are, after all, wherever one grows. He has grown here in our country. And the affirmations, as well as the sturdy rejections, just quoted, lead one to look confidently, not for the Indian Summer of Oliver Allston, but for a new flowering of Van Wyck Brooks. DOROTHY BREWSTER.

WHAT THE SOVIETS EXPECTED

Why the Red Army was ready. Harry F. Ward reviews Anna Louise Strong's latest book.

THE SOVIETS EXPECTED IT, by Anna Louise Strong. Dial Press. \$2.50. Workers' Library Publishers. 50c.

ANNA LOUISE STRONG holds a distinguished and distinctive position in that small group of writers who can be called journalistic historians. To their writings the scholars of tomorrow will turn to get the



Anna Louise Strong

flesh and blood to put around the dry bones of official documents in order that the past may live again. One or two others of this group have shown a like capacity to give an accurate and honest account of what they have seen. But no one of them has Miss Strong's uncanny capacity for getting inside the people of the lands she writes about and so enabling the reader to understand them. To this feeling for the people is added an understanding of the nature of the world crisis, partly intuitive and partly the result of her long sojourn in the Soviet Union, which makes her its true interpreter, when other writers who have lived there are either lost in a fog of their own making, or have become prejudiced and lying servants of reaction.

The title of Miss Strong's latest volume does not do it justice. The book is very much more than an explanation of the fact that the Soviets knew they were going to be attacked sooner or later, that their leaders got them ready for it at a terrific cost which the people paid because they understood its necessity, that opposition to the speed and cost of industrialization, as essential for defense as it was for social advance, by some Communist Party leaders, was one of the steps that finally led them to the position of traitors. In the foreword the author insists that, for our own sake as well as for the sake of all