

ence, and was even now spinning and dripping blood as it spins, how we would cry up the news to those unknowing ears! It is something as strange as this that Benham tells us. There is "an unseen kingship ruling the whole globe, a King Invisible, who is the Lord of Truth and all sane loyalty. There is the link of our order, the new knighthood, the new aristocracy, the new aristocracy that must at last rule the earth. There is our Prince. He is in me, he is in you; he is latent in all mankind." Here at last is a temple for our homeless faiths, a place of beauty where we can satisfy the human instinct for high endeavors, a place of power where we compromise our ambition, the leadership of the world. And it has been revealed to us by the despised attribute, the intellect, which we are told should be taken from the hot grasp of the artist and left to the cold hands of the professor.

REBECCA WEST.

London.

## Desire as Hero

*The "Genius," by Theodore Dreiser. New York: John Lane Co. \$1.50 net.*

THE insistent theme of Mr. Dreiser's work is desire, perennial, unquenchable. The critic who would discuss him takes his life in his hands. He must either be denounced as an advocate of prostitution, or an admirer of that second-rate pseudo-passion which Mr. Hearst and his able fictional lieutenants have made it their business to introduce to our American consciousness. A public which uses the word "sex" as indiscriminately as it does would be very hard to talk to on the subject of desire. As currently used, sex has a subtly derogatory sense. What it really means is, "We have no intention of making primary the values and implications which cluster around desire." A recent naïve critic expressed it exactly when he preferred Booth Tarkington to Tagore and Artzibashev because Tarkington makes business the master-motive of life, to which religion and sex are incidental. One simply takes them for granted in a turmoil the vortex of which is professional or business action. Of course no great Continental novelist ever believed this, Rolland or Dostoevsky or Tolstoi or Frensen or Nexo, and it is in this contrast of values that we get our American uniqueness in the imaginative world. The major motive of these Continentals is almost always the inexorable desire of life, a desire which is no more physical than it is spiritual, a desire which consists often of walking in the mud with the face towards the stars. This push and yearning is what makes for religion and art in a kind of insatiable straining towards realization and perfection. The East has too much of it and tries to put it to sleep. The West in the last century had almost too much, but struggled nobly to make something out of it. That struggle, embittered by a new knowledge of how meanly constituted the world was, produced modern literature.

No matter how badly Mr. Dreiser might do his work, he would be significant as the American novelist who has most felt this subterranean current of life. Many novelists have seen this current as a mere abyss of sin from which the soul is to be dragged to the high ground of moral purpose and redemption, but this will not quite do. The great interpreters see life as a struggle between this desire and the organized machinery of existence, but they are not eager, as we are, to cover up and belittle the desire. There can be little creative imagination as long as we regard the motion-

picture trappings and action of life, the safe running in social harness, as "realer" than primeval or almost subconscious forces.

That Mr. Dreiser is our only novelist who tries to plumb far below this conventional superstructure is his great distinction. We have enough "red blood" in our fiction, but too much of it is patently compounded of carmine and water. And if we are to talk of bestiality, there is nothing more bestial than the romantic love of the conventional novel. What Mr. Dreiser has discovered is that "libido" which was nothing more than the scientific capturing of this nineteenth-century desire. You may come away from the Freudians and the Jungians chagrined at their technicalities and horrified at their phenomena, but you can scarcely deny that they have found and interpreted a central *leitmotiv* of our human living, which is immensely to illuminate our understanding of ourselves and the world about us. What Mr. Dreiser seems to me to do is to give us a crudely impressive fictional portrayal of this motive. His hero is really not Sister Carrie or the Titan or the Genius, but that desire within us that pounds in manifold guise against the iron walls of experience. Sister Carrie was a mass of undifferentiated desire, craving finery and warmth and light and sympathy quite as much as satisfied sex. The masculine Titan appeared in unpleasantly crystallized form of physical passion. In the Genius the libido takes the form of an insatiable desire which is sexual and yet incurably aesthetic. In his world, genuine spiritual monogamy would be an *idée fixe*, a kind of pathological petrification of desire. Here it is always overleaping the particular, seeking something elemental, almost metaphysical, that eludes the individual woman. The "Genius" himself calls it Beauty, and perhaps that is as good a word as any. Some magical manna he seems to seek in the women he is mad about. As they pass from his sight, that spirit merely becomes incarnated in another form. To those who would dismiss a character like Eugene Witla, the "Genius," as a beast, such an interpretation will seem over-idyllic. But he eludes moral capture. From Mr. Dreiser's first chapter we are out on a wider and more perilous sea.

Mr. Dreiser carries his hero over a restless field of adventure. From his boyhood in the Illinois town he takes him to Chicago and little jobs, until he discovers artistic talent and is drawn to the dazzling life of New York. (Mr. Dreiser never quite gets over this dazzle.) Studio life, exhibitions, social intrigue, come to a halt in nervous collapse and the effort to recover through hard physical labor. When the Genius's career revives, it is in the form of advertising art and the dizzy directorship of the United Magazines Corporations. Ultimately his good art reasserts itself, and he regains his place in the world. Through all of this runs the tragic stream of incontinence.

Mr. Dreiser writes of the erotic with an almost religious solemnity. There is something crudely massive about such a long epic of desire. There is a touch of the same Greek tragic note which vibrates through "Spoon River Anthology." The Genius, swept away by girlish beauty, is himself bewildered by the vehemence of the Unknown Eros within him. That experience of such thrilling loveliness should end in such bitter and humiliating woe! Like Medea's "O wrath within me! Spare my children!" he feels himself haunted by this power not himself which makes for unrighteousness. The storms of angry chagrin which his unfaithfulness excites in his wife Angela bring him only the most undisguised astonishment. There is almost Greek irony too in the fact that the only good, responsible and dutiful act which he performs—his mar-

riage to the devoted Angela—precipitates many of the horrors. When her child finally releases her in death from a purgatory of agonized jealousy, we are left with the unquenched Genius, worn but not repentant, restored to his painting and reconciled in a devotion to his unwelcome little daughter.

This does not pretend to be a solution. Through the chaotic welter of his artistic, business, and social career, the Genius wearily seeks a guiding thread which does not emerge. His researches in Herbert Spencer, cosmic philosophy, and Mrs. Eddy, are curiously typical manifestations of the libido. Mr. Dreiser seems to take them all very seriously, but he is honest in not making them points of satiation for weary desire. Very true also is the contrast between the Genius's hard and realistic art and his supersensuous life. He never becomes integrated, because with talent and passion and intelligence he yet finds himself in a world which is too diverse and too big for him. He is on a sea which is full of cross-currents where he cannot steer. The major current pulls him where he would not go. And the sea opens so far on every side that he does not know in what direction he wants to steer. One feels that this chaos is not only in the Genius's soul, but also in the author's soul, and in America's soul.

Mr. Dreiser compels and convinces almost entirely in spite of his method. He has no distinction of style. His conversation is negligible, and at times falls even below the level of cheapness. He is portentously wordy. He has no humor. And yet one reads him. In the 736 pages, one skips only the business and social details—which are too minute to be even good photography. One reads him because he never forgets that he is talking about life as it is lived, and because he takes it seriously. Even scenes of freezing realism like the birth of Angela's child do not offend as they might. He is always saved by a plodding sincerity. His people are rarely desirable or interesting. Yet they live and you cannot escape them.

And for all its dull and rather cheap texture, the book is set in a light of youthful idealism. Nobody but Mr. Dreiser could manage this fusion, but it is there. For the Genius the golden glow shines from everything. Always there is a sense of the miraculous beauty of girls, the soft clinging of charming atmospheres. Of sordid realists Mr. Dreiser is certainly the most idealistic. You cannot disillusion him. He still believes in, and still gives, a sense of the invincible virginity of the world.

I trust that the quotation marks in the title indicate Mr. Dreiser's realization that he has created only a second-rate personality, that he never, indeed, creates any but second-rate personalities. In the Genius he has made, however, a grandiose caricature of the masculine soul. And his real hero, anyway, is not his second-rate personality, but the desire of life. For this, much shall be forgiven him.

RANDOLPH BOURNE.

## Egoism in Poetry

**E**GOISM goes into poetry as well as into every other expression and every other activity. Nevertheless it seems right that the thing that inspired the poem should not be dwarfed by the poet's vision of himself. The poem, presumably, is for generations; the poet is a passing man or woman: when the poet makes himself appear more important than the occasion of his poem we are aware of an inversion.

One of the several differences between the imagist verse and the work of the accepted poets is that in the new verse

there are many such inversions. Burns writes about a mouse and the mouse is not diminished by a grain. Byron writes about things that are obviously big—mountains, the sea, battlefields—and he leaves them at least as big in our imaginations as they were before. Now we may look at the work of some of the imagists. Mr. John Gould Fletcher writes about a city and it becomes as small as a place beset by a Colossus ("London Excursion"). Mr. Richard Aldington writes about a girl and she becomes, not a living creature, but a shell ("Daisy"). When one speaks of egoism in poetry there is always someone present who mentions Byron. Byron puts himself forward as Sardanapalus the poet-king and as Manfred the mortal who has earned an immortal's doom; he draws attention to himself on the field of Waterloo and he declaims about his love for the Ocean. And yet even Byron's poetry does not leave the same impression of egoism as do the poems of nearly all the writers who have published imagist verse. If you believe that Byron was a great egoist in poetry read "When We Two Parted," and then look at Mr. Aldington's "Daisy":

### WHEN WE TWO PARTED

When we two parted  
In silence and tears,  
Half broken-hearted  
To sever for years,  
Pale grew thy cheek and cold,  
Colder thy kiss;  
Surely that hour foretold  
Sorrow to this.

They name thee before me,  
A knell to mine ear;  
A shudder comes o'er me—  
Why wert thou so dear?  
They know not I knew thee,  
Who knew thee too well:  
Long, long shall I rue thee,  
Too deeply to tell.

### DAISY

You were my playmate by the sea.  
We swam together.  
Your girl's body had no breasts.

To-day I pass through the streets.  
She who touches my arm and talks with me  
Is—who knows? Helen of Sparta,  
Dryope, Laodamia.

And there are you  
A whore in Oxford Street.

Now Byron's poem may be of the drawing-room while Mr. Aldington's is of the mountain; "When We Two Parted" may be nerveless and sentimental while "Daisy" is clean-cut and virile. But Byron's is certainly less egoistic than the poem in "Some Imagist Poets." One poem shows concern for a life other than the poet's; the other is concerned with the writer's own moment.

Those whom we may call the accepted poets wrote with constant reference to something which they thought was outside themselves—something that was not dwarfed by their own proportions. With Burns this something was the life of a community. With Blake it was God. With