

Dreiser as Master Craftsman

THE BULWARK. By Theodore Dreiser. New York: Doubleday & Company. 1946. 337 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by ROBERT E. SPILLER

THIS is the first of two novels which Dreiser completed and put to press just before he died. Both were conceived and probably partly written thirty or more years ago. The third volume of the Cowperwood trilogy is yet to appear. "The Bulwark," a study of a Philadelphia Quaker family at the close of the last century, was first announced in 1916. It is possible, however, that the reception of "The Genius" one year earlier discouraged the completion of another major work at that time, for, until "An American Tragedy" in 1925, Dreiser gave to the world only short stories, essays, plays, and autobiography.

"The Bulwark" is a major novel, a substantial piece of work, well conceived and carefully executed, representing its author in his full creative power. If it may also be taken as a last will and testament, it presents an interesting biographical problem, for here is an answer in faith to the spiritual doubt of his best work. Another possible reason for its delay is that Dreiser at the age of forty-six was not yet ready for the affirmation which seemed logical to him at seventy-four. Perhaps it took him thus long to face his own challenge.

"The Bulwark" is the life story of Solon Barnes and of his family from the time when, at the age of ten, he left with his parents the small town of his birth, to his death in the now old family home in New Jersey not far from Trenton, his grown children about him. It is a quiet and solemn story, told with an almost heavy sincerity and an economy of incident. The moral issue which confronts Solon throughout is always before the reader. The characters move, as Dreiser characters must, through the shaping actions of their lives helpless in the hands of a fate beyond their control, but "The Bulwark" is unique among Dreiser novels in that the moral issue and the forces of which it is composed are clearly defined and never for a moment forgotten. Never is the reader lost in mere action; always he is weighing and evaluating the central problem: Does the simple way of the Friends provide a philosophy capable of dealing with the forces which so mangled the lives of Carrie and Jennie and Frank Cowperwood, and later Clyde Griffith? Had Solon the answer?

Emphasis on ideology involves a sacrifice in fictional vividness. When a novelist, in the manner of a Hawthorne, is interested rather in what his characters stand for than in what they are, there is an inevitable loss of the sense of reality. They become typed to the point of losing much of their actuality. The line between realism and allegory is crossed, and the characters are themselves controlled instead of controlling the action. This happens to Solon, and it happens even more so to Benecia his wife, and to his five children, their friends, business associates, and relatives. Each character moves only within the



— Arthur D'Amato

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part in the ideological pattern assigned to him. Even Stewart and Etta, the youngest and most wayward of the children, lack the authenticity of Jennie Gerhardt and Clyde Griffith, although the course of their lives is closely drawn to the Dreiser formula of Sex and Wealth. The old stories are here repeated, but compressed so that their bearing upon Solon's problem alone is emphasized. Yet even minor characters, within these limitations, have a firmness of outline and a solidity which is Dreiser's greatest achievement always. There is nothing shadowy about his allegory; it is made of the stuff of life—and his people live.

The sacrifice of full character development is more than repaid in firmness of texture, a quality not so certain in Dreiser's work. This is the most solidly built of all his novels, in plot and ideology. The long pages of minutiae which stretch out the slim

plots of his other works are here severely cut to essentials, and he is able to tell a much longer and more involved story than is usual with him, in half the space. And the uncertainty of direction which spoiled "The Genius" is no longer present. This is the work of a master craftsman who knows what he wishes to say and exactly how much writing is necessary to its saying.

For Quakers, the central issue of this story will have a profound and searching meaning; and for those others who have found in the way of the Quakers in wartime a hope and a promise, it will serve as a fair and non-partisan examination of their faith. For Solon's guidance by the Inner Light is constant if not always perfect. He falls into the error of substituting the dicta of "The Book of Discipline" for an ever fresh searching on his own part. He is too much Solon, the lawgiver; too little the lover of men. He fails with his children because his conviction is too rigid for a world in change; and he fails in his profession as banker because he listens to the false logic of his elder friend, Justus Wallin, that property may be acquired if administered in justice. The sense of guilt which pursues him through life is not laid aside until sorrow has taught its lesson. That in the end he is still able to distil the doctrine of love from his religious heritage makes it possible for him to die in peace.

In thus reconciling God with nature, Dreiser has not rejected the brutality of his own naturalism, but he endows Solon finally with a way of life which, for him at least, gives meaning if not always clear direction to the conflict in the natural world. Was this Dreiser's deathbed confession? Had the mysticism which always colored his dogged acceptance of the ugly with the beautiful finally taken a form and a control in religious awakening? His biographers must decide.

The Critic

By Sara Van Alstyne Allen

SAY some charitable thing.

Dismiss him then

To the little world of men.

Shape your thin pencil to the page
Wherein he compassed his own age.

Close the new book and go to bed,
Remembering nothing that he said.
But in the night his hopes will come—
One at your head, one at your feet—
One with quiet fingers at your throat,
As you remember what he wrote!

The People Interview Mrs. Roosevelt

Who writes your column? What is your system for getting so much other writing done, along with your many activities?

I write my column myself; at least I dictate it to Miss Thompson, who takes it directly on the typewriter, and then I correct it and she makes the final copy and sends it to the syndicate by wire.

As far as my other writing goes, I nearly always dictate it to Miss Thompson and then correct it; sometimes a good many drafts have to be typed before it is in final shape. I use whatever spare time I can find for doing this writing and I try not to be idle much of the time.

Is there anything you have always longed to do, and never quite gotten around to?

I have always wanted to try to write fiction, but I have never had the time.

Have you ever said to yourself, "If only I were a man?" Or are you quite content with being a woman?

No, I have never wanted to be a man. I have often wanted to be more effective as a woman, but I have never felt that trousers would do the trick!

Do you consider a fur coat—not sable, mink, or ermine—a luxury or a necessity?

Any fur coat I consider a luxury.

How can I convince my mother that twelve years old is not too young to have dates?

I doubt very much if you can. I have a feeling that only a very unwise mother would consider that a girl of twelve should have dates. You are still a child and should have a good time as a child and stop thinking or wishing that you could grow up before your time. You will have a much better time in the future if you do not try to grow up too quickly.

Have you any good friends who are Republicans?

I hope so.

What do you think of the increasing tendency of today's novelists to use so many "four-letter words" not spoken in polite society?

I did not know there were any words left that were not spoken in polite society.

Did your husband notice a new

FOR more than four years Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt has been answering questions on every conceivable subject in her department in *The Ladies' Home Journal*. Selected questions and answers from this department make up two-thirds of the contents of "If You Ask Me," which is reviewed by W. L. White on the opposite page. The questions and answers on this page are taken from this second portion of the book.

dress or hat when you wore one, or was he like so many other men who never even see a wife's new clothes?

I think my husband was too preoccupied, usually, to notice my clothes, but sometimes he would suddenly look up and say he liked something I had been wearing for two or three years!

What was the most amusing occurrence in the White House while you were there?

I cannot think of any except, perhaps, when five hundred people were expected at a reception, and only four came, and we found later that the invitations had never been issued. It was not only amusing, but it gave me some unexpected extra time, which is always welcome.

What quality in your husband do you think was most responsible for his success?

His patience and his ability to look at things historically. By that I mean that his vision was not limited by the immediate situation, but he was able to see the background and the future of whatever was under consideration. When he made a decision he could patiently wait for the outcome; and if it was wrong or partially wrong, he had the patience to begin again.

What is your favorite poem?

Stephen Vincent Benét's "John Brown's Body." It is a little hard, though, to say, because I read a great deal of poetry, and when I reread some of my old favorites, I decide that I like them better than my newer ones. If you were to ask me tomorrow, therefore, I might have just reread Milton's sonnet "On His Blindness" and have decided that is my favorite for the moment!

What is your greatest fear?

My greatest fear has always been

that I would be afraid—afraid physically or mentally or morally—and allow myself to be influenced by fear instead of by my honest convictions.

Most little girls seem to want to be actresses. Do you remember—or would you be willing to tell—what was your earliest ambition?

I do not know that most little girls want to be actresses. I think all little girls are actresses, but then so are all little boys. Every child I have ever known "imagined" his way through his early life. My earliest ambition was to be a nurse.

Are you afraid of mice?

I do not like them, but I do not shriek when I see one.

Do you approve of women smoking on the street?

I am old-fashioned enough not to like the looks of a woman smoking on the street, but I realize this is purely an old-fashioned prejudice.

Are you ever going to continue your autobiography which ended with your husband's election in 1932?

My autobiography ended with Governor Smith's first campaign for nomination for the presidency, in 1924. I fully intend to go on with my autobiography when I can find the time, but I wouldn't want to have it published for some years to come.

Do you ever lose your temper?

Occasionally, but not in the way one usually thinks of as losing one's temper. I become cold and silent, and I regret to say that my children recognize this and say, "Look out, ma's mad."

Bette Davis's pet economy is using the same bobby pins several years. What is yours?

Saving string.

Being a hairdresser, it has often puzzled me why a modern woman, such as you, has never changed her hair style. Do you have any particular reason for not having a new hair-do?

I have changed my hair style several times, perhaps not often enough. In any case, when you reach my age, if you can find anything which is moderately becoming, it is better to leave it alone and care less about being in the fashion and more about being inconspicuous!