

days and growing-up, of courtship and hoping, are caught with radiant imperishability. They manage to be general in their application even when stated in terms of individuals. Somehow they link the fires in New England homes with hearths everywhere, from today right back to Greece and Babylon. Although these acts are brightened by a dry, humorous, Yankee matter-of-factness, in their mood, perception, and tenderness they are poetic.

It is only in the concluding act that "Our Town" is disappointing. Here again I found the play unchanged because, for me at least, this last act, which has death and the dead as its subject, has always been a disappointment. Its chill is inescapable; its words are too colloquial; its ideas too small. The familiar aspects of living, dealt with so imaginatively in the first two acts, dwindle here into guesses unsupported by high imagination. There are many touching moments as when, for example, the young wife who has died in childbirth is allowed to return to her living parents for one unimportant day in her childhood. But there is a let-down. The surety of the two fine preceding acts is diminished, their universality lost.

In the Thirties, tingling as they were with social consciousness, there were those who complained because Grover's Corners was not more like Middletown. They could not believe in "Our Town" because it lacked brothels, race riots, front-page scandals, social workers, agitators, and strikes. The passing years, however, have only proved Mr. Wilder's correctness in writing as he did. His subject had no datelines. His interest was not what gets into the public prints. It was what each of us must live with in private. Man's spirit was his business; man's spirit and evocations of those small-important incidents which test us in our daily living.

Adding to the timelessness of the first two acts of "Our Town" is the non-representational form in which Mr. Wilder elected to have his say. It is make-believe of the frankest sort. It is as old as the theatre, and as new as the last time it was used effectively. Although it is not the kind of form that every playwright could use for every play, it is the right form for Mr. Wilder to have used for "Our Town." It sets him free. It leaves his imagination unimprisoned within settings. It relieves him of the need of employing the ordinary and quickly aging techniques of realistic plays. Indeed, it is as timeless as his own subject matter.

Not many plays have come out of the American theatre which better with the years. "Our Town" is one of these. Much as I admired it in 1938, I find that now I admire it even more.

5. S. V. Benét: "John Brown's Body"

EUGENE O'NEILL, JR.



Eugene O'Neill, Jr.

NEITHER sweetly nor correctly, "John Brown's Body" has been called a "cinema epic." Of these two words the former contains both the vinegar and the truth, while the latter is almost benevolent and definitely wrong.

To call it "cinematic" is not only correct, but also highly complimentary, if rightly taken. The film has shown conclusively that it is capable of esthetically valid achievements, when its makers are real artists and its producers give them a free hand. That the vast majority of films has no merit is not to be blamed on the medium.

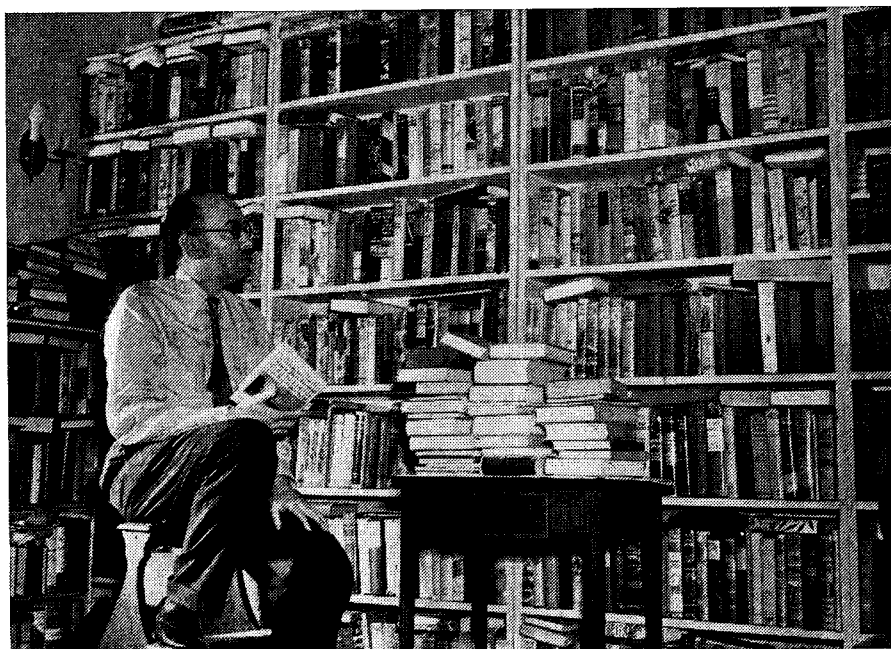
"John Brown's Body" is cinematic in the very best sense that the word can bear. It uses in literature all of the most successful techniques of the cinema, and uses them well. It is really a series of vignettes; almost a 300-page montage. Its highest moments are essentially close-ups. It uses flashback and simultaneous portraiture as expertly as D. W. Griffiths ever dreamed. Its lyrical interludes are analogous to the narration of Pare Lorentz's documentaries, or, to shift to radio, the Olympian commentaries that Norman Corwin used to set to the fine voice of House Jameson.

Out of all this comes a long poem that has been bought and read by more Americans than anything comparable to it. Out of it comes a heterogeneous and conglomerate work, that can still dissolve one in tears, despite principal disapproval of many of its parts and some of its methods.

So bulky a theme as the Civil War is obviously worthy of a whole cycle of epics, but Benét's work can hardly be regarded as such. To call it an epic is to confuse its values. Only its subject has any connection with epic. In every other respect it departs widely from even the very flexible norms of the genre. It is not objective in attitude, despite its magnificent impartiality so far as North and South are concerned. Benét obtrudes himself on his reader again and again, with emotional and personal reactions and comments.

In the "Iliad" the most effective books (e.g., the Embassy to Achilles, and the Ransoming of Hector) consist largely of speeches and are therefore basically dramatic, as Aristotle observed long ago. Of Benét's varying success with narrative we shall have more to say later. Dramatically, however, he consistently fails, even in the relatively small number of sections of the poem in which he tries. He never attempts anything comparable with the Embassy, much less with Odysseus's account of his adventures.

Some of the best parts of the poem are purely lyrical, and thus constitute



—Acme.

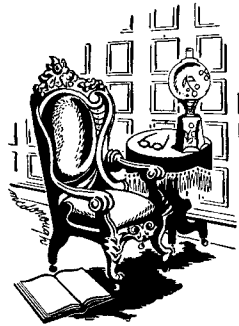
"... a long poem that has been read by more Americans than anything comparable."

altogether un-epic enclaves in a narrative poem. They also contribute heavily to the variability of tone and style that characterizes "John Brown's Body" and, more than any other factor, prevents its being called a true epic. The genre is hard to define, and this review is evidently avoiding a definition, but surely it may be said of all genuine epics that they have a single style, variable, to be sure, but within relatively narrow limits.

Another indisputable feature of genuine epic is that it gives us not only a large and national theme of struggle, in which nameless forces are at work and the impersonal and un-individualized group is fundamental, but also preeminent individuals. Homer, for example, gives us Greeks and Trojans, but he also gives us Achilles and Hector. Benét somehow misses both of these. He gives us some interesting characters: Sally Dupré and Wingate in the South, and in the North Jack Ellyat and a not fully realized Lincoln; in the West his most alive individual, Melora. But none of them has the stature of Andromache or Priam or Diomedes, not to mention Achilles. Benét likewise never makes

armies come alive. Homer, in a succession of similes, puts more mass movement into his poem in thirty lines than Benét can do in as many pages.

Benét's narrative suffers from his having bitten off more than his Muse



could chew. He either forgot or disregarded the wisdom of Aristotle's remark that Homer was wise not to try to tell the whole story of the Trojan War. Benét might have made a better poem if he had singled out some incident in the Civil War, and had then made it significant by bringing in the right elements of background at rele-

vant points. Instead he inflicts on us highly prosaic "history" and tactical analyses; not enough to make the war understandable to a person with no other knowledge of it; too much, if one have such knowledge.

When he is dealing with essentially romantic situations, such as that of Melora, or the effect of the war on Wingate Hall, Benét's narrative is excellent. It cannot, as, indeed, narrative poetry generally cannot, transcend the individual. He should have pondered well the successes and the failures of Addison's "Blenheim" before he attempted his own Gettysburg. Many have tried, and only Aeschylus has really done it right.

The late Twenties are not popularly thought of as a period of large and serious work. As the Forties verge toward extinction, those of us who, like the present reviewer, lived their formative years in those fabulous Twenties, now taking the inevitable backward look of middle age, may draw some satisfaction from the evidence provided by "John Brown's Body," that the Twenties were not so silly as some youngsters are pleased to assume.

And One Came Running

By Louise Townsend Nicholl

GEORGE WASHINGTON, Abraham Lincoln, and my father,
Their footsteps mingling here together
In the worn stone
Of Old St. Paul's, the oldest church;
In walk and porch
Footsteps fallen, leaves blown,
Merged together in the stone.

Three of them came, and one came running,
Over the stones which now lie sunning.
Battery up to The Central Park
My father was heir to Old New York.
He ran and searched it, east and west,
Looking for Greatness and Event,
And the place he said he liked the best
When he reached the age of seven or eight
Was Old St. Paul's where Washington went—
The Pew, the flags, the fabulous Date.
Hard to believe it was Washington!
A name and a period half divine:
Seventeen Hundred and Eighty-nine.

He was eleven in Sixty-one
And found St. Paul's high iron fence
The most auspicious perch to wait
For Lincoln the President to come
Down Broadway in an open carriage.
(Was he old enough to think of the marriage,

The timeless meetings of those who are Great,
Adding up to a Place, a sum?)
President Lincoln strange and tall,
He would sleep in the Astor House next door,
He would have a room on the second floor.
This was the greatest thing of all,
Event immediate, immense.

Washington, Lincoln, and my father,
These were the great men, the three Brothers,
And one of them saw one of the Others,
One of them on top of a fence
In the Old City,
Kept fresh the memory, intense
With shock of fierce adoring pity:
Always the tone of hush and awe,
"The homeliest man I ever saw,"
The look which showed that he was great,
Marked for extremity by Fate.

And that was all . . .
Till four years later he lay in State
Across Broadway in City Hall;
Sixty-five, and the boy fifteen,
Filled with the Greatness he had seen.
Footsteps fallen, leaves blown,
In the worn stone.
Three of them came, and one came running,
Here on the stones which now lie sunning.