

Svevo's art of the "interior monologue" reached its fullest expression in *Confessions of Zeno* one can speak of two "periods" in the development of the writer. But an examination of his first work, now available to English-speaking readers in an excellent version by Archibald Colquhoun, who renders all the subtlety and humor of Svevo's style, makes it clear that such a division is artificial. In fact, *A Life* contains all the elements of Svevo's artistic originality.

Alfonso, its protagonist, is the prototype of all the novelist's heroes. A young man employed in a bank, and dreaming of writing, he cannot escape from the prison of his self; the oddity of his personality impedes his communication with other people. He is in love with the daughter of his boss and tries to seduce her, but as soon as she gives herself to him, his feelings get confused. He pushes her away and lets her go—although he cannot stand the solitude to which he is condemned by her desertion, and prefers suicide to the drabness of a senseless existence. Slow-moving, at times too long-winded, the novel can be summarized as the story of a failure. It can also be called the story of a rift between dream and reality, or the portrait of a young man who could have become an artist but missed every opportunity to do so because he spent all his strength and cunning fighting small obstacles and achieving little victories without ever facing the main problem of his incapacity to live and to create. What Svevo said in his first novel about boredom, futility, and absurdity endeared him half a century later to European existentialists.

A Life offers a combination of many different literary assets: it depicts in a strictly realistic manner the shabby surroundings of a middle-class family and the dull routine of a banking institution; it has brilliant pictorial visions of the sea, of Trieste, and of the countryside; and it contains a most penetrating exploration of the tortuous turns our mind and senses take under unfavorable circumstances.

Unlike the majority of Italian novels of the same epoch, *A Life* does not suffer from provincialism, exaggerated "local color," and folkloristic reminiscences. It has a universality and humanity befitting the man of wide European culture that was Svevo. Perhaps that is the reason why seventy years after its publication this novel is still more than a historical document or a rare item for admirers of Svevo; it stands in its own right as an absorbing psychological work of fiction that has remained through the decades remarkably fresh and modern.

Secret of Survival

The Coin of Carthage, by Bryher (Harcourt, Brace & World. 240 pp. \$4.50), portrays some victims of Rome's defeat in the Second Punic War. Books by the prolific Robert Payne include several dealing with the Greek and Roman past.

By ROBERT PAYNE

ALL OF Bryher's books tend to be elegiac, and *The Coin of Carthage* is no exception. Her elegies are composed without fuss, with a casual elegance that is a proper ornament for vanished splendors. No trumpets blare, and there is no loud tattoo of drums. She goes about the business of reviving the past with the calm of a woman setting out to market on a summer's day, though the market she reaches perished more than twenty centuries ago. Then very calmly she tells us what she has seen.

This time the market is somewhere in Southern Italy at the time of the Second Punic War. Hannibal has brought his elephants over the Alps and is ravaging the land. One day Zonas, a poor Greek peddler of bridles, caught between the lines, is forced to watch the parade of the Carthaginian army, for all conquerors like to be admired by the people they have conquered. While the villagers are cheering mechanically at the orders of a Carthaginian guard, Zonas's donkey suddenly breaks through the lines and darts in front of Hannibal's emblazoned elephant, followed by Zonas waving his mule stick. Hannibal is amused. He is not in the least annoyed by this diversion in the magnificent order of his procession, and he tosses the peddler a silver *stater* bearing his own portrait.

A few days later Zonas finds a young Roman officer wounded in the hills, tends him, and takes him to his home, a large villa dominated by the matronly Sybilla. She shares with Zonas a dedication to the pursuit of happiness through wealth; so Zonas stays on in the villa, content for the moment to live a sheltered life among the slaves, though sometimes he rouses himself sufficiently to take an interest in the affairs of the young officer or in Verna, the half-Gallic slave-girl who dreams of being free as the winds. Winter comes,



—Islay Lyons, Capri.

Bryher—happiest with the humble.

and then the world is safe from enemies. Eventually Zonas will go to Rome and set up his bridle shop in the Forum, and give his coin away for safe-keeping, being strong enough to part with it; for he is one of those who survive—not because he is any better or worse than the rest, but because he has the gift of survival. He is rough-hewn, and he would survive anywhere, in any age, even our own.

Elegies are notoriously uneven—one thinks of *Lycidas* with its startling riches and even more startling dross—and so it is with *The Coin of Carthage*. Sometimes Bryher sees the past clearly, but there are occasions when she is compelled to describe things she has only half-seen. All the scenes in the winter villa come to life; Zonas tending the wounded officer rings true; Verna and Sybilla leap across the page; the worried slaves have the proper smell of slavery. But Karus, the officer, has no sooner got on his feet than he surprises us with his falsity.

Bryher is happiest when she speaks about the humble, the wanderers, the people touched by the common earth, with their rough kindnesses and dangerous courtesies. She knows what they think about the lords of creation: "O Hermes strike them! What pity, what pity is there ever for the vanquished?" She knows what they dream about: "A captain told me that if I sailed south with him on his next voyage, we should come to a country where

There is no grass and the ground is like skin of an animal, powdered with gold." She knows their dreams, their hates, their happy slovenliness, and their exaltations; and because she knows these things so well, her work gives an impression of moral beauty.

City Squares and Yankee Clippers:

Henry Beetle Hough is a died-in-the-wool Martha's Vineyard man out of New Bedford by way of Columbia, Yale, and the winner's circle when they gave out the Pulitzer Prizes back in 1918. Who has not heard about the nice balance of sophistication and homespun featured in the *Vineyard Gazette*, co-edited and published by Hough and his wife? What reader does not recognize a few samples from his long list of books, the titles appearing about every two years on subjects that interested him most at the time? To name a few: Thoreau, the whaling tradition, the problems of a country editor, the sea-haunted moods of the Cape region—and the conflicts that arise when a city man attempts to inflict progress upon benighted natives, who (generally speaking) have been around the track before and think of their thoughts than their short sentences indicate.

In *The Port* (Atheneum, \$4.50) we encounter the last theme, but it's a fair question whether the characters herein displayed will win many friends on either side of the fence. What's right about the novel is the author's

clear love of coastal villages, his appreciative ear for clipped Downeaster small talk, his general disapproval of disruptive urban ways. What's wrong are the contrived motivations and portentous banalities of the story itself.

Whit Fifield, the narrator, is a Bad-dow Port man who has done his time in New York communications and is now a thankful, Thoreauvian escapee who spends his time fishing and watching summer visitors get their comeup-pance from neighboring Yankee clippers. Solon Ridgeley, a close-mouthed member of the home team, has become rich by not paying his way. Says the narrator admiringly: "It seemed to me that Solon was probably correct in believing that frugality of the right sort could be far more enjoyable than extravagance, and I did not wonder that he seemed to smile to himself as he relished the good things that had cost him practically nothing, or would cost him practically nothing in the long run. He had turned the principle of conspicuous consumption inside out and got the better of it."

Needless to say, Ridgeley turns out to be more than a match for summer visitor Pete Pickering, who comes down from New York with his quaintly wanton wife, Clare, and decides to acquire the necessary options and permissions to turn Barrow Port into a high-class vacation resort. When the chips are down, Madison Avenue progress proves no match for hidden historic real estate liens, riparian rights, and vestigial In-

dian claims. Not even the narrator's recurrent, nonaggressive affair with Mrs. Pickering or his mild irritation at Ridgeley's buncombemanship (New England division) can switch his sympathetic allegiance from those who want to keep things as they were. He even supplies a rationale for himself: "The more there is in the world, the more there is to miss. It's a strain to keep up."

At the convoluted climax, Ridgeley has obfuscated all issues more effectively than a Nantucket mist, and pristinity is served—even though by this time one may have joined emotional forces with the repentant Pickering and his aggressive associate, who have run aground on the sharp edges of wiles and guiles that would have seemed less cute on a carnival midway, where the "marks" don't ask for it quite so openly.

The Port, unfortunately, depends upon the cliché of Downeast invincibility when confronted by modern ways, with no new dimensions added except for the author's sensible appreciation of the rock-ribbed beauty of his native habitat and his respect for the basic, if sometimes hidden, human qualities of the reticent people who share his sea and village. Altogether, an undemanding, loosely-woven garland of footnotes for coastal New Englanders and assorted *simpáticos* who will delight in the moments of recognition supplied by an eminently qualified spokesman. —JAMES KELLY.

Painter in Ink: "Drawing was not easy for Manet," writes Pierre Courthion in *Edouard Manet* (Abrams, \$15). "His good drawings are those in which the contour is replaced by patches and line is absorbed into its surroundings." The book's 131 reproductions, 48 in color, illustrate the artist's work in both genres.



"Bistro" (about 1877).



"La Toilette" (1862).



"Le Rendez-vous des chats" (1869).