

THEODORE DREISER AND THE AMERICAN NOVEL

An American Tragedy, by Theodore Dreiser. New York: Boni & Liveright. \$5.00.

For the convenience of classification it might be maintained that the bulk of contemporary American novels are the result of one of two processes: we have the novel of secretion and we have the novel of accretion. The former are in the majority. Most first novels are such, and perhaps the longer short stories of Sherwood Anderson are their prototype. Mr. Anderson is reported once to have said that he simply had to write or he should have gone crazy. Surely here we have as praiseworthy an incentive to authorship as may be found in our naughty world. The only trouble is that once sanity is insured by the catharsis of a book there is no further propulsion to write. The author must wait patiently until he is again on the brink of insanity before he can secrete another novel. The result can at best be only a refinement of the means of secretion—or rather, expression. There can be no real progression, no further revelation of form, no satisfactory approach to the totality of life.

The novel of accretion is a more difficult undertaking. It presupposes at least the existence of an objective world, confusing as that world may be in all its complexity, and implies a reality greater than the sum of its interpretations. The interpretation may be tragic or comic in accordance with the way the writer has marshalled his facts and in tune with the temper of his insight which informs these facts. But the very recognition that there is a complex objective reality to be grasped and synthesized in comprehensive form implies the function of the novelist as artist. So that the novel of accretion is at least the germinal of a work of art, whereas the novel of secretion, of self-expression is at best only a lyrical pattern, at worst a psychoanalyst's holiday.

The works of Theodore Dreiser are our splendid examples of the novel of accretion. Dreiser cannot, by any stretch of critical folly, be termed a complete creator, master of his medium and possessor of the full creative imagination. He belongs, we might rather say, to the glacial period of American literature. For not unlike a glacier he moves ponderously across the American scene, pulling up forests here, mountains there, digging deep gorges in a third place. And when he has withdrawn we can at least say: here is the impress of a powerful hand. The landscape is no longer the same. Dreiser has impressed upon it his rude passion.

That Dreiser has expressed at various intervals an incoherent philosophy in harmony with the religion of our great country is, I think, of comparatively little importance. Dreiser was and will always be in part that curious bird, the newspaper man. Such fauna are used to seeing life unsteadily and in pieces and there arises from their hurried observation a cynicism that is nine-tenths sentimentality. Even so, if Dreiser's newspaper philosophy were the measure of his novels, it would have

to be considered importantly. Such was certainly the case of *A Book About Myself* and the result was not particularly engrossing. But the fact is that Dreiser is sufficient artist to recognize life as greater than his ideas. Else there could be no pity and no terror. Else there could be no American tragedy.

To conceive life in terms of an American tragedy is in itself an achievement! Tragedy implies at least

close to the facts of the case, this is of course an oddity in contemporary fiction but it is not necessarily a literary crime. When a creator can regiment those facts as does Dreiser in a devastating chain of consequences and with the propulsion of poetic necessity, it becomes a magnificent achievement.

It is in Book III that we find the flaw in Dreiser's method, or rather his lack of complete method. Here the instinct of the good newspaper man

mate moment of his birth under the shadow of the electric chair.

An American Tragedy is a novel of significance for Theodore Dreiser and for contemporary American literature. For Dreiser it marks a definite advance over his previous novels, a firmer grasp of structure, a sense of omniscience above the hot conflicts of life, a recognition of the quickening value of tragedy. He has outgrown, though not entirely, the tendency to



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DRAWING BY OTTO SOGLOW

a conception of man as the unhappy victim of environment, of circumstances, of "a break . . . an original sin." There are tears for things. If life is conceived merely as the counterplay of blind forces, the crest and the slough of desire and again the crest, there can be no victory, no defeat, no real comedy, no real tragedy. Tragedy, in other words, implies the human approach to existence and, shelving the cold laws of inevitability, weeps for the cruel humiliation of disaster.

It has been pointed out that the story of Dreiser's new novel is the story of that crime which flooded our newspapers in the summer of 1906, when Chester Gillette murdered Grace Brown, that Dreiser has followed Gillette's history very closely and has even reproduced the original letters of Grace Brown almost to the word. This might at first seem quite distressing, for Book II of Dreiser's novel, containing those details leading up to the murder and the murder itself, and those terrible, broken letters of Roberta Alden, is surely the most deeply moving, the most passionately conceived and executed book of the three that make up the novel. I think we can credit Dreiser with recognizing these letters as literature in themselves and incapable of improvement. Certainly they jibe in no way with the created character of Roberta Alden. As for his holding

assumes the role of the bad novelist. The bloodhounds of justice and their infallible cunning in tracking the criminal, the political feud involved in the cynical travesty of an open trial, the feature story of the poor old mother's heroic fight to save her son from death—all this was too much for the professional news writer. Fortunately, Dreiser recovers in time to give us Clyde Griffiths once again in the moment of his disintegration under the torture of the death house and the ultimate

sacrifice the unity of legend for the complexity of life. The values of Dreiser's advance can in turn afford nourishment to our young novelists. Our American novel today stands still upon the painted sea of factualism or sprawls on the sands of self-expression. Dreiser alone of the older men has grown; he alone offers the novel as a living structure strong enough to support the reality of America and its people.

Edwin Seaver

THE BATTLE OF PASSAIC

(Continued from page 14) where the great dye works are. Quietly two by two they marched, through the country roads. The procession a mile long and the police of Lodi received them without clubs. They marched past the Lodi works and wound across the fields, along curving lines of singing men and women. There was quiet, strength and purpose about this great procession.

The light that was lighted in Passaic is spreading; it has gone to Lodi and tied up the dye works. It has gone to East Paterson. The great dyeing plants that dye the silk of the country are striking.

Then the Paterson strikers marched on Washington. Frank P. Walsh, Joint Chairman of the War Labor

Board, Chairman of the Industrial Relations Commission, is their counsel. They asked for a Congressional investigation of the textile industry. They went to the White House to ask for another industrial relations investigation, but the President would not see them. In the office of Secretary of Labor James J. Davis, they reiterated their willingness to settle the strike, and refused the terms offered by the mill owners, which meant breaking the strike, since the first step the mill owners demanded was that the workers return to work. Meantime, the workers in Paterson are stirring; the silk workers in Paterson demand wage increases. Lawrence and Providence, and the entire textile industry, look toward the flame that burns in Passaic.