



## Dreiser the Puzzle

By Granville Hicks

IN "Letters of Theodore Dreiser" (University of Pennsylvania Press, 3 vols., \$18), edited by Robert H. Elias, there are more letters to H. L. Mencken than to any other one person. The earliest was written in 1907, and in it Dreiser, as editor of the *Delineator*, offers advice on some articles on baby care that Mencken was revising for a Baltimore doctor. The correspondence, begun in this curious fashion, soon became lively, and for the next eight or ten years, while Mencken was vigorously campaigning for Dreiser as a novelist, the letters were frequent. Thereafter the correspondence was more casual, but it continued almost as long as Dreiser lived.

The last letter to Mencken included in Mr. Elias's selection is dated March 27, 1943. Mencken had written Dreiser on March 19, asking, "What, precisely, are your ideas about the current crusade to save humanity?" In the First World War, he went on to say, he and Dreiser had agreed, and he wondered why Dreiser had changed. He noted with approval that Dreiser no longer seemed to be so closely associated with the Communists, adding, "I continue of the opinion, as always, that they are a gang of frauds."

Mencken's tone was flippant, as it almost invariably was, no matter how serious his intentions. Often in the past Dreiser had tried, in his elephantine way, to match his correspondent's flippancy, but now he was completely earnest. Not directly answering Mencken's question about the war, he said that he was interested in saving humanity if its lot could be improved, as he believed it could. "I know that you have no use for the common man," he wrote, "since he cannot distinguish himself. But I have." He went on: "You see, Mencken, unlike yourself, I am biased. I was born poor." For the American Communists, he explained, he had no great regard, but "as for the Communist System—as I saw it in Russia in 1927 and '28—I am for it—hide and hoof." After defending his views, with a characteristic lack of cogency, he abruptly changed his tone, to conclude with a warm expression of gratitude and affection.

What a puzzle Dreiser is! Much of the time in these letters he seems

coarse, egotistical, and cantankerous, and the reader grows more and more exasperated; but then suddenly, as in this letter to Mencken, one feels a tortured intensity that one has to respect. Often, as here, he is wrong-headed in these moments of strong emotion, but one cannot doubt the depth of his compassion.

Mr. Elias has selected some 600 letters, apparently from a much larger number available to him, and has edited them with scrupulous care. Dreiser was not a great letter writer nor even, most of the time, a very good one, and no one will read these volumes for the pleasure of reading them, but they are interesting because Dreiser is interesting, and they tell us a great deal about certain aspects of his career.

As a writer he was incurably unprofessional. Every novel he wrote, at least after "Sister Carrie," was put in shape by other hands—the hands of editors, of the devoted women who surrounded him, of literary friends from Mencken to James T. Farrell. ("I am always behindhand with my work," he candidly wrote an inquirer in 1921, "and the scope and intricacies of the matter in hand have, at times, made it impossible for me to give due attention to all of the details of the book—a task which most often I have been compelled to leave to others.") He was a prodigious worker, and in a great creative outburst after he lost his job on the *Delineator* in 1910 he finished "Jennie Gerhardt" and wrote "The Genius," "The Financier," and "The Titan." On the other hand, "The Bulwark" and "The Stoic" were in the works for thirty years or so, and many projects that remained unfinished are mentioned in his correspondence.

The letters also contain an appalling record of Dreiser's difficulties with publishers. His troubles began, of course, with the efforts of Doubleday, Page, fully documented here, to persuade him to withdraw "Sister Carrie," and they continued virtually all his life. Again and again he turned hopefully to a new publisher, and again and again the relationship ended for him in bitterness—if not, as once, in violence. Most writers have their publishing problems, but Dreiser must have set a record for wearing out publishers.

Next to his own books, the subject Dreiser most frequently wrote about was politics. Politics, so far as the letters show, had little importance for him in his early years, but by the late Twenties his interest was acute. We know that his visit to Russia in 1927 made a strong impression upon him, but, unfortunately, there are few letters about it. As for the domestic scene, in 1928 he began working for the freedom of Tom Mooney, and soon after that he became active in a variety of causes, chiefly those supported by the Communist Party. In the middle Thirties he drew away from the Communists, and for a time tried to form an alliance of non-Communist radicals, but his loyalty to the Soviet Union remained strong. After the outbreak of World War II, that loyalty became fanatical, and so it remained until his death in 1945. In 1941 he sent an autographed copy of "America Is Worth Saving" to Joseph Stalin, and three years later he wrote Mme. Chiang Kai-shek, "It is my opinion, and that of many students of Communist Russia, that Stalin can be trusted. He is a great thinker and a great leader."

His fanaticism about Russia, his strange streak of mysticism, his gullibility in many matters, his oafish anti-Semitism, his ferocious and abiding hatred of England and the Catholic Church—all these were as much a part of the man as his sympathy for the underdog or his struggle to be honest with himself. The muddiness of his mind is often reflected in his writing, and the more serious he is, the worse his sentence structure is likely to be.

He was not, by and large, an attractive figure, and the letters present his unattractive qualities more relentlessly than the books that have been written about him have done. One notes, for instance, his dependence on other persons, particularly women, and his offhand acceptance of their services to him. One notes his arrogance and his greed. But at the same time one feels in the letters, as in the novels, that this was a man who was utterly faithful to his own vision of life.

As he wrote Mencken, he was born with a bias, a bias not so much in favor of the common man as a bias in favor of men and women as victims—of the economic system, of their own impulses, of life itself. This bias led him into ridiculous contradictions, but it also gave him insights that have made his novels, with all their many faults, a permanent part of our literature.



# In the Time of Tolstoy an Artistic Dynasty Was Born

**THE POET:** *An endeavor to have Boris Pasternak lecture in the U. S. and Britain has been abandoned because of the USSR's refusal to grant the Spanish novelist José Luis de Villalonga, chairman of the sponsoring international committee, permission to enter Russia and discuss plans with the writer. Fearing further efforts would be troublous to him, the committee has dissolved. Pasternak's latest book, "I Remember: Sketch for an Autobiography," translated, with a preface and notes by David Magarshack (Pantheon, 192 pp. \$3.75), reached Feltrinelli a year after the Italian publisher received the manuscript for "Dr. Zhivago." The new work, which contains an essay on translating Shakespeare (translated by Manya Harari), has already been published in France. SR's critic is the authority on Russia David J. Dallin, whose last book was "The Changing World of Soviet Russia."*

By DAVID J. DALLIN

FROM the pages of this remarkable little book there looks out at us the restless, searching, and excited face of a great personality of our time, a poet and novelist, artist and philosopher, who has not yet found—will he ever find?—the definite, soothing, and reassuring answers to his questions, nor even a final field for his talents. He was, he says, a "leftist"; now they call him a "reactionary." A talented composer, he drops music after six years of passionate devotion. A great admirer of painting and painters, himself the son of a prominent painter, he turns to poetry. He writes a book of poems entitled "A Twin in the Clouds," and then calls the title "silly" and is "sorry" that he wrote the book. About his own poetry there is an avalanche of self-criticism. "My ear was at the time perverted by the pretentious extravagances and the break from everything natural that were in vogue in those days. Everything spoken in a normal way rebounded from me."

As if personalized in this outstanding man, we recognize the Russia of the twentieth century—its eternal metamorphoses and quests and torments, its religiousness in paradoxical garb, and its agonized spiritual ramblings. The peculiar world of the top strata of Russian intellectuals on the eve of the revolution and after re-emerges before our eyes—its "schools" and "trends," its enthusiasms, passions, and disenchantments. The names of the author's friends read like a survey of Russian literature:

Maxim Gorky, Leo Tolstoy, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Sergei Essenin, and many others.

An autobiography is not a novel, and style in an autobiography is generally not of the greatest importance, but here the style is extraordinary. I have never read a biography or an autobiography written in such beautiful, polished, and grand-master style. It is a delight. Here is an excerpt from Pasternak's description of the visit to Leo Tolstoy's house right after the great writer's death:

In the room lay a mountain like Elbrus, and she was one of its large, detached crags; the room was filled by a storm cloud the size of half the sky, and she was one of its separate lightnings. And she did not realize that she had the privilege of a crag and of a sheet of lightning to be silent and to crush by the mysteriousness of her conduct; that she need not enter into arguments with those who were the most untolstoyan in the world—the Tolstoyans; that she need not join in a pygmy battle with those people.

But he adds:

It was not a mountain that lay in the corner of the room, but a little, wizened old man, one of the old men created by Tolstoy, one of those he had described and scattered over his pages by the dozen. Little Christmas trees stood all around the place. The setting sun cut across the room with four slanting shafts of light and formed a cross over the corner where the body was lying with the thick shadow of the window-bars and other little baby crosses with the traceries of the young Christmas trees.

Among Pasternak's early reminiscences is his impression of Alexander Scriabin's third symphony, the "Divine Poem," played by the great composer himself at a neighboring *dacha*:

Lord, what music it was! The symphony was continually crumbling and tumbling like a city under artillery fire, and was all the time growing and



—From "Pasternak" (To be published May 4. McGraw-Hill).

Young Boris sketched by his father, Leonid Pasternak.