

were massacred during the three or four days of civil war, castrated, hanged head down, stabbed. Among those who were hanged, there were some whose testicles had been stuffed in their mouths.

In 1967 came the Six-Day War, when the French Left distinguished itself by its equally surrealist anti-Zionism.

Anti-Semitism has always outraged Ionesco but it took a brave man to write as he did in Rumania in 1940, even if only for a private journal. Yet he did so as an essentially private act. His only real politics are those of distrust and hatred for everything totalitarian and anti-individual. Ionesco's target in 1940 was the totalitarianism of the Right; now it is of the Left. Hence his current unpopularity with the Parisian exponents of radical chic, who accuse him of being a closet fascist. Actually, he is a deeply antipolitical animal who acquired his distaste for all parties by watching his unspeakable father change his beliefs according to the ruling clique—not, says Ionesco, because he was an opportunist, but simply because he worshiped power and the state.

He describes these transformations shrewdly and at length. Ionesco also brilliantly conveys the slow contagion of Nazism, watching his friends, fascinated, as they change before his eyes into rhinoceroses. Page after page of his journal is haunted by the image of himself as the last of the human beings in a nation of pachyderms. This, remember, was written in 1940, twenty years before the play was produced. In one of his 1967 asides, Ionesco remarks that he had forgotten all about the idea. It is as though it had sunk into what Henry James called "the deep well of unconscious cerebration," to resurface years later in one of the flimsy little stories—now collected in *The Colonel's Photograph*—which were the basis for most of his plays. But only when Ionesco reworked the stories for the stage did they finally take on the weight and reverberations of serious art.

Oddly enough, in the context of the journals the image of the rhinoceroses triumphant is little more than a bright idea and not particularly important. What seems to matter to the young Ionesco are the long philosophical disquisitions on the Self and Other, History, Death, and Reality. (He apparently had a youthful vision of truth and radiance that has pursued him ever since.) Odder still, the 1967 additions show that nothing much has altered in twenty-seven years. The strain of being what he once called a "professional, card-carrying artist" has in no way dulled his appetite for metaphysics. He seems peculiarly proud of
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Book Forum

Letters from Readers

Eva Le Gallienne

IN "IBSEN THE SHY GIANT" [SR, Aug. 14] Eva Le Gallienne says, "Women's Lib would have nauseated [Ibsen]," and she agrees with Michael Meyer that "'A Doll's House' is no more about women's rights than Shakespeare's *Richard II* is about the divine right of kings. . . . Its theme is the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she really is and to strive to become that person." What do Ms. Le Gallienne and Mr. Meyer think the theme of the women's liberation movement is?

Although Ms. Le Gallienne apparently cherishes some false labels and is helping to keep them in circulation, she does say about some she does not cherish that "false labels are hard to remove." Members of the National Organization for Women are also aware of the remarkable durability of false labels, since sometimes even the women and men who come to us for help express amazement and relief that we are not at all the kind of people they expected us to be. No visitor has ever vomited at any NOW meeting I have attended, and I doubt that Ibsen would have either!

MARY G. DABBS,
Atlanta, Ga.

IT WAS A THRILLING EXPERIENCE to read Eva Le Gallienne's essay on Ibsen. In 1926 and 1927 I often saw Miss Le Gallienne perform in Ibsen's great plays at the Civic Repertory Theater on 14th Street in New York. On one occasion, I vividly recall, well along in the first act of *The Master Builder*, some imbecile shouted, "Fire!" There was a moment of frozen anxiety in the audience. In a matter of seconds there could have been a disastrous stampede. Miss Le Gallienne interrupted her performance of Hilda Wangel, stepped forward, held up her hand, and said simply, "There is no fire." The situation was saved. All uneasiness vanished. It was a magnificent display of leadership.

Perhaps this story deserves a footnote. Anyone who remembers the Civic Repertory Theater will agree it was no place to be in case of fire.

EDWARD H. DARE,
Stamford, Conn.

Understanding Farrell

ROBERT PHILLIPS'S REVIEW of James T. Farrell's *Invisible Swords* [SR, June 12] is one of the very few understanding and perceptive critiques of Farrell's writing that have appeared for a number of years.

EDGAR M. BRANCH,
Berkeley, Calif.

Desensitized

AS I'VE TENDED TO LIKE Haskel Frankel's reviews, I'm overjoyed to weigh his remarks about George Axelrod's *Where Am I Now—When I Need Me?* [SR, Aug. 14]. So that's

the kind of stuff H. F. enjoys! It isn't often I'm granted the opportunity for feeling convinced I have superior taste, compared with that of an authority I've respected.

But, seriously, this tells me a lot about how really astute critics become desensitized after so much exposure to trash.

JOSEPH GANCHER,
Albany, N.Y.

It-Thou

MEYER LEVIN [SR, July 31] errs in assuming that Martin Buber was in a position to invite meaningful dialogue with Palestinian Arabs during the days of British rule. Dialogue occurred regularly between the occupier (Britain) and the beneficiary of the occupation (the Zionists), but the occupied (the Palestinians) were invited only to cooperate with the occupation and acquiesce to their own disfranchisement. The externally determined relationship precluded the promotion of the Palestinian from "it" to "Thou."

RAY L. CLEVELAND,
Regina, Canada

Tatters . . . trembled

IF THE REPETITION of "shreds," which I intended, for the passage from Gabriela Mistral [SR, July 17] does not create enough reverberation for translator Doris Dana [BOOK FORUM, Aug. 14], then why not pair "tatters" with "trembled" in the same line and achieve greater accuracy than with "flecks" and "fog"? Good translation can also be accurate—even literally so sometimes, as Miss Dana proves in her treatment of the rest of the poem.

A. F. GRONBERG,
San Diego, Calif.

Abomination

I DISAGREE WITH Maurice Samuel's *In Praise of Yiddish* [SR, July 17]. To anyone who speaks traditional (high) German, Yiddish is an abomination. It is a patois of the crudest kind and, while it has produced a few succinct words for which it is impossible to find substitutes in conventional languages, Yiddish by and large is about as much entitled to be dignified by the term "language" as is pigeon English or any of the other linguistic catchalls that the desperation of communication has produced.

Despite the fact that excellent literature has been written in Yiddish, this does not get away from the fact that it is a garbled, quasi-medieval German.

Hopefully it will disappear within a generation or two. It is guttural, crude, and has no grammar or elegance to speak of. But it did give us a few irreplaceable words such as *chutzpa*. Which may be Hebrew. I am no linguist. But I am Jewish and mention this lest I be accused of being anti-Semitic.

FELIX DE COLA,
Hollywood, Calif.

HOMAGE TO THEODORE DREISER:
August 27, 1871—December 28, 1945

by Robert Penn Warren

Random House, 173 pp., \$5.95

Reviewed by Clifton Fadiman

■ Robert Penn Warren's *Homage*, marking the centennial of Theodore Dreiser's birth, is excellent. But it would be welcome even if second-rate. In a literary scene dominated by the twin cults of Ego and Now it would inform us that thoughtful acts of piety are still possible. In an era of lengthening hairdos and shortening memories it would force us once more to remember that Dreiser's generation—and he among the foremost—unshackled our literature and edged a part of the reading public away from gentility toward maturity.

The achievement of this brief, packed, closely argued study rests on two breakthroughs. First, Mr. Warren had to break through the resistance offered by Dreiser's personality. As a young publishers' man I once had occasion to try to do business with Dreiser. I can confirm Mr. Warren's calm assessment of him. Dreiser was suspicious, devious, uncultivated, racist, a liar, rude, ill-balanced, vengeful, and a sucker for all sorts of fads and quack intellectual nostrums. How could this primitive write *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, the first two parts of the Cowperwood trilogy, and *An American Tragedy*—all flawed, yet all impossible to ignore? Mr. Warren explains how.

Secondly, it was necessary to break through the resistance put up by Dreiser's famous style, in the restricted sense of style as the issue of the choice and arrangement of separate words. By an act of creative sympathy Mr. Warren penetrates the coarse mesh of an autodidact's English to the "thematic density" that is actually there, to the opposition of rhythms and patterns that create in the better novels their almost puzzling tension. In this respect (and in others) Thomas Hardy, who abandoned fiction just before Dreiser started, resembled him. Hardy's mere *writing* is often abominable; nevertheless his finest work, whether verse or prose, continues to generate an extraordinary field of force. So many nineteenth-century masters—Hardy, Dostoevsky, Dickens, Balzac—compared to a Flaubert or a Ford Maddox Ford, wrote badly. Yet, there they stand. And, though not quite of their company, there stands Theodore Dreiser.

At the outset Mr. Warren poses the core problem that will lead to his most fruitful passages of analysis: How can



—Gene Markey

Theodore Dreiser—a "nightmare self."

we call a man an artist whose real life and whose fictions are so interwoven that the critic is hard put to place a finger on any spot and declare, "Here he created." The answer involves a searching consideration of the unpleasant, unhappy, and un-simple man who was Dreiser. Mr. Warren sees him as "the outsider, the rejected, the yearner," somehow (but the how is explained) channeling his alienation into the very books that he hoped would help him to break into the charmed circle of "society." Dreiser came, to use Chesterton's happy term for Dickens's parents, from a family of "downstarts," gifted with a talent for disaster. His rejection of his failed father (who persisted in living after his failure) and his pitiful passion for his mother (the only woman, he tells us, he was ever capable of loving) stand as childhood fixations that would surface in complex metamorphoses in the major novels. Influenced by the fashionable social Darwinism of the period, the young Dreiser developed obsessive dreams of power. Parallel dreams of sexual conquest were nourished by his ugliness, his crudity, his fear of impotence, his compulsive masturbation.

Had Dreiser surrendered completely to these lurid fantasies of the will, he might have written mere servant-girl romances, or possibly nothing at all. But he wandered also within another dream-structure, its foundation laid by the physicochemical, materialist science of the day—the researches, for example, of Jacques Loeb. This part of Dreiser was obsessed by a dark, cha-

otic vision of man as but "a chemical atom in a whirl of unknown forces." This nihilism, in conflict with the success dream, gives his work its special quality. Indeed, Mr. Warren says, "It is his work." Thus in both his novels and his personal career we can see him torn between a lust for the bitch-goddess Success and a sense of her futility and vacuity. In his fiction the tension emerged in many ways, notably in his "constant need . . . for both self-indulgence and self-scrutiny." Mr. Warren uses this insight to explain why Dreiser, despite all the surface realism, was not really a novelist of manners, like Edith Wharton in his day or John Marquand in ours. "He was, quite literally, a novelist of the metaphysics of society—of, specifically, the new plutocratic society of the Gilded Age. And this meant that he was, too, the anatomist of the guilt involved in the characteristic ambition of that age as well as the poet of the pathos of success."

Mr. Warren sees *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt* as powerful manipulations of his childhood obsessions; *The "Genius"* as a "crashing bore"—partly because of Dreiser's inability to establish any psychic distance between himself and Eugene Witla; *The Titan* and *The Financier* as projections of Dreiser's Nietzschean daydreams—documentaries dramatizing the illusions of love, art, and power; and, finally, his masterpiece, *An American Tragedy*, as the unbelievably complex objectification of his "nightmare self"—the Dreiser who spent his desperate life seeking, as did Clyde Griffiths, to find out who he was and what he wanted. Forty-six years after *An American Tragedy* we look about—or within—and discover millions of Clyde Griffiths. *An American Tragedy* was perhaps more aptly titled than even Dreiser could conceive.

That he probed deeply into the most recessed guilts and fears of Americans is, I think, fairly demonstrated in this book. That, despite the bumbling prose, the overwriting, and the callow intellectualizing, Dreiser could be subtle will come to many, as it did to this reviewer, as something of a revelation. The revelation is only one of the services Mr. Warren renders to the memory of a man who, however difficult he may be to read with pleasure in our quasi-sophisticated age, helped to change the course of American literature, and, in so doing, to cleanse it, like some monstrous half-heroic, half-barbaric Heracles diverting the Alpheus to purify the stables of Augeas.

Long known as a book critic, Clifton Fadiman, who is on the Board of Editors of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, is working on a critical history of children's literature.