

A Major Literary Event



Arthur Hoppe

ONE OF the most important literary events of this or any other season was the publication last week of a long-awaited work dramatically entitled "Recorded Presidential Conversations" (Government Printing Office; 1308 pp; \$12.25; Expurgated).

While some reviewers will see this as simply another oral history of the behind-the-stairs-at-the-White House variety and others will dismiss it as a tawdry mystery, to these tired old eyes it is a work of major proportions (8 x 10 x 2½ inches; 3 lbs; paperback).

It is by the same popular author who recently brought us the instant best-seller, "Presidential Tax Returns," to which this is, in a way, a sequel. But this, it cannot be gainsaid, is his magnum opus.

For the discerning reader will find here a deeply penetrating psychological drama that goes to the very heart of the human condition.

It is not, one should be warned, light fare. Many a reader will be put off by the stream-of-consciousness style, reminiscent of "Ulysses." Others will be confused by the tangled web of plots and sub-plots. But those who persist through to the unsurprising end will be rewarded with new truths that so enlighten the mind.

★ ★ ★

THE BASIC plot is simple yet innovative. The protagonist, a respected midce-aged executive identified only as "P," is surprised to discover his loyal assistants are not plotting against him. Instead they are plotting for him.

His problem is how to protect his assistants and himself from the villainous investigators who are pursuing them all. Event piles upon event. We feel the enemy closing in from all sides.

Slowly, gradually, in one of the most

brilliant dissections of a man's soul in English literature, we see P's noble character erode before our very eyes until finally, in one dramatic scene, he speaks desperately of perjury, bribery and other methods of obstructing justice. Talk about Dorian Gray!

Throughout the work moves the tragic figure of young D. At first, we see him as the most loyal of all the aides, almost a son to P. But then he is revealed to have been one of the plotters. Thus he makes the agonizing decision to betray P to save his own skin.

In revenge, P attempts to make D the scapegoat instead of J.M., a secondary figure whom he had originally planned to blame or . . .

But let us not destroy the suspense by revealing too many of the plots. Suffice it to say that many, including double-acrostic fans, will be richly rewarded by the challenges presented.

★ ★ ★

IF THE WORK suffers from any flaw, it is the dialect of the characters. Typical, perhaps, is P saying, "Because we can't — I've got — if the U.S. Attorney's Office and, ah . . ."

Clarity suffers. Yet much of the authenticity would be lost if the characters spoke plain English.

The author has also seen fit to delete expletives such as, presumably, "golly," "gee" and "oh, fudge" for fear, oddly enough, of offending his readers.

But these are minor criticisms. There is no question we have here an important work by a best-selling author. And we can't help feeling he has a great deal more to say.

Let us hope we hear from him again soon.