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THEODORE DREISER

America's Foremost Novelist



NEW YORK: JOHN LANE COMPANY LONDON: JOHN LANE, THE BODLEY HEAD



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LOAN STACK

THEODORE DREISER

THEODORE DREISER—A PORTRAIT*

By Edgar Lee Masters

961 D77 T38

SOUL enrapt demi-urge, Walking the earth, Stalking life.

JACK o'Lantern, tall shouldered,
One eye set higher than the other,
Mouth cut like a scallop in a pie
Aslant, showing powerful teeth,
Swaying above the heads of others,
Jubilant, with fixed eyes scarcely sparkling,
Moving about rhythmically, exploding with laughter,

Touching fingers together, back and forth, Or toying with a handkerchief, And the eyes burn like a flame at the end of a funnel,

And the ruddy face glows like a pumpkin On Halloween!

R else a gargoyle of bronze
Turning suddenly to life
And slipping suddenly down corners of stone
To eat you:
Full of questions, objections,
Distinctions, instances,
Contemptuous, ironical, remote,
Cloudy, irreverent, ferocious,
Fearless, grim, compassionate yet hateful,
Old yet young, wise yet virginal,
To whom everything is new and strange,

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^{*} Written for The New York Times Review of Books.

THEODORE DREISER—A PORTRAIT

Whence he stares and wonders, Laughs, mocks, curses— Disordered, yet with a passion for order And classification—hence the habitual Folding into squares of a handkerchief.

R else a well cultivated and fruitful valley, But behind it unexplored fastnesses. Gorges, precipices, and heights Over which thunder clouds hang, From which lightning falls, Stirring up terrible shapes of prey That slink about in the blackness. The silence of him is terrifying As if you sat before the sphinx. The look of his eyes makes tubes of the air Through which you are magnified and analyzed. He needs nothing of you and wants nothing. He is alone and content. Self-mastered and beyond friendship, You could not hurt him. If he would allow himself to have a friend He could part with that friend forever And in a moment be lost in wonder Staring at a carved rooster on a doorstep, Or at an Italian woman Giving suck to a child On a seat in Washington Square.

SOUL enrapt demi-urge, Walking the earth, Stalking life.

WHAT MANNER OF MAN HE IS* By Harris Merton Lyon

TN many ways, my masters, the one man writing in this country to-day that is worth the lot of them. All the good magazine fellows-and they are good fellows, the Tarkingtons, Beaches, Londons and the rest-may play their little lighthearted game and fare on into the dusk, pleased that they did nothing and did it well. They are for the most part dead before they die, and so no mystery. But here is a fellow who now shows as if he may never die at allwhose work reveals at once that lucidity and that inscrutability which we accord to the seer. This man is mysterious; he is interesting.

Imagine a man, long, loosely put together, with design obtuse, blunted or slack where in most individuals nature makes for acuteness and tautness. A lolling gait; a lolling head; unbeautiful, unarresting, prematurely grizzled. Somewhere between forty and fifty years old now, I take it. A loose mouth, chin blunted and rather small; bluish grey eyes, large, lolling eyes, perhaps

^{*} From "Reedy's Mirror."

neurotic, and meaning nothing, save perhaps in anger. Simply a tall, ungainly, unlovely man with something of the cast of Oliver Goldsmith's features. Something lumpish, something rankly vegetable is evoked. What? A huge rutabaga; a colossal, pith-stricken radish. In this body dwells this interesting, this amazingly fascinating mind. He sits, lolling his head, articulating with a drone . . "Well-ah . . . Well-ah" . . . folding a pocket handkerchief eternally into a strip, folding the strip itself together, accordion-wise. Theodore Dreiser, mysterious and powerful.

William Marion Reedy once said to me, when the musty ale was flowing free, "Thank God, Dreiser hasn't got style. If he ever gets a style, it's good-bye." You know what he meant: If Dreiser ever gets thinking how he is going to say a thing rather than what he is going to say his work will suffer in body what it gains in telling.

But Dreiser will never get this sort of style. The man's mind is essentially simple; it is so simple that many people

AMERICA'S FOREMOST NOVELIST

find him too confoundedly prosaic and so will have none of him. For years he prepared magazines for the simple people; and he seems in that work to have convinced himself that it will never do to take it for granted that the mob is already apprised of a fact. Once, riding in the subway, he opened a copy of the Evening World and showed me the line: "Let us introduce you to the work of Rudyard Kipling." I scoffed, saying people already knew that work. Dreiser said, "No, they don't; they have to be introduced to everything." To believe that, and yet to write novels, requires infinite patience. It also lays the ghost of "style"; for perhaps one-half of style is repression. The stylist is the man who withholds his pen.

Dreiser has tried to give himself an impassive attitude of mind. His idea is that a writer should look down on life much as a god does, neither in irony nor in awe; should regard men and women as blades of grass, flourishing and perishing under the eternal sky. For such a god, for such a writer we may concoct a

paradox: everything is really so unimportant that it might well be treated as important. Thus Dreiser. Lest a plate glass window or an apartment house perish forever from men's minds, he will set it down in detail. I do not see how he ever gets done with a book. Every hour in every day is so important to every character that Dreiser himself must feel rather like a clock with a conscience.

Yet patience alone does not explain Dreiser. If you ask anyone who knows the man personally, he will say he cannot tie Dreiser up with his books at all. That part of the writer which sees human character in a flash and builds it up into an enduring monument is hidden. Dreiser in the flesh seems too peevish and fretful. That he isn't we know from Carrie and Jennie and Hurstwood and Cowperwood. Here is nothing but broad sympathy, genuine sweetness of heart, sublime and thrilling moments of true pity that sometimes torture the reader into tears. What does this recluse

AMERICA'S FOREMOST NOVELIST

keep from us, behind those lolling, uninitiated eyes of his?

That he keeps poetry is one thing sure. I sat once with him on a roof in Harlem and watched some pigeons flying. He spoke in a sort of rhapsody of their grace and their mystery. I think later he wrote a bit about them; I know he intended at that time a book. To a man who, in the backward-running holes of his mind, keeps caves for poetry any inappropriateness of genius is creditable. We read of Hurstwood and his rocking chair and his trips to the butcher with a sort of sick sense of the realism of it all. But the man who gave us Hurstwood is a poet in his heart.

I think perhaps I have hit the mystery of Dreiser in using the word recluse. Not that he is a recluse socially. I mean mentally. There are some men, like Chesterton, who wear their minds on the tips of their tongues. Dreiser would talk, and talk with a stumbling, droning conviction, but not with that exultation and precision with which he writes. Dreiser was the first man who taught me to think.

He would pick up a newspaper with an account in it of a murder trial and he would make some comment that gave so clear and arresting a judgment on humanity that I, the neophyte, used to gasp. But it would soon be lost in rambling, petty inconsequentialities. There was no sustained flow to Dreiser, as for instance there was to Henley and to Oscar Wilde, and, in this day, to Vance Thompson. Some men are born to keep conversation always at its flower. But not so Dreiser. From him, too, I learned that there are always two, and possibly three or a dozen sides to everything. This is enough to make anybody tongue-tied.

Thus I should say the mental recluse in Dreiser is partly due to his philosophy. And I think, too, to a certain morbidity which he himself had admitted. His early life was both interesting and severe. Once, in New York, he had but a loaf of bread left. A veritable staff of life. While he was applying in an office for employment, an officious porter picked up the loaf in the ante-

room and threw it into the dust hin. God could do him no viler trick. So from then on his fortunes began to mend. But the experiences through which he passed left this new and tantalizing nervousness in his system. I think this slight morbidity may have ramified out into delusions of animosities in the world around him; whereas the animosities never were there . . . they were simply puzzled incomprehensions of him. Naturally, however, a man thinking thus would keep his real self for the sanctity of pen and paper. His social self he felt was best kept commonplace to a degree; and hence the casual acquaintance of Dreiser cannot reconcile the man to his books.

Dreiser is important. There is no American writing man to-day the condition of whose health, vigor and spirits is more important. I am like Reedy in that I hope he will never accumulate a "style."

What I hope from him is that Dreiser will go along in the slow, painstaking way on which he is faring, but with the four fingers of his good right hand feeling sensitively under their tips whether a sentence, a paragraph, a page thrills and jumps with life or whether it is just cold putty, molded and dumped there . . . so many hundreds of words et praeterea nihil.

He sits, rolling in his chair, rolling his head, rolling his tongue, pleating his handkerchief, drinking his glass of water, droning after the manner of Coleridge only not so somnolent. . . "Well-ah . . . "Well-ah . . . " and behind those round, uncommunicative eyes passes the procession of the characters of his genius . . . Drouet with his shiny shoes and drummer odor, Jenny Gerhardt's old father carrying the baby to the Lutheran church to be christened, Cowperwood, who got everything and nothing, Hurstwood turning on the gas to change his problem for a new one. . . .

The one man, my masters, worth the lot of them.

TO THEODORE DREISER ON READING "THE 'GENIUS'"

By ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE

THERE were gilded Chinese dragons
And tinkling danglers of glass
And dirty marble-topped tables
Around us, that late night-hour.
You ate steadily and silently
From a huge bowl of chop-suey
Of repellant aspect;
While I,— I, and another,—
Told you that you had the style neither of William
Morris

Nor of Walter Pater.

And it was perfectly true . . .

But you continued to occupy yourself
With your quarts of chop-suey.

And somehow you reminded me
Of nothing so much as of the knitting women
Who implacably counted stitches while the pride
of France
Went up to death.

Tonight I am alone,

A long way from that Chinese restaurant,

A long way from wherever you are.

And I find it difficult to recall to my memory

The image of your large laboring inexpressive face.

For I have just turned the last page

Of a book of yours-

A book large and superficially inexpressive,—like yourself.

^{*} From "The Little Review"

AMERICA'S FOREMOST NOVELIST

It has not, any more than the old ones, The style of Pater.

But now there are passing before me Interminable figures in tangled procession—

Proud or cringing, starved with desire, or icy,

Hastening toward a dream of triumph; fleeing from a dream of doom,—

Passing—passing—passing

Through a world of shadows,

Through a chaotic and meaningless anarchy,

Under heavy clouds of terrific gloom

Or through ravishing flashes of knife-edged sunlight—

Passing—passing—passing—

Their heads haloed with immortal illusion,-

The terrible and beautiful, cruel and wonder-laden illusion of life.



A CARICATURE OF THEODORE DREISER DRAWN BY P. B. McCORD

THE WRITER AND HIS WRITINGS*

By John Cowper Powys

N estimating the intrinsic value of a book like *The "Genius"* and—generally—of a writer like Theodore Dreiser, it is advisable to indulge in a little gentle introspection.

Criticism need not always impose itself as an art; but it must at least conform to some of the principles that govern that form of human activity. The worthlessness of so much energetic modern criticism is that it proceeds like scum—from the mere surface of the writer's intelligence. It is true that all criticism resolves itself ultimately into a matter of taste;—but one has to discover what one's taste really is; and that is not always easy.

Taste is a living thing, an organic thing. It submits to the laws of growth; and its growth is fostered or retarded by many extraneous influences. In regard to the appreciation of new and original works of art, it belongs to the inherent nature of taste that it should be enlarged, transmuted, and undergo the birth-pangs

^{*} From "The Little Review"

f a species of re-creation. In the presnce of a work of art that is really unsual; in an attempt to appreciate a iterary effect that has never appeared efore, one's taste necessarily suffers a ertain embarrassment and uneasiness. t suffers indeed sometimes a quite exreme discomfort. This is inevitable. This is right. This means that the cretive energy in the new thing is getting o work upon us, unloosening our prejidices and enlarging our scope. Such process is attended by exquisite intelectual excitement. It is also attended y a certain rending and tearing of peronal vanity.

In dealing with a creative quality as musual and striking as that of Theodore Dreiser, it is of absolutely no critical value to content ourselves with a crude physical disturbance on the surface of our minds, whether such disturbance is avourable or unfavourable to the writer. t is, for instance, quite irrelevant to url condemnation upon a work like The Genius" because it is largely preocupied with sex. It is quite equally ir-

relevant to lavish enthusiastic laudations upon it because of this preoccupation. A work of art is not good because it speaks daringly and openly about things that shock certain minds. It is not bad because it avoids all mention of such things. An artist has a right to introduce into his work what he pleases and to exclude from his work what he pleases. The question for the critic is, not what subject has he selected, but how has he treated that subject;—has he made out of it an imaginative, suggestive, and convincing work of art, or has he not!

Dreiser is concerned with the mass and weight of the stupendous life-tide; the life-tide as it flows forward, through vast panoramic stretches of cosmic scenery. Both in respect to human beings, and in respect to his treatment of inanimate objects, this is always what most dominatingly interests him. You will not find in Dreiser's books those fascinating arrests of the onward-sweeping tide, those delicate pauses and expectancies, in back-waters and enclosed gardens, where persons, with diverting

twists in their brains, murmur and meander at their ease, protected from the great stream. Nobody in the Dreiser-world is so protected; nobody is so privileged. The great stream sweeps them all forward, sweeps them all away; and not they, but *It*, must be regarded as the hero of the tale.

It is precisely this quality, this subordination of the individual to the deep waters that carry him, which makes Dreiser so peculiarly the American writer. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why he has had a more profoundly appreciative hearing in England than in the United States. It was so with Walt Whitman in his earlier days.

The true literary descendants of the author of the Leaves of Grass are undoubtedly Theodore Dreiser and Edgar Masters. These two, and these two alone, though in completely different ways, possess that singular "beyond-goodand-evil" touch which the epic form of art requires. It was just the same with Homer and Virgil, who were as naturally the epic children of aristocratic ages, as these are of a democratic one.

And so with the style of the thing. It is a ridiculous mis-statement for critics to say that Dreiser has no style. a charming irony, on his own part, to belittle his style. He has, as a matter of fact, a very definite and a very effective style. It is a style that lends itself to the huge indifferent piling up of indiscriminate materials, quite as admirably as that gracious poetical one of the old epicmakers lent itself to their haughtier and more aristocratic purpose. One would recognize a page of Dreiser's writings as infallibly as one would recognize a page of Hardy's. The former relaxes his medium to the extreme limit and the latter tightens his; but they both have their "manner." A paragraph written by Dreiser would never be mistaken for anyone else's. If for no other peculiarity Dreiser's style is remarkable for the shamelessness with which it adapts itself to the drivel of ordinary conversation. In the Dreiser books—especially in the later ones, where in my humble opinion he is feeling more firmly after his true way,-people are permitted to say those

things which they actually do say in real life—things that make you blush and howl, so soaked in banality and ineptitude are they. In the true epic manner Dreiser gravely puts down all these fatuous observations, until you feel inclined to cry aloud for the maddest, the most fantastic, the most affected Osconian wit, to serve as an antidote.

But one knows very well he is right. People don't in ordinary life—certainly not in ordinary democratic life—talk like Oscar Wilde, or utter deep ironic sayings in the style of Matthew Arnold. They don't really—let this be well understood—concentrate their feelings in bitter pungent spasmodic outbursts, as those Rabelaisean persons in Guy de Maupassant. They just gabble and gibber and drivel; at least that is what they do in England and America.

And the same thing applies to Dreiser's attitude towards "good and evil" and towards the problem of the "supernatural." All other modern writers array themselves on this side or that. They either defend traditional morality

or they attack it. They are anxious, at all costs, to give their work dramatic intensity; they struggle to make it ironical, symbolical, mystical—God knows what! But Dreiser neither attacks morality nor defends immorality. In the true Epic manner he puts himself aside, and permits the great mad Hurly-Burly to rush pell-mell past him and write its own whirligig runes at its own careless pleasure. Even Zola himself was not such a realist. Zola had a purpose;the purpose of showing what a Beast the human animal is! Dreiser's people are not beasts; and they shock our æsthetic sensibilities quite as often by their human sentiment as they do by their lapses into lechery.

Dreiser has no prejudices except the prejudice of finding the normal man and the normal woman, shuffled to and fro by the normal forces of life, an interesting and arresting spectacle. To some among us such a spectacle is not interesting. We must have the excitement of the unusual, the shock of the abnormal. Well! There are plenty of European

THE WRITER AND HIS WRITINGS

writers ready to gratify this taste. Dreiser is not a European writer. He is an American writer. The life that interests him, and interests him passionately, is the life of America. It remains to be seen whether the life of America interests Americans!

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