

no mere homage, though. At one point Boewe notes the “cardboard characters” of one of Rice’s novels (p. 157). Boewe writes lovingly about her main subject, Alice, while offering an honest evaluation of her (and Cale’s) literary work as they struggled to remain relevant against the swift-turning tide of modernity.



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Theodore Dreiser
Political Writings

Edited by Jude Davies

(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. Pp. xxix, 321. Illustrations, notes, index. \$50.00.)

Meticulously edited and annotated, this new volume of the Dreiser Edition deserves accolades from author-centered and historicist scholars alike. The volume draws on fifty years of Dreiser’s social and political commentary, tracking his evolution from sentimental sympathizer of the down-trodden in the 1890s to World War I pacifist; from stridently leftist public intellectual in the late 1920s to Soviet apologist in the 1930s and ’40s. Editor Jude Davies has judiciously selected and divided Dreiser’s writings into four periods, providing historical introductions to each. He has framed each selection with detailed, informative, and illuminating annotations.

Indeed, with this publication Davies may win more admirers than Dreiser. Scholarly disinterest prevents me from wishing Dreiser had heeded the advice Hutchins Hapgood offered him, as documented in this volume: “Dreiser, go back to your novels; cease

to occupy yourself with ‘labor’ or with any other broadly social activities” (p. 183). The insult appears in the acrimonious 1933 exchange that he and Dreiser had over the latter’s public statements about Jews. We see in this exchange that Dreiser’s attempts to clear himself of the charge of anti-Semitism served only to implicate him further. Davies includes Dreiser’s 1936 letter to *The Nation*, titled “Mea Culpa,” which has been “previously neglected” by biographers and scholars (p. 118). Here Dreiser acknowledges his prejudices but “think[s] today that the sufferings and persecution which this question entails are inevitable; that it is a kind of war, perhaps, which increases in fury until some final solution.... There is nothing anyone can do. Social life, economic life, for all of us, whether in connection with the Jews or any other group, runs a bitter, unsettled course” (pp. 206-207). The editor seems to believe that the document helps to lift

the “shadow” from Dreiser’s reputation (p. 118). But Dreiser’s subsumption of Jewish persecution under the broader experience of all human suffering makes this view hard to accept.

In addition to airing Dreiser’s nativist laundry, the volume shows the important role that Dreiser could play when he used his renown to bring attention to specific social and economic injustices such as the Scottsboro trial and the plight of miners in Harlan County, Kentucky. More often, however, Dreiser’s political assignments provided him the opportunity to voice yet another sweeping condemnation of capitalism. Over and against mainstream newspapers, which “set forth the usual corporation blah” (p. 166), Dreiser styled himself a straight-talking if world-weary “Prophet” with trenchant insight into the cause of political-economic ills. And for Dreiser, one cause did fit all: Germany’s aggression in World War I, the need for birth control in 1921, the Farm Board’s implementation of price controls in 1931—they all indicated the ravaging, predatory force of Anglo-American imperialist capitalism. “As I have stated and restated and re-stated, the big mind the world over is destined to rule the little one,” he intoned in 1929 (p. 122). Readers of this volume can confirm that he did indeed state and restate and re-state this point.

Frequently infused with a naturalist sense of inevitability, Dreiser’s arguments are not always cogent or innocuous. His contribution to a symposium on Americanism and Marxism, sponsored by the *Partisan Review* in 1936, offers a case in point. Viewing Americanism as the “illusion of national individuality held by the great mass of our people,” he argues that “the most practical thing is to enlist this feeling, if possible, in the cause of reform and revolution. As I see it, the reforms and revolutions, the changes from capitalism to socialism and communism, are inevitable and inherent in the very nature of things; and if identifying these changes with this powerful emotional force of Americanism will make these changes and processes of adjustment easier for the great mass of people, and correspondingly easier to bring about,” then the mass illusion should be indulged (p. 201). Dreiser exhibits no concern about this tactic’s proximity to authoritarian instrumentalism or the incoherence of his selective naturalism. If only he had listened to Hapgood.

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