Book Reviews


This volume is not a formal biography of Theodore Dreiser. It is rather a compilation of articles of criticism, comment, and personal reminiscence, selected from various books and periodicals and early newspaper reviews, covering a period of more than fifty years—from 1900 to the present day. Among the twenty-five contributors are some of the leading authors and literary critics of the first half of the twentieth century, including Stuart Sherman, Sherwood Anderson, Henry L. Mencken, Sinclair Lewis, Francis O. Matthiessen, Malcolm Cowley, and Lionel Trilling.

There is considerable biographical data scattered through the selections. Theodore Dreiser was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, in 1871, and spent the first seven or eight years of his life in that city. It seems to have been a rather drab existence. He knew poverty and degradation at first hand. The family was a large one of German-American extraction, Roman Catholic in religion. He came to hate his improvident father and to pity his mother. His education was obtained first, in parochial schools, then in the public schools of Warsaw, Indiana, where the Dreisers lived for a number of years, and at Indiana University for a period of one year. This was in the late eighties when David Starr Jordan was president, Joseph Swain professor of mathematics, and Amzi Atwater professor of Greek and Latin. He said that he derived much physical benefit from his year at the university but through his own fault little mental stimulation. There followed several years as a newspaper reporter and magazine writer in Chicago, St. Louis, New York, and other cities. In 1896, in New York, he assisted his older brother, Paul, a popular song writer, in composing On the Banks of the Wabash, which was later to become the Indiana state song.

Dreiser's first novel, Sister Carrie, appeared in 1900. It immediately encountered difficulties because of an attempt
upon the part of the publishers to suppress its sale. The way had been prepared for such a realistic work by the fight for realism led by William Dean Howells, but this novel went far beyond anything undertaken before, into the realm of naturalism, with which Howells would have no part. In short, Dreiser broke completely with the English tradition of gentility. It is rather significant, in view of this fact, that he secured his first recognition as a writer in England where *Sister Carrie* was published in 1901, and highly praised in the *Daily Mail* and in such a critical publication as the *Athenaeum*. The book was the forerunner of a veritable deluge of novels in the 1920’s—a literature of disillusionment, frustration, defeat, despair, and tragedy. It had its place in perhaps arousing people from their complacency. The worst that can be said about this literature is that it held out no hope. There was little that was really constructive about it. Man was but a helpless pawn in an all-determining environment. He was reduced to the law of the jungle. Life had little purpose or meaning. Dreiser published no more novels until 1911, when they began to appear in rapid succession. *An American Tragedy*, termed by Herbert G. Wells one of the great novels of the century, was published in 1925.

Impressed by what he saw in Russia on a visit to that country in 1927, Dreiser later became a Communist. Meanwhile, he turned against his father’s orthodox religion and became an atheist. It was in part a reaction from rigid dogmas he had come to associate with Christianity in his boyhood. He was also greatly influenced in his early twenties by the reading of Herbert Spencer, Thomas Huxley, and John Tyndall, as were many other young men of that day.

Dreiser died in 1945. His writings soon became extremely unpopular. His Communist beliefs certainly did not contribute to his popularity. Moreover, a new genteel tradition was ushered in. The literature of protest with which he was so closely identified was no longer the fashion. He remains to this day a controversial figure, and in many ways not an admirable one, yet a writer who must be reckoned with in any history of modern American literature. The articles in the volume under review reflect the varying opinions concerning the man and his work. They are on the whole favorable but not all of them. Stuart Sherman, for
example, refers to the "barbaric naturalism" of Dreiser. Sherwood Anderson, on the other hand, defends him in his portrayal of the rough, ugly side of modern industrial society. After all, this was a part of America. If his writing is unpleasant, there is much in American life which is unpleasant. Sinclair Lewis went all out in his Nobel Prize acceptance in 1930, in defending him against attacks by Henry Van Dyke and other representatives of the genteel tradition who were trying in the words of the speaker "to guide America into becoming a pale edition of an English cathedral town." "Dreiser," continued Lewis, "more than any other man, is marching alone. Usually unappreciated, often hounded, he has cleared the trail from Victorian Howellsian timidity and gentility in American fiction to honesty, boldness, and passion of life. Without his pioneering I doubt if any of us could, unless we like to be sent to jail, seek to express life, beauty and terror" (pp. 111-112).

Americans who especially prize our English heritage and who cling to the older American tradition of literature, which is in reality the English tradition, have little patience for Dreiser and his like. Other Americans, thinking more in terms of a new chaotic America with its mixed population, applaud him, painful as much of his writing is, because they believe he expresses this new America. They look upon him as the outstanding leader in what has been called "the great liberation"—"the new freedom" in American literature. Not many readers will be changed in their point of view by this volume. None the less, the editors have rendered a valuable service by bringing together in convenient form in a single volume the divergent views of many writers and critics relative to a very prominent name in American literature of the early decades of the twentieth century.

One of the most valuable portions of the book, for those who might desire to pursue the subject further, consists of a selected bibliography of Dreiser biography and criticism, thirty-three pages in length, classified under the heading of "General" and "Book Reviews and Notices" of the author's more important works.

The volume has no index, something which was missed by the reviewer when he wished to look up certain points. This, however, is a minor criticism in view of the general excellence of the book.

Terre Haute, Indiana.

Charles Roll