

# Through Dreiser's Imagination the Tides of Real Life Billowed

**THEODORE DREISER.** By F. O. Matthiessen. American Men of Letters Series. 267 pp. New York: William Sloane Associates. \$3.50.

By JOHN BERRYMAN

FOR decades Theodore Dreiser loomed large as one of the few world figures in our fiction. Then his immense fame so deteriorated, especially after his death in 1945, that when a detailed biography was produced by Robert H. Elias just a year or so ago an influential book reporter could question whether Dreiser was a subject of general interest to the public at all. Now with the posthumous study by one of America's most respected literary historians, the late F. O. Matthiessen of Harvard, the question is conclusively answered. Dreiser's shifting, somber, dubious life is hardly one to be dealt with briefly (as it has to be in this account), but that it has to be dealt with, and that it is of great general interest there is no longer any doubt.

The earlier part of that life has been handled impressively by Dreiser himself in several books ("Dawn," "Newspaper Days," "Twelve Men") very like his novels and not much less interesting. Small wonder if Matthiessen's opening chapters are somewhat perfunctory, but it is to his credit that even here he helps to clarify Dreiser's story.

Born in Indiana in 1871, Dreiser was a German immigrant's son. His father was a strict Catholic and his mother loving and easy-going. His education was wretched by any standard and he proved to have small gift for language, and very modest ability as a newspaper reporter. At 27, as Matthiessen says clearly, he showed exactly no promise of becoming a writer of note. When presently he wrote his first novel, "Sister Carrie," he had to be prodded by a friend, Arthur Henry (as Louis Bouilhet prodded Flaubert into "Madame Bovary"). And when it was virtually suppressed upon publication in 1900, Dreiser sank into a depression that lasted three years and wrote no more fiction for ten.

INSTEAD, upon recovery, Dreiser became an optimistic and extremely successful director of popular magazines, soliciting from other writers, including Mencken, just the sort of emasculated trash he had despised. For six years he rode the facile American waves. Then, at 39, he wrote "Jennie Gerhardt" and, behold, he had learned nothing and forgotten nothing and was just the same and nearly as good as before.

Matthiessen emphasizes, without attempting to explain, the mystery of Dreiser's resumption of his talent and integrity after an entire decade of wasted or degraded activity. He says very little, however, about a mystery

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more cardinal still—namely, Dreiser's blank failure thereafter to develop as an artist. Four long novels followed, and then, at last, two others—one better, the rest worse, but all essentially like the early novels.

It has not escaped notice that Dreiser wrote like a hippopotamus. His ineptitude, in fact, has been so long familiar that perhaps we have not been sufficiently surprised that an important author, writing badly over a lifetime, should continue to do so without an effort at redemption or amelioration. Probably the two mysteries are related, and we might try to approach them through a con-

deep sense of changingness which made it seem historically important to preserve appearance. He analyzes handsomely the debts to Balzac and Spencer, and the devices, such as they are, used by the novelist to organize his materials. He remarks that "One of the reasons why Dreiser's characters often take on a grave magnitude lies in their refusal to be hurried, a refusal on his part as well as on theirs."

HE denies genuine stature to Frank Cowperwood and does not conceal a progressive weakening through the financial trilogy. He notes that Dreiser's

tify the emotion or emotions. Here we can be in no doubt. Matthiessen speaks in other passages of Dreiser's most recurrent theme as that of "the outsider." Yet is the theme really a figure? Is it not rather the feelings that swarm, hardly distinguished, through the figure of the outsider—the bright, vague longing or aspiration or yearning that every reader will probably recognize as Dreiser's central and characteristic emotion?

This emotion is American. We remember it less broodingly in sharper, more polished works by Dreiser's contemporaries, in the early novels of Sinclair Lewis,

play at all it brought up the one fixed emotion, and the tides of a real life, long past, billowed through him again.

Stupidity is a weapon, for an artist, almost as powerful as intelligence—as a social man can be protected against bores by a mild deafness. The same stupidity, or unself-consciousness, prevented Dreiser from ever improving his style. Probably the notion never occurred to him, and thus no artifice ever arose to interfere with the almost unconscious overwhelming way in which his finest work sweeps the reader with it. A test of Dreiser, as of any large writer, is how he handles what matters most.

THE magnificence of his supreme achievement has not always been distinguished from the merely fascinating readability of his early novels. His masterpiece—I would agree with what I take to have been Matthiessen's opinion—is "An American Tragedy," and the center of it is the murder (legal and moral up to a point, and then only moral). The darkening rhythm of these phantasmal scenes has hardly been surpassed in fluidity since "Life on the Mississippi." "And then, as planned that night between them—a trip to Grass Lake. . . . And yet \* \* \* And then \* \* \*". The prose is artless and unlike Mark Twain's except that both embody freely American plain speech; the comparison is between their perfect attention to the nervous rhythms of their heroes' desires. It is worth mention, too, that "no"-style may on occasion be preferable to some aspects of Melville's lengthy and deplorable affair with Shakespeare.

ONE of Matthiessen's shrewdest remarks about this wonderful book is this: "As Clyde plots murder in spite of himself, Dreiser goes to the opposite extreme from the writer of a detective story. Everything that Clyde does is so inept that he is discovered at once." But, all the same, the kind of interest that Dreiser's work evokes and satisfies resembles more the interest we take in a detective story than the interest we take in Hemingway or Jane Austen. It is a little feverish.

Some readers will remember a devastating passage in E. M. Forster's "Aspects of the Novel" where the author is relating the action of some novel by Walter Scott. "And then?" he says, and tells you what comes next. "And then?" "And then?" But suddenly the novel was over, and you must not—says Forster acidly—ask that question too often. In Scott, no doubt, one follows an artificial series of events, and in Dreiser a natural, but the kinds of interest gratified are the same: a gossip interest, an "And then?"

Greater writers, frankly, do

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Theodore Dreiser: "A shifting, somber, dubious life."

sideration of Matthiessen's chapters on the individual novels.

The usual decline of an author's reputation following his death was dramatized in Dreiser's case by an increasingly feeble or contemptuous response to the posthumously issued novels, "The Bulwark" (1946) and "The Stoic" (1947). The critical chapters here ought to help arrest this decline.

Matthiessen is hardest on "The Genius," which he calls Dreiser's poorest novel, the one "least rewarding to reread." This strikes as very severe a man who has read it four or five times just for pleasure—never, I confess upon reflection, with admiration precisely, but with the febrile, self-indulgent eagerness Dreiser is apt to induce. But Matthiessen is right, of course, or if not quite right he has only forgotten "The Stoic."

Mr. Matthiessen is nearly always right. He attributes Dreiser's formidable descriptive power to a freshness of eye and obstinate memory fused with a

naïveté above a certain social level is simply the price we pay for the marvelous keenness of longing represented in his characters for successive levels of luxury and achievement far above them, but still below most of his cultivated readers. Matthiessen is right above all in insisting on the word "rhythm" as a key to Dreiser's method.

It is well to have this position—which looks like a critical haven—stated by someone as scrupulous, as cautious as Matthiessen, who had seldom much to say on his own as a literary scholar and stuck close to his texts. He describes Dreiser's style as a matter of "the groping after words corresponding to a groping of the thought, but with both words and thought borne along on the diapason of a deep emotion"—of a "deep grounding, at its best, in the rhythm of his emotions." This seems to me to be profound, the only way, indeed, of accounting for immense effects achieved by means so banal and shabby.

The question, then, is to iden-

in "The Great Gatsby." The objects vary—money and fame and love—but the clustered, helpless emotions persist without change even through their gratification—because it was the emotions and not their objects that mattered.

WHAT distinguishes Dreiser from his contemporaries is a kind of stupidity, a kind of unself-consciousness, that forbade him ever to employ these emotions until they had passed thoroughly under the mastery of his elephantine memory. He could deal only with the past. Not surprisingly, therefore, he displayed no promise, and he could not be corrupted. We recall Mencken's mature description of him as "granitic, without nerve," with no cunning but with a "truly appalling" tenacity.

There was no question of "integrity" at all. He could be discouraged, and so do nothing, or he could be busy with other things, and so not write. Yet once his imagination came into

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not evoke this interest so keenly or simply—although it has become fashionable, as story-telling decays among us, to pretend that they do. One does not, that is, rush on from chapter to chapter of "Anna Karenina" just to see what happens.

**O**NE great author who admittedly does evoke this interest is Dostoevsky, and it is with Dostoevsky that Dreiser must be compared. He poorly stands the comparison when his major work is placed against one by no means the Russian's greatest—"Crime and Punishment." As Matthiessen says, Clyde Griffiths is no Raskolnikov, and Dreiser knew no such heights of understanding as those upon which Dostoevsky created his ultimate chapters.

An English view will enforce the abyss of difference. H. G. Wells, who ought one day to be recognized as a judge of modern fiction with few peers, described "An American Tragedy" perfectly as "a far more than life-size rendering of a poor little representative corner of American existence, lighted up by a flash of miserable tragedy \* \* \* It gets the large, harsh superficial truth" and is "one of the great novels of this century." Dreiser commanded pathos without the tragic dimension. Perhaps he insisted too much upon personal ideas.

Still, Dreiser at present has other interests for us. Matthiessen's second real achievement is the careful study in his concluding chapters of Dreiser's politics and philosophy. Thoroughly grounded himself in American radical thought, and sympathetic with the broodings of an inquirer, Matthiessen has unraveled as well as anyone could the tangled paths by which Dreiser approached simultaneously a membership in the American Communist party and a cloudy position somewhere in the universe of neo-Christian mysticism. A long comparison with Clarence Darrow is more helpful here than were the frequent comparisons earlier with Whitman, Melville and others.

**T**HE whole painful discussion, which does not avoid, for example, Dreiser's slow development away from anti-Semitism, is relevant to Matthiessen's tragic death last year and ought to be read by everyone interested in either man. "Contemplating for ourselves," Matthiessen writes, "the extremes to which both Darrow and Dreiser had gone in their skepticism, we are faced with the grave question of how long positive values can endure only as the aftershine of something that has been lost."

An essential horror in life, in modern life, which Dreiser did not ever really face in his fiction, faces us quietly in these last chapters, and we can only mourn two honest men.