
THEODORE DREISER AS I KNEW HIM

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THEODORE DREISER was perhaps the second major novelist I encountered (the first was Robert Herrick, with whom I took courses at the University of Chicago) and if we were not extremely intimate, at least I met him shortly after the publication of *Sister Carrie* and I knew him all through his career. I had come to New York to look for a job after I had been discharged from the *Chicago American* for "lowering the tone of the Hearst papers." At any rate this was the Managing Editor's euphemism in his final note to me. Some one, I have forgotten who now, told me that the *Broadway Magazine* was looking for a journalist to write an article about Richard Strauss's "Salome," soon to be produced at the Metropolitan Opera House.

Music was very much in my line at that period (indeed, eventually I obtained the job of assistant music critic under Richard Aldrich on the *New York Times*). So I called on the editor of the *Broadway Magazine*, who happened to be the then not very well known Theodore Dreiser. He must have immediately commissioned the article. At any rate I wrote it. My contacts on the magazine were mostly with James Keating and Harris Merton Lyon ("De Maupassant, Jr." in *Twelve Men*), but occasionally I enjoyed audience with the walrus-jawed Mr. Dreiser. The principal memory I retain of these meetings is of his habit of folding and refolding his handkerchief until it was a nest of tiny squares. When this objective was attained, he appeared to be satisfied. He would then unfold the handkerchief and begin the process again. This habit he clung to all through life.

The article, profusely illustrated, appeared in the January, 1907, issue of the *Broadway Magazine*. My copy, plentifully interlarded with subsequent comment by the editor, may be located with my books and manuscripts in the New York Public Library. In the meantime "Salome" had been taken off the Metropolitan Opera House boards, after a single performance (a dress rehearsal), and was heard of no more until Mary Garden discovered its possibilities.

Meanwhile I had captured a job on the *New York Times*. Also Mr. Dreiser had commissioned another article on which I worked long and laboriously under the tutelage of Annie Nathan Meyer and James Keating. This was to be about Barnard College but, although my father had studied law at Columbia University, this subject did not appeal to me and as a matter of fact the article was not accepted or even finished. I believe no trace of it exists today.

It was probably fifteen years before I saw Dreiser again, although occasionally I ran into one of his girl friends, Florence Deshon or another. Our paths lay in different directions. I worked in musical circles and he continued to edit magazines, most successfully in the case of the *Delineator*. I have recently been reading Robert Elias's *Theodore Dreiser* and rereading Dorothy Dudley's *Forgotten Frontiers*, and was amazed to discover how successful Dreiser had been as editor. He might have made a comfortable fortune at that job alone. At the time nothing interested me less than big-shot magazines and the manner in which they are run. I was interested in Allen Norton's *Rogue*, in Donald Evans's Claire-Marie Publishing Company, in Marcel Duchamp's journalistic experiments and his ready-mades, in Walter Arensberg's growing collection of paintings, in Fania Marinoff's contributions to the moving-picture world, in the *Little Review*, in "291," Stieglitz's early contribution to the world of art, in the Provincetown Theatre, and in Alexander's Ragtime Band. I was dimly aware that the author of *Sister Carrie* was going places, but I did not much care to know what these places might be.

Looking over my Dreiser collection, recently, preparatory to sending it to Yale, I was amazed to discover how complete it was. Most of the early "difficult" books, everything, indeed, but some of the pamphlets and a few of the late volumes, is included. This despite the fact that I did not admire his writing (who does?) and seldom

read him. I appreciate his work, today, indeed, more than I did then. He was, however, a friend and acquaintance from 1906 until the day he died.

Our second meeting may have been in the Gotham Book Mart, where we thought it was funny to write in a copy of the Bible lying on the counter, "With the compliments of the Author." Maybe God himself did consider it funny. Certainly, today, I do not; but I recall we had quite a ribald laugh after this silly performance.

Dreiser was responsible for my withdrawal from the Authors' League, for when, due to the action of the censor, *The "Genius"* got into trouble, that august body refused to come to the author's assistance. I was indignant about this and resigned from the society, and I have never rejoined the League. Not that I liked *The "Genius"* so much; as a matter of fact I have never read it, but I thought it was the business of the Authors' League to protect its members, especially its important members, as Dreiser had become in many eyes, on occasions like this.

Dreiser once gave a party at his apartment in St. Luke's Place which has been described by several writers, never quite accurately. Mencken, Boyd, and I dined on the way to the party, very probably at the Brevoort, where we were joined by Scott Fitzgerald, then in his early prime. He expressed great admiration for Dreiser, said that he would rather meet him than any one else he could think of, and admitted he was most envious of us others who had been invited to the great man's house. Despite this special pleading, we did not ask him to accompany us.

The party wasn't much. There was nothing to drink but beer. We, reinforced by T. R. Smith and a few others, whose names I have forgotten, sat stiffly and soberly in a circle, "All silent and all damn'd!" There was little conversation, surprisingly little considering the names of those present, but it must be remembered that the literati of that period often depended on external moisture to open their lips. Anyway in the midst of this nothingness there was a distraction. The doorbell rang and Dreiser answered it himself. The door opened into the large bare room where we sat so quietly, and there was Scott with a bottle of champagne under one arm. I shall never forget his boyish charm, of which he had a plenty in those

days, or the sweet gesture with which he handed the bottle to Dreiser, who accepted it with thanks, and invited Scott in. Our host put the bottle on ice (the refrigerator was also visible from where we sat) and we never saw it again. Soon after the party broke up.

On another occasion, Dorothy Dudley, who was engaged in writing *Forgotten Frontiers*, asked me to dinner with the subject of her book. I had a reason for wanting to see him and accepted the invitation with alacrity. Formerly it was my custom (perhaps it was even a superstition) to have my contracts witnessed by some one to whom the book was dedicated or at any rate by some one connected in some way with the subject of the novel. I wanted Dreiser to witness the contract for *The Tattooed Countess* and I carried it with me to Dorothy's. She was living in Nyack at the time, near the River, and we dined in a grape arbor on a table extravagant with its fiascos of Chianti, colored glass, and splendid nappery. Dreiser and I signed the contract on this table.

A great deal later, when Dreiser occupied the huge studio at 200 West 57th Street, he gave a party every month. He had become easier in manner and his bank account was larger, and he could invite pretty nearly any one in New York with the assurance he would turn up, if not otherwise engaged. However these parties did not come off much better than the earlier one I have described. He was not by nature a party giver. Anita Loos reported to me once that in the midst of one of his soirées, with the rooms crowded with people, she had missed Dreiser and, searching for him, discovered him in the butler's pantry, dissolved in tears, shed no doubt for the sorrows of the world.

In spite of this behavior, he was actually perverse enough to enjoy the company of people, and one of his chief pleasures was to ask questions of all and sundry. I brought Max Ewing with me one night. This was during the winter of 1927-28. Dreiser as usual was concerned with an idea. He wanted to find out what became of handsome men. What, he demanded, would become of Max in ten years? He made Max and me agree to tell him. Alas, in barely three years from that date, Max, poor devil, killed himself.

Dreiser often visited our apartment on East 19th Street. He even came to our apartment at 150 West 55th Street, opposite Mecca

Temple, but I do not recall seeing him at 101 Central Park West. The letters remain to remind me that Helen Richardson asked us to a dancing party for May 31, 1928, and withdrew the invitation later because she was unsuccessful in securing the guests she desired. The author of *Jennie Gerhardt* was not fitted by nature to practise the rites of Terpsichore, but nevertheless he enjoyed them.

Having suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, and being actually poor most of his youth, Dreiser was not of the "giving" kind, but he actually presented me with the French translation of *Twelve Men*, *Douze Hommes*, and it was characteristic of him that he inscribed it more warmly than he had the books I asked him to inscribe when he came one night to my apartment on East 19th Street, along with Tom Smith. We had enjoyed a bibulous dinner and he was fairly ribald on this occasion, as one or two of the books, now at Yale, will bear testimony. Later, inserting a clipping for *Douze Hommes*, he wrote me inquiringly, "Why can't you two frogs agree?" I had assured him that the book was well translated. The clipping asserted that the translation was bad.

He professed to admire Henry Fuller as an early realist, but he seemed to possess none of his books. I sent him some; also some volumes by T. F. Powys, a favorite of mine. Powys did not agree with him. Fuller did not agree with Miss Cather to whom I was also sending books at this period. She decided he was "old-fashioned."

On March 21, 1927, Dreiser wrote me from Reading, Pennsylvania (where Bobby Clark's celebrated roué came from), inviting me to join him in a walking tour. The invitation was not accepted. I had a feeling that Dreiser and I would be an odd pair of walking-tour mates. Walking, indeed, is scarcely one of my major pastimes.

In 1930 Hugh Walpole expressed a wish to meet Dreiser. I couldn't exactly contemplate with pleasure the idea of bringing these two men together. Probably no two more uncongenial souls could have been discovered among fiction writers. However, an idea occurred to me which I thought would make the encounter more possible. I invited Long Lance, a Blackfoot Indian, very popular at the period, who spoke English perfectly, to join us at lunch. Dreiser wrote me: "Dear Van Vechten, The thought of lunching with three indians appeals to me. Therefore on Feb 12 I shall pass my breakfast & make

the Crillon at one. I have black feet myself."¹ This letter, of course, is pure Menckenesese, and is much lighter in tone than Dreiser usually managed to achieve. For instance, let me quote the following example of his disastrous and elephantine attempt at humor:

I wouldst have come—and gladly [*it must have been a reply to some invitation*—but I had a previous engagement with Chomias Oppenheim & his wife at Washington Square South & couldn't. But another time, God willing, I will post-haste—de facto and de jure—similia similibus—or is it simile-ebus. Anyhow—well.

And I missed all the drinks. God, what a tragedy.

THE AUTHOR OF DEUTERONOMY.

Admittedly this is pretty awful, but no worse than certain passages in *Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub*.

I recall an evening at the psychiatrist's, Dr. Berg's, with Dreiser, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and a few others. All specialists interested him because he could ask them questions, but on this occasion his principal subject was drugs and anesthetics. He had recently been experimenting with these in an attempt to discover if they had any value for the writer. He found out, for instance, that laughing gas apparently puts you in touch with the secrets of the universe, but when its effects depart, which they do almost immediately, no whit of this remains in your consciousness and anything you attempt to write is gibberish.

When I began to make photographs, Dreiser was one of the first authors I invited to pose. He had a wonderful head for photography and my pictures of him are superb. He came to me in the morning on his way to a train. He was in great good humor and joked all through the sitting. Indeed, one of the best pictures shows Dreiser laughing, a rare shot, which is published in Elias's biography. Dreiser's last letter to me in 1938 refers to these photographs.

CARL VAN VECHTEN.

New York,

October 4, 1950.

1. Dreiser's letters are quoted by permission of his wife, Helen Richardson Dreiser, and of the Yale University Library to which they now belong.