

## THEODORE DREISER

(1871-1945)

Death underlines our loss. The man who moved mountains of men is dead on a mountain peak. And those he hated, those whom he always loved are quiet now: We will not hear him speak, flushed, impulsive, angry again. He never truly achieved old age despite his years; never evaded combat, rarely ran for cover; in his eighth decade undertook new chores, left jumbled notes to plague the stunned survivor.

Whether we care or not, we are his heirs and ours the busybody task is: to decipher the massive marginalia of his plodding years, the words piled high on words, the flowing river of novels, poems, polemics, apologies. No matter where we turn, we will be bogged deep in a brooding delta of discrepancies, in work diffused too widely to be catalogued, a life too intricate for neat obituaries.

And questions still confound us: why, more than ten years ago, in the illiterate south, caught in the compulsive human act, did he deny the very power that gave his novels worth—his own virility? And he, who profoundly knew what casts the malignant mote in mankind's eye, why did he gibe the English, bait the Jew?

To say he typified the world's protracted youth is true but does not pierce the essential truth.

His foibles were not his alone. Voltaire in another century and to a like degree debased his precious alloy in the fire of similar falsehoods; and even in our day men who lead nations through blood, sweat, tears, adding immortal moments to our history, at other moments mouth the vicious lie that quickens hatreds and prolongs for years the myths that send men brutally to kill, to die.

But now he is home, he is safe. No more will he dig in the lower depths of our despair nor engage in public boxing matches nor praise motherhood, damn poverty and laissez faire. His death embarrassed us: in the city where he died no liberal journal dared identify the spade, to call him what he was, a Communist. To do so would have pricked the provincial pride which now will label him our greatest novelist.

His loss still leaves the major question-mark unanswered: how a man of vast confusions, of usual failings, reflecting all the dark complexities of our ignorance and passions, can yet create a life in life, illumine those crevices we others shrink from, and explore the tortuous highways of the soul, the human

heart and its most tempestuous truths—the core of our most devious motives in eternal war.

But speculation serves no purpose. Dreiser was what he was. No judgment is complete. Much as we wish he had been surer, wiser, we cannot change the fact. The man was great in a way Americans uniquely understand who know the uneven contours of their land, its storms, its droughts, its huge and turbulent Mississippi, where his youth was spent, whose floods entomb its truest sons in the ocean's sand.

*Edwin Rolfe*