

## Dreiser's *J'Accuse*

The dean of American novelists writes a blazing manifesto on the great crisis of our time. An urgent plea for peace and democracy. Reviewed by Samuel Sillen.

AMERICA IS WORTH SAVING, by Theodore Dreiser. Modern Age Books. \$2.50.

THEODORE DREISER is fighting mad about the way the American people are getting pushed around by Churchill, Roosevelt, and the House of Morgan. This is not our war. This is not the war of the English people. This is not the war of the German people. All of Hitler's talk about socialism, all of Churchill's talk about civilization as we know it, all of Roosevelt's talk about arsenals for democracy is so much "eyewash." The blunt fact is that the war is a frenzied struggle for world markets waged by factions of "the Wealth International" at the expense of the native and colonial populations of the imperialist powers. Mr. Dreiser proclaims and documents these truths in a volume which has all the urgency of a bulletin from the battlefield.

Only a man who realizes that the meaning of his whole life is at stake could write this book with such passionate energy. Theodore Dreiser has fought every inch of the way, even though gropingly at times, for a freer and more humane America. At 69, he remains our most distinguished man of letters, the novelist who has most adequately depicted the tragic tensions of our national life. The measure of his greatness has ever been the measure of his sincerity, his devotion to truth and the democratic idea. And now he finds himself writing against a fascist deadline, bitterly aware that in the minds of Martin Dies and his friends ("a group apparently now including the Honorable Franklin D. Roosevelt") and in the eyes of Hoover's FBI men he will be committing treason by recording unpleasant truths.

Mr. Dreiser's books have been outlawed before: *Sister Carrie* lay buried for years in the cellar of its original publisher; *The Genius* was excommunicated by Sumner's vice squad; and *An American Tragedy* was banned by the Boston authorities. Mr. Dreiser has been called names before: "pro-German" in 1917 because he clung to the facts, alien agitator in Harlan, Ky., a few years back because he defended workers who had struck for a living wage. Only recently he was prevented from explaining the Bill of Rights at a public meeting place in Los Angeles. And most students of our literary history have been thoroughly ashamed and thoroughly indignant at this un-American treatment of America's greatest novelist, just as every citizen who retains a sense of fair play and a knowledge of the issues at stake must applaud Theodore Dreiser's introducing Earl Browder to



Hugo Gellert

a nationwide radio audience during a repressive election campaign.

The urgency of his style and message, then, expresses the author's understanding that the illiberal forces which he has opposed for so many years are using the war as a means and provocation for riding roughshod over American democracy. Their intentions this time are final; that is to say, fascist. To support the war is to oppose democracy. Whatever the illusions of seriously misguided people, this is the central reality of our day. Mr. Dreiser has assembled an incontrovertible mass of evidence to confirm this truth.

Hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue; and it must be admitted that imperialism pays the same tribute to "democracy" and "socialism." Like any honest writer, Mr. Dreiser devotes his main energies to reducing the pretense to the facts.

The British empire for which we are being asked to fight, he demonstrates, is a financial and military despotism which rules over half a billion of the world's population, including the masses of England proper. British imperialism, as surely as German imperialism, is the deadly foe of popular rights. It fights not for freedom but for the retention of criminally usurped privilege. Its central effort since the last war has been the crushing of socialist democracy in the USSR. As the copious evidence produced by Mr. Dreiser shows—and most of this evidence is from British sources—finance capitalists in London intrigued with their associates in Berlin to impose Hitler on the German people, not merely with a view to smashing popular discontent under the Republic, but also to directing a

fascist war machine eastward. Britain's ruling class connived with Hitler in Spain, Austria, Czechoslovakia. The confident strength of the Soviet Union forced the Nazis to change this ambitious schedule, and they began to bite the hand that fed them—and still feeds them, judging by the interlocking financial interests of Britain and Germany which Mr. Dreiser describes.

To the democratic pretense of capitalist vested interest, Mr. Dreiser applies acid tests: India, China, Spain; civil liberties, jobs, popular participation in governments; the true lesson of France; the tie-up between American, British, and German finance. He disposes once and for all, as one would think, of the gigantic hoax-romance between England and America. He exposes the Harold Laski-Max Lerner mythology of a Churchill "revolution." And he indicates how stupid and ironic and meretricious is the analogy between the two opposites, the Nazi and the Soviet states.

In a brief but impressive section on the Soviet Union, Mr. Dreiser contrasts the scarcity-amidst-plenty economy of the imperialist powers with the planned abundance of the socialist power. Analyzing the nonsensical contradiction of the phrase "Soviet imperialism" which reactionary propagandists have manufactured to obscure the issue, the author draws a withering comparison between the equal treatment of national minorities in the USSR and the discriminatory treatment of national minorities in other states. The resources of the land have been released for the people. Science, education, culture flourish under the non-profit economy. Women have been enabled to take their place with men in the building of the new society. And "Russia was the first country in the world to make the mere utterance of an anti-Semitic sentence a punishable offense." Mr. Dreiser challenges his readers to examine the facts, presented so forcefully in the Dean of Canterbury's recent book, *The Soviet Power*.

It is regrettable that three or four passages in this splendid book are marred by internal contradictions. For example, Mr. Dreiser remarks toward the end of the volume that "We in America have no time to waste arguing Russia's plan. We need an American plan; and we have it—in our Constitution and Declaration of Independence." To be sure we need an American plan, and to be sure the liberating principles of our two great charters provide the democratic impulse of such a plan. But there is no essential disparity between the "Russian" social scheme and the society which we must develop here if we are to make

available the fruits of labor, peace, and liberty to the masses of our population. Taking into account differences in the level of economic development and variations in the social composition of the two lands, the basic problem is nevertheless identical; namely, the socializing of economy by and for the great majority of the people. And the truth that, far from being wasteful, it is *necessary* to discuss the "Russian plan" is proved by the fact that Mr. Dreiser finds it indispensable constantly to contrast that plan with imperialism in order to show how good life might be, if properly organized.

Another internal contradiction that must be noted is Mr. Dreiser's tendency at times to understate the case against American imperialism, even though he marshals facts elsewhere to condemn American imperialism a thousand times over. In one place, he declares: "For England is essentially an imperialism, and the United States—however much the Wall Street clique try to imitate their London friends—is *essentially* a free and equal association of peoples." (Mr. Dreiser's italics.) But Mr. Morgan is hardly to be classed as an "imitator." The machinations of the Guggenheims in Chile and of Standard Oil in Bolivia—to which Mr. Dreiser alludes very sharply—led to armed intervention and economic exploitation which differed in no important respect from the tactics of British imperialism. And Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, also cited by the author, dispose of any illusion about our being any more "a free and equal association of peoples" than England.

And lastly, the volume contains traces of the author's earlier mechanistic views, even though he has largely abandoned the strictness and pessimism with which he formerly expressed them. Thus, he tends to regard the acquisition of wealth and power by a tiny minority as a violation of "nature's laws, which make for balance and proportion between all things in nature—even class and degrees of intelligence in society. . . ." Actually, as Dreiser's analysis of the development of British imperialism shows, the appropriation of wealth must be explained according to historical laws and must be corrected not by an impulse of nature to restore the balance but by the conscious will of men. The mechanistic view has an offshoot in Dreiser's uncritical acceptance of a psychological theory that only three percent of the people born in the world think creatively, that twenty-two percent understand and execute the orders of the three percent, and that 75 percent react mechanically and by instinct to their environment, a "strange arrangement" of nature which "man did not invent and does not appear to be able to change." Dreiser uses this view as the basis for revolutionary change. But, in the first place, there is no scientific evidence in support of this theory, and, in the second place, if it were true there would be no possibility of revolutionary change. "Only the mass can get America out of the mess," says Dreiser; and he is right. But the 75 percent can get us out of the mess be-

cause they are capable of creative thinking, and there is no natural law to the contrary.

Dreiser is on much more solid ground when he insists, as he does again and again, that the problem is not so much intelligence as information, fair and accurate information. A shrewd critic of propaganda, he notes that the monopolists control the press, radio, and movies, and that these agencies of public enlightenment are therefore biased. More bluntly, he calls them liars. The sober reality is that ignorance is the main weapon of the enemies of democracy. That is why they have visited their wrath, and will no doubt continue to visit their wrath, on people like Theodore Dreiser who go around explaining to their fellow Americans that "We are being rushed into war because the economic monopoly system has riveted in its belly the

germs of war and because it cannot solve the problems—the really very simple problems—of peace."

For those of us who are determined to keep on explaining this truth in the passionate belief that only its full recognition—by the millions, and at once—will save us from fascism, the publication of a book like this from the pen of Theodore Dreiser is an occasion for pride and rejoicing. It is appropriate, terribly appropriate, that this great artist, recognized throughout the world as a spokesman for the American people, should issue this blazing *J'Accuse* at the very moment when the effort to silence brave voices is at fever height. It is appropriate, terribly appropriate, that Theodore Dreiser should rise to challenge the shivering corps of lesser writers who, whether duped, drugged, or dined, have

## From Dreiser's Book

### Class Antagonisms

"To say this—to point to the divergence of interest between the wealthy fraction and the vast mass of the people—is to be accused of 'fomenting class antagonisms.' (The next verse of that number being 'We must have unity. What destroyed France?') But it isn't fomenting. It's pointing out something that exists and that must exist in America as it is now organized."

### These People, Too

"There is no democracy for us, any more than there is for the inhabitants whom nobody ever consults, in America taking over British and French colonies in the West Indies. Does it ever occur to you, gentle reader, that there are people who are born and die in those colonies, people who yearn just as much as you or I for freedom?"

### Soviet Progress

"What people as a whole want, so far as my observation goes, is more food and more houses and more clothes and more leisure and more opportunities to use that leisure pleasantly and advantageously. The facts show that the Russians, having abolished the dividend system, are now getting these things at a faster rate of progress than has ever been recorded in history."

### India and Democracy

"India has no democracy, and never will have under England, because imperialism and democracy are opposites. Nor will the people of England ever have effective democracy until England ceases its imperialistic oppression of weaker peoples."

### The War

"In the name of all reason, is this 'a war against Nazism'? No, it is a scrap between Hitlerdum and Hitlerdee."

### China

"Our hearts bleed for the Chinese. We have enjoyed this sensation so much that we long supplied Japan with the iron to torture the Chinese a little more, and the oil to take Japanese planes to the altitudes from which it can most effectively be hurled. This makes our hearts bleed more gushingly than ever. We reach down into our patched jeans and are overcome with the sense of our benevolence."

### Hitler and Capitalism

"Our lying press seriously expects us to believe that Hitler is anti-capitalistic, hoping to prove it by the downfall of small business and, recently, of Thyssen. In fact, of course, the small capitalists were sacrificed merely so that the great monopolists of heavy industry could survive in a war economy run hog-wild—so hog-wild that it was bound to lead to still further eliminations, placing the monopolies in still fewer hands."



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agreed to bless the flames of cultural destruction. America Is Worth Saving, Dreiser tells us, and books such as his will help save America.

SAMUEL SILLEN.

### New Yorker Short Stories

SHORT STORIES FROM THE NEW YORKER. Simon & Schuster. \$3.

MAINLY, the sixty-eight stories in this collection are between 1,500 and 2,500 words long, about what the ordinary magazine story needs to get itself started. Their writers, therefore have had to be very economical, isolating a characteristic, if a character is being sketched, or serving an incident, if a touchy situation is being analyzed, only with the most effective detail. The results are impressively neat, and it is easy to be over-impressed, like the anonymous editors of the collection. The stories are all well written, and some very well written. John Mosher's "In Honor of Their Daughter," and in its different way E. B. White's, "The Door" are little marvels of stylistic competence. Erskine Caldwell's two stories have a remarkable combination of realism and legend; their reality, in other words, is so forceful that the stories take on an almost symbolic emphasis in the mind. And Albert Maltz and Leane Zugsmith's stories have a warmth of humanity, startling amidst the general sophistication here which is tolerant of pathology but alarmed by normal emotions.

The rest of the stories please during the reading but are not hard to forget. But, perhaps Jerome Weidman's "The Explorers," Dawn Powell's "Such a Pretty Day," Mark Schorer's "Portrait of the Ladies," Daniel Fuchs' "Love in Brooklyn," John O'Hara's "Over the River and Through the Wood," James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," call for special mention.

As I read on into the book I became aware of a certain atmosphere which, despite intervals of fresher breath, became pervasive. It was a neurotic air; and if one wanted to describe the settings, one could find of service some such phrase, as "the scenes are laid in a state of nervous tension." Forty-nine of the sixty-eight stories, by count, turn upon psychological wounds, conflict, maladjustment, or frustration for which E. B. White's "The Door" might well have been printed first as cue and theme. It deals with neuroses induced in laboratory rats by placing unexpected obstacles in their scientifically routinized lives, and White works this into a dizzying but beautifully proportioned stream-of-consciousness pattern of human parallels. Of Robert Coates' three stories, "The Fury" deals with the flight of a sex pervert; another, "The Net," with the rise of jealousy to homicidal mania; the

