

The International Journal of Ecopsychology (IJE)

Volume 9
Issue 1 *Open Issue*

Article 11

9-3-2024

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Recommended Citation

Board, Editorial (2024) "American Letters: Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945)," *The International Journal of Ecopsychology (IJE)*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/ije/vol9/iss1/11>

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American Letters: Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945)

“Life seems to prove but one thing to me, and that is that the various statements concerning right, truth, justice, mercy are palaver merely, an earnest and necessitous attempt, perhaps, at balance and equation where all things are so very much unbalanced, paradoxical and contradictory—the small-change names for a thing or things of which we have not yet caught the meaning.

History teaches me little save that nothing is really dependable or assured, but all inexplicable and all shot through with a great desire on the part of many to do or say something by which they may escape the unutterable confusion of time and the feebleness of earthly memory (1920: 17)”

Excerpt from Chapter XVIII: The Essential Tragedy of Life in Hey Rub-a-dub-dub: A Book of the Mystery and Wonder and Terror of Life (1920)

“The very idea of extreme individuality, even under the most special and favored circumstances, is seen to be all but an impossibility. We are at best, even in our arts and highest forms of special adaptations, copies of things which are and have been as common as pig-tracks—generals, philosophers, statesmen, society grande dames and the like not excepted. Over and over and over we appear, one and all, even our exact gestures, smiles, glances. Who has not seen it in so short a space as three generations? And we speak of individuality, of special destinies!

Herein lies the pathos, and this is the outstanding fact, that man is essentially a creation or mechanism, accidental or not as you wish, of a force or forces which in so far as any one can determine is or are, far more than he in his wildest flights of fancy suspects, the thing which he most craves to be, individual, enduring, but of which he is only a part and of which he is constantly seeking more—*life*. The thing which makes and repeats over and over ad infinitum and *is* two billions of men, or anything else into which it chooses to form itself, may be thought of as having life, personality, success and the like, but as for individual man or any of its minute atoms! Indeed man might as well think of the minute atoms of his internal mechanism as having success, fame, a great life or future, as himself. His day, like theirs, is measured by a minute fraction of time and labor and energy, and so is nothing.

Quite obviously there is something which is to man what man in his entirety as an individual is to the least ion or molecule of his inner cosmos: a thing of so vast a magnitude comparatively as to be as far outside his reckoning as must he be to the ion of his inner body. And as for size or force and import, that which creates him is as far above him as he is above the ion. Indeed, although man, in his capacity or proportion as an individual and as contrasted with the least of the electrons of his being, is beyond computation for size, yet viewed again in contrast with his external world he sinks into a mere fumbling, briefly-ended mote and tool. Like the ion of his inner cosmos, in this vast etheric or ionic something which is outside of him and which we see blazing as worlds or suns or existing as immeasurable space, he is too minute and too brief to be

discussed. Even the great earth which he treads with so much pride is to this external thing quite as minute as man's electron is to him; and yet his relationship even to this is almost as nothing.

For on this so minute thing which, sidereally speaking, is as nothing, he appears nevertheless, insect-wise, by the billion every forty (or whatever the average life of man may be) years, to say nothing of innumerable other forms which have the ion or the molecule as the base of their material presence or structure. Still he permits himself to believe that he is something, and in facing all has the stupendous or fortunate ignorance to write himself down as Lord, Master, Great Guider of Things Terrestrial!

One of the things which might modify this supreme romantic estimate of himself, if such a thing were either desirable or possible, would be an even slightly technical examination of the process by which he arrives, as well as the extreme simplicity of the mechanical and chemical formula by which, throughout endless ages, he and all his fellows have been created. There is no longer any vast mystery about it; we are even getting relatively close to the secret, or could if we were permitted to go on undisturbed for a period by wars, let us say, or religious and educational illusions and furies (put forward by what? How brought about?), a persistent inherent mass opposition to thought and change in man himself. What subtle force ever invented that as a race quieter?

As biologists and anthropologists present man and his allied species, the original type structure on which all are more or less modeled is not so wonderful: two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, two feet and two hands or four feet, two of them antecedents of the present hands; or two feet and two wings, the latter successors of former feet; a lung or air-breathing system, not unlike that of any tree or plant; a root or arterial system, modified to meet various conditions and situations as in birds, fishes, moles; a nervous or sensory system of an allied character—no marked diversity in anything indeed, and all brought about by the inescapable chemical and physical reactions and compulsions of seemingly blind forces, as Crile and Loeb have shown.

Even now chemists and physicists are at work upon the balances and equations involved in the mechanical and chemical construction of man, the leverage by which he moves, the combinations which control his form or aspect, as well as the chemical combinations which can induce motion or self-propulsion. Even as to his so-called thought how close are the Behaviorists to the material mechanics which produce it? His thoughts also are apparently little more than compelled reactions of one chemical upon another which he can no more escape than can he his form or motions.

The one unsolved mystery apparently is why a machine so easily made and controlled should be able to speculate as to the reason for his being or to worry over it (1920: 246-247)"

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Theodore Dreiser (1920). *Hey Rub-a-dub-dub: A Book of the Mystery and Wonder and Terror of Life*. United States: Boni and Liverlight, 1920 (Chapter XVIII: The Essential Tragedy of Life.)

