

Howard Fast, James T. Farrell, and *The Best Short Stories of Theodore Dreiser*

JOSEPH GRIFFIN, *University of Ottawa*

Shortly after Theodore Dreiser's death, the World Publishing Company was granted publication rights to Dreiser's works by his widow Helen.¹ World's first project under this arrangement was a volume of Dreiser's best short fiction, and the editors hired Howard Fast to make a selection of stories and to write an introduction. *The Best Short Stories of Theodore Dreiser*, a fourteen-piece collection, appeared in 1947 with Fast's highly laudatory introduction. Nine years later World reissued the book, discarding the Fast introduction and commissioning James T. Farrell to write a new one. These events constitute what Fast calls "an interesting story,"² and the story deserves telling at the very least in the interest of shedding light on a small corner of Dreiseriana that has gone unnoticed.

Fast took to the World assignment with enthusiasm. A frequent contributor to the Communist magazine *New Masses*, he was a fervent admirer of Dreiser's fiction and saw Dreiser's joining the Communist party as evidence that he must be read as a proletarian *fictionist*. Fast sent to Dreiser's widow for the short story collections;³ chose four stories from *Free and Other Stories*, eight stories from *Chains*, and two sketches from *Twelve Men*;⁴ and wrote a glowing essay placing Dreiser at the very zenith of American short-story writers. The essay performed double duty: several months before *The Best Short Stories* appeared, Fast published it in the September 3, 1946 issue of *New Masses*; when the volume appeared the following March, he used the essay, in a somewhat modified form, as the introduction.

Fast's introduction is identical to his *New Masses* essay except that three short passages have been excised. The first shows the unqualified esteem in which Fast held Dreiser:

Consider the three volumes of tales Dreiser produced; in the work of what other American writer could they be equalled? Mark Twain's "Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg" [sic] stands with them, as does Jack London's "Samuel"; nothing of Bret Harte's attains the same level, and only one of Sinclair Lewis'

¹ Charles A. Madisom, *Book Publishing in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 524.

² Howard Fast to the author, 17 July, 1979.

³ Howard Fast to the author, 17 July, 1979.

⁴ The contents of *The Best Short Stories of Theodore Dreiser* are "Free," "McEwen of the Shining Slave Makers," "Nigger Jeff," and "The Lost Phoebe" from *Free and other Stories* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918); "Khat," "St. Columba and the River," "The Shadow," "The Old Neighborhood," "Phantom Gold," "Convention," "Marriage—for One," and "The Prince Who Was a Thief" from *Chains* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927); and "My Brother Paul," and "A Doer of the Word" from *Twelve Men* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919).

shorter pieces can match the average of Dreiser's work. One or two of Hawthorne's things, a piece from Melville, two or three from O. Henry and perhaps that many from Sherwood Anderson: and even in all of these cases, the tales chosen would lose in juxtaposition to Dreiser's compassion, mercy and understanding.⁵

This passage was probably removed because the editors felt that Fast's praise of Dreiser was somewhat excessive.

The other two excisions are more directly related to the "interesting story" behind the reissuing of *The Best Short Stories*. These passages are both related to Dreiser's Communism. The first, in praise of "My Brother Paul," Dreiser's sketch about his songwriter-brother, begins: "I know of no better statement of the love of one brother for another" and ends: "There was no half-way point where [Dreiser's] beliefs halted; he became a champion of Russia because he saw in Russia a practical application of the ethical creed he strove so vainly to find in America, and the same logic of his work and belief led him to join the Communist Party of the United States" (p. 11). The other passage, following a discussion of Dreiser's "soaring" imaginative power," is a rather gratuitous addendum: "That was the Dreiser who sat for a whole night, through to the dawn, talking with some friends of mine after his return from the Soviet Union. He was full of his experience, his discovery of the youth of the world, and he let his imagination roam unfettered into the future, into a time when all men would be brothers, when war would be only a dim and barbaric memory of the past, along with hatred and starvation and the degradation of man by man" (p. 12). The editorial decision (it is probably not Fast's) to eliminate references that tended to emphasize Dreiser's Communist affiliations foreshadowed the decision to disregard Fast when *The Best Short Stories* was reissued nine years later.

In 1947 *Best Short Stories* caused little stir; the few publications that reviewed it were less than flattering. The *New York Times Book Review*, which routinely reviewed Dreiser's books and had interviewed him on a number of occasions, carried no comment. Nevertheless, *The Best Short Stories* sold out, and William Targ, the editor at World, was anxious to have the book back in print. Targ spoke to James T. Farrell about writing a new introduction for the collection, then made a formal offer by mail. The letter related clearly the book's history; Farrell knew what the invitation meant. Targ included a copy of *The Best Short Stories* and wrote that he wanted a new introduction of 2000 to 2200 words to replace Fast's, specifying that the collection itself would remain exactly the same.⁶

The prospect of writing the Dreiser introduction must have pleased Farrell, and he no doubt had few qualms about replacing Fast in a book devoted to a writer with whom he had enjoyed a close relationship, especially during Dreiser's last years. Although they met only twice, Farrell and Dreiser developed warm professional ties during the first half of the 1940s. Dreiser relied upon Farrell's critical judgement in his efforts to complete both *The Bulwark* and *The Stoic*, and Farrell accepted "as an honor" Mrs. Dreiser's invitation to serve as a co-executor of Dreiser's estate.⁷ Certainly Farrell must have considered himself a more competent judge of

⁵ Fast, "Dreiser's Short Stories," *New Masses*, 3 Sep. 1946, p. 11. Page references to this essay hereafter cited in the text.

⁶ William Targ to James T. Farrell, 7 September 1955, Farrell Collection, University of Pennsylvania Library. Hereafter FC.

⁷ Farrell, "Some Correspondence with Theodore Dreiser", *Reflections at Fifty and Other Essays* (New York: Vanguard, 1954), p. 126.

Dreiser's short stories than Fast, who had tended to use ideological rather than artistic criteria in his evaluation of *The Best Short Stories*.

Farrell began reading—and, in some cases, rereading—the stories immediately. Entries in his notebook contain favorable comments. On September 9 he noted that the stories were “solidly put together,” and that “My Brother Paul” has “a quality of nostalgia . . . yet [it] does not glamorize, falsely romanticize or sentimentalize.”⁸ On October 1 he called Dreiser a “good story teller,” and commented on the “brooding power [and] depth of feeling” of “Free” which he had “first read in ’27.”⁹ “I’ve read most of the Dreiser stories and am most impressed,” he wrote Targ on September 14. “I’ll do my best with the introduction.”¹⁰ But Farrell, busy as usual with many projects and much correspondence, only got around to the introduction a few days before it was due. “Worked on novel yesterday, dictated letters, and then tried to get going on the introduction to the Dreiser volume of short stories,” he wrote in his journal on October 5, adding in an entry for the next day, “Late last night I finished the Dreiser introduction—at least a draft of it. I had trouble all day getting into it.”¹¹ Farrell’s draft seems to have been satisfactory for when the new *Best Short Stories* appeared in February 1956, the introduction bore the date October 5, 1955.

Farrell’s introduction was, of course, highly complimentary of Dreiser’s stories, but more temperate than Fast’s. For Farrell, Dreiser was “a great writer of our century”¹²; some stories in the collection were better than others: he singled out “Free,” “The Lost Phoebe,” and “Nigger Jeff” and justified his choices. Farrell also made the point that “this collection contains some of [Dreiser’s] best stories,”¹³ thereby taking issue, probably deliberately, with Fast’s original selection.

When the 1956 *Best Short Stories* came out it carried no sign whatever that Fast had had a hand in the book’s conception, that it was in fact his book. Indeed, the entire process of reissuing the collection seems to have gone on without Fast’s knowledge. The 1947 byline, “Edited, with an Introduction by Howard Fast,”¹⁴ was replaced by “With an Introduction by James T. Farrell.” Fast’s name appeared on neither the 1956 book nor on its dust jacket. Moreover, an examination of the Farrell-Targ correspondence and of Farrell’s notebook and diary before and at the time of publication shows that neither the writer nor the publisher was concerned about any impropriety.

When Fast came upon the 1956 reissue he was “understandably furious, both at the Publisher [sic] who had allowed this to happen and at Farrell who had no compunctions about putting his name on another man’s work.”¹⁵ “I confronted Targ,” he recalls. “I was terribly angry and I gave him as fierce a tongue-lashing as I have ever given anyone. I called his behaviour disgusting, immoral and beyond

⁸ Farrell, Notebook, 9 September 1955, FC.

⁹ Farrell, Notebook, 1 October 1955, FC.

¹⁰ Farrell to William Targ, 14 September 1955, FC.

¹¹ Farrell, Journal, 5 October 1955, 6 October 1955, FC.

¹² Farrell, Introduction, *The Best Short Stories of Theodore Dreiser* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1956), p. 12.

¹³ Farrell, Introduction, p. 9.

¹⁴ Fast’s editing of *The Best Short Stories of Theodore Dreiser* was limited to selecting the stories. The texts were reproduced verbatim from *Free and Other Stories*, *Chains*, and *Twelve Men*.

¹⁵ Fast to the author, 17 July 1979.

the pale of decency. He only stared at me stupidly and reminded me that there was a black list."¹⁶

Very likely the immediate wrath Targ absorbed was meant for Farrell as well and would have been vented on him had Fast found the opportunity. But "[when] the 1956 edition came out," Fast recalls, "I had no communication with Farrell. When the public realized that I was communist, communication between us [i.e., Farrell and me] would have been unlikely. After all, he was the leading Trotskyite writer in America and he must have felt, if not dislike at least the existence of a wall between us."¹⁷ In seeking to account for his reluctance to approach Farrell about a breach in professional ethics, Fast has identified the most important element in Farrell's, and the World Publishing Company's, ignoring of routine decency and normal professional practice.

In identifying Farrell as a "Trotskyite" Fast was drawing attention to important ideological differences between himself and his adversary. Farrell's association with the Communist party in the United States reached its apex in April 1935 when he addressed the first American Writers' Conference in New York. Subsequently though, he became a major spokesman for a group of Trotskyist intellectuals who repudiated the official party's Stalinist position. Fast himself remained a member of the Communist party. Thus Farrell and Fast represented two ideological positions that reflected basic tensions among Marxists in the United States during the thirties and forties.¹⁸

Fast's intuition about "the wall" between Farrell and himself being one of conflicting ideologies was correct, as confirmed by words Farrell wrote only a few months after the 1956 *Best Short Stories* appeared. Traveling in the Near East during the summer of 1956, Farrell came across news of Fast in a London *Observer* dispatch entitled "Confession by a Stalin Prizewinner."¹⁹ He responded by drafting a letter commending Fast for publicly condemning Stalin's crimes and for his "moral courage" in doing so, and "publicly [extending] congratulations and the hand of friendship."²⁰ It is not clear who Farrell's primary addressee was, but the letter specified that copies were to be sent to the *New York Times* and to Howard Fast.

As for Targ and the World Publishing Company, it is not surprising that they would want to disassociate themselves from Fast, given the liabilities of sponsoring a Communist writer during the fifties. World had already established its ground when it removed the Communist references from Fast's 1947 introduction. Fast no doubt recognized at the time, as he was to express later on, that there was a connection between his introduction being dropped from the book and the fact that "McCarthyism was at its height,"²¹ and whatever uncertainty remained would have been erased by Targ's reference to the "blacklist" when Fast confronted him.

The World Publishing Company did not make amends for its affront to Howard Fast. *The Best Short Stories of Theodore Dreiser* became, effectively, James T. Farrell's

¹⁶ Fast to the author, 24 July 1984.

¹⁷ Fast to the author, 24 July 1984.

¹⁸ For an account of Farrell's socialism and communism see Alan M. Wald, *James T. Farrell: The Revolutionary Socialist Years* (New York: New York University Press, 1978).

¹⁹ "Confession by a Stalin Prizewinner," London *Observer*, 16 June 1956, p. 1.

²⁰ Farrell to an unspecified addressee, 22 June 1956, FC.

²¹ Fast to the author, 17 July 1979.

book; when Fawcett issued a paperback edition of the collection in 1961, the Farrell introduction was used. And Farrell himself, though willing to extend the hand of friendship to Fast, apparently never publicly alluded to the injustice he had helped perpetrate. James T. Farrell, the civil libertarian, had roared loudly and repeatedly about lesser affronts to human rights than this one in which he was a major actor.