

# THE DREISER NEWSLETTER

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## DREISER AND THOREAU: AN EARLY INFLUENCE

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Theodore Dreiser's early short story "The Shining Slave Makers," written at Maumee, Ohio, in 1899, and eventually published in *Ainslee's Magazine* in 1901, had one scientific source which Dreiser himself noted.<sup>1</sup> In a letter protesting the story's rejection by *Century* magazine, he argued that the ant lore central to the tale was "scientifically correct and according to Lubbock."<sup>2</sup> Sir John Lubbock's treatise *Ants, Bees and Wasps, a Record of Observations on the Habits of the Social Hymenoptera* (1872) is a secondary source, the kind of "research" for which the naturalists of the 1890's are well known.<sup>3</sup>

But there is another source, a primary or generative one, which has not been noticed heretofore and which is, I believe, discoverable in the essential elements of the story. This is the famous passage on ants in the "Brute Neighbors" chapter of *Walden* (XII). Dreiser's familiarity with Thoreau's writing dates from among his earliest literary experience. He reports in *Dawn* that during the eighth grade in Warsaw he read a good deal, including: "And here I became aware of some American authors of no less import: Thoreau, Emerson, Twain . . ."<sup>4</sup>

The case for Thoreau's influence on "The Shining Slave Makers" rests upon several parallels. The most fundamental is the human observer who watches two ant armies engaged in deadly warfare. Thoreau describes what he saw one day while at his pile of stumps:

Looking farther, I was surprised to find that the chips were covered with such combatants, that it was not a *duellum*, but a *bellum*, a war between two races of ants, the red always pitted against the black, and frequently two red ones to one black. The legions of these Myrmidons covered all the hills and vales in my wood-yard, and the ground was already strewn with the dead and dying, both red and black.<sup>5</sup>

Dreiser's observer, Robert McEwen, views a similar scene:

Only a few feet away in the parched grass, lay an arid spot, overrun with insects. He approached it, and stooping, saw thousands and thousands engaged in a terrific battle. Looking close, he could see where lines were drawn, how in places, the forces raged in confusion, and the field was cluttered with dead.<sup>6</sup>

Between the ants and mankind Thoreau establishes a direct analogy: "I was myself excited somewhat even as if they had been men. The more you think of it, the less the difference" (p. 158). Dreiser, however, goes far beyond Thoreau in this regard; he transforms his hero McEwen into an ant and has him participate fully and enthusiastically in the ant war. Indeed the passage quoted above which sounds so like Thoreau occurs in the frame ending to Dreiser's story, after McEwen has awakened from his ant dream and been restored to his former human condition. Incidentally, it is worth noting that Dreiser's ants, like Thoreau's, are distinguished by the colors of red and black.

Another important parallel is the fierceness of the fighting and its effect upon the observers. Thoreau uses a microscope for closer inspection of the combatants and records the details scrupulously:

. . . when I looked again the black soldier had severed the heads of his foes from their bodies, and the still living heads were hanging on either side of him like ghastly trophies at his saddle-bow, still apparently as firmly fastened as ever, and he was endeavoring with feeble struggles, being without feelers and with only the remnant of a leg, and I know not how many other wounds, to divest himself of them . . . (p. 158).

Passages in Dreiser's story convey a similarly graphic depiction of the slaughter: "Others bore upon their legs the severed heads of the poor blacks who had been slain in the

defense of their home, and whose jaws still clung to their foes, fixed in the rigor of death" (p. 447) and: "One, called by the others Og, had a black's head at his thigh" (p. 447). Such scenes inflame both human observers. Thoreau describes how he reacted later: ". . . I felt for the rest of that day as if I had had my feelings excited and harrowed by witnessing the struggle, the ferocity and carnage, of a human battle before my door" (p. 159). Dreiser's character, of course, experiences much more than vicarious excitement. In the height of battle he becomes a more than satisfactory warrior: "Enemy after enemy seized upon him, and died as he wished them to die. He began to count and exult in the numbers" (p. 450).

In the light of these similarities of detail and attitude it is interesting to recall what Dreiser said of Thoreau in his introduction to *The Living Thoughts of Thoreau* (1939). There in the concluding paragraph he writes:

Thoreau never looked forward to a life that was easy, harmonious on any minor scale, such as among men, devoid of pain, where what we call good should be the only state; he liked struggles, fighting, war, any battle of a creature in its effort to save its highly personalized, highly individualized, instinctive life--such fights as were waged by muskrats or beavers, or by John Brown. But he would have disapproved of and despised our recent world war as a commercial enterprise--or indeed, our whole mechanical warfare of today, based on social institutions which he would have despised *a priori*. But he would have rejoiced to see a contest between two Indian tribes for the possession of a hunting ground.

There are two kinds of war described here: one fought to maintain personal autonomy and one fought for base commercial or institutional reasons. It is the second that most closely corresponds to the ant war recounted in "Brute Neighbors." The two armies represent, Thoreau says, "red republicans" and "black imperialists" (p. 157). In Dreiser's story, though, it is the first kind of war that is presented: a struggle for survival and for not personal but group autonomy. My point is that Dreiser's treatment of war seems much more complex than Thoreau's in this instance. Thoreau is always at a distance from the ants--despite certain excitements that I have pointed to--and hence from their war. For him the ant battle symbolizes the stupidity and savagery of human wars, including, some commentators feel, the Mexican War of 1845. For Thoreau the ant war is a vehicle of satire and mock-epic.

Dreiser, on the other hand, sees the ant war as much more than an analogy for the worst of human follies. It is as well a means to express the primordial basis of such positive values as personal and tribal loyalty; it is nothing less than an occasion for wonder at the paradoxical fact of moral positives in a setting of elemental struggle.<sup>8</sup> In his sojourn among the ants Dreiser's hero learns through necessity and sympathetic involvement the importance of friendship and love. Dreiser's respect for life makes him, ironically in the context of the Thoreau comparison, a naturalist in both of its familiar literary senses: a close and sympathetic observer of all forms of life and a seemingly pessimistic recorder of meaningless existence.

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<sup>1</sup> W. A. Swanberg, *Dreiser* (New York: Bantam, 1967), pp. 100, 115.

<sup>2</sup> Dreiser to Robert Underwood Johnson, January 9, 1900. *Letters of Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Robert Elias (Philadelphia, 1959), I, 46.

<sup>3</sup> Identified by Elias, *Letters*, p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Dawn* (New York, 1931), p. 252.

<sup>5</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Sherman Paul (Boston, 1960), p. 157. Hereafter all citations are to this edition and will be included in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Theodore Dreiser, "The Shining Slave Makers," *Ainslee's*, VII (June 1901), 450. Hereafter all citations are to this text and will be included in the body of the essay.

<sup>7</sup> Theodore Dreiser, "Presenting Thoreau," *The Living Thoughts of Thoreau* (New York, 1939), p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Both Ellen Moers and Donald Pizer have offered interpretations of "The Shining Slave Makers" which largely agree with my thematic formulation. See Moers' *Two Dreisers* (New York, 1969), p. 144; and Pizer's "A Summer at Maumee: Theodore Dreiser Writes Four Stories," *Essays Mostly on Periodical Publishing in America*, ed. James Woodress (Durham, 1973), p. 199.

# DREISER'S SATANIC MILLS: RELIGIOUS IMAGERY IN AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

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In general, critics have either ignored or discussed in negative terms the influence of Theodore Dreiser's Catholic upbringing upon his fiction.<sup>1</sup> One exception to this tendency is Robert Penn Warren, who points out that in *An American Tragedy*, "only in the image drawn from religion does [Clyde Griffiths], ironically enough, with all his ambivalences, find an image of the responsible self."<sup>2</sup> In still another positive manner, Dreiser's boyhood association with religion is incorporated into *An American Tragedy*. For the author who claimed that "by the age of eighteen" "Catholicism had almost made a reality to me" "the narrow alternatives of heaven and hell,"<sup>3</sup> one level of traditional religious imagery came to denote the conclusive spiritual destruction resulting from uncontrolled material longings. In a manner not previously recognized, much of the power of the story of Clyde Griffiths' temptation in Lycurgus is evoked by Dreiser's innovative use at strategic points of vivid, almost medieval, images of hell and damnation.

Clyde's encounter with the manufacturing society of Lycurgus is in fact framed by episodes which depict the extremes of his spiritual condition. The protagonist's first job in the family shirt collar factory is in "the shrinking room."<sup>4</sup> Occurring in the place "where the manufacturing process begins" (I, 191), the scene is a crucial indicator of Clyde's relationship to Lycurgus, and the effects the industrial society will have upon him. In view of his expansive hopes for the future, the name of the room is ominous enough. But the real force of the dramatic irony lies in the descriptive imagery, for the place presents a hellish vision suggesting the extent to which the protagonist is vulnerable to the deathly forces of industrial society.

In form alone the place evokes a ghastly quality of spiritual malaise through the skillful use of a stark expressionism. It is subterranean, "reached by descending a flight of steps at the end of a third hall" (I, 190). "An enormous basement" (I, 190), its immensity is emphasized by continual references to geographical coordinates; in it things move not from wall to wall so much as "from east to west" (I, 190), from "north to south" (I, 190). With the impact of a cinematic image of technological sterility, it is described in an almost uniform whiteness. Under "four long rows of incandescent lamps . . . [are] row after row of porcelain tubs or troughs, lengthwise of the room, and end to end" (I, 190). The room is filled with the white material from which the collars are made, the "webs" being processed. Steam is everywhere. And the workers themselves, "clothed only in armless undershirts, a pair of old trousers . . . and with canvas-topped and rubber-soled sneakers on their bare feet" (I, 191), are ghostly in their white silence.

Already powerful, the sense of the place's deathliness is strikingly heightened by the description of the activity it contains, for it is in this passage that Dreiser first employs the grim imagery based upon religious tradition:

For the length of this room, all of a hundred and fifty feet in length, were enormous drying racks or moving skeleton platforms, boxed, top and bottom and sides, with hot steam pipes, between which on rolls, but festooned in such a fashion as to take advantage of these pipes, above, below and on either side, were more of these webs, but unwound and wet and draped as described, yet moving along slowly on these rolls. . . . This movement . . . was accompanied by an enormous rattle and clatter of ratchet arms which automatically shook and moved these lengths of cloth forward. . . . In the center of the room were enormous whirling separators or dryers. (I, 190).

The language with which Dreiser describes this technological process, tellingly, is far less objective than it is connotative and even poetic.<sup>5</sup> Each phrase is qualified by an image which evokes a sense of transcendent malignancy. The "enormous drying racks" may be seen as "moving skeleton platforms." They are not so much covered by the immense webs of white fabric as hideously "festooned" by them. The machines move with a skeleton-like sound, the "enormous rattle and clatter of ratchet arms" that Dreiser seems to be using onomatopoeia to suggest. The "enormous whirling separators" at the center,

contrasting with the otherwise slow movement, seem dervishes in their frenzy. In view of its overall ritualistic quality of deliberate and repetitive movement--"as fast as it [each bolt] had gone the way of all webs, another was attached"(I, 190)--the passage seems based upon a vision of the medieval dance of death. By drawing upon the dire associations of this ghastly ritual to mark his initiation into Lycurgus, Dreiser establishes an ominous sense of the helplessness of his protagonist as he is enmeshed in the immensely powerful destructive forces of the technological society.

In a somewhat different manner, the traditional imagery of damnation is employed in the long death house episode to provide a heightened impression of the intensity of Clyde's final guilt and suffering. Much as is the shrinking room, this place is conceived with stark expressionistic brightness. "Harsh illuminatively" (II, 349), the death house is lighted by day with "a blaze of light pouring through an over-arching skylight high above the walls. By night--glistening incandescents of large size and power which flooded each nook and cranny" (II, 353). Here, however, the hellish associations are no longer implicit. The setting is described as "as gloomy and torturous an inferno as one could imagine any human compelled to endure" (II, 347), and in it Clyde is surrounded by condemned figures almost each of whom, the grotesqueness of his appearance expressing the heinousness of his crime, resembles an aspect of a medieval tableau depicting the congregation of the damned. There is "a Hungarian of Utica who was convicted of burning his paramour--in a furnace--then confessing it--a huge, rough, dark, ignorant man with a face like a gargoyle" (II, 369), "two dark-eyed sinister-looking Italians, one of whom . . . had robbed and then slain and attempted to burn the body of his father-in-law" (II, 361), "a sallow and emaciated and sinister-looking Chinaman" (II, 348), "Pasquale Cutrone, of Brooklyn, an Italian, convicted of the slaying of his brother for attempting to seduce his wife," striking in "the horror of his emaciated face, . . . a face divided into three grim panels by two gutters or prison lines of misery that led from the eyes to the corners of the mouth" (II, 364).

In the same way, the manifestations of suffering read like those in a tract on hell's agonies. There is "a voice from the lowest hell to which a soul can descend--complete and unutterable despair" (II, 350-51), the frantic contortions of another "crawling up and down his cell on his hands and knees, kissing the floor, licking the feet of a brass Christ on a cross" (II, 364), still another's thwarted suicide, and a

general background of "curses--foul or coarse jests--or tales addressed to all--or ribald laughter--or sighings and groanings" (II, 361). Perhaps the most explicit hint of the role of traditional religious imagery in *An American Tragedy* is found in one of the text's comments upon this scene. For while the conclusion that "at its best [it] was a kind of inferno of mental ills--above which--as above Dante's might have been written--'abandon hope--ye who enter here'" (II, 360) does not ensure that Dreiser was completely familiar with this particular early account of hell,<sup>6</sup> it does suggest that underlying the narrative there is an awareness of materials displaying a cast of mind in sharp contrast to that of the twentieth century.

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1 See, for example, Lionel Trilling's discussion of religious attitudes in *The Bulwark* in "Reality in America," from *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Viking Press, 1945), reprinted in *The Stature of Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955); and Philip L. Gerber's account of the split which characterizes Dreiser's portrayal of father figures in *Theodore Dreiser* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 171.

2 "An American Tragedy," *The Yale Review*, 52 (1962), reprinted in *Dreiser: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Lydenberg (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1971), p. 140.

3 Quoted in Ellen Moers, *Two Dreisers* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), p. 296.

4 Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925), I, 191. Subsequent references to this edition will be included in the text.

5 See William L. Phillips, "The Imagery of Dreiser's Novels," *PMLA*, 78 (1963), 572-85. Phillips discusses the new importance of subjective imagery in *An American Tragedy*, but concentrates on materials drawn from fable, fairy tale, and dream.

6 In 1921, Dreiser wrote of using Dantean imagery to express subjective states: "...here [Manhattan] are also Hell, Heaven and Purgatory of the soul, which Dante would have found. . . . He would have gone beyond mere realistic description and shown us the half-monstrous proportions of our city like a giant sphinx with wings." Quoted in Moers p. 277.



# DREISER'S FRIVOLOUS SAL

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The story of Dreiser's dissatisfaction with Paramount's 1930 film of *An American Tragedy* is well known. Sergei Eisenstein was to have adapted the text and directed the picture, but Paramount feared such a version would be too radical and so had Samuel Hoffenstein, best known for his humorous verse, write a new scenario, to be filmed by Josef von Sternberg, director of Marlene Dietrich romances. Dreiser denounced the script for reducing his novel to a murder melodrama, "a cheap, tawdry, tabloid confession story," and tried unsuccessfully to prevent Paramount from distributing the picture.<sup>1</sup>

One would therefore expect that Dreiser would not approve further Hollywood versions of his work unless they were faithful to the realism of the originals. Yet despite his calling Hollywood "Hooeyland,"<sup>2</sup> he permitted Paramount to film *Jennie Gerhardt* in 1933 (starring Sylvia Sidney, who had played Roberta in *An American Tragedy*) and declared himself happy with the treatment, sentimental though it was.

Perhaps his sentimental side explains why he permitted Twentieth Century-Fox to turn "My Brother Paul" from *Twelve Men* into a glossy musical comedy entitled *My Gal Sal* in 1942. Written by Seton J. Miller, Darrell Ware, and Karl Tunberg (the latter's credits include the 1959 *Ben-Hur*) and directed by Irving Cummings, the film purports to be the story of Paul Dresser, popular song writer of the turn of the century. Though it uses much of Paul's music, its scenario bears little resemblance to Dreiser's reminiscence or to his brother's life. Dreiser apparently raised no objections and allowed the picture to be titled "Theodore Dreiser's *My Gal Sal*."

The main motive in his cooperation was financial. In the mid-1930's, his companion Helen Richardson suggested that he arrange for a movie about Paul, based on Dreiser's autobiographical writings, in order to improve his deteriorating finances. When Dreiser agreed, she made legal arrangements with the Paull-Pioneer Music Corporation and the Edward B.

Marks Music Corporation to use Paul's songs.<sup>3</sup> The songs having become the property of the Dreiser family, Helen then obtained permission from the surviving brothers and sisters for their use in the film.<sup>4</sup> In 1937, she went to Hollywood to promote the project but found it difficult to sell.<sup>5</sup> For the next four years, Dreiser's agents, William C. Lengel and Donald Friede, tried to market the package, which Friede finally sold to Fox in 1941 for "approximately \$50,000."<sup>6</sup>

Paul's character and career do, in fact, offer very promising material for a movie; but unfortunately, the Fox film slicks up Paul's music with 1940-ish production numbers, adds new songs by Leo Robin and Ralph Rainger, and turns Paul's life into a conventional Hollywood romance. The real Paul's life was closer to the plot of a Dreiser novel. Thirteen years older than Theodore, Paul was the oldest of the Dreiser brothers. Like the rest of the family, he endured appalling poverty as a child. As a teenager in Terre Haute, Paul was jailed three times for petty crimes.<sup>7</sup> The first time was for an unproved charge of robbing a store with some alleged accomplices. On the second occasion, Paul forged a note in his father's name, and John Dreiser decided to let his son stay in jail as a lesson. Paul was finally released through the efforts of a lawyer who had seduced one of the Dreiser girls.<sup>8</sup> Instead of following his father's demand that he become a priest, Paul ran away from St. Meinrad's Seminary near Evansville, Indiana, and joined a covered-wagon medicine and minstrel show selling Dr. Hamlin's Wizard Oil. With them, he performed in blackface and wrote comic songs. After switching to another minstrel troupe, he moved to New York and quickly became end man for the famous minstrel company of Thatcher, Primrose and West. For boxoffice appeal, Paul changed his name from the Germanic Dreiser to Dresser. As author and composer of *The Paul Dresser Songster*, he was an immense success by the age of 23.

The film omits Paul's grim childhood altogether and opens with little brother Theodore sniveling on the porch because his brother is going away to school to become a minister of some unspecified denomination. In case anyone in the movie audience ever heard of *Sister Carrie*, the movie provides one sister (rather than the five in real life), who is named Carrie. Instead of the squalid poverty of the Dreisers, the film family live in a large frame house with a picket fence, in middle-class rural comfort. Paul never gets to seminary but runs away from home to pursue a musical career, as the background music vibrates with "On the Banks of the Wabash."

After a brief stint with the Kickapoo Indian Medicine Man Show and a merely hinted-at romance with its ingenue, played by Carol Landis, our movie hero (Victor Mature) becomes enamored of a high-toned musical comedy star, Sally Elliott (Rita Hayworth), who is the Sal of the title, and who fascinates him with her song and dance routine "On the Gay White Way." She steals one of his songs, writes words to it, introduces it to her own show, and makes him a hit. Meanwhile, recognizing himself as a hick, Victor Mature decides that he must rise in the world and so heads for New York. When he accuses Sal of stealing his music, she gets him a contract with her agent and he proceeds brashly to woo her away from her fiance, a dapper but anemic gent played by John Sutton.

In fact, Sal was Sallie Walker (a pseudonym for Annie Brace), the madam of the best brothel in Evansville, Indiana, where Paul sometimes played the piano while on tour. Paul lived in the brothel as Sallie's lover; and according to W. A. Swanberg, "a part of Paul's prosperity came from the profits of her twenty girls . . ."<sup>9</sup> Dreiser himself saw Sallie only twice, once when she was in a carriage before his house and once when his mother sent him to the brothel with a basket of preserves.<sup>10</sup> He was supposed to deliver the basket at the door; but told to come in, he did so and was ushered upstairs to Paul's "charmingly furnished rooms," where he saw his brother "in the trousers of a light, summery suit and a silk shirt, making his morning toilet." Sallie was with him, "in a pink and white, heavily beflounced dressing gown."<sup>11</sup> To the poor boy, the elegant chambers "seemed a kind of fairyland"; but elsewhere on the premises, he looked through open doors into rooms with unmade beds and half-naked girls, who aroused his budding sexual curiosity and desires.<sup>12</sup> Paul could not contain his own appetites, and when he dallied with one of Sallie's whores, his mistress quarreled with him and kicked him out. This is the real "frivolous Sal, a peculiar kind of a gal . . . a wild little devil, but dead on the level."

The movie's Sal, on the other hand, is a proper young lady who, though the toast of Broadway, wants nothing more than to settle down in matrimonial bliss with the young song writer. Once he sells a song, her company does nothing but perform his numbers.

The movie makes a feeble attempt to approximate Paul's life and times. To provide some plot and prolong the story after Paul becomes an instant celebrity, the screenplay makes him a mild philanderer who implausibly strays from Rita Hayworth to flirt with women in high society. All this is about as innocent as a high-school prom. The real Paul was an

extravagant libertine. Theodore wrote of him, "He was always sighing over the beauty, innocence, sweetness, this and that, of young maidenhood in his songs, but in real life he seemed to desire and attract quite a different type--the young and beautiful, it is true, but also the old, the homely, and the somewhat savage--a catholicity of taste I could never quite stomach."<sup>13</sup> Instead of resembling a matinee idol, Paul was five feet, ten inches tall and weighed over 300 pounds, "and yet of so lithe-some a build that he gave not the least sense of either undue weight or lethargy."<sup>14</sup> Dreiser compared his brother to Falstaff both in his build, his gross sensuality, and his ebullient, cheerful temperament. Paul never married but continued seducing available women and wives and consorting with prostitutes. While writing sentimental songs about childhood innocence and maiden sweetness, he introduced young Theodore to the fanciest whore-houses of New York.

This mixture of sensualist and sentimentalist could have become a complex screen characterization. As it is, the movie genteelly skirts the issue, giving only a few hints of Paul's sex life. When he leaves the minstrel show at the beginning, he says of Mae, the girl he leaves behind him, that she "taught him to grow up." Victor Mature portrays Paul as a bit like Drouet in *Sister Carrie*--a loud-mouthed masher in fancy clothes. In New York he hits all the bars. When flirting with a married countess, he cannot decide whether to go to Cuba with her or write up his idea for a song about the Wabash. In a jealous rage, Sal slashes his expensive wardrobe, whereupon he crosses the hall to her apartment and rips her gowns. The house police then haul him off to jail, where he writes "The Convict and the Bird" and has a barbership quartet serenade her with it. The judge releases him on probation, provided he writes "On the Banks of the Wabash." After reconciliation with Sal, Paul proposes to her and rejects the countess, who then tries to trick him into returning by arranging a fraudulent duel between Paul and her husband. When this scandal prompts Sal to break the engagement, Paul writes "My Gal Sal" and has his sidekick (Phil Silvers) sing it to Sal while Paul has her trapped on a Ferris wheel. Thus they are reunited and live happily ever after.

This Hollywood hokum replaces the real drama of Paul's life. The dynamic Dresser was one of the most popular men of his day in New York, a friend of the leading politicians, prostitutes, performers, and pugilists (including Gentleman Jim Corbett) of the 1890's. In addition to writing such songs as "The Letter That Never Came," "I Believe It for My Mother Told Me So," "The Bowery," "Just Tell Them That You Saw Me,"

"The Blue and the Gray," and "The Pardon Came Too Late" and performing as a minstrel, Paul became a successful actor in comedy and in such melodramas as *The Danger Signal*. He spent his summers with the theatre in New York and his seasons on the road. He was a notable raconteur and did expert imitations of Germans, Jews, and Irishmen.

With such material and with such a character, it would have been possible to recreate an authentic and colorful picture of late 19th-century Americana; but despite its costumes, the film lacks any genuine period flavor and fails to convey the vitality of Broadway, of Tammany Hall, of the world of vaudeville and minstrelsy. Victor Mature does better than one might expect with his material; but he is wrong for the role, which calls for someone with the girth and extroversion of Jackie Gleason. In 1942, Fox did in fact have the right actor under contract--the Falstaffian Laird Cregar, who not only possessed the figure but also the skill to recreate Paul Dresser. But Fox wanted a glamorous matinee idol and so selected Mature, who had recently been billed as a "beautiful hunk of man."

Most important, the film shied away from any of history's harsh realities. The nineties were not always gay; they were rent by depression, poverty, and violence between labor and management. The contrast between Paul's sentimental songs and the impoverished lives millions were leading (including most of the Dreisers), between his ethnic jokes and the struggles of immigrants, between Broadway and the Lower East Side could have offered provocative pictures of the American past.

Despite Paul's success, his family continued to survive on the fringes of poverty, and he frequently had to bail them out financially. The film, however, ignores the Dreiser family after the opening. *My Gal Sal* could have focused more clearly on Paul's character by reintroducing Theodore, who as a young man joined his more famous brother in New York and saw his world with the star-struck gaze of a hero-worshipper. The brooding, introverted tragedian and the swaggering life of the party would have been natural foils to each other. One of the most dramatic episodes in Theodore's life was his encounter with Paul in 1903. After the failure of *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser fell into a nervous breakdown with hallucinations and horrors. On skid row, nearly starved, feeling suicidal, Theodore met his brother, who forced money on him, placed him in a sanitarium, and paid for his six weeks' stay there, and saved his sanity and possibly his life. A year after having rescued Theodore from depression and destitution, Paul himself hit the skids. His music business failed;

and though he had another hit with "My Gal Sal," its success came too late. As he told Theodore, "As long as you're down and out no one wants to see you any more . . ."<sup>15</sup> With his money gone and his popularity lost, Paul's health gave way, and he surrendered to depression. He died deserted and in poverty in 1906.

Theodore's depression and Paul's decline and death resemble Hurstwood's in *Sister Carrie* and make a dramatic climax to the career of the dynamic Dresser. Combined with an authentic recreation of the music and melodrama of the gaslight era, the story of Paul Dresser could have been a memorable film with the potential for a masterpiece such as *Les Enfants du Paradis*. Hollywood later made some musicals with complex characterization, grim realism, and authentic atmosphere--*Young Man with a Horn*, *Love Me or Leave Me*, *A Star Is Born*, and *Lady Sings the Blues*. Instead, a slick and genteel treatment makes *My Gal Sal* a trifle that bears only a superficial resemblance to Dreiser's "My Brother Paul."

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<sup>1</sup> W. A. Swanberg, *Dreiser* (New York: Scribners, 1965), pp. 372-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 374.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Dreiser, *My Life with Dreiser* (Cleveland and New York: World, 1951), p. 255.

<sup>4</sup> Swanberg, p. 474.

<sup>5</sup> Helen Dreiser, p. 260.

<sup>6</sup> Swanberg, pp. 455, 474-5.

<sup>7</sup> Robert H. Elias, *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature* (New York: Knopf, 1949), p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Dawn, A History of Myself* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1931), pp. 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> Swanberg, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Dreiser, *Dawn*, p. 141.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

12 *Ibid.*

13 Theodore Dreiser, "My Brother Paul," *Twelve Men* (New York: The Modern Library, 1928), p. 93.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

15 Dreiser, "My Brother Paul," p. 82.

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## THE COMPLETE WORKS OF THEODORE DREISER AN ANNOUNCEMENT

One of Theodore Dreiser's unrealized wishes, when he died in 1945, was for a complete edition of his works. On August 27, 1975, Dreiser's 104th birthday, the first steps were taken to satisfy that desire. The University of Pennsylvania, custodian of the extensive Dreiser Collection, announced that it will sponsor "The Complete Works of Theodore Dreiser" for publication.

The Dreiser Edition will be published by J. Faust and Company under the editorial direction of Dr. Joseph Katz. Dr. Neda Westlake, curator of the University's rare book collection, was named the General Editor of the project. Dr. James L. W. West III will be the Textual Editor.

The purpose of the Edition is to make available reliable texts of the body of Dreiser's writings. All texts are being established according to the principles of modern critical editing. The volumes will contain authoritative texts and full apparatus that will be useful for a variety of studies.

A pioneer in twentieth century American literature, Dreiser suffered from excessive editing by his early publishers and associates. Therefore, the Edition will contain not only many previously unpublished and uncollected writings, but also newly-established texts of published volumes.

*Sister Carrie*, scheduled for publication in 1976, Dreiser's first novel, will demonstrate for the first time what Dreiser originally wrote. On the first page of the new edition, for instance, there are nine textual variants from the 1900 publication on which all subsequent editions have been based. The authoritative text, based on the voluminous manuscript in the New York Public Library and the printer's copy typescript in The Theodore Dreiser Collection at the University of Pennsylvania, will restore Dreiser's intention and result in a revelatory volume.

"An Amateur Laborer," the unpublished manuscript, in five bound volumes, of Dreiser's account of his breakdown and recovery in 1903, is scheduled as the second volume in the Edition. Versions of some of these experiences were incorporated in *Twelve Men* and *The "Genius"*; the complete text will reveal much about Dreiser's family associations, his reduction to absolute poverty and nervous prostration, and his ultimate recovery.

Successive volumes in the Edition will include the novels, particularly *Jennie Gerhardt*, for which the dramatic hiatus in the preparation of the manuscript is illuminated by "An Amateur Laborer"; the autobiographical *Dawn* and *A Book About Myself* with the restoration of material deleted from the original publications because of personal revelations; the non-fiction, drama and poetry. High on the list of priorities will be unpublished diaries and journals, short stories and articles.

When Dreiser signed the agreement in 1942 with the University of Pennsylvania for the preservation and use of his vast accumulation of manuscripts, letters, and library, it was with the hope that the University would encourage the ultimate publication of his complete writings. Since that time, valiant and earnest and unsuccessful efforts have been undertaken to bring this about. Now with the cooperation of J. Faust and Company, we have every expectation of ultimate completion of the project. This massive endeavor will take several decades to accomplish, and it will benefit from cooperative efforts of Dreiser scholars throughout the world, many of whom have already responded enthusiastically to the announcement which the University made on Dreiser's birthday in 1975. Suggestions and inquiries for further information should be addressed to Dr. Westlake in the University of Pennsylvania Library.

-- Neda M. Westlake  
University of Pennsylvania



# REVIEWS

## The Inevitable Equation

*The Inevitable Equation: The Antithetic Pattern of Theodore Dreiser's Thought and Art*, by Rolf Lundén. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1973. 186 pp.

There has been the usual amount of disagreement among Dreiser scholars on various questions related to his work, but one thing on which almost everyone has agreed is that Dreiser was not a first-rate intellect. Not a profound thinker, he was seldom even a clear one. We can admire the depths of his intellectual curiosity, but we can hardly be impressed with its results, philosophically speaking. We tolerate Dreiser's pretensions to profundity in philosophical works like *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub* and "Notes" only because he was an original artist (and of course there are those who deny him even that). Rolf Lundén apparently concurs with those who do not rate Dreiser high intellectually. In his study *The Inevitable Equation*, he criticizes John McAleer for praising the intellectual importance of Dreiser's "Notes on Life" and offers the opposite view that "Notes" is "often rambling and rambunctious, naive and narcotizing" (p. 39). We are all the more perplexed, therefore, when Lundén uses the same "Notes," and its dull and unilluminating dichotomizing methodology, as the subject and method of his own study.

Dreiser had his intellectual, as well as his sexual obsessions. Mr. Lundén takes one of the former--Dreiser's belief (adopted from Spencer) in an inevitable equation in life--as the central thesis of his study. Yes, Dreiser did believe life was based on opposites; he also believed that human personality consisted of electrical force--strong people having much more of a charge than weaklings. But perhaps only we academicians, who make a profession of intellectuality, would attach so much significance to what somebody thinks he believes. One of the least interesting things about Dreiser and his work may be his belief in antitheses. It is a philosophy which has had a lot of

subscribers, from the ancient Greeks down to the Hegelians and the Marxists, the latter emphasizing the dialectical nature of the opposition, particularly in economic and social life. But Dreiser was not aware of or necessarily capable of understanding these developments in the theory of antitheses. It was the humanitarian and religious altruism of communism that Dreiser responded to, not its philosophy of dialectical materialism. Alfred Kazin's observation that Dreiser lacked everything but genius makes a good deal of sense only if we think of genius in the artistic rather than the intellectual sense. If there have been writers who possessed both kinds, Dreiser was not one of them.

As has been suggested often, Dreiser's genius was compassion. As an artist he dealt primarily in feelings--much to Lionel Trilling's distaste--not ideas. To reduce Dreiser's novels to an examination of opposites in them, as Lundén does in the second part of his study, is to put the unimpressive intellectual cart before the superb emotional horse. Not surprisingly, given this approach, Lundén's analysis of the novels tends to be mechanical and uninteresting, as well as occasionally inaccurate. To take just one example, he claims that Dreiser, as a believer in the inevitable balancing of opposites, was a detached determinist in his fiction. In comparing *Sister Carrie* with *Pere Goriot*, Lundén says Balzac displayed an emotional involvement with Goriot that borders on melodrama, whereas Dreiser in his handling of Carrie's loneliness and Hurstwood's death is low-keyed and detached. This is not an informed reading of the novel generally, and it shows a peculiar disregard of the implications of Dreiser's explicit outpouring of compassion in the final paragraph of the novel: "Oh, Carrie, Carrie! Oh, blind strivings of the human heart." Intellectually, Dreiser did strive for detachment from his characters, as befitted an age enthralled with science and empiricism, but emotionally he was perhaps as deeply involved with underdogs and misfits as any alleged Spencerian could be. His compassion for his characters was rooted in the religious feelings he inherited from his Memmonite mother, feelings that were at least as important as his intellectual commitment to naturalism, and certainly far more significant in his work than his fascination with dichotomies.

Lundén makes the same error of judgment in the first part of his book, where he is generally on firmer ground, when he dismisses as insincere the concluding sentences in a passage he is interpreting--dismisses them because they tend to undercut his thesis that Dreiser was a detached observer of life's harsh

antitheses. In the sentences in question, Dreiser has expressed the wish that the poor could be productive and well paid and the rich considerate and benign. "I am convinced," Lundén wrote, "that Dreiser added this utopian wish for social amelioration as a mitigating effect [to the pessimistic views expressed earlier in the paragraph]. He had found that too much outspokenness did not pay" (p. 53). To deny Dreiser his compassion, as Lundén does here, is to deny him his humanity and his genius. Intellectually, Dreiser did tend to be pessimistic, like Lester Kane in *Jennie Gerhardt*, believing that people were pawns pushed about meaninglessly by fate. But Dreiser wrote much more with his heart than his head, and like Jennie, he showed remarkable patience and love for his characters, bearing witness, in the Christian sense, for a suffering humanity.

Because Mr. Lundén is obviously intelligent and widely read in Dreiser and Dreiser criticism, he surely will make a stronger and subtler defense of his thesis than he has in this book, which is based on his doctoral dissertation. On reflection he may even modify it significantly. In my own view, he appears to be a good critic trapped by a weak thesis.

-- Robert Forrey  
Yale University

### Dreiser Bibliography

*Theodore Dreiser: A Primary and  
Secondary Bibliography*, by Donald  
Pizer, Richard W. Dowell, and  
Frederic E. Rusch. Boston:  
G. K. Hall, 1975, x & 515 pp. \$28.50

The authors are to be congratulated on their successful collaboration in producing this long-awaited bibliography of Theodore Dreiser. The scope of the 525-page volume goes beyond the usual boundaries set for a bibliography, and the resulting work should prove a working guide for many non-bibliographical studies of Dreiser.

An initial statement of this sort in a review is usually followed by verbose comments on the subject of the bibliography and his place in literary history. This review assumes that

readers know that Theodore Dreiser was born in 1871, died in 1945, and was a major writer of works that have been germinal to twentieth century American literature. Therefore, this will be a straight-forward description of the bibliography with indications of its usefulness for those who would like to know the contents and will most profit from its publication.

The bibliography is divided into three parts: WORKS BY DREISER, WORKS ON DREISER, and MISCELLANEA. Donald Pizer is responsible for the listing of the works by Dreiser and of library holdings of primary Dreiser material. Richard Dowell and Frederic Rusch have contributed the important sections of works about Dreiser, interviews and speeches, and miscellanea.

Reading the brief preface and introductions to each section (an admonition that all compilers of bibliographies hope the reader will follow) is imperative in this case. The authors have carefully explained their principles of selection and have provided the key to the excellent numbering system which enables the reader to identify at a glance the dating and sequence of each item.

*Works by Dreiser*, Section A "Books," is particularly commendable for attention to textual variants in successive editions of a work and for noting previous periodical publications. Section B, "Contributions to Books," supplies a listing of well-known introductions to works by Frank Norris, George Sterling, and Samuel Butler as well as many hard-to-find items in ephemeral publications. In Section C, "Contributions to Periodicals," Dr. Pizer deserves credit for tracking through the jungle of early newspaper articles, writings in *Ev'ry Month* and *The Bohemian*, and other elusive and defunct magazines. He has realized that Dreiser's memory for such matters frequently erred toward enlarging the list of his early publications. Section D, "Miscellaneous Separate Publications," contains miscellaneous material previously published by Dreiser. Section E, "Published Letters," lists Dreiser's posthumously published correspondence. Section G, "Library Holdings," indicates only major Dreiser collections, with references to other catalogues of locations for manuscripts.

*Works on Dreiser* has been the responsibility of Dowell and Rusch. Their expansion of the usual definition of a category of this sort provides one of the great values of this bibliography. Section F, "Interviews and Speeches," was within their province and cites formal interviews and news accounts of Dreiser's speeches, including comments that Dreiser made to the

press. Section G is noted in the previous paragraph, compiled by Dr. Pizer. Section H, "Bibliographies and Checklists," provides a history of previous publications with useful descriptive annotations. Section I, "Books and Pamphlets," includes such publications devoted exclusively or primarily to Dreiser.

These two shining slave-makers, Dowell and Rusch, begin to show their talents from this point through the rest of volume, making easy the way for other ants to follow.

Section J, "Parts of Books," contains material on Dreiser which was part of a more inclusive study. Again, it is important here to read their strictures on inclusion in this category. Section K, "Articles in Newspapers and Journals," is worth the price of the book. Although admittedly selective, six hundred and ninety-three entries from 1901 through 1973 display the extent of the impact of Dreiser's writing and personality reflected in American and foreign publications. Section L, "Reviews," should be added as worth the price of the book. One hundred and six pages of reviews from *Sister Carrie* in 1900 through original Dreiser material published after his death provide an invaluable source for tracing the critical and popular reception of this writer. Section M, "Tapes," lists discussions of Dreiser that have been verbally recorded.

Section N, "Theses and Dissertations," provides an interesting history of Dreiser scholarship from 1926 to 1973, with one hundred forty-three titles in this category. The diversity of institutions, here and abroad, that sponsored such studies is illuminating. It is also diverting to look through the list for first efforts of many who have become recognized Dreiser scholars. Section O, "Productions of Plays," is followed by Section P, "Adaptations of Works," with reviews and selected news stories. The Patrick Kearney version of *An American Tragedy* in 1926 received glowing reviews, and that novel still leads Dreiser's works in popularity for dramatic presentation.

The index: a final word of approval for a simple alphabetical arrangement of all entries of titles and individuals. References to periodicals and newspapers are not included, but this would have placed an impossible burden on an index already seventy pages in length.

-- Neda M. Westlake  
University of Pennsylvania

## Dreiser's Stoic

"Dreiser's Stoic: A Study in Literary Frustration," by Philip L. Gerber. *Literary Monographs*, Vol. 7. Edited by Eric Rothstein and Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975. Pp. 85-164. \$12.50.

In 1912, speaking to a *New York Times* reviewer about his recently published *Jennie Gerhardt*, Dreiser confessed a compulsion that became increasingly evident as his literary career progressed: "I hate to leave a piece of work undone." Appropriately enough, this assertion serves as the epigraph to Philip L. Gerber's "Dreiser's Stoic: A Study in Literary Frustration," an essay which traces that novel's history from its enthusiastic inception in 1913 to its rather abortive publication in 1947. Drawing largely upon unpublished correspondence from the Dreiser Collection at the University of Pennsylvania, Gerber narrates Dreiser's diversions and stultifying doubts about the novel as an art form, his fitful returns and rumors of his return to the project, the inevitable quarrels with publishers over the promised but always delayed manuscript, the aid, criticism, and encouragement of friends, and finally the takeover by Helen Dreiser. Of particular interest is Gerber's use of Dreiser's newspaper clippings and manuscript notes, including the summaries prepared in 1932 by Kathryn Sayre, to establish the degree to which Dreiser held to his original design for *The Stoic*. Comparing these notes and clippings to the final text, Gerber concludes that to the point of Cowperwood's death, Dreiser remained faithful to the facts of Yerkes' life; in fact, such comparisons suggest Dreiser's almost total dependence on the raw materials of his research. As Gerber clearly demonstrates, Dreiser and Helen were "not so much writing *The Stoic* as tacking it together like a patchwork quilt." Following Cowperwood's death, however, the final text departed rather significantly from the plan suggested by the research materials, so significantly that Dreiser's original intent to dramatize the collapse of Cowperwood's estate as an illustration of the "equation inevitable" gave way to an emphasis on Berenice's yogicism and philanthropy.

Such a shift not only violated the thrust of the trilogy but also ignored the narcissistic character of Berenice's prototype, Emilie Grigsby. To a certain extent, the revised conclusion can be traced to Dreiser's altered sympathies and philosophies; however, as Gerber's documentation reveals, it was primarily the product of Helen's interest in Indian philosophy and her power to dominate the enfeebled novelist. Despite the objections of James T. Farrell to such a sentimental conclusion, Dreiser's death placed his literary estate in Helen's hands and thus her will prevailed. With all its ironies, animosities, and intrigues, the history of Dreiser's *Stoic* provides the basis for an interesting and informative essay by the most knowledgeable student of *The Trilogy of Desire*.

-- R. W. Dowell

### Dreiser Seminar at MLA

The 1975 Dreiser seminar at MLA, entitled "Perspectives on Dreiser Criticism," was on the whole quite successful and stimulating. The attendance was relatively small--only the bravest and most fanatic Dreiserians could make the regrettable Sunday 8:30 a.m. time assigned. Also, due to the United Airlines strike, which cancelled MLA charter flights to the convention, Jack Salzman was unfortunately unable to attend and take his place on the panel. The panel did consist of Paul A. Orlov, discussion leader, Charles Shapiro (CUNY, York College), Richard Lehan (UCLA), and William Phillips (U. of Washington, Seattle). An audience of approximately twenty-five was in attendance. General sentiment at the close of the seminar was that whatever the meeting lacked in numbers was more than made up for by the feeling of rapport and enthusiasm for the author-subject.

The nature of the discussion would be difficult to "sum-up"; perhaps, indeed, it is as well not to try, for one of the prevailing ideas was that Dreiser defies neat categorization and has too often received just such critical treatment, that there is still power and emotional appeal and intellectual interest in the novels of Dreiser because the texts of those novels ought not to be looked at from any single point of view but rather remain there for readers and critics to consider in diverse and creative ways. Another keynote observation, the one on which the meeting ended, was that the problems concerning Dreiser criticism and the nature of Dreiser's artistry remain challenging ones; thus, all of the things said at the seminar formed but a prelude.

Virtually all the participants in the 1975 seminar gave immediate and enthusiastic support to the idea of holding another Dreiser seminar at the MLA Convention in 1976. Paul Orlov has already submitted the necessary material to create such a seminar, and plans are under way to make the event more distinguished and crowded--yet hopefully no less stimulating--than its predecessor. Moreover, proposals were made at the seminar that a Dreiser Studies Association be formed to make an MLA meeting devoted to Dreiser and his work an annual part of the convention proceedings on a distinct, secure basis. This idea rests dormant for the time being, but with a view to the future, Mr. Orlov would appreciate from any readers of the *Newsletter* their reactions to the proposal. Further plans for the 1976 MLA seminar will be announced in the Fall issue of the *Newsletter*. In the meantime, all inquiries concerning the seminar or the Dreiser Studies Association may be addressed to Paul A. Orlov, 755 Steeles Avenue - West, Apt. PH 4, Willowdale, Ontario, Canada, M2R 2S6.

-- Paul A. Orlov  
University of Toronto

## Dreiser News and Notes

Vera Dreiser's *My Uncle Theodore* is scheduled for publication in May by the Nash Publishing Corp., 1 Dupont Street, Plainview, New York. . . . Donald Pizer's *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser: A Critical Study* will be issued in April or May by the University of Minnesota Press. Also, his *Theodore Dreiser: A Selection of Uncollected Prose*, to be published by Wayne State University Press, will appear in the early fall. . . . Scheduled for April, the first number of *Prospects: An Annual Journal of American Cultural Studies*, edited by Jack Salzman, will feature a section celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the publication of *An American Tragedy*. This section will include a previously unpublished chapter from the manuscript of the novel, as well as essays by Robert H. Elias and James T. Farrell. *Prospects* is to be published by Burt Franklin & Co., 235 East 44th Street, New York. Salzman is also guest-editing a special Dreiser issue for *Modern Fiction Studies*, to be published in Autumn 1977. Manuscripts can be sent to Jack Salzman, English Department, Long Island University, Brooklyn Center, or to Bill Stafford, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Purdue University. Deadline: May 1, 1977.