

DREISER STUDIES

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“DOWN HILL”: A CHAPTER IN DREISER’S STORY ABOUT HIMSELF

Thomas P. Riggio
University of Connecticut

Dreiser’s nervous breakdown after the publication of *Sister Carrie* was still very much on his mind in 1943, when he wrote H.L. Mencken that, forty years earlier he had “*cursed life*” and had “gone down to the East River from a \$1.50 a week room in Brooklyn to a canal dock to quit.”¹ He also mentioned that he wanted to tell the whole story of his depression in “*A Literary Apprenticeship*,” a memoir planned as a sequel to *Newspaper Days*. Although Dreiser never did write that book, his long crisis—and particularly its relation to his literary career—figured in his writing for many years. In 1904 he wrote the first and fullest account of his collapse, *An Amateur Laborer*. The narrative Dreiser started in the early 1900s was so intimately linked to his uncertain identify as a writer that he kept returning to it, like a sculptor trying to work shapeless matter into coherent form; and for over two decades, he rearranged and reinterpreted the main events of the story to fit his changing needs.²

On 6 March 1924, Dreiser wrote to William C. Lengel, then managing editor of *Hearst’s International*, responding to Lengel’s request for articles based on his bout with neurasthenia.³ In summarizing the plot of the proposed series, Dreiser drew upon a long autobiographical essay called “*Down Hill and Up*.”⁴ Lengel finally bought only one article, a piece on the novelist’s relation with the Irish railroad foreman Mike Burke, which Dreiser excerpted from the “up hill” half of the manuscript.⁵ The complete text, which was never published, covers an eleven month period from February 1903, when Dreiser arrived in New York from Philadelphia, severely depressed and down to his last few dollars, to December 1903, when he left a job on the New York Central Railroad to do editorial work for the *New York Daily News*. Part I, “*Down Hill*,” is presented here for the first time and will be followed by Part II in the next issue of *Dreiser Studies*.⁶

While Dreiser’s account of his breakdown changed from one telling to another, certain ideas remained constant. All versions, for instance, focus on one central issue: the search to understand the loss of self-confidence which led to his inability to write. In “*Down Hill*” he isolates the period’s obsessive question—“*Who was I*”—and its source: “*my doubt as to whether I should ever be able to write again*.” In earlier variations on this theme, Dreiser explored the physical basis of his illness, and sought to explain his

weakened state variously as malaria, "some inherent blood affliction," stomach trouble, lung spots, and "mental exhaustion from past excesses both of the sexual passion and mental labor." Here he traces his depressive moods in part to a "malignant appendix" and general ill health.

As usual, Dreiser respectfully reviews medical facts, but the peculiar power of "Down Hill" comes from the sense he conveys that more mysterious and hidden forces influenced his actions. He was right, of course, though he wasn't skillful enough at self-analysis to trace the deeper sources of his problems. As a storyteller, however, he had more valuable tools: images that captured the experience, if not all its meaning. "To be down. What a horrible significance that word had come to have for me," Dreiser had noted in 1904.⁷ By the early 1920s, the metaphors of "down" and "up" hill represented for him the inscrutable and precarious poles of human existence. Always an absolutist in his thinking, Dreiser had come to believe that the individual either strides above the storms of life or succumbs to them; and the outcome, he suggests, depends mainly on one's strength of character.

The outcome, to be sure, is never in question here. The fledgling author we find in these pages endures much but has an inner toughness that leads him to search out manual work and put himself on the path to recovery. In 1924, as Dreiser looked back on his younger self, he could afford the luxury of such a portrait. He wrote "Down Hill" from the perspective of a literary survivor--a view he had asserted but found hard to sustain when he was working on the *Laborer*. Not surprisingly, a certain degree of smugness creeps into his tone here. This is balanced, however, by a strong sense of inexplicable forces at work in his life. Even after so many years, he can decipher his earlier state only figuratively. Hamlet's language, not the rhetoric of success, becomes the vehicle for self-definition. "There is a star, a providence which shapes our ends," Dreiser insists. He surrounds his struggle with auguries that are genuine emblems of his fate. One such is the tipsy "Irish or Scotch sailor or wanderer" whose fantastic appearance and antics give an aura of fable to the account. The faun-like creature prophesies Dreiser's eventual victory over "unkind fate." While disclaiming belief in apparitions, Dreiser directly appeals to the reader to keep all avenues to self-knowledge open: "Yet now and again in my life, Horatio, there have appeared to be things in Heaven and Earth that are not dreamed of in our philosophies."

Despite such evocations, the note of mystery remains a subtext to Dreiser's more obvious need to proclaim his power to pick himself up in times of crisis and to begin again. As a result, although he dramatizes his plight in extreme terms--this is the first mention of suicide in any of the accounts of his breakdown--he underplays other factors, like the mental distress that he recorded in the diary he kept in Philadelphia and the excruciating psychosomatic disorders and fits of hallucination that make the *Laborer* so vivid. He underscores his self-sufficiency by making

himself a more isolated figure than he was. His wife Sara, for instance, is barely mentioned, though she supported him sporadically throughout the long ordeal. Also missing are the financial aid and moral support given him by his brother Paul Dresser--and the stay at William Muldoon's sanitarium that Paul forced upon him. To be fair, these distortions of fact probably are due less to ingratitude than to the more powerful urge to center the narrative on another kind of truth: the hard-won knowledge that the power of renewal lay finally in his own strong will to live--and especially to write.

Dreiser immortalized the record of his growth as a writer by framing it within an elaborate social fable of artistic struggle. "Down Hill" is the most detailed version of an anecdote that he had embellished over the years and told to Mencken, Dorothy Dudley, Fremont Older, and others who then made it part of the literary mythology of their time. Dreiser himself held center stage, as both victim and resurrected hero, in a drama that by this point had as its antagonists a well-known cast of villains. First among them is an unlikely character, Neltje Doubleday, the wife of the publisher Frank Doubleday, whose role in the shabby treatment of Dreiser's first novel may never be fully explained.⁸ Besides the Doubledays, Dreiser introduced a score of minor ogres: magazine editors who rejected his stories and articles, hostile and moralistic critics, unsympathetic and narrowminded publishers--all arbiters of native opinion who, in the fable, are factors as potent in Dreiser's downward slide as his weak appendix or any star that may have shaped his end. Put another way, Dreiser had moved beyond the physical and metaphysical speculation of the *Laborer* and formulated the links between his breakdown and his later revolt against the literary order of the day. It was, and still is, a good story, with enough truth to it to have served a generation of writers who found in it a mirror of their own sense of exclusion and a poignant allegory of triumphant artistic integrity.

DOWN HILL AND UP

PART I.

"DOWN"

by Theodore Dreiser

Personally I have several times referred to and often thought back upon a rather black storm of combined ill-health and morbid depression which overtook me about one year after I had completed *SISTER CARRIE* and just as I had outlined to myself for the first time the major

part of JENNIE GERHARDT. Mentally and physically this reduced me until at last, at one time, I was thinking of ending it all in some way which would be neither painful nor too disagreeable. Why? It is never quite possible, I think, to lay one's finger definitely upon the causes of either success or failure, strength or weakness under certain circumstances or at certain crucial moments. There is a star, a providence which shapes our ends. Quite frankly a number of my very personal experiences has led me to suspect that for some people, at least, there are essential occurrences or experiences that must be endured willy-nilly. [They are necessary to character, they toughen and make durable. Modesty in the hour of success depends upon them. They make for a larger humanity in some who would never know the meaning of the word save for what they themselves have endured.]⁹

Be that as it may.

A malignant appendix was an early possession of mine. I did not know it until I was thirty-nine, but up to that year, my health was very poor at times. I was very thin and nervous, although burning always with a desire to live, be, do, play and be happy. But from time to time my condition produced a morbid psychology or hypochondria, the which I was constantly fighting as best I could. Just the same it succeeded in coloring my work, thoughts and notions. For even then I realized that the physical state was purely personal to me--a visitation of evil or an unkind fate--and it made me sad.

At last, after many battles, and being discharged from the New York World in 1895, and eliminating myself perforce from the newspaper world hereafter, I came to the place (1897-8-9) where I was beginning to make my own way as a contributor to various magazines.¹⁰ Although I could not as yet write a short story to suit me, or one that any magazine would accept, I had still read me the riddle of the current magazine article and could write a passing picture of oyster farming on Long Island, the making of heavy ordinance in Bridgeport, how and why the current popular song was written, how the local political leader ruled and controlled his district. And I could paint vivid pen pictures of such current personalities as W.D. Howells, Chauncey M. Depew, P.D. Armour, Marshall Field--a long list. The articles, as I soon found, netted me from fifty to a hundred dollars. And being of not a frugal, but rather socially indifferent and meditative turn of mind, not anxious to make money but preferring to browse about queer neighborhoods, old bookstalls, the rooms and studios of indigent jugglers like myself, and to take romance and pleasure how and where could find it, I did well enough. Sometimes a girl, idling among old hooks or loitering before some street door or shop window would smile at me or begin a conversation about nothing, and we would while away an evening or an afternoon together. Sometimes I went fishing, swimming, dilling with some artist, writer or idler like myself, who had a fancy for that sort of thing. The now famous artist Bruce Crane was one of my

youthful cronies. W. Louis Sonntag another. J. Francis Murphy another. J.A. Dolph, the "cat and dog" painter, as they used to call him, another. I loved artists and their studios, and loafed away many a happy hour in dozens of the studios of men who have come and gone, leaving in some cases not a trace--in others shining trails--E.L. Henry--J. Francis Murphy, Bruce Crane.

However, in 1898, and for the first time after giving up the hope sometime before, I eventually succeeded in evolving a type of story which pleased me and which I sought to market. And I did market four or five in out-of-the-way places. Yet, as I soon found, also, all the more important magazines were roundly criticizing me for a type of tale that I thought was fine and true--"Old Rogaum and His Theresa", "Nigger Jeff" and a now lost story called "The Great Fortune". Where, as in the case of the former two, they did not think them utterly immoral, or at least scandalously and shamefully frank, they did consider them irritatingly rough and candid, too much so for their use. In connection with "The Great Fortune", one editor--an associate of the Century--remarked to me personally, that no self-respecting magazine should publish it. I thought their opinions mistaken and provincial. For the first time in my life I began to suspect that these men did not know life or were not interested in its verities. I was.

Incidentally, as more than two editors were plain spoken enough to tell me "if I were going in for that sort of thing", I might as well stop trying to write. I would find no market in this country. (And that was but twenty-six years ago.) And most of those in charge of the major magazines, at least, began to act as though no phase of work that I could do or attempt--article or story--would be satisfactory to them. I was too radical, apparently. Too perverse in my moods and tastes. Yet having tasted of the joy of short-story composition, I was through with articles for life, I thought or hoped, at any rate. I wanted to do only short stories, the purely creative type of thing and had already begun a novel.

Now about this time, having solved for myself, as I thought, the problem of subsistence of sorts, I had decided to take unto myself a wife, and did. The amazing knight-errantry of youth and romance. And as speedily thereafter as possible I discovered that instead of having less means, I must have more. Two could not live as cheaply as one in New York. Hence, and forthwith, the economic problem became heavily oppressive. I found I must do more and better work than I had ever done before, and so make more money. Yet I was up against this problem of compromise or no sales, and I was in no mood to compromise. I had, as you see, my own theory as to what the short story or novel ought to be--with what it might concern itself. Nor was I troubled as to how it should be written. I would write it as it was given me to write.

With much driving on my part and the deep encouragement of one single male friend who wished to write himself¹¹ and found in me one who

could keep him genial and corroborative company, I finally got through *SISTER CARRIE*. And a number of short stories and articles. Because of considerable private praise anent the novel I based great hopes on it. I had, in short, the definite and yet entirely illusory notion that because it was considered excellent, by a number of personal and critical friends, it must sell and sell well. All one had to do was to take it to a reputable publisher and get it published. Presto--fame and fortune. One's picture in the papers. The plaudits of many--the friendship and affection of the wise.

Never was an ambitious sprig of a novelist destined for a more definite and drastic reduction. Although after but two attempts, I succeeded in finding a publisher, and was assured by a then famous novelist (Frank Norris), who reigned as first reader at Doubleday Page & Co., that I had written something that would create a sensation, still nothing was to come of it. For, although in the absence of the publisher and his wife, who were in Europe, the book was accepted by the vice-president of the company--afterwards ambassador to Great Britain¹²--a contract drawn and not a little preliminary publicity indulged in regard to it. (There was to have been a complimentary dinner given me, I believe, by the firm.) Then the publisher and his wife returned and the book was given to the wife to read by her husband--or so I was told. It was forthwith repudiated with contumely and even loathing. It was low, vulgar, naturalistic, whereas all else of the day, or nearly all, was romantic and virtuous. (Our better selves.) I was requested to take the book back and cancel my contract.

This shocked and reduced me not a little, as you may guess. For being young and new to this work I had given myself over to the wildestancies as to what might befall me. Now that I had written so fine a book, and it had been so grandly received, I was to be this, that and the other. And then to be told, after the spring and summer had gone, and I had been living all this while in anticipation of so much, that my book was so retched a thing. And in spite of what had been told me and a contract drawn and signed, it was to be thrown back on my hands. I could have died. I was so green as to the ways of publishers--as to the possibilities of my own book.

Worse, and more of it. Owing to the well-meaning but impracticable advice of friends, among them the genial and generous and poetic and enthusiastic Frank Norris, and the then vice-president of Doubleday-Page Co., I was urged to stand by my contract. After all, this was the work of a foolish and officious woman who knew nothing of life or letters. Her husband, solely because of her mood, as I was told by Norris and Page, had been persuaded to reject it. Once it was published and sent broadcast to the critics, such an uproar--favorable, of course--would follow as would never silence the attitude of wife and husband toward it. They would be drowned in a chorus of hallelujahs, or words to that effect.

However, as I am sorry to report, the thing did not work out quite that way. Because of my temerity in voicing the wishes of others in the matter, although I did not name them, and demanding that the contract be fulfilled, the publisher angrily exclaimed at last, "All right. I'll publish it. But that's all I will do." And after having re-conferred with my friends and well wishers, although really against my own private and better judgment, which told me to take the book elsewhere, I was persuaded to proceed--to compel this company to publish this book whether it would or not--stand on my contract--a move which now seems to be so ridiculous and silly that I am heartily ashamed of it.

Be that as it may.

The publisher did as demanded. Only after having the plates cast and some fifteen hundred copies of the book printed, the entire lot according to his own lawyer, Thomas H. McKee, barring three hundred sent to critics and newspapers by the first reader, was stored in the cellar of the company and there they remained until 1905 when I with money borrowed from a friendly admirer, was able to take them over at cost.

In the meanwhile, as is now well known, the book had been much discussed. As a matter of fact, it and myself were as savagely attacked in certain quarters as though we were errant outlaws, criminals and adventurers of the most degraded type. And in other quarters it was praised. With scarcely a dime in my pocket, and owing to a certain deadly opposition which sprang up in nearly all editorial and publishing quarters, thereafter I was yet the recipient of letters which rather staggered me by their serious consideration. Without the slightest hesitation and upon the recommendation of Frank Norris, who sent it to William Heinemann in London, it was published there in 1901, and scored another rather ponderous critical success in England. So much so that salvos of critical objection were registered in America. Nevertheless, in so far as this country was concerned, no copies were sold and few after the first or second edition in England. It was destined to be a work of slow growth.

In so far as my own private affairs were concerned, however, they were forthwith, upon the publication of the book, made much worse rather than better. I could induce no publisher to consider re-issuing the book, firstly, because it had already been published and presumably failed, although no copies had been sent out. Secondly, because of its character, which (only consider the literature of the last decade) was too frank, even shamefully immoral. The publisher of the Century Company in 1911, handing me a contract for a certain work and a check for two thousand dollars in advance, assured me that although on a certain day in 1901 he knew that I was outside with my book under my arm, anxious to see him, still he would not admit me, because he considered the work immoral--then. The head of the firm of A.S. Barnes & Co., then a publishing house of repute, gave it to his most trusted advisor to read and the same threw it in the fire. I have the letter covering the transaction

The chief literary advisor of D. Appleton & Co. thought that something might be done with it, if a less drastic work were written and put out on the market first. But he would advance no money for such a work as JENNIE GERHARDT, which I then and there troubled to outline to him. The chief literary authority of McClure-Phillips Company, a gentleman who afterwards conducted a magazine of his own, assured me that SISTER CARRIE was vulgar and impossible--a poor novel. And when I outlined Jennie Gerhardt flew into a critical rage, and assured me--I recall his words, nearly, I think--that "if that was the way I was heading, I would find myself a social pariah" and that he for one would have nothing to do with me. And within ten years, the same gentleman was assuring me that the two books were exceptional books, indeed.

But I dally. The thing is of no import save that it was like that everywhere. I could get no cash and such short stories as I wrote, to say nothing of such articles as I suggested, I could not sell. A small bank account, stored in the days when I still had entree to one and another publishers, dwindled to quite nothing. At the same time, sensing an economic storm approaching as well as a critical storm already at hand, and becoming gravely uncertain as to my future, I became depressed--very. Life took on a darker look for me than it had ever worn before. I seemed destined to defeat in the one field that seemed worth while to me--the one realm that spelled escape from monotony and humdrum. I began to brood. This coupled with a physical condition which was never sound up to that time, quite did for me. I became morbid and in attempting to continue my writing, regardless of market conditions, I suddenly found myself too nervous to concentrate. Days and weeks even went by and I accomplished nothing. Instead I walked the streets, wondering how I was to manage in the face of a situation which seemed to preclude my writing in any form.

Sensing what promised to be a long psychic, as well as financial storm, I did my best to prepare for it. Having already written out a fairly complete plan for JENNIE GERHARDT¹³ and recalling that at least one publisher had said that if I would write another novel, not quite as drastic as SISTER CARRIE, he would consider accepting the two of them together--that is, publish the new novel first and then reissue SISTER CARRIE afterwards--I returned to him (Mr. Ripley Hitchcock of D. Appleton's), but he was just in the process of resigning and could do nothing for me. And every other publisher of repute refused to have anything to do with me. The manager of Stokes and Company, to whom I was given a letter by Hitchcock, sent out word that he was busy and not interested, anyhow.

Finally, I found one small publishing concern--J.F. Taylor & Company--which because it was interested to essay fiction, and because its lead was entirely new to the publishing world, decided to advance me the sum of sixty dollars a month for twelve months in order that I might finish

JENNIE GERHARDT. This was really a wild literary experiment on their part and led to nothing, as I will show. For, as I myself half suspected at the time, I was in no condition to write or finish any book. My nerves were unstrung. My mood too dark. After entering upon a contract to finish another novel in at least twelve months, I found myself, as before, unable to write. Yet on the strength of the sum assured me I had closed up my small apartment in New York, induced my wife to look after herself for a period here or elsewhere, and proceeded to a small hamlet in Virginia where I prepared to immure myself until I should come forth with a complete manuscript.

That book was never written then at all. Instead I wandered here and there in Virginia and West Virginia, unable to write, my mood made worse by the fact that the money that was being sent me was being used up and I was getting no where. Finally, at the end of eleven months, having exhausted my own patience, although not the good will of my prospective publishers, I decided to explain that I was accomplishing nothing, refuse any more money from them since I could make no return, and come back to New York. My plan was to repay later what had thus far been received, and this, eventually, I did.

As I had but sixty dollars remaining I was not quite able to decide what I would do there, but the country without the power to write and without any immediate friends was terrible. At least in New York there were many I knew even if now I did not care to see them. A kind of morbid melancholy, due to my great failure in connection with the writing world, as I saw it, caused me to wish to shun all men--particularly those who had known me as a writer. My name to editors, at least, as I assumed, must be by now a fast vanishing memory. My standing with any respectable publisher nothing. Yet I returned to New York in the fall of the year and facing a drear prospect, the conclusion of which I could not guess, settled in a hall bedroom in Williamsburgh (Brooklyn)--the cheapest I could find. It was a minute and dark affair in that region to which the old East 23rd and East Grand and Roosevelt Street ferries then plied. Here in a tumble down street near the water front, but with a most picturesque view of the East River, Brooklyn Bridge and the Navy Yard, I hid myself away in the hall bedroom, daily determined to complete at least one saleable article, poem or short story, yet accomplishing no single thing of which I mentally could approve.

In fact, a kind of fury of despair seized upon me at this time and, at certain moments, being horribly dissatisfied with my state and my seeming inability to write anything worthwhile, I would tear up whole scores of pages, the fruit of days of attempted concentration and nervous stress, and going out into the lone streets, would walk and walk. Now and again I would make my way to some market, where the sight of the busy marketmen and their customers would soothe and comfort me. It seemed as though I should be able to write something about that and sell it to a

newspaper. Again it would be some nook or cranny of the great Brooklyn waterfront where within sight of scores of old barges, scows, lighters and international freighters being loaded and unloaded, I would stand or sit and dream and grieve. The great world was wagging on. Other men were busy and healthful enough. Across the water was the great city in which I had hoped to attract so much attention--to be someone. And here now I was an outcast really. Almost a beggar as I saw it. The restless and fascinating waters at my feet clashed and flashed and ran. The great life of the city flowed on. In bookstalls and on the magazine stands were many and most fascinating contributions of later and early pens. But nothing of mine. And presumably now there never would be. My gift had forsaken me.

I watched my cash dwindle until finally it got so low as ten dollars--five dollars--one dollar--then finally so little as a quarter. Do not think I had not tried. I had tried and tried to write and to sell, too--impossible things, as I now recall, which I should not have sent out at all. At the same time, it is true, I had relatives in New York, two sisters and a brother to whom for reasons of my own I did not wish to appeal. I had felt them to be, if not ungenerous, at least unfriendly at the time. There was a sister in Rochester, comfortable and of no small social position to whom I might have appealed. Yet because of pride I would not. Why should I? In my days of modest achievement here and there I had not troubled to consider them to any extent. Now in my poverty, why should I expect them to look after me. It seemed petty and cowardly and I refused to do it.

Yet, just the same, unless I did this, and that instantly, as I well knew, disaster was obviously before me. I had to get money from somewhere--a job, or something--or starve. I have mentioned my dwindling cash. On the day it reached a quarter, with my room rent due in a day or two, I went to the Wallabout waterfront, which was so near at hand, stood out on a long pier there at evening, looking at the then miniature and unimpressive skyline of New York, the red of a February West beyond it. Before me, as I stood, were the shuttling ferries with their homing crowds; the hundreds and thousands of lights of the city beyond already beginning to twinkle in the distant buildings over the river, the sounds of boats, cars and the traffic of the great city being wafted to my ears from the shore beyond. And indeed then the world seemed preternaturally beautiful and desirable, but obviously too much for me. I saw no pleasing prospect anywhere--was really too ill and weary. As I stood, I recall now, that a great sound boat passed by--either the Plymouth or the Puritan, its decks even on this winter evening swarming with those who, to me at least, seemed comfortable and happily housed for the night. They could travel. They could have good times whereas I--well--here I was and I could not even afford an evening meal. My lone quarter would not permit it. Instead I found a large raw potato on the deck and ate that. But I asked

myself then--has it come to this? Must I ask for charity or drop out here, once and for all? Have I the courage in the face of failure to quit? Or have I the strength not to quit? And if I do not, which way shall I turn next.

During the past three months in which I had been hiding here, living on almost nothing, I pawned a watch I had for twenty-five dollars and used that. I developed a cough, which as a later x-ray proved, had produced a lung spot. And my appendix, perhaps as much because of poor food as anything, was more troublesome than ever. I suffered constantly from a form of gastric pain.

Nevertheless I could not quite bring myself to end it then. It was not that the solution seemed so very difficult, as that I did not want to admit defeat so completely. Why should I? I might get well again. At the same time the sight of the icy cold and splashing waters actually appealed to me. It would be so easy to drop in. The cold would soon numb me--a few gulps and all would be over. All that was necessary was to slip down into this gulf and rest. No one would know. I would be completely forgotten.

Then I turned upon myself and asked why should I? After all I was not old, nor was I broken mentally or physically entirely. I might not have friends for the moment, but they could be made, and some day, who knows, I might be able to write again. But supposing I decided to live, how was I to do? I had only a quarter now. To whom or what was I to turn. A job, however mean, might not necessarily be secured in a day. And betimes, in searching, on what would I subsist? Sleep in a station house? Apply to the Salvation Army? Although both thoughts came, they sickened me. I resented them horribly. Perhaps this other was best, after all.

Yet, after a solemn debate with myself, which held me until after eight at night, I finally turned and retraced my steps up the barren street, by which I had descended. My plan as I now decided was to rest that night in the room that was still mine until morning, albeit supperless. The following day, since the next week's rent would then be due in advance, I would take my bag and depart. But where?

[By means of stress or sheer mental inertia, as you will, in the face of the psychic strain, my clothes and my general appearance had now become such that I was almost afraid to face anyone. The one suit that I retained throughout all this was become, well, not much. An overcoat the same. A single suit case held the barest essentials--no more. Yet despite this equipment I was planning to seek employment, give up writing entirely for the present, anyhow, and work at anything I could find.]¹⁴

It is one thing to decide suddenly that one will work with one's hands, or otherwise, apart from writing, and another to find work speedily. And by then, as I have said, I was down to my last quarter. Since I had but a

quarter my plan was simple. I would buy my ferry passage to New York with one nickel. With another dime I would check my bag at some convenient place, the Grand Central Station, say. That would leave me baggageless and free. Then what? At the moment I could not tell what I had no definite, workable scheme of any kind.

Yet lying in my small room that night, thinking how I was to do, an interesting idea popped into my mind. It was, as is most usual in such cases, based on the experiences of another or some previous experience of one's own. A year or two before I had one day met an old newspaper acquaintance of mine, who the year before that again, had been in desperate straits--apparently not unakin to those in which I was in now. Like myself he was down and out and I had given him a few dollars. On this occasion however, the last on which I saw him, he was resplendent in new and good clothes and announced with a smirk that he was done with the newspaper "game" forever. He was now a conductor on the New York, New Haven, and Hartford. And in explanation of "how come" he elucidated that at his lowest ebb, he had decided to go to see the president of the New York, New Haven, and Hartford. It appeared that he had interviewed him once and been most cordially received. The president had given him a drink. And invited him to stop back at some time or other. Hence, at this lowest rung of his fortunes, he had resolved to appeal to him. and the said president having a personal liking for him, had decided that he would make him a conductor and had. "And," he said in parting, "if you ever want to go over the road while I'm on, all you've got to do is to see me, see, and it'll be all right, if you've got your fare. Montreal." He waved me a gay adieu.

So now, on this occasion, in my dim hall bedroom, I thought of him. And I then and there resolved that I would go and see, not the president of the New York, New Haven, and Hartford--that side of the street had already been worked--but the president of the New York Central. Why not? The conditions were much the same. I had once interviewed him and sold the interview for fifty dollars. Another time I had written a study of him and secured the publication of it in a magazine along with a full page portrait of himself.¹⁵ And he had given me a drink on both occasions. In fact, both times, we had sat in front of an open fire in his home in one of the fifties and he had talked amusingly of New York and of life and railroading. Now was my chance. Could I not go to him, recall the pleasant occasions and tell him my tale of woe? He might make me a trainman, or at least a working man somewhere, in some capacity, on the immense system of which he was the head. To be sure, my clothing and general appearance were not such as to permit me to affect an air of well being or camaraderie, as I saw it, but still, the ruse might work, and quickly.

Apropos of this idea of doing something manual, I should say this. In the South, and later in Philadelphia, being intensely nervous and unable

to sleep or to work, I had consulted two different specialists. One had resorted to pills. Another had shook his head and said I should give up trying to write and do something different--travel and rest-- in Europe, say, or Asia. Fee, in each case, ten dollars. Again, on arriving in New York, I had gone to the leading nerve specialist and being at my wit's end, had told him that I had no money, but at some time or other, might have some. Dana was his name. Would he examine and advise me and wait? He so did, most thoroughly. And after pondering over the matter, he announced "Neurasthenia. But medicine won't help you. And trying to write in your condition will merely aggravate your situation. You can't. Your notion is against it. Get a job out of doors, on a farm or do something that will take your mind off yourself and exercise your body. Drive a wagon, get a place as a collector where you have to walk. Try snow shoveling, street cleaning, anything. If you ever get any money, you owe me twenty-five dollars." And he bowed me out.

Now, at this lowest ebb, as quite often recently I had thought of him and his advice. And in thinking of Mr. Chauncey M. Depew, I thought of getting some such task, maybe as a trainman, or switchman. Or, if not either of those, then as a day laborer, working with a pick and shovel, say. I was not very strong now, to be sure. Still it might be done, or so I thought.

The execution of that idea, once I had thought it all out, was not so easy. I have mentioned my clothes. I have dwelt upon my nervous and decidedly recessive and melancholy state. I could barely muster sufficient courage or interest at times to face the streets, let alone the president of the New York Central.

Nevertheless, the next morning, my rent in advance being due, I announced as early as nine a.m. that I was leaving, took my small suit case and departed. And having but the lone quarter, decided to walk to the nearest ferry--about a mile away--pay my way across, leaving a balance of twenty cents, check my bag at the Grand Central--charge ten cents--balance ten cents. Thus I would be free to go, do, be anything. And I would not have encumbrances of any kind. Yet in so doing I rather congratulated myself on my courage to essay this last chance rather than--slip into the water. "After all," I said to myself, "I can scarcely get any lower than this. I am sick and broke. My fortunes will not go much beyond this, without changing or ending. So here goes." And I walked doggedly on. Yet my mental state was very low indeed. That courageous thought was but a flash. Within the depths of my being was being rendered a requiem.

And now, before I go a word further, let me report a very curious thing. I have never really believed in apparitions, materializations, boggarts, or kobolds. Yet now and again in my life, Horatio, there have appeared to be things in Heaven and Earth that are not dreamed of in our philosophies. I was walking west now toward this same East River.

Once there my plan was to follow the shore street to the ferry which ran to East 23rd Street. And as I now approached this river street, I saw turning into it about a half a block away a curiously interesting and half drunk Irish or Scotch sailor or wanderer, who by his gait and manner suggested the sea to me. He was slim and uncouth and rather shabby as to his get-up and yet amusingly loutish and waggish and decidedly more than half drunk. He had on, as I saw, a long and loosely fitting frieze coat, from the bulging pockets of which projected on the one side a bundle, on the other a rag of red and green kerchief. On his head was resting a small round, brown, faded hat, cocked over one ear most jauntily, which gave him a devil-may-care or rakish air. His arms, too, as I saw at the moment, were lifted rather high, as a bird chooses to lift his wings, and he appeared not to be able to resist pirouetting a little as he came, he extracted from the inside pocket of his great coat a small tin whistle or flute and placing this to his lips, proceeded to execute a fairly airy and trill-ful melody to which he added a few gay steps and capers. And then as he came exactly opposite to me, he paused, removed the pipe from his lips, fixed me with an impish and yet congenial leer, much as might a goat or a faun, and exclaimed, "Ah, well. We're very low today, but we'll be much better by and by. Tootle-e-oot. Tootle-e-oot." For, as instantly he restored the pipe to his lips and dancing and capering and so tootling, danced on and up the street and out of my sight.

"Now, what is this?" I asked myself, gazing after him. "And what can it bode?" For, as I have often indicated, in my catalogue of experiences, if not my philosophy, are entered many things not recorded in the books of current fact.

But let that be as it will. I proceeded to cross [on] the ferry, walked to 42nd Street and Fourth Avenue, checked my bag and then, standing outside the New York Central office, pondered on my grand plan. In my pocket was ten cents exactly. Now what? Should I go or should I not? Did I have the courage to face Mr. Depew or did I not? There would be officious office boys and assistants between himself and myself. There would be my clothes--my nervous run down look. Would they let me see him? Would he talk to me if they did? What would he think? Would you believe it, it never even occurred to me this time to call at his house where twice before I had been received without formality and with the greatest civility. Instead I must wait here, and finally decided to go up.

But before I could get to see him here, as I discovered, there were various preliminaries. I had to write my name on a card and state what my business was. But I disguised that by saying that I was or had once been connected with various magazines and that I had once interviewed him, and that now I desired to ask a slight favor of him. After nearly a half hour's waiting, there came to me a clerk, very courteous but remote, who explained to me that Mr. Depew was very busy. No doubt I had written an interview with him. But nevertheless, unless I could wait

several days I could not see him. But if there were any specific requests I would care to make--any special desire--that he might present to Mr. Depew over the telephone--

I explained my quest to this clerk. He looked at me dubiously, went away and soon came back saying that it was nothing really with which ordinarily Mr. Depew could concern himself. He was too busy and never troubled to employ anyone personally. That was a matter for the various department heads. The thing for me to do, if I wanted anything so humble as a job, was to see the Engineer of Maintenance of Ways. That gentleman, or department of which he was head, employed fifty thousand men. If anything could be done for me, he was the one to do it. Then, because my face fell, I presume, and my appearance indicated necessity, no doubt, he added that he could give me a card which would get me to Mr. _____ (The name has long since escaped me.)

I thanked him for the card and proceeded to the department of the engineer which was on another floor. He was not in then. Having had neither breakfast nor dinner the night before, unless it was the raw potato I had found on the dock, I now went out to do a little something for myself in that respect. Going to Second or Third Avenue, I forget which, I bought a loaf of fresh bread. Total worldly cash after that, five cents. Half of this, I ate at once, and reserved the other half, done up in brown paper and held under my arm, for my dinner, for I was by no means sure how soon, again, I was to eat. Then at two, I returned to the office of the Engineer of Maintenance of Ways, but he was still not in. But on going in this time, and desiring to make as trim an appearance as possible, I laid my half loaf on a window ledge outside, expecting to recover it when I returned. But when I came back, after finding that he was still not in, and not expected before three, I found that my half loaf was gone--my dinner. Needless to say I was darkly reduced by that. It seemed as though all was against me. Nevertheless hanging about below stairs, and walking about here and there, it finally came to be three, and a little after and again I returned. This time he was in, and on the strength of the card given me, I presume, he deigned to see me.

I can never forget how in contradistinction to my own wretched and distraught state at the time, the decidedly affluent, guarded and restful office in which this somewhat princely figure appeared before me, affected me. He was so tall, so slim, so dark, so Spanish almost. His long, thin, ivory-colored fingers were still toying with some papers as I entered. His long and rather sallow face, very much the color of old ivory, suggested a painting by Goya. And below his high, narrow forehead, gleamed two glassy, black eyes. He merely looked at me curiously.

"You came from Mr. Depew's office?"

"Yes."

"Now, briefly and exactly what is it you wish?"

I explained definitely without emphasizing in any way at the moment my extreme poverty. I was a writer. I had fallen ill. I had been told I was semi-neurasthenic and that out-of-door work, manual labor, really, was the only thing that would help me. Having once written of and been cordially received by Mr. Depew, I had ventured to call upon him and explain what I wanted and had been referred by him to this office. I did not say that a clerk had so referred me--merely left him to think as he would.

Afterward, for the life of me, I could not decide whether my attempt to make him think Mr. Depew had sent me had any weight or not. He was such a very curious person--so very reserved, so individual, so very remote and meticulous, as it seemed to me, miles beyond and away from such a trivial business as this before him. Still he remained the soul of courtesy and now assumed at once a most easy and confidential and conversational tone toward me.

"Neurasthenia is a curious business, isn't it? They don't seem to know much about it. I was very much run down myself a few years ago. As a matter of fact, I have to be very careful of my diet now. (I thought of my last half loaf.) But my physician suggested sleeping out-of-doors. So I had the top of a veranda at my place out at Westchester next to my sleeping rooms turned into a sort of out-door bedroom--quite open except for a little lattice work--and I sleep out there now. Besides I put in a few exercising apparatus--a rowing machine, a stationary bicycle and a punching bag. I work with those a few minutes every morning and after I get up and then I take my bath. I don't suppose you ever thought of going in for those things, did you?"

"What the devil does this man take me to be?" thought I. "Is he kidding me? Can't he tell by my looks and my clothes whether I would be able to indulge in a rowing machine and a punching bag at this stage of the game? Here he sits in a mahogany office, unable because of his stomach to eat anything he wants, and he hints to me that I might try sleeping out on a latticed veranda in Westchester." He looked to me as he spoke, ever so much like one of the distinguished, dark noblemen who are always pictured in paintings as surrounding the erratic Emperor Charles V.

"Unfortunately," I said, "I can't go in for that sort of thing now. The treatment wouldn't be drastic enough. I really need a complete change--something entirely opposite to what I have been doing."

"That is possible," he said. "No two cases are ever alike." He then turned slowly to his desk, picked up a framed map of the New York Central system, a more complete and extensive map than ever I had seen, and began to examine it.

"You see," he said calmly, laying it before me on a corner of his immense flat desk. "I could send you nearly anywhere, if it is just manual work you want to do. We have lots of that. This department manages

fifty thousand men. We have some shipping interests on the Great Lakes." He pointed with a pencil point toward Sault Ste. Marie, on Huron. "I might put you out there on a boat." Then he paused. "There is also a building department for this division at Yonkers. And another at Albany. There is the bridge department at White Plains. They build and repair everything East of Buffalo. I could put you out with a bridge or carpenter gang, if you knew any least thing of carpentering, or bridge work. We have even some mines down in Pennsylvania—that is a good healthy mining country." He now put his pencil on some spot in Pennsylvania, indicating a mining region. Later he pointed to some division in the Adirondacks. "I might go up there. It was a little cold yet, but would be nice in Summer. He seemed a little uncertain as to just what he should do with me.

"Why not let me work with an out-door gang at something," I urged. "I would like that. I wouldn't mind the work. The harder the better, perhaps. It wouldn't kill me and it would be different, interesting."

"But my dear fellow," he explained. "I don't think you could get away with it. You don't understand what gang work is, I am sure. We have as many as fifty mason foremen, here and there with gangs of from ten to twenty Italians. We have heaven only knows how many section gangs. They load and unload stone, ballast the tracks, lay the ties and the rails and repair them. But it's hard work, very. It would break your back. You couldn't stand it. Just watch a gang once and see for yourself. Besides it's dangerous. I wouldn't want to send you where you might get hurt. They work in tunnels and on the main tracks, mostly."

He studied the map once more, looking at times out over the city north of Forty-Fourth Street.

"Nevertheless, I'd like to be out of doors, if I could."

"Well, let me see," he said. "Mr. Williams is an intelligent man. He's my superintendent of buildings at Yonkers. He does all the building repair work this side of Poughkeepsie and Brewster. He has several easy repair gangs. I believe I'll turn you over to him. But I'll just put you down as beginning work, when Monday?"

"The sooner the better," I said eagerly.

"Very well, Monday, then. I'll give you a note and you can report to him and he can puzzle out just where to fit you in. But no track gangs. He hasn't any under him, anyhow." He rang and a stenographer entered. "A note to Mr. Williams at Yonkers," he began. "The bearer, Mr. Theodore Dreiser, a writer, is to be employed beginning Monday morning next at day labor out-of-doors. This is for his health and is not to be too strenuous. You will list him accordingly."

He explained, as the stenographer went to type this letter, that it might be as well if I were to essay some work somewhere near New York to begin with. If I didn't like it or couldn't stand it, well, I would be near New York. No long trip back. Later if I liked it, but wished to go farther

away, he could send me anywhere--the Adirondacks, Pennsylvania, the Great Lakes. The clerk returned with the note. He signed it and I bowed myself out.

But once outside the door I realized that I had but that single nickel in my pocket and he had said nothing of any transportation to Yonkers. And after my grand manner I would not venture to speak of it, either. But how to get to Yonkers. There was no subway, even. Besides this was Friday and my wages did not even begin until Monday. And pay day on a railroad might be a remote thing--once every month, say. I was about to decide that my new job was nothing to me--a wasted effort--when a second thought, not unlike that relating to the ex-newspaper man struck me. I had in my day preceding 1900, as a magazine contributor, written of several things in connection with charity organization work in New York, the shark money-lenders who robbed the ignorant and needy, the charity organization money-bureaus known as the Provident Loan, the Straus Milk Fund, the AICP, and things of that sort. Now, on the street corner, outside this depot, it occurred to me that, although I had no valuable thing to pawn, my watch and several pins having long since gone the way of the money-lenders above mentioned, still if I did not wish to ask charity of anyone, I might still work a ruse. I had this letter of the Engineer of Maintenance of Ways. I had, as I now suddenly bethought me, the rather commonplace overcoat I was wearing. It was still cold, nearing the first of March. But obviously it would soon be warmer. Supposing I took this coat and went to one of those semi-philanthropic loan offices and as a bluff, tried to raise money on the coat. It would not be worth more than a dollar or two, at most, supposing it could be pawned at all. But it might provoke an inquiry, give me a chance to explain my new job and what lay between me and it.

I no sooner thought of this than I hustled down Fourth Avenue to a loan office, located in the Charity Organization Building itself at 23rd Street. My plan on the way was modified to this extent: I would show the man the letter first, explain my predicament and offer to hock the coat. Then he might loan me a little more on it than he otherwise would. But when I reached his window, I was not a little confused by the thin, severe and seemingly bloodless clerk who eyed me coldly and wanted to know what I wanted. My grand plan went glimmering. Instead I exclaimed: "I'm down and out. I have a job on the New York Central if I can get to Yonkers and live until the first pay day. Here is a letter about it. How much will you give me on this coat?"

He looked at me fixedly for a moment and then said: "I don't want the coat. But write me out an I.O.U. for ten and I'll let you have that much." He pushed out to me a small piece of paper on which a moment later I wrote, "I owe you ten" and signed it. Then I handed it back and he handed me out a ten dollar bill. I ran for the nearest cheap restaurant and ate all I could get for thirty-five cents. Then I went for my bag and

being very tired, proceeded forthwith to the Mills Hotel, then newly opened in Bleecker Street, and very much advertised. (See *The Color of a Great City*¹⁶) the rate per night there, as I had read, was twenty-five cents and that fact had already caught my eye. There I stayed from Saturday until early Monday morning when I proceeded to Yonkers by the first train, the first I could get after seven in the morning.

¹Dreiser to H.L. Mencken, 27 March 1943; in Thomas P. Riggio (ed.), *The Correspondence of Theodore Dreiser and H. L. Mencken, 1907-1945*, Vol. II (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 688.

²For the most complete discussion of Dreiser's use of the *Laborer* materials, see Richard W. Dowell (ed.), *An Amateur Laborer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), xxix-xlix.

³Dreiser to William C. Lengel, 6 March 1924; in Robert H. Elias (ed.) *Letters of Theodore Dreiser*, Vol. II (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), 423- 25.

⁴It is unclear exactly when Dreiser began "Down Hill and Up." Internal evidence--references to *Twelve Men* (1919) and *The Color of a Great City* (1923)--suggest it was written sometime between 6 December 1923 (the publication date of *The Color of a Great City*) and August 1924, when Lengel published the article Dreiser took from "Down Hill and Up" (see below, n. 5).

"Down Hill and Up" survives in three versions:

- (1) a holograph manuscript;
- (2) a typescript of the manuscript with extensive additions and alterations in Dreiser's hand;
- (3) a second typescript of 73 pages which incorporates the revisions of the first typescript and includes minor changes by Dreiser.

The text published here is based on the second typescript and includes all Dreiser's revisions. Holograph and typescripts are stored in Box 92A of the Dreiser Collection, in the Charles Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania.

⁵Dreiser, "The Irish Section Foreman Who Taught Me How to Live," *Hearst's International*, XLVI (August 1924), 20-21, 118-21.

⁶The Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania, who own the copyright, kindly gave their permission to publish this material.

⁷Dreiser, *An Amateur Laborer*, (ed.) Richard W. Dowell (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 59.

⁸The best account of Mrs. Doubleday's part in the publication of *Sister Carrie* is in Richard Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser: At the Gates of the City, 1871-1907* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1986), 286-91.

⁹The passage in brackets was crossed out in the second typescript.

¹⁰In 1895-97 Dreiser edited *Ev'ry Month*, the magazine of the music-publishing firm of Howley, Haviland & Company, in which Paul Dresser owned a third interest. Dreiser doesn't mention this here, partly because it would involve discussing his dependence on his brother Paul and, more importantly, because it would identify him with the literary establishment to which he claims to have been an outsider.

¹¹Arthur Henry.

¹²Walter Hines Page.

¹³In the second typescript, Dreiser revised the first part of this sentence, which originally read "Having already a fairly complete plan for JENNIE GERHARDT in my mind..."

¹⁴The paragraph in brackets was crossed out in the second typescript.

¹⁵"Life Stories of Successful Men--No. 11, Chauncey Mitchell Depew," *Success* I (November 1898), 3-4; repub: *How They Succeeded* (1901). Depew was also the subject of another article in the twenties: "Chauncey M. Depew," *Hearst's International-Cosmopolitan*, 79 (July 1925), 86-87, 183-85.

¹⁶Dreiser is referring to "A Wayplace of the Fallen," in *The Color of a Great City* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923).

"DEAR MARGUERITE": AN EARLY DREISER LETTER TO MARGUERITE TJADER HARRIS

Robert Coltrane
Lock Haven University

The exact nature of Theodore Dreiser's relationship with Marguerite Tjader Harris has been something of a mystery, due in large part to the lack of documentary information. Given Dreiser's propensity for sexual affairs, the fact that Mrs. Harris divorced her husband in 1930, and the many working hours that Dreiser and Marguerite spent together, one is inclined to suspect their relationship was not entirely platonic. However, only circumstantial evidence presently exists to support the view that they were anything more to each other than "great writer" and "devoted fan."

No autobiographical record by Dreiser about Marguerite is known to exist. Helen Dreiser and others--including Marguerite herself in *Theodore Dreiser: A New Dimension*--have conveyed only information about their working relations, and only a few letters between Dreiser and Marguerite have been made public. One possible source which might prove enlightening is a memoir about Dreiser by Marguerite, titled "The Lust of the Goat Is the Bounty of God," but this work has not been published.¹ Thus, the student of Dreiser's life can only speculate about the degree of intimacy in the relationship between Dreiser and Marguerite from the few references in sources that are publicly available.

(10) A previously unpublished holograph letter from Dreiser to Marguerite, recently acquired by the Pennsylvania State University, contributes to this mystery through Dreiser's implied suggestion that he and Marguerite should see each other in private. Dated 8 July 1937, this is the earliest known letter written directly to Marguerite by Dreiser.² The following text of the letter preserves Dreiser's spelling and punctuation:

THEODORE DREISER

June 8 - 1937

Dear Marguerite

Your letter was addressed to Mt. Kisco. (Incidentally, welcome home) Helen and I have been living here in N.Y. since Xmas. (Park Plaza Hotel 50 West 77th St. Tel Endicott 2- 3700) However Helen has her own

room and I have mine. Hers' is 1006. Mine 623. The Mt. Kisco Place is rented. I'd be glad to see you here, if your in town ever. You could drop me a note or we could come out there. I'll explain things when I see you. Are you happy? *More or less* Oxfordian? You might write Helen. But you can reach me here by marking the room number 623. It's nice to know your back. Since you say nothing of Beppi maybe the nazis got him. Yes? No? Neither.

Anyhow
Affectionately
T.D.

I'm not passing your note on to Helen. You write direct as you choose.³

What should we infer from this letter? Dreiser's repeated emphasis about the number of his room and the fact that Helen's room is some distance away, plus the postscript suggestion that he and Marguerite keep their correspondence private, indicates a guarded but strongly implied invitation for their prior intimacy to be resumed. If my assumption is correct, then this letter is the best evidence to date that a greater degree of familiarity existed between Dreiser and Marguerite than was previously suspected.

Dreiser's "welcome home" statement refers to Marguerite's recent return from Europe. She had come back to the United States in the spring of 1937 to raise funds for the fight against the fascists in Spain. Dreiser's joking comment that the Nazis must have gotten Beppi suggests that her Bavarian friend Joseph Rabenbauer had accompanied Marguerite when she was in Europe; her own account, however, indicates she did not go into Germany.⁴ As part of her anti-fascist effort, Marguerite was instrumental in establishing a new journal of literary and cultural commentary, called *Direction*. Dreiser provided a photograph of himself and an introductory statement for the first issue, dated December 1937.

From previously published correspondence with Mencken, we have long known that Dreiser was living in room 623 at the Park Plaza Hotel in New York City during this period. The letter to Marguerite, however, provides confirmation that he and Helen were experiencing one of their periodic estrangements since, as Dreiser points out, she is staying in a room separate from and some distance from his, number 1006. While the body of the letter indicates that Dreiser and Helen were still socializing together, the postscript suggests Dreiser was not confiding all his interests to her. Dreiser's offer to visit Marguerite "out there" probably refers to her family home in Darien, Connecticut.

Dreiser first met Marguerite in 1928 when she was married to a New York attorney, and by the following year she was helping Dreiser in his effort to bring the Russian Ballet to the United States. Three years after

obtaining a divorce in Switzerland, Marguerite began assisting Dreiser periodically with his correspondence during the 1930s. Later, she would assist him with the completion of *The Bulwark* shortly before his death.

Marguerite Tjader Harris died on 7 April 1986 in Miami, Florida, at the age of eighty-four.⁵

¹Cited by Lawrence E. Hussman in his remembrance of Marguerite Tjader Harris following her death; see *Dreiser Newsletter*, 17 (Fall 1986): 21-22.

²The Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania, who own the copyright, kindly gave their permission to publish this material, which is the physical property of Pennsylvania State University.

³An earlier letter, dated 19 December 1929, is addressed to Marguerite's newborn son Hilary; see *Letters of Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Robert H. Elias, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), II, 495-96. W.A. Swanberg quotes part of a letter dated 15 July 1938 in which Dreiser refers to Marguerite as "beloved" and thanks her for allowing him to use the beach house she had rented on Pratt's Island, near her home in Connecticut; see Swanberg's *Dreiser* (New York: Scribners, 1965), p. 451, and *Theodore Dreiser: A New Dimension* by Marguerite Tjader (Norwalk, Conn.: Silvermine, 1965), p. 84. The earliest correspondence published by Elias is a Dreiser letter dated 12 June 1941; see *Letters*, III, 927.

⁴*Theodore Dreiser: A New Dimension*, pp. 81-82. Elias identifies Beppi; see letter dated 12 June 1941 in *Letters*, III, 929.

⁵For a brief summary of Marguerite Tjader Harris's life, see Hussman's remembrance in *The Dreiser Newsletter*, Fall 1986. An "Airmail Interview" with Marguerite Tjader appears in the Fall 1971 issue of *The Dreiser Newsletter*, pp. 11-17.

THEODORE DREISER

June 8 - 1937

Dear Marguerite:

Your letter was addressed to
Mt. Kisco. (Incidentally, welcome home)
Helen and I have been living here in
N.Y. since June. (Park Plaza Hotel. 50 West
77th St. Tel. Endicott 2-3700) However
Helen has her own room and I have
mine. Mine is 1006. Mine 623.
The Mt. Kisco place is rented. I'd
be glad to see you here, if your in
town ever. You could drop us a note
so we could come out there. I'll
explain things when I see you are
you happy? How is your condition?
You might write Helen. But you can
reach me here by marking the
room number. 623. It's nice
to hear your word. since you

say nothing of Rappi maybe he knows
got him. Yes? No? neither.

Anyway

affectionately

(1.1)

I'm not forcing your note on Helen.
You write direct as you choose

A NOTE ON CARRIE'S HOMETOWN

Richard W. Dowell
Indiana State University

Carrie Meeber leaves Columbia City, Wisconsin, to begin her quest for fame and fortune; however, the Columbia City Dreiser knew was in Indiana, a town of fifteen to eighteen hundred located approximately thirty miles east of Warsaw, Dreiser's home from the fall of 1884 to the summer of 1887. He never had the opportunity to go there, but it lingered in his memory as an exciting realm of sexual promiscuity. Finally, in 1915, when Dreiser passed through Columbia City in preparation for *A Hoosier Holiday* (1916), he was disappointed to have his illusions shattered by the drabness of the community. Recalling his youthful fantasies, Dreiser wrote:

Columbia City . . . was another spot to which our small-town life-seeking gadabouts were wont to run on a Saturday night--for what purpose I scarcely know, since I never had sufficient means to accompany them. At that time, in that vigorously imaginative period, I conjured up all sorts of sybaritic delights, as being the end and aim of these expeditions, since the youths who comprised them were so keen in regard to all matters of sex. . . . or made sly references to these jaunts which thereby became all the more exciting to me. . . . With an imagination that probably far outran my years, I built up a fancy as to Columbia City which far exceeded its import, of course. To me it was a kind of Cairo of the Egyptians, with two-horned Hathor in the skies, and what breaths of palms and dulcet quavers of strings and drums I know not. (276-77).

Then these impressions were seemingly verified when a girl from Columbia City enrolled in Warsaw High School. Dreiser would view her "with adoring eyes," for "she was so rounded and pink and gay. But that was all it ever came to, just that--I contemplated her from afar. I never had the courage to go near her" (277). It may not be coincidence, then, that in creating a character who was destined to rise through sexual compromise Dreiser would cast her as a girl from Columbia City.

REVIEW

DREISER'S JOURNALISM: SUCCESS OR FAILURE

Theodore Dreiser Journalism Volume One: Newspaper Writings, 1892-1895. Ed. T.D. Nostwich. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988. 398 pp. \$37.95.

Nostwich's edition of newspaper articles by Dreiser collects 106 pieces Dreiser wrote for the *Chicago Globe*, the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, the *St. Louis Republic*, the *Toledo Blade*, the *Cleveland Dealer*, the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, and the *New York World* between June 1892 and February 1895. Not only has Nostwich succeeded in attributing to Dreiser many of the articles which had never been identified as Dreiser's, but he has thoroughly annotated each of them. He is not merely a run-of-the-mill editor; he serves in this volume as a superb lexicographer as well. Without his painstaking research, students of American journalism, history, and linguistics would not be able to recognize the true meaning of such words in the 1890s as "fly cops," "snap," "slay line," "chip basket," "cully," "boodle," "whack up," "wiley," "whalebacks," "staving," "stogy," or such strange expressions as "forked biological specimens," "struck another tartar," "as unto a thousand of bricks."

Throughout, the editor remains so judicious in interpreting the young Dreiser's attitude toward the period and the profession of journalism that he is somewhat reluctant to touch upon controversial issues like anti-Semitism. Rather than referring to Dreiser's portrayal of Joseph Pulitzer, the owner of the *New York World*, as "an upstart Jew,"¹ Nostwich mildly remarks: "Here everyone worked in the spirit of ferocious competitiveness fostered by Pulitzer himself."² In any event, the result is an invaluable document which has illuminated not only the most important period of Dreiser's development as a writer, but also the 1890s, an important turning point in American history. This volume, an indispensable companion to Dreiser's *A Book About Myself*, one of the finest autobiographies ever written in America, will help widen the ever-expanding Dreiser canon.

The assessment of a realist's journalism ought to be a fruitful investigation, for it has been a common practice in modern times for an American writer to learn his trade through journalism. Dreiser was no exception. Like Crane and Norris, his contemporaries, and Hemingway and Faulkner much later, Dreiser tried his hand at creative writing while a newspaperman. Before reaching New York, the literary capital, in late 1894, he had spent nearly three years as a reporter in several cities.

Beginning in Pittsburgh, however, he became frustrated as a newspaperman because he was instructed by his city editor specifically as to the value and the limitations of news. Dreiser was told, for example, not to touch on labor conditions, since this subject was assigned to the specialist who was to make prescribed reports. Dreiser was not allowed to detract from the rich or the religious, for they were considered "all right" as far as the city desk was concerned. He was told not to cover scandals in high society, the editor's explanation being that the "big steel men here just about own the place, so we can't. Some papers out West and down in New York go in for sensationalism, but we don't" (*Book*, p. 106). When Dreiser went to New York, he ran his head against another wall. Even as an experienced reporter working for Joseph Pulitzer's *World*, Dreiser felt himself a victim of the gruesome competition in the profession. Like Melville's Bartleby the scrivener, Dreiser the newspaperman preferred not to write anymore and departed from the scene.

Whether Dreiser's journalism was a success or a failure depends on one's point of view. This collection clearly demonstrates in article after article that Dreiser failed to produce the type of report he wanted to do. Instead he was coerced to write what influential civic or political leaders such as Andrew Carnegie and Thomas Brackett Reed expected the press to report to the public. In a newspaper article, for instance, Dreiser was forbidden to say anything critical of or detracting from Carnegie's image of generosity. Carnegie's machinations disturbed Dreiser's conscience so much that, after Dreiser left newspaper writing, he wrote a magazine article about the man's character. He satirized Carnegie's appearance of generosity in contributing part of his huge fortunes to various libraries. In reality, Dreiser subtly noted, Carnegie was, like the Chicago industrialist Charles T. Yerkes, an egocentric public figure. "Selfish wealth," Dreiser remarked with a bit of sarcasm, "stands surprised, amazed, almost indignant, at the announcement that Andrew Carnegie, instead of resting in Olympian luxury on the millions he had earned and going to the grave with gold tightly clutched in his stiffening fingers, proposes to expend the bulk of his riches, during his lifetime, for the benefit of his fellow men."³

From the very beginning of his newspaper career Dreiser encountered this censorship. One of the longest articles he wrote, "Greatest in the World," which appeared in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* in 1892, is a typical example of journalism in which the realist writer that Dreiser aspired to become was not allowed to present fact as he saw it. This particular experience stuck in his memory: an article Dreiser wrote as late as 1938 still posed the question of the difference between literature and journalism. In this article Dreiser recalled a routine assignment while he was a young reporter in St. Louis, which resulted in writing "Greatest in the World." He was to interview an old millionaire about the city's new

terminal project, and naturally he expected to meet a forceful experienced businessman. Unexpectedly, however, the young Dreiser met a pathetically aged and feeble man who thought of his success and power as useless. During the interview the old man could only say: "My interest in all these things is now so slight that it is scarcely worthwhile--a spectacle for God and men" Upon his return to the city desk Dreiser asked the editor whether he should write about the old man's age. "No, no, no!" the editor almost shouted. "Write only his answers. Never mind how old he is. That's just what I don't want. Do you want to queer this? Stick to the terminal dope and what he thought. We're not interested in his age." "No doubt," Dreiser reflected, "the vast majority of the people thought of him even then as young, active, his old self. But all this while this other picture was holding in my mind, and continued so to do for years after. I could scarcely think of the city even without thinking of him, his house, his dog, his age, his bony fingers, his fame." Dreiser then concluded:

Those particular matters about which the city had asked to know concerned, as I now saw, only such things as were temporary and purely constructive in their interest, nothing beyond the day--the hour--in which they appeared.

Literature as I now saw, and art in all its forms, was this other realm, that of the painter, the artist, the one who saw and reported the non-transitory, and yet transitory too, nature of all our interests and dreams, which observed life as a whole and drew it without a flaw, a fact, missing. There, if anywhere, were to be reported or painted such conditions and scenes as this about which I had meditated and which could find no place in the rush and hurry of our daily press.

Then it was, and not until then, that the real difference between journalism and literature became plain.⁴

It is also during his newspaper days that Dreiser came in contact with a certain number of individuals who made an impact on the young writer. John M. Maxwell, the copy reader of the *Chicago Globe*, who gave Dreiser his first newspaper job, told Dreiser: "Life is a God-damned stinking, treacherous game, and nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of every thousand are bastards" (*Book*, p. 59). Maxwell talked about the phases of Chicago he knew intimately and assured Dreiser: "A hell of a fine novel is going to be written about some of these things one of these days" (p. 68). Through this mentor, Dreiser managed to articulate a new vision of life that surprised and impressed even an old hand like Maxwell, who told Dreiser: "You're one of the damnest crack-brained loons I ever saw . . . but you seem to know how to get the news just the same, and you're going to be able to write" (p. 59). But, in those days, journalism was not yet

eady to accept such a view as Maxwell's or Dreiser's, for nearly all news stories distorted reality in order to heighten color and romance. It was Maxwell again who cautioned Dreiser not to let his youthful romantic flair get the best of his writing, and gave him an antidote: "Read Schopenhauer, Spencer, Voltaire. Then you'll get a line on this scheme of things."⁵

Another mentor was none other than his own brother Paul Dresser. It was also during his newspaper days that Dreiser fully understood what his brother was trying to accomplish in his profession. When Dresser made a theatrical appearance in St. Louis, Dreiser wrote a feature article about him pretending that they were unrelated. Speculating on the motive behind Dresser's famous songs, Dreiser wrote: "What made him write that?" has frequently been asked. "What moved him to compose such a weird piece as "Only a Stranger"?" His own answer is 'fact.' The motive is gained from life. What he writes he has witnessed and felt, having laughed or cried over the reality. To this he attributes the success of his pieces."⁶

While Dreiser recognized the success of his brother's work, he himself was keenly aware of the inherent limitations of journalism as the medium for expression. Even if he had imagined he could write a worthwhile story from his life, it would not only have shocked the newspaper editors but it would never have been printed. To have a newspaper article published, one must depict only our best selves--the accepted editorial policies everyone knew but Dreiser. And if the world of the evil and sordid must be alluded to, it must be done with the charm of shadow, not the nightmare reality of fact. "When I think of the literary and social snobbery and bosh of that day," he reflected years later, "its utter futility and profound faith in its own goodness, as opposed to facts of its own visible life, I have to smile" (*Book*, p. 500). Dreiser's contempt for American journalism in the nineties indicates not a sense of jealousy but a simple belief that writing must deal with facts of life--those awesome forces that haunted him and at times, as he admitted, would paralyze his zest. Granted he lost the game of journalism, but he won a true vision for the novelist-to-be in the twentieth century.

Dreiser's own admissions and the ample evidence presented in Nostwich's edition make it clear that one would be hard pressed to defend the intrinsic value of Dreiser's journalism. His newspaper writings in 1892-1895 are no more and no less than what the newspaper editors around the country in that period wanted to see in print. In this sense, Dreiser was a conformist, a competent and able reporter, and one is easily impressed with his enormous efficiency in gathering details and making them into print.

But if one tries to find in Dreiser's journalism the kind of writing called "new journalism" or "nonfiction fiction," one will be disappointed. For Dreiser as a newspaperman never intended to write as Tom Wolfe,

Norman Mailer, or Truman Capote recently has. Many of Dreiser's newspaper articles, which deal with such topics as fraud, rape, murder, lynching, execution, and trial, are filled with facts and details, but these elements are not charged with emotion, nor are they developed with pathos and point of view. "Ten-Foot Drop," Dreiser's article on a black rapist's lynching published in the *St. Louis Republic*, was a purely factual, superficial report on a racial matter. "They lynched him," Dreiser began. "That is the way the people of St. Louis County dealt with John Buckner. They tied one end of a rope around his neck, tied the other end to a bridge timber, and gave him a 10 foot drop" (*Dreiser Journalism*, p. 251). Unlike Dreiser's masterpiece "Nigger Jeff," "Ten-Foot Drop," focused on the brutality of the rapist rather than the penetrating effects such a tragedy had on the rapist's family or the reporter himself. By contrast, the reporter in "Nigger Jeff" is overwhelmed not only by the remorse he feels for the victim, but by his compassion for the bereft mother he finds in the dark corner of the room where the body is "hanging black and limp." The reporter, Dreiser wrote, "swelled with feeling and pathos as he looked. The night, the tragedy, the grief, he saw it all."⁷

It is sheer irony that while Dreiser failed as a journalist, he succeeded as a novelist. Not only did his journalistic experience teach him to write acceptable newspaper articles, but it taught him the difference between literature and journalism.

¹Theodore Dreiser, *A Book About Myself* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1922), p. 469. Later references to this book are indicated as Book.

²Theodore Dreiser *Journalism*, p. 343.

³Theodore Dreiser, "a Monarch of Metal Workers," *Success*, 2 (3 June 1899), 453.

⁴Theodore Dreiser, "Lessons I Learned from an Old Man," *Your Life*, 2 (January 1938), 6-10.

⁵See Robert H. Elias, *Theodore Dreiser: Emended Edition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 39; cf. *Book*, p. 75.

⁶Theodore Dreiser, "At the Theatres," *St. Louis Republic*, 28 January 1894, p. 11. Excerpts are reprinted in *Dreiser Journalism*, pp. 258-59.

⁷Theodore Dreiser, "Nigger Jeff," *Ainslee's*, 8 (November 1901), 366-75.

Yoshinobu Hakutani
Kent State University

DREISER NEWS & NOTES

During the week of July 23-30, 1988, the Friends of Indiana Literature celebrated the cultural contributions of Theodore Dreiser and Paul Dresser with a literary festival titled Theodore Dreiser and His Brother. Activities included lectures by Richard Lingeman ("The Indiana influence"), George Douglas ("The Books About Himself") and Richard Dowell ("*Sister Carrie: The Game as It Is Played*"); the showing of four movies: "An American Tragedy," "A Place in the Sun," "Carrie," and "My Gal Sal"; and a musical program titled "The Popular Songs of Paul Dresser in Concert." We are pleased to note that this time Dreiser received top billing in the state of his birth. . . . Harold Dies, Trustee of the Dreiser Trust, writes that he has signed an option agreement with Richard Goodwin, a screen writer, for a TV production of *The Trilogy of Desire*. He has also signed a contract with Ivan R. Dee, Inc., Chicago publisher, for a paperback edition of *The Best Short Stories of Theodore Dreiser*. . . . Tom Riggio, General Editor of the Pennsylvania Edition of Theodore Dreiser, informs us that three additional volumes are under consideration: 20th century journalism, *Twelve Men*, and *A Traveler at Forty*. . . . Correction: In a Spring 1988 *Dreiser Studies* review of T.D. Nostwich's *Theodore Dreiser's "Heard in the Corridors": Articles and Related Writings*, the impression was left that all 175 pieces were written for the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* and are available in the Dreiser Collection at the University of Pennsylvania. The fact is that the volume included items, as well, from the *Chicago Daily Globe* and the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*. Also, of the 175 pieces, only 96 are available at UP; the remaining 79 were discovered by Professor Nostwich in their originally published form and attributed to Dreiser on the basis of internal evidence. We apologize for an error that tends to minimize Professor Nostwich's efforts in collecting this material. . . . In the Fall of 1987, we announced the publication of Professor Kiyohiko Murayama's *Seodoa Doraisa Ron--Amerika to Higeiki*, translated *On Theodore Dreiser: America and Tragedy*. We are now pleased to report that this volume has been awarded the U.S.-Japan Friendship Commission's book prize in the field of American literature. In recommending Professor Murayama's work, the committee noted the paucity of work on Dreiser published in Japan, citing only two small volumes preceding Murayama, whose book they termed "a great milestone of Dreiser scholarship in our country." They also observed that Professor Murayama rejects the view that Dreiser's works are more social than tragic; he finds instead that Dreiser's social stance is not

necessarily incompatible with his tragic view of life. The committee's recommendation concluded, "In Professor Murayama's opinion, Dreiser's major works show a dialectical development of the two modes, culminating finally in their full reconciliation. The thesis may provoke a storm of criticism among Dreiser scholars in Japan, but it certainly extends our understanding of what the 'Americanness' of tragedy is, beyond the mere scope of Dreiser criticism. We are still living in the same social predicament and so such a discussion of modern tragedy remains a vital issue." Since receiving this award, Professor Murayama has been invited to give several lectures on Dreiser, including one at the 23rd International Seminar in Korea, sponsored by the American Studies Association of that country. We congratulate Professor Murayama for his contribution to Dreiser studies. Journalist George Seldes' recent book, *Witness to a Century: Encounters With the Noted, the Notorious, and the Three SOBs*, contains a section of anecdotes about Dreiser, who, we are pleased to report, is among the "noted." Of Dreiser, Seldes writes, "Although he never received the Nobel Prize, he was in the opinion of many writers in all parts of the world the most worthy of it of all Americans. Among those who thought so was Sinclair Lewis [Seldes' neighbor in Vermont], and this was not just a gracious pose, as several of the columnists hinted; when I got to know Lewis better, he showed me that every year from 1931 on when the committee awarding the prize asked holders of it to send in suggestions, he nominated Dreiser. Lewis said frequently that Dreiser was America's greatest writer."

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