

DREISER NEWSLETTER

Published by the International Dreiser Society

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SOCIETY CHARTERED

The International Dreiser Society was formed at the second annual American Literature Association Conference in Washington, D.C., on Saturday, May 25, 1991. Those present approved the following appointments:

Officers pro tem (one year terms):

President: Miriam Gogol, University of Hartford
Secretary-Treasurer: Frederic E. Rusch, Indiana State University
Vice-President: Lawrence E. Hussman, Wright State University

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Yoshinobu Hakutani, Kent State University
Mary Lawlor, Mullenberg University

Welcome to all members of the new Society. Do you have a query, news of work in progress, a call for papers, conference details, or other information of interest to Society members? *Dreiser Newsletter*, which will appear biyearly, solicits your contributions and suggestions for the Spring 1991 number.

MORE NEWS FROM THE ALA

This year's ALA conference featured a separate session devoted to Dreiser studies. "Theodore Dreiser in the Nineties: Lacan, Foucault, and Feminist Readings," chaired by Miriam Gogol, featured two papers—"The Lure of the Perfect Body: A Feminist Reading of Dreiser's Treatment of Female Sexuality,"

by Irene Gammel, and "The Child in the Man: A Freudian/Lacanian Analysis of Dreiser's Frank Cowperwood," by Leonard Cassuto—followed by a response from Lawrence Hussman. Miriam Gogol has already announced plans for a Dreiser session, business meeting, and party at next May's ALA conference. The Society hopes for a large contingent in San Diego.

AIRMAIL INTERVIEW: RICHARD LINGEMAN

One of the most popular features in the "old" *Dreiser Newsletter* (which evolved into the present *Dreiser Studies*) was its Airmail Interviews with W.A. Swanberg, Richard Lehan, Ellen Moers, Neda Westlake, and Marguerite Tjader, among others. Beginning with this issue, *DN* continues that tradition.

RICHARD LINGEMAN, born in Crawfordsville, Indiana, was educated at Haverford College, Yale Law School, and Columbia Graduate School (in English and comparative literature). He has served as free-lance writer and editor of *Pentacle Press*; executive editor of *Monocle*, a quarterly of political satire; editor and columnist for the *New York Times Book Review*; and, since 1978, executive editor of *The Nation*. He has written *Don't You Know There's a War On?*; *Small Town America: A Narrative History 1620—The Present*; and recently a two-volume Dreiser biography: *Theodore Dreiser: At the Gates of the City 1871-1907* (1986) and *Theodore Dreiser: An American Journey 1908-1945* (1990).

What sparked your interest in Dreiser? How and when did you decide to become his biographer?

To answer the second question first, I had been hankering to do a literary biography, and my then editor at Putnam, Phyllis Grann, and my agent, Lynn Nesbit, suggested Dreiser, for whatever reasons. My immediate reaction was one of those wild rushes of enthusiasm that I have sometimes later regretted. And then I had some serious doubts: Hadn't Robert Elias and W.A. Swanberg said all there was to be said? Was there any new information? Anything new to say? Ten years later, the completed biography must serve as my answers to those questions—for better or for worse. But I have never regretted that initial rush of enthusiasm.

As for my interest in Dreiser, I esteemed him as a writer who probed American society and values more deeply than any other novelist of his era (and it was a very long era). Also, he seemed such a crucial figure in American literary history; his life provides a window on a larger terrain, as it were. Similarly, I have long been interested (though not in a theoretical

way) in the interactions between literature and society, between a writer and his times, and Dreiser's seemed such a representative American life; he was embroiled in so many periods of dramatic social change.

Is there one seminal event which more than anything else determined what Dreiser would write about?

More likely several; I'll mention two of the most crucial. First, the vision of Hurstwood that came to him in the form of a homeless man in City Hall Park after a fruitless day of jobhunting. Add to that (assuming it happened as he described it in *Newspaper Days*) his own "down and out period" on the Bowery after quitting the *World* in 1894. This deepened his pessimistic vision of how economic conditions—or Nature or Society—overwhelmed the puny individual. Another influence was his sister Emma's husband, E.A. Hopkins, in whom Dreiser saw the fear of failure he himself felt.

The second crucial experience—though one extended over time—was the breakup of his marriage to Jug and his aborted infatuation with Thelma Cudlipp, which haunted him for years and crystallized the "stinging sense of what it was to want and not to have" that he attributes to Clyde Griffiths. The Jug-Thelma triangle, followed by the Estelle (Bert) Kubitz-Helen Richardson one and the Sally Kusell-Helen one, were the emotional core of *An American Tragedy*. He discerned an objective correlative in the train of murders he studied in which an ambitious young man finds "Miss Poor" standing in the way of his marriage to "Miss Rich." After he rejected a number of these, he found the one that chimed with his inner conflicts, his erotic compulsions.

Given Dreiser's family background and education, how did he become a writer of such extraordinary power?

His "family background," for all its emotional damage, made him the artist he was. Start with heredity. Brother Paul had some facility with words, though he subordinated it to his music, and brother Al was considered the cleverest of them all. The social ostracism of his family in Warsaw drove this already lonely boy deeper into reading and introspection. Not a happy prognosis for a normal childhood, but

certainly a common condition among embryonic writers. Then there was his huge ambition, nurtured by his mother, sympathetic teachers and mentors who sensed his raw talent. Lacking other outlets, he channeled his ambition into writing, starting out as a reporter because journalism provided the most accessible entree for a lad of his background. He served a solid apprenticeship in the newsroom. As editor and chief writer of *Ev'ry Month* and then as a magazinist, he acquired habits of discipline and productivity—think of him turning out some fifty

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articles in a year on a wealth of subjects! After eight or nine years of solid writing experience, he found his metier as a novelist. In that career he was aided by a powerful memory, which enabled him to summon up scenes out of his past in full, living detail. Finally, his philosophical vision—contracted from youthful exposure to Herbert Spencer—was emotionally real to him, imbuing him with a tragic sense of life. He "interiorized" the Spencerian-Darwinian universe in an almost mystical way and saw life as "little human beings . . . playing in and out among the giant legs of circumstance." Yet, he never let his vision of the macrocosm blind him to the microcosm, to those "little human beings." His eye was on the sparrows.

Does an "identity theme" (or themes) run through Dreiser's own life story from beginning to end?

I think his main impulsion was *to be, to live*. There was always the poor boy inside him with an anxious craving for a *place* in life, and beyond that, a psychological niche, a sense of being, in a hostile universe. He craved fame and money and the love of women, in compensation for real and fancied childhood denial; but his strongest desire and need was to express himself. Creativity was a counterforce to the blind, relentless process of destruction in Nature, driving the individual to extinction.

What standard myths about Dreiser did your research dispel?

That he was a bad and careless writer. That he was stupid, albeit a genius. That he was not an artist. That he treated women cruelly, kicked dogs and lusted for little girls. That his political beliefs and philosophical speculations were crackpot. That he quarreled with every one of his friends. Etc., etc.

What new information about Dreiser are you the proudest of unearthing? How did the discovery come about?

One of my biggest kicks was "de-classifying" TD's courtship letters to Jug, which a few previous researchers had read but had been embargoed by Jug's niece, because of Dreiser's treatment of her aunt. The breakthrough came thanks to the intervention of Vera Dreiser (TD's niece), who wrote Gupton Vogt (Jug's niece's son), who wrote Indiana University, where the letters reposed. Also important were Grant Richards' letters, scattered about in various collections, which cast light on the travails of *A Traveler at Forty*. Although many people who knew Dreiser were dead, I located some lively and smart ladies who had been his confidantes from the late 1920s to the early 1940s, and they (sometimes requesting anonymity, being respectable grandmothers, etc.) provided insights into TD's later years.

Most of my "discoveries," though, were pieces of a mosaic. For example, notes for a religious poem on the back of an envelope, written during his post-*Carrie* period of depression; an unpublished manuscript, "Autobiographical Attack on Grant Richards," in which TD describes his determination while writing *Carrie* to be truthful whatever the cost; a local historian's file at the Sullivan (Indiana) Public Library which contained newspaper clippings about Paul Dreiser Sr.'s career at the woolen mill. Writing a biography is like an archaeological dig; one sifts out potsherds and tries to assemble an intellectually and aesthetically pleasing vessel.

I assume you were too polite to ask me about the missed discoveries. There were those too, such as a Warsaw local historian's interviews with people

who remembered the Dreisers when they lived there. (The gentleman was deceased; his wife said his files were in such a confused state that it would be impossible to find them.) Or the fragment of TD's musical comedy *Jeremiah II* that I discovered in a file at the Dreiser Collection, too late to include in Volume I. (See *Dreiser Studies*, Fall 1989.) Or the account of her marriage that Jug wrote for her lawyer.

What most surprised you in what you found?

To me, the courtship letters showed that Dreiser was in love with Jug and yearned to marry her, contrary to his glum protestations in *Newspaper Days*. His political views during the 1930s, confused and contradictory though they were at times, struck me as making more sense, in the context of the times, than has commonly been attributed to them. And his philosophical speculations—really an impassioned quest for God—undertaken for his never-finished book, *The Formula Called Man*, seemed to me more significant, autobiographically, than they are generally credited with being.

What were TD's most significant literary relationships?

Mencken, Mencken and Mencken. You said "literary relationships." Oh, yes, Arthur Henry, who was certainly a catalyst for *Sister Carrie*, though as an editor he gets mixed reviews and as a literary advisor he was a disaster.

How great do you consider the influence of editors on Dreiser's fiction? Is it primarily positive or negative?

Obviously, he suffered at the hands of editors who censored him or pruned his text or simplified his sentences—or, rather, *tried* to do all those things. Most writers need editors (speaking from both sides of the fence), but Dreiser's bad experiences, I think, led to distrust and to his practice of hiring his own personal editors (sometimes inexperienced young women, as we know). Ultimately, though, he had to deliver the manuscript to the publisher. Without discussing the editing of each of his books, one could generalize that he took editing gratefully but strongly

resisted over-editing (as he saw it) and what he called "censorship."

Dreiser wrote his own books, but his practice of getting advice from a panoply of friends and pro-tem editors raises all sorts of textual and aesthetic problems, mainly of interest to scholars. For example, Donald Elder of Doubleday did a brilliant job of editing, *qua* editing, on *The Bulwark*. It has been argued, most vocally by Marguerite Tjader, that his editing stripped the book of TD's power. But it could also be contended that at this late stage of TD's life, he was enfeebled and deeply unsure of himself and needed someone to call the shots. Fortunately, he found *two* someones, Tjader, who surely assembled the book from its many drafts and fragments, and Elder who gave its style a clarity and an appropriate

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Quakerly simplicity. Then there is the very knotty matter of Jug's and Arthur Henry's work on *Sister Carrie*. Some of the cuts Henry made were concessions to the prudes, others speeded up the narrative. How do you decide between the versions in determining a "true" edition? I don't think you can, although I thought the University of Pennsylvania Edition was a magnificent job of scholarship which scraped clean much of Dreiser's original intent. Yet Dreiser's "intent" is sometimes layered over with his own second and third thoughts, all valid.

When Dreiser was an unknown novelist he more or less willingly acquiesced in Arthur Henry's cutting 30,000 words from *Sister Carrie*; when he was an established novelist, he supposedly told the editors who lopped 50,000 words out of *An American Tragedy*, "What's 50,000 words between friends?"—then restored most of them. Yet he surely took a lot of editing on the *Tragedy*.

Publishers were another story. For a variety of reasons, he was incessantly quarreling with them (Doubleday, Jones, Liveright, Simon & Schuster). He was often wrong-headed in these tussles, but, I

think, just as often in the right. Nowadays, such publisher-author disputes are routine.

What is TD's most underrated book?

Jennie Gerhardt.

What is your advice to young scholars interested in doing new work on Dreiser? Are there neglected subjects or sources—in or out of standard collections—still untapped?

Certainly more psychological interpretation should be done. Feminist and multicultural critics could contribute a lot (*A Gallery of Women* and *This Madness* are obvious points of departure for the former). Also, post-Marxist critics might illuminate the politics of his novels. And there are specialized topics such as Dreiser and the movies, Dreiser and the theater, Dreiser and *The Spectator*, Dreiser and *Ev'ry Month*, etc. His *European Diaries 1911-1913* deserve fuller analysis. A Russian Studies person, if there are such, might snag a grant to follow TD's trail in the Soviet Union during his 1927-1928 trip, and also track the history of his books there. (I'm told that nowadays, with everyone reading Adam Smith and *The Art of the Deal*, TD has fallen into neglect.) A scientific philosopher might have a go at *Notes on Life*. More research on the ground might be done regarding his Harlan County visit and on the history of Jug's family, the Whites, in Montgomery County, Missouri.

On what will TD's future reputation be based? Will he be reevaluated in any way, as either a person or a writer?

His reputation will continue to be planted on the pillars of *Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*, though the latter now seems, in some ways, more "dated" than the former. Interestingly, *The Trilogy of Desire* inspired a lot of budding business tycoons, including the past and present publishers of *The Nation*. Several literate commentators were reminded of Cowperwood when the post-1980s financial scandals broke. *The Financier* and *The Titan* remain the best business novels in American literature; they are crammed with financial history, as well as romance, art,

philosophy and a ripping yarn. As for *The "Genius"* it might have some kind of revival as a period piece, but it is not among my favorites. I think Dreiser is already being re-evaluated as a person and as a writer by a new generation of scholars who find him sympathetic because of the perceptive, even prophetic, way he dramatized the contradictions between the American dream and American reality and the workings of power, class, money and gender. The inequities and desires he so keenly evoked are very much alive today.

Who is the essential Dreiser?

The novelist who said, "I want to write about—life as it is, the facts as they exist, the game as it is played!" He did.

NEW AND NOTEWORTHY

Richard Lingeman. *Theodore Dreiser: An American Journey 1908-1945*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1990.

Donald Pizer, Frederic E. Rusch, and Richard Dowell. *Theodore Dreiser: A Primary Bibliography and Reference Guide*. G. K. Hall, 1991.

Donald Pizer, ed. *New Essays on Sister Carrie*. Cambridge University Press, 1991.
Papers on Language & Literature 27, 2 (Spring 1991). Special Dreiser issue, based primarily on materials in the Theodore Dreiser Papers at the University of Pennsylvania, edited by James L. W. West III.

The woodcut of Dreiser is used by permission of Harold Dies and the Dreiser Trust.

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NIECE OF FAMOUS BROTHERS VISITS FOR 175TH

By Penny Blaker Mitchell

Vera Dreiser, niece of Paul Dresser and Theodore Dreiser, will return to Terre Haute late this afternoon to join the celebration of the 175th anniversary of the founding of Terre Haute.

Her visit to the city will include dinner at the Holiday Inn tonight, and a tour of the Historical Museum of the Wabash Valley and the Paul Dresser Birthplace this weekend.

She will be an honored guest when the Terre Haute Symphony Orchestra presents the premiere performance of "A Wabash Portrait" at 6 p.m. Sunday at Fairbanks Park.

In between all of the activities planned and coordinated by the Greater Terre Haute Chamber of Commerce, Dreiser will wind her way to the banks of the Wabash River. There, in the lacy shade of some of the same old trees her uncles may have whiled away the hours against, she will watch the lazy, late-summer river and recall again precious memories and family stories told, and retold.

Dreiser is eager to return to the city by the Wabash River that for so many years was home to her famous uncles: Paul Dresser, a songwriter, and Theodore Dreiser, a novelist.

In the early 1970s, while compiling research for a book about her Uncle Theodore, Dreiser lived in Terre Haute. She holds fond memories of that year.

During a telephone interview Thursday afternoon from her home in Sandy Springs, Ga., she described her previous stay in Terre Haute as an emotional experience. "I always seemed to gravitate toward the Wabash," she said in the soft, gracious manner of women who live in the South. "It was like it was pulling me."

The river is a part of many of the stories told to Dreiser by her Uncle Theodore, who recalled

combing the railroad tracks along the river in search of chunks of coal that had fallen from passing trains. The family was poor and the precious pieces of found coal warmed them through many a long winter night.

Paul Dresser died before Vera Dreiser was born in New York City to Mai Shelly and Edward Dreiser. But she and her Uncle Theodore became fast and dear friends.

She is quick to say that the experiences shared with Theodore and the people she met through him greatly contributed to the shaping of her own life and her way of doing things.

Dreiser describes Theodore as a man who was misunderstood. "I don't believe he had a happy, carefree day in his entire life," she said. "He was depressed and worried for everybody, especially the underdog. I felt so sorry for him."

Somehow the niece, who eventually became a clinical psychiatrist, managed to chip a place into her uncle's sad heart. They responded to one another. Theodore was able to talk with Vera, and she was able to cheer him, to lighten his mood.

Edward and Theodore were very close, Dreiser said. "They were boon companions. My father was a great athlete, popular and handsome. Theodore was clumsy. He never knew why my father was so concerned about him. Daddy loved him very much.

Theodore and Mai, however, often were at odds. "My Mother gave him a hard time," Dreiser recalled. "The two never got along. He called her a 'wild Irish Catholic.' They clashed at every turn."

But in 1945, in the final year of his life, when Theodore visited the family, the two "got along beautifully," Dreiser remembered. "Theodore said, 'Mai has mellowed.'"

Theodore Dreiser was born Aug. 27, 1871, in Terre Haute and died Dec. 28, 1945, in Hollywood, Calif.

His first novel, "Sister Carrie," was published in 1900, but was not widely available until 1912. At the turn-of-the-century, the novel was deemed "controversial," "too shocking," "amoral" and "very verbose."

His second novel, "Jennie Gerhardt,"—also a tale of desire and fate—was published in 1911.

Publication of "The Financier" in 1912, pretty much sealed his reputation as an author. Dreiser intended the book to be the first of a trilogy, the tale of an industrial tycoon clawing his way to power. But the second book failed, and the third wasn't published until after Dreiser's death.

Many hail the haunting novel, "An American Tragedy," as Dreiser's most impressive work. It has endured through the years to become a classic.

Dreiser says her uncle never thought anyone cared about him or his work. He was without self-esteem, she says, but he wrote beautiful words.

Paul Dresser penned the time-honored "On the Banks of the Wabash," now Indiana's state song. Dreiser said he never realized the success of "My Gal Sal," which still draws royalties from Italy and France.

Vera Dreiser wrote music for a time, and then turned to dancing, all the while studying for a degree in fine arts. Eventually, she began studying psychology.

She received a doctorate from New York University, and then maintained a private practice in New York City for 11 years. Later, she worked 10 years in a women's prison in California.

Her daughter, Sheri, whose stage name is Tedi Dreiser, is "an actress with a gorgeous voice," Dreiser proudly said.

"I tell my daughter she gets gratification from the applause, but sometimes the applause dies. I have 20 or 30 years worth of letters from people I have helped. That's all the applause I need.

"I love what I decided to do with my life. I'm very proud of what I've done."

The widow of Alfred Scott, Dreiser lives near Atlanta. Her book, "My Uncle Theodore," was published in 1976 and is available at the Vigo County Public Library.

The Sunday evening concert at Fairbanks Park will feature the premiere performance of "A Wabash Portrait," a medley composed by David H. Watkins, co-principal French horn with the symphony orchestra, and a professor of music at Indiana State University.

The piece is composed of four existing works: "On the Banks of the Wabash" by Paul Dresser, "Back Home Again in Indiana" by James F. Hanely, "Wabash Blues" by Dave Ringle and Fred

Meinken and "Terre Haute Street Fair March" by C. A. Nightingale. Watkins intertwines the old tunes with his own melodies.

MUSIC PAINTS 'WABASH PORTRAIT'"

Symphony plays piece to crowd on river's bank

by Rosie Blankenship

Symphony fans crowded their folding chairs and blankets into the amphitheater of Fairbanks Parks on Sunday evening to hear the world premiere of "A Wabash Portrait," a piece commissioned for the 175th Anniversary of the city's founding by the Greater Terre Haute Chamber of Commerce.

The setting couldn't have been more perfect for the performance. A cool evening breeze rustled the leaves of nearby trees as the symphony entered the soft opening bars of the composition. Most patrons had a beautiful view of the Wabash River, the inspiration for the piece.

Composer David H. Watkins nervously explained the premise of the composition prior to the performance. "A Wabash Portrait" brings together four historical songs, including "On the Banks of the Wabash" by Paul Dresser, with Watkins' original material. Other songs in the piece are "Back Home Again in Indiana," by James F. Hanley, "Wabash Blues," by Dave Ringle and Fred Meinken, and "Terre Haute Street Fair March" by C. A. Nightingale.

The piece displays the best the Wabash Valley has to offer.

Vera Dreiser, the niece of Paul Dresser, had a front row seat for the performance. She burst into tears as the chorus from her uncle's song was played.

"I was totally unprepared for that," she said. "When they started with the chorus, it almost killed me. Thank God I brought a tissue."

During the intermission of the program, original prints of a special commemorative design was presented to Dreiser and Watkins. The print was created by local artist Omer "Salty" Seamon, and depicts various highlights of the Wabash Valley.

IN PROGRESS

The Pennsylvania Edition of Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt* is in production at the University of Pennsylvania Press. Publication is scheduled for the early fall of 1992. Copy-text for the edition is Dreiser's composite manuscript of 1910-11; that text has been emended against the Harpers first edition of 1911. The resulting text, however, is quite different from the Harper text: some 16,000 words, cut by editor Ripley Hitchcock and his assistants, have been restored; Dreiser's frank comments on religion, social mores, sex, and marriage have been reinstated; his blunt, unadorned language has been retained.

Perhaps the most important change has been the restoration of Jennie's point-of-view to the book. *Jennie Gerhardt*, as Mencken said to Dreiser in a letter, is a novel about "the reaction of will on will, of character upon character." The central "reaction" in the novel is between

Lester and Jennie, between his pragmatic determinism and her quasi-religious mysticism. In the original text Dreiser took pains to balance these two approaches and to leave the central dialectic of the novel unresolved. Major cuts by the Harpers editors in Jennie's sections, however, threw the narrative out of balance. Lester's orientation came to dominate the philosophical argument of the book; Jennie's "voice" was silenced. The Pennsylvania text reinstates Jennie's passages and thus restores the novel to equilibrium.

The Pennsylvania Edition will include historical and textual introductions, historical glosses, illustrations, textual apparatus, various appendices, and a map of Chicago in the 1890s. Publication in both cloth and paper covers is contemplated; a classroom edition is also planned.

James L. W. West III, editor