Books

Justice to Theodore Dreiser

On the greatness of a writer whom critics have long treated with either scorn or condescension

by Michael Lydon

In 1915, when The "Genius," just published, was being lambasted by critics, Theodore Dreiser got a fervent letter of support from a young poet in Washington, D.C. Touched, Dreiser wrote back his thanks and added "a kindly bit of advice" in closing: "Never bother to know me, personally. Remain illusioned, if you can."

Any admirer of Theodore Dreiser's novels who is tempted to learn more about Dreiser the man may be wise to follow his advice. Richard Lingeman's two-volume life (1986 and 1990), now reissued by John Wiley & Sons as Theodore Dreiser: An American Journey, abridged in one fat paperback, is more sympathetic than W. A. Swanberg's 1965 Dreiser, but the portrait that emerges is still that of a sage who for obstinacy, irrepressibility, obsessional sexuality, and overall inconsistency between high-minded word and small-minded deed has no match in modern literature but Leo Tolstoy.

Dreiser was a hypochondriac, drank too much, and had a nervous habit of folding and refolding his handkerchief. He philandered, and philandered on his philandering; despite buckteeth, a cast in one eye, and a shambling gait, he attracted women with what one called his animal magnetism. He quarreled with publishers over royalty statements and movie studios over script control, and even quarreled with H. L. Mencken, who had fought at his side in early battles against the censors. He plagiarized poetry from Sherwood Anderson and journalism from Dorothy Thompson—the latter incident just before he openly campaigned for the 1930 Nobel Prize and lost it to Sinclair Lewis, Thompson's husband. When Dreiser and Lewis met soon after, at a star-studded literary dinner in Manhattan, Lewis called Dreiser on the plagiarism, and Dreiser slapped Lewis in the face.

Dreiser studied science for years yet remained superstitious—he believed, for instance, that hunchbacks brought him luck. His politics veered all over the map, from the bohemian radicalism of turn-of-the-century Greenwich Village to the anti-Semitism that he shared with Mencken. Sometimes Dreiser loved "the people," sometimes he considered them "potato minds." In the 1930s he was drawn to communism, but he didn't mind when Hitler attacked England, because he hated aristocrats. Only when Hitler attacked Russia did Dreiser decide that the Nazis were no good. He finally joined the Communist Party in 1945, just months before his death, but this proved not to be a clear-cut last statement, because he also started going to church—after having railed for years against religion. As a final indignity (or dignity—it's hard to say which), Dreiser was buried in Hollywood's Forest Lawn cemetery, beside the movie cowboy Tom Mix.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM SULLY

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Dreiser’s writing career was as lopsided as his character. While an ambitious twenty-eight-year-old itinerant journalist, he wrote *Sister Carrie* quickly in 1899-1900. Frank Norris spotted it for Doubleday, but after Frank and especially Mrs. Doubleday realized that Carrie was a chorus girl who rose in the world through loose living, Doubleday suppressed its own edition, selling only 456 copies. For several years Dreiser drifted in depression. Jennie Gerhardt, in 1911, marked the full return of his powers, and he published three novels in the next four years: *The Financier and The Titan*, the first two volumes of the Trilogy of Desire, about the capitalist Frank Cowperwood, in 1912 and 1914, and *The Genius*, a fictionalized autobiography, in 1915. Several years later Dreiser began what became his magnum opus, *An American Tragedy*; it appeared in 1925 to tremendous acclaim. After that, silence. No more Dreiser novels were published while he lived; *The Bulwark*, for which he had made the first notes in 1912, and *The Stoic*, the last volume of the trilogy, came out posthumously in 1946 and 1947.

The incongruities of Dreiser’s life matter as much as they do because they have always affected the critical reception of his work. An air of venerability has gathered about him, and *Sister Carrie*, of course, has been accepted as a masterpiece. But Dreiser remains the great gawk of American literature—a “peasant,” Mencken called him, the poor-born, ill-educated German-American Hoosier from Terre Haute, an oaf with mud on his shoes who invaded the drawing rooms of the genteel to talk about sex and, even worse, money.

An examination of Dreiser criticism reveals, among nods to his greatness, a surprising number of sharp barbs. Lionel Trilling, for example, clearly despised Dreiser; his essay in *The Liberal Imagination* drips with sarcasm: “No one, I suppose, has ever represented Dreiser as a masterly intellect.” F. O. Matthiessen, who wrote the first major posthumous critique, felt that Dreiser “was never to display much invention, which indicates a severe limitation to his imaginative resources.” In a book he called *Homage to Theodore Dreiser*, Robert Penn Warren still found *The Genius* a “crashing bore.” The critics’ most constant complaint has been that Dreiser wrote badly. Dreiser simply does not know how to write, never did know, never wanted to know,” Arnold Bennett declared in 1930, a theme that Alfred Kazin continued in 1959 (“occasional vulgarity of style... unevenness of style... clumsiness”) and John Updike brought into 1991 (“so muddled is his prose... not only awkward but careless”).

Kazin also pointed out, however, that Dreiser’s novels had “survived sixty years of complaint against Dreiser.” Now it is ninety. As the centenary of Dreiser’s emergence approaches, it is time to drop the barbs and acknowledge, without reservation, that Theodore Dreiser is an immortal, a giant who stands with Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, and James among Americans, and with Balzac, Hugo, Flaubert, Dickens, Eliot, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Lawrence, and Solzhenitsyn among moderns. Except for O’Neill and Faulkner, Dreiser’s contemporaries stand in his shade. Howells, Wharton, Lewis, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway are fine writers; so are Farrell, O’Hara, Chandler, and Cain. None tells all that Dreiser tells. Dreiser sees more; he understands more. The most patient and observant of American writers, Dreiser lets his pen follow life, finding words to fit its appearing and dissolving forms, weighting every sentence with data absorbed from research and experience. Thick with time and place, peopled by fully fleshed characters, Dreiser’s novels convey the very dust hanging in the air of his restless, crowded cities.

The eight novels may be seen in four groups: *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, two portraits, one cool, the other tender, of women outside convention; *The Financier, The Titan*, and *The Stoic*, the trilogy that follows Cowperwood’s buccaneering path from Philadelphia to Chicago to London to New York; *The Genius* and *The Bulwark*, again two portraits, one blackly comic, the other elegiac, of very different men, the eccentric artist Eugene With and the sober Quaker Solon Barnes; and *An American Tragedy*, a mountain of a book and a group unto itself. All the novels are replete with the time-honored pleasures of big-canvas books—vivid characters acting out passionate dramas in imaginary worlds as intricately real as our own. Like all the great realists, Dreiser had an extraordinary gift for capturing both the suspense of the moment and the slow curves of life and death, the turn of centuries.

Balzac inspired the young writer to paint, as Dreiser put it, “American pictures here, as opposed to French pictures there,” and because he doggedly described what his world and characters looked like, his novels, like Remington’s paintings of the cowboy West, have value as compressed, accurate renditions of the American past. In *The Genius*, Dreiser made his fictionalized self, Eugene Witla, a newspaper illustrator who became a realist of the Ashcan School, who could paint street scenes “forceful in the peculiar massing of their blacks, the unexpected, almost flashing, use of a streak of white.” One of Witla’s street scenes—“Fifth Avenue in a snow storm, the battered, shabby bus pulled by a team of lean, unkempt, bony horses”—Dreiser took from an Alfred Stieglitz photograph. Exteriors were Witla’s forte; Dreiser himself could paint interiors as sumptuous as Sargent’s. Here is the mansion of Senator Mark Simpson in *The Financier*:

In his reception hall were replicas of Caligula, Nero, and other Roman emperors; and on his stair-walls relics of dancing nymphs in procession and priests bearing offerings of sheep and swine... Handsome tiger and leopard skin rugs, the fur of a musk-ox for his divan, and tanned and brown-stained goat and kid skins for his tables...

This word-painter stance gave Dreiser his fundamental point of view: the watchful passer-by, who mingles with the crowd he observes. In the opening scene of *An American Tragedy*, as often elsewhere, Dreiser placed himself (and the reader) among a “vagrom and unstable street throng,” this time clerks and idlers who stop for a moment to watch the Griffiths family sing weak hymns at dusk on a Kansas City street:

As they sang, this non-descript and indifferent street audience gazed, held by the peculiarly of such an important-looking family publicly raising its collective voice against the vast skepticism and apathy of life.

Compare this opening with the second chapter of *Adam Bede* and see in a flash the sharp contrast between the hopeful warmth of George Eliot’s vision and the bleak American loneliness of Dreiser’s. Eliot also painted evening preaching to the unconverted, and we
sense both writers' interest in the moral voice speaking up in the daily hubbub. With Eliot, however, we are in a country village, and her preacher is the beautiful Dinah Morris, whose voice, “like a fine instrument,” brings tears “... into some of the hardest eyes.” The Architects, on the other hand, sing next to an alley “bare of life.” Elvira, the mother, conveys a “fighting faith” in God's wisdom; otherwise, Dreiser's “little band of six,” including the twelve-year-old Clyde shifting from foot to foot, are “flabby,” “emasculated... with no real mental force,” and the crowd forgets them as soon as they stop.

Dreiser hung his pictures on rock-solid structures. He found unity by building each novel around a single character—Carrie, Jennie, Cowperwood, Eugene, Clyde, Solon. In Sister Carrie he added a strong second character, Carrie's lover George Hurstwood. Hurstwood falls and Carrie rises as the story moves from Chicago to New York; Sister Carrie's structure is thus a bold X anchored in two big cities. A triangle is at the heart of An American Tragedy—Clyde Griffiths and his two loves, the sweet factory girl Roberta Alden and the society flirt Sondra Finchley. By the time Clyde tries to escape his triangular trap by murdering Roberta, it has already split him in two. When playing tennis with Sondra's set,

of a sudden he would wake to realize that he was floundering or playing badly—that Bertine or Sondra or Grant was calling: “Oh, Clyde, what are you thinking of, anyhow!” And from the darkest depths of his heart he would have answered, had he spoken, “Roberta.”

Many other realists have also built on stable structures, but Dreiser was uniquely able to convey instability as well. Formlessness fascinated this master of form and runs like a lyric countermelody through his writing. Dreiser gave the street numbers of his characters’ houses and declared them dreaming spirits lost in a billowing universe. Man is “a creature of incalculable variety” (Sister Carrie), subject to “little blood moods... zephyr-like emanations of emotions” (The Titan). Cowperwood thinks of the earth as “a little ball in immeasurable reaches of ether,” and Witta doubts that anything orders “the shifting, subtle forces of nature.”

By blending form and fluidity with nearly invisible skill, Dreiser rounded off the rough edges of his structures, made them flexible. The structure of Jennie Gerhardt is one long legato curve; Dreiser followed the events of “well-rounded” Jennie's placid life as if he were watching twigs and leaves float by in a stream. Though enormous, the trilogy's structure curves with the earth as it spans half a continent and the Atlantic Ocean. By allowing both will and accident, both eros and convention, to shape his work, Dreiser achieved the fumbling give-and-take that is the hallmark of his realism and, like an architect who plans for earthquake, did much to ensure long life for his creations.

How did Dreiser paint his pictures and build his structures? By writing superb English prose. Here I disagree most heartily with Dreiser's critics. Dreiser wrote badly? An awkward sentence here and there, perhaps; Dreiser might have nodded, along with Homer. Much more striking is page after page of durable English in the plainspoken tradition of the King James Bible and Daniel Defoe, simple words in supple sentences. Dreiser didn't point at or point up his prose, because his goal was not that we see his words but that we see through the words to the world he was writing to create. His prose can be dense when it delves into money matters (how Philadelphia sold its municipal bonds after the Civil War, for example) that other writers find too knotty to tackle. Passion makes Dreiser's prose leap hissing off the page, here from The “Genius”:

If she could only find them together and kill them! How she would like to strike her on the mouth! How tear her hair and her eyes out... She was a real tigress now, her eyes gleaming, her red lips wet. She would kill her! Kill her!! Kill her!!

The Bulwark, perhaps, contains Dreiser's most eloquent prose. When he was writing the Cowperwood novels, a young woman told him about her father, a devout Quaker. Intrigued by the idea of a good man in the city, the opposite of the wolfish Cowperwood, Dreiser made notes and then dropped and went back to the idea for decades, settling down to finish it only in his last months. The Bulwark is shorter than the other novels, painted in broader strokes. Dreiser suited-

ed his style to Solon Barnes's quiet sobriety and homely Quaker speech: the prose sings like bowed tones from a bass viol. Solon prospered as a Philadelphia banker but remains simple, even quitt-

ing the bank to protest unethical loans to unscrupulous businessmen. His children, however, yearn to be regular Americans, and Dreiser built their conflict to a shattering climax: Stewart, a boy as weak and handsome as Clyde Griffiths, participates in a gang rape in which a girl is accidentally killed, and commits suicide. Solon's beloved wife, Benicia, dies of grief, leaving Solon to fight desperately for his faith in God. Walking one day in the garden, Solon stumbles a puff adder, who first swells up defensively and then glides over his shoe as if to say, Solon realizes, that he knows Solon meant no harm. Overjoyed, Solon tells his daughters that now he knows “there are more languages spoken than we have any knowledge of.”

“What does thee mean, Father?” questioned Isobel.

“I mean that good intent is of itself a universal language, and if our intention is good, all creatures in their particular way understand, and so it was that this puff adder understood me just as I understood it...”

Solon's triumphant discovery is The Bulwark's second climax. Even more it is Dreiser's last triumph: the discovery by a master writer of a language without words.