Dreiser Among The Critics

Study of American Reactions to the Work of A Literary Naturalist, 1900-1949

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I. Aims

It is the aim of this dissertation to present the results of research into the making of Theodore Dreiser's literary reputation in the United States during the years 1900 to 1949. That the history of the novelist's critical reception in the United States was highly controversial has been common knowledge to all students of twentieth-century American literature, but no one has attempted hitherto to determine precisely what issues were raised, who the principals in the battle were, and what trends in Dreiser's reputation became evident in the course of the decades. An attempt to answer some of these questions in regard to early phases of Dreiser's career was made by Dorothy Dudley in her biography, Forgotten Frontiers: Dreiser and the Land of the Free (New York, 1932), by Marie Hadley Bower in her unpublished doctoral dissertation, Theodore Dreiser: The Man and His Times: His Work and Its Reception (Ohio State University, 1941), and by Robert H. Elias in Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature (New York, 1949), and to these studies the writer is deeply in debt; but neither Miss Dudley, Miss Bower, nor Mr. Elias--concerned as they were with larger aspects of Dreiser's life and work--has made an investigation of the course of Dreiser's literary reputation over the entire span of his career, covering all of his books.

A secondary aim of the dissertation is to provide an insight into the operation of several American critical systems and, in particular, of the sensibility of various critics upon a body of work that has frequently been characterized as revolutionary in philosophy and literary method. The test of critical theory and sensibility is undoubtedly practice, and in the exercise of critic upon author, and particularly upon a new author presenting an unfamiliar or untraditional point of view, one can learn a great deal about the scope and limitations of both.

II. Conclusions

A study of American literary criticism in its operation upon the writings of Theodore Dreiser reveals several notable changes in the novelist's reputation during the years 1900 to 1949. The author's career began auspiciously in 1900 with the publication of his first novel, Sister Carrie, because of its dubious morality from the point of view of traditional New England standards, the work was issued reluctantly by Doubleday and Company and received a largely negative response from the reviewers of the day. But in 1907, on the republication of Sister Carrie, the majority of critics spoke favorably of Dreiser's achievement, possibly as a result of the acclaim that the novel had received in England in 1901. Thereafter Dreiser's position in American letters improved steadily, and particularly during the miraculous years 1910 to 1916, when the author wrote Jennie Gerhardt, The Financier, A Traveler in Forty, The Titan, and The Genius. During these years Dreiser was regarded as an important literary figure and a live issue even by those who despised what they called his mechanistic philosophy and his naturalistic method. In 1915, when the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice asked John Lane and Company to withdraw The "Genius," from circulation on the ground that it was obscene and profane, Dreiser be-
came a figure of national and international prominence.

Though he produced comparatively minor work during the next nine years--several of his books were played mercilessly by the reviewers--Dreiser retained his command position among American novelists so that by 1925, with the publication of *An American Tragedy*, he had become the most imposing figure on the literary landscape. After 1925 Dreiser wrote little work of any measurable aesthetic value, but he was considered a major novelist of current influence and force until at least 1930, when he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

In the years after 1930 Dreiser's literary achievement became increasingly a subject for critical revaluation and historical analysis, and by 1940 he was no longer of contemporary importance. Scholars began assigning him a place in the history of the American novel of the first twenty-five years of the century, and in particular to the first fifteen years, when the impact of his pioneering was felt most strongly. This interment of the still living author was the result, in large part, of his turning to journalism after his visit to the Soviet Union in 1927 and after the world economic crisis of 1930; he seemed to have abandoned fiction to become a man of action. His Marxist writings of the depression decade and the early years of World War II (*Tropic America* and *America Is Worth Saving*) espoused unpopular solutions to major political and social problems and received harsh treatment at the hands of political scientists, economists, and students of public affairs.

On his death in 1945 Dreiser received warmly eulogistic notices in magazines and newspapers everywhere; the emphasis in all commentary was on Dreiser's early achievements. A similar note of remembrance and historicity appeared in the reviews of Dreiser's two last novels, *The Bulwark* and *The Stoic*, published posthumously in 1946 and 1947. Much of the criticism of these works, and especially of *The Bulwark* was self-consciously kind, but the reviewers did not conceal the fact that the novels were old-fashioned in subject and treatment and far inferior to Dreiser's major work. Thus, at the mid-century point, Dreiser's reputation as one of the outstanding American novelists of the twentieth century rested on four of his early novels: *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, *The Financier*, and *An American Tragedy*. The rest of his voluminous writings were unread and forgotten by all but the literary historians.

A study of the fate of individual works shows how short the life of most of them was. Of the unfavorably reviewed books, *Sister Carrie* proved to be the only one able to win a reversal of judgment in the course of time. *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911) was well received, and its reputation continued high throughout the half-century under consideration, some critics, like H. L. Mencken, holding that it was the best of Dreiser's novels; but in the late 1930's it fell in the estimation of critics to a position considerably inferior to that of *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser's life-like portrait of the predatory capitalist of the post-Civil War period in *The Financier* won the book a warm reception in 1912 and the continuing regard of critics and historians in later years; but *A Traveler at Forty* (1913) was characterized as superficial and inept by the first reviewers, and their verdict was never reversed. The second volume of the Cowperwood trilogy, *The Titan* (1914), was received favorably, but many of the critics regarded it as inferior to its predecessor because of its tedious prolixity; the same opinion was expressed frequently in the years that followed. *The Genius* (1915) won, by a slim margin, the approval of the reviewers, and in the controversies that arose as a result of the pressure exerted against it by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice the book drew much critical support; but after the smoke of battle blew away the critics took the position that *The Genius* was the least impressive of Dreiser's novels.

Plays of the *Natural* and *Supernatural* (1916) was unfavourably received, the critics being chiefly concerned with what they called Dreiser's philosophy of ugliness and the unsuitability of the plays for theatrical production; the work was quickly forgotten. *A Hoosier Holiday*, published in the same year, won a much warmer reception, largely because of its realistic drawing of Middle Western scenes, but it was unable to cope with time. *Free and Other Stories* (1918) received brief, routine notices of favorable cast, but a number of the stories, such as "The Lost Phoebe," "The Cruise of the Idlewild," "Old Rogaun and His Theresa," and "Free," fared far better in later years than the collection as a whole. Dreiser's book-length play, *The Hand of the Potter* (1919), shared the fate of *Plays of the Natural* and *Supernatural*. Although a few of the critics were impressed by Dreiser's daring choice of material--"the master sexual perversion"--most of the reviewers found the play badly constructed, arbitrarily motivated, and dull in its moralizing. The majority opinion was never challenged in later years. *Twelve Men* (1919), Dreiser's collection of character sketches, received a preponderantly favorable critical response, with "My Brother Paul," "Culhane," "The Village Feudists," and "The Country Doctor" singled out for especial praise. The work continued in critical favor in succeeding years, and as late as 1946 Howard Mumford Jones spoke warmly of it as one of the few books by Dreiser that could be considered as insurable risks. The reaction to the collection of philosophical essays, *Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub* (1919), was overwhelmingly negative, the majority opinion being that the book was dull, commonplace, and contradictory. It never improved in reputation.

Dreiser's life-like treatment of the biographical narrative of his own life in *The Man Without a Country* (1925), somewhat similar in form to *The Titan*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, and *Tobacco Road*, *A Book About Myself* (1922), received a fairly warm response on publication, the reviewers stressing the excellence of the author's description of a reporter's life and his clear understanding of the forces at work in American society; but in later years the book was read only by scholars interested in the development of Dreiser's literary career. A similar fate befell *The Color of a Great City* (1923), a collection of sketches of New York in the early years of the century. It received short, rather perfunctory, but on the whole favorable notices; however, it was rarely mentioned by anyone after 1925. Dreiser's major work of the period, *An American Tragedy* (1925), was instantly recognized as an outstanding contribution to American letters by such discriminating critics as Joseph Wood Krutch, John Cowper Powys, Stuart Sherman, and T. K. Whipple. The novel was put at the top of the hierarchy of works by Dreiser, and in this position it has remained for some twenty-
The response of reviewers to Dreiser's collection of free verse, *Moods* (1926), was almost unanimously negative. No one seemed convinced that the novelist could write poetry. The poems were described as chunks of prose arbitrarily arranged in verse patterns. Later commentators found nothing to say about Dreiser's experiments in verse. *Chains* (1927), a collection of stories and "lesser novels," had a lukewarm reception, but "St. Columbia and the River" and "Phantom Gold" were sometimes praised. The critics found the volume less successful than *Twenty Men* and far below the standards set by his previous novels. In later years *Chains* was rarely mentioned in critical commentary. The publication of Dreiser's next book, *Dreiser's Last Will* (1928), was greeted with a storm of negative criticism. The conservative critics called it superficial and inaccurate; the leftist reviewers objected to Dreiser's patronizing attitude; all of them were somewhat dismayed by resemblances between Dreiser's book and Dorothy Thompson's already-published study of the Soviet regime. Because of its topical and polemic nature, the work was rarely read after 1930. The first reviewers liked *A Gallery of Women* (1929) and called it superior to anything that Dreiser wrote since *An American Tragedy*; but they regarded it as inferior to its companion piece, *Twelve Men*, except for the sketch "Regina C.--". In later years the collection was considered to be among Dreiser's better works, but not one of his best.

Dreiser's autobiographical narrative covering Dreiser's first twenty years, *Fame Is the Highest Goal* (1943), was occasionally mentioned in literary histories, but its reputation declined steadily. *Tropic America* (1932), *Dreiser's excursion into the field of political and economic analysis, met with an overwhelmingly hostile reception. All the Commiswvists thought that it was inaccurate in its statistics, over-emotional, and badly written. Being essentially a tract for the times, the work was quickly forgotten. *America Is a Worthless Offspring* (1941) was a strong American isolation from the European war and was attacked mercilessly for its communism, its spiteful attack on Great Britain, and its bad writing. Its life was as ephemeral as that of a newspaper editorial. Dreiser's posthumous novel, *The Bulwark* (1946), was given a warm, national-wide reception; it was called a powerful, compassionate, and mature work, though somewhat old-fashioned. But the majority of critics considered it inferior to Dreiser's work at its best. The author's last novel and the final volume of the Cowperwood trilogy, *The Stieglitz* (1947), was favorably reviewed, but the general effect of the critical commentary was lukewarm because it was heavily qualified. In general, the reviewers thought that *The Stieglitz* was the least impressive of the Cowperwood novels.

Although the criticism of Dreiser's writing was widely distributed to topics, the principal subjects of comment were comparatively few. The novelist's philosophy was one of them, most of the critics agreeing to characterize it, at least in its earlier phases, as mechanistic or naturalistic because it was predicated on the insights of science rather than on religious revelation. Critical attitudes toward this philosophy were, of course, mixed, since they were conditioned by differing views of the cosmos; but it can safely be said that the genteel critics, the humanists, and the moralists in general were opposed to it on the ground that it failed to recognize the presence of a divine spirit in the universe and did not allow for a portrayal of mankind in human (i.e. amoral) and therefore moral terms. Support for Dreiser's philosophy came from the literary radicals, the Marxists, and all those who believed that science was capable of explaining animate as well as inanimate reality. A number of the critics and literary historians seemed to detect a change in Dreiser's philosophical attitudes after 1918, a turning from bleak mechanism and social Darwinism in human affairs to a belief in the possibility of social justice and the perfectibility of human institutions. In this change they saw the key to Dreiser's political commitments after 1930. At the time of the publication of *The Bulwark* and *The Stieglitz* many conservative reviewers triumphantly, though not wholly justifiably, pointed to still another change in Dreiser's philosophy, from the materialism and revolutionary radicalism of his mature years to a belief in spiritual force and cosmic love.

Another common topic of the criticism was Dreiser's literary method, that is, his brand of realism or naturalism. The subject was closely linked to consideration of the novelist's philosophy because his literary method, with its emphasis, as it seemed to some, on clinical objectivity, was well seen to be the inevitable result of a mechanistic or behavioral view of man. From the very beginning of his career, Dreiser found his naturalism under attack because, as the critics said, it made life ugly, drab, and spiritually empty. In 1900 the reviewers saw the author's naturalism as a decadent form of the mature, middle-of-the-road realism advocated by W. D. Howells; in 1915 the humanists attacked it as being concerned with human nature in its base aspects (meaning sex) and took issue with a creed that laid claim to the impartiality of the scientific scientist. The opponents of naturalism, however, had to contend with such strong affirmative voices as those of H. L. Mencken, Randolph Bourne, John Cowper Powys, and Carl Van Doren, who saw Dreiser's literary method as an excellent way of arriving at the truth of American life.

The form and structure of Dreiser's works were of special interest to the critics. Those who saw Dreiser as following the contours of reality closely and who recognized that the novel was capable of as many structural patterns as life itself liked the form of the Dreiserian novel; others, conditioned by tradition into expecting only practiced forms, found the Dreiserian structure clumsy and ugly. But the deficiency of form on which the critics were in greatest accord—the one on which affirmative and negative voices joined throughout the fifty-year period under consideration—was the mediocrity of the novelist's style. The negatively disposed critics took Dreiser's bad style as an indication of the limitations of his mind and declared flatly that neither the moral nor the satiric writing could prevent his works from living beyond their creator's lifetime. The critics who liked Dreiser's books conceded that the style was rough and ungainly but insisted that the author's power, pity, and truth compensated for his stylistic gaucheries. Sometimes they defended the writing on the ground that it was a perfect vehicle
for the representation of the raw, rough reality of American life; a
highly polished style, they maintained, would not be adequate to the task.

The majority of critics regarded Dreiser's characterization as
excellent and pointed to such impressive fictional figures as Caroline
Meeber, George Hurstwood, Jennie Gerhardt, Papa Gerhardt, Frank
Copperwood, and Clyde Griffiths in justification of their praise. Dreiser's painting of character against a rich, complex social background
was especially commended as making for multi-dimensional solidity and
extension. On the other hand, a number of reviewers felt that the characters never quite came alive, that they were too closely hedged in by
social and historical circumstance, that background detail was so pro-
fuse that it smothered life. Others held that the author's knowledge of
upper-class behavior was so limited that his portraits of men of power
and high social position lacked verisimilitude, and many remarked that
Dreiser's heroes were incorrectly described as polished and brilliant
speakers in view of the fact that their reported conversations were so
often commonplace and downright boorish.

Another major subject of critical interest was the author's mind,
character, and personality as they manifested themselves in his writings.
Reaching beyond the words of the text to the creator, the reviewers
often tried to estimate the range of Dreiser's intelligence, imagination,
emotional capacity, etc. Most of them agreed that the novelist had
genius, if not talent; they found evidence of extraordinary imagination,
emotional power, compassion, honesty, and other qualities in his work.
But a very vocal minority insisted that he was a bumpkin, a fool, a
Teutonic behemoth without grace or humor, a huge, uninformed, Caliban-
like creature without sensitivity or moral concern.

How did the various critical schools or movements react to Dreiser?
Which favored him and which did not? In most cases the reaction can
be anticipated from the tenets of the literary creed in question, but in
the case of impressionism, which, as generally practiced, can be con-
sidered a movement only by courtesy, prediction is impossible. How-
ever, the record clearly indicates that the majority of impressionistic
reviewers, those who judge work in terms of its emotional, moral, and
espectatic effect on the critic, were pleased by Dreiser's major novels.
The reviewers, as could be expected, were unanimously opposed
to the writer on the ground that he failed to bring elevation to the novel
and emphasized a sordid realism that was unrepresentative of American
life as they knew it. Their attack was carried on by the humanists,
who, from their dualistic point of view, found Dreiser's drawing of human
behavior inadequate and his literary method absurdly unselective. The
university-critics, being largely under the influence of humanism and
genial criticism, rejected the Midwesterner until the 1920's, but it was
not until the 1930's that they gave him a fully respectable place in the
textbooks and literary histories.

Of the movements that favored the author, literary radicalism of the Randolph Bourne and H. L. Mencken variety did most for his reputation; critics of this grouping championed
Dreiser because, as they said, his work tallied with the American reality.
The Mencken-Muller brand of the novelist because they saw evidence in
his work that he understood the social and economic forces underlying
American life and had a sense of historical process. The Freudians
spoke favorably of Dreiser's novels, but, as they were unable to make
over-all judgments in their literary mode, they usually limited them-

The reviewers who took part in the literary controversy over
Dreiser were at first comparatively unimportant men, since the author
was an untried newcomer of insufficient rank to engage the pens of the
major critics of the time. In 1900 the reviews of Sister Carrie were large-
ly anonymous. A. Schade Van Westrum of Scribner's Book Buyer was the
only anonymous of any importance to come to grips with Dreiser's first
novel, and he, of course, attacked it. In 1907, when it was reissued
Sister Carrie received the attention of far more discriminating critics,
such as Frederic Taber Cooper, Joseph Horner Coates, Agnes Reppeller,
and Harrison Rhodes, all of whom recognized the literary value of the
novel. None of these reviewers, however, was of the first rank. Dur-

During the second decade of the century, 1910-1920, Dreiser was a contro-
versial, newsworthy figure who won the favorable notice and support of
such outstanding writers as H. L. Mencken, Randolph Bourne, John Cow-
er Powys, John Macy, Floyd Dell, William Marion Reedy, Lucian Cary,
Lawrence Gilman, Sherwood Anderson, and Ludwig Lewisohn. His im-
portance can also be gauged by the fact that he was attacked by such
famous critics and students of literature as Stuart Sherman, Irving
Sand, Paul Elmer More, H. W. Boynton, and Van Wyck Brooks. From
1920 to 1930 Dreiser had the backing of most of the first-rate reviewers
and critics, particularly after the appearance of An American Tragedy; one
list among them Joseph Wood Krutch, H. L. Mencken, Carl Van
Doren, Burton Rascoe, Ludwig Lewisohn, T. K. Whipple, John Cowper
Powys, Sherwood Anderson, Charles R. Walker, Edwin Segar, Stark
Young, Vernon Parrington, Gairom B. Munson, Upton Sinclair, Lewis
Bannet, Henry Miller, and, notably, Stuart Sherman. Numbered among
Dreiser's unwavering enemies during this decade were Richard Le Gall-
ienne, Gertrude Atherton, H. W. Boynton, Irving Babbitt, Llewellyn
Jones, Paul Elmer More, Lewis Mumford, and William McGee. In the
period 1930-1941 Dreiser was not a live issue, but he was commented
favorably by such literary historians and critics as Henry Hazlitt,
Horace B. Musson, Herbert J. Muller, Carl Van Doren, Joseph Warren
Beach, Russell Blankenship, Harry Hartwick, Walter F. Taylor, Oscar
Cargill, Alfred Kazin, Clifton Fadiman, Dorothy Dudley, Granville Hicks,
John Chamberlain, and Edmund Wilson. He was attacked chiefly by
economists and students of public affairs, who disliked his polemical,
farist writings. Among these critics one can list Norman Thomas,
Stuart Chase, Simeon Strunsky, Elmer Davis, R. L. Duffus, and Max
Eisen. From 1942 to 1949 favorable comments on Dreiser were made
by James T. Farrell, Malcolm Cowley, Howard Mumford Jones, Robert
Elis, Robert E. Spiller, Edwin B. Burrough, Howard Fast, Max Lerner,
Nancy Howe, Charles Poore, John Howard Lawson, Philip Rahy, F. O.
Thiesosen, Burton Rascoe, John Cournos, Sterling North, Edmund Wil-
and Elizabeth Hardwick; unfavorable criticism was made by Winfield
Nelson, Scott, Floyd Stovall, J. Donald Adams, and Lionel Trilling.

No inquiry into the causes of the changes or fluctuations in Dreiser's
definitely reputation can, in the nature of the case, be wholly successful,
for the development of an author’s fame depends in large part on imponderables that no amount of scholarly endeavor can accurately assess. Ideally, one would expect a writer’s importance to be determined solely by the excellence of his literary product, but in actual fact numerous contextual considerations—social, personal, economic, political, and philosophical—direct the course of a writer’s reception; furthermore, excellence itself, as critically conceived, seems to derive from prevailing philosophies and fashions in literary method. One fact is unmistakably clear; Dreiser’s work was far more acceptable to the American critical taste in 1925 and in the succeeding years than it was in 1900. One can only speculate as to the reasons why. Any explanation would need to take into account the increasing relativism of American life, its pluralism in the fields of politics, morals, and esthetics, that, for example, a critic could speak appreciatively of both Henry James and Theodore Dreiser without putting an unbearable strain upon either his critical system or his sensibility. Factors of importance in the development of relativism in the United States were the heterogeneity of the American population, the vastness of the country and the consequent establishment of regional folkways, the breakdown of religious and political orthodoxy, the disillusionments of the two world wars, the recurrent economic crises, and widespread reliance on science for truths about the nature of man and the universe. The broadening of taste, the willingness to examine diverse points of view without blind preconception, the readiness to divorce, at least for purposes of analysis, the moral and esthetic factors in literature—these, then, were significant elements in the complex of causes that effected changes in Dreiser’s literary reputation. Geographical factors, interestingly enough, seem to have played small part; Dreiser’s work was praised and attacked in all sections of the country. Only in New England, stronghold of Puritanism, was there any crystallization of long-term anti-Dreiserian sentiment; Boston and Springfield, Massachusetts, never really warmed up to the writings of the Midwesterner.

Thus a backward glance over the years of the development of Dreiser’s reputation discovers the outline of the familiar American success story, a story all the more appealing for the fact that it involves the triumph of a man of extraordinary integrity and humanity whose literary creed espoused the real and the genuine over the sentimental and confected. Dreiser’s artistic vision, like Walt Whitman’s, was shaped by love of truth and by compassion, and the frequent inadequacy of his utterance does not measurably obscure its values. His high reputation in the United States is a tribute to the perspicacity of American literary criticism.