ON the dollar book counter of a drug store, the first night of this year, I encountered "Jennie Gerhardt". No doubt, this most palatable of the Dreiser novels had been for some time in happy entrenchment beside the opera of Robert Chambers, Rex Beach, Zane Grey and the female gasp-starters of our common letters. Yet the sight arrested me, and the shopkeeper's assurance that he had sold "quite a lot of copies" had the ring of the incredible. Dreiser with even a small popular audience—with any sort of soda-fountain following—seems somehow beyond the border of expectation.

Within the week Dreiser himself magnified this portent with the news that "The Financier" is soon to be issued in German by Kurt Wolff of Berlin and "Twelve Men" in French by Rieder et Cie. "Sister Carrie", "The Titan", and "Jennie Gerhardt" are also to have French publication from the press of "Editions de la Sirène", and the last named book is to appear serially in "L'Humanité".

So this abused Ebermensch among our novel-makers is discovered in the act of invading home popularity and reaching, at the same moment, the elevation of international audience.

It was entirely by accident that these bits of news about the fortunes of Theodore Dreiser came synchronously with an interview he gave me from the eremitage in California where he has been in tropical hiding for a year. The opening notes of this fugue of dreiserian opinion deserve to be sounded here in juxtaposition to the report of his personal progress.

"Do I think there is any tendency toward liberal letters in America?" he demands, echoing my question. "I do not."

Evidently he is not beguiled by the wan light of his own slow illumination. He finds the night that broods upon the creation of fine letters in this country as black as ever. The vast surges of Philistinism and Puritanism seem to him still far too strong and noisy for the little voices lifted among them. He expects America to treat its artists no better than of old. He considers the moving picture finer than most of the books it dramatizes. We shall listen to him at length presently.

Curiously and sadly enough it is now all of twenty years since the young Dreiser saw his first novel issued and the edition all but suppressed, and it is nearly twenty since "Sister Carrie" was published by Heinemann in London, where the book received its critical baptism. It has taken the greater part of a generation for this significant literary figure to reach such "success" as comes to the common swep of sensational novelists in a lustrum.

Looking back over most of this period I remember with pardonable mirth that "Sister Carrie" came into my hands seventeen or eighteen years ago and that when I passed it about for the enlightenment of my colleagues on a certain western newspaper, hugely impressed by the vision and truth
of the book, wondering that an American had done it, the novel was greeted with the same critical shibboleths that have rained about the head of Dreiser ever since. The editors and reporters of this obscure sheet found the book immoral and not representative of American life. Dreiser's penetration was termed "unprofitable digging under the hardpan". And the whole crew summed up with the damning judgment: "He can't write." Plainly this author was destined for no pleasant voyage.

The selfsame "brabble and roar", to use Thomas Hardy's phrase, has greeted each new Dreiser book as it has come from his hand, and the identical grenades of blind and dull opposition have been thrown upon all his product. Year by year it has become a little more difficult to neglect, disregard, or contemn this man and his work. The schoolgirl reviewer of books, who serves the great bulk of American newspapers of all ranks, finds it increasingly embarrassing to write condescendingly of a man who has long ago made a tradition among the discriminating. The pulpitering critic has long since broken his last lance against the imperturbable Dreiser mill. But he continues to charge at every opportunity with his pointless weapons, giving the angels and the hereafter strong meat of mirth.

For some years no person of mentality and taste has paid the least attention to the Dreiser detractors. The Wesleyan complex is too well understood to leave this novelist's moral judges any tatters of serious habitation. By dint of enormous steadfastness, incredible labors, in the face of heartbreaking reverses and treacheries, Dreiser has forced his way to commanding position in our literary procession.

But the better public is unbelievably small. Readers of fine works are so sparsely strewn among us that not a single periodical devoted to sound and progressive letters has survived among us unless extraneously supported or devoted to some blighting propaganda. The man who attempts to feed and clothe himself with the returns from uncompromising books faces always the spectre of starvation and the unsustaining prospect of posthumous regard. Since Dreiser is now in his fiftieth year and no more certain of long survival than the rest of mankind, there has been some reason for the fear that this latter fate might overtake him. He is still by no means certain to witness either reward or recognition to match his labors or his desert. Thus it is heartening to find even the first indications of widening fortune for him.

II

What sort of man is this Dreiser? What strange meat does he eat? What is his secret? These are questions always in the minds and often on the lips of his remoter following. Attempts to describe the man physically and interpret him mentally have been made so frequently and with such varying results that the reader of his work must find himself confounded. Apparently the man's friends and commentators find him as difficult to encompass and describe as the populace finds his books to digest.

Edgar Lee Masters finds the misused Theodore a "soul enrapt demi-urge...stalking life". He relates that he has a "mouth cut like a scallop in a pie", and is "a gargoyle in bronze". Arthur Davison Ficke discovers that he has a "large laboring inexpensive
Theodore Dreiser
Sketched by George Luks
find none of the rude strength, the fierce passion, the brutality I had heard so much about. Instead I saw a man in whom I believed to sense pain, defeat, bafflement, resignation. The face was perhaps unhandsome, but there was a light and expression about it that struck me at first acquaintance as fine, groping, and pathetic. I should have said that the man behind that mask was kindly, certainly understanding. I wondered if some of his reported brusquerie and rudeness might not be a shield to hide certain weaknesses and failings. I was soon enough to find the whole legend of this terrible man reduced to nothing more than a certain abruptness and social awkwardness, due directly to preoccupation and shyness. The lionlike Dreiser of the yarns has always been, under my eye, the most lamblike of men, though I make no doubt he has teeth.

Well, I have glimpsed him often and often in the intervening years, at work, at play, sad and gay, depressed and triumphant—at times even widely talkative, though the habit of silence and receptivity does not come off him easily. Even still I fail to find the symbols of those vasty descriptions anywhere about his form or aura. Sherwood Anderson assures us that Dreiser is old, very old, grey, bleak, lumpy, hurtful. No doubt, if your eye is confused by your memory of the Dreiser character procession and his philosophic evocation.

My string of adjectives for Theodore Dreiser is somehow barren of these disconsolates. To me he is tall and shambling, tired, shy, timid, always tentative, absorbed and absorbing, hungry, searching, penetrating, slow, inexhaustibly weary, pitying and pitiful. He is also jocular and frequently boyish. He is romantic with-
out having many of the graces of the romancer. He is superficially inexpressive and annoyingly inarticulate, at the wrong time—a quality which sometimes reaches over into his writing and blurs many an exuberantly conceived passage.

I assure you he is not vegetable or lumpy. He has a penchant for palm beach suits and slender canes. The last time I appraised him he seemed lean and getting leaner. There was an air almost of the dapper about him, though his lolling gait undid the impression. Far from the sum total of impressions to be got from his pen photographers, this man who is charged with nothing so frequently as with constant preoccupation with the sordid and ugly, is aesthetically sensitive, moved by a picture or a bar of music, quite capable of being sentimental and generally a little mystic. The truth is that beauty sways him and enslaves him and hurts him. But his beauty is not of the common sort. There is a loveliness too bright for the Semeles of the herd. They have had their revenge by denying its existence. Dreiser is, I apprehend, one of those who will testify that it is sometimes a torture to have eyes for no other.

Nothing has been so much written about by the fervid interpreters of the Dreiser personality and so stupidly assaulted by his critics as a certain ponderosity and lack of humor in the man. I do not know why Americans consider that a great man must also be a funny fellow. Perhaps it is because such empty and sterile phrases as "the saving grace of humor" and "the salt of wit", have been adopted as a public creed. (It would not be the first time that our people have built a faith about a few hollow words—notably from our political oratory, which happens to be about the lowest in the world.) But the idea persists and has been used to the detriment of this serious artist.

Certain it is that there is little levity in the man and no wit. He does not play facilely with either words or ideas. Again, life affects him as immensely tragic, hopeless, and piteous. He has not the heart to jest. He is neither Gallic nor Celtic. There is a Greek fatality about him and what he visions. Yet the man floods with laughter. He is constantly breaking into the disconcerting mirth I have already described, used to conceal some other emotion. But he is also full of a large, mastifflike playfulness which he accompanies by successive and sustained detonations of bass laughing. An intrusive mongrel pup bent on burrowing its way up the dreiserian trousers leg has been known to divert him to the point of collapse, and I have seen the rogueries of Messrs. Potash and Perlmutter confound him with guffaws.

I can remember the time when I was convinced the man kept his cool silence, even in the circle of his intimates, because of inability to talk. And there is some truth in the notion. He is naturally neither vocal nor articulate, and talking confuses him. But I think there is another reason for the silence. Dreiser is constantly and, I think, for the most part unconsciously absorbing everything and everybody about him. He has the passion for observation and acquisition necessary to his work. He does not talk for fear of missing something. He is too busy receiving to give forth.

One evening when I asked him to dinner there was a striking illustration of his absorptive powers. Among the notables at a long table in the amiable Barbetta's wine den were a Rosicrucian adept, a moving picture
magnate, a bank robber, a musician, a few assorted painters, and two or three newspaper men. One of the last came with the determination to call on Dreiser for a speech, to stand him on the table and have him talk to the assembled diners, or some other madness. The thing began at six and wound up at one. The movie man talked himself hoarse. The Rosicrucian monk grew breathless with revelations. The artists proclaimed a new theory of beauty. Only Dreiser and the bank robber were silent. The novelist sat all evening drinking in everything, taking into mind a phantasmagoria of conversation sufficient to unseat the reason of a Mirandola; giving out no more than a desultory fire of guffaws and an occasional question.

When the proprietor finally uttered us into the early morning Dreiser took the musician under his wing and started for Greenwich Village, where both lived. Some time before two they reached the latter’s studio and went in.

“Play me some Strauss and Debussy and tell me about them,” said the writer, still unsatisfied, insatiable. The pianist pounded away for two hours, pausing now and then to rest his hands and explain. Just before four o’clock, Dreiser got up, skinned on his coat, clapped his hat on his head and stalked off with hardly a word—home to sleep on his mental gorge.

The recording of such trivialities needs, perhaps, to be excused on the ground of an attempt to present a more intimate and detailed view of the man than has yet been given.

Whatever critics have understood Theodore Dreiser have commented upon his aloofness and detachment, his dispassionate and tolerant insight, his compassion for the swirl of men and motives about him, his loneliness in the multitude. Someone has referred to him as a man on a high hill. H. L. Mencken notes the “gesture of pity” which is in all the Dreiser work. These qualities in the work and the man are, of course, complementary and they both explain and question.

A certain loneliness or remoteness is a need of the creative artist, and it seems to me that this quality is especially necessary to Dreiser, not only because of the kind of work he does but because of the manner of its doing. I imagine that he works slowly and with great effort. Unless he has recently yielded to the drudgery-lifting powers of the typewriter, he writes everything slowly and deliberately in his close but vague chirography. I fancy that words flow no more easily to his pen than his tongue, and that enormous imposts of time are necessary to his vast output. Hence, it seems probable that Dreiser has had to train himself against time-consuming friendships and social pleasantries. He has had to restrain his enthusiasms, whatever they may have been. He has closed his mouth and opened his ears; closed his doors and widened his eyes.

So we have here a man friendly but, so far as I know, without an absorbing friendship and probably incapable of one; a man closely touched and moved by all the pathos of life, akin to all suffering, and yet endlessly remote.

It is, perhaps, not altogether the fault of such a man if he permits himself no complete intimacies with his fellows. This yielding belongs, first of all, to his work. Again, it is certain that this particular artist’s experience with men and their world has been a little too disappointing to leave much spontaneous gregariousness. I can remember several occasions when
I was unfortunately a witness to some of these clashes. When "The Genius" was suppressed at the nod of the vice snoopers there were several honest efforts to aid the novelist or at least to hearten him against the iniquitous stroke. These movements served, more than anything else, I think, to bring out the jealousy and pettiness of our writing crew and to throw the novelist back upon his inward strengths, upon his solitariness. Again, when Dreiser brought a group together to promote a society for the aid of aspiring authors, a project he had long nourished, nothing was accomplished beyond an exposure of selfishness and log rolling. I think I have seldom seen a man so hopelessly alone as he seemed on this evening.

III

"I do not believe there is any tendency in the country toward liberal letters," the novelist began when I asked him for an expression of opinion. "There is unquestionably a growing audience for books of a liberal character. But the growing clan of the lovers of these, contrasted with those who love a flivver and a bakery or a small insurance business, and who find that they have neither time nor the mind for anything above the mere matter and necessity of making a living, is as one to ten or twenty thousand. I mean that literally. Not that Americans are not intelligent, or let us say slick, in a commercial and material way. They are. In any material and mechanical way you cannot 'put anything over on them'. They usually sense about what you are planning to do and proceed to do it first. But the same people who can build a moving picture concern, a great popular magazine, a bank, a real estate concern or something of that sort, when it comes to letters of a liberal and artistic character, are as dull as oxen. They literally have no conception of art in the scriptic sense. I am thinking of de Maupassant, Flaubert, Chekhov, France, Wilde, Poe, D'Annunzio, Shaw, Moore, Hauptmann—well, extend the list yourself. In fact, nearly all—yes, I can safely say all—who have attempted liberal and artistic writing in America, in the best sense, have failed not of artistic achievement in the main but of public recognition and support.

"Let us begin at the beginning. Take Poe. Is his artistic product really not marvelous? Can you resist its appeal? And was he not lied about and misrepresented and literally tortured by the rude and crass attitude of the public of his day? Consider Griswold, that malicious, falsifying preacher in letters, venting a cheap commercial jealousy and spleen upon a man so far above his level spiritually that he should have approached him on his knees. And to this day we have the trashy newspapers, and the trashier magazines, still hawking the same old lies and the same old cheap commercial misunderstanding and abuse which irritated and confused him then. I marvel that the man wrote anything at all. It has been only a year or two since 'The Atlantic Monthly', in an article written by that master critic, Bliss Perry, grudgingly admitted him to the same table with Howells, Stevenson, Mark Twain and, if I am not mistaken, Bret Harte. As I recall one paragraph of this excellent critique, it pictured Poe as saying to himself that he was entitled to sit with these master minds and, (so concluded the admirable Perry), he would be right. But would he?

"America never did and never will understand the spiritual needs of a
man like Poe. Our people cannot grasp the artistic temperament or value the work of a temperamental artist.

"Step on a little and look at Walt Whitman. Consider only the noble and even religious attitude of the Concord school of literature and art—how standoffishly he was patronized by Emerson, Holmes, Lowell, the author of 'Prue and I', and their ilk. I haven't any doubt that Longfellow, that third-rate rhymester, thought he was dreadful—a low fellow, not fit to come within a hundred leagues of Parnassus. But I certainly need not recite this history to you, nor to say what I personally think of Whitman. To this day the soundest appreciation of him comes from abroad.

"Sidney Lanier was a poet of no mean ability. He flourished—or was neglected, rather—between the 'seventies and the 'nineties. 'The Marshes of Glynn' and 'Corn' are no mean poems. They are excellent, in my judgment; far better, say, than anything which Mr. Longfellow or Mr. Holmes or Mr. Lowell or Mr. Emerson (as poet, I mean) ever wrote. But was he recognized? or made anything of? He was—not. No recognition and no market. Such is his simple tale.

"The noble Mark Twain, compromiser with convention that he was, and a mere clown artistically compared to Poe, was himself sniffed at by the college and magazine fraternity of Boston and New Haven and Franklin and Union Squares until very well along toward the end of his life. I recall picking up one day in the office of a publisher a history of American literature written by some college pundit of the day and bringing the story of our various masters down to say 1898 or 1900. The book was then but newly published and in it was no mention of Twain save at the very end—the very last page, if you please—where, in summing up a few negligibles, it was admitted, grudgingly, as one could see, that in the last few years a few of the books of one Mark Twain seemed to have a popular appeal of a sort. Yet in this same volume were long and serious estimates of E. P. Roe, Louisa M. Alcott, Ik Marvel, Nat Willis, and a score of others now entirely forgotten. I saw the book in 1901.

"But that is not all, by any means. In my day—this is from 1895-6, at which time I first took notice of things literary—I have seen quite every book of any real literary distinction, as well as the author of the same (American I mean) properly and in some cases deliberately neglected. I have reference to such writers as Henry B. Fuller, author of 'With the Procession' and others; Hervey White, author of 'Quicksand'; Will Payne, author of 'The Story of Eva'; Stephen French Whitman, author of 'Predestined'; I. K. Friedman, author of 'By Bread Alone'; Harold Frederic, author of 'The Damnation of Theron Ware'; and Judge Grant, who wrote 'Unleavened Bread', most utterly and completely neglected. Wild huzzas for such writers as Richard Harding Davis, Owen Wister, Winston Churchill, the Reverend Cyrus Townsend Brady, F. Hopkinson Smith, Robert W. Chambers, and so on—but not a worth-while critical word for any of these men. They were and remain outside the pale of decent American letters. In almost every case they succeeded in writing but one book before the iron hand of convention took hold of them. Will Payne wrote 'The Story of Eva', a fine piece of American realism, and then quit—started to make a decent living by
writing for 'The Saturday Evening Post'. Stephen French Whitman quit after his 'Predestined'. Not a thing since. Norris wrote 'McTeague' and the 'The Octopous'. Then he fell into the hands of the publishers who converted him completely to 'The Pit', a bastard bit of romance of the best seller variety. Hamlin Garland wrote 'Main-Traveled Roads'—his one book, by the way—and then diluted a clear realistic vision with as much sweetness and light as he thought would keep him respectable (on the calling lists of American manufacturers of plows and elevators and saws, possibly) and sell a few more books. After that—well, you know the rest. Even Chambers wrote one good book, 'The King in Yellow', proving that he could have written more of the same. He deliberately chose the best seller grade, I fancy. Unquestionably Jack London did so. I have read several short stories which proved what he could do. But he did not feel that he cared for want and public indifference. Hence his many excellent romances."

The novelist turned from the experiences of authors to consideration of the public and its taste.

"No, distinctly our American world is unfriendly to letters in their best or truly interpretative sense," he continued. "An American, outside of his business, cannot possibly look life in the face. In trade he will lie, cheat, swindle, steal, lure, trap, rob, and slay in every conceivable fashion, moving heaven and earth to destroy his competitor and seem better than he is, but when he reads or writes, assuming that he can do either, he wants and expects the world to be pictured as a realm of surpassing excellence. In his books all men must be honest, kind, and true; all women, more especially his wife and daughters, pure as driven snow. There are no cruel, sneaky, conning business men in all the walks of trade such as he ornaments, none—at least not in his books. But read the sweet mush on the editorial page of the average American paper. How good all these business men are, or should be. Then turn, if you will, to the records of the courts before which these men are called to answer for their crimes. It is to laugh. But no American book must reflect that. It is low, sordid, not the sort of thing the people should read, because, in good sooth, it gives one a bad impression of the American business man, the American father, the American son, the American mother, the American daughter. Hence the writer of a serious interpretation of America is more or less a scoundrel, a low fellow. I hope I have the honor to be one."

"You ask me about criticism. Well, in the face of such conditions how can the serious and discriminating critic, any more than the serious and interpretative writer, flourish? Your best critic, like your best writer, must not only have something to interpret, but he must be allowed to interpret it; in other words, have a market for his interpretations, once he has found a writer or two or ten to interpret. In America the best a critic of this stature can do is to pen a lament to the effect that he has so little to write about. The things he can laud or enthuse over are few and far between. It is a significant fact that our best contemporary critics of both the book and the stage are not only loud and bitter in their denunciation of the annual American literary output, but also of the immense audiences which the same persistently obtain. They laugh and swear at the authors and playwrights, as the case may be, but they laugh and swear even louder at the public
which accepts them so enthusiastically. Of really exceptional men they have very little to say, because, in truth, there are so few at work in America. One critic solemnly proclaims that he is tired of hearing the same few writers over and over. Even so, but who or what is to blame? The critics, the writers, or the land itself? I say the land.

"The time is not propitious for fine letters. America is too busy constructing material equipment for more life. At best art is a byproduct. It is free, surplus, joyous energy—something over and above material necessity. Perhaps the American has not reached that free material state where he can afford to pause and think, aside from material things, of course. It may be that once he has built all the needful bridges, dug all the needful mines, erected all the needed skyscrapers, built all the necessary roads and factories and machines, he will pause to meditate upon the many things he has done and the manner in which he has done them. Possibly. But also possibly not. In my humble judgment, or according to my taste, the great works, the great commercial and financial planning and execution, ought to go hand in hand with great pictures and plays and books which should somehow picture and interpret the same. Maybe I am wrong. Perhaps this is not the way. Perhaps this can all be done best after the fact. But can it? I have the feeling that if it is not well and beautifully done now it will never be done. Rome did not interpret itself and so remains uninterpreted. Greece truly interpreted itself in many ways and so we know Greece. Russia, England, and France have done well, very well, more particularly Russia. But how about America? The great century that recently closed, for instance? The one through which we are living now? I think we have precious little to show for them."

I asked Dreiser, who has been in touch with the motion picture industry and its people for a year, what he thought of the cinema.

"Despite many defects", he said, "I think the movies show more of an advance than our current books or plays. As I see most books and plays they are somewhat more sensibly interpreted in the films than on the stage or between cheap covers. Some moving picture directors appear to have more brains and taste than most of the authors whose works they handle. Yet this is not a clean bill of health for the movies by any means. They have a long way to go, but they give some evidence of being on their way. The trouble with movies as they stand and as they apparently must remain, is that they are a composite of applied brains and borrowed ideas. But even so they are in the main truer to fact than the books and plays from which they are taken."

IV

To those who have been put to thought in the matter there is, certainly enough, little that is new here, either as fact or as Dreiser doctrine. In the end the wonder is not Dreiser's—that Poe wrote anything at all in the face of personal slander and artistic misunderstanding—but a general marvel that Dreiser keeps steadfastly on his way in the teeth of organized, commercialized, capitalized Philistinism such as was unknown two generations ago.

No one can write of this man without wondering and searching at him as a most provocative phenomenon. His is the only sustained fine phrase
sounding in the cacophony of American fiction making.

The facts as to his life are well enough known. He was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, in 1871, the twelfth of thirteen children of a woolen weaver, whose factory was destroyed when Theodore was a child, leaving the family in sorry poverty. He is of Rhenish Catholic blood and his father was not only a devotee but a zealot. His much older brother was the celebrated Paul Dresser, the Broadway king of low-brow balladry, whose popularity twenty-five years ago was as profound as his younger brother’s more recent neglect. For a number of years Theodore Dreiser was a newspaper reporter, employed on dailies in Chicago, St. Louis, Cleveland, and New York. His “Sister Carrie” was begun while he was reporting on a western newspaper and its completion followed his advent in New York, where he also wrote short stories for a time, edited various magazines for a number of years, and finally quit the commercial literary field in disgust and went resolutely back to his novel writing.

Dreiser attended the Indiana public schools and was for one year in the state university. Then necessity forced him out into breadwinning. He was never out of the country until he had reached forty and begun to be celebrated. He has read foreign literary men only in translation, since he speaks no languages have his own, remembering even the German of his parents most imperfectly.

The newspaper work of the young Dreiser shows itself as a much more vital factor than any of his critics have noted or his apologists admitted. Nothing is so certain as that reporting opened his eyes and stripped him of a thousand illusions. No other experience teaches men such sovereign contempt for names and reputations, such healthy skepticism of externals and masks, such clear understanding of the motives which yeast under the surface of life and bring about its actions and reactions. In no other profession is curiosity about life and its individuals—that noblest of vices—practised as a recognized art, with its conventions and its highly developed technique. Dreiser himself confesses the journalistic debt on a hundred pages.

On the other hand much of the loose, careless, bad writing this author has done—the one thing that has always given his stupid detractors something real to hang their plaints upon—is also to be charged to newspaper work. The journalese cries out from almost every page of the writer’s text. The solecisms of the reporter are everywhere. The stock phrases of the headline builder and the “lead” writer ring through his golden thought with brassy dissonances. All this has been said nauseously often but always without understanding of the cause.

The truth is that Dreiser’s whole technical training as a writer has been acquired in the news foundries and that he has since been too busy observing, interpreting, and translating life, too absorbed in the elemental struggle between man and nature, between self-constituted right and helpless truth, to devote time to the correction and reconstruction of his writing. Any writer who has once fallen into the mire of the journalese is doomed to spend the rest of his life cleansing himself or to go unclean.

Personally, though I have myself been fool enough to carp and bluster at his inept writing and to urge all manner of changes, I am certain now that any attempt to make a stylist of the man or to divert his thought from
the thing he is trying to say to the manner of its saying, can only result in ruin. If Flaubert can be rated among the immortals for his style, despite obvious faults of philosophy and sense and despite occasional preoccupation with the merely libidinous, so Dreiser ought to be exalted for the content and inner beauty of his work, letting the matter of scriptic nicety rest.

For those who insist on seeing Dreiser as not quite American it may be suggested that his constant “journalsisms” form the only semi-polite language that has had its origin among us, and for those who persist in the asinine sweeping assertion, “He can’t write”, there is the truth that many passages of Dreiser’s best work ring with an eloquence and sincerity beyond the achievement of any of the stylists so dear to the mealy mouth. There is in a respectable body of his writing a beauty beyond common conception and a literary effect often laboriously but always tellingly achieved.

Dreiser is not a schooled craftsman, to be sure. That is why there is an appalling unevenness in his product. He is in the main an instinctive artist. Whether he knows how he gets certain effects, seems to me doubtful. At least, I never expect to hear him articulate enough to reveal the method. Our obscurantists will certainly never accept this man and never grant the truth of his work, not because, as they set up, he is not typical of America, but precisely because he is so faithfully America’s expounder and depictor and so inescapably the product of this country and this time. His naive approach to many of the refinements of life; his insatiable, youthful curiosity about everything—matters the most weighty and the most trivial; his untiring and unstinting energy; his very cumbersome and laboring application of force to great obstacles and his triumphant surmounting of them—all these things belong to us and to our time. No other people and no other social state in all the cortège of history could have wombed this man.

There is thus an indefeasible difficulty in finding the literary cognates of Dreiser. H. L. Mencken long since set down Conrad and Hardy as his only recognizable relatives and this judgment seems to me accurate and penetrating. Not that either of these men writes or constructs remotely after the Dreiser fashion, but that both think and feel and see their subject as he. Mr. Mencken calls attention to the guerdonless questing of these men, the seeking without finding, as he expresses it. Hardy has put into his own verse this view of the plight of mankind:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{thorn we ache,} \\
\text{Round our frail faltering progress for some path or plan.}
\end{align*}
\]

There is, it seems to me, in these three sons of disenchantment, a marked difference of progress along the road of disbelief and disavowal. Hardy strikes me as having arrived in his senectitude at a positivism of negation. He no longer doubts. He denies. Nothing of the old faith of mankind remains. He has trod all but the last reaches of the path. He knows it ends in nothing. All his scanning has disclosed nothing.

In Conrad, on the other hand, there is still the passionate note of questioning, the bitter bright song of the seeker. But unless I fail to read into him something that is there, he seeks without hope of finding, without any deep wish to find. His only philosophy
seems to me expressed through man driven darkly to his day's work by some blind energy driving blind matter, and whither? He rarely asks.

Dreiser, as I apprehend the man, is not yet so remote, not so sure of his negation, not ready to detach himself from the woe of men. Not long ago I asked him, a little idly, I fear, what conclusions he had come to about it and about; what changes time had etched upon himself. Here is a paragraph from his letter:

"I think, for one thing, I am much more philosophic than I once was, for which fault may whatever powers there be forgive me. Next, I may be somewhat less romantic, though I doubt it. In some respects I think I am a better liver; not so depressed about the tragic aspect of things. The thing takes on the look, at times, of a very badly played melo-drama. At other times I get a little cross, but that is only when I cannot find refuge in either work or play. I never can and never want to bring myself to the place where I can ignore the sensitive and seeking individual in his pitiful struggle with nature,—with his enormous urges and his pathetic equipment. As I see him he is too often a poorly armed and undernourished, and none too courageous private, sent over the top at dawn against his wish or will in the face of a veritable hell fire. We should, all of us, like so much to live and be somebody in this great, indifferent, cruel swirl. And only see what in the main happens to us. Think back over the many you have known. So many who have tried so hard and failed are in my thoughts too much, perhaps. When I think of them, as I do a great deal, I haven't the heart to 'get too gay', as the expression is."

Here is the already mentioned "gesture of pity", but there is also about it the strong movement of fellow feeling, the absence of chill detachment. There is no Jovianism here and no Nietzschean contempt for the weak and worthless. Just this absence is one of the outstanding stigmata of the Dreiser work. I must confess that he is often all too human for my palate, too much involved in the drama.

So there is in Theodore Dreiser's questing still the human note of wishfulness. I do not think he expects to find. Consciously he probably does not hope to find, but in his unconscious there labors still the pitiful deep hunger of mankind for some satisfactory and impossible solution. Perhaps this explains the much noted preoccupation of his with the so-called unseen world, with semi-mystical subjects such as underlie some of his minor work. Whether this is only a mild concern or whether its hold upon the writer will augment with time, seems to me a matter of vital interest but one which cannot now be discussed for lack of evidence.

At any rate, here you have a man who stands leagues aloof from all other literary figures in the country and may not be seriously compared with any of his predecessors excepting the two or three abused masters.

Says Sherwood Anderson:

"The feet of Dreiser are making a path for us, the brutal heavy feet. They are tramping through the wilderness, making a path. Presently the path will be a street, with great arches overhead and delicately carved spires piercing the sky. Along the street will run children, shouting 'Look at me'—forgetting the heavy feet of Dreiser."

I think the children will not be able to forget.