ALFRED KAZIN

THEODORE DREISER
AND HIS CRITICS*

The impression is simply one of truth, and therein lies at once the strength and the horror of it.  
The Newark Sunday News on Sister Carrie,  
September 1, 1901.

At a time when the one quality which so many American writers have in common just now is their utter harmlessness, Theodore Dreiser makes painful reading. The others you can take up without being involved in the least. They are “literature”—beautiful, stylish literature. You are left free to think not of the book you are reading but of the author, and not even of the whole man behind the author but just of his cleverness, his sensibility, his style. Dreiser gets under your skin and you can’t wait to get him out again; he stupefies with reality:

Carrie looked about her, very much disturbed and quite sure that she did not want to work here. Aside from making her uncomfortable by sidelong glances,

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no one paid her the least attention. She waited until the whole department was aware of her presence. Then some word was sent around, and a foreman, in an apron and shirt sleeves, the latter rolled up to his shoulders, approached.

"Do you want to see me?" he asked.

"Do you need any help?" said Carrie, already learning directness of address.

"Do you know how to stitch caps?" he returned.

"No, sir," she replied.

"Have you ever had any experiences at this kind of work?" he inquired.

She answered that she had not.

"Well," said the foreman, scratching his ear meditatively, "we do need a stitcher. We like experienced help, though. We've hardly got time to break people in." He paused and looked away out of the window. "We might, though, put you at finishing," he concluded reflectively.

"How much do you pay a week?" ventured Carrie, emboldened by a certain softness in the man's manner and his simplicity of address.

"Three and a half," he answered.

"Oh," she was about to exclaim, but she checked herself and allowed her thoughts to die without expression.

Theodore Dreiser and His Critics

"We're not exactly in need of anybody," he went on vaguely, looking her over as one would a package.

The city had laid miles and miles of streets and sewers through regions where, perhaps, one solitary house stood out alone—a pioneer of the populous ways to be. There were regions open to the sweeping winds and rain, which were as yet lighted throughout the night with long, blinking lines of gas-lamps, fluttering in the wind. Narrow board walks extended out, passing here a house, and there a store, at far intervals, eventually ending on the open prairie.

"He said that if you married me you would only get ten thousand a year. That if you didn't and still lived with me you would get nothing at all. If you would leave me, or if I would leave you, you would get all of a million and a half. Don't you think you had better leave me now?"

These are isolated passages—the first two from Sister Carrie, the third from Jennie Gerhardt—and normally it would be as unkind to pick passages from Dreiser as it would be to quote for themselves those frustrated mental exchanges that Henry James's characters hold with each other. For Dreiser works in such detail that you never really feel the force of any until you see the whole structure, while James is preoccupied with an inner meditation that his own characters always seem to be interrupting. But even in these bits from Dreiser there is an overwhelming impression that puzzles and troubles us because we cannot trace it to its source. "One doesn't see how it's made," a French critic once complained about some book he was reviewing. That is the trouble we always have with Dreiser. Carrie measuring herself against the immensity of Chicago, that wonderful night-scene in which we see a genera-
tion just off the farms and out of the small towns confronting the modern city for the first time; the scene in which Hurstwood comes on Carrie sitting in the dark; Jennie Gerhardt’s growing solitude even after the birth of her child; Clyde Griffiths and Roberta Alden walking along the haunted lakes while he is looking for one where he can kill her—one doesn’t see the man writing this. We are too absorbed. Something is happening that tastes of fear, of the bottom loneliness of human existence, that just barely breaks into speech from the depths of our own souls; the planet itself seems to creak under our feet and there are long lines of people bitterly walking to work in the morning dark, thinking only of how they can break through the iron circle of their frustration. Every line hurts. It hurts because you never get free enough of anything to ask what a character or a situation “really” means; it hurts because Dreiser is not trying to prove anything by it or to change what he sees; it hurts even when you are trying to tell yourself that all this happened in another time, that we are cleverer about life than Dreiser was. It hurts because it is all too much like “reality” to be “art.”

It is because we have all identified Dreiser’s work with reality that, for more than half a century now, he has been for us not a writer like other writers but a whole chapter of American life. From the very beginning, as one can see in reading over the reviews of *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser was accepted as a whole new class, a tendency, a disturbing movement in American life, an eruption from below. The very words he used, the dreaminess of his prose, the stilted but grim matter-of-fact of his method, which betrayed all the envy and wonder with which he looked at the great world outside—all this seemed to say that it was not art he worked with but knowledge, some new and secret knowledge. It was this that the reviewers instantly felt, that shocked the Doubledays so deeply, that explains the extraordinary bitterness toward Dreiser from the first—and that excited Frank Norris, the publisher’s reader (Dreiser looked amazingly like the new, “primitive” types that Norris was getting into his own fiction). Dreiser was the man from outside, the man from below, who wrote with the terrible literalness of a child. It is this that is so clearly expressed in the publisher’s efforts to kill the book, in the fact that most literary and general magazines in the country did not review the book at all, that even some newspapers reviewed the book a year late, and that the tone of these early reviews is plainly that of people trying to accustom themselves to an unpleasant shock.

*Sister Carrie* did not have a bad press; it had a frightened press, with many of the reviewers plainly impressed, but startled by the concentrated truthfulness of the book. The St. Louis *Mirror* complained that “the author writes with a startling directness. At times this directness seems to be the frankness of a vast unsophistication. The scenes of the book are laid always among a sort of people that is numerous but seldom treated in a serious novel.” The general reaction was that of the Newark *Sunday News* which, almost a year after the book had been published, commented: “Told with an unsparing realism and detail, it has all the interest of fact. . . . The possibility of it all is horrible: an appalling arraignment of human society. And there is here no word of preaching; there are scarce any philosophic reflections or deductions expressed. The impression is simply one of truth, and therein lies at once the strength and the horror of it.”

This was the new note of the book, the unrelieved seriousness of it—but a seriousness so native, so unself-
Balzac—that world of industrial capitalism which, James confessed, had been a “closed book” to him from his youth—everything free of “literature” and so free to become literature, now became identified with this “clumsy” and “stupid” ex-newspaperman whose book moved the new writers all the more deeply because they could not see where Dreiser’s genius came from. To the young writers of the early twentieth century, Dreiser became, in H. L. Mencken’s phrase, the Hindenburg of the novel—the great dumb ox who pushed American life forward for them; who went on, blindly, unchangeably, trampling down the lies of gentility and Victorianism, of Puritanism and academicism. Dreiser was the primitive, the man from the abyss, the stranger who had grown up outside the middle-class Protestant morality and so had no need to accept its sanctions. In Sherwood Anderson’s phrase, he could be honored with “an apology for crudity,” and in fact the legend that Sister Carrie had been suppressed by the publisher’s wife now became so dear to the hearts of the rising generation that Mrs. Doubleday became a classic character, the Carrie Nation of the American liberal epos, her axe forever lifted against “the truth of American life.” So even writers like Van Wyck Brooks, who had not shared in the bitterness of Dreiser’s early years, and who as socialists disapproved of his despair, now defended him as a matter of course—he cleared the way; in the phrase that was to be repeated with increasing meaningfulness through the years, he “liberated the American novel.”

Dreiser now embodied the whole struggle of the new American literature. The “elderly virgins of the newspapers,” as Mencken called them, never ceased to point out how uncouth he was; the conservative academicians and New Humanists, the old fogeys and the young fogeys—all found in Dreiser everything new,
brutal, and alien they feared in American life. Gertrude Atherton was to say during the First World War that Dreiser represented the “Alpine School of Literature” —“Not a real American could be found among them with a magnifying glass”; Mary Austin was to notice that “our Baltic and Slavic stock will have another way than the English of experiencing love, and possibly a more limited way. . . . All of Theodore Dreiser’s people love like the peasants in a novel by Bojer or Knut Hamsun. His women have a cowlike complaisance such as can be found only in people who have lived for generations close to the soil”; Stuart Sherman, in his famous article of 1915 on “The Barbaric Naturalism of Theodore Dreiser,” made it clear that Dreiser, “coming from the ‘ethnic’ element of our mixed population,” was thus unable to understand the higher beauty of the American spirit.

So Dreiser stood in no-man’s-land, pushed on like a beast by one camp, attacked by the other. Everything about him made him a polemical figure; his scandals, miseries, and confusions were as well-known as his books. The “liberals,” the “modernists,” defended books like The “Genius” because “it told the truth”—and how delighted they must have been when John S. Sumner tried to get the book banned in 1915 and anybody who was anybody (including Ezra Pound, John Reed, and David Belasco) rushed to its defense. To the English novelists of the period (and Sister Carrie owes its fame to the edition Heinemann brought out in London) he was the raw America they envied amid the doldrums of literary London. How much of that fighting period comes back to you now when you discover Arnold Bennett on his feverish trips to America identifying all the rich, teeming opportunities of American life with Dreiser, or listen to Ford Madox Ford—“Damn it all, it is fun to see that poor old language, that vehicle for conveying moderated thoughts, having the guts kicked out of it, like a deflated football, over all the fields of the boundless Middle West.” While Mencken, in Dreiser’s name, slew William Lyon Phelps in his thousands, the young English discovered that Dreiser was the friend of art. Each side in the controversy used Dreiser, and each, in its own way, was embarrassed. How many times did the young Turks have to swallow Dreiser’s bad books, to explain away his faults; and how clear it is from reading Paul Elmer More (who was a deeper critic than his opponents and would have been a great critic if he had not always tried to arm himself against American life) that he was always more moved by Dreiser’s cosmic doubts than he could confess. More settled the problem of Dreiser, as he settled the problem of every writer he feared, by studying the man’s “philosophy”—where he could show up Dreiser to his heart’s content, and prove—in a prose that could not have been more removed from the actualities of the subject—that he had disposed forever of this intellectual barbarian.

This pattern remained to the end—Dreiser was the great personifier. When he went to Russia, even the title of the book he wrote had to begin with Dreiser rather than with Russia; when Sinclair Lewis praised Dreiser in his Nobel Prize speech, he did so with all the enthusiasm of a Congressman trying for the farm vote; when Dreiser delivered himself of some remarks about Jews, the Nation was not so much indignant as bewildered that this son of the common people could express such illiberal sentiments; when he spoke against England at the beginning of the Second World War, there was a similar outcry that Dreiser was letting the masses down. It is typical of Dreiser’s symbolic role that a writer now so isolated as James T. Farrell has been able to find support for his own work only in Dreiser’s
example; that the word plebeian has always been used either to blacken Dreiser or to favor him; that the Russians were able to make such use of him; that Sergei Eisenstein suffered so long to make a film of An American Tragedy that would be the ultimate exposure of American capitalism. When Dreiser joined the Communists, his act was greeted as everything but what it really was—the lonely and confused effort of an individual to identify himself with the one group that had taken him up in his decline; when he died in 1945, in the heyday of American-Soviet friendship, one left-wing poet announced that Dreiser's faults had always been those of America anyway, that he was simply America writ large—“Much as we wish he, had been surer, wiser, we cannot change the fact. The man was great in a way Americans uniquely understand who know the uneven contours of their land, its storms, its droughts, its huge and turbulent Mississippi, where his youth was spent.” Even Dreiser's sad posthumous novels, The Bulwark and The Stoic, each of which centers around a dying old man, were written about with forced enthusiasm, as if the people attacking them were afraid of being called reactionary, while those who honestly liked them reported that they were surprisingly good. And how F. O. Matthiessen suffered all through the last year of his life to do justice to Dreiser as if that would fulfill an obligation to the cause of “progressivism” in America.

But soon after the war all this changed—Dreiser was now simply an embarrassment. The reaction against him was only partly literary, for much of it was founded on an understandable horror of the fraudulent “radicals” who had been exploiting Dreiser before his death. And thanks not a little to the cozy prosperity of a permanent war economy, America, it seemed, no longer required the spirit of protest with which Dreiser had been identified. The writers were now in the universities, and they all wrote about writing. No longer hoary sons of toil, a whole intelligentsia, post-Communist, post-Marxist, which could not look at Alger Hiss in the dock without shuddering at how near they had come to his fate, now tended to find their new ideology in the good old middle-class virtues. A new genteel tradition had come in. Writing in America had suddenly become very conscious that literature is made with words, and that these words should look nice on the page. It became a period when fine writing was everything; when every anonymous smoothie on Time could write cleaner prose about God's alliance with America than poor old Dreiser could find for anything; when even the Senior Scholastic, a magazine intended for high school students, complained of Dreiser that “some of the writing would shock an English class.” It is of this period, in which we live, that Saul Bellow has noted: “I think that the insistence on neatness and correctness is one of the signs of a modern nervousness and irritability. When has clumsiness in composition been felt as so annoying, so enraged? The ‘good’ writing of the New Yorker is such that one experiences a furious anxiety, in reading it, about errors and lapses from taste; finally what emerges is a terrible hunger for conformity and uniformity. The smoothness of the surface and its high polish must not be marred. One has a similar anxiety in reading a novelist like Hemingway and comes to feel that in the end Hemingway wants to be praised for the offenses he does not commit. He is dependable; he never names certain emotions or ideas, and he takes pride in that—it is a form of honor. In it, really, there is submissiveness, acceptance of restriction.”

The most important expression of the reaction against Dreiser is Lionel Trilling's “Reality in America” (the
opening chapter in The Liberal Imagination). This essay expresses for a great many people in America just now their impatience with the insurgency that dominated our famously realistic fiction up to the war, and not since Paul Elmer More's essay of 1920 has anyone with so much critical insight made out so brilliant a case against Dreiser. Not since William Dean Howells supported Stephen Crane's Maggie, but not Sister Carrie, has anyone contrasted so sharply those notorious faults of style and slovenly habits of thought, which our liberal criticism has always treated as "essentially social and political virtues," with the wonderful play of mind and fertility of resource one finds in Henry James. Never has the case against the persistent identification of Dreiser with "reality" in America—coarse, heavy, external reality—been put with so much intellectual passion. For Trilling is writing against the decay of a liberal movement ruined largely by its flirtation with totalitarianism, by its disregard of human complexity and its fear of intellect. No one who has followed the extent to which our liberal critics have always acknowledged that Dreiser is a bad thinker—and have excused on the grounds that the poor man at least "told the truth about American life"—can help but share Mr. Trilling's impatience with what has always passed in this country for liberal "imagination."

But may it not be suggested that Henry James as a culture hero serves us as badly as Dreiser once did? What happens whenever we convert a writer into a symbol is that we lose the writer himself in all his indefeasible singularity, his particular inimitable genius. A literature that modeled itself on Dreiser would be unbearable; a literature that saw all the virtues of literature in Henry James would be preposterous. If one thing is clear about our addiction to Henry James just now, it is that most of our new writing has nothing in common with James whatever. For James's essential quality is his intellectual appetite—"all life belongs to you"—his unending inner meditation, and not the air of detachment which so misleads us whenever we encounter it on the surface of the society James wrote about—the only society he knew, and one he despised of precisely because it was never what it seemed. Just now, however, a certain genteel uninvolvedness is dear to us, while Dreiser's bread lines and streetcar strikes, his suffering inarticulate characters, his Chicago, his "commonness," are that bad dream from which we have all awakened. As Dreiser's faults were once acclaimed as the virtues of the common man, so now we are ashamed of him because he brings up everything we should like to leave behind us.

There is no "common man"—though behind this fiction wait those who may yet prepare all too common a fate for us all. Literary people, as a class, can get so far away from the experience of other classes that they tend to see them only symbolically. Dreiser as "common man" once served a purpose; now he serves another. The basic mistake of all the liberal critics was to think that Dreiser could ever see this world as something to be ameliorated. They misjudged the source of Dreiser's strength, and misunderstood what Dreiser and the early naturalists really believed. For these writers and painters were "naturalist" only in the stark sense that the world had suddenly come down to them divested of its supernatural sanctions. They were actually obsessed with the transcendental possibilities of this "real" world; like Whitman, they gloried in the beauty of the iron city. In their contemplative acceptance of this world, in their indifference to social reform, in their awe before life itself, they were actually in the tradition not of political "liberalism" but in that
deeper American strain which leads from the early pietists through Whitman to the first painters of the modern city.

This gift of contemplativeness, of wonder, of reverence, even, is at the center of Dreiser’s world. Who can forget the image of the rocking chair in Sister Carrie, where from this cradle endlessly rocking man stares forever at a world he is not too weak but too bemused to change? And it is this lack of smartness, this puzzled lovingness for the substance of all our mystery, that explains why we do not know what to do with Dreiser today. For Dreiser is in a very old, a very difficult, a very lonely American tradition. It is no longer “transcendentalist,” but always it seeks to transcend. This does not mean that Dreiser’s philosophy is valuable in itself, or that his excursions into philosophy and science—fields for which he was certainly not well equipped—have to be excused. It does mean that this vision is always in Dreiser’s work, and makes it possible. Just as the strength of his work is that he got into it those large rhythms of wonder, of curiosity, of amazement before the power of the universe, that give such largeness to his characters and such unconscious majesty to life itself, so the weakness and instability of his work is that he could become almost too passive before the great thing he saw out there, always larger than man himself. The truth is, as Eliseo Vivas says, that Dreiser is “not only an American but a universal novelist, in the very literal sense of the word. The mystery of the universe, the puzzle of destiny, haunts him; and he, more than any other of his contemporaries, has responded to the need to relate the haunting sense of puzzlement and mystery to the human drama. No other American novelist of his generation has so persistently endeavored to look at men under the aspect of eternity. It is no... paradox, therefore, that... while Dreiser tries to demonstrate that man’s efforts are vain and empty, by responding to the need to face the problem of destiny, he draws our attention to dimensions of human existence, awareness of which is not encouraged by current philosophic fashions. . . .” To understand how this gets into Dreiser’s work one must look not back of it but into it for that sense of “reality” which he thirsted for—that whole reality, up to the very shores of light, that made him cry out in Jennie Gerhardt: “We turn our faces away from the creation of life as if that were the last thing that man should dare to interest himself in, openly.”

This is what makes Dreiser so painful—in his “atheism,” his cosmology; this is what dismays us in our sensible literary culture, just as it bothered a generation that could never understand Dreiser’s special bitterness against orthodox religion, against the churches; this is what drove Dreiser to look for God in the laboratories, to write essays on “My Creator.” He may have been a “naturalist,” but he was certainly not a materialist. What sticks in our throats is that Dreiser is outside the agreed boundaries of our concern, that he does not accept our “society” as the whole of reality, that he may crave after its fleshpots, but does not believe that getting along is the ultimate reach of man’s effort. For we live in a time when traditionalists and “progressives” and ex-progressives alike are agreed that the man not to be trusted is the man who does not fit in, who has no “position,” who dares to be distracted—when this great going machine, this prig’s paradise in which we live just now, is the best of all possible worlds. Dreiser committed the one sin that a writer can commit in our society: he would not accept this society itself as wholly real.

It is here, I think, that we get perspective on his famous awkwardness. For what counts with a writer is
that his reach should be felt as well as his grasp; that words should be his means, not his ends. It is this that Malcolm Cowley noticed when he wrote that "there are moments when Dreiser's awkwardness in handling words contributes to the force of his novels, since he seems to be groping in them for something on a deeper level than language." This is what finally disturbs us about Dreiser in a period when fine writing is a polished mirror that gives back our superficiality. Dreiser hurts because he is always looking for the source; to that which broke off into the mysterious halves of man's existence; to that which is behind language and sustains it; to that which is not ourselves but gives life to our words.