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THE OCCASIONS OF THEODORE DREISER'S LITERARY CRITICISM
- A VIEW FROM THE THEODORE DREISER EDITION

Abstract: Theodore Dreiser published over fifty items of literary criticism between 1900 and 1945 on a wide variety of subjects, while additional discussion of literary matters is scattered through his correspondence, memoirs, unpublished speeches, and cultural and philosophical essays. Hitherto this work has proved useful piecemeal, in its illumination of Dreiser's fiction, while a few outstanding pieces have served to define Dreiser's version of realism or literary naturalism. This essay takes the literary criticism seriously as a body of work in itself, sketching out some categories and topics, and providing detailed historical contexts for several items, which reveal under-appreciated nuances and engagements in even better-known pieces such as "True Art speaks Plainly" and "Life, Art and America."

The essay sees coherence across the diverse foci of Dreiser's literary criticism via the concept of the "occasions of literary criticism", by which is meant the historical and cultural contexts into which he was writing. It charts the roots of Dreiser's literary criticism in his need to respond to charges of "literary immorality," its growth through his very particular response to censorship, and its maturity in his suggestion, in a speech given as part of the peace conference in Paris in 1938, of an American literary tradition dedicated to social justice, taking in Mark Twain and H. D. Thoreau as well as the expected cohort of realists and naturalists. The essay concludes by relating these contexts and preoccupations to the history and practice of the Theodore Dreiser Edition.

Keywords: Theodore Dreiser Edition, modernism, literary naturalism, Theodore Dreiser, textual editions, literary criticism, censorship, American literature

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“A modern without the doctrine of modernism”,¹ Dorothy Dudley’s epithet for Theodore Dreiser, frames his work as a direct response to industrial, urban, consumer society. Laid out at length in Dudley’s critical biography *Forgotten Frontiers*, this identification of Dreiser with modernity had been made earlier by friends and supporters such as Sherwood Anderson, and continues to be teased out and theorized, by for example Frederic Jameson, Jennifer Fleissner, Clare Eby, Bill Brown, and Paul Giles. As their work attests, Dreiser’s depictions of human selfhood constituted by desire, consumption, and performance have remained salient through shifting forms and perspectives on modernity in the twentieth century and on into the twenty-first. (Though it is also important to recognise other contexts, especially Dreiser’s intellectual formation through nineteenth-century science and philosophy, often signaled by his designation as a literary “naturalist”; and his capacity to evoke a strong feeling for the plight of his characters, not a quality particularly validated outside the work of Alfred Kazin, but one that surely underwrites what popularity Dreiser continues to enjoy outside the academy.)

In this essay though, I want to take up the second part of Dudley’s comment, where she highlights Dreiser’s apparent lack of an overt interest in the kinds of theorizing that she associates pejoratively with literary modernism. The perception that Dreiser was indifferent to, or naive about matters of literary form has shaped many facets of his literary reputation, from his dismissal by Stuart P. Sherman and Lionel Trilling, to affirmatory readings of Dreiser as a truth-teller impatient with literary and social conventions, such as Joseph Epstein’s validation of Dreiser’s fiction as “a good boiled potato”; hearty and nourishing but lacking the sophistication of the caviar that is Henry James.² A more balanced view emerges from a recent discussion of Dreiser’s influence on modernist writers by Kiyohiko Murayama, who quotes from a 1958 lecture by William Faulkner: “I think,” Faulkner said

that Dreiser knew exactly what he wanted to say, but he had a terrific difficulty in saying it, there was never any fun to him, any pleasure to him, he was convinced that he had a message, I don’t mean an ideological message or political but he had to tell folks, This is what you are. That he wasn’t writing for pleasure, he wasn’t writing for fun, and he

¹ Dudley, D. *Dreiser and the Land of the Free: A Novel of Facts*. London: Wishart and Co., 1933: 3. Published in the USA as *Forgotten Frontiers: Dreiser and the Land of the Free* (1932).

² Epstein, J. *Partial Payments: Essays on Writers and Their Lives* [1989]. New York: Norton, 1991: 260.

had a terrific time of it, which [Sherwood] Anderson didn't have, he loved the writing. It was his own confusion that troubled him but he never hated it, but I'm— I can imagine that Dreiser hated the sight of blank piece of paper. . . ³

Faulkner's association of Dreiser with an idiosyncratic version of that modernist quality of "difficulty" responds to the habitual suspensive condition of Dreiser's narrators and protagonists; his continual evocation of forms of biological, chemical, historical, social, and other forms of knowledge, which never quite deliver a full explanation for human behavior. My aim in this essay is to introduce the *occasions* of Dreiser's literary criticism – some of its main topics, and the contexts to which he responded. A diverse and dispersed body of work, it is best understood, I argue, not as articulating a "doctrine," modernist or otherwise, but as a series of attempts to address that "difficulty" as Faulkner put it, in telling folks "this is what you are."

The following is a provisional list of the discrete works of literary criticism that Dreiser published after the beginning of his literary career in 1900. It is drawn from the Pizer *et. al.* Dreiser Bibliography⁴ and from research in the Dreiser Papers at the University of Pennsylvania:

"True art Speaks Plainly." *Booklovers Magazine* 1 (February 1903): 129.

"At the Sign of the Lead Pencil: The Day of the Great Writer." *Bohemian* 17 (October 1909): 426-27.

"At the Sign of the Lead Pencil: Our National literary Debt." *Bohemian* 17 (December 1909): 705–707.

"Authors Dreiser and Brady Join in Hawthorne Plea." *St. Louis Star*, 11 July 1913: 2.

"My Uncompleted Trilogy." *New York Evening Sun* (30 May, 1914): 6.

Foreword to *Life in a Garrison Town* by Lieutenant Bilse. New York: John Lane Company; London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1914: v–xiii.

"The Saddest Story." *New Republic* 3 (12 June 1915): 155–56. (A review of *The Good Soldier* by Ford Madox Ford.)

"Neither Devil Nor Angel." *New Republic* 3 (10 July 1915): 262–63. (A review of *One Man*

³ Faulkner, W. *Faulkner in the University* eds. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Botner. Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1995: 234; quoted in Murayama, K. "Theodore Dreiser and the Modernists," *Studies in American Naturalism*, 11: 2 (Winter 2016), 38-55; 49.

⁴ Pizer, D. *et. al.* *Theodore Dreiser, A Primary Bibliography and Reference Guide*. Online Edition at <http://sceti.library.upenn.edu/dreiser/bibliography.pdf>.

by Robert Steele.)

“*The Genius*” *Not of a Trilogy*. *Reedy's Mirror* 24 (15 October 1915): 265.

“As a Realist Sees It.” *New Republic* 5 (25 December, 1915): 202-204. (A review of *Of Human Bondage* by W. Somerset Maugham.)

“Freedom for the Honest Writer.” *Cleveland Leader*, 12 March 1916: 7.

“America’s Foremost Author Protests Against Suppression of Great Books and Art by Self-Constituted Moral Censors.” *Los Angeles Record* (7 November 1916): 4.

“Life, Art and America.” *Seven Arts* 1 (February 1917): 363–89.

“Mister Bottom.” *The Social War* 1 (April, 1917): 2.

Statement in Reedy, William Marion. “To Make It Safe for Art.” *Reedy's Mirror* 28 (21 February, 1919): 101-102.

“Man and Romance.” *Reedy's Magazine* 28 (28 August 1919): 585.

“Why Not Tell Europe About Bertha M. Clay?” *St. Paul Daily News*, 11 September 1921, Section 2: 6.

Letter to Thomas A. Boyd, dated 25 August 1921, printed in *New York Call*, 24 October 1921: 6.

Letter to Max J Herzberg, 2 November 192, printed as “A Letter About Stephen Crane.” *Michigan Daily* (Ann Arbor), 27 November, Sunday Magazine Section: 1.

“The Scope of Fiction.” *New Republic* 30 (12 April 1922), Spring Literary Supplement: 8-9.

“A Letter from Vienna to Theo. Dreiser-And His Reply.” *Tempest* (Ann Arbor) 1 (2 April 1923): 3.

Letter to Rex Beach, May 5 1923 (a broadside on the Author’s League of America)

Preface to *Ebony and Ivory* by Llewelyn Powys. New York: American Library Service, 1923: vii–ix.

“Sombre Annals.” *New York Evening Post Literary Review*, 17 November 1923, p. 255. (A review of *Undertow* by Henry K. Marks.)

“America and the Artist.” *Nation* 120 (15 April 1925): 423-25.

Contribution to “Tributes from American and English Writers”, Thomas Hardy *Notes on His Life and Work*. Pamphlet published by Harper & Brothers, New York and London, 1925: 15.

“Henry L. Mencken and Myself” in *The Man Mencken: a Biographical and Critical Study* by Isaac Goldberg. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1925: 378–81.

“My Favorite Fiction Character.” *Bookman* 63 (April 1926): 175.

Introduction to *Lilith: a Dramatic Poem* by George Sterling. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926: vii–xii.

Foreword to *Poorhouse Sweeney: Life in a County Poorhouse* by Ed Sweeney. New York: Boni & Liveright, 1927: v–xi.

“Introduction to the Sandgate Edition of H.G. Wells.” Introduction to H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay. The Sandgate Edition*. New York: Duffield and Company, 1927: v–xi.

Foreword to *A Bibliography of the Writings of Theodore Dreiser* by Edward D. McDonald. Philadelphia: The Centaur Book Shop, 1928: 11–12.

Introduction to *The Road to Buenos Ayres* by Albert Londres. London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1928: v–xviii.

Introduction to *The Crime of Dr. Garine* by Boris Sokoloff. New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1928: vii–xii.

Introduction to *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* by Frank Norris. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1928: vii–xi.

“Dreiser on Tolstoy.” *San Francisco Bulletin*, 29 September 1928: 12.

Contribution to a symposium “Anatole France: A Post-Mortem Five Years Later.” *Tambour* (Paris), 5 (November, 1929): 25–26.

“The New Humanism.” *Thinker* 2 (July 1930): 8–12.

“The Early Adventures of *Sister Carrie*.” *Colophon*, 5 (March, 1931), unpaginated.

Contribution to “Goethe as Viewed by American Writers and Scholars: A Symposium” in *Monatshefte für Deutschen Unterricht* 24 (March–April 1932): 78–79.

“The Great American Novel.” *American Spectator* 1 (December 1932): 1–2.

“An Address to Caliban.” *Esquire* 2 (September 1934) : 20–21, 158D.

“The Epic Sinclair.” *Esquire* 2 (December 1934): 32–33, 178B-79.

Contribution to a collection of “Tributes to Gorky.” *Soviet Russia Today* 5 (July 1936): 7.

Contribution to Carolyn Marks. “Book Marks.” *New York World-Telegram*, 25 September 1936: 23.

International Literature, no. 1 (January): 126. (A letter dated 11 October 1932, recipient unnamed.)

Introduction to *Magnificent Hadrian: A Biography of Hadrian Emperor of Rome* by Sulamith Ish-Kishor. New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1935: 1-5.

Introduction to *Waiting for Nothing* by Tom Kromer. London: Constable & Co Ltd, 1935: xi–xix.

“Four Cases of Clyde Griffiths.” *New York Times*, 8 March 1936, Section 9: 1–2.

Introduction to *The Way of All Flesh* by Samuel Butler. New York: The Limited Editions Club, 1936: v–xxx.

Introduction to *Of Human Bondage* by W. Somerset Maugham. New Haven: Yale University Press/The Limited Editions Club 1938: iii–xiv.

“Presenting Thoreau” in *The Living Thoughts of Thoreau*. The Living Thoughts Library. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938: 1–32.

“Upton Sinclair.” *Clipper* 1 (September 1940): 3–4.

Introduction to *More Dangerous Thoughts* by Mike Quin. San Francisco: People’s World, 1941: 7-8.

“Sherwood Anderson.” *Clipper* 2 (May 1941): 5.

“Women Are the Realists.” *You* 2 (Fall 1944): 5, 48–49.

This diverse list is itself only part of a larger and still more heterogeneous series of writings on literary matters from across Dreiser’s career-long engagement with literary criticism. It does not include the magazine articles on American literary figures, and capsule book reviews, that Dreiser produced in the 1890s, before he began seriously writing fiction. It should also be supplemented by a further five discrete publications on drama, and seventeen on film, and by essays in the archives which seem to have remained unpublished, such as “A Modern Advance in the Novel,” “The Professional Intellectual and His Present Place,” “Literature and Journalism,” and “Is There a Future for American Letters?”. Moreover, Dreiser reflected on his own work and that of others in essays with more general themes (“Neurotic America and the Sex Impulse,” in *Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub* [1919] for example); in interviews and speeches; in his correspondence; and in memoirs and autobiographical writings. Also relevant too, are Dreiser’s discussions of visual art and painting, in novels such as *The Titan* (1912) and especially *The “Genius”* (1915) which explores his interest in representing the city through the painting career of the semi-autobiographical figure Eugene Witla.

Faced with this range of material, critics have tended either to use Dreiser’s critical writing piecemeal, primarily as an aid to examining his literary output, or to read two outstanding pieces, “True Art speaks Plainly” (1903) and “Life, Art and America” (1917) doctrinally, as semi-abstract philosophies of literature, or manifestos of naturalism or (the term Dreiser used) realism. In what follows I try to consider Dreiser’s literary criticism as a body of writing in its own right, which benefits from historical contextualization as such. Therefore my approach is twofold: to sketch out some of his main topics and ongoing themes, and for a small selection of items, to offer a more detailed description of what occasioned them, in order to clarify nuances of Dreiser’s thinking and engagements that might otherwise be missed.

SELF DEFENSE AND RESISTANCE TO CENSORSHIP

The roots of Dreiser's literary criticism lay in the need to defend his own artistic practice and to contest powerful expressions of taste which often stigmatized, censored, or threatened the legal suppression of his work. Both of his best-known pieces of literary criticism had their genesis as defensive responses. "True Art speaks Plainly" appeared in the wake of Dreiser's troubles with publishing house Doubleday, Page, who having accepted his first novel, *Sister Carrie*, had a change of heart and did almost all they could to disassociate themselves from it. The 447-word essay opens with a strong polemical statement:

The sum and substance of literary as well as social morality may be expressed in three words—tell the truth. It matters not how the tongues of the critics may wag, or the voices of a partially developed and highly conventionalized society may complain, the business of the author, as well as of other workers upon this earth, is to say what he knows to be true, and, having said as much, to abide the result with patience.⁵

This has resonated with generations of readers and critics, and has helped to substantiate Dreiser's reputation for fearless realism. However the apparent simplicity of its message is belied by its immediate historical and cultural context. A direct response to charges of "Literary Immorality" (the title of an earlier draft),⁶ the piece was evidently called into being by either the pre-publication wrangling over *Sister Carrie*, or critics who had called the published book "squalid," "unpleasant" and a depiction of "vice [as] triumphant"; or by both. But some further contextualization of what was being defined as "immoral" and what the repression of sexual matters implied, is in order.

In the first place, while some reviewers had found *Sister Carrie* morally problematic, many contemporary reviews were positive, showing no signs of finding the novel scandalous, and Dreiser would go on to deplore the more direct depictions of sex in literature in "Freedom for the Honest Writer" (1916). The main issue here was not explicitness, as such, but rather Dreiser's refusal to moralize over Carrie's extra-marital sexual activity or to narratively punish her for it. Nevertheless, Dreiser's demand for the freedom to treat sexual matters with more openness decisively expanded the argument being made since the late 1880s by Hamlin Garland, and most prominently William Dean Howells, who called for a literature that represented "commonplace" experience rather than the ideals and conventions of a social élite,

⁵ Dreiser, T. "True Art speaks Plainly." *The Booklovers Magazine* (Philadelphia) 1:1 (January 1903): 129.

⁶ Dreiser, T. and Dreiser, S. W. "Literary Immorality," unpublished holograph manuscript, Dreiser Collection, University of Pennsylvania, folder 121270.

and thereby was committed to democracy and social justice. Moreover, concern about the far-reaching and invidious results of sexual repression is a keynote of Dreiser's cultural criticism, further elaborated in later work such as "Life, Art and America" and "Neurotic America and the Sex Impulse." It is worth noting two aspects of his argument here. First, that for Dreiser sexual repression is the primary and characteristic repression in American culture, a root and a paradigm for other conventions, mystifications and repressions. Second, that in "True Art speaks Plainly" Dreiser views literature in directly ethical and social terms, grounded like all art in the honest observation of historical conditions, and attacks the appeal to supposedly "immutable forms" which he sees as bolstering the social *status quo*.

Having noted the specifics of Dreiser's argument here, it is also worth considering the situation of the essay as initially published. It was one of the "short, pungent, vigorous, signed editorials by men and women who have things to say and who want to say them 'hard'" in the first issue of what would become *Appleton's Magazine*. Dreiser's statement followed contributions by Hamlin Garland, Brander Matthews, and others, and was succeeded by Ella Wheeler Wilcox on the importance of disobeying tyranny. On republication in *The Modernist* in 1919 it appeared above a paragraph by Randolph Bourne commending virtue over duty. In other words, while Dreiser was a pioneer, he was not alone in his views and practice, but rather could be grouped with others who, unlike Dreiser at this point, crossed the boundary between literary and political radicalism.

"Life, Art and America" (1917), published in the little magazine *Seven Arts*, associated with Greenwich Village bohemia, was the culmination of a long campaign against censorship, most recently affecting his novel *The "Genius"*. Of all Dreiser's non-fiction, this essay has had the longest range, perhaps due to the continued relevance of its critique of a longstanding national refusal to come to terms with its own obsession with the material. Again though, it was called into being by, and needs still to be read against, very historically specific fears that the progressive social and cultural trends of the early nineteen-teens, growing support for women's suffrage and trades unions, the hobohemian synthesis of avant-garde art and progressive politics in Greenwich Village itself, were about to be put at stake by a nationalistic reaction rising alongside the US's path to involvement in the First World War. Not that Dreiser foresaw the "Red Scare" repressions of the 1918-19, during which his friend Emma Goldman was deported, but this time he did attempt to take his cultural critique of American nationalism into the realm of politics. In the wake of "Life, Art and America" Dreiser composed a parallel essay entitled "American Idealism and German Frightfulness" (both epithets were used ironically), also intended for *Seven Arts*. In 1917 the formal declaration of war, and the passing

of the Espionage Act, made it unpublishable. It is only recently that it has become possible to read the pair of essays together.⁷

Censorship then for Dreiser was not a narrowly literary issue, but at various social, psychological and political levels, a symptom of national “neurosis”. In interviews and in short written pieces, he was consistent in his approach to the topic, which had been formed through his experiences as a newspaperman in the 1890s and in reaction to Doubleday, Page’s embarrassment over *Sister Carrie*, and hardened by the subsequent struggle to include mild sexual content in *The “Genius”* and to address sex crimes in the play *The Hand of the Potter*. Dreiser did not see censorship in rights-based terms, as a free-speech issue. In fact, and particularly with Hollywood in mind, he explicitly accepted the need to censor unscrupulous and exploitative cultural production. What Dreiser wanted was, as he made clear in the title of that 1916 essay, “Freedom for the Honest Writer”. For him, the censorship issue folded directly into the sense of a writer’s obligation to depict real lives truthfully. This was both a moral and, he increasingly came to see, a political obligation, in order to explode mystifying conventions and promote his core social value of “equity”.

VALIDATING FRIENDS AND ALLIES

Quite a large proportion of Dreiser’s literary criticism was devoted to the validation of work or of writers with which he felt some kind of affiliation. Here, various occasions intersected. Naturally, he responded to questions about his literary influences, consistently citing Honoré de Balzac as the most important. In addition, no doubt for reasons of solidarity and to try to build collective cultural capital, Dreiser frequently cited American realist precursors such as Henry Blake Fuller, Ignatius Donnelly, Hamlin Garland, Frank Norris, and Stephen Crane, as pioneers of the kind of writing he aimed to practice.

Less well-known is the range of writers for whose works Dreiser agreed to write prefaces or introductions. Some of these were personal friends as well as literary allies (George Sterling, Ed Sweeney, and Sulamith Ish-Kishor, for example); some were sympathetic writers with whom Dreiser shared a publisher (Albert Londres), some were political allies who shared Dreiser’s 1930s and 1940s affiliation with American communism (Mike Quin). Dreiser also responded enthusiastically to requests from the USSR to write about Pushkin and Gorky, and he seems to have felt a particular affinity with Dostoyevsky. Others were from further afield

⁷ See “American Idealism and German Frightfulness,” in Dreiser, T. *Political Writings* ed. Jude Davies. Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2011: 56-82.

both geographically, ideologically and in terms of literary style. Dreiser wrote introductions for reprints of British writers H. G. Wells, Samuel Butler, and W. Somerset Maugham, and defended Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, against that old charge of "literary immorality"⁸

A NATIONAL LITERATURE, AN INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE, AND MARK TWIN

While there was always a potential for canon-building in Dreiser's validation of his writers he regarded as fellow realists, it was only comparatively late in his career that his interest in the specificity of American culture was developed into anything like a detailed literary history. Emphasizing what he saw as the general hostility to America's best writers, - "Poe, Hawthorne, Whitman, and Thoreau, each in turn was the butt and jibe of unintelligent Americans..."⁹ - for most of his career Dreiser seems to have regarded the idea of a national literary tradition as a contradiction in terms.

After a period when his literary credentials had been established in the wake of the critical and popular success of 1925's *An American Tragedy*, two new developments are visible. Dreiser expanded his field of reference beyond the realists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, engaging with Mark Twain and with Henry David Thoreau in detail,¹⁰ and, in specific circumstances, for the right audience, he began to try to piece together a historical account of American literature and its interaction with social justice.

From the mid-1930s, Dreiser wrote about Mark Twain with the deepest admiration, seeing Twain as the first American writer to combine true literary achievement with popular success, and thereby a token of the maturity of American letters, albeit that Twain was obliged to spilt his literary persona in two in order to accomplish this. In a 1938 speech Dreiser constructed an argument that read American literary history alongside its political history, linking Twain and canonical American writers with a turn to social justice, the "novel of protest

⁸ Dreiser, T. "The Saddest Story." *New Republic* 3 (12 June 1915): 155-56.

⁹ Dreiser, T. "Life, Art and America," *Seven Arts* 1 (February 1917), 363-89; 389.

¹⁰ Dreiser, T. "Mark the Double Twain," *English Journal* 24 (October 1935), 615-27; Dreiser, T. "Mark Twain: Three Contacts," *Esquire* 4 (October 1935), 22, 162, 162A-B; Dreiser, T. "Presenting Thoreau," in *The Living Thoughts of Thoreau*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1939: 1-32.

in America”, of which Twain’s *The Gilded Age* was “almost the first”.¹¹ The occasion was an international peace conference in Paris. The International Association of Writers in Defense of Culture brought together socialists, communists and others concerned at the rise of fascist dictatorships in the 1930s, and inspired by a belief that culture, shared internationally, could help build resistance and overcome fascism. It was founded at a Congress in Paris in June 1935, attended by writers such as Louis Aragon, Romain Rolland, Henri Barbusse, André Gide, André Malraux, Bertolt Brecht, Heinrich Mann, Klaus Mann, Lion Feuchtwanger, Robert Musil, Ernst Toller, Anna Seghers, E.M. Forster, John Strachey, Aldous Huxley, Ilya Ehrenburg, Michael Koltzov, Aleksei Tolstoy and Boris Pasternak. After a second Congress held in war-torn Spain in July 1937, the third took place in Paris in July 1938, immediately following the World Conference for Action on the Bombardment of Open Towns and the Restoration of Peace, at which Dreiser also spoke. Both took place in the shadow of increasingly visible political violence: the emergence of fascist regimes in Germany and Italy and their bombing of civilian populations in Spain; Japanese bombing of the Chinese cities of Shanghai and Chongqing; and Stalinist repression within the USSR and in Spain.

In his “Address” to the conference on 25 July 1938, Dreiser outlined a political history of American literature for his international audience, that can best be understood by comparing it with the much more fully realized conception worked out in V. L. Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927-1930). Like Parrington, Dreiser described an opposition between realist and romantic tendencies, the former progressive and the latter reactionary. Unlike Parrington, Dreiser read canonical writers such as Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, Henry James, and Walt Whitman not as partisans for one side or the other, but as humanitarians who “despite their sympathy and their understanding” were “enviored by a moral and religious opposition to reality which characterized American life practically up to 1920.” Here Dreiser differed from Parrington both conceptually, in granting the field of literature some independence from essential political struggle, and historically, in that he saw the decisive political split in American literature as emerging not from essential tensions that went back beyond the nation’s foundation, but rather from the social changes attendant upon industrialization, and triggered by the dislocations of World War I and the widened political horizon created by the Russian Revolution. What these made

¹¹ Dreiser, T. “Address to the International Association of Writers in Defense of Culture, Paris, 25 July 1938.” Unpublished typescript, Dreiser Papers, University of Pennsylvania Library, folder 13379. Subsequent references are to the same text.

possible, Dreiser argued, was the “novel of protest” based on authors’ ability to see individual misery in relation to social-economic conditions. Here then the familiar cohort of realists appear; Stephen Crane, Hamlin Garland, Henry Blake Fuller, William Allan White (a comparatively new addition) and Upton Sinclair (Dreiser included his own *Sister Carrie* too, but this time Norris was not mentioned) – configured not in terms of a break with their precursors but as developing further what Twain had started with *The Gilded Age*.

Dreiser went on to list twentieth-century American writers that he regarded as the most important practitioners of this widely-defined “protest novel”, many of whom certainly did not align themselves, as Dreiser did, with the left. Abraham Cahan, Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, and later Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald, depicted conditions “under an alleged democracy.” After another bifurcation when the historically existing example of Russian Communism forced writers to take sides, depictions of “economic and social conditions as they are” included Erskine Caldwell’s *God’s Little Acre* and William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*, and plays by Marc Blitzstein and Paul Peters. The speech moves to its end with a typically Dreiserian confession of the limits of his own knowledge, here concretized by reference to his international audience; and something quite unusual in Dreiser’s writing; a self-deprecating joke. “I do not know how literature stands in most of the countries that are represented here,” he said, “I am not able to understand any but my own language, and scarcely that...”

THE IRREDUCIBILITY OF THE SPECIFIC

If there is a quality in Dreiser’s novels that carries through directly to his literary criticism, it is his concern with the irreducible specificity of individual lives. Manifested in his painstaking care to detail the thinking, feeling, suffering, and (sometimes) resilience, of his best-known protagonists, Carrie Meeber, Jennie Gerhardt, Frank Cowperwood, and Chester Gillette, this mirrored, we learn from an obscure cinema program note, what Dreiser most valued in Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and that he was moved to find honored in German director Robert Wiene’s 1923 expressionist film version of the novel. “How achieve the moods of man in art” Dreiser’s note on the film began,

– his deeper and deepest psychologic reactions and approaches. His subtlest responses, whether pleasurable or the reverse, to the various stimuli of life – his deepest fears,

elations, suspicions, hatreds – his most abstruse and in some cases completely, if not permanently, veiled motivations.¹²

Just as he honored the irreducible specificity of people, in another realm Dreiser's literary criticism, considered as a body of work, is characterized not by polemic and generalization but by its attention to specifics. One final example shows Dreiser applying this distinction in favor of Frank Norris over Stephen Crane.

In 1928 Dreiser, we might surmise, was particularly keen to write an introduction to a new edition of Norris's *McTeague*, since Norris was not only one of his cohort of fellow realists, but had – as Dreiser makes clear in the piece – played an essential role in his career, (Norris had made the initial decision to accept *Sister Carrie* while working as an editor for Doubleday, Page). But for Dreiser the introduction is also occasioned by something else – the British writer H. G. Wells's claims on behalf of Stephen Crane as the most important pioneer of literary realism. He contests that claim by comparing invidiously Crane's universalism and what he portrays as Norris's interest in the local. While *The Red Badge of Courage* concerns itself with “the psychology of war in general” it says nothing of the specifically American psychology of the Civil War. By contrast *McTeague* is a better example of American realism because “this work of Norris's concerns San Francisco and the everyday life of a certain element of that city.”¹³ He closes with extravagant praise:

I know of no book, before or since, out of America, France, Germany, Russia, Scandinavia, or England, that is essentially more correct as to milieu and situations, or artistically and socially more illuminating and valuable.¹⁴

Dreiser's implication being that social and artistic illumination and value are intimately connected with being “correct as to milieu and situations”.

In anticipation of the publication of the *Critical Writings* in the Dreiser Edition, I would like to close by briefly considering an echo of this preoccupation with specificity in the Dreiser Edition's practices. Since its inception in 1981, the Dreiser Edition has published five novels, *Sister Carrie* (1981), *Jennie Gerhardt* (1992), *The Genius* (2008), *The Financier* (2010), and *The Titan* (2016), the memoirs *An Amateur Laborer* (1983) and *Newspaper Days* (1991), one

¹² Dreiser, T. “Theodore Dreiser Says.” *W8 Street Film Guide*, Fifteenth Program, June 29 to July 5, 1929; n.p.

¹³ Dreiser, T. “Introduction,” in Norris, F. *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1928: vii-x; ix, x.

¹⁴ Dreiser, T. “Introduction to *McTeague*,” xi.

travel book, *A Traveler at Forty* (2004), the collection of biographies and character sketches *Twelve Men* (1998), the *American Diaries 1902-26* (1982), the *Interviews* (2004), the *Political Writings* (2011), and four volumes of letters. Volumes of the *Plays*, the *Critical Writings*, the *European Diaries*, and *The Stoic* are currently in preparation. Aside from the letters and the parallel pairs of *The Financier* and *The Titan* (initially conceptualized and drafted as a single work, and published within an eighteen-month period), and the selections *Political* and *Critical Writings*, no two of these volumes share exactly the same editorial procedures. For comparison, the editors of the ongoing Oxford University Press's *Complete Works of Edith Wharton*¹⁵, dealing with an equally diverse and more extensive *corpus*, aspire to apply as far as possible a single detailed editorial policy to each of thirty volumes.

While this striking difference echoes distinctions between Dreiser's and Wharton's literary conceptions, it perhaps more significantly corresponds to the conditions under which they wrote and were and are published. Coincidence is a product of historical continuity. It has remained as financially difficult to produce a posthumous "uniform edition" of Dreiser's work in English as it was when he was alive, and part of the reason for the shifting editorial policies applied by the Dreiser Edition to his novels, is accounted for by shifts in the theory and practice of textual editing, and the advent of digitization, during the forty-plus years that the Dreiser Edition has been in process. The first volume in the Dreiser Edition, 1981's *Sister Carrie* attracted controversy for its apparent intent on purging the text of its social and historical influences, affiliating itself explicitly with the Gregg-Bowers tradition of textual editing and espousing a particularly narrow definition of Dreiser's authorship which rejected even his own process of revision. On the face of it, the current rationale for the Edition could hardly be more different, situating itself instead in the tradition of "versioning" and engaging with notions of the "social text". Here for example is part of the general statement of editorial principles, prepared by Thomas P. Riggio and myself for the 2016 Dreiser Edition of *The Titan*:

Dreiser Edition volumes are not based on any fixed theory or school of thought, and editors assume that every text presents unique issues that shape critical practice. [...] The Dreiser Edition advocates an approach that avoids the pitfalls of eclecticism and ontologies of definitiveness, while also seeking as much as possible to replicate the historical presentation of a clean text to readers. Accordingly, all texts are presented as one of a number of possible versions in a continuum of composition. In this regard the

¹⁵ <https://whartoncompleteworks.org/about/>

Dreiser Edition has evolved from the original formulations published in 1981 to take into account the central ideas common to diverse modern textual critics (among others, Philip Gaskell, Jerome J. McGann, and Donald H. Reiman).¹⁶

However, this apparent tectonic shift in editorial practice elides major continuities. The 1981 *Sister Carrie* practiced a form of eclectic textual editing and its detailed apparatus and subsequent publication history enabled what I have termed a form of textual versioning “by the backdoor”.¹⁷ But the real point here is that the circumstances under which Dreiser wrote generated a textual history that defies a universal approach. James L. W. West, textual editor of several significant Dreiser Edition volumes, has remarked that his editorial choice of Dreiser’s revised holograph manuscript of *Sister Carrie* as copy-text would not even have been possible for the later novels, for the simple reason that a finished fully Dreiserian text had never existed for them.¹⁸ After 1911 not a single one of Dreiser’s novels was submitted to the publisher in the form of what might be considered a completed final draft, whether due to his increasing confidence in trusted editors, his growing familiarity with an editorial process of dialogue between writers, publishers, and editors that would bring the work to completion, because he delivered typescripts incomplete due to time and financial pressures, because he was too ill to oversee the completed work, or because he had died.

This brief sketching-out makes no pretense to completeness, and it should be clear by now that a commitment to understand the occasions of Dreiser’s literary criticism is, in some senses, at loggerheads with a wish to abstract its most “important” aspects. There are other Dreisers, and there are other stories to be told about his literary criticism. This then is not a Conclusion.

¹⁶ Davies, J. and Riggio, T. P. “Editorial Procedures,” in Dreiser, T. *The Titan*, ed. Roark Mulligan. Winchester, U.K: Winchester University Press, 2016: xiv-xv.

¹⁷ Davies, J. “Method and Judgment in the Theodore Dreiser Edition: From *Sister Carrie* to *The Titan*.” *Scholarly Editing: The Annual of the Association for Documentary Editing*. 37 (2016), 1-18; 3-8.

¹⁸ See West, J. L. W. “Fair Copy, Authorial Intention, and Versioning,” in West, J. L. W. *Making the Archives Talk: New and Selected Essays in Bibliography, Editing, and Book History*. Philadelphia: Penn State Univ. Press, 2011: 29–30, 36–37.

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