

THEODORE DREISER AND THE AMERICAN FINANCIER

A passage from Dreiser's first novel *Sister Carrie* (1900), will serve to suggest both Dreiser's interest in the world of business and his attitude toward it:

Into this important commercial region the timid Carrie went... She walked bravely forward, led by an honest desire to find employment and delayed at every step by the interest of the unfolding scene, and a sense of helplessness amid so much evidence of power and force which she did not understand. These vast buildings, what were they? These strange energies and huge interests, for what purposes were they there? She could have understood the meaning of a little stone-cutter's yard at Columbia City, carving little pieces of marble for individual use, but when the yards of some huge stone corporation came into view, filled with spur tracks and flat cars, transpierced by docks from the river and traversed overhead by immense trundling cranes of wood and steel, it lost all significance in her little world.

As can be seen from the autobiographical *A Book About Myself* (1922) and *Dawn* (1931), Carrie's awe at « so much evidence of power and force which she did not understand » is an immediate reflection of Dreiser's own youthful feelings about Chicago. The fascination of Chicago remained with Dreiser all his life, and so did the intimately related fascination of business—bolstered as it was by his professional interest as a journalist in the careers of men who had « made good », and by his personal obsession with wealth, power and success.

Dreiser's intense interest in business is reflected to a greater or lesser extent in almost all his novels: much of *The « Genius »* (1915) is taken up with Eugene Witla's advertising and managerial work, much of *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911) with the business affairs of the Kane family, while Samuel Griffiths's collar-factory plays an important part in the action of *An American Tragedy* (1925), and *The Bulwark* (1946) could

justifiably be classified as a business novel, although business is not really its central theme. But in speaking of Dreiser as a business novelist the books that come immediately to mind are the three which describe the career of Frank Cowperwood: *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914) and *The Stoic* (1947). *The Financier* is « prodigiously got up », to use James's phrase, but badly put together. *The Stoic* Dreiser could never finish, and it was published after his death in its incomplete form. *The Titan*, the middle volume and the best of the three, has many of the qualities of the ideal business novel without being a great novel itself.

In *The Titan*, Frank Cowperwood is presented as intensely 'individual', a kind of land-locked Captain Ahab: « Rushing like a great comet to the zenith, his path a blazing trail, Cowperwood did for the hour illuminate the terrors and wonders of individuality ». Cowperwood, indeed, is intended to be a kind of superman. The title is attached to him in the chapter heading 'Man and Superman', and it is thus that Berenice imagines him: « As she thought of him — waging his terrific contests, hurrying to and fro between New York and Chicago, building his splendid mansion, collecting his pictures, quarrelling with Aileen — he came by degrees to take on the outline of a superman, a half-god or demi-gorgon. How could the ordinary rules of life or the accustomed paths of men be expected to control him? They could not and did not ». Cowperwood thinks of himself as a man of destiny: « He could, should, and would rule alone. No man must ever again have the least claim on him save that of a suppliant... By right of financial intellect and courage he was first, and would so prove it. Men must swing around him as planets around the sun ». His motto is: « I satisfy myself ». Ruthless, individualistic, determined to be the master of his own destinies, Cowperwood carries Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance to its logical and terrifying conclusion.

Yet Cowperwood by no means appears wholly self-reliant. On another occasion he seems to Berenice « a kind of superman,

and yet also a bad boy—handsome, powerful, hopeful, not so much older than herself now, impelled by some blazing internal force which harried him on and on ». Berenice, that is, feels maternally towards him, and it is this emotion that takes her to him on the night of his defeat: « 'I thought... that you might really need me now' ». An even greater modification of his independence is his insatiable sexual appetite. Such an appetite may have seemed to Dreiser a sign of the vigour proper to a merchant-prince, but it may equally be regarded as a sign of weakness or of inadequacy. With Cowperwood it is a matter not merely of appetite but of addiction, and he has all the addict's desperation and lack of control. This is a grave handicap to him in his business affairs. His defeat in the crucial matter of the fifty year franchises is due very largely to the implacable silent hatred of Hosmer Hand, aroused by Cowperwood's seduction of his wife. Dreiser makes it quite clear that Cowperwood's sexual adventures are the main cause of the growth of opposition to him: « It was not until the incidents relating to Cowperwood and Mrs Hand had come to light that things financial and otherwise began to darken up ». Cowperwood, in short, behaves stupidly, especially as nothing apart from their availability particularly attracts him to these wives of his business colleagues.

Cowperwood acts unwisely, too, in alienating on other grounds such people as Purdy and MacDonald. But Dreiser needed to have Cowperwood get himself into tight corners, for what he wanted to celebrate was not so much his wisdom as his courage: his tenacity in the face of heavy odds, his bold handling of millions of dollars, his undauntedness in a political atmosphere in which, however deceptive the surface appearance, « a jungle-like complexity was present, a dark, rank growth of horrific but avid life — life at the full, life knife in hand, life blazing with courage and dripping at the jaws with hunger ». Dreiser succeeds in conveying much of his sense of Cowperwood's grandeur, but he does not succeed in making him wholly credible, nor in conveying the full excite-

ment of the great affairs in which he is involved. Norris, in *The Pit*, managed this better by concentrating on Jadwin's own activities in the hurly-burly of the exchange. In *The Titan* this is too much diluted. Dreiser's documentary passion, more controlled here than in *The Financier*, still leads him to lose Cowperwood in his surroundings. So much is done by others on Cowperwood's behalf, and attention is so often shifted to them for whole chapters at a time, that we never get a sufficient sense of Cowperwood sitting competent, cool and omniscient at the centre of an enormous web of his own spinning. Yet something of that kind was needed to hold all the multifarious political and business activities together.

There is, too, a certain dull repetitiousness about Cowperwood's business affairs, as about his love affairs: the operations in which he is successively involved tend to differ from each other in degree rather than in kind. This repetitiousness points in turn to a more fundamental inadequacy in the book: the failure of Cowperwood to develop as a character. These ever vaster business dealings are not used by Dreiser to bring out some new facet of Cowperwood's character or to throw a brighter light on what is already known of him: they simply happen. Cowperwood, in fact, scarcely grows at all. He springs fully-armed into the opening pages of *The Financier*: watching the lobster eat the squid he learns at once the single principle that is to guide all his future conduct. The attempt in *The Stoic* to give a new direction to his character ends in disaster. Dreiser eventually kills him off, in a rather abrupt manner, and turns his attention to Berenice as a more satisfactory vehicle for his changed ideas.

The extent to which Dreiser's ideas did change in his later years is most clearly shown in *Tragic America* (1931), in which he violently attacks those American capitalists whom, in *The Financier* and *The Titan*, in the portrait of old Archibald Kane in *Jennie Gerhardt*, and in the essay on 'The American Financier' in *Hey, Rub-a-Dub-Dub* (1920), he had previously portrayed as representing the most dynamic and productive

forces in American society. In *The Bulwark*, which, with *The Stoic*, Dreiser was finishing at the time of his death. Solon Barnes seeks spiritual peace by renouncing his business interests and Freeborn K. Baker, a character strongly reminiscent of Cowperwood, is unsympathetically presented. This change seems to date from the shock of the stock-market crash of 1929 and the subsequent depression, but the first hint of it can perhaps be seen in the presentation, in *An American Tragedy*, of Clyde Griffiths, the American failure, almost identical with Frank Cowperwood in aspiration, but in achievement his very antithesis.

Cowperwood, however, remains Dreiser's one major portrait of a business figure and the character is modelled in detail upon a real-life figure, Charles A. Yerkes, the Chicago traction magnate, in whom Dreiser seems to have seen the makings of a figure of almost mythic proportions. In a later article he wrote:

Some tales are too great to be told, or they need retelling. Certain I am of one thing, the age that produced at once the mechanical perfection of the world and its most colossal fortunes is classic. From that period certainly some Croesus, Lepidus or Maecenas is sure to show forth in fable, song, or story. In my limited search and with my selective tendencies none seemed of so great import, socially, sociologically, financially, philosophically as the individual whom I have selected. A rebellious Lucifer this, glorious in his somber conception of the value of power. A night-black pool his world will seem to some, played over by fulgurous gleams of his own individualistic and truly titanic mind. To the illuminate it will have a very different meaning, I am sure, a clear suggestion of the inscrutable forces of life, as they shift and play — marring what they do not glorify — pagan, fortuitous, inalienably artistic¹.

That Dreiser's achievement fell short of his conception was due to nothing so much as to his attempt, hinted at in the phrase «inalienably artistic», to present Cowperwood as a kind of artist. Stephanie Platow «conceived of him as a very great artist in his realm rather than as a business man,

¹ Quoted in F. O. MATTHIESSEN, *Theodore Dreiser*, London, 1951, p. 135.

and he grasped this fact after a very little while and appreciated it » — naturally enough, since we are told in *The Financier* that « Of all individuals he respected, indeed revered, the sincere artist ». Whereas Frank Norris actually showed some tendency to elevate the business man above the artist, Dreiser inclines to place them on an equal footing:

Cowperwood was innately and primarily an egoist and intellectual, though blended strongly therewith was a humane and democratic spirit. We think of egoism and intellectualism as closely confined to the arts. Finance is an art. And it presents the operations of the subtlest of the intellectuals and of the egoists. Cowperwood was a financier.

« Finance is an art »: Dreiser is always careful to discriminate between the operations of finance, which may be on the level of art, and those of commerce, which are unworthy of serious attention. This insistence on the superior creativeness of financial speculation and manipulation as contrasted with the dull sordidness of mere trade is a little difficult to accept, but it is central to Dreiser's conception of Cowperwood. Governor Archer, we learn, « was by nature materially and commercially minded — therefore without basic appeal to the higher ranks of intelligence ». It is true that Dreiser, with his usual carelessness about individual phrases, says at one point that Cowperwood « wanted fame and reputation, but he wanted money even more »: nevertheless we are clearly meant to regard him as essentially free from crudely materialistic motives. His secretary, Antoinette Nowak, thinks of him as utterly different from « the men of the business world, crazy over money, and with no understanding of anything save some few facts about Chicago and its momentary possibilities. In Cowperwood's office... she had learned more of life than she had ever dreamed existed. He was like a vast open window out of which she was looking upon an almost illimitable landscape ».

When, however, Dreiser attempts to define this special, artistic quality of Cowperwood's mind he can do no more than make large but ineffectual gestures. His most sustained

attempt is put into the mouth of Aileen, who thinks of Cowperwood as having:

a mind and spirit far greater than any other she had ever known. Neither honor, virtue, consistent charity, nor sympathy was there, but only a gay, foamy, unterrified sufficiency and a creative, constructive sense of beauty that, like sunlit spray, glowing with all the irradiative glories of the morning, danced and fled, spun driftwise over a heavy sea of circumstances. Life, however dark and somber, could never apparently cloud his soul. Brooding and idling in the wonder palace of his construction, Aileen could see what he was like. The silver fountain in the court of orchids, the peach-like glow of the pink marble chamber, with its birds and flowers, the serried brilliance of his amazing art-collection were all like him, were really the color of his soul.

This is especially interesting in that it attempts to describe Cowperwood in terms of the 'palace of art' of his own conception and construction, the outward expression of his own artistic nature. The trouble is that we cannot take the palace itself at all seriously, nor, for we know what it comprises, the 'amazing art-collection'. Dreiser, as F.O. Matthiessen points out², had very uncertain artistic taste and very little notion of what it meant to be an artist. Indeed, we are less surprised at Dreiser's placing the businessman on a footing of equality with the artist when we see, in *The «Genius»*, some of the attitudes which Eugene Witla, presented as a true artist, finds it possible to have towards his art. In the course of the book Witla moves quite easily from art to advertising and to the management of advertising and publishing concerns and back again to art. He makes a great success as a businessman and what loses him his job — and brings him back to his art — is not professional inadequacy but a Cowperwoodian passion for a young girl. Yet Dreiser always insists that Witla is 'primarily an artist' and has 'the artistic temperament'. The unconvincingness of Witla as an artist, however, is perhaps

² *Op. cit.*, p. 147.

sufficiently suggested by his reflection upon being appointed advertising manager to the Kalvin Publishing Company:

Eight thousand a year! Was he eventually going to become a great business man instead of an artist?... He foresaw an apartment on Riverside Drive in New York a house in the country perhaps, for he fancied he would not always want to live in the city. An automobile of his own, perhaps; a grand piano for Angela; Sheraton or Chippendale furniture; friends, fame — what artist's career could compare to this? Did any artist he knew enjoy what he was enjoying now, even? Why should he worry about being an artist? Did they ever get anywhere? Would the approval of posterity let him ride in an automobile now? He smiled as he recalled Dula's talk about class superiority — the distinction of being an artist, even though poor. Poverty be hanged! Posterity go to the devil! He wanted to live now — not in the approval of posterity.

Dreiser's inadequate grasp of the nature of art and of the artist's vocation is perhaps symptomatic of his standing apart from virtually all cultural movements and traditions. As a writer he is *sui generis*. He was a 'naturalist' because, so to speak, it came naturally. He had not read Zola before writing *Sister Carrie*, nor even, it appears, Frank Norris. The only traditions with which he can be confidently identified are not literary but moral and social: in all his novels he testifies to the drive towards the top which is inherent in the American ideology of success.

What is most remarkable about *The Financier* and *The Titan* is Dreiser's supreme effort — far beyond what any other American novelist has attempted and comparable only to the prodigious enterprise of Zola — to conquer the occultness of business by means of exhaustive research. In large measure he succeeds: the financial and political world of Chicago is amply and, we are ready to believe, exactly bodied forth in his pages. Unfortunately, the body lacks a heart, remains inert. There is a failure not of documentation but of imagination. Like his *Carrie*, Dreiser understood very well the lower levels of business — the hierarchical structure of the collar-factory in *An American Tragedy*, for example, is perceptively delineat-

ed — but he never entirely grasped what went on at the peaks of power and success. Those 'strange energies and huge interests' of Chicago which appeared to the young Dreiser as such fascinating enigmas never ceased to fascinate him throughout his life, nor did they cease to be enigmas.

This limited imaginative power is evident throughout Dreiser's work, apart from those all too rare occasions — parts of *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, for example, and a few sections of *An American Tragedy* — when it is transcended by the sheer strength of Dreiser's humanity. It is characteristic of Dreiser that the great mass of his material is either taken directly from his own experiences or based upon fully documented accounts of other people's lives. He is rarely able, however, to achieve artistic detachment from his own experiences, and his most nearly autobiographical novel, *The « Genius »*, is also his worst, immensely long, sprawling and chaotic. He tends to be at his best when he can use something outside himself — someone else's career, an actual case-history — as a core to which his material can accrete in orderly fashion. Thus Dreiser's sister was the original of Carrie, the Cowperwood novels are based on the life of Yerkes, and *An American Tragedy* follows closely the records of an historical murder trial. By basing his novels firmly on fact Dreiser felt, rightly or wrongly that he was getting closer to « reality » and it must always be remembered that realistic fidelity of presentation was always his principal aim. It is, after all, Dreiser's realism, in its sociological almost as much as in its literary aspects, which provides the chief interest of his work at the present time.

Dreiser presents, as an artist, very considerable difficulties. F.O. Matthiessen, by turning from Hawthorne and Melville, from James and Eliot, to write of Dreiser in his last book, has in effect made the appreciation of Dreiser a crucial test of a full response to American literature as a whole. It is perhaps harder for English readers to pass that test than it is for non-Americans whose first language is not English, for it is almost impossible for the English reader to reconcile himself to the

sheer badness of Dreiser's writing: few writers have been so insensitive to language, so ignorant of the possibilities of their craft. Nor is it simply that he has no ear for colloquial speech, that his grammar is faulty, his rhetoric ludicrously high-flown, his image-making power almost non-existent. Much more serious is his frequent inability to say clearly what he means, to make his reader see what he wants him to see. The presentation of character is often slipshod and shifting. On page 385 of *The Titan* Aileen says of Cowperwood: « He was never brutal to me ». She is speaking to Lynde, to whom, on page 267, she had been first drawn because « He would be winsome and coaxing, but at the same time strong, direct, deliciously brutal, like her Frank ». It seems unfortunate that there should be any uncertainty about so central a question as the quality of Cowperwood's relationship with his wife. But there are even more glaring inconsistencies. On page 197 of *The Titan* we learn of Cowperwood that « His greatest weakness, if he had one, was that he could but ill brook opposition of any kind ». Some twenty pages later we read: « Cowperwood, individual, reliant, utterly indifferent to opposition of any kind... ».

Dreiser's admirers do not deny that he has faults, but they claim that he rises superior to such considerations. The case is well put by Alfred Kazin in *On Native Grounds*:

It is because he has spoken for Americans with an emotion equivalent to their own emotion, in a speech as brokenly and blindly searching as common speech, that we have responded to him with the dawning realisation that he is stronger than all the others of his time, and at the same time more poignant; greater than the world he has described, but as significant as the people in it. To have accepted America as he has accepted it, to immerse oneself in something one can neither escape nor relinquish, to yield to what has been true and to yearn over what has seemed inexorable, has been Dreiser's fate and the secret of his victory³.

This is persuasive, but not sufficiently persuasive to convince a non-American, at least, that Dreiser's faults are in fact

³ ALFRED KAZIN, *On Native Grounds*, London, 1943, pp. 89-90.

his virtues. In his second sentence, however, Kazin touches upon that one quality in Dreiser to which it is impossible not to respond in a positive way. Dreiser was identified more completely than any other writer has been with the deepest motivations and aspirations of contemporary American life — identified, not as a conscious act of will, but because he could not do otherwise, because he was himself the perfect embodiment of the forces charted in his books. For Dreiser, as Kenneth S. Lynn has shown,⁴ the American 'success' story was not merely a usable theme, it was, imperatively and inescapably, the only possible theme. Dreiser was preoccupied, even obsessed, with success not only in his novels but in his own life. Success, with all its implications of wealth, luxury, freedom and fame, was what he himself longed for. His interest in business sprang largely from his understanding that business, in one form or another, was the route by which success was most often and most rapidly achieved.

Dreiser, more than almost any other American writer, can be fully appreciated only in terms of his biography — which is perhaps simply to say that only in terms of his biography can he begin to be excused his faults. It can also be said, however, that Dreiser has an historical importance out of all proportion to the actual quality of his achievement. When Dreiser is seen in his role of literary pioneer, opening up new social and moral territory and making it available for later development and civilization, then his ruggedness becomes more understandable, if still not entirely excusable. He has, too, a somewhat incoherent but nonetheless powerful sense of humanity, evident in *Tragic America* as much as in *An American*, and his novels, though clumsy, ponderous and often contradictory, have a weightiness, compounded of passionate sincerity and deeply felt experience, which becomes finally impressive.

⁴ KENNETH S. LYNN, *The Dream of Success*, Boston and Toronto, 1955, pp. 13-74.

Sherwood Anderson has left a memorable image of Dreiser:

Theodore Dreiser is old — he is very, very old. I do not know how many years he has lived, perhaps forty, perhaps fifty, but he is very old. Something gray and bleak and hurtful, that has been in the world perhaps forever, is personified in him.

When Dreiser is gone men shall write books, many of them, and in the books they shall write there will be so many of the qualities Dreiser lacks. The new, the younger men shall have a sense of humor, and everyone knows Dreiser has no sense of humor. More than that, American prose writers shall have grace, lightness of touch, a dream of beauty breaking through the husks of life.

O, those who follow him shall have many things that Dreiser does not have. That is a part of the wonder and beauty of Theodore Dreiser, the things that others shall have, because of him.

Long ago, when he was editor of the *Delineator*, Dreiser went one day, with a woman friend, to visit an orphan asylum. The woman once told me the story of that afternoon in the big, ugly gray building, with Dreiser, looking heavy and lumpy and old, sitting on a platform, folding and refolding his pocket-handkerchief and watching the children — all in their little uniforms, trooping in.

«The tears ran down his cheeks and he shook his head», the woman said, and that is a real picture of Theodore Dreiser. He is old in spirit and he does not know what to do with life, so he tells about it as he sees it, simply and honestly. The tears run down his cheeks and he folds and refolds the pocket-handkerchief and shakes his head⁵.

It is the helpless honesty of Dreiser that compels us, however unwillingly, to read him. He sees the tears of things, and weeps himself, but his tragedy, as man and as writer, is his inability to see the human condition whole. In his vast and repetitious novels he cannot seize firmly upon what is most significant in his own or other people's experience but must put everything down: the moments of genuine insight are there, but they are imbedded in a mass of turgid prose and lifeless documentation. His human sympathy is too comprehensive for him to imagine that the sufferings he so painfully observes can be cured merely by a political programme,

⁵SHERWOOD ANDERSON, «Dreiser», reprinted in HORACE GREGORY (ed.) *The Portable Sherwood Anderson*, New York, 1949, pp. 557-558.

and his novels, unlike those of many other American social novelists, are never shaped by the demands of a narrow political commitment. Unfortunately, however, this does not mean that Dreiser responds sensitively and flexibly to the demands of his material: it is rather that the material itself takes charge and documentation becomes an end in itself.

Dreiser remains an enigmatic figure who will not be formulated in a phrase. He can hardly be said to have fulfilled his ambition to be the American Balzac, but he is, after all, the nearest American counterpart to Zola. Frank Norris in *The Octopus* is perhaps nearer in spirit to Zola (specifically to *Germinale*) than Dreiser ever gets in a single novel, but as an American equivalent of *L'Argent* Norris's *The Pit* is less impressive than *The Financier* and *The Titan*, whether considered together or separately. This is not so much in spite of Norris's greater familiarity with Zola as because of it: where *The Pit* is primarily a literary response to Zola, *The Financier* and *The Titan* represent wholly and authentically a direct response to the actual conditions of American life. They are less well written than *The Pit* and more clumsily constructed, but they are an altogether bigger achievement. Dreiser emerges less impressively, however, from comparisons with more accomplished writers. Placed alongside Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*, for instance, the novels of the Cowperwood series and even *An American Tragedy* begin to look like the raw material of the art of fiction rather than the art itself. If it is difficult to like Dreiser, it is impossible not to admire him: it seems equally impossible, however, to think of him as a major novelist.

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