

THE NATURAL SUPERNATURALISM OF DREISER'S NOVELS

H. L. MENCKEN'S cis-idolatrour regard for Theodore Dreiser always stopped at what Mencken once termed "his belief in non-Euclidian arcana"¹—

Turn to page 703 of "The 'Genius.'" . . . [A]t this hurried and impatient point, with the *coda* already begun, Dreiser halts the whole narrative to explain the origin, nature and inner meaning of Christian Science, and to make us privy to a lot of chatty stuff about Mrs. Althea Jones, a professional healer, and to supply us with detailed plans and specifications of the apartment house in which she lives, works her tawdry miracles, and has her being.²

In context, the passage just quoted is part of a charge against Dreiser of "the . . . exasperating rolling up of irrelevant facts."³ Mrs. Althea Johns certainly is a wearisome addition to the dramatis personae of *The "Genius"*; indeed, the whole episode of Eugene Witla's trafficking with Christian Science is crudely inserted, but it is by no means irrelevant.

The difficulty of determining what is relevant and what irrelevant to the purpose of the novels begins whenever one defines Dreiser's position by any "ism" whatever—naturalism, materialism, determinism, or other—and then holds him responsible for keeping faith with the applied label.⁴ Only one tag really is possible to define the intentions of Dreiser, and it is not an "ism." He was a seeker for ultimate truth, eager to investigate by every means the significance of the universe and man's relation to it; and eager to report any discoveries he might make, or rather to help others pursue the same end for themselves:

The great business of the individual, if he has any time after struggling for life and a reasonable amount of entertainment or sensory satiation, should be this very thing. He

should question the things he sees—not some things, but everything—stand, as it were, in the center of this whirling storm of contradiction which we know as life, and ask of it its source and its import. Else why a brain at all? If only one could induce or enable a moderate number of the individuals who pass this way and come no more apparently to pause and think about life and take an individual point of view, the freedom and individuality and interest of the world might be greatly enhanced.⁵

Because of his severe deficiency in systematic education, if for no other cause, Theodore Dreiser was of course destined to failure in his quest for consistent answers to the eternal riddles. At mid-career he was entirely disillusioned. In 1928 he wrote: “. . . I catch no meaning from all I have seen, and pass quite as I came, confused and dismayed”;⁶ again, in 1931:

For I take no meaning from life other than the picture it presents to the eye—the pleasure and pain it gives to the body. But can these be of universal interest or import? And if not—and I cannot feel that they are—they are certainly not worth preserving for any other state. . . . For only think of eating here or drinking, or dressing, or parading, or making a name for oneself here, as meaning anything anywhere else. Tush! Life, lust, vanity, greed here merely make it seem so. But elsewhere? Tra la! Tra la!⁷

If he had composed novels in the next decade, no doubt they would have justified very fully the tags of the labelers: naturalistic, pessimistic, deterministic, and the rest. But after 1925 (or 1927, counting his revision of *The Financier*) Theodore Dreiser ceased novel writing until nearly the end of his life. Then, after a strange interlude of direct political action, he forced himself practically on his deathbed to complete, or approximately complete, the long-planned but posthumously published *Bulwark* and *Stoic*, in both of which he returned to the former quest.

In his autobiography Dreiser tells how at the age of

twenty-three he "had the fortune to discover Huxley and Tyndall and Herbert Spencer, whose introductory volume to his *Synthetic Philosophy (First Principles)* quite blew me, intellectually, to bits."⁸ The effect of his excited reading of the great English rationalists, which could easily be misconceived, can be understood best from the parallel experience of Eugene Witla. Not only in the general sweep of *Lehrjahre* and *Wanderjahre* but very often in detailed events and even in such minute particulars as the similar maiden names of the clinging wives, Sara *White* Dreiser and Angela *Blue* Witla, the "genius" of the novel (note the modest quotation marks) clearly is intended to represent his author. Moreover, Witla reads substantially what Dreiser has read, and therefore it behooves us to consider the sort of mind upon which this reading works: "He was one of those men who from their birth are metaphysically inclined."⁹ To Eugene Witla (and to Dreiser), "metaphysical" is equivalent to "trans-physical":

The five senses certainly could not indicate the totality of things; beyond them must lie depths upon depths of wonder and power. (p. 728)

He saw through to something that was not material life at all, but spiritual, or say immaterial, of which all material things were a shadow. (p. 681)

To such a mind the world has the two faces of Janus. Only the visible side is open to sensory inspection and to purely logical interrogation, but man lives also under the influence of the unseen smile or frown of the other face. Witla feels that he has found significant clues to "just what life was" in writers like Emerson, Plato, and Carlyle.¹⁰ He is much impressed by the self-limitation of rationalism—especially by Spencer's philosophy of "the unknowable." "Another thing that fascinated him was to find that the evolutionary hy-

pothesis did not after all shut out a conception of a ruling, ordaining Divinity, as he had supposed, for he came across several things in the papers which, now that he was thinking about this so keenly, held him spellbound"; he is much gratified with Alfred Russel Wallace's teleological interpretation of the evolutionary process.¹¹

To the Witla-Dreiser mind, conceiving the universe as both sensory and extrasensory, the central question is the relation of those two faces of Janus. The unseen divinity that shapes our ends might be benign but might be hostile, or—what would amount to the same thing—indifferent toward a suffering world. Witla's "own feelings," before he has begun to investigate Christian Science, were "that the universe, the spirit of it that is, was subtle, cruel, crafty, and malicious."¹² To his surprise he finds that "the theory he was now interesting himself in was not a narrow dogmatic one in any sense, but religion in its large aspects, a comprehensive résumé and spiritual co-ordination of the metaphysical speculation of the time, which was worthy of anyone's intelligent inquiry." The word "metaphysical" is obviously the clue to his interest:

Mrs. Eddy had formulated or rather restated a fact that was to be found in the sacred writings of India; in the Hebrew testaments, old and new; in Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, St. Augustine, Emerson, and Carlyle. The one variation notable between her and the moderns was that her *ruling unity* was not malicious, as Eugene and many others fancied, but helpful. Her *unity* was a *unity* of love. (p. 700)

The reader will not fail to observe Dreiser's use of the assured term "fact" in the passage last quoted. At the same time, the quotation defines the crux of his intellectual, or "metaphysical," difficulty. Eugene Witla passes "from what might be described as *almost* a belief in Christian Science to almost a belief that a devil ruled the world . . . By degrees

his God, if he could have been said to have had one in his consciousness, sank back into a dual personality or a compound of good and evil . . . He then reached a state not of abnegation, but of philosophic open-mindedness or agnosticism."¹³ As ever with Theodore Dreiser, the quest has been a wandering in a circular maze through bypaths of optimism and pessimism, of naturalism and idealism, in baffled search of a fabled parterre at the center. Coming out through the same gate wherein he went, Witla is thrown back upon his, also Dreiser's, sense of the mystery and wonder and terror—and beauty—of life: "He came to know that he did not know what to believe. . . . 'What a sweet welter life is—how rich, how tender, how grim, how like a colorful symphony.'"¹⁴

The episode, following the death of Frank Cowperwood, of Berenice Fleming's flight "away from the Western world and its crass materialism,"¹⁵ which Dreiser wrote into the conclusion of the "trilogy of desire" at the very close of his own life, is much of a piece with the excursion of Eugene Witla into Christian Science. She feels: "Something appears to be drawing me like a magnet . . ."; presently her *guru* instructs her:

"Where is anyone that is not you? You are the soul of the Universe. If a man come to your door, go and meet yourself. For all are one. The idea of separateness is hallucination. You hate. You love. You fear. All hallucinations; ignorance and delusion."¹⁶

Afterward, as for Witla, comes disillusion—but with a difference that assuredly can be related to Dreiser's intervening "activist" years,¹⁷ and possibly to the fact that just as he was struggling to bring *The Stoic* to completion he at last formally joined the Communist Party.¹⁸ Having studied Yoga for four years, Berenice spends the next year traveling through India with her mother—

And the farther they traveled, the more shocked was Berenice by the low mental and social status of the millions of inhabitants of this startling and perplexing land. She was puzzled as to how a country could have evolved such a noble and profoundly religious philosophy of life and yet, at the same time, have evoked and maintained such a low, cruel, and oppressive social system, whereby a few managed to live a princely existence while millions struggled for even less than bread. The stark disillusion of such a sharp contrast was too much for Berenice to comprehend. (p. 300)

Contemplating the child-wives, the untouchables, and the diseased and starving children, "She was spiritually lacerated, and there sprang into her mind the assurance of the Gurus that God, Brahman, was All Existence, Bliss. If so, where was He?" She decides that perhaps she is called "to assist, aid, change, until this earthly phase of Himself would be altered or transmitted into the exchange of evil for good";¹⁹ and back in New York, having been shown misery to rival that of India, she founds the Cowperwood Hospital for children. Less in humility than in disillusionment, she does not overestimate the value of her service:

"What is the world anyway?" she asked herself. "Why should millions of little things come into it only to be tortured and so denied—to be allowed to die from want, cold, starvation?" Yes, to be sure, she thought, she was now at last trying to do what she could to relieve the sufferings of a few children, who were fortunate enough to be taken into her hospital. But what about all of those thousands who could not be taken in? What of them? A drop in the ocean was her contribution. One drop!²⁰

More clearly than Eugene Witla, however, she keeps in view the goal of the quest: ". . . she had experienced the dawn of a spiritual awakening, which was even now enabling her to see more clearly. She must go on, she must grow, she thought, and acquire, if possible, a real and deep understanding of the meaning of life and its spiritual import."²¹

The dualistic assumption underlying the attitude of such characters as Eugene Witla and Berenice Fleming—of a Janus universe of material appearance and spiritual reality—makes inherently probable the further assumption that in such a world contact is possible on both levels of experience, and indeed that material communication is but the imperfect token of a deeper spiritual communion. Floundering terms like “chemism” for affinity (*passim*) and “psychic osmosis” for telepathy (*The Stoic*, p. 43) record Dreiser’s effort to find a nomenclature for that harmony. His vocabulary was, of course, formed too early for influence from the modern jargon of parapsychology (“E.S.P.,” “psionics,” and the like).

Of all words longer than three syllables, one of Theodore Dreiser’s marked favorites is “intuition.” Receiving an anonymous letter about the secret meetings of his daughter Aileen and Frank Cowperwood, “Butler got the impression strongly that it might have been written by some one living in the vicinity of the number indicated, so keen are our intuitions. As a matter of fact, it was . . .”²² On the same day Cowperwood goes to the office of Butler on business—

During this drive, curiously, by reason of one of those strange psychologic intuitions which so often precede a human difficulty of one sort or another, Cowperwood had been thinking of Aileen. . . .

This afternoon, . . . whenever he thought of her at odd moments, it was with the feeling that all was well in that quarter; but he could not help wondering why it was that he should be thinking at all of her so much. He did not believe so thoroughly in psychic intuitions, although there were times when he thought he had them.²³

Sister Carrie, deficient in intellectual power, “had . . . that sense, so rich in every woman—intuition.”²⁴

Often Dreiser refers to “instinct” in place of, or in combination with, “intuition.” As Clyde Griffiths’ interest in Roberta Alden weakens,

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One of the things that Roberta soon found was that her intuitive notions in regard to all this were not without speedy substantiation. . . .

At the same time because she was there all of the working hours of each day in the same room with him, he could not fail instinctively to feel some of the thoughts that employed her mind—such dark, sad, despairing thoughts.²⁵

After the funeral of Lester Kane, the discarded Jennie Gerhardt "observed the group of immediate relatives . . . She actually succeeded in identifying most of them, though it was not knowledge in this case, but pure instinct and intuition."²⁶ Sometimes, in his groping for diction, Dreiser fixes on the terms "clairvoyance" and "telepathy." Griffiths "was slightly taken back by the shrewd or telepathic way" in which Roberta hit upon Sondra Finchley as the probable new object of his affections.²⁷ Cowperwood, who at the outset of his career was warned that some men "were psychic—clairvoyant was the word in use then," himself proves to have an "ever-telepathic mind."²⁸

Theodore Dreiser's conception of intuition extends even to foreknowledge. That he believed in the real possibility of the faculty, and was not merely detached reporter of supposed experiences of his characters, is made evident in a passage of *The "Genius"*:

One could almost accept the Brahmanistic dogma of a psychic body which sees and is seen where we dream all to be darkness. There is no other supposition on which to explain the facts of intuition. So many individuals have it. They know so well without knowing why they know.

Angela had this intuitive power in connection with Eugene. Because of her great affection for him she divined or apprehended many things in connection with him long before they occurred. (p. 366)

Mrs. Alden is of the opinion that before the fatal journey Roberta has had "a premonition that all would not work out as she had planned," and the last letter read at the trial

of Clyde shows that she was thinking of death as well as marriage when she departed.²⁹ Berenice Fleming, who is strongly intuitional,³⁰ comes to Cowperwood in the hour of his defeat in Chicago, telling him:

“I can’t explain myself to myself quite, . . . but I couldn’t stay away any longer. I had the feeling that you might be going to lose here for the present. But I want you to go somewhere else if you have to—London or Paris. . . .”³¹

The occult is by no means a random adornment, or blemish, of Dreiser’s novels: it runs through their very texture. A seeming instance serves to keep the plot of *Jennie Gerhardt* from dissolving midway of the book. Attacked by qualms of conscience, Jennie decides to abandon her irregular life and return to her father, but is dissuaded when Lester Kane unexpectedly returns home—

For some unforeseen reason he had changed his mind. He was not in the least psychic or intuitional, but on this occasion his feelings had served him a peculiar turn. He had thought of going for a day’s duck-shooting with some friends in the Kankakee Marshes south of Chicago, but had finally changed his mind; he even decided to go out to the house early. What prompted this he could not have said.

(p. 250)

At the time of his physical breakdown, Eugene Witla feels “as if some malign planetary influence were affecting him” and consults an astrologer, whose predictions explain if not control Eugene’s subsequent career.³² Frank Cowperwood is once called “no fatalist” but instantly the reservation is added: “or if he was, he would not give fate the opportunity to say that he had not put up a good fight—had not taken advantage of every single opportunity.”³³ At any rate, he lives under the consciousness of destiny: “he always believed in his star.”

Something—he could not say what, it was the only metaphysics he bothered about—was doing something for him.

It had always helped him. It made things come out right at times. It put excellent opportunities in his way. . . . Accident, perhaps; but somehow the thought that he would always be protected—these intuitions, the “hunches” to act which he frequently had—could not be so easily explained.³⁴

Dreiser, as author, testifies to the reality of such forces, without pretending to account for them:

In some instances all the cross-waves of life must be cut by the strong swimmer. With other personalities there is a chance, or force, that happily allies itself with them; or they quite unconsciously ally themselves with it, and find that there is a tide that bears them on. Divine will? Not necessarily. There is no understanding of it.³⁵

At the end of his life Solon Barnes sees his house, once illuminated as he has always believed by the Inner Light, plunged into darkness. “Almost . . . ready to cry, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’”—he achieves release from “a sudden and deep spiritual uncertainty” by developing a penetrating insight into “the Creative Force that created all things in an apparently endless variety of designs and colors.”³⁶ He improves upon the moral of the Ancient Mariner’s ghastly tale, adding to universal love a power of direct communication with nature:

“I mean that good intent is of itself a universal language, and if our intention is good, all creatures in their particular way understand, and so it was that this puff adder understood me just as I understood it. It had no ill intent, but was only afraid. And then, my intent being not only good but loving, it understood me and had no fear, but came back to me, crossing the toe of my shoe. And now I thank God for this revelation of His universal presence and His good intent toward all things—all of His created world. For otherwise how would it understand me, and I it, if we were not both a part of Himself?”³⁷

Solon and his daughters, to whom he reports this experience, necessarily interpret his discovery in terms of the family

religion. To Dreiser, however, it is of more general significance. For thirty years and more, he had intermittently labored over *The Bulwark*, and it closes on the two notes that are most characteristic of his whole habit of mind. When Solon Barnes dies and his son Orville unfeelingly reproaches Etta for weeping, she explains:

“Oh, I am not crying for myself, or for Father—I am crying for *life*.” (p. 337)

Yet as she has watched her father through his fatal illness, the pessimistic view of the world implied in that last terrible cry has been mitigated by his revelation to her of the possibility of a communion with the hidden truth of things:

In this love and unity with all nature, as she now sensed, there was nothing fitful or changing or disappointing—nothing that glowed one minute and was gone the next. This love was rather as constant as nature itself, everywhere the same, in sunshine or in darkness, the filtered splendor of the dawn, the seeded beauty of the night. It was an intimate relation to the very heart of being. (p. 331)

Almost, Theodore Dreiser had found the hidden path into the fabled parterre at the center of the maze.

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NOTES

1. Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy*, introd. H. L. Mencken (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, ©1948), p. 8.
2. H. L. Mencken, “Theodore Dreiser,” in *A Book of Prefaces* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), pp. 80-81.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
4. Mencken himself was no labeler of Dreiser: “One faction maintains that he is a realist; another calls him a naturalist; a third argues that he is really a disguised romanticist. This debate is all sound and fury, signifying nothing . . .” (*ibid.*, p. 146). Mencken’s conclusion about Theodore Dreiser (p. 147) is that

- "he is driving at nothing, he is merely trying to represent what he sees and feels."
5. Theodore Dreiser. "Life, Art and America," in *Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub: a Book of the Mystery and Wonder and Terror of Life* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920), p. 257.
 6. Theodore Dreiser, in "Statements of Belief: the 'Credos' of America's Leading Authors," *Bookman* (New York), LXVIII (1928), 25.
 7. Theodore Dreiser, *Dawn* (New York: Horace Liveright, Inc., 1931), p. 588. (Vol. I of *A History of Myself*; see below, note 8.)
 8. Theodore Dreiser, *A Book about Myself* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), p. 457. (As the second volume of *A History of Myself*, this book was later retitled *Newspaper Days*.)
 9. Theodore Dreiser, *The "Genius"* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1946), p. 689.
 10. *Ibid.*, pp. 689, 694. Whether this attitude should or should not be referred to as "mysticism" raises a question of definition. In an article "Concerning Dreiser's Mind," *American Literature*, XVIII (1946), 233-243, Woodburn O. Ross argues strongly in the negative:

"Dreiser should never be called a mystic. A mystic is one who places his faith in nonrational means of apprehending reality, who seeks through contemplation truth which is denied to the scientist. But I am unable to discover Dreiser at any time placing his confidence in any method of discovering truth other than the scientific, rational one of observation, classification, and induction. His conclusions may be false, but he attempted to reach them by rational means." (p. 242)

The writer also observes (p. 236): "Though critics have never developed the point in any detail, . . . occurrences to which Dreiser gave an interpretation which most people would call superstitious contributed significantly to the content of his narrative works." Ross points out several passages in various writings of Dreiser, but except for two quotations of *The "Genius"* (from pages 292 and 404) and the remark that "his posthumous novel, *The Bulwark*, treats mysticism sympathetically" (p. 243), does not develop the suggestion in relation to the novels. Here, too, his intention is to defend Dreiser from the charge of irrationalism: "One is not superstitious when one attempts to handle facts rationally but in spite of the attempt misinterprets. The method of attempting to observe the facts and draw conclusions from them is the method of science; it does not preclude error, but the conclusions thus reached are hardly to be called superstitious, no matter what they are." (p. 238)

In an article recently revised for *The Stature of Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), pp. 246-269, under the title "Theodore Dreiser and the Divided Stream"—originally "The Three Stages of Theodore Dreiser's Naturalism," *PMLA*, LV (1940), 266-289—Charles Child Walcott interprets the duality of Dreiser's mind as symptomatic of a divergence of American Transcendentalism toward "poles of optimism and pessimism, freedom and determinism, will and fate, social reformism and mechanistic despair" (p. 246).

11. *The "Genius,"* pp. 735-736, 696-699.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 694.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 726.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 726, 736.
15. Theodore Dreiser, *The Stoic* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1947), p. 287.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 287, 295.
17. See George J. Becker, "Theodore Dreiser: the Realist as Social Critic," *Twentieth Century Literature*, I (1955), 117-127. Becker's premise (p. 117) is, however, that "the utterances and actions of these later years . . . contribute nothing to our understanding of the novelist—indeed, they only blur the picture."
18. See Robert H. Elias, *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), pp. 305-306 and p. 354, n. 57.
19. *The Stoic*, p. 301.
20. Appendix to *ed. cit.* ("prepared by Mrs. Theodore Dreiser from the notes of her husband"), pp. 309-310.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 310. (These are the last words of Helen Dreiser's summary, and therefore in a sense the final words of Theodore Dreiser.)
22. Theodore Dreiser, *The Financier* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1912), p. 359.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 365-367.
24. Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926), p. 13; cf. pp. 410, 555.
25. *An American Tragedy*, p. 400.
26. Theodore Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1951), p. 429.
27. *An American Tragedy*, p. 391.
28. *The Financier*, p. 83; *The Stoic*, p. 186.
29. *An American Tragedy*, pp. 625, 714.
30. Theodore Dreiser, *The Titan* (New York: John Lane Company, 1914), p. 458; *The Stoic*, p. 7.
31. *The Titan*, p. 550.

Dreiser's fictional use of ominous dreams should also be mentioned. See *Sister Carrie*, pp. 89-90; *Jennie Gerhardt*, pp. 419-420; *An American Tragedy*, pp. 478-479 (cf. pp. 841-842); *The Bulwark* (*ed. cit.* below, note 36), pp. 60-62.

32. *The "Genius,"* pp. 253, 291-292, 676.
33. *The Financier*, p. 432.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 476.
35. *The Titan*, p. 251.
36. Theodore Dreiser, *The Bulwark* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1946), pp. 298-299, 316.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 318-319. Elias, *op. cit.* (above, note 18), indicates that the episode of the snake was founded on a personal experience of Dreiser (p. 288 and p. 352, n. 27).