

Dreiser and the Wonder and Mystery and Terror of the City

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1887, Theodore Dreiser, a gawky 16 year-old boy, left a small town in Indiana and went alone to the rapidly growing Midwestern metropolis of Chicago to seek his fortune. He had to start, however, with taking his first job as a busboy at a seedy restaurant. Seven years later, in November, 1894, he arrived in New York where he struggled to establish himself as a journalist and would-be novelist. Once again, he experienced the harshness of life in the big city, only his sufferings in New York, which drove him to the verge of suicide, were even worse than in Chicago. When he wrote his first novel *Sister Carrie*, he drew on his experiences of these two metropolitan centers. They provided an inexhaustible source of material for his major novels as well as his more overtly autobiographical writings, so much so that he emerged as what might be called the founder of the American city novel. As Blanche Housman Gelfant puts it, “[in] a way, all the assumptions and motifs of modern urban fiction were implicit in *Sister Carrie*. It was the generic novel of twentieth-century city fiction, just as Dreiser was its generic novelist.”¹ She further writes that “[he] stands out as a germinal figure in American urban fiction, a figure to whom later writers have turned for inspiration because they have found in his novels a fictional world that is familiar to them, that is the world they themselves have experienced.”²

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The usual literary assumption, however, is that Dreiser's achievement was that of a solitary pioneer of modern American literature, as if he could have shaped his urban themes without any aid or model, or his literature were nothing but the putting down of his own experiences which were unique and new in themselves owing to the fact that American society was transitioning into an unprecedented stage. Contrary to such an assumption, Thomas Riggio in "American Gothic: Poe and *An American Tragedy*" demonstrates that Dreiser turned to Edgar Allan Poe when delineating Clyde Griffiths' psychological state of being possessed by the idea of murdering Roberta Alden, which leads to the fatal scene on the lake. An advocate of the doctrine of art for art's sake, Poe might well be regarded as one of the remotest writers from Dreiser, though as a matter of fact the latter professed time and again his admiration of the former. In his concluding remarks, Riggio writes: "Dreiser's subtle reworking of Poe. . . argues against the idea of Dreiser as a 'primitive,' an instinctual writer who has no literary or intellectual roots and who achieved powerful effects as a plodding recorder of 'real' experience."³

Following the example set by Riggio, this paper reconsiders the idea of Dreiser as a mere documentarian, by tracing literary precedents that Dreiser might have appropriated to give expression to his own thoughts and feelings in dealing with the shocks he suffered in the city. In his treatment of the city as a literary subject which I will hereafter examine, Dreiser resorted to at least three literary traditions or genres: the formulaic seduction story of the sentimental novel in which he equivocally gendered the city, the novel portraying a young artist afflicted with alienation in the city, and the literature of slumming that was conducive to the aesthetics of the urban sublime which, remodeled from the pastoral tradition, served to foster proletarian literature.

I

Dreiser's urban experience included growing up in a poverty-stricken immigrant's family in local cities in Indiana, struggling to survive as a practically jobless youth in Chicago, witnessing squalor and corruption as a newspaperman in cities such as St. Louis, Pittsburgh, and New York, falling into destitution after the setback in New York journalism, and contemplating suicide as a vagrant and failed novelist suffering from neurasthenia. Dreiser's writings including nonfiction such as autobiographies and sketches, however, abound not only in expressions of humiliation, loneliness, and the anguish of being poor, but in those of excitement and fascination, feelings that both the author and his characters undergo as newcomers to the city.

In *Sister Carrie*, for instance, Carrie Meeber, a country girl coming to Chicago, is enthralled by the din and bustle of a great city but also intimidated by its overwhelming power. Perhaps, she is excited about the urban atmosphere not so much in spite of her fear as because of it. When she goes out for the first time to find a job, the city seems to her as thrilling as it is terrifying:

The entire metropolitan centre possessed a high and mighty air calculated to overawe and abash the common applicant, and to make the gulf between poverty and success seem both wide and deep. . . . 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.⁴

Concerning the nature of the city, an interesting passage appears at the very beginning of the novel:

The city has its cunning wiles, no less than the infinitely smaller and more human tempter. There are large forces which allure with all the soulfulness of expression possible in the most cultured human. The gleam of a thousand lights is often as effective as the persuasive light in a wooing and fascinating eye.⁵

Here the city is figured as a “tempter.” As for “the infinitely smaller and more human tempter,” there are numerous examples, from Drouet to interviewers of job applicants, to male co-workers at the factory, to Hurstwood, to profligate followers of the star actress Carrie Madenda; even Bob Ames may be counted among them. The city, however, is far more “cunning” than all of them. Whereas the seducer is endowed with the wickedness of the city according to the convention of the sentimental novel, in *Sister Carrie*, it is the city that is endowed with the fascinating power of the seducer.

The seduction story found in the sentimental novel of the American Revolutionary age, such as Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791) and Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797), which warns the unmarried girl against falling prey to the seducer, seems to be a source for the formula appropriated in *Sister Carrie*. The likely reason the sentimental novel was so popular among young woman in those days was not because they were impressed by the warning, but rather because they were excited about the course of events surrounding the seduction.

Analyzing the appeal of the seduction story, Cathy Davidson argues as follows:

“Seduction,” at first glance, implies female powerlessness; nevertheless, by read-

ing about a female character's good or bad decisions in sexual and marital matters, the early American woman could vicariously enact her own courtship and marriage fantasies. She could, at least in those fantasies, view her life as largely the consequence of her own choices and not merely as the product of the power of others in her life—the father's authority, the suitor's (honorable or dishonorable) guile, the husband's control.⁶

In Revolutionary America where freedom from British tyranny was extolled, it is small wonder that women also began to yearn for freedom from patriarchal tyranny. Freedom, however, entailed its own risk, particularly in this case the risk of becoming a victim of the seducer. Seduction was both an abomination unmarried women had to avoid and a risk they had to assume in pursuing freedom.

Carrie's encounter with the seductive city presents a situation that is formally similar to that of early sentimental novels: she is in a double bind between freedom and risk not unlike the situation surrounding the heroine of the sentimental novel. She cannot help feeling ambivalence toward the city's seductive power. Carrie differs substantially, however, from middle-class girls depicted in the earlier tradition. First of all, in leaving home, Carrie is merely drawn to the city, which is called in a chapter title "The Magnet Attracting;" she cannot afford as much as her prototypes to cherish the illusion that she is exercising the freedom of making her own decision. Moreover, patriarchy in her impoverished home cannot be as tyrannical as in theirs, and the risk she faces is more forbidding because the city is far more powerful a seducer than a human tempter. Nevertheless, the sentimental novel still stands as a model for the form of *Sister Carrie*, for there is another prototype mediating between them.

The formulaic sentimental novel enjoyed resurgence as "tales of the working girl" in the 1890s, created by such now forgotten writers as Lillian E. Sommers, Laura Jean Libbey, Margaret Sherwood, Julian Ralph, and J. W. Sullivan. The burgeoning popularity of "tales of the working girl" was a response to the rapid increase of wage-earning women working in the city. Such women figured prominently in the unsavory locales of tenement, street, dance hall, and workplace, giving rise to fears about their vulnerability and susceptibility to corruption. In particular, the seduction tale of the working girl warned against her removal from the domestic sphere, reflecting the uplifters' desire to regulate the working girl's threatening sexuality, as Laura Hapke elucidates:

Writers refashioned the sensational melodrama of earlier “wicked city” or “virtue betrayed” fiction. Infusing that formulaic subgenre with a quasi-sociology of the female workplace, the working girl’s literary imaginers soon included the genteel practitioners of the Lower East Side seduction tale, who catered to middle-class preferences for the eleventh-hour rescue and the romanticized poor.⁷

Against this background, *Sister Carrie* appears to have taken shape by refashioning the prevalent subgenre of the refashioned seduction story. In refashioning the tale of the working girl, Dreiser characteristically brings to the fore the role of the city exerting its seductive power. As a result, in Dreiser’s novel, instead of many “human tempters” to be condemned, it comes to pass that “his real villain is the city itself.”⁸

In Dreiser’s peculiar treatment of the city as if it were human, his involvement with it appears sometimes highly personal. Dreiser as a person, a notorious womanizer, was so easily infatuated with a pretty girl that he could not help regarding her as a seductress. For instance, he writes about one such girl whom he met during the automobile travel recounted in *A Hoosier Holiday*:

Her whole manner was at once an invitation and repulsion—the two carefully balanced so as to produce a static and yet an irritating state. I half liked and disliked her. If she had been especially friendly, no doubt I should have liked her very much. Since she was so wholly evasive, I fancied that I could dislike her quite as much.⁹

Morton and Lucia White see in this passage Dreiser’s symptomatic ambivalence toward beautiful women, and find in it a similarity with his attitude toward the city. They argue:

One need not be a speculative psychoanalyst to say that Dreiser often sees the American city as he saw this girl. When the city smiles at him, he likes it; when it turns him down, he doesn’t. Those who capture the city he admires, those who don’t, he despises or feels sorry for. But the city is always a living thing for Dreiser. . . . He then sees himself and his characters as threatened by it, and in this mood Dreiser can be the most anti-urban of American novelists. Then he is the unrequited lover, the disappointed suitor.¹⁰

Carrie, to whom the city is a seducer rather than a seductress, is the author’s projected self. For that matter, it is almost an axiom in Dreiser studies that most of his major characters at least partly stand in for Dreiser himself. In that sense, most of his fictional works may be considered to be displaced autobiographies. Indeed, there are many close resemblances between pas-

sages in novels and autobiographical writings, particularly between places delineating emotions aroused by initial experiences of urban life. Striking, however, is the recognition that even a girl like Carrie can be employed to substitute for Dreiser's self. From such a displacement, one may well draw a thematics of androgyny, as Christophe Den Tandt does, who writes: "If we assume that Carrie is a probe that Dreiser sends out into the metropolis, it is crucial to determine what symbolic act is achieved by substituting an inexperienced provincial young woman for the novelist himself."¹¹ While Den Tandt perceives that such a symbolic act evinces the naturalist postulation of "an uncanny affinity between women, the urban scene, and the field of art,"¹² and, more to the point in this context, it also bears out Dreiser's anxiety about his own insecure gender identity, it remains a fact that Dreiser was able to employ the formula of the sentimental fiction as a framework for his novel that is a displaced autobiography.

II

In Dreiser's fiction whose heterogeneity has often drawn attention, it is not surprising that there should be more than one convention called into play. Another conventional framework utilized for Dreiser's depictions of city life is that of the novel about a young artist. An arresting feature of Dreiser's narrative therefore is his tenacious adherence to representing the aesthetic reactions of the newcomer to the city.

As Carrie goes through the inevitable process of becoming colored by the moods and sophistications of the city, for instance, her basically aesthetic way of accepting the influences is constantly emphasized. When she learns to acquire the conventional manner of popular actresses and charming city women, the narrator comments, "as a matter of fact, it was nothing more than the first subtle outcroppings of an artistic nature, endeavoring to re-create the perfect likeness of some phase of beauty which appealed to her."¹³ Carrie possesses self-esteem in having "more imagination" than her fellow shop-girls who "seemed [to her] satisfied with their lot, and were in a sense 'common,'"¹⁴ not unlike the young Dreiser who was constantly saying to himself, "No common man am I."¹⁵ She succeeds ultimately in developing her own "innate taste for imitation and no small ability"¹⁶ to become a popular stage artist. Perhaps rather incongruously with the lowly status conferred upon most of the protagonists in Dreiser's fiction, they are indeed endowed with such "an artistic nature" or at least an acute sensitivity.

Eugene Witla, the protagonist of *The "Genius,"* is an obvious example.

His artistic nature reveals itself since he becomes an artist by profession, not a writer, though this is Dreiser's most overtly autobiographical novel. Judging from the descriptions of his works, Eugene's style of painting suggests that he might have had a close connection with "The Eight," a group of painters dubbed the "Ashcan school," some of whom were friends of Dreiser since they were one-time newspaper illustrators. It has been argued that Eugene's life as an artist was modeled after Everett Shinn, George Luks, or this or that painter of the same group, but, as Cyrille Arnavon states, "indeed several currents in American painting circa 1910 may be said to coalesce in the synthetic figure of Witla: impressionist influence, emphasis on the American scene, selection of apparently trivial subjects, and above all the opposition to academic art."¹⁷ Both Eugene and the "Ashcan school" painters take delight in rendering city scenes, especially its seamy side, or the beauty of the city's ugliness.

Exploring the relationship between Dreiser and painting, Arnavon, though an obscure French scholar, gets at the kernel of his city writings:

The brooding meditation of a lonely spectator wandering through a large city, a characteristically Dreiserian theme, emerges for the first time; it evokes a feeling of utter loneliness in "atomistic" individuals as they are first confronted with a metropolis like Chicago in *Sister Carrie* and *Newspaper Days*, or New York in *The "Genius."* The description of this mood is perhaps one of Dreiser's most original creations.¹⁸

Individuals comprising what David Riesman would later call the lonely crowd, the sense of exhaustion of the alienated and anonymous individuals in the midst of the clamor of the modern metropolis, and its apparent opposite, that is, the feeling of exhilaration like fever infected by the urban furor—the discovery of these themes was what triggered the modern arts. Dreiser was almost obsessed by this subject.

Dreiser's infatuation with the city in particular, which runs parallel to a recurring depressed tone of alienation, renders a peculiar texture to his writings. As Gelfant observes, "Dreiser's young people are among the most wholehearted and zestful in modern literature, quite different from the jaded characters of later fiction and from all the twentieth-century fictional people who feel guilt or nausea, rather than joy, at the fact of their existence."¹⁹ Sidney Finkelstein ascribes the prevalence of jaded characters in later fiction to the crises of the twentieth century which caused modernist writers to retreat further into their own subjectivism. In contrast with them, Finkelstein judges that:

In such writers as Balzac, Tolstoi, Dreiser and O'Neill, who have depicted the process of alienation in bourgeois society, there is no accompanying alienation on the part of the writers themselves. As they depict it, alienation is a form of human suffering or self-destruction, and they thereby reveal the alienated themselves as understandable human beings through whom the reader learns something about himself.²⁰

Den Tandt tracks down the newer generation's stylistic difference from Dreiser to the change in the decade following WWI in which the view emerged that "writing can satisfy itself with exploring fragments of experience—artistic practice and consciousness, typically—through a highly tightened-up idiom."²¹ According to diagnoses given by Gelfant, Finkelstein and Den Tandt, Dreiser was not wholly overwhelmed yet by the debilitating influence of alienation in modern society, even if his characters were coming under its sway.

Silently consenting to Arnavon's insight, F. O. Matthiessen underscores Dreiser's vivid delineations of dreamy individuals isolated in the city, focusing on the close kinship between Dreiser and the young man in Honoré de Balzac's novels such as *The Great Man of the Provinces in Paris*. In "A Young Man of the Provinces in New York," a chapter in his critical biography of Dreiser, Matthiessen states:

The city he discovered for himself was "so huge and powerful and terrible" that it added further to his feeling of uselessness. Yet it fascinated him, too, it was so varied and alluring, if, above all, so hard.²²

To be sure, Dreiser repeatedly acknowledged Balzac's influence on him, an influence equally recognized by his critics. Chicago and New York at the turn of the century and in the early twentieth century, however, must have presented to young people coming from the country difficulties different from those found in Paris before 1848. The conception of the city in Balzac must have served as a model for Dreiser as a novelist, but he also had to grapple with the newer problems modernity entailed.

When Dreiser tries to convey the spiritual elevation the city arouses in youth, however, the style and diction in some passages, which he seems to have borrowed from Walt Whitman rather than Balzac, remains unfashionably romantic. In his autobiography, he describes his own practice of expressing excited feelings about the city as "[improvising] rhythmic, vaguely formulated word-pictures or rhapsodies anent these same and many other

things—free verse, I suppose we should call it now.”²³ The following would be an example of such “free verse”:

The odor and flavor of the city, the vastness of its reaches, seemed to speak or sing or tinkle like a living, breathing thing. It came to me again with inexpressible variety and richness, as if to say: “I am the soul of a million people! I am their joys, their prides, their loves, their appetites, their hungers, their sorrows! I am their good clothes and their poor ones, their light, their food, their lusts, their industries, their enthusiasms, their dreams! In me are all the pulses and wonders and tastes and loves of life itself! I am life! This is paradise! This is that mirage of the heart and brain and blood of which people dream. I am the pulsing urge of the universe! You are a part of me, I of you! All that life or hope is or can be or do, this I am, and it is here before you! Take of it! Live, live, satisfy your heart! Strive to be what you wish to be now while you are young and of it! Reflect its fire, its tang, its color, its greatness! Be, be, wonderful or strong or great, if you will but be!”²⁴

This passage seems to demonstrate a close affinity to Whitman’s catalogues delineating his fascination with New York, or to anticipate the anti-modernist aesthetics of spontaneity endorsed by the Beat Generation. Then it goes without saying that such a style would hardly meet the ordinary standard for writing. Gelfant’s contention that “[when] Dreiser tried to rise to poetic heights in expressing aesthetic reactions, he became merely vague and extravagant”²⁵ is accurate to some extent, but it fails to appreciate fully Dreiser’s difficult art of representing the experience of the inarticulate and downtrodden.

What Dreiser tried to illustrate in his writings, however, can be called, in association with the subtitle of his strange book of philosophy *Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub*, “The Mystery and Wonder and Terror”²⁶ of the City. In order to deal with this subject, he did not refrain from going out of the confines of realism or naturalism as such. The model of Eugene’s works, for example, is not limited to the realism of the “Ashcan school” painters, as is apparent from the description of his pictures. His painting of “Fifth Avenue in a snow storm, the battered, shabby bus pulled by a team of lean, unkempt, bony horses,”²⁷ which most strongly attracts the art dealer M. Charles’s attention, is obviously patterned after Alfred Stieglitz’s photograph of “Winter on Fifth Avenue” published in his *Picturesque Bits of New York and Other Studies* (1897).²⁸ In American art history, the Photo-Secessionist Stieglitz, whom Dreiser as a journalist interviewed quite favorably, is renowned as one of the most important figures in establishing the modernist art movement in the United States. Moreover, although members of “The Eight” were usually regarded as realists, this group actually included such post-impressionists as

Arthur B. Davis and Maurice Prendergast, and was responsible for bringing about the so-called Armory Show of 1913, an art exhibition famous for having introduced European post-impressionism and modernism to the American art scene.²⁹

In representing the cityscape, Dreiser not only employed writing genres available to him but also adopted visual art modes without regard to the differences from each other of realism, impressionism, or modernism. As a matter of fact, in the 1910s Dreiser frequented and lived in Greenwich Village, keeping company with artists as well as radicals, Bohemians, and various social activists. From around this time, he began to show the influence of modernist experiments with form. While the impact of modernism is felt in some short stories and sketches as well, it is in his plays that one witnesses the most conspicuous effects. Although Dreiser's activities in this field have been largely ignored, he took part in the little theatre movement known through the Washington Square Players and the Provincetown Players, at the same time as Eugene O'Neill, Susan Glaspell, and John Reed. Dreiser wrote many plays, some of which are quite modernistic. *Laughing Gas*, for example, the first among them to reach the stage and "America's first staged expressionistic play," "was something of a *cause célèbre*, for the presentation of *Laughing Gas* would mark the first time in America that a theater would attempt to personify simultaneously the workings of both the conscious and the unconscious mind."³⁰ No matter where additional sources of Dreiser's modernism may yet be found, it is certain that experimentalism and the Bohemian lifestyle he adopted were key factors which contributed to the forging of his modernist responses to the city.

Dreiser's attempts at incorporating various styles and trends in arts from romanticism to modernism into his own work stem from his commitment to characterizing the subjects confronting the modern city as artists of some kind. Consequently, the portrait of a young man or woman as an artist, a motif typical of the modernist novel, emerges in most of Dreiser's writings of the city.

III

Dreiser would wallow one moment in the joys of the city life only in the next to be depressed about the melancholia and destitution of the metropolis. His ambivalence toward the city is apparent in all his major works. Having said this, in general his literary response to the city seems to shift from naïve excitement to mature animosity. Such a change may have been approaching

a turning point in the summer of 1915, when Dreiser and illustrator friend Franklin Booth went on the automobile trip recorded in *A Hoosier Holiday*, in which Dreiser declares, "After a long year spent in the heart of New York, I was sick of the city—any city."³¹ "The heart of New York" referred to here is Greenwich Village, where, after many years residing in other places in the city, he had begun to live one year before the visit to his home state of Indiana.

While Dreiser's role in promoting such Midwestern writers as Sherwood Anderson and Edgar Lee Masters has not been sufficiently recognized, literary themes arising from the region, pursued in *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Spoon River Anthology*, captured Dreiser's fancy, and he responded by helping them to find publishers. It was in fact at the party Dreiser gave to celebrate the publication of Masters's *Anthology* that the plan to visit his home state began to take shape. Perhaps startlingly for a writer known as a city novelist, Dreiser now had the following to say about small towns in the countryside:

Towns of this size, particularly in the Middle West—and I can scarcely say why—have an intense literary and artistic interest for me. Whether it is because of a certain comic grandioseness which accompanies some of their characters or an ultra seriousness entirely out of proportion to the seeming import of events here—or whether one senses a flow of secret and subconscious desires hindered or trampled perhaps by cluttering or suffocating beliefs or weaknesses, or a lightness and simplicity of character due to the soil and the air—I do not know; but it is so.³²

Indeed, the scenes of his next major novel, *An American Tragedy*, contrary to the direction of movement in previous novels, recede from such urban locations as Kansas City and Chicago to the provincial districts of upstate New York, as Clyde Griffiths wanders across the states. The Whites have described this general shift in Dreiser's attitude toward the city:

The urban contrasts that attracted Dreiser and then repelled him, attracted him once again after the grim nineties receded. In later life he could resume his more detached and more esthetic view of the city's grinding forces.³³

Taking into account Dreiser's inclination to treat the city as if it were female, the Whites aptly characterize its effect upon the younger Dreiser as that of "a tantalizing girl," and upon the older Dreiser as "a cruel, unsatisfying woman," presuming this difference to be "a measure of Dreiser's disappointment with the American city of his dreams."³⁴

Even from the beginning, however, the hostility toward the city, if beneath the frivolous disguise of indignation at a girl's coquetry, is easily detectible in Dreiser's writing. It must be remembered that his subject is not only the "mystery and wonder" but also the "terror" of the city. This terror derived from his anger at debilitating urban forces and social injustices and from his sense of uncertainty and anxiety. He wrote many pieces delineating his own predicaments as well as the miserable living conditions of other social outcasts in the city.

In order to shape such stories, Dreiser could turn to the literature of slumming, dating back at least to the time of Friedrich Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) and Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1852). In the United States, literary investigations of urban slums emerged from the 1890s to the 1910s, the most notable of which were Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Stephen Crane's "An Experiment of Misery" (1894), Frank Norris's "The Third Circle" (1895), Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903), some of the muckrakers' writings, and the reportage of the type established by John Reed. In the same vein, Jane Addams's prolific writings resulted in her book *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910), and women writers such as Nelly Bly, Dorothy Richardson, and the Van Vorst sisters, Bessie and Marie, who were active in what Laura Hapke calls "the rise of the female 'undercover' labor investigator and the entry of women into the settlement house and social welfare movements,"³⁵ wrote exposés on the oppression of lower-class women. Dreiser's depictions of the life of the urban underclass undoubtedly contributed to the literature of slumming in vogue at the time.

In general, slumming is an act prompted by the impulse to cross classes, as is exemplified by Crane and London, who disguised themselves as bums to mingle with slum dwellers, or by the middle-class female writers, who had to camouflage themselves in shabby shop-girl clothing in order to infiltrate factories. Dreiser's adoption of the convention of slumming, however, did not necessarily involve disguise, for more often than not he was a real destitute. Nevertheless, he had to distance himself from the truly poor, as is clearly shown in "On Being Poor," a piece included in *The Color of a Great City*. The book, published in 1923, is a collection of sketches about New York City mostly written before 1910. Its newly written opening and closing chapters are pervaded by images of death, but most of the sketches in it deal with "the astounding areas of poverty and of beggary even,"³⁶ that is, "the strangest and most peculiar and most interesting areas [Dreiser] could find as contrasted with those of great wealth."³⁷

From internal evidence, it is possible to determine that “On Being Poor” was written in 1903, when Dreiser had sunk into the depths of poverty compounded by a nervous breakdown brought about by the frustration he encountered in publishing *Sister Carrie*. In the essay, Dreiser avers that what should be avoided most is “poverty of mind, the most dreadful and inhibiting and destroying of all forms of poverty.”³⁸ On the other hand, venturing to sound as though he were really snobbish, he acknowledges that even if he is materially no better off than most in hovels, he can keep “[his] own mind, [his] own point of view.”³⁹ Owing to this capacity, he has never “felt that sense of poverty that appears to afflict thousands of those about [him].”⁴⁰ Refusing to become spiritually impoverished, he accentuates the fact that he can and does turn to books as well as “go to many of the many, many museums, exhibits, collections and arboreta that are open to [one] for nothing in this great city.” Apart from these pursuits, he cherishes “the beauty of life itself” most of all. Even in his severest privation, he tries to maintain an artistic attitude by appreciating urban scenes:

I know it [life] to be a shifting, lovely, changeful thing ever, and to it, the spectacle of it as a whole, in my hours of confusion and uncertainty I invariably return, and find such marvels of charm in color, tone, movement, arrangement, which, had I the genius to report, would fill the museums and the libraries of the world to overflowing with its masterpieces. The furies of snow and rain that speed athwart a hidden sun. The wracks and wisps of cloud that drape a winter or a summer moon. A distant, graceful tower from which a flock of pigeons soar. The tortuous, tideful rivers that twist among great forests of masts and under many graceful bridges. The crowding, surging ways of seeking men. These cost me nothing, and I weary of them never.⁴¹

While Nancy McIlvaine Donovan points out that in “On Being Poor” “Dreiser’s careful distinction between himself and those he considers truly poor is a mask to conceal his own fear of becoming like them,”⁴² I would rather like to emphasize the peculiarity of his aesthetic stance. Like the unusual sort of aesthete that he was, Dreiser was deeply dedicated to finding all the loftier feelings—admiration, transport, enthusiasm, vehemence, even awe and terror—in the squalid city life. These feelings culminate in “the urban sublime” that Den Tandt detects in Dreiser’s depictions of the city. Den Tandt argues that Dreiser’s “mixture of documentary and romantic discourse” serves to “produce a pseudo-totalizing spectacle of the urban scene”:

Dreiser’s sublime depictions of the city round off the fragmented, local vision of

his novel's own realist idiom. The novelist suggests thereby that, if the totality of the city cannot be made visible in the sharp light of realism, his text can at least make it apprehensible to a romantic imagination.⁴³

In other words, Dreiser's urban sublime is a result of his attempts to achieve a totalizing discourse.

Edgar Allan Poe was one of the first writers to exploit fully the urban sublime, if only by writing "The Man of the Crowd." Poe in turn deeply inspired Charles Baudelaire, the author of *Paris Spleen*. What's more, Poe and Baudelaire were the writers with whom Dreiser most closely identified as an isolated artist, no matter how unlikely such a juxtaposition may seem. As for the estrangement Baudelaire suffered, Walter Benjamin, the connoisseur of modern urban culture, observes:

In Baudelaire Paris becomes for the first time a subject of lyric poetry. This poetry is not regional art; rather, the gaze of the allegorist that falls on the city is estranged. It is the gaze of the *flâneur*, whose mode of life still surrounds the approaching desolation of city life with a propitiatory luster. The *flâneur* is still on the threshold, of the city as of the bourgeois class. Neither has yet engulfed him; in neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd. Early contributions to a physiognomics of the crowd are to be found in Engels and Poe. The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city lures the *flâneur* like a phantasmagoria. In it the city is now a landscape, now a room. Both, then, constitute the department store that puts even *flânerie* to use for commodity circulation. The department store is the *flâneur's* last practical joke.⁴⁴

Benjamin's description of Baudelaire's *flânerie* reminds us of many scenes in Dreiser's writings. The term "phantasmagoria" in the above quotation which Benjamin regularly uses to signify the bewitching nature of the metropolis is also Dreiser's favorite alongside "kaleidoscopic." Whether one thinks of Carrie's strolls while job hunting in Chicago, or Hurstwood's walk in New York, or Dreiser's autobiographical descriptions of his own wanderings in Chicago and New York, there is felt to be some leisurely and spectatorial air, that is, qualities of *flânerie*, in their perambulations, perhaps because the wanderer Dreiser imagined is, if powerless, fascinated by the urban sublime.

Although in a different essay about Baudelaire Benjamin writes, "[t]he man of the crowd [in Poe's tale] is no *flâneur*,"⁴⁵ one wonders if the unnamed narrator of the tale who stalks the insane follower of throngs throughout nocturnal London likewise cannot be regarded as a *flâneur*. Benjamin's distinc-

tion between “the pedestrian who would let himself be jostled by the crowd” and “the *flâneur* who demanded elbow room and was unwilling to forgo the life of a gentleman of leisure,”⁴⁶ seems too rigid. It seems that Benjamin could not countenance conferring the title of a *flâneur* on the unworthy who, lacking the intelligence to appreciate the urban spectacle, are dumbfounded by it. If Carrie and Hurstwood approximate mere “pedestrians,” they still retain some quality of “*flânerie*.” Tired of getting rejected for work, Carrie “[wanders] on, feeling a certain safety and relief in mingling with the crowd.”⁴⁷ She knows, as a *flâneuse* must, both the menacing nature of the bustling crowd and the soothing effects of its anonymity in which she finds refuge. Enthralled with consumer culture displayed in department stores, Carrie may be entrapped in “the *flâneur*’s last practical joke,” but department stores “offered a protected site for the empowered gaze of the *flâneuse*,” as Anne Friedberg argues. Friedberg adds that “[the] department store may have been, as Benjamin put it, the *flâneur*’s last coup, but it was the *flâneuse*’s first.”⁴⁸

Such being the case, Carrie’s stroll through department stores assumes the nature of *flânerie*. Dreiser may have learned by virtue of his love for Poe to conceive of Carrie’s wandering as having something to do with *flânerie*. Dreiser was almost always engaged in aestheticizing in his own way what he calls the “terror” of the city, even if by doing so he would run the danger of getting resigned to “the urban picturesque,” which, according to Carrie Tira-do Bramen, “sought to make modernity less terrifying by making it familiar through a gradualist approach that linked old concepts with new phenomena.”⁴⁹ As a result, Dreiser’s representations of the urban sublime went so far as to absorb in one work apparently mismatched literary models, namely, both the factor of slumming of which the most obvious specimen is the depiction of Hurstwood in destitution, and that of *flânerie* which such an improbable character as Carrie in poverty enacts.

IV

In concluding, it seems appropriate to note that Dreiser’s practice of co-opting disparate literary heritages and concocting a strange amalgam inevitably brought about ironic concerns which were shared by writers of proletarian literature and critics of the 1930s. Whether Benjamin admires or condemns *flânerie*, for example, is in the last instance ambiguous; his interests in it are ironical and do not reach any dialectical resolution. Dreiser’s infatuation with the city is similarly ironical. Den Tandt’s caution concerns

this issue, for he writes, “dismissing Dreiser’s romanticizing of the urban world—as would be the case if we followed to the letter the logic of Benjamin’s. . . –might lead us to disregard the complex ideological work performed through this discourse.”⁵⁰ Paradoxical as this “ideological work,” through conferring connoisseurship similar to Benjamin’s *flânerie* on such a poor girl as Carrie, may seem, the hostility to the city which was from the start implied and would later come to the fore in Dreiser’s treatment of the metropolis attests to his pastoral impulse as well as his critique of capitalism.

Pastoral images abound in his city novels. Beauty and happiness are portrayed to Carrie, for instance, in terms of rustic enticements: “that halcyon day,” “that radiance of delight which tints the distant hilltops of the world,” and “the tinkle of a lone sheep bell o’er some quiet landscape, or the glimmer of beauty in sylvan places.”⁵¹ Hurstwood’s fascination with her is similarly expressed:

Hurstwood felt the bloom and the youth. He picked her as he would the fresh fruit of a tree. He felt as fresh in her presence as one who is taken out of the flash of summer to the first cool breath of spring.⁵²

Even though it may seem incongruent that pastoral images should intermittently jut out from events in urban scenes, Den Tandt accurately makes the point that “in order to avoid any reductive dualism, it makes sense to assume, as Raymond Williams and William Cronon do, that, to borrow Cronon’s words, ‘the city-country story’ should be told ‘as a unified narrative.’”⁵³

In this sense, Dreiser’s writings about the city stem partly from the classical literary mode of the pastoral. From the point of view of William Empson to whom “[good] proletarian art is usually Covert Pastoral,”⁵⁴ however, this genealogy would present an annoying dilemma insofar as the pastoral in one way or another results in snobbery. According to Empson:

The realistic sort of pastoral (the sort touched by mock-pastoral) also gives a natural expression for a sense of social injustice. So far as the person described is outside society because too poor for its benefits he is independent, as the artist claims to be, and can be a critic of society; so far as he is forced by this into crime he is the judge of the society that judges him. This is a source of irony both against him and against the society, and if he is a sympathetic criminal he can be made to suggest both Christ as the scapegoat (so invoking Christian charity) and the sacrificial tragic hero, who was normally above society rather than below it, which is a further source of irony.⁵⁵

It could be Clyde Griffiths of *An American Tragedy* that “the person described” above implies. Interestingly, the original and much shorter version of this essay titled “Proletarian Literature,” which would be incorporated as the first chapter in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, appeared in three installments in a short-lived, forgotten journal put out as the fruit of Japanese progressive academicians’ concerted efforts to put up a modest resistance against the oppressive Japanese regime of the early 1930s. It evinces Empson’s interests in international leftist or anti-fascist movements. As a professor at the Tokyo Imperial University, Empson tried to support this journal, making contributions and undertaking lectures on its behalf.⁵⁶ His writings on proletarian literature and Marxism, however, were oblique, even more ironical than Benjamin’s stance.

Michael Denning appraises Empson’s ironic view on proletarian literature as follows:

Empson’s argument is, like many of the early contributions to the proletarian-literature debates, based more on an imagined literature. . . than on the analysis of particular works. . . . Nevertheless, Empson’s sense of the pastoral element in proletarian writing is an important counterweight to the “naturalist” interpretations of these harrowing yet mythic tales of mining camps and urban slums.⁵⁷

Highlighting those elements of the left-wing novels of the 1930s which do not follow the mandatory tenets of realism, Denning suggests that proletarian literature exploits not only a “proletarian sublime” but also a “proletarian pastoral.”⁵⁸ Contending that “[the] ghetto pastoral is less a form of social realism than a proletarian tale of terror, an allegorical cityscape composed in a pidgin of American slang and ghetto dialect, with traces of old country tongues,”⁵⁹ he as well as Empson finds irony in the discrepancy between the subjectivity of pastoral and the proclaimed realism of proletarian literature.

Dreiser, who considered himself to be at once an impoverished failure and an uncommon aesthete, embodies such an irony. Perhaps on that account, major products of his indefatigable grappling with the task of representing the city life, appropriating earlier narrative forms from the sentimental novel to the venerable tradition of the pastoral, demonstrate the trajectory of his endeavors which set an example for the plebeian writers of the 1930s, “the children of the migrants from the Black Belt South and the Slavic and Mediterranean East,”⁶⁰ the storytellers of the tales of “foreign” and “colored” neighborhoods in the transformed metropolis.

NOTES

¹ Blanche Housman Gelfant, *The American City Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954; 1970), 64.

² *Ibid.*, 93.

³ Thomas P. Riggio, "American Gothic: Poe and *An American Tragedy*," *American Literature* 49 (January 1978): 532.

⁴ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism: Second Edition*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York: Norton, 1991), 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶ Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 123.

⁷ Laura Hapke, *Tales of the Working Girl: Wage-Earning Women in American Literature, 1890–1925* (New York: Twayne, 1992) 3–4.

⁸ Gelfant, *The American City Novel*, 88–9.

⁹ Theodore Dreiser, *A Hoosier Holiday* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1974), 365.

¹⁰ Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual versus the City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 124–5.

¹¹ Christophe Den Tandt, *The Urban Sublime in American Literary Naturalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 66–7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 67.

¹³ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 117.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁵ Theodore Dreiser, *A Book About Myself* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1965), 34.

¹⁶ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 117.

¹⁷ Cyrille Arnavon, "Theodore Dreiser and Painting," *American Literature* 17 (May 1945): 121.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 117–8.

¹⁹ Gelfant, *The American City Novel*, 67.

²⁰ Sidney Finkelstein, *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature* (New York: International, 1965), 159–60.

²¹ Den Tandt, *The Urban Sublime*, 243.

²² F. O. Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser* (New York: Dell, 1966), 44.

²³ Dreiser, *A Book About Myself*, 8.

²⁴ Theodore Dreiser, *Dawn* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1965), 271.

²⁵ Gelfant, *The American City Novel*, 92.

²⁶ See Theodore Dreiser, *Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub: A Book of the Mystery and Wonder and Terror of Life* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1920).

²⁷ Theodore Dreiser, *The "Genius"* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., n. d.), 227.

²⁸ See Dorothy Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz* (New York: Aperture, 1976), 94. About Dreiser's view of Stieglitz, Dreiser, "A Master of Photography" in *Selected Magazine Articles of Theodore Dreiser: Life and Art in the American 1890s*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Press, 1985), 248–253; Dreiser, "A Remarkable Art: Alfred Stieglitz" in Theodore Dreiser, *Art, Music, and Literature, 1897–1902*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 112–121.

²⁹ See Arthur Frank Wertheim, *The New York Little Renaissance: Iconoclasm, Modernism, and Nationalism in American Culture, 1908–1917* (New York: New York University Press, 1976); Martin Green, *New York 1913: The Armory Show and the Paterson Strike Pageant* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988).

³⁰ Keith Newlin, "Productions of Dreiser's Plays" in Appendices, *The Collected Plays of*

Theodore Dreiser, ed. Keith Newlin and Frederick E. Rusch (Albany: Whitston Publishing Co., 2000), 334.

³¹ Dreiser, *A Hoosier Holiday*, 71.

³² *Ibid.*, 338.

³³ Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual versus the City*, 135–6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁵ Hapke, *Tales of the Working Girl*, 45.

³⁶ Theodore Dreiser, *The Color of a Great City* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1923), v.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, vii.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴¹ *Loc. cit.*

⁴² Nancy McIlvaine Donovan, ““On Being Poor”” in *A Theodore Dreiser Encyclopedia*, ed. Keith Newlin (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2003), 293.

⁴³ Den Tandt, *The Urban Sublime*, 33.

⁴⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 156.

⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 172.

⁴⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁴⁷ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 18.

⁴⁸ Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 37.

⁴⁹ Carrie Tirado Bramen, “The Urban Picturesque and the Spectacle of Americanization,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (September 2000): 444.

⁵⁰ Den Tandt, *The Urban Sublime*, 39.

⁵¹ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 369.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵³ Den Tandt, *The Urban Sublime*, 252n.

⁵⁴ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 16–7.

⁵⁶ See William Empson, “Proletarian Literature,” *Shin-Eisei-Bungaku [the newer spirit of British & American literature]* II 2–4 (April/May–August 1933): 6–7; 35–37; 20–23.

⁵⁷ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 251.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁶⁰ *Loc. cit.*