

dreiser and the prophetic tradition

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Readers of this article might want to compare it to Robert W. Schneider's "Stephen Crane and the Drama of Transition: A Study in Historical Continuity" (II, 1, 1) in which it's argued that Crane can't be understood without a look at *his* religious values. See also our note in XIV, 1, 95, on reinterpretations of turn-of-the-century rebels and reformers *other* than writers. *American Studies* has run a number of articles on the subject, and they "speak" to one another as good scholarship should.

—SGL

The idea that there is a strong religious element in Dreiser's fiction is not new. Many critics and writers have already suggested this in different ways.¹ What they have rarely emphasized, however, is that Dreiser was religious not only at the end but also at the beginning of his career. I think, furthermore, that one can characterize the religious spirit in which he began and ended his career as *prophetic*.

It is possible to distinguish four types of religious responses: the ritualistic, the mystical, the apocalyptic and the prophetic.² The prophetic—of which the Social Gospel movement is an example—differs from the others in being more concerned with the now than the hereafter; with social justice, rather than salvation; and with the spirit, rather than the letter of religious law. In his book *The Prophets*, Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel stresses that it is in sympathy that the ultimate meaning, worth and dignity of the prophetic religion of the Old Testament can be found. The prophetic God is a God who loves, a God who is known to and concerned with man.³ In Martin Buber's terms, the prophetic God is involved selflessly and sympathetically with humanity, particularly with the weak and lowly.⁴

Both of Dreiser's parents were intensely religious, but in very different ways. His father was a devout Catholic who adhered strictly to the letter

but often, in his son's opinion, lost sight of the true spirit of religion. Dreiser's mother, on the other hand, came from a family of Mennonites, a Protestant sect which I feel stresses that the essence of Christianity is love and charity, not dogma and ritual. Through her selfless devotion not only to her children but to many others as well, Sarah Dreiser fulfilled the spirit of the Mennonite faith and provided her son Theodore with an example of Christian charity that he would never forget. Although he was moved by the message of hope for the poor in the Sermon on the Mount, Theodore found little else inspiring about the Catholic schools his father insisted he attend. The priests and nuns who instructed him reminded him too much of his grim and oppressive father. When Theodore finally got an opportunity to attend a public school, at the age of thirteen, he felt liberated.

What apparently destroyed Dreiser's waning faith in the Catholic Church were the circumstances surrounding his mother's death. A reluctant convert to Catholicism, she had not gone to Mass or confession with any regularity, if at all in the last years of her life. On her deathbed she showed no interest in summoning a priest. After her death, Dreiser's father anxiously called in a priest to bless the body, but he refused and said she could not be buried in a Catholic cemetery. After tearful entreaties by the father and a promise to have special Masses said for the repose of her soul, at \$2.50 per Mass, the Church allowed her to be buried in a Catholic cemetery. The nineteen year-old Dreiser did not speak out at the time, but he was appalled at the priest's attitude. After she was buried, he broke with the Church and stopped attending Mass entirely.

Though he rejected Catholicism, Dreiser retained his respect for religion. In the company of his brother Al, he began to go to hear the many excellent liberal preachers in Chicago, all of whom, Dreiser recalled, attacked the economic and political wrongs of the day. It was quite different from going to Mass. Working days in a laundry, he went evenings to hear David Swing, the liberal Presbyterian pastor who withdrew from the Presbyterian Church and preached to large audiences in the Central Music Hall; Frank Gunsaulus; H. H. Thomas; Emil G. Hirsch, a leader of Reform Judaism in Chicago; and at the Ethical Culture Society, M. M. Mangasarian, an Armenian whom Dreiser called one of the most enlightening speakers he had ever heard.⁵ These preachers had a much greater influence on Dreiser's moral development than has previously been recognized. "Inspirationally," Dreiser wrote of them, "they were of far more importance than any or all of the professors I had heard at college."⁶

In *A Book About Myself*, Dreiser claimed that he had become a newspaper reporter so that he could meet important people and move up in the world. If he had become increasingly ambitious for material and social success, he nevertheless could not help continuing to care deeply for those in distress. Although he later claimed that the horrors he saw

daily as a young reporter destroyed his faith in God, he managed to retain his respect for the compassionate ideals of the Sermon on the Mount. Having freed himself from the Catholic Church, he admitted that he “was still swashing around among the idealistic maxims of Christ and the religionists and moralists generally, contrasting them hourly as it were, with the selfish materialism of the day as I saw it.”⁷

Working in Pittsburgh as a reporter in 1894, Dreiser read two books by Thomas H. Huxley which may have convinced him that the prophetic religion was superior to all others. In *Science and the Christian Tradition*,⁸ Huxley rejects the demonological and miraculous elements in Christianity as vestiges of an earlier age of superstition and ignorance and questions the authenticity and authority of the Gospels. Calmly and logically, he denies that it was possible for Jesus to be the son of God or a savior, pointing out that Christianity as a religion did not arise until a hundred years after Jesus’ death. At the same time that he rejected what he considered the hocus-pocus of apostolic Christianity, Huxley affirmed the value of many of Jesus’ ethical and moral teachings. He believed it likely that Jesus was an authentic religious teacher in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. In *Science and the Hebrew Tradition*,⁹ Huxley explained why he preferred the earlier prophetic faith of the Hebrews to Christianity. The Hebrew prophets, he argued, were the first great ethical teachers of Western civilization. Huxley claimed that “in the natural course of evolution, [Judaism] preached, in the prophetic age, an elevation and an ethical purity which have never been surpassed; and that, since the new birth of the prophetic spirit, in the first century of our era, the course of Christian dogmatic development along its main lines has been essentially retrogressive.”

However much his faith in Jesus as a savior was shattered by Huxley, Dreiser was not an atheist after he read his two books. All that Dreiser was willing to say later was that *Science and the Hebrew Tradition* and *Science and the Christian Tradition* had greatly altered his thinking about Christianity and religion.¹⁰ In much of the writing which Dreiser published between 1894 and 1900 we can see that the ethical and moral import of Jesus’ teachings were as important to him as ever. The difference was that he now came to see Jesus as more of a prophet than a savior, a spokesman of God rather than his only son. Nor was Jesus unique. Anyone through whom the divine stream of love flowed and in whom the divine light of justice glowed could be prophetic.¹¹

His work as a reporter on the Pittsburgh *Dispatch* failed to provide him with the platform he needed to play the role of prophet, but his brother Paul, a successful popular song writer, did. Showing the wide-eyed Theodore around New York, Paul pointed out the opulent hotels and restaurants. Paul was no radical, but growing up poor in the Midwest he had absorbed some Populist sentiment. “Sometimes you ought to write about these things, Thee,” he told Theodore. “They’re the

limit for extravagance and show. The people out West don't know what's going on yet, but the rich are getting control. They'll own the country soon. A writer like you could make 'em see that. You ought to show up some of these things so they'd know."¹² In Chicago, St. Louis and Pittsburgh, Dreiser had been tempted to do just that, but the problem was how. Intentionally or not, Paul offered the solution. In October, 1895, with the financial backing of a musical publishing firm in which his brother was a partner, the twenty-four-year-old Dreiser launched *Ev'ry Month*, a monthly magazine which announced that it would be devoted to literature and popular music. From the first issue in October, 1895, to September, 1897, Dreiser wrote a column of sermon-like observations which he called "Reflections." He signed it "The Prophet."¹³

Like a number of other journalists and preachers of the social gospel movement, Dreiser considered it his duty as the Prophet to arouse what he called a "working sympathy among those whom the tide of fortune has elevated, for those whom the undertow of adversity has swept to the lowest depths of the seas of misery."¹⁴ Although he testified to no personal divine revelations, the Prophet did believe in and identify himself with a compassionate God who "is not unmindful of the least of His creatures."¹⁵ The Prophet was not concerned with theological or doctrinal matters but with the well-being of the poor. In November, 1896, the Prophet insisted that man must be devoted above all to the welfare of his fellow man and not waste time trying to unravel ultimate questions. "We must unravel the tangled affairs of men first," he wrote, "and make them smooth. We shall concern ourselves with their miseries and find where they are wrong. . . . We will be concerned with making things good, with living so that things shall be better."¹⁶

In January, 1896, a financial panic brought ruin to many small investors. As the Prophet, Dreiser chose as one of his topics the following month the evil influence of money on men. Exploiting the average American's desire for financial security, money speculators plunged recklessly into the market with other people's money. In the panic that followed, everything was lost. All of this, the Prophet wrote, was the result of "money-desire, a weakness bred by the fear of poverty and hunger and fostered by gratification of appetites and vanities." He wondered whether the "money changers (and they are not all Jews nowadays) may see and learn that it is evil to crave immense prosperity, or to seek it at risk and peril of the little of others?" The moral of the whole disaster, he decided, was that the "golden calf of success" was a creature of Mammon, not of God. His reflections were part of a longer section on the evil influence of money, which included a sentence which foreshadowed the fate of Sister Carrie. The Prophet warned that "Amid all that money can buy, you can sit quite alone."¹⁷ Friendships are not purchased with money, he moralized, but with "goodness of heart and clearness and generousness of mind." It is these and not mansions and

carriages and obsequious attendants that win and hold worthwhile people, the kind of people who, in a moral sense, "are higher up, and allured by the heart alone."¹⁸

With a painting of Christ on the center of the page devoted to his "Reflections," the Prophet in October, 1896, introduced the subject of the city's magnetic appeal and corrupting influence upon the young adventurer. "To go to the city is the changeless desire of the mind," he wrote in a memorable line. He made it clear, however, that it was a desire unworthy of the moral man. He compared the city to a "sinful Magdalen [which] decks itself gayly, fascinating all by her garments of scarlet and silk, awing by her jewels and perfumes, when in truth there lies hid beneath these a torn and miserable heart, and a soiled and unhappy conscience that will not be still but is forever moaning and crying 'for shame.'" The Prophet warned that behind the city's glamor was moral decay, behind its opulent facade the ragged world of the poor. "All is not gold that glitters," he sermonized platitudinously. The Prophet's basic concern, however, was not with sin but with the suffering of the poor and helpless. "Endless jewels can this city show; treasures so vast as to seem improbable; glories so numerous that in their very number they rob each other of their individual charm; pleasure so elaborate and costly as to pall upon the pursuing imagination; yet, amid all, men starve."¹⁹

Frequently drawing upon Biblical analogies, the Prophet used the parable of the prodigal son to moralize on the life of a wealthy piano manufacturer who lived a gay, thoughtless life in New York city, drinking heavily and spending money freely until his life of extravagance and dissipation took its toll and his mind snapped. He was placed in an institution for the insane on an island in the East River, from which, the Prophet imagined, he could sit and watch the bright lights of Manhattan burning in the night, as he had once burned his candle at both ends in the pleasure domes of that city. All the elements of the youthful Dreiser's intensely moralistic vision were implicit in the story of the prodigal piano manufacturer. The harlotry of the city, the illusoriness of pleasure and riches, the inevitable decay of worldly things—all were underscored in reflections about a man whose pursuit of materialism had ended in disillusionment and ruin. The same distrust of materialism would reappear later in Dreiser's novels, although the religious basis of this distrust would fade into the background and almost disappear completely. Nevertheless, underneath the naturalism of Dreiser's novels the Prophet's distrust of materialism and desire, his compassion for the poor, are always present.

We know from Dreiser's confessions in autobiographies and from subsequent events in his own career how much he was driven by the desire to succeed. But as the Prophet he looked at the question of success almost exclusively from a moral point of view. "How to be successful—

what a burning question that is to one who is trying to succeed,"²⁰ the Prophet wrote. He insisted, however, that success means nothing if it serves only for self-gratification. He measured success by the degree to which it helped others less fortunate. "You must not think of the pleasure and profit the attaining of your object will give you, but what pleasure and profit the attaining of your object will give others." The object of all human activity, he averred, was "Samaritanism." The men who were most successful in life were those who put themselves in a position to do the most good for others—good not in a narrowly materialistic, but in a spiritual sense. In the Prophet's words, "you must have the feeling that if the attainment of your object is going to benefit other people, it must not benefit them in a low but in a high sense. The greatest men have been those who have tried to elevate their fellow men, and you will probably agree that, in point of fame at least, the greatest men are the most successful men."²¹ To see Dreiser only as a success monger, as Kenneth Lynn does,²² is to overlook the moral depth of his nature, which was most evident in the mid-nineties, when he was writing as the Prophet.

For the light they may throw on Dreiser the novelist, none of the Prophet's moralistic reflections are more interesting than those on art and artists. In the Prophet's view the artist should not stand outside the range of human suffering and sorrow. The artist should be personally involved with, even stirred by, the figures he paints or the characters he creates in fiction. He should in particular be identified with the down-trodden. The trouble with modern painting, the Prophet complained, was an art-for-art's-sake philosophy. The modern painter ignores "all scientific, philanthropic, political or educational movements, and lives in a rather narrow cut, where he tells us he is engrossed by his art." But an art which did not elevate mankind was not worth the canvas it was painted on. In art as in religion, the heart was the core. Without the heart "there is neither light nor love nor interest, and with it no painting worth seeing is too deep to be understood. We are all connoisseurs if we are right-hearted, and if we are not no amount of study will ever make us such." The important thing in judging, as well as in creating a work of art was, therefore, "a true and responsive heart, by whose decisions all great paintings, as indeed everything else in this complicated life, must either live in fame or pass into oblivion."²³ This commitment to the heart was not something which Dreiser abandoned after he stopped writing as the Prophet; seemingly in spite of himself, it persisted, from *Sister Carrie* (1900) to *The Stoic* (1947).

Condemned as soulless when it was first published in 1900, praised in our own day as a classic of literary naturalism, *Sister Carrie* may actually be more of a religious novel than either of these interpretations would allow. It may be testimony to the influence of the prophets and the Social Gospel on Dreiser that two of the major junctures of the pro-

phetic tradition—to have compassion for the poor and live a spiritual life—should be important themes in his first novel. Dreiser's commitment to the poor was lost sight of by some critics when the novel was first published. Disturbed by what they saw as the immorality of the story, they were not able to appreciate its implicit concern for those without jobs, homes or prospects in life. When *Sister Carrie* was reissued in 1907, Dreiser made it clear in a newspaper interview that he thought of himself first as a writer devoted to depicting the struggles of the lower classes. "The infinite suffering and deprivation of great masses of men and women upon whom existence has been thrust unasked appals me," he told the reporter. "My greatest desire," he went on, "is to devote every hour of my conscious existence to depicting phases of life as I see and understand them."²⁴

The Prophet's injunction to be a good Samaritan was still on Dreiser's mind when he wrote *Sister Carrie*. Apparently he had not forgotten that the Hebrew prophets had commanded that alms be given freely to those in need, and that Jesus had repeated this command in the Sermon on the Mount: "Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away" (Matth. 5:42). In Chapter 14, as Hurstwood, Drouet and Carrie emerge from a theater on their way to dinner, Hurstwood in a foreshadowing of his own impoverishment is approached by a derelict. Extending a palm to Hurstwood, he pleads, "Say, mister . . . would you mind giving me the price of a bed?" Busy talking to Carrie, whom he is trying to win away from Drouet, Hurstwood pays no attention to the Beggar. "'Honest to God, mister,'" he implores, "I'm without a place to sleep.'" (153)²⁵ But Hurstwood and Carrie are oblivious to him. Genial Drouet gives the beggar a dime, but does not really see him. The chapter title, "With Eyes and Not Seeing," refers not only to Drouet's failure to see the affair that is developing between Hurstwood and Carrie, but also and more importantly to the failure of Hurstwood and Carrie, and almost everyone else in the novel, to see or appreciate the suffering of the poor. The characters in the novel lack moral vision, as did those of whom Christ said, in a passage which may have inspired the title of the chapter, "they seeing, see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand" (Matth. 13:13). The only good Samaritan in *Sister Carrie* is perhaps the strange man who collected money for the derelicts and found them a place to sleep. By including him in *Sister Carrie* and having him place a kindly hand on Hurstwood's shoulder when the latter was down and out, Dreiser managed to include at least one compassionate person in a novel full of thoughtless and materialistic characters.

The prophets had warned against worshipping idols and earthly wealth, and Jesus had repeated this warning in words which Dreiser, more than once, said he found tremendously moving: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth. . . ." Most of the characters in *Sister*

Carrie seek to do just that, perhaps nobody more eagerly than Carrie: she looks for happiness in material things. It is the character Ames who points out to Carrie that as a creature of desire she is doomed to discontent and unhappiness. Although he often seems ambivalent about his basic aims in *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser is fairly consistent in his underlying point of view, expressed here through Ames, that happiness does not rest in earthly treasures, which are only phantoms of human desire.

The Book of Daniel provided Dreiser with two important metaphors in *Sister Carrie*. It was the prophet Daniel's mission to remind the various kings of earth that there is a higher kingdom of the spirit, ruled over by a greater power than they. The rulers who ignore Daniel's warnings and grow proud and idolatrous are eventually brought low and their kingdoms destroyed. Carrie, Hurstwood and the other characters in the novel believe only in the materialistic kingdom, represented by the great cities of America. But Dreiser's title for Chapter 30, "The Kingdom of Greatness," is intentionally ironic, for New York city, to which it has reference, is no more a true kingdom of greatness than Babylon was, as Daniel had reminded Nebuchadnezzar. "Little use to argue," Dreiser laments editorially in the chapter, referring to New York, "that such is not the kingdom of greatness, but so long as the world is attracted by this and the human heart views this as the one desirable realm which it must attain, so long, to that heart, will this remain the realm of greatness. So long, also, will the atmosphere of this realm work its desperate results in the soul of man." (322)

The implied criticism of materialism which runs throughout *Sister Carrie* reaches a high point in Chapter 32, "The Feast of Belshazzar: A Seer to Translate." In this chapter Carrie dines with Mrs. Vance's party at Sherry's, one of the most sumptuous restaurants in New York. Under the spell of New York's materialistic standards, Carrie is, as it were, a guest at Belshazzar's feast, a worshipper of the idols of gold and silver. Dreiser expressed his own disapproval of Sherry's through Ames, the only one at the party who speaks from a moral point of view. He tells Carrie that it is a shame that people waste money on such extravagance and show. "'A man doesn't need this sort of thing to be happy,'" he says. (358) Ames is the "Seer" in the chapter title. He knows that New York is but another Babylon. Carrie hears Ames' prophetic words but does not understand them, any more than the guests at Belshazzar's feast understood the writing on the wall.

In Dreiser's second novel, *Jennie Gerhardt*, he created a character who possesses the kind of compassion and religious feelings that, at best, had remained latent and undeveloped in Carrie. "From her earliest youth," we are told of Jennie early in the novel, "goodness and mercy had molded her every impulse."²⁶ Condemned by her pharisaic contemporaries, who observe the letter but violate the spirit of religion, Jennie thinks of others first, even though it costs her her reputation and

happiness. Her sense of right stems from what Dreiser calls, with obvious religious overtones, an inner light. Not what her narrow-minded neighbors or her rigidly religious father say is right, but what she feels is right in her heart, guides her actions.

It has been argued that *Jennie Gerhardt* is a deeply pessimistic novel and that the grim philosophy which Lester expounds to Jennie on his deathbed expresses Dreiser's own view on life, that people are pawns on a chessboard, pushed about by powers over which they have no control. Lester does represent Dreiser's intellectual pessimism, which was growing bleaker in this period of his life. The novel, however, is written not from Lester's, but from Jennie's point of view; not from the view of the skeptical, intellectual male, but from the view of the trusting, emotional woman. Lester represents the mind, which cannot rationally believe in God, but Jennie represents the heart, which instinctively does. Unlike Lester, who thinks more deeply than he feels, Jennie feels more deeply than she thinks, and her feelings, even in time of misfortune, tell her to believe. The existence of God is not a question which troubles her very often because she lives in a world of feelings rather than ideas, and her religion is really, as it was for Dreiser, a religion of love. While we today may find Dreiser's (and the Prophet's) heart religion rather sentimental, if not simple-minded, we cannot adequately understand Dreiser or his work unless we approach it in the spirit in which it was created, and that spirit was not basically naturalistic but prophetic.

The Financier (1912) and *The Titan* (1914), the first and second volumes of Dreiser's trilogy, are the first novels Dreiser wrote, or attempted to write, from a naturalistic point of view. It was only after he met H. L. Mencken and read Nietzsche, to whom Mencken introduced him, that he made this attempt. However, even in the trilogy, Dreiser's religious feelings persist, not only in the compassion for the underdog which occasionally surfaces in it, but even more strongly in the theme that runs throughout it of the futility of desire and materialism. (The subtitle of the Cowperwood saga is "A Trilogy of Desire.") The selfish side of Dreiser was identified with his marauding financier, but he differed from him in being aware all along that the treasures which his titan is laying up in money and art would not, could not, bring him peace or happiness. Like all of Dreiser's major characters, Cowperwood is a victim of desire, futilely seeking fulfillment in the material rather than the spiritual world. Dreiser awkwardly emphasized this point in the final pages of *The Financier* by foretelling Cowperwood's future disillusionment in Chicago, where glory would turn to the "ashes of the Dead Sea fruit."²⁷ The moral is emphasized again in the heavy-handed epilogue of *The Titan*, in which Dreiser looks ahead to the third volume of the trilogy with Cowperwood "forever suffering the goad of a restless heart—for him was no ultimate peace, no real understanding, but only hunger, thirst and wonder. Wealth! Wealth! Wealth!"²⁸ The epilogues of *The*

Financier and *The Titan* underscore what is generally only implied in the novels themselves—namely, that while Dreiser shares to a significant degree in his hero's hedonistic quest of women, wealth and art, he knows at the outset that the quest is doomed to fail, as do all quests rooted in the flesh. When he wrote these two novels, Dreiser no longer quoted Jesus' words, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth," but he had not forgotten their meaning.

Those critics who saw *The "Genius"* (1915) simply as an illustration of Dreiser's "barbaric naturalism," as did Stuart Sherman in 1915,²⁹ were too one-sided in their approach to the novel. Eugene Witla is a complex character, torn, as Dreiser himself was, between the flesh and the spirit. We cannot understand Eugene if we see him simply as a pagan, or *The "Genius"* as no more than "The Biography of An Amourist," as another reviewer called it. We must see the prophet in Eugene, as well as the pagan, or we are not seeing the whole character. After a desperate search for sex and success leads Eugene to the edge of a nervous breakdown, his sister prevails on him to go see a Christian Science practitioner. Highly skeptical, Eugene goes. At first the frumpy woman seems ineffectual and ordinary. Why would God want to speak through someone like her? But she impresses him by quoting immediately from the prophet Isaiah, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow. . . ." Although he has not heard the quotation in years, Eugene finds that it appeals to him deeply, as had all the "Hebraic bursts of prophetic imagery in the past." (705)³⁰ Gradually, he overcomes his aversion for religion, and Christian Science in particular, concluding that the God whom the Christian Scientists worship is not basically different from the God whom the prophets proclaimed in the Old Testament. When he sees Christian Science as part of the prophetic religion tradition, Eugene views it with new respect. If there is a true religion, Eugene feels, it must be the one which the Jews before anyone else had developed through the inspiration of the prophets. In his reading, he learns—he wonders if he had not known it before and simply forgotten—that the earliest prophets had first seemed little more than whirling dervishes who worked themselves up into wild transports but who nevertheless had always set forth "something that was astonishingly spiritual and great." (707)

When Eugene lost the wealth and position he had ruthlessly acquired, Dreiser viewed his fall as an act of retribution by a higher power. To describe the pathos which Eugene experienced after his fall, Dreiser turned to the Books of the Prophets, and to the Book of Daniel, once again. "The prophets of the Old Testament discerned it clearly enough," Dreiser sermonized, "for they were forever pronouncing the fate of those whose follies were in opposition to the course of righteousness and who were made examples of by a beneficent and yet awful power." (685) Then he quoted at length from the applicable passage from Daniel, the

same passage he apparently had in mind in "The Kingdom of Greatness" chapter in *Sister Carrie*.

Eugene's conflicts are reflected in his art as well as his life. As a painter he swings between two opposing theories of art. One of these, based upon a sympathetic portrayal of human suffering, is prophetic. He takes common, even unpleasant objects and people and paints them with respect, or even with reverence. One of the most moving and controversial paintings in his first exhibit is of a black trash collector on a freezing winter morning in a New York ghetto. (It is interesting to note that Dreiser's first published story, "Nigger Jeff," was about a black.) In reviewing Eugene's first exhibit, a critic sees in his work that prophetic quality which characterizes Dreiser's fiction:

A true sense of the pathetic, a true sense of the dramatic, the ability to endow color—not with its photographic value, though to the current thought it may seem so—but with its higher spiritual significance; the ability to indict life with its own grossness, to charge it prophetically with its own meanness and cruelty in order mayhap it may heal itself; the ability to see wherein is beauty—even in shame and pathos and degradation; of such is this man's work. (237)

The anonymous reviewer has described that quality which I have defined in this paper as prophetic. Indeed, he uses that very word in the phrase "to charge it prophetically." Since *The "Genius"* is Dreiser's most autobiographical novel—he originally had made Eugene a writer, not a painter—it would be useful to know whether this review was based on something written about Dreiser's early work, or whether Dreiser, aware of his own prophetic cast of mind, had made it up wholly on his own. In any event, whether actual or imagined, the theory of art implied in the review is very reminiscent of the Prophet's rather moralistic and ingenuous views on the subject.

In 1921 a critic and acquaintance of Dreiser wrote to accuse him of practically embracing religion in *The "Genius."* In the circles in which Dreiser then moved, this was a serious charge, and Dreiser defended himself. "My next novel, which will soon be ready," Dreiser promised, "will clear the air once and for all."³¹ *An American Tragedy* (1925) was Dreiser's most conscious attack on religion. But even it, as relentlessly deterministic and intentionally skeptical as it appears, is not as irreligious as Dreiser intended and Mencken wanted to believe it was. In Dreiser's irrepressible compassion for the novel's pitiful characters and for Clyde Griffiths in particular, we see evidence of the Prophet's presence. The Christian minister in the novel fails Clyde, but Dreiser does not. This may perhaps be the meaning of Paul Goodman's otherwise paradoxical statement that "it is art and art alone that does human justice to Clyde Griffiths." The excessive detail about Clyde's life is, Goodman explains, a manifestation of Dreiser's love, "the love of undeviating attentiveness."³² Irving Howe makes a similar point: "Dreiser's

passion for detail is a passion for his subject; his passion for his subject a passion for the suffering of men."³³ Back in the thirties, Halford E. Luccock, a professor of religion at Yale, observed that though Dreiser was an avowed enemy of religion, believers had something to gain from his novels. Luccock noted that in works like *An American Tragedy* Dreiser bore witness to the suffering of the helpless individual in the modern industrial world. "For these victims," Luccock wrote, "he has a deep and wondering pity."³⁴

One does not have to argue that Dreiser's last two novels, *The Bulwark* (1946) and *The Stoic* (1947), were religious, for by that time he was openly spiritual in his beliefs once again. However it is worth noting that the religion of these last novels, or the ending of *The Stoic*, if not its beginning, is prophetic in character, thus giving a particular spiritual continuity to his whole career. The Quaker Solon Barnes, the central character in *The Bulwark*, comes in the last years of his life to a full realization of the prophetic spirit of the faith founded in England in the seventeenth century by George Fox, whom Dreiser in a speech in 1939 called the greatest prophet since Jesus.³⁵ Although he had been for most of his life a rather narrow-minded Christian and a banker, Solon comes to understand the truth of Jesus' injunction, "You cannot serve God and money," and resigns his position with the bank, condemning as he does so the craze for wealth in the United States. Among the things Solon believes God has revealed to him is the necessity of loving everyone, particularly the poor, and defending them against exploiters.

Even Cowperwood, in *The Stoic*, sees the light before he dies. But it is the financier's young mistress, Berenice Flemming, who realizes the goals that Dreiser, writing as the Prophet a half century earlier, had sermonized about. After Cowperwood's death, she seeks a religion "that would brush completely out of her considerations the whole Western materialistic point of view which made money and luxury its only god." (286)³⁶ In its outlines, the Eastern religion she embraces combines the asceticism and social consciousness which characterizes all prophetic religions. Her final meditations, the last words Dreiser ever wrote—he finished them the day before he died—show the triumph in her of the prophetic spirit. "Her entire life, as she realized—with the exception of the past few years—had been spent in the pursuit of pleasure and self advancement. But now she knew that one must live for something outside one's self, something that would tend to answer the needs of the many, as opposed to the vanities and comforts of the few, of which she herself was one." (306)

As late as 1902—late because Spencer and others were supposed to have shattered his religious faith in 1893—Dreiser wrote a revealing letter to William Dean Howells in which he expressed his appreciation of the older writer's moral greatness, placing him, along with Tolstoy and Hardy, in a select circle of religiously inspiring writers. Referring

to the spiritual support which he had received from these writers, Dreiser wrote to Howells, "Thomas Hardy has provided some of this spiritual fellowship. Count Tolstoy yet some more. Of you three, however, I should not be able to choose, the spirit in each seeming to be the same, and the large tender kindliness of each covering all of the ills of life. . . ." He went on to praise the three novelists for their compassion. "I may be wrong in my estimate of life, but the mental attitude of you three seems best—the richest, most appealing flowering out of sympathy, tenderness, uncertainty, that I have ever encountered." Dreiser saw "a chain of sympathy" "binding . . . together" Hardy, Tolstoy and Howells. Using Biblical imagery, as he had so often as the Prophet, Dreiser saw in Hardy and Howells "the same sympathetic solicitude for life, sorrow for suffering—care for the least and the greatest, even to the fall of a sparrow. . . ." ³⁷

For all his artistic and moral limitations, Dreiser was an heir of the great brooding religious novelists of the late nineteenth century. *Sister Carrie* (1900) and *Jennie Gerhardt* (not published until 1911 but substantially written a decade before) grew out of the same spirit that had inspired Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1887); Howells' *Annie Kilburn* (1888) and Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). The capacity of these writers to be angered by the unjustness of society and fate and to respond compassionately to life's victims—particularly to buffeted women—links them with the "tender spirits" Dreiser admired so much. Whether or not these writers felt they were spokesmen of God, or whether they believed at all in God ("uncertainty" was one of the qualities Dreiser believed they shared in common), they nevertheless sensed that they were bearing witness to the suffering of the individual in an inhospitable universe and trying to redeem him or her through their art.

"We are all prophets, Puritans like you and Hebrews like Waldo [Frank] and myself," an artist friend once told Van Wyck Brooks. Brooks agreed that most of his generation, of which Dreiser was an older member, saw the artist as a religious or spiritual leader, lighting the way for humanity. ³⁸ Dreiser tried to abandon this religious role, particularly after he met H. L. Mencken and read Nietzsche. But Dreiser could no more stop writing in a prophetic spirit than Mencken could begin believing in God. Throughout his long career—and no one knew this better or deplored it more than Mencken—Dreiser never really stopped being religious. Thus it may be more accurate to see Dreiser coming out of the prophetic religious tradition than out of a literary tradition such as naturalism, which is only to say that Isaiah may have had more influence on him than Zola, the Bible more meaning for him than any novel he ever read.

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footnotes

1. Among the critics are F. O. Matthiessen, Robert Elias, Alfred Kazin, Charles C. Walcutt, David Brion Davis, Irving Howe and Ellen Moers, as well as such writers as John Cowper Powys, James Farrell, Saul Bellow, Edward Dahlberg and Robert Penn Warren.
2. Leon I. Feuer, "Prophetic Religion In An Age of Revolution," in *Interpreting the Prophetic Tradition* (New York, 1969), 184.
3. (New York, 1962), 224.
4. *The Prophetic Faith* (New York, 1949), 183.
5. *Dawn* (New York, 1931), 556. For Mangasarian's views, see his *A New Catechism* (Chicago, 1902). Somewhat anti-Catholic, Mangasarian may have influenced Dreiser in this direction. For a discussion of the prophetic basis of the Ethical Culture movement, see Howard B. Radest, *Toward Common Ground: The Story of the Ethical Societies in the United States* (New York, 1969), 35, 165.
6. *Dawn*, 557.
7. *A Book About Myself* (New York, 1922), 197.
8. (New York, 1902), 34.
9. (New York, 1899), xi.
10. *A Book About Myself*, 361. *Science and the Hebrew Tradition* and *Science and the Christian Tradition* are among the books which influence the religious views of Eugene Witla, Dreiser's autobiographical hero in *The "Genius"* (New York, 1915), 695.
11. Huxley's theory may have given Dreiser himself a new respect for his own personality and experiences. The mystical feelings of oneness with the universe which he had experienced as a child; the sense that he was peculiarly different from others; these things did not necessarily mean that he was a neurotic misfit, as he had feared in adolescence. From a clinical point of view, the ancient prophets had not been normal either; in fact, some seemed insane. But sane or not, the prophets, in Huxley's view, had given mankind the most humane and ethical religion the western world had known.
12. *A Book About Myself*, 449.
13. The religious significance of the columns Dreiser wrote as the Prophet has perhaps not been adequately appreciated. In a short article in *American Literature* in 1937, John F. Huth helpfully called attention to the existence of *Ev'ry Month* and briefly listed a number of the topics Dreiser discussed as the Prophet. But Huth had little to say about the strong religious spirit of Dreiser's "Reflections." Like the few other critics who have dealt with *Ev'ry Month*, Huth was struck most by the few Spencerian passages in the "Reflections," possibly because he accepted the prevailing view that Dreiser was and always had been a naturalistic writer. With this view, Huth did not know what to make of the name with which Dreiser signed his monthly column. "Just what led Theodore Dreiser to assume the pen name 'The Prophet,'" Huth wrote, "we have no means of knowing." "Theodore Dreiser: 'The Prophet,'" *American Literature* IX (1937), 215. Robert Elias pointed out the obvious when he linked the pen name with the prophets of the Bible in *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature* (New York, 1949), 92. But Elias passed over the pen name without attaching any significance to it. Ellen Moers pays more attention than anyone previously has to Dreiser's religious roots, but in discussing *Ev'ry Month* she does not get into the deeper implications of the prophet role which Dreiser aspired to play in this period of his life. *Two Dreisers* (New York, 1949), 32-42.
14. *Ev'ry Month* (May 1897), 20. Dreiser was only one of a number of Americans in the late nineteenth century who were strongly influenced by the example of the Biblical prophets. Henry George, Walter Rauschenbusch and other important figures in the social gospel movement thought of themselves as being part of the ongoing prophetic tradition. As we can see in the first chapter of *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York, 1964), Rauschenbusch based his own religious philosophy squarely on the prophets, of whom he considered Christ to be one of the most important.
15. *Ev'ry Month* (September 1896), 7.
16. *Ibid.* (November 1896), 7.
17. A well-known, well-paid actress, Carrie sits alone in her rocking chair at the end of the novel, having found neither happiness or true love.
18. *Ev'ry Month* (February 1897), 2.
19. *Ibid.* (October 1896), 6.
20. *Ibid.* (June 1897), 21.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *The Dream of Success* (Boston, 1955), 72.
23. (September 1896), 3.
24. *New York Times* Book Review, June 15, 1907, 393.
25. Numbers in parentheses refer to pagination in the 1900 New York edition of *Sister Carrie*.
26. (New York, 1911), 16.
27. (New York, 1912), 780.
28. (New York, 1914), 551.

29. *The Nation*, December 2, 1915, 648-50.
30. Numbers in parentheses refer to pagination in the 1923 New York edition of *The "Genius."*
31. *Letters of Theodore Dreiser* (Philadelphia, 1959), I:338.
32. *Growing Up Absurd* (New York, 1956), 285-86.
33. "Afterword" to the Signet paperback edition of *An American Tragedy* (New York, 1964), 827.
34. *Contemporary American Literature and Religion* (Chicago, 1934), 63.
35. Quoted in Ruth Kennell, *Theodore Dreiser and the Soviet Union* (New York, 1969), 265, 303-04.
36. Numbers in parentheses refer to pagination in the 1947 New York edition of *The Stoic*.
37. Quoted in Ellen Moers, *Two Dreisers* (New York, 1969), 175-76.
38. *Days of the Phoenix* (New York, 1957), 118.