

CHARLES FORT AND A MAN NAMED DREISER

Mike Dash takes a sidelong glance at the career of Charles Fort by examining Fort's relationship with his mentor and disciple, the American novelist Theodore Dreiser.

Dreiser's nativity was attended by portents. He was born in the summer of 1871, the twelfth child of John and Sarah Dreiser of Terre Haute, Indiana - and while Sarah Dreiser was in labour (she later recalled) three 'graces', brightly garbed, came into her house, passed silently around her bed and danced out through the back door. This visitation, according to a family tradition, was also witnessed by John Dreiser and by Mary (Mame), the couple's eldest daughter.

As a baby, young Theodore was "puny beyond belief", so much so that his mother feared for his life and sent Mame to consult a local 'sorceress'. Fearing father Dreiser's sharp Catholic tongue, the old woman refused to see the child, but sent word to Sarah that she must measure Theodore from fingertip to fingertip and from head to toe, using a piece of string. "If the arms are as long as the body," said the crone, "bring the string to me."

They were, and the wise woman sent word that the baby would not die. "But for three nights in succession," she instructed, "you must take him out in the full of the moon. Leave his head and face uncovered, and stand so that the light will fall slantwise over his forehead and eyes. Then say three times: '*Wass ich hab, nehm ab; wass ich thu, nehm zu!*'" Sarah complied; her son survived, and ever after she was sure that his life had been saved by the moonlight. [1]

Theodore Dreiser was raised by a strict, deeply religious father with whom he felt little kinship, and by a near-pagan mother whom he adored. As a poor, stuttering, painfully shy Indiana schoolboy who dreaded the onset of winter; as a dishwasher in Chicago, aged 17; as a debt collector and as a junior reporter in St Louis, he fought to resolve this conflict of values. The struggle produced a man of considerable complexity, emphatically a product of the nineteenth century mid-West but nevertheless capable of establishing himself as the first

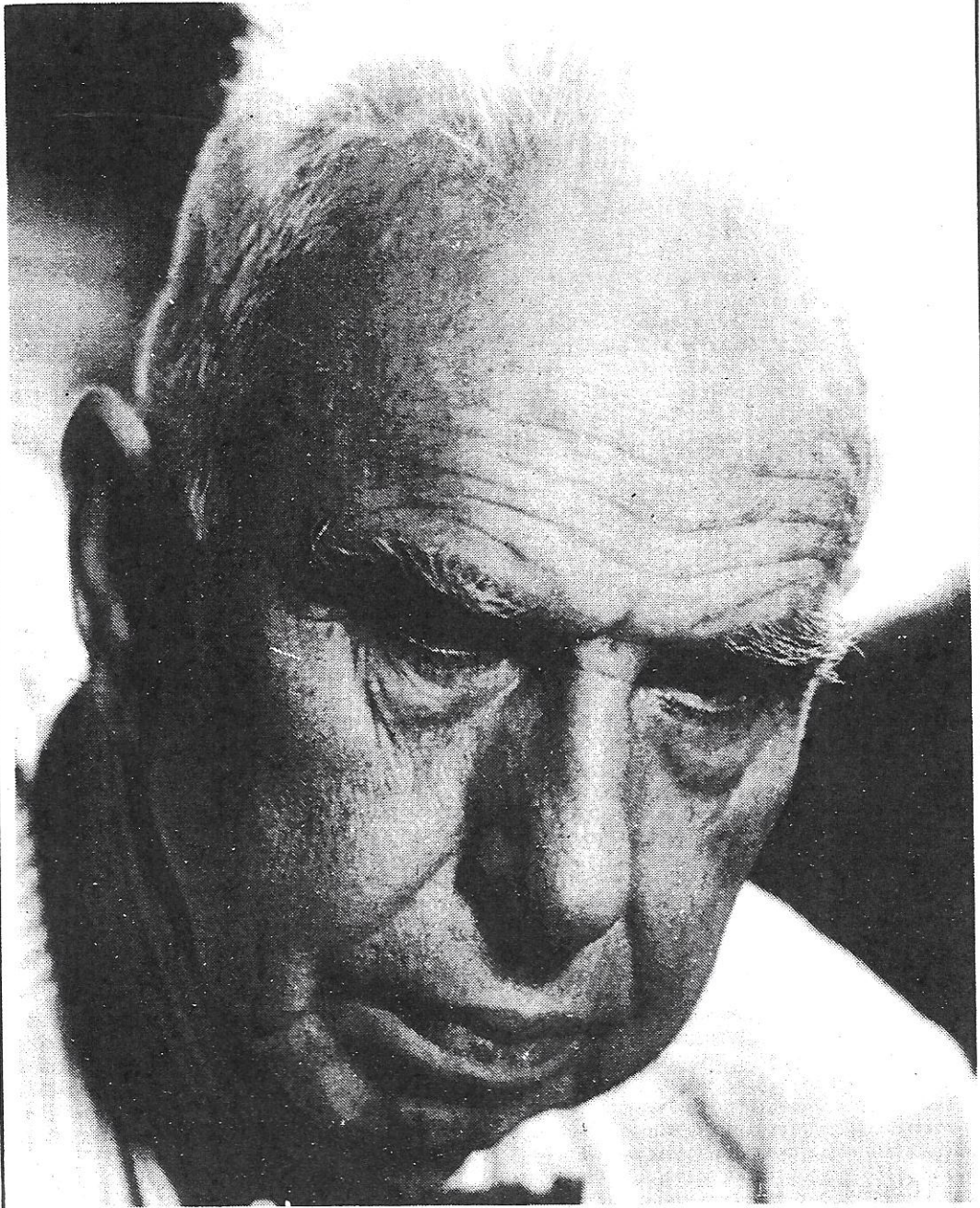
great American novelist of the twentieth century.

Dreiser's character abounded with contradictions. Unlike the middle-class Charles Fort, whose richest journalism was based on descriptions of the teeming tenements of New York City, Dreiser the author was obsessed by "bankers, millionaires, artists, executives, leaders, the real rulers of the world." [2] He wrote books that glorified capitalism, then became a supporter of the communist party - but always coveted wealth himself, for the security it bought. Physically unattractive, he nevertheless charmed so many women into his bed that he feared he would be remembered as a lecher. Gifted with astonishing powers of observation, he still lacked the most rudimentary discipline as a writer, suffering acutely from logorrhoea. "He wanted to be good but great, a rake and a saint, a poet and a tycoon," writes one biographer. "There were two Dreisers, one a gentle spirit who looked at the ruthless other self with alarm." [3]

YOUNG DREISER (1893-1904)

Engaged at 22 to a virginal young St Louis Methodist, Sara White, working for the papers in Chicago and St Louis, and then as editor of the magazine *Ev'ry Month*, Dreiser forged himself a solid reputation as a writer. The American *Who's Who* for 1899 mentions him as an editor, poet and author. In that year he started work on his first novel, *Sister Carrie*, writing later: "My mind was a blank except for the name. I had no idea who or what she was to be. I have often thought three was something mystic about it, as if I were being used, like a medium." [4]

It was not long, however, before *Carrie* became the story of Emma Dreiser, a sister who had eloped with an embezzler in the middle 1880s. Liberated from the need to conform to the wishes of an editor or a publisher, Dreiser



photograph by Lotte Jacobi.

Theodore Dreiser photographed in old age. Dreiser was one of the first great American novelists of the century, and is reckoned by many critics to be the essential link between nineteenth century literary craftsmen and later realists such as Ernest Hemingway. Between sporadic bouts of writing, Dreiser also found time to sponsor Charles Fort and conduct his own hefty investigation of the sciences.

turned *Sister Carrie* into a surprisingly realistic study which at first found favour with the progressive Doubleday publishing company. After signing an agreement to put out the book, however, Doubleday had second thoughts. *Carrie* was an affront to contemporary morals. It featured a heroine who was vulgar, enjoyed relationships with two obvious sinners, and yet emerged unpunished (though unfulfilled) from the final chapter as a successful actress. Dreiser held the publishers to their agreement, but his novel was barely promoted and sold a humiliating 456 copies. His royalty cheque came to \$68.40.

Disillusioned, he sank into despair. He worked fitfully at a second novel. He laboured on the railroads, then lived in city slums on ten cents a day. He sent for a horoscope, and the astrologer advised him: "You have stomach and bowel troubles, nervousness and cannot eat when excited or angry... [but] you are destined to travel and see strange things..." [5]

It took Dreiser three years to recover from the blow that *Carrie's* failure had dealt him. Not until December 1903 did he seek more work in the media, turning his hand to editing Street & Smith's sanguinary dime novels. After a year of struggling with Wild West stories, however, Dreiser's literary talents were recognised when the company gave him the editorship of a new journal - *Smith's Magazine* - it was preparing for launch. He received a rise, a title, and a commission to seek out and publish talented young authors.

A MEETING OF LIKE MINDS (1905)

Fort and Dreiser first met in 1905, after Dreiser came across some of the former's sketches of New York life and wrote inviting him to contribute short stories to his new magazine. One day Fort appeared in Dreiser's office and, pulling a number of battered manuscripts from an old jacket, thrust them under the editor's nose. Fort was nervous, a man then barely scraping a living from his writing; looking back, Dreiser recalled: "When I see [Oliver] Hardy I see Fort as he was then - that unctuous, ingratiating mood, those unwieldy, deferential, twittersy mannerisms were Fort's." [6] Later, Dreiser introduced his new author to Marguerite Tjader, who remembered him as "a low-set man, dark with a greasy complexion, scant black hair brushed over a round dynamic head. His hands were fat and protruded from filthy shirt-cuffs under a dark nondescript suit. In spite of all this there was something fascinating about him; he seemed utterly alive, carefree

and all-knowing as he talked." [7]

Dreiser was impressed by Fort's writing, by his humour and by an eye for telling detail that rivalled the editor's own. He purchased several short stories and commissioned Fort to write others, sending him to Ellis Island to observe the stream of European immigrants [8] and publishing his humorous descriptions of tenement life. Fort's characteristically vigorous contributions appeared on *Smith's* shaggy pulp surrounded by 'fluffy serials', but circulated 200,000. Dreiser passed the word about his new discovery to other editors, and soon Fort's work began to appear in the better papers - *Tom Watson's, The Popular Magazine*.

Fort and Dreiser formed a friendship, but it was at about this time that Fort the journalist was seized by the compulsion that never left him. To Dreiser's dismay, he announced that he was no longer interested in writing stories and wanted to devote himself to collecting data for a book unlike any ever written. Shortly thereafter, Fort moved house suddenly and Dreiser lost contact with him for more than a year.

By 1907 Dreiser had moved on himself, becoming editor of *Broadway Magazine*. *Broadway* was "a handsome magazine with a veneer of quality, devoted to the low- and middle-brow audience who revered glitter, replete with departments such as 'Beautiful Women of New York Society'..." [9] As editor Dreiser published Kipling and O. Henry, felt that Fort's contributions would suit the title, and looked his friend up once again. He found Charles and his wife, Anna, living in considerable poverty in the Hell's Kitchen area of New York and tried to wean Fort back to him by offering a high rate for his work. To his astonishment, Fort at first refused the offer, but the writer must have relented for by December he was writing in his diary, "Have not been paid for one story since May. Have two dollars left. Watson's has cheated me out of \$155. Dreiser has sent back two stories he said he told me he would buy, one even advertised to appear in his next number. There will be no money from the house this month. I owe \$15 since July on the mortgage. Everything is pawned...I am unable to write. I can do nothing else for a living. My mind is filled with pictures of myself cutting my throat or leaping out the window, head first." [10]

Yet Fort followed Dreiser as he moved on yet again, to *The Delineator*, a 'glossy' which the new editor strove to inject with a social conscience. Most of *The Delineator's* copy was, however, devoted to luring its female readers into purchasing knitting patterns hawked by the publisher, Butterick. Dreiser and his contributors - including HL Mencken and Sinclair

Lewis, another literary genius-to-be prostituted themselves self-consciously, writing moral pieces, scribbling sentimental verse and advising mothers on how long to hold their babies to the breast. Fort, whose manuscripts Dreiser continued to solicit, had no time for it. He was beginning to write of comets.

In 1910 Dreiser was fired from *The Delineator*, largely as a result of his attempts to contract a liaison with an 18-year-old girl named Thelma Cudlipp. He had already lost touch with Fort, who was increasingly immersing himself in the libraries of New York State, and he did not hear from his friend for several more years. It was not until May 1914 that Fort wrote (presumably care of publisher, since the author was then living *incognito* with his latest mistress at various temporary addresses) requesting sponsorship for library privileges at the New York Public Library. Dreiser, increasingly lionised by some for his novels *Jennie Gerhardt* and *The Financier*, signed the requisite forms and wrote back urging Fort to "consume more data to your own confusion. Eat libraries and suffer eventual encyclopedic apoplexy. Stuff in world histories and choke on a world dictionary. You will be no wiser. And meanwhile fare well for two more years - unless perchance I look you up in person. May you swell with information until you burst." [11]

X AND Y (1915)

In fact it was less than a year before Dreiser heard from Fort again. Early in 1915 the reclusive scholar sent on the manuscript of X, the mysterious book on which he had been labouring almost since the two first met. Fort was taking his first tentative steps towards the thesis that would one day be enshrined in *The Book of the Damned*, but, from surviving descriptions of the long-lost MS, it appears that he had yet to shake off convention as absolutely as he was to do. According to Damon Knight, "The excesses... are excesses of belief, or of quasi-belief. Fort was still hampered by the orthodoxy of the unorthodox; in rejecting conventional systems, he felt obliged to set up his own unconventional ones and defend them. He did this, I think, because he knew of no other way to write an unorthodox book." [12]

Dreiser was nevertheless utterly captivated by X, in which Fort suggested that events on earth were controlled by a higher civilization in space and that the world itself, and everything on it, was not real but an illusion projected from an unknown location, the X of his title. Dreiser's own reading and his semi-

pagan Indiana background had increasingly distanced him from orthodox religion and science; not yet ready to formulate his own philosophy, he seized on Fort's half-formed, semi-satiric world-view.

"I had not read three paragraphs before I said to myself, this is not only beautiful, it's wonderful," Dreiser wrote in an unpublished *memoir* of Fort. "It was then for the first time, that I fully understood why it was that he had decided to waste no more time on fiction... It was so strange, so forceful, so beautiful that I thought that whether this was science, or apocryphal and discarded, it was certainly one of the greatest books I have ever read in my life... Strange arresting explanations and deductions from a thousand sources that I had never contemplated as sources - newspaper clippings, published but ignored data from the world's most scientific journals... There was a vessel-like mechanism with great wheels of fire that passed before the eyes of ship-masters in various parts of the Pacific. There were recorded foot prints of an immense giant in some northern snow field - a record not reported in a newspaper, but in some scientific journal of standing. Here and there and everywhere were rains of blood that fell in the exact dimensions of certain artificially marked out areas. Somewhere in space about us were forces as intelligent and as practical as ourselves... When I sensed the imaginative power of such a concept, I was in a worshipping state of mind. True or false, marvellous." [13]

Optimistically convinced that X ought to "sell a hundred thousand", Dreiser offered to act as an agent for Fort's work. This was a service that he performed for three or four other unpublished authors he admired, among them John Maxwell, an old journalistic mentor from St Louis who had written a five-volume study to prove that Shakespeare's plays were the work of the Earl of Salisbury. [14] X influenced Dreiser profoundly and immediately, inspiring him to write a one-act Fortean play, *The dream*, and providing some of the thoughts that he later worked into an ill-received philosophical *pot pourri*, *Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub: a Book of the Mystery and Wonder and Terror of Life* (1920). But it had less effect on the publishers Dreiser approached on Fort's behalf. Macmillan, Alfred Knopf, Harpers, John Lane and Charles Scribner's Sons all rejected the manuscript, as they did Fort's second work of non-fiction, Y (1916), which argued for the existence of a malignant civilization beyond the North Pole. Waldemar Kaempffert, editor of *Popular Science Monthly* returned X with a note observing that

"a vast amount of reading has been done which has not been correctly applied." [15] One editor at *Scientific American* reacted less favourably and "almost blew up in my presence," Dreiser recalled. "And how! He almost choked as he told me that it was an outrage for Fort, an uninformed fool or dunce, to go gathering so-called data that no scientist would accept, and then dare offer it as a book. He said it was an insult to show him such a thing." [16]

DINNER AT THE FORTS' (1917)

Fort grew discouraged by Dreiser's failure to sell his work, and in June 1916 he asked for the manuscripts to be returned, saying that he had collected so much new information that they would have to be rewritten. Later, to Dreiser's great distress, he destroyed both works, but the two men continued to be on the friendliest of terms. The novelist's sympathy for Fort (already strong because the iconoclast was living in the sort of near-poverty Dreiser had experienced in his youth) was strengthened by Dreiser's own difficulties in securing adequate distribution for a new book, *The 'Genius'*, which attracted the attention of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice for its 17 profane and 75 lewd passages. [17] Fort thought the charges ridiculous, but was amused by them. "High-priest of Evil," he wrote, "What shall I do to be lewd?... I write of the attractions of the planets, and of the affinities of atoms. These are lusts. Yet, to save me, I can not convey evil notions of astronomic and chemic obscenities." [18]

War was raging in Europe... America joined in the war... but Fort and Dreiser were engaged in other battles. Probably the two friends met in the New York Public Library, where Dreiser had secured a study room in which to read up on physics and chemistry. [19] They also socialised occasionally after hours. Here is Dreiser's diary description of dinner at the Forts' in November 1917:

"Thursday. Thanksgiving Day.

"Cold and grey. Looks snowy. To French place for breakfast. Mame is to come today to hang curtains, but doesn't show up. I work on *Free* till 2.30, then go out and get a drink. No letters, no messages. At 5.30 quit and go up for Bert [Dreiser's lover Estelle Kubitz]. Find her charmingly dressed in Marion's dress. We take 8th Avenue car to 43d and then walk across to Fort's. I show her tenement in which he used to live (rear). We find his bell by aid of matches and go up. Charming apartment. Learn that a Mr and Mrs Charles Bizozzer are expected. He

is a Frenchman and is working out a new language like Esperanto. Has it nearly done, but no name. Fort suggests BUNK as a good name. Dinner at 7. A wonderful turkey. Fort has a new preserve which he has named 'Topeacho' made of tomatoes and peaches. I suggest 'Topeaka'. It is very good. Long discussion as to moral or immoral character of Nature - or unmoral. Also importance of man. Also Futurists, American puritanism, the war, Fort's work, Bizozzer's etc. Bizozzer is very jealous of his wife, who is a pretty young English girl. At 11 they leave. At 11.15 Bert and I leave. She is uncertain whether I want her to come down, but I bring her along. Much loving and a long screw follow. To sleep about 1.30." [20]

Late in December, Dreiser returned the compliment and invited the Forts over for a meal.

"...Go up to Bert's and get 12 bottles of beer en route. The Forts are already there. Fort presents 'To-pruno', his tomato and prune preserve. Very good. Bert presents a wonderful steak and kidney pie, spinach and eggs, hearts of lettuce salad, beer, wine, coffee and mince pie. Swell! We dine and talk till 11. Fort describes tenement life. His experiments in psychics. The impression of red and gold in the dark room and the dream of the two birds! The snowy bird emerging from filth! At 11 they go..." [21]

At last, early in 1919, Fort completed the manuscript of *The Book of the Damned*. He sent it to Dreiser, and once again the latter was captivated by Fort's style and vision. "Wonderful, colorful, inspiring," Dreiser wrote. "My hat is off. All of your time has been admirably spent. This book will be published and I offer my services to that extent as a tribute." [22]

DREISER AND THE DAMNED (1919)

This time the novelist was as good as his word. He went to see Horace Liveright, his latest publisher, showed him Fort's manuscript and recommended it in no uncertain terms. Liveright demurred; the book would have no sales, he said. This time Dreiser was insistent: publish Fort, he threatened, or lose me. The tall, cadaverous Liveright was an iconoclast and a fervent admirer of Dreiser. He chose to print a small edition of Fort's book rather than lose the prestige of publishing one of America's most promising authors. *The Book of the Damned* appeared almost immediately, in the spring of 1919.

Fort was delighted by Dreiser's success and honoured his friend with the following Fortean

Charles and Anna Fort



Charles and Anna Fort, from a passport photograph probably taken c.1920. According to Tiffany Thayer, Anna never read Fort's books nor understood what was going on in her husband's head, but the marriage seems to have been a happy one.

[Photo © Aaron Sussman.]

creation:

"I have invented something. I named it after you.

It's a meatless cocktail.

You take a glass of beer, and put a live goldfish in it - instead of a cherry or olive or such things that occur to a commonplace mind.

You gulp.

The sensation of enclosing a squirm is delightfully revolting.

I think it's immoral. I have named it the Dreiser cocktail." [23]

Dreiser welcomed Fort's modest success, but for him 1918-1919 were years of utter failure. His novels were scattered among half-a-dozen publishers, none of whom were actively promoting his work. His royalties were drying up, and the great goal of a collected edition of his books looked as far away as it ever had.

Dreiser was becoming increasingly unpublishable. He had always been a verbose writer, and his editors had regularly to cut the gigantic manuscripts he produced by up to half, excising whole chapters of irrelevancy and paragraphs of repetition. He wrote compara-

tively poorly on the whole, confessing that "grammar was ever a mystery to me and I never mastered its rules" [24], and winning over the critics by working, like Tolstoy, on "an immense canvas and spilling off on all sides". [25] Matters were made worse by an increasing obsession with Forteanism, and with science and philosophy too. Seeking some meaning to life, Dreiser turned out a series of turgid, speculative short stories and submitted them to magazines demanding dainty confections. In 1918 he collected a total of 76 rejections, and lowered his rates to the point where he was glad to accept \$300 for a story.

The novelist could not write novels - his unresolved dispute with the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice had put paid to that, although Liveright had offered to fight the case in the courts. Dreiser's attempt to establish a rival pressure group, which would sponsor the publication of worthy but contentious works, foundered on his impulsive optimism and inability to foresee practical difficulties. He broke temporarily from his old friend and critic HL Mencken, who had penned a scathingly honest portrait of Dreiser in his *A Book of Prefaces* and who increasingly regarded his colleague's antics with dismay. "The man is such a hopeless ass that he falls for any flatterer," Mencken wrote. "Let some preposterous wench come in a long blue smock, and call him 'Master', and he is immediately undone." Dreiser, the satyr, Mencken heard, "is doing little writing but devotes himself largely to the stud." [26]

As an author, Dreiser consciously used his many sexual experiences to fuel his art. "I doubt that I have ever been in love with anyone, or with anything save life as a whole," he admitted [27], opining that love was merely an electro-physical or chemical reaction of short duration, lasting perhaps for three months to three years. "The spark is dead at the end of three years," he assured one correspondent. "If two persons remain together after that, it is because of some other reason." [28]

HEROIN AND HELEN (THE 1920s)

In the early 1920s Dreiser tried heroin, hashish and laughing gas to stimulate his imagination, but abandoned them all as useless. He was saved by his relationship with Helen Richardson, a second cousin by marriage who proved in the end to be the woman he needed to put some stability into his life. She was an aspiring actress; together they moved to the Los Angeles area. By now Fort was gone, living in London and working at the British Museum. He had sent Dreiser a short note an-

nouncing his departure, but gave him no more than a forwarding address. "Forces are moving me," Fort told his friend. "I hope you'll always write to me, once a year... May strange orthogenetic gods destroy me if I ever forget all that was done for me by Theodore Dreiser." [29]

They corresponded only very occasionally, but when Dreiser was in London in 1926 the two men did meet again. Dreiser's circumstances had changed once more; buoyed now by the success of his greatest novel, *An American Tragedy* - a two volume study of murder and morality that earned him royalties in excess of \$50,000 in the first months of publication - he looked up Fort's typically modest two-room flat in Marchmont Street. Fort had become increasingly solitary, but according to Anna, "delightfully exclaimed that 'life itself with all its component parts came in through the door', when Dreiser appeared." [30]

In 1927 Dreiser was in New York. In 1928 he visited Russia. When a Philadelphia newspaperman who was trying to track Fort down wrote to Dreiser for help in 1929, the author confessed, "I am indeed sorry to report to you that I know absolutely nothing about his whereabouts. Like you, I am interested in him and uneasy, too, and should you locate him or learn anything regarding him, I would very, very much appreciate your passing this on to me." [31] Yet after Fort returned to the States later in that year, the two men renewed their close friendship of the war years. Fort was often a guest at Dreiser's country home at Iroki, generally arriving after he had been assured there would be no other visitors present. He and Dreiser enjoyed discussing the significance of 'cosmic phenomena', which the novelist attempted to work into an increasingly unwieldy unpublished philosophy.

As he became more and more involved with the mechanics of religion and science, Dreiser looked to Fort - as he looked to a number of other friends - for intellectual guidance. When *Lo* was on the presses he wrote gratefully, "I'm so glad you are alive and that there is another book of yours to read", and affected astonishment when the publisher, Claude Kendall, requested a 'puff' from a writer like Dreiser for the back cover of a book by a master like Fort. "You - the most fascinating literary figure since Poe. You - who for all I know may be the progenitor of an entirely new world viewpoint; you whose books thrill and astound me as almost no other books have thrilled and astounded me." [32]

Publication of *Lo!* and the posthumous *Wild Talents* galvanised Dreiser into a flurry of promotional activity on Fort's behalf. He tried

to persuade a publisher to buy up the rights to the iconoclast's books and put them out as a collected edition, with the royalties going to Anna Fort. He purchased as many copies of *The Book of the Damned* and *New Lands* as he could find and sent them out to influential writers and critics. To HG Wells Dreiser mailed his rare first edition of *The Damned*; Wells replied bluntly, describing the work as that of "one of the most damnable bores who ever cut scraps from out-of-the-way newspapers... he writes like a drunkard... Scientific workers are first rate stuff & very ill paid & it is not for the likes of you and me to heave Forts at them". Dreiser was so hurt by this dismissal that he later refused to attend a dinner given in the Englishman's honour in New York. [33] At about this time, Dreiser began to collect material for some biographical sketches of Fort and planned to write articles on the latter's philosophy. Eventually, though, the novelist abandoned his plan, saying that a true description of Fort's mind was beyond his own pen. [34]

By now Fort's health was in decline. Towards the end there are hints that he had exhausted the small inheritance that, 1916, had given him a degree of financial independence, or perhaps he had lost money on the 'highly speculative' stocks he invested in after the Wall Street Crash. In 1931, at Christmastime, Dreiser visited the Fort apartment in the Bronx and gave his old friend a present of \$100. [35] Possibly they met again, but we do not know what was said. Fort died, of 'an unspecified weakness', probably leukemia, on 3 May 1932. Dreiser could not bear to stay in New York. He sailed for Galveston, Texas, to continue work on his novel *The Stoic*. [36]

THE MIND OF THEODORE DREISER

Charles Fort affected Dreiser's life and work profoundly. Scattered throughout the novelist's later books are hints that reality is an illusion and life a terrible, unpredictable mystery. "I don't know anything," he told one interviewer. "I know that life is amazing to me, that I am going through an experience that seems like a dream... If it has any reality, it is the reality of illusion." [37]

After reading *X*, Dreiser came to the conclusion that humanity was collectively in an embryonic stage of its evolution, a concept that also led him to deny real individuality to his fictional characters. His refusal to accept that there were absolutes of good and evil reinforced the non-judgemental tone of works like *Jennie Gerhardt* and directly inspired his most famous creation, Clyde Griffiths, the central character in *An American Tragedy*. In

describing Clyde's eventual fate - executed for a murder he had not intended to commit - Dreiser took pains to depict his hero as an insignificant atom caught up in the grip of a great unmoral creative force. "Nature is unscrupulous," he told one admirer. [38]

This is not to suggest that Dreiser believed life had no meaning. He accepted, with Fort, that it did - inscrutable though that meaning might be. To friends he denied that he was becoming more religious or enamoured of metaphysics, protesting that he was "merely very curious as to how and why we come to be where and as we are today. I doubt... if any healthy person differs with me as to that." [39] Perhaps Mencken, Dreiser's 'realist-conscience' did; distressed by his friend's straying from the rationalist path, the New York sage savagely observed that "one-half of the man's brain, so to speak, wars with the other half. He is intelligent, he is thoughtful, he is a sound artist - but there come moments when a dead hand falls over him, and he is once more the Indiana peasant, snuffling absurdly over imbecile sentimentalities, giving a grave ear to quackeries, snorting and eye-rolling with the best of them." [40]

Yet unlike Fort, Dreiser never developed a thorough-going distrust of science. His beef, rather, was with its increasing compartmentalisation and with the cult of the specialist. As a committed generalist (from necessity as much as by inclination), Dreiser wanted to form his own theories - and as a good Fortean, he could not believe that his acceptances were any less valid than those of the most brilliant scientist. "I cannot feel," he wrote in 1929, "that a greater knowledge of chemistry or physics or mathematics is to solve anything in so far as the totality of the universe is concerned... Hence as for speculations, developments of the science of this and the art of that, to me they are only partially valuable, and at that only as passing curios and toys." [41]

In his youth, Dreiser acquired what was to become a life-long habit of attaching himself to intellectuals who appeared to know something of the mysteries of existence. At the Chicago hardware store where he worked at age 16, he struck up a friendship with a Danish fellow-worker, Christian Aaberg, "an omnivorous reader and free-thinker". [42] On the St Louis *Globe-Democrat*, young Dreiser was attracted to the bohemian artist Peter McCord. His interest in the paranormal was strengthened by an encounter with the Theosophist Annie Besant and an assignment to test the clairvoyance of one J Alexander Tyndall. Dreiser became convinced that

Tyndall possessed wild talents when the psychic drove a horse and buggy, blindfold, through the St Louis streets to an address which Dreiser was attempting to communicate to him telepathically. [43]

The author's struggle to gain public acceptance for *Sister Carrie* and *The 'Genius'* reinforced his identification with unconventional men. One biographer formulates 'Dreiser's Law' as follows: "Beliefs held by the multitude, the bourgeois and their leaders, are likely to be wrong *per se*", with the corollary that "beliefs held by unconventionalists which fly in the face of orthodoxy are in all probability correct." [44]

At 23, in Pittsburgh, Dreiser picked up Herbert Spencer's *First Principles*, a philosophy of evolution based on the unconventional thesis that man is buffeted by outer forces beyond his control and doomed to respond helplessly to internal physico-chemical reactions which he does not understand. The collision between Spencer and Dreiser's lingering Catholicism "nearly killed me," the young journalist wrote, "took every shred of belief away from me; showed me that I was a chemical atom in a world of unknown forces." [45]

Spencer ignited in Dreiser a lasting interest in science and philosophy which was substantially reinforced by his long relationship with Fort. In his last twenty years, the literary output all but dried up. After the *Tragedy* appeared in 1925, Dreiser wrote some poetry and sketches, an account of his visit to the Soviet Union (which led him to become a supporter of the communist party and an apologist for Stalin), two novels (published posthumously) and two works dissecting the state of American capitalism. Much of his time, however, was given to research for a grand (and unpublished) philosophy with the working title *The Mechanism called Man*, which included gathering evidence that supported its central, and essentially Fortean, proposition: that the universe was the creation of a possibly unknowable supernatural force. This book was to have been, in part, Dreiser's tribute to Fort and Fort's thinking, but it was never finished and now languishes in unwieldy and all-but-incomprehensible note form among Dreiser's papers at the University of Pennsylvania. At the time of the novelist's death, in December 1945, the book was well over a million words long; one scholar began an assessment of it, but died before he had finished the work.

Dreiser's dedication to Fort was a deeply personal one. Although anxious to propagandise, he refused to become involved

with Tiffany Thayer's *Fortean Society Magazine*, resigned from the Fortean Society and rowed with the younger man over the disposal of Fort's notes. [46] When he died, aged 74, a vision of Fort died with him. Thayer's hero was not the same man as the Fort Dreiser knew.

Fort's legacy to Thayer was a dispensation

to be outrageous, outspoken, occasionally brilliant. His gift to Theodore Dreiser was an appreciation of "the mystery and wonder and terror of life".

And if Dreiser nursed that understanding in his heart, and chose to work alone, was that not a Fortean thing to do?

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YORKSHIRE'S WATER WOLF

by Nigel Mortimer

"West Yorkshire - In drinking out of a stream, a man is sometimes said to swallow a water wolf which, it is said, lives and grows in his stomach." — *English Dialect Dictionary*.

I first read about the 'Water Wolf' in an old leather-bound book which I found on the shelves in Ilkley Library. This told of an ancient Roman encounter with the supposed 'beastie', about the time the local moorland was dotted with camps belonging to the legionaries. Though information about the creature was sparse, our Roman interpretation conformed with a much later description, that given in the turn-of-the-century *English Dialect Dictionary* quoted above.

In most accounts a water-wolf was described as grey in colour, hard or rough-skinned, and about three inches in diameter(!), although upon occasions considerably larger. Its facial description is given in only one or two accounts, where it is said to resemble "that of

a frog or a lizard". Sometimes it had a straight, elongated body, like a snake, but others were said to be flat and round "like a flat stone".

Tales and rumours of the water-wolf were prevalent in Yorkshire in the late 1800s and up to around 1910, and this seems to have been the case in other areas as well. In those times, other strange phenomena were much discussed by countryfolk in Yorkshire, and sightings of faeries, gnomes and the like were widely accepted (see David Pendleton's 'Special Brew', in *Earth* 3 p.16). Some believed that faeries were able to take on different guises and called them 'shape-changers'. Some lived by wells, streams and other water-sources.

Historical tales of such bizarre beasties are not uncommon. Faerie-lore states that the