

Miracle on Grub Street

THEODORE DREISER

At the Gates of the City 1871-1907.
By Richard Lingeman.
Illustrated. 478 pp. New York:
G. P. Putnam's Sons. \$22.95.

By Cynthia Ozick

THIS first volume of Richard Lingeman's two-part biography of Theodore Dreiser reaches only seven years beyond the initial publication of "Sister Carrie," when, in the wake of early neglect, the book was successfully reissued. Its 1907 revival — and victorious arrival — is an appropriate biographical climax. A first novel by the son of a German Catholic immigrant, "Sister Carrie" is also the first recognizably "American" novel — American in the way we feel it now. Springing up in a period when the novel's tone was governed chiefly by aristocrats of English-speaking stock — William Dean Howells, Edith Wharton, Henry James — Dreiser's driven prose uncovers the unmistakable idiom of a raw Chicago and the New York of dumbwaiters and flophouses. To find one's way into the streets and flats of Dreiser's two cities is to experience the unfolding of literary history — to see how the English novel, itself an immigrant, finally pocketed its "papers" and became naturalized.

But to enter these cramped flats and teeming streets is to re-experience personal history as well. Dreiser's salesmen and managers, his factory girls and \$2-a-week boarders, his images of shirtwaists, sweatshops, horsecars, are the fabric of our grandparents' world; we know it with the kind of intimacy we cannot bring to Hawthorne's Puritans or James's high-caste international visitors. "Sister Carrie" is a turn-of-the-century vat boiling with the hot matter — and cold materialism — of old Broadway, West Side apartment houses newly built, glimmers of restaurants, hotels and theaters that once were remote names out of newspapers in our own households. Unless you are descended from John Quincy Adams — unless no one in your family ever passed through Castle Garden — "Sister Carrie," read now and for the first time, is an oddly private voyage home: a time machine into the harrowings of an era not yet dimmed, when jobs meant unbroken drudgery and when the eight-hour working day, Social Security and publicly funded relief were futuristic socialist visions. Into just such confrontations and predicaments our immigrant relations tumbled.

Richard Lingeman's impressive marshalings build toward the consummation of this landmark work, and if a new life of Dreiser needs any justification at all, then the unremitting veracity and inclusiveness of "Sister Carrie" are reason enough. It is strengthening to Mr.

Cynthia Ozick's forthcoming novel is called "The Messiah of Stockholm."

Lingeman's undertaking that he is preceded by an already admirable procession of biographers and critics — among the latter the late Ellen Moers, unsurpassed in robust Dreiserian advocacy. Still, a fresh biography becomes a necessity only if more life is imagined for it, more than there was before. Biography remains, after all, the one form where the chronological empowerment of character, in the way of the 19th-century novel, continues to dominate — with the difference, of course, that the life in it is "real." Some biographies require no successors — Leon Edel's "Henry James" springs to mind — because their subjects are permeated with the conviction of sufficiency. It is not that they have been recorded merely; they have "come to life," and break through the page once and for all. In this sense there is still plenty of room, and opportunity, for the psychological illumination of Theodore Dreiser — for a biography with the blood-force of a novel.

Mr. Lingeman, a cultural historian whose last book, "Small Town America," combined economics, litera-

ture, sociology and history, is an ardent explorer of background, context, milieu. "Theodore Dreiser" is scrupulously, massively — devotedly — constructed; everything is in it, including a clear passion for the social issues of the period. And it is immaculately rendered, free of tendentiousness of any kind. But it is an expository library construction, not an elastically breathing imaginative reanimation. The great Dreiserian riddle is not even so much as approached, still less appraised: how is it that a workhorse daily journalist — a needy and febrile Grub Street factotum grinding out newspaper copy at fire-truck speed — could transform himself into a novelist of such encompassing gritty recalcitrant power? Mr. Lingeman asserts this miracle without examining it. "Dreiser's great strength," he tells us at the halfway mark, "is his empathy with his characters, which reaches its peak [in "Sister Carrie"] in the final scenes about Hurstwood. In the supreme effort to make believable the climactic downfall of this, the most strongly imagined figure in the book, Dreiser became Hurstwood, producing his every thought, his every emotion, from inside himself." (That Dreiser would become Hurstwood again later on, and far less metaphorically, is a vivid connection with the future Mr. Lingeman crucially lets slip.)

Theodore Dreiser.

MARK O. SHANNERS

Yet Mr. Lingeman, from inside himself, offers no comparable becoming. His Dreiser is for the most part a product of strong information, not strong imagining. Hence "Theodore," as Mr. Lingeman calls his subject — with undelivered intimations of insight — remains just that: a subject, a datum on the surface of the text. Theodore — the living Dreiser — is not exactly there. But his evidences are everywhere, and they are rich and dense. A biography of information is not overwhelmingly inferior to a biography of psychological re-creation; and flashy re-creation (such a thing is possible) without the dedicated accumulation of a store of diligent accuracies is a cheat. Mr. Lingeman's biography of information is never a cheat. On the contrary. Such patient assimilation of old and new particularity not only earns our homage, but, on its own terms, exhilarates. Once warned that Theodore — Dreiser as *mind* — is not exactly there, we can marvel at what is.

AND what is there, punctiliously there, is a chronicle of emergence — of an especially American kind. Dreiser was an obsessive reader of Balzac, but his own story is tonally different from that of Balzac's young man from the provinces who sets out to seize literary fame in the glorious city. In much of Dreiser's America, city and boondocks were alike in newness and rootlessness; both were more provisional than traditional, more contingent than composed. The Midwest was only just fashioning itself; a family line was often no longer than a single generation. Dreiser's father was himself, to use that striking old immigrant's tag, right off the boat; his English was never unblemished. All 10 of his children (Theodore was the ninth) were given combinations of names that would have been more at home in his native Mayen in Alsace-Lorraine than in Terre Haute, Ind. All the children eventually Anglicized their Christian names — Alphons Joachim, for instance, became Al — and the oldest, Johann Paul Jr., changed Dreiser to Dresser and ended as Paul Dresser, the celebrated songwriter. The mother of this first-generation family came of an earlier German-American migration. A Mennonite, she abandoned the "plain people" strictures of her sect and converted to Roman Catholicism to please her rigidly devout husband.

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These shifts of vowels and allegiances, these fresh and strange alliances, would have been unthinkable in any society less bent on mutation. Emerging from the American backwater was not so much a matter of making one's way as it was of finding a way to make oneself up. Dreiser was determined to emerge — he allowed himself no other course — because he was born, so to speak, sunk. His father, a wool worker, rose briefly to mill manager and then, after a head injury, descended into unbalanced religious fanaticism and irreversible joblessness and poverty. The mother moved the children from Hoosier town to Hoosier town, taking in washing and boarders. Dreiser's brother Paul sang in blackface and for a time lived with the madam of a prosperous bordello. Dreiser's sisters went off to be "kept." One gave birth to an out-of-wedlock child. Another, Emma, fled first to Canada and then to New York with a Chicago thief and absconder named Hopkins: the flagrant domestic seed of "Sister Carrie." In New York, Hopkins, like the fictional Hurstwood, collapsed into indigent apathy. So, finally, did Dreiser's father. Respectability was no part of Dreiser's family inheritance; he grew up on the underside, among the spurned. At 20 he stole money to buy himself an overcoat. If, in later years, he wrote with a journalist's detachment of the "curious shifts of the poor," it was nevertheless out of bitter familiarity. For Dreiser, being poor was life, not hypothesis.

THE instruments of his emergence were two. The first was social gentility: Sara White, nicknamed Jug, the woman he romantically fixed on to marry (he went on dreaming and letter-writing through a drawn-out courtship), belonged to a prominent small-town Missouri family of transplanted Virginia aristocrats. The second instrument was journalism. Dreiser's climb from legman to freelance to full-time reporter to "magazinish" to editor, with pratfalls and loss of footing along the way, is the sovereign thread of Mr. Lingeman's narrative. It includes Dreiser's peculiarly dependent friendship — an entrance into psychological twinship — with his fellow journalist Arthur Henry: "If he had been a girl, I would have married him," Dreiser once remarked. Instead, Henry moved in with the newlyweds, Dreiser and Jug, on West 102d Street, and the pair — Dreiser and Henry — formed a writing partnership, sharing assignments and fees. The summer before, they had shared Henry's house on the idyllic Maumee, in Ohio. Urged on by Henry — with whom he eventually broke — Dreiser began writing his first fiction.

Mr. Lingeman's meticulous account of Dreiser's work history — covering Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Chicago, New York, a progression of cities in growth — yields also a masterly impressionist history of American journalism in the pre-eminent age of newspapers, and in the heyday of a variety of popular periodicals now obsolete: song sheets, song magazines and even dress-pattern magazines. The sale of song sheets made Paul Dresser rich; his hit "On the Banks of the Wabash," partly written by Dreiser, quickly acquired the credentials of a folk melody. *Ev'ry Month*, a song magazine for the parlor piano that had been launched by the success of "The Sidewalks of New York," took Dreiser on as editor; he soon transformed it, and even found room for an essay by Arthur Henry entitled "The Philosophy of Hope." This was in 1897; that same year Dreiser was fired. A decade beyond saw him editor of the Butterick pattern-periodical *The Delineator*, which he authoritatively refashioned into a more comprehensive women's magazine. He had risen to become a major editor in New York, quartered in genteelly plush offices. In between, he was successively at the helm of Smith's and Broadway — the latter "a prototype of *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker*" — where his assistant, a young intellectual fresh out of Bryn Mawr, "thought her boss a commercial hack — until she read 'Sister Carrie' and

became a worshiper."

"Sister Carrie" had been grudgingly brought out in 1900 against the wishes of its own publisher, Frank Doubleday, who had accepted the novel on the basis of Frank Norris's enthusiasm, and then precipitately changed his mind midway. A libertine according to conventional judgment, Dreiser's heroine not only goes unpunished but ascends to become a brilliant figure in the world. To Doubleday this was "indecent," and though both Jug and Arthur Henry worked at softening — bowdlerizing — certain problematical passages, the publisher, fearing scandal, barely fulfilled his contract; the novel was stillborn. Dreiser, however, was counting on William Dean Howells, who had the power of making reputations. No review by Howells appeared. When Dreiser ran into him by chance, Howells told him brusquely: "I didn't like 'Sister Carrie.'"

With the failure of his novel, Dreiser's morale gradually foundered, and from this moment — a hundred pages or so before the close of this first volume, and the harbinger perhaps of larger resonances in the second — Mr. Lingeman increases in psychological force and imaginative presence. His record of Dreiser's extraordinary decline, after a period of pointless wandering — "an aching desire to be forever on the move," Dreiser called it — into the lost life of lodging-house hall bedrooms, is a cutting portrait of mental depression and the disintegrations of "neurasthenia." But it is also something more. Dreiser as railway crew member, Dreiser spending the night in a Bowery flophouse — here is

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the mystery of a vigorous and self-disciplined writer melting into the character and fate of his creation; Dreiser astoundingly turning himself into his own Hurstwood. Mr. Lingeman is able to penetrate this eerie and prodigious darkness, I think, because he lets it unfold almost novelistically on its own; he surrenders to its unaccountability.

EARLIER, Mr. Lingeman had plausibly reminded us of "Dreiser's sense of the economic tragedy at the heart of American life." In a prologue, he sketches the stringent circumstances of Dreiser's ripening years — "the mass migration to the cities, the widening fissure between rich and poor, the rise of industry, the centralization of economic (and political) power in the corporations and trusts," and more. It is true that much of this roil entered Dreiser's fictional domestic scenery. An anonymous reviewer of "Sister Carrie" observed how the downward course of Hurstwood illustrated a rule: that "civilization is at bottom an economic fact," that "if the economic pilings on which . . . lives are built are swept away, they will sink into destitution, loss of self-respect, moral squalor." Mr. Lingeman appears to attribute this altogether programmatic position to Dreiser himself. Possibly. (Toward the end of his life Dreiser did become markedly programmatic, to the extent of endorsing Communism and supporting the American Communist Party leader Earl Browder's early opposition to the war against Hitler.)

And yet something there is in the enigma of literary dreaming that eludes even the most pressing social thesis. Those economic pilings cannot be

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made to sustain or explain the whole range of the human predicament, and it is hard to believe that Dreiser — as novelist — ever took such a view. Dreiser sinking into the very vision his art foretold — Dreiser becoming Hurstwood — is in a place where socioeconomic theory cannot reach. His recovery and return to achievement, followed by the gratifying reissue of "Sister Carrie," stand poignantly apart from any determinist social analysis. "Sister Carrie" — the story of a woman dreaming her way out of poverty — may powerfully exemplify the migration to the cities and the fissure between rich and poor, and indeed the entire American economic tragedy of a century ago; but what Carrie exemplifies hardly accounts for her. And Hurstwood too is governed as much by his own threadbare imagination as by any external collapse of economic pilings. Carrie is Dreiser's dream of the spirit incandescent, Hurstwood of the

snuffed. It is not a contradiction that Dreiser is significantly recorded among the realists.

I spoke at the start of the rare chance of encountering "Sister Carrie" now and for the first time. Who, after so many school assignments, will have such good luck? But to come to "Sister Carrie" minus the baggage of unripe exposure and stale critical disparagements — to cut loose from Dreiser's reputation for ponderous eyesore sentences — is to fall into a living heat, the truth of things. The well-accepted abuse of Dreiser's style — how relieving it is that Mr. Lingeman steers clear of any of this — seems a calumny. Taken by itself and for itself, Dreiser's novel is life-hard: stubborn, nervy, gaudy and bawdy, full of weather, sex, hope, inertness, toil, sadness, dirt, dream. A work with no lying — toward which Mr. Lingeman's lucid sympathies and resourceful labor form a strong and granite corridor.]