

# THEODORE DREISER AMERICAN DIARIES 1902-1926

Edited by

THOMAS P. RIGGIO

Textual Editor

JAMES L. W. WEST III

General Editor

NEDA M. WESTLAKE



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#### Designed by Adrianne Onderdonk Dudden

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### PREFACE

Dreiser's careful preservation of his papers bears new fruit with the publication of his personal diaries for the years 1902–26. This volume presents all seven of Dreiser's hitherto unpublished American diaries, the intermittent journals he kept during the most productive years of his literary career. Together they constitute a revealing self-portrait as well as a valuable commentary on the American scene during the first quarter of this century. They offer reflections on turn-of-the-century Philadelphia, the American South and Mid-West, Greenwich Village of the nineteen-teens, and Hollywood of the twenties. The diaries begin in 1902, when Dreiser was at a low point after the "suppression" of Sister Carrie, and continue until 1926, when he was enjoying the greatest success of his career with An American Tragedy.

This publication constitutes in its entirety a new source for biographical and critical study. This is particularly true of the diaries covering Dreiser's experience in Philadelphia, Greenwich Village, and with Helen Richardson—all of which were not available to previous biographers. The present Introduction by Professor Riggio is the first biographical narrative to make use of these materials. Future biographers will now be able to speak with more assurance of Dreiser's whereabouts, the people he knew, what he was reading, which writings were in progress, and of his fascinating private affairs in general. In addition, these diaries will be of interest to students of Dreiser's literary art, as they reveal subtle aspects of how Dreiser viewed the external world and transmuted it in his daily creative efforts.

The diaries were written usually on half-sheets, often on trains, in parks or hotel lobbies, and were interspersed with postcards, ticket stubs, and rent receipts. Dreiser generally wrote casually, at times hurriedly, posting these "notes," as he called them, to capture an immediate impression, to record fleeting exhilarations or depressing moods, and to note his reactions to literary associates and to various women companions. These materials have been edited in conformity

with widely accepted principles and designed to make Dreiser's difficult scripts accessible to contemporary readers.

Thomas P. Riggio, as editor, conceived the volume, wrote the introductory essay, supplied the annotations and identifications, and compiled the index. James L. W. West III, as textual editor, devised the editorial principles, emended the texts, and compiled the apparatus. Neda M. Westlake, as general editor, coordinated these efforts and served as liaison with the publisher. West and Westlake shared equally in transcribing and verifying the diary texts.

Philadelphia November 1981

NEDA M. WESTLAKE

viii · Preface

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Theodore Dreiser	ii
Sara White Dreiser	88
Philadelphia Dispensary	103
Markham-Dreiser "at Home" Card	115
Street Map of Savannah	130
Hotel Savannah Menu	141
Brevoort Hotel	148
Estelle Kubitz	168
Louise Campbell	194
Brevoort Hotel Dining Room	197
"Daimio" Caricature of Dreiser	240
Kosciusko County Court House	257
The Beach at the Esplanade, Asbury Park, New Jersey	269
Helen Richardson in Hollywood	279
Dreiser's Wasserman Report	293
Dreiser and Helen in Hollywood	301
Manuscript Page of Diary	324
Dreiser and Helen in Hollywood	328
Telegram from Helen	344
Helen with the Cat	346
TheNoteTied to the Cat's Collar	346
GuestCard for the Bohemian Club	354
Clipping: Poet Upholds Dive in Lake	367
Sunland, The Magazine of Florida	416
H. L. Mencken in Baltimore	418
Horace Liveright Telegram Reporting	
on Early Progress of the Tragedy	432
	Sara White Dreiser Philadelphia Dispensary Markham-Dreiser "at Home" Card Street Map of Savannah Hotel Savannah Menu Brevoort Hotel Estelle Kubitz Louise Campbell Brevoort Hotel Dining Room "Daimio" Caricature of Dreiser Kosciusko County Court House The Beach at the Esplanade, Asbury Park, New Jersey Helen Richardson in Hollywood Dreiser's Wasserman Report Dreiser and Helen in Hollywood Manuscript Page of Diary Dreiser and Helen in Hollywood Telegram from Helen Helen with the Cat TheNoteTied to the Cat's Collar GuestCard for the Bohemian Club Clipping: Poet Upholds Dive in Lake Sunland, The Magazine of Florida H. L. Mencken in Baltimore Horace Liveright Telegram Reporting

# CONTENTS

Preface vii
Acknowledgments ix
Illustrations xi

INTRODUCTION 3
EDITORIAL PRINCIPLES 45

## DIARIES

PHILADELPHIA, 1902–03 53

SAVANNAH AND THE SOUTH, 1916 115

GREENWICH VILLAGE, 1917–18 147

HOME TO INDIANA, 1919 257

A TRIP TO THE JERSEY SHORE, 1919 269

HELEN, HOLLYWOOD, AND
THE TRAGEDY, 1919–24 275

MOTORING TO FLORIDA, 1925–26 415

Appendix: Diary Fragments, 1914–18 445

Textual Apparatus 451

Index 459



### INTRODUCTION

The life of every man is a diary in which he means to write one story, and writes another. . . .

J. M. Barrie, *The Little Minister* 

When Theodore Dreiser arrived in Philadelphia, sometime in July 1902, he was weary after nine months of travel that had taken him through Virginia, West Virginia, Delaware, Maryland, and to his wife's family in Missouri for a brief Christmas holiday. Sara White Dreiser, called "Jug," had followed her husband from town to town as he tried unsuccessfully to calm his nerves and to write Jennie Gerhardt, a second novel which he would not be able to complete for nearly a decade. He was sick: he was suffering from what used to be known as neurasthenia but what today we would call an identity crisis accompanied by nervous prostration. The distinction is worth noting, since the bias of that period led Dreiser to believe that his condition had underlying physical causes. Consequently he sought to explain his weakened state variously as "malaria," "some inherent blood [affliction]," or "mental exhaustion from past excesses both of the sexual passion and mental labor." Unknown to him, the doctor he found in Philadelphia, Louis A. Duhring, was a distinguished professor of dermatology at the University of Pennsylvania who, despite his specialty, took on neurasthenic cases. Duhring himself apparently had a nervous disorder, which may account for the unusual directive he gave Dreiser, along with routine doses of several arsenical preparations.1 The doctor proposed that his patient keep a daily medical record. On 22 October 1902, Dreiser wrote what was to be the first entry of a diary he would continue intermittently for twentyfive years.

He began the Philadelphia diary under handicaps as serious as any

<sup>1.</sup> Herman Beerman and Emma S. Beerman, "A Meeting of Two Famous Benefactors of the Library of the University of Pennsylvania—Louis Adolphus Duhring and Theodore Dreiser," *Transactions and Studies of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia* 42 (1974): 43–48.

he had faced in his thirty-one years. He was fatigued, down to his last few dollars, and aware that he was developing a resistance to sustained writing. In the two years before he had completed his first novel in 1900, he had published over one hundred articles; Sister Carrie had been written in seven months, and he had given over some of that time to short pieces for the magazines. When he began Jennie Gerhardt in January 1901, he worked at the same quick pace, completing forty chapters within four months. Then his troubles began. He found that "an error in character analysis" made necessary a wholesale revision of the text. Publishers seemed to shy away from committing themselves to his new work. He spent part of the summer of 1901 with Arthur Henry in Noank, Connecticut, trying to recapture the impetus to write that their summer together in 1899 had provided for Carrie. Henry's account of this time in An Island Cabin (1902) suggests that Dreiser was already showing signs of strain. In September 1901 the small publishing firm of J. F. Taylor offered him weekly advances to free him to finish Jennie. But by November he left New York for Bedford City, Virginia, and there he began the peripatetic routine that lasted until he moved to Philadelphia the following July.

In spite of increasingly severe bouts of anxiety, Dreiser kept doggedly to his task. As late as 2 July 1902, he received a statement from his typist, Miss M. E. Gordinnier, for 110 pages of manuscript he had sent her in June. She was touched by the story of Jennie and regretted not having read earlier chapters. Shortly after, Dreiser moved to 210 Sumac Street in Philadelphia and tried again to write his way out of his impasse. By the time he started the diary in October, however, he was paralyzed in his creative efforts; in December he wrote J. F. Taylor, admitting he could no longer hope to fulfill his commitment in the near future. To himself he said in his journal, "I feel as if I cannot write. [The absence of] lucidity of expression and consecutiveness of ideas is what is bothering me. I cannot write continuously. I lose the thread and forget" (14 February 1903). His state of mind at this juncture is commonly attributed to the poor critical reception of Sister Carrie and the shabby treatment he received at the hands of his publisher. To a remarkable degree, the popular legend has displaced the more compelling reality.

It is true that the "failure" of *Sister Carrie* took on excessive symbolic meaning in the young novelist's mind. Partly this stemmed from the change Dreiser underwent in the course of writing the book. Its compo-

sition crystallized his burgeoning sense of vocation as he made the transition from a free-lance hack to a writer of serious fiction. He knew now what he wanted to do. Writing of the sort that had made him financially independent in the late 1890s was no longer what he expected of himself. Along with its share of defensive bluster, Dreiser's response to Walter H. Page's attempt to withdraw Carrie from publication conveys this sense of maturing purpose and large ambition.

A great book will destroy conditions, unfavorable or indifferent, whether these be due to previous failures or hostile prejudices aroused by previous error. Even if this book should fail, I can either write another important enough in its nature to make its own conditions and be approved of for itself alone, or I can write something unimportant and fail, as the author of a triviality deserves to fail. Therefore I have no fear on this score.2

What crippled Dreiser for a time was not his critics but his inability to achieve such resilience in handling the greater demands he began making on himself.

Available evidence indicates he overreacted. He worried that his brand of realism would be hard to place and the reputation of his novel would make him a literary pariah. There was encouragement in 1901-02 from many quarters—the favorable English reviews of the Heinemann edition of Carrie, the interest publishers expressed in future books, his election to the Indiana Club of Chicago, his reappearance in Who's Who as a prominent editor, poet, author—but nothing helped. His editor at Taylor's, Rutger B. Jewett, tried to get him to reduce the internal pressures that were building up: "Brace up, stop worrying, and rest your head as well as your body. You exaggerate greatly the obligation under which you think you are staggering."3 Jewett must have sensed that for someone with Dreiser's energy and will, to turn the force of his critical powers inward could only result in massive debilitation.

Dreiser eventually pushed beyond his personal confusion, and out of the turmoil of the moment he left a literary legacy. During the first quarter of the century, as Sister Carrie progressively became the rallying point around which American writers denounced genteel standards, he increasingly came to identify his early collapse with the sufferings of the

<sup>2.</sup> Dreiser to Walter H. Page, 6 August 1900, Letters of Theodore Dreiser, ed. Robert H. Elias (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), 1: 61.

<sup>3.</sup> Jewett to Dreiser, 19 December 1902, Dreiser Collection, University of Pennsylvania Library.

artist in a puritanical society. He succeeded in doing for himself and his generation what Baudelaire had accomplished for Poe. He created a cultural myth, larger than his own experience, which served as a sustaining metaphor of artistic integrity in his time. But in the process, his version of the beleaguered artist-genius established the link between his professional anxieties and his breakdown so rigidly as to obscure equally important dimensions of his story.

This first diary, which does not mention Sister Carrie or the Doubledays, suggests that the source of Dreiser's three-year crisis ran deeper than the strain from troubles with a first novel. It points to a pervasive uncertainty about the aims of his writing, accompanied by a disabling anxiety over the possibilities of failure in his career. "Going to work I do not get very far before I question the order and merit of what I am doing and find myself utterly confused as to what is best and interesting" (22 November 1902). The entries alternate between moments of despair and manic feelings of hope when he recalls himself as a promising novelist whose success as an editor and journalist secured him a good living in the literary marketplace. He reads novels ("Since I shall want to be writing another one myself someday"), particularly those of Americans he admires—William Dean Howells, Hamlin Garland, Harold Frederic, Henry B. Fuller. At times their example only ignites his frustration: "Me. Theodore Dreiser. A man who has ideas enough to write and to spare and walking for want of a nickel" (13 February 1903).

It is not easy to know how clearly Dreiser understood his predicament. He was a man of colorful and passionate moods who responded to experience with unusual vividness, but with no knack for incisive self-analysis. This was not due to any shallowness on his part but to a lifelong awkwardness in expressing deep emotions. Moreover, his characteristic habit of studying human behavior within the framework of general ideas often impeded the more directly efficient action required in times of weakness. Other avenues to self-knowledge were closed to him. He had no close friends at hand, and he was too embarrassed to confide in his family. He frequently mentions having "bad dreams," but he had not yet read Freud; so he simply dismisses his nightmares without relating them, as he would in later diaries, to his present needs. Daily in the diary he was able to tell himself only that he feared poverty and failure.

His obsession became part of the novel he was struggling to finish:

"Poverty was driving them," he says of Jennie Gerhardt and her family. Curiously, no attention has been paid to the impact on Dreiser of his second book, which he began at the outset of this troubled period. In Jennie Gerhardt he first gave shape to the disquieting memories he associated with his youth in Indiana and Chicago. In the diary, Dreiser's reaction, after listening to the editor Joseph Coates's lukewarm response to his manuscript, underscores the intensity of his emotional ties to this material:

We then went back and sat talking about my novel of Ger Jennie Gerhardt, the manuscript of which I had given him to read and which he consider in parts he considered very good. It was mixed, he thought, and and overwrought in parts, but when I told him the whole story, as I had originally conceived it, he was as moved as everyone else has been and told me it was fine. I could see by his interruptions though that he was even more wrought up than his words would indicate and when we parted for the night, it was with the assurance that he would give the mss some new thought. . . . [10 February 1903]

The "whole story" he told Coates had so strong a hold on his mind that whenever he tried to put it on paper he would exhibit physical symptoms and labor under "a disturbing sense of error." The decision to put aside the novel and restrict himself to articles and short fiction was not the result of his running into technical problems with the longer form. He slowly came to realize this was not the point to open old wounds; he knew he needed greater distance from his subject and time to decipher its meaning for him.

We can only speculate on what elements of the story most affected him. Unlike Sister Carrie, Jennie's tale combined the adventures of more than one Dreiser sister. And Mrs. Gerhardt introduced memories of his mother. In later autobiographies, the picture of his mother and sisters generally corresponds to the portrait he drew of the Gerhardts. Jennie, like Carrie, is idealized somewhat, but Dreiser worked that out consciously in several revisions of both novels. The moving but sentimental treatment of Jennie's father, however, may hold a clue to Dreiser's conflicts of the moment. One of his most memorable characters, Old Gerhardt, is modeled on John Paul Dreiser, the German-born father who, as Dreiser emphasized in his memoirs, instilled in him a lifelong fear of failing and of being poor. In Dawn John Paul Dreiser is presented as "an illustration of the beaten or at best psychically depressed man."4 Throughout his life Dreiser associated personal de-

4. A History of Myself: Dawn (New York: Horace Liveright, 1931), p. 164.

feat with the world of his father, and there is reason to believe he found it difficult to shed the influence of that example. On Christmas Day 1900, shortly before Dreiser began what he would term the "downhill" phase of his career, John Paul Dreiser died. Twelve days after, on 6 January 1901, Dreiser discarded an autobiographical novel entitled "The Rake" and wrote the first chapter of *Jennie Gerhardt*. 5

That the elder Dreiser's death stimulated his son to brood on failure and poverty appears likely. Richard Duffy's letter of 30 December 1900 indicates that those closest to Dreiser understood how susceptible to depression he was under the circumstances: "I am very sorry to hear of the bereavement you have suffered in the death of your father. . . . I hope you will force yourself to bear this trial with fortitude, the

5. Dreiser mentioned "The Rake" to Dorothy Dudley, who gives round (and vague) figures for "The Rake and Jennie Gerhardt. Since 1900 he had written thirty chapters of one and ten or twelve of the other" (Dudley, Forgotten Frontiers: Dreiser and the Land of the Free [New York: Smith and Haas, 1932], p. 196). Because Dreiser dated the first chapter of Jennie on 6 January 1901, and none of the correspondence after this date mentions any other novel but Jennie, it is safe to assume "The Rake" was begun first, before the trouble with Carrie at Doubleday. Dreiser's letter of 27 November 1923 to Fremont Older suggests this is true. He describes his excitement after Carrie was accepted by Doubleday in the spring of 1900: "this so stirred me that I decided to be about the work of another novel—to join the one a year group, which seemed to be what was expected of me. And to this end I scraped together a little cash and returned to the country" (Letters, 2: 418). This is clearly not a reference to Jennie; and the "country" is the home of Mrs. Dreiser's parents in Montgomery City, Missouri, where early in June 1900 Dreiser went to write his second novel. By mid-July, when Arthur Henry began sending the news of Doubleday's turnabout, he could have completed ten chapters or more, if he was writing at the same pace as he would when he began Jennie in January 1901. (The dating on the Jennie manuscript shows he completed the first five chapters of the novel in six days.) And certainly he might have finished ten or more chapters between 14 July 1900 and 6 January 1901. As Dreiser wrote to Arthur Henry in late July 1900, he hoped his "forthcoming book," which he meant to complete "this winter," would persuade Doubleday to "publish Sister Carrie and preserve my credit" (Letters, 1: 53).

"The Rake" of 1900 survives on the small yellow sheets that Robert Elias first noted in the manuscript of *The History of Myself*, vol. 2 (*The Library Chronicle*, University of Pennsylvania [1971], p. 43). Dreiser used these yellow sheets, on which he wrote *Sister Carrie* and the chapters of *Jennie* he finished in 1901–2, only in this period. When he returned to *Jennie* in 1910, he began using the standard-size typewriter paper he would continue to write on for the rest of his career. "The Rake" was obviously an autobiographical novel, dealing in part with Dreiser's experience as a newspaperman. For his main character, he used the name Eugene, as he would for the hero of *The "Genius"*. Despite this, one cannot consider "The Rake," as Swanberg does, an early version of *The "Genius"* (W. A. Swanberg, *Dreiser* [New York: Scribners, 1965], p. 543, n. 7), except in the broadest sense of its being an autobiographical novel which *may* have dealt with Dreiser as artist. *The "Genius"*, however, by-passes Dreiser's newspaper days and focuses mainly on his life after the publication of *Sister Carrie*.

Dreiser's troubles with Doubleday may have made "The Rake," which was begun in a mood of triumph, hard to complete; or he may have felt, in the light of the criticism of *Carrie*, that a "rakish" theme was unwise; or the death of his father on 25 December 1900, may have pushed him toward material closer to his childhood memories; or he may simply have run into a dead end, technically, with "The Rake." For whatever reason, the story of Jennie entirely displaced "The Rake" by January 1901.

more so, since it has seemed to me that you are lately inclined to ponder sadly."6 Eventually Dreiser would trace the origin of this inclination. As he confided to Dorothy Dudley, "there is an access of gloom, a brooding in me over long periods, so like him [John Paul Dreiser] that I feel a close relationship." He could admit this without threat in later years, but, as the diary shows, in his early thirties his ego was not strong enough to integrate such an awareness into his consciousness. Perhaps the idealized image of the father in Jennie Gerhardt was Dreiser's way of handling repressions and conflicts in other parts of his mind. The implied brutality, early in the novel, of Gerhardt's outraged piety, in the face of Jennie's pregnancy, runs like a dark undercurrent throughout the story and re-emerges years later in the portrait of his father in Dawn. Moreover, there is at least unconscious symbolism in the impulse that led Dreiser to mark the end of his crisis—the resignation from his laborer's job and the return to literary work as an editor—on Christmas Eve 1903, instead of when it actually occurred, sometime in early 1904. As far as one can understand such a gesture, the symmetrical framing of his three-year hiatus points as much in the direction of the senior Dreiser as toward Sister Carrie. 8

Dreiser's journal record of regular attendance at church services also points to the inner discord of unresolved emotions he faced after his father's death. Dreiser afterward came to see his parent's defeatism as a by-product of religious fanaticism, and to this aberration he traced his enmity to all versions of orthodoxy, particularly Roman Catholicism. The violence and intensity of his subsequent pronouncements on formal religion are a measure of the distance he had to go in order to free himself from the restraints he carried into his young adulthood. And a gauge of his lasting attraction to the varieties of religious experience is the surprising glimpse we get here of the self-proclaimed foe of organized religion participating in Catholic or Episcopal worship.

I walked to Manayunk and attended mass at the Catholic church there, a spectacle which I enjoyed very much. The church was soothing, the music beautiful and the lights and candles upon the altar a spectacle to behold. I rejoiced enthusiastically in it all and came home feeling as if I were better than ever. [8 February 1903]

9

<sup>6.</sup> Dreiser Collection, University of Pennsylvania Library.

<sup>7.</sup> Quoted in Dudley, Forgotten Frontiers, p. 25.

<sup>8.</sup> Ellen Moers notes the discrepancy, but accounts for it as a "romantic" impulse, in *Two Dreisers* (New York: Viking, 1969), p. 178.