

Theodore Dreiser and the Realm of the Social

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As far as the eye could see were carriages, the one great social diversion of Chicago, because there was otherwise so little opportunity for many to show that they had means. The social forces were not as yet clear or harmonious. Jingling harnesses of nickel, silver, and even plated gold were the sign manual of social hope, if not achievement. (*The Titan* 18)

Our family wasn't ever in society . . . and I haven't been much of anything except a slave. . . . ("Will You Walk into My Parlor?" 289)

Though labelled a literary “naturalist” and self-described as an “individualist,” Dreiser accords immense explicatory force in his fiction to something he calls “society.”¹ Thus *The Titan* presents Chicago in the 1870s and 1880s as a place where social forces are “not as yet clear and harmonious” and therefore a site hospitable to the ambitions of financier Frank Cowperwood, newly released from a prison sentence for embezzlement served in Philadelphia. By contrast Imogene Carle, a character in the 1918 short story “Will You Walk into My Parlor?”² gives voice to a sense of society as inescapably deterministic, exclusion from the elite equating to an almost complete negation of agency. Both passages make a typically Dreiserian gesture towards the notion that society acts as some kind of conditioning environment through which human narratives can be explained, as perhaps biology would in some notional form of literary naturalism. Admittedly, the effects of that conditioning are felt in antithetical forms by Cowperwood and Carle, but this can be explained in various ways. Contemporary readers might be struck by the importance of patriarchy in restricting the scope of Carle’s autonomy. Dreiser himself thought that the building up of large fortunes had led to a closing up of American society between 1870s-80s Chicago and the New York of the 1910s where we encounter Carle. Indeed as James Truslow Adams would go on to do, Dreiser employed an ideologically loaded sense of historical change, looking backwards past what Alan Trachtenberg calls “the incorporation of America” towards a more dynamic and unruly period (Adams 232-34). In conceptualizing the workings of society, Dreiser also had recourse to ideas of “equation” and “balance” drawn from

Herbert Spencer, and critics have done valuable work in demonstrating how his use of these concepts precluded the dead hand of naturalist determinism (see Moers, Culbertson). Building on this work, I want to suggest here that Dreiser's evocation of the social realm is both more complex and more interesting than a mere historical backdrop to narratives of individual success or failure. From this perspective, the language of "equation," for which Dreiser himself reached, is a post-hoc rationalization that smooths over some of what makes his texts most interesting and most significant in their address to the individual/society nexus. Rather than trying to abstract from Dreiser's writings a model of American society, in this essay I draw attention to how they dramatize the difficulty of defining the social at all.

Consider how in the passage from *The Titan* a knowable, historical social realm materializes and dematerializes in front of us. The gilded accoutrements of carriages and their horses are tokens of a glamorous life to which Frank and Aileen aspire only because nascent hierarchies of wealth are materialized in forms of display that Thorstein Veblen among others regarded as symptomatic of the Gilded Age. And Dreiser's prose draws attention to how this is a matter of semiotics, notionally in need of external validation through a "sign manual," the signature of a sovereign. To underwrite such conventions, society is required to be both God-given and immutable; but to allow for the animating hope of social mobility, Chicago must also be a society-in-process, in which "what is socially acceptable" in the view of "the so-called best society of a city" (26) has only partly hardened and solidified. The slippage between "society," in the sense of something like the enabling aggregate of relationships between human beings, and a closed social elite, is characteristic of *The Titan* and indeed might be considered to be symptomatic of a defining unresolved tension between individual-based and society-based perspectives.

It is therefore worth approaching Dreiser's texts as vehicles for thinking about society, in the ways that Raymond Williams envisaged when he observed that "[o]ur thinking about society is a long debate between abstractions and actual relationships" (120). In what follows, I will situate Dreiser's fiction in that tradition, delineated in European literature, philosophy and culture by Williams in *The Long Revolution*. After an initial overview, I focus on *The Titan* and "Will You Walk into My Parlor?" texts from a period in the nineteen-teens when Dreiser engaged the dynamics of American social development in fiction, travel-writing, and in essays on contemporary cultural and social topics.³ The aim here is, generally speaking, to demonstrate

the depth and complexity of Dreiser's "thinking about society." This is best understood not as an achieved body of knowledge but as a set of explorations which proceed from two contrasting perspectives: the individual, and the social. The first half of the essay therefore reads Dreiser's fiction as holding together individual-based and society-based perspectives. The second half goes on to illustrate how Dreiser's fiction was accorded importance in the twentieth century by reference to contrasting prioritizations of society and the individual. I focus a history of these reading practices through the example of the Russian critic, translator, and editor Sergei Dinamov, a long-distance friend of Dreiser from the late 1920s until falling victim to Stalinist terror in 1939. Dinamov was drawn to Dreiser's fiction for its delineation of a possible version of industrial modernity, whether positively or negatively. His correspondence with Dreiser, along with his published criticism of Dreiser's work, opens up inter-cultural perspectives that deserve attention in themselves and provide a prism through which to understand anew American debates about literature and society.

I. Society in *Sister Carrie*, *The Titan*, and "Will You Walk into My Parlor?"

In *The Long Revolution*, Raymond Williams tries to set out some of the reasons why the "long debate" over society since the Enlightenment has been quite so long. It is complicated and sustained, he argues, because "the living organization of men, women and children [is] in many ways materialized, in many ways constantly changing" while our abstract understanding of "society" is similarly subject to constant change (120). These two historical formations, the determining/liberating matrix of actual social relations, and the conceptual understanding of society itself, are in some ways touchstones of Dreiser's fiction. On the one hand he depicts protagonists' "personal" experience of a social realm materializing around them. This is often associated with a binary form of class difference, between haves and have-nots, so to speak, which in turn frames a vision of social mobility in terms of once-and-for-all transformations. On the other hand, protagonists and narrators conceptualize and name the social, as an abstraction of lived relations between human beings. This more social understanding is often associated with a view of social mobility in terms of incremental steps and in which related concepts, such as what we would recognize as social capital, taste, and aesthetics, interact with social hierarchy.

One of the best-known examples of the first perspective comes from Dreiser's first novel *Sister Carrie* (1900), where Carrie Meeber experiences exclusion from middle-class

consumership as a near-absolute negation of self. During her first visit to a department store, she is relegated to below the status of a commodity by “the fine ladies who elbowed and ignored her, brushing past in utter disregard of her presence, themselves eagerly enlisted in the materials which the store contained” (23). Later, Carrie embraces “the Old definition, ‘Money: something everybody else has and I must get’” (62) and imagines that within the elegant mansions of Chicago’s North Shore Drive “was neither care nor unsatisfied desire” (116). This understanding anticipates the logic invoked by Imogene Carle in “Will You Walk into My Parlor?” Her *cri de coeur* is part of an attempt to explain to a crusading journalist how despite her love for him, she was compelled to take part in a plot to discredit him, a conspiracy that eventually succeeds in spiking his planned exposé of municipal corruption. “[Y]ou don’t understand what my life has been like, what I’ve suffered, how I’ve been pushed around,” she exclaims, “Our family wasn’t ever in society . . . and I haven’t been much of anything except a slave, and I’ve had a hard time, too, terrible” (289).⁴ Carle is a femme fatale in a seldom-read story that combines tropes from *noir*, gothic, melodrama, detective, and surprise-ending fiction, but that feeling is widely shared by protagonists in Dreiser’s “realist,” “naturalist,” or epic fiction—most saliently the young Carrie and Clyde Griffiths and Roberta Alden in *An American Tragedy* (1925). They experience society in binary terms, with membership of the social elite a precondition for free will. Exclusion from that elite is equated with the practically complete circumscription of autonomy.

And yet Dreiser’s novels make room for an entirely different understanding of social mobility, one based on incremental process, which they painstakingly narrate, and consciousness of which is vouchsafed to certain protagonists as well as his narrators. In spite of Carrie’s own initial feelings, and the misdirection of its opening page (“When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things” [3]), *Sister Carrie* narrates how, bit by bit, she attains success, status, and autonomy. And *contra* Clyde’s view, his cousin Gilbert and his factory-owning uncle Samuel Griffiths see social mobility not in terms of an absolute binary of inclusion/exclusion but rather by reference to the “higher and higher social orders to which the lower social classes could aspire” (*An American Tragedy* II, 180-81), a hierarchy whose gradations turn out to be highly significant in the family’s struggle to contain the scandal of Clyde’s involvement in murder.

In Williams’s terms then, Dreiser’s fiction may be said to recognize contradictory materializations of social mobility. In one, many protagonists experience society in binary terms,

as a cancellation of agency that can be changed only by moments of individual transformation, whereby entry is effected not simply into a higher social class but into a realm of full agency and the possibility of satisfaction. Or so they dream and desire. Thus, for example, Hurstwood in front of the safe, dreaming of a life with Carrie and ten thousand dollars of his employer's money, and Clyde willing himself free of Roberta. In the other, social mobility is an incremental process, composed of myriad moments of education and development across multiple social and cultural fields, as when Cowperwood plans and times meticulously his attempt to enter Chicago "society."

This "incremental" view then is often associated with characters already in possession of elite status, or so destined, such as Carrie, and in the "Trilogy of Desire" of which *The Titan* is the second volume, not only Frank Cowperwood, but also Berenice Fleming, whose educated, rounded personhood not only supersedes that of Aileen in Cowperwood's affections but ultimately outlasts Cowperwood himself and expands his legacy beyond commerce and art to include a charitable foundation and an engagement with spirituality. But it is also associated with Dreiser's characteristic authorial persona and that persona's meditations on, and attempts to explain, society. From *Sister Carrie* to *The Titan*, that persona increasingly resorts to the terminology of the social. In *The Titan*'s published text, the words "society" and "social" appear no fewer than 73 times and 186 times, respectively, or approximately once every couple of pages, while the 1900 *Sister Carrie*, only a little shorter, racked up merely seventeen citations of "society" and 26 of "social." It is not that a social perspective is lacking in *Sister Carrie*, given its references to "social institution" (49), "social order" (*ibid*), "social . . . troubles" (62) [in the sense of social tensions], "social injustice" (299), and "social system" (465). But Carrie's experience of exclusion/inclusion tends to be delineated in personal terms, while in *The Titan* the terminology of social/society proliferates. At the same time, it refers less to a general condition or abstraction of a common life, and more to the sense of a powerful exclusive elite—"best society."

The tenor of my argument thus far has been to try to shift the focus of our reading away from characterization, determinism, and narratives defined in terms of success or failure, and towards a sense of the dynamics of social formations, grasped from different perspectives (protagonists, narrators) given by the Dreiser text. But this does not mean that the Dreiser text negates the individual; rather it presents the individual as necessarily defined in social terms. A

useful way of understanding this scenario is provided by Williams's account in *The Long Revolution* of the two foundational Western traditions of thinking about society. Observing that "the key to any description is its starting-point" (121), he describes the first of these as basing itself on abstract notions of "man [sic] as a bare human being, the 'individual' [as] the logical starting-point of psychology, ethics, and politics." This, which Williams terms "Liberal," he argues forms the common basis of a variety of philosophical systems "from Hobbes to the Utilitarians." An "alternative tradition" moves in the opposite direction, idealizing not the individual but "society." This tradition can be traced from Rousseau through Hegel to Marx (94-95).

Dreiser's fiction straddles these two strands of thinking about society. The initial conceptualization of the Trilogy of Desire comes directly from the "Liberal," individualistic tradition. Based on the career of a historical figure, Charles Tyson Yerkes, the trilogy was conceived of as narrating the rise, fall, rise, fall, rise, and illness and death of its hero, financier-turned-urban transport magnate Frank Cowperwood. As such it not only foregrounds the individual-centered perspective; it seems at first sight to side with it ideologically, looking back to Ralph Waldo Emerson's formulation in "Self-Reliance" (1841) that "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members" (41) and forward to Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* (1943). However, while the writing in the opening chapters of *The Titan* flirts with this kind of anti-social individualism, it repeatedly grounds itself in the social dimension. Thus, in Chapter 2, Cowperwood "had a prison record to live down; a wife and child to get rid of—in the legal sense" (10). However, as we have seen, he understands that success lies not in ranging himself against society, but in exchanging the more restrictive society of Philadelphia for the "more breezy and generous" (10) atmosphere of the West. Where Emerson sees "manhood"—that is, the fullest exercise of human agency, as non-conformity, the defiance of social conventions—in *The Titan* individual agency is always exercised within society:

It would take some such loose, enthusiastic Western attitude to forgive in him the strength and freedom with which he ignored and refused to accept for himself current convention. *I satisfy myself* was his private law, but so to do he must assuage and control the prejudices of other men. (10)

In passages such as this, and in charting Cowperwood's trajectory through three long novels, Dreiser characteristically comes at the individual/society problematic from both angles. The

individualistic “strength,” “freedom,” “ignored,” and “refused” are balanced against the sociable “enthusiastic,” “forgive,” “assuage,” and “control”. The almost Emersonian “I satisfy myself” crystallizes the tradition of social thinking that is defined by Williams as idealizing the “abstract individual,” but it is embedded in a sense of human relations that belongs in the rival tradition delineated by Williams, that of “the idealization of society” (95). However, as with Williams himself, the sense of two parallel traditions is illusory, since the individual is already defined through the social.

This complex social perspective is dramatized in *The Titan*’s characterizations, whereby Frank Cowperwood and, later, Berenice Fleming are presented as embracing multiple forms of expertise, and the ability to hold in mind contradictory perspectives, in a way that contrasts implicitly with other characters. Unlike his male peers in business, Frank is motivated by more than the acquisition of money and power as such, having studied hard to become expert in art and culture, a process narrated in detail in *The Financier*, the first volume in the trilogy. He is “[i]ndividualistic and even anarchistic in character,” yet “temperamentally he was in sympathy with the mass more than he was with the class” (26). He is also expert in the feminized world of at-home entertaining practiced by the Chicago elite, deliberately delaying his and Aileen’s entrance into that world (30, 31) before demonstrating his mastery of it. This atypicality is emphasized by Dreiser’s claim elsewhere that the dominance of American society by commerce has resulted in “men so singularly devoid of a rounded human nature that they have become freaks in this one direction—that of money getting . . . Rockefeller, Gould, Sage, Vanderbilt the first, H. H. Rogers, Carnegie, Frick” who are “[s]trong in but this one capacity” (“Life, Art and America” 53). Within *The Titan*, Frank is contrasted also with Aileen, who despite their alliance is confined to the putatively feminized “social” sphere, defined in terms of display, leisure, entertainment, and the performance of status. Tellingly, when before their move to Chicago Frank interests himself in the newly founded town of Fargo, as a place where he can involve himself in commercial and civic development, Aileen, unable to find “her chance for social exchange,” views the place with “disgust” (17). Again, she has little understanding of literature and culture, and her knowledge of art “was merely a jingle of names gathered from Cowperwood’s private comments” (34), while Frank appreciates art both as a form of cultural capital, and for its history and aesthetics.

An even narrower perspective than Aileen's is attributed to Lillian Semple Cowperwood, "Mrs. Frank Algernon Cowperwood number one" (28). Back in *The Financier*, this is signaled when Frank is struck on his first visit to her home by its "not so very artistic" interior. Though only nineteen years old, he judges that "The pictures were—well, simply pictures" (*Financier* 46). As their foredoomed marriage comes to an end, Lillian appears briefly in *The Titan*, still in hidebound Philadelphia. Regarding Frank, "She hardly knew what to think." Aileen, meanwhile "had been his seductress and was probably now to be his wife" and was due for punishment from God. "So she went to church on Sundays and tried to believe, come what might, that all was for the best" (*Titan* 29). The vignette is presented as evidencing the reductiveness of applying a rigid code of sexual morality derived from American Christian traditions. Though Dreiser was a frequent critic of such traditions, what matters as much as the source of this code is the one-dimensional perspective, which almost always equates to a deficient understanding of society.

Lillian's moralistic view of Aileen is strikingly similar to the patriarchal, secular frame of reference that will be employed by Ed Gregory, the investigative journalist betrayed by Imogene Carle in "Will You Walk into My Parlor?" Despite professing himself "happily married," Gregory has sought to carry on a flirtation with Carle, both because he is enjoying her attention, and because he hopes to use her professed affection for him to turn her against the corrupt organization he is working to expose. Although the story's ending (Gregory is filmed in what appears to be a compromising embrace with Carle, and the implicit threat of blackmail means that his exposé must be suppressed) may come as a surprise to some readers, Gregory's judgment is undermined throughout by his naïve, if not absurd, belief in a rigidly binary typology of women. He continually refers to his wife as "the girl"—her name, Emily, is revealed only late in the story—and so reflects on the "contrast" between "his wife, faithful, self-sacrificing, patient," and "on the other side of the scale this girl [Imogene]—tricky, shameless, an actress, without scruples or morals" (286). Even when forced to a crisis in having to decide whether Imogene is friend or foe, his thinking is paralyzed as he proves unable to choose between the extreme positions to which his typology dictates Imogene must be assigned. Addressing her, he says "You're either one of the greatest actresses and crooks that ever lived, or you're a little light in the upper story," and he spends the closing pages tormenting himself over his own "foolishness" and his inability to determine Carle's role (293). And in a sense the reader is no wiser than Gregory, for the story leaves unresolved whether Carle's professions of love for him are

genuinely felt or part of the plot to frame him as having a sexual affair. Or, indeed, both at the same time. But readers should know better than Gregory, if they have been paying attention, and understand how Carle, as a woman, experiences shifting degrees of agency as she moves between social structures of power, constraint, and patronage, and as a character, may “mean” different things in different contexts, rather than applying a rigid typology that makes a fetish of her undecidability.

Outside the story, readers of Dreiser may well be tempted to map Gregory’s distinction between his wife and Imogene on to the characterizations of the protagonists of *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*. Emily loves selflessly like Jennie, with “her one object the welfare of those whom she truly loved,” while the negative view of Imogene, “her sole object in life” being “apparently, to advance herself in any way she might” (286), suggests one of Carrie’s most powerful impulses. This perspective further emphasizes the unreliability of Gregory’s one-dimensional judgmental framework and might lead us back into a consideration of the unusual, for Dreiser, use of genre-fiction tropes. Gregory himself internalizes a kind of naturalistic gothic, predisposing him to read Imogene as the disruptive, unfathomable alien, irrupting into the social world. But if Gregory (or his patriarchal typology) constructs Carle as a femme fatale, we can also see her as simply acting out tensions between social prescriptions for social mobility and for emotional authenticity, an example of literary naturalism’s noted reification of female characters through the operation upon them of American cultural, economic, or social conditions.⁵ Imogene Carle is, notwithstanding the complaint of being “never in society,” essentially and absolutely a social being.

II. Russian and American Perspectives on Society

There is a long and various tradition of reading Dreiser in terms of his thinking about society. After all, it was essentially Dreiser’s perceived social determinism that made him scandalous to a conservative critical trajectory invested in certain ideologies of individualism. Harold Bloom, reinvigorating a line of argument initiated by Lionel Trilling and developed by Philip Rahv, epitomizes this view in his reference to “Dreiser’s own tendency to identify reality with existent institutions, and to assume that reality is entirely social in its nature” (17). Such a view attributes too much explanatory power to a somewhat underdeveloped notion of society, which seems to be scarcely more than simply whatever exercises determining power upon the individual. What is

missed, or rather conflated into this reductive notion of society as solely deterministic, are the diverse biological, chemical, and psychological contexts painstakingly explored by Dreiser. His explicit challenge to individualist notions of agency comes then less in the name of the social *per se* than in the form of interlocking networks of “forces” and determining contexts, some of which may be delineated as social, biological, chemical, psychological, and environmental. So while individual agency is always produced out of the social, the social is both a set of forces and a realm in which other forces and processes operate. In this, it is worth pointing out in passing, Dreiser’s fiction is differentiated from the American sociology that was emerging alongside literary naturalism from the 1890s and often linked with it (see Davies), which posited “society” as susceptible of analysis as a discrete and determinative field.

Different critical angles produce different understandings of the social dimension in Dreiser’s fiction. The above summary could apply to the approaches Dreiser himself imbibed from Herbert Spencer and nineteenth-century natural science, while also evoking post-structuralist or neo-Marxist interrogations of the theoretical integrity of the social “realm” (see among others Castoriadis, Laclau, and Latour). It would be fascinating therefore to try to chart a history of the ways in which generations of critics in different cultures have read Dreiser’s evocation of society. What follows offers one version of that history, which focuses particularly on its role in debates over American national specificity taking place from abroad, specifically the U.S.S.R., before circling back to the New Critics and the constraints of Cold War ideology in the U.S.A. as well as the U.S.S.R. It focalizes this narrative through the example of Sergei Dinamov, a Russian critic and editor who played a central role in the mediation of Dreiser’s work to Russian readers in the 1920s and 1930s as well as becoming a critical friend of the American writer.

Only twenty-five years old when he first wrote to Dreiser from Moscow in December 1926, Dinamov would make important contributions to the dissemination of Anglophone literature in the U.S.S.R., rising to head the Anglo-American section of Gosizdat, the State Publishing House. His wider role as a cultural mediator under the increasingly totalitarian Soviet regime is in itself worthy of attention,⁶ but most relevant here are Dinamov’s debates with Dreiser in their correspondence, which continued until 1938, and his critical writings, including several articles and prefaces for the Russian editions of Dreiser’s works he commissioned for Gosizdat. At the heart of Dinamov’s engagement with Dreiser is a sense of the “social,”

particularized through his sense of American national culture, viewed comparatively as one of several models of modernity.

Dinamov's perspective lies at a tangent to both American and mainstream Soviet critical traditions, even as he pursued common critical concerns with issues of determinism, individualism, and the relation between literature and power. Grounded in his own understanding of a "Marxian" approach, Dinamov interrogated the social and political contexts of Dreiser's fictions more thoroughly than did many of the novelist's American supporters and detractors in the polarized critical atmosphere of the 1930s and 1940s. At the same time, in attempting to bridge what he referred to as the "poles" of Soviet Russia and America, and to engage the cultural and political distance between himself and Dreiser, Dinamov implicitly positioned himself against the nationalistic and authoritarian trajectory of Russian criticism under Stalin, a stance that would eventually cost him his career and, during the purges of the 1930s, his life.

In that first letter, Dinamov introduced himself as a great admirer of Dreiser's work, adding that "you will find in me one of your best friend[s] in Russia" (Dinamov to Dreiser, 10 Dec. 1926, 1). Over the next decade he made good on this promise, but his enthusiasm was tempered with major literary and political reservations. As much as Dinamov championed Dreiser, as much as their correspondence evidences a warm friendship, and as much as he regarded Dreiser as painting "the truest pictures of America," the Russian was highly critical of the political position he attributed to Dreiser and his work. As their correspondence developed Dinamov frequently tried to persuade Dreiser of Soviet achievements and of the transformative potential of class consciousness, along the Marxist model, and was just as frequently frustrated. In response Dreiser often played devil's advocate and over-emphasized his own affiliation with American individualism. Biographers have emphasized the warmth of their friendship and the heat of their disagreements. Dinamov at one point good-naturedly acknowledged that he knew "very well [Dreiser's] sweet temperament laden with dynamite" (Dinamov to Dreiser, 18 July 1935, 1). However, more interesting is the split in Dinamov's own view of Dreiser, which could be expressed as one between literary validation and political critique, with the proviso that they are ultimately inseparable from one another. Sending his preface to the Russian edition of *Twelve Men* in September 1928, for example, Dinamov inscribed on the first typescript page, "Believe me, Dreiser, I have written some words here with pain of my heart" (1). That pain was mainly caused by Dinamov's conclusion, repeated in several of his writings, that in spite of the

prominent sense of social injustice in Dreiser's fiction, its determinism, and its siding with the individual rather than the mass, marked his work as irredeemably "petit bourgeois." As he summarized his view:

Facing actualities, Dreiser before all sees in them a special individual, a human being,—characteristically, in the novels *Jennie Gerhardt*, *Sister Carrie*, *The Titan*, *The Financier*, *The "Genius."* His path is from the individual to the substance. He is not a social novelist. Or rather, he is social only to the extent that his hero is connected with the society, with the epoch. (1)

Here Dinamov was in part articulating a mainstream position in Soviet literary criticism, but with a significant difference, and to appreciate that position some contextualization is necessary.⁷ Criticism of determinism and individualism, and their branding as reflecting the failing values of the petit bourgeois, were in themselves typical of 1930s Russian critical approaches to writers such as Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson, whose critical depictions of America seemed to negate all transformative possibilities. Dinamov himself called Upton Sinclair "the artist of destroyed aristocracy" (Dinamov to Dreiser, 22 July 1928, 1). What Dinamov thought of as the lack of a "social" dimension in Dreiser's work, or what another critic called his "social pessimism" (Brown 258), could under other circumstances have been regarded in Soviet Russia as "naturalistic," a term used in a derogatory manner and with Emile Zola as its primary focus, to designate culture (especially literature, film, and visual art) that portrayed social problems fatalistically and, therefore, remained within the bounds of capitalist ideology. The main reason that Dreiser's fiction largely was not so considered was that Soviet critics were well aware that from 1930 he was a prominent spokesman for Communist campaigns and Russian causes, finally formally joining the Party shortly before his death in 1945. By contrast, Dinamov's early engagement with Dreiser, pre-dating the latter's overt move to the left, and his personal contact with Dreiser afterwards, made him especially aware of the complexity of the dynamics between Dreiser's work and his political activism. At a personal level, in correspondence and in person, his attempts to convince Dreiser of the positive achievements of the U.S.S.R., and of the possibilities for revolutionary transformation in America, often met with skepticism as Dreiser used Dinamov's commitment to test his doubts. Therefore Dinamov separated the determinist and individualistic novels, culminating in *An American Tragedy* in 1925, from Dreiser's later activism.

Increasingly, after the deaths of Dinamov and Dreiser, as ideological battle lines hardened during the Cold War, this trajectory of Dreiser's career was collapsed, and Soviet critics seem to have read back Dreiser's affiliations from the later period into his earlier novels, highlighting *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt* as well as *An American Tragedy*, and blaming the influence of others—such as H. L. Mencken whose role, according to Ivan Anisimov, was to blunt the ideological force of Dreiser's social criticism—for his deterministic tendencies. (At the same time, American critics moving in the opposite direction tended to isolate his work completely from his political activism, with the result that his engagement with Progressive and other political movements in the early century has only fairly recently begun to be appreciated.) In any case, by 1950, according to Deming Brown, Dreiser's 1945 affiliation was used in Soviet criticism to frame his novels of the early century. As the charge of “petit bourgeois individualism” came to be used increasingly as an ideological touchstone to castigate writers on the non-Communist left, Dreiser's high reputation in Russia came to rest on the interpretation of his fiction as being fundamentally and essentially “social.” Thus Irina Bassis sees the “distinctive emphasis” of Soviet Dreiser criticism as lying on “the social aspect of his prose, specifically the depiction of typical characters, their social orientation and conditioning, and Dreiser's general denunciation of the social system” (38). She cites the symptomatic example of Y. N. Zasursky's reading of *Sister Carrie* as depicting the corruption of Carrie's initial artistic interest in dramatic performance by bourgeois materialism, while Hurstwood falls victim to the mendacious slogans of American opportunity. Zasursky thus hailed Dreiser as exposing the corrupt and corrupting influence of American social life, its conventions, institutions, and cultural narratives, upon worthwhile human projects of artistic endeavor and self-fulfillment; a reading that apparently would be reiterated in the 1970s by L. G. [Vera] Pankova and Tatiana N. Denisova (see Bassis 40-43).

Though he bore the brunt of Dreiser's philosophical criticisms of Russia, arguing with him extensively during the latter's visit to Russia in 1927-28, Dinamov was not the only Russian to wrestle with Dreiser's ambivalences. Michael David-Fox points out that an anonymous report on Dreiser at the time turned this duality back on Dreiser, describing him as “a typical bourgeois writer, with a specific petty-bourgeois individualist ideology,” but one impelled towards the left by conditions in the U.S.A. and educated by his Russian experience (138). However, in public, later Soviet critics emphasized Dreiser's status as a political ally and defended Dreiser the man,

emphasizing his pariah status in American literary circles and, for example, glossing over his sexual promiscuity, or treating it as helping him to create convincing fictional portrayals of women. More significantly, this also involved the effective suppression of Dreiser's 1928 book *Dreiser Looks at Russia*, the account of his 1927-28 visit to the U.S.S.R., which was omitted from the Soviet-era collected editions of his works, translated excerpts only appearing in the 1980s. What was most troublesome about the book was perhaps less its inclusion of some criticisms of Soviet Russia and more Dreiser's description of himself as "an incorrigible individualist—therefore opposed to Communism" (9) and at best interested in the Soviet Union as a historical experiment.

That self-description, perhaps intended to present the persona of a disinterested observer to American readers, did nevertheless capture the often-rebarbative attitude Dreiser took towards Soviet boosterism on his visit and shortly afterwards, experienced by Dinamov at first hand. But independently of this, the interpellations of Dreiser as "social novelist" or ideological ally were simplifications that obscured a full and detailed understanding of how his fictional worlds evoke the dimension of the social and the intersections of his fiction with his political commitments. As early as 1962 Deming Brown called attention to how under Stalin this ideological simplification of Dreiser's texts worked by collapsing other categories into the social. "The human tragedies on which [Dreiser's] novels are based," he pointed out, "are attributable in part to the organization of society, but they are also built on combinations of circumstances and fatal coincidences that are independent of the social structure." For this reason, he argues, "Soviet critics . . . were wrong in claiming for his major novels a feeling of hope and faith in the possibility of social progress." What Dreiser's determinism enabled later Russian critics to do was to present Dreiser's books, in Brown's terms, as "a thoroughgoing attack on the whole structure of American life" (270). In this Stalinist conceptual scheme, which wedded socialism with nationalism, the complete negation of American progress served to confirm the view that the American people could only be liberated by external influences. At the same time, the incongruities between Dreiser's political output and his literary fascination with arch capitalist Frank Cowperwood were cohered by collapsing the dimensions of narrative and history, or naturalism's messy interaction of various forces ("circumstances and fatal coincidences," in Brown's terms) into an all-encompassing category of society; and by identifying the "social" and

the American as coterminous. The conflation identified by Brown was the same as that which Harold Bloom would perform decades later but from exactly the opposite ideological standpoint.

It is precisely in countering these simplifications that Dinamov's contention that Dreiser was "not a social novelist" matters. Dinamov faced head on what he saw as the problem of the lack of a "social" dimension in Dreiser. Rather than viewing continuities in Dreiser's trajectory, he emphasized the suddenness of the transformation from "spokesman of the petty bourgeoisie" to "revolutionary publicist," in an essay in one of the journals he edited, *Literature of the World Revolution* (a forerunner of *International Literature*). "As late as 1927 it was difficult to catch a glimpse of this new Dreiser" ("Theodore Dreiser Is Coming Our Way" 127), Dinamov observed, drawing in part upon his own correspondence with Dreiser in the late 1920s, where he repeatedly questioned Dreiser about his politics, social views, and his literary influences, and Dreiser just as repeatedly evaded direct engagement with these contexts. In his first letter, Dinamov had asked Dreiser point blank,

You don't like capital and capitalists. But what do you want to have instent [sic.] of them? Socialism or communism? In what social directions do you see the salvation from the contemporary social position? (Dinamov to Dreiser, 10 Dec. 1926, 1)

Dreiser's response has become the best-known passage in their correspondence, first quoted by Dinamov in the "Theodore Dreiser Is Coming Our Way" essay and by many critics subsequent to its inclusion in Richard Elias's 1950 collection of Dreiser's *Selected Letters*. "Life as I see it, is an organized process about which we can do nothing in the final analysis," he replied, adding that "until that intelligence which runs this show sees fit to remould the nature of man, I think it always will be the survival of the fittest, whether in the monarchies of England, the democracies of America, or the Soviets of Russia" (Dreiser to Dinamov, 5 Jan. 1928, 1-2). This negation of social specifics by conditions and forces, loosely defined as natural/evolutionary or historical, was a trope that Dreiser often resorted to in his letters to Dinamov, but how far did it enunciate a core belief? Frequently, as here, it was part argumentative gambit, part test and part provocation. Significantly, and typically, Dreiser ends that particular letter by qualifying his own assertion, acknowledging that he knows so little of Russian conditions "that I would not venture an opinion as to the ultimate result, but I do hope that something fine and big and enduring does come out of it" (2).

In the context of Dreiser's letters to Dinamov in the late 1920s, this equivocation was symptomatic of Dreiser's resistance to be read as producing "social" novels. To Dinamov's repeated questions about his literary influences from December 1926 to February 1927, Dreiser all but stonewalled. "To say that any writer is influenced or inspired by another is," Dreiser said he believed, "hardly ever a conscious process." "Frank Norris was an unknown name to me" until after *Sister Carrie* had been written; and while he had read Hardy, it was the notion that contemporary authors were "writing about life as I saw it" that was inspirational, rather than any specific example (Dreiser to Dinamov, 5 Jan. 1928, 1). Rather than literary traditions and conventions, the roots of his literary career lay in his own predisposition to brood about life, triggered into literary production by witnessing poverty in New York, watching the "breadline" and "the tragedies of the Bowery—the human wrecks who stood for hours in the snow and rain waiting for a bite of free food." So far, this bore out Dreiser's repeated, direct and simple rationale for fiction that reflected "real life," but what might have particularly interested Dinamov is the way that Dreiser seemed to partially acknowledge, yet ultimately evade, the social dimensions of that social spectacle. He continues, "Whether or not there is some psychic influence—some mental wave which makes for an affinity between minds—I am not prepared to say definitely, but I am rather inclined to believe that would be a truer explanation of the so-called literary tradition in any land, than a conscious process of either imitation or conventional following along prescribed lines" (Dreiser to Dinamov, 14 March 1927, 2). The convoluted, speculative style seems intent on finding some kind of extra-literary category to describe the links between people—the "psychic," the "mental," his own "morbid" tendencies—anything, rather than to acknowledge the social dimension of experience.

With this interpretive gloss it is easy to see how Dinamov would read Dreiser's fiction as antipathetic to notions of the social as a site for the production of agency. In his published writing, one result was that Dinamov eschewed any project of validating the overt politics of Dreiser's fiction. Significantly, Dinamov preferred the novels that tended to be neglected by Soviet critics, who tended to focus primarily on *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*. "Of course, Clyde Griffiths is a very interesting type," he wrote to Dreiser, "but Cowperwood is the most interesting hero of all the heroes in your novels" (Dinamov to Dreiser, 13 Feb. 1927, 2). This may be initially puzzling, in that *An American Tragedy* is eminently readable as indicting American society on several counts, from its direct depiction of the class-based restriction of

access to contraception and abortion, to its mystifying ideology of social mobility. Yet Dinamov thought that Dreiser's most important works were *The Financier* and *The Titan*, even though—or perhaps precisely because—they “offer[ed] a rather weak criticism of large-scale capitalism” while Dreiser “himself enthus[ed] over it” (“Theodore Dreiser Is Coming Our Way” 127).

In his preference for the works where Dreiser's “petit bourgeois” sensibility was most evident, Dinamov is clearly positioned at loggerheads with contemporaries who privileged “partisanship” and the later Soviet orthodoxies of Socialist Realism. Rather, Dinamov is aligned with another Marxist position, one which sought to learn from the “bourgeois” literary tradition, a position which was being elaborated in the 1930s in the pages of *International Literature*, the journal of which Dinamov was editor-in-chief. As James L. Murphy has pointed out, it was the English language edition of *International Literature*, for which Dinamov was specifically responsible, which made available to English-speaking readers for the first time writings by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels which espoused this position.⁸ This material foregrounded Marx's interest in classical writers such as Aeschylus, Goethe, and Shakespeare, a preference of which Dinamov reminded Dreiser in a letter of 26 Oct. 1933, in which he defended his own two-year “struggle” to understand Shakespeare through the lens of a Marxist criticism that he described as “not dead and scholastic but living like the smell of violets” (1, 2). Still more indicative is Engels's 1885 letter to the German novelist Emma Kautsky, which had just then appeared in translation in *International Literature*. It includes a discussion of bias and class-orientation which has been highly influential in Marxist-influenced literary criticism, but it also directly addressed the kinds of questions that Dinamov was asking pertaining to social criticism and historical agency. As Engels put it,

the writer is not obliged to obtrude on the reader the future historical solution of the social conflicts pictured. And especially in our conditions the novel appeals mostly to readers of bourgeois circles . . . and therefore a socialist biased novel fully achieves its purpose, in my view, if by conscientiously describing the real mutual relations, breaking down conventional illusions about them, it shatters the optimism of the bourgeois world, instills doubt as to the eternal domination of the existing order, although the author does not offer any definite solution or does not even line up openly on any particular side. (Murphy 90-91)⁹

Engels might almost have been describing the endings of novels such as *Sister Carrie* and, especially, *The Financier* and *The Titan*. In any case, this argument enables us to understand perfectly well Dinamov's preference for *The Financier* and *The Titan*, as well as to see how the convictions that Dreiser was both irredeemably petty bourgeois and the greatest painter of American life could be reconciled.

Revealingly, these nuances in the critical reception of Dreiser in the U.S.S.R. were symmetrical with Dreiser's critical reception in the U.S.A. Russian criticism of determinism was roughly equivalent to the charge of "barbaric naturalism" levelled at Dreiser; the difference stemming directly from antithetical national political ideas of agency. What appeared to Stuart P. Sherman and Lionel Trilling as Dreiser's negation of individual moral agency was echoed in the Russians' sense of his "social pessimism." Conversely, the notion of Dreiser as a "social novelist" took hold in the U.S.S.R. in parallel to Vernon L. Parrington's elaboration of "critical realism" in the United States, but in terms that, unsurprisingly, reflected national differences. At their roots, both were ways of redeeming Dreiser's apparent determinism. Critics in both countries responded, as Dreiser's readers have always done, to his depiction of human beings victimized by social and economic conditions, by historical forces, and by biology, in ways that were reinforced by misplaced beliefs in individual autonomy. On the one side, this confirmed American benightedness and the belief in Soviet communism as the way of the future; on the other, the identification of mystifying ideals and conventions was a forward step for American democracy.

More strikingly still, proponents of the New Criticism seeking to dismiss Dreiser's work and his political perspective mirrored the Russian foreclosures of social agency in Dreiser's writing. Philip Rahv, for example, arrived at a formulation revealingly similar to the second part of Dinamov's reading of the "social" in *Twelve Men*. According to Rahv, writing initially in 1942,

To the naturalist, human behavior is a function of its social environment . . . [i]n such a closed world [of Dreiser's Cowperwood novels and *An American Tragedy*] there is patently no room for the singular, the unique, for anything in fact which cannot be represented plausibly as the product of a particular social and historical complex. (43)

This parallels Dinamov's observation that Dreiser is a "social novelist . . . only to the extent that his hero is connected with the society, with the epoch," but exerts more interpretative pressure, so that where Dinamov saw connection and linkage, Rahv professes to see bombastic determinism.

Through the long trajectory of reading Dreiser, categories of the social have remained of foundational importance, even as the "social" is continually reformulated. Dinamov's example reminds us what can be lost in the premature resolution of such questions, with his preoccupation with what he regarded as Dreiser's foreclosure of agency, in which the questions of determinism, individualism, and the "social" were all bound up. This was why he was so pained by the fatalism of Dreiser's biographical sketches in *Twelve Men*, with its series of narratives of failure, whether in terms of biography, aesthetics, or politics, and which he saw as symptomatic of Dreiser's world-view. At times Dinamov offers up a perspective that mirrors Rahv's insistence on reading Dreiser only from the perspective of social determinism. To Dinamov, for example, the exceptional elements of Cowperwood's characterization and perspective paled into insignificance beside his status as an exemplary capitalist. In the 1927 Preface to the Russian edition of *The Titan* he reads Cowperwood as a type produced by the domination of social forms by capitalism, citing his sexist "acquisition of women" and the commodification of his aesthetic appreciation of art. More perceptively than Rahv, however, Dinamov puts this myopia in the context of patriarchal gender formations. Noting the one-dimensional depiction of women in *The Titan*, Dinamov initially attributes this to the determination of middle-class women's identity through class: "almost all the heroines of Dreiser are taken from the bourgeois circles and he approaches them from that side which for them is most characteristic—from the sexual." However, Dinamov goes on to suggest that Dreiser generalizes this view so that it conditions his depiction of women in general: "He does not see women as workers, as social agents, as comrades of men. He sees them only as women—as mistresses, as females, as hunters for men" (6). This criticism was amplified by Ruth Epperson Kennell, an American who knew both Dinamov and Dreiser in Russia, acting as Dreiser's secretary, translator and guide during his visit to the Soviet Union in 1927-28, and whose own letters, published writings, and biography are finally attracting the attention they deserve. There is an instructive irony in seeing Kennell

identify in Dreiser himself the kind of androcentrism that distorts and limits the perspective of his fictional creation Ed Gregory: many of Dreiser's texts—not least *A Gallery of Women*, which repeatedly narrates the frustration experienced by women such as Kennell—have a tendency to reinscribe that Emersonian equation of “manhood” with agency *within society*.

Sergei Dinamov's ambivalent readings of Dreiser remain inspirational beyond their historical role as alternatives to the one-dimensional approaches of American and Russian critics constrained by Cold War antagonisms. But those polarized critical discussions have largely been supplanted by more nuanced approaches, after Cold War binaries gave way to more multipolar understandings of power. Susan Mizruchi for example has offered a genealogy of naturalism based on the relative deployment of the “natural” and the social: “where Norris's naturalism tends to corroborate a social evolutionary scheme, Dreiser's naturalism, by showing how such a scheme justifies and entrenches a man-made social system, tends to challenge it” (203). Subsequently, in the most insightful criticism of naturalism, attention to gender's mediating position between biology and society has helped to prize open the death grip of debates over determinism, unpicking the ways that naturalist texts depict “social forces” interacting with and mediating that which is defined as biological (Fleissner, Campbell). This essay began by wondering how recognizing literary naturalist texts' participation in the “long debate” over society might allow us to rethink naturalism's long-standing and seemingly intractable debate with determinism, but it is no coincidence that it ends thinking about gender. There is much more of interest here than the substitution of one kind of determinism for another.

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NOTES

¹ As even Stuart P. Sherman, who had most influentially labelled Dreiser as a naturalist writer, came to realize (“Mr. Dreiser”). I return in part two to critics’ use of the term “social forces” as shorthand for the complicated and interlocking determinisms in Dreiser and other “naturalists.”

² “Will You Walk into My Parlor” is a 70-page story rejected multiple times by American periodicals before being published in the collection *Free and Other Stories* (1918). Aside from the aspects discussed below, the story may also be of interest for its anticipation of several elements in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, published seven years later, albeit in a very different genre. It is set in Long Island leisure class locations (luxury hotels and resorts rather than private homes), from which protagonists drive automobiles into Manhattan to do business. One of these “powerful machines” is crashed in an attempted homicide. Characters include “sporty” women, among whom Imogene Carle and a Mrs Skelton have a relationship similar to that between Jordan Baker and her aunt, while there is also a Jewish businessman, Mr Diamondberg, although he lacks the narrative importance, and the more extreme negative stereotyping, of Fitzgerald’s Meyer Wolfsheim.

³ In addition to *The Titan* and “Will You Walk into My Parlor?” an interest in society in general, and the dynamics of American society in particular, is also prominent in *A Hoosier Holiday* (1916), a travel book surveying rural America, in the revisions Dreiser made to “The Shining Slave-Makers” and “Nigger Jeff” for publication alongside “Parlor” in *Free and Other Stories* (1918), and in a series of social and political essays most of which were published in *Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub: A Book of the Mystery and Wonder and Terror of Life* (1920).

⁴ Imogene does not mean that she and her family were literally “slaves,” but she uses the term in a dehistoricized, metaphorical fashion consonant with the melodramatic form of the story, her emotional state, and her narrative positioning as a femme fatale whose “real” feelings and affiliations remain in doubt throughout. Nevertheless, her ability to use the term in this figurative way is redolent of white racial privilege and historical ignorance. In actuality of course enslaved people were able to exercise agency to rebel, resist, and escape. It is worth noting that a sense of the historical existence of slavery is represented as key to Cowperwood’s first and formative understanding of power and struggle in American society, in a passage often read in purely naturalistic terms (*The Financier* 7-10).

⁵ The current essay, like much recent critical work, is indebted to Jennifer Fleissner’s account of literary naturalism’s central relation to perceptions of the “feminization” of American modernity.

⁶ As a critic, Dinamov sought to help Russians understand writers such as Hawthorne, Poe, Galsworthy, Sinclair Lewis, and Shakespeare; and was asked to contribute to the *Modern Quarterly* and *New Masses* in the United States. In 1935 he became president of the Institute of Red Professors and editor-in-chief of the multi-language Marxist journal *International Literature*, in which he published, among much else, one of Dreiser’s most perceptive pieces of literary criticism, “Mark the Double Twain.” Although Dinamov corresponded with a variety of

British and American literary figures, from *Partisan Review* co-founder Joseph Freeman to the English writer and critic George Orwell, his relationship with Dreiser was perhaps the most important to him. For further details of Dinamov's biography, see Casciato.

⁷ My understanding of trends and examples in Soviet criticism of Dreiser is limited by my personal capacity to draw only on English-language sources and should be read accordingly. I depend especially on the works cited by Brown, Bassis, Murphy, and Clark *et al.* While Brown emphasizes the ambivalence of Russian critics before the consolidation of Dreiser's reputation as an ideological ally in the 1950s, Bassis's summary of the trajectory of Soviet criticism (39-48) implies that, while Dreiser's work was continually understood as exemplifying the "social novel," that term became more elastic in the 1970s, when critics such as Pankova, Denisova, and Baturin registered its stylistic range beyond realism and its engagement with the individual as well as, and in tension with, society.

⁸ See Murphy, Chapter 4: Aesthetic Theory in International Literature (85-104) for an authoritative account of these publications and debates. Murphy's book uncovers the vitality of debates over literature within *New Masses* and *International Literature* in the 1930s, which had been buried by later dismissals of "leftism" from critics associated with *Partisan Review*.

⁹ For historical reasons the text given here is the translation printed in *International Literature*, as given in Murphy. For a more recent translation see Craig 267-8.

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