AFTERWORD

Do I exaggerate in saying that Theodore Dreiser has dropped out of the awareness of cultivated Americans? If so, it is but a slight exaggeration. Few young writers now model themselves on his career, and not many readers think of him as one of those literary figures whose word can transform the quality of their experience. Dreiser has suffered the fate that often besets writers caught up in cultural dispute: their work comes to seem inseparable from what has been said about it, their passion gets frozen into history.

Mention Dreiser to a bright student of literature, mention him to a literate older person, and only seldom will the response be a swift turning of memory to novels that have brought pleasure and illumination. Far more likely is a series of fixed associations: to a craggy, brooding, bearlike figure who dragged himself out of nineteenth-century poverty and provincialism, and in *Sister Carrie* composed a pioneering novel of sexual candor; or to a vague notion that the author of *The Financier* and *The Titan* turned out quantities of ill-tuned and turgid social documentation; or to a prepared judgment against a writer taken to be sluggish in thought and language, sluggishly accumulating data of destruction and failure, but deaf to the refinements of consciousness, dull to the play of sensibility, and drab, utterly and hopelessly drab in the quality of his mind.

The decline of Dreiser’s reputation has not been an isolated event. It has occurred in the context, and surely as a consequence, of the counterrevolution in American culture during the past few decades. For readers educated in these years, Dreiser often became a symbol of everything a superior intelligence was supposed to avoid. For the New Critics, to whom the very possibility of a social novel seemed disagreeable; for literary students trained in the fine but narrow school of the Jamesian sensibility; for liberals easing into a modest gentility and inclined to replace a belief in social
commitment with a search for personal distinction; for in-
tellectuals delighted with the values of ambiguity, irony, com-
plexity and impatient with the pieties of radicalism—for all
such persons Dreiser became an object of disdain. He stood
for an earlier age of scientism, materialism, agnosticism: all
of which were now seen as hostile to the claims of moral
freedom and responsibility. He represented the boorishness
of the populist mentality, as it declined into anti-Semitism
or veered toward a peculiarly thoughtless brand of com-
munism. He could not think: he could only fumble with the
names of ideas. He could not write: he could only pile words
on top of each other. He cared not for art as such, but only
for the novel as a vehicle of social and "philosophical" ideas.
He was uneducated, insensitive—the novelist as mastodon.

So the indictment went, frequently right in its details, and
when coming from so temperate a critic as Lionel Trilling
often persuasive in result. If a few literary men, like the
novelist James T. Farrell and the critic Alfred Kazin, con-
tinued to praise Dreiser as a writer of massive and poignant
effects, if they insisted that attention be paid to the novels
he wrote rather than to his foolish public declamations, they
were not much heeded in the last few decades.

But now, when Dreiser's prejudices have begun to be for-
gotten and all that remains—all that need remain—are his
three or four major novels, it is time for reconsideration.
The early praise these books received may have been undis-
criminating: we are not obliged to repeat it. Dreiser's role in
assaulting the taboos of gentility can no longer excite us as
once it did his admirers. And as for his faults, no great
critical insight is required to identify them, since they glare
out of every chapter, especially his solemnities as a cosmic
voice and his habit of crushing the English language beneath
a leaden embrace. Yet these faults are interwoven with large
creative powers, and it can be argued that for the powers to
be released there had first to be the triggering presence of
the faults. Let me cite an example.

As a philosopher Dreiser can often be tiresome; yet his very
lust for metaphysics, his stubborn insistence upon learning
"what it's all about," helped to deepen the emotional resources
from which he drew as a novelist. For he came to feel that our
existence demands from us an endless contemplativeness,
even if—perhaps because—we cannot think through our
problems or solve our mysteries. In the frustrations he en-
countered when trying to extract some conceptual order from
the confusion and trouble of existence, he grew more closely
involved, more at one, with the characters he created, also confused and troubled. Somewhat like Thomas Hardy, he learned to stand back a little from the human spectacle and watch the endlessly repeated sequence of desire, effort and disintegration; and from this distance—perhaps the sole reward of his philosophical gropings—he gained a sense of the shared helplessness of men, he learned how brutal and irrelevant the impulse to moral judgment can become, and he arrived at his profoundly inclusive compassion for the whole of human life.

In the first task of the novelist, which is to create an imaginary social landscape both credible and significant, Dreiser ranks among the American giants, the very few American giants we have had. Reading An American Tragedy once again, after a lapse of more than twenty years, I have found myself greatly moved and shaken by its repeated onslaughts of narrative, its profound immersion in human suffering, its dredging up of those shapeless desires which lie, as if in fever, just below the plane of consciousness. How much more vibrant and tender this book is than the usual accounts of it in recent criticism might lead one to suppose! It is a masterpiece, nothing less.

II

Dreiser published An American Tragedy in 1925. By then he was fifty-four years old, an established writer with his own fixed and hard-won ways, who had written three first-rate novels: Sister Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt and The Financier. These books are crowded with exact observation—observation worked closely into the grain of narrative—about the customs and class structure of American society in the phase of early finance capitalism. No other novelist has absorbed into his work as much knowledge as Dreiser had about American institutions: the mechanisms of business, the stifling rhythms of the factory, the inner hierarchy of a large hotel, the chicaneries of city politics, the status arrangements of rulers and ruled. For the most part Dreiser’s characters are defined through their relationships to these institutions. They writhe and suffer to win a foothold in the slippery social world or to break out of the limits of established social norms. They exhaust themselves to gain success, they destroy themselves in acts of impulsive deviancy. But whatever their individual lot, they all act out the drama of determinism—which, in Dreiser’s handling, is not at all the
sort of listless fatality that hostile critics would make it seem, but is rather a fierce struggle by human beings to discover the harsh limits of what is possible to them and thereby perhaps to enlarge those limits by an inch or two. That mostly they fail is Dreiser's tribute to reality.

This controlling pattern in Dreiser's novels has been well described by Bernard Rosenberg, a sociologist with a literary eye:

Emile Durkheim had suggested in Dreiser's day that when men speak of a force external to themselves which they are powerless to control, their subject is not God but social organization. This is also Dreiser's theme, and to it he brings a sense of religious awe and wonder. "So well defined," he writes, "is the sphere of social activity, that he who departs from it is doomed" . . . Durkheim identified social facts, i.e., the existence of norms, precisely as Dreiser did: by asking what would happen if they were violated. . . . Norms develop outside the individual consciousness and exist prior to it; we internalize them and are fully aware of their grip only when our behavior is deviant. Durkheim illustrated this proposition in a dozen different ways, and so did Dreiser.

In Dreiser's early novels most of the central characters are harried by a desire for personal affirmation, a desire they can neither articulate nor suppress. They suffer from a need that their lives assume the dignity of dramatic form, and they suffer terribly, not so much because they cannot satisfy this need, but because they do not really understand it. Money, worldly success, sensual gratification, are the only ends they know or can name, but none of these slakes their restlessness. They grapple desperately for money, they lacerate themselves climbing to success, yet they remain sullen and bewildered, always hopeful for some unexpected sign by which to release their bitter craving for a state of grace or, at least, illumination. Dreiser's characters are romantics who behave as if the Absolute can be found, immaculately preserved, at the very summit of material power. Great energies can flow from this ingrained American delusion, both for the discharge of ambition and the aggressiveness of ego. And Dreiser too, because he had in his own experience shared these values and struggled, with varying effectiveness, to burn them out of his system—Dreiser too lived out, with
an intense dramatic complicity, the longings and turmoil of his characters.

Yet there is usually present in his early novels a governing intelligence more copious and flexible than that of the characters. This governing intelligence is seldom revealed through direct statement, either by characters or author. So thoroughly does Dreiser recognize the bond of vulnerability between a Carrie and himself, he never moralizes. So patiently does he join a Cowperwood and a Jennie through the course of their experience, he never condescends. Taking upon himself the perils and sharing in the miseries of his characters, he leaves the privilege of admonition to others. Yet there is never really a question as to what his novels “mean,” nor any serious possibility that the characters will usurp control. Through the logic of the narrative, the working-out of its implications, we are enabled to grasp with an almost visceral intensity how shallow are the standards by which the characters live.

In these early novels society figures largely as a jungle; and with good reason—the capitalism of the early twentieth century closely resembled a jungle. The characters may begin with a hard struggle for survival, but far more quickly than most of Dreiser’s critics allow, they leave it behind them. Having emerged from the blunt innocence of their beginnings, they are now cursed with a fractional awareness. They can find neither peace nor fulfillment. In their half-articulate way, Dreiser’s characters are beset by the same yearnings that trouble the characters of Fitzgerald and many other American novelists: a need for some principle of value by which to overcome the meanness, the littleness of their lives. To know, however, that the goals to which one has pledged one’s years are trivial, yet not to know in what their triviality consists—this is a form of suffering which overcomes Dreiser’s characters again and again. In all its dumb misery, it is the price, or reward, of their slow crawl to awareness. One sometimes feels that in the novels of Dreiser there is being reenacted the whole progression of the race toward the idea of the human.

The prose in these early novels is often as wretched as unsympathetic critics have said. Dreiser had little feeling for the sentence as a rhythmic unit (though he had a strong intuitive grasp of the underlying rhythm of narrative as a system of controlled variation and incremental development). He had a poor ear for the inflections of common speech, or even for the colloquial play of language. And worst of all,
he had a weakness, all too common among the semieducated, for "elegant" diction and antique rhetoric. Yet, despite the many patches of gray and the occasional patches of purple prose,* Dreiser manages to accumulate large masses of narrative tension; he pulls one, muttering and bruised, into the arena of his imagination; and finally one has no recourse but surrender to its plenitude, its coarse and encompassing reality.

Not even Dreiser's philosophical excursions—bringing together nativist American prejudice with the very latest ideas of 1900—can break the thrust of these narratives. Dreiser's thought has by now been analyzed, mauled, and ridiculed: his distortion of social life through metaphors of brute nature, his reduction of human motive to the malignant pressure of "chemisms," his toying with notions about "the superman" in the Cowperwood novels. But it hardly matters. One brushes all this aside, resigned to the malice of a fate that could yoke together such intellectual debris with so much creative power. One brushes aside, and reads on.

III

Though surely Dreiser's major achievement, An American Tragedy is not the work of a master who, at the approach of old age, decides upon a revolutionary break from the premises and patterns of his earlier writing. For that order of boldness Dreiser lacked a sufficient self-awareness and sophistication as an artist; he was cut off from too much of the tradition of Western, even of American, culture to do anything but continue with his version of naturalism. He was the kind of writer who must keep circling about the point of his beginnings, forever stirred by memories of his early struggles and preoccupations. All such a writer can hope for—a very great deal—is to mine his talent to its very depth; and that Dreiser did in An American Tragedy. Still, there are some changes from the earlier novels, and most of them to the good.

* "The function of language is much more largely referential in the novel than in other literary forms... the genre itself works by exhaustive presentation rather than by elegant concentration. This fact would no doubt explain... why the novel is the most translatable of genres; why many undoubtedly great novelists, from Richardson and Balzac to Hardy and Dostoevsky, often write gracelessly, and sometimes with downright vulgarity..." —Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel.
The prose, while quite as clotted and ungainly as in the past, is now more consistent in tone and less adorned with "literary" paste gems. Solecisms, pretentiousness, and gaucherie remain, but the prose has at least the negative virtue of calling less attention to itself than in some of the earlier books. And there are long sections packed with the kind of specification that in Dreiser makes for a happy self-forgetfulness, thereby justifying Philip Rahv's remark that one finds here "a prosiness so primary in texture that if taken in bulk it affects us as a kind of poetry of the commonplace and ill-favored."

For the first and last time Dreiser is wholly in the grip of his vision of things, so that he feels little need for the buttress of comment or the decoration of philosophizing. Dreiser is hardly the writer whose name would immediately occur to one in connection with T. S. Eliot's famous epigram that Henry James had a mind so fine it could not be violated by ideas; yet if there is one Dreiser novel concerning which something like Eliot's remark might apply, it is An American Tragedy. What Eliot said has sometimes been taken, quite absurdly, as if it were a recommendation for writers to keep themselves innocent of ideas; actually he was trying to suggest the way a novelist can be affected by ideas yet must not allow his work to become a mere illustration for them. And of all Dreiser's novels An American Tragedy is the one that seems least cluttered with unassimilated formulas and preconceptions.

Where the earlier novels dealt with somewhat limited aspects of American life, An American Tragedy, enormous in scope and ambition, requires to be judged not merely as an extended study of the American lower middle class during the first years of the twentieth century but also as a kind of parable of our national experience. Strip the story to its bare outline, and see how much of American desire it involves: an obscure youth, amiable but weak, is lifted by chance from poverty to the possibility of winning pleasure and wealth. To gain these ends he must abandon the pieties of his fundamentalist upbringing and sacrifice the tender young woman who has given him a taste of pure affection. All of society conspires to persuade him that his goals are admirable, perhaps even sacred; he notices that others, no better endowed than himself, enjoy the privileges of money as if it were in the very nature of things that they should; but the entanglements of his past now form a barrier to realizing his desires, and to break through this barrier he
must resort to criminal means. As it happens, he does not commit the murder he had planned, but he might as well have, for he is trapped in the machinery of social punishment and destroyed. "So well defined is the sphere of social activity that he who departs from it is doomed."

Now this story depends upon one of the most deeply grounded fables in our culture. Clyde Griffiths, the figure in Dreiser's novel who acts it out, is not in any traditional sense either heroic or tragic. He has almost no assertive will, he lacks any large compelling idea, he reveals no special gift for the endurance of pain. In his puny self he is little more than a clouded reflection of the puny world about him. His significance lies in the fact that he represents not our potential greatness but our collective smallness, the common denominator of our foolish tastes and tawdry ambitions. He is that part of ourselves in which we take no pride, but know to be a settled resident. And we cannot dismiss him as a special case or an extreme instance, for his weakness is the essential shoddiness of mortality. By a twist of circumstance he could be a junior executive, a country-club favorite; he almost does manage to remake himself to the cut of his fantasy; and he finds in his rich and arrogant cousin Gilbert an exasperating double, the young man he too might be. Clyde embodies the nothingness at the heart of our scheme of things, the nothingness of our social aspirations. If Flaubert could say, Emma Bovary, c'est moi, Dreiser could echo, Clyde Griffiths, he is us.

We have then in Clyde a powerful representation of our unacknowledged values, powerful especially since Dreiser keeps a majestic balance between sympathy and criticism. He sees Clyde as a characteristic reflex of "the vast skepticism and apathy of life," as a characteristic instance of the futility of misplaced desire in a society that offers little ennobling sense of human potentiality. Yet he nevertheless manages to make the consequences of Clyde's mediocrity, if not the mediocrity itself, seem tragic. For in this youth there is concentrated the tragedy of human waste: energies, talents, affections all unused—and at least in our time the idea of human waste comprises an essential meaning of tragedy. It is an idea to which Dreiser kept returning both in his fiction and his essays:

When one was dead one was dead for all time. Hence the reason for the heartbreak over failure here and
now; the awful tragedy of a love lost, a youth never properly enjoyed. Think of living and yet not living in so thrashing a world as this, the best of one's hours passing unused or not properly used. Think of seeing this tinkling phantasmagoria of pain and pleasure, beauty and all its sweets, go by, and yet being compelled to be a bystander, a mere onlooker, enhungered and never satisfied.

The first half of An American Tragedy is given to the difficult yet, for Dreiser's purpose, essential task of persuading us that Clyde Griffiths, through his very lack of distinction, represents a major possibility in American experience. Toward this end Dreiser must accumulate a large sum of substantiating detail. He must show Clyde growing up in a family both materially and spiritually impoverished. He must show Clyde reaching out for the small pleasures, the trifles of desire, and learning from his environment how splendid are these induced wants. He must show Clyde, step by step, making his initiation into the world of sanctioned America, first through shabby and then luxury hotels, where he picks up the signals of status and sin. He must show Clyde as the very image and prisoner of our culture, hungering with its hungers, empty with its emptiness.

Yet all the while Dreiser is also preparing to lift Clyde's story from this mere typicality, for he wishes to go beyond the mania for the average which is a bane of naturalism. Everything in this story is ordinary, not least of all the hope of prosperity through marriage—everything but the fact that Clyde begins to act out, or is treated as if he had acted out, the commonplace fantasy of violently disposing of a used-up lover. This is the sole important departure from ordinary verisimilitude in the entire novel, and Dreiser must surely have known that it was. In the particular case upon which he drew for An American Tragedy, the young man did kill his pregnant girl; but Dreiser must nevertheless have realized that in the vast majority of such crises the young man dreams of killing and ends by marrying. Dreiser understood, however, that in fiction the effort to represent common experience requires, at one or two crucial points, an effect of heightening, an intense exaggeration. Clyde's situation may be representative, but his conduct must be extreme. And is that not one way of establishing the dramatic: to drive a representative situation to its limits of possibility?

In An American Tragedy Dreiser solved the problem which
vexes all naturalistic novelists: how to relate harmoniously a
large panorama of realism with a sharply contoured form. 
Dreiser is endlessly faithful to common experience. No one,
not even the critics who have most harshly attacked the
novel, would care to deny the credibility of Clyde and
Roberta Alden, the girl he betrays; most of the attacks on
Dreiser contain a mute testimony to his achievement, for in
order to complain about his view of life they begin by taking
for granted the "reality" of his imagined world. Yet for all
its packed detail, the novel is economically structured—
though one must understand that the criterion of economy
for this kind of novel is radically different from that for a
James or Conrad novel. In saying all that I do not mean
anything so improbable as the claim that whatever is in the
book belongs because it is there; certain sections, especially
those which prepare for Clyde's trial, could be cut to ad-
\[...\]vantage; but the overall architecture has a rough and impres-
sive craftsmanship.

The action of the novel moves like a series of waves,
each surging forward to a peak of tension and then receding
into quietness, and each, after the first one, reenacting in a
more complex and perilous fashion the material of its pre-
decessor. Clyde in Kansas City, Clyde in Chicago, Clyde
alone with Roberta in Lycurgus, Clyde on the edge of the
wealthy set in Lycurgus—these divisions form the novel until
the point where Roberta is drowned, and each of them acts
as a reflector on the others, so that there is a mounting
series of anticipations and variations upon the central theme.
Clyde's early flirtation with a Kansas City shopgirl antici-
pates, in its chill manipulativeness, the later and more im-
portant relationship with Sondra Finchley, the rich girl who
seems to him the very emblem of his fantasy. Clyde's child-
hood of city poverty is paralleled by the fine section pre-
senting the poverty of Roberta's farm family. The seduction
and desertion of Clyde's unmarried sister anticipates Clyde's
seduction and desertion of Roberta. Clyde receives his pre-
liminary education in the hotels where he works as bellboy,
and each of these serves as a microcosm of the social world
he will later break into. Clyde's first tenderness with Ro-
berta occurs as they float on a rowboat; the near-murder,
equally passive, also on a rowboat. The grasping Clyde is
reflected through a series of minor hotel figures and then
through the antipathetic but complementary figures of his
cousin Gilbert and Sondra; while the part of him that re-
tains some spontaneous feeling is doubled by Roberta, there-
by strengthening one’s impression that Clyde and Roberta are halves of an uncompleted self, briefly coming together in a poignant unity but lacking the emotional education that would enable them to keep the happiness they have touched. There are more such balancings and modulations, which in their sum endow the novel with a rhythm of necessity.

Reinforcing this narrative rhythm is Dreiser’s frequent shifting of his distance from the characters. At some points he establishes an almost intolerable closeness to Clyde, so that we feel locked into the circle of his moods, while at other points he pulls back to convey the sense that Clyde is but another helpless creature among thousands of helpless creatures struggling to get through their time. In the chapters dealing with Clyde upon his arrival at Lycurgus, Dreiser virtually becomes his character, narrowing to a hairline the distance between Clyde and himself, in order to make utterly vivid Clyde’s pleasure at finding a girl as yielding as Roberta. By contrast, there are sections in which Dreiser looks upon his story from a great height, especially in the chapters after Roberta’s death, where his intent is to suggest how impersonal is the working of legal doom and how insignificant Clyde’s fate in the larger motions of society. Through these shifts in perspective Dreiser can show Clyde in his double aspect, both as solitary figure and symbolic agent, confused sufferer and victim of fate.

In the first half of the novel Dreiser prepares us to believe that Clyde could commit the crime: which is to say, he prepares us to believe that a part of ourselves could commit the crime. At each point in the boy’s development there occurs a meeting between his ill-formed self and the surrounding society. The impoverishment of his family life and the instinctual deprivation of his youth leave him a prey to the values of the streets and the hotels; yet it is a fine stroke on Dreiser’s part that only through these tawdry values does Clyde nevertheless become aware of his impoverishment and deprivation. Yearning gives way to cheap desire and false gratification, and these in turn create new and still more incoherent yearnings. It is a vicious circle and the result is not, in any precise sense, a self at all, but rather the beginning of that poisonous fabrication which in America we call a “personality.” The hotels are his college, and there he learns to be “insanely eager for all the pleasures which he saw swirling around him.” The sterile moralism of his parents cannot provide him with the strength to resist his environment or a principle by which to overcome it. The first tips he
receives at the Green-Davidson hotel seem to him "fantastic, Aladdinish really." When he tries to be romantic with his first girl, the images that spring to his mind are of the ornate furnishings in the hotel. Later, as he contemplates killing Roberta, the very idea for the central act in his life comes from casual reading of a newspaper. It would be hard to find in American literature another instance where the passivity, rootlessness, and self-alienation of urban man is so authoritatively presented. For in one sense Clyde does not exist, but is merely a creature of his milieu. And just as in Dreiser's work the problem of human freedom becomes critically acute through a representation of its decline, so the problem of awareness is brought to the forefront through a portrait of its negation.

Even sexuality, which often moves through Dreiser's world like a thick fog, is here diminished and suppressed through the power of social will. Clyde discovers sex as a drugstore clerk, "never weary of observing the beauty, the daring, the self-sufficiency and the sweetness" of the girls who come to his counter. "The wonder of them!" All of these fantasies he then focuses on the commonplace figure of Sondra Finchley, Heloise as a spoiled American girl. Apart from an interval with Roberta, in which he yields to her maternal solicitude, Clyde's sexuality never breaks out as an irresistible force; it is always at the service of his fears, his petty snobbism, his calculations.

Now all of this is strongly imagined, yet what seems still more notable is Dreiser's related intuition that even in a crippled psyche there remain, eager and available, the capacities we associate with a life of awareness. False values stunt and deform these capacities, but in some pitiful way also express and release them. Clyde and Roberta are from the beginning locked in mutual delusion, yet the chapters in which they discover each other are also extremely tender as an unfolding of youthful experience. That this can happen at all suggests how indestructible the life-force is; that Dreiser can portray it in his novels is the reward of his compassion. He is rarely sentimental, he reckons human waste to the bitter end; but at the same time he hovers over these lost and lonely figures, granting them every ounce of true feeling he possibly can, insisting that they too—clerk and shopgirl, quite like intellectual and princess—can know "a kind of ecstasy all out of proportion to the fragile, gimcrack scene" of the Starlight Amusement Park.

Dreiser surrenders himself to the emotional life of his
figures, not by passing over their delusions or failures but by casting all his energy into evoking the fullness of their experience. And how large, finally, is the sense of the human that smolders in this book! How unwavering the feeling for "the sensitive and seeking individual in his pitiful struggle with nature—with his enormous urges and his pathetic equipment!" Dreiser's passion for detail is a passion for his subject; his passion for his subject, a passion for the suffering of men. As we are touched by Clyde's early affection for Roberta, so later we participate vicariously in his desperation to be rid of her. We share this desire with some shame, but unless we count ourselves among the hopelessly pure, we share it.

Other naturalists, when they show a character being destroyed by overwhelming forces, frequently leave us with a sense of littleness and helplessness, as if the world were collapsed. Of Dreiser that is not, in my own experience, true. For he is always on the watch for a glimmer of transcendence, always concerned with the possibility of magnitude. Clyde is pitiable, his life and fate are pitiable; yet at the end we feel a somber exaltation, for we know that An American Tragedy does not seek to persuade us that human existence need be without value or beauty.

No, for Dreiser life is something very different. What makes him so absorbing a novelist, despite grave faults, is that he remains endlessly open to experience. This is something one cannot say easily about most modern writers, including those more subtle and gifted than Dreiser. The trend of modern literature has often been toward a recoil from experience, a nausea before its flow, a denial of its worth. Dreiser, to be sure, is unable to make the finer discriminations among varieties of experience; and there is no reason to expect these from him. But he is marvelous in his devotion to whatever portion of life a man can have; marvelous in his conviction that something sacred resides even in the transience of our days; marvelous in his feeling that the grimmest of lives retain the possibility of "a mystic something of beauty that perennially transfigures the world." Transfigures—that is the key word, and not the catch-phrases of mechanistic determinism he furnished his detractors.

Santayana, in his lecture on Spinoza, speaks of "one of the most important and radical of religious perceptions":

It has perceived that though it is living, it is powerless to live; that though it may die, it is powerless to
die; and that altogether, at every instant and in every particular, it is in the hands of some alien and inscrutable power.

Of this felt power I profess to know nothing further. To me, as yet, it is merely the counterpart of my impotence. I should not venture, for instance, to call this power almighty, since I have no means of knowing how much it can do: but I should not hesitate, if I may coin a word, to call it omnificent: it is to me, by definition, the doer of everything that is done. I am not asserting the physical validity of this sense of agency or cause: I am merely feeling the force, the friendliness, the hostility, the unfathomableness of the world.

Dreiser, I think, would have accepted these words, for the power of which Santayana speaks is the power that flows, in all its feverish vibration, through An American Tragedy.

IRVING HOWE
On one level, *An American Tragedy* is the story of the corruption and destruction of one man, Clyde Griffiths, who forfeits his life in desperate pursuit of success. On a deeper, more profound level, however, the novel represents a massive portrayal of the society whose values both shape Clyde's tawdry ambitions and seal his fate: it is an unsurpassed depiction of the harsh realities of American life and of the dark side of the American Dream. Extraordinary in scope and power, vivid in its sense of wholesale human waste, unceasing in its rich compassion, *An American Tragedy* stands as the supreme achievement of a writer who ranks, in the words of Irving Howe, "among the American giants, one of the very few American giants we have had."