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The Necessary Good: The "True Ethic" of "Sister Carrie"

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THE NECESSARY GOOD

THE "TRUE ETHIC" OF *SISTER CARRIE*

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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by

David Essex

1986

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

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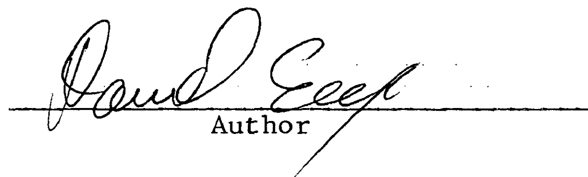

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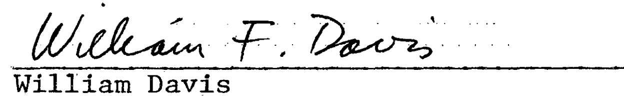

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ABSTRACT

Theodore Dreiser espoused in _Sister Carrie_ a mechanistic or deterministic model for the operations of all the world, including human behavior. Nothing, he believed, was exempt from causality. He was heavily influenced in this belief by Herbert Spencer's metaphysical treatise _First Principles_. The aim of this thesis is to illuminate the influence of Spencer's work on Dreiser, to suggest how that influence helped Dreiser shape the plot of his novel, with particular reference to the mechanistic ethic for which it becomes almost a parable, a cautionary tale, and to show how Dreiser incorporates psychological verisimilitude into the novel to such an extent that he anticipates the efforts of modern clinical and ethical thinkers in the attempt to resolve the question: if man is not free, is he not fated to do as he pleases?

It is rare that any one book can be said to have been influenced by any other to the extent that Sister Carrie was influenced by Herbert Spencer's First Principles, a metaphysical treatise which proposes a wholly mechanistic or materialistic model for the world. The narrator of Sister Carrie refers specifically to Spencer's work, oddly enough in the form of a caveat:

> For all the liberal analysis of Spencer and our modern naturalistic philosophers we have an infantile perception of morals. There is more to the subject than mere conformity to a law of evolution. It is yet deeper than conformity to things of earth alone.[1]

Nonetheless, Dreiser goes on to make use of Spencer's theories, and indeed places Carrie in a world in which the material and mechanical are so heavily emphasized as to obscure any glimpse of anything not "of earth alone."

Christopher Katope, in what is probably the most thorough discussion of Spencer and Sister Carrie to date, writes that First Principles provided Dreiser with an "architechtonic element" for the novel and "helped him solve the problems of character relationships and plot advancement."[2] Katope views the novel as an illustration of evolution (as Spencer describes it), the narrative, the description and characterization fleshing out a skeleton of theory. He takes as a point of departure for this view, Spencer's model of evolution:

> Evolution is an integration of matter and concomitant dissipation of motion; during which the matter passes from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite coherent heterogeneity. . . .[3]

Thus, Katope traces Carrie's progression from "indefiniteness," indecision, confusion of "her own image of herself and the world's," into an artist of "differentiated, self-assured complexity."[4] The novel depicts Carrie's transformation from one of a class, just another shop girl, to "one of a kind," a celebrity who can trade on her unique identity. Simultaneously, Hurstwood's dissolution is shown, taking him from "coherent heterogeneity" to "incoherent homogeneity." From his position as Manager, "a well-known man about town," with a "solid substantial air," (SC, p. 43) whose vocation consists mainly of lending his own character to the atmosphere of the establishment, he degenerates to just another of the countless, nameless beggars in New York, wandering the streets, muttering "incoherently," unable to "think logically." (SC, p. 494) Katope goes on to argue that Dreiser sends Carrie and Hurstwood on their various perambulations through the city to illustrate the "dissipation of motion" which accompanies an organism's evolutionary development.[5] He also suggests that Carrie's rocking chair is introduced at various points as a "rhythmic prop" to suggest the "new order of rhythm" which, in Spencer's view, accompanies all evolution.[6] These last two points, it should be noted, are not made very convincingly. The language with which Dreiser describes the activities, walking and rocking, is in no way evocative of Spencer, though elsewhere there are numerous deliberate echoes of the philosopher. In the absence of any auctorial pronouncement

on the subject, therefore, the case for a deliberate parallel here seems tenuous, at best. Finally, Katope raises and too quickly drops the Spencerian concept of "equilibration," noting only that as the novel opens, Hurstwood is in a state of "equilibrium," his wants more or less matched by his means.

In much of this Katope is correct, but Spencer's philosophy was much more to Dreiser than a skeleton for a plot or a blueprint of the actions of his characters. Katope fails to recognize the complete logical agreement which Dreiser holds with Spencer. If Dreiser's view is anywhere at variance with the philosopher's, it is nowhere evidenced save in the caveat above. Moreover, Katope almost ignores the concept of equilibration, the very concept most fundamental to Sister Carrie. Equilibration is, in this novel, the concept which dictated the moral slant, which, in the words of Ronald Martin, provided "conceptual alternatives to conventional morality."[7]

Equilibration is also one of the concepts most fundamental to First Principles, one of the most basic blocks on which the work's argument is founded. The concept of equilibration arises because, to paraphrase Spencer, we necessarily conceive of our own (ultimately ineluctable) world as consisting of coexistent opposing forces, such as "attraction and repulsion" or "pressure and tension." (FP, p. 192) Given this, it follows that,

> In all cases there is a progress toward equilibration. That universal coexistence of

> antagonist forces which, as we before saw, necessitates the universality of rhythm, and which, as we before saw, necessitates the decomposition of every force into divergent forces, at the same time necessitates the ultimate establishment of balance. (FP, p. 419)[8]

Clearly, Dreiser took formulations such as this to heart for he constructed in Sister Carrie a system of forces and elements in varying states of equilibrium. The notions of balance and imbalance are all-pervasive, referred to specifically in philosophical asides, expressed in symbol and embodied in the structure of the narrative.

Among the most specific references to balance is Dreiser's reflection on the human condition as a "balance between good and evil" and what seems to be his description of human happiness:

> There is nothing in this world more delightful than that middle state in which we mentally balance at times, possessed of means, lured by desire, and yet deterred by conscience or want of decision. (SC, p. 67)

Consistent with this view of human nature, Sister Carrie portrays characters struggling for balance and security against a tide of forces which drags all toward an entropic equilibrium. In the character rendered most subjectively we find the clearest example of this, as Hurstwood's progress is pictured in terms of a system of balances and imbalances, showing the operation of the equilibrating forces in the world. At the beginning of the novel Hurstwood is in a position of relative harmony with the world. Managing the bar provides him a nice balance of desires and means. He is content in his career. But, as

Katope points out, Hurstwood's equilibrium is an "unstable" one.[9] The materialism of his wife and children threatens to overtake his means. Furthermore, his acrimonious relationship with his wife and his estrangement from his children have caused him to live too much for his work. As domestic harmony degenerates, Hurstwood looks for compensation elsewhere: ". . . his interest in Drouet's little shop girl grew in an almost evenly balanced proportion." (SC, p. 115) Normally, the tendency toward balance deters Hurstwood:

> Once in a while he would meet a woman whose youth, sprightliness and humor would make his wife seem deficient by contrast, but the temporary dissatisfaction which such an encounter might arouse would be counterbalanced by his social position and a certain matter of policy. (SC, p. 85)

Hurstwood's domestic difficulties, however, are exacerbated to a point which suppresses any discretion or indecision which might restrain him. Then, when his indiscretions come to light and he forfeits his home life entirely, Hurstwood becomes desperate. He steals money from his employers and steals Carrie from Drouet in an attempt to restore balance and contentment. He succeeds, in the short term, in New York. His status there erodes with respect to the outside world, but this does not threaten his contentment at first, for he does not fully sense this erosion. "If he did not, it was due to the fact that his state was so well-balanced that an absolute change for the worse did not show." (SC, p. 339) Thus, even if his professional status is reduced, his satisfaction with his youthful "wife" compensates for this fact.

Hurstwood's contentment cannot last long, because here, too, his equilibrium is unstable. Hurstwood is analogous to what Spencer calls an equilibrium mobile, a closed system of elements in equilibrium which is yet subject to the larger equilibrating forces of the world around it. Spencer illustrates with the example of a top, the gyroscopic equilibrium of which persists only until gravity and friction make their claims upon it. (FP, p. 240)

Because, as Ernest Griffin puts it, Dreiser's "plots and characters gather significance when related to studies" of more modern thinkers (he has the existentialist Norman O. Brown and Herbert Marcuse in mind), it might be useful here to turn to the work of several theorists whose work suggests the psychological verisimilitude with which Dreiser, drawing from Spencer, imbues Sister Carrie.[10] Some contemporary psychologists examining, much as the way Dreiser has done, the full range of sacrifices and rewards, both economic and intangible, in social and intimate transactions, have concluded that there is a natural drive to balance expenditure and gain. This, loosely stated, is what they call "equity theory." The central tenet of equity theory is this: "When individuals find themselves participating in inequitable relationships, they will become distressed. The more inequitable the relationship, the more distress the individuals will feel."[11] On the most intimate and intangible level, Dreiser depicts the inequity of love, the disparity of feeling and commitment between Hurstwood and

Carrie; Carrie does not entirely reciprocate Hurstwood's affection. Another theorist, Merleau-Ponty, describes the probable result of such an imbalance:

> This is what happens in the case where there is more love felt on one side than on the other: one throws himself, and his whole life, into his love, the other remains free, finding in this love a merely contingent manner of living. The former feels his being and substance flowing away into that freedom which confronts him, whole and unqualified.[12]

Clearly, this is what has happened with Hurstwood and Carrie. She is not in love with him in Chicago, though his influence is sufficient "almost to delude her into the belief that she was possessed of a lively passion for him." (SC, p. 205) Carrie finds in their attachment only a "contingent manner of existence," in fact assents to it only as such. Hurstwood, begging her to come with him, promises, "You can see Montreal and New York, and then, if you don't want to stay you can go back." Under these terms, for the first time, Carrie finds the arrangement remotely acceptable.

> The first gleam of fairness shown in this proposition for Carrie. It seemed a plausible thing to do, much as she feared opposition if she tried to carry it out. Montreal and New York. Even now she was speeding toward those strange lands and she could see them if she liked. She thought, but made no sign. (SC, p. 279)

Carrie acquiesces in the proposition, but demands the freedom to leave if she wants to. (SC, p. 280) Hurstwood later broods over what he has lost: "his host of friends, his name, his house and family . . . his dignity, his merry meetings, his pleasant evenings," feeling (as Merleau-Ponty might characterize it) his "being and substance flowing

away." (SC, p. 287) Hurstwood's "substance" passes, in a sense, into that 'whole and unqualified freedom' which Carrie comes to possess, because Carrie will gain from the relationship a form of that which Hurstwood sacrifices for her, celebrity and flexibility within cosmopolitan society.

Established in New York, Hurstwood experiences a period of contentment, but only because he ignores the erosion of domestic tranquility which the disparity of feeling makes inevitable.

> At any moment the extremes of feeling might be anti-polarized at the dinner table. This often happens in the best regulated families. Little things brought out on such occasions need great love to obliterate them afterward. . . . Between Hurstwood and Carrie, as we have shown, was no mutual great love.

Dreiser finds in the action of the equilibrating forces on man the seed of destruction of Hurstwood's temporary contentment:

> Either (man) is growing stronger, healthier, wiser as the youth approaching manhood, or he is growing weaker, older and less incisive mentally, as the man approaching old age. There are no other states. Frequently, there is a period between the cessation of youthful accretion and the setting in, in the case of the middle-aged man, of the tendency toward decay when the two processes are almost perfectly balanced and there is little doing in either direction. Given time enough, however, the balance becomes a sagging to the grave side. (SC, p. 338)

In this passage we find a clear echo of Spencer's model of evolution, and Dreiser's mentor sheds some light on the course of Hurstwood's decline:

> . . . the aggregate has at length parted with its excess of motion, and habitually receives as much from its environment as it habitually

> loses--when it has reached that equilibrium in which its changes end, it thereafter remains subject to all actions in its environment which may increase the quantity of motion it contains, and which in the lapse of time are sure, either slowly or suddenly to give its parts such excess of motion as will cause disintegration. Accordingly, as its equilibrium is a very stable or unstable one, its dissolution may come quickly or may be indefinitely delayed. . . . (FP, p. 448)

Hurstwood's equilibrium is an unstable one, for his relationship to Carrie is unbalanced. Furthermore, his fortunes are due to decline, he no longer will 'receive as much as he habitually loses,' and this imbalance will hasten his disintegration. Dreiser posits yet another cause of disintegration, Hurstwood's own morbid perception of disparity.

> Constant comparison between his old state and his new showed a balance for the worse, which produced a constant state of gloom, or at least depression. Now it has been shown experimentally that a constantly subdued frame of mind produces certain poisons in the blood, called katastates, just as virtuous feelings or pleasure and delight produce helpful chemicals called anastates. The poisons, generated by remorse, inveigh against the system and eventually produce marked physical deterioration. To this Hurstwood was subject. (SC, p. 339)

Clearly, Dreiser intends to show Hurstwood undone by the many imbalances which arise in his world. Just as a plenist universe abhors a vacuum, Dreiser's equilibrating universe abhors imbalance and Hurstwood is swept away by the forces the world marshals to eliminate it.

The notion of balance pertains to far more than Hurstwood's fate. Dreiser has structured the novel in such a way as to suggest that he was trying to balance the elements of the novel itself. He loads Sister Carrie with

terms suggesting opposites and correlatives, reinforcing the sense of the world as a system of polarities struggling to strike a balance. Thus, he creates in Carrie "the passivity of soul which is always the mirror of the active world." (SC, p. 157) He contrasts the "emotional" and "intellectual" nature. (SC, p. 378) He speaks of "the ancient attraction of the stale to the fresh." (SC, p. 105) Dreiser posits as the motors of human activity, "free-will" and "instinct." (SC, p. 73) The need for balance dictates the operation, in the novel of a physical law, formulated in Spencer's work, "action and reaction are equal and opposite." (FP, p. 462) Thus, Dreiser writes of Hurstwood's epistolary wooing of Carrie, "By the natural law which governs all effort, what he wrote reacted upon him." (SC, p. 144) Possibly he has this principle in mind, too, when he has the critic state, "If you wish to be merry, see Carrie's frown." (SC, p. 448) Dreiser suggests an equal and opposite reaction when he writes of Carrie, "So peculiar was her lonely, self-withdrawing temper, that she was becoming an interesting figure in the public eye." (SC, p. 478) Carrie (and Ames as well) seem to attract attention almost to the extent that they shun it.

Dreiser gives many elements in the novel their opposite number to insure a suggestion of balance in the structure. The largest system of opposites occurs within the corresponding ascent of Carrie and fall of Hurstwood. The two characters very nearly trade positions, as is made clear by

considering their respective positions at the beginning and end of the novel. At the outset Carrie is a nearly helpless waif apparently destined to end in the street, and Hurstwood is a man of position and localized celebrity. As the novel ends, Carrie has lifted herself above the faceless masses, has fashioned an identity for herself, has become a "personality," as is highly proclaimed to New York in the glowing signs. (SC, p. 493) At the opposite pole is Hurstwood; he has been assimilated into the nobodies. So complete is his transformation that he becomes, in a sense, the beggar he ignores as theater-goer in Chicago (p. 139), begging in front of the New York theaters for something to eat and the price of a bed. (SC, p. 492) The 1900, "unexpurgated" edition of Sister Carrie suggests this metamorphosis somewhat more strongly, with a clearer echo of the beggar by Hurstwood. Here the beggar pleads, "Say mister . . . , would you mind giving me the price of a bed?" and "Honest to God, mister, I'm without a place to sleep." (p. 103) Hurstwood later says, "Give me a little something, will you, mister? . . . For god's sake, do; I'm starving."[13] Thus, the progress to opposite ends of the spectrum is completed, as Carrie's name lights up the sky Hurstwood snuffs his light and the city sends his "nameless body to Potter's field."[14]

Consistent with the importance of balance in the novel the action is structured to suggest a device of counter-weights. We see the fortunes of Hurstwood descend to

counterbalance the ascent of Carrie, and we can mark the strata through which they pass. The first stop on Hurstwood's fall is the point at which he begins to measure himself against Drouet. Hurstwood ". . . envied him, and now as he looked at the well-dressed, jolly salesman whom he so much liked, the cold gleam of the rival glowed in his eye." (_SC_, p. 108) Inherent in this rivalry is an equation of individuals, and this is a reduction in stature for Hurstwood who should be superior to Drouet. At the same time, Carrie is said to have come up a bit in the world; ". . . when Hurstwood called he found a young woman who was much more than the Carrie Drouet had first spoken to." (_SC_, p. 105) On the train to Detroit Hurstwood's reduction is more complete and he plays the part of the "masher," offering a "berth in the sleeper," and the use of his coat. (_SC_, p. 281) Carrie's superiority to Hurstwood at this point is clearly established by his abject prostration before her.

Carrie's rise to success in the theater is, at least in its beginning, necessitated by Hurstwood's continued decline. Unemployed, he finds himself in New York every bit as dependent upon her as she had once been on Drouet. In a continuance of the role-reversing trend of the action, Hurstwood's dependence on Carrie ceases with the symbolic repayment of the exact sum with which Carrie's dependence upon Drouet began. (_SC_, p. 439) Continuing the trend, Hurstwood is shown at one point in the straits in which

Carrie begins the novel, one social rung above the street, with employ so tenuous as to be lost through illness. (SC, p. 463) Hurstwood, like Carrie, does lose his job through illness, but, on the "graveward" side of the continuum, there is no one to rescue him from the gutter.

Dreiser uses, in his counterweighted structure, the image of counterweighted devices at several key junctures. Minnie Hanson, in her dreams, sees her sister descending merrily to perdition in some sort of line-and-pulley device, "An old basket used for descending was hanging there, fastened by an old rope. . . . She began to pull the basket over, and now in spite of all protest she had swung over and was going down--down." (SC, p. 79) Later, when the twinned fortunes of Carrie and Hurstwood are in a state of temporary equilibrium, Carrie comes face to face with the cosmopolitan society (in the person of Mrs. Vance) for which she is destined, through a stationary dumbwaiter. (SC, p. 318) Carrie finally reverses her descent into perdition, in the person of Drouet, in her New York hotel, taking the elevator up, out of the reach of the salesman. (SC, p. 476) Thus, Dreiser manages to include as symbol a signature and suggestion of the structure of the whole novel.

The preoccupation with notions of equilibration and balance in Sister Carrie is more than a structural or an "architectonic" device. It leads to the considerable moral emphasis of the novel. It seems rather ironic that this particular novel was once regarded as immoral or amoral, for

the moral tone of Sister Carrie falls just short of didacticism. What Dreiser seems to have attempted is to start with certain metaphysical or meta-ethical principles (principles such as laws of nature or of the universe more fundamental than ethics, but out of which ethics necessarily come), and then to depict the operation of those principles, and the true ethic which arises from them, in the novel. In the process Dreiser mounts an attack on conventional morals or ethics.

Almost immediately, Sister Carrie seems to have drawn the righteous indignation of those with very conventional moral sensibilities. There are accounts detailing the objections of either Frank Doubleday, the novel's eventual publisher, or those of his wife, on moral grounds, and the near suppression of the novel on those grounds.[15] While hardly typical of the reviews, the following contemporary review of Sister Carrie, catches the essence of the moralistic objections to that work:

> "Sister Carrie," by Theodore Dreiser. The author calls his work a novel of city life, but he might have been more descriptive had he called it a novel of the worst side of city life. . . .
>
> The book is unhealthful in tone, however, and its literary quality is not high enough to cover its faults of theme.[16]

The book is flawed, in this reviewer's eyes and apparently for the Doubledays, by its lack of overtly moral theme, by the fact that neither Carrie nor Drouet are punished for their adulteries. As his diaries and biographies attest, Dreiser's sexual mores were unconventional for the time, and

this is reflected in his work, but Sister Carrie is by no means amoral.

Dreiser, along with Spencer, holds that the same laws which describe the operation of natural phenomena describe the motivations and behavior of men as well. Dreiser sees man being borne along by the forces of nature, "Among the forces which sweep and play through the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind." (SC, p. 73) Man is subject to the tyranny of his own chemistry and instinct, but Dreiser's view of the world does not preclude free will.

> We see man far removed out of the lairs of the jungles, his innate instincts dulled by too near an approach to free will, his free will scarcely sufficiently developed to replace his instincts and afford him perfect guidance. (SC, p. 73)

What Dreiser means by free will, however, is not the conventional notion of the concept. Some years after writing Sister Carrie, in his philosophical writings, Dreiser ridiculed what sounds like the Victorian notion of free will:

> But assume that the battery, finding itself to be a battery, (although, as in the case of man, not knowing just how or why), exclaims to itself--By God! I made that bell ring! . . . Yet man says to himself--See, I am a man, I am making my way in life. I am master of my fate.[17]

Dreiser ridicules philosophically naive notions of free will, particularly those which require free will and deny causation to support their view of the operation of ethical principles. Dreiser would surely have encountered some version of one such system of thought in his Catholic catechism, an echo of which, the theological "problem of

evil," we find him mocking in An American Tragedy.

> For in some blind, dualistic way both she and Asa [Clyde Griffiths' parents] insisted, as do all religionists, in disassociating God from harm and error and misery, while granting him nevertheless supreme control. They would seek for something else--some malign, treacherous, deceiving power which, in the face of God's omniscience and omnipotence, still beguiles and betrays--and find it eventually in the error and perverseness of the human heart, which God has made, yet which he does not control. . . .[18]

Dreiser, in a letter to H. L. Mencken, makes Spencer at least partly responsible for the philosophical demise of his religious beliefs. "(Spencer, Huxley and Tyndall) shifted my point of view tremendously, confirmed my worst suspicions and destroyed the last remaining traces of Catholicism which I now detest as a political organization or otherwise."[19]

Apparently, Dreiser does not wish to divorce any class of phenomena entirely from the material laws, or from the fact of causation. He has taken his cue from First Principles where Spencer specifically includes action of the mind, heart or soul, in his discussion of physical phenomena:

> In what we distinguish as acquired habits, and in the moral differences of races and nations produced by habits that are maintained through successive generations, we have countless illustrations of this progressive adaptation; which can cease only with the establishment of a complete equilibrium between constitutions and conditions.
>
> Possibly some will fail to see how the equilibrations described in this section can be classed with those preceding them. . . . Nevertheless, such equilibrations are as truly physical as the rest. . . . For the present it must suffice to point out, as before, that what we know subjectively as states of consciousness are, objectively, modes of force. . . . (FP, p. 438)

Clearly, Dreiser holds with Spencer here. We have the evidence of his discussion of katastates and anastates to attest to the fact that Dreiser did not divorce subjective and physical phenomena. Also, in his accounting for Carrie's lack of conscience, as she goes with Drouet to a restaurant after the theater, Dreiser echoes Spencer's notion that "moral differences" are produced by "habit."

> If any habits had ever had time to fix upon her, they would have operated here. Habits are peculiar things. They will drive the really non-religious mind out of bed to say prayers that are only a custom and not a devotion. The victim of habit, when he has neglected the thing which was customary with him to do, feels a little scratching in the brain, a little irritating something which comes of being out of the rut, and imagines it to be the prick of conscience, the still, small voice that is urging him ever to righteousness. (SC, p. 77)

Having apparently reduced morals to a matter of habit and custom, it would seem that Dreiser is making a nihilistic attack on ethics as a whole. His relatively neutral reporting of Carrie's adultery and Hurstwood's thievery gives rise to the view that Sister Carrie is an a-moral work. But what he has actually attempted is to explode conventional morality and to supplant it with what he regards as a "true ethic." The nature of the moral strain which Dreiser wishes to expose is aptly pointed up by lines from "Under the Gaslight," the play in which Carrie gains her first theatrical experience. Speaking of the character Carrie portrays, one of the actors declaims,

> Have you ever heard of the Siberian wolves? When one of the pack falls through weakness, the others devour him. It is not an elegant comparison--but

> there is something wolfish in society. Laura has mocked it with a pretence, and society, which is made up of pretences, will bitterly resent the mockery. (SC, p. 184)

When Carrie makes her entrance in the same scene of the play ". . . the social pack moved away from her scornfully." (SC, p. 185) It is, in Dreiser's view, a reversion to the instinctive side of man's nature that leads us into the sort of pack morality depicted in the play. Hurstwood is motivated by this pack morality. This is made clear when his deliverations before stealing the money occasion this reflection by the narrator:

> We must remember that it may not be a knowledge of right, for no knowledge of right is predicated of the animal's instinctive recoil at evil. Men are still led by instincts before they are regulated by knowledge. It is instinct which recalls the criminal--it is instinct, (where highly organized reasoning is absent), which gives the criminal his feeling of danger, his fear of wrong. (SC, p. 269)

Though Hurstwood vacillates for a long time before taking the money, it is his drive for self-preservation which deters him, not a real consideration of right and wrong. "The true ethics of the situation never occurred to him. It is most certain they never would have, under any circumstances." (SC, p. 270) The "true ethics" of the situation would never occur to Hurstwood because he has no real ethic. He has middle class morals but they are a system of deceptions and lies, meeting the world, like his "home life," through "force of habit, by force of conventional opinion." His morals arise out of what the equity

theorists call "psychological equity." Individuals naturally attempt to reduce the distress of perceived inequity. "A person can restore psychological equity to a relationship by distorting reality in appropriate ways. He can try to convince himself that an inequitable relationship is, in fact, equitable."[20] (SC, p. 87) His bourgeois conscience divorces itself from the many inequities about which it can do nothing but suffer distress, setting up instead a delusional moral order. The only sin in this sort of moral order is getting caught. Hurstwood, therefore, "lost sympathy for the man that made a mistake and was found out." (SC, p. 85) He is as ready as the rest of the pack to fall on the unfortunate wretch. As Hurstwood discovers, however, his wife's pack instinct seems to be a little more highly developed. "Mrs. Hurstwood felt something, she knew not what, sniffing change as animals do danger, afar off." Hurstwood commits the cardinal error, is found out, and his wife, sensing her advantage, sets upon him. Dreiser salts the confrontation with bestial imagery. "Hurstwood pricked up his ears . . . ," at the tone of his wife's voice. He tries to ignore it asking, "Where did George get that dog he has there in the yard?" (SC, p. 219) Later, sensing instinctively her husband's final defeat, Mrs. Hurstwood "turned upon him, animal-like, able to strike an effectual second blow." (SC, p. 220) Shown in her final victory, "She gazed at him--a pythoness in humor." (SC, p. 221) Thus, Dreiser shows middle class morality for the "pretence"

he believes it to be. In place of reasonable consideration of the ethics of a given situation, there is a blind, instinctive groping for either safety or advantage.

We will do well to recall, at this juncture, that Dreiser opposes his notion of free will to instinct, and so it is possible that by taking up the examination of free will, we can illuminate the nature of what he considers "true ethics." Dreiser does not furnish a philosophical aside explaining just what he meant by "free will," but he does make clear that it is dependent upon and potentiated by understanding. In the narrative this is illustrated primarily by negative example. Drouet, for instance, can be only "as good as his intellect conceived." (SC, p. 64) Later he is shown, in virtue of his ignorance, to be a fine proof of a deterministic or fatalist model of the world:

> That worthy had his future fixed for him beyond a peradventure. He could not help what he was going to do. He could not see clearly enough to wish to do differently. He was drawn by innate desire to act the old pursuing part. (SC, p. 75)

Hurstwood is trapped in his fate, much like Drouet, by lack of capacity for understanding or analysis. He is more truthful than he suspects when he tells Carrie of his desperate deception of her, "I was simply put where I didn't know what else to do." (SC, p. 279) Hurstwood is doomed by his own chemistry because, "Not trained to reason or introspect himself, he could not analyze the change that was taking place in his mind and hence his body." (SC, p. 339) There is an alternative:

> It is the higher mental development which induces philosophy and that fortitude which refuses to dwell upon such things--refuses to be made to suffer by their consideration. (SC, p. 341)

Carrie, on the other hand, while no intellectual, tends to be made more free by what powers of observation and analysis she has. Carrie, on the stage in New York, is very different from the Carrie of Chicago who was reluctant to "recite without solicitation." (SC, p. 171) Her keener perception of her relation to, and worth to the world, leads her to "break part" (as Drouet was said to be incapable of doing) in a performance, to deviate from the role laid out for her.

> He [the star] expected no answer and a dull one would have been reproved. But Carrie, whose experience and belief in herself gave her daring, courtsied sweetly again and answered:
>
> "I am yours truly." (SC, p. 431)

She has changed in other ways, too:

> Experience of the world and of necessity was in her favor. No longer the lightest word of a man made her head dizzy. She had learned that men could change and fail. Flattery in its most palpable form had lost its force with her. (SC, p. 432)

Dreiser attempts in Sister Carrie a narrative resolution of the paradox of a world where there is mechanistic causation, fate, and there is also free will. Deliberately, and to some extent constrained by the nature of this undertaking, he fashioned a tragedy. As Donald Pizer observes, Dreiser himself called Sister Carrie the "tragedy of a man's life."[21] Sister Carrie is, in part anyway, Carrie's portrait as dramatic artist. Dreiser could hardly have written a

novel so intrinsically concerned with the theater without having been mindful of the dramatic archetypes in the story. We have W. A. Swanberg's recounting of Dreiser's burst of enthusiasm for Sophocles, in an instance where the tragedian sounds precociously existentialist.

> These two literary realists (Dreiser and Edgar Lee Masters) saw each other almost every day, and Floyd Dell, dropping in on them at Tenth Street, found them reading Sophocles aloud: "O ye deathward going tribes of men, what do your lives mean except that they go to nothingness."[22]

With this in mind, and given Larzer Ziff's suggestion that "Spencer operated for Dreiser as a choric explanation of experience," it is arguable that Dreiser's numerous philosophical asides are similar to the Greek's choral declamations, serving the function of informing the audience as to the nature of the higher forces with which the characters struggle.[23] As in Sophoclean tragedy, each of the characters is given a _fate_ in this novel, and each is given a sort of limited free will to either accept or attempt to circumvent his fate. Their autonomy is much like that of their classical counterparts, as abstracted by J. C. Opstetelten: "(Fate's) operation, on the one hand, coincides with the deployment of devine power, and, on the other hand, operates actively not so much _over against_ man as _out of_ him, as an immanent force belonging to man's ultimate being. . . . That is why Sophocles' heroes appear at once to act freely and to fulfil their destiny. . . ." Interestingly, Hurstwood resembles the Sophoclean hero in more than his conditioned freedom, for as Opstelten goes on to observe

of the Greek's typical protagonist, often, "His only rehabilitation is a self-chosen death."[24] To a certain extent, one's struggle against fate hastens one's dissolution. But as Pizer aptly argues, Dreiser's adaptation of tragedy is not strictly classical in form. Hurstwood's fall is not the product of a single transgression, the hamartia, or sin, of Sophocles and Aristotle.

> Hurstwood's fall is not primarily a tragedy of chance, of the accidental closing of the safe. It is principally the tragedy of a man who thinks he is impregnable but who is then discovered to be weak when his desires drive him outside protection of his roles.[25]

Hurstwood's tragedy is partly that of the modern "everyman," a "medieval tragedy," a "fall from high places as the universal forces of 'circumstance' and 'subconscious direction' have their day."[26]

Hurstwood only hastens his undoing with his crime, that being only a part of his larger tendency to test "the boundaries which necessity sets." (SC, p. 132) Hurstwood steals the money because he takes typical "bad faith" view of money, seeing it as "usurped privilege." (SC, p. 62) The money represents to Hurstwood a usurpation of dominance; his theft is an attempt to escape the social order. Dreiser describes Hurstwood's deluded presumption in terms reminiscent of the classical, anthropomorphizing world view:

> A prisoner of fate, held enchained for his own delight, he does not know that the walls are tall, that the sentinels of life are forever pacing, musket in hand. He cannot perceive that all joy is within and not without. He must be for scaling the bounds of society, for overpowering the sentinel. (SC, p. 132)

Hurstwood's presumption is a violation of the social order as conceived by Spencer and enforced by equilibration. For Spencer, ideally, no desires are entertained but those which may be "properly" enacted within the context of society. Thus, his hypothetical universal equilibrium will be, "the arrival at a state of human nature and social organization, such that the individual has no desires but those which may be satisfied without exceeding the proper sphere of action. . . ."[27] Hurstwood's failure, in Spencerian terms, is a failure of "equilibration between man's desires and the conduct necessitated by surrounding conditions." (FP, p. 443) Hurstwood's transgressions, like those of Carrie and Drouet, do not necessitate swift retribution. Dreiser depicts instead a slow and subtle evolution of Hurstwood's "surrounding conditions," a change which renders them hostile to the saloonkeeper, as he himself grows less adaptable.

The proper exercise of free will, as opposed to Hurstwood's, is "philosophic" resignation, "alignment with the forces" which govern the universe, something akin to acceptance of the will of the gods. Ames is the only character in the novel to achieve this resignation. He is, in his denigration of material pretence, akin to ". . . the Epictitus who smiles when the last vestige of physical welfare has been removed." (SC, p. 340) Ames, at Sherry's, shows disdain for the "usurped privilege" of the nouveau riche:

> I sometimes think it's a shame for people to spend so much money this way. . . . They pay so much more than these things are worth. They put on so much show. (<u>SC</u>, p. 334)

Ames is so far from the sort of self-destructive brooding that Hurstwood engages in, over "constant comparison of his old state and his new," that he takes Carrie away from her own materialistic dissatisfactions.

> He had taken away some of the bitterness of the contrast between this life and her life, all by a certain defiant indifference which concerned only him. (<u>SC</u>, p. 336)

Ames' superiority consists partly in his "indifference" to the tides of materialism. Manifest elsewhere, less perfectly in the less perfect creatures of the material world, even the <u>appearance</u> of indifference can be a distinguishing feature of superiority. Hurstwood, before his precipitous decline, is still capable of presenting a detached appearance to the world, for while, "Drouet was palavering with the loosesness of excitement and passion. The manager mastered himself only by a superhuman effort." (<u>SC</u>, p. 193) Mrs. Hurstwood vanquishes her husband in their confrontation partly in virtue of her unprecedented "cruel look of indifference." (<u>SC</u>, p. 220) After her dinner with the Vances and Ames, Carrie aspires to Ames' calm, taking her leave with "feigned indifference." (<u>SC</u>, p. 337)

The quality of indifference, such as Ames manifests, seems to be the saving grace in the tragic world of <u>Sister Carrie</u>. It is to be distinguished from the indifference of apathy and torpor into which Hurstwood sinks in New York.

It is a product of the process of resignation, in its purest form, of <u>philosophical</u> resignation. (In Ames' case the quality resembles what Kierkegaard spoke of as "infinite resignation.")[28] In almost all cases a certain passivity seems to bring one into more fortuitous 'alignment with the forces.' Thus, Carrie, with her "passivity of soul," is the one smiled upon by the gods. (<u>SC</u>, p. 157) Thus too, Ames advocates self-abnegation as the highest calling. The electrical expert speaks in terms reminiscent of conduction versus resistance, "You and I are but mediums through which something is expressing itself. Now, our duty is to make ourselves ready mediums." (<u>SC</u>, p. 485) The "something" which expresses itself, is the same power which Opstelten sees coming "out of" man, the "immanent force belonging to man's ultimate being."

Dreiser, through Ames, confronts us directly with a curious form of freedom, one which incorporates both compulsion (by that which "expresses something") and choice, to recognize or ignore one's "duty." Under Spencer's model, as his concepts appear in this novel, free will and fate or determinism are just two more of the opposites or correlatives through which we must envision the world. In <u>Sister Carrie</u> we never see absolute freedom or absolute determinism, the characters are free in proportion to their understanding of their situation and the forces being brought to bear upon them. Absolute freedom and absolute compulsion lose meaning in this context, just as it is meaningless to say, for

instance, that anything is absolutely expensive or absolutely cheap. (Dreiser would not admit to anything being, in the economic sense, "free.") One can be only more or less free. As Dreiser portrays it, freedom sounds very much like the freedom of Merleau-Ponty's succinct analysis:

> What then is freedom? To be born is to be born of the world and to be born into the world. The world is already constituted, but also never completely constituted; in the first case we are acted upon, in the second we are open to an infinite number of possibilities. But this analysis is still abstract, for we exist in both ways _at once_. There is, therefore, never determinism and never absolute choice. . . . The generality of the "role" and of the situation comes to the aid of decision, and in this exchange between the situation and the person who takes it up, it is impossible to determine precisely the "share contributed by the situation" and the "share contributed by freedom."[29]

Dreiser seems to feel too that we are "open to an infinite number of possibilities"; man for him is "a creature of incalculable variability." (_SC_, p. 73) The world, as Merleau-Ponty says, "is never completely constituted, just as, for Dreiser, "evolution is ever in action." (_SC_, p. 73) The fact that man is not independent of "the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe" (_SC_, p. 73) leaves him, for both Dreiser and Merleau-Ponty, vacillating between freedom and compulsion. The fact of determinism, that there is causation, that the forces of the universe shape and sometimes govern human behavior, does not explode, for Dreiser, all morality. He is not speaking metaphorically when he speaks of morals and ethics. Early in _Sister Carrie_, Dreiser waves some philosophical expostulations into

the narrative, and these point the way to a morality within the framework of causation and mechanistic philosophy:

> Answer first, why the heart thrills: explain wherefore some plaintive note goes wandering about the world undying, make clear the rose's subtle alchemy, evolving its ruddy lamp in light and rain. In the essence of these facts lie the first principles of morals.
>
> "Oh," thought Drouet, "how delicious is my conquest."
>
> "Ah," thought Carrie with mournful misgivings, "what is it I have lost?"
>
> Before this world-old proposition we stand, serious, interested, confused; endeavouring to evolve the true theory of morals--the true answer to what is right. (SC, p. 88)

This is not simply rhetoric, Sister Carrie constitutes Dreiser's "endeavour to evolve" a theory of morals, for in these simple reflections of Carrie and Drouet is a clue to the nature of morality. The salient point of their respective positions is this: Drouet's boon necessitates Carrie's loss. Nothing can be gained on the one hand without a correlative loss on the other, and this is a principle derived from nature itself, like the "rose's alchemy." All gain and loss is simply equilibration. This forms the moral crux of the novel. Hurstwood errs under the terms of the novel's ethic because he believes he can separate gain and loss, action and reaction. He is one of those without "Conception of a well-organized society wherein all shall accept a certain quota of responsibility and all realize a certain amount of happiness." (SC, p. 132) He enters into his liaison with Carrie, with ". . . only a thought of

pleasure without responsibility. . . . He would be happy with her and his own affairs would go on undisturbed." (SC, p. 133) He is like Joyce's "sentimentalist," ". . . who would enjoy without incurring the immense debtorship for a thing done."[30] He is more literally correct, once again, than he knows when he tells Carrie, ". . . I need someone to waste a little affection on me." (SC, p. 128) "Waste" is the correct word because he feels no corresponding responsibility or obligation incurred by the privilege of intimacy. Ames is the only character of the novel to grasp the underlying ethical principle of their world and he presents us with a sort of moral summary in the form of his advice to Carrie. The advice he gives has both ethical and aesthetic significance, but, most important, it shows the relation of Carrie's self-interest to her moral obligation:

> It so happens that you have the power to act. That is no credit to you. You might not have had it. It isn't an excuse for pride or self glorification. You paid nothing to get it. But now that you have it you must do something with it. . . .
>
> You have so much sympathy and such a melodious voice--make them valuable to others. You will have them so long as they express something in you. . . . You can't become self-interested, selfish and luxurious without having these sympathies and longings disappear. . . . You can't remain tender and sympathetic, and desire to serve the world without having it show in your face and your art. (SC, p. 486)

By themselves, Ames' assertions do not seem necessarily to follow, but in light of the novel's metaphysics they prove to be logical. Dreiser has asserted that money, in its true analysis, proves to be "stored energy." (SC,

p. 62) As such, it simply cannot be created ex nihilo. Carrie paid nothing to get her talent, but still it seems to mint money out of the air. Money must conform, like all other forces in the world, to the principle of equilibration; therefore, the books must balance. Carrie has incurred a debt, her own equilibrium is therefore unstable. In a state of equilibrium the balance "habitually receives from its environment as much as it habitually loses. . . ." (FP, p. 448) When it ceases to, as in Hurstwood's case, dissolution sets in immediately. The world sees to it subtly that it does not give more than it habitually receives. Carrie gets nothing for nothing; her satisfaction with wealth shrinks as fast as wealth grows.

> It does not take money long to make plain its impotence providing the desires are in the realm of affection. With her one hundred fifty dollars in hand Carrie could think of nothing particularly to do. . . . If she wanted to do anything better or move higher, she must have more--a great deal more. (SC, p. 457)

Thus, Ames' advice amounts to a call for Carrie to seek artistic and selfless satisfactions, rather than material satisfaction. Artistic satisfaction would consist partly in benefit to others and would presumably require a higher effort of Carrie. It would serve then to balance Carrie's debt, eliminate the debt's "drag on her soul." (SC, p. 477) It would allow her to make an act of restitution, restoring as the social scientists have it, "actual equity," without resorting to the delusional systems required by psychological equity seeking, delusions which would threaten the "sympathy"

Ames sees as necessary to her art. (SC, p. 477) The balance would then be restored to her life. She would receive, in satisfaction, as much from her environment as she lost, and dissolution would be forestalled. So, Ames (and Spencer) have clearly pointed the way for Carrie, but Dreiser leaves it unresolved at the novel's end whether she will follow it, or fall victim to her material success.

Clearly, Dreiser has woven a moral principle into Sister Carrie finding in equilibration a balance on which the true ethical considerations of the story may be weighed. He proposes an ethic which eschews the particular proscription (Thou shalt not commit adultery, for instance) and calls for recognition of a generalizable principle: responsibility follows on privilege and gain, just as reaction follows action. Having started with the most abstract of physical principles, he constructed a work in which that principle shaped, consistently, the language, structure and plot, and in so doing instanced an ethical principle operant within, even necessitated by, the principles of a mechanistic model of the world.

Notes

[1]Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie, (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 88. All other references to this work will be noted parenthetically (SC) in the text.

[2]Christopher Katope, "Sister Carrie and Spencer's First Principles," American Literature, No. 41 (1969), p. 65.

[3]Herbert Spencer, First Principles (New York: J. A. Hill and Company, 1904), p. 343. All further references to this source will be noted parenthetically (FP) in the text.

[4]Katope, p. 68.

[5]Katope, pp. 68-9.

[6]Katope, pp. 70-1.

[7]Ronald E. Martin, American Literature and the World of Force (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1981), p. 255. Martin has produced an exhaustive study of the mechanistic thinkers (principally Spencer) of the nineteenth century and the wide use to which their philosophies were put by American writers at the close of that century. Oddly, although he devotes a chapter to Dreiser, his treatment of Sister Carrie is quite cursory and he does not mention Katope at all. Richard Hofstader, in his Social Darwinism in American Thought, takes up the study of Spencer, among others, and the more popular and propagandistic applications of their philosophies.

[8]When Spencer speaks of equilibration he sometimes gives rise to confusion for several reasons. First, in his specifically mechanical and thermodynamic illustrations of the concept, equilibration seems roughly equivalent to entropy; however, when Spencer generalizes beyond these illustrations it becomes clear that the concept of entropy is more narrow than what he intends. Second, equilibration and equilibrium come to have a rather circular application in First Principles. Spencer maintains that the tendency of all forces is toward equilibrium, and the tendency of evolution is toward a universal equilibrium. The universal equilibrium becomes then, a concept similar to Aristotle's entelechy, the end of the formative cause. Universal equilibration enforces itself, for Spencer, through the infinite particular equilibrations which comprise evolution.

[9]Katope, p. 73.

[10]Earnest J. Griffin, "Sympathetic Materialism: A Re-reading of Theodore Dreiser." Humanities Association Bulletin, 20, No. 1, (1969), p. 60.

[11]Elaine Walster, G. William Walster, Ellen Berscheid, Equity: Theory and Research (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1978), p. 6.

[12]Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), ~~p. 453.~~ p. 319

[13]Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie, ed. Donald Pizer, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1970), p. 361.

[14]Dreiser, Sister Carrie, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1970), p. 362.

[15]Donald Pizer has included a history of the "legendary" controversy over the publication of Sister Carrie in the edition which he edited. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1970), pp. 433-70.

[16]Review in the Denver Republican, January 20, 1901, quoted in Theodore Dreiser: The Critical Reception, Jack Salzman, ed. (New York: David Lewis, Inc., 1972), pp. 10-1.

[17]Theodore Dreiser, Notes on Life, eds. Margeurite Tjader and John J. McAleer (University of Alabama Press, 1974), p. 102.

[18]Theodore Dreiser, An American Tragedy (New York: The New American Library, 1964), p. 23.

[19]Letter of May 13, 1916. Quoted in Letters of Theodore Dreiser, ed. Robert Elias (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), p. 211.

[20]Walster, p. 18.

[21]Donald Pizer, The Novels of Theodore Dreiser (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), p. 80. He is quoting Otis Notman, "Talks with Four Novelists," New York Times Review of Books, June 15, 1907, p. 393.

[22]W. A. Swanberg, Dreiser, (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York: 1965), p. 190.

[23]Larzer Ziff, The American 1890's: Life and Times of a Lost Generation (New York: Viking Press, 1968), p. 336.

[24]J. C. Opstelten, Sophocles and Greek Pessimism (North-Holland Publishing Co., Amsterdam: 1952), pp. 75-6.

[25]Pizer, pp. 77-8.

[26]Pizer, pp. 80-1.

[27](*FP*, p. 443) Martin gives an excellent analysis of Spencer's ethical writings, pp. 49-54.

[28]Soren Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling," in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall (New York: The Modern Library, 1959).

[29]Merleau-Ponty, p. 453.

[30]James Joyce, *Ulysses*, (New York, Random House, 1961), p. 199.

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