FISH, CRYSTAL, AND LOOP: DREISER'S HISTORIES IN THE "TRILOGY OF DESIRE"

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In 1912, Theodore Dreiser spoke with the *New York Sun* about his new novel *The Financier*, the first volume of what would become his epic "Trilogy of Desire." He briefly described the plot as being concerned with one Frank Cowperwood, a Philadelphia broker who enriches himself during the post-Jacksonian period of wildcat banking, the Civil War, and the financial panics of the 1850s, '60s, and '70s. He also alluded to his planned but as-yet-unwritten sequels *The Titan* (1914) and *The Stoic* (1947), which would see Cowperwood and the American economy through the advent of corporations, the rise of the labor movement, the Populist campaigns of William Jennings Bryan, and the dawn of the twentieth century.

Dreiser spoke at greater length about his novel's sense of history, announcing that while *The Financier* was ostensibly concerned with a nineteenth-century person and context, he believed it evoked something much older. "In 'The Financier' I have not taken a man so much as I have a condition," he told the reporter. "It has always struck me that America since the civil war in its financial and constructive tendencies has represented more the natural action of the human mind when it is stripped of convention, theory, prejudice and belief of any kind than almost any period in the world's history."[1] He went on to compare American business magnates of the period to the ambitious, self-interested, and imperial rulers of previous eras, finding a transhistorical connection uniting them all: "I do not think that the mind of H. H. Rogers or John D. Rockefeller or E. H. Harriman was far removed from that of either Alexander VI, Cesare Borgia, Machiavelli, or to go back to the Roman Empire, any one of twenty Roman emperors, including Galba and Nero," he said.[2]

The "Trilogy of Desire" receives relatively little attention today, with scholars drawn more to Dreiser's contemporary-minded *Sister Carrie* (1900), *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911), and *An American Tragedy* (1925). Indeed, only one of its volumes, *The Financier*, exists in a modern scholarly edition.[3] But as Dreiser's interview remarks suggest, the trilogy was an important achievement in its time and remains one

today, representing an ambitious departure from his earlier writings, from the generic conventions of the historical novel, and from the practice of history writing as it stood in the early twentieth century. It was Dreiser's first literary undertaking to require research, inspired as it was by the life of the streetcar and railroad tycoon Charles T. Yerkes (the man instrumental in creating Chicago's Loop and the London Underground). It was unusual in comparison to other American novels about business, its depictions of economic history being more even-handed than the generally polemical ones—whether by muckrakers or corporate apologists—that had come before.[4] So too did it distinguish its author from most professional historians of the day, to whom the economy was of little interest.[5] Most significant of all, however, was the profound contradiction that the trilogy sought to demonstrate within history itself. As he had put it to the *Sun*, Dreiser found the nineteenth century to be a valuable moment for historical investigation because it revealed something that was entirely ahistorical, laying bare "the natural action of the human mind" and divesting it of any culturally specific beliefs or mores. Consequently, the trilogy depicts a time that somehow exists outside of time, with Dreiser both engaging in historical study and evoking the past in ways that almost no professional historian would.

The "Trilogy of Desire" is a historical novel comprised of many histories. It is relentlessly factual in its narration, with its central character modeled so faithfully upon the real-life Yerkes that critics such as Philip L. Gerber have described it as "biography in fictional dress."[6] Conversely, Alison Shonkwiler and others have found that Dreiser strays so frequently from his chosen moment and milieu in the trilogy that it becomes markedly unstable, as though its author were searching for a way to "negotiate between competing models of history."[7] Both interpretations are correct, but many more are possible, for the trilogy contends that one understands the past only after attempting several methods of historical investigation, especially those methods that might initially seem to be in conflict with one another. Dreiser is on some occasions an archivist of midcentury historical materials, a document hound who stuffs his novels with speeches, newspaper articles, and mind-numbing, step-by-step descriptions of financial transactions. At others, he is a pitiless naturalist who finds that humanity's accomplishments are meaningless in the scope of geological time, no different from the behaviors of primordial beasts. On still others, he depicts the movement of history as essentially magical and historical personages as mythic archetypes rather than human beings. After reading the

trilogy, one might conclude that Dreiser's historical perspective is that of a biological determinist, or a fatalist, or a believer in mysticism, or a proponent of American exceptionalism, or all of these at once. The work therefore comes to seem as much a historiographical novel as a historical one, and its assorted approaches to history-writing advance an argument that literary fiction is a uniquely unbounded, and thus superior, instrument for exploring the past.

Dreiser reinforces this argument by creating a protagonist who ponders the flow of time in expansive, original, and conspicuously successful ways. In seeking a model for Cowperwood, Dreiser researched the careers of about a dozen nineteenth-century businessmen, and he settled upon Yerkes because he was a supremely paradoxical figure. Yerkes was a man who catered to the needs of the larger community but also boasted of being an entirely self-regarding individual; who demonstrated considerable discipline in business but also recklessly courted scandal in his personal life; who was ruthless in his financial pursuits but also passionately devoted to the arts; and who commanded both admiration and condemnation from press and public alike. His fictional double in the "Trilogy of Desire" is a man of similarly perplexing tensions, which partly explains Dreiser's multifarious narrative method. But Yerkes was also possessed of a farsighted vision, having correctly predicted the direction that America's economic development would take in the second half of the nineteenth century—with that direction, of course, having become abundantly clear by the beginning of the twentieth. Dreiser therefore presents Cowperwood as an almost clairvoyant reader of the future, with the retrospective trilogy tending to validate virtually everything he sees and does. History has a discernible, inevitable course in Dreiser's telling, but most people cannot anticipate it because it is too complex, driven by scientific principles, divine higher powers, and any number of other forces. Only Dreiser's protagonist is comprehensive enough to see the shape of things to come, and when all is said and done the trilogy suggests that writers must be equally comprehensive if they are to succeed at capturing the past in words.

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Dreiser's miscellaneous historical methodology is most memorably revealed at the end of *The Financier*, after he has related two decades or so of Cowperwood's career. Before turning to the conclusion, however, a brief summation of the novel's plot is in order. In the

1850s, Cowperwood distinguishes himself as a stockbroker on the Philadelphia Exchange, eventually making enough money to marry and start a family. He begins investing in the city's streetcar lines—"a new transportation feature which was then entering the world"—and ingratiates himself with government officials, who allow him to borrow funds from the treasury in return for his cutting them in on the profits, "a case generally of 'You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours'."[8] He is essentially amoral in his business dealings, bending the rules whenever it is useful and avoiding illegal transactions only on the pragmatic grounds that they are "unwise—dangerous—hence wrong" (*F*, 149). But Cowperwood is something less than wise in beginning an affair with a business associate's daughter named Aileen Butler: just as the local markets are thrown into turmoil by the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, Aileen's father learns of the relationship and vows revenge. Butler conspires to ensure that Cowperwood is ruined in the panic and then brought up on criminal charges for the improper use of city funds. After having been thrown into prison, Cowperwood is released early but he remains unreformed and carries on much as before, continuing his romance with Aileen and regaining his lost fortune thanks to sharp maneuvering during the panic of 1873. The novel ends with him striking out for Chicago with his young paramour: "Isn't it nice to be finally going?" Aileen asks him. "It is advantageous, anyhow," he replies (*F*, 503).

Or at least, that is where the novel's plot ends. What follows is a five-paragraph essay titled "Concerning Mycteroperca Bonaci," a sudden change of subject that begins thus:

> There is a certain fish, the scientific name of which is Mycteroperca Bonaci, its common name black grouper, which is of considerable value as an afterthought in this connection, and which deserves to be better known. It is a healthy creature, growing quite regularly to a weight of two hundred and fifty pounds, and lives a comfortable, lengthy existence because of its very remarkable ability to adapt itself to conditions. That very subtle thing which we call the creative power, and which we endow with the spirit of the beatitudes, is supposed to build this mortal life in such fashion that only honesty and virtue shall prevail. Witness, then, the significant manner in which it has fashioned the black grouper. (*F*, 503)

The fish, Dreiser goes on to marvel, is adaptable insofar as it possesses "an almost unbelievable power of simulation," with markings that can "change as the clouds of the sky" (*F*, 503–4). Its "power to elude or

strike unseen is of the greatest," and it therefore presents something of an ethical conundrum, particularly for any doctrinaire Christian who believes that God "never wills that which is either tricky or deceptive" (*F*, 504). The fish's thematic relevance to Cowperwood is no doubt obvious to readers—the financier is not so much dishonest as interested in maximizing his advantage, as all biological entities are—but the oblique means by which Dreiser makes this point is quite idiosyncratic. The fish is meant to suggest a world outside of culture, a law more ancient than morality, and an origin that cannot fit within a biblical schema of history. Writing in an age that was still grappling with Darwin's theories and the possibility that the earth might be more than a few millennia old, Dreiser has taken the provocative step of putting his protagonist's behavior in simultaneously naturalistic, zoological, and prehistoric contexts. It is not unusual, of course, for authors to make such chilly critiques of humanity, and writers have been comparing people with animals for thousands of years. But the point lies less in the juxtaposition of species than in the vast expanse of time that Dreiser has invoked, for there is no explicit analogy being drawn here, no symbolic language directly indicating either that Cowperwood is like a fish or that he is beastly in his nature. Rather, "Concerning Mycteroperca Bonaci" brings two very different temporal vistas into fleeting contact with one another and then disengages them just as quickly, inviting readers to think in two historical registers at once and draw their conclusions accordingly. This glancing but dramatic change in scope is jarring after several hundred pages of historically precise, nineteenth-century social detail, and for all its brevity, Dreiser's flash of natural history and his glimpse into geological time lingers once the novel is concluded.[9]

Dreiser is still not finished, however, for "Concerning Mycteroperca Bonaci" is followed by yet another essay, this one titled "The Magic Crystal." Here Dreiser refers to his fictional characters by name and casts them in a supernatural rather than naturalistic light, revealing their futures with what will turn out to be uncanny accuracy and offering a preview of his forthcoming novel *The Titan*:

> If you had been a mystic or a soothsayer or a member of that mysterious world which divines by incantations, dreams, the mystic bowl, or the crystal sphere, you might have looked into their mysterious depths at this time and foreseen a world of happenings which concerned these two, who were now apparently so fortunately placed. In the fumes of the witches' pot, or the depths of the radiant crystal, might have been revealed cities, cities, cities; a world of mansions, carriages, jewels,

> beauty; a vast metropolis outraged by the power of one man; a great state seething with indignation over a force it could not control; vast halls of priceless pictures; a palace unrivaled for its magnificence; a whole world reading with wonder, at times, of a given name.
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> And sorrow, sorrow, sorrow. (*F*, 504–5)

The forecast events are less striking than the general turn to magic in the essay, with its otherworldliness growing ever more pronounced as it unfolds and its connection to both Dreiser's predominantly realist aesthetic and his preceding scientific essay becoming ever more tenuous. (By the end of "The Magic Crystal," no lesser personages than the Weird Sisters of *Macbeth* will have made cameos to prophesy Cowperwood's destiny.) The result of all this strangeness is that *The Financier* becomes a disorienting compound of intersecting planes and vectors in its final paragraphs, a historical novel that concludes in a swirl of science and soothsaying. Yet in his last sentence, Dreiser has faith that his readers are now prepared for what is to come in the trilogy: "What wise man might not read from such a beginning, such an end?" he asks (*F*, 505). The insights of the magician and of the "wise," discerning reader harmonize quite comfortably with one another, leading to the same, inevitable conclusion. And crucially, the ability to see this inevitability is not hampered but rather enhanced by the several, historiographically distinct views of Cowperwood at novel's end. The mass of detail in its plot has illustrated the material world in which he operates; the fish has implied that he is ruled by primordial urges; and the magic crystal has suggested the controlling hand of fate. In Dreiser's view, the historical Cowperwood is at once a social actor, an animal, and the subject of some higher power, and the novel that would account for him in a historical context must do so by deploying a distinct investigative method for each of his identities.

Dreiser generally treats history as a knowable human narrative in the trilogy, but so too does he understand it as a function of nature and as the play of magical forces, with his novels frequently suspended in a productive tension between the cold empiricism of the fish and the mystical insights of the crystal. Indeed, if one returns to the plot of *The Financier*—and particularly to its depiction of significant historical events—one can hear echoes of this fluctuating perspective long before it is formally encapsulated in the concluding essays. Consider, for example, the novel's engagement with the Civil War, which begins when Cowperwood is twenty-four years old. Read a certain way, it is an extraordinarily uncharitable take on the conflict, for Cowperwood is very much the self-interested fish, quite immune to the patriotic ideals

being ballyhooed around him. "It was a thrilling sentiment, no doubt, great but unprofitable," goes his thinking. "It meant self-sacrifice, and he could not see that. If he went he might be shot, and what would his noble emotion amount to then?" (*F*, 66) Any "poor over-wrought working-man" who does enlist, meanwhile, has in Cowperwood's mind been infected with false consciousness, joining others who "really did not know what they were doing" and who have been fooled into acting against their own interests (*F*, 66). Nor is Cowperwood unaware of the ethical stakes of the conflict. He is simply indifferent to such things, believing that "the slave agitation might be well founded in human rights—no doubt was—but exceedingly dangerous to trade" (*F*, 65).

Cowperwood thinks this way because, for him, the exploitation of blacks in America is less a historically specific problem to be solved than an eternal condition to be accounted for: "The vast majority of men and women, as he could see, were not essentially above slavery, even when they had all the guarantees of a constitution formulated to prevent it. There was mental slavery, the slavery of the weak mind and the weak body" (*F*, 84). Considered from this cold-eyed perspective, the Union is not in a fight with the Confederacy at all but has instead put itself in opposition to an immutable fact of existence. Those who fight on principle, meanwhile, have failed to understand a greater natural law and are therefore making a "wasteful, pathetic, unfortunate" decision to put off "the true commercial and financial adjustment of the country" (*F*, 84–85). As he will throughout the trilogy, Cowperwood distinguishes himself here from the mass of humanity, considering himself a superior reader of large-scale social dynamics. And so too does Cowperwood's creator distinguish himself from other historians who looked back upon the Civil War in the early twentieth century, for in Dreiser's time it was quite unusual to emphasize the economic stakes of the conflict rather than its political, military, or ethical ones. Indeed, *The Financier* appeared more than a decade in advance of the most influential and well-known economic treatments of the war, among them Charles A. and Mary R. Beard's *The Rise of American Civilization* of 1927 and Matthew Josephson's *The Robber Barons: The Great American Capitalists, 1861–1901* of 1934.[10]

Cowperwood's base, unapologetic preoccupation with the material concerns of life—the integrity of his body, the nation's riches—allows him to evade humanistic ones, to his obvious benefit. Still, it is difficult to read Dreiser's account of the war and not notice a strange pervading spirit throughout, a presiding authority that seems something more than propaganda and mass delusion. Cowperwood thinks the Union army's

frequent displays of bravado are designed primarily to "so impress the hitherto indifferent or wavering citizen, to exalt him to such a pitch, that he would lose his sense of proportion, of self-interest," and then volunteer to become cannon fodder (*F*, 65). Yet there seems to be a larger force directing one such scene of enlistment, a force that cannot quite be identified:

> He saw one working-man swinging his pail, and evidently not contemplating any such dénouement to his day's work, pause, listen as the squad approached, hesitate as it drew close, and as it passed, with a peculiar look of uncertainty or wonder in his eyes, fall in behind and march solemnly away to the enlisting quarters. What was it that had caught this man, Frank asked himself. How was he overcome so easily? He had not intended to go. (*F*, 65–66)

No answer is hazarded here as the anonymous man disappears into the war, with the cause of his "peculiar look" and behavior left ambiguous. But a possible one appears two paragraphs later when Cowperwood catches a glimpse of Abraham Lincoln in Philadelphia, "just through with his solemn pronunciamento in regard to the bonds that might have been strained but must not be broken" (*F*, 66). Now the possibility that there is a higher power orchestrating the conflict is made doubly explicit:

> "A real man, that," [Cowperwood] thought; "a wonderful temperament." His every gesture came upon him with great force. He watched him enter his carriage, thinking "So that is the railsplitter, the country lawyer. Well, fate has picked a great man for this crisis."
>
> For days the face of Lincoln haunted him, and very often during the war his mind reverted to that singular figure. It seemed to him unquestionable that fortuitously he had been permitted to look upon one of the world's really great men. War and statesmanship were not for him; but he knew how important those things were—at times. (*F*, 66–67)

The passage ends with a dash of cynicism, but there is nevertheless something mystical in this scene, as though Cowperwood has looked into the magic crystal and learned the course of the nation's not-yet-written history. And while his reverence for Lincoln would seem to be in conflict with the condescension he shows to the men who actually serve him, each impulse has in its way been beneficial. In avoiding service he has remained alive, and in recognizing Lincoln's power he anticipates a war victory that will propel the nation into an unparalleled economic boom.[11]

Cowperwood's capacity for both brute self-interest and magical intuition are valuable during the war, and they are yet more so during the novel's economic moment, one that augurs considerable future success. The banking system is becoming more centralized and stable, cities and their markets are connecting more efficiently, and the nation's borders have been settled, all of which creates "boundless commercial possibilities" and "potentialities" (*F*, 84). Taking full advantage of these potentialities, moreover, requires that a man have precisely the skills that Cowperwood does, the most obvious being his ability to survive the law of the jungle. The business environment he inhabits is frequently described in the feral terms of social Darwinism: he stares at a mark "as might a snake at a bird" (*F*, 201); his craftier competitors are like "certain fish after a certain kind of bait" (*F*, 42); and when all is said and done, "Life was war—particularly financial life" (*F*, 345). Yet Dreiser's language frequently suggests that investing and speculating in this period have aesthetic and spiritual dimensions as well. Cowperwood's career is beautiful in its way: "Finance is an art," Dreiser declares at one point, and it is an art for which artists need not suffer, as Cowperwood has found "a happy mean . . . whereby he could, intellectually and emotionally, rejoice in the beauty of life without interfering with his perpetual material and financial calculations" (*F*, 133). So too is there an architectural elegance and mathematical sublimity to his craft:

> He knew instinctively what could be done with a given sum of money—how as cash it could be deposited in one place, and yet as credit and the basis of moving checks, used in not one but many other places at the same time. When properly watched and followed this manipulation gave him the constructive and purchasing power of ten and a dozen times as much as his original sum might have represented. He knew instinctively the principles of "pyramiding" and "kiting." He could see exactly not only how he could raise and lower the value of these certificates of loan, day after day and year after year . . . but also how this would give him a credit with the banks hitherto beyond his wildest dreams. (*F*, 109)

The economic historian Harold James has noted that novelists often depict financiers as something akin to magicians, and Dreiser is no different, describing Cowperwood's talent as a strange combination of natural ability, aesthetic sensitivity, and alchemy.[12]

The Financier culminates in the panic of 1873, a historical event that once again seems a function of both natural and magical forces. At first glance, it reads as a parable in which the fish and the crystal

are working at cross-purposes, with a dreamy idealist brought low by creatures of self-interest. The cause of the panic is Jay Cooke, the real-life celebrity financier who had funded the Union army during the war and, by the 1870s, was known as the foremost financial figure of his day. Depicted in this novel as a large-hearted man "without the wolfish cunning of a Gould or the practical knowledge of a Vanderbilt," Cooke has searched for "some constructive work which would be worthy of his genius" and settled on building the Northern Pacific Railroad, the better "to bind up the territorially perfected and newly solidified Union" (*F*, 491). The project will turn out to be "so vast that it could not well be encompassed by one man, even so great a man" as Cooke, but the "only one" harboring suspicions about it is the discerning Cowperwood, who goes against virtually all contemporary opinion in labeling it an endeavor of "great danger and risk" (*F*, 492–93). His skepticism thus insulates him from the project, and his foresight prepares him for the inevitable day when the house of Jay Cooke & Company closes its doors, provoking a national run on banks—"A financial thunder-clap in a clear sky," reports one newspaper (*F*, 493). As soon as the panic begins, Cowperwood is ready to strike: "Like a wolf prowling under glittering, bitter stars in the night, he was looking down into the humble folds of simple men and seeing what their ignorance and their unsophistication would cost them" (*F*, 497). In a few days he is a millionaire again, and the moral, as Walter Benn Michaels interprets it, is that just as one cannot defeat nature, neither can one beat the "implacably uncontrollable" market.[13] The financier must ultimately accept his "inability either to master or confidently to predict events in the economic world around him," and Cowperwood emerges as an agent of the chaos that awaits even so skilled an idealist as Cooke.[14]

Yet for all that Cowperwood has benefited by his austere realism, an eerie unreality still hangs over the conclusion. A certain transmigration of souls appears to have occurred here, as Cowperwood seems to be becoming the very man he has just bested—and not only because Dreiser lifted a great deal of material from a biography of Cooke when writing *The Financier*. Both are men of vision, and Cooke was not ultimately wrong about the wisdom of his undertaking: Cowperwood correctly intuits that the railroad will "some day" be useful but is not just yet, with Cooke undone by historical prematurity in a way that, as we shall see, foreshadows Cowperwood's own fate in *The Stoic* (*F*, 497). Moreover, Cowperwood celebrates his triumph over Cooke in an almost perverse manner, preparing to enter a similar line of business to the one that has just brought Cooke low: he plans to give up stocks

and enter "street-railways, land speculation, some great manufacturing project of some kind" (*F*, 501). Even Cooke's poetic personality appears to have rubbed off on the formerly savage Cowperwood, who alludes to Milton—"my future is all before me"—and arrogates a mythic, Biblical grandeur to himself before beginning his conquest of Chicago (*F*, 501).[15] These doublings are perhaps too understated to qualify as truly supernatural in context, and yet as the magic crystal will indicate just a few pages later, they are crucial points along Cowperwood's overarching, fated trajectory.

Ultimately, Dreiser's historical methodologies in *The Financier* present Cowperwood's career, the world of midcentury Philadelphia, and historic American events as at once palpably real and strangely fantastical; the novel is at times a straightforward narrative of human events and at others something more like natural science or a fairy tale. Before seeing how Dreiser develops this approach over the rest of the trilogy, however, it is worth pausing to ask how unusual it was during the early twentieth century and to consider what sources might have influenced it. A partial explanation lies in the genre of literary naturalism, the school of fiction that Dreiser is most frequently identified with and that Charles Child Walcutt has termed a "divided stream" of scientific theory and romanticism.[16] So too has John C. Waldmeir suggested that Dreiser's use of trilogy's "tripartite structure" necessarily draws a contrast between linear time and a circular, mythic variety in his novels.[17] But because the "Trilogy of Desire" is most distinct from other works of literary naturalism in its engagement with historical events rather than contemporary life, it must also be considered in its historiographical context.

Dreiser's miscellaneous historical narrative both did and did not follow prevailing trends in the contemporary American historical profession, which according to Peter Novick was then characterized by a broad effort to codify a "scientific method" of history "in an age when scienticity was the hallmark of the modern and the authoritative."[18] Invoking German models of scholarship, American historians from the late nineteenth century onward became increasingly concerned with practicing *Wissenschaft*, which they took to refer to a rigorous, empirical, and studiously objective scholarly undertaking. In Dreiser's time it became more and more common to hear pronouncements like the following, delivered to the American Historical Association three years before *The Financier* was published: "What we need is a genuinely scientific school of history, which shall remorselessly examine the sources and separate the wheat from the chaff; which shall critically

balance evidence; which shall dispassionately and moderately set forth results."[19] Certainly Dreiser's naturalistic perspectives on Cowperwood and Mycteroperca Bonaci were of a piece with this method, but his invocations of magic and mysticism would have struck many historians as uncomfortably close to the older "moral histories"—by George Bancroft and others—that they were then laboring to supplant. According to Novick, however, American historians had tended to overlook a crucial aspect of their widely fetishized *Wissenschaft*:

> The connotations of the word were rooted in the idealist philosophical tradition within which it developed. *Wissenschaft* signified a dedicated, sanctified pursuit. It implied not just knowledge, but self-fulfillment; not practical knowledge, but knowledge of ultimate meanings. If *Wissenschaft* had vaguely idealist implications, there could be no doubt of the idealism implicit in the *Geisteswissenschaften*: idiomatically, "humanistic disciplines," but more literally and evocatively, "spiritual studies." History, together with philosophy, literature, and theology, was unequivocally *eine Geisteswissenschaft*. German historians reacted with outrage to the suggestion that *naturwissenschaftlich* approaches could be applied within their realm.[20]

Dreiser, the first great American writer of German heritage, may or may not have known the contours of the historical profession back in the fatherland. But there is no question that the search for lofty "ultimate meanings" was as important to his historical fiction as empiricism.

Dreiser drew more directly on financial and investment histories when writing the trilogy, relying on them for their technical accounts of business transactions but strongly differing from them in his treatment of the past. Nearly all of the studies he read—many of them personal accounts by Wall Street insiders—promised objectivity and fair-mindedness, yet most had been written from self-congratulatory or defensive perspectives. They usually began by making some variation of the claim that, in the words of Sereno S. Pratt in *The Work of Wall Street* (1903), investing and speculation constituted "practically the history of the agricultural, industrial, and commercial development of the United States."[21] So too did most of them seek to correct the public impression that financial markets offered nothing more than what Charles A. Conant called "a sort of adjunct of Monte Carlo."[22] Particularly galling to Dreiser, however, were their frequent boasts that American businessmen had served their country with distinction over the years and therefore deserved the public's gratitude. The main offender he encountered was Henry Clews and his memoir

Twenty-Eight Years in Wall Street (1887), in which the grandiloquent financier claimed to have been at the center of practically every historically significant American political event of his adult life. Here are his thoughts on helping finance the Union during the Civil War:

> At this momentous juncture, where there was no eye to pity, and when no other arm seemed mighty enough to save, the Wall Street men were equal to the occasion. They put their heads together, came to the front, and resolved to extricate the Government from its perilous position. It is true that they were well paid for it. They charged twelve per cent. for the loan, but that was nothing when the risk is taken into account. . . . Had they failed to do so, it is not improbable that the repulse at Bull Run might have proved a decisive blow to the Union, and plunged the country into a state of anarchy from which nothing but a despotism almost as bad could have retrieved it.[23]

Clews further claimed to have known that the war would be far more protracted than any of Lincoln's cabinet believed, and that his perspicacity and "inspiration" were instrumental in helping the Union win the conflict.[24] And while Cowperwood may resemble Clews in having an unusually sharp sense for what the future holds, Dreiser indicated in his aforementioned 1912 interview that he intended his fictional financier to demonstrate just how insincere such patriotic palaver from the nation's businessmen had in fact been.[25]

Yet it is worth lingering on the predictive powers that these business writers often claimed for themselves, as Dreiser emphasized them when writing the more mystical sections of the trilogy. If Jay Cooke's fall in *The Financier* seems to harmonize uncannily with Cowperwood's rise, for example, it is surely in part because Dreiser drew on Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer's biography *Jay Cooke: Financier of the Civil War* (1907), which frequently connected the man's business instincts to his rich emotional life. The idea of extending a railroad into the west appealed to Cooke, Oberholtzer argued, because he had "patriotism, sentiment and imagination in that part of his being which in other men is so often given up to doubt and fear"; to merely "practical persons," such visions as his would be only "a wild dream."[26] Moreover, Oberholtzer found Cooke's fate to be particularly undeserved given the fact that his "dream" ultimately proved to have been prophetic: the biography is littered with rueful observations that "all now know" the value of the Northern Pacific, and that Cooke had been vindicated "in the light of later knowledge."[27] So too did even the swaggering Henry Clews strike Dreiser as in tune with the supernatural forces flowing through

his trilogy, such that he quoted Clews directly—though only as an unnamed man of "great executive judgment"—in the first edition of *The Financier*:

> I am no spiritualist nor theosophist . . . but this gift, or occasional visitation of Providence, or whatever else people may choose to call it, to which I am subject at intervals, has saved me from being financially shattered at least two or three times every year. I do not indulge in any table-tapping or dark séances, as did the elder Vanderbilt; but this strange, peculiar, and admonitory influence has always clung to me in times of approaching squalls more tenaciously than at any other. . . . I have known others who have had these mysterious forebodings, but who recklessly disregarded them; and this has been the rock on which they have split in speculative emergencies.[28]

Clews's "forebodings" are further said to resemble Cowperwood's "sixth sense, or gift, or psychic control," and while this passage was cut from the novel's second edition, Dreiser's inclusion of it the first suggests that real and fictional financiers alike have been accorded the opportunity to look into history's magic crystal.[29]

Perhaps the most significant influence on Dreiser's historical method, however, was the philosopher Herbert Spencer and his *First Principles of a New System of Philosophy* (1862), a work that Dreiser said "quite blew [him], intellectually, to bits" as a young man.[30] Writing under the influence of Darwin, Spencer had theorized that a single law of evolutionary development governed "all orders, from those of stars down to those of nervous discharges and commercial currents," with the entire known universe impelled by "a persistent Force, ever changing its manifestations but unchanged in quantity throughout all past time and all future time."[31] That "Force," Spencer believed, was progressively directing history toward a final, harmonious equilibrium, and his cheerfully deterministic worldview was so broadly appealing that it penetrated nineteenth-century American thought to a degree "never before reached by any formal philosophy save Christianity."[32] In the field of history, Spencer's ideas shored up arguments that society—and especially American society—was on a path of unstoppable improvement: one of his most fervent disciples, the popular lecturer John Fiske, saw the nation's past as indicative of a global trend, one that anticipated "the successive union of groups of men into larger and more complex aggregates" and eventually would result in the "UNITED STATES . . . stretching from pole to pole."[33] Moreover, Spencer's theories offered a convenient means of reconciling history with science, business, and

religion, for he argued that each was a partial, valuable manifestation of the same universal system. Spencer's relativism in regard to spiritual matters was a particularly important influence on Dreiser's eclectic historical method:

> Thus, however untenable may be any or all the existing religious creeds, however gross the absurdities associated with them, however irrational the arguments set forth in their defense, we must not ignore the verity which in all likelihood lies hidden within them. The general probability that widely-spread beliefs are not absolutely baseless, is in this case enforced by a further probability due to the omnipresence of the beliefs.[34]

For Spencer, all forms of religious and spiritual expression, whether organized or pagan, are equally legitimate means of explaining the larger universe because each is equally incomplete. None can entirely account for the larger play of forces, yet each is expressive of and governed by those forces, and so there is no reason to value the insights of one faith—or of one historical method, or of one scientific theory—over any other. In Spencer's pages, one can see the reconciliation of Mycteroperca Bonaci and the magic crystal in a dramatically expanded context.

Readers are required to think in multiple registers throughout the "Trilogy of Desire," negotiating the material circumstances of the late nineteenth century, the overarching movement of history, and the at once scientific and mystical "Force" of a Spencerian universe. Significantly, Dreiser's talented protagonist sometimes does the same, as in this moment toward the end of *The Financier* when he passes time in prison by pondering the ultimate scale of things: "He had never taken any interest in astronomy as a scientific study, but now the Pleiades, the belt of Orion, the Big Dipper and the North Star, to which one of its lines pointed, caught his attention, almost his fancy. He wondered why the stars of the belt of Orion came to assume the peculiar mathematical relation to each other which they held . . . and whether that could possibly have any intellectual significance" (*F*, 471). Cowperwood cannot reflect upon cosmic problems for long, finding his own life "very trivial in view of these things" and doubting whether such speculation is of any real importance to him (*F*, 471). Yet in the rest of the trilogy, Dreiser will show the financier's fate to be broadly, even universally significant nonetheless, the shape of his career dimly but truthfully reflective of a vast and ancient order. Cowperwood looks inward after this view into the heavens, "possessed of a sense

of grandeur, largely in relation to himself and his affairs" (*F*, 471). Convinced that he can and will become a "significant personage" if not a great thinker, he resolves that it "was not given all men to see far or to do brilliantly; but to him it was given, and he must be what he was cut out to be" (*F*, 471–72). His vision will soon turn to worldly systems and enterprises, but his expansive moment under the stars still anticipates that which is to come.

* * * * * *

It is difficult to describe the experience of reading *The Titan*, which takes Cowperwood and Aileen to Chicago but sometimes seems as though it is set in another world entirely. The novel's strangeness is largely a function of the inconsistent ways in which historical time now seems to be unfolding. It is on the one hand predictably linear, with Cowperwood arriving in the city, investing in gas delivery works, making plenty of money and enemies, and never stumbling as he approaches his greatest achievement, the consolidation of Chicago's mass transit lines into the central Loop. Yet the novel is something of a loop itself, for it compulsively retells what begins to feel like the same story over and over again in gradually expanding registers. Cowperwood enjoys success after success; an unending procession of rivals challenge him and are defeated; and he has an astonishing fourteen extramarital affairs with secretaries, actresses, and the wives of professional associates, only one of which lasts longer than a few chapters. An unfriendly contemporary review of the novel called it "a huge club-sandwich composed of slices of business alternating with erotic episodes," but this memorable image is far too static.[35] The repetitive aspects of *The Titan* make it seem more analogous to a ritual or a rite, with its characters performing their assigned roles time after time and with only minor differences distinguishing the consecutive iterations.

The novel is further complicated by Dreiser's addition of another historical layer, a new narrative method of exploring the past that is—as his title suggests—largely mythic in emphasis. *The Titan* retains the predominantly realist aesthetic of *The Financier*, but it also frequently turns its characters into something more like archetypes and its American setting into a place of dreams and abstractions. People flicker elusively between races, epochs, and material forms, as when one of Cowperwood's romantic partners is described as "Asiatic," "African," and "Greek"; and as the living embodiment of the Winged Victory of Samothrace; and as the second coming of Circe, all within a few

pages.[36] The city of Chicago, meanwhile, is both a rising metropolis of the late nineteenth century and a resurrection of something long since vanished:

> To whom may the laurels as laureate of this Florence of the West yet fall? This singing flame of a city, this all America, this poet in chaps and buckskin, this rude, raw Titan, this Burns of a city! By its shimmering lake it lay, a king of shreds and patches, a maundering yokel with an epic in its mouth, a tramp, a hobo among cities, with the grip of Caesar in its mind, the dramatic force of Euripides in its soul. A very bard of a city this, singing of high deeds and high hopes, its heavy brogans buried deep in the mire of circumstance. Take Athens, oh, Greece! Italy, do you keep Rome! This was the Babylon, the Troy, the Nineveh of a younger day. (*T*, 6)

Note just how many categories have collapsed in this moment: not only is Chicago aligned with the cities of antiquity as well as "all America," but so too do author, protagonist, and setting merge, each a worthy candidate for the title of "Titan." Here and elsewhere, Dreiser keeps his novel suspended between timelines, aesthetics, and conceptions of reality, and it consequently becomes hard to know at any given point whether one is in the midst of a biography, or an allegory, or a demonstration of some eternally recurring principle. Indeed, the generic instability of *The Titan* sometimes grows so pronounced that it can seem to anticipate T. S. Eliot's famous, *Ulysses*-inspired theory of a "mythical method" in fiction; that is, an author's drawing "a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" in the hopes "of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."[37]

Whether a Titan or a man in this novel, Cowperwood retains the same forward-looking business acumen that he has always had, though he applies it in a somewhat different fashion. He still relies on a prescient "sixth sense," but whereas in *The Financier* he mostly had calculated market risks and invested accordingly, now he now intuits the direction in which large-scale developmental forces are moving and situates himself so as to maximize profits. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about his new career is that he is able to gain a fortune and establish a reputation without doing much of anything at all. When entering Chicago's gas industry, for example, his most important action is to perceive that industry's underlying order. He finds areas of the city that are underserved by already-existing companies, surreptitiously obtains

the government's permission to provide a utility to them, organizes the basic financing and structure of a business, and then sits back as his asleep-at-the-switch competitors learn of the situation and are forced to buy him out. Cowperwood makes a killing, and his opponents are furious, for as he matter-of-factly points out, he will "never need to lay a pipe or build a plant" to achieve victory (*T*, 83). These and other such transactions hearken back to a description of Cowperwood in *The Financier* as "one of those subtle masters of the mysteries of the higher forms of chess," one whose opening moves are so devastating as to render an actual, complete game superfluous (*F*, 108).

If Dreiser's aesthetic seems frequently unreal and Cowperwood's talent strangely prophetic in *The Titan*, both are well-suited to the moment of late nineteenth-century Chicago, a city that was then the subject of a great deal of extravagant, even mythical rhetoric in the business community. As William Cronon has shown in his history of Chicago's development, the city was at the time virtually synonymous with forecasting, futurity, and the language of speculation. In its earliest days it was the site of a real estate bubble that remains extraordinary even by today's standards, with $33 lots increasing in value to $100,000 during the 1830s. Its population increased twentyfold in four years, and this burgeoning was both a function of and inspiration for a great deal of breathless advertising. Convincing the world of Chicago's eventual economic importance and attracting investment there often led to Spencerian imagery: "A city is an organism . . . springing from natural laws as inevitably as any other organism, and governed, invariably, in its origin and growth, by these laws," proclaimed one booster.[38] Others spun pseudo-scientific theories to demonstrate that Chicago's growth was assured because of propitious census figures, advantageous geographical features, and vortex-like forces of urban gravitation. Still others invoked flamboyant historical models, proclaiming that Chicago and other American cities would eventually become the Athens, Carthage, and Babel of the West. Such pronouncements, Cronon notes, can seem comic in retrospect, but the city's proponents "surely did not think it silly to view American history through the epic lens of classical civilization, or to imagine that the grandeur of St. Louis or Chicago might someday, in the not too distant future, equal Rome's. To believe otherwise was to doubt the high destiny of America itself."[39]

In what Dreiser refers to as a "seething city in the making," then, it is crucial to have a sense for the trajectory of development and the ways in which potential energies will eventually be converted into material forms, and herein lies Cowperwood's road to wealth (*T*, 4).

The rail scheme that will ultimately make him famous begins with yet another moment of insight, one that is characteristically systematic and aesthetic at the same time: he notices that the city's bridges are regularly clogged with traffic in a manner that is "Dickensesque—a fit subject for a Daumier, a Turner, or a Whistler" (*T*, 169). Learning of some tunnels that the city has dug beneath the river but has had to abandon because they are too steep for wagon traffic, he sets about running cable-operated streetcars through them. Correctly predicting that the city's population and transportation needs will continue growing through the 1880s and 1890s, he drums up the necessary support to create a commuter rail network, and before long he has established the Loop in central Chicago, affording every inbound car the opportunity both to pass through the all-important business district and to turn around with ease. As with his coup in the gas industry, Cowperwood's clever positioning has forced his rivals in other companies to operate on his turf and terms, and his dominance of the city is complete. "In the commercial heart of this world Frank Algernon Cowperwood had truly become a figure of giant significance," Dreiser writes. "How wonderful it is that men grow until, like colossi, they bestride the world, or, like banyan-trees, they drop roots from every branch and are themselves a forest—a forest of intricate commercial life, of which a thousand material aspects are the evidence" (*T*, 472).

Crucially, Cowperwood insists that his success is a result not so much of building infrastructure but of having looked into the future and seen that which would inevitably be built; in his own estimation he is not directing historical forces and demands but merely apprehending and then following them. "They're all angry," he says of his opponents, "because I managed to step in and do the things that they should have done long before. I came here—and that's the whole story in a nutshell" (*T*, 329).[40] The Loop, because it provides a necessary service, would have come to pass whether he was the man behind it or not, and in making this point he not only engages in a bit of optimistic Chicago boosterism, but he also joins a wider, ongoing literary conversation about the historical inevitability of American industrialization and urbanization. Examples of Cowperwoodian thought abounded in the fiction of Dreiser's naturalist peers: a particularly memorable character in Frank Norris's anti-railroad novel, *The Octopus* (1901) had argued some years before that a transportation system is "a force born out of certain conditions" and as such can even be said to build itself.[41] Because the mass of Americans must and will move from place to place, the theory went, railroads would have to appear one way or

another, and the desires of individual entrepreneurs have "only little to do in the whole business."[42] As Mark Seltzer has observed, late nineteenth-century businessmen like Cowperwood were frequently depicted in fiction not as leaders but as "middlemen" of the sort theorized by Adam Smith, "whose trade it is not to do anything, but to observe everything; and who, upon that account, are often capable of combining together the powers of the most distant and dissimilar objects."[43] But if Cowperwood's sensitivity to the foreordained movements of humanity makes him an effective businessman and representative literary type, it also opens him to charges of being an opportunistic parasite. Certainly Charles Yerkes was often criticized on these grounds, as in a memorable 1907 polemic by Charles Edward Russell that Dreiser consulted during his research for the trilogy: such men as Yerkes, Russell argued, contributed no "Great American Idea" to the economy, but merely followed "the Agreeable Formula for Making Something from Nothing" and thus unfairly exploited the public.[44]

Perhaps the most important assumption undergirding this turn-of-the-century discussion was that the American people themselves constituted a singular, natural force, one whose history-making movements could be anticipated and accounted for by particularly skilled businessmen. Whereas Cowperwood the financier once forecast markets, Cowperwood the transportation mogul now forecasts humanity, and he is good at it: "[T]emperamentally he was in sympathy with the mass more than he was with the class, and he understood the mass better" (*T*, 27). He is attentive to the workers of Chicago in part because to be so is politically and financially advantageous; he is after all pursuing his business in the aftermath of the Haymarket Square Riot, which had brought the problem of labor unrest "to the fore, once and for all, as by a flash of lightning," and "changed, quite as an eruption might, the whole face of the commercial landscape" (*T*, 187). But as was the case during the Civil War, Cowperwood's view of the disadvantaged tends to avoid questions of ideology and to see humanity in a much older historical context:

> Often now, in these preliminary days, he looked at the large companies of men with their horses gathered in and about the several car-barns of the company, and wondered at their state. So many of them were so dull. They were rather like animals, patient, inartistic, hopeless. He thought of their shabby homes, their long hours, their poor pay, and then concluded that if anything at all could be done for them it would be to pay them decent living wages, which he proposed to do—nothing more. They could not be expected to understand his dreams or his

> visions, or to share in the magnificence and social dominance which he craved. (*T*, 187)

Indeed, Cowperwood believes that he can understand the wants of the masses better than the masses themselves, and that these "poor sheep who paid their hard-earned nickels" must have him for a shepherd (*T*, 473). "Pity the poor groveling hack at the bottom who has not the brain-power either to understand or to control that which his very presence and necessities create," his thinking goes (*T*, 473). Cowperwood is a man among people even less sophisticated than children, and his attitude adds an important dimension to Georg Lukács's well-known argument that effective historical fiction "must disclose artistically the *connection* between the spontaneous reaction of the masses and the historical consciousness of the leading personalities."[45] For Lukács, the "leading personalities" of historical fiction generally have the ability "to perceive in quite small and insignificant reactions a change of mood, in the people or a class, and to generalize the connection between this mood and the objective course of events."[46] But while Cowperwood understands the people and their movements all too well, he also quite explicitly distinguishes himself from the masses; he provides what he knows they need but will not allow that he could actually be one of them.

It is the achievement of the Loop that most completely enthrones Cowperwood in the realm of mythic notoriety, and the more powerful he becomes, the less he seems to exist in his given time and place. When the city's leaders assemble and conspire in the hopes of driving him out of business, the chapter is titled "MOUNT OLYMPUS" (*T*, 422). When he begins to design his luxurious new house, it is "the Italian palaces of medieval or Renaissance origin" that most appeal to him (*T*, 439).[47] But in his beginning is his end: just as the Colossus of Rhodes would eventually fall and the Titans would be overthrown by other deities, so too is Cowperwood's defeat ensured the moment he achieves his epic stature. Ominously, there is a similar temporal haziness taking hold in the lower social orders as well, with the masses beginning to fear that they are slipping into an almost prehistoric state of exploitation. The age of monopolies and trusts has begun, and as a consequence "there was growing up a feeling that at the top there were a set of giants—Titans—who, without heart or soul, and without any understanding of or sympathy with the condition of the rank and file, were setting forth to enchain and enslave them" (*T*, 399). The "vast mass" therefore turns to the "prophet" William Jennings Bryan in the

hopes that he will inaugurate a new economic system, and while that particular hope is dashed in the election of 1896, its implications for Cowperwood's future are fatal (*T*, 399).

Once the masses join Cowperwood and the retrospective Dreiser in thinking mythically, the novel approaches its bombastic conclusion, and it all but ceases to be concerned with trains and city planning. The final battle begins when Cowperwood seeks an extended, lifelong franchise for his rail lines from the state government, and his opponents do not hesitate to frame this power grab in the broadest possible terms. He is a man charged with driving the people of Chicago before "the chariot of his greatness" (*T*, 526); he begins "to take on the outlines of a superman, a half-god or demi-gorgon" in the press (*T*, 527); and he is described as facing his opponents with an "attitude of Promethean defiance" (*T*, 528). By the time Cowperwood's case comes before the legislature, Dreiser has dispensed with a fictional frame entirely, beginning to write in the much older mode of scripted drama instead. And for all the local political intrigue and specifically anti-railroad commentary that drives the plot to its climax, Dreiser's vision now extends considerably further back than the nineteenth century:

> Life rises to a high plane of the dramatic, and hence of the artistic, whenever and wherever in the conflict regarding material possession there enters a conception of the ideal. It was this that lit forever the beacon fires of Troy, that thundered eternally in the horses' hoofs at Arbela and in the guns at Waterloo. Ideals were here at stake—the dreams of one man as opposed perhaps to the ultimate dreams of a city or state or nation—the grovelings and wallowings of a democracy slowly, blindly trying to stagger to its feet. In this conflict—taking place in an island cottage-dotted state where men were clowns and churls, dancing fiddlers at country fairs—were opposed . . . the ideals of one man and the ideals of men. (*T*, 485)

Now stripped to its essential structure, the story of the overreaching Cowperwood turns out to have been told many times before in many lands and many eras, with only the names and scenery changing. That story, moreover, has always been destined to be one of tragedy, as Cowperwood fails to get his franchise, cashes out, abandons his rail network, and leaves Chicago—or, as Aristotle would have put it, experiences a "change to bad fortune" which is "not due to any moral defect or depravity, but to an error of some kind."[48] The rise and fall of a Chicago rail magnate transcends its historical circumstances, revealing fundamental, ever-cycling dynamics that are as old as humanity itself.

Epic self-regard and mythical self-conception have long been characteristic of American business. The future President James A. Garfield accused gold speculators during the panic of 1869 of exercising the "malign influence which Catiline wielded over the reckless and abandoned youth of Rome," and some investment bankers have notoriously dubbed themselves "Masters of the Universe" in our own time.[49] So too did historians at the turn of the century find the corrupt economic conditions of antiquity repeating themselves, whether in Brooks Adams's *The Law of Civilization and Decay* (1895) or Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918). But in Dreiser's short conclusion to *The Titan*, the American economy and those who work in it are important only insofar as they illustrate a still-greater Spencerian principle, namely, the "dancing or raging" of all matter as it perpetually seeks to resolve itself into an "ultimate, still, equation" (*T*, 551). Cowperwood, Dreiser declares, serves mainly to "illuminate the terrors and wonders of individuality," as might a comet in the night sky (*T*, 551). "But for him also the eternal equation—the pathos of the discovery that even giants are but pygmies, and that an ultimate balance must be struck" (*T*, 551). As he had at the end of *The Financier*, Dreiser gestures once more toward the upcoming plot of *The Stoic*, the trilogy's concluding volume. He also lays his mythical method bare, removing all traces of his hero's temporal positioning and situating him in a transhistorical context: "What thought engendered the spirit of Circe, or gave to a Helen the lust of tragedy? What lit the walls of Troy? Or prepared the woes of an Andromache? By what demon counsel was the fate of Hamlet prepared? And why did the weird sisters plan ruin to the murderous Scot?" (*T*, 552). It would be more than thirty years before Dreiser's readers would learn whether the final volume of the "Trilogy of Desire" would contain an answer.

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Distracted by other projects, personal affairs, and many, many changes of address, Dreiser put off writing *The Stoic* until the end of his life. In the years since finishing *The Titan*, he had witnessed two world wars, a crippling economic depression, and the first use of a weapon powerful enough to destroy the earth. His protagonist, on the other hand, was still negotiating what must have struck Dreiser as a very faraway time, crossing the Atlantic in 1900—the same year that Dreiser's first novel, *Sister Carrie*, had been published—to begin his final venture, the development of the London Underground railway system.

There is an unmistakably weary quality to this final work, in part because of the biographical demands of the subject, in part because of Dreiser's own exhaustion, and in part because time and history seem already to have left the characters behind. Though Cowperwood is still a man of insight, and though his vision of a transportation network for London is not an impossible dream, his health is failing and his energy is much reduced. This man who had always been "intensely engaged with the living present" now walks among the graves of Henry IV, Thomas à Becket, and the Black Prince in Canterbury Cathedral, moved by the inevitability of change: "He looked, meditated, and was somehow touched with the futility of so much that was still so beautiful."[50] His thoughts now go beyond his own future, into a time when he, too, will be a figure of the vanished past. The novel therefore finds him particularly concerned with what he will bequeath to later generations, both in business and in good works. If all were to go according to his design, he "would have established his title as not only promoter but builder, and would have given London a modern and comprehensive metropolitan system which would bear the imprint of his genius, just as Chicago's downtown loop bore it."[51] So too does he imagine an art gallery to display his extraordinary collection of paintings for the public, and a charitable hospital for the indigent. But he dies of Bright's disease at a profoundly anticlimactic moment, long before any of these plans have come close to fruition. The panics and clashes that concluded *The Financier* and *The Titan* are but faint echoes in this very diminished conclusion.

The only action that remains in *The Stoic* after Cowperwood's death concerns his monetary legacy, which is also fated to come to a feeble end. His estate, now in the hands of Aileen, is besieged by lawyers, and after five years of confused litigation she is left "with the painful realization that at the end of whatever steps she took in any direction, there was nothing."[52] Cowperwood's fortune, having been in a state of fluidity to finance the London Underground and his lavish lifestyle, turns out to have existed only on paper; in order to meet outstanding debts, his house and possessions are auctioned off, and the "dream of grandeur" is now "vanished into thin air."[53] These indignities were drawn directly from Yerkes's life, and the ironic reversal they represented was a major reason for Dreiser's decision to depict him rather than any of the more conspicuously successful captains of nineteenth-century industry he had once considered. Many twentieth-century observers considered this to be poetic justice for the infamous Yerkes: see, for example, Edwin Lefèvre's 1911 essay "What Availeth It?," a

moralizing piece that made such an impression on Dreiser that he refers to it by its title at the end of the trilogy.[54] "That in man which does not perish is his personal influence," Lefèvre argued, concluding that Yerkes had not had much of one:

> Since we are creatures of environment and heredity, if you wisely shape the environment of those about you and transmit that which is good to your—and their—posterity, you will live. And the waves of time shall dash impotently against your life, next year and next century. You will be living ten generations hence in ten thousand or ten times ten thousand descendants of yourself and of those whose lives your life beneficently influenced. And you can not buy life with gold nor with great works that pay dividends in dollars, but with service and self, coined into deeds of unselfishness.[55]

Given that Cowperwood leaves nothing more substantial than a widow's allowance for Aileen, and given that it was only his outsized efforts that managed to make his vast holdings cohere during his life, there is little question as to what Lefèvre would have thought of his lasting worth.

But of course, Yerkes did "shape the environment" of Chicago in a significant way, and while we are not yet "ten generations hence" from 1900, it seems obvious that the people of London continue to have their lives influenced by him as well. Indeed, as Yerkes's historical moment recedes further and further into the past, his legacy grows more and more impressive, observable not in any solid, physical monument but in the still-pulsing, still-looping systems of connectivity that remain vital parts of urban modernity. And in the historical "Trilogy of Desire" that tells his story, Dreiser's protagonist seems to become more farsighted with each passing year, for we readers continue to live in the world he foresaw. Cowperwood may be more an enabler than a creator, but Dreiser tended to think of great accomplishments as acts of channeling more than anything else: as he would put it in a different but related context, "The word creation applied to art is wrong. Art is not *created* by an artist. He is not an original source but a contact instrument with and through which life in many forms expresses itself."[56] Similarly, Cowperwood's genius begins and ends in discovery, in the perception of and appreciation for a deep American current—a current that, because it flows through systems of mass transit, is coterminous with collective society itself. His success lies in having anticipated our ever-evolving present, and his vision ultimately reinforces the broadminded, eclectic historical perspective that Dreiser attempted to take in his novels.

If the trilogy sometimes seems to be a confusion of narrative and historical methods, it is surely because Dreiser thought Yerkes, his systems, and the American past could never be ascertained by using only one. In 1920 he wrote an essay-length study of other nineteenth-century financiers, at points finding them to be "shark-like" apex predators and "cat-like animals weaving a devious way amid intricacies of law and public opinion."[57] Yet while they struck him as being as cold and selfish as any creature of nature, he also saw them as "among the greatest constructive forces imaginable; absolutely opposed to democracy in practice, yet as useful an implement for its accomplishment as for autocracy."[58] So too did he detect robust spirits and imaginations in them, a shared aspiration to create something greater than themselves:

> They, too, are but minute factors in the total machinery, little able to forefend against disaster or the ultimate nothingness that swallows them. But one thing is sure: the individual in the course of the development of his dreams and ambitions does scheme out and construct or bring into organic operation functions which are valuable to mass prosperity, and on that score there is scarcely any fault to be found with him.[59]

In a fanciful moment with a journalist in 1914, Dreiser was yet pithier when analyzing these titans: "What did they care for the verdict of history?" he asked. "They WERE history!"[60] If the nineteenth-century financier was indeed as complex a person as Dreiser said he was, if he did in fact contain both the primordial past and the civilized future, and if he was truly synonymous with nothing less than history itself, then one can finally see why the method of the "Trilogy of Desire" had to be so multifarious. The man in whom so much inhered demanded nothing less.

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NOTES

[1] "Theodore Dreiser Now Turns to High Finance," interview, the *New York Sun*, 1912, repr. in *Theodore Dreiser: Interviews*, ed. Frederic E. Rusch and Donald Pizer (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2004), 34–35.

[2] "Theodore Dreiser Now Turns to High Finance," 35.

[3] *The Financier* has had a particularly tangled textual history, existing in three significantly different versions today. First published in 1912, it was edited and rereleased in 1927, with the second version cut in length by roughly one third. A third edition was published in 2010 by the University of Illinois Press, as part of a series of Dreiser's collected works; it restores some but not all of the cuts from the first edition, representing a blend of the 1912 and 1927 versions. The second edition is the most frequently cited and the most widely available, and so this essay will refer to it unless otherwise indicated.

[4] For critical studies that compare the "Trilogy of Desire" to other American business novels, see Harold James, "The Literary Financier," *American Scholar* 60.2 (1991): 251–57, Henry Nash Smith, "The Search for a Capitalist Hero: Businessmen in American Fiction," in *The Business Establishment*, ed. Earl F. Cheit (New York: John Wiley, 1964), 77–112; Wayne W. Westbrook, *Wall Street in the American Novel* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1980); and David A. Zimmerman, *Panic!: Markets, Crises, and Crowds in American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2006).

[5] When Charles A. Beard's landmark work *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1921) appeared the year after *The Financier*, for example, its call for a "turn away from barren 'political' history" and toward "the real economic forces which condition great movements in politics" was considered eccentric and even insulting (v).

[6] Philip L. Gerber, "The Financier Himself: Dreiser and C. T. Yerkes," *PMLA* 88.1 (1973): 117. Gerber has written extensively on the biographical sources of the "Trilogy of Desire" in other essays, including "The Alabaster Protégé: Dreiser and Bernice Fleming," *American Literature* 43 (May 1971): 217–30; "Dreiser's Debt to *Jay Cooke*," *Library Chronicle* 38 (1972): 67–77; "Dreiser's Financier: A Genesis," *Journal of Modern Literature* 1.3 (1971): 354–74; "Frank Cowperwood: Boy Financier," *Studies in American Fiction* 2.2 (1974): 165–74; and "Jolly Mrs. Yerkes Is Home from Abroad: Dreiser and the Celebrity Culture," in *Theodore Dreiser and American Culture: New Readings*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2000), 79–103. See also Roark Mulligan, "Historical Commentary," appendix to *The Financier: The Critical Edition*, by Dreiser (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2010), 557–94; and Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1976). For a recent biography of Charles T. Yerkes, see John Franch, *Robber Baron: The Life of Charles Tyson Yerkes* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2006).

[7] Alison Shonkwiler, "Towards a Late View of Capitalism: Dehistoricized Finance in *The Financier*," *Studies in the Novel* 41.1 (2009): 43. Shonkwiler's piece is primarily concerned with *The Financier* and its depiction of capitalism both as historically situated and as an ahistorical force of nature; she concludes that Dreiser's novel "makes a powerful case for the limits of narration to capture history's increasingly exigent contradictions" (45). In *Panic!*, Zimmerman finds that the novel's financial catastrophes disrupt orderly conceptions of history and reveal the limits of temporal design; see 191–222. For a reading of *The Financier* that finds Cowperwood to exist outside of historical circumstances, see Lois Hughson, *From Biography to History: The Historical Imagination and American Fiction, 1880–1940* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1989) 122–59.

[8] Dreiser, *The Financier* (1912, rev. 1927; repr., New York: Penguin, 2008), 36–37, 63. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *F*.

[9] Dreiser's conclusion to *The Financier* deploys something like Wai Chee Dimock's conception of literary "deep time"; that is to say, "a set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessional, with input going both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations" (*Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006], 3). However, Dreiser has gone further back in time than even Dimock's expansive temporal paradigm allows for, as she is concerned with literature only within the context of human civilization. On conceptions of geological time and their effects on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thought, see Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983). A possible analogue for Dreiser's

naturalistic perspective on nineteenth-century America is Henry Blake Fuller's *The Cliff-Dwellers* (1893; repr., Peterborough: Broadview, 2010), an American realist novel whose introduction takes a quasi-archeological view of contemporary Chicago: the city's streets are "a deep and rugged chasm" (57), its skyscrapers "towering cliffs" (57), and its residents part of a "tribe" (59). Another is Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), which investigates Chicago's meatpacking industry and finds little more than savagery and atavism. Dreiser was aware of and favorably impressed by Fuller's novel at the time that he wrote *The Financier*; he later attested to having read *The Jungle* and endorsed Sinclair when the latter ran to become the governor of California in 1934. But ultimately, Dreiser's trilogy may be closest in spirit to the vast field of "Big History," which Fred Spier has defined as "the approach to history that places human history within the context of cosmic history, from the beginning of the universe up until life on Earth today" (*Big History and the Future of Humanity* [Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010], 1). See also David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2004).

[10] Dreiser was anticipated, however, by Gustavus Myers's *History of the Great American Fortunes* (1907–1911), which had presented the conflict in Cowperwoodian terms a few years before the trilogy's first volume was published. Dreiser read Myers in 1916, after he had written *The Financier* and *The Titan*.

[11] Useful histories of the postwar national economy include Richard Franklin Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859–1877* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990); H. W. Brands, *American Colossus: The Triumph of Capitalism, 1865–1900* (New York: Doubleday, 2010) and *The Money Men: Capitalism, Democracy, and the Hundred Years' War Over the American Dollar* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006); Steve Fraser, *Every Man a Speculator: A History of Wall Street in American Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); Robert P. Sharkey, *Money, Class, and Party: An Economic Study of Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1959); Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (1982; repr., New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Irwin Unger, *The Greenback Era: A Social and Political History of American Finance, 1865–1879* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964); and Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

[12] See James, 251.

[13] Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), 83.

[14] Michaels, 77.

[15] For the Miltonic original, see *Paradise Lost*, book 12, line 646.

[16] Charles Child Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1956), 10.

[17] John C. Waldmeir, *The American Trilogy, 1900–1937: Norris, Dreiser, Dos Passos and the History of Mammon* (West Cornwall: Locust Hill Press, 1995), 4.

[18] Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (1988; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), 21. On changing professional standards for historical scholarship during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see also John Higham, *History: The Development of Historical Studies in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965).

[19] Albert Bushnell Hart, "Imagination in History," *American Historical Review* 15.2 (1910): 232.

[20] Novick, 24.

[21] Sereno S. Pratt, *The Work of Wall Street* (New York: D. Appleton, 1903), 7.

[22] Charles A. Conant, "The Function of the Stock and Produce Exchanges," *Atlantic Monthly* 91 (April 1903): 434.

[23] Henry Clews, *Twenty-Eight Years in Wall Street* (New York: Irving, 1887), 40–41.

[24] Clews, 79.

[25] In all fairness to Yerkes, Dreiser's novel leaves an incorrect impression of his service during wartime. While Yerkes never enlisted fully, he did join the Pennsylvania militia on two occasions when Confederate forces drew near the state. In both cases, they were driven back by the Union army (at Antietam and Gettysburg) before Yerkes saw combat.

[26] Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer, *Jay Cooke: Financier of the Civil War*, 2 vol. (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs, 1907), 2:156, 96.

[27] Oberholtzer, 2:176, 318.

[28] Dreiser, *The Financier: The Critical Edition*, 268. The source passage for the quotation can be found in Clews, *Twenty-Eight Years*, 79–80.

[29] Dreiser, *The Financier: The Critical Edition*, 268.

[30] Dreiser, *A Book About Myself* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), 457.

[31] Herbert Spencer, *First Principles of a New System of Philosophy* (1864; repr., New York: D. Appleton, 1882), 540, 552.

[32] Ronald E. Marin, *American Literature and the Universe of Force* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1981), 59. Dreiser's attempts to reconcile scientific observation and spiritual insight are also explored in Louis J. Zanine's *Mechanism and Mysticism: The Influence of Science on the Thought and Work of Theodore Dreiser* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1993). Other accounts of Spencer's influence in America are Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1944); Stow Persons, ed., *Evolutionary Thought in America* (New York: George Braziller, 1956); and Barry Werth, *Banquet at Delmonico's: Great Minds, the Gilded Age, and the Triumph of Evolution in America* (New York: Random House, 2009).

[33] John Fiske, *American Political Ideas Viewed From the Standpoint of Universal History: Three Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain in May 1880* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1885), 151.

[34] Spencer, 17.

[35] Quoted in Jerome Loving, *The Last Titan: A Life of Theodore Dreiser* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2005), 234.

[36] Dreiser, *The Titan* (New York: John Lane, 1914), 351–53. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *T*.

[37] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 177–78.

[38] Quoted in William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 35.

[39] Cronon, 43. Such descriptions of Chicago could also be found in various fictional works that predated Dreiser's trilogy. A particularly striking example was *The Pit* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1903) by Frank Norris, who was instrumental in getting Dreiser's first novel, *Sister Carrie*, published in 1900. Here is Norris's naturalistic, transhistorical view of the city as it recovers from the Great Fire of 1871: "It was Empire, the resistless subjugation of all this central world of the lakes and the prairies. Here, midmost in the land, beat the Heart of the Nation, whence inevitably must come its immeasurable power, its infinite, infinite, inexhaustible vitality. Here, of all her cities, throbbed the true life—the true power and spirit of America; gigantic, crude with the crudity of

youth, disdaining rivalry; sane and healthy and vigorous; brutal in its ambition, arrogant in the new-found knowledge of its giant strength, prodigal of its wealth, infinite in its desires. In its capacity boundless, in its courage indomitable; subduing the wilderness in a single generation, defying calamity, and through the flame and the débris of a commonwealth in ashes, rising suddenly renewed, formidable, and Titanic" (62–63).

[40] Dreiser sounded a similar note in a 1914 interview, arguing that "the mind of the great merchant is conscious of the poetry of his work. He has something that men want and he sends it to them everywhere. From Alaska to Mexico, from Massachusetts to the Philippines, he makes himself known to men, for he supplies what they need, whether it's oil or tobacco or steel rails. The romance of it is tremendous" ("Business Overlords of America Greatest, Most Powerful Men since Days of Old Rome, They Have Made History as Well as Money, Says Theodore Dreiser, and Thinking in Terms of a Continent Have Figured in a Tremendous Romance of Unscrupulous Success," interview with Marguerite Mooers Marshall, repr. in *Theodore Dreiser: Interviews*, 48).

[41] Norris, *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901; repr., New York: Penguin, 1986), 576.

[42] Norris, 576.

[43] Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 26. Smith quoted in Seltzer, 50.

[44] Charles Edward Russell, "Where Did You Get It, Gentlemen?," *Everybody's Magazine* 17.3 (1907): 350.

[45] Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (1937; repr., Boston: Beacon, 1963), 44.

[46] Lukács, 44.

[47] As Michael Kammen has shown, late nineteenth-century American culture was frequently characterized by a similarly transhistorical and transnational aesthetic, with the pasts of various nations appropriated and transplanted into new contexts: he finds America's natural monuments described with European analogies, its pueblo villages compared to Nineveh and Babylon, its historical novels reaching back to Roman and medieval times, and its new buildings constructed in a kind of "neo-classical pastiche" (*Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* [1991; repr., New York: Vintage, 1993], 170). On the pervasive antimodernism of American intellectual and cultural thought in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, see T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981).

[48] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 21.

[49] Pratt, 22.

[50] Dreiser, *The Stoic* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1947), 137.

[51] Dreiser, *The Stoic*, 200.

[52] Dreiser, *The Stoic*, 283.

[53] Dreiser, *The Stoic*, 283.

[54] Dreiser, *The Stoic*, 303.

[55] Edwin Lefèvre, "What Availeth It?," *Everybody's Magazine* 24.6 (1911): 848.

[56] Dreiser, *Notes on Life* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1974), 110.

[57] Dreiser, *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub: A Book on the Mystery and Wonder and Terror of Life* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920), 74.

[58] Dreiser, *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub*, 74.

[59] Dreiser, *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub*, 83.

[60] Dreiser, *Interviews*, 50.