

The 75th Word: Dreiser's Language in *Sister Carrie*

Theodore Dreiser, writes James Phalen, is “probably the most egregiously deficient stylist among novelists of the first rank”¹ — and Phalen is one of Dreiser's partisans. He, at least, believes Dreiser to be a writer of the first rank, despite his linguistic shortcomings; other critics, less generously, have termed Dreiser no less than “the worst writer of his eminence in the history of literature”² and remarked that “Dreiser writes as if he hasn't a native language.”³ John Flanagan has even gone so far as to separate Dreiser's stylistic faults into two categories, verbal and syntactical: “The first category includes inaccuracies, pretentiousness, archaisms, faulty idioms, triteness, inappropriate use of foreign terms, and unfortunate coinages. The second category includes faulty reference, dangling modifiers, failures in agreement and a curious substitution of participial constructions for finite verbs.”⁴ Of the two types of flaws, Flanagan adds, “it is perhaps debatable which occasions the greater annoyance.”⁵

The opening sentences of Dreiser's 1900 novel *Sister Carrie* certainly do little to contradict the harsh judgment of these critics:

When Caroline Meeber boarded the afternoon train for Chicago her total outfit consisted of a small trunk, which was checked in the baggage car, a cheap imitation alligator skin satchel holding some minor details of the toilet, a small lunch in a paper

¹James Phalen, *Worlds From Words*, p.9.

²quoted in Phalen, p.67.

³quoted in Julian Markels, “Dreiser and the Plotting of Inarticulate Experience,” p.505.

⁴John Flanagan, “Dreiser's Style in *An American Tragedy*,” p.287.

⁵Ibid.

box and a yellow leather snap purse, containing her ticket, a scrap of paper with her sister's address in Van Buren Street, and four dollars in money. It was in August, 1889.⁶

Though the first sentence certainly has its share of inept phrasing (“four dollars in money”? As opposed to what, four dollars in real estate?), it is the short second sentence that truly catches the eye. What, precisely, is the antecedent of the “it” that “was in August, 1889”? Does Dreiser conceive the entirety of the previous sentence as an object that can be placed in a given month the same way a letter can be placed in an envelope or a marshmallow in a cup of cocoa? Syntactic correctness or incorrectness aside, what does Dreiser's phrasing tell us about his conception of the relationship between his narrative and the world?

It is my contention that many of Dreiser's linguistic tropes, be they errors or defensible turns of phrase, reflect a view of this relationship very much in keeping with the realist project as described by Dreiser and other prominent realist writers of the day. But before I can begin my examination of these tropes or the realist project, it is necessary to briefly sketch out a vocabulary with which to discuss the subject at hand.

Speech acts and the “direction of fit”

John Searle has made a name for himself in two very different arenas: as a property owner, he lent his name to the “Searle increase” which hobbled California rent control law; as one of the leading figures in the philosophy of language, he is known for pioneering a theory of speech

⁶Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, p.3. All citations refer to the 1986 Penguin Classics edition, the text and

acts in which he categorized the types of statements that can occur in a language according to their illocutionary force — that is, according to what they are intended to *do* rather than what they mean. One of the key aspects underlying illocutionary force is the idea of “direction of fit,” which is simply a matter of whether the words in a given statement are intended to match the world or whether the statement is intended to change the world to match its words. Thus, if I say “the window is open” this statement has what Searle would call a “word-to-world direction of fit,”⁷ or what in the interest of clarity I will call “word-fits-world”: the words are an attempt to describe the condition of the window. But if I say “please open the window,” the direction of fit is what Searle calls “world-to-word”⁸ and I will call “world-fits-word”: if my statement is successful, someone will change the world to put the window in the condition I wish.

It is not always possible to look at a piece of language and be able to determine its direction of fit with no other information. Elizabeth Anscombe illustrates this fact quite well in the following thought experiment:

Suppose a man goes to the supermarket with a shopping list given him by his wife on which are written the words “beans, butter, bacon, and bread”. Suppose as he goes around with his shopping cart selecting these items, he is followed by a detective who writes down everything he takes. As they emerge from the store both shopper and detective will have identical lists. But the function of the two lists will be quite different. In the case of the shopper’s list, the purpose of the list is, so to speak, to get the world to match the words; the man is supposed to make his actions fit the list. In the case of the detective, the purpose of the list is to make the words

pagination of which is identical to the 1981 Pennsylvania edition.

⁷John Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, p.4.

⁸Ibid.

match the world; the man is supposed to make the list fit the actions of the shopper.⁹

A further wrinkle in this system is the existence of a class of statements known as declarations (which are completely unrelated to “declarative” statements such as “the window is open” — in Searle’s taxonomy such statements are called “assertives”). The defining characteristic of declarations is that their very utterance brings about a change in the world: in this sense, declarations have a world-fits-word direction of fit, but require no cooperation on the part of the world to make it so. As Searle puts it, “saying makes it so.”¹⁰ To return to my earlier example, if I say “please open the window,” the fact that I *want* the world to change doesn’t necessarily mean it will; if you’re already a little chilly you may well refuse to open the window. (The success or failure of the statement has no impact on its direction of fit, however: it is the intention of the speaker alone that determines its illocutionary force.) But if you are my employee and I say “you’re fired,” the very act of my uttering those words changes the world: you are no longer my employee. A declaration is this type of statement.

The distinctions among these various categories grow quite complicated when they are applied to fiction, for authors have unlimited power over the virtual worlds they create. If you and I are discussing what we did the previous evening and I say, “It was a dark and stormy night,” that is an assertive statement with a word-fits-world direction of fit. You are perfectly free to dispute my assertion if you have evidence to the

⁹quoted in Searle, p.3.

¹⁰Searle, p.16.

contrary: “What are you talking about? It was a moonlit and beautiful night!” But if I write a story which begins, “It was a dark and stormy night,” the fact of my writing that sentence makes it a dark and stormy night in the world of that story: the world fits my words, because it is comprised of those words. The two sentences may be identical — the same seven words, in the same order — but the illocutionary force behind the statements is radically different.

Dreiser’s use of language in *Sister Carrie*

Having covered the necessary vocabulary, we can now return to the second sentence of *Sister Carrie*: “It was in August, 1889.” This sentence seems to straddle the line between an word-fits-world assertion and an authorial, world-fits-word declaration. It is a declaration in the sense that it does not report an objectively existing reality but instead sets forth a date for the action of the virtual world of the novel, over which Dreiser has sole control; the reader cannot read the sentence and retort, “No, it was in 1894.” But Dreiser does not phrase his sentence the way a normal authorial declaration would be phrased. It is the 75th word of the novel, that little preposition “in,” that is the problem. Had Dreiser written, “It was August, 1889,” the illocutionary force would be identical to that of an author writing “It was a dark and stormy night.” The authorial declaration “It was August, 1889” would have brought August 1889 into being in the world of the story. But as it stands, the sentence reads “It was in August, 1889.” The word “it” thus has to refer to something previously mentioned; it cannot be interpreted as a placeholder “it” as in the

sentence “it is raining.” The only thing that “it” can possibly refer to in context is the action of Carrie Meeber boarding the train to Chicago with her luggage. And thus the sentence as a whole has a hybrid quality. In its placement of that event at a certain fixed point in time, it is an authorial declaration: it performs an action. But it does not *create* August 1889. As phrased, the sentence treats August 1889 as an entity preexisting the novel. Which, in a sense, it is: there was in fact an August 1889 before *Sister Carrie* was written. But that August 1889 occurred in reality; Carrie’s boarding of the train occurs in the unreal world of the narrative. By phrasing his sentence in this clumsy, even incorrect way, Dreiser has done something quite remarkable: he has set an unreal event at a real point in time.

Nor is this an isolated example of Dreiser’s grounding of his novel in the non-fictional world; other stylistic tropes of Dreiser’s require even less analysis to tease out the underlying relationship between the real world and *Sister Carrie*. Take, for example, his prefatory remark about department stores: “The nature of these vast retail combinations, should they ever permanently disappear, will form an interesting chapter in the commercial history of our nation.”¹¹ What is most remarkable about this statement and the panegyric to department stores that follows it is not so much the reportorial style — after all, a talented science fiction writer could describe an interstellar spacecraft in an identical style and still be light-years away (ahem) from a word-fits-world direction of fit. Nor is it the last clause that clinches the case for such a direction of fit: an argument could be made that the “our nation” referred to is the virtual

¹¹*Sister Carrie*, p.22.

America that only exists between the covers of the book, and that the word “will” turns this portion of the statement into an authorial declaration, as if Dreiser were saying, “I’m the author, I know how the commercial history of the country in my book turns out, and this will be an interesting chapter in it.” I don’t necessarily endorse this take on the statement, but it is certainly defensible. The middle clause, however, throws a completely new light on the illocutionary force of the statement. The reason Dreiser (or rather the narrator, but with so little distance between Dreiser and the narrative voice I’ll call the voice “Dreiser” for the sake of convenience) gives for describing department stores is to provide information about them to future readers “should they ever permanently disappear.” Disappear from where? From the world of the novel? This seems highly unlikely, for two reasons. First, the conditional nature of the word “should” suggests that the narrator truly does not know whether department stores will permanently disappear — for all Dreiser knew, readers ninety-six years after the publication of the novel could be scratching their heads trying to figure out what Carson Pirie Scott could possibly be as they drove along in their horse-drawn carriages. This implies that it is not the world of the novel, over which Dreiser has absolute power to determine what will or will not happen, to which he is referring. Second, a novel is a spatial as well as a temporal phenomenon. Once Dreiser places a department store in the story, that department store will exist in the world of the text as long as the text itself exists — just as the destitute Carrie tromping through the snow will always be there to read about despite her ascension to superstar status later in the novel. Thus, the only place from which department stores *can* disappear is the

world outside the text, and thus, this statement is as much a hybrid as the one about August 1889. It, too, can only be accounted for by recourse to a word-fits-world direction of fit interwoven with the authorial declaration implicit in a fictional work.

And all that has been said about the department stores can be applied to Dreiser's description of "drummers" — a term which does require some explaining to modern readers unfamiliar with the period. Once again, Dreiser prefaces his description with the phrase "Lest this order of individual permanently pass..."¹² But here the implications of Dreiser's move reach much further than in the case discussed earlier. For if Dreiser does indeed ground "drummers" in the real world through this linguistic sleight of hand, and I believe he does, then by defining the character of Drouet as a type — he is described as "a type of the traveling canvasser for a manufacturing house" several pages before we even learn his name — he indirectly grounds Drouet in reality even though Drouet is every bit as fictional as Isabel Archer or Silas Lapham. Other characters share Drouet's escape from pure fictionality to the extent that they, too, are defined as types: Hurstwood as a typical example, if "an interesting character after his kind,"¹³ of an emerging upper-middle class distinct from the truly rich; Carrie as someone in such a common position that there are well-defined rules for "when a girl leaves her home at eighteen."¹⁴ One gets the sense that their individuality is no more important to Dreiser than which loaf of bread the shopper took was important to the detective in Anscombe's thought experiment.

¹²Ibid., p.6.

¹³Ibid., p.43.

¹⁴Ibid., p.3.

The realist project

“The only reason for the existence of a work of fiction is that it does attempt to represent life”,¹⁵ wrote Henry James in “The Art of Fiction”. William Dean Howells, in *Criticism and Fiction*, expressed much the same sentiment: “We must ask ourselves before we ask anything else, Is it true? — true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women?”¹⁶ Thus it is no surprise to hear Dreiser agree that “The sum and substance of literary as well as social morality may be expressed in three words — tell the truth. [...] Truth is what is; and the seeing of what is, the realization of truth.”¹⁷ But in practice, Dreiser takes the notion a step further than other realist writers. As Richard Poirier points out, “Writing for [Dreiser] obviously did not involve the ‘building’ of a world so much as reporting one already existent,”¹⁸ and this is reflected in the language of *Sister Carrie* even when direction of fit in the strictest linguistic terms does not come into play. Dreiser rarely if ever takes the tone of the literary craftsman or puppeteer; indeed, he often casts himself as just another spectator in the world of the novel, albeit a more informed one than the reader. Take for example the passage in which he describes Chicago, “a city of over 500,000”¹⁹: a writer such as James would perhaps have couched such a passage in terms of painting a portrait of the city, with the real-world Chicago as the subject, himself as

¹⁵Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” p.5.

¹⁶William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*, p.99.

¹⁷Theodore Dreiser, “True Art Speaks Plainly,” p.481.

¹⁸Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere*, p.238.

¹⁹*Sister Carrie*, p.16.

the artist, and the reader as the viewer of the painting, seeing it as James has chosen to present it (for it must be viewed from *some* perspective — the entirety can't be known at once or, more than likely, at all). But Dreiser takes a completely different tack, beginning, “let us look at the sphere in which [Carrie's] future was to lie.”²⁰ He is explicitly positioning himself in the same role as the reader: he, too, is just “looking.” Though it seems a naive stance to take today, Dreiser almost certainly seems to have considered the statistics and observations that followed to be nothing less than “the truth” about Chicago; what is on the page is what *is*, not because Dreiser says so as the author of the book, but because it simply *is*. The idea that the mere fact of expressing something in words takes that thing out of the realm of the real and into that of language would have been anathema to him.

That Dreiser was frustrated by language and its limitations is hardly a revelation; that he struggled with it even less so, especially given that many critics, such as those that opened this essay, have believed that Dreiser essentially lost the struggle. And very early in *Sister Carrie* Dreiser expresses a measure of his frustration: “How true it is that words are but vague shadows of the volumes we mean.”²¹ But just as a round object will cast a round shadow and not a square one, the linguistic “shadows” that make up the text of *Sister Carrie* reveal Dreiser's stance toward the relationship between fiction and reality better than he ever articulated himself. I don't believe for a moment that Dreiser consciously chose to twist his language to express his underlying philosophy in ways that

²⁰Ibid., p.15.

²¹Ibid., p.9.

conventional formulations could not have managed, but neither do I think that his phrasing is purely accidental. His mangled sentences simply represent his best attempt to capture his “great inaudible feelings and purposes.”²² And though they do indeed suffer from all the faults enumerated by Flanagan and other critics, they simultaneously blur the distinction between world-fits-word declarations and word-fits-world assertions, between the writer and the reader, between fiction and reality. For “the worst writer of his eminence in the history of literature,” this is quite a remarkable accomplishment.

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²²Ibid.

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