

Book Review

Rolf Lundtn, *Dreiser Looks at Scandinavia*. Uppsala 1977. 143 pp.

Theodore Dreiser visited Norway, Sweden and Denmark from June 22 to August 5 in 1926. Rolf LundCn's monograph has "two modest objectives," viz. to describe in some detail who and what Dreiser saw during that visit, mainly based on unpublished diary material in the University of Pennsylvania Dreiser Collection, and to give a brief sketch of America in the mid-20s which is meant to serve as background and "atmosphere" to the diary impressions. Although Mr LundCn modestly disclaims any originality as far as this survey of the age is concerned he has dug out quite a few interesting facts concerning the reception of American literature, in particular of Dreiser himself, in the Scandinavian countries — some of it is included in the Appendix: "Scandinavia Looks at Dreiser."

Mr LundCn may have felt that the period of Dreiser's life covered during his 7 weeks in Scandinavia did not contain sufficient material for a full monograph so besides the brief presentation of the age already mentioned his book opens and concludes with a description of Dreiser's character, which I take from the "Concluding Remarks" is meant to provide some continuous meaning, some coherent theory to Mr LundCn's narrative about Dreiser. This theory is, briefly, that Dreiser's childhood lacked a "homogeneous scale of values" (p. 10); that the family's poverty and Dreiser's "physical weakness" (p. 12) gave the boy a "deeply rooted inferiority complex," a "fundamental insecurity" — hence Dreiser's constant need to assert his manhood (Ibid.). Hence also his "quest" for absolute values, for Truth and Beauty (pp. 14–16). But perhaps no central organizing theory was intended and Mr LundCn in his narrative quite often hedges with "may"s and "probably"s. And, in fact, it seems to me that Mr LundCn's book is rather unprincipled on what "facts" to bring to the reader's knowledge. For example, a fairly trivial incident — Dreiser criticizing his friend, Helen Richardson's driving — triggers off some information about auto deaths in America in 1925. This is followed by some information about the changing moral behavior among youth in the 20s due to the automobile (pp. 26 ff.), which in turn leads back to the interrupted narrative about Dreiser's private life with Helen Richardson. I don't think this is untypical of the book's progression as a whole: there is, frankly, too much padding. Too often the effect on the reader is similar to that of picture-books entitled, "The Roaring 20s," "The Angry 30s," etc., — viz., a montage of facts, figures, pictures is offered that may entertain the reader but rarely helps him *understand*.

I take it that the best biographies are those that succeed in bringing together the private life and the public work(s) in such a way that we can read the one in terms of the other, and vice versa. I don't think Mr LundCn's book manages a genuine synthesis of this sort and I think the failure was inevitable given the na-

ture of Dreiser's visit (cf. pp. 42–3). Also I regret that Mr Lundén resolutely refuses to interpret his facts. For example, the long quotation from Dreiser's Vanity *Fair* essay, "The Romance of Power," is headed "Patriotism," but no attempt is made to link up the quotation with Dreiser's character or with his work. Likewise, given Mr Lundén's attention to Dreiser's sex life, it is disappointing that he doesn't comment on the somewhat incestuous nature apparent in many of his relations with women.

Christen Kold Thomsen
Odense University