CHAPTER-NINE
THE HEIGHT OF ECSTASY:
THE GENIUS, THE BULWARK AND THE STOIC
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*The Genius, The Bulwark and The Stoic*

*The Genius* written in his earlier years, reveals the beauty of life in the midst of misery and cruelty. It may be called as the first milestone in the spiritual pilgrimage of Dreiser. In *The Bulwark* Dreiser’s speculations on the source of existence find some sort of satisfactory answer. Herein also we find Dreiser’s majestic concern with Beauty that is Truth. The new recognition of the merciful God in the novel reveals the transcendental insight. *The Stoic*, his swan song, although he started writing it since 1914, dealt with the relationship of existence with Ultimate Existence. This novel offers the quintessence of Dreiser’s perception of the essence of grandeur in life. Dreiser’s desire to find man’s position in the Great Chain somewhere between angel and animal as Shakespeare’s Hamlet cries, it out in one of his famous soliloquies, his attempt to show man his position, both of the infinite gradations above him and of his dramatic difference from the creatures beneath him made the Trilogy of Dreiser more fascinating. While the technical theories of deterministic philosophy reflected in the earlier fictional efforts of Dreiser revealed to some extent a predominance of environment and heredity on man’s free will, *The Financier* and *The Titan* exemplified the two elements — metaphysical and passional which Santayana considered ‘primal’ in the American spirit.
Renewal was the essential goal of transcendentalism — the hope of establishing in Emerson’s phrase “an original relation to the Universe.” (C. I. 3)

The primary task of transcendentalism therefore is to explore the self and nature. Nature is symbolic of spiritual truth. Emerson wrote: “God is a reality and His method is illusion.” (J VII 505). Reality to Emerson was “the low circle of the senses and the understanding” (J. X 115). For Santayana the business of a spiritual life is the experiencing of the “ultimate in the immediate” or “the realization of an essence” - a fugitive but perfect moment of illumination. The realization is necessarily predicted on sense experience in the world of existence but the spiritual man is freed from the imputation of sensualism because his desire for the world is pure, he seeks momentary harmonies, not object. It was imperative for the sake of eternity to subordinate the passions to the will. Metaphorically or otherwise he insists that only spirit exists. In his Journal Emerson stressed on the “invisible connection between heaven and earth........”. (J 1, 61)

Emerson wrote :

You seek in vain to contemplate the order of things apart for its existence you can no more banish this than you can separate from yourself the notions of space and duration. (J 1, 61)

About revelations, Emerson clearly states :

Let man then learn the revelation of all nature and all thought to his heart; this namely, that the highest dwells with him; that the sources of nature are in his own mind if the sentiment of duty is there. (C. II. 294)
His essay 'Self-Reliance' ends by simply a higher affirmation of law and order. There was a kind of teleology implied in Emerson’s dogged insistence on the necessary supremacy of the life of the mind. By a persistent denial of the flesh, he hoped to ensure his body's acquiescence to the ultimate triumph of the soul — for Emerson, the primary entelechy of being. Dreiser's conception of God was Emersonian in spirit. Louis J. Zanine remarked:

His (Dreiser's) notion of God was that of a creator, immanent is the matter and energy comprising the universe.

Like Emerson's, Dreiser's God was at once both immanent and transcendent in the Universe. Zanine discussed the point of similarity between the philosophy of Mary Baker Eddy and the philosophy of Dreiser. Both Mrs. Eddy and Dreiser believed that All is infinite mind and its infinite manifestation for, God is All in All. God is creative Energy which is equated with Emerson's called "Over-soul." The pantheistic conception of an immanent creator was expressed in The Financier, The Titan and The Bulwark. Each individual is a part of the total energy of life, reminding us of the concept of Brahma who is manifested in all the living beings. Dreiser introduced Thoreau by saying:

Of all my philosophic and scientific reading of recent years from Democritus to Einstein, these scattered notes of Thoreau impress me as being more illuminating.

Dreiser studied the intuitive contemplation of the transcendentalism, and his mysticism like that of Emersonian philosophy has in it an emphasis on human consciousness opening into the whole
of spiritual reality. He was profoundly moved by "a sense of revelation" as reflected in *The Bulwark* where Solon declares:

> And now I thank God for this revelation of his universal presence and His good intent toward all things — all of his created world, for otherwise, how would it understand me, and I it if we were not both a part of Himself. (TB 318-310)

H. L. Mencken referred to the two warring halves of Dreiser’s brain — the romantic and the realist side — both of which were woven harmoniously in Dreiser’s Transcendental search for mystic realization of life enriched by a spiritual faith. The materialistic world which laid bare before him a world of romantic possibilities gradually giving way to disillusionment finally led him to achieve intuitive realization of life and universe. In Dreiser’s mind the question of human freedom was uppermost because of the two predominant trends of thought — one related to mechanism, the other related to Freudian psychology. To see man against the background of the universe as a whole is a relief from the gloom that the purely mechanistic structure of universe spreads. In *The Bulwark* and in *The Stoic* Dreiser was to formulate the new attitude toward life and life’s mysterious order. He wanted to elaborate that the mind or spirit which animated and ordered that life was if incalculable more benign than otherwise and was, in most essentials indistinguishable, from the God of Eastern philosophy. Sidney Richman also emphasised this gradual change in Dreiser’s perception about life:

> What has always touched Dreiser’s activities with grandeur was his unceasing concern for the significance of life and in the years
following the publication of *An American Tragedy* the search seemed if anything to take on renewed vigor.³

Richman rightly explained the influence of mechanism Dreiser:

Loeb’s mechanism had for Dreiser something of the spiritual content that the Celestial Mechanics had for Cotton Mather. It diverted him not away from God but toward Him.⁴

For Solon Barnes, the close attention to the forms of flowers and trees—to all of vegetative life—confirms in him the belief that the Creative Divinity moves purposefully throughout nature. *In The Bulwark* Etta is found crying for life:

> Why should you cry? You were the one to start all the trouble in our family. (TB 337).

After a moment she sought to check her sobs, yet without anger or reproof, she replied:

> Oh, I am not crying for myself, or for father - I am crying for life. (TB 337).

Sidney Richman wrote,

> In a way it is an almost perfect re-enactment of young Cowperwood’s experience in *The Financier* with the squid and lobster, the scene—and the image—which was to supply the youthful tycoon with his first comprehensive look at society, the world and the universe.⁵

These responses on the part of Cowperwood and of Solon were reminiscent of Thoreau’s emotionalizing over the natural
struggle he saw about the Walden Pond. Dreiser's introduction to Thoreau's writings illustrated the kinship between his own thought and Thoreau's to some extent. Nevertheless, Dreiser is closer to Emerson than to Thoreau whose dream is not of some transcendent reality, but of a natural fact. Thoreau's imagination is kept in earthly bounds, Dreiser like Emerson could easily transcend the earthly bound for reaching the Reality beyond. However, in one aspect Dreiser was indebted to Thoreau and it was in his disgust for the commercialism and the materialistic world. Dreiser declares that "Thoreau would have despised our recent world war as a commercial enterprise." For another faith he recalled Thoreau that "he (Thoreau) did not consider man as a social organism or part of one. He was a universal organism." 

The harmony with spiritual forces which created the world and the comprehension by intuition the 'Over Soul' are the two other resemblances between Dreiser and Thoreau. But this is not an acceptance of the philosophy of Thoreau. Dreiser's belief in the inner principle of God and its manifestation in life seems to have been taken directly from the Quaker Concept of the Inner light which Dreiser describes in The Bulwark "the dwelling consciousness of the Divine Spirit, the true Union of God with human beings."

Even in The Financier Dreiser stressed on the mind of the hero. Cowperwood's mind was of the first order: "It was a big mind .......... but he could not be sure .......... whatever .......... was important for him." (TF 700). Old Cowperwood was doomed to middle class mediocrity. He lacks the vision and drive to see beyond: "He looked upon life as a business situation or deal ...... " (TF 2).
Later we know:

He really degenerated into a mere automation. (TF 733).

To older Cowperwood the vision of the world was linear, rigid and exclusionary. Cowperwood and Solon saw the world in a cyclical expansive, non-Western manner because personal relationships were more important to them than material acquisitions. Even Jennie and Clyde, more or less victims of materialistic illusions of the commercial world, also regarded personal relationships more important than wealth. Clyde wanted wealth but he wanted Sondra more. This seems to be an illusion of beauty. In The Titan Cowperwood struggles to keep this spirit alive. Dreiser says of him: "He must always have youth, the illusion of beauty." (P. 208)

Clyde's pursuit of woman may be compared with that of Cowperwood which in Dreiser's opinion is due to the desire to stay young, to keep the world in perpetual bloom and, to stay the cold hand of age and death. In a strange way, Cowperwood felt that if he could extend his personal relationship, he could triumph even over the universe itself. In The Stoic this search for beauty in every form becomes symbolic of "the search for the Divine design beyond all forms." (TS 305).

Stuart P. Sherman attacked The Genius with uncommon severity and brought the charge of "barbaric naturalism". Witla, the typical country boy of American letters moves from a small town through hardship, depression and self—doubt to the height of success and glory in New York. Thus we get in the novel a world of dream and romance;

Oh Frieda! Frieda! Oh youth youth! That they should dance
before him for ever more an unattainable desire - the holy grail of beauty. (TG 284)

The aspirations of Witla were Franklinesque in his pursuit and the mode of anti-romantic romance used in Dreiser's novels seems to have reached a culmination. It relates to the fundamental ambiguity of money—its potentiality and also its powerlessness. Witla having reached his goal of worldly success does not find the happiness he had been looking and hoping for. Neither the attainment of power, nor the satisfaction of pleasure is enough for abiding satisfaction, the need and the longing in both spheres is insatiable. The illusions engendered by wealth gradually give in to disillusionment which enabled him to speculate more widely. The familiar nostalgia for an ordered and happy past probably symbolising the pastoral innocence existing in the pre-industrial period is the theme of The Genius. Dreiser's description of heavenly nature is superb:

Outside the bright October stars were in evidence by millions. The Bay and Harbor of New York were as wonderfully lit as that night when Suzanne came to him after the evening at Fort Wadsworth on her own porch. He recalled the spring odours, the wonderful feel of youth and love — the hope that was springing in them. (TG 677)

Then Dreiser gives the account of disillusionment when romance was gone:

Suzanne, sweet voice, accomplished shape, light whisper delicate touch. Gone, all gone . . . Faded the flower and all its budded charms, faded the sight of beauty from my eyes; faded the shape
of beauty from my arms, faded the voice, warmth, whiteness, paradise. Gone were those bright days in which they had ridden together, dined together, walked in sylvan places .... (TG 677-678)

The account continues,

He had come in his car but he really did not want it. Life was accurssed. His own was a failure. To think that all his fine dreams should crumble this way. Shortly he would have no car, no fame on Riverside Drive, no position, no anything (TG 678)

But here Witla remembers God and cries out:

God, I cannot stand this! he exclaimed and a little later — By God, I can’t! I can’t! (TG 695).

Towards the end of the novel Witla is no longer lost and confused. He begins to see the totality of rather than his own limited self. Though he is unable to perceive clearly the purpose behind this all, he feels that

life at bottom, in spite of all its teeming terrors, was beautiful. (TG 695 TG).

Dreiser shows majestic concern with superhuman patterns of the laws of the inscrutable universe in many of his short stories and plays. Edmund Biddle analyses Dreiser’s quest for the unknown in plays such as The Blue Sphere, Laughing Gas, In The Dark, The Spring, Recital or The Hand of the Potter. These plays also reflected Dreiser’s favourite theme of man’s yearning for wealth and pros-
perity and his disillusionment on achieving these. In the play *The Height in the Window* Laura and Kinderling were shown as victims of illusion but they could not become happy even in spite of their wealth.

It is important to note that Dreiser retained an almost mystical faith in the beauty of life in all forms in spite of all his tragic awareness of life. It is this faith that sustained the artist in him. In *The Genius* he makes a strong plea for special recognition of the artist who is not to be governed and judged by the same moral and ethical codes as ordinary human beings. In many of his stories of *Free and Other Stories* in 1918 Dreiser’s conception of man’s powerlessness is expressed. But the world of dreams co-exist side by side. Dreiser knew the animalism of human beings. But he was also aware of the nobler side of life. In *Twelve Men* he portrays the characters of a doctor from Warsaw, a New York financier, Sallie White’s father, Peter McCord, William Muldoon and the famous sketch of his brother, Paul. While some of the characters like those of McCord and Muldoon are the embodiments of selfishness, characters like Charles Potter in “A Doer of the Word” are ‘good’ The love their fellow men and yet never preach the Bible. He is a man who had discovered the meaning of life.

Later in Solon Barnes of *The Bulwark* we get such nobility of character. The account given by Dreiser of Mr. White’s saintly life is moving. The self-seeking animality is not the theme, the urge for selfless pursuit for the welfare of others is more prominent. In *A Hoosier Holiday* Dreiser had declared:

I once believed .......... that nature was a blind stumbling force or
combination of forces which knew not what or whither ....... Of late years. I have inclined to think just the reverse, i.e. that nature is merely dark to us because of her tremendous subtlety and our own very limited powers of comprehension.  

In “The Myth of Individuality’ he thought of “eternal oneness” and regards individual as “a fraction” of it. The essay concludes with quotations from Emerson’s ‘Brahma’. Dreiser here comes very close to dealing with the nature of the Creative force and also to the insistence on the limitations of human mind. Dreiser refers to “the unified reality” behind the mystery of our existence. This is why he spoke of the denial of individuality:

Man is not really and truly living and thinking, but on the contrary is being lived and thought by that which has produced him.

This is indeed different from the concept of man as a puppet in the naturalistic interpretation of life.

In the Victorian England Thomas Hardy also found the whole scheme of the Universe incomprehensible and in The Dynasts he spoke of Immanent Will to offer some interpretation of the inscrutable mysteries of the universe; Science cannot illuminate. Religion has one answer—heaven. Dreiser finally came to realize that human knowledge is very far short of any understanding of the constructing and guiding forces of human life.

The mystery of the creative force seized Dreiser’s imagination. He took interest in omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent intelligence. Sometimes he sang like Thoreau:
It is with sensations alone that I am concerned not their cause (P. 408 Acquaintances)

Again, in a few poems such as ‘Interrogation’ or ‘Sutra’ he gives an idea of God very close to the final conception of the creative force. The God in ‘Interrogation’ is benevolent with no trace of malice. In ‘Sutra’ God is the “King of Blessedness” “the light of mankind.” The cravings for power and freedom from such cravings — constitute the two main planks in Dreiser’s philosophy. Human ambitions be it Carrie’s, Jennie’s or Clyde’s involve the necessity for power. They were victims of the illusions of power in the form of wealth, beauty or sex. But there was always a tension, always an attempt to achieve freedom. The characters in the earlier novels feel the pressure of disillusionment but failed to extend their faculty of comprehension to realize the totality, the supreme Directive Force of the universe or the Divine Essence. In The Bulwark Dreiser immersed himself in the Quaker ideals. He expressed his faith in a purposeful creation a belief in a Divine Creator. Swanberg quoted Vera Dreiser saying to him about Dreiser:

I not only believe in God, but I can go into any scientific laboratory and prove His existence.13

The Bulwark was the story of a devout Quaker. Quakerism embodies in itself idealism and perfection in this wretched world with its temptations and unbridled pleasures. In the earlier novels too we found the same conflict between material possessions and the yearning for mental happiness or spiritual satisfaction. The pattern of anti-romantic romance employed in Sister Carrie or Jennie Gerhardt shows how the characters are fascinated by the
wonders of materialism and their great expectations were belied by the repulsion, the degrading effect of that lure on life. Clyde’s romantic aspirations for wealth turned to a gloomy realization of the meaninglessness of life. In spite of all the reading of Bible or references to God, Clyde could not regain the peace of mind. But in *The Bulwark* Solon finds peace and this is possible in the midst of all his poignant sufferings of personal life. Rufus Barnes and Hannah were not touched by the materialistic lures of the society till they were confined to their isolated dwelling in a remote corner of Maine. But they moved to Philadelphia and settled at Phoebe’s palatial Thornbrough house. He was obliged to live in luxury to avoid the greater evil of providing more luxuries for prospective buyers. Solon came here at the age of ten. He could not understand the dilemma of the Quakers. But the moment he started courting Benecia Wallin, the daughter of rich banker living in the posh Girard Avenue of Philadelphia, he becomes disconcerted. This is another story of illusionment:

The spell of materialism had outdone the Quakers while Solon is determined to remain untainted. He saw everything in terms of divine order and life appeared to him a series of law-governed details each one of which had the import of being directly connected with divine will .... To him the religion of George Fox and John Woolman was the solution of all earthly ills. (TB 90 TB).

The Quakers equated divine blessedness with the acquisition of wealth. This rationalization of the accumulation of wealth was not acceptable to Solon who always distinguished religion from
o’er vaulting ambition for wealth. Solon did not stoop to Mammon worship and resigns from the bank to vindicate his religious principles. In the outlook of the new generation of Quakers, we find close resemblances to characters like Carrie, Jennie or Clyde who also came under the spell of materialism. Solon is Dreiser’s first character who was able to resist the temptation. Dreiser creates three characters, Briscoe, Stewart and Etta to give us the impression about the magnitude of the lures that Solon’s society had in it. Briscoe embarks on a freer existence. The inner light was nothing to Stewart who like the young Clyde took a keen interest in sexual gratification, Solon’s beloved daughter Etta also leads an immoral life at New York. In *The Bulwark* Dreiser’s purpose goes beyond the discovery of the delusion of the protagonist whom he wants to make wiser and capable of spiritual insight. Dreiser transforms his own mystical experiences to Solon whose affirmation of the reality of the Inner light is expressive of Dreiser’s own faith in Creative Force. He makes this explicit when he describes Solon as

energized by the Creative Force that created all things in apparently endless variety of designs and colors." Solon realizes that “surely there must be a Creative Divinity and so a purpose behind all this variety and beauty and tragedy of life. (P. 316-317 TB).

Dreiser wanted to find meaning in the horrible mess in which he found himself entangled. The curiosity of its meaning seemed wonderful, because, the discovery of an adequate system of reference or pattern was not simply an aesthetic necessity but also
a keenly felt personal need. The widened perception about existence disillusioned Dreiser about the old fictional mode and he was in desperate need of a new fictional pattern that would truly explain the chaos of life. Since his newspaper days, he was faced with this problem. As a journalist he saw life and gathered experiences which he wanted to present in a new way. He was not merely a chronicler of the American life. His problem as a writer was the problem of exploration as well as expression. He was not a technical innovator himself but like Proust or Joyce he had a great sympathy for technical experiment. What is significant is that the fictional form Dreiser needed to portray reality evolved in his fictions rather unconsciously. This was chiefly because the true means for him in the making of his fiction was “a power of observation informed by a living heart.” He lived the life of his characters till he reached a totality of vision. He did not impose anything till it emerged spontaneously. Dreiser himself remarked at the end of *The Titan*: “Life is to be learned from life and the professional moralist is, at best, but a manufacturer of shoddy wares.” (TT 499). That is why he was not able to surrender himself to the artificial and erroneous morality of orthodox religion. He rejected dogmatic Christianity and with the same fervour he refused to celebrate the hedonistic doctrine which he had found in Spencer’s *The Data of Ethics*. If Dreiser’s life is a tragedy of five Acts, *The Stoic* reveals all his passions spent and calm of mind gained. *The Titan* had ended with the query of Nirvana! the ultimate, still equation. *The Stoic* is concluded on a calmer note with Berenice gaining peace and spiritual strength through study of Hinduism:

For Berenice *The Bhagavad Gita* seemed to condense and epitomize thousands of years of Asiatic religious thought.

(TS 286).
Dreiser’s portrayal of Berenice is not mechanical. She was Dreiser’s dreamchild as Lucy was Wordsworth’s or Emile was of Rousseau. Dreiser wrote this novel in failing health and with his creative faculty weakening. But it was not an instant creation. He had been preparing himself for the novel since the days of Carrie. While Carrie was lost in crass materialism, Berenice was at last able to come to India to seek mental and spiritual help. Carrie had no such options open before her. But there was an awareness of the delusion. From *Sister Carrie* to *The Stoic* it was a long odyssey for Dreiser, like the journey from Inferno of materialism to the Paradiso of truth and non-attachment. Carrie was confused like the young Dreiser. Like Berenice’s, his eyes were opened to the oneness of all life, the nature of the Brahman which is infinite, absolute. While Carrie was fascinated by sexual love, Berenice was convinced by divine love: “Even in the lowest kinds of attraction is the germ of Divine love” (TS 297).

Here Dreiser portrays the character of Berenice sympathetically, but he is not what Berenice is. Dreiser did not accept any religious precept as such but through Hinduism he could give vent to his ideas. Many of her ideas were in tune with Dreiser’s thinking. Earlier in *An American Tragedy* we have found that sexual aberrations for Clyde were due to his search for beauty. The same search in the case of Cowperwood became “a search for the face of the Brahman shining through” (TS 305). Beauty leads to self-gratification and sensuous enjoyment of life in the case of Clyde. In the case of Cowperwood, it is a final transcending of all material desires as its cherished goals. Dreiser along with Helen Dreiser took a profound interest in Hindu philosophy and, as Marguerite Tjader
informed it, Helen went to Vedanta Center in Los Angelos to meet Prabhavananda:

It was she (Helen) who did the talking. She wanted to know if they were right in their expression of he Vedanta teachings.  

Nevertheless, Dreiser had not become a Quaker or a Hindu yogi in the last year of his life. Dreiser was above everything an artist who absorbed life, drew it and metamorphosed experience into expression without prejudice or fear. He was thrilled by the diversity and endless grandeur of life. Between the lure of materiality and the call of the spirit he lay torn, divided, isolated and alone in his quest for Truth. Cowperwood in *The Stoic* spiritually survives his bodily death through his artistic achievement of Berenice. Dreiser was also drawn to idealistic sentiments by which he indited America’s excessive materialism and discovered the disillusionment underlying the external romances of wealth and beauty. He felt as if he were living in a godless universe and made honest attempts to spiritualize the mechanistic universe.