

sen: *Critical Views* aims so strongly at representing the development of Dinesen criticism that it neglects current interpretations. Only one essay, Morten Kyntrup's "The Vertigo of Staging: Authority and Narration in Isak Dinesen's 'The Roads Round Pisa,'" was first published after 1985, and none of these essays is a new contribution. This criticism notwithstanding, *Isak Dinesen: Critical Views* is a solid collection providing a good and useful survey of criticism for readers acquainting themselves with Dinesen's writing.

Philippe Sollers

Watteau in Venice

Trans. Alberto Manguel

New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994. Pp. 240. \$22.00

Reviewed by T. Douglas Doyle

What does an author do when he finds the literature of his time "of no use whatsoever"? If that author is the French writer/critic Philippe Sollers, the answer is simple: reinvent literature. Such is the philosophy which underlies *Watteau in Venice*, a text that is as innovative and controversial today as were the paintings of Antoine Watteau in the first decades of the eighteenth century.

Whether one reads this text to indulge an interest in art or literature (as indeed it will appeal to lovers of both), most will concur that *Watteau in Venice* is a composition unlike anything they have seen before. Those who seek an engrossing plot, for example, will be disappointed, for as the author himself explains, "The eminent reader-critic . . . has no wish to know the world of today, is happy with clichés lifted from vague detective novels produced by the entertainment industry in charge of amusing their ignorance" (157). What little plot this novel does have revolves around a black market art dealer, Pierre Froissart, a.k.a. Watteau, who is conducting a clandestine art sale in Venice. In between dealings, he and his beautiful American astrophysicist mistress reflect upon the degeneration of contemporary techno-commodity culture and find solace among the philosophical musings of a host of painters and poets about whom our salesman demonstrates almost encyclopedic knowledge. In fact, some of this novel's most moving and entertaining passages are purloined directly from the letters and journals of an eclectic catalogue of artistic visionaries from Mrs. Monet to Mr. Stendhal.

What this novel lacks in cohesiveness, however, it more than compensates for in complexity. Because this text tries hard to link the art of writing with that of painting, it assumes an impressionistic quality which will challenge the sensibilities of casual readers. Its teasing narrative twists and turns in a prose labyrinth as playful and unpredictable as the avenues of that European city which shares its name. Speakers and tones of voice change abruptly, as do the meanings of words (and even names, e.g., Watteau), which Sollers's wordplay ultimately forces us to question. And, happily, this English translation preserves much playful parlance present in Sollers's 1991 original.

Sollers extends the metaphor of writing as painting more explicitly by his many references to framing (both literally and figuratively), and plays with this notion in his discussions of what exists beyond the frame. He reflects that there is light outside of our frame of vision. Do characters have a life outside of a scene in painting? Outside of the pages of a book? Do we have a life outside of what we know as life? Alas, Sollers's cleverness sometimes leads us nowhere except to the Land of the Lost, but more often this author's painterly prose forces us to look closely, to read closely, and at its best, to think critically.

For example, Froissart's characteristically cynical consideration of the Sistine Chapel's renovation begs a reassessment on our part: "We, Insurance Company H., chain of department stores W., offer you, united spectators, works of art constantly renovated, finally revealed in their restored authenticity. Here they are, sparkling, barely sprung forth from the mind and joints of the painter. How lovely, just like TV!" (148-9).

In short, Sollers's artfully written novel is literature for those who love to read—and read aggressively. His text is highly informed by premodern, modern, and postmodern theory, which is not surprising considering the author's position as editor of the French avant-garde journal *L'infini* and his marriage to the influential theorist/critic Julia Kristeva. And, as a postmodern novel, we should be alert to its attempts to deconstruct itself. Thus, the careful reader will take pleasure in *Watteau*'s many references to its own creation and the narrator's theory of his own text's significance. He questions, for example, whether his text will be fully appreciated within the frame of today's readership or whether, like the works of so many artists, his creations will be valued only by those of a later generation.

To be sure, *Watteau in Venice* indulges in the sort of egotistical fantasies that artists such as Picasso and Warhol have become notorious for, but this is not to say that this novel lacks a profound significance for a wider audience. Quite the contrary. Indeed, for all this text's haughty mannerism, the questions it raises are as pertinent today as they were for the first painters of the caves at Lascaux.

Irene Gammel

Sexualizing Power in Naturalism: Theodore Dreiser and Frederick Philip Grove

Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1994. Pp. 262. \$24.95

Reviewed by Axel Knoenagel

Naturalism has been one of the most important and long-lasting forces in Western, and particularly North American, literature. While European naturalism had its climax in its beginnings in the works of Émile Zola, North American naturalism did not begin in earnest until the 1890s when authors such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser began to publish. And whereas the naturalist focus on the determining force of the material circumstances of life soon gave way to modernist introspection in European literature, it remained a viable