

The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism: Howells to London.

The Problem of Definition by Donald Pizer

Two problems for anyone writing about the literary movements, realism and naturalism: (1) the problem of writing any large-scale literary history; (2) New Historist's discount traditional historical divisions in the study of American literature so that a second problem arises from recent theorizing of literary study. Despite these positions Donald Pizer argues that: "the effort to describe and understand a historical phase of writing in terms of major shared characteristics of that writing continues." Pizer adds: "an awareness of the hazards and complexities of textual and historical analysis can lead, not to abandonment of the attempt to understand the past, but rather to a redefining of that understanding" (2) Three points of opposition: (1) social and intellectual history versus the close reading of texts, (2) older modes of critical and historical analyses versus those currently in fashion, (3) the traditional canon versus an emerging alternative canon. Pizer is looking to understand things dialectically and he hopes this approach suggests something of "the dynamic nature of literary history, that is an interpretive act in process, and (more specifically) that it will contribute to an understanding of some of the distinctive characteristics of late 19th and early 20th century-American literature" (2).

Q: Are Realism and Naturalism indeed satisfactory critical and historical terms in relation to the writing of the period? Are there problems with the terms Realism and Naturalism? The fact that both words also have distinctive meanings in philosophical discourse can spill over into literary analysis, with awkward consequences. For example, Pizer argues that, "metaphysical and epistemological inquiries as to what is real, or the ethical implications of what is natural, can be used to undermine almost any act of literary historiography or criticism" (3).

There is a long relationship between "the real" and several generations of Howells' scholars that relate his literary beliefs and practices to democratic value: In contrast, Naturalism is "morally culpable" because it appears to concentrate on the physical in man's nature and experience" (3). According to Stuart P. Sherman, Theodore Dreiser's naturalism is derived from an animal theory of human conduct. In the 19th c debates the terms are looked at as "the ideal versus the common place in experience" (4). In the 1920s the arguments were about whether or not the writer should depict the rational or irrational as central to human behavior. In the 1930s the debate centers on the need for literature to serve a social purpose rather than fulfill an aesthetic need. A final major problem in the use of Realism and Naturalism as key terms in American literary historiography arises from the different ways the terms have been used in European literary history.

> European naturalism 1850s to the late 1880s

> American naturalism Civil War to WW1

My thesis hinges on the idea that European and American Naturalism mark two very separate social, political and aesthetic moments in history, and that their differences do not lead to a rejection of the terms but rather to studies that help to understand the American literary phenomena and its crossover into American Film Noir. Whatever the philosophical, moral, and social baggage that encompasses them or separates them, I agree with Pizer that the Naturalism of American fiction is, "a body of writing produced during a distinctive phase of American expression"(5).

V.L. Parrington > American literary historian (1920s and 1930s) described realism, as "a new phenomenon unleashed upon the American scene during the 1870s/80s by rapid industrialism industrialization, and urbanization of America in the post-Civil War period. Social, material and intellectual life march forward in American ideology (19th c thought). Authors were supposed to follow a realistic aesthetic.

- subject matter of contemporary life is to be objectively depicted "no matter how unliterary" the product of this aesthetic might seem to be. He writes: "Nothing is stable.... nothing absolute, all changes, all is relative" (6).

Stephen Crane, Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser

Naturalism explores the irrational and primitive in human nature, the unplumbed depths of the human heart, the mystery of sex, the problems of life, and unearthed caverns of the human soul of man using an allegorical framework that permits the expression of abstract ideas about the human condition (8). Though Naturalism has been linked to a Darwinian landscape and determinism or a deterministic ideology, for Norris, Pizer argues that it is, "method and a product," which dare not subscribe to a philosophical base. Norris and Dreiser were often criticized in that their works depicted man as a victim (see: Greeks view of man as a victim of the Gods) and Naturalism thus served as an apt expression of late 19th (c) American social reality (10). The lurid themes of open sexuality led to the negative comments upon their fictions. They were called "trailblazers of freedom." The attitude changed in the 1930s, "the Naturalists of the 1890s became less valued as explorers of freedom of expression than as reflections of the destructive mechanistic and Darwinian world; A struggle in which it was assumed most Americans functioned. Pizer argues that by the 1930s the criticism of Naturalism spelled out the differences between American Naturalism to Zolaesque determinism. The writers were responding to the belief that American life at the turn of the century imprisoned the average American in a matrix of economic and social deprivation. Literary Naturalism (with its deterministic center) addressed these conditions, but with the cold war came the commitment of the American democratic tradition in all phases of American expression; (hence, the exile of Naturalism). Instead, a fiction emerges that is

"deeply impregnated with democratic beliefs as trust, common vision and pragmatic values" (11). The threads of criticism celebrate the idea of the democratic, the New Critical, and the dynamic. This stream of realism became a significant movement and its importance to a cultural reflection as America could be proud (12).

> Naturalism suffered dismissed, critical neglect for the postwar period. Mid-1930s American intellectual and Communist principles emerge. Pizer writes: "Also telling as a negative factor in the estimation of Naturalism was the disillusionment beginning in the mid-1930s of American intellectuals with what they held to be the mindless authoritarianism of Communist ideology" (12). These authors became identified in the 1930s with a resurgence of Naturalism. Steinbeck, Dos Passos, and Farrell were also on the left; Dreiser confirmed endorsement of the Communist party and its goals from the 1930s to his death in 1945. Oscar Cargill's *Intellectual American* (1941) disposed of Naturalism as a crude and thinly derivative fiction with fascistic inclinations (12). Anti-Naturalists criticized the resurgence and the Red Threat of Communism deepened the Cold War paranoia. For instance, Lionel Trilling, Malcolm Cowley, and Philip Rahv, as well as, Irving Howe made comments on Dreiser's work as "something a superior intelligence was supposed to avoid.

During the 1950s and 1960s Willard Thorp and Alfred Kazin asked: "If naturalism is inept, intellectually impoverished, and foreign to American values, why has it persisted as a major element in all phases of 20th century American fiction? Richard Chase wrote, *The American Novel and its Tradition* (1957) and locates Naturalism within the American Romance tradition because of its union of sensationalism and ideas (12). Others followed, for instance, Charles C. Walcutt's, *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream* (1956), and Donald Pizer's, *Realism and Naturalism in 19th (c) American Literature* (1966). And then later major studies of naturalism began with Robert Penn Warren's *Homage to Theodore Dreiser* (1971). The movement became possible to discuss because it had moved past the earlier classifications of criticism of its critics in the 1890s and 1900s, as well as the New Critical conservatism and Communist ideology. The 1920s novels of Social Realism according to Pizer has had a constant complement in the fiction of the Fantastic or Fabulist, and in the 60s and 70s, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and Donald Bartheleme, as well as earlier figures, were led by James Branch Cabell and Nathanael West. Pizer argues that historically the movement has had the ability to adapt to fresh currents of ideas and expression over generations but retains a central focus and preoccupation "between a restrictive social and intellectual environment, and the consequent impoverishment both of social opportunity and of the inner life" (Pizer 13). A shared and common theme writers of the 1930s John Steinbeck, John Dos Passos, and James T. Farrell, whether the theme is worked out in "group defeat" or of personal emptiness and collapse continues into the 1940's and 50s in Saul Bellow, William Styron, and Norman Mailer, with the existential quest for meaning in the face of the inadequacy of social life and belief"(14), and Freudianism and

Marxism in the 1930s or the Vietnam War. Naturalistic impulses are located later in both Faulkner and Hemingway where Faulkner's major theme is of "the burden of the past as expressed through regional and family destiny" (14). Hemingway's "preoccupation with the behaviorist interplay between temperament and setting" (14) and Richard Wright's Naturalism and the deterministic center of Bigger Thomas's deprivation with no escape from his environment and living conditions in an urban decay all take up this duality of freedom and expression versus society and personal restriction. Edith Wharton's theme of entrapment of women within social codes and taboos, Kate Chopin's and Charlotte-Gilman-Perkins's works follow in a similar thematic light.

A present emphasis on literary studies on the social basis of literary expression emphasizes

- roots of literary values.
- American Experience
- literary market place in the work
- role of the city
- Black Expression
- Female Voices

There is a common theoretical position that both Realism and Naturalism "constitute a critical response to the condition of late 19th (c) American life. Read, for example, Walter Ben Michael's *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1993), Eric Sundquist's introduction to *American Realism: New Essays* (1982) which works as a re-examination of the return to the conventional positions of the period. The world of late 19th century was so corrupt and dismaying that writer's like James and Crane sought to escape "into the farthest reaches of the imagination" (15), in order to preserve their integrity. Realism and Naturalism arose in part, according to Louis Budd as "disjunctures" between rhetoric and actuality in American life- between the language of hope in American's civil religion and the actuality of the world encountered (16).

*To Witness Spectacles of Pain of Georges Bataille:
The Hypermorality*

> We need to understand immoral violence beyond condemnation. We need to recognize that the acts we most prohibit are paradoxically the very ones we most celebrate.

> Bataille relies on a notion of excess energy and expenditure. The transgression of law is both an accused and ineluctable part of our lives. The surplus of energy is accused. The accused excess confronts us with the problems of how to expend energy, when this results in usages that cannot be made useful. Violence has a value for us as those condemned to the realm of non-productive expenditures. When this impossibility of useful expenditure is ignored, we fail to recognize ourselves.

- > Bataille argues for the transgression of our prohibitive moral value. We tend towards moral righteousness, rather than to immoral outpourings of energy or sudden bursts and violent exceeding all rational considerations. The violent non productive outpouring, according to Bataille, is required of all living beings, (Shopenhauer, Nietzsche and Artaud).
- > Bataille says we need something counter-intuitive, a kind of morality of evil; moreover, a morality able to face up to a question of acceptability, not utility.
- > Bataille like Nietzsche proposes a revaluation of moral values, a transformation of what Nietzsche calls "herd" morality. The value of the "herd" morality breaks down when taking human life as a whole into account.
- > In *Literature and Evil*, Bataille draws an analogy between insects that flock towards a ray of light and human nature attempting to escape death.
- > Bataille celebrates the desire for self-ruin as a divine or sovereign inspiration, as one taught to us by religion, Greek tragedy and the great books. "There is an instinctive tendency towards divine intoxication, which the rational world of calculation cannot bear. This tendency is the opposite of good. Good is based on common interest, which entails consideration of the future. Divine intoxication is entirely in the present (23).
- > Bataille argues that the dark forces that drive us towards ruining ourselves cannot be dismissed. We suffer from a problem of self-recognition, of not knowing ourselves for who we are. This failure to know ourselves does not limit our ruin, only our self-knowledge as such. The self-image of ourselves as good prevents our acknowledging the problem of the surplus energy that must be squandered. Our prohibitionist morality deals with evil only after the fact, without acknowledging the fundamental value prior. For Bataille we won't recognize ourselves until we see ourselves as condemned. The failure to recognize ourselves has an alarming implication that we may be headed in the direction of self-destruction. We must recognize ourselves and our potential for evil, violent and condemned. If we remain complacent in the knowledge that we are fundamentally good, then Bataille's dialectic of self-recognition remains for the most part unknown.

Sherwood Anderson's
Winesburg, Ohio
 Notes

- > Anderson on *Winesburg, Ohio* speaks on the languages and form of the collection: "my own vocabulary was small. I had no Latin, Greek, no French..." There was the language of the streets, of American towns and cities, the language of the factories and warehouses where I had worked, of laborers, rooming houses, the saloons, the farms... It is my own language limited as it is...

There was a kind of paucity I was seeking in my prose, word to be laid against word in just a certain way, a kind of word color, a march of words and sentences, the color to be squeezed out of simple words; simple sentence construction" (13).

The stories taken together made something like a "novel," a complete story. Individual tales are all linked or interconnected. There are no plot stories in life. For Anderson writers who wrap life up into neat little packages only betray life, he depicts the small town American life and the story of starved and defeated characters of old American individualistic small town life. He wants understanding and tenderness for the people in these stories.

Chapter 1. *The Book of the Grotesque*

> The old writer has a good deal of thoughts in his head.

> Anderson is interested in the lies. All of the women and men the writer had known had become grotesques.

> Procession of grotesques before the writer's eyes.

> "That in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many truths but no such thing as truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about the world were the truths and they were all beautiful" (25): Truth of virginity, passion, wealth, poverty, theft, profligacy, carelessness and abandon. It was the truths that made the people grotesque.

*The old man's theory was that the moment a person took one of the truths to himself, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.

Hands

In this story we are introduced to George Willard, the writer in town for the "Winsburg Eagle" and Wing Biddlebaum, also known as Adolph Myers. Wing condemns George Willard for being too influenced by what other people around him think. He says to George "you must try to forget all that you have learned." There is a moment where he raises his hands to "caress" George and is seized by a paralysis. George is frightened but refuses to ask him what is wrong out of fear of knowing what it is. The narrator tells us that Adolph Myers nature and gentleness is expressed through his hands, which explain his consequent exile and the desire he had for young boys. Doubts about his character were "galvanized" when several boys reported incidents of caressing. He was beaten and driven from the Pennsylvania town. The narrator tells us that he does not know what happened but somehow believes his hands are to blame. "Although he still hungered for the presence of the boy, who was the medium through which he expressed his love of man, the hunger became again a part of his loneliness and his waiting" (33).