

AMERICAN LITERARY

Frank Norris,

NATURALISM AND ITS

Ernest Hemingway,

TWENTIETH-CENTURY

Don DeLillo

TRANSFORMATIONS



PAUL CIVELLO

**AMERICAN LITERARY
NATURALISM AND ITS
TWENTIETH-CENTURY
TRANSFORMATIONS**

AMERICAN LITERARY

Frank Norris,

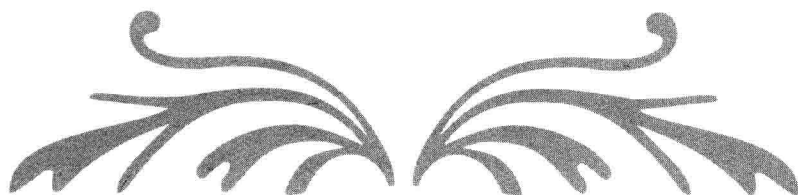
NATURALISM AND ITS

Ernest Hemingway,

TWENTIETH-CENTURY

Don DeLillo

TRANSFORMATIONS



PAUL CIVELLO

The University of Georgia Press . Athens and London

© 1994 by the University of Georgia Press

Athens, Georgia 30602

All rights reserved

Designed by Betty Palmer McDaniel

Set in ten on fourteen Janson Text

by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Printed and bound by Thomson-Shore, Inc.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for
permanence and durability of the Committee on
Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the
Council on Library Resources.

Printed in the United States of America

98 97 96 95 94 C 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Civello, Paul.

American literary naturalism and its twentieth-century
transformations : Frank Norris, Ernest Hemingway,
Don DeLillo / Paul Civello.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-8203-1649-0 (alk. paper)

1. American fiction—20th century—History and criticism.
2. Hemingway, Ernest, 1899-1961—Criticism and interpretation.
3. Norris, Frank, 1870-1902—Criticism and interpretation.
4. DeLillo, Don—Criticism and interpretation.
5. Naturalism in literature. I. Title.

PS374.N29C58 1994

813'.520912—dc20

93-41004

British Library Cataloging in Publication Data available

To Wendy and Tony

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



I would like to thank, above all, Richard Lehan for his critical comments, suggestions, and encouragement throughout this project. He is a model of professional decency and dedication. I would also like to thank Robin Gajdusek for his support for my work and, more important, for his enthusiasm for Hemingway and Hemingway scholarship, which could not help but be an influence. Thanks also to Donald Pizer, Don Graham, and Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., for their kindness and inspiration, as well as their criticism, and to Maximillian Novak and Lucia Re, both of whom read and commented on an early draft of the manuscript. I also deeply appreciate the work of Nancy Grayson Holmes, Kim Cretors, Madelaine Cooke, Debbie Winter, and the rest of the editorial staff at the University of Georgia Press.

I must also acknowledge Macmillan Publishing Company for permitting me to quote from Ernest Hemingway's novels *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*, as well as the nonfiction work *Death in the Afternoon*, and Viking Penguin Inc. for permitting me to quote from Don DeLillo's novels *End Zone* and *Libra*. An earlier version of Chapter 10 appeared in *Arizona Quarterly* 48.2 (Summer 1992): 33-56.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my wife, Wendy, for her support and love. Books, indeed, are for the scholar's idle times.

CONTENTS



Acknowledgments ix

Introduction i

ONE

Man, God, and Natural Law: Darwinism
and the Darwinian Debate 6

TWO

Zola and Determinism 23

THREE

Vandover and the Brute
and the Post-Darwinian Condition 28

FOUR

✓ *The Octopus*: Norris's Response
to the Post-Darwinian Condition 48

FIVE

The Rise of Consciousness and
Hemingway's Transformation of Literary Naturalism 67

SIX

A Farewell to Arms:
Modern Response, Naturalistic Fate 76

SEVEN

The Sun Also Rises: Learning to Live
in a Naturalistic World 92

EIGHT

Fields, Systems, and DeLillo's Postmodern Transformation of Literary Naturalism	112
--	-----

NINE

<i>End Zone</i> : The End of the Old Order	125
--	-----

TEN

<i>Libra</i> : Undoing the Naturalistic Novel	141
---	-----

Notes	163
-------	-----

Works Cited	183
-------------	-----

Index	189
-------	-----

INTRODUCTION



American literary naturalism is not of a piece. Like most sweeping literary movements (Romanticism and modernism come immediately to mind), naturalism resists any set definition we may try to impose on it. In fact, Charles Child Walcutt begins his seminal work on naturalism, *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream*, by conceding the impossibility of such a definition. He compares the movement to Proteus; naturalism, he says, is “of a Protean slipperiness,” changing form before we can grasp it with our critical apparatuses, before we can trap it within our interpretive paradigms.¹ Indeed, we see great divergence among the early works of literary naturalism. The Spencerian universe depicted in Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, for example, is far different from the LeContean universe in Norris’s *Octopus*; so too is the former’s urban milieu from the latter’s rural setting. And humanity’s battles with the capitalist economic forces in both those novels differ markedly from its battles with the forces of nature in London’s works, or, for that matter, from its battles with the “red animal” of war in Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage*. Even among the works of an individual author, there is divergence. As we shall see, Norris depicts two different responses to Darwinism in *Vandover and the Brute* and *The Octopus*.

As might be expected, this divergence within American literary naturalism extends to the criticism that surrounds it, criticism that has accrued substantially over the past forty years. Literary critics who have dealt with naturalism can, I think, be usefully divided into four broad and often overlapping groups: early theorists, history-of-ideas critics, European-influence critics, and recent theorists. The early theorists, preeminently Charles Child Walcutt and Donald Pizer, tended to view naturalism thematically and in terms of literary technique.² The history-of-ideas critics, of whom Pizer is also in the forefront, examined American literary natural-

ism against the background of the late nineteenth-century scientific, philosophical, and literary milieu.³ They felt, and still feel, that naturalism is best understood as an expression of the central ideas of that era. The European-influence critics, of course, have traced the influence of nineteenth-century European writers—particularly Zola—on their American naturalistic protégés.⁴ And recent theorists, who have been responsible for the current burgeoning of criticism on American literary naturalism, have either reconceptualized naturalism as a narrative form, or denied its existence or usefulness as a category.⁵

This book is an attempt to work the ground left vacant by the early theorists and history-of-ideas critics, on the one hand, and the recent theorists—particularly the New Historicists—on the other. For, as I see it, the main shortcoming of the early and recent critics is that, despite their different methodologies, both conceive of naturalism either as a static form largely confined to the late nineteenth century, or as a literary anachronism in the twentieth.⁶ With one exception, neither view naturalism as a narrative mode closely aligned with historical processes, one that is developed and transformed as it moves through time.⁷

My argument, then, is twofold. First, it is based on the assumption that the narrative reality of naturalism is grounded in contemporary constructions of “reality”—particularly scientific and philosophical constructions. As such, naturalism concerns itself with a central post-Darwinian crisis: the collapse of humanity’s conception of an order in the material world, an order that had formerly imbued that world with meaning. Naturalism, I argue, depicts the rift that opens as a result between the self and the material world—now perceived as one of meaningless, indifferent force—and points toward a resolution of it. My argument also propounds that as naturalism moves forward through time—that is, as it is “re-presented” in modern and postmodern texts—it is transformed markedly. I argue, in effect, that terms such as “naturalism,” “modernism,” and “postmodernism”—terms usually used to denote separate narrative forms—prove too exclusive, that, in fact, there is a “modern” naturalism and a “postmodern” naturalism. These “naturalisms” confront the newer scientific paradigms of the early twentieth-century human sciences and the later constructs of the new physics and systems theory, just as late nineteenth-century naturalism had confronted Darwinian and post-Darwinian “reality.”

Frank Norris, my example of nineteenth-century naturalism, depicts in his work what I call the post-Darwinian condition: the rift between the self and the material world that Darwinism produced. Here the material world is nature, both humanity's biological nature and its biological environment. Darwinism had effectively destroyed the Enlightenment conception of a divinely created, ordered universe in which human beings—also divinely created—could feel “at home”; in addition, it had destroyed any ordering structure through which they could subsume their “bestial” nature to their moral and spiritual selves. In *Vandover and the Brute*, Norris depicts a man caught in this new world of deterministic force in which the traditional order and ordering structures have collapsed. Vandover becomes a victim of nature, succumbing, à la Zola, to a biologically determined mental illness. In *The Octopus*, however, Norris presents a different response to this post-Darwinian condition; in effect, Norris reinvests meaning into the natural world by reestablishing God in it. While there is initially a rift between the self and nature, it is only a perceived rift, not an actual one. Human beings need only learn to perceive the divine presence that lies immanent within the natural world in order to be reconciled to it.

Ernest Hemingway, a distinctly “modern” writer, nevertheless exhibits several features of literary naturalism in his work: the collapse of the old order that had imbued the material world with meaning, the subsequent rift between the self and that material world, and the struggle to reconcile the two. His work, however, shows a marked departure from the naturalism exhibited in Norris's *Octopus* in that the self no longer *perceives* an order in the material world—for there is none—but *creates* its own. This exemplifies the modernist belief in consciousness as an ordering principle; the Hemingway hero puts forth consciousness in the face of destructive natural force (of which war, as we shall see, is a part). He imbues existence with a personal, rather than divine, meaning. Such a meaning, however, must be firmly grounded in his experience in the material world; it must not be based on an abstraction. In *A Farewell to Arms*, the order that Fredric Henry creates for himself and Catherine, an order that apotheosizes love to an absolute and that therefore possesses an affinity with the collapsed Christian paradigm, fails in this regard. It is an order that attempts to separate them from the natural, biological world—an impossibility—rather than reconciling them to it, and they fall victim to the “biological

trap." Yet in *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake Barnes slowly learns to "live in it," to create an order that gives meaning to existence *within* a world of indifferent material force. He learns, in other words, how to create his own personal order that is not belied by experience.

Don DeLillo also depicts a rift between the self and the material world—in this case, the postmodern, "built" environment that has grown in complexity beyond humanity's comprehension. Yet the collapse of the old order is here a collapse of the old cause-and-effect scientific paradigm—precisely that which Zola, Norris, and the other nineteenth-century literary naturalists had embraced. DeLillo's material world is not one of linear causality, but one of interconnecting systems. The self, then, does not stand in relation to a material world in which it must perceive a spiritual order (as in Norris), nor does it create an order that enables it to live in the material world (as in Hemingway), but instead it is itself a part of that systems order, inextricable from it. There is no separation between subject and object, and therefore no "objective" reality. This condition creates a new dilemma for the self: how to find meaning in a world that is ultimately unknowable, a world in which order lies beyond one's rational comprehension. In *End Zone*, Gary Harkness and several other characters try to apply the obsolete linear paradigm to experience, to events in the material world, and as a result remain isolated from that world, trapped within their own paradigm that gives them an inaccurate picture of reality. In *Libra*, Nicholas Branch, Lee Harvey Oswald, and others attempt the same thing with similar results. Yet, more important, *Libra* depicts the end of the Zolaesque "experimental novel" in which the novelist can stand apart from his "experiment" and watch it unfold objectively. DeLillo presents us in *Libra* with what he himself calls "a new map of the world,"⁸ one that undermines the scientific foundation of Zola's and Norris's naturalism, and that therefore "undoes" the naturalistic novel.

I have chosen in this study to focus on six novels—two from each of the three authors—rather than attempt to cover each author's entire canon. While there are certain limitations to this approach, there are also certain advantages. By examining closely a few representative texts in light of my conceptual paradigm, I hope to elucidate the complexities and nuances of those works as they pertain to it, and at the same time to avoid re-

ducing them to an undifferentiated mass, and my conceptual paradigm to a Procrustean bed. I have purposely selected two texts from each author that exhibit marked differences in the depiction of the naturalistic dilemma and in the transformation of the naturalistic form. As a rule, the first text focuses on the collapse of the old order and the self's inability to come to terms with it; the second text points toward a successful resolution of the metaphysical crisis. The exception here is DeLillo's *Libra*, which does not attempt to resolve the crisis internally—that is, within the novel's dramatic context—but rather puts forth a new paradigm that helps us to rethink it. I have also begun each of the three parts of this study with a chapter that attempts to ground each author's work—and each author's transformation of literary naturalism—in a broader transformation of humanity's conception of itself and the universe.

CHAPTER ONE

MAN, GOD, AND NATURAL LAW: DARWINISM AND THE DARWINIAN DEBATE



Religion is primarily a social phenomenon. Churches may owe their origin to teachers with strong individual convictions, but these teachers have seldom had much influence upon the churches that they founded, whereas churches have had enormous influence upon the communities in which they flourished.

BERTRAND RUSSELL

Charles Darwin was certainly no founder of a church, but he was the founder of a scientific theory that had a profound effect on late nineteenth-century humanity and its conception of itself, of nature, and of God. Yet, as with the church founder, Darwin's direct influence beyond the strictly biological field was overshadowed by the various and often contradictory permutations and interpretations of his theory of evolution—Darwin's "church," to extend the analogy. And as the founding of a church inevitably produces a virulent backlash from the old orthodoxy, a backlash that often helps popularize the new church and extend its influence, so too did the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 spark an outcry and foment a debate that took Darwin's theory beyond the field of biology—where Darwin the founder had intended it to remain—and into such diverse fields as philosophy, sociology, economics, theology, and, of course, literature.

Darwin's theory in itself was not a general theory of evolution at all, but a specific theory of biological evolution. There had been several evolu-

tionary theorists before Darwin, and some, such as the geologist Charles Lyell, had been successful in explaining the dynamics of evolution in the inorganic world.¹ There had even been several proponents of organic evolution, but no one, not even Lamarck, could give a plausible explanation of how such an organic process would work.² Darwin provided an explanation and, in so doing, succeeded for the first time in explaining organic phenomena in natural, rather than in supernatural, terms. Darwin was aware of Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798; rev. ed. 1803),³ a study that indicated that population growth would outstrip food supply if it were not held in check by various natural factors such as famine and disease, and had himself observed a wide range of morphological variation among individuals within each species. As a result, Darwin reasoned that in the competition for food and subsistence—in the “struggle for existence,” as he termed it—those individuals within each species with advantageous variations would be more apt to survive and thus reproduce, passing their traits down to their offspring. Darwin's two major discoveries, the two keys to this dynamic process, were those of randomly occurring variations in offspring and what he called “natural selection.”

Darwin knew nothing of genetics—Gregor Mendel's groundbreaking genetic study of pea plants, although begun before the publication of *The Origin of Species*, was not widely known until the turn of the century—and therefore he could not account for the mechanism of variation, only affirm its existence.⁴ He suspected, however, that it had something to do with reproduction and that it was haphazard. In this he was amazingly prescient, for our modern knowledge of genetics confirms that morphological variation is genetically and therefore reproductively linked, and that the primary cause is random genetic mutation.⁵ It is a process of accident upon accident, and it provides the material on which natural selection operates. In natural selection, nature (i.e., the environment) “selects” which variations are indeed advantageous to survival in that particular environment. Individuals with deleterious traits are destroyed, and those with beneficial ones live to reproduce, preserving the trait within the species. Over time, the interconnected processes of random variation and natural selection will generate new, divergent species from a common stock.

Although Darwin carefully avoided metaphysical speculation in *The Origin of Species*, the metaphysical implications of his theory were clear. Dar-

winism was implicitly an assault on traditional Christian orthodoxy and on the view of humanity and nature that that orthodoxy maintained, and thus many of Darwin's contemporaries found it completely unacceptable. For one thing, Darwinism seemed to deny teleology, to deny a design and hence to deny a rational "first cause" of natural phenomena. The very nature of randomly occurring variations—in other words, variations via accident—argues against teleology, against design. Design is, by definition, *not* accidental. Moreover, the process of Darwinian evolution is itself "purposiveless"; were evolution synonymous with progress (as many would claim), then evolution would perhaps argue design. Yet it is important to realize that Darwinian evolution is not primarily progressive, but adaptive. It is progressive only in so far as it moves a species toward greater adaptability to a particular environment, not—as would often be claimed—toward an idealistic higher form. When Darwin speaks of "improvement" of a species, it is this adaptability to which he is referring; in Darwinian evolution, the highest form of life in a tropical swamp could very well be a frog.

Of course, arguing against design and disproving design are two different things, a distinction that would not be lost on many religiously minded supporters of Darwin. But, as Cynthia Eagle Russett points out, while Darwinism could not disprove design, it did render it an "unnecessary hypothesis."⁶ Natural phenomena could now be explained solely in naturalistic terms with no need to appeal to the supernatural or religious. In fact, this refutation of the argument by design, of teleology in natural process, attacked the foundation of religious orthodoxy; it attacked God Himself. Without design there need be no designer. The clergyman Charles Hodge enunciated this realization and the fear it produced in his essay "What Is Darwinism?" when he claimed that the essence of Darwin's theory was the rejection of "teleology, or the doctrine of final causes. . . . the denial of design in nature is virtually the denial of God."⁷ Darwinism, logically considered, effectively banished God from nature, banished the "Creator" from His own "creation."

Thus Darwinism presented a very different world than that of orthodox Christianity. The Darwinian universe was an indifferent universe; it was *not* an ordered, providential universe created and guided by a beneficent, if sometimes wrathful, personal deity. It was a universe propelled solely by impersonal, natural forces, forces "silently and insensibly working"⁸

without need of a “sensible” first cause. Moreover, humans were no longer privileged, no longer the only organisms created in God’s own image. Instead, they were just animals—albeit highly developed and successful ones. The individual, too, was no longer preeminent; only the preservation of the species was important in the overall scheme.

Darwinism had ramifications beyond the cataclysmic effect on the spiritual self such a philosophical realignment inevitably produced; it affected the moral self as well. By presenting a universe indifferent to human suffering and fate, Darwinism stripped the natural world of the comforting moral order with which traditional Christianity and even more recent religious sects had imbued it. Nature was no longer God’s one true revelation, as the eighteenth-century Deists believed, nor was it a symbol of spirit, a spirit that was inherently good and virtuous, as Emerson and the Transcendentalists would have it. Rather, nature was amoral, a world in which individuals were neither rewarded nor punished for their moral conduct, but succeeded solely because of their physical “fitness” and their ability to adapt to environmental change. Thus nature no longer provided a model on which human beings could base their personal moral conduct or construct a moral order for society. Such a situation, if not rejected outright, could produce only two antipodal responses.

The first, and predominant, response was to subscribe to a strict determinism. According to this view, a human being was just one material phenomenon in a universe of material phenomena, and therefore his behavior was determined much like the behavior of chemicals in a chemical reaction: according to strict physical laws of cause and effect. Despite his protestations to the contrary, a human being had no free will, no moral freedom; he was a slave to natural forces. Thus humanity’s relationship with nature split into paradox: on one hand, the individual as a physical, natural being was an intricate part of the natural world; on the other hand, the individual as a moral, rational, and spiritual being was torn and alienated from that world. Nature was no longer his friend, his mentor, his home; it was his slave-master who sought to undermine his human dignity and against whom he therefore had to struggle.

The second response, which while nascent in the nineteenth century would come to the fore in the twentieth, was to shift emphasis away from nature as a moral guide and toward the individual consciousness. Morality