

Charles Child Walcutt

AMERICAN
LITERARY
NATURALISM,
A DIVIDED
STREAM



GREENWOOD PRESS, PUBLISHERS
WESTPORT, CONNECTICUT

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Walcutt, Charles Child, 1908-

American literary naturalism, a divided stream.

Reprint of the ed. published by the University
of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. American fiction--20th century--History and
criticism. 2. American fiction--19th century--
History and criticism. 3. Naturalism in literature.

I. Title.

PS379.W28 1973,
ISBN 0-8371-7017-6

813'.03

73-10584

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Originally published in 1956 by the University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Reprinted with the permission of the University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Reprinted in 1973 by Greenwood Press
A division of Congressional Information Service, Inc.
88 Post Road West, Westport, Connecticut 06881

Library of Congress catalog card number 73-10584
ISBN 0-8371-7017-6

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4

***FOR
SUE, MARGARET, AND PHIL***

Preface

A STUDY of the naturalistic novel should perform two tasks. It should describe the body of theory that is designated by the term *naturalistic*; and it should show in some detail what this body of theory does to the novels in which it appears. The undertaking would be simpler if the theory actually controlled the "naturalistic" novel, but it does not; it merely affects it in a variety of ways. The body of theory involves philosophy, biology, sociology, psychology, physiology, and economics, loosely, of course, and in terms that change from one decade and writer to the next. What this theory does to particular novels, as well as where and how it is to be found in them, can be shown only through a close examination of a number of works that have been called naturalistic. We are dealing with an element and a tendency that takes as many forms as Proteus but never in itself accounts for the total aesthetic reality of a work of fiction.

My thesis is that naturalism is the offspring of transcendentalism. American transcendentalism asserts the unity of Spirit and Nature and affirms that intuition (by which the mind discovers its affiliation with Spirit) and scientific investigation (by which it masters Nature, the symbol of Spirit) are equally rewarding and valid approaches to reality. When this mainstream of transcendentalism divides, as it does toward the end of the nineteenth century, it produces two rivers of thought. One, the approach to Spirit through intuition, nourishes idealism, progressivism, and social radicalism. The other, the approach to Nature through

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science, plunges into the dark canyon of mechanistic determinism. The one is rebellious, the other pessimistic; the one ardent, the other fatal; the one acknowledges will, the other denies it. Thus "naturalism," flowing in both streams, is partly defying Nature and partly submitting to it; and it is in this area of tension that my investigation lies, its immediate subject being the forms which the novel assumes as one stream or the other, and sometimes both, flow through it. The problem, as will appear, is an epitome of the central problem of twentieth-century thought.

I am indebted to the following periodicals for kind permission to use materials which have appeared, in somewhat different form, in their pages: *PMLA*, the *Quarterly Review of Literature*, *Accent*, the *University of Kansas City Review*, *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters*, the *Sewanee Review*, and the *Arizona Quarterly*. I wish to thank the University of Minnesota Press for permission to reprint part of a chapter on Frank Norris which appeared in *Forms of Modern Fiction*, edited by William Van O'Connor, 1948; the University of Michigan Press for the same courtesy with regard to a monograph on Winston Churchill published as Number 18 of *Contributions in Modern Philology*, 1951; and the University of Indiana Press for permission to reprint, with substantial modification, "Theodore Dreiser and the Divided Stream," from *The Stature of Theodore Dreiser*, edited by Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro, 1955.

It is a great pleasure to acknowledge my indebtedness and my gratitude to friends who have been generous with suggestions and counsel that make this work much less imperfect than it would otherwise have been — to Warner G. Rice for penetrating criticism and kind encouragement since the inception of the project; to Frederic I. Carpenter for criticizing several of the chapters and for many suggestions that have contributed greatly to the formulation of my central thesis; to Howard Mumford Jones for guidance throughout the undertaking; to Eugene S. McCartney, who persuaded me to take a second and often a third look at certain irresponsible metaphors (but who is not to be blamed for any that remain); to George Arms for reading the entire manuscript in an

PREFACE

earlier form and making many valuable suggestions; to Ray B. West, Jr., for very helpful suggestions on the first two chapters; to Harry Kurz for improving some of my translations from Zola; to James H. Case, Jr., for assistance in preparing the manuscript and for much personal stimulation; to Edwin M. Moseley for many enlightening discussions of modern literature; to James E. Tobin, for generous help with the index; to Jeanne Sinnen, of the University of Minnesota Press, for most sympathetic and intelligent help with the manuscript in its final stages and for catching a variety of small errors; and especially to my wife for invaluable assistance at all stages of my work.

C. C. W.

September 1956
Queens College
Flushing, New York

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*AMERICAN LITERARY NATURALISM,
A DIVIDED STREAM*

I

New Ideas in the Novel

SOMETHING extraordinary happened to the American novel about 1890, when what is called the Naturalistic Movement began to gather momentum. It was a wonder, a scandal, and a major force. Its effects appear everywhere today, both in fiction and in popular attitudes, for it reflects at once our faith in science and our doubts about the modern "scientific" world. And perhaps because the effects of science have been so disturbing and ambiguous, the true character of naturalism has not been determined. In one form it appears a shaggy, apelike monster; in another it appears a godlike giant. Shocking, bestial, scientific, messianic — no sooner does its outline seem to grow clear than, like Proteus, it slips through the fingers and reappears in another shape. The critics reflect its elusiveness. Whereas one authority describes it as an extreme form of romanticism, another counters that it is the rigorous application of scientific method to the novel. When others say it is desperate, pessimistic determinism, they are answered by those who insist that it is an optimistic affirmation of man's freedom and progress.

These authorities are not all mistaken. On the contrary, they are all correct. But each has reached his conclusion by looking at different aspects of naturalism, at different times between 1890 and about 1940, and having committed himself to a confining definition he has found it difficult to consider other areas and aspects of the subject. The Beast, which cannot be named until it is caught, is indeed of a Protean slipperiness. But if it may not be caught and

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held in a single form, it may be observed in enough of its forms so that we can finally mark the varieties and the limits of its changes. Only in this way can naturalism be explained and defined. Seeing it in perspective involves a considerable step backward through the centuries; but it can be taken quickly.

THE EMERGENCE OF NATURALISM

All literature is founded on some concept of the nature of man. When a major new literary trend appears it either assumes or defines some new concept of man and therefore of his place in the world. Such a new image takes its shape against the background from which it has emerged and against which it has in some way reacted. Naturalism has its roots in the Renaissance, its backgrounds in the Middle Ages. The medieval idea of man (which lived on, indeed, through the nineteenth century) was of a fallen creature in a dualistic universe. This dual universe was divided into heaven and earth, God and Satan, eternal and temporal, and, in man, soul and body. Its values pointed always toward the eternal, toward salvation and God — away from the temporal, the worldly, and the natural; for nature was under God's curse. Man too, by his own Fall, was under God's curse. Having both body and soul, he was torn in the eternal battle between good and evil. Man's physical nature — his desires and instincts — was, by and large, the Devil's playground; it had contributed to the original Fall and it continued to corrupt his will and his reason. Nonhuman nature was not only under God's curse; it was also unpredictable because of the workings upon it of fiends and the occasional miraculous intervention of God or a saint.

Reliable truth came from God to man through particular miraculous revelations and through the permanent miraculous authority of the Scriptures, which were interpreted and systematized by the Church. The Church was ordained by God; its head, the Pope, was divinely inspired. Emphasis on authority prevailed: in matters of dogma the Church Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries were consulted; religious practices and personal morality were rigidly prescribed by the wisdom of the past, for neither man's impulses

nor his reason could be trusted; the sovereign, divinely appointed, was not subject to popular mandate; and for the final word on nature men turned not to experiment but to books — to the antique wisdom of Aristotle, Pliny, or Isadore of Seville. Authority dominated then, as reason and observation do today. Science, called “natural philosophy,” was not an end in itself; it was “the hand-maid of theology,” pursued for the glory of God.

This subordination of nature and its dualistic separation from spiritual matters began to vanish during the Renaissance, as a new concept of the nature of man took shape. The change began with astronomy, the science furthest from man and society, but it got to man very rapidly, in a series of great intellectual strides that may be reviewed briefly by reference to the thinkers who made them.

Late in the seventeenth century, Sir Isaac Newton formulated mechanical laws that explained the movements of the planets in our solar system. He calculated their masses, velocities, and gravitational attractions; suggested that the energy and matter in the universe were constant and indestructible; and speculated that the universe was composed of billions of minute particles in ceaseless motion. The work of many astronomers and philosophers — Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Descartes — had already pointed this way, but Newton's system seemed mathematically perfect and irrefutable (even Einstein has only modified it). It dignified nature and implied that its laws were not subject to God's miraculous intervention. This system did not consider the problems of form and growth, because according to it all forms were reducible to the same particles and hence the varying forms themselves were not within the scope of mechanical science. In other words, it dealt with phenomena in terms of ultimate constituents, and so it had no tools for the consideration of complex forms like life. The problems of mind and will were not considered, although God and the soul were not denied. But even though not carried to its logical conclusions, the system itself was essentially materialistic and supplied both the method and the direction for later thought. Applied to the individual, the Newtonian system would produce determinism; it would subject man to natural law.

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Oddly enough, the outlines of a popular philosophy called deism, which anticipated the social and moral consequences of Newton's theories, were set forth some twenty years before the publication of his *Principia Mathematica* (1687). The deists appealed to man's nature as evidence against the orthodox belief that he was fallen. They said that man was innately and instinctively good; they doubted creeds and authority; and during the following century they put increasing emphasis on the worship of nature as God's only revelation. In this latter respect, a popular theology was drawing on science; yet its actual import — and certainly its literary expression — appeared in the belief that the essence of God, nature, and man was to be found in the noble principle of reason. By the end of the eighteenth century, deism's corollary, the philosophy of naturalism (so called because it joined man and God through nature's law of reason), was widely influential; but because science had not yet adequately implemented it with biological data, it was not rigorously applied to man, the works of "necessitarians" like Bentham and Godwin exercising the fascination of rhetorical novelty rather than basically altering the popular belief in the existence of the soul and in man's freedom to sin and be eternally punished therefor. It was in the nineteenth century that scientific method, deistic faith, and biological discoveries began seriously to converge upon man and to suggest not only that his nature was good but also that his natural self was his ultimate self. This trend was soon to be tremendously accelerated by the positivism of Auguste Comte and the Darwinian theory of evolution.

Positivism was presented as an empirical, naturalistic method of finding truth. It stresses accuracy and objectivity and affirms that the only significant reality is the content of experience. The function of science is to observe facts and formulate laws which explain those facts. But positivism was much more than a method. It was a torch to burn the dark rubbish of the past and to light the way into the future. Living in the period following the French Revolution, Comte was impelled by a desire to establish society and its institutions on a more solid foundation. To that end he sought a new faith

that would use the intellectual advantages of the age to unite men in a common purpose. In his *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (1830) he devised his famous law of the three stages of thought as it progresses toward maturity. They are the theological, the metaphysical, and the scientific, to which he applied the very prejudiced terms *fictitious* (i.e., mythical), *abstract*, and *positive*, respectively, the last being the triumphant stage at which mankind will for the first time in history enjoy a reliable basis for progress. In this final stage science is descriptive rather than—as philosophy had attempted to be—explanatory. Comte rejects the pursuit of first causes and absolute truths; he wants “effective” causes from which useful laws may be deduced, and he firmly asserts that all phenomena are subject to physical laws. Here is a sweeping rejection of the authority and supernaturalism of the past.

Comte went on to classify the sciences in the order of their complexity, dependency, and perfectibility. He arrived at the conclusion that sociology was the last in each of these categories: it was the most complex; it required the pre-existence of the other sciences; and it would be the last to attain the perfection of positive method. Sociology thus became the unifying discipline of human thought and its purpose the perfect organization of human society. A religion of progress was offered to replace the darkness of antique superstition.

Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) was a culmination in the field of biology of the naturalistic temper of the period, presenting a hypothesis toward which many streams of thought and investigation had been converging. A hundred years earlier Montesquieu (*Esprit des Lois*, 1748) had proclaimed the influence of environment in all human affairs. Malthus had written (*Essay on the Principle of Population*, 1798) on the over-fecundity of nature. Wallace, unknown to Darwin, worked in the same area toward the same conclusions. Darwin employed the positive method to show how natural selection operated to produce new species. His theory challenged the prevailing belief of biologists in the immutability of species; it challenged the teleological concepts of “purpose” and “design” in the universe, for it attributed the physical changes of