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Determined Fictions

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DETERMINED FICTIONS

PREFACE

Taking Determinism Seriously

LITERARY NATURALISM has never enjoyed an easy time with the critics, perhaps because even admirers have felt compelled to concede two crippling points: that naturalism offers a behavioral model encountered nowhere in life, and that its style falls woefully short of the standards deemed appropriate for art. Ever since 1868, when Émile Zola heralded a new fiction of determinism—of characters “completely dominated by their nerves and blood, without free will”¹—readers have taken a perverse delight in naturalism’s fateful plots. Yet narratives of victims beleaguered by events have rarely inclined those same readers to praise the dislocated styles that seem so characteristic of the mode. Only occasionally has the “power” often attributed to literary naturalism seemed anything like a just compensation for its apparent lack of craft. Among more discriminating readers, in fact, the less said about craft, the better.

For a variety of reasons, the naturalist “movement” attracted less

interest abroad than it did in America, which has had the effect of making the debate on its literary status more pressing here than elsewhere. The basic terms of that debate, however, have altered little in more than a century—and this despite changing tastes and theories that have dramatically reshaped the literary canon. The critical bench mark applied to naturalism remains for most the same as ever, accepted by advocates and detractors alike because it is based on a common judgment: that the naturalists devised forceful plots for what otherwise seems rather thin as philosophy, and yet that their writing rattles and creaks. Some have simply attributed these flaws to the very premise of naturalism, assuming that only incompetent writers could be drawn to so limited a vision of human behavior. Whatever their views of determinism, however, few would deny Zola's identification of the philosophy with naturalism.

Despite an astonishing variety in writers as different as Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser; despite the refusal of Crane and Jack London ever to accept the naturalist label; despite the failure of all but Dreiser to persist in the mode throughout a career, or of any writer to acknowledge a common thread to their collective efforts: despite all this, a consensus on American naturalism has emerged. The alleged movement's "classic" phase occurred near the turn of the century, so all concede, and further agree that it consists primarily of works by a central quartet of writers: Crane, Dreiser, London, and Frank Norris. Sometimes included as well are novels by Harold Frederic and Hamlin Garland, Edith Wharton, David Graham Phillips, and Upton Sinclair. The usual reason for including these texts, notwithstanding their notable differences, is that each depicts the range of human activity as if determined, not free. Each one as well supposedly offers a Darwinian version of literary realism that elaborates the ever fuller, ever more oppressive constraints of heredity and environment.²

Darwin's theory formed only part of a larger intellectual upheaval that supposedly cleared the ground of religious myths and humanistic sentiments. Science had confidently taken the field, as announced at the time by one of its most prominent spokesman, Ernst Haeckel:

The great struggle between the determinist and the indeterminist, between the opponent and the sustainer of the freedom of the will, has ended to-day, after more than two thousand years, completely in favor of the determinist. The human will has no more freedom

than that of the higher animals, from which it differs only in degree, not in kind . . . We now know that each act of the will is as fatally determined by the organization of the individual and as dependent on the momentary condition of his environment as every other psychic activity.³

Accompanying this pride in the newly discovered laws of human behavior was a corresponding assurance in a new literary aesthetic, expressed some years earlier by the very man responsible for popularizing Social Darwinism. "In a good modern work of imagination," pronounced Herbert Spencer, echoing Zola, "the events are the proper products of the characters living under given conditions, and cannot at will be changed in their order or kind."⁴ All that naturalist authors now needed to consider in their art were "given conditions"—a proposition so self-evident to Spencer's contemporaries that subsequent definitions of naturalism have focused on the characteristic conditions favored by its authors.

It will become clear in the opening chapter why this line of reasoning seems misguided to me—why naturalism refuses to be reduced to a "distinctive array of features," whether of particular scenes, or special themes, or characters and kinds of activities.⁵ Still, the logic of adducing such features continues to seem attractive to critics, perhaps because many assume that determinism in fiction must mean "pessimistic realism"—a low-rent version, as it were, of efforts by George Eliot and William Dean Howells. Even those who rightly reject so reductive an equation rarely go on to envision the more profound implications of determinism for narrative.⁶ Instead, they too have turned to supposedly appropriate themes and materials, or put the issue aside entirely in favor of other literary models. Philip Fisher, for instance, argues that naturalism consists of "the plot of decline," while June Howard more broadly identifies the "genre" with "documentary organization, the plot of decline, [and] the incorporation of melodramatic and sentimental formulas"; Eric Sundquist asserts that in naturalism "the abnormal becomes the barely submerged norm," resulting in a "*Gothic intensification of detail* that approaches the allegorical"; Alfred Habegger announces instead that the greatest triumph of naturalism is its defense of "American masculinity," while for Mark Seltzer, "an autonomous and masturbatory economy of production characterizes the discourse of naturalism generally"; Walter Benn Michaels identifies that discourse with "the

working-out of a set of conflicts between pretty things and curious ones, material and representation, hard money and soft, beast and soul.”⁷ These, among the best younger critics, persuade us to reconsider naturalism through inventive, sometimes trenchant readings of individual texts. But they do so all by giving short shrift to the very determinism they grant as its premise.

Perhaps this neglect has occurred because of the kinds of difficult issues raised by a necessitarian vision, which in any case seem to lie in the province of philosophy rather than that of literary criticism. Still, current work in narratology encourages us to turn our attention to questions like, How can an action be shown to be impersonally caused rather than motivated? or, When does fiction dissociate an agent’s will from a world of events? or, What does lack of responsibility entail in terms of narrative perspective, or plot sequence, or even syntax itself? To treat such questions with philosophical rigor is necessarily to confront head-on the “problem” of naturalist style. Its irritating repetitions and dislocations, its grammatical excesses and wrenching maneuvers cannot any longer be curtly dismissed as the irrelevant lapses of incompetent writers; nor can we simply assume it is enough to know Theodore Dreiser is not Henry James. We need, if only for the moment, to relax the stranglehold of literary “standards” in order to appreciate how fully any enacted philosophy depends on its style—or rather, to recall that the two are one and the same, and that an extreme philosophy can only be realized in correspondingly extreme styles. Inquiring thus into the sometimes awkward, invariably disruptive styles of determinism may well compel us into a larger reconsideration of narrative standards themselves. In any event, we will discover how much a larger pattern to grammatical improprieties can alter some of the deepest assumptions we bring to bear on the world around us.

Nearly forty years ago, Saul Bellow commented on Dreiser’s reception by wondering why “no one has thought to ask just what the ‘bad writing’ of a powerful novelist signifies.”⁸ Now we can venture an answer: “bad writing” (at least in the hands of the naturalists) signifies determinism, and it may well be that our scorn for the former is linked to our general aversion to the latter. Critics of naturalism have for far too long avoided its problematic style, and have done so (I would assert) because they inadequately acknowledge its philosophical terms. My approach can most simply be distinguished from other studies of naturalism, then, in the seriousness

with which I explore the narrative effects of determinism.⁹ That is my reason for turning first to recent work in moral philosophy, which differs from that of the naturalists' contemporaries (William James, say, or Charles Peirce) in striving to clarify the distinctly narrative implications of any such premise.¹⁰ Peter Strawson, for instance, has observed that the traditional opposition of free will and determinism corresponds to an ongoing conflict in our most basic human attitudes, and in particular those attitudes we cannot help but maintain toward each other. Understanding that conflict helps us to see that the problem for naturalism is one of encouraging readers to adopt a set of attitudes associated with a necessitarian view.

Even more radically, Thomas Nagel claims that our accounts of behavior stand always at odds with themselves, and that therefore the assumptions we project on each other immerse us in a realm of "moral luck"—a realm in which little we do seems to lie within our control. Not only does Nagel's suggestion alter our understanding of naturalist plots, but it helps to clarify as well why their textual rhythms are so disruptive. And to begin to think in this way about the effects of sometimes perturbing prose styles is to realize how a new angle of vision can alter literary flaws into narrative strengths. Closer attention to the texture of naturalism—from its selection of words to its structure of scenes—reveals that the "lapses" most critics feel compelled to excuse are in direct support of its premise. Resist and even resent as we do the misplaced phrases and unseemly repetitions, the "power" of naturalism is established through a perspective that thoroughly unsettles our views. In short, a concession to standards of style obscures an understanding of what the naturalists achieved.

The naturalists, contrary to the central claim advanced by proponents ever since Zola, did not simply substitute a mechanistic determinism for the assumed agency by the realist novel. In far more searching endeavors, they depicted the ways in which "agency" itself is constructed only after the fact, made up as we go along in the stories we tell about the moments of our lives. The imposition of causality and motive on a series of past events is, as recent theoreticians have observed, the inevitable consequence of narration itself. What distinguishes the naturalists, however, is their sensitivity to the logic that informs such rationalization, not just at the level of narrative plot but at those of syntax and verbal style. The collective agenda behind their efforts was nothing less than to expose that

logic, thereby to compel a larger reconsideration of the assumptions we hold about the coherent self.

These rather large claims have implications that can only be addressed in local terms, which is why four of the chapters that follow offer readings of individual texts—one apiece by each of the major naturalists. Before turning to particulars, however, we need to examine the overall process by which characters are created who remain determined by forces beyond themselves. An extended introduction initially does this by considering the kind of moral vision the naturalists repudiated—a vision exemplified in the work of William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Mark Twain. Idiosyncratic as was each of these realists, they all presented characters as “subjective selves” who possessed clear capacities for restraint and responsibility. By contrast, Crane, Dreiser, London, and Norris rejected the very category of the “self,” creating characters who seem little more than occasions for passing events—who merely mark the bodily intersections of outer force and inner desire. Realist authors enforced a moral perspective on narrative action, a perspective involving the same considerations of intention and responsibility we habitually project on each other (and onto fictional characters as well). Those seemingly “natural” projective impulses are precisely what naturalists seek to subvert, and they do so in two major ways: through distinctive means of presenting plot crisis; and through stylistic strategies that serve to defamiliarize our sense of the “self.”

Realist crises, first of all, occur typically in scenes of deliberation, which means that individuals are defined through an elaborate process of responsible choice; they seem to possess moral selves that are greater than the sum of forces that go into making them. Naturalist characters, on the contrary, are ever unable to forestall their own actions when a combination of inner and outer forces otherwise impels them. They may respond to experience out of a similar constellation of yearnings and motives, but they lack in addition the wills that would enable them to resist desire or alter behavior. Yet the premise of agency is subverted in naturalism through means more subtle than plot or motive, including most importantly prose style. Its repetitions, for instance, expose the absence of a controlling will, and do so altogether variously—whether through reiterated scenes, or stuttering syntax, or characters psychologically doubling each other. Contrary to conventional wisdom, in other words, this opening chapter argues that naturalism forms as complex a mode as

realism, with as extensive a repertoire of characters, events, plots, settings, and styles. The sole handicap under which naturalism works is the requirement (introduced by its very premise) to disrupt the habitual and powerful process by which we create not only ourselves but each other as responsible agents.

In shifting from theoretical speculation to the specifics of naturalist texts, chapter 2 turns to London's "To Build a Fire" (1906) for two reasons: because London has rarely been read for his style, and because the story is so frequently interpreted as an account of irresponsible negligence. On the contrary, the narrative presents an unnamed man's fatal incompetence so as to emphasize the importance of circumstance, not character. Negating through verbal and scenic repetitions our customary categories of selfhood, the text succeeds at last in discrediting any ascription of responsibility. And by denying all but entirely the importance of contingency in events, it not only derails assumptions of human autonomy but elegantly stops narrative time altogether. Still, the story also reveals how essential the notion of agency is to narrative, even when that capacity has been clearly excluded. Blame is as misplaced a response in this world as either regret or guilt, and yet the character, the narrator, and the reader as well are all impelled to reintroduce the categories. The story becomes, therefore, as much an account of that recalcitrant narrativizing impulse as it is of a man's death.

Just as "story-telling" forms the general problem in London's text, the more complicated process of constructing a "self" haunts Dreiser's *American Tragedy* (1925). In chapter 3, I show that narrative repetition, relentless foreshadowing, and psychic doubling all work to deny an autonomous selfhood to Clyde Griffiths. His actions, in fact, are little more than the sum of circumstances beyond his control. Raised to success by the same plot motion that plunges him gradually downward toward failure, he endures the paradox of being lifted socially through events that coerce him toward death. Throughout the novel, moreover, a process of psychic doubling highlights the central repetition of Clyde in his lover, and renders his "murder" of Roberta Alden a death of the double that confirms the narrative's psychological determinism. The supposed agency of a coherent subject is again no more than a fiction that has been pieced together retrospectively, in the lengthy trial of Clyde for Roberta's murder. It is useless to complain about the "repetitious" plot, or Clyde's "failure to learn," or his "undeveloped" character, since

these are part of the very problem the novel works to illuminate. From this perspective, *An American Tragedy* interests us less for its relentless determinism than for its revelation of the disparity between Clyde's apparent "self" and the circumstances that define him.

What allows this contradiction to be accepted, even perpetuated, by readers is language itself—the primary deterministic force in my reading of naturalism. That is the reason for turning next to Norris' *Vandover and the Brute* (1914), in order to focus attention on the moral suasions of narrative discourse in a novel commonly read as a textbook illustration of mechanistic determinism. More narrowly than Dreiser, Norris defines his hero as accommodating to circumstance, so much so that in the alliance of inner and outer experience he comes to seem indistinguishable from his surroundings. Even so, and despite his affliction with a disease that reduces him to animal howls and yelps, Vandover is destroyed less by natural forces than by the dictates of social convention. Like Crane's Bowery heroine, Maggie (who undergoes a similar decline and fall), he is blind to the self-destroying morality by which his actions are judged. What makes that morality possible, moreover, is the structure of conventional language itself—not only in Vandover's society but our own; not only in the world represented by the novel but in the readerly premises quietly but firmly reinforced by that representation. The very medium of naturalism is exposed as replete with assumptions about action and intention that encourage us, like Vandover, to accept moral labels for otherwise unaccountable events.

It is only a step from this verbal determinism to the specular absorption of Henry Fleming in Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* (1895). The conventional morality of ordinary language in Norris assumes visual form in Crane, as Henry actively learns to *see* the rationalizing narrative by which his culture ascribes responsibility to individuals. He can thus come to imagine that he is a "hero" by the end of the novel, even though the actions that change him emerge from nothing but a series of unaccountable desires. From our perspective, in fact, he appears fragmented by the very syntax of his presentation, leaving his emotions, thoughts, and behavior profoundly unaligned. Crane was aware of the powerful impulse (of readers as well as characters) to transform those contradictory impulses called "Henry Fleming" into a moral agent. At every point, he unsettles his narrative's tendency to become a coherent "story," the story in particular of Henry's "education" into heroic behavior. He dramatizes the propensity

of characters to interpret circumstances as warrants of identity, even as he establishes an ironic distance from his narrative through repetition and syntactic disruption. In the process, he leaves the reader with two rather clear alternatives: either to reproduce the moral "heroism" of Henry (and thus be duped by the text) or to deconstruct the illusion of "Henry Fleming" as a coherent personality.

Clearly, the "mechanisms" of literary naturalism belong less to some physical "universe of force" than to the grammatical pressures of distinctively verbal realms. Yet in shifting attention away from scientific to linguistic forms of determinism, I have been intent on developing a further argument based on my selected texts: that each one defines a contradiction in its central character, between a self-image as an autonomous, integrated, freely willing agent, and the narrative's revelation of him as no more than a set of conflicting desires. That is the reason my sequence of chapters defies the customary chronology that opens with Crane and ends with Dreiser (usually because of their published dates), in order to establish a larger logic in my treatment of linguistic determinism. One formulation of that logic is as the passage of a misplaced morality gradually into the text, as it were, from an omniscient narrator to characters who seem increasingly benighted: from London's inculcating narrative voice; to the retrospective judgment of Clyde's peers; to Vandover's thoughtful adoption of an irrelevant social code; finally, to Henry's incoherent self-definition. As well, however, my sequence of chapters is informed by an obverse logic, as a transition in the kinds of constraints that determine a person's behavior: from London's intense physical world of intractable circumstance, to Dreiser's fraught psychological realm of uncontrollable desire, to Norris' social domain of ineluctable convention, to Crane's integration of all three. I hasten to add that the hierarchy implied by this sequence from material to cultural spheres reveals nothing special about each author's particular accomplishment. What my readings *do* reveal is how fully each context requires the other, if sometimes only implicitly, and how much the differences between them emerge through verbal stresses and narrative slants.

For too long, critics have simply avoided the disturbing language of naturalism, turning instead to the historical conditions that drew a generation to so singular a philosophy, or focusing on the naturalists' shaping interests in biology and psychology, or even adducing biographical sources for fictional materials. More recently, New Histo-

ricists have shifted our attention to contemporary texts in economics, sociology, and philosophy in order to reveal the structural correspondences they share with naturalist fiction. Each of these perspectives helps inform our understanding of that curious body of work, and each is valuable enough in its own right to warrant further critical efforts. Indeed, I myself have elsewhere read naturalist texts as the products of socioeconomic conditions, and those interested in such questions should turn to studies devoted to them.¹¹ My argument here, however, is a formalist one, based on the assumption that naturalism's strengths are apparent not through cultural influences nor through authorial motives inferred from other sources (Dreiser's editorial pronouncements, say, or Norris' essays, or London's letters). What draws us to naturalism is not what lies *behind* its narrative structures but what exists *in* the conflicts and disruptions we feel as we read it even today.¹²

The reason we continue to experience this sense of disruption is because we project a series of expectations that go unfulfilled—expectations instilled in us by a tradition of literary realism. Other critics have generally seen naturalism as an extension of realism, as if in a kind of ongoing dialogue with that earlier, more comforting mode. My argument is, on the contrary, that naturalism poses an attack on the reader by undermining narrative assumptions that realist authors invoked in their fiction, assumptions by which we otherwise more generally author our own selves into life. The naturalists assaulted the reader by writing iconoclastically, inverting the strategies implicit in any structuring of a moral self. It hardly matters that this description of their efforts would have been incomprehensible to them, except as a way of reminding ourselves of their lack of interest in abstract philosophy and, more particularly, in any sustained or systematic analysis of determinism. The important point is that they constructed an assortment of convincing determinist models by rejecting the premise essential to realism.

To reiterate, the naturalists' most radical innovation was in their perspective, not their material, and thereby entailed far more than a simple embrace of stupider characters, or more squalid subjects, or less optimistic plots than had been found before in fiction. Such commonplaces of literary history ignore the extreme reversals of a determinist logic, suggesting that naturalism was little more than a tedious (and awkward) rehearsal of possibilities already mapped out by realist authors. Nothing could be less true of the remarkable

variety evinced by naturalist writers from their unusual premise—a variety that belies any single set of principles, thematic, structural, or stylistic. And that is part of the problem, since supposedly representative claims gloss over the idiosyncracies that make particular narratives naturalistic.

Still, it should already be clear why the usual criticisms seem to me misguided—those attacking mechanical characters, say, or excessive repetition, or disjunctive syntax. Instead of liabilities, these elements actively generate the narrative power of naturalism, which unsettles our most cherished conceptions of agency precisely through distortions of usage. To take naturalism seriously is to recognize how deeply we resist a determinist vision, how predisposed we are to assume capacities we cannot prove we possess. Conversely, to accept (if only for the moment) the prospect that determinism may actually be true is to recognize how fully our assumptions about character and event, like those of prose style, may be based on nothing other than convention.

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I .

Naturalism and the Excluded Self

MOST OF us take for granted an ability to decide what we are going to do: whether to go to work or to the dogs, to join the Marines or the Communist Party, to continue this sentence or fly off to Hong Kong. We tend to assume not only that we are the kind of beings who act in the world, but that our actions (at least the important ones) result from choices we have consciously made. And we treat others similarly, judging them by the choices we can infer from the actions they perform. Yet the more we reflect on this assumption, the less coherent it comes to seem, as we grow to appreciate how fully we are all a part of the world beyond our control. We begin to wonder how to distinguish our actions from other events in that world, which leads in turn to a consideration of what it would mean for us to be somehow determined. Would we possess a sense of ourselves akin to the one we presently have and, if so, would we extend that sense of the self's capacities to others? Would we deliber-

ate about matters of choice, or instead give up the process? And would our conception of responsibility come to seem as irrelevant as it in fact now was? These questions all emerge from a classic philosophical crux about freedom and action—one that reveals how sharply opposed are our deepest beliefs about ourselves. On the one hand, we are part of a world that appears to be structured by laws of causality; on the other, when our actions are reduced to those laws, we seem to disappear as responsible agents. Determinism appears to fit our normal conception of the physical world and yet at the same time it leaves us feeling, in the words of one philosopher, that “there is no elbow room left for our own selves.”¹

From the beginning, this paradox has inspired masterworks of Western literature: Oedipus resisting the oracle’s truth, Job bowing to an implacable God, and countless tragedies since in which noble characters confront untoward events. Artists would not extend this conception to depictions of lower-class life, however, until well into the nineteenth century, by which time innovations in fictional realism had so altered mimetic conventions as to lend the illusion that characters were fully immersed in a world of recalcitrant things. Realism bound characters ever more firmly to the demands and contingencies of everyday life, and yet it significantly continued to treat individuals as moral agents. No matter that they were coerced more than ever before by the bonds of class and gender, characters were still expected to take responsibility for the course of their lives—no less so than when the sole constraints had been circumstance and temperament. Readers, that is, were expected to judge them no less by a notion of moral worth.²

A generation after the realists, the naturalists sharply rejected this view, exploring instead the prospect that ethics might be irrelevant to the lives we live. Or as Jacques Loeb pointedly asked in *The Mechanistic Conception of Life* (1912): “If our existence is based on the play of blind forces and only a matter of chance; if we ourselves are only chemical mechanisms—how can there be an ethics for us? The answer is, that our instincts are the root of our ethics and that the instincts are just as hereditary as is the form of our body.” We end up, in other words, approving simply “what instinct compels us ‘machine-like’ to do.”³ So strict a causal logic would have inspired the realists with genuine horror, not only at its stark amorality but at the evident thinness of its narrative claims. The naturalists, on the contrary, felt at once a release from outmoded Victorian ethics and a rekindled hope in the possibilities now available to fiction.