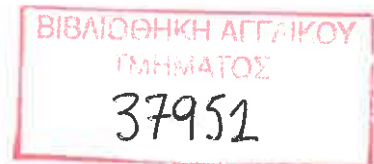

BLOOM'S PERIOD STUDIES

*American
Naturalism*

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 **CHELSEA HOUSE**
PUBLISHERS
A Haight's Cross Communications Company
Philadelphia

to grasp and encompass, the ordinary facts of human existence; and I mean this in the simplest sense conceivable. Least of all can the novelist dispense with it, as his medium knows of no other principle of coherence. In Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* there is a famous passage in which the novelist Edouard enumerates the faults of the naturalist school. "The great defect of that school is that it always cuts a slice of life in the same direction: in time, lengthwise. Why not in breadth? Or in depth? As for me, I should like not to cut at all. Please understand: I should like to put everything into my novel." "But I thought," his interlocutor remarks, "that you want to abandon reality." Yes, replies Edouard, "my novelist wants to abandon it; but I shall continually bring him back to it. In fact that will be the subject; the struggle between the facts presented by reality and the ideal reality."

NOTES

1. Balzac, to whom naturalism is enormously indebted, explains in his preface to the *Comédie Humaine* that the idea of that work came to him in consequence of a "comparison between the human and animal kingdoms." "Does not society," he asks, "make of man, in accordance with the environment in which he lives and moves, as many different kinds of man as there are different zoological species? ... There have, therefore, existed and always will exist social species, just as there are zoological species."

Zola argues along the same lines: "All things hang together: it is necessary to start from the determination of inanimate bodies in order to arrive at the determination of living beings; and since savants like Claude Bernard demonstrate now that fixed laws govern the human body, we can easily proclaim ... the hour in which the laws of thought and passion will be formulated in their turn. A like determination will govern the stones of the roadway and the brain of man.... We have experimental chemistry and medicine and physiology, and later on an experimental novel. It is an inevitable evolution." (*The Experimental Novel*)

2. Chekhov remarks in one of his stories that "the sense of personal freedom is the chief constituent of creative genius."

3. Moreover, it should be evident that Zola's many faults are not rectified but merely inverted in much of the writing—so languidly allusive and decorative—of the literary generations that turned their backs on him.

MALCOLM COWLEY

Naturalism in American Literature

I

Naturalism appeared thirty years later in American literature than it did in Europe and it was never quite the same movement. Like European naturalism it was inspired by Darwin's theory of evolution and kept repeating the doctrine that men, being part of the animal kingdom, were subject to natural laws. But theories and doctrines were not the heart of it. The American naturalists turned to Europe; they read—or read about—Darwin, they studied Spencer and borrowed methods from Zola because they were rebelling against an intolerable situation at home. What bound them together into a school or movement was this native rebellion and not the nature of the help that, like rebels in all ages, they summoned from abroad.

They began writing during the 1890's, when American literature was under the timid but tyrannical rule of what afterward came to be known as the genteel tradition. It was also called Puritanism by its enemies, but that was a mistake on the part of writers with only a stereotyped notion of American history. The original Puritans were not in the least genteel. They believed in the real existence of evil, which they denounced in terms that would have shocked William Dean Howells and the polite readers of the *Century Magazine*. The great New England writers, descendants of the Puritans, were moralists overburdened with scruples; but they were never

mealymouthed in the fashion of their successors. Gentility—or “ideality” or “decency,” to mention two favorite words of the genteel writers—was something that developed chiefly in New York and the Middle West and had its flowering after the Civil War.

Essentially it was an effort to abolish the various evils and vulgarities in American society by never speaking about them. It was a theory that divided the world into two parts, as Sunday was divided from the days of the week or the right side from the wrong side of the railroad tracks. On one side was religion; on the other, business. On one side was the divine in human beings; on the other, everything animal. On one side was art; on the other, life. On one side were women, clergymen, and university professors, all guardians of art and the ideal; on the other side were men in general, immersed in their practical affairs. On one side were the church and the school; on the other side were the saloon, the livery stable, and other low haunts where men gathered to talk politics, swap stories, and remember their wartime adventures with the yellow girls in New Orleans. In America during the late nineteenth century culture was set against daily living, theory against practice, highbrow against lowbrow; and the same division could be found even in the language itself—for one side spoke a sort of bloodless literary English, while the other had a speech that was not American but Amurrkn, ugly and businesslike, sometimes picturesque but not yet a literary idiom.

The whole territory of literature was thought to lie on the right side of the railroad tracks, in the chiefly feminine realm of beauty, art, religion, culture, and the ideal. Novels had to be written with pure heroines and happy endings in order to flatter the self-esteem of female readers. Magazines were edited so as not to disturb the minds of young girls or call forth protests from angry mothers. Frank Norris said of American magazines in 1895:

They are safe as a graveyard, decorous as a church, as devoid of immorality as an epitaph.... They adorn the center table. They do not “call a blush to the cheek of the young.” They can be placed—oh, crowning virtue, oh, supreme encomium—they can be “safely” placed in the hands of any young girl the country over. ... It is the “young girl” and the family center table that determine the standard of the American short story.

Meanwhile there were new men appearing year by year—Frank Norris was one of them—who would not write for the young girl or the center table and could not express themselves without breaking the rules of the genteel editors.

These new men, who would be the first American naturalists, were all in some way disadvantaged when judged by the social and literary standards then prevailing. They were not of the Atlantic seaboard, or not of the old stock, or not educated in the right schools, or not members of the Protestant churches, or not sufficiently respectable in their persons or in their family backgrounds. They were in rebellion against the genteel tradition because, like writers from the beginning of time, they had an urgent need for telling the truth about themselves, and because there was no existing medium in which they were privileged to tell it.

II

Instinctively the new writers began a search for older allies. There were a few of these to be found in America, but not enough of them to serve as the basis of a new literary movement. For most of their support the rebels had to look eastward across the Atlantic.

They were especially attracted by the English evolutionary scientists and pamphleteers. Most of the young writers read the works of this whole English group, beginning with Darwin, whose observations were too rigorously set forth to please their slipshod literary tastes. They could not find much to use in Darwin's books, except his picture of natural selection operating through the struggle for life; most of their Darwinism was acquired at second hand. Huxley they seem to have read with less veneration but more interest, chiefly because of his arguments against the Bible as revealed truth and because of his long war with the Protestant clergy. Young writers, feeling that the churches were part of a vast conspiracy to keep them silent, believed that Huxley was fighting their battle. It was Herbert Spencer, however, who deeply affected their thinking. Spencer's American popularity during the last half of the nineteenth century is something without parallel in the history of philosophic writing. From 1860 to 1903 his books had a sale of 368,755 copies in the authorized editions, not counting the many editions that appeared without his consent. In the memoirs of many famous Americans born in the 1860's and 1870's, one finds the reading of Spencer mentioned as an event that changed the course of their lives. Said John R. Commons, speaking of his father's cronies, “Every one of them in that eastern section of Indiana was a Republican living on the battle cries of the Civil War, and every one was a follower of Herbert Spencer.... I was brought up on Hoosierism, Republicanism, Presbyterianism and Spencerism.”

What was a family inheritance for Commons was a personal discovery for most of the young writers who belonged to the same generation. Hamlin

Garland, when he was starving in Boston on three or four dollars a week, managed to borrow Spencer's books from the public library. After a five-cent breakfast of coffee and two doughnuts, he went "with eager haste," so he says, to Spencer's Synthetic Philosophy. Edgar Lee Masters read Spencer in Illinois, at the age of nineteen. Jack London read him in the little room in Oakland, Calif., where he was teaching himself to write. He says of his autobiographical hero, Martin Eden, that he opened Spencer's *First Principles* in bed, hoping that the book would put him to sleep after algebra and physics and an attempt at a sonnet. "Morning found him still reading. It was impossible for him to sleep. Nor did he write that day. He lay on the bed till his body grew tired, when he tried the hard floor, reading on his back, the book held in the air above him, or changing from side to side. He slept that night, and did his writing next morning, and then the book tempted him and he fell reading all afternoon, oblivious to everything." Theodore Dreiser read Huxley and Spencer in Pittsburgh, when he was working as a young reporter on the *Dispatch*. He tells us in *A Book about Myself* that the discovery of Spencer's *First Principles* "quite blew me, intellectually, to bits." And he goes on to say:

Hitherto, until I had read Huxley, I had some lingering filaments of Catholicism trailing about me, faith in the existence of Christ, the soundness of his moral and sociologic deductions, the brotherhood of man. But on reading *Science and Hebrew Tradition* and *Science and Christian Tradition*, and finding both the Old and New Testaments to be not compendiums of revealed truth but mere records of religious experiences, and very erroneous ones at that, and then taking up *First Principles* and discovering all I deemed substantial—man's place in nature, his importance in the universe, this too, too solid earth, man's very identity save as an infinitesimal speck of energy or a "suspended equation" drawn or blown here and there by larger forces in which he moved quite unconsciously as an atom—all questioned and dissolved into other and less understandable things, I was completely thrown down in my conceptions or non-conceptions of life.

Not many of Spencer's readers were left with this impression of being confused and "completely thrown down." There were many more who valued him because he fitted together the pieces of a universal scheme that had been shattered by their earlier loss of faith in Christian dogmas. Garland, for example, found that "the universe took on order and harmony" as he

considered Spencer's theory of the evolution of music or painting or sculpture. "It was thrilling, it was joyful," he says, "to perceive that everything moved from the simple to the complex—how the bow-string became the harp and the egg the chicken." Spencer's chief value, for the generation of writers who studied him, was that he gave them another unified world picture to replace the Christian synthesis. In that early age of specialization, he was the only great lay scholar with the courage to expound a synthetic philosophy. Many young men worshiped him not merely as a teacher but as a religious prophet. "To give up Spencer," said Jack London's autobiographical hero, "would be equivalent to a navigator throwing the compass and chronometer overboard." Later, when he heard a California judge disparaging Spencer, the hero burst into a rage. "To hear that great and noble man's name upon your lips," he shouted, "is like finding a dewdrop in a cesspool." In his quieter way, Edwin Arlington Robinson was almost as loyal to the synthetic philosopher. He said in a letter written in 1898 to one of his Harvard friends:

Professor James's book is entertaining and full of good things; but his attitude toward Spencer makes me think of a dream my father once had. He dreamed he met a dog. The dog annoyed him, so he struck him with a stick. Then the dog doubled in size and my father struck him again with the same result. So the thing went on till the universe was pretty much all dog. When my father awoke, he was, or rather had been, halfway down the dog's throat.

But Spencer, enormous as he seemed, was no guide to young writers in the specific problems of their craft; nor was he a model to which they could point as justification for their dealing frankly with the world around them. In fiction and poetry they had to find other allies and, once again, most of them were transatlantic.

There were, for example, the English eighteenth-century classics, which could always be cited in arguments for honest realism. *Roxana, or the Fortunate Mistress* was one of Howells' favorites. "Did you ever read Defoe's 'Roxana'?" he said in a letter to his friend Samuel Clemens. "If not, then read it, not merely for some of the deepest insights into the lying, suffering, sinning, well-meaning human soul, but the best and most natural English that a book was ever written in." Still, he was more than a little worried by the effect that novels like *Roxana* and even scenes from Shakespeare might have on public morals. "I hope the time will come," he said in an essay written not long after his letter to Clemens, "when the beast-man will be so

far submerged and tamed in us that the memory of him in literature will be left to perish; that what is lewd and ribald in the great poets shall be kept out of such editions as are meant for public reading." But this was only a pious wish, and perhaps not wholly sincere. General readers could still buy Defoe and Fielding and Smollett in unexpurgated volumes printed in England.

They could also buy translations of living Continental writers, sometimes in paper-bound reprints that sold for as little as ten cents a copy. Turgeniev and Tolstoy both had a following among literary people, and Tolstoy, because of his reputation for frankness, even had a popular sale. Ibsen was not often played, but he was widely discussed. There was a complete translation of Balzac, which stood on the shelves of the larger public libraries, and there were many editions of his separate novels. Zola also had a large public here and an extensive underground influence, in spite of the fact that he was seldom mentioned in the critical journals without being sweepingly condemned. "I read everything of Zola's that I can lay hands on," Howells confessed in a letter to John Hay. "But I have to hide the books from the children!" Theodore Dreiser tells us in his memoirs that when he was working as a reporter on the *St. Louis Republic*, in 1893, the city editor kept advising him "to imitate Zola's vivid description of the drab and the gross and the horrible, if I could—assuming that I had read him," Dreiser added, "which I had not, but I did not say so."

By that time, however, he had gained a fairly definite notion of Zola's methods at second hand. Two of his colleagues on the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, where he had worked the preceding year, had written a novel in the Zola manner. It was about a young and very beautiful actress named Theo, who was the mistress of a French newspaper man. Though deeply in love with her, the hero was unfaithful on at least one occasion; and this, Dreiser said when he retold the story in his memoirs, "brought about a Zolaesque scene in which she spanked another actress with a hairbrush. There was treacherous plotting on the part of somebody with regard to a local murder, which brought about the arrest and conviction of the newspaper man for something he knew nothing about. This entailed a great struggle on the part of Theo to save him, which resulted in her failure and his death on the guillotine. A priest figured in it in some way, grim, jesuitical."

This novel, which never found a publisher, must have been one of the earliest attempts to write in the manner of the French naturalists. Dreiser read it in manuscript and was greatly impressed, though he also wondered why his friends found it necessary to deal with French, not American, life when they wished to write in terms of fact. He didn't read Zola till much

later in his career, so he tells us; but he discovered Balzac in 1894, when he was a reporter in Pittsburgh. "It was for me," he says, "a literary revolution. Not only for the brilliant and incisive manner with which Balzac grasped life and invented themes whereby to present it, but for the fact that the types he handled with most enthusiasm and skill—the brooding, seeking, ambitious beginners in life's social, political, artistic and commercial affairs (Rastignac, Raphael, de Rubempré, Bianchon)—were, I thought, so much like myself." Doors had opened in his mind. "Coming out of the library this day," he says, "and day after day thereafter, the while I rendered as little reportorial service as was consistent with even a show of effort, I marveled at the physical similarity of the two cities"—Pittsburgh and Paris—"as I conceived it, at the chance for pictures here as well as there. American pictures here, as opposed to French pictures there."

This experience of Dreiser's brings to light a curious phenomenon connected with the whole stream of foreign influence. Not only did the rebels of Dreiser's generation learn technical methods from the European naturalists, and find examples of frankness that supported them in their struggle with the genteel tradition; they also were inspired by Europeans to write about American scenes. They had to read European books in order to discover their own natures, and travel in imagination through European cities before they gained courage to describe their own backgrounds. Hamlin Garland, who was the most dogmatically American of them all, and the most vehemently opposed to the imitation of foreign masters, was at the same time a disciple of Ibsen, Tolstoy, and the French Impressionist painters. "In my poor, blundering fashion," he said long afterward, "I was standing for all forms of art which expressed, more or less adequately, the America I knew.... Ibsen's method, alien as his material actually appeared, pointed the way to a new and more authentic American drama. 'If we must imitate, let us imitate those who represent the truth and not those who uphold conventions,' was my argument."

III

Meanwhile there were a very few living American authors whose work seemed to represent the truth and could therefore serve as models to the new generation. There was Whitman, still living meanly in his little house in Camden and still saying over and over again that American books should deal with American life. There were the local-color novelists, scores of them, each studying the folkways of his native or deliberately chosen territory. Garland thought that they represented a national movement, but the truth

was that they dealt with a very few sections of the country: chiefly New England, the Southern Highlands, Louisiana, or California.

There were, however, three local writers from the Middle West who described their respective backgrounds with less sentiment and decorum than those from other sections. Edward Eggleston, of southern Indiana, had published *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* in 1871, at a time when there were no American models for that sort of homely writing; his inspiration for the book, he said, was a translation of Taine's lectures on *Art in the Netherlands*, in which he first encountered the thesis that an artist should work courageously with the materials he finds in his own environment. Edgar Watson Howe, of Kansas, had failed to find a publisher for his *Story of a Country Town* and had printed it at his own expense in 1883. It was the first novel to suggest that there was narrowness, frustration, and sexual hypocrisy in Midwestern lives. Joseph Kirkland, of Illinois, had read *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* and had wondered whether a similar background couldn't be presented more honestly than in Eggleston's book; in 1885 he published *Zury, the Meanest Man in Spring County*. Later he said to Garland, who greatly admired his novel, "Why shouldn't our prairie country have its novelists as well as England or France or Norway? Our characters will not be peasants, but our fiction can be close to the soil." Kirkland recognized the imperfections of his pioneer work; "I began too late," he said.

All these early realists began too late in their lives, and with insufficient preparation. Eggleston, whose books were popular in Scandinavia, was the only one who became a professional man of letters, and that was only after he had abandoned fiction for lecturing on American history. Kirkland was a lawyer who wrote in his spare time. Ed Howe was a newspaper editor. "When I quit the newspaper," he wrote to Garland, "I will write my best book, but I am successful at newspaper work and afraid to give it up." He never quit the newspaper or wrote another book as good as *The Story of a Country Town*. Men like Howe had no assurance that they could earn a living merely by writing novels; no assurance that there was any large public for the sort of truth they had to tell. Their few honest books pointed toward a road that they were unable to follow. But meanwhile, as a model for young writers, there was also William Dean Howells, who, for all his timidity, was trying to present the American world that lay before his eyes. Howells was the real patron and precursor of naturalism in America.

Frank Norris, in one of his magazine pieces, "A Lost Story," described the old schoolmaster as he appeared to the literary rebels of 1898. "He was," Norris said, speaking of an imaginary character named Trevor, but undoubtedly thinking of Howells, "a short, rotund man, rubicund as to face,

bourgeois as to clothes and surroundings, jovial in manner, indulging even in slang. One might easily set him down as a retired groceryman—wholesale, perhaps, but none the less a groceryman. Yet touch him upon the subject of his profession, and the *bonhomie* lapsed away from him at once." And Norris continued,

This elderly man of letters, who had seen the rise and fall of a dozen schools, was above the influence of fads, and he whose books were among the classics even before his death was infallible in his judgments of the work of the younger writers. All the stages of their evolution were known to him—all their mistakes, all their successes. He understood; and a story by one of them, a poem, a novel, that bore the stamp of his approval, was "sterling."

But the public, in 1898, had lost its taste for sterling. It had ceased to buy Howells' novels, let alone those of the young men he kept recommending in his many critical articles. Instead it was buying the romances of F. Hopkinson Smith and Kate Douglas Wiggin, brassy sentiment covered with a thin silver wash.

IV

Norris had dressed in tails to spend his first evening at the Howells'; he liked to be the dandy when he had money for good clothes. He was a big, engaging young man of twenty-eight with prematurely gray hair and a wide cupid's-bow mouth that curled into consciously boyish smiles. Unlike the other naturalists, he had been the rather spoiled child of a wealthy family; and he had formed a high opinion of himself that kept him from feeling professional jealousy and therefore permitted him to have a high opinion of others. Howells liked him so much at their first meeting that he consented to read the manuscript of the Zolaesque novel that his visitor had lately finished after working on it at intervals for four years. It was called *McTeague* and it was the story of an unlicensed San Francisco dentist who had murdered his miserly wife. A few evenings later Norris came back to hear the master's judgment. This time he was received by Howells in lounging slippers and they sat for a long time by the open fire talking about the novel. It wouldn't be popular, Howells said, but he gave it the stamp of his approval; it was sterling.

Most of the magazines were shocked by *McTeague* when it was published in February, 1899. The *Independent* called it a dangerous book that

had "no moral, esthetical or artistic reason for being." The *Bookman* condemned it as "the unexpected revival of realism in its most unendurable form." Other critics were incensed by a page in *McTeague* that described a little boy wetting his pants; they said that Norris had mentioned the unmentionable. There was much in the book that worried Howells, too, but he reviewed it with something close to enthusiasm. It prompted him to raise a serious question in the weekly column he was writing for *Literature*. The question was "whether we shall abandon the old-fashioned American ideal"—to which Howells himself had always clung—"of a novel as something which may be read by all ages and sexes, for the European notion of it as something fit only for age and experience, and for men rather than women; whether we shall keep to the bonds of the provincial proprieties, or shall include within the imperial territory of our fiction the passions and motives of the savage world which underlies as well as environs civilization." Howells did not try to answer the question; but he did say with a sense of prophecy, "The time may come at last when we are to invade and control Europe in literature. I do not say that it has come, but if it has we may have to employ European means and methods."

McTeague was not the first novel in the manner of the French naturalists to be written in the United States, for there must have been others that remained in manuscript, like the wicked book by Dreiser's two St. Louis friends. It was not even the first naturalistic novel to be published here, for Stephen Crane's *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets* had been issued by D. Appleton & Company in 1896, after being privately printed in 1893. But *Maggie*, though it dealt with poverty and prostitution from a naturalistic point of view, was not so much American as metropolitan; it was an episode that might have taken place in any of the world's large cities. *McTeague* was localized; it was the first novel that applied Zola's massive technique, his objective approach and his taste for the grotesquely common to a setting that everyone recognized as American.

Today it has lost its power to shock, but it retains more vitality and clear-sightedness than any of Norris' later novels. The others, even *The Octopus*, are full of romantic situations in the taste of the time; we read them today as period pieces. And the author himself, when we follow his career in Franklin Walker's biography, arouses a good deal of affectionate amusement mingled with our respect for what he achieved. He was a giant who never grew up. He never got over his dependence on his strong-minded mother; every illness sent him scurrying home to her apron strings. Harry Thurston Peck, the editor of the *Bookman*, said of Norris in a letter, "The author of the terrible 'McTeague' is a pleasant, cultivated young gentleman, inclined to be obstreperous—and

humorless—in arguments on realism, but in every other respect a very pleasant boy." He also thought that his face suggested "photographs of Hawthorne or of some classic actor." Another observer thought that he resembled "an old-time tragedian ... Edwin Booth, perhaps." The truth was that Norris' writing was full of stage effects and that he never lost the actor's habit of looking at himself admiringly in the successive roles he played: the art student, the French dandy with sideburns and a cane, the fraternity brother, the breezy Westerner, the man about town, the Anglo-Saxon imperialist and explorer, the romantic lover, the struggling writer, the great novelist. Yes, even the last was a role; for his letters give the impression that Norris stood back and applauded himself as the author of books on big themes that he chose for their bigness, no matter how foreign they might be to his own experience.

About the time that *McTeague* appeared, he was getting launched on the biggest theme of all. "Tell Burgess I'm full of ginger and red pepper," he said in a letter, "and am getting ready to stand up on my hind legs and yell *big*." At the end of March, 1899, he wrote to Howells thanking him for his review of *McTeague*. "I have the idea of another novel or rather series of novels buzzing in my head these days," he added. "I think there is a chance for somebody to do some great work with the West and California as a background, and which will be at the same time thoroughly American. My idea is to write three novels around the one subject of *Wheat*. First, a story of California (the producer), second, a story of Chicago (the distributor), third, a story of Europe (the consumer) and in each keep to the idea of this huge Niagara of wheat rolling from West to East. I think a big epic trilogy *could* be made out of such a subject, that at the same time would be modern and distinctly American. The idea is so big that it frightens me at times but I have about made up my mind to have a try at it." He was in fact already working on his plans, and early in April he went to California in a search for characters, incidents, and local color.

The first volume of the trilogy was published just two years later, in April, 1901. *The Octopus* was on all counts his most ambitious novel, the most carefully composed, the broadest and most colorful in its background, the closest in its theme to great historical events. It was written after a period of sudden booms and depressions, when big business was swallowing little businesses and millions of individuals felt themselves the victims of impersonal corporations or uncontrollable forces. Norris gave expression to their sense of injustice and bewilderment; and he also introduced new technical methods, especially in his collective treatment of the California ranchers. His chapters on the barn dance and the rabbit hunt were almost the first portrayals in American fiction of a group that exulted and suffered as one

man. *The Octopus*, in one of his favorite phrases, was a book "as big as all outdoors"; but its bigness was achieved at the expense of many strained effects and more concessions than he had made in *McTeague* to the bad taste of the day. At the end it declined into muzzy sentiments and fine writing. There is one long passage describing a dinner given by a railroad tycoon, with ortolan patties and Londonderry pheasants served at the exact moment when Mrs. Hooven, robbed of her home by the railroad, was dying of starvation in a vacant lot—one passage of twenty pages that belongs in an old-fashioned servant girls' weekly.

Howells admired *The Octopus* with reservations; after the comparatively unpretentious honesty of *McTeague*, he seems to have felt that it made too many compromises. But there were still more compromises in the second volume of the trilogy, *The Pit*, which appeared in January, 1903, after being serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post*. With its effort to romanticize the big gambler on the Chicago Board of Trade, and with its secondary plot about the wife who discovers that she really loves him after being tempted to run away with a freshwater esthete, who in turn is merely funny instead of being the sinister figure that Norris tried to present, it becomes a provincial melodrama rather than a second canto in the epic of the wheat. *The Pit* seems to indicate that the author had made his peace with genteel society. Perhaps the indication is false, for Norris was dissatisfied with this latest work. Perhaps the next book would have been better; but he died suddenly of peritonitis in the autumn of 1902, before *The Pit* was published and before he had even begun to collect material for the third volume of his trilogy.

It is easy now to see the faults of his work. He was a borrower of literary effects; he took those he needed wherever he found them, in Kipling, Stevenson, Tolstoy, Zola, or Maupassant. He depended on instinct rather than intelligence for his choice of borrowings, since he always thought viscerally, with his heart and bowels instead of his brain. In that respect he resembled the first Roosevelt; and Henry Adams' judgment on the President applies to the novelist equally: "We are timid and conventional, all of us, except T. R., and he has no mind." But T. R. was often timid and conventional in politics, for all his bluster, just as Norris was often conventional in writing his big dramatic scenes and timid in his moral judgments. One remembers how Presley, the poet in *The Octopus* who often speaks for the author, sets out to rescue the penniless Hooven family, finds that the daughter has become a prostitute and runs away from her in sick terror, feeling that with her first step into sin she has passed beyond all human help. Norris' moral rebellion, like T. R.'s political rebellion, stayed within the limits of what was then good form.

He had no feeling for any but the most obvious social values; I think it was Henry James who said that Norris' pictures of Chicago society would have been good satires if he had known they were satires. He was proud of not writing careful prose. He didn't live long enough to learn many subtleties of character or the use in portraying them of many shades between black and white. Yet it may be that his faults and failures helped to keep him close to a public that had missed the ironies in Henry B. Fuller's work and felt that Stephen Crane was cold, European and possibly corrupt. They were the faults of his time and they contributed, in their way, to his timely influence on American writing. His great virtues were also of a sort that the public could learn to respect: freshness, narrative vigor, a marvelous eye for the life around him and courage to portray it in its drama and violence, besides the ability to construct his novels like Zola's in massive blocks. During a literary career of only six years, he managed to impress his personality, some of his particular virtues, and many of his shortcomings on the whole naturalistic school that would follow him.

V

After half a century we can look back in an objective or naturalistic spirit at the work of the writers inspired by Dreiser and Norris. We can describe their principles, note how these were modified in practice and reach some sort of judgment on their achievements.

Naturalism in literature has been defined by Oscar Cargill as pessimistic determinism, and the definition is true so far as it goes. The naturalists were all determinists in that they believed in the omnipotence of natural forces. They were pessimists in that they believed in the absolute incapacity of men and women to shape their own destinies. They regarded the individual as merely "a pawn on a chessboard"; the phrase recurs time and again in their novels. They felt that he could not achieve happiness by any conscious decision and that he received no earthly or heavenly reward for acting morally; man was, in Dreiser's words, "the victim of forces over which he has no control."

In some of his moods, Frank Norris carried this magnification of forces and minification of persons to an even greater extreme. "Men were nothings, mere animalculae, mere ephemerides that fluttered and fell and were forgotten between dawn and dusk," he said in the next-to-last chapter of *The Octopus*. "Men were naught, life was naught; FORCE only existed—FORCE that brought men into the world, FORCE that made the wheat grow, FORCE that garnered it from the soil to give place to the succeeding crop."

But Norris, like several other naturalists, was able to combine this romantic pessimism about individuals with romantic optimism about the future of mankind. "The individual suffers, but the race goes on," he said at the very end of the novel. "Annixter dies, but in a far distant corner of the world a thousand lives are saved. The larger view always and through all shams, all wickednesses, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good." This was, in its magniloquent way, a form of the belief in universal progress announced by Herbert Spencer, but it was also mingled with native or Emersonian idealism, and it helped to make naturalism more palatable to Norris' first American readers.

Zola had also declared his belief in human perfectibility, in what he called "a constant march toward truth"; and it was from Zola rather than Spencer or any native sources that Norris had borrowed most of his literary doctrines. Zola described himself as "a positivist, an evolutionist, a materialist." In his working notes, which Norris of course had never seen, but which one might say that he divined from the published text of the novels, Zola had indicated some of his aims as a writer. He would march through the world observing human behavior as if he were observing the forms of animal life. "Study men as simple elements and note the reactions," he said. And again, "What matters most to me is to be purely naturalistic, purely physiological. Instead of having principles (royalism, Catholicism) I shall have laws (heredity, atavism)." And yet again, "Balzac says that he wishes to paint men, women and things. I count men and women as the same, while admitting their natural differences, and *subject men and women to things*." In that last phrase, which Zola underlined, he expressed the central naturalistic doctrine: that men and women are part of nature and subject to the same indifferent laws.

The principal laws, for Zola, were those of heredity, which he assumed to be as universal and unchanging as the second law of thermodynamics. He fixed upon the hereditary weakness of the Rougon-Macquart family as a theme that would bind together his vast series of novels. Suicide, alcoholism, prostitution, and insanity were all to be explained as the result of the same hereditary taint. "Vice and virtue," he said, "are products like vitriol and sugar." Norris offered the same explanation for the brutality of McTeague. "Below the fine fabric of all that was good in him," Norris said, "ran the foul stream of hereditary evil, like a sewer. The vices and sins of his father and of his father's father, to the third and fourth and five hundredth generation, tainted him. The evil of an entire race flowed in his veins. Why should it be? He did not desire it. Was he to blame?" Others of the naturalistic school, and

Norris himself in his later novels, placed more emphasis on environmental forces. When Stephen Crane sent a copy of *Maggie* to the Reverend Thomas Dixon, he wrote on the flyleaf: "It is inevitable that this book will greatly shock you, but continue, pray, with great courage to the end, for it tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing and often shapes lives regardlessly. If I could prove that theory, I would make room in Heaven for all sorts of souls (notably an occasional street girl) who are not confidently expected to be there by many excellent people." *Maggie*, the victim of environment, was no more to blame for her transgressions than McTeague, the victim of hereditary evil. Nobody was to blame in this world where men and women are subject to the laws of things.

A favorite theme in naturalistic fiction is that of the beast within. As the result of some crisis—usually a fight, a shipwreck, or an expedition into the Arctic—the veneer of civilization drops or is stripped away and we are faced with "the primal instinct of the brute struggling for its life and for the life of its young." The phrase is Norris', but it might have been written by any of the early naturalists. When evolution is treated in their novels, it almost always takes the opposite form of devolution or degeneration. It is seldom that the hero evolves toward a superhuman nature, as in Nietzsche's dream; instead he sinks backward toward the beasts. Zola set the fashion in *L'Assommoir* and *La Bête humaine* and Norris followed him closely in the novel he wrote during his year at Harvard, *Vandover and the Brute*. Through yielding to his lower instincts, Vandover loses his humanity; he tears off his clothes, paddles up and down the room on his hands and feet and snarls like a dog.

A still earlier story, *Lauth*, was written at the University of California after Norris had listened to the lectures of Professor Joseph Le Conte, the famous evolutionist. The action takes place in medieval Paris, where Lauth, a student at the Sorbonne, is mortally wounded in a brawl. A doctor brings him back to life by pumping blood into his veins, but the soul had left the body and does not return. Without it, Lauth sinks back rapidly through the various stages of evolution: he is an ape, then a dog, then finally "a horrible shapeless mass lying upon the floor. It lived, but lived not as do the animals or the trees, but as the protozoa, the jellyfish, and those strange lowest forms of existence wherein the line between vegetable and animal cannot be drawn." That might have been taken as a logical limit to the process of devolution; but Jack London, who was two parts naturalist, if he was also one part socialist and three parts hack journalist, tried to carry the process even further, into the realm of inanimate nature. Here, for example, is the description of a fight in *Martin Eden*:

Then they fell upon each other, like young bulls, in all the glory of youth, with naked fists, with hatred, with desire to hurt, to maim, to destroy. All the painful, thousand years' gains of man in his upward climb through creation were lost. Only the electric light remained, a milestone on the path of the great human adventure. Martin and Cheese-Face were two savages, of the stone age, of the squatting place and the tree refuge. They sank lower and lower into the muddy abyss, back into the dregs of the raw beginnings of life, striving blindly and chemically, as atoms strive, as the star-dust of the heavens strives, colliding, recoiling and colliding again and eternally again.

It was more than a metaphor when London said that men were atoms and star dust; it was the central drift of his philosophy. Instead of moving from the simple to the complex, as Herbert Spencer tells us that everything does in this world, the naturalists kept moving from the complex to the simple, by a continual process of reduction. They spoke of the nation as "the tribe," and a moment later the tribe became a pack. Civilized man became a barbarian or a savage, the savage became a brute and the brute was reduced to its chemical elements. "Study men as simple elements," Zola had said; and many years later Dreiser followed his advice by presenting love as a form of electromagnetism and success in life as a question of chemical compounds; thus he said of his brother Paul that he was "one of those great Falstaffian souls who, for lack of a little iron or sodium or carbon dioxide in his chemical compost, was not able to bestride the world like a Colossus."

There was a tendency in almost all the naturalistic writers to identify social laws with biological or physical laws. For Jack London, the driving force behind human events was always biology—"I mean," says his autobiographical hero, Martin Eden, "the real interpretative biology, from the ground up, from the laboratory and the test tube and the vitalized inorganic right on up to the widest esthetic and social generalizations." London believed that such biological principles as natural selection and the survival of the fittest were also the laws of human society. Thomas Hardy often spoke as if men's destinies were shaped by the physical sciences. He liked to say that his characters were doomed by the stars in their courses; but actually they were doomed by human conflicts or by the still Puritan conventions of middle-class England. Norris fell into the same confusion between the physical and the social world when he pictured the wheat as "a huge Niagara ... flowing from West to East." In his novels wheat was not a grain improved by men from various wild grasses and grown by men to meet

human needs; it was an abstract and elemental force like gravity. "I corner the wheat!" says Jadwin, the hero of *The Pit*. "Great heavens, it is the wheat that has cornered me." Later, when he is ruined by the new grain that floods the market, Jadwin thinks to himself,

The Wheat had grown itself: demand and supply, these were the two great laws that the Wheat obeyed. Almost blasphemous in his effrontery, he had tampered with these laws, and roused a Titan. He had laid his puny human grasp upon Creation and the very earth herself, the great mother, feeling the touch of the cobweb that the human insect had spun, had stirred at last in her sleep and sent her omnipotence moving through the grooves of the world, to find and crush the disturber of her appointed courses.

Just as the wheat had grown itself, so, in the first volume of Norris' trilogy, the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad had built itself. This octopus that held a state in its tentacles was beyond human control. Even Shelgrim, the president of the railroad, was merely the agent of a superhuman force. At the end of the novel he gives a lecture to Presley which overwhelms the poet and leaves him feeling that it rang "with the clear reverberation of truth." "You are dealing with forces," Shelgrim says, "when you speak of Wheat and the Railroads, not with men. There is the Wheat, the supply. It must be carried to the People. There is the demand. The Wheat is one force, the Railroad, another, and there is the law that governs them—supply and demand. Men have little to do with the whole business." If the two forces came into conflict—if the employees of the railroad massacred the wheat ranchers and robbed them of their land—then Presley should "blame conditions, not men."

The effect of naturalism as a doctrine is to subtract from literature the whole notion of human responsibility. "Not men" is its constant echo. If naturalistic stories had tragic endings, these were not to be explained by human wills in conflict with each other or with fate; they were the blind result of conditions, forces, physical laws, or nature herself. "There was no malevolence in Nature," Presley reflects after meeting the railroad president. "Colossal indifference only, a vast trend toward appointed goals. Nature was, then, a gigantic engine, a vast, cyclopean power, huge, terrible, a leviathan with a heart of steel, knowing no compunction, no forgiveness, no tolerance; crushing out the human atom standing in its way, with nirvanic calm." Stephen Crane had already expressed the same attitude toward nature in a

sharper image and in cleaner prose. When the four shipwrecked men in *The Open Boat* are drifting close to the beach but are unable to land because of the breakers, they stare at a windmill that is like "a giant standing with its back to the plight of the ants. It represented in a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual—nature in the wind, and nature in the visions of men. She did not seem cruel to him, then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent."

These ideas about nature, science, and destiny led to the recurrent use of words and phrases by which early naturalistic fiction can be identified. "The irony of fate" and "the pity of it" are two of the phrases; "pawns of circumstance" is another. The words that appear time and again are "primitive," "primordial" (often coupled with "slime"), "prehensile," "apelike," "wolflike," "brute" and "brutal," "savage," "driving," "conquering," "blood" (often as an adjective), "master" and "slave" (also as adjectives), "instinct" (which is usually "blind"), "ancestor," "huge," "cyclopean," "shapeless," "abyss," "biological," "chemic" and "chemism," "hypocrisy," "taboo," "unmoral." Time and again we read that "The race is to the swift and the battle to the strong." Time and again we are told about "the law of claw and fang," "the struggle for existence," "the blood of his Viking ancestors," and "the foul stream of hereditary evil." "The veneer of civilization" is always being "stripped away," or else it "drops away in an instant." The characters in early naturalistic novels "lose all resemblance to humanity," reverting to "the abysmal brute." But when they "clash together like naked savages," or even like atoms and star dust, it is always the hero who "proves himself the stronger"; and spurning his prostrate adversary he strides forward to seize "his mate, his female." "Was he to blame?" the author asks his readers; and always he answers, "Conditions, not men, were at fault."

VI

All these characteristics of the earlier American naturalists might have been deduced from their original faith in Darwinian evolution and in the need for applying biological and physical laws to human affairs. But they had other characteristics that were more closely connected with American life in their own day.

The last decade of the nineteenth century, when they started their literary careers, was an age of contrasts and sudden changes. In spite of financial panics, the country was growing richer, but not at a uniform rate for all sections: the South was hopelessly impoverished and rural New England

was returning to wilderness. Cities were gaining in population, partly at the expense of the Eastern farms, industry was thriving at the expense of agriculture, and independent factories were being combined into or destroyed by the trusts. It was an age of high interest rates, high but uncertain profits, low wages and widespread unemployment. It was an age when labor unions were being broken, when immigrants were pouring through Ellis Island to people the new slums and when the new American baronage was building its magnificently ugly chateaux. "America," to quote again from Dreiser's memoirs, "was just entering upon the most lurid phase of that vast, splendid, most lawless and most savage period in which the great financiers were plotting and conniving at the enslavement of the people and belaboring each other." Meanwhile the ordinary citizen found it difficult to plan his future and even began to suspect that he was, in a favorite naturalistic phrase, "the plaything of forces beyond human control."

The American faith that was preached in the pulpits and daily reasserted on editorial pages had lost its connection with American life. It was not only an intolerable limitation on American writing, as all the rebel authors had learned; it also had to be disregarded by anyone who hoped to rise in the business world and by anyone who, having failed to rise, wanted to understand the reasons for his failure. In its simplest terms, the American faith was that things were getting better year by year, that the individual could solve his problems by moving, usually westward, and that virtue was rewarded with wealth, the greatest virtue with the greatest wealth. Those were the doctrines of the editorial page; but reporters who worked for the same newspaper looked around them and decided that wealth was more often the fruit of selfishness and fraud, whereas the admirable persons in their world—the kind, the philosophic, the honest, and the open-eyed—were usually failures by business standards. Most of the early naturalistic writers, including Stephen Crane, Harold Frederic, David Graham Phillips, and Dreiser, were professional newspaper men; while the others either worked for short periods as reporters or wrote series of newspaper articles. All were more or less affected by the moral atmosphere of the city room; and the fact is important, since the newspaper men of the 1890's and 1900's were a special class or type. "Never," says Dreiser, speaking of his colleagues on the Pittsburgh *Dispatch*, "had I encountered more intelligent or helpful or companionable albeit more cynical men than I met here"; and the observation leads to general remarks about the reporters he had known:

One can always talk to a newspaper man, I think, with the full confidence that one is talking to a man who is at least free of

moralistic mush. Nearly everything in connection with those trashy romances of justice, truth, mercy, patriotism, public profession of all sorts, is already and forever gone if they have been in the business for any length of time. The religionist is seen by them for what he is: a swallower of romance or a masquerader looking to profit and preferment. Of the politician, they know or believe but one thing: that he is out for himself.

Essentially the attitude forced upon newspaper men as they interviewed politicians, evangelists, and convicted criminals was the same as the attitude they derived or might have derived from popular books on evolution. Reading and experience led to the same convictions: that Christianity was a sham, that all moral professions were false, that there was nothing real in the world but force and, for themselves, no respectable role to play except that of detached observers gathering the facts and printing as many of them as their publishers would permit. They drank, whored, talked shop, and dreamed about writing cynical books. "Most of these young men," Dreiser says, "looked upon life as a fierce, grim struggle in which no quarter was either given or taken, and in which all men laid traps, lied, squandered, erred through illusion: a conclusion with which I now most heartily agree." His novels one after another would be based on what he had learned in his newspaper days.

In writing their novels, most of the naturalists pictured themselves as expressing a judgment of life that was scientific, dispassionate, and, to borrow one of their phrases, completely unmoral; but a better word for their attitude would be "rebellious." Try as they would, they could not remain merely observers. They had to revolt against the moral standards of their time; and the revolt involved them more or less consciously in the effort to impose new standards that would be closer to what they regarded as natural laws. Their books are full of little essays or sermons addressed to the reader; in fact they suggest a naturalistic system of ethics complete with its vices and virtues. Among the vices those most often mentioned are hypocrisy, intolerance, conventionality, and unwillingness to acknowledge the truth. Among the virtues perhaps the first is strength, which is presented as both a physiological and a moral quality; it implies the courage to be strong in spite of social restraints. A second virtue is naturalness, that is, the quality of acting in accordance with one's nature and physical instincts. Dreiser's Jennie Gerhardt was among the first of the purely natural heroines in American literature, but she had many descendants. A third virtue is complete candor about the world and oneself; a fourth is pity for others; and a fifth is

tolerance, especially of moral rebellion and economic failure. Most of the characters presented sympathetically in naturalistic novels are either the victors over moral codes which they defy (like Cowperwood in *The Financier* and Susan Lenox in the novel by David Graham Phillips about her fall and rise) or else victims of the economic struggle, paupers and drunkards with infinitely more wisdom than the respectable citizens who avoid them. A great deal of naturalistic writing, including the early poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson, is an eloquent hymn to loneliness and failure as the destiny, in America, of most superior men.

There are other qualities of American naturalism that are derived not so much from historical conditions as from the example of the two novelists whom the younger men regarded as leaders or precursors. Norris first and Dreiser after him fixed the patterns that the others would follow.

Both men were romantic by taste and temperament. Although Norris was a disciple of Zola's, his other favorite authors belonged in one way or another to the romantic school; they included Froissart, Scott, Dickens, Dumas, Hugo, Kipling, and Stevenson. Zola was no stranger in that company, Norris said; on one occasion he called him "the very head of the Romanticists."

Terrible things must happen [he wrote], to the characters of the naturalistic tale. They must be twisted from the ordinary, wrenched from the quiet, uneventful round of everyday life and flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood and sudden death.... Everything is extraordinary, imaginative, grotesque even, with a vague note of terror quivering throughout like the vibration of an ominous and low-pitched diapason.

Norris himself wished to practice naturalism as a form of romance, instead of taking up what he described as "the harsh, loveless, colorless, blunt tool called Realism." Dreiser in his autobiographical writings often refers to his own romantic temper. "For all my modest repute as a realist," he says, "I seem, to my self-analyzing eyes, somewhat more of a romanticist." He speaks of himself in his youth as "a creature of slow and uncertain response to anything practical, having an eye to color, romance, beauty. I was but a half-baked poet, romancer, dreamer." The other American naturalists were also romancers and dreamers in their fashion, groping among facts for the extraordinary and even the grotesque. They believed that men were subject to natural forces, but they felt those forces were best displayed when they led to unlimited wealth, utter squalor, collective orgies, blood, and sudden death.

Among the romantic qualities they tried to achieve was "bigness" in its double reference to size and intensity. They wanted to display "big"—that is, intense—emotions against a physically large background. Bigness was the virtue that Norris most admired in Zola's novels. "The world of M. Zola," he said, "is a world of big things; the enormous, the formidable, the terrible, is what counts; no teacup tragedies here." In his own novels, Norris looked for big themes; after his trilogy on Wheat, he planned to write a still bigger trilogy on the three days' battle of Gettysburg, with one novel devoted to the events of each day. The whole notion of writing trilogies instead of separate novels came to be connected with the naturalistic movement, although it was also adopted by the historical romancers. Before Norris there had been only one planned trilogy in serious American fiction: *The Littlepage Manuscripts*, written by James Fenimore Cooper a few years before his death; it traces the story of a New York state landowning family through a hundred years and three generations. After Norris there were dozens of trilogies, with a few tetralogies and pentalogies: to mention some of the better known, there were Dreiser's trilogy on the career of a financier, T. S. Stribling's trilogy on the rise of a poor-white family, Dos Passos' trilogy on the United States from 1900 to 1930, James T. Farrell's trilogy on Studs Lonigan and Eugene O'Neill's trilogy of plays, *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Later O'Neill set to work on a trilogy of trilogies, on a theme that he planned to treat in nine full-length plays. Farrell wrote a tetralogy about the boyhood of Danny O'Neill and then attacked another theme that would require several volumes, the young manhood of Bernard Clare. Trilogies expanded into whole cycles of novels somehow related in theme. Thus, after the success of *The Jungle*, which had dealt with the meat-packing industry in Chicago, Upton Sinclair wrote novels on other cities (Denver, Boston) and other industries (oil, coal, whisky, automobiles); finally he settled on a character, Lanny Budd, whose adventures were as endless as those of Tarzan or Superman. Sinclair Lewis dealt one after another with various trades and professions: real estate, medicine, divinity, social service, hotel management, and the stage; there was no limit to the subjects he could treat, so long as his readers' patience was equal to his own.

With their eyes continually on vast projects, the American naturalists were careless about the details of their work and indifferent to the materials they were using; often their trilogies resembled great steel-structural buildings faced with cinder blocks and covered with cracked stucco ornaments. Sometimes the buildings remained unfinished. Norris set this pattern, too, when he died before he could start his third novel on the Wheat. Dreiser worked for years on *The Stoic*, which was to be the sequel to

The Financier and *The Titan*; but he was never satisfied with the various endings he tried, and the book had to be completed by others after his death. O'Neill stopped work on his trilogy of trilogies. Lewis never wrote his novel on labor unions, although he spent months or years gathering material for it and spoke of it as his most ambitious work. In their effort to achieve bigness at any cost, the naturalists were likely to undertake projects that went beyond their physical or imaginative powers, or in which they discovered too late that they weren't interested.

Meanwhile they worked ahead in a delirium of production, like factories trying to set new records. To understand their achievements in speed and bulk one has to compare their output with that of an average novelist. There is of course no average novelist, but there are scores of men and women who earn their livings by writing novels, and many of them try to publish one book each year. If they spend four months planning and gathering material for the book, another four months writing the first draft (at the rate of about a thousand words a day), and the last four months in revision, they are at least not unusual. Very few of the naturalists would have been satisfied with that modest rate of production. Harold Frederic wrote as much as 4,000 words a day and often sent his manuscripts to the printer without corrections. At least he paused between novels to carry on his work as a foreign correspondent; but Jack London, who wrote only 1,000 words a day, tried to fulfill that quota six days a week and fifty-two weeks a year; he allowed himself no extra time for planning or revision. He wrote fifty books in seventeen years, and didn't pretend that all of them were his best writing. "I have no unfinished stories," he told an interviewer five years before his death. "Invariably I complete every one I start. If it's good, I sign it and send it out. If it isn't good, I sign it and send it out." David Graham Phillips finished his first novel in 1901 and published sixteen others before his death in 1911, in addition to the articles he wrote for muckraking magazines. He left behind him the manuscripts of six novels (including the two-volume *Susan Lenox*) that were published posthumously. Upton Sinclair set a record in the early days when he was writing half-dime novels for boys. He kept three secretaries busy; two of them would be transcribing their notes while the third was taking dictation. By this method he once wrote 18,000 words in a day. He gained a fluency that helped him later when he was writing serious books, but he also acquired a contempt for style that made them painful to read, except in their French translations. Almost all the naturalists read better in translation; that is one of the reasons for their international popularity as compared with the smaller audience that some of them found at home.

The naturalistic writers of all countries preferred an objective or scientific approach to their material. As early as 1864 the brothers Goncourt had written in their journal, "The novel of today is made with documents narrated or selected from nature, just as history is based on written documents." A few years later Zola defined the novel as a scientific experiment; its purpose, he said in rather involved language, was to demonstrate the behavior of given characters in a given situation. Still later Norris advanced the doctrine "that no one could be a writer until he could regard life and people, and the world in general, from the objective point of view—until he could remain detached, outside, maintain the unswerving attitude of the observer." The naturalists as a group not only based their work on current scientific theories, but tried to copy scientific methods in planning their novels. They were writers who believed, or claimed to believe, that they could deliberately choose a subject for their work instead of being chosen by a subject; that they could go about collecting characters as a biologist collected specimens; and that their fictional account of such characters could be as accurate and true to the facts as the report of an experiment in the laboratory.

It was largely this faith in objectivity that led them to write about penniless people in the slums, whom they regarded as "outside" or alien subjects for observation. Some of them began with a feeling of contempt for the masses. Norris during his college years used to speak of "the canaille" and often wished for the day when all radicals could be "drowned on one raft." Later this pure contempt developed into a contemptuous interest, and he began to spend his afternoons on Polk Street, in San Francisco, observing with a detached eye the actions of what he now called "the people." The minds of the people, he thought, were simpler than those of persons in his own world; essentially these human beings were animals, "the creatures of habit, the playthings of forces," and therefore they were ideal subjects for a naturalistic novel. Some of the other naturalists revealed the same rather godlike attitude toward workingmen. Nevertheless they wrote about them, a bold step at a time when most novels dealt only with ladies, gentlemen, and faithful retainers; and often their contemptuous interest was gradually transformed into sympathy.

Their objective point of view toward their material was sometimes a pretense that deceived themselves before it deceived others. From the outside world they chose the subjects that mirrored their own conflicts and obsessions. Crane, we remember, said his purpose in writing *Maggie* was to show "that environment is a tremendous thing and often shapes lives regardlessly." Yet, on the subjective level, the novel also revealed an obsessive

notion about the blamelessness of prostitutes that affected his career from beginning to end; it caused a series of scandals, involved him in a feud with the vice squad in Manhattan and finally led him to marry the madam of a bawdy house in Jacksonville. Norris's first novel, *Vandover and the Brute*; is an apparently objective study of degeneration, but it also mirrors the struggles of the author with his intensely Puritan conscience; Vandover is Norris himself. He had drifted into some mild dissipations and pictured them as leading to failure and insanity. Dreiser in *Sister Carrie*, was telling a story based on the adventures of one of his own sisters; that explains why Carrie Meeber in the novel is "Sister" Carrie, even though her relatives disappear after the first few pages. "My mind was a blank except for the name," Dreiser said when explaining how he came to write the novel. "I had no idea who or what she was to be. I have often thought that there was something mystic about it, as if I were being used, like a medium." In a sense he was being used by his memories, which had become subconscious. There was nothing mystic to Upton Sinclair about his fierce emotion in writing *The Jungle*; he knew from the beginning that he was telling his own story. "I wrote with tears and anguish," he says in his memoirs,

pouring into the pages all that pain which life had meant to me. Externally, the story had to do with a family of stockyards workers, but internally it was the story of my own family. Did I wish to know how the poor suffered in Chicago? I had only to recall the previous winter in a cabin, when we had only cotton blankets, and cowered shivering in our separate beds.... Our little boy was down with pneumonia that winter, and nearly died, and the grief of that went into the book.

Indeed, there is personal grief and fury and bewilderment in all the most impressive naturalistic novels. They are at their best, not when they are scientific or objective, in accordance with their own theories, but when they are least naturalistic, most personal and lyrical.

If we follow William James and divide writers into the two categories of the tough and the tender-minded, then most of the naturalists are tender-minded. The sense of moral fitness is strong in them; they believe in their hearts that nature *should* be kind, that virtue *should* be rewarded on earth, that men *should* control their own destinies. More than other writers, they are wounded by ugliness and injustice, but they will not close their eyes to either; indeed, they often give the impression of seeking out ugliness and injustice in order to be wounded again and again. They have hardly a trace of the cynicism

that is often charged against them. It is the quietly realistic or classical writers who are likely to be cynics, in the sense of holding a low opinion of life and human beings; that low estimate is so deeply ingrained in them that they never bother to insist on it—for why should they try to make converts in such a hopeless world? The naturalists are always trying to convert others and themselves, and sometimes they build up new illusions simply to enjoy the pain of stripping them away. It is their feeling of fascinated revulsion toward their subject matter that makes some of the naturalists hard to read; they seem to be flogging themselves and their audience like a band of penitentes.

VII

So far I have been trying to present the positive characteristics of a movement in American letters, but naturalism can also be defined in terms of what it is not. Thus, to begin a list of negations, it is not journalism in the bad sense, merely sensational or entertaining or written merely to sell. It has to be honest by definition, and honesty in literature is a hard quality to achieve, one that requires more courage and concentration than journalists can profitably devote to writing a novel. Even when an author holds all the naturalistic doctrines, his books have to reach a certain level of observation and intensity before they deserve to be called naturalistic. Jack London held the doctrines and wrote fifty books, but only three or four of them reached the required level. David Graham Phillips reached it only once, in *Susan Lenox*, if he reached it then.

Literary naturalism is not the sort of doctrine that can be officially sponsored and taught in the public schools. It depends for too many of its effects on shocking the sensibilities of its readers and smashing their illusions. It always becomes a threat to the self-esteem of the propertied classes. *Babbitt*, for example, is naturalistic in its hostile treatment of American businessmen. When Sinclair Lewis defended Babbitt in a later novel, *The Prodigal Parents*, his work had ceased to be naturalistic.

For a third negative statement, naturalism is not what we have learned to call literature "in depth." It is concerned with human behavior and with explanations for that behavior in terms of heredity or environment. It presents the exterior world, often in striking visual images; but unlike the work of Henry James or Sherwood Anderson or William Faulkner—to mention only three writers in other traditions—it does not try to explore the world within. Faulkner's method is sometimes described as "subjective naturalism," but the phrase is self-contradictory, almost as if one spoke of "subjective biology" or "subjective physics."

Naturalism does not deal primarily with individuals in themselves, but rather with social groups or settings or movements, or with individuals like Babbitt and Studs Lonigan who are regarded as being typical of a group. The naturalistic writer tries not to identify himself with any of his characters, although he doesn't always succeed; in general his aim is to present them almost as if they were laboratory specimens. They are seldom depicted as being capable of moral decisions. This fact makes it easy to distinguish between the early naturalists and some of their contemporaries like Robert Herrick and Edith Wharton who also tried to write without optimistic illusions. Herrick and Wharton, however, dealt with individuals who possessed some degree of moral freedom; and often the plots of their novels hinge on a conscious decision by one of the characters. Hemingway, another author whose work is wrongly described as naturalistic, writes stories that reveal some moral quality, usually stoicism or the courage of a frightened man.

Many naturalistic works are valuable historical documents, but the authors in general have little sense of history. They present each situation as if it had no historical antecedents, and their characters might be men and women created yesterday morning, so few signs do they show of having roots in the past. "Science" for naturalistic writers usually means laboratory science, and not the study of human institutions or patterns of thought that persist through generations.

With a few exceptions they have no faith in reform, whether it be the reform of an individual by his own decision or the reform of society by reasoned courses of action. The changes they depict are the result of laws and forces and tendencies beyond human control. That is the great difference between the naturalists and the proletarian or Marxian novelists of the 1930's. The proletarian writers—who were seldom proletarians in private life—believed that men acting together could make a new world. But they borrowed the objective and exterior technique of the naturalists, which was unsuited to their essentially religious purpose. In the beginning of each book they portrayed a group of factory workers as the slaves of economic conditions, "the creatures of habit, the playthings of forces"; then later they portrayed the conversion of one or more workers to Marxism. But conversion is a psychological, not a biological, phenomenon, and it could not be explained purely in terms of conditions or forces. When the conversion took place, there was a shift from the outer to the inner world, and the novel broke in two.

It was not at all extraordinary for naturalism to change into religious Marxism in the middle of a novel, since it has always shown a tendency to

dissolve into something else. On the record, literary naturalism does not seem to be a doctrine or attitude to which men are likely to cling through their whole lives. It is always being transformed into satire, symbolism, lyrical autobiography, utopian socialism, Communism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Freudian psychology, hack journalism or the mere assembling of facts. So far there is not in American literature a single instance in which a writer has remained a naturalist from beginning to end of a long career; even Dreiser before his death became a strange mixture of Communist and mystic. There are, however, a great many works that are predominantly naturalistic; and the time has come to list them in order to give the basis for my generalities.

I should say that those works, in fiction, were *Maggie* and *George's Mother* by Stephen Crane, with many of his short stories; *The Damnation of Theron Ware* by Harold Frederic; *Vandover, McTeague* and *The Octopus* (but not *The Pit*) by Frank Norris; *The Call of the Wild*, which is a sort of naturalistic Aesop's fable, besides *The Sea Wolf* and *Martin Eden* by Jack London; *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair, as far as the page where Jurgis is converted to socialism; *Susan Lenox* by David Graham Phillips; all of Dreiser's novels except *The Bulwark* which has a religious ending written at the close of his life; all the serious novels of Sinclair Lewis between *Main Street* (1920) and *Dodsworth* (1929), but none he wrote afterward; Dos Passos' *Mahabatta Transfer* and *U.S.A.*; James T. Farrell's work in general, but especially *Studs Lonigan*; Richard Wright's *Native Son*; and most of John Steinbeck's novels, including *In Dubious Battle* and all but the hortatory passages in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In poetry there is Robinson's early verse (*The Children of the Night*) and there is Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*. In the drama there are the early plays of Eugene O'Neill, from *Beyond the Horizon* to *Desire under the Elms*. Among essays there are H. L. Mencken's *Prejudices* and Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Modern Temper*, which is the most coherent statement of the naturalistic position. There are other naturalists in all fields, especially fiction, and other naturalistic books by several of the authors I have mentioned; but these are the works by which the school is likely to be remembered and judged.

And what shall we say in judgment?—since judge we must, after this long essay in definition. Is naturalism true or false in its premises and good or bad in its effect on American literature? Its results have been good, I think, in so far as it has forced its adherents to stand in opposition to American orthodoxy. Honest writing in this country, the only sort worth bothering about, has almost always been the work of an opposition, chiefly because the leveling and unifying elements in our culture have been so strong that a man who accepts orthodox judgments is in danger of losing his literary

personality. Catullus and Villon might be able to write their poems here; with their irregular lives they wouldn't run the risk of being corrupted by the standards of right-thinking people. But Virgil, the friend of Augustus, the official writer who shaped the myth of the Roman state—Virgil would be a dubious figure as an American poet. He would be tempted to soften his values in order to become a prophet for the masses. The American myth of universal cheap luxuries, tiled bathrooms, and service with a smile would not provide him with the basis for an epic poem.

The naturalists, standing in opposition, have been writers of independent and strongly marked personalities. They have fought for the right to speak their minds and have won a measure of freedom for themselves and others. Yet it has to be charged against them that their opposition often takes the form of cheapening what they write about; of always looking for the lowdown or the payoff, that is, for the meanest explanation of everything they describe. There is a tendency in literary naturalism—as distinguished from philosophical naturalism, which is not my subject—always to explain the complex in terms of the simple: society in terms of self, man in terms of his animal inheritance, and the organic in terms of the inorganic. The result is that something is omitted at each stage in this process of reduction. To say that man is a beast of prey or a collection of chemical compounds omits most of man's special nature; it is a metaphor, not a scientific statement.

This scientific weakness of naturalism involves a still greater literary weakness, for it leads to a conception of man that makes it impossible for naturalistic authors to write in the tragic spirit. They can write about crimes, suicides, disasters, the terrifying, and the grotesque; but even the most powerful of their novels and plays are case histories rather than tragedies in the classical sense. Tragedy is an affirmation of man's importance; it is "the imitation of noble actions," in Aristotle's phrase; and the naturalists are unable to believe in human nobility. "We write no tragedies today," said Joseph Wood Krutch in his early book, *The Modern Temper*, which might better have been called "The Naturalistic Temper." "If the plays and novels of today deal with littler people and less mighty emotions it is not because we have become interested in commonplace souls and their unglamorous adventures but because we have come, willy-nilly, to see the soul of man as commonplace and its emotions as mean." But Krutch was speaking only for those who shared the naturalistic point of view. There are other doctrines held by modern writers that make it possible to endow their characters with human dignity. Tragic novels and plays have been written in these years by Christians, Communists, humanists, and even by existentialists, all of whom believe in different fashions and degrees that men can shape their own fates.

For the naturalists, however, men are "human insects" whose brief lives are completely determined by society or nature. The individual is crushed in a moment if he resists; and his struggle, instead of being tragic, is merely pitiful or ironic, as if we had seen a mountain stir itself to overwhelm a fly. Irony is a literary effect used time and again by all the naturalistic writers. For Stephen Crane it is the central effect on which almost all his plots depend: thus, in *The Red Badge of Courage* the boy makes himself a hero by running away. In *A Mystery of Heroism* a soldier risks his life to bring a bucket of water to his comrades, and the water is spilled. In *The Monster* a Negro stableman is so badly burned in rescuing a child that he becomes a faceless horror; and the child's father, a physician, loses his practice as a reward for sheltering the stableman. The irony in Dreiser's novels depends on the contrast between conventional morality and the situations he describes: Carrie Meeber loses her virtue and succeeds in her career; Jennie Gerhardt is a kept woman with higher principles than any respectable wife. In Sinclair Lewis the irony is reduced to an obsessive and irritating trick of style; if he wants to say that a speech was dull and stupid, he has to call it "the culminating glory of the dinner" and then, to make sure that we catch the point, explain that it was delivered by Mrs. Adelaide Tarr Gimmitch, "known throughout the country as 'the Unkies' Girl.'" The reader, seeing the name of Gimmitch, is supposed to smile a superior smile. There is something superior and ultimately tiresome in the attitude of many naturalists toward the events they describe. Irony—like pity, its companion—is a spectator's emotion, and it sets a space between ourselves and the characters in the novel. They suffer, but their cries reach us faintly, like those of dying strangers we cannot hope to save.

There is nothing in the fundamental principles of naturalism that requires a novel to be written in hasty or hackneyed prose. Flaubert, the most careful stylist of his age, was the predecessor and guide of the French naturalists. Among the naturalistic writers of all countries who wrote with a feeling for language were the brothers Goncourt, Ibsen, Hardy, and Stephen Crane. But it was Norris, not Crane, who set the standards for naturalistic fiction in the United States, and Norris had no respect for style. "What pleased me most in your review of 'McTeague,'" he said in a letter to Isaac Marcossou, "was 'disdaining all pretensions to style.' It is precisely what I try most to avoid. I detest 'fine writing,' 'rhetoric,' 'elegant English'—tommyrot. Who cares for fine style! Tell your yarn and let your style go to the devil. We don't want literature, we want life." Yet the truth was that Norris' novels were full of fine writing and lace-curtain English. "Untouched, unassailable, undefiled," he said of the wheat, "that mighty

world force, that nourisher of nations, wrapped in Nirvanic calm, indifferent to the human swarm, gigantic, resistless, moved onward in its appointed grooves." He never learned to present his ideas in their own clothes or none at all; it was easier to dress them in borrowed plush; easier to make all his calms Nirvanic and all his grooves appointed.

Yet Norris wrote better prose than most of his successors among the American naturalists. With a few exceptions like Dos Passos and Steinbeck, they have all used language as a blunt instrument; they write as if they were swinging shillelagns. O'Neill is a great dramatist, but he has never had an ear for the speech of living persons. Lewis used to have an ear, but now listens only to himself. He keeps being arch and ironical about his characters until we want to snarl at him, "Quit patronizing those people! Maybe they'd have something to say if you'd only let them talk." Farrell writes well when he is excited or angry, but most of the time he makes his readers trudge through vacant lots in a South Chicago smog. Dreiser is the worst writer of all, but in some ways the least objectionable; there is something native to himself in his misuse, of the language, so that we come to cherish it as a sign of authenticity, like the tool marks on Shaker furniture. Most of the others simply use the oldest and easiest phrase.

But although the naturalists as a group are men of defective hearing, they almost all have keen eyes for new material. Their interest in themes that others regarded as too unpleasant or illbred has immensely broadened the scope of American fiction. Moreover, they have had enough vitality and courage to be exhilarated by the American life of their own times. From the beginning they have exulted in the wealth and ugliness of American cities, the splendor of the mansions and the squalor of the tenements. They compared Pittsburgh to Paris and New York to imperial Rome. Frank Norris thought that his own San Francisco was the ideal city for storytellers; "Things happen in San Francisco," he said. Dreiser remarked of Chicago, "It is given to some cities, as to some lands, to suggest romance, and to me Chicago did that hourly... Florence in its best days must have been something like this to young Florentines, or Venice to the young Venetians." The naturalists for all their faults were embarked on a bolder venture than those other writers whose imaginations can absorb nothing but legends already treated in other books, prepared and predigested food. They tried to seize the life around them, and at their best they transformed it into new archetypes of human experience. Just as Cooper had shaped the legend of the frontier and Mark Twain the legend of the Mississippi, so the naturalists have been shaping the harsher legends of an urban and industrial age.