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Literary Naturalism as a Humanism

Donald Pizer on Definitions of Naturalism

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In the preface to his recent edition of *Hamlin Garland, Prairie Radical: Writings from the 1890s*, Donald Pizer notes that while Garland made little money from his early work he did win considerable renown “for his pioneering efforts to replace depictions of his region as a land of bucolic bliss with truthful accounts of its hardship, poverty, and cultural isolation, conditions that he knew firsthand” (vii). Since Pizer began his scholarly career in the mid-1950s with a series of articles on Garland that culminated in the seminal study *Hamlin Garland’s Early Work and Career* (1960), this new collection gives his five and a half decades of scholarship a kind of symmetry. There is also symmetry between Pizer’s scholarly project and Garland’s early work, for Pizer too has been a pioneer in a career-long effort to replace misconceptions, in his case about American literary naturalism, with more truthful accounts derived from firsthand experiences of the texts themselves.

At this point, an overview of Pizer’s career would be in order. But since the lead essay in the inaugural issue of *Studies in American Naturalism* provides such an overview (Brennan), it seems appropriate to focus here instead on Pizer’s own commentary—in his published work, in recent interviews, and in personal correspondence, though some overlap with the earlier essay is inevitable. It would be impossible to capture in a brief essay the range of thought in Pizer’s eleven books, sixty-odd articles, and dozens of reviews, lectures, and introductions to editions and collections. Still, one can discern in his more theoretical statements two central beliefs: that American literary naturalism is best understood when read as *literature* rather than as philosophy or ideology, and that it is a species of humanism.

In casual conversations at recent conventions and in the interview I conducted on 26 December 2009 in his Tulane office,¹ Pizer several times expressed regret at the recent tendency among critics to treat American

naturalism mostly in light of some current theory of discourse rather than as literature. As I began this essay, it struck me that I didn't know precisely what he meant by *literature*. Drawing upon my reading of most of his work, I inferred a definition and asked him in an email whether I had it right. Below is the key passage in his reply:

I think my sense of what is literature is probably more oppositional in origin than the product of a fully thought out conception. I was responding to the tendency that I first encountered in theory-based criticism and then in the New Historicism and Cultural Studies to reduce all writing to "discourse"—that is, to a form of communication little different from any other, to which could be applied universal means of analysis. This to my mind eliminated almost all that is distinctive both in particular literary works and in the special appeal and permanent hold of literature as a whole within the human experience. I was especially appalled by the effect of this conception of the literary work on the young person who is drawn to literature because he or she loves to read novels or poems and who then discovers that this response is considered simple-minded and extraneous. I realize that there is danger in my mode of thinking—that it raised the specter of the high school teacher half-comically and ineptly rapturous over a Keats sonnet. But that's the way the issue played out for me.

Although I think you are correct in locating some of the roots of this antagonism in my early experience of intellectual history and the New Criticism, I also sense that part of the lasting impact of these critical methods on me was their common stress on what can be called the "individuality" of each work of literature. The literary works of an era may deal with the same body of ideas, but they often do so in strikingly different ways. And specific works within a period differ strikingly in their success in moving us to an experience and possible acceptance of these ideas.

As Pizer recalls his reading of Crane and Norris in his first graduate seminar at UCLA in 1951–52, he was receptive to their fiction in part because of his working-class background in the New York of the 1930s and 1940s. He did not suffer the deprivations of a Maggie or McTeague or undergo the violent conflicts similar to those engulfing a Presley or a Henry Fleming, yet, he writes, "as someone who had been raised in a totally urban civilization and who had lived through depression and war, I instinctively sensed the relevance of the lives depicted in this fiction to my own life" ("Study" 2). He read these authors for pleasure, not ideas, and only later discovered that critics generally considered naturalistic fiction "both untrue and inept" in its failure to depict "a fully deterministic universe" (3). During his undergraduate and early graduate study at UCLA he had

been taught to view literature mostly in terms of the history of ideas. At some time in the early 1950s, however, “a few wayward younger instructors and some undirected critical reading” exposed him to the New Criticism, with Mark Shorer’s essay “Technique as Discovery” being a “revelation” (“Study” 4). In a graduate seminar with Leon Howard, he pointed out to his mentor that *The Octopus*, then usually considered a mish-mash of ideas, reminded him of the transcendentalist works he had recently studied, and when Howard encouraged him to pursue a study of the novel in light of this observation as well as in relation to current theories of fictional form, he discovered that he had “found a critical mission” (“Study” 5). His seminar paper on “Another Look at *The Octopus*,” published in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* in 1955, represents his first effort to demonstrate that naturalism is “far more complex than it was believed to be within any traditional definition of the form and the movement” (“Study” 5).

That literature is less about ideas than about men and women is a conception Pizer absorbed in graduate school from his mentor Howard, best known for his biography of Herman Melville:

I think what attracted me to him as a dissertation director was that he was preoccupied with the human element in literary expression. And because he was essentially a biographer, he began any study of a literary work with the author, who, with all his extraordinary individuality of experience and idiosyncrasy of mind, had produced this work. And until you understood those aspects of the work’s origin, you were not going to understand the work.

Today, a scholar like Howard, whose main interest lay in pre-Civil War authors, would not likely be considered qualified to direct a dissertation on a later author such as Garland, but the field in the 1950s did not demand the narrow specialization we see today. “People worked throughout the field,” Pizer remarked with a chuckle. “It didn’t seem unusual to me that he was willing to direct my work. There wasn’t that density of production then, and you weren’t expected to know that much, and so you were freer.” Responding to the “human element” in Garland, Pizer was the first to explore Garland’s papers at the University of Southern California, papers that were only then being organized. Anyone who has worked in archives under the watchful eye of a modern curator will envy the young scholar’s situation: “I was allowed access to the room and was given a key. I would go in the evening, alone, and do my work and lock up when I was finished.” When asked about any Eureka! moments he may have had then and later in other archives, Pizer said, “I think I had a lot of those. When you read an author’s biography and works, and then examine his

notebooks and drafts, you make connections and discoveries as a result of pulling it all together.”

The year after Pizer received his doctorate from UCLA, Charles Child Walcutt's *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream* verified that he was not alone in his reevaluation of the mode. As Pizer recalls the event, he found that Walcutt's book was

so well done and contained such serious-minded deep probing, that even though I disagree with a good deal of what Walcutt had to say about specific works, and to some degree have difficulty with what he does with his basic thesis of the divided stream, I think he was taking the right tack, principally by emphasizing the American roots of naturalism. It was not simply a manipulation of a foreign idea inappropriate to the American scene, which was the commonplace notion of it at that time, but had rather a significant role in American thought and significant roots in various phases of American thinking and experience. So it was really a trail blazing book to my mind, and I think almost everyone who wrote after it was indebted to it. And I told him that once. In fact, about ten years ago, I tried to persuade a publisher to reissue the book and let me write an introduction, because it was out of print and hard to acquire, but I was unsuccessful.

It would be some years before Pizer's immersion in the life, times, and work of specific authors resulted in the general conceptions about literary naturalism that have informed his more theoretical writings:

In connecting what I wrote in my books to the area of naturalism in general, I think I started out differently from most people who wrote later about naturalism. They came to it with a conception of the area and then tested it out with individual writers. I started with an interest in the writer and his total career, with Garland and the other major figures I worked on. The writing I did on naturalism as a movement came out of an awareness of the full range of the writer's work and thought. I think it was extremely important that I had that background, which helped me avoid some of the pitfalls of much criticism about the movement.

Pizer's publications from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s reveal a gradual movement from his exploration of particular biographical subjects (“Hamlin Garland in the *Standard*” [1954]) and close readings of single works (“Another Look at *The Octopus*” [1955]) to more general issues (“Romantic Individualism in Garland, Norris, and Crane” [1958] and “Evolutionary Ideas in Late-Nineteenth-Century English and American Literary Criticism” [1961]).

The year 1965 saw the appearance of Pizer's landmark article “Nine-

teenth-Century American Naturalism: An Essay in Definition,” in which he laid out fully the “oppositional” view of naturalism that has guided much of his work to the present. In the 1950s, a common conception was that, as Pizer phrases it, naturalism is “essentially realism infused with a pessimistic determinism” (85). Those who approach naturalistic fiction with this narrow definition in mind will discover a “sensationalism” and “moral ambiguity” that makes virtually all naturalistic works seem to be “flawed specimens of the mode” (86). However, the critic who takes these works on their own terms is likely, as Pizer does, to realize that these supposed flaws are not signs of the authors’ “confusion” but rather distinguishing characteristics of American naturalism. Drawing on the terminology of the then-dominant New Criticism, he demonstrates in *McTeague*, *Sister Carrie*, and *The Red Badge of Courage* the presence of two “tensions or contradictions” that constitute “both an interpretation of experience and a particular aesthetic recreation of experience.” The first tension relates to naturalistic characters who on the one hand are often poor and ignorant and on the other possessed of “qualities of man usually associated with the heroic or adventurous.” The second tension is between the theme of determinism and the effort to find “a new basis for man’s sense of his own dignity and importance,” an effort that yields “an affirmative ethical conception of life” (87). As Jeanne Campbell Reesman has recently shown in an analysis of Jack London’s “Mauki,” even “one of the most gruesome and sensational of naturalistic stories” (44) yields an unexpectedly complex view of human nature when read in light of Pizer’s definition of naturalism as ethical at its core.

In 1993, Pizer collected this essay and several of his other most important pronouncements on the mode in *The Theory and Practice of American Literary Naturalism: Selected Essays and Reviews*, which he dedicated to Leon Howard and offered in his preface as a “full-scale and coherent interpretation of naturalism in America” (vii). Two essays seem particularly representative of his continuing project of opposing reductionist treatments of naturalism. In the first, “Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism: An Approach Through Form,” originally published in 1972, he offers a reading of naturalism from “the angle of vision of a sophisticated innocence,” that is, from the perspective of one who has read many novels but no critical theory and who thus understands the form of a novel as a sequence of “physical or psychological events.” Such a reader would find in English and American novels written before the 1890s a “progressive” pattern in “the physical, intellectual, or spiritual movement of characters through time” but would find in naturalistic works “a profound doubt or

perplexity about what happens in the course of time” (104). To support this contention, Pizer demonstrates how key symbols in three naturalistic novels—gold in *McTeague*, the rocking chair in *Sister Carrie*, and the wound in *The Red Badge of Courage*—define the protagonists’ “journeys through time” as “essentially circular” (106). Typically, however, he is not content with a theoretical point. He qualifies his conclusion that the “major impact” of naturalistic fiction is “that of the inefficacy of time” by emphasizing the humanity of the novels’ protagonists: “So the Carrie who rocks, the Fleming who is proud of his red badge, and the McTeague who stands clutching his gold in the empty desert represent both the pathetic and perhaps tragic worth of the seeking, feeling mind and the inability of experience to supply a meaningful answer to the question that is human need” (107).

The imperative Pizer took from Howard to understand the human element in literature finds perhaps its most concerted expression in Pizer’s 1978 Mellon Lecture, “American Literary Naturalism and the Humanistic Tradition.” Opposing the mistaken notion that naturalism, with its emphasis on the bestial and irrational in humans, was a unique expression of the age’s scientific materialism, Pizer considers naturalism as but another version of the relatively “bleak” view of humankind held in the past by such figures as St. Augustine, John Calvin, and Thomas Hobbes. Naturalism, in short, is one of the “metaphors in a huge and endless historical poem in which the poetic mood wavers continually from doubt and skepticism to celebration and faith” (37). Asserting that Zola’s influence derived more from his novelistic practice than from his theory of environmental and hereditary determinism, Pizer sees the American naturalist not as a “dispassionate observer of a scientific process but instead an imaginative presence infusing meaning and dignity and a sense of tragic potential into what he observes” (40). What follows is Pizer’s typically lucid exposition of this thesis in readings of Crane’s *Maggie*, Farrell’s *Gas-House McGinty*, and Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*. In *Maggie*’s need for love and beauty in the midst of urban squalor, *McGinty*’s delight in the “beauty” of applied mathematics, and Sgt. Croft’s Ahab-like quest to conquer a mountain in the center of a Japanese-held island, the three writers have each “made a central humanistic concern integral to his naturalism in ways that suggest the dynamic responsiveness of naturalism to the changing nature of the American experience” (53).

Pizer would fully explore this dynamic four years later in *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation*, in which he relates naturalists of the 1930s and of the late 1940s and early 1950s to changes

in American experience since the 1890s. He finds in Depression-era naturalism a recurring theme of “hope from out of the ruins” (16) and in post-World War II naturalism a concern with “fundamental philosophical questions about the nature and condition of man” (88), the same sort of questions being asked by the French existentialists. He considers American writing of the period only “analogous” to European existentialism, so when he finds in the work of Mailer, Styron, and Bellow a depiction of “the individual seeking meaning in his own immediate experience” (87), he is not proposing a direct influence.

Yet since at least the 1960s, Pizer has been defining American literary naturalism in terms resembling those employed by the existentialists in defense of their own worldview. Jean-Paul Sartre’s important essay “Existentialism Is a Humanism” is a case in point. According to some critics, Sartre writes, existentialists emphasize “all that is “ignominious in the human situation” and portray “what is mean, sordid or base to the neglect of . . . the brighter side of human nature” (287), thereby promoting a “naturalistic” worldview of an especially nauseating strain: “Those who can quite well keep down a novel by Zola such as *La Terre* are sickened as soon as they read an existential novel” (288). Sartre counters this and similar charges with an extended argument for the optimism underlying existentialism. In a Godless universe in which “existence precedes essence” (290), he asserts, human beings are free to create the world and supply its essence by the actions they choose from moment to moment, actions for which they alone are responsible. Sartre, however, anticipates no apocalyptic transformation of the world such as the American transcendentalists promised. There is no progress, Sartre believes: “Progress implies amelioration; but man is always the same, facing a situation which is always changing, and choice remains always a choice in the situation” (306). Pizer’s humanistic naturalist, described above as “an imaginative presence infusing meaning and dignity and a sense of tragic potential into what he observes,” resembles the existentialist who believes that in the absence of God “there must be somebody to invent values. . . . Life is nothing until it is lived; but it is yours to make sense of, and the value of it is nothing else but the sense that you choose” (Sartre 309). Sartre certainly emphasizes freedom far more than any American naturalist, but this freedom is exercised in a world of limits that changes while going nowhere, the kind of world defined by the circularity Pizer identifies as the formal principle of much naturalistic fiction.

In fact, Pizer argues that at least on occasion naturalists would have agreed with Sartre that determinism is a flight from responsibility. “Those who hide from this total freedom, in a guise of solemnity or with de-

terministic excuses,” Sartre proclaims, “I shall call cowards” (308). In his 1970 essay “The Problem of Philosophy in the Naturalistic Novel,” Pizer makes a similar point about a well-known passage from Frank Norris’s *Vandover and the Brute* describing “Life” as an “enormous machine . . . driving before it the infinite herd of humanity” and “crushing out inexorably all those who lagged behind” (112). While many readers take such expressions of determinism in *Vandover* for Norris’s own “philosophy,” Pizer argues persuasively that they are “principally an image of fear” that enables Norris to “dramatize the emotion” of characters within the context of the novel (113). None of this means that the early American literary naturalists were proto-existentialists or that their successors were of the full-blown variety; it does suggest Pizer’s recognition that American naturalists did not, as earlier readers supposed, wander off the main traveled road of Western thinking about the human condition.

The larger part of Pizer’s critical writing is much less theoretical than the essays considered thus far. In his single-author books, he usually addresses literary naturalism only in passing (there are only three entries under the term in the index to his *Novels of Theodore Dreiser*, for instance, none at all in his book on Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.*). What he has attempted to do throughout his career, he recently explained, is

to bring back to the study of these works some of the devices of the New Criticism which sought to examine the work for its sources of power—why it holds us, why it interests us—and to seek in the works . . . irony, paradox, symbolism, all functioning to create a powerful mix, holding our imagination. It’s not that one should limit oneself to the interior workings of the novel, as the New Critic in his heyday might have claimed. You have to bring in all that you know about the work and the author, but the text as *literary* text is still something that is not entirely understood in this body of expression. . . . This might be something we might want to return to, with the careful caveat that we don’t buy into the extremes and limitations of the New Criticism. In fact, perhaps that’s a bad term to use in relation to what I’m saying. . . . [We need] close readings but with an awareness that extends beyond the text. A good example would be *Sister Carrie*, where reading the novel is one thing, but to understand how Dreiser revised the novel and what might have led him to that revision, what led him to accept [Arthur] Henry’s changes, that would play a role, it seems to me, in your understanding of what you have in the end.

It is, in fact, one of the pleasures of reading Pizer’s books to see how much he knows about the work and the author when he sets about a close reading of a major naturalistic text.

In the inaugural issue of *SAN*, I described Pizer's critical method at some length as illustrated by his *The Novels of Frank Norris* (1966), and I offered the opinion that *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser* was his most accomplished extended close reading of the sort he calls for. Since then, I have read his *Dos Passos' U.S.A.* (1988) for the first time cover to cover and am almost persuaded to revise my estimate. Moving systematically from an examination of the trilogy's roots in Dos Passos's life, early works, and literary, cultural, and political environment, to an overview of the trilogy's themes and techniques, to an analysis of how the four modes—Camera Eye, Newsreels, biographies, and narratives—function separately and in complex “interlacings,” and finally to an exposition of the unique qualities of the three individual novels, Pizer has accomplished a remarkable feat that will be the starting point for Dos Passos scholars for decades.

What will endure longer than his criticism, he believes, is his editorial work, not the several Norton Critical Editions, volumes in the Library of America, and collections of essays that have come his way owing to his stature in the field, but those volumes resulting from his “total immersion in the career and writing of a specific author in preparation for a critical study” (“Ten Questions” 30). Under this category fall *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris* (1964), *Hamlin Garland's Diaries* (1968), *Theodore Dreiser: A Selection of Uncollected Prose* (1977), and *John Dos Passos: The Major Non-Fictional Prose* (1988), among other volumes, including the recent edition of Garland's radical writings mentioned above. While some consider this sort of work to be “dryasdust plodding,” Pizer feels otherwise: “I like the detective element in it and I also take satisfaction from the sense that I'm producing something that will be used long after my criticism is considered irrelevant.” His only regret about his editorial work is the damage it did to several friendships following his involvement during the 1980s and 1990s in the “disputatious scholarly area” of textual editing (“Ten Questions” 30), as in the extended debates occasioned by Henry Binder's edition of *Red Badge* and James L. W. West III's Pennsylvania Edition of *Sister Carrie*, both of which take early manuscripts as copytext.

A scholar whose critical stance is admittedly “oppositional” is bound to ruffle some feathers, though an oppositional stance might be the only one a scholar can take in the face of a literary establishment that relegates naturalism to the status of the sub-literary or the culturally symptomatic. “[N]aturalism has low status in the literary field,” Pizer remarked in the interview, “so that you have to struggle against the lack of interest and lack of concern of publishers and editors.” He then offered this illustrative anecdote:

I once submitted a book to Princeton University, which I thought was one of my better books. I eventually got back a letter saying, “Well, we got very strong letters of recommendation from our readers, but when we submitted it to our board one of the members popped up with, ‘Why are we bothering with books on American Naturalism?’” I took it to another publisher, but that illustrates the problem of low esteem of the field in general.

Certainly books on naturalism have issued from major university presses in recent years to much critical acclaim, one instance being Jennifer L. Fleissner’s *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (2004). Pizer finds the book interesting and sometimes “pyrotechnical” but not ultimately very illuminating: “Fleissner’s book is probably a fine example of its kind, which is why it attracts interest and praise—people find confirmed in it what they are doing . . . but it’s not about literature as an institution or as a form of communication. It’s about the society in which literature may have been produced.”

The shift in interest from literary to social concerns has not, in Pizer’s view, benefitted either critical practice or the teaching of literature, as the following anecdote indicates:

[M]y reaction to what’s going on now . . . started, I think, about twenty years ago when Blanche Gelfant had the misfortune to organize a session at the MLA on recent criticism of naturalism. . . . And because she knew both of us, she asked Dick Lehan and me to speak. She also asked Mark Seltzer, who had previously published a book [*Bodies and Machines*], to speak. Dick and I, independently of each other, had been reading what had been coming out, including [Walter Benn] Michaels’s book [*The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*], and we both wrote somewhat nasty-minded attacks on what was going on. (I think Michaels was in the audience.) The heart of my attack was based on the obscurity of their arguments, and I read some passages that drew gasps of astonishment from the audience. When you read this stuff aloud, its basic incomprehensibility shouts at you. Then Seltzer got up and began a vigorous defense of this recent criticism because he was part of it. In his preparatory remarks before he began reading his paper, he had the misfortune to say, “To my mind there is nothing obscure about these writings. They are perfectly comprehensible.” And then he started reading his own paper and it was obscurer than the other passages. As the audience began catching on, it got a little hilarious.

Lehan and I were very much of a mind that much contemporary criticism was characterized by just what you shouldn’t do in criticism as a matter of common sense and awareness of your function as a critic. And that is, you don’t come to a body of writing with preconceptions

of what it's going to do and where it comes from. You try to examine the body of writing and see where it's coming from and what it's trying to do. The New Historicism—this is Dick's bugbear—is actually ahistorical. It tries to impose a contemporary set of analytical tools on a body of work which is not receptive to that, and it therefore produces a reading which mirrors our own preoccupation while distorting the work. As I myself have pointed out, it is not dissimilar to what was done by Marxist critics in the thirties, when they would entirely misunderstand aspects of previous writings because they were trying to read them in Marxist terms.

This need imposed by recent critical practice for all criticism to have a broad cultural perspective, Pizer believes, also accounts for the virtual disappearance from graduate programs of the single-author dissertation and the decline among undergraduate majors in literature.

The way forward, Pizer argues, is for English departments to return to doing what they do best, which is engage students in particular literary works. Pizer spent his entire teaching career at Tulane, where he discovered that almost all his undergraduate students were “overeager for the crutch of simplified controlling ideas” as a means of stabilizing their response to specific literary texts (“Ten Questions” 28). He tried instead to recreate in them something of his own excitement and pleasure in his first encounter with naturalist fiction. “Students are choosing to major in more practical subjects,” he said in the interview. “I think the way we teach the subject as a representation of social and cultural currents—basically as an abstraction—tends to turn students away.” They will perhaps return if teachers give them what they want:

They want to talk about why so-and-so loves so-and-so and why it doesn't work out, and what happens next and why does it happen? These are reasonable questions: What happens in the novel, and what are its themes, and how does the writer go about achieving those themes? It's the same with poetry, of course, which has even less interest for students. So I think one thing we might do is return to teaching the best works of naturalism as literary works.

Graduate students, of course, need the thorough grounding Pizer provided in literary theory and the critical history of the works under study, but who among those of us who have devoted our careers to the study of literary naturalism didn't come to the field because we found *The Call of the Wild* or *The Red Badge of Courage* just a damn good read?

What should be clear from all this is that Pizer's oppositional strategy has never been simply a negation of what others believe but has always

meant an affirmation of the human connection we feel with characters in naturalistic fiction when we come to them without preconceptions. Pizer found his “critical mission” in the 1950s when he recognized transcendentalist ideas in *The Octopus*, and in good transcendentalist fashion he later exorcised his own hobgoblins to take an oppositional attitude even towards his own earlier work. His thinking “has evolved in two ways,” he has recently observed. While he once set out to define “precise characteristics” of naturalism, he now thinks in terms of “a looser conception of the movement—one that stresses ‘strains’ and ‘tendencies’” as well as “formal characteristics”—and he now also gives increased attention to the social themes of naturalist fiction, as in his recent *American Naturalism and the Jews* (2009) (“Ten Questions” 31). This openness to new ways of thinking about the subject that has absorbed his energies for more than five decades is an appropriate note to end on. “What questions must we ask about the subject now that have not been asked before?” I queried last December. The reply: “I don’t know. (laughter) . . . That’s for the next generation.”

NOTE

I. All quotations not cited from other sources are from this interview.

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