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Alfred Kazin

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Alfred Kazin

AMERICAN NATURALISM: REFLECTIONS FROM ANOTHER ERA

WITH US naturalism has been not so much a school as a climate of feeling, almost in the very air of our modern American life, with its mass patterns, its rapid social changes, its idolatry of the mechanical and of "facts." The French may have conceived *le roman naturaliste*, but Chicago, many an American writer has suspected, is its incarnation. And while the term is inevitable to our discussion of the twentieth-century American novel—it evokes for us a particular concentration on "society," from Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser to John Dos Passos and James T. Farrell; it establishes a dividing-line between temperaments in the novel (certainly it is hard to think of Hemingway and Faulkner as "naturalists," their sensibility is too wide)—it will not help us much to trace its intellectual pedigree too solemnly, to follow its track, in the usual academic way, out of literature into the history of "influences."

The influences are there; they are still here, in the life all around us. Naturalism in America is not easily reduced to the well-known formula of determinism, its pretensions to "laws" of human behavior, its severe air of necessary meanness. Think only of the career of Theodore Dreiser, the most deeply grounded of

our naturalistic novelists, with whose *Sister Carrie* (1900), so much of our twentieth-century social fiction seems to begin. Stephen Crane, exactly his contemporary, and Frank Norris, only a year older, were writing "naturalism" before he did, but for them it was still in the experimental mode. Crane's *Maggie* (1893, and almost too pointedly subtitled "A Girl of the Streets"; it comes out of the world of Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*) is a social exposé and rather a trick, the book of a precocious and restless young reporter who has found an untouched subject in the slums. It has nothing of the daemonic sincerity of *The Red Badge of Courage*. Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899) is powerful, and as we so often say of the characters in the naturalistic novel, "tragic," for we still have no other word for it; but there is something curiously repellent about it, not because of its subject, but because it is so obviously patronizing toward the "common" and "brutal" materials he has chosen. Morally Norris is not in his book at all, just as Crane has been led to *Maggie* by its scandalousness; everything seems just a little too deliberately planned; Norris has been reading Zola, and without anything of Zola's humanity, would like to manipulate tragic destinies; he is ironic, superior, and rather coldly intent on squeezing all the horror out of the situation and his characters—whom, in fact, he has chosen because they are so "primitive," either in their grossness (*McTeague*) or their piteousness (*Trina*), rather than for anything felt in their characters.

As soon as we turn to *Sister Carrie*, we know that we are in the presence of a writer for whom "naturalism" is the only way of addressing himself to life. There is an impalpable emotion that arises from the very commonplaceness of human existence.

Dreiser had been a newspaperman writing Sunday supplement "human interest" stories; he was now a novelist, but only because he found in himself the courage to believe that the kind of life he had always known could be brought into the novel—it was a belief that came slowly and painfully, and one he was to lose for a

time after *Sister Carrie* so shocked his publisher's wife that she had the first edition withdrawn from circulation. In many ways he was closer to the worldly, driven, inarticulate characters in his novel than to sophisticated young naturalists of his generation. He was not a reformer, least of all a revolutionary; because of his own bitter poverty and his life-long identification with the failures in American life, he yearned toward success with that love of the power-world that he was to bring into *The Financier* and *The Titan*. For all his reading in the complacently sceptical philosophers of late nineteenth-century materialism, he had no coherent philosophy, and tended to brood like an animal in pain over the "welter" of life. When you compare him with the older "realists," like Howells and Mark Twain, who were also challenged to their depths by the urbanized and plutocratic society of the nineties, and who were outraged by its degradations of the old American freedom, you cannot help feeling that Dreiser was not even concerned with questions of human justice. These older writers had been shaped by Western life before the Civil War, with its relatively unformed class structure; egalitarianism was still the breath of life to them, as it had been to Whitman. They have an ethical directness (if no longer the old certainty), a deep sense of their own dignity, the artist's dignity, with all its consonant feeling for personal style, that are completely missing in Dreiser. Howells and Mark Twain are in their different ways elegiac in their hostility to the emerging new patterns of power; they are still outside the age they are writing in. Dreiser is not; he is confined to the American success story of the period for his whole experience of life.

The distinguishing quality of Dreiser's characters, that which particularly marks his thought as a novelist, is the air they have of being limited entirely to the society of their time, of being locked up in the terrible equation: life is only what America has made it. His people are not simply *doomed*, like the characters in Frank Norris and John Dos Passos; the cards are not that coldly

stacked against them. Dreiser is too little the prisoner even of his own theory, vague as it is, to fit his characters to a rule. It is rather that he can start only with what is most ordinary in life. He is possessed by the force of the banal. I think you would feel this even if you knew nothing about Dreiser's career. There is in *Sister Carrie* none of that savagery against the eternal bourgeois which we find in Flaubert's portrait of Homais in *Madame Bovary*, or in Hemingway's ironically constructed platitudes. Far from being detached from "Sister" Carrie (whom he called that, unconsciously putting the name down on a piece of paper before he even thought of the novel, because she was *his* sister, as Jennie Gerhardt was another), he overvalues her symbolic humanity at the end of the book, addresses her sentimentally, does not seem to realize how mediocre she appears to us. These are the only kinds of people he has ever known—the provincial girl on her way to the big city; the cheap drummer, Drouet; the flashy restaurant manager in Chicago, Hurstwood, with his rings and his condescending heartiness, whom the young Dreiser had so much envied. But in some way born of his own narrowness of experience, of his leaden concentration on what is most familiar to him, he brings us face to face with the idea of necessity.

If Dreiser had been more sophisticated, more intellectually self-conscious, the effect of *Sister Carrie* would be diminished; we would feel that he is trying to prove something to us, to give us a theory rather than an experience. And, in fact, Dreiser is annoying whenever he is tempted to "fine" writing—the difference between the careening "philosophy" of his chapter titles and the painfully sober prose of the narrative is startling. The chapter titles show Dreiser in his real uncertainty, trying to blow realism up into a metaphysic. But the awkward honesty of his narrative style is finally overwhelming; one feels the imponderable meanness of daily life.

Carrie looked about her, very much disturbed and quite sure that she did not want to work here. Aside from making her uncomfortable

by sidelong glances, no one paid her the least attention. She waited until the whole department was aware of her presence. Then some word was sent around, and a foreman, in an apron and shirt sleeves, the latter rolled up to his shoulders, approached.

"Do you want to see me?" he asked.

"Do you need any help?" said Carrie, already learning directness of address.

"Do you know how to stitch caps?" he returned.

"No, sir," she replied.

"Have you ever had any experience at this kind of work?" he inquired.

She answered that she had not.

"Well," said the foreman, scratching his ear meditatively, "we do need a stitcher. We like experienced help, though. We've hardly got time to break people in." He paused and looked away out of the window. "We might, though, put you at finishing," he concluded reflectively.

"How much do you pay a week?" ventured Carrie, emboldened by a certain softness in the man's manner and his simplicity of address.

"Three and a half," he answered.

"Oh," she was about to exclaim, but checked herself and allowed her thoughts to die without expression.

"We're not exactly in need of anybody," he went on vaguely, looking her over as one would a package. "You can come on Monday morning, though," he added, "and I'll put you to work."

"Thank you," said Carrie weakly.

"If you come, bring an apron," he added.

He walked away, and left her standing by the elevator, never so much as inquiring her name.

The simplicity of this writing is oppressive—certainly nothing could be more naïve of its kind than "Carrie, already learning directness of address," or less encouraging about a writer's mind than "she . . . allowed her thoughts to die without expression." Yet the whole scene, delivered in the most flat, toneless words, has in the context of Carrie's arrival in Chicago something heart-breaking about it. There is an immediate image of the factory wall itself, of what is purely abashed and helpless at this moment

in Carrie, staring straight at it and at the man who spoke to her "vaguely, looking her over as one would a package." That "vaguely" makes the whole scene come through: Carrie is suspended in the inhuman air. I can never read it without a feeling of dread. And it is a dread that remains with me long after Carrie has made herself independent of factory jobs, something not to be explained by her joblessness alone. It is in the very nature of life. There is nothing else but this. We are moved not because the people are suffering—when they are, they cannot give voice to it—but because with these broken gestures, these natural silences, these fits and starts and *ends* of communication (as if speech were the hopeless résumé of an experience too deep for it), they seem to be commenting uselessly on their own destinies.

The textbooks call it "determinism," and in its grimmest signification it is an idea which Dreiser upheld about as steadily as he did anything—that we are not responsible for what we do, that "we suffer for our temperaments, which we did not make, and for our weaknesses, which are no part of our willing or doing." Yet this does not convey the real tone and quality of *Sister Carrie*, which is anything but complacently "scientific," and in fact rouses us to a deeply felt sense of the mystery of the human condition, a compassion for all that is beyond our control. These people may not be conscious of the dark power that moves them; they do not protest; but they are humanity under the pressure of life itself; nothing intervenes between them and the cruelty of the human condition. There is an unconscious loneliness about them that is more affecting than any critical suffering could be, for *they do not know what is happening to them*. Carrie goes to Chicago, then to New York; she lives first with Drouet, then with Hurstwood; she becomes an actress and finally leaves Hurstwood, but all with the same dreamy subjection to the forces around her. She is taken up, she plays a part, she is unwittingly the instrument of Hurstwood's downfall; but fundamentally there is no reason for her doing one thing rather than another; she is simply swept

on by accidents more akin to nature than to her nature; to the very end of the novel she takes in life with the same dim, incredulous stare with which she first looked on Chicago, "a lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless sea."

So, too, the deeper story in Hurstwood's degeneration is the general indifference to his fate. Once he has been cut off from his accustomed success in Chicago and has come, already more than half a failure, to New York, he is absolutely defenseless. He is falling out of life before our eyes; his decline is awful in its steady, remorseless consistency; there is no one—least of all Carrie, the catalyst of his fate—to stop him. Yet worse than all this is the indifference, which he accepts as a matter of course, and which finally kills him. Force alone rules this world, as Simone Weil wrote of the *Iliad*—a force like the tyranny of everlasting war over the Homeric warriors, the reasons for which have been almost forgotten, while force still hangs over them like the real divinity that shapes life, calling out awe and submission in the heart of man. And it is our world, incontrovertibly it is *this* world, in its most naked essence. With all his faults, Dreiser has gone straight to the issue, that which it was his whole merit to understand—the tragedy of man in a society fundamentally more inhuman than "nature" ever was.

It is unnecessary for me to speak at length of Dreiser's defect as an artist, of his fearful lapses in taste, of his pedestrianism—that which everyone knows best about him, and has always made him fair game to his critics. At a time when his kind of writing is completely out of fashion, when we are ready—at most—to praise him for his "candor," to bury him deep among the pioneers of our self-conscious modern "honesty," it seems to be more useful to stress his involvement in the human problem, his creative pity, and all this leads to in the actual texture of his novels—his way of converting his slowness, a certain stolidity in his world-view, into the novelist's grip on character. Let us bypass for once the pseudo-science of his philosophy, the fundamental illiberalism of his so-

cial thought, the brutal commonness in much of his writing. Dreiser certainly made every mistake a writer can make and still remain alive; but in our current reaction against naturalism, we tend to forget that in his best work he is, fortunately, superior to his own ideas. For Dreiser was in many ways really an old-fashioned kind of realist, or "portrait-painter," with all that implies. If, today, we do not go in for "solid" character; if we are suspicious and rightly so—of his literalism, it is because we are no longer sure what character is. We see it as a complex of inward forces or symbols; it presses upon our consciousness as something half in and out of the visible world we inhabit. We "have" a character only in its subtle infinitude of suggestion; but in all the flickering, there is the steadier light of an idea. Every note on a character is crossed by an intimation from the private imagination; in the merging the fundamental note of consciousness is struck. For Dreiser, character was built up as a matter of course from the outward details—dress, the "brilliance" of the decor, the bourgeois details on which he feasted with such helpless admiration (how religiously he noted the splendor of the American parvenu in the big city!). And though some of the best things in his work are significantly moments of some deep human inarticulateness, of a half-felt awareness—Carrie facing the immensity of Chicago, Drouet coming upon Carrie in the dark, Hurstwood clinging to his rocker against life, Jennie Gerhardt following the body of her lover as the train bears his coffin out of the station—one remembers how methodically he got the surface toil of things into his books, piled up the "facts" until he forces the density of human affairs upon our minds. He was a man who could write, as it seems to us now, only from one side of the page to the other. His characters are so saturated in detail that long after they have withdrawn, their image is still blotted over the world through which they have passed.

Yet if they live so hauntingly for me, it is hardly because of Dreiser's literalism alone. It is because he still feels a certain awe

before life as a whole; he never ceased to be amazed by the cruelty of the human condition. I do not think he ever explained it very well by his excursions into philosophy and science, nor are we likely to forget the essential pathos of his career, which petered out after *An American Tragedy* into long years of silence, political confusion, and that fifth-rate book *The Bulwark*. But for him character was still more than an example of the social mechanism; it was a portion of the human tragedy. And it is in this that I mark the essential difference between Dreiser and the naturalists who come after him. For with them, as even Vernon Parrington had to admit (and Parrington is usually only too quick to honor a book just for its "liberal" message), the naturalistic novel relapses into social inquiry. There are the reformist tracts of Upton Sinclair, now largely unreadable except to students of the period, the work of a writer more radical than intelligent, and fundamentally not *radical* at all; there are the pseudo-Nietzschean adventure stories of Jack London; the documents of the Progressive period; the dreary wastes of the "proletarian" novel of the 1930's; the outraged war novelists, spewing up all the misery and degradation of war, but most of them hopelessly outweighed by one such cardinal work of imagination as E. E. Cummings' *The Enormous Room*; and there is James T. Farrell—honest, eternally aggrieved, the very incarnation of all that was once so urgent and is now so mechanical in the American social novel. Of late years Farrell has increasingly identified himself with Dreiser, and very understandably, for he comes out of much the same kind of world, had the same long and bitter struggle against the arid Catholicism of his youth, and has always written against all the obstacles that gentility and the rationalizations of "good taste" could put in his way. Yet creatively they seem to me very different writers. For Farrell's real story—one might say his only story—has been himself. Despite his militant defense of naturalism and the formally Marxist aura he has put around his novels, he has been unable to get free of his early struggles, much less to create

characters out of his own imagination. He is much concerned today with defending the "tradition" of naturalism, and has rather ambiguously found new ancestors for it, starting from Tolstoy and Chekhov. But this seems to have very little relevance to the actual spirit of his work; he tends to read into "naturalism" his own fierce ardors and defects as a writer. The truth is that his literary and political creed is outside the crucial promptings of his novels. For the novels are an autobiographical saga, the story of an education—deeply moving for what they tell us of his life, an unforgettable record of what, behind its sleek and smiling face, society has imposed upon the children of the "foreign" poor, especially when they are heretics. But it is so repetitious and self-absorbed that to find ourselves being confronted these days with the same story in *Bernard Clare* and *The Road Between*, after the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy and the Danny O'Neill tetralogy, is to feel that Farrell has missed the distinction between art and life.

The only naturalistic novelist in America after Dreiser who seems to me as interesting an artist is John Dos Passos, a far more finished and expert writer, certainly, than Dreiser, and one whose inventive skill has influenced many European and American novelists. *U. S. A.* is inseparable from our consciousness of American life in the twentieth century. But I feel increasingly that it brings to an end a whole tradition of naturalistic social fiction in America, that it is the memorial not only to a vanished social period, but also to the kind of writing Dos Passos practices. I admire his inclusive power; I think I admire even more Dos Passos's feeling for the dissenters in American life against *all* the orthodoxies, of the Left as well as of the Right. But somehow it is a very dated kind of book, wearisomely familiar; and this not because all the storms of our twentieth-century life play in it, but because it is too much like the thing it describes. It even seems to me quite a deadly book, conceived and carried through with a certain dead accuracy of contempt for most of the people in it.

I am not concerned here with Dos Passos's political opinions;

so far as they are about the patterns of our society, I agree with them. The trend toward his current thought was implicit in *U. S. A.*; it has more and more directly entered into all his books since then, and it is of the very cast of his mind—sceptical, aloof, deeply concerned with principle, above all with the salvation of the individual in our mass society—for Dos Passos has always been on the individual's side, no matter what class he comes from. But the paradox of *U. S. A.* is that the individual does not get into it. What is the final effect of the four-fold plan—the narrative, the acrid “newsreels,” the biographies of the true and false heroes of our time, the “Camera Eye” which is turned back on Dos Passos's own life—but to show man irrevocably split up between its mechanisms? And what is it that makes the “Camera Eye” section itself so ineffective and sentimental but that it is the only way Dos Passos has left of commenting on his own world? It is the tiniest possible hole cut into the prison wall to let the spirit breathe. It is a confession that Dos Passos has closed himself up within his own devices. In *U. S. A.* man is no longer part of history; he is only acted upon by forces, turned into a *thing*; and Dos Passos has not left himself time or space or love—certainly not Dreiser's brooding love—to sorrow over it. The book is a triumph of method that confutes its moral purpose. Just as the narrative style has the final impersonality of a machine dragging lives into its maw, so the crucial images for the book, in its outward structure, its concrete details, are entirely functional and technological. In the end, Dos Passos is less compassionate for the victims than he is dazzled by the power mechanism that consumes them; he has created the greater machine. The book is an image of the thing that destroys almost everyone in it. It was the whole merit of naturalism to describe the society of our time, in its fundamental aspects; and here Dos Passos has done it almost too well. *U. S. A.* is irrefutable proof—though other evidence is not lacking—that naturalism brought us into the modern world, but has left us to work out very different problems in it.