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## Naturalism and Poetry

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## CHAPTER 26

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# NATURALISM AND POETRY

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CHRIS BEYERS

In his essay, "The Responsibilities of the Novelist," Frank Norris remarked that Marlowe and Shakespeare were the spokesmen for their era, and Pope and Dryden for theirs, while novelists spoke for the modern age. He continues, "if the matter could be in any way statisticized, the figures would bear out" his assumption, since novels are "essential" in that they "express modern life" more truthfully and authentically than poetry and other genres (176). Because Norris is considered to be an important theorist of American literary naturalism, when he says "novelist," most interpret him to mean "naturalist writer." For Norris, naturalist works are inherently written in prose.

Norris's view of poetry and naturalism has often been echoed; Donald Pizer, the movement's most persistent critic and historian, defines naturalism as a "vital stream in American fiction" (ix), and time and again, when critics talk about naturalism, they address novels and short stories exclusively. Few if any poets claim the title of naturalist, and critics have infrequently used the word to describe poetry. Consequently, there are no manifestos to read, no prefaces to consult, and no critical tradition to summarize. If Norris is right, naturalism and poetry are mutually exclusive. However, if we consider the ways that naturalism is generally defined, there is a body of poetry that can profitably be looked at as naturalist.

American literary naturalism is generally considered a subgenre of the realist fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Finding its inspiration in the novels and theories of Émile Zola, such novelists as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, and John Dos Passos seek to document, more or less objectively, the material forces shaping humankind, examining the lives of people circumscribed by biological, social, economic, and political systems. Complicating this view of naturalism is Charles Child Walcutt's "divided stream" thesis, which identifies a more hopeful branch of naturalism that valorizes "intuition" and

promotes a more progressive, even radical ideal; the other stream, Walcutt argues, goes through the "dark canyon of mechanistic determinism" (vii–viii). His example of a darker, deterministic stream is Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), in which its protagonist, Clyde Griffiths, "is powerless to choose at the very climax of the action" (26). He finds the more optimistic, ideal stream in such novels as London's *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), in which "the movement of the plot depends on acts of self will and in no sense embodies the operation of external determining forces" (113), and in Frank Norris's *The Octopus* (1901), where the Vanamee subplot expresses the "fruitfulness and benign natural force" (146). Walcutt argues that the two branches are rarely completely separate, so that the more idealist naturalist works typically contain significant materialist elements.

This generally accepted definition helps explain why comparatively little poetry is written in the naturalist mode. Since the eighteenth century, writers seeking to document material conditions have usually chosen prose. A realist novel frequently introduces characters by describing their upbringing, their experiences, and their world as a way of explaining their character. While the modernist poets who were contemporaries of the naturalist novelists do try to represent their world, they usually represent it using symbol, implication, and other sorts of truncation.

More fundamentally, modernist poets typically do not accept the category "reality" as posited by the naturalists. Consider, for example, the tryst between the typist and the carbuncular clerk in part III of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922)—the type of scene (often considered sordid in its day) that might appear in a naturalist novel. In Eliot's poem, a figure out of classical mythology narrates the episode; subsequent elaborations of the idea rely on allusions to the operas of Richard Wagner and to fertility myths. Thus it seems that, for every contemporary gesture in modernist poetry, there is a counter-gesture toward the universal and transhistorical. Moreover, modernist poets like Eliot question the naturalist presumption of objectivity. When naturalist writers seek to document the world "scientifically," they typically take for granted a notion that the conditions and events they describe can be verified objectively and, for that reason, peruse newspapers and other documents in order to report, truly, things that happened in the world. Their facts can be easily verified. For example, Dreiser carefully studied newspaper articles on Chester Gillette while writing *An American Tragedy*, just as Norris studied newspaper reports about a sensational San Francisco murder when drafting *McTeague*. Modernist poets, however, tend to question what we mean by "the world" as well as the notion that their works should be based on verifiable evidence. What is the factual source for Eliot's depiction of the encounter between the typist and the clerk? Even if we are to accept it as something that actually happened, how should we interpret the scene? To what extent is the evidence mediated by its mythic, Greek teller?

A good touchstone for modernist poetry's attitude toward the objective world occurs in canto LXII of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (1938), when the speaker remarks that Alexander Hamilton "was the Prime snot in ALL American history," followed by the phrase, "ego scriptor cantilenae" (Latin for "I, the writer of these cantos" [350]). Although Pound believed his judgment valid, the fact that he must announce that he

is offering his own opinion indicates that most of what is said in the *Cantos* is not his opinion—instead, the long poem constantly introduces voices that speak from other subjectivities. Indeed, when modernist writers do incorporate documents that might seem to represent objective reality, they typically fragment them or in other ways present them as rooted ineluctably in their own historicity and subject to reinterpretation.

A final stumbling block to a truly naturalist verse is the fact that poets have been less likely to embrace the sense of futility sometimes associated with naturalism, partly because of the liberating sense that the speaker's voice tends to give a poem. This is particularly notable for poets who embrace the poetry of witness, a politically engaged mode seeking to articulate perspectives that they feel have been ignored by previous generations. A good illustration can be seen by comparing Adrienne Rich's early poem, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" (1951), with her later poem, "Hunger" (1978). In the former poem, the narrator describes a woman burdened by the "massive weight of Uncle's wedding band." The narrator remarks that she is "mastered by" the "ordeals" she must endure (4). That is to say, she is caught, as so many naturalist characters are, in an oppressive patriarchal system. However, two decades later, the narrator in "Hunger" remarks, "They can rule the world while they can persuade us / our pain belongs in some order" (230). In the poem, the antecedent for the "They" is never firmly established. It would seem that Rich wants the reader to understand the "They" as the agents and beneficiaries of the patriarchal, capitalist system that seeks to control all of us. While Aunt Jennifer has been persuaded that her pain is justified, in "Hunger" the statement's very articulation demonstrates that the speaker is *not* so persuaded, that the reader should not be so persuaded, and that *we* can avoid being mastered by refusing to be persuaded. The poem puts human choice, freely made and defiant, at the fulcrum of human society; it seems to make change possible, even imminent.

Thus, the main intellectual trends of twentieth-century poetry are inimical to a naturalist verse tradition. On the other hand, nothing in the generally assumed definition disqualifies poetry from the genre. Regarding naturalist poetry in terms of genre, a rather clear narrative comes into view: naturalist poets began by critiquing convention, as naturalist novelists did, and went on to adopt modernist techniques to reflect the changing notion of what constitutes reality. Common to all is an enduring strain exploring the severe restraints on human possibility.

## STEPHEN CRANE

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Probably more than any other poet, Stephen Crane's two startling books of poetry—*The Black Riders* (1895) and *War Is Kind* (1899)—offer a clear challenge to convention. This is clear even in the typography of the early editions of *The Black Riders*, where the poems were printed without titles and with all words in small capitals.

This sets a fitting tone for the volume. Capitalization and titles establish hierarchies among words in a poem; they can also help suggest frames of interpretation. Crane's poetry, above all else, questions established hierarchies, a stance that became a dominant naturalist tendency.

For example, in poem IV of *The Black Riders*, the speaker challenges the prevalent notion of the transcendent truth of poetic language. The speaker says that he has "a thousand tongues / And nine and ninety-nine lie." He chooses to sing with the one truthful tongue yet struggles because this honest impulse "will make no melody at my will" (1300). Crane thus establishes a dichotomy between truthful saying and the false sonorities of verse. Perhaps John Keats found Beauty and Truth synonymous, but Crane did not. This is made even clearer in a lyric unpublished during Crane's life that parodies Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's once-universally-known poem, "The Psalm of Life":

Tell me not in joyous numbers  
We can make our lives sublime  
By—well, at least, not by  
Dabbling much in rhyme. (Crane 1347)

Seventy years earlier, Longfellow said that we could reach sublimity by following in the footsteps of those who have gone before us. Crane mocks Longfellow's strenuous didacticism, suggesting that the traditional music of poetry willfully falsifies the real conditions of human experience for the tune's sake.

Crane's divergence from tradition is especially noticeable in his many poems that are essentially theological anecdotes. In them, Crane presents an unlikely God that resembles the Judeo-Islamic-Christian deity only in name. For instance, in poem VI of *The Black Riders*, God "carefully" makes "the ship of the world," using "the infinite skill of an all-master." But when he turns his head to attend to some "wrong," the ship escapes his grasp, and "forever rudderless" (1300) moves in its arbitrary patterns while "many in the sky" laugh at the sight (1301). The God of this poem is capable of error and distraction and is either powerless to control his creation or so indifferent that he just does not do it. The angels in heaven seem to think the whole thing is amusing, though the world's inconstancies and vagaries cause great suffering.

The view of God here is greatly at odds with the conception of God as all-loving, all-powerful, and all-knowing. While it is not unusual to come across agnostic poets looking at empty skies or atheist poets who deny a deity, Crane confidently asserts a peculiarly unconventional, uncomfortable God. His main target is the problem addressed by religious apologists: how to square the conception of a loving God with natural catastrophes and more generally with the fact that evil does not seem to be hindered or punished. In this regard, Crane takes an empirical approach. Observing human pain and its causes, he asks, "What sort of god created this?" Crane's poems can be seen as little existentialist sermons, refusing to make the leap of faith, asserting the world's absurdity, and forging a kind of faux theology based on observable evidence.

As Crane emphatically rejected a conventional God, so his nature poems turn their back on romantic nature. Wordsworth saw the natural world as a restorative, giving us a glimpse of something greater to buoy us as we trudge on in this vale of tears. In a famous lyric, however, Crane describes the universe of London's "To Build a Fire" or his own "The Open Boat":

A man said to the universe:  
"Sir, I exist!"  
"However," replied the universe,  
"The fact has not created in me  
"A sense of obligation." (1335)

The tart response tells us that, from the universe's viewpoint, human existence is neither particularly interesting nor obliges it to anything. Someone seeking to find truth in the natural world is like the person chasing the horizon in poem XXIV of *The Black Riders*: a fool desiring a beautiful illusion.

Taken as a whole, the salient point of Crane's poetry is not the positions it takes but the skeptical stance it assumes. A consistent butt of satire are those who adhere rigidly to their ideas despite disastrous results. In poem V from *The Black Riders*, for instance, incalculable blood is shed as a result of people who obey a man demanding that the whole world be arranged in rows; in a later poem, a youth cheerfully allows himself to be assassinated because it is being done in accordance with "the best legends" (1308). Similarly, Crane's war poems depict, time and again, the dangers of believing false ideas. The first poem in *War is Kind*, for instance, relentlessly juxtaposes the pain and suffering of war with the rhetoric used to justify it. After describing "a thousand corpses," the speaker admonishes the weeping survivors that "[w]ar is kind" because it gives the fallen soldiers a "splendid shroud" (1325). His ultimate message, then, seems to presage the message that Adrienne Rich articulated nearly a century later: they can control you so long as you believe that your pain belongs to some transcendent order. Crane's poetry tries to get the reader to see just how improbable and self-serving these conceptions of order are.

## CARL SANDBURG

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Although Carl Sandburg wrote a great deal for over fifty years, *Chicago Poems* (1916) best demonstrates his naturalist tendencies toward critiquing the social and economic forces that entrap humans, tendencies that are most evident in the works he wrote before becoming the self-appointed celebrator of all things American. While some poems in the volume do not fit in well with the traditions of naturalism, others clearly do. The poem "Mamie," for instance, recounts the life of

a female figure who, like Dreiser's Carrie Meeber, dreams of something better, yet like Crane's Maggie Johnson, ends up defeated by economic realities. There are, in fact, a number of sympathetic poems documenting the plight of women caught in economic systems that do not offer social mobility and that encourage disregard for their well-being. "Onion Days" is one of the more hopeful poems, describing a pregnant immigrant onion-picker who looks forward to the birth of her child—that is to say, her happy dreams may be realized since they do not involve economic or social advance. Other characters are like "Anna Imroth," the "factory girl" (33) who died because the sweatshop where she worked did not have a fire escape.

The men in these poems do not fare much better. In "Muckers," for instance, the speaker describes the terrible working conditions of the men digging ditches for new gas mains. While ten men wipe their brows and say, "O, it's a hell of a job," as many say, "Jesus, I wish I had a job" (21). Although a poem like "Mag"—in which the speaker regrets getting married and having children—portrays the breakdown of familial feeling also seen in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), more often Sandburg portrays those who have not been dehumanized by conditions. For instance, in three successive poems, "The Shovel Man," "A Teamster's Farewell," and "Fish Crier," workers retain their humanity and sense of self despite enervating work. Sandburg rather scrupulously avoids the Victorian implication that hard work is, itself, morally uplifting. In fact, in poems like "Dynamiter," "Ice Handler," "Masses," and "I am the People, the Mob," Sandburg's endorsement of Marx's vision of proletarian revolution (and Marx's romantic notion of an ideal future) disqualify him from endorsing the sublime resignation to nature and global systems that Norris seems to endorse at the end of *The Octopus*. Sandburg's poetry tends to the forward-thinking, ameliorationist impulse—we are encouraged to see that, for example, the deaths of people like Anna Imroth can be avoided by perfectly enactable measures like building codes.

Though Sandburg's poetry fits well within the naturalist impulse to describe the forces that constrict human life, he is always a little resistant to the more determinist strains. Take, for example, "Skyscraper." Skyscrapers at the time were quickly becoming the visible emblems of major cities, sources of civic pride and testaments to engineering. The designs of architects like Louis Sullivan frequently highlighted vertical lines to give buildings that were already unprecedentedly tall an even taller feel. As such, these buildings functioned as self-regulated, self-sufficient, massive systems. "Skyscraper" makes gestures in this direction, describing the long elevators, the girders used to hold up the frame, the "hundreds of names" on office doors, the "tons of letters" that circulate every day, and the "master-men who rule the building" (66). But for all this, Sandburg does not give in to pessimism. The poem's refrain is that the building has a "soul," and its final scene is of a "young watchman" (67) hopefully looking out a window at the city lights below. One senses that, had Sandburg written *An American Tragedy*, Clyde Griffiths would have been able to make parole.

## EDGAR LEE MASTERS

Both in subject matter and philosophical orientation, Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) strongly reflects the influence of American literary naturalism, particularly its skepticism regarding convention, its concern for documenting the lives of the lower classes, and its depiction of the ways in which social and economic forces constrain human aspirations. The book's main conceit is that of a graveyard tour where, at each gravesite, a dead person rises to speak. Like the disembodied voices of *The Greek Anthology* that inspired Masters, the poems are short, generally lyric, and most often consist of the dead person's reflections on life. Masters updated the *Anthology* by locating the speakers in a small town in Ohio, so that the volume anticipates the perspective of works like *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), and *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919).

*Spoon River* also has a strong allegiance to the first third of *The Divine Comedy* (1321). Like the denizens of Dante's *Inferno*, the spirits who tell their stories in *Spoon River* find that their translation to the next realm has not taken away their personalities, passions, or prejudices. Masters's volume begins with a poem about the great leveler, death, listing people up and down the social scale, followed by the refrain, "All, all, are sleeping on the hill" (11), yet the spirits themselves seem surprised by this fact—those of high social standing, such as Judge Somers, are disgusted that they must rest for eternity next to ne' er-do-wells. Idlers and thieves like Chase Henry and Hod Putt find death's disregard for position and rank very amusing, a cosmic practical joke on their more respectable neighbors.

In *Spoon River*, the characters are generally defined not so much by the facts of their lives, but by the part of their lives they choose to narrate and how they explain, apologize, exult upon, or try to excuse their actions. Often the same event is narrated by more than one spirit, introducing a dynamic perspectivism that would become the hallmark of modernist art. For instance, Knowlt Hoheimer explains he enlisted in the Civil War to avoid going to prison for hog-stealing and pointedly asks the reader what the phrase, "Pro Patria," on his tombstone means. However, the next speaker, Lydia Puckett, tells us that Hoheimer really went off to fight because she broke up with him. Which is the right version of events? Is Puckett revealing Hoheimer's real motivation, or are we to see her assertion as an example of her overweening pride? Are both telling the truth? Neither?

Puckett's claim also highlights one reason why the book is less popular with academics than it was fifty or sixty years ago: her entire speech is about Hoheimer's supposed affection for her. Indeed, very few of *Spoon River*'s women define themselves except in terms of the men they love or who love them; even fewer suppose any identity except that as lover, wife, or mother. The men, it is true, frequently focus on their personal relationships as their lives' defining aspect, but they just as often talk about their professions, their political and social aspirations, or their philosophical ideas. What keeps the women from being merely cultural stereotypes, however, is the way that their poems express frustration over their circumscribed



lives. In this, the poems reflect naturalism's general attitude that social institutions hinder rather than promote happiness.

The problem of marriage is one aspect of the greater naturalist theme in *Spoon River*—how corrupt human institutions and narrow social ideologies deprive human beings of happiness. Spoon River is filled with people whose lives have been inhibited. Both Serepta Mason and Mabel Osborne in fact describe themselves as stunted flowers, and readers hear from a frustrated inventor (Franklin Jones), frustrated politicians (most pathetically, Enoch Dunlap), a frustrated philanthropist (Seth Compton), frustrated scientists (Perry Zoll and Alfonso Churchill), and frustrated artists (Margaret Fuller Slack and Archibald Higbie). Abel Melveny believes himself to be “a good machine / That Life had never used” (168).

Some of Spoon River's denizens blame their frustration on life itself or fate. Robert Fulton Tanner explains that life is nothing other than a rat trap, seemingly offering something only to use that to ensnare us, whereas Cassius Hueffer and Henry Layton assert the biological argument that since they are made of such incompatible elements, their failure was inevitable. Aner Clute and Griffy the Cooper articulate socially deterministic points of view—the former explains that, if enough people decide a boy is or will be a thief, that boy will grow up to be a thief, and Griffy says that we are all constrained by “[t]aboos and rules and appearances” (77).

In addition to social and religious taboos, the spirits in Spoon River frequently point to a small group of men who enriched themselves and kept the rest from opportunity: Thomas Rhodes, who owned the bank and worked for the railroads; Coolbaugh Whedon, editor of the newspaper, *The Argus*; Rev. Abner Peet; and A. D. Blood, the mayor. The corrupting influence of these men is mentioned even by people who were not directly hurt by them. However, in their own epitaphs, only Whedon admits any wrongdoing; in his monologue, he says that he was able to “see every side of every question” (137), which apparently led to a moral relativism directed by whatever was convenient and profitable for him at the moment. His disgust is directed partly at himself, as he acknowledges the “base designs” his newspaper promoted, and partly at Spoon River, which he sees as a sewer of illicit activities and not worth saving.

While Rhodes mocks the “liberals” and offers his own life devoted to getting money as “self-contained, compact, harmonized” (115) as opposed to the messy and unsuccessful lives of his detractors, the other powerful characters do not bother to address their detractors. They either do not recognize or refuse to admit the suffering they caused. An instructive group of epitaphs in this regard is the sad story of Minerva Jones, who was born with some sort of birth defect that left her with a “heavy body, cock-eye, and a rolling walk” (32), yet she also wrote poetry for the *Argus*. One day, “Butch” Weldy hunted her down and brutally raped her, leaving her with Dr. Meyers, who tried, unsuccessfully, to save her life. After she died, Meyers was indicted for the murder and vilified by the *Argus*, which presumably implied that she died because he tried to abort a child that he had engendered. His wife, Meyers explains, died of “a broken heart” (34), and he himself by pneumonia.

After Jones and Meyers tell their stories, Weldy tells his—and yet he does not even mention the incident. He only describes how he “got religion and settled down” (36) and was blinded in an accident in the canning works. While his actions on that one night constituted the defining, tragic moment for three other people, it does not seem to have been particularly remarkable or important to him. Moments such as this in *Spoon River* suggest that human society is, as Thomas Rhodes suggested liberals are, just “cellular atoms,” interacting randomly according to no grand scheme.

Indeed, the only characters satisfied with their lives are the ones who believe in conventional religion or in some spiritual substitute and who have given up worldly success. They find satisfaction in life because they expect nothing from it. While the town is full of frustrated and discouraged women, an exception is Lois Spears who is the “happiest of women, / As wife, mother, and housekeeper” (62), occupations that brought no joy to Margaret Fuller Slack. Spears finds these tasks fulfilling because she was born blind and thus (given the cultural milieu) grew up assuming she would be an old maid. Likewise, Fiddler Jones rejects the opportunity to labor on a farm and instead spends his life fiddling for dances and picnics. His epitaph ends,

I ended up with a broken fiddle,—  
And a broken laugh, and a thousand memories.  
And not a single regret. (71)

The moral seems to be that the world's systems are corrupt and like Tanner's rat trap. The reasonable person does not go for the bait.

## THEODORE DREISER

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Theodore Dreiser's verse, more than any other of the works in this survey, exemplifies the justice of Walcutt's divided-stream argument—yet both streams are rarely present in the same poem. *Moods, Philosophic and Emotional, Cadenced and Declaimed* (1935) can be neatly divided between poems on theological and spiritual themes and poems portraying the sort of stunted lives found in *Spoon River*.

The realist, documentary impulse can be seen in “Geddo Street,” which juxtaposes the “Bleary dwellings, / Dreary dwellings” and the “open saloons at every corner” of the ghetto, with the “splendid machines, / That never pause, / Speeding to the west” (66)—trains—to dramatize economic inequality. “Flaherty Junction” offers brief sketches of a “bearded German and his wife,” a frazzled station agent, a tramp, a “lout,” and a Swede, all accompanied by details Dreiser might have used in one of his novels. However, these sorts of poems are in the minority, probably because when Dreiser was adopting this sort of documentary approach, he typically thought in terms of prose.

More generally, Dreiser emphasizes the fruitless hopes of people bumping their heads against economic systems and social prejudices. In "The Factory," for example, the workers are but cogs in a huge machine, their "deepest, darkest moods repressed" (107). There are only a few that dream, laugh, or sing; what everyone believes, the narrator explains, is that if the workers do not hasten in their work, they will be impoverished and lose "the respect of men" (108). In "The Victim Speaks," a boy who has lost his hand in a railroad accident complains that he is exactly the same person he was before the accident, yet now "All men withdraw from me / As though they feared contagion" (173). The theme of the futility of hope is emphasized by the last poem in *Moods*, "As with a Finger in Water," which informs its readers that "The aspirations, / The dreams, / And the achievements / Of men" (423) are as significant and lasting as a finger in water, chalk on a chalkboard, and breath misting a windowpane.

This fatalistic view is countered by poems that articulate the spiritual beliefs Dreiser associates with Eastern religion. In "Brahma," for instance, the speaker perceives

Dim  
But persistent images  
Of sloughing mortal, meaty flesh,  
For the pure fire of energy and thought. (21)

Later in volume, "Sutra" offers an "*Improvisation upon the Upanishad*"—a loose interpretation of a text held holy by Hindus—which suggests an "absolute" behind all earthly appearances (316).

Dreiser seems to prize these non-Western conceptions of the divine as an arational antidote to the repressive conceptions he finds in conventional religion, which are almost always the butt of satire. In "Sailor," for instance, the sailing speaker walks on "the deck of dogma, / Steering by the light of faith" and yet finds his conceptions are inadequate for his actual experiences in the world. In a poem reminiscent of one of Crane's metaphysical lyrics, the God in "Toymaker" describes the "chemism"—human beings—which he created and for which he does not "provide / Enough" (12). God finds his toy entertaining and laughable.

This mechanistic view of human existence, which ultimately lampoons the Enlightenment's Clockmaker God, is addressed in "Martyr," the story of a Christian martyr in Roman times who, facing imminent death, begins a series of metaphysical and theological reflections. He begins "Proud of what I thought was true" but comes to a less certain belief. He asks whether he is just "a mathematical, / Or shall I say, / Electro-chemical formula" (114), but rejects this notion, ultimately arriving at the same reality that René Descartes did: the self, the ego, the "I." While the martyr is unsure, finally, of his Savior, he does affirm the self that desires (and perhaps invented) such a savior.

Like Crane, Dreiser seems either incapable of, or more likely, uninterested in providing a consistent and coherent theology or metaphysics, but instead wants to

affirm the human desire for something greater and to attack narrow points of view. Thus, we can see the strain of naturalist agnosticism and skepticism running through Dreiser's verse; like Crane, sometimes he seems to believe and sometimes he seems to deny, and overall the only thing a reader can confirm is his spiritual questioning.

## ROBINSON JEFFERS

Jeffers's corpus can be seen as one long demonstration of the naturalist notion that human beings are unable to alter the social, economic, and natural forces which determine their lives. In "The Purse-Seine," for example, the speaker likens schools of sardines caught in a net to all of Western civilization, telling the reader that, like the fish, our "interdependence" will lead to our ultimate destruction. The speaker does not warn but prophesizes: "There is no escape," the speaker remarks dispassionately; didn't we know "that cultures decay, and life's end is death" (62)?

Moreover, the poem constitutes a rejection of romantic nature even more emphatic than anything in Crane. Wordsworth's revelation at the top of Mount Snowdon gives him sudden insight about his relationship with the world, with the God of which the natural world is a manifestation, and with all other humans. Jeffers's speaker, also looking down from a height, likewise gains insight into his relations with the world, God, and other people, but he finds the symbols point to human futility, not to the infinite reaches of human possibility. The interdependence which Wordsworth hails as a foundation of moral life Jeffers sees as the inevitable cause of decay. The lesson the natural world teaches us is how far civilization has taken us from the primal impulse of free growth, independent direction, and passionate creativity.

Unlike Crane and Dreiser, who are generally content to critique the limitations of traditional religion, in his longer poems Jeffers proposes a quasi-religious outlook that embraces the physical world and rejects human institutions. This is most evident in his strange and disturbing narrative, *The Roan Stallion* (1925), which features a young mother whose name, California, and parentage (she is one-fourth Scottish, one-fourth Native American, one-fourth Spanish, and one-fourth unidentified) alert the reader to her allegorical importance. Jeffers describes California as an ideal woman: she is "nobly formed," as "strong as a new tower; the features stolid and dark, / But sculpted into a strong grace," not unlike the stone cottage and tower Jeffers built overlooking Carmel Bay. She is carved out of local materials, with an intrinsic nobility befitting her rough-hewn dignity. Her brutal, alcoholic husband, Johnny, on the other hand, is an "outcast Hollander; not old but shriveled with bad living." He is the worst of a dying civilization and controls California by violence and by withholding money. Their daughter, Christine, is close to her mother but has "inherited" her father's "race blue eyes" (15). She sees the world, in a fundamental

way, as her father does, partly because she is a Christian. The main characters, then, are products of their heredity, environment, and history. They are initially positioned, that is, as if they were characters in a novel by Zola.

As the narrative opens, Johnny, drunk as usual, returns home in the early hours of the morning, bringing a stallion he has won in a poker game. This earns California's silent disgust, since it is not a working horse and has no utility; the narrator later tells us that "she hated him for his uselessness, serving nothing / But Johnny's vanity" (21). She worries that the stallion will eat up all the barley normally given to their "buckskin," a mare and workhorse. As he stumbles to bed, she gets up to go to Monterey to buy presents for Christine since the next day will be Christmas. She rides on the buckskin, whose hard life, patient nature, and unstinting work ethic cause her to identify with the horse. The poem, then, portrays her as virtually the property of her vicious patriarch, who uses her with as much compassion as he uses his workhorse. At the beginning of the poem, she is very much like Rich's Aunt Jennifer.

Together, the two make the arduous journey to town, nearly dying on their return, since a rainstorm swells the river they must ford. The connection between California and the buckskin is made even more directly in this scene, since to coax the animal across and preserve her presents (including Johnny's whiskey), she must lead the horse by hand and strap the burden on herself: she is literally the pack animal. Thus, the first half of the narrative posits essential, racial character and examines the brutal, hopeless life of the underclass. But Jeffers is uninterested in the larger economic conditions that led to her victimization, as the narrative's second half demonstrates. Startlingly, the second part of the narrative aligns itself with the intuitionist, idealist stream of naturalism without relinquishing the pessimism that is often seen as accompanying the materialist stream.

After Johnny leaves again and Christine is put to bed, California goes out into the night, seeking to understand the sense of a transcendence she experienced while fording the river. She climbs a mountain and has a vision in conjunction with the Roan Stallion, whose natural power and reckless freedom represent everything that her life lacks: he is the "savage and exultant strength of the world" (27). Her mystical vision includes a "crucified man," yet California sees this as one of the "racial myths" that are "the phantom rulers of humanity" (29). The narrator had earlier explained what California learns: "I say / Humanity is the mould to break from, the crust to break through, the coal to break into fire, / The atom to be split" (24). In her encounter with the Roan Stallion, California learns to embrace what Jeffers would later call the gospel of Inhumanism, which urges us to break free of human solipsism and accept the transhuman magnificence that our humanistic beliefs have caused us to discount or allegorize into something else. That is why the racial myths are "phantoms": they are fictions that we invent in an attempt to render transcendent truth into human categories. Thus, while *The Roan Stallion* exemplifies both tributaries of Walcutt's divided stream, it does so by advocating a kind of idealism that, like the universe in Crane's lyric, is unimpressed with human aspiration and unmoved by human suffering.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the poem's final, climatic scene. Johnny, drunk again, instructs his dog to track California down so that he can have sex with her. Driven by her night-time experience, she hides in the stallion's corral, but the dog picks up the trail and follows her to the corral where the stallion, agitated by the dog, begins to paw the ground. Johnny, fearing injury to his dog and his stallion, enters the corral, while California doubles back to the house to get a rifle. The powerful stallion is upset by the snarling dog and the tense human. By the time California returns, Johnny has been injured and is crawling slowly back to the fence around the corral. California, "without doubting, without hesitation," shoots the dog. She then lowers the rifle and watches while the horse rears up and kills Johnny, leaving "nothing alive but teeth" (33).

As dreadful as this scene is, it is made even more terrible because Christine has witnessed the entire thing, crying out when her mother killed the dog (though California claims, dishonestly, it was a mistake), and then watching in silent horror as the stallion kills her father. With such a witness, California then feels compelled to act. Jeffers's description is disconcerting. California, "moved by some obscure human fidelity," takes up her rifle and draws a bead on the stallion:

Each separate nerve-cell of her brain flaming the stars fell from their  
places  
Crying in her mind; she fired three times before the haunches crumpled  
sidewise, the forelegs stiffening,  
And the beautiful strength settled to earth; she turned then on her little  
daughter the mask of a woman  
Who has killed God. (33-34)

California, driven by her ideological identification with "the human," her notions of what is expected of a mother and wife, and the Christian religion, kills the transhuman, untamed, and vital spirit. Given the chance to burst out of her skull and break the mould, she instead chooses to deny her true self and adopt the mask. She feels she must act against what she knows instinctively, in a way that she has been told is "good," and thus destroys the actual spirit manifesting itself.

From Jeffers's perspective, the deaths of Johnny and his dog are not tragic. The dog, after all, lives to please the man. And Johnny represents the last, degenerate dregs of a Dutch race that flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but now has spent its force. Allowing the stallion to kill him only hastens what was already happening. When California kills the horse, though, she tragically chooses that branch of the human family tree that will lead to our demise. Her name identifies her as an emblem of the last frontier in America; her action symbolizes the national acquiescence to values that will cause us all, in the not-too-distant future, to be caught up in the sardine net. In the end, she cannot break from the systems and the beliefs that naturalist writers from Zola to Jeffers insist have subjugated us.

The poem also reveals Jeffers as taking the naturalist view of nature to an extreme beyond that which was envisioned by London or Crane. By the eighteenth

century, poets like Alexander Pope, James Thomson, William Cowper, and countless others established the practice of relentlessly allegorizing the natural world. The romantic writers changed the meaning of these allegories, but time and again, the reader finds out that natural phenomena are significant because of the greater truths they point to, generally some version of a divine plan. In naturalist works, however, the natural world functions not as a symbol but as the reality to which symbols point. In Crane and London, for instance, we are left with the realization that, despite the universe's impressiveness, it has no interest in furthering human philosophical enlightenment. Still, these works leave us with the notion that it is a shame that we live in such a world, that it would be so much nicer and more comfortable if only we lived in the purposeful universe of Thomson and Wordsworth. Jeffers, however, is one of the first to take the perspective of the astrophysicist or archaeologist—human life comes and goes, civilizations rise and fall, and everything develops and decays inevitably. Jeffers is unusual in asserting that the fall of great civilizations, and of humanity in general, is a good thing, since these human beings are constantly distracted from the vital, the beautiful, the clean, the absolute, and the lasting. It is a lonely cosmology, to be sure, but, Jeffers would have us know, it is the only one that has any claim to truth.

### ROBERT LOWELL, SYLVIA PLATH, AND SHARON OLDS

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Naturalist poetry generally went the way of naturalist fiction, becoming subsumed into the evolution of realism into modernism, remaining a stream but rarely so purely expressed as it was in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Naturalist religious skepticism helped lay a foundation for the twentieth-century poet's quest for a new, individualistic, more satisfying spirituality (even if the answer turned out to be a healthy dose of atavism), and poets have remained interested in the underclass. However, the naturalist poetical works that seemed daring and new in the teens began to seem old-fashioned by the avant-garde poets who became more interested in ever-more-radical experiments in poetic form (and in the ideologies implicit in these forms) than in documenting the material realities of life. Moreover, the grounds of what writers began to consider "reality" started to undergo a seismic shift that was almost lethal to the Zolaesque naturalists. The assumptions fundamental to the objective, "scientific" approach, such as the validity of "race" and social Darwinism, began to seem much less tenable. Poets, in general, became more preoccupied with uncertainty and subjectivity.

Paradoxically, this preoccupation helped give rise to an impressive body of poetry with strong naturalist tendencies in the 1950s and 1960s. Since naturalist poets and novelists were grounded in nineteenth-century speculation, they were apt

to talk about "character," but they were often trying to understand something that nowadays would be called psychology. Freud and others revolutionized how we thought about the mind, personality, and the motivations for human behavior, sometimes in positing rather deterministic paradigms. For this reason, the poetic movement that most markedly exhibits naturalist tendencies is the intensely subjective confessional poetry.

For instance, in *Life Studies* (1959), Robert Lowell narrates his own life in "91 Revere Street," which shows that the troubled and damaged persona of the volume is the result of growing up in household where life was made uncomfortable by his mother's insistent though undirected sense that she deserved something better, and by the way his father miserably failed in doing the things that his wife demanded and he thought he was obligated to do. The family became financially insecure and emotionally unbalanced. In short, Lowell shows how he was created by his environment.

Writing about himself as a character controlled by environmental forces led Lowell into the habit of seeing everyone so controlled. In "Memories of West Street and Lepke," for instance, the speaker remarks, "These are the tranquillized fifties" (85). That is, he implies that his view from the roof of the West Street Jail is more generally the view of his generation, and that the final image of a lobotomized "Czar Lepke"—the nickname of an infamous crime syndicate leader—is only an exaggerated image of us all, since we are all seemingly incapable of any "agonizing reappraisal" (86).

Similarly, in one of Lowell's finest poems, "Skunk Hour," the speaker, alone at night, observes the world in a car overlooking a point where teenagers park to make out. The "radio bleats / Love, O careless Love"—a song about how love is doomed and destroys the lives of those in its throes. However, the speaker and the various characters he describes are too lifeless even to experience the agonies of passion. The speaker's attitude anticipates postmodernism: we are all spectators rather than actors, imagining (probably wrongly) that other people live more fully and have more meaningful contact with one another than we do.

The poem's one nondespairing image is only a cause for greater despair. The poem concludes with a description of a mother skunk and her kittens rooting through the garbage. However disgusting, life is going on for the skunk, who, upon being spotted, "drops her ostrich tail, / And will not scare" (90). The skunk—capable of resistance, procreation, and self-assertion—can find her way in a modern landscape, mainly because she is not human and thus not bedeviled with self-consciousness. She cannot hear the song "Careless Love" and reflect on her own lack. Her stubborn fecundity, then, only foregrounds the unbridgeable difference between the natural world and the world humans have made for themselves. For all its modernist trappings, the poem reflects the naturalist, anti-romantic conception of the natural world.

Sylvia Plath's poetry similarly depicts the plight of its persona caught in a hostile world and in the remorseless operations of her own mind, a terrible drama depicted time and again in her greatest work, *Ariel* (1965). In what is today perhaps her most



famous poem, "Daddy," the speaker speaks, impossibly, futilely, to her dead father, venting her rage at his early death and what she describes as his "Fascist" manners when he was alive. She admits to attempting suicide in order to "get back, back, back to you," but "they" wouldn't let her die (58).

The speaker's irrational vehemence invites the reader to ask what conditions cause her to think these thoughts. These conditions include the social pressures placed on women, as is made clear on a series of poems Plath wrote about bees ("The Bee Meeting," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings," "The Swarm," and "Wintering"), all of which explore the paradox that even the most powerful female bee, the queen, is caught in a system, a "honey-machine" (70) that will eventually serve as her "mausoleum" (71)—just as, implicitly, women are trapped in their role of baby-making machine and nurturer.

In addition to manifesting the naturalist impulse to social criticism, Plath's poetry is laced with despair regarding human possibility. At the end of "Daddy," the speaker claims to be "through" with her father, but it is hard to credit this assertion since she does not seem to have gained the self-understanding that would allow her, in good Freudian style, to put the past safely in the past and begin living in the present. Plath's characters, like Lowell's, have an enduring argument with the past, and for this reason, the argument cannot be resolved. A poem to an ex-lover may spark a reply, even a change of heart, but dead people do not write poems, answer phone calls, or amend their actions.

The contemporary confessional poet Sharon Olds carries on these naturalist tendencies of the poets of the 1950s and 1960s, but she has carved out a less desperate persona. This is especially evident in the conclusion to *The Father* (1992), a book of poems that describes a grown woman watching her aged father, beset with incurable illness, slowly degenerate and die. The father is ill, vulnerable, helpless, trying to hold on to something as he "moves, hour by hour, head-first / toward death" (6). As such, he is pitiable, except for one thing: he lived an alcoholic, abusive, and violent life, married to a woman who was unable to defend herself. To her credit, Olds does not forget this aspect of her past relationship with her father in order to make it an easier book to write or a more empathetic portrayal of illness and death. Instead, in the concluding poems of the book, she asks with increasing intensity, what is my connection with this person? Clearly her relationship has not been what a father-daughter relationship "should" be, what everybody assumes it "really is," what people tend to assume all father-daughter relationships, at some deep level, "are." At every turn, she rejects metaphysical consolation, the idea that his abusive past does not matter any more, and the notion that, like Tolstoy's Ivan Illych, his illness and suffering have moralized him.

What, then, is there to love? In the final poem, Olds lists the things she loves—which all turn out to be body parts. Even his brain is lovable, not because of its thoughts, but for its "halves and silvery folds" (78). She decides she loves her biological connection to her father, an attachment with none of the traditional, nostalgic pull of other sorts of bonds, but a connection she finds real and compelling nonetheless. As she looks down at the body of her dead father, she finds it saying to her:

I am matter,  
 your father, I made you, when I say now that I love you  
 I mean look down at your hand, move it,  
 that action is matter's love, for human  
 love go elsewhere. (79)

In these lines, Olds affirms a strong attachment that is in part the human desire for love (even for the despicable) and in part DNA. She affirms the worth of this need, and she attempts to push her desire for physical connection out into the world in which we live so that it might have some tangible positive influence.

This ending makes the poem perhaps the supreme naturalistic philosophical poem. Naturalist poets typically struggle mightily between Walcott's two "streams"—that is, between a relentless materialism which seems, ineluctably, to lead to determinism, and the idealist impulse which tends toward transcendent hope. Some poets, like Crane, give in to one strain, resorting to satire and anecdotes of futility, while others, like Dreiser, schizophrenically dabble in both streams. Jeffers cast his lot with the rocks and oceans and rather insouciantly bids goodbye to all messy humanity. While Jeffers found a formulation that is idealist and pessimistic, Olds found one that is nearly diametrically opposite. She crafts a position that is both material and progressive. The end of *Father* indicates that our positive values come from paying attention to what Blake, two centuries earlier, called "minute particulars"—small things like the hands of a dead man. Taken as a whole, her poetry attests to the enduring legacy of a naturalist poetic tradition.

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