

*The Vast and Terrible Drama: American Literary Naturalism in the Late Nineteenth Century*, by Eric Carl Link. Studies in American Literary Realism and Naturalism. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004. 231 pp. Cloth, \$35.00.

“For most people, Naturalism has a vague meaning,” Frank Norris wrote in 1896 in his essay “Zola as a Romantic Writer.” “It is a sort of inner circle of realism—a kind of diametric opposite of romanticism, a theory of fiction wherein things are represented ‘as they really are,’ inexorably, with the truthfulness of a camera. This idea can be shown to be far from right, that Naturalism, as understood by Zola, is but a form of romanticism after all.”

In his groundbreaking study *The Vast and Terrible Drama: American Literary Naturalism in the Late Nineteenth Century*—the compelling title is a quotation from the aforementioned Norris essay—Eric Carl Link has examined and attempted to disentangle the competing literary credos, theories, manifestos, and critical opinions that were in the air when the naturalist ethos took root in American literature at the end of nineteenth century and which have continued to be discussed and argued about by scholars ever since. His monograph is a splendid exercise in literary taxonomy. It is also a work which, like Louis Menand’s recent book, *The Metaphysical Club*, adeptly frames the debate within the context of its times as experienced by individual writers, and, in so doing, provides a synthesis that in essence comprises a history of ideas as well as a work of literary history and criticism.

It is Norris’s observations (as well as his fiction) that Link uses as a jumping off point for his own investigation of American literary naturalism. His main concern is with “definitional, descriptive, contextual, and theoretical matters,” with an examination of American literary naturalism as a totality, rather than individual authors per se (although he does provide extended analyses of individual works such as Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* and Norris’s *Vandover and the Brute*). He takes issue with representative definitions of naturalism advanced by an earlier generation of scholars such as Lars Åhnebrink and George Becker, which emphasize literary naturalism’s deterministic philosophical orientation and realistic aesthetic creed. What the works of the naturalists have in common, Link argues, is not a deterministic credo or a pessimistic outlook but their thematic content. “It is *theme*, rather than genre, methodology, convention, tone, or philosophy, that qualifies a text for admission in the ‘school’ of American literary naturalism,” he concludes. Rather than consciously attempting, in a Zolaesque spirit, to transfer either philosophical or scientific naturalism into

literary form, the American literary naturalists “can be better understood as exploring themes arising out of the academic milieu of the day,” a period when the ideas of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, John Fiske, William Graham Sumner, Thomas Huxley, Charles Lyell, and Arthur Schopenhauer were prominent on the intellectual horizon.

Naturalist theory, Link asserts—using his expansive, revisionist definition of the genre—can enter a narrative through symbolism (as in the aquarium passage that acts as a thematic icon in Dreiser’s Cowperwood trilogy) or, alternatively, through characters who express or represent elements of naturalistic theory (as can be seen in characters such as Norris’s McTeague or Wolf Larsen in Jack London’s *The Sea-Wolf*). Naturalist theory can also form the basis of the plot, as in Norris’s *McTeague* and *Vandover and the Brute*. Link makes a distinction between “light” or “positive” and “dark” or “negative” forms of naturalism, either of which strains can be predominant depending upon the author and the work. Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* and *Newspaper Days* can be characterized as examples of negative literary naturalism, with their essentially pessimistic outlook, while *Jennie Gerhardt* exhibits a blending within the narrative of positive and negative tendencies.

The American literary naturalists (notably Dreiser), Link points out, were for the most part unaware of and not affected by the theories adumbrated by Émile Zola in his literary manifesto *Le roman expérimental*, which called for the application of scientific positivism to literature. Rather than writing within the tradition and strict confines of the realistic novel, Link concludes, Rebecca Harding Davis, Oliver Wendell Holmes (whose little-known novel *Elsie Venner* is discussed as an important forerunner of literary naturalism), Norris, Crane, and Harold Frederic drew heavily on romantic forms and conventions. Link makes the novel (it is, he acknowledges, not completely new) claim that literary naturalism is more closely allied to the romanticism of antebellum writers such as Charles Brockden Brown, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville than it is to the realism of writers like Howells and Garland. The naturalistic novel, he argues, should not be considered as a subset—a sort of offspring or offshoot (and a failed one at that due to a failure of design or literary execution)—of the realistic novel.

A valuable contribution of this monograph is to place American literary naturalism within the context of the cultural/intellectual/historical currents within which it operated. Among the questions Link addresses are the relationship of the American “school” of literary naturalism and the French school (he argues that the theoretical writings of Zola had limited practical impact on the development of American literary naturalism); the crucial distinction among philosophic, scientific, and literary naturalism; and why

American literary naturalism seems to have encompassed more diverse forms and treatments than its European counterparts, which were more uniformly positivistic. “[O]ur understanding of American literary naturalism,” he concludes, “benefits most when we look at the evolution of this literary movement, not solely within the context of literary realism, but within the context of the whole nineteenth century—socially, philosophically, culturally, and aesthetically.” He commends the efforts of scholars who in recent years have made efforts in this direction, notably Donna Campbell, June Howard, Jennifer Fleissner, and Donald Pizer. A particularly important thrust of this new research, he suggests (and exemplifies in this study), is to look both backwards and forwards in time. Literary naturalism did not spring forth full grown in the 1890s but had its roots in mid-nineteenth century works, he concludes, noting that works such as Holmes’s *Elsie Venner* and Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills* provide a “clear bridge” between the first and second halves of the nineteenth century.

Many critics have commented on what they perceive as an evolution in Dreiser’s outlook, from the deterministic ethos of *Sister Carrie*, where the theories of Herbert Spencer are invoked, to his final work, *The Bulwark*, which has been seen as representing a break on Dreiser’s part with naturalism. Link does not discuss the posthumously published *Bulwark*, but he does discuss Dreiser’s earlier novels, particularly *The Financier*. He finds a uniquely Dreiserian strain of “dark romanticism . . . which manifests itself in Dreiser’s symbolically charged naturalistic novels.” In works such as *Sister Carrie* and *The Financier*, Link observes, Dreiser implements a romantic symbolism “that seeks to embody and reveal the abstract, hidden forces in nature” in a way more reminiscent of romantic works from the early to mid-nineteenth century than realism: “In several of his major novels, Dreiser abandons the intratextual realist symbol for the larger romantic symbol, with its universal and/or metaphysical implications.” An example is provided by the lobster and squid episode in the *Financier*. “The symbolic struggle between lobster and squid,” Link observes, “does more than simply represent Cowperwood’s struggle for survival in the world of finance; it symbolizes the struggle for survival engaged in throughout nature. . . .” Dreiser’s later writings, Link suggests, seem to indicate that his views were evolving in the direction of a “softer” form of determinism.

This is a lucid, elegantly written, deeply learned, and important new contribution to our understanding of literary naturalism.

—Roger W. Smith

