

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 13 (2000)

**Artikel:** Resisting incorporation : the melodrama of agency and the naturalist text  
**Autor:** Heim, Otto  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99975>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 06.08.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Resisting Incorporation: The Melodrama of Agency and the Naturalist Text

Otto Heim

## I

At the end of a recent essay on the notion of individualism in Twain, Belamy and Dreiser, Walter Benn Michaels restates the ongoing interest of naturalist fiction with regard to the limits of agency:

It is, of course, usual to understand Dreiser and American naturalism more generally as concerned with the limits of human agency; indeed, it is almost a definition of naturalism to characterize it as a literature devoted to determinism and to the critique of conventional morality and idealistic metaphysics such a determinism seemed to entail. But . . . the preoccupation with the limits of agency should be understood less as a metaphysical obsession than as a point of access to new patterns of constraint and possibility. ("An American Tragedy" 193-94)<sup>1</sup>

Michaels here expresses a shift in the appreciation of naturalism's deterministic vision that has taken place in the wake of post-structuralist theories of writing and reading. This shift can be described as a move away from a philosophical interest in ideas toward a more political interest in literary forms. Post-structuralist notions of discourse as powerfully shaping social reality and constituting individual subjectivity have enabled a reformulation of determinism in terms of textual constraints. They have also profoundly unsettled the categories of literary history as a history centered on writers and works. In this, post-structuralist theory has articulated a set of concerns that strikingly resembles what Michaels describes as naturalism's preoccupation with the limits of human agency. Indeed, I would suggest that the revisiting of naturalism in recent literary studies is in large part motivated by the problematic status of agency in contemporary critical theory.

---

<sup>1</sup> The writing of this essay has been made possible by a research grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation, for which I would like to express my gratitude here.

As a case in point we can consider the contradictory accounts of agency that emerge from two of the more provocative studies of naturalism to have appeared in recent years: Walter Benn Michaels's *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* and Mark Seltzer's *Bodies and Machines*. Both start from similar premises about the status of the subject in critical theory, referring to the same passages in Foucault; yet their theoretical formulations differ considerably. Michaels seems to push the deterministic implications of Foucault's critique of the "constituent subject" ("Truth and Power" 117) to their extreme, dismissing any notion of critical agency on the basis of the subject's constitution by the discursive underpinnings of culture. But Michaels not only denies the subject's capacity to critique the culture in which it emerges, he also reduces the discursive complexity of that culture to its dominant or hegemonic stratum, so that it can be represented as a logic. In his view, then, the "subject of naturalism . . . consists only in the beliefs and desires made available by the naturalist logic – which is not produced by the naturalist subject but rather is the condition of his existence" (*The Gold Standard* 177). This logic, which articulates the desires and beliefs of the naturalist subject, is capitalism and its influence in Michaels's account is so pervasive that the market tends to emerge – paradoxically – in the guise of a phantom subject whose sovereignty is virtually unchallenged.

Mark Seltzer criticizes just such a conception in *Bodies and Machines*. Following Foucault's analysis in *Discipline and Punish*, according to which in the eighteenth century a set of related processes brought the individual to the fore as both endowed with the formal liberties designated by the human rights and controlled by a pervasive regime of everyday disciplines, Seltzer argues that any view of agency that opposes the individual and culture is inevitably flawed. Whether the individual is seen as constrained by culture or on the contrary as a product of culture, the result is an "all-or-nothing" account, which typically rehearses what Seltzer calls the "'sublime' melodrama of uncertain agency" (84). Against this view, he proposes an understanding of agency "not as the *cause* of an action but as *part* of an action" (84), an unpredictable element that resides in "a necessary and non-invidious break in causal or logical sequence" (198). I think that this understanding of agency, which involves a sense of risk and chance, is critically more useful than a subject-based concept of agency.<sup>2</sup> Seltzer's account most forcefully

---

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, we find the same notion of agency in Michaels's *The Gold Standard*. In an essay on photography and writing, entitled "Action and Accident," Michaels evokes a sense of "pure" agency as "the arbitrariness that makes freedom possible (the break in the chain of cause and effect)" (232). This sense of agency, which bets on "a certain irreducible even if minimal" (231) unpredictability in even the most mechanic processes, however, hardly seems to inform

challenges such a concept, both in naturalist writing and in contemporary cultural criticism, reading it as the sign of a panic that invariably expresses itself in melodramatic fashion.

It seems paradoxical, therefore, that in crucial summarizing passages Seltzer should revert to formulations that in their logic seem indistinguishable from accounts which he elsewhere criticizes severely. Thus when he concludes a discussion of Frank Norris's novels by crediting them with "the invention of a flexible and totalizing machine of power" (44), or when he maintains that "creation, in Norris's final explanation, is the work of an inexhaustible masturbator, spilling his seed on the ground, the product of a mechanistic and miraculous onanism" (31), the subject that these propositions hail by the name of "Norris" is the same "subject of naturalism" that Michaels evokes in *The Gold Standard*. Seltzer indeed makes this clear by quickly expanding from Norris to "the discourse of naturalism generally" (31). The only difference between Michaels and Seltzer here lies in the identification of the logic that underwrites the production of this subject and resolves its internal contradictions. Whereas Michaels identifies this as the logic of capitalism, Seltzer ascribes the internal management of the naturalist text to "a thermodynamic that forms part of the textual mechanism itself" (31). At this point, both Michaels and Seltzer appear to propound a determinism that is structurally indistinguishable from that of a crude version of psychoanalysis, which operates with the notion of a symbolic order ruled by some uniform paternal law. Whether the laws assumed to be immanent in the production of texts are those of the market or of thermodynamics, the result is a reductive mimeticism which, while denying the possibility of historical reference, insists that all texts homologically substantiate the authority invested in those laws. Thus, Seltzer maintains that

in referring to a logistics of realism, I am not suggesting that such a logistics can itself be accounted for by referring these problems of embodiment and mechanism back to larger historical causes and forces. These relays and relations are in fact what they appear to be. They are not ultimately reducible to transparent symptoms or manifestations of deeper conflicts and contradictions but intrinsi-

---

Michaels's deterministic readings elsewhere in *The Gold Standard*. Nor is it noticed by Seltzer in his critique of Michaels's account. The elaboration of this notion of agency indeed remains incipient in Seltzer's account of naturalism as well, which appears to return to the question of agency again and again only to highlight the shortcomings of contemporary cultural criticism. The frequency with which "the melodrama of uncertain agency" appears in Seltzer's text indicates the predominantly polemical character of his argument. Such polemic, however, tends to aggrandize the difference between critical positions and makes it difficult to articulate the "mixed or impure account of action" (135) that Seltzer advocates, since it fails to recognize anything useful in the dramatic (or performative) terms of an actor-based account of agency.



cally and immanently intelligible. The realist account operates by way of the conflicts and reversals that constitute it. (101)

In my view, only a figurative effort can make the semiotic processes of a text intelligible in terms of the physical processes of a machine. And although Seltzer frequently punctuates his account with adverbs like “exactly,” “precisely,” “directly,” and other phrases calculated to evoke a sense of clockwork precision in textual relations, what he points out as a flaw in some recent criticism of naturalism, namely that “‘the market’ functions in that work at once as topic and as metaphor” (84), might equally be said of his use of “the machine.” If we are to take Seltzer’s phrase of the “melodrama of uncertain agency” seriously, therefore, we should apply it to his own discourse as well, seeing it enacted, for instance, in a rhetorical *tour de force* that combines the staggering display of interpretative virtuosity and daring with assertions of immanent evidence and clarity; or in the imputation of irrationality to critical opponents, aggrandizing the sense of antagonism and disavowing any affinities between critical positions.

Hindsight no doubt in large part accounts for the enactment of the melodrama of agency in this form – more specifically, the tension between exaggerated likeness and difference inherent in the particular vision of the past designated by hindsight. If hindsight consists in the retrospective perception of the nature and demands of historical events and circumstances, it creates an uncomfortable kinship between the past and the present, for the logic that makes sense of history belongs as much to the moment of perception as to the moment perceived. The continuity that emerges in this particular apprehension of the past is perhaps best understood as the felt trace of power, the sign of its historical effectiveness. The discomfort or unease that accompanies this perception then is a sense that the power which manifests itself so compellingly in the logic of historical events also threatens to absorb the subject who detects this logic. Hence a reflex tendency that is also part of the perspective of hindsight and which consists in a disavowal of kinship by the conversion of familiarity into a sign of mastery. This is perhaps most explicitly the case where the exposure of a logic is defined as a critical agenda, which almost automatically restricts the critical capacity of historical agents to the unconscious and symptomatic articulation of the logic inscribed in their affairs. In this double gesture of a claim to familiarity and a simultaneous disavowal of kinship, the perspective of hindsight betrays a preoccupation which tends to aggrandize if not mystify the phenomenon of power.

I do not mean to suggest that hindsight can simply be avoided in our dealing with the past, nor indeed that it cannot produce valuable insights into

the workings of historical processes. In fact, much literary scholarship has long deployed hindsight – though rarely called by that name – as the principal form of conceiving of its object of study. It notably characterizes the form of memory at work in literary tradition, ensuring the survival of texts down generations while effectively precluding substantial change to literary canons. Although of a conservative nature, however, hindsight nevertheless represents the ongoing possibility of bringing old texts (back) to life, and of discovering ever new patterns of meaning in them. We might even argue that one of the most influential kinds of literary readings, which identifies meaning with the kind of closure that is only recognizable in retrospect, deploys the perspective of hindsight in paradigmatic fashion. For the same reason, however, the reliance on hindsight tends to compromise the validity of historical study, since it takes the textualization of history for granted. But if we recognize the immediate legibility of historical reality as the work of power, then any historical analysis that aims to be more than a mere reflection, or even reinforcement, of the work of power cannot content itself with deciphering the logic that is apparently inscribed in events and circumstances of the past. Instead, it will seek to inquire into the operations and processes that lend power the permanence of a system of forces that can be described in terms of a textuality.

Such an understanding of the relations between power and textuality brings us back to the question of agency as an historical question. If we consider agency as part of an action, we need to locate it within the very processes that articulate and regulate power relations in a discursive order. It is in these processes that subjects emerge as agents, but their agency stems from the fact that as subjects they are “never fully constituted,” as Judith Butler writes, “but [are] subjected and produced time and again” (223). In other words, subjects are constituted as signs of power, but they do not stay in place and their signifying capacities exceed the meanings accounted for in any established discursive order. The question of agency can thus be asked in Butler’s terms:

what possibilities of mobilization are produced on the basis of existing configurations of discourse and power? Where are the possibilities of reworking that very matrix of power by which we are constituted, or reconstituting the legacy of that constitution, and of working against each other those processes of regulation that can destabilize existing power regimes? (223)

Accordingly, we might formulate our specific interest in the agency of writing by asking how texts challenge the stability of the textuality which, as the

discursive articulation of power, constrains and enables the activities of individual writers. Taking up this challenge, we might acknowledge that texts, as Edward Said has said, "are a system of forces institutionalized by the reigning culture at some human cost to its various components" and that criticism is "responsible to a degree for articulating those voices dominated, displaced, or silenced by the textuality of texts" (53).

In *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*, June Howard has produced the most sustained study of naturalist fiction in terms of such an understanding of textual agency. Acknowledging the textuality of history or reality as we know them, Howard sets out "to trace how naturalism is shaped by and imaginatively reshapes an historical experience that, although it exists outside representation and narrative, we necessarily approach through texts" (70). Her interest therefore lies in the ideological work of naturalist novels and she reads texts as interventions in a discursive environment that, although clearly marked by hegemonic relations, continues to be "a terrain of struggle over meanings" (82). Her study details the ways in which the discourse of naturalist literature emerges from an ideological context, drawing on and re-circulating images and messages, not only consolidating hegemonic ideologies but also performing important resignifications within a dominant discursive order. With regard to the omnipresent image of the Brute in naturalist fiction, for instance, Howard shows that "[w]orking with complex materials in the general ideology of the period, the naturalists invent an Other that is revealingly consistent but also significantly variable" (102). Avoiding the reduction of ideology to a logic, Howard sees in naturalism above all a concern with social problems and change, as well as with the remoteness of historical forces and the diminishing control over ideological processes. The result of these preoccupations is the emergence of the naturalist text as a generic formation, which not only exhibits an "immanent ideology" (142), but is also characterized by formal experimentation, combining what Howard calls "a documentary logic", "the plot of decline" and the dialogue with disparate generic discourses into "a *bricolage* of strategies for generating meaningful sequence and closure" (142).

In the following, I will adopt Howard's notion of the naturalist text as the result of an effort to integrate disparate ideological materials into an aesthetic form, but I will consider it more explicitly as the product of a conflicting engagement with the forces that articulate power relations in the shape of a textuality. I consider textuality then not only as the site of a struggle over meaning but more directly of a struggle over the means of representation and control of the public sphere. Emerging as texts, acts or proc-

esses of representation participate in this system of forces and in the contest over relative public influence. A text's agency may thus be recognized in the extent to which it succeeds in incorporating the forces that dominate textuality without being fully determined by them. Keeping this in mind, I will return to Frank Norris in the last section of this paper, in order to consider how the naturalist text stages and participates in the conflict at the heart of textuality and how it articulates the implications of this conflict for the organization of the public sphere in corporate society. But before I do this, let me sketch an image of the textuality in which naturalist writing emerged.

## II

Alan Trachtenberg closes his study of the Gilded Age, *The Incorporation of America*, with a discussion of White City, the Columbian Fair at Chicago in 1893. The Fair, as described by Trachtenberg, articulated the hegemonic power relations of corporate society in the shape of what we can consider an ideal textuality. White City was itself readable and offered a foil against which society could be read by its members: "White City represented itself as a representation, an admitted sham. Yet that sham, it insisted, held a truer vision of the real than did the troubled world sprawling beyond its gates" (231). The hegemonic nature of White City manifested itself precisely in this claim to superiority, not only over other representations of reality, but of itself as representation over reality, for in this the Fair could announce itself as a vision of the future. This vision, as Trachtenberg shows, contained a hierarchically integrated and harmonized arrangement of the forces that shaped reality:

The spectacle proclaimed order, unity, coherence – and mutuality now in the form of hierarchy. . . . Business and politics provided the structure, the legitimacy of power, the chain of command. Industrial technology provided the physical power, forces of nature mastered and chained to human will, typified by tens of thousands of electric bulbs controlled by a single switch. And culture served as the presiding genius, orchestrating design and style, coordinating effort. (230-31)

This self-representation of the corporate ideal made society resemble a gigantic machine, but it did so, as Trachtenberg's analysis also shows, by erasing from the picture all traces of manual labor and suppressing signs of social conflicts. At the heart of this machine was science providing the substance of the authority that ordered corporate society as a textuality. Science



not only provided the knowledge that would drive the progress of society; it also provided a textual model and a notion of the agency of writing that proved influential far beyond the confines of scientific inquiry. The scientific text might be described as the recording and structured arrangement of observed reality in the form of data, facts, and laws, notably in view of the reproduction of natural processes under controlled circumstances. The knowledge produced by science was not widely disseminated in textual form, but it became increasingly available for use and further processing in the shape of technology. The progress of science thus brought an increase in productivist rationality, a knowledge defined largely in operational and technical terms, abstracted from human performance and susceptible of direct inscription in the machine process shaping the human environment.<sup>3</sup>

This radical separation of operational knowledge from human performance also informed the authority invested in the scientific text. The scientific text did not present itself as the product of an imaginative effort or rhetorical intention but of a neutral observation of material reality. The scientist's work of recording and formalization should not appear as the product of any subjectivity, but should ideally be recognizable as the visible mark of natural forces. The more the scientist could efface himself as a writer, the more his writing could appear to emerge directly from the observed phenomena. Ideally then, scientific writing presented itself as a writing from within, and this location defined its authority and agency. The authority of the scientific text was thus directly related to the writer's ability to make himself invisible, while making apprehensible the invisible forces at work in natural processes. For this, the scientist's apparatus for observation had to integrate itself into the phenomena to be observed as a neutral component, the part that made the forces at work in these phenomena apprehensible not merely externally, in their effects, but internally, as causes and principles immanent in material reality. In a short-hand formulation: the scientist provided pen and paper, and nature did the writing. The particular agency of this writing consisted in its capacity to render apprehensible, and thus predictable and available, the invisible forces of nature.

---

<sup>3</sup> Michel de Certeau has analyzed this detachment of operational or technical knowledge from an older form of know-how, conceived of as an art. This process, which took place during the nineteenth century, not only led to the embodiment of operational knowledge in the industrial machine process, but also left behind an inarticulate kind of "knowledge" that is hardly recognizable as such but lingers on in everyday practices as something comparable to folklore. This fragmented "knowledge," according to de Certeau, "enters massively into the novel or the short story, most notably into the nineteenth-century realistic novel" (70).

Such an image of science characterized the idealizing view of science that placed it at the heart of corporate society, where it operated in analogy to the invisible forces of nature that it continually strove to discover. In this view, science, as the exercise of a disinterested curiosity, lent the society that applied its discoveries the aura of nature, and in this conferring of the qualities of naturalness on the corporate ideal resided the principal authorizing function of science. But of course it is doubtful whether science was ever merely driven by an idle curiosity uncontaminated by ideology, and scientific texts were not written by nature, but by literate men, mostly. As a form of writing, the scientific text inevitably relied on semiotic operations that also characterized other forms of writing. Most notable among the figurative structures favored by scientific discourse were binary relations, capable of articulating causation, motion and transformation, and a certain allegorization, assisting abstraction and the experimental transfer of properties from one phenomenon to another by analogy. In these figurative structures of scientific discourse we can recognize, as Veblen observed in 1906, not only the close association between scientific inquiry and industrial technology, but also a residual dramatism that endeavored to explain natural phenomena in terms of activity. According to Veblen, scientific accounts detached themselves from older metaphysical explanations and became "highly opaque, impersonal, and matter-of-fact" (16),

but hitherto no science (except ostensibly mathematics) has been content do to its theoretical work in terms of inert magnitude alone. Activity continues to be imputed to the phenomena with which science deals; and activity is, of course, not a fact of observation, but is imputed to the phenomena by the observer. (15)

Because of this preoccupation with activity, therefore, Veblen suggests that scientific accounts "must be admitted still to show the constraints of the dramatic prepossessions that once guided the savage myth-makers" (16).<sup>4</sup> In the 1890s, the need for scientific methods and standards was perhaps most strongly felt in occupations concerned with the improvement of social con-

---

<sup>4</sup> Veblen himself appears ambivalent about the growing influence of science in his society. On the one hand, he considers the cultural primacy of science a fact, which one might welcome or deplore, but not dispute (29). On the other hand, he shows himself disturbed by the fact that "the findings of science are not questioned on the whole" (27) and that scientific methods are emulated in all cultural disciplines: "The name of science is after all a word to conjure with. So much so that the name and the mannerisms, at least, if nothing more of science, have invaded all fields of learning and have even overrun territory that belongs to the enemy" (27). Veblen explicitly mentions theology, law and literature as branches of knowledge that, although in a sense "hostile" to science, in his day increasingly came under the influence of science.



ditions, the management of industrial relations, and the formation of government policies. This was the time when a new professional approach to problems of social welfare replaced the older charity approach, and it did so largely by an appeal to the authority of science. According to Don Kirschner, the emerging professionals were critical of sentimental charity as well as of partisan politics, because both paid undue attention to the individual and misrepresented the nature of society. In their view, social conditions were the product of forces beyond individual control that were as yet ill understood. The improvement of these conditions therefore required a sustained inquiry into society as a system of forces and the application of the findings in cooperative action. The pioneers in settlement work, public health and city planning developed new descriptive vocabularies and experimented with new methods of quantitative inquiry, rapidly compiling large amounts of data and information that soon could no longer be examined and managed by a single discipline and therefore made specialization and cooperation necessary. As Kirschner points out:

Each of these occupations followed similar lines of development, characterized by new theories, new methods, and new areas of specialization. In each case a group of experts emerged who claimed special competence in urban problems by virtue of their access to an expanding volume of more or less esoteric knowledge. In time, expertise donned the armor of professionalism in the form of special journals, organizations, and educational requirements. Soon the initiates shared an exclusive community of knowledge and activity that worked to limit the casual participation of part timers and outsiders. (6)

Social scientists thus extended the scientific model by analogy from the observation of natural phenomena to the study of society. If natural scientists promoted a metaphorical view of nature resembling a machine, the early social scientists in turn naturalized an image of the ideal society as a machine, a kind of an organism made up of elements operating in coordinated action.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the authority of the social scientist depended on his ability to present his writing as a writing from within: a formalized record of society as it revealed itself to scientific scrutiny. The particular agency of the

---

<sup>5</sup> This image of society proved very influential and was elaborated, for instance, in the science of work in the early twentieth century. The concept of society as an integrated machine also promoted a notion of human labor in terms of the metaphor of the "human motor," which Anson Rabinbach has most thoroughly examined. Rabinbach's study focuses mostly on the European development of the science of work, but he also includes a discussion of Taylor's program of scientific management, probably the best-known version of the "human motor" approach to labor in America.

social scientist, then, like that of the natural scientist, resided in his ability to render apprehensible, and thus predictable and manageable, the invisible forces of society. But the transfer of the scientific model from natural phenomena to social processes also brought to the fore implications that potentially compromised the scientist's authority and complicated his agency as an insider.

The ideal of society operating like a machine, which social scientists saw emerging from their work, after all resembled strongly the corporatist structures which defined the conditions and increasingly provided the means for social science investigation and control; and the ideal location of the scientists as a neutral observers inside the processes under scrutiny tended to coincide with the insider role that corporate organizations and the state prepared for them. This limited the critical influence of social scientists, as Mary Furner observes with regard to economists engaged in government investigations around the turn of the century:

participation in special blue-ribbon investigations gained economists access to the new, state-based process of investigation and control being constructed to monitor relations between capital and labor and define the role of the state in relation to corporate business. Economists chosen to play these "insider" roles were of course selected by the political leaders in power at the moment on the basis of reputation, previous contacts with officials, and the views they had expressed. (176)

Furner does not deny that social scientists had "an area of free agency" (176), but identifies it largely with the elaboration of a discursive apparatus surrounding the knowledge generated by their investigations. Their insider agency, it seems fair to say, thus mainly consisted in the perfection of the status quo, notably by establishing it as a scientific discipline.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, those among them who sought more substantial change would from time to time step out of the cooperative context that lent them their authority and seek to address and influence the public directly. For this purpose they

---

<sup>6</sup> In his account of the US Commission on Industrial Relations (CIR), 1912-1915, Leon Fink focuses specifically on the situation of politically radical social scientists working within corporate or state structures. He points out that although progressive reformers may have been skeptical of the philanthropic foundations by which private corporations sponsored social work, the CIR experience showed that the difference between state and business-sponsored investigations was in fact quite small. This is also Trachtenberg's view, who observes that from the 1880s government was increasingly influenced by the "new structures of corporate organization, of decision from above by a board of directors" (164). This does not mean that there was no rivalry between the state and corporate business, which a shrewd social scientist might perhaps take advantage of.

had to abandon scientific discourse and emerge as writers engaged in a rhetorical effort, dramatizing, for instance, statistical data in moving personal stories. Betting on their authority as scientists as they did so, they at the same time put their scientific credibility at risk. Where they succeeded, they helped to define the public interest and to shape the public into an effective force.<sup>7</sup>

Although science was mostly dependent on corporate business and state interests, then, the model of scientific authority based on intrinsic knowledge and a form of immanent writing that revealed an invisible environment, held a wide appeal in late nineteenth-century society, reaching well beyond the self-representations of natural and social scientists. Of course, only a minority of the textual production of the age could even pretend to meet scientific standards, but the scientific model functioned as a dominant ideological force within the textuality of corporate society. As such, it claimed a superiority over other forms of texts and obliged any writing aspiring to a degree of seriousness to place itself, and to pursue its agency, with reference to the scientific model. As an ideal standard, the model also operated as an ordering principle, regulating the ideal textual relations in the shape of something like a gravitational system with science at the center and minor representational forces orbiting around it.

The orbit of science would be the place of the public sphere in the corporate ideal. In fact, however, the public sphere at the end of the nineteenth century was anything but as well-ordered and controlled as the image of an orbit suggests. Indeed, the primacy of science in society brought to the fore what after the First World War people like Walter Lippmann and John Dewey would confront as the *problem* of the public.<sup>8</sup> The public was chiefly defined by its outsider position, its strategic exclusion from the productive processes of society. The reliance on science increasingly turned both busi-

---

<sup>7</sup> An important setting for such public activity was the courts, where, as Kirschner (15-23) points out, the early professionals found themselves contending with a judiciary that effectively defended corporate interests by laws designed to protect the individual. Trying to articulate the interests of a community affected by large propertied interests, they were led to redefine democracy while contesting individualism. Writing about the problem of the public in the 1920s, John Dewey would set himself the same task.

<sup>8</sup> Lippmann and Dewey started from a similar diagnosis that the complex and invisible forces shaping the human environment were beyond a single individual's comprehension, and both were concerned with the implications this fact had for the practicability of democracy. But while Lippmann took the cognitive weakness of the individual as evidence for the impossibility of democracy, Dewey strove to dissociate democracy from the notion of an autonomous individual by considering how an "inchoate and amorphous" public could be "organized into effective political action" (125).

ness administration and government into insider affairs and led to the growth of a public that by the 1890s had already become salient as a great mass of people outside. As Dewey would define it, the public consisted of the collectivity of those who were indirectly affected in a serious and lasting way by the consequences of associated actions. The public was thus not an association formed on the basis of a common interest; rather, something like a public interest could only emerge and become effective once a collectivity of outsiders could be recognized. For this, the public had to be properly represented, which, according to Dewey, was the function of the officials forming the state. The transformation of politics into a machine, however, and the attendant growth of the public in both size and heterogeneity, made the question of proper representation the principal problem of the public. As Dewey put it:

It is not that there is no public, no large body of persons having a common interest in the consequences of social transactions. There is too much public, a public too diffused and scattered and too intricate in composition. And there are too many publics, for conjoint actions which have indirect, serious and enduring consequences are multitudinous beyond comparison, and each one of them crosses the others and generates its own group of persons especially affected with little to hold these different publics together in an integrated whole. (137)

As Trachtenberg's discussion of government and party politics (161-73) shows, this situation already pertained in the 1890s. In the absence of a reliable standard of representation, the public sphere became the site of an ongoing conflict among a multitude of representational forces and agencies, competing for influence and striving to incorporate as large a section of the public as possible.

### III

Such was, then, the shape of the textuality in which naturalist writing emerged. As the set of conditions underpinning the emergence of voices and acts of representation as texts and determining their relative authority and influence among other texts and other forms of representation, this textuality was principally characterized by two related but discontinuous spheres: an insider sphere, which drew its authority from the rigorous standard of representation of science, and an outsider sphere defining a public that, although mobilized by representation, lacked a standard and thus was the site of ram-

pant and uncontrolled representational activity. The discontinuity between the two spheres presented "serious" writers of the age with a challenge in which they might find their own professional vocation.<sup>9</sup> Those able to recognize the primacy of the scientific representation of reality could thus feel called upon to fashion, on the basis of this recognition, a standard of representation that promised to order the public sphere into a cultural space resembling the form of an orbit around the gravitational center occupied by science. Writers who took up this challenge found themselves straddling both spheres and this position (in-between and slightly above) lent them their precarious authority and that sense of uncertain agency, which resulted in the predilection for melodrama as one of the narrative strategies June Howard has observed in naturalist fiction (172).

The case of Frank Norris is most interesting in this context because the preoccupation with professional standards of (literary) representation led him into a particularly involved engagement with the representational forces of his day. In his late essays, written in 1901 and 1902, Norris again and again returns to the problems confronting the professional novelist: problems of authority, of the relationship between the novel and other genres and arts, problems of training and method, of the novelist's public responsibility, and of the economic viability of fiction writing. The assertive tone and the authoritative views Norris expresses on such issues as the superiority of the novel over all other art forms, or the patriotic responsibility of novelists and their commitment to truth, tend to dispel the sense that he is dealing with problems at all. But it is clear that the authority that informs his essays is above all an effect of Norris's rhetoric, which tends to make him appear twice his own age. The problems that he addresses remain problems, regarding, for instance, the foundation of professional authority in the absence of the objectifying support of formal training and an elaborate apparatus, or the passage from the close observation of reality to a carefully constructed plot. We do not need to suspect that Norris is being dishonest in order to recognize that he is assuming a role in his essays. Indeed, his rhetoric shows

---

<sup>9</sup> Professionalism would soon become a dominant cultural force, resulting in a certain "democratization" of scientific standards, as employees could experience their work as cooperatively bringing a complex body of knowledge to bear for a better society. By 1910 this ideology of professionalism had established itself in the form of a recognizable class, as both Steven Brint and Richard Ohmann have shown. In the 1890s, it was still emergent. Meanwhile corporate culture strove to order the public sphere into something like an orbit by staging the technological and managerial application of science as a spectacle and assembling the public as "witnesses to an unanswerable performance which they had no hand in producing or maintaining" (Trachtenberg 231).



him quite aware of the fact that he is inserting his voice into pre-established generic constraints. As Robert Morace has pointed out, Norris knew his audience and knew what was expected of him. But while this must warn us against using the essays to establish an "authorized" version of the novels, we may still recognize a commonality in the concerns expressed in both genres. Norris's ambivalence about the status of the professional in society, notably regarding the slippery distinction between the charlatan and the expert and the corruptibility of professional standards, has been suggested by David Hedderdorf. I think that this ambivalence also affects Norris's questioning of the status of the novel amid the representational forces of his day, and his inquiry into the cultural power of mimesis. It is in the dialogue, and specifically in the contradictions, both within and between his novels and his essays, that we can witness a rhetoric of approximation with which Norris seems to probe the limits of textuality. This rhetoric of approximation brings together, without resolving the tensions between them, Norris's ideological investment in the corporate ideal and its notion of scientific authority, and his allegiance to the public and its persistent disregard for representational standards. The two orientations coexist in Norris's rhetoric in the form of idolatrous and iconoclastic impulses, and I want to end this essay by sketching their import in Norris's fiction.<sup>10</sup>

Norris's idolatrous side is the more familiar one of the two. This is the Norris who is drawn to the scientific ideal and its authorizing power. Thus it appears at times as if Norris took literally the figurative underpinnings of the scientific text, which endow nature itself with the capacity of writing. In this view, writing or, in a wider sense, representation is conceived of as a motive force analogous to natural forces. Some such belief or confidence seems to motivate Norris's most daring stylistic experimentation, and indeed his sense of experimentation as such. Among the most striking stylistic features of Norris's novels are the use of bold allegorizations, extreme contrasts, and the application of similar imagery to diverse objects. Looked at from this experimental angle, it seems tempting to consider these features as Norris's staging of the semiotic props of the scientific text: its predilection for binary relations and its allegorical conception of phenomena as behavioral units susceptible to the experimental abstraction, exchange and modification of properties. I cannot illustrate this in any detail here, but we may think of

---

<sup>10</sup> My use of "idolatry" and "iconoclasm" here is indebted to W.J.T. Mitchell's *Iconology*. The elaboration of the rhetoric of approximation combining the two impulses in Norris is part of a larger project on the public space of writing in American narrative literature at the turn of the century.



Norris's allegorical conception of his characters in all his naturalist novels and the way he constructs his plots on the basis of a variation and repetition of contrastive character constellations. *McTeague* comes immediately to mind, but so does *Vandover and the Brute* with its allegorically conceived trio of Vandover, Geary and Haight, who are brought together in variable pairings, allowing repeated exposure of their contrasts. The same applies to *The Pit* and its allegorical cast and, in a different way, also to *The Octopus*, where the most memorable contrast is perhaps not the juxtaposition of two characters but that of the starving Mrs. Hooven and the Gerard banquet toward the novel's ending. What makes these contrasts even more striking is the fact that Norris tends to apply the same imagery to characters or objects that seem to be very different. Thus, for instance, he uses the same image of galloping hoofs in a variety of contexts, referring to the railroad as well as to the mental states of characters as different as Vandover, Presley and Curtis Jadwin. Or he evokes the awakening of the Brute in Vandover and *McTeague* in the same terms as the desire for artistic creation in both Vandover and Presley.

In a certain sense, then, we might say that Norris appears to be conducting scientific experiments with his characters, bringing them together in various contrastive constellations and using his pen to apply some catalyzing substance, in order to see what will happen. The "terrible things" that he expects to "happen to the characters of the naturalistic tale" (*Novels and Essays* 1107), would thus appear to be the effect of representational forces that his experiments have unleashed and made manifest. In a recent essay on the performative in *McTeague*, William Dow supports such a reading, suggesting that "[t]he intention . . . of Norris's experimentation . . . is to reveal the meaning of Zola's 'phénomènes naturels,' the forces behind human culture that Norris can only approximate in *McTeague*" (80). The hypothesis behind these experiments would be the existence of something like natural representation or automatic writing, an ideal that is perhaps most compellingly evoked when Vandover's artistic mastery gives way to what appears to be the spontaneous expression of the Brute in "[g]rotesque and meaningless shapes" (*Novels and Essays* 167). In that it points to such a hypothesis, Norris's stylistic experimentation lends credibility to the readings proposed by Walter Benn Michaels and Mark Seltzer, which observe a certain fetishism of representation in Norris's fiction or the emergence of an autoerotic machine-god as an object of worship. In order to integrate Norris's texts into either a corporate logic or the logistics of a machine process, however, a critic must be prepared to yoke together what Norris merely juxtaposes. In

so doing, we disregard the sense of willfulness and contrivance that attends Norris's experimentation and effectively prevents it from achieving a satisfactory metaphorical closure. Where it has been noticed, this resistance to the logic of incorporation has commonly tended to increase the embarrassment that the idolatrous Norris causes his critics, as is quite remarkably expressed in Ronald Martin's judgment of *The Octopus*:

The scheme was simply too ambitious, as Norris was basically too derivative a novelist to invent the literary form and the philosophical vision that would integrate it all. The result was an impressive, problematical, fictive novel, a colossal, hairlifting failure, for which each reader can essentially have his own interpretation. (175)

I think that Martin's observation of the derivativeness of Norris's art is pertinent, but I would hesitate to qualify this as a failure. In fact, I would argue that the derivative nature of Norris's writing draws attention to the iconoclastic impulse in his rhetoric of approximation. Despite his insistence on the virility of novel writing as an outdoors activity and his assertion that a novel is made of "life, not other people's novels" (*Novels and Essays* 1159), Norris's writing in large part appears to be the product of his reading. Not only did he regularly draw his inspiration, subject matter and background from written sources, both literary and non-literary, as Donald Pizer has shown. The recurrence of the same images, phrases and sentences throughout his work as well as the literary allusions that can be detected in it, lend his texts the dimension of a system of quotations that foregrounds the textuality of his fiction and disturbs the mimetic illusion. Some of these quotations indeed seem to be calculated to open a performative context in which Norris can be seen to stage the conflicts between different forms of representation, media, genres, and styles. Thus when in *McTeague* he drops allusions that, as William Cain has pointed out (207-8), liken McTeague to Othello and Trina to Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he not only enlarges the range of meaning or evokes a dramatic analogy to his story, but also self-consciously raises the question of artistic value. One of the most explicit dramatizations of this question equally seems to have entered Norris's text in the form of a quotation. According to Richard Davison, the episode surrounding Presley's derivative poem "The Toilers" in *The Octopus* is a direct allusion to the success of Edwin Markham's poem "The Man With the Hoe" which was inspired by Jean Millet's famous painting "Man with the Hoe" and published in 1899.

The issues at stake in the episode surrounding "The Toilers" regard the function of art in society and the relative value and status of different art forms. The contest between art forms is a central theme in all of Norris's naturalist novels, and in a sense it can be seen to revolve around the question of the primacy of verbal over visual art. But the fact that the representation of visual art forms is generally far more differentiated than the representation of literary forms, suggests that Norris is using the reference to visual arts in order to reflect on the image making qualities of literature. Again, I cannot provide detailed illustration here, but we may think of the many references to visual art that occur in *McTeague* alone, ranging from decorative and commercial art, through painting and photography, to theater and early cinematic representation. Artists feature prominently in both *Vandover* and *The Pit*, which abound in scenes debating artistic styles and quality. Meanwhile Presley in *The Octopus* is the only writer to speak of in Norris's work, beside the author himself. Although the relative merit of different forms of visual representation is constantly at issue, however, I do not think that we can deduce a consistent hierarchy of art forms from Norris's texts, because his handling of the matter is again performative rather than expository and his technique again approximation. Thus the same characters are exposed to different forms of visual representation successively, characters are brought into interaction who hold different aesthetic theories, and Norris's writing at different times approximates the effect of different visual representations of the same character or scene.

Norris's principal concern in this seems to be the power of images to move people, in the strongest sense of both psychological motivation and physical mobilization, and the purpose of his experimentation appears to be to expose the mechanism that supports this power. The power of images rests on their claim to truth, their capacity to conjure an impression of lifelikeness and immediacy, which Norris again and again exposes as an illusion. In the case of "The Toilers," for instance, Shelgrim, who is sometimes taken as the final authority on the matter in *The Octopus*, asserts that he prefers the painting over the poem because it came first and because, without words, it says more than the poem (*Novels and Essays* 1035-36). As compelling as this sounds to Presley, I doubt whether we are meant to endorse it as Norris's view. Shelgrim's principal reason for preferring the picture is that it was there first. He has no idea of where "the great French painter" took his idea from, but he believes that his is a "first hand" expression and therefore superior to the poem, which can only ever refer back to the painting that inspired it. His judgment is thus based on a preconception – quite

literally the “picture in his head,” as Lippmann would later call our preconceptions – quite as much as the judgment of others, like Vanamée, who consider the poem to be original and true to life, because they have not seen the painting, which belongs after all to the industrialist Cedarquist’s private collection.

The power of preconceptions to shape our perception of reality is of course a central issue in *The Octopus*, where several of the principal characters experience extraordinary visions that seem to answer their profoundest psychological needs. But I think that Norris quite generally works to destroy the illusion of immediate mimeticism by exposing the verbal nature of the pictures in characters’ heads, thereby underlining that preconceptions are produced and shared in and through language. Lee Clark Mitchell has shown that language indeed appears as the most deterministic force in *Vandover and the Brute*, shaping people’s perception of each other and their world and inevitably leading to false accusations and judgments. Similarly, Norris draws attention to the verbal nature of seemingly the most overwhelming impressions by often repeating them *verbatim*, or by pushing the figurative vocabulary to its extreme where it defies any attempt at reintegrating an image in any mimetic sense. The most obvious example is the representation of the railroad as seen by Presley’s inner eye at the end of the first chapter of *The Octopus*, but a similar effect is achieved by the replaying of the same images at different points in *Vandover* and *McTeague*.

In a sense, this technique can of course still be seen as a way of asserting the superiority of the verbal over the visual image, but Norris’s rhetoric of approximation works both ways and equally tends to undermine the writer’s claim to truth in representation. Norris not only approximated visual images to verbal objects in a manner that disrupts the mimetic illusion. According to Ron Mottram, he also often strove to approximate photographic and cinematic effects in his writing, and to mirror the techniques of photography and the motion picture, in a way that made him an inspiring source for film directors in the twentieth century. Mottram’s analysis suggests that Norris perceived an analogy between mental images, such as a literary representation evokes, and the moving images produced by cinematic representation. The analogy indicates that the most potent images are those that capture motion, but also establishes a similarity between the rhetorical devices involved in the production of literary images and the technological apparatus deployed in the production of moving pictures. Indeed, the very construction of the analogy foregrounds the image making apparatus in Norris’s text and thereby exhibits the foundation of the writer’s authority.



This ties in finally with the highlighting of the performative qualities of Norris's narratives, which continually tend to challenge the authority of their narrator. The shifting attitudes and positions of the narrator in *McTeague*, at once assuming omniscience and pleading ignorance, have been observed by Dow and Cain. Similarly, Lee Clark Mitchell has pointed out the unreliability of the narrative voice in *Vandover*, which, like the protagonist himself, appears to be trapped in a language that is at odds with the implications of the narrated sequence of events (394). And in *The Octopus*, various characters at different times assume authoritative perspectives in a way that leaves no room for a separate narrative authority to establish itself. If Norris's rhetoric of approximation here shows itself in a tendency to collapse the epistemological boundaries between narrator and characters, the ultimate arbitrariness of the writer's authority is perhaps most clearly exposed in those scenes that are generally acknowledged as the most melodramatic in Norris's fiction: the presence of the author in his work is indeed nowhere more apparent than in the depiction of his characters' deaths, which, as Dow has said, are effectively "staged" (87). The closing scene of *McTeague* and perhaps even more the death of S. Behrman in *The Octopus*, appear to be so overwritten that they can hardly be read as anything other than the author's assertion of his representational power by destroying the images of his own creation. At this point in Norris's rhetoric of approximation, then, the author's iconoclasm in turn comes close to a form of idolatry.

Norris's writing shows a preoccupation and fascination with the phenomenon of power that, as William Cain has observed, make him both disturbing and embarrassing. It has been my aim here, however, to suggest that if we resist the temptation to submit Norris's texts to a logic of incorporation and instead read them in terms of a rhetoric of approximation, we can see a writer who, despite the deterministic force of any representational system, vindicates representation as a human prerogative. The most terrible things happen to people in Norris's fiction when they are absorbed by a single representational force, and he seems prone to dramatize this again and again. At the same time, his rhetoric suggests that he is pursuing a sense of agency in a tactic of approximation, which strives to incorporate disparate representational forces in his texts, yet resists being fully determined by any one of them. This sense of agency implies an acknowledgment of limited control and hence the assumption of a certain risk, counting on an element of unpredictability in even the most strictly reproductive processes. This is a sense of agency that is not often available to Norris's characters, and even those among them with the keenest sense of gambling, like Vandover, Magnus

Derrick or Curtis Jadwin, fall in the end. If we were to find a character in Norris's naturalist novels who approximates the role of a model for this sense of agency most closely, I would suggest that we consider Laura Dearborn in *The Pit*. She has the deepest appreciation of the performative nature of identity and she assumes her various roles with a combination of melodramatic indulgence and self-conscious observation that lends her character a psychological depth rarely achieved by any of Norris's creations.



## References

- Brint, Steven. *In an Age of Experts: The Changing Role of Professionals in Politics and Public Life*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Butler, Judith. "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism.'" *Critical Encounters: Reference and Responsibility in Deconstructive Writing*. Ed. Cathy Caruth and Deborah Esch. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995. 213-32.
- Cain, William E. "Presence and Power in *McTeague*." *American Realism: New Essays*. Ed. Eric J. Sundquist. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982. 199-214.
- Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
- Davison, Richard Allan. "Frank Norris and the Arts of Social Criticism." *American Literary Realism* 14.1 (Spring 1981): 77-89.
- Dewey, John. *The Public and Its Problems*. (1927). Athens, O.H.: Swallow Press, 1988.
- Dow, William. "Fiction is not Real: The Performative and Norris's *McTeague*." *ESQ* 21.2 (1996): 77-92.
- Fink, Leon. "Expert Advice: Progressive Intellectuals and the Unraveling of Labor Reform, 1912-1915." *Intellectuals and Public Life: Between Radicalism and Reform*. Ed. Leon Fink, Stephen T. Leonard, and Donald M. Reid. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996. 182-213.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. (1977). London: Penguin, 1991.
- . "Truth and Power." Interview. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. Ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. 109-33.
- Furner, Mary O. "Social Scientists and the State: Constructing the Knowledge Base for Public Policy, 1880-1920." *Intellectuals and Public Life: Between Radicalism and Reform*. Ed. Leon Fink, Stephen T. Leonard, and Donald M. Reid. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996. 145-81.
- Heddendorf, David. "The 'Octopus' in *McTeague*: Frank Norris and Professionalism." *Modern Fiction Studies* 37.4 (Winter 1991): 677-88.
- Howard, June. *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.

- Kirschner, Don S. *The Paradox of Professionalism: Reform and Public Service in Urban America, 1900-1940*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986.
- Lippmann, Walter. *Public Opinion*. (1922). New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1991.
- Martin, Ronald E. *American Literature and the Universe of Force*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1981.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- . "An American Tragedy, or the Promise of American Life." *The New American Studies: Essays from Representations*. Ed. Philip Fisher. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. 171-98.
- Mitchell, Lee Clark. "'Little Pictures on the Lacquered Surface': The Determining Vocabularies of Norris's *Vandover and the Brute*." *Papers on Language and Literature* 22.4 (Fall 1986): 386-405.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Morace, Robert A. "The Writer and His Middle Class Audience: Frank Norris, A Case in Point." *Critical Essays on Frank Norris*. Ed. Don Graham. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980. 53-62.
- Mottram, Ron. "Impulse Toward the Visible: Frank Norris and Photographic Representation." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 25.4 (Winter 1983): 574-96.
- Norris, Frank. *Novels and Essays*. Ed. Donald Pizer. New York: Library of America, 1986.
- . *The Pit*. (1902). New York: Penguin, 1994.
- Ohmann, Richard. *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century*. London: Verso, 1996.
- Pizer, Donald. *The Novels of Frank Norris*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966.
- Rabinbach, Anson. *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Said, Edward. "The World, the Text, and the Critic." *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. (1983). London: Vintage, 1991. 31-53.
- Seltzer, Mark. *Bodies and Machines*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Taylor, Frederick Winslow. *The Principles of Scientific Management*. (1911). Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1998.

- Trachtenberg, Alan. *The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.
- Veblen, Thorstein. "The Place of Science in Modern Civilisation." (1906). *The Place of Science in Modern Civilization and Other Essays*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publ., 1990. 1-31.