

Ethnic Writers, “Thick Description,” and American Literary Naturalism

When we think of realism and naturalism in American literature, certain writers and texts immediately leap to mind: Frank Norris’ *The Octopus* or *McTeague*; Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* or *An American Tragedy*; Henry James’s *The Ambassadors* or *The Wings of the Dove*. A second thought might lead one to Willa Cather’s or Edith Wharton’s work. Most treatments of these movements, however, do not include works by working-class ethnic writers or writers only recently immigrated to America. Nevertheless, a number of immigrant writers from the early and middle twentieth century deliberately employ techniques of realism and naturalism, but especially of naturalism, in their work. Many ethnic or immigrant writers share the political and philosophical concerns of their more famous Anglo-American forerunners; they certainly share their aesthetic interests and techniques. The Italian-American Pietro DiDonato, in *Christ in Concrete* (1939), and the Slovakian-American Thomas Bell, in *Out of This Furnace* (1941), both show marked sympathies for a number of the basic tenets of naturalism. Of particular interest are their emphases on the hereditary nature of the circumstances of their central characters, the difficulties of their struggle for survival, the deterministic nature of their socioeconomic situations, and their ultimate failures to control both their destinies or their environments to their satisfaction.

Nevertheless, while their works parallel traditional naturalist texts in a number of ways, DiDonato and Bell both depart somewhat from the “formula” for objective narrative that is so often a part of this tradition. While both writers sustain a detailed, realistic accuracy in envisioning the lives of their characters, they present their narratives from a far less remote position, one from which they covertly guide readers to a sympathetic understanding of the central characters; this carefully measured proximity gives an almost choral voice to the narratives. This choral voice, as I will call it, may come from a number of places; however, the most obvious source is the basically autobiographical origins of their stories. Each writer chooses to remain proximate to the story and to bring the reader close, as well. This practice parallels that of the narrator in Rebecca Harding Davis’ early realistic masterpiece, “Life in the

Iron Mills,” who tells her auditors: “I am going to be honest. This is what I want you to do. I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down here with me, --here, into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia. I want you to hear this story” (Davis 199). These writers want that kind of passionate attention from their readers; DiDonato and Bell seek to maintain it with a choral voice.

The use of a traditionally *dramatic* choral voice in *Christ in Concrete* and *Out of this Furnace* may initially incline literary historians to discount these works as legitimate naturalistic texts. However, I argue that they are in fact true descendants of the naturalist tradition, and that their differences bear some striking parallels to the differences between earlier and more contemporary practices in anthropological studies. A productive way for looking at how these novels fit into the naturalistic tradition, extending the tradition without disrupting it, comes from the field of anthropology, where the growth of “‘fourth-world’ studies” has changed the methods of collecting and presenting field research.¹ In addition to their similarities to “fourth-world” anthropologists, DiDonato and Bell use a narrative technique that closely resembles the practice of “thick description,” a pattern of heavily-layered description and analysis best represented in the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz.²

¹ Briefly, “‘fourth-world’ studies” is the term given to anthropological research on communities or tribes conducted either by tribal members who, while fully schooled in anthropological theory and fully trained in the methods of anthropological research and observation, choose to remain active community members, or to outsiders who choose to become active members of the group they study. The results of their research often differ markedly from those garnered by earlier, more traditional researchers who maintained both physical and emotional distance from their subjects. Fourth-world studies, while initially controversial, has gained wide acceptance, partly because of the more richly detailed information and understanding it yields.

² Clifford Geertz’s accounts of life in Bali, Java, and Morocco, undertaken and published in the 1950s ‘60s, and ‘70s, have caused a true sea change in his discipline. Geertz was the first American anthropologist to employ a textual metaphor for understanding culture (Silverman 121). Geertz has himself suggested that “the essay, whether of thirty pages or three hundred, has seemed the natural genre in which to present cultural interpretations and the theories sustaining them” (Geertz, *IC*, 25). Geertz’s research consistently demonstrates that his informants are keenly aware of their roles in their local cultures and that they understand how their actions influence and are influenced by both the local and the global cultures that surround them. His essays, always highly narrative, clearly reveal his informants “as actors rather than subjects” (Silverman 124). To illustrate their self-conscious activity, Geertz practices a form of reporting that is almost Whitmanesque in its depth and multiplicity of information, a form he calls “thick description.” He demonstrates the value of thick description both to convey a rich and nuanced understanding of a culture to those outside of it, and to make explicit the depth of cultural knowledge that natives must possess. To present his accounts of the Balinese cockfight or the Javanese theatre-state, Geertz does not take the role of detached reporter; in literary terms, he is not Henry James’s lucid reflector, disappearing transparently into the text. Neither does he maintain the egoistic centrality of Dickens’ hapless Pip. Instead, Geertz mediates a peripheral but interested position as a participant in local culture. Geertz maintains the role of what Renato Rosaldo

I suggest a way for reading *Christ in Concrete* and *Out of This Furnace* that both elucidates and models their methodology; while we observe the level of thick description in the novels, we also practice the techniques of close reading that writers of thick description have performed on their subjects. By drawing the parallels between “fourth-world” studies and immigrant fiction, and between “thick description” and naturalistic detail, readers may see more readily that the concerns of these later immigrant novelists are quite close to those of earlier naturalists. Beginning with some background reading on genre and moving to what Geertz has written about thick description, students gain an understanding of the shift in anthropological study as an extension of traditional theories and practices that enables them to return to the subject of naturalism with a slightly different understanding of the relationship between the earlier naturalistic writers and these particular novelists.

Students in the Novel course where I teach *Christ in Concrete* and *Out of this Furnace* are generally sophomores, English majors or minors, with some background in American or British literature, so they already have some experience working with literary texts, but they may have relatively little experience with the critical history of the genre or specific literary movements. The course is designed to focus on the novel as a genre and introduce students to a variety of themes and some of the forms that these thematic explorations can take. The course strives for breadth rather than depth and thus includes novels from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries, by both British and American writers. The novels we usually read before we get to the ethnic writers considered here include *The Scarlet Letter*, *Jane Eyre*, *Great Expectations*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Sister Carrie*, and *McTeague*. *Portrait* and *Sister Carrie* are especially relevant in this context because both focus on a central character whose relationships with others change her social class and her self-awareness, and because both are told by a narrative voice which strongly suggests its partisanship with the central character, even while maintaining a pose of detached distance from her. While there are many elements in the

has called a “‘positioned observer’--a recognition that ‘you *are* somebody: you come out of a certain class; you come out of a certain place; you go into a certain country; you then go home; you do *all* of these things’” (Olson 246).

two works that likewise distinguish them sharply, these similarities provide for significant discussion and enable students to extend this discussion to the later works. From the thematic and formal commonalities they identify in James and Dreiser, students can discuss how differently the roles of fate and free will function in these novels and establish a shared understanding of how much or how little the writers participate in a tradition of realistic and naturalistic writing.

At this point, we read some background material,³ starting with Vernon Parrington's lecture on "Naturalism in American Fiction," which gives students an outline of "the criteria of naturalism." As I hope they will, students generally take most seriously Parrington's emphasis on "A philosophy of determinism," which he calls "the vital principle of naturalism. . . . a philosophy that sets man in a mechanical world and conceives of him as victimized by that world (Parrington 324, 325)." I also note that another important element of Parrington's essay is the section titled, "Naturalism and the Conception of Tragedy." Parrington's deliberate reference to tragic drama is striking; equally striking is how later critics (for example, Donald Pizer) take up this term. Parrington's focus is on the "noble character of heroic proportions," an important dramatic element in its own right, but also the element of Greek tragedy most closely connected to the role of the chorus. The chorus often understands what the characters do not, and the choral voice always recognizes how the actions of the characters affect the chorus itself. The chorus is connected to the central characters without actually being at the center. Although modern readers are often impatient with the chorus, it is important to recognize the chorus' role as both interpreter and guide for the audience's response to the central characters. The chorus occupies an instructive role similar to that of a first-person narrator like Jane Eyre or Philip Pirrip. Like them, the chorus articulates an emotional and functional reaction to the events it witnesses, signaling to the reader how to feel and respond. At the same time, the chorus maintains a more distanced perspective than the central characters and creates the sense of reportorial accuracy that

³ To conserve some time and to keep the focus of the course on the primary texts, students work in small groups where one student in each group reads one of the assigned critical essays and reports on it to the rest of the group. Groups then make brief reports to the class with an eye toward reaching a common understanding of what about the critical essay will be helpful in their subsequent reading of the novels.

readers expect from a third-person narrator: the chorus, like a third-person narrator, often explains why things have happened and announces their import. The voice of the chorus in Greek drama, then, is not that of a detached observer, but rather of a very interested bystander, whose own life depends on the outcome of the story, who feels with and for the central characters, and who enjoins the audience to do the same. In my reading of their work, DiDonato's and Bell's narrators serve a deliberately choral function in *Christ in Concrete* and *Out of This Furnace*.

In addition to Parrington's essay, students read later critical essays, such as Charles Walcutt's "New Ideas in the Novel," and Donald Pizer's "American Literary Naturalism: The Example of Dreiser," or the Introduction ("American Naturalism in the 1890s") to Pizer's *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism* to get a sense of how later critics expand on both the initial theories of naturalism developed by Dreiser and Norris and the first analysis by Parrington. Generally, students come to understand that naturalism may initially have been seen as a form practiced by a particular group of writers at the turn of the century and carried on in disparate corners of the literary scene after 1915, but that more recent critics have consistently argued for a much larger number of writers working within the naturalist tradition, especially in the years following the First World War.⁴ Of particular interest are their emphases on the inherited and difficult struggles of their central characters, their highly deterministic socioeconomic situations, and their ultimate failures to control both their destinies or their environments to their satisfaction. Students will look for these specific naturalistic elements when they go back to reading the novels.

Finally, students read two additional essays, Susan Harris' "Problems of Representation in Turn-of-the-Century Immigrant Fiction" and Elizabeth Ammons' "Expanding the Canon of American Realism." The revisionist work of Harris and Ammons ably demonstrates that

⁴ Donald Pizer (in *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism*, 1982), John Conder (in *Naturalism in American Fiction*, 1984) and Paul Civello (in *American Literary Naturalism and Its Twentieth-Century Transformations: Frank Norris, Ernest Hemingway, and Don DeLillo*, 1994), and numerous other scholars, have taken great pains to trace the successful continuation of the naturalist tradition beyond the period of its initial flourishing. Pizer notes at least two periods of resurgence, and Civello suggests there may have been a third.

immigrant and minority writers from the earlier period of American realism deserve to be taken seriously as part of the tradition of American literary realism because of the ways that their work deliberately employs many of the themes and formal structures typical of realistic writing. In Harris' essay, which focuses on the work of Abraham Cahan, students find strategies for understanding the immigrant writer's dual task of "translat[ing] the culture as well as [telling] a tale. . . . how his intercession will shape the reader's perception of the culture" (Harris 137). Ammons' work not only provides students with another carefully annotated review of scholarship on American realism; her proposal of taking a multicultural approach to "the multiple realities figured in the broadest possible range of authors writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" reminds them that, while the experiences of DiDonato's and Bell's characters may closely parallel those of Dreiser and Norris, their purpose in writing about those characters may lead them to make some different formal choices. Nevertheless, those few different choices do not move them out of the tradition of naturalism.⁵

After reviewing this first section of criticism, we then read *McTeague*. One element students invariably notice about this novel is its "voice," and they are quite definite in their belief that one of the markers that distinguishes Norris from other writers we have read (for example, Hawthorne, Bronte, or Dickens) is the "scientific," "objective" point of view. Students speculate on reasons for this more remote, more detached voice: "the narrator doesn't want us to identify with the characters"; "the narrator doesn't like these characters." We talk about other motivations, as well: Norris' possible commitment to portraying a mechanistic world that dehumanizes individuals; his putative valorizing of a world-view where "fate" outstrips "grace" as a force affecting individuals' lives; the possibility that Norris, as well as some other writers, is

⁵ I realize that my brief mention of it here does not do justice to the importance of Ammons' essay, which has already been multiply anthologized, first in *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism* and more recently in *Documents of American Realism and Naturalism*. Beginning with the question of whether the relatively small and homogeneous group of authors traditionally designated as American realists truly captures the full breadth of American literary expression in the realist mode, Ammons carefully articulates an alternate, multiculturalist paradigm for canon formation that is "intellectually provocative, inclusive, historically sound, and pedagogically flexible" (Ammons 98). She demonstrates the richness of her approach with close readings of works by Sui Sin Far, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Charles Chesnutt, and Zitkala Sa. These readings reveal that, while these works all embody most (and sometimes, all) of the major elements of realistic writing, they do so in ways somewhat different from works by white, Euro-American, male authors.

blind to his own class prejudice and how it affects the portrayal of characters seeking to move out of poverty and into the greater prosperity of the middle class. *McTeague* thus provides a good place to cross over to the world of anthropological study, and so we read Geertz's essay here.

In order to use Geertz's approach, students read "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," which describes the important symbolic and political functions of cockfighting in Bali.⁶ The essay begins with a detailed description of how Geertz's investigation began when, in the course of observing an illegal cockfight in the village where he was staying, he instinctively "behaved like a local" and ran from the authorities when the cockfight was raided. His unstudied and unplanned response to the police raid resulted in a change in his status within the local community from "Distinguished Visitor" to "co-villager" and afforded him "a sudden and unusually complete acceptance into a society extremely difficult to penetrate. . . . It put [him] *very quickly* on to a combination emotional explosion, status war, and philosophical drama of central significance to the society whose inner nature [he] desired to understand" (Geertz, *IC*, 416-17, emphasis added).

This essay gives students a way of understanding what Geertz calls "local knowledge": a process of knowing which requires "a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring them into simultaneous view" (Geertz, *LK*, 69)--a process which effectively describes the narrative technique of DiDonato and Bell. The discussion of point of view that is affected by Geertz's essay gives students a more rounded conception of the role of narration in influencing how they understand the story, but it also helps them to think about some of the other, more thematic, philosophical components of naturalistic writing, as well.

Another important benefit accrues from reading about the Balinese cockfight before we return to the novels: just as he illustrates a perspective that some earlier naturalists, particularly Dreiser and Norris, eschew, Geertz also validates and valorizes that perspective from within the

⁶ As a point of interest, I note that Geertz and his way of "reading culture" have achieved a wider recognition in literary critical circles than just in my own classroom. The most recent edition of *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, Second Edition (David H. Richter, editor. New York: Bedford Books, St. Martin's Press, 1997), includes Geertz's essay in the section on cultural criticism.

context of a science-centered community like the one Dreiser and Norris sought to emulate. In a twentieth-century context, Geertz's essay brings students back to the position I suggested earlier with the passage from "Life In the Iron Mills" that asks them to "come right down here . . . to hear this story." And with the background knowledge they acquire from our discussions of choral voice and local knowledge, this is what students are able to do.

The novels by DiDonato and Bell suggest answers to many of the questions students have after reading these earlier works. What might one see if a narrator with the insider's view of, say, a *Jane Eyre* or a *Philip Pirrip* were to write about trying to rise from the working class, but without Jane's and Pip's good fortune or their belief in the efficacy of grace and redemption? Can someone intimate with the trap of poverty tell the story of poverty's trap from a perspective that both hopes for a better future and believes that future is fated to be denied? Must the narrator voicing a naturalistic point of view necessarily remain distanced and disinterested?

DiDonato and Bell clearly see themselves *as* authors, but they also understand that they stand "outside" of the literary "tradition" to which they want to belong; thus, their position with regard to their American-born predecessors makes an anthropological approach especially useful and appropriate. As has been the practice of many writers who saw themselves as outsiders (for example, Herman Melville and ironically, from our perspective, Dreiser and Norris), they share the strategy of inscribing that tradition into their own work in order to announce their right to membership in that inner circle. They owe several obvious debts to earlier naturalistic writers. Throughout their novels, the two writers follow naturalistic conventions and structure their narratives to reveal the determinism that shapes and restricts the lives of their central characters. Whether it is the monolithically-figured "Job" of laying bricks in *Christ in Concrete* or the almighty mill owners in *Out of This Furnace*, external forces well beyond their control direct the lives of the characters. In speaking about the first generation of naturalists, Donald Pizer notes, "Great industrial and financial combinations and self-serving national political parties appeared to control the fate of the nation as a whole, while the destiny of the common man of city and town--a destiny powerfully influenced by his personal and social background--appeared to be

equally beyond individual control”; he could as easily be speaking of the worlds in which DiDonato and Bell place their characters (Pizer, IAN, 4).

Likewise, in the tradition of the earlier naturalists (as well as in the manner of their contemporaries, John Steinbeck and James Farrell), DiDonato and Bell delineate characters primarily of great physical strength, possessed of “strong animal drives” (this is Parrington’s phrase), but often marked by limited intellectual ability. These characters are offset in both novels by an individual, strongly intelligent character who comes to understand more about his circumstances and must decide how to use that knowledge. Finally, and, again, like their predecessors, DiDonato and Bell use third-person narrators to trace the lives of their protagonists. On the one hand, this strategy allows them to establish their narrators as accurate reporters of their characters’ activities, achieving both the “truth in the spirit of the scientist” and the “frankness” noted by Parrington and most later critics (Parrington 323). On the other hand, the choices that DiDonato and Bell make concerning narrative perspective enable them to manage the interior reflection necessary to show the development of their characters’ insights and to do so in a sympathetic light.

We begin our examination of each novel by looking first for evidence that the writer shares at least some of the thematic concerns of the earlier naturalistic writers. We also look for evidence that each writer has made some effort to accommodate the formal concerns of the naturalistic tradition, such as narrative voice and tone. Working in small groups that report back to the class, students find evidence of the writer’s recognition of the thematic concerns they have identified as important to a naturalistic perspective; these include an emphasis on the hereditary nature of the characters’ circumstances, the difficulties of their struggle for survival, the deterministic nature of their socioeconomic situations, and their ultimate failures to control both their destinies and their environments. Formally, students look for evidence of reportorial narrative, strongly persuaded that graphic descriptions of the physical circumstances of the characters’ lives and situations constitute an important element of a naturalistic story.

While *Christ in Concrete* sometimes exhibits an almost breathlessly unreflective narrative pace, the third-person narrator provides a steadying effect that offsets the often effusive nature of the details. And while the narrator regularly completes the description of events with a declaration of pity for the workers or contempt for the system that abuses them, the narrator also reports on the actions and circumstances of the characters with unwavering directness. This narrator consistently practices what Clifford Geertz calls the “dialectical tacking between . . . detail and . . . structure” that results not only in our seeing the naturalistic circumstances of the characters, but also in hearing a naturalistic narrative, albeit one with a more compassionate voice. DiDonato’s narrator demonstrates what I have been calling choral voice.

Christ in Concrete begins with the story of Geremio, a bricklayer who is killed when the structure collapses because the company that employs him has skimmed on construction materials. The company later blames the immigrants for poor workmanship to sidestep its liability. Geremio’s death leaves his pregnant wife, Annunziata, with a houseful of children, and after her brother, who has taken Geremio’s place as breadwinner, is himself crippled in another construction accident, she must let her oldest son, Paul, work as a bricklayer, as well. Paul is barely a teenager when he starts; the work taxes him physically and almost weakens him permanently until a doctor intervenes and insists that he not work until he grows stronger. Paul must relinquish his dream of attending school, his best option for escaping his dead-end job. He must deal with corruption in the local government, in the church, in the company he works for, and even at the job site, where his immediate superiors demand kickbacks in exchange for hiring his godfather Nazone. When Nazone dies in yet another accident, Paul realizes that it is the workers’ fate to sacrifice themselves for the Job. As he tries to escape his dreadful work situation, his mother unwittingly secures his fate by asking him to vow to care for his brothers and sisters when she dies. He momentarily rebels, and the shock of his rebellion weakens her and hastens her end, as well as the end of Paul’s dreams.

Christ in Concrete demonstrates several obvious connections to the naturalistic tradition. The novel includes graphic descriptions of the violent dangers that bricklayers face. The deaths

of Paul's father and godfather, as well as the accident that cripples his uncle, are all described in unsparing detail. The account of Geremio's drowning and mutilation in the concrete that buries him is brutally complete. Its closest parallel is the description of Trina's death as she suffocates in her own blood near the end of *McTeague*, with the gruesome difference that the narrator of *Christ in Concrete* reports Geremio's keen awareness of what is happening to him as he moves through pain to fear and finally despair, his last thoughts on his family, fully aware that they will be left without provision when he dies.

Paul inherits his father's circumstances, and, also like his father, he struggles physically and emotionally to provide for his large family. True to the naturalistic tradition, Paul's socio-economic situation is beyond his control, as evidenced when Paul is refused an extension of credit by the butcher and denied charity by his parish priest, who sends him to the welfare office or the organized charities before turning back to his own richly laden dinner table, offering Paul only a small piece of his dessert. When the family goes to the state compensation board to claim Geremio's death benefit, Paul sees the difference between himself and those who are supposed to help him and understands that he will never bridge that difference.

The narrator in *Christ in Concrete* is careful to *report* the circumstances of Paul's story; at the same time, the narrator never fails to *respond*, with pity or indignation, and sometimes with joy, to the events at hand. The narrator also reports on Paul's increasingly keen understanding of his circumstances. One might argue that this narrator is merely a stronger incarnation of James's "lucid reflector." What distinguishes DiDonato's narrator is the seeming decision to evoke the choral voice I have described, deliberately guiding the readers' response where the Jamesian narrator would leave them in the dark along with the character. The narrator registers Paul's shock at the cruelty of the police, the church, and the Job, which all deceive the workers, and the narrator specifies that the immigrants who do not perceive these deceptions do not deserve their fate, emphasizing this belief by demonstrating that the more knowledgeable Paul is equally powerless to change his circumstances. The narrator's careful juxtaposition of reports on what is with laments for what should be focuses the readers' attention in ways that

parallel the practice of the chorus of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. The narrator cannot rescue Paul, any more than the chorus can rescue Oedipus or Kreon; however, both the narrator and the chorus can and do evoke and guide our response to the characters.

DiDonato's narrator continues to demonstrate Paul's growing awareness of his circumstances and draw attention to his insights. Like his family relationships, Paul's friendship with the young Russian intellectual, Louis Molov, extends over a period of years and provides him with several opportunities to reflect upon his tenuous place in the world. Paul learns about class consciousness from Louis, and he considers its significance after winning a much sought-after award for his bricklaying, recalling "the dainty pink-cheeked perfumed dolls of men who gave out the awards and spoke tired high-class talk. Could he ever forget that these hot-housealia owned great Job!" (DiDonato 182) Paul recognizes the irony of working for such men. He also learns how little difference his knowledge makes when his godfather is killed: "Paul remained by the shattered Nazone. A flame shot through him. 'That is your father Geremio!' it cried. 'Your father! You!'" (DiDonato 219) That night, Paul has a terrible dream in which he comprehends that it is each worker's task to walk to the edge of the construction scaffold so the foreman can push him to his death. His father appears in the dream, as well, and when he, too, willingly falls into the wrecked building, Paul realizes that "not even Death can free us, for we are . . . Christ in Concrete" (DiDonato 226). When he awakes, he tells his mother that this fate is "unfair"; nevertheless, Paul makes no protest when Annunziata exhorts him to take his father's place, and for the other children to "follow" (DiDonato 236). As his life extends before him, Paul sees clearly what his father could see only at life's end, and there is great dignity in his insight. Our recognition of that dignity comes through the narrator's presentation of these events.

Christ in Concrete demonstrates DiDonato's ability to combine both naturalistic themes and a naturalistic perspective with the detailed accuracy of an interested participant. *Out of This Furnace* demonstrates Bell's even more richly layered vision of the inexorable difficulties of working-class life. His novel represents an even closer adherence to the thematic concerns of

earlier naturalistic writers, combined with a significantly more sophisticated narrative voice than that of *Christ in Concrete*.

Out of this Furnace begins in 1881 with the story of George Kracha, a Hungarian immigrant who eventually ends up working in the steel mills around Pittsburgh. His fortunes rise and fall before the story shifts to Mike Dobrejczak, a younger immigrant, also a steelworker, who eventually marries Kracha's oldest daughter, Mary. Mary and Mike work hard to make a life for themselves and their four children. They are barely able to scrape by on what Mike earns in the mills; only when Mary takes in boarders can they improve their situation somewhat. Despite their difficulties, Mike and Mary are happy with each other, although not content with their lot in life, aware they can do little or nothing to change it. What security they achieve quickly evaporates when Mike is killed in a work accident.

The difficulty of providing for her family breaks Mary's health, already weak after her last two pregnancies. Her oldest son, John, called Dobie, still in his early teens, goes to work, and Mary and the younger children go to a sanitarium. Mary and her daughter Pauline die there two years later.

After Mary's death, the narrative shifts to Dobie, a basically good and honest young man who shifts from job to job before settling in to work at the steel mill. Dobie's life is not too different from his father's: he falls in love with a kind young woman named Julie, whom he marries; his prosperity is entirely dependent on the vagaries of the steel industry, which still manipulates the workers to suit the owners' pocketbooks. However, Dobie invests his work with added meaning when he becomes involved in organizing the steelworkers' union. The novel ends with Dobie reflecting on the future in light of the union's successful efforts, quietly hopeful as he and Julie await the birth of their first child.

Bell establishes his affinities with the naturalistic tradition, like DiDonato does, with a story that almost naturally fits the thematic concerns of Dreiser and Norris. The dangers the steelworkers confront in the workplace and the dangers their families face in substandard ghetto housing lend themselves to the graphic descriptions generally identified with naturalistic writing.

Bell's choice to focus on the multigenerational story of a family of steelworkers, in which three generations engage in the same cycle of work and enforced unemployment, effortlessly emphasizes the hereditary nature of the characters' circumstances. The difficulties that Kracha, Mike, and Dobie all face in the wake of the foundry's cycle of anti-union activities, the financial panics and depressions that exacerbate their circumstances, and the recurring natural disasters of fire and flood that disrupt their personal lives underscore the immediacy of their struggles for survival. Their inability to improve their situations in spite of their obvious abilities and honest ambitions gives the lie to the commonplaces mouthed by their bosses that it is their own faults that they don't improve. The unflinching work ethic of the Kracha/Dobrejczak family definitively underscores the deterministic nature of their socio-economic situations. It also makes more poignant the family's ultimate failure to control its destiny. The note of quiet optimism that Dobie sounds at the end of the novel is muted when one realizes that it sounds too much like expressions voiced earlier by his grandfather and his father--usually just before some traumatic reversal of fortune. The parallels are too precise for comfort. Even the last scene in the novel, when Dobie lies down with tired satisfaction to sleep next to his pregnant wife, almost exactly parallels specific scenes in the earlier sections focusing on Kracha and Mike. Both older men also lie down to sleep with their wives, believing all is well, but they awaken to tragedies not predicted by their idyllic sense of well-being.

The harsh realism and the unforgiving determinism of the circumstances in *Out of This Furnace* make strong claims for this novel to stand squarely in the naturalistic tradition. Like DiDonato, however, Bell also eschews the scientific objectivity of earlier naturalistic narrators and opts for a "positioned observer." The narrator makes it difficult, if not impossible, for readers to remain aloof from the characters, especially Mike, Mary, and Dobie. For example, when immigrant characters speak to each other, the reader hears them as they would hear each other--in language that is richly descriptive and grammatically clear. The narrator likewise records conversations between these characters and their children without the barriers of inflected dialect. Only when Kracha or Mike speak to their American-born bosses do we hear their broken English

and heavy accents. This strategy subtly but effectively mediates the distance between the characters and readers. Likewise, by beginning the narrative with the story of George Kracha, a selfish and ignorant man who, one might argue, deserves some of his bad luck, and then moving on to Mike and Dobie, whose generosity of spirit and intelligence, by contrast, merit a better fate, the narrator enables readers to know these men and to sympathize with them in ways that a more overtly distanced narrator would make more difficult. And again, this narrator takes up a pattern of narration that parallels Geertz's process of "tacking" between alternating modes of report and commentary on the lives of the men. The narrative follows this pattern in each of the four sections, but perhaps the best example of how it works is in the narrator's treatment of Mike.

Mike Dobrejcek articulates his hopes for the future and his faith in the efficacy of work on several occasions, but he also knows the limitations he faces because he is an immigrant laborer. The circle that these ideas trace in his mind reaches its clearest synthesis after he realizes that his rogue vote in a local election will not cost him his job. He is first disappointed that his voice has so little meaning. But Mike is finally unwilling to despair:

He clung to his belief that the mass of men were in their hearts good, preferring the excellent to the shoddy, the true to the false, striving for all their blunders toward worthy goals and failing most often when they put their trust in leaders rather than themselves. Unless this was so he felt there was no use going on. Unless this could be proved true here and now, today, in the teeming alleys and courtyards and kitchens of the First Ward, it was true nowhere, never. And unless it was true there was no hope. It never entered his mind that he himself was all the proof and hope he needed (Bell 199).

The narrator's commentary here and elsewhere in the novel makes it impossible to dismiss Mike's insight or discount his worth.

The narrator treats Mike's son Dobie in the same way. After his second trip to Washington to testify against the company's union-busting tactics, Dobie reflects on these efforts and their effect; he can't help but take satisfaction in what the workers have accomplished. Never one to lose his sense of perspective, however, Dobie "grinned suddenly and murmured,

‘What are you trying to do, make the world over?’ Why not?’ (Bell 409) It would be difficult for any reader to miss the narrator’s tacit approval of Dobie and his work. As the narrator did with Mike, so the narrator reports and comments on Dobie and his behavior more explicitly than would a typical naturalistic narrator. Again, however, like the chorus in ancient drama, this narrator guides and directs the reader, not the character, and the narrator’s approval is no more capable of changing the characters’ fate than the characters’ own hard-earned insight.

The narrators of *Christ in Concrete* and *Out of This Furnace* establish themselves as inside observers. Thus, while they present characters who know that their roles in the world are limited, they show that these characters also understand that their worth is not proportional to that limited role.

Both of these works bear the undeniable influence of the American naturalist tradition. Taking my students into the worlds created by DiDonato and Bell is less difficult going if we keep before us the methodology of interpretive anthropology, looking for the thick descriptions of these narratives. Likewise, revising our view of their narrators, letting them, like Geertz, relinquish the status of “Distinguished Visitor” to become “co-villagers” with the characters, enables us better to see the many debts both writers chose to owe to the tradition of naturalism.

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