

Social Determinism and Protest Literature:
Can Science Change the World?
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[W]e must accept determined facts, and not attempt to risk about them our personal sentiments. (Zola 596-7)

Emile Zola's experimental model of novel writing is wholly rooted in scientific thinking, imploring authors to use the fundamental laws that govern society and the natural world as the blueprint for their writing. Included among these laws, the values, customs, and hierarchies of present-day society are also taken as given. The main advantage of adopting the social determinist method of writing is that the experiments usually result in accurate representations of contemporary life. Insofar that realistic plots are considered marks of good writing, then, social determinism offers an easy formula for maintaining plausibility. However, this formula also makes it difficult to "get out of the box" because it takes "the box" as natural and immutable. Thus, from Stephen Crane's pseudo-sociological *Maggie* to Richard Wright's impassioned *Native Son*, protest novels that try to use social determinist methodologies often cannot cut ties with the hegemonic values that they were meant to critique.

The clinical, pure social deterministic approach employed in *Maggie* prevents readers from investing enough of themselves in the novel to question their values. Zola, quoting Claude Bernard, assumes that there is a distance between subject and object in the experiment: "[W]e...admit that there is a necessary connection between the acts and their cause; but what is this cause? We do not feel it, we are not conscious of it, as we are when it acts in ourselves" (594). Just as a lab technician cannot enter the minds of his guinea pigs, Zola's conception of social deterministic literature denies any other possible

perspective other than that of a solidly distant third person. Thus, in *Maggie* the narrator only examines the characters in superficial detail; while the reader does occasionally get a glimpse into Maggie or Jimmie's thoughts, most of the novel watches the characters get into brawls or family feuds with a tone of vague, condescending impartiality. Multiple times, the story becomes so divorced from the individual characters that it goes on for paragraphs without even naming the person being followed. The reader is left unsure whether the prostitute walking the streets is Maggie or someone else altogether. While this strategy is useful in establishing the universality of the novel's plot (the prostitute walking the streets could be *anyone*), it comes with the cost of alienating readers from the characters.

There is also a power dynamic between the reader and the characters, as the narrator assumes an elevated, upper-class perspective. Bernard's work, by which Zola's social deterministic ideas are directly inspired, talks "of vivisection, of the preparatory anatomical conditions, of the choice in animals," etc. in terms of example experiments (591). What the experimentalist author does to his characters is little different; with Crane the reader voyeuristically watches the characters in the novel wriggle on a pin. Crane, and by extension the narrator, is the god of the novel; while the events of the novel are ostensibly unmanipulated and follow from the natural laws of the environment, he "place[s] his character in [those] certain conditions, and of these he remains the master" (593). The reader is assumed to be outside those conditions, sharing the narrator's position; while readers can temporarily visit the slum environment through literature for entertainment or edification, they are not socially determined themselves. The reader's life and values are distanced from nature and therefore never called into question.

While an alternative value structure exists in *Maggie*, Crane does not see it as worthy of the reader's attention. Jimmie has cultivated a strong sense of self-worth through his lower-class status and his truck-driving job. He despises well-dressed, wealthy men: "He and his order were kings, to a certain extent, over the men of untarnished clothes, because these latter dreaded, perhaps, to be either killed or laughed at" (Crane 202). From the seat of his truck, streetcars are reduced to "intent bugs" and pedestrians to "pestering flies"; looking down on the world with a permanent sneer, his blue-collar job develops a "private but distinct element of grandeur" (203). At the same time, his ego is balanced by the necessity of obeying the powerful: "he achieved a respect for a fire engine" or "a much larger man than himself" (203-4). Jimmie's values are not particularly well developed; many are crude inversions of bourgeois norms (Jimmie's view of rich, well-dressed men as weak) or a confused, hypocritical muddle (Jimmie's schizophrenic opinions on female sexual morality, as applied to his sister and to his former lovers). Nevertheless, his values could have been highlighted as an unpretentious, pragmatic lower-class challenge to genteel norms. Instead, Crane emphasizes Jimmie's characteristic lack of self-reflection, personal uncertainty, and uneducated accent. The only statement to Jimmie's intellectual capacity is sarcastic: "Nevertheless, he had, on a certain star-lit evening, said wonderingly and quite reverently: 'Deh moon looks like hell, don't it?'" (204). Crane makes no effort to encourage readers to take Jim's thoughts seriously. He includes Jimmie's worldview to demonstrate how "corrupt" the poor are, rather than to question the well-dressed men of the world. Following Zola's scientific method, *Maggie* is confined to describing the horrors and indignities of being poor. The novel is a protest only in the sense that one hopes that someone, reading Crane's account,

will be inspired to do something about the problem. However, by failing to address the norms that uphold a system that creates poverty in the first place, Crane reifies them instead.

Despite his critical eye toward “protest” works that kowtow to hegemonic norms, Wright’s novel *Native Son* also falls prey to similar accommodating tendencies. Wright observes that Negro literature is limited to two constraining types:

At best, Negro writing has been something external to the lives of educated Negroes themselves. That the productions of their writers should have been something of a guide in their daily living is a matter which seems never to have been raised seriously. Under these conditions Negro writing assumed two general aspects: 1) It became a sort of conspicuous ornamentation, the hallmark of “achievement.” 2) It became the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice. (“Blueprint” 306)

Native Son falls within the latter category. The book does not plead, of course; it shocks. It traps the white racist in the mind of his worst nightmare; it creates moral tangles irreconcilable with white liberals’ simple platitudes. But the turns of plot that generate these shocks are calculated with white values in mind. If *Native Son* were to inspire progress, white people would initiate it. In that sense, then, the novel is fundamentally “white-directed.”

While *Native Son* does make a bid for an alternative worldview, the result is still dependent on white, middle-class norms. The connection between whiteness and fear in the novel--the “white blur” that fills Bigger with “hysterical terror” and inspires him to murder, the white cat he fears “had given him away,” and the white snow outside as he flees the vigilantes--is not an independent theme (“Native” 84, 190). Rather, it reflects white writers’ themes of ominous shadows and scary darkness as well as the medieval

association of black with evil. Similarly, Wright's fights the Jim Crow rape myth with a simple reversal:

[R]ape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one. ... He was a long, taut piece of rubber which a thousand white hands had stretched to the snapping point, and when he snapped it was rape. But it was rape when he cried out in hate deep in his heart as he felt the strain of living day by day. That, too, was rape. (214)

Wright uses the rape myth against itself by describing whites' oppression of blacks with the same language. However, this inversion only makes sense within the context of the original stereotype. *Native Son's* ideology is relational; in trying to rebel completely against mainstream white society, its oppositional norms necessarily become white-directed.

Even these steps towards freedom from hegemonic values are only made possible not by Wright's adherence to Zola's method, but rather his deviations from it. Not only does Wright use an atypical individual, Bigger, as his "specimen" (losing the easy claim to universality possible by choosing a more average subject)--he delves into Bigger's inner thoughts instead of taking the position of an impartial, outside observer. It is Bigger's unusual behavior that lends *Native Son* its shock value; it is the intimacy with which the reader gets to know Bigger that lets even white readers in on a genuine black male view of society. *Native Son* is still a social determinist novel, in that it emphasizes that Bigger's actions are the result of his surroundings rather than some innate flaw and examines the environmental factors that make him tick. Nevertheless, the novel's deviations from the traditional social determinist model are what enable its protest.

Of course social determinism has been an important literary phenomenon. It gave writers an alternative to sappy Romanticism and strengthened support for ideological alternatives to Western individual-worship. However, according to Zola, an experimental novel “has no necessity to worry itself about the ‘why’ of things; it simply explains the ‘how’” (Zola 590). Thus, for novels to engage in a robust protest and discuss the “why,” they must go beyond Zola’s model. Social determinist novels can describe in graphic detail the consequences of the current world order, but they are blind to the ideologies that create the present and the options for the future. As works of protest literature, they offer plenty of sound and fury, but little signification and no alternative. A different kind of “experiment,” less reverent of science and more imaginative of heart, is needed.

Works Cited

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