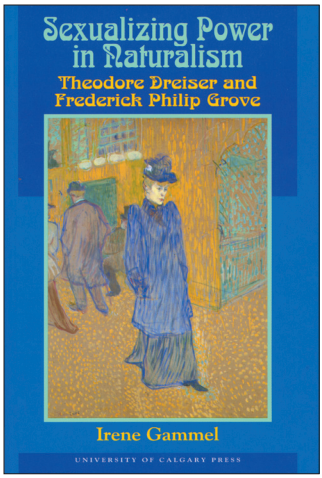

SEXUALIZING POWER IN NATURALISM: THEODORE DREISER AND FREDERICK PHILIP GROVE

by Irene Gammel

ISBN 978-1-55238-631-6

13

Conclusion

In this study I have examined some of the continuities and transformations in naturalism's journey from Europe to Canada and America and from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. As a predominantly male genre, naturalism continued its preoccupation with the female's "problematic" sexuality. In an age concerned with the "truth" of the female body, Dreiser and Grove carved out a niche for their fiction by making use of women's new voices, incorporating women's sexual confessions into an already sexualized genre. Thus, they participated in and further stimulated the twentieth-century psychoanalytic and sexological desire to hear the woman's body speak the authentic truth about itself. Yet while energizing the naturalist genre, the women's (feminist) voices often present an unsettling voice of *Widerstand* in these texts. Contradicting male concepts of power as well as the male narrator's standards of biological or behavioural normality, these female voices create the dialogical quality so typical of Dreiser and Grove's naturalism.

The desire to upset taboos and to present an "entropic vision" in naturalist literature has been shown to be often in contradiction with the narrators' and authors' own desire for establishing specifically male

systems of order. It is, above all, in his treatment of female sexuality and female rights that the male naturalist writer exposes his desire for "normalizing" the female body. The narrator-author of "Emanuela" speaks for most of Dreiser's fictional narrators (and for most of his male characters) when he claims to disrupt society's Victorian conventions by speaking the truth about sex, a truth that promises to "liberate" the body from repressive social constraints. Yet for most of the female characters this celebrated sexual liberation is an illusion, as their bodies and sexualities are evoked only in terms of a goal that prompts the males to impose their own sexualities and to search in women's bodies for what D.H. Lawrence – another problematic sexual "liberator" – has called the "bedrock of her nature." Insisting on imposing the norms of what they claim to be a "normal" sexuality, Dreiser's narrators and male characters elevate their own, male sexuality as the "true" standard, thereby not only erasing any notion of a plural (women's) sexuality but covertly also marginalizing female sexual activity into the "abnormal." To a large extent, Dreiser's narrators' affirm, even celebrate, a male sexuality, as they affirm the Don Juan philosophy of most of the male characters with all its misogynistic implications. The women's resistance often exposes naturalism's male bias, but as often the female voices are successfully recontained within the boundaries of the male genre, enchained in patterns of subjugation that are reminiscent of nineteenth-century French naturalism.

Exploring the role of discourses, practices, and norms as the privileged psychological and social determinants of their twentieth-century naturalism, Dreiser and Grove's fiction displaced the nineteenth-century emphasis on genetic and hereditary physiology. The authors' twentieth-century naturalism is consonant with Foucault's recognition that discourse is always yoked to power. Their fiction explores how discourses structure relationships of power, how these power relationships in turn "produce" specific forms of discursive resistance and how a resisting discourse can shift once again and become reappropriated by the dominant discourse. Dreiser and Grove's naturalism explores a great variety of oppositional strategies while continually emphasizing the limits of such resistance. In their struggle against seductive (and equally restrictive) forms of patriarchal power, many of the female characters (e.g., Fanny Essler, Susie Ihle, Emanuela) consciously reject the language that others (fathers, lovers, bourgeois society) impose on them, deliberately refusing to be a dutiful daughter, a "seduced" woman, a "prostitute," a "wife," or a traditional "housekeeper." Other resisting female characters appropriate the language of the (male) masters to engage in a ruthless power struggle (e.g., Henrietta Elliot), only to demonstrate that

such a strategy perpetuates and energizes the very power principle they set out to subvert. The women's "reverse" discourses, once put into circulation, quickly "run the risk of re-codification, re-colonization" (*P/K* 86). In most cases, the naturalist cycle closes itself, with the male systems of (narrative, generic, and social) order once again in place.

In a work with the suggestive title *Forget Foucault*, Jean Baudrillard has charged that "with Foucault, power remains, despite being pulverized, a *structural* and a polar notion with a perfect genealogy and an inexplicable presence, a notion which cannot be surpassed in spite of a sort of latent denunciation, a notion which is whole in each of its points or microscopic dots."[1] Baudrillard's critique is well taken. Although Foucault insists on power's "nonessential" quality, Foucauldian power often appears as an abstract machine that takes hold of everything, infiltrating the microcosm of the social field. "Everyone today wallows in the molecular as they do in the revolutionary," Baudrillard writes, adding that, "for Foucault, power operates right away like Monod's genetic code," that is, like the "complex spirals of the DNA."[2] Polemical though it may be, Baudrillard's critique could also be voiced against naturalism's conceptualization of power as a network of force relations that cannot be escaped because it reaches into the microcosmic areas of physical bodies – the genetic, physiological body in the nineteenth and the psychological body in the twentieth century. For Foucault and naturalism there is no outside of power, since resistance is always already part of a larger system of power. In naturalism's "equation inevitable," even the individual capitalist superman is but a "giant pygmy," who rises in order to fall, to die, and to be superseded by others. What always stays, though, is the machinery of power itself.

Is it surprising, then, that new historicist Walter Benn Michaels should have drawn the somewhat cynical conclusion that Dreiser's naturalism is inevitably informed by the logic of the marketplace? In other words, is the Dreiserian or Foucauldian world, perhaps, a universe in which the word *resistance* has been emptied of meaning since, ultimately, power cannot be escaped? Michaels frames his interpretation of Dreiser's naturalism by declaring the end of oppositional criticism:

> What exactly did it mean to think of Dreiser as approving (or disapproving) consumer culture? Although transcending your origins in order to evaluate them has been the opening move in cultural criticism at least

---

1 Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault* (New York: Semiotext[e]: 1987) 39.

2 Baudrillard 33–34.

> since Jeremiah, it is surely a mistake to take this move at face value: not so much because you can't really transcend your culture but because, if you could, you wouldn't have any terms of evaluation left – except perhaps theological ones. It thus seems wrong to think of the culture you live in as the object of your affections: you don't like it or dislike, you exist in it, and the things you like and dislike exist in it too. Even Bartleby-like refusals of the world remain inextricably linked to it – what could count as a more powerful exercise of the right to freedom of contract than Bartleby's successful refusal to enter into any contracts?[3]

But as Gerald Graff has pointed out in his critique of Michaels's approach, it appears that the critic who professes to distrust transcendental categories ends by adopting the "market" as a transcendental category.[4]

If anything, this study has attempted to highlight that Dreiser's naturalism should not be reduced to a monological voice or a single dominant discourse of power. Even if resistance is shown to have its inevitable limits, the oppositional voices (often the female voices in this male genre) present overt and covert forms of insurrection, contradicting and baffling the dominant (male) voices, challenging the notion of a unified order. It is these oppositional voices that, in turn, make possible a resisting reading that unravels the text from within, highlighting what naturalism chooses to relegate into its margins. Dreiser's naturalism is full of contradictions and tensions: between the male narrators' omniscient voices and the erupting female voices; between the narrators' rejection of conventions and their embracing of (biological notions of) normality; between the female characters' claim for independence and their subjection to male sexual conquering in "normalized" relationships. It is the texts' internal contradictions and tensions that inevitably unravel their inherent gender bias, and thus the texts themselves expose their narrators' and characters' misogyny from within.

In Grove's fiction, the artist is born in the midst of such contradictions, as *In Search of Myself* demonstrates. Writing his fictionalized autobiography, while identifying himself with his "tragic" male protagonists, the narrator is confronted with his own apocalypse: "In this record, I know, I am dying to myself" (*ISM* 387). In *In Search of Myself*, Grove conceptualized writing as an eternal process of self-doubling, whereby

---

3 *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987) 18–19.

4 Gerald Graff, "Co-optation," *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989) 168–81.

creation becomes a kind of *mise en abîme* in the face of death. In such a *mise en abîme*, "language turns back upon itself," as Foucault writes: "it encounters something like a mirror; and to stop this death which would stop it, it possesses but a single power: that of giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits."[5] Obsessed in his fiction with his (autobiographical, confessional, and simultaneously fictionalized) persona, Grove creates words that are put in the service of his "search" of himself and his male identity. This search, though, returns him inevitably to the secure and predictable male power structures provided by the naturalist genre, a genre Grove originally wanted to leave behind. The (incestuous) doubling of the author in his narrators and characters thus leads him back to a doubling of the naturalist conventions and the same stock figures.

Grove's conceptualizing of problematic female sexuality and patriarchal power structures has as much to do with cultural realities in Germany and Canada as it does with the author's own ideological contradictions. Just as Dreiser was deeply implicated in the popular and sentimental tradition that he tried so hard to overcome, so Grove was involved in undoing and simultaneously holding on to naturalism's sexual boundaries. His challenge of the "nature of naturalism" is reflected in his exploration of sexual impersonations, cross-dressing, and androgyny. But Grove's (somewhat contradictory) shaping of the genre has to be seen as an ambivalent gesture, growing out of his own sense of sexual and creative crisis. Faced with a strong female competition in Canada (where many bestselling authors were women), Grove reacted in many ways defensively, trying to hold on to naturalism's traditional sexual/textual boundaries. Grove was intent on erecting boundaries between his male realism (which, much to the author's chagrin, never produced a bestseller) and Canada's romance literature by women (which was successful in the marketplace, as the example of Lucy Maud Montgomery shows). Having to compete with such overwhelmingly popular successes of what he considered to be a female genre, Grove appropriated the realist treatment of sexuality as his – *male* – domain and prerogative. This may explain his deep jealousy and defensiveness when faced with the success of Martha Ostenso's naturalist novel, *Wild Geese* (1925), which coincided with the publication of his *Settlers of the Marsh*. Claiming that "only trash wins a prize," Grove reveals how deeply

5 Michel Foucault, "Language to Infinity," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. and ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988) 54.

he felt threatened by the success of the twenty-five-year-old female writer who dared tread on what he considered to be "male territory" – the realistic representation of sexuality in Canadian fiction. "How could a young girl know anything of the fierce antagonisms that discharge themselves in sex,"[6] he wrote, implicitly "charging" his own discourse with the tropes of his own phallic prerogatives.

Martha Ostenso, of course, was serious competition. *Wild Geese* takes its roots in the male genre, presenting a Grovian father figure in old Caleb, who tyrannizes his family, especially the daughters, on his farm on the Canadian prairies. At the same time, Ostenso was also committed to "feminizing" the male naturalist genre from within, by giving the women stronger voices. Thus, the ending of *Wild Geese* presents an interesting twist in the naturalist genre: nature participates in the destruction of the male family tyrant, so that "the nature of naturalism" is made to serve a female vision of justice and order. Although Ostenso shared Grove's view of the mother's complicity in the daughter's victimization, the women in the novel emerge as survivor figures, quietly triumphing after Caleb's death.

Even before F. P. Grove's death in 1948, another Manitoban writer, Gabrielle Roy, further continued this "feminization" of Canadian naturalism. In her classic, *The Tin Flute* (1945), sexuality continues to be the realm through which the female body is seduced, exploited, subjugated, and victimized. But the emphasis is, like Ostenso's, on the women's capacity to survive. From Grove's father figure, Roy moves the mother, Rose-Anna Lacasse, into the centre of the naturalist universe. Indeed, the narrative voice itself becomes feminized. Roy's narrator is no longer in a position of male superiority, but is, as Patricia Smart writes, "much better evoked by Rose-Anna Lacasse's image of God – a somewhat harassed mother at the beck and call of all her children/characters at the same time, trying to soothe their pain with her loving attentiveness."[7]

While these two Canadian examples show further possibilities of "feminizing" the genre from within, Grove and Dreiser have to be credited with questioning, criticizing, even deconstructing the genre's male convention in the early twentieth century. But the two male naturalist-realists also reinscribed these male conventions anew into the genre, thus perpetuating its "maleness" in the twentieth century. It is these conventions that became "canonized" as the specifically American and Canadian forms of naturalism. Dreiser's canonization as "the" Ameri-

---

6 Quoted in Makow 41.

7 Patricia Smart, *Writing in the Father's House* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991) 161.

can naturalist and city writer was assured after his publication of *An American Tragedy*; Grove's canonization as the realist historiographer of Canadian prairie-pioneer life was not far behind. But Grove's overt assertion that on the pioneer farm "woman is a slave," as he defended his position in *In Search of Myself*, is not only contradicted by his own writing, but was also challenged by contemporary women realists, such as Willa Cather, who celebrated the female as a strong pioneer figure in *O Pioneers!* (1913).

Lastly, and perhaps most ironically, as naturalist writers Dreiser and Grove found themselves caught in naturalist circles of their own. Both writers carried the symptoms of their sexual/textual tensions and crises inscribed on their bodies: Dreiser suffered from chronic headaches, stomach upsets, and neurothenia, while Grove obsessively bemoaned his bodily failings in his autobiographical writing. While Dreiser's crisis frequently found its expression in bouts of writer's block, Grove's found an outlet for his tension in an obsessive commitment to writing – he was and remained a "workaholic" throughout his life. In their naturalist fiction, they inscribe the "threat" of the new woman but also exorcize this threat through naturalist strategies: the strong, stubbornly rebelling woman is often doomed to die (e.g., Roberta Alden, Clara Vogel, Martha Elliot), while the newly empowered woman is frequently "tamed" through more sophisticated "normalizing" practices (Carrie Meeber, Fanny Essler). And yet the new woman's body, sexuality, and voice constitute a threat in the context of male naturalism that is only barely contained, as she continually "spills" over the boundaries of their narratives, confronting and challenging the male narrative voice with a different kind of truth.

In Grove's case, this "feminizing" of the genre from within energized the author's creative process. The new woman's power and threatening sexuality necessitated more and more words, spirals of sexual confessions, stories of sexual entrapment and victimization, which allowed the author to recontain the female body and to assert his male voice of authority and his male vision of order in his naturalist fiction. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Grove's own life was characterized by a private renunciation of sexuality "for the sake of art"; this "antisexuality" in his personal life is reflected both in his autobiography, *In Search of Myself*, and in Elsa's memoirs. Conversely, Dreiser's personal history was that of a Don Juan womanizer, which made him a double of his male characters, as he, like his male characters, tried to "conquer" the female body through his phallic power. This doubling of his male characters, however, is a dangerous venture for any naturalist author, since the power of his character is always already limited, his

downfall from superior height prescribed by the logic of naturalist conventions. The authorial role thus becomes slippery, hovering uneasily on the border of the genre, confronting the author with his own fears and failings. These elements are not radically new in the twentieth century; the male fear of feminization was a characteristic of nineteenth-century French naturalism. But this crisis becomes more overt as the narrators and authors become more conscious of narrative contradictions. Thus the version of male naturalism that emerges in this twentieth-century tension is one that simultaneously questions and affirms, appropriates and rewrites, deconstructs and reconstructs the nineteenth-century naturalist connection between male power and the female's sexual "nature."