CHAPTER VI

THE LIMITS AND UNIQUENESS OF ANDERSON'S NATURALISM

Every literary movement is a fresh attempt at reinterpreting life and the world. This interpretation draws its vitality and mood from a few scientific, philosophic or social findings and ideas which throw significant light on man and his complex relationship with the universe. Thus, the writings belonging to a particular literary movement constitute an extended perspective and artistic transmutation of these findings and ideas which serve as its basic stance and frame of reference. To put it in other words, a literary manifesto is crystallized and formulated by the writer's consciousness and comprehension of these findings and ideas which he assimilates and objectifies in the form of art.

This, however, does not imply that the writings of all the writers belonging to a genre are necessarily identical both in substance and technique. A writer's adherence to the fundamental tenets of the genre does not, in any way, inhibit him from providing fresh insight into, and new dimensions to, these tenets. This insight alone defines his uniqueness and distinctiveness in the context of the writings of the literary movement to which he belongs.

From the preceding chapters it follows that the ideas of force and determinism presiding over human destiny are the central
premise of naturalism to which Anderson's perception of life conforms. Nevertheless, in the whole range of American literary naturalism, Anderson occupies a unique position. The substance in his creative writings and his mode of transcribing human life make him stand apart from the rest of the naturalistic writers. In this chapter an attempt is made to clarify this unique position of Anderson.

The American naturalistic novelists share Zola's moral preoccupation to liberate man from the tangle of deterministic forces. For these novelists, nature is not an abstraction; nor is it overwhelmingly huge and baffling. The American geography, its boundaries constitute the limits of nature for them. And within these limits operate the malignant forces which either destroy man or wholly dominate his life rendering his struggle, choice and free will futile and absurd.

The plight of Maggie, Susan Lenox, Jurgis Rudkus and Bigger Thomas, to mention only a few, is delineated with such brutal frankness and compelling force that the social aberrations victimizing them call for urgent and drastic remedial measures. The novelists subscribe to Zola's optimism that their voice of protest against the hostile forces and their deep compassion for the victims can lead to the reorganization of society with all its destructive elements eliminated so that it can offer propitious climate for the happiness and development of man.

One of the most consistent and recurrent patterns in the
naturalistic novel is man's attempts to transcend the deterministic forces which threaten his very survival. As the grip of these forces over the victim becomes increasingly firmer, he becomes anxiously concerned about saving himself: to protect his physical existence at any cost. This overriding anxiety erases all other considerations from his mind thus reducing him to a tense, breathless and desperate being. It need hardly be pointed out that transcendence may be possible only when man accomplishes survival; when his energy enables him to register victory over, and to release himself from, the grip of these forces. In the naturalistic dispensation, transcendence is well nigh impossible. If the victim survives at all, as do Rudkus and Carol Kennicott, he lives a life not as he plans it to be but as it is shaped by these forces. The grim conclusion is that man's aspiration for transcendence never comes true, engaged as he is in the immediacy and compulsions of the circumstances of the present.

It may, however, be mentioned that while discussing naturalistic novel, the word, transcendence, is used in a limited and qualified sense. It means that Rudkus tries to transcend the economic harshness he encounters, Carol tries to transcend the tediousness of the small-town life, Bigger Thomas tries to transcend the fear-psychosis that he is a Negro, Clyde Griffith tries to transcend the social principles and laws so that his desires can be fulfilled, Maggie tries to transcend the evils of which the slum is a veritable incarnation.
Such approach to the question of human survival in the midst of the destructive forces is in total accord with the dictum of Zola. The pessimism explicit in the naturalistic novel is, indeed, intended to focus on the urgency of rescuing man from his being swallowed up by these forces.

The assertion of the natural science that growth and decay of life are subservient to inevitable natural laws, has made man conscious of and confront his mortality. Literary naturalism which transmutes the deductions of this science into art, is the first serious literary movement to persistently dwell upon the theme of human mortality. Man could have accepted the inescapable finality of his life with at least two cheers had he not been proved to be a feeble creature divested of energy and assertive will. How he can degenerate and disintegrate is best illustrated by the destiny of Theron Ware, Vandover, McTeague, Hurstwood and Wolf Larsen. Both life and death are depicted as absolutely pointless and insignificant, man's struggle as fruitless and ridiculous.

It is not possible to write a novel like An American Tragedy, The Jungle, The Octopus and The Grapes of Wrath today. The compelling social issues which had stimulated and engaged the novelists' mind into writing these novels are no longer in the American society. Today a Roberta Alden could unhesitatingly approach a doctor and efface from her the stain of pregnancy which the social laws at Dreiser's time had strictly forbidden. Clyde Griffith's eventual destruction is attributable, to a great extent, to his failure to jettison the tormenting weight of his once-beloved's pregnancy.
Today an immigrant does not encounter similar hostile problems as did Rudkus; nor is today's slaughter house identical with Chicago's Beef Trust where this unlucky immigrant had worked. The laying of railroads was once interpreted as a brutal stab in the wholesome and life-sustaining extensive ranch. The desperate bid of the ranchers to resist this advancing stab provides the conflict in *The Octopus*. The depression of the thirties and social planning which had played havoc with man's life and form the background of *The Grapes of Wrath* are not to be found today in America.

Whether the slum life was improved, social laws were liberalized, the problems of the immigrants were looked into because *Maggie, An American Tragedy, The Jungle* were written, is beside the point here. What is important to note is that the complexion of America has undergone so sweeping a change that for the proper understanding of the deterministic forces delineated in such novels, one must not lose sight of the historical and social perspective in which they were written because these novels are rooted in the then prevalent scheme of things in the country. It will be preposterous to apply the standards of the present day America for the evaluation of these novels. The mutability and ethos of American society have distanced, in a large measure, the appeal and interest of these novels. The shape of determining factors which are central to these novels and against which man is shown in desperate conflict has become remote in the consciousness of today's reader. Some of these novels are, indeed, like tools which were designed to serve a particular purpose.
Fiction, or for that matter literature, is not social history. Its concern is not to describe facts, as does social history, to provide a photographic picture of society at a particular time in its history. It depicts ideas. And the mood, temper and typicality of the time get fused in the depiction whether the novelist wishes to do so or not. The novel, then, reflects the archetypes of the time to which it belongs. This insight about man and the place and time in which he lives is provided by the novel: It is a task which social history cannot accomplish. The American naturalistic novel, thus, makes one acquainted with the quintessence of American life and society as they had existed between the closing decades of the last century and the first quarter of this century. The novelist was deeply committed to man and the social problems of his time to which his novel remains stubbornly faithful. With the disappearance of the social issues which typify the forces presiding over human destiny, it is doubtful if the naturalistic novel can survive the corrosion of time and sustain its interest. The profound humanism and deep compassion of Dreiser, Steinbeck, Wright and Sinclair will, no doubt, continue to disturb and move a reader; he will be conscious of man's confrontation with malignant forces; but with a sense of relief he will convince himself that the factors against which these novelists had protested are now nonexistent.

The familiar and oft-repeated naturalistic thesis discussed above, finds significant modification in Anderson's writings. This modification can best be discussed in the light of what Joseph Wood
Krutch has to say about the naturalistic temper. In his *The Modern Temper*, Krutch observes that by destroying God and theology and by proving metaphysics to be misleading, science has exposed man to the rigours of a mechanical universe. The earth, with its sharply demarcated outlines, is bereft of mystery and illusion. It functions on its own, in accordance with the natural laws operating automatically in it. Man's awareness of his smallness and insignificance, his sense of utter loneliness and abandonment arises because of his realization that he is condemned to encounter and struggle against the "materialistic tyranny" within the bounds of the earth. Not divine justice but blindness of natural forces determines his destiny. The question, therefore, is not whether a man is good or bad but how long he can defend his survival in the face of these forces.

Krutch maintains that the most important parts of our lives—"our sensations, emotions, desires and aspirations—take place in a universe of illusions which science can attenuate or destroy, but which it is powerless to enrich."¹ He pleads for a universe of illusions, a "metaphysical world" which should be inaccessible to science, which science cannot destroy. This universe should be a matter of unshakable belief for man. He must convince himself, without scepticism and doubt, that it has filled up the vacuum created by the destruction of God. Man's reliance on it can be a healing touch to his divided soul and his anguished self. This, according to Krutch, is the only means by which man can overcome spiritual crisis and the tyranny of matter.
Man still possesses metaphysical longings despite his being disillusioned about his habitual, godless world. His awareness of the physical forces conditioning his life and his sense of insignificance about himself intensify, rather than weaken, these longings. The crisis is due to the fact that these longings have been cut off from the metaphysical realm because science has liquidated it. Consequently man encounters the harsh world of facts and realities and is painfully conscious that nothing exists beyond the horizon of the world of matter. These facts and realities to which he is inexorably bound are unable to give him the inward satisfaction and harmony notwithstanding his ostensible mastery over them. His sense of unfulfillment and inner dissociation arises because of his inability to relate himself to something bigger, more meaningful, significant and abiding than the naturalistic basis on which the tangible world functions. He feels demoralized and alienated because during the moments of crisis he cannot fall back upon something that can provide him with the emotional prop which can, indeed, persuade him to face life with a spirit of inner strength and self-confidence. Had there been a "metaphysical world" it would have been possible for him to transfer his attention from the immediacy of this disharmonizing world to that blissful one. His metaphysical aspirations, therefore, clamour to make him a part of the infinite and the eternal by delivering him from the finite and the temporal.

No other American naturalistic novelist is as much preoccupied with this clamour of man's metaphysical yearnings as Anderson is.
The treatment of this idea is obviously new and unique in the whole spectrum of American naturalistic novels. This is one important reason which creates confusion in some criticism of Anderson's works and leads some critics to believe that the novelist is not, after all, naturalistic. In his assessment of Anderson's works Lionel Trilling describes this attitude of the novelist towards life as one of "crude mysticism". Trilling's underestimation of the novelist's vision of life is clear in his observation that what Anderson was speaking about "was only the salvation of a small legitimate existence of a quiet place in the sun and moments of leisurely peace, of not being ... deprived of one's due share of affection."² Julius W. Friend also describes this attitude of Anderson as "mystical".³

In the analysis of some of Anderson's novels in the second chapter it is seen that the needs of the protagonists are not as simple as Trilling claims them to be. Their needs are identical: They feel restless to realize their metaphysical longings. It may be repeated that their lives fall into a particular pattern. Born of poor parents they all fight against economic privation with the conviction that material wealth is the only answer to human needs. After rejecting wealth they all flounder about not knowing how to satisfy the baffling torment within their self. It is important to note that most of the Anderson protagonists are affluent, but the moment they triumph over their economic privation, the world loses all its significance for them; indeed, it becomes empty incapable of offering anything that can resolve their inward torment
and enrich their lives. Sam McPherson, Kit Brandon and Hugh McVey try to go beyond temporality and achieve an order of existence the precise nature of which they never comprehend.

The protagonist of the familiar American naturalistic novel struggles to overcome the factors of determinism because these factors not only threaten his very existence but also keep his desires out of his reach. He knows that his requirements exist in his habitual world. It could have answered the needs of Carol, Hurstwood, Bigger Thomas, Jurgis Rudkus and Clyde Griffith. Exactly for this reason, unlike the Anderson protagonist, he does not reject his world; he desperately holds on to it till he is totally overwhelmed by it. This world becomes hostile, a place of denial for this protagonist. It becomes insubstantial for the Anderson protagonist who can, at least in money-making matters, dictate terms to it. Whereas the American naturalistic novelist is concerned about man's security, Anderson is preoccupied with man's mental crisis which he suffers after attaining this security.

Not physical survival but spiritual enrichment, not the fulfillment of material needs but the realization of metaphysical longings—this is how some Anderson protagonists differ from their counterparts in other naturalistic novels. For the protagonists of these novels, this world is the ultimate domain for their salvation and they strive to steer their lives towards the recognizable goals; the Anderson protagonists try to liberate themselves from this finite world and search for the intangible unknown.

In a letter to Waldo Frank in 1917, Anderson writes: "I have
come to think of the muddle of life as a necessary thing and all direct effort at corrective measures as rather absurd." It is noted in chapter five that the bearded man in the story, "Seeds", who tries to cure man's malady by the method of psychoanalysis is told that this malady is universal and incurable. Anderson is convinced of the inadequacy of this phenomenal world: It does not have the resources to satisfy man's inward hunger and resolve his sense of disharmony and circumscription.

Obviously, Anderson does not share Zola's, or for that matter the American naturalistic novelist's, idea that by restructuring the social and economic order, the hostile environmental forces can be eliminated. He does not believe that man's predicament is rooted in social imperfections the correction of which can promise fulfillment of his yearnings. It is to be noticed that Poor White tries to objectify the transition of America from agrarian pastoralism to tension-ridden industrialism. Beyond Desire, on the other hand, projects the moral chaos of the depression decade and the economic hardship it brought to the underprivileged. The background of Kit Brandon is also different. Its focus is on the clandestine bootlegging world and the protagonist's involvement in it. The change in the background and time of these novels does not make the protagonists different from one another. They have identical yearnings. Like Sam McPherson and Beaut McGregor, they consider their material accomplishments to be of no consequence. They try to release themselves from the world of matter with which their spirit is in constant conflict. Anderson feels that this irremediable conflict is timeless and universal.
It is seen in *Winesburg, Ohio* that man's predicament on this planet can stem from the biological process which has nothing to do with any external factor. The determinism circumscribing the lives of the Winesburg characters is related to the abnormal nature of their psyche which bears the indelible stamp of the mysterious process of birth and growth. This psyche is part of man's natural being, a condition of his biological entity.

In this book, Anderson probes the elemental source of man from which the deterministic force operates. Anderson's concern is not with the physical shape of the Winesburg characters which is, apparently, normal. The quality of a physically normal man's life is not dependent upon the soundness of his body. His existence demands his being related to the objective world and this relationship is determined by his psyche, his mental capacity. The failure of the Winesburg character is, thus, traceable to his misshapen and imperfect mental structure. He is a fanatic in the sense that his perception of life and the world being utterly narrow, he has only one obsession and considers it to be the only truth and substance in life. He struggles for transcendence from this imperfect mental shape for a wholesome life as the protagonists in some novels struggle for transcendence from matter for the realization of their metaphysical longings.

The ideas discussed above are unique in the whole range of literary naturalism in America. Anderson's insight into the idea of determinism has enabled him to identify sources from which determinism emanates and of which neither Zola nor any other American naturalistic
novelist seems to be aware. *Marching Men* and *Beyond Desire* are the only two novels which Anderson writes with a measure of social commitment. He suggests collective force and communism as the antidote against economic and social maladies. The intended collective force disintegrates immediately after the workingmen start marching on the street thus reinforcing Anderson's conviction that the muddle of life cannot be corrected. The idea of communism in the latter gets totally obscured because it has not been consistently developed to form an integral strand in the narrative. The reader's residual memory of these two novels concerns the buried and unrealized life of the protagonists of these novels.

Thus, at the hands of Anderson, the concept of determinism receives a vertical extension and achieves intense inwardness. Except Sponge Martin in *Dark Laughter*, all his important characters try to circumvent their respective situations with which their self is perpetually at odds. Anderson sums up this self-situation conflict by saying that "the people of my story are constantly struggling to break out of the world into which I had been trying to force them ..." 5 The disconsolate Sam McPherson, Kit Brandon, the characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* and the short stories restlessly move and run about unable to quieten the agony and torture of their self. This movement is a gesture of their desperate attempt to release themselves from their situations and give their self a wholly harmonious orientation.

They never succeed. The prospect of having a world which should be completely in consonance with man's desire, melts right
after the repudiation of the discordant situation takes place. Sam McPherson, Kit Brandon and Hugh McVey try to look beyond the horizon of the world of matter with the conviction that their desired worlds do not exist in it. Webster, Bruce Dudley and Aline do not take issue with the world of matter; they want uninhibited and spontaneous expression of their instinctive self. They reject their marital lives which, according to them, constrict their sexual hunger and arrest their life-bearing fertility. They desire uninterrupted prolongation of animated sexual participation so that their physical self can be put to creative use.

These two sets of protagonists, thus, have contrasting desires and values. They try to redeem their lives through different means. But the dominant pattern in Anderson's novels remains the same: it is the story of revolt and rejection and futile search. These novels persistently point to the fact that the human spirit and his world are totally out of joint. Man's relationship with the world gets reduced to the mere fact that he is just alive in it.

In Many Marriages and Dark Laughter, Anderson's perception of psychological naturalism comes close to Dreiser's in the sense that both of them do not blame man for his conduct which is the manifestation of his temperament. Man does not create his temperament; on the contrary, it is shown as an inexorable force effacing his sense of judgement and rationality from his mind. In these two novels, civilization is depicted as an artificial barrier which man must overcome to live in accordance with the dictates of his natural self.
The pattern of revolt, rejection and search noticeable in the novels is not to be found in the short stories. The familiar American naturalistic story dramatizes in detail the constant interaction between the deterministic force and human life. In Anderson's naturalistic story, the focus of the narrative is on the interiority of man's mind. The determinism which exercises a traumatic effect on the character is just hinted at and kept in the background. It serves to suggest the causality of the character's predicament. The only exception to this usual mould in Anderson's stories is "Unused." In this story, with the help of circumstantial documentation, Anderson depicts the flight of the heroine from one hostile situation to another till she is encircled and destroyed by circumstances.

Instead of revolting against the forces which disharmonize the self and deny it happiness and expression, the character in the short story withdraws himself from these forces. Far from confronting these forces, he allows himself to be completely dominated and overwhelmed by them. He never tries to repudiate his dehumanizing situation; he surrenders himself to it. In short, he lacks the will and energy which revolt and confrontation entail. He never thinks of exploring the possibility of an alternative to his discordant situation.

Therefore, it is not man's struggle against determinism but his inward suffering and turmoil which constitute the substance of the story. In the case of the heroine in "Seeds", Mary Cochran, Hugh Walker, Elsie Leander and Rosalind Wescoff, the intensity of
this inward suffering achieves fantastic and maddening pitch.

They all desire transcendence from their hostile situations, but devoid of strength and assertiveness to do so, they hopelessly resign themselves to their state of being. They almost become oblivious of their desire to renew their life. The story of Mrs. Grimes illustrates this point in a very moving and poignant manner. It is obvious that the character in the short story shares the author's conviction that the muddle of life is inescapable. They accept this muddle and undergo suffering which is the price they pay for their existence in the world.

Anderson's short stories and, of course, *Winesburg, Ohio* have a mode of transcription of life which is essentially Andersonian. As is seen in the first chapter, on this point he marks a departure from Zola's dictum which has persuaded some critics into believing that Anderson is not a naturalistic writer. The function of the novelist, insists Zola, is synonymous with that of a scientist. The novelist must make detached and minute observation of a "human specimen's" responses to the milieu in the light of which the social scientist can undertake the job of correcting its defects. The novelist's absolute neutral stance dispenses with the role of imagination and intuition in writing the novel.

Zola himself has not been able to live up to this ideal he has set for the novelist. American novels like *Studs Lonigan* and *Susan Lenox* amass minute details in order to show the sustained flow of a character's life in relation to the factors of determinism.
As a matter of fact, except possibly Crane, all other major naturalistic novelists have tried to depict life so that their novels can approximate to the exactitude of realistic details in photographs.

None of these novelists, however, is as non-committal to his character as a scientist is with the specimen on which he conducts experiments in the laboratory. The dominant tone in The Jungle and, specifically, in the hortatory passages in The Grapes of Wrath, is one of indignation, protest and deep anguish. The profound sense of compassion and pity for the characters in novels like Native Son and An American Tragedy is too explicit to remain within the bounds of Zola's strictures. The novelists, then, prefer to share the sufferings of their characters rather than maintain detached objectivity from them.

Contrary to Zola's dictum, Anderson attaches importance to the role of imagination in creative writing. According to him, the function of a writer's mind is to bring about a harmonious synthesis between reality and imagination so that reality can be metamorphosed into the form of art. He is convinced that "imagination must constantly feed upon reality or starve". The imaginative and intuitive faculty of a writer is stimulated and engaged by his perception of reality. Conversely, this faculty enables the writer to recognize the reflection of universal and timeless truth in reality. Therefore, Anderson is concerned with the exploration of significance and uniqueness in reality. He believes that a work of art is possible by the interaction of this faculty of the writer
and the significance and uniqueness he recognizes in reality. For this reason, he is not interested in describing the surface reality; he penetrates its crust in order to search for its essence and delineate it in fictional terms. In order to accomplish it, what he considers to be of paramount importance is not the sight of a detached observer but the insight of a lyric poet.

As an illustration of this point, the story, "The Egg", may be reconsidered. The importance of this story lies in the quality of delineation of the father's predicament. The sandy soil, the egg, the grotesque chicken and the father's desperate bid to tame the egg enlarge and intensify the substance of the story to such an extent that each becomes a meaning in itself and merges in the larger context of the story. Together they suggest, and not describe, the confrontation of man with malignant forces of cosmic and eternal order. The fact that the father remains nameless indicates that his failure and alienation are the ineluctable lot of man in this world.

The male dogs circle round the dead body of Mrs. Grimes in the snow. In a fit of insane frenzy, Joe Wainsworth chops off his assistant's head. In a supreme moment of reunion Elizabeth Willard and Doctor Reefy embrace each other before the former's death. These are not just surface details. Anderson's imaginative vision and intuitive perception invest these incidents with a meaning of quite complex and evocative nature. This is rarely seen in naturalistic novel which tries to give a surface and photographic picture of man's experiences with the forces of determinism.
Not elaboration but brevity, not broadness but condensation—this is how Anderson's narrative distinguishes itself from that of any other naturalistic writer. Anderson claims "that the true history of life is but a history of moments." He does not describe a segment of a character's life with minute details. He does not show how a character moves from one moment to another; he directs his creative insight towards depicting an intense moment in a character's life. The depiction of this moment which parallels James Joyce's idea of epiphany, becomes a formula, a key for the comprehension of the essence of the character's inner being.

Jarvis Thurston comments thus: "Anderson had no interest in how a character moves from A to D in time. He had the lyric poet's interest in D ... there is no concern for intermediate points or process." Stripped to the bone, the narrative of Winesburg, Ohio and the short stories is vastly different from that of any other naturalistic novel. Anderson scrupulously avoids details which do not directly bear upon the revelation of the intense moment of his character. Therefore, his story suggests and implies. His character creates a deep impression, but does not exist in the reader's mind as a three-dimensional being.

Louise Bentley, Alice Hindman, Elmer Cowley and Elsie Leander do not confront varied and complex situations in the light of which a broader perspective of their personality could have emerged. Their outbursts and insane movements point to the state of their inwardness and psychic stirrings which, according to Anderson, project the true picture of man.
The delineation of this moment being Anderson's concern, he fails to handle the plot of his novel with consummate craftsmanship. He proceeds directly towards exploring the inner recesses of each character with the result that the plot grows piecemeal. Denounced as Anderson's weakness and applauded as his strong point, this structural looseness is unique in the method of writing naturalistic novel.

From the foregoing discussion it can be concluded that Anderson shares the naturalistic vision that uncontrollable forces govern human life, but the substance and technique in his writings enable him to occupy a distinct position among the naturalistic writers. He has obviously broadened and enriched the concept of determinism and has demonstrated that the most important task of a writer is to give forceful expression to his attitude towards life. He may not necessarily remain allegiant to the strictures specifying the mode of this expression.
CHAPTER VI

Notes


3 Julius W. Friend, "Anderson's Philosophy" in Homage to Sherwood Anderson, pp. 55-62

4 Letters of Sherwood Anderson, p. 28


8 Jarvis Thurston, "Anderson and 'Winesburg': Mysticism and Craft".