

## **DONALD PIZER (1929-2023)**

### **A Professional Memorial Tribute**

DONALD PIZER, who died on November 7, 2023 at the age of 94, was one of the foremost scholars of American literature of his generation. He took his BA, MA, and PhD degrees all from UCLA. In 1957, following service in the US Army, he embarked on a long and distinguished career as a researcher, writer, and teacher of literature, entirely here at Tulane University. From 1970 until his retirement from teaching in 2001, he held the prestigious Pierce Butler Chair in English, at that time the department's only endowed chair. When on sabbatical, Don also taught abroad, at the universities of Cambridge, Hamburg, and Gronigen.

As Don's persistence at UCLA and then at Tulane suggest, his life in the academy, from his student days onward, was marked by commitment and single-mindedness. For him, the study of literature was a noble calling.

The Pizer bibliography is extensive. Don wrote hundreds of scholarly articles and over forty books. Deep into retirement, he was more productive than scholars half his age. During his lifetime, he became *the* major critical voice in the field of American realism and naturalism. Early in his career, he championed important but underappreciated writers, such as the novelist and essayist Hamlin Garland. Later, he wrote compellingly on more canonical figures such as Stephen Crane, Jack London, Frank Norris, and especially Theodore Dreiser—although it must be said that it was Don's work, really, that secured this group's rightful place in the American literary pantheon.

Don was patient with neophytes, who could mistake "realism" and "naturalism" as synonyms. He would explain deliberately that naturalism is a movement which emphasizes the role of science and determinism in life and fiction: it is not simply about transporting the facts of experience into a novel. One of Don's more than thirty graduate students, who himself joined the professoriate, observed that his mentor's main contribution to the study of naturalism was twofold.

First, he distinguished American from French naturalism, the latter being narrowly philosophical in its aims and analysis of texts. Second, he advanced sensitive and humane rather than anemic ideological readings of naturalist writings, such as Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. According to Don, the hopes, fears, and moral dilemmas of that novel's characters are more important to Dreiser than any aesthetic category or template.

In addition to his essays and monographs, Don was a superb editor of literary texts, who, according to a colleague, sometimes remarked that his editions would "outlive" his criticism. Textually sound, Don's editions were prepared as a way of introducing others to literary works that he found to be essential. He grew up during the 1930s, in a household abuzz with trade unionist ideas. He regarded Crane, London, Norris, and Dreiser as writers in the tragic mode, whose innovative "tragedies of the little guy" could hold their own against the classical Greek tragedies of kings and counsellors. Among other texts, he edited *Sister Carrie* for the Norton Critical Editions series, which is designed for

classroom use; and the novels and essays of Frank Norris for the landmark Library of America series, a public scholarly enterprise underwritten by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Ford Foundation.

Alongside these edited volumes, two of Don's most influential books are *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser* (1976) and *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation* (1987). In honor of his groundbreaking contributions to the field, the inaugural issue of the journal *Studies in American Naturalism* (2006) was dedicated to Don. One of Don's final publications, *American Literary Naturalism: Late Essays* (2020), is already being hailed as a classic.

Don practised a deeply grounded form of literary analysis. For him, literature was a genre that must be valued, and therefore elucidated, in terms of its language. He was a disciple of the New Criticism, a movement during the 1950s that focused attention on style—although he eschewed its disabling doctrine about keeping an author's biography out of reading. (Don after all had studied with the great Melville biographer, Leon Howard, at UCLA.) The literary text, Pizer insisted, is an artful expression of a writer's intentions. Its style, therefore, should exert a gravitational pull on the critic.

Toward colleagues who adopted other approaches, Don was unfailingly tolerant. Nevertheless, he was committed, over a long career, to his own. Its contribution lay in its results: transformative insights about novels, poems, and plays that less sensitive critics tended to reduce to uninspiring didacticism.

As a colleague, Don was a wellspring of institutional memory. During my nine years chairing the department, he frequently saved me in a crisis by explaining "how the department worked." Although he sometimes offered advice, he never insisted that I take it. He served on the usual complement of departmental and university committees with efficiency and integrity. At the same time, according to another colleague, he would seem to "transcend" the realm of faculty governance, his work and reputation functioning as his primary mode of service. Indeed, many job candidates over the years reported, during interviews, an interest in joining the Tulane English Department because "Don Pizer is there."

Beyond his scholarly focus, Don was a man of adventurous and eclectic concerns, both academic and extracurricular. On most of his teaching days, at lunchtime, he could be found in the faculty dining room of the Tulane Student Center, eating and conversing with colleagues. On Friday afternoons, he would often be spotted at the circulation desk of Howard-Tilton Library, checking out a stack of modern novels (Philip Roth, Iris Murdoch, etc.)—the weekend's reading. A colleague who attended this year's Ferguson Lecture, delivered by a prominent New York-based scholar of Shakespeare, told Don where he was headed: "Oh, I've read his stuff. He's quite good," was the reply. Nothing in the realm of literature or criticism, it seemed, escaped his attention.

Don had a special interest in the relationship between the visual arts and literary style, especially in the writings of the novelist and painter John Dos Passos. He was fond of travel, classical music, and good food and drink. An Anglophile, he spent many summers in London, where he introduced me to a Polish restaurant near Hampstead Heath that served delicious pickled herring and wild boar. On occasion, he enjoyed games of chance: poker and horse racing. Even at the New Orleans

Fairgrounds, however, his love of literature was never far out of mind. He told me once how he spotted the actor Albert Finney at the track, shortly after the premiere of the film *Tom Jones*, in which Finney played the lead. “Tom,” Don shouted out to Finney, “how’s Sophia doing?”, referring of course to Sophia Western, Jones’s girlfriend and later wife in Henry Fielding’s picaresque novel.

Respectfully submitted,  
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Pierce Butler Chair in English

(I have been helped in writing this tribute by Barry Ahearn and Teresa Toulouse, both *emeriti* professors of the Tulane English Department, and by Geoffrey Harpham, a former Professor and Pierce Butler Chair in English at Tulane University, and more recently President and Director of the National Humanities Center and Senior Fellow at the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. I have also drawn on an interview with Don Pizer conducted by his former graduate student, the late Steve Brennan, *emeritus* Professor of English at LSU Shreveport.)