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The "Lure" of the Naturalist Text

"Literature," Terry Eagleton has observed, "may appear to be describing the world, and sometimes actually does so, but its real function is performative: it uses language within certain conventions in order to bring about certain effects in a reader" (118). Realist or naturalist fiction appears not to subscribe to this general principle, particularly as it is frequently presented by its authors as being descriptive, representational, dissociated from any pragmatic function except to convince the reader of the authenticity of its representations. But no less than the works of any other fictional type, naturalist novels engage the reader in active responses, for they present the essential components of fiction, as Rainer Warning defines them: "l'habituel et l'inhabituel, le normal et l'anormal, la positivité de l'autorisé et la négativité de l'exclu, la construction d'un monde et le combat contre cette construction." In this way, fiction forces the reader to "intervenir, à prendre position, à prendre parti" (337).

In his study *Le Naturalisme*, Yves Chevrel reminds us that, in general, critical reactions to naturalist works inevitably reveal a faithful adherence to the canonical models of a literature which was designed to reassure readers rather than to disturb them. The impact of naturalist literature, then, was of the order of a "succès de scandale, entretenu par certains écrivains eux-mêmes, mais encore davantage par la critique, prompt à s'effaroucher" (Chevrel 1982, 201). Such reactions were signs that something new was occurring in literature, something which "pourrait bien être résumée par l'adjectif 'brutal.' De fait, et de nombreux lecteurs ... sont à même de le constater, le public se sent agressé, soumis à des chocs répétés" (Chevrel 1982, 201). The shock factor of naturalist literature can indeed be measured by the yardstick of critics' responses and of their counterattacks prompted by this sense of aggression. Denunciations of naturalist works were usually made on moral grounds, but the charges of scatology and perversion frequently reveal a political dimension, for behind the outcries in the daily press were gathered the more formidable and powerful opponents of this new literature, the guardians of France's own "great tradition," the arbiters of taste associated with both literary and political officialdom. Brunetière's sustained campaign against certain forms of naturalism is the obvious

example, but the following observation of Armand de Pontmartin more than adequately illustrates the point: "Une littérature infecte s'est produite à la faveur des triomphes de la démocratie et du radicalisme comme ces couches d'insectes puants et malfaisants qui pullulent dans la vase, et en augmentent la pestilence, après les débordements" (Desprez 239). Thus the image applied to Nana in Zola's scandalous text (*la mouche d'or*) is here turned against her creator. It required almost as much manliness, so it seems, to read the novel of Zola's famous courtesan as was required to resist the fictional character's devastating blandishments. "À tout homme qui ouvre un roman de Zola," Chevrel writes, on the perils of reading such works, "il peut arriver la même aventure que Fontane et P. Lindau: il faut une condition toutefois: qu'il soit, ou qu'il devienne fort, capable de supporter le choc d'un texte qui ne le ménage pas" (211). Lindau, it appears, was up to the task. On reading *Nana*, he revealingly wrote: "Avant qu'on se soit remis de son étonnement, on reçoit un deuxième coup en plein visage, encore plus cynique et brutal cette fois. On s'indigne, on veut rejeter le livre, mais l'intérêt est éveillé" (Chevrel 199).

Many readers of naturalist texts, however, were far less compliant. Naturalist writers frequently complained that their works were being judged as if they were addressed to innocent girls or to ladies of delicate sensibility. In his review of *Nana*, a novel which, incidentally, he found to be dull, tasteless, tactless and unreadable, Henry James at least acknowledged the problem of the readership of naturalist texts. "The novel," he wrote, from an English point of view,

is almost always addressed to young unmarried ladies, or at least always assumes them to be a large part of the novelist's public. This fact, to a French storyteller, appears, of course, a damnable restriction, and Zola would probably decline to take *au sérieux* any work produced under such unnatural conditions. Half of life is a sealed book to young unmarried ladies, and how can a novel be worth anything that deals only with half of life? (James 278).

George Moore stated the problem rather less delicately in observing that English literature was being "sacrificed on the altar of Hymen" (21). But the criterion was by no means limited to Victorian England, for in France too the naturalist text was held to be a *violation*. Thus a special point was made in the advertising of Zola's *Une Page d'amour*, describing the novel as "une page intime qui s'adressera surtout à la sensibilité des lectrices, et dans une note absolument opposée à celle de *L'Assommoir*." "Ce roman," the blurb in *Le Bien public* added, "pourra être laissé sans crainte sur la table de famille" (Zola 1982, 140). Similarly, Zola wrote at the beginning of his *ébauche* for *Le Rêve*: "Je voudrais faire un livre qu'on n'attende pas de moi. Il faudrait, pour première condition, qu'il pût être mis entre toutes les mains, même les

maines des jeunes filles."¹ Such comments are proof, if proof were needed, that Zola and his fellow naturalists were very conscious of the effect of their texts on their readers. If at times they wished to please them, they frequently sought to disturb them and did not hesitate to lay the blame for the hostile reaction to their works on their critics' and readers' narrow views.

But the fact that the naturalist works that were most vigorously criticized and even prosecuted were not only erotic, but anticlerical (like *Autour d'un clocher* by Louis Desprez and Henry Fèvre) or antimilitary (like *Sous-Offs* by Lucien Descaves), and more than implicitly critical of the social and political order, suggests that much more was at stake than the delicate sensibilities of female readers. The naturalist text not only admitted more explicit sexual material into its range of reference and attacked the modes of representation of bourgeois culture, especially its reassuring, edifying literature. In a more fundamental way, it appropriated that culture's favourite genre, the novel, the genre of moral, social, political and intellectual consolation, consolidation and distraction in order to shock and disturb with it and to defy the bourgeois myths of order, decency and permanence. The naturalist text not only dealt with forbidden topics but employed strategies to implicate the reader into its disconcerting effects. It transgressed the carefully maintained barrier between the literature of the drawing room and literature from under the counter. It incorporated into fiction matters that should have been confined to the doctor's treatise, the sociologist's survey or the politician's brief. It was an intruder, importunate, troublesome, yet intriguing.

The naturalist novel, therefore, posits an ideal reader eager for the truth, unflinching before its harsh realities. But its virtual reader remains the bourgeois creature with an abiding taste for fictions of a distracting kind. Even Nana, hardly a pillar of society, vigorously protests against the type of literature in which she figures, "cette littérature immonde, dont la prétention était de rendre la nature; comme si l'on pouvait tout montrer! comme si un roman ne devait pas être écrit pour passer une heure agréable." Thus naturalist literature, whilst pretending not to do so, sets out to shock and disturb the reader, running the constant risk of overstepping the mark to the detriment of the desired effect. We see Zola in certain private statements acknowledging this aim. In August 1886, for example, he urged George Moore to write a naturalist novel about Ireland, "un roman social, vrai, audacieux, révolutionnaire." England would be "bouleversée"; "jamais occasion pareille ne s'est offerte de remuer un peuple. Songez-y. De l'audace, de l'audace, encore de l'audace!" (Zola 1985, 426). There is little doubt — though the evidence is fairly rare — that Zola constantly had in

1 Bibliothèque Nationale, n.a.f. Ms. 10.323, f° 217.

mind the effect of his texts. He wrote to Edmond de Goncourt, for instance, as he was preparing *Une Page d'amour*: "Par parti pris, je travaille pour les pensionnaires, je me fais plat et gris. Ensuite, avec *Nana*, je rentrerai dans le féroce" (1982, 82). Then there is the revealing incidental comment in the preparatory notes of *Germinal*, which defines the pragmatic effect sought after in one of the novel's most dramatic scenes: "Les ouvriers lâchés vont jusqu'au crime: il faut que le lecteur bourgeois ait un frisson de terreur" (Becker 176).² Indeed, in the novel, Zola introduces into this scene a group of Montsou bourgeois who watch the rampaging mob of miners and respond appropriately with a "frisson de terreur."

"Terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalistic tale," wrote the American naturalist Frank Norris in an article on Zola. "They must be twisted from the ordinary, wrenched out from the quiet, uneventful round of every-day life, and flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood and in sudden death" (3). Norris is clearly overstating the case. Yet his comments do capture the essential dynamics of naturalist fiction. It is also undoubtedly true that naturalist writers tend to dwell in their works upon certain horrific realities, as in the frequent obstetrical scenes of painful childbirth, bloody abortions and miscarriages.³ "Très bonnes pages chez la sage-femme," Zola wrote to congratulate his Swiss colleague Edouard Rod on such a scene in *Les Protestants*. *Côte à côte* (1983, 297). Naturalist texts are provocative in dealing openly with taboo topics, to scandalous effect, like Bonnetain's *Charlot s'amuse*, a novel of onanism published in an age still very much under the sway of what Roger-Henri Guerrand terms "cette folie antimasturbatoire, née au siècle des Lumières" (Duby 100). Naturalist literature functions in a way very much like the popular genres, which work upon and transmute many of the latent fears, repressed desires and fundamental taboos of a society, but, instead of veiling these fears in literary conventions, naturalist texts draw them starkly to the reader's attention with shocking directness.

The naturalist, then, is the inheritor of Musset's Lorenzo, who declares: "tous les masques tombaient devant mon regard; l'Humanité souleva sa robe, et me montra, comme à un adepte digne d'elle, sa monstrueuse nudité" (*Lorenzaccio* III 3). But the naturalist fleshes out the abstractions and there is no heroic action to redeem his protagonist. His literature is a *scandal*, not only as an outrage to bourgeois morality, but also in the etymological sense

of the term, as a snare or trap. Outraged critics of naturalist literature tended to select the most outrageous passages of a work for their attention and denounce naturalism as no more than an excessive form of realism. Such passages are undeniably there, but they are part of a more complex pragmatic enterprise.

It is now a commonplace of criticism that a literary text establishes at the outset an understanding with the reader, then either conforms to the latter's expectations or proceeds to manipulate and even thwart them. One theorist describes the process in blatantly economic terms: "avant d'entreprendre sa narration, le narrateur tente de passer un marché avec celui (ou celle) à qui il est en train de s'adresser. Le récit est un objet d'échange, narrer équivaut à marchander" (Schuerewegen 248). This exchange, or contract, clearly occurs within the framework of generic conventions, to which the submissive writer adheres and which the submissive reader accepts. There is thus a generic contract between writers and readers according to which the practitioners of the genre either commit their works to provide the kind of effects and satisfactions that conform to the recipient's expectancies or institute transgressive practices to confound them. Traditional genre theorists have tended to attribute single emotional or intellectual effects to particular genres, but there is no reason why a work belonging to a particular genre should not evoke complex or contradictory responses. In any case, the novel, as Tony Tanner points out, has always been by its very nature "a transgressive mode, inasmuch as it seemed to break, or mix, or adulterate the existing genre expectations of the time" (3). Then there is the fact that fiction establishes patterns of feeling within a prolonged process of temporal development. As Elias Schwartz remarks, genres "embody *general patterns or norms of human feeling* which, when they are particularized and actualized in specific works, "become" the rhythmic patterns which directly imitate human feeling" (121).

Now, if naturalist literature is considered to be no more than an intemperate form of realism, it can be held to do no more than seek to engage the reader in what Philippe Lejeune has called "le pacte référentiel" (36), purporting to deny its fictionality and to provide, in a similar way to biography, autobiography, scientific or historical discourse, information about a reality external to the text. But we know that realism is more a discourse of verisimilitude than of referentiality, determined more by accepted concepts of appropriate fictional representations, by an image of reality rather than by images *from* reality. As Philippe Hamon writes: "Ce n'est jamais, en effet, le "réel" que l'on atteint dans un texte, mais une rationalisation, une textualisation du réel, une reconstruction *a posteriori* encodée dans et par le texte, qui n'a pas d'ancrage, et qui est entraînée dans la circularité sans clôture des 'interprétants,' des clichés, des copies ou des

2 Ms. 10.307, f° 421, p. 261.

3 See *Poi-Bouille* and *La Joie de vivre* by Zola, Maupassant's *Une Vie*, *Sous-Offs* by Lucien Descaves, *L'Hystérique* of Camille Lemonnier and *L'Accident* de M. Hèbert by Léon Hennique.

stéréotypes de la culture" (129). We need therefore to interpret naturalist literature, not on the basis of the avowed aesthetic principles of its creators, who emphasized its referentiality as realistic representation, history or a form of scientific discourse, but rather from the point of view of the effects brought about by their creations, according to *pragmatic* considerations, "l'hypothèse étant, selon une formule que l'on peut emprunter à K. Stierle, que 'l'usage projeté d'un texte donne les règles de sa constitution'" (132). From this point of view naturalist literature must clearly be dissociated from the realist enterprise and defined in opposition to it.

A more evident way to illustrate this crucial point would be to examine in naturalist novels what have come to be called (again mainly by Philippe Hamon) the "jeux stratégiques" of a text, especially its beginning and ending. As far as naturalist fiction is concerned, these determinants have always been viewed as *realistic* strategies, as a series of difficulties relating to the contact between the world of fiction and the world of reality that is supposed to be represented. But these "strategic sites" are also indicators of genre specific to naturalist literature in the way that they function in opposition to each other. Thus the *incipit* of the naturalist text introduces readers into the familiar world of realist representation, into the domesticated world of their mimetic literature, into the reassuring reflection by the mirror aesthetics of their own reality, offering their society "le confort d'une vision systématique d'elle-même et la sécurité d'un sens structuré" (Zola 1982, 59). But the conclusion of the text certainly does not fulfil this same familiarizing function. Whereas the naturalist *incipit* tends to derive from the realist project, the ending is more particular to the genre. Between these two "ensembles-limites" of the text, as Barthes calls them (4), and through the transformations that the world of the text has undergone along the way, the naturalist work takes on its own "genericness," undermining the realist "contract" with the readers' expectations and instigating a new (dis)order. Having led its readers into the universe of the mimetic order and still maintaining the mimetic illusion, the naturalist text subjects them to the scandal of its thematics. They are caught up in the dynamics of attraction and repulsion that the *incipit* has set in motion and that the conclusion completes. Thus naturalist endings provide the finishing touch to these effects. These endings are varied, of course, but tend to consist of three identifiable types. There is the deprivation ending, in which the victim, like Gervaise Macquart in *L'Assommoir*, sinks down into her or his ultimate misfortunes. There is the banal ending, which frustrates the reader's expectation of closure and prolongs the trivialities of the story beyond the conclusion of the plot. Finally, in some cases, there is the sententious ending, which summarizes the satire of the baseness that has gone before, as at the conclusion of Zola's *Pot-Bouille*, where one of the servants in the

"respectable" apartment house declares: "Mon Dieu! mademoiselle, celle-ci ou celle-là, toutes les barriques se ressemblent. Au jour d'aujourd'hui, qui a fait l'une a fait l'autre. C'est cochon et compagnie."

The naturalist text is therefore like a snare, which involves its readers in secure expectations and offers them the pleasures of the "readable" text all the better to provoke them with its disturbing developments. Some works boldly shock and scandalize the reader. If Zola's *L'Assommoir* provides the model of this process in its graduated disconcerting effects, *La Terre* presents an unequivocally provocative case in point. As Roger Ripoll writes of this work and its author:

Il serait singulièrement naïf de croire que Zola n'entendait pas malice et se contentait de décrire fidèlement ce qui est. En réalité, le romancier a choisi, entre toutes possibilités qui s'offraient à lui, celles qui choqueraient le plus profondément. L'étude de la genèse montre qu'il a toujours cherché à accroître dans le récit la part de la grossièreté, de la sexualité, de la violence. La recherche de l'excès se découvre dans tous les domaines; Zola éprouve le besoin d'aller toujours plus loin, de montrer toujours plus nettement ce qui est le moins supportable.⁴ (782)

Other works tend less to shock than to disappoint. As William W. Thomas has shown, the reader of *Une Belle journée*, for example — a text that both derives from and significantly breaks with the model of *Madame Bovary* in precisely the kind of transgressive process that interests us here and which operates in relation to a text-model which in itself was transgressive for a previous generation — leads the reader into the expectancy that a dramatic adultery will occur, but proceeds to frustrate this expectancy in the narrative of the trivialities that follow (332). Reception theorists argue that literary texts are variously received according to the degree of naivety or sophistication of their readers, their sensitivity to generic conventions. But, with literature in the mimetic mode there is a further dimension to this problem: the degree to which readers accept the representational nature of the fiction. Naturalist literature may be doubly disturbing to readers, who are shocked or deceived in their literary and moral expectations, doubly shocked that life is as it is represented and that literature should show it. More enlightened readers, however, will recognize the double conventionality of the genre, of its mimetic representations and its textual machinations. Such is the fate of naturalist literature that its most

4 Cf. "Le roman dira ce que la littérature ne doit pas dire. ... le récit tend à montrer toujours davantage ce qu'il est scandaleux de montrer, les jambes écartées, la chair nue, les poils, le sperme" (783).

sophisticated readers must remain impervious to its strategies. Hence, no doubt, despite its vast appeal, its continuing lack of prestige.⁵

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5 For a fuller study of the problem outlined in this article, see chapter 7 of the book from which this article derives: David Baguley, *Naturalist fiction: The Entropic Vision*. Cambridge UP, 1990.

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Marques et masques du lecteur dans *Les Cloches de Bâle* de Louis Aragon

Le cycle romanesque du *Monde réel*, on le sait, comprend cinq romans: *Les Cloches de Bâle* (1934), *Les Beaux Quartiers* (1936), *Les Voyageurs de l'Impériale* (1942), *Aurélien* (1944) et *Les Communistes* (1951). *Les Cloches de Bâle* est le seul de ces cinq romans qui se prête de manière immédiate et relativement aisée à une poétique du lecteur. Encore s'agit-il d'une poétique restreinte, car le lecteur dont je voudrais commenter les apparitions successives n'est ni le lecteur extérieur, "empirique," ni le "lecteur implicite" postulé dans l'acte même d'écrire; c'est un lecteur ambigu, et aux figures changeantes, mais explicitement désigné dans le texte romanesque ou son paratexte. Il revêt trois identités différentes: c'est d'abord l'auteur en personne, proclamant qu'il a lu ses propres livres plus qu'il ne les a écrits; c'est ensuite Elsa, lectrice-critique, évoquée dans la préface des *Cloches de Bâle* pour le rôle qu'elle a joué dans la genèse de l'oeuvre; c'est enfin un lecteur anonyme interpellé dans l'oeuvre, pris à partie, convoqué comme garant d'une démarche qui fait du roman un acte de fraternité associant l'écrivain et cette partie du public qui partage sa vision sociale et politique. Trois incarnations du lecteur sont ainsi engagées dans la genèse des *Cloches de Bâle*: je, elle et tu, construisant un jeu de personnes original, où s'affiche la solidarité de l'écriture et de la lecture.

Je rappellerai d'abord ce que sont *Les Cloches de Bâle*: un roman en trois mouvements, de longueurs fort inégales, de tons et de significations également fort différents. Chacun construit autour d'un personnage de femme: Diane, Catherine, Clara. Le second de ces personnages, Catherine, donne naissance en réalité à deux parties de l'oeuvre: "Catherine," et "Victor." Mais le lecteur est conduit à accorder l'importance principale à ces trois femmes.

La première est Diane. Mondaine, séductrice, femme-objet et intrigante. On suit sa carrière mondaine, d'un amant à un autre, d'un mari à un autre, entre 1903 et 1912. C'est le type de la femme entretenue. Elle fait commerce de sa séduction et de son esprit dans un monde qui commence par être celui de la petite aristocratie décaillée d'où elle est issue, pour finir en une