

# Chapter 9

## Naturalism, Literature, Truth and Objectivity

### 9.1 Readings and Homework

- Readings: Zola, Chapters 16-32
- Study questions:
  1. Naturalists claims to describe the reality without any use of the supernatural. How do you understand the "visits" of Camille's "ghost" tormenting the murderers?
  2. How do you understand the fact that Laurent becomes a true artist?
  3. Compare chapters VII and XXI in terms of the relationships between Laurent and Thérèse.
  4. Compare chapters XIX, XXVI and XXXII in terms of the respective power of the character over the others.
  5. What about cats again? Find the different places where the cat appears. What is the cat's effect on the lovers? What do you think is his role in the novel?

### 9.2 Action and notes on the way

XVI: Laurent cheats on Thérèse with a model

- XVII: Nocturnal hallucinations of Laurent  
 XVIII: Laurent and Thérèse thinking about the wedding  
 XIX: Laurent and Thérèse gradually put the idea of the wedding in Madame's mind. Decision is taken.  
 XX: Wedding  
 XXI: Wedding night  
 XXII: Hallucinating together – continued  
 XXIII: Idem – Camille in their bed  
 XXIV: double life of Laurent and Thérèse  
 XXV: Laurent goes back to painting. He is now a real artist. But cannot paint anything but Camille's portrait.  
 XXVI: Madame paralyzed. She learns that her "children" are the murderers.  
 XXVII: Madame's failure to denounce the murderers to the Thursday's parties's guests.  
 XXVIII: Hatred growing up – quarrels and violence.  
 XXIX: "Remorse" of Thérèse. Laurent beats her.  
 XXX: François is killed. Laurent is afraid that Thérèse denounce them.  
 XXXI: Laurent follows Thérèse. She is cheating on him and give herself to a deprived way of life. They threaten one another to go to the police. Suspicion growing. Thinking about killing the other.  
 XXXII: They attempt to murder one another the same night. Finally commit suicide under the stare of the paralyzed old mother.

### 9.3 Naturalism and the description of reality – Literature and Truth

A novel is a *representation of reality*. The ways of representing reality differ from one writer to another. Zola claims that his way amounts to a perfect *imitation* of reality, with a clear and simple style. He likens his writings to *scientific reports*. According to him, art aims at nothing but the complete *truth*. However, he certainly uses literary devices, to lead the plot and character in a consistent way, and also to drag the reader along.

It is very difficult to sustain that Zola's style has anything in common with a scientific report. The style is indeed not plain, but rather rich in literary techniques, even if the vocabulary and the syntax are simple.

In his commentary of the novel, Sainte-Beuve thinks that Zola's descriptions go *beyond* the truth. It is not true, but fantastically true. About the opening description of the Passage, he writes that he knows the Passage very well and that it does not have the "melancholy" and the "Rembrandtesque shades" which pervades Zola's description. Still, he says that it is, in a sense, more "true" than any other description. How can we make sense of this?

## 9.4 The opening description, a paradigmatic case

- A "classic" opening: the order of description
  - neighborhood, street and then store
  - down to the characters: no names, but the "trio" is here
  - note that it is a real street
  - the reader knows the place, and can easily believe in what he is reading
  - Zola could be describing real people as well: they are completely unexceptional (contrast with other character, noble and superior, in the literature)
- A "fantastic atmosphere", the "Rembrandtesque shades" to set up the melancholy.
  - note the use of adjectives
  - convey the atmosphere both of *mediocrity and poverty*
  - *claustrophobic* place
  - all the *senses* are at work: sight of course, but also ears (the irritating steps) and smell (damp draughts blow in from the street)
  - but also a form of *decrepitude*: the Passage is metaphorically sick: "leprosy", "scars"
  - already something *threatening* in the air: people don't want to stop, it seems a "hiding-place for cutthroats"
  - *death* is finally around with the "funerary lanterns"

## 9.5 The Thursday parties or the painting of the society

- Description of the reality: the bourgeois society.
  - Michaud, Police officer, and Olivier, his son, and the wife of Olivier
    - note that we do not even learn her name until the end of the next page (Suzanne)!!, went up just a little bit
    - Note all the details: Places, Salaries
    - “bourgeois” values: Camille is jealous because Olivier is “head clerk in the department of security and order”.
  - Grivet, Camille’s chef – respect for the hierarchy
  - Description of the middle class, “bourgeois” entertainment
- Beyond Reality: Human mechanics (24)
  - Literary devices to prepare the final sequence on Thérèse’s look upon these people. They are nothing but puppets.
  - No free will: mechanical instincts
  - Note the constant irony in Zola’s style
- Thérèse’s look on this society: take on the description of the guests as puppets.
- Mechanics and Puppets: determinism against free will.

## 9.6 The Morgue

- Description of the reality: the corpses
  - This chapter provides us with an example of naturalism with a vengeance:
    1. incredibly detailed, realistic descriptions of decaying bodies
      - a. patches of colors painterly writing again (71/108)
      - b. water washes away the flesh of the face of one corpse exposing a grin (72/108)

2. earning the critical reactions of "putrid literature," "quagmire of slime and blood" mentioned in the introduction
3. Laurent's animal reactions range from nausea and terror to pleasure and desire
  - a. the latter provoked by the body of an attractive young woman (72-73/109, q.v.)
  - b. some think that the black stripe on her neck makes her resemble Olympia, who was wearing a black velvet choker (Buss 199 note 2)
- Beyond Reality: The morgue as a free show
 

Note "the regulars:" (73/109-110)

  1. the morgue as entertainment, a free show
  2. people feel disappointed when there are not enough bodies
  3. Note the variety: (73/110)
    - a. workmen carrying bread and tools, making jokes
    - b. the genteel, respectable making expressions of distaste
    - c. young women who come "window shopping"
    - d. the widow staring at the body of a good-looking young guy (74/110-11)
      - 1.) she carries the smell of violets
      - 2.) violets are associated with death, esp. young death, in the works of Shakespeare, Milton, etc.
    - e. the young boys who head straight for the naked ladies (74/111)

*Everybody is equal in front of the spectacle of death.*

## 9.7 The murder

- Occasion to describe the popular gathering along the river on Sundays. All the senses again, and the entire world (the whores and the student)
- Some have also said that the description fits the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* by Monet
- In any case, the whole description of the Sunday festivities reminds us of the impressionist paintings on the same subject

- All this contrasts with the scene of the murder
- night and death are coming (fallmand also right from the beginning: vault)
  - cold
  - colors disappear: the sight is somewhat blurred – sky and water, island
  - sounds disappears and sight blurs
  - narrow passage

## 9.8 The visits of Camille's ghost

- Reality: Hallucinations and reactions describes from a medical point of view: madness, disease, epilepsy
- Beyond Reality: Striking descriptions of the visits of the ghost.

## 9.9 Objective, did you say objective?

There some in which Zola's style is objective:

- He never describes the psychological sorrows, feelings and emotions as Shelley is.
- Rather, whatever the characters feel is explained in physiological terms
- Never the character have a chance to "express themselves", like Walton, Frankenstein and the monster have.
- Rather, Zola is always the master of the description, written from an objective point of view, which gives no room to personal outpouring.
- In this sense, there is no subjectivity in Zola's description, only the fatal unfolding of natural consequences, given the initial situation.
- The fact that Zola uses a lot of literary techniques to express this natural fatality, and the influence of both social and physiological circumstances does not change anything to this.
- If not more true, it makes the whole more credible.

- The truth which Zola seeks, is not the truth about such and such place in Paris, but rather, the truth about the human nature and its unavoidable animal part.

