

Part III

Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*

Chapter 4

Introduction to Zola

4.1 Readings and Homework

- Readings: Preface to the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin*
- Homework: Give a short answer to the following questions on the basis of your readings:
 1. How does Zola answer to the accusations of pornography?
 2. In what sense does Zola aim at applying science to literature?
 3. Explain how Zola describes the “experiment” in *Thérèse Raquin*.
 4. What argument does Zola give in support of the idea that moral considerations are irrelevant to art?

4.2 Zola’s Preface

- **Response to charges of pornography.**

Note that Zola does not so much deny the charge as argue that his critics have misunderstood what the novel is about

1. pretends to be shocked and amazed at the reception
 - note the opening paragraph “I naïvely thought (p. 3)
 - “So I was greatly astonished” when they called his book a pool of mud and gore. (p. 5)

2. he is not complaining that his critics found it disgusting, but they should be disgusted for the right reasons! (p. 3)
 3. there are only 2 or 3 men capable of being true judges of his work (pp. 6-7) they would have pointed out his departures from the Naturalist style (p. 7)
- Zola suggests that **the charge of pornography is like finding anatomical specimens disgusting**. That is, his work is one of science, his aim is “scientific” (p. 4)
 1. he “wrote every scene . . . with the pure curiosity of a scientist” (p. 6)
 2. he speaks of applying “scientific analysis” in the novel (p. 7)
 - He claims **morality not relevant to science** (p. 5, q.v.)
 1. draws a comparison with the artist/painter who is not excited by naked models (p. 4, q.v.). Allusion here to an actual case: people were shocked by Manet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* and *Olympia* (1863)
 2. Zola defies the reader to find anything pornographic, alluding to actual pornography (“little pink volumes” p. 6)
 3. accuses his critics of hypocrisy
 - they applaud the painted actresses (p. 6)
 - thus implicitly associates them with the bourgeois exploiters of women of the realist genre
 - Goal of the book:
 1. a study of “temperament” not character (p. 4)
 2. that is, a study of “human animals” with out free will, without souls, completely dominated by physical laws
 - Experimental method:
 1. idea is to take people of different temperaments, throw them together, see what happens, and carefully describe the outcome (p. 4)
 2. note that the novel has very few characters: it is like a controlled experiment, controlling the number of variables

4.3. THE REVOLUTION OF FRENCH REALIST AND NATURALIST MOVEMENT IN LITERATURE

3. Here, see what happens when one throw a third character disturbing the former balance existing in the lives of th two first characters.

4. also compares his work to the analytic method that surgeons apply to corpses (p. 4)

5. describes himself as scientist dedicated to truth: "I forgot everybody" and lost himself in work (pp. 4-5)

- the present experiment:

Laurent

1. sanguine temperament:

- warm, passionate, healthy, ruddy glow

- 19th century theory of temperaments derived from medieval theory of the four humors: in the sanguine temperament, blood is the dominant humor

2. and, of course, highly sexed

Thérèse

1. nervous temperament, excitable

2. sexually unsatisfied

3. idea was to determine the effect of the latter type of temperament on the former

Outcome (deterministic):

1. drawn together by a "need" (p. 4, q.v.)

2. murder a "consequence"

3. feelings of remorse nothing but a nervous disorder

4.3 The revolution of French Realist and Naturalist movement in literature

The Romantic period roughly: 1770 - 1850 (this does not mean that Romanticism disappears)

Naturalism comes at the end of the Romantic period.

4.3.1 Literature and Sociology

- **Describing common people**

Realism and naturalism contrast with previous literature in describing the lives of contemporary (not ancient) common people (not heroes of courage and virtue) in their most materialistic and trivial aspects:

- **Realist** literature mostly deal with middle-class people and the French “bourgeoisie”, most often outside Paris.

- **Naturalist** literature have a broader interest: Everyday life of the working class: factories, mines, farms, etc. Zola in particular was known for compelling crowd scenes – e.g.,the strike scene in *Germinal*

- Realism and naturalism wants **to integrate the story and characters in the historical and social contexts:**

- **Realism:** the story is highly involved in the **history** of the times. Here, Paris during the beginning of the Second Empire (Napoleon III, 1852-1870) before Hausman changed the city. Colonization mentioned: the heroin is the daughter of a French officer and an Algerian woman.

- **Naturalist** literature: Description of the **social environment** which is of high influence on the actions and destiny of the characters. In particular, description of the development of capitalism and the consequences of the **industrial revolution**. Also, description of family life and marriage as social institutions.

- Realism and Naturalism aim at **an exact imitation of reality/nature**. This involves a transparent writing style, and a “omniscient” author. That is to say, the author does not intervene and describes things for a god point of view: omniscient (contrast this with novels written in the first person where only one point of view is given to you).

Thus, Realist and Naturalist literature amount to a form of anthropology and sociology of every day life during the 19th century.

4.3. THE REVOLUTION OF FRENCH REALIST AND NATURALIST MOVEMENT IN LITERATURE

4.3.2 Realism, Naturalism and other kinds of literature

- Realist and naturalist literature were aimed at making novels available to a **new class of reader**
 - Romantic literature was written by and aimed at a small, highly-educated minority
 - In the 19th century, literacy was spreading to the working classes: the industrial revolution has made it possible to **print large amounts** of various journals.
- This new literature was often published in **inexpensive magazines**
 - Zola, *Thérèse Raquin* first appears in serial form
 - magazine serials were a popular literary form just as they were in England
- French naturalist literature, however, was much more **leftist**. Study of social dissymmetries and relations of power.
 1. Working class vs. the aristocracy and the church
 2. Men vs. women – e.g., Balzac's *Cousin Bette*

Don't forget the context of the battle for democracy after the French Revolution (Some people defend monarchy and hope to restore it up until the beginning of WWI)
- **Comparison with Romantic literature:**

Realist and Naturalist literature involve challenges to authority, just a romantic literature does. However, realism and naturalism also represent a turning away from Romantic literature like *Frankenstein*

 - Change in style: no rhetorical sophistication or literary allusion. The new readers were not sufficiently educated to catch all the literary allusions of the Romantic writers
 - Change in subject: no melodrama self-centered on a psychologically torn individual. The new readers were not interested in the *Sturm und Drang*, the morbid self-analysis, the thoughts of suicide etc.

- **Realism, Naturalism and the human body**

Realist and Naturalist literature also contrast with previous literature in so far as the *human body*, and even the female body, becomes a major subject. In particular, these authors deal with sexuality and disease. This was highly controversial. It is not to be understood as a provocative challenge to the authorities. **The main point is to give an accurate account of all aspect of men and women.** Since it is undeniable that the body is an important part of human beings, a true account of humanity should include an account of the body.

4.4 The Realists and Naturalists

4.4.1 The origin: Realists and Naturalists in France

It is very hard to tell who exactly is realist/naturalist or both (except for Zola himself!). Some were taken as founding fathers while they never took themselves as realists. Some depart from the main line in some aspects. Others just decided to leave the group, which is not itself so unified.

- The **realist** tradition more or less begins with **Honoré de Balzac**
 1. although he does not personally use the term
 2. the *Human Comedy*
 - about 100 novels
 - 1830-50
 3. Attempt to demonstrate the way in which people are influenced by their material environment
 4. Characterized by detailed realistic description
 5. Emphasizes animal nature of human beings and their passions
- **Stendhal** (Real Name: Marie-Henri Beyle)
 1. emphasizes the baser motives of human conduct
 2. written in a plain style
 3. ignored during his lifetime, but discovered in the 1850's by the self-proclaimed Realists

- promoted a type of literature that they held to be the very opposite of art
- any attempt at literary style, any infusion of point of view, etc. was thought to be a departure from objective, scientific description
- compare Zola's preface, where he speaks of a "clear, natural written style" (p. 7)

- **Gustave Flaubert**

1. *Madame Bovary* (1857), a novel of small town, middleclass adultery
2. was actually tried for pornography for this work

- **Emile Zola, founder of naturalism**

1. 1840-1902
2. a poor kid who flunked out of college
3. turned to art reviews, literature
 - friend with Cézanne, Manet
 - defends the Salon des Refusés
4. *Thérèse Raquin*, 1867, was his first "big success"
 - attacked as pornographic
 - which of course helped sales tremendously
5. to defend himself, adds a preface to the 2d edition (1868), which serves as a kind of manifesto for "naturalism"

4.4.2 Influence on the U.S. writers

Both Realist and Naturalist movements had influence on the U.S. writers. Just as in France, it is difficult to talk about any unified group and doctrine. Still, the Realists are interested in describing the reality out of the symbolism and the dramatic effects of the Romantics. Also, the Naturalists departs from the Realist in that they criticize the focus on bourgeois, middle-class WASP and the taboo on sex and violence. They describe low-income people, immigrants in the poor neighborhoods of big cities.

- Realists:
 - W.D Howells
 - Henry James
- Naturalists
 - Abraham Cahan
 - Ellen Glasgow
 - Jack London
 - Stephen Crane
 - Frank Norris
 - Theodore Dreiser

4.5 Zola's "Naturalism"

- Distinction between **realism and naturalism** is not all that sharp, as **both involve**
 1. *detailed descriptions* of nearly everything
 2. an emphasis on the *animal side* of human beings
 3. a plain, *objective style*
- **Zola's "Naturalism"**
 1. The word refers first the naturalist as a **scientist** (interested in biology)
 - Zola uses the word on p. 7 of Preface
 - Literally, a naturalist was a student of nature, like Darwin, Cuvier, etc.
 2. It is also the name of a **philosophy** which claims that nothing exists beside nature. That is to say: no supernatural, no metaphysics. The naturalist holds that there is only matter in the world (no God, no souls etc.)
 3. It becomes finally the name of a **artistic movement**. First in painting. Naturalists hold that art is an expression of all the aspect of life (likable or not) at its highest intensity.

Zola has naturalism as a combination of these three meanings.

- **Naturalism and science**

1. cf. Balzac had explicitly drawn the parallel between the naturalist and the novelist (xxiv); Zola similarly compares himself to a medical researcher

2. Influence of **Positivism** (Auguste Comte, Littré). Idea that scientific knowledge is:

- the best knowledge available for humans
- gradually expanding its domain of legacy on all disciplines
- including the individual and social behavior of humans (biology, psychology, sociology)

3. **Influence of Darwinian ideas:** French translation of Darwin's *Origins of species*: 1852. Hippolyte Taine applies idea of influence of the environment and transmission of characters to social sciences.

4. **Influence of Physics:** work of forces and energy transfer. All phenomena, natural or human, are treated as conflicts of forces and transfers of energy.

5. **Naturalism and Scientific method:** Zola conceived novels as like **scientific experiments**. Notion of experimental novel.

- emphasizes the way that people are shaped by their heredity and their environments

- reflecting a literary understanding of the scientific spirit of the age

3. **Zola's works and science:**

- temper in *Thérèse Raquin*

- *Les Rougon-Macquart*: series of 20 novels tracing out the effects of heredity and environment on a single family: . The best known novels of the series: *Nana*, *Germinal*. He began writing them in 1868 and they appeared in 1871-1893.

- started another series like this but died while writing the fourth one

- **Naturalism and Truth**

Zola aims at giving a true, objective description of reality.

Writing Style:

- Very simple, no rhetorical sophistication. Avoids pathos as all others Zola's novels.
- Later, also long descriptions as well as documented comments.
- The model is the objective, analytic style of medical reports.

● **Overlap between Romanticism and Naturalism or Realism?**

1. we find Walton, at least, comparing the scientist with the poet in Frankenstein
2. one can also find realistic descriptions of nature in Frankenstein, such as the contrasts between the sublime arctic or mountain landscapes with the beauties of life in the river valleys
3. in Frankenstein, however, the beautiful in **nature is used to represent goodness and the work of God**, in opposition to the corrupting influences of civilization
4. **For Zola, on the other hand, nature does not represent** goodness, beauty, etc. Nature is the expression of **deterministic physical laws**, not the work of one God.

Naturalists rejects all forms of SYMBOLISM.

● **Naturalism and morality**

1. Zola was personally a man of high moral standards, as reflected in his taking position against the Second Empire and in his role in the Dreyfus affair
2. The relation between literature and morality is paradoxical.
 - On the one hand, no moral rules can make it forbidden to deal with immoral behaviors. Literature cannot be ruled by morality.
 - On the other hand, one aim of this literature is a greater morality. In discovering the deterministic influences of the animal part of humans on their behavior, Zola hopes to get people learn how to master these instincts.
 - On the one hand, the aim is to never deny the determinism of natural instincts. Most novels describe human failure to master them. Most novels are highly pessimistic. Morality does not appear as possible

since very little room is left for free will. For most part of it, human behavior is ruled by instincts and desires.

- On the other hand, the book does at least appear to teach a moral lesson about the wages of sin

Thus, Zola's claim that morality is meaningless, a "great empty word" (p. 7) is to be taken with precaution.

4.6 Conclusion and prospects

Given the above, while reading the novel, you should think about the following questions:

- Find instances in the text in which human beings are reduced to soulless animal and their behavior reduced to the deterministic consequences of their biological nature together with their social environment.
- To what extent does Zola's treatment of the characters and their story resemble a scientific experiment? To what extent does Zola's description of the characters and their story resemble a scientific report?
- Is there a moral lesson in the novel or not?

