

NATURALIST FICTION

THE ENTROPIC VISION

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For Natasha and Alexander

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INTRODUCTION

A brief preamble on the genesis of this book will perhaps not seem out of place in a study of a type of literature much concerned with origins and frequently intent upon defining its originality in relation to other literary models. The book was conceived, some considerable time ago, as an introductory study to the French naturalist movement for (mainly) English-speaking readers. Had that project come to fruition, it would undoubtedly have followed a most predictable plan. There would have been the requisite initial chapter on usages of the term 'naturalism' in philosophy, in art criticism and in literary aesthetics, followed, no doubt, by a study of positivist and scientific thought in mid-nineteenth-century France, then by a summary of the main ideas of Hippolyte Taine, all of which supposedly provided an impetus to the movement. There would have been sections on the literary precursors of the naturalist writers, 'realists' like Balzac, Duranty, the Goncourt brothers, on Zola's early works and aesthetic principles, on the formation of the so-called 'Médan group' (officially Paul Alexis, Henry Céard, Léon Hennique, Joris-Karl Huysmans and Guy de Maupassant) with mention of the celebratory dinner offered by the five above (plus Octave Mirbeau) to their elders, Flaubert, Edmond de Goncourt and Zola (plus the publisher Charpentier), at the restaurant Trapp on 16 April 1877, an occasion usually considered to have been the founding event of the naturalist school in France. Special prominence would have been given, in the anecdotal history of the movement, to the publication, exactly three years later, of the collection of stories by the same five plus Zola, *Les Soirées de Médan*, a work usually held to have been a kind of manifesto of the group. But the main body of the book would almost certainly have consisted of a series of monographs on the principal naturalist writers (including Alphonse Daudet), with due but modest recognition afforded the minor figures, and an attempt to gauge the degree of adherence of all and sundry to the tenets of the school. Each writer's idiosyncrasies would have been cheerfully explained away by reference to Zola's

famous formula to describe a work of art, 'a corner of nature seen through a temperament', as long as hefty 'slices of life', 'studies of nature', 'human documents' prevailed in his works, for the master himself never failed to emphasise the individuality of his fellow writers. Then, towards the end of the book, there would have been the inevitable chapter on the inevitable decline of the movement in the late eighties and early nineties with the onset of the idealist reaction, the religious renewal, the Russian evangelical novel, symbolist poetry, psychological novels, and with the decline of the prestige which science was supposed to have enjoyed in the heyday of the movement. Special significance would have been given to the infamous 'Manifeste des Cinq' in *Le Figaro* of 18 August 1887, with which five upstart young writers, Paul Bonnetain, Lucien Descaves, Gustave Guiches, Paul Margueritte and J.-H. Rosny – a kind of anti-Médan group – posing as Zola disciples, attacked the master and his latest novel, *La Terre*, thereby signalling, so it is usually claimed, a repudiation of naturalism and its leader by the new generation of writers. By the time the journalist Jules Huret published in 1891 the opinions of sixty-four men (and women) of letters in his *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire* – a final chapter of the book would have shown – there was general agreement, even among the naturalists themselves, that the movement was over, though the famous telegram from Zola's ever faithful disciple, Paul Alexis: 'Naturalisme pas mort. Lettre suit' – his finest literary achievement according to a sardonic Catulle Mendès¹ – would have provided the pretext for a concluding section on the lasting impact of the naturalist movement in France and abroad.

Certain traces of this happily aborted project still remain within the present book, particularly in chapters 1 and 2, which deal in part with the history of the naturalist movement in France (and with the apparent lack thereof in Britain) and with naturalist aesthetics.² But this material will be presented as much for the problems and uncertainties that it illustrates as for its informational value. For mainly methodological reasons the kind of serene exposition outlined above is no longer possible. Traditional studies of naturalism have been excessively anecdotal and biographical to the detriment of an understanding of the literature that they often purport to explain. Furthermore, they have almost invariably been limited to a single national tradition such that recent surveys of research have emphatically deplored the lack of studies from a more international perspective.³ The main focus of this book, nevertheless, as the subject dictates, is French naturalist literature, with particular reference to

fiction. I am not, therefore, attempting a comparative study. But the generic approach that I wish to adopt does require frequent reference to texts from other national traditions, particularly, with the English-speaking reader in mind, to works written in English.

A further reason for abandoning the traditional approach, of which my scheme above provides a kind of parodic reduction, is that the decentred method that is regularly employed by such surveys tends to perpetuate or to gloss over certain paradoxes, contradictions and ambiguities, for they are often content to trace loose associations among writers rather than to make rigorous studies of relationships among their texts. How do we explain, for example, the problematic association between realism and naturalism, 'a great, perhaps the greatest, bug-bear of this topic' according to two recent interpreters of the movement?⁴ How do we reconcile the apparent disparity between the doctrines and the practices of certain naturalist writers? Is it enough merely to assert that they failed to put their theories into practice – and so much the better for their works!⁵ How do we account for the fact that most naturalist writers, certainly in France, were refined aesthetes, yet seem to have relished writing on the most sordid themes? Is the nature of naturalist literature so disparate – to raise another vexed question – that it inherently defies attempts to define a specifically naturalist poetics?⁶

In his landmark study *Le Naturalisme* (1982), a work which alone represents the final and decisive reason why to go back over the well-trodden paths of the familiar survey would be impossible, Yves Chevrel raises a number of these key questions. In this book Chevrel breaks completely with the approach of his predecessors in the field, refraining from applying any a priori definitions and seeking factors of coherence, not in the often contradictory declarations of the naturalist writers themselves nor in the circumstances of their varied careers, but in the common themes and practices of their texts. Furthermore, as a comparatist, he adopts a resolutely international perspective, dealing, for example, with the question of periodisation within the broad context of Western literature as a whole. But Chevrel's book is particularly useful for the eclecticism of its approach, for the variety of critical resources that are brought to bear on the elusive topic, notably those of comparative literary history, literary poetics, narratology, thematics, stylistics, reception theory and sociological criticism. It is a work which opens up the whole field of naturalist studies to fresh perspectives and from which all subsequent studies will, to some degree, be derivative.

This present study is more limited in its methodological scope than

Chevrel's book, but my attempt to deal with naturalist literature as a distinct literary genre and to define its primary characteristics is prompted by a shared conviction that 'il s'agit d'abord de rassembler un corpus de textes qui, dans les années 1870–1900, ont été perçus comme possédant des traits communs et de les éclairer les uns par rapport aux autres en utilisant l'œuvre et l'action de Zola comme repère, mais non comme critère unique'.⁷ A similar point is made by Haskell M. Block in an earlier study: 'If naturalism represents not only an attitude but also a literary tradition and style, it should be possible to discover common devices and techniques in particular naturalistic novels, as well as common underlying assumptions and processes of composition.'⁸ But Block's own corpus of texts, though taken from different national traditions, is far too restricted, consisting only of three works, *L'Assommoir*, *Buddenbrooks* and *An American Tragedy*. In fact, as well as the methodological considerations that I have so far indicated, it was precisely a growing awareness of recurrence on reading a much larger number of naturalist texts that led to the approach that I have adopted. One would expect, of course, to be totally subjected to the mimetic effect on reading a broad sample of naturalist works, based, as they are usually claimed to be, on a thoroughly documented or observed reality. One would expect, on encountering the hundreds of characters that there are in these works, in an immense variety of situations, to be impressed by their multifariousness. Instead, the reader becomes increasingly aware of their fundamental repetitiveness and conventionality. Very soon, the tell-tale signals become clear: the heroine's hopes – to be dashed by a series of deceptions; the calm bourgeois interior – to be disrupted by some secret vice; the hard-working plebeian – to be brought down by a propensity for drink; the respectable and virtuous maiden – to be ruined by some inherited, hysterical weakness. The registry of scandals and disasters becomes all too predictable. No doubt the contemporary occasional reader was surprised, often outraged, sometimes titillated by these texts. But the modern critic reading a number of them soon comes to feel at times like some industrious social anthropologist engaged upon the study of the dens of vice of some vast metropolis, whose senses (and sense of shock) are dulled by the familiarity but who hopes nevertheless to gain insights from the continued frequentation. Already in 1880, with typical prophetic intuition, Henry Céard saw danger in the growing conventionality of naturalist subjects: 'Défions-nous des mastroquets, faisons attention aux bordels: tâchons que dans le naturalisme il n'y ait pas de sujet classique.'⁹ Likewise, at roughly the same time, Flaubert,

a reluctant inspiration to the movement, warned Huysmans, the young author of *Les Soeurs Vatar*, on the question of style: 'Prenez-garde; nous allons retomber, comme au temps de la tragédie classique, dans l'aristocratie des sujets et dans la préciosité des mots. On trouvera que les expressions canailles font bon effet dans le style, tout comme autrefois on vous enjolivait avec des termes choisis. La rhétorique est retournée, mais c'est toujours de la rhétorique.'¹⁰

This is not to accuse naturalist literature of being given to tedious repetitiveness. The simple explanation lies in the fact that, like all literature, naturalist literature is generic, having definable relations (whether derivative or transgressive) and sharing common characteristics with one or more general literary classes. Even the most startlingly original texts, or those which seek to deny such affiliations, are subject to the same law and are part of a larger system. As Laurent Jenny argues, literary works always enter into a relationship of realisation, transformation or transgression with regard to archetypal models: 'Hors système, l'œuvre est donc impensable.'¹¹ From the same premise derives the main purpose of this book: an attempt to describe and define the 'literariness' of naturalist fiction in the essential aspects of what might be called its 'genericness', an aim which is clearly in defiance of the traditional tendency to interpret naturalist texts as almost outside the scope of literature, as a set of documents, records, *procès verbaux* of their age. In more straightforward terms, the purpose will thus be, in the words of E. D. Hirsch Jr, 'to describe the common elements in a narrow group of texts which have direct historical relationships'.¹² This generic approach, I would hasten to emphasise, does not involve the mere categorising, classifying and, no doubt, disparaging of naturalist literature in relation to some fixed, monolithic, hierarchical, essentialist typology inherited from the past. By consciously attempting to avoid writing biographical or social history, I shall be more disposed to write what might be called – to borrow Brunetière's notions, ironically so in a study of the literature he abhorred – an 'internal literary history', seeking to trace a 'filiation of texts' and to define the generic links between them. An appropriate balance will be sought between the abstract scheme and the historical fact, between the model and the text, in the hope of avoiding certain of the excesses of traditional studies of naturalism, which tend either to reduce the literature to the pure historicity of the literary movement and to the biography of its participants, or to assimilate the literature too abstractly to the principles of naturalist aesthetics, thereby losing sight of the reality of the texts themselves. As Gérard Genette has emphatically argued, a genre cannot be

defined exclusively in transhistorical or historical terms: 'à quelque niveau de généralité que l'on se place, le fait générique mêle inextricablement, entre autres, le fait de nature et le fait de culture'.¹³

Inevitably, therefore, if the historical development of our genre is to be studied as much as its more abstract characteristics, as modern theoreticians would require,¹⁴ at least in the French context where this can more easily be achieved, we must be sensitive to its mutability and to the main phases of its development: roughly, a period of inception, in which certain models are established, a period of crisis, in which rival types conflict, then a decadent stage, in which the conventions are used and abused. There are indeed those who would argue, like Jean-Marie Schaeffer, that the mobility of a genre is such that each text modifies it: 'Pour tout texte en gestation le modèle générique est un "matériel" parmi d'autres sur lequel il "travaille"'.¹⁵ Thus the generic nature of texts is to a considerable degree explainable as a series of imitations, borrowings, modifications, derivations, adaptations, parodies, working from text to text and from model to text. Clearly, in such a scheme, the exemplary texts deserve special attention for the authority with which they establish the parameters of the genre. Accordingly, chapter 3 of this study will seek to identify and analyse the influential, prototypical naturalist texts which seem to sum up the essential properties of the genre, inspiring transtextual reworkings, establishing a continuity, forming models. Clearly also, in such a study, minor works and writers have their place and must be given a certain prominence, which their reputation may not seem to justify. But, minor works frequently better display and exploit the favoured conventions of a genre than do the more generically complex, acknowledged masterpieces.

Just as there are complex texts which derive from a variety of genres, there are hybrid genres which draw characteristics from a variety of literary types, even from types of discourse that are not necessarily literary. Zola made the extravagant claim that naturalist literature embraces *all* genres (for reasons that we shall explore in chapter 2). He could more reasonably have made a case for stating that its boundaries do in fact overlap with many a neighbouring territory. Thus, in asserting the specific nature of naturalist fiction as a 'genre' and in seeking to define its primary characteristics, I am not by any means claiming that this specificity is exclusive. On the contrary, I shall attempt to demonstrate that the typical naturalist text is the meeting place of several types of discourse whose combination alone determines the distinctive character of naturalist fiction. Once these elements have been defined, it will be possible to go on

(in chapters 4 and 5) to demonstrate the existence of certain recurrent combinations, certain fundamental types of naturalist texts, species within the genre – to use a problematic and discredited analogy – as well as certain recurrent character types and even certain recurrent localities favoured by naturalist fiction, with their characteristic functions.

All this conventionality is, of course, disguised by the mimetic, realistic practices of naturalist literature and is not acknowledged by naturalist aesthetics, which tends to perpetuate the realist myth of the direct representation of an inexhaustibly rich, complex, observable reality of situations, people and sites to be depicted like some vast Balzacian enterprise. Realist literature – and naturalist literature in so far as it shares this common, fundamental design – can be situated in what Paul Hernadi calls ‘the area of fading distinctions, between the highly polarized universe of the imagination and its undifferentiated “center” – the actual world’.¹⁶ Yet, more patently directed towards the representation of this so-called ‘actual world’ (than to featuring the fundamental literary structures), it (unnaturally) seeks to conceal literary distinctions, to disguise its ‘literariness’, hide its ‘genericness’. A major purpose of this book is to counter that process and restore to naturalist literature its generic identity.

In a similar way, this book also seeks to counter the tendency to interpret naturalist literature as a *passive* depiction of reality, usually the sordid, ill-chosen aspects of reality. Just as, in the field of linguistics, the discipline of pragmatics puts into question the priority given to the descriptive and representational functions of language, an attempt will be made here to draw attention to the more active, performative, operative functions of naturalist literature. Hence a chapter on the ironic, satirical and parodic dimensions of naturalist fiction (chapter 6), followed by a chapter which looks to define the kind of effects that the naturalist text produces in the reader and the strategies by which these effects are brought about. Even naturalist description, the subject of chapter 8, can be shown to partake, in some degree, of this intentionality.

But the principal factor of unity in naturalist fiction, I shall be arguing, is thematic. The final chapter will therefore attempt to define essential thematic constants in the corpus of texts used for this study. Thematic criticism is hardly a fashionable venture these days. But, it seems to me, it is an essential part of the generic study of literature and of naturalist literature in particular, for it is in its ‘thematic content’ that naturalist fiction asserts most specifically its literary characteristics. In Gérard Genette’s terms, two of the essential

dimensions of literature (along with the *formal*), are the *generic* and the *modal*. 'La différence de statut entre genres et modes', he writes, 'est essentiellement là: les genres sont des catégories proprement littéraires, les modes sont des catégories qui relèvent de la linguistique, ou plus exactement de ce que l'on appelle aujourd'hui la *pragmatique*.'¹⁷ Now naturalist fiction shares its modal determinants with the broader categories of realist fiction and representational fiction. But, it is in its thematics, informed by a common view of man's newly perceived relationship to nature in the scientific age, that can be discerned its essential, specific generic features.

Theorists frequently comment on the awful methodological pitfall that attends generic studies, the vicious circle of auto-justification in which the analyst may so easily founder. Heather Dubrow describes the danger in the following way: 'Underlying all of these morphological considerations is the central problem that definitions of genres, like those of biological species, tend to be circular: one establishes such a definition on the basis of a few examples, and yet the choice of those examples from the multitude of possible ones implies a prior decision about the characteristics of the genre.'¹⁸ However, in the face of such a dilemma, to avoid being paralysed into inertia, the critic must find some mean approach between the deductive and the inductive methods, between the models and the texts, between the general scheme and the particular cases in point. In fact, this book is made up of a series of such mediations: between a historical and a non-historical approach, between theory and textual analysis, between national and international perspectives, between detailed studies and sweeping generalities, between selectiveness and inclusiveness.¹⁹ But it is in the nature of genre criticism to seek such mediation, as a number of theorists have pointed out. Claudio Guillén, for instance, argues that the concept of genre itself 'occupies a central position in the study of literary history, very probably, because it has succeeded so well and for so long in bridging the gap between critical theory and the practice of literary criticism'.²⁰ Tzvetan Todorov frequently makes the same point: 'Les genres sont précisément ces relais par lesquels l'œuvre se met en rapport avec l'univers de la littérature.' The same critic even goes so far as to claim: 'Le genre est le lieu de rencontre de la poétique générale et de l'histoire littéraire événementielle; il est à ce titre un objet privilégié, ce qui pourrait bien lui valoir l'honneur de devenir le personnage principal des études littéraires.'²¹

Clearly the danger with such an approach is of being caught

between the Scylla of the too-general and the Charybdis of the too-specific, or, more humbly, of falling between a whole series of stools. This may even be the case with the decision to use both English and French in this study, a solution likely to displease polyglots and unilinguals alike.²² But in this, as, no doubt, in a host of other matters, the well-intentioned author can only crave his reader's indulgence.

1

HISTORIES

Just as narratologists have recently made much of the fundamental distinction between the events that are supposed to have occurred in a story and the narrative that relates them (*histoire* and *récit* in Genette's terminology), historiographers have long since distinguished between, on the one hand, history as the happenings of the past and, on the other hand, accounts that have been or could be produced to relate those happenings. Hegel referred respectively to *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum*, while other Germans later – and more economically – differentiated between *Geschichte* and *Historie*. Italians, after Croce, contrasted *storia* and *storiografia*, while a French translator of Heidegger, Henry Corbin, was even more economical in distinguishing between *Histoire* and *histoires*.¹ In the actual practice of history writing, so it seems, this fundamental distinction is more complex and far from absolute. As Walter L. Reed points out: 'The referential gap between history-as-account and history-as-events [rather] has become the mechanism for a history interminable, as newly identified events have demanded newly constructed accounts and old accounts (like Hegel's *Philosophy of History*) have themselves acquired the status of events that need accounting for.'² In the field of *literary* history there is the same complication, in kind if not in degree, with the added problem that literature itself is largely composed of accounts, stories, *histoires*.

If we bear in mind, therefore, the difference between 'History' and 'histories', it is clear that the former is unique, being the happenings themselves, and has no inherent, natural pattern, but remains open, at least in theory, to an incalculable number of accounts, of 'histories' in the second sense of the term.³ Inevitably, therefore, there would seem to be, in any historical field, a totally impossible situation: an infinite number of different histories seeking to account for an infinitely complex History. However, an important corrective to this apparent multifariousness is, of course, the simple fact that historical accounts, like literary texts, even realist novels, are derivative of

one another. Histories borrow their plots from previous histories. In other words, whereas, as we know, History never repeats itself, histories certainly do.

In a chapter dealing with the problem of the historical approach to naturalist literature, it is clearly as important to take into account the nature of, and the motivations behind, previous histories, with their characteristic ordering principles, as it is to attempt a further, necessarily incomplete and inadequate account of some aspect of naturalism's complex History. Let us proceed, therefore, directly to what is probably the main source: Zola's own 'accounts'. Unlike his, contemporary naturalists, the Goncourt brothers, Zola never wrote any straight historical works, but as one would expect of a man of Taine's and Michelet's era and of an admirer of their works besides, he was imbued with the historical spirit and, as we shall see, eager to situate, explain and justify naturalist literature from a historical perspective. In fact, his critical works are replete with brief lessons in literary history. He would no doubt have preferred Taine himself to have accomplished the task, but he was never reluctant to attempt it himself.

In an early review of a book on Roman history, an *Histoire de Jules César* (1865), the novelist discusses in general terms the problem of writing history. He characterises two types of historian: (1) those who neglect details, 's'attachent à l'ensemble', 'embrassent d'un coup d'œil l'horizon d'une époque' (X, 158),⁴ imposing a system and, in doing so, Zola argues, depriving history of its vitality; (2) those who belong to the opposite school, thriving on detail and attempting to render the figures, events, spirit and customs of an age in all the vivid colours of reality: 'Elle est analyse, et non pas synthèse' (X, 159). Now being, as he puts it, 'fou de réalité', Zola clearly prefers the analytical method, the realist approach, and he condemns the providential, synthetic type of history of the author of the text under review. But his objections are not only methodological, for he is still writing under the Second Empire as an opponent of the régime and the anonymous author in question is none other than Louis Napoleon himself. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that, pretending to write himself without 'le moindre sous-entendu', he ironically condemns the author's partiality: 'Il est presque juge et partie à la fois, et bien que personne ne se permette de soupçonner un instant sa bonne foi d'historien, il se trouve dans la position fausse d'un homme qui fait par moments sa propre apologie' (X, 162).

Now exactly the same objections could be raised against Zola himself when he later came to give his version, more imperial than