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American Realism versus French Naturalism: Henry James, Émile Zola and the Negotiation of Ideology

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Introduction

As students of nineteenth-century American literature know, one issue that has aroused controversy is whether Henry James was, at least during the decade of the 1880s, a Zolaesque naturalist or not. The strongest argument comes from Sergio Perosa who writes that "James . . . for some time at least, felt at heart, and was in his fictional practice, a full-fledged *scientific* 'naturalist' in the sense that [Émile] Zola had given to those terms" (18). Donald Pizer in turn casts James as a naturalist when he states that James incorporates naturalistic themes in his later fiction, depicting life as "extraordinary and sensational rather than as placid and commonplace" (xii). In more general terms, Edwin Fussell explains James's factual "depth" and "detail" in French morals, culture and ideology as "the French side of Henry James" (115-116); while Richard Grant maintains that "Mr. James does not belong to the English school (English and American being in literature but one), but rather to the French. His cast of thought is French" (qtd. in Pollak 2-3). Finally, Philip Grover prudently considers the influence of Zola to be a minor one, although acknowledging its existence (87, 94, 117, 151).

Any faithful reader of James is aware that he does indeed incorporate into his fiction Zolaesque naturalistic themes, as well as themes more generally concerning French morality and behavior, not to mention his occasional portrayal of French characters and social life, as well as the topography of France. It is possible moreover that James had acquired what I would call the French nicety of taste. That James read and commented on most of Zola's works is also a well-known fact. Yet all this does not suffice to consider him a Zolaesque scientific naturalist. One may maintain at the most that James inserted some of Zola's naturalistic creed into his fiction.

"Literature," Terry Eagleton writes, "is the most revealing mode of experiential access to ideology that we possess" (*Criticism and Ideology* 101). Ideology is a multi-faceted concept, defined either in relation to the economic framework of society or to social structure. For the purposes of my analysis in this article, I focus on the social facet. Louis Althusser defines ideology as a "particular social reality, specific to given social practices," which "constructs subjects for a particular social formation" (qtd. in Smith 14). Karl Mannheim, on the other hand, categorizes the social practices particular to certain individuals as "group ideology" (53). The

social practices of a group of people give them cultural identity, national unity, and a function.

Richard Coward and Jerry Ellis consider ideology to be “an articulation of the fixed relations of representation to a specific organization of reality” (78). In this sense, literature embodies ideology. That is to say, the “agent” for the “reproduction” of ideology is, as Paul Smith puts it, the “literary text” which exhibits the “natural workings of an ideological mechanism.” The text contains values, meanings, habits, traditions, and behaviors which are highly reliable and expressive of ideology. Put in other words, the text expresses an ideological message (28). Althusser also sees the text as that which names the “process of cultural construction” (qtd. in Smith 20), and Pierre Macherey posits literature as a “locus of the production of ideology” (qtd. in Smith 26).

Realist novelists articulate their ideologies when they insert social realities in their fiction. However, realist authors might include in their fiction culturally generated types (i.e. artifacts, landscape, social gestures, social institutions) of different ideologies, as well as characters formed by different ideologies. This creates quandary. As Kathryn Slott puts it, “if the author espouses a certain ideology in the text . . . then the reader is prone to accept that ideology. If, however, the reader detects conflicting sets of attitudes towards the characters, such . . . mixed messages may obscure the underlying ideology of the text” (93). Such a mixture, the product of an author’s sophisticated fictional representationalism, naturally generates ambiguity, and leads to confusion in the reader’s mind.

Most of James’s novels contain characters from several ideological and environmental backgrounds, a matter which complicates the functions of both consciousness and fate. The aim of this paper is to engage in and clear up this ambiguity in James’s fiction. In order to understand the intricate ins and outs of James’s characters and the ups and downs of their destinies, it is necessary to examine their ideological environments.

I argue that despite the presence of Zolaesque naturalistic themes and, in more general terms, that of several French ideological practices, James’s treatment of his American characters is neither naturalistic nor French (Note 1); he translates the violent and sensational naturalistic themes found in Zola into much more genteel themes. James espouses in his fiction an Emersonian philosophy of idealism and transcendentalism, regarding any influence Europe may have on his American characters as being destructive. Put another way, in James’s fiction, ideological practices seem to play a role in determining the characters’ fate. James contrasts the ideology of old-world (corrupt) Europe with that of new-world (untainted) America. He portrays Americans as innocent and ethical, finding themselves estranged in European environments, and furthermore deceived as well as victimized by the “immoral” European spheres of life. Yet, they resist, transcend,

and learn. I argue that in doing so, they are drawing from a context of a specifically Emersonian ideology of individualism and Puritanism.

To highlight the difference between James's fictional and ideological representation and that of Zola, I compare in this article James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and the French author's *Nana* (1880). Both novels serve as succint examples of the fictional representation of each writer.

The Portrait of a Lady

Isabel's Idealism

At the beginning of *The Portrait of a Lady* the reader sees the young American Isabel as a character who is an idealist, a girl who spends most of her time thinking of beauty and freedom, and who is imbued with theoretical standards that work only in her own private "Isabelian" world. She is determined to regard the world as a "place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action" (139); and she is always "planning out her development, desiring her perfection, observing her progress" (144). Her basic concern is to be "of the best." Her philosophy of life renders her personality ambiguous to those around her. Even she herself is confused:

> Who was she, what was she that she should hold herself superior? What view of life, what design upon fate, what conception of happiness, had she that pretended to be larger than these large, these fabulous occasions? . . . The isolation and loneliness of pride had for her mind the horror of a desert place. (164)

The reader learns of her urgent desire to perfect her self to the extreme, and of her isolating secretive self:

> Her [Isabel's] thoughts were a tangle of vague outlines which had never been corrected by the judgment of people speaking with authority . . . She had a theory that it was only under this provision that life was worth living; that one should be one of the best, should be conscious of a fine organization, should move in the realm of light, natural wisdom, of happy impulse, of inspiration gracefully chronic. . . . One should try to be one's own best friend . . . The girl had a certain nobleness of imagination which rendered her a good many services and played her a great many tricks. . . . She had a fixed

> determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action. (104)

When she puts her idealistic philosophy into practice, Isabel "had an immense desire to appear to resist. . . . The world, in truth, had never seemed so large; it seemed to open out, all round her" (635). Isabel comes to resist what she construes as a common, materialistic world, and, more specifically, to contest the traditional standards of everyday life, that, for example, bestow such a prominent position on Madame Merle. Isabel rejects traditional social practices and refuses to be conditioned by the material environment.

I suggest that what is at stake in Isabel's resistance to the behavior of the people around her, such as the Europeanized Madame Merle, is the moral tension between Isabel and the European milieu. In other words, Isabel resists the "group ideology" which tries to impose itself on her in order to alter her personality and render her like Madame Merle. Rather than surrendering, Isabel posits herself as a distinctive "subject" whose own opinions, statements, and system of ideas define her as a person. The novel shows Isabel's task in formulating her own individualist ideology by opposing the "other," as difficult but not impossible. As Smith contends, resisting common social practices "can and does take place, actively or passively, through single people . . . privately and publicly. It can take the form of refusal as much as intervention; it can be in the service of conservation as much as of disruption" (5). Isabel manifests this refusal when she rebuffs Caspar Goodwood, who suggests to her, as Tony Tanner puts it, "oppression, coercion and constraint on the psychological level." She also rejects Lord Warburton, who with his "complex social relations and obligations suggests immobilization on the social level" (Tanner 109). If she spurns the first out of a distinct disinclination to enter a firm physical world, she certainly declines the second on theoretical grounds, because what he offers her does not fit her vague notions of indefinite expansion. Isabel thinks she finds in Osmond, however, the qualities that fit her world: he is the ideal lover for her as the poor artist who seeks to perfect himself via art.

I would argue that it is Isabel's Emersonian view of life which is responsible for her resistance to the "common," as she sees it, opinions of those around her, and for her insistence upon making her own choice in marrying Osmond. This view of life sustains and nourishes her, and helps her develop a strong, independent character. At the same time, her ignorance and/or avoidance of the "common," together with her icy aloofness, have negative effects. She refuses, for instance, to listen to the advices of Ralph, Mrs. Touchett and others with regard to her marriage to Osmond—until she herself realizes her mistake and admits it. She then finds Osmond a "hidden serpent," someone who has "a wonderfully cruel intention" towards her (436).

Isabel's resistance and conscious wish to construct her personality in a transcendental way do not, nevertheless, mean that she is not subject to concealed environmental forces that have formed her character. Although the novel provides merely glimpses and hints of Isabel's childhood, these sufficiently let transpire the psychological, as well as social and economic, circumstances under which it was spent. The reader is told that Isabel's late father had left her ignorant of the unpleasant aspects of life, and that she had had no "regular education and no permanent home." She was "at once spoiled and neglected" (87). I suggest that the absence of, in Lacanian terms, both the "narcissistic image" (the mother)—i.e., the fact that Isabel is motherless—and the "symbolic father"—i.e., the fact that she has an "irresponsible" father—makes her develop as an alternative an idealized vision of the mother and the father. That is to say, she herself becomes the idealized image of her parents. Carol Vopat remarks that:

> Her [Isabel's] idealism and her fear of experience were alike manifestations of a single response; . . . this response evolved in part in reaction to the confusions of her childhood in Albany; and, in particular, to her experiences as the eager-to-please, motherless daughter of a charming but irresponsible father. . . . Isabel lacks an attentive mother to "mirror" her and a strong competent father to idealize; the child is required to mirror a parent who should be mirroring her. (38-39)

Isabel tells Madame Merle, "I can do what I choose—I belong quite to the independent class. I've neither father nor mother; I'm poor and of serious disposition. . . . I therefore am bound to be timid and conventional" (214). Vopat finds that being fatherless, Isabel becomes the father's "champion" and,

> his "partisan," her purpose [being] to support without judging; defend without criticizing; entertain and please; idealize and exalt; to publish his burnished reputation abroad in the world. . . . Isabel's [ideal self] is in its origins like a profligate father's vision of the perfect child, a child whose much praised "cleverness" and "independence" would preclude any demands for attention, direction, protection or love, a child with no need or wants; in short, a child without feelings. (39)

Paul Seabright argues that like most "morally healthy individuals," Isabel, in her preoccupation with herself and in her attempt to crystallize and idealize her character, subverts her personality and finds herself "pursuing perverse or paradoxical ends, in full consciousness without unclouded eyes" (314). In justifying Isabel's idealistic behavior, Seabright relates it to her seeking "unnecessary personal unhappiness." (Note 2) This is the basic motive, he

contends, for Isabel's idealistic philosophy in life. Vopat in turn finds "oedipal longings" behind the image Isabel forms of Osmond, and contends also that "Osmond proves so attractive [to Isabel] because he provides . . . mirroring and idealization, and is the ideal self object" which "neither Caspar nor Lord Warburton can be" (52). For her, Osmond becomes then the real gentleman—"the first gentleman in Europe" (47), "perfectly polite" (478), and moreover "artistic" (296). Isabel is impressed by his "clerverness," "amenity," "good nature," "felicity," and "knowledge of life" (479). She notices that people do not criticize Osmond as they criticized her father. Indeed, Osmond's upbringing of Pansy makes Isabel regard him as an ideal father. He advises Pansy and offers her discipline and protection. Seeing such conduct on the part of Osmond makes Isabel think that her father had not been concerned with her. Vopat maintains that

> To realize that her father in truth didn't protect her, nor even particularly care about her, would be painful in itself. . . . Rather than risk what passed for love in her world, rather than surrender the portrait she has internalized and called her self, she prefers to remain the ideal daughter of an ideal father. . . . Ultimately, Isabel agrees with her fiancé [Osmond] that life must be lived not emotionally or passionately, but aesthetically. . . . Their joint ideal is the exquisite life, emotion frozen and framed. (25, 51, 54-55)

Isabel comes to have a passive view of men in general—she sees them as "abstractions" from whom she needs only "approval," not, say, "passionate love"—to the extent that "men are afraid of her" (Vopat 38-39). But what about Osmond? For Isabel, asserts Vopat, Osmond "is a non-threatening masculine figure," who "evokes only safe and familiar feelings," such as "maternal protectiveness, or filial adoration, and who calls forth what is definitely an aesthetic rather than a sexual or sensual appreciation" (52-53).

For Vopat, Isabel has a tendency to ignore what others say to her, reducing them, in her exalted evaluation of her own ideas, to "things" (40). Osmond chides Isabel several times about this behavior, but she ignores his words. Hating her for having a mind of her own, he tells her sarcastically, "You can do exactly what you choose" (281). When Madame Merle tells Isabel, "I know you better," Isabel's answer is, "I'm not sure of that" (190). And when Caspar Goodwood tells Isabel, "You will get sick of your independence" (151), she tells him, "I like my liberty too much. . . . If there is anything in the world I'm fond of . . . it is my personal independence" (149). Ralph, indeed, informs her, "I don't believe you allow things to be settled for you," and Isabel responds: "Oh yes; if they're settled as I like them" (73).

Isabel’s sexuality

A look at Isabel’s sexuality reveals further how classical James’s art is. Isabel’s sexuality is not represented explicitly, but symbolically, even ambiguously. She vacillates between the sexual and the asexual: the reader finds in the novel both a sexual symbolism showing a sentimental and passionate Isabel and a portrayal of her that shows her inhibited as well as tough. She rejects Goodwood and Lord Warburton, as mentioned above, because she feels they will restrain her independence, and chooses to marry Osmond not because of a physical attraction but because of his artistic talents.

Sexual symbolism concerning Isabel is apparent when she considers Goodwood’s figure as “too straight and stiff” (115). Seymour Kleinberg explains Isabel’s relation to Goodwood in Freudian terms, believing that she sees Goodwood as a “walking erection” (3). This becomes more evident when Isabel rejects Goodwood’s offer of marriage. “She felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact in his face” (636). After turning him down, Isabel takes his hand and “felt a great respect for him; she knew how much he cared for her and she thought him magnanimous” (215). But a few lines later, she “intensely rejoiced that Caspar Goodwood was gone.” At these moments Isabel struggles between her passionate and impassionate pulses, until the sexual conflict (Note 3) in her comes to be expressed in bodily gestures:

> She was not praying; she was trembling—trembling all over. Vibration was easy to her, was in fact too constant with her, and she found herself now humming like a smitten harp. She only asked, however, to put on the cover . . . but she wished to resist her excitement. (232)

I argue that James’s ambiguous representation of sexuality has ideological and historical roots, but it is also associated with the nature of his religious and puritan as well as Swedenborgian upbringing, that would not allow him to portray excessive and open sexuality, and would instead push him to hide the sexual in his fiction. Such sexual representation is by no means naturalistic or Zolaesque, but classical, moderate, and idealistically realistic.

Emersonian individualist ideology

As mentioned above, James inscribes in the novel the Emersonian individualist ideology of the restless puritan who seeks growth and independence. If Isabel’s portrait as a whole implies anything, it is the American anxiety to build the topology of the ideal, the complex self-identity whose limits are undefined, as well as the mysticism and spirituality of such identity. Isabel says, “I’m not fixed, but . . . a good deal mystified.” Nothing expresses her, and others cannot read her. Her

many speeches and monologues in the novel about the nature of her self, independence, infinite freedom and the mystified ideal personal behavior as when Isabel says, “I try to judge for myself; to judge wrong, I think, is more honorable than not to judge at all. I don’t want to be a mere sheep in the flock; I wish to choose my fate” (120, 214), remind one of Emerson’s statements in “Self-Reliance.” (Note 4)

When Isabel is deceived in her marriage to Osmond, Ralph assures her not to mind others—not only when such an other is the husband who hates her, but also even when he happens to be the cousin who adores her. When Ralph is in pain, she feels a passionate need to “let her sorrow possess her,” and to melt “together into his [Ralph’s] present pain”; and all he can tell her is, “don’t mind people. . . . I think I’m glad to leave people.” When she asks him, “Is it true—is it true? . . . that all [love] I have is yours [Ralph’s],” he turns his head away and then replies, “Ah, don’t speak of that—that was not happy” (575-576). Reminded by his words that heroines are always happy and never surrender to pain—a basic Jamesian idea finding its origin in Emerson—not even to the painful truth of love, she responds:

> Here on my knees, with you dying in my arms, I’m happier than I’ve been for a long time. And I want you to be happy—not to think of anything sad; only to feel that I’m near to you and I love you. Why should there be pain? In such hours as this what have we to do with pain? That’s not the deepest thing; there is something deeper. (622)

Like Emerson, Ralph does not deny that unhappiness reigns in the “painful kingdom of time and place,” but he has “all eternity to rest.” Ralph says to Isabel: “You said just now that pain’s not the deepest thing. NO-no. But it’s very deep . . . . You [Isabel] won’t lose me—you’ll keep me in your heart; I shall be nearer to you than I’ve ever been” (621-623).

When Isabel is about to return to Osmond and Pansy, Caspar pleads, “You don’t know where to turn. Turn right to me” (634). But Isabel cannot return to him because she cannot ignore her inner Emersonian voice. “To get away from you!” (634) is her only answer to Caspar. She can think of nothing more dangerous than his aggressive reality, and she sticks to this thought despite Caspar’s (Emersonian) invitation for her:

> Why shouldn’t we be happy—when it is here before us, when it is so easy? I’m yours forever—for ever and ever. Here I stand as firm as rock. What have you to care about? You have no children. . . . You mustn’t lose it all simply because you’ve lost a part. It would be an insult to you to assume that you care for the look of the thing, for what people will say, for the bottomless idiocy of the world. We all

have nothing to do with that; we are quite out of it, we look at things as they are. (634-635)

Clearly, Isabel hears the voice of her own self, (Note 5) and opposes everything that clashes with this independent self. Isabel lives idealistically and entertains an imaginary world of her own to project an "ideal" Emersonian American Self. And she does this successfully. She proves her personality to *be*, although deceived by the Europeanized Osmond. Rejecting the role of an "actor" following ready-made ideological scripts and mimicking the "other," she *proves herself* as an agent who attempts to transcend both the "common," and what Jonathan Freedman defines as "any one vision that tries to fix or define her," even the author's own ostensibly omniscient vision (163).

Nana

Nineteenth-century French authors such as Joris-Karl Huysmans and Émile Zola represented in their fiction the crudest elements of French life, "with a veracious and courageously abject realism," as Havelock Ellis put it (ix). These French writers dealt with themes of open sexuality, social corruption, decadent morality, and prostitution. Zola, who believed that human beings are organisms who are slaves to their biological desires and needs which they can neither control nor understand, established his own school, which he called "naturalism." He put his ideology into practise in the twenty-novel saga *Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire Naturelle et Sociale d'une Famille sous le Second Empire* (The Rougon-Macquart: the Natural and Social History of a Family under the Second Empire), published between 1871 and 1893. Each subtitle of the series explores a specific milieu, and together, they form a panorama of French life. Kathryn Slott writes that the explicit ideology and organizing principle of the *Rougon-Macquart*involves the demonstration of how the forces of heredity and environment (Note 6) combine to control the lives of individuals who, despite good intentions and valiant efforts, fail to overcome biological and sociological determinism (95). (Note 7)

One of the basic themes in Zola's novels is prostitution, the theme of *Nana,* (Note 8) the ninth work of the *Rougon-Macquart*. Nana, the protagonist, is the epitome of a *courtisane*. French society, and more particularly the Second-Empire society, a world of festivity which was to reach its zenith in the World Fair of 1867—the year in which the novel starts—when royalty and notables flocked to Paris from all over Europe and beyond, was singularly propitious for the rise of the courtesans Zola had in mind. For a basically materialistic society, Zola thought, Nana is a highly desirable sex-object to parade at a supper-party or at a race-meeting. The male protagonist in *Nana*, Count Muffat, a scapegoat for imperial society, was swept off his feet by Nana's physical beauty.

Zola portrays the Second-Empire society as obsessed by sex, and Nana as the beautiful body that seduces and corrupts such a society. Zola writes in his notes that she is “nothing but flesh, but flesh in all its beauty. . . the cunt on an altar, with all the men offering up sacrifices to it” (qtd. in Holden 12-13). Nana has “heaps of proposals,” sometimes leading to despair men who desire her. Nana herself is, however, only concerned, in fact obsessed, with becoming rich. Her flesh is her instrument for seduction and the means to gain money. Her “greedy mouth breath[s] desire over her flesh” (Zola, *Nana* 223). She “eats up gold” and men’s wealth, and “leaves nothing but ashes” (qtd. in Holden 13).

Being a naturalist, Zola relates Nana’s behavior to hereditary origins, and thus focuses on the physiology rather than the psychology of his characters. He must also have relied on the fact that many of his readers would be familiar with Nana’s background from their knowledge of *L’Assommoir*, published three years earlier, where her past is abundantly detailed.

In *L’Assommoir*, Nana is born in a slum and brought up in traumatic conditions that would have justified a plea for extenuating circumstances before any reasonable judge. At the age of three, she inadvertently causes her father, a tiler, to fall from a roof; as a result of his injury he becomes work-shy and idle. Thus Nana unwittingly sets him on a path of alcoholism. As she grows older, Nana turns into a noisy, mischievous child, however good-natured. Possessing a “vicious curiosity” (*Nana* 114), she notices her mother slip one night, half-naked, into the bedroom of her former lover while her husband, Nana’s father, lies drunk, grunting in his vomit. At twelve, Nana is sticking pieces of paper into her bodice to enhance the shape of her breasts. At fifteen, doubtless influenced by her milieu, she is foul-mouthed and becoming keen on boys. Finally, she leaves home for good and disappears from the novel, although the reader has news that she has been seen driving round in a smart carriage and is later reported as having snaffled a viscount. From then on the ups and downs of her life depend on her relationships with men, usually for money. In any case, she is plainly ready to embark on a wider world, which is exactly the point at which the reader meets her again, in the first chapter of *Nana*. She is by then a fleshy sex-object.

Zola gives great focus to Nana’s voluptuous body and its effects on men.
For William K. Buckley, Zola’s “great innovation” as a naturalist “was to challenge the reluctance to describe sex” (118). Indeeed, while James explores sexuality in a symbolic and indirect way in *The Portrait of a Lady*, as discussed above, Zola daringly exposes Nana’s nudity and relates her sexual fantasies. Janet L. Beizer asserts that “we can hardly ignore the many scenes in which Nana, sex goddess and bed partner of an empire, undresses before a mirror or strips for her lovers; nor can we forget that she nightly displays herself to theater audiences as she stars in a performance of her own nudity” (45). There are several detailed descriptions of Nana’s body in the novel, as in the scene when she looks at herself in the mirror while Muffat is watching her body adoringly:

> . . . then she studied other parts of her body amused by what she was doing, and filled once more with the depraved curiosity she had felt as a child. . . . Slowly she spread out her arms to set off her figure . . . lingering over the side-view of her bosom and the sweeping curves of her thighs. Nana had stopped moving. With one arm behind her neck, one hand clasped in the other . . . she had thrown back her head, so that he [Muffat] could see a fore-shortened reflection of her half-closed eyes, her parted lips . . . she displayed the solid loins and the firm bosom of an Amazon. (Zola, *Nana* 222).

Slott views Muffat, who cannot resist Nana's powerful enticement, as "the vehicle for conveying the most intense uncontrolled male reactions to Nana" (102), in such instances as when "Muffat gave a long, weary sigh. This solitary self indulgence was beginning to exasperate him. Suddenly his self-control was swept away as if by a mighty wind. In a fit of brutal passion he seized Nana round the waist" (Zola, *Nana* 223). Nana's flesh makes men, such as George, Muffat, La Faloise, and Fontan "under her spell" (Zola, *Nana*45). A twitch of "her little fingers," the reader is told, "could stir men's flesh." She herself remains "victorious by virtue of her marble flesh, and that sex of hers . . . was powerful enough to destroy this whole assembly and remain unaffected in return" (Zola, *Nana* 46).

Since Zola excludes the role of the mind in Nana's behavior (i.e., as she is merely a blind sexual force), he describes her via animalistic imagery and metaphors, a basic characteristic of naturalism: Nana has a "neck on which her reddish hair looked like an animal's fleece" (Zola, *Nana* 33). She has the face of a "horse" (Zola, *Nana* 111); she is a "wolf" (Zola, *Nana* 183), and a cat "sleeping with its claws drawn in and its paws stirred by a barely perceptible nervous quiver" (Zola, *Nana* 96). This animalistic imagery continues throughout the whole novel (for further animalistic metaphors, see 54, 111, 195, and 270-271). Muffat himself comes to view her in time as a "naked stupid monster" (Zola, *Nana* 230) which suggests "beastliness." She is "as blind as a brute force" (Zola,*Nana* 223) that is antagonistic, destructive and indifferent to humanity's blight or circumstance. This force leads George to suicide and Muffat to bankruptcy, while condemning Nana's own son Louis, who is left to die of a disease that proves to be fatal because "it had been neglected and badly cared for" (Zola, *Nana* 455).

Zola explores in the novel other areas of sexuality, and, in particular, lesbianism. Satin, a piquant young prostitute and former schoolmate of Nana, is a frequent visitor at the Rue des Martyrs restaurant where Nana comes to meet her. She has sex with men out of financial necessity yet experiences a same-sex relationship with Nana. Satin is so taken by Nana that she becomes violently jealous of Nana's male companions, while Nana herself develops a love for Satin which is both

passionately sexual and deeply affectionate. (Note 9) They clearly experience a shared enjoyment and understanding which they do not find in their heterosexual encounters. Although neither Satin nor Nana give up their male companions, their relationship is something special and incorporates a tenderness which Nana feels in only one of her heterosexual relationships that, interestingly enough, starts when the boy, Georges Hugon, is dressed in woman's clothes. As Georges presses her, Nana feels as if he were a girl: "In these clothes with his bare young arms showing, and his wet tawny hair falling to his shoulders, he looked *just like a girl*" (emphasis mine). Then, "Georges joined her; and, as if considering the window-sill too narrow, he put his arm round Nana's waist and rested his head against her shoulder." Nana "was experiencing sensations she had never known before. Meanwhile Georges was giving her little coaxing kisses on the neck, and unsettling her even more" (Zola, *Nana* 182, 184).

As Slott asserts, "Nana has taken up prostitution . . . to earn a good living, not to have a good time, and . . . to seek revenge on the socio-economic situation in which men have placed her family" (Zola, *Nana* 102). In fact, the sexual conduct of most of the characters in *Nana* proceeds from such factors as boredom, envy, snobbery, ambition, a need for money, a desire for power, and/or to display wealth. It is not surprising, then, that sexuality appears as joyless. In contrast, Muffat, with his strong sensuality, possesses "carnal desires" that make him follow Nana like a "dog" (Zola, *Nana* 442). Dominated by sexual instincts, he "abandoned himself to the power of love" (Zola, *Nana* 440). Thus seduced by the "man-eater" (Zola, *Nana* 45) Nana, Muffat's reason eventually "fails him" (Zola, *Nana* 445). Her ignorance of his love for her leads him to suicide: he plunges "scissors into his chest" when he feels that he will lose her (Zola, *Nana* 423).

In the novel, Fauchery's article about the "Golden Fly" ironically displays Nana's function in her environment. Fauchery explains to Daugneat that the article is

> the story of a girl descended from four or five generations of drunkards, her blood tainted by an accumulated inheritance of poverty and drink, which in her case had taken the form of a nervous derangement of sexual instinct. She had grown up . . . in the gutters of Paris . . . she was avenging the paupers and outcasts of whom she was the product. With her the rottenness that was allowed for ferment among the lower classes was rising to the surface and rotting the aristocracy. She had become a force of nature, a ferment of destruction, unwittingly corrupting and disorganizing Paris between her snow-white thighs, and curdling it just as women, every month, curdle mink . . . [the Fly] now, buzzing, dancing and glittering like a precious stone, was entering palaces through the windows and

> poisoning the men inside, simply by settling on them.
> (Zola, *Nana* 221)

Like the Fly in the article, Nana appears to poison her surroundings. It is not only men, enslaved by their instincts, who are biologically determined in the novel, but also Nana herself. She seems to be determined, like the Fly, by heredity: a product of poor and drunkard parents of the gutters of Paris. And even after her suicide, her corrupting influence remains: her corpse "was beginning to poison the atmosphere of the room" (469) where it lay.

Conclusion

In comparing James's portrait of Isabel in *The Portrait of a Lady* to Zola's portrait of Nana in *Nana*, the difference is discernable.

James did not intend *The Portrait of a Lady* to be a naturalistic novel. He presented his characters without compelling them into certain formulae to fit a "naturalistic design," as personae determined by environmental forces. His characters, and especially the protagonist Isabel, are human agents whose behavior the reader can analyze. Indeed, rather than depriving Isabel of responsibility and freedom of choice, James portrays her as an autonomous agent who is more or less responsible for her own behavior, and who refuses to be swallowed by circumstance. In projecting her system of thoughts, ideas of independence, idealism, and transcendence, James signposts Isabel as an Emersonian subject who attempts to improve and perfect herself and who refuses to be a "mere sheep in the flock" (214). James's realism is not only idealistic, but also psychological. James's psychological penetration of Isabel's character in the novel led William Dean Howells to assert that *The Portrait of a Lady* is "an analytic study, rather than a story" (qtd. in Tanner xxxvi).

Zola's *Nana*, in contrast, is a scientific study; and even an experiment. Zola meant *Nana* to be a naturalistic novel, situating his characters in certain social contexts to see how they react to environmental forces, social, economic, sexual, and biological. He shows such characters as weak, helpless, and determined. Unlike James's characters who resist such forces, Zola's characters surrender to them, and are represented primarily as biologically determined as to their sexual desires and needs.

A further distinction between James's portrayal of Isabel and Zola's portrayal of Nana concerns the body. In *The Portrait*, the reader rarely finds an explicit reference in language to the body, its exposure or seductive power. In other words, James does not violate in his fiction the codes of his conservative standards. Unlike

James, Zola uses in *Nana* a language that explicitly and extensively denotes the physical body. In so doing, Zola is not only conducting a scientific study of a character's enslavement to biological instincts, but, by presenting Nana as a true-to-life portrait of the French courtesan, is also reflecting an ideological reality of French society at a given moment.

Both James's *The Portrait of a Lady* and Zola's *Nana* are strongly distinguished as different fictional ideological representations. The basic ideological construction that prevails in James's *The Portrait of a Lady* is the Emersonian idealistic and transcendent philosophy of life projected via Isabel's independence and freedom; and the puritan standards of American society represented through Isabel's passionlessness and inhibited sexuality. The basic ideologies in Zola's *Nana*, in contrast, are the author's bio-sociological determinism on the one hand, and the traditional, patriarchal view of prostitution on the other. *Nana* lays bare the moral corruption prevailing in Napoleon III's France.

Both writers are drawing from common-life ideological realities. But whereas James's moderate ideological representation, American and European, renders him a genteel and idealist realist, Zola's ideological representation proves him the typical naturalist.

Notes

1 F.O. Matthiessen notes that "what distinguished James from French naturalists and English aesthetes alike was that he never forgot the further*kind of seeing*, the transcendent passage to the world behind appearance and beyond the senses" (434).

2 Whereas Vopat seems to attach Isabel's idealistic philosophy to psychological background (i.e. absence of narcissistic images), Seabright attributes it to Isabel's desire for "disinterest." Vopat's view makes more sense than that of Seabright in interpreting Isabel's behavior, because Seabright's view, as several critics demonstrate, is not applicable either psychologically or thematically. Psychologically, how can the motive "disinterest"—personal unhappiness—attract Isabel? Thematically, how can James persuade us that such motive is logical? To illustrate, as Craig Howard White explains, James is amazingly concerned in "interest" in most of his novels, the interest in everything: the interest to be, to see, to experience and to resist (192). In short, "interest" is a basic motive in James's fiction for the characters' happiness and growth. James encouraged an optimistic doctrine in most of his novels, and *The Portrait of a Lady* is no exception. His portrait of Isabel, as a whole, is a deep psychological analysis.

3 Isabel's unsettled sexuality troubles critics. Edward Wagenknecht sees her sexuality as being "limited by the mores and standards of her time" (93); William Bysshe Stein views her as sexually repressed and calls her situation the "case history" of a frigid American woman (180); Annette Niemtzow argues that she has

"an almost obscene—certainly no frigid—imagination" (386); Courtney Johnson sees her as "Eve" (139). Daniel Schneider believes Isabel to be mentally diseased; he maintains that she has a divided self, which he attributes to a "schizoid personality"; and he moreover finds her sexually repressed and thus "neurotic" (447). Other critics connect Isabel's sexuality to that of James, believing that James's celibacy made him both fear and idealize women. Leon Edel, for instance, asserts that James suffered from "latent prudery," and had "transmuted passions." Edel concludes that James's attitude toward women rendered his sexuality divided, as that of Isabel is (xii). The most convincing critical argument is that of Kurt Hochenauer who disagrees with most arguments concerning Isabel's sexuality, believing that "when the critics fail to recognize the tension between the passionate and the inhibited Isabel, James's portrait runs the risk of becoming a cheap, contrived painting rather than the epitome of the new literary realism" (19). What Hochenauer implies here is that the very ambiguity of Isabel's sexuality makes James's work realistic. As Hochenauer puts it, "Isabel's sexual realism reflects what James felt to be the prevailing ideology among women in his day. If it reflected anything less, the portrait would be marred: passionless ideology required women to de-sexualize themselves to achieve some equality with men" (24). In this perspective, James is inscribing and reworking cultural practice in this novel to produce an effect of the real, and this renders his work realistic and purposeful. John Frow writes that realism needs to "reflect, 'with objective correctness' the total objective process of life'" (13). This reflection of the real, Frow emphasizes, means "the reconciliation of the artist with society; through his obligation towards 'reality'"; and once the artist is committed to historical and ideological realities, his or her realism directs him or her to a "precisely determined function in . . . society and it subordinates the work of art to a purposeful design" (13).

4 This speech echoes Ralph Waldo Emerson when he writes:

Imitation is a suicide . . . trust thyself. . . . Ah, that he [man] could pass again into this neutral, god-like independence! Who can thus lose all pledge, and having observed, observe again from the same unaffected, un-biased, unbearable, unaffrightened innocence, must always be formidable, must always engage the poet's and the man's regard. . . . These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter in the world of society. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of everyone of its members. . . . The virtue in most request is conformity. A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition as if everything were titular and ephemeral. . . . A man has nothing to do with what people think. (57-58)

5 For Karl Marx, an individual cannot exist without his (or her) social community. Marx attacks the idealist tendency that "presuppose[s] an abstract-isolated-human

individual" (qtd. in Smith 8). However, for Smith, "none of us lives without a reference to an imaginary singularity which we call our Self." Smith is worth quoting fully here:

Such singularity or individuality is to be located in the imagery register—in that set of images, identifications, and narratives which appear to consolidate the centered nature of the subject individual. Acting as the broker of that imaginary is the ego, assigned to assuring a dialectical adaptation to the pressures of social life, which has produced it and which it helps to produce. (6)

6 By tracing the destiny of a single family and its descendents, Zola felt he would endow his fictional world with an internal coherence and, at the same time, give due weight to biological imperatives. This would be afforded not only by the blood ties and comparative experiences, but also by the reappearing characters. Étienne, the hero of *Germinal* (1885), with his "tainted" blood, is a homicidal maniac, and also the brother of Jacques Lantier in *La Bête Humaine* (The Human Beast, 1890), who suffers as well from psychotic disorder, killing any woman who arouses him sexually. The two brothers are the sons of Gervaise Macquart, Nana's mother, whose decline is chronicled in *L'Assommoir* (1877). Zola portrays Gervaise as weak and submissive. Like Nana she sinks into degeneration, of both character and body, because of her drunkard husband whose irresponsibility makes her miserable and homeless. In *L'Œuvre* (The Masterpiece, 1886), Gervaise's son Claude Lantier is an insane maniac who kills himself in front of his "unfinished, unfinishable" masterpiece. Zola dedicated a novel for each member of the family, depicting the degrading effects of materialism upon the members.

7 There is felt in Zola's saga the seminal influence of Hippolyte Taine, formulated in the Positivist philosopher's isolation of three principal determinants on human behavior: heredity, environment, and the historical moment. In his *Le Roman Expérimental* (The Experimental Novel, 1880), Zola attempted to establish an analogy between literature and science, contending that the novelist, like the scientist, situates his characters with specific hereditary traits into a given environment to record their behavior. For Zola, the writer should not intrude with his imagination in the work of art, for he is like a chemist who watches certain substances from a distance and then notes down the progress and results of his experiment.

8 Zola had already dealt with the subject of prostitution earlier, in his semi-autobiographical novel *La Confession de Claude* (Claude's Confession, 1865), where the torments of the idealistic Claude to reform a prostitute have similarities with Muffat's predicament in Nana. The same subject was also covered by other

French fellow-writers of the period, Huysmans in his Marthe, *Histoire d'une Fille* (1876), and Edmond de Goncourt in *La Fille Élisa*. (1877).

9 Several critics comment on Nana's feelings toward Satin and Georges. Naomi Schor, for instance, asserts that Nana's affair with Georges dressing up in a woman's clothes is "a rehearsal for the . . . [lesbian] love scenes with Satin" (51).

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