

The Family in Crisis in Late Nineteenth-Century French Fiction focusses on a key moment in the construction of the modern view of the family in France. Nicholas White's analysis of novels by Zola, Maupassant, Huysmans, Hennique, Bourget and Armand Charpentier is fashioned by perspectives on a wide cultural field, including legal, popular and academic discourses on the family and its discontents. His account encourages a close rereading of canonical as well as hitherto overlooked texts from *fin-de-siècle* France. What emerges between the death of Flaubert in 1880 and the publication of Bourget's *Un divorce* in 1904 is a series of Naturalist and post-Naturalist representations of transgressive behaviour in which tales of adultery, illegitimacy, consanguinity, incest and divorce serve to exemplify and to offer a range of nuances on the Third Republic's crisis in what might now be termed 'family values'.

Nicholas White is Lecturer in French at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is editor (with Naomi Segal) of *Scarlet Letters: Fictions of Adultery from Antiquity to the 1990s*, and he has also edited Zola's *L'Assommoir* and Huysmans's *Against Nature*.

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THE FAMILY
IN CRISIS IN LATE
NINETEENTH-CENTURY
FRENCH FICTION

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NICHOLAS WHITE



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1999

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Baskerville MT 11/12½ [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 56274 0 hardback

In memory of Jack Morris
teacher, scholar, raconteur

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Acknowledgements

Chapters 4, 5 and the second half of chapter 6 have their origins in a Ph.D. thesis completed in the University of Cambridge in September 1993. I am grateful to the British Academy for a Major Award between 1990 and 1993, and to Fitzwilliam College and the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages in Cambridge for assistance of many kinds dating back to 1986. I would also like to thank Royal Holloway, University of London, for providing the sabbatical leave during which the bulk of the completed draft was written, and colleagues for fostering an atmosphere conducive to research. Versions of two chapters have appeared elsewhere in somewhat different forms. I thank the editors for permission to use this material. Portions of chapter 4 appeared in *French Studies Bulletin*, 47 (1993), pp. 12–14, and in French translation as ‘*Le Docteur Pascal: entre l’inceste et l’“innéité”*’ in *Cahiers naturalistes*, 68 (1994), 77–88. Versions of both parts of chapter 6 have appeared elsewhere, in the case of Hennique in *Essays in French Literature*, 32–3 (1995–6), pp. 41–63, and in the case of Zola in *Neophilologus*, 81 (1997), 201–14. Much help has been gratefully received from librarians in London (the British Library and the libraries at Royal Holloway), Cambridge (the University Library and the Radzinowicz Criminology Library), Paris (the Bibliothèque Nationale), and Oxford (the Taylor Institution Library). Linda Bree, Kate Brett and Alison Gilderdale of Cambridge University Press have provided invaluable support. It is also with great pleasure that I take this opportunity to express my gratitude towards friends, teachers and colleagues, some of whom have read this material in different versions, all of whom have offered through conversation and correspondence many instances of comment, encouragement and advice germane to this project. They include Jennifer Birkett, Malcolm Bowie, Peter Collier, Stephen Gundle, Robert Hampson, Ruth Harvey, Stephen Heath, Edward Hughes, John Leigh, Karl Leydecker, Robert Lethbridge, Jann Matlock, Timothy Mathews, Michael Moriarty,

Patrick O'Donovan, Christopher Prendergast, Naomi Segal, Michael Sheringham, Jonathan Thacker, Andrew Walsh, Tony Williams and Robert Ziegler. The debt to members of my family – Nikola, my parents and my brothers – is ongoing.

PART I

The promiscuous narrative of Pot-Bouille

Demon lover or erotic atheist?

What do men who can command, who are born of rulers, who evince power in act and deportment, have to do with contracts? Such beings are unaccountable, they come like destiny, without rhyme or reason, ruthlessly, bare of pretext.¹

At least religious atheists could believe that God was dead, but what can the erotic atheist believe?²

Though its origins precede the death of Flaubert, *Pot-Bouille* is at the heart of the rewriting of the Flaubertian novel which we observe after May 1880. Of course, it enjoys a literally and symbolically central location as the tenth novel in Zola's twenty-novel cycle. (As we shall see, there is a particular way in which the final novel, *Le Docteur Pascal*, responds to the patriarchal concerns voiced and ironised in Zola's own novel of adultery.) Indeed, the opinion of Lionel Trilling and George Steiner that *Pot-Bouille* is actually *the* archetypal bourgeois novel can be clarified in the cultural context of the novel of adultery, as well as in the social context of hypocritical bourgeois values. So whereas readings of this novel have traditionally stressed the satire of social norms, an awareness of hitherto uninvestigated intertextual links will highlight its parody of cultural forms, which might be described as 'authorized transgression'.³ Zola's novel displaces the focus of the great nineteenth-century tradition of adultery in fiction by returning in a tragicomic (and thus Mozartian) vein to the Don Giovanni theme. Both novels and operas do form the major cultural fields of intertextual reference in *Pot-Bouille*, but these references (or at least the explicit ones) are not to Mozart and Flaubert, but to Meyerbeer and Grétry on the one hand, and Balzac and Sand on the other. The narrative describes the adulterous machinations of the inhabitants of an apartment block in the rue de Choiseul in Paris by following the adventures of Octave Mouret who arrives from Plassans (and, we might say, from *La Conquête de Plassans*). The novel of adultery

is parodied by Zola's use of the Don Juan figure who enjoys a double-edged relationship to the patriarchy that the novel of adultery subtends. As a sexual peripatetic, the Don Juan figure, Octave, threatens husbands with the notorious uncertainty of paternity, and yet at the same time embodies a certain principle of virility, which is itself grounded in a crisis of masculinity and paternity.

What Zola does in this novel is to make the male seducer into the central figure (and not, as is so often the case in bourgeois fiction, a seduced wife such as Emma Bovary). This resolutely does not mean that he is the recipient of the reader's sympathy. Indeed, one of the characteristics of this archly cynical novel is the lack of sympathy elicited by the various characters, for within the scheme of dramatic irony which we have identified in general terms above, those characters in the know appear quite malevolent and those in the dark appear fairly dim. It is for this reason that the exceptional scene of the 'fausse couche' of Adèle is so painfully memorable. It would certainly be an exaggeration to read Zola's critique as an attack on the family *per se*. In the discussion about *union libre* over a decade later Zola still sees the family as the 'least worst' unit of social organisation: 'Toute notre organisation sociale repose sur la famille . . . [I]l faudra que l'union entre un père et une mère représente des garanties pour les petits. Ces garanties, le mariage seul les donne à présent.'⁴ Although we are not invited to sympathise with Octave Mouret in any great measure, we are nevertheless constrained as readers by the focalizing mechanism of the novel.

Even the title *Madame Bovary* – in spite of its initial constructive indeterminacy as to which Madame Bovary we might be about to pursue – identifies a female focus of interest. The problematics of such a focus are made infamously clear in Flaubert's transgender identification with his heroine ('Mme Bovary, c'est moi'), and this effect is sharpened by Flaubert's use of *style indirect libre*. What critics have noted, though, is the mobility of such narrative identification, such that the seducer's perspective is not wholly marginalised by Flaubert's narrator. It is this view which is tracked assiduously in *Pot-Bouille*, which might therefore be thought of as the seducer's tale.

Though *La Conquête de Plassans* and the comparisons it invites with other novels by Zola create one context which helps to define *Pot-Bouille's* cultural location, there is a yet more specific context which surrounds the publication of the novel. The prelude to this was the appearance of three newspaper articles written by Zola. On 14 February 1881, *Le Figaro* published a satirical piece entitled 'Le divorce et la littérature' in which

Zola describes the crisis in subject matter that writers would undergo if those reformers promulgating a fresh divorce law were successful:

[les romans et surtout les drames] . . . sont toujours plus ou moins bâtis sur l'adultère, et ils ont tous des dénouements inacceptables, coups de couteau, coups de fusil, violences inutiles et odieuses. Du moment qu'on pourra lâcher sa femme, je compte qu'il ne sera plus permis de la tuer. . . Voilà donc notre répertoire détruit.⁵

Notably, the focus of this critique of contemporary writers is, once again, their sense of an ending. As examples, Zola cites *La Femme de Claude*, the plays of Dumas fils, Augier and Sardou. Once more the self-conscious nature of the obsession with adultery in nineteenth-century literature emerges: 'Faut-il tuer la femme? Faut-il tuer l'amant? Faut-il tuer le mari? On a retourné la question de cent manières, on a sauté sur place dans cette «toquade» de notre temps, que le dix-huitième siècle a ignorée et qui fera hausser les épaules du vingtième.'

Two weeks later *Le Figaro* published 'L'Adultère dans la bourgeoisie' which compares middle-class infidelity with proletarian prostitution.⁶ In both instances, the apparently fallen nature of women can be explained, Zola tells us, by reference to 'milieu' and 'éducation'. In a mode which echoes Balzac's warning that 'ce n'est pas le mari qui forme la femme',⁷ he proceeds to analyze three forms of upbringing, which can be mapped onto specific characters in *Pot-Bouille*. Firstly, he considers the neurotic effect of spatial enclosures on 'une race atrophiée par les plafonds bas' which generates 'l'adultère physiologique par le déséquilibre des névroses héréditaires', witnessed in Valérie Vabre. By a rhetorical sleight of hand it is such a woman, and not just the progeny of such an adulterous relationship, who is described as illegitimate, 'une créature abâtardie'. Zola concludes this description by suggesting that at least four out of ten adulteresses fall into this category. (To perceive self-irony in this taxonomical zeal would be a generous interpretation.) So what we might have expected to be merely a psychological case turns out to be a socially identifiable type, and it is in this displacement from case to type (to which Naturalism as a literary movement is so sensitive) that the decadence of contemporary mores becomes quite visible.

In the second instance, the link between prostitution and adultery is manifest. What Zola dislikes is the homosocial bonding of mother and daughter which excludes the father, who is criticized by his wife. This is represented in the novel by the Josserand family where the mother chaperons her daughters on the social circuit in search of husbands. Such a mother's 'véritable cours de prostitution décente' teaches her

daughter 'des révérences et des clins d'œils, des pâmoisons de gorge, tout l'art du libertinage reconnu nécessaire et autorisé par les familles'. We see this in action in the 'scandale de la fenêtre' which seals the union of Berthe and Auguste Vabre.⁸ The aim is a socially and economically advantageous marriage. Once the bait is taken and the daughter is married off, the game of seduction starts all over again: 'Et la chasse recommence, non plus au mari, mais à l'amant. Même tactique, d'ailleurs. Sa mère lui a appris le métier'.⁹ So adultery mimes marriage. This is 'l'adultère de la femme sortie de sa classe, gâtée par les appétits de son milieu, élevée par une mère respectable et prude dans cette idée que les hommes sont mis au monde pour fournir des robes de femme'. Like Octave's, this is a desire that seems to know no end, caught up on the wheel of bourgeois possibilities in this post-revolutionary world.

If this second category equates adultery with greed, then the final section considers the other extreme in which the perpetuation of innocence produces 'l'adultère le plus commun, dans la bourgeoisie'. So if four out of ten adulteresses are hysterics, then by Zola's reckoning perhaps five out of ten are simpleminded, with the odd materialistic woman thrown in for good measure! In the novel Marie Pichon is guilty of 'l'adultère par bêtise. . . l'adultère sentimental, où la chair n'est encore pour rien, et qui n'est jamais que la faute de la sottise du milieu et de l'étrange conception de l'honnêteté chez les parents.' As will be suggested in chapter 2, if the first scenario depicts domesticity as asphyxiation, in like fashion, this final category depicts domesticity as incarceration, 'on calfeutre les portes et les fenêtres, pour que le dehors n'entre pas'. This resistance to the realm of external desires cannot be repeated in married life.

Zola's cynicism generated a deal of public reaction which led him to nuance these views in an article on 'Femmes honnêtes' in *Le Figaro* on 18 April 1881.¹⁰ In place of this misogynistic image of female foibles, Zola offers three alternative scenarios which suggest how Valérie, Berthe and Marie might have been other than they are: firstly, the assiduous, frugal and moral housewife; then, an instance of 'l'intelligence française', 'cette souplesse à tout comprendre'; and finally native intelligence which resists the naïvety otherwise fuelled by a convent education. In the first case, the fusing of capital and desire acts as a positive moral force. So busy is the wife of the watch repairer, 'brûlée du seul besoin d'aider son mari, afin d'arriver tous deux à quelque chose', that 'il n'y a pas de place pour un vice, l'adultère est supprimé par les faits'. Unlike Berthe who expects to be served by the income of a man, this wife 'devient une

volonté et une force, au même titre que l'homme'. Whereas Berthe's adulterous desire is fuelled by her indolence and triggered by her material aspirations, material improvement in their quality of life becomes a form of desire for this valiant wife: 'une passion, où elle met toutes les forces nerveuses de son être'. For she represents labour, whereas Berthe embodies consumption.

Zola's second case of the laudable bourgeoisie is also defined by her active engagement with her husband's business activities. Whereas the watch repairer's wife walks the streets of Paris returning completed work and collecting payments whilst her husband works inside the boutique that is also their home, this second figure runs the family business whilst her husband is away on business at Le Havre or Marseille. Theirs is really a marriage of 'associés' and she is 'un autre lui-même' who manages sales and accounts. Once more Zola suggests a contrary vision to the diagnosis of idle hands which readers will see in *Pot-Bouille*: 'Ceux-là s'entendent et se reteront fidèles; ils sont trop occupés, ils ont trop d'intérêts communs'. Of particular interest is the vision of sexual equality which Zola perceives amongst the industrious bourgeoisie (as he brushes over questions of birth, childcare and the value of domestic work): 'Lui, la traite en égale, avec une nuance de respect pour son activité. Elle, cesse d'être une femme, lorsqu'elle est en bas; et, si un homme se montre galant, elle demeure surprise, oublieuse de la beauté pleine, de la santé superbe de ses trente ans.' The *femme de trente ans* made notorious by Balzac is rendered a paragon of virtue by the desexualizing qualities of robust labour.

The final type of faithful bourgeoisie represents the triumph of 'une hérédité lointaine et compliquée' over 'son milieu', over a convent education which usually produces 'une poupée aimable' like Marie. What such a wife inherits is a kind of native good sense which makes her an invariably accurate source of business acumen on which her husband can draw behind closed doors; she is the power behind the man. Though she loves to go out dancing in Paris, she has 'rien d'une héroïne de roman, pas même l'allure un peu garçonnière de la femme de commerçant', as though her happiness lies in her capacity to escape contemporary narrative possibilities, to live a life untracked by literary culture. Even though she is depicted as 'une vraie femme', once more it is the virtual desexualization of women which guarantees happiness: 'Après les adorations de la lune de miel, les deux amoureux deviennent deux amis; et, dès lors, le bonheur du ménage est indestructible'. Zola's ideal consists of a heterosexual marriage tie which discovers the virtues

of homosocial friendship. Such friendship between men and women might thus be termed *heterosocial*. As the article concludes, 'Dans tous les ménages honnêtes que j'ai connus, la femme vivait étroitement la vie du mari. La moralité du mariage est uniquement là'. Ironically, this heterosocial partnership is what Octave appears to find by the end of the novel in both his commercial-conjugal relationship with Mme Hédouin and, even more ironically, in his largely unexplored (because unspoken) friendship with Valérie.

What all of these these positive scenarios imply, however, is the potential link between socioeconomic decline and moral decadence. Although this article is largely a tactical response to virulent criticism, it nevertheless becomes clear from this pair of articles that Zola was both immersed in the misogynistic motifs of the literature of adultery and yet also suspicious of the pernicious effect such social stereotypes might exercise upon the literary imagination. It is in this ambivalent context that *Pot-Bouille* was written, apparently intended as a novel of adultery to end all novels of adultery.

These female types can, as has been suggested, be mapped onto characters in the novel. As such Zola's moral and social typology of women is culturally sanctioned in the press before publication of the novel. As the lender of books Octave comes to dominate the circulation of cultural capital before his sexual circulation can come into its own. As we have already noted, both of these forms of capital are but preludes to his triumph in the true capitalist exchange of financial capital. Marie Pichon receives a kind of literary titillation from her reading of romantic and post-romantic fiction such as George Sand and Honoré de Balzac which Octave procures for his mistress-to-be, borrowing so as to be able to lend. As such Octave operates as a sort of literary pimp. Indeed, it is in the realm of literature rather than that of sex where Octave seems to provide Marie with the greatest pleasure.

The fact that critiques of reading such as Léon's and Duveyrier's prove so pointless suggests a similarly ambivalent attitude towards that Flaubertian critique of the romantic education of Emma's sensibility. Octave seduces Marie Pichon in chapter 4 of the novel, when an implicit parallel is drawn between the 'désordre' in the household of the *hystérique*, Valérie Vabre, and the 'désordre' – the same word is used – in the Pichon household as Madame is overcome by a rereading of George Sand's *André*. What is interesting is that it is Mme Pichon, and not Mme Vabre, who yields to Octave's seductive manoeuvres (although Valérie indulges her desires elsewhere). The moral disorientation triggered by

reading romanticism is diagnosed in the foreground of the novel whereas the effects of a much-pathologized hysteria are marginalized in the text as rumour and connotation. Zola's letter to Baille (dated 4 July 1860) situates Sand's writing at the heart of the tradition of adultery in fiction, when he qualifies his criticism of *Jacques* with an assertion of the general validity of the situation it recounts: 'rien de plus strictement vrai que cette situation d'une femme n'aimant plus son mari et ne pouvant s'empêcher d'aimer un autre homme'.¹¹

Rather than copying *Madame Bovary's* critique of such reading, however, one is left wondering whether even this *lieu sûr* of Flaubertian irony is not also subject to Zola's parody. The moral lesson becomes a comically heavy-handed set scene. Marie complains of the effects of reading, 'Quand ça vous prend, on ne sait plus où l'on est . . .' (p. 75), and it is made quite clear that she is playing *not* so hard to get . . . She faints, Octave diagnoses, 'C'est d'avoir trop lu', and subsequently – in a scene that is both ridiculous and brutal – we learn how 'il la posséda, entre l'assiette oubliée et le roman, qu'une secousse fit tomber par terre' (p. 77). This sense of a parodic overplaying of the topos of dangerous reading is particularly important given that even in Culler's destabilising reading of *Madame Bovary*, he maintains this critique of romanticism as a Flaubertian certainty.¹² This parody of the proscription of reading makes mincemeat of the final line in chapter 4 where M. Campardon tells Octave: 'L'éducation dans la famille, mon cher, il n'y a que ça!' (p. 78).

One of the benefits of married life is that Marie escapes from the cultural censorship of her father, M. Vuillaume, whose educational theory runs thus: 'pas de romans avant le mariage, tous les romans après le mariage' (p. 67). The sense that Marie's upbringing has been isolated and uninspiring is brought out early in chapter 4 when Octave enjoys afternoon tea with the Pichons and Marie's parents. The piano is a far more acceptable bourgeois pastime for a young lady, hence the 'gêne' when Octave expresses shock at the fact that Marie cannot play. This immediately puts into question their bourgeois status, to which Zola's inane characters aspire. She can, however, sing and her mother recalls 'cette chanson sur l'Espagne, l'histoire d'une captive regrettant son bien-aimé'. What Zola suggests is that the culture of romance is pervasive, and will prove especially attractive only to a woman who has known such a cloistered upbringing. The ultimate irony is that it is her father who originally allowed her to read *André* a few months before her marriage, thinking it to be 'une œuvre sans danger, toute d'imagination et qui élève l'âme'.

The choice of *André* as the accessory to adultery is itself revealing, for this is a novel which already invokes the subject of reading. The eponymous hero, the son of the marquis de Morand, is a Walter Scott fan, and when his friend, Joseph, tries in vain to denigrate the character of Sand's heroine Geneviève, he pretends that she is a major consumer of novels: 'elle fera pis que les autres; je me méfie de l'eau dormante et des filles qui lisent tant de romans'.¹³ So both the indulgence and the proscription of romantic reading seem equally pathetic. André's own fantasies about novelistic heroines are already subject to irony in Sand's account, and this is only exacerbated in Zola's novel. André hides books in his jacket and goes out into the wilds of nature with 'Jean-Jacques ou Grandisson'. Unlike that other secret reader, Julien Sorel, André does not consume Napoleonic texts (for unlike Julien, he is not a social aspirant; his family has already 'arrived'). The fantasies of André (unlike the Lovelace figure, Joseph) are of 'les chastes créations de Walter Scott, Alice, Rebecca, Diana, Catherine', of 'les soupirs éloignés des vierges hébraïques de Byron', and of course 'la grande et pâle Clarisse'. There is, however, a musical counterpart to these 'chœurs délicieux', as 'quelquefois un chœur de bacchantes traversait l'air et emportait *ironiquement* les douces mélodies'.¹⁴ Zola's novel represents a displacement from romantic fantasy to this ironic Bacchanalian mode to which even André is attracted in spite of himself. In the terms which Sand borrows from Richardson, Zola takes us back from Grandisson to Lovelace. Indeed as we shall see, the very name Clarissa is desublimated by Zola in the form of Clarisse Bocquet.

In her chapter on 'Educating Women: *André* and *Mauprat*' which raises these very questions of milieu, upbringing and their romantic transcendence, Kathryn J. Crecchius stresses the cautionary element in Sand's account of 'society's lack of place for unusual women'.¹⁵ *André* can thus be read in a manner which Zola would have appreciated as 'an epistemological enquiry, one that seeks to define the use and meaning of knowledge to a woman'. The *grisette*, Geneviève, is elevated in this Pygmalion tale by her acculturation which seems at first to make her eminently suitable for André, but Geneviève dies during a stillborn birth, disappointed by her timid husband and hurt by her father-in-law's unkindness. As Crecchius observes: 'Geneviève's passage from a calm, semi-educated maker of flowers who does not have an inkling of the meaning of passion to a loving, knowledgeable artist parallels, and then surpasses Galatea's transformation from inert marble to warm flesh.' Ovid's tale is reformulated in the reading imagination of the bourgeoisie,

Marie Pichon, as a fantasy of social aspiration which is particularly intriguing because its *grisette*–aristocrat relationship actually brackets out the middle classes. This tale of a ‘love between two spheres’ reminds the bourgeoisie of their origins but also of their goals.¹⁶ In her 1851 preface Sand explains how she wrote the novel in Venice and delights in quoting the Italian proverb, ‘*Tutto il mondo è fatto come la nostra famiglia*’.¹⁷ The ironic twist for bourgeois readers in this quotation is that the Pygmalion plot forces them to consider the links between their own families and not only those socially superior but also those socially inferior. This makes such readers recall their class’s origins amongst the *peuple*, as does Zola’s uncomfortable analogy between the homes in *Pot-Bouille* and the image of the cess-pit at the back of the house.

André is in both senses of the term an accessory to adultery. At one level it seems to be an accessory to the crime of adultery, aiding and abetting the seduction; but at another it is also presented as but one more aspect of domestic furnishing, a further banal instance of bourgeois *bricabracomanie*. Indeed Sand’s novel is specifically invoked in that moment of ‘seduction’ in chapter 4 of *Pot-Bouille* which shares the brutality of Ventujol’s ‘seduction’ of Gabrielle Hébert in the Hennique novel discussed below in chapter 6: ‘il la renversa brutalement au bord de la table; et elle se soumit, il la posséda, entre l’assiette oubliée et le roman, qu’une secousse fit tomber par terre’ (p. 76). So these icons of two forms of consumption (culinary and literary) frame the tragicomically brief moment of sexual consummation. The heavily symbolic determination of the book falling (like wifely virtue) is a sign of the collapse of the romantic culture to which the naive Marie has subscribed, as we have learnt only pages earlier:

Quand elle était jeune, elle aurait voulu habiter au fond des bois. Elle rêvait toujours qu’elle rencontrait un chasseur, qui sonnait du cor. Il s’approchait, se mettait à genoux. Ça se passait dans un taillis, très loin, où des roses fleurissaient comme dans un parc. Puis, tout d’un coup, ils étaient mariés, et alors ils vivaient là, à se promener éternellement. Elle, très heureuse, ne souhaitait plus rien. Lui, d’une tendresse et d’une soumission d’esclave, restait à ses pieds. (pp. 72–3)

This fantasy of *fin’amor* appears to locate idealized love in the natural realm of the woods, and in particular in the type of clearing set up as the focus of satire and parody in the *déjeuner sur l’herbe* scene in *Un accident de Monsieur Hébert* discussed below in chapter 6. The state of decadence to which this hackneyed rhetoric has been reduced is indexed by the simile ‘comme dans un parc’ which offers a contextualization for the image of the flowering roses. Rather than asserting its originary status within the

stock of 'natural' commonplaces, this metaphorical figure suggests a quasi-Wildean inversion whereby the natural wood (like life) seems to be imitating the urban artifice of the park (like art). Besides, in *Madame Bovary* (as in Bérroul's *Tristan et Yseut*) the woods are the site of adulterous consummation. The defloration of Marie as a new bride within this fantasy is brushed over in the flourish of a single line which leaves the newly weds walking off (into the sunset one presumes). Conjugal satisfaction is reflected in the calming of desire ('Elle, heureuse, ne souhaitait plus rien') which novels of adultery bring into question.

When Octave does seduce Marie, such illusions are shattered, as Marie tries in vain to defend herself with the words: 'Vous allez gâter le bonheur que j'ai de vous avoir rencontré . . . Ça ne nous avancera à rien, je vous assure, et j'avais rêvé des choses . . .' (p. 76). Octave's misogyny comes to the fore when he replies by whispering to himself what he truly feels about Marie: «Toi, tu vas y passer!» The disrespect which anticipates his brutal act of possession is registered in the shift from her use of 'vous' to his use of 'tu', and the fact that intersubjective dialogue is replaced by his internalization of discourse reflects the narcissism of the Don Juan as a cultural type and thus of this 'desire that desires *itself*'.¹⁸ He has already made it clear that he is not interested in protracted conversation. When Marie explains her passion for fictional 'déclarations', he retorts, 'Moi, . . . je déteste les phrases . . . Quand on s'adore, le mieux est de se le prouver tout de suite' (p. 72).

This puts a particular gloss on Shoshana Felman's observation that 'the myth of Don Juan's irresistible seduction . . . dramatizes nothing other than the success of language, the felicity of the speech act'. Her use of Mozart and Molière suggests the particularity of the seducer's position within the social system of language which is echoed not only in *Pot-Bouille* but also in *Bel-Ami*. As in these novels the seducer in Molière's play enjoys the power of a kind of linguistic minimalism which allows him to seduce with very few words. As he tells Charlotte and Mathurine in Act 2 Scene iv, 'Tous les discours n'avancent point les choses. Il faut faire et non pas dire; et les effets décident mieux que les paroles.'¹⁹ In Felman's words, 'To seduce is to produce language that enjoys, language that takes pleasure in having "no more to say".' As such Don Juan embodies the performative power of language ('performance' to be understood in its theatrical, linguistic and erotic senses), which confronts a constative faith in the truth-potential of language. The latter view is represented by the enemies who pursue Don Juan (usually angry fathers or fiancés). As such the Don Juan figure represents a threat to the

referential system which reaches its summum in naturalism for 'the trap . . . of seduction consists in producing a *referential illusion* through an utterance that is by its very nature *self-referential*: the illusion of a real or extralinguistic act of commitment created by an utterance that refers only to itself.' This is the challenge which Octave and Georges Duroy present to the realist-naturalist literary system which houses them.

Indeed, Octave and Marie have nothing to say to each other after the seduction, until Octave notices that they have failed to close the door leading onto the stairs, which is itself a metaphor of the adulterous transgression of spatial proprieties. The 'malaise' that he feels relates to the homosocial betrayal of which he is guilty: 'il se rappelait que, fraternellement, il avait projeté de pendre la jeune femme au cou de son mari.' 'Animé d'intentions fraternelles' (p. 71), Octave has encouraged her husband to take her to the theatre and he plans to take them out for dinner in order to 'les pendre au cou l'un de l'autre' (p. 72). But this 'amitié singulière' and his 'accès de bonté' have given way to his misogynistic cocktail of disdain and desire. The emotional vacuity of the seduction scene is impressed upon the reader by continual reference to banal materiality when we might expect the language of idealized passion. This shift from the ideal to the material is witnessed most clearly in the concern they show for the damage done to the binding of 'ce beau volume de George Sand' (p. 77). Marie had even wrapped the book in paper so as not to dirty it, and her assertion of innocence resonates in the intertextual echo chamber of sexual morality: 'Ce n'est pas ma faute' (p. 76). The wider implicit question of moral fault runs through representations of adultery, normally at the expense of a guilty wife like Marie. In Zola's tale wives tend to be pathetic or indifferent rather than particularly malevolent. The role of judge may fall to the aggrieved husband, though often it falls to society at large, and the most ambiguous assertion of ambivalence in such matters is surely the famous conversation between Rodolphe and Charles towards the end of *Madame Bovary*. For there is a radical undecidability in Charles's observation that 'C'est la faute de la fatalité!'²⁰ Is this a supreme act of interpretative generosity and moral relativism on Charles's part, as the narrator would have it, 'un grand mot, le seul qu'il ait jamais dit'? Or is Charles's pronouncement just one more candidate for the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* (as Rodolphe thinks, 'comique même, et un peu vil')? More precisely, Marie's claim echoes the words of the Don Juan figure, Valmont, in Laclos's *Liaisons dangereuses* who, at the Marquise de Merteuil's behest, repeats the very same words as he tries to abandon Madame de Tourvel.²¹

In chapter 5 Berthe Josserand traps Auguste Vabre into marriage when they are exposed behind a curtain at the Duveyriers' party. This victory represents a triumph for the androphobic triumvirate of Berthe, Hortense and their mother: 'et, dans leur triomphe, reparaissaient les leçons de la mère, le mépris affiché de l'homme' (p. 93). In the battle of the sexes such behaviour is represented as a grotesque complement to Octave's own misogyny. The textual complicity of marriage and adultery, which might be thought of as two moments in the same system of sexual organisation, is symbolized most acutely in chapter 8 at the wedding of Berthe and Auguste where Théophile wrongly accuses Octave of seducing his wife, Valérie. This accusation actually takes place in the church and the ironic counterpoint of marital and pre-marital scenes is resolved by the triumph of the narrative of adultery, as virtually everyone is fascinated by the sideshow which becomes the main event. As such we return in another key to Flaubert's parodic reading of a romantic sentimentality which privileges individual desire as an assertion of splendid subjectivity. Indeed, this vital scene is perhaps best read as a reply to Flaubert's famous 'Comices agricoles' scene in *Madame Bovary*. What this reveals is a contrapuntal relationship between these two counterpoints. The irony of Zola's counterpoint is of course particularly acute because he interrupts a public celebration of marital life – what Stephen Kern calls 'one of the most comforting and yet frightening moments in family life',²² with a stock scene of marital discord as the reader is taken back and forth between the discourses of consent and accusation with comic effects. Auguste's accusatory line, 'vous avouez . . .', is greeted with the piercing 'Amen' of a young chorister. At the start of chapter 8 we learn that Théophile Vabre has discovered an unsigned love letter which he falsely believes to have come from Octave who has been seen in public with Valérie – ironically in this very same church the day before the marriage takes place. With overbearing symbolism, marriage therefore competes on home territory against adultery . . . and loses: 'personne ne faisait plus la moindre attention à la cérémonie'.

The conclusion of this contrapuntal movement between the public avowal of fidelity and the indiscreet accusation of adulterous infidelity is hinted at in the sentence which follows the moment when Octave opens the letter he is supposed to have written: 'L'émotion avait grandi dans l'assistance' (p. 146). For at this instant in the text it is not clear which scenario the 'émotion' refers to. In the next sentence, though, it becomes clear that the spectacle of the wedding ceremony has been displaced by the counter spectacle of accusation: 'Des chuchotements

couraient, on se poussait du coude, on regardait par-dessus les livres de messe'. So in more than one way the servicebook functions as what might be termed an alibi text, allowing the congregation to spy on the rival event rather than the main attraction, and the carnivalesque humour of the scene comes in large part from this inversion of the public spectacle of marriage and the secrecy of adultery. (The servicebook as alibi text echoes ironically the function of *André* as a textual accessory to adultery.) The conflict between the public discourse of marital consent and the private-cum-public discourse of accusation is played out not only by conflicting speech contexts but also through the interpretation of conflicting texts: the biblical text and the mysterious love letter. The one sanctions marriage; the other betokens its failure. The one defies attempts at ambiguous interpretation; the other refuses to give its reader any firm interpretative base (the true answer to Théophile's quest for authorial attribution is not just Valérie's lover; in terms of Barthes's famous question 'Qui parle?' the mysterious text also seems to be an encoded projection of husbandly paranoia). The religious text offers solace; the love letter is profoundly disturbing for all but its author and intended reader. The one interests nobody except the 'homme sérieux', Auguste, who says yes to the priest only after careful consideration; the other provides the audience with a collective *jouissance* (the initially ambiguous 'émotion' discussed above). So Auguste's cuckoldry is already prescribed in the dynamics of this ceremony.

Texts are not the only props in this tragicomic farce. Similarly, Berthe uses her veil to manipulate the visual logic of the event. Rather than merely fulfilling its symbolic function of obstructing any external gaze directed towards the blushing bride, the veil is used as a way of concealing her own transgressive gaze: 'Mais Berthe, ayant lu la lettre, se passionnant à l'idée des gifles qu'elle espérait, n'écoutait plus, guettait par un coin de son voile' (p. 147). As such the relationship of audience and actors is transformed by this refocussing of the narrative gaze. What this scene manipulates is the distinction between the public and private faces of desire with the secrecy of adultery undermining the publicly sanctioned marriage.

The paradox of this particular form of privacy (or secrecy) which undoes the privacy of family life is articulated most famously in Flaubert's 'Comices agricoles' scene, which draws a contrast between, on the one hand, the public world of the rural community and of economic exchange and, on the other, the secret prelude to Rodolphe's seduction of Emma Bovary. In the famous counterpointing of public

and private (or official and transgressive) the reader is taken back and forth between scenes of natural fertility (with crops and animals on show) and the superior gaze of the would-be lovers looking down from the first floor of the townhall (where, ironically enough, the state registers marriages). In typical Flaubertian fashion the reader is invited by the demon of analogy to see a static comparison between private and public, instead of a progressive contrast leading to a resolution. It is as if the reader finds in seduction all the platitudes of the country market, with the effect that the dynamics of the counterpoint are haunted by the spectre of sameness. The official speech of the *conseiller* delivered before the prize-giving is as rhetorically inflated as Rodolphe's speech of seduction, both of whose *lieux* are indeed *communs*.

Overarching this is the implicit analogy with the 'meat market' of bourgeois marriage. In the context of this spatial arrangement of narrative discourse, flitting cinematically between two locations, only to find that they are reduced to the stultifying figure of sameness, it is particularly fitting that the *conseiller* should be called M. Lieuvain. It is at the level of the metaphorical that the reader draws connections between these public and private scenes, for example in Lieuvain's use of the image of the nation as a body to map out the growing freedom of travel:

Si . . . je reporte mes yeux sur la situation actuelle de notre belle patrie: qu'y vois-je? . . . partout des voies nouvelles de communication, comme autant d'artères nouvelles dans le corps de l'Etat, y établissent des rapports nouveaux; . . . enfin la France respire! . . .²³

Emma can only compete with this liberation of the public (and by implication male) citizen, by looking for a particular type of 'rapport nouveau' to free her from the stultifying constriction which means that she will not actually be able to travel to the Paris of her dreams. This is one reason for her disappointment at not having a son. Emma imagines that a son would enable her to break the mimetic cycle in which the mother is reproduced in the daughter, a cycle which entraps her in the tyranny of metaphor, keeping closed the desirous realm of male adventure in a public sphere. Flaubert's way of reinvesting the sameness of comparison with the dynamics of counterpoint is to accelerate the pace of exchange so that ultimately we change focus from sentence to sentence, with no narratorial intervention, until Rodolphe seizes Emma by the hand. Emma's tragedy stems in part from the different ways in which she and Rodolphe conceptualize the space of desire. What for her is liberation is, in his mind, imprisonment: 'Rodolphe lui serrait la main, et il la sentait toute chaude comme une tourterelle captive qui veut

reprendre sa volée'. This itself is merely a prelude to the appearance of the reluctant prizewinner, the simple Catherine Leroux.

This relationship between desire and the market (in its straightforward and conceptual forms) is echoed in *Pot-Bouille* in the syntagmatic unfolding of Octave's shift from private to public realms, from the house on the rue de Choiseul to Mme Hédouin's department store. The irony of Zola's scene of counterpoint is that it is Berthe, the bride, who will fall into the arms of Octave. It is thus fitting that when the priest asks her whether she promises Auguste 'fidélité en toutes choses, comme une fidèle épouse le doit à son époux, selon le commandement de Dieu' (p. 147), Berthe is already looking over her shoulder, not at her past, but at her future, as she watches Octave being accused. Like a naughty school-girl, she senses that life is elsewhere. Female economic dependency is reconstituted via Zola's misogynistic vision in the form of Berthe's materialistic aspirations. Inspired by her mother's desire to push her daughters up the socio-economic ladder, Berthe is seduced by Octave's little gifts. It is perhaps here that the thematics of prostitution in *Nana* meet *Pot-Bouille* most explicitly. The wife who is never satisfied rehearses a melodramatic stereotype, but what Zola's narrative offers is a bridge from a stereotype of materialistic, socioeconomic desire to another stereotype of the unquenchable sexual desire of women reformulated in Freud's notorious question 'Was will das Weib?' In other words, what constitutes the *bonheur des dames*? Part of the fascination exerted by the Don Juan figure is that he at least appears to know the answer to that question. The goal of *bonheur* is ironically invoked in the wedding scene. Théophile reads out to Octave the confirmation of adulterous *jouissance*, received by Valérie in an anonymous letter: '«Mon chat, que de bonheur hier!»' (p. 147), and the term is picked up in the reference to Berthe's distraction by this counter spectacle as she answers the priest's question about fidelity: 'Oui, oui, répondit-elle précipitamment, au petit bonheur.' The intensity of the eudemonic quest so central to the tradition of *Bildung* in fiction is undermined by the nonchalance and randomness of uninterested (and in a sense profoundly uninteresting) lives.

However, there are women who do resist Zola's Don Juan, not least the *hystérique*, Valérie Vabre, who, like the reader, laughs at the accusation made by her husband (which we may contrast with the tragic overtones of the Princesse de Clèves's rejection of the duc de Nemours and her anguished confession). The other characters take events rather more seriously, but Valérie keeps her distance from the 'incestuous' machinations of the apartment block into which she refuses to be drawn,

although she too has a lover who is held in the shadows of textual allusion, outside the house. It is for this reason that her husband is the victim of a double humiliation in his accusation of Octave, for M. Vabre is both right (that he is being deceived) and wrong (about the lover's identity). Her lover (and her unmappable hysteric's desire which becomes a fantasy of the male homosocial clique) are in all senses ob-scene, displaced off stage in this theatricalized farce of bourgeois adventure. Paradoxically, all of this allows Valérie the privilege of sharing the reader's sense that what could be tragic is merely derisory. By resisting Octave she comes to share his omniscience, and when they say goodbye as the Duveyriers' party draws to a close at the end of the novel and she looks at him 'de son air d'amie désintéressée', it is clear to the reader at least that theirs is a special relationship: 'Lui et elle auraient pu tout se dire' (p. 383). As much as Octave once fought against it, they are, it seems, the true heterosocial couple of the piece, for she does not allow the ruses of desire to intervene. Catherine Belsey argues that 'what the stories of demon lovers suggest is that the desire defined in the fiction cannot be met by a mortal lover, because in the end desire is not of the other, but of the Other, and its gratification is both forbidden and impossible'.²⁴ In particular, the implicit heterosexual utopia in which the minds and bodies of men and women might fit together is deferred here due to Zola's cynicism about the ethical values of this historical moment. In this skewing of the desires of mortal lovers Zola comes closest to that literary fantasy of writing his own version of *L'Education sentimentale*.