

Therese Raquin

E.Zola

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I must have bought the book in 1970, and some day in 1971 I read through it, understanding nothing, yet persevering no doubt just out of bravado to be able to say to myself (whom else could take it seriously?) that I had read a French book. Now the experience is very different, I seem to have made some progress during the last fifty years.

It is melodrama, starting out rather realistically, then being carried to the extreme making you somehow losing the interest in the story, at least on a deeper level, but still turning the pages quickly in anticipation of the release to be caused by its conclusion.

It starts out realistic enough as already noted. A rather hard-nosed businesswoman living widowedly in the provinces with her sickly son and a niece she has had thrust on her. The son and the niece grow up as siblings and the mother decides that they should get married. The son does what his mother tells him, and the niece has not much choice. Then the son gets the idea to stand up to his mother and announces that he intends to move to Paris. After some initial reluctance the mother complies and they move house and business and the son gets some clerical position at a railway department. They live a quiet life with a small shop and a rented apartment in conjunction with it. The niece - Therese, employed in the shop is reduced to leading a rather boring life for a young woman, the only distraction being an invitation they extend every Thursday evening to a small circle of friends entertaining them with tea and a game of dominoes.

One day the son - Camille, brings home a childhood friend, who has also settled in Paris working as a matter of fact in the same office, nourishing some romantic and half-baked ideas of becoming a painter. He is all what Camille is not. A country lad by name of Laurent, big and strong and filled with the vitality of an egoist. Laurent is used to pick up women, commercial as well as freely available ones, but he is in short cash for the latter. So he looks at Therese and is a bit reluctant, she is not that pretty after all, but she seems available, such things can be felt. In order to have an excuse for regular visits he suggests that he paints a portrait of Camille. The upshot is that he and Therese do have an affair, quite a passionate one, the young woman having been dormant with her youthful exuberance for so long, and Laurent having had some experience. It goes very well, no one suspects anything, and it is all rather exciting as well, doing it in the conjugal bedroom to boot. But it is not really enough for Therese, and as Laurent runs out of excuses for his short daily leaves, she one evening sneaks out of the house on some flimsy pretext and visits him in his attic abode and then the idea of a common future is breached. As to Laurent he would not mind stepping into the place of Camille, with his mother with capital, would the latter be suitably removed from the scene. In practice this means murder.

One day the three of them take a Sunday outing, and Laurent is overcome with carnal desire for the young wife, while her husband is snoozing close by. They decide to have dinner together in a restaurant (the whole scene which is taking place by the banks of the

Seine, makes you think of a painting by Renoir). But before doing that why not take a boat trip on the river? Camille is afraid of water, having never, due to his fragile constitution, played in it, while Laurent of course is used to it having had a healthy rough country boyhood. Let us not forget that he is a real peasant character. But Camille cannot of course own up to his timidity and they enter on a boat. In the middle of the river, close to some islands which provides protection from an outside view, Laurent throws Camille into the water. But the poor guy does stand up and gives a fight biting the neck of Laurent before finally succumbing drowning. Laurent is in the water, and he makes sure that Therese is as well, and they cry for help, and some young people in canoes come by and can testify to the accident.

Laurent is too much of a coward to face Mme Raquin but delegates this unpleasant task to the retired police officer who is part of the Thursday evening circle, by virtue of being an old acquaintance of Mme Raquin since their days in the provinces further down the Seine. Laurent rightly suspects that going directly to him will give him a kind of alibi, and later on the whole thing is written up in the papers and he is depicted as a hero trying to save the life of his friend.

Naturally Laurent finds great relief and calm after the deed, something he no doubt has worried about and now being thankful that it was accomplished so quickly and successfully. But now they cannot marry right away, that would cause suspicions, so they decide to lie low. And even if they now could carry on the affair with greater ease than before, they seem to have no desire to do so. For almost two years they live apart, and Laurent picks up a convenient mistress to warm his bed. A mistress who one day just disappears, no doubt having found a better bed. Laurent wonders whether he should really go ahead and marry Therese, but it would after all be stupid not to, in view of all the trouble they have taken. But the question of marriage is a delicate one. Now Laurent is being beset by childish terrors, once he starts to sleep alone in his bed. He has seen the grossly disfigured body of Camille in the Morgue which he has taken the habit of visiting regularly. The sight deeply affects him. He also has a scar from the bite that Camille managed to inflict on him, which he can never get rid of, and serves as a constant reminder of him and the intimate relation they had by virtue of the killing. Therese is also getting nervous and they are talking about marriage and how to go about it in a circumspect way. But there will be a brilliant solution to that. Therese plays the comedy of the young grieving widow to such an extreme that her aunt starts to worry about her. Seeking advice from her friend the police officer, she learns that she should marry her niece to someone. She is a bit reluctant at first, after all she does not want to let in a stranger in the family, she wants to be taken care of in old age, but then the officer convinces her that she should let her niece marry Laurent. One evening both of them pretend to reluctantly accept the suggestion and a marriage ceremony is shortly arranged. So now one would think that it would be perfect. But on the wedding night Therese is overcome with disgust, the presence of Camille, that drowned cadaver, has come between them. They lie in bed at opposite sides and in the vacant space between them there is Camille. Laurent even sees him in the room, but it turns out to be his painting of him, a painting he now realizes is a fake of no artistic value whatsoever. Camille is in both of their thoughts and terrors and being together does not mollify as they had hoped, but rather exacerbates it. Therese is still married to him and

the cadaver is jealous.

They find that they cannot be together, nights are ordeals and they are only happy when they are away from each other, she in the shop, he in the office. One day he decides to quit his job and become a painter, he rents a studio and starts to paint, mostly in order to have a space of his own. An old painter friend comes to the office and is surprised by what he sees. He never thought that Laurent had any talent at all, but now his sketches show real artistic sensibility and originality. How come? As a reader we are to understand that the psychological ordeal that Laurent has gone through has endowed him with a sensibility he previously lacked. But there is just one criticism, the friend tells him, that can be made. The faces are too similar, as if in the same family. If he is to make a group of them, the effect will be comical. When he is gone Laurent realizes that the faces are all of Camille, and how much he tries he can only paint Camille, no matter whether in the disguise of an old man or of a young girl.

Outwardly their marriage seems so happy, but it is of course pure torture for both of them. Mme Raquin suffers a stroke and she is well taken care of by her niece and her husband, because while at home they need distraction at any price to avoid confronting each other, while the old stricken lady thinks of it as disinterested kindness.

All details need not be disclosed, but the relationship deteriorates inexorably with beatings of Therese. At one time she finds herself pregnant and the thought of bearing Laurent's child is intolerable to her, so when he beats her next time, she makes sure that he hits her belly. And a miscarriage follows. As a reader you are a bit puzzled as to her being impregnated by him, or anyone else for that matter, after all she has not had any sexual relation with him (nor, presumably, with any other for a long time). In the end they commit a joint suicide and that ends the book rather abruptly and a little bit cheatingly.

Now what to make of it all? It is a novel written in the naturalistic spirit which would be the view point of Zola in all his literary work. Naturalistic is not the same thing as realistic, and as to realism in this novel under review, one can have serious doubts, especially in retrospect, but while reading one turns the pages with expectation. Naturalism means that one conceives of life as something to be studied scientifically, and the conceit of Zola, in which his greatness lies, is to think of his novels as scientific explorations. It means actually believing that life can be studied with dispassionate objectivity, in the same way we may study ants. It was a refreshing idea at the time, to do away with sentimentality and purple writing, and to take a more detached view. Consequently the novel when it first came out in a serialization back in 1867 was met with hostile reviews and condemned as putrid. Now in spite of the hostile reviews, or rather because of them, it made Zola famous.

Now the novel addresses some very potent aspects of human life. Death and sexuality. The relationship between Laurent and Therese is hardly sentimental, they may not even like each other, but that is never the issue, at least not initially. Laurent is not terribly attracted to her but nevertheless he is caught beyond his rational desire. I am writing that it is not sentimental, but that does not mean that it is not romantic. It is very romantic. The idea of sexual passion overriding anything else in human relations is if anything a very romantic idea. It indicates that humans are more than rational calculating entities, but are liable to be seized by forces going well beyond themselves. At least this is how it

may be experienced, but the detached observer may simply discount it as a mere matter of hormones. Normally we do not condone murder, we find it awful and despicable, but the notion of a 'crime de passion' is of course a very romantic one, the idea being that people caught in a blind passion are indeed above the law. Presumably because they do not commit murder for petty personal reasons, but for transcendental ones, and that indeed they should be forgiven. And indeed one does not begrudge the couple their eventual reward in spite of the fact that Laurent turns out to be a rather unsavory character to whom passion seems secondary to the comforts of an easy life, in which passion may be the spice, but not the justification. Incidentally, the main protagonist is Laurent, Therese Raquin on the other hand appears more opaque to the reader. In that sense the title of the novel is misleading, on the other hand it is far more attractive to potential readers. Now the moral of the novel is that passion, however exciting and powerful, is ephemeral. This may not mean that it is insignificant, only that one has no claims on it, it is a gift only temporarily bestowed, just like happiness in general¹. The second moral is of course that the taboo against murder goes very deep. You may get away with it initially, as Laurent does, but the horrendousness of the act eventually catches up with you, and that indeed, the taboo against it may in the end be stronger than the sanction given to it by passion.

The novel is a psychological one, and in that sense it is unmistakably naturalistic, by making it the central concern, but that does not mean that it is realistic. As a reader you are struck by on one hand the callousness of Laurent, how he can play the cruel game just in front of Mme Raquin, and on the other hand his infantile sensitivity, of being afraid of ghosts. Also the reaction of Mme Raquin when she is paralyzed learning from the open discussion between Therese and Laurent that they actually plotted to kill her son, seems not really realistic. She would be crushed of course, but would she become crafty thinking of ways to convey what she just learned by overcoming by willpower alone her paralyzed state, if only temporarily, guided by a burning desire for revenge. Would there be the energy for that? It appears as a literary construction with little basis in the real world. But good literature is not mainly about truth but by suspending judgment, and as a narrative the novel is gripping enough.

November 9, 2019 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

¹ But of course passion is not the same thing as happiness which is more associated to tepid contentment than burning desire. But of course happiness is not the goal of life, which passion is there to remind you of.