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Romancing the Machine: American Naturalism in Transatlantic Context

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Abstract and Keywords

This article focuses on Émile Zola's influence on American naturalism. Zola's historical vision—a vision of the world as man-made and mechanical in its operation—is, together with the formal consequences of that vision, the unifying feature of naturalism in France, England, and America. In late nineteenth-century America, as in Second Empire France, a period of rapid industrialization marked a shift from a predominantly agrarian to a highly mechanized and urban culture. Industrialization and urbanization in America resulted in a tradition of literary naturalism that shared Zola's a vision of the world as man-made—an urban, industrial world where human beings are subjected to mechanisms they themselves have created.

Keywords: historical vision, Émile Zola, France, England, industrialization, urbanization

French Origins: The Problem of the “Experimental Novel”

Traditionally, critics of American naturalism have distanced the movement from its French antecedents. Founded and theorized by Émile Zola, European naturalism seems relevant to the American tradition to the extent that direct influence can be demonstrated, and though a writer like Frank Norris, signing himself the “Boy-Zola” (qtd. in McElrath and Crisler 380), obviously owes a debt to the French tradition, a similar allegiance cannot be shown for authors like Dreiser, Crane, Wharton, and others. Moreover, the fate of naturalism seems even more doubtful elsewhere in the English-speaking world. Smuggled across the Channel by George Moore in *A Modern Lover*

(1883), naturalism in Britain is generally thought to be a short-lived tradition at best. In 1887, Zola was denounced in the French press for the ostensible indecency of *La Terre*, and the appearance of an English translation of the same novel induced, despite expurgation, a fierce reaction against the corrupting influence of French fiction. Zola's English translator was prosecuted and imprisoned, and even Moore—the self-proclaimed “Zola ricochet”—beat a retreat. In America, Zola enjoyed a more moderate reputation for obscenity, but the available (p. 22) translations were arguably mutilated beyond recognition. Thus, though French naturalism can be shown to have been “imported” by specific writers, the foundational French tradition is often acknowledged as a precedent only to be discarded as an inadequate explanation of naturalism in England and America.

The problem of defining French influence is further complicated by the fact that Zola was the only truly successful and persistent naturalist in France. In 1880, he and five younger writers—Paul Alexis, Henri Céard, Léon Hennique, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Guy de Maupassant—collaborated on a joint volume of naturalist short stories, *Les Soirées de Médan*. Most of the “Medan group,” however, strayed from the naturalist fold in the mid-1880s, and when the French journalist Jules Huret asked in 1891 whether the movement was dead, the prognosis was unfavorable. Maupassant refused to discuss the matter; Céard asserted that it could not die because it had never existed; and Zola's own response—“perhaps”—was not particularly life-affirming. Only Alexis, in a famous telegram—“Naturalism not dead. Letter follows.”—defended the movement (407). Pointing to the seventy editions of Zola's most recent novel, and echoing Zola's theoretical pronouncements in *The Experimental Novel* (1880), Alexis described naturalism as the literature of the future—a “scientific” form of fiction, “a branching-out into the domain of literature of the broad general current which carries our age toward more science, more truth” (410). Naturalism would be the “literature of the twentieth century” (408), and if there was as yet no perfect naturalism—no literature of pure science—this was because “romanticism, whence we all came is still there, too near at hand. None of us has yet succeeded in purging his blood completely of the hereditary romantic virus” (410).

Posing romanticism as a “hereditary virus,” Alexis broached one of the most problematic elements of the genre—its persistent association with a romanticism it claims to eschew—in the naturalistic language of experimental medicine. In *The Experimental Novel*, Zola had aligned the naturalist novel with the experimental physiology of Claude Bernard, arguing that the naturalists do for literature what Bernard had done for medical science. By following a “scientific” or “experimental” method, Zola argued, the naturalist denounces imagination for “analysis,” produces a body of work free from “irrational and supernatural explanations” (54), and furnishes a literature capable of providing “human data” for the sciences themselves (53). In theory, then, the naturalist improves in documentary validity upon nineteenth-century realism, incorporates the scientific advancements of the day into the novel form, and purges what Alexis calls the “hereditary romantic virus.” In practice, however, Zola's inoculation against the “romantic virus” has been disputed since the appearance of *The Experimental Novel*. With the exception of Alexis and (less durably) Céard, little theoretical support was expressed even among

French naturalists for the idea of the “experimental novel” (Baguley 45), and Maupassant—voicing a common objection—contended that Zola, “son of the romantics, [is] a romantic himself in the way he deals with everything” (qtd. in Hemmings 88). Abroad, the verdict was similar: Frank Norris judged it a “strange perversion” that “Zola should be quoted as a realist, and as a realist of realists” (“Zola as a Romantic Writer” 168), and Thomas Hardy remarked that an insistence upon a “science of fiction” was, for (p. 23) “such a romancer as M. Zola, ... singular indeed” (“Science of Fiction” 107). Even George Moore, the “Zola ricochet,” embraced naturalist theory only to moderate his endorsement upon reflection. Receiving Zola’s ideas—“*Naturalisme, la vérité, la science*”—like a “violent blow on the head” (*Confessions* 72), he did not immediately recognize that “the very qualities which set [his] admiration a blaze wilder than wildfire [were] precisely those that had won the victory for the romantic school forty years before” (77). Only gradually did he realize that he was chiefly impressed by the aesthetic design of texts like *L’Assommoir*—“its pyramid size, strength, height, ... decorative grandeur, and ... the immense harmonic development of the idea” (*Confessions* 77).

Zola’s works are often described as feats of literary architecture, and the massive symmetries of novels like *L’Assommoir* (1877) disclose an overdetermined sense of narrative order that would seem, as numerous critics have remarked, “to make of *The Experimental Novel*’s more extreme denials of novelistic arrangement a grotesquely misleading account of [Zola’s] own practice” (Lethbridge, Introduction 7). “Pyramidal” in shape, *L’Assommoir* devotes six chapters to its heroine’s rise, one to her saint’s day, and six to her fall. The “arching narrative line” reinforces the tragic plot (Walker 35), just as the total number of chapters (thirteen) “exactly figures misfortune” (Pierre-Gnassounou 93). Yet the care with which Zola constructed the text is not necessarily incompatible with the “experimental” objectives of the novel. A story of congenital alcoholism among the Parisian working classes, the work shows Zola’s “scientific” preoccupation with the joint effects of physiology and environment and his obsession with documentary detail. Gervaise Coupeau, the heroine, is a laundress, and the operations of her trade are all minutely described. Likewise, her husband’s precarious work as a roofer is detailed methodically, and though his fall from the Parisian rooftops ultimately seems to take on the inevitability of predestination, the accident is not implausible in itself.

The narrative of Coupeau’s fall—“His body made a shallow arc ..., turning over twice, crashing on to the middle of the road with the dull thud of a bundle of linen flung from high up above” (115)—is given with a kind of documentary precision that coexists in strange harmony with its symbolic dimension. Tumbling like a “bundle of linen” (115), Coupeau becomes, both literally and figuratively, a burden for his laundress wife, and his fall precipitates a physiological decline that is at once a logical consequence of his accident and a capitulation of biblical magnitude. Coupeau’s father, also a roofer, died in a drunken fall, and Coupeau’s deterioration (he takes to drink during his convalescence) appears to affirm a hereditary or “original” sin. That this weakness will eventually extend to his wife is prefigured in the brandied plum (the bite of alcoholic fruit) over which Coupeau courts Gervaise in the *Assommoir*, and the influence of demon drink—realized in the figure of the *Assommoir*’s monstrous distilling apparatus—looms ominously from the

earliest chapters. The big machine, in its “endless coils of piping,” “weirdly-shaped containers,” and “big copper belly” (42), is itself rendered in a detail that shifts curiously between the factual and the mythological. The “subterranean rumbling [of the still], coming from deep within” (42), is both sufficiently documentary and suggestively symbolic. (p. 24) The process of distillation literally makes a rumbling noise, but it also figures the latent physiological weakness of the alcoholic, or—more mythically—the diabolical source of an inevitable capitulation. The “coils” of the still’s piping suggest the serpent, and its “lackluster copper surface” gradually bodies forth an alcoholic hell. By the end of the novel, “the shadow cast by the apparatus ... conjure[s] up obscene shapes, figures with tails, monsters opening wide their jaws as if to devour the world” (344).

In *L'Assommoir*, the enormous still gradually takes on the proportions of a demonic beast capable of transforming working-class Paris into an alcoholic underworld. As Peter Brooks puts it, the machine “is quite literally the energy source for the novel, and for the destructive dynamic of its characters’ lives” (*Body Work* 149). Yet the monster apparatus unleashes a force that is not only destructive for the characters of *L'Assommoir* but potentially disruptive to the narrative itself. The “scientific” objectives of the novel falter in the mythic rendering of the machine. In *The Experimental Novel*, Zola repeatedly asserts that the naturalist novel does away with the “irrational and supernatural explanations” (54) of imaginative literature, and though his mythic monster seems to emerge from the documentary language of his descriptions, that monster—embodying the “irrational” and “supernatural”—also conflicts with the declared objectives of the naturalist narrative. Indeed, the documentary mechanics of Zola’s narrative seem to collapse in the act of documentation: under the pressure of representing a specific reality—the force of an alcoholic proclivity—the still takes on demonic proportions, and the “trickle of crystal-clear alcohol” builds into a biblical flood, “a relentless spring which would eventually flood the bar-room, spill over the outer boulevards and inundate the vast pit that was Paris” (42). The mythic figure thus both describes and enacts a loss of control. Zola’s documentary impulse appears to succumb to its own mythological deluge, bursting under the pressure of documenting an uncontrollable force. In the representation of the diabolical still, the documentary yields to the imaginary, the rational gives way to the irrational, and the machine—agent and emblem of the “scientific” narrative itself—produces all the “irrational and supernatural” effects the “experimental” novel theoretically denounces.

Zola and the Monster Machine

Though the “scientific” objectives of the experimental novel appear to break down in the figure of *L'Assommoir*’s monstrous still, the problem is not unique to this novel. The distilling apparatus is only one of the earliest and simplest of Zola’s monster machines. As Peter Brooks has pointed out, Zola’s novels are typically “centered on a piece of social or industrial machinery, which almost always provides the energetic source of the

narrative" (*Body Work* 149)—and almost always (p. 25) bursts out of control. In *Germinal* (1885), the central machine is the mine, le Voreux, a "squatting god" feeding on the miners it is supposed to support. In *La Bête humaine* (1890), it is the railroad engine, a giant beast—its headlamp like "the living eye of a cyclops" (195)—that runs wild at the end of the novel. In *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883), it is the department store, a "machine working at high pressure" (16), a monstrous "system for consuming [the] women" (76) to whom it ostensibly ministers. The list goes on; in novel after novel, the machine runs rampant, destructive, out of control.

The out-of-control machines of Zola's fiction appear to contradict, with stunning inconsistency, the objectives expressed in *The Experimental Novel*. In theory, Zola looks forward to "a century in which [humankind], grown more powerful," will exploit its scientific knowledge "to penetrate the wherefore of things, to become superior to these things, and to reduce them to a condition of subservient machinery" (24). In the novels, however, Zola follows the science to a darker conclusion: there are no "subservient" machines. Rather, intended to subjugate the forces of nature, the machine masters its maker. The engine of *La Bête humaine*, built to ease human travel, stalls, crashes, and runs wild, finally grinding its own engineer to death under its wheels. The monstrous still of *L'Assommoir*, intended to moderate the hardships of working-class life, exploits the weaknesses it is supposed to relieve. The department store of *Au Bonheur* feeds on its consumers, exploiting the desires it is supposed to serve. The mine of *Germinal* swallows its starving miners, subjugating those it is meant to support. Humanity's subjection to material circumstances is recreated, by science, as subjection to its own machines. The figure of the monster—the "irrational" and "supernatural" rendering of the emblem of the "experimental" method—turns out to be a perfectly rational expression of a modern reality. Zola's mythic monsters are not the antithesis but the consequence of scientific development.

There is always some debate concerning the extent to which Zola, persistently affirming in theory the scientific developments he critiques in practice, was conscious of his own effects. Yet the monster machine, appearing in novel after novel, could hardly have been an accident of execution in every case. Rather, the solution—the reason for the apparent contradiction between Zola's theory and practice—seems to lie in the circumstances the monster represents. Just as the mythic quality of the machine seems to emerge naturally from the documentary language in which the apparatus is described, the mythic monsters of the *Rougon-Macquart* novels are natural, as it were, to Zola's documentation of a specific historical reality. The whole *Rougon-Macquart* sequence is devoted, as the subtitle of the series reminds us, to the "natural and social history" of a family under the Second Empire in France; yet the "nature" of life under Napoleon III was curiously artificial. The Second Empire saw a period of unprecedented industrial and urban development: in Paris, Baron Haussmann demolished the medieval city, cutting new boulevards straight through the old streets with huge engines; and in the provinces, canals and railways were expanded, making mechanized France "the center of Europe with six great railroad lines converging on the capital" (Lehan, *Realism* 20). Thus, in *Au* (p. 26) *Bonheur des Dames* and *L'Assommoir*, steam engines knock great holes in Paris,

and in *La Bête humaine*, Zola envisions France as a huge body organized by the railway—a “giant creature laid out on the ground with its head in Paris, its vertebrae the length of the track, its limbs stretching out with every branch-line, and its hands and feet in Le Havre and other destinations” (44). This body is not organic but mechanical, and the “great circulation of the railway line” (163) becomes the new lifeblood of the nation as the “natural” world is reorganized by the machine.

The result of the Second Empire in France was a shift from an agrarian to an industrial society—the advent of a man-made, mechanical order. This man-made world is fast and orderly; in *La Bête humaine*, “precision [is] allied to power” (146) in the engines that drive it. Yet such developments need not end in a ringing endorsement of technological progress: the threatening force of the natural world, ostensibly mastered by the machine, is inevitably reproduced by it in Zola’s novels. The world of the *Rougon-Macquart* is a world in which human beings are terrorized by mythic monsters and giant beasts, fatally vulnerable to brute forces—but a world in which these forces (demonic stills, cyclopean engines, god-like mines) are all man-made. Zola’s “scientific” novels confront a situation that science itself has created—a world in which machines, magnificent in their power, inevitably overwhelm their creators.

Critical opinion is divided on the value of such representations. On the one hand, Irving Howe recognizes in the monster machine a powerful rendering of a real historical problem: for Howe, the monster—a “force bursting out of the control of its creators”—is merely a “physical emblem of the impersonality of commodity production” (“Zola” 287). Liberation lies in the demystification of the machine, in the recognition that “not in mines or factories lie the sources of [human] troubles but in the historically determined relations between contending classes” (287). On the other hand, Georg Lukács criticizes Zola for the pessimistic determinism of his vision: naturalism, he argues, implies the impossibility of contending with historical conditions that humanity itself has created.

On Lukács’ side, Zola’s monster machines do appear to dramatize the futility of human opposition to man-made circumstances; even Zola himself seems unable to contain the force he has unleashed. In *Germinal*, “it is as if the novel itself collapses into the abyss along with the Voreux mine” (Mitterand 118), and in *La Bête humaine*, both the railway engine and the novel seem to “[go] off the rails” (Lethbridge, “Zola” 140). Succumbing to internal contradictions in their representation of the very technological developments on which they are modeled, Zola’s novels dramatize the failure of their own “scientific” objectives. Yet these “failures” may themselves finally serve a critical function. Yves Chevrel argues that Zola’s texts internalize social problems as narrative problems in order to expose and critique the very systems on which they are built, and Jennifer Fleissner contends that such narrative complicity is the necessary condition of a social critique: “It is only by witnessing our failure to imagine a way out of a system that we are ever able to recognize that system as system, as that which places boundaries around what can presently be achieved” (49). Zola’s novels, built on and powered by (p. 27)

machines they represent as monstrous, expose a system from which they cannot themselves escape.

Man-Made Monsters in England and America

Zola's historical vision—a vision of the world as man-made and mechanical in its operation—is, together with the formal consequences of that vision, the unifying feature of naturalism in France, England, and America. In late nineteenth-century America, as in Second Empire France, a period of rapid industrialization marked a shift from a predominantly agrarian to a highly mechanized and urban culture. As Richard Lehan has observed, “the aftermath of the Civil War in America paralleled the kind of historical change taking place in France between 1848 and 1870, as both economies moved from a landed to a commercial/industrial world” (“European Background” 62). Between the Civil War and the turn of the century, the U.S. population nearly tripled; cities grew rapidly; agriculture was mechanized; manufacturing accelerated; and national production octupled (Howard 31). At the same time, the railroad and communications technologies expanded swiftly, transforming the American continent. In 1883, clock time was standardized by the railways, which established the time zones we use today, and in 1890 the U.S. Census declared the American frontier closed (Howard 32–33; Marx 340). A rural, agrarian nation—a continent that still seemed partly wild at the end of the Civil War—was transformed into a predominantly urban, industrial one.

As in France, industrialization and urbanization in America resulted in a tradition of literary naturalism—a series of fictions which, whether or not directly influenced by Zola, share with him a specific historical vision. Though Theodore Dreiser insisted that he never read Zola, and Stephen Crane claimed to find his works “tiresome” (qtd. in Link 6), Zola's outlook is mirrored in the “superhuman” allure of the city in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), the oppressive industrial slums of Stephen Crane's New York novellas, and the monster machines—runaway engines, “mammoth” harvesters, “insatiable” mines—of Frank Norris's California novels. The American naturalists share with Zola a vision of the world as man-made—an urban, industrial world where human beings are subjected to mechanisms they themselves have created. In Crane's *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893), “[w]ithered persons” sit smoking in the corners of a hellish tenement, “in curious submission” (7) to a slum that, made by human beings, is inescapable for its inhabitants. In Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, the city is gorgeous in its artifice, magnifying in its “cunning wiles” the myriad temptations of “the infinitely smaller and more human tempter” (1) who composes but does not control it. And in Norris, the monster machine reproduces the threat of the natural world it is intended to conquer or contain: in *The Octopus* (1901), the railroad engine takes on the proportions of a natural monster—it is “the (p. 28) leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus” (51).

In England, a similar apprehension is distinguishable among the writers most frequently classed as naturalist. Commemorating the plight of the Victorian writer in *New Grub Street* (1891), George Gissing represents the literary world as a vast machine—a man-made mechanism impervious to the hardships of the individual creator. George Moore’s provincial heroine in *A Mummer’s Wife* (1885) seeks (unsuccessfully) to escape a life that works “like a colliery, every wheel ... turning, no respite day or night” (52). And Thomas Hardy, looking back to the period that gave rise to Gissing’s urban machinery and Moore’s industrial provinces, sets his novels in the causal moment—we might say the naturalist moment—in English history. Leading the Industrial Revolution, Britain was the first to produce the conditions hospitable for naturalist fiction, and though it is often said to have no tradition of literary naturalism—the prosecution of Zola’s English translator made writing naturalist novels “a risky business” (Brooks, *Realist Vision* 12)—the historical vision that unites the French and American naturalists was by no means lost upon the English. Indeed, though Hardy criticized Zola’s “science of fiction,” we see in his works the belated realization of the genre England itself produced: in the backward-looking “Wessex” novels, we encounter the historical genesis of the monster machine.

The odd archaism of Hardy’s novels—the name “Wessex” is derived from that of an ancient Saxon kingdom—looks back to the moment of England’s transformation from a traditional, agrarian society into a modern, mechanized one. In *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), the “steam feeler” (251) of Norris’s Octopus is just advancing into the preindustrial world it will inevitably destroy, and in the *Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), the market town of Casterbridge—teetering on the edge of industrial modernity—is astonished by the sudden advent of a mechanical monster:

It was the new-fashioned agricultural implement called a horse-drill, till then unknown ... in this part of the country.... The machine was painted in bright hues of green, yellow, red, and it resembled as a whole a compound of hornet, grasshopper, and shrimp, magnified enormously. (127)

Though merely a horse-drawn mechanism, the machine creates “about as much sensation in the cornmarket as a flying machine would create at Charing Cross” (127), and—in its Frankensteinian combination of “hornet, grasshopper, and shrimp, magnified enormously”—a violation of the natural order. Arguably, Hardy’s contraption pales in comparison to the monster machines of Norris and Zola—and yet, with an over-determination to rival Zola’s, it represents a force of modernization that organizes the tragic course of the entire novel.

The title character of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*—a prosperous, old-fashioned grain merchant named Henchard—is obliquely responsible for the introduction of the “new-fashioned” (127) seeding machine. The seeder is imported by his manager, the modernizing Farfrae, and though both Farfrae and the machine promise to contribute to Henchard’s prosperity, they initiate his inevitable decline. Henchard and (p. 29) Farfrae fall out, Farfrae sets up in business as his competitor, and soon—by dint of modern methods and new-fashioned machines—edges him out of economic prosperity and social position. Further, at the moment of Henchard’s economic downfall, news of an old sin is publicly revealed. The news seals his fate, and though critics typically complain that

Hardy “overplots” the novel at this point—that he “rel[ies] too heavily upon mechanical devices” (Howe, *Thomas Hardy* 90)—the “machinery” of the plot has a curiously literal dimension. The mechanical plot is, after all, inextricably linked to the operation of real machines. Like Zola’s monstrous contraptions, the monster seeder in Casterbridge market is both the emblem and agent of Henchard’s decline. Like the old agrarian industry he represents, Henchard is doomed to inevitable destruction by the mechanisms he himself has introduced. Where the novel seems contrived, the contrivances point to the overwhelming force of mechanization; the narrative “devices” are attuned to the mechanical operation of the new, man-made world.

Like Zola’s novels, formally determined by the mechanical forces they represent, Hardy’s *Mayor of Casterbridge* expresses the historical problem of mechanization as a narrative problem. Ironically, his “mechanical” determinism often leads critics to exclude him from the company of other naturalists. Richard Lehan, for example, observes a “cosmic” force at work against Hardy’s characters—a force in excess of more plausible (environmental or hereditary) forms of naturalist determinism (*Realism* 168). However, Hardy not only fits the naturalist mold but illuminates the critical features of the genre. Tracing the problem of mechanization back to its original moment in English history, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* links the shift from an agrarian to an industrial world to the production of a monster machine—and this machine, organizing the course of the novel as inexorably as it organized the course of history itself, exposes the monstrosity of the historical process of mechanization. In a sense, Hardy sacrifices his novel to indict the operations of the machine. His realism, becoming as “mechanical” as the machines it represents, appears to break down in its depiction of the operations of the monster. Yet such, it appears, is the price of the naturalist vision: like Zola’s narratives, Hardy’s novel is both defined and deformed by its submission to the mechanisms it indicts.

Frank Norris and the Monster Machine

The formal problems associated with French and English naturalism crop up in the American tradition also. As Eric Link puts it, “For many years, a theme running through accounts of late-nineteenth-century American literature has been that [the naturalists] wrote ‘flawed’ narratives—fiction that is often labeled ‘powerful’ though less than masterful, if not downright inartistic” (22). It remains to determine whether the “flaws” of the American naturalists devolve, as in France and England, from the representation of the mechanized, man-made world—but the indications (p. 30) seem to affirm it. Significantly, the American writer most influenced by Zola, and most faithful to Zola’s vision, is also usually considered the least “masterful.” Frank Norris, more than any other American naturalist, has attracted critical attention for aesthetic imperfection—but this reputation appears to derive, like Zola’s and Hardy’s, from the representation of a monster machine.

Like Zola's, Norris's narratives are typically organized around a monster machine and appear to run wild in the rendering of a mechanism that has itself burst out of control. Most famously, in *The Octopus*, a railroad engine plows through a helpless flock of sheep, and the only witness—horrified by the “all but human distress” of the slaughtered animals, and the “brute agony he could not relieve” (50)—apprehends the man-made engine as a mythic monster:

Faint and prolonged, across the levels of the ranch, [Presley] heard the engine whistling for Bonneville. Again and again, at rapid intervals in its flying course, it whistled for road crossings, for sharp curves, for trestles; ominous notes, hoarse, bellowing, ringing with the accents of menace and defiance; and abruptly Presley saw again, in his imagination, the galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam, with its single eye, cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon, but saw it now as the symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path; the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus. (51)

Here, simple referential language (whistles, road crossings, curves, and trestles) is transformed by a series of progressive substitutions; the machine is swiftly magnified into a superhuman force. Taking on the “hoarse” and “bellowing” tones of an enormous beast, the “ominous” whistle acquires the volitional note of “menace and defiance,” until Presley “abruptly” apprehends the machine as a mythic monster. “Scientific” language gives way to the “imaginary” as Presley “sees again ... the galloping monster, ... leaving blood and destruction in its path.” Exceeding documentary figuration, the engine becomes a “symbol” of overwhelming power, and the mythic terms pile up in a way that captures Presley's acute horror at the cost of expressive focus. The engine is not just the Cyclops, but the Leviathan, Colossus, Octopus—Presley's rhetorical precision collapses in the face of a power that, built by human beings, is beyond human control.

In Norris's novels, as in Zola's, the mythic magnification of the machine captures, with figurative authenticity, the horror of the man-made world. Yet it also tends to “naturalize” a set of man-made circumstances—to represent as natural, and thus potentially inalterable, the systems it figures as monstrous. In *The Octopus*, Presley is bestirred to acts of socialism and anarchism in opposition to the Railroad but is inevitably defeated by circumstances beyond his control. His socialistic poem, “The Toilers,” is wildly successful, appropriated by the market forces it was intended to expose; his attempt to blow up the railroad agent, S. Behrman, is wildly unsuccessful, demolishing everything but the target himself; and his confrontation with the railroad boss, Shelgrim, ends in a discussion of a corrupt economic logic that appears, to Presley, irrefutable. Shelgrim denies responsibility for the depredations (p. 31) of the Railroad on the grounds that it is a fact of life, a force of nature: asserting that “Railroads build themselves” and “Wheat grows itself” in obedience to a “natural” force of supply and demand, Shelgrim insists that Presley “Blame conditions, not men” (576). Shelgrim's speech is an obvious mystification—a willful occlusion of the human source of the “conditions” he describes. Yet it strikes

Presley “with the clear reverberation of truth” (576), and appears to be confirmed by his subsequent experience. Unable to intervene in the operations of the Railroad, Presley is ultimately consoled by the powers that have crushed him:

But the WHEAT remained. Untouched, unassailable, undefiled, that mighty world-force, that nourisher of nations, ... indifferent to the human swarm, gigantic, resistless, moved onward in its appointed groove.... The individual suffers, but the race goes on.... The larger view always and through all shams, all wickedness, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good. (651–52; emphasis in original)

Exhausted by his contest with the Railroad, prostrated by the futility of his fight and grief for his friends, Presley ends up singing the praises of the forces that have crushed him.

The conclusion to *The Octopus* is oddly dissonant; the ending of the novel appears to extol the very mechanisms the narrative indicts in the figure of the monster machine. Yet that powerful, critical image of the man-made world—the monstrous Octopus—also produces the logic to which the narrative adheres. At once horrifying and resistless—a destructive force against which individuals are powerless—the machine necessarily determines the triumph of the Railroad and futility of Presley’s opposition. This is not to say, however, that the “truth” Presley appears to discover in the final passages is any more reliable than the self-justifying “conditions” Shelgrim points to in the offices of the Railroad. Though the death of S. Behrman (swallowed by his own wheat in the hold of the ship that will carry Presley to India) appears to dole out appropriate comeuppances, the “force” that overwhelms him is morally neutral at best, and Behrman’s own manipulation of that force ensures that it is not, as Presley thinks, “untouched, unassailable, undefiled.” (The “undefiled” wheat is necessarily sullied by the corpse it has produced.) Further, though the optimism with which *The Octopus* ends appears to be Presley’s, the closing passage is inflected by the tone and sentiments of a far less reliable character. Shortly before boarding the wheat ship, Presley takes leave of Vanamee, the mystical shepherd who insists that “Evil is short-lived.... The whole is, in the end, perfect” (636). Thus, it is Vanamee’s perspective that is echoed in Presley’s closing reflection—and the echo casts doubt upon the narrative’s apparent endorsements. At the beginning of the novel, it is Vanamee’s carelessness that sets the Railroad plot in motion (the sheep the railroad engine runs down are Vanamee’s sheep, allowed to stray across the tracks), and the soundness of his perspective is emphatically called into question by the subplot he dominates in *The Octopus*.

The “allegorical side of the wheat subject” (qtd. in McElrath and Crisler 352), the Vanamee subplot involves the shepherd’s successful attempt to summon his (p. 32) dead love, Angéle, from the obscurity of a seed ranch. As we know from Norris’s notes for the novel, “Angéle is the wheat” (qtd. in Seltzer 33), and her resurrection—coincident with the sprouting of the crop—is apparently intended to align her “corruption” (the victim of rape, she died in childbirth) with the natural cycle whereby the death of one body nourishes the life of another. Yet Angéle, like the wheat, obeys “natural” forces that are emphatically unnatural, and man-made. Emerging from the “seed” ranch, she not only

appears to be the product of asexual, masculine reproduction but embodies a kind of parody of the “natural” law of supply and demand: just as the wheat in *The Octopus* ostensibly moves—sprouts, grows, harvests, ships—in “resistless” obedience to this natural law, Angéle responds (unconsciously—asleep) to Vanamee’s need. Supply, in other words, answers demand; Vanamee wishes, and Angéle appears. Thus, while Angéle ostensibly demonstrates that life comes out of death and good comes out of evil, this endorsement exposes its own perversity. Angéle is not miraculously summoned from Vanamee’s desire, but is rather—quite horribly—the product of her mother’s rape. Her restitution depends upon her mother’s violation, and this violation is repeated in the conditions of Vanamee’s newfound happiness: “Angéle or Angéle’s daughter, it was all one with him” (392). Like the wheat she stands for, Angéle is essentially a commodity—an object subservient, like her mother, to the brute force of (masculine) demand. The whole Vanamee “romance” is based upon an appalling corruption, and though there appears to be no one to blame for it (Angéle’s rapist, the mysterious “Other,” is never located), the horror is nonetheless man-made—produced and perpetuated by the men it benefits. The entire subplot thus exposes the fatuity of the economic “truths” it appears to endorse: good comes out of evil; Railroads build themselves; wheat grows itself; “blame conditions, not men.”

Unromantic Machines

In Norris’s *Octopus*, the figure of the monster machine—a powerful rendering of a man-made force that exceeds human control—seems to “naturalize” the artificial systems it seeks to critique, involving the novel in a form of social and economic determinism that ultimately appears to endorse the operations of the monster. Yet the narrative’s formal dissonances draw attention to the human source of its monstrous operations, tracing the impersonal action of its “natural” laws to their origin in human corruption. Like Zola’s and Hardy’s novels, Norris’s *Octopus* reproduces—and thus indicts—the mechanical operations of the man-made system it apprehends as monstrous. Not all naturalist novels, however, internalize the problem in this way. Although the figure of the monster machine connects Norris, Hardy, and Zola, one might sketch a more “respectable,” less “faulty” tradition of literary naturalism in the works of such writers as Gissing, Dreiser, Wharton, and Crane. Like Norris and Hardy, these writers confront a man-made world—a world in which (p. 33) social and economic systems operate with the impervious tenacity of a machine. Their machines, however, are merely machines, unmiraculous in their brutality.

While *The Octopus* dramatizes the perversity of man-made systems through a Vanamee-style celebration of female objectification, Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, Crane’s *Maggie*, *A Girl of the Streets*, Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* (1905), and Gissing’s *New Grub Street* demonstrate the economics of objectification quite directly: Carrie, in the Chicago shoe factory, is subjected to the “humdrum, mechanical movement of [a] machine” (28) that is totally devoid—apart from its “eternal” imposition of a single mechanical task (29)—of

mystical qualities. Maggie looks upon the older women in the collar and cuff factory as “mere mechanical contrivances sewing seams” (35), finding nothing romantic or miraculous in their exploitation or her own. Wharton’s Lily Bart confronts the material conditions of her own social refinement in the milliner’s shop, her “creation of ever-varied settings for the face of fortunate womanhood” (219) demystifying the glamour to which she ostensibly ministers. And Gissing’s Marian Yule considers herself “not a woman, but a mere machine for reading and writing” (137). The only mythic machine in the novel is a phantom of her desire for release from literary manufacture:

[H]er startled eye had caught an advertisement in the newspaper, headed “Literary Machine”; had it then been invented at last, some automaton to supply the place of such poor creatures as herself, to turn out books and articles? Alas! the machine was only one for holding volumes conveniently, that the work of literary manufacture might be physically lightened. (138)

Marian’s miraculous machine is merely a ruse, a device to aid in the perpetuation of her labors. There is no escape from the mechanism she serves.

In *The Octopus*, Angèle’s sexual objectification—her status as an interchangeable love object—represents the invidious operations of man-made social and economic forces. In the less “romantic” naturalist novels, objectification is traced more methodically to its causes: it is both the alternative and the result of factory work. Maggie “beg[in]s to see the bloom upon her cheeks as valuable” (35), trading on her looks instead of her labors. Carrie nominally escapes the machine when she accepts Drouet’s “two soft, green, handsome ten-dollar bills” (47), turning herself into a salable object to elude a harder subjection in the factory. Lily, unfitted for the physical hardship of millinery, and unwilling to sell herself into a profitable marriage, resolves the problem in an overdose of chloral. And Marian, aware that she is only purchasing an escape from her labors in her engagement to Jasper Milvain, loses both when her inheritance falls through. The women in these novels never escape the tyranny of the machine; rather, their physical subjection is both reproduced and reinforced by the conditions of their supposed liberation. There are no mechanical monsters; instead, monstrosity is a quality of their social condition—a quality of the man-made environment—which operates with the unrelenting tenacity of the machine.

In naturalist novels without monster machines, the mythic tyranny of the man-made world is generalized, attaching to the social mechanism that controls (p. 34) individual fates. Crane’s Maggie escapes from the monotonous life of the factory only to be trapped in an industrial hell; she dies in a “gloomy distric[t]” where the “tall black factories shut in the street” (77). Dreiser’s Carrie, selling herself from the shoe factory to the stage, is irresistibly attracted to the vast glitter of a “superhuman” city impervious to the individuals it ensnares. Wharton’s Lily, “chain[ed] to her fate” by the links of her bracelet (8), is fatally constrained by the organization of her own genteel society. And Gissing’s Marian—like Lily, a “victim of the civilization which had produced her” (8)—is trapped in

the British Library, a Dantescan hell where readers sit immobilized by the “great circle of the Catalogue,” or wander “in an eternity of vain research along endless shelves” (138).

In these novels, the monstrosity of the man-made world is not—especially in comparison to the apparent excesses of Norris, Hardy, or Zola—noticeably ugly or narratively infelicitous. There is something grimly impressive in Crane’s description of Maggie’s fate, and Dreiser’s city is simultaneously a monstrous threat and a gorgeous spectacle. The “sense of [Carrie’s] helplessness amid so much evidence of power and force” coexists with an impression of urban magnificence, “all wonderful, all vast” (13). Yet aesthetic beauty, in these works, is itself relentlessly exposed as a mechanical production. In Carrie’s shoe factory, Maggie’s collar-and-cuff factory, and Lily’s millinery, the narrative calls attention to the mechanical conditions of the aesthetic object—and to the mechanical conditions of the narrative (as aesthetic object) itself. *Sister Carrie* depends for some of its most powerful aesthetic effects on the system of exploitation it exposes; *New Grub Street* represents, in a work of literary manufacture, literature itself as an industrial product; and *Maggie*, following its heroine’s fate from the factory to the industrial swamp, connects story-telling to the man-made mechanism it condemns. Like the women in the collar-and-cuff factory, “grinding out ... tales of imagined or real girlhood happiness” (35) together with their manufactures, the narrative grinds out a tragic story, obedient to the inexorable logic of the machine. These novels, no less than the more “faulty” works of Norris, Hardy, and Zola, are formally determined by the machines they condemn.

Transfixed by the horror—or the terrible beauty—of the man-made world, the naturalist novel reproduces the operations of a mechanism it cannot both escape and expose. The result is a form of narrative monstrosity—a form of collusion with the brutal machine. Often, this monstrosity is expressed as a “defect”: In Zola’s novels, the narrative appears to collapse under the pressure of representing a force that is itself beyond human control; in Hardy, the whole novel creaks under the pressure of inflexible “devices”; and in Norris, the text appears to endorse a system it simultaneously exposes as corrupt and perverse. Yet these “defects” are themselves representative and constitute a unique critical integrity: the failures of narrative mastery reproduce the failure of rational mastery—the failure to control a force humanity itself has created—embodied in the figure of the monster machine. In the less “faulty” fictions, the machines are comparatively unmiraculous. Yet these narratives also reproduce, with ruthless plausibility, a world organized and driven by mechanical forces. Determined by the very machines they condemn, and exposing (p. 35) their own aesthetics as machine-made, these novels draw attention to their inevitable complicity in the man-made mechanisms they deplore.

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