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In it together, in Zola?: Empathic Encounters in Naturalist Fiction

Research in empathy studies has been nourishing debate in the humanities and in the public forum over the past thirty years; critical inquiry in this interdisciplinary area has gained millennial momentum as part of the return to more humanist-inspired approaches across the academy and beyond. It is an article of faith that the arts and culture, in any era, offer a space where empathy may be nurtured, shared, and rewarded. A human gesture captured by a painter or a sculptor, the consolatory movement of a symphony, or the beneficent action of a character in literature can proffer, for us to replicate in our own lives, the value of empathy: we are moved by the Virgin Mary's attitude of compassion and care in Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1498–99), just as our fellow feeling for the exiled and displaced – *Einfühlung* ['feeling with' in German] – is stirred by the visionary power of Baudelaire's 'Le Cygne'. The cellist Yo Yo Ma has spoken of the power of Bach's cello suites to 'create shared meaning' across borders of time and space, and thus enhance the quality of civic exchange.¹ Works of art and cultural invention can elicit active responses, with, sometimes, transformative effect. At the very least, such works may have the potential, however fleeting, to inspire positive smaller-scale actions in the viewer, the reader, or the listener.

It can be instructive to reflect on the *nature* of the empathy that art works and literature elicit, or solicit, from us, as well as the quality of empathy. Through our encounter with Boule de Suif in Maupassant's eponymous tale of the good-hearted, self-abnegating young prostitute (1880) or with Jude in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), we grow more alert to questions of exclusion and belonging (person–group empathy); through our engagement with films from *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) (socio-economic empathy) to *Watership Down* (1978, 2018) (animal–human empathy), we are drawn into the experience of anguish, fear, resilience, and solidarity. We gain a keener sense of suffering through Manet's portrait of alienation in *Un bar aux Folies-Bergère* (1882) (existential empathy); and, through Giorgio Morandi's study of 'quiet' everyday objects, we learn to care for the small, unremarkable things that reward slower acts of attention (subject–object empathy).

The work of the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, in the area of cultural advocacy, has encouraged us to appreciate the value – and the values – of

¹ The Karl Taylor Compton Lecture, 19 March 2018, MIT (<http://news.mit.edu/2018/compton-lecture-yo-yo-ma-culture-action-build-better-world-0320>, accessed 27 December 2018).

literature and storytelling as a force for empathy. Central to Nussbaum's work is the ethos of capability: the idea that human individuals are empowered when they can develop their full capacity for empathy with the other.² Guided by a profound concern for social and political justice, Nussbaum argues that the encounter with the arts and, in particular, with literature, plays a fundamental part in the sustaining of a healthy democracy and in creating a more empathic society.³

In narrative studies, the work of Suzanne Keen has been influential in making us reflect on the capacity of novels to enhance readers' empathy.⁴ That means, in the first instance, distinguishing between 'empathy' and 'sympathy', values that are proximate, but also fundamentally different in their scope and reach.⁵ Empathy, for psychologists, is our capacity to imagine ourselves in another's situation, whereas sympathy is the articulation of pity and compassionate feeling. So, empathy implies our active projection into the position or plight of the other; it involves a strong identification with the other person's suffering. (I use the term 'plight', knowingly, because empathy is usually a response to aversive experiences, perhaps because these resonate more acutely and more deeply with us, than other people's experience of joy and celebration.) Excess empathy, however, may lead us to turn away from the person suffering because their plight and our over-projection incapacitate us emotionally, making us too distressed to act effectively.⁶ More constructively, empathy can develop into 'mature sympathy' (Keen's term), which prevents over-identification with the sufferer and thus preserves our cognitive and affective ability to offer enabling support to the sufferer.⁷

Keen's concern is with empathic capacity and popular fiction, but does 'more difficult' literature present other, enhanced possibilities for empathy? This question is explored by social scientists David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano in 'Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of

² Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Harvard University Press, 2013).

³ Nussbaum explores the benefits of empathy in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁴ Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford University Press, 2007), proposes a series of hypotheses that can offer a springboard to further research in this field. See the Appendix.

⁵ Suzanne Keen, 'A Theory of Narrative Empathy', *Narrative*, vol. 14, no. 3, October 2006, 207–236 (pp. 208–09).

⁶ 'Empathy that leads to sympathy is by definition other-directed, whereas an over-aroused empathic response that creates personal distress (self-oriented and aversive) causes a turning-away from the provocative condition of the other' (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 208).

⁷ Keen, 'A Theory of Narrative Empathy', p. 214.

Mind’ in the journal *Science* (2013). Kidd and Castano argue that challenging works of literature enable this more empathic disposition because they assist readers *actively* – intellectually and imaginatively – to recreate the situations and dilemmas of complex fictional characters.⁸ Drawing on Barthes’s distinction between ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ literature, Kidd and Castano contend that writerly literature, precisely because of its qualities of openness and indeterminacy and its power to trouble categories, guides readers in productive acts of empathic envisioning.

Mary-Catherine Harrison, in ‘The Paradox of Fiction and the Ethics of Empathy: Reconceiving Dickens’s Realism’, makes the case for Victorian fiction as a privileged site of empathy: social groups and the individuals who belong to them are placed under extreme pressure in historical contexts that we come to recognize and to understand, however partially and imperfectly.⁹ In this, Harrison takes issue with Suzanne Keen’s scepticism about the ultimate ‘real-world’ ethical benefits of reading, whilst resisting the idea that the experience of developing empathy for fictional characters *necessarily* makes us better people and produces more enlightened citizens. Harrison engages with the paradox whereby we know that fictional characters are without material reality, yet their plight speaks to us, moves us, and may, at least occasionally, prompt us to ‘real world’ empathic action.

The Risks of Empathy

Our default assumption – and it is reflected in the developing line of this article – is to identify empathy as a positive disposition or attribute. Myths and their adaptations across time hold up visions of empathy and its denial; they reveal the risks that attend empathy, notably the failure to appreciate how things might be for others. In immediate and directly impactful ways, painting can expose us to the failure of empathy where counter-models (forms of antipathy) are represented. Adam Elsheimer’s *Ceres and Stelio* (c. 1605), inspired by a tale from Ovid, represents the lack of empathy shown by the young boy Stelio, to the desperate Ceres as she searches for her abducted daughter Persephone. Ceres stops, at night, at the home of Hecuba to seek water. There, Stelio mocks her thirsty gulping of the water, and

⁸ David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, ‘Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind’, *Science*, 18 October 2013, vol. 342, 377–80.

⁹ Mary-Catherine Harrison, ‘The Paradox of Fiction and the Ethics of Empathy: Reconceiving Dickens’s Realism’, *Narrative*, vol. 16, no. 3, October 2008, 256–78.

Ceres responds by turning him into a snake: the boy is punished for his scandalous lack of empathy with the distraught mother and for his failure to respect, far less replicate, the empathic attitude of the elderly Hecuba.

Empathy, normatively, is judged to be a good, a value to be protected, but it can also produce less beneficial responses to the experience or the suffering of another. The psychologist Paul Bloom writes *against* empathy for we empathize, often unthinkingly or unconsciously, with those for whom we have an acute sense of shared feeling, because they reflect us back to ourselves.¹⁰ Bloom argues that, by engaging in unthinking acts of empathy, we risk making unreasonable excuses, and endorsing morally indefensible actions. Bloom challenges us to think more deeply about the scope and the limits of empathy; he asks us to move beyond the everyday proposition ‘empathy is good, lack of empathy is bad’. Too much empathy, or the wrong kind of empathy might be a bad thing – just as bad as insufficient or inadequate empathy. For Bloom, only ‘rational compassion’, founded on lucidity rather than emotion, can generate world-changing benefits.

When I first began thinking about empathy and the tensions and equivocations it generates, a legal case reported in the British media highlighted the kind of problems empathy can encounter, and exposed the cultural, social, and political ‘ground’ on which empathic responses are formed. At the centre of the legal case was a brilliant university student who had committed a grievous assault on her partner.¹¹ The guilty young woman’s predicament stirred the empathy of the trial judge, who determined that the standard prison sentence would be too harsh, too prejudicial, for her. The judge’s decision exposed, starkly, the risks that arise when empathy relies on perceived affinities between self and other: the judge had identified the young woman as ‘highly educated’ (cultural empathy); she was upper middle-class (socio-economic empathy); she was an intending medical doctor (professional-class empathy). Other forms of empathy may also have been in play, related to physiognomy (characteristics of beauty and age) and assumptions about social and personal ‘refinement’. Empathy, which tends to be focused on the individual and his or her experience of adversity, may produce responses that over-invest in a particular individual at the expense of the wider social group or the social good, producing inequalities of treatment and outcomes, and even, in extremis, imperilling the ends of justice itself. Empathy shapes our responses and can also distort those responses. Empathy can, thus, be a solipsistic, even narcissistic act: the one

¹⁰ Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (Bodley Head, 2016).

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-41389520> [consulted 16 December 2018].

I empathize with reminds me of myself, and, as I wish to protect myself and defend my own interests, so I feel empathy for my ‘semblable’. It is the purpose of challenging literature not to gratify our pretensions to empathic understanding, but, instead, to expose those pretensions and strip them bare: Baudelaire (and T.S. Eliot after him) dares to remind us of this when he writes ‘Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère’ (‘Au lecteur’, *Les Fleurs du mal*).

Empathy and Zola’s Fiction

Nineteenth-century fiction is a rich store of potential lessons in empathy, from Dickens and George Eliot to Hardy and Hawthorne in the English-speaking world. What makes this so? Certainly, fictional characters and the themes they weave may touch us; their predicaments may affect us deeply. Is there a *style* of writing that stirs and shapes empathy? The realist novel in English and American literature nourishes empathic sensibility, but this question remains underexplored in French Realism and Naturalism studies. So, what of Zola’s fiction and empathy?

Brian Nelson has reflected on the qualities of style that elicit empathic responses in Zola’s readers, specifically. Nelson underscores the novelist’s mastery of the lexis and the inflections of vernacular language, and his gift for deepening our engagement with the subjectivities of fictional characters:

[Zola’s use of] free indirect style [and] his brilliant ability to capture popular speech patterns, even when writing indirectly, reflect his powers of empathy [and] capacity for evoking the workers’ own vision of the world. [This] also has significant ideological implications [for] the reader is brought into more direct and authentic contact with the characters and their culture, their attitudes and values.¹²

Equipped with a sense of the scope and the limits of empathy, its capacity for good and its attendant risks, we can turn to consider how empathy works – or might work – in three narrative instances where Zola explores the complexities of empathy and where, as readers, we may find ourselves drawn into the sometimes paradoxical, often unsettling experience of empathizing with a fictional character or exploring the empathic work of characters themselves: *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), *L’Assommoir* (1877), and *La Joie de vivre* (1884).

¹² Brian Nelson, *The Cambridge Introduction to French Literature*, p. 136.

Empathic Paradox: *Thérèse Raquin* (1867)

If a capacity for understanding others, and for sharing their experience vicariously and projectively (through acts of remembering or imagining) is the base-line definition of ‘empathy’, these conditions would appear *not* to be met in one of Zola’s earliest novels, *Thérèse Raquin* (1867).¹³

Thérèse Raquin is an accomplice to murder; she is guilty of deception and cruelty; she is complicit in perverting the course of justice. Yet, Zola has created a character with whom modern readers, paradoxically, empathize. My experience of exploring this novel with undergraduate students (male and female) suggests that, notwithstanding the melodramatic plot-line, Zola achieves a nuanced exploration of human values that is conducive to the stirring of empathy. Such readers tend to express feelings of compassion and understanding towards Thérèse: their response draws on a keen sense of women’s historical constraint and is nourished by a belief in individual freedom as a right for all. I shall call this ‘contextual empathy’: the reader’s own cultural situation, horizon of expectations, and personal circumstances lead her or him to empathize with another whose experience is shaped in a wholly different context, be it social, cultural, or historical.

How does empathy for the protagonist develop in the reading of *Thérèse Raquin*? The narrative atmosphere (physical and affective) and the dysfunctional personalities of others with whom the protagonist interacts and who constrain her are, in important ways, conducive to an empathic reading. The reader is confronted with visions of Thérèse’s emotional repression and her social isolation; her limited and impoverished opportunities for interpersonal connection (‘les amis du jeudi’); her entrapment in patriarchy (and to a considerable extent in the matriarchy of Madame Raquin *mère*). At the same time, we feel a sense of shock at the plotting and execution of Camille’s murder, the betrayal of the elderly mother’s trust, the wilful outwitting of justice, the physical and mental cruelty that ensues, and the irony that the law never punishes the culprits. So, our capacity for empathy is in constant tension with our natural antipathy towards betrayal, cynicism, and violence. Here, the argument of Kidd and Castano, which pertains to ‘serious fiction’ (as opposed to the two-dimensional forms of popular fiction), can assist us. Kidd and Castano stress that, as readers, we are immune to the consequences that such immoral, cruel, and socially harmful actions would have in the real world. Literary fiction provides us with a

¹³ Page references to *Thérèse Raquin* are to the following edition: *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Henri Mitterand (Cercle du Livre Précieux), hereafter abbreviated to OC, followed by volume and page numbers.

space, in other words, in which we can speculate, create, imagine, and free ourselves of the juridical constraints or social expectations that exist in our everyday lives.

In suggesting that readers today more generally empathize with Thérèse than audiences did in 1867 when the novel first appeared, I am countering Suzanne Keen's proposition that 'some novels may only activate the empathy of their first, immediate audience'.¹⁴ Indeed, many of Zola's first readers blasted the novel, the novelist, and his fictional characters, and clearly found antipathy to be the only appropriate response. For some critics, the novel was steeped in vice, setting a morally repugnant example of how to behave in society. For the scandalized 'Ferragus' (Louis Ulbach), writing in *Le Figaro* (23 January 1868), the book was a sticky, repulsive mess ("une flaque de boue et de sang").

Some readers have reflected on the equivocation that Zola's writing nourishes for the late-modern reader. For Andrew Rothwell, translating *Thérèse Raquin*, the novel places the reader in a kind of moral 'no-man's land':

we find ourselves largely unable to sympathise or to condemn, for throughout this tense and lurid drama Zola works hard to deny the reader two key privileges which centuries of [...] psychological literature had accustomed him or her to enjoying as of right: those of identifying with the characters' motives and feelings, and of judging their actions.¹⁵

Rothwell captures Zola's power in creating the conditions of reader indeterminacy ('we find ourselves largely unable to sympathise or to condemn'). In highlighting reader antipathy as a more 'natural' and traditional response, Rothwell underplays – denies, even – the empathic power of this novel over readers. Yet, his emphasis on narrative equivocation reminds us that the novelist is not aiming at didacticism within the narrative.¹⁶ Indeed, Zola often traces the contours of a moral judgement that his narratives actively subvert or undermine, such that (at least) two competing perspectives are in play at any time, in a proleptic move that looks ahead to modernist simultaneity. Brian Nelson, in *Zola and the Bourgeoisie*, discusses this defining feature of *Une page d'amour* (1878), whose protagonist, Hélène Grandjean, presents to the world, somewhat in the manner of Thérèse, an inscrutable expression that hides the conflict that

¹⁴ Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 169.

¹⁵ Andrew Rothwell, *Zola, Thérèse Raquin*, Oxford World Classics (Oxford University Press, 2008), Introduction, p. viii.

¹⁶ As a strategy intended to disarm hostile critics who had slated the novel for its 'filth', Zola assumes a conspicuously didactic voice in his preface to the second edition of the novel where he explains the Naturalist premises of his narrative project.

she experiences between passion and conformity in marriage.¹⁷ My experience of undergraduates' responses to *Thérèse Raquin* makes me align with Nelson and with Rothwell, although for different reasons. Rothwell underscores the 'unresolve' that is a feature of the novel, whereby the reader is detached from the plot, yet also drawn into the narrative world, and thus able to sustain, simultaneously, perspectives that are both more 'objective' and more 'subjective'. So, how does Zola create the conditions in which we can feel and exercise empathy, when much would seem to conspire against our feeling empathy given the remoteness of Thérèse, the quality of impersonality created around her, that distance the reader?

In distancing us from the character's interior life, Zola affords us the space to imagine that life, to project ourselves into that space of exasperation, crushing solitude, indifference, and *petit-bourgeois* hypocrisy with its vicious, self-seeking agenda. A climate of isolation is present, materially, in the vacancy of the Passage du Pont Neuf, the dank, dark arcade that has been forsaken by consumers avidly exploring the new retail emporia – the dazzling department stores of the *grands boulevards*. The constraining atmosphere of the Raquin family household has fed in Thérèse a corrosive mixture of apathy and resentment (“une indifférence dédaigneuse”, OC, I, p. 528). In Thérèse ('la nerveuse'), emotional atrophy and sexual frustration combine with feelings of proto-existentialist nausea (“il lui sembla qu'elle descendait dans la terre grasse d'une fosse. Une sorte d'écœurement la prit à la gorge”, OC, I, p. 534). The narrator's focus is the life-long solitude of the character, perversely turned into a near-invalid by an overbearing aunt and a manipulative future mother-in-law:

Elle était d'une santé de fer, et elle fut soignée comme une enfant chétive, partageant les médicaments que prenait son cousin, tenue dans l'air chaud de la chambre occupée par le petit malade. Pendant des heures, elle restait accroupie devant le feu, pensive, regardant les flammes en face, sans baisser les paupières. Cette vie forcée de convalescente la replia sur elle-même ; elle prit l'habitude de parler à voix basse, de marcher sans faire de bruit, de rester muette et immobile sur une chaise, les yeux ouverts et vides de regards. Et, lorsqu'elle levait un bras, lorsqu'elle avançait un pied, on sentait en elle des souplesses félines, des muscles courts et puissants, toute une énergie, toute une passion qui dormaient dans sa chair assoupie. (OC, I, pp. 529–30)

For much of the time, the reader can only speculate as to Thérèse's feelings and her mental processing of her experience. The narrator expresses uncertainty, repeatedly, as to the character's emotion, which creates a space

¹⁷ Brian Nelson, *Zola and the Bourgeoisie: A Study of Themes and Techniques in the Rougon-Macquart* (Palgrave MacMillan, 1983), pp. 99–100.

into which the reader can project and develop empathy. Here, the narrator explores the inscrutability of the young Thérèse to those around her, at the same time signalling her capacity to *present* an image of mild-mannered submissiveness, whilst sustaining her deeper resolve and determination:

La jeune fille [...] *semblait* rester froide et indifférente. Elle arrêta parfois ses grands yeux sur Camille et le regardait pendant plusieurs minutes avec une fixité d'un calme souverain. Ses lèvres seules avaient alors de petits mouvements imperceptibles. *On ne pouvait rien lire* sur ce visage fermé qu'une volonté implacable tenait toujours doux et attentif. Quand on parlait de son mariage, Thérèse devenait grave, se contentait d'approuver de la tête tout ce que disait Madame Raquin. Camille s'endormait. (OC, I, p. 531)

Her sterile marriage, her sexual frustration, the withholding of consolation, and the denial of empathy by those who constitute Thérèse's affective world – her aunt and substitute-mother, her capricious, self-regarding, self-indulgent husband, and her exploitative lover Laurent – may spur us to compensate for the lack of intradiegetic *Einfühlung* towards her by nurturing our own empathic response, that extends to our recognizing Thérèse's agency.

The novel appeals powerfully to our empathy for the individual who is the trapped victim of circumstances not wholly of her making, whose predicament is cultural, personal, sexual, and economic. For the late-modern reader, there is a sense of blighted lives, a response shaped by the long history of feminist consciousness-raising and women's struggles for personal, sexual, cultural, economic, and political freedoms.

Empathy Embodied: *L'Assommoir* (1877)

Young Lalie Bijard presents a fascinating example of the fictional character as both an agent, and an object, of empathy. Empathy with Lalie is created through intense focalization on the child's suffering during scenes of atrocious violence that are witnessed by the protagonist Gervaise Macquart.

In sustained and powerful ways *L'Assommoir* draws the reader into the narrative experience of empathy, which we recognize in the beneficent actions and reactions of Gervaise, Goujet, and Lalie. We ourselves empathize most keenly and constantly with Gervaise: we endorse her values; we appreciate her modest ambition; we laud her hard work; we share a sense of the pressures and the threats that she faces. Seeing through Gervaise's eyes, we feel through her emotions and think through her consciousness, so her modest joys and her escalating fear are shared vicariously with us.

Gervaise is repeatedly witness to the violence inflicted by Bijard on his family, in a narrative crescendo of brutality. The laundress confronts what she intuits as a specular image of her own suffering (in scenes of violence, domestic abuse, and chronic drunkenness) that is proleptic of her own final degradation and destruction. She recognizes, through her repeated exposure to Lalie's torment, something that is more fully shared and more pervasive. Indeed, one might venture that, motivated by empathy with the wider working-class community, Zola determines that his novel will have for its definitive title *L'Assommoir* and not the exclusivist *La Vie simple de Gervaise Macquart*. Gervaise's story is part of the broader human 'story' of suffering, love, fear, pleasure, anger, and resignation. So, the cruelty inflicted on Lalie, and the escalating abuse of Gervaise, have a more general, even universal, significance that transcends the particularity of the context and collapses the differences between literary fiction and the real world.

The most dramatic scene of Lalie's sadistic treatment (Chapter 10) is anticipated by the episode where the child's mother is subject to a violent beating at the hands of her husband (Chapter 6).¹⁸ Through Gervaise's witnessing eyes, we encounter a remarkable lesson in empathy as the four-year-old Lalie works to screen her youngest sibling from the sight of their mother's suffering:

Par terre, madame Bijard soufflait plus fort, la bouche grande ouverte, les paupières closes. À présent, Bijard la manquait ; il revenait, s'acharnait, frappait à côté, enragé, aveuglé, s'attrapant lui-même avec les claques qu'il envoyait dans le vide. Et, pendant toute cette tuerie, Gervaise voyait, dans un coin de la chambre, la petite Lalie, alors âgée de quatre ans, qui regardait son père assommer sa mère. L'enfant tenait entre ses bras, comme pour la protéger, sa sœur Henriette, sevrée de la veille. Elle était debout, la tête serrée dans une coiffe d'indienne, très pâle, l'air sérieux. Elle avait un large regard noir, d'une fixité pleine de pensées, sans une larme. (RM, II, p. 557)

The moral stature and the physical courage of the child, which are the object of a triple focus (that of Gervaise, the narrator, and the reader), create exceptional conditions for empathy that elevate the child beyond the figure of pathos. Reader empathy is deepened in situations where the body experiences extremes of suffering. My empathy with the embodied experience of others is strong as I, as a sentient self, can imagine myself inhabiting their suffering and pain. Such foregrounded scenes involving characters whose plot-role is secondary and intermittent assume greater

¹⁸ Page references to *L'Assommoir* and to *La Joie de vivre* are to the following edition: Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, ed. by Armand Lanoux and Henri Mitterand (Gallimard, 'Pléiade'), hereafter abbreviated RM, followed by volume and page numbers.

power for their unanticipated narrative focalization and their exceptional intensity. The narrative economy is restricted in terms of the Bijards' background and context, but that very ellipsis – the absence of detail and narrative infilling – assists the spare, unflinching presentation of the act of violence.

Through the witnessing eyes of Gervaise, the reader has empathy with the eight-year-old child who inherits her mother's suffering, who effectively becomes her mother, taking on her living death ('elle tenait la place de la morte'), as she takes charge of her two younger siblings and submits to a regime of brutality and abuse. This duplication and extension of suffering holds up (for Gervaise, and for us) a mirror of the pervasiveness of pain and anguish. Lalie experiences serial physical violence and sexual abuse at the hands of a drunken father driven by a sadistic imagination:

D'une claque, il lui couvrait la figure entière, et la chair avait encore tant de délicatesse, que les cinq doigts restaient marqués pendant deux jours. C'étaient des tripotées indignes, des trépiquées pour un oui, pour un non, un loup enragé tombant sur un pauvre petit chat, craintif et câlin, maigre à faire pleurer, et qui recevait ça avec ses beaux yeux résignés, sans se plaindre. Non, jamais Lalie ne se révoltait. Elle pliait un peu le cou, pour protéger son visage ; elle se retenait de crier, afin de ne pas révolutionner la maison. Puis, quand le père était las de l'envoyer promener à coups de soulier aux quatre coins de la pièce, elle attendait d'avoir la force de se ramasser ; et elle se remettait au travail, débarbouillait ses enfants, faisait la soupe, ne laissait pas un grain de poussière sur les meubles. Ça rentrait dans sa tâche de tous les jours d'être battue. (RM, II, pp. 689–90)

Given our empathy for Gervaise, and Gervaise's for young Lalie, we extend readily our readerly empathy to the child: "Gervaise s'était prise d'une grande amitié pour sa voisine. Elle la traitait en égale, en femme d'âge, qui connaît l'existence" (RM, II, p. 690). Our empathy deepens as we imagine the horror of the scene. When the narrator returns to the agony of Lalie, seen once more through the horrified eyes of Gervaise, the act of reading and mental reconstruction is gruelling:

[Gervaise] était restée suffoquée, en lui voyant l'échine bleue, le coude écorché et saignant encore, toute sa chair d'innocente martyrisée et collée aux os. Mais, la petite avait prié la blanchisseuse de ne rien dire. Elle ne voulait pas qu'on embêtât son père à cause d'elle. Elle le défendait, assurait qu'il n'aurait pas été méchant, s'il n'avait pas bu. Il était fou, il ne savait plus. Oh! elle lui pardonnait, parce qu'on doit tout pardonner aux fous. (RM, II, p. 690)

The corruscating narrative is amplified by *style indirect libre* that exposes the bitter irony of the unpardonable cruelty endlessly tolerated by the victim. The terrible final sentence ("Oh! elle lui pardonnait, parce qu'on doit tout pardonner aux fous") merges the subjectivities of Gervaise, the narrator, and

the reader, and turns on the daughter's resolve to bear her father's cruelty in silence and conceal it from public censure.

Gervaise's empathy translates into acts of altruistic agency via her repeated (futile) attempts to block the violence perpetrated on Lalie and her siblings. The repeated imperfective relays the idea of a cycle of threat and violence: "Gervaise veillait, tâchait d'intervenir, dès qu'elle entendait le père Bijard monter l'escalier" (RM, II, p. 690). Lalie's torture at the hands of her depraved father as he subjects her to the lashes of a horse-whip, provokes revulsion in Gervaise: the scene is at the limit of the readable as we behold, through Gervaise, the sadistic cruelty meted out to the child, a vision that transcends narrative context in its study of domestic tyranny and inhumanity.

The overwhelming power of these embedded narrative episodes may be understood through 'projective' theory that explains the reader's direction of emotion and feeling towards the literary character.¹⁹ As that terrible episode is mediated back to us through Gervaise, the plot slows, such that we experience the scene immersively. Certain narrative strategies put into place turn on traumatized viewing (which is also transgressive in that it literally crosses a threshold and results in visual 'punishment' for fictional viewer and for the reader). The visual trauma is heightened by disturbing sound experiences that draw us in and spur us to imagine in turn this theatre of cruelty in its visual and acoustic fullness. These narrative conditions determine the strength of feeling (pity, horror, revulsion, the quality of 'unbearable-ness') that readers feel. The reader becomes uncomfortable, their reading ease ("it's just a story") challenged to the point where they may discontinue or foreclose their reading. This may have to do with the extremeness of the child's plight, and with the knowledge that such a plight is not the stuff of fiction alone, as Zola knew only too well when he drew on a *fait divers* for the theme of child cruelty.²⁰ Lalie's pain and Gervaise's horror and her empathy in the sphere of fiction have enduring 'real world' relevance, notwithstanding their separation by time, context, and culture from the present of our reading: the scene of Lalie's martyrdom is surely burned on the brain of every Zola reader.

¹⁹ Kendall Walton, 'Projectivism, Empathy, and Musical Tension', *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 26, nos 1–2 (1999), 407–23.

²⁰ Colette Becker, *Zola : Le Saut dans les étoiles* (Presses Universitaires de la Sorbonne, 2002), p. 113.

Tides of empathy: *La Joie de vivre* (1884)

Through Pauline Quenu, Zola explores themes of sickness, suffering, desire, pressure, and finitude, and probes what it is to be human. Pauline is an orphan and an outsider; she is the *intruse* in the household of her embittered aunt and gout-suffering uncle, and in the coastal community of Normandy. She strives to alleviate physical and emotional suffering, and to relieve economic hardship and social exclusion, both in her adoptive family and in the wider community of Bonneville. Driven by love and affection, she is, in many ways, the very model of empathy in action (“une tendresse active”).

Pauline recognizes suffering in others and works altruistically to bring comfort and relief. Her anguish at the devastation wreaked by the storm on the seafaring community reveals her stunned recognition of nature’s reversibility, and the affective response of one who is sensitive to her social world. Pauline’s centripetal gaze and her thoughts travel constantly *towards* the suffering of others in a gesture of *Einfühlung*, envisioning their plight and hers as an involuntary capitulation to a deep chasm of despair. Her experience of the forces of nature as unpredictable and destructive (“surprise douloureuse”) – her sense of nature’s antipathy – is mitigated by her own capacity for empathy:

Retournée près de la fenêtre, elle écoutait, avec une gravité de grande personne. Son visage exprima une bonté navrée, une fièvre de sympathie, dont ses grosses lèvres tremblaient.

– Oh ! ma tante, dit-elle, les pauvres gens !

Et ses regards allaient au-dehors, dans ce gouffre noir où les ténèbres s'étaient encore épaissies. On sentait que la mer avait galopé jusqu'à la route, qu'elle était là maintenant, gonflée, hurlante ; mais on ne la voyait toujours plus, elle semblait avoir noyé de flots d'encre le petit village, les rochers de la côte, l'horizon entier. C'était, pour l'enfant, une surprise douloureuse. Cette eau qui lui avait paru si belle et qui se jetait sur le monde ! [my emphasis]. (RM, III, p. 828)

The narrative unfolds a deep connection between Pauline, who feels empathy towards all (animals, children, her peers, the aged, the seafaring population), and the reader, who feels empathy towards Pauline. This has a powerful resonance in the empathic landscape of *La Joie de vivre*.

Zola’s magisterial evocation of landscape and seascape – the power of his nature-writing – intensifies the reader’s empathic emotion, quickening our sense of the injustice of life in the fishing community of Bonneville. Extreme weather, tidal disruption, and coastal erosion reveal the human individual and the community to be in the grip of natural forces that they

cannot mitigate, far less control. These natural pressures resonate with human rhythms of misfortune and suffering, physical and affective, to form a Naturalist objective correlative. Nature reveals the vicissitudes of human experience, and the vicissitudes of empathy itself.

Pauline's empathic values, her authentic care, and her altruistic actions bring benefits, altering for the better the family culture and the household atmosphere (start of chapter 2). The young girl has a remarkable transformative effect on family relations, assuaging antagonism and bringing balm to conflict:

Dès la première semaine, la présence de Pauline apporta une joie dans la maison. Sa belle santé raisonnable, son tranquille sourire calmaient l'aigreur sourde où vivaient les Chanteau. (RM, III, p. 833)

Pauline's empathy with those who suffer is resourceful and adaptive. She immerses her thoughts in the suffering of her uncle in order to spur in him the comforting belief that he does not suffer alone. Her intentional act of supporting her uncle by her presence and analysing his responses to her empathic companionship translates into the relief of his suffering accompanied by his enhanced courage and resilience:

Pauline était retournée près de son oncle. Elle seule restait calme, dans sa pitié pour tant de douleur. Si elle ne pouvait que demeurer là, elle voulait au moins donner au malheureux le soulagement de ne pas souffrir solitaire, le sentant plus brave contre le mal, lorsqu'elle le regardait, même sans lui adresser la parole. Pendant des heures, elle s'asseyait ainsi près du lit, et elle arrivait à l'apaiser un peu, de ses grands yeux compatissants. (RM, III, p. 943)

Humans and animals elicit Pauline's emotion, sharpening her understanding and spurring her actions of caring. After a year spent in Normandy, she has developed a prodigious empathy for the place, the people, and the animals around her. At the same time, her unchecked empathy, the narrator indicates, is becoming excessive ("débordait", "effusion"): the affective equivalent of the unbridled forces of nature, Pauline's empathy is developing into a tidal wave, an emotional tsunami. Indeed, Pauline's investment in her adoptive family and her new community leads to a subjective unbalancing whereby she erases her past, forgets her roots, and rewrites her own autobiographical script:

C'était, chez Pauline, un amour de la vie, qui débordait chaque jour davantage, qui faisait d'elle 'la mère des bêtes', comme disait sa tante. Tout ce qui vivait, tout ce qui souffrait, l'emplissait d'une tendresse active, d'une effusion de soins et de caresses. Elle avait

oublié Paris, il lui semblait avoir poussé là, dans ce sol rude, au souffle pur des vents de mer. (RM, III, p. 856)

Over time, Pauline's empathic instinct takes a colonizing 'turn' where the empathic urge becomes indiscriminate, and, an ironic narrator implies, species categories seem almost to become blurred in the hyperactive giving and taking of the gift of empathy:

Maintenant, sa charité active s'élargissait sur toute la contrée. Elle aimait d'instinct les misérables, n'était pas répugnée par leurs déchéances, poussait ce goût jusqu'à raccommoder avec des bâtons les pattes cassées des poules, et à mettre dehors, la nuit, des écuelles de soupe pour les chats perdus. C'était, chez elle, un continuel souci des souffrants, un besoin et une joie de les soulager. Aussi les pauvres venaient-ils à ses mains tendues, comme les moineaux pillards vont aux fenêtres ouvertes des granges. Bonneville entier, cette poignée de pêcheurs rongés de maux sous l'écrasement des marées hautes, montait chez la demoiselle, ainsi qu'ils la nommaient. Mais elle adorait surtout les enfants, les petits aux culottes percées, laissant voir leurs chairs roses, les petites blêmies, ne mangeant pas à leur faim, dévorant des yeux les tartines qu'elle leur distribuait. Et les parents finauds spéculaient sur cette tendresse, lui envoyaient leur marmaille, les plus troués, les plus chétifs, pour l'apitoyer davantage. (RM, III, p. 897)

So, let's now reverse the tide and consider what happens when empathy makes its return in less favourable ways. We recognize that Pauline's empathy is shaped by cultural forces and interrelational factors, but, as the outsider, she *needs* to make deep connection with the others who form her available circle of relations and friends. Surrounded by exploitative relatives in the form of her controlling aunt, Pauline would willingly destitute herself economically, in order to enrich her life affectively: she has a keen self-interest in the likely return on her empathic investment. Her motivations, which are a mixture of genuine and 'instinctive' empathy and egotistical compassion, present an intriguing problematization of empathy by Zola.

Empathy is, ideally, non-judgemental but the narrative suggests that Pauline equivocates between moral critique, condemnation even, and unfettered charity. Pauline herself recognizes this, but can only partially resolve the conflict within herself over the 'deserving' poor and those who bring suffering upon themselves through their immoral living:

Pauline les regardait, surprise. Si les misérables étaient propres, on n'aurait pas besoin de les nettoyer. Le mal et la misère se tenaient, elle n'avait aucune répulsion devant la souffrance, même lorsqu'elle semblait le résultat du vice. D'un geste large, elle se contenta de dire *la tolérance de sa charité*. (my emphasis). (RM, III, p. 900)

We discern a struggle within Pauline in which she confronts and successfully quells the urge to default to *petit-bourgeois* morality and attitudes. The charitable instinct is dampened by (mere) ‘tolerance’ in that revealing phrase. Yet, in many ways, the empathy of Pauline offers a model of empathy for others to copy. When Pauline herself is gravely ill, this duplication happens in the world of human-human relations, of course, through the devoted caregiving of Lazare, but also, arrestingly, the model of empathy that originates with Pauline is ‘copied’ in the animal world by the family dog:

C’était Mathieu, oublié de tous, qui avait enfin quitté le dessous du lit, pour s’approcher de la jeune fille, dont une main pendait hors des couvertures. Le chien léchait cette main avec tant de douceur, que Lazare, très ému, le prit par le cou, en disant :

– Tu vois, mon pauvre gros, la maîtresse est malade... Mais ce ne sera rien, va ! Nous irons encore galoper tous les trois.

Pauline avait ouvert les yeux, et malgré la contraction douloureuse de sa face, elle souriait. (RM, III, p. 917)

When Pauline smiles at the dog who comforts her, she is, consciously or otherwise, recognizing herself in the empathy shown to her by the family pet, and she rejoices at the sight of empathy being practised more widely. Lazare will, in turn, assume the role of the empathic care-giving cousin, as he battles against the double standards of his mother, submits to the rigid routines of the patient, Pauline, and carries out duties of care where embarrassed awkwardness mixes with tenderness and delivers an ultimate lesson in active compassion born of love:

Alors, commença l’existence d’angoisses, le cauchemar que l’on vit dans la chambre d’un malade. Lazare, cédant à un sentiment d’affection sauvage, en chassait tout le monde ; c’était à peine s’il laissait sa mère et Louise entrer le matin, pour prendre des nouvelles, et il n’admettait que Véronique, chez laquelle il sentait une tendresse véritable. Les premiers jours, madame Chanteau avait voulu lui faire comprendre l’inconvenance de ces soins donnés par un homme à une jeune fille ; mais il s’était récrié, est-ce qu’il n’était pas son mari ? puis, les médecins soignaient bien les femmes. Entre eux, il n’y avait, en effet, aucune gêne pudique. La souffrance, la mort prochaine peut-être, emportaient les sens. Il lui rendait tous les petits services, la levait, la recouchait, en frère apitoyé qui ne voyait de ce corps désirable que la fièvre dont il frissonnait. C’était comme le prolongement de leur enfance bien portante, ils retournaient à la nudité chaste de leurs premiers bains, lorsqu’il la traitait en gamine. Le monde disparaissait, rien n’existait plus ... (RM, III, pp. 917–18)

Conclusion

Empathy teaches us what it is to be human and helps us distinguish attitudes and actions that are less than humane. Reading *Thérèse Raquin*, *L'Assommoir*, and *La Joie de vivre* reveals the forensic agency of Zola's fiction as it probes consciousness and exposes values and motivations, holding up specular images by which we gain a keener sense of empathic capacity and agency. As the three novels from Zola's corpus I have been discussing demonstrate, literature plays a key role in providing instances of looking, learning, and feeling (in both corporeal and affective senses), making us reflect through characters who themselves respond and take action in situations that shape empathy within the world of fiction and beyond, relating fictional characters and narrators to actual readers.

My purpose here has not been to test the 'real-world' validity of empathy. I don't wish to claim empathic causation or suggest that reading Zola will make us better people in a moral sense. It might, but there again, it might not. However, it may be conjectured, from my reading, that our investment – of attention, of imagination, of reflection – in Zola's novels brings benefits to our *understanding* of empathy, with its freight of possibilities and constraints. In that way, certainly, our thinking lives may be richer for reading Zola.

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