

LA BÊTE HUMAINE

AN EXAMINATION OF THE PROBLEMS
INHERENT IN THE PROCESS OF ADAPTATION
FROM NOVEL TO FILM

By

BARBARA IRENE WRIGHT

B.A., The University of Leicester, 1981

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF FRENCH

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

November 1987

© Barbara Irene Wright, 1987

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of FRENCH

The University of British Columbia
1956 Main Mall
Vancouver, Canada
V6T 1Y3

Date 4TH SEPTEMBER 1987

Abstract

In this thesis the process of adaptation from novel to film is examined. La Bête humaine by Emile Zola and the film version by Jean Renoir provide specific examples. The starting point is the assumption, often made by cinema audiences, that the film should be "faithful" to the novel upon which it is based. A statement made by Renoir regarding his efforts to be true to what he describes as the "spirit of the book" is quoted to illustrate the prevalence of this attitude. Novel and film are then compared in order to test Renoir's claim to fidelity. What is revealed are the differences between the two. Through an examination of character, action, and space some of the reasons for the director's departure from the novel begin to emerge and it becomes increasingly clear that Renoir was obliged to adopt a different approach. Theme and form are then examined and the organic nature of their relationship suggested. Finally, the departure of the film from the novel is traced to the very different ways in which the two media function -- linearity in the written medium as opposed to simultaneity in the cinematic medium -- and the indelible nature of the association of theme and form is confirmed. In conclusion, the view that the media should and do correspond is found to be mistaken, and Renoir's statement is re-evaluated and assessed as an attempt, by a director sensitive to the public's insistence on fidelity, to disarm criticism.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Introduction	1
Chapter One Character	9
Chapter Two Action	38
Chapter Three Space	58
Chapter Four Theme and Form	75
Chapter Five Limits of Style	91
Concluding Remarks	109
Works Consulted	114

Introduction

Interest in the cinema is not new. More recent, however, is a growing interest in the process of film-making, as a result of which the functioning of the cinematic medium has itself become the focus of attention.¹ In conjunction with this heightened awareness of the technical aspect of film, interest in the relationship of film to the written medium has increased. A film based on a novel is, therefore, particularly interesting.

When a director sets out to make a film based on a novel his task is more complex than would normally be the case. He must first adapt the material for filming and surmount the problems which arise during this process. Yet, in spite of the difficulties involved, numerous directors have undertaken adaptations -- with varying degrees of success. Jean Renoir is one such director.

During the course of his career Renoir made a wide range of films. On several occasions he based films on the works of great literary figures but popular fiction, the work of

¹ Edward Pincus' Guide to Filmmaking (USA: Signet Books, New American Library, 1969) provides one example of a work published in response to the demand for information about the techniques of film, in a form accessible to the layman.

Georges Simenon, for example, also provided inspiration. The title of one of Renoir's earliest films, Nana, made in 1926, reveals the director's indebtedness to Emile Zola. In 1934 Flaubert's novel, Madame Bovary, became the basis for a film of the same name while earlier, in 1932, the film Nuit du carrefour, based on Simenon's novel had been released. In 1938, more than a decade after the release of Nana, Renoir turned his attention once more to the author of the "experimental novel" and embarked upon the filming of La Bête humaine.²

Author and director have very different backgrounds. Emile Zola is best known for the Rougon-Macquart series, an epic project comprising twenty novels in which the author traces the histories of two families, the Rougons and the Macquarts. The Rougon-Macquart series was conceived as a direct result of Zola's formulation of a specific approach to literature, an approach which was originally outlined in a preface to Thérèse Raquin (1868) and later formally defined in his essay Le Roman expérimental (1880). The theories expounded by the young novelist owed much to the philosophers and scientists of the age -- Claude Bernard's work on experimental medicine provides one example, H.A. Taine's

² Jean Renoir made a number of other films based on novels. These are: Le Tournoi (1929), La Chienne (1931), Partie de campagne (1936), Les Bas-Fonds (1936), Swamp Water (1941), The Southerner (1945), The Diary of a Chambermaid (1946), The Woman on the Beach (1946), The River (1946) and Le Caporel épinglé (1962).

Histoire de la littérature anglaise published in 1865, another -- but more than anything else it was Zola's adaptation and application of the principles contained in these and other works to the world of fiction which popularized them. So vigorous was his approach that the term naturalism quickly became associated with his work and later, that of the school of writers who developed under his influence.³

Jean Renoir, son of the impressionist painter Auguste Renoir, grew up in an atmosphere colored by the artistic perception of his father. Pierre Leprohon, doubtless writing from his knowledge of the director's background, states that for Renoir junior:

. . . l'art était dans la vie et vice versa. Il ne s'agissait donc pas, l'heure venue, de conquérir cet art, mais de le découvrir, de le dégager. Il était dans la vie de Renoir comme la statue dans le bloc de marbre.⁴

³ Naturalism is, broadly speaking, the application of criteria used in the assessment of physical states and conditions to the assessment of moral states. The naturalist philosopher or writer through observing man's environment sets out to present man existing within a set of conditions produced by himself and which he, at the same time, acts upon and modifies. The method used, therefore, is scientific in its genesis arising from the principles of notation, decomposition and, finally, deduction.

For more information on naturalism see Pierre Martino, Le Naturalisme français (1870-1895) (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1930).

⁴ Pierre Leprohon, Jean Renoir (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1967), p. 18.

Leprohon's observation appears to place realism at the center of Renoir's conception of art, an inference that is confirmed by the director's own analysis of his position:

Cessant d'accuser sottement la soi-disant incompréhension du public, j'entrevis la possibilité de le toucher par la projection de sujets authentiques dans la tradition du réalisme français. Je me mis à regarder autour de moi et, émerveillé, je découvris des quantités d'éléments purement de chez nous, tout à fait transposables à l'écran Je refis une espèce d'étude du geste français à travers les tableaux de mon père et des peintres de sa génération.⁵

The last sentence of this quotation is especially telling. Renoir's approach does not produce the realism of, for example, Flaubert. The director is always aware of the frame which, like that of a painting, encloses his work, separating it from the world of everyday people and events and defining it as an area in which his creative talent holds sway. On more than one occasion this talent takes the direction of an overt stylization of characters and situations and, although these may originate in the pragmatism of everyday life, they soon generate a sense of the theatrical. In Renoir's version of Nana, for instance, the element of theatricality

⁵ Jean Renoir, "Souvenirs," included by André Bazin in his work Jean Renoir, ed. François Truffaut (Paris: Editions Champs Libres, 1971), p. 152.

associated with the novel's heroine is developed to a much greater extent. Catherine Hessling, who plays the role, appears powdered and rouged which, together with the unnatural abruptness of her gestures, creates the impression of a "poupée animée" (Leprohon, p. 26). In addition, the film, with its division of activity into center stage and off stage, has the self-conscious air of a show which effectively creates a double focus. This tendency towards stylization, and in particular the atmosphere of a show, persists in Renoir's mature work and is especially notable in La Règle du jeu (1939). The framework of the film is a celebration held at a large country house. The guests bring with them their intrigues and infidelities and against the backdrop of the formal entertainment, play out their individual dramas. Throughout the film the audience is made aware of different groups or configurations of characters as they participate in the social "game" of deception and adultery. Other Renoir films, however, have a very different ambiance. Partie de campagne (1936), for example, displays a lyrical quality, particularly the scene on the river when the young couple steal a precious hour alone together. Here the director captures beautifully the langorous atmosphere of a hot afternoon and shots of the river and its banks impose a smooth, gliding tempo. Occurring after the presentation of the family's departure for their day in the country and their arrival at the inn, this scene represents an "épanouissement" and suggests an escape from the confines of "petit bourgeois"

mentality (and morality) before these restrictions close irrevocably around the daughter of the house.

On the surface, author and director appear to share common ground: Renoir's desire to portray "sujets authentiques" drawn from his own environment would seem to coincide with Zola's observation and use of the material world as the basis for his novels. However, even a cursory examination of Renoir's work reveals a marked difference in the way in which he treats his subject matter. Zola's world is rooted in matter and Antoinette Jagmetti characterizes his work most succinctly when she says:

C'est à travers l'objet matériel que Zola, d'une part, exprime l'homme et, d'autre part, révèle les puissances de la vie. Son monde se compose de matière lourde et épaisse. Il n'existe qu'en elle et pour elle.⁶

Thus the union of Zola and Renoir as it occurs in the film version of La Bête humaine may not have been an easy one to achieve, as the following statement by Jean Renoir about the film seems to imply:

. . . j'ai été aussi fidèle que je l'ai pu à l'esprit du livre; je n'en ai pas suivi l'intrigue, mais j'ai toujours pensé qu'il valait mieux être

⁶ Antoinette Jagmetti, "La Bête humaine" d'Emile Zola: étude de stylistique critique (Genève: Librairie E. Droz, 1955), p. 13.

fidèle à l'esprit d'une oeuvre originale
qu'à sa forme extérieure . . . j'ai pensé
au côté poétique de Zola.⁷

The director admits that he did not follow the plot yet at the same time asserts that he has been faithful to something he describes as the "spirit of the work." One wonders what exactly is meant by this rather nebulous description. Indeed, Renoir seems to have moved into a totally subjective area. What is especially noteworthy is the director's emphasis on "fidelity." He insists that he has remained faithful to something intrinsic to the novel in spite of the sweeping changes he has made. In fact, because Renoir makes the assessment of what is fundamental to the novel a subjective exercise, he is placing himself firmly in control of the material. His statement is therefore an attempt to reconcile the changes he has made with the maintenance of the novel's integrity. He is motivated, no doubt, by his awareness of a phenomenon operative in the area of public reaction and peculiar to adaptations. A phenomenon which may be dubbed the "fidelity factor." The fidelity factor comes into play, in particular, when a film has been based on a well-known novel. Audiences have pre-established expectations, the film-maker is expected to present a film which will live up to these. If reaction is unfavorable the

⁷ Jacques Rivette et François Truffaut, "Entretien avec Jean Renoir," Cahiers du Cinéma, No. 34 (avril 1954), p. 4.

film-maker is considered to have failed both members of the audience, with their individual responses to the novel, and to have somehow betrayed the written work itself. Consequently, the film-maker's task is difficult, if not impossible.

In this study both novel and film will be examined with the intention of illustrating the process of adaptation as it was undertaken by Renoir. The comparison will, in addition, test the validity of Renoir's claim to fidelity. La Bête humaine provides a specific example, an examination of which will show how one particular director tackled an adaptation, however, certain general principles applicable to the functioning of each medium will also be revealed.⁸

⁸ This type of study presents particular problems with regard to methodology, foremost among which is the need to effectively distinguish novel from film, as they share the same title. Accordingly, the novel is referred to in lower case (La Bête humaine) and the film in upper case (LA BÊTE HUMAINE). In a further attempt to promote clarity each chapter is divided into approximately two halves, the first dealing with the novel, the second with the film.

Chapter One

Character

The characters in La Bête humaine fall into three categories: railway workers, representatives of the "haute bourgeoisie" and members of the judicial system. Of these three categories Zola concentrated particularly on the first. Were one to draw up a list of the railway workers who feature in the novel it would be impressive by dint of its length. An engine driver, fireman, signalman, crossing keeper, station-master... Indeed, one would be inclined to wonder just how Zola managed to incorporate such an array of characters into one novel of fairly standard length. The clue lies in the ease with which the characters can be reduced to a list of functions.

Those connected with the railway range from the most exalted, its president, Grandmorin, to the lowly lavatory attendant, Victoire. In effect, the hierarchy which is the organization of "la Compagnie de l'Ouest" is represented almost in its entirety. Clearly, the author went to great lengths in order to be able to include such a number and variety of characters. But why did he bother? The answer lies in the novelist's approach to his subject.

The cornerstone of Zola's preparation of a novel was research. He took much time and great care documenting a

subject and its setting. In the case of La Bête humaine the concern to reproduce an authentic milieu became almost obsessive. Information about timetables and routes, for instance, and about the roles of the various railway workers was accumulated until the documentary aspect of, what may be termed, the naturalist project gained ascendancy. Consequently, and not surprisingly so, the novel is rich in detail, an observation which may at first seem quite irrelevant to a discussion of the characters. Yet if one considers the characters as they have been listed in this study the connection will become apparent.

Immediately remarkable is the tendency to catalog the characters according to their positions on the staff of "la Compagnie de l'Ouest," rather than by name. Roubaud, for example, is Séverine's husband and the murderer of her guardian and lover, Grandmorin, yet the reader is at once given to understand that his role in the novel is inseparable from his role within the organization of the railway. Thus the novel opens with Roubaud's arrival in Mère Victoire's rooms and he is introduced by name: "En entrant dans la chambre, Roubaud posa sur la table . . ." (p. 53). But within the space of a few lines the name is replaced by the function: "Et le sous-chef de gare, ayant ouvert une fenêtre, s'y accouda." The fact that Roubaud (as the author soon explains) owes his position to his wife Séverine, ward of the president of "la Compagnie de l'Ouest," and that he discovers her infidelity when he seeks to use her influence to

safeguard his position, further enforces the connection. The cases of lesser characters are even more extreme, so much so that the job can actually be seen to justify the inclusion of a particular character or characters. The signalman, Ozil, is a prime example, as is Dauvergne who is introduced as "Henri Dauvergne, conducteur-chef... ."

The reason is not hard to find. Zola, working from his copious notes, aimed to give as complete a picture as possible of the railway milieu. He deliberately set out to depict as many different jobs connected with the railway as he could assimilate into the text. The emphasis thereby falls on the job or function and not the character. Consequently, many of the "characters" in La Bête humaine are not characters in any accepted literary sense. They are functionaries included in the novel as a result of over zealous documentation and are, more often than not, irrelevant to the plot. Viewed thus, a high percentage of the characters would seem to be redundant and their inclusion in the novel the cause of unnecessary clutter; yet another, and more positive aspect of the issue should also be considered. The characters/functionaries included by Zola may often appear superfluous on an individual basis however collectively, they serve a distinct purpose. By his presentation of such a multiplicity of characters Zola effectively extends awareness of station life, until the milieu itself is perceived as a protagonist.

Zola's concerns as a naturalist writer had an obvious

bearing on the choice of characters included in the novel. Moreover, it will be seen that characterization throughout La Bête humaine is also intimately connected with these same concerns. Each novel in the Rougon-Macquart series explores a particular area or aspect of human existence. La Bête humaine, as the title implies, takes as its subject a pathological murderer, yet the novel's major theme extends beyond the depiction of a single crazed killer. A closer look at a selection of the characters will explain why.

Roubaud is described shortly after his introduction:

Il ne vieillissait point, la quarantaine approchait, sans que le roux ardent de ses cheveux frisés eût pâli. Sa barbe, qu'il portait entière, restait drue, elle aussi, d'un blond de soleil. Et, de taille moyenne, mais d'une extraordinaire vigueur, il se plaisait à sa personne, satisfait de sa tête un peu plate, au front bas, à la nuque épaisse, de sa face ronde et sanguine, éclairée de deux gros yeux vifs. Ses sourcils se rejoignaient, embroussaillant son front de la barre des jaloux. (p. 56)

Pecqueux makes his first appearance accompanied by the following description:

. . . un grand gaillard de quarante-trois ans, maigre avec de gros os, la face cuite par le feu et par la fumée. Ses yeux gris sous le front bas, sa bouche large dans une mâchoire saillante, riaient d'un continuel rire de noceur. (p. 115)

While mention of his (legal) wife Victoire prompts the information that she has become "énorme et difficile à remuer," the exact opposite of Pecqueux.

The pattern is established. Each character is presented by means of a concise physical description. The description is invariably succeeded by an equally specific reference to their natures. Thus Roubaud is overcome by a wave of jealous rage as he waits for Séverine:

Un flot de sang montait à son crâne, ses poings
d'ancien homme d'équipe se serraient . . . Il
redevenait la brute inconsciente de sa force . . .
(p. 57)

Pecqueux, it is revealed, "ne devenait vraiment à craindre que lorsqu'il était ivre, car il se changeait alors en vraie brute, capable d'un mauvais coup" (p. 116). And Victoire? she displays the easy-going disposition so often associated with fat people, tolerating her husband's infidelities and even giving him money "afin qu'il prît du plaisir dehors. Jamais elle n'avait beaucoup souffert de ses infidélités . . ." (p. 116).

Both Roubaud and Pecqueux are placed beneath the sign of the sun, the former having hair "d'un roux ardent" while the latter's face is "cuite par le feu et par la fumée." Each has a choleric disposition and their inclination to physical violence is further implied by the low forehead common to them both. Victoire, on the other hand, is quite simply the

embodiment of phlegm. Thus an examination of these three characters reveals a systematic approach to characterization that extends throughout the novel. An approach which has as its basis the assumption of a direct (and obvious) link between physical appearance and behavioral tendencies.

One can trace this postulation back to Zola's research and, in particular, his interest in the work of the Italian criminologist, Cesare Lombroso.⁹ The effect of Zola's rather literal translation of Lombroso's theories into the characters of La Bête humaine is extreme. The "characters" possess no psychological dimension and are totally lacking in depth. They are creatures of instinct and react to the stimulus of their emotions without any intervening process of ratiocination. Consequently, any one of them could be cited as the perfect example of flesh unleavened by spirit; every one of them without exception would, if so cited, reveal The Beast in Man as the English translation of the novel is so aptly entitled. Thus Jacques may initially have been considered the eponymous character and he is indeed prey to a deadly obsession, but Misard for instance, is obsessed with

⁹ Cesare Lombroso (1836-1909) is best known for his works The Criminal Man (1876) and Crime, its Causes and its Remedies (1899). He formulated the concept of the atavistic criminal, based on the idea of biological regression to a more primitive state of evolution. He believed that criminals have more physical abnormalities than non-criminals and grouped these "stigmata" into categories by which he claimed to be able to identify different criminal types.

"Lombroso," Encyclopedia Americana, 1985 ed.

finding Phasie's nestegg and in order to achieve possession of the money which he is convinced is hidden somewhere in the cottage, poisons his wife. Flore is in love with Jacques; when she discovers his affair with Séverine she sets out to kill them both by causing their train to crash, instead she brings suffering and death to a number of innocent passengers. Roubaud discovers Séverine's infidelity and his reaction is immediate and extreme:

C'était un besoin physique, immédiat, comme une faim de vengeance, qui lui tordait le corps et qui ne lui laisserait plus aucun repos, tant qu'il ne l'aurait pas satisfaite. (p. 73)

Each character is a monotone sounding the same note throughout the novel, but to what effect are these single notes combined? A closer look at the three principal characters, Séverine, Roubaud and Jacques, will provide the answer.

Séverine represents an alluring woman with "l'étrangeté de ses larges yeux bleus, sous son épaisse chevelure noire" (p. 57). At the outset Zola stresses the passive quality of her sensuality which is garbed in a childlike naïveté but which she, nonetheless, uses to good effect on the suspicious Roubaud: ". . . avec une gentillesse d'enfant, elle se jeta à son cou, en lui posant, sur la bouche, sa jolie petite main potelée" (p. 58). Later, her sensuality fully awakened in Jacques's embrace, she seeks to use her power to bend the

engine driver to her will in an act of seduction that seals her own fate:

D'un mouvement câlin, elle s'approchait pour se pendre à lui de ses bras nus, levant sa gorge ronde, que découvrait la chemise, glissée sur une épaule. (p. 343)

For Roubaud Séverine is "l'unique roman de son existence." He is besotted with her. Clearly, he is cast as the jealous husband but the role is more extreme than the stereotypical description implies. Emphasis is placed on his origins as a laborer. He is alluded to as "un ancien homme d'équipe," "un ouvrier dégrossi." These references are reinforced by the presentation of his physical strength and ready recourse to brute force when he turns upon his wife. Roubaud's jealousy is in fact pathological.

Jacques, on the basis of his physical description, is less obviously categorized. He is presented as a "beau garçon au visage rond et régulier mais que gâtaient des mâchoires trop fortes." On the surface, all appears well yet the flaw is present and when Jacques loses control his features distort and the beast surfaces:

Cependant, elle, [Séverine] qui croyait bien connaître Jacques, s'étonnait. Il avait sa tête ronde de beau garçon, ses cheveux frisés, ses moustaches très noires, ses yeux bruns diamantés d'or; mais sa mâchoire inférieure avançait tellement, dans une sorte de coup de gueule, qu'il s'en trouvait défiguré. (p. 346)

It is in the interaction of these three characters that the full extent of their individual obsessions is realized. Severine's seductive charm, for instance, creates the circumstances which bring about Roubaud's outburst of violent temper. As a result he murders Grandmorin. Jacques, in turn, responds to Séverine because of his own dark secret. He is fascinated by her connection with violent death and hopes she will vicariously satisfy his manic cravings. In her relationship with Jacques Séverine's sensual nature is revealed in all its potency. She becomes a "femme d'amour, complaisante à l'homme, toute à celui qui la tenait, sans coeur pour l'autre qu'elle n'avait jamais désiré." Governed by sensual egotism, she can envisage only one course of action -- the calculated murder of her husband: "On s'en débarrassait puisqu'il gênait, rien n'était plus naturel" (p. 345).

The process of interaction, when considered in terms of the above outline, reveals a specific function. It in fact provides the trigger mechanism which activates the ensuing sequence of events. Roubaud is the primer. His explosion of jealous fury leads to the plan to murder Grandmorin. After the murder the guilty couple actively seek to allay suspicion. Séverine sets out to charm Jacques whom she and Roubaud fear may suspect them and give evidence that will prove incriminating. However, Séverine is caught in her own trap and falls passionately in love with Jacques. Her total commitment to Jacques paves the way for the next link: she

plots to do away with Roubaud using Jacques as the assassin. Jacques, meanwhile, is finding it increasingly difficult to control his manic urge to kill a woman. Proximity to Séverine in the sexually charged atmosphere of the bedroom at the Croix-de-Maufras where they await their victim, proves too much for Jacques and he turns upon Séverine in a delirium of bloodlust. At this point the reader understands that the chain is complete, even without the heavily rhetorical question posed by Zola: "et les deux meurtres s'étaient rejoints, l'un n'était-il pas la logique de l'autre?" (p. 349).

The "logic" or thread of inevitability which links the murders has its source in the characters' impulses -- impulses which are invariably of the basest kind. Undoubtedly, the characters are strongly defined, indeed they are defined as much by what they lack as by what they embody. Qualities which counterbalance man's less desirable traits are notably absent. As a result, it is impossible to empathize with the entities presented by Zola. Poor, misshapen things, they are fragments splintered from a mirror in which only the darkest side of human nature is reflected.

*
* *
*

Casting is an important part of the director's task. He must approach the selection of actors and actresses with care for the physical representation of the characters on the screen -- even before direction and acting ability come into

play -- has an immediate impact on the audience. However, in the case of LA BÊTE HUMAINE this procedure was reversed. Jean Gabin, the leading actor in France, initiated the idea of adapting La Bête humaine. His motivation -- a longstanding desire to drive a train on screen.¹⁰ Accordingly, the novel was selected to provide a particular role. Chosen to play Séverine was Simone Simon who, previously, had been pursuing her career in Hollywood. Both the male and female leads, therefore, were given to "faces" in the film world.

The obvious advantage of casting a famous actor or actress in a part is the added box-office draw which the film immediately acquires. The public are more likely to go to the film if only for the sake of seeing a well-loved face. In addition, a "star" has usually built up a reputation for a particular kind of role or style of acting and the public will inevitably make an association between what it already knows of a given film actor and his new role, thereby making an implicit assumption about the latest film.

The stars cast in LA BÊTE HUMAINE, particularly those in the leading roles, all boasted a certain physical attractiveness (a fact which doubtless contributed to the success of their careers). Gabin with his strong, open features, which a tightening of the jaw or a twist of the

¹⁰ Raymond Durgnat, Jean Renoir (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 172.

mouth could render sinister, had played a wide variety of parts. Simon's delicate yet sensual charm would be exploited to the full in the filming of Cat People (1943).

Attractiveness, however, is not immediately associated with the characters of the novel, what springs to mind is their lack of self-control, the violence into which they erupt so easily. Antoinette Jagmetti considers the emphatic features that Zola assigns to his characters to be the counterbalance to the protagonists' fiery temperaments, somehow containing and restraining their disruptive (and eruptive) urges:

Les descriptions se réduisent à quelques traits, nets, vigoureux, souvent durs Les contours précis semblent n'être aussi fortement accentués que parce qu'ils renferment et contiennent les¹¹ puissances intérieures éruptives et insondables.

Yet, although strongly defined in terms of appearance, the characters are not without a certain physical appeal.

Roubaud is a vigorous man of average build with large intelligent eyes and a thick blond beard. Both Jacques and Séverine are attractive. It is only when rage breaks through that the portent of Zola's characterization is realized. Renoir's casting is, then, not inappropriate. A sense of tension emanates from Gabin, he has the air of a man who fears to let go in case that moment of relaxation should

¹¹ Jagmetti, p. 19.

become loss of control. His good looks actually become a part of his condition, pinpointing the irony of his situation -- that of an attractive man who must avoid women. Simone Simon's performance was received with mixed critical reaction. Graham Greene, however, comments favorably:

. . . Mlle Simon . . . acts with intensity the little, sensual, treacherous wife . . . helped . . . by a cameraman who knows how to deal with the coarse black electric hair, the snub nose, the rather African features.¹²

Simon's slender figure and sinuous grace provide the perfect combination for a portrayal of Séverine. Roubaud's temper rises and she cajoles him; his arms close about her and she evades him, as elusive as a butterfly. Fernand Ledoux, who had his first major role in the part of Roubaud, appears to be all that is average: a man approaching middle-age with a steady job and a happy marriage. The strength of his acting ability is revealed in his portrayal of Roubaud's decline -- he depicts a man whose sphere of effectiveness (home and work) has been destroyed and who, once the initial rush of anger is past, becomes ineffectual.

Ledoux/Roubaud is quite unlike Zola's character. He is distinctly "petit bourgeois" and his urge to violence seems

¹² Graham Greene, "La Bête humaine," The Spectator, 5 May 1939, p. 760.

uncharacteristic and is soon exhausted. Yet with all three characters, when considered in relation to their counterparts in the novel, there is a sense of incompleteness. Each film character is cast in a specific mold. Simon/Séverine, for example, is attractive and flirtatious. Gabin/Lantier is handsome and troubled. In effect, the faces which fit the roles both add to and detract from the original characterization. The physical reality of the actors has undeniable immediacy yet it falls short of the careful descriptions given in the written medium. Indeed, what is conveyed is the surface attractiveness without the underlying turbulence which is such an integral part of Zola's characters. The original characters have, in fact, become the third stage in a process which first of all imposes on them the physical reality of an actual person and secondly, if that person is a star, an aura of fame which arises from an inescapable association with the actor's previous starring roles. The end product is not, for example, Lantier but Gabin/Lantier.

Here arises the first major point of deviation between the two media, a deviation based on the distinction between creation and representation. Zola created the characters of La Bête humaine, Renoir represented them on screen. Zola enjoyed the freedom of the creator; he could assemble the various features provided by Lombroso's research in any combination he chose in order to produce the characters. Renoir, on the other hand, was doubly tied. Firstly, to the

novel that he had taken as the basis for his film and secondly (and most unavoidably) to physical reality. Thus Séverine, Roubaud and Jacques acquired an existence independent of their fictional counterparts, but how did Renoir set about bringing them to life on screen?

Séverine first appears seated before an open window, stroking a white angora kitten. Yet this bare description fails to do justice to the masterful tableau which Renoir thereby achieves: a background of sunshine against which is set the slender young woman with the piquant features, a charming little cat in her arms. A sequence of impressions is in the process of formulation. The aim -- to establish Séverine's character. Roubaud enters. He embraces his wife. She moves her head and the kiss intended for her lips brushes her cheek. Dialogue ensues. Throughout Roubaud defers to his wife, whose tone carries an edge of impatience on more than one occasion. In a matter of moments Renoir has successfully conveyed not only Séverine's character but the balance of her relationship with her husband. The initial aura of tender charm has been undermined by the revelation of a coquettish and manipulative nature. Séverine is certainly attractive to look at but, like the kitten which may show its claws at any time, her fragile appeal cloaks a sharper and less appealing nature.

Her first contact with Jacques occurs aboard the Le Havre train just after Roubaud has murdered Grandmorin. Aware that Jacques saw her and Roubaud heading towards

Grandmorin's compartment, she approaches the young man in the hope of disarming him. However, her faltering attempt at conversation is received with obvious surprise and she retreats. Later, when the body has been discovered and the passengers are detained at the station, she sends Jacques a look of such mute appeal that he is moved. This point marks the outset of the collusion between Roubaud, Séverine and Jacques. Henceforward Séverine's bearing in Jacques's presence is more assured and when the couple meet without Roubaud, the pact is sealed. The young woman asks Jacques to believe in her innocence and he assures her: "Je suis votre ami, vous pouvez compter entièrement sur moi... entièrement."¹³ Now Séverine is confident of her power over Jacques. She pouts prettily at the young man and tells him not to stare at her ". . . parce que vous allez vous user les yeux."¹⁴ Subsequently, Séverine pays particular attention to the engine driver. She kisses him in greeting then makes a play of removing a smudge of lipstick from his cheek. This

¹³ This quotation is taken directly from the film. The original script underwent so many modifications that it coincides only rarely with the finished version of the film, a point made by Pierre Leprohon: "Il [Renoir] . . . rédigea en quinze jours un scénario assez superficiel dont le dialogue était très mauvais (ce sont les termes de l'auteur) . . . il ne répond que très rarement au film réalisé. Une fois de plus, Renoir modifia le scénario en tournant, remplaçant le plus souvent son dialogue hâtif par celui du romancier." Leprohon, p. 78.

¹⁴ Jean Renoir La Bête humaine (Scénario) (Paris: Copy Bourse, n.d.), p. 57. Referred to subsequently as "Script."

and a number of other little attentions increase the intimacy between them until Jacques can maintain the charade no longer; he declares his love for Séverine but she, protesting that she is unable to love anyone, recoils. She plays for sympathy, hinting coyly at an unfortunate experience in her childhood. Jacques is convinced by her guileless air and agrees that they should be simply "de bons camarades" (direct transcription from film). Yet it is Séverine who, later, initiates the change in the relationship and they become lovers. One particular gesture, at this stage, provides the clue to Séverine's nature and gives the lie to her presentation of herself as a victim of the opposite sex. She meets Jacques in Paris at Victoire's rooms. With a predatory, nipping movement that speaks both of her assertiveness within the relationship and her assurance of her own sensuality, she moves eagerly into her lover's embrace.

Roubaud is first seen in his position as deputy station-master, doggedly enforcing the rules of the company in the face of threats from a high ranking passenger who has infringed a regulation. The switch from professional to domestic scene provides an insight into two aspects of Roubaud's character: his honesty and dedication to duty (it would have been easier for him to simply avoid the confrontation or to kow-tow to the offender); and his devotion to his young wife. When his passion for Séverine has been destroyed he becomes a shell of a man. His

attention to his duties is perfunctory; the focal point of his existence is the cafe where he can lose himself, briefly, in a passion for gambling. But even here his changed circumstances are highlighted. He loses and plunges into a downward spiral of debt and increased speculation. The cheerful employee who at the beginning of the film turned down an invitation to play cards is now seen intent on a game. When it ends he loses all animation, his shoulders slump and he rises heavily. His demeanor is less that of dejection than the absence of any feelings at all. He makes his rounds of the depot and his movements are those of an automaton. Staring ahead with vacant eyes, he moves past Jacques and Séverine, concealed in the shadows, oblivious to their presence. Indeed, one cannot help feeling that he would have welcomed the blow if Jacques had been able to deliver it.

Jacques presents an image of uneasy reticence. He is taciturn and tense and only seems to relax when at work. Consequently, a division is noticeable between Jacques in his professional capacity and Jacques as an individual. The film opens with shots of Jacques driving his engine. Here he is in command, his attention completely on the operation of the engine. Back at the depot, however, he seems to retreat into himself, remaining aloof from the light-hearted banter of his colleagues. When he reports the damage to the engine which occurred during the journey, he alludes to "la Lison" and the clerk questions: "Qu'est-ce que c'est 'la Lison'?" Jacques

replies: "C'est ma machine" (direct transcription from film). This brusque response hints at the depth of the attachment that the driver feels for his engine. It is a feeling which extends beyond professional pride. Jacques has endowed the machine with the personality of a woman and given "her" a name and in this substitution he enjoys a measure of release, for with the metal giant he is in control both of "her" and, more importantly, of himself. Jacques's attraction to Séverine is the source of the rare occasions when he is seen to relax. They meet in the depot and Jacques invites Séverine aboard his engine. This scene, occurring when la Lison is about to be supplanted by a woman of flesh and blood, temporarily unites the two facets of Jacques's character. Yet the hope which Jacques glimpses in his association with Séverine is but a brief spark. It flares -- represented, metaphorically, by the sunrise which greets the couple after they have consummated their relationship -- and dies when Séverine confesses her part in Grandmorin's murder, at which point Jacques feels the stirring of a dreaded desire. With the confirmation of his worst fears the strain returns to Jacques, accompanied by an air of desperation for now the engine driver knows that he cannot escape his condition.

The characters can be summed up quite concisely: Séverine is a coquette; Roubaud (originally) a conscientious employee and devoted husband; and Jacques is a loner. In fact, what such a summing up reveals is a series of types.

That Renoir dealt in types, of an altogether different kind from Zola, is further borne out by an examination of the other characters; in particular Flore, and the Misards generally.

Renoir presents Flore in a pastoral setting; she has just finished bathing in a pool. Two young men are looking on, teasing her and she reacts by pushing one of them into the water. The scene is taken directly from the novel where it is given as an example of the reasons behind Flore's reputation as a virago. Zola's Flore is imbued with a pristine savagery and the character contains more than a hint of Artemis the Virgin Huntress. The original encounter is, therefore, decidedly more violent. One of the young men has the misfortune to be seized by Flore, "et elle l'avait arrangé si bien, que personne ne la guettait plus" (p. 94). In the film, Flore's reaction is presented as the result of a burst of temper and marks her with a rather appealing gaucherie. Her response to Jacques is in the same vein. She shuns him more from a sense of awkwardness and a spark of tomboyish independence than any real desire to evade his caress. The pastoral scene, the laughter of the two young men and Flore's petulant flounce as she steps onto the bank combine to produce a sympathetic image of a buxom country lass on the threshold of womanhood. The same process of etiolation can be seen at work on her parents. Gone are the stubborn Phasie and the avaricious Misard, in their places Renoir presents a benevolent invalid, concerned for her

god-son's wellbeing, and an innocuous crossing keeper.

A marked difference exists therefore between the types depicted by Zola and those depicted by Renoir. The trend is towards a niceness totally at odds with the originals. Even Jacques, in his struggle to overcome his condition, evokes sympathy rather than revulsion. Indeed, the existence of such a vast gulf between the characters in the book and their portrayal on screen suggests that they underwent a major review during the work of adaptation, a review which could most accurately be described as an "embourgeoisement." Petulance replaces aggression; flirtatiousness is substituted for sensuality -- these traits were much more socially acceptable. The situations, devoted husband deceived by flighty wife, for example, or the murder of the wife's lover by a vengeful husband, were situations with which the audience could at least identify. The presentation of violence as a norm (as is the case in the novel) would have been an altogether different matter. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that Renoir was obliged to conform to the moral standards of the day due to the necessity of satisfying the official censor.

Undoubtedly the most striking change in characterization is to be found in Renoir's representation of Pecqueux. He cast Carette in the role. The actor's name appears in the credits "en vedette," thereby focusing attention on his appearance in the film and reminding the audience of his renown... as a comedian! A greater difference between the

film character and the original can hardly be imagined. The Pecqueux of the film is a short, winsome figure who adds a welcome note of whimsical humor. In his partnership with Jacques he provides the counterbalance to his somber companion. Once more the emphasis is on niceness for, although Pecqueux has the makings of a rogue, he is an extremely likeable one and the sincerity of his concern for Jacques is never in doubt.

One character has yet to be mentioned in either context of book or film. Cabuche, the shy quarryman, is transformed for no apparent reason into a poacher and appears only briefly in the film. Zola inserts a cameo of Beauty and the Beast into the novel in the form of Cabuche's description of his love for the tender young Louissette. On his return from prison where he has served four years for killing a man in a quarrel, Cabuche finds himself an outcast and retreats into the woods. Louissette is the only person who treats him like a human being:

Alors, tout le monde me fuyait, on m'aurait jeté des pierres. Et elle, dans la forêt où je la rencontrais toujours, elle s'approchait, elle causait, elle était gentille, oh! gentille... Nous sommes donc devenus amis comme ça. Nous nous tenions par la main, en nous promenant. C'était si bon, si bon, dans ce temps-là!...
(p. 153)

Cabuche is primarily a victim of the two elements which combine to form his character: great physical strength and

profound naïveté. Accordingly, he functions as a scapegoat throughout the novel. He is accused of Grandmorin's murder, blamed for the train crash engineered by Flore and finally condemned as Roubaud's accomplice in the murder of Séverine. In the film Jean Renoir himself plays the part of Cabuche. His longest appearance is the speech made during his questioning, when he describes the relationship with Louisette. Violent protestations of innocence result in him being dragged from the room. He does not reappear and the audience is left with the examining magistrate's assumption of his guilt: ". . . c'est aux yeux que je les reconnais... Son compte est bon... Il est à nous" (Script, p. 42). Cabuche has been reduced to a fairly obvious plot mechanism and after one subsequent reference to him by Jacques who, in conversation with the Roubauds, asserts the poacher's innocence, no more is heard of him. The result is an imbalance. Renoir plays the part with verve and wrings every ounce of feeling from the story of Cabuche's love for Louisette then... Cabuche just disappears. The interrogation scene is thus left unsupported, jutting out like a broken spar from the rigging. It seems that in this instance the director's love of pathos has led him to subvert his own chosen limits in adapting the novel. As the innocent poacher was to disappear so completely, his appearance should have been correspondingly brief and unmarked by any emotional atmosphere in order to avoid a subsequent sense of incongruity.

Zola's desire to portray the railway milieu as accurately and fully as possible is achieved most effectively through the medium of film. Men and machines are seen in action. Shots of engines being driven, shunted, cleaned and generally maintained occur at intervals throughout the film. The railway workers are therefore integrated into the backdrop as well as featuring at the forefront of the action. Jacques, for example, is a major character and his function as engine driver is highlighted, but other aspects of railway procedure are shown and add to the film's documentary validity. Thus Pecqueux is seen in the shunting yard cleaning out the boiler when Jacques walks across to the office to report the damage to his engine.

Renoir paints a pleasant picture of the working man as an industrious, trustworthy member of a tightly knit group. Indeed Pecqueux, with his "terre-à-terre" approach to life, his disarming frankness about his peccadilloes and his concern for Jacques, is the focal point of Renoir's portrayal of the railway workers. These agreeable images are due, at least in part, to the depiction of everyday "people" in the context of their working situation. The novel, for all Zola's efforts to reproduce an authentic environment, is populated by the victims of aberrant tendencies -- a psychopath, poisoner, drunkard, and others of equally charming disposition -- which, as previously stated, makes empathy impossible. However, an additional factor should be taken into account when considering the ability of the

audience to relate to the film characters. Renoir has updated the action to 1938, the era contemporaneous with the shooting of the film. The novel, on the other hand, is set earlier in time as the events take place during the close of the Second Empire. Yet novel and film share a common feature. The era in which each is set saw a build up to war. The novel closes with the image of Jacques's engine, unmanned and careering headlong to destruction. An image which parallels France's plunge into the Franco-Prussian conflict. When Renoir filmed LA BÊTE HUMAINE the world stood once more on the brink of armed hostilities, but no allusion is made in the film to the storm clouds which were gathering over Europe.

Renoir's updated version of La Bête humaine effectively adds a third time frame to the two already associated with the novel -- these being the era in which action is set and the period in which Zola researched and composed the text. The Second Empire provides the political/historical backdrop to the novel and is referred to mainly in the context of the judiciary. Indeed, attention to the political angle, especially when compared with the wealth of detail given about the railway, is cursory and limited to a view of the regime's profligacy. In the film the railway continues to be the chief setting. But Renoir, with the exception of the interrogation scene, ignores the judicial aspect of the novel, concentrating instead on the mainstream of the plot. The director did, however, share Zola's concern for

authenticity in the portrayal of the railway milieu. Sequences involving trains were shot at gare St. Lazare and on a stretch of track between Le Havre and Paris. Alexander Sesonske describes how Renoir and his team:

. . . became students of the "chemin de fer," determined to make a film that the "cheminots" would not disavow as false to their metier. With the cooperation of the national railroad, the Societe Nationale de Chemin de fer, and the railroad workers' Federation, they rode the engines, prowled the yards, watched the workings of the station.¹⁵

In addition, the SNCF put a locomotive and ten meters of track at the film crew's disposal. Thus Renoir was able to film work scenes with maximum authenticity and, of all the scenes shot, only Jacques's suicide was a mock up. Zola's method of composition and his observation of the technical aspects of the railway at first hand (on 15th April 1889 he was permitted to travel aboard an engine) finds a counterpart in Renoir's attention to detail -- albeit that the director was motivated by a sense of responsibility to the railway workers. The result, in each case, is particularly effective and there can be no doubt that the determination of the film-maker and his team to understand and utilize the rolling

¹⁵ Alexander Sesonske, Jean Renoir The French Films, 1924-1939 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 353.

stock greatly enhanced the impact of the film. The fact that Renoir was able to use the facilities offered by the SNCF indicates that the technology involved had altered little since Zola's time. The later advent of high powered diesel trains and concomitant changes in working methods means that it would be very difficult to film La Bête humaine today. Indeed, it is Zola's preoccupation with technological advance, expressed through his documentary approach to the railway, which is foremost among the elements that now date the novel, precisely because the procedures it portrays have been overtaken by progress.

Some critics, notably those to the left of the establishment, criticized Renoir for what they considered his total disregard of Zola's political stance in the novel.¹⁶ Certainly, Zola does attack the corrupt system in operation under the emperor Napoleon III and his administrators. Grandmorin exemplifies a high ranking citizen and one honored by the regime yet who is a moral degenerate in his private life. But although Zola underlines some of the inequities of the system with heavy penstrokes, it still would not be

¹⁶ François Poulle in Renoir 1938, ou Jean Renoir pour rien, enquête sur un cinéaste (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1969) is especially dismayed by Renoir's portrayal of Cabuche, exclaiming: "Car si le personnage de Cabuche n'est plus une source d'émotion ou de révolte, s'il doit provoquer l'attendrissement ou le rire, alors l'édifice tragique de Zola s'écroule" (p. 49). And it should be noted that for this critic tragedy in La Bête humaine lies in his view of the work as ". . . une dénonciation de l'aliénation de l'homme dans la société industrielle" (p. 51).

correct to make social criticism the hinge-pin of the novel. Evil is depicted but in such a way that it is taken beyond the scope of one particular time and place and amplified to mythic proportions. The process by which this amplification is achieved provides the subject, in part, of Chapter Four of this study. Suffice it to say, for the moment, that any attempt to present the novel primarily in the light of a social critique fails to do justice to the savage beauty of some of its images which, at the last, transcend even the author's intention to harness them to a particular doctrine or theory.

Renoir's response to Zola's emphatic portrayal of the darkest side of human nature was, seemingly, a move in the opposite direction. The images he presents -- Flore at the pool, Pecqueux recounting an anecdote to fellow workers in the canteen -- have a far pleasanter flavor. Necessity accounts, in part, for the change. It was impossible to portray characters on screen in the specific physical molds used by Zola. Further, the link between appearance and behavior assumed by the author would, if translated onto film, have resulted in a horror movie of the first order even by present-day standards. Notwithstanding the fact that the rationale provided by the presentation of a respected school of thought in the field of criminal science no longer existed in the 1930s as Lombroso's theories were, by this time, obsolete.

Yet, necessity aside, Renoir's portrayal of the

characters suggests a specific approach to their functions. His treatment of Pecqueux and the change in the fireman's relationship with Jacques is a fine example. Pecqueux, it was previously noted, counterpoints the somber Jacques, just as the sunlit scene at the pool is a prelude to the dark onrush of Jacques's fury when he begins to strangle Flore. Clearly, the contrast of light and dark is a facet of Renoir's direction which extends beyond the characters and may provide a clue to his overall conception of the film, a point which will be developed later. The effect of Renoir's characterization on the thematic content of the film is, however, an immediate consideration and one which will be examined in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two

Action

Action in La Bête humaine is unrelentingly similar. The novel is constructed around a series of murders and violent deaths, thus: Roubaud (and Séverine) murder Grandmorin; Misard murders his wife, Phasie; Jacques attempts to murder Flore; Jacques and Séverine attempt to murder Roubaud; Flore sets out to murder Jacques and Séverine, fails and then kills herself; Jacques murders Séverine; Pecqueux attacks Jacques and both are killed. This résumé leaves no doubt that murder is the primary component of action in the novel. Each character is subject to an identical process by which he, or she, begins as aggressor and ends as victim. Even Misard who lives on after he has killed Phasie, does so in the grip of a mania resulting from his inability to find her savings, a mania which in the end destroys his sanity.

The figure of the hereditary killer lurks at the heart of this welter of dark deeds. Jacques does not kill until the narrative reaches its final stages. The imminence of his loss of control provides the thread of suspense which Zola unwinds throughout the novel and tightens until it reaches breaking point in chapter eleven, when Séverine dies at Jacques's hands. Jacques's compulsion is demonstrated as early as the second chapter when his sexual onslaught upon

Flore changes character and he is tempted instead to kill her:

Une fureur semblait le prendre, une férocité qui le faisait chercher des yeux, autour de lui, une arme, une pierre, quelque chose enfin pour la tuer. (pp. 96-97)

The background to this manic urge to kill is explained shortly afterwards. Jacques, exhausted by his frenzied race across the hilly countryside around the Croix-de-Maufras, collapses beside the track. Into Jacques's subsequent thoughts the author incorporates a description of the character's family history, carefully inserting him into the genealogy of the Rougon-Macquart series as the third son of Gervaise and Lantier. A last minute addition to the family, in fact, brought about by the need for a totally new character to embody such an all-consuming compulsion. The explanation then continues:

La famille n'était guère d'aplomb, beaucoup avaient une fêlure. Lui, à certaines heures, la sentait bien, cette fêlure héréditaire; non pas qu'il fût d'une santé mauvaise, car l'appréhension et la honte de ces crises l'avaient seules maigri autrefois; mais c'étaient, dans son être, de subites pertes d'équilibre, comme des cassures, des trous par lesquels son moi lui échappait, au milieu d'une sorte de grande fumée qui déformait tout. Il ne s'appartenait plus, il obéissait à ses muscles, à la bête enragée. Pourtant, il ne buvait pas, il se refusait même un petit verre d'eau-de-vie, ayant remarqué que la moindre goutte d'alcool le rendait fou. Et

il en venait à penser qu'il payait pour les autres, les pères, les grands-pères, qui avaient bu, les générations d'ivrognes dont il était le sang gâté, un lent empoisonnement, une sauvagerie qui le ramenait avec les loups mangeurs de femmes, au fond des bois

Puisqu'il ne les connaissait pas, quelle fureur pouvait-il avoir contre elles? car, chaque fois, c'était comme une soudaine crise de rage aveugle, une soif toujours renaissante de venger des offenses très anciennes, dont il aurait perdu l'exacte mémoire. Cela venait-il donc de si loin, du mal que les femmes avaient fait à sa race, de la rancune amassée de mâle en mâle, depuis la première tromperie au fond des cavernes? Et il sentait aussi, dans son accès, une nécessité de bataille pour conquérir la femelle et la dompter, le besoin pervers de la jeter morte sur son dos, ainsi qu'une proie qu'on arrache aux autres, à jamais. Son crâne éclatait sous l'effort, il n'arrivait pas à se répondre, trop ignorant, pensait-il, le cerveau trop sourd, dans cette angoisse d'un homme poussé à des actes ou sa volonté n'était pour rien, et dont la cause en lui avait disparu. (pp. 98-99)

It is necessary to quote the passage relating to Jacques's atavism at such length in order to demonstrate the variety of elements that the author suggests as the possible source of Jacques's mania. The passage begins with a reference to heredity (the first element); Jacques's suffering it seems is transmitted genetically. He is the victim of a "fêlure héréditaire." From his drink sodden ancestors -- "les générations d'ivrognes dont il était le sang gâté" -- Zola moves on to talk of "une sauvagerie qui le ramenait avec les loups mangeurs de femmes, au fond des bois." The second element is then a move even further back in time to an age of prehistoric savagery when man existed on a par with the beasts. So far the progression -- or rather,

regression -- has shown a certain logic, however a third element is about to be introduced. Reference is made to: "Une soif toujours renaissante de venger des offenses très anciennes." Thus the idea of vengeance (the third element) as motivation for the urge to kill is suggested. But vengeance upon whom? The author continues, posing the question: "Cela venait-il donc de si loin, du mal que les femmes avaient fait à sa race . . .?" The existence of one particular memory deeply ingrained in the subconscious of all members of the male sex is therefore implied, a memory which not only separates them from but, equally, opposes them to members of the female sex. This memory refers to Eve and her invitation to Adam to partake of the apple or, in Zola's words, "la première tromperie au fond des cavernes." Zola, by including the reference to the Fall in this way, has engineered a fusion of elements. Physiological regression has been intermingled with myth. The first act of deception, according to Zola, took place not in the Garden of Eden but in the depths of a prehistoric cave. An additional element (the fourth) is now described: "une nécessité de bataille pour conquérir la femelle et la dompter, le besoin pervers de la jeter morte sur son dos." Desire for vengeance is succeeded by the urge to conquer and possess. Absolute possession in the terms of aggressor and victim employed by Zola can only mean death.

Emphasis has shifted away from an hereditary flaw occurring in a given family to a much wider sense of male

outrage against the female sex. The latter word is, indeed, of paramount importance. S-E-X, it will be seen, is fast becoming the focal point of the issue. Reference to the Fall conjures an awareness of Original Sin and a consequent aura of guilt. The next step in Zola's scheme is an evocation of the libido in its darkest form: the urge to obliterate the one possessed. The delineation of the causes underlying Jacques's "mal" is, to say the least, complex and rather muddled. The genealogy of the Rougons and the Macquarts fades into the mists of man's prehistoric ancestors. Somewhere along this tenuous line woman becomes the victim of a primeval sense of male fury. A causal link is then made between victim and culprit. Culpability is associated with the lapse into carnal knowledge. Man and woman are now separate and opposed. The sense of male outrage is associated with a specific grudge against woman and the male turns against womankind in a fury of rampant libido. Zola has constructed a sequence of references which, by their juxtaposition, resonate with symbolic meaning. Anthropology: primeval man -- an embodiment of raw power. Myth: the first Man -- deceived by Woman, the result evil/sex, the price death. The latter allusion merges with the evocation of the savage male force, the ungovernable hunger to possess and destroy.

The consequence of the spinning of this veritable web of associations is the forging of an indelible link between sex and death. "Amour-mort" become two faces of one coin.

Murder, therefore, acquires an additional perspective. It is (with the sole exception of the murder of Phasie) motivated by jealousy. And, the point must be underlined, jealousy arising not from love but from passion. Throughout La Bête humaine the act of murder is formulated in the context of physical desire, thus: Roubaud desires Séverine, she refuses him and her resistance leads to the confession of the nature of her relationship with Grandmorin; Séverine's increasingly passionate response to Jacques prompts her to seek a final solution to the problem of her husband's presence; Flore desires Jacques, she discovers the engine driver and Séverine locked in an embrace and is racked with jealousy; Jacques sleeps with Philomène and the couple are caught "en flagrant délit" by Pecqueux who erupts into a jealous fury. Jealousy/desire is obviously the "force motrice" for murder and one can see how this outline interconnects with the résumé of action given on page 38 of this study. Séverine confesses her affair with Grandmorin and Roubaud murders him; Flore discovers Jacques and Séverine's liaison and causes their train to crash; Pecqueux surprises Jacques with Philomène and the two men fight and die.

The nature of the action in La Bête humaine may now be re-evaluated. Murder is indeed a primary component of action in the novel, however death, it has been demonstrated, is inseparable from sex. Accordingly, it would be more accurate to say that sexual desire and an associated urge to kill

comprise the source of the novel's action.¹⁷

Physical desire has been described in this study as the context for murder and the statement may now be recalled in a more literal sense. The setting for Séverine's confession of her liaison with Grandmorin is Victoire's living quarters -- a sort of bedsit with table, stove and, of course, bed. Alone with Séverine in the intimate atmosphere of the room, Roubaud becomes aroused:

Peu à peu, sans une parole, il l'avait enveloppée d'une caresse plus étroite, excité par la tiédeur de ce corps jeune, qu'il tenait ainsi à pleins bras. Elle le grisait de son odeur, elle achevait d'affoler son désir, en cambrant les reins pour se dégager. D'une secousse, il l'enleva de la fenêtre, dont il referma les vitres du coude. Sa bouche avait rencontré la sienne, il lui écrasait les lèvres, il l'emportait vers le lit. (p. 66)

But his lust is denied and quickly gives way to violence:

"D'un bond, il fut de nouveau sur elle, le poing en l'air; et, furieusement, d'un seul coup, près de la table, il l'abbatit" (pp. 68-69). Jacques and Séverine spend the night together and once more the setting is Victoire's quarters (chapter seven). Unable to restrain the urge to share her

¹⁷ Denis de Rougemont in his work L'Amour et l'occident (Paris: U.G.E., 1962) examines the recurrent association of death with desire in Western culture and traces its origins to the influence of the troubadours and the sublimation of profane love as it occurred in the rituals and traditions of "l'amour courtois."

guilt with Jacques, Séverine describes Grandmorin's murder. As her "récit" (and "récit" is indeed the correct description for the vivid first person account given by Séverine) reaches its climax: "Ils se possédèrent, retrouvant l'amour au fond de la mort, dans la même volupté douloureuse des bêtes qui s'éventrent pendant le rut" (p. 257). Afterwards Jacques is tortured by the resurrection of his "mal" and in order to spare Séverine, goes out in search of a victim. Once more lust is succeeded by an impulse to kill. In the latter instance an impulse which is translated into action in chapter eleven, when the location is once more a bedroom -- the "chambre rouge" at the Croix-de-Maufras.

The recurrence of a particular type of setting, a bedroom for instance, suggests the recurrence of a particular type of action. However, Zola's characters do not simply go to bed. Arousal and the sexual act itself are described in the most explicit terms. The scene in which Roubaud's lust is kindled includes a number of specific physical details: "Elle le grisait de son odeur, elle achevait d'affoler son désir, en cambrant les reins... ." And Jacques and Séverine's union is evoked in grossly physical, even bestial terms as the couple are compared with "des bêtes qui s'éventrent pendant le rut." Action in La Bête humaine is therefore not only violent in nature, its evocation is achieved through the use of terms which are unremittingly physical and often of an extreme brutality.

An additional factor contributes to the shocking nature

of Zola's portrayal of sex and death. Violent acts accumulate as the novel progresses. The characters experience lust, jealousy, rage, suspicion. However, one particular emotion is notable for its absence. Remorse is not included in the limited range of the protagonists' emotions. For example, Roubaud's existence continues after he has murdered Grandmorin "sans un remords." The deputy station-master has in fact sunk into a lethargic state of total indifference: "il s'en allait de son pas alourdi, le dos indifférent" (p. 294). Jacques, on the other hand, feels positively exuberant. Aboard his new engine, three months after murdering Séverine, he glories in the sweetness of the night:

. . . cette nuit-là, le ciel était d'une douceur si délicieuse, qu'il se sentait porté à l'indulgence, la laissant galoper un peu à sa fantaisie, heureux lui-même de respirer largement. Jamais il ne s'était mieux porté, sans remords, l'air soulagé, dans une grande paix heureuse. (p. 353)

He even "experiments" by sleeping with Philomène in order to put his cure to the test:

Et il n'y avait pas eu là seulement une minute de curiosité sensuelle . . . Deux fois déjà, il l'avait eue, et rien, pas un malaise, pas un frisson. Sa grande joie, son air apaisé et riant devait venir, même à son insu, du bonheur de n'être plus qu'un homme comme les autres. (pp. 353-354)

The amount of violence depicted in the novel, coupled with the rank callousness exhibited by the characters, suggests a particular aim on the part of the author. Therefore it is hardly surprising to discover that Zola set out to create a "drame violent à donner le cauchemar à tout Paris," and there can be no doubt that he was successful.¹⁸ Long after the last page has been turned, images of Séverine's shattered body return to haunt the memory and the thunderous passage of the runaway troop train echoes in the mind as it hurtles ever onwards towards a crescendo of destruction.

*

* *

In the film action is presented quite differently. Indeed, having noted Renoir's treatment of the characters, one should be prepared for a significant change in approach to the presentation of events. First of all, action is reduced to a core comprising: the murder of Grandmorin by Roubaud (and Séverine); the attempted murder of Roubaud by Jacques (and Séverine); the murder of Séverine by Jacques. The branch of the plot which relates to the Misards has been completely pruned away and the focus is now on Roubaud, Séverine and Jacques. Murder still appears to be the

¹⁸ Emile Zola, Letters to J. Van Santen Kolff, ed. R. J. Niess (St. Louis: Washington University Press, 1940), p. 338.

chief component of action, jealousy the motivating force, however here coincidence with the novel ends. An examination of the act of murder as it is presented by Renoir will demonstrate the difference.

The first murder, that of Grandmorin, takes place on a train. The president opens the door of his private compartment and his surprise at seeing Séverine turns to alarm as Roubaud pushes her forward, jostles Grandmorin back into the compartment and quickly closes the door, snapping the blind shut in the same movement. The camera continues to focus on the shuttered door and the stretch of empty corridor; the soundtrack rises to a crescendo. The rattle and roar of the train combine with intermittent flashes of light to produce a sensation of escalating speed. The door opens. Roubaud shoves Séverine out into the corridor, he himself backs from the compartment moving as if skirting an object on the floor. The frantic rush of the train, suggested by the interplay of light and sound, slows to a steadier pace. The couple return to their carriage.

The murder of Séverine is staged in the Roubauds' apartment. After an evening of dancing at the "bal des cheminots" -- a social aspect of the railwaymen's lives introduced by the director -- Séverine has told Jacques that she cannot continue seeing him and he understands that the removal of Roubaud is the condition upon which the continuation of their relationship depends. He determines to commit the murder and follows Séverine home to tell her of

his resolution. As they talk someone is heard ascending the stairs, the couple assume it is Roubaud. Séverine extinguishes the light and kisses Jacques. His control snaps. A brief struggle ensues during which Séverine's voice, shrill with surprise, cuts across the silence. She collapses onto the bed and Jacques stares down at her lifeless form before discarding the knife and running from the room.

Most notable about Renoir's presentation of murder is precisely the way in which he does not present it. In each case the director avoids showing the act of murder. A closed door is interposed between the camera and the assumed act of violence while an atmosphere of tension is created by the use of light and sound effects. Jacques turns upon Séverine and his movements are cloaked by the darkness into which she has just plunged the room. A scuffle, a cry and the deed is done. The same approach can be detected in the director's treatment, or non-treatment, of sex.

The consummation of Jacques and Séverine's relationship takes place, originally, in a shed. This is also the case in the film but the camera does not follow them through the door. When Séverine tells Jacques about Grandmorin's murder the setting is, like the novel, Victoire's rooms. The couple embrace but soon Séverine begins to talk of the time when she was with Roubaud in the same room. With barely concealed avidity Jacques questions her about the murder, and as the details emerge he abruptly hides his face. Startled,

Séverine asks what is wrong, but he soothes her fears and the moment passes.

This scene depicts the re-awakening of the beast and, in the novel, highlights the visceral quality of the link between death and desire. Séverine's words mingle with the physical expression of her desire for Jacques, and the act of confession combines with the characters' sexual coupling to create a terrible vortex which threatens to overwhelm even Séverine:

Le frisson du désir se perdait dans cet autre frisson de mort, revenu en elle. C'était, comme au fond de toute volupté, une agonie qui recommençait. Un instant, elle resta suffoquée par une sensation ralentie de vertige. (p. 249)

Renoir's approach to the scene is an altogether different matter. Gone the vividly phrased confession whispered between kisses in the shadows of the night, in its place a conversation which is positively sedate by comparison, conducted fully clothed and in broad daylight. Jacques's eagerness to know the details, his breathless concentration recall his condition but the association of "amour-mort" that is the crux of the scene in the novel is entirely absent, a point which is further borne out by Jacques's dismissal of his condition as an inclination to spells of melancholia -- ". . . les coups de tristesse qui me rendent terriblement malheureux, dont je ne puisse parler" (direct

transcription from film). One can only conclude that Renoir's beast is an entirely different animal from that portrayed by Zola. Yet Jacques is still the victim of a compulsion to kill and, specifically, a compulsion to kill women. The question must then arise: how did the director portray Jacques's mania? The clue lies in Jacques's reaction to Séverine's description of her feelings at the moment of Grandmorin's death. As she exclaims: "C'est affreux! J'ai plus vécu dans cette minute-là que dans toute ma vie passée" (direct transcription from film), he hides his face. This gesture is linked with an action which is common to each murder, or attempted murder, scene.

Séverine has just told her husband that she has refused an invitation to her guardian's chateau, and Roubaud thinks her reluctance is due to a fear that she should be mistaken for Grandmorin's illegitimate daughter. Séverine is horrified by this suggestion and rushes to the mirror. While she makes an anxious examination of her features Roubaud takes her in his arms. Rejection and revelation follow one upon the other with Séverine blurting out her distaste for men because "ils ne pensent qu'à ça" (direct transcription from film), and, in the next breath, her dislike of the ring given to her by Grandmorin. Roubaud is, of course, quick to make the association.

Jacques and Séverine stalk their intended victim across the deserted shunting yard. Jacques stoops to pick up an iron bar and as he does so, confronts his own image reflected

in a pool of water. He freezes and the instant is associated with his later inability to strike when Roubaud crosses the yard.

Séverine is dead. Jacques stares down at her then turns to leave. As he passes the dresser he catches sight of his contorted features in a mirror and flees, horror stricken, into the night.

The mirror provides the means of expressing a sudden rush of self awareness. Séverine seeks confirmation of Roubaud's assertion that she could be Grandmorin's daughter, and the realization fills her with horror for then her illicit relationship with Grandmorin would be not only adulterous but also incestuous. Disgust wells up in her and overflows in a gesture of revulsion which alerts her husband to the truth. Jacques sees himself on the brink of taking a life and the realization of what he is about to do stays his hand. However, realization comes too late to save Séverine. Jacques only becomes conscious of what he has done afterwards when he recognizes the reflection in the mirror as his own, and this instant of revelation recalls that other moment when he sought to conceal his features in an attempt to escape the knowledge that his malaise had returned to torture him. Awareness brings with it an overwhelming sense of remorse. Yet can one really assume so much from that one brief instant when the engine driver stares into the mirror? Perhaps not, however the film's ending leaves no room for doubt. Jacques commits suicide.

A brief extract from the novel is presented in the guise of a preface to the film. It is taken from the passage relating to Jacques's atavism however, by quoting piecemeal, the director has completely changed the emphasis and the passage now seems to anticipate Jacques's suicide:

Lui, à certaines heures, la sentait bien, cette fêlure héréditaire. Et il en venait à penser qu'il payait pour les autres, les pères, les grands-pères, qui avaient bu, les générations d'ivrognes dont il était le sang gâté. Son crâne éclatait sous l'effort dans l'angoisse d'un homme poussé à des actes où sa volonté n'était pour rien, et dont la cause en lui avait disparu.

(direct transcription from film)

The reference to heredity remains, indeed the focus has shifted to this aspect. Jacques's condition is attributed to an illness inherited from members of previous generations of his family, but now the accent is on its source as a mental aberration rather than a physiological compulsion. Jacques, it seems, is at the mercy of forces in the grip of which he commits "des actes où sa volonté n'était pour rien". Ultimately he is pushed beyond the limits of endurance -- "Son crâne éclatait sous l'effort" -- and self-destruction becomes inevitable. The director has completely erased the premise upon which the novel is based, namely the embodiment of regressive forces in members of modern civilization, yet as the text fades it is replaced by a picture of the author beneath which the signature Emile Zola appears. The wily

Renoir is not only attributing the quotation, he is setting a seal of authenticity on his own work. Whether one approves or disapproves Renoir's version, the shot of the august author certainly lends it an air of assurance at the outset.

The tonalities of book and film vary greatly. Red, the shade of freshly spilt blood, and black, the color of darkest night, are the predominant hues of the novel. However, the film is starker. The sharpness of Renoir's presentation and the contrast of black and white arising from the medium itself combine to make it so. Much is omitted and the film immediately gains in conciseness. Events are presented in quick-fire succession, producing an unequivocal causal sequence that gathers pace from the opening shots of Jacques and Pecqueux on the home stretch to gare St. Lazare through to Jacques's leap from his engine on the very same stretch of track. Yet, despite the director's avoidance of the blatant brutality intrinsic to the novel, his approach was received with as much horror in certain quarters as if he had emulated Zola's original intention to disturb the dreams of the people of Paris. "[Le] film le plus dégradant jusqu'alors." Can such a description really have been deemed applicable to LA BÊTE HUMAINE, especially when one considers how little violence is shown in the film compared to the content of the novel? Candel, representative of "la Ligue de Moralité," thought it applicable. Indeed, his views, which include the above reaction to LA BÊTE HUMAINE, are couched in the strongest terms:

Comprenez, Monsieur, l'actuel esprit moral est assez ténébreux, il me semble inutile de le galvauder davantage. Par conséquent, il ne tient qu'à vous, par votre saine compréhension et votre attitude, de mettre entrave à ce courant malsain.

La dignité de la personne humaine est pour moi et pour bien d'autres, animés des mêmes sentiments, un reflet très précieux dont nous exigeons le respect.

Soyez persuadé que je veux traiter ici en ami sincère mais certes rebelle à tout ce qui compromet la destinée de toute personnalité.¹⁹

According to Candel LA BÊTE HUMAINE posed a real threat to the moral fabric of society. But in what way was LA BÊTE HUMAINE so demoralizing? And surely, if such were the case, how much more undesirable the original must have been. In fact, LA BÊTE HUMAINE's supposed undesirability is located precisely in the areas where it differs most notably from the novel. The characters of the novel are nothing more than an accumulation of base instincts which invariably find expression in violence. They are not approximations of people but of throwbacks and are, by implication, the exception and not the rule. In the film action has another source: the interplay of conscious and unconscious motivation. Renoir's characters represent human beings and each suffers from a fatal flaw. Renoir seems to have

¹⁹ Extract from a letter included in a compilation of articles and interviews by Bernard Chardère entitled "Jean Renoir," Premier Plan, Nos. 22-24 (Lyon: S.E.R.D.O.C., 1962), p.272.

effectively shackled free will and left humanity at the mercy of its darker impulses and this, undoubtedly, is the basis for Candel's objection. Thus Jacques is seen to be the victim of darker forces within his own psyche. He fights against his weakness... and loses.

La Bête humaine ends in an orgy of destruction; LA BÊTE HUMAINE closes with shots of the track onto which Jacques has hurled himself. So, where the book describes a parabola, the film is circular; where Zola's world is bounded by genetic determinism, the plight of Renoir's characters is cast in more existential vein. They struggle to control their destinies but cannot even master their own actions against the backdrop of a world which appears implacable in the face of their suffering. Both book and film are devoid of transcendence but, finally, it is the film which is the more pessimistic. It lacks the energy of that closing rush to destruction, the open-endedness which, in its own way, offers a certain hope for renewal. Instead the film closes on a scene of pathetic irony. Jacques destroys himself, an action expressing despair and ultimate futility. Further, an official is shown insisting that the body be cleared from the line so that the train service will not be impeded. How much more can the importance of human life be diminished!

The beast in La Bête humaine is omnipresent, in LA BÊTE HUMAINE the applicability of the title narrows considerably and Jacques does seem to be the eponymous

character. Indeed, one soon begins to wonder whether there is a beast in the film at all. And, if there is, it is certainly not of the kind envisaged by Zola. It is a subtler, more psychologically oriented manifestation -- more the product, one could speculate, of the influence of Freud than that of Lombroso.

Chapter Three

Space

La Bête humaine is based on relationships of identity. One is continually made aware of reciprocal states and situations. The characters who exist within the confines of their obsessions are similarly trapped in their physical environment. The countryside around the Croix-de-Mauftras, with its hills and dips and bushes into which Jacques stumbles at every turn, is a fine example. Yet this and other descriptions exceed the limits of pathetic fallacy. Zola is not projecting Jacques's mental state onto his surroundings, he is drawing a parallel between the two. A look at an earlier passage will serve to highlight the distinction. After Roubaud has discovered Séverine's infidelity he stares out into the gathering dusk:

. . . c'était une confusion, à cette heure trouble de l'entre chien et loup, et il semblait que tout allait se briser, et tout passait, se frôlait, se dégageait, du même mouvement doux et rampant, vague au fond du crépuscule Quand Roubaud se retourna, il avait la face épaisse et têtue, comme envahie d'ombre par cette nuit qui tombait. (p. 75)

Roubaud is physically infected by the darkness. The line

which would normally separate the spectator from the scene is absent, leaving instead a situation of equivalence. The common denominator is matter. Roubaud, like his fellow protagonists, was not created as a vehicle for the examination of mental processes. He represents matter and is therefore permeable. According to the author's scheme, everything is reduced to one level -- that of corporeal existence. This is felt not only in the proliferation of physical elements, but also in the sense of pollution connected with them. Matter has little structural integrity; it can be penetrated and/or diffused, so adding a coloration to, or assuming the coloration of, something else. As inanimate and animate are identified on an equal basis (their materialism), Zola's fictional world is itself imbued with a primitive life force which in turn creates a sense of pervasive menace.

Throughout the novel action takes place in enclosed surroundings: Victoire's rooms, the employees' quarters at Le Havre, the Misards' cottage, the offices of the examining magistrate, the carriages and cabs of trains... However the sensation of being closed in is not limited to interior scenes. On the occasion of their first tryst, Séverine hurries to meet Jacques: ". . . la nuit était sans lune, une nuit de ciel couvert, ou pas une étoile ne luisait, sous la brume ardente qui assourdissait le ciel" (p. 196). The blackness is almost palpable as it closes about them: "Il faisait si sombre, qu'elle l'aurait frôlé sans le

reconnaître, s'il ne l'avait arrêtée dans ses bras, en lui donnant un baiser" (p. 196). External environment is consistently portrayed in terms of a barrier. Nowhere is this more apparent than chapter seven when the Lison and "her" passengers are beset by snow and not the fluffy white flakes of a Christmas card landscape but "épaisseurs blafardes," which restrict vision and eventually seize the engine in a deathly grip.

The reverse side of the coin is the characters' desire for concealment. Séverine, dressed all in black, melts into the shadows. She and Jacques stroll across the depot and among the maze of sheds and outbuildings: ". . . rien n'était plus facile que de se dissimuler, de se perdre ainsi qu'au fond d'un bois" (p. 197). Indeed, the impulse to hide is a reflex, a fact that infers both guilt and the presence of prying eyes. A closed door conceals and so may provide a refuge of sorts but it may, by the same token, conceal the listener on the other side. The corridor which divides the employees' quarters at Le Havre is full of furtive rustlings: the gentle click of a latch, the muted pad of carpet slippers, then -- silence. But no! is that a hiss of indrawn breath...? The sensation of being spied upon quickly reaches paranoiac proportions.

The latter is a particularly effective aspect of the novel. Zola successfully conveys an atmosphere of voyeurism which extends beyond the characters and is amplified into a hugely inimical presence. In the shunting yard Jacques and

Séverine wait for Roubaud, intent upon his death. Once more the setting is deepest night. Their faculties are heightened by the strong element of danger involved in the act they contemplate:

Le meurtre était décidé, il leur sembla qu'ils ne marchaient plus, qu'une force étrangère les portait au ras du sol. Leur sens avaient pris subitement une acuité extrême, le toucher surtout, car leurs mains l'une dans l'autre s'endolorissaient, le moindre effleurement de leurs lèvres devenait pareil à un coup d'ongle. Ils entendaient aussi les bruits qui se perdaient tout à l'heure, le roulement, le souffle lointain des machines, des chocs assourdis, des pas errants, au fond des ténèbres. Et ils voyaient la nuit, ils distinguaient les taches noires des choses, comme si un brouillard s'en était allé de leurs paupières . . . (p. 290)

The night no longer constitutes a barrier, their sharpened senses penetrate its blackness and their surroundings, affected by the tension of the moment, assume a different air. Movement animates the darkness and in the distance sound adds another dimension:

Au loin, une machine sifflait, jetant à la nuit une plainte de mélancolique détresse; à coups réguliers, on entendait un fracas, le choc d'un marteau géant, venu on ne savait d'où . . . (pp.290-291)

In fact, the atmosphere of menace associated with the furtive

couple has been magnified. Moreover, the description, containing the words "plainte" and "mélancolique détresse," has an ominous quality. When the author alludes to the pounding of a hammer "venu on ne savait d'où," he indicates the mechanism behind the effect. Each part of the description extends further into the distance and each stage (distanced progressively from the range of the protagonists' visual perception) becomes at the same time vaguer and larger. Thus the noise originates from a giant hammer the location of which is unknown. Because of its regularity the sound is reminiscent of a gigantic pulse. Also, because its origin is surmised and not seen, the sound becomes disassociated from an objective source and assumes an independent existence. Associated, instead, with the darkness and the murderous intentions of the human element, it becomes part of a brooding, malevolent presence.

It has been noted that environment is used to reflect the characters' constraint within the bounds of their obsessions. Surroundings, whether natural or man-made, are invariably evoked in terms of mass. Soon this preponderance of matter becomes stifling, so much so that it provokes a reaction and the build up of pressure produces an explosion. The steam engine provides a direct parallel because of the way it functions and the use to which it is put in the novel. Compression produces energy which in turn produces movement, yet movement that is channeled in one direction only. The link with Zola's characters becomes clear. They too are

forced in one direction and must move along their respective grooves at an ever increasing pace with no hope of escape. The only way out is, like the fate of the troop train, obliteration.

So far this examination of space has highlighted the deceptive simplicity of the subject. A room, a patch of hilly countryside -- what could be simpler? On the surface, nothing. However, a closer look reveals deeper implications, and indeed associations which entwine to form a pattern of increasing complexity. Nowhere is this truer than in the case of a single deserted house.

The novel's structure is based on the linearity of the railway track. Action is distributed between two ends of a line -- Paris and Le Havre -- and the level crossing -- the Croix-de-Maufras. The crossing sees a concentration of action: Grandmorin's murder, Jacques's attempt to strangle Flore, Phasie's murder, a train crash, Flore's suicide, Séverine's murder, Jacques's and Pecqueux's deaths. Clearly, action of a particular kind is staged at the Croix-de-Maufras, a fact which is sufficient to mark it as the "lieu fatal." However, the influence of the house at the crossing is felt throughout the novel for not only does violence recur there with unfailing regularity, references to the house itself also recur. At the beginning of chapter two, for instance, as Jacques approaches the Misards' cottage and again shortly before his assault on Flore. In chapter six when Jacques returns from a day in Paris, a day which has

seen the blossoming of his relationship with Séverine and at the end of chapter seven after Flore has found out about the relationship, now full blown. And in chapter eleven when Jacques returns to the house under cover of darkness intending to murder Roubaud.

This is just a selection of the references and a more detailed look at them (again, in order of their occurrence in the novel) may prove interesting.

A la Croix-de-Maufras, dans un jardin que le chemin de fer a coupé, la maison est posée de biais . . . toujours close, laissée comme en détresse . . . C'est le désert . . . (p. 81)

. . . la maison solitaire, plantée de biais . . .
(p. 92)

. . . la maison plantée de biais, dans son abandon et sa détresse, les volets éternellement clos, d'une mélancolie affreuse. (p. 185)

Et, là, dans cette lueur louche, la maison de la Croix-de-Maufras se dressait de biais, plus délabrée et toute noire . . (p. 239)

Jacques se retrouva devant la maison solitaire, plantée de biais au bord de la voie, dans la détresse de son abandon. (p. 342)

The references are not the only recurrent feature. The terms used to describe the house are also repetitive and what emerges is, in fact, a lexical field. (For the sake of conformity nouns have been substituted for adjectives

throughout). Thus:

coupure
biais
clôture
abandon
désert
solitude
détresse
mélancolie
malheur

These nouns are all negative, furthermore they have strong connotations of moral stigma. They are most frequently applied to the sinner: he who has cut himself off from God, he who has closed his mind to truth.

For Jacques the house holds a particular fascination and once more a series of references conveys the impact that it has on the engine driver:

Elle le hantait sans qu'il sût pourquoi,
avec la sensation confuse qu'elle importait
à son existence. (p. 93)

Et, sans savoir pourquoi, cette fois encore,
plus que les précédentes, Jacques eut le coeur
serré, comme s'il passait devant son malheur.
(p. 185)

Et il eut encore au coeur le choc douloureux, ce
coup d'affreuse tristesse, qui était comme le
pressentiment du malheur dont l'inévitable
échéance l'attendait là. (p. 342)

The sense of doom he feels is connected unequivocally with the Croix-de-Maufras and his unease increases. Yet, in direct proportion to his discomfort, the malignant attraction of the house grows as if the urge to know the secret it conceals must override all else. Here lies the essence of the house at the crossing and the source of its attraction. The Croix-de-Maufras represents forbidden fruit. It is the corollary of awareness without knowledge; a shell beyond which the eye cannot penetrate: ". . . le monde entier filant à grande vitesse la sait à cette place, sans rien connaître d'elle, toujours close . . ." (p 81). Forbidden fruit, knowledge... one is reminded of the network of associations woven by Zola around the figure of the compulsive killer, a figure in which sex and death meet and merge. The coincidence cannot be dismissed. The sequence of murders is set in motion by Roubaud's discovery of his wife's infidelity. The object upon which suspicion focuses is a ring, a serpent ring with eyes of ruby and a gift from Grandmorin when Séverine was staying at the Croix-de-Maufras. The reference to the Fall is unmistakable. S-E-X rears its head once more. The Croix-de-Maufras is not only the scene of murder. Séverine was seduced there, Louisette was raped and Jacques's assault on Flore was initially sexual.

Sex and death -- the indelible nature of their association throughout the novel has already been demonstrated (chapter two of this study). The evocation of the Croix-de-Maufras is systematically

negative terms produces a level of symbolic meaning that is more coherent than the jumbled threads by means of which Zola supposedly traces the root of Jacques's compulsion to kill. Indeed its import is inescapable. The opposite of paradise (and, by inference, spiritual salvation) the house at the crossing represents sin -- the descent into corporality (sex) -- and consequently death. It last appears having fulfilled its terrible purpose, "ouverte et désolée . . . dans son abandon de mort" (p. 350).

The Croix-de-Maufras demonstrates an organic link between action and location. As a point of intersection it represents the juncture where the monovalency associated with the railway track gives way to polyvalency. Throughout the novel a thread of necessity is spun around the two elements "amour," "mort." Their conjunction is expressed in the crossing and they are inevitably drawn together in the Croix-de-Maufras, vortex of debauchery and death. Consequently the house at the crossing represents the concretization of a thematic and formal association ("amour-mort"). Yet the deserted house is more than a symbol of this binary formula, it is a nucleus from which is generated a series of symbolic associations designed to impel the narrative towards its fateful conclusion -- the shedding of blood in the "chambre rouge."

*
* *
*

In his approach to space/location Renoir appears to differ most radically from Zola. His staging of the murderous encounter between Jacques and Flore (chapter two of the novel) is certainly in an altogether different spirit from that of the novel. Jacques approaches Flore as she emerges from the pool; he seizes her and their struggle takes them to the bank beside the railway track. As Flore's resistance crumbles, Jacques is overcome by the impulse to kill; his hands close about Flore's throat but he is disturbed by a passing train and breaks away, moving off into the meadow. Their subsequent conversation takes place against a vast backdrop of sunlit sky:

Jacques arrive sur une petite
butte qui domine la plaine immense.
Au loin, on voit des pommiers,
des prés avec des vaches.
Peut-être un village ou une femme.
(Script, pp. 15-16)

Apple trees, cows, possibly a village or a country lass in the background -- a pastoral setting and no mistake. But why? The director offers his own comments on the subject:

Ce qui m'a aidé à faire La Bête humaine, ce sont les explications que donne le héros sur son atavisme; je me suis dit: ce n'est pas tellement beau, mais si un homme aussi beau que Gabin dit cela en extérieur, avec beaucoup d'horizon derrière, et peut-être avec du vent, cela pourrait

prendre une certaine valeur. C'est la clé qui m'a aidé à faire ce film.²⁰

Indeed. Is the director really saying that he set out to prettify an explanation of Jacques's atavism by an artifice of staging? And what, one might ask, is the "certain value" he hoped to achieve? However one approaches these questions the fact is inescapable -- Renoir took the opposite course to Zola on each point. Firstly, Renoir contradicts the nocturnal associations of the book by presenting an attempted murder in the sun; secondly, he places the characters in a completely open environment; and thirdly, by having Jacques explain his condition to Flore, he turns the raging frustration of the original into a resigned acceptance. But because Renoir does deviate so consistently from Zola, one can begin to understand and accept the logic of his choice. In the novel Jacques's reaction to Flore is the first active manifestation of his mania and afterwards a full account of his condition is given. It is therefore of paramount importance that the scene be completely accessible to the audience. On film a frenzied attack in the dark followed by a mad dash through some hilly countryside would not have been particularly comprehensible to the audience. Instead Renoir opts for a technique which he feels more appropriate to his

²⁰ Jean Renoir from an interview with André Bazin (1951) quoted in Leprohon, p. 79.

medium. He exploits the opportunity for explanatory dialogue but more than this, he creates a contrast between what we see and what we hear to immediate effect.

Jacques is filmed against the skyline. Flore sits down beside him. A breeze caresses the grass, high overhead a few fluffy clouds float lazily by. The scene seems set for tenderness yet only a moment before death cast its shadow. Somberly Jacques tells Flore that he can never share his life with her, that he is doomed to lead a loveless existence. The import of his words stands in stark contrast to the idyllic setting and its deliberate associations with young lovers. Thus, by means of this pleasant setting, the film-maker skillfully conveys the irony of Jacques's situation and the isolation the engine driver must suffer (suggested by a distance shot of Jacques, a small figure against the expanse of the horizon). Another example of Renoir's use of contrast occurs at a later point in the film.

Jacques and Séverine meet secretly in the depot. Jacques points out his engine and helps Severine aboard. Concealed within the confines of the cab, surrounded by pools of shadow and darker patches denoting heaps of coal, the engine driver describes the landscape through which he passes each day:

. . . sur la ligne on voit tout on
connaît tout . . . on suit très bien
les saisons, avec les feuilles qui
poussent aux arbres et qui
grandissent, et puis qui tombent.
Et puis dans les champs les petits
lapins, vous savez, on voit leurs
petites oreilles . . . Ils nous
regardent passer, ils n'ont pas
peur ils savent très bien que
nous leur ferons pas de mal.

(direct transcription from film)

These words evoke a sunlit exterior, the tranquil progression of the seasons and an almost godlike freedom to see and know. They are full of the promise of new beginnings and, by implication, hope for Jacques and Séverine at the outset of their relationship. Yet this spirit of tender enthusiasm is belied by the couple's physical surroundings. They are together illicitly, under the cloak of darkness. Séverine is a party to murder and Jacques is prey to murderous inclinations. The darkest motivations -- guilt and deceit -- are the true basis of their relationship.

Enclosure is very much a feature of the film. Action is set in shuttered rooms to which access can only be gained by a shadowy stairway, in train compartments and cabs. The characters, portrayed in their working environment, are frequently seen either inside or alongside engines and an implicit comparison of stature is thereby achieved. The characters are deliberately dwarfed by machinery. When the engine steams into gare St. Lazare shortly after the film has begun, the effect is ponderous, even majestic. The

sound-track slows in accompaniment to the deceleration of the engine. A lateral shot of the machine drawing level with the platform fills the screen with its dark bulk. When the men descend from the cab the metal flanks of the engine tower above them.

In La Bête humaine environment is restrictive. Further, it is used to express the essential materialism of the characters' condition. Considered thus, Zola's characters have an almost symbiotic relationship with their surroundings. Renoir uses objects and perception of space to different effect. He shows man dominated by his surroundings. The sense of menace which provides the atmosphere of the novel is missing. The prevalence of matter that is its source is gone. Renoir's characters are helpless, alienated in a profound awareness of futility and isolation. Their world is not malignant it is simply (and hugely) impervious. The resulting atmosphere is more chilling than the sense of threat, positive at least, that emanates from the novel.

Structurally LA BÊTE HUMAINE is a much abbreviated version. Action is staged at Le Havre or Paris, and mostly the former. A level crossing is featured on one brief occasion when Jacques visits his godmother near Bréauté. The enquiry into Grandmorin's murder is set in an anonymous interior. The murders are staged on a train and in the Roubauds' apartment respectively. Nowhere does the house at the crossing appear. Of course, the truncation which the

plot has undergone removes the structural justification for its existence. In fact it is quite probable that the director altered the structure in order to facilitate the exclusion of the Croix-de-Maufras. Having examined the function and significance of the house at the crossing, it is hardly surprising that Renoir chose to ignore it.

The role of the Croix-de-Maufras extends far beyond the purely mimetic, standing as it does at the core of the novel's symbolism. On film it would have become simply a structure -- four walls, a roof, windows, a door -- a desolate ruin where murder (by extreme contrivance) was prone to occur. Lighting, music, and sound effects as accompaniments to the staging of a specific kind of action in its vicinity would, in the best tradition of the Hollywood haunted house, have appended a certain sinister atmosphere to it. Renoir was wise enough to avoid this trap. There is no place for the Croix-de-Maufras in his film and any attempt to include it would have proved doubly disappointing, at the same time diluting the powerful image created by Zola and falsifying the director's conception of the work.

With increasing insistence a single point recurs: Renoir's approach to La Bête humaine was dictated precisely by what he was not able to convey. Pathetic fallacy, for example, is a perfectly viable cinematic technique. The director uses it in the opening frames of the film. Somber music accompanies an image of swirling smoke or fog. The credits roll. The association with Jacques's condition is

made later when he describes what he experiences as "une espèce de grande fumée qui déforme tout" (Script, p. 16).

Zola, however, went beyond pathetic fallacy and Renoir, faced with the complex symbiosis that resulted, uses images which have clarity and impact and are totally at odds with the text.

In their respective approaches to the subject of space, both author and director reveal their conceptions of the work. When Renoir describes the explanation Jacques's gives of his atavism as "la clé qui m'a aidé à faire ce film," he is doing two things: pinpointing an area where the film must differ from the novel and betraying his delight in the potential for the creation of some beautiful images which this allows. Just as identity is central to the novel, so the technique of contrast is central to the film. Indeed, the changes made by Renoir and which have been noted, begin to assume a new coherence and significance in the light of this awareness.

Chapter Four

Theme and Form

The novel presents particular problems for analysis. Like the Will-o'-the-wisp it appears within reach only to elude the grasp once more. A strangely ephemeral comparison for a work which is based so completely in corporality on both formal and thematic levels. However, while unraveling one thread, one comes upon another, then another... and soon the tidy process of unpicking the textual tapestry has become a jumble of false starts and lost ends, in which one merely multiplies words. The reason is the essential density of the novel, a density which arises from the interpenetration of theme and form.

The railway is the point of attraction in which theme and form unite. The novel's central theme for example, the contrast of progress and atavism, is expressed by the dynamism of the locomotive and the stasis of the characters who live beside the track. Phasie, confined within the crossing keeper's cottage, a prisoner of her failing body and, equally, the obstinacy which keeps her at the mercy of her husband, watches and wonders:

Bien sûr que la terre entière passait là, pas des Français seulement, des étrangers aussi, des gens venues des contrées les plus lointaines, puisque personne maintenant ne pouvait rester chez soi, et que tous les peuples, comme on disait, n'en feraient bientôt plus qu'un seul. Ça, c'était le progrès, tous frères, roulant tous ensemble, là-bas, vers un pays de Cocagne.
(p. 87)

The paradox is clear. Isolation is thrown into relief by the progression of a veritable multitude of travelers, all of whom pass by completely unaware of the peril in which Phasie exists:

Cela lui semblait drôle, de vivre perdue au fond de ce désert, sans une âme à qui se confier, lorsque, de jour et de nuit, continuellement, il défilait tant d'hommes et de femmes, dans le coup de tempête des trains . . . (p. 87)

In effect the concept of progress is encapsulated in the linear progression of the railway, a feature which is associated directly with the structure of the novel:

C'était comme un grand corps, un être géant couché en travers de la terre, la tête à Paris, les vertèbres tout le long de la ligne, les membres s'élargissant avec les embranchements, les pieds et les mains au Havre et dans les autres villes d'arrivée. Et ça passait, ça passait, mécanique, triomphal, allant à l'avenir avec une rectitude mathématique, dans l'ignorance volontaire de ce qu'il restait de l'homme, aux deux bords, caché et toujours vivace, l'éternelle passion et l'éternel crime. (pp. 90-91)

This quotation concludes with the binary formula resumed later in the novel as "amour-mort," and anticipates the integration of these two elements at the point of intersection -- the Croix-de-Maufras. The point at which the forward momentum of the train is halted on two occasions with deadly consequences (chapter seven and chapter ten).

The multiple uses to which Zola puts the railway (and the locomotive) arise invariably from the tension between regression and progression. The railway may at first have been considered solely as the manifestation of progress yet the distinction blurs and the heart of the paradox is revealed. For all its association with technological advance and the subsequent promise of new horizons made accessible to all, the author approaches the railway in a spirit which if not exactly contrary, is at the very least ambiguous. Consequently, the railway is at the origin of the profound sense of closure which marks the novel. Because action may only be staged at fixed points (Le Havre, Paris, the Croix-de-Maufras) a pattern of reflex associations is established. In chapter one a trip to Paris and a sojourn in Mere Victoire's rooms are used to present a revelation, as a result of which murder is planned. In the second half of the novel (chapter eight) a stay in Victoire's rooms again prompts a dramatic disclosure, bringing thoughts of murder in its wake.

At the same time the locomotive represents forward momentum. Each chapter is marked by the rush and rattle of

an engine and the early chapters (one - three) in particular are identified by their portrayal of the train in motion. Chapter one concludes: ". . . et rien ne devait plus arrêter ce train lancé à toute vapeur. Il disparut" (p. 80). The sensation of rapid acceleration is sustained in chapter two as the train exits from the tunnel: "Déjà, le train fuyait, se perdait vers la Croix-de-Maufras . . ." (p. 102). And the impetus continues in chapter three: ". . . le train de neuf heures cinquante s'ébranla, roula plus vite, disparut au loin, dans la poussière d'or du soleil" (p. 130). In each case it gathers speed and disappears into the distance. Zola is clearly initiating a device which will imbue the action with an atmosphere of inescapable doom. From the departure of the 6:30 Le Havre train (chapter one) to the uncontrolled dash of the troop train in chapter twelve, the sensation is that of an inexorable surge forwards... to destruction.

But not only does the locomotive's dynamism inform action with a sense of fatality, the train, as part of a system and therefore having regularized movements, also provides the means to intensify the portrayal of cause and effect. The lives of the railway workers are ruled by the timetable. Even their spouses measure the passing moments by successive departures and arrivals:

Elle [Séverine] se levait assez tard, heureuse de rester seule au lit, bercée par les départs et les arrivées de trains, qui marquaient pour elle la marche des heures, exactement, ainsi qu'une horloge. (p. 188)

Because station existence forms the infrastructure of the drama, Zola is able to draw attention to temporal progression at the micro level in a context where awareness of passing moments is directly related to the movement of trains. Thus after Jacques has killed Séverine the author notes: "pas une heure, depuis un an, sans qu'il eût marché vers l'inévitable" (p. 349), thereby linking the evolution of the engine driver's state with the inflexible rotation of the timetable to which he must adhere.

Chapter eleven presents the culmination of the mainstream of the action in the novel (namely, the murder of Séverine conceived as the inevitable consequence of Grandmorin's killing). The various functions of train and railway examined thus far have in fact combined to this end. However, the locomotive continues to be implicated (and the word is not excessive) in the action. It figures largely in this penultimate chapter, punctuating the action with the frequency and ferocity of its passing. On a more obvious level Zola is using the locomotive as a tension building device, by means of which the minutes seem to drag interminably:

De nouveau, un train passa, un descendant celui-ci, l'omnibus qui croisait le direct devant la Croix-de-Maufras, à cinq minutes de distance. Jacques s'était arrêté, surpris. Cinq minutes seulement! comme ce serait long, d'attendre une demi-heure! (p. 345)

Yet the train has a direct link with the scene unfolding within the walls of the isolated house. The tumultuous passage of successive locomotives scans the drama of Jacques's struggle to repress the beast until:

. . . il abbatit le poing, et le couteau
lui cloua la question dans la gorge
A cette seconde, passait l'express de Paris,
si violent, si rapide, que le plancher en
trembla; et elle était morte, comme foudroyée
dans cette tempête. (p. 348)

The timing of Jacques's blow to coincide with the arrival of the Paris express is not mere artifice; it marks the fruition of the train's symbolic significance as an avatar of death and desire, an association which began with the first murder. As Jacques paces the "chambre rouge" desperately trying to contain the wave of violence that threatens to engulf him, the roar of each passing train denotes the increasing dominance of the beast.

The pattern is directly related to that developed in chapter two. Here Jacques's conversation with Phasie is interrupted at regular intervals by Misard's function as crossing keeper:

Une sonnerie brusque lui [Phasie] fit jeter
au-dehors le même regard inquiet On
entendit le train, un express, cache par une
courbe, s'approcher avec un grondement qui
grandissait. Il passa comme en un coup de
foudre, ébranlant, menaçant d'emporter la
maison basse, au milieu d'un vent de tempête.
(p. 85)

Attention is drawn simultaneously to Misard and the train. However the relevance of the association only becomes apparent in the light of Phasie's assertion that her husband is poisoning her. Taken in conjunction with the murder plan of the preceding chapter and the fatalistic terms in which the departing train is described -- "On ne voyait de lui, saignant comme des blessures ouvertes, que les trois feux de l'arrière, le triangle rouge." -- the reader suspects that Zola is surrounding the locomotive with an aura of death. The events leading to the conclusion of chapter two (Jacques's attempt on Flore's life and his witnessing of the murder on the passing train) confirm this impression and enhance it with an awareness of the association of desire with death.

*

* *

Renoir condenses the repeated references to moving machinery found in La Bête humaine into an opening sequence of visual and acoustic mastery. The audience is swept into the film by the impetus of the engine, an effect which is due to a deliberate interplay of movement: that of man, machine and camera. The actions of the operatives are emphasized by a shift from left to right following the motions of either Jacques or Pecqueux, the camera then draws back along the length of the cab in a movement contrasting with the forward surge of the engine, which is suddenly thrust upon us by an

external shot. At this stage the train is filmed at a lateral angle while the passing countryside fills a quarter of the left-hand side of the screen. The resultant sensation is one of rapid progress. A little later the camera is focused ahead of the train. Now the tracks curve away from the voracious wheels of the locomotive and we plunge headlong into the distance. But speed, although a major factor, is not the sole basis for the effect of these images. Renoir, through his use of sound and camera angle, presents the train as the dominant force. For the first few moments, before the external sound-track breaks in, the engine noise alone silences the men, forcing them to communicate by gesture. Lateral shots of the engine interpose the bulk of the machine between us and the screen space while shifts between internal and external shots evoke the dimensions of the machine in proportion to its human operatives, creating an overwhelming sense of its mass and power. Thus the impact of the opening sequence can be resolved into two distinct yet related impressions: the imperiousness of the machine -- emphasized by the subservience of the men whose actions are performed solely to maintain the functioning of the engine -- and speed -- the achievement of a sensation of inexorable forward momentum.

The sequence is defined by motion in more than one respect. It begins at full throttle, joining Jacques and Pecqueux en route, and ends with their arrival at gare St. Lazare when the engine at last steams to a halt. Viewed

independently, it betrays a very deliberate structure based on a central division constituted by a tunnel. Prior to entry into the tunnel, the camera is positioned inside the cab and medium shots of Jacques and Pecqueux alternate successively from left to right and back again. This series of shots is interrupted by a brief period of total blackness when the train is in the tunnel. It emerges and the camera is now repositioned ahead of the engine to give a forward view of the tracks, a shot which alternates a number of times with a rear view of the operatives. Clearly, a pattern is being established based on the possibilities for symmetry provided by the tunnel. Left - right, right - left; front, back, back - front; the shots form a series of matching reversed pairs.²¹

The opening sequence becomes even more interesting when considered in relation to the rest of the film. It is repeated in reverse order at the end and recurs in part midway through. Around this central division the director arranges the action. In the first half a compulsive murder attempt is followed by a calculated murder, in the second a planned attempt precedes a compulsive murder. The initial sequence can now be seen to serve three distinct purposes: it provides the dynamism associated with the novel's fatal conclusion; it also provides a means of dividing and

²¹ For a more detailed breakdown of this sequence of shots see Sesonke, p. 374.

enclosing the action; further it is a microcosm of the main body of the film, effectively prefiguring its symmetrical structure.

The film's central division is marked by the recurrence of a unique shot -- the one occasion when the locomotive was framed in the left-hand quarter of the screen and showing Jacques craning out of the cab. The focus shifts to the tracks then back to a rear view of the men. Driver and stoker communicate by sign language, working as a team. Jacques's attention in particular is wholly on the task in hand. The second time that we see the shot is directly after Jacques has declared his love for Séverine. On this occasion Pecqueux tries repeatedly to catch Jacques's attention but without success. Comparison with the initial sequence is clearly invited. Jacques's original air of cool competence has given way to a state of distraction, indicated by the breakdown in the men's working rapport. Later another short sequence focusing on the men in working mode is included, this time after Jacques has failed to do away with Roubaud and has, as a result, jeopardized his relationship with Séverine. Now the engine driver is sullen and withdrawn and deliberately ignores Pecqueux who maintains a cheerful monologue. Thus, with admirable brevity, the director conveys the extent of Jacques's deterioration, using the opening sequence as a yardstick by which to measure the evolution of the characters' states within the film.

One detects a similar intention in Renoir's use of

Lebleu, a character who is otherwise redundant in the revised scheme of things. Lebleu is only seen on the stairway of the employees' quarters at Le Havre as he returns from or leaves for a shift. He represents the routine of station life. At the outset he replies to Roubaud's greeting as the deputy station-master hurries eagerly to see his wife. Later, when Roubaud has degenerated into a compulsive gambler, Lebleu's acknowledgment of his colleague takes the form of a rebuke about his bad time-keeping which highlights the extent of Roubaud's decline. Ironically, by the end, the deputy station-master keeps such erratic hours that Séverine mistakes Lebleu's approach for that of her husband and precipitates her fate with a kiss.

The regularity which is the basis of station existence is either indicated directly by the movements of employees -- Lebleu being an immediate example -- or indirectly by the backdrop of trains and the locales associated with them -- platforms, tool sheds, the workers' canteen. The audience is made aware of time in the specific context of a timetable on three separate occasions: in the opening sequence, the first half of the film, and the second half. Firstly, Jacques checks his watch on the stretch before gare St. Lazare; secondly, Roubaud, waiting for Séverine, looks down from Victoire's room on the departing and arriving trains and consults his watch; thirdly, this action is repeated by Jacques in the same location and situation. Repetition clearly links the latter two instances and parallels the

episodes in question. In each case, a confession takes place, the consequence of which is murder. However, the first example occurs in isolation and may perhaps be dismissed as unimportant byplay -- that of the conscientious engine driver with a timetable to follow. What quickly becomes apparent is the sheer rigor of the film's structure; not a shot, not even a movement is superfluous. Everything is relevant and nothing more so than that initial gesture.

When Renoir has Jacques check his watch, he is introducing the concept of temporal constraint. Jacques must follow a timetable just as the train he drives must follow the tracks. Soon a sense of urgency pervades the scene. The association between driver and engine is built up by the series of alternating interior and exterior shots that comprise a mesmeric pattern designed to envelop the audience in its compulsive atmosphere. The forward rush of the locomotive parallels Jacques's condition; he cannot deny the dictates of his nature and has no choice but to follow the course it sets him. Consequently, these images instigate the process of cause and effect which locks events into a sequence of rapid and inevitable succession.

Obviously Renoir is establishing a direct relationship between the railway and subsequent action. A point which is confirmed by examination of another, and major, aspect of the opening sequence.

Jacques and Pecqueux are shown in the limited space of the cab; their actions are similarly limited to the scope of

the mechanical manoeuvres required to operate the machine. Considered thus, each action can be seen to have a preformulated result. When the director goes on to encompass their actions in a repetitive symmetrical structure he in fact produces the deterministic mechanism that will inform the entire film and propel it relentlessly towards its fatal conclusion. The mechanism recurs in the latter half of the film, this time in a social context as Jacques and Séverine dance at the "bal des cheminots." The predetermined movements required to operate the engine are resumed in the prescribed motions of the waltz. Jacques leads Séverine round the dance floor and each step brings him closer to the fatal blow.

The connection is emphasized by the way in which the final murder is presented. When the plan to kill Roubaud has misfired and Séverine lays dead Renoir intersperses shots of her body with scenes from the ball where a singer is giving a rendition of a ballad entitled "Le Petit Coeur de Ninon" -- the same tune to which Jacques and Séverine were dancing just minutes before. The silent darkness of Séverine's bedroom is counterpointed by the bright and animated ballroom and as the camera focuses on her lifeless hands the words of the song resume:

Le petit coeur de Ninon est si petit et si fragile,
C'est un léger papillon, le petit coeur de Ninon.

And conclude after a shot of her staring eyes:

Il est mignon, mignon. Si la pauvrete a
quoi de coquette et n'est pas facile,
C'est pas sa faute, non, petit coeur,
petit coeur de Ninon.

(direct transcription from film)

The lyrics describe the delicate beauty of a flirtatious young woman; what is depicted is the frozen horror of violent death. The technique of contrast has reached its culmination.

Throughout the film light vies with shadow. Roubaud greets Séverine as she sits in the sun at the open window, soon he looks out of another window as darkness gathers, his life in ruins. Jacques and Séverine meet in a sunlit park, during their subsequent meetings they hide in the dark depot, soon to be the scene of their rupture when Jacques is unable to kill Roubaud. The tension between light and darkness, symbolically, hope and despair, slips inexorably towards the latter, revealing the dichotomy that exists between man's aspirations and his capabilities -- the essential irony of the human condition.

Renoir exploits the potential for visual drama which the locomotive contains but disassociates it from the particular thematic dimension which it has in the novel (namely, the association of death with desire). Yet Renoir's use of the railway, which is totally appropriate to the requirements of

his own medium, produces a variant of the "metaphor of the tracks." How else should one describe the function and effect of the opening sequence? The rush to destruction which parallels the deadly obsessions of the individual characters is necessarily associated with the author's preoccupation with atavism and its contrast with progress, both of which center on the locomotive. Renoir's metaphor, however, exploits the mechanical aspect of the engine, setting up a visual equation of cause and effect that will operate succinctly throughout the film. The difference between these two metaphors raises an interesting point about the relationship of theme to form.

Renoir omits much of the thematic content of the novel, by so doing he avoids the paradox inherent in Zola's ambivalent approach to the railway. Instead, he develops a different paradox -- the duplicity of life in which light and laughter are invariably overshadowed by darkness and suffering. He does so through the technique of contrast, which is associated with the fatalistic atmosphere generated by the opening sequence. The means is ideally suited to the end (that is to say, the contrast of light-hearted music and gruesome death scene, to cite a more recent example) and at once conveys a mixture of pathos and irony. It is, in fact, visually eloquent.

The process of expression (be it literary or filmic) is subject primarily to the constraints within which it is formulated. What may be difficult to convey via the written

medium may lend itself to portrayal on film. The writer, for instance, gropes for words to express the full impact of a locomotive in motion, the film-maker simply records and plays back images of a fast moving train. Yet the film-maker is hampered in areas where the writer moves with ease. It would seem reasonable to suggest, therefore, that some material is by nature filmic, while other material is by nature literary. When one is dealing with an adaptation, however, this approach to content assumes a deeper significance. It implies that theme is subordinate to form. Indeed, reference to the association of theme and form will recur in the following chapter which takes as its subject those areas of expression that appear exclusive to each medium, and to the novel in particular.

Chapter Five

Limits of Style

The preceding chapters have plotted the course taken by the adaptation. The pattern which has emerged corresponds with an assessment made by George Bluestone: "Like two intersecting lines, novel and film meet at a point, then diverge."²² Some of the reasons behind this divergent tendency have already been discussed; in the majority of cases they have prompted the conclusion that the media themselves preclude closer identity. This chapter, concentrating particularly on the creation of figural meaning, will confirm this conclusion.

Creation of figural meaning in the literary medium can be traced to the operation of three textual modes:

1. Narrative
2. Metaphoric
3. Epic-Symbolic.

The Lison's journey through the snow (chapter seven) provides a particularly good example of the functioning of these three modes. The description of the journey represents the first;

²² George Bluestone, Novels into Film (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1957), p. 63.

the references to the Lison as a ship on a sea of snow the second; and the portrayal of the situation in terms of a deathly struggle between opposing elemental forces the third. Listed thus an obvious gap exists between the first and third modes. However, the key to their effectiveness lies in the interaction of the three levels, a point which will be borne out by an examination of chapter seven.

The opening paragraph immediately associates the train journey with the weather conditions. The snow is not merely inconvenient, it is an out and out hazard:

. . . ils [Jacques et Pecqueux] avaient eu un grognement d'inquiétude, devant cette neige entêtée, dont crevait le ciel noir ils attendaient le coup de sifflet . . . regardant la tombée muette et sans fin des flocons rayer les ténèbres d'un frisson livide. (p. 213)

Not surprisingly, the passengers seek refuge from the icy conditions: "La neige des chaussures ne se fondait même pas; et les portières se refermaient aussitôt, chacun se barricadait, le quai restait désert . . ." (p. 214). The train pulls out of the station and: ". . . dans la nuit, la lumière éclatante du fanal était comme mangée par ces épaisseurs blafardes qui tombaient" (p. 214). Much is condensed into the last few lines and in them is also contained the significance of the preceding references. Immediately remarkable are the terms in which the snow is

described. It is a looming presence -- "dont crevait le ciel noir" -- and an all encompassing mass -- "la tombée muette et sans fin des flocons... ." Further, the passengers do not simply take shelter. The reflexive use of the verb "barricader" introduces a sense of siege and the human element actually appears to be in retreat before the icy assault. The scene is dominated by three colors: black (night), white (snow), and red (fire -- from the boiler). The immediate impact is that of contrast, black and white overlaid by vivid flame red, yet the effect extends further. The forces denoted by the colors are in competition: "la lumière éclatante du fanal était comme mangée par ces épaisseurs blafardes . . ." (emphasis added). The switch from passive to active voice has been made, indeed there has been a reversal. The human element has been incapacitated, confined within the carriages and cab of the train, and from a vast brooding presence the snow has been transformed into an aggressor against which is pitted the locomotive, personified in turn by references to the lamp at its head as: ". . . un oeil géant, élargissant au loin, dans l'obscurité, sa nappe d'incendie" (p. 214).

During the course of the next few pages, the train's association with fire is reinforced, it trails a "queue de comète, trouant la nuit." The sensation of laborious progress is enhanced by the way in which the engine appears to be searing a path through the darkness, darkness which is identified by its density and actively joins with the snow to

form a barrier:

Ce qu'il [Jacques] s'imaginait distinguer,
au-delà du pullulement pâle des flocons,
c'étaient d'immenses formes noires, des
masses considérables, comme des morceaux
géants de la nuit, qui semblaient se
déplacer et venir au-devant de la machine.
(p. 218)

Inversely, Jacques and Pecqueux are isolated and dwarfed by these monolithic forces. When Jacques struggles across the engine to grease a cylinder, he is compared with "un insecte rampant" and effectively reduced to a mere speck which could be engulfed at any moment. Indeed, death is omnipresent. Snow forms a "shroud" around the train while the whistle produces "un sifflement de détresse qui pleurait au fond de ce désert de neige." The reference to the desert introduces a new element into the description. The emptiness and isolation are resumed in an image of a vast white sea closing about the locomotive which has, in turn, become "un paquebot, laissant un sillage" in this "désolation d'un océan de glace, immobilisé dans la tourmente" (p. 220). The end of the journey is imminent. The engine is brought to a standstill then freed only to face the prospect of being trapped a short distance ahead. An interesting situation but not a particularly dramatic one. Drama is generated by the operation of the metaphoric and epic-symbolic levels.

The train's difficult passage through the snow becomes

a struggle for survival on an increasingly large scale. The laboring engine acquires the attributes of an angry giantess engaged in battle:

. . . la Lison, raidissant les reins, buta du poitrail, avec son souffle enragé de géante. Enfin elle parut reprendre haleine, elle banda ses muscles de métal en un suprême effort, et elle passa . . . (p. 224)

Zola's colorful imagination transforms the engine into a truly amazonian force yet a further transformation is about to occur. The lamp fronting the boiler provides the author with the opportunity to develop the parallel:

. . . le fanal blanc . . . luisait dans le jour, comme un oeil vivant de cyclope. Elle roulait, elle approchait de la tranchée, avec cet oeil largement ouvert. (emphasis added)
(p. 225)

The Lison is identified with the Cyclops, the one-eyed giant of legend, and the association is based not only on the single lamp (suggesting the one eye) but also the link with fire -- the fiery glow of the lamp and the fiery heart of the engine ("her" boiler). In fact a telling switch has been made -- a glide from female to male. The locomotive now clearly represents the male force; snow/water (identified with the sea -- "une mer blanche" [p. 219]) represents the

female force and the struggle is resolved into the clash of male and female on a huge scale.²³

The significance of the battle is, of course, its outcome. The trail of fire blazing from the furnace is reduced to "un panache de fumée noire, épaisse, qui salissait le grand frisson pâle du ciel" (p. 225). Under this funereal banner the train continues to advance but the threat of being swamped looms ever larger until: ". . . la Lison s'arrêta définitivement, expirante, dans le grand froid. Son souffle s'éteignit, elle était immobile, et morte" (p. 225). Dead... and buried, Zola emphasizes the point: "La neige tombait toujours, l'ensevelissait lentement, sûrement, avec une obstination muette" (p. 229). Matter has triumphed. The passengers of the train now share the fate of the inhabitants of the Croix-de-Maufrais for they too are immobilized and trapped. The parallel is not coincidental. During the journey Jacques recalls:

²³ The Cyclopes were male, furthermore they were associated with fire as both sons of the storm gods and helpers of Hephaestus at his forge. Gaston Bachelard in his work L'Eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière (Paris: Corti, 1942) discusses the significance of fire as the male element and water as the female element in literature. In chapter seven of La Bête humaine the locomotive (fire) is notable for its powers of penetration: "au-dessus du train. . . flambait l'éblouissante queue de comète, trouant la nuit" (emphasis added), while the snow envelops and is referred to on one occasion as "une sorte de brouillard laiteux, où les choses ne surgissaient que très rapprochées, ainsi qu'au fond d'un rêve" (emphasis added), a reference which is, according to Bachelard, an unmistakable sign of the female myth.

. . . une tranchée profonde, qui se trouvait
à trois cents mètres environ de la
Croix-de-Maufras: elle s'ouvrait dans la
direction du vent, la neige devait s'y être
accumulée en quantité considérable; et, tout
de suite, il eut la certitude que c'était là
l'écueil marqué où il naufragerait.

(emphasis added)
(pp. 224-225)

The metaphors of ship and shipwreck connect with the
Croix-de-Maufras. The area is repeatedly described in terms
of a wilderness cut off from the rest of the country and, it
has already been noted, the stasis associated with the
Croix-de-Maufras provides the basis for the development of
the novel's central theme -- the contrast of atavism and
progress. When the train makes its unscheduled stop
civilization is stranded at the Croix-de-Maufras and "l'ordre
naturel était perverti." The natives of the crossing:

. . . dévisageaient ce monde inconnu qu'un accident
jetait sur la voie, ils le contemplaient avec des
yeux ronds de sauvages, accourus sur une côte où
des Européens naufrageraient. (p. 227)

While at the crossing keeper's cottage Jacques questions
Phasie about her illness and Misard's part in it. The sick
woman replies: "Je sais qu'il veut me manger, et moi je ne
veux pas qu'il me mange, naturellement" (p. 233). The
response is formulated in terms which recall an earlier
description, that of the passage of the train through the

snow. To reiterate: "Mais, dans la nuit, la lumière éclatante du fanal était comme mangée par ces épaisseurs blafardes qui tombaient" (emphasis added). Appropriately the focus has returned to the characters and the struggle for dominance carried on between particular couples.

Appropriately because the Croix-de-Maufras is the core of the symbolism associated with the alienation which opposes Male and Female -- the Fall. Through the interaction of the three textual modes -- narrative, metaphoric and epic-symbolic -- the novel expresses a continual movement upwards and outwards, escalating from the individual to the cosmic through a series of interlocking struggles between male and female.

Emphasis on the linearity of the literary technique -- that is, its separation into three distinct levels of operation -- may belie the complexity of the effects achieved. Even a cursory examination of chapter seven reveals the overlapping significance of the various elements that it contains. The metaphor of the shipwreck, for example, has a number of ramifications. The immediate implication is that of disaster, the second isolation. The image coincides neatly with the god-forsaken atmosphere which surrounds the Croix-de-Maufras. References to outcasts and the wilderness soon acquire mythic overtones when considered in the context of the house at the crossing. Yet the Genesis story is not the only element of myth present in the novel. The drama of La Bête humaine is that of physical

passion; its setting is the unrelieved corporality of a physical environment. Here night has the ascendancy in a world divided between black and white, darkness and light; a world in which sexual desire takes the form of an urge for obliteration. This is the realm where (dark) Eros reigns supreme. Unequivocally, one can add Manicheanism to the list of Zola's mythic ingredients.

So closely are elements interwoven in the novelist's creative scheme that identity becomes synthesis. However, in the light of his admix of myths it might be better described as syncretism. Heresy and orthodoxy mingle under Zola's pen, passive becoming active as fusion (in the Manichean sense) turns into cannibalism and escalates until his fictional universe resolves itself into opposing forces of Titanic dimensions. Thus, through a process of literary amplification, Zola inflates his original theme to grandiloquent proportions. And darkness, far from a symbol of moral decay, is felt as a material entity animated by a malignant spirit of its own.

*

* *

Renoir reverses the impetus and returns the focus to the individual characters at the center of the plot. Yet, although the scope of the drama is reduced, film effects its own kind of amplification. The staging of Grandmorin's murder offers one example.

The killing is not actually shown, instead an atmosphere of growing tension is created which is designed to parallel the escalation of Roubaud's fury and its inevitable culmination. The camera is trained on the shuttered door to Grandmorin's compartment. Music rises to a crescendo, lights glimmer spasmodically through the blind indicating the speed of the locomotive as it races past stations; the carriage rocks and sways. Suddenly a shaft of light ricochets along the corridor. The act of murder has been precisely pinpointed. When the light slices through the twilight of the corridor the audience knows that Roubaud has plunged the knife into Grandmorin's body.

The painstaking description of the murder given by Séverine (chapter eight) has been condensed into a scene of a few moments duration combining light, music and sound-track to climactic effect. Simultaneity is in fact the key to its effectiveness. Film engages both visual and aural senses thereby increasing the emotive impact of the action. Moreover, the cinematic medium gains greatly from its ability to appeal to the imagination. The impact of the example under discussion is generated precisely because the act of murder is not shown. The frenetic interaction of light and sound is far more eloquent than a shot of a knife thrust succeeded by more shots of a bloodied corpse.

Written and cinematic media appear to operate largely on a principle of mutual exclusion. The creation of figural meaning in the first is the result of linear development

while in the second simultaneity is its source. However, despite the fact that the stylistic techniques of the former often exceed the limits of filmic expression, the latter may compensate with the immediacy of its images. The work of thriller writer Ian Fleming, for example, gains in impact in its film versions. This is the case because it is based primarily in action. Works of a more contemplative nature and which have greater recourse to the figural dimension of language are more problematic for the film-maker. Indeed, the crux of the problem is located in areas of overlapping significance. In La Bête humaine the locomotive represents just such an area.

The divergent trend associated with the train has already been indicated. In relation to Jacques, the engine driver, the Lison is not only feminized but also acquires a female sexuality. Jacques, it is stated, loves "her" "en mâle reconnaissant." His drive back to Le Havre in chapter five is described in overtly sexual terms: "Il avait rarement senti la Lison si obéissante; il la possédait, la chevauchait à sa guise, avec l'absolue volonté du maître" (pp. 184-185). But the locomotive is also associated with the savage power of the beast, a point which is especially evident in chapter eleven when the resurgence of Jacques's mania is described. The imminence of his loss of control is expressed in the speed and ferocity of the passing trains and the blow falls just as the Paris express hurtles by; then Jacques too plunges into the night and disappears : ". . . et il

s'enfuit . . . se lança dehors, dans la nuit d'encre, où son galop se perdit, furieux" (p. 350). The train is here being exploited for its male properties -- the virile surge of speed which, associated with its shape, has phallic connotations, notwithstanding the fact that the victims are always female. The beast is unmistakably a male force. The author, however, does not attempt to reconcile the apparent contradiction. In fact he compounds it by referring to the train in a number of other registers; as a "bête domptée" or a gigantic being of metal striving to serve Jacques (a description separate from the evocation of the Cyclops). Clearly, the locomotive is an androgynous entity and one which fills a multitude of roles. The coexistence of these various images raises an interesting point concerning the transference of what may be termed multiple values to film.

The novelist can animate a fictional object, use and re-use it for a variety of stylistic ends. But unless one moves into the realm of cartoon animation, the film director enjoys a less flexible relationship with his objective material. Renoir's presentation of the train is a case in point. The director intensifies the impression of unrestrained power by the use of camera angles and framing. He subsequently introduces a train into scenes which focus on Jacques in a violent state. The passage of a train interrupts Jacques as he is strangling Flore; after Séverine's murder an engine hurtles past him as he walks blindly through the night. Renoir is highlighting qualities

germane to the locomotive and associating them with the ferocity of Jacques's compulsion. The link is emphasized by music. The dramatic strains that accompany moments of violence or references to Jacques's mania are also used to orchestrate images of the train in motion. Thus by identifying the characteristics of an object with those of a major protagonist, the director effectively extends the value of the object in question. What he is not able to do of course is diversify the object itself.

The preceding observations are indicative of film's potential for figural expression. An examination of some examples from Renoir's work will explain why. The director goes to some lengths to avoid the staging of explicitly violent or sexual scenes. Such an occasion is the consummation of Jacques and Séverine's relationship. The couple meet secretly one rainy night; they disappear inside a shed. The camera focuses on a bucket which is filling rapidly from the downpour. The overflowing bucket is in fact a visual metaphor designed to convey the intensity of physical passion taking place inside the shed. When the rain eases and finally stops the couple emerge. The technique is reminiscent of that used in Partie de campagne when the full-throated singing of a bird in a nearby bush replaces the scene of physical love as it nears its consummation. In each case the object which assumes a metaphorical role is integral to the scene. In LA BÊTE HUMAINE, for instance, action occurs during a

thunderstorm when Jacques and Séverine seek shelter, hence the exterior view of a shed and water flowing from a gutter into a bucket. Further, the nature of the action which is not shown is implicit in the turbulence of the deluge. Thus where diversification plays an important role in the formulation of figural meaning in the literary medium, contextualization is an essential part of the creation of figural meaning in film. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the director's approach to composition and lighting.

Those on the train when Grandmorin was murdered are called for questioning by the examining magistrate. Roubaud, Séverine and Jacques wait their turn. The two men stand at opposite sides of the small room. They are separated by a shaft of light while they themselves are partially obscured by bars of shadow. Throughout the inquiry scene light is disposed in this way -- a patch of light succeeded by strips of shadow cast by a lowered blind. Undoubtedly these bars bear a metaphorical relationship to the more substantial bars of a prison cell. The effect certainly conjures the prospect of imminent loss of liberty thereby contributing to the tense atmosphere.

The composition is effective for another reason. Light divides the space into two distinct areas. The men face each other but their expressions are veiled by shadow. This physical disposition actually crystalizes the dramatic undercurrents of the situation. The protagonists are

separated by their doubt and mistrust of each other. Neither knows how the other will react. Roubaud's anxious thoughts are easily imagined: "Does he suspect?" "Will he denounce us?" While Jacques is no doubt wondering what motivates the couple and what Séverine's involvement is. All this is accessible to the audience but the motives of each character remain hidden from the other.

Light and shadow have a comparable function in the scene in which Séverine surprises Roubaud removing money from the cache. The setting: Roubauds' apartment in near darkness. Close up of Roubaud bending over the cache, his face in shadow. A shaft of light cuts across the floor; he looks up, startled. Close up of Séverine framed in the doorway. She shouts accusingly at Roubaud: "Voleur! Voleur!" Towards the end of the film Renoir parallels this scene. Roubaud goes once more to the hiding place and takes out Grandmorin's watch. Finding the knife discarded by Jacques he gets up and approaches the open bedroom door, still carrying the watch. The camera gives a rear view of Roubaud outlined in the doorway, then focuses on the watch hanging from his hand. The narrative link is clear, the director is underlining the connection between Séverine's murder and Grandmorin's. More than this he is suggesting the individual's duplicity against the background of a shared secret. Thus Séverine discovers Roubaud in the act of "stealing" to pay for his gambling and Roubaud, in turn, enters a room only to find the evidence of Jacques's deadly secret. The interplay of light and shadow

is common to the three main characters and has the dual effect of uniting them in the unstated knowledge of the crime and, conversely, of isolating them. Their individual doubts and motivations make them impenetrable, enclosing them in the dark shadows of the ego. The deadly game of hide-and-seek between what is revealed and what remains hidden is expressed beautifully by Renoir's chiaroscuro approach to lighting, culminating in the murder of Séverine.

The lovers lie in wait for Roubaud; Séverine kisses Jacques. This action triggers his mania. He seizes her; Séverine's eyes widen with horror and she struggles to escape. Jacques reaches for the knife; the lower part of his face is in shadow, the upper part in light. The camera focuses on his contorted features. Séverine's shocked voice echoes in the room: "Pourquoi, Jacques? Pourquoi?" But this is no longer Jacques and only now, when it is too late, does Séverine glimpse the dark depths of his being, the duplicity of Jacques's nature which it was beyond his power to control.

This scene is the heart of the drama as envisaged by Renoir. In it the various elements utilized by the director combine and come to fruition: contrast (crosscutting to the ball); the mirror motif (Jacques's glimpse of himself in the glass); and, not least, lighting which throws into greater relief the paradox developed through the technique of contrast. Indeed, the source of the film's effectiveness lies in the way in which opposites are poised and that delicate balance is then tipped with increasing velocity to one

side... the darkest.

Zola's novel could be regarded as an elaboration of the expression "carnal knowledge," since it uses the Genesis story and other mythic elements solely in order to evoke the ascendancy of man's corporeal existence. The film exploits a different angle. Under Renoir's direction, action is no longer informed by a vague theory of atavism, formulated in terms which reveal a deeply rooted awareness of transgression. Instead, one is left with a strong sense of the implacable nature of existence. Zola presents an extreme view of the human condition. Renoir shows us the intrinsic weakness of the human state. If one can talk of the influence of myth in relation to the film, it must be in the residual awareness of the Fall suggested by the portrayal of man's flawed nature. Jacques, Séverine and Roubaud are all primarily victims of their own weaknesses, but their situation is also a microcosm of a wider and equally ironic state -- that of life itself. Moral condemnation does not figure in either book or film, it is out of place in both. Zola set out to depict bestiality in the so-called human species. Renoir's characters remain closed within their own egos. Awareness dawns only in extremis and is not accompanied by understanding since, by then, the situation exceeds human rationale.

Undoubtedly the techniques employed by Renoir produce an altogether different emphasis from that found in the novel. The story -- a doomed love set against the background

of a fatal compulsion -- remains the same; it is the underlying features which have changed. In effect, story (composed of characters and events) is divisible from the rest of the novel -- that is, its thematic content. Theme, however, is indelibly linked with the written word through which it is expressed. Thus, anyone undertaking an adaptation:

. . . looks not to the organic novel, whose language is inseparable from its theme, but to characters and incidents which have somehow detached themselves from language and, like the heroes of folk legends, have achieved a mythic life of their own.²⁴

Consequently, the integration of theme and form is such that alteration of the novel's content is not a by-product of the process of adaptation but intrinsic to it. Theme is not so much subordinate to form, it is inseparable from it.

²⁴ Bluestone, p.62

Concluding Remarks

This study of La Bête humaine and its conversion into film functions as a balance sheet. Throughout emphasis has fallen, with increasing insistence, on the disparity between novel and film. Almost at once, comparison revealed a toning down of the violence which is intrinsic to the novel. Zola's characters, defined by specific physical features which identify them as types, share a common vigor, a barely restrained urge to violence or passion. Renoir's treatment of the characters also produces a series of types; these, however, indicate a distinctly bourgeois conception of character. Similarly, action is subject to moderation. In the film the extent to which violence is depicted is considerably less than in the novel. Renoir's approach to scenes with violent or sexual content and which in the text are described in detail, is deliberately evasive. On several occasions the director, rather than cutting from a scene, prefers to block action out by training the camera on a closed door. Necessity in the form of censorship laws provides one reason, yet preference should also be considered. Renoir, observes Poulle, "se contente de suggérer les accouplements par des images poétiques," furthermore, ". . . il se dispense complètement du poncif, si

français, du couple au lit." ²⁵ Zola's insistent portrayal of copulation in beds, sheds or dark alleyways was clearly too blatant for the film-maker's tastes.

The mood of the film is pessimistic. The source of this pessimism and the sense of inevitability which contributes to it, are to be found in the somber tone of the film's images. Unrelieved darkness is, however, less effective than the interplay of two different shades. The contrast of light with dark enhances the depth of the latter. With an artist's appreciation of shading, Renoir counterpoints dark with light. Night/blackness is an integral part of the film's backdrop and, because of this, scenes which at first appear unremarkable assume unexpected poignancy. Jacques describes a sunlit landscape to Séverine and the image evoked by his words stands in sharp contrast to the "reality" of the dark shunting yard. Thus it is not hope, or even romance, which colors the atmosphere but foreboding as shadows close around the couple. Indeed, as the characters' hopes and dreams are engulfed by a bleak and inescapable reality, Renoir's use of contrast generates a level of figural meaning which highlights the gulf between man's aspirations and his abilities. Contrast is also evident in the novel. Snow, for example, offsets the blackness of the pre-dawn sky (chapter seven). Yet here it is used purely to identify

²⁵ Pouille, p. 29.

opposing elements. More importantly, these elements are characterized by what they have in common -- their material substance. The contrast of color is, therefore, part of a wider phenomenon. A phenomenon which has as its basis the essential homogeneity of all the elements, both animate and inanimate, which constitute the world of the novel.

The use of contrast, more than any of the other changes made by Renoir, pinpoints the difference in his approach. While in search of an explanation for the film's departure from the novel, one may have noted not only the different personalities of novelist and film-maker but, equally, the different eras in which each lived, and the impact of a different set of attitudes and conventions on their individual perceptions. However, something more fundamental than background or personal taste was found to account for the extent to which novel and film differ. The organic nature of the relationship between theme and form means, quite simply, that when the latter changes, so must the former. Accordingly, just as Zola chose a theme suited to his medium, Renoir selected a theme which he could treat eloquently on film. Indeed, the director applies the criterion outlined by Béla Balázs, according to whom the film-maker:

. . . may use the existing work of art merely as raw material, regard it from the specific angle of his own art form as if it were raw reality, and pay no attention to the form once already given to the material. The playwright,

Shakespeare, reading a story by Bandello, saw in it not the artistic form of a masterpiece of story-telling but merely the naked event narrated in it.²⁶

Yet what are the implications of the above for Renoir's claim to fidelity? His statement may now be reassessed:

. . . j'ai été aussi fidèle que je l'ai pu à l'esprit du livre; Je n'en ai pas suivi l'intrigue, mais j'ai toujours pensé qu'il valait mieux être fidèle à l'esprit d'une oeuvre originale qu'à sa forme extérieure . . . j'ai pensé au côté poétique de Zola.²⁷

Renoir's words reveal a simple motivation. The director is erecting a defense in the hope of disarming criticism. Behind this smokescreen he is really saying that he selected the elements he could exploit to fullest effect on film and then relied on his own skills to develop the project. However, if this study has revealed a lack of sincerity in Renoir's assertions with regard to LA BÊTE HUMAINE, it has also uncovered the inherent falseness of the premise upon which the concept of fidelity is based -- namely, that the

²⁶ Béla Balázs, Theory of the Film (Character and Growth of a New Art), trans. Edith Bone (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd., 1952), p. 263.

²⁷ Rivette et Truffaut, "Entretien avec Jean Renoir," p.4.

media should and do correspond. To erect a principle of fidelity and judge an adaptation strictly on the extent to which it adheres to the original is patently a naïve and mistaken approach. Unfortunately, it is just as obvious that this ill-founded notion of fidelity will continue to dog the heels of any film-maker who undertakes the adaptation of a novel, as long as the public continues to regard the written work as a pre-established canon. The director must therefore feel the invidiousness of his position. He is being judged with little hope of putting his own case. The sense of guilt underlying Renoir's words is now more comprehensible.

LA BÊTE HUMAINE received mixed critical response. Maurice Bessy is representative of the favorable reaction, exclaiming: "Voici le plus beau film que j'ai vu depuis dix ans!"²⁸ Leprohon, who alludes to Bessy's response to the film, associates this enthusiasm with what he describes as "[1]a grandeur du film," which he locates in its construction: ". . . cette conjonction d'éléments plastiques et du rythme."²⁹ Both the film's structure and its rhythm derive from the director's use of the railway. Indeed, it is in his exploitation of the railway that Renoir touches "le côté poétique de Zola." The train scans and punctuates the

²⁸ Chardère, p. 264.

²⁹ Leprohon, p. 80.

film and, from the opening frames, engages the thread of causality. What one witnesses is, in fact, less the poetic aspect of Zola, which reposes in the savage and often hallucinatory atmosphere created by his prose, than the poetic aspect of Renoir revealed in the comprehensive and professional way in which he realizes the full potential of images of the train in motion. Overall, it is the ways in which LA BÊTE HUMAINE differs from the novel that make the film most memorable. The portrayal of the railway workers, for example, and in particular Carette who, as Pecqueux, brings humor to the film but in such a way that it integrates perfectly with the camaraderie of his colleagues. Or the scene between Jacques and Flore in the meadow which, because of the pastoral implications of the setting, encapsulates the bitterness of the engine driver's situation.

To conclude: it must be said that Renoir takes what is diffuse in Zola and condenses it until it has the glistening, compact qualities of a diamond. If he is guilty of anything it is the transformation of a complex and overly emphatic novel into a rigorous and visually exciting film.

Accordingly, the question that should be asked is not: "Was Renoir faithful to the original?" but "Did Renoir make a good film?" I believe the answer is yes. This is so because Jean Renoir was faithful... to his own art form.

Works Consulted

The Novel

- Bachelard, Gaston. L'Eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière. Paris: Corti, 1942.
- Barioli, Marc. Le Train dans la littérature française. Paris: Editions N. M., 1964.
- Bernard, Marc. Zola par lui-même. Ecrivains de Toujours. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971.
- Borie, Jean. Zola et les mythes ou de la nausée au salut. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971.
- Brown, Calvin S. Repetition in Zola's Novels. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1952.
- Duncan, Philip A. "Zola's Machine Monsters." Romance Notes, iii (1962), 1-3.
- Hemmings, F. W. J. Emile Zola. London: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- Jagmetti, Antoinette. "La Bête humaine" d'Emile Zola: etude de stylistique critique. Geneve: Librairie E. Droz, 1955.
- Kanes, Martin. Zola's "La Bête humaine": A Study in Literary Creation. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1962.
- Martino, Pierre. Le Naturalisme français (1870-1895). Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1930.

Matthews, J. H. "The Railway in Zola's La Bête humaine."

Symposium, Spring (1960), 13-14.

Rougemont, Denis de. L'Amour et l'occident. Paris: U.G.E.,
1962.

Zola, Emile. La Bête humaine. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion,
1972.

Zola, Emile. Letters to J. Van Santen Kolff. Ed. R. J.

Niess. St. Louis: Washington University Press, 1940.

The Film

- Balázs, Béla. Theory of the Film (Character and Growth of a New Art). Trans. Edith Bone. London: Dennis Dobson Ltd., 1952.
- Bazin, André. Jean Renoir. Ed. François Truffaut. Paris: Editions Champs Libres, 1971.
- Bluestone, George. Novels into Film. Baltimore: University of California Press, 1974.
- Chardère, Bernard, ed. "Jean Renoir." Premier Plan, 22-24, Lyon: S.E.R.D.O.C., 1962.
- Durgnat, Raymond. Jean Renoir. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.
- Greene, Graham. "La Bête humaine." The Spectator, 5 May 1939, p. 760.
- Leprohon, Pierre. Jean Renoir. Paris: Editions Seghers, 1967.
- Pincus, Edward. Guide to Filmmaking. USA: Signet Books, New American Library, 1969.
- Poulle, François. Renoir 1938, ou Jean Renoir pour rien, enquête sur un cinéaste. Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1969.
- Renoir, Jean. La Bête humaine (Scénario). Paris: Copy Bourse, n.d.
- Rivette, Jacques, et François Truffaut. "Entretien avec Jean Renoir." Cahiers du Cinéma, No. 34 (avril 1954), pp. 3-12.

Sesonske, Alexander. Jean Renoir The French Films,
1924-1939. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University
Press, 1980.