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ILLUSION AND REALITY  
A STUDY OF DESCRIPTIVE TECHNIQUES  
IN THE WORKS OF GUY DE MAUPASSANT

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# I

## THE MAUPASSANTIAN POSITION

In the most widely known of Maupassant's theoretical pieces, the so-called "preface" to *Pierre et Jean*, there occurs a statement of purpose which has given rise to much critical examination. Maupassant says: "Les grands artistes sont ceux qui imposent à l'humanité leur illusion particulière."<sup>1</sup> Although this problem has been examined in several critical studies,<sup>2</sup> a satisfactory explanation has yet to be made concerning his aesthetic aspirations and realizations.

There can be no doubt that the universe of Maupassant, like that of any other exponent of the art of fiction, is basically illusionary. The present study is certainly not an effort to prove or indeed to disprove the author's claim. Aesthetic products of necessity spring from the imagination, and are by definition bound up to a greater or lesser degree with the necessity of creating illusion.

Typical of opinions expressed by a number of critics, that Maupassant was facile, shallow, a shining example of the "artiste inconscient", is this remark by Beuchat:

Cet admirateur de la nature ne s'attarde que rarement à l'évocation d'un paysage. S'il le fait, c'est parce que la nature extérieure a pris part à la scène. Tout concourt ainsi à reproduire la vie, rien que la vie. Le style clair et limpide

<sup>1</sup> Guy de Maupassant, "Le roman", *Pierre et Jean, Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Conard, 1907-10), p. XVI. The complete works published by Conard seem to be the standard critical edition of Maupassant in spite of certain lacunae and inaccuracies of dating. Because it is so readily available, all references to Maupassant's works will be to this edition when possible. Its twenty-nine volumes are not numbered and therefore the title of the pertinent volume will be given in each case. The fifteen volume Librairie de France edition (1934-38) is chiefly valuable for the final tables concerning theme and chronology, but this material is also to be found in René Dumesnil's *Chroniques, études, correspondance de Guy de Maupassant* (Paris: Gründ, 1938).

<sup>2</sup> See especially the following excellent studies: R. Dumesnil, *Guy de Maupassant* (Paris: Taillandier, 1947); E. D. Sullivan, *Maupassant the Novelist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954); André Vial, *Guy de Maupassant et l'art du roman* (Paris: Nizet, 1954).

apporte sa contribution, c'est le style le plus naturel qui soit. Jules Lemaître avait raison d'affirmer que l'écrivain produisait 'ses nouvelles comme un pommier des pommes',<sup>3</sup>

or the following evaluation of his style by Pierre Cogy:

Maupassant a naturellement le style qui n'est pas un style parce qu'il colle à la vie même. Sa phrase, nette et pure, est aussi difficile à analyser que celle de Voltaire, ou d'Anatole France. Les articulations, sujet, verbe, complément, y sont bien, mais le mystère qui préside à leur parfait agencement demeure entier. Il n'y fallait qu'un immense talent, et ce talent est tout.<sup>4</sup>

A profound thinker he certainly was not, but nevertheless, how could it have been possible for someone so closely linked with Gustave Flaubert as was Guy de Maupassant not to have seriously weighed such problems of creative writing as style, precision, documentation, form – those basic tenets of the Flaubertian aesthetic, the dogma of that most conscious of nineteenth century novelists. Maupassant's faith in his mentor's teachings burned with a bright flame throughout his creative life, and doubtless the popular conception of Maupassant the spontaneous inventor of tales, the author of brilliantly executed but essentially empty narratives, is little else but an unproven cliché of criticism.

The heir to Flaubertian "realism", the intellectual cousin of Zola's naturalism, Maupassant is often regarded as the epitome of the objective novelist, that most dispassionate observer of phenomena who seems to be a logical conclusion of a whole century of fictional tradition.

Et si, maintenant, autour de ces nouvelles de la peur et de l'angoisse, on rassemble tout le reste de l'oeuvre, toutes les pages écrites avec le goût et le sens de la vie, sans aucune vaine prétention scientifique ou documentaire, d'un style admirablement limpide, on sera tenté d'affirmer que bien plus que Zola, Maupassant, dans les parties troubles de son oeuvre, aussi bien que dans ses claires visions de la campagne normande ou de la vie parisienne, est représentatif de la génération naturaliste; il a traduit à la fois le goût du siècle finissant pour la réalité et aussi son inquiétude devant la réalité, qu'on finissait par juger bien incomplète et triste.<sup>5</sup>

With particular reference to the novel, Sullivan maintains that what he sees as an extension of this so-called objective technique leads Maupassant into a kind of psychological morass of subjectivity.<sup>6</sup> It is my contention that an analysis of objectivity in this author's work will not in itself prove

<sup>3</sup> Ch. Beuchat, *Histoire du naturalisme français*, 2 vols. (Paris: Corrèa, 1949), II, p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> P. Cogy, *Le naturalisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1953), p. 93.

<sup>5</sup> P. Martino, *Le naturalisme français* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1965), p. 145.

<sup>6</sup> Sullivan, *Maupassant the Novelist*, ch. 9.

a great deal. Even that most "objective" of novels, Flaubert's *Salammbô* is, as everyone knows, quite revealing when viewed in the light of the author's personal sensibilities. And Maupassant's contention concerning illusion suggests that he, like his master, was well aware of the problem.

Maupassant's creation of illusion must first be approached from quite another angle – that of aesthetic resolutions of fictional problems as seen from within the works themselves. In other words, must the noticeable changes in subject matter, technique and emphasis which are visible in his later period be seen as a break, a denial of earlier concepts, or can a logical, unbroken progression be discerned? Do his early and later productions show a necessary and predictable evolution in terms of technique? These problems are of course aggravated by the fact that his creative life was unusually brief. Maupassant's writings themselves must therefore speak, and suggest some conclusion to the debate over subjectivity and objectivity.

One must of necessity then approach Maupassant's work from within. Only by viewing in some detail the methods and techniques practised in his stories, novels and travel books, is it possible to understand the writer. However significant his celebrated malady may or may not be, its much disputed influence on his creative imagination must take secondary position within the confines of the present study. A very great weakness of much critical work on Guy de Maupassant up to the present, has been the inability on the part of the critic to separate Maupassant the man from Maupassant the creative artist.<sup>7</sup> I would be among the first to admit that his life holds great fascination, and obviously plays its part in his artistic development, yet in terms of literary criticism, this aspect has been much over-emphasized. Critics seem almost in spite of themselves to be attracted by his biography.

With the exception of Sullivan's book<sup>8</sup> with which, for all its excellence I cannot always agree, and André Vial's most detailed study<sup>9</sup> which, in its thoroughness fails, in my estimation, to offer a clear elucidation of the author from a strictly artistic and formal point of view, there have been

<sup>7</sup> There is a vast amount of biographical material available concerning Guy de Maupassant. Among the best studies I would mention: René Dumesnil, *Guy de Maupassant*: E. Maynial, *La vie et l'oeuvre de Guy de Maupassant* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1906); F. Steegmüller, *A Lion in the Path* (New York: Random House, 1949).

For a more complete list of books and articles see the excellent bibliography in Vial's work (*Guy de Maupassant*) or A. Artinian, *Maupassant Criticism in France* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1941).

<sup>8</sup> Sullivan, *Maupassant the Novelist*.

<sup>9</sup> Vial, *Guy de Maupassant*.

few attempts to deal with these problems on anything more than a fragmentary basis. Certain astonishingly similar techniques from novel to novel, from story to story, have been noticed in the isolation of a single work.<sup>10</sup> Nowhere has there been, to my knowledge, an attempt to link them up into a unified view of the whole.

Maupassant's "illusion particulière" is not necessarily a reflection of his inherited neuroses if such there were, nor of the intellectual erosion effected by disease, if such there was. Disregarding the surfeit of conflicting medical evidence surrounding "le cas Maupassant", I think it is possible to explain his work satisfactorily from self-contained evidence, that is to say from the point of view of the conscious artist.

This study takes the form of a progression from the interior outward, with a view to showing a logical development in Maupassant's work. It is my hope that it may in some way contribute to a re-appraisal of this novelist's significance in the larger framework of literary history. Misjudged by his contemporaries<sup>11</sup> and somewhat slighted by succeeding

<sup>10</sup> A number of articles have dealt with imagery in a single novel with little attempt to integrate them into the totality of Maupassant's creation. The following are among the best of these: R. B. Grant, "Imagery as a Means of Psychological Realism in *Une vie*", *Studies in Philology* LX, 669-84; G. Hainsworth, "Pattern and Symbol in the Work of Guy de Maupassant", *French Studies* V (January, 1951), 1-17; R. J. Neiss, "*Pierre et Jean*: Some Symbols", *French Review* XXXII (May, 1959), 511-19; E. D. Sullivan, "Portrait of the Artist: Maupassant and *Notre coeur*", *French Review* XXI (December, 1948), 136.

<sup>11</sup> We have seen something of Jules Lemaître's view in Beuchat's reference to him (see note 3). Anatole France, with his usual facility dismisses Maupassant in the following manner: "J'inclinerais à croire que sa philosophie est contenue tout entière dans cette chanson si sage que les nourrices chantent à leurs nourrissons et qui résume à merveille tout ce que nous savons de la destinée des hommes sur la terre:

Les petites marionnettes  
Font, font, font,  
Trois petits tours  
Et puis s'en vont."

Anatole France, "M. Guy de Maupassant et les conteurs français", *La vie littéraire*, 1ère série: *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1926), p. 61.

Only Brunetière comes anywhere close to a valid judgement: "Tous les procédés du vrai naturalisme, si l'on y veut bien faire un peu d'attention, n'ont pour objet, dans le roman, comme en peinture, que de mettre l'artiste en garde contre mille moyens qu'il a de déformer la réalité, pour un seul de la reproduire. Lisez à ce point de vue les meilleures nouvelles de M. de Maupassant: il vous semblera que tout autre que lui, que vous-même, au besoin, eussiez pu les écrire; elles sont impersonnelles comme les œuvres classiques. . . . Mais si cette fidélité de l'imitation, si la réalisation de ce caractère impersonnel et en quelque sorte éternel de l'œuvre a été dans notre temps, en France et aussi ailleurs, l'objet du naturalisme, on peut dire encore que nul ne l'a plus pleinement atteint que M. de Maupassant" (F. Brunetière, *Le roman naturaliste* [Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1889], p. 379).

generations, Guy de Maupassant has been perhaps the most maligned and most frequently misunderstood artist of his period.

Before we embark on this study of more precise textual material I think it is useful to review in as brief a space as possible the general lines of his thinking concerning some of the great novelists of his century.

In a form of literature as closely related to its society as is the nineteenth century novel of manners, the external world, its sights, its smells and its sounds, performs a vital function.

But the rôle of this real world varies greatly in importance from author to author. The Stendhalian view of the novel as a mirror, which furnishes a kind of point of departure for the imagination, is far removed from Zola's concepts of the real. Maupassant is well aware of the difficulties which arise out of realistic aspirations. Can literature be real? Within the bounds of nineteenth century the tradition may be considered to have its focus in the work of Honoré de Balzac, whose tendencies towards realism have been so often analyzed.

What concerns us with regard to Maupassant, the relationship between external appearances and internal make-up is a device which is very common in the nineteenth century novel. One can think of Fabrice del Dongo imprisoned in the citadel urgently needing to communicate with the outside world in the person of Clelia Conti, or of Jean Valjean and the famous loaf of bread. There is in nineteenth century fiction a constant interplay between character and environment, between interior life and external objects, rendered more complex by the function of the observer, the artist who depicts this interplay. It is especially in this regard that the work of Balzac looms so large. His "Avant-propos" succinctly suggested this when he wrote of the triple form that fiction should take: "les hommes, les femmes et les choses, c'est-à-dire les personnes et la représentation matérielle qu'ils donnent de leur pensée; enfin l'homme et la vie."<sup>12</sup> One has only to think for example, of the elaborate apartment of César Birotteau or of the faded yellow salon of Mademoiselle Gamard to see to what excellent use physical objects as an adjunct of character portrayal can be put in Balzac. The décor of a place of residence becomes under his pen a tangible, exteriorized manifestation of what is already established beneath the surface. The "peau de chagrin" takes on a multitude of forms. Reality in his narratives is often subservient to character, and Balzac's detailed descriptions such as that of the Pension Vauquer which opens *Le père Goriot* not only performs this same function with regard to those

<sup>12</sup> Honoré de Balzac, "Avant-propos", *La comédie humaine* 1 (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), p. 5.

who dwell therein, but sets a mood and furnishes an architectural skeleton which the novel will clothe. The tangible world in Balzac's most successful works is seldom, if ever, extraneous. It is rather an illustration of, a mould for, a comment on personalities and relationships. In other words, Balzac's reality is by no means photographic, by no means independent. Detailed as it may be, it is the servant of the greater whole that is the novel. Maupassant, an admirer of the work of his illustrious predecessor is most astute in his perception of the true nature of Balzac's world. Already in 1876, that is to say, four years before he himself published anything of significance, and at a period at which he is under the direct influence of Flaubert, he senses Balzac's basic unreality. While his portrait of Balzac is based on the letters rather than the novels, Maupassant had a clear understanding of the true rôle of all the descriptive detail:

Chez lui tout est cerveau et coeur. Tout passe en dedans: les choses du dehors l'intéressent peu, et il n'a que des tendances vagues vers la beauté plastique, la forme pure, la signification des choses, cette vie dont les poètes animent la matière; . . .<sup>13</sup>

Maupassant's interest in Balzac lies principally then in what he sees as an almost magical ability. It is a case of a basically non-realistic approach in art, which, because of the great skill of the creator, takes on a vitality unequalled in life. It transcends the bounds of the imagination to enter a world more closely identified with the real. That Maupassant criticizes Balzac because of his disregard for the material world, or to use his terminology, for the lack of poetry in his writing, is eloquent testimony of the extent to which Flaubert's training has already gone. But for Maupassant, Balzac is nevertheless a great artist, a creator, a man endowed with a special talent. The images he uses, the word paintings he constructs take on a depth of meaning which surpasses the limits of the tangible. His work moves into reality, it does not spring from it. Fictional reality has a very special sense in the Balzacian view of life, and although Maupassant would appear to have little sympathy for it here, his interest in it should be noted.

But Balzac is not of course the only novelist concerning whom Maupassant makes this kind of observation. I have already mentioned the special relationship between himself and Gustave Flaubert. The biographical facts are well known and need no further comment. But just how did Maupassant view the work of Flaubert with regard to his use of the real

<sup>13</sup> Maupassant, "Balzac d'après ses lettres", *Chroniques, études, correspondance de Guy de Maupassant*, ed. by René Dumesnil. This article was first published in *La Nation* (November 22, 1876).

world, and indeed what distinction did the young man make between the rôle of the perceptible in the works of Balzac and Flaubert.

Flaubert, the painstaking artisan of prose style and narrative fiction is equally particular about accuracy of detail. The physical world plays no small part in the art of Flaubert. As might be expected, his view is far more accurately documented than was that of Balzac, and in this sense, the author of *Madame Bovary* is without question a realist. But writing naturally involves choice of detail, choice of material, choice of situation. And nowhere is that choice more scrupulously controlled than in Flaubert. He too seeks to harmonize the interior world of his fiction with the exterior world, but significantly enough, in a calculated, rational manner. His constant choice is the small, but significant detail; Charles Bovary's famous cap, the description of the ball at "la Vaubyessard", Salammbô's snake, or the Seine valley in the opening chapter of *L'éducation sentimentale*.

Flaubert's ideal artistic product would have, among numerous attributes, total objectivity. The external world becomes then in his fiction not only an architectural framework on which the book can be erected, but an integral part of the narrative itself. The physical setting moves into a more active rôle, commenting on character and situation, reflecting, observing and recording. Characters become identified by material objects such as Félicité's parrot, and whole lives are commented on by setting, such as we find in *L'éducation sentimentale* with its views of Paris and surroundings. This is at least the traditional view of Flaubert, a view which, in spite of newer and equally valid interpretations of his work by such critics as Richard or Brombert, cannot be totally rejected.

In a preface to an edition of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* published in 1885 Maupassant tells us something of his conception of art in the light of Flaubertian principles. After mentioning the doctrine of "impersonnalité" which his master cultivated, he goes on to tell us something of his idea of the writer and his aims:

L'écrivain regarde, tâche de pénétrer les âmes et les coeurs, de comprendre leurs dessous leurs penchants honteux ou magnanimes, toute la mécanique compliquée des mobiles humains. Il observe ainsi suivant son tempérament d'homme et sa conscience d'artiste.<sup>14</sup>

Considering only this problem of the function of reality in fiction, we see here another element in Maupassant's concept. The Flaubertian struggle

<sup>14</sup> Maupassant, "Étude sur Gustave Flaubert", *Oeuvres complètes, Oeuvres postumes* II, p. 97. First published in *La Revue Bleue* (January 19 and 26, 1884).

to grasp what underlies the perceptible in human motivation intensely interests the younger author. The small but meaningful detail drawn from close observation of the surrounding world, such as the decoration of the china at the inn as Emma at age thirteen travels to the convent, acquires through art a depth of value which cannot be overestimated. Flaubert may hold a mirror up to nature, but it is a mirror "qui . . . reproduisait les faits, en leur donnant ce reflet inexprimable, ce je ne sais quoi de presque divin qui est l'art".<sup>15</sup> Herein lie the roots of his restrictions concerning Balzac.

The third major figure with whom the name of Maupassant is often connected is of course Emile Zola. Again much confusion has tended to cloud the relationship between the two men. In the few years immediately prior to 1880, that is to say preceding Maupassant's meteoric rise to celebrity, the elder writer had become closely acquainted with, among others, Guy de Maupassant. The product of this relationship, the famous *Soirées de Médan*, has given rise to a general misconception of Maupassant.

Such an association tended to link his name too closely to Zola's naturalism, although Brunetière, no friend of the latter, admires the young author's work. In his study of naturalism entitled *Le roman naturaliste* (1888) he wisely associates Maupassant with the work of Flaubert rather than with Zola.

Maupassant's own explanation of the *Soirées de Médan* which appeared in defence of the work shortly after its publication is not only factually inaccurate concerning the collection's original inspiration, but obviously for the sake of propaganda adopts a literary argument which Maupassant never really espoused as his own. To see his career as an adoption of the cause of naturalism followed by a reversal and a return to more orthodox Flaubertianism is to distort literary perspective.

He states himself in this article, entitled "Les soirées de Médan", that none of the authors involved had the intention of forming a school. Their stories are reactions against romantic patriotism. A curious comment, obviously intended for Flaubert, is contained in the piece:

Quand un monsieur, qualifié de réaliste, a le souci d'écrire le mieux possible, est sans cesse poursuivi par des préoccupations d'art, c'est à mon sens un idéaliste.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Maupassant, "Étude sur Gustave Flaubert", p. 96.

<sup>16</sup> Maupassant, "Les soirées de Médan", *Oeuvres complètes, Boule de Suif*, p. 84. First published in *Le Gaulois* (April 17, 1880).

Does this of necessity indicate a preference for the Zola type of realism, or indeed a predilection for realism at all? He unquestionably attacks those who tend to embellish nature,<sup>17</sup> and designates this type of author as a charlatan or an imbecile.

Zola's personal interpretation of the real differs greatly from that of either Balzac or Flaubert. In the experimental novel the author's position is quite distinctly that of the dispassionate observer of phenomena. Reality then takes precedence over art and will determine the latter's quality, which will be in direct proportion to the accuracy of the reproduction. Such is the theory that Zola expounds, in spite of the concessive "à travers un tempérament".

Maupassant has no delusions as to Zola's ability to live up to his own theories. He has great admiration for such novels as *L'assommoir*, but little regard for the author's theories. As early as 1883 he states:

... fils des romantiques, romantique lui-même dans tous ses procédés, il porte en lui une tendance au poème, un besoin de grandir, de grossir, de faire des symboles avec les lettres et les choses. Il sent fort bien d'ailleurs cette pente de son esprit; il la combat sans cesse pour y céder toujours. Ses enseignements et ses oeuvres sont éternellement en désaccord.<sup>18</sup>

What is so very curious and indicative for Maupassant is his observation that the founder of naturalism has a tendency to "faire des symboles avec

<sup>17</sup> Maupassant sees a long line of sentimental novelists whose falseness he attacks. Among them he singles out Octave Feuillet (see especially "Les soirées de Médan" and "Réponse à Monsieur Francisque Sarcey", *Oeuvres complètes, Mademoiselle Fifi*, p. 277; first published in *Le Gaulois* (July 28, 1882).

George Sand does not escape criticism in the same light. In a "chronique" published in *Le Gaulois* on July 9, 1882, Maupassant observes: "Le romancier se trouve donc placé dans cette alternative: faire le monde tel qu'il le voit, lever les voiles de grâce et d'honnêteté, constater ce qui est sous ce qui paraît, montrer l'humanité toujours semblable sous ses élégances d'emprunt ou bien se résoudre à créer un monde gracieux et conventionnel comme l'ont fait George Sand, Jules Sandeau, et M. Octave Feuillet" (Maupassant, "Chronique", *Oeuvres complètes* XV [Paris: Librairie de France, 1934-38], p. 70).

Pierre Loti too is included in this group. Speaking of *Pêcheur d'Islande* in a "chronique" which appeared in *Le Gil Blas* of July 6, 1886, he remarks: "Il [Pierre Loti] nous dit aujourd'hui les amours des marins, et la détermination d'idéaliser jusqu'à l'invraisemblable apparaît de plus en plus. Nous voici en plein dans les tendresses à la Berquin, dans la sentimentalité paysannesque, dans la passion lyrico-villageoise de Mme Sand."

"Cela est charmant toutefois et touchant; mais cela nous charme et nous touche par des effets littéraires trop apparents, trop visiblement faux, par l'attendrissement dure et poignante qui nous bouleverse le coeur au lieu de l'émouvoir facticement comme le fait M. Loti" (Maupassant, "L'amour dans les livres et dans la vie", *Maupassant journaliste et chroniqueur*, ed. by G. Delaisement (Paris: Albin Michel, 1956), p. 185; first published in *Le Gil Blas*, July 6, 1886).

<sup>18</sup> Maupassant, "Étude sur Emile Zola", *Oeuvres complètes, Oeuvres postumes* II, p. 157. First published by Quantin in *Les célébrités contemporaines* (1883).

les lettres et les choses". One thinks immediately of such things as Félicité Rougon's yellow salon, or of Lison, the faithful locomotive of *La bête humaine*. Inanimate objects, observed in exterior reality again take on more than their surface meaning and conjure up a whole state of mind. The tangible world again is placed in communication with the world of ideas, the abstract, the general. The remarkable fact is that Maupassant attributes to the logical, factual Zola a greater poetic feeling than he does to the imaginative Balzac.

Basically, what we have seen him attracted to here is the actual relationship, in the works of Balzac, Flaubert and Zola, between the physical world in which their novels exist, and the deeper, intangible world of feeling, the idea, the inexpressible. Each of them has evolved a means well suited to his own temperament. Maupassant also seeks some personal means of identification between the two, some bond that will clearly state that they are closely interrelated, and that therefore they are really only different aspects of one universe. It is a search for unity.

In Balzac he finds a basic lack of concern for "realism" which makes use of it only to clarify those pre-ordained problems of life which do interest him – problems of the mind and heart. In Flaubert he sees the potentialities of an aesthetic approach to reality to be able to convey great depths of meaning. In Zola he admires the great evocative sweep of his descriptions. Balzac's functional description, Flaubert's significant detail, Zola's epic and symbolic exaggerations are all, in Maupassant's view, links between this physical world of sense perception and a deeper, more meaningful literary experience.

The problem we are about to examine then is by no means unique to Maupassant, and might at first glance appear obvious and naive. The relationship between fiction and life as manifested in descriptive material is a problem common to most literature.

However this dialogue between two worlds gives rise to deeper concerns than one might expect, concerns which I shall not investigate further at this particular point in the discussion. Since my general intention is to proceed, in dealing with Maupassant, from the particular to the general, I feel it will be of greater value to deal with these more abstract problems as a result of, and not as an introduction to, more precise textual analysis. We must begin this investigation with a consideration of the presence of the physical world in Maupassant's fiction. Observation of just what material he uses should lead us directly towards the deeper questions of how and why such material is meaningful.

## II

### THE SHORT STORIES

The short stories of Guy de Maupassant present to the critic certain rather complex problems. The two hundred and seventy odd tales which are known to be his, present such a variety of subject matter and technique that it is extremely difficult to pin him down. Some readers, judging from such well known pieces as "La parure" or "La ficelle" see him as the master of the trick ending, while others will consider "Le Horla" or "L'endormeuse" as sufficient evidence to call him an explorer of hallucination. As Sullivan so aptly points out,<sup>1</sup> no such sweeping generality can even hope to approximate the truth.

Added to this variety of treatment and of subject matter is of course the thorny problem of chronology. For the vast majority of stories the only means of dating which we have is based on the time of publication, which sheds little or no light on the more significant factor – date of composition. For these reasons it is virtually impossible to single out significant stories in a study of this nature. In seeking textual evidence which will offer clues as to Maupassant's view of his world we must by necessity approach the short stories as a kind of organic unit and take note of trends not with a view to chronology but rather with the intention of discovering patterns in his descriptive material.

The problem of the physical world is given a great deal of attention by Maupassant, as one might logically expect from an artist of his period and formation. By assigning to it a special function with regard to fictional problems of character and situation, he too will seek to bridge the gap. If our observations of his opinions are borne out in his own works, then reality must be developed according to some kind of discernible pattern.

On the simplest level this reality is obviously the décor in which the narrative is placed. This external world deals with a relatively small

<sup>1</sup> E. D. Sullivan, *Maupassant: The Short Stories* (= *Barron's Studies in French Literature*) (New York: Barron's Educational Series, 1962), pp. 7–8.

number of geographical locations, variations on which can be traced through his work from beginning to end. What follows here is a kind of catalogue of Maupassant's world as he presents it to us in fictional terms. Through it we may gain some insight into the relationship between these descriptive passages and the narratives they illustrate.

A child of Normandy, of that rich green countryside astride France's most important river and wedded to the sea, Maupassant exploits the area to great advantage. Landscapes, rural and maritime settings, are perhaps the richest and most varied descriptive elements in his work. Using as a basis for analysis the Conard edition of Maupassant, let us first consider the frequency with which the rural landscape appears.

It is perfectly justifiable to expect that Normandy will dominate Maupassant's interest in non-Parisian France. Out of the stories reviewed, I have found that somewhere over half the total, or about one hundred and fifty, contain some reference, direct or otherwise to this geographical area<sup>2</sup> – the Norman countryside, the Seine Valley, or the principal urban centres of this region that the author knew so well, Rouen, Le Havre, Etretat or Fécamp.<sup>3</sup> Those essentially rural tales dealing directly with Norman peasants in their native habitat number some fifty, with considerable variety with regard to the attention devoted to the physical surroundings. One might consider as extreme cases such stories as "Le Père Judas" (1883),<sup>4</sup> with a panoramic view of the Seine Valley at Rouen strongly reminiscent of Georges Duval's honeymoon excursion with Madeleine to his native Cantal in *Bel-Ami*, and "Une vente" (1884), one of a number of courtroom tales in which references to the natural setting are completely absent. In the one case, physical exterior reality occupies at least as much of the reader's attention as the narrative itself, and in the other it is dispensed with totally. Within this range there lies a whole group of stories of various types and lengths in which the rural scene plays some rôle, major or minor. In the village scenes of "La maison Tellier" the setting is closely interwoven with the narrative, and we catch glimpses of the fields, their colours and their smells during the journey of the motley group of women, of certain aspects of the village, such as its church and street. But nowhere does the author focus our attention for any extended

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix II for a breakdown of the stories according to setting.

<sup>3</sup> For a complete breakdown of the short stories according to theme consult René Dumesnil, *Chroniques, études, correspondance*, pp. 459–503.

<sup>4</sup> Rather than referring to the location of individual short stories mentioned, I have included as Appendix I of the present study the table of contents of each volume of short stories in the Conard edition. Only direct quotations or those stories with identical titles will therefore need any further elucidation.

duration on this element. The characters in such stories as "Le Père Amable" (1886), "Le diable" (1886) or "Le petit fût" (1884), are closely bound up with their fields and crops, yet again Maupassant does not indulge in extensive passages of description of external nature. The farm in these three is always there, but any description of the natural setting is brought into the narrative only as an adjunct of development of plot and character. Indeed, in *Le diable*, while the harvesting of the crops is a vital and essential element in the establishment of the dramatic situation, the entire story takes place indoors with only brief reference to the sunlight and the breeze through the open window of the bedroom.

Exterior description has still another variation in these essentially rural stories. Vial points out an interesting fact concerning Maupassant's method of presentation – that in about half his stories he uses as a point of departure, or as an introduction, an incident which is only remotely connected with the main body of the tale, such as an after-dinner conversation, a train journey, or a courtroom situation, to mention only three general types. Description is often involved in this indirect introduction.<sup>5</sup> Sullivan quite justifiably remarks that such a "cadre" technique is as old as story-telling itself<sup>6</sup> and that Maupassant exploits it simply because it is well suited to his general approach to creative writing. But with regard to descriptive passages it is not without significance. In a number of rural tales this element is entirely contained within this framework, and is thus set apart from the development of plot and character. The fairy tale effect the "cadre" produces is most effective for example in "La légende du Mont-Saint-Michel" (1882), in which the description of the setting encases the narrative, thereby providing both the backdrop and the link between a timeless mythological tale and the real contemporary world of Maupassant the observer and the writer. This "cadre" description appears as well in such works as "Le fermier" (1886), in which it links people of distinct social classes, or in "Le retour" (1884), where we find an opening seascape which evokes the past life and the hardships of the principal participants in the action. By setting the description apart from the main action, Maupassant not only stresses the value of it within the story, but deepens its meaning and intensifies its relationship to the work as a whole.

These peasant or rural tales offer still another type, when one examines them from the point of view of external setting. Along with the courtroom dramas of the sort mentioned, and including such others as "Le cas de

<sup>5</sup> Vial, *Guy de Maupassant*, pp. 460–69.

<sup>6</sup> Sullivan, *The Short Stories*, pp. 12–19.

Madame Luneau" (1883) and "Tribunaux rustiques" (1884), we have those that, while remaining essentially peasant in flavour, take place in an environment which is not specifically rural. The outstanding example of this is of course "La ficelle" (1883). Although the Goderville market is quite logically agricultural and rural in nature, it must be regarded as an urban concept. Its description in the story makes no mention of nature, and Maître Hauchecorne is seen against a social backdrop, not a specifically rural one in the descriptive sense. It is indeed his society which establishes the lifelong conflict the tale presents, and external nature has a minimal function to play here. Much the same can obviously be said about others, such as "La bête à Maîtr' Belhomme" (1885), which is set almost entirely in a coach, or "Les 25 francs de la supérieure" (1888) and its urban, hospital milieu.

There are of course a significant number of Norman stories which do not involve characters of peasant stock. The Norman château is also a favorite setting for Maupassant's stories, again an atmosphere commonly found in the short story from its earliest manifestations in European literature. I have found over forty stories of the two hundred and seventy which make at least some mention of this part of the author's experience. But again, when dealing with descriptions of the exterior world, and more specifically with nature descriptions this group contains a broad spectrum of different types.

Many of these stories, which for the most part are predictably upper class provincial in social background, deal with the theme of hunting, and understandably lead the reader directly into communication with nature. One need only consider for example the volume of stories entitled *Les contes de la bécasse*<sup>7</sup> to realize that this background attracts Maupassant with some frequency. The opening "story" is curious since it provides, much in the tradition of Boccaccio or Marguerite de Navarre, a kind of framework or introduction for the collection, and is intended to have the function for a number of stories that has been mentioned with regard to individual ones. Again description of external nature is directly involved. Just as we have seen with peasant tales, the "cadre" technique, so prominent throughout Maupassant's all too brief career, can be placed in a position of prominence with regard to its presentation of nature. A short story such as "Le fermier" (1886) for example must attract our attention since the description of nature in the work is contained entirely in this

<sup>7</sup> Indeed Albert-Marie Schmidt uses this little piece as the initial entry into his most useful and accurate edition of the short stories. See bibliography.

framework. The narrator, part of a hunting party, entertains the group after dinner. What is told is the tragic story of a Norman farmer's love, a farmer whom those present had recently encountered in the course of their day's activity. The immediately real, that is to say the countryside and the peasant's house, is visually presented to us as a direct experience of the narrator, while the actual events of the central story we hear second-hand, as told to the narrator by his host. Similar complex relationships between the perceptible world of nature and the fictional world of character and plot may be seen in numbers of other hunting tales, told on rainy days when the party is confined indoors, or during the course of an evening's conversation after dinner, or simply as part of a week-end visit to a friend in the country. Of such a construction are "Un réveillon" (1882), "Une veuve" (1882) or "Le père".<sup>8</sup> Although in each of the stories mentioned nature performs some function, it will be found that the only significant presentation of the countryside, the weather, the sky, that is to say of nature, will be found in the introductive element of the narration.

But nature descriptions in these non-peasant rural stories is by no means confined exclusively to introductions and conclusions. "Le loup" (1882), a hunting tale, has a good deal of description integrated with the narrative itself, while the framework introduction and conclusion offer us nothing but a brief outline of the basic situation which inspires the story. Similarly a work like "La rempailleuse" (1882) springs from an identical and only briefly mentioned "real" situation, and indeed contains no noteworthy description of nature either in the framework or in the central narrative.

Not all these essentially rural tales which deal with other than peasant types involve hunting, of course. Stories such as "Joseph" (1885) or "La fenêtre" (1883) are located in country homes, but in neither case is the external setting dealt with significantly. In both the action takes place exclusively indoors, and the outdoor world would have little or no contribution to make. Nor are all these Norman stories developed around the country home or hunting lodge. Tourism also appears with reference to Maupassant's native province, particularly in association with the sea-coast of his childhood at Etretat. The people seen on the beach here often become the subjects of the author's attention. Here again we will find some stories in which the descriptive talent is employed entirely in the framework of the piece, such as in "Imprudence" (1885), in which the beloved is seen in the opening paragraph against a background of sun and

<sup>8</sup> Maupassant, "Le père", *Clair de lune, Oeuvres complètes*, p. 181. First published in *Le Gil Blas* (July 26, 1887).

sea, and in which the external plays no further rôle in the deepening of their relationship once they return to Paris. In "Bombard" (1884) we discover in the opening paragraphs, a similar emphasis on the setting which is not maintained throughout the story. Still more striking is the case of "Le modèle" (1883) which launches directly into an exhaustive description of the seacoast at Etretat. This serves again as a framework into which the action is fitted.

On the other hand, a masterpiece such as "Miss Harriet" (1883), as much a rejection of "objectivity" as any work of Maupassant, depends for most of its impact on the significance of the setting. Both in the framework introduction and throughout the ensuing narrative, landscape and seascape are vitally important. The link is direct and immediate. The natural setting joins the "present" of the introductory cadre with the past of the central story by means of a visual image, a panoramic view of the coast and is complicated by the narrator's painting to which Miss Harriet reacts so strikingly.

Tourism inevitably leads us beyond the borders of Normandy to that most celebrated of seaside resort areas, the Riviera. Many of Maupassant's tales deal directly with Mediterranean settings. A fairly important number involve descriptions of this part of France, and considered as a group, they are most enlightening. It would seem that, when speaking of this region he cannot resist including some reference to the attractions of nature. Travelling through it by train, as we do in "Les soeurs Rondoli" (1884), "Idylle" (1884) or "En voyage"<sup>9</sup> we are treated to the smells of fruits and flowers, to glimpses of the mountains and the sea for which the coast is renowned. Even when Maupassant wishes to deal with what amounts to an essentially interior theme, in which setting is not specifically linked to situation or character, as in "Madame Parisse" (1886), we are regaled with a lengthy presentation of a Mediterranean sunset. Or again in "Julie Romain" (1886) the story opens with the coast, the sea, the physical setting of her house, when in fact the main focus of our attention will be Julie, the retired celebrity of the Paris stage – again what I would consider to be in the main an internal or interior presentation. Even in such a brief little story as "Rose" (1884) we are offered a sunset as an external framework for a tale of deception in which natural setting must be regarded as non-essential to the intrigue, save for a vague suggestion of mood.

One of Maupassant's most effective panoramas is found in "Le bon-

<sup>9</sup> Maupassant, "En voyage", *Miss Harriet, Oeuvres complètes*, p. 285. First published in *Le Gil Blas* (May 10, 1882).