

William Bradley Holley

AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?

Émile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* as a retelling of Cain and Abel

RELIEF 11 (2), 2017 – ISSN: 1873-5045. P. 57-66

<http://www.revue-relief.org>

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18352/relief.975>

Uopen Journals

The author keeps the copyright of this article

This article is published under a CC-by license

Émile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* exemplifies what the author would develop as his naturalist philosophy. This philosophy, based upon what Zola considered to be a scientific and empirical process to the human condition, appears at a time in France where many different philosophical thoughts converge. This paper looks at how Zola's declared scientific study of the 'human-beast' is in fact a retelling of the Biblical tale of Cain and Abel, perhaps spurred by the confusion of the competing philosophies.

In the author's preface to the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin*, Émile Zola describes his novel as a physiological study of the human-beast, underscoring the naturalist philosophy that would later be exemplified in his *Rougon-Macquart* series. Although the author posits that his goal was "un but scientifique avant tout" (60), researchers have found more than a scientific study within the fictional events of the text. Elizabeth Knutson ties *Thérèse Raquin* to the fantastic, noting the thematic parallels between that genre and naturalism, resulting in the novel being "both a physiological study and a horror tale" (141). With its many theatrical and cinematic adaptations, *Thérèse Raquin*, "a tale well-suited for retelling" is, in fact, a reworking of a much earlier tale (Mayer-Robin, 158). Beyond the perfunctory similarities of murder and fratricide, this gruesome story of adultery and murder bears striking resemblance to the Biblical account of Cain and Abel. At the time of its publication, *Thérèse Raquin* enters a social landscape of competing philosophical movements, each vying for a foothold in mid- to late nineteenth-century France. It appears at a time when much of France is consumed with ontological questions and engrossed with a search for truth. Pierre Brunel suggests that these fundamental

questions spur the creation of myths whose purpose is to help attribute meaning to otherwise incomprehensible ideas.

Or c'est précisément du mystère que va naître le mythe. La disposition mentale favorable au mythe est l'humeur interrogant. Je me trouve devant quelque chose que je ne comprends pas, dont aucune théorie ne m'explique la cause. Je cherche donc un autre type d'explication, sans le secours ni de la raison ni de l'expérience scientifique.
(18)

At the interstices of idealism, positivism, and spiritualism, Zola produces *Thérèse Raquin* as a new (god-less) myth, replacing one of the first myths found in Genesis of the Bible, Cain and Abel.

Thérèse Raquin's first publication in 1867 is situated in a period when France is host to numerous movements addressing the metaphysical as well as man's role in the universe. Superficially, these various movements (namely spiritism, positivism, idealism and Zola's naturalism) seem to represent a dichotomy between science and religion, representing a falling away from the Catholic Church toward philosophies spurred from the Enlightenment. Lynn L. Sharp writes: "From its inception, spiritism was caught between two worlds that became increasingly separate as the century wore on: science and religion" (123). When seen through the lens of spiritism, this may be true, but in the broader French social climate, various groups of thought occupy the same chronological space and do not always hinge on the notion of religion and science being diametrically opposed. Ravaisson's view of French philosophy in the 1850s and 1860s evokes Kant's contributions, stating "that the general tendency of thought at this time was toward idealism" (cited in Walker, 91). Certainly, the writings of Kant and Hegel have influenced many French authors and stretched into other facets of French society by the time Zola began writing *Thérèse Raquin*. Fantastic literature's subversive nature demonstrates how the Kantian philosophy may have been losing a foothold. "Hoffmann and his French admirers use the fantastic to thematize anti-Enlightenment philosophies: autonomous and willful objects step over subject-centered boundaries of space and time, undermining Kant's transcendental idealism" (Cropper, 40). Again from fantastic literature, Michel Condé explains that the apparent rise in its popularity corresponds to a dechristianization of France. "Le sens de ce texte ne peut guère se comprendre en dehors du contexte de déchristianisation de l'époque [...] enfin les marques du sacré, comme les reliques, perdent leur valeur aux yeux d'une fraction importante du public cultivé" (185). In *Laboratories of Faith*, John Monroe

describes the adherents to the movement of Spiritism of that same period in the following terms:

[They] were by no means isolated eccentrics; their efforts to reach a new understanding of the beyond were part of a wave of innovative religious thought and practice that first emerged with Mesmerism in the late eighteenth century and developed into a widespread cultural phenomenon after 1850. (3)

Additionally, spiritism “sought the endorsement of science, and fought against the Church as a dead institution” and yet “functioned for its followers much more as a religion than as a science” (Sharp, 123). At the same time the Catholic Church saw a decline in followers, there is evidence of a resurgence in devotion to Catholicism, partially demonstrated to Bernadette Soubirous’ eighteen apparitions and the subsequent pilgrimages by many to Lourdes (Harris, 3). Lastly, the positivist movement is arguably the closest movement to Zola’s naturalism, and Monroe describes it as having a “seemingly ‘scientific’ neutrality, however this epistemological ideal had clear moral overtones: not only was it the path to truth, it was also the path to virtue” (5). Clearly, mid-nineteenth-century France is a tumultuous landscape where questions once reserved for the Church are attempting to be addressed in a multitude of ways.

At a time saturated with ontological philosophies, Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin* acts as a retelling of Cain and Abel that embraces the ambiguity of myth. If we are to accept Brunel’s assertion that myths are the product of mysteries left unsolved, these rivaling movements testify that there are questions that the scientific, religious, and philosophical movements have yet to resolve, allowing for *Thérèse Raquin* to serve as a sort of secularized and naturalist myth, replacing the Judeo-Christian Cain and Abel. Though he is borrowing from the Biblical account, Zola remains true to his assertion of the preface that his study is aimed to be scientific and does so without attributing judgement of what is good or right, bad or wrong. This myth creation moves from that of Brunel and can be viewed through Jean-Pierre Vernant’s assertion that,

Le mythe met donc en jeu une forme de logique qu’on peut appeler, en contraste avec la logique de non-contradiction des philosophes, une logique de l’ambigu, de l’équivoque, de la polarité [...] une logique qui ne serait pas celle de la binarité, du oui ou du non, une logique autre que la logique du logos. (250)

The myth of Cain and Abel receives a secular treatment in his novel *Thérèse Raquin*, ostensibly stripping away the good and evil attributions attendant sacred texts. Furthermore, that *Thérèse Raquin* aligns with the fantastic genre in

the eyes of readers, suggests that it occupies an in-between space and is the product of a transition from an adherence to the mythical and supernatural perception of the world toward the rational and empirical.

The brief Biblical account of Cain and Abel, found in Genesis 4, details the livelihood of the two brothers, the murder of Abel by Cain, and the punishment and protection offered to Cain by the Lord following the murder. Cain and Abel are the first and second sons of Adam and Eve. Abel, "was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground" (KJV Gen. 4:2). When it was time to offer sacrifice to the Lord, Abel offered the first of his flocks and Cain brought fruit of the ground. "And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect" (Gen. 4:4-5). Within *Thérèse Raquin*, Laurent and Camille share no biological relationship. As childhood friends who have found each other in Paris, they are bound together through their common patrimony. Indeed, the relationship between Laurent and Camille begins as a friendship, and through the events of the novel, the relationship becomes fraternal. Camille and Laurent resemble other Zolian non-brothers, like Jean and Maurice from *La Débâcle* "qui, sans être du même sang, n'en ont pas moins 'vécu en frères'" (Anfray, 75). For Laurent and Camille, the brother-like relationship begins when Laurent comes regularly to the Raquin home and Mme Raquin dotes upon him as if he were her own son.

Le soir, dans la boutique, Laurent était parfaitement heureux. D'ordinaire, il revenait du bureau avec Camille. Mme Raquin s'était prise pour lui d'une amitié maternelle ; elle le savait gêné, mangeant mal, couchant dans un grenier, et lui avait dit une fois pour toutes que son couvert serait toujours mis à leur table. Elle aimait ce garçon de cette tendresse bavarde que les vieilles femmes ont pour les gens qui viennent de leur pays, apportant avec eux des souvenirs du passé. (99)

This motherly friendship which Mme Raquin had for Laurent moves her to keep a permanent place for him at the family table. The good nature of Mme Raquin is not limited to Laurent, however, and it moves her to reach out to others as well. Zola demonstrates this through the weekly gatherings every Thursday night with the *vieux* Michaud, Grivet, Olivier and Suzanne. What separates Laurent from these others? Michaud, after all, was also a friend of the family when they lived in Vernon. Before Camille's death, Zola explains that she pampered Laurent more than the other guests, "Mme Raquin choyait davantage l'ami de la maison," and this is reminiscent of the way she cared for her own sickly son, Camille (110). After Laurent kills Camille, this devoted affection becomes comparable to the manner in which Mme Raquin previously treated her own son. "La bonne dame gâtait Laurent comme elle avait gâté

Camille" (200). Through this mother-son relationship, Laurent becomes a son to her, further solidifying the fraternal relationship with Camille.

Zola was not alone in utilizing the genesis mythology in his nineteenth-century narratives. Others from the larger nineteenth-century period who refer to Cain and Abel are Victor Hugo's "La Conscience" from *La Légende des siècles* and Charles Baudelaire "Abel et Caïn" from *Les Fleurs du mal*. Zola, however, places brotherhood rivalry throughout many of his novels. "Qu'il soit sérieux ou grotesque, le mythe des frères ennemis est à l'origine de la famille zolienne" (Anfray, 75). Of course, the most prominent Zolian family is none other than the Rougon-Macquart. And yet, the Raquin family from Vernon serves as a literary precursor, embodying the figures and themes that are more fully developed over his series of novels. Mme Raquin, the mother of two feuding sons, is reprised again in Zola's work in the body of Adélaïde Fouque. "Le fratricide est, dans l'œuvre zolienne, ce qui fonde l'humanité, ce qui la marque définitivement du sceau de la honte que rien ne pourra racheter. C'est toute la famille des Rougon-Macquart qui tire son origine de la rivalité entre deux demi-frères élevés par le même mère, Adélaïde Fouque" (Anfray, 81). Zola's *La Fortune des Rougon-Macquart*, the first of the series, is still about four years from publication at the time *Thérèse Raquin* is first published, allowing time for Zola to continue to develop and enrich the themes and conflicts for his monumental project. Even the opposing physical descriptions of Laurent and Camille, the first as a large and strong man, having a "cou de taureau" and the second "resta petit et malingre" (70) find their counterparts in Zola's later work. "Busch, l'usurier, survit à son frère marxiste... l'un est fort, sanguin, bien portant, l'autre est chétif, maigre ou maladif. L'empire s'apparente à une curée, la république à une bête traquée" (Anfray, 76).

Zola draws from the Bible for more than the tale of Cain and Abel. Anfray explains how for *La Terre*, the brothers Jésus-Christ and Bueau have a relationship akin to that of Jacob and Esau. A more subtle instance that can be found in *Thérèse Raquin* is the marriage between Laurent and Thérèse after Camille's death. "If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband's brother unto her" (Deut. 25:5). Laurent fulfills the brotherly duty to marry his brother's widow. The fear of a stranger in her home prompts Mme Raquin to arrange the marriage between Laurent and Thérèse. "Ce choix d'un mari était une grande affaire ; la pauvre vieille songeait encore plus à elle qu'à Thérèse ; elle voulait la marier de façon à être heureuse elle-même, car elle craignait vivement que le nouvel époux de la jeune femme ne vînt troubler

les dernières heures de sa vieillesse" (161). Once the idea takes shape, Mme Raquin can see no other solution. The benefits of Laurent marrying Thérèse are described through the idiom "keeping it in the family".

Mme Raquin fut comme frappée d'un trait de lumière ; elle vit d'un coup tous les avantages qu'elle retirerait personnellement du mariage de Thérèse et de Laurent. Ce mariage ne ferait que resserrer les liens qui les unissaient déjà, elle et sa nièce, à l'ami de son fils, [...]. De cette façon, elle n'introduirait pas un étranger chez elle, elle ne courrait pas le risque d'être malheureuse ; au contraire, tout en donnant un soutien à Thérèse, elle mettrait une joie de plus autour de sa vieillesse, elle trouverait un second fils dans ce garçon qui depuis trois ans lui témoignait une affection filiale. [...] Elle pensait, comme on dit, que cela ne sortait pas de la famille. (163)

Through the marriage, Mme Raquin was not hoping to only replace her son, but rather to find a second son of her own. Lastly, the final stroke that solidifies the mother-son relationship for Mme Raquin is when Laurent accepts the marriage proposal, telling her "Chère mère [...] Vos enfants veulent vous rendre heureuse" (165). Though Laurent intends this line as a ruse, a simple flattery to win over his new mother-in-law, its poignancy is felt in the speechless Mme Raquin symbolically bringing the hands of Thérèse and Laurent together as if to perform the ceremony herself.

Again from Genesis, Laurent and Camille's relationship takes on new meaning as Laurent embodies the role of Cain from the Old Testament. When it is time to make a sacrifice to the Lord, Cain offers up a portion of his crop and Abel offers the firstlings of his flock. "And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect" (Gen. 4:4-5). Cain becomes wroth, and then when they are in a field together, "Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him" (Gen. 4:8). For Cain, his motivation to kill Abel is rooted in jealousy at not having the approval and respect of the Lord. Laurent, Zola explains, has fallen out of favor with his own father. In leaving Vernon, Laurent's father supports him financially as he studies law. Rather than study, Laurent spends time with an artist friend, learning to paint, sleeping with models, and living a carefree life. Laurent explains to Camille that the leisurely life has to come to an end. "Par Malheur, continua Laurent, cela ne pouvait durer. Le père a su que je lui contais des mensonges, il m'a retranché net mes cent francs par mois, en m'invitant à piocher la terre avec lui" (85). Just as Cain works the earth, Laurent, too, is invited by his father to do the same. However, for Laurent, "il frissonnait à l'idée de piocher la terre", so he is left to find work elsewhere in Paris (85). Now lacking his father's approval, and seeing the relative easiness of life that Camille enjoys causes Laurent to become jealous. This jealousy is what

prompts him to kill Camille, even more than his motivation to have Thérèse all to himself.

Certes, le désir de posséder à lui seul sa maîtresse était entré pour beaucoup dans la pensée de son crime, mais il avait été conduit au meurtre peut-être plus encore par l'espérance de se mettre à la place de Camille, de se faire soigner comme lui, de goûter une béatitude de toutes les heures ; si la passion seule l'eût poussé ; il n'aurait pas montré tant de lâcheté, tant de prudence ; la vérité était qu'il avait cherché à assurer, par un assassinat, le calme et l'oisiveté de sa vie, le contentement durable de ses appétits. (158)

Just as Cain is jealous of the respect that the Lord shows to Abel, Laurent tastes the easy life that Camille enjoys at the doting hand of his mother and he wants to have it for himself.

The most oft-quoted portion of the original myth of Cain and Abel is the brief interrogative exchange between the Lord and Cain following the iconic fratricide. "And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: *Am I my brother's keeper?*" (Gen. 4:9). Cain's reply is two part; the first is a lie, "I know not", and the second, a question that he asks in order to deflect responsibility and blame from himself, and to hide the murder he committed. In *Thérèse Raquin*, the idea that one can hide a crime comes first from Olivier, Grivet and Michaud during a Thursday night dinner discussion. Michaud, a retired police commissioner, explains that there may be crimes that have gone unsolved, to which Olivier exclaims: "Il y a des scélérats qui ont appris le crime à l'école du diable ; ils échapperaient à Dieu lui-même... N'est-ce pas mon père?" (111). In the tradition of Cain, Laurent begins to plot a crime where, with the help of the devil, he can escape God. The place of the crime likewise affirms an attempt to hide the murder. For Abel's death and that of Camille, there is a distance created from the home, away from the protective eyes of the Lord and Mme Raquin, respectively. Abel is killed in a field. While this field may have been one in which Cain has toiled, the Lord's question, "Where is Abel thy brother?" suggests that it is removed from both the Lord and the family of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:9). Laurent, like Cain, waits for Camille to be away from the watchful eyes of a protector before committing the gruesome act. Zola underscores this distance in the mind of Mme Raquin when he writes, "Et voilà qu'il mourait loin d'elle, tout d'un coup, dans l'eau froide et sale, comme un chien" (125). The space created between the home and the crime assures anonymity as well as protection for the perpetrator. It is not known if this was the intention for Cain. For Laurent, however, he separates Camille, Thérèse and himself from the home by exacting the crime on the water at Saint-Ouen. Lastly, from Cain's question, "Am I my

brother's keeper", there is an attempt to brush aside an implied judgement from the Lord. Laurent tactfully removes himself from accusations and the judging eyes of Mme Raquin by first going to Michaud. "Il venait là, pour chercher une protection, dans le cas où il serait soupçonné, et pour s'éviter d'aller annoncer lui-même l'affreuse nouvelle à Mme Raquin" (123). Michaud protects Laurent from the presence of Mme Raquin, instructing him to wait outside while he tells the mother of her son's death, once again creating a protective space between the killer and the victim's mother.

A noticeable difference between Zola's positivist/naturalist *Thérèse Raquin* and the biblical account of Cain and Abel is the apparent absence of an (all powerful) Lord. The removal of the Lord symbolizes the removal of the superstitious and supernatural element of what Zola intends to be a scientific text. "Positivism insisted on a separation of 'factual' science from 'superstitious' spirituality" (Sharp, 59). Nevertheless, the role of the Lord in the biblical text is divided and attributed to several figures in the new myth. It has already been noted that both Laurent's father and Mme Raquin are parallels for the Lord through their treatment of Laurent. The final exchange between Cain and the Lord in Genesis is brought about by Cain who fears retribution by others for having killed his own brother. Due to his fears that others will seek to take away his life, the Lord places a mark upon his skin as a warning that those who would kill him will be punished with a harsher judgement. "Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him" (Gen. 4:15). Laurent and Thérèse do seem to be sheltered from accusations. After Mme Raquin becomes mute and paralyzed, Laurent and Thérèse inadvertently admit to their crime in her presence. During one of the Thursday evening gatherings, Mme Raquin momentarily regains some of her strength and attempts to accuse her son's murderers while they are at the table with the former police commissioner, only to fall back into paralysis before her message could be understood. When she realizes all hope of bringing them to justice is lost, Zola reveals her thoughts: "Le ciel ne voulait pas que Camille fût vengé, il retirait à sa mère le seul moyen de faire connaître aux hommes le meurtre dont il avait été la victime" (218). The actual mark that is placed upon Laurent in *Thérèse Raquin* is not placed upon him by the Lord, rather it is a bite mark that he receives from Camille during the struggle preceding the murder and which never truly heals. This mark, less a reminder for those seeking vengeance, is a reminder for the perpetrators, Laurent and Thérèse. Lastly, for Laurent and Thérèse, their sleepless nights, and nocturnal hauntings serve as the punishment for the crime committed. They soon discover that with another person in

the room, they can prolong the relative peacefulness of the daylight hours. They stay late into the night with Mme Raquin sitting between them, protecting themselves from the haunting visions and remorseful anguish that would otherwise trouble their waking hours. While temporary, the presence of Mme Raquin serves as a protection from their *remords*, from the punishment that they fear. Even after Mme Raquin's paralysis, the couple keep her motionless body in the room, selfishly waking her so that they are spared a little longer the retribution they will otherwise face. The seemingly supernatural punishment brought on by their remorse, is a notable difference from the traditional Cain and Abel tale, as Cain is spared immediate punishment from the Lord.

François-Marie Mourad, writing of the period surrounding when Émile Zola penned *Thérèse Raquin*, states that "Le contexte général, idéologique et scientifique, était propice à cette inflexion de l'inspiration littéraire. L'essor des sciences naturelles et médicales, en particulier, est remarquable" (157). The convergence of scientific thought and movements, alongside Spiritism, and the resurgence in fervor within the Church, created the favorable landscape for the creation of *Thérèse Raquin*. Perhaps, just as Zola claims in his preface, this is indeed a study "des milieux et des circonstances" (63).

Zola a pour objectif d'illustrer la théorie des tempéraments, impossible équilibre entre les nerfs et le sang, l'esprit et la chair. [...] Mais dans le roman la traîtrise, l'hypocrisie, les cauchemars et l'égoïsme qui dominent tous les personnages subvertissent heureusement l'intention de Zola. (Kiran, 55)

Zola the scientist, the nascent naturalist, may have been more heavily influenced by his environment and competing philosophies than he declares. It is a stretch to suggest that the similarities between Laurent and Camille with Cain and Abel are the product of an explicit design to create a new scripture for naturalism. Rather, these similarities between *Thérèse Raquin* and Genesis 4 suggest that as the mythology of Christianity is dismissed by many, this myth is maintained and even reprised in many of Zola's works. The myth is re-appropriated to comply with the naturalist philosophy and continues to address the taboo of murder, largely omitting an all-powerful deity, and incorporating physiological elements and madness. Just as Cain and Abel serve as part of the Genesis/genesis of the Old Testament and Judeo-Christian dogma, so too do the new Cain and Abel serve as a means for the emerging naturalist movement to showcase some of its foundational principles.

Works Cited

- Clélia Anfray, *Zola biblique : La Bible dans Les Rougon-Macquart*, Paris, Cerf, 2010.
- Pierre Brunel, *Mythocritique : théorie et parcours*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1992.
- Michel Condé, *La Genèse sociale de l'individualisme romantique : esquisse historique de l'évolution du roman en France du dix-huitième au dix-neuvième siècle*, Tubingen, Niemeyer, 1989.
- Corry Cropper, "Réintroduction à la Littérature Fantastique: Enlightenment Philosophy, Object-Oriented Ontology, and the French Fantastic", *Nineteenth-century French Studies*, 44.1, 2015, 25-45.
- Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age*, New York, Viking, 1999.
- Ayşe Eziler Kiran, "Les relations de la nature et de la culture dans *Thérèse Raquin*", *Synergies Turquie*, 9, 2016, 53-67.
- Elizabeth M. Knutson, "The Natural and the Supernatural in Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*", *Symposium: a Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, 55.3, 2001, 140-154.
- Carmen Mayer-Robin, "Framed! Fact, Fiction, and Frame Tale in Adaptations of Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*", *Romance Studies*, 28.3, 2010, 158-168.
- John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2007.
- François-Marie Mourad, "*Thérèse Raquin*, roman expérimental", *Cahiers Naturalistes*, 84, 2010, 157-164.
- Lynn L. Sharp, *Secular Spirituality: Reincarnation and Spiritism in Nineteenth-Century France*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2006.
- The Holy Bible: King James Version*, Iowa Falls, World Bible Publishers, 2001.
- Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mythe et Société en Grèce ancienne*, Paris, Seuil, 1992.
- Philip Walker, '*Germinal*' and Zola's Philosophical and Religious Thought, Amsterdam, Benjamins, 1985.
- Émile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1970.