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ALA LI 303

Le roman urbain américain 1893-1925

Serge CHAUVIN

EC : ALA LI 303 Littérature américaine : le roman urbain

PRÉSENTATION DU COURS

La fin du dix-neuvième siècle à la fois dans l'histoire des Etats-Unis et dans la représentation qu'ils se font d'eux-mêmes. En 1892, la fermeture de la *frontier*, cette ligne imaginaire marquant la séparation entre l'espace colonisé (*settlement*) et les territoires encore ouverts et inexplorés (*wilderness*), met fin au rêve d'une expansion sans fin, alors même qu'une immigration massive venue d'Europe provoque une explosion démographique. À une Amérique perçue comme horizontale et illimitée (dont la prairie fournit la parfaite illustration) succède un paysage urbain vertical (les premiers gratte-ciel), étroitement circonscrit et surpeuplé, où s'entasse dans les *tenement houses* et les *slums* un sous-prolétariat misérable, exploité et en proie à un alcoolisme endémique. L'industrialisation accélérée et la conscience soudaine de l'existence d'une hiérarchie sociale dans un pays qui se rêvait société sans classes rapprochent soudain la réalité américaine des conditions de vie dans la vieille Europe, et les métropoles des Etats-Unis (à commencer par New York) viennent progressivement se substituer à Londres comme symboles d'une modernité essentiellement urbaine, avec ses innovations technologiques, ses nouveaux loisirs, mais aussi ses fléaux sociaux.

Cette transformation brutale amène les écrivains américains à repenser non seulement leur imaginaire, mais les formes littéraires aptes à rendre compte de ce nouvel état de fait. S'éloignant de la volonté d'émancipation esthétique de leurs prédécesseurs, ils vont s'inspirer de leurs homologues européens, et singulièrement de Zola, pour créer une école naturaliste caractérisé par une volonté de critique sociale (commune aux mouvements de réforme qui fleurissent à l'époque) et par une interrogation sur les causes de la misère ambiante, : faut-il

l'imputer au poids de l'hérédité et de l'instinct, dans une perspective darwinienne, ou à l'environnement (déterminisme social) ?

Toutefois, ces écrivains infléchissent leurs influences françaises pour s'inscrire dans une tradition américaine profondément réfractaire à un réalisme étroit. Avec *Maggie* (1893), qui se veut « a story of New York », Stephen Crane combine le naturalisme avec une dimension allégorique et un point de vue ironique qui prend le contrepied des conventions du mélodrame, tout en reprenant les procédés dramatiques. Quant à Frank Norris, son choix d'ancrer *McTeague* (1899) à San Francisco lui permet de retravailler le mythe de la Californie comme Eldorado.

Lorsqu'en 1925 John Dos Passos publie *Manhattan Transfer*, fresque des vingt premières années du vingtième siècle, il relève d'un courant esthétique très différent, celui du modernisme, novateur plutôt qu'influencé par l'Europe. L'éclatement du récit entre les trajectoires croisées ou parallèles de multiples protagonistes, l'hétérogénéité formelle faisant alterner narration classique, passages lyriques ou allégoriques et bribes de documents (les manchettes de journaux), le rythme musical, le recours à un montage quasi cinématographique : autant de procédés qui marquent une véritable entrée dans la modernité, et une tentative d'offrir un roman multiforme et peuplé comme la Ville elle-même.

Bibliographie

Œuvres étudiées :

Crane, Stephen : *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (A Story of New York)*, 1893, Norton, 1979.

Cette édition est donnée à titre purement indicatif ; toutefois, si vous trouvez une autre édition du roman, veillez bien à ce qu'elle reproduise le texte original de l'édition de 1893, et non celui (expurgé) de la réédition de 1896. Par ailleurs, l'édition Norton comporte un très riche appareil critique (texte annoté, critiques d'époque, analyses contemporaines, documents annexes), qui rend superflue la bibliographie citée plus bas.

Norris, Frank : *McTeague (A Story of San Francisco)*, 1899, Norton, 1997.

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Modalités d'examen

L'examen consistera soit en une dissertation, soit en un commentaire d'extrait, portant sur l'une des œuvres du programme. On attend que ces dissertations soient nourries par une connaissance profonde des œuvres, et comportent des références précises à des passages pertinents. La dimension proprement formelle et littéraire ne doit jamais être négligée : ces textes ne sont pas de simples témoignages sociaux ou historiques.

Sujets de devoirs (facultatifs)

Dissertation

1. Nature versus culture in *McTeague*

2. Character in *Manhattan Transfer*

Commentaire de texte

Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, chapter 7

Les devoirs sont à faire parvenir, avant le 1^{er} avril 2009, à l'adresse suivante :

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1. Stephen CRANE : *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (A Story of New York)* (1893)

Stephen Crane was born in 1871 in New Jersey. He was the son of a Methodist minister, and his ancestors were among the earliest settlers in New England. They had been involved in the first settlements in Connecticut and New Jersey, and some of them had taken part in the American Revolution. So he came from a long line of dissenters and politically or religiously motivated people. Stephen Crane turned to writing at an early age, as evidenced by his death at 29 after completing a body of work that makes him one of the important American writers of the late nineteenth century. He wrote poems, short stories and novellas (or short novels, such as *Maggie*), and he also was a war correspondent in the later years of his life. He especially covered the American military expedition to Cuba, designed to help Cuban rebels fight Spanish rule, to ensure the end of Spanish presence in Central America and the creation of an independent Cuban state whose views would be consistent with American foreign policy. Crane went there as soon as political unrest began, and again when American troops landed there. But, being afflicted with a type of tuberculosis, he met an untimely death in 1900 while in Cuba.

Maggie was first published in 1893 but proved to be very unsuccessful. It was Crane's first major, full-length work, but he had to publish it at his own expense. Furthermore, he had to use a pseudonym. The manuscript had been rejected by all the publishers to whom he had submitted it, either because they were personally offended by it or because they considered it too shocking for their readership, feeling that the public was not ready for such a crude, honest book. Such was the case in particular of William Dean Howells, who was the great theoretician and champion of realism in American letters at that time. Howells admired *Maggie* and respected what Crane had attempted to do, but he still thought that the book was

not publishable, especially because of its dialogue full of profanity (“damn”, “Gawd” for “God”), which may seem harmless today, but was considered improper and impermissible at the time – not to mention the sexual innuendoes present in the text. Therefore, Howells told Crane that he could not and perhaps should not publish such a novel. *Maggie* was eventually published at author’s expense, but got mostly unnoticed, although Crane tried to imagine some publicity stunts to help the novel find its audience: for instance, he would have several people standing all day on platforms in elevated train stations in New York City, just reading the book, in order to be seen by commuters. But this attempt proved unsuccessful.

Then, in 1895, Crane published *The Red Badge of Courage*, a fictional account of the Civil War. Of course, he was too young to have experienced that conflict first-hand (he was born six years after the end of the war), and had not even seen combat of any kind yet. But he had the gift to recreate, from a subjective point of view, what could be a soldier’s personal experience. That novella had some common points with Stendhal’s *La Chartreuse de Parme*: in both cases, the hero finds himself caught in a great battle, but fails to understand what is at stake or what is going on from a military perspective. But Crane emphasized the suffering, the chaos and the absurd pain endured by the soldiers. *The Red Badge of Courage* met with tremendous success, and it remains to this day one of the major literary works inspired by the Civil War. It set a standard for all subsequent American works aiming for a literary treatment of the war experience, and it was an absolute model and inspiration for Ernest Hemingway in particular, when he tried to offer an account of the First World War in *A Farewell to Arms*. However dissimilar as a writer, Hemingway was a great admirer of Crane’s technique and style. Crane literally triggered American literature’s obsession with modern warfare as a worthy subject, and, without necessarily using the same literary devices, many American novelists have since tried to write an equivalent to *The Red Badge of Courage* while

describing a subsequent conflict (the 1936 Spanish War in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, again by Hemingway, the Second World War in Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*).

The immediate critical and commercial success of *The Red Badge of Courage*, hailed as an artistic breakthrough and an instant American classic (which it has remained since), allowed *Maggie* to be reissued, this time by an actual publisher (instead of being printed at author's expense), and under Crane's real name. This time, it got indeed noticed, though not altogether favourably. As Howells had predicted and as Crane in fact expected, critics were extremely negative about the supposed crudeness of the novel and its so-called lack of moral perspective, the profanity in the dialogue and the mere subject matter chosen: such a topic as slum life was considered unworthy of literary attention. Besides, Crane's vision of slum life made many readers uncomfortable insofar as it was irredeemably pessimistic. Crane was not keen on idealizing reality, as evidenced by his short stories about frontier life (such as "The Blue Hotel" or *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky*), whose depiction of the Wild West is neither pretty nor heroic, and whose characters are either ridiculed or victimized.

Crane's depiction of the Bowery in *Maggie* led critics to consider him a realist, and indeed he seemed to agree with that definition. He wanted to give an honest, objective depiction of what city life was really about, or so he claimed, which seemed to fit Howells' definition of realism as "the truthful treatment of the material". But Crane was not only a realist but what might be called a symbolist as well – not in the sense of the fin-de-siècle European poetic movement, but insofar as he went beyond mere data about the facts of life. Many elements in *Maggie* exceed their fictional, narrative necessity to function as symbols for something wider, as examples illustrating more general truths. Likewise, Crane's technique lacks the continuous, demonstrative aspect typical of realism. His use of strong images is no pure depiction of life, it is metaphorical, and the various physical notations point out moral characteristics, constant social traits, maybe even a whole metaphysical view of

existence. There even are religious overtones, however ironic. Religious imagery permeates what Cane has to say about social conditions, and the slums are represented as an inferno from the very first chapter, despite its tragicomic quality, for we know that the street urchins will grow up to become if not delinquents, at least marginalized characters, social outcasts and misfits. Furthermore, the background, colours and noises of the street fight refer to a vision of hell. “Hell” is a recurrent word in the dialogue, not only as a profane interjection, but also as a literal depiction of what the characters are going through. It is that infernal imagery and lexicon which give unity to the novella, which might otherwise be erroneously perceived as a succession of sketches and vignettes. But that structure is neither chaotic nor random. Crane was concerned by the fact that *Maggie* was not constructed like a single, carefully crafted painting. Yet he definitely established a structure unified by a succession of images, however apparently disconnected.

If that falsely haphazard structure may have unsettled readers, they were doubtlessly appalled by the gritty realism and bleak vision of the novel. *Maggie* did not even have the redeeming qualities of a melodramatic novel which would both titillate the reader by picturing the downfall of a fallen woman and easily arouse his/her pity. Crane adamantly refused to resort to such strategies. But its subject matter certainly made *Maggie* very topical. It was a militant book about actual issues of the day, except that public opinion tended to downplay or ignore such issues as much as they could. The early 1890s not only were a period of massive industrialization and extreme poverty, but of course they also marked the closing of the frontier. In 1892, at the Chicago World Fair, historian Frederick Jackson Turner delivered a very famous lecture explaining that the frontier was no longer a geographical reality in the United States. For immigrants or relative newcomers, there was no new territory in which to settle and find a place. From now on, they would have to stick to already settled territory and generally settle at their point of arrival, namely New York City. The Bowery, in which

Maggie is set, was mostly populated by recent immigrants of German and Polish stock. Maggie works in a factory owned and managed by a “foreigner” of unspecified origin, but who probably comes from central Europe, judging from his accent. New York City itself was something of an inferno for recent immigrants and the working classes. Social reformers of the day were of course acutely aware of that reality, but did not approach it the way Crane does in the novel. They primarily saw it as a moral issue: the “degradation” brought about by exploitation, lack of hygiene, promiscuity, alcoholism. They sought to improve these living conditions, but above all to “amend” and “redeem” the people affected by them. But nobody actually questioned the very social structure that fostered such a situation, namely the industrial boom that induced the exploitation of workers. The subject matter of *Maggie* was nothing new in itself, but up till then it had been either treated melodramatically or mediated through a moralizing perspective: a lesson was supposed to be learnt from such a gloomy picture. On the contrary, *Maggie* generally remains non-judgemental. It does not imply any moral judgement about the characters. Although the narrator is anything but neutral, the perspective adopted does not derive from any pre-established moral code, nor does it set the grounds for any possible moral solution or reform. This is inseparable from the dismissal of psychology in the novel. Maggie has no actual depth as a character: she is rather a void at the centre of the story, as proved by her belated apparition, anonymous and ambiguous death and early disappearance, both from the plot and from the memory of the characters (except as an alibi for self-righteousness). She may be the eponymous character, but the double subtitle of the novella is actually more accurate: *Maggie* is primarily “a story of New York” about “a girl [any girl] of the streets”, which stresses her exemplary value. Maggie stands for a whole social class, at the risk of being de-individualized. The novel primarily intends to convey a logical vision of what certain given conditions of life lead to. On the other hand, the secondary characters are basically caricatures, grotesques, two-dimensional puppets. They are

denied any significant individuality. They are usually defined by one essential physical trait, e. g. Mary's red face (the archetype of the drunken mother) or Pete's swagger. Neither Pete nor Jimmie experience any evolution or psychological progress over the years. Even as children or teenagers, they already display a monolithic personality and rigid attitudes. They remain as they are, only more so. They "blossom" but, unlike Maggie, in a negative way. To some extent, such two-dimensional figures are typical of melodrama, but Crane's cold, objective description of their behaviour prohibits any comforting moral lesson from being drawn. For even Maggie's death will not open their eyes, or trigger any sudden surge of awareness in the characters.

Maggie's death does not provoke any word of regret or sorrow, or offer any prospect of improvement or reform on the part of the other characters. All are equally trapped in their environment. When Crane sent a copy of the novel to fellow realist writer Hamlin Garland, the inscription read: "It is inevitable that you will be greatly shocked by this book but continue please with all possible courage to the end. For it tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless." So Crane emphasizes the conditions that make a person what he or she is. Crane claims such a vision to be objective and scientific. Accordingly, there is no worthy or unworthy subject for literature, and Maggie has as much dignity or legitimacy as a literary character as anyone else. Crane goes on:

If one proves that theory one makes room in Heaven for all sorts of souls (notably an occasional street girl) who are not confidently expected to be there by many excellent people.

It is probable that the reader of this small thing may consider the Author to be a bad man, but, obviously, this is of small consequence to

The Author.

For Crane, moral issues are thus irrelevant. Furthermore, he somehow dismisses the question of personal responsibility, since the environment is prevalent. Maggie has excuses for

becoming a prostitute, for she is not a free agent. Besides, not only is the reference to her being welcome in heaven true to the Christian message of forgiveness as expressed by the Gospel, but it may be read as an allusion to a “literary heaven”, a conception of literature as open to all social types. Crane does not attempt to prove or change anything, not to mention judge anything, but only to describe reality as it is. Although he is obviously scandalized by living conditions in the slums, he is no reformer, and even his compassion (or empathy) is problematic. Even though their attitudes are shaped by their environment, he seems to be very critical of Mary’s hypocrisy, Jimmie’s double standards or Pete’s cynicism. Not even Maggie escapes his criticism, for, like most characters in the novel (and especially the anonymous theatre audience), she is alienated by her unrealistic expectations. The upper classes may be exploitative, but the lower classes condemn themselves to remain passive by only aspiring to the same living standards, fantasizing themselves as virtuous and believing in an unlikely happy ending, a “rose-tinted future”. And in a famous letter to Miss Catherine Harris, he claims: “I had no other purpose in writing *Maggie* than to show people to people as they seem to me. If that be evil, make the most of it.” “Showing people to people” is of course the key to his literary project. The problem is that the context of American literature did not really allow for such a gesture. America lacked a Flaubert (whose *Madame Bovary* had been published in France almost forty years earlier) or a Zola. Of course, both had been considered scandalous in their own country (Flaubert had even been prosecuted), but at least French literature had made room for their respective brands of realism, which were completely alien to the American tradition of “romance” (emphasizing plot and symbolism, as opposed to the psychological and social realism of the novel in the Balzac-Dickens vein). Even the recent “genteel tradition” (which 1930s philosopher George Santayana would later call “the New England disease”) was softer in its approach and preferred to focus on the upper classes; it emphasized correctness and conventionality, both social and aesthetic. Besides, America’s

earlier, rather timid attempts at realism had provided their characters with social and especially moral choices: they were still granted free will. On the contrary, Crane, who had read and admired both *L'Assommoir* (1877) and *Nana* (1879) by Zola, espoused the pessimistic tenet of naturalism, the belief in some determinism submitting human beings to forces beyond their control – namely here, an overpowering environment rather than heredity (which Zola tended to favour as a defining factor). Crane was very isolated in his literary attempt. He wanted to depict the social environment in all its deficiencies, and human beings in all their shortcomings. By doing so, he went against a moral as well as an aesthetic consensus. Hence the critical rejection endured by *Maggie*. In the *New York Tribune*, a literary columnist wrote that he could only see “dullness and dirt”, “monotonous and stupid roughness” in the novel. It is hard to determine whether he confused subject matter with style or just felt that the bleakness of the vision was permeating the writing as well. Perhaps he considered that Maggie’s life was no worthy literary subject because it did not elevate the reader to a higher level of morality or aesthetic awareness. Crane’s refusal to teach a moral lesson through any character’s atonement or redemption was of course problematic. Equally shocking was the profanity of the dialogue. William Dean Howells found it impossible for “cultivated ears” to tolerate such vulgarity. The irony of it was that Crane was himself an aesthete, acutely aware of the requirements of style, a lucid coiner of sentences. His approach was that of an artist, not of a mere witness or journalist. That is why the pictorial model is prevalent in his project. *Maggie* is by no means a random, haphazard collection of impressions, although it relies primarily on the recording of action and speech, and favours a paratactic style (that is a juxtaposition of statements without any explicit logical link establishing causality). Very rarely do you find such words as “but”, “therefore”, “yet” etc. Statements simply follow one another. Far from being evidence of shoddy writing, the deliberate use of parataxis seeks to show that the characters have no awareness of what is

happening to them, that they are unable to connect successive events and experiences as cause and effect. They live in an eternal present, however bleak, that repeats and renews itself one moment after the other without any progression. On the other hand, for the reader, it is all the more striking and impressive. That juxtaposition of sentences makes him all the more aware of the tragic necessity, the logical determinism that shapes the characters' fate and settles what they are to become. There is some mathematical quality in that cold, impassive accumulation of statements. Crane's writing does not need any emphasis through adverbs or epithets, which would actually weaken the effect. It also expresses a dismissal of pathos and cheap sentiment in favour of lucidity, outrage and unsentimental empathy. The simple syntax only offsets the social scandal uncovered here.

Every gesture or attitude also opens on to a wider view. The characters' behaviour and background influence each other. Besides, the background is endowed with symbolic value. During the initial street fight between two gangs of "urchins" (respectively belonging to "Devil's Row" and "Rum Alley", two imaginary but highly eloquent street names), the only spatial horizon is... the prison. In chapter XVII, when Maggie dies by the harbour, the last thing she sees is a factory, the very kind of industrial inferno she tried to escape. In other words, there is no way out of the city, an enclosed, prison-like place. The whole chapter is of course unrealistic in geographical and temporal terms: in one single evening, the "girl of the crimson legions" crosses all of Manhattan from West to East, successively encountering members of all social classes, from the top to the bottom of the social ladder. This is not impossible as such, but obviously we are to interpret that trajectory as a synthetic summary of Maggie's downfall, a downward spiral which in real life would span several months if not years. Such a device is not dissimilar to Zola's treatment of Nana's death, yet it may owe less to strict naturalism than to the traditional leaning of American literature toward allegory and symbolism. Maggie's whole "career" is summed up in a couple of pages. Time here is

compressed, and each small unit of meaning in the chapter is exemplary of one stage in Maggie's degradation. A realistic, exhaustive account of the same facts not only would be longer, but would actually look more random, encompassing some insignificant details. Conversely, in Crane's narrative, every detail is meaningful and symbolic. In that respect, far from being strictly realistic, that passage strikes us with its deliberate theatricality (whereas subsequent American realistic writers, Frank Norris of course, but also Theodore Dreiser [*Sister Carrie*, 1900] and socialist militants Jack London and Upton Sinclair, would uphold the would-be exhaustive, sociological approach of orthodox naturalism). The settings in that chapter are highly stylized, like a stage backdrop, with very few props and lighting sources (one lamppost, saloon windows...) and a meticulous soundtrack shifting from joyous harmony to cacophony to silence. The scene only involves anonymous figures, from the heroine (a nameless, de-individualized Maggie) to her potential clients. It may almost be read as a musical number.

More generally, *Maggie* may be considered as a three-act drama with an epilogue: the first act would consist of the first three chapters and offer an introduction to slum life, the dismal background of the city, the river landscape, the squalor, violence, brutality. From then on, the characters will remain as they are, stick to their early status (an acquired status, rather than an inherited nature). The third chapter, deceptively peaceful, ends on a threatening note. The next six chapters would make up the second act: they revolve around Maggie, her growing up and encounter with Pete. They are punctuated by dancehall and bar scenes (and the comparison of such scenes throughout the novel would offer a perfect view of the logic of Maggie's degradation). There remain some hints at the local colour of the Bowery, though less picturesque than exemplary. Crane's vision here is inseparably ironic and sympathetic. Inner focalization on Maggie (whose thoughts and dreams we share) does create empathy, except that the narrator's slightly condescending lucidity (though implicit, only suggested by

the discrepancy between dreams and reality), highbrow references (the Bible, epic and romantic poetry, Greek and Elizabethan tragedy) and literate lexicon establish a distance between the character and the reader. Sometimes, the narrator indulges in actual judgements on the characters' behaviour, either through subjective comments or simple juxtapositions that allow us to understand that he does not condone their attitudes or beliefs. He thus exposes Pete's duplicity or the neighbours', holier-than-thou, hypocritical self-righteousness. When we are told that Maggie perceives Pete as a medieval knight, that romantic image is probably not even explicit in her mind, since she is probably illiterate – although she enjoys going to the theatre. It is rather the narrator's rendering of her own delusional, idealized vision of Pete as her "beau ideal" (another phrase which does not belong in Maggie's vocabulary). The very discrepancy with Pete's inarticulate, repetitive boastfulness is thus enough to create an ironic gap between subjective vision and objective reality.

The third act spans chapters X to XVII: the seduction, degradation and eventual death of Maggie. Of course, she is not responsible for her downfall: she is caught in an inescapable chain of events, a social (not moral) logic. Yet she is considered a sinner in the eyes of her (disreputable) community and her mother (the hardly virginal Mary), although at that stage she is still "pure", untainted by her environment: having "blossomed in a mud puddle", she had grown up as a miraculous creature, beautiful and virtuous in an ugly and corrupted world. But, being disowned by her family, she has no other choice than to go live with Pete and therefore become the "ruined woman" she was accused of being. She is thus forced to conform to her (initially false) social image, an image conveyed by a chorus of beggars, thieves and drunks noisily defending bourgeois morality (or rather propriety), ethics and honour. Their attitude reflects alienation rather than sheer hypocrisy. Of course, that whole pattern is a parody of melodrama (of the theatrical kind that Maggie and her class are so fond of): she is not a "fallen woman", but there will be no "knight in shining armour" and no happy

ending for us; her virtue will not be rewarded, neither will the villains be punished or recognize the error of their ways. All characters, including Maggie, are trapped in the moral vision imposed upon them by the dominant culture of the time. In that respect, chapter VIII is an aesthetic key to the whole novel. It describes the whole array of entertainment available to Maggie and Pete: whether belonging to high culture (the museum) or low culture (the freak show) or partaking of both (the zoo, the theatre), those places of leisure present the characters with distorted mirror images of themselves, never fully human – mummies, freaks, monkeys, puppets, two-dimensional characters. As for theatrical melodrama (a degraded form of drama, a mock tragedy), it comforts the popular audience in a deluded vision of what they are, equating poverty with virtue (a view contradicted by Mary, Pete, Jimmie...) and offering false hopes for a happy ending that, far from being realistic or logical, can only be imputed to some *deus ex machina* or authorial arbitrariness designed to please and appease the crowd. Maggie fully identifies with melodrama heroines, without realizing that she may share their beauty and virtue, but not their refinement nor their happy fate. In that respect, the final sentence of the chapter (“The theatre made her think”) is full of irony: Maggie does *not* think, she only dreams. And the irony of upper class moral notions of honour being upheld by lower class characters culminates in chapter X, with the mock duel between Jimmie and Pete.

Then comes Maggie’s fall into prostitution, anonymity and ignominious death – which remains ambiguous: we do not know whether she committed suicide or was murdered by her ultimate, beastly client. The cruelty of that fate also stems from the fact that the “fallen” Maggie sinks into oblivion: the other characters seem to have forgotten that she ever existed. This bleak vision of a human jungle (and some critics attacked Crane for being an “animalistic writer”) is consistent with the author’s social pessimism that rejects the “transcendental realism” he mocked in theatrical melodrama: here, there is no possible

transcendence, be it religious (divine justice and retribution) or literary (the happy ending, poetic justice). There is just realism.

2. Frank NORRIS: *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* (1899)

Frank Norris was probably the most exemplary representative of American naturalism, even more so than Stephen Crane. He was also more directly influenced by Zola's work and theories, and his literary aesthetics, based on virtually exhaustive detail and precise description, strongly differs from Crane's theatricality. But like Crane, he belonged to the upper class, and therefore adopted an exterior, slightly superior point of view to depict both the working class (the impoverished, exploited Chicago slaughterhouse workers in *The Octopus*) and the lower middle class in *McTeague*. The major difference between *Maggie* and *McTeague* lies in the fact that the former emphasizes the part played by social environment in the shaping of human lives and destiny, whereas in the latter the driving force is to be found within the characters themselves, in their natural instincts and unnatural passions.

We can also notice differences in the urban setting chosen for *McTeague*. Not only was San Francisco less of a sprawling metropolis than New York City, but it drew on a different mythology. In the American imagination, San Francisco was primarily associated with the 1848-49 Gold Rush (and it was also the main starting point for gold diggers sailing to Klondike in the 1890s) and had become synonymous with pleasure and lawlessness (the "Barbary Coast"), especially in a decade that became known as the "Gay Nineties". Therefore, it somehow maintained the spirit of the frontier, even after the frontier was officially closed. In that respect, it makes sense that *McTeague* is a former miner who is still hoping to "strike gold". Similarly, however urban and sophisticated he may be, Marcus keeps dreaming of becoming a cowboy, and eventually fulfils that Wild West fantasy. Nevertheless, when the Sieppes get bankrupt in California, they have to contemplate a move to another, unlikely "promised land" on the other side of the world, namely New Zealand.

Norris' naturalistic approach is best exemplified that he considers his characters as case studies in excess: their extremes are thus supposed to offer glimpses into human nature. If Crane sometimes drew implicit comparisons between his characters and animals (see Pete's and Maggie's visit to the zoo), Norris consistently views mankind as one species among others, a creature primarily driven by instincts and appetites. Even the veneer of middle class good manners and propriety, exemplified by the Sieppes, fails to conceal the primacy of nature: in the theatre scene, Maggie's younger brother is overcome by the need to urinate (what the English language humorously refers to as "a call of nature"); likewise, the wedding banquet is a moment when the Sieppes forget their manners to stuff themselves with food.

But the main natural instinct is of course to be found in sexual impulses, those of McTeague and Trina. Yet their primarily sexual bond, which confuses desire with love ("Love me big", as Trina keeps saying to her husband, is a phrase more sexual than sentimental), gradually gets distorted into an unnatural, increasingly sadomasochistic relationship: not only does McTeague bite his wife's fingers, but she actually enjoys it. Sexual perversion is one example of how mankind has drifted away from wholesome natural instinct toward self-destructive drives. Accordingly, a distinction has to be drawn between natural instincts and unnatural passions, the most prevalent of which here is of course greed (by the way, *Greed* was the title chosen by film director Erich von Stroheim for his famous 1923-1925 film adaptation of *McTeague*). Trina's obsessive love for gold (which has no intrinsic, natural value, and only becomes precious within the context of culture, of human economy) becomes an overwhelming force dictating her behaviour. The problem is that she does not spend her fortune for pleasure, for instant gratification (the way McTeague and, to a lesser extent, Marcus do). Nor does she save her money as a precaution against possible impoverishment, since she refuses to spend any part of it, even when she is no longer able to work. In fact, the richer she gets (through the interests on her capital, invested in her uncle's

business), the more poorly she lives, to the point that she gives up not only bourgeois propriety (keeping up appearances, maintaining a standard in terms of housing and dress), but even basic human values of compassion and solidarity and the natural sense of family (when she denies any help to her parents). Gold, hoarded and treasured, becomes an end in itself, and even the sole object of her affection. In her life, it comes to play the part of a surrogate child (the McTeagues are conspicuously childless, and the toys offered by her uncle as a wedding gift remain unused: for Trina, toys are only a way to earn a living), then, climactically, of a surrogate lover – she ends up literally sleeping with her gold coins.

Such an unnatural channelling of sexual impulses is only conceivable in the human world. In a very symmetrical way, the novel presents two possible versions of desire as redefined by culture: on the one hand, courtly love, which has sublimated any sexual drive and only consists of a romantic, purely sentimental bond between soul mates, as embodied by Miss Baker and Old Grannis; on the other hand, a bond solely based on mutually shared greed, like the one that “links” Zerkow and Maria Macapa, who, despite the evidence of sexual relationships between them, are only united by a common, mimetic desire for gold that dismisses any other attachment (including parental love for the child that dies at birth). Logically, their marriage will end in murder, an obvious prolepsis of the McTeagues’ fate.

These echoes and mirror effects are typical of Norris’ literary strategies, inasmuch as they implicitly convey a moral lesson, in a novel that overall shuns explicit moral judgement on the part of the narrator. Whereas Crane’s irony was explicit and slightly condescending (based as it was on the discrepancy between the characters’ blindness and inarticulateness and the narrator’s lucidity and highbrow eloquence), Norris favours the tragic irony of omens (that the characters fail to recognize but that the reader easily deciphers) and of retribution. This is apparent for instance in the running metaphor of jaws: McTeague is a dentist, whose professional success is made manifest by the gilded tooth; but he will use his own teeth to

torture and eventually mutilate Trina; finally, the image of jaws will be applied to the deadly desert where he finds his demise.

Similarly, Trina's physical predicament is the logical consequence of her greed: she loses her fingers not only because of the violence she has triggered in McTeague, but because she has insisted on continuing to make toys, a job she did not need keeping to earn a living. She then gets infected by paint that is supposed to be "non-poisonous" but proves to be toxic; she thus falls victim to a deceitful form of advertising that she should have been aware of: after all, the toys she makes are supposed to have been "made in France"...

There is a contagious quality to Trina's greed that eventually contaminates McTeague himself. He has been initially described as a primitive man with simple needs and desires: his pleasures (drinking beer, playing his concertina), ambitions (the gilded tooth as a sign of social status) and affections (the canary bird) are modest and remain so throughout the novel. But toward the end, he gets torn by a conflict between his natural part (his animal-like but constructive instinct for survival, which amounts to a kind of sixth sense) and unnatural passion (greed). In that respect, his final showdown with Marcus in Death Valley (a genuine, realistic geographical location that nevertheless has transparent connotations) is fraught with symbolic value. The desert represents both nature at its most brutal and ruthless (and completely indifferent to man) and the metaphor of human sterile pursuits. In that hostile, barren landscape (described as "abominable", the same term elliptically used to sum up Trina's murder at the hands of McTeague), no living being can survive, let alone thrive (apart from equally hostile predators such as rattlesnakes); such an environment (the exact opposite of the "land of plenty", the "land of milk and honey" that the wilderness was supposed to be) only produces gold, which is worthless in nature. The only precious commodity is water: thirst (a natural instinct dictated by the necessity of survival) should prevail over greed. Yet

both Marcus and McTeague choose the latter, in a suicidal move, and they end up chained not only to each other but to their own destructive passion.

John DOS PASSOS: *Manhattan Transfer* (1925)

Although the plot of *Manhattan Transfer* begins in 1892, the novel offers a retrospective view of the late nineteenth century (whereas Crane's *Maggie* constituted a topical statement on contemporary issues). John Dos Passos obviously belonged to a different, subsequent literary generation that evolved beyond naturalism. His name is usually associated with the aesthetic trend called modernism, very roughly characterized by its distrust of any unifying narrative and its fragmented view both of the realities described and of its cultural legacy.

Dos Passos was a third generation Portuguese immigrant, the grandson of a self-made man. In that sense, we might say that his lineage embodied the American dream come true. Yet he was an illegitimate child, belatedly recognized by his father, which gave him an outsider's status, compounded by the years he spent in Europe during and after the First World War. In that respect, he belongs to what fellow writer and expatriate Gertrude Stein nicknamed "the Lost Generation", an informal group of self-exiled American writers which also numbered such important literary figures as Francis Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, disillusioned and traumatized by their war experience and sharing a defiant fascination with America, whose ideals and values they could no longer wholly embrace but still nostalgically described from a critical distance. Dos Passos also was a fellow traveller of the American Left, initially sympathetic to the newly created Soviet Union. In his other major work, the *USA* trilogy (*42nd Parallel*, 1930; *1919*, 1932; *The Big Money*, 1936), he would chronicle the dreams and disillusionment of American revolutionary movements, before becoming increasingly conservative after the Spanish Civil War and World War II. *USA* also systematized the literary experiments in narrative fragmentation he had initiated in *Manhattan*

Transfer. Both his progressive political commitment and pioneering, avant-garde aesthetics made him a very influential writer well into the 1940s, especially hailed by such European writers as Jean-Paul Sartre, who wrote a very laudatory article on him in *Situations 1*.

Manhattan Transfer attempts to cover the transformations experienced by New York City (and beyond it by the entire United States) between 1892 and 1920. But instead of offering a linear, extensive view of that period, it is based on heterogeneity, discontinuity and fragmentation. The plot is split into a multiplicity of elliptical narratives. The proliferation of characters prevents the singling out of any heroic figure – although some characters (Ellen/Elaine and Jimmy Herf) are present throughout the novel and therefore emerge as protagonists. But those individual trajectories do not necessarily intersect, thus deliberately leaving many loose ends in the storyline(s). There is no unifying perspective at work here.

Such a dismissal of unity not only reflects modernist aesthetics, but reveals an attempt to reveal the modern urban experience: parallel lives exposed to a random multiplicity of simultaneous experiences and perceptions. Accordingly, the novel resorts to several types of writing, each being assigned its specific typography: the main narrative is thus visually distinct from chapter epigraphs (often given a proleptic or self-referential value) and quotes from popular songs or newspaper headlines, providing a literary equivalent to the soundtrack of the city, the rumour of the outside world (and history in the making, including the outbreak of the First World War) and the inner thoughts of the characters. Rendering the heterogeneity of city life (and the transformations brought about by technological innovations) was indeed a major concern for all arts in the 1920s, and *Manhattan Transfer*, variously described as a tapestry or a kaleidoscope, was heavily indebted to contemporary visual arts. Its functioning has been compared both to cinematic montage (especially as it was then used by avant-garde Soviet filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein [*Battleship Potemkin*, 1925] and Dziga Vertov [*Man With the Movie Camera*, 1929]) and to pictorial, Cubist collage. But the most relevant

influence, as pointed out by Pierre-Yves Pétilion¹, may be that of a newspaper front page, with its dissimilar headlines, stories “to be continued” and advertisements. Besides, Dos Passos’ novel is also characterized by its mixture of high and low culture, as exemplified by Stan’s drunken stream of thoughts (“Rollercoaster”, II, 7), which blends reminiscences from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, the Bible, gospel songs and nursery rhymes.

Similarly, the opening chapter of the novel, “Ferryslip”, is emblematic of Dos Passos’ strategies, as it is made up of three parallel but separate episodes. At first sight, we may think that they are simultaneous, but the newspapers headlines in Chapter two correct that wrong impression: not only are Bud’s and Ellen’s stories distant from each other in time, but the chronology is reversed: Bud’s arrival into the city takes place twelve years before Ellen’s birth. Besides, Bud’s story, encompassed by the first part in the novel, only covers the few final months in his life leading up to his suicide, whereas that same first part retraces the first eighteen years in Ellen’s life. As for the last character mentioned in that inaugural chapter, he remains anonymous and will not reappear later. Yet the three episodes are linked by the fact that they all describe beginnings: birth, arrival, and finally self-reinvention – in the case of that young, nameless but exemplary Jewish immigrant who (influenced and possibly alienated by advertising) shaves his beard in order to look more “American” and therefore, hopefully, have more chances to succeed and partake of the American dream.

This scene is obviously echoed by Bud’s visit to the barbershop. Yet Bud’s destiny leads to a pessimistic statement. Born and raised in Cooperstown (the birthplace of James Fenimore Cooper, who in the 1820s wrote *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Prairie*), he should embody the promise of the frontier. But the frontier has closed, country life is no longer synonymous with purity but with domestic violence and parricide, and he has no choice but to return back East. The promised land has been reduced to a single city that attracts not only recent European immigrants but old stock settlers. Bud’s greatest mistake is

¹ in « Les Romans d’une ville », *Le Magazine littéraire*, « New York et ses écrivains », n° 443, juin 2005.

to seek the “center of things” in a environment that is devoid of any centre – just as the novel offers no single central character or plot: in a way, the main character is the city itself. He mistakes Broadway (a former cowpath in the early days of Dutch settlements in Manhattan, and one of the few streets that do not fit into Manhattan’s perpendicular grid) for such a center. But as Ellen, the aspiring actress, knows all too well, Broadway is only make believe, not a reality but a representation. Things are not stable in the city: everything is subject to transformation and mutability, nothing remains stable or static. The title is very revealing in that respect: “Manhattan Transfer” refers to the train depot in upstate New York where people had to change trains in order to get into the city. That railway station is only mentioned once in the novel, but it symbolizes circulation, motion, change, as well as the random coexistence of dissimilar characters. It is only a temporary meeting point before trajectories diverge again.

In a way, Ellen/Elaine is probably the most emblematic character in the novel, since she keeps changing names, identities, husbands, theatrical roles, occupations. From her very birth, when the nurse jokingly confesses that sometimes she cannot tell the newborn babies apart, it is suggested that Ellen may be a changeling (as one may find in fairy tales, myths or Elizabethan drama). Her dynamic, metamorphic quality perfectly fits the nature of city life, though it does not necessarily lead her to fulfilment.

For the city tends to dehumanize its dwellers, or at least to alienate them, to deprive them of their individuality and reduce them to the sum of their perceptions and influences. They are recurrently compared to mechanical dolls. But the city itself is vulnerable: the constant references to a former metropolis, be it Babylon, Rome, Nineveh or Constantinople, suggest a cyclical vision of the rise and fall of empires. Like Babel and other Biblical cities, New York may be doomed to Apocalypse (the Flood implicitly referred to by the nursery rhyme about Noah’s Ark). Yet that threat (or promise?) of annihilation never comes to pass: fires keep breaking out throughout the novel, but the city always rises from its ashes.

Throughout the novel, the city operates as a magnet, a pole of attraction, yet the book ends on a departure: that of Jimmy Herf, the disillusioned radical journalist, who eventually hitches a ride out of the city, in search of a lost America that would keep its original promise. Such a departure (which would be echoed in the 1940s and 1950s by the Beat Generation [Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, 1951-1957]) is a final attempt to reinvent oneself, but nothing indicates that Jimmy's quest will be successful: he only knows that, to find his ideal America, he will have to go "pretty far".

