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Title

Maupassant and the Limits of the Self

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2434p6dp>

Journal

Romantic Review, 101(4)

ISSN

0035-8118

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Publication Date

2010-11-01

DOI

10.1215/26885220-101.4.781

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MAUPASSANT AND THE LIMITS OF THE SELF

In 2007 appeared the world's first wiki novel, so called because it was generated by inviting Internet users to contribute text through the same process of iterative online edits popularized by Wikipedia. The results are uneven at best.¹ Time will tell whether future wiki novels more successfully exploit the nebulous zone between individual inspiration and collective sensibility. It is worth remembering for the moment, however, that even when written by a single person, the novel has always plumbed the limit between individual and collective. Beginning with the structuralist tradition, of course, critics have long called the individuality of literary authorship into question, positing a "death of the author" in the work's construction by the supra-individual forces of language, readership, and society.² I am more interested here in how the novel has thematized its own precarious existence at the border between individual and collective—a parallel manifestation, at the level of the human being, of the novel's dueling imperatives toward the particular and the universal—and how this precariousness has destabilized the novelistic text.

I shall return to the much-commented negotiation between particular and universal by the novel. Suffice it to say for now that the novel has found this a delicate endeavor. In the nineteenth century, when the porosity between self and collective became a particularly vexed question, the tension of inhabiting such an epistemologically and ontologically ambiguous frontier reached a breaking point. The present essay locates an instance of that tension in the work of French novelist and short story master Guy de Maupassant, taking stock along the way of the consequences for the novel and for its conception of the self. What Maupassant anxiously explored, I argue, is that in the balance struck by the novel between particular and universal, the self faced dissolution in the collective. What is more, the novel's compensating insistence on the individual seemed paradoxically only to hasten that dissolution.

1. "Artie would have worn his sunglasses, but being a whale meant he didn't have ears, which made it difficult for his sunglasses to stay on," reads one typically head-scratching excerpt. The novel was a project of Penguin Books and students at De Montfort University. It has no title, presumably because the wiki editing process would have caused the title to vary too erratically. The full text can be found at <http://www.amillionpenguins.com>.

2. See Barthes and Foucault, "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?"

Maupassant's literary exploration was corroborated by the philosophical and scientific developments of the age. Advances in the understanding of sensory perception, a nationwide vogue for Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy, and the forays of a nascent psychology into a theory of the unconscious—the phenomena I most closely examine—combined in nineteenth-century France to reignite the classic reflection on whether what resided within the individual was truly distinct from what resided outside him. In this environment appeared Maupassant's 1888 novel *Pierre et Jean*, his fourth, along with its well-known preface "Le Roman." The preface engages extensively with questions of individuality, and the poignancy of Maupassant's classic novel lies largely in its account of a painful intrusion on the self by the disindividuating currents around it. But even more significant than the intrusion is the manner in which it occurs. Maupassant's psychological excavation of his protagonist Pierre encounters a disturbing limit at which, in its deepest recesses, human interiority turns outward onto exteriority. That limit, I conclude, announced the abiding modern conundrum of an individuality that receded ever further as it increased in importance.

Pierre et Jean's preface occupies a place alongside Emile Zola's 1880 *Le Roman expérimental* and Honoré de Balzac's 1842 foreword to *La Comédie humaine* as one of the most frequently invoked expressions of nineteenth-century French realist poetics. Yet in its content and context, "Le Roman" finds Maupassant training his attention as much beyond realism as toward it. Maupassant's essay was written just a few weeks after the August 1887 publication in the newspaper *Le Figaro* of what has become known as "Le Manifeste des cinq," an open letter to Zola by a group of young writers critical of Zola's naturalism. "Le Roman" thus arrived at a time when realism, or at least its naturalist strain that had recently dominated, was under fire. Denying the novel's ability to depict an absolute reality, "Le Roman" implicitly joined this backlash by questioning the documentary pretensions of a naturalism under whose label Maupassant himself had long bridled. Further stoking questions about the direction of the French novel, the mid-1880s had seen the successful emergence of a new brand of psychological novel, exemplified by the work of Paul Bourget, that explored the inner psychological life that naturalism and realism had supposedly neglected. Maupassant's essay admiringly references this psychologism, overtly associating *Pierre et Jean* with its tendencies while arguing nonetheless for the superiority of the realist novel.

Such caginess has variously led critics to identify in *Pierre et Jean* and its preface either the last gasps of a waning realism or the early signs of a post-realist turn.³ These judgments obviously come down to a matter of perspective,

3. David Walker adopts the first attitude, submitting that "in *Pierre et Jean* and its prefatory essay, 'Le Roman,' Maupassant sought to revitalize realism by drawing attention to the illusions of the mind that influence the formation of stories, but the

with *Pierre et Jean*'s "caractère hybride," as André Vial terms it (399), inviting equal interpretation as a terminus and a beginning. Rather than rehearse the question of whether Maupassant was coming or going, however, I prefer to consider how *Pierre et Jean*'s hybridity—refracted through the contradictory impulses of its preface—grants it a purchase that exceeds the sum of its realist and psychologist parts. The novel form had long taken the world of particulars as its object, distinguishing itself from earlier literary forms more dependent on universal archetypes. Novelists nevertheless called on these particulars to demonstrate universal truths, relying, as David Baguley puts it, on the ability of particulars to function in a grander, "representative" way even while doing the "representational" work of mimesis (59). The realist novel, especially, relied on such an inductive epistemology to invest the everyday with meaning. The trouble was that in celebrating the particular's capacity to be significant, one risked evacuating the particular of its particularity—and, by extension, the individual of his individuality.

Though this tension haunted realist and psychological novels alike, it came into especially crisp focus in *Pierre et Jean* under the lens of a hybrid textual mode that combined aspects of each. This hybrid mode is notable for both its epistemological ambitions and its ontological conclusions. The former are jointly illuminated by the novel and its prefatory essay. Maupassant's decision to make a medical doctor the protagonist of *Pierre et Jean* facilitates the work's adherence to the exigencies of what, in "Le Roman," Maupassant calls the *roman objectif*. Discussing his predilection for this realist strategy, Maupassant emphasizes the authorial effacement that verisimilitude, an artistic hallmark of the *roman objectif*, requires. Thus does Pierre's profession furnish a convenient alibi for his sustained self-analysis. Ruminating, as a doctor might, on the sensations produced within him by the painful events of the novel, Pierre convincingly assumes the introspective duties that might otherwise have fallen to an intrusively omniscient narrator.

Maupassant's clever narrative device allows him to lay bare his character's inner life, or what he calls the "ossature invisible" of individual psychology. According to "Le Roman," the *roman objectif* usually only figures such psychology obliquely: "[Les romanciers objectifs] cachent donc la psychologie au lieu de l'étaler, ils en font la carcasse de l'œuvre, comme l'ossature invisible est la carcasse du corps humain. Le peintre qui fait notre portrait ne montre pas notre squelette" (710). Bound by realist poetics, the *roman objectif* can do no more than offer an external reflection of the psychological skeleton that, in social life, remains "cachée" (710). Any direct, internal apprehension of

picture conveyed by the naturalist novel was beginning to be perceived as the least significant feature of reality" (126). Robert Lethbridge, in contrast, locates Maupassant as much in the vanguard as in the old guard, stressing *Pierre et Jean*'s integration of Bourget's psychologism with realist techniques (*Maupassant* 40–43).

this skeleton enters into the province of what Maupassant calls the "roman d'analyse pure" (709).

Yet Maupassant's appending of the qualifier *pure* leaves open the possibility, as Robert Lethbridge has noted, that Maupassant's classificatory dichotomy, rather than erecting mutually exclusive categories, simply demarcates the poles of a continuum (*Maupassant* 27). *Pierre et Jean's* narrative hybridity certainly testifies to the existence of such a continuum. Hewing to self-imposed conventions of the *roman objectif* (witness the plausibility of Pierre's self-analysis) even as it stakes out the territory of the *roman d'analyse*, Maupassant's novel leaves intact the realist world of surfaces while revealing the psychological skeleton underneath. The result is a novel that not only advertises the form's twin impulses toward universality and particularity, but also juxtaposes them in a way that dramatically calls attention to their difficult coexistence. In its implied "objectivity," *Pierre et Jean* invokes a universalizing standard of plausibility. But in taking its cues from psychologism to peer ever further inside the mind of his protagonist, Maupassant's novel simultaneously pushes the envelope of realism's fascination with the particular. Ultimately, what the novel discovers is that the two gestures fold back into each other in unexpected and unsettling ways.

In this fashion do Maupassant's fraught poetics crystallize the lasting ontological quandary toward which the preoccupations of the age were beginning to point. The more attentive that modern man became to the inner workings of the individual, the more that individuality seemed tenuous. The new theory of the unconscious, for instance, did as much to attribute a man's actions to collectively held impulses as it did to privilege the individuality of his psyche. Later I will return to this aporia and to the metaphysical line it traces from Maupassant to the twentieth century. To begin, however, I would like to situate Maupassant within the anxiety about individuation already brewing in his era and examine how Maupassant's response to it conditions and disrupts his work. Turning first to "Le Roman" and then to *Pierre et Jean*, I describe how tensions that remain latent in the preface surface in the novel, provoking a drama of individuality and threatening the foundations of realist narrative.

* * *

During the nineteenth century, an age-old metaphysical question—can we really perceive what exists outside us?—was given new impetus by scientific inquiry. Hermann von Helmholtz's tremendously influential *Handbook of Physiological Optics*, translated from German into French in 1867, reaffirmed his teacher Johannes Müller's discovery earlier in the century that nerve endings responded similarly to different sorts of stimuli. Müller's "doctrine of specific nerve energies" held that a blow to the eye, or a simple electrical stimulus, could be detected as light by the optical nerve. Such a disjunction

between stimulus and perception implied that the body's senses responded not directly to objects themselves but to the indirect stimulation provoked by those objects. Perception, in other words, was a subjective, physiological process, one mediated by the body and producing potentially different results in every person. The referential fidelity of perception had been found wanting; in its place, a corporeal gap had arisen between what was perceived within and what might actually exist without.⁴

A German thinker like Helmholtz could not help but notice the apparent continuity of these physiological discoveries with the enduring epistemological limits proposed by Kant in the previous century. Kant, of course, had famously declared in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that man's perceptual apparatus, mediating his experience of the world through a priori categories of perception like space and time, could never grasp the thing-in-itself, or reality undistorted by such a priori instruments of perception. This metaphysical insulation of the self from objective reality seemed, with Müller and Helmholtz, to have found its scientific confirmation.

Around the time Helmholtz was tackling the disconnect between internal perception and external reality, Schopenhauer was, a decade after his death, beginning to enjoy an enthusiastic reception in France. Translations of Schopenhauer's philosophical writings in 1879, 1880, and 1881 marked the beginning of a long-standing fascination for the master pessimist by a French intelligentsia still reeling from France's 1870 defeat by Germany. Given Schopenhauer's place in the lineage of theorists of perception who, from Kant to Helmholtz, had elaborated what Jonathan Crary calls the modern paradigm of "perceptual autonomy" (79), Schopenhauer's newfound popularity can hardly be coincidental. Drawing on observations from the field of optics (for instance, that the eye captures images upside-down but that the mind never "sees" them that way), Schopenhauer had by 1815 mobilized empirical evidence to buttress the abstract philosophical idealism of Kant, arguing that the perceiving mind only constructs ideas, or representations, of the world around it, without grasping things-in-themselves.

Schopenhauer was reticent, however, to accept Kant's absolute injunction that knowledge of the thing-in-itself was impossible. The conduit to this knowledge proposed by Schopenhauer became a centerpiece of his philosophy. Because man himself was a manifestation of the ontological substrate of the world—the Kantian thing-in-itself, or what Schopenhauer called "will"—it was possible to bypass the phenomenal veil of perceptual representation and plug directly into the noumenal source. "*We ourselves are the thing-in-itself,*"

4. For an account of nineteenth-century developments in the physiology of perception and their epistemological impact, see Crary, especially chapters 2 and 3, to which I am particularly indebted.

he wrote, and “consequently, a way *from within* stands open to us to that real inner nature of things to which we cannot penetrate *from without*” (*World 2*: 195; original emphasis). Despite the radical individuality of a perception produced by man’s imperfect corporeal apprehension of the world, that same corporeality opened access to the radically collective.

Both “Le Roman” and *Pierre et Jean* represent a coming-to-terms with this disindividuating proposition. Friends with Jean Bourdeau, an early French translator of Schopenhauer, Maupassant absorbed as much as he could of Schopenhauer’s philosophies in readings and conversation. Even though Schopenhauer’s influence on Maupassant has been documented (Colin 193–202; Lanoux 195–97; Vial 115–19), critics have yet to properly contextualize *Pierre et Jean* and its preface within the anxiety about individuation induced in part by Schopenhauer’s elaboration of man’s relation to the world around him. To explain Maupassant’s flat contention in “Le Roman” that “nos yeux, nos oreilles, notre odorat, notre goût différents créent autant de vérités qu’il y a d’hommes sur la terre” (709), Louis Forestier cites a passage of Schopenhauer’s *On the Basis of Morality*, translated into French in 1879:

Thus in consequence of the subjectivity essential to every consciousness, everyone is himself the whole world, for everything objective exists only indirectly, as mere representation of the subject, so that everything is always closely associated with self-consciousness. The only world everyone is actually acquainted with and knows, is carried about him in his head as his representation, and is thus the center of the world. (*Basis* 132)

Highlighted by Vial as having likely retained Maupassant’s attention (129), this passage voices the skeptical zeitgeist of an era in which physiology had seemingly vindicated post-Kantian subjectivism. Maupassant’s affirmation in “Le Roman” that our senses guarantee that “chacun de nous se fait donc simplement une illusion du monde” could indeed hardly draw more from the Schopenhauerian playbook (709).⁵ Yet Forestier extracts the passage from a

5. In his 1885 short story “Lettre d’un fou,” Maupassant had already commented at length on the inherent uncertainty introduced into human perception by the reliance on sensory organs, an observation very much in line with physiological discoveries by the likes of Müller and Helmholtz. The data we receive about the outside world, Maupassant writes, are “incertains, parce que ce sont uniquement les propriétés de nos organes qui déterminent pour nous les propriétés apparentes de la matière.” A corporeal gap arises between matter outside us and our experience of it because each sensory organ “impose à l’esprit sa manière de voir.” Maupassant concludes that everything is “appréciable de manières différentes,” a perceptual relativism he pithily sums up as follows: “Vérité dans notre organe, erreur à côté” (462–64).

broader argument at the end of which Schopenhauer concludes, in a chiding tone, that the "microcosm" of individual subjective experience stands in transient, egoistic relation to the "macrocosm" of being (*Basis* 133). Schopenhauer's belief in the relativity of perception, in other words, is doubled by an equally firm conviction that this illusory subjectivity ought not obscure the objective truth of our only real existence in the disindividuated "will."

Maupassant's conflicted relation to this ontology produces a latent tension in "Le Roman." If Maupassant invokes the subjectivity of perception to explain that an author can only be expected to render his personal illusion, or version of reality (709), the essay's preoccupation with literary originality precludes that illusion's proper Schopenhauerian dismissal. Quite to the contrary, Maupassant offers that transcendence inheres in a talented writer's rendering of his unique perspective. Because Maupassant's notion of illusion, however, remains grounded in the opposition between the thing-in-itself and the representation we make of it to ourselves, he never really leaves the ambit of the greater Schopenhauerian paradigm. "Le réaliste," writes Maupassant, "s'il est un artiste, cherchera, non pas à nous montrer la photographie banale de la vie, mais à nous en donner la vision plus complète, plus saisissante, plus probante que la réalité même" (708). Here Maupassant trots out the venerable nineteenth-century critical saw that realism's "photographic" representation of the material was crassly incapable of conveying the immutable Idea beyond it. He embraces this essentially Platonic critique, positing an idealist poetics of his own that distinguishes the superficial realm he calls "reality" from what can be discovered by probing deeper.

Yet the banality Maupassant ascribes to the superficial presumes a world of appearances whose banality all can agree on, an assumption that undermines his otherwise confident perceptual relativism. Our senses may deceive us, but apparently not in a manner we cannot collectively intuit; and so, to the extent that we agree that it is not "banal," we share a collective idea of what we might find by probing further. Implicitly proposing something within us that lies beyond the senses but that we intuitively share, Maupassant tacitly espouses a Schopenhauerian, supra-individual ontology. This much is evinced by what otherwise seems an inconsistency in Maupassant's aesthetic logic. How else to make sense of Maupassant's claim that, despite the relativity of perception, the talented realist author makes skillful use of the plausible? Such plausibility used to construct a world readers would recognize and presupposes a common currency, a common measure of existence. Either Maupassant does not take seriously his conceit that there are as many realities as there are perceiving bodies, or he implies that, on a deeper level, the writer taps into some sort of collective substratum.

Sensing a double bind, Maupassant does not relish that a writerly turn into the particularity of the individual might ultimately lead outward. He laments the encroachment of exteriority on bodily interiority whereby "notre corps

entier nous donne l'impression d'être une pâte faite avec des mots" (711). Schopenhauerian aesthetics offered no consolation. Schopenhauer's belief in the unique perceptivity of the contemplative artistic genius appealed to Maupassant, who inherited from his master Gustave Flaubert a similar faith in the artist's special powers of discernment (Vial 115). The aesthete's comforting distinction from the herd, however, is undercut in Schopenhauer by the contention that aesthetic contemplation prompts the observer to "forget [his] individuality" and escape particularity for the timeless, universal realm of Idea (*World 1*: 178). The artist's privileged access to the transcendent therefore effaces individuation even as it appears to affirm it, a reversal with which "Le Roman" struggles.

The harder Maupassant clings to individuation, the more it seems to elude him. One might liken the cumulative effect to that of a "zolly" (zoom-dolly) shot in film, with the camera lens zooming in on its subject even as the camera itself pulls increasingly away. *Pierre et Jean* more fully enacts the same disorienting movement, drawing close to its individual protagonist only to discover an ever more uncannily engulfing background. Spellbound by Schopenhauer's equation of the unconscious with will, Maupassant's novel uneasily documents how the psyche, ostensibly the most private of realms, conceals a leveling of ontological difference against which the self stands little chance of autonomy. It is this revelation, and its ramifications for literature, that I now consider.

* * *

Pierre et Jean's Pierre Roland, the eldest son of a retired jeweler in the port city of Le Havre, is stunned when his younger brother Jean inherits a fortune from a family friend, Maréchal. Pierre is consumed by jealousy and comes to suspect, accurately, that Maréchal might in fact be Jean's real father. Pierre spends the rest of the novel obsessively tormenting his mother and brother with his suspicions about the presumed adultery, upending the Rolands' family life until Jean restores peace by contriving to send Pierre off to sea as a ship's doctor.

Pierre's autoscopic examination of his own jealousy marks, after the novels of Bourget, one of the first entrances into French letters of the theory of the unconscious:

Il se mit à réfléchir profondément à ce problème physiologique de l'impression produite par un fait sur l'être instinctif et créant en lui un courant d'idées et de sensations douloureuses ou joyeuses, contraires à celles que désire, qu'appelle, que juge bonnes et saines l'être pensant, devenu supérieur à lui-même par la culture de son intelligence. (736)

Beneath Pierre's thinking consciousness, there resides what the text elsewhere calls "une seconde âme indépendante" (739). Mary Donaldson-Evans has credibly advanced that Maupassant was influenced by the pre-psychoanalytical theories of his friend J. M. Charcot and of others in Charcot's circle, in particular Pierre Janet, who in the 1880s had begun theorizing what he called "le dédoublement de la personnalité" ("Maupassant *Ludens*" 208). But it is worth recalling that the notion of an unconscious operating apart from consciousness already dated back, as Freud later acknowledged, to Schopenhauer himself (Magee 307–9). As early as 1844, Schopenhauer had described the "unconscious" governing of conscious action by the will, that blind principle of existence and striving that undergirds all animate and inanimate existence (*World 2*: 219). It is against the backdrop of this determinism that *Pierre et Jean* reproduces the fundamental tension of its preface, struggling to reconcile the relativity of perception—and the individuality of interior experience it implies—with the unnerving possibility that this individuality might constitute a mirage perched precariously atop a uniform plane of undifferentiated existence.

Maupassant drives home the relativity of perception early on, memorably anthropomorphizing the lighthouses of the Normandy coast in implicit illustration of the preface's explicit physiological contentions. Pierre watches as the twin beams of the Cap de la Hève lighthouse scan the sea like a probing set of eyes. As if in response to the hubris of this monolithic ocular perspective, other lighthouses shine back in the darkness, "s'ouvrant et se fermant comme des yeux" (737). Maupassant seems to hint at the novel's impending shift in perspective in which the narrative focalization will pass from Pierre to Jean, and it is fitting that, just as the shift occurs, Jean is seen to have "l'oeil allumé" (788). Maupassant later reinforces such a perspectival relativism in a description of the four engravings that adorn the living room of Rosémilly, Jean's fiancée (817–18). Divided into two pairs of images that prefigure the novel's final scene of maritime departure and loss, but depict it from both the shore and the departing boat, the engravings stand in ekphrastic reminder of perspectival difference.⁶

No sooner does the text establish the relativity of interior experience, however, than it questions the sanctity of that interiority. Having contemplated the lighthouses from the docks, Pierre turns his attention to a shadow approaching under the moonlight. He recognizes a fishing boat and briefly imagines how different a fishing life would be. Pierre makes out the ship's captain and

6. In the first of what the narrator calls the "scènes analogues" contained in the two pairs of engravings (818), a fisherman's wife watches from the shore as her husband's boat departs then later sinks in a storm. In the second pair, a young woman on an ocean liner longs wistfully for her shore-bound love, only to learn of his death.

continues his poetic reverie on alterity by wondering if the man is wise, or in love, or sad. Then, abruptly, he recognizes his own brother Jean (738). Where Pierre has sought the other he has found the same, in a wry illustration of the principle that, as Pierre Bayard has observed, the other fascinates us not on his own terms but because he reminds us of the other we dimly perceive within ourselves (47). The visual counterpart to Pierre—readers will remember that Jean is “aussi blond que son frère était noir” (719), among many other such inverted similarities between the brothers—Jean evokes his brother the way a photographic negative evokes its positive image, in an eerie balance between the altogether same and the altogether different that characterizes the unconscious. Emerging as a double from the shadows of the nighttime sea, Jean is the external avatar of what, tellingly, the text chooses in this moment to dub “une seconde âme indépendante” within Pierre (739).

The visual inversions of the novel’s meditation on perceptual relativism (a scene considered from multiple perspectives; lighthouse “eyes” that produce light rather than receive it) here converge with the visual inversions that link Pierre and Jean. For if our experience of reality is really just our own, what does it mean that part of that experience—the unconscious part—remains incompletely accessible to us? When Pierre threatens the stability of the bourgeois family order with dangerous information about his mother’s marital infidelity, he is summarily excised. The painfulness of the excision reveals the extent to which, despite his aspirations to rise above the complacent mediocrity of his bourgeois origins, Pierre remains psychologically beholden to the collective that produced him. Jean confirms this. In Jean, Pierre is confronted by the exteriorization of a part of himself he does not control. And the exteriorization makes sense: after all, Pierre’s most private, unconscious desires—money, his mother—are precisely those of his mediocre brother and of all those like his brother. The difficult secret of Pierre’s unconscious, it turns out, is that it belongs more to the collective than to him.⁷

7. Maupassant’s short story, “Le Horla,” the second version of which was published the year Maupassant wrote *Pierre et Jean*, advances a similar theme. Critically, Maupassant chooses to make the ghostly double of the “Horla,” a possible figure for the narrator’s unconscious that Joan Kessler has rightfully associated with the Schopenhaurian will (xliv), appear to torment the narrator from without rather than from within. Watching his cousin undergo hypnosis, the narrator marvels as his cousin describes seeing the narrator remove from his pocket and contemplate a picture of himself, an act performed earlier that day out of his cousin’s sight. The narrator’s photographic encounter with another self outside himself symbolically enacts the truth his cousin’s clairvoyance implies: namely, that the two share on some level an unconscious connection, and

Schopenhauer had argued as much. Of our conjoining in will, that substratum of unconscious existence against which subjective individuation is but a passing phenomenon, Schopenhauer writes in *On the Basis of Morality*:

We see only outward; within it is dark and obscure. Accordingly, the knowledge we possess of ourselves is by no means complete and exhaustive, but very superficial; regarding the larger, and in fact main part of our existence, we are strangers and a riddle to ourselves, or, as Kant puts it, the ego knows itself only as phenomenon, not according to what it may be in itself. Regarding that other part which comes within our knowledge, everyone is indeed quite different from another; but it does not then follow that the same is true of the great and essential part that remains hidden from and unknown to everyone. *Thus there remains at least a possibility that it may be one and identical in all.* (206; emphasis added)

Maupassant himself, writing three years after *On the Basis of Morality* was translated into French, penned an 1882 article entitled “Les Foules,” which worriedly describes the disappearance of individual judgment into the “âme collective” of the crowd (481). In light of Schopenhauer’s philosophy of will and the impersonal evolutionism championed by another of Maupassant’s philosophical heroes, Herbert Spencer, the crowd had emerged for Maupassant as a reminder of the ways in which deep, unchanging structures might bind the individual to his surroundings on a far more permanent basis.⁸ The “ivresse” of the crowd, to which Maupassant recounts falling prey in the autobiographical *Sur l’eau* (115), simply rendered palpable what, after Schopenhauer, increasingly seemed a condition of human existence. Crowd or no crowd, each man’s unconscious life was not entirely his own.

That is the essential predicament of *Pierre et Jean*, and one senses Maupassant’s novel struggling with its own conclusions. In this regard, *Pierre et Jean* ratchets up the incipient metaphysical anxiety of “Le Roman.” Maupassant’s preface treats perceptual uncertainty as something of a liberation, one that frees the author from the troubling constraints of genre and critical expectation. After all, if each writer is distanced by his senses from any objectively verifiable account of the world, he can only be expected to render the world as he sees it. But this comforting individuation, it becomes clear, only barely

that consequently the narrator’s unconscious belongs as much to an external, supra-individual other—the “Horla”—as it does to him.

8. Concern about the disindividuating effects of crowds would famously culminate in France with the success of Gustave Le Bon’s 1895 best-seller *La Psychologie des foules*.

conceals a substratum wholly indifferent to the individual. One is reminded of Schopenhauer's likening of the individual to a boatman blithely unaware of the infinity atop which he floats, an infinity into which, "like drops in the ocean," all men necessarily dissolve (*World 1*: 352–53, 205). *Pierre et Jean's* maritime setting takes on an interesting dimension in this context. Against the anthropomorphized subjectivities of the Normandy lighthouses ("C'est moi," we are told each seems to say), the impenetrable surface of the "mer obscure" marks the inherent limits of perceptual autonomy (737). Even Pierre's love of the sea erodes his agency, shared as it is with his father in a way that suggests the determinism of heredity, or at least education.⁹ Hence does the sea everywhere wait to reclaim men, like drops, from the prismatic mirage of individuation. Pierre seems to give voice to this when, contemplating the swarming crowd of immigrants massed below deck on the ship whose crew he has joined, he feels the urge to scream "Mais foutez-vous donc à l'eau avec vos femelles et vos petits!" (828–29). Pierre will shortly disappear into the sea himself, "fondu dans l'Océan" with the ship that bears him toward the horizon (832).

The text experiences this Schopenhauerian finale as a trauma. Bereft of its protagonist, the story, too, must end, called out of individuated existence by the force of its own logic. The narrative itself homophonically rejoins the *mer* by adopting in its final paragraphs the perspective of the *mère*, Madame Roland.¹⁰ Her repeated, longing looks back at Pierre's rapidly disappearing ship signal Madame Roland's sadness at relinquishing her son; but, perhaps just as much, they signal the novel's own difficulty in relinquishing the principle of individuation on which realist narrative fundamentally relies, and whose essential instability *Pierre et Jean's* psychological turn inward has disclosed.

Relevant here is a key passage of "Le Roman" in which Maupassant explains that the realist author necessarily performs a triage, selectively omitting the kinds of everyday occurrences that would cause narrative to grind to a halt. The writer cannot very well allow his hero to be felled by a falling roof tile, for example, no matter how mimetically plausible the event (708). The "untypical particularity," as George Levine calls such an event, has of course always posed difficulties for realist authors keen to represent the world in

9. Vial notes this shared passion for the sea as an example of Maupassant's general belief in the possibility of determining family influences. As Vial points out, however, it is important to remember that Maupassant never subscribed to Zola's scientific convictions about the determining effects of heredity (262). This is why, in my discussion of the disindividuating forces that populate Maupassant's oeuvre, I have not emphasized the biological determinism otherwise so associated with the era.

10. I borrow the observation of this homophony from Donaldson-Evans, though to different ends (see "The Sea as Symbol" 37).

all its aleatory reality (37–38). Yet *Pierre et Jean* manifests the suspicion that more than an accident might stand between an individuated protagonist and his relegation to undifferentiated anonymity. The permeation of Pierre's individual interiority by a disindividuating exteriority reveals the extent to which, in a sense, the roof tile has always already struck. Maupassant's problem is less the untypical particularity than the over-typicality of every particular to begin with. The result—a character whose innermost life is not his own—threatens the enterprise of characterization itself, blending the singular into the plural in a way that perhaps sheds light on the prevalence in Maupassant's work of the doubles and mirrors that has so attracted critics.

Ultimately, *Pierre et Jean* acknowledges the struggle of its selective realism to delineate its characters artificially against a backdrop of Schopenhauerian ontological homogeneity that resists such selectivity. Just as perceptual relativism has been shown for Pierre to bestow only the illusion of individuality, Maupassant's narrative thematizes the difficulty of its own perceptual attempt to maintain the finite distinct from the infinite. The "petite fumée grise" of Pierre's departing ship, increasingly indistinguishable for Madame Roland from "un peu de brume," no doubt represents a fitting closure to such a destabilized text (833). A metonym for Pierre and the narrative possibilities that disappear with him, the ship's smoke fades into an undifferentiated background from which the subjective perceptual apparatus of Madame Roland, or of the author himself, is powerless to reclaim it.

* * *

Thus does Maupassant anxiously end the drama of individuation he has staged, an understandable result given the obvious implications of disindividuation for the realist idiom that *Pierre et Jean* employs, hybrid though Maupassant's novel might be. Literary realism, after all, had abetted the rise of the modern individual, plucking the working man and the bourgeois from their former literary anonymity. Return that individual to anonymity, and the realist project threatens to leave its moorings and disappear, like Pierre's ship, into the undifferentiated sea.

The ending of Maupassant's novel is so anguished that one is tempted to wonder if Maupassant did not write "Le Roman"—which he wrote several months after *Pierre et Jean*—in part as a retroactive bulwark against the implications of his own novel. Maupassant's discussion in "Le Roman" of the authorial effacement required of the *roman objectif* prompts the attentive reader to take Pierre's doctorly self-examination for what it is: a plausible alibi for what otherwise might have required heavy-handed and intrusive narration. Hence does the preface preemptively debunk as constructed "illusion" the world on offer in *Pierre et Jean*. The novel itself, however, remains considerably less assured about maintaining that illusion against an all-consuming,

noumenal real—something suggested when the narrative ends at precisely the moment in which, as a ship's doctor, Pierre must actually practice the medical profession that until then has merely served narrative plausibility. It is this passage from literary device to the realm of the real that the preface aims potentially to reverse, insisting on literary artifice to reclaim realist narrative from the depths of a disindividuating real.

Textual considerations aside, how might the question of disindividuation have conditioned the production of *Pierre et Jean* in the first place? The answer to this question, with which I concern myself in the remainder of this section, is twofold. On the one hand, *Pierre et Jean* is the product of a very specific historical conjuncture, one in which philosophical and scientific circumstances—as well as Maupassant's own personal history—ensured not only that disindividuation seemed increasingly possible but also that it would be perceived by Maupassant as a threat. On the other hand, however, Maupassant's artistic experiment jumps out ahead of its time, anticipating an even more significant, and unsettling, shift in the ontological prospects of the self. It is the stirrings of this shift, I argue, that produce the greatest tension in *Pierre et Jean* and that connect this corner of Maupassant's oeuvre as much to the twentieth century as to the nineteenth.

I begin with the first, more localized explanation for the anxiety inscribed in *Pierre et Jean*. It is clear that the text registers with dismay the Schopenhauerian dissolution of the individual into the collective. This response was magnified by a confluence of factors in the 1880s. Janet's and Charcot's psychological experimentation seemed to confirm the lesson of the German philosopher and of increasingly influential evolutionary theorists like Darwin and Spencer: namely, that a man's drives were not his own. Strictly speaking, of course, this was not a new development. Thinkers like Spinoza and Leibniz had long theorized ontological imbrications of the individual with the world around him. Yet what man lost in individual agency to such schemas he had traditionally recovered in the satisfaction of knowing that he was the instrument of God's greater plan. Schopenhauer offered no such succor. Removing God from the equation, Schopenhauer replaced divine causality with an impersonal, non-teleological "will" that stripped man of his fundamental individuality and that, like theories of evolution or of the unconscious that similarly punctured the individual's inner sanctum, provided little metaphysical comfort in exchange. It is this uncompensated loss, descending from all sides at once, that helps account for the worries over individuation that preoccupied Maupassant and his contemporaries in the 1880s.

Especially for Maupassant, the notion of disindividuation gained extra currency from the memory of its recent philosophical appeal. Flaubert, Maupassant's cherished mentor, was long fascinated by a pantheistic dissolution of the self in the universe; recall Saint Antoine's delirious, unforgettable wish to

become one with matter (“être la matière”) in the final passage of Flaubert’s 1874 novel *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* (164). Such a temptation rested on a Spinozan belief, in vogue since the romantics, that the individual’s acceptance of his unity with the only, universal substance might bring revelation.¹¹ With the advent of the Schopenhauerian era in France, that dream had been painfully quashed. To lose oneself now was to gain nothing in exchange—a double loss, then, and one seemingly guaranteed by theories of an encroaching unconscious and evolutionary determinism.

Schopenhauer did, however, contribute to making Maupassant the uneasy literary avatar for what would become a defining ontological and epistemological shift. As the tools and paradigms of the modern era became increasingly fixated on the individual self and increasingly capable of probing the depths of that self, the paradox I have cited would emerge: the more man delved into the individual, the less ontologically distinct that individuality appeared. I turn now to this shift and to the way that Maupassant’s poetics, in its very failure in *Pierre et Jean* to operate as expected, succeeds as an important early announcement of the era at hand.

“Le Roman” embraces the perceptual, subjective relativity insisted on by Schopenhauer. Yet as I argued in the previous section, the essay takes its lesson out of context, eliding the role this corporeal subjectivity plays for Schopenhauer both as an illusory distraction from the truth of ontological homogeneity and as a potential conduit for apprehending this truth. In its contradictory assumptions, too, “Le Roman” undermines its own unproblematic assumption of a hermetic interior subjectivity. With *Pierre et Jean*, this fissure reaches critical dimensions. Producing the hybrid narrative mode, at once *objectif* and psychological, to which “Le Roman” subtly gestures with its implication that there might exist gradations of the “roman d’analyse pure,” *Pierre et Jean* unsettles the precepts of its preface even as it fulfills them. Certainly, Maupassant’s novel aptly illustrates the perceptual relativity espoused in “Le Roman.” But it also discovers that within this apparent individuality lurks the same.

What makes this realization so remarkable, I propose, is that having set out in *Pierre et Jean* to render visible the “ossature invisible” of individual psychology—in part as a gentle corrective to the realist, objective mode, and to its disindividuating social determinism—Maupassant succeeds only in effacing it. “Le Roman” hedges against this outcome, noting that any interiority revealed in a novel is always that of the author’s. Because of the relativity of perception, the author can never wholly inhabit another’s interiority, inevitably only ever offering a disguised version of himself. “C’est donc toujours nous que nous montrons,” Maupassant proclaims, adding that “l’adresse consiste à

11. On Flaubert’s pantheism, see Unwin, “Flaubert and Pantheism.”

ne pas laisser reconnaître ce *moi* par le lecteur sous tous les masques divers qui nous servent à le cacher" (711; original emphasis). Pierre's disindividuation might thus simply be read as Maupassant's commentary on the limitations of narrative in figuring the absolute alterity of another's interiority. Just as the realist author must bracket off the narrative-killing possibilities of the real world and its falling roof tiles, so must he labor under the constraint that any interiority he depicts will really only be his own. The other's interior sanctum, in this schema, remains guaranteed by its very unrepresentability, which testifies to the incommensurable individuality in us all.

To the extent that he embodies Maupassant's dictum that the author only ever represents himself, Pierre also retains, as a projection of the author's own unique individuality, a second-order claim to that same ineffable individuality. Yet against this Spinozan or Leibnizian dimension—according to which the individual freedom of the created is ensured by the freedom of the creator—*Pierre et Jean* opposes the Schopenhauerian possibility that no such godly guarantor of real individuality might in fact exist. Threatening the author's final causal control are the even more potent narratives of a Janet or a Charcot that, like unwanted guests, complicate the epistemological gamesmanship with which Maupassant wishes to parlay his own interiority into character study. The author of "Le Roman" freely admits that to delve into a character's soul means merely to delve into his own. Such a pursuit of the individual, though elliptical, yields individuality nonetheless. Pierre, however, reflects back a perfectly inverted vision of this poetics: looking within himself, he finds another.

Amid this metaphysical anxiety, one cannot overlook that Maupassant's worries about individuality likely also proceeded from slightly more pedestrian concerns. Maupassant made his literary name with his publication of "Boule de Suif" in the famous 1880 collection of short stories *Les Soirées de Médan*, so named because its contributors had met at Zola's country house in Médan. Because of Zola's involvement, the so-called Médan group was associated with the literary naturalism Zola so indefatigably championed. Maupassant, however, never embraced the label and privately griped at having been lumped in with a movement over which Zola cast such an enormous shadow (Lanoux 110; Vial 251–58). Coming as it did on the heels of "Le Manifeste des cinq" critiquing Zola's naturalism, Maupassant's trumpeting of literary originality in "Le Roman" inevitably reads like an anti-naturalist manifesto of Maupassant's own.

Whatever the reason, "Le Roman" argues that a novel is essentially a narrative of an individual self. *Pierre et Jean's* central character, however, calls the very possibility of that individuality into question. Moreover, *Pierre et Jean* encodes this tension as a hopelessly self-defeating process. Reacting against a specter of disindividuation announced by the developments of the era and exacerbated by his own fixation with literary originality, Maupassant

discovers that the affirmation of the individual—for him, the very essence of writing—carries within it the greatest promise of its own undoing. In the most intimately particular, the collective surprisingly takes hold; difference collapses into similarity; Pierre becomes his brother.¹² This, I suggest, is *Pierre et Jean*'s most prescient result, presaging an unexpected convergence between the twin tendencies of modernity toward individuation and disindividuation.

* * *

The modern convergence between individuation and disindividuation mirrored the contradictory results of what Carlo Ginzburg has called the conjectural, or evidentiary, paradigm, a mode of inquiry that depends on knowledge gleaned from individual instances. According to Ginzburg, this paradigm began steadily gaining ground in the nineteenth century with the rise in prestige of medicine, philology, and other fields inclined to proceed conjecturally or inferentially from individual cases rather than deductively from a general principle (96–125). Ginzburg contends that the novel, in embracing the “small insights” of the evidentiary paradigm, met with the success it did because it furnished a “concrete” experience of the particular to a bourgeoisie increasingly removed from that experience by the abstractions of capital (115).

One might extrapolate from this that for its bourgeois readers—and, as Maupassant would have it, for its authors—the novel offered a vehicle for the individualization of experience. But as such a vehicle, the evidentiary paradigm represented a decidedly double-edged sword. Wielded by practitioners like Charcot, the evidentiary paradigm was just as likely to produce deterministic theories as it was to affirm the individuality of experience. If, as Ginzburg suggests, the success of the novel contributed decisively to the success of the evidentiary paradigm (115), then the novel had undercut its own aspirations. Gone in search of individuality, it had produced the opposite in equal measure. Especially when read against its preface, *Pierre et Jean* is the first novel to actively dramatize this aporia, encoding the counterintuitive possibility that the modern insistence on the individual might participate in, rather than combat, the very disindividuation it could have been expected to allay.

It is interesting in this light that *Pierre et Jean* resembles a detective story, a genre pioneered in France by Emile Gaboriau's 1866 novel *L'Affaire Lerouge*. Madame Roland's infidelity constitutes the criminal enigma that her son essentially spends the rest of the novel investigating. Though I am not the first to

12. The two brothers even swap professional roles: it is the doctor Pierre, not the lawyer Jean, who investigates and indicts their mother, while Jean provides Madame Roland the only medical attention she receives (see Donaldson-Evans, “Maupassant *Ludens*” 207).

note this generic filiation—Timothy Unwin, for one, has likened *Pierre* to “the hero of a detective novel” (“Maupassant” 168)—the stakes of Maupassant’s genre allusion have long remained unexamined. I would submit that, in the detective story, Maupassant was tellingly drawn to a nascent genre structured perhaps more than any other by anxiety over individuation. Concerned, as Walter Benjamin argues, with the modern “obliteration of the individual’s traces in the big-city crowd” (23), the detective story on one level affirmed the possibility of reconstituting those traces, working to recuperate individuality from mass existence. To what Benjamin considered the bourgeoisie’s anxiety over “the fact that private life leaves no traces in the big city” (25), the detective story offered an imaginative, if twisted, antidote.

The detective story was not entirely friendly to the individual, however. Dependent on the urban anonymity that made the modern unsolved mystery possible, the detective genre reinscribed that anonymity at every turn. What is more, the detective’s case-by-case approach belied a totalizing confidence in his ability to inhabit the criminal mind, a deep structure that ontologically subsumed its individual manifestations. The detective story, then, evoked the curious limit at which interiority seemed inexorably to veer back onto exteriority. This explains Benjamin’s well-known suggestion of a congruity between Edgar Allan Poe’s 1840 short story “The Man of the Crowd” and the detective genre (27). Having chased a suspicious-looking “man of the crowd” through the busy streets of London, Poe’s proto-detective narrator declares that, in his affinity for the crowd, his quarry represents “the type and the genius of deep crime” (239). The reader never learns what crime the man of the crowd may or may not have committed, nor does it matter. What matters is the individual’s disindividuating continuity with the crowd and the essential importance of that disindividuation to crime itself. Benjamin posits this as the fundamental truth of the detective story. Behind the façade of the individual he seeks, the detective uncovers the presence of the multitude.

Pierre et Jean runs headlong into this truth. *Pierre*’s investigation finds that the crime in question, whose enigma he never actually solves, matters less than the disindividuating realizations the investigation provokes; likewise, Maupassant’s novel discovers something in the “ossature invisible” of psychology for which it had not bargained. What makes *Pierre et Jean* so important, I propose, is its willingness to document the fallout from these failures and discoveries. Many of Maupassant’s contemporaries in the 1880s reacted against a perceived disindividuation. Bourget, for instance, whose successful 1887 novel *André Cornélis* may have inspired aspects of *Pierre et Jean*,¹³ led the backlash against a naturalism deemed overly deterministic. Bourget’s influential *Essais*

13. On the affinities between *Pierre et Jean* and *André Cornélis*, see Lethbridge, “Bourget, Maupassant and Hamlet” 63–65.

de psychologie contemporaine (1883) distinguished between the “roman de mœurs,” which explored the average man’s necessary determination by his social “milieu,” and Bourget’s own self-professed genre of the “roman d’analyse,” which peered inside the minds of exceptional characters whose “individualité ait su demeurer plus forte que le milieu” (2: 241–42). In the same vein, Maurice Barrès’ 1888 novel *Sous l’oeil des barbares* celebrated the subject’s resistance against an encroaching world of “barbarians.” But though Maupassant respectfully cited the *roman d’analyse* in “Le Roman” and wrote *Pierre et Jean* under its undeniable influence, he immediately encountered a problem. The new rhetoric of individual resistance assumed the a priori, distinct nature of an inner life that, at least in some cases, might maintain its independence from an encroaching environment. What if, however, no such distinction between interior and exterior had ever existed at all, by virtue of a Schopenhauerian “will” or any other primal, leveling ontological fact?

Posing this question, Maupassant subverts the project of his literary peers even as he flirts with it. In the process, he gestures past the post-realism of the new psychological novel—with which, I think, *Pierre et Jean* has been too easily associated—to adumbrate a later, twentieth-century appreciation for modernity’s growing and paradoxical tendency to conjure away the very individuality it appeared to embrace. Michel Foucault has such a tendency in mind when he writes of *assujettissement*, that invisible technology of power whose modern construction of the “free” subject in fact participates in that individual’s subjection.¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, in a more optimistic vein, approaches the question by proposing that the very process of differentiation, or individuation, is in fact compatible with Spinoza’s single ontological substance insofar as that substance can essentially be understood as difference itself.¹⁵ Maupassant, for whom the notion of a differentiated self assumed the classical notion of an undifferentiated whole, could not yet imagine such an ontological reconciliation. Yet by dramatizing the inexorable tendency of interiority to veer back onto exteriority—in the manner of what Deleuze would later metaphorize as the “le pli” (*Le Pli*)—Maupassant intuited not only that any theory of the self would inevitably have to contend with the self’s permeation by the world, but also that the more modernity placed a premium on the individual, the more the individual participated in its own obsolescence.

In recognizing this, Maupassant was served by a hybrid poetics whose realist appreciation of the individual’s social embeddedness coexisted with an insistence on the self’s ineffable particularity. Though fraught, the combination forced him to think of the categories of self and world in terms of each other

14. See, to cite but one example, Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* 204.

15. See both Deleuze’s *Différence et répétition* and *Spinoza et le problème de l’expression*.

in a way that more dogmatically psychologist or realist approaches, with their preference for one or the other category, could not. It is time, then, to stop wondering whether *Pierre et Jean* and its preface should be situated at the tail end of a dying realism or at the leading edge of a burgeoning psychologism. We should be turning our attention instead to how, in cultivating a dual allegiance, Maupassant transcended them both. A good place to start would be the first two lines of the aforementioned wiki novel's first full chapter: "The deep waters, black as ink, began to swell and recede into an uncertain distance. A gray ominous mist obscured the horizon." How telling that a collaboratively penned novel would open by invoking the very things—the sea, a receding horizon, a disconcerting mist—with which Maupassant, in the closing lines of *Pierre et Jean*, signaled the slippage of individuality into the collective.¹⁶

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16. I would like to thank Mary Donaldson-Evans for her helpful comments on this essay.

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