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THE BATTLE OVER THE "NEW" REALISM**

by

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War of the Words: The Battle over the “New” Realism

by
Sandra Woods

According to John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, a person with good judgment feels “that the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind” (146). Mill wrote in 1859, but his observations could well describe the literary scene at the end of the nineteenth century, when critics, writers, and readers—the “cultural elite” of their day—engaged in an extended, often acrimonious, debate about the direction that contemporary fiction should take.

Although Lynn Pykett has cautioned that “the debates about realism and naturalism are part of a continuing contest in which more is at stake than simply a literary mode or style,” clarification of such modes provides a useful starting place (168). “Realism” emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as a kind of fiction that examined the lives of real people—usually middle class—in real situations. “Naturalism” extended the scope of realism to include the lower classes. Perhaps more important, in stressing the impact of heredity and environment, naturalism presented a grimly deterministic view of human existence. Emile Zola’s experimental novel took naturalism one step further. In this “scientific” fiction, the writer set his characters in motion, then stood back to observe and record their actions. By the time H.D. Traill defined “new” realism in 1897, such fiction wasn’t “new” at all. “New” realism claimed to look honestly at lower class life in this quasi-scientific manner and is virtually synonymous with French naturalism (63). Thus, naturalism/“new” realism can be distinguished from the earlier realism by its focus on the lower classes and its philosophy.

Modern critic Ann Ardis offers another, more fundamental difference: Unlike the “old” realism, the “new” realism told the truth about sexuality (34). For almost two decades prior to Traill’s essay, British writers had examined the lives of the lower classes. By the end of the 1800s, for example, George Gissing’s four novels dealing with the working class and the poor had drawn comments on his morbidity, but reviewers found little that truly shocked them,

that is, no sexual content. Pornography and erotica flourished, but sexual frankness remained taboo, at least in terms of what might be considered “art.”

The first shots in the literary battle rang out in 1884, when two female subscribers to Mudie’s Select Library registered disapproval of George Moore’s novel *A Modern Lover*. Mudie responded by withdrawing the book from circulation. In our day, this decision would be the equivalent of having Barnes & Noble, Borders, Waldenbooks, and amazon.com refuse to stock a writer’s book—an economic kiss of death.

The angry author, who had lived in France and adapted French naturalism to his own writing, promptly launched an attack on the circulating library system. In his pamphlet, *Literature at Nurse*, Moore charged “that English writers were subject to the censorship of a tradesman who, although doubtless an excellent citizen and a worthy father [Mudie], was scarcely competent to decide the delicate and difficult artistic questions that authors in their struggles for new ideals might raise: questions that could and should be judged by time alone” (3). Moore’s argument was coolly received both at home and in the United States. The *New York Times* reported that Moore’s books were “probably stupid as well as indecent” and concluded that “if any device can bring him readers it is the one he has adopted of asserting his books are so filthy that reputable dealers will not handle them” (qtd. in *Critic* 106).

Moore’s publisher, Henry Vizetelly and Sons, had a distinguished record that included introducing the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Harriet Beecher Stowe to the British public (Decker 1141). This publishing house also pioneered production of one-volume novels. As Alison Hennegan points out, “Producing [books] in one volume mattered: up until now the private commercial circulating libraries took care to insist that publishers continue to print novels in three volumes: that way, libraries could lend the same novel to three separate readers simultaneously and pocket a triple fee” (184). Hennegan credits Vizetelly and Sons as being “the first to break the tyranny of the circulating libraries” with the 1884 translation of Georges Ohnet’s *The Ironmaster; or, Love and Pride* (184).

In 1884, Henry Vizetelly and Sons also published the first British translation of a much more controversial book, Emile Zola’s *Nana*. Part of a twenty-one-novel family saga—a mega-mini-series in its day—*Nana* unflinchingly describes the career of a French actress/prostitute. For the next four years, Vizetelly sold transla-

tions not only of Zola but also of other French writers, including Flaubert and Maupassant.

During that time, critical reception of Zola was mixed. Early reviews in the *Westminster Review* praised the novelist but faulted the Vizetelly translations. For example, after disparaging the unexpurgated translation of *L'Assomoir* as too literal, the reviewer conceded, "But still how natural and life-like are the incidents and situations . . . , how human and living are the characters, when compared with the shadowy creatures who occupy the scene in commonplace novels" ("Belles-Lettres" 598).

Others, however, found less to admire. In 1885, W. S. Lilly asserted that all artists were naturalists because they must conform to nature. Lilly complained that whereas the "old" naturalism was poetic and idealistic, the "new" naturalism espoused by Zola and his followers was "scientific" and materialist. "Above the mud [Zola] never rises; it is his natural element" (248). Two years later, H. Rider Haggard—no stranger to lurid prose himself—condemned French naturalism as "an accursed thing"; these writers "in full and luscious detail" drew attention to "erotic matters" (177). Nevertheless, Haggard warned that British novelists needed a middle path. If forced to choose between naturalism and "the unreal, namby-pamby nonsense" aimed at "the Young Person," they would gravitate toward the unsavory French (177). Surveying the French novel in January 1888, George Saintsbury announced that "it is undeniably [Zola's] filth that makes him popular" (113).

In March 1888, Henry Vizetelly was interviewed by W. T. Stead, today probably better known for "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon," his 1885 exposé of child prostitution. Vizetelly claimed that it was "a bad week when the sale of the Zola translations fell below a thousand volumes" (qtd. in Vizetelly 257). The publisher estimated that his establishment had sold about one million translated French novels altogether. Modern critic William C. Frierson says this figure may be exaggerated, but only slightly.

After publication of Stead's interview and under pressure from the National Vigilance Association, the House of Commons unanimously passed a motion proposed by Samuel Smith, deploring "the rapid spread of demoralizing literature" (qtd. in Frierson 540). In May 1888, Smith declared that "an immense increase of vile literature in London and throughout this country . . . was working terrible effects upon the morals of the young" (National Vigilance Association 352). Smith condemned the trade in penny dreadfuls

and pornographic pictures, but in a classic political maneuver, he blamed this moral decay upon a foreign influence. Zola’s works, Smith contended, were “only fit for swine, and those who read them must turn their minds into cesspools” (qtd. in Vizetelly 265). Urging vigorous enforcement of the law against obscene publications, Smith wondered, “Were they to wait until the moral fibre of the English race was eaten out, as that of the French was almost? Look what such literature had done for France” (National Vigilance Association 355). Thus, in August 1888, sixty-eight-year-old Henry Vizetelly was charged with publishing three obscene books: *Nana*, *Pot-Bouille* (*Piping Hot*), and, most notoriously, *La Terre* (*The Soil*).

Soon after Vizetelly was charged, another bookseller was summoned for selling a translation of the *Decameron*. The defense pointed out that this work had been available for over four hundred years and that there were two hundred copies in the British Museum alone. After the magistrate remarked that he himself had read the book in Italian and English, this case was dismissed.

Henry Vizetelly wasn’t so lucky—and he did nothing to improve his fortunes. Prior to 1888, the publisher had had several other legal dust-ups that included a prosecution for distributing a periodical without the required government stamp. While awaiting trial, he further enraged his critics: He issued a public notice that there were no legal restraints on the sale of the books in question. He also printed extracts from English authors like Congreve, Swift, Sterne, and Shakespeare. He sent this material to the Solicitor of the Treasury with a letter asking, “Is actual life to be no longer described in fiction simply because the withdrawal of the veil that shrouds it displays a state of things unadapted to the contemplation—not of grown-up men and women, but of ‘the young person of fifteen’ who has the works of all Mr. Mudie’s novelists to feast upon?” (qtd. in Vizetelly 273).

On October 31, 1888, Henry Vizetelly was tried in the Old Bailey. The prosecution set forth the test of obscenity—that is, whether the published material had “a tendency to deprave and corrupt those into whose hands the publication might fall” (Vizetelly 277). They conceded that the publication of *The Soil* in France had a moral intent—to improve the lot of French peasants; such a motive did not apply to the English translation. When the defense countered that the works in question were less objectionable than either Byron’s *Don Juan* or Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives of Windsor*, the prosecution denounced the Zola novels as “the three most immoral

books ever published” (“Central Criminal Court” 13).

The prosecution then began to offer into evidence twenty-one excerpts from *The Soil*. But they were soon interrupted. Was it necessary, the jury wondered, to hear all these sordid passages? At this point, Henry Vizetelly bowed to the inevitable and changed his plea to guilty. He received a fine and was ordered to go and sin no more for the next twelve months.

The case caused few ripples in the public consciousness. An editorial in the *Times* of London found Vizetelly’s sentence “sufficiently heavy” but fair because the publisher had outraged the standard of public decency; the paper agreed with the prosecution that most people who read the translations “read them for the filth” (“Sale” 9).

According to Vizetelly’s son, the judgment specified that none of Zola’s novels should be sold in unexpurgated translation, but the publisher left the courtroom honestly believing that he could still sell expurgated versions. When he subsequently did so, however, he found himself in trouble again. On May 30, 1889, as Vizetelly entered the courtroom, his attorney advised him to plead guilty because he had no defense. Unable to obtain other counsel on such short notice and believing that he would receive another fine, Henry Vizetelly followed his attorney’s advice. This time, despite his age and poor health, the publisher was sentenced to three months in jail.

This disposition drew a stronger response than that of the first trial. The *New York Daily Tribune* noted the possible chilling effect of the decision: If *Queen v. Vizetelly* involved only Zola’s works, it would be an unimportant trial, for “Zola is a writer of extraordinary power, who has chosen to turn his great gifts to base uses” (“Notes” 10). But the prosecutor had suggested that the National Vigilance Association could now move against all unexpurgated literature. Following the Vizetelly sentence, several other translations were withdrawn.

Despite this threat of censorship, contemporary publications, in general, did not rush to Vizetelly’s defense. Indeed, the *Times* of London noted that the publisher had flagrantly disregarded the judgment in his first case (“Zola’s” 12). Instead of withdrawing the censured translations, as he had been ordered to do, Vizetelly had notified the public of their re-issue.

But if the public voice of London was complacent, private voices were not. One hundred twenty-five prominent statesmen, scientists, and artists, including Olive Schreiner, Havelock Ellis,

Leslie Stephen, and Thomas Hardy, petitioned for the elderly man’s release. George Moore appealed in the London edition of the *New York Herald* for his publisher’s freedom. Robert Buchanan, another of Vizetelly’s authors, published a pamphlet *On Descending into Hell: A Protest against Over-legislation in Matters Literary*. In this open letter to the Home Secretary, Buchanan appealed for Henry Vizetelly’s release from prison. He cited Vizetelly’s record as a reputable journalist and publisher as well as the free-speech arguments of Milton and Mill. Buchanan also touched on the economic subtext of the trial when he noted that “Vizetelly’s books are sufficiently attractive and cheap to reach those classes who are pornographic in neither their habits nor their tastes—young clerks, frisky milliners, *et hoc genus omnes*” (138). This was precisely the large, new reading public spawned by the compulsory education acts of 1870 and 1880. Eloquent though they may have been, Moore’s and Buchanan’s appeals appeared too late to affect the sentence. By the time the publisher was released at the end of August 1889, further distribution of the forbidden translations had become moot: Vizetelly and Sons had gone bankrupt.

According to Frierson, the Vizetelly trial had two important, contradictory results: It made British publishers reluctant to issue sexually explicit works even as it spurred interest in the French naturalists, their works, and techniques (550, 543). For the next few years, skirmishes continued. In “The Decay of Lying,” an unimpressed Oscar Wilde observed sardonically that “if [Zola] has not got genius, he can at least be dull” (39). Other negative views were less blithely expressed. In 1889, Emily Crawford feared for France because of “the school of foul novelists” (94). Offering a sympathetic biographical sketch of Zola, Crawford nevertheless asserted that “his books are dangerous, and must be frowned out of existence in any country” where no strict segregation of the sexes existed (103). In “The Decadence of Thought in France,” Madame Blaze de Bury issued a lurid condemnation of the Decadents, the descendants of Hugo and of Zola, whose work was “unqualified useless filth” (397). And in “The New Watchwords of Fiction,” novelist Hall Caine conflated Flaubert and Zola when he priggishly insisted that “clean-minded people” were tired of hearing about Zolaism; “the Madame Bovarys are not the women whom right-minded people want to know about” (480). In an 1890 essay on “Realism and Decadence in French Fiction,” William Barry declared that Zola adhered to that first great principle of realism: “the essential bestiality of man” (77-

78). Two years later, Barry mean-spiritedly celebrated the collapse of Maupassant and the other French naturalists with the hope that M. Prudhomme, who had successfully prosecuted French theaters, “may one day commit the volumes of Zola and Maupassant to the flames” (“French” 482).

Man of letters Edmund Gosse raised a conciliatory voice. He discredited the charges that the French naturalists saw only dirt and crime, but believed that the experimental novel had gone as far as it could go. These works had, moreover, served a useful purpose: British fiction would henceforth be unable to return to “the madonna heroine and the god-like hero, to the impossible virtues and melodramatic vices” of earlier novels (“Limits” 152-53).

In an 1890 issue of the *New Review*, Walter Besant, Eliza Lynn Linton, and Thomas Hardy articulated three distinct positions on contemporary fiction. Besant claimed that the artist could write whatever he wished for himself, but he should practice prudence to satisfy the market forces. Claiming that “Art herself” would not allow writers to create sympathetic immoral characters, Besant concluded with a jab at “those writers who yearn to treat of the adulteress and the courtesan because they love to dwell on images of lust,” to wit, the French naturalists (9). Linton suggested that literary works be clearly aimed at specific audiences—adult readers or “the Young Person” who was a staple of Mudie’s (11). For his part, Hardy dismissed contemporary literature as essentially insincere and called for “a Fiction that expresses truly the views of life prevalent in its time” (15).

By 1891, serious re-evaluation of Zola was underway. In “*La Bête Humaine: A Study in Zola’s Idealism*,” J. A. Symonds argued that despite his realistic details and motives, Zola was an idealist because he approached his work as though he were a poet. Two years later, Vernon Lee conceded that Zola “has had to be accepted” because of his genius (196). In September, 1893, Zola’s rehabilitation was almost complete. He was fêted by the Society of Journalists in London and dined at the Authors’ Club.

Even such public praise did not completely silence the critics. Following Zola’s appearance in London, J.E.C. Welldon, headmaster of Harrow and “a conspicuous ornament” of the National Vigilance Association, publicly denounced the novelist. The *Scots Observer*, however, depicted the headmaster as a “misguided and mildly dangerous gentleman” who “confuses the morals of life with the frankness of literature” (“Realist” 552).

The irony of Zola's reception was not lost on contemporary observers. As Clarence Decker has noted, “The *Spectator* commented on the . . . fact that a country which punishes a writer's publisher and a press that constantly attacks his works should unite to give him a reception worthy of some master who had been taken to the heart of the English nation” (1150). Considering “Zola and His Work” for the *Westminster Review*, W.H. Gleadell echoed this opinion when he described Zola's treatment in England as “a magnificent example of British inconsistency” (614). Bemoaning the French novelist's concentration on vice, however, Gleadell detected a new danger: British authors like Thomas Hardy had become infected.

Indeed, in 1892, Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* had triggered a new firestorm. Mowbray Morris complained that complying with Hardy's insistence that one read the novel as the story of a “pure” woman put a “strain on the English language”; to Morris, *Tess* was “an extremely disagreeable story” related in “an extremely disagreeable manner” (323). Andrew Lang's reservations about *Tess* elicited a preface from Hardy himself and a heated response from D.F. Hannigan, whose “Latest Development of English Fiction” attacked Lang almost as vehemently as it defended *Tess*. In “The Tyranny of the Novel,” Edmund Gosse also praised *Tess*; it was, he declared, one of the three most notable works published in London in 1892.¹ Gosse claimed that the publication of *Tess* proved that English novelists were free to say almost anything they liked (16). Nevertheless, Gosse urged writers to avoid “the brutal, the abnormal and the horrible”—that territory was already dominated by the French (20). Instead, British novelists should write for mature readers about the struggle for existence beyond “reproductive aspects” (21). If novelists failed to find a new direction, Gosse warned, the public would soon lose interest.

Instead of heeding Gosse's admonition, by 1893, British novelists seemed to focus even more directly—some said perniciously—on the flesh. Many of the most noted offenders were women, the so-called “New Woman” novelists. In “The Novel of the Modern Woman,” W.T. Stead reviewed ten such works, which he characterized as “written by a woman about a woman from the standpoint of Woman” (64). According to Stead, these novelists believed that motherhood remained “the crowning glory” of womanhood, they took marriage seriously, and they condemned sex and marriage without love. The review linked such disparate works as Dr. Arabella

Kenealy's *Dr. Janet of Harley Street* and Sarah Grand's *Heavenly Twins*. In Kenealy's novel, study and labor sap a woman's maternal vitality; in Grand's novel the main female characters reach high levels of self-awareness. How, Stead wondered, would this frank writing affect impressionable females just coming of age?

As the New Woman novels came under increased attack, the rhetoric of attackers resembled that previously directed at the French naturalists. In "A Dominant Note of Some Recent Fiction," for instance, Thomas Bradfield complained that once-forbidden subjects were now being openly presented. "The gentlest epithet" for this most recent school of fiction was "unwholesome" (541). These works possessed a "flagrantly distorted" moral perspective (542). In the same volume of the *Westminster Review*, Thomas Hannan agreed with Bradfield that these novels and others like them might have worthy purposes, but their distorted view of the world could corrupt innocent readers.

By 1895, critics were in full cry. Even D.F. Hannigan, otherwise an advocate of the "new" realism and a consistent admirer of Hardy, saw a debilitating trend in works by writers like Grand and Schreiner ("Tyranny" 303-306). James Ashcroft Noble complained in "The Fiction of Sexuality" that recent "novels of redundant sexuality" had been written solely to achieve notoriety and—gasp!—make money (490). (Noble seems to have forgotten Samuel Johnson's dictum, "No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money.") Noble conceded that Hardy's *Tess* showed that some writers could treat sexual matters frankly and freely without sacrificing art, but "the novelists of erotomania" could not. Indeed, they resembled a host who cleaned his teeth in the presence of his guests (495). Noble's essay drew counterfire from Hannigan, whose "Sex in Fiction" tempered his earlier reservations about the New Woman novelists when he praised the artistic handling of sexual questions by George Egerton—the pen name of Mary Chavelita Dunne.

Like Hannigan, Mrs. B.A. Crackenthorpe admired the sincerity and frankness of *Tess*. But, like Noble, she regretted that less skilled writers were producing no less frank, but far less tasteful, books. In "Sex in Modern Literature," she objected that while it was fashionable to criticize female writers for works like *Theodora*, male novelists were just as responsible for the tawdry books that threatened to drive out the good. In contrast to Mrs. Crackenthorpe, in "Tommyrotics," Hugh E.M. Stutfield placed the blame for this degenerate fiction squarely upon "our decadent lady novelists"

(837). Their works offered a “morbid spirit of analysis” and a negative view of husbands (835).

Novelist Grant Allen responded to these attacks by defending his own novels like *The Woman Who Did* as “hill-top novels” that “raise a protest in favour of purity” (qtd. in “‘Hilltop’” 722). “‘Hill-top Novels’ and the Morality of Art,” an anonymous counterthrust in the *Spectator*, suggested that “wild, nonsensical, and immoral” better characterized Allen’s novels (722). These books were as extreme in exposing the ugliness of life as earlier novels had been at concealing it. Unfortunately, the *Spectator* critic included Grand’s *Heavenly Twins* in this classification along with Hardy’s *Tess* and his newest novel, *Jude the Obscure*.

If *Tess* caused a critical firestorm, *Jude* came close to inciting a literary meltdown, replete with book burnings and vitriolic attacks. In June 1896, for example, R.Y. Tyrrell conceded that “Thomas Hardy is at the summit of British novelists, and the British public will endure anything from him” (857). But Tyrrell made it clear that he would not. Classing *Jude* as a novel of sex and the New Woman, the critic mourned Hardy’s having been drawn into the web of the French naturalists.

As the century came to a close, the controversy finally fizzled out. Henry Vizetelly had died on January 1, 1894. Emile Zola, for whose works Vizetelly sacrificed his liberty and his livelihood, had earned a major reputation, but then fled to England to avoid a prison sentence during the Dreyfus affair. The New Woman novelists whose writing had caused such ferment had all but vanished; they would remain invisible until rediscovered by feminist critics in the 1970s. Indeed, the only British novelist to emerge from the turmoil with reputation relatively intact was Thomas Hardy, who had established himself well before the conflict began and who abandoned fiction after *Jude*.

In fiction, the triple-decker novel was all but extinct. “New” realists like Arthur Morrison were focusing on London’s mean streets, whereas “old” realists like Henry James were exploring the convolutions of consciousness. Sexuality in fiction had once again been thrust back into the subconscious—but it would not be suppressed and repressed for long. Within twenty years, a new challenge to “public morality” would emerge, this time from a native son, D.H. Lawrence.

Pykett has argued convincingly that the dispute over the “new” realism was a “contest about representation in which ques-

tions of aesthetic representation—who or what may be represented in fiction, in what manner, by whom, and for whom”—were closely tied to political and social unrest (169). It should be noted that, in those turbulent times, such questions were not the sole domain of fiction but also sparked debate in visual art and drama.

In moving from the 1890s to the 1990s, perhaps what is most striking in modern debates about censorship is how the media have changed. Even in the recent stories on NEA funding, our national discussions focus far more on visual and electronic images than on the printed word. What people watch on television or what they access on the Internet draws far more attention than what they read. This attention may be an indication of the diminished impact of the written word or it may indicate a greater concern with newer technologies. After all, increased “print” literacy and access to books in *fin-de-siècle* Britain exposed people to new ideas much as computer literacy does today.

When debates about book censorship do occur, they tend to take place on a local level, often in schools. Frequently, there seems to be less concern with explicit sexual content than with depictions of violence or racism. Consider the many school disputes over *Huckleberry Finn* and the recent move in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, to ban books that use racist language. One notable, recent exception is the 1994 banning of Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* from a high school in Lynden, Washington, where parents objected to “obscene language and explicit representations of adultery” even as they avoided the incest theme at the center of the novel (Leslie 32).

In almost all such debates, the target to be protected has changed as well. We worry less about guarding the community as a whole than about shielding all school-aged children, not just impressionable young women.

In 1859, John Stuart Mill asserted that “in an imperfect state of the human mind the interests of truth require a diversity of opinions” (179). The nineteenth-century battle over the “new” realism demonstrates the importance of such a diversity. Perhaps, too, it offers a few lessons for our own disputatious age. As the twentieth century draws to a close, reviewing the conflict related to the “new” realism can remind us not only of the need for maintaining a free exchange of ideas but also of the rapidity with which those ideas can change.

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NOTES

¹ Publishing, like politics, creates strange bedfellows; the other two “notable” works were Mrs. Humphry Ward’s didactic *David Grieve* and J. M. Barrie’s *Little Minister*.

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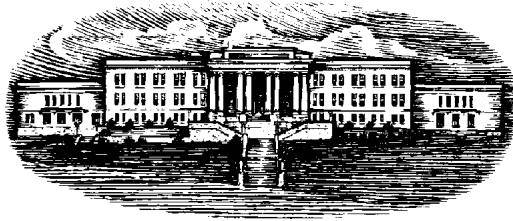
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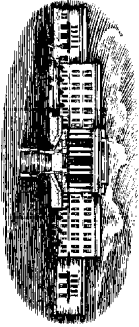


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