

A Thematic Study of the Novels of Montherlant

CYNTHIA J. HAFT, *Hunter and Brooklyn Colleges of C.U.N.Y.*

The following essay is based on the technique developed by Professor Jean-Paul Weber in *La Genèse de l'oeuvre poétique*.¹ Therefore, we are adopting certain terms peculiar to Professor Weber. As we choose to use it, the term *theme* signifies "the unique traumatic experience." The *modulations* are "the more or less unconscious variations on a given *theme*." We are attempting to demonstrate that Montherlant's work can be expressed through and explained by such a unique traumatic experience, that is to say, the theme.

Could the reading of Sinkiewicz's *Quo Vadis*, undertaken by Montherlant for the first time at the age of nine, according to Faure-Biguet,² have been his thematic experience? We know, according to Montherlant himself in *Va jouer avec cette poussière*, that the insistence upon the influence of *Quo Vadis* in his work, "est très nécessaire pour qui veut comprendre ce que je suis et ce que j'écris."³ We also know, thanks to Faure-Biguet, that "la trace de *Quo Vadis*, nous pouvons la relever en Montherlant à travers toute sa vie; elle ne s'est pas perdue . . . Montherlant est enivré par ce livre" (*E. de M.*, p. 23). From the same source it is clear that Montherlant often borrows certain sentences from Sinkiewicz, the author of *Quo Vadis* (*E. de M.*, pp. 23-24).

Our own rhetorical question must be answered in the negative: the reading of *Quo Vadis* was not Montherlant's unique traumatic experience, because there is an earlier experience which permits us to understand the capital importance of *Quo Vadis* in Montherlant's work.

Montherlant's grandmother, Madame de Riancey, was a very important person in the author's life. A fervent Jansenist, she wore mourning all her life, "sa mère étant morte entre ses bras, dans un château isolé où l'on ne peut faire venir de charpentier pour le cercueil, elle installe le cadavre à côté d'elle dans un cabriolet et fouette cocher" (*E. de M.*, p. 17). This anecdote was very often recounted in the Montherlant family. He had heard it many times from a very tender age, since the incident had indelibly marked Madame de Riancey. Until the end of her days, she remained in mourning, a character surrounded by lugubrious objects. It is this macabre story which left its mark on Montherlant's unconscious during his childhood and became the theme of his entire literary creation.

This thematic experience, which hereinafter will be referred to as the "course au cadavre," is characterized by an unconscious desire to get rid of the cadaver and, at the same time, by the thought that it is a sacred duty to take care of the dead. To dispose of the corpse, to drop it from the carriage, would be the equivalent of throwing it to the wolves. Let us point out here that we are speaking of the cadaver of a woman, of a mother. Since Montherlant had heard this story several times, it must have become deeply ingrained in his unconscious, so that we find its traces in his very earliest works.

Toward 1909, Montherlant wrote a story entitled "Amour" (*E. de M.*, p. 51), the plot of which revolves around two newlyweds who, the night after their marriage, are riding in a troika across the steppe while exchanging tender kisses and loving words. The wolves are after them and will catch up to the troika unless its burden

can be lightened. Whereupon the man pushes the woman out, the wolves devour her, the troika dashes ahead, and the man is saved. The parallel is quite clear: there are two rides, one in a troika, the original one in a carriage. The central problem in each is the precarious burden, i.e. the woman. Madame de Riancey held on to hers, the husband in the story does not. Montherlant thus shows his preferred interpretation of the "course au cadavre": he chooses to throw the woman to the wolves. The idea of sacrificing the woman, of getting rid of her, will constantly recur in his works—and it will always be a question of a woman most beloved, as was Madame de Riancey's mother.

We see, then, that the instance of the "course au cadavre" infiltrated Montherlant's childhood, even before the beginning of his period of real "literary creativity." It must also be pointed out that, according to Faure-Biguet, Montherlant's well-known enthusiasm for bullfighting began prior to his reading of *Quo Vadis* (*E. de M.*, p. 24, note a.). The love of the *corrida* is very closely tied to the motif of the "course au cadavre." For Montherlant, bullfighting is the act of killing a tenderly loved animal by means of a "course," and the relationship between the two becomes evident.

Returning to *Quo Vadis*, we suggest that it is because of Montherlant's thematic experience and its unconscious influence that *Quo Vadis* so profoundly affected him. The "races" described throughout Sinkiewicz's novel fascinate Montherlant. Moreover, there is also a story of betrayal in Sinkiewicz: the betrayal of a woman by a man whose one motivating force in life is money. At the time of Nero, to act treacherously against Christians meant to deliver them to wild beasts in open arenas.

In a letter written by Montherlant to Faure-Biguet in 1910, we find not only traces of the "theme" but also of *Quo Vadis*. Montherlant describes a rat race, characterizing it as a heart-rending Neronian spectacle. At the end of the race, the rats are thrown to the dogs. Thus we may come to the conclusion that there is a parallel between *Quo Vadis*, the races already mentioned, and this "Neronian spectacle," all linked to the "theme." From this vantage point, we will undertake a brief and necessarily incomplete analysis of Montherlant's novels.

In his first novel, *Le Songe*,⁴ the protagonist, Alban, finds that his love for Dominique puts in jeopardy his very life ideal: to remain faithful to the principles of war. But, nevertheless, he loves her. This is, summarily, the same conflict as the one experienced by Madame de Riancey: the desire to get rid of a loved one versus the duty imposed by love and filial piety. In this novel, the idea that the woman must be sacrificed emerges clearly. Alban will never possess Dominique and will abandon her for the sake of the war. Knowing that Dominique loves him, he sacrifices her, as it were, "to the wolves," in order to remain faithful to his own law of morality. The same protagonist reappears in a later novel, *Les Bestiaires*.⁵ Here Alban is younger, since the action takes place before the war. In this novel, bullfighting plays a major role. Thanks to the author's explanations, we understand that for him bullfighting is part of a profound, almost religious mysticism. Love of racing is particularly evident in this work. The woman, playing a secondary role in any case, is weak, representing the nineteenth-century prototype, feminine and frivolous. At the beginning of the novel, Alban is incapable of loving her. Here one of the principal characteristics of Montherlant's women can be seen: they always arrive late! Why is Montherlant so obsessed with women who are always late? Let us recall a phrase already quoted from the author's thematic incident as described by Faure-Biguet: "fouette cocher." Madame de Riancey was traveling at full speed, the body next to her. The faster the ride, the greater the possibility of the cadaver

falling out of the carriage. If we attempt to construct the parallel between the women as Montherlant depicts them in his novels and the cadaver in the thematic incident, we understand that in both cases it is a matter of a woman arriving at death too late. Thus, the women in Montherlant's work are left behind, subject to destruction and to death.

The young woman in *Les Bestiaires*, Soledad, causes a certain evolution in Alban's character. She showers endless praises upon him and he begins to love her, all the while fearing that these praises may diminish him in some way. At the end of the novel, Soledad puts Alban to a test: he must kill a bull of which he is afraid. He will do so, but at that very moment he will cease to love Soledad. Here, the race with the corpse and bullfighting are tightly linked. It is the bullfight which permits Alban to conquer the "course à la femme," that is to say, "la course au cadavre." Thanks to his victory over the bull, he will be able to sacrifice the woman, the dead weight which had threatened to ruin his entire life, and thus to destroy him. Once more, let us recall Madame de Riancey who remained in mourning all her life. Thus it appears that Montherlant always expresses his fear that the beloved woman, that corpse to which the man is so strongly attached, may cause his death unless he succeeds in getting rid of her in time.

In one of his most recent notebooks, Montherlant writes: "Si la femme avec qui nous couchons a l'haleine mauvaise, jetons-nous intrépidement sur sa bouche et dans sa bouche, et nous ne sentirons plus l'odeur, de même que toréant à un mètre du taureau, nous sommes en danger, mais ne le sommes plus si nous nous collons contre lui."⁶ He entitles this: "erotaumachie." The strong link between woman and bull appears throughout Montherlant's work. This theme is also alluded to in *Pasiphaë*,⁷ a dramatic poem in which the woman wishes to engage in the sexual act with the bull. She herself is half-animal, half-woman. Montherlant shows a great deal of affection and admiration for this woman. She symbolizes the complete rejection of everything that he considers "feminine." She embodies the concept of "erotaumachie" taken to the extreme. This idea of the animal-woman appears several times in Montherlant's work. Ram, in *L'Histoire d'amour de la rose de sable*,⁸ is an Arabic woman, adored by the protagonist. She is completely passive during their rendezvous and her body exudes a very strong odor. Let us recall that the body of a dead woman would also give off a very strong odor. Ram is practically unique among Montherlant's women in the sense that she is very late, and Auligny, the protagonist, does not hold her in disdain. He regards her as a child because, for Auligny, there are three sexes: male, female, and child. When Auligny tells us that he wishes she had leprosy, we again find traces of his thematic experience: he wishes for leprosy (the beast) to devour the woman he loves. Here begins the road of his creativity that will lead straight to the creation of Rhadidja, a woman afflicted with leprosy in *Les Jeunes Filles*.⁹ In *L'Histoire d'amour de la rose de sable*, there also appears the figure of a mother, Madame Auligny. She is a bland, conniving, mundane woman, whom Montherlant shows in the most ridiculous light. The protagonist is interested only in disposing of her, for she is a woman without any positive characteristics, whose intentions toward her son are totally misdirected. Thus we can observe a certain progression in our author's works. One of the first mothers in Montherlant's early work *L'Exil*¹⁰ (a play which we will not examine in detail here), was a highly admirable woman in everything concerning her son. But Madame Auligny shows no admirable traits. Therefore it may be said that a rather rapid deterioration in the characterization of the mother figure has taken place in Montherlant's works.

In *La Petite Infante de Castille*, the author continues his quest for the animal-woman. The little girl is "la Lionne humaine, Divine . . . son odeur était

forte.”¹¹ But the protagonist renounces this woman at the very moment at which he could take her easily because he wants to give himself the satisfaction of renunciation. This work is of prime importance for any thematic analysis for in it Montherlant points out that he is conscious of the extent to which he has fallen prey to the thematic incident: “Je suis la proie de fânetes qui me possèdent, me jettent d’un bord à l’autre de cette Méditerranée autour de laquelle je tourne, tourne comme les bêtes dans leurs cages . . .” (p. 588). He is unable to put out of his mind that incident which continues to persecute him, possess him, haunt him; although foggy in his recollection, it is ever present. Its traces are found again and again in Montherlant’s work, and we continue to follow Professor Weber’s terminology, when we call the above quotation “the signature of the theme”—that is to say, the place in which the author indicates to the reader his awareness of having fallen prey to that incident which we call the *theme*.

The story of *La Petite Infante de Castille* clearly demonstrates the thematic motif: one person must reject the other to remain alive. The frequency of travel in this novel cannot be considered a simple coincidence. Montherlant clearly describes the anguish, the torture that these trips produce, but it is a torture always mixed with pleasure, thus forming the leitmotif of the author’s entire work. This leitmotif comes to the fore most clearly when the protagonist is awaiting the visit of a woman or when he is about to leave on a trip. These trips are innumerable repetitions of the “course” of the thematic incident. The very title of another work, which we will not discuss here, shows the relationship between travels and the thematic incident: *Le Voyageur solitaire est un diable*.¹²

In *La Petite Infante de Castille*, Montherlant ties tightly together the themes of travel and mourning, since for him, at the moment when this story takes place, all of Spain is a symbol of perpetual mourning. He speaks of those who depart as having an air of the Mater Dolorosa about them (cf. p. 589)—a most evident reference to the thematic incident. He also speaks of family goodbyes, reminding us again of Madame de Riancey’s macabre behavior. Moreover, Montherlant describes “Mal de mer” (sea-sickness), an obvious play on words between “mer” (sea) and “mère” (mother). In this same novel, the author depicts a mother traveling with her child in a train: “Collée à lui comme la goule au cadavre, sa mère lui suce le cou, les oreilles, les cheveux . . .” (p. 590). Moreover, Montherlant adds to this work his ideas on the relationship between animal and man, as if to give us all possible references to the theme. One quotation taken from many will suffice: “Tout le train plein d’agonies d’animaux. A un gosse qui le torturait, la mère retire son moineau . . . [L]’homme entretient des animaux domestiques sous prétexte d’utilité, mais en réalité pour pouvoir assouvir sur eux sa sauvagerie, légèrement” (pp. 591-592). And here once again, Montherlant links the idea of the woman to that of the animal: “. . . je voudrais décrire aujourd’hui le visage de la bête féminine . . . des marques de petite vérole . . . les mouches [comme elles le seraient autour d’un cadavre] affolées par la saleté puissante tourbillonnaient autour d’elle . . . Quand elle avait avalé une bouchée, elle renversait la tête, à la manière d’une poule . . . elle était si animale que je fus surpris, saisi la première fois que je l’entendis parler” (pp. 592-593). The protagonist awaits the moment when she falls asleep to caress her, that is, the moment at which she becomes an object. *La Petite Infante de Castille* closes with the rejection of the woman by the protagonist, thus repeating the author’s favorite variation on the thematic incident.

In *Les Célibataires*,¹³ the analysis of the thematic incident becomes more complex, since all principal characters are male. Nevertheless, this novel is of prime importance for our study. The women we meet within its pages are secondary characters: Mélanie, two mothers, and a Jewess, Léa. From other sources we know

that the characters in this novel were suggested to Montherlant by his environment as an adolescent.¹⁴ The two mothers in *Les Célibataires* are significant factors in the abnormal development of the two bachelor's characters. The other women are but vaguely sketched. It thus seems logical to look elsewhere for the relationship between this novel and our main theme. According to Montherlant, man must get rid of the woman, the cadaver. Why, then, are these two men such misfits in their society if they do not frequent women? And why does Léon de Coantré end his life crying out: "Madame Mélanie, restez. Je ne veux pas mourir seul . . . ?"¹⁵ After all, these last words of his are addressed to a woman. It therefore seems to us that here Montherlant shows the importance of the "course" (race) itself in the life of every man, that is to say, man needs this "course" in order to stay alive and, finally, to discard the cadaver. Moreover, the two protagonists are so ill-adjusted because they cannot manage to rid themselves completely of women, even if they do not frequent them—the influence of the mothers, and that of the sister and of Léa, remain with them. The two bachelors die pitifully because of their inability to win in the "course"—to win and thus to be able to discard eventually.

Let us now turn to *Les Jeunes Filles*, the novel generally considered to be Montherlant's masterpiece. This series consists of four volumes which will be treated as one complete unity. In it, there are four young women, all of them in love with the protagonist, Costals, each for a different reason. As we will see, the personality of Costals reveals a great deal about the author. Among the women, there is first Thérèse Pantevin, who appears only in the first volume. She is a fanatically pious woman. She writes many letters to Costals, but he answers only once. The possibility of his loving her in return does not even exist, as the reader understands from the outset. However, Thérèse reveals a very important idea of Montherlant's, that of love being linked to suffering. Costals can only feel pity for this young woman who, by the way, is a Jansenist, just as Madame de Riancey was. Thérèse suffers terribly because of her love and is eventually committed to a mental hospital as a result of this passion. The second woman is Andrée. It is important to understand why Costals cannot love her but must painfully attempt to get rid of her. Andrée in no way resembles the passive animal-woman. Sometimes, she seems to see through him, which upsets him a great deal; he cannot stand such a possibility. Throughout the series, Costals seeks to reject her. In a certain way he loves Andrée but he would never make her his mistress because she is an intelligent woman, and highly sensitive. He must reject her without completing the "course" (that is to say, without ever possessing her), for he finds that not being passive, she does not sufficiently resemble the animal. It is Solange Dandillot who represents Montherlant's typical woman. She is docile, passive, and hardly speaks at all. At the beginning, she greatly resembles the animal-woman, but she eventually changes, due to her mother's influence. Costals is unable to share his life with her; he can only take her as his mistress without permitting her to really enter his personal life. Solange would like to attach herself to him, but he will not permit her to do so, and thus she does not attain her goal. She is an amoral woman, scheming with all her might to get Costals to marry her. Solange never asks any questions. She is truly the dead weight, the real cadaver. Costals must finally reject her completely. At certain moments, she inspires in him the same feelings which, undoubtedly, the corpse aroused in Madame de Riancey: disgust and love, both at the same time.

The women in these four novels must be looked at together so as to obtain a composite image of the "cadaver," since individually each is incomplete. For example, only Andrée can inspire Costals with any respect. We have already discussed Rhadidja (*Les Jeunes Filles*) who, like Ram (*L'Histoire d'amour de la rose de sable*), embodies the prototype of the animal-woman. Let us now examine the last woman in the series, Madame Dandillot, Solange's mother. This mother does not horrify us, but she is far from being a completely likeable character. She too wants

to please Costals; she is an immoral woman. Outwardly Madame Dandillot does not object to the life which her daughter leads with Costals but we know that she opposes it on moral grounds. This is not a typical Montherlant mother because she does not thwart her daughter's wishes. However, Montherlant does not present her as an admirable person. Thus Costals must seek to rid himself of Madame Dandillot as well.

As the sum total of the female characters in this series of novels, there emerges the figure of the woman who cannot help being unacceptable, and whom the man must reject for the sake of his own survival. Thus his "course" will be completed, the corpse disposed of. Only the man, the diabolic traveler, will remain after the woman has been thrown to and devoured by the wolves.

In conclusion: the demonstration has been made and the validity of the thematic approach has been established. The question of the role of the woman in Montherlant has always been a tricky one which no prior works have satisfactorily resolved. Yet, the thematic approach has afforded new insight into the woman's role, and it has furnished the key to Montherlant's obsessive attitudes, his recurring themes, and his pessimism.

NOTES

¹Jean-Paul Weber, *La Genèse de l'oeuvre poétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961). I wish to thank Professor Weber for the help and inspiration he afforded me in the preparation of this essay.

²J. N. Faure-Biguët, *Les Enfances de Montherlant* (Paris: Plon, 1948), p. 22. Hereinafter referred to as *E. de M.*

³Henry de Montherlant, *Va jouer avec cette poussière* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 198.

⁴H. de Montherlant, *Le Songe* (Paris: ed. de la Pléiade, 1959). Written in 1922.

⁵H. de Montherlant, *Les Bestiaires* (Paris: ed. de la Pléiade, 1959). Written in 1926.

⁶H. de Montherlant, *Va jouer avec cette poussière*, p. 68.

⁷H. de Montherlant, *Pasiphaë* (Paris: Fabiani, 1944).

⁸H. de Montherlant, *L'Histoire d'amour de la rose de sable* (Paris: ed. de la Pléiade, 1959).

⁹H. de Montherlant, *Les Jeunes Filles* (Paris: ed. de la Pléiade, 1959).

¹⁰H. de Montherlant, *L'Exil* (Paris: ed. de la Pléiade, 1959).

¹¹H. de Montherlant, *La Petite Infante de Castille* (Paris: ed. de la Pléiade, 1959), p. 593.

¹²H. de Montherlant, *Le Voyageur solitaire est un diable* (Paris: ed. de la Pléiade, 1963).

¹³H. de Montherlant, *Les Célibataires* (Paris: ed. de la Pléiade, 1959).

¹⁴J. N. Faure-Biguët, p. 17.

¹⁵H. de Montherlant, *Les Célibataires*, p. 906.