INTRODUCTION

The Netherlands of the mid-nineteenth century was one of the cultural backwaters of Europe. The great current of the Romantic movement had barely stirred its complacent materialism. It had produced only a single literary work of stature, Eduard Douwes Dekker's novel *Max Havelaar* (1860), an attack on abuses in the colonial East Indies.

In the last quarter of the century, however, the new waves of Impressionism, Wagnerism and Naturalism began to wash Dutch shores, and by the 1880s a full literary awakening, the Movement of Eighty, was under way. Among the prophets claimed for themselves by the young men of the movement was the writer Marcellus Emants. It was a role Emants declined, as he was to decline affiliation to any group or school.

Born in 1848 into a patrician family from The Hague, Marcellus Emants was intended for a career in the law. But he detested the joyless drinking and promiscuity of Leiden student life, and abandoned his studies as soon as his father died. Thereafter he lived as a writer of independent means, travelling abroad to avoid the Dutch winters. He made three marriages, the last of them singularly wretched. After the world war, fearing Socialist government and high taxes, he removed to Switzerland, where he died in 1923.

Though Emants thought of himself as a playwright first and foremost, it is his novels and stories that have kept his name alive, principally *Een nagelaten beken-*

tenis (*A Posthumous Confession*, 1894), *Inwijding* (*Initiation*, 1900), *Waan* (*Delusion*, 1905), *Liefdesleven* (*Love-life*, 1916) and *Mensen* (*People*, 1920). Their principal subject is love and marriage: deluded love, unhappy marriage. Emants is one of a line of European novelists who, in dissecting the intimate discords of modern marriage, have also explored the discontents of modern Western civilization: Flaubert, Tolstoy, Ford Madox Ford, Lawrence.

In the literary handbooks Emants is usually classed among the Naturalists. He seems to belong there because (like the Goncourt brothers) he is interested in the sexual under-life of the bourgeoisie and because (like Zola) he uses the language of the new sciences of heredity and psychopathology to explain human motivation.

But, though Emants was influenced by the patron thinkers of Naturalism – Taine, Spencer, Charcot – he differs from the Naturalists in important respects. His pessimism is far removed from Zola's faith in the power of the novelist to guide man towards a better future. Nor is there in Emants much of the painstaking and systematic description of milieu characteristic of Naturalism. His interest is in pyschological processes, his style analytic rather than descriptive. Where the committed Naturalist gathers a corpus of data on which to base his *roman expérimental*, Emants comes to his material in the traditional way, via chance, memory and introspection. His true sympathies lie with the older generation of European Realists, in particular with Flaubert and Turgenev.

In 1880 Emants published an essay on Turgenev which describes his own philosophy rather better than it does Turgenev's. In youth, he writes, we create a fantasy ideal of the self we hope to be. The pattern our life takes, however, is determined not by any ideal but by unconscious forces within us. These forces impel us to acts; and in our acts it is revealed to us who we truly are. The transition from living in terms of fantasy

ideals to living in self-knowledge always entails disillusionment and pain. Such pain becomes acutest when we recognize how unbridgeably vast the gap is between the ideal and the true self.

There is a dual emphasis in this account: on the powerlessness of the individual before unconscious inner forces, and on the painful disillusionment of coming to maturity. If we turn to Willem Termeer, the narrator of *A Posthumous Confession*, we find both aspects present: a helpless drifting in a sea of passions, fears and envies; and an agonized twisting and turning to escape confrontation with the true self his life-history reveals to him: impotent, cowardly, ridiculous.

Yet in terms of his own view of life, Termeer cannot be blamed for being what he is. The son of a cold, spiteful mother and a sickly, irascible father with a taste for pornography who ends his life in a mental asylum – a 'degenerate', in the language of the day – Termeer is doomed (or at least feels himself to be doomed) by his birthright to repeat the past: to become a voluptuary and crypto-sado-masochist terrified of women, to choose a cold, dutiful spouse with whom to re-create his parents' loveless marriage, and at last to descend into madness.

As for social relations, the first memory Termeer has is of being taken to school and abandoned there like a rabbit in a cage of wild beasts. All around him he senses antagonism: people know there is something wrong with him, and for the good of the species want to put an end to him. His fellow-men are savage beasts, and society itself a gigantic system of cogs and wheels in which ineffectual creatures like himself are doomed to be crushed.

From the beginning of his life-story, Termeer thus presents himself as a victim, a victim of heredity, of the Darwinian jungle of life, of the impersonal social machinery. Quite as much as it is a piece of self-rending analysis and sly exhibitionism, his confession is an agonized plea for pity.

But is Termeer simply a victim? His self-fulfilling conviction that everyone hates him can equally well be read as a projection of his own malevolence. Before he commits his murder, he experiences episodes of blind rage during which he barely deflects himself from assaulting his wife, whom he has already contemplated raping. When he eventually kills her, the act is directed not only against a woman who denies him both love (the mothering love he craves) and, in the name of her duty to the institution of marriage, freedom, but against the society on whose behalf she stands like a wardress barring his way to what he wants: bliss. (Like Emma Bovary, Willem Termeer has read of bliss and is convinced it exists, somewhere.) Indeed, the agitated leaping and darting of his language is indication enough of the violence within him.

Termeer resorts to action in his war against society only when words fail him. The document he bequeaths us, we should remember, is his *second* confession. The first, 'an unadorned revelation of my most secret feelings', has been offered for publication and turned down as 'trivial'. In his failure to become a writer – an occupation for which he feels eminently qualified, being 'sick, highly complex, neurasthenic, in some respects of unsound mind, in other respects perverse' – we detect what is perhaps Termeer's deepest crisis. If there is no symbolic avenue by which he can claim a value for his life, then the only recourse left is action. Since revelation of his inner self, no matter how bizarre and wretched that self, is not enough to win him currency, he must create something outside himself and display that to the world, to give himself substance.

From this point of view we can see Termeer, and perhaps Emants too, as children of Rousseau, who in his *Confessions* inaugurated the literary mode of the exhaustive secular confession. Since the time of Rousseau we have seen the growth of the genre of the *confessional novel*, of which *A Posthumous Confes-*

sion is a singularly pure example. Termeer, claiming to be unable to keep his dreadful secret, records his confession and leaves it behind as a monument to himself, thereby turning a worthless life into art. As for his author, in the name of investigating the inner life of this 'superfluous man', this marginal member of the upper bourgeoisie, he is doing – what?

Some twenty years after *A Posthumous Confession*, in the heyday of Freud, Emants was to defend his interest in psychopathology by claiming scientific goals. The deviant, he suggested, is characterized above all by an inability to censor and repress the forces at work within him. By documenting the self-expression of the deviant psyche, can we not expect to uncover fragments of what is kept so carefully hidden in the 'normal' inner life?

I would not deny the importance of the aims Emants claims here. Artists have told us as much about our inner life as psychologists ever have. But are the artist's motives ever as clear-cut and dispassionate as Emants would have us believe? Marcellus Emants is not disjunct from Willem Termeer: the author is implicated in his creature's devious project to transmute the base metal of his self into gold.

The gabble of Willem Termeer, so frank, so perceptive, yet so mad, is not new. We have heard these accents at least once before, in 1864, from the nameless 'underground man' of Dostoevsky's story. Both he and Termeer tell their woes and pick their sores in the name of the truth; both acknowledge the exhibitionism of their performance, despise themselves for it, yet go on nevertheless. The difference between Dostoevsky and Emants is that, after *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky, with deeper insight into the motives behind and inherent demands of the confessional mode, was to go on to write *The Idiot* and *The Possessed*, in which he would destroy the pretensions of Rousseau and his heirs to arrive at true self-knowledge, uncovering the worm of ambition at

the heart of the feigned disinterestedness of secular confession. Emants, a lesser thinker, a lesser artist, a lesser psychologist (and who is not?), remains bound in Rousseau's toils.

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1986