Michael Lastinger  
West Virginia University

Geo-Graphies: Writing on the Earth(Mother) in Emile Zola’s La bête humaine

This study examines the “geography” of La bête humaine as a reflection of what psychoanalyst Leonard Shengold calls the “universal failing” in the relation between the human body and geographical space. For Shengold, this “failing” is related to the story of Oedipus and to the riddle of the Sphinx, which itself bears the repressed theme of locomotion (crawling, walking, hobbling) and reflects the phenomenon he calls “soul murder.” Themes of locomotion and murderous rage point to a psychological dynamic that is key to Zola’s success in fusing his two original projects on trains and on murder into a single, powerful work.

Readers of Emile Zola have long noted the felicities and infelicities that resulted from the novelist’s commitment to a scheme that would give his Rougon-Macquart series global unity and structure. While this commitment varied in scope, growing from an originally projected ten novels to the finally executed twenty, it was only rarely compromised in principle. One of the most glaring examples of such a compromise came in the writing of La bête humaine. Not only did Zola invent a new member of the famous family tree (Etienne not Jacques Lantier was originally to be the killer), but having neared the end of his vast project and feeling the need to finish the series with a round number, he decided to fuse into one volume the stories of the murderer and of the railroads—stories that were originally projected to make up two separate novels.
While many critics have marveled at how well Zola managed to attain his narrative effect in this fusion, studies themselves have a bit ironically tended to focus on one or the other of the two sides of this novel. Alternately this work is viewed as the tale of man’s technological mastery of time and space or as the study of primitive and violent human instincts, with the weight generally toward the latter. One might note, for example, the table of contents of the acts of the 1990 Glasgow colloquium that celebrated the centennial of La bête’s publication. Articles like “Zola and ‘the railway novel’” (Geoff Woollen), and “De La bête humaine à Lourdes, ou un train peut en cacher un autre” (Jacques Noiray), clearly focus on the novel’s portrayal of the rail and the locomotive, while pieces like “‘Human beasts’? Criminal Perspectives in La bête humaine” (Pauline McLynn) and “Des brutes humaines dans La bête humaine” (Geoff Woollen) explore the criminal and animalistic passions at work in this tale of sex and murder. It is of course the nature of critical analysis to focus on certain elements of a text. Yet even the general reader of La bête humaine feels instinctively that under Zola’s pen the train story and the murder story have come together in a way that surpasses the author’s mere need to finish his series with an even twenty volumes. The object of this study is to examine elements deriving from each of these competing narrative schemes with an eye to uncover the means by which Zola’s treatment of the themes of travel and of murderous passion work in “tandem” to carry us further across the face of the earth and deeper into the primitive urges of its “proto-agonists” than either of them could possibly do alone.

As we have already begun to see, a novel about trains is of its essence a novel about human relations to time and space, the importance of which has often been examined in Zola’s work. The spatial world of La bête humaine is especially important to Michael Wetherill in that it is not simply a decor in which the narrative is set but an essential element of the narrative itself. He notes for example that “la présence centrale du chemin de fer, la topographie, l’espace clairement et géographiquement défini constitue un leitmotiv essentiel et dynamique—ce qui n’est guère le cas des autres romans de Zola, à la seule exception sans doute de La débâcle” (68). Wetherill demonstrates how the topography of La bête, through place names, spatial configurations, and depictions of stasis and movement, plays an essential role in the determination of character and of