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Obsession and Paralysis in Tobias Picker's *Thérèse Raquin*

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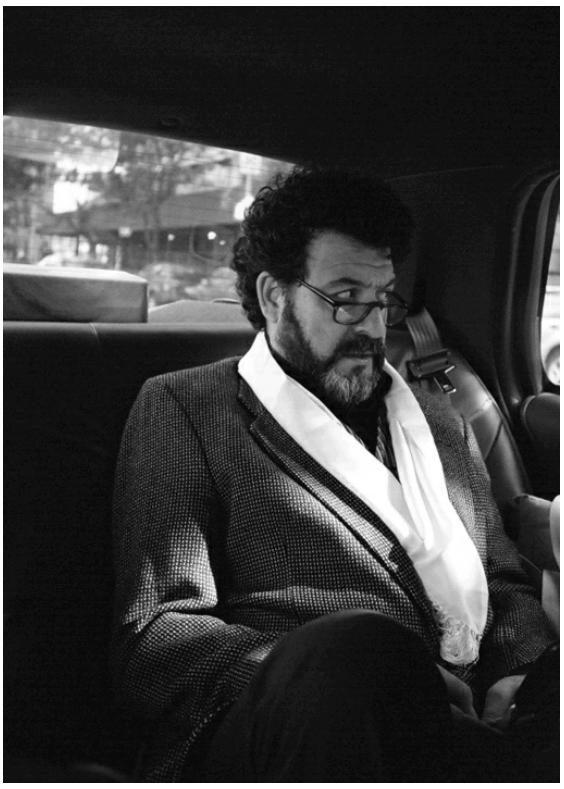
> *While I was writing* Thérèse Raquin*, I forgot everybody and lost myself in a precise, minute production of life, giving myself up entirely to an analysis of the working of the human animal; and I can assure you that there was nothing immoral for me in the cruel love of Thérèse and Laurent, nothing that could arouse evil desires.*
>
> Émile Zola, Preface to *Thérèse Raquin*

Nineteenth-century Parisian literati were fascinated by the downtrodden, the pathetic, and the pitiable, but also by the sensual, which seemed to be the antidote to such states of human darkness. Rather than dwell upon these depressive emotional states themselves, however, Émile Zola sought to create a new world of literary naturalism that would enable him to describe with perfect detachment the behavior of the "human animal," which he did in his 1867 novel, *Thérèse Raquin*.[1] While at the surface of this work, the plot may seem to develop around an adulterous love affair, disability provides the impetus for the entire story, its causes and its effects. Thérèse's husband, Camille, has been an invalid since birth, which prompts Thérèse to take a lover; she and her lover murder Camille; the shock of the murder then causes Camille's mother's stroke. Thus, the functionality of body and mind among Zola's characters provides a locus of meaning in the novel, reinforcing the clinical, observationary method employed by the author.



Tobias Picker, composer

Where the novel reads with the chilly clarity of a scientific report, its operatic counterpart fills with music the emotional void so purposefully left by Zola. Tobias Picker's third opera, *Thérèse Raquin* (2000), rewrites Zola's novel into a tale of obsessive love that fulfills not the ideals of the Naturalist school of literature, but rather, those of the opposing Romantic school. Zola's treatment of the "human animals" in his novel relies largely on a harsh and filthy social environment and his invention of his characters' heredity to determine their fate. Picker's musical setting brings to bear upon the characters a more idealistic, symbolic perception of their lives; the composer even writes an unsettling ghost aria for Camille, reflecting the Romantic penchant for the supernatural. Through this musical treatment, the physical and psychological states of the characters in *Thérèse Raquin* come to either represent or butt against their respective positions along a continuum of morality. This article particularly examines Picker's opera from the standpoint of its relationships with physical disability and mental illness. The opera itself represents a rewriting of obsession (Thérèse, her lover, Camille's ghost) and paralysis (Camille's mother) according to twenty-first century perceptions of disability. Picker's own admittedly Tourrettic tendencies in composition also contribute significantly to the turn-of-the-millenium cultural product that is *Thérèse Raquin*.[2]

Obsession and Paralysis in *Thérèse Raquin* (cont.)

Obsession is a concept that receives both praise and blame in modern society. As Lennard Davis aptly notes, "[a]t the beginning of the twenty-first century, obsession is seen both as a dreaded disease and as a noble and necessary endeavor." Davis then asks: "How can a disease also be, when you use a different lens, a cultural goal?"[3] In musical circles, obsessive behavior is prized and encouraged: professional orchestral musicians in training must practice the same symphonic excerpts for hours each day for years until they land permanent positions; composers have long been lauded for obsessive and excessive productivity, even over and above the quality of their work; and conductors should and must possess unparalleled fervor in learning full orchestral scores by heart. As Davis writes, "No scientist or musician's reputation is safe without the word 'obsessed' tacked to his or her occupation."[4] It would seem that with the opera *Thérèse Raquin*, the perfect merger of obsessive scientist (Zola) and musician (Picker) has finally taken place. Yet, obsession is also understood as a destructive force, crowding out the "normal" in order to make space for the abnormal that is its object. In clinical terms, we—particularly in the United States—are culturally aware of and familiar with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and its symptoms, to the point of using the acronym freely to denote any behavior that would signal tendencies toward dislike of germs, deviant sexuality, or superhuman neatness.

Thus, this dichotomy of obsession as both desired and reviled seems to have its origins in both medical and cultural arenas. Because Zola's novel takes place in nineteenth-century Paris, it is not too far-fetched to reference the obsessive musical *oeuvre extraordinaire* of Hector Berlioz, and specifically his *Symphonie fantastique*, in constructing a narrative of obsession in the Romantic era of Western art music. Whether desirable or not, Berlioz's *idée fixe* repeatedly returns to his young artist in the form of the symphony's unifying musical theme, from which even death cannot free him. As Blake Howe has noted,

> Music has the potential to map onto the mental spaces of obsession. Indeed, there are a number of compositions that seem to reinforce these psychiatric models, representing obsession as the product of a static note or group of notes interrupting an otherwise steady flow of melody or harmony. The obsessive musical agent—stuck, fixed, rigid—interferes with the expected forces of motion along musical paths and goal-oriented progressions, either by restricting the range of movement within the obsession's fixed parameters or by irritating an otherwise consonant passage with dissonance.[5]

A scene from Thérèse Raquin *by the Dicapo Opera Theater. Photo by Hiroyuki Ito for* The New York Times

The specific association of obsessive passion with musical phrasing sets the compositional and cultural stage for Picker to write his own obsessive theme in the nineteenth-century monomaniac style, while also alluding to its potentiality as a musical signifier for paralysis. While Picker has been known to compose twelve-tone works, he did not choose to set *Thérèse Raquin* in intellectually acute but emotionally spare serialism, as might befit Zola's naturalist approach to his novel. Rather, Picker takes his creative cue from Berlioz and his cohort, bringing a sense of humanity to the opera that is not found in the novel, and nudging the listener towards repetitive use of thematic material. The Romanticization of Zola's

characters through the musical setting also engenders a sense of sympathy for their actions and reactions, which renders them less morally reprehensible. Yet, Picker utilizes the tools of added dissonance and musical dissolution to construct their respective downfalls—physical, moral, and spiritual.

Much of the action in Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* occurs through the omniscient narrator, who is, in essence, Zola himself. The setting of the novel is put forth in very explicitly symbolic terms. The action will be as grim as the Paris scene presented in the opening pages:

> At the end of the *Rue Guénégaud*, if you follow it away from the river, you find the *Passage du Pont-Neuf*, a sort of dark, narrow corridor linking the *Rue Mazarine* to the *Rue de Seine*. This passageway is, at most, thirty paces long and two wide, paved with yellowish, worn stones which have come loose and constantly give off an acrid dampness. The glass roof, sloping at a right angle, is black with grime.[6]

In this piece, Zola's gloomy setting foreshadows the lovers' eventual torrid affair and subsequent demise. This establishment of mood not mitigated through dialogue, but rather, through the heavy smell and dim light of the *Passage du Pont-Neuf*. While the problem of translation from novel to a staged, sung work exists throughout operatic literature, it is particularly difficult when the literary work depends so deeply on setting and narration as tools for plot development. Picker's librettist, Gene Scheer, chose not to employ a narrator—who might have been a Zola-esque character—or a Greek chorus, but instead relied entirely on dialogue to establish the narrative. This choice alone ushers the action of the opera out of the realm of Zola's Naturalism and into that of Romantic passion, because the characters themselves must explicate their own histories for the audience, thereby inviting sympathy for their actions.

A prime example of this shift is the operatic treatment of the title character. Picker's silent, sullen Thérèse sings for the first time only when the name of her lover, Laurent, is first mentioned, after one-hundred and ninety measures of silent reaction to others' dialogue. Her vocal presence depends entirely on Laurent; without him or the idea of him, she does not sing, but only lives through a fragment of a repeated motive: "Thérèse, Thérèse, Thérèse." Camille's past as a childhood invalid, overprotected and to some extent constructed by his mother, emerges not through the unbiased and dispassionate voice of the narrator, but instead gradually emerges through the voice of Thérèse. In her first aria, found in digital Example 1, Thérèse details the paltry existence of her life with the Raquins.[7] But because she herself provides the information, her racial otherness as a half-Algerian child, a by-product of French colonial occupation, has been erased. Zola described the incident of Thérèse's adoption thus:

> [Madame Raquin] had a vague notion that the dear little thing had been born in Oran and that her mother was a native woman of great beauty. An hour before he left, the captain handed over a birth certificate in which Thérèse was recognized by him as his child and bore his name. He left and they never saw him again. A few years later, he was killed in Africa.[8]

In essence, the vestiges of Thérèse's identity—memories of her mother and father—gradually faded until she was as a person dead. In Zola's novel, Thérèse might be read as an allegory for the restlessness of the suppressed Algerians, colonized by France in 1830. Despite the notion that "it was the continued colonization of Algeria that promised to remedy France's social ills," the Algerian situation—much like that of Zola's heroine—would explode to a deadly, yet freeing, outcome.[9]

In the opera, however, we meet Thérèse in adulthood, and the African blood that Zola considered so crucial to her general character—though stereotypically colonialist in treatment, to be sure—has no bearing on the

listener-viewer's perception of her as a character. She might as well be any other Parisian woman in Picker's opera, and Scheer makes no allusion to her racial otherness in the libretto.[10] Thérèse may be the product of a morally questionable union by the standards of her contemporaries, but in the opera, her ancestry as a woman of mixed race and nationality has been cleansed of any cultural impurities, leaving only the moral ones behind.

Picker and Scheer skillfully capture the obsessive, physical love that forms the basis of the relationship between Laurent and Thérèse in the opera through the use of anaphoric repetition of names and phrases in her Act I aria "My father left me" (digital Example 1 above). Yet, in the interaction between Thérèse and Laurent within this piece, the palpable difference between their relationship in the novel and that in the opera becomes apparent. In the novel, Thérèse's emotional and social growth has been as forcibly stunted as Camille's physical and intellectual development; as well, she has deeply repressed all physical desires, because "Camille's blood had been impoverished by illness and he felt none of the urgent desires of adolescence."[11] Thus, Thérèse's sexual awakening has all of the violence of a volcanic eruption in Zola's novel, while in Picker's opera, the scenes between Thérèse and Laurent might be those of any other *bel canto* operatic couple. In addition, according to the opera's timeline, Camille's infirmity is a thing of the past by the first scene. He seems delicate, but his dialogue has no hint of weakness—indeed, Camille conducts himself as a robust, enthusiastic and happy individual, even having his wife's best interests in mind. We hear nothing of his suspected sexual impotence, or of his years of fevers and near-death experiences, saved only by his mother's care and forbearance. He sings to her at the beginning of the opera, "You must let me go, Mama. My illness now has passed. Let me move on like the river. I am strong enough at last," with this last phrase on high A's and B's, which would indicate a state of increasing health and vigor.[12] It would seem that the only vestiges of Camille's invalidism are his mother's fear and his wife's dissatisfaction.

Suzan Hanson (left) and Ani Maldjian (right) of the Long Beach Opera perform Thérèse Raquin*.*
Photo by Cheryl A. Guerrero of the Los Angeles Times

Just as obsession plays out as a kind of musical excess in the opera, so does the shocking paralysis of Madame Raquin. The wedding night scene begins what will be a swift dissolution of all aspirations established in the first half of the opera. As they try to embrace, Laurent and Thérèse gradually come to realize, to their mutual horror, that the drowned corpse of Camille will always be joining them in their marriage bed. After a long, hellish night of terror beneath the haunting portrait of Camille that Laurent himself painted in Act I, the couple finally falls asleep with the rising sun. Picker takes this opportunity to unleash the ghost of Camille upon the sleeping pair, in an aria that screams for justice from beyond the grave.

Camille's "Ghost Aria" continues the theme of repetition that is one of the hallmarks of musical obsession and excess in this opera. The repetition in the aria occurs both verbally as well as in the rhythmic repetition that pushes the piece forward, almost as though a living man were pushing the corpse from behind with a great effort and regular step. The continuous eighth-note pattern that propels the piece also trips on occasion, as though running into a rough piece of pavement or sliding on a slimy rock on a dank night near the morgue. Although the rhythm of the orchestral accompaniment is quite steady, the vocal line jerks in and out of the musical scene, as reflected in the irregular poetic rhythm of the aria's text.

Camille's vocal range is extreme in death as it never was in life, and Picker calls for singing both at the very top and bottom of the tenor register, and at very loud and very soft dynamic levels in quick and sudden succes-

sion. As is apparent from the aria's words and the exclamatory mode of delivery called for by the composer, Camille has found beyond the grave a passionate, vengeful obsession that can only be compared in its intensity to that of the newly-wedded couple, his murderers. Take, for example, this line: "They kissed each other while I drowned. While I drowned they kissed, they kissed, they kissed, they kissed while I drowned, while I drowned."[13] The text repetition employed by Picker and Scheer transcends the typical, crossing over into a pointillist poetry of singlemindedness. See Digital Example 2.[14]

The musical tools Picker uses in the aria reflect Zola's description of Laurent's all-too-frequent visits to the Paris morgue to view the various bodies, culminating in his final recognition of Camille's drowned, rotting corpse. Zola describes in this passage Laurent's first encounter with the body of his victim. Although frequent visits to the morgue had desensitized him to the awful effects of death, even by drowning, Laurent still feels an impact upon discovering Camille.

> The next day, on entering the Morgue, [Laurent] received a violent shock in the chest. Opposite him, on a slab, Camille lay looking at him, extended on his back, his head raised, his eyes half open. The murderer slowly approached the glass, as if attracted there, unable to detach his eyes from his victim. He did not suffer; he merely experienced a great inner chill, accompanied by slight pricks on his skin…. For fully five minutes, he stood motionless, lost in unconscious contemplation, engraving, in spite of himself, in his memory, all the horrible lines, all the dirty colours of the picture he had before his eyes.[15]

Zola continues in the passage to describe in detail the gruesome appearance of Camille's drowned body, down to the smallest anatomical detail. Finally, Zola allows Laurent to walk away from the morgue. But "as he stepped out, he repeated: 'This is what I have done. He is hideous.'"[16]

Three aspects of Zola's passage bear particular importance to Picker's opera, not only in the ghost aria, but also in the scenes that follow pertaining to Madame Raquin's imminent paralysis. First, note that in the novel, Camille is on a slab in a decidedly horizontal position, whereas in the opera, Camille's ghost is upright and active, vertical in all senses. Second, the motionlessness with which Laurent receives the sensory information of Camille's body is akin to a momentary paralysis, which then takes its full form on the body of Madame Raquin later in the opera. Third, the notion of repetition, as aforementioned in relation to the text of Camille's aria, haunts the end of Laurent's encounter with the corpse. Each of these three literary devices has its logical parallel in Picker's music, with the idea of repetition standing out as the most easily understood both in the score and in the text. But the concepts of verticality and paralysis are seemingly more troubling, particularly when paired.

Madame Raquin's paralysis occurs in the opera almost immediately after she witnesses the ghost of her murdered son, Camille. Before fainting, she screams in terror, "Camille! Camille! My son! My son!" Laurent and Thérèse enter and discover that Madame Raquin is unwell, and place her upright in a chair; but in their stupor from the previous night's sleeplessness they neglect to notice that Madame has awakened and that she can hear them speaking of Camille's murder. After a brief exclamation ending in "Murderers! Murderers!" the score indicates that Madame Raquin has a stroke. While the book continues for a considerable length after the stroke event, the opera has but two scenes remaining after Madame Raquin becomes disabled. Although Scene 7 begins with Laurent's brief but disturbing account of his time as caretaker for Madame Raquin, this scene also contains the climactic moment when, after months of motionlessness, Madame Raquin attempts for the police inspector's benefit to write that "Thérèse and Laurent are m…" (murderers). Unfortunately, she can only achieve the first letter of that final accusatory word. And Scene 8 plays out the dual suicide of the lovers, which occurs in the presence of Madame Raquin.

Obsession and Paralysis in *Thérèse Raquin* (cont.)

These two final scenes tease out a musical enactment of paralysis that connects with both the composer's own identity as a person with a neurological difference and with the music as having certain attributes that need not be normalized. Oliver Sacks features Picker briefly in his book *Musicophilia*, within the chapter on music and Tourette's syndrome. Rather than relate an inspirational story of how music has "cured" him, however, Picker notes that he has "harnessed [Tourette's] energy—I play with it, manipulate it, trick it, mimic it, taunt it, explore it, exploit it, in every possible way."[17] Picker's claiming of his disability also relates to his deep conviction that the Tourette's tics that seem to disappear when he composes have found their way into the music. He writes: "It may be true that there's a 'Tourettic energy' that fuels my work to some degree. Sometimes my music strikes me as having Tourettic characteristics in its sometimes irrational changeability and sudden outbursts."[18] The music of Act II particularly lends itself to this conception of being "Tourretic" in nature, especially Camille's ghost aria, with its erratic dynamic and range changes. But the composer also notes that he doesn't believe it's the only factor for analysis of his works, and not perhaps the most important idea at play in his music.

Yet Picker has established that without Tourette's his compositions would be decidedly different; indeed, he does not wish to be cured of the syndrome entirely lest it utterly transform his compositional process. The same principle of normalization applies to the music of *Thérèse Raquin*. Joseph Straus has asserted: "If a work of music is metaphorically a body, then an excess of verticality, particularly if it involves the piling up of dissonant notes, is a disabling condition, one that restricts and potentially paralyzes movement."[19] The troubling verticalities of the second act of the opera not only include Camille's disturbing upright and out-of-morgue appearance in the Ghost Aria, but also, in the most direct musical sense, the vertical axis of the music, which traditionally includes chords and harmonic function. Camille's verticality threatens to destabilize the whole scheme of the murder, given that his ghostly return to the shop is the indirect cause of Madame Raquin's stroke. As well, the narrative changes when Camille returns after his death: his conviction that Laurent and Thérèse are cold-blooded murderers and artists of betrayal removes the chilly journalistic effect that Zola had so hoped he would achieve with this piece. Musically, the whole of the second act is much more dissonant than the first. It's as though Picker has altered his compositional style from Neo-Romanticism to freely atonal Expressionism in one opera. The transition from one style to the other occurs primarily through the harmonic, or vertical, features of the piece, such as chords. If these chords are so jarring or dissonant as to stop the flow of harmonic function (the way it feels comfortable to get back to the home key area), then a kind of musical paralysis has occurred along with the literary one in Act II.

While the plot of this opera appears to revolve around an affair, it is actually the obsessive qualities of the couple's interactions, as well as Madame's forced invalidism of her son, that lead to the murder, and thus to the major crisis of this piece. These events are further complicated—or enriched, depending upon individual viewpoint—by the subsequent paralysis of Madame Raquin and the reappearance of her son. The composer's "Tourettic" compositional tendencies, far from impeding the composition of this work, make *Thérèse Raquin* a product of disability culture from the inside out.

Notes

[1] Émile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, trans. Robin Buss (London: Penguin Books, 2004 [1867]), 2.

[2] Tourette's Syndrome is a type of tic syndrome that does not affect cognitive ability. For additional information, see the website of the Tourette Association of America, <https://www.tourette.org/about-tourette/overview/what-is-tourette/> accessed 27 May 2016.

[3] Lennard J. Davis, *Obsession: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Blake Howe, "Music and the Metaphors of Obsession," Unpublished manuscript, 2010.

[6] Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, 9.

[7] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvopwKZ3hhs> accessed 26 May 2016.

[8] Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, 15.

[9] Benjamin McRae Amoss, "The Revolution of 1848 and Algeria," *The French Review* 75, no. 4 (2002): 745.

[10] Tobias Picker, *Thérèse Raquin: An Opera in Two Acts* (New York: Tobias Picker Music, 2001), 39-45 (vocal score).

[11] Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, 17.

[12] Picker, *Thérèse Raquin: An Opera in Two Acts*, 13-14.

[13] Picker, *Thérèse Raquin*, 222-232.

[14] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lXpH2Ukmg-o> accessed 26 May 2016.

[15] Zola, 74.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Tobias Picker, quoted in Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 252.

[18] Tobias Picker, quoted in Jessica Duchan, "How making music helped me fight Tourette's" in *The Jewish Chronicle Online*, [ital.] 1 July 2011, <http://www.thejc.com/arts/music/50979/> accessed 26 May 2016.

[19] Joseph Straus, *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 120.