The Confluence of Naturalism and Postmodernism in Rose Tremain’s *The Swimming Pool Season*: a Post-War Feminist Approach to Realism

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Although the 1980s saw a resurgence of realistic novels in England, realism itself, especially when tackled by women writers, still labours under suspicions of conservatism and commercialism. The conventions used in nineteenth-century novels were initially criticised by structuralist Roland Barthes in *Writing Degree Zero* and ‘The Reality Effect’ for engineering a deceptive referential illusion providing the bourgeois reader with harmless entertainment through an open text self-determined as purely literary. Poststructuralist thinkers like Colin MacCabe and Catherine Belsey further argued that the mimetic deception served to promote normative values by presenting reality as self-evident, overlooking its dimension as a social and historical construct. Belsey compared classic realism to product placement in advertising, most famously drawing a parallel between Dorothea in Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and ads for women’s perfume to demonstrate how realism conveys stereotyped female identity (Belsey 45-7). Postmodernist critics similarly deplored the absence of self-reflexivity in realistic texts which lack a metafictional approach to the fictional fabrication of representation. The 1970s criticism of the linearity of the plot, the middle or lower class focus, verisimilitude and third-person omniscience in nineteenth-century novels still persists today in evaluations of the genre which is deemed obsolete—in the wake of Robert Scholes’ pronouncement in *The Fabulators*—on account of its alleged resistance to innovation. Realism is consistently posited as the obverse of experiment in debates on the future of the novel. Considering the lack of academic attention accorded to them, Rose Tremain’s novels are no exception.
to such bias. Nick Turner includes Tremain in his discussion of realism and post-war British women novelists, underlining an enduring prejudice against them: 'There is however still a feeling that literary fiction about the middle classes, particularly if written by women about women, and domestic in focus, is somehow lacking, inauthentic and outdated' (Turner 50). This article aims to adopt instead the perspective of John Barth on postmodernist fiction which he presaged would achieve 'the synthesis or transcension' (Barth 201) of the modes of writing of traditional bourgeois realism and modernism. In her novels, Tremain reclaims the tradition of the great realist novel of the nineteenth-century by portraying middle or lower class characters and their interactions with their social, economic, geographic, national environment within plots that follow a causal logic and provide a plausible insight into the characters’ psychological motivations while accommodating modernist issues of the exile of the self, temporal disjunction, the contrast between self-perception and the world’s judgment. Her use of polyphony, in particular, circumvents the supposedly 'unproblematic relationship between reality and its representations' (Beaumont 2) postmodernist thinkers perceive in realistic texts by conflicting divergent world views, especially regarding gender issues. Her texts fit Amy J. Elias’ definition of postmodern realism as ‘record[ing] the multiple worlds/texts within contemporary culture and recogniz[ing] the inability to evaluate society’s conflicting values; it [postmodern realism] mimics the multiple selves of characters (or more accurately, the self and subject within a textualized culture) and recognizes the problem of articulating an essential Self in this social context’ (Elias 12). The Swimming Pool Season, published in 1985, portrays the typically postmodern identity crisis of migrant characters while resorting to naturalist intertextual references and themes.

The Naturalist Tradition and the Post-War Masculine Identity Crisis: Xavier

The starting point of The Swimming Pool Season is the mid-life crisis of a couple of British lifestyle migrants who settle in the Dordogne region after Larry has lost his swimming pool business. While Larry sets out to build his own swimming pool in France, Miriam goes back to Oxford, England, to look after her dying mother. The novel contrasts lives in the two communities, the elitist Oxford people and the cosmopolitan French village. The made up French village of Pomerac hosts a mix of locals and foreigners whose interactions revolve around gender issues: Larry’s neighbours, dairy farmer Gervaise and her unemployed husband Mallélou, are involved in a ménage à trois with German Klaus; the village’s bachelor misogynist doctor, Hervé, is wooed by Polish Nadia whose French husband, Claude, is locked away in an adjustment home; Gervaise and Mallélou’s son, Xavier, falls in love with the doctor’s niece, Agnès, whom Larry also fancies and who is engaged to well-off Luc. Their dealings are overlooked by two tutelary figures: the grandfatherly patriarch, the Maréchal, and a local female potentate, Madame de la Brosse. The British community at Oxford is similarly arranged around love triangles with Miriam entertaining the idea of an affair with an old family friend, Dr. O., while he is already in a relationship with bland Bernice who gets pregnant. Miriam competes for the love of her self-centred domineering mother, Leni, with homosexual Gary whom Leni regards as the son she never had. Gary is in a relationship with black actor Gabriel, rehearsing Othello, which is threatened by the play’s director, Piers.
The novel dramatises social, generational and gender divides through comic intrigues and dalliances. Thus Tremain opts for a dramatic interpretation of Balzac’s œuvre and has the Maréchal exclaim over the arrival of the British: ‘C’est la comédie humaine, non?’ (23). With its chorus of characters, its multiple love triangles and its serial dénouements, the novel has a theatrical dimension and was probably inspired by the radio play Temporary Shelter for which Tremain won the Giles Cooper Award a year before the publication of The Swimming Pool Season. Like Balzac, Tremain is interested in depicting ‘social species’ (Balzac) contrasting social hierarchies, with lower, middle and upper middle class characters. She also portrays gender differences and types with a view to contextualizing women’s struggle: ‘women’s lives, in her novels, are lived, in heterosocial contexts. Understanding women, their problems, traumas, desires and aspirations, of necessity involves understanding men and the cultures in which they operate’ (Sceats 166), thus offering the reader a critical assessment of men and women’s relations in the 1980s just as Balzac endeavoured to write ‘a history of the human heart’ based on gender differences: ‘There may be two perfectly dissimilar beings in one household’ (Balzac). Finally she historicises her evaluation of changing relations through references to WWII as well as through the confrontation of three generations, which is reminiscent of Balzac’s scheme in writing a ‘history of manners’.

Already it is apparent how the feminist and historicist twist Tremain gives to Balzac’s elaborations on the writer figure as society’s historian modifies classic realism inasmuch as the intertextual process implies a self-reflexive approach to characterisation, which is further reinforced by the dramatic impulse of the novel. Where Balzac takes his mission as the ‘secretary’ of ‘French society’ (Balzac) very seriously, British Rose Tremain provides a comic outlook on cultural difference through references to world literature thus underlining ‘the “complex connectivity” reflective of both an emergent European community and a newly globalized world’ (Durham 473). Similarly she reclaims the naturalist tradition of investigating social pathology with the portrayals of outcasts whose exclusion stems from ‘race, milieu and moment’, to quote Hippolyte Taine, with the name of her character, Gervaise, as a direct reference to Zola’s L’Assomoir. Yet Tremain’s adoption of marginal points of view serves a feminist purpose, which Sarah Sceats identifies as the salient feature of her commitment in writing as it enables her to contrast the mainstream and the divergent:

there is also another kind of openness at work, and that has to do with what I have described as Tremain’s oblique perspectives. If her writing may be described as feminist it is not because she focuses on women. It is rather that her writing is imbued with a strong suggestion that patriarchal society and fixed gender relations might be otherwise. Many of her characters are thus marginal or undefined in some way. Others undergo radical, depolarizing change: her most heartily ‘masculine’ characters are feminized by experience; her women take on roles or assume characteristics associated normatively with men. (Sceats 175)

Xavier is a case in point to demonstrate how Tremain uses and modifies the conventions and themes of realist, and more specifically naturalist writing, to assess the post-war masculine identity crisis. Xavier is caught up in a sociological and hereditary dilemma emblematised by the two opposite paternal figures of Malléoulou and the Maréchal. Xavier despises his own father, Malléoulou, for his male chauvinism. Malléoulou is a striking embodiment of the obscene father whose impotence turns to tyranny. A former railway worker now supported by his wife and a cuckolded husband, Malléoulou keeps telling his son about the glorious days of his bygone omnipotence when he enjoyed sodomizing his
mistress and his morning ritual was to stub out his cigarette in the pussy of a woman-shaped ashtray (7). When he learns that Xavier’s female employer has him arrested for theft, he plans retaliation and forces his son’s hand arguing that ‘two men are better than one when it comes to teaching a woman a lesson’ (61). She is called ironically Mme Motte, which is slang for a female pubis in French. He fails miserably in the attempt, being too drunk to carry out his plan. Thus Xavier ‘when he was little, [...] used to invent alternative fathers for himself’ and ‘One of these was the Maréchal’ (60). In contrast to obscene Mallélou, the benevolent grand-fatherly figure of the Maréchal stands for the archaic patriarchal order and is referred to using his military rank. Furthermore Tremain historicises the two oppositional figures through references to French history. The Maréchal’s name is Foch, recalling the military hero of WWI while Mallélou is an avowed Pétainist, Foch’s greatest rival and the head of Vichy France. Through the two figures, Tremain exposes a waning patriarchal order embodied by the Maréchal—who dies at the end of the novel—and the subsequent emergence of the obscene father, which Salvoj Žižek has theorised:

> Public order is no longer maintained by hierarchy, repression and strict regulation, and therefore is no longer subverted by liberating acts of transgression. [...] Instead, we have social relations among free and equal individuals, supplemented by ‘passionate attachment’ to an extreme form of submission, which functions as the ‘dirty secret’, the transgressive source of libidinal satisfaction. (Žižek 1999)

Mallélou yearns for a master he identifies with the German invader: ‘He’s never questioned, nor found anything strange in his admiration of the German race. I’m a ragged dog, is what he believes; I hoped for a fine, clean master’ (142). Thus he sees his wife’s German lover, Klaus, as a master and the instrument of his wife’s punishment: ‘That Klaus is king of his household saves him from his failures and satisfies his ache to see his peasant wife possessed and mastered, her skinny little arse bunched like dough in the breadmaker’s hands’ (142). The portrait of ignominious Mallélou matches the naturalist purpose of exploring the basest aspects of humanity, which its detractors at the time castigated as ‘the laying bare of social sores in their most loathsome forms’ reproving ‘dig[ging] up foul expressions to embody filthy ideas’. Xavier embodies the male conundrum as he tries to escape his father’s legacy: ‘contemporary manhood is caught up in awkward transition between an old order, on the wane yet still unrelentingly influential, and the perplexing freedom and indeterminacy of a new order, palpably there but tragically insubstantial and beyond practical grasp’ (Lea and Shoene 11).

A sign of his discomfort is the eczema which afflicts Xavier. He is dissatisfied with his life. He commits petty theft because he feels petty himself: ‘Je suis petit, he repeats helplessly’ (170). He wants to change: he wants to become a student and to find ‘some woman he could admire, some clean girl with a mind’ (162). In Pomerac, he falls in love with the doctor’s niece, Agnés, whom he wants to ‘love [...] with words and small caresses, with his humanity’ (211) and marry. His eczema heals. He escapes his prison sentence in exchange for a fee the Maréchal will pay. Tremain writes realistically about the aspirations of a lower class character determined to escape the limitations of his station and the fate of his father. It turns out however that virginal Agnès is not in love with him but uses him for sex, ‘her stud, her buck, her bull’ (211), and leaves for Paris without saying good-bye to marry Luc, who shares the same well-off background. Agnès is a projecting space for the male characters in the novel. Despite his progressive ideas, Xavier cannot imagine that Agnès would use him for her entertainment like the masters.
of old abusing the lower classes. Larry develops a crush on Agnès because he sees her as the 'odd girl, out of her time, so goody-goody. Like girls used to be told to be' (47), who enjoys domesticity and 'can’t bear’ travesties (47).

In the end, Xavier is left with two options: enrolling in college with a part-time job to sustain him or ‘us[ing] Corinne’ (267), a girl working at a babyshop who is madly in love with him. He follows in his father’s footsteps when devising a plan that has Corinne sustain him through college, avenging himself of Agnès by tricking Corinne. Even the thought of college fades away in the last snapshot the reader gets of Xavier so that it seems that, like his father, Xavier will be supported by a woman whom he wants to punish. Thus Xavier, as a representative of the younger generation, is evidence that masculinity ‘as a fixed set of ideologically motivated imperatives and ideals, inscribed and upheld by patriarchal heteronormativity, [...] still proves to be as markedly resilient and persistent as it is now anachronistic’ (Lea and Shoene 8).

Women in The Swimming Pool Season are just as anachronistic in their endorsement of the patriarchal order as men. Miriam’s marriage with Larry is failing because she sees his business failure as diminishing. She cannot bear to hear his feminised vulnerability when he speaks French (‘the way Larry speaks French makes him sound both eager and helpless’ [9]) and would like instead to ‘displac[e] him to Germany where, in hard monosyllables like gutt and Gott and nicht and nacht he might regain some missing strength, some sort of dignity’ (9). The collaborationist background and the perverted Bismarckian theory of strong leadership incarnated by the German master serves to illustrate the characters’ insecurity in the absence of any master signifier to regulate their life. Such blatant exhibition of misogyny and stereotyped standards of both femininity and masculinity would seem, at first, to substantiate the charge against realism as hopelessly conservative: ‘women writing realism have been charged with producing work that is aesthetically and politically reactionary, or non-literary’ (Turner 51). However the comic impulse of the text generated by its polyphonic dimension creates a self-reflexive irony allowing the reader to speculate on gender representations.

Polyphony and Heteroglossia: Nadia

‘One of the book’s triumphs’ in reviewer Richard Eder’s estimation, the character of Polish Nadia best embodies the workings of this polyphonic comedy. As the village gossip, Nadia ‘doubles as a sort of Greek chorus commenting on the action’ (Sceats 168). An echo chamber of the village’s rumours as well as of several languages with her nonidiomatic English, she is a representative of the Bakhtinian notions of polyphony and heteroglossia. Her ‘mangled English’ (Eder) also recalls the naturalist endeavour to transcribe the colloquial. The mimetic dimension of the realist text is modified however by the historicised experiences of migration and exile. Nadia’s Polish background comes as a complement to the references to the German invasion of France, evoking the subsequent Cold War and the Soviet dominion over Eastern Europe. Like her native country, Nadia’s language is a site of conflict between different linguistic systems. While the naturalists sought to reproduce the people’s jargon for the sake of fidelity to a scientific purpose of sociological study, Tremain displaces the question of veracity by mimicking foreign familiarity. Nadia is not a Polish first name. The dish Nadia cooks, the gulashnova (148), or the word she uses to describe herself as an ‘old Gulashka’ (135) are invented. They highlight the way the verisimilitude of the realistic text is being transformed by
postcolonialism as mimesis becomes mimicry, defined by Homi Bhabha as ‘almost the same, but not quite’ (Bhabha 1994, 84). Tremain thus achieves the paradoxical conjunction of the foreign and the familiar: to the reader’s ear, the invented names sound both distinctly exotic as well as recognizably cultural. Tremain could be said to anticipate in this 1985 novel the post-Cold War issues of cosmopolitanism and more particularly vernacular cosmopolitanism as coined by Homi Bhabha as a juxtaposition of the local and the transnational in communities defined by a variety of migrating experiences where the process of ‘cultural translation’ means that ‘cultures are required to revise their own systems of reference, norms and values, by departing from their habitual or ‘inbred’ rules of transformation’ (Bhabha 2000, 141).

Nadia’s awkwardness with the English language serves several purposes. It serves as a distraction from tragedy: ‘she makes errors of grammar and syntax, gets the carefully learned colloquial phrase exquisitely wrong. People have momentarily forgiven and forgotten the most wounding betrayals trying not to grimace at Nadia’s language’ (16). For instance, she distracts Miriam from the news of her mother’s decline by asking ‘who is looking at her’ while she is ‘round her rocker’ (18). In this comedy of love, Nadia’s misplaced colloquialisms also mirror the characters’ failed attempts at conforming to norms in a post-war world where the signifiers ‘man’ and ‘woman’ have lost their stability. The characters’ desperate endeavours to cling to the familiar, especially regarding female identity, ‘a sex the whole patriarchal world is hoping will retain its last shred of docility and willingness to obey’ (9), turn to parody. Thus Gervaise’s original destiny in Zola’s is repeated with differences, like the ménage à trois she forms with Lantier and Coupeau: Tremain’s Gervaise has elected her lover Klaus and no longer shares her bed with Mallélou. The hereditary traits of Zola’s Gervaise have been transferred to the two male chauvinist characters in Tremain’s novel: Mallélou is a drunk while Hervé’s broken legs recall both Gervaise’s limp and Coupeau’s fall. As is often the case in Tremain’s novels, the physical impairment of the male characters serves to transcribe the masculine identity crisis.

Nadia identifies Hervé’s broken legs with his fear of life. He is also trying to escape Nadia’s advances because he is looking for a girl not only ‘out of her time’ (47) but also out of time altogether: he can’t bear the thought of women ageing—‘he knows his old age will probably be lonely, but better this than sleep with the bad breath of some loyal decaying woman’ (43). He plans to retire to Florida where ‘deference is paid’ to his ancestors ‘centuries older than the country’ while allowing him to feel ‘separated from his own (European?) mournfulness’ (185). He hopes to leave behind him ‘the wounds, the tumours, the wars, the faeces, the rashes, the shaven hair, the burns, the bleeding’ his profession forced him to endure, as in America ‘they make sure he’s comfortable on his lavender-scented toilet’ (185). The passage is an example of polyphony with its combination of free indirect speech, which allows the reader to empathise with the character, and the ironic additions of the narrator which mock the character’s shortcomings. It also illustrates heteroglossia by including Hervé’s appreciation of American English, in particular the pronunciation of his first name “Hair-vay!” they call him, accenting the second syllable’ (185) which implicitly calls forth the dissimilar French accent mark materialised graphically with the italics. The British reader is thus confronted with the issue of foreign languages and is made to experience the same linguistic expatriation as the characters by reading French names and words and guessing at their correct pronunciation.
Heteroglossia echoes polyphony as the inclusion of divergent linguistic systems implies a diversity of perspectives. Hervé’s portrait is thus complemented by Nadia’s point of view lamenting men’s preference for youth and beauty over experience and companionship. She takes the example of *Beauty and the Beast*, ironically ‘turning the table round’ in her own words: ‘if you take some handsome young stripple and he meets in the rose garden this grey hag, no matter how she is kind and loving of him he won’t cradle her poor head and say don’t worry I am loving you anyway in spite of warts’ (149). While the narrator’s ironic comments contextualise Hervé’s misogyny in relation to his fear of ageing, Nadia’s angle overtly exposes gender inequality. The feminist intent behind Tremain’s use of polyphony modifies the reader’s response to what otherwise reads as ‘the balanced combination of mimesis and diegesis of the nineteenth-century novel’ (Lodge 41). Nadia’s lack of command of the language epitomises the characters’ helplessness in the face of sweeping societal changes. It furthers the reader’s empathy with the characters’ experience of their own unsuitability, which is equivalent to speaking a foreign language: they are never quite right in their position, always slightly missing the vernacular of their proper identity.

Through her husband Claude, committed to an Adjustment home, Nadia is aware of the instability of the signifiers ‘man’ and ‘woman’, ‘husband’ and ‘wife’, and the symbolic positions they entail. Indeed Claude does not recognise his wife when she visits but he keeps calling her name and ‘the woman his wife was stands not in but outside this saying of her name. Like a ghost at the edge of this word. The pain is in the word, not in the insubstantial woman who lingers to one side of it’ (226). Claude is no longer the husband or the man he used to be just as Nadia has changed. The signifier is painful as it points to the lost coordinates of their former relationship whose alteration has voided the signified. Nadia laments the insecurity of change: ‘We are all deceived, runs her threnody: the people or things we put our faith in alter and disappear before our very eyes’ (33). The couples in crisis in the novel are all confronted to the relocation of symbolic positions they had assumed were fixed. Larry mourns the routine of his former office and feels ‘helpless, like a rape victim’ (22); Mallélou is a case of the biter bit, the cheat turned cuckold; Claude has lost his marbles and worries about the end of the world. With old age, Leni has lost her ‘sorceress’ powers. Back at her mother’s, Miriam follows in her footsteps, playing the seductress with Dr O., dutifully preparing lunch as the ‘dining rooms’ are ‘like power houses’ (81), conforming to her late father’s pronouncement: “Give a woman a house”, her father once teased, “and she’ll ask for so very little else you must conclude that all her curiosity has gone up its chimney!” (87). Nadia desperately seeks the comfort of a man’s arms, hopelessly with Hervé, successfully with Larry who briefly becomes her lover. Conservatism reads like a defense mechanism against the transitional shifts in gender relations.

The characters’ conformity to familiar stereotypes emphasises their fear of change while the historicised references to exile and invasion and the present-day expatriation of the British lifestyle migrants point to the identity crisis they are unwilling to acknowledge. Resorting to realism allows Tremain to concur with her characters’ (reader’s?) need for the familiar while historicising and spatialising the exile of the self through the constant parallel drawn with migration.
Postmodern realism

While the novel may first appear as harmless entertainment akin to summer reading with its hackneyed stereotype of the British expatriates obsessing over their pools in the south of France, the many-layered discourses involving social, historical and gender issues allow for a more complex reading, especially when related to the author’s other novels. Tremain’s work provides an illustration of postmodern realism whose prototypical plot Amy J. Elias describes as ‘a protagonist facing a personal catastrophe that is so cataclysmic or psychologically shocking that the protagonist’s essentialist world view is shattered and replaced by a postmodern conception of reality’ (Elias 14). In *The Swimming Pool Season*, the loss of Larry’s business may seem quite mundane and bourgeois indeed, but the naturalist references and the novel’s polyphony may also read as a literary endeavour to appropriate realism in a comic vein. Tremain used polyphony again in a much more cataclysmic novel from 1992, *Sacred Country*, to locate the voice of its transsexual protagonist as inhabiting ‘a country in between’ genders, which comes to upset the symbolic coordinates of male identity in the British post-war landscape: ‘*The Swimming Pool Season* and *Sacred Country* [...] evoke fragmentation or instability of belonging, but within a polyphonic or multi-voiced narration, where the narrative point of view is passed between different characters’ (Sceats 168). By ‘allow[ing] different characters to articulate different ideological positions in a text without subordinating them to [the author’s] own authorial speech’ (Lodge 22), polyphony accommodates a typically postmodern conflict between discourses and world views which translates into the characters’ helplessness faced with a fragmented identity.

Thus the geographic displacement experienced by the British lifestyle migrants mirrors an expulsion from the self and its set familiar ways. While losing his business and his routine, Larry has also lost sight of himself and his self-importance as a manager and the head of the household. His expatriation in France materialises his struggle with identity and his sense of loss: he has to learn a new language and conform to the host country’s law. The swimming pool he endeavours to build by himself takes on different meanings testifying to his struggles. He first starts building the pool for Miriam. The pool embodies his endeavour to live up to his wife’s expectations, to become the husband he has failed to be (157). He later believes he is building the pool for Agnès to honour the ‘fictions’ of ‘his middle years’ (182) she stands for. Finally, he confesses to his son that he conceived it as his cathedral (270), a monument to himself, an attempt to elevate himself as a *cathedra* is, etymologically speaking, a seat of authority, and it is no wonder that Larry’s confession is addressed to his son as Larry tries to recover his paternal authority. For Klaus and Xavier, who help Larry build the pool, it also represents an attempt to overcome failure. For Klaus, building the pool is a way to repair a childhood wound when he failed to learn to swim because of his weight and the ensuing feeling that Klaus is fated to be ‘landlocked’ (258). For Xavier, the pool corresponds to the time when he starts believing in his own future and his eczema heals. For the three men, the pool represents a hope for betterment and their efforts to positively reconstruct their identity. Ironically enough, their endeavour will be thwarted by the local female potentate, Mme de la Brosse, positioning herself as upholder of the law to destroy the pool. The destruction of the pool exposes the many obstacles barring the way to a successful renewal of male identity, including the obstacle posed by women themselves resisting change. The novel comically...
dramatises the characters’ failed attempts to locate their selves either through frustrated stabs at change and relocation or through detrimental rigidity: Mme de la Brosse is tired of life in Pomerac and would like to leave for Paris but she remains in the village over which she rules by venting her frustration on foreigners.

Hence Cristina Nistor’s remark that ‘Tremain’s conclusion whether the “global village” is a cosmopolitan dream or not is still pending’ (Nistor 167). Fragmented identity expressed through gender divide and competing cultural manners tackled both historically with the Occupation and juridically with de la Brosse’s crusade are problematised spatially as sense of self and sense of place converge. In that perspective, the made-up French village is significant. Like the foreign Polish words, it is both mimetic in that its representation duplicates reality and history and made up of intertextual references so that its mimicry of characters reads like a naturalist play. The novel illustrates Elias’ contention which, by appropriating Brian McHale’s thesis, distinguishes between the epistemological dominant of traditional realism—which corresponds typically in naturalist literature to the scientific investigation of marginality—and the ontological dominant of postmodern realism: the margin has been reconfigured by postcolonial and feminist studies so that post-war reality is that of a decentered self struggling with the multiplicity of texts and competing discourses. Even though Tremain does not use the characteristic postmodern feature of metafiction, which may account for the academic oversight of her work, she does manage to introduce surprise in an otherwise conventional text as she believes precisely in bringing together what she calls the ‘two primary pleasures’ of fiction: ‘the pleasure of recognition (i.e. a recognised realism, confirming the reader’s perception of how things are right now) and the pleasure of surprise (i.e. making the reader see something from an entirely new perspective)’ (Dedhukina).

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NOTES

1. Temporary Shelter similarly focuses on the financial difficulties of a mid-life British couple: Larry and Marje. While they haven’t gone on holidays for seven years, they decide to go camping to the south of France where they meet a French poet and his wife along with a failed British actor turned tramp who narrates the story.

2. The words are from a pamphlet by the National Vigilance Association from 1889 (quoted in Ledger 86).

3. In Lacanian theory, a master signifier is a word around which a community builds itself and elaborates a master narrative, a word like ‘nation’ for instance: ‘Suffice it to recall how a community functions: the master signifier that guarantees the community’s consistency is a signifier whose signified is an enigma for the members themselves—nobody really knows what it means, but each of them somehow presupposes that others know it, that it has to mean “the real thing”, and so they use it all the time’ (Žižek 2002, 58).

ABSTRACTS

With such characters as Gervaise or the Maréchal exclaiming over ‘la comédie humaine’, Tremain pays homage in The Swimming Pool Season to the tradition of the great realistic novel. Her portrayal of mid-life crises of middle and lower class characters impacted by their ‘milieu’—the social, economic, national components of their identity—within a causal plot matches the conventions of the realistic novel, more particularly of the naturalistic school. Her character study, however, also incorporates modernist issues of the exile of the self and the disjunction between one’s perception and the world’s judgement with a gallery of migrant and local characters gathered together in the made-up French village of Pomerac. Although postmodernist thinkers were highly critical of realism, The Swimming Pool Season may be an example of the ‘the synthesis or transcension’ of the modes of writing of traditional bourgeois realism and modernism that John Barth foresaw for postmodernist fiction. Tremain’s brand of realism adopts feminist and psychoanalytical concerns with the instability of gender signifiers depicted in this polyphonic novel through marital crisis and a variety of love triangles. Larry and Miriam are a British couple in crisis while Gervaise, her husband Mallélou and her lover Klaus are involved in a ‘ménage à trois’. Hervé, the village’s bachelor misogynist doctor, is wooed by Polish Nadia whose husband resides in an Adjustment Home. Xavier, Gervaise’s son, falls in love with the doctor’s niece who is engaged to well-off Luc. It is also modified by postcolonialism and post war issues with the fabrication of a cosmopolitan village against the historical background of the French collaborationist past. The novel opposes the patriarchal figure of the Maréchal and the obscene figure of Pétainist Mallélou. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the vitality of the
realistic genre and attempt to answer the charges against it of conservatism, especially when written by a woman.

Cet article entend démontrer la vitalité de l’écriture réaliste dans le monde contemporain en prenant pour exemple le roman de Rose Tremain, *The Swimming Pool Season*, publié en 1985. Bien que condamné par la critique structuraliste et post-structuraliste des années 70 et 80 comme véhicule de valeurs bourgeoises conservatrices, le réalisme a su se renouveler en intégrant la problématique postmoderniste de la fragmentation de l’identité. Dans *The Swimming Pool Season*, les références intertextuelles à la *Comédie humaine* de Balzac et à *L’Assomoir* de Zola servent à la fois à revendiquer la grande tradition du roman réaliste et à réécrire, selon un paradigme contemporain, les relations entre les genres. En effet, ce roman comique polyphonique multiplie les triangles amoureux pour mettre en tension une masculinité et une féminité en crise. Le contexte migratoire du roman qui met en scène la vie d’immigrants dans un village français imaginaire pose le cadre d’une réflexion sur les transitions identitaires, réflexion que viennent compléter et complexifier les allusions au passé collaborationniste de la France et à l’Occupation allemande. On peut ainsi parler de réalisme postmoderne, selon la définition qu’en donne Amy J. Elias, qui intègre à la description de la réalité une vision du monde postmoderne marquée par le conflit des discours et des valeurs.

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*Mots-clés*: réalisme, naturalisme, réalisme postmoderne, polyphonie, relations genrées  
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