

THE "IMPASSIBILITY" OF GUY DE MAUPASSANT

EDNA C. FREDRICK *

No definite agreement exists among literary critics with respect to the nature and extent of Maupassant's impassibility. Traditionally, he is portrayed by earlier critics as the cold, disinterested observer of men and women whose weaknesses and vices he flayed with pitiless irony.¹ Most of the more recent critics of Maupassant prefer to believe that his attitude toward his characters changed considerably in the course of the decade during which he wrote. In the beginning, these critics hold, Maupassant was the observer without illusion, the moralist ironic and harsh, and although these traits were to remain characteristic of him until the end, "on les verra dans la suite ou s'adoucir ou se compléter par quelques autres dont le voisinage donnera à l'ensemble moins de rudesse."² The following statement by Gérard de Lacaze-Duthiers may be considered typical of still a third point of view: "S'il méprise les esprits terre à terre, les êtres médiocres, les arrivistes de tous bords, Maupassant se penche sur la souffrance sous toutes ses formes. Sous sa cuirasse d'impassibilité, il y a un coeur qui bat."³

The purpose of this study is to determine, if possible, which of these opinions is correct. Should one consider Maupassant insensitive and impassive? Can one distinguish two "manners" present in his work, an early detached, pitiless attitude, softened later by a veil of tenderness? Or do pity and tenderness pervade his entire work?

* Department of Modern Languages.

¹ *Etude* of Pol Neveux in Conard edition of *Oeuvres complètes* of Maupassant, Paris, 1910-1930, I, lxiv: "La pitié, on n'a pas voulu la trouver dans son oeuvre; il est entendu qu'il est impitoyable." Cf. also R. Dumesnil, *Guy de Maupassant*, Paris, 1933, p. 217; G. Pellissier, *Essai de littérature contemporaine*, Paris, 1884, p. 37.

² R. Doumic, "L'Oeuvre de Maupassant," *RDM*, CXX, 196. Cf. also: E. Gilbert, *Le Roman en France pendant le XIXe siècle*, Paris, 1896, p. 429; G. Larroumet, "Guy de Maupassant," *Revue Bleue*, XI (1899), 325; A. Lumbroso, *Souvenirs sur Maupassant*, Rome, 1905, p. 282; G. Normandy, *Guy de Maupassant*, Paris, 1926, p. 175; A. Riddell, *Flaubert and Maupassant: A Literary Relationship*, Chicago, 1920, p. 23; J. Rolland, *Guy de Maupassant*, Paris, 1924, p. 23; J. Terrier, *Le Génie et la maladie chez Guy de Maupassant*, Paris, 1927, p. 32.

³ *Guy de Maupassant. Son Oeuvre*, Paris, 1926, p. 66. Cf. also Pol Neveux, *loc. cit.*, pp. lxiv-lxv; R. Dumesnil, *op. cit.*, pp. 217-221.

The answer to these questions is complicated by the fact that Maupassant was extremely reticent about revealing his personal feelings. Like his master, Gustave Flaubert, he wished to remain objective and impassive, and although he felt compelled to admit that he was "de la famille des écorchés," he carefully qualified his admission:

Mais cela, je ne le dis pas, je ne le montre pas, je le dissimule même très bien, je crois. On me pense sans aucun doute un des hommes les plus indifférents du monde. Je suis sceptique, ce qui n'est pas la même chose, sceptique parce que j'ai les yeux clairs. Et mes yeux disent à mon coeur: Cache-toi, vieux, tu es grotesque, et il se cache. . . .⁴

For a time, perhaps, Maupassant succeeded in hiding his heart, in imposing on his contemporaries the characterization which he wished. There is abundant evidence, however, in his recently published correspondence and in his books of travel that his heart did not always obey his eyes, that he was not indifferent and impassive by nature. The Maupassant whom we meet in the *Correspondance* is quite different from the cynical *boulevardier* of *Bel-Ami*. When we see him rushing to the rescue of a child being senselessly beaten in the streets of Paris,⁵ or tormented with anxiety about the health and solitary state of his mother,⁶ or agonizing over the pitiful condition of his brother,⁷ or materially assisting a woman in need,⁸ we know that Maupassant was tender, sensitive and compassionate by nature. *Au soleil* corroborates this conclusion. Passionate delight in the brilliant sunlight and splendid landscape of Tunisia did not blind Maupassant during his travels in Africa to the scenes of poverty and human wretchedness which confronted him on all sides. What pity, what compassion he felt for one of his countrywomen, now destitute, who had been lured to Africa with promises of land and plenty, false promises which never materialized!⁹ Insurrections plagued this land of Africa. Why were rebellions so numerous among the Arabs? Not hatred, not religious fanaticism, but hunger was the cause of their revolts. And Maupassant concluded pessimistically: "Notre système de colonisation consistant à ruiner l'Arabe, à le dépouiller sans repos, à le poursuivre sans merci et à le faire crever de misère, nous verrons encore d'autres

⁴ *Chroniques, Etudes, Correspondance de Guy de Maupassant*, edited by R. Dumesnil, Paris, 1938, p. 384.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 209, 360, 367.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁹ *Au soleil* (1884), VIII, 28. (References to Maupassant's works are from the Conard edition.)

insurrections."¹⁰ Obviously, Maupassant's sympathies lay with the Arabs, not for political reasons, not for reasons of personal gain, but for simple humanitarian considerations.

Sur l'eau, Maupassant's moral testament, betrays like preoccupations and like sensitivity, and is particularly interesting because it contains a very detailed analysis of that sensitivity which is the peculiar mark of the artist:

En lui aucun sentiment simple n'existe plus. Tout ce qu'il voit, ses joies, ses plaisirs, ses souffrances, ses désespoirs, deviennent instantanément des sujets d'observation. . . .

Acteur et spectateur de lui-même et des autres, il n'est jamais acteur seulement comme les bonnes gens qui vivent sans malice. Tout, autour de lui, devient de verre, les coeurs, les actes, les intentions secrètes, et il souffre d'un mal étrange, d'une sorte de dédoublement de l'esprit, qui fait de lui un être effroyablement vibrant, machiné, compliqué et fatigant pour lui-même.

Sa sensibilité particulière et malade le change en outre en écorché vif pour qui presque toutes les sensations sont devenues des douleurs.

Je me rappelle les jours noirs où mon coeur fut tellement déchiré par des choses aperçues une seconde, que les souvenirs de ces visions demeurent en moi comme des plaies.¹¹

One day, for example, as Maupassant was returning from a hunting expedition, he was asked by a local doctor to assist him in attending a dying woman and her daughter stricken with diphtheria. The impoverished women, Norman peasants, had spent the last twenty-four hours alone on their beds with nothing to eat or drink and no one to comfort them in their struggle against death. As Maupassant sat in lonely vigil with the rain beating against the window panes and the wind tearing at the roof of the dilapidated farmhouse, his sensibilities were so aroused that a sinister fear seized him and he asked himself:

Était-ce vrai que des choses pareilles arrivaient? qu'on mourait ainsi? . . .

Au moins j'espérais mourir dans une bonne chambre, moi, avec des médecins autour de mon lit, et des remèdes sur les tables!

Et ces femmes étaient restées seules vingt-quatre heures dans cette cabane sans feu! râlant sur de la paille! . . .

J'entendis soudain le trot d'un cheval et le roulement d'une voiture; et la garde entra, tranquille . . . sans étonnement devant cette misère.

Je lui laissai quelque argent et je me sauvai avec mon chien; je me sauvai comme un malfaiteur, courant sous la pluie, croyant entendre toujours le sifflement des deux gorges, courant vers ma maison chaude où m'attendaient mes domestiques en préparant un bon dîner.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹¹ *Sur l'eau* (1888), XXI, 80-83, *passim*.

Mais je n'oublierai jamais cela et tant d'autres choses encore qui me font haïr la terre.

Comme je voudrais, parfois, ne plus penser, ne plus sentir. . . .¹²

To later biographers familiar with passages like these from his correspondence and journals, Maupassant seems not at all indifferent and impassive; on the contrary, such passages provide conclusive evidence that he was deeply stirred by the sufferings of the helpless and the oppressed. Should one be astonished to find similar, if less directly expressed, sympathy in his creative writing? Is this sympathy revealed mainly in his later works as suggested by Doumic, Normandy, and others mentioned above?

Critics who accept this thesis base their conclusions largely on a study of Maupassant's novels, especially *Mont-Oriol* (1887) which, it is affirmed, inaugurates his second "manner." *Mont-Oriol* is, indeed, more sentimental, more tender in tone than *Bel-Ami* which preceded it. Differences of opinion arise concerning the reason for this change which has been variously attributed to Maupassant's increasingly wretched physical condition,¹³ to the tender emotions evoked by the experience of paternity,¹⁴ or to prolonged contact with suffering.¹⁵

A study of Maupassant's *Correspondance* leads one to conclude rather that this change in "manner" is due not to any fundamental modification in the author's outlook on life, nor to increasingly acute physical disabilities, nor to continued contact with suffering, but to a conscious desire to renew his creative effort. He wrote to his mother from Auvergne about his new novel: "Je ne fais rien que préparer tout doucement mon roman. Ce sera une histoire assez courte et très simple dans ce grand paysage calme; cela ne ressemblera guère à *Bel-Ami*."¹⁶ And in a letter to Madame Lecomte du Nouy, he described in greater detail the atmosphere of *Mont-Oriol*:

. . . Je fais une histoire de passion très exaltée, très alerte et très poétique. Ça me change—et m'embarrasse. Les chapitres de sentiments sont beaucoup plus raturés que les autres. Enfin ça vient tout de même; on se plie à tout avec de la patience; mais je ris souvent des idées sentimentales, très sentimentales et tendres, que je trouve, en cherchant bien! J'ai peur que ça ne me convertisse au genre amoureux, pas seulement dans les livres, mais aussi dans la vie; quand l'esprit prend un pli, il le garde, et vraiment il m'arrive quelquefois en me

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92, *passim*.

¹³ Normandy, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Terrier, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Neveux, *loc. cit.*, p. lxviii; Larroumet, *loc. cit.*

¹⁶ *Correspondance*, p. 335.

promenant sur le cap d'Antibes . . . en préparant un chapitre poétique au clair de lune de m'imaginer que ces aventures-là ne sont pas si bêtes qu'on le croirait.¹⁷

It is obvious from these letters that Maupassant made a conscious effort to avoid repeating himself in his novels. Like each of his other novels, *Mont-Oriol* represents an excursion into a milieu quite different from that of its predecessor and, with the judiciousness characteristic of the good novelist, Maupassant endeavored to adapt his “manner” to the exigencies of a new situation. It is this striving for originality, it seems to me, rather than any basic change in philosophy which accounts for the difference in tone between *Mont-Oriol* and *Bel-Ami*, for example. It is deceptive, therefore, to rely mainly on the novels for one's opinion regarding Maupassant's sensitivity. Indeed, to do so is to discredit the more substantial evidence furnished by the *contes* which, in my opinion, provide a far more accurate gauge than the novels of the nature and depth of Maupassant's reaction to human suffering.

In the pages which follow, reference is made to some seventy-five short stories, roughly speaking about one-third of the total number which Maupassant wrote. There is evident in all of these stories a sympathetic attitude on the part of the author toward the characters he is analyzing. Sometimes he interrupts his story to express his pity directly in the first person; sometimes one of his characters betrays by word or action his compassion for another; in other stories, no direct comment is necessary—the author plays upon the reader's sympathies indirectly. While suffering in any form attracted Maupassant's attention, his sympathy centered, in general, upon the lonely, the disillusioned, the weak, and victims of fate, of social injustice and of war.

The spiritual isolation in which all human beings live and die was a favorite theme of Maupassant, a theme which recurs with disquieting frequency in novel and short story, correspondence and journal. Some dozen short stories at least were devoted to a sympathetic analysis of the feelings of men and women who live in loneliness and solitude. This is not surprising if one remembers that Maupassant himself was often depressed by a sense of spiritual loneliness. At the age of twenty-three, for example, he wrote to his mother from Paris:

. . . Je me trouve si perdu, si isolé, et si *démoralisé* que je suis obligé de venir te demander quelques bonnes pages. J'ai peur de l'hiver qui vient, je me

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 336–337.

sens seul, et mes longues soirées de solitude sont quelquefois terribles. J'éprouve souvent, quand je me trouve seul devant ma table avec ma triste lampe qui brûle devant moi, des moments de détresse si complets que je ne sais plus à qui me jeter.¹⁸

Nor should these words be dismissed lightly as the words of a home-sick youth in Paris; they are common enough throughout the whole *Correspondance*,¹⁹ especially after the death of Flaubert when Maupassant's sense of *isolement moral* was particularly acute. In *Solitude* (1884), Maupassant analyzed in detail that despair which he himself knew on occasion and which was to be the basis of the disenchantment of Christiane in *Mont-Oriol*:

Et moi, j'ai beau vouloir me donner tout entier, ouvrir toutes les portes de mon âme, je ne parviens point à me livrer. Je garde au fond, tout au fond, ce lieu secret du *Moi* où personne ne pénètre. Personne ne peut le découvrir, y entrer, parce que personne ne me ressemble, parce que personne ne comprend personne.²⁰

The loneliness which envelops Maupassant's characters has various causes: there is the loneliness of the man or woman who has never known love: *Par un soir de printemps* (1881), *Regret* (1883), *La Reine Hortense* (1883), *Le Baptême* (1884), *Miss Harriet* (1884), *Promenade* (1884); the loneliness of those whose love has been unrequited: *La Rempailleuse* (1882), *Petit Soldat* (1885); the loneliness of those who have wilfully and stupidly sacrificed their real happiness to selfish interests: *Le Père* (1883); the loneliness of a mother whose son has left her to go with his bride to England: *Humble Drame* (1883); the loneliness of a selfish old man who resents his daughter-in-law's marrying again after his son's death: *Père Amable* (1886).

To judge from an observation in *Julie Romain* (1886), Maupassant seemed particularly sensitive to the loneliness of the aged whose only escape from reality lies in nostalgic longing for the past:

Une tristesse indéfinissable, poignante, irrésistible, m'étreignait le coeur, la tristesse des existences accomplies, qui se débattent encore dans les souvenirs comme on se noie dans une eau profonde.²¹

The same tender sadness pervades *Menuet* (1882), *Souvenirs* (1884), and *Le Masque* (1889).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

¹⁹ Cf., for example, pp. 209, 213, 217, 243, 287, 288, 293. Cf. also *Sur l'eau*, XXI, 128-131, for further development of Maupassant's attitude.

²⁰ *Solitude*, in *Monsieur Parent*, XV, 266.

²¹ In *La Petite Roque*, XVI, 209-210.

Closely allied to the theme of loneliness is that of disenchantment. Maupassant's sympathies were often quickened by the sufferings of both young and old in moments of disillusion. Children may be disillusioned by the conduct of their parents: *Yveline Samoris* (1882), *Yvette* (1884), *Garçon, un bock* (1884); parents may be disappointed in the actions of their children: *L'Attente* (1883), *Duchoux* (1887); both men and women suffer from deception in love: *La Femme de Paul* (1881), *Le Pardon* (1882), *Le Petit* (1883), *Monsieur Parent* (1886), *Le Champ d'Oliviers* (1890). *Suicides* (1883) presents the moral portrait of a young man whose disillusion with life is so complete that he is led to suicide. The inventory of his disillusion is interesting for it resembles very closely the inventory which Maupassant was to draw up as his own in *Sur l'eau*. Is it deep grief, is it hidden despair which lead men to seek refuge in suicide? It is rather "la lente succession des petites misères de la vie, la désorganisation fatale d'une existence solitaire, dont les rêves sont disparus. . ."²²

Many of Maupassant's stories, like *Monsieur Parent* and *La Femme de Paul*, deal with illicit love and with love which is faithless and cruel. Unfortunately, this sometimes obscures the fact that a number of other stories are based on a conception of love which is tender, devoted, and constant. *L'Enfant* (1882), *Le Modèle* (1883), *Le Bonheur* (1884), *Clochette* (1886), *Le Fermier* (1886), *Mademoiselle Perle* (1886), *L'Infirmes* (1888), *Alexandre* (1889) exemplify this attitude. *Clair de lune* (1882), although written at approximately the same time as *La Maison Tellier*, is entirely different from the latter in meaning and atmosphere but just as representative of Maupassant and quite as much a masterpiece.

Several other stories were inspired by Maupassant's compassion for those whose physical or moral weakness condemns them to become victims of cruelty or indifference. The concluding words of *L'Aveugle* (1882), one of the less successful of the *contes* from a literary point of view, reveal very clearly Maupassant's sympathy for the weak and the oppressed:

Et je ne puis jamais ressentir la vive gaieté des jours de soleil, sans un souvenir triste et une pensée mélancolique vers le gueur, si déshérité dans la vie que son horrible mort fut un soulagement pour tous ceux qui l'avaient connu.²³

²² *Suicides*, in *Soeurs Rondoli*, IX, 230.

²³ In *Oeuvres Posthumes* I, XXVIII, 23.

Other stories in which compassion for the weak is less directly stated, though no less clearly implicit, are: *En voyage* (1882), *Mon Oncle Jules* (1883), *L'Orphelin* (1883), *Première Neige* (1883), *Berthe* (1884), *Le Gueux* (1884), *Le Baptême* (1885), *Une Famille* (1886), *Le Noyé* (1888).

Maupassant's sympathy embraced also the suffering inflicted on helpless animals through the cruelty or stupidity of their masters. Stories like *Pierrot* (1882), *Mlle Cocotte* (1883), *L'Âne* (1883), and *Coco* (1884) reveal the keenness of Maupassant's perceptions and the breadth of his feelings.

In the stories which we have just enumerated, men find themselves helpless in the presence of human strength which is greater than their own. In other stories, men find themselves at the mercy of invisible forces which strike them down without reason and without warning. "Comme la vie est singulière, changeante! Comme il faut peu de chose pour vous perdre ou vous sauver!" Thus mused the heroine of *La Parure* (1884) as she sat at the window and dreamed of that long-ago evening when she had been so happy and so beautiful. In *La Ficelle* (1883), we witness the destruction of a man's life by something as trivial and insignificant as a piece of string. In *A cheval* (1883), *Le Retour* (1884), *L'Ermite* (1886), *Le Port* (1889), stories in like vein, Maupassant awakens the reader's sympathy for simple, pathetic characters who become, through some queer twist of fate, hopelessly enmeshed in a tragic situation. Much of Maupassant's work is imbued with this sense of pity, the source of which must be attributed largely to the author's awareness of those involuntarily tragic elements out of which man's life is compounded.

Victims of fate usually evoke in the spectator spontaneous feelings of pity, especially when tragedy is wrought by fragile means. Then the irony of the situation seems unbearable, and one's compassion is reinforced by a sense of terror that helpless men and women can be crushed so easily by forces beyond their control. In stories portraying victims of social prejudice and social injustice, the reader's sympathies, like those of Maupassant, are heightened rather by a feeling of anger and contempt for a social order which breeds much needless tragedy. Maupassant defended the *filles* and the *filles-mères* against a society which condemned them, and he wrote solicitously of the illegitimate child abandoned by one or both parents. These are the themes directly expressed or implied in: *Boule de Suif* (1880), *Histoire d'une fille de ferme* (1881), *Le Papa de Simon* (1881), *Madame*

Baptiste (1882), *Un Fils* (1882), *L'Odysée d'une fille* (1883), *L'Enfant* (1883), *L'Abandonné* (1884), *Un Parricide* (1884), *L'Armoir* (1884), *Rosalie Prudent* (1886).

Victims of war as well as victims of poverty and social injustice found their way into Maupassant's *contes*. Several pages of *Sur l'eau* contain a magnificent diatribe against war in which Maupassant bitterly condemns the civilization which permits, even encourages, wholesale slaughter of innocent human beings. While Maupassant laments the loss of young men who might have worked, produced, and contributed to the material development of the human race, it is their parents who elicit his gravest concern:

... Leurs pères sont vieux et pauvres; leurs mères qui, pendant vingt ans, les ont aimés, adorés comme adorent les mères, apprendront dans six mois ou un an peut-être que le fils, l'enfant, le grand enfant élevé avec tant de peine, avec tant d'argent, avec tant d'amour, fut jeté dans un trou comme un chien crevé, après avoir été éventré par un boulet et piétiné, écrasé, mis en bouillie par les charges de cavalerie. Pourquoi a-t-on tué son garçon, son beau garçon, son seul espoir, son orgueil, sa vie? Elle ne sait pas. Oui, pourquoi? ²⁴

The same condemnation of war, the same sympathy for war's unfortunate victims distinguish the short stories suggested by this subject: *Mademoiselle Fifi* (1882), *La Folle* (1882), *Le Père Millon* (1883), *Deux amis* (1883), *La Mère Sauvage* (1884), *L'Horrible* (1884).

This brief review of some seventy-odd stories suggests the reply to the questions which prompted our study. The sensitivity and compassion which we noted in Maupassant's journals and correspondence indisputably color his creative writing and add interest and permanent value to his work. This sympathy did not manifest itself exclusively, or even principally, in the latter part of the decade during which he wrote since the majority of the stories listed here were published in the years 1883 and 1884, that is, several years before the appearance of *Mont-Oriol*. Indeed, the evidence furnished by the *Correspondance* and a goodly number of short stories appearing annually from 1880 to 1890 justifies the broader conclusion that Maupassant's sympathy and compassion were not confined to any specific period; they were a constant element in his nature which we must recognize if our interpretation of his work is to be fair, accurate, and complete.

²⁴ *Sur l'eau*, XXI, 52-53.