

# Narrative Voice and Vision in Paul Nizan's *Antoine Bloyé*

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It is not surprising that little critical attention has been given to matters of narrative voice and vision in Paul Nizan's socialist novels. Their manifestly political, referential features have understandably overshadowed their literary qualities. But a *roman à thèse* is, after all, still a *roman*; and it adheres to the same conventions as other narrative works, although it may modify certain established practices.<sup>1</sup> This essay will examine the modifications that occur in the treatment of the protagonist and the other narrative participants in Nizan's *Antoine Bloyé* (1933) in order to determine how those modifications further the novel's didactic purpose of decrying the stultifying effects of bourgeois existence.

One important narrative feature of Nizan's novel involves silencing the eponymous protagonist, thereby making the reader aware of what the retired and alienated Antoine Bloyé *cannot* feel or say rather than what he can. The intelligent, educated son of a proletarian railroad worker, Antoine Bloyé crosses class boundaries and enters the bourgeoisie. The passage is not easy, however; and the novel records various actions and inner conflicts that stem from his divided class affiliation. The eclipsing of Antoine's voice in the novel is especially striking. Not only is he dead at both the beginning and end of the novel; his first words occur only in the fifth chapter, some seventy-five pages into the work.<sup>2</sup> His ten-line reported speech on that occasion, when he attempts to convince a group of fellow workers to strike, is indeed the only meaningful or sustained use of his voice in the entire novel. Other than this one speech, he makes only occasional, perfunctory, one or two-line utterances—a fact that is all the more surprising given that the novel is, after all, the story of his life. The muting of Antoine Bloyé's voice heightens the reader's sense of Antoine's bourgeois existence as an impoverishment and stripping away of normal human functions.

Antoine Bloyé stands apart from the narrative chain, typical in realistic novels, that links the implied author, the narrator, and the privileged character who serves as the work's "focalizer."<sup>3</sup> His normal human attributes are thereby stripped away, as they are in bourgeois life generally according to Nizan. A striking example occurs at the very end of the novel when Antoine faces death alone, unable to speak, his vision reduced to a single, colorless perception: "Il se dirigea vers la porte; le bouton de porcelaine était d'une blancheur éclatante comme un os verni, comme un oeuf illuminé" (p. 314). Only in a few isolated instances is the reader ever "with" Antoine Bloyé in the sense of partially or totally adopting his point of view or vision for any sustained period of time. Those instances are times when what is normally impossible in Antoine's adult bourgeois existence becomes possible, to wit, seeing the world and meaningfully experiencing its sensual, visual qualities.

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<sup>1</sup>Regarding the *roman à thèse* generally, see Susan Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

<sup>2</sup>Paul Nizan, *Antoine Bloyé* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1933), p. 74. References to this novel will be placed in parentheses in the text.

<sup>3</sup>Susan Sniader Lanser, *The Narrative Act* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 140-45.

Antoine's point of view prevails at two special times in his life, once as a schoolboy and the other as a soldier; they are times when a sense of solidarity and camaraderie with others exists and thus when, according to Nizan's socialist worldview, meaningful perception of the outside world is possible. The point of view that is adopted in the presentation of such perceptions is a plural rather than a singular one, for example, the point of view of schoolchildren or soldiers. The following description of Antoine and a group of soldiers viewing Paris is characteristic: "Ils traversaient les quartiers nord et montaient vers Montmartre où ils ne s'attardaient pas . . . Ils y restaient le temps de . . . regarder Paris étendu à leurs pieds, avec une espèce d'inquiétude, comme une mer trop vagissante et trop vaste pour eux" (p. 85). The plural point of view reinforces the social significance of visual acts for a group rather than for the isolated, alienated individual.

The novel also implies that the individual point of view, as glorified in nineteenth-century realist literature, is a reprehensible bourgeois invention. That implication can be discovered in the oblique but discernible intertextual allusion which the description quoted above makes to Balzac's Rastignac, who similarly looked down at the city of Paris in *Le Père Goriot* and from that vantage point formulated his celebrated individualistic, protocapitalist motto "A nous deux maintenant."<sup>4</sup> The discernible allusion to Balzac here is especially salient in the conclusion to the above passage: "Ils étaient un peu fiers de dominer la ville: impossible sur les hauteurs de ne pas sentir un coeur de montagnard qui traite les plaines de haut,—mais ces jeunes gens ne pensaient pas à la conquête de Paris, ce rêve n'était pas pour eux" (p. 86). It is precisely to de-emphasize the kind of bourgeois individualism which Rastignac represents that Nizan's novel has recourse to such narrative practices as a limited use of focalization and a plural rather than singular point of view.

Two important features of Nizan's treatment of his bourgeois protagonist in *Antoine Bloyé* are thus already apparent, both of which further the novel's didactic purpose. One feature is the stripping away from the individual protagonist of such narrative attributes as voice and vision, a stripping away which is presented as corresponding to the reification caused by bourgeois life. As an individual, Antoine Bloyé cannot speak or see because, like his social class, he has been alienated from natural contact with himself, the world, and others. The other feature is the occasional use of Antoine's voice and vision only when he transcends his individual existence and forms part of a group.

It is not enough, however, to observe the severe limitations placed on the voice and vision of the main character in *Antoine Bloyé*. The extent to which the text emphasizes the voice and vision of someone else must also be considered. At the outset, for example, the reader feels the presence of someone who is not Antoine but who is not merely an impersonal, omniscient narrator since he is capable of providing specific details about the Bloyé home: "C'était une rue où presque personne ne passait, une rue de maisons seules dans une ville de l'Ouest. Des herbes poussaient sur la terre battue des trottoirs et sur la chaussée, des graminées, du plantain. Devant le numéro 11 et le numéro 20 s'étaient les taches d'huile déposées par les deux automobiles de la rue" (p. 11). Here and in the following sentences, there is a close and distinctly focalized recording of someone's physical and visual movements. There is also an implicit reflection of that person's outlook: details such as the negative touch introduced by "presque personne ne passait" in the first sentence, and the image of traces left by automobiles in front of other houses on the street in the third sentence, suggest someone's opinion that a new generation and a new technology have developed with which Antoine Bloyé failed to keep pace. Such an opinion forms part of a consistent and constant narrative presence

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<sup>4</sup>Honoré de Balzac, *Le Père Goriot* (Paris: Garnier, 1963), p. 309.

in the novel: a presence which Jacqueline Leiner has aptly described as a “narrateur-récitant” who pronounces “une psalmodie grave, sorte de plain-chant pur” throughout *Antoine Bloyé*.<sup>5</sup>

If the “someone” whose physical and visual movements are recorded at the beginning of the novel is identified as Pierre, Antoine’s son, rather than as an impersonal, omniscient narrator, an enriched understanding of *Antoine Bloyé* can be obtained.<sup>6</sup> Several reasons can be adduced for thus identifying Pierre’s role in Nizan’s novel. He is one of the two persons present at the time of his father’s death and thus is a plausible figure for focalization. He is one of the few persons who would be likely to engage in the act of looking through Antoine’s old papers and documents, an act that provides a plausible setting for the narration and is alluded to on several occasions, as in the following passage: “Ces lettres marquaient les étapes de la vie . . . Toute la vie est tissée par ces éléments, ces papiers imprimés dont les blancs sont remplis par les lettres soigneuses d’un employé de bureau sont les uniques traces du passage sur la terre des hommes obscurs: on les retrouve au fond d’une caisse, d’une armoire, lorsqu’ils sont morts” (p. 177). And finally, there is the fact that in another novel, *Le Cheval de Troie* (1935), Pierre Bloyé plays a privileged narrative and political role and was indeed originally projected by Nizan to play the role of narrator.

It is also possible to hypothesize that the “someone” to whom Pierre is speaking can be identified as none other than Antoine Bloyé. Several reasons can be given for this identification. The first and most important one is the thematic centrality in the novel of the father-son relationship. Repeatedly sons question and seek to understand their fathers’ lives, although admittedly with only partial success; thus one reads that “il n’est pas dans la coutume des hommes que les fils pénètrent toutes les pensées qui se forment dans la tête des pères comme de grosses bulles douloureuses, et les fils ne sont pas des juges sans passions” (p. 59). Not only does Pierre seek to understand and judge Antoine’s life: so too does Antoine with his father Jean-Pierre, whose docility and submissiveness to authority he blames (p. 137); and so too does M. Guyader, Antoine’s father-in-law, who scorns his father’s working-class outlook (p. 110).

There are also other reasons for identifying Antoine as the person to whom Pierre is speaking in the novel. Extratextual evidence shows that Nizan’s intent in writing the novel was largely to address his own father whom he, like Pierre, sought to understand and judge. Redfern quotes Nizan as having said, “We live in an age when children no longer repeat the lives of their fathers”; and Redfern goes on to say, “In *Antoine Bloyé*, Nizan makes a deep and patient effort to get into his father’s boots, under his skin, and into his head. But he aims also to judge his father, and through him, a whole class of people. In order to judge, Nizan has first to sympathetically reinvent his father.”<sup>7</sup> Some critics do not agree regarding the narrative role of Nizan’s father or Antoine Bloyé. Although Redfern suggests that Antoine Bloyé may be Nizan’s “imagined father,” Leiner speaks of “Antoine Bloyé, alias Paul Nizan.”<sup>8</sup> By failing to identify the role of a father generally and Antoine Bloyé specifically in the novel, I would argue, critics have failed to identify an important feature of Nizan’s didactic novel. The didactic purpose of *Antoine Bloyé* requires addressing the bourgeois father as “you” and calling his values into question.

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<sup>5</sup>Jacqueline Leiner, *Le Destin littéraire de Paul Nizan* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1970), p. 135.

<sup>6</sup>A similar interpretation is provided by Adele King, *Paul Nizan, Ecrivain* (Paris: Didier, 1976), pp. 88-89.

<sup>7</sup>W. D. Redfern, *Paul Nizan: Committed Literature in a Conspiratorial World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 49-50.

<sup>8</sup>Redfern, p. 66 and Leiner, p. 133.

Another subtle way in which the text highlights the issue of addressing Antoine can be discerned in a comment made at the beginning of the novel about the change in Mme Bloyé's way of addressing her husband at the time of his death: "Quand elle avait connu que le corps était vraiment rigide et froid, elle avait éclaté en sanglots, à cette seconde-là seulement, elle avait compris qu'Antoine était mort, elle avait cessé de lui parler, de l'appeler, de crier "Antoine, Antoine, réponds-moi": elle avait commencé à parler de lui à la troisième personne, uniquement à la troisième personne" (p. 17). So too in the novel as a whole does Pierre's addressing his father take the form of an impersonal "il." Antoine's death can be viewed in this regard as a sign of the reification, alienation, and dehumanization during his lifetime on which the novel dwells.

It is possible now to summarize the profound reasons for the narrative voice and vision of *Antoine Bloyé*. The narration serves the intensely personal need that all men have of understanding, judging, and ultimately giving meaning to their fathers' lives. Fulfilling the prophecy that Antoine made at the time of Pierre's birth—"Mon fils me vengera" (p. 169)—Pierre is undertaking the weighty project of attempting to give meaning to his father's life through the act of narration: "Il faut beaucoup de force et de créations pour échapper au néant. Antoine n'avait rien créé, il avait laissé se dissiper sa force, il n'avait rien inventé, il n'avait pas frayed avec les hommes . . . il n'aurait pu être sauvé que par des créations qu'il aurait faites, par des exercices de sa puissance" (pp. 286-87). And elsewhere one reads: "Il eût fallu dans ce temps-là qu'Antoine trouvât un homme qui fût capable de lui démontrer que son passé était digne d'être aimé, qu'il contenait des parties qui méritaient la reconnaissance, l'amitié" (p. 311). Pierre is that man. He is a man engaged in the intensely personal act of giving meaning to his father's life and, moreover, of indirectly communicating with a father who was unable to address him directly as an adult: ". . . il n'était plus capable depuis des années d'échanger avec Pierre un seul mot humain" (p. 301). Whether Paul Nizan speaks to and for his father, or Pierre Bloyé to and for Antoine, the acts are homologous. An enlightened bourgeois son rises above the silence and blindness to which his father's generation and social class condemned him.

The communication between father and son in *Antoine Bloyé* is not merely personal in nature. If, as Sartre argues in *L'Idiot de la famille*, the family mediates between the class and the individual, the familial relationship between Antoine and Pierre Bloyé can properly be viewed as mediating the difficult and problematic relationship between two individuals and two classes: a submissive and blind bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century on the one hand and a "contestatory" and lucid bourgeoisie of the middle twentieth century on the other. It is the more significant relationship between two classes that is at the heart of *Antoine Bloyé*.

As for tone, Nizan's novel often strikes a discordant and denunciatory note that is in keeping with its didactic purpose. As Sartre said, Nizan "était un trouble-fête. Il appelait aux armes, à la haine: classe contre classe."<sup>9</sup> And elsewhere he observes, "Il comprenait son rôle d'écrivain communiste . . . En 1930 . . . la Révolution, chez nous, n'en était qu'à détruire: l'intellectuel avait mission de brouiller les paroles et d'emmêler les fils de l'idéologie bourgeoise . . . on lui donnait une mission nouvelle: en période négative, un livre peut être un acte si l'écrivain révolutionnaire s'applique à déconditionner le langage."<sup>10</sup> Nizan fulfills his mission to "brouiller les paroles . . . de l'idéologie bourgeoise" and to "déconditionner le

<sup>9</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface to *Aden-Arabie* (Paris: Maspero, 1969), p. 10.

<sup>10</sup>Sartre, p. 41.

language" in his treatment of narrative voice and vision in *Antoine Bloyé*. By engaging father and son, reader and writer, conservative and revolutionary in an act of communication, Nizan succeeds in calling into question, if not actually undermining and destroying, a number of ideological illusions—individuality, respect for parental values, continuity between generations—on which, to his mind, unthinking bourgeois life is based.