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Edited by Brian Nelson

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[More information](#)

I

BRIAN NELSON

Zola and the nineteenth century

Unlike Flaubert, the ‘hermit of Croisset’, who turned away from his age in an attitude of ironic detachment, Emile Zola embraced his century in a way no French writer had done since Balzac. Zola’s ambition was to emulate Balzac by writing a comprehensive history of contemporary society. Through the fortunes of his Rougon-Macquart family, he examined methodically the social, sexual and moral landscape of the late nineteenth century along with its political, financial and artistic contexts. Zola is the quintessential novelist of modernity, understood in terms of an overwhelming sense of tumultuous change. ‘Why read Emile Zola?’ asks Sandy Petrey in his chapter in this volume, answering himself thus: ‘Because his representation of society’s impact on the individuals within it memorably depicts what it means to be a human being in the modern world.’

The motor of change was the rapid expansion of capitalism, with all that that entailed in terms of the altered shapes of the city, new forms of social practice and economic organisation, and heightened political pressures. Zola was fascinated by change, and specifically by the emergence of a new, mass society. Henri Mitterand has argued that Zola was ‘the first novelist . . . to make the crowd a character in itself’ [‘le premier romancier . . . à faire de la foule un personnage en soi’];¹ while Henry James noted Zola’s ability to ‘make his characters swarm’,² arguing that it was both the ‘fortune’ and the ‘doom’ of the Rougon-Macquart cycle to ‘deal with things almost always in gregarious forms, to be a picture of *numbers*, of classes, crowds, confusions, movements, industries’.³ Industrialisation brought with it urban poverty and prostitution, class conflict, the rise of mass movements, the birth of a consumer culture, and the struggle between the forces of secularism and religion. As Erich Auerbach commented in *Mimesis*, his classic study of the representation of reality in Western literature, Zola ‘is one of the very few authors of the century who created their work out of the great problems of the age’.⁴

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[More information](#)

BRIAN NELSON

Zola's epic type of realism is reflected not only in the vast sweep of his work, but also in its variety and complexity. In addition to his thirty-one novels, he wrote five collections of short stories, a large body of art, drama and literary criticism, several plays and libretti, and numerous articles on political and social issues published in the French press at various stages of his career as a journalist. He was actively engaged in his age. He was a major critic of literature and painting, and a significant political commentator long before the Dreyfus Affair. His main achievement, however, was his twenty-volume novel cycle, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, which was to rival Balzac's *Comédie humaine*, a collection of about ninety interlocking novels and stories portraying French society during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, and which showed how the novel could become a vehicle for mature commentary on modern society. In eight months, during 1868 and 1869, Zola outlined the twenty novels he intended to write on the theme of heredity: a family, the Rougon-Macquarts, tainted with alcoholism and mental instability, were to intermarry, to proliferate, and to pass on their inherited weaknesses to subsequent generations. Their fortunes would be followed over several decades. Zola began work on the series in 1870 and devoted himself to it for the next quarter of a century. The summary of Zola's novels provided at the beginning of this volume indicates the roles played by the various family members and its three branches, who spread through all levels of society. The Rougons represent the upper-class hunt for wealth and position, their members rising to occupy commanding positions in the worlds of government and finance; the Mourets are the bourgeois tradesmen and provincial bourgeoisie; and the Macquarts, with the exception of Lisa Macquart (*Le Ventre de Paris*) are the submerged proletariat. Nicholas White, in his chapter on 'Family histories and family plots', analyses the role of the family in relation to the narrative structure and thematic configurations of Zola's vast project, seen in the context of the cultural values and intellectual discourses of the nineteenth century, and Zola's own planning notes for the Rougon-Macquart series.

Auerbach concludes his comments on two passages from *Germinal* with these remarks:

Zola knows how these people thought and talked. He also knows every detail of the technical side of mining; he knows the psychology of the various classes of workers and of the administration, the functioning of the central management, the competition between the capitalist groups, the cooperation of the interests of capital with the government, the army. But he did not confine himself to writing novels about industrial workers. His purpose was to comprise – as Balzac had done, but much more methodically and painstakingly – the whole

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[More information](#)

Zola and the nineteenth century

life of the period (the Second Empire): the people of Paris, the rural population, the theater, the department stores, the stock exchange, and very much more besides. He made himself an expert in all fields; everywhere he penetrated into social structure and technology. An unimaginable amount of intelligence and labour went into the Rougon-Macquart.⁵

Materialism and imagination

As a writer, Zola was, in many respects, a typical product of his times. This is most evident in his enthusiasm for science and his acceptance of scientific determinism, which was the prevailing philosophy of the latter part of the nineteenth century. Converted from a youthful romantic idealism to realism in art and literature, Zola began promoting a scientific view of literature inspired by the aims and methods of experimental medicine. He called this new form of realism ‘naturalism’. His fourth novel, *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), a compelling tale of adultery and murder, applied these ideas and attracted much critical attention. The subtitle of the Rougon-Macquart cycle, ‘A Natural and Social History of a Family under the Second Empire’, suggests Zola’s two interconnected aims: to use fiction to demonstrate a number of ‘scientific’ notions about the ways in which human behaviour is determined by heredity and environment; and to use the symbolic possibilities of a family whose heredity is tainted to represent a diseased society – the immoral and corrupt, yet dynamic and vital, France of the Second Empire (1852–70). Zola set out, in the Rougon-Macquart cycle, to tear the mask from the Second Empire, and to expose the frantic pursuit of appetites of every kind that it unleashed. He was influenced by Balzac; by the views on heredity and environment of the positivist philosopher and cultural historian Hippolyte Taine, whose proclamation that ‘virtue and vice are products like vitriol and sugar’ he adopted as the epigraph of *Thérèse Raquin*; by Prosper Lucas, a largely forgotten nineteenth-century scientist, author of a treatise on natural heredity; and by the Darwinian view of man as essentially an animal (a translation of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, first published in 1859, appeared in French in 1865). Zola himself claimed to have based his method largely on the physiologist Claude Bernard’s *Introduction à l’étude de la médecine expérimentale* (*Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*), which he had read soon after its appearance in 1865. The ‘truth’ for which Zola aimed could only be attained, he argued, through meticulous documentation and research; the work of the novelist represented a form of practical sociology, complementing the work of the scientist, whose hope was to change the world not by judging it but by understanding it. When

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[More information](#)

BRIAN NELSON

the laws determining the material conditions of human life were understood, man would have only to act on this understanding to improve society. Zola, in other words, was an early advocate of social engineering.

Zola was most truly a ‘naturalist’ (in the sense of being a writer who based his fiction on scientific theory, and in particular on methods developed by the natural sciences) in the early novels *Thérèse Raquin* and *Madeleine Férat* (1868). In his uncompromising preface to the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin*, he defended the ‘scientific’ purpose of the book: namely, a physiological rather than psychological analysis of the ‘love’ that brings two people of differing ‘temperaments’ together, and an attempt to present as an entirely physical, ‘natural’ process, the ‘remorse’ that follows their murder of an inconvenient husband. Theory and practice had diverged considerably by the time, over a decade later, he wrote his polemical essay ‘Le Roman expérimental’ (‘The Experimental Novel’, 1880). But in any case Zola’s naturalism was not as naive and uncritical as is sometimes assumed. His formulation of the naturalist aesthetic, while it advocates a respect for truth that makes no concessions to self-indulgence, shows his clear awareness that ‘observation’ is not an unproblematic process. He recognises the importance of the observer in the act of observation, and this recognition is repeated in his celebrated formula, used in ‘The Experimental Novel’, in which he describes the work of art as ‘a corner of nature seen through a temperament’ [‘un coin de la nature vue à travers un tempérament’]. Zola fully acknowledges the importance, indeed the artistic necessity, of the selecting, structuring role of the individual artist and of the aesthetic he adopts. It is thus not surprising to find him, in a series of newspaper articles in 1866, leaping to the defence of Manet and the Impressionists – defending Manet as an artist with the courage to express his own temperament in defiance of current conventions. Zola’s brilliant critical ‘campaign’ made Manet famous. Not only did he understand what modern painters like Manet were doing, but he was able to articulate it before they could. The rich (and often awkward) interchanges between Zola and the painters of his time are discussed by Robert Lethbridge in his wide-ranging chapter on Zola and contemporary painting.

Zola’s representation of society is informed by a vast amount of dedicated first-hand observation, note-taking and research – in Les Halles, the Paris slums, the department stores, the theatre, the coal fields, the railways, the French countryside. Zola took his notebook down a mine to write *Germinal*; he travelled in a locomotive and studied the railway system and timetables to write *La Bête humaine*. He combines the vision of a painter with the approach of a sociologist and reporter in his observation of the modes of existence, the patterns, practices and distinctive languages that characterise particular communities and milieus. The texture of his novels is infused with

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Zola and the nineteenth century

an intense concern with concrete detail; and the detailed planning notes he assembled for each novel (published selectively in volume form by Henri Mitterand in 1987) represent a remarkable stock of documentary information about French society in the 1870s and 1880s.⁶ Mitterand comments:

What we find in this typical preparatory work for the successive novels in the Rougon-Macquart series are the three basic features of the ethnographic method: fieldwork, observation of the characteristics of particular groups (the railway workers on the Paris–Rouen line, the peasants of the Beauce, the shop workers of the Bon Marché), analysis and organisation of the phenomena observed in order to produce descriptive documents and syntheses.

[On découvre bien dans cette activité caractéristique de la préparation des *Rougon-Macquart*, répété de roman en roman, les trois traits principaux de la méthode ethnographique: le travail sur le terrain, l'observation de phénomènes particuliers à des groupes restreints (les cheminots de la ligne Paris-Rouen, les paysans de Beauce, le personnel du Bon Marché), l'analyse et l'organisation des phénomènes observés pour élaborer des documents descriptifs et des synthèses.]⁷

Zola's fiction acquires its power, however, not so much from its ethnographic richness as from its imaginative qualities. Zola is above all a narrative artist. Some of the chapters in this volume explore Zola's narrative art through detailed textual analysis. Susan Harrow argues that Zola's hybrid style in *Thérèse Raquin* subverts the reader's expectations (and the naturalist claim to transparency) in proto-modernist ways. Valerie Minogue brings out the narrative power and subtlety of Zola's representation of his alluring, terrifying and highly complex prostitute heroine in *Nana*. Chantal Pierre-Gnassounou, on the basis of a detailed examination of the voluminous planning notes Zola wrote for his novels, shows the extent to which, in his narrative practice, he went well beyond the procedures of the supposed naturalist method.

Zola's novels tend to be built in massively constructed blocks, huge chapters cemented together by recurring leitmotifs and a consummate gift for storytelling. In his narrative practice, he combines brilliantly the particular and the general, the individual and the mass, the everyday and the strange. His various narrative worlds, with their specific atmospheres, are always presented through the eyes of individuals, and are never separate from human experience. Often, the first chapter recounts the arrival of a stranger in a community – Gervaise Macquart in *L'Assommoir*, recently arrived in Paris, surveying the street from her hotel window, and later, walking round the neighbourhood before stopping to gaze up at the tenement house where her friend Coupeau lives; the abbé Faujas arriving in the small town of Plassans

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

BRIAN NELSON

in *La Conquête de Plassans*; Florent in *Le Ventre de Paris*, suddenly appearing in the midst of the community of Les Halles; Etienne Lantier in *Germinal*, arriving in the mining community, being introduced to the communal life of the *coron*, and descending into the mine for the first time; Octave Mouret in *Pot-Bouille*, shown round the bourgeois apartment building in the rue de Choiseul before finding his own way; Denise Baudu in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, arriving in Paris and coming, open-mouthed, upon the new department store.

The interaction between people and their environment is evoked in Zola's famous physical descriptions, which are such a prominent feature of his novels. These descriptions are not, however, mechanical products of his aesthetic credo, objective 'copies' of the real; rather, they express the very meaning, and ideological tendencies, of his narratives. Consider, for example, the lengthy descriptions of the luxurious physical décor of bourgeois existence – houses, interiors, social gatherings – in *La Curée*. The main syntactic characteristic of these passages is (as Sandy Petrey points out in his chapter) the eclipse of human subjects by abstract nouns and things, suggesting the absence of any controlling human agency, and expressing a vision of a society which, organised under the aegis of the commodity, turns people into objects. Similarly, the descriptions of the sales in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, with their cascading images and rising pitch, suggest loss of control, the female shoppers' quasi-sexual abandonment to consumer dreams, at the same time mirroring the perpetual expansion that defines the economic principles of capitalism. Description of the physical realities of workers' lives reinforces the radicalism of novels like *L'Assommoir* and *Germinal* by pointing insistently to conditions of labour that are monstrously unjust.

Zola's descriptive style reveals a genius for dramatic pictorial representation. Did anyone before him see a tenement house as he did in the second chapter of *L'Assommoir*? Descriptions become highly metaphorical; the observed reality of the world is the foundation for a poetic vision. The originality of Zola's fiction lies in its movement, colour and intensity; and especially in its remarkable symbolising effects. Emblematic features of contemporary life – the market, the machine, the tenement building, the laundry, the mine, the apartment house, the department store, the stock exchange, the theatre, the city itself – are used as giant symbols of the society of his day. Zola sees allegories of contemporary life everywhere. In *La Curée*, the new city under construction at the hands of Haussmann's workmen becomes a vast symbol of the corruption, as well as the dynamism, of Second Empire society. In *Au Bonheur des Dames*, the department store is emblematic of the new dream world of consumer culture and of the changes in sexual attitudes and class relations taking place at the time. Zola's fictional

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Zola and the nineteenth century

naturalism becomes a kind of surnaturalism, as he infuses the material world with anthropomorphic life, magnifying reality and giving it a hyperbolic, hallucinatory quality.⁸ The play of imagery and metaphor often assumes phantasmagoric dimensions. We think, for example, of Saccard in *La Curée*, swimming in a sea of gold coins – an image that aptly evokes his growing mastery as a speculator; the fantastic visions of food in *Le Ventre de Paris*; the still in *L'Assommoir*, oozing with poisonous alcohol like some malevolent beast, and Goujet's forge, where machines become giants and the noise of the overhead connecting belts becomes the flight of night birds; Nana's mansion, like a vast vagina, swallowing up men and their fortunes; the dream-like proliferation of clothing and lingerie in *Au Bonheur des Dames*; the devouring pithead in *Germinal*, lit by strange fires, rising spectrally out of the darkness.

Realist representation is imbued with mythic resonance. As Flaubert wrote: 'Nana turns into a myth, without ceasing to be real' ['Nana tourne au mythe, sans cesser d'être réelle'].⁹ *Le Ventre de Paris* is simultaneously a description of Les Halles and the story of the eternal struggle between the Fat and the Thin. *Germinal* offers perhaps the most obvious examples of the fusion of reality and myth: the pithead, Le Voreux, is a modern figuration of the Minotaur, and is constantly compared to a monstrous beast which breathes, devours, digests and regurgitates. Reality is transfigured into a theatre of archetypal forces. Zola's fascination with these forces, and their central role in his creative project, are reflected in his repeated use in his preparatory sketches for his novels of the word 'poem': 'poème des désirs du mâle' (*Nana*), 'poème de l'activité moderne' (*Au Bonheur des Dames*), 'poème vivant de la terre' (*La Terre*).

Zola's use of myth is inseparable from his vision of history, and is essentially Darwinian. His conception of society is shaped by a biological model informed by a constant struggle between the life instinct and the death instinct, the forces of creation and destruction. His social vision is marked by an ambivalence characteristic of modernity itself – a pessimistic attitude towards the present, but optimism about the future. Progress, for Zola, cannot be imagined without a form of barely contained primitive regression, as witnessed by Jacques Lantier's feelings of both veneration and destructive hatred towards his locomotive in *La Bête humaine*. Despite his faith in science, Zola's vision is strongly marked by the anxiety that accompanied industrialisation and modernity. Scientific and technological progress bring alienation as well as liberation, and modern man feels trapped by forces he has created but cannot fully control. The demons of modernity are figured in images of destruction and catastrophe: the sinister still in *L'Assommoir*, the labyrinthine Le Voreux in *Germinal*, the runaway train in

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

BRIAN NELSON

La Bête humaine, the city in flames in *La Débâcle*. Zola's naturalist world is an entropic world, in which nature inevitably reverts to a state of chaos, despite all human effort to create order and to dominate its course.¹⁰ But there is also emphasis on regeneration, on collapse being part of a larger cycle of integration and disintegration. Catastrophe has a cathartic function leading to regeneration. Zola's work always turns towards hope, as the very title of *Germinal* implies.

It is the mythopoeic quality of Zola's work that makes him one of the great figures of the French novel. Heredity serves as a structuring device, analogous to Balzac's use of recurring characters; and it has great dramatic force, allowing Zola to give a mythical dimension to his representation of the human condition. For Balzac, money and ambition were the mainsprings of human conduct; for Zola, human conduct was determined by heredity and environment, and they pursue his characters as relentlessly as the forces of fate in an ancient tragedy. As well as looking back to Balzac, Zola points forward to Proust – in the huge sweep of society he presents, in his inclusion of political and sexual themes, in his close attention to the particular idiom of individuals or groups, even in his representation (as in *La Curée* and *Nana*) of transvestism and homosexuality, but especially in his intense awareness of the disruptive effect of sex in breaking up formerly solid class barriers.

Class and sex

In 1876 Zola published in serial form his first novel of working-class life, *L'Assommoir*, which describes the social and moral degradation of that class in contemporary Paris. The novel focuses on the life and death of a washerwoman, Gervaise Macquart. It was hugely successful (the first bestseller in the history of the French novel), and it was also scandalous: the serialisation of the novel was interrupted by the government, and several bourgeois critics noisily accused Zola of pornography. These violently hostile reactions to *L'Assommoir*, together with the novel's immense commercial success (ironically, it made Zola rich), indicated that something significantly new had happened to the novel. In 1877, when the novel appeared in book form, Zola added a preface in response to the storm of controversy it had provoked. He characterised *L'Assommoir* as 'a work of truth, the first novel about the common people which does not tell lies but has the authentic smell of the people' ['une œuvre de vérité, le premier roman sur le peuple, qui ne mente pas et qui ait l'odeur du peuple' (RM ii 373–4)].

To understand the reasons for the scandal that surrounded the publication of *L'Assommoir*, and its success, we need to consider how the novel

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Zola and the nineteenth century

undermined the expectations of its contemporary readership. The novel in France was essentially a bourgeois genre, having developed in tandem with the bourgeoisie's political and material rise. It depended on a largely bourgeois readership, and was shaped by a bourgeois ideology of literary propriety. Conservative critics clearly considered that Zola had transgressed the limits of what could be written about. To focus entirely on urban workers was itself new and disturbing, and to make a working-class washerwoman a tragic heroine even more so. If the workers could take over the novel, perhaps they could also take over the government; the trauma of the Commune of 1871, when the people of Paris had repudiated their national government and set up their own, was still fresh in people's minds.

What also greatly disturbed bourgeois critics was Zola's unflinching realism, the sheer force and candour of his representation of the squalor of slum life, and especially his graphic portrayal, unprecedented in French fiction, of the workers' physical being, their bodies. Bourgeois thought generally concealed both the bourgeoisie's physical nature and the workers' humanity; this meant that Zola's emphasis on the body, by forcing the reader to recognise that the human condition is a universal, had a powerful subversive effect on the ideological justification for the capitalist hierarchy. As Jean Borie has argued, the bourgeoisie devised a complex mental system in which the body and the proletariat were alien and subservient.¹¹ In the artistic myths communicating that system, the body was either pornographic or subsumed by the soul, while workers, when not invisible, were either vicious drunkards or inspiringly resigned labourers on their way to becoming bourgeois.

What disoriented contemporary readers most, however, was not the subject matter of *L'Assommoir*, but its style: its use of working-class language and urban slang. The workers are intrusively present – they can be 'smelt' – in the very language of *L'Assommoir*. Language itself is – aggressively and provocatively – socialised. During the course of the narrative, popular speech is not simply sprinkled throughout the text but becomes, increasingly, the medium of narration. It is as if the characters themselves take on a narrative function, telling their own story. The language of the characters is absorbed by the (traditionally 'bourgeois') narrator without quotation marks, as if the novel were spoken via the collective voice of the Goutte-d'Or district, using the lexicon and syntax of the street.

Zola achieved this effect by use of a special form of the technique known as free indirect speech (*style indirect libre*). His brilliant ability to capture popular speech patterns, even when writing indirectly, reflects his powers of psychological empathy, a capacity for evoking the workers' own vision of the world; and it also has significant ideological implications. Not only are the expectations associated with conventional bourgeois narrative disrupted,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

BRIAN NELSON

but the reader is also brought into more direct and authentic contact with the characters and their culture, with their attitudes and values, than would have been the case had these been relayed exclusively by means of direct speech and conventional dialogue. It was his bold experiment with style that, according to Zola, explained why his bourgeois readers had been so upset. As he wrote in his preface:

They have taken exception to the words. My crime is that I have had the literary curiosity to collect the language of the people and pour it into a carefully wrought mould. The form! The form is the great crime.

[On s'est fâché contre les mots. Mon crime est d'avoir eu la curiosité littéraire de ramasser et de couler dans un moule très travaillé la langue du peuple. Ah! la forme, là est le grand crime! (RM ii 373)]

His 'great crime' was to have shown that the novel is not an intrinsically bourgeois genre, tied to bourgeois discourse.

The novel's central chapter (Chapter 7) describes Gervaise's celebration of her saint's day with a Rabelaisian feast where food, drink and companionship are the focus. The doors and windows are opened and the whole neighbourhood is invited to join in the merrymaking. The feast is a pivotal episode, marking the high point of Gervaise's professional success, but also a turning-point in her fortunes. The sheer extravagance of the feast suggests the lurking dangers of dissipation, and the occasion also marks the fateful return of Lantier, Gervaise's malevolent former lover. Gervaise decides to spend all of her hard-won savings on the meal, and even pawns her wedding ring in order to buy superior wine. Above all, the extravagance of the feast expresses defiance, through recklessness and prodigality, of the constrictions – the prudence and thrift – of a life always on the edge of starvation. The workers' plight is expressed through the very description of their pleasure: 'The whole shop was dying for a binge. They needed an absolute blow-out' ['Toute la boutique avait une sacrée envie de nocer. Il fallait une rigolade à la mort' (RM ii 558)]. The meal becomes an orgy, and the mounting excitement of the characters is matched by that of the narrative voice, which appears to blend joyously with the voices of the assembled company:

Christ, yes, they really stuffed themselves! If you're going to do it, you might as well do it properly, eh? And if you only have a real blow-out once in a blue moon, you'd be bloody mad not to fill yourself up to the eyeballs. You could actually see their bellies getting bigger by the minute! The women looked pregnant. Every one of them was fit to burst, the greedy pigs! Their mouths wide open, grease all over their chins, their faces looked just like arses, and so red you'd swear they were rich people's arses, with money pouring out of them.