

H-France Review Vol. 7 (October 2007), No. 124

Brian Nelson, Ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Émile Zola*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 214 pp. Further reading and specialist resources, notes, and index. \$85 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-521-83594-7. \$29.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-521-54376-7.

Review by Janice Best, Acadia University.

This edited book offers a snapshot of a variety of critical approaches to Zola's work in twelve newly commissioned essays by renowned Zola scholars. Some focus on detailed readings of individual novels. Others present analyses of his representations of society, sexuality and gender; his relations with painters of his time; his narrative art; and his role in the Dreyfus affair. Each author has provided a list of recommended readings. Included are a chronology of Zola's life, brief summaries of his novels, and a supplementary reading list at the end of the volume.

Brian Nelson opens the volume by examining Zola's place in and his relationship to the nineteenth-century. For Nelson, Zola is the quintessential writer of modernity, because he focused on the changes to society brought about by the rapid expansion of capitalism. Nelson places Zola's novels in the context of his interest in heredity, experimental medicine, and in the theory of scientific determinism. Zola is best known for his twenty-volume novel cycle, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, in which he follows the fortunes of one family over several decades. By spreading the three branches of this family through all levels of society, Zola pursues two interconnected aims: first to demonstrate through his fiction the ways in which human behaviour is shaped by heredity and environment and second to use the symbol of a family whose heredity is tainted to represent what he saw as the diseased society of France's Second Empire.

The second essay, by Nicolas White, "Family histories and family plots", makes the point that the family is not only the thematic focus of Zola's Rougon-Macquart series, but also its grand structuring principle. The main characteristic of his novelistic family, its excessive appetite, also sums up Second Empire society. The legitimate and illegitimate sides of the Rougon-Macquart family which issue from Adelaïde Fouque (tante Dide), her marriage to the gardener Rougon, and her affair with the unbalanced drunkard Macquart follow rival narrative paths, yet both tend towards the erosion of solid family structures. White focuses on the symbolic importance of the children born in the fourth novel, *La Conquête de Plassans*, the only point at which the legitimate Rougon branch and the illegitimate Mouret (née Macquart) branch grow back into one another and fuse in the marriage of Marthe Rougon and François Mouret. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the connections between Zola's private life and the culmination of the *Rougon-Macquart* series with the novel, *Le Docteur Pascal*.

In his essay, "Zola and the representation of society" Sandy Petrey points out that Zola's fiction makes the social milieu an active force, instead of simply a background to the main action. The interaction between milieu and heredity explains the characters' behaviour and determines their lives. Because of this, the representation of society figures prominently in the narrative, aesthetic, and stylistic organization in all of Zola's novels. Zola's two best known novels, *L'Assommoir* and *Germinal*, present images of society as an insurmountable obstacle. Étienne sees in the coal mine where he works a ravenous beast, and Gervaise, his mother, looks at a tenement house and fears that it will fall and crush her to death. Petrey argues that Zola's representation of society is basic to his representation of everything else. Petrey ends his essay with an analysis of the Marxist and sociocritical approaches to Zola. He claims the sociocritical approach is the ideal method to understand Zola's novels.

As Hannah Thomson points out in her essay on “Questions of sexuality and gender” it is only since the rise of feminism in the 1970s that Zola’s interest in these themes has attracted critical attention. In fact, when Zola’s novels were first published, their often overtly sexual content met with much criticism. One of the primary aims of Zola’s naturalism was to document all aspects of society, including some truths about the human condition considered unspeakable at the time. Sex is a privileged topic in Zola’s work not only because it was a central if hidden preoccupation of Second Empire society, but also because it provided the means by which the Rougon-Macquart family tree, and hence the novel cycle, could progress. This does not mean that Zola was only interested in describing sexual behaviour that conformed to traditional gender identities. Zola often portrays his characters as dominated by terrifying and irresistible sexual desire which his readers found all the more shocking because it rarely translated into the kind of family-oriented heterosexual reproductive sexuality essential to the development of both his novelist family and French society. Modern critics see in Zola a writer whose interest in non-traditional gender assignments prefigures twenty-first century conceptions of gender identity as culturally informed and socially constructed.

Robert Lethbridge’s essay examines Zola’s relationship with contemporary painters. In his writings about the development of modern painting, Zola accorded more importance to Edouard Manet than to his childhood friend Paul Cézanne. Lethbridge argues that we can better understand this critical silence as an inability to *write* about Cézanne, not only because their aesthetic principles and priorities were different, but also because Cézanne’s work did not fit well into the discursive practices of Zola’s art-historical rhetoric. The novelist used his art criticism as a testing-ground for developing his own theories. Zola is shown as self-contained within his own agenda, rather than sharing a common purpose with the painters he championed. This tension is reflected in Manet’s portrait of Zola, where the writer turns his glance away in non-recognition of the visual signs of Manet’s activities and tastes. Understanding Zola’s position in his critical discourse on art allows Lethbridge to re-read novels such as *Thérèse Raquin*, *L’Œuvre* and *Le Ventre de Paris* as demonstrations of textual superiority.

Chantal Pierre-Gnassounou examines in her essay the substantial collection of texts linked to the genesis of Zola’s novels known as the “dossiers préparatoires”. She maintains that Zola intended these files to be an exemplary illustration of the naturalist method. Starting with *Le Ventre de Paris*, they all follow the same model and illustrate to perfection the two great principles enunciated in Zola’s theoretical work, *Le Roman expérimental*: observation and experimentation. Careful examination of these planning notes has revealed, however, that in his narrative practice Zola contradicted his naturalist method. The story outline and the characters existed before Zola began his documentation and were shaped by pre-existing literary models, the most striking of which was melodrama. To counter this, Zola makes description take precedence over plot and narration, although his novels are tightly organized. His characters indulge in plotting and planning and reveal what Zola meant to hide.

The remaining essays in the volume deal mainly with studies of individual novels. Susan Harrow’s contribution looks at one of Zola’s early novels, *Thérèse Raquin*, which remains popular today and has been the subject of many stage, film, and opera adaptations. Harrow argues that Zola’s aim was to have readers experience this novel as shocking, brutal, and brutalising. In his preface, Zola makes it clear that his focus is not the psychology of his characters, but their passions and instincts. Faced with charges of crudeness and obscenity, he justifies this approach in terms of experimental objectivity. This novel, with its focus on violent desire and destructive remorse, set the tone for many of the later novels in the *Rougon-Macquart* series.

Valerie Minogue turns in her essay to another of Zola’s novels, *Nana*, which also shocked its audience for its portrayal of sexuality and desire. Minogue argues that although *Nana* shares many characteristics of the “man-eating Monster-Woman of decadent nineteenth-century fiction” (p. 121), she is a more complex character, with social and political implications. Once again, Zola is shown to go beyond his stated method of naturalism. *Nana*’s exploits and career are mythic in nature. The animal

imagery Zola uses to describe men as a pack of hounds chasing after sex reveals his contempt for Second Empire society. Some critics have seen in Nana's horrible death by smallpox an expression of Zola's patriarchal misogyny, a punishment for her revolt against male domination. For Minogue, however, Zola shows considerable sympathy for Nana and women in general. He denounces loose women for their exploitation of men, but also castigates the patriarchal Establishment that fosters them. In his essay, "Germinal: the gathering storm", David Baguley analyses the social and political messages of one of Zola's best known novels and highlights its rich variety of themes, myths, allusions and cultural references. Zola's first working class novel, *L'Assommoir*, had focused on the individual fate of Gervaise Macquart, but in *Germinal*, Zola tackles the theme of the political and social aspirations of the workers' movement through the story of a strike in a mining district in the north of France. In *Germinal*, Zola shows less interest in his earlier naturalist preoccupation with the laws of physiology. He is increasingly aware of the importance of industrial action and of socialist doctrines. Although the action of the novel is set during the Second Empire, it reflects issues contemporary to Zola.

Rae Beth Gordon examines Zola's subtle treatment of nervous disorders in *La bête humaine*, which she links to psychological theories of the mind proposed by Pierre Janet and Jean-Martin Charcot. Zola wanted the violent drama of *La Bête humaine* to have an "aura of mystery." He focuses on mechanical, involuntary, and automatic aspects of human behaviour that are beyond the control of reason. His characters act on impulse, instinct, and obsession. The notion of a division between the higher faculties (reason, judgment, and will) and the lower faculties (motor response, nervous reflex, sensation and instinct) was widely accepted in the nineteenth-century. The same year that Zola published *La Bête humaine*, Janet published a work based on over a decade of case studies and experiments in which he put forward "the first coherent, detailed description of the unconscious" (p. 153). Gordon's chapter explores the use Zola made of contemporary theories such as Janet's to create "a scientifically grounded, yet lyrical and epic, poem of the unconscious" (p. 153).

Julia Przybos' contribution deals with Zola's final series of utopist novels, *Les Trois Villes* and *Les Quatre Évangiles*. Critics generally see a rupture in style and method between the *Rougon-Macquart* and Zola's later works. Przybos argues against this traditional view of his fiction. According to Przybos, Zola's work was from the outset marked by both optimistic and pessimistic currents, at battle with each other. By looking at Zola's early and middle works such as *La Confession de Claude*, *Une page d'amour* and *Le Rêve*, Przybos identifies the idealist and utopian tendencies that triumph in the later *Évangiles*. Zola ended his *Rougon-Macquart* series with an optimistic note. The birth of a new child in the family offers hope for humanity. This was the foundation for his new cycle of novels, which outline the problems of society he saw in post-1870 France, such as slow population growth and workers' deepening poverty, but also suggest utopian solutions.

The last essay in the series by Owen Morgan offers an overview of Zola's involvement with and writings on the Dreyfus Affair. Captain Alfred Dreyfus was a Jewish officer who had been wrongly convicted, in December 1894 of betraying military secrets to Germany. Morgan begins with a review of the sequence of events leading up to the Affair, in particular the role of the various officers and handwriting experts named in Zola's open letter to the President of the Republic "J'accuse...!", published in *L'Aurore*, on 13 January 1898. The Affair began when an unsigned note, written in French, containing confidential information about military matters was found in the wastepaper basket of the German military attaché, Colonel von Schwartzkoppen. The handwriting on the note resembled that of Dreyfus. Although the only official handwriting expert consulted, Alfred Gobert, reported that the note could have been written by someone else, Dreyfus was arrested. He was tried for treason, sentenced to deportation for life and in April 1894 was sent to Devil's Island, off the coast of Guiana. A year later, another compromising document, with handwriting identical to the original note, was found in Schwartzkoppen's wastebasket. This note was traced to a certain Major Esterhazy, a "dissolute stock-market gambler" (p. 191). Despite this new evidence Dreyfus remained on Devil's Island until a group of men convinced of his innocence met with Zola to solicit his help. Morgan retraces the series of articles

Zola published prior to the time Esterhazy was brought to trial, focusing on his transition from “comparative restraint to impassioned polemic” (p. 195). Shortly after Esterhazy was tried and declared innocent, Zola published his “J'accuse...!”, hoping to force a public trial for libel in order to bring the facts about the Dreyfus case to public attention. Zola was put on trial, found guilty, and sentenced to the maximum penalty. He spent eleven months in exile in England. The 1894 judgment against Dreyfus was eventually quashed, and a new court martial ordered. A second guilty verdict made it clear that no court martial would admit to an error of justice and a presidential pardon was issued. Dreyfus' final rehabilitation came in 1906, four years after Zola's death.

This is a good general introduction to some aspects of Zola studies. There is continuity between the essays, particularly in the way each author looks at Zola's stated methods of literary naturalism, based on neutral observation and scientific experiment, in order to show how his imagination often took him beyond his method. Overall, the essays are well written and are a useful resource for readers new to Zola's works, such as students, as well as for Zola scholars.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Brian Nelson, “Zola and the nineteenth century”

Nicholas White, “Family histories and family plots”

Sandy Petrey, “Zola and the representation of society”

Hannah Thompson, “Questions of sexuality and gender”

Robert Lethbridge, “Zola and contemporary painting”

Chantal Pierre-Gnassounou, “Zola and the art of fiction”

Susan Harrow, “*Thérèse Raquin*: animal passion and the brutality of reading”

Valerie Minogue, “*Nana*: the world, the flesh and the devil”

David Baguley, “*Germinal*: the gathering storm”

Rae Beth Gordon, “*La Bête humaine*: the poetics of the unconscious”

Julia Przybos, “Zola's utopias”

Owen Morgan, "J'accuse...!" : Zola and the Dreyfus Affair"

Janice Best Acadia University janice.best@acadiau.ca

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (October 2007), No. 124

ISSN 1553-9172