

INTRODUCTION

*Readers who do not wish to learn details of the plot
will prefer to read the Introduction as an Afterword*

ZOLA's ambition was to emulate Balzac by writing a comprehensive fictional history of his own society. He is the quintessential novelist of modernity, understood as a sense of tumultuous change. 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 organization, and heightened political pressures. Zola was fascinated by change, and specifically by the emergence of a new, mass society. His 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 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*, published between 1871 and 1893. In eight months, during 1868 and 1869, Zola outlined the series of 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. The fortunes of the various family members, as they spread through all levels of society, would be followed over several decades. The Rougons represent the 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 (*The Belly of Paris*), are the submerged proletariat. Through his family Zola examined systematically the social, sexual, and moral landscape of the late nineteenth century along with its political, financial, and artistic contexts. Zola began work on the series in 1869 and devoted himself to it for the next quarter of a century.

The Fortune of the Rougons (*La Fortune des Rougon*, 1871) is the first volume of the Rougon-Macquart cycle. In his preface to the novel Zola wrote that the cycle would have two main themes, physiological and historical; the demonstration of the 'laws' of heredity would be paralleled by the portrayal of a society whose characteristics are exemplified by the Rougon-Macquart family: 'The great characteristic of the Rougon-Macquarts . . . is their ravenous appetites, the great upsurge of our age as it rushes to satisfy those appetites.' The cycle would portray 'a strange period of human folly and shame'. The symbolic possibilities of a family whose heredity is tainted would thus be used to represent a diseased society—the dynamic but corrupt France of Napoleon III's Second Empire (1852–70). *The Fortune of the Rougons* is not only the inaugural novel of *Les Rougon-Macquart* but also, in every sense, its founding text. As Zola wrote in his preface: 'The first episode, presented here as *The Fortune of the Rougons*, could bear the scientific title *Origins*.' The novel recounts the prehistory of the family, establishing the genealogical basis for the series through the expository flashbacks in Chapter 2 (the Rougons' past) and Chapter 4 (the Macquarts' past). Each descendant of the family's founder, Adélaïde Fouque (Aunt Dide), and the two men who shared her life, Rougon and Macquart, will be the protagonist of a subsequent novel: Aristide Rougon (*The Kill and Money*), Lisa Macquart (*The Belly of Paris*), François and Marthe Mouret (*The Conquest of Plassans*), Serge Mouret (*The Sin of Father Mouret*), Gervaise Macquart (*L'Assommoir*), Hélène Mouret (*Une page d'amour*), Anna Coupeau (*Nana*), Octave Mouret (*Pot Luck* and *The Ladies' Paradise*), Pauline Quenu (daughter of Lisa Macquart) (*La Joie de vivre*), Étienne Lantier (*Germinal*), Claude Lantier (*The Masterpiece*), Jean Macquart (*Earth* and *La Débâcle*), Angélique Rougon (daughter of Sidonie) (*The Dream*), Pascal Rougon (*Doctor Pascal*). The only exception is a third son Zola gave to Gervaise Macquart: Jacques Lantier, who was invented much later, in 1889, when Zola began to write *La Bête humaine*.

Scientific Observation and Poetic Vision

As a writer, Zola was in many respects a typical product of his times. This is most evident in his articles on the role of the writer and the function of literature, which reflect his enthusiasm for science and his

acceptance of scientific determinism—the prevailing philosophy of the second half of the nineteenth century. Converted from a youthful romantic idealism to realism in art and literature, he began promoting a scientific view of literature inspired by the aims and methods of experimental medicine. He called this new form of realism ‘Naturalism’. 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 not only as a vehicle for a great social chronicle but also to demonstrate a number of ‘scientific’ notions about the ways in which human behaviour is determined by heredity and environment. 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* (1867); 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 complete 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 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 the laws determining the material conditions of human life were understood, man would have only to act on this understanding to improve society.

Zola was most truly a Naturalist, in the sense of being a writer who based his fiction on scientific theory, in the early novels *Thérèse Raquin* and *Madeleine Féral* (1868). In his 1868 preface to the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin*, a compelling tale of adultery and murder, he defended the ‘scientific’ purpose of the book in the face of accusations that he was the purveyor of ‘putrid literature’. His purpose, he said, was to use a strictly experimental methodology to analyse the processes by which his characters (whom he calls ‘temperaments’) are completely dominated by their nerves and blood, are devoid of free will, and are drawn into every act of their lives by the inexorable laws

of their physical nature. Theory and practice had diverged considerably by the time, over a decade later, he wrote his lengthy polemical essay '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 recognizes 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'. 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.

Zola's 'scientific' representation of society in *Les Rougon-Macquart* is informed by a vast amount of dedicated first-hand observation, note-taking, and research—in Les Halles (*The Belly of Paris*), the Paris slums (*L'Assommoir*), the department stores (*The Ladies' Paradise*), the theatre (*Nana*), the coalfields (*Germinal*), the railways (*La Bête humaine*), the French countryside (*Earth*). Zola combines the approach of a reporter and sociologist with the vision of a painter in his observation of the modes of existence, the patterns and practices that characterize particular milieux. The texture of his novels is infused with an intense concern with concrete detail, and the detailed planning notes he assembled for each novel represent a remarkable stock of documentary information about French society in the 1870s and 1880s.

Zola's fiction acquires its power, however, not so much from its ethnographic richness as from its imaginative qualities. In his narrative practice he combines brilliantly the particular and the general, the individual and the mass, the everyday and the fantastic. His various narrative worlds, with their specific atmospheres, are always presented through the eyes of individuals, and are never separate from

human experience. The interaction between people and their environments is evoked in his celebrated physical descriptions. These descriptions are not, however, mechanical products of his aesthetic credo, parts of the text that can easily be skipped; 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 *The Kill*. The main syntactic characteristic of these passages is 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, organized under the aegis of the commodity, turns people into objects. Similarly, the descriptions of the sales in *The Ladies' Paradise*, 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 consumerism. The observed reality of the world is the foundation for a poetic vision. The originality of Zola's fiction lies in its remarkable symbolizing 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 *The Kill*, 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 *The Ladies' Paradise*, 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.

Realist representation is imbued with mythic resonance. The pithead in *Germinal* is a modern figuration of the Minotaur, a monstrous beast that breathes, devours, digests, and regurgitates. Reality is transfigured into a theatre of archetypal forces; and it is the mythopoeic dimension of Zola's work that makes him one of the great figures of the European novel. Heredity not only serves as a structuring device, analogous to Balzac's use of recurring characters, but also 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