

Le Roman expérimental and Zola's Master Plan

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RÉSUMÉ

La question de la réconciliation de la mission scientifique de l'écrivain naturaliste avec l'expression artistique propre à la littérature se pose dans Le Roman expérimental. À l'époque, Zola répondit à ses critiques en affirmant que le mouvement naturaliste se situait dans la prolongation de la littérature qui l'avait précédé, et en soutenant qu'il n'avait pas inventé ce soi-disant nouveau modèle de naturalisme. En introduisant l'élément scientifique dans la littérature, Zola contribue donc à son évolution naturelle en même temps qu'il révolutionne le concept même de littérature. Cet article propose une vue d'ensemble de l'histoire et de la discussion que générèrent la théorie naturaliste et Le Roman expérimental aux fins d'éclaircir l'ambitieux projet zolien d'introduire les théories scientifiques dans la forme artistique du roman et de parvenir ainsi à une synthèse de la science et de l'art dans le naturalisme.

The problem of reconciling the scientific mission of the naturalist writer with the artistic expression of literature arises in *Le Roman expérimental*, a collection of essays published in 1880 in which Émile Zola articulates his views on naturalist theory and practice, following the example of Claude Bernard's experimental method in medicine.¹ This fundamental text can be considered Zola's manifesto of naturalism. However, Zola's theories were generally disparaged for many years. In 1992, Yves Chevrel observed that most criticism, from Zola's time through the twentieth century emphasized the themes of the naturalist novel over the experimental method, saying that *Le Roman expérimental* "has been neglected for a long while, and if Zola research, especially during the last few decades, has taken some pleasure in re-evaluating his novels, it has at the same time underestimated or even ignored his critical and theoretical studies."² Since Chevrel's observation in the 1990s, there has been renewed interest in Zola's theories, with significant contributions from Henri Mitterand among others.³ This article presents an overview of the history and discussion surrounding naturalist theory and *Le Roman expérimental* in order to elucidate Zola's master plan to introduce scientific theories into the art form of the novel, thus arriving at a synthesis of science and art in naturalism in the late nineteenth century.

¹ The title essay, "Le Roman expérimental," is the most significant for this article, but general discussion herein refers to the work as a whole: Émile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1971).

² Yves Chevrel, "Toward an Aesthetic of the Naturalist Novel," in *Naturalism in the European Novel: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. Brian Nelson (New York: Berg, 1992) 47.

³ See in particular Henri Mitterand, *Zola, tel qu'en lui-même* (Paris: PUF, 2009). Mitterand introduces his book as an attempt to "relativiser" Zola's naturalism, defining the word in this way: "c'est-à-dire ni prendre pour argent comptant les définitions et les propositions des *Romanciers naturalistes* et du *Roman expérimental*, ni en dénier totalement l'intérêt et la valeur" (vii).

By the end of the 1870s, Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* series of novels, eventually numbering twenty in all, was well underway with the triumph of *L'Assommoir* still resounding, even as *Nana* began to appear in serial form alongside "Le Roman expérimental" in *Le Voltaire* in October 1879. Yet, the internal conflict of naturalism in theory and in practice was already showing in this concurrent publication. Alain Pagès suggests in *La Bataille littéraire* that the fictional work overshadows the theoretical essay: "Si la critique a si mal lu pendant l'automne 1879 ce texte fondamental, c'est certainement à cause de son entourage romanesque [...]. Ainsi le discours naturaliste, dans son effort de conquête spatiale, s'est-il détruit lui-même: par son désir d'une trop grande extension."⁴ While Pagès is concerned here with the public reception of these texts, a look inside them also finds a competition between theory and fiction on the level of content.

Many of the articles gathered in *Le Roman expérimental* were originally written between 1875 and 1879, first for the Russian journal *Vestnik Evropy* [*Le Messager de l'Europe*], before being published in France.⁵ In his later preface to *Le Roman expérimental*, Zola indicates his polemical purposes, and thanks Russia for accepting his writings when his own nation's press did not:

Qu'il me soit permis de témoigner publiquement toute ma gratitude à la grande nation qui a bien voulu m'accueillir et m'adopter, au moment où pas un journal, à Paris, ne m'acceptait et ne tolérait ma bataille littéraire. [...] Ce sont donc ici des articles de combat, des manifestes, si l'on veut, écrits dans la fougue même de l'idée, sans aucun raffinement de rhétorique.⁶

The language Zola uses is revealing, as he speaks in a very personal way of the literary battle he was waging. Indeed, Zola's prolific contributions to several journals, especially in the year 1879, amount to nothing short of a conquest for naturalism.⁷

Henri Mitterand, in "Zola théoricien et critique du roman," refers to the period of 1879-1881 as "une deuxième époque du naturalisme [qui coïncide] avec un véritable forcing didactique et polémique de Zola."⁸ After years of engaging in journalistic debate, Zola was ready to leave that part of his career behind, with retrospective works like *Le Roman expérimental*, and a year-long campaign of articles, justly called *Une campagne*, in *Le Figaro*.⁹ Zola's strategy seems to have been to solidify the place of both naturalism and himself in the literary world. His promotion of naturalism at this particular time, and in the comprehensive format of a book, underscores the importance of the experimental method in naturalism. As shown even by the title, *Le Roman expérimental* insists upon the primacy of scientific experiment in literature and proves to be invaluable for documenting

⁴ Alain Pagès, *La Bataille littéraire: Essai sur la réception du naturalisme à l'époque de Germinal* (Paris: Séguier, 1989) 84.

⁵ Pagès comments on the ramifications of Zola's collaboration with the foreign journal: "La théorie du 'Roman expérimental' va naître de cette nouvelle possibilité d'expression, de ce détour insolite par une revue étrangère. [...] *Le Messager de l'Europe* est l'école du discours naturaliste" (82-83).

⁶ Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* 55.

⁷ Consult pages 118-27 of Henri Mitterand and Halina Suwala, *Émile Zola journaliste* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1968) for proof of the quantity of articles Zola published in 1879 alone. Moreover, that year was the first since the debut of the *Rougon-Macquart* series in which he did not publish a novel, leading Alain Pagès to conclude that it was instead a year for "réflexion théorique" (80).

⁸ Henri Mitterand, "Zola théoricien et critique du roman," Preface to Zola's *Du roman* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1989) 14.

⁹ While he maintained no regular engagement with any journal after 1882, Zola did occasionally write articles and open letters, the most famous being "J'Accuse," published in *L'Aurore*, 13 January 1898, in defense of Alfred Dreyfus. Also of note is his *Nouvelle campagne* in *Le Figaro* in 1895-1896.

the impact of naturalism not only as a literary movement of the late nineteenth century, but also in terms of its scientific and historical significance.

Naturalism is distinguished as a literary movement incorporating ideas of the great scientists and theorists of the day: Claude Bernard, Prosper Lucas, Hippolyte Taine, Auguste Comte. While the insertion of scientific discoveries in literature is a revolutionary conception, the naturalist movement is also an evolution. In response to critics, Zola asserts that the naturalist movement which he spearheaded is an extension of the literature that came before it, and that he did not invent the supposedly new idea of naturalism, or even the term itself, which drew such criticism:

Mon grand crime serait d'avoir inventé et lancé un mot nouveau, pour désigner une école littéraire vieille comme le monde. D'abord, je crois ne pas avoir inventé ce mot, qui était en usage dans plusieurs littératures étrangères; je l'ai tout au plus appliqué à l'évolution actuelle de notre littérature nationale. Ensuite, le naturalisme, assure-t-on, date des premières œuvres écrites [...].¹⁰

To situate naturalism in the context of his own times, Zola incorporates many scientific terms and notions in his theoretical writings, with words such as “observation,” “enquête,” “étude,” “document humain,” and “logique” dominating his discourse. However, as Henri Mitterand suggests, the scientific quality of Zola’s naturalism is not quite as innovative as it may seem: “[L]e discours naturaliste de Zola renoue bien avec l’héritage de l’esprit des Lumières, qui au dix-huitième siècle avait déjà emprunté les objectifs et le langage de la rationalité scientifique pour revendiquer la liberté du jugement et la liberté de la création.”¹¹ Moreover, Aimé Guedj contends that the whole matter of the relationship between science and literature reopens an earlier debate: “En effet, ce n’est pas aux alentours de 1880 mais vingt ans plus tôt que se forme l’image prestigieuse du romancier savant. Et ce n’est pas Zola mais les critiques les plus sérieux des revues les plus éminentes qui la mettent en circulation à propos d’une toute autre génération d’écrivains,” which includes Flaubert for example.¹² Thus, Zola’s purportedly new premise of the writer as a savant employing logic and reason is put into question, since others had made the association between literature and science before him.

For as much as Zola set out to provide a modern definition of naturalism, the literary current is equally determined by what it is not. There is evidence that Zola found fault with certain aspects of the French literary heritage, among them classical idealism and romanticism.¹³ Yet, contrary to his rejection of these former standards, hints of classicism and romanticism appear both in Zola’s fictional works and in his theory of naturalism. Therefore, it would be wrong to disregard completely the presence of past literary influences in naturalism. Zola was inspired by authors like Hugo, Shakespeare, and Montaigne, in addition to contemporary scientific theorists. Halina Suwala, in *Autour de Zola et du naturalisme*, comes to the conclusion that there can be a successful blend of science and literary tradition:

C’est là, dans cette alliance féconde entre science et littérature, que réside pour Zola, sinon la rupture, du moins l’apport nouveau de la formule naturaliste. On peut observer chez Zola-

¹⁰ Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* 139.

¹¹ Henri Mitterand, “Le naturalisme théorique de Zola,” *Lez Valenciennes* 10 (1985): 187.

¹² Aimé Guedj, “Le naturalisme avant Zola: La littérature et la science sous le Second Empire,” *Revue des Sciences Humaines* 160 (1975): 568.

¹³ See Mitterand, “Le naturalisme théorique de Zola” 187.

théoricien une double tendance: volonté de sauvegarder la continuité, de chercher dans les grandes œuvres du passé des titres de noblesse pour sa formule naturaliste, et volonté d'apporter quelque chose de radicalement nouveau, conforme aux exigences de l'époque nouvelle [...].¹⁴

This double tendency manages to include the seemingly opposed notions of continuity and rupture, which Suwala uses to characterize the formulation and elaboration of naturalist theory. She extends this observation to Zola's work as a novelist: "Il emploie tous les procédés les mieux éprouvés de l'art narratif, les structures les plus codées du récit, mais en les détournant de leur utilisation traditionnelle, en les subordonnant à des objectifs nouveaux."¹⁵ Naturalism, as a theory and in practice, differs from other literary movements precisely because it marries tradition and innovation from the disciplines of literature and science, in effect creating a literary art form according to scientific laws and procedures.

To understand the convergence of science and literature at this point, one may consider two ways to account for the development of the naturalist movement.¹⁶ First, naturalism is equated to a revolution whereby naturalist writers, rather than following in the footsteps of their predecessors, break significantly from that tradition and strike out on their own path. A second view of naturalism holds that it is more of an evolution out of previous movements, dependent on them for its very existence and sharing some of the same characteristics along with the new, which in this case is the inclusion of science. According to this viewpoint, Zola proudly traces the heritage of naturalism to Diderot, ancestor of the naturalists ("le véritable aïeul des naturalistes"), whose influence was carried through to Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, and the Goncourt brothers.¹⁷ Though most critics believe in the need to temper these claims, Charles Beuchot, in his far-reaching *Histoire du naturalisme français*, enthusiastically confirmed this line of "triumphant" naturalism, calling Homer the first naturalist and Rabelais "le véritable père du naturalisme" (287).¹⁸

While the process of evolution is evident in attempts to define the literary history of naturalism, many subscribe to the generalization that Zola sought a complete revolution in literature by rejecting romanticism as a legitimate shaping factor. David Baguley, for instance, develops the thesis in *Naturalist Fiction* that Zola reduces all literature to two contending types: naturalist and romantic. Yet, Zola was forthcoming in stating otherwise: "Aujourd'hui, quand on étudie le mouvement littéraire depuis le commencement du siècle, le romantisme apparaît comme le début logique de la grande évolution naturaliste."¹⁹ Still, despite his insistence upon the vast evolution of naturalism through the ages, including the romantic era, Zola expresses the desire to break from the constraints of the romantic tendencies ingrained in naturalist writers, a struggle that would become apparent in his novel *L'Œuvre*. Zola's own words in 1896 reveal that he held on to the view throughout his career that each new literary movement must wipe the slate clean: "Dans cette terrible lutte pour la vie qu'est la littérature, tout nouveau venu a le besoin de faire la place nette, d'égorger ses aînés, s'il veut pour lui tout le

¹⁴ Halina Suwala, *Autour de Zola et du naturalisme* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1993) 56.

¹⁵ Suwala 56.

¹⁶ See David Baguley's chapter on the "Histories" of naturalism in *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁷ However, Baguley suggests that, "had they been alive to do so, Stendhal and Balzac would have protested as vigorously as did Flaubert at being included in Zola's great tradition. [...] Clearly, for polemical purposes, the novelist is fabricating a largely mythical heritage in the guise of literary history" (*Naturalist Fiction* 13).

¹⁸ "Grâce à des génies de la force d'un Balzac, d'un Stendhal ou d'un Flaubert, le naturalisme poursuit joyeusement sa marche triomphale" (Charles Beuchot, *Histoire du naturalisme français*, 2 vols. [Paris: Editions Corrêa, 1949] 287). Baguley challenges Beuchot's claims: "The author casts his net over an extraordinarily wide sea, making half of French literature naturalist in kind [...]. Most other literary historians, as one would expect, are more restrained in their views, but there are more than a few vestiges of the same overall vision and spirit" (*Naturalist Fiction* 14).

¹⁹ Émile Zola, "Lettre à la jeunesse," *Le Messager de l'Europe*, May 1879, rpt. in *Le Roman expérimental* 108.

champ, tout l'empire."²⁰ This statement, with its allusions to battle, demonstrates that Zola regarded naturalism as a revolutionary movement, even though at other times he acknowledged the contributions of previous movements.

Zola's contemporary, Guy de Maupassant, member of the Médan Group and participant in the group's 1880 publication of *Les Soirées de Médan*, another work marketed as a manifesto of naturalism,²¹ perceptively combined both the revolution and evolution points of view in one characterization of naturalism. He defined Zola's literature as a change from what came before, even if, he claimed, nothing could really be called "new" in literature any more. In his article titled "Émile Zola," he comments:

Zola est, en littérature, un révolutionnaire, c'est-à-dire un ennemi féroce de ce qui vient d'exister. Quiconque a l'intelligence vive, un ardent besoin de nouveau [...], est forcément un révolutionnaire, par lassitude de choses qu'il connaît trop [...]. Alors un étrange besoin de changement naît en nous; [...] nous cherchons autre chose, ou plutôt nous revenons à autre chose; mais cet "autre chose" nous le prenons, nous le remanions, nous le complétons, nous le faisons nôtre; et nous nous imaginons, de bonne foi parfois, l'avoir inventé.²²

Maupassant points here to a certain "autre chose," which can be interpreted as the experimental method itself and the inclusion of science in literature. By bringing a new element into literature, we could say, Zola contributes to its natural evolution, while at the same time revolutionizing the very concept of literature, building on his view that naturalism is not entirely new, but rather a new incarnation of a literary tradition that is centuries old.

The principal element that is the goal in each of these manifestations of naturalism is "la vérité" or truth. Among naturalism's literary predecessors, the realist movement comes through most convincingly as an impetus to depict what is real. Yet, the search for truth ties naturalism to the classical and romantic traditions as well.²³ The fundamental idea of truth belongs to an extensive line of literary predecessors and, despite its new scientific angle, does not constitute much of an innovation in naturalist literature. Science, however, is an integral part of the evolution of naturalism that extends beyond the bounds of literature. Zola writes, "le Naturalisme est l'évolution même de l'intelligence moderne. [...] [I]l ouvre l'infini, comme la science des Newton et des Laplace a reculé les limites du ciel des poètes."²⁴ In taking such a grand view of naturalism, Zola is asserting his master plan, one that is based on subjective invention or intervention in naturalist writing.

What matters most is Zola's belief that the unifying factor over such a long and diverse span of literature is observation, the starting point for writers, who seek to represent the world around them, or "nature," as faithfully as possible. For Zola, nature is not merely a background, nor should it on the other hand dominate through gratuitous description. Rather, nature is vital to the discovery of human existence. The artist must seek to represent "le vrai," or "la vérité" of human existence, which is implied in Zola's conception of nature. In his "Lettre à la jeunesse," he urges

²⁰ Émile Zola, *Nouvelle campagne* in *Œuvres complètes*, éd. Henri Mitterand, vol. 14 (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1970) 724.

²¹ See Jennifer K. Wolter, "The Médan Group and the Campaign of Naturalism," in *Models of Collaboration in Nineteenth-Century French Literature: Several Authors, One Pen*, ed. Seth Whidden (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009) 107-19.

²² Guy de Maupassant, "Émile Zola" in *Chroniques*, vol. 2 (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1978) 311-12.

²³ Mitterand points out in his discussion of "la vérité naturaliste": "Les Classiques et les Romantiques ont travaillé eux aussi au nom de la vérité" ("Le naturalisme théorique de Zola" 186).

²⁴ Émile Zola, letter to Gustave Rivet, 12 February 1879 in *Correspondance*, ed. B. H. Bakker, vol. 3 (Montreal and Paris: Presses de l'Université de Montréal and Éditions du CNRS, 1982) 294.

naturalist writers to use the experimental method to express the “truth” of their personal experience: “[O]n vous demande de chercher et de classer votre part de documents humains, de découvrir votre coin de vérité, grâce à la méthode.”²⁵ Elsewhere in *Le Roman expérimental*, Zola likens the practice of writing to the pursuit of truth throughout all time: “Mon opinion personnelle est que le naturalisme date de la première ligne qu’un homme a écrite. Dès ce jour-là, la question de la vérité était posée.”²⁶ In sum, though the immediate predecessor of naturalism is realism, there are still vestiges of romanticism and classicism from naturalism’s long and varied pedigree, a situation suggesting that naturalism is not only a revolutionary movement in literature, but a form evolved from other forms, with the best traits selected in the Darwinian sense.

But in naturalism, does selection occur naturally or is it manipulated by the writer? The impact of the experimental method emerges here, with Zola calling upon Claude Bernard’s methodology from the world of science. In a 1960 study of Bernard, Reino Virtanen refers to those who criticized Zola’s adoption of the experimental method: “Almost every commentator on Zola’s essay has smiled at the presumption of the novelist who fancies he is conducting experiments when he is merely contriving plots and putting invented characters into fictitious settings.”²⁷ The problem of selection is indeed significant because it compromises the objectivity of the writer. Many critics have only endorsed the experimental method to the point where they perceive it falters. Historian Roland N. Stromberg takes this view:

[Zola] could approximate the scientific method in collection of “facts”; he could remain morally neutral toward his facts by overtly neither praising nor blaming. But his treatment of his material was another matter. Here, no doubt unconsciously, he used many criteria of selection not drawn from his facts. Underneath the trappings of scientific objectivity, Zola structured his tales much as novelists always have done, using myths, archetypes, value judgments.²⁸

Thus, the imposition of the artist’s personality alters any attempt at an objective representation of facts. Stromberg concludes: “Realistic observation can provide the materials for art, but it cannot be that art itself.”²⁹

Zola’s preface to the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin* (originally published in 1867)³⁰ explains the project in terms of a scientific experiment: “Dans *Thérèse Raquin*, j’ai voulu étudier des tempéraments et non des caractères. [...] J’ai choisi des personnages souverainement dominés par leurs nerfs et leur sang, dépourvus de libre arbitre, entraînés à chaque acte de leur vie par les fatalités de leur

²⁵ Zola, “Lettre à la jeunesse,” *Le Roman expérimental* 127.

²⁶ Zola, “Le naturalisme au théâtre,” *Le Roman expérimental* 140.

²⁷ Reino Virtanen, *Claude Bernard and His Place in the History of Ideas* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960) 122.

²⁸ Roland N. Stromberg, ed., *Realism, Naturalism, and Symbolism: Modes of Thought and Expression in Europe, 1848-1914* (New York: Walker, 1968) xvii.

²⁹ Stromberg xviii.

³⁰ This “preface” is an addendum to the novel (15 April 1868). It is in essence, a defense against the charges of immorality in literature, or “la littérature putride,” leveled by Louis Ulbach, under the pseudonym of Ferragus. Zola also wrote a response to the article in *Le Figaro*, 31 January 1868, in which he strives to defend not himself, but “la cause de la vérité” (Émile Zola, *Œuvres complètes*, éd. Henri Mitterand, vol 10 (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1968) 727. His argument comes down to one striking metaphor: “La vérité, comme le feu, purifie tout” (729). On the “discours préfaciel” of *Thérèse Raquin*, consult Henri Mitterand’s “La Préface et ses lois: Avant-propos romantiques” in *Le Discours du roman* (Paris: PUF, 1980).

chair.”³¹ By depicting characters deprived of free will, Zola shows the strength of temperament over reason. In this deterministic view, characters are fated to succumb to forces beyond their control, leading them to irrational acts or behavior that cannot be explained by science alone. But, they are also subject to the direction of the writer. Zola’s treatment of the characters does not fully obey the rules he expounds in the preface. As Lilian R. Furst and Peter N. Skrine point out, the characters in this early Zola novel are “not mere puppets at the mercy of outer determinant forces,” resulting in the assertion that “the prototype of the Naturalist novel already comes up against certain features of Naturalist theory which were to prove untenable and indeed undesirable in a work of art.”³²

For some critics, the deterministic aspect of naturalism takes away from the reader’s interest. Limitations imposed on characters render them ordinary to a fault, as suggested by F. W. J. Hemmings: “If one analyses Zola’s characters singly, one finds that they are sadly lacking in what is called autonomy. They rarely develop, they seldom if ever transcend their ‘given’ natures, they never surprise us.”³³ However, the behavior of many of Zola’s characters is far from ordinary. Rather, it is the extraordinariness of their fictional lives that shocks readers at first, then settles in as commonplace. David Baguley speaks of a “*déjà-lu*” whereby every naturalist novel is essentially the same: “Dans le registre naturaliste, les malheurs et les désastres sont facilement prévisibles; les ‘fatalités de la chair’ sont inexorables.”³⁴ In this way, the innovation of writing about characters’ heredity or other physiological influences quickly becomes overused.

Characters of naturalist novels are often victims of a pessimistic determinism in accordance with the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. René-Pierre Colin assesses the “personnage-type du roman naturaliste”: “Écrasé par la vie, les choses, la fatalité biologique, il est perpétuellement en porte à faux par rapport à son siècle.”³⁵ Colin generalizes that “le pessimisme schopenhauerien cristallisa bien des thèmes déjà familiers aux naturalistes français”³⁶ and Yves Chevrel echoes the sentiment in saying that “le naturalisme serait la version littéraire du schopenhauerisme.”³⁷ Zola, however, protested against being labeled a Schopenhauerian and criticized other naturalist writers for their increasingly pessimistic works.³⁸ Without placing too much emphasis on the pessimistic side of determinism, one finds that Zola does subscribe to the notion that humans are subject to their biology and, as a result of determinism, rational choice and self-control give way to genetic anomalies or other overwhelming circumstances.

Furthermore, there is an overriding question that stems from Zola’s deterministic practice of depriving his characters of free will, one which perhaps shakes the very foundation of his novelistic purpose, as Yves Malinas questions in *Zola et les hérédités imaginaires*:

[O]n peut se demander à quelles règles obéissent ces personnages dépourvus de libre arbitre: ont-elles été édictées par Zola? Quelle est alors leur valeur scientifique?... Sont-elles indépendantes de l’auteur? Dans ce cas, comment en a-t-il eu connaissance?... S’il ne les connaît que pour y être

³¹ Émile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1970) 59-60.

³² Lilian R. Furst and Peter N. Skrine, *Naturalism*, The Critical Idiom Series, vol. 18 (London: Methuen, 1971) 45.

³³ F. W. J. Hemmings, ed., *The Age of Realism* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1978) 188.

³⁴ David Baguley, *Le Naturalisme et ses genres* (Paris: Nathan, 1995) 5.

³⁵ René-Pierre Colin, *Schopenhauer en France: Un mythe naturaliste* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1979) 152.

³⁶ Colin 149.

³⁷ Yves Chevrel, *Le Naturalisme* (Paris: PUF, 1982) 106.

³⁸ David Baguley discusses Zola’s “fundamental disagreement with [other writers’] uncompromising pessimism” in “From Man’s Misfortune to *Au Bonheur des Dames*: Zola Against Naturalism” in *Excavatio* 3 (1993): 111.

soumis lui-même comme tous les humains, s'il ne dispose pas lui-même de plus de liberté que ses personnages... alors, qui a écrit les *Rougon-Macquart*?³⁹

Malinas answers this question by saying that Zola did understand this contradiction and explained it by distinguishing between the poet and the savant. However, is it not also possible that, in doing so, he explains away the validity of his scientific goals and undermines his own objective of infusing science in literature?

Alain de Lattre poses a similar question in an effort to reconcile the work of the artist with that of the savant: "Si l'artiste et le savant parlent de la même chose, ils n'en parlent pas de la même façon et ce que l'on demande à l'un n'est pas ce qu'on attend de l'autre."⁴⁰ While many scholars grapple with the duality of the poet and the scientist in the person of the naturalist writer, J. H. Matthews does not view this situation as problematic for Zola. Of course, Matthews's opinion in arriving at this acceptance of both sides is not overly simplistic. He quotes Zola's words from *Le Roman expérimental* as confirmation: "Il n'y a pas de contradiction entre ce mot 'poète' et le but scientifique que poursuit le romancier. Car, pour Zola, la Science est 'de la poésie expliquée,' et le savant, 'un poète qui remplace les hypothèses de l'imagination par l'étude exacte des choses et des êtres.'"⁴¹ For Zola, science and poetry are one, as he states in the letter of 6 July 1864 to Antony Valabrègue: "Je crois qu'il y a dans l'étude de la nature, telle qu'elle est, une grande source de poésie."⁴² Although Matthews's explanation offers a plausible compromise, allowing both the poetic and scientific aspects of the writer, the problem is keeping in check the temperament of the artist. For the scientist, imagination has no place in the process of observation and experimentation. But, the objectivity of science must be compromised in a work of art. Without the guidance of a creative imagination, the result would be simply a scientific report.

Moreover, the authoritative power of the scientific method is also at risk when it is faultily made to fit where it does not belong in literature. De Lattre maintains that "l'application de la méthode scientifique à l'œuvre littéraire a pour effet de compromettre le souci de réalisme au nom de quoi précisément elle en sollicitait l'appui."⁴³ Is it possible, then, that Zola's use of science backfires precisely where it was supposed to have strengthened his naturalist cause? This question may be answered in part by the artificiality of the experimental method when applied in literature. Malinas notes that "l'expérimentation n'est pas l'observation: elle demande des conditions artificielles."⁴⁴ Thus, the problem of naturalism, for many of Zola's contemporaries and modern-day critics alike, is the attempt at experimentation, not observation, as Brigitte Weltman-Aron argues in "Le 'Procès-verbal' de l'expérience": "[P]eu de critiques mettent en cause l'instrument que constitue la faculté d'observation ou la recherche de documents pour le romancier; seule la possibilité de l'expérience dans un sens scientifique semble contestable dans un roman."⁴⁵

A common criticism of the experimental method is that it can only be artificially manipulated in literature since the novelist is always in control of conditions in the experiment/novel. Tullio Pagano, in *Experimental Fictions*, finds that "the notion of experiment in narrative always implies

³⁹ Yves Malinas, *Zola et les hérédités imaginaires* (Paris: Expansion Scientifique Française, 1985) 30.

⁴⁰ Alain de Lattre, *Le Réalisme selon Zola, archéologie d'une intelligence* (Paris: PUF, 1975) 10.

⁴¹ J. H. Matthews, *Les Deux Zola: Science et personnalité dans l'expression* (Geneva: Droz, 1957) 20.

⁴² Émile Zola, *Correspondance*, ed. B. H. Bakker, vol. 1 (Montreal and Paris: Presses de l'Université de Montréal and Éditions du CNRS, 1978) 367.

⁴³ De Lattre 11.

⁴⁴ Malinas 39.

⁴⁵ Brigitte Weltman-Aron, "Le 'Procès-verbal' de l'expérience: Le réalisme selon Zola," *Excavatio* 3 (1993): 100.

the active intervention of the author [...] to direct conflicts toward a certain outcome.”⁴⁶ In this sense, there can be nothing unexpected, nothing that would surprise the writer. Not everything is determined by physiological or psychological factors alone. The creative and subjective mind of the writer is, above all else, the most controlling component. Although the naturalist writer’s observation of nature and human behavior may be objective, its passage into the fictional world of the novel under the guise of experimentation is subject to the inventions of the writer’s mind. Pierre Martino concludes that “le romancier ne trouvera jamais dans son *expérimentation* que ce qu’il y aura préalablement introduit lui-même.”⁴⁷ The experimental method in literature, as Zola’s critics would insist over and over, is therefore an artificial version of the method used in science because the novelist is at liberty to tamper with evidence and rearrange the facts to fit his master plan.

Henri Mitterand’s essay on “La Genèse du roman zolien” observes in the author’s *Ébauches* the prevalence of a “je-metteur en scène” directing the action.⁴⁸ Zola’s contemporary Louis Desprez also implies that Zola knew very well that the hypotheses he put forward would be verified: “La doctrine positiviste, m’écrit M. Zola, la méthode expérimentale, sont aujourd’hui les outils qui trompent le moins. Seulement, dans l’application, il faut admettre l’hypothèse, et c’est par l’hypothèse qu’on marche en avant. [...] [J]e crois que, tout en acceptant pour bases les vérités acquises de la science, nous devons aller en avant à la découverte des vérités entrevues.”⁴⁹

Desprez further characterizes Zola’s force and originality in his masterful creation: “Certes, il travaille dans la vie, mais la vie de ses livres est de la vie arrangée par un artiste.”⁵⁰ However, based on the above-mentioned letter and other evidence,⁵¹ Zola would insist that not everything is arranged or predetermined in his novels, only the hypothesis, and that the rest would play out according to the laws of determinism without his intervention. Yet, Pagano suggests that Zola is mistaken to think such a thing possible:

Zola recognizes the importance of the author’s ‘personnalité’ but limits it to the formulation of an initial ‘hypothèse.’ Although one might agree that a certain degree of determinism is present in the premises of any fictional work, the role of the author cannot by any means be limited only to the initial ‘hypothèse.’⁵²

Desprez’s presentation of Zola’s letter indicates that Zola was perfectly cognizant of his authorial role in the application of the experimental method. But, a later critic, F. W. J. Hemmings, addresses the “fallacy” of this practice, saying that Zola never seemed to have noticed it, or if he did, he ignored it.⁵³ Hemmings’s view is that Zola’s scientific method for writing a faithful account of reality is an impossibility. Yves Chevrel would attribute this impossibility to the actual process of writing: “L’écriture naturaliste est une écriture artificielle, parce qu’elle est une écriture artistique. [...] Le naturalisme n’est pas la reproduction du réel ‘tel quel’; il ne peut pas l’être par le fait même

⁴⁶ Tullio Pagano, *Experimental Fictions: From Émile Zola’s Naturalism to Giovanni Verga’s Verism* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999) 17.

⁴⁷ Pierre Martino, *Le Naturalisme français 1870-1895* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1969) 38.

⁴⁸ See Henri Mitterand, *Le Regard et le signe* (Paris: PUF, 1987).

⁴⁹ Louis Desprez, *L’Évolution naturaliste* (Paris: Tresse, 1884) 220-21.

⁵⁰ Desprez 234.

⁵¹ For instance, Zola detests the notion of art that is purposely not true to life: “Je n’aime point ce mot d’art, qui entraîne avec lui je ne sais quelle idée d’arrangement, de convention. Je ne connais que la vie” (“Causerie du dimanche,” *Le Corsaire*, 3 December 1872, *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. 10, 974).

⁵² Pagano 46.

⁵³ Hemmings 183-84.

du passage à l'écriture."⁵⁴ Both critics present valid points concerning the alteration of reality that takes place in naturalist or any kind of writing. But, it need not preclude the aim of a realistic form of writing, even if the writer's subjectivity must be accepted as part of the package.

Although Zola speaks of his desire to represent the "vérité" of human existence, his subjectivity often clouds his attempts. As J. H. Matthews and others point out, Zola is unable to be perfectly objective:

Toute vision du monde ne saurait être que subjective [...]. Qu'il le veuille ou non, comme tout autre artiste, Zola interprète à sa manière la réalité. [...] [J]usque dans les passages où il s'efforce de rester le plus impassible, on sent la présence de l'artiste, qui communique son impression très individuelle de la réalité.⁵⁵

The presence of the artist in a work of art colors and distorts the depiction of reality, as Zola admits. In naturalism, though, he calls for a rejection of literary extravagances by way of following a scientific method. Matthews interprets Zola's claim that life must be presented without frills: "C'est la méthode documentaire qui fournira au romancier les éléments de la réalité qu'il va communiquer, car les descriptions lyriques ou fantaisistes sont écartées comme étant une déformation de la vérité" (19). This estimation of Zola's method, however, lies in contrast to the actuality of his prose. Zola's novels are more than real and do, in fact, contain such lyrical and fantastical descriptions.

Despite Zola's efforts to distance himself from stylistic embellishments, he often returns to the liberties allowed by the temperament of the artist. Furst and Skrine attribute the variance between naturalist theory and novels to the unexpectedly large role of the artist's temperament, leading them to observe that "there is a discrepancy between theory and practice in the Naturalist novel which does *not* exclude the imaginative in language and symbolism, or the nobler sides of human nature, or even distinct elements of romance."⁵⁶ One calls to mind here the influence of the classical and romantic heritages. Henri Mitterand also comments on the important role of imagination in Zola's writing preparation: "Il ne fait aucun doute que cette part du génie zolien [la part de l'imaginaire], essentielle à ses créations, travaille en surface et en profondeur ses écrits de genèse. Chacune des ébauches en porte témoignage."⁵⁷ At the same time, Zola remains enigmatic about the creative process, with the critic noting "un silence quasi total sur ce qui est, dans les faits, l'essentiel, le trait pertinent de son être, de son désir, de sa fonction et de ses techniques de romancier: l'art d'inventer et de conter, le travail de la fiction, qui transparait déjà à son corps défendant, [...] dans son rêve de scientificité."⁵⁸ The interplay of Zola's assertions and his silences, as Mitterand puts it,⁵⁹ allows no certainty for scholars wishing to understand Zola. The discrepancy between his theoretical writings and fictional works may prove irreconcilable, but Zola may be readily excused for falling short, in practice, of the scientific ideals he set forth in theory. It is precisely this "shortcoming" or the inability to achieve a purely objective, scientific form of writing that enables his novels to transcend and become enduring works of art.

⁵⁴ Chevrel, *Le Naturalisme* 162.

⁵⁵ Matthews 36.

⁵⁶ Furst and Skrine 54.

⁵⁷ Mitterand, *Zola, tel qu'en lui-même* 24.

⁵⁸ Mitterand, *Zola, tel qu'en lui-même* x.

⁵⁹ Mitterand, *Zola, tel qu'en lui-même* ix.