

# The Foreign Father's Influence on Émile Zola's Naturalism in *L'Œuvre*

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## RÉSUMÉ

*Cet article traite de la représentation du père de Zola dans le onzième roman du cycle des Rougon-Macquart, L'Œuvre, et le poème de jeunesse "Le Canal Zola." Il s'efforce de montrer que la figure paternelle, associée à la fois au développement d'une "imagination matérielle" et "formelle" chez Zola, pour emprunter des termes déployés par Gaston Bachelard, exerça une influence majeure et complexe sur l'écrivain, contrairement à ce que ses biographes soutiennent en général. Le développement d'une imagination matérielle qui fait passer le respect de la nature au premier plan est en effet primordial pour l'esthétique zolienne. Tandis que le poème "Le Canal Zola" témoigne d'une admiration totale du jeune Zola pour son père, l'analyse du couple antagoniste formé par les personnages de Lantier et Sandoz dans L'Œuvre révèle au contraire que Zola établit une distance entre son père et lui dans sa manière éthique d'aborder les relations entre la nature humaine et autre.*

Sometime between 1893 and 1896, Émile Zola accepted Dr. Édouard Toulouse's invitation to undergo the first medical and psychological examination of its kind. Purporting to investigate the relation between neuropathy and the development of intellectual superiority known as "genius," Toulouse's "medico-psychological investigation" resulted in the publication of *Émile Zola, Enquête médico-psychologique sur les rapports de la supériorité intellectuelle avec la névropathie*. The physician asserts that Zola's nervous condition, with its possible connection to the writer's superior intellectual abilities, has been passed on to him primarily by his mother, a French national from birth, whereas the contribution of Zola's father, an Italian-born, naturalized French citizen, is deemed marginal at best:

Je ne vois là en somme qu'un père intelligent ayant un fils qui présente à son tour une supériorité intellectuelle marquée, et rien de plus [...] En résumé, voilà ce que l'histoire des antécédents héréditaires nous apprend. La transmission des hautes facultés intellectuelles ne doit être acceptée qu'avec les plus grandes réserves. Ce qui est plus certain, c'est l'hérédité de la vigueur physique, apportée à M. Zola par ses deux parents. Ce qui est certain aussi, c'est la transmission par la mère d'un état neuro-arthritique, qui est suffisant pour expliquer la disposition originelle de M. Zola.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Édouard Toulouse, *Émile Zola, Enquête médico-psychologique sur les rapports de la supériorité intellectuelle avec la névropathie* (Paris: Société d'Éditions Scientifiques, 1896) 110.

In 1908, in *Émile Zola: sa vie, son oeuvre*, biographer Edmond Lepelletier, reporting on the influence of Zola's genitors on their son, takes up Toulouse's conclusions and even widens the supposed personality gap between father and son, stating that "François Zola était né à Venise, en 1796. Ce Vénitien, qui, par ses origines, était Hellène et Illyrien, apparaît comme un aventurier, un migrateur, un homme d'action [...] Aucune tendance artistique, aucun goût littéraire."<sup>2</sup> Thus while external observers such as Toulouse and Lepelletier allowed for a physical resemblance between Zola and his father in their discourses on hereditary transmission, they denied any moral or intellectual influence, thereby leaving the purity of the national French "genius" untarnished by a foreigner.

In this article, by focusing on Zola's early work "Le Canal Zola" and his later, major autobiographical novel, *L'Œuvre*, I intend to demonstrate that Zola's father had, in fact, a substantial impact on Émile's naturalist project. As will become evident in the following pages, such an influence also attests to Zola junior's distancing from the engineer for ethical reasons. In her influential book on the relations between literature and philosophy, *Love's Knowledge*, American philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues very convincingly that works of literature are necessary supplements to moral philosophy when it comes to ethical inquiry because, she writes: "Built into the very structure of novels is a certain conception of what matters,"<sup>3</sup> adding that "an ethical discourse addressed to the soul expresses certain ethical preferences and priorities in its very structure"<sup>4</sup> – the superiority of literature over moral philosophy deriving from the former's ability to offer a "sensitive study of the sense of life"<sup>5</sup> through the representation of "complex particularity."<sup>6</sup> Following Nussbaum, I will strive to show that Zola's conception by which "one can live, and one can live with others,"<sup>7</sup> was at odds with what François Zola had come to embody in his mature son's mind.

François Zola was an important figure in French and European life. A doctor in mathematics, member of the prestigious Ricovrati Academy and audacious civil engineer, he oversaw the construction of the first rail line in continental Europe (the Linz-Budweis line in Austria), as well as the first arch dam, with its accompanying canal which still provides drinkable water to the city of Aix-en-Provence. He also had an important influence on his son Émile. This is strikingly illustrated in one of the young Zola's very first literary works "Le Canal Zola. Dithyrambe" that appeared in *La Provence* in 1859.<sup>8</sup> As its subtitle "Dithyrambe" clearly states, this piece was written in praise of a father Émile lost early in life. François passed away when his child was only seven. Such a poem suggests that the achievements of civil engineering contain their own sublime. As David Macauley argues in his study on the representation of the elements in Western ancient and modern philosophies, this type of sublime speaks powerfully to our aesthetic sensibility, thereby competing with the natural sublime itself.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, according to Macauley, massive hydraulic constructions such as dams may even be considered to lie at the very foundation of civilization. Henri Mitterand, in his own biography of Zola, sees in the naturalist writer's genitor "un personnage qui aurait pu servir de modèle pour un roman romantique."<sup>10</sup> This

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<sup>2</sup> Edmond Lepelletier, *Émile Zola: sa vie, son œuvre* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1908) 23.

<sup>3</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 26.

<sup>4</sup> Nussbaum 17.

<sup>5</sup> Nussbaum 24.

<sup>6</sup> Nussbaum 23.

<sup>7</sup> Nussbaum 24.

<sup>8</sup> Émile Zola, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> David Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas* (Albany: SUNY, 2010) 264.

<sup>10</sup> Henri Mitterand, *Zola*, vol. 1 (Paris: Fayard, 1999) 17.

comment suggests the extent to which Zola's foreign father may have influenced the development of his son's aesthetic mind, despite Toulouse and Lepelletier's assertions to the contrary.

In *Zola, tel qu'en lui-même*, Mitterrand reads the figure of the engineer which the young Zola emulates in "Le Canal Zola," as "l'homme moderne par excellence," and his son, as "un enfant du calcul, du béton et des premiers grands barrages, forme parfaite imposée à l'anarchie de la montagne."<sup>11</sup> In his characterizations of both father and son, Mitterrand seems to suggest that Zola's father only appeals to his son's formal imagination, being first and foremost perceived as the one who organizes chaos ("anarchie") by imposing a *form* ("barrages") upon a natural formation ("la montagne") (my emphasis). However, a reading of Zola's poetic ode to his father reveals that the latter is imagined not only as a disembodied producer of forms, but also as an embodied agent implicated in the fecundation of the earth through the domestication of water – a process which seems to enable the essential liquid to realize its own purpose, that is, fertilization. This connection can be inferred from the following lines:

Ce n'étaient que [...] profonds abîmes  
 Où s'engouffraient les eaux [...]  
 Cette nature est vierge [...]  
 Un homme veut passer!... La terre est sans verdure;  
 La plaine manque d'eau [...]  
 Soudain le vent se lève et la nuée enfuie  
 Va répandre plus loin ses fécondants trésors.  
 Arbres, plantes et fruits dans la plaine étaient morts.  
 Un homme veut passer!... Autour d'Aix la Romaine,  
 Il veut d'un long cours d'eau fertiliser la plaine.<sup>12</sup>

The description of the father's dual action (as shaper of the natural landscape and as fertilizing agent) suggests that the paternal figure stimulates two types of imagination in this early work by Zola: the formal and material imaginations, the second type being fundamental to Zola's naturalism. I borrow the expressions "formal imagination" and "material imagination" from Gaston Bachelard, who distinguishes between two types of *imagination* – *rêverie formelle* and *imagination (rêverie) matérielle*: "la rêverie formelle se développe en organisant des objets d'assez grande dimension. Elle foisonne. Au contraire, la rêverie matérielle damasquine ses objets. Elle grave [...] Elle descend, en continuant les rêves du travailleur, jusqu'au fond des substances."<sup>13</sup> Put differently, whereas formal imagination places the highest value on its own overinflated ideas that it projects onto the natural environment, material imagination offers the artist the opportunity to work with nature in a sustained hands-on encounter. With recourse to these notions, I make the case in what follows that, in *L'Œuvre*, Zola predicates artistic success on the ability to develop material imagination. It is the secondary character and aspiring writer Pierre Sandoz, and not the protagonist Claude Lantier, who is able to activate this type of imagination. Significantly, Pierre's father, like Zola's own, is a foreigner. In fact, the naturalist writer indicates in his preparatory notes that he conceived Sandoz as a foil for himself:

[I]l y a un romantique au fond, un constructeur. De là la lutte: il [Claude] veut embrasser d'une étreinte la [f° 277] nature qui lui échappe. Si je me mets en scène, je voudrais

<sup>11</sup> Henri Mitterrand, *Zola tel qu'en lui-même* (Paris: PUF, 2009) 77.

<sup>12</sup> "Le Canal Zola" in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, 26-27.

<sup>13</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les rêves: Essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (Paris: Corti, 1942) 106.

compléter Claude ou lui être opposé [...] Ami de collège de Claude, travaillant de mon côté, bafoué, honni, avec du succès vers la fin; et n'apportant que des idées sur les œuvres, une parité de tempérament, mais moins absolu, cédant à ma nature et produisant tandis que Claude se butte.<sup>14</sup>

*L'Œuvre*<sup>15</sup> is set in the Parisian artistic milieu of the second half of the nineteenth century and centers on the difficulties faced by a group of friends in their struggle to burst onto the artistic scene in the French capital.<sup>16</sup> It also offers its author a space for exposing his ideas about what makes for authentic artistic creation. To that end, Zola introduces a protagonist and secondary characters whose trajectories provide clues as to why some of them fail to gain the social recognition they long for, while others do. These secondary characters usually succeed for the “wrong” reasons, with the notable exception of his fictional double, the would-be writer Pierre Sandoz, the only artist to find well-deserved success in a circle of friends made up of aspiring painters and sculptors, some of whom resort to questionable means in their all-consuming and aggressive quest for success. Claude Lantier suffers the most tragic fate among his fellow artists since he commits suicide at the end of the novel, departing from a life plagued by his inability to complete what he considers to be his masterpiece.

Critics usually explain Claude's lack of success as a product of his flawed heredity (his eye lesion), or as a combination of the latter and other factors such as his idealism and self-doubt.<sup>17</sup> In a previous article,<sup>18</sup> I argue that, contrary to appearances, the novel does not attribute Lantier's demise to family heredity. Throughout the novel, Claude strives to find a stable, definitive answer to a very unequal productivity punctuated by recurring creative blocks, strokes of genius and, ultimately, lack of success: is his eye lesion, in other terms an “hereditary unknown” (“inconnu héréditaire”<sup>19</sup> in the original), to blame? At one of the salons where his exhibited painting is mocked by the gazing crowd, Claude overhears someone refer to him as an

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Brady, *L'Œuvre de Émile Zola. Roman sur les arts, manifeste, autobiographie, roman à clef* (Geneva: Droz, 1967) 433.

<sup>15</sup> Émile Zola, *L'Œuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983). All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

<sup>16</sup> In spite of being a lesser popular novel than other novels belonging to the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, such as *L'Assommoir*, *Germinal* or *Nana*, *L'Œuvre* has received a great deal of critical attention. The novel's success among literary scholars stems, for the most part, from its painter protagonist Claude Lantier, whose depiction recalls real cultural icons such as Cézanne (Zola's childhood friend), Manet or Monet. Alain Pagès, in his article “J'irai te voir pour te serrer la main,” Web. May 5, 2017 <[http://www.cahiers-naturalistes.com/wa\\_files/Pages\\_20\\_20Lettre\\_20de\\_20C\\_3\\_A9zanne\\_20\\_20mai\\_202014.pdf](http://www.cahiers-naturalistes.com/wa_files/Pages_20_20Lettre_20de_20C_3_A9zanne_20_20mai_202014.pdf)>, gives an exhaustive account of the ongoing debate surrounding the interpretation of the Lantier character as a foil for Cézanne. *L'Œuvre* appeals to critics for yet another reason: it is an autobiographical novel, and maybe Zola's most autobiographical novel, as Robert J. Niess suggests in *Zola, Cézanne and Manet: A Study of L'Œuvre* (Madison: University of Michigan Press, 1968) 1. For a thorough psychological study of the novel, see Patrick Brady's *L'Œuvre de Émile Zola*, bearing in mind that Brady is not always correct to assume that Zola's protagonist can be read as a mouthpiece for the writer's ideas about artistic creation.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, Emilia Sitzia in “De Manet à Moreau: l'évolution artistique des tableaux de Claude Lantier dans *L'Œuvre*,” Web. May 5, 2017 <[http://www.revue-textimage.com/06\\_image\\_recit/sitzia3.html](http://www.revue-textimage.com/06_image_recit/sitzia3.html)> adheres to the idea that Claude is doomed from the start by his faulty heredity, even though her own argument suggests otherwise: “Lantier est perdu depuis le début du roman, condamné à l'échec par son hérédité [...] C'est lorsqu'il perd contact avec le réel et la nature que l'artiste meurt, et que Claude se suicide.”

<sup>18</sup> Hélène Sicard-Cowan, “Water Avoidance and Artistic Failure in Émile Zola's *L'Œuvre*,” *French Review* 90 (2016): 13-23.

<sup>19</sup> Zola, *L'Œuvre* 74.

“incomplete genius” (“génie incomplet”<sup>20</sup>), a description which prompts him to accept this explanation for his lack of success as follows:

Oui, ce devait être cela [...], le déséquilibre des nerfs dont il souffrait, le détraquement héréditaire qui, pour quelques grammes de substance en plus ou en moins, au lieu de faire un grand homme, allait faire un fou. Quand un désespoir le chassait de son atelier, il emportait maintenant cette idée d’une impuissance fatale, il l’écoutait battre contre son crâne, comme le glas obstiné d’une cloche. Son existence devint misérable. Jamais le doute de lui-même ne l’avait traqué ainsi.<sup>21</sup>

This quotation shows how damaging the internalization of the fatalistic interpretation of family heredity can be for the individual who dwells on it obsessively. As French historian of medicine Anne Carol points out in her article “La télégonie, ou les nuances de l’hérédité féminine,” after the 1870 French defeat, medical doctors redefined heredity as a fatal force which “rend implacable le mécanisme de la dégénérescence et motive les inquiétudes des eugénistes.”<sup>22</sup> Surprisingly, after having accepted this notion of family heredity as destiny, Claude marvels at one of his old paintings in which he sees his artistic talent reflected: “Était-ce possible qu’il eût peint un tel morceau de maître? Il avait donc du génie en ce temps-là? On lui avait donc changé le crâne, et les yeux, et les doigts?”<sup>23</sup> The unmistakable irony contained in the last sentence in this quote leaves no doubt that, for Zola, family heredity and creativity belong to different orders. Therefore, the unstable nature of artistic talent, which Claude experiences throughout his life, cannot be explained by a scientific discourse, expressed here by a member of the general public, anchoring creative potential, or lack thereof, in an individual’s physical make-up inherited from his ancestors. Rather than family heredity itself, Claude’s uncritical internalization of a narrative which traces a physical and/or mental lack of ability to something that might reveal itself to be a mere figment of the (scientific) imagination, that is, an “hereditary *unknown*” (my emphasis), is partly responsible for his tragic fate. The fact that Zola resorts to free indirect discourse to convey Claude’s thoughts about his lack of success demonstrates his sympathy for a character who, in a short-lived moment of disbelief, does call into question the accuracy of the fatalistic narrative he ends up choosing to embrace. Claude’s momentary suspension of belief should, therefore, be read as a healthy burst of lucidity.

If family heredity fails to explain the protagonist’s failure as an artist, what other reason(s) can be invoked? The answer is a constellation of factors, and hydrophobia seems to be a decisive one. The reader indeed learns in the very first lines of the novel that Claude has an uneasy relationship to water: while strolling in Paris during a hot summer night, the painter is caught in a violent storm that reveals his fear of the liquid element. Claude then quickly puts aside this unpleasant feeling: “[I] trouvait imbécile cette peur de l’eau.”<sup>24</sup> Such a difficult relation with the other-than-human world leads him to instrumentalize and brutalize his wife, child, and friends before he finally turns his violence against himself. Claude’s drama can thus be reframed using Prosper Lucas’s notion of “hérédité de nature,” or natural heredity. For Lucas, a medical doctor

<sup>20</sup> Zola, *L’Œuvre* 281.

<sup>21</sup> Zola, *L’Œuvre* 281-82.

<sup>22</sup> Anne Carol, “La télégonie ou les nuances de l’hérédité féminine,” *Rives méditerranéennes* 24 (2006), Web. May 5, 2017 <<https://rives.revues.org/550#text>> (paragraph 8).

<sup>23</sup> Zola, *L’Œuvre* 290-91.

<sup>24</sup> Zola, *L’Œuvre* 29.

specializing in heredity studies and whose seminal work *Traité philosophique et physiologique de l'hérédité naturelle dans les états de santé et de maladie du système nerveux* Zola claimed had a profound influence on his own, natural heredity precedes and determines what Lucas calls "l'hérédité d'institution," or family heredity, and occurs at a primary, elementary level: "L'hérédité de *nature* est celle des éléments et des caractères physiques et moraux. Nous la nommons de *nature* parce que la nature est son unique principe et qu'elle ne relève que des lois de la vie."<sup>25</sup> Put differently, a primordial heredity made up of the interactions between the different natural elements – earth, water, fire, and air – can be called upon to explain human behavior, whereas family heredity is only secondary: "L'Homme, nous sommes-nous dit, non seulement fait partie [de la nature], mais est [...] symbole de sa pensée, verbe incarné de sa force, en qui elle se répète, il la répète elle-même, il la continue en se continuant; il est le MICROCOSME. En lui vit et agit le principe qui crée dans l'univers."<sup>26</sup>

Not only has Claude forgotten that he is the microcosm evoked by Lucas, but his artistic failure is even more irreversible because he represses the element that seems to characterize him most intimately and which is urgently needed to lessen the artistic fever which he so easily falls prey to: the first name Claude indeed contains the word "eau," and the reordering of its syllables creates the sentence "C'est de l'eau." This word play is not gratuitous. In fact, Zola's preparatory notes for the novel reveal the protagonist's original last name to be "Dulac." Another detail emphasizes the role played by water in Claude's art: the misplaced color blue that can be seen on his paintings<sup>27</sup> and which imposes itself as the trademark of the emerging painters borrowing from Claude,<sup>28</sup> whereas its inventor reaps only scorn for it. Because of his hydrophobia, Claude also misses a crucial opportunity to develop his material imagination through a carnal encounter with a woman who is precisely associated with water, namely his future wife Christine. Significantly, it is when he finally has sexual intercourse with her in the countryside, far away from Paris with its competitive, destructive infightings among visual artists that Claude manages both to find his personal painting style and to be true to his verbal commitment to paint outdoors on small canvases. However, this blissful parenthesis at both a personal and professional level is short-lived, and Claude's self-aggrandizing tendency drives him back into the capital, where he fails to become the revolutionary leader he aspires to be in relation to French painting, taking his own life instead after having spent several years brutalizing other living beings for his art's sake. To sum up my discussion of Claude's personality and tragic life trajectory, Claude's failure and aggressive behaviour can be said to come primarily from his repression of nature writ large, combined with his egotism and internalization of fatalistic personal discourses.

This analysis of Zola's fictitious artist suggests that, for the novelist, not only is material imagination a prerequisite for artistic success, but it needs to be driven by a sense of ethics. Lantier's counterpart in the novel, the Pierre Sandoz character, breaks through as a writer precisely by fully accepting and nurturing his individual physiological make-up and the elements constituting it – the components of his "natural heredity." As a result, Sandoz, unlike Lantier, is able to develop

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<sup>25</sup> Prosper Lucas, *Traité philosophique et physiologique de l'hérédité naturelle dans les états de santé et de maladie du système nerveux, avec l'application méthodique des lois de la procréation au traitement général des affections dont elle est le principe. Ouvrage où la question est considérée dans ses rapports avec les lois primordiales, les théories de la génération, les causes déterminantes de la sexualité, les modifications acquises de la nature originelle des êtres, et les diverses formes de névropathie et d'aliénation mentale* (Paris: J.B. Baillièrre, 1847-1850).

<sup>26</sup> Lucas 22.

<sup>27</sup> Zola, *L'Œuvre* 154, 184.

<sup>28</sup> Zola, *L'Œuvre* 336.

his material imagination. As a matter of fact, Sandoz's apprehension of reality forms an explicit contrast with Claude's, as illustrated in the following passage:

Ah! bonne terre, prends-moi, toi qui es la mère commune, l'unique source de vie! toi l'éternelle, l'immortelle, où circule l'âme du monde, cette sève épandue jusque dans les pierres, et qui fait des arbres nos grands frères immobiles!... Oui, je veux me perdre en toi, c'est toi que je sens là, sous mes membres, m'étreignant et m'enflammant, c'est toi seule qui seras dans mon œuvre comme la force première, le moyen et le but, l'arche immense, où toutes les choses s'animent du souffle de tous les êtres! [...] Est-ce bête, une âme à chacun de nous, quand il y a cette grande âme!"<sup>29</sup>

This excerpt testifies to the fact that Zola's foil, contrary to Claude, is aware of the unity of life, does not shun unmediated contact with the natural elements and understands his debt towards nature (both other-than-human and human).

Zola's foregrounding of the earth and the natural elements harkens back to the figure of the foreign father. Indeed, the domestication of water is an element that brings both fathers closer to one another; but the figure of the foreign father in the novel seems to be even more closely associated with Zola's development as an artist than Zola senior as depicted by the young Émile in his poetic tribute, as the following excerpt makes clear: "Le père de Sandoz, un Espagnol réfugié en France à la suite d'une bagarre politique, avait installé près de Plassans une papeterie, où fonctionnaient de nouveaux engins de son invention; puis, il était mort, abreuvé d'amertume, traqué par la méchanceté locale."<sup>30</sup> Without his father, who produces the very material resource he needs, namely paper, the young Sandoz would not be able to pursue his artistic activity with such ease. Equally importantly, Sandoz senior is associated with matter in the form of pulp, that is a malleable matter. Bachelard calls it "le schème fondamental de la matérialité,"<sup>31</sup> thus foregrounding the importance of water in material creation:

Dans la pâte, l'action de l'eau est évidente [...] C'est par l'activité de l'eau que commence la première rêverie de l'ouvrier qui pétrit [...] elle lie et délie. La première action est évidente. L'eau, comme on disait dans les anciens livres de chimie, "tempère les autres éléments." En détruisant la sécheresse – l'œuvre du feu – elle est le vainqueur du feu; elle prend sur le feu une patiente revanche; elle détend le feu; en nous, elle apaise la fièvre. Plus que le marteau, elle anéantit les terres, elle attendrit les substances.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, for the philosopher, kneading speaks to material imagination:

[...] la main travailleuse et impérieuse apprend la dynamogénie essentielle du réel en travaillant une matière qui, à la fois, résiste et cède comme une chair aimante et rebelle. Elle accumule ainsi toutes les ambivalences. Une telle main en travail a besoin du juste mélange de la terre et de l'eau pour bien comprendre ce qu'est une matière capable d'une forme, une substance capable d'une vie.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Zola, *L'Œuvre* 192.

<sup>30</sup> Zola, *L'Œuvre* 55.

<sup>31</sup> Bachelard, *L'Eau et les rêves* 21.

<sup>32</sup> Bachelard, *L'Eau et les rêves* 121.

<sup>33</sup> Bachelard, *L'Eau et les rêves* 21.

In addition, Sandoz's father is a Spaniard, an origin that may serve the purpose of severing this character from any ties to the Romantic tradition since, according to Madame de Staël in *De la littérature*,<sup>34</sup> such a tradition didn't exist in Spain. This is important because Zola presents Romanticism as having a negative influence on the artists he stages in his novel for prompting them to favour inner vision over observation. Significantly, Sandoz settles for much less ambitious literary projects than he had originally planned, leaving their Romantic ideals behind: "D'abord, épris de besognes géantes, il avait eu le projet d'une genèse de l'univers [...] Mais il s'était refroidi devant les hypothèses trop hasardées [...] et il cherchait un cadre plus resserré, plus humain, où il ferait tenir pourtant sa vaste ambition."<sup>35</sup> Such relatively modest goals stand in stark contrast with Claude's own, who insists on painting on large canvasses – a gesture which can be read as an unmistakable sign of formal imagination as defined by Bachelard.

Given this influence of the foreign father in *L'Œuvre*, it is interesting to note that the novel curbs the young Zola's enthusiasm for his own father's formal mastery over the natural world through an all-encompassing respect for nature. Put differently, it is not enough to surrender to one's material imagination to be successful as an artist. Zola's contrasted characterization of Claude, who invariably ends up figuratively dismembering and disfiguring the women he paints,<sup>36</sup> and Pierre, who deplures tree-cutting and suffers deeply when confronted with his friends' marginalization of Claude, is an aspect of the novel that provides evidence for the writer's awareness of the violence inherent in the process of representation as such. In "Zola, les miroirs de *L'Œuvre*," Robert Lethbridge reproduces a compelling excerpt from Zola's analysis of a portrait painted by Fantin-Latour in "Le Naturalisme au Salon": "une merveille de science [...], ce qui ne l'empêche pas d'être respectueux devant la nature, de la consulter et de lui obéir. Chacune de ses toiles est un acte de conscience."<sup>37</sup> This laudatory critique of a minor painter shows that Zola thought about the unequal relations between the subject and object of representation; an artist's temperament, or essential being, always expresses itself in a work of art, as Sandoz indicates,<sup>38</sup> whereas the object that is represented is distorted to some extent. Zola seems to have sought to remedy such unequal relations.

How do Zola's ethical concerns manifest themselves in a novel such as *L'Œuvre*? Jean Kaempfer reads Zola's decision to open his novel with a storm as a strategy designed to highlight the organic resemblance between life and text:

S'il se singularise par les présages dont il est gros, l'orage de *L'Œuvre* n'en partage pas moins, avec tous ceux qui peuplent notre expérience commune, une vertu précise, en régime naturaliste: voici en effet un phénomène naturel qui offre par lui-même – et spectaculairement – un début et une fin. Aussi Zola n'invente-t-il rien, à proprement

<sup>34</sup> Madame de Staël, *De la littérature* (Paris: Flammarion, 1991) 193-94.

<sup>35</sup> Zola, *L'Œuvre* 67.

<sup>36</sup> Claude's cruelty, professional difficulties and physical disability (his eye lesion) are all reminiscent of Claude Bernard, the father of the experimental method, which Zola claimed to have applied in his novelistic writing. Indeed, Bernard turned to medicine after failing as a writer. He is associated with the Bernard-Horner syndrome, which affects vision. Moreover, Claude Lantier's stated commitment to paint with "des morceaux de nature, jetés sur la toile, vivants, grouillants, tels qu'ils étaient" (Zola, *L'Œuvre* 106) recalls Bernard's grueling experiments on conscious live animals. I plan to investigate Zola's vexed, ironical relation to the sciences of his era in my book tentatively entitled *Le Naturalisme d'Émile Zola, ou comment dépasser les sciences et la société mortifères*.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Lethbridge, "Les miroirs de *L'Œuvre*" in Zola, *l'homme-récit*, eds. Yannick Portebois and Dorothy E. Speirs (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003) 147.

<sup>38</sup> Zola, *L'Œuvre* 403.



parler, lorsqu'il coule le début de son récit dans cette très vieille histoire: il ne fait que rendre au monde un canevas prêté par la vie.<sup>39</sup>

Kaempfer's reading suggests that the natural elements (the "intrigue cosmique") are depicted by Zola as primordial and ultimate referents in *L'Œuvre*. I would add that Zola's effort to co-create with nature illuminates his awareness of his moral debt to the natural world. Mihaela Marin also confirms the importance of the elemental world throughout Zola's work:

[L]a réalité est pour Zola d'abord substance, matière, avant d'être forme et sensation visuelle [...] l'image est une fabrique, non pas à distance, mais dans la proximité épidermique des choses, un eidolon, mais un eidolon qui opère une simplification du monde réel, une réduction des éléments à leurs formes primitives.<sup>40</sup>

The simplification of reality which causes forgotten elements, most specifically water and earth in *L'Œuvre*, to appear in their most primary forms at the surface of the text can be regarded as an ethical gesture on Zola's part. Several passages illustrate this "return of the repressed," or setting free of the liquid element: water brings itself to Claude's attention not only in the misplaced hue of blue that becomes a defining feature of his way of painting, but also in his son's disease (hydrocephalus) and in the moving crowds that visit the exhibition halls where Claude hangs his paintings twice and whose liveliness is conveyed through water imagery.<sup>41</sup> As I already suggested, both elements also make their presence known in the names given by Zola to his characters: Claude points to water, Pierre to earth and Sandoz to blood ("sang"), whereby this latter substance is shown to be a combination of both fire and water ("Sandoz" can be phonemically rewritten as "sang d'eau," with the "z" standing for Zola). It is also worth mentioning, in this context, that several passages in the novel emphasize the constitutive role played by those elements that are forgotten by the artists depicted in the novel, who are all obsessed by fire: "la vase remuée"<sup>42</sup> in Fagerolles's eyes; Claude's corpse which is compared to a "flot de boue"<sup>43</sup> being reunited with its earthly origins; the coffins whose "boue humaine"<sup>44</sup> makes them too damp to burn properly. All these allusions to the malleable matter from which human beings are made evoke Zola's holistic consciousness, which he shares with his Pierre Sandoz character. On the other hand, the novel calls into question the confluence of art and technological progress with its overvalorization of fire, as evidenced by the description of a noisy train followed by a monster-like locomotive that interrupt Claude's funeral.<sup>45</sup>

In his article "Le Besoin de formules nouvelles," which appeared on March 22nd, 1888 in *Le Figaro*, Zola indicates that, "L'esprit idéaliste a été trop vivace en France."<sup>46</sup> In my own article, I hope to have demonstrated that the figure of the foreign father is characterized by Zola, in *L'Œuvre*, as exerting an essential influence in the development of his anti-idealist, naturalist aesthetics. Indeed, Sandoz's Spanish father produces the very resource, namely paper, without which his son would be hard pressed to practice his literary activity. However, in this novel, the

<sup>39</sup> Jean Kaempfer, *Émile Zola. D'un naturalisme pervers* (Paris: Corti, 1989) 12.

<sup>40</sup> Mihaela Marin, *Le Livre enterré: Zola et la hantise de l'archaïque* (Grenoble: ELLUG, 2007) 107.

<sup>41</sup> Zola, *L'Œuvre*, 82, 103, 146, 340.

<sup>42</sup> Zola, *L'Œuvre* 309.

<sup>43</sup> Zola, *L'Œuvre* 398.

<sup>44</sup> Zola, *L'Œuvre* 403.

<sup>45</sup> Zola, *L'Œuvre* 406.

<sup>46</sup> Émile Zola, *Écrits sur le roman* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2004) 303.

paternal figure also receives a different characterization from its original representation in “Le Canal Zola.” On the one hand, the father of the future national “genius” Pierre Sandoz not only appeals to material imagination – being first and foremost associated with malleable matter such as pulp which, in Bachelard’s view, lies at the foundation of materiality as such; he furthermore distinguishes himself from Zola senior for the small scale of his achievements as a producer of paper. Significantly, it is the work performed by the son, not the father, which will earn the Sandoz family a national reputation in Zola’s novel. With the creation of the couple formed by Sandoz’s father and his son, Zola thus seems to work through his own relationship with his father, highlighting both his respect for the latter and ultimate rejection of the idealism his genitor can be said to embody. In addition to showing that Zola posits an unacknowledged foreign influence as a necessary cause of his literary naturalism, this study of the characters in *L'Œuvre* reveals that Zola takes issue with idealism, as embodied by the Romantic tradition, for its failure to be truthful to reality because of the interference of the artists’ susceptibility to *fantasmagoria*, that is, for its lack of ethical concern for its objects. Moved by a spiritual holism, Zola strives, on the contrary, to offer an ethical corrective to nature’s unequal encounter with the figurative intention, by returning the elemental to the foreground.