

Mens sana in corpore sano: Eugène Paz, Paul Féval (père), Émile Zola, and a Whole Generation “au gymnase”¹

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RÉSUMÉ

La question de l'exercice physique et de l'équilibre entre le corps et l'esprit commença à préoccuper Zola dans les utopies tardives, Travail (1901) et Vérité (1903), où il établit une théorie des bénéfiques pratiques qu'une population en bonne santé peut apporter à une démocratie prospère. Pourtant, dès 1865, Zola avait déjà déclaré l'exercice physique “une véritable question littéraire” dans son compte rendu d'un ouvrage contemporain d'Eugène Paz intitulé La Santé de l'esprit et du corps par la gymnastique. Les œuvres de fiction populaires écrites par des auteurs comme Paul Féval (père) confirmaient certes ce point de vue. Aussi, l'idée qui allait se retrouver dans les utopies tardives — celle que l'exercice fait partie intégrante du succès de la République française — était-elle déjà présente dans les premiers travaux journalistiques de l'écrivain. Ceci corrige donc la notion que l'utopisme des dernières œuvres de Zola était sans précédent, qu'il constituait simplement une réaction à des décennies ancrées dans le style sombre et la vision pessimiste du monde associés au naturalisme, ou bien encore qu'il était pour l'auteur vieillissant une antidote aux déceptions profondes liées à l'affaire Dreyfus. Il est clair que les efforts théoriques et pratiques d'auteurs comme Eugène Paz, qui contribua lui-même à établir et à populariser le Grand Gymnase, à instaurer l'éducation physique dans les écoles publiques, et à initier une révolution sportive au XIXe siècle, aidèrent Zola à façonner sa réflexion sur la société française après le Second Empire. Ces premières œuvres servent de points de départ théoriques et nous permettent d'envisager Travail et Vérité dans leur contexte fin-de-siècle, celui d'une époque où la société française se redéfinissait progressivement dans l'optique du bien-être et adhérait au mouvement que Pierre de Coubertin avait lancé pour rétablir les Jeux olympiques internationaux.

ABSTRACT

Physical fitness and mind-body balance began to preoccupy Zola in the late utopias, Travail (1901) and Vérité (1903), where he theorized the practical benefits of healthy people for the prosperous democracy and sketched out his vision for state-supported wellness. As early as 1865, however, Zola had already declared exercise “une véritable question littéraire” in his review of a recently published book by Eugène Paz, La Santé de l'esprit et du corps par la gymnastique. Thus, the idea which found its way into the late utopias — that exercise was integral to the success of the French Republic — was at the least already present in the earliest journalistic writings. This amends any notion that Zola's late utopianism was without precedent, that it was simply a reaction to decades steeped in the bleak style and pessimistic world view of naturalism, or that it was an

¹ I am indebted to The University of Alabama for granting me research time to complete this essay, and to the Modern Languages & Classics colleagues who read drafts and offered helpful input during a departmental workshop series: Matthew Feminella, Alessandra Montalbano, Jessica Goethals, Kelly Shannon-Henderson, Xabier Granja, Micah McKay, and Fabio Battista.

aging author's antidote to the deep disappointments of the Dreyfus Affair. Arguably, the theoretical and practical efforts of authors like Eugène Paz, who was himself instrumental in establishing and popularizing the Grand Gymnase, bringing physical education to public schools, and launching the nineteenth-century fitness revolution, helped shape Zola's thinking about French society after the Second Empire. These early works serve as theoretical points of departure and allow us to reconsider Travail and Vérité in their turn-of-the-century context, as French society gradually redefined itself through wellness and embraced the movement begun by Pierre de Coubertin to reestablish the international Jeux olympiques.

Zola was a 25-year-old budding young writer in one of his first paid newspaper gigs when he published "La Littérature et la gymnastique" in *Le Salut public* on 5 October 1865. The essay was reprinted a year later in *Mes haines*, a collection of articles on a variety of topics, most of which Zola wrote for *Le Salut public* between 1865 and 1866.² This is just before Zola penned *Thérèse Raquin*, shortly before the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle was conceived and, in any event, before Zola emerged as a novelist à succès.³ At this early stage of his career, Zola was working ten-hour days at the Librairie Hachette.⁴ Eugène Paz (1837-1901), recently acquainted with Zola, had published excerpts of the *Contes à Ninon* (1864) in another paper, *Le Petit Journal*, where Paz was co-director. It was through Paz's introduction that Zola landed a writing job there as well, one of several patched together in those first years in Paris. It lasted less than five months, evidently because the paper abjured Zola's far too serious portraits of modern life and sought, rather, to publish lighter pieces "[aux] cordes amusantes," according to the paper's chief editor, Georges Stemme.⁵ Zola was nevertheless keen to return Paz's professional favors, and it is in this spirit that "La Littérature et la gymnastique" applauded Paz for his first book, *La Santé de l'esprit et du corps par la gymnastique*.⁶ Zola also used the book review to develop a theme touched upon in many of his other essays of the same period, notably that of the "neurotic century," the *siècle de nerfs*, with its brainy pursuit of new knowledge and its obsession with material and scientific progress. Zola couches this post-Enlightenment phenomenon always in terms of a modern pathology, one he seems simultaneously to abhor and admire, one in which the mind (*l'esprit* or, alternately, *les nerfs*) has so outpaced the body (*le corps* or, just as often, *le sang*) that the body has succumbed to a pitiable atrophy and, quite possibly, irreparable decay.

² Émile Zola, "La Littérature et la gymnastique," *Mes Haines*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 40 (Paris: Eugène Fasquelle, 1928) 47-53. All passages quoted from "La Littérature et la gymnastique" will be abbreviated LG hereafter with page numbers indicated within parentheses, referring to pagination in a reprint volume, *Éditions d'Ores et déjà* (Mesnil-sur-l'Estrée: CPI Firmin Didot, 2013). Seven years later, Zola published "L'Éducation physique," an almost verbatim copy of "La Littérature et la gymnastique." This retitled 1872 version omitted the parts on Eugène Paz's book, but redeployed the same arguments, with less ambivalence, clearly promoting national fitness programs in public education. Émile Zola, "L'Éducation physique," *Mélanges, préfaces et discours*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 50 (Paris: Eugène Fasquelle, 1929) 119-26.

³ For a thorough discussion of Zola's early foray into journalism, see F. W. J. Hemmings, "Zola's Apprenticeship to Journalism (1865-1870)," *PMLA* 71.3 (June 1956): 340-54.

⁴ See Henri Mitterand, *Zola, vol. I: Sous le regard d'Olympia (1840-1871)* (Paris: Fayard, 1999).

⁵ Mitterand 425.

⁶ Eugène Paz, *La Santé de l'esprit et du corps par la gymnastique: étude sur les exercices du corps depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à nos jours, leurs progrès, leurs effets merveilleux, etc.* (Paris: Librairie du Petit journal, 1865). < <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb31070976p> > accessed 6 Oct. 2021. The title is hereafter abbreviated to *La Santé*.

Comparing this progress-driven cerebral mania in modern times with the “hysterical” mysticism of early Christianity, Zola’s opening paragraph in “La Littérature et la gymnastique” takes a stand in favor of restoring balance through fitness therapy:

Qu’il me soit permis de parler d’un sujet qui intéresse toute notre génération d’esprits affolés et hystériques. Le corps, comme aux meilleurs temps du mysticisme, est singulièrement en déchéance chez nous. Ce n’est plus l’âme qu’on exalte, ce sont les nerfs, la matière cérébrale. La chair est endolorie des secousses profondes et répétées que le cerveau imprime à tout l’organisme. Nous sommes malades, cela est bien certain, malades de progrès. Il y a hypertrophie du cerveau, les nerfs se développent au détriment des muscles, et ces derniers, affaiblis et fiévreux, ne soutiennent plus la machine humaine. L’équilibre est rompu entre la matière et l’esprit. Il serait bon de songer à ce pauvre corps, s’il en est encore temps. (LG 15)

Zola appears to agree with Paz, whose book concludes with a call to repair the weakened and feverish musculature of the “human machine,” before it is too late. Yet in the ensuing pages of Zola’s essay, the young journalist oscillates between two alternatives: on the one hand, sympathizing with Paz, whose book proposes exercise as the antidote to France’s overzealous mid-century obsession with the cerebral; and, on the other, questioning whether to restore balance is even ultimately desirable, at least insofar as creating works of poetry and fiction is concerned.

In this way, Zola engages with Paz, appropriating the topic of national health to explore its ramifications for the literary trade. His ambivalence is patent throughout the review. One minute he writes, albeit somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that he admires Paz’s book and agrees with its premise and conclusions: “[J]’applaudis sans réserve aux conclusions du livre; je voudrais que tout Paris, comme l’ancienne Lacédémone, se portât au Champ de Mars et s’y exerçât à la course, au jet du javelot et du disque” (LG 21). Yet a moment later, Zola claims to eschew the very idea of balance, on the basis that the “anarchic” and messy literature of his own times by far surpasses, in his view, the measured equilibrium of the more carefully crafted traditions of France’s pre-romantic past. Arguing that the work of literature both resembles the author and mirrors the epoch, it follows, Zola asserts, that throughout history, literature emanating from “tempéraments mesurés et pondérés” shows balance — he uses the classical period as his example — and that, conversely, literature characterized by a dominance of either the mind or the body (in his terms, “les nerfs ou le sang”) is prone to extremes (LG 16). When *le sang* dominates, literature becomes the offspring of “belles brutes florissantes” (LG 16). When ruled by *les nerfs*, conversely, literature descends from “fous de génie” (LG 16). Conceived in the most binary of terms, modern literature either rises up generously or plummets into the proverbial abyss as a result of the “ardent aspirations” and “sudden collapses” of the times. Zola embraces both:

Je l’aime, cette littérature, je la trouve vivante et humaine, parce qu’elle est pleine de sanglots et que je trouve dans l’anarchie qui la trouble une vivante image de notre siècle, qui sera grand parmi les siècles, car il est l’enfantement des fortes sociétés de demain. Je la préfère à ces autres époques de calme et de perfections, d’une maturité complète, qui nous ont donné des œuvres pleines et savoureuses. En nos temps de recherches et de révoltes, d’écroulement et de reconstruction, je sais que l’art est barbare et qu’il ne saurait contenter les délicats; mais cet art tout personnel et tout libre a d’étranges délices, je vous assure [...]. Moi, j’aime notre anarchie, le renversement de nos écoles, parce que j’ai une grande joie à regarder

la mêlée des esprits, à assister aux efforts individuels, à étudier un à un tous ces lutteurs, les petits et les grands. (LG 19-20)

Zola here views the tension as wholly alive, human, and empathetic, a reflection of a great century animated by probing, upheaval, renewal, invention, and the necessary crumbling of outmoded paradigms. It is a literature marked by avant-gardism, forward thinking, society building, and new schools of thought.

However, just when Zola appears to position himself *against* insipid poetic balance *in favor* of highly personal but “barbaric art” that shocks with its oscillating extremes and “strange delights,” he revisits the question of physical exercise. Without training the body, Zola seems prepared to concede, modern literature “kills authors”:

Mais on meurt vite dans cet air; les champs de bataille sont malsains, et les œuvres tuent leurs auteurs. Puisque la maladie vient de ce fait que le corps est diminué au profit des nerfs, puisque si nos œuvres sont telles; si notre esprit s'exalte, c'est uniquement parce que nous laissons s'amollir nos muscles, le remède est dans la guérison, dans la culture intelligente et fortifiante de la chair. Notre cerveau se développe par trop d'exercice; exerçons notre corps et peu à peu l'équilibre se rétablira. (LG 20)

In the book that followed *La Santé de l'esprit et du corps par la gymnastique*, Paz in fact directly addressed the literary community. Of equally long title, *La Gymnastique raisonnée*⁷ dedicated an entire chapter (XV) to “Les Hommes de lettres” and argued that authors and other sedentary types ruin their health through overeating and by neglecting exercise:

Simple question: Messieurs les écrivains, messieurs les bureaucrates, vous tous qui vous livrez à des travaux sédentaires, comment vivez-vous? Vous déjeunez le plus souvent à midi et dînez à six heures. Dans l'intervalle, aucun exercice! Et vous voulez que votre corps puisse loger ces deux repas? Mais vous demandez l'impossible! (135)

Similarly, Chapter XIII targeted women, on the predictable basis that lack of proper exercise compromised their reproductive health, considered to be their social and national mission.⁸ Zola would not develop this latter point until much later in *Fécondité*, but he already appeared to concur with Paz, who in his words “envoie toute notre génération au gymnase” (LG 21).

How literally ought we to interpret Zola's exact positions or degree of seriousness on the basis of these newspaper articles? As F. W. J. Hemmings points out in “Zola's Apprenticeship to Journalism (1865-1870),” during these years Zola continuously inveighed against what he saw as the unfortunate restrictions placed on the newspaper author, who, depending on the publication, had varying degrees of space and freedom to develop views and express them candidly:

Nous n'avons qu'une toute petite place, et il nous faut tant bien que mal, y entasser nos opinions, sans même pouvoir les établir logiquement. On nous accuse

⁷ Eugène Paz, *La Gymnastique raisonnée, moyen infaillible de prolonger l'existence et de prévenir les maladies; nécessité du mouvement rationnel démontrée par le mécanisme du corps humain, suivie d'une méthode de gymnastique de chambre avec et sans instruments* (Paris, Hachette: 1872).

<<http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb31070970m>> accessed 6 Oct. 2021. The title is hereafter abbreviated to *La Gymnastique*.

⁸ *La Gymnastique* 114-15.

d'ignorance, de partis pris, on nous dit que nous manquons de critérium, que nous jugeons à l'aventure. Hélas! Nous jugeons comme il nous est permis de juger. Nous portons le plus légèrement possible la tâche ingrate qui nous est échue. Nous ne sommes que les modestes serviteurs du Roi Public [...].⁹

These observations published in an article on Sainte-Beuve in *L'Événement* (25 September 1866) no doubt resonate with us today as we consider the degree to which the press does or does not freely serve up the truth in societies whose insatiable appetite for entertainment is undeniable. In the same commentary, Zola went on to target a public readership interested only in short, to-the-point pieces that amuse and entertain, limiting the author to the shallowest of discussions and analyses.¹⁰ The overarching concern for Zola was that he might lose credibility not just as a critic, but as a literary artist in his own right. In a letter dated 26 July 1866 to Numa Coste, Aixois painter, journalist, and Zola's future co-collaborator with Paul Alexis and others on *L'Art libre*, Zola complained about being reduced to churning out cursory reviews of “les ouvrages de tous les imbéciles contemporains”: “Je sais bien que ma réputation d'homme littéraire souffrira à ce compte, mais on m'assure que les lecteurs y gagneront. Je m'incline respectueusement devant les lecteurs et j'obéis à leur bon plaisir. Public, le critique ennuyeux qui va mourir te salue.”¹¹ According to an 1868 entry in the *Journal des Goncourt*, Zola went so far on one occasion as to accuse *La Tribune* of dictating opinion and forcing him to write “des articles infâmes, ignobles [...], au milieu des gens dont il me faut prendre l'opinion idiote.”¹² Although it is doubtful Zola counted Paz's book among these “infamous” and “ignoble” samples of printed mediocrity, his degree of sincerity and commitment to the subject of physical fitness promoted in Paz's book may be debatable at this early stage of his career, when he strove primarily to establish himself as an artist through the only means immediately available to him — the press.

Regardless, the growing cultural significance of exercise was clearly seeping into the consciousness of urban literati and intellectuals, offering itself up as a tangible cure for the sedentary bourgeois lifestyle. The preface to Eugène Paz's *La Santé de l'esprit et du corps par la gymnastique* began with a dedication to Paul Féval, père (1816-1887), the popular and prolific author of swashbucklers, vampire novels, and crime fiction, and often Paz's exercise partner:

Vous dédier un *Traité de Gymnastique*, à vous le plus fécond et le plus attrayant des romanciers, me paraîtrait chose presque téméraire, si je ne me rappelais l'intérêt que cette science, de toute action, vous a toujours inspiré. Je vous ai vu à l'œuvre; nous avons, maintes fois, voltigé de concert à travers cordes et trapèzes, et dans les quelques causeries, trop courtes à mon gré, qui suivaient les leçons prises en commun, j'ai pu apprécier avec quelle rare justesse de vue vous aviez saisi la portée et l'utilité des exercices du corps, leur favorable influence sur la santé, et leur effet salutaire sur l'équilibre des facultés physiques et intellectuelles. Vous êtes homme de pensée et *homme d'action*; laissez-moi mettre sous ce double patronage ce modeste livre, qui n'a d'autre prétention que de démontrer et de répandre les

⁹ Qtd in Hemmings 432.

¹⁰ Hemmings 432.

¹¹ Qtd in Mitterand 485-86.

¹² Qtd in Hemmings 432.

bienfaits d'une science vieille comme le monde et appelée à rendre les plus grands services à l'humanité.¹³

At almost precisely the same time that Paz published *La Santé de l'esprit et du corps par la gymnastique*, his friend and mentor was penning the second tome of his *Habits noirs* series, *Cœur d'acier*,¹⁴ whose wildly convoluted sequence of plots and sub-plots included the physical rehabilitation of the mortally wounded Roland de Clare.¹⁵ Although Roland's miraculous recovery through exercise ironically makes him well enough to stand trial for a crime he did not commit, the episode creates space for a narrative apologia on exercise, and a publicity campaign for strongman Hippolyte Triat's *Gymnase*, with its body-building machines and utopian potential:

Personne n'en est plus à renier cet auxiliaire tout puissant de la médecine qui a nom la gymnastique [...]. On ne fait jamais de meilleure gymnastique qu'au gymnase, et, certes, ce n'est pas en vain que Triat, le maître, a inventé les mille et un détails de ses ingénieuses machines, chargées d'exercer utilement tour à tour les divers muscles qui composent le mécanisme humain [...]. Pour donner une définition qui n'ait aucunement couleur de science médicale et qui tourne légèrement au contraire du côté de la philosophie pittoresque, nous dirons que la gymnastique est la plus-value que l'usage obtient de toute chose: la bêche qui a bêché vaut mieux que la bêche neuve, la terre qui a été bêchée a gagné en valeur, et le bras qui a manié la bêche a gagné en vigueur. Ne trouvez-vous pas cela beau, consolant, social, providentiel? C'est la grande parabole du travail.¹⁶

The casual reference to Hippolyte-Antoine Triat (1818-1881) points to the latter's status as a contemporary cultural icon, with his body-building machines and "ingenious" muscle training programs. In Figure 1 below, the celebrated strongman and gym founder is featured in his gym, right front center, dressed as a cavalier and towering above his pupils; six-kilo barbells are on the wall to the right, trapeze ropes above, and spectators in the upper levels.¹⁷

¹³ *La Santé* 6 (my emphasis).

¹⁴ Paul Féval (père), *Cœur d'acier*, in *Les Habits noirs*, vol. 2 (Bibebook). <<http://www.bibebook.com/search/978-2-8247-0548-4>> accessed 15 Oct. 2021.

¹⁵ On this series and Paul Féval's place in the annals of mid-century popular fiction, see Robin Walz, "The Crime Factory: The Missed Fortunes of Paul Féval's *Les Habits noirs*," *Journal of Western Society for French Literature* 37 (2009). <<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.0642292.0037.014>> accessed 6 Oct. 2021.

¹⁶ Féval 135-36.

¹⁷ Image Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gymnase_Triat_Pais_1856.png> accessed 18 Oct. 2021. Internet sources on Triat abound. For a fascinating turn-of-the-century print resource, see Edmond Desbonnet, *Les Rois de la force: Histoire de tous les hommes forts depuis les temps anciens jusqu'à nos jours (avec 733 photographies et dessins)* (Paris: Libraire Berger-Levrault, 1911). Desbonnet was, himself, a body-building practitioner, collector of muscleman photography, historian of the art of body building and, according to one blogger, whose web site contains academic nudes of the author, Desbonnet enjoyed a "réussite commerciale sans précédent." See "Fred's Museum (and Web Library)" <<http://fredsmuseum.blogspot.com/2012/05/la-methode-desbonnet.html?zx=4764649b029ae947>> accessed 14 Oct. 2021.

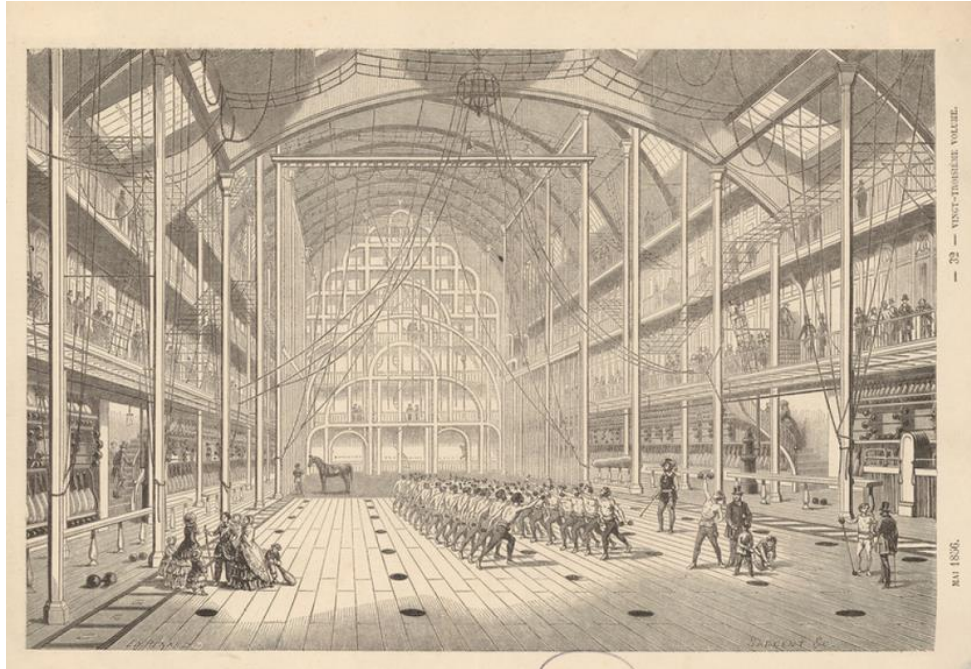


Figure 1. *Le Gymnase Triat* (1846-1880)¹⁸

This is sport as spectacle, with bodies on display. The engraving highlights an organized and choreographed practice, reminiscent of orderly military formations or Early Modern corps de ballet.¹⁹ The history and evolution of physical fitness training, both private and public, is complex.²⁰ Long before French public schools incorporated physical education programs into the mandatory curriculum, as signed into law by Victor Duruy's 1869 decree, exercise was limited to the military schools. Even later, with the George Act of 27 January 1880, school exercise continued to combat the idea of national decline, of French *décadence*, and to promote the values of strong, healthy bodies capable of working hard, supporting national security, and moving France forward

¹⁸ Hippolyte Triat's celebrated gym was first built in 1846 in Paris's allée des Veuves, renamed avenue Montaigne in 1850. Under the massive redesign of the Champs-Élysées quarter in the 1860s under the Baron Haussmann, Triat's gym was demolished, but rebuilt in the same avenue Montaigne, where it remained until its definitive closure in 1880, just before Triat's death. For a discussion of Triat's involvement with the Fourieristes and for insight into the gym's connection with political upheaval toward the end of the Second Empire, see Bernard Desmars, "Hippolyte (Antoine) Triat" on charlesfourier.fr: <<http://www.charlesfourier.fr/spip.php?article1731>> accessed 18 Oct. 2021.

¹⁹ See Kate Van Orden, *Music, Discipline, and Arms in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

²⁰ On this topic, see Pierre Olivier Weiss, "The creation of physical education in France: the challenges of a political and ideological struggle," *Giornale Italiano di Educazione alla Salute, Sport e Didattica Inclusiva*, 2020, *Research and reflections on education, technologies and psychophysical wellbeing in difficulties* [sic] - *Ricerca e riflessioni su istruzione, tecnologia e benessere psicofisico in situazioni di disagio*, 4 (3).

<<http://ojs.gsdjournal.it/index.php/gsdj/article/view/183>> (HAL Archives ouvertes: ffhal-02911798f), accessed 15 Oct. 2021. See also Pierre Arnaud, *Le Militaire, l'écolier, le gymnaste: Naissance de l'éducation physique en France (1869-1889)* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1985). For a study of the medical benefits of exercise, see Dr. Narcisse-Auguste Le Blond-Gérardin, *Manuel de gymnastique hygiénique et médicale: comprenant la description des exercices du corps et leurs applications au développement des forces, à la conservation de la santé et au traitement des maladies* (Paris: J.-B. Baillière et fils, 1877). <<http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb30498738g>> Accessed 15 Oct. 2021.

into the twentieth century.²¹ Along these lines, *Cœur d'acier*'s narrator goes on, philosophically, to discuss the body's use value in terms recalling political economists of the day, from Proudhon to Marx and Engels, concluding that the body's health underpins the health of the democracy.²²

Féval's passage on exercise perhaps most astonishes in its allusion to the "grande parabole du travail" which unwittingly anticipates the "hosanna du travail" of Zola's penultimate novel, *Le Travail*.²³ Whether or not Zola was acquainted with Féval or *Cœur d'acier*'s pro-athletics discourse, it is difficult to imagine that he could have missed the advent of public gymnasiums. After all, his friend and collaborator, Eugène Paz, directed the *Grand Gymnase*, which opened in 1857 at 40, rue des Martyrs (Figure 2):



Figure 2. *Le Grand Gymnase*, erected in 1857 and directed by Eugène Paz, 40 Rue des Martyrs²⁴

Indeed, more than a casual sports enthusiast, Paz was well-poised in his professorship at the Lycée Condorcet to help develop exercise science for non-military, public consumption and pave the way

²¹ See the French *Sénat: un site au service des citoyens*, on the "Projet de loi portant nouvelle organisation territoriale de la République" :

<<https://www.senat.fr/rap/a14-150/a14-1507.html#:~:text=La%20loi%20George%20du%2027,les%20gar%C3%A7ons%20et%20les%20filles>> accessed 15 Oct. 2021.

²² See "Des Rapports entre Proudhon et Karl Marx," *Revue d'économie politique*, Éditions Dalloz 7.3 (1893):177-207 (no author named). <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24677063>> accessed 7 Oct. 2021.

²³ Féval 136. Zola's expression appears in the *Notes préparatoires* and throughout the novel. A sabbatical leave in Fall 2017, a generous University of Alabama CARSCA grant, and travel support from the Department of Modern Languages and Classics and Capstone International Center all allowed me to consult the *Travail* manuscript (Mss. Naf 10.333-10.334) at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) and the Institut des Textes et Manuscrits Modernes (ITEM) in Paris, France.

²⁴ 1866 lithograph, Musée du Carnavalet. Image Source: Les Musées de la ville de Paris :

<<https://www.parismuseescollections.paris.fr/en/node/105535#infos-principales>> accessed 18 Oct. 2021.

for the inclusion of mandatory physical education in primary schools in France.²⁵ His own health turnaround from a debilitating nervous illness, which he managed through physical fitness training and hydrotherapy under Triat's supervision, would have given him reason enough for this interest. By the time the book reviewed by Zola was published, Paz had already founded the first Parisian athletic society, *Les Amis de la Gymnastique* (1859). Between 1865 and 1886, Paz went on to publish another half-dozen books, several of them commissioned by the French government, on the health benefits of exercise and best practices for physical fitness. In 1869 he launched the monthly review, *Le Moniteur de gymnastique scolaire, hygiénique et médicale*, and in 1873, with the support of the *Ligue des Patriotes*, founded *L'Union des sociétés de gymnastique en France*. Sports culture in France was not, however, a preordained *fait accompli*. As of 1870, few high schools apart from the Lycée Descartes in Paris were adequately equipped to offer the kind of physical education programs Paz recommended.²⁶ Nor were school gym teachers sufficiently trained to carry out the work of physical education instruction, despite being animated "sans doute" by "la meilleure volonté," a fact which led Paz to urge Jules Simon, then *Ministre de l'instruction publique et des cultes*, to establish an *École Normale de Gymnastique*.²⁷ Through these efforts and associations, Paz worked with French, British, European, and even American institutions to develop internationally accepted best practices for physical fitness without injury, marking a shift in thinking about schoolyard athletics and public gyms. All these activities certainly made Paz the kind of "homme d'action" he saw in his mentor and gym partner, Paul Féval, a literary man who was convinced of the benefits of physical fitness for the nation. French statesmen certainly caught on; and, by 1892, when the Baron Pierre de Coubertin delivered his celebrated *Manifeste Olympique* at the Sorbonne, he could thank Jules Simon and others present not only for signing the constitution for a committee on the *Propagation des exercices physiques*, but also for having themselves competed earlier that year in a "cross-country interscolaire" organized in the capital — a sign that sports had become a serious political matter.²⁸

Any ambivalence that may have characterized Zola's early thinking about sports would evaporate three decades later in *Les Quatre Évangiles*. Of the four planned *Évangiles*, only three were ultimately completed: *Fécondité*, in 1899; *Travail*, in 1901; and *Vérité*, published posthumously in 1903. Notes exist for the fourth novel, *Justice*, left unwritten at the time of Zola's

²⁵ For a detailed history of compulsory physical education in French public schools, the development of French and European athletic associations, the evolution of sports and especially gymnastics technique, and the rebirth of the International Olympic Games, see Jean Latte, *La Gymnastique* (Paris: Vigot, 1948).

²⁶ See the author's *Rapport à Monsieur Jules Simon, Ministre de l'instruction publique et des cultes, sur la mission remplie par M. Eugène Paz à l'effet d'étudier l'organisation de l'enseignement de la gymnastique et des exercices militaires dans les Lycées et les Collèges de Paris* (Paris: Imprimerie centrale des chemins de fer, A. Chaix et Compagnie, 1870) 3 (hereafter *Rapport*). For a history, see Claude Piard, *Éducation physique et sport: Petit manuel d'histoire élémentaire* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001).

²⁷ *Rapport* 16. Numerous government-sponsored studies on physical education programs across Europe and in the United States played a role in curricular development in French public schools. That these programs emerged concurrently with the turn-of-the-century Olympic revival comes as little surprise, particularly given that the founder of the modern Olympic Games, the Baron Pierre de Coubertin, authored several books promoting physical fitness as a matter of national socio-economic health. By Pierre de Coubertin, see for example *L'Éducation anglaise* (Paris: Au Secrétariat de la Société d'économie sociale, 1887) and his celebrated "Conférence faite à la Sorbonne au Jubilé de l'USTSA, Nov. 1892" in François d'Amat, *Manifeste olympique: Le Discours de Pierre de Coubertin à l'origine des Jeux olympiques modernes* (La Courneuve: Fer de lance, DL 2006) (hereafter *Manifeste*).

²⁸ *Manifeste* 77. On the politics of an emergent bourgeois sport culture in nineteenth-century works by Balzac, Mérimée, and Flaubert, see Cory Cropper, *Playing at Monarchy: Sport as Metaphor in Nineteenth-Century France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), especially chapter 6 on "Olympic Restoration."

death in 1902.²⁹ The most explicitly utopian of the three finished works, *Travail* was structured around two competing socioeconomic models: the one, represented by the city of Beauclair's iron ore mine, recalling the coal mine in *Germinal* and aptly named *l'Abîme*; and the other, the novel's experimental cradle city, La Crêcherie, founded by Luc Froment, Zola's second secular apostle.³⁰ Absent from all but the latter pages of the novel, the gymnasium plays a vital role in shaping the offspring of the city's first citizens, comprised of the toiling iron ore families whom Luc skillfully coaxes away from *l'Abîme* with the promise of fundamental material comforts and opportunities for personal development. These include pretty homes with gardens, fewer working hours, machine instead of manual labor, community centers, collective day cares, universal healthcare, and gender-neutral public schools, all running on electricity captured sustainably through solar power, making this a modern day *città del sole*. For La Crêcherie's gym, Zola contents himself with the vaguest of sketches, referring blandly to "des jeux, des exercices de toutes sortes" that the children enjoy there as part of the frequent recess breaks that punctuate the school day.³¹ The detailed and meticulously crafted descriptions of place that characterize other modern spaces in Zola's novels are absent in this portrait: no *machines*, *poids*, *trapèzes*, or other training equipment that might be found in Paz's or Triat's *Gymnases*. One is reminded instead of the oppressed proletariat of earlier naturalist novels. In *Travail*, a metaphorical *poids qui écrase* bears down on a subjugated and impoverished working class.³² Serving as the counterexample to this premise, however, is the figure of Fauchard, the iron forge worker whom Zola redeploys and mythologizes and whose muscle, strength, and athleticism bring to mind Triat:

Mais lui, sans hâte, de ses yeux habitués à la flamme, cherchait le creuset au fond de la fosse embrasée, se penchait un peu pour le saisir avec la longue pince, et, d'un brusque redressement des reins, en trois mouvements rythmiques et souples, l'une des mains s'écartant, glissant le long de la tige, jusqu'à ce que l'autre vînt la rejoindre, il arracha le creuset, sortit d'un geste aisé, à bout de bras, ce poids de cinquante kilogrammes, pince et creuset compris, le déposa par terre, tel qu'un morceau de soleil d'une blancheur aveuglante [...]. (*Travail* 575-76)

The quick, rhythmic, supple movements of Fauchard's body allow him not only to maneuver fifty kilos of molten iron with a mere flick of a wrist, but also to deposit it on the ground effortlessly, as if this colossus — the narrator calls him *Vulcain* — had plucked a small "piece of sun" directly from the heavens. In the mythopoetic world of Zola's utopian experiment, Fauchard's role is prototypical and evangelical, foreshadowing the Olympians who will ultimately emerge from a city reconceived around gymnasiums, not factories.

If the utopian gym lacks the painterly, poetic quality of earlier naturalist spaces, however, it is nonetheless fascinating in other ways. The gym unites people in fraternal, gender-neutral happiness, with its "flot de garçons et de filles qui fraternisaient en bons amis [...] sans distinction

²⁹ See my article, "Justice, Zola's Global Utopian Gospel," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 36.1 (The University of Nebraska Press, 2007): 571-86.

³⁰ Mathieu, Luc, Marc, and John, respectively, were the four protagonists of these so-called gospels, all framed didactically as *romans à thèse*, as David Baguley has shown. See his thorough discussion of Zola's antithetical structural and philosophical approach in *Fécondité d'Émile Zola: Roman à thèse, Évangile, Mythe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973).

³¹ Émile Zola, *Les Quatre Évangiles*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 8 (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1968) 692. All quotations from *Travail* and *Vérité* come from this edition. Henceforth, parenthetical citations in the text reference the novel and page number.

³² Four out of the eight instances of the word *poids* in *Travail* are combined with the verb *écraser*.

de sexe” (*Travail* 890). Both Triat’s and Paz’s gyms were, in fact, open to men, women, and children, although a subscription menu reveals that the price of membership was higher for women, while women’s access to the facility was limited to fewer days and times (see Figure 3):

GRAND GYMNASSE	
Rue des Martyrs, 40.	
GYMNASTIQUE, HYDROTÉRAPIE, ESCRIME BOXE ET GANNE	
Ouverture le 15 Octobre 1893	
PRIX DES LEÇONS DE GYMNASTIQUE	
HOMMES	
<i>Trois fois par semaine.</i> <i>Tous les jours.</i>	
Un mois 25 fr.	Un mois 40 fr.
Six mois 130	Six mois 200
Un an 240	Un an 350
Mêmes prix pour les leçons d’escrime ou de canno et de boxe.	
ABONNEMENT A TOUS LES EXERCICES	
Un mois 40 fr.	Un mois 50 fr.
Six mois 250	Six mois 300
Un an 450	Un an 500
Les douches hydrotérapiques, frictions, massage, etc., qui suivent la leçon, sont compris dans les prix ci-dessus.	
PRIX DES LEÇONS DE GYMNASTIQUE	
DAMES	
<i>Trois fois par semaine.</i> <i>Tous les jours.</i>	
Un mois 40 fr.	Un mois 60 fr.
Six mois 200	Six mois 300
Un an 360	Un an 500
PETITES FILLES	
<i>Trois fois par semaine.</i> <i>Tous les jours.</i>	
Un mois 23 fr.	Un mois 40 fr.
Six mois 130	Six mois 200
Un an 240	Un an 360

— 130 —	
PETITS GARÇONS	
<i>Deux fois par semaine.</i> <i>Quatre fois par semaine.</i>	
Un mois 16 fr.	Un mois 25 fr.
Six mois 85	Six mois 130
Un an 150	Un an 240
HYDROTÉRAPIE	
Douche d’eau froide, friction et massage	1 fr. 50
Par dix cachets	1 25
Bains de cercle, douches verticales, etc.	
JOURS ET HEURES DES LEÇONS	
HOMMES	
<i>Les lundi, mercredi et vendredi.</i>	
Le matin à 8 h.	Le soir à 5 h.
Le soir à 3 h. 1/4	Id. 9
<i>Les mardi, jeudi et samedi.</i>	
Le matin à 9 h.	Le soir à 9 h.
Le soir à 8	
DAMES	
<i>Les lundi, mercredi et vendredi.</i>	
Le matin à 10 h.	
<i>Les mardi, jeudi et samedi.</i>	
Le soir à 3 h. 1/4.	
PETITES FILLES	
<i>Les lundi, mercredi et vendredi.</i>	
Le matin à 10 h. 1/2.	
<i>Les lundi, mercredi et samedi.</i>	
Le soir à 4 h. 1/2.	
PETITS GARÇONS	
<i>Les dimanches.</i>	
Le matin à 10 h.	
<i>Les dimanche, mardi, jeudi et samedi.</i>	
Le soir à 4 h. 1/2.	

Figure 3. Subscription menu, Paz’s *Grand Gymnase* (*La Santé* 135-36).

In proportion to the expanding needs of La Crêcherie’s youth, the city’s learning spaces expand and multiply into more gyms, workshops, and gardens where children are released to play freely “every two hours” and develop into citizens of the future:

Ces classes étaient devenues tout un monde. Il avait fallu les subdiviser, créer des locaux plus vastes, élargir aussi les dépendances, les gymnases, les ateliers d’apprentissage, les jardins, où les enfants, toutes les deux heures, étaient lâchés en liberté. Après quelques tâtonnements [...] ce libre enseignement [...] donnait d’admirables résultats, augmentait chaque année la Cité d’une génération nouvelle, capable de plus de vérité et de justice. (*Travail* 888-89)

It is clear, finally, that the mind/body balance Zola had discussed in “La Littérature et la gymnastique” had finally made its way into the utopian novel: “Dans le jardin, un gymnase se trouvait installé, des jeux, des exercices de toutes sortes, afin que le corps fût fortifié, sain et solide, à mesure que le cerveau se développait lui-même, s’enrichissait de savoir. Il n’est de bon équilibre

mental que dans un corps bien portant” (*Travail* 692). Borrowing more from Rousseau’s *Émile* than from the great indoor gyms of nineteenth-century Paris, Zola viewed fresh air, nature, and outdoor spaces as essential not just to the educational mission, but to the relationship of the individual to society:

La règle était de les enfermer [les enfants] le moins possible, on donnait souvent des leçons en plein air, on organisait des promenades, les instruisant au milieu des choses qu’ils avaient à connaître, dans les fabriques, devant les phénomènes de la nature, parmi les animaux, les plantes, les eaux, les montagnes. C’était la réalité des êtres et des choses, à la vie elle-même qu’on demandait le meilleur de leur enseignement, dans cette conviction que toute science ne doit avoir d’autre but que de bien vivre la vie. Et, en dehors des notions générales, on s’efforçait de leur donner la notion d’humanité, de solidarité. (*Travail* 692)

Mental equilibrium, a healthy body, humanity, solidarity: just as in Paz’s 1865 treatise on exercise and well-being, physical and mental health were, for Zola, inextricably tied together in the notion of utopia. Knowledge freed from dogma, moreover, would become Zola’s thesis in *Vérité*, where the well-functioning, healthy democracy of France’s future hinged upon its institutionalizing *le savoir*.

As Alain Pagès and other scholars have shown, *Vérité* was Zola’s *roman à clef* for the Dreyfus Affair.³³ Possibly the most well-known of the novelist’s utopian novels, *Vérité* was set in the France of the Jules Ferry laws, which mandated free public education for all French citizens, boys and girls, between the ages of six and thirteen. Zola’s novel uses as its point of departure the brutal rape and murder of a school-aged child by an educator to stage the contemporary battle between private parochial and public educational institutions. Represented on the one side by the Catholic Church, and on the other by national secular schools, the institutions of this novel borrow from the national scandal of the Dreyfus Affair to expose the inherent anti-Semitism and anti-Republicanism of a powerful mainstream, motored by superstition and archaic doctrine, both of which, Zola emphatically shows, are deadly to any viable form of modern democracy founded on truth and justice. Early in the novel, Marc Froment, a public-school teacher, sketches out a philosophy of education that addresses content, delivery, and the educational mission. His is a broad curriculum that honors (but without prioritizing) the traditional standards of reading, writing, and arithmetic, but that also places music, physical education, manual crafts, and moral and civic training on the same level as the rest. According to Marc’s educational model, learning is made accessible through patient, joyful, and childlike candor on the part of the instructor, in order to awaken the sleeping brains of the school children and to shape them gradually into the robust bodies and refined minds of the future:

Alors, pendant deux années, avec infiniment de patience et de bonhomie, Marc fit la conquête de ses élèves, dans le milieu hostile, au travers d’ennuis sans nombre. C’était son génie propre, il était l’instituteur-né, qui savait redevenir enfant pour se faire comprendre par les enfants. Il se montrait surtout très gai, il jouait volontiers avec eux, n’était plus qu’un camarade, un grand frère. Sa force était d’oublier sa

³³ Alain Pagès, éd., *Affaire Dreyfus, lettres et entretiens inédits* (Montréal : Presses universitaires de Montréal, 1994). See also Susan Rubin Suleiman, “The Literary Significance of the Dreyfus Affair,” in *The Dreyfus Affair: Art, Truth, and Justice*, ed. Norman Kleeblatt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987)129-31.

science, de se mettre à la portée des jeunes cerveaux mal éveillés, de trouver les mots qui expliquaient tout, comme si lui-même, ignorant encore, eût partagé la joie d'apprendre. Dans les programmes si chargés, lecture, écriture, grammaire, orthographe, rédaction, calcul, histoire, géographie, éléments des sciences, chant, gymnastique, agriculture, travail manuel, morale, instruction civique, il s'efforçait de ne rien laisser en arrière, tant que les enfants n'avaient pas compris. Et tout son premier effort portait de la sorte sur la façon d'enseigner, de manière à ce que rien de l'enseignement ne fût perdu, une assimilation certaine et complète, s'imposant par elle-même, nourrissant les intelligences grandissantes, devenant la chair des hommes de demain. (*Vérité* 1145-46)

Marc's ideas about forming the "men of tomorrow" begin to crystallize through practice, and his thoughts about sports education in particular develop: "Selon lui, la gymnastique devait se confondre avec les jeux, les récréations se trouvaient naturellement consacrées aux exercices du corps" (*Vérité* 1388). Thus, the very formula prescribed by Eugène Paz finds its way into Zola's late œuvre. Any erstwhile ambivalence is now emphatically replaced with the conviction that the goal of an education and path to a strong democracy are to be achieved by merging the intellectual and physical development of children.

Children are invested with enormous power in *Vérité*, for they not only represent the future, they also exert a positive influence to reshape, correct, and heal an adult world that has fallen astray. This becomes apparent in the personal drama that unfolds between Marc and his estranged wife, Geneviève, who retreats into Catholicism after the *affaire Simon*. In *Vérité*, imbalance (*déséquilibre*) is the fruit of irrational belief:

C'est effrayant, le ravage que l'exaltation religieuse fait dans une cervelle de femme, quand une éducation catholique y repousse. Celle-là [Geneviève] paraissait pondérée, d'une bonne santé, et il a suffi de cette malheureuse affaire Simon pour y produire le déséquilibre le plus complet. (*Vérité* 1322)

It is key that Louise, their daughter, at age twelve, be imbued with the special qualities that allow her to draw her mother back toward "free thinking" and save the marriage and family. The text leaves no doubt as to the source of her power to heal: it derives from her father's influence and a *secular* education. Salvan, director of the normal school and the family friend who introduced the couple, fears he may have acted "sans prudence, en consentant à marier la libre pensée avec l'Église" (*Vérité* 1321), but nevertheless reassures Marc: "si votre femme vous revient, mon ami, ce sera l'enfant qui vous la ramènera, l'enfant tout-puissant, santé et paix du foyer" (*Vérité* 1323). Salvan's assurances unfold as predicted, and in the manner of all three *Évangiles*, *Vérité* culminates in unprecedented social transformations and utopian triumph. Marc wins over Jonville's mayor, Martineau, and persuades the municipal council to arrogate the recently vacated sweatshops, where two hundred impoverished women sewed undergarments. Through Marc's efficacious advocacy, the factory is ultimately transformed into a grand civic palace "où l'on pourrait installer, au fur et à mesure des ressources, une salle de jeux et de danse, une bibliothèque, un musée, même des bains gratuits" (*Vérité* 1432). Reminiscent of La Crêcherie's community spaces and public gymnasiums, Marc's project includes exercise facilities and athletic fields to practice "jeux d'adresse et d'énergie":

La pensée profonde de Marc était de dresser en face de l'église, pour achever de la vider, une sorte de palais civique, où le peuple des travailleurs trouverait un lieu de

réunion et de délasserment [...]. [Marc] aurait voulu une sorte d'abjuration, une cérémonie lui permettant de venir à la tête du conseil municipal rendre la commune au culte de la raison et de la vérité [...]. Et c'était cette cérémonie que Marc avait eu la pensée de réaliser, en faisant inaugurer, par le maire et le conseil municipal, la salle de jeux et de danse de la maison commune, dans laquelle le pays devait se réunir chaque dimanche pour des fêtes civiques. [...] Ensuite, tous les jeux qu'on avait réunis là, des jeux d'adresse et d'énergie, des gymnases, des pistes et des pelouses, dans le jardin voisin, seraient livrés au petit peuple, qui s'y réunirait chaque semaine [...]. (*Vérité* 1412-13)

What literary potential might the team sports and childhood games of *Vérité*'s civic palace have offered us in the final, global gospel?

Without the fourth novel to complete the full picture of progress as Zola conceived it at the turn of the century, we can only guess at how *Justice*, the pan-European novel, might have imagined the future of sport in French society. In the *Première ébauche* of the *Quatre Évangiles*, Zola discussed his plans for scaling each novel in the series, beginning with the local, then expanding outward and beyond, from the national to the international: "Et d'un roman à l'autre, j'élargis mon cadre (très important), d'abord dans une maison avec 'Fécondité', ensuite dans une ville avec 'Travail', enfin par le vaste monde avec 'Justice'."³⁴ Zola's unique historical framing in the late works, all set in a twentieth-century future, was at times prophetic and visionary, at others resolutely anchored in the present or recent past, as David Schalk has shown, bearing witness to the sociocultural trends of the nineteenth century.³⁵ *Justice* might well have featured an Olympian, then, and given Zola's growing interest in the potential for physical fitness to foster the well-being of democracy, would it not seem natural for him to include a national hero like Pierre de Coubertin in the global utopia?³⁶

That the body's energy, strength, and health (or conversely, its deterioration) are wholly literary matters becomes apparent in the works of all three authors. Paz, an athlete, schoolteacher, and cultural innovator, devoted his career to revolutionizing the French public education system during the latter half of the century. Féval, a regular at Triat's gym and as antithetical to the sedentary author as one could be, felt that the novel was the most powerful contemporary vehicle for social change. Although Zola predicted (erroneously) in "La Littérature et la gymnastique" that "les gymnases resteraient vides" (*LG* 29), he nevertheless saw a direct correlation between literature throughout history and degrees of corporeal health or illness, declaring the mind-to-body matter "une véritable question littéraire" (*LG* 26). More importantly, Zola's position on literature and exercise evolved by the time he began writing the late utopias. *Travail* and *Vérité* both testify to a shift in his thinking on the subject, as he foregrounds physical health as values to uphold in a free democratic society. That Zola was attuned to the changing times is made resolutely clear in the

³⁴ Émile Zola, "Pour Justice," in *Les Quatre Évangiles. Œuvres complètes*, vol. 8 (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1968) 506.

³⁵ David Schalk, "Zola and History: The Historian and Zola," in *Historical Reflections / Réflexions historiques* 20.1, *Faces of Marianne: Political, Sexual, and Religious Themes during the French Third Republic* (New York: Berghahn Books, Winter 1994) 77-93.

³⁶ On Baron Coubertin, the Frenchman responsible for launching the first International Olympic Games in modern times, see John J. Macaloon, *This Great Symbol. Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

last words of his essay on Paz: “L’épigraphe est là, sur la muraille, toute flamboyante en face de moi: *Mens sana in corpore sano*” (LG 30).

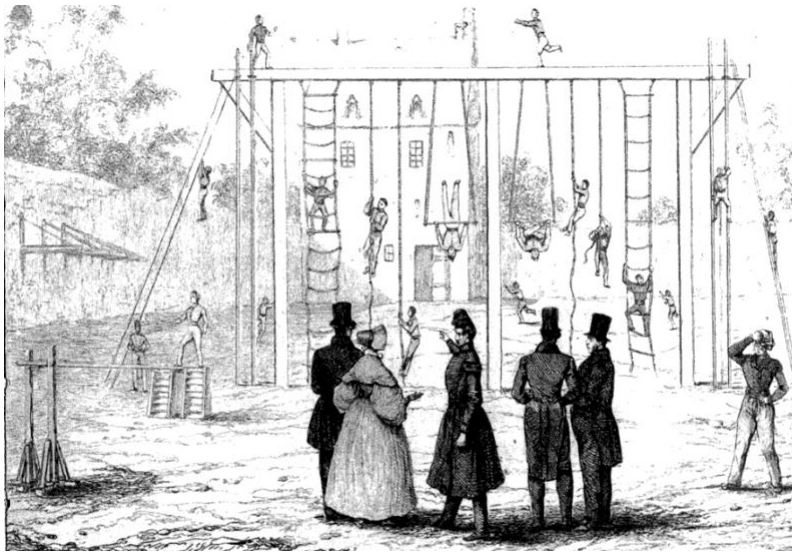


Figure 4. Gymnase scolaire, circa 1835.³⁷

³⁷ Image Source: Marc Le Cœur, “Couvert, découvert, redécouvert... L’invention du gymnase scolaire en France (1818-1872),” *Histoire de l’éducation* 102 (Lyon: Open Edition Journals, 2004): 109-35. <<http://histoire-education.revues.org/705>> accessed 18 Oct. 2021.



Figure 5. Gymnase scolaire.³⁸

³⁸ Image Source: Frontispiece of *Gymnastique des jeunes gens, ou Traité élémentaire des différens [sic] exercices, propres à fortifier le corps, à entretenir la santé et à préparer un bon tempérament* (Paris: Audot, 1829) (anonymous author). <<http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb33412843n>> accessed 18 Oct. 2021.