

“Methinks He Doth Protest Too Much”: Zola, Brunetière, and the Politics of Sympathy in George Sand and George Eliot

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans la notice nécrologique que Zola consacre à George Sand, l’auteur naturaliste déplore, de façon prédisible, l’idéalisme de la femme auteur et sa fidélité au “rêve” plutôt qu’à “la vérité.” Là, comme dans Le Roman expérimental, Zola adopte une approche genrée du roman naturaliste et de l’écrivain en se rangeant du côté du “vrai” et en privilégiant la laide vérité sur le “beau mensonge” de l’imagination et de l’idéalisme sandiens. Pour Zola, le roman naturaliste est défini, du moins en partie, par ce qu’il n’est pas, à savoir un roman de Sand – et son efficacité en tant que véhicule de changement social ne vient pas de son charme mais de son analyse des “plaies humaines.” En accord avec ces principes, Zola réagit également de façon négative aux écrits de la femme écrivain britannique George Eliot.

Pour Ferdinand Brunetière, toutefois, Sand et Eliot contribuèrent de manière différente à définir – et à critiquer – le naturalisme. J’envisagerai dans cet essai les façons dont le critique conservateur utilise les deux femmes écrivains pour questionner la position de défenseur du “réel” et du “vrai” que Zola occupe. Fidèle à son désir de voir l’art refléter un certain ordre moral, Brunetière célèbre Sand et Eliot pour la “sympathie universelle” dont font montre leurs romans – qualité, à son sens, ostensiblement absente des romans de Zola.

ABSTRACT

In Zola’s obituary of George Sand, the naturalist author (predictably) lamented the female author’s idealism, her fidelity to “le rêve” rather than to “la vérité.” Here, and in Le Roman expérimental, Zola genders the naturalist novel and the novelist male, aligning both with “le vrai” and privileging the ugly truth over the “beau mensonge” of Sandian imagination and idealism. For Zola, the naturalist novel was defined, at least in part, by what it was not – that is, a novel by Sand – and its efficacy as a vehicle for social change arose not from its charm but from its “analyse des plaies humaines.” In keeping with these tenets, Zola had a similarly negative response to the female British novelist, George Eliot, whom many considered an English naturalist.

For Ferdinand Brunetière, however, Sand and Eliot played a different role in defining – and critiquing – naturalism and, in this paper, I will consider the ways in which the conservative critic used both female authors to challenge Zola’s assumed position as a champion of the “real” and the “true.” In keeping with his desire for an art that reflected some kind of moral order, Brunetière celebrated Sand and Eliot for the “sympathie universelle” manifested in their novels, a quality he found conspicuously lacking in Zola.

Zola and George Sand I: “*La charité militante*”

In a series of letters written in the spring and early summer of 1860 to Jean-Baptiste Baille and Paul Cézanne (*les trois inséparables* from the Collège Bourbon in Aix), Zola shared his thoughts on literature, poetry, art, and his search for “la Muse.”¹ At twenty, the aspiring author hoped to become the next Musset and his correspondence with his friends Baille and Cézanne reflected his current readings and soaring ambition. “[S]orti des bancs du lycée” and prompted by the “concert de louanges sur cet écrivain,”² Zola declared his intention to read the works of George Sand in order to “la juger moi-même” (Bakker I, 154); and here he comments on four of Sand’s better-known novels of the 1830s-1840s: *La Mare au diable*, *Lucrezia Floriani*, *André*, and *Jacques*. In his letter of 2 May 1860 to Baille,³ Zola praised her “style clair, simple, vif” (Bakker I, 156) and deemed *La Mare au diable* an “idylle simple et gracieuse,” exclaiming “quelle perle!” (Bakker I, 154). He notes that her descriptions are sometimes too long, her male characters are always inferior to her female characters, and her view of love is too pessimistic for his taste but disagrees with those who contend that “George Sand pêche par sa philosophie,” arguing “[j]usqu’à présent, dans les livres que j’ai lus, je n’ai découvert qu’une douce tolérance, qu’un grand esprit de charité” (Bakker I, 156).

Zola would go on to expand upon this idea/spirit of generosity, praising what he subsequently termed Sand’s “charité militante” (Bakker I, 156) and her engagement with the possibilities of a better world. The author of *Indiana* “voudrait que le monde entier fût peuplé de riches et de joyeux, que tous soient frères, s’aiment et s’entr’aident,” he notes admiringly, and she goes beyond “de vaines larmes” shed over an imperfect world (Bakker I, 156). Instead of empty protests,

[e]lle propose de marcher au-devant des maux, d’aller trouver le misérable dans sa mansarde, et là de lutter corps à corps avec la misère; point de larmes inutiles, point de vains attendrissements sur les pauvres, mais une lutte patiente, un combat de chaque jour, d’où tous les hommes sortiront frères, formant une seule république riche et forte. Hélas! ce n’est peut-être qu’un rêve, et pourtant cela serait bien. (Bakker I, 156-57)

Far from critiquing Sand’s idealism – unnamed here as such –, the young Zola admires the battle she undertakes, using military metaphors he would soon deploy on his own behalf in defense of naturalism. A few weeks later, upon reading *Jacques*, “une œuvre étrange” where “chaque phrase vibre, chaque mot vous émeut,” Zola admits to Baille (4 juillet 1860) “on ne saurait la feuilleter sans pleurer, sans éprouver les frissons d’enthousiasme” (Bakker I, 195), the distancing pronouns “vous” and “on” doing little to mask his own emotional response to the controversial novel.

¹ Zola, letter to Baille, 17 March 1860, in *Correspondance: Lettres de jeunesse* (Paris: Charpentier, 1907) 27.

² Zola, letter to Baille, 2 May 1860, in *Correspondance de Zola*, éd. B.H. Bakker, 10 vols. (Montréal: Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1978-1995) I, 154-55. Henceforth, references to this work will be given parenthetically in the text, with the indication Bakker, followed by volume and page number. Later, the next month (25 June 1869), Zola would confess to Cézanne his admiration for Musset and how the romantic poet influenced his own work (Bakker I, 194).

³ Bakker I, 153-59.

Zola and George Sand II: “*Elle n’a rien de révolutionnaire*”

Sixteen years later, as his career was ascending, Zola published a lengthy essay about George Sand in *Le Messager de l’Europe* on the occasion of her death. Unlike the intimate letters of 1860, in which Zola expressed both respect and appreciation for Sand, the public-facing article of 1876 takes an adversarial tone. Wasting little time on niceties, the naturalist author vaguely gestures to her role “parmi les ouvriers du commencement de ce siècle,” before shifting the focus to a dialectic history of the contemporary novel flowing from the breasts of Balzac and Sand: “le fleuve du vrai” and “le fleuve du rêve” respectively.⁴ Shorthand for literary realism and idealism, these terms – *le vrai* and *le rêve* – would become central to his explanations of the naturalist novel, which in many ways would be defined by what it was not: that is, an idealist novel by Sand. In relegating the female author to a distant past – “Elle n’existait plus pour la génération nouvelle [...]. Elle était d’un autre âge, elle se trouvait véritablement dépaysée au milieu du nôtre” (OC 12, 412) –, Zola proclaims not only the expiration of Sand, but also of idealism itself.

Returning to the military tropes he used in praise of the female author in 1860, Zola reverses the valences, aligning Sand and “le rêve” not with noble battle, but rather with ignoble defeat. Zola avows :

A cette heure, dans la lutte du vrai et du rêve, c’est le vrai qui l’emporte, après quarante ans de production littéraire. Chaque jour, Balzac a grandi davantage [...] parce qu’il a été l’homme de la science moderne, parce qu’il s’est rencontré avec le mouvement même du siècle. Il allait en avant, quand George Sand restait stationnaire. De là sa victoire. (OC 12, 412)

Repeating these images of martial domination, Zola depicts Sand’s demise in terms of a violent triumph of naturalism over idealism that conflates the woman and her work: “[E]lle ne peut opposer à l’armée des disciples de Balzac [ses disciples à elle]. Telle est la vraie situation. Le roman naturaliste a vaincu, il y a là un fait évident qui ne peut être nié par personne. George Sand représente une formule morte, voilà tout” (OC 12, 413). The absolute nature of these assertions, brooking no possible doubt, belies perhaps a level of anxiety on Zola’s part, as do the ongoing images of battle – “la lutte du vrai et du rêve,” “l’armée des disciples” –, his identification as “le soldat le plus vaincu du vrai” (OC 10, 1222),⁵ and the repetition of the verb *vaincre* throughout this and other essays. Aligning himself with Balzac and the “les vainqueurs,” Zola takes remarkable pains to distance himself from Sand, dismissing the late author and her work with a ferocity that seems gratuitous at best, even for Zola. Coexistence, it would seem, is impossible and naturalism’s success is both a cause and a result of idealism’s failure. But why, one might wonder, does he bother? What does George Sand really represent here?

Zola structures his argument along a familiar set of oppositions – real vs ideal, truth vs falsehood, science vs poetry, past vs future, reality vs dream, observation vs imagination, and of course, male/masculine vs female/feminine – that are all embodied, quite literally, by Balzac and Sand. Implicit here is his own position, alongside Balzac, on the side of a virile and forward-looking *vérité*, conquering a feminized romanticism and idealism that cannot speak to the modern experience. This gendering of the literary genres in terms of survival of the fittest gestures to the

⁴ Zola, *Œuvres complètes*, éd. Henri Mitterand, 20 vols. (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1966-) 12: 389-90. Referred to hereafter as OC, with volume and page number given parenthetically in the text.

⁵ My emphases.

principles of evolution and determinism that naturalism espoused. At the same time, though less explicitly, the gendering of literary genres seeks also to resist or deny the essential *indeterminacy* that characterizes Sand's work and that of myriad romantics and idealists, who refused the very certainty naturalists hoped to emulate or produce in their writing. As Zola would insist, “les romanciers idéalistes restent de parti pris dans l'inconnu [...] sous le prétexte stupéfiant que l'inconnu est plus noble et plus beau que le connu” (OC 10, 1189). “[S]cientifiquement,” he explains, this question of the ideal “se réduit à la question de l'indéterminé et du déterminé” (OC 10, 1194) and accordingly “cette question de l'idéal” is nothing more than “la question de l'indéterminisme” (OC 10, 1188).

The world of dream, fantasy, and imagination which Zola associates directly with romantic idealism in general, and with George Sand in particular, is one of uncertainty, where multiple possibilities, meanings, and even identities can exist simultaneously, while linear logic may be held in abeyance by what he calls an “irrational” belief in the beauty and nobility of the unknown or unknowable. Inversely, Zola's experimental novelists-qua-scientists privilege knowledge, power, and mastery of the world over appreciation of its mystery: “l'observateur et l'expérimentateur” thus contribute to “la puissance et le bonheur de l'homme, en le rendant peu à peu le maître de la nature” (OC 10, 1194). And, speaking on behalf of naturalist novelists, Zola claims: “Nous voulons, nous aussi, être les maîtres des phénomènes, des éléments intellectuels et personnels, pour pouvoir les diriger” (OC 10, 1188). If, as Zola insists, naturalism seeks above all to assert control over nature, society, and the truth, then idealism, “qui n'est, en somme, que la question de l'indéterminisme” (OC 10, 1188), is at odds with the very idea of a singular truth, let alone its mastery. The naturalist's lexicon of conquest⁶ expresses a vision of domination that resonates with the colonial logic of empire and *la mission civilisatrice*, where truth, power, and morality are aligned with a masculinized naturalism that mirrors the nationalism of Imperial France, while error, weakness, and immorality are a feminized idealism identified with the colonized (or soon to be colonized) world. Even as it is associated with failure and impotence, idealism is posited as a threat that must be defeated.

At the heart of this contrast between naturalism and idealism in the George Sand essay – and beyond – we find the question of the nature of art itself: What is the role of art? Who can be an artist? And what can and should art *do*? The answer for Zola, at least as elaborated in his theoretical writings, lies in art's political efficacy: its ability to “diagnose” and “cure” the social body of its ills. The artist must be objective and scientific, rather than emotionally or personally engaged, while art's moral value lies in its unmediated relationship to difficult or ugly “truths,” rather than beautiful “lies.” In a remarkable move of rhetorical jujitsu, as seen above, Zola claims for naturalism the moral high ground generally associated with idealism; here, the concepts of freedom and love, dreams of a better world or a poetic and elevated existence are dismissed as examples of “l'immoralité,” and associated with all that is “faux, maladif, malsain, grotesque” (OC 12, 404), while narratives of corruption, addiction, prostitution, and murder “ont une morale unique et superbe, la vérité” (OC 12, 411-12). Inverting the traditional values of beauty and ugliness, Zola exclaims “Combien les réalités, même grossières, sont plus saines!” (OC 12, 404).

⁶ Here are examples of this lexicon, with my emphases throughout. First, the conquest: “[N]ous travaillons avec tout le siècle à la grande œuvre qui est la *conquête* de la nature” (OC 10, 1191); “le but de notre effort humain est chaque jour de réduire l'idéal, de *conquérir* la vérité sur l'inconnu” (OC 10, 1194); “[L]e seul idéal qui doit exister pour nous, romanciers expérimentateurs, c'est celui que nous pouvons *conquérir*” (OC 10, 1195). And here are examples of moral direction or regulation: “Être *maître* du bien et du mal, *régler* la vie, *régler* la société” (OC 10: 1188); and “[c]'est nous qui avons la force, c'est nous qui avons la morale” (OC 10, 1191).

Thus, defined via a series of horizontal or parallel (a/b) binaries in these numerous essays, Zola's naturalism is theoretically constructed in absolute terms that also function vertically (a > b) in terms of evaluative hierarchies of power, superiority/inferiority or, most simply, positive and negative poles, such that

male = truth = strength = moral > female = falsehood = weakness = immoral.

While this is nothing new in the long history of gendered rhetoric and aesthetic philosophizing,⁷ it is still noteworthy that Zola goes so far as to dedicate a memorial essay about the revered – and very recently departed – “Bonne Dame de Nohant,” in which he speaks to the unambiguous failures of her vision, an argument he will repeat over the course of the following decade,⁸ while asserting the moral and political value of his work against the futility of the Sandian idealism he had once privately admired. As alleged in “Lettre à la jeunesse” (1879), the very future of France in the decades following the debacles of 1870 depends on “la morale *moderne*” (my emphasis) found only in the naturalist novel, which alone provides the tools to “master” and “dominate” good and evil in the name of the nation.⁹ “Aujourd’hui,” Zola proclaims, “nous avons besoin de la virilité du vrai pour être glorieux dans l’avenir, comme nous l’avons été dans le passé” (OC 10, 1206). Reflecting on his youthful enthusiasm for Sand and her “charité militante,” one might wonder if Zola “doth protest too much” in this “Lettre à la jeunesse.” Whom, we might ask, is he really addressing as he adamantly proclaims, again and again, that art, as a political tool for social progress toward a powerful, positive, and truthful future, is within the exclusive purview of masculinity?

Indeed, following this logic, Sand and idealism are collectively removed from the realm of political agency in Zola's naturalist schema and denied a political voice from the essay of 1876 forward. In their adhesion to what Zola deems beautiful untruths, her novels cannot be moral and thus cannot play a role in social progress, because only “l’esprit de vérité,” associated with the virility of conquest, is capable of transforming society. By the same token, as Zola conflates the author and her work into a single signifier of the feminine, Sand herself “n’a rien de révolutionnaire” (OC 12, 390). He finds her “campagnes de réformateur forcément stérile” (OC 12, 398) – an interesting word choice in and of itself – and comments specifically on the “inanité” of her efforts on behalf of women: “George Sand n’a point réussi à faire faire un pas à l’émancipation des femmes” (OC 12, 399). The “charité militante” he once praised is, again, no longer salient for the naturalist author and, despite her role on the barricades in 1848, Zola insists, one would be sadly mistaken to consider her a reformer or a revolutionary. With her long hair, her “poitrine qu’une émotion agitait,” and “son cœur de mère et d’épouse qui obéissait impérieusement

⁷ See Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

⁸ Sand died on 8 June 1876 and Zola's essay appeared the next month in *Le Messager de l'Europe* (July 1876). Zola's “George Sand” was published again in *Le Voltaire* in March 1879 and an abbreviated version was published in *Le Bien Public* in June 1877.

⁹ In “Lettre à la jeunesse” (published in May 1879), Zola proclaimed: “Demain, c’est ce vingtième siècle dont l’évolution scientifique aide la naissance laborieuse; demain, c’est l’enquête universelle, l’esprit de vérité transformant les sociétés; et si nous voulons que demain nous appartienne, il faut que nous soyons des hommes nouveaux, marchant à l’avenir par la méthode, par la logique, par l’étude et la possession du réel” (OC 10, 1206). Later in the essay, which appeared in both *Le Messager de l'Europe* and in *Le Voltaire*, he wrote: “La morale moderne aspire à un rôle plus grand [...]; elle veut, en un mot, dominer le bien et le mal [...] pour qu’on puisse être le maître du milieu et de l’homme [...]” (OC 10, 1220).

aux lois naturelles,” no one, according to the naturalist, has “le sens féminin plus développé” than George Sand (*OC* 12, 397).

The hyperbolic claim of maternal and spousal *obedience* in reference to Sand – a woman who famously left her husband and children at age twenty-seven for an independent life as an author and was widely known for her affairs with Jules Sandeau, Mérimée, Musset, Louis Blanc, Chopin, among others – marks the distance between the singular George Sand Zola is constructing here for his argument and the once controversial author. If Sand was first notorious for her *travestissement* in her masculine trousers, *redingote*, cigar, and pseudonym, she was a consummate performer until the end of her life, inhabiting a variety of identities, sometimes simultaneously, but always with a playful acknowledgement of multiplicity and the possibility of *being both*. As Naomi Schor has observed, toward the end of her career “Sand’s most enduringly successful fictional creation [was] the truly astonishing transformation of herself from an object of scandal into the supreme figure of propriety, the good mother par excellence, the popular public persona and cultural artifact that came to be known as the ‘Bonne Dame de Nohant.’”¹⁰ But in referencing this final performance as if it were fixed and inherent, without reference to the myriad other identities Sand claimed, Zola silences a complex and threatening history of mutability and undecidability for a single image that adheres predictably “aux lois naturelles,” reducing the unpredictable George Sand to her biological essence (*OC* 12, 397).

Thus, in the world of absolute truths and clear binaries that Zola describes, one could never consider the woman or her work in male terms, and those who do or did are gravely mistaken: “On a trop voulu voir en elle un homme, on a trop parlé des virilités de sa nature, et l’on est arrivé à se tromper, à créer une légende” (*OC* 12, 397). Debunking the masculine myth of “George Sand,” Zola insists that, above all, “[e]lle reste femme fatalement” (*OC* 12, 395). The female author may have imagined herself in the role of a revolutionary moralist, but ultimately this is impossible, for “[i]l lui manquait simplement d’être un homme” (*OC* 12, 398). Insisting again in absolute terms, Zola explains: “Pour moi, elle est simplement restée femme, en tout et toujours” (*OC* 12, 397). In this deterministic, if tautological, formulation, Sand is presented as *simply* and exclusively “la femme” in mind, body, artistic creation, and fruitless political engagement – “rien n’est plus femme, je le dis encore” (*OC* 12, 398) – and functions for Zola, here and elsewhere, as the antithesis of the naturalist construction of the “*virilité* du vrai” (*OC* 10, 1206; my emphasis) embodied by the – inevitably male – naturalists, leading France toward future glory through “la méthode, la logique, par l’étude et la possession du réel” (*OC* 10, 1206). The multiplicity embraced and embodied by Sand – at once Aurore Dudevant *and* George Sand, a woman *and* an author, an active political voice, *and* an idealist – was at once unthinkable within Zola’s naturalist formulae and yet needing to be contained, denied, and conquered. The primary identity he assigns her, a woman *tout court*, precludes the possibility of access to reform, revolution, or successful advocacy for Sand. The very idea of the female author’s “charité militante” becomes, for Zola, an oxymoron. Again, we might ask, why doth he protest so much?

Flipping the table: Brunetière reads Zola, Flaubert, and Sand

To better understand the role played by George Sand in the construction – and deconstruction – of naturalism, it is worth turning to the writings of Ferdinand Brunetière. An influential critic at the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and one of naturalism’s fiercest opponents, Brunetière used a similar

¹⁰ Naomi Schor, *George Sand and Idealism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993) 179.

rhetorical strategy – that of antithesis – to postulate his views on contemporary literature and, like Zola, he repeatedly invokes George Sand to highlight what realism and naturalism are not, but here the valences are reversed. In his 1879 essay titled “*Le Roman experimental*,” Brunetière echoes Zola’s contention that there are two ways of understanding the world, one Sandian, the other Balzacian. In the first case, he tells us, one would write *Le Marquis de Villemer*; in the second, *La Cousine Bette*, and his preference is clearly for the former.¹¹ Advocating a classical, even reactionary, set of criteria to define the role of art and *la morale*, Brunetière dismisses Zola’s novels as “pornographie et reportage,”¹² insisting instead on the importance of beauty in literary form and aesthetic emotion. He declares that the naturalists are, in fact, “à la fois très près et très loin de la vérité” (RN 127) and takes Zola to task for categorizing idealism, and specifically Sand’s works, as unreal or irrational – “M Zola nous dira-t-il du moins en quoi *Valentine* est ‘basée sur le surnaturel,’ ou *Indiana* sur ‘l’irrationnel?’” (RN 137) –, clearly stating his preference with the remark that “nous avons besoin d’un peu d’idéal” (RN 136).¹³

In a similar fashion, Brunetière’s 1884 review of the published letters of Flaubert and Sand uses the author of *La Mare au diable* to highlight Flaubert’s shortcomings and those of his fellow realists. He notes that never have two novelists had more contradictory natures and goes on to contrast Flaubert’s “dédain” and “mépris” for all but a small handful of readers – “les ‘dix ou douze lecteurs’ qui voyaient et pensaient comme lui” – with Sand’s quest to write for “tous ceux qui ont soif de lire et qui peuvent profiter d’une bonne lecture.”¹⁴ This leads the critic to contend that Flaubert is “un artiste,” while Sand is “un poète.” For Brunetière, artists, interested in nothing but their art, are infinitely inferior to poets, as they lack “la profondeur d’universelle sympathie que ce nom de poète comporte” (RDM 703-04). This “sympathy,” notably absent for Brunetière in *Madame Bovary* and *L’Education sentimentale*, is tied to the critic’s conception of “la moralité” and reflects a “sens intime et profonde de la vie” only possible when novelists feel “un intérêt, une curiosité” for or about the characters they represent, “une sympathie que Flaubert n’a jamais éprouvée” (RDM 702). He goes on to explain that one can only be a *poète* – such as Sand – if one is endowed with “la condition d’une sympathie ou, pour mieux dire encore, d’une sensibilité qui vibre à l’unisson de toutes les joies et de toutes les douleurs de l’humanité”; although Flaubert has an extraordinary lucidity of vision and sense of the sonorities of the French language, “hors de là, néant! égale incapacité de comprendre et de sentir” (RDM 704). *La sympathie* is thus understood by Brunetière as a sentiment or feeling, a sensibility and perhaps even an identification with humanity found in “l’intelligence éclairée par l’amour” (RN 219).

¹¹ See Ferdinand Brunetière, *Le Roman naturaliste* (Paris: Calmann Levy, 1896) 128-29. Hereafter referred to as *RN*, with page numbers given parenthetically in the text. One piece in this edition of his collected essays is titled “*Le Roman experimental*” (121-48).

¹² “Pornographie et reportage, voilà tout ce que l’auteur de *L’Argent* a su faire d’une grande doctrine d’art [...]. Ce laborieux et puissant ouvrier de lettres, moins laborieux que régulier peut-être, et assurément moins puissant que commun, n’a pas compris ni ne comprendra jamais qu’en rendant le mot de naturalisme synonyme de celui de grossièreté, son œuvre manquait à toutes les promesses du nom qu’elle avait usurpé.” Brunetière, “Le Symbolisme contemporain,” *Revue littéraire* 104 (1891): 681-92. 683-84.

¹³ “M Zola se moque lorsqu’il prétend qu’on lui demanderait ‘de sortir de l’observation et de l’expérience pour baser ses œuvres sur ‘l’irrationnel et le surnaturel’ ou ‘de s’enfermer dans l’inconnu sous le prétexte stupéfiant que l’inconnu est plus noble et beau que le connu’” (RN 136-37). Brunetière continues: “[Lui] qui trouve qu’on adresse au naturalisme des ‘reproches bêtes,’ de quel adjectif nous permettra-t-il de qualifier cette définition de l’*idéalisme*? Nous dira-t-il du moins en quoi *Valentine* est ‘basée sur le surnaturel,’ ou *Indiana* sur ‘l’irrationnel?’” (RN 137).

¹⁴ Ferdinand Brunetière, “Correspondance de Gustave Flaubert avec George Sand,” *Revue des Deux Mondes* 61.3 (1 fév. 1884): 695-705. 698. Hereafter referred to as *RDM*, with page numbers given parenthetically in the text.

In highlighting this quality of generous sympathy in George Sand's novels, Brunetière counters what he deems the “*réalisme misanthropique*” (RN 7) found in Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, and reconfirms idealism's claim to *la morale*. Rejecting the distancing lens of social criticism espoused by the realists, the critic celebrates a more rose-colored view of humanity and life in general. Nonetheless, Brunetière does concur with Flaubert on one crucial point: the author should never be “personally” present in the narrative. Briefly shifting his own sympathies to the realist's professed position, Brunetière takes pains to clarify the shortcomings of Sand's aesthetic vision:

Il lui [à Flaubert] eût peut-être été plus difficile encore de lui [à Sand] faire comprendre que le roman et le théâtre n'ont pas été précisément inventés pour servir de tribune à l'exposition des idées politiques ou sociales du romancier et de l'auteur dramatique. [...] Or presque tous les romans de George Sand qui ne sont pas une mise en scène de quelques-unes de ses aventures sont une mise en thèse de quelques-unes de ses idées sociales ou socialistes. (RDM 700)

Eschewing “l'esprit de parti” and “l'intervention de la doctrine personnelle” in any kind of art, Brunetière condemns “cette perpétuelle préoccupation d'agir sur l'esprit du public” that he found in many of Sand's novels (RDM 701). “En insinuant quelque chose d'infiniment trop personnel,” he explains, the author “y introduit quelque chose aussi de caduc et qui risque, par conséquent, d'entraîner quelque jour l'œuvre entière dans sa chute” (RDM 701). Where Zola argued against the possibility of political content in Sand's writing, Brunetière acknowledges the problematic “idées politiques ou sociales” found in much of her work and denounces her efforts at social commentary out of hand. The sympathy he praises, it would seem, is removed from any kind of personal reflection, social engagement, or political position, while *la morale* lies in the elevating fictions of classical art, “les Hermione et les Phèdre” (RN 26) and the comforting embrace of the dignity of the quotidian. In his multi-pronged attack on realism and naturalism, Brunetière cannily uses George Sand as a battering ram to highlight the failings of Zola, Flaubert, and others, continuing the defining antithesis of idealism to realism and introducing the concept of *la sympathie* as an important distinguishing quality. At the same time, Brunetière confirms Sand's political voice, albeit as an artistic failing, and his gambit in these essays is less to praise Sand, of whom he often disapproved, than to further denigrate the naturalists by attributing *la moralité* and *l'engagement* to an author they considered not only opposite, but also inferior to them: a female idealist.¹⁵

Brunetière's “Le naturalisme anglais: Étude sur George Eliot”

This idea of a generalized, benign sympathy for humanity and its foibles was also at the heart of Brunetière's provocative essay “Le naturalisme anglais: Étude sur George Eliot” (1881), wherein he redefines “successful” naturalism in his own terms. As much an assault on Zola as an assessment of Eliot, the article compares the French naturalists' “ridicule” of the characters in their novels with what Brunetière terms the English naturalists' “sympathie” (RN 219). Challenging the author of the *Rougon-Macquart*'s contention that a protestant could never be a naturalist, the critic holds up the examples of Dutch genre painting and George Eliot's British novels as examples of a

¹⁵ Brunetière focuses almost exclusively on the differences between Sand and Flaubert in the review of their recently published correspondence and does not comment on their deep friendship and respect for each other that is evident in so many of these letters. Instead, Brunetière insists “Ils ne s'étaient pas compris!” (RDM 699).

superior form of naturalism – thus opposing Zola’s claims on every front: nation, gender, and aesthetics. He proposes that French naturalism, coextensive to some extent in this formulation with French nationalism, is based in a sense of superiority and condescension toward its humble subjects, while British authors, such as Fielding, Dickens, and Eliot, “se mettent à plein pied avec leurs personnages, vivent au milieu d’eux, s’efforcent à les comprendre, et les aiment parce qu’ils les comprennent” (RN 218). Brunetière notes the emotional distance embraced by Zola, Flaubert, and their confrères, and argues that the deep connection and affection he witnesses in the work of Eliot and the English naturalists better reflect a *knowledge* of people, places, and things, reclaiming Zola’s emphasis on “le connu” for the authors on the other side of *la Manche*.

Brunetière redeploys Zola’s oppositions to highlight French naturalism’s failures; associating psychological penetration and understanding not with scientific observation but with “cette sympathie de l’intelligence éclairée par l’amour” (RN 219), the critic takes one of Zola’s own claims for naturalism’s superiority – that of capturing human psychology with unprecedented accuracy – and attributes it to British authors, and above all, George Eliot. For indeed, Brunetière argues, “l’observation en quelque sorte hostile, ironique, railleuse tout au moins, de nos naturalistes français ne pénètre guère au-delà de l’écorce des choses,” whereas in the English novel, “cette sympathie [...] descend doucement et se met sans faste à la portée de ceux qu’elle veut comprendre; tel est en effet, tel a toujours été, tel sera toujours l’instrument de l’analyse psychologique” (RN 219).

Focusing on “external action” rather than “internal reaction,”¹⁶ the realists may tout the factual or scientific bases of their depictions of human behavior and motivations, but Brunetière maintains that they, in fact, “ne les comprennent pas” (RN 223). Despite their efforts to capture the truth and their claims of mastery, the very nuances and “délicatesses” of human experience elude the realists, he contends; and it is specifically the French authors’ lack of the kind of sympathy¹⁷ found in Sand, Eliot, and the British “naturalists” that constitutes their weakness. Brunetière goes on to define the naturalists dialectically, in terms of what they are and what they are not: “physiologistes habiles, psychologues incomplets; observateurs précis, analystes maladroits; et peintres vigoureux de la réalité palpable, mais explorateurs moins que médiocres de la réalité qui ne se voit pas” (RN 223).

Brunetière similarly aligns morality with the sympathy he finds in the English variant of the naturalist novel and, quoting the philosopher Herbert Spencer, locates “la morale” in any conduct that contributes to the well-being of the self and that of others. Spencer, a close friend of Eliot’s and of her long-time partner George Henry Lewes and who introduced the couple, was a proponent of the emerging theories of evolution and known for his application of Darwinian theory to society, psychology, and progress. The French critic attributes Eliot’s principles of human solidarity entirely to Spencer’s thought, regardless of the fact that the novelist and the philosopher enjoyed a mutual influence upon each other.¹⁸ As such, while endorsing the philosophical theories

¹⁶ “L’action de l’extérieur n’est rien, c’est la réaction du dedans qui importe” (RN 223).

¹⁷ Brunetière’s entire statement: “Il y a des délicatesses qui lui [à Balzac] échappent, quelque laborieux et consciencieux effort qu’il y fasse pour les saisir; et elles lui échappent, comme à Flaubert, *faute de cette sympathie* que nous définissons tout à l’heure: parce qu’ils ne les comprennent pas” (RN 233). My emphasis.

¹⁸ At the time, Brunetière wrote: “La morale de l’auteur d’*Adam Bede* ne règle pas dogmatiquement le devoir une fois pour toutes sans l’égard aux occurrences, mais elle attend aux occurrences, et fait l’application du principe selon le cas. Ce principe est immédiatement déduit de la solidarité qui lie nos actions entre elles et nos actions aux actions des autres. ‘Il ne faut pas arranger pour soi seul les affaires de sa vie.’ C’est George Eliot qui parle. Et encore ailleurs: ‘Il ne faut pas rechercher sa propre volonté.’ Nous reconnaissons ici la doctrine que, dans sa *Morale évolutionniste*, M Herbert Spencer a depuis exposée.” Quoting Spencer, Brunetière continues “La morale a un champ plus vaste qu’on

of Spencer and Lewes, Brunetière goes on to find fault in the female author's own metaphysical leanings, judging her later novels inferior to earlier ones based on her own family and personal experiences. Just as Brunetière privileged George Sand's pastoral novels for their "simplicity" and emotional, rather than intellectual or political, engagement, he also finds Eliot's "simple" and local tales – *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner* – more successful than her later works, *Daniel Deronda*, *Theophrastus Such*, with their forays into the realms of history and philosophy (RN 248-49). Regarding the earlier works, the female author is praised for her "humble" and "charming" tales, while ambition beyond an emotional *sympathie* is anathema.

Although Brunetière continued to elevate Eliot as one of the "true naturalists"¹⁹ for years to come, Zola's only recorded mentions of the author of *Middlemarch* appeared in a pair of second-hand reports in *La Revue bleue: Revue politique et littéraire* filed under "Nouvelles de l'étranger" in 1890 and 1892. In the first of these, titled "George Eliot jugé par M. Zola," Michel Delines reports on an interview published in London's *Daily Graphic*.²⁰ As he recounts, the British interlocutor was soliciting Zola's opinion on the proposal of establishing an *Académie anglaise* following the model of the *Académie française* – the French author is decidedly opposed to this idea.

The correspondent relates that Zola claimed to know very little British literature, having read nothing more than "quelques traductions des romans de George Eliot."²¹ Delines dryly remarks that he must have chosen poorly from her works or, perhaps not being familiar with British life, he was simply unable to appreciate them. Yet Zola – or the writer voicing Zola in this piece – doubles down, expressing his incredulity at the judgment of critic Edmond Scherer "qui opposait toujours le naturalisme de George Eliot à celui de Flaubert, de Balzac, et de M Zola."²² Acknowledging the now frequent comparison of Eliot with the French realists, without mentioning Brunetière, Delines asserts that Zola would unequivocally repudiate associating the two:

L'auteur de *Nana* ne comprend pas qu'on puisse comparer à Balzac la grande romancière anglaise, et il est tout étonné d'apprendre que jusqu'ici George Eliot n'est point descendue du piédestal où l'a placée l'admiration de ses compatriotes. Il est certain que George Eliot avait une autre manière de comprendre le naturalisme que l'auteur de la *Joie de vivre* [sic]; si elle reflète dans ses œuvres les types immortels de ses compatriotes pris dans toutes les

ne le lui assigne ordinairement. Outre la conduite communément approuvée comme bonne ou mauvaise, elle s'étend à toute conduite qui favorise ou contrarie, d'une manière directe ou indirecte, notre bien-être et celui des autres.' Ôtez ou changez ce mot de bien-être qui n'a pas du tout en anglais le sens étroit que nous lui donnons. Il n'est pas de morale plus haute, que dis-je? – il n'en est pas de plus utopique" (RN 233).

¹⁹ See "Une Définition des mots" in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (1 March 1889): 220.

²⁰ Michel Delines was the pseudonym of the Russian writer and translator Mikhail Ashkinazi, who frequently wrote for the French press at the fin de siècle, reproducing second-hand "interviews" and encounters that may have been partially or entirely apocryphal. I am beholden to Elizabeth Emery and her article "Verlaine en vitrine: La mise en scène d'un 'poète maudit' pour *Les Contemporains chez eux*" in *Atelier* (2015), for these insights on Delines. Not surprisingly, perhaps, I was unable to locate the original interview with Zola that Delines claims to have read in the London *Graphic*. Ivan Turgenev, a friend of Sand's and an admirer of Zola's, encouraged Delines's literary ambitions and may have connected him to French authors and artists.

See https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Michel_Delines. See also Marie-Ève Théranty on the nineteenth-century practice of publishing fictitious interviews.

²¹ Michel Delines, "Bulletin: Nouvelles de l'Étranger," *La Revue bleue* (27 déc. 1890): 829. Further references to this source will be indicated Delines.

²² Delines 829. For discussion of Scherer's admiration of Eliot and his extensive publications in the French press about the English author, see John Philip Couch, *George Eliot in France: A French Appraisal of George Eliot's Writings, 1858-1960* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1967) 68-84.

classes de la société anglaise, elle s'est refusée à admettre, dans une œuvre de littérature ou d'art, ce qu'elle appelait les choses *crues*. C'est probablement pourquoi M Zola ne la trouve pas assez naturaliste.²³

Adamantly contradicting his adversary and acolytes, “Zola” insists that Eliot cannot be a naturalist by his definition. Two years later, Delines reports in the same journal that, according to Zola, George Eliot “n’a aucune connaissance précise de la nature humaine. Elle ne connaît l’humanité que par les livres.”²⁴ Even in 1892, some twelve years after her death, it was still clearly understood that George Eliot, like George Sand, must be denied by the French naturalists. Again, one might ask, why such vehement resistance to a deceased female writer? And why did the long-established discourses of naturalism still need to be defined through opposition?

The antinomies of realism

Part of the reason for this perseveration may lie in the very nature of authors’ and critics’ ambitious claims for the realist/naturalist novel. At the most obvious level, for Zola, and Balzac, Flaubert, etc., realism was always – and exaggeratedly – gendered male, and the passionate rejection of Sand and her writing expressed by the author of *Nana* was in some ways a continuation of dialogues Balzac and Flaubert had also engaged in with her on a regular, though more personal and less violent, basis.²⁵ As female authors became increasingly visible and more and more successful in nineteenth-century France, it was something of a commonplace for male authors to dismiss them in an effort to reclaim their turf; romanticism and idealism were quickly feminized with the rise of realism, the authors and readers of these novels assigned inferior positions in the hierarchies of art and prestige. As naturalism was defined as a tool for progress, Zola’s repeated claim that Sand’s very identity as a woman would automatically disqualify her from this kind of agency carved out the exclusive power to effectuate social change for male naturalists. By extension, George Eliot could not be a naturalist, not only because she was British, but also because she was female. These were tried and true strategies for containing women writers during the period.

There is, however, something deeper in Zola’s engagement with George Sand, for as we all know, there is often a marked distance between what authors *say* about their own work and what they *do* in their work, just as criticism may often say one thing, only to signify something else. Zola’s dogged insistence in his theoretical writings on certainty and mastery – his commitment to conquering nature “par la méthode, par la logique, par l’étude et la possession du réel” (*OC* 10, 1206), his belief in an absolute *vérité* and a verifiable *connaissance*, and finally, his professed faith in naturalism’s ability to “dominer le bien et le mal [...] pour qu’on puisse être le maître du milieu et de l’homme” (*OC* 10, 1220) – collectively betray what Fredric Jameson calls the “antinomies of realism”²⁶ and the anxiety induced by the concomitant recognition of the uncertainty or undecidability of meaning. As Jennifer Yee has argued, “realist authors regularly amplify their texts’ own claims to empiricism and secularism while simultaneously [...] troubling

²³ Delines 829.

²⁴ Michel Delines, “Bulletin: Nouvelles de l’Étranger,” *La Revue bleue* (6 fév. 1892): 192.

²⁵ See *Correspondance Gustave Flaubert, George Sand* (Rennes: Part commune, 2011) for the fascinating exchange between this pair of authors. For discussion of Balzac’s complex relationship with Sand, see Alexandra Wettlaufer, “Signifying Difference: Reading Balzac and Sand/Writing Balzac and Sand,” *Romanic Review* 112.2 (Sept. 2021): 189-212.

²⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013) 6 and elsewhere.

those very claims.”²⁷ Thus, Zola’s aversion to George Sand’s idealism as a kind of “indeterminacy,” to her troubling refusal of a singular identity or position as a woman, and to her claims for the moral value of dream and imagination, articulated most fervently as he defines naturalism in the late 1870s, reflects what Claire White calls a self-conscious “expulsion of Sandian idealism”²⁸ that he would never really be able to maintain in his fiction. For indeed, what Zola establishes as naturalism’s opposition to dream, imagination, and the beauty of the ideal in the late 1870s is theoretical, aspirational, and, perhaps, idealized: this belief in absolute knowledge, power, and mastery is not necessarily central to or even evident in his novels, most notably in his later works, such as *Le Rêve* of 1888 and *les Quatre Évangiles* (1898-1902). If Zola the critic positions himself and his novels as the antithesis of Sand and idealism, Zola the author cannot maintain this stance, hence the images of battle; if Zola the critic seeks to expunge Sand’s embrace of *l’inconnu* from literature, the author remains haunted by it, as he is haunted by the hope that bubbles to the surface in so many of his novels – even as he would continue to deny it. Zola’s claims for naturalism’s potential to “dominer le bien et le mal [...] pour qu’on puisse être le maître du milieu et de l’homme” (*OC* 10, 1220) is ultimately an idealist dream.

La sympathie and la difference

Finally, the antagonism Brunetière exhibited to realism and naturalism did not preclude a certain level of perspicuity regarding some of these contradictions and anxieties, especially vis-à-vis Sand. Grasping the role played by the idealist author for Zola and his predecessors, Brunetière borrowed the fundamental opposition at the heart of so many of his essays, only to reverse the terms, elevating Sand’s idealism to criticize realism’s *immoralité*. Thus, although they constructed themselves as aesthetic and moral opponents, Brunetière and Zola shared similar strategies of dialectic definition, as each used the figures of prominent female writers of the nineteenth century to delineate the moral qualities of art. Embracing antitheses and hierarchical structures, both Zola and Brunetière used *différence* as a tool to assert superiority and, by extension, dominance. For Zola, the qualities of idealism, imagination, and sympathy, as manifested in George Sand’s life and writings, represented everything the naturalist novel was not; and he wanted us to understand the latter not only as a negation of the former but also as a superior form of art. For Brunetière, the most powerful way to negate Zola’s naturalism was to raise George Eliot’s work – embodying national, gender, and aesthetic difference at a variety of levels – above Zola’s, displacing the French (male) formulation of foundational naturalism with a British, female version as the “true” naturalism, superior to Zola’s flawed vision.

But perhaps most importantly, Brunetière brought the idea of *sympathy* to the conversation, focusing on what he found lacking in realist and naturalist narratives, yet abounding in the works of the two most influential female authors of the period – that is, a quality of non-hierarchical human connection between authors and their subjects that he identifies in Sand and Eliot. The French critic gets something right here and something wrong as well. Recognizing the shared quality of *la sympathie* in Sand’s and Eliot’s work,²⁹ he indeed pinpoints a fundamental distinction

²⁷ Jennifer Yee, *The Colonial Comedy: Imperialism in the French Realist Novel* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016) 24.

²⁸ Claire White, “Labour of Love: George Sand’s *La Ville noire* and Émile Zola’s *Travail*,” in *Modern Language Review* 106.3 (July 2011): 687-708. 698.

²⁹ Critic Jules Lemaître, among others, also observed the quality of *la sympathie* which he believed one finds equally “chez le George d’outre-Manche” and “chez le George français,” and which arises from “autant de goût pour la vie

between this pair of authors and the French realists. However, in refusing the woman author any kind of political voice in her work (just as Zola did) and relegating both Sand's and Eliot's intellectually and socially engaged novels to the category of simple and soothing pastorals, he misreads – whether deliberately or not – the politics of sympathy. For Brunetière, sympathy is merely a feeling, “feminine” or “feminized,” based on subjective emotion rather than on factual observation, not too far removed from Zola's own definition of idealism; though where Brunetière praises the emotion, Zola condemns it.

Nevertheless, for both Georges, sympathy in the novel was far from an anodyne and apolitical position divorced from historical, philosophical, or social commentary; sympathy instead is associated with a radical inclusiveness that refuses hierarchies of status and difference – of gender, nation, class, economics – in favor of horizontal structures of collectivity or community, based on shared qualities, both positive and negative, of humanity. In a sense, the commonality of difference is what *unites* us as humans in these works by Sand and Eliot. The moral quality of this *sympathie* is not located in a “knowledge” of the other, nor in an identification, which would necessarily be based to some extent on the assumption of knowledge; instead, the moral quality of *sympathie* lies in the acknowledgment of the unknowability of the other and in what Rae Greiner has identified as a process of “imagining, not knowing, what others think and feel.”³⁰ As Greiner explains, sympathy and emotion or feeling “are not the same”; sympathy is a “cognitive process,” a “way of thinking about others,” and a “mental action” leading to “fellow feeling”³¹ that entails a kind of work both for the author and the reader that is dynamic and deliberative. Following Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which enjoyed renewed popularity in the nineteenth century, sympathy is a form of “imaginative labor, endowed with ethical force,”³² an intersubjective “exchange” based on a fundamental acknowledgment of the impossibility of the dream of absolute mastery or, for that matter, absolute categories, that is arguably at once more “moral” and more “modern” than the definitions of naturalism that Zola and the naturalists so vehemently insisted upon and, perhaps at least in Zola's case, never really believed in anyway.

simple et les détails familiers, autant de complaisance et d'art à nous faire sentir, qu'elle qu'en soit l'enveloppe et la condition sociale, combien c'est intéressant et digne d'attention, une âme humaine.” See “De l'influence récente des littératures du Nord,” *Revue des Deux Mondes* (décembre 1894): 847-72. 851.

³⁰ Rae Greiner, “Sympathy Time: Adam Smith, George Eliot, and the Realist Novel,” *Narrative* 17.3 (October 2009): 291-311.307. Referred to hereafter as Greiner.

³¹ Rae Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2012) 3-4.

³² Greiner 294.