

Rethinking Paternal Authority in Émile Zola's *Rome*

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RÉSUMÉ

Plusieurs éléments narratifs du roman Rome (1896) d'Émile Zola, notamment la description des personnages et l'utilisation du discours direct par opposition au discours indirect, insistent sur le fait que les figures paternelles légitimes ne peuvent justifier leur position de pouvoir que lorsqu'elles agissent selon des modes rationnels qui protègent et de préservent la famille. Les interactions du personnage principal Pierre Froment avec deux dirigeants de l'Église, le pape Léon XIII et le cardinal Pio Boccanera, montrent que le modèle d'autorité paternelle de l'Église est incompatible avec l'avenir imaginé par Pierre. Cet article suggère que Rome promeut la religion nouvelle utopique de Pierre, de la science et de la fertilité, en dissociant la famille européenne occidentale hétéronormative de l'Église catholique. Afin de démontrer l'incompatibilité de la famille et de l'Église dans la fiction zolienne tardive, cet article se concentre sur trois aspects du roman: les doutes de Pierre sur la position sociopolitique de l'Église contemporaine; les descriptions d'un Leo paradoxalement fort et faible; et la décision de Boccanera de défendre l'Église aux dépens de sa famille. Chacun de ces trois hommes remplit différemment son rôle de leader masculin; et le roman explore sa propre conception de la figure paternelle idéale en contrastant ces trois modèles d'autorité paternelle.

ABSTRACT

Several narrative elements in Émile Zola's Rome (1896), including character descriptions and the use of direct versus indirect discourse, insist that legitimate paternal figures can justify their positions of power only when they act in rational ways that protect and preserve the family. Main character Pierre Froment's interactions with two Church leaders, Pope Leo XIII and Cardinal Pio Boccanera, show that the Church's model of paternal authority is incompatible with the future that Pierre imagines. This article argues that Rome promotes Pierre's utopian religion nouvelle, of science and fertility, by disentangling the heteronormative western European family from the Catholic Church. In order to demonstrate the incompatibility of the family and the Church in late Zolian fiction, this article focuses on three aspects of the novel: Pierre's doubts about the contemporary Church's socio-political position; the descriptions of a paradoxically strong and weak Leo; and Boccanera's decision to defend the Church at the expense of his family. Each of these men fulfill their roles as male leaders differently, and the novel explores its own conception of the ideal father figure by contrasting these three models of paternal authority.

“La vérité est absolu, pas une pierre de l'édifice ne sera changée.”¹ Pope Leo XIII delivers these words to Émile Zola's protagonist, Pierre Froment, in one of the final episodes of *Rome* (1896),

¹ Émile Zola, *Rome* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014) 757. Henceforth, all quotations from this novel will be taken from this edition and will be indicated parenthetically with page numbers only.

the second volume of the *Trois villes* trilogy (1894-1898). Through a verbal metaphor that links the Church's truths to its physical presence, the pope asserts the Catholic Church's authority against a priest whose proposed *religion nouvelle* challenges traditional Catholic notions of fatherhood and authority. *Rome* is the second part of Pierre's story, and the novel begins shortly after he writes a revisionist history of Rome and the Church, entitled *La Rome nouvelle*, which details the groundwork for his utopian new religion. However, the Church's Index of prohibited books (*Index Librorum Prohibitorum*) swiftly condemns this work. Pierre travels to the novel's titular city in order to seek an audience with Leo, vindicate his book, and pursue his vision of establishing a new religion. When Leo upholds the Index's decision, however, Pierre's growing doubts force him to recognize that he cannot bring his desires to fruition within the confines of the Church's hierarchy. Rather, the foundation of Pierre's new religion rests not on a radical break from hierarchical power structures – it is, after all, a *religion nouvelle* as opposed to a *nouvelle religion* – but rather on replacing the role of the pope with the familial father. While Pierre's current goal of establishing this new religion with the Church as its foundation may put him into conversation with his namesake, the Biblical Peter,² the young priest's vision for religious life is one of family ties held together by a rationalist father.

In this article, I argue that the actions of the novel's two paternal priests, Pope Leo XIII and Cardinal Pio Boccanera, justify Pierre's doubt as the first step in a utopian project that separates the heteronormative western European family from the Catholic Church.³ Valentin Duquet has recently argued that *Rome* asks “who – what father figure – will lead France into the new century?”⁴ While the novel does not answer this question fully, my analyses of these two ecclesiastical fathers will show that Pierre's vision for the future, itself a literary manifestation of Zola's anti-clericalism, cannot function while the family and the Church remain tied to one another. *Rome* demonstrates what the ideal father might look like by means of negative examples. That is, Pierre questions, through doubts which the novel condones by dramatizing the failures of Leo and Boccanera, the Catholic Church's claims to legitimate, paternal authority in western European life. The father figures of *Rome* are metaphorical ones only; their authority does not arise from reproductive capacities or the European family structure, but rather from the cultural and political hegemony that the Church holds in western Europe. Furthermore, neither man is the determined rationalist that the Zolian father must be. While Leo and Boccanera are both members of the Roman Curia, their roles as fathers are distinct up to a point. The pope serves as a strictly symbolic father as head of the Church, and his paternal role is confined to this institution as a religious and political entity throughout the novel. Boccanera, by contrast, serves as a *pater familias* to the aristocratic Boccanera family in addition to his duties as a cardinal.

² The Catholic Church recognizes Peter as its foundation: “Simon Peter holds the first place in the college of the Twelve; Jesus entrusted a unique mission to him. [...] Our Lord then declared to him: ‘You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.’ Christ, the ‘living Stone,’ thus assures his Church, built on Peter, of victory over the powers of death.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [2nd ed.] (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2016) 141.

³ The trope of priest-as-father has a long history in French Catholicism. Jean-Marie Le Gall writes of medieval and early modern priests that “les clercs exercent souvent dans la société une forme de paternité spirituelle qui est aussi une autorité morale et sociale. [...] Nullement chargé d’une famille pastorale comme les ministres réformés, le curé catholique a tout loisir d’être le père de chacun.” Jean-Marie Le Gall, “La virilité des clercs” in *Histoire de la virilité*, vol.1. *L’invention de la virilité de l’Antiquité aux Lumières*, ed. Georges Vigarello (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2015) 231.

⁴ Valentin Duquet, “Anachronistic Visions of Socialism and Colonial Endeavor: The Influence of Saint-Simonian Thought on Émile Zola's Novels,” *Excavatio* 33 (2022): 12.

In order to demonstrate the ways that *Rome* addresses paternal authority, I focus on three aspects of the novel in this essay: the models of thinking and of community that the novel imagines as the foundations for Pierre's *religion nouvelle*; the fictionalized depiction of the historical Pope Leo XIII; and Cardinal Boccanera's defense of the Church. This essay opens with a discussion of positivistic doubts and of community as the foundations of the Zolian family of the future. In part two, two irreconcilable versions of Leo – the one imagined by Pierre and the one he meets – help to delegitimize the priest-as-father archetype. The final section presents an analysis of Boccanera's decision to hide the facts of a botched assassination – which protects the Church, but emphasizes that the family cannot thrive under its shadow. Through its representations of a Curia whose actions speak to a refusal to change, the novel undercuts the progressive Church that Pierre imagines. *Rome* promotes the trilogy's utopian project by disentangling the Church from the heteronormative western European family. It does this through a dramatization of the logical consequences of a Church rejecting evolving conceptions of authority and fatherhood.

Pierre, doubt, and the family

To return to Duquet's question, who, then, will lead the new family? Pierre's *religion nouvelle* will eventually become one of rationalistic fraternity and fertility; the Zolian father, therefore, must be a two-fold being: he must be both scientifically minded and actively procreative. The final novel of the *Trois villes*, *Paris* (1898), will articulate the necessity of scientific rationality when Bertheroy, Pierre's friend and a mouthpiece for Zola's own positivist outlook, says that "ce n'est pas en détruisant, c'est en créant, que vous venez de faire acte de révolutionnaire. [...] [L]a science seule est révolutionnaire."⁵ Additionally, the full extent of the Froments' procreative might becomes evident in Zola's subsequent series of *Quatre évangiles* novels (1899-1903), as Katrina Perry has observed in writing that "the numerous Froment offspring spill out of the family farm. [...] The procreative movement expands to populate the world itself with a 'single fraternal people.'"⁶ Although Pierre is far from achieving this fertile revolution, *Rome* demonstrates that it is through rationalistic doubt that a Zolian man justifies his authority, and Pierre first expresses these doubts in public through his writings. In his condemned book, *La Rome nouvelle*, Pierre reimagines the historical place of the Catholic Church and Rome in order to argue that the purpose of the Christian faith is to serve in a teleological march towards a socialist, viriarchal utopia:⁷

Pendant les trois premiers siècles, chaque église a été un essai de communisme, une véritable association, dont les membres possédaient tout en commun, hors les femmes. Les apologistes et les premiers pères de l'Église en font foi, le christianisme n'était alors que la religion des humbles et des pauvres, une démocratie, un socialisme, en lutte contre la société romaine. (72)

⁵ Émile Zola, *Paris* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015) 633.

⁶ Katrina Perry, "L'Encre et le lait," *Excavatio* 13 (2000): 90.

⁷ I owe my understanding of the word *virarchal* to Olivia Gazalé: "Il vaut mieux nommer *virarchat* que *patriarchat*, puisque l'homme détient le pouvoir, qu'il soit père ou non." Olivia Gazalé, *Le Mythe de la virilité: Un piège pour les deux sexes* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2017) 55. It is worth noting that Pierre's *religion nouvelle* eventually becomes one in which both paternity and maternity are necessary, and whose power is structured after patriarchal models that require the presence of women.

In recognizing a transformative element in early Christianity, Pierre calls the Church's current hegemonic power into question and partially foreshadows the beliefs to which the Froment family will cling in later novels. However, in having little more to offer than a revisionist history – that the narrator dismissively calls “le cri d'un apôtre, en sa forme sentimentale de poème, où brûlait l'unique amour du prochain” (76) –, Pierre undermines his own authority. In trying both to reimagine the Church and to create a *religion nouvelle*, Pierre is caught between imagination and invention, two terms whose contrast helps to define the Zolian aesthetic, according to Colette Becker. The imaginative novel, rejected by Zola according to Becker, is a text that “relève de l'imagination proprement dite, c'est-à-dire de la faculté de créer des histoires extraordinaires, des fables ne respectant pas le réel.”⁸ The inventive novel, instead, comes from “cette faculté d'inventer, de ‘produire quelque chose de nouveau’ à partir ‘d'éléments ou de matériaux naturels,’” and it “permet d'avancer une hypothèse et de monter une expérience destinée à la confirmer.”⁹ While Pierre's book burns with “l'unique amour du prochain,” suggesting that he is looking to invent something new, the task is accomplished through a mercurial “forme sentimentale” (76), and not through the scientific logic that would be necessary for his text truly to create in the Zolian sense of the word. Nonetheless, the act of writing a revisionist history shows that Pierre has doubts about the structure and purpose of the contemporary Church.

The act of doubting, as the *Trois villes* trilogy shows, can be the first step in directly challenging structural power. While these doubts may superficially tie Pierre to his namesake, who doubted Christ on the Sea of Galilee,¹⁰ they will become scientific lines of questioning that Becker suggests are fundamental to the Zolian aesthetic. Here, however, they are still in a transitional phase that is tied to the authority of the Church. The development of ideas through questions links *Rome* back to the previous novel in the trilogy, *Lourdes* (1894), a novel in which, as Scott Powers has argued, “faith is inevitably accompanied by doubt,”¹¹ and in which this doubt “is recast through an overdetermined framing as simple ‘staging.’”¹² I work within this assertion that Pierre's doubts are staged as part of a project of secularization that justifies the primacy of scientific reason over religious faith, and of the fecund father over the sterile one. Doubt is thus both a metanarrative tool that promotes anti-clerical stances and a diegetic, transformative emotion that drives Pierre towards a reclamation of his virile authority from what the Zolian text asserts is the sterility of Catholic power structures.¹³

Pierre's doubt across the trilogy slowly becomes a rationalistic and virile-coded tool for challenging received knowledge about faith and power. I choose to focus specifically on the way it disrupts conceptions of Catholic manhood and fatherhood because Pierre's *religion nouvelle* eventually becomes a mode of authority that is rooted in the procreative human body. Manhood is fatherhood in a Zolian context, and this comparison is established in *Rome* by apophatic examples

⁸ Colette Becker, “Imagination, invention, expérience: Retour sur l'esthétique zolienne,” *Excavatio* 14.1-2 (2001): 8-15. 9.

⁹ Becker 10.

¹⁰ See Matt. 14:22-33, *The Bible* [Douay-Rheims ed.] (Charlotte, NC: Saint Benedict Press, 2009).

¹¹ Scott Powers, *Confronting Evil: The Psychology of Secularization in Modern French Literature* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue Univ. Press, 2016) 10.

¹² Powers 13.

¹³ It is important to note that the Catholic Church as it exists in the Zolian text is a fictional creation whose existence is dictated not by its historical equivalent, but by Zola. I do not mean to argue that the Church that is represented in *Rome* is an accurate or consistent portrayal of the historical Church. It is a component of a fiction that serves the narrative's goal of promoting an utopian project, in a sense also naturalist. Likewise, the family in *Rome* is equally a fictional construct meant to express a contrasting model of authority.

in Leo and Boccanera. These two men represent an inadequate fatherhood which helps to create, by contrast, a model of what Angus McLaren calls “hegemonic masculinity”¹⁴ as it was developing in the late nineteenth century. McLaren defines this hegemonic masculinity as when “‘dominant’ forms of masculinity [are] constituted out of a set of ‘negative’ varieties that [appear] in everyday discourse and practice.”¹⁵ As McLaren and others – like Donald Hall and Norman Vance – have shown, this hegemonic masculinity of what a “real man” is came not from “timeless notions,” but instead is “tied to particular social and ideological preoccupations”¹⁶ that arose rapidly and unevenly during the nineteenth century. *Rome* is a novel of this time period that engages in discussions both of legitimate authority and of ensuring that future generations will be able to thrive. In this way, *Rome* and the trilogy as a whole are concerned with what Peter Brooks calls the “family romance”¹⁷ of post-Revolutionary French literature: a search for legitimate paternal authority. Pierre’s *religion nouvelle* becomes one that challenges the power of the Catholic Church by shifting its focus to a worship of fertility, to paraphrase Perry when she writes that Pierre’s son Mathieu “succeeds ostensibly because he procreates endlessly. [...] Although the hero is intelligent, educated, and works hard, his predominant quality is a fervent belief in the new religion.”¹⁸ Kristin Cook-Gailloud, too, sees a symbolic “transfert de forces” to the new religion, noting that Zola’s choice to name his main character after the biblical Peter shows “une certaine fascination pour ‘l’Elu, l’Unique, le Surhumain.’”¹⁹ As such, the foundation of Pierre’s new religion ultimately rests on reimagining the Church’s models of paternal authority. The Zolian model of change is one that, as Valerie Minogue writes, both builds “new knowledge and a new consciousness” while also “demonstrating the persistent grasp of old cultural patterns.”²⁰ In Zola, ecclesiastics lack legitimate claims to fatherhood and, as such, the Catholic Church cannot assume true authority, which is linked to virility and procreation.

In spite of the novel’s focus on religious fathers, the heteronormative, European family is nonetheless a strong presence throughout the text. For the duration of his visit to Rome, Pierre stays with the Boccanera family, a clan that serves as a prototype of the utopian, Zolian family, as they are both a part of and a driving force behind a larger community. The Boccaneras represent a step towards the more perfect Zolian family, but problems arise specifically because its patriarch favors the Church. The ultimate dissolution of the Boccanera line stems not from any problem inherent to the family structure, but rather from the foundation of faith upon which this specific family has built itself. While they lack the procreative might that will later help the Froments thrive, the Boccaneras nonetheless have aspects the novel presents as desirable. As an early model

¹⁴ Angus McLaren, *The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870-1930* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997) 7. I cite McLaren’s use of this term because of his focus on turn-of-the-century masculinities, but the concept of hegemonic masculinity was first theorized by R. W. Connell as a part of the social organization of masculinity. See R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* [2nd edition] (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2005) 77.

¹⁵ McLaren 10.

¹⁶ McLaren 7. See, also, Donald E. Hall, ed., *Muscular Christianity. Embodying the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994); Norman Vance, *Sinews of the Spirit: The Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985).

¹⁷ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984) 44.

¹⁸ Perry 94.

¹⁹ Kristin Cook-Gailloud, “Du Pape au papier. Religion et expérience dans *Rome*,” *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 81 (2009): 165-87.174.

²⁰ Valerie Minogue, “Zola’s Mythology: The Forbidden Tree,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 14.3 (1978): 227.

of a better family, then, the Boccaneras can offer insights into how the Zolian family might be constructed.

The early chapters of *Rome* present the Boccaneras as a large community, full of different yet collaborative voices. At a party hosted at their estate, and attended by various important figures, Pierre mentions his plans to stay in Rome for only three weeks. Though a general sentiment of shock is expressed by all in response to this announcement, no one individual voice is prominent, initially; “le salon entier se récria” (132), the text states, collectivizing the various, independent voices through a free indirect style. This communal aspect shifts in the next paragraph when the cardinal’s sister, Serafina, speaks. Largely, she repeats the disbelief that the voices in the room share about Pierre’s plans, but adds an element of reflexivity to these observations: “[T]rois semaines!” répéta donna Serafina de son air de dédain. ‘Est-ce qu’on peut s’étudier et s’aimer, en trois semaines?’”(132). Serafina’s use of reflexive verbs suggests that coming to know one’s surroundings is inseparable from coming to know one’s self. Furthermore, an individual’s use of the subject pronoun *on* insists on the collective action of the verbs. Even when Serafina speaks individually, the abstract ideas of study and love become a generalized, communal endeavor. Serafina’s words contain within them an identification with and pride in her family and community.

More important than the unity that various voices express, however, is the family around which the community gathers: “Et c’était dans cette famille, d’orgueil superbe, dont l’éclat continuait à emplir la ville, qu’une aventure venait d’éclater, soulevant des commérages sans fin” (138). While the negative connotations of words like *orgueil* and *commérages* foreshadow the demise of the Boccaneras, it is nonetheless as a family, as opposed to a political and religious dynasty, that they have come to dominate the city of Rome. Pierre, as a priest who is estranged from his few living relatives, denies himself the potential of participating in such a familial group. In this scene, *Rome* portrays family as the foundation of a community with utopian aspirations. The creation of such a collective of people cannot rest on ideas alone, but must be embodied by the humans who live and perpetuate the group. In the reckoning of Zolian fiction a male body that remains chaste cannot create, nor can it lead. The family, not the Church, is repositioned as the key to Pierre’s desires for a utopian *religion nouvelle*.

The pope and the Church

In order to insist on the incompatibility of the family and the Church, *Rome* first demonstrates that the highest authority of the latter is suspect. The papacy’s questionable claims to legitimacy come to the forefront when Pierre sees Leo clearly for the first time during two ceremonial processions in Chapter VII. These two events highlight the pope’s apparent lifelessness and foreshadow his resistance to change – a stance he will directly express to Pierre later in the novel. Struggling to secure an audience with the pope to discuss his condemned book, Pierre attends these demonstrations on the suggestion of other members of the Curia. He expects to find “le pape idéal” (83) that he insists on in his book but instead he sees a passive, lifeless body. Throughout the ceremonies, the pope appears almost to be a decorative, preserved corpse, with a “face de cire” (344) and “un corps d’ivoire” (355). Paolo Tortonese’s reading of *Rome* extends this embalmed death to the city of Rome as a whole: “[Le rêve de Pierre] est en ruines à la fin de son séjour, quand il a traversé la ville morte et rencontré ce cadavre mystique qu’est l’Église romaine, momie

embaumé au beau milieu d'un monde moderne et vivant."²¹ In this way, Leo and Rome are reflections of one another, and just as Pierre's book removes Rome's capacity to speak for itself, so too does the novel mute Leo's words. His words are deferred either to indirect discourse or to the voice of another, as can be noted when the pope first speaks. In this moment, the text avoids his exact words in favor of indirectly reporting them: "Léon XIII, enfin, se leva, répondit à l'évêque et au baron. Sa voix était grosse, fortement nasale, une voix qui surprenait, au sortir d'un corps si mince. Et, en quelques phrases, il témoigna sa gratitude [...]" (343). Even though the action of speaking is reported, the words themselves are left unsaid; and the narrator's reaction of mild shock is not to the words spoken, but to the fact that they were spoken at all. In an ironic twist, one in which the brevity of the last sentence undercuts the anticipation built by the previous sentences, Leo's rhetoric is shown to be no more powerful than his body. Despite the strength of his voice, Leo is little more than set dressing, and a representation of him could serve the same ceremonial purpose.²² He is an ornamental part of the Vatican's displays of power, little more than a precious jewel – a collection of "diamants noirs" (739), as his eyes are later described – to be displayed. This underwhelming pope is not "le pape idéal, le prédestiné chargé du salut des peuples" (83) that Pierre praises in his book. The staging of doubt is evident in the text's juxtaposition of images of a frail and unauthoritative man with ceremonial demonstrations of his supposed power.

Even though the pope does not live up to Pierre's expectations, there is a subtle, if not entirely unsympathetic, melancholy in the descriptions of Leo. In spite of the praise and adoration of the crowds, a repeated chant of "Vive le pape roi" (370) suggests that Leo's body is not his own: Leo is both a pope and a monarch, and just as the body politic of the king represents the power of a state,²³ what we might call Leo's body religious is a tool through which the power of the Catholic Church expresses itself. In a moment of clarity among the pageantry, Pierre comes to a realization about the status of bodies in the Church's systems of power:

En dehors de cette royauté universelle, de la possession totale des corps et des âmes, le catholicisme perdait sa raison d'être, car l'Église ne peut reconnaître l'existence d'un empire ou d'un royaume que politiquement, l'empereur ou le roi étant de simples délégués temporaires, chargés d'administrer les peuples, en attendant de les lui rendre. (376)

The goal of the Church, in Pierre's reckoning, is one of total bodily control maintained through political and spiritual cabals. Even Leo, the highest authority in the Church's hierarchy, appears to have lost all energy playing the multiple roles that his position demands of him. At this point in the novel, Pierre acknowledges that the Church seeks absolute control over bodies – "corps" without any modifier – which must necessarily include his own. Although he does not yet realize it, this notion is in conflict with what his *religion nouvelle*, of paternal authority justified by scientific reasoning, will become. This moment is one which perpetuates Pierre's doubts by contrasting the pope's meek presence with the priest's expectations of a mighty paternalistic figure of authority.

²¹ Paolo Tortonese, "Rome décadente," *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 44.72 (1998): 225-35. 227.

²² Cook-Gailloud has written that the pope is a longstanding target for writers wishing to attack the Church, specifically because of this tension between power and powerlessness: "Pour tout écrivain qui se défie des préceptes imposés par l'Église catholique, il n'est rien de plus irrésistible que de toucher à son symbole le plus vivant et en même temps le plus vulnérable: le pape." Cook-Gailloud 165.

²³ See Ernst Kantorowicz, Introduction, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997).

Despite a budding disillusionment, Pierre still seeks to meet Leo, and continues to believe that the pope will vindicate him and his book. “[I]l vaincrait, il confondrait les adversaires de son livre” (735), he assures himself as if feeling the need to squelch uncertainty in the face of the long, dark hallways of Saint Peter’s Basilica. The lengthy descriptions of the interior of the building, leading to the much-awaited meeting in Leo’s chambers, present an empty space almost devoid of life: “ce Vatican énorme, qu’il sentait à son entour si muet et si noir” (735). The apparent lack of sensory information creates a distancing effect that emphasizes Leo’s isolation, as well as the disconnection between his power and his physical person. Cook-Gailloud has argued that this distancing effect creates a meaningless infinity that minimizes Leo’s power by contrast: “Pour y parvenir, [Pierre] devra traverser une longue enfilade d’antichambres qui semblent repousser à l’infini le lieu de destination et, partant, en oblitèrent le prestige. [...] Le pouvoir du pape est déjà en partie anéanti.”²⁴ Like the poisoned figs meant to assassinate Cardinal Boccanera that I will discuss later, Leo is locked away from sight, hidden from those who might ask too many questions. Pierre also is isolated here, effectively alone in this vast edifice that houses the power that he still refuses to accept will reject his utopian reformations. Though he moves forward in a spatial sense, Pierre moves through a space that, in its illusory endlessness, seems to be halted in a temporal sense. The Church and those who support it live in an eternal, unchanging present.²⁵

Finally, Pierre arrives at the pope’s chambers, where, just as in the public space of the ceremonies, Leo’s physical person is described in a way that suggests lifelessness, sterility, and loneliness. Building on his “face de cire” (344) and “corps d’ivoire” (355) from Chapter VII, the description here indicates that the pope also has “lèvres de neige” and a face with “une pâleur d’albâtre, [...] comme si le sang se fût totalement retiré”; only his eyes, “restés beaux et jeunes,” regularly show signs of life within this body (739). Nonetheless, those same eyes that hint at something lively are described as little more than a precious stone, “d’un noir luisant de diamants noirs” (739). Leo’s status as an object of display is thus made manifest in his body; he is a static object, little more than a jewel. Both men here are alone in their own ways, but only one embodies the full weight of an institution in this relationship. As mentioned earlier, however, this power has cost Leo his vitality and virility. Compared to this novel’s initial descriptions of Pierre, Leo’s aged pallor might be comical if it were not so stern. In the opening chapter, Pierre is depicted as in the grasp of an “impatience enfantine,” visiting as much of the city as he can with an “émotion croissante qui faisait battre son cœur” (52), jumping nimbly down from carriages, and barely able to contain a poetic fever that threatens to violently erupt from within: “Pierre sauta lestement de la voiture [...]. Et Pierre, déjà, regardait de toute sa vue, de toute son âme, debout contre le parapet, dans son étroite soutane noire, les mains nues et serrées nerveusement, brûlantes de sa fièvre” (53). Contrasting his own youthful vigor, Pierre faces a man who could pass for dead were it not for his eyes, though they themselves are more mineral than animal.

Just as the two men are physically different, so too their ideas are incompatible. The conversation between them quickly becomes tense and combative: “Dès le début, la conversation bifurquait” (742), the text unambiguously states, with its verb foreshadowing the unmendable rupture that will finally separate these two men. Leo unequivocally denounces Pierre’s reformist ideas on the basis that they would disrupt established Church authority. Using a royal plural, Leo

²⁴ Cook-Gailloud 176-77.

²⁵ I owe the phrase “eternal present” to Robert Viti, who wrote of the uniformity of Pope Leo XIII and Cardinal Boccanera’s schedules in *Rome* that “such chronological uniformity is undergirded by the repletion of an eternal present.” Robert Viti, “Science, the Church and Revolution: Time Wars in Zola’s *Les trois villes*,” *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* 47:4 (1993): 416.

tells Pierre that his ideas are “les idées gallicanes qui repoussent sans cesse comme les herbes mauvaises; tout un libéralisme frondeur, en révolte contre notre autorité” (744); he adds that the Church’s truths are not to be challenged, saying “non, la vérité est *absolue*, pas une pierre de l’édifice ne sera changée” (757; emphasis added). The use of the word *pierre* is an ironic choice on Leo’s part, as it is indeed Pierre who will shake the foundations of the Church that his namesake founded. Leo unintentionally points to the coming “transfert de forces” that Cook-Gailloud sees in the symbolism of Pierre’s name.²⁶ This moment of shortsightedness emphasizes, once again, that Leo’s voice is strong, but his rhetoric is weak.

After having begun his trip to Rome at “l’église San Pietro in Montorio [...], à l’endroit où saint Pierre, dit-on, fut crucifié” (53), Pierre brings his adventure to its conclusion in the building named after that crucified saint. The circular nature of Pierre’s trip underlines the lack of progress that Pierre has made towards achieving his goals in Rome and, by extension, pessimistically reinforces the Church’s unwillingness to move forward. However, the foundations of Saint Peter’s Basilica are not as sound as they may seem. The imagery of weeds, in spite of the negative connotations that the pope implies, gives hope to the future that Pierre seeks – as Leo implicitly recognizes the vulnerability of a Church so dilapidated that weeds could grow in through the cracks. The novel’s portrayal of Leo as frail and weak is thus supported by his own, unintentionally negative outlook on the Church. Nonetheless, Pierre is condemned as a pariah, having publicly shared his doubts and having lived out these doubts by failing to find any path towards reconciliation with the Church authorities. The meeting ends with Pierre rejecting his own book while privately cleaving to his convictions, seeing no other way to maintain his position as a priest.

The conflict between Pierre’s public persona and his private beliefs that have animated him since before the beginning of the trilogy forces him to recognize his role as an outsider. Pierre’s failures to achieve his goals of exonerating himself and of reforming the Church underline that he is just “un simple passant” (247) in Rome; and his status as an outsider is thus doubled: he is ostracized within a vocation that Zola considered to be in “un monde à part.”²⁷ In this house of the Lord and its congregation, he is more a guest than a leader. This disconnection is made unambiguous during the end of Pierre’s meeting with Leo. Pierre contemplates renouncing his book while gazing upon Rome from within the heart of the Catholic Church: “Brusquement, Pierre se leva, tout debout. Et, dans le silence énorme qui s’était fait, autour de cette chambre morte, si pâlement éclairée, il n’y avait que la Rome du dehors, la Rome nocturne, noyée de ténèbres, immense et noire, semée seulement d’une poussière d’astres” (766). The Church’s sterility is emphasized by Pierre’s bodily presence in a “chambre morte,” separated physically and metaphorically from the outside world that is “semée seulement d’une poussière d’astres.” Through association, the word *semée* links the stars to seeds that will eventually sprout, the “herbes mauvaises” that terrify Leo earlier in this same chapter; the eventual apostatic result of Pierre’s doubts is thus foretold. However, Pierre does not, and in fact cannot, seek to grasp and to understand the world outside the Church at this moment. The “ténèbres” that leave the city “immense et noire” reject attempts at comprehension; they obscure the city, and prevent it from being seen as Pierre would have seen it in the broad daylight of the opening scene. This is not “la Rome papale, victorieuse au Moyen Âge, maîtresse du monde, faisant peser sur la chrétienté cette

²⁶ Cook-Gailloud 174.

²⁷ “Il y a quatre mondes, écrit Zola: peuple (ouvrier, militaire), commerçant (spéculateur sur les démolitions et haut commerce), bourgeoisie (fils de parvenus), grand monde [...], et un monde à part (putain, meurtrier, prêtre, artiste).” Henri Mitterand, “Conferencia de apertura: Les trois langages du naturalisme,” in *Realismo y naturalismo en España en la segunda mitad del siglo XIX* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1988) 26.

église colossale de la beauté reconquise" (70), but rather a mystery to those who look at it from the limited perspective offered by Saint Peter's Basilica. Yet Pierre is able to conceive of a Rome that exists independently from him and the Church – "il n'y avait que la Rome du dehors." He abandons his illusions of reforming the Church and of shaping Rome to fit a predetermined idea in order to renounce his book in full. In doing so, he begins to separate himself completely from the institution that prevents him from founding his new religion of fertility and science.

Cardinal Boccanera and the notion of "family"

While the pope is a powerful man in many respects, he cannot claim to be the mouthpiece of the heteronormative European family, even if it is a component part of the Church's power. Instead, the character of Cardinal Pio Boccanera serves as the novel's conflicted representative of the family as it exists in relation to the Church. Acting as both a Church leader and a family patriarch, Boccanera's actions show that the two institutions are incompatible. The secondary plot of *Rome* concerns the Boccanera family and culminates in the cardinal covering up an assassination attempt on his life by another member of the Church. His nephew, Dario, accidentally eats poisoned figs left for the cardinal, and dies as a result. Dario's cousin and lover, Benadetta, subsequently dies of grief in his arms, ending the family line. The cardinal hides the figs, knowing that they have been left by the priest Santobono and swears all who know the truth, including Pierre, to secrecy. Boccanera thus buries the truth alongside his family's last scions. The cardinal's ability to efface reality demonstrates to Pierre, once again, that the Church cannot be challenged or changed.

Boccanera's institutional authority is demonstrated in two significant instances: first, when he convinces all who know the truth to repeat a lie about the cause of Dario's death; and second, when he hides the poisoned figs under lock and key. Rather than declaring his knowledge of the guilty party, Boccanera carefully manages the situation by suggesting to the doctor, through the guise of a question, that Dario is dying of a fever: "Enfin, d'une fièvre infectieuse?" (700) The doctor "entendait bien ce que le cardinal lui demandait ainsi" (700) by this subtle gesture, and he declares the culprit to be a fever, not an assassin's poison. Through framing his insistence on a fever as a question, Boccanera allows the doctor to maintain the appearance of authority, which grants Boccanera a façade of objectivity. The doctor, unaware of the figs but cognizant of the political implications of diverging from Boccanera's desires, declares the death "évidemment, d'une fièvre infectieuse, comme le dit si bien Votre Eminence" (700).²⁸ Pierre, who is present when Boccanera first insists that Dario died of a fever, repeats this lie when he meets the prominent Republican, Orlando Prada, saying that Dario's death was ruled to be caused by "une fièvre infectieuse. Il n'y a aucun doute" (856). Pierre thus finds himself complicit in maintaining the Church's power, more a victim of his circumstances than a true believer in the Church's right to act above and outside the law. Indeed, Pierre has been carrying a fever of his own since looking out on the Roman skyline at the beginning of the novel: "Et Pierre, déjà, regardait de toute sa vue, [...] les mains nues et serrées nerveusement, brûlantes de sa fièvre" (53; emphasis added). While Pierre's fever is metaphorical, it has nonetheless infected him because of his passion for reforming the Church. The multiple references to fevers throughout the novel show that a connection to the Church can only result in sickness. As Pierre continues the lie begun by Boccanera about a literal fever infecting Dario, he perpetuates the destruction that accompanies this disease. The repetition

²⁸ The instance of the cardinal's authority outweighing the doctor's points again to the metanarrative staging of doubt, as it is highly unusual for a Zolian doctor to not be the most authoritative figure in any given novel.

of the phrase “une fièvre infectieuse” not only reifies a false belief, but it also cements the cardinal’s power. If the pope’s authority is tied to the control of bodies, then the cardinal’s is tied to the control of minds. In publicly refusing to acknowledge what he knows to be the true cause of Dario’s death, Cardinal Boccanera shows his allegiance to be first and foremost to the Church. With each repetition of the lie, Boccanera affirms the Church’s power while delegitimizing his familial authority.

While Boccanera maintains power through the repetition of the lie of the “fièvre infectieuse,” he undercuts his and the Church’s claims to moral superiority through his actions, thoughts, and words, all of which attempt to preserve the Church’s position within society. The night of the murder, Boccanera hides the figs under lock and key as if he is ashamed of them: “Le cardinal, sans parler, prit sur la table le panier de figues, le porta dans une armoire, qu’il ferma à double tour; puis, il mit la clef dans sa poche. Sans doute, dès que la nuit serait tombée, il se proposait de le faire disparaître lui-même, en descendant le jeter au Tibre” (694). The cardinal’s actions in the first sentence, locking away the figs and then hiding the key in his pocket, further reify the lie of the “fièvre infectieuse” by physically removing the cause of Dario’s death, and simultaneously prevent the figs from being found or from causing any future harm that could incriminate. Additionally, the shift in the second sentence from the indicative mode to the conditional mode disorients the reader. Paired with “sans doute,” the conditional “serait” prompts various questions: Are these Boccanera’s thoughts produced through indirect discourse? Is the narrative voice of the text making assumptions on Boccanera’s part? How can either potential voice here assert certainty within a conditional framework? The linguistic evasiveness highlights the cardinal’s internal conflict.

The indirect discourse that expresses the cardinal’s inner hesitancy is immediately superseded by a shift to direct discourse that dismisses any questions as to Boccanera’s motivations from a second party’s perspective. Seeking to maintain appearances and power above all else, Boccanera tells two priests who have witnessed his act of deception:

Messieurs, je n’ai pas besoin de vous demander d’être discrets... Il est des scandales qu’il faut épargner à l’Église, laquelle n’est pas, ne peut pas être coupable. Livrer un des nôtres aux tribunaux civils, s’il est criminel, c’est frapper l’Église entière, car les passions mauvaises s’emparent dès lors du procès, pour faire remonter jusqu’à elle la responsabilité du crime. Et notre seul devoir est de remettre le meurtrier aux mains de Dieu, qui saura le punir plus sûrement... Ah! pour ma part, que je sois atteint dans ma personne ou dans ma famille, dans mes plus tendres affections, je déclare, au nom du Christ mort sur la croix, que je n’ai ni colère, ni besoin de vengeance, et que j’efface le nom du meurtrier de ma mémoire, et que j’ensevelis son action abominable dans l’éternel silence de la tombe! (694)

Boccanera’s concern here is, above all, the protection of the Church. He makes this religious institution exclusive and clearly defined through two uses of the first-person plural possessive, and he thus embraces all present ecclesiastics with his lie. The Church is not simply innocent; categorically and legally, it “ne peut pas être coupable.” The negation of the verb *pouvoir* serves two roles: on the one hand, as a denial of the possibility that the Church could have been guilty in the first place; while on the other, as a refusal of potential contradictions of this sentiment. The clauses on either side of “ne peut pas être coupable” syntactically reinforce this protection of the Church on both conceptual and concrete levels. Not one stone in the building will be changed, the cardinal seems to say. Boccanera, however, acknowledges that a crime has been committed,

verbalizing the intention to bury – “j’ensevelis” – Santobono’s murderous actions and to shift the responsibility of punishing the guilty to God. In denying the secular world the right to enact justice for a crime, and in relegating it to the realm of the transcendental, Boccanera places the Church in a world apart from the Italian Republic. The common trope of the struggle between the father and the priest for true authority over a family is reimagined and theoretically resolved in the character of Cardinal Boccanera; but through his attempts to consolidate the Church’s power outside of a system of checks and balances, he unwittingly participates in proving the invalidity of the Church’s societal position. Though Pierre currently strives to establish his new religion of human procreativity within the boundaries of the Catholic Church, Boccanera’s actions and abuses of power show that the old faith wants nothing to do with new ideas. The Republic may have its laws, but Boccanera insists, even while facing a crime motivated by human power struggles, that they have no bearing on the internal affairs of the Church.

By enacting Leo’s proclamation that “pas une pierre de l’édifice ne sera changée” (757), Boccanera’s deeds show that the Church willingly remains apart from the rest of the world. This insistence continues the demarcation of two nations, one entrenched in traditional ways and one seeking to break free from stagnation through progress, a situation that Barbara Corrado Pope argues highlights societal rupture in *Lourdes*.²⁹ In such a polemic situation, it is not enough for the family merely to supersede the Church, as Pierre later acknowledges when he refuses to become a Catholic layman: “Est-ce que la prêtrise n’était pas indélébile, marquant le prêtre à jamais, le parquant à l’écart du troupeau?”³⁰ Zola’s fiction falls short of offering a path towards a compromise with an institution that refuses to change. However, *Rome* does not present uncritically the established European model of the family either, as the *de facto* alternative. The demise of the Boccanera clan highlights that the family, too, must be willing to change, or it will continue to suffer at the expense of the Church. The Church’s truths are absolute, as Leo tells Pierre in a scene later in the novel; and the cover-up of the murder shows the logical extreme of this reality, pointing once again to the novel’s discussion of authority as an anti-clerical literary tool. In analyzing the ways that Zola represents the city of Rome across his novels, Auguste Dezalay has written that “dans le monde latin Roma valait Amor, dans le monde moderne Rome redit la mort.”³¹ Here, *la mort* is literal, as the machinations of the city’s elite have led to the death of innocents. One could argue that there is a cold logic behind Boccanera’s actions, as he is devout member of the Curia protecting what is important to him; but the novel nonetheless condemns him for making this choice, and for enforcing it from a position of illegitimate authority: “Deux grosses larmes, aussitôt, reparurent dans les yeux de Boccanera. Maintenant qu’il avait mis Dieu à l’abri, son humanité saignait de nouveau” (700). Killing the procreative might of the family in the service of protecting the hegemonic and unmovable presence of the Church is a morally reprehensible action in a trilogy that positions the father and his family as the leaders of the utopia to come.

²⁹ Pope refers to the concept of “two Frances,” but the idea of a nation split into two is applicable in this Italian situation, too: “The political and intellectual differences between believers and secularists were so great and so vociferously and militantly held that historians often speak of the existence of ‘two Frances’ during [the late nineteenth century].” Barbara Corrado Pope, “Émile Zola’s *Lourdes*: Land of Healing and Rupture,” *Literature and Medicine* 8 (1989): 24.

³⁰ Zola, *Paris* 419.

³¹ Auguste Dezalay, “Mythe et histoire: Présence de Rome chez Zola,” *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 54 (1980): 157.

Untangling the Church from the family

Several narrative elements, including the description of characters and the use of direct versus indirect discourse, insist that legitimate paternal figures cannot justify themselves without acting in rational ways that protect and preserve the family. *Rome* foreshadows the new family model that the Froments will realize in *Paris* – and more fully in the *Quatre évangiles* –, by showing that the continued coexistence of the Church and the family cannot function within the utopian future imagined in Zola's late fiction. *Rome* dramatizes the disastrous results of allowing the two institutions to influence one another and insists that, eventually, one must take primacy over the other. The pope may be the Holy Father, but as a priest who is more a mummy than a man, he is not a father who can biologically create new life. Likewise, the family cannot rely on a leader who would sacrifice it, as Boccanera does in hiding the cause of Dario's death. The family offers a different model of community that is founded on self-perpetuation. Hélène Sicard-Cowan's image of the Zolian father "as shaper of the natural landscape and as fertilizing agent"³² is apt in combining both rationalistic and procreative prowess within the singular figure of the head of the family. One who is shaping the land to his needs must be able to logically assess the situation, create a plan and, subsequently, see that it is cared for so that it will flourish. Ultimately, in seeking to establish what he calls his *religion nouvelle*, a belief in scientific truths that emphasizes the role of the human body and procreation, Pierre rejects the flawed assertion that the Church's hierarchy can claim legitimate authority when it lacks a true father figure.³³ Zola expresses a similar idea in his 1878 "Lettre à la jeunesse," writing that "nous avons besoin de la virilité du vrai pour être glorieux dans l'avenir, comme nous l'avons été dans le passé":³⁴ in other words, virile authority must not only justify itself, but must lead by example.

Pierre's doubting of papal hierarchy serves to push him towards a form of Zolian manhood that is defined by rationalistic thinking and procreative potential. By questioning the Vatican's power structure as it stands, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, Pierre comes to understand that its paternal authority is illegitimate as it lacks what Zola calls "la virilité du vrai," the virile masculinity that ties past to future. Rather, the Church is caught in an eternal present, stuck in one moment, and unwilling to change. The culmination of Pierre's journey comes in the final novel, *Paris*; but in *Rome* the seeds that will grow into the plants that so frighten Leo are sown. I have discussed two paternal figures, Leo and Boccanera, both of whom are used by the novel to highlight the Church's illegitimate claims to power: Leo is presented as a decorative mummy who is dedicated to a tradition that is in turn enacted by Boccanera, who lets his family die in the name of that tradition. Pierre is forced to accept that the doubt that has been plaguing him is justifiable, and thus that his implicit protests against the Church are too. By rejecting the power structures that have been presented to him as an unquestioned reality, Pierre takes the next step in creating his own work, his *religion nouvelle* of the human body.

³² Hélène Sicard-Cowan, "The Foreign Father's Influence on Émile Zola's Naturalism in *L'Œuvre*," *Excavatio* 29 (2017): 3.

³³ In addition to refusing to acknowledge either Leo XIII or Boccanera as models of paternity, Pierre will go on to reject Christ as a sufficient father figure in the final *Trois villes* novel, *Paris*: "Pas une société ne vivrait sous l'application stricte de l'Évangile. Jésus est destructeur de tout ordre, de tout travail, de toute vie. Il a nié la femme et la terre, l'éternelle nature, l'éternelle fécondité des choses et des êtres." Zola, *Paris* 443.

³⁴ Émile Zola, "Lettre à la jeunesse" in *Le Roman expérimental* [1880] (Paris: Flammarion, 2006) 93.