

Economies of Scale and the Nineteenth-Century French Novel: Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola

Teddy KELLOGG
Cornell University

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore l'essor des "économies d'échelle" industrielle dans la presse quotidienne parisienne, incluant des œuvres publiées en feuilleton (c'est-à-dire, les grands tirages, les petites marges de profit par unité et donc l'impératif d'atteindre un public de masse), dans la mesure où elles ont façonné le roman français du XIXe siècle. Les carrières d'Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), de Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) et d'Émile Zola (1840-1902) sont considérées comme des études de cas de la manière dont les écrivains ont réagi à la production de masse de la fiction narrative en prose – et ont tenté de s'élever au-dessus d'elle. Il examine ces écrivains ensemble et dans l'ordre, selon trois axes interconnectés: 1) l'économie sous-jacente qui a façonné la confrontation de chaque écrivain avec le marché littéraire; 2) les stratégies formelles employées par chaque écrivain pour contourner ce marché ou en tirer profits; et 3) les régimes concurrents de valeur littéraire auxquels ils donnent lieu. Contrairement aux lectures canoniques des positions de ces auteurs dans le champ littéraire, cet article montre que ces auteurs ne sont ni complètement déterminés par, ni indépendants des marchés capitalistes que leurs romans dépeignent. L'étude aboutit à une lecture du naturalisme de Zola comme médiation des modes de production littéraire qu'il a hérités de Balzac et de Flaubert. Ce faisant, cette lecture redonne à l'auteur des Rougon-Macquart la place qui lui revient dans le panthéon des réalistes littéraires en tant qu'auteur prééminent de la classe ouvrière. Malgré toutes les accusations d'entrepreneuriat que Zola a essuyées, cet article tente de démontrer que Zola a utilisé le marché littéraire pour s'engager dans les questions sociales de son temps.

ABSTRACT

This article explores the rise of industrial "economies of scale" in the Parisian daily press, which includes the publication of works in feuilleton format (that is, large print runs, small per-unit profit margins, and thus the imperative of reaching a mass audience), as it shaped the nineteenth-century French novel. It takes the careers of Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880), and Émile Zola (1840-1902) as exemplary case-studies of how writers responded to – and attempted to rise above – the mass production of narrative prose fiction. It considers these writers together and in sequence, along three interconnected axes: 1) underlying economics that shaped each writer's confrontation with the literary marketplace; 2) the formal strategies each writer employed to circumvent it or capitalize upon this market; and 3) the competing regimes of literary value to which they give rise. Contrary to canonical readings of these authors' positions in the literary field, this article shows that they are neither completely determined by, nor independent from, the capitalist markets their novels portray. The study culminates in a reading of Zola's naturalism as a mediation of the modes of literary production he inherited from Balzac and Flaubert. In so doing, such a reading restores the author of Les Rougon-Macquart to his rightful

place in the pantheon of literary realists as a preeminent author of the working-class. For all his accusations of entrepreneurialism, the objective of this article is to demonstrate that Zola used the commercial literary market to engage with the social issues of his time.

For too long, Zola has been denied a place alongside Balzac, Flaubert, and other canonical authors in the pantheon of the French nineteenth-century novel. The author of *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire* is virtually absent from many of the *fin-de-siècle* treatises of literary criticism that followed his death, and yet French prose fiction cannot be properly understood without his contributions. Ironically enough, Zola's subordinate position within, or exemption from, the canon has been most evident within the Marxist literary tradition, whose ostensibly materialist understanding of cultural production has often failed to grasp the full social, political, and economic significance of Zola's writing.¹ In contrast, this article analyzes Zola's naturalism as a mediation of the literary techniques he inherited from Balzac and Flaubert, reading their novels as they respond both to one another and to the material circumstances of their particular historical context.

More particularly, this study reads Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola's writing as distinct responses to the rise of industrial economies of scale² in the Parisian *feuilleton* press³ – that is, large print runs, small per-unit profit margins, and thus the imperative of reaching a mass audience – and to the commercialization of the nineteenth-century French novel. It offers a preliminary account of each author's confrontation with the literary marketplace, some of the formal strategies they used to circumvent – or capitalize upon – this market, and the specific modes of literary production to which they give rise. In so doing, the study seeks to challenge canonical readings of these authors' respective positions in the literary field, showing that they are neither completely determined by, nor independent from, the capitalist markets their novels portray.

¹ The classical formulation of this literary hierarchy can be found in the essays assembled by György Lukács in *Studies in European Realism* (English translation 1964), and is anticipated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The latter “considered [Balzac] a far greater master of realism than all the Zolas *passés, présents, et à venir*.” See Engel's letter to Margaret Harkness, in Margaret Harkness, *A City Girl* [1887], ed. Deborah Mutch (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2015) 135. For Marx's remarks, see Paul Lafargue, “Reminiscences of Marx [1890],” in *Marx and Engels Through the Eyes of the Their Contemporaries* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972). According to Lafargue, Marx “ranked Cervantes and Balzac above all other novelists. [...] He considered Balzac not only as the historian of his time, but as the prophetic creator of characters which were still in the embryo in the days of Louis Philippe and did not fully develop until Napoleon III” (33). Meanwhile, the first English translation of *Madame Bovary*, undertaken (in the late 1880s) by Eleanor Marx, cemented the perceived stylistic superiority of Flaubert.

² The status quo in other industrial and commercial pursuits at the time, economies of scale occur when an increase in the quantity of goods produced results in a lowering of the average unit cost of production. The arrival of scale in the publishing industry was driven by the exponential growth of the press's productive capacity over the nineteenth century as it rushed to meet the demands of a rapidly expanding middle-class readership. To capitalize on this untapped market of urban bourgeois readers, Girardin came up with the lucrative idea of cutting the price of his newspaper, *La Presse*, to half that of competitors. He saw that a reduction in price would increase circulation, that he could offset distribution costs by increasing advertising revenue, and that smaller per-unit profit margins would be handsomely compensated for by a significantly larger consumer base. Most importantly for this analysis, he saw the potential for the serialization of longer works of fiction to cultivate this mass market of consumers. Thanks to the success of the serialized novel, the total circulation of the Parisian press rose from 80,000 in 1836 to 180,000 in 1847. This strategy, the first proper high-volume market in the field of publishing, would eventually overtake and transform art, literature, and intellectual life.

³ The diminutive of *feuille* or “leaf,” the smallest standard unit of print, *feuilleton* or “small leaf” initially referred to a section of the French newspaper cut off from the rest, relegated to the lower half of the page, which contained anecdotes, theater reviews, literature, and other forms of cultural entertainment.

Starting with Balzac, this article analyzes the scale of *La Comédie humaine* (some 90+ novels) as a function of the serialized production of the novel, situating his tendency towards symbolic excess in the context of the piece-rate payment schemes of the publication of *feuilletons* in the Parisian press. It then considers Flaubert as he responds, not only to Balzacian excess, but to the overaccumulation of symbolic goods in Second Empire France. Hence, the emergence of free-indirect discourse in his prose will be read as an attempt to subtract this excess from his own literary expression. This adoption of a discursive strategy will allow for an understanding of Zola's naturalism as it blends the Flaubertian narrative voice with the storytelling conventions in Balzac and *feuilleton* literature more generally. Finally, we conclude with an analysis of how Zola's unique fusion of his predecessors' distinct writing practices shaped the composition, publication, and reception of *Germinal* (1885).

The most politically charged novel of late nineteenth-century French literature, *Germinal* will be considered, in this reading, as an example to challenge the notion that the commercial literary market cannot be used to affect change. Indeed, the age-old prejudice against Zola, ostracized on account of his supposed entrepreneurial spirit, overlooks Balzac, Flaubert, and other "classic" novelists' engagement with the market. More importantly, that prejudice prevents critics from seeing how Zola's writing practice combined his predecessors' formal approaches in a way that called upon readers to act as subjects of history.

I. The rise of literary economies of scale

Balzac's writing practice is not often read in connection with the commercial literary market. Yet his tendency towards symbolic excess cannot be fully understood in the absence of the early-to-mid nineteenth-century boom of the Parisian *feuilleton* press.⁴ This section of the article will thus resituate Balzac's position in the context of the economies of scale that he had to negotiate throughout his career as a writer – from the heady days of his youth to his early death –, a result of his own metabolic excesses or overextension in caffeine-induced manias as he raced to meet the demands of an exponentially expanding market of *feuilleton* literature. As will become clear, Balzac's narrative economy became a force that would shape both Flaubert and Zola's own literary production, whether negatively, positively, or in the push-and-pull of contradictory tendencies.

The son of a petty-bourgeois textile merchant who married into a Parisian haberdasher family, Balzac was the living embodiment of the "paysan de Paris." He codified in fiction his own rise as a provincial, petit-bourgeois *parvenu*, writing himself into fictionalized personas in self-referential narratives like *Illusions perdues* (1836-1843) and *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1838-1847). Taken together, these texts provide a novelization of Balzac's experiences: first, as a journalist and pseudonymous writer of sensational potboilers;⁵ then, as a one-man publishing house – printmaker, typesetter, and editor-in-chief of the failed *La Chronique de Paris* (1835-1837/38); and, finally, riding on the coattails of press-mogul Émile Girardin, as an agent in the commercialization of modern print-culture in France and a force in the rise of the *roman-feuilleton*. Balzac's success thus marks the advent of the new economies of scale that would play a

⁴ Symbolic excess, here, refers to the heightened sense of drama, discursive heterogeneity, and oversaturation of meaning inherent to the Balzacian narrative voice.

⁵ For example: *Jean-Louis* (1821), *Clotilde de Lusignan* (1822), *L'Héritière de Birague* (1823), under the pseudonym Lord R'Hoone; *La dernière fée* (1823), *Le Centenaire* (1824), *Annette et le criminel* (1824), under d'Horace de Saint-Aubin; *Du droit d'aînesse* (1824) et *l'Histoire impartiale des Jésuites* (1824), published anonymously.

determinative role, not only in his own mode of literary production, but in that of the writers to follow, including Flaubert, Zola, and subsequent late nineteenth- and twentieth-century novelists.

Written and published throughout 1836-1847, the extended composition of *Illusions* and *Splendeurs* spans from the introduction of the serialized format in *La Presse* by Girardin to its crystallization as a popular form. Each volume is the cumulative product of three to four separate novellas united in a final edition only *ex-post-facto*,⁶ and thus their at times uneven formal structure bears the imprint of the market conditions that determined each successive print cycle. Taken together, then, both the content of these narratives and their publishing contexts provide a record of Balzac's relationship to the expansion of the Parisian *feuilleton* market throughout the July Monarchy (1830-1848): from the heroic phase of its primitive accumulation, which Balzac enthusiastically embraced, to his disillusionment with its limitations. Contrary to writers like Eugène Sue who, in *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842-1843), capitalized on the serialized format with his formulae of repetition, suspense, and pauses, Balzac would oscillate in the relative distance that he kept from what Sainte-Beuve had labeled "de la littérature industrielle."⁷ The arc of his diametrically opposed positions vis-à-vis the latter is expressed by the author's claim in an 1843 letter that Part II of *Splendeurs* would be "du Sue tout pur,"⁸ as against Parts III-IV, in which he purposefully frustrates readers' expectations for his competitor's formulaic dénouements.

What is the explanation for this sudden reaction against the *feuilleton* market? The response to this question can only be discovered by studying the material conditions of Balzac's literary production. Doing so will anticipate both Flaubert's reaction against large-scale literary production and, subsequently, Zola's relative adoption of it. For without the particular social, historical, and economic conditions that gave rise to *La Comédie humaine*, the tableau against which Flaubert set himself apart as a writer would have never existed, nor the palette of different narrative styles from which Zola composed his own portrait of French society. The following analysis thus seeks to explain Balzac's oscillations between negation, affirmation and, finally, the mediation of large-scale literary production, by which he made a determinate narrative economy available to Flaubert and Zola.

Rarely understood as such, Balzac's volte-face is in large part a function of the cyclic patterns intrinsic to the new economies of scale determining the literary field. He was swept up by the euphoria of the first large-scale capital infusions into the *feuilleton* press as it underwent its initial phase of commercial expansion. This triggered an acute period of experimentation, as publishers tested the capacity for distinct genres of prose fiction and non-fiction to drive subscriptions. The ensuing profusion of new textual forms complemented the discursive heterogeneity intrinsic to Balzac's narrative voice, already exemplified by the Rabelaisian project of *Les cent contes drolatiques*. The rapid growth of the *feuilleton* press and the diversification of textual forms it entailed had thus entered a system of "renvois, réflexions, et miroitements"⁹ as Balzac's migrations between different print media shaped the initial composition and successive textual expansions of *Illusions* and *Splendeurs*. This creative process underlies the majority of

⁶ The novel *Illusions perdues* is thus the cumulative publication of the novellas *Les deux poètes* (1837), *Un grand homme de province à Paris* (1839), and *David Séchard ou les souffrances de l'inventeur* (1843); *Splendeurs et misères* is that of *La Torpille* (1838), *Esther* (1843), *Lucien* (1846), and *Vautrin* (1847).

⁷ "De la littérature industrielle" is the title of a premonitory pamphlet published by Sainte-Beuve in 1839 – republished in 2013 by Éditions Allia.

⁸ Balzac to Mme Hanska, May 31, 1843. Qtd. in Jonathan Paine, *Selling the Story: Transaction and Narrative Value in Balzac, Dostoevsky, and Zola* (Cambridge US: Harvard Univ. Press, 2019) 48.

⁹ Honoré de Balzac, *Balzac journaliste: Articles et chroniques*, éd. Marie-Ève Therenty (Paris: Flammarion, 2014) 40.

Balzac's novels and, as will be seen in Part III, extends into Zola's own blend of journalism, literary criticism, and narrative prose fiction.¹⁰

Thus, with a seemingly free reign for literary exploration, Balzac initially saw great financial opportunity in the *feuilleton* press and serialized format of the *roman feuilleton*. The euphoria he felt during the *feuilleton* boom of 1836 is brilliantly illustrated in a letter to his companion Mme Hanska. In it, Balzac boasts of having written a series of columns, reviews, dictionary entries, and novels of varied genres, all undertaken with quasi-simultaneity. Each publication he lists is punctuated by the sum it fetched:

Over a fifteen-day period, I sold 50 columns to the *Chronique* for 1000FR, 120 columns to *La Presse* for 8,000FR, 20 columns to a *Revue musicale* for 1000FR, an article to the *Dictionnaire de la conversation* for 1000FR, which makes 11,000FR in a fortnight. I worked 30 nights without going to bed, and I completed *La Perle brisée*, (for *La Chronique*, out already) and *La Vieille Fille* (for *La Presse*, out tomorrow).¹¹

The financial equivalencies that Balzac draws between each form of writing attest to the author's understanding of literary production in terms of its profitability. Balzac's compulsion to write, preoccupation with the rate of words that he produced per hour, and the many genres he cycled through in *La Comédie humaine* can thus be understood as the result of a regime of literary production in which the quantitative exchange-value of the signifier has become separate from that which it signifies. If the writer is paid at a fixed-rate per word or phrase – regardless of that phrase's signification, centrality to the plot, or stylistic expression – then the difference of quality in distinct utterances are, financially speaking, equivalent. This motivates Balzac's drive to monopolize the emergent middle-class readership and literary market of nineteenth-century France. He must capitalize, as quickly as he can, on the incipient tendencies of this market.

The conception of *La Comédie humaine* is itself a clear expression of this desire to establish a monopoly. It is menacing in its sheer quantitative magnitude. Take, for example, its three-tiered organization into "studies," the first of which (the *Études de mœurs*) is itself divided into six distinct scenes. Taken together, they form a unified series of 85-90 novels total, all of which were conceived in little more than two decades. In these novels, the estimated 2,472 characters' embodiment of the historical tropes germane to post-Napoleonic France can be understood as an attempt to cash in on their value as symbolic goods in the emerging market for these products. Balzac concentrated on tropes circulating in Paris, London, and Weimar, exhausting their symbolic value by flooding the market with his own iterations thereof.

The demands of journalism's high-volume markets, however, eventually resulted in the standardization of the conventions of the *feuilleton* genre to drive subscriptions – much to Balzac's dismay. Literary signs, increasingly reduced to the price they fetched on the *feuilleton* market, had entered a system of fixed rates within which determinant narrative formulae produced predictable reader reception. Content differed, but form remained the same, circumscribed by the essential serial ingredients of Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*, which brought the *Journal des débats* from

¹⁰ See Stéphane Vachon, *Les Travaux et les jours d'Honoré de Balzac. Chronologie de la création balzacienne*, (Vincennes: CNRS, 1992) and Isabelle Tournier's edition of *Nouvelles et contes*, vols. I and II: 1820-1850 (Paris: Gallimard, 2005-2006), which provide a detailed journalistic genealogy of each short story and tale.

¹¹ Honoré de Balzac, *Lettres à Madame Hanska*, éd. Robert Laffont, vol. 1 (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1990) 341-42. Translation mine.

around 2,500 to 25,000 subscribers in a month and thereafter to 40,000.¹² This explains the vicissitudes of Balzac's literary production over the course of *La Comédie humaine*'s composition, as he both drew from and sought to undermine the conventions of the *roman feuilleton*.

Whetting readers' appetites with the mysterious allure of the masquerade ball in *Splendeurs*, for example, Balzac ridicules his own use of this well-worn *feuilleton* trope in a stroke of meta-fictional irony. Commenting on the as-yet-unnamed protagonist (Lucien de Rubempré, back from *Illusions perdues*), he points to the artifice of his own narrative: "il devait être le héros d'un de ces mystères à trois personnages qui composent tout le bal masqué de l'Opéra"; "ce grimoire d'intérêts est lisible comme un roman qui serait amusant."¹³ These remarks are noteworthy as they parody the prevalence of the *bal masqué* trope in prose fiction and non-fiction, as the demonstrative pronoun in "le héros d'un de ces mystères" signifies its repetitive nature.

This subversive approach to the *feuilleton* market notwithstanding, Balzac's prose still embodies many of the formal characteristics meant to capture, if not actively cultivate, "l'immense consommation"¹⁴ of the newly literate reading masses, such as the increasingly popular spirit of his novels' setting, subject-matter, plot, and characters – all of which are imbued with melodramatic sensationalism. This heightened sense of emotion is fed by an impulse to claim post-revolutionary France's as-yet undefined national identity.¹² But by the time Flaubert arrives on the scene, the field of historical possibility has become oversaturated with such claims.

II. Flaubert: Distancing himself from the *feuilleton* market

When Flaubert enters the mid-to-late nineteenth-century "market of symbolic goods," he is responding, then, not only to Balzac's symbolic excess, but to the overaccumulation of signs in Second Empire France. His reaction is meant to be understood both metaphorically and materially. The repetition of popular tropes in the serialized novels of the July Monarchy had exhausted their symbolic value and had been motivated by the *feuilleton* press's subscription-based valuation schemes. The expansion of the *feuilleton* market between 1851-1870 from an estimated total output of 200,000 to an astonishing 1.5 million units only exacerbated this hypertrophy of signs.¹⁵ The false promise of the press, the purported democratization of knowledge and free exchange of ideas, had instead resulted in its commodification. The novel *L'Éducation sentimentale*, published in 1869, follows the life of protagonist Frédéric Moreau through the July Monarchy, Second Republic, and Second Empire, asking us to consider the effects of this reifying process on language. The restraint and stylistic unity of Flaubert's prose in this text constitutes a process of textual "distillation," by which he boils down his predecessors formulae to the concentrate of *le mot juste*.

Rather than attempting to subsume this marketplace, à la Balzac, Flaubert removed himself from it. His work thus subtracts out from the excess of the former's writing by stripping away the motifs, symbolic signposting, and melodramatic rhetorical overtures that mark Balzac's prose. Zola made an excellent point when, ranking Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale* as the

¹² Christopher Prendergast, *For the People by the People? Eugène Sue's "Les Mystères de Paris": A Hypothesis in the Sociology of Literature* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003) 1.

¹³ Honoré de Balzac, *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, in *La Comédie humaine*, vol. 6. *Études de mœurs: Scènes de la vie parisienne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977) 431.

¹⁴ Honoré de Balzac, "De l'état actuel de la librairie [1830]," in *Œuvres diverses*, vol. 2 (dir.) Pierre-Georges Castex et al (Paris: Gallimard, Éditions de la Pléiade, 1996) 662-70. 664.

¹⁵ Jonathan Paine, *Selling the Story. Transaction and Narrative Value in Balzac, Dostoevsky, and Zola* (Cambridge US: Harvard Univ. Press, 2019) 145.

apogee of the modern novel, he spoke of the latter's "négation du romanesque dans l'intrigue," its "rapetissement des héros à la taille humaine"¹⁶ and its elimination of "les longues énumérations commissaire-priseur dont Balzac obstruait le début de ses romans."¹⁷ Such elements remained *monnaie courante* in Louis-Bonaparte's gilded age of literature, art, and the press, when the commercialization of print-culture that began to peak during the July Monarchy. The *coup d'état* of 1851 marked a dramatic expansion in the power of the commercial bourgeoisie class. It catapulted the rise of what Saint-Beuve had already described as "littérature industrielle." And it is precisely this industrialization of literary production from which Flaubert, in writing *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1864-1869), wished to set himself apart. In fact, Flaubert blamed the bourgeois philistinism and romantic idealism of the press for the spread of the false consciousness that resulted in Napoléon Louis-Bonaparte's coup d'état and the Bloody Week of May 1871.

In Flaubert's view, this mass scale of national violence would have been unthinkable without the melodrama that had become so pervasive in mid-to-late nineteenth-century print culture. Whether it be the Social or Sentimental Novel, First- or Second-Wave Romantics, the Bourgeois Drama or Poetic Bohemianism, Flaubert considered the modern artistic landscape to be overinvested with symbolic value in a way that was out-of-step with the material reality of post-revolutionary France. His exercise of stylistic restraint is thus a reaction to the symbolic regime of the Second Empire and to the impossibility of the terms from the Napoleonic past to adequately express the historical situation of post-1848 France. Yet, perhaps as a form of over-compensation for a feared loss of cultural hegemony, these terms had never been so prevalent in literature and art. As Peter Brooks underlines, Flaubert, whose *L'Éducation sentimentale* had few appreciators, claimed that, had only France read his novel, it would have avoided The Terrible Year (1871).¹⁸ This claim stands in stark contrast to Flaubert's removal of himself from the public sphere and to his conception of writing as the practice of style as such.

Flaubertian understatement is therefore a response to the "inflation of signs" in Balzac as well as to the symbolic excess of the so-called *idées napoléoniennes*, "PROPRIÉTÉ, FAMILLE, RELIGION, ORDRE," and against their continued use in Second Empire France. As Frederic Jameson states:

In Balzac, everything that looks like a physical sensation – a musty smell, a rancid taste, a greasy fabric – always means something, it is a sign or allegory of a character's moral or social status. In short, it is not really a sensation, it is already a meaning. By the time of Flaubert, these signs remain, but they have become one-dimensional.¹⁹

This one-dimensionality of symbols is a response to the over-accumulation of symbolic goods that Flaubert will make it his task to subtract from his own literary expression. Hence, the emergence of free-indirect discourse in his prose. This narrative strategy eliminates the dramatic conventions of dialogue associated with Balzacian melodrama, often accompanied by an omniscient narrator's explicit interpretation, whereas in Flaubert the interpretation of a given situation is implicit in the tone of the text.

¹⁶ François-Marie Mourad, *Zola critique littéraire* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2003) 299.

¹⁷ Mourad 302.

¹⁸ See Peter Brooks, *Flaubert in the Ruins of Paris: The Story of a Friendship, a Novel, and a Terrible Year* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

¹⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London /New York: Verso, 2015) 33.

Flaubert's withdrawal into the letter of *le mot juste* represents a process of interiorization that folds the storytelling conventions of the omniscient narrator back into the narrative discourse itself. The story's emotional, psychological, or existential investments are thereby distilled into the telling of the story itself so that the interpretation of the situation is contained in its description. Flaubert's aim, then, is to subtract from the reified symbols of the past the material situation of the present, and to show how the "truth of the phenomenal world is also revealed in [unmediated] linguistic expression."²⁰ His obsessional focus on style or the craft of narrative marks a shift in the literary field, as the storytelling situation, with its narrator and middle-class public, now draws into the struggle of the writer against their art, against themselves, and with other writers of the Parisian *salons littéraires*. This is what Pierre Bourdieu refers to in his analysis of literature's relative autonomy.²¹ But Flaubert declared his independence from the commercial literary market in part because he could. The inheritance from his father and the house in Croisset granted him the financial independence necessary for unremunerative writing.

III. Zola: Reevaluating large-scale literary production

If Zola emerges as an intermediary between Balzac and Flaubert, this is explained first by the material conditions underlying his novelistic enterprise. Of his family estate in Aix-en-Provence, Zola inherited only the debt left from his father that he would pay off incrementally for twenty years into his own literary career. Unlike Flaubert, he was not "né à la littérature avec des rentes";²² he had to write for money. His novels are thus mediated by the popular forms of prose fiction and non-fiction that would supplement his income before he achieved financial independence as the author of *L'Assommoir* which, over the course of 1877-1878, sold 75,000 copies, of which 15,000 came out in an expensive illustrated edition.²³ Second, it is explained by a subsequent change in the story-telling situation that we have described above, in which rising literacy levels, which had hitherto extended primarily to the bourgeois middle-classes, now encompassed a wider socio-economic demographic, including the working-classes. Finally, these conditions conspired with the dramatic expansion of the book publishing industry as the capital, commercial techniques, and mass consumer market responsible for the scale of the *feuilleton* press migrated to the newly affordable book-format.

We should therefore understand the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle as recovering the totalizing project of Balzac, while incorporating the invisibilisation of authorial omniscience and free-indirect discourse that is intrinsic to Flaubert's style of writing – and this as a means of reaching the materiality or structural conditions of the social situation and letting them speak for themselves. Indeed, the second half of the nineteenth century is marked by the increasing gap between the *subjective identification* of the French masses with Napoleon III's unfulfilled promises of prosperity and the *objective limitations* of the Second Empire, when wealth inequality reached levels never seen before – and which have not been seen since the turn-of-the-century.²⁴

Zola understood this discrepancy deeply, having experienced the *déclassement* of his family after the death of his otherwise financially successful father. One need only recall his stint

²⁰ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, tr. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003) 486.

²¹ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

²² Émile Zola, préface [1885], *Les Mystères de Marseille* [1867] (Paris: Charpentier, 1885) VII.

²³ Paine 191.

²⁴ Thomas Piketty, *Le Capital au XXI^e siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2013) 260-64.

as a clerk at the *Compagnie des Docks Napoléon*, where he was paid a meager two francs a day, followed by a nearly two-year long period of unemployment, which ended by his living alone in the attic of an apartment building on the *rue St. Étienne du Mont*.²⁵ Isolated, without a means to support himself or his widowed mother, he went from living off of bread dipped in olive oil to starving himself and selling his clothes for money. Forced to pass by the wealthy Faubourg Saint-Germain on his way to pawn off his few remaining possessions at the Mont-de-Piété, Zola thus experienced firsthand the juxtaposition between the phlegmatic opulence of *la haute bourgeoisie* and the comparatively debilitating struggle for existence of the masses (a recurring motif throughout the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle which *Germinal* exemplifies). Those who scrutinize the financial motivations of Zola's literary output and, in turn, question his commitment to the working classes, would do well to remember his experience as an impoverished and unemployed aspiring author.

It is the precarity of the young Zola's personal financial situation when he moved to Paris from Aix-en-Provence in 1858 that would prompt the author's initial identification with Balzac – a connection that would significantly deepen over the course of Zola's literary career. Zola entered the literary sphere “*par la petite porte*”²⁶ of the publishing house and bookseller Hachette in 1862, rising to head of publicity. He cut his teeth on the publishing circuit by writing ten- to twenty-line promotional blurbs for the new texts that appeared on *Bulletin du libraire*, which he himself distributed, giving him the opportunity to communicate with many of the authors he promoted. Hachette, it is important to note, was also one of the main harbors for the flood of capital that would inundate the book publishing industry in mid-to-late nineteenth-century France,²⁷ making the book-format affordable to a much wider demographic of consumers. At the center of the commercial literary marketplace, Zola thus discovered the “*liens mutuels de l'argent, des structures familiales, des alliances d'affaires et d'épousailles de l'État – et de la culture.*”²⁸ Obligated, in this way at-least in part, to embrace the modalities of large-scale literary production, it is during this time at Hachette that Zola would “*tisse[r] [...] son réseau de relations littéraires [et commerciales].*”²⁹

Indeed, the years Zola spent at Hachette were responsible for many of the convictions that mark his 1880 treatise “*L'Argent dans la littérature,*” the following excerpt of which connects the emergence of literary economies of scale to the relative independence of the author:

Autrefois, il coûtait très cher; aujourd'hui, les bourses les plus humbles peuvent se faire une petite bibliothèque. Ce sont là des faits décisifs: dès que le peuple sait lire, et dès qu'il peut lire à bon marché, le commerce de la librairie décuple ses affaires, l'écrivain trouve largement le moyen de vivre de sa plume. Donc, la protection des grands n'est plus nécessaire, le parasitisme disparaît des mœurs, un auteur est un ouvrier comme un autre, qui gagne sa vie par son travail.³⁰

In alignment with Balzac – who claimed as early as his 1830 article for the *Feuilleton des journaux politiques*, “*De l'état actuel de la librairie,*”³¹ that intellectual property was the *sine qua non* of the

²⁵ Henri Mitterand, *Zola*, vol. 1: 1840-1871 (Paris: Fayard, 1999) 315- 21.

²⁶ Mitterand (1999) 324.

²⁷ Mitterand (1999) 325.

²⁸ Mitterand (1999) 326.

²⁹ Mitterand (1999) 330.

³⁰ Émile Zola, “*L'Argent dans la littérature,*” *Le Roman expérimental*, (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1902) 177.

³¹ See footnote no. 14.

writer's autonomy – Zola believed that the increasing volume of book production and mass readership of the *feuilleton* press had “emancipated the writer,”³² granting authors financial independence from the patronage system of the *Ancien Régime*.

The capitalist literary marketplace had created the possibility for provincial, petit-bourgeois *parvenus*, like Balzac and Zola himself, to become writers in the first place. Not only did Zola's initial financial straits and subsequent professional situation at Hachette provoke identification with Balzac, but the material basis of the *Rougon-Macquart* series, as for *La Comédie humaine* before it, had arisen in part from the need for a long-term source of revenue, the Goncourt brothers wrote in 1868:

Nous avons eu à déjeuner notre admirateur et notre élève Zola. [...] Il nous parle de la difficulté de sa vie et du besoin qu'il aurait d'un éditeur l'achetant pour six ans, trente mille francs, lui assurant chaque année six mille francs: le pain pour lui et sa mère et la faculté de faire *l'Histoire d'une famille*, roman en dix volumes.³³

As in the case of Balzac, for Zola, “les contrats ne sont pas pièces annexes [de l'œuvre de Zola] mais pièces principales.”³⁴ Economic necessity forced Zola to write for profit, to embrace the modalities of the field of large-scale production and thus to consider the concrete relation between an author and the anonymous public of the masses.

By the end of his time at Hachette, Zola would find himself “[a]u croisement de trois chemins: celui de l'éditeur, celui de l'auteur, et celui de la critique.”³⁵ He thus held virtually the same position under Louis-Bonaparte that Balzac had occupied during the reign of Louis-Philippe. The latter's polyvalent mode of literary production was increasingly reincarnated by the young Émile's migrations between different print media, from his contributions to *Le Petit Journal*, to his essays on the *Salons de peinture annuels* and, finally, to his first cycle of narrative prose fiction: *Contes à Ninon* (1864), *La Confession de Claude* (1865), *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), *Les Mystères de Marseille* (1867). The latter, a reprise of Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* commissioned by *Le Messager de Provence*, illustrates Zola's unabashed use of what Jonathan Paine refers to as narrative “pre-fabrication”³⁶ to meet the demands of the *feuilleton* market and satisfy his own financial needs. *Thérèse Raquin*, written simultaneously with *Les Mystères de Marseille*, is on the contrary one of the amateur novelist's first forays into the literary avant-garde. From the duality of Zola's trajectory as *littérateur-journaliste-critique*, expressive of the author's ambivalent and, in many ways, unprecedented position in the literary field, thus came a division of labor between commercial and literary writing.

Zola's economic understanding of literature would distinguish him from Flaubert, otherwise deemed *le grand maître* of the naturalist school of writing by his protégé. Whereas for Flaubert, works of art “[poussent] comme des phénomènes isolés,” as if from the spontaneous expression of charismatic literary genius, for Zola, literary texts “forment une chaîne affectant certaines courbes selon les mœurs et les époques historiques” and thus cannot be divorced from the particular historical circumstances underlying each individual act of writing.³⁷ His materialist

³² Émile Zola, *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*, tr. Belle M. Sherman (New York: The Cassell Publishing Co., 1893) 194.

³³ Qtd. in Henri Mitterrand, *Zola: L'histoire et la fiction* (Paris: PUF, 1990) 15.

³⁴ Pierre Barbéris, *Balzac: Une mythologie réaliste* (Paris: Larousse, 1971) 92.

³⁵ Mitterrand (1990) 15.

³⁶ Paine 195.

³⁷ Mourad 304.

conception of literature differed from that of his mentor, allowing him to see beyond the cult of the artist and restore literary criticism to history. Nevertheless, Zola declared that *Madame Bovary* and *L'Éducation sentimentale* contained “la formule du roman moderne [qui], éparse dans l'œuvre colossale de Balzac, [a été réduite] et clairement énoncée dans les quatre cents pages d'un livre.”³⁸ In contrast to Flaubert's exalted conception of literature, his prose yet remained “la négation même de l'art du romancier,” bringing to naturalism “la dernière force qui lui manquait, celle de la forme parfaite et impérissable qui aide les œuvres à vivre.”³⁹

These encounters with Flaubert gave Zola the literary techniques he felt necessary to reach the “materiality” of the socioeconomic dynamics that his novels depict – that is, the effacement of the omniscient narrator, variations between external and internal focalization, and use of free-indirect discourse. Zola's incorporation of these aspects from Flaubert's style speaks to their shared point-of-view that the downfalls of the 1848-1852 French Second Republic and the 1871 Paris Commune were due to the spirit of romantic socialist utopianism spread by the *roman-feuilleton*, such as Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842-1843), Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862), and George Sand's *La Ville noire* (1860). These novels exemplify the characteristics of so-called “bas romantisme”⁴⁰ against which Flaubert, Zola, and subsequent literary naturalists forged their own practice of style – that is, the lyricism of the prose, the charismatic heroism of the protagonist, the melodramatic sensationalism of the plot, and the romantic sentimentalism that often underlies the latter's resolution. As Alphonse Lamartine explains: “Pour passionner les peuples, il faut qu'un peu d'illusion se mêle à la vérité.”⁴¹ To the contrary, Zola's entire body of work is driven by the impulse to pierce through the cult image of the Second Empire and thereby overcome “la voie de l'idéalisme prêchant et consolant les lecteurs par les mensonges de l'imagination,”⁴² initiated by Sand and continued by *fin-de-siècle* novelists.

The incipit of Sand's *La Ville noire*, for example, opens upon the young cutler Étienne Lavoute, an idealized working-class subject, as he sits at the foot of a waterfall, “*Le Trou d'Enfer*,” situated at the base of the mineshaft by which one enters the fantastical underground mining city where the novel takes place. He is forced to choose between his dream of owning a factory or pursuing his lover. The latter, Tonine, inadvertently inherits her deceased brother-in-law's workshop at the end of the novel, allowing for both their marriage and the social mobility sought by Lavoute to come to fruition. The aesthetic idealization of the mine in *La Ville noire* and the symbolic act of class reconciliation of its plot of misalliance stand in stark contrast to *Germinal* (1885). Rather than idealizing the working-class subjects, Zola's novel captures the abject realities of their objective material existence. The dramatization of “la lutte du travail contre le capital”⁴³ depicts the autonomy of the economic structures underlying the exploitation of labor in capitalism.

³⁸ Frédéric Giraud, *Émile Zola, le déclassé et la lutte des places*. Les Rougon-Macquart, *condensation littéraire d'un désir d'ascension sociale* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2016) 188.

³⁹ Giraud 188.

⁴⁰ Romain Descendre, “Surhomme, bas romantisme, fascisme: Antonio Gramsci et le roman populaire français,” in *La France d'Antonio Gramsci*, eds. Romain Descendre et Jean-Claude Zancarini (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2021) 113-52. 113. The discussion of the term “bas romantisme” continues until circa p. 122. According to the author, the expression originates with Gustave Lanson, who, in *Histoire de la littérature française*, groups together about half of Balzac's work with that of Sue, Dumas, and other *feuilletonistes*.

⁴¹ Alphonse Lamartine, qtd. in Notice, Gustave Flaubert, *L'Éducation sentimentale* (Paris: Gallimard, Éditions de la Pléiade, 2021) 1065. The original quotation by Lamartine is from *Histoire des Girondins*, vol. 1 (Paris: Furne et Coquebart, 1847) 24-25.

⁴² Giraud 196.

⁴³ Émile Zola, *Mes notes sur Anzin*, qtd. in Henri Mitterand, “Zola à Anzin: Les mineurs de *Germinal*,” *Travailler* 7 (2002): 37. < <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-travailler-2002-1-page-37?lang=fr> >.

Rather than depicting the strength of the individual to overcome these structures, Zola emphasizes the assertion of the external environment over the individual. This is expressed formally by the motif of anthropophagic industrial machinery, exemplified by *Germinal*'s descriptions of the mine, le Voreux – from the Latin verb *voro*, “to devour,” and noun *vorago*, “abyss,” or “inundation,”⁴⁴ the latter an etymological prolepsis for the novel's conclusion:

Le Voreux, à présent, sortait du rêve. Étienne, qui s'oubliait devant le brasier à chauffer ses pauvres mains saignantes, regardait, retrouvait chaque partie de la fosse, le hangar goudronné du criblage, le beffroi du puits, la vaste chambre de la machine d'extraction, la tourelle carrée de la pompe d'épuisement. Cette fosse, tassée au fond d'un creux, avec ses constructions trapues de briques, dressant sa cheminée comme une corne menaçante, lui semblait avoir un air mauvais de bête goulue, accroupie là pour manger le monde.⁴⁵

The materiality of Zola's prose is expressed, first, by the comparative scale of Le Voreux, rendered by Zola's use of parataxis (“le hangar [...], le beffroi du puits”) which dwarfs the characters' stature by the sheer accumulation of different parts of the mine. Further, not only does Le Voreux consume laborers, but in other passages it breathes, and is described as having a voice, and even a body of gesticulating “membres d'acier.”⁴⁶ These attributions give a dramatic sense of agency to the mine that contrasts with the fictional characters' own lack thereof. The subordination of characters to machines could be read as a symptom of the “autonomization” of industrial production in the nineteenth century, that is, when the structures of capitalism become so entrenched that they begin to expand of their own accord.

Germinal, the thirteenth novel in the twenty-novel cycle of *Les Rougon-Macquart*, comes after the commercial successes of *L'Assommoir*, *Nana*, and *Au Bonheur des Dames*. It is thus a work of maturity that shows the crystallization of Zola's literary mode of production, characterized by his division of labor between commercial and literary writing. This is apparent, first, in the way that Zola chooses the subject of his novels and the process of documentation that informs his literary reportage. He states: “Nous autres romanciers qui faisons nos livres de documents, qui allons regarder la vie avant d'en parler, qui ne coordonnons que des notes prises sur les choses et les gens de notre entourage, nous procédons identiquement comme le journalisme étudiant l'actualité.”⁴⁷ *Germinal*, for example, was inspired by an announced coal miners' strikes in Anzin reported in *Le Petit Journal* and whose unprecedented scale (12,000 miners) had attracted the attention of the entirety of France. The newspaper reports on 22 February 1884: “L'agitation qu'on pouvait croire calmée parmi les mineurs d'Anzin recommence et menace de prendre de graves proportions.”⁴⁸

Second, the fusion of commercial and literary objectives is expressed in Zola's use of journalism, criticism, and promotional literature to form elaborate press campaigns for the publication of each of his novels. After hearing about the strike himself, Zola decided to visit the mines of Anzin to prepare his *Notes sur Anzin*, but not before ensuring that his presence there was

⁴⁴ See Félix Gaffiot, *Dictionnaire Gaffiot* (Paris: Hachette, 1934) 1695. In this dictionary, the nominal form *vorago* signifies “tournant d'eau,” “gouffre,” “tourbillon”; and the example of the entry for *voro* is connected with a ship being swallowed up by a vortex of water: “*navern vorat vortex*.”

⁴⁵ Émile Zola, *Germinal* in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, Éditions de la Pléiade, 1964) 1135.

⁴⁶ Zola, *Germinal* 1248.

⁴⁷ Émile Zola, preface to *La Vie parisienne*, by Parisis [nom de plume d'Émile Blavet] (Paris: Ollendorf, 1889) vi.

⁴⁸ “Les Mineurs D'Anzin,” *Le Petit Journal*, 22 février 1884, p. 8.

well-reported upon by *Paris*, *Le Matin*, and other daily journals, thus stoking curiosity for the novel that he would write and publish only a year later: “Il y a un mois environ, l’éminent romancier alla [à Anzin] afin de se procurer sur les mines et les mineurs des renseignements dont il avait besoin pour son prochain roman.”⁴⁹ In doing so, he positioned *Germinal* to become a flashpoint in the inflammatory nationwide debates on miners’ working conditions that took place after the strike. Published in the controversial literary periodical *Gil Blas*, the dark tone of the incipit of the novel suited the literary periodical’s reputation for provocation:

Dans la plaine rase, sous la nuit sans étoiles, d’une obscurité et d’une épaisseur d’encre, un homme suivait seul la grand-route de Marchiennes à Montsou, dix kilomètres de pavé, coupant tout droit, à travers les champs de betteraves. Devant lui, il ne voyait même pas le sol noir, et il n’avait la sensation de l’immense horizon plat que par les souffles du vent de mars, des rafales larges comme sur une mer, glacées d’avoir balayé des lieues de marais et de terres nues. Aucune ombre d’arbre ne tachait le ciel, le pavé se déroulait avec la rectitude d’une jetée, au milieu de l’embrun aveuglant des ténèbres.⁵⁰

Finally, in the language of the novel itself, we find a distinct blend of naturalism with the melodramatic sensationalism of the *feuilleton* press. Yet the latter is not, as opposed to the novels of Balzac or *le bas romantisme*, channeled through larger-than-life characters. Nor does it include any explicit explanations or appeals to the reader that would require the intervention of an omniscient narrator. Instead, the sense of heightened emotion in *feuilleton* literature is reinvested into the environment contained in the novel itself through a series of subtle stylistic procedures. Take, for example, the menacing atmosphere that progressively takes shape through the repetition of signifiers like *obscurité*, *ténèbres*, *sol noir*. Reiterated in nearly each phrase, this repeated emphasis on the dark atmosphere of the plains introduces the theme of enclosure, while simultaneously foreshadowing the collapse of *Le Voreux* that occurs at the end of the novel. Meanwhile, dramatic tension is generated through the juxtaposition of the protagonist, introduced simply as “un homme,” and the immense scale of the landscape. Again, this tension is not conveyed by any facile narrative exposition, but by an ekphrastic description of the path to the mine, whose extension into the horizon is expressed by the movement from “la plaine,” to “la grande route de Marchiennes à Montsou dix kilomètres tout droit, à travers les champs de betteraves.” The succession of prepositional phrases generates a sense of movement, providing the setting of the novel with an epic quality that contrasts with the protagonist’s diminished characterization.

As the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle came closer to its conclusion, Zola’s narrative prose fiction became more expressive of his authorial viewpoint, incorporating thematically organized description in which each detail is invested with metonymic significance referring back to the plot, as the incipit of *Germinal* illustrates: the dark imagery of Étienne’s journey across the plains anticipates the description of *Le Voreux* itself, which occurs only a few pages later. Further, Zola implicitly positions himself within the text as an advocate for the working-class, the novel itself dedicated to the “soulèvement des salariés.”⁵¹ This objective signifies the closing of the division of labor between his literary and journalistic writing as the novel becomes a tribune where his novelistic imagination joins his political engagement. Should doubts arise concerning the

⁴⁹ “Zola à Anzin,” *Le Matin*, 1 mars 1884. < <https://www.retronews.fr/journal/le-matin/01-mars-1884/66/168773/2>>.

⁵⁰ Zola, *Germinal* 1133.

⁵¹ Zola, *Mes notes sur Anzin* 37.

legitimacy of his political intentions, one need only consider the fact that Zola allowed all the socialist organs of the press to reprint *Germinal* as a *feuilleton* for free: “Prenez *Germinal* et reproduisez-le. Je ne vous demande rien, puisque votre journal est pauvre et que vous défendez les misérables.”⁵² For all his accusations of entrepreneurialism, as if the latter disqualifies Zola’s writing from the pantheon of literary realists, something has to be said for the fact that novels like *Germinal* reached the reading public whose plight it portrayed.

This article underscores the inseparability of Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola from one another as well as from the material conditions underlying their diverse writing regimens. Too often these writers are read as opposed to, or in isolation from one another, but their different formal approaches are better understood as intertwining threads in the complex tapestry of French nineteenth-century literary history. Unsettling many of the categorical distinctions between Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola that have become a literary *status quo*, this reading reveals how Zola inscribed himself in the distinct symbolic legacies left by Balzac and Flaubert: at once nominally, by repeated claims of their literary heritage; formally, in the distinct fusion of their stylistic characteristics; and practically, by capitalizing on the material infrastructure that Balzac and Flaubert helped to create.

Lukács, perhaps the foremost critic to have established the consensus against Zola, (in)famously subordinated naturalism to the form of literary realism practiced by Balzac. Confining Zola to so-called “photographic naturalism,” he opposed its emphasis on narrative description in favor of Balzac’s plot structure, characterization, and epic narration. While Balzac’s novels purportedly “strip social institutions of their apparent objectivity,” revealing them “as bearers of class interests and the instruments of their enforcement,” Zola depicts only the “outer trappings” of capitalism, as an “institution independent of society and standing above it.”⁵³ Perhaps what Lukács failed to notice is that the prevalence of description in Zola registers, not the negation of these social processes, but a renewed primacy of the object-world over human subjectivity. This prejudice prevents Lukács from seeing how Zola’s writing practice called upon readers to act as subjects of history, as attested to by the attendance of the miners from Denain at Zola’s funeral. Their solidarity forces us to reevaluate, *contra* traditional literary doxa, the value and possibilities of large-scale literary production.

⁵² Zola, *Mes notes sur Anzin* 37.

⁵³ Georg [György] Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964) 89.