

Introduction

The AIZEN editorial team is very proud to present Volume XXXV (2024) of *Excavatio*, the *International Review for Multidisciplinary Approaches and Comparative Studies Related to Émile Zola and Naturalism Around the World*, which comprises nine articles from distinguished contributors from the United States, Canada, and France. Offering a wide variety of critical approaches to Émile Zola and naturalism – historical, political, scientific, feminist, and aesthetic –, the volume celebrates the ongoing relevance of naturalism in our world today, underlining our indebtedness to the movement on a broad range of topics including the awareness of social ills like domestic violence, child abuse, and sexual assault, the importance of the press in molding literary production, the expansion of the notion of a literary marketplace, the role of artists' personal political engagement in shaping their artistic output, and the concept of food as a symbol of socio-economic status, a concept that has significantly influenced modern notions and trends like “foodies,” “organic” food, and “farm-to-table” restaurants.

The first two articles share *new interpretations of Zola's landmark novel L'Assommoir* (1877), his first bestseller, as a common thread. In her article “La vie nue de *L'Assommoir*: Lalie et Gervaise dans le tombeau de la maison” Agnieszka Tworek shows how the novel reflects the fragile status of women and children in nineteenth-century France, a time when they were not yet protected by laws against domestic violence. The article focuses on a secondary character, Lalie Bijard, who is brutalized and tortured by her father to the point of death, making her a martyr like her patron saint Eulalia. Tworek demonstrates that her story is much more important to the plot than it may first appear, revealing an unexpected kinship between Lalie and the novel's protagonist, Gervaise Coupeau. The placement of both characters in an apartment building resembling a prison or a cemetery highlights their suffering, captivity, and powerlessness, emphasizing their similarity to what Giorgio Agamben calls a *homo sacer*, a person devoid of agency and legal rights and reduced to bare life.

Hannah Wegmann offers a different take on *L'Assommoir* in her paper “Farm to Table: Appetites, Ambitions, and Migrations in Zola's Paris.” She shows how Zola details the meals of his characters, personal diets furnishing new cartographies of power that map a changing political, social, and economic landscape. By examining the economy of labor and exploitation associated with food, she shows how the text explores urban relocation through culinary imagery, edible mirrors that reflect, distort, and prefigure the experience that awaits new arrivals in the city. In so doing, Wegmann underlines Zola's relevance in today's world, one where foods and beverages play an increasingly symbolic role, defining both the ever-evolving culinary ambitions of the city dweller and the ever-precarious plight of the hungry, thirsty migrant.

The next four essays shift the focus to *notions of economics, commodification, and the material production of realist and naturalist works*. In his unique piece “Economies of Scale and the Nineteenth-Century French Novel: Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola,” Teddy Kellogg explores the rise of industrial “economies of scale” in the Parisian daily press, which includes the publication of works in *feuilleton* format, as it shaped the nineteenth-century French novel. He considers 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 her essay "Le 18e Brumaire de Pierre Rougon: L'héroïsme parodique dans *La Fortune des Rougon*," Grace Yan links the concepts of heroism and commodification in her complex analysis of the character of Pierre Rougon in *La Fortune des Rougon* (1871), the first volume in the *Rougon-Macquart* series. Drawing on Karl Marx's analysis in *The Eighteenth of Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), she examines Pierre Rougon's fabricated heroism and focuses on the literary and theatrical mechanisms which are exploited to enable his rise to power. The mediocre bourgeois milieu serves as the stage for his heroic performance, as Rougon's entourage, driven by petty material ambitions, also demands a heroism that is aristocratic and grandiose. This exchange, akin to that between actor and spectator, ultimately reflects a materialist conception of history in which heroism is commodified, and ideals are subjected to the laws of material production and consumption.

Karine Macarez's article also considers the role of theatrical and performative elements in the proliferation of ideals, while tying the production of art to personal political convictions and to the material realities of artistic collaboration. In her article "Sarah Bernhardt et *Les mauvais bergers*: Une *praxis* politique pour Dreyfus" she proposes a new analysis of the collaboration between Octave Mirbeau and Sarah Bernhardt on the play *Les mauvais bergers* (1897) in the light of the historical context of the Dreyfus Affair, arguing that Bernhardt's interference, decried by Mirbeau, constituted a form of personal reappropriation of the play as an instrument of political praxis in defense of Dreyfus. She examines how their collaboration on the play acted as a reciprocal creative exercise, providing them with material to shape their future political commitment. Furthermore, Macarez examines various elements of the play's production, showing the antagonism between a play written for a popular theater and its staging in a bourgeois theater. Finally, she considers the extent to which Bernhardt's acting and the incidents that occurred during the performances, as reported by the press, contributed to an allegorical reading of the Dreyfus Affair.

In her essay "Sous l'affabulation toute une humanité s'agite": Thèse et concrétude dans les finitions des *Évangiles*," Hortense Delair shifts the focus to the material production of Zola's *Évangiles* series by examining the author's own editing techniques. From a pragmatic as well as a literary point of view, she considers his finishing touches on the typographical proofs as a continuation of processes formed in his previous series. Following a well-established procedure, the finishing gestures aim to render the text of the manuscript denser: Zola rarely adds, but simplifies, specifies and favors concrete images, conducive to textual effect. Delair shows how each novel carries a meaning that must be infused into the text, without setting aside the plot that Zola knows is the strength of his works. For her, it is the finishing touches – through work on lexicon, syntax and rhythm – that render the final balance between thesis and diegesis, between meaning and life, and explain what makes Zola's last novel cycle so special.

The next two articles treat *reactions to naturalism and types of neo-naturalism* – notably in Frenchman Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *À rebours* (1884) and in Canadian Gil Courtemanche's novel *Un dimanche à la piscine à Kigali* (2000). Christophe Ippolito's article, "À rebours du naturalisme: L'anti-modernité dans *À rebours*," examines how Huysmans's text constituted a reaction against Zolian naturalism. While many critics have studied the aesthetic and stylistic aspects of this reaction, Ippolito focuses on the antimodern dimension of the novel, exploring how

the protagonist, Des Esseintes, rejects contemporary society by retreating into extreme solitude and into the bygone eras of his vivid imagination. As such, through its disengagement from the modern world, the work anticipates both the “spiritual naturalism” and the devotion to Catholicism of Huysmans’s subsequent works.

Carolyn Snipes-Hoyt introduces us to an author unknown to most readers of *Excavatio*. In her unique piece, “Documentary Neo-Naturalism: Gil Courtemanche and the Rwandan Genocide,” she articulates the many dimensions of Courtemanche’s neo-naturalism in his acclaimed novel, *Un dimanche à la piscine à Kigali*. On the one hand, the work could be considered an example of documentary neo-naturalism, on the order of Zola’s fictional account of the Franco-Prussian War in *La Débâcle* (1892). Interestingly, like Zola himself, Courtemanche and his protagonist are both journalists, with emphasis placed on recounting observations in disturbing detail. The book could also be considered as an example of “néo-naturalisme provocateur,” as Rita Schober has termed Michel Houellebecq’s 1998 novel *Particules élémentaires*. In addition, the novel takes sexual issues to an extreme level of human depravity, linking them clearly to murderous behaviors, as in Zola’s *La Bête humaine* (1890). Even the nineteenth-century genre of “la littérature putride,” as Ferragus categorized Zola’s proto-naturalist novel *Thérèse Raquin* (1868), could be considered relevant.

Finally, this issue of *Excavatio* offers a rare treat, the transcription of an in-person interview with a relative of the Master of Médan himself. Recorded on November 26, 2024, Isabelle Schaffner’s “Entretien avec Martine LeBlond-Zola” offers fresh insights into Émile Zola’s legacy, through the reflections of his great-granddaughter and Vice-President of the “Association Maison Zola-Musée Dreyfus” – Martine Le Blond-Zola. Enjoy!

I would like to give special thanks to my wonderful Associate Editors, Carolyn Snipes-Hoyt and Isabelle Schaffner, and my Co-Editor-in-Chief and Vice President of the AIZEN, Elisabeth-Christine Muelsch. Special thanks go to Jean-Philippe Vauchel and Phil Hoyt for their invaluable technical assistance. Without any one of you this project would not have been possible. My sincere thanks also go to all the authors who have contributed to this volume of *Excavatio* to ensure its richness and highly international content.

Juliana Starr, President of the AIZEN
Co-Editor-in-Chief of *Excavatio*