Zola and the Naturalistic School in French Fiction

BY

HERMAN S. PIATT.

THESIS

FOR DEGREE OF MASTER OF LITERATURE IN GRADUATE SCHOOL.

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That portion of Europe bounded by Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Mediterranean, the Ocean, and the Channel is the home of strange and interesting people, strange and interesting are their history, their customs, their civilization, their literature. Fickle, volatile, mercurial, and hyper-refined, like the Athenians of old, they are constantly seeking to "see and hear some new thing." He who would catch the ear of the Parisian public—for Paris, et la France—must startle, must amaze, must beuppen révolutionnaire in fact.

This is perhaps sufficient to introduce and explain a recent movement which has taken place in French literature, which has attracted considerable attention and criticism in the literary world, especially outside of France, and which
its promoters have dignified by a name and raised to the
rank of a "school." I refer to the so-called "realistic," or in its
more exaggerated form, the "naturalistic" or "experimental"
school of French literature. I shall treat it exclusively in its re-
lation to French fiction, and shall confine myself for the most
part to one name—that of Emile Zola—who stands not only for
the extreme development, but also, especially in England and
America, for the typical development of French fiction of to-day.

1.

Emile Zola was born in Paris in 1840. His father, though
rather cosmopolitan, both in nationality and character, was
more Italian than anything else, being born at Treviso. He
was a cultivated man, speaking Spanish, English, French,
and German, besides his native Italian. He was a civil engineer
by profession, and published several works on scientific sub-
jects. When Émile was three years old the family moved to Aix, where the father superintended the construction of a canal which still bears his name. When he died, the entire fortune was in the bonds of this canal, which soon failed, throwing the family upon its own resources. Thus from his very infancy Zola's life was embittered by poverty, whose sting left its mark upon his later temperament. The mother toiled and economized and placed the boy as a day-pupil in a lycée. Here he showed industry and severe application rather than brilliance, a trait of character manifesting itself again in his later manhood. At 17 he was taken back to Paris and entered the lycée Louis-le-Grand, where his scholarship was excellent and where he especially won distinction by an essay on Milton. Before two
years he was compelled by adverse circumstances to leave the school, and gladly accepted a position in the Custom House at $10 a month. During this period he was forced by poverty to live in a disreputable portion of the city, and there much of the material which entered into his later novels was gathered. Through a friend he obtained a position with Hachette at $20 a month. Here he came into contact with the leading men of the literary world. One day he left one of his compositions on the great publisher's desk. Hachette read it, sent for the author, encouraged him to continue, and raised his wages to $40 a month, afterward making it $60. He also gave him some back literary work to do. After this, he became collaborator of the Figaro. He soon lost his position and remained a while without work. This was perhaps the bitterest portion of his life. But here again, being forced to stay among the poorer classes of Paris, he made those profound sociological studies which appear in L'Assommoir, L'Etat de Paris, and in fact through all of the Rougon-Macquart series.
Rising once more out of the depths he caught the public attention, and since the publication of his Rougon-Macquart commenced, he has been the most talked-of author in contemporary literature. He now lives in a delightful villa at Mélan, near Paris, surrounded by all that art, elegant and refined taste, afforded by abundant wealth, can gather together. Here he lives, writes and fights the battles of naturalism. In most persons he is modest, diffident, nervous and reserved. He lives as retired as possible, never goes into society, and is, in fact, the very opposite of his own novels—chaste, refined, and domestic.

Such is the man: what of the work? The first of his literary efforts which attracted attention were the Contes de Novembre, a volume of short tales written in his peculiar vein, though not so "naturalistic" as his later works. As a critic (a line of work to which he is not at all adapted) he has written Mœurs Modernes, Le Roman Exposé, Réunions Naturalistes, and Le Naturalisme au Théâtre. But the greatest monument
of Zola's genius, and in many respects one of the most comprehensive and colossal of modern literary undertakings is the famous novel, or series of novels, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, in twenty volumes. With the exception of Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine* (from which Zola probably got his idea), this work is unique in French literature, and, indeed, so far as I know, in any literature. In it Zola traces the "natural and social history" of a middle class family under the Second Empire, showing the inevitable laws of heredity in actual operation, noting the modification of their effects through environment—in a word, performing what he would call a "sociological experiment" of gigantic proportions, the object being to note the reaction between certain documents in human beings brought into certain relations with each other under certain conditions. A passionate, scientific account of the experiment and its results constitutes a work of "experimental fiction." The last volume of this series, *Le Docteur Pascal*, has but recently been given to the world. The individual volumes cannot
be discussed here. The remarks which I shall have occasion to make later on concerning Zola's work as a whole may be considered as applying to it, since they stand to-day, by the common consent of the critics, and doubtless in accordance with the wish of the author, as the chief and representative work of Zola's life.

In style Zola cannot be called brilliant. He is rather conscientious and painstaking. Aside from his descriptions he makes no effort at rhetorical effect, does not endeavor to awaken either the reader's admiration or disgust; this would be inconsistent with his naturalistic principles. It is in his descriptions, however, that the power of the master shows itself. They are wordy and exuberant. His pages bristle with adjectives—adjectives of every shade and color, and every degree of comparison; adjectives obsolete, rare, and commonplace, many of them coined fresh from the mint of his own imagination. The superabundance of detail often weary...
He is also thoroughly cosmopolitan and unbiased in his selection of subjects. The bourse, the saucages in a butcher shop, a magnificent bourgeois wedding, breakfast, a public wash-house, a low den of vice, a death by delirium tremens, and a grand church equally engage his powers and efforts. In fact, according to his own account of his method of work, his first thought upon going to work at a new novel is to select a series of things, places, and events that he will describe, and these are the skeleton of the new story and the only part of it that he ever plans before he sits down to write.

Gödà's literary principles and purpose will be discussed later in connection with the naturalistic school as a whole, as also the question whether he preserves the traditions of the founders of the school, and may thus properly stand as the representative and highest development of its method. The question of his influence will also be discussed in that connection.
Naturalism.

What, then, is naturalism, its purpose, method, and aim? The great aim of naturalism, according to the adherents of the school, is to return to nature. The novelist should be a photographer, not a painter. He should study the world as he finds it, observe, analyze, and combine human sentiments, thoughts, and emotional motives. No part of the writer's individuality should ever enter into the work. He must simply observe and record. He must depict the bare mechanism of life. His story must be a sociological monograph, a page of existence, the development of a single fact. His domain is partly psychological, partly physiological. His aim is to exhibit the workings of the human machine under the influence of heredity and environment, to show the living man in the social order which he himself has produced, to demonstrate the presence and activity of immutable law in all human intellectual and emotional manifestations—such as the theory of the naturalistic, or rather, under
Zola's development, "experimental" novel. Zola himself expressed the

duty of the experimental novelist as follows: "In one word, we should
operate on the characters, the passions, on the human and social data
in the same way that the chemist and the physicist operate on in-
animate beings. Determinism dominates everything. It is sci-
entific investigation, it is experimental reasoning which contro-

l one by one the hypotheses of the idealists—and which replaces
purely imaginative novels by novels of observation and experi-

ment." This is the keynote of the whole section as expounded by
Zola in the work in which he sets forth his peculiar creed (Le Ra-

mon Experimental), he makes constant allusion to the eminent
experimental physiologist, Claude Bernard, and seems to have
adopted him and his method as a pattern on which to work out his
own literary system. He says in the beginning of this work that he
is going to try to prove that "if the experimental method leads to the
knowledge of physical life, it should also lead to the passionate and
intellectual life."
The idealist will of course assert at the outset, that in dealing with human passions and emotions, in experimenting with "human documents" in fact, no such mode of procedure is possible as the chemist and physicist use in dealing with inanimate matter. This, Zola vigorously combats. What is experiment? It is to employ the process of investigation, to vary or modify, for an end of some kind, natural phenomena, and to make them appear under circumstances and conditions in which they are not presented by nature. Are not human acts, human motives, passions and sentiments as susceptible of such treatment as the molecules of hydrogen or oxygen? Will not a man, with a certain endowment of emotions and feelings, placed in the same conditions of heredity and environment, always behave in the same way, just as hydrogen always behaves the same under like conditions? If so, can the phenomena of the human emotional nature not be observed and experimented on, just as any other entity of the universe? To all these questions the dis
ciple of naturalism would give an affirmative answer. And not
only would he declare it possible, but he would assert with all the
reverence that a coldly scientific nature would permit, that
this should be the true aim of the novelist of the present age, which
is so eminently scientific in its spirit. Listen to the master
again: "The experimental novel is a consequence of the scien-
tific evolution of the century; it continues and completes phy-
ology, which itself draws for support on chemistry and medi-
cine; it substitutes for the study of abstract and metaphysi-
cal men the study of the natural man, governed by physical
and chemical laws, and modified by the influences of
his surroundings; it is, in one word, the literature of our sci-
centific age, as the classical and romantic literature correspond-
ed to the scholastic and theological age."

These words explain also in a measure the origin and
raison d'être of the naturalistic school. Zola declares that we
are living in a new age. Its spirit and genius, as we have inti-
mated before, is rigidly scientific—almost barrenly so. Everywhere there has been a breaking of the shackles of tradition, of classicism, of idealism, and a return to reality—

To nature. The problems of life are being stated and discussed anew along the whole line. In everything is demanded the ostracism of sentiment, feeling, passion, imagination—everything in fact which savors of poetic idealism. Only those facts which are cognizable by the senses are recognized as facts and the experimental method in every domain of intellectual activity is strenuously insisted upon.

In politics the movement has come in the form of democracy, in religion as agnosticism and the higher criticism, in philosophy as positivism, in literature as naturalism. Such, in brief, is Zola's apology for his own literary exis

If we examine him and his corrie from the historical side, we shall find, first of all, that the principles they represent are by no means new, even in French literature. In the reproduction of nature and the faithful imitation of
reality by artistic means, then, as Bruneau said some years ago in a lecture before the Sorbonne, there has been no epoch in our literary history when this purpose has not been dominant in the minds of at least a portion of our literary workers. In the XVIIth century the movement is represented by such eminent names in poetry as Molière, Racine, La Fontaine, Boileau, and in prose by Bossuet and Brueyre. (Bruneau, Études critiques sur l'histoire de la littérature française.) In the XVIIIth century Zola himself declares the cult which he represents to have been founded by Diderot and his followers. Thence he traces the line of literary descent down through Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert to himself. How well this claim may be established deserves examination. That all three are commonly considered as belonging to the realistic or naturalistic school cannot be denied. But that does not solve the problem. So much depends upon definition. The question is: Is Zola's realism or naturalism the same with that of his literary ancestors? Was he, or has he not, while claiming the protection and patronage of their ge-
inus, departed from their traditions and teachings, and at the same time
adopted a family name to which he has no legitimate claim?

Balzac was certainly a realist. He was “the great master of the real.”

But he was not an experimentalist. There is a distinction. He observed
and recorded human phenomena as they presented themselves to him
but he was not a physiologist. He was not even a mere copyist.

His was an imaginative realism, of the kind to which heimi, not a scientist.

described

in that colossal work of genius, *La comédie humaine*, with the work of the first century and the
restoration is depicted as by the brush of a Michael Angelo, and
which Victor Hugo, himself the prince of idealists, thus describes
in his funeral oration on the author: **louer vivant**

luminous, profound, in which one can see at once effort and of terrible, real.

Toute notre civilisation contemporaine, livre qui est l’observer
ation et qui est l’imagination; et qui, par moments, à travers
toutes les réalités baignant et largement déchirées, laisse
tout à coup entrevoy le plus sombre et le plus tragique réel."
Would Zola consider himself complimented or insulted by
such a characterization of the Rougon-Macquart series? Balzac was
indeed an anatomist. But what he dissected, he reconstructed, and
in the reconstruction transformed and embellished the work
by the power of his own genius until his characters became more
real than reality; and this is little short of idealism: Zola him-
self seems disposed to deny or repudiate his own genealogy. L’im-
agination de Balzac m’inscrit, il s’agit d’une place. And it is
precisely this imagination which distinguishes the author of Le
comédie humaine from the experimentalists. At other times a
sort of filial reverence and a sense of unworthiness of his line
seems to come over him, for in another place he writes: For my
own part
I cannot help feeling that there are real grounds for such an
hension
But perhaps Diderot should have been examined first, since to him falls the honor or dishonor of the paternity of the whole line. As with Balzac, so with Diderot, I suppose there is no denying that Zola does in some measure represent the literary principles and movement inaugurated by him. Diderot was filthy, so is Zola. Diderot considered nothing in the universe or man too sacred for literary treatment, so does Zola. Diderot was guilty of degrees of literary bestiality unknown before his time, likewise Zola. But there the similarity ends. Diderot's was a brilliant genius; Zola's only a genius for toil and feverish detail. Diderot commanded respect by the boldness of his innovation; Zola simply shocks by the rashness of his performances. Finally, the quintessential dictum of Diderot is, measured by Zola's orthodoxy, the banal heresy: Il faut que l'artiste ait dans son imagination quelque chose d'ultrême à la nature.

The connection with Stendhal is perhaps somewhat more justified, and yet in essence the difference is abysmal. Zola, in
method, principle, and treatment, is physiological intensely so. Stendhal is anything but physiological. The phenomena with which he dealt—traits of character, passions, emotions, soul-manifestations—were essentially psychological. As to his principles, it may be doubted if he had any well defined, clearly thought out, and consistently adhered to canons of literary procedure. What has perhaps gained for him his title of "realist" is his disregard of the proprieties and his dealing with subjects in his novels which are not admitted to polite society. Certain it is that he allied himself to no school, expressed contempt for literary fame, published everything under a pseudonym (of which he had half a dozen), and for the most part wrote only when he had to and for bread. If Stendhal was a realist, then Rabelais was the prince and prophet of the whole tribe.

How little of realism do we find in Flaubert! if we may perhaps except the Madame Bovary, which he wrote comparatively early in life and from the style of which he afterward departed: "Say Maxime
Du Camp, the eminent critic, in his Souvenirs: "He has been represented as a realist, a naturalist. There are those who have sought to see in him a literary surgeon, dissecting the passions and making a sort of post mortem of the human heart. He was the first talking his shoulders at this sort of thing. He was in truth a poet (un lyrigone)." His motto also is L'art pour l'art (art for art's sake), which he sometimes carried to extremes, ought to excommunicate him at once and forever from the worship professed by Zola.

What shall we say of the Goncourt, whom Zola especially delights to remember in the brotherhood of realism, and to whom he certainly was bound by many ties of sympathy and personal friendship. It is true that in style they are assimilated to Flaubert, who is counted as a realist. But Flaubert, as we have seen, is not Zola. Judged by intellectual resemblance, we should assign their literary paternity to Gautier, who was a romanticist of the romanticists. They absorbed to some extent the doctrines of Taine, who has nothing in common with naturalism. The fact is, the Gon-
courts came into contact with all schools without being swallowed up by any, and like all masters, have a style, manner and method peculiar to themselves. They were artists— but in their own way. Their art, such as it was, was delicate rather than powerful, and the reader must himself be something of an artist in order to appreciate it. Aside from their numerous and camera-like descriptions, perhaps the only characteristic which would ally them to naturalism is the fact that they do not hesitate at unpleasant subjects, and that when speaking of such subjects they use the vocabulary of the signboard vulgar, rather than the delicate circumlocutions required by polite society. Indeed, this characteristic is only too apt to be considered by the uninitiated as an unmistakable brand of naturalism.

And this last remark suggests the next topic which I wish to discuss: What is and will be the influence of this school, and especially of the morbid and fungus-like outgrowth from it which we find embodied in Émile Zola, not only upon th
character and morals of its contemporaries, but also upon the
current of the world's thought and the course of literature? At
most inevitably in connection with the naturalistic school
comes up the question of licentiousness. Indeed, as has just
been intimated, with the great unlearned public it is pre-
eminently and almost solely the mark of naturalism, es-
pacially in fiction. With the public, all naturalistic novels are
necessarily licentious, and vice versa; all licentious novels
are necessarily naturalistic. This supplies a convenient and
easily applied norm of measurement by which to test the
"naturalism" of any new writer or book. But this epithet of
licentious, and particularly this standard of estimation in
most bitterly and vehemently repudiated by Zola himself, and
not without reason—"from his point of view. He asserts that
his books are more healthful morally than Walter Scott's. Why
Because he represents things, not ideally, but as they are. He gives
correct pictures of the world and the things and people in it,
not the impossible, false, and misleading tableau, born of a
miseducated and exotic imagination. So far as this is true, it
is right. It is best, even for youth, to see things as they are. If
things are bad, wholly bad, the necessity is even greater. Any
novel which gives false notions of life and men in society
is more pernicious than one which gives true ones, no matter
how beautiful the former nor how repulsive the latter. The
question then becomes simply one of fact. Is Zola's estimate
of humanity, as exhibited in his characters, correct? The an-
swer to this would be too long to seek here, and besides, must
forever rest, ultimately upon individual judgment, so I leave
it for each careful reader of his works to determine for himself.
This much I think, however, all will admit: however real the pic-
tures of life which Zola has given us may be, all his works put
together offer but a very minute fraction of all the reality in the
universal—a pitifully insignificant fraction. And what fraction
has he chosen? Scarcely without exception, the base. Corrupt or prin-
ciple, here is the fatal rock upon which naturalistic fiction has gone to pieces. Without exception, naturalism seems blind to the fact that virtue is quite as real as vice, and probably as abundant, that the human heart is not wholly and irretrievably corrupt, selfish, and contemptible, that the race of honest, sober men and chaste women is not wholly extinct, and that the world is in a state of fact growing better rather than worse. It is in constantly holding up the dark side of the picture that naturalism errs, and here is where its pernicious influence lies. It may be truth, but it is at best only fragmentary truth, and that is often worse than a lie. Dantès and Trevise and Cabuche and all the noisome brood that masquerade before us in Les Rougon-Macquart may be real (I do not think it likely), but they are not all of society, nor even a representative portion of it. Subjectively I do not think Zola is licentious. His private life is a sufficient basis upon which to rest such a belief. But he can hardly help having the same influence upon immature and uninstructed minds.
as if he were. A lady was once going through an art gallery with
Mr. Emerson. Stopping before a statue of the Venus de Medici, she
turned and said: "Mr. Emerson, do you not think that is vulgar?"
"No, madam," was the reply, "but your question is." It is much the
same with Zola and his critics. No one who has studied the liter-
ary principles of Zola, who has made himself familiar with his pur-
pose, plans, and methods, will accuse him of any profligate intent. Yet
not all who read Zola's novels have taken the trouble to do this, nor
have any large majority of them the penetrating insight and imma-
culate mind of an Emerson, and consequently most of his novels
are among those which the good people of the world would, perhaps
"willingly let die."

The simple fact is that real realism is simply a "barest id-
ality"—a delusion. The human soul is too complex, too many-
 sided, its phases are too elusive and evanescent to be photographed.
The elements that go to make up any given state of consciousness
even the simplest, are too intricate and lie too deep for the ordi-
many observer. Again, the realist, the student of documents humanizing
must be, above all, a psychologist; such was Stendhal, such was Bal-
zac; and yet realism has thus far repudiated the only science upon
which it can ever find a sure foundation—psychology. Even if
this were not true, the science of psychology is as yet in too in-
tricate and unsatisfactory a state of development to supply data
for literary treatment. Hence, I conclude that a realistic novel
which shall be really realistic is, even under the most favorable con-
ditions, in the present fallibility of the human judgment and the
imperfect state of psychological research, a practical impossibility.
Zola’s literary creations themselves are from first to last pro-
ducts of the constructive imagination—far removed from
reality as they well could be. It is not the fault of the author;
he has not meant that they should be. But they are, and in the
nature of things they could not be otherwise.
What shall we say of the audacious pretensions of “experi-
mentalism”? If it is impossible even to observe and repro-
once accurately the mystical hued reflections of the human soul, what shall we say of him who attempts to play with these souls to subject them to processes, to set them up in various positions and relations to note their interaction— in a word, to “experiment” with them? It is stupendous folly. Such a procedure will forever remain impossible. When a chemist mingles two gases he performs a purely mechanical labor. No part of his own personality ever does or can enter into the process. No phase of his consciousness, no attitude of mind of his own can in any way influence the resultant reaction. Not so the experimenter on human souls. In the first place, the very materials for the experiment are largely subjective; it could not be otherwise. Thus, when they are put together, their behavior follows, not immutable laws of nature, perhaps unknown to the operator, but the result has been already foreseen, if not predetermined, by him. A moment’s reflection will convince any thinking mind that this must be the case. The character of fiction is
The products of the imaginative faculty of the author, not "things" which can be handled and operated upon. They may be for simile of nature, but they are still subjective creations, and in the present limitations of the human mind must be more or less colored and modified by the writer's own personality. It must be so. Their performance cannot originate in their own volitions, for they have none. They are puppets in the hands of their master and originator, and every act and word of theirs must grow up in the brain of their author and be transferred thence to them. Thus it is seen how flimsy and unsound are the claims of experimentalism. It is an idle phantasy which will never command any lasting respect or at

Not so with realism. When the science of the human soul and its operations shall have vastly extended its limits and when the human mind in its powers shall have become more nearly assimilated to the divine, then will the time have come to
write the realistic novel. Then we shall be spared the grotesque spec-
tacle of two schools of fiction, one depending for its success upon
accurate observation of reality and the other upon correct psycho-
logical analysis at war with each other. Then the realist and
the psychologist will work hand in hand, and he who shall be
the most successful realist will be at the same time the most
successful psychologist.