



**“Émile Zola and the Naturalistic School, or Realism in French Literature” (1885) by Mary Elizabeth Braddon.  
Edited with an Introduction and Notes.**

**Scott C. Thompson**

**Abstract**

Mary Elizabeth Braddon wrote an essay on the French naturalist novelist, Emile Zola in 1885. This edition of the essay, with contextual introduction, a note on editorial principles and explanatory notes is the first publication of Braddon’s manuscript which otherwise remains accessible to scholars only in the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas.

**Key Words**

Mary Elizabeth Braddon; Zola; Balzac; Naturalism; essay; gender; French Literature.

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**“Émile Zola and the Naturalistic School, or Realism in French Literature” (1885) by Mary Elizabeth Braddon**

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**Introduction**

The relationship between English and French literature in the nineteenth century is a tale of two stories. The first story is of a prudish and conservative English public who feared the immoral licentiousness and radicalism of French literature and were insulated by literary gatekeepers who strove to protect the purity and sensibility of the Victorian readers.<sup>1</sup> This tidy narrative of Gallophobia, amplified nationalism, and cultural isolationism in nineteenth-century England is underpinned by familiar gestures to Victorian morality, especially in regards to sex and sexuality, and fears of political volatility from the continent. The second story is of a vast and intricate network of cultural influence between the two countries.<sup>2</sup> In England, French literature circulated in cheap serializations in widely-read periodicals; it was consumed in high volume by subscribers of lending libraries; it passed hand-to-hand in private clubs; and it drew large audiences to melodramatic stage adaptations. These conflicting narratives coexist in large part due to a discrepancy between what Victorians admitted reading and what they actually read: public lip service to abstinence did not necessarily correspond to private consumption practices.

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<sup>1</sup> See Moretti 1998: 156-158.

<sup>2</sup> See Cohen 2012 and Atkinson 2017.

One productive way into this labyrinth of cultural exchange is the work of one of Victorian England's most prolific and popular novelists, and one of its most avid consumers of French literature, Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Though scholarship likes to remember her adaptation of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in *The Doctor's Wife* (1864), Braddon's engagement with French literature was extensive and spanned her career.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Braddon had developed such a reputation as a Francophile that in 1884 she was solicited by Thomas Hay Sweet Escott to write an article on French novelists for the *Fortnightly Review*. Between 12 February and 17 March 1885, Mary Elizabeth Braddon wrote "Émile Zola and the Naturalistic School, or Realism in French Literature."<sup>4</sup> The story of the solicitation, creation, and eventual withdrawal of her essay begins to reveal the complexities of the cross-Channel relationship and how one of the most popular novelists navigated the cultural stigmas and expectations of the Victorian literary marketplace.

Escott initially suggested that the essay be both an analysis and condemnation of French literature, with a particular focus on Émile Zola and Alphonse Daudet. Braddon accepted the task but with the caveat that she was not going to "depreciate their work" because she was an "ardent admirer" and the French authors were her "chief benefactors" (qtd. in Carnell 2000: 221). As she was researching and writing the essay, Braddon became increasingly concerned about attaching her name to the piece, eventually inquiring whether she could publish it anonymously or under a pseudonym. Part of her hesitation stemmed from the essay's focus on Zola, a controversial figure, even for a French writer.<sup>5</sup> Braddon was also very aware of her reputation and public position. Zola's subject matter was not only risqué, but it also carried unpleasant parallels to Braddon's personal life, especially her early relationship with John Maxwell, and to some of her novels, which had received critical censure over the years, all of which gave her pause for claiming authorship. However, Maxwell decided to intervene and wrote to Escott to express his desire that the essay should be published under Braddon's name.<sup>6</sup> On 12 May, Braddon wrote to Escott and withdrew the article.

The following is a transcript of the surviving article draft, collected by Braddon biographer Robert Lee Wolff and currently housed in the Robert Lee Wolff Collection of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Fiction at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin.<sup>7</sup> Though cited by a few scholars, the essay is not widely known, due in part to Braddon's difficult-to-read handwriting in the draft, resulting in a gap in scholarship on the essay's importance. The

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<sup>3</sup> For scholarship on *The Doctor's Wife*, see Heywood 1970, Pykett 1998, Golden 2006, and Edwards 2008. Examples of Braddon's engagement with French literature beyond *The Doctor's Wife* include *The Black Band* (1861-62) and *The White Phantom* (1862-63), which draw on Frédéric Soulié's work; *The Octoroon* (1861-62) draws on Jules Barbier's *Cora, ou l'esclavage* (1861); *Birds of Prey* (1867) is influenced by Balzac; *Circe* (1867) adapts Octave Feuillet's *Dalila* (1857) and Balzac's "Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu" (1837); *Dead Sea Fruit* (1868) is inspired by an unknown French play; and *The Golden Calf* (1883), *Phantom Fortune* (1883-84), and *Ishmael* (1884) are all heavily influenced by Zola.

<sup>4</sup> The commencement and completion of the essay were recorded in her diary. See Wolff 1979: 317-320.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Vizetelly was prosecuted as late as 1888 and 1889 for publishing English translations of Zola. See Cummins 2009.

<sup>6</sup> It was not uncommon for Maxwell to assist Braddon in matters of publication. It is in Braddon's 12 May letter to Escott in which she mentions Maxwell's intervention. See Carnell 2000: 222.

<sup>7</sup> Wolff's picture of the article, its solicitation, and withdrawal is incomplete. Carnell's discussion is much more detailed.

publication of this transcript is designed to bring Braddon's critical writing to a wider audience in a way that is coherent and useful, and my introduction is designed to begin explicating the essay's significance.<sup>8</sup>

On the surface, the essay demonstrates Braddon's extensive knowledge of French literature, her intimacy with the work of Émile Zola, and her prowess as a literary critic. However, just below the surface there are subtle but pervasive preoccupations that reveal Braddon's hand behind the curtain. Despite her desire to remain anonymous as the author of "Zola and the Naturalistic School," and her claim that she wrote the article from an entirely "masculine standpoint" (qtd. in Carnell 222), her invested interest in the depiction of women in fiction shapes the essay's analysis of Zola's novels and his literary naturalism. That Braddon would be concerned with how women are portrayed in fiction is anything but surprising to her readers. Her novels are (in)famous for their colourful and multifaceted—if not controversial—female characters, from Lady Audley to Aurora Floyd to Isabel Gilbert. Braddon's conservatism and the demands of the middle-class marketplace required that her transgressive female characters ultimately be punished for their actions, but the simple act of depicting transgressive women, giving them the space to speak for themselves and rationalize their actions, demonstrates the way Braddon pushed the social boundaries of gender and sex in her novels. In this regard, she stays true to her form in "Zola and the Naturalistic School." This introduction unpacks Braddon's critique of Zola's depiction of women and his naturalism, draws parallels to Braddon's fiction, and then concludes with a consideration of the place of "Zola and the Naturalistic School" in the larger landscape of Victorian studies.

### **"That M. Zola wills it so"**

"What is a novel?" Braddon asks, in her short *Belgravia* article "French Novels" (1867). "A picture representing," she answers, "with more or less truth and faithfulness, the manners and customs of society. A work of fiction delineating dramatic or humorous characters. A web in which are skillfully wrought the passions, emotions, or feelings, supposed to fill the human breast, as well as the incidents which bring them into play" (Braddon 1867: 78). The rest of her article goes on to describe the primary difference, as Braddon understood it, between French and English fiction: the depiction of the heroine. The "heroine can never be delineated alike by a French and English romancer" because the "the bright, graceful, daring girl" of English society "does not exist beyond the Straits of Dover" (Braddon 1867: 78). Instead, the heroine in French literature, though modest and sweet in person, "is a perfect nonentity" "as far as her relations with society are concerned" (Braddon 1867: 78-79). "French Novels" reveals not only Braddon's interest in and familiarity with Gallic literature and culture but also her deep investment in the depiction of women, the novel's ability to delimit the reciprocal relationship between the individual and the social, and its capacity to depict the "web" of human experience and "the incidents which bring them into play" (Braddon 1867: 78). Though written almost two decades later, "Zola and the Naturalistic School" brings all of the concerns and preoccupations Braddon expresses in "French Novels" to bear on Zola and his naturalist novels.

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<sup>8</sup> See Wolff 1979 and Carnell 2000 for the longer considerations. The essay is also cited or referenced by Beller 2012, Mattacks 2009, and Birke 2016. For more on the manuscript's format, see my Textual Note below.

Braddon includes in her essay all the necessary components of a piece of literary criticism of the period, such as summaries, close readings, and historical contexts. However, her consistent return to Zola's portrayal of women—as if it were an issue that stuck with her as she poured over his work in preparation for the article—reveals her central concerns. Consider, for example, Braddon's discussion of Miette's death in *La Fortune des Rougon* (1871). She sets the stage, describing the scene in detail for her readers. Miette lays dying in the aftermath of the violent coup d'état of 1851. Zola interprets her final moments, shared with her lover, as filled by lust and regret for not consummating her relationship before she died. Braddon holds this up as a prime example of Zola's inability to portray romantic love as something more than sex or women as more than sexualized animals. He is unable to describe a scene like this “without sounding the depths of sensuality and reducing womanhood to the level of brute-beasts.” In his hands, women are dominated by their bodily and animalistic desires. He feminizes and sexualizes anything, Braddon criticises, from a “domestic cat” to a “Chinese Hibiscus.” Zola's women are too often created to serve his purpose, rather than as people in their own right, discrete individuals but also social beings, shaped by circumstance and their socio-cultural relations. Nana, for example, is not “a creature with a heart and a conscience, led astray, but still human.” Instead, she is a caricature of a woman, “vice incarnate, the very spirit of wickedness.” “She is merciless,” Braddon continues, “hard as iron, cruel as fate, a devouring fire, a gulf into which men go down alive, swallowed utterly with their fortunes, their bodies, their once honourable names.” And Nana is typical of Zola's women. It is his special talent to “create a really interesting woman,” as he does in *La Joie de Vivre* (1883) and *Une page d'amour* (1877-78), “and then to drag her through the sewers of realism till he has so befouled her that the reader sickens and shuts the book in disgust.” Even Denise in *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883), whom Braddon—in a rare moment of praise—describes as “a heroine of unsullied purity,” throws into relief Zola's other women, who are too often “a marketable commodity, at the beck of every man who can afford to pay her price.” Braddon's critique of Zola's women, though, is not simply couched in readerly reaction: she skillfully meets Zola on his own playing field, as a novelist. With a practiced eye, she analyses the way he constructs the determining influences on his characters—the “web” of human experience and expression—and “the incidents which bring them into play” (Braddon 1867: 78), the defining features of the naturalist novel.

At its best, the naturalist novel discovers the various and interconnected influences that determine human expression and interaction. The long form prose genre is preoccupied with depicting the way its characters are shaped by the simultaneous pressures of circumstance, social expectation, and the limits of the cultural models of acceptable modes of self-expression. The naturalist novel affords its writers and readers the space to identify slowly, over the course of the narrative, the entangled influences that define the characters and determine how they will react to their constructed situations; it offers a slow but steady burn in which the narrative outcome is inevitable—determined—by the anterior developments. Zola's naturalism is most clearly articulated in “*Le Roman Expérimental*” (1880), in which he outlines a theory of the novel that synthesizes the epistemological realism of nineteenth-century experimental science and the literary realism of the long form novel.

In the essay, Zola draws on Claude Bernard's experimental medicine in order to theorize the experimental novel as a form of literature governed by science. The ontological foundation of experimental medicine is causal determinism, which considers the material conditions that dictate the way phenomena interact with one another in the world. As machines are determined by their mechanical components to fulfill their constructed purpose, so too are human beings

determined by a combination of their physio-biology and socio-cultural environment—their physical and social relations. The novel form provides the perfect medium through which the various social pressures—the various social influences—can be identified, according to Zola. The experimental novelist studies the “reciprocal effect of society on the individual and the individual on society” (Zola 1880: 11). It is clear from Braddon’s essay that she is familiar with this theory of literary naturalism. Though she does not cite “*Le Roman Expérimental*” directly, she does describe his fiction as analyses of “the human mechanism” and “human motive” and draws consistently on medical discourse—physiology, dissection, vivisection—to describe Zola’s specific brand of realism, echoing his own adopted medical lexicon.<sup>9</sup> In a way, Braddon’s critique anticipates Lukács’s criticism of Zola in “Narrate or Describe?” (1936) and *Studies in European Realism* (1964), in which Lukács takes Zola to task for a flaccid photographic style of realism that describes the mechanical average of everyday life without the social contradictions and complexities.<sup>10</sup> Braddon, as early as 1885, puts her finger on the tension in Zola’s work between describing the determining physical and social influences that affect his characters and creating characters who merely play out the author’s fantasy under the pretense of plausible reasons for their actions. She argues, for example, that Zola lacks “the slightest motive” for his graphic descriptions of an accouchement in both *Pot-Bouille* and *La Joie de Vivre*: “In neither case does the crisis end fatally, in neither case has it anything to do with the story. The thing is there, in all its revolting details, simply because M. Zola likes to write about such things.” To claim that something is done in fiction “simply because” the author “likes to write about such things” is a cutting critique, especially when applied to a novelist who champions naturalism in his work.

As explained above, Braddon is attuned to the ways women are constructed, and to what end, in Zola’s fiction. Her critique though is always tied directly to Zola’s naturalism: she analyses the way the French naturalist constructs his women within the novel’s internal logic. One woman in Zola’s *oeuvre* whose depiction Braddon finds to be successful is *L’Assommoir*’s Gervaise. In her, Braddon argues, Zola synthesizes successfully his naturalism and his depiction of women. Gervaise is a complicated and messy character, sexual but not sexualized, whose development and decline are affected by both her physical and social relations. Zola traces how “this sweet woman’s character deteriorates” gradually, making legible the determining influences that contribute to her decline, such as her hereditary inclinations, financial situations, personal circumstances, and social pressures. He shows, Braddon writes, how Gervaise becomes

self-indulgent, is fond of good-eating, does not see why she should work hard six days a week, and not enjoy herself occasionally. She who was once so thrifty, who, when she found herself abandoned by her cowardly partner, sighed for no higher bliss than to work for her daily bread, to have a humble shelter to herself, to bring up her children, now grows extravagant, begins to get into debt, and on her fête day must needs give a dinner-party of fourteen. (p. 116 below)

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<sup>9</sup> The nineteenth century saw many advancements in physiological knowledge, especially in relation to the fields of biology, medicine, and psychology. It was also common for literary writers and critics to employ the physiological lexicon in discussions of fiction and the practices of reading (see Bourne-Taylor 1988, Rylance 2000, Dames 2007, and Stiles 2012). Braddon also used this discourse as early as the 1860s in discussing Balzac’s work. It should be noted that Braddon’s use of vivisection in the 1880s would have carried some negative associations with the essay’s English audience, as vivisection was a controversial practice by that time. However, the use of medical language to describe fiction writing is in keeping with Zola’s theory of the “experimental novel” in “*Le Roman Expérimental*.”

<sup>10</sup> For Lukács’s full critique of Zola, see *Studies in European Realism*, pp. 85-96.

Here, as in other places, Braddon's grammatical construction mirrors the slow, gradual progression she is describing, and it echoes Zola's own stylistic syntax. Braddon is impressed by how "the author traces his heroine's degradation step by step, hour by hour, with a pitiless minuteness"; she uses parataxis to construct freighted sentences with lists of fully-saturated verb phrases: she condenses an entire novel's worth of character development—the step-by-step, hour-by-hour degradation—into long independent clauses:

[Zola] shows us how the very sweetness of [Gervaise's] nature tends to evil, how her placid temper accepts abasement, suffers the brutality of husband and lover, ministers to their selfishness, toils for them, waits upon them, pledges her credit and pawns her property for them, with a slavish meekness, sees the little business of which she was once so proud sink stage by stage into ruin, sees her customers fall off, until there is no longer any need for journeywomen, no one left but the vicious little apprentice, an imp of mischief, to assist in the now desultory business—the only customers remaining to Gervaise being the dirty and disreputable, the rejected of respectable laundries. (p. 118 below)

Braddon's analysis of *L'Assommoir* and Gervaise dominate the majority of the essay's space, but Gervaise is the exception, not the rule, when it comes to Zola's women and his ability to construct and communicate their social relations.

If *L'Assommoir* is the example of Zola's success, then *Une page d'amour* is the example of Zola's failure. Hélène, Zola's heroine, abandons her social respectability and parental responsibilities in a fleeting moment of sexual desire. The motives for this abandonment are empty, shallow. Braddon argues that Hélène's actions have not been justified within the logic of the novel:

There is every reason why this woman should stand steadfast against temptation. There is practically no reason why she should fall, except that M. Zola wills it so. She has friendship, religion, of the broadest most indulgent type, she has maternal love to sustain her. Her lover is neither very ardent, nor very enterprising—yet, stupidly, willfully as it were—at the end of a finely managed and very dramatic scene—having rescued the wife from the seductions of a fopling, she flings herself into his arms. She remembers nothing, not even the sick child whom she has left in deepest distress at her desertion. (p. 121 below)

"[T]hat M. Zola wills it so" brings to the fore the heart of Braddon's overarching critique. Zola's women are too often treated not on their own terms but as set pieces for his dramas and vehicles for his perversities. Though Braddon admires his skill as a novelist, his deployment of his naturalism is not executed as successfully or consistently across both his male and female characters. Braddon wanted to retain her anonymity in this essay, but her perennial concern with the depiction of women in fiction remains nonetheless.

Robert Wolff argues that Braddon went through a Zola phase, in which her fiction was highly influenced by and modeled on the French novelist. Included in this phase are *The Golden Calf* (1883), *Phantom Fortune* (1883-84), and *Ishmael* (1884). Though *Ishmael* draws on Zola in a more direct way, *The Golden Calf* and *Phantom Fortune* offer more than just minor echoes of the naturalist's influence: they actively re-envision how women and their social relations can be depicted in the novel.<sup>11</sup> In many ways, *The Golden Calf* and *Phantom Fortune* are mirror

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<sup>11</sup> *Ishmael*, in Wolff's words, is "not so much a novel influenced by Zola as a Zola novel" (Wolff 1979: 311). As it is set in Paris during the French Second Empire and lacks the majority of the "sensational" narrative components that had come to define much of her work, this classification is appropriate. Both Braddon biographers dedicate several pages to discussing *Ishmael* and Zola, and both only note in passing the echoes of Zola in *The Golden Calf* and *Phantom Fortune*.

images of each other. Both novels feature centrally women who are forced to make a crucial decision. Both choose incorrectly, according to the moral logic of the novels, and are forced to reap the consequences. *The Golden Calf's* Ida has to decide whether or not to marry Brian Walford. This decisive moment occurs in the first third of the novel, and the rest of the narrative follows her redemption arch as she pays penitence by being a dutiful wife to a terrible husband. *Phantom Fortune's* Lesbia is not so lucky: her decision to abscond with Don Gomez de Montesma occurs in the final act, and she is denied redemption. However, Braddon situates both of these women in entangled networks of social influences. Both novels carefully identify the reasons why these characters make the decisions they do, such as the threat of poverty, the social and family expectation to marry into the aristocracy, the desire to assert one's own agency, and the lack of fulfilling alternative life-path options. By identifying these determining factors, Braddon brings into focus the limits of Ida's and Lesbia's agency within the networks of their social environment. "Zola and the Naturalistic School," written just after these two novels, makes legible the extent to which Braddon was influenced by Zola; reading her contemporary fiction alongside the essay makes legible the way she challenged and revised Zola's naturalism.

## Conclusion

"Zola and the Naturalistic School" should be read in several ways. First, it should be read for what it is: a critical analysis of Zola and his writing. Braddon skillfully constructs a lineage of French realism from Balzac, to Flaubert, to Zola. She considers several novels from the Rougon-Macquart cycle, but the essay is dominated by her analysis of *L'Assommoir*, which Braddon argues, due to Zola's "potent faculty of mental imitation," is the "most wonderful book that was ever written about the working classes of any country." Second, Braddon's essay is a defense of the French naturalist. She informed Escott upfront that she was an admirer of the French writers, and the extent to which Zola's work had interested and influenced her is evident throughout the article and her late fiction, just as the influence of Balzac and Flaubert is evident in her earlier work. Though buttressed with genuine criticism of his "indecent" subject matter, the essay argues that "Zola is a master of his art" and "is the most imaginative writer in France."<sup>12</sup> And her mirroring of his grammatical style further indicates Zola's influence on Braddon. Finally, the essay should be read for what it tells us about Braddon's fiction and the development of Victorian literature – read, in her words, "between the lines." At the time of writing, it had been almost a quarter of a century since her initial genre-defining success, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), and her novels had slowly begun to develop into more recognizably realist works, but she never left behind the central themes and preoccupations that made her one of the most popular nineteenth-century novelists and that continue to make her fiction resonate with twenty-first-century readers.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Braddon's attunement to literary realism and the depiction of women and their social environment anticipates the naturalist novels of Thomas Hardy and

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<sup>12</sup> It is hard to determine how much of Braddon's criticism is genuine and how much is simply adherence to the expectations of the editors and audience of the *Fortnightly Review*. I would suggest that the truth lies somewhere in the middle. None of Braddon's fiction comes near the explicitness of Zola, despite what her critics argued. From her well-known *Madame Bovary* "adaptation" *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) to her later publications *The Golden Calf* and *Phantom Fortune*, Braddon consistently catered, whether for moral or market purposes, to the English sensibility.

<sup>13</sup> See Gilbert 2000, Tromp, Gilbert, and Haynie 2000, and Ifill 2018.

George Gissing and the New Woman novels of Olive Schreiner and Sarah Grand. “Zola and the Naturalistic School” showcases Braddon’s extensive knowledge of French literature and demonstrates her aptitude for sharp literary criticism, but, most importantly, it provides a glimpse into entangled relationship between French and English literature in the nineteenth century and the shifting literary landscape from the sensation and realist genres of the mid-century to the naturalist and social novels of the late-century, from the perspective of one of the Victorian period’s most influential authors.

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## Textual Note

This document is a transcription of Braddon's handwritten draft, created between 12 February 1885 and 17 March 1885. The manuscript is written on plain paper and consists of 25 folios. Braddon's address is written on the recto of the first folio. On the verso, her address is repeated with instructions to send proofs to that location if the article is accepted, and the essay's full title is recorded. Braddon refers to herself as Mrs. Maxwell in both addresses. The last folio contains an archivist's note of the essay's author and title. The middle 23 folios contain the essay draft. Braddon numbered the rectos in the top right corner, 1-13. There are eight exceptions in which she marked the rectos with both a number and a letter: the second folio of the essay proper is marked "1.A." and the seven folios following the folio marked "8" are numbered "8.A" through "8.G." All of the folios marked with an "8" correspond to her extended discussion of *L'Assommoir*. An archivist has numbered the versos, beginning on the back of the first folio of the essay proper, continuing through the final folio of the essay. On five of the versos, Braddon has included additional writing that corresponds to designated spots on the preceding rectos. There is one entire folio included that is marked "Insertion A," which is an expansion to Braddon's page 6 and the point of insertion is noted by Braddon in the text. To enable checking, I have marked where the folios begin with square brackets and "fol.": e.g. [fol. 8A].

The essay draft is a puzzle, and this transcript attempts to bring the pieces together to form a coherent picture. However, as it is a draft, it does contain crossed out words; words added to lines using a caret; words and phrases written elsewhere on the page and inserted appropriately using lines and arrows; paragraphs included on some of the versos; phrases and paragraphs written sideways in the margins; shorthand abbreviations; and misspelled words. Despite all of this, once all of the puzzle pieces have been arranged appropriately, there is a surprisingly complete narrative. To help the reader understand the nature and complexity of the puzzle, I have marked the beginning of an insert with [insert \*] and its end with [\*]. To aid the reading of Braddon's very long paragraphs, larger inserts are separated out from surrounding text by indentation.

I have had to make some editorial adjustments, though my overarching goal has been to retain as much of Braddon's voice as possible. This has meant the retention of what to modern eyes might seem irregular and even incorrect punctuation. The few places I do intervene I do so for the sake of readability. I mark all my editorial interventions with square brackets. There is one place in which I have chosen to preserve a mistake of Braddon's. I mark it with "sic" in square brackets. I have included Braddon's original pagination in square brackets within the transcript. The parts of the text that appear between asterisks in square brackets designate the text written on the versos. For novel titles, I have italicized and regularized capitalisation. In cases where the capitalisation of a word is unclear in the manuscript, or the same word is capitalised in one spot and not in another, I have regularized them. Where Braddon has included dialogue, paraphrase, and/or direct quotation from the novels in her text, I have regularized the quotation marks. All translations within the text are Braddon's. This includes her extended translation and paraphrase of the Lalie scene on folios 8E-8F. I have maintained all specific words and phrases that Braddon wrote in French, some of which she designated with an underline. I translate these moments in the footnotes. Braddon uses a lot of shorthand. For "and," she writes "+." For "which," she writes "w<sup>h</sup>." For "would," she writes "w<sup>d</sup>." For "could," she writes "c<sup>d</sup>." For "should," she writes "sh<sup>d</sup>." I have changed all of the shorthand to long form.

In the few cases where words remain illegible, I have marked this.



## **Émile Zola and the Naturalistic School, or Realism in French Literature (1884-5)**

**Mary Elizabeth Braddon**

[fol. 1] Nearly thirty years ago there appeared a novel which inaugurated a revolution in the art of novel-writing and a new departure in morals. Before Gustave Flaubert leapt into renown by the literary success of his first novel, and by the public prosecution of that work as an outrage against morality and religion Balzac stood alone as the high priest of the naturalistic school; and it was popularly supposed that in *La Cousine Bette*, and in *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* that philosophic and laborious writer had gone as far in the analysis of vice as it was possible for the audacity of genius to go.<sup>14</sup> But Balzac was not a realist in the modern sense of the word. He was an analyst but not a naturalist. The atmosphere of romance pervades all his books; there is in all the same flavour of the ideal, a tropical splendour, a mixture of *mille-fleurs* in the ink with which he wrote, a Ouida-esque suggestion of velvet dressing gowns and eau-de-cologne baths.<sup>15</sup> His women of fashion are lovelier than life, his young heroes, Rastignac, de Rubempré, and the

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<sup>14</sup> Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* was first serialized in *Revue de Paris* in 1856 and then published in volume form in 1857. Honoré de Balzac's *La Cousine Bette* (1846) and *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1838-1847) are part of his *La Comédie humaine* cycle.

<sup>15</sup> *Mille-fleurs*, originally a late medieval tapestry style of representing a mixture of flowers on a flat green background, had recently been revived by William Morris in the *Pomona* tapestry (1885). Braddon may also be thinking of Venetian glass in this style (called *mille-fiori*). Ouida is the pseudonym of English novelist Marie Louise Ramé: the reference suggests the first chapter of Ouida's most famous novel, *Under Two Flags* (1867), where the glamorous Bertie Cecil has just emerged from a bath.

rest of them, have all the same excess of gifts.<sup>16</sup> They are veritable princes of fairy-land on whom all potential godmothers have showered graces and talents. They are of a stronger fibre than the heroes of Disraeli; but they too have an oriental flavour, curled, perfumed, sleek, silken, the beloved of duchesses, the destroyers of marital honour.<sup>17</sup> Balzac was essentially the novelist of society. He himself declared that the first duty of a writer of fiction is to see as much as possible of the great world. All other things he may evolve out of his inner consciousness or find in books, cuisine, art, philosophy: but manners and fashion must be studied from the life. And Balzac worshipped that great world, and its elegant surroundings. The love of the ugly had no place in his art-gospel. Let him descend never so deeply into the gloomy basement of the social fabric there is always the counter balance of beauty, luxury, refinement somewhere in the picture. There is always something to gladden the eye and soothe the senses.

The appearance of *Madame Bovary* opened new vistas and revealed wider horizons. The novelist of the old school was left a long way behind by the physiologist, the analytical student, the vivisectionist of the present. In cold blood and with a passionless pen, Gustave Flaubert traces the degradation of a selfish and vain young woman, mated with a husband of coarser clay, for whom her only feeling is indifference. Step by step he follows her in the progress from dull provincial respectability—a young wife, solitary in a shabby-genteel home, nursing vague yearnings for all the beauty and luxury, the pomps and pleasures of this world—to the nethermost deep of infamy. Her fall is inevitable from the outset. There is no ballast of religion or morality to steady this linnet's head. But in the first of her two intrigues there is, on her side, some touch of poetic feeling, though the lover is almost as commonplace as the husband, his superiority a question of externals, the work of the tailor and the boot-maker. [fol. 1A] The second liaison is gross and shameless. The woman whose aspirations for the refined and beautiful were the only grace of a feeble self-indulgent nature now lapses into unbridled sensuality, abandons herself to a lover who wearies of her, and finally ends her ignominious career by taking a handful of arsenic from the surgery of her bovine husband, a good-natured dolt, feeble in his domestic life, worthless in his profession, a creature who can neither love nor hate with vigour, and who meekly pardons his wife's seducer across her new-made grave.<sup>18</sup>

To such a story as this Gustave Flaubert lent the grace of his admirable style, a style in as every sentence was the result of intense thought and study, an almost religious devotion to art for art's sake.<sup>19</sup> Every line is true and clear as the lines of a marble figure, every phrase is instinct with life. The story passes before the eye of the reader in a series of [fol. 2] word-pictures. He sees the farm and homestead where Emma's early life was spent, as plainly as he sees the old

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<sup>16</sup> Eugène de Rastignac and Lucien de Rubempré are recurring characters in Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*. Rastignac first appears in *Le Père Goriot* (1835) and Rubempré in *Illusions perdues* (1837-1843).

<sup>17</sup> Braddon may have in mind characters of Benjamin Disraeli's such as Charles Egremont of *Sybil* (1845) or the eponymous hero of *Lothair* (1870).

<sup>18</sup> Though her novel *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) drew heavily on *Madame Bovary* and was well known to Braddon's readers, she does not mention it here. This speaks to the fact that Braddon was extremely hesitant to attach her name to the piece. See Carnell, pp. 222-223.

<sup>19</sup> The expression "art for art's sake," or *l'art pour l'art*, was an aesthetic creed in nineteenth-century French art. It gained credence in Britain in the second half of the century, especially through the writing of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde.

grange in *Adam Bede*.<sup>20</sup> He sees the dull shabby street in the small French town, the cat stalking on the housetop, the only living creature in the prospect, the ugly little garden, the dew-drops glittering on the spider-threads spun between cabbage and cabbage; the dreariness, the despair of such a life. It is as real as Hetty's journey to Windsor, or as the little bedchamber where she tries on her illicit jewels.<sup>21</sup> There is an affinity of style between Flaubert and George Eliot, a studied simplicity, a rejection of all conventional ornament, a stern grip upon reality, which lifts fiction into the regions of positive science.<sup>22</sup> There is a curious resemblance too in the characters of Emma Bovary and Hetty Sorrel, which would be interesting to trace to some suggestion derived from the older book. There is in both women the same weak longing for luxury, the same sensuous delight in their own beauty, the same supreme selfishness, and unresisting abandonment to the first tempter; and in the treatment of each character there is the same broad handling, the same pitiless analysis. But in the English writer there is at least some touch of tenderness, and there is also all the reticence which marks the wide gulf between French and English fiction.

*Madame Bovary* is not so terrible a book as *La Cousine Bette*, but it must have seemed more offensive to French bourgeois, since it provoked prosecution of the author, from which in the words of M. Zola art came forth triumphantly.<sup>23</sup> Gustave Flaubert was acquitted; but the correctional tribunal of Paris took occasion to express its reprobation of the naturalistic school of which he was the latest and most powerful hierophant. This happened in 1856. Since then *Madame Bovary* has become a classic; and read now by the light of later studies in the science of realism, *Madame Bovary* is the very mildest of improper stories, a[n] elegant idyll which seems to exhale an atmosphere of buttermilk and curds and whey, as compared with the reeking odours of vitriol<sup>24</sup> and *sang-de-boeuf*,<sup>25</sup> which pervade the novels of M. Emile Zola. *Plus avant*,<sup>26</sup> is M. Zola's motto, and taking his starting-point from the ultimate of Gustave Flaubert he has gone very far in advance of all his predecessors who startled propriety in those old fashioned days of the Empire. He looks back triumphantly at that prosecution of Flaubert as a tradition of the dark ages, almost on a par with the prosecution of Galileo—*e pur se muove*:<sup>27</sup> and still the naturalistic

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<sup>20</sup> George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859).

<sup>21</sup> Hetty (Sorrel) is a key character in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*: her journey to Windsor to search for the father of her child is described in chapter 36; the scene where she secretly puts on ear-rings in her bedchamber occurs in chapter 15.

<sup>22</sup> Positive science is the application of positivism to scientific study. Positivism is an epistemological system based on sensory experience and logical reasoning that was developed most famously by French philosopher Auguste Comte. Comte's theories were disseminated and popularised in Britain by John Stuart Mill, Harriet Martineau, and George Henry Lewes. Its influence on George Eliot was acknowledged at the time: see, for example, the many references in George Willis Cooke, *George Eliot: A Critical Study of Her Life, Writings and Philosophy* (1883).

<sup>23</sup> Formal charges for offense against public morality and religion were brought by the French government against Flaubert's novel and the *Revue de Paris*, a liberal periodical, in January of 1857. After a short trial, Flaubert was acquitted.

<sup>24</sup> "alcool au vitriol" is home-distilled spirits with a high alcohol content ("moonshine" or "firewater").

<sup>25</sup> "Ox-blood."

<sup>26</sup> "Further."

<sup>27</sup> A mis-spelling of Italian *Eppur si muove* ("and yet it moves"), a phrase attributed to Galileo after he had been forced to recant after his claim that that earth moved around the sun.

school progresses, and progresses at a pace that brings us to the edge of that gulf of emptiness which little children picture to themselves as the end of the world. M. Zola has gone so far that it seems improbable he can go further. He must now make a retrograde movement: and in order to find new material he must return to that world of [fol. 3] decent people and cleanly ideas which he has despised hitherto. Like that reformed rake who has exhausted every form of debauchery before he tastes of the well-spring of calm domestic bliss, M. Zola has now to drink of the fountain of virtue which he may find as plenteous a source of inspiration as the marshy pools of vice. His wings have strengthened in an atmosphere heavy with the taint of pestilence and death. He has now to essay a new flight, and he is young enough to soar high in a purer atmosphere. He is, with all his faults so consummate an artist, that it is within his choice to conquer new worlds, and delight a vast public to which his stories have hitherto been sealed books. There is a wide field for him here—a mine in which he has dug but little as yet. But that he can dig profitably in such a field, and that he can produce treasures from such a mine has been fully exemplified in one of his later novels, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, in which he condescends for once to be almost decent, and in which he rises more nearly to the altitude of his great master Balzac than in any other of his books.<sup>28</sup>

The surest way of comprehending M. Zola as a novelist is to examine his theories and leanings as a critic. He has very fully criticised the works of his contemporaries in fiction, has criticised in a broad and generous spirit, and between the lines he has made his own confession of faith. He is proud of the victory of Gustave Flaubert over the correctional tribunal, and still prouder of that wider license which has been given to himself, the right to depict all that is most horrible in modern Paris, from the open infamy roaming the barrières after dark, to the occult vices of the boudoir, to publish to the world unchallenged such things as St. Paul has said should not be so much as named among you, to wallow in filthiness of every kind, from the drunken orgies of a party of courtisans and their lovers to the grossest details of a difficult accouchement. In his defense and [word illegible] of *Germinie Lacerteux* by the brothers Goncourt, one of the most hideous stories that was ever written, M. Zola boldly claims for his school the right to describe humanity upon every side and under every aspect, however revolting.<sup>29</sup> There is to be nothing hidden, nothing sacred, nothing left to the reader's imagination.

[insert \*] Subjects which doctors speak of with bated breath to mothers M. Zola writes about as openly as he would write of the Pont Neuf. There are pages in *La Joie de vivre* so revolting that one can only remember them with a shudder.<sup>30</sup> There are ideas deliberately expanded in *Nana* which no English writer—no, not even Mr. Swinburne—has ventured to hint at, between the lines, muffled in those voluminous folds of classic drapery which, like Charity, cover a multitude of sins.<sup>31</sup> [\*]

This story of *Germinie Lacerteux* evidently took a firm hold upon M. Zola's fancy. It startled Paris by coarseness which went leagues in advance of Flaubert's masterpiece. *Germinie Lacerteux*, the hysterical maid-of-all work is to Emma Bovary as the Parisian gutter to the

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<sup>28</sup> Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883).

<sup>29</sup> Braddon is most likely referring to Zola's 1865 essay "Germinie Lacerteux par MM. Ed. et J. de Goncourt," which was reprinted in *Mes Haines* in 1866. *Germinie Lacerteux* was published in 1865.

<sup>30</sup> *La Joie de vivre* was serialized in the illustrated daily *Gil Blas* in 1883 and published in volume form in 1884.

<sup>31</sup> *Nana* was published in 1880.

wayside stream. She is a hapless creature who follows the bent of a sensual nature, with a brutal [fol. 4] naïveté, abandoning herself to a young scoundrel who trades upon her folly, who finally deserts her, and then, sinking in her gutter-fashion as Emma sank with her little airs and graces of a fine lady, she lapses from stage to stage in the downward slide of vicious inclinations, till she dies in a hospital, pitied and lamented by the pure-minded mistress who only at the last discovers the infamy of her attendant, the woman with whom she has been in daily and hourly contact for years. The portrait of this noble spinster, this Mademoiselle de Varandeuil, who has sacrificed all her life for others, is worthy of the author of *La Comédie humaine*, says M. Zola. Granted, and the descriptions of scenes in Paris which the book contains are also worthy of Balzac. But for one healthy chapter, and for a few pages of vivid word-painting, we are to endure a whole volume of the rank animalism. And this story M. Zola tells us is the masterpiece of the brother authors, the men who wrote *Renée Mauperin*, with its noble girl-heroine, a character far in advance of the typical *ingénue*,<sup>32</sup> and infinitely superior to the young wife, first *ennuyée*<sup>33</sup> and then erring, who generally figures as the heroine of a French novel.<sup>34</sup>

In the preface to a later book, written by the elder of the two brothers, when the hand that had worked in such loving harmony with his own was stilled forever, M. Edmond de Goncourt writes that the success of such books as the *Germinie Lacerteux* and *L'Assommoir* are but the victories of the advance-guard in the army of naturalism.<sup>35</sup> The real victory will be won when some writer arises who will apply to the world of rank and fashion the same cruel analysis which has hitherto been only exercised upon the lower grades of society. On that day says M. de Goncourt classicism and its followers will be annihilated.<sup>36</sup>

It is not the only mission of naturalism, adds M. de Goncourt, to describe the degraded, the repugnant, the *mal odeurs*,<sup>37</sup> it is its place also to define in artistic language that which is elevated and beautiful, that which smells sweet, and to produce studies of the beautiful in humanity and in still-life as severe and unconventional as laboriously correct and true as those other studies of the ugly which have lately been given to the world. M. Zola approves and rejoices over this preface; and he has shown in one of the episodes of his *Nana* that he does not shrink from applying his scalpel to the world of rank and fashion. He has given us in *La Curée* his idea of what society was like in the golden age of Napoleon the third, and the general result of his observations appears to be that society in the city or in the province, in the palace or in the hovel is from scalp to sole, one slough and crust of sin!<sup>38</sup>

There is no clean spot anywhere, no, not one. [fol. 5] The poisonous taint of a morbid imagination infects every creation of the novelist's mind. He cannot paint youth and innocence without besmirching the picture before it is finished. In the first, and one of the best, of his Rougon-Macquart series, *La Fortune des Rougon*, he spoils a scene of real tragic power, he

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<sup>32</sup> The common character type of an innocent young woman.

<sup>33</sup> Bored.

<sup>34</sup> *Renée Mauperin* was published in 1864.

<sup>35</sup> Zola's *L'Assommoir* was published in 1877.

<sup>36</sup> See Edmond de Goncourt's preface to *Les Frères Zemganno* (1879).

<sup>37</sup> Bad odours.

<sup>38</sup> *La Curée* was published in 1871.

pollutes an episode of idyllic grace by the foulest suggestions.<sup>39</sup> Where the girl Miette, slain among the rustic victims of the Coup d'État, lies shot to death, gazing at her lover with despairing eyes, feeling the icy hand of death parting them forever, how does M. Zola interpret that dying look of innocent girlhood, snatched away from life and love?<sup>40</sup> To his mind those glazing eyes seem to reproach the agonised lover for having respected his sweet-heart's purity, for having been so cold-hearted and perverse as not to have understood the latent animalism in this young creature's love, not to have satisfied the desires of fawning passion. That is the kind of language those dying eyes have for M. Zola. He cannot describe the idyllic loves of a boy and girl—an episode which, had he but held his hand would have been as charming a rustic picture as any by George Sand—without sounding the depths of sensuality and reducing womanhood to the level of brute-beasts.<sup>41</sup>

Nor does M. Zola's ingenuity in imputing evil end with his analysis of human motive. He will not even spare us the vicious propensities of a domestic cat. He contrives to be distinctly immoral in his descriptions of the tropical plants and flowers in a conservatory: he becomes almost hysterical in his picture of the Chinese Hibiscus with its large purple blossoms, perpetually renewing themselves, to perish within a few hours. To his rich fancy these purple flowers recall the sensual mouths of women, the moist red lips of some titanic Messalina, lips wounded by kisses, yet always reviving, with their blood-red passionate smile.<sup>42</sup> M. Zola must have been pleased with this little bit of imagery, which occurs in the opening chapters of *La Curée*, since he repeats it as the story nears its end, like a chorus in a Greek tragedy, charged with foreshadowing of fate.

Seldom has there been, by way of a fashionable novel, a ghastlier story than this of *La Curée* or a more hideous representation of life among the newly rich. What power of analysis and description, what a fine feeling for colour, wasted upon a monstrous theme. The story opens with a description of the Bois de Boulogne in that holiday time of the second Empire.<sup>43</sup> The artificial beauties of the landscape, the movement of carriages and horsemen, the colour, the feeling, the atmosphere are all reproduced in a few pages of vivid word-painting which bring the whole scene before the reader, a living panorama, palpable, distinct, and brilliant as absolute reality. The power of words can go no further. And then, having set his scene, places his actors before us. M. Zola begins to pluck out the heart of their mystery, and to show us their rottenness. His heroine, young, pretty, fascinating, and ruined, is the wife of an unscrupulous adventurer enriched by trickery and corruption, who has married a beautiful young woman under most degrading conditions, a husband who indulges all his wife's extravagances and asks no questions. This fair young creature is oppressed by overwhelming despondency. Balls, suppers,

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<sup>39</sup> Zola's Rougon-Macquart series is a cycle of twenty novels published between 1871 and 1893. *La Fortune des Rougon* is the first in the series.

<sup>40</sup> On December 2, 1851, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte staged a coup d'état that dissolved the National Assembly and marked the beginning of the Second French Empire (1852-1870). Braddon wrote about the coup and the Second Empire in *Ishmael* (1884). For Wolff's discussion of the novel, see *Sensational Victorian*, pp. 304-315.

<sup>41</sup> George Sand is the pseudonym of French novelist Amandine Aurore Lucie Dupin.

<sup>42</sup> Messalina was wife to Roman Emperor Claudius. She is known for being sexually promiscuous and manipulative.

<sup>43</sup> The Bois de Boulogne is a large public park in Paris, designated as such by the city in 1852. It appears in Braddon's *Ishmael*.

diamonds, [fol. 6] lovers delight her no longer. She complains to her step son, an effeminate young cynic, corrupt to the core. She is tired of everything, it is all *banale*,<sup>44</sup> *connu*.<sup>45</sup> “Yet I think you have tasted all the apples,” the precocious stripling hints delicately, and she does not gainsay him. “And yet you are not satisfied, ‘no,’” she replies, “*je veux autre-chose, est-ce que je sais moi.*”<sup>46</sup>

[insert \*] And then with charming candour she tells him that there are hours in which she feels so weary of her existence as the wife of a millionaire, adored, honoured by everyone, that she would like to be one of “*ces dames.*”<sup>47</sup> “Yes, that must be less insipid, less always-the-same. But after all, those ladies must have their hours of weariness. Nothing in life is really amusing. Everything is deadly dull. I pine for something else—do you understand—something which has never happened to anybody else, something that one does not meet with everyday—an exceptional, an unknown delight.” [\*]

*Autre-chose*,<sup>48</sup> as the reader foresees, means an intrigue with the step-son, which offers a flavour of originality, audacity, perversity, a something unnatural which stimulates the young lady’s jaded senses—and the rest of the book is for the most part given up to the progress of this liaison, which is described in all its phases with more than M. Zola’s customary wealth of detail. Renée the heroine, and her boy-lover move amidst the vilest surroundings in a society given over to unblushing vice—vice open, and vice secret, vice obvious, and vice obscure—everywhere infamy and horror. [“Insertion A”] There is some tragic power in the treatment of the denouement, where in the midst of the clatter and riot of a ball that has degenerated into an orgie, the guilty heroine awakens to the horror of her position, sees herself before the glass half naked, in her gauzy draperies, sees in one hideous retrospect the loathsomeness of her past life: but even this moment of conscience is but the despair of a baffled Messalina—the bitter sediment in the wine-cup of vice. It is only her lover’s positive refusal to elope with her which brings about this tardy compunction. It is only the cynical indifference of her husband, who has been from the first complacent to infidelity, and who is hardly resentful of incest, at which the shuddering soul of the sinner recoils, seeing in that one moment all the hideousness of the gulf into which she has fallen. And while this guilty soul, suddenly awakening, endures its first paroxysms of remorse Mr. Zola, trifling with his own genius, expatiates between-whiles upon the sensualities of a cotillon, in which the great ladies of Imperial Paris behave no better than their sisters, Mdlls Rigolboche and Cie, at the Mabilles.<sup>49</sup> He devotes several pages to the description of this one dance, reveling in the opportunities it affords him for proving his preeminence in the fleshly school. Nothing can exceed the blatant vulgarity of the picture, which is put forth as a

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<sup>44</sup> Banal or ordinary.

<sup>45</sup> Known.

<sup>46</sup> “I want something else: do I know [what] myself?”.

<sup>47</sup> Those ladies.

<sup>48</sup> Something else.

<sup>49</sup> A cotillon is a French dance. Rigolboche is the stage name of Amelia Marguerite Badel, nineteenth-century French dancer; “Cie” is the French abbreviation for “Company” (as in “limited Company”). The bal Mabilles was a fashionable private garden where dances took place. It had a scandalous reputation: the can-can had its first outing there and it is where Zola’s *Nana* has great success. Balzac mentions it frequently. It had closed in 1875, a decade before this essay.

photographic representation of manners in Imperial Paris. [End of “Insertion A”] And in all this there is not one throb of real passion, not one spark of the true fire, not one line that senses quicken the pulses or thrill the heart of the most susceptible reader.

[insert \*] It is indeed M. Zola’s boast that he writes without passion. In his preface to *Thérèse Raquin*, a crude and revolting picture of sensuality and murder, a story written eighteen years ago, while the pencil of the naturalist was still clumsy and mechanic, his colours still raw and harsh, he apologizes for the *donné*<sup>50</sup> of his book, on the ground that it is a study of temperaments and not of characters.<sup>51</sup> He has chosen for his types creatures dominated by their nerves and their blood, deprived of all free will, drawn to every act of their lives by fatalities of their physical natures. He has tried to follow these human-brutes step by step in the development of their passions, the bent of their instincts. He declares that for his mind there was nothing universal in the lives of these creatures. His only thought was to produce an exact copy of life, and he abandoned himself wholly to the analysis of human mechanism.<sup>52</sup> [\*]

It is all morbid anatomy: as one reads, one imagines M. Zola, as cool as a cucumber, sitting at his dissecting table, reveling in his demonstrations of humanity’s vileness.<sup>53</sup> M. Zola has essentially the medical mind. He delights in descriptions of disease. He has given us epilepsy and hysteria in *La Fortune des Rougon*, epilepsy again in *Une page d’amour*, delirium tremors in *L’Assommoir*, in *Pot-Bouille* a revolting case of facial disfigurement, in *Au Bonheur des Dames* an interesting case of anemia, while his latest complete novel *La Joie de vivre* is one long succession of vulgarity, beginning with a description of chronic gout and proceeding through all the agonizing details of a case of abscess in the throat, to be followed speedily by a lingering and painful death from dropsy and heart disease. The victim to acute gout “*hurlant*”<sup>54</sup> and “*beuglant*”<sup>55</sup> like a wild beast in his diabolical sufferings below-stairs while his women-kind are on the point of death in the upper story, as it were a dismal bass accompaniment to a shill minor treble. Finally when the heroine has recovered from her abscess, and the house-mother has succumbed to her dropsy, there is a marriage—naturally between the wrong people—and this affords M. Zola the rapture of an accouchement, his capacity to describe which, with all the finer touches of a miniature painter and more than the knowledge of a midwife, he had already demonstrated in *Pot-Bouille*. There is not, in either novel, the slightest motive for this hideous representation. In neither case does the crisis end fatally, in neither case has it anything to do with the story. The thing is there, in all its revolting details, simply because M. Zola likes to write about [fol. 7] such things. There can only be two motives possible for such a monstrosity in art: either a morbid love of the horrible, which makes it enjoyment to M. Zola to riot in the grossest details; or a perverse vanity

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<sup>50</sup> General theme.

<sup>51</sup> This preface was included in the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin*, published in 1868.

<sup>52</sup> Zola’s understanding of humans as mechanistic is part of his larger theory of determinism. He believes there are biological and sociological influences that directly determine human expression, similar to how discrete parts determine a mechanism’s function. This theory is most fully articulated in *Le Roman Expérimental*, originally a set of articles published in the southern French daily *Le Bien public* in 1880.

<sup>53</sup> The use of medical language echoes Braddon’s discussions of Balzac in her letters to Bulwer-Lytton in the 1860s. See Wolff 1974.

<sup>54</sup> Howling.

<sup>55</sup> Bellowing.

which impels him to display his technical knowledge of subjects with which no man outside the medical profession has any right to be familiar. Surely this hankering after the loathsome in life, this call for describing hideous sights and foul smells, vicious inclinations and unnatural passions must indicate a morbid strain in the mind of the naturalistic novelist, such a strain as that which reveals itself, like a terrible foreshadowing, in the writings of Jonathan Swift. Strange that an author who is said to be exemplary in his domestic relations should be utterly without delicacy of feeling when he writes about women, should expose all their physical weaknesses, their hysterical impulses, their morbid symptoms, with the frank brutality of a surgeon lecturing to an audience of medical students, and should have only in two or three rare instances, out of his vast panorama of human life, depicted the passion of love in any other than its lowest and worst animal phase.

It would be too long a task to attempt even the briefest analysis of the entire Rougon-Macquart series. This curious chain of stories, linked only by the relationship of the main characters, commencing with *La Fortune des Rougon*, in which the Rougon brood has its uprising from an unhappy woman, who begins life with a small property inherited from her father, and who spends her existence a victim to epilepsy, and sensual impulses, and ill treatment on every hand, and who dies miserably at the end of the book. This ill-fated Adelaide Fouque is the mother of the race whose various offspring we meet in all the later stories. She is the grandmother of Gervaise, the heroine of *L'Assommoir*, and of Aristide Saccard, the millionaire of *La Curée* and of *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*. She is M. Zola's Cybele, and taking into account this lady's temperament and history one is hardly astonished at the tendencies of her monstrous brood.<sup>56</sup>

[insert \*] A very curious document, placed as a frontispiece to *Une page d'amour*, exhibits the genealogical tree of the Rougon-Macquart family, of which Adelaide Fouque is the root. M. Zola has been often asked to furnish this genealogy, he informs us, and in this document he is able again to indulge his medical propensities, and, imagining that the analysis has been furnished by Pascal Rougon, the scientist, he favours us with the heredity and natural predispositions of each member of the family, beginning with the common mother Adelaide, *névrose originelle*,<sup>57</sup> and culminating in her great-granddaughter the renowned Nana. (*hérédité de l'ivrognesse se tournant en hystérie*.<sup>58</sup>) [\*]

In the opening chapter of the family history we see poor Gervaise, lame and fragile from her birth, a victim to ill usage from her cradle, fated always to serve others, and suffer for them, and taught almost in her infancy to take comfort from the bottle. Five stories, each complete in itself, follow before we pick up poor little Gervaise in *L'Assommoir*.

In *La Fortune des Rougon* we see her already the mistress of Lantier, and the slave of a father, too degraded [insert \*] and too selfish to bring about her marriage with her seducer, preferring that she should remain single, so that he, the father, may live upon her earnings as a laundress. When her patient pack-horse mother dies the girl can endure her martyrdom no longer. She and Lantier leave Plassans together, to seek their fortune in Paris, where we find them [\*] in

<sup>56</sup> Cybele, also called the "Great Mother," is a Greek goddess. In some versions, she is the mother of the Olympic gods.

<sup>57</sup> "Original neurosis."

<sup>58</sup> "Hereditary drunkenness or alcoholism that turns into hysteria."

the opening pages of *L'Assommoir*, perhaps the most widely known of Émile Zola's books, and [fol. 8] assuredly not the most criminal; for in this, amidst so much that is coarse and revolting, there is at least a warning, a lesson which he who sins may read.<sup>59</sup> M. Zola states that moral very plainly in his preface. "My purpose" he writes, "was to depict the fatal degradation of a family of working people amidst the pestilential surroundings of our faubourgs. As natural evolution [insert \*] of drunkenness and sloth come the loosening of family ties, the *ordures*<sup>60</sup> of promiscuousness, the gradual oblivion of all honest feelings. Then as a denouement shame and death."<sup>61</sup> [\*] It may be safely asserted that this book is the cleverest which the author has yet written, revealing a power of word portraiture unsurpassed by any writer living or dead, and that faculty of entering into the minds of an alien class which has been called mental-imitation. There are scenes in *L'Assommoir* which are unapproachable in their terrible truth, scenes perhaps which should never have been depicted by the pen of a writer, but which having been written could not be written better. The artist, the author of human motive is here supreme; and in these scenes of squalid misery, in the lowest stages of mental and physical degradation, the aim of the Greek tragedy is distinctly fulfilled, and pity and horror are evoked in the mind of the reader with rare and infinite power. To read that story of Gervaise and her husband without being stirred to deeper pity for the sufferings and the vices of the class to which the two belong would imply a heart of wood in the reader. The book is like the cry of a new Peter the Hermit rousing the souls of men to a new crusade, a crusade against drink, and dirt, and neglected dwellings, ugliness, coarseness, brutality, a call to the rich and the happy to hasten to the rescue of their fellow men—a stimulus to philanthropy, a warning of danger.<sup>62</sup> The story is of an almost primitive simplicity—simple as Goldsmith or Fielding.<sup>63</sup> It opens in medias res with the parting of Gervaise and Lantier, the latter abandoning his patient companion, a wife in all save the legal bond, shamelessly and heartlessly to consort with a coarse virago. Gervaise, suddenly apprised of her abandonment, wreaks her anger upon the sister of Lantier's new love, the brazen-faced Virginie, in a coarse and revolting scene which unnecessarily degrades a character that from the outset strongly appeals to the reader's sympathy. But M. Zola could not resist the temptation to describe a fight between two women in a public laundry, and to show his mastery in the language of the Parisian gutter. This episode also gives fine opportunities for more touches of sheer indelicacy, those by-the-way bits of fleshly description without which no picture of M. Zola's is complete. After this skirmish in the laundry, poor little lonely Gervaise limps patiently along her story path, works as a journeywoman laundress, sends her two boys to school, and for some time turns [fol. 8A] a deaf ear to the pleading of Coupeau, an honest lubberly creature, a journeyman zinc-worker, who by the sheer force of good nature, by little friendly services and constant kindnesses, vanquishes her hesitations to risk the uncertainties of a second union, and finally, after persistent solicitations of a less honourable kind, offers himself to her as a husband. Then comes the workman's wedding, the marriage at the Mairie,<sup>64</sup> the marriage at the church, the

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<sup>59</sup> Plassans is a fictional French town in Rougon-Macquart cycle. It is based on Aix-en-Provence, Zola's hometown.

<sup>60</sup> Filths.

<sup>61</sup> This is from the preface to the first edition of *L'Assommoir*, published in January of 1877.

<sup>62</sup> Peter the Hermit was an eleventh-century French preacher, legendarily credited with playing an influential role in instigating the First Crusade.

<sup>63</sup> Eighteenth-century novelists Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774) and Henry Fielding (1707-1754).

<sup>64</sup> "Town hall."

mass at five francs, bargained for by the bridegroom, shuffled over half-reluctantly in a side chapel, by a sulky priest, while a beadle sweeps up the dust, the promenade of the wedding party along the boulevard, the afternoon in the museum of the Louvre, the ascent of the Vendôme column,<sup>65</sup> and the pic-nic, or dinner upon Yorkshire principles at a cheap restaurant,<sup>66</sup> the various humours of the guests each particularised with an extraordinary precision and with a grim humour which is too cold for laughter. With what rollicking fun would Dickens or Paul de Kock have described the same festival.<sup>67</sup> The peculiar strength of Zola reveals itself in a ghastly touch at the end of the chapter, where on the threshold of their squalid home Coupeau and Gervaise meet the drunken undertaker, whose aspect chills the newly wedded wife to the heart. She cowers in an angle of the wall, shrinking from the loathsome wretch with horror. He is offended at her avoidance of him. “That won’t hinder you coming my way, little one,” he says, “you may be very glad to come with me, some day. Yes, I know of women who would say, ‘thank you,’ if I went with my coffin to fetch them.” And then as he staggers off he mutters between two hiccups “When one is dead—mark you—it is for a long while.”

This drunken undertaker appears again and again in the book, a grisly figure, as it were symbolical of Fate. He has a ghastly penchant for Gervaise, and haunts her life till the last page of the story, when he carries her away in the pauper’s coffin, staggering and hiccupping over his dismal office. From this marriage night the story quietly unfolds itself. There are no stunning incidents. There is only the slow inevitable ruin of two humble lives—two kindly hearts perverted. Two existences sacrificed to the old familiar demon of strong drink. Step by step, hour by hour, the author follows the laundress in her patient industrious career—[*word illegible*], as it were, every beat of the warm affectionate heart, enters into all the workings of the uncultured mind. It is almost as if he had lived with these people, listened to Coupeau’s friendly vulgar talk, watched Gervaise as she put away her savings under the glass of her clock, to withdraw the notes slowly, one by one, as the little hoard melted away, during her husband’s long illness. The white light of imagination enables the writer to see all these things as clearly as with his [fol. 8B] bodily eyes. Charles Dickens once told George Henry Lewes that when he was writing an impassioned scene in a story he could see all the characters and hear them talk—hear them, and see them as if they had been living creatures. And Mr. Lewes did not believe him. That very scepticism gauges the difference between the author of *David Copperfield* and the author of *Rose, Blanche, and Violet*.<sup>68</sup> There can be little doubt that as Charles Dickens saw and heard Pegotty [*sic*] and little Emily, so did Zola see and hear Gervaise, living her life with her, thinking her thoughts.<sup>69</sup> And by this potent faculty of mental imitation he has achieved the most wonderful book that was ever written about the working classes of any country. The reader almost forgives him the needless grossness that defaces the book for the sake of its stern reality,

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<sup>65</sup> The staircase in the interior of the column, erected in 1810 in the place Vendôme to celebrate Napoleon’s victory at Austerlitz, is no longer open to the public.

<sup>66</sup> That is, each guest pays for themselves.

<sup>67</sup> Popular nineteenth-century French novelist Paul de Kock (1793-1871), known for his humour.

<sup>68</sup> Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1849-50) and Lewes’s *Rose, Blanche, and Violet* (1848). Braddon might have in mind here Lewes’s 1872 article on Dickens in the *Fortnightly Review*. In it, Lewes considers at length the relationship between Dickens’s fiction and mental hallucinations. However, Lewes’s thoughts on the topic in the article are more complicated than Braddon suggests. For a reading of Lewes’s article on Dickens, see Logan 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Peggotty and Emily are both characters in *David Copperfield*.

its grimly tragic power. Some blots though there are that cannot be forgiven, that cry aloud against the writer—such as certain loathsome details in the descriptions of the night before the funeral of Coupeau’s old mother, when M. Zola positively wallows in his opportunity of being disgusting about the dead. One need not apologise for using that word “wallows” in this connection for the verb *se vautrer*<sup>70</sup> is a favourite with M. Zola. His heroine rarely reclines or repose, be her abode a hovel or a palace, she is generally described as “wallowing.” Proceeding always upon his leading principle that all things are sweet and right to be described he has discarded the old-fashioned novelist’s respect for the idea of death. He treats his corpses as he treats his living subjects, with plain-spoken brutality, and from his early study in *Thérèse Raquin* of a corpse in the morgue, a corpse that has been in the Seine for a fortnight, and which naturally affords fine chances for the vivid colourist, to this later, more elaborate picture of the dead woman lying in her narrow den behind the laundry he has always given his pen the fullest scope. And so with that ruthless pen of his he shows us Gervaise in her prosperity, industrious, clean, thrifty happy. He shows us her<sup>71</sup> loving spirit when her husband, the zinc-worker falls from the roof he is covering. She will not have him carried to the adjacent hospital. He has a home, she tells the people, and to that home she has him carried; and there she nurses him and works for him, and sees her little hoard vanish day by day without one murmur of discontent, though the viperous sister-in-law tells her how much wiser it would have been to send Coupeau to the hospital. The loss of these savings is all the harder for Gervaise, as she was on the point of taking a little shop in which she means to start as a clean-starter. Coupeau recovers, but his whole character deteriorates after the enforced idleness of those long months, in which his broken leg was mending. He goes back to his craft reluctantly, is fonder of watching other men at their work than of [fol. 8C] working himself. He drinks more than of old, though he boasts he takes only wine; he treats, and is treated. That gay happy go-lucky temperament of his predisposes him to gossip and good-fellowship. The hereditary taint which is the first article in M. Zola’s creed begins to show itself, sole heritage of the drunken father, who was killed in his cups. Gervaise is divinely indifferent, excuses her husband when other people hint at his idleness, endures him with good humour when he is the worse for liquor, bears with him even when he is brutal to her son Étienne. A lodger on the other side of the landing, one Goujet, an honest herculean blacksmith, a Gallic Joe Gargery, has watched Gervaise in her devotion as a wife, and worships her in silence, with a reverent chivalrous affection, which, rare exception to M. Zola’s usual method, is untainted by one impure thought.<sup>72</sup> This good Goujet finds employment at the forge for the boy Étienne: he lends Gervaise five hundred francs to start her in that business for which she hankers, his serious old mother consenting somewhat reluctantly to the loan, seeing regretfully her son’s platonic affection for another man’s wife.

Gervaise sets up in her trade, and prospers exceedingly. She is a model of industry, civility, cleverness. She is popular in her neighbourhood and among her customers, is able to employ two journey-women and an apprentice, and makes so much money by her business that she can afford to be indulgent to Coupeau’s idleness and ever increasing sottishness. But with the growth of her prosperity this sweet woman’s character deteriorates, just as her tiny inferior husband has deteriorated. She becomes self-indulgent, is fond of good-eating, does not see why

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<sup>70</sup> To wallow.

<sup>71</sup> Braddon has failed to delete “have” and “&” here when she has deleted the intervening words “more independent.”

<sup>72</sup> Joe Gargery from Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1860-1861).

she should work hard six days a week, and not enjoy herself occasionally. She who was once so thrifty, who, when she found herself abandoned by her cowardly partner, sighed for no higher bliss than to work for her daily bread, to have a humble shelter to herself, to bring up her children, now grows extravagant, begins to get into debt, and on her fête day must needs give a dinner-party of fourteen—a Gargantuan feast which is described with vivid colour, relentless coarseness, and a wonderful air of reality by M. Zola.<sup>73</sup>

[insert \*] He glories in this scene of gourmandising and riot, he expatiates upon every dish with infinite gusto, and the impression made upon each guest as the orgie progresses. Not once does he go out of his way to be funny. There is scarcely a laugh in the whole picture; there is only a painful sense of reality, the conviction that such people must have so behaved. The episode occupies many pages, for the feast is after the fashion of one of those good old Flemish wedding dinners at which the guests sat and eat from midday to midnight. It is in the small hours that Mdme Coupeau's party finishes hazily thus. "No one among the company was ever able to remember precisely how the festivity finished. It must have been very late, that was all, for there was not so much as a cat passing in the street. Perhaps, after all, it was true that they had danced around the table, holding hands. It was all drowned in a kind of yellow fog, with leaping forms and lurid faces, and mouths agape from ear to ear." [\*]

Alas the hard-working patient unselfish Gervaise is a creature of the past. She is still tender and affectionate, a nature all softness and love, showing kindness to a helpless old pauper, giving shelter to her husband's mother, infinitely patient with Coupeau himself, who brutalises rapidly under the debasing influence of those vile liquors *casse-poitrine*,<sup>74</sup> *vitriol*,<sup>75</sup> *pétrole*,<sup>76</sup> consumed at Father Colombe's Assommoir hard by—a popular establishment where the customers can see the machinery which distils these favourite poisons in action. Coupeau sinks lower day by day, and Gervaise has not the strength of mind to save him, or to stand firm while he falls. Her evil genius has reappeared in the person of Lantier, the wretch who left her to starve with her two boys, while he went off to a new mistress. By sheer perversity of mind Coupeau conceives a violent friendship for his wife's former lover, encourages his visits until he all but lives in the house, and [fol. 8D] finally insists upon his living there altogether, much to the inconvenience of Gervaise and her son. He is to pay for his bread and lodging, but it is needless to say that beyond an occasional payment on account in the early days of his residence he pays nothing and ends by borrowing of Gervaise, who has now to support two idlers instead of one. This Lantier is an elaborate study of the genus scamp, sleek, plausible, crafty, a hanger-on of foolish women, sensuous, self-indulgent, smart of exterior, filthy underneath, always pretending to be on the look out for employment, full of big schemes and mysterious enterprises, and a past master in the art of living upon other people. His establishment on the premises is the beginning of the end. Hitherto Gervaise has shrunk from him with horror at the idea of any renewal of the old bonds. She has sworn to her platonic adorer Goujet that this vile thing shall not be; but she is the foredoomed victim of Coupeau's abominations, and an episode, which no one but Zola or

<sup>73</sup> Reference to Rabelais's eponymous giant from *Gargantua* (1535).

<sup>74</sup> Maxime du Camp describes *casse-poitrine* as beloved of drunkards: a cheap strong brandy coloured with caramel or with sugar and molasses (p. 103).

<sup>75</sup> See note 11 above.

<sup>76</sup> Braddon is making a mistake here: *petrole* ("petrol") is not mentioned in *L'Assommoir*.

Swift would have dared to describe, precipitates her fall. But here it must be observed that if Gervaise falls a victim to that want of space which M. Zola in his preface describes as *les ordures de la promiscuité*,<sup>77</sup> the overcrowding in the Coupeau dwelling is not the result of stern necessity, has indeed nothing in common with the horrors of a London lodging house, but is the consequence of drunken Coupeau's abject folly; and the only moral to be deduced from this hideous situation is that a husband, were he ever so good a fellow before he begins to booze, loses together with his sobriety all sense of honour and decency, all natural feeling common to nobleman and peasant.

From this point the author traces his heroine's degradation step by step, hour by hour, with a pitiless minuteness. He shows us how the very sweetness of her nature tends to evil, how her placid temper accepts abasement, suffers the brutality of husband and lover, ministers to their selfishness, toils for them, waits upon them, pledges her credit and pawns her property for them, with a slavish meekness, sees the little business of which she was once so proud sink stage by stage into ruin, sees her customers fall off, until there is no longer any need for journeywomen, no one left but the vicious little apprentice, an imp of mischief, to assist in the now desultory business—the only customers remaining to Gervaise being the dirty and disreputable, the rejected of respectable laundries. In the midst of ruin the old mother dies, and the details of the dreary interval between the death and the funeral are given with a graphic power which is alike masterly and revolting. There is a ghastly touch [fol. 8E] where Bazouge the drunken *croquemort*<sup>78</sup> comes early on the morning of the funeral, with his coffin and his sack of bran, and is astonished to find Gervaise alive. He had supposed till that moment that the coffin was wanted for her. He apologises, after his drunken fashion, and she shrinks from him, lest he should seize her with his great fleshy hands to carry her away in his box. Once before, upon the evening of her marriage, he had told her that there were woman who would thank him if he were to fetch them. "She had not come to that. The thought of it froze her marrow. Her life was in ruins, but she did not want to be taken away yet awhile: no, she would rather starve year after year, than die once for all, though it were but the pain of a moment."

She sees Goujet at the funeral, and the sight of him with his serious air, with his gentle salutation, redoubles her grief. "It was not only Maman Coupeau for whom she wept. She was weeping over the abominations of her own existence, weeping for something of which she would not have spoken, the thought of which suffocated her." Later she makes a kind of mute appeal to this faithful adorer. She remembers the hour in which, before her final degradation, he had asked her to go away with him, far away from the vice and horror of Paris, to live peaceably together somewhere—and now the time has come in which she would gladly go. She trembles, her voice takes a caressing tone. "We are not bad friends, are we?" she asks. "No, surely not. We shall never be bad friends. Only, you understand, all is over," he answers sadly, as he strides hurriedly away. After this she feels there is no hope for her. All is over. She has nothing left in life except to sink lower and lower in the morass in which she is wading. There is a scene near the end of the book, where they meet once again—under circumstances of deepest abasement on the part of Gervaise. They have both grown gray. Goujet's mother is dead, he is solitary, still unmarried, faithful to that old unhappy love, and he kisses the wretched creature upon her careworn brow, where hangs a lock of gray. It is an agonising scene—agonising because the reader feels that in the life of the Paris faubourg and the London slums there must be many such episodes—many

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<sup>77</sup> The filths of promiscuousness. Braddon provides this entire quotation above (see page 114).

<sup>78</sup> Undertaker.

existences such as that of Gervaise, beginning fairly, in honest courageous toil and patient endurance, ending in shipwreck.

Still more agonising, infinitely tragic is the episode of the little Lalie, the eldest child of a drunken mason, who has kicked his patient wife to death in his cups, and who now tyrannises over his even more patient daughter.<sup>79</sup> “In her corner of misery, in the midst of her own cares and those of the rest, Gervaise found a noble example of courage in the home of the Bijards. Little Lalie, that mite of eight years old, no bigger than a pennyworth of butter, [fol. 8F] kept house with the neatness of a grown person; and it was hard work too, she had the charge of the two brats, her brother Jules and her sister Henriette, little kids of three and five years, whom she had to watch all day, even when she was sweeping the room or washing the plates and dishes. Since her father had killed his better-half with a kick in the stomach Lalie had made herself the little mother of the family. Quietly, unobtrusively she took the place of the dead, and so well that her brutal father, doubtless to complete the resemblance, pommelled the child today as he had pommelled the mother in days gone by. When he came home drunk he wanted women to massacre. He never so much as perceived that Lalie was quite a child; he could have struck no harder upon an old skin. With one slap he covered the little face, and the flesh was so delicate that the marks of his five fingers would remain for a couple of days. It was a blow for a yes, or a no, a savage wolf falling upon a poor little pussy-cat, timid and gentle, piteously thin and wasted, suffering every brutality with lovely looks of resignation, without one complaint. No, never did Lalie rebel. She bent her neck a little, to guard her face; she stifled her tears for fear of disturbing the house. Then, when her father was tired of driving her from corner to corner with his boot, she waited for strength to pick herself up again, and she went back to her work, washed the children, made the soup, would not leave a grain of dust upon the furniture. To be beaten was only a part of her daily task.[”]

Later comes the death scene. The little martyr struggles against her agony till the last moment, and then lies down to die. Bijard takes up the carter’s whip with which he has tortured her to death. He cracks it across the little bed. But the child supplicates, “No, Papa, I entreat you, do not beat me. You will be sorry afterwards. I cannot get up anymore. Don’t you understand? I am dying.”

[“]Gervaise had thrown herself upon Bijard and snatched away the whip. He stood stupefied before the truckle bed. What nonsense was she talking, this brat? As if one died at that age, and without having been ill. Some trick to get a lump of sugar given to her. Ah, he would soon find out, and if she had been lying!”

“You will see it is the truth,” she went on. “As long as I could I spared you trouble. Be kind, at the last, and say goodbye, Papa.”

[“]Bijard twisted his nose, afraid of being taken in. It was true though that her face had a curious look, the grave haggard face of a grown up person. The chill blast of death which breathed through the room sobered him. He looked round him slowly with the air of a man awakened from a long sleep, saw the little home in order, the children washed, ready to laugh and play, and he sank into a chair murmuring: ‘Our little mother, our little mother.’”

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<sup>79</sup> Braddon’s use of quotation marks in this section is inconsistent. The majority of the description of the scenes with Lalie are very close to direct quotations from the novel. Where necessary, I have added quotation marks in square brackets to delineate her quotations from her analysis.

[“]That was all he could find to say, and it was a great deal for Lalie, who had never been so tenderly treated before. She comforted her father. She was troubled at being taken away thus, before she had quite brought up her children. He would take care of them, would he not? With her dying voice she [fol. 8G] gave him her instructions how to look after them, how to keep them clean. Saddened, stupefied by the fumes of drink, he lolled his head and watched her passing from him with round stupid eyes. The sight stirred him with all sorts of feelings; but he could not find another word, and his throat was too hot for tears.”

From this point to the end of the book there is an ever deepening horror, the horror of souls and bodies abandoned to the Drink-demon, till that last page of all where Gervaise after having seen her husband die by inches in the hospital, after having amused the neighborhood by her imitations of that agonising death, after having sunk to the lowest depth of degradation to which humanity can descend, is found dead in the hole under the stairs on the sixth story, that miserable den where old father Bru vegetated and starved for years, the recipient of poor Gervaise’s charity long ago in her prosperous days. She has been relegated to this hole, and here she dies none knowing when or how, and it is only the odour of death that appraises the neighbours of her end. And Father Bazouge, the drunken croque-mort, takes her away in the pauper’s coffin.

[fol. 9] If there is every excuse for a man having written such a book as *L’Assommoir* there is assuredly no excuse for his having written such a book as *Nana*. Here no purpose is served, no end is gained. Here there are the elements of neither pity nor lesson. Here the preacher has changed to the buffoon, laughing his cynical laugh at a state of society in which such things can be. Here the reader wades wearily in a sea of filth, wondering for what harbour he is making. There is no lesson, except that the more vicious a woman is the more devoted are her admirers, and the more unbridled is her power to spend their money and laugh at them for their fatuity in giving it. She may *vouler*<sup>80</sup> as often as she likes, descend to the lowest note of the scale, sink to the gutter, pawn her last rag, drink her last *sou*,<sup>81</sup> scramble half-naked over a skylight in fear of the police. She is the veritable phoenix, and there is always life in her ashes. There is always some fool who will reestablish her *dans ses meubles*,<sup>82</sup> find her still costlier surroundings than those of her last nest, finer jewels, better horses and carriages, more money to fling out of windows. That she should die of small pox at the end of the chapter—lodged luxuriously in the Grand Hotel, and visited assiduously by the sisterhood of prosperous sinners—is only an accident which has happened to a king as well as Nana; and in contrast to this loathsome death of Nana’s, there is for the encouragement of the reader that pendant picture of the retired courtesan, living on her own estate, in the dignity of honoured old age.

Nana is not a vicious woman, as other women depicted by other novelists. She is not a creature with a heart and a conscience, led astray, but still human. She is vice incarnate, the very spirit of wickedness, and she has no more compunction than the brazen figure of Ashtaroth, within which burned the furnace that was fed with human sacrifices.<sup>83</sup> She is the destroying

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<sup>80</sup> “be willing.”

<sup>81</sup> Cent.

<sup>82</sup> Literally “in his/her furniture,” the expression is explained in the following phrase.

<sup>83</sup> Ashtaroth is the Canaanite goddess mentioned in the Old Testament. She is associated with both love and war, a fitting association for Nana.

angel sent to wreak heaven[']s vengeance upon the corruptions of the great city. She spares neither young nor old; her boy-lover, generous, devoted, her senile adorer, the feeble slave of her personal charms, are both alike her victims. She is merciless, hard as iron, cruel as fate, a devouring fire, a gulf into which men go down alive, swallowed utterly with their fortunes, their bodies, their once honourable names. The book is an abominable book, serving no purpose, pointing no moral, but like all Zola's later novels it is written by the hand of a master. There are scenes and descriptions unrivaled in their force, their grim humour, their intense reality, notably the supper given by Nana after her first success, that supper at which everybody lapses into drunkenness, and where the frivolous young men of the party pour champagne and curaçoa into the piano—also the little dinner where Nana and Satin seated en grand [*word illegible*] with Nana's two most distinguished admirers insist upon recalling their early experiences of the gutter and the slum, while the well [fol. 10] trained servants listen and look on with undiminished solemnity.

After *Nana* in the Rougon-Macquart series comes *Pot-Bouille* the picture of a brand-new Parisian mansion, with its little world of various households, various only in their different orders of vileness, since all are alike infamous. There are many studies of grim humour and much life-like description, but there is not one worthy character or agreeable episode in this extraordinary novel.

*Une Page d'amour* is a far more interesting story, and comes much nearer the manner of Balzac, but even here M. Zola, after having created a really interesting heroine is not content to leave her unsullied. She is a widow, with one little girl, whom she idolizes. The child inherits the terrible epilepsy of her great-grandmother, Adelaide Fouque, and from the first chapter her life trembles in the balance. Nothing can be more perfect than the union between the widowed mother, and the only child. They are in comfortable circumstances, occupying a pretty apartment in the heights of Passy, looking down upon the vast panorama of Paris.<sup>84</sup> They have two devoted friends in the person of a retired commercial man and a simple minded priest, his brother. These two good souls worship the little girl, and the merchant hopes eventually to win the mother for his wife. She is young and beautiful and he is middle-aged and homely, but so excellent a creature that he wins the reader[']s sympathy from the beginning. His love is described with a graceful pathos, recalling Thackeray's treatment of Dobbin: but how different would Thackeray have dealt with such a character as Helen.<sup>85</sup> How ruthlessly does M. Zola degrade his creation. This woman, who has hitherto been spotless as wife perfect as mother cannot arm herself against the fatal passion of a married man, the doctor whom she has summoned to her child's sick bed in an hour of emergency, whose wife, a foolish frivolous creature, but kindly, receives her with open-hearted friendship. There is every reason why this woman should stand steadfast against temptation. There is practically no reason why she should fall, except that M. Zola wills it so. She has friendship, religion, of the broadest most indulgent type, she has maternal love to sustain her. Her lover is neither very ardent, nor very enterprising—yet, stupidly, willfully as it were—at the end of a finely managed and very dramatic scene—having rescued the wife from the seductions of a fopling, she flings herself into his arms. She remembers nothing, not even the sick child whom she has left in deepest distress at her desertion. Blindly, in sensuous self-abandonment she surrenders herself to her lover, crawls home [fol. 11] late in the evening to find

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<sup>84</sup> Passy is a small district of Paris.

<sup>85</sup> William Dobbin from William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-1848).

that her child has been watching at the open window all the time in the [word illegible]<sup>86</sup> rain, and has caught a cold that is likely to be fatal. She is horrified with herself, full of remorse and compunction; but later when it is obvious that the child is in a decline and she is recommended to take her to Italy she cannot make up her mind to leave her lover. She remains in Paris, and the little girl dies, an agonizing deathbed, pathetic to deepest tragedy. The mother feels herself a murderess. The intrigue has never been continued, and is now for ever ended. The doctor and his wife have gone to the south, happy, and united. Helen and her child were to have gone with them, only death intervened. The story ends in the cemetery, two years later. The good merchant has married Helen, knowing her sin, and they have come together to look upon little Jeanne's grave, before they go away to their native province, bidding farewell to Paris altogether.

Next in the series comes *Au Bonheur des Dames* undeniably the most respectable, and perhaps the best of all Zola's novels, and the one in which he comes nearest to Balzac in the profound study of the human heart. Taking for his subject the commonplace interior of a gigantic draper's shop, and the smaller shops of pettier traders which surround the gigantic building and wither under the shadow of its walls, with no plot, without being either immoral or filthy M. Zola has contrived to write a novel which holds the reader from the first page to the last. Here perhaps for the first, and it may be feared for the last time he has given us a heroine of unsullied purity, a girl who living amidst vicious surroundings, and with her eyes thoroughly opened to the nature of the world about her, is yet modest, pure, steadfast in the preservation of her self-respect. This character of Denise, the shop-girl, is one of the sweetest in modern French fiction, and the love which her purity kindles in the breast of that very dubious gentleman M. Octave Mouret, is finely described. Granted that it is at best the passion of a baffled profligate. There is not the less a refining and softening influence in a love which teaches him for the first time that every woman is not a marketable commodity, at the beck of every man who can afford to pay her price.

There is much pathos too in the picture of those adjacent traders and their ruined homes—their impotent rage against the monopolist, the dull blank horror with which they see this commercial juggernaut car bearing down upon them, crushing them under its gigantic bulk. The poor old umbrella dealer who will starve in his den, rather than enrich himself by the surrender of his lease, for which Mouret offers liberally: the little old fashioned draper's shop, dark, dingy, with a stock that has not been altered in style for half a century, boasting a specialty [fol. 12] for calicoes and flannels, holding out on the strength of a long-established reputation, but sinking at last, wrecked in the wake of the *Bonheur des Dames*, where profits are often sacrificed on a given article in order to tempt customers. All the innermost workings in a great house of business, every crank and wheel in the vast machine, is described with a supreme mastery of the subject. One would suppose that M. Zola had lived for a week under the roof of M. Boucicaut, whose mighty mansion in the Rue du Bac, with its free buffet and its brass band selected from the staff employés seems to have furnished the model for his *Bonheur des Dames*.<sup>87</sup> It has been said that M. Whiteley offered a large sum to M. Frith, RA, for a picture of

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<sup>86</sup> Though the new word is illegible, it replaces “cold and drenching.”

<sup>87</sup> Aristide Boucicaut is the founder of *Le Bon Marché*, the department store on which *Bonheur des Dames* is based.

the Westbourne Grove Emporium.<sup>88</sup> Would not the same princely mind richly reward an English Zola, who should describe his vast monopoly with Homeric grandeur of *Le Bonheur*, and make of himself as dashing and soul-subjugating a hero as Octave Mouret. Never before has the “Calicot” been elevated to the regions of romance.

Having been eminently decent for once in his life M. Zola may have thought that he had earned the right to be as nasty as he liked in his next novel, and assuredly in *La Joie de vivre* he took ample advantage of that license. There can hardly be a nastier book in the French language than this his story of a girlish life, which ought to have been pure and true and noble, for the heroine herself is a fine unselfish creature. It is M. Zola’s specialty to create a really interesting woman, and then to drag her through the sewers of realism till he has so befouled her that the reader sickens and shuts the book in disgust. That is exactly what he has done with his heroine in *La joie de vivre*. She is the only redeeming element in a most dreary and disgusting book, and in his passion for physiology he makes her an absolutely revolting personage whose experiences impress one very much as the anatomical plates in a surgical book, opened unawares, and shut with a shiver of horror. We are told that these works of M. Zola’s, these semi-psychical semi-physiological histories of the strange brood descended from the epileptic Adelaide are read immensely by all classes in France; that M. Zola is earning twelve thousand a year by his pen: and one can but regret, knowing this, and recognising the great advance of the craftsman from these earlier stories before the advent of Adelaide, that so great a master should not employ his pen upon worthier material—or should not rather hold his hand, and refrain from that unbridled filth which is an altogether unnecessary element in stern realism. A novelist can be [fol. 13] real, natural, scathingly and searingly true without one allusion to those debasing defects which all decent people have tacitly agreed to ignore. That M. Zola is a master of his art, and that this ardent apostle of realism is the most imaginative writer in France, no one who has read his books carefully can for a moment doubt. He is a master of humour, and he is a master of pathos. There is nothing in Balzac so natural, so graphic, and so true as the description of Coupeau’s drunken day, when starting with an honest intention of going to work he is gradually tempted into idleness, and puts his bag of tools under the counter in the Assommoir. The whole character of an easy-tempered fool is revealed in the experiences of that one day. He is a consummate artist. He sees nature with the eye of a poet; he has a painter’s feeling for colour. All he needs is moderation and decency, the common self restraint which good feeling should impose upon every writer of fiction however original and however powerful.

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<sup>88</sup> William Whiteley is the founder of the Whiteley’s department store, whose original location was in Westbourne Grove section of west London. William Powell Frith was an English painter and member of the Royal Academy known for his portraits and paintings of social life. He painted Braddon’s portrait in 1865, and the two remained personal friends and correspondents.