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Émile Zola’s *La Débâcle*: A Transnational Media Event?

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INTRODUCTION

Many thanks to Karine for organizing this conference, and to Marion and Kate for allowing me to intervene between their papers with my rather narrow contribution on one particular novel, Émile Zola’s 1892 fictional account of the war, *La Débâcle*. I’m sure that the three of us are grateful to you as card-carrying historians for allowing us to cross the frontier between our disciplines, and I hope that by the end of this you will all see us as benign tourists rather than untrustworthy spies. I am aware that historians of 1870-71 will often have read Zola’s account, not necessarily as an unproblematically accurate historical source, but as the most high-profile literary response to the war, in and beyond France. Indeed, such historians may well show a greater interest in the novel than literary critics of, let’s say, the last one hundred years, since the aftermath of the First World War.

My aim is to address our conference’s question of a “European turning-point” by reflecting on the novel in two ways: first, externally, in terms of Zola’s growing status by 1892 as an international celebrity, made famous by the publication of *L’Assommoir* in 1877, but still prior to the Dreyfus Affair; second, internally, through a close reading of the novel’s own colonial vision of France’s European failings.

So, first: THE INTERNATIONAL CELEBRITY OF THE *MAÎTRE DE MÉDAN*

My title today expresses a wish to build on an article published over three decades ago in the *Beiträge zur romanischen Philologie* by the French scholar Colette Becker: “*La Débâcle* de Zola: un événement médiatique”. Born in 1840, Zola’s literary career began in the second decade of the Second Empire and before the outbreak of war he had already begun to plan his multi-volume family fiction, *Les Rougon-Macquart*. The serialization of the first novel in the series was interrupted by the events of 1870-71. Indeed, Zola’s own career can be understood in terms of its relationship to regime change, *Les Rougon-Macquart* providing in the event a Third Republic retrospection on Second Empire life.

For just over two decades, Zola produced approximately one novel per year, increasingly identified with that brand of quasi-scientific hyperrealism known as Naturalism, and thus an aesthetic brand that was exported far and wide, not least via the increasing range of translations of his novels, particularly after the success of *L’Assommoir*. This, and subsequent novels such as *Nana*, *Germinal*, and *La Bête humaine*, embody a Naturalist canon which is largely replicated in the celebrity of his novels today. The exception to this one-to-one mapping is *La Débâcle*. Within the *Rougon-Macquart* series, Zola’s avowedly loose relationship to chronology allows the start of the war to reappear at the end of three novels prior to *La Débâcle*, all in the ironic knowledge of the war’s outcome: first, *Nana*; then *La Terre*, where the widowed peasant farmer Jean Macquart (who will reappear in *La Débâcle*) responds to the call of war in 1870 as an alternative to his brutalizing experience of agricultural life; finally, in the seventeenth novel *La Bête humaine*, whose tale of sex, murder and railway trains sends Frenchmen off to war in its final paragraphs. And it is hard to resist the notion that Zola’s description of ‘ce train fou, cette machine sans mécanicien ni chauffeur’ emblematizes his retrospective vision of the Second Empire’s loss of self-control, not least as the network of lines in this most famous of railway fictions marks out the cartographical limits of the nation itself which Jean will attempt to defend in *La Débâcle*. What I’d like to suggest is that this most internationally renowned of cultural representations of the war finds its European context both excessive and insufficient: excessive, because the novel never leaves these cartographical limits of the nation, never reaches beyond the Rhine, and focuses introspectively on the internal French political story that leads to the Paris Commune in the novel’s final chapters. But also insufficient in the link that Zola weaves in the background between France’s military failure in Europe and the hubris born of the French army’s colonizing experiences in Africa.

Before I turn to this matter in detail, I should also note that the translation and reception of Zola’s novel in and after 1892 – not least in the German-speaking world - is of course vital to the international status of this cultural object. If it is a given of literary criticism that its interpretations turn one way or another on acts of close reading, then that textual closeness can of course be the product of geo-linguistic distance – a distance energized by the histories of translation and of comparative literary criticism. This nineteenth of Zola’s twenty-novel series was awaited by his now vast international readership with bated breath, desperate to discover the interpretation which this republican critic of the Third Republic would provide of the bellicose events surrounding the regime’s very origins. The novel first appeared in feuilleton form in the twice-weekly *La Vie populaire* from 21 February to 21 July 1892, the book then being published by Charpentier, reaching its 150th run of a 1000 copies by 10 October. By the time of his death in 1902, his new publisher Fasquelle advertised the 207th such run. In 1893 the first illustrated edition appeared, with pictures by Georges Jeanniot. To give a scale of the novel’s success in France, it is worth noting that it was the biggest selling Zola novel in his lifetime; and it is sometimes said that in all-time sales of fiction in France, Zola is only outnumbered by Agatha Christie.

More problematic was the financial framework for translations as a way of europeanizing and indeed globalizing fiction, as the Bern Convention of 1886 did not include USA and Russia and in this Zola played a particular role as president of the French Société des Gens de Lettres. On 23 December 1893 he published in *Le Temps* an open letter to the Russian press where pirate editions proliferated, in the case of *La Débâcle* fourteen translations at the same time! In fact, negotiations with potential translators take up a fair portion of Zola’s correspondence prior to the publication of the novel. As he writes on 26 January 1892 to his Dutch friend, Van Santen Kolff:

Le volume paraîtra chez Charpentier le 20 juin. Des traductions vont paraître simultanément en Allemagne, en Angleterre, en Amérique, en Espagne, en Portugal, en Italie, en Bohême, en Hollande, en Danemark, en Norvège, en Suède, en Russie.

The breadth of global interest in such transactions is now more easily trackable via the digital Zola project, CORREZ, whence this letter to Zola from Madrid on behalf of the Venezuelan publication, *El Cosmos*. Indeed, an emblem of Zola’s status as an international icon is the fact that some of his journalism appeared first in the major liberal magazine of late-nineteenth-century Russia, *Vestnik Evropy*, or *The Messenger of Europe*, from 1875 onwards, and, moreover, some of it never even appeared in French in Zola’s lifetime. The Zola story that would reappear in *Les Soirées de Médan* in 1880 had already appeared in St. Petersburg in July 1877 and would not appear in France until the following year.

As ever, Zola’s fiction divided critical opinion, though for different reasons in the case of *La Débâcle*: less to do with the habitual issues of moral scandal and sociological authenticity, more to do with the accuracy of Zola’s military history and the novel’s claim to be patriotic. Most clearly at stake was the vision of France which Zola conveyed, to the virtual exclusion of the German experience. Even within France, antipathetic critics such as the Russophile Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé found an intellectual disequilibrium in this Francocentrism:

Ce gros livre boite, parce que l’auteur ne nous montre qu’une seule des deux forces en présence, dans le terrible duel qu’il raconte. […] La victime n’a pas été égorgée par une main anonyme, et c’est l’impression que laisse le roman, avec son trou vide à la place où l’on attend l’Allemagne. Je demande à voir l’Allemagne.

In turn, Vogüé predicted, the very popularity of Zola across the world would threaten the global reputation of France:

Je vois aussi les nombreux exemplaires qui vont se répandre sur le monde, à l’étranger. Si l’on y lisait ce qui nous fâche tant : que l’Allemagne est une grande nation, […] personne ne s’étonnerait, car l’étranger sait cela et rend justice à l’Allemagne. Mais le monde s’étonnera de découvrir une France si petite, si putréfiée ; même dans le temps de l’éclipse, il attendait d’elle ce rayon voilé qui nous fait aimer des uns, respecter des autres.

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In the second part of my talk, I’ll now look within the text to ask just how French the novel is.

Of the twenty novels in the series, Zola’s own truly historical novel generated the largest preparatory dossier of over a 1000 pages. It would be wrong, however, to imagine in these later Zola novels a clear distinction between the private act of research and writing on the one hand, and then on the other, a sudden moment of publication. On the contrary, Zola used his post-*L’Assommoir* celebrity to whet the appetite of his readership through journalism, penned by himself and others, which not only served as publicity but also aimed to pre-define audience response. This phenomenon was particularly acute in the case of *La Débâcle*, not least because here at last was a Zola novel not only reliant on the ambient sociological mimesis of his Naturalist enterprise, but one defined by a specific historical event of which a good number of his readers had precise personal experience. And in the preparatory dossier one finds the notes from Zola’s personal reading of historical accounts and memoirs, in particular Théodore Duret, Alfred Duquet, Colonel Canonge, General Lebrun and Prince Bibesco. Zola himself was no linguist, but translated from the German, he did make use of Moritz Busch’s two-volume account in 1878 of *Graf Bismarck und seine Leute während des Krieges mit Frankreich*.

The novel is divided into three parts, each of eight chapters. Having rehearsed the start of the war three times, Zola now plunges us in medias res, as we follow a small *escouade* of French troops from the fictional 106th regiment of the 7th corps of the armée de Châlons, as they move in disorientating fashion in Part I between Mulhouse, Paris, Reims, and the Ardennes. Faced with the habitual challenge of how to assimilate within aesthetically pleasing forms the sheer complexity of war and confusion of battle, Zola filters the French military experience through the unlikely but intense friendship between two men: the leader of the unit, the aforementioned Jean Macquart, who represents peasant good sense, in more than one way, the salt of the earth; and the dilettantish bourgeois, Maurice Levasseur. Part II of the novel pauses to focus on their experience of the one major battle represented in the novel (rather than merely reported), the Battle of Sedan, described in the language of the turning-point by the Symbolist reviewer Gustave Kahn as ‘le pivot même de son livre’, including at the halfway point of the novel Zola’s own version of Neuville’s famous painting of Bazeilles, *Les Dernières cartouches*, transposed to display the civilian heroism of the Alsatian Weiss, whose death widows Maurice’s twin sister Henriette. Part III of the novel fast-forwards the reader from the aftermath of Sedan, skipping over the German siege of Paris, to the Semaine sanglante in the final chapters of the novel. After Sedan, Jean and Maurice go their separate ways, Maurice to Paris where he will join the Commune, but his twin, Henriette, staying to nurse the injured Jean (already widowed in *La Terre*), and an unspoken love develops between them. As Marion’s research shows, prose fiction inspired by 1870-71 often pinpoints its response to these vast events through the particularities of family romance plots, encouraging the reader, through patterns of empathy, to feel historical knowledge. Once recovered, Jean will go to fight his way into Paris on the side of the Versailles regime. In a moving and symbolic if implausible ending, Jean bayonets a Communard on a barricade only to discover that the dying insurgent is in fact his beloved Maurice. As a result, the love between Maurice’s twin sister and Jean must remain frustrated at the end of the novel, Henriette confronted with the same question of *fraternité* as France itself after the Civil War, namely, how is it possible to love the man who has killed your brother?

To briefly give you the plot is also to acknowledge that the very notion of ‘turning-point’ (in French ‘tournant’, in German ‘Wendepunkt’) foregrounded by our conference would – in a different kind of conference – also point us towards another more literary understanding of the notion of turning-point as peripeteia which stretches all the way back to Aristotle’s notion of plot. Indeed, history itself is in part the study of fictions and illusions, Zola in a newspaper article of September 1868 critiquing the manoeuvres of the camp de Châlons as a misleading narrative: ‘Tout s’est passé comme l’Empereur le désirait; nous avons fait mine de plier afin d’ajouter au régal une **péripétie dramatique**, puis nous nous sommes précipités sur ces pauvres Prussiens qui se sont laissé massacrer avec la meilleure volonté du monde.’ And the very notion of plot is a matter of space as well as time: in the case of Zola’s novel, the temporal unfolding of the war also a cartographical unfolding of military manoeuvres. Indeed, sometimes literally a matter of turning-points in the surprise element of the ‘mouvement tournant’ (as Zola calls it, ‘l’éternel mouvement tournant’).

If we think of the novel in terms of the relationship between French, European and global history – in keeping with the concerns of recent books such as Deluermoz’s *Commune(s) : Une traversée des mondes au XIXe siècle*, and Nicolas Bourguinat and Gilles Vogt’s *La guerre franco-allemande de 1870: Une histoire globale* - this brings to the fore Zola’s sometimes overlooked references to the different experiences of the French colonial enterprise: from fleeting depictions of turcos (though no mention of spahis), via the more numerous depictions of zouaves (always nameless, but typologized more than once by a hasty Zola as ‘un bel homme à barbe noire’), to the most widely referenced chasseurs d’Afrique. Zola’s preparatory dossier contains four sides of barely legible notes from Fernand Hue’s *Le 1er Régiment de chasseurs d’Afrique* of 1887. The French experience in North Africa is embodied by two otherwise apparently minor characters: first, Prosper Sambuc, a cavalryman in the division Margueritte. ‘Tombé au sort,’ we read, ‘il était depuis trois ans en Afrique, lorsque la guerre avait éclaté ; et il avait bon air sous la veste bleu de ciel, le large pantalon rouge à bandes bleues et la ceinture de laine rouge.’ In his preparatory pen picture, before a parenthetical reference to Hue, we read of Prosper: ‘Il me donne toute l’Afrique.’ And second, Lieutenant Rochas, from Jean Macquart’s unit: ‘Soldat de fortune, il avait porté le sac, caporal en Afrique, sergent à Sébastopol, lieutenant après Solférino, ayant mis quinze années de dure existence et d’héroïque bravoure pour conquérir ce grade’. As Zola notes in this pen picture: ‘École d’Afrique, cervelle d’oiseau, très brave.’ When the unit encounters Prosper, Rochas, his superior, views him with a benevolent eye, as ‘l’uniforme éveillait ses souvenirs d’Afrique’, and ‘malgré la hiérarchie,’ the two engage in imperialist nostalgia for the Algerian province of Médéah. This merry tone is interrupted by Prosper’s grave realization of the difference between such imperial assertion and France’s vulnerability in Europe: ‘— Ah ! dit Prosper, devenu grave, ce n’est pas ici comme là-bas, on se bat autrement,’ quite at odds with the Bonapartist nostalgia for European grandeur of Maurice’s grandfather who had fought for the original Napoleon, a nostalgia recalled in the very same chapter: ‘la France était partout chez elle, en conquérante qui promenait ses aigles invincibles d’un bout de l’Europe à l’autre, n’ayant qu’à poser le pied dans les royaumes pour faire rentrer en terre les peuples domptés.’

It is telling that prior to the Battle of Sedan, Jean’s unit should find itself located just outside the town on the plateau d’Algérie. In this sense, to attempt to bring Algeria across the Mediterranean was, for Zola, a French delusion, embodied most clearly in the figure of Rochas, who – in the very first chapter of the novel – argues with the sane and sage civilian Weiss about the prospects of the French army. Weiss, with whom that other civilian, Zola, seems to identify, presents his justifiable pessimism in a balanced fashion : ‘l’armée, certes, d’une admirable bravoure de race, toute chargée des lauriers de Crimée et d’Italie, seulement gâtée par le remplacement à prix d’argent, laissée dans sa routine de l’école d’Afrique, trop certaine de la victoire pour tenter le grand effort de la science nouvelle’. In the face of Weiss’s calm rationality, Rochas offers an image d’Épinal vision: ‘C’était la légende, le troupier français parcourant le monde, entre sa belle et une bouteille de bon vin, la conquête de la terre faite en chantant des refrains de goguette.’ Wonderful (as captured in Paul de Sémant’s depiction, for the poster advertising the 1893 illustrated edition, of his heroic death wrapped in the flag), but also ridiculous: ‘il eut un geste superbe, la sérénité d’un enfant, la conviction candide de l’innocent qui ne sait rien et ne craint rien.’

Indeed, this critique of the école d’Afrique echoes Zola’s own established positon – and here I shall conclude. Gaston Calmette’s well-informed article as early as 2 April 1891 in *Le Figaro* which publicizes Zola’s 1870-71 project notes one peculiarity in Zola’s analysis:

Un détail curieux et plus contestable : c’est l’Afrique qui nous a fait perdre l’Alsace ! D’après le maître, en effet, nos généraux ont été éblouis par leurs succès d’Afrique ; ils se sont montrés trop confiants en la tactique trop facile qu’ils avaient employée là-bas contre les Arabes…

And in Zola’s article also in *Le Figaro* on Sedan on 1 September, he makes clear this link between African adventure and European misadventure:

Aujourd'hui, il n'y a plus aucune honte à faire cet examen de conscience. […] Et je ne suis ici d'aucun parti politique, l'Empire a certainement aggravé le désastre, mais les causes premières remontent plus haut. Notre école d'Afrique, si glorieuse, a été sûrement détestable au point de vue de la grande guerre, telle que les Allemands nous l'ont faite. […] Telle est la leçon.

Zola then, we can conclude, shares the view that there is a causal link between the hubris of extra-European colonialism and the nemesis of European defeat. Thank you.