ZOLA'S FIN-DE-SIÈCLE REPRODUCTIVE POLITICS

Abstract

This article offers a synoptic reading of Émile Zola's fictional and journalistic writings from the mid-1890s to his death in 1902, considering these in light of the novelist's engagement with the Third Republic's politics of pronatalism, and with questions of reproduction more broadly. It explores Zola's particular conception of the problem of depopulation (the declining French birth rate at the end of the nineteenth century) as an aesthetic question demanding an aesthetic solution, before examining how he attempted to provide such a solution in his later fiction. The final novels are shown to be incessantly preoccupied, and at several levels, with an idealized figure of the child. The article finally considers the intolerance displayed by Zola in his last few novels towards all individuals – homosexuals, 'new women', priests, Catholics, decadent novelists, childless heterosexuals – who he imagined as failing to conform to his own reproductive ideal.

If we were able to carry out a survey of the educated Frenchmen of 1896, asking them to identify the problems facing their country, we would most likely receive an impressively wide range of answers – since as anyone familiar with the period knows, identifying, bemoaning and just occasionally exaggerating the symptoms of national decline was a beloved past time of the denizens of fin-de-siècle France. Was it the wild pretensions of radicalized workers that most threatened the nation? The financial influence of the Jews? The subversive power of the Jesuits? Or, conversely, the Freemasons? The corrosive principles of *quatrevingt-treize* or the ever-present threat of a Catholic-sponsored monarchist coup? A

possible resumption of anarchist 'propaganda of the deed'? A generalized effeminacy among men; the increasingly visible public role of women? Widespread prostitution? The ever-present German menace? Each respondent would choose from this non-exhaustive list according to his political sensibility, but there is a good chance that a broad consensus might arise as to one additional menace: depopulation.[1] Anxieties about France's declining birth rate had been present since the Restoration at least, but had intensified in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War to reach the level of what Jean Borie has called a national 'délire nataliste'.[2] By 1896, indeed, the problem had reached such a level of perceived severity that the demographer Jacques Bertillon founded the Alliance nationale pour l'accroissement de la population française, an organization whose subsequent influence in national politics reflected the fact that certain people took the matter of depopulation very seriously indeed.

One such person, it seems, was Émile Zola. On 23 May 1896, Zola published an article in *Le Figaro* entitled 'Dépopulation', in which he lamented France's diminishing birth rate in terms seemingly borrowed from Bertillon, and explicitly hailed the appearance of the Alliance nationale as a good thing. In this same article, he refers to a novel he had previously thought of writing to illustrate the problem, provisionally entitled *Le Déchet* – a novel which would subsequently appear in 1899 under the title *Fécondité*.[3] Now, in considering the involvement of a literary author's work with a contemporaneous social discourse, the natural tendency of academic literary criticism is to demonstrate how the literary texts in question only superficially *appear* to bear out the social theory at issue, but may equally be shown to distort it or undermine it. The adoption of this method as a matter of mere habit has been denounced with scathing eloquence by D.A. Miller: 'It has become easy', Miller writes, 'to show how the various decorums that determine a work of literature [...] are exceeded by the disseminal operations of language, narrative, desire – so easy that the demonstration now proceeds as predictably as any other ritual.'[4] Miller's admonition is salutary, of course, but

equally salutary is an awareness of why such readings are offered in the first place – namely, because they underscore a vital, even defining characteristic of the literary text; what has variously been called its undecidability, its ambiguity, or its interpretability. Much recent criticism on the work of Émile Zola has striven to emphasise this undecidability in the face of the author's own, frequently reductive accounts of his novelistic project, on the one hand; and in resistance to the too-easy dismissal of his fictional writing as the mere expression of this or that sociological or scientific discourse, on the other.[5]

And yet, however persuasive such arguments may be when applied to Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* series, they are rather more difficult than usual to make about his later writing – and especially the last three novels, the (incomplete) *Quatre Évangiles* series, *romans à thèse* in which the author may be said to have striven to eliminate precisely that element of interpretability which we might otherwise consider inherent in the literary text.[6] In the last seven or eight years of his life, Zola's opinions on the various political and social questions of his day are not merely discernible in his literary works, but are stated there as simple truths, providing their basic subject matter and informing their figurative and stylistic characteristics. The later novels not only borrowed content and phraseology from Zola's political and journalistic writing, but were themselves presented to the public as intellectual and political interventions in their own right, interventions which both staged and participated in some of the most contentious debates of the era – including the debate concerning France's declining birth rate. Accepting, then, the particular difficulty of arguing that the relationship of Zola's later writing to the discourse of depopulation and pronatalism is in any significant way 'ambiguous',[7] I shall nevertheless want to suggest that it is, at the very least, extremely idiosyncratic: in discussing this cliché-ridden issue, Zola developed his own unique ideas and emphases, and these set him apart from the pronatalist herd. We shall see how, in his 1896 article and elsewhere, Zola views depopulation as an *aesthetic* problem: that is, firstly, how

he explicitly situates it as a phenomenon rooted in the domain of art and, especially, literature, and consequently demanding an artistic solution; and secondly, how he develops certain new aesthetic strategies in his later fiction in order to address the problem. The texts I shall consider in this connection will be, obviously, *Fécondité* (1899) and, less obviously, *Vérité* (1903), Zola's allegorical novel of the Dreyfus Affair, as well as a number of other articles from the period 1895-96 – in other words, works emerging from the period that Henri Mitterand has taught us to call the *troisième* and even the *quatrième Zola*.[8] These periodizations in Zola's own career coincide with the flourishing of pronatalist politics under the Third Republic, and the texts Zola produced during this period are marked – not coincidentally – by a preoccupation with the idealized figure of the child. In the final part of the article, I shall examine the intolerance of Zola's pronatalism as it plays out in the later writing, and the ideological evasions it entails.

The aesthetics of depopulation

In a sense, Zola's 1896 article on depopulation serves to publicize not only the perceived problem of the declining birth rate, but also the creation of the Alliance nationale to combat that problem. Historians of depopulation describe Zola as a 'recruit' to or a 'patron' of the Alliance,[9] and it does indeed seem that both he and they saw things that way: 'Je suis des vôtres ; inscrivez-moi parmi vous,' Zola apparently wrote to André Honnorat, one of the Alliance's cofounders, in the spring of 1896.[10] It is nevertheless hardly the advent of a political force to be reckoned with that Zola depicts in his piece in *Le Figaro*. Despite the popularity of depopulation as an idea in the moderate and conservative press from 1889 onwards, the Alliance's 'failure to attract widespread attention before 1910'[11] seems almost prefigured by Zola's account of the organization's opening meeting:

> La centaine de personnes qui se sont dérangées, pour assister à la première séance de la ligue, ont fait preuve d'une bonne volonté dont il faut leur tenir grand compte. Ce n'est pas qu'on ait travaillé très utilement, dans cette séance, car il ne s'y est guère répété que les choses sues de tout le mode sur les causes de la dépopulation. (XVII: 432)

Zola goes on to note the Alliance's fixation on fiscal matters, an observation that is borne out by consideration of the society's own publications. Tax incentives for the heads of large families figured prominently within the programme, and the Alliance frequently lamented the 1804 Civil Code's disposition of inheritance law, which apparently encouraged parents to restrict the number of their offspring in order to prevent the excessive division of the estate. These were the staple arguments of the Alliance and the many similar associations that sprang up in the next thirty years, as well as of pronatalism more broadly.[12] Articles in both the mainstream press and more specialist venues like the *Journal des économistes* or the dreary *Revue politique et parlementaire* were likely to repeat them.[13]

It is surprising, therefore, that Zola's next sentence should read: 'Hélas ! un peu moins, un peu plus de justice dans l'impôt, je ne pense pas que cela suffise' (XVII: 432). The economic disadvantage of multiple children is not, Zola tells us, the main cause of the declining birth rate. 'Remarquez', he instructs, 'que, dans cette limitation de la famille, il y a certainement une part de mode et de bon ton.' The solution, then, is obvious: we must change the demands of fashion.

> J'imagine que tout changerait, si l'on persuadait à nos jeunes et jolies dames que rien n'est beau, que rien n'est fort comme les nombreuses familles. [....] Est-ce que l'idée de beauté n'est pas toujours victorieuse, et, si la beauté était mise à avoir beaucoup d'enfants, si la fécondité ennoblissait, est-ce que, de toutes parts, nous ne verrions pas se multiplier les naissances ? (XVII: 432)

Although he refers in this passage to a sort of misplaced prudery that makes large families seem somehow indecent, his reduction of this attitude to a desire to be *bon ton* and the subsequent appeal to the all-conquering power of an abstract 'idée de beauté' suggest, intriguingly, that what is at stake here is aesthetics: the models of beauty which shape the taste of the French middle classes are, Zola alleges, simply not favourable to the mothers of large families.[14] The solution to the problem of the declining birth rate, then, is almost certainly not what the members of the Alliance nationale expect. 'Et c'est pourquoi,' Zola continues, 'les législateurs me paraissant sans force, je voudrais qu'on confiât la tâche aux moralistes, aux écrivains, aux poètes' (XVII: 432). It is the makers of art and culture, Zola suggests, and not the makers of laws, who must bring about the aesthetic shifts that will finally overcome the reticence of France's pretty young ladies, by redefining their understanding of where beauty resides. Sure enough, in his closing paragraph, Zola's wish for 'la patrie' is, first, that within her frontiers, 'life' should be valued more highly than anything else; and, second, 'qu'elle eût une littérature puissante et naturelle, virile et saine, d'une honnêteté qui brave les choses et les mots, remettant en honneur l'amour qui enfante' (XVII: 434). The novel *Fécondité*, whose imminent recommencement Zola announces at the end of the piece, will of course be Zola's contribution to this imagined literature.[15] It will, moreover, repeat explicitly and more than once the 1896 article's observations concerning the need to recreate French familial aesthetics.

A number of aspects of this article are worthy of comment. Firstly, it seems important to note, with David Baguley, that Zola concerned himself with a social question like this one 'en tant qu'artiste', and not merely as a bland pundit or *publiciste*.[16] Zola has no doubt of the importance of the writer's work; it is from his point of view an acknowledged truth that art matters. Secondly, and like much of Zola's writing about literary aesthetics, it seems marked by a curious naivety. Zola's central claim is that while small families are currently

fashionable, 'tout changerait, si l'on persuadait à nos jeunes et jolies dames que rien n'est beau [...] comme les nombreuses familles'. The assertion of the power of literature that derives from this idea seems ultimately question-begging, however, in its assumption not only that fashions or aesthetic preferences change (which is obviously true), but also that they *may be changed*, that is, that they are somehow amenable to conscious, purposive manipulation by literary writers. This proposition probably underestimates the complex processes by which tastes evolve, for if it is indeed true, as Zola asserts, that the middle class's catastrophic preference for smaller families is based on 'fashion', that alone illustrates that whatever factors influence aesthetic change, social utility has not historically been the most decisive. The third noteworthy point in the article, then, is the way it demonstrates the consistency of Zola's argumentative strategies and intellectual style at different stages in his career, and even at a time when his worldview was undergoing rapid change (as it most certainly was during the mid-1890s). This moment of apparent naivety recalls the famously 'unconvincing' application of the experimental method to the novel, undertaken sixteen years earlier in *Le Roman expérimental* (1880). In that case, it was extremely easy to riposte, as friends and critics alike duly did, that in logical terms a fictional work could not possibly be a space of impartial observation and thus of inductive reasoning.[17] And yet the very obviousness of that objection suggests that in making it, we may be missing the point: namely, that in around 1880, the association of his writing with a prestige discourse and especially with a secular worldview, and, indeed, the creation of a sense (however illusory) that his fiction was itself reasoned in design and rational in spirit, seemed to Zola of sufficient strategic importance to justify the perpetration of a slight logical distortion. A similar rhetorical move may be found at the heart of the 1896 article; there is a tactical claim to be made here for the importance of literary writing, and Zola proceeds with an almost admirable

unscrupulousness in his vindication of that claim. Like the *roman expérimental* before it, this text advances as a logical argument what might better be thought of as a profession of faith.

In any case, it seems clear that like much of Zola's writing about literature, the article on depopulation only really makes sense when replaced in the broader polemical context from which it emerged. It forms, after all, part of a 'campaign', alongside a number of other *Figaro* articles from the years 1895-96 that were subsequently collected under the general title *Nouvelle Campagne* (1897). So when Zola claims that legislators are seemingly powerless to confront depopulation, and therefore hopes that the job will be 'confi[é] [...] aux écrivains, aux poètes', he does not mean to suggest that literature is more important than politics – but rather, that literature *is* politics. This is in itself a polemical proposition, of course, one that contests what we might call an orthodoxy within French literary circles – the idea, developed by Gautier and entrenched by the repressive character of the Second Empire, that the domain of literature and of aesthetics in general was fundamentally separate from the sphere of political activity and struggle.[18] Zola was far from alone in fin-de-siècle France in disagreeing that this was the case, of course; his didactic works of the late 1890s reflect a literary scene in which the socially engaged *roman à thèse* was enjoying a particular revival. Indeed, many of the social questions raised by a novel like *Fécondité* were simultaneously being addressed by other novelists, including Zola's political allies and opponents: the need for a return to agriculture in Maurice Barrès's *Roman de l'énergie nationale* (1897-1902), for instance, or the evils of commercial wet-nursing in Alexandre Hepp's *Le Lait d'une autre* (1891).[19] Birth control and the birth rate, moreover, were the explicit topic of the many neo- or anti-Malthusian literary works that appeared at the turn of the century; Francis Ronsin notes that at least twenty *romans à thèse* were published on the theme between 1890 and 1910.[20] In such a literary context, it is perhaps less surprising that Zola should have felt impelled to fictionalize his own political views on these matters. The 1896 article, which

prepares the way for these later interventions, may thus be seen as an attempt to use his hard-won position as a 'serious' author to provide an explicit, extra-fictional intellectual justification for such social literature, asserting pre-emptively the moral and social accountability of the art writer over and against Aestheticist fantasies of his sublime isolation. Many of the articles in *Nouvelle Campagne* are dedicated to debunking this idea and its various sequelae. In 'Le Solitaire', Zola rejects the notion that the great writer must by definition be a Verlaine-like failure, rejected by an uncomprehending world, insisting instead that the literary author must strive to make himself understood by all; while in 'L'Élite et la politique', the novelist admits his own sometime contempt for politics and his sense that literature should be above such questions, but repudiates this 'puérile conception' of literature in an implicit rebuke to those writers who perpetuate it (XVII: 423). The 1897 collection, then, is both an example and a theorization of writerly *engagement*.

The final point of interest in the depopulation article is that, insofar as it exemplifies Zola's engagement with a substantive political question, it anticipates the political action that constitutes Zola's most lasting legacy – his critical interventions during the Dreyfus Affair. The article 'Pour les Juifs', reproduced in *Nouvelle Campagne*, is indeed an important early attack on anti-Semitism, so we might say that Zola's anxiety about these two questions – that is, the 'Jewish question' and the 'depopulation question' – emerged at around the same time. But a stronger claim can be made. In the remainder of this article, I wish to suggest that throughout his more famous political interventions of the late 1890s, Zola's reproductive politics continued to serve as a guiding principle; in his idiosyncratic way, indeed, Zola seems to enfold the questions of racial prejudice raised by the Affair into his personal politico-aesthetic project, a project organized, as we shall see, around the totemic figure of the child.

Colonization by the child

Children, of course, are certainly not absent from *Les Rougon-Macquart*, yet their role in Zola's later fiction may almost be considered the inverse of the one they held in his middle period. There, the child appeared principally as the site of social pathology: the unwanted consequence of unwise sexual unions, the victim of hereditary degeneracy or brutal economic injustice, the inevitable perpetuator of parental disorder. Zola's writing of the 1890s witnesses the child's migration from the domain of the pathological to that of the axiological: in the later writing, that is, children are *necessarily* good. They may even, indeed, represent the cure to the very pathologies they previously symbolized. An example of this possibility may be found towards the end of 'Pour les Juifs', where Zola recommends the best 'tactique' to adopt in order to alleviate the religious tensions sweeping the nation. The necessary approach demands that the French mainstream swallow up the Jews and incorporate them into a unified national community:

> Embrasser les juifs, pour les absorber et les confondre en nous. Nous enrichir de leurs qualités, puisqu'ils en ont. Faire cesser la guerre des races en mêlant les races. Pousser aux mariages, remettres aux enfants le soin de réconcilier les pères. (XVII: 429)

This assimilationist vision is characteristic of much anti-anti-Semitic writing at the fin de siècle, even Jewish authors of which tended to accept their opponents' charges that Jews formed a hermetic, inward-looking community, and that such cultural separatism was undesirable.[21] Such writing thus frequently fell short of being positively philo-Semitic, since it seemed to posit the disappearance of Jewishness, if not of the Jews themselves, as its utopian end point. Zola's version of this idea is nevertheless rather bold in its recommendation that that disappearance be brought about by intermarriage and interbreeding, rather than by Jews changing their habits. It is surely possible to see in this suggestion a sort

of biological or reproductive solution to civil strife: the begetting of children seems at once a necessary but also a sufficient step towards the disappearance of social rifts and the accomplishment of what Zola calls 'l'œuvre d'unité' (XVII: 429).

It is precisely this miscegenationist therapy that is enacted in fictional form in the denouement of *Vérité*, Zola's Dreyfus allegory, where the intermingling of the gentile Froment family and the persecuted Jewish Simon family is explicitly associated with the advent of a post-confessional national unity in which, to quote one character, 'il n'y a plus de Juifs, puisqu'il ne va plus y avoir de catholiques' (XX: 356).[22] *Vérité* tells the story of a Jewish state schoolteacher, Simon, who is framed for the rape and murder of his own nephew, Zéphirin; his friend and colleague, the hero Marc Froment, will struggle to secure his exoneration after many years. The subordination of the Dreyfus allegory to a general interest in children is evident, of course, in the various fundamental transpositions at work in the novel's basic plot: army to schoolroom, Jewish officer to Jewish *instituteur*, treason to child rape and murder, and so on.[23] Yet in its closing pages, the novel's language makes even more obvious the procreative vision underlying its pedagogical thesis. Alongside the central preoccupation with free secular education, and even eclipsing that preoccupation, the ending of Zola's last novel devotes loving attention to the vast expansion of the Froment-Simon clan; Marc Froment's 'enfants, petits-enfants, arrière-petits-enfants' surround him, 'le patriarche très vénérable [...] de qui était né l'heureux avenir' (XX: 391), while the narrator recasts his pedagogical theme through images of fecundity – he evokes 'la floraison générale des esprits' and the nation become 'une vaste terre féconde' (XX: 392) – which link together at the level of metaphor the Dreyfus-inspired 'thesis' and the reproductive obsession culminating in the 'quatrième génération en fleur' of the Froment family (XX: 391). Such imagery recalls not only the ending of *Fécondité*, of course, but also that of *Travail* (1901), which closes with scenes of 'la bande joyeuse des enfants' beneath a 'soleil [...] fécondateur' (XIX: 354); and of

Paris (1898), where the Froment family's latest child is offered as an 'auguste cadeau' to the 'moisson future de vérité et de justice' (XVIII: 332). The child-focussed, redemptive conclusions of these novels all seem to suggest, perhaps somewhat fancifully, the ability of mere procreation to resolve a panoply of substantive social problems. In a sense, then, the title 'Zola's fin-de-siècle reproductive politics' should be understood as implying that *all* Zola's fin-de-siècle politics were in some way reproductive.

At the very least, it may be seen from these closing images that Zola identifies all of his various utopian political visions, and the future he expects to realise them, with an idealized childhood that is called upon to represent, by turns and together, hope, health, prosperity, Socialism, democracy, heterosexuality, national glory, international understanding, scientific enlightenment, ethnic union, technological advancement, and so on.[24] The centrality of the figure of the child, both at the thematic and metaphorical level, is indeed one of the most striking and consistent features of Zola's later 'utopian' writing – writing which appeared, as Baguley notes, in the decade following the transformative birth of Zola's own two children.[25] That the increased prominence of the child as a literary trope is closely related to Zola's pronatalism is suggested, moreover, by the tendency to abstraction the works exhibit at crucial moments concerning children. When the narrative voice of *Fécondité* describes the hero Mathieu Froment's ever-increasing brood of infants as 'une splendeur de chairs roses et pures' (XVIII: 76), it represents them as an undifferentiated mass whose exquisite beauty lies precisely in their numerousness, a numerousness that forms the principal object of the novel's political programme. Similar abstractions are to be found in *Vérité*, where groups of children may be described emotively, as 'un peu du souriant avenir' (XX: 371) or, even more tellingly for our purposes, more bluntly as 'la matière brute dont serait faite la nation future' (XX:114). In both cases, the aesthetic valorization of the proposed image is inseparable from its *political* attractiveness to the pronatalist imagination. The

stylized homogeneousness of the children evoked in such passages arguably reflects the basic pronatalist sense that all children are equally and intrinsically desirable.

Sure enough, the child's increased literary importance for Zola is already heralded in the 1896 article on depopulation. There, as we have seen, Zola credits the literary writer with a significant influence on the development of social mores and fashion. Zola plans to use this influence in his forthcoming novel, but he chooses first to demonstrate the power of literature negatively, by indicting much contemporary writing as being in effect *responsible* for the critically declining birth rate:

> N'est-il pas évident [...] que, dans notre littérature aussi, on ne fait plus d'enfants ? L'éternel adultère y règne en maître, et le pis est qu'il est infécond ; car, si l'amant, au lieu du mari, fécondait la femme, ça compterait tout de même, pour la bonne nature ; mais l'enfant n'apparaît presque jamais, parce qu'il est encombrant et sans élégance ; l'enfant a cessé d'être littéraire. (XVII: 433)

Zola alludes to Symbolism and Schopenhauerian pessimism as recent examples of this unfortunate trend, yet his argument perceptively identifies a much longer tradition in French letters. For by positing, however ironically, a young protagonist's cultivation of maturity in general, and of an adult erotic identity in particular, as their special narrative *desideratum*, the many French iterations of the Bildungsroman may be seen to have long demarcated a literary space in which the presence of the child could only ever appear embarrassing or calamitous. Such an attitude is encapsulated in Gustave Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1869), in the telling episode of Rosanette's pregnancy by Frédéric Moreau, and the death of their son a few pages later. Nothing could be more 'inelegant', more aesthetically unpleasing than this 'quelque chose d'un rouge jaunâtre, extrêmement ridé, qui sentait mauvais', as the child is described at its birth.[26] The painter Pellerin's attempt to preserve its likeness in pastels after the poor thing has finally expired later in the same chapter will only reproduce its formless

repulsiveness; as an aesthetic undertaking, the commission is ridiculous, embarrassing, the redirection of an unfit mother's capricious grief when her first instinct – embalming – is denied. This new life which, though illegitimate, should have pleased 'la bonne nature' in Zola's phrase, is reduced instead to a *nature morte* by the pessimistic demands of a cynical realism that Zola had already confessed – in response to Jules Huret's literary survey of 1891[27] – could no longer meet the spiritual needs of the future. The repudiation of this grisly scene, and the rehabilitation of the child as a legitimate aesthetic subject, would become the central programme of Zola's work from this point on; to the grim pseudo-impressionism of Flaubert's 'quelque chose d'un rouge jaunâtre', we might say, Zola will riposte with those gauzy visions of childish 'chairs roses et pures' in *Fécondité*.

The development of a child-focussed aesthetics does more, however, than merely condition the thematic and metaphorical choices of Zola's later writing. Consider a passage that occurs early on in *Vérité*, in which the hero Marc's pedagogical vocation is explained to the reader:

> Ce don de l'enseignement, il l'avait découvert en lui, lorsque, bachelier à dix-sept ans, il était venu terminer son apprentissage de dessinateur lithographe [...] à Beaumont. Chargé de l'exécution de tableaux scolaires, il s'était ingénié à les simplifier encore, il avait créé de véritables chefs-d'œuvre de clarté et de précision, qui lui avaient indiqué sa voie, son bonheur à instruire les petits de ce monde. (XX: 39-40)

This description of Marc's pedagogical flowcharts as 'chefs d'œuvre' self-consciously associates his work with Zola's own as a literary artist. Like Marc, the writer of *romans à thèse* understands, in Susan Suleiman's words, 'the necessity of simplifying and schematizing [the novel's] representations for the sake of its demonstrative ends'.[28] Yet while Suleiman regards such schematization as a sacrifice to the novel's didactic purpose, Zola's phrase 'de véritables chefs-d'œuvre de clarté et de précision' boldly asserts that simplicity, or rather,

simplification, is itself as much an aesthetic virtue as a means to an instructional end; to achieve simplicity is to achieve a kind of beauty. That Zola is thinking about his own literary practice here is made even clearer when the narrator speaks of Marc's ability to inspire a 'passion' for 'la grammaire et l'arithmétique, les rend[re] pour ses élèves intéressantes comme des contes' (XX: 39). Fictions and facts become interchangeable; story-telling and teaching are, Zola suggests, mutually reinforcing pursuits.

Now the logical consequence of this conception of the novel, which places an aesthetic premium on the rendering simple of what seemed complex, is to reimagine the hypothetical intended reader *as a child* – a point Zola had, in fact, already developed explicitly, in 'A la jeunesse', another *Figaro* article included. There, Zola details an aesthetic and stylistic programme which, while ostensibly describing his work so far, applies *a fortiori* to the novels that would follow:

> Ah ! la clarté, la limpidité, la simplicité ! imaginez-vous que j'en meurs ! Pour moi, il n'est pas certain que deux et deux font quatre, et il faut que je le prouve. Si mes livres sont si longs, si je me répète tant, c'est que je crains toujours de n'avoir pas été compris. [....] Je voudrais la phrase de cristal, claire et si simple que les yeux ingénus des enfants pussent la pénétrer de part en part, s'en réjouir et la retenir. (XVII: 389)

Though the likening of literary writing to arithmetical demonstration recalls some of the more dogmatic aspects of *Le Roman expérimental*, the innovation of this later formulation is its promotion of an imagined childish comprehension to the status of a limit case, but perhaps for that very reason the most important case, against which to judge the success or failure of the work. This reframing of the novel's aesthetic purpose completes what we might call, drawing our language from the final hallucinatory pages of *Fécondité*, the colonization of Zola's writing by the child (cf. XVIII: 394-96),[29] the accession to power of what Zola's final 'comédie lyrique', composed in 1901, announced as *L'Enfant roi*.[30] At the level of theme,

through his determination to make the child 'literary' once more; in political and social purpose, through the uninterrupted engagement with pronatalist politics; and finally in its imagined audience, through its didacticism and rehabilitation of simplification as an aesthetic category, the work of the later Zola makes the child its almost obsessive alpha and omega.

Children in danger

The question of why Zola's post-1893 writing should have taken on these characteristics is, of course, a complex one, though the novelist's personal experience of fatherhood alone seems insufficient to explain such a shift – not least because the theme of the child was evidently in the air of the early Third Republic, and well beyond strictly pronatalist circles. Historians have described how from the 1880s onwards the regime was acutely concerned with the moralization of the family and the protection of children as both a pragmatic and an ideological matter; Sylvia Schafer notes for instance how 'leading politicians and commentators channelled their anxiety about moral decline toward the family, [...] consecrating it as the basic educative and social unit of a healthy, truly republican polity'.[31] This interest is doubtless reflected in the enormous vogue in the 1880s and 90s for what literary historian Denis Pernot has called *romans de socialisation*, novels dealing with the education of children and adolescents, even before the appearance of the more narrowly focussed neo- and anti-Malthusian literature of the turn of the century.[32]

The triumphalist closing passages of *Fécondité* and *Vérité* make evident Zola's acceptance of this association between solicitude for families and childrearing, on the one hand, and the creation of a 'truly republican polity' on the other. Yet what *Vérité*'s allegorical narrative of child-rape and murder (as well as, somewhat differently, *Fécondité*'s obsession with abortion and conjugal 'fraud') equally makes explicit is the ability of the child to serve as the symbol not only of the Republic's future triumph, but equally of its famous fragility

during its first few decades. The recurrent descriptions of little Zéphirin's corpse, with its 'visage délicat de fille', its 'maigres jambes', its 'échine déviée', but also its angelic *je ne sais quoi* (XX: 24), imagines the child as the embodiment of a generalized civic *vulnerability*; and Zéphirin is the victim, as it would happen, of the selfsame cultural forces that seemed most hostile to the early Third Republic, namely, cultural traditionalism and, especially, Catholicism (Zéphirin's killer is a monk at the local Jesuit school, Frère Gorgias). Thus the Zola of the Dreyfus Affair can be seen to return to an anticlerical symbolic language developed by writers such as Paul Bonnetain and Octave Mirbeau in their novels of Catholic pederasty, *Charlot s'amuse* (1883) and *Sébastien Roch* (1890). Taken together, these works seem at once to mirror and to allegorize the Third Republic's own moral and political discourses of childhood (those on child labour, on the sexual exploitation of children, and in an even more fundamental way, on depopulation), by presenting an image of the republican child, or the child of the Republic, as existing under constant and amorphous threat.

It is, then, the nature of this threat to the child as imagined by Zola that I wish finally to consider here, for it constitutes one of the most troubling aspects of the author's later writing. In Frère Gorgias, the murderous paedophile monk and arch-pantomime villain of *Vérité,* Zola offers us what is in a sense an unremarkable anti-Catholic set piece. The association of the Catholic clergy with sexual malfeasance, and especially with child abuse, was a long established trope of free-thinking discourse, and had recently been re-energized by governmental campaigns against monasticism and Catholic schooling.[33] In a paradigmatic moment, the narrator attributes Gorgias's sex-crime to the interaction of innate predisposition and the pathogenic atmosphere of the monastic life; thus we hear of the 'démence de [ses] passions contre nature, grandies et perverties à l'ombre des cloîtres' (XX: 369). What is curious, though, is that while Gorgias is presented as a figure of spectacular perversion and monstrosity, a similar rhetoric is used by the well-meaning hero of *Paris*, the doubting priest

Pierre Froment, to describe himself: 'Je suis en dehors de la nature, je suis un monstre,' he cries (XVII: 213). What Pierre means to denounce here, however, is not some innate perversion, but merely his priestly vocation and the celibacy it entails. The hyperbole of Gorgias's depravity in the later novel seems like overkill, then, when the mere choice of a non-reproductive life appears ultimately sufficient to make a man a monster.

In fact, this is just one of many rhetorical and lexical linkages established by Zola in the 1890s between a heterogeneous array of social undesirables. These abject figures come to represent a general threat to the continuation of the race whose most brutal symbolic expression is, to be sure, the rape and murder of a defenceless child in *Vérité*, but which looms in more diffuse form everywhere in the later novels. Various moments in *Vérité* suggest for a start that Zola, like many of his contemporaries, was unable or unwilling to distinguish between male homosexuality and pederasty; thus the crapulent schoolboys who were implicitly Gorgias's semi-willing victims in the novel's earliest chapters grow up to become, again implicitly, his lovers and accomplices towards the end. This elision doubtless seems trivial to Zola because in the world of his later writing, the most salient, if not the only, moral distinction to be made is the one between 'l'amour qui enfante', the love Zola longs to restore to literary honour in the article on depopulation, and its opposite – what the novelist in 'A la jeunesse' calls 'l'amour qui ne fait pas d'enfants' (XVII: 390). Intuitively, this phrase sounds like a circumlocution for homosexuality, an interpretation that appears to be confirmed by the almost verbatim reprise of this passage in those sections of the novel *Paris* describing the character of Hyacinthe Duvillard. Hyacinthe, like the literary *jeunesse* addressed two years earlier, has experimented with occultism, Satanism, and Symbolism, but the reference to 'l'amour qui ne fait pas d'enfants' is replaced in his case by the more explicit indication that he is, at least occasionally, a 'sodomiste' (XVII: 41).[34] And yet it may be important to retain the ambiguity of the original 1896 phrasing, for as Pierre Froment's self-

accusation in *Paris* suggests, any deliberate failure to procreate not only makes Zola's heterosexual characters appear, as Nicholas White notes, 'no less barren' than their homosexual counterparts,[35] but even renders them vulnerable to the sort of epithets – 'against nature', 'monstrous', and so on – that the fin de siècle typically reserved for that especially stigmatized group. Certainly, the gorgon-like Sérafine, *Fécondité*'s vicious parody of the 'New Woman', is a frenetic connoisseur of what the narrator calls the 'spasme infécond' (XVIII: 56), and thus of 'l'amour qui ne fait pas d'enfants', as of course are the novel's many heterosexual couples who practice the infamous 'fraude' – the narrator speaks, indeed, of their 'monstrueuses débauches' (XVIII: 46). When in one passage a troubled Mathieu Froment imagines such a non-reproductive, decadent couple, he describes them as 'fanfaron des opinions extrêmes'; but the adjective *fanfaron* is, again, equally applied to the homosexual Hyacinthe in *Paris* (he is 'fanfaron [...] de vices'; XVII: 41) – which in turn links him (and thus seemingly the hypothetical sterile couple as well) to an entry in Jules and Edmond de Goncourt's *Journal* concerning none other than Oscar Wilde, which had occasioned a brief newspaper contretemps upon its publication in 1891.[36] 'L'amour qui ne fait pas d'enfants', then, may just as easily be hetero- as homosexual – indeed, the androgyny of many of its practitioners (ironically captured in Sérafine's pseudo-Balzacian forename) suggests that the distinction may be moot.

Importantly, moreover, many of these quotations posit the sexual threat they denounce as in some sense the fault of literature. It is, after all, only as the culmination of a series of literary and intellectual experimentations that Hyacinthe and the *jeunesse* of the article stoop to 'sodomism' or 'l'amour qui ne fait pas d'enfants'; the sterile couple of *Fécondité*, meanwhile, have had their 'cervelle détraquée par la pose d'une littérature imbécile' (XVIII: 56). The word 'pose' recalls, of course, the famous insult ('posing [as a] sodomite') issued to Oscar Wilde by the Marquess of Queensberry, and is equally and

knowingly reused by Zola in *Paris*: twice to describe Hyacinthe's apparently affected aversion to women, and once to describe Pierre Froment's priestly doubt and depression (XVII: 82, 165; 216). Once again, heterosexual sterility, homosexual scandal, and avant-garde literature become lexically associated. And yet it is Zola's pointed choice to make *Fécondité*'s principal representative of this literature of 'pose' not an effete Hyacinthus but a cynical heterosexual seducer, in the figure of Santerre. His literary 'spécialité', we are told, is adultery, of the sort which 'jamais n'enfantait' (XVIII: 43) – which is to say that he writes precisely the literature of 'l'éternel adultère' denounced in the 1896 article, from which the child is excluded on the grounds of its inelegance. In the paragraph of 'Dépopulation' where this literary tradition is identified, a host of loosely associated signifiers of corruption may be found: 'dégénérés', 'impuissants', 'stérilité', 'débauche' (XVII: 433). Whatever its sinfulness, one might suppose that such a Don-Juanesque literary imagination as this would be above any suspicion of pederasty. Yet Zola's insistence that Santerre is a Catholic novelist, one who voluntarily pronounces the Roman Church 'l'infécondité même' and whose professed ideal of monkish manhood is 'le contemplatif, l'infécond, le solitaire égoïste' (XVIII: 45; 'solitaire' here refers specifically to an ascetic monk), serves to align his aesthetic worldview with the depraved Gorgias's 'passions contre nature, grandies et perverties à l'ombre des cloîtres'.

Such slippages serve, perhaps, to make implicitly associations that would seem perplexing (pederasty/heterosexual promiscuity) or illogical (Catholicism/birth control) if stated outright. Yet Zola's most striking rhetorical gesture is to lump together all of these figures within the single, singularly capacious category of the negative: Santerre is a seeker of 'l'anéantissement' (XVIII: 43), just as the literary figures reviled in 'Dépopulation' are 'les amoureux du néant' (XVII: 432); as Hyacinthe's inversion and Pierre Froment's doubt in *Paris* are dismissed as mere 'négation' (XVII: 82, 216); as the faithful of *Vérité* find only 'néant' in their religious devotions (cf. XX: 290); and as Sérafine's hysterectomy reduces her

to a 'néant de spectre' in *Fécondité* (XVIII: 272).[37] Zola's 'narrative principle of dichotomies', the dominant conceptual mode of his later writing, brings these heteroclite figures together as one side of an ideological binarism, the antithesis of his novels' insistent thesis.[38] The various bogeymen of the novelist's liberal pronatalism thus ultimately emerge as indistinguishable, subtle shades of nothingness whose ineluctable destiny is to disappear.

Conclusion

Life must go on, the narrator tells us at the end of *Le Docteur Pascal*; 'au risque de faire des monstres, il fallait qu'elle créât' (XV: 572). Yet Life, it seems, could never be as teratogenic as Zola's own literary interventions in her defence, which generate such a rich profusion of monstrous scapegoats and cautionary tales. The intolerance displayed by Zola's reproductive politics in dealing with these phantasmatic creations is, at times, disturbing. If Zola proposed his own work as a literary solution to the nation's ills, he was nonetheless eager to acknowledge, as we have seen, that literature was also part of the problem. In the article on depopulation, he introduces the idea thus: 'Je ne voudrais pas, dans le cas actuel, donner à la philosophie et à la littérature de ces derniers cinquante ans une influence néfaste exagérée. Mais, en vérité, examinez le dossier, jugez le procès' (XVII: 432). 'Le dossier'; 'le procès'; the metaphor is telling. In this passage, Zola speaks of literature not so much as a writer, but as a censor – assessing what the English law of obscenity, the very law under which Zola's own works had been prosecuted in 1888 and 1889, called the 'tendency' of certain literary works to 'deprave and corrupt' the likely reader. We might provocatively call what follows Zola's own 'exhibition of degenerate art': Schopenhauer and Wagner are named defendants, followed by their apparently numerous imitators, as well as the symbolist and decadent 'schools'. The novelist seems untroubled by his newfound role, wilfully braving irony by jokingly referring to himself earlier on in the article as 'l'auteur malpropre qui a écrit *La*

Terre' (XVII: 431) – evoking not only the Vizetelly trial but also the quarrel of the so-called 'Manifeste des Cinq'.[39] No one can be avant-garde forever, of course, but there is surely something disagreeable about this re-emergence, after less than a decade indeed, of the persecuted author as a censorious moral guardian, castigating the work of other writers in the name of 'national vigilance'.[40]

How 'bothered' should we be, then, by this last incarnation of Zola? The answer, perhaps, is not very bothered – for if the pronatalist delirium of the 1890s has anything to teach us, it is the value of retaining a sense of proportion. While Jean Borie is not necessarily unjustified in his dark hints that it was in the 'nouveau monde de *Fécondité*', with its promotion of Family, Work and Nation, that 'la mort industrielle avait vraiment son avenir', this judgement perhaps attributes rather too much coherence to Zola's fin-de-siècle visions.[41] What remained most consistent about Zola's work throughout his career was, arguably, the inchoate nature of its motivations and effects. It is, after all, from these very same political *parti pris* that Zola's most lasting and most deservedly exalted engagements emerged, during the Dreyfus Affair; while the extent to which the anarchic genius of the *Rougon-Macquart* series may have sprung from the application of a particular stylistic approach to a fundamentally normative (even, indeed, censorious) moral vision is easy to underestimate. It may ultimately be the case that Zola's involvement with the Alliance nationale pour l'accroissement de la population française is worth paying attention to simply because it is – to use a word favoured by Zola throughout his career – so very 'curious'.

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[1] On depopulation in France, see Karen Offen, 'Depopulation, Nationalism and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France', *American Historical Review*, 89 (1984), 648-76; and Richard

Tomlinson, 'The Disappearance of France, 1896-1940: French Politics and the Birth Rate', *The Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), 405-15.

[2] Jean Borie, *Le Célibataire français* (Paris: Sagittaire, 1976), p. 68.

[3] Émile Zola, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Henri Mitterand, 21 vols (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2002-09), XVII, 431. All subsequent references to Zola's works (other than his correspondence) will be given parenthetically in the text, and refer to this edition.

[4] D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. x-xi.

[5] For examples of work adopting such an approach, see: Naomi Schor, *Zola's Crowds* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); David Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Susan Harrow, *Zola, The Body Modern: Pressures and Prospects of Representation* (Oxford: Legenda, 2010).

[6] For an account of the *roman à thèse* as a genre, see Susan Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

[7] Which is not to say that such arguments are impossible to make, and even to make well; see Carmen K. Mayer-Robin, 'Midwifery and Malpratice in *Fécondité*: Zola's Fictional History of Problematic Maternities', in *Birth and Death in Nineteenth-Century French Culture*, ed. by Nigel Harkness et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 173-89, for a perceptive reading of one such *roman à these* which emphasizes how Zola 'simultaneously carries out and contradicts his own thesis' (p. 189). Hannah Thompson, meanwhile, uncovers a kind of intertextual ambiguity in *Fécondité* by placing its descriptions of women, and especially mothers, in dialogue with the earlier works of the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle; see 'La Fête (manquée ?) de la maternité dans *Fécondité*', in *Naturalisme et excès visuels : pantomime, parodie, image, fête*, ed. by Catherine Dousteyssier-Khoze and Edward Welch (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), pp. 107-115.

[8] See Henri Mitterand, 'Le Quatrième Zola', *Œuvres et critiques*, 16 (1991), 85-98; and *Zola*, 3 vols (Paris: Fayard, 1998-2002), III (*L'Honneur, 1893-1902* (2002)).

[9] See Tomlinson, p. 405; and Cheryl A. Koos, 'Gender, Anti-Individualism, and Nationalism: The Alliance Nationale and the Pronatalist Backlash against the Femme Moderne, 1933-40', *French Historical Studies*, 19 (1996), 699-723 (p. 700). David Baguley notes that the Alliance's own documents list Zola as a 'sociétaire'; see *'Fécondité' d'Émile Zola: roman à thèse, évangile, mythe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), p. 42.

[10] Émile Zola, *Correspondance*, ed. by B.H. Bakker, 10 vols (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1978-95), VIII (1991), 325. This sentence, apparently drawn from a full but undiscovered letter, was quoted by Honnorat in an article of 1896.

[11] Koos, p. 700.

[12] Eighty comparable organizations had appeared by 1922; see Tomlinson, p. 405.

[13] For a representative sample, see Bertillon, 'Le Problème de la dépopulation'; Émile Cheysson, *L'Influence des lois successorales sur l'expansion de la race* (Paris: Société d'économie sociale, 1903); and, more generally, the regular *Bulletin de l'Alliance nationale*.

[14] Catherine Malinas notes that Zola is not wrong in asserting as much, and especially in suggesting that breastfeeding continued to be shunned by middle-class women in the fin de siècle; see 'Le Culte du sein dans *Fécondité*', *Les Cahiers Naturalistes*, 60 (1986), 171-83 (p. 175-76).

[15] For a contextual account of *Fécondité* and fin-de-siècle politics, see Baguley, *'Fécondité'*, pp. 28-53.

[16] Baguley, *'Fécondité'*, p. 46.

[17] The point was made, for instance, by Henry Céard (friend) and Ferdinand Brunetière (foe); see Mitterand, *Zola*, II (*L'Homme de 'Germinal'* (2001)), 504.

[18] See for example Ross Chambers, *Mélancolie et opposition: les débuts du modernisme en France* (Paris: José Corti, 1987), esp. pp. 44-47.

[19] See Baguley, *'Fécondité'*, pp. 171-73, 176-78.

[20] See Francis Ronsin, *La Grève des ventres : propagande néo-malthusienne et baisse de la natalité française (XIXe-XXe siècles*) (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1980), pp. 66, 235-36.

[21] See Stephen Wilson, *Ideology and Experience: Antisemitism in France at the Time of the Dreyfus Affair* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), pp. 702-04.

[22] Jeffrey Mehlman notes with concern the twist whereby 'the happy end of the Dreyfus affair in Émile Zola's fictional transposition is, paradoxically, a world without Jews'. See 'Zola's Novel of the Dreyfus Affair: Between *Mystique* and *Politique*', in *Jews, Catholics, and the Burden of History: Studies in Contemporary Jewry 21*, ed. by Eli Lederhendler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 243-51 (p. 247).

[23] See Gilbert Chaitin, 'Transposing the Dreyfus Affair: The Trauma of identity in Zola's *Vérité*', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 38 (2001), 430-444, on the broader dynamics of this allegorical transposition.

[24] For a fuller discussion of the utopianism of Zola's later fiction, see Béatrice Laville, 'L'Écriture de l'utopie', in *Zola à l'œuvre : hommage à Auguste Dezalay*, ed. by Gisèle Séginger (Strasbourg: Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 2003), pp. 233-44; and Fabian Scharf, *Émile Zola : de l'utopisme à l'utopie (1898-1903)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2011).

[25] Baguley, *'Fécondité'*, p. 208. Dominique van Hooff similarly associates the revalorization of motherhood that is so central to *Fécondité*, and which contrasts so sharply with the 'images dégradantes' of maternity in the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, with his witnessing Jeanne Rozerot's fulfilment after the births; see 'Émile Zola, allaitement et fécondité', *Les Cahiers Naturalistes*, 74 (2000), 183-93 (p. 189).

[26] Gustave Flaubert, *Œuvres*, ed. by Alain Thibaudet and René Dumesnil, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1951-52), II, 416.

[27] On the Huret survey, see Mitterand, *Zola*, II, 1050; III, 16.

[28] Suleiman, p. 23.

[29] On the wild colonial fantasies at the denouement of *Fécondité*, see Jean-Marie Seillan, 'L'Afrique utopique de *Fécondité*', *Les Cahiers Naturalistes*, 75 (2001), 183-202.

[30] This play emphasises the need for married couples to recognize and accept illegitimate children born to either spouse – a concern close to Zola's own paternal heart.

[31] Sylvia Schafer, *Children in Moral Danger and the Problem of Government in Third Republic France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997) p. 9. See also Jacques Donzelot, *La Police des familles* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), p. 76; and Rachel G. Fuchs, 'Crimes against Children in Nineteenth-Century France: Child Abuse', *Law and Human Behavior*, 6 (1982), 237-59 (pp. 253-55).

[32] See Denis Pernot, *Le Roman de socialisation, 1889-1914* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), pp. 21-25.

[33] On the Waldeck-Rousseau government's moves against the Church, see C.S. Phillips, *The Church in France, 1848-1907* (London: Macmillan, 1936), pp. 259-75.

[34] On homosexuality and its various associations in *Paris*, see Andrew J. Counter, '"One of Them": Homosexuality and Anarchism in Wilde and Zola', *Comparative Literature*, 63 (2011), 345-65.

[35] Nicholas White, *The Family in Crisis in Late Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 175.

[36] Jules and Edmond de Goncourt, *Journal : mémoires de la vie littéraire*, 3 vols (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1989), II, 1002; see Counter, '"One of Them"', p. 350. On references to

Wilde in the *Ébauche* of *Paris*, see René Ternois, *Zola et son temps: Lourdes—Rome—Paris* (Paris: Société des Belles Lettres, 1961), p. 632.

[37] Sérafine's 'néant de spectre' may be associated with the description of Gorgias in *Vérité* as 'un revenant du passé' (XX: 365); the implications of this suggestive description for Zola's Naturalism are usefully developed by Gilbert Chaitin, 'Le Cauchemar de (la) *Vérité*, ou le rêve du revenant', *Les Cahiers Naturalistes*, 82 (2008), 187-97 (p. 197).

[38] Mayer-Robin, p. 182.

[39] Mitterand, *Zola*, II, 852-57, 954.

[40] The case against Henry Vizetelly, Zola's translator and publisher in England, was supported by the National Vigilance Association.

[41] Jean Borie, *Mythologies de l'hérédité au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), p. 163.