

Publishing Vitriol: Rachilde, Léon Bloy, and the *Mercure de France*

Abstract: In 1899, the **avant-garde** writers **Rachilde** and **Léon Bloy** both penned critiques of **Émile Zola's** *Fécondité*, which was serialized in *L'Aurore* at the height of the **Dreyfus affair**. This article analyses the pair's vitriolic responses to Zola's novel, their ideological position against the values it enshrined, and the differing levels of ease with which they were able to publish their opinions. Highlighting **Alfred Vallette's** decision to refuse Bloy's *Je m'accuse* at the *Mercure de France's* **publishing** house, it considers the thin but flexible line separating acceptable and unacceptable forms of public discourse at the *fin de siècle*.

How much vitriol should a media outlet disseminate at a time of heightened political division? This question had particular urgency in the 1890s, when France witnessed a series of polarizing media debates that challenged the role of literature in society, notably anarchist 'propaganda by the deed' (1893–4) and the Dreyfus affair (1894–1906). By intervening publicly in the latter, the Naturalist writer Émile Zola became a pariah figure condemned for defamation and forced to take temporary refuge across the Channel. The publication of *Fécondité*, serialized in *L'Aurore* during Zola's exile in England, subsequently took place in a highly charged atmosphere, and its reception was bound up in the broader polemic about Zola's literary and social position. The first volume in what would become the *Quatre Évangiles* tetralogy, *Fécondité* is a pronatalist thesis novel recounting the story of Mathieu Froment, whose work ethic and fertile sexuality combine to lift his ever-increasing family out of poverty and into a revitalized form of land-ownership, business, and wealth. The book is lengthy, ideologically unsubtle, and stylistically repetitive. Because of these characteristics,

its critical reception was mixed, ranging from tacit acceptance of Zola's message to outright rejection of his ideology and style.¹

The most extreme criticism came from two controversial avant-garde writers: Rachilde and Léon Bloy.² In November 1899, the former published an acerbic review of *Fécondité* in the *Mercure de France*: a little magazine ('petite revue')³ founded in 1890 by Rachilde's

¹ For a summary of *fin-de-siècle* critical responses to *Fécondité*, see David Baguley, *Fécondité d'Émile Zola: roman à thèse, évangile, mythe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), pp. 149–67.

² I use the term 'avant-garde' to denote individuals who oppose or reject mainstream channels for recognition and success, using marginal media to secure their reputation and gain alternative forms of cultural capital. Typically associated with autotelic (as opposed to bourgeois or social) approaches to art, 'avant-garde' literature changes in response to earlier models, including those within the avant-garde itself. For further discussion of the term, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), pp. 175–7 and 352–6.

³ 'Petites revues' were periodicals that observed and critiqued literary, artistic, and intellectual production, while offering a medium for lesser-known writers to publish and promote their works. They typically adopted a more artisanal format and lower publication frequency than mainstream newspapers. The genre flourished in the mid-1880s and became increasingly professionalized in the 1890s: a decade that witnessed the foundation of notable titles such as *Le Mercure de France* (1890–1965), *La Revue blanche* (Belgian series: 1889–1891, Parisian series: 1891–1903), and *La Plume* (1889–1914). See Yoan Vêrilhac, 'Petites revues', in *La Civilisation du journal: histoire culturelle et littéraire de la presse française au XIXe siècle*, ed. by Dominique Kalifa and others (Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, 2011), pp. 359–373.

husband, Alfred Vallette, and ten other writer-journalists.⁴ Rachilde hosted the review's weekly *salon* while contributing fictional works and book reviews. From April 1896, she oversaw a regular column, entitled 'Les Romans', which she held for nearly 30 years.⁵ Rachilde's position at the *Mercure* offered the kind of stability that her colleague Léon Bloy failed to achieve as a critic. From his early involvement in the militant conservative press (notably *La Croix*) to his contribution to *Le Chat noir*, Bloy established a reputation for polemic that gained him employment at larger newspapers, *Le Figaro* and *Gil Blas*. However, he pushed the boundaries of journalistic etiquette far enough to lose his position at these papers, before shifting towards respected but less outwardly successful avant-garde little magazines.⁶ As well as losing a steady income by alienating the mainstream press, Bloy

⁴ Initially associated with Symbolism, the *Mercure* earned contemporaries' respect for its eclectic and encyclopedic content. For a historical overview of the *Mercure de France*, see Géraldi Leroy and Julie Sabiani, *La Vie littéraire à la Belle époque* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1998), pp. 129–37, and *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 92.1 (1992).

⁵ For further analysis of Rachilde's journalism, see Claude Dauphiné, 'Rachilde ou de l'acrobatie critique', *Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé*, 3 (1991), 275–88, Samuel Lair, 'Rachilde et ses « Mercuriales »', *Studia Romanica Posnaniensia*, 34 (2007), 231–60, Nelly Sanchez, 'Rachilde, critique littéraire au *Mercure de France*' in M. Andrin, L. Brogniez et al (eds.), *Femmes et critique(s): Lettres, Arts, Cinéma*. (Namur, Belgium: Presses Universitaires de Namur, 2009). pp. 55–74, and Anita Staron, *Au Carrefour des esthétiques: Rachilde et son écriture romanesque, 1880–1913* (Łódź, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2015).

⁶ For further analysis of Bloy's journalism, see Michèle Fontana, *Léon Bloy: journalisme et subversion, 1874–1917* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1998), Marie-Françoise Melmoux-Montaubin, *L'Écrivain-journaliste au XIXe siècle: un mutant des lettres* (Saint-Etienne:

experienced a series of misfortunes in the mid- to late-1890s, including the death of his two sons and the financial failure of *La Femme pauvre* (1897) and *Le Mendiant ingrat* (1898). In January 1899, Bloy and his family moved to Denmark, his wife's country of origin, in an attempt to reduce living costs. During their time there, Bloy drafted an incendiary pamphlet, antagonistically entitled *Je m'accuse*, which combined 'Le Crétin des Pyrénées' – an article about Zola's novel *Lourdes*, which originally appeared in the *Mercure's* September 1894 issue – and 'La Dernière enfance': a diary in which Bloy recorded his day-by-day reaction to *Fécondité's* serial publication (from May to October 1899). Despite gaining Rachilde's support, Bloy was unable to convince Alfred Vallette to print *Je m'accuse* through the *Mercure's maison d'édition*. He struggled to secure a publisher and the pamphlet appeared much later than originally intended (September 1900).

By analysing Rachilde and Bloy's respective critiques of *Fécondité*, their ideological position against the values it enshrined, and the differing levels of ease with which they were able to publish their opinions, this article considers the thin but flexible line separating acceptable and unacceptable forms of public discourse at the *fin de siècle*. It does so while considering Zola's longer-term reception by both mainstream and avant-garde critics, as well as the journalistic practices adopted by marginal writers to assert their literary position. In this way, it expands modern critical understandings of the individual writers' career trajectories and reception, while contributing to periodical studies and to publishing histories of Belle Époque France through sustained close analysis of a revealing case study.

Tainted by Association: *Fécondité* and *L'Affaire*

Throughout his career, Zola's writings were frequently the source of polemic, associated by some with 'putrid' subject matter and by others with the stylistic force of epic literature.

Cahiers intempestifs, 2003), and Gilles Negrello, *Léon Bloy critique* (Paris: Champion, 2005).

Mainstream critics such as Ferdinand Brunetière contested the theoretical vision of Naturalism, put forward in *Le Roman expérimental* (1880), while critiquing Zola's treatment of sexual or morbid themes. Yet Zola's rising popularity and financial success were undeniable to all, if irritating to some. The publication of *Germinal* (1885) encouraged a more positive reception from his peers, which swiftly returned to vitriol and caricature in the wake of *La Terre* (1887). While the later Rougon-Macquart novels received more favourable responses, the rise of a new literary avant-garde – especially Symbolism – led younger writers to suggest that Naturalism was in decline.⁷ In the 1890s, Zola's relationship with Symbolist writers was ambivalent and occasionally fractious, as he moved towards a more socially engaged approach to literature, in the form of utopian fiction and thesis novels ('romans à thèse'). By intervening in the Dreyfus affair, Zola re-drew the lines dividing literary generations and schools, gaining respect from socialist contingents of the avant-garde (who downplayed Zola's aesthetics in favour of his politics), while radicalizing their more politically conservative peers.⁸

Considering the level of media attention surrounding Dreyfus and Zola in this period, it is unsurprising that Rachilde and Bloy framed their responses to *Fécondité* through the lens of the ongoing affair, and vice versa. Despite claiming indifference to the outcome of Dreyfus's retrial at Rennes (between August and September 1899), the pair expressed visceral antipathy

⁷ For a concise summary of Zola's reception by his contemporaries, see Alain Pagès, 'Émile Zola: Bilan critique', <http://www.item.ens.fr/articles-en-ligne/mile-zola-bilan-critique> [accessed 4 December 2023].

⁸ On Zola's relationship with Symbolist writers in the 1890s, see Yoan Vérilhac, 'Zola et les jeunes, la haine en partage? Le dialogue critique entre Zola et les petites revues symbolistes', *Les Cahiers Naturalistes*, 87 (2013), 191–207, and Philippe Oriol, "'J'accuse...!'" ou la rédemption: Émile Zola et les « Jeunes »', *Les Cahiers naturalistes*, 72 (1998), 93–104.

towards Zola's interventions in socio-political debates, effectively blending his role in *l'Affaire* with the pronatalist position he put forward in *Fécondité*. While neither Rachilde nor Bloy had written extensively on Zola's earlier works, they both seized the opportunity to demonstrate their disdain for the father of Naturalism.⁹ The forceful, even excessive, vitriol they employed makes for uncomfortable reading and reveals the capacity for avant-garde aesthetics to sit happily alongside reactionary politics.¹⁰ This potential is realised in Rachilde's November 1899 'Romans' column, dedicated solely to analysing Zola's thesis novel, which opens with a direct address to the Jewish community:

...Voici, Messieurs les Juifs, le moment de régler l'addition! Vous allez tous acheter ce livre *de sept cent cinquante pages* et [...] vous le poserez bien en évidence sur le premier rayon de votre bibliothèque [...]. Avalez et payez, Messieurs les israélites, c'est écrit spécialement pour vous et vos familles patriarcales, vos patriarcales familles, sociétés dans la

⁹ Rachilde's column at the *Mercure* post-dated the Rougon-Macquart cycle. However, she penned a humorous (if biting) review of *Paris* in April 1898 that compared it to Zola's earlier novels. Bloy had given Zola mitigated praise after the publication of *Le Rêve*, in an article entitled 'Antée' (*Gil Blas*, 21 January 1889). It is for this article that Bloy wished to repent in 1899, and which explains the title *Je m'accuse*. In 1891, Bloy gave a conference series in Denmark, part of which appeared in *La Plume* (15 May 1891) before being published in a short volume. He refers to Zola as 'l'avocat le plus éloquent de la fange humaine'. Léon Bloy, *Les funérailles du naturalisme: conférences publiques* (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad, 1891), p. 12.

¹⁰ Erin Williams examines how writers associated with the *Mercure de France* promoted an individualism sufficiently extreme to justify a reactionary, anti-democratic ideal. See Erin W. Williams, 'Signs of Anarchy: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Symbolist Critic at the *Mercure de France*, 1890–95', *French Forum*, 29 (2004), pp. 45–68 (p. 62).

société, états dans l'État [...]. Avalez donc les yeux fermés, le nez bouché, car, malgré que votre religion vous le défende, c'est pour employer le refrain favori de votre récent poète, Laurent Tailhade:

«... C'est de la viande de cochon ! »

C'est blanc, c'est rose, c'est blond, c'est gras, ça vous a des plis aux cuisses, c'est lourd, indigeste, obscène et propre à donner la nausée à tous les amateurs d'idylles.¹¹

Laden with anti-Semitic tropes, the column's opening section associates Jewish people with financial ease and enclosed, non-assimilating communities. Such stereotypes were widespread in *fin-de-siècle* France and even appeared in Zola's own journalistic writing, such as 'Pour les Juifs'.¹² Sharing stereotypes typical of the period's 'antisémitisme ambiant' did not, however, equate to sharing the same outlook on the 'Jewish question'.¹³ After all, there is little sympathy apparent in Rachilde's image of Zola's late work as prohibited pig flesh that Jewish people must swallow in return for his interventions in the Dreyfus affair. The ensuing description of pig skin combines a suspect sensuality with disgust, in a way that implicates the Jewish audience through continued address: 'ça vous a des plis aux cuisses' (my

¹¹ Rachilde, 'Les Romans', *Mercure de France*, November 1899, 485–94 (p. 485). Hereafter references appear parenthetically after quotations in the text.

¹² 'Pour les juifs' first appeared in *Le Figaro* on 16 May 1896 and was republished in Zola's collected volume *Nouvelle campagne*. It perpetuates anti-Semitic tropes while attacking extreme forms of anti-Semitism, and calls on non-Jews to adopt supposedly 'Jewish' traits in order to best and ultimately assimilate the Jewish community. As Maurice Samuels aptly puts it: 'With friends like this, one might say, the Jews hardly need enemies.' *The Right to Difference: French Universalism and the Jews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) p. 105.

¹³ On Rachilde's implicit anti-Semitism, see Lair, p. 232.

emphasis). While evoking religious food restrictions, the pig functions as a shorthand for humanity's baser instincts, and for literary works seen to pander to them. In *fin-de-siècle* visual culture, pigs represented both pornography and Judaism, in a way that paralleled medieval German iconography of the *Judensau*. It is therefore no coincidence that Zola was frequently caricatured as a pig wallowing in excrement.¹⁴ Rachilde reformulates this longstanding cliché and repackages it within the broader accusation she levels at the Jewish community: namely, that they have compromised themselves by allowing a denigrated writer to defend their honour and innocence. She implies that they are tainted by association with Zola's aesthetic ignominy.

The transference of blame between Jewish people and their defender functions as part of a wider network of references to shared guilt associated with the affair as a whole. Summarizing recent events, Rachilde remarks: 'On leur a rendu leur M. Dreyfus, leur cher capitaine va mieux, et nous avons fini du cauchemar de l'innocence qui faillit rendre tout le monde coupable' (p. 487). Bloy mirrors this idea when he discusses the 1899 re-trial at Rennes:

Il faudrait un geste de Dieu pour finir cette horrible affaire où tout le monde est abominable. L'*innocence* même de Dreyfus, en la supposant tout à fait certaine, est presque sans intérêt. Je la vois très bas, le front dans les ténèbres et les pieds dans les excréments. Innocence proclamée par Zola! C'est à faire peur.¹⁵

¹⁴ On the association between Zola and pig-related imagery, see Norman L. Kleeblatt, 'MERDE! The Caricatural Attack against Emile Zola', *Art Journal*, 52 (1993), 54–58. On the *Judensau* motif, see Maya Balakirsky-Katz, 'Émile Zola, the *Cochonnerie* of Naturalist Literature, and the *Judensau*', *Jewish Social Studies*, n.s., 13 (2006), 110–35.

¹⁵ Léon Bloy, *Je m'accuse* (Paris: La Maison de l'Art, 1900), p. 104. Hereafter references appear parenthetically after quotations in the text.

Like Rachilde, he suggests that Dreyfus's initial innocence – something upon which he maintains a level of doubt – has since been tainted, if not outright nullified, by Zola's intervention. Indeed, later in the pamphlet, Bloy implies that Zola has made Dreyfus a pariah by association: 'Dreyfus, qui est, maintenant, lépreux de toi et qui aimerait mieux son île du Diable, s'il te connaissait' (p. 162). Although Bloy's accusations are bound up in his antipathy towards Zola, they also express his eschatological approach to the affair, which involved juxtaposing human justice with its divine counterpart.¹⁶ This vision helps to explain Bloy's confident prediction that Dreyfus would be re-convicted: 'Dreyfus donc sera condamné, j'ose le prédire, et la Justice divine n'aura pas reçu l'atteinte la plus légère' (p. 116). Whereas Rachilde teases out the aesthetic, moral, and social implications of innocence during the Dreyfus affair, Bloy asserts a religious interpretation that posits any individual human's claims to innocence and justice as hubristic in the face of divine judgement.

While asserting the Jewish community's complicity with Zola's most recent work, Rachilde and Bloy attack the latter (and, indirectly, the former) by evoking *Fécondité's* plot and key themes through a sustained lexis of disgust. For example, Rachilde describes the experience of reading Zola's depictions of childbirth and abortion as a nauseating stomach ache: 'Quelle péritonite, ce livre! C'est une infernale frénésie d'étaler tous les ventres et toute l'ordure. Recto: forceps. Verso: fausse couche' (p. 490). The combination of hyperbole with short paratactic sentences here highlights the novel's perceived excess by reductively paraphrasing its most dramatic scenes. Rachilde later extends the indigestion analogy by combining it with the pig-flesh image analysed above: 'J'ai vraiment peur de la prose de ce monstre, comme j'aurais peur d'une indigestion de

¹⁶ On Bloy's eschatological approach to justice, see Pascaline Hanom, 'Je m'accuse de Léon Bloy: un pamphlet antinaturaliste', *Les Cahiers naturalistes*, 88 (2014), 131–54 (pp. 148–9).

tripes, et ma religion me défend... les indigestions de tripes en littérature' (p. 492). By depicting Zola's prose as animal viscera, Rachilde expresses disgust while aligning her aesthetic opinion with religious stricture. The satirical nature of this comparison, highlighted by the ellipsis, draws on the article's opening claim that Jewish people must transgress their religion in order to pay their 'debt' to Zola, whereas Rachilde – a non-believer – is loyal to her aesthetic faith by criticizing him overtly. References to stomach ache and nausea recur in *Je m'accuse*, where Bloy asserts that reading *Fécondité's* prose requires a strong constitution: 'pour le suivre, il ne suffit pas d'avoir l'âme impure, il faudrait encore de l'estomac' (*Je m'accuse*, p. 52). He goes on to compare the experience of reading Zola's *feuilleton* to swallowing rising bile: 'Surmontant une nausée furieuse, je reprends ma lecture. Le facteur m'ayant apporté deux numéros à la fois, je les ai avalés coup sur coup, au risque d'en crever' (p. 56). By repeatedly evoking the desire to vomit, both critics express a visceral repugnance that forecloses intellectual analysis and diminishes *Fécondité's* aesthetic value.

Although Rachilde and Bloy experienced a comparable disgust in reading *Fécondité*, the latter expressed his revulsion in more extreme terms, drawing on scatological animalistic imagery. In response to chapters three and four of the novel's first section – where Mathieu discusses marital 'fraud' with Santerre, Séguin, and Valentine, before socializing with the adulterous Beauchêne – Bloy writes: 'La joie des clients doit être grande, car c'est cochon à ravir [...]. Dans cet ultra-cocasse roman, tout le monde semble avoir le nez dans le derrière de tout le monde' (pp. 56-7). This is a striking and dehumanizing image, comparing Zola's characters (and,

implicitly, his readers) to dogs sniffing each other's sexual regions. Added to Bloy's degrading menagerie, the pig image also appears, with its implicit accusation of pornographic appeal. As the novel reveals further sordid details about its characters, Bloy depicts Zola as animalistic, perverted, and hypocritical: 'ce porc atteint de priapisme [...] qui [...] veut tout de même être un *Moraliste*, n'a pas l'audace de l'obscénité' (pp. 58–9). He extends this unflattering portrait by comparing Zola to both a monkey and an incontinent old man: '[T]out ce torrent de cochonneries, qu'est-ce autre chose que l'occasion, espérée vingt ans, d'un gâtisme assez obtenu pour que le mandrille, érigé moraliste transcendant, osât enfin se déculotter et se polluer devant les garnos?' (pp. 61–2), and 'Le feuilleton sempiternel de ce drôle continue. Le rabâchage sénile, au lieu de finir dans sa bave, a l'air d'augmenter, menace de tout engloutir, comme une alluvion de crotte' (pp. 104–5). The presence of bodily fluids in Bloy's diatribes is therefore not limited to vomit, but also includes references to semen, spittle, and excrement. Through the emphatic repetition of such references, Bloy's vitriolic disgust in *Je m'accuse* far outstripped Rachilde's more playful, if undeniably acerbic, depiction of Zola's work. Bloy's unwillingness to temper his vitriol with the kind of self-aware humour Rachilde wielded skilfully in her column undoubtedly contributed to the difficulties he faced getting the work published, as the final section of this article suggests.

By employing extreme language and visceral imagery in their responses to *Fécondité*, Rachilde and Bloy were not simply expressing idiosyncratic antipathy towards a specific individual. Rather, they used their critiques to position themselves within the 'critique d'humeur' tradition. This approach, which combined the expression of personal taste with lampooning attacks against others, typically appeared in the works of *pamphlétaire*-style

journalist-writers such as Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, Jules Vallès, and Octave Mirbeau.¹⁷ Rachilde and Bloy's Symbolist peers often adopted this style, which hovered between dogmatic and impressionist criticism, associated with Ferdinand Brunetière and Jules Lemaître, respectively.¹⁸ As Yoan Vêrilhac has shown, such critics rejected the normative values of dogmatism's authority. Instead, they valorized a passionate and partial conviction, the sincerity of which was expressed via 'véhémence' and 'radicalité'.¹⁹ In doing so, they enacted Baudelaire's earlier pronouncements about partiality in art criticism, while mirroring the extreme critical antipathy adopted by Zola himself decades earlier.²⁰ Vêrilhac suggests that the Symbolists inherited tendencies from Zola only to turn them against him, in a gesture that demonstrates the fractious nature of their relationship, mediated by *fin-de-siècle* literary criticism and journalism.²¹ By adopting extreme antipathy in their critical approaches,

¹⁷ Melmoux-Montaubin (2003) analyses these four writers in *L'Écrivain-journaliste*.

¹⁸ See Yoan Vêrilhac, *La Jeune Critique des petites revues symbolistes* (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'université de Saint-Etienne, 2010), p. 109.

¹⁹ Yoan Vêrilhac, 'Le critique, l'écrivain: fusion des empris et redéfinition des rapports dans la jeune critique symboliste', in *L'Anti-critique des écrivains au XIX^e siècle*, ed. by Julie Anselmini and Brigitte Diaz (= *Elseneur*, 28 (2013)), pp. 135–145 (p. 142).

²⁰ In the *Salon de 1846*, Baudelaire wrote: 'la critique doit être partielle, passionnée, politique'. Charles Baudelaire, *Critique d'art; suivi de Critique musicale*, ed. by Claude Pichois and Claire Brunet (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 78. At the start of his career, Zola asserted the importance of partiality and antipathy in literary criticism. In *Mes Haines* (1866), he claimed: 'La haine est sainte. Elle est l'indignation des cœurs forts et puissants, le dédain militant de ceux que fâchent la médiocrité et la sottise.' Émile Zola, *Mes haines: causeries littéraires et artistiques; Mon salon (1866); Édouard Manet: étude biographique et critique* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1923), p. 1.

²¹ Vêrilhac, *La Jeune critique*, p. 35, and Vêrilhac, 'Zola et les jeunes'.

Rachilde and Bloy effectively attacked Zola with his own weapons, while positioning themselves as representatives of a wider literary community that rejected him on both aesthetic and ideological grounds.

Fecundity vs. Sterility: *l'art social* and *l'art pour l'art*

In their reviews of *Fécondité*, Rachilde and Bloy targeted its author's interventions not only in the Dreyfus affair, but also in other contemporaneous debates, such as pronatalism and 'l'art social'. Zola's attitude towards biological reproduction had shifted throughout his career. In the Rougon-Macquart cycle, he regularly depicted fertile heterosexual unions where either the mother or the child, and often both, perish (*L'Assommoir*, *Nana*, *La Terre*) or where sexual relationships remain childless (*La Bête humaine*). Reproduction and fertility are repeatedly associated with death, such as in *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* (1875), where scenes at Le Paradou depict the 'ominous undercurrent of morbidity [...] running beneath the garden's exuberant celebration of growth and fertility'.²² Throughout the 1890s, however, Zola increasingly valorized fertility as a moral and aesthetic imperative. *Fécondité* was one of several interventions Zola made on the question of France's declining birth rate, which by the late 1890s had attracted attention and concern from a range of politicians, moralists, and scientists. This led to the creation of pronatalist pressure groups such as the *Alliance nationale pour l'accroissement de la population française* (founded in 1896), which sought to encourage larger families, particularly among the middle classes, through financial incentives. At the same time, neo-Malthusian theorists and activists disseminated information about birth control and, in some instances, advocated abortion as a means of preventing

²² Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, ed. by T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 66.

unwanted pregnancies.²³ Intervening in this debate, Zola published an article entitled ‘Dépopulation’ in *Le Figaro* (23 May 1896), where he argued that France’s low birth rate had aesthetic foundations, based on a widespread distaste for childrearing, and therefore required an aesthetic solution. He imagined writing a novel that would demonstrate the dangers of sexual ‘fraud’, promote the value of large families, and combat the influence of contemporaneous intellectual and literary trends, including: Schopenhauer’s pessimism, Wagner’s idealization of virginity, the anti-child aesthetic of adultery fiction, and the non-procreative characters in psychological, Decadent, and Symbolist literature.²⁴ Zola associated these trends with the lily – a symbol of purity and virginity, but also of death – and juxtaposed them with pronatalism, represented by productive fields of wheat: ‘Les grands blés nourrisseurs sont coupés, ce sont des champs de lis qui empoisonnent le monde’ (p. 226). The lily/wheat analogy had already featured in ‘À la jeunesse’: another *Le Figaro* article (7 February 1896) which addresses a younger generation of Symbolist writers accused of preferring idealism and *l’art pour l’art* over positivism and *l’art social* (pp. 51–63, especially pp. 58–9). It later returns as a central image in *Fécondité*, appearing through the mantra-like evocations of Mathieu Froment’s expanding family, farm, and prosperity.²⁵

²³ On the history of neo-Malthusianism in France, see Francis Ronsin, *La Grève des ventres: propagande néo-malthusienne et baisse de la natalité française (XIX–XXe siècles)* (Paris: Éditions Aubier Montaigne, 1980).

²⁴ Émile Zola, *Nouvelle Campagne* (Paris: Eugène Fasquelle, 1897), pp. 223–5. Hereafter references appear parenthetically after quotations in the text.

²⁵ As Andrew Counter has noted, Zola’s 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’. See ‘Zola’s *fin-de-siècle* Reproductive Politics’, *French Studies*, 68 (2014), 193–208 (p. 195).

The notion of fecundity in Zola's late writings therefore had clear meta-literary implications, functioning as an analogy for writers' approaches to the literary marketplace and for the different forms of value it produces. This analogy was central to one of Zola's earlier articles, 'Le Solitaire', published in *Le Figaro* on 18 January 1896, shortly after the poet Paul Verlaine's death. The article later appeared alongside 'Dépopulation' and 'À la jeunesse' in *Nouvelle Campagne* (pp. 35–47). In 'Le Solitaire', Zola criticized young writers for creating a myth around Verlaine's supposed disinterestedness. He argued that their vision of market failure as aesthetic success exemplified bad faith, revealing a desire to create easily passable yardsticks for success (p. 43). Most controversially, Zola implicitly depicted himself as the true 'solitaire': that is, a writer free from others' influence and fully in control of their work (p. 47). Unsurprisingly, 'Le Solitaire' provoked intense antagonism from avant-garde critics, to which Zola responded in turn with 'A la jeunesse' (pp. 51–63). In this second article, Zola mocked his critics' accusations of jealousy, acknowledged the inevitability of polarization between literary generations, and re-asserted his literary ideals – namely: clarity, realism, and positivism – which he aligned with 'healthy' sexuality and virility. As Yoan Vêrilhac has noted, this extended polemic shows how avant-garde critics, from little magazines such as *Le Mercure de France*, *La Revue blanche*, and *La Plume*, created collective myths opposing Zola, while at the same time sharing his vision of journalistic criticism as a primal force strengthened by intense antipathy.²⁶ However, as previously noted, Zola's increasing political activism, his move towards socialism, and his pariah-like status during the Dreyfus affair, did in fact gain him sympathy from some corners of the avant-garde. This included contributors to the *Mercure's* primary competitor, *La Revue blanche*, who saw him taking a share of the public's antipathy, which had previously been directed at them.²⁷

²⁶ Vêrilhac, 'Zola et les jeunes', pp. 195–8 and p. 203.

²⁷ Oriol, pp. 96–7.

Unlike their more sympathetic contemporaries, Bloy and Rachilde refused to accept Zola's socio-political activism as exoneration for his aesthetic position. Instead, the pair entered the polemical foray and took Zola to task for his promotion of biological fecundity, which they considered ridiculous, and for his vision of literary fecundity, which they viewed as primarily profit- and popularity-oriented. We see examples of the former when Bloy redeployed demeaning animalistic imagery to attack *Fécondité's* primary 'thesis': 'Tout le monde travaille courageusement à faire des enfants. On se croirait au haras ou chez l'éleveur. Zola grouille là-dedans comme le têtard dans son marais' (p. 103). Rachilde's derision of pronatalism is equally sarcastic. She uses faux-naïf questions to demonstrate contradictions within the novel's moral logic. When discussing the Froments' procreative inclinations, she asks whether the couple stop having sex when the wife is already pregnant: 'Ce Matthieu [sic] Froment cesse-t-il, automatiquement, de fonctionner? Ou, s'il continue, sachant qu'il ne procréé plus, quel genre de plaisir éprouve-t-il? [...] Alors?... Ce sera-t-il du vice... ou de l'abstention? Ce qui regarde la morale, pure, absolue, doit être nettement défini' (p. 490). Rachilde here highlights, through Froment's double bind, the inconsistencies of an ethical system aiming to distinguish completely between procreative sex and sex for pleasure (which, by Zola's own analogy, represent *l'art social* and *l'art pour l'art*, respectively). According to Zola's pronatalist vision, continuing to have sex with a woman once she becomes pregnant would be considered 'immoral', since the primary aim of sex, impregnation, would disappear. While sexual abstention is attacked elsewhere in Zola's novel as representing another form of anti-procreative 'vice', in this example it is the only means of *preventing* that 'vice'. Rachilde's faux-naïf claim to need more specific moral guidance therefore functions as a satirical jibe at the hyperbolic and unnuanced claims made by thinkers and activists who refused to valorize sex, and indeed art, beyond utilitarian parameters. It is precisely this utilitarian framework, typical of *l'art social*, that Rachilde

opposes in Zola's socially engaged novel, which she juxtaposes with his more excusable form of engagement during the Dreyfus affair: 'On peut pardonner à Emile Zola de nous avoir exaspéré durant deux hivers, l'héroïsme étant toujours de l'exaspération en puissance, mais je ne vois pas la nécessité d'admirer un mauvais roman après une belle action' (p. 487). In this sentence, Rachilde offers a backhanded compliment premised on juxtaposing Zola the successful activist with Zola the failed artist. By contrasting the socio-political and artistic realms in this way, Rachilde suggests that success in one domain leads to, and perhaps necessitates, failure in the other.

While undermining *Fécondité's* ideological vision of biological fertility, Rachilde and Bloy used their criticism as a pretext for settling old scores by attacking the image of 'productive' literature from 'Le Solitaire'. In *Je m'accuse*, Bloy cites Zola's earlier article and accuses him of aligning literary success with its financial counterpart, in a conveniently self-promotional gesture: 'Shakespeare en gagnait fort peu et le Dante moins encore. Tu leur es donc très supérieur. Voilà ce qui est entendu' (p. 161). Through this uncharitable interpretation, which employs a form of straw man argument, Bloy depicts Zola as arrogant and presumptuous, while hinting at the anxiety and self-doubt that such claims belied. He expands on this idea when describing Zola's reaction to younger writers' disdain:

Il ne te fut pas possible de cacher que tu gueulais en bavant, à la seule pensée que les jeunes hommes, qui lisaient passionnément des poètes pauvres tels que Barbey d'Aurevilly, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam et Paul Verlaine, te considéraient comme une vieille truette à merde. Etait-ce ma faute? je te le demande.

Il te fallait, à tout prix, une revanche, et l'affaire Dreyfus, heureusement, s'est présentée. (p. 162)

Bloy fills his prose with scatological invective by depicting Zola spitting with anger and calling him a ‘vieille truëlle à merde’. He suggests that Zola’s reaction to younger writers’ critiques reveals the former’s fragile ego, seen in the phrases ‘à la seule pensée’ and ‘à tout prix’, which denote excess. By posing a faux-naïf rhetorical question and by using the word ‘heureusement’ to depict the Dreyfus affair as a convenient form of revenge, Bloy lends a sarcastic tone to his verbal sparring match. The staccato-like cadencing of the final sentence further underscores the dialogic force of Bloy’s insulting address to Zola. Ultimately, Bloy undermines the latter’s claims to literary influence by noting the avant-garde’s preference for other, less financially successful, writers, as well as by emphasizing the impotent and desperate nature of his rage.

In Bloy’s pamphlet, the comparison between Zola and younger avant-garde writers is only a passing reference. However, in Rachilde’s article, it functions as a key structuring device. Throughout the review, she recounts the fictional life story of Mathieu Froment in parallel with Paul Verlaine’s real-life equivalent:

... Il y avait une fois un Monsieur qui se nommait Verlaine. C’était un poète, un patriote nationaliste avant l’heure, chose plus grave un *uraniste*, et un homme de génie, car on peut être tout cela et avoir du génie...

... Il y avait une fois un Monsieur qui se nommait Mathieu Froment. Il n’était ni très beau, ni très spirituel, ni très adroit, mais il était fort bien portant. (p. 488)

By employing the introductory phrasing typical of a fairy tale, Rachilde frames the two men’s stories as related parables, before unravelling the differences between them and the divergent moral lessons they represent. Importantly, Rachilde’s description of Verlaine conveys ambivalence towards his status as a ‘patriote nationaliste’ and ‘uraniste’ – ideologically loaded terms upon which she renders no overt judgement. In this section of her review,

Rachilde uses affirmative rhetoric to represent Verlaine, but defines Mathieu Froment by what he is not ('ni [...] ni [...] ni [...]'), before sarcastically noting his good health: a euphemism for virility. After setting up the initial comparison between the two men, Rachilde continues to juxtapose the rampant heterosexual fertility of Zola's protagonist with the infertile 'uraniste' Verlaine: 'Stérile, possédant à peine la force physique de créer un mouton de plus, il fécondait très utilement la Beauté, chose nécessaire entre toutes pour supporter la vie quotidienne' (p. 491). The reference to sheep aligns Froment – and, by association, Zola – with mediocrity and conformity, which both undermine artistic ideals ('la Beauté'). Rachilde extends this analogy by juxtaposing prey and predator: 'Je ne suis point un moraliste. Je suis cyniquement pour l'Amour égoïste contre la Société; c'est-à-dire dans l'humanité des bêtes fauves et non dans l'humanité pour la multiplication des moutons imbéciles' (p. 491). In this statement, Rachilde mirrors Zola's gesture of making the depopulation debate an aesthetic question, aligning 'l'Amour égoïste' – which includes, but is not limited to, homoeroticism – with *l'art pour l'art* (Verlaine) and pronatalist, heterosexual 'Société' with *l'art social* (Froment). However, she adopts a negative formulation, associating the teleological ideology of 'productivity', central to pronatalism and to Zola's literary ethics, with aesthetically compromised literature, whether that be through its moralizing stance, popularity, or lucrative status. By juxtaposing 'moutons imbéciles' – which we can read as Froment's children, naïve readers, and Zola's many novels – with 'bêtes fauves', Rachilde ultimately promoted a profit-wary and amoral form of aesthetic elitism typical of her Symbolist milieu.

Using their criticism as a discursive weapon, Rachilde and Bloy strategically positioned themselves as defenders of alternative values, to which Zola represented the antithesis. Adopting a quasi-heroic stance, they depict themselves tanning Zola's hide as a punishment for his misdeeds, both aesthetic and ideological. In *Je m'accuse*, Bloy refers to an announcement in *L'Aurore*, regarding a special copy of 'J'accuse...!' offered to Zola by his

supporters. Horrified at the prospect, he exclaims: ‘quel dommage que le relieur ne songe pas à me consulter pour le choix d’une *peau!*’ (p. 80). By suggesting that Zola’s skin be used to bind ‘J’accuse...!’, Bloy expresses his antagonism towards, and desire to punish, Zola, while also hinting that Zola never truly risked his ‘skin’ during the Dreyfus affair. The lexical associations of ‘la peau’ juxtapose the perceived cowardice of Zola’s exile with Bloy’s righteous vengeance.²⁸ Rachilde adopts a similar position of moral superiority, framing her article as an opportunity to right an injustice by tanning Zola’s hide in public. After acknowledging the success of Zola’s interventions in the affair, Rachilde announces her belligerent stance: ‘Alors, comme, de temps en temps, au *Mercure*, on demande la peau du personnage qui n’est pas de notre avis, nous ne voyons pas le crime que ce serait de *tanner* un brin celle du grand champion dreyfusard’ (p. 487). While adopting a playful, tongue-in-cheek tone, Rachilde makes her point clear: Zola’s role in the Dreyfus affair does not provide him with immunity to critique. In fact, she suggests that Zola’s media presence and reputation as the ‘grand champion dreyfusard’ – an ambivalent phrase conveying mocking hyperbole – increase his accountability in the public domain. It is with this argument in place that Rachilde later re-deploys the hide-tanning image to defend *l’art pour l’art* and the writers who exemplify it:

Puisqu’il est d’usage de demander une peau, à la fin d’un article du *Mercure*, je demande celle d’Emile Zola pour en relire les livres de Verlaine. Et j’offre, l’usage le veut ainsi, la mienne en échange pour qu’on en relie *Fécondité...* (seulement je crains bien qu’elle ne soit trop petite.) (pp. 492–3)

²⁸ On Bloy’s unwillingness to see Zola’s exile as anything but an ‘imposture’, see the critical annexe in Léon Bloy, *Je m’accuse*, ed. by Michèle Fontana (Jaignes: La Chasse au Snark, 2003), pp. 170–87 (p. 182).

By portraying herself as the self-sacrificing champion of Symbolism, Rachilde re-deploys and parodies discourses familiar to readers at the height of the Dreyfus affair. Reversing the Dreyfusard logic, Rachilde insists that Zola must be punished for the injustices he has committed in the literary domain, first by denigrating writers like Verlaine, and second by producing substandard novels like *Fécondité*. To do so, Rachilde is willing to put her own reputation on the line, in a gesture akin to duelling in the aristocratic honour system. However, it is worth noting that although Rachilde opposed Zola from a self-appointed position of superiority, she also undercuts her lampooning attack with playful humour, as seen in the parenthetical aside. This softens the harshness of Rachilde's critique, while simultaneously demonstrating her iconoclastic disregard for Zola's literary and social position.

Unlike Rachilde, Bloy offers little in the way of mitigation for his relentless assault on Zola's reputation. As a staunch Catholic, he takes more extreme issue with the language of martyrdom used to describe Zola's actions during the affair, stating that: 'On est tellement dans la viande et l'abolition du sens des mots est si demandée qu'il suffit de parler de souffrances pour éveiller l'idée de Martyre' (p. 121). He not only suggests that Zola's suffering is insufficient to be considered martyrdom, but also denies that the writer truly suffered for his actions. This uncharitable interpretation, which belittles the impact of Zola's exile and pariah status, reflects a cynical vision of the writer's capacity to weather the storm due to his pre-existing wealth, contacts, and easy access to mass publication. As Gilles Negrello has noted, Bloy's opinions on rich and poor artists were bound up in a Catholic vision of the communion of saints, in which the innocent (poor) artists pay for the success, or 'salut', of their guilty (wealthy) counterparts. In other words: wealthy writers achieve their success through other writers' suffering and necessary failure.²⁹ Applying this logic in *Je*

²⁹ Negrello, p. 158.

m'accuse, Bloy argues that Zola is not a martyr, since his earlier financial success – gained at the detriment of other, implicitly worthier, writers – places him in a position of sin or moral damnation. This religious framing belies a harshness that sits uncomfortably alongside Christian teachings regarding forgiveness and charity.³⁰ Indeed, the extremity of Bloy's antipathy emerges in a postscript that he added to a later edition of the work, after Zola had announced *Quatre Évangiles* as the title of his final tetralogy. Citing a fellow Catholic writer, Ernest Hello, Bloy suggests that Zola's egotism had gone too far, and that 'lorsqu'un homme triomphe en lui-même, croyant avoir dompté le destin, et qu'il assigne à la Providence à comparaître devant lui, sa mort est proche. Espérons!' (p. 175). Overtly wishing Zola dead, Bloy claims that this fate would be the most charitable outcome: 'Il est vrai que ce puant peut crever demain. C'est la grâce qu'il faut charitablement souhaiter à des damnés qui ne peuvent plus qu'accroître la rigueur inexprimable de leurs châtements éternels' (p. 177). While Bloy's antipathy is clearly hyperbolic, it responds to the provocative nature of the tetralogy's title, which in Bloy's eyes amounted to sacrilege. That said, his vitriolic prose goes beyond the framework of religious offence-taking used to justify its intensity, and renders the text polemical, if not outright inflammatory.

The Limits of Vitriol: Bloy, Rachilde, and the *Mercure*

Bloy's reputation for excessive vitriol, combined with his marginal, pariah-like status in the literary community, caused delays in the publication of *Je m'accuse* and almost prevented it entirely. Seeking a swift turnaround to heighten the work's polemical impact, Bloy started making enquiries about potential publishers from July 1899, mid-way through *Fécondité's* serialization. He first approached Alfred Vallette, who had published 'Le Crétin des pyrénées' in the *Mercure* in 1894. However, Vallette was reluctant to publish incendiary material at the

³⁰ José Santos, 'Accuser les cochons: Léon Bloy, cet enragé', *Excavatio*, 17 (2002), 221–33 (p. 232).

height of the Dreyfus affair, with the upcoming retrial at Rennes on the horizon. Despite rejecting Bloy's pamphlet, Vallette agreed to place a notice in the September 1899 issue of the *Mercure*, to help him find a publisher. Bloy subsequently contacted Edmond Deman, the Belgian publisher of *Le Mendiant ingrat* (1898), and Chamuel, who had published *Léon Bloy devant les cochons* (1894). These attempts failed, as did those of several Parisian correspondents making enquiries on his behalf. Having completed *Je m'accuse* on 11 October, Bloy turned to a Belgian publisher recommended by two friends: Georges Balat. After receiving Bloy's manuscript, Balat was unresponsive, so Bloy asked a Belgian correspondent, Edouard Bernaert, to retrieve it. Around this time, Bloy made overtures to Rachilde to change Vallette's mind about publishing *Je m'accuse*, while also discussing its potential serialization with Bernaert. Having received a second rejection from Vallette in early November, Bloy agreed to publish sections of his work in Bernaert's recently established periodical, *Par le scandale*, and hoped to collaborate with him on publishing the entire pamphlet. However, this agreement deteriorated with the financial collapse of Bernaert's paper in February 1900. Finally, in April that year, Paul Redonnel, who had replaced the recently deceased Léon Deschamps as director of the little magazine *La Plume*, agreed to publish *Je m'accuse* in 'La Maison d'Art': a newly founded publishing house. After asking Bernaert to return his manuscript, Bloy revised and forwarded it to Redonnel and his associate Paul Ferniot. The book finally appeared in mid-September 1900, with a second edition announced by the end of December that year. With its significantly delayed circulation through a relatively unknown publishing house, *Je m'accuse* achieved neither the *succès de scandale* nor the financial gains Bloy desired. By analysing Bloy's diary entries and correspondence from this period, the article's remaining pages consider Vallette's pragmatism as an editor and the *Mercure*'s broader publishing politics, in order to assess the intersecting factors that made Bloy's vitriol ultimately less palatable than Rachilde's.

As the previous sections demonstrate, *Je m'accuse* wielded scatological language and animalistic comparisons to demean Zola repeatedly and emphatically. This approach to criticism was not new: Bloy had a longstanding reputation for unmitigated invective. By this stage in his career, he had burned bridges with most mainstream newspapers and publishing houses in Paris, and had been systematically refused media attention by fellow writer-journalists, as part of a 'conspiracy du silence'.³¹ Timing was another important factor. When Bloy contacted Alfred Vallette about the potential publication of *Je m'accuse*, in July 1899, Alfred Dreyfus had returned to France and was awaiting retrial at Rennes. With journalistic and political attention turned to this upcoming event, the *Mercure's* director wished to avoid the danger of an untimely or misjudged polemic. Upon receiving Bloy's initial proposal, Vallette expressed an unwillingness to re-ignite heated debates that the retrial could either exacerbate or nullify, depending on the outcome. His response was both pragmatic and conciliatory:

Nous nous fichons, ici, autant des gens de tel journal que de ceux de tel autre, mais l'état des esprits est actuellement au calme, et il ne faut pas rallumer la guerre. Une étincelle y suffirait, et c'est une torche que vous me proposez. Je ne sais comment, de l'étranger, la chose – la chose présente – vous apparaît, mais je crois que si vous étiez ici vous n'auriez pas eu l'idée de publier – de publier présentement – ce pamphlet.³²

³¹ Bloy used the term 'conspiracy du silence' to refer to his reception by fellow writer-journalists, for example in the preface to the 1914 edition of *Histoires désobligeantes* (Paris: G. Crès, 1914), pp. 8–11.

³² Letter cited by Jennifer Birkett in 'The imaginative exploitation of theological doctrines in the work of Leon Bloy (1846–1917)', 2 vols (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 1974), II, p. 30. Hereafter references to Birkett's thesis appendix appear parenthetically after quotations in the text.

While asserting the *Mercure*'s neutrality on the Dreyfus affair, Vallette nonetheless emphasizes the extreme nature of ongoing media debates, and suggests that Bloy's physical distance from Paris reduces his capacity to assess the wisdom of publishing excessive vitriol ('une torche') at that particular moment ('présentement'). Bloy's residence in Denmark undoubtedly affected his ability to stay connected with broader views on the ongoing affair. He received few Parisian newspapers, had a limited – often delayed – correspondence with colleagues in France, and remained beleaguered with financial concerns. Even for a writer with greater tact than Bloy, these conditions would have made judgements about acceptable tone and content difficult.

Seemingly oblivious to such issues, or simply unwilling to let Vallette's pragmatism delay the work's publication, Bloy actively manipulated Rachilde to change her husband's mind about *Je m'accuse*. Having received repeated rejections from other publishers, Bloy seized an opportunity that presented itself through his correspondence. On 28 October 1899, Bloy notes that he has received a draft of Rachilde's *Fécondité* review:

Elle a reçu *Par le Scandale* après son article et dit en effet des choses analogues à mes affirmations. Par malheur, la pauvre femme est un peu incohérente.

Mais j'ai l'impression que Vallette n'aurait plus la même répugnance à m'éditer, s'il comprenait que ma brochure n'a rien de redoutable, rien à voir à la politique. Je vais donc essayer de l'ascendant de sa femme.³³

This diary entry reveals Bloy's patronizing interpretation of Rachilde's review as well as his mercenary approach to literary friendship. It also, indirectly, affirms his perception of

³³ Léon Bloy, *Journal inédit*, ed. by Marianne Malicet and others, 4 vols (Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, 1996–2013), II (2000), p. 697. Hereafter references appear parenthetically after quotations in the text.

Rachilde's influence at the *Mercure de France*, which Bloy was willing to exploit for the purposes of self-interest. In his epistolary response to Rachilde's article draft, Bloy tries to counter Vallette's earlier concerns about publishing a 'compromising' work at an inopportune moment, by interpreting such concerns as a personal fear for Rachilde's literary reputation: 'je m'avise enfin de ceci que je me suis mal expliqué et que Vallette a pu croire qu'il s'agissait d'un pamphlet *politique* plus ou moins dangereux alors qu'il s'agissait de Rachilde en danger d'être compromise par une dédicace pleine de perfidie et de netteté: *à Rachilde, pour la compromettre*' (p. 698). Elsewhere in the letter, Bloy asserts the value of his work, highlighting its timeliness ('actualité') and potential to bring in significant financial revenue ('*une bonne affaire!*'), while guilt-tripping Rachilde through references to his poverty ('mon effrayante situation'). He subsequently offers to dedicate the work to Rachilde, regardless of whether she succeeds in changing her husband's mind, in a gesture of gratuitous sympathy that thinly veils Bloy's desire to curry favour. In fact, Rachilde ultimately refused the dedication, citing her own tendency to compromise others by association: 'dès que mon nom est proféré quelque part l'on s'indigne ou l'on s'enthousiasme mal à propos et l'on me fait toujours du mal... par conséquent il peut rejaillir de ce mal quelque chose pour celui qui a proféré le nom en question!' (cited in Birkett, p. 35).³⁴

While appealing to Rachilde's ego and sympathy, Bloy drew on the language of justice associated with the Dreyfus affair in order to convince her – and, consequently, Vallette – to reconsider his work for publication. Towards the letter's closing lines, he writes:

³⁴ Bloy subsequently mock-dedicated the work to Octave Mirbeau, the 'faux contempteur de grands hommes' who, Bloy implied, had praised *Fécondité* based on his political sympathy with Zola during the Dreyfus affair, rather than on aesthetic value. On *Je m'accuse's* dedication, see Rachilde, 'Les Romans', *Mercure de France*, November 1900, 485–94, (p. 490) and Bloy, *Journal inédit*, II, pp. 961–2.

[C]'est vous qui m'avez suggéré de reconquérir Vallette jusqu'à ce jour mal informé. Donc plaidez pour moi. Songez que L.B. est une *bonne affaire!!!* Sachez que *Je m'accuse* est une chose *exclusivement littéraire* qui vous comblera d'allégresse et qu'il n'est parlé de Dreyfus dans un ton d'ailleurs assez neutre que par rapport à Zola pour qui je montre peu d'enthousiasme, ce faisant j'ai pensé vous plaire. [...]

Vous vous en permettez d'assez raides, au *Mercur*, les uns et les autres, pour ne pas me refuser l'hospitalité. Suppliez donc votre mari de réviser mon procès, de considérer que je suis en danger. Vraiment. (p. 698)³⁵

Bloy's references to the affair are blatant in his request that Rachilde 'plead' on his behalf and that Vallette 'revise' the judgement against him. When citing himself as a '*bonne affaire*', the italics encourage multiple readings: 'affaire' refers not only to a profitable business transaction, but also to a judicial case or media scandal. Bloy's claims about the exclusively literary (and not political) nature of *Je m'accuse* are suspect, especially since he mitigates these claims with qualifiers ('assez neutre') and over emphasis (the italics). Moreover, by suggesting that Vallette is hypocritical to reject *Je m'accuse* based on its polemical nature, while permitting risqué content to appear in the *Mercur*, Bloy indirectly confirms the potential for controversy that he outwardly denies.

Despite his best efforts to wield Rachilde's influence, Bloy failed to change Vallette's mind. Announcing the second refusal in a letter to Bloy, dated 2 November 1899, Rachilde describes Vallette's counter-arguments, which included his doubts regarding the text's saleability and the difficulties he would face in getting the work accepted by the *Mercur*'s publishing committee. While conveying the bad news, Rachilde demonstrated her sympathy for Bloy by continuing negotiations with her husband ('j'ai fait remarquer qu'on ne peut

³⁵ The prose in Bloy's draft letter, as published in the *Journal inédit*, has a slightly different order than the version received by Rachilde. See Birkett, pp. 33–4.

jamais refuser une œuvre *sans l'avoir lue*'), which results in an offer to receive the manuscript for consideration. She also promises better treatment regarding editorial transparency and communication, compared to other publishers Bloy had contacted. That said, she clearly depicts the *Mercure* as a last resort, due to the unlikely acceptance of Bloy's manuscript: 'Si Georges Balat avait le moindre désir d'éditer mon conseil serait de le lui laisser sinon envoyez ici; on vous accusera réception et vous aurez toutes les possibilités de correspondre, bien entendu' (cited in Birkett, p. 35). Vallette's position, as an editor rather than a fellow-writer, meant that his sympathy could only go so far, and the reference to financial unviability serves as a harsh counterpoint to Bloy's repeated, almost desperate, refrains of 'bonne affaire' throughout his correspondence. However, Vallette's pragmatism did not preclude a genuine desire to support Bloy through other means. For example, he played an important role in getting the *Mercure* to publish a different book, *Le Fils de Louis XVI* (1900), only months after rejecting *Je m'accuse*. Funds received for this work helped Bloy and his family return to Paris after their unsuccessful exile in Denmark.³⁶ The publication of one work but not the other suggests that Vallette was in good faith when he explained the reasons for rejecting *Je m'accuse*. The latter's topic, combined with Bloy's well-known proclivity for excessive vitriol, simply had too much incendiary potential for the *Mercure*'s editorial board to accept it.

By the late 1890s, the *Mercure de France* had a reputation for non-partisan eclecticism in its approach to literary and socio-political debates. Compared to its competitors, notably *La*

³⁶ 'Bloy's return from Denmark was made possible by the intervention of Foulon de Vaulx (Henri Provins) who persuaded a rich Naundorffist, Madame Barbey, to pay 2,000 francs for the publication of *Le Fils de Louis XVI*. Vallette contrived to send the whole of the sum to Bloy'. Birkett, p. 31, footnote 1. See also Bloy, *Journal inédit*, II, pp. 817, 839, 844, 846, 859, 865, and 877.

Revue blanche, the *Mercure* remained relatively impartial during the Dreyfus affair. Yet, as Bloy's comment to Rachilde suggests ('Vous vous en permettez d'assez raides, [...] pour n'avoir guère le droit de me refuser l'hospitalité'), the review did not shy away from publishing provocative content, especially during its early years. Furthermore, its *maison d'édition* gained much of its initial notoriety by publishing eroticized novels such as Pierre Louÿs's *Aphrodite* (1896) and Hugues Rebell's *La Nichina* (1897).³⁷ Even as the paper evolved, adopting a more neutral approach to topical issues,³⁸ there was still some scope for controversy, as demonstrated by the scathing nature of Rachilde's reviews. That said, Rachilde's more excessive diatribes raised eyebrows amongst her peers. In the closing lines of a letter to Vallette, written shortly after receiving the *Mercure*'s November 1899 issue, the writer Eugène Demolder commented on Rachilde's review: 'Mes cordiaux hommages à Madame Rachilde (oh! le pauvre Zola! Bigre on n'est pas indulgent tous les jours dans les chroniques littéraires du Mercure!)'.³⁹ The fact that one of Rachilde's peers reacted in such a way suggests that her attack was especially harsh, perhaps only borderline acceptable, even when judged by her avant-garde milieu's standards. Considered in tandem with Vallette's remarks about *Je m'accuse*, Demolder's comment suggests that, although it was possible to publish excessive vitriol in the *Mercure*, such leeway came with restrictions regarding who, what, when, and where.

While Rachilde's position at the *Mercure* allowed her greater scope for publishing risqué material, her relationship with the review was not completely harmonious. Her

³⁷ Fontana, *Léon Bloy*, p. 100.

³⁸ Michel Décaudin, 'Le "Mercure de France": filiations et orientations', *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 92 (1992), 7–16.

³⁹ IMEC Archives, Fonds Blaise Gautier. Correspondence between Eugène Demolder and Alfred Vallette [1890–1928], MDF 9. 46. Letter dated 16 November 1899.

correspondence with Bloy suggests that she experienced some push-back from other contributors, or at the very least was not on the same political or aesthetic wavelength as many of them. Towards the end of her letter from 2 November 1899, Rachilde expresses dissonance with other contributors and the review's general atmosphere. She broaches the topic ominously with the phrase: 'Maintenant, il faut que je vous mette un peu au courant de... l'air de la maison.' In opposition to Vallette's earlier claim that the *Mercur* was indifferent to the Dreyfus affair ('Nous nous fichons, ici, autant des gens de tel journal que de ceux de tel autre'), Rachilde asserts that the majority, if not all, of her fellow contributors were committed Dreyfusards who supported Zola's late-career vision of social art ('Ils sont tous Dreyfusards ici et s'ensocialisent jusqu'aux oreilles'). She goes on to analyse the reasons for this trend: 'Ils gagnent ce mal à n'avoir pas compris que l'on doit s'intéresser *aux siens* avant de s'intéresser aux gens des nations voisines et l'internationalisme qui est à la fois la *tare* et l'*habileté* des Juifs devient pour eux la source de leur progrès et le nivelage certain de leur individualité.' Reading this sentence alongside the pig analogy employed in the *Fécondité* review, it is clear that Rachilde was an anti-Dreyfusard who harboured anti-Semitic and nationalist opinions, which she channelled through a broader stance of aesthetic elitism. This position, which was not unusual for the period, is worth noting because it shows the difficulty of recuperating Rachilde's writing for 'progressive' political ends, according to twenty-first century standards. Later in her letter, she hints at disagreements with Vallette, whose workload and aspirations for a broader readership prevent him from supporting writers, like Bloy, whose opinions and works push too strongly against 'acceptable' opinion: 'Vallette est débordé de travail il ne peut voir cela et le verrait-il il est devenu *trop pour la grande diffusion* pour demeurer fidèle aux cas isolés. Vous en êtes un. J'en suis un. [...] Maintenant, il y a l'*art utile, l'art social. La fin de tout!*' (cited in Birkett, pp. 35–6). The highlighted words '*grande diffusion*' suggest that Vallette's ambitions have become chiefly

pecuniary, and align financial success with the denigrated aesthetic standards required to achieve mass appeal. Rachilde implies that Vallette (and, by association, the *Mercure* as a whole) has become uncannily similar to writers like Zola, who pander to mass markets: the ‘moutons imbéciles’ denigrated in her column. The accusation of disloyalty betrays disappointment and bitterness, which suggests that Rachilde experienced friction regarding her ideological position and the copy she produced. By comparing herself to Bloy in the paratactic isocolon: ‘Vous en être un. J’en suis un’, Rachilde identifies with the latter’s marginality, while implicitly doing so from a position of greater financial security and literary standing. Through her advice, Rachilde simultaneously demonstrates her influence and highlights its limitations. For although she may have had sufficient literary standing to publish her own vitriol, Rachilde was ultimately not influential enough to vouch successfully for that produced by a colleague.

Conclusion

The content and publishing history of Rachilde and Bloy’s responses to *Fécondité* exemplify the thin but flexible line delineating acceptable and unacceptable forms of public discourse at the *fin de siècle*. Despite both producing critiques with comparable invective force, and despite both defending *l’art pour l’art* against Zola’s moralizing *l’art social*, the pair received very different treatment when it came to publishing their bile. Several factors, both textual and extra-textual, explain this situation. First, there are differences in length: Rachilde’s article is shorter than Bloy’s, and therefore risks falling less frequently into excess and repetition. Another key difference is the presence of ironic humour in Rachilde’s article, which offsets some of the harsher aspects of her critique. Bloy rarely blunts his attacks with good-natured humour, but instead sharpens them with a religiosity that borders on fanaticism. Beyond the texts’ content, Rachilde’s personal influence at the *Mercure*, her presence in Paris, and her status as a regular columnist undoubtedly facilitated the publication of prose

that, from a less well-positioned writer, may not have passed muster. The medium of each text is also noteworthy, since a review appearing alongside other articles in a collaborative periodical has a less provocative form than a sole-authored, sole-topic pamphlet with an inflammatory title. So, while Bloy's lack of moderation was probably the most influential factor contributing to his rejection, it was heavily exacerbated by his lack of economic, social, and cultural capital, such that he failed to pass communal standards of acceptability, even amongst peers well-versed in 'critique d'humeur'.

The fact that Rachilde's review was uncannily similar to Bloy's pamphlet but was still published shows how difficult it was to publish vitriol at the *fin de siècle* without strong support networks or tactical know-how. As a case study, *Je m'accuse's* publication history sheds light on how such networks and know-how worked behind the scenes at the *Mercure*, through debates between friends, spouses, and colleagues, and through tensions between contributors, that would otherwise be opaque to the review's readership. It confirms the role played by editors and directors in selecting what material was acceptable, through a process of internalized censorship, in a literary milieu known for controversy and subversion. The intersection of personal ties and publication politics in this example shows how Rachilde and Vallette were a source of support for marginal writers, while also acting as gatekeepers for access to the *Mercure's* broader influence in the literary sphere. Yet it also demonstrates the limitations of any single individual's influence in a collaborative journalistic enterprise, since Vallette, as director, felt unable to push through a work without the support of the *Mercure's* publishing committee. Ultimately, the interplay of individual against collective (or perceived collective) judgement in this case study shows how marginality applied in different ways to different people across the literary hierarchy, making some more powerful than others, but leaving no individual free from the experience of powerlessness.

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