ZOLA AND THE AMERICAN CRITICS

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THE first novel by Emile Zola to attract widespread attention in America was *L'Assommoir,* which made its appearance in 1877 in French, and in an English translation two years later. The period was an inauspicious one for the pronounced and somewhat brutal realism of Zola, and the reception accorded *L'Assommoir* by the American critics was decidedly unfavorable. *The Nation* said, "I have quit the novel as I should have gone out of a dissecting room; *L'Assommoir* left in me an impression of anger and disgust."[1] *The Atlantic Monthly,* in its review of the novel, described Zola as an author who deliberately blackened every human being he could lay his hands upon, and the reviewer maintained that "all of this diving down into unutterable defilement does not belong to fiction."[2] When an English translation of the novel appeared in 1879, *Harper's Magazine* declared:

> Of Emile Zola's *L'Assommoir* the less said the better. A revelation of some of the most revolting phases of low Parisian life, its atmosphere is loaded with moral contagion. Its impure pictures may be life-like, but so would be the reproduction of a cancerous sore, or of a scrofulous ulcer. We would as soon introduce the smallpox into our homes as permit this unclean volume to come into contact with the pure-minded maidens and ingenuous youth who form their chiefest ornament.[3]

The Boston *Literary World* "did not advise anyone to read *L'Assommoir,*"[4] but that it was being read widely in spite of vigorous criticism, *The Atlantic Monthly* revealed in April, 1880.[5] In September, 1879, *The Nation* condemned the novel for offering "stimulus and means to the wicked; but neither help nor suggestion of anything better as possible."[6] One critic, it would seem, condemned Zola for not having made vice romantic:

[1] *The Nation,* XXIV, 160-162 (March 15, 1877).
[2] *The Atlantic Monthly,* XXXIX, 761-763 (June, 1877).
[3] *Harper's Magazine,* LIX, 309 (July, 1879).
[4] *The Literary World,* X, 202 (June 21, 1879).
[5] *The Atlantic Monthly,* XLV, 571 (April, 1880).
[6] *The Nation,* XXIX, 213 (September 25, 1879).

The vice even has no fascination in it; the wickedness is without romance; it is low, sordid, stupid, vulgar. There is magnificent scene painting, but no drama; perfect wardrobes, but no hero and no heroism. And this is very far from the perfection of art.[7]

Nana, which appeared in America in 1880, aroused much unfavorable criticism. *The Literary World* said, "We cannot see the use of writing such books, or the profit of reading them."[8] *The Nation* said:

Nana, in fine, is not worth reading, but everyone who has been irritated by the extent to which the theory of "le naturalisme" has been carried will rejoice that it was written. It is a blow from which the cult of M. Zola will hardly recover.[9]

Mr. Thomas S. Perry, writing in *The Atlantic Monthly,* was severely condemnatory, maintaining that "the book was so distasteful that no right-minded critic could even mention it without becoming unclean."[10] *Nana* inspired a long article in *The North American Review* entitled "Profligacy in Fiction," in which it was stated that there was no warning in Nana's life for the innocent, but rather they were encouraged to vice; the critic condemned "foreign purveyors of infection" generally, and contrasted the undesirable influence of French novels with the ennobling influence of the English novel, which "has been a powerful agency of reform and purification."[11]

In 1881, *Le Roman expérimental,*[12] Zola's expository essay on the theory underlying his novels, arrived in America. In it, Zola, in addition to his vain endeavor to reconcile the methods of science with those of literature, explained his well-known "humanitarian purpose." He asserted that just as medical science experiments in order to make itself master of disease and thus benefits humanity, the experimental novelist concerns himself with the problems of man as a social being in order that he may re-establish equilibrium and health in the social order. "Donc les romanciers naturalistes sont bien en effet des moralistes expérimentateurs," he concluded.

[7] *The Literary World,* X, 359-360 (November 8, 1879).
[8] *Ibid.,* XI, 58 (February 14, 1880).
[9] *The Nation,* XXX, 311-312 (April 22, 1880).
[10] *The Atlantic Monthly,* XLV, 693-699 (May, 1880).
[11] *The North American Review,* CXXXI, 79-89 (July, 1880).
[12] An English translation of this essay did not appear until 1895.

The Critic doubtfully admitted that Zola might be considered a good moral influence because he made vice unattractive:

Zola draws the consequences of vice to hundreds besides its legitimate victims, and so fraught with dissatisfaction does he invariably depict even the short-lived triumphs of one who is a slave to temptation, that we can conceive of a serious-minded person debating whether he would not put one of these books into the hands of the tempted.[13]

But this recognition of Zola's claim of a humanitarian, ethical purpose was not representative of American critics in general. *The North American Review,*[14] *The Atlantic Monthly, The Nation,*[15] and *The Literary World* refused to recognize such an aim in his work. *The Atlantic Monthly* stated:

Whenever a French novelist claims to have a purpose with a large P, it is safe to assume that he intends to be particularly indecent.[16]

The Literary World revealed something of the attitude of the period when it said:

The mission of art is to please, to elevate the mind by appealing to the emotions on the noble side. Zola succeeds only in arousing disgust. The interest felt in his novels must be that of a man of science watching with abhorrent fascination some hideous larva crawling in the filth of a dung hill.[17]

Indeed, for a time after the appearance of *Le Roman expérimental,* criticism of Zola became more severe than ever. For some unknown reason *The Critic* reversed its hesitant recognition of a moralistic purpose and became extremely condemnatory. In March, 1882, it declared that none but a tainted mind could produce Zola's works, and that his methods "are those which lead to the madhouse."[18] A year later the same periodical reiterated:

He seems to be mentally smitten with an awful disease. He is following the path which leads to a madness. His sincerity, his force of character,

[13] *The Critic,* I, 189 (July 16, 1881).
[14] *The North American Review,* L, 323-339 (October, 1882).
[15] *The Nation,* XXXIV, 233-234 (March 16, 1882).
[16] *The Atlantic Monthly,* XLVIII, 432 (September, 1881).
[17] *The Literary World,* XIII, 401 (November 18, 1882).
[18] *The Critic,* II, 72-73 (March 11, 1882).

his strength of will, are all rotting away. For the author we may have pity.[19]

The same lack of restraint had characterized its review of *Pot-bouille* when that novel appeared in 1882; the book was decried as "filthy, immoral garbage"[20] and the intervention of the Society for the Prevention of Vice, whose activities at that time were directed by the redoubtable Anthony Comstock, was called for. *The Literary World* was equally violent, labeling the book as "nauseously offensive, reeking with filth, a veritable hot-bed of indescribable grossness" which would "besmear everyone who touched it."[21]

In contradistinction to these opinions of the majority of American critics were those of Henry James and William Dean Howells. Henry James met Zola at Flaubert's house in Paris in 1876. Zola at this time was having trouble with the French public and critics, and the publication of a serial novel had just been interrupted because of the protests of provincial subscribers. James, in a letter to Howells, expressed sympathy for Zola in his financial loss, but the letter implied that James had little knowledge of Zola's work at that time, and little active interest in him.[22] But eight years later, in 1884, the early indifference had become admiration. On February 21, 1884, James wrote to Howells:

I have been seeing something of Daudet, Goncourt, and Zola; and there is nothing more interesting to me now than the effort and experiment of this little group, with its truly infernal intelligence of art, form, manner—its intense artistic life. They do the only kind of work today that I respect; and in spite of their ferocious pessimism and their handling of unclean things, they are at least serious and honest. The floods of tepid soap and water which, under the name of novels, are being vomited forth in England, seem to me, by contrast, to do little honour to our race. . . . Read Zola's last thing: *La Joie de vivre*. This title, of course, has a desperate irony: but the work is admirably solid and serious. . . .[23]

James began actively to champion Zola and French naturalism in the United States. In an article published in *The Atlantic Monthly*

[19] *The Critic,* III, 104 (March 10, 1883).
[20] *Ibid.,* II, 140 (May 20, 1882).
[21] *The Literary World,* XIII, 175 (June 3, 1882).
[22] *Letters of Henry James,* I, 49-50.
[23] *Ibid.,* I, 104-105.

in January, 1884, he dealt favorably with the liberal views of the "Flaubert group" regarding the relation between art and morality:

It would have been late in the day to propose among them any discussion of the relation of art to morality, any question as to the degree in which a novel might or might not concern itself with the teaching of a lesson. They had settled these preliminaries long ago, and it would have been primitive or incongruous to recur to them. The conviction that held them together was the conviction that art and morality are two perfectly different things, and that the former has no more to do with the latter than it has with astronomy or embryology. The only duty of a novel was to be well-written; that merit included every other of which it was capable.[24]

James had this to say about the American attitude toward realism at that time:

It is not open to us, as yet, to discuss whether a novel had better be an excision from life, or a structure built up of picture cards, for we have not made up our mind as to whether life in general may be described.[25]

In May of the same year, William Dean Howells published in *The Atlantic Monthly* an account of a meeting of the naturalistic group at Daudet's house in Paris. The tone of the article was distinctly sympathetic towards the naturalists, and said in part:

The profound and delicious enjoyment that invades you in the presence of certain pages and certain phrases does not come simply from what those phrases say; it comes with an absolute accordance of the expression with the idea—from a sensation of harmony, of secret beauty, that generally escapes the judgment of the profane crowd. It is the pursuit of this high, mysterious beauty, the search for this soul of words that appears on contact with other words, and bursts forth and illumines the pages with an unanalyzable, subtle light, that forms the constant care and study of the modern French novelists. They are perpetually toiling and moiling and racking their brains to find *the* word, the one and only word, verb, epithet, or phrase, that is the perfect and absolute expression of the thing.[26]

When it is considered that Henry James and William Dean Howells were at this time two of the outstanding men of letters in Amer-

[24] *The Atlantic Monthly*, LIII, 46 (January, 1884).
[25] *Ibid.*, LIII, 52 (January, 1884).
[26] *Ibid.*, LIII, 726 (May, 1884).

ica, such an attitude could hardly have been without effect. Whatever influence they had in helping to bring about a more tolerant feeling toward Zola among American critics was not, however, immediately apparent. *La Joie de vivre,* which Henry James had found "admirably solid and serious," *The Literary World* called "utterly contemptible, a disgrace to literature, to science, and to civilization."[27] *The Nation* contrasted Zola unfavorably with Eugène Sue whose novels "made us shudder without making us blush."[28] *The Critic* made it quite clear that American preferences in fiction did not include naturalism:

We will gladly follow the fortunes of our hero through whatever devious windings, providing we may see him at last basking in the sunshine of some sweet valley or glorious hilltop; but we do not feel paid when at last we find him disfigured, discolored, disintegrated. We are not overfond of tragedy, unless it be of that kind where virtue, fortitude and honor survive and are crowned, in lieu of the mere persons of the hero and heroine. . . . The favorite plot of the novelist nowadays—is it anything more than a process of disintegration? Disintegration is, of course, a natural process. Dissolution never ceases in nature; but these are not pleasant processes to follow. Though useful to the student of disease, they are surely not advantageous to the invalid searching for health; and most of us, in our moments of novel reading are to be classed in the category of invalids.[29]

In a public address, Maurice Thompson criticized "the realists" for "dealing only with the faults of human character, instead of attempting to imagine noble instances of human self-sacrifice, of lofty aspiration, and of soul-stirring passion." Continuing, he said:

The desire for happy endings is a healthful, sane desire; a taste for disappointing conclusions is an artificial one, acquired at the expense of much that is necessary to perfect moral sanity.[30]

It was not until two years after Howells and James first publicly expressed sympathy for the naturalists, that Zola was approved by any other American critics. In 1886, Professor J. W. Davidson,[31] in

[27] *The Literary World,* XV, 127 (April 19, 1884).
[28] *The Nation,* XL, 286 (April 2, 1885).
[29] *The Critic,* III, 157-158 (April 4, 1885).
[30] Quoted by *The Critic,* VI, 20 (July 10, 1886).
[31] For biographical details, see *Cyclopedia of American Biography,* IX, 100.

an address delivered before the "Concord School," praised Zola as follows:

I find in Socrates' irony of conversation one characteristic which distinguishes it from the irony of most other men. I can think of only four other men whose irony has the same characteristic—Aristotle, Jesus, Goethe, and Zola. I know it will surprise most of you to hear me include Zola in this noble company but I do so with knowledge of cause. Zola is much decried at present for an over-devotion to truth, which he persists in telling in its entirety, yea, even when he uses irony. Let us then not join in the cry, remembering that Socrates, in his day, was put to death for atheism and for corrupting the youth of Athens, that Aristotle had to flee for similar reasons, that Jesus was crucified for blasphemy. . . . That howl is mostly hushed, nowadays, and so will the present howl against Zola soon be. In the whole range of literature, I know of no more cool, calm, terrible irony than that of Zola. It is the very irony of truth itself.[32]

In his reply to the criticism which such statements naturally aroused, Davidson defended Zola's "humanitarian" aims. He stated, in part:

Newspaper reports of vice and crime . . . merely record disagreeable facts, which repel the pure-minded and attract the impure-minded; in the former case doing no good, in the latter doing harm, in neither pointing the way to any remedy or arousing men's minds to apply any such. They are, therefore, deserving of entire reprobation. Zola's novels, on the contrary, while reporting the same facts, present them to us in their connection, show us their causes in existing social or other institutions, and their effects upon men's lives and characters, and so at once suggest a remedy and rouse us to apply it. No one who has read Zola's novels understandingly will ever think of denying this. . . . One of the chief merits of Zola is that he presents vice in all its prosaic, dull, heartless, disgusting nakedness. No man has made vice so unlovely, so sickening as Zola has done.

The Literary World now admitted: "We are willing to concede that the view [Davidson's] is one which may be defended with some force," and several months later, this periodical, which had reviewed Zola's *Pot-bouille* under the title of "Zola's Stink Pot" and had called the book among other things "a veritable hot-bed of in-

[32] Quoted by *The Literary World*, XVII, 264 (August 7, 1886).

describable grossness which will besmear everyone who touches it,"[33] now declared more temperately that it was not Zola's sensuality which it had condemned so much as it was his misrepresentation of humanity and his unmitigated pessimism: "these are the qualities, not immorality, which deform and sterilize his art."[34]

That a tendency to regard Zola's novels with a greater degree of tolerance was beginning to make itself felt among American critics was evidenced by the reception afforded *La Terre* in 1888. Of all Zola's novels it was most open to the charge of sensuality, since in it Zola endeavored to depict the animality and degradation which, he felt, often characterized French peasant life. Yet *The Critic,* which a few years back had almost savagely denounced novels much less frank, such as *L'Assommoir,* now acknowledged in *La Terre,* probably the most brutally realistic of Zola's novels, an ethical purpose which greatly mitigated its evils. *The Critic* now stated:

It is possible to perceive in Zola a desire, not to wallow in sensuality for its own sake, but to rouse the student to a sense of what sensuality, constant degradation, intolerable and irremediable poverty and hopeless physical suffering will lead the peasant class to, born as they are without higher instincts and bred as they are without noble teaching to ward off natural consequences. As a story we cannot conceive of anybody's finding it interesting; it is dull, slow, unpleasant, and bestial; but as a study, one reads between the lines and is filled with pity and a wholesome sense of warning. Zola has become a synonym for everything that is bad; and when a suspicion of profligacy, sensuality, and riotous bestiality appear in other work, we are wont to shrink from the suggestion of "an American Zola." But it is safe to say that the American Zolas have never based their sensuality and bestiality on any such ground as a revelation or a warning or an impulse to pity, as may be perceived by the careful reader of Zola, himself.[35]

Whether or not the foregoing article was influenced by Howells's writings in defence of Zola cannot definitely be ascertained, yet it is significant that in the article the following is quoted from a review commending *La Terre* which Howells had written for *Harper's Magazine:*

[33] See *The Literary World,* XIII, 175 (June 3, 1882).
[34] *Ibid.,* XVIII, 148 (May 14, 1887).
[35] *The Critic,* IX, 255-256 (May 26, 1888).

The bestiality of Zola has this excuse: that it is the bestiality of a class that could not well be otherwise than bestial. It is of a kind also to rouse a profound sense of the terrors, the dangers, the revenges to which the state and the aristocratic classes are exposing themselves by their indifference to the degradation and the suffering of such a class as is represented in *La Terre*. . . . It [*La Terre*] legitimately addresses itself to scientific curiosity and humane interest.[36]

That Howells's advocacy of Zola's claim attracted considerable attention may be assumed from the following editorial comment:

Mr. Howells's statement that *La Terre* represented a phase of life which had a legitimate place in fiction, has aroused almost as much discussion as the book itself. Mr. Howells is right in saying that the phase of life is one it behooves us not to ignore.[37]

Several months later *The Critic* reiterated its belief in Zola's moralistic aims:

Whoever knows anything of the man Zola, or has made a dispassionate study of his works, knows him to be terribly in earnest, and however intemperate and mistaken in his methods, still an advocate of reform. He makes vice loathsome, not engaging.[38]

The novels of Zola which appeared in America during the nineties were on the whole favorably received by the critics. The comment of *The Critic* upon *L'Argent* was typical:

It is a masterly work, unnecessarily revolting at times in some of its details, but nevertheless a book in which a difficult subject is handled with the utmost skill.[39]

La Débâcle was generally admitted to be a work of power; it was more widely approved than any other of Zola's novels, perhaps because, as *The Literary World* said, "the shudder is merely physical, not moral."[40] *The Critic,* which ten years before had designated Zola's *Pot-bouille* as "filthy, immoral garbage" and had declared that "the author, henceforth, is not only a literary outlaw; he is on his way to the madhouse,"[41] now said,

[36] *Harper's Magazine,* LXXVI, 641-642 (March, 1888).
[37] *The Critic,* IX, 255-256 (May 26, 1888).
[38] *Ibid.,* XIII, 63-64 (August 11, 1888).
[39] *Ibid.,* XV, 262 (May 16, 1891).
[40] *The Literary World,* XXIII, 245 (July 16, 1892).
[41] *The Critic,* II, 140 (May 20, 1882).

It was a brilliant idea to introduce the scientific spirit of the age into the novel, and Zola set to work upon it with his immense energy and his unshakable resolution. One by one the evils of his time have been taken up by this prodigious representative of Latin realism and laid before the world in all their enormity.[42]

The Dial, which, like nearly all American periodicals, had formerly criticized Zola severely, now said in a review of *La Débâcle:*

He spares us none of the horrors of his subject; nor in such a case should they be spared. We doubt if the conditions of that struggle and the tremendous events that led up to and followed upon the fatal day of Sedan have ever received a more careful and masterly analysis than M. Zola has here given them. . . . After all, morality is merely the nature of things; let things be shown as they are, and they convey their own lesson; nothing explicit is needed.[43]

When *La Bête humaine* appeared in 1892, a writer in *The North American Review* stated:

I do not think his books immoral. He is mercilessly outspoken, coarse, revolting, painfully true to our lowest nature, but he does not paint for the sake of pruriency, or the amusement of the vile-minded. Some of his books are distinctly and powerfully of a most moral tendency.[44]

We may suppose from the foregoing that the acceptance of Zola's claim of a humanitarian purpose was making headway among the American critics, and that many of his revolting scenes were now beginning to be considered powerful indictments of the evil with which he was dealing.

It may be well to digress here for a moment to call attention to a letter written by the capable English critic Arthur Waugh to *The Critic* in October, 1893. The letter served, it may be believed, to encourage those American critics who had already adopted a favorable attitude towards Zola. It was written on the occasion of Zola's visit to England in 1893 and his cordial reception at the London Guildhall by the English journalists, an event which many regarded as evidence of reconciliation with the British middle class. Mr. Waugh remarked on "the vast change in English taste and appre-

[42] *The Critic,* XVIII, 103-104 (August 27, 1892).
[43] *The Dial,* XIII, 105 (August, 1892).
[44] *The North American Review,* CLIV, 91-92 (January, 1892).

ciation that has taken place during the last few years—a change which it may be said without offense, was necessary to render the warmth and spontaneity of M. Zola's welcome a true and genuine thing."[45] Continuing, Mr. Waugh said:

It must be within the recollection of most readers that but a few years have elapsed since an English publisher was tried and imprisoned for the publication of M. Zola's works! And today we are all ready with our eulogy upon his "brilliant and triumphant" career! The whirligig of time indeed brings its revenges. It is only of late that English taste has been able to distinguish between the frank and the prurient. The presence of M. Zola at the lecturer's desk reminds us of one good truth, which in the haste of the hour we are apt to overlook—the priceless truth that we are progressing, that the grey hours of our national taste are melting into the dawn.[46]

Praise predominated in the reviews of Zola's indictment of religious fanaticism, *Lourdes*.[47] Appreciation of Zola's "epic greatness" was voiced in William Dean Howells's *My Literary Passions,* which was published in 1895. Howells stated:

I do not mind owning that Zola has been one of my great literary passions, almost as great as Flaubert, and greater than Daudet or Maupassant, though I have profoundly appreciated the exquisite artistry of both of these.

He granted that Zola's material might be distressing to people of Puritanical traditions, that the naked facts he presented might be construed as indecent, but, said he:

for my own part, I think that the books of Zola are not immoral. . . . Every literary theory of mine was contrary to him when I took up *L'Assommoir,* though unconsciously I had always been as much of a realist as I could, but the book possessed me with the same fascination that I felt the other day in reading his *L'Argent.*

[45] *The Critic,* XX, 231 (October 7, 1893).

[46] For a complete discussion of the controversy over Zola's novels in England, see the article in *P. M. L. A.* by William C. Frierson. (*P. M. L. A.,* XLIII, 533-550, June, 1928.)

[47] See *The Critic,* XXII, 89-90 (August 11, 1894); *The Literary World,* XXV, 386-387 (November 17, 1894); *The Dial,* XVIII, 54-55 (January 16, 1895); *The Nation,* LIX, 181-182 (September 6, 1884).

An event now occurred which was important in furthering Zola's popularity in America among the reading public as well as among the critics. This event was the Dreyfus case, in which Zola took a prominent part. Americans took an active and sympathetic interest in the case of the falsely-accused French Jew. The America of the period had not yet felt the effects of the Russian-Jewish invasion which was later to result in anti-Semitic sentiment, and her idealistic nature was profoundly touched by what seemed to be a glaring case of injustice. On the morning of January 13, 1898, Zola sent his famous open letter to the President of the French Republic, with its striking title, *J'Accuse!* The picture which Zola drew in this letter of an innocent man, suffering torture on the notorious Devil's Island for a crime that he had never committed, was unforgettable. The subsequent prosecution of Zola, which had the appearance of a persecution, and his flight from France to England, a refugee because of his courageous stand for truth and justice, appealed strongly to the American imagination. Here was proof, many Americans believed, that the man who had maintained from the beginning of his career that his sole purpose in writing novels was a humanitarian one, his only aim that truth might prevail, was sincere. The comments of *The Nation* and *The Dial* were typical. *The Nation* said:

> In view of a recent *cause célèbre,* it should not be difficult to persuade the reading public in this country and in England that M. Zola is a sincere lover and even a devoted champion of civil justice.[48]

The Dial likewise stated that "Zola's part in the Dreyfus case has compelled the admiration of the disinterested public," and commended him for displaying in his novels "the impatient and passionate idealism of the clear-sighted philosophical observer, who does not shrink from laying bare the plague spots of the present, knowing that by such service the permanent interests of society are best furthered."[49]

In *The North American Review* for September, 1899, Henry James, in an essay entitled, "The Present Literary Situation in France," described Zola's method as his most important contribution

[48] *The Nation,* LXVII, 57 (July 21, 1898).
[49] *The Dial,* XXIV, 184-186 (March 16, 1898).

to literature, and stated that he regarded Zola as a novelist of importance. He said, in part:

He would still be magnificent, if he had nothing for him but his solidarity —in the contemplation of which I should almost luxuriously lose myself were it permitted to me to treat in summary fashion even one side of his work. He is a large enough figure to make us lose time in walking round him for the most convenient view. What he has most vividly created, to my sense, is the process which has seen him through. His method is what makes him most interesting. . . . There the system is today, supremely representing, in his behalf, the communication of life. We have seen it at work, time after time—seen it more and more a calculated means to an end; and have lived with it during these years very greatly to our entertainment, if not to our highest edification. I may not here undertake the business of describing it, and I mention it, indeed, mainly to pay it publicly my respects. For it has been in its way an intellectual lesson. It has shown, at least, admirably what a method can do.[49a]

When *Fécondité* appeared in 1900, a periodical which eight years before had immoderately condemned Zola, now declared:

This is indeed a great novel. It is the triumph of a large mind and a full heart. The interiors of life are open, the immoralities of some men and women are in full view; the depravities, degradations, and disasters which characterize human experience are not avoided. But the purpose is novel, the plane of vision is elevated, the literary skill is varied and abundant, and the atmosphere is pure and uplifting. The book is an ascension of genius. May the people have ears to hear what this master—this in a way greater than Bossuet and Massillon, though in a different way, has to say.[50]

At the time of Zola's death, which occurred on September 29, 1902, he was favorably regarded by many American critics. In a period of a little over twenty years an almost complete reversal of public opinion in regard to the novelist had taken place. On the occasion of his death, *The Dial* stated:

Had Zola died ten years ago, the verdict of criticism would have been substantially different from what it must be today. . . . Re-reading his earlier novels in the light of his later ones, as well as in the light of his public

[49a] *The North American Review,* CLXIX, 498-499 (September, 1899).
[50] *The Literary World,* XXXI, 131 (July 1, 1900).

acts, we discover in them things that we never saw before, glimpses of the larger aspects of truth that he so studiously sought to conceal. . . . From the position of the dispassionate scientific observer he has come to assume something of the position of the prophet, and his utterances have gained immensely in weight and authority.[51]

Howells and James both published essays of appreciation and praise shortly after Zola's death. Howells said, in part:

Because he believed with his whole soul that fiction should be representation, and in no measure the misrepresentation of life, he will live as long as any history of literature survives. It will not require so great an effort of the reader's honesty now, as it once would, to own that Zola's books, though often indecent, are never immoral, but always most terribly, most pitilessly moral. . . . As to the intention of Zola in his books, I have no doubt of its righteousness. Zola was an artist, and one of the very greatest, but even before and beyond that, he was intensely a moralist.[52]

Henry James's final estimate of Zola appeared in August, 1903.[53] The following are a few of the more significant passages in the essay:

His personality is the thing that finally pervades and prevails. . . . No finer act of courage and confidence is recorded in the history of letters . . . its admirable, its almost unimaginable strength. The strength was in the young man's very person—in his character, his will, his passion, his fighting temper, his aggressive lips; his weakness was in that inexperience of life from which he proposed not to suffer. For he was fairly bristling with the betrayal that nothing whatever had happened to him in life but to write *Les Rougons-Macquart.* "I don't know my subject, but I must live into it; I don't know life, but I must learn it as I work"—that attitude and programme represent to my sense, a drama more intense on the worker's own part than any of the dramas he was to invent and put before us.

James excused Zola's grossness:

He was obliged to be gross, on his system, or neglect, to his cost, an

[51] *The Dial,* XXXIII, 231-234 (October 16, 1902).

[52] *The North American Review,* CLXXV, 587-596 (October, 1902).

Outstanding among the other essays about Zola published at this time were those by Harry Thurston Peck in *The Bookman,* XVI, 233-240 (November, 1902), and Walter Littlefield in *The Critic,* XLI, 405-409 (November, 1902).

[53] *The Atlantic Monthly,* XCII, 193-210 (August, 1903).

invaluable aid to representation . . . and I cannot withhold my frank admiration from the courage and consistency with which he faced his need.

James believed that Zola's grossness was often his strength—that taste would have weakened such books as *La Ventre de Paris, L'Assommoir,* or *Germinal,* for each of these is concerned with a world with which taste has nothing to do.

There was a great outcry, as we all remember, over the rank materialism of *L'Assommoir,* but who cannot see, today, how much a milder infusion of it would have weakened the whole strong treatment of the subject? The qualification of the painter was precisely his strength of stomach. Refinement of intention always presided at Zola's experiments. The defect in Zola's "sense of proportion" was not nearly so great as that of his critics, for there are judges, in these matters, so perversely preoccupied that for them to see anywhere the "improper" is for them straightway to cease to see anything else.

James regarded *L'Assommoir, Germinal,* and *La Débâcle* as Zola's greatest books. He said of *L'Assommoir:*

Gervaise, the most immediately "felt" of all his characters, is a lame washer-woman, loose and gluttonous, without will, without any principle of cohesion, the sport of every wind that assaults her exposed life; and who, rolling from one gross mistake to another, finds her end in misery, drink, and despair. But her career, as presented, has fairly the largeness that, throughout the chronicle, we feel as epic, and the intensity of her creator's vision of it, and of the dense sordid life hanging about it, is to my sense one of the great things the modern novel has been able to do. It has done nothing more completely constitutive and of a tone so rich and full and sustained. I doubt if there has ever been a more totally represented world, anything more founded and established, more provided for all round, more organized and carried on. It is perhaps the most extraordinary imitation of experience that we possess. . . . He has established altogether a new measure and standard of handling, a new energy and veracity; since which the old trivialities and poverties of treatment . . . have become incompatible, for the novelist, with either rudimentary intelligence or rudimentary self-respect.

Thus Henry James took leave of the novelist whom he had befriended some twenty years before, at a time when Zola and his

work were being severely condemned, and little effort was being made by the critics to understand or to evaluate intelligently. In 1884, James had faced the prejudices of most American critics, and had stood forth, together with Howells, as the champion of an extremely unpopular man. In their effort to bring about a more intelligent understanding of, and a greater tolerance for, Zola's novels in America, it may well be supposed that they contributed a by no means negligible share toward the development of more tolerant, more liberal, more intelligent critical standards in the United States.