

# The Allure of Idleness in Zola's *Rougon-Macquart*

Charlie Tyson  
Harvard University

**ABSTRACT:** The naturalist novel is celebrated for its depictions of labor. Yet the grim determinism of this genre, with its plots of inexorable decline, suggests that one is doomed no matter how hard one works. Under such conditions, idleness offers to naturalism's working-class characters a reprieve, a weapon of the weak, a rational response to an unjust regime. Drawing on eight of Zola's novels and focusing on *The Ladies' Paradise* (*Au Bonheur des Dames*, 1883), this essay argues that naturalism rescues, rather than rejects, the ground of idleness and aesthetic surrender. One implication of this argument is that naturalism and aestheticism are closer in character than is often understood.

THE NATURALIST NOVEL AS DEVELOPED BY Émile Zola is lauded for escorting into fiction the new capitalist world of work.<sup>1</sup> Zola was the first major novelist to see that the modern world was split into atomized domains of industry: coal mines, department stores, theaters, the art world, the stock market.<sup>2</sup> He wrote meticulously researched novels about nearly every form of modern labor. For *Germinal* (1885), his novel about a coal miners' strike, he went down into the mines, notebook in hand. For *The Ladies' Paradise* (*Au Bonheur des Dames*, 1883) he spent a month observing the Parisian department stores, counting the number of cash

<sup>1</sup> Elaine Scarry notes that the subject of work, "awesomely researched and stunningly imagined" in the novels of Zola, has a "substantial presence" in the nineteenth-century English novel as well. Sos Eltis, meanwhile, hails the naturalist novel as offering the "most effective means" of representing the material conditions and inner experience of working life in the late nineteenth century. See Elaine Scarry, "Work and the Body in Hardy and Other Nineteenth-Century Novelists," *Representations* 3 (Summer 1983): 98; Sos Eltis, "Representing Work," in *Late Victorian into Modern*, ed. Laura Marcus, Michèle Mendelssohn, and Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 465–66.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 16.

registers (seventy-three) and horse-drawn delivery vans (sixty) at Le Bon Marché.<sup>3</sup> Hence naturalism has typically been regarded as a literature of labor and class struggle.<sup>4</sup>

This genre, nevertheless, has something of a bad reputation. Critics have faulted Zola and other naturalist authors for naively attempting to apply methods of scientific experimentation to art, for flat, cardboard characters, for sensational twists of narrative, for fetishizing the ugly, the sordid, and the unbeautiful, and for recycling plots (as if this genre, known for its focus on working-class labor, itself takes on the aura of industrial production).<sup>5</sup> The fundamental terms of disapproval, however, are moral rather than aesthetic. In depicting vulnerable people drawn down, step by step, to their doom, the naturalist novel exudes the cruel and indifferent determinism of Greek tragedy but grants its characters little of the dignity that the ancient tragedians bestowed upon their fallen heroes and heroines.

Focusing on Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, with particular emphasis on *The Ladies' Paradise*, this essay examines three interrelated subjects: first, the bleak logic of the naturalist novel and its plots of inexorable decline; second, the proffering of work ethic as a solution to this relentless downward movement and the exposure of that solution as at best partial, at worst illusory; and third, the allure of idleness and aesthetic surrender for people who have no way of escaping their fates. Zola's naturalism, filled with nightmares of decline, offers a prehistory of our current morality of busy-ness, wherein we fear that if we relax our work ethic, our lives will unravel. Yet the genre's grim determinism suggests that one is doomed no matter how hard one works. Under such conditions, idleness emerges as a momentary reprieve, a way of disengaging from an unjust economic regime. Once we think of naturalism as rescuing the ground of idleness and aesthetic surrender, rather than rejecting it, some seemingly incongruous features of the genre begin to make more sense—above all, the languid characters and beautiful surfaces that fill these allegedly unadorned and documentary novels.

## THE DOWNWARD-MOBILITY PLOT

For all its antipathy to the supernatural, naturalism is a genre of horror; for all its scientific and documentary aspirations, it is governed by the logic of nightmare. The nightmare it discloses is a vision of sharp decline. A woman struggles against a harsh environment. One small mistake begets other, more damaging, errors, and her life spins out of control, like tires whirring on black ice. Step by step, she is forced down to increasingly unspeakable humiliations. At last, through no fault of her own, she finds all hope of escape gone. If she is lucky, she will, like Edith Wharton's Lily Bart, die in bed; more typically she will surrender to her fate at the bottom of a flooded mine

---

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Brown, *Zola: A Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 491–92.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 12; Laura Hapke, *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 6–7, 252–53.

<sup>5</sup> Take, for example, Fredric Jameson's remark that the naturalist novel is a form that "can be used over and over again," or David Baguley's appraisal of the genre's "fundamental repetitiveness." In Malcolm Cowley's famous essay on American naturalism, the analogy with industrial production is made explicit; the naturalists, he writes, work "in a delirium of production, like factories trying to set new records." See Fredric Jameson, "The Aesthetics of Singularity," *New Left Review* 92 (2015): 105; David Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 4; Malcolm Cowley, "Not Men: A Natural History of American Naturalism," in *Documents of American Realism and Naturalism*, ed. Donald Pizer (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 231.

(*Germinal*) or in a “hole” under the staircase (*L'Assommoir*), or she will starve to death in the street (Frank Norris's *The Octopus*).<sup>6</sup>

Not all naturalist novels follow this plot shape of a self-accelerating downward plunge. Equally important, as Jennifer Fleissner has observed, is a plot of repetitive compulsion, or “stuckness in place.”<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the downward-mobility plot is the narrative arc for which naturalism is best known. The bare outlines of this plot shape are so simple that Zola can sketch them in four sentences. In *Nana* (1880), Zola's eponymous courtesan and her female lover are staring out the window one rainy night when they see an old toothless ragwoman foraging in the gutter. That old woman, Nana's lover informs her, had once been “the toast of Paris” — a title Nana now holds.<sup>8</sup> In “frozen silence” Nana listens to the tale:

What a super tart she'd been . . . what impudence and verve, leading men by their noses like tamed animals, with men of high position in tears on her staircase! And now she'd taken to drink and her neighbours would give her absinthe to have a laugh; street urchins used to chase her, throwing stones. In a word, completely and utterly degraded, a queen ending up literally in the gutter! (304)

Young, beautiful Nana knows that the career of the high-class prostitute has an expiration date. Yet it is disturbing to have before her window such a gruesome premonition. She turns away from the window, her face wet. (Rain, not tears, accounts for this; the response of sentimental pity is mimicked, but in the world of *Nana* pity and mercy are in short supply.) The decline plot outlined here omits the slow sinking characteristic of a novel like *L'Assommoir* (1877), in which the heroine's descent into degradation is depicted in its many intermediate phases. It instead presents a vivid contrast between two opposed states: “a queen” / “in the gutter.”

As Nana's frozen silence suggests, the naturalist novel reveals a political and economic system saturated by dread of downward mobility. This dread has a disciplinary function.<sup>9</sup> Terror of sliding downward, of losing one's social position, motivates hard work.<sup>10</sup> Relevant here is the

<sup>6</sup> The motif of the “falling woman,” David Baguley remarks, is central to naturalism, and the repeated conjunction of male author/suffering female character suggests a certain Hitchcockian misogyny underlying the enterprise. Nonetheless, male characters too fall victim to naturalism's classic downward mobility plot. American naturalism, Jennifer Fleissner notes, presents several notable examples of a young woman drifting or ascending while an older man slides downward; the forked fortunes of Carrie and Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie* offer a paradigmatic example. See Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction*, 102; Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 161–63.

<sup>7</sup> Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 9. Surveying French naturalism, Nicholas White identifies two “plot shapes”: an arc of decline in which the protagonists are “pushed down the slope . . . by supra-individual forces” and a flat anti-plot of nondevelopment. Stated geometrically, the two main options for naturalist narrative trajectory are sloped curve or flat line. See Nicholas White, “Naturalism,” in *The Cambridge History of French Literature*, ed. William Burgwinkle, Nicholas Hammond, and Emma Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 522–23.

<sup>8</sup> Émile Zola, *Nana*, trans. Douglas Parmée (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 304. All further references come from this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>9</sup> D. A. Miller, for instance, includes Zola's work, singling out *Nana* in particular among the nineteenth-century novels he regards as exercising a policing function. In Zola, the theme of surveillance is explicitly treated in *The Belly of Paris*, *The Conquest of Plassans*, and *The Ladies' Paradise*, among other works; see D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 2, 20–21.

<sup>10</sup> See Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1989) for suggestive parallels. The popularity of downward mobility plots, however, does not seem to correspond predictably to economic conditions. As Katherine Binhammer observes, narratives of downward mobility became dominant in late-eighteenth-century sentimental fiction at the same moment that Britain's net wealth

fact that naturalism's heyday coincides roughly with the emergence of a very different popular genre: a literature of self-help that addressed the problem of how to govern the will.<sup>11</sup> Self-help purveyed instructions for achieving upward mobility by harnessing self-control. Naturalism, by contrast, presents stories of people sliding into idleness, alcohol, or other forms of ungoverned dissipation. The genre's downward-mobility plots offer what Beth Blum, in another context, calls scenarios of "negative visualization": the stick to self-help's carrot.<sup>12</sup>

The naturalist novel traps its protagonists in a rigged game with lethal stakes. It establishes an environment in which the floor of the world is angled downward, tilted at an inclined plane. Do nothing, and you will start sliding toward the abyss. Slip, and you will fall faster. Gervaise raising a glass of anisette to her lips; Coupeau stumbling on the slats of the roof "like a cat whose feet have got mixed up," an uncontrolled downward slide that sets into motion a larger arc of descent: such moments are not reversals so much as they are nodes of plot in which naturalism's structural logic of decline erupts to the surface.<sup>13</sup>

### THE FALSE PROMISES OF THE WORK ETHIC

What can one do in the face of such relentless downward pressure? In Zola, a chorus of neighbors and well-wishers say: work. These exponents of the work ethic are often relatives of an idler-protagonist; sometimes they are shopkeepers, keeping careful ledgers of debits and credits.<sup>14</sup> They are voices of convention, promising that hard work will stave off unraveling. They are also, frequently, figures of hypocrisy.<sup>15</sup> Take, for example, the bourgeois patriarch in *Earth* (*La Terre*, 1887) who chokes with emotion as he instructs his daughter "how to earn money, from good organization and hard work"—never mind that the respectable family's wealth comes from running a brothel.<sup>16</sup>

A particularly forceful statement of work ethic arrives in *The Belly of Paris* (*Le Ventre de Paris*, 1873). The shopkeeper Lisa Quenu (born Lisa Macquart, sister of doomed Gervaise), is the very image of the mercantile middle class, a savvy entrepreneur on the make. As a child, Lisa watched her mother work herself to death while her father, always roaring drunk, refused to work at all. Her notions are, accordingly, that everyone, man or woman, ought to work for his or her living, that

began increasing annually. See Katherine Binhammer, *Downward Mobility: The Form of Capital and the Sentimental Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Theodore Dreiser, for one, was interested in self-help from his boyhood on, and he cites the influence of Samuel Smile's *Self-Help* (1859) on his thinking. See Anne Diebel, "'That Indescribable Thing': Personality in Dreiser's Early Journalism and *Sister Carrie*," *Studies in American Naturalism* 9, no. 2 (2014): 123–46.

<sup>12</sup> Beth Blum, *The Self-Help Compulsion: Searching for Advice in Modern Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 144.

<sup>13</sup> Émile Zola, *L'Assommoir*, trans. Leonard Tancock (London: Penguin, 1970), 126. All further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>14</sup> Weber argues for rational bookkeeping as emblematic of the Protestant ethic, from Benjamin Franklin's tabulations of his moral progress to John Bunyan's "characteristically tasteless extreme [in *The Pilgrim's Progress*] of comparing the relation of a sinner to his God with that of customer and shopkeeper." See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2001), 77.

<sup>15</sup> Partisans of the work ethic, in this respect, resemble female characters who criticize "fallen women" like Thomas Hardy's *Tess*, but who are themselves sexually compromised. This analogy between chastity and work ethic as ways of warding off "falling" is complicated by the fact that, in Zola, prostitution emerges as a paradigm of successful work: characters get rich by selling a fantasy. I thank Geoffrey Kirsch for discussion on this point.

<sup>16</sup> Émile Zola, *Earth*, trans. Brian Nelson and Julie Rose (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 282. All further references come from this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

everyone was responsible for his or her own happiness, that it was wicked to encourage idleness, and that if there was so much unhappiness in the world it was mainly due to sloth.<sup>17</sup>

But this petit-bourgeois business owner did not attain her position through labor alone. Her shop was paid for by a windfall of capital. After Quenu's uncle dies from a stroke while making a jellied-meat dish, plunking face-down among the minced meats and aspic, Lisa searches the shop for the dead man's long-gossiped-about fortune. She finds the money at the bottom of a salting tub. She gathers the coins in her apron and releases them before a stunned Quenu in a silver stream (48). Diligent she may be—but in an economy ruled by capital, wage labor, however assiduously pursued, can get one only so far.

We might suppose that figures such as Lisa are mouthpieces of received ideas that the novels in which they are embedded reject. But in the case of Zola, matters are more complex. This most prolific and politically engaged author, vaunted for his “cyclopean labors,” spent his life trying to keep his idleness at bay.<sup>18</sup> The man who in a youthful letter to Paul Cézanne adopted a self-identification as an idler, musing that “dreaminess and laziness are what explain me”; who as an established novelist had emblazoned in gold letters above his fireplace the motto *Nulla dies sine linea* (“Never a day without a line”); who moaned in an 1889 letter to his one-time protégé Joris-Karl Huysmans, “All my repressed laziness has burst forth”—that this artist had a tortured relationship to work and idleness should come as little surprise. In a letter to a Dutch colleague, he reflected, “I am either the laziest man in the world or the most industrious.”<sup>19</sup>

Zola's approval of hard work often persists even when the work exacts great personal cost. In his art-world novel *The Masterpiece* (*L'œuvre*, 1886), a painter is driven to suicide by his obsessive devotion to his artistic labors. Yet the novel's final words, delivered by the writer-character Sandoz (a personage very similar to Zola) minutes after his painter-friend's body has been put in the earth, are the exclamation: “And now, back to work!”<sup>20</sup> In this respect, the portrait of Sandoz is true to life. To the many younger writers he mentored, Zola never ceased, Harry Levin comments, “to preach the gospel of labor: it was work, he affirmed, which gave life its meaning.”<sup>21</sup> Work fed his imagination. In labor he found drama, conflict, complexity. His close descriptions of the pulleys and coal tubs in *Germinal*, or the mixing of paints in *The Masterpiece*, or the sprawl of food stands in *The Belly of Paris*, all bespeak an enthusiastic conviction that work is life's central activity, the site in which human personality and ingenuity display themselves most fully.

Even so, there emerges from Zola's novels a powerful critique of the work ethic, a recognition that in the harsh conditions in which many of his characters labor, hard work cannot save you: it might instead destroy you. The very first image of labor in the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle shows men sawing wood “with machine-like regularity, as if they were wire puppets”—a forewarning of the triumph of the machine later heralded in *Germinal* and *La Bête Humaine* (1890).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Émile Zola, *The Belly of Paris*, trans. Brian Nelson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 45.

All further references come from this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>18</sup> See Matthew Josephson's 1928 biography of Zola, which broadcasts in its title the “cyclopean labors” of its subject.

<sup>19</sup> Brown, *Zola*, 58, 71, 616.

<sup>20</sup> Émile Zola, *The Masterpiece*, trans. Thomas Walton, rev. Roger Pearson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 363. All further references come from this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>21</sup> Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 311.

<sup>22</sup> Émile Zola, *The Fortune of the Rougons*, trans. Brian Nelson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8.

This picture of the human as automaton, jerked around by the social and economic forces that play puppeteer, conveys the thrust of Zola's critique of modernity.

Zola admits the possibility that some workers, despite their disempowerment, might be able to scrape a living through steady application. But to do so requires submission to a most unpleasant bargain. Witness the twist of narration in *L'Assommoir* that occurs as the narrator recounts how Gervaise and Coupeau have gone "steadily downhill":

No doubt the Coupeaus had only themselves to blame. However hard life is you can always manage by dint of a little system and thrift—witness the Lorilleux, who paid up their rent on the dot, screwed up in bits of dirty paper; *but really those two lived like a couple of skinny spiders, enough to disgust you with the very idea of work.*<sup>23</sup>

This ironic narrative voice, strewn with colloquial diction, is intended to represent the views of the community—one of Zola's experiments in collective voice developed more fully in *Earth*, in which an unspecified communal point of view expresses the currents of gossip that circulate through the village. The neighborhood's judgment is plain: Coupeau and Gervaise are to blame for their suffering. Yet this cynical articulation of the community's work ethic is half-hearted. With that "but . . .", the communal voice doubles back on itself and undercuts its own verdict. The scrounging and greedy Lorilleux, who refuse to take in their old mother, for example, on the grounds that it is "wrong to maintain somebody in idleness," do not represent an acceptable way to live (165). The result of their grubbing is a loss of humanity, a descent into an insect form of life in which pleasure and compassion are jettisoned in favor of white-knuckled survival.

Skepticism about the work ethic is further licensed by the high body count of characters in Zola who literally work themselves to death. Here we might think immediately of *Germinal*, a novel whose great moral force comes from its insistent repetition of the question Étienne asks himself his first day down in the mines: "Was it possible that people could work themselves to death at such terrible labour, down here in this mortal darkness, and still not earn enough for their daily bread?"<sup>24</sup> To dwell here on *Germinal*, however, would be to misstate the case by focusing on an unusually dangerous site of labor. In Zola, overwork alone is a frequent cause of death.<sup>25</sup> Sheer quantity of labor can be fatal. Marx in his famous chapter in *Capital* on the working day observes that otherwise unobjectionable or gratifying forms of work, such as blacksmithing, can be "made by mere excess of work the destroyer of the man."<sup>26</sup> Zola pursues this insight, but with a difference: in Zola, overwork is the destroyer of the *woman*.

Almost without exception the characters liable to work themselves to death in Zola are women who destroy themselves to support a male dependent, whether a son or a younger brother. The list of self-denying mothers and surrogate mothers is long. Florent's mother "killed herself with work" so that her son could study law; Lisa's mother likewise "worked herself into the grave" to support her family (*Belly of Paris* 37, 45). A middle-class mother in *Earth* dies of "overwork" after trying to keep up the reputation of the family's brothel, her "good-for-nothing husband"

<sup>23</sup> Zola, *L'Assommoir*, 317. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>24</sup> Émile Zola, *Germinal*, trans. Roger Pearson (London: Penguin, 2004), 55.

<sup>25</sup> While Zola uses death from overwork as a melodramatic tactic, this literary convention has a basis in social fact. If we read the *Rougon-Macquart* alongside Marx, we might conclude that Zola is if anything understating the frequency with which men and women in his century were worked to death. See Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 355, 363–67.

<sup>26</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 366.

having declined to do his share of the labor (280). In *L'Assommoir*, Gervaise's neighbor Lalie Bijard, a child who runs the household and tends her younger siblings while being beaten and abused by her sadistic, whip-brandishing father, expires while murmuring about undone household chores. "I am being lazy coddling myself," the girl says minutes before dying (386).

Most deaths from overwork in Zola happen offstage. In *Earth*, however, he inserts the death of Palmyre, one of the most degraded scapegoat figures in his fiction, directly into the narrative. Palmyre agrees to bind sheaves of wheat for a minuscule piece rate to support her disabled brother (with whom she is having an incestuous relationship). Having toiled for twelve hours in the hot sun, she lets out a cry and collapses on the ground, stretched out on her back "as though crucified" (205). This human being reduced to a "beast of burden" dies of exhaustion like an "overworked animal" (114, 205). *Earth* studies an entire population whose constant work is futile: an agricultural peasantry that only barely manages "not to die of starvation by wearing itself out with work" (97). Palmyre's death emphasizes the pointlessness of this ceaseless labor. Frantic work, prescribed as the solution to downward mobility, simply brings death faster.

Zola's imaginative universe has no scruples about sacrificing women on the altar of work. Indeed, his analysis of capitalism insinuates rather darkly that such sacrifices are required. Staining the foundations of the Ladies' Paradise is the blood of Mouret's first wife, Caroline Hédouin, who fell into a hole at the building site when the store was being expanded.<sup>27</sup> The repeated imagery of a woman's blood on the foundations of the store that is Zola's great symbol of modern capitalism suggests a disturbing insight: that to the impersonal procedures of capitalist rationalization there adheres a primitive logic of ritual sacrifice.

### THE ALLURE OF IDLENESS

A paradox at the heart of naturalism is the push and pull between the genre's philosophical commitment to *passivity* (the view that human beings are shaped by external forces) and its artistic commitment to *activity* (the representation of labor). More than any other genre of modern literature, naturalism shows human beings *working upon* their environments—scrubbing floors, starching laundry, mending roofs, extracting coal, harvesting wheat. And more than any other genre of modern literature, naturalism shows persons being *worked upon*, stunted and disfigured by their environments of filth and poverty.

This harsher, bleaker offshoot of realism devotes itself to analyzing how human agency disintegrates amid the bewildering conditions of modern life. It deals with powerful but often subterranean processes: the workings of heredity, the circulation of capital, the ironic unfolding of historical change. Such abstract forces cannot be brought directly into the field of literary representation. What is representable is not "History" or "Capital" but its epiphenomena. The artist needs to find some middle ground, some category of experience in which the dissolution of agency enters ordinary perception. Thus many naturalist fictions are stories of addiction or compulsion, depicting in minute detail the breakdown of the will.

Idleness provides another space of experience in which the fragility of human agency becomes representable. In this literature of labor, indolence is everywhere. In a fateful scene in *L'Assommoir*, for instance, Gervaise, bending over a mound of filthy laundry, breathes in the

<sup>27</sup> For an intriguing discussion that finds not just Caroline Hédouin but another dead woman—the enigmatic and powerful Nana—at the core of the Paradise, see Steven Wilson, "Nana, Prostitution, and the Textual Foundations of Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 41, nos. 1–2 (2012–13): 91–104.

“poisonous miasma” that emanates from the dirty clothing (149). The smell plunges her into a “drowsy contentment” (148). The narrator reflects: “You might say that her first bouts of laziness dated from this moment” (149). Here, the tenuousness of the will and the lethal power of setting and environment find expression in the “miasma” that leaves Gervaise curiously intoxicated.

The intrusion of aesthetic abundance into naturalist fiction, taken to special heights by Zola, also supports this genre’s inquiry into the dissolution of agency. In the face of overpowering aesthetic phenomena, the will is overridden and external objects colonize the interior of the passive subject. The glut of silks, velvets, laces, and satins in *The Ladies’ Paradise*; the symphony of flowers in *The Sin of Abbé Mouret* (*La Faute de l’Abbé Mouret*, 1875); the sprawl of rolling vegetables and striated meats in *The Belly of Paris*—in all these situations, the beholding subject is overwhelmed by an avalanche of sensation.<sup>28</sup> In Zola, passivity in the face of intractable societal circumstances and passivity in the face of awe-inspiring aesthetic spectacle become intriguingly tangled. In scenes of aesthetic enthrallment, the spellbound character recedes from centrality. What looms large instead are the objects around the body.<sup>29</sup> With the passive character arrested or stalled, the material surroundings—rocking chairs, velvet coats, chicken bones, stacks of tattered bank notes—swell to grand proportions, fill the reader’s eye. Such sequences often give rise to long stretches of static description: a feature of Zola’s writing that Georg Lukács famously condemns in his essay “Narrate or Describe?”<sup>30</sup> Yet these descriptive passages are not, as Lukács suggests, instances of mere “virtuosity”; they are sequences in which the fundamental topic of naturalism—the domination of persons by their environments—finds formal expression.

My claim in this essay is that naturalism’s determinist plotting and its pessimistic skepticism about the work ethic grant wide latitude to idling, daydreaming, and aesthetic experience. While it may seem heretical to place idleness at the center of a genre devoted to labor, and to say that a school of literature typically associated with dirt and grime is in fact preoccupied with the immobilizing effects of beauty, such claims are more modest than they appear. Scholarly assessments of naturalism have shifted over time from stressing the genre’s sociological and documentary character to emphasizing the mythic, symbolic, dream-like, and painterly qualities of naturalist writing.<sup>31</sup> Many critics have marked the listless, languid, strangely passive characters who populate naturalist novels. More recently, scholars have noticed that the overwhelming visibility of work in these fictions has the result of augmenting the visibility of indolence—spells of time in

---

<sup>28</sup> Commenting on Zola’s delirious sensory barrages, Fredric Jameson detects “a tremendous fermenting and bubbling pullulation in which the simplicity of words and names is unsettled to the point of an ecstatic dizziness by the visual multiplicity of the things themselves and the sensations that they press on the unforwarned observer”—the result being the creation of a new, autonomous realm of sensation; Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 54.

<sup>29</sup> My analysis here has benefited from Fisher, *Hard Facts*, 134.

<sup>30</sup> Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?” in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970), 110–48; see also Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction*, 184–203.

<sup>31</sup> In the case of Zola, this academic reappraisal dates to the 1950s, but readers since Flaubert have remarked on the mythic attributes of his writing. For an influential account of Zola’s use of sacrificial scapegoat myths, see Naomi Schor, *Zola’s Crowds* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 3–34 and *passim*; for more recent discussion of Zola’s “mythopoeic” qualities, see Brian Nelson, “Zola and the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Zola* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–18; on Zola’s painterly attributes (e.g., his use of color and light effects), see Susan Harrow, “Zola: Colorist, Abstractionist,” *Romantic Review* 102, no. 3–4 (2011): 465–84.



which work is paused, interrupted, or refused—as well.<sup>32</sup> My re-characterization of Zola's naturalism pushes forward this ongoing reappraisal of the genre. One implication of my view is that naturalism and aestheticism are closer in character than is typically acknowledged.

Indeed, the commonplace that Zolian naturalism is a literature fixated on the “ugly” does not survive the actual reading of the novels. The sensuous descriptions of fabrics, clothing, architecture, and decorative objects (bearskin rugs, bronzes, bathtubs, chairs) in such works as *The Kill* (*La Curée*, 1872), *Nana*, and *The Ladies' Paradise* offer abundant counter-evidence. Even if we restrict ourselves to fictions of the proletariat, the idea that beauty is excluded from naturalism is still proven false. Sensory experience is crucial to Zola's naturalism, and not all sensations are pleasant. *L'Assommoir*, for instance, assails us with the stench of laundry and the dirt of tenement housing. But through the gutters in front of Gervaise's shop rushes a stream of water from the nearby dye works, floods of apple-green or sky-blue or pale-pink (the color varies with her moods).<sup>33</sup> On the summer evening when Gervaise first visits the tenement building in which she will die, she peers in through the open doors along the passage. Each open door reveals “scenes of poverty and toil, suffused with a pinkish haze” (68). The poverty and toil are important for Zola, but so is the pinkish haze. We might interpret the streaks of color in his scenes of urban despoilment as indicating a purely aesthetic project: the pinkish haze and the cracked walls of the apartment building set each other into relief. Or we might, on the contrary, regard such painterly flourishes as a democratic extension of beauty to domains from which it is ordinarily excluded.

Let us now turn to *The Ladies' Paradise*, in which the claims of idleness and aesthetic surrender are richly elaborated, to see in more concrete terms how Zola integrates aestheticism into his vision of modern life. This novel, more so than any other in the *Rougon-Macquart*, construes idleness and aesthetic experience not just as holdouts against naturalism's fatal downward slide, but as portals that may lead us out of the trap.

### PASSIVITY AS AN INTENSIFIER OF AESTHETIC SENSATION: THE LADIES' PARADISE

The department store rises like a colossus over the city of Paris. All who pass before it are transfixed. All who are drawn inside are devoured. Customers are seduced; competitors are flattened. The store is a feminine counter-public, a magnification of the bourgeois home, a symbol of capitalism and empire.<sup>34</sup> Above all, it is a machine designed to produce a rapture so powerful that the

<sup>32</sup> Passivity has long struck critics as one of naturalism's fundamental themes; more recently, scholars have observed the presence of idleness and leisure in the *Rougon-Macquart* novels as well. Claire White comments that Zola's most celebrated novels of work—*L'Assommoir*, *The Ladies' Paradise*, *Germinal*—are punctuated by spells of leisure (such as the trip to the Louvre in *L'Assommoir* or Denise's day in the country in *The Ladies' Paradise*) that lend “certain anecdotal or episodic possibilities” to the plot of modern labor. Susan Harrow credits Zola for his skill in representing not just the laboring body or the body under pressure but also the “relaxed, indolent, or playful body,” noting the many scenes of swimming, resting, skipping, and reclining that occur across the novels. See Claire White, *Work and Leisure in Late-Nineteenth-Century French Literature and Visual Culture: Time, Politics, and Class* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2014), 47; and Susan Harrow, *The Body Modern: Pressures and Prospects of Representation* (London: Legenda, 2010), 15.

<sup>33</sup> See Leonard Tancock, introduction to Zola, *L'Assommoir*, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Here I summarize insights from several studies of *The Ladies' Paradise*. On the store as a feminine public sphere and an “oversized bourgeois home” (in Naomi Schor's words), see Schor, “Before the Castle: Women, Commodities, and Modernity in *Au Bonheur des Dames*,” in *Bad Objects: Essays Popular and Unpopular* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 149–55; Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 67–74; and Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing,*

gasps, screams, fevers, swoons, binges, and kleptomaniacal frenzies of the shoppers reflect only a fraction of its intensity. Cascades of wools, silks, velvets, rugs, parasols, and dresses, reels of every imaginable color and texture unspooling before the eye, dazzle the breathless, beauty-seeking customers. This “cathedral of modern business” promises nothing less than the satisfaction of every desire (234). At the center of capitalism, Zola locates aesthetic intoxication.

That the Paradise with its majestic façade and colorful displays has the power to arrest the will is marked in the novel’s first paragraph, when the sight of the store renders a young woman motionless. When Denise Baudu, the heroine of *The Ladies’ Paradise*, arrives in Paris fresh off the train from the provinces, she stands immobilized before the store, “rooted to the spot, excited, fascinated, oblivious to everything else” (4). The store’s capacity to enchant, registered first in Denise’s soft exclamations, her widening eyes, and her open-mouthed stare, will over the course of Zola’s novel be elaborated hundreds of times. Denise first beholds the Paradise on an ordinary morning. It is on the highly anticipated “sales days,” however, that the shop unleashes the full force of its splendor. As crowds of women jostle and suffocate in the halls, we see again and again how the Paradise’s sensory plenitude paralyzes the will. A group of women lean over a railing to look down at a lake of blue velvets and think about hurling themselves in; the aristocratic kleptomaniac Madame de Boves stuffs laces up her sleeve despite having pockets bursting with money; the compulsive spender Madame Marty seizes every object that glitters before her eyes:

Women pale with desire were leaning over as if to look at themselves . . . filled with the secret fear of being caught up in the overflow of all this luxury and with an irresistible desire to throw themselves into it and be lost. (104)

“No, no, I’m not going in, I’m frightened,” murmured Madame de Boves. “Let’s go, Blanche, or we’ll be crushed to death.” But her voice was faltering, and she was gradually giving way to the desire to follow everyone else inside; her fear was melting in the irresistible lure of the crush. (240)

. . . as [Madame Marty] was going through the silk scarves and glove departments, her will weakened once more. (243)

[Madame Marty] could not tear herself away, dead tired though she was; she was held there by an attraction so strong that she kept retracing her steps needlessly, wandering through the departments with insatiable curiosity. (266)

In the Paradise, political passivity and aesthetic passivity converge. The store is an embodiment of a new social and economic order. It is also an aesthetic triumph. Its blinding colors, sensuous surfaces, and sheer, awe-inspiring magnitude conspire to transfix and gratify the senses. Faced with the Paradise’s spectacle of consumption, these shoppers suffer extravagant losses of self-control. The surging warmth of the crowd, the infinite multiplication of departments, and above all the Paradise’s shimmering wares induce a frenzied self-loss.<sup>35</sup>

---

*and Zola* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 66–82. On the store as a symbol of capitalism and empire, see David F. Bell, *Models of Power: Politics and Economics in the Rougon-Macquart* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 96–124. For a helpful overview of critical perspectives on the novel, see Brian Nelson, “Zola and the Counter Revolution: *Au Bonheur des Dames*,” *Australian Journal of French Studies* 30, no. 2 (1993): 233–40.

<sup>35</sup> Although my discussion focuses on the aesthetic dimensions of the shoppers’ response to the Paradise, I should note the intense eroticism of these passages. As Peter Brooks remarks, “*Au Bonheur des Dames* is preeminently

Critics have noted that in these crowd scenes, boundaries of class are suspended.<sup>36</sup> Rich and poor alike can wander in the store (looking, touching, desiring) without an obligation to buy. The fashion historian Philippe Perrot credits the nineteenth-century French department store with undercutting class distinctions by bringing “entire wardrobes formerly reserved for their betters” within reach of the “intermediate classes,” from “upper working-class to middle bourgeois.”<sup>37</sup> Consumer culture, then, emerges as an ally of democratization. The de-individuation that occurs in these scenes of aesthetic intoxication goes deeper, however, than an effacement of class. Not class alone but all markers of identity save some primordial femininity are stripped away. The women in the store are seized with an almost suicidal desire to lose themselves entirely in the sea of fabrics. The Paradise does not just suspend human agency; it annihilates it.

So new are the sensations stirred by the Paradise that the shoppers, if they can speak at all, can only exclaim such platitudes as “It’s enchanting!” or “It’s fantastic . . . Amazing!” (242, 398). No satisfactory vocabulary exists to describe the department store. Verbal evaluations falter. The crowd of shoppers offers its aesthetic judgments not through speech acts but through tides of rippling movement, goods stripped off the walls, and hands plunged in lace. Frank Norris famously described naturalism as “an instrument with which we may go straight through the clothes and tissues and wrappings of flesh down deep into the red, living heart of things.”<sup>38</sup> *The Ladies’ Paradise* is Zola’s attempt to capture his century not by penetrating the clothes but by dwelling on them. The soporific effect of the dirty laundry over which Gervaise stoops in *L’Assommoir* is here magnified and transfigured.

The three “sales day” episodes that punctuate the novel’s plot chart the growth of the behemoth. In this novel, whose central subject is the entanglement of the aesthetic and the commercial, Zola devises a plot structure that mimics the logic of advertising: the sales day chapters are teasingly previewed so as to ratchet up suspense. What is advertised to the reader is the flood of sensory description to come. Each sale gives Zola a chance to let loose his virtuosic descriptive talents; each sale marks the store’s evolution from a formidable but vulnerable human institution to a self-sufficient mythic world ruled by queens and gods.

The first sale is nearly a disaster; a morning rain shower dissuades customers from arriving. A novel that elsewhere celebrates the store as an embodiment of the spirit of the age, an emblem of the unstoppable onward march of history, gestures briefly toward contingency. But the sky soon clears, and the rain is transmuted into a waterfall of silks gushing down from the store’s glass roof. The second sale is an orgiastic bacchanal that confirms the unshakable power of the store owner Octave Mouret and the insatiability of his customers. Crushes of women storm maenad-like through the halls, trampling over goods and gorging on wine and fruit juice; forty thousand red balloons are released into the air. The third and final sale marks an ascent from realism into romance. In the main hall is erected an enormous tent of white curtains, evoking both tabernacle and bedroom; the customers are adorned with white flowers. The Paradise grows

---

the novel of commodity fetishism, and since the commodities fetishized by the market are articles of woman’s clothing, the Marxist notion of fetishism converges with the Freudian, in an overheated economy that is both an erotic and a cash nexus.” See Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 149.

<sup>36</sup> Schor, *Zola’s Crowds*, 158.

<sup>37</sup> Philippe Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Richard Bienvu (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 71.

<sup>38</sup> Norris, “A Plea for Romantic Fiction,” in Pizer, *Documents of American Realism*, 172.

paradisiacal as the entire shop celebrates the marriage between Denise and Mouret with which the novel ends.

Across the three sales-day set pieces, Zola's strategy for evoking the state of aesthetic passivity into which the customers are plunged is to simulate a parallel feeling of sensory bombardment in the reader through long stretches of description. He makes sure we know that the shoppers are breathless, agitated, overheated—intemperate, indeed, in every respect, with many “making themselves ill” by “losing all shame before the free refreshments” (246). The bulk of his descriptions, however, depict not the subjective experience of the shoppers but the objective features of the store. In taxonomic fashion, Zola piles up wares before our eyes—curtains, calicos, satins, silks. It is true, as Rita Felski remarks, that certain of these descriptive passages “simulate the precision and repetitiveness of a stock inventory.”<sup>39</sup> But equally characteristic is an abandonment of precise enumeration in favor of rhapsodic flights of metaphor.

Three classes of metaphors—the floral, the musical, and the divine—reflect Zola's efforts to claim for commerce a proximity to these prestigious instantiations of beauty. The many invocations of flowers import into the store the idyllic and the pastoral. A display of silk scarves becomes a “harvest” of flowers: rippling off the overflowing shelves are the “brilliant red of geraniums, the milky white of petunias, the golden yellow of chrysanthemums, the sky blue of verbena” (244). Satins streaming down from the glass roof are likened to a shimmering rush of water; suspensions of lace flutter in the air like butterflies (104, 397). With these invocations of vegetable matter, flowing water, and butterflies, this center of urban commerce becomes an enchanted garden. A second set of metaphors aligns the goods on display with music. A “harmonic phrase” flows through the exhibition of white cloth that forms the centerpiece of the final sale; as the varied shades of white weave together, the phrase deepens and expands into a “masterly fugue” (398). A third set of metaphors draws on religious language: a silk counter is turned into an “altar,” the shop itself into a “cathedral” (398, 73). Why turn scarves into flowers, linens into song, a shop counter into an altar? Each class of substitutions announces Zola's ambition to instill in the reader the sense that the store is making available a profound aesthetic experience. It may seem odd to imagine that in reaching for a pair of gloves we find ourselves swept up into a metaphysical realm: but Zola affirms repeatedly that the store is “producing a new religion” (427).<sup>40</sup> The spells of description in *The Ladies' Paradise*, in likening the commodities on display to canonical sites of beauty—flowers, songs, gods—attempt to provoke an aesthetic rapture in the reader akin to that experienced by the spellbound shoppers.

If we imagine, as Zola's figuration encourages us to do, that the shoppers are not walking through a display of coats but instead swimming in a painting, or drifting through an expanse of flowers, or holding their breath in the nave of a cathedral, we may get a better sense of the quality of subjective experience Zola is claiming arises in the Paradise. The pleasure of surrendering to the commodity is not entirely unmixed. Zola repeatedly frames the entrancement of customers

<sup>39</sup> Felski, *Gender of Modernity*, 68.

<sup>40</sup> The idea of capitalism as the religion of modernity has been explored recently by Eugene McCarragher, who sees architecture in particular (the gigantism of the corporate skyline) as a powerful reflection of capitalism's spiritual aspirations. My discussion of *The Ladies' Paradise* focuses on the commodity form, but I should note that Zola devotes great attention to the store's architectural features, above all its towering size and relentless expansion. It may be relevant here that Le Bon Marché, in many ways the model for Zola's Paradise, employed Gustave Eiffel's engineering firm to design its expanded building. See Eugene McCarragher, *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 204–6.

as an erotic conquest. References to shoppers leaving the store “despoiled and violated . . . with the secret shame of having yielded to temptation in the depths of some sleazy hotel” are invoked across the text (427). Nonetheless, in the delirium of consumption Zola spies the glory of aesthetic rapture. That this aesthetic rapture is Dionysian in character—a regression to the primitive, the violent, the ritualistic—does not negate the novel’s celebration of the store as a world devoted to the display of beauty.

The European bourgeoisie, Philippe Perrot argues, for centuries identified the “multicolored splendor of fabrics and finery” with “aristocratic idleness.”<sup>41</sup> To be bourgeois was to reject both idleness and color. The black clothing favored by bourgeois men well into the nineteenth century signaled “a new ethic based on will, self-denial, thrift, and merit”—in short, a work ethic.<sup>42</sup> The sumptuous colors on display in the Paradise, beautiful for their own sake, are also seductive because they whisper a fantasy of privileged inactivity. The store’s “multicolored splendor” signifies a partial democratization of aristocratic idleness.

The Paradise does not merely symbolize the distribution of idleness to a larger population; it actively courts it. The shop is a pleasure ground for women to stroll and stare at magical objects. The sales-day episodes, moreover, bring these objects within reach. As Felski suggests, we might regard Zola’s bourgeois shoppers as female flâneurs, wandering and observing—albeit with the “aloof detachment” of the flâneur “replaced by a more intimate relationship between surveyor and surveyed.”<sup>43</sup> The department store degrades idleness by ushering the idler into a commercial relationship. But it also extends forms of leisure previously delimited by class and gender—the conspicuous adornment of the aristocracy, the aesthetic responsiveness and command over public space enjoyed by the (male) flâneur—to women of all ranks.

That the passivity induced by the store’s displays is specifically *aesthetic* in nature, rather than some more degraded quality of fetishism, is a matter on which the novel forcefully insists. As early as *The Belly of Paris*, we can see Zola contemplating the idea that modernity’s key site of aesthetic achievement is not art but commerce. The painter Claude Lantier declares that his greatest work of “art” was a display of meats in the window of Lisa Quenu’s charcuterie (187). *The Ladies’ Paradise* treats more explicitly the notion that one key force driving capitalism is an aesthetic impulse. We have already seen how Zola recruits storied idioms of beauty (flowers, songs, the divine) to describe the Paradise’s wares. He also repeatedly presents Mouret as an artist and the store as a work of art. One scholar, comparing Mouret to Zola’s other great entrepreneur figure, Aristide Saccard, observes that both have artistic talent, Saccard in the “literary domain,” Mouret in the “plastic arts.”<sup>44</sup> In fact, Mouret’s artistic talents range much more widely. The store owner is twice compared to a poet because of the intuition and imaginative vision that inform his entrepreneurial risk-taking (34, 73). Speaking to a group of women, he affects an “actor’s voice” to exercise his seductive powers (78). His window displays are described as “symphonies” (86). His ability to dictate the movements of the shoppers links him to the art of choreography; his sensitivity to color, talent for window dressing, and vision for the store’s material expansion ally him with sculpture, the decorative arts, and architecture.

<sup>41</sup> Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie*, 30.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Felski, *Gender of Modernity*, 70. Most of these women are bourgeois or upper class, but not all. Although Zola imagines class boundaries dissolving in the scrum of the crowd, Naomi Schor notes that the store conspicuously does not provide a protected space of *flânerie* for its working-class heroine Denise. Schor, *Bad Objects*, 153.

<sup>44</sup> Bell, *Models of Power*, 116.

Mouret, then, is a total artist whose work draws on elements from nearly every major art form. His store is a total work of art, a stimulus that overpowers all the senses. Although Zola's descriptions of the store emphasize the visual and the tactile—the swirls of color, the fabrics begging to be touched—other sense modalities get their due. One customer, trying on a pair of gloves, grows excited by the perfume that emanates from the material, “that animal smell with a touch of sweetened musk” (101). Within the roar of the crowd Zola isolates particular sounds: the trampling of feet, the clinking of coins (109). Even taste enters by way of the refreshments the customers gorge on. The Paradise is a world of sensation. To enter the store is to immerse oneself in a living work of art, one that engages with the full range of aesthetic forms and sensory registers. The luxurious liquefaction experienced by the customers is not, however, easily induced. With intricacy Zola represents the “work” behind aesthetic passivity, the labor that makes idleness possible. He documents the productive effort that goes into Mouret’s “laboriously constructed spectacles,” even depicting supplementary forms of labor, such as the kitchen that feeds the staff.<sup>45</sup> Zola as a writer sought to incorporate in his fiction every sense experience, every domain of modern life. In Mouret’s store he finds a model for an art capable of encompassing every facet of human experience—in short, the art of the novel.

*The Ladies’ Paradise* is the centerpiece of the *Rougon-Macquart*, the eleventh novel of twenty, and it offers a synthesis of the series’ preoccupations. The department store is a condensation of nearly every site explored across Zola’s epic cycle. The Paradise is compared to a mine, a self-propelling machine, a church, a theater, an artwork, and a garden (indeed, a paradise); the array of consumer wares is likened to a harvest and Mouret, surveying his sale, to a general on the battlefield.<sup>46</sup> In the department store, the atomized fields of activity separated out across the twenty novels are assimilated into a single institution.<sup>47</sup> The Paradise is a civilization in miniature. Zola thus devises a summary statement for the entire *Rougon-Macquart*.

But it is a strange summation. In *The Ladies’ Paradise*, Zola composes not in a minor but a major key. In his sketch for the novel, he envisioned

a complete change of philosophy; away with pessimism, dwell not upon the stupidity and melancholy of life, emphasize rather its continual labor, the power and gaiety of its birth-giving. In short, go with the century, express the century . . . show the joy of action and the pleasure of existence.<sup>48</sup>

The result is what Naomi Schor calls a “hymn to private enterprise.”<sup>49</sup> In *The Ladies’ Paradise*, the downward-mobility plot that I have been describing as a signature feature of naturalism is

<sup>45</sup> Bowlby, *Just Looking*, 74.

<sup>46</sup> Thus we have, in order, reference to the themes of *Germinal* (mine), *La Bête Humaine* (machine), *The Conquest of Plassans* (clergy), *Nana* (theater), *The Masterpiece* (art world), *The Sin of Abbé Mouret* (garden, paradise), *Earth* (harvest), and *The Debacle* (*La Débâcle*, 1892) (military). In its aestheticizing of commerce, *The Ladies’ Paradise* follows lines laid down first in *The Belly of Paris*; as a novel of entrepreneurship it can be grouped with *The Kill* and *Money*; and of course it is literally a sequel to *Pot-Luck*, the other Octave Mouret story. While all the novels in Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart* are deeply interconnected, *The Ladies’ Paradise* incorporates into its imagery and structure the wide-ranging materials of the cycle to a degree unrivaled by any other installment save *Doctor Pascal* (*Le Docteur Pascal*, 1893).

<sup>47</sup> This distillation might be one reason why critics have struggled to describe the ontological status of the department store—at once symbol, setting, and character—using conventional literary terms.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Brown, *Zola*, 491.

<sup>49</sup> Schor, *Zola’s Crowds*, 155.

displaced onto secondary characters. Denise's uncle runs a failing shop opposite the Paradise. His daughter Geneviève wastes away in the gloom. In ruining her father's shop, the Paradise destroys Geneviève's economic future. It also destroys her hopes of private happiness: her fiancé is infatuated with one of the emporium's worldly and flirtatious shopgirls. The funeral procession that follows Geneviève's death, its pathos augmented by her child-sized coffin, dramatizes "the defeat of the old-fashioned shopkeepers," the tininess of the coffin poignantly underlining destruction of the small by the large (370). When Geneviève's mother expires ten pages later, she dies with her eyes fixed on the enormous store looming through her window, staring with obsessive despair at this "monster" that has "taken everything from her," leaving her with a wrecked business, piling debts, and a dead daughter (383).

While her cousin drifts toward death, the novel's heroine, Denise, enjoys a classic upward-mobility plot. Through her intelligence and resolve she ascends through the department store's ranks, from lowly salesgirl to "beloved queen of the shop" and, finally, Mouret's wife (412). In one scene midway through the novel, Denise, looking upon her heart-broken cousin, wonders if she is "wicked" to return to the Paradise and "assist the machine which was crushing the poor" (231). But by representing the Paradise's ascent as an expression of ineluctable forces of historical change, Zola absolves Denise and Mouret of blame. The novel ends with shopgirl and store owner embracing on a table heaped high with coins. In any other Zola novel—*The Fortune of the Rougons*, *The Kill*, *Germinal*—this image would be a viciously ironic statement of the rapacity of the rich. But in *The Ladies' Paradise* it is a triumph. As Mouret clasps Denise to his chest, there rises from the store a murmur of "acclamation" (432).

Other naturalist novels have treated capitalism and aestheticism as fundamentally at odds. Thomas Mann in *Buddenbrooks*, for instance, plots an arc of decline in which each subsequent generation of the Buddenbrook family shifts away from capitalism and toward aestheticism, until finally, with sickly, piano-playing Hanno, the line is extinguished forever. In *The Ladies' Paradise*, Zola imagines an integration of capitalism and beauty. He thus avoids what is foretold in Mann's novel: the death of art. He ensures the survival of the aesthetic by lodging it within the world of business. Writing in the 1880s, he correctly perceives that capitalism will remain the hegemonic economic system for a long time to come. Instead of accepting a marginal position for art, he imagines how society's nexus of power might be made to serve beauty. This is, however, a risky entanglement. For we might think that when art and wealth embrace, beauty tends to serve power, not the other way around. *The Ladies' Paradise* is easily read as a glorification of capitalism at its most ruthless and bold.<sup>50</sup> And Zola's suggestion that modernity's supreme site of art making is a ladies' department store is a position that many if not all connoisseurs of dance, music, poetry, or painting would find baffling and obscene.

It would be wise to pause, however, before accusing the author of *Germinal* of a reactionary capitulation to the status quo. For embedded within *The Ladies' Paradise* is a program for mitigating capitalism's exploitative drives. Recall that the department store is, like Melville's *Pequod*, a model of society. Its division into many specialized departments—gloves, silks, ladieswear, children's suits—reflects Zola's sense of the modern world as subdivided into discrete domains.

<sup>50</sup> Brian Nelson, while noting that Zola's general attitudes toward capitalism as an economic system are ambiguous, argues that in *The Ladies' Paradise* the novelist "writes lyrically of private enterprise and the bold new forms of capitalism, for he sees in them the triumph of Life: capitalism is creative." Brian Nelson, *Zola and the Bourgeoisie: A Study of Themes and Techniques in Les Rougon-Macquart* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1983), 28.

Yet the store, to an extent unrivalled by other institutions Zola studies across his novels, is highly synthetic and self-sufficient. A world unto itself, the shop encompasses within its boundaries the spheres of art, industry, and religion. Also present is the world of politics—and reform. Denise, after she ascends through the shop's ranks, earns Mouret's ear. To this zealous man of business she proposes a series of humanitarian reforms. She imagines schemes in which "everyone would have a fair share of the profits according to merit" (355). Swayed by Denise, Mouret improves the working conditions of the staff. Employees are given health care. Mass dismissals are replaced by a system of leave during slack seasons. Above all, the workers are given leisure and education: concerts, balls, billiard tables; evening classes on a range of subjects; a library of ten thousand volumes. The shop becomes a commonwealth.

To a large degree, Zola shares with Marx an understanding of the seductive powers of the commodity and a sense that capitalist domination derives from the inexorable unfolding of history. But whereas Marx thought capitalism would give way to communism, Zola sees capitalist prosperity as paving the way for a robust welfare state in which wealth is shared. The shop does not become a paradise (so to speak). Denise's reforms are erected undemocratically: the "queen" of the shop rules as a benevolent despot. Moreover, as Brian Nelson comments, the changes Denise urges "reflect her concern with efficiency as well as social justice"—they are justified by appeal to the interests of the employer.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, the "symbolic union of capitalist and worker" achieved in the marriage of Denise and Mouret really does usher in a new balance of power.<sup>52</sup> Of a plan to create a mutual aid society to guarantee workers a pension, Zola makes a remarkable predictive statement: "This was the embryo of the vast trade unions of the twentieth century" (356). He anticipates further changes to come. The reforms point to a more humane direction for capitalist society.

Nelson observes that the shop's reforms are premised on a logic of capitalist rationality. But they are also premised on a *narrative* logic: Denise's desire to arrest or undo the trajectory of downward mobility that afflicts the more vulnerable employees.<sup>53</sup> Troubled by the precarity of the junior assistants, and with the humiliations of her early days as a salesgirl fresh in her mind, Denise reflects on how even the best of the shopgirls often suffer a "sad decline":

They were all worn out by their profession before they were forty; they would disappear, go off into the unknown, many would die in harness of consumption or anaemia, brought on by fatigue and bad air, and some would end up on the street. (355)

Zola offers this sketch of a downward-mobility plot as a way of explaining Denise's passion for reform. To stave off this cycle of downward mobility, Denise proposes adjusting the balance of work and reward so that employees get a "fair share." This realignment of incentives aims to transform work from a self-defeating enterprise—an activity that enriches someone else while leaving the worker "worn out" before she turns forty—into a more dignified pursuit. True, when speaking to Mouret, Denise justifies this appeal on behalf of her fellow workers on the grounds of efficiency. Some readers might see her, accordingly, as a hard-nosed capitalist; I see her as a good negotiator.

---

<sup>51</sup> Nelson, *Zola and the Bourgeoisie*, 29.

<sup>52</sup> Nelson, "Zola and the Counter Revolution," 239.

<sup>53</sup> On the relation between the upward-mobility plot and the welfare state, see Bruce Robbins, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).



In the store that is his microcosm of civilization, Zola imagines a commonwealth growing out of capitalist prosperity. But he imagines more than this. The Paradise offers a vision of a society of artistic laborers. The workers attached to the store labor in service of beauty. Although Mouret's vision dominates, the store is a sprawling and collective work of art: each employee has a part to play in its maintenance. Zola's paradise is not a realm free of work. It is instead a realm in which the object of work is the creation of a world of sensation. The shop produces sensuous goods; it also produces ecstatic idleness. And so this most elaborate document in naturalism's reclamation of idleness ends—not by celebrating idleness, but by celebrating the work undertaken to sustain it. A