

The Roles of William Dean Howells and Samuel S. McClure in Zola's Reception in the USA

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article a pour but de montrer que la réception favorable de la fiction fin-de-siècle d'Émile Zola aux États-Unis a été déterminée par deux forces d'importance égale: 1) sa dissémination dans des périodiques régionaux sous la houlette de l'éditeur Samuel S. McClure, fondateur d'un syndicat littéraire ayant pour objet de faire paraître l'œuvre des écrivains étrangers ainsi que des écrivains naturalistes et américains; 2) les écrits critiques de William Dean Howells, doyen des lettres américaines, qui a mis en avant la question morale chez Zola, tout en critiquant l'indécence du langage et du comportement des personnages.

What forces determined how the fiction of Émile Zola was received in the USA during the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, a time when Zola's novels were among the most popular in Europe? I would propose adding to the authoritative explanations offered by Professor Albert Salvan of Brown University, written in the 1940s.¹ This writer claimed that Zola's reception was governed by literary criticism in the leading magazines of the day. He researched those journals, listing critical articles in each decade from 1860 to 1910, a period of time during which Zola's fiction became more and more accepted. He claimed that it was the critics themselves who made Zola's ultimate reception a favorable one. After reading his book, I would ask, however, if popular readers actually depended on what critics wrote in the bluestocking magazines of the Northeastern establishment – *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, *The Northeast Literary Review*, and *Century*? How many everyday readers of Zola's translated short stories, novellas, and novels really took time to read about Zola in those costly magazines? Where did general readers find shortened, sanitized translations, at a time when no international copyright laws disallowed the piracy of literary material?² There was little regulatory control, and certainly no censorship, in the United States for those who bought writers' works, translated them, abridged them, and even rewrote them to produce popular versions of the original text. It was only in 1886 that an international meeting took place in Bern, Switzerland, to establish copyright protection for authors. From that time on royalties were received by those who wrote the work published far afield by publishers, distributors, and newspaper editors. Zola himself had signed a contract with Charpentier in 1881, making him the sole beneficiary of royalties earned for his work published outside of France.

I would offer another explanation in proposing that it was also the work of Samuel S. McClure, the publisher, who brought Zola's work to the public eye through the medium of syndicating the works in regional newspapers in all parts of the United States. Thus, it was

¹ Albert J. Salvan, *Zola aux États-Unis* (Providence, USA: Brown University, 1943).

² Salvan 341. On September 9, 1886, ten nations were signatories – France, Great Britain, Spain, Germany, Poland, Italy, Luxemburg, Switzerland, Monaco, and Tunisia. The USA was not among them. Salvan points out that many American translations were so altered (for example, those of Mary Neal Sherwood) that they did not give full flavor to the original texts (Salvan 34).

McClure, as publisher, and William Dean Howells, the writer and influential critic, who were most important in making Zola accessible and acceptable to the American reading public of their time.

Howells, McClure, and Zola

What did the lives of the three men – Howells (1837-1920), McClure (1857-1949), and Zola (1840-1902) – have in common? Some information about their biographies might be useful in understanding this situation, especially since Howells and McClure are not biographical figures who generally appear in articles about the work of Émile Zola. All three men came from modest backgrounds and rose to success and fame by their unique talents. In that sense, they exemplified the nineteenth-century success story of rags to riches, even though Howells, unlike McClure and Zola, never knew abject poverty and had powerful family connections. All three believed zealously in a free press, the open exchange of ideas, and representational democracy. All three were outraged by social injustice, exposed social blight; and each one, in his own way, blew the whistle on corrupt abuse of power.

William Dean Howells, son of a small town Ohio printer, editor, and publisher, was well connected because of his father's political career (in the Ohio State Legislature) and his friendship with key Republican Party politicians. His biographers note that the young Howells had a troubled childhood and in 1858 developed what today would be called a nervous breakdown.³ They also emphasize the association with literature in a printer's daily life in small town America as well as the marginality of his economic status. These facts, the prevalence of infectious diseases in nineteenth-century America, and the Swedenborgian morality of his family all influenced young Howells's morbid fantasies and somatic preoccupations, and perhaps his literary work too. Goodman and Dawson's young Howells is described as socially anxious, self-deprecating and awed by others who seemed to him to have greater skill than he did in overcoming life's obstacles. His themes emphasize the fact that neither one's personal conduct nor the vagaries of sorrow or joy, can be explained by easy formulae. Howells grew up in the state of Ohio and finally left to go east to Boston and New York. Once established there, and after a short stint as American consul in Venice, he found himself living in a post-Civil War-torn America. He married Elinor Mead, the sister of the famous American architect, William Rutherford Mead (of McKim, Mead and White), gave up his dream of being a poet, and settled down to write an enormous corpus of novels. They did not deal with battlefields or life on mean, urban streets, but consisted rather of honest, unsentimental fiction about the lives of average Americans with whom the reader could feel familiar. His novels, essays, political comments, and editorial work led to his becoming the recognized dean of American letters. As editor of the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly* (1871-1881),⁴ he published stories by European and American realist and naturalist writers, as well as his own work. After that he remained influential for many years, engaging himself in political issues, such as the Haymarket trials to defend those he thought were convicted innocents, as well as the plight of freed men in the Reconstructionist South and the industrial North. He was an avid abolitionist and viewed John Brown, the raider of Harper's Ferry, as a politically engaged man of justice. Howells was close to Presidents Garfield and Hayes and, along with his good friend, Henry James, was perhaps the most influential literary voice in America.

³ Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson, *William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life* (Berkeley, USA: University of California Press, 2005).

⁴ *The Atlantic Monthly* (founded in 1857) was the established journal of Lowell, Longfellow, Emerson, and Holmes, such that a favorable review of a European author was certain to boost his readership and acceptance.

To exemplify the broad array of literature discussed in *The Atlantic Monthly* between 1868 and 1883, I would note that articles were published about Stendhal, Dostoyevsky, the Goncourts, Flaubert, Zola, Mérimée, Mistral, Alfred de Musset, Baudelaire, Gautier, Boyesen, Renan, Saint-Beuve, Scribe, and Dumas *père*. By scanning Cornell University Library's web site "The Making of America," which includes the most popular American periodicals after the Civil War, for the term "Émile Zola," alone, I found 252 hits that included articles about his life, his work, and his personal thoughts. This observation gives one an idea of how often articles were written about Émile Zola in well-read literary journals during this period of Zola's reception in the USA. Furthermore, William Dean Howells was one of the first to support strongly American, as opposed to British literature, which had dominated the cultural scene in the USA before his time⁵

As for Samuel S. McClure's role in Zola's reception, in 1892 he and his college chums, John S. Philips and Albert Brady, founded *McClure's Magazine*, for which he is most remembered in historical texts. But, long before that day, McClure hit upon the idea of a literary syndicate in America that could disseminate the works of European and American writers to great numbers of local American newspapers. He finally was able to launch the operation, The Literary Associated Press, on November 16, 1884;⁶ it was successful in purpose but profitable only after several years of operation. In his autobiography McClure claimed that it always left him in debt. His idea was to syndicate fiction the way newspapers were syndicating news. He set out to buy works of European and American realist-naturalist authors and then sell them to a large network of American newspapers each of which would pay a small fee, totaling a large sum from them all. This turned out to be a workable arrangement for the publisher, the author, and the growing numbers of regional American newspapers. It provided serialized, translated (and often abridged) works by Émile Zola (among others) to the growing number of American readers who were hungry for his full-blooded tales of human, social, and psychological problems similar to their own in an exciting vernacular that defied accepted standards of decency.

It is worthwhile to quote from McClure's autobiography to understand the nitty-gritty of his thinking and the tenuous economic nature of the operation he was launching. He described his plan as follows:

I could get a short story from any of the best story writers then for \$150. I figured that I ought to be able to sell that story to 100 newspapers throughout the country, at \$5 each. News was syndicated in this way, and I did not see why fiction should not be [...]. The first thing I syndicated was a two part story by H.H. Boyesen. I had agreed to pay Boyesen \$250 for it, and although some newspapers in large cities paid as high as \$20 for the right to publish it, my returns on the story aggregated \$50 less than the story cost me. This was a serious situation, as I was not only \$50 behind, but I had no money to live on.⁷

In this way McClure's organization was going to expose Zola, and others, to a much wider audience than the more privileged, educated community who read the Northeastern literary magazines. Johanningsmeier points out that McClure's American Literary Press distributed 155 short stories and one serialized novel in 1885 and 119 short stories and sixteen serial novels in 1899, each of them to an average of twenty newspapers from Boston to San

⁵ Goodwin and Dawson 230ff. A controversy arose when Howells wrote in *Century* magazine that American literature was surpassing in finesse and quality the world of British letters, including the works of Dickens and Thackeray.

⁶ Samuel S. McClure, *My Autobiography* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1914).

⁷ McClure 168.

Francisco, with circulation per newspaper ranging from 10,000 to 120,000 copies. If one accepts the usual estimate of three readers per copy, this one syndicate thus made fiction available to at least as many readers in a year as did any of the supposedly pioneering national mass-market magazines founded in the late 1880s and early 1890s.⁸ McClure himself boasted his ability to bring material to a very large number of readers.⁹

Only the very educated minority were able to read the French authors in French. After 1892 *McClure's Magazine*, designed to cost less than its competitors, soon became as popular as the leading periodicals cited above, surpassing in two and a half years the circulation of *Century*, *Harper's* or *Scribner's*.¹⁰ It survived the economic crisis of 1893 better than most others at a time when most beginning businesses were failing. This early success was due largely to the tenacity of McClure, in whom investors believed strongly. *McClure's Magazine* included photocopy illustrated literary and political articles. Photocopy was a new technique that was cheaper than traditional wood-engraved illustrations. It was also the first magazine to hire a staff of salaried writers, including the noted investigational journalists Ida Tarbell (who exposed the monopolistic, tyrannical practices of John D. Rockefeller),¹¹ Lincoln Steffens (who denounced corruption in local government),¹² Ray Stannard Baker (who covered civil unrest and labor protests),¹³ Jacob Riis (known for his photojournalism of the slums),¹⁴ and William Allen White.¹⁵ It was the first to report on social reform, the tyranny of corporations and trusts, and the new, popular political figure, Theodore Roosevelt. In short, it was the muckraking journal of its day.¹⁶ I would note that in the late 1890s McClure also hired the young California novelist, Frank Norris, who was labelled "The American Zola," and gave him a salary that permitted him to write his naturalist novel, *The Octopus*, exposing large-scale social injustice by the great railroad corporations in the West.¹⁷

In practical terms, McClure's business skill was responsible for Zola's dissemination. In his autobiography, McClure stated proudly: "The test of a writer's market value is how

⁸ Charles Johanningsmeier, *Fiction and the American Literary Marketplace: The Role of Newspaper Syndicates in America, 1860-90* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 1.

⁹ McClure claimed: "I could give a new writer such an instrument of publicity as had probably never been built up before. Through my newspaper syndicate I could place him at once before a million families, the representative people who read the leading dailies in all parts of the country" (234).

¹⁰ McClure 222.

¹¹ Ida Tarbell, *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (New York: McClure and Philips, 1904). Ida Tarbell was also authored a popular biography of Abraham Lincoln.

¹² His six part series, *The Shame of the Cities*, begun in 1902, made him internationally respected for his detailed investigation and reporting on bribery in municipal governments.

¹³ Baker accompanied the famous march of Jacob Coxey's Army to Washington in 1894 and wrote about the violent attack by the mounted police on the marchers demanding a government-sponsored public works program to put thousands of unemployed men back to work building roads. He also reported on the violent clash at the Pullman workers strike in 1894. Baker met Eugene Debs and covered the firing on the crowds ordered by President Grover Cleveland, in what was a seminal moment in American labor-management history.

¹⁴ Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1890) was a work of photojournalism that exposed a tenement world of filth, crime, corruption, and disease tantamount to Zola's fictional depiction in the pages of *L'Assommoir*.

¹⁵ White was the quintessential country editor from Emporia, Kansas. He was on the staff at *McClure's* for ten to fifteen years but never lived in New York. Although he was always a corresponding editor to *McClure's*, his contributions to and interactions with the journal influenced his thinking. He became cosmopolitan, progressive and, in short, a muckraker.

¹⁶ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Bully Pulpit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013).

¹⁷ Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Jesse S. Crisler, *Frank Norris. A Life* (Urbana and Chicago, USA: University of Illinois Press, 2006) 256-60. Norris left *McClure's* because of Sam McClure's incessant, frenzied demands for his syndicate in 1900, when the internal organization was in trouble.

many people will read him.”¹⁸ His efforts gave as many people as possible the chance to read Zola (among others) in that long-gone day of computer-less publishing technology:

When I was serving, say, forty papers, forty copies of the story for any given week had to be sent out, and the copies for the Pacific Coast papers had to be mailed ten days before the date of their publication. Making these duplicates was always a harassing question. If I had them set by a job printer and galley proofs run off, the cost of my composition would have more than eaten up any possible profits. So it was my custom to supply the service free to one newspaper that would set from the author’s copy and supply me with the requisite number of galley proofs to be sent to the other newspapers, where the story was set up for each paper from these proofs. Often the paper that supplied these proofs would be late, sometimes, after I had spent an anxious day or two waiting for them, they would come just in time for me to rush them off on the first mail. Sometimes they would be too late altogether for the more distant papers and I would lose heavily for the week and perhaps lose the patronage of a paper that had been disappointed. So we lived in turmoil.¹⁹

Ironically, it was the internal crisis at *McClure’s Magazine* in 1906 that exemplified Samuel McClure’s tenacity and devotion to his eponymous periodical and led to his hiring of Willa Cather. In that year his principal staff writers – Philips, Tarbell, Steffens, Baker, and Boyden – decided to leave *McClure’s Magazine* to start a journal of their own. This sudden loss left McClure without a managing, editorial, or executive staff. He was able to replace Tarbell with Willa Cather, then a little-known writer of fiction who would become a world-class novelist. Cather ultimately had a profound effect on the magazine’s direction and wrote a series on the life of Mary Baker Eddy. She was less gifted as an investigative journalist than her predecessor, but went on to show her talents in historical narrative. Her bibliography includes several important and popular novels. She worked at McClure’s when the powerful, reforming force of journalistic muckraking was giving way to a conservative backlash and to President Theodore Roosevelt’s attack on *McClure’s Magazine* – which had gone far afield in its criticism of those institutions of capitalism in which Roosevelt wholly believed and which he supported enthusiastically.²⁰ Nonetheless, the high quality of literary publications and the introduction of new writers by Sam McClure’s persistent endeavors and his literary syndicate continued until a decline came about caused in large part by McClure’s own personality. Whatever ultimate judgment one makes on Sam McClure’s career, his importance in the reception of Émile Zola in America and on the careers of young writers, such as Willa Cather, cannot be disputed.

To turn to the subject of literary critics and Zola’s reception, one must agree that acceptance by the literary community was as important as the dissemination of the works themselves. There could not be acceptance without both elements. The critical articles about Zola and his work appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Nation* and *McClure’s*, and elsewhere too, and included Howells’s own forthright but supportive criticism. I would state once again that it was this combination – the commercial and the literary – that was responsible for Zola’s ultimate acceptance and popularity in the USA, as well as for the popularity of naturalism as it evolved in the American novel. Salvan does not mention this aspect of the reception story or the name of Samuel S. McClure in his text. He makes one

¹⁸ McClure 235. He claimed, “I could give a new writer that test at once. The magazine and syndicate were the machinery I offered to get the young men in whom I believed to the people. The only critic worth listening to is the publisher – the critic who backs his judgment with his money.”

¹⁹ McClure 176.

²⁰ Goodwin 488-89.

reference to the dissemination of Émile Zola, stating that the important points of Zola's reception during the years 1880-1886 include "*la diffusion des périodiques de toutes sortes*" without further elaboration and, particularly, without mention of Samuel S. McClure, or of any other specific publisher. Later in that chapter Salvan also claims that the years following 1880 were perhaps the most active ones for the introduction of Zola's work into the USA. Not just more translations were available but numerous well-known critics were willing to consecrate long, signed articles about him.²¹ I have also been told by Zola's authoritative biographer, Henri Mitterand, that he himself has never come across the name of Samuel S. McClure in any of Zola's letters or literary reviews.²² However, in his work on the role of the newspaper syndicate in the distribution of American fiction, Charles Johanningsmeier points out that this area has been overlooked by scholars for reasons he enumerates in his work but claims it to be a fertile new research area in which one might study the interface between American fiction and its everyday readers, principally women, who could afford the daily or weekly paper and the new, relatively cheap, copiously illustrated magazines, but not the clothbound books.²³

Salvan's letters

To take a more detailed look at the American literary criticism of Zola, we will ask how he was received by Howells, Henry James, and other respected men (and women) of American letters and what the nature was of American realist writing before 1880.

For readers and critics, Zola, the novelist, was a representative of and spokesman for the naturalist school of writing. On the other hand, Zola, the intellectual-humanist, was an engaged polemicist involved in the general pursuit of truth and justice, specifically, in defense of Captain Alfred Dreyfus. To make this point I would cite a 1964 study by Professor Salvan.²⁴ It deals with a collection of letters sent to Zola by American readers from 1879 to 1902 and given to Salvan by Zola's son, Jacques, years after the author's death. The upshot of Salvan's observation was that the vast majority of these letters were postmarked 1898, the year of "*J'accuse...!*" and they praised Zola for his engagement in the Dreyfus Affair. There were also letters of a literary nature sent by lesser known American writers of the period, but they were only a few in this remarkable collection. That said, one might conclude that Zola's popularity in America was based largely on his political engagement which was perceived as honest, selfless, and heroic.

Indecency and morality

Two words included frequently in American literary criticism of the *Rougon-Macquart* are "indecent" and "immorality."²⁵ This was not so different from much of the European criticism of Zola. One critic, Louis Ulbach, who called himself Ferragus, identified Zola's writing as "*de la littérature putride mettant à leur porte des linges hideux en guise de*

²¹ Salvan 41, 60.

²² Henri Mitterand: personal communication.

²³ Johanningsmeier 16.

²⁴ Albert J. Salvan, "Les correspondants américains d'Émile Zola," *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 27 (1964): 101-14.

²⁵ Salvan (1943) 67.

drapeaux pour attirer les passants”²⁶ – a label that was also attached to the works of later French authors, such as Céline, Houellebecq, and Littell.²⁷

In those days an American novel was publishable only if its morality and aesthetics were both conventionally acceptable. Indecent actions and language were not admissible in the recounting of a tale, even if its moral theme were laudable. The novels of Flaubert and the Goncourts were deemed transgressive and not fit to be left on the shelves of proper young ladies. It was easy to understand why negative criticism followed the publication of translations of *La Terre*, *L’Assommoir*, *Germinal*, and *Nana*. Yet, concerns about Zola’s indecency of expression did not dampen his increasing popularity between 1880 and 1900.

Literary and political America

In order to understand the disconnect between the severe criticism of Zola’s work, on the one hand, and the great popular appeal on the other, we need to consider literary, political, and social aspects of America in the last part of the nineteenth century. In 1868 Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed American triumphalism when he wrote an elegy to culture and knowledge, claiming them to be the basis of man’s power.²⁸ Despite Emerson’s optimism, post-bellum America had been convulsed by the Civil War – the death of 600,000 of its young men, the grief of mothers and widows, as well as the visual reminder of its horrors, with maimed veterans on the streets. These sobering realities, the rise of post-war industrialization, the enormous growth of wealth for business owners, the legal protection of the corporation over the individual, and the proportionately low incomes for western farmers and eastern factory workers had shaken the very foundations of traditional American society and had an effect on its literary tastes. The public was raging at the monopolistic tactics of corporations – in particular, the railroads and the oil refiners, as well as the police attacks on striking workers. The year 1893 brought a severe, unprecedented economic depression. The great divide between rich and poor was blatantly evident in the unhygienic living conditions of city tenements, the spread of disease, alcoholism, and abject hunger. The new American realism would have to concern itself with the often shocking conditions of daily life in America.

Howells on Zola

As for literary criticism, just what exactly did Howells have to say about Émile Zola and naturalism? In March of 1898, Howells and colleagues debated a resolution in favor of Émile Zola at the Author’s Club, the prestigious club of American writers. After the motion had been tabled, Howells wrote to Hamlin Garland, “I was astonished at the opposition for I feel strongly that Zola’s trial was an outrage and his punishment an infamy [...]. But what is the use?”²⁹

Howells the author, like Henry James, the other leader of American letters, chose not to write about battlefield gore or life in the streets, but rather created a realism concerning everyday individuals whom we all might know and recognize from our own lives. But

²⁶ Émile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, éd. Philippe Hamon (Paris: Pocket, 1991) 266. Hamon cites Louis Ulbach’s newspaper article (the letters of Ferragus) in *Le Figaro* 23 juin 1868.

²⁷ Aurélie Barjonet, “Bienfaits de la nouvelle ‘littérature putride’? Le cas des ‘Particules élémentaires’ de Michel Houellebecq et des ‘Bienveillantes’ de Jonathan Littell,” *Academia.edu*, Web. 12 Aug. 2014 <http://www.academia.edu/171352/_Bienfaits_de_la_nouvelle_litterature_putride_Le_cas_des_Particules_lementaires_de_Michel_Houellebecq_et_des_Bienveillantes_de_Jonathan_Littell_>.

²⁸ Ralph W. Emerson, *The Atlantic Monthly* 21 January 1868: 123.

²⁹ Goodman and Dawson 147.

Howells had a literary point of view all his own, and was not swayed by current opinion. As a critic, he had a sensitivity and talent that could perceive the least differences in the work of writers and express them without fear.

Zola, the naturalist – a romantic at heart

Howells's criticism is an excellent example of the way Zola was received by many American critics. From the time of his earliest work (*Thérèse Raquin*), European critics saw Zola as not living up to his own naturalist, scientific principles and, instead, giving in to romantic symbolism and poetry. Yet, his work was always attacked for its stark realism and alleged indecency. Howells's remarks in the 1902 monograph, "*Émile Zola*,"³⁰ merit a closer look. He wrote that Zola had been so influenced by Hugo and other romantics in his early years that he could not avoid the flight toward epic grandeur in his own naturalist novels, thus failing to achieve the pure objective defined in *Le Roman expérimental*. In his essay Howells keeps insisting that Zola succumbed to his romantic inclinations and gave up on his ideological naturalism; but he also notes that where Zola failed in literature, he succeeded as a humanist in his fight for justice. Howells concluded by saying:

He made France to triumph with him. By his hand she added to the laurels she had won in the war of American Independence, in the wars of the Revolution for liberty and equality, in the campaign for Italian unity, the imperishable belief of a national acknowledgement of national error.³¹

But Zola had faced similar criticism at home and often stated, in a light-hearted fashion, that he was given to flights of symbolism, poetry, and situations in which he, and not a positivistic determinism, chose the ultimate actions of his characters and the outcomes of their personal dramas. He never denied the romantic aspect of his painterly descriptions of cities, skies, landscapes, and décor.

Howells emphasized over and over the indecency of Zola's characters' language. Even so, he concluded that Zola's writing was never immoral and never betrayed Zola's standards of truth and justice. Until then the acceptability of a novel was based on the fact that its morality and aesthetic were both conventionally acceptable. Howells's articles about Zola made the point that although his works were often indecent, the content and form of the novels were never depraved or attractive to immoralists. In short, for Howells, Zola's work was aesthetic and moral in its essence even though pessimistic and dark in tone – the unavoidable result of the determinism of his scientific theories. He claimed further that Zola's novels were not "fit for a young lady's bookshelf," a criticism that others have made while contrasting the often violent indecency with Zola's poetic and romantic passages and which has been named the theory of the two Zolas.³²

In his monograph, Howells finally comes around to praising Zola the moralist for his engagement in the Dreyfus Affair, and he states that Zola was "incapable of the peculiar lubricity we call French and [that] the vices, small and great, are always his text, upon which he preaches virtue." He says that Zola's books, "though often indecent, are never immoral, but always terribly, most pitilessly, moral"; and he concedes that no matter how much "they may disgust, they will not deprave, only those already rotten can scent corruption in them,

³⁰ William Dean Howells, "Émile Zola," *North American Review* 175 (1902): 587-96.

³¹ Howells 591.

³² John H. Matthews, in *Les Deux Zola* (Genève: Droz 1957), is cited as first use of the term "two Zolas" by Aurélie Barjonet, in *Zola, d'Ouest en Est. Le naturalisme en France et dans les deux Allemagnes* (Rennes, France: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010) 25ff.

and this, I think, may be deceived by effluvia from within themselves.”³³ In another article about Zola he states that “His works are infinitely more moral than the books of any other French writer”; and he adds, almost tongue-in-cheek: “This may not be saying a great deal but it is saying the truth.”³⁴

Howells, the writer, did not allow himself to represent truth in all its aspects because “that might, at any moment, stimulate adultery, unhappy marriage, and divorces as well as vulgar and impolite people.”³⁵ It seems that Zola never concerned himself with such niceties. His style was not that of a pulpit preacher as was that of many nineteenth-century American novelists, including Emerson and Howells. Frank Norris himself wrote an essay about the responsibility of the writer, stating that the novelist and the preacher both have the ability to affect the morality of those to whom they communicate.³⁶ Zola was not fettered with this kind of obligation; he certainly did not mention it in *Le Roman expérimental*. In short, Zola was a master story-teller and told stories with full, raw, often unpleasant content and in a non-traditional format.

When Frank Norris wrote about Zola’s naturalism, he too was critical even though his own work bears tribute to Zola’s influence in form, if not in content. I would cite the description of Norris’s crowds going to work each morning along Polk Street in *McTeague* and compare it with the morning scene of Parisian workers in the opening pages of *L’Assommoir*; I would also note that the violent impulses overcoming McTeague, the dentist, in front of Trina, are similar to those Jacques Lantier experiences in the presence of Séverine in *La Bête humaine*. In his essay Norris judges Zola harshly for his novels which are too grandiose in their construction of characters one is unlikely to meet in daily life: a soldier who kills his old military mate because of their presently finding themselves on different ends of the political spectrum; a financial speculator who makes and loses fortunes in the excitement of the rebuilding of Second Empire France; a complicated young priest torn by his passions; or a prostitute who is at the center of Imperial life and boulevard theatre. Norris claims that the reader will never have known people like the ones found on Zola’s pages and would be more comfortable with fictional folks who seem to be taken from their daily lives. Nonetheless, he extols the naturalist novel in its dealing with elemental forces and motives that stir whole nations. He wants fiction to move from the concrete to the analysis of society and its great forces in the lives of his chosen characters – the men and women who compose that society. It is this combination which, of course, characterizes Zola’s work. The *Rougon-Macquart* novels show the history of social cataclysm through the lives of members of one Second Empire family. Norris criticizes Zola’s alleged romanticism while praising the form and content of works which epitomize Zola, and provide the model on which Norris’s own epic works are formed. In the same essay Norris criticizes Howells’s characters as recognizable because they are so much like us, like well-behaved bourgeois folk who never do anything too unexpected.³⁷

To Norris’s criticism one might respond that Norris’s characters themselves span a spectrum that includes very typical examples of the privileged Nob Hill set to which Norris himself belonged, all the way to transgressive characters whose behavior and personality are so different as to be unbelievable. In this regard I would cite Travis Bessemer in *Blix* as the cameo portrait of wholesomeness which contrasts with that of Moran (*Moran of the Lady*

³³ Howells 592.

³⁴ Howells 594.

³⁵ Salvan 110.

³⁶ Frank Norris, *The Responsibility of the Novelist and Other Essays* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1903).

³⁷ Frank Norris, “Zola as a Romantic Writer,” *The Wave* 15 (1896): 3.

Letty), whose untamed, amazon androgyny approaches a comic book Superwoman and can hardly be taken seriously.

We must conclude that, in the USA, Zola's translated, trimmed novels were taken from the same shelves that housed the novels of Norris, Howells, and their American contemporaries. I would ascribe the popular reception of Zola to the very fact that his naturalism was transmitted to the reader in the form of great stories with very descriptive portraits of a changing, dynamic, class-structured France under Louis Napoleon. The reader could be absorbed into the personal struggles of those facing poverty, political upheaval, war, a demolished and reconstructed Paris, overseas speculation, the sexual mores of prostitution, the education of bourgeois girls, the hypocrisy of bourgeois morality, and any other of a number of daily life issues that affected nineteenth-century readers on the other side of the Atlantic as well. Zola's freedom with popular language allowed the reader to deal more openly with the kinds of expression not normally used in the literature of Victorian America, more concerned with decency than with true feeling. Zola's fiction transmits the architecture of *Les Halles*, the smells of the market, and the cries of the *vendeuses*. It is a temporal and topographical transformation that is not found so clearly expressed on the pages of Norris and Howells. Zola's popularity resided then, and does so now, in the masterful way he tells a story. His work engages the reader to resurrect the characters and their interaction so as to recreate a living work, to bring it back to life, so to speak, as if he, the reader, were a metaphoric Orpheus descending into the obscurity of the Underworld to bring his Eurydice back to the world of light.³⁸ These are the qualities that sell novels. They do not end happily and problems are not resolved as they seem to be in the mawkish ending of Howells's work, such as *A Forgone Conclusion*, or in the happy, Hollywood ending of Norris's *The Pit*, in which his hero, Curtis Jadwin, stock trader, loses all his money but is yet loved and supported by his faithful wife who will be there to encourage his next endeavor on the road back to indubitable financial recovery and triumph. In contrast, Zola paints life for what it is – namely, showing the things that really happen to people in spite of their best laid plans.

Zola's reception could therefore not have been favorable without McClure's endeavors to disseminate his work to a reading public, which was a first step in its acceptance by first-rate literary critics, such as William Dean Howells. My goal has been to enter Samuel S. McClure into the "Who's Who" of Zola Studies, and I hope that future research will acknowledge him as one whose energies were critical to the American reception of Émile Zola's writing at the end of the nineteenth century.

³⁸ Jonathan Littell, "Un inédit de Jonathan Littell: 'Lire'?", *Le Figaro.ca* 5 Feb. 2009, Web. 28 Aug. 2014 <<http://www.lefigaro.fr/livres/2009/02/05/03005-20090205ARTFIG00411-un-inedit-de-jonathan-littell-lire-.php>>.