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## Henry James On Zola

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lished, with 2 or 3 other short things, as a volume. The little dramatization was an experiment of several years later & was never acted. I have produced but 4 plays:

The American (dramatised from the Novel of that name) in 4 acts.

Guy Domville, in 3 acts.

The High Bid, 3 acts.

The Saloon, 4 acts.

All these were performed in London—none of them in America.

There are two volumes, further, of "Theatricals" (entitled respectively "1st Series" & "2d series")—published by Harper & Brothers.

Yours very truly

HENRY JAMES



HENRY JAMES ON ZOLA

BY CORNELIA PULSIFER KELLEY\*

ANY admirer of Henry James who is in possession of LeRoy Phillips' excellent *Bibliography of the Writings of Henry James* (New York, Coward-McCann, 1930) can ferret out, if he has the patience and access to a well-

\* Miss Kelley, a native of Waterville and a graduate of Colby College (B.A., 1918), is known to all students of Henry James as the author of *The Early Development of Henry James* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1930). When Lyon N. Richardson published his *Henry James* in 1941, he provided a discriminating and critical bibliography, in which Miss Kelley's work was described as "indispensable, careful, elaborate, sound, authoritative." The same note of authority will be heard in the article here printed. In *The Early Development* Miss Kelley wrote: "It is doubtful if any American novelist of recent years has stimulated more interest than Henry James. . . . In the early period . . . James as a critic outweighed James as a writer of original fiction. . . . This influenced his stories. . . . He . . . made himself into a writer of tales and novels. His only genius was that which is the most dependable of all—a genius for work." —*Editor*.

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stocked library, most of the early productions of James's pen. One item, however, a review of Emile Zola's *Nana*, is not, to the best of my knowledge and searchings, available anywhere in this country. *The Parisian* is not listed in the *Union List of Serials*, nor has there been any response to a questionnaire which twice circulated the major libraries of this country. James's review was originally published in February, 1880, by his friend Theodore Child, "a young London journalist," who, according to James, "was fondly carrying on under difficulties an Anglo-American periodical called the *Parisian*."<sup>1</sup> On this centenary occasion, it is perhaps fitting to republish the review and make it for the first time available in America. It is here printed from a transcript made from the files of the *Parisian* in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

This early review, it should be noted, represents James's reaction to Zola a few years after the fateful sojourn in Paris, when James had tried to bring himself to settle there for the better pursuit of his chosen profession. Fearing the better might become the worse in the fetid and obnoxious atmosphere of the "literary fraternity" of Flaubert, Maupassant, Daudet, the de Goncourts, and Zola, whose "wares" he did not like, recoiling with distaste from art which disregarded life or saw it imperfectly and incompletely, James had finally turned to the less artistic but humanly more congenial surroundings of London, and from London the review was sent to Child.<sup>2</sup> It not only announces without mincing James's opinion of *Nana* and of Zola, but gives his hopes and fears for realism which

<sup>1</sup> See Preface to Vol. XIX of *The Novels and Stories of Henry James*, London: Macmillan & Co., 1922, p. xxii. The quoted words occur in James's remarks on the first appearance of *A Bundle of Letters*, which Child had published in the Dec. 18, 1879, issue of the *Parisian*. James speaks of the inception of the story at Child's request during a visit to Paris; doubtless the review of *Nana*, to be published two months later, was also decided upon at this time.

<sup>2</sup> See my *The Early Development of Henry James* for further comment on James's reactions to the French group.

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was proceeding with Zola, James felt, to the unhealthy and misnamed extreme of naturalism. It also makes interesting distinctions, valuable in understanding James, between the French and Anglo-Saxon temperament.

The review should be followed by a reading of a long evaluation of Zola written by James at the time of Zola's "premature and disastrous death."<sup>3</sup> Where the review is mainly negative, severely denunciatory, somewhat strident and peremptory, and distinctly in James's early manner, the article, published in 1903, is a careful appraisal, considered, intellectual, kind, distinctly mature. In the latter, James recognizes Zola's ability in the light of his whole achievement, the prodigious, impressive Rougon-Macquart. James still speaks of Zola's limitations, his failure to see life whole, his lack of taste (capitalized in the 1903 essay) but treats this lack as inherent in Zola and in his "system," and thus, in a manner, forgivable. The long article should, of course, be recognized as James's final verdict on Zola, the one he chose to include in *Notes on Novelists*; the review, however, is of interest as his immediate response. The two, when placed side by side, reveal strikingly the differences in manner, attitude, and style of the early and the later James.<sup>4</sup>

A REVIEW OF ZOLA'S NOVEL *NANA*

by HENRY JAMES, JR.

From *The Parisian*, February 26, 1880, page 9.

M. ZOLA'S new novel has been immensely talked about for the last six months; but we may doubt whether, now that we are in complete possession of it, its fame will further increase. It is a difficult book to read; we have to push our way through it very much as we did through *L'Assommoir*, with the difference that in *L'Assommoir* our perseverance, our patience were constantly rewarded, and that in

<sup>3</sup> "Emile Zola," *Atlantic Monthly*, August, 1903; reprinted in *Notes on Novelists*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914.

<sup>4</sup> Between the early review and the later article many brief references to Zola may be found in articles James wrote on Daudet, Turgéniéff, and Balzac, and also in his personal letters.

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*Nana* these qualities have to content themselves with the usual recompense of virtue, the simple sense of duty accomplished. I do not mean, indeed, by this allusion to duty that there is any moral obligation to read *Nana*; I simply mean that such an exertion may have been felt to be due to M. Zola by those who have been interested in his general attempt. His general attempt is highly interesting, and *Nana* is the latest illustration of it. It is far from being the most successful one; the obstacles to the reader's enjoyment are numerous and constant.

It is true that, if we rightly understand him, enjoyment forms no part of the emotion to which M. Zola appeals; in the eyes of "naturalism" enjoyment is a frivolous, a superficial, a contemptible sentiment. It is difficult, however, to express conveniently by any other term the reader's measure of the entertainment afforded by a work of art. If we talk of interest, instead of enjoyment, the thing does not better our case—as it certainly does not better M. Zola's. The obstacles to interest in *Nana* constitute a formidable body, and the most comprehensive way to express them, is to say that the book is inconceivably and inordinately dull. M. Zola (if we again understand him) will probably say that it is a privilege, or even a duty, of naturalism to be dull, and to a certain extent this doubtless is a very lawful plea. It is not an absolutely fatal defect for a novel not to be amusing, as we may see by the example of several important works. *Wilhelm Meister* is not a sprightly composition, and yet *Wilhelm Meister* stands in the front rank of novels. *Romola* is a very easy book to lay down, and yet *Romola* is full of beauty and truth. *Clarissa Harlowe* discourages the most robust persistence, and yet, paradoxical as it seems, *Clarissa Harlowe* is deeply interesting. It is obvious, therefore, that there is something to be said for dullness; and this something is perhaps, primarily, that there is dullness and dullness. That of which *Nana* is so truly portentous a specimen, is of a peculiarly unredeemed and unleavened quality; it lacks that human savor, that finer meaning which carries it off in the productions I just mentioned. What *Nana* means it will take a very ingenious apologist to set forth. I speak, of course, of the impression it produces on English readers; into the deep mystery of the French taste in such matters it would be presumptuous for one of these to attempt to penetrate.

The other element that stops the English reader's way is that monstrous uncleanness to which—to the credit of human nature in whatever degree it may seem desirable to determine—it is probably not unjust to attribute a part of the facility with which the volume before us has reached, on the day of its being offered for sale by retail, —a 39th edition. M. Zola's uncleanness is not a thing to linger upon, but it is a thing to speak of, for it strikes us as an extremely curious phenomenon. In this respect *Nana* has little to envy to its predeces-

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sors. The book is, perhaps, not pervaded by that ferociously bad smell which blows through *L'Assommoir* like an emanation from an open drain and makes the perusal of the history of Gervaise and Coupeau very much such an ordeal as a crossing of the Channel in a November gale; but in these matters comparisons are as difficult as they are unprofitable, and *Nana* is, in all conscience, untidy enough. To say the book is indecent, is to make use of a term which (always, if we understand him), M. Zola holds to mean nothing and to prove nothing. Decency and indecency, morality and immorality, beauty and ugliness, are conceptions with which "naturalism" has nothing to do; in M. Zola's system these distinctions are void, these allusions are idle. The only business of naturalism is to be—natural, and therefore, instead of saying of *Nana* that it contains a great deal of filth, we should simply say of it that it contains a great deal of nature. Once upon a time a rather pretentious person, whose moral tone had been corrupted by evil communications, and who lived among a set of people equally pretentious but regrettably low-minded, being in conversation with another person, a lady of great robustness of judgment and directness of utterance, made use constantly in a somewhat cynical and pessimistic sense, of the expression "the world—the world." At last the distinguished listener could bear it no longer and abruptly made reply: "My poor lady, do you call that corner of a pigsty in which you happen to live, *the world*?" Some such answer as this we are moved to make to M. Zola's naturalism. Does he call that vision of things of which *Nana* is a representation, *nature*? The mighty mother, in her blooming richness, seems to blush from brow to chin at the insult. On what authority does M. Zola represent nature to us as a combination of the cesspool and the house of prostitution? On what authority does he represent foulness rather than fairness as the sign that we are to know her by? On the authority of his predilections alone; and this is his great trouble and the weak point in his incontestably remarkable talent. This is the point that, as we said just now, makes the singular foulness of his imagination worth touching upon, and which, we should suppose, will do much towards preserving his works for the curious contemplation of the psychologist and the historian of literature. Never was such foulness so spontaneous and so complete, and never was it united with qualities so superior to itself and intrinsically so respectable. M. Zola is an artist, and this is supposed to be a safeguard; and, indeed, never surely was any other artist so dirty as M. Zola! Other performers may have been so, but they were not artists; other such exhibitions may have taken place, but they have not taken place between the covers of a book—and especially of a book containing so much of vigorous and estimable effort.

We have no space to devote to a general consideration of M. Zola's theory of the business of a novelist, or to the question of naturalism

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at large—much further than to say that the system on which the series of *Les Rougon-Macquart* has been written, contains, to our sense a great deal of very solid ground. M. Zola's attempt is an extremely fine one; it deserves a great deal of respect and deference, and though his theory is constantly at odds with itself, we could, at a pinch, go a long way with it without quarreling. What we quarrel with is his application of it—is the fact that he presents us with a decoction of "nature" in a vessel unfit for the purpose, a receptacle lamentably, fatally in need of scouring (though no scouring, apparently, would be really effective), and in which no article intended for intellectual consumption should ever be served up. Reality is the object of M. Zola's efforts, and it is because we agree with him in appreciating it highly that we protest against its being discredited. In a time when literary taste has turned, to a regrettable degree, to the vulgar and the insipid, it is of high importance that realism should not be compromised. Nothing tends more to compromise it than to represent it as necessarily allied to the impure. That the pure and the impure are for M. Zola as conditions of taste, vain words, and exploded ideas, only proves that his advocacy does more to injure an excellent cause than to serve it. It takes a very good cause to carry a *Nana* on its back, and if realism breaks down, and the conventional comes in again with a rush, we may know the reason why. The real has not a single shade more affinity with an unclean vessel than with a clean one, and M. Zola's system, carried to its utmost expression, can dispense as little with taste and tact as the floweriest mannerism of a less analytic age. Go as far as we will, so long as we abide in literature, the thing remains always a question of taste, and we can never leave taste behind without leaving behind by the same stroke, the very grounds on which we appeal, the whole human side of the business. Taste in its intellectual applications, is the most human faculty we possess, and as the novel may be said to be the most human form of art, it is a poor speculation to put the two things out of conceit of each other. Calling it naturalism will never make it profitable. It is perfectly easy to agree with M. Zola, who has taken his stand with more emphasis than is necessary; for the matter reduces itself to a question of application. It is impossible to see why the question of application is less urgent in naturalism than at any other point of the scale, or why, if naturalism is, as M. Zola claims, a method of observation, it can be followed without delicacy of tact. There are all sorts of things to be said about it; it costs us no effort whatever to admit in the briefest terms that it is an admirable invention, and full of promise; but we stand aghast at the want of tact it has taken to make so unreadable a book as *Nana*.

To us English readers, I venture to think, the subject is very interesting, because it raises the questions which no one apparently has the energy or the good faith to raise among themselves. (It is of dis-

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tinctly serious readers only that I speak, and *Nana* is to be recommended exclusively to such as have a very robust appetite for a moral.) A novelist with a system, a passionate conviction, a great plan—incontestable attributes of M. Zola—is not now to be easily found in England or the United States, where the story-teller's art is almost exclusively feminine, is mainly in the hand of timid (even when very very accomplished) women, whose acquaintance with life is severely restricted, and who are not conspicuous for general views. The novel, moreover, among ourselves, is almost always addressed to young unmarried ladies, or at least always assumes them to be a large part of the novelist's public. This fact, to a French story-teller, appears, of course a damnable restriction, and M. Zola would probably decline to take "au serieux" any work produced under such unnatural conditions. Half of life is a sealed book to young unmarried ladies, and how can a novel be worth anything that deals only with half of life? How can a portrait be painted (in any way to be recognizable) of half a face? It is not in one eye, but in the two eyes together that the expression resides, and it is in the combination of features that constitutes the human identity. These objections are perfectly valid, and it may be said that our English system is a good thing for virgins and boys, and a bad thing for the novel itself, when the novel is regarded as something more than a simple "jeu d'esprit," and considered as a composition that treats of life at large and helps us to *know*. But under these unnatural conditions and insupportable restrictions a variety of admirable books have been produced; Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot, have all had an eye to the innocent classes. The fact is anomalous, and the advocates of naturalism must make the best of it. In fact, I believe they have little relish for the writers I have mentioned. They find that something or other is grievously wanting in their productions—as it most assuredly is! They complain that such writers are not serious. They are not so, certainly, as M. Zola is so; but there are many different ways of being serious. That of the author of *L'Assommoir*, of *La Conquête de Plassans*, of *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret* may, as I say, with all its merits and defects taken together, suggest a great many things to English readers. They must admire the largeness of his attempt and the richness of his intention. They must admire, very often, the brilliancy of his execution. *L'Assommoir*, in spite of its fetid atmosphere, is full of magnificent passages and episodes, and the sustained power of the whole thing, the art of carrying a weight, is extraordinary. What will strike the English Reader of M. Zola at large, however, and what will strike the English reader of *Nana*, if he have stoutness of stomach to advance in the book, is the extraordinary absence of humor, the dryness, the solemnity, the air of tension and effort. M. Zola disapproves greatly of wit; he thinks it an impertinence in a novel, and he would probably



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disapprove of humor if he *knew* what it is. There is no indication in all his works that he has a suspicion of this; and what tricks the absence of a sense of it plays him! What a mess it has made of this abominable *Nana*! The presence of it, even in a limited degree, would have operated, to some extent, as a disinfectant, and if M. Zola had had a more genial fancy he would also have had a cleaner one. Is it not owing to the absence of a sense of humor that his last and most violent expression of the realistic faith is extraordinarily wanting in reality?

Anything less illusory than the pictures, the people, the indecencies of *Nana*, could not well be imagined. The falling-off from *L'Assommoir* in this respect can hardly be exaggerated. The human note is completely absent, the perception of character, of the way that people feel and think and act, is helplessly, hopelessly, at fault; so that it becomes almost grotesque at last to see the writer trying to drive before him a herd of figures that never for an instant stand on their legs. This is what saves us in England, in spite of our artistic levity and the presence of the young ladies—this fact that we are by disposition better psychologists, that we have, as a general thing a deeper, more delicate perception of the play of character and the state of the soul. This is what often gives an interest to works conceived on a much narrower program than those of M. Zola—makes them much more touching and more real, although the apparatus and the machinery of reality may, superficially, appear to be wanting. French novelists are at bottom, with all their extra freedom, a good deal more conventional than our own; and *Nana*, with the prodigious freedom that the author has taken, never, to my sense, leaves for a moment the region of the conventional. The figure of the brutal “fille,” without a conscience or a soul, with nothing but devouring appetites and impudences, has become the stales of the stock-properties of French fiction, and M. Zola’s treatment has here imparted to her no touch of superior verity. He is welcome to draw as many figures of the same type as he finds necessary, if he will only make them human; this is as good a way of making a contribution to our knowledge of ourselves as another. It is not his choice of subject that has shocked us; it is the melancholy dryness of his execution, which gives us all the bad taste of a disagreeable dish and none of the nourishment.

London, February, 1880.



## NOTES AND QUERIES

**A** SHY young man once met Henry James and tried to express his admiration. James patted him on the shoulder and said: ‘That’s right, my dear boy; we *can’t*