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Zola à la mode

by [Brooke Allen](#)

Had Émile Zola been able to see into the future, he might have thought better of insisting as strenuously as he did upon his status as a “naturalist.” By doing so, he attached his name to the most fashionable group of contemporary artists and writers (the term had been coined by Gustave Courbet and taken up by the influential Goncourt brothers, among other trend-setters), ensuring that his novels would be perceived as stylistically and intellectually up-to-the-minute, but the tag has proved something of a drag on his posthumous reputation. Pedagogues dearly love such handy rubrics, which allow them to spoonfeed a writer to their pupils, and Zola’s “naturalism” has been repeated as an article of dreary faith to generation after generation of high school and college students. I myself shied away from him for years, for the textbooks made him sound a grim fellow, obsessed with the gutter and with a peculiarly nineteenth-century brand of pitiless biological determinism.

What a surprise I had, then, twenty years after leaving school, when I picked up *Nana* and discovered a writer apparently more of a symbolist than a naturalist, a metaphorical thinker with a dark sense of humor, a frequently indulged taste for the outrageous, the descriptive gifts of a painter, and the dramatic control of a filmmaker. It is true that the author was deeply concerned with social issues, but it would be hard to classify him as a “political novelist,” for he simply was not idealistic enough. In his fiction, political revolutionaries tend to be as petty, egotistical, and limited as the rest of humanity. The twenty novels in his *Rougon-Macquart* series (written between 1872 and 1892) expose every level of Napoleon III’s empire: there is corruption at the top of society, greed among the bourgeoisie, and desperate poverty at the bottom, but all men and women are equally human, and all, to some extent or other, debased.

Privately, Zola admitted that his exploitation of the “naturalist” label was largely a matter of PR, as Edmond de Goncourt recorded in his journal.

This evening Flaubert, while paying tribute to his colleague’s genius, attacked the prefaces, the doctrines, the naturalist professions of faith, in a word all the rather flamboyant humbug with which Zola helps along the sale of his books. Zola replied roughly to this effect: “You, you had private means which allowed you to remain independent of a good many things. But I had to earn my living with nothing but my pen; I had to go through the mill of journalism and write all sorts of shameful stuff; and it has left me with—how shall I put it?—a certain taste for charlatanism. . . . I consider the word *Naturalism* as ridiculous as you do, but I shall go on repeating it over and over again, because you have to give things new names for the public to think that they are new.

The third novel in the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, *The Belly of Paris* (*Le Ventre de Paris*, 1873), has

just been reissued by The Modern Library in a new translation by Mark Kurlansky. The Modern Library's commission comes hard on the heels of the well-received Oxford World's Classics 2007 translation by Brian Nelson, an Australian professor of French and a specialist in Zola studies. It's something of a luxury to have two new renditions, particularly since the original 1888 translation by Henry Vizetelly, revised and expurgated by his son a few years later, was for many years the only available English version of the novel.

Kurlansky, who lived and worked in Paris for a decade, is primarily known as a food writer: a winner of the James A. Beard Award, he is the author of *The Last Fish Tale*, *The Big Oyster*, *Cod*, *Salt*, and the editor of *Choice Cuts*, an anthology of food writing. His translation of Zola's great novel is serviceable enough, excellent in spots, and lazy and careless in others; he appears to have been selected for the job on the rather bizarre assumption that *The Belly of Paris* fits in with the modern fashion for gastronomic literature and will appeal to foodies, who of course are legion among today's book-buyers. The press material actually touts the book as "a vibrant read for foodies, Francophiles, and those in search of an off-the-beaten-path work of fiction," while Kurlansky's introduction lauds the author's ability to write "about voluptuous women and the delights of food."

Huh? *The Belly of Paris* is not a sensual romp; it is one long, heartfelt shudder of disgust at the voracity of human appetites, and the market of Les Halles is, as one of the novel's characters recognizes, "a metaphor for some satiated, gluttonous beast, a bloated Paris wallowing in fat and propping up the empire. . . . It was the belly of shopkeepers, the belly of ordinary people puffing themselves up, celebrating in the sunshine, declaring that everything was for the best, since passive people had never been so well fattened." The food of Les Halles is gross and excessive; the women of Les Halles, even its famous beauties, are tainted, "like dubious meat that had been dressed for the window."

Kurlansky's introduction displays an impenetrability that should have disqualified him for the job. "There is no poetry in Zola's novels," he writes. "They are unflinchingly realistic." Apparently he took his high school French teacher's edicts on naturalism a little too seriously. Are realism and poetry, as Kurlansky suggests, mutually exclusive? Does poetry presuppose fantasy? Zola didn't think so, and his descriptions, his richly *poetic* descriptions, support his position brilliantly. But maybe Kurlansky simply doesn't hear the poetry. "[Zola's] visual descriptions," he goes on to say, "can be labored. Several of his descriptions of food are so lengthy they will try the patience of all but the most dedicated foodies, though these remarkable passages are occasionally worth it."

Occasionally? No—they are the whole point of the book. It is not the plot or the characterization of *The Belly of Paris* that will stick with the reader, it is these truly extraordinary descriptions, in which Zola, aficionado of avant-garde art and boon companion of Paul Cézanne, showed himself to be a painter as well—though his art is less closely allied with Cézanne's relatively austere work than it is with that of their contemporaries Manet, Monet, and Renoir. This is evident on the novel's very first page, in which Zola describes the entry of the vegetable carts into Paris at dawn:

Up on the carts, lying on their stomachs in the vegetables, wrapped in their black-and-gray-striped wool coats, the drivers slept with the reins in their fists. Occasionally the light from a gas lamp would grope its way through the shadows and brighten the hobnail of a boot, the blue sleeve of a blouse, or the tip of a hat poking from the bright bloom of vegetables—red bouquets of carrots, white bouquets of turnips, or the bursting greenery of peas and cabbage.

Any sensitive reader should note the close alliance with Manet, then at the height of his career. Indeed, Zola employs the device of making one of his characters a modern painter—Claude Lantier, who is mad for the colors and textures on view at the market.

The few pages following that opening description make the painterly connection even clearer.

She arranged them in her allotted space with an artistic flair, so that the tops formed a green wreath around the bunches. She arranged the display with dazzling speed in the dank morning light that made it resemble a tapestry with geometric splashes of color. . . .

The piles of vegetables were now spilling into the road, with narrow paths between them so that people could pass. The sidewalk was covered end to end with the dark vegetable mounds. But in the flicker of lantern light, you could barely make out the lush fullness of a bouquet of artichokes, the delicate green of the lettuce, the flush coral of carrots, the soft ivory finish of turnips. Flashes of the bright colors skipped across the mounds with the flickering of the light.

Here Zola, like so many artists of the period, assigns human, even sexual qualities to the delectable objects, a practice he would adhere to throughout the novel, specifically associating the various vendors and *vendeuses*' physical characteristics with what they sell—presumably on the principle, as with dogs and their owners, that propinquity effects similarity. Thus Madame Françoise, the countrywoman who brings her vegetables to Les Halles, is as wholesome and attractive as the goods she sells, but most of the other merchants are tainted with a sort of original sin deriving from the cruel or unsavory methods employed in the manufacture of their wares. As Claude observes, “everything at Les Halles was in the throes of death.”

Current animal rights activists deplore the inhumane methods of modern farming while comparing it with some idealized rural past in which animals are supposed to have ranged freely and died painlessly. A perusal of *The Belly of Paris* should disabuse them of that notion. Cruelty to animals did not begin with industrialized farming; it is inherent in human nature and human appetite. The chickens Zola's protagonist Florent observes at Les Halles are plucked while still alive, for instance, making the process easier for the plucker, while the unfortunate pigeons are force-fed with seeds blown into their beaks: “They choked and squirmed, then fell backward white-eyed into the darkness of the box, knocked senseless by the forcibly swallowed food.” And let's have a look at young Marjolin in the poultry market:

Fat geese hung from spiked bars above him. The hooks plunged into bleeding wounds in their long stiff necks, and their enormous red bellies under fine down ballooned out like obscene nudes as white as linen from tail to wings.

Gray-backed rabbits also hung from the bar, their legs spread as though about to take some impressive leap and their ears lying flat with tufts of white fur at the tail. Their heads showed sharp teeth and terrified eyes vivid with the laughing grimace of dead animals. Plucked chickens showed fleshy breasts on the display table, where they were stretched tight on skewers, while pigeons, pressed together on a wicker frame, exposed the tender naked skin of newborn babies. Tough-skinned ducks splayed their webbed feet. Three turkeys with blue shadows like a shaved face and their throats sewn up with needle and thread slept on their backs on the fans of their wide black tails. Giblets were placed in plates next to them—livers, gizzards, necks, feet, and wings—and in a nearby oval bowl sat a skinned and gutted rabbit with a blood-spattered head, its four limbs stretched wide apart, and the cavity was spread to reveal the two kidneys inside. A trickle of blood ran down to the tail and fell drop by drop, staining the pale ceramic tiles.

Not exactly a vision calculated to appeal to “foodies.”

The epicenter of this cruel land where man, not nature, is red in tooth and claw, is the Quenu charcuterie and its presiding goddess, the Beautiful Lisa, who surveys her domain with “satisfaction

in her lovely face, as peaceful as the smile of a golden calf.” (“Golden calf” is a poor equivalent of Zola’s original, “*vache sacrée*”—an entirely different object). Zola’s rendering of the shop’s window typifies his queasy mixture of admiration and repulsion:

First of all, close to the windowpane, was a row of crocks full of rillettes alternating with jars of mustard. The next row was nice round jambonneaux with golden breadcrumb coatings. Behind these were platters: stuffed Strasbourg tongues all red and looking as if they had been varnished, appearing almost bloody next to the pale sausages and pigs’ feet; boudin coiled like snakes; andouilles piled two by two and plump with health; dried sausages in silvery casings lined up like choirboys; pâtés, still warm, with little labels stuck on them like flags; big, fat hams; thick cuts of veal and pork whose juices had jellied clear as crystal candy. In the back were other dishes and earthenware casseroles in which minced and sliced meats slept under blankets of fat. . . .

At the top of the window display, draped with symmetry on a bar armed with sharp wolves’ teeth, were links of sausages, dried saucissons and cervelas, their lacy membranes hanging like cords and tassels.

The floor and walls of this “gourmand’s chapel” are in a marble as pink and white as the meat on sale, and as pink and white as the fat, luscious proprietress herself. In a world in which, as Claude points out, the Fat are perpetually preying on the Thin, Lisa personifies the Fat and their values—the philosophy, that is, of the overfed, complacent bourgeois who seek nothing more from life than the means by which to enrich and engorge themselves. “She was just a steady, sensible Macquart with a rational desire for comfort, who understood that the best way to fall asleep blissfully is to make a comfortable bed to lie in. She gave all her time and effort to the preparation of this fluffy soft couch.” A lesser writer than Zola would have had her opposite number, the thin and suffering Florent, be a more obviously positive foil, but Zola has made him (though kind and benevolent) idealistic to the point of asininity and cursed with a deadening passivity, “so unconcerned for his own well-being was he that it could no longer be counted as a virtue. It was more a matter of supreme indifference, a lack of personality.” Faced with Florent’s deficiencies, the reader is sometimes tempted to assent to Lisa’s barbaric creed, which she preaches quite persuasively.

The kitchen where the Quenus concoct their boudin (blood sausage) and other delicacies reveals the charcuterie’s underside:

Despite the excessive cleanliness, grease dominated; it oozed from the white and blue tiles, shone on the red floor tiles, gave a gray sheen to the stove, polished the chopping block to the glow of varnished oak. And in the vapor from the three continuously steaming pots of melting pork, the condensation, falling drop by drop, ensured that there was not, from floor to ceiling, so much as a nail that did not drip grease.

Potent prose, and even more so in Zola’s original—in his version, it is not “drip grease” but “*pissât la graisse*,” an infinitely superior image. Where Kurlansky will trot out an overworked word like “chubby,” Zola has come up with the really magnificent “*potelé*”; Kurlansky settles for the relatively mild “pungent” to describe a cheese’s odor, as opposed to the master’s stronger “*pestilentielle*”; the translator renders the author’s definition of Paris as “*la ville gourmande*” into “city of gluttony.” This kind of thing gives the lie to Kurlansky’s presumptuous claim that “One of the great challenges of translating Zola is the occasional desire to improve him.”

Kurlansky should have translated “*la ville gourmande*” as “the greedy city” or “the voracious city,” stressing the fact that it is *the city itself* that devours—for Zola has turned Paris itself into an organism, a giant organism that gobbles up not only food but lives and souls. “Paris was dispersing the mouthfuls that would feed its two million inhabitants. These markets were like a huge central

organ, furiously pulsating and pumping the blood of life through the city's veins. The uproar from all the stocking and provisioning was like the chomping of the jaws of a colossus." Edmond de Goncourt sourly pointed out that this technique was a gimmick Zola had exploited more than once: "That huge, awe-inspiring animal that he makes out of a factory, a barracks, or a shop, is a comparison taken from *Notre-Dame de Paris* which he uses again and again in all his lyrical works." Still, it is very effective, and appears to have been not simply a borrowing from Hugo but a widespread feature of the Industrial Revolution imagination: Dickens's personification of the railroads in *Dombey and Son* is a classic example, and H. G. Wells's *Time Machine* would imprint equally powerful images onto the consciousness of his era.

Zola was in no respect an optimistic man, and he was not given to closing his novels with hopeful images. In *The Belly of Paris*, however, he allows the thin and gentle Florent, defeated by the combined efforts of the Fat, a final gesture of defiant grace. Escorted from the Quenu household by the gendarmes—for of course his little effort at political revolution has failed—Florent persuades them to let him return briefly to his bedroom.

On reaching the room he went straight to the finch's cage, took the bird, kissed it between its wings, and released it from the window. He watched it perch in the sunlight on the roof of the fish market, seeming dazed. Then it took flight again, disappearing above Les Halles, headed in the direction of the Square des Innocents. He remained an instant longer, staring at the sky, the open, free sky. He thought of the pigeons cooing in the Tuileries and the pigeons in the storage cellar whose throats had been slit by Marjolin. Then everything in him crumbled, and he followed the police, who put their weapons back in the holsters and shrugged.

A small gesture, saving one bird after helplessly watching thousands being sacrificed to the *ville gourmande*. But it shows that even the weakest are not entirely without moral resources, and that the capacity for positive action, however limited, is there for all of us. This is Zola's philosophy, and his politics, in a nutshell.

Notes

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1. *The Belly of Paris*, by Émile Zola, translated by Mark Kurlansky; The Modern Library, 368 pages, \$16. [Go back to the text.](#)

Brooke Allen's latest book is *Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers* (Ivan R Dee).

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