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## The Novel Map

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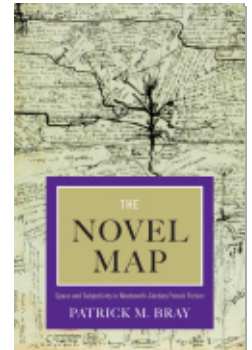
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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Zola and the Contradictory Origins of the Novel

Naturalism, as Zola theorized it, merged for the first time in literary history the realist ambition of depicting social interactions with the scientific examination of what underlies those interactions. Mimesis surrenders to analysis as the naturalist novelist discovers the true cause of human behavior hidden under the surface of polite nineteenth-century bourgeois society. No longer Stendhal's mirror dragged along a muddy road, the novel, in Zola's telling, would be a precise observational tool, akin to a scientist's laboratory. The author's detailed and objective study of a given milieu supported by the laws of heredity and psychology produce a novel that can both represent the logical outcome of any narrative situation and explain its scientific necessity. When milieu, as an amalgam of space, class, and historical time (derived in part from Hippolyte Taine's "race, milieu, moment"), defines the very essence of characters, the naturalist author merely juxtaposes one milieu to another and deduces the rational dénouement. The author becomes a scientist who observes phenomena and then experiments in the language of the text. By affirming the experimental aspect of fiction writing, Zola shows that naturalism does not blindly copy or assimilate science, but practices it; carefully planned novels simulate real-life situations just as laboratory experiments selectively test one hypothesis at a time. The *Rougon-Macquart* follows the vicissitudes of one simulated family, but the laws of human behavior may be applicable to Second Empire France and beyond.

In his preface to the first novel in the series, *La Fortune des Rougon*, and so to the series as a whole, Zola announces his theory of the novel and the method to his creative process, which will be focused on the analysis of a group of individuals who appear dissimilar but who are "intimately tied together," since "heredity has its laws, like gravity" (Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, 1:3). Zola's novels will try to solve the "double

question of temperaments and milieus” that determine people’s actions. The novels must be grounded in physiological laws and historical accuracy to reveal truths both natural and social. The recent disastrous loss of the Franco-Prussian War and the fall of the Second Empire months before the novel’s publication offer proof of the validity of Zola’s method and the inevitability of such a historical outcome in a world governed by natural laws (1:4). Zola claims to have collected over the preceding three years all the documents needed for such an extensive study, and thus affirms the existence of a separate archive of documents at the origin of the novels (1:3). In the two short pages of the preface Zola proclaims the theoretical foundation for his novels as a scientific and historical project spanning many years and many novels based on reliable documents in the author’s possession.

Equally present, however, is the author’s own signature, his ownership not just of ideas but of a world he has created. The first word, “Je,” is repeated eleven times and accompanied for good measure by “mon oeuvre” and “ma pensée.” Napoléon III’s fall, while inevitable in Zola’s estimation, was also a dramatic necessity “dont j’avais besoin comme artiste” (“which I needed as an artist”) (1:4). The objects of the novelistic experiment become puppets in the author’s hands:

Et quand je tiendrai tous les fils, quand j’aurai entre les mains tout un groupe social, je ferai voir ce groupe à l’oeuvre, comme acteur d’une époque historique, je le créerai agissant dans la complexité de ses efforts, j’analyserai à la fois la somme de volonté de chacun de ses membres et la poussée générale de l’ensemble.<sup>1</sup> (1:3)

Zola’s preface alternates between a scientific vocabulary (analysis, social group, historical period) and an artistic, even theatrical, vocabulary (actor, create, drama, artist) with the effect of subsuming the whole of his work under one artistically new and scientifically valid vision. The preface amounts to a pact offered to the reader and signed by the author, who stands by the soundness of his method and implicitly acknowledges that the novel must pass through the filter or “screen” of his vision.<sup>2</sup>

Gustave Flaubert, in an otherwise enthusiastic letter to Zola, criticizes his younger colleague’s inclusion of the preface to *La Fortune des Rougon*: “Je n’en blâme que la préface. Selon moi, elle gâte votre oeuvre qui est si impartiale et si haute. Vous y dites votre secret, ce qui est trop candide, chose que dans ma poétique (à moi) un romancier n’a pas le droit de faire” (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, 1:1541) (“I only disapprove of the preface. For me, it spoils your work, which is otherwise so impartial and so

lofty. You give away your secret, and that is too naive, something which in my (own) poetics a novelist has no right doing"). Flaubert neatly summarizes the difference between the two authors. *La Fortune des Rougon*, like the other novels in the series, erases all signs of authorial presence, suggesting an objectivity and a distance from what is represented. The preface attached to the work, however, reintroduces the figure of the author and allows the reader to see the cogs in the textual machine. For Flaubert, a novel's preparation, its documentation and all the evidence of the author's research, must remain a trade secret, since presumably the novel must speak for itself. But Zola's preface does not tell the reader any secrets, it makes known that there is a secret, namely, the novel's factual basis in science and history recorded in a collection of documents hidden from view.

Flaubert's negative reaction to Zola's preface and to his theories in general reflects quite accurately the critical consensus until fairly recently. When not rejecting them outright, critics spared Zola's novels only by banishing the theory behind them. Even at the time, contemporary writers were suspicious of the scientific laws Zola promoted, and they ridiculed the notion of experimentation in the novel, since the outcome of the experiment was already known by the author (which assumes that authors control the meaning of their texts). Any number of reasons can be put forth to save the novels from the potentially embarrassing (and certainly dated) science found in Zola's theory: Zola's writing practice, as shown by genetic critics, does not entirely correspond to his purported method; Zola only represented scientific knowledge of the time, however erroneous it appears today; Zola did not actually believe the theories he trumpeted, but used them as part of an ingenious marketing campaign.<sup>3</sup> All of these assertions are convincing, but rely on a denial of Zola's theoretical and literary innovation: a scientifically and historically researched novel series with a documentary archive as long as the novels themselves. Zola's naturalism professed, in word if not always in deed, a narrative derived not from literary history and novelistic convention but from natural history and scientific practice.

The laws of heredity and the observations of social milieu described by Zola, whether true or not (and in his notes Zola hinted at his indifference to the question), generate new narrative effects, almost mythical in their sweeping vision, that can play out in an infinite number of combinations without repeating.<sup>4</sup> When social history and heredity become a new narratology, the novel's very structure resembles the society it depicts; Napoleon III's fall is a social, physiological, and narrative inevitability. The textual motor, as Michel Serres described it, finds its fuel, its stock,

in its own subject matter (and I would add, its reserves in the dossier), consuming itself in an inexorable, entropic blaze.<sup>5</sup> Only by juxtaposing Zola's theoretical impulse to the *dossiers préparatoires* and to the novels themselves can we understand the complex, even contradictory, relationship between the author's aesthetic, documentary, and scientific projects.

### Rancière, Zola, and the "Mute" Dossiers

The philosopher Jacques Rancière provides a useful framework for contextualizing Zola's novel project in the literary history of the nineteenth century. Instead of proposing a chronology of successive literary movements in opposition to each other that lead inevitably to modernism and postmodernism, Rancière argues that all literature defines itself internally as a struggle between the autonomy of the written word, as the indifference of subject matter to its expression, and a more mystical equivalence of all forms of expression found in material objects. Each "new" literary movement only reshuffles the terms of the original contradiction. Beyond a conception of naturalism as a stop on the road between romanticism and modernism, Zola's naturalist theories and novelistic practices reflect an attempt to harness the latent poetic energy of things in the service of a representation of society.

In *La Parole muette: Essai sur les contradictions de la littérature* (1998) as well as in many other works, Rancière describes the paradigm shift away from a "representational regime of art" toward an "aesthetic or literary regime of art" that occurred around the end of the eighteenth century. This aesthetic revolution introduced the notion of "literature" as an art that abandons the hierarchy of representational genres and defines itself exclusively in relation to language and the act of writing. Playfully mocking his and anyone else's inability to answer Jean-Paul Sartre's question "What is literature?" Rancière shows that literature has no object, no "what," but is rather a "*mode historique de visibilité des oeuvres de l'art d'écrire*" (13) ("*historical mode of visibility of works of the art of writing*"). Literature conceptualizes the very possibility of visualizing writing as an art form. It is historical since this mode of seeing did not exist before, roughly speaking, the French Revolution.<sup>6</sup> Literature is therefore not some spiritual and transcendental experiment. At the same time, as it has no inherent object, no conventions governing what is appropriate to represent, it cannot be defined by any strictly social or directly political context. Refusing the extremes of Sartre's idea of literature as political engagement and Maurice Blanchot's idea of literature as the exteriority

of language (a concept we will return to later in this chapter), Rancière proposes that literature functions precisely because it combines these two contradictory elements inherent to the alienating nature of language and text.

Ignoring other ways of dividing and classifying literature by movements or schools such as romanticism, symbolism, or realism, Rancière proposes a different division, that of a preliterate regime of representation and the literary or aesthetic regime of art, whose visibility depends upon a seemingly never-ending list of irreconcilable dualities. Literature's contradictions, far from being negative, are described as productive tensions; accepting Rancière's argument, it becomes apparent that the different movements, schools, and authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have in fact produced more and ever-changing contradictions in their impossible search for an organic literature in harmony with society and nature. Literature becomes the art of writing beginning in the nineteenth century by renouncing the primacy of fictional representation, which Rancière links to the tradition of *belles lettres* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the classical imagination, every genre has its natural subject matter and specific generic conventions; fictional representation reproduced the hierarchies that structure society. With the advent of the aesthetic regime of art and the abandonment of appropriate subjects of representation, anything can become the subject of literature; now "everything speaks" or has a voice in writing, even inanimate objects. As his primary example, Rancière cites Victor Hugo's novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*, where the subject of the fiction is not an aristocratic tragic hero or a comic peasant but a stone building. Hugo famously claims that the printing press kills or takes the place of architecture ("Ceci tuera cela"). It can only do so because the stone of the cathedral can also signify or "speak," and thereby become absorbed as the "material" of the novel.

While it allows any object to become the speaking subject of a text, this same rejection of generic boundaries promotes the unchecked, democratic circulation of meaning so abhorred by Plato. The ties between language and its referents are loosened by a "parole muette," the written word devoid of any human voice or any stable meaning. The concept of writing for Rancière becomes doubled, self-contradictory: on the one hand writing is a hieroglyph where an idea is inscribed through form, and on the other hand the word becomes "orphaned" of any body or stable meaning (14). Literature is divided between the language of forms and things and the language of ideas (174); it is both "chatty" and "mute," both symbolic of what Rancière calls "the poeticity of the world" and "floating" without any fixed meaning (172); it is caught between "the indifference of what

is written and the necessity of form” (154). While his text clarifies how literature is perceived by dismissing the differences and divisions between literature’s various manifestations over the last two hundred years, Rancière invents, or demonstrates how texts have invented, countless and shifting new divisions, paradoxes, and partitions, not between different conceptions of literature, but within texts themselves. At each text’s origin lies the failed attempt to bridge a divide, and the failure even to represent this origin as seamless.

At the same time as he argues that literature, as framed in the nineteenth century, is intrinsically contradictory, Rancière makes the surprising claim that naturalism as conceived by Émile Zola offers the novel form a compromise between the representational primacy of fiction (in the service of a political, republican agenda) and the antirepresentational play of literary expression. Zola’s novels, according to this argument, would not produce contradictions or even seek to resolve them, but rather would work to structure the text so as to hide the conflicting origins of literature. Rancière’s comment on Zola comes in chapter 9 of *La Parole muette* when he contrasts Stéphane Mallarmé’s negative assessment of Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet* to his favorable reception of Zola:

La description du boudoir de Nana, comme celle des fleurs du Paradou, des étalages des Halles ou des vitraux du *Rêve* applique, dans l’‘égalité’ des sujets, l’identité du principe d’expression. Zola, qui ne s’est jamais posé le problème d’une poéticité de la prose, obéit encore au principe de symbolicité qui fonde la poétique romantique, il fait parler les choses à la manière de *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Et ce principe d’expressivité vient doubler sans problème la narration à l’ancienne, comme la rime de l’idéal en toute réalité. Le naturalisme donne à la forme romanesque le moyen d’être la forme du compromis: compromis entre les principes contradictoires de la poétique nouvelle, et, par là, compromis entre l’ancienne et la nouvelle poétique, entre le primat représentatif de la fiction et le principe antireprésentatif d’expression.<sup>7</sup> (121–22)

This rather dense passage is made all the more confusing since it is difficult to tell at times whether Rancière is expressing his own judgment or is expressing Mallarmé’s, given the free indirect discourse so common in Rancière’s work. If Rancière is speaking for Mallarmé, his interpretation seems skewed. At the end of the passage on Zola’s compromise, a footnote refers the reader to the enthusiastic letter Mallarmé wrote to Zola on March 18, 1876, after reading Zola’s *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*, one of the few novels in the series that lacks long lists of “speak-

ing objects” à la *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Mallarmé’s letter does not entirely correspond to Rancière’s appraisal. It relates how the poet read the novel twice: the first time all in one sitting, as he says “à l’ancienne,” like a “theatrical play,” and the second time fragment by fragment as a person would who is caught up in the speed of the modern world. The novel, according to Mallarmé, is adaptable to both styles or rhythms of reading. Instead of a compromise of contradictions, for Mallarmé the forces and drives of Zola’s sweeping narrative create a modulated time, one that allows for both textual detail and mythic grandeur.

Reading the passage as Rancière’s own critique, Zola’s naturalism would be a double compromise, the first between the contradictions within literature, which is to say between on the one hand a poetry found within banal objects and on the other a mute language of the written word. The second compromise, related to the first, would be between the “old” narration, which I take to be one from the “representative regime of art,” and a newer, literary narration that would be antirepresentational. Zola’s project for the *Rougon-Macquart* is representational because it seeks to describe how the laws of heredity and milieu determine the trajectory of a family during the Second Empire, while at the same time its “poetic” descriptions of objects and milieus, which belong to the new form of literature, become indistinguishable from the old representational regime. The long lists of everyday objects, technical vocabulary, and colorful ethnographic detail, which form the evidence of the naturalist’s research, inevitably take on a poetic quality of their own, independent from their representational context. As Rancière shows, Zola’s journalistic pretensions to the truth take nothing away from the poetic force of his descriptions (46).

Here as elsewhere, Rancière wants to deny that Zola’s aesthetic or literary compromise allows for an account or understanding of what he calls “political dissensuality,” the essence of politics being the capture of a share of power by a formerly marginalized group not through consensus but through “dissensus.” Political dissensuality in literature has nothing to do with a representation of the politically oppressed, but rather with how a text allows innovative reconceptualizations of what is common to all, in his terms “le partage du sensible” (the partition, division, or sharing of the perceptible). Rancière thus claims that Virginia Woolf’s novels are more effective for thinking politics than what he calls Zola’s “social epics.”

But concretely, how does the *Rougon-Macquart* amount to a compromise? I would like to argue *against* Rancière’s notion of a compromise, with its implication that Zola was simply attenuating the extreme positions of literature’s opposing tendencies, and *for* Rancière’s concept of lit-



erature as contradiction. Zola's compromise does not involve a resolution of the contradictions of literature, or even a hybrid novel form embracing elements of both belles lettres and literature as defined by Rancière, but rather, the displacement of representation in the form of the hidden, or "mute," *dossiers préparatoires* for the *Rougon-Macquart*. It is as if the dossiers must be silenced in order to guard against the inevitability of the mute speech of the novel's text. The dossiers, which themselves contain representational documents (notes and drawings), can be thought of as the repository for the artifacts of representation; their material, sequestered and separated from the novels, remains silent, as if Victor Hugo had actually killed the cathedral with his novel.

The dossiers form a parallel text, both representational and visual, containing their own aesthetic and their own fictions, which the novels do not always incorporate. The passage from note to novel sacrifices visual representation and the guarantee of documentary evidence in favor of the freedom of verbal expression within representation. If, as elsewhere in *La Parole muette*, Rancière is correct in saying that literature "est en son principe la séparation du voir et du dire" (165) ("is in principle/at its origin the separation of the seen and the spoken"), the separation of visual representation in Zola's notes from the literary text of his novels suggests that Zola's compromise actually generates the productive contradictions of a literature which cannot be reduced to its competing representational or poetic engagements.

### Partitioning the Dossiers

Unearthing the *dossiers préparatoires* for the *Rougon-Macquart*, making the silenced or muted documents speak, exposes the contradictory origins of the novel series as a poetic and scientific project. Zola's notes, like Rancière's argument, progress through a succession of partitions that literally and metaphorically separate the poetic from the representational, and the written from the visual. The simultaneous juxtaposition and separation of contradictions only serves to heighten the contrasting elements of the literary paradox, as we will see by examining the role of the visual in the notes, and in particular the first maps found in the dossiers.

The 10,000 or so pages of Zola's *dossiers préparatoires* contain countless sketches, diagrams, maps, and lists of observations that attempt to convey a one-to-one correspondence between objects and linguistic representation. They correspond perhaps to the "base indestructible" or "des faits vrais" he mentions in his essay *Le Roman expérimental*.<sup>8</sup> Besides

notes about plot and character development, the dossiers contain about 150 hand-drawn sketches and maps by the hand of Zola himself. There are maps of city streets (*Une Page d'amour*, *Germinal*), maps of the battlefield at Sedan (*La Débâcle*), and even maps of the Middle East (*L'Argent*), along with layouts of dinner tables (*Nana*), department stores (*Au Bonheur des Dames*), and countless other visual documents. These dossiers serve as the factual, observational double to Zola's novelistic experiment; they are visual, in the manner of Stendhal's ichnographic maps, compared to the novels, which are inevitably rooted in the play of language. Though Zola claimed in his preface to have amassed all the documentation necessary in the three years preceding the publication of the first novel, as the *Rougon-Macquart* series progressed, the number of notes taken for each novel increased exponentially: for *La Fortune des Rougon* there are only 111 folios, whereas for *La Débâcle* there are 1,250 (Becker, preface to Zola, *La Fabrique des Rougon-Macquart*, 1:10).

A meticulous organization evolved over the course of the project; each novel would eventually have a dossier containing notes classified into the following sections, "Ébauche" (rough outline), "Personnages" (characters), "Plans" (meaning variously outline, project, or map), then the notes documenting Zola's research. These classifications also function as divisions within the dossiers themselves, sorting out the fictional from the documentary, even as these boundaries were highly porous. In his thorough study of the visual imaginary structuring the *dossiers préparatoires*, Olivier Lumbroso argues that Zola was a visual thinker who framed reality in geometric terms.<sup>9</sup> According to Lumbroso, Zola's creative process habitually began with the invention of a frame ("le cadre") that not only defined the limits of a fictional place, but stratified characters, arranged the novels' chapters, and organized the dossiers themselves; furthermore, the geometric frame not only defines the places and the chapters, but extends, to use Rancière's term, to the novels' poeticity, since geometric figures abound in the novels (Lumbroso, *Zola: La plume et le compas*, 37–38). Likewise, the words on the page or the order of the chapters form visual puns, "calligrammes," where the repressed visual image returns displaced in the text (267–79). Far from imposing two distinct and noncommunicating regions, Zola's frames set up a hidden network of internal cross-references, where (fictional) word and (documented) image continually change places.

The first two sketches drawn by Zola himself in the *dossiers préparatoires* for *La Fortune des Rougon* establish the partitions between the visual and the textual and the factual and the fictional, as well as between the two branches of the same family, Rougon and Maquart. The sketches

inaugurate the section entitled “Plan de la Fortune des Rougon,” in which Zola wrote out a detailed outline of all the chapters of the novel. The first sketch is a map depicting the march of republican insurgents against Napoleon III’s coup d’état around the fictional city of Plassans (figure 4.1) (Zola, *La Fabrique des Rougon-Macquart*, 1:249). Just as Sand’s fictional village Valcreux in her novel *Nanon* was a transparent stand-in for the easily identifiable Aun, Plassans corresponds to Zola’s childhood home Aix-en-Provence. The geographical situation of the fictional towns on the map is rather approximate, since Zola rearranged them along a line and drew a road connecting them that did not yet exist, as if the narrative needed to improve the infrastructure of the region (Lumbroso, 36). Plassans, according to Henri Mitterand, shares the same geographical location as the town of Lorgues, while the layout of its streets and its history are that of Aix (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, 1:1545). On the map itself, Zola includes in parentheses beside the fictional toponyms, the real names of the towns: Sainte-Roure (Aups), Orchères (Salernes), Alboise (Vidauban), and a double referent for Plassans (Lorgues, Aix). The line of the road on the map visually links the circles representing the fictional towns, establishing a fictional spatial network even as the text of the place names in parentheses refer to a very different and real spatial configuration. The

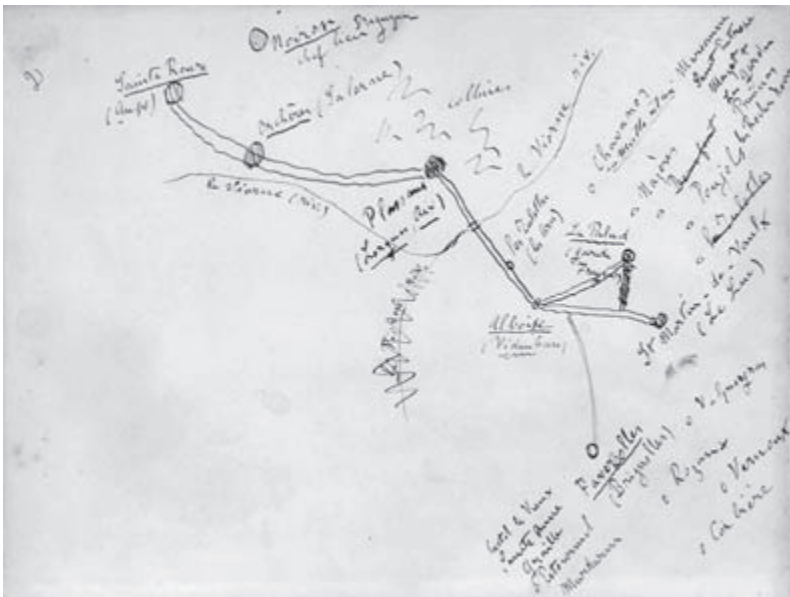


Figure 4.1. Zola’s preliminary map of the region surrounding Plassans. Mss, NAF 10.303 folio 2. Courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France.

map captures the process of metamorphosis as the real Provence dissolves into the Plassans of the *Rougon-Macquart*.

The second sketch found in the dossiers represents a map of the “Aire Saint-Mittre,” an abandoned lot at the edge of the city of Plassans (figure 4.2) (Zola, *La Fabrique des Rougon-Macquart*, 1:251). Adjacent to the lot is the property called the Jas-Meiffren where Adélaïde Fouque begat the split or double family, Rougon-Macquart. When the novel begins in 1851 right before Louis-Napoléon’s coup d’état, the Aire Saint-Mittre is inhabited by gypsies; moreover, by day it is a wood yard where children come to play, and by night a favored rendezvous point for young lovers. The Aire Saint-Mittre and the cul-de-sac of the same name uncannily resemble the impasse Sylvacanne in Aix-en-Provence where Zola lived with his mother and grandparents between 1843 and 1858, which is to say the time of the novel’s narration (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, 1:1545). But like the first sketch where the real Provence coincides with its fictional double, the second sketch portrays the transformation between Zola’s childhood Aix and the imaginary Plassans.

The sketch makes no reference to characters or events in the novel, but the juxtaposition of places and text on the map suggests a sort of

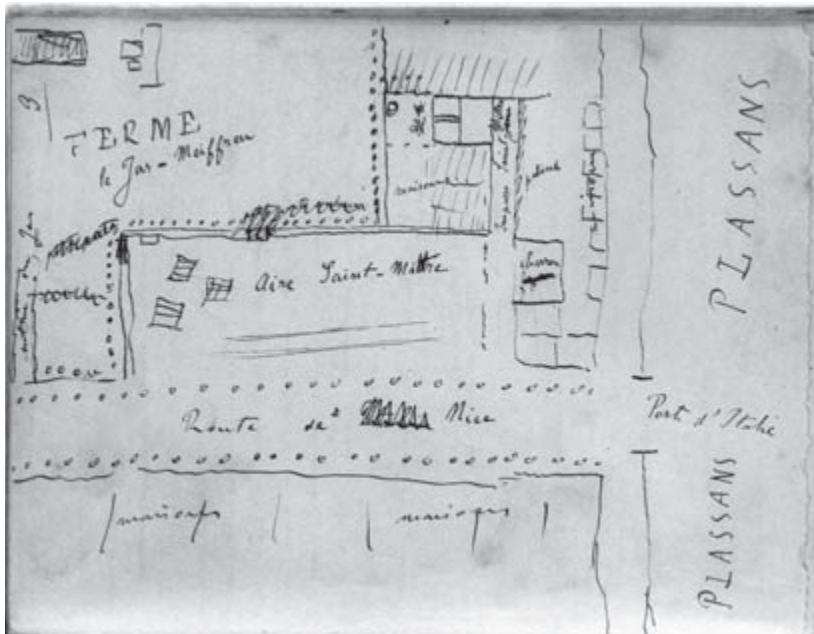


Figure 4.2. The Aire Saint-Mittre. Mss, NAF 10.303 folio 3. Courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France.

prenarrative. Taking a closer look at the drawing, we see that the Aire Saint-Mittre is at the southern edge outside the walls of Plassans, a liminal space. Enclosed on three sides, it is surrounded by numerous abstract marks representing trees, walls, houses, and other buildings forming square shapes and boxes within boxes. In the novel, the wall between the Jas-Meiffren and the impasse Saint-Mittre will split Adélaïde Fouqué's legitimate descendants, fathered by the rough peasant Rougon, from her illegitimate descendants, fathered by the drunk Macquart, who lives in a shack on the impasse Saint-Mittre. After Rougon's death, Adélaïde and her lover Macquart build a door between the two properties, an action which the local gossips find more scandalous than the fact that she had two illegitimate children. On the sketch it is possible to make out in a few places the words "petites portes" or openings that Zola drew and then crossed out, which implies that he first thought of creating a way for the two places to communicate. By suppressing any gap in the walls, the separation between the properties becomes even more absolute and the divide between the lovers more poignant.

The other love story in the novel grows out of the same spatial complications. Adélaïde ends up living with her grandson Silvère in Macquart's hovel on the impasse, and their portion of the Jas-Meiffren is sold to a certain Rébufat. Rébufat's niece, Miette, falls in love with Silvère, and at the beginning of the novel, she climbs over the wall enclosing the Jas-Meiffren, since there are no "petites portes" in the wall, in order to meet Silvère at night. Three-quarters of the way into the novel Silvère and Miette are separated again by walls as her family tries to prevent her from seeing him. They discover, however, that the two properties share a large well, split by a wall, which the novel refers to as a "puits mitoyen" (an adjoining or shared well) (Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, 1:179). By looking into the well on each side of the wall, they can see each other's reflections and hear each other's voices. The sketch hesitates between a few different locations for the well, none of them between the walls, an idea again which postdates the dossiers (Mitterand and Lumbroso, *Les Manuscrits et dessins de Zola*, 3:324). The sketch puts forth and then rejects several breaches in the partitions around the Aire Saint-Mittre, as if to seal off the "air" from circulating. As the novel describes at the end of the second paragraph: "Ainsi fermée de trois côtés, l'aire est comme une place qui ne conduit nulle part et que les promeneurs seuls traversent" (Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, 1:11) ("Thus enclosed on three sides, the Aire Saint-Mittre is like a square that leads nowhere and which only strollers traverse"). The subsequent narrative in the novel invents new ways for the characters to communicate by exploiting the points of juncture between

places, which is to say the very structure that divides them; Adélaïde and Macquart build a little door in the wall, and Silvère and Miette take advantage of the privacy afforded by the wall to stare at each other's reflections in the well. The novel formulates narrative out of the notes' frames.<sup>10</sup>

The sketch of the Aire Saint-Mittre gives no indication at all of the novel's most extraordinary invention: a hundred years before Silvère and Miette meet in the empty lot, it used to be a cemetery, a fact all but forgotten by 1851. The opening pages of the novel describe how the cemetery was desacralized and desecrated: tombs were taken down; bones were dug up and carted through the streets to a new area on the other side of the city; the cemetery's walls were torn down in an unsuccessful effort by city officials to sell the land to investors. Inexplicably, fragments of some of the tombs remain, one of which especially troubles Miette with its enigmatic epitaph: "Cy-gist . . . Marie . . . morte . . ." (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, 1:11) ("Here lies . . . Marie . . . died . . ."). The tombstone retains the trace of the long-dead woman, but time and the destruction of the cemetery by the city have effaced the text that could have identified her name, her place of birth, and the relevant dates. The grave of one particular woman in the past loses its specificity, its material reference, and becomes an ill omen for whoever finds it in the future; Miette fears she shares the same fate because she shares the same first name (1:208). Naomi Schor argues that the passage from cemetery to "Aire," and in particular the suspicious death of a young woman (Marie or Miette) and destruction of her tombstone, represent the secret at the origin of the Rougon-Macquart family: "the origins of the Rougon-Macquart are encoded in a half-erased message, at the same time revealed and concealed, thus literally indecipherable" (Schor, *Zola's Crowds*, 19). The bloody origins of the family, presumably in the death of a sacrificial victim, haunt the family, but the original secret stays unknowable, opening up a "hole" or "discontinuity" in a novel that ends with Docteur Pascal's attempt to map a "seamless genealogy" (19).

As I have argued, Rancière's many partitions and contradictions in literature reveal that at each text's origin is the failed attempt to bridge a divide or to represent a seamless origin. The sketch of the Aire Saint-Mittre, at what Zola called the "origin" of the *Rougon-Macquart*, presents a structure of partitions and walls that part space into noncommunicating enclosures, which in turn lead to the division of a family into opposing branches. The partitions differentiate the family members into classes as they occupy every position of Second Empire society (Hamon, *Le Personnel du roman*, 209–11). Moreover, as this sketch as well as the narrative of the *Fortune des Rougon* demonstrate, the porous walls and

barriers of the text break down over time to create new divisions and new boundaries. The invention of a razed cemetery, and the idea for the gruesome details of graves being dug up and children playing with skulls, what Rancière might call the “poeticity” of the novel, was invented after the completion of the dossiers and therefore might be considered to fall outside the “representational regime”; the novel’s “poeticity,” then, fabricates a verbal image of its own origins without a factual or a visual equivalent in the dossiers.

At the origin of the narrative lies a divide between dossier and novel and at the origin of the family lies a spatial division between the different branches. This original division is passed down as an inheritance from the founder of the family, Adélaïde Fouque, also known as Tante Dide, in the form of the physiological and hereditary “fêlure,” the “crack” or rupture she has in her brain, which manifests itself in various ways for all of her descendants. This “fêlure,” this hole or discontinuity, resurfaces silently in every novel until it erupts, destroying the status quo. As Gilles Deleuze theorized it in relation to Zola’s *La Bête humaine* in *Logique du sens*, the “fêlure” in Zola’s works represents inheritance itself, it divides instinct from the object of desire, it is the death drive or even death, and ultimately it raises obstacles to thought that make thought possible (*Logique du sens*). From the empty grave in the Aire Saint-Mittre and the crack in Tante Dide’s head flow all of the novels of the *Rougon-Macquart*. If literature emerges from its contradictions, Zola shows us, despite whatever compromises he might have made, that the art of the novel is always “fêlé.”

### Zola’s *Fêlure*

The distinction between dossier and novel, the factual and the fictional or the visual and the verbal, creates opposing zones that are then partitioned or cordoned off from each other. The novels rely on the factual basis of the dossiers for their fictional narratives, while the supposed absence of fiction in the dossiers reinforces the narrative innovations of the novels. The unchecked circulation of meaning inherent in the written word, its “silent speech,” can be given a stable meaning, a body, in the silent dossiers; in turn, the archival dossiers liberate the novels from the strictly mimetic representation of the world and allow for flights of poetic fancy. The disjuncture, the crack, that rips the two parallel works apart at their origin generates more and more text on both sides of the divide—twenty novels (instead of the original ten) and 10,000 pages of notes (beyond the



original documents collected over the three years prior to the publication of *La Fortune des Rougon*).

Another rift tears the two bodies of text apart and separates them into a first-person journal of artistic creation and a fictional text with an omniscient narrator. In both senses of the word as “crack” and its more colloquial meaning of mental instability, Zola’s “fêlure” protects the integrity of the authorial subject from the instability of the written word by insisting on the author’s appropriation over the factual dossiers and by producing the illusion of a godly remove from the play of language found in the fictional novels. Zola’s fear of his own “fêlure” as authorial subject, which is to say the abandonment of the self to the uncertainty of textual meaning, leads to a proliferation of “fêlures” that replicate themselves throughout the two bodies of text. The only way to resist the division of the writing self from the self on the page is to amplify this split, to assert the complete independence of the two.

Reminiscent of Stendhal’s Brulard who feared that his autobiography would “fall into the novel,” Zola’s dossiers amount to a first-person account of a novelist afraid of losing control of his fictional narrative. The dossiers’ autobiographical aspect exposes the alienating process of composing an independent world in a fictional text. Colette Becker detects in Zola’s correspondence and in the dossiers an anguish over his inability to master the writing process (Becker, preface to Zola, *La Fabrique des Rougon*, 1:8). The very fact that the dossiers declare over and over “an affirmation of the will to power” signals Zola’s profound self-doubts and hesitations (18); the phrases “je veux” (“I want”) and “je voudrais” (“I would like”) are among the most frequently used in the “Ébauches” of the dossiers. Continually doubting his talents as a novelist, Zola worked through his anxieties in the dossiers, using them as an escape valve for psychic pressure and as a generator of text.

While many critics have found in the dossiers proof that Zola intended to portray facets of himself in many of the characters in the *Rougon-Macquart* (most obviously Sandoz in *L’Oeuvre* and Docteur Pascal in the final novel), Zola’s appropriation of his fictional creation goes beyond simple character identification.<sup>11</sup> Abstract concepts, such as plot turns and chapter arrangements, as well as characters and places, become possessions marked by the author’s ubiquitous possessive adjectives: “ma série,” “mon histoire,” “mes personnages,” “mes chapitres.” Zola creates his world (“Je crée” appears almost as frequently as “je veux”) as text and story, but then imagines himself within it. In the “Ébauche” for *La Conquête de Plassans* Zola writes, “Comme marche générale dans l’oeuvre, il est temps de revenir à Plassans, où, de longtemps ensuite, je ne pourrai



remettre les pieds. Vers la fin seulement” (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, 1:1648) (“For the unfolding of the work as a whole, it is time to come back to Plassans, where, for a long time afterwards, I will not be able to set foot. Only towards the end”). Likewise, the novel itself, and the events created within it, must be experienced firsthand. For his research documented in the dossiers, Zola famously descended into the mines for *Germinal*, rode with train engineers for *La Bête humaine*, and traversed the farmland of the Beauce for *La Terre*. His notes for *La Débâcle*, named “Mon voyage à Sedan,” plan to have the soldiers in the narrative follow Zola’s own itinerary, though in the novel itself he makes them follow the same route as an actual army corps during the war (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, 5:1379–81). While fascinating documentation of Zola’s time, these first-person accounts prepare for the transition from note to novel by way of the author’s “screen.”

Crucially, the dossiers chronicle Zola’s own transformations as the struggle to define his style, in opposition to other writers and in relation to the representational material he collected, resulted in a heightened awareness of his own thought process and his sense of self. In the fragment entitled “Différences entre Balzac et moi” included in the dossiers and written in the early stages of the project’s conception, Zola summarizes the differences in style, scope, methodology, and ambitions between Balzac’s *Comédie humaine* and his own vast project. But the fragment also describes their differences in temperament and their visions of the role of a novelist: “Je ne veux pas comme Balzac avoir une décision sur les affaires des hommes, être politique, philosophe, moraliste. Je me contenterai d’être savant, de dire ce qui est en en cherchant les raisons intimes” (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, 5:1737) (“I do not want, like Balzac, to have a say in men’s affairs, to be a politician, a philosopher, a moralist. I will be happy to be a scientist, to say what is while studying its internal logic”). In another note probably written a little later, Zola ridicules Balzac’s philosophical pretensions and conservative moralizing, all the while allowing that moralists and legislators are free to draw their own conclusions from the truth of his novel (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, 5:1740), and conceding that his novels need some sort of philosophical bent (such as “materialism”) so as to liberate them from tedious metaphysical explanations (5:1744).

As the novels and the dossiers progressed, Zola’s aggressively combative tone gave way to a more reflective, internal monologue. In the “Ébauche” for *L’Oeuvre*, he envisions writing a novel about his own creative process, the pains and joys of Zola the writer embodied by Claude the painter: “Avec Claude Lantier, je veux peindre la lutte de l’artiste

contre la nature, l'effort de la création dans l'oeuvre d'art. . . . En un mot, j'y raconterai ma vie intime de production, ce perpétuel accouchement douloureux, mais je grandirai le sujet par le drame" (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, 4:1353) ("With Claude Lantier, I want to paint the struggle of the artist against nature, the effort of creation in a work of art. . . . In a word, I will tell in this novel the story of my personal work life, this perpetual, painful childbirth, but I will exaggerate it through tragedy"). The novel about a failed artist reflects the writing process itself, as if in a dream Zola projects himself in the unfolding of the novel as a whole as well as in each of its characters.

In the "Ébauche" for *Le Rêve*, the sixteenth novel, Zola expresses the desire to prove his artistic versatility, almost as a challenge to himself and his detractors: "Je voudrais faire un livre qu'on n'attende pas de moi. . . . Puisqu'on m'accuse de ne pas faire de psychologie, je voudrais forcer les gens à confesser que je suis un psychologue" (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, 4:1625–26) ("I would like to make a book that no one expects from me. . . . Since I'm accused of not doing psychology, I would like to force people to admit that I am a psychologist"). Here, Zola conveys his temptation to break with the *Rougon-Macquart's* stated project by abandoning the laws of heredity for the more intimate, and classical, psychological novel. But this temptation, later in the same "Ébauche," proves to be rooted in a more personal need to understand his own creative drives: "Moi, le travail, la littérature qui a mangé ma vie, et le bouleversement, la crise, le besoin d'être aimé, tout cela à étudier psychologiquement" (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, 4:1626–27) ("Me, work, literature which has devoured my life, and upheaval, crisis, the need to be loved, all of this needs to be studied psychologically"). To write a novel, psychological or otherwise, is to confront what lies behind the need to write, the dangerous combination of self-doubt and hubris. In the end, Zola opted for "something much simpler" for *Le Rêve*, saving the tale of artistic and scientific angst for the last novel, *Le Docteur Pascal* (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, 4:1627).

In *L'Espace littéraire*, Maurice Blanchot describes how the act of writing is a confrontation with death, with the loss of self to a work whose central point is "l'oeuvre comme origine, celui que l'on ne peut atteindre" ("the work as origin, an origin that cannot be attained") (60). According to Blanchot, in the transition from first-person "je" to third-person "il" intrinsic to the fictional writing process, a writer will often begin a journal:

Il est peut-être frappant qu'à partir du moment où l'oeuvre devient recherche de l'art, devient littérature, l'écrivain éprouve toujours davantage

le besoin de garder un rapport avec soi. C'est qu'il éprouve une extrême répugnance à se dessaisir de lui-même au profit de cette puissance neutre, sans forme et sans destin, qui est derrière tout ce qui s'écrit, répugnance et appréhension que révèle le souci, propre à tant d'auteurs, de rédiger ce qu'ils appellent leur *Journal*.<sup>12</sup> (24)

To write fiction is to search for an unknowable, unattainable origin, the origin of the work in the depths of language. The author grapples with conflicting literary and existential constraints since the act of writing requires an extraordinary will to project the self on the page and a corresponding loss of self to the "solitude" of the text. A journal inscribes the author's memories in a parallel text, but mimics the very act that threatens the integrity of the self: "Le moyen dont il se sert pour se rappeler à soi, c'est, fait étrange, l'élément même de l'oubli: écrire" (24) ("the method used to remember oneself, is, strangely, the very element of oblivion: writing").

Zola shows us in the dossiers that the only cure for the torment of writing, the work which has "devoured" his life, would be further writing, an analysis of the self through text. The *dossiers préparatoires* may document the novelist's research, but they are also a journal of the abandonment of the self to the work. Zola's partition between the notes and the novel proves to be a futile attempt to protect the self from written language, all the while generating more and more text. Out of Zola's "fêlure" grew the expanding notes and increasingly inward-looking monologues in the dossiers that attest to both his terror at the independence of his creation and to the fact that with each novel finished, he approached, little by little, the very essence of literature.