"La lucidité de somnambule": Zola's Allegorical Depiction of Paris in *L'Œuvre*

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine l'évocation textuelle du tableau de Claude Lantier, Île de la Cité, représentant l'île vue du Pont des Saints-Pères, aux fins d'illustrer le concept de "lucidité de somnambule" qu'Edmond de Goncourt formule dans son Journal de 1889, trois ans après la publication du roman de Zola L'Œuvre.

L'expression apparemment contradictoire de Goncourt concilie son penchant pour une objectivité qu'il revendique, mais qui se double d'une approche subjective. C'est ainsi que dans l'espace de L'Œuvre, l'attachement au naturalisme et l'observation attentive de la nature, représentatifs de la méthode artistique "moderne," sont constamment minés par la présence tout aussi forte du lyrisme, de la subjectivité et de l'imagination.

Nous avançons que l'hétérogénéité du texte de Zola, qui adopte l'objectivité scientifique en même temps qu'elle l'élude, est repérable dans la toile de Claude, qui passe d'une étude de plein air à l'image allégorique de Paris en déesse nue, parée de bijoux, s'élevant sur fond prosaïque de métropole animée. Nous posons en effet que le choix de l'allégorisation est ancré dans la volonté zolienne de rendre un portrait littéraire de Paris en tant que personnage symbole.

A lyrical Zola, who, as the novelist himself remarks in "De la description" (1879), is endowed with "une cervelle de poète," stands in contrast to the methodical, naturalist and positivist Zola.[1] This alternate side of the writer's *tempérament* makes him very responsive to the spectacle of nature and inspires him to produce "poèmes de clartés et de parfums," counterbalanced by authoritative and rigorous observations *d'après nature* designed to validate his scientific objectivity.[2] These divergences in Zolian thought, ranging from the writer's struggle to achieve harmony, unity and order when dealing with "uncontainable" themes; the profound discrepancy between the lyricism of his preparatory notes and the positivist agenda of the final product; the theoretical inconsistencies of the naturalist novel; to the overtly moralistic and utopian tone of his *Gospels,* have been the object of in-depth analysis.[3] Henri Mitterand rightly notes that in

[1] Émile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 9 (Paris: Nouveau Monde Éditions. 2002-2009) 426.
[2] See Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* 427.
[3] See, for example, Philip Walker, "Zola and the art of containing the uncontainable," *Zola and the Craft of Fiction,* eds. Robert Lethbridge and Terry Keefe (Leicester, UK: Leicester University Press, 1990) 28-41; Henri Mitterand, *Les Manuscrits et les dessins de Zola,* 3 vols. (Paris: Textuel, 2002) 1:11; Henri Mitterand, "Le Regard d'Émile Zola," in *Les Critiques de notre temps et Zola*, ed. Colette Becker (Paris: Garnier, 1972) 73-78. For a discussion of the "troisième Zola" see Henri Mitterand, "Seul et debout," in *Zola, Cahier de l'exposition,* ed. Michèle Sacquin (Paris: Fayard, 2002) 11-15. Regarding Zola's humanitarian and utopian tendencies see Julia Przybos, "Zola's utopias," in *The Cambridge Companion to Émile Zola*, ed. Brian Nelson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University

order to grasp the intricacies of the Zolian opus, "[i]l faut défendre Émile Zola contre lui-même aussi bien que contre ses critiques."[4] This particular line of thought, revealing a Zola who self-censors his lyrical and exuberant outbursts in view of preserving the authoritative appearance of positivist exactitude, has inspired my own exploration of Zola against himself, to a certain extent.

In this paper I examine the allegorical depiction of Paris in Claude Lantier's final canvas from *L'Œuvre* (1885) as an instance of what Edmond de Goncourt calls "lucidité de somnambule" in a journal entry dated May 14, 1889.[5] My purpose is twofold. Firstly, I attempt to situate Zola's use of the concept of somnambulism and its reverberations on the writer's artistic choices, in connection with Edmond de Goncourt's aesthetic doctrine. This approach is based on a lineage that the author of *L'Assommoir* himself has established with his older colleague, in *Le Roman expérimental*.[6] Secondly, I look at ways in which somnambulistic lucidity, this mixture of rationality and exacerbated imagination that implies a state of disconnect from external reality, finds its manifestation in Claude Lantier's canvas representing Paris as an allegorical female figure set against a mundane urban backdrop.

In *L'Œuvre*, more than in any other of his novels, Zola professes his "commitment to a new aesthetic propaganda" designed to subvert tradition, by presenting the enticing allegory of Paris, this "idole d'une religion inconnue, faite de métaux, de marbres et de gemmes" as the nonsensical fabrication of the painter Claude's deranged mind.[7] While working on his canvas, Claude "avait des yeux élargis de somnambule, des gestes précis et rapides, se baissant à chaque instant, pour prendre de la couleur, se relevant, projetant contre le mur une grande ombre fantastique, aux mouvements casés d'automate" (728). The painter, a fantastic shadow driven by pure instinct, has fallen into a hypnotic trance, defined in the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales* (1881) as "somnambulisme artificiel."[8] This trance is induced, however, not by a "magnétiseur," but by the character's obsession with capturing the beauty, the complexity and the charm of the metropolis. Zola astutely injects key clinical terms ("somnambule," "automate") into his portrayal of Claude's degenerative neurosis, which involves automatic, instinctual movements, introspection, complete disengagement with external reality and an increased appetite for raw, unblended color. In so doing, the naturalist writer marks his allegiance to contemporary scientific treatises on mental illness put forth by Théodule Ribot,

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Press, 2007) 169-87. Concerning the discordances of Zola's naturalist paradigm see David Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 10-39, 40-70.

[4] Henri Mitterand, *Le Regard et le signe* (Paris: PUF, 1987) 55, cited in Robert Lethbridge,"Against Recuperation: The Fictions of Art in *L'Œuvre*," *The Romanic Review* 102. 3-4 (2011): 460.

[5] Edmond de Goncourt and Jules de Goncourt, *Journal: mémoires de la vie littéraire*, vol. 16. (Monaco: Imprimerie Nationale, 1956) 74.

[6] Baguley in *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision* speaks of a "prestigious lineage of naturalist writers" that Zola had grouped around his naturalist aesthetics (12). Despite the forced nature of Zola's classification, Mitterand notes the influence of the Goncourt brothers' style and subject matter on Zola's work. See his introduction to *Mes Haines*, *Causeries littéraires et artistiques* followed by *Mon Salon, Édouard Manet: étude biographique et critique* (Genève: Slatkine, 1979) iii, and his article (1972) in *Les Critiques de notre temps et Zola* 73. This is not to say that Zola and the Goncourts' politics coincided. While the Goncourts are notorious for their aristocratic, anti-Semitic, and misogynistic tendencies, Zola is recognized as a defender of republican values, a philo-Semite, and a supporter of the public education system.

[7] Robert Lethbridge, "Zola and Contemporary Painting," in *The Cambridge Companion to Émile Zola*, 67-85 (74). Émile Zola, *L'Œuvre*, version 3.0 (Québec, Canada: La Bibliothèque électronique du Québec) 739. Subsequent references to *L'Œuvre* will be to this anthology and are indicated parenthetically with page numbers only in the text.

[8] B. Ball and E. Chambard, "Somnambulisme provoqué," *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales*, ed. M. A. Dechambre, 3rd ed., vol. 10 (Paris: G. Masson and P. Asselin, 1864-1889) 363-64.

Pierre Janet and Hippolyte Taine.[9] This psychiatric thesis on somnambulism extends to the writer Pierre Sandoz, and accounts for his episodes of creative delirium – the "somnambulisme de mes heures de création" (554). For both Claude and Pierre, episodes of somnambulism are connected to heightened inventiveness and originality. Zola's critical paradigm reiterates major tropes of the discourse on somnambulism disseminated during the second half of the nineteenth century in medical and literary discourse.[10]

The correlation between somnambulism and heightened artistic sense is also stressed by Brierre de Boismont in his influential mid-century work (1845) on hallucination. In this somewhat hybrid treatise, mixing clinical psychology with literature, folkloric tales and anecdotes, de Boismont contends that somnambulism is a type of ecstasy triggered by a feeling of acute exaltation, leading to hallucinatory visions, and usually a characteristic of contemplative natures ("esprits contemplatifs").[11]

The *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales* (1881) provides a more comprehensive definition of somnambulism as "un état pathologique," an "affection névropathique par excellence" connected to hysteria, in which "la conscience, la notion de *Moi* et par la suite le souvenir des faits qui ont lieu pendant l'accès, disparaissent."[12] The symptoms of this condition include "un délire de sensations, de pensées, d'actions" followed by "facultés imaginatives […] surexcitées."[13] Often, during these attacks, the patients exhibit an artistic penchant, such as singing and reciting poems in a much more eloquent manner than in their lucid, awake state, due to a "développement du sentiment du beau."[14]

The notorious *Journal* of the Goncourt brothers contains several noteworthy references to somnambulism. Although Edmond and Jules do not provide a clear definition of this medical condition, somnambulism is presented, with few exceptions, as a distinctive trait of artists and scholars.[15] The art critic Saint-Victor is said to find a mainstream painting in a museum with the precision of a "somnambule" and George Sand usually exhibits "un air de somnambule" due to her strenuous writing routine.[16] Théophile Gautier, who is recovering from a heart condition, displays the automatic movements of a "blême somnambule" whose symptoms are episodes of lethargy that alternate with moments of acute lucidity.[17] The illustrator Pierre Gavarni projects a "doux et tranquille air de somnambule" before engaging into a discussion about Japanese archery; and even a depressed Zola has "quelque chose de somnambulesque" during a dinner party at his

[9] For an analysis of the influence of Ribot's *Les Maladies de la volonté* (1883) and *Les Maladies de la personnalité* (1884), Janet's *L'Automatisme psychologique* (1889), and Taine's *De l'intelligence* (1870) on Zola's treatment of involuntary discourse, hallucination, automatism, emotional and sexual drives in his opus, see Sophie Ménard, "Paroles torturées: l'aveu malgré soi dans l'œuvre d'Émile Zola," *Paradigmes de l'âme,* eds. Jean-Louis Cabanès, Didier Philippot, and Paolo Tortonese (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2012) 213-28.

[10] Nicole Edelman's "La Conscience à l'épreuve du somnambulisme magnétique," in *Paradigmes de l'âme* 39-53, examines scientific and philosophical studies on somnambulism, emitted in the nineteenth century in France and Germany.

[11] Brierre de Boismont, *Des hallucinations ou histoire raisonnée des apparitions, des visions, des songes, de l'extase, du magnétisme et du somnambulisme* (Paris: Germer Baillère Libraire-Éditeur, 1845) 276.

[12] Ball and Chambard 322, 347, 333.

[13] Ball and Chambard 333.

[14] Ball and Chambard 342, 375.

[15] Other mentions of "somnambules" include a charming woman sitting at a café (September 8, 1860), Napoléon III (May 14, 1868), and the survivors of the 1871 Parisian bombardment occurring during the Paris Commune (April 25, 1871).

[16] Goncourt, *Journal* 4: 242, 5: 85, and 6: 122.

[17] Goncourt, *Journal* 10: 75, 10: 101.

house.[18] Finally, not only does Edmond de Goncourt diagnose himself as a "somnambule," he is also jubilant at the thought of composing a hypnotic monograph dedicated to four or five acclaimed Japanese artists, active at the end of the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth: "non un livre documentaire, comme je l'ai fait pour les peintres français du siècle dernier, mais un livre hypothétique, où il y aurait des envolements de; poète, et peut-être de la lucidité de somnambule."[19]

Edmond de Goncourt's coining of the syntagm "lucidité de somnambule," this seemingly antithetical conjecture of opposing terms, represents the culminating point, both conceptually and chronologically, of his conception of somnambulism. The important emendation introduced by the notion of "lucidité de somnambule" to the scientific definition of the disorder is that, during their fits, the "somnambules" still maintain certain characteristics of their lucid self (*Moi*). In other words, this state of interiority grants individuals access to hidden realms of their interior selves.[20] Artists, as de Goncourt suggests (offering his own experiences as an example), can benefit from this non mentally debilitating trance, since it allows their minds to be purged of the distractions of the outside world, thus giving them unimpeded access to a treasure-trove of sensations, memories, fantasies and desires, these "envolements de poète."[21]

Edmond de Goncourt's manipulation of this clinical notion is designed to account for the complexities of the Goncourtian style, which amalgamates anti-academic propaganda, a professed "enthusiasm for science," a crusade for originality, a disavowal of classical models and a penchant for alternative sources of inspiration, including *Japonisme* and the art of the eighteenth century.[22] The heterogeneity of the Goncourtian style, or this "art of containing the uncontainable," to use Walker's characterization of Zola's literary endeavors, is rooted in Jules and Edmond de Goncourt's hesitation between their self-imposed quest for verisimilitude and their propensity for descriptive embellishment and artifice (at times excessive), expressed in the preface to the *Art du dix-huitième siècle* (1873).[23] Here, the brothers claim to alternate the "noires et mélancoliques études" of contemporaneity with much shorter periods of leisure, "riantes vacances" dedicated to the study and critique of their favorite artworks. In this context, the notion of "lucidité de somnambule" provides a way of resolving this antinomy by harmonizing modern positivist theories on this mental condition with an overt praise of artistic freedom.

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[18] Goncourt, *Journal* 12: 42, 12: 72. Zola's deteriorating health, his depression and his fatalism, very discernible after the death of his mother, are mentioned on several occasions in the Goncourt *Journal*. For an investigation of this topic see Patrick Brady, *L'Œuvre de Émile Zola. Roman sur les arts, manifeste, autobiographie, roman à clef* (Genève: Droz, 1967) 13-47.

[19] Goncourt, *Journal* 16: 74.

[20] Edelman speaks of "des zones obscures de l'esprit" that the "somnambule" reaches during his state, and which are the equivalent of our contemporary notion of unconscious ("*inconscient psychique*") 53.

[21] Goncourt, *Journal* 16: 74.

[22] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, tr. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953) 496. For an overview of the Goncourtian literary practices see, for example, Pierre-Jean Dufief, "La Critique des institutions académiques à la fin du XIXe siècle," and Marc Fumaroli "Le 'siècle' des Goncourt ou le XVIIIe siècle réhabilité," in *Les Goncourt dans leur siècle: un siècle de "Goncourt,*" eds. Jean-Louis Cabanès, Robert Kopp, and Jean-Yves Mollier (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2005) 277-86, 17-28; Bernard Vouilloux, *l'Art des Goncourt: une esthétique du style* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997) and *Le Tournant 'artiste' de la littérature française: écrire avec la peinture au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Hermann, 2011) 385-456.

[23] Edmond de Goncourt and Jules de Goncourt, *Préfaces et manifestes littéraires* (Paris: Charpentier, 1888) 247; Walker 28.

Returning to Zola's creative practices, we notice that this syntagm constitutes a useful tool in decoding the writer's own slippage from positivism, openly addressed in the articles "Les Frères Zemganno" and "De la description," published in *Le Roman expérimental* in 1879, and exemplified in *L'Œuvre*.[24] Reading the allegorization of Paris in Claude's final canvas as Zola's own brand of "lucidité de somnambule" justifies an in-depth examination of a recurrent pattern from *Une page d'amour,* namely the writer's infatuation with a gendered, eroticized version of the city, portrayed as a femme fatale:

> Ce grand Paris immobile et indifférent qui était toujours dans le cadre de ma fenêtre, me semblait comme le témoin muet, comme le confident tragique de mes joies et de mes tristesses. [. . .] Eh bien! dès ma vingtième année, j'avais rêvé d'écrire un roman, dont Paris, avec l'océan de ses toitures, serait un personnage, quelque chose comme le chœur antique. Il me fallait un drame intime, trois ou quatre créatures dans une petite chambre, puis l'immense ville à l'horizon, toujours présente, regardant avec ses yeux de pierre le tourment effroyable de ces créatures. C'est cette vieille idée que j'ai tenté de réaliser dans *Une page d'amour*. Voilà tout.[25]

Scholars have provided an array of rich and nuanced studies of the role of Paris in Zola's opus and have drawn parallels between the carefully crafted descriptions of the city in *Une page d'amour* and in *L'Œuvre.*[26] I am interested in this passage from "De la description" as an instance of the Goncourtian somnambulist lucidity in which a Zola "flâneur, contemplatif et rêveur," the eternal poet of Paris, superimposes reverie and prosaicness, rationality and irrationality, and ultimately opts for an allegory of the city as the only mode of representation that can capture and synthesize the beauty, the complexity and the eroticized appeal that this site of progress and urban lyricism exerts on him.[27] Personified as a "confident tragique" and a "témoin muet," Paris becomes a cherished interlocutor of the first-person narrator. As Huysmans

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[24] "Est-ce que l'ignoble auteur de *l'Assommoir* n'a pas écrit la deuxième partie de *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret,* une idylle adamique, une sorte de symbole, des amours idéales dans un jardin qui n'existe pas?" Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* 441.

[25] Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* 427.

[26] A number of scholars have made analogies between the artful descriptions of Paris in *L'Œuvre* and in *Une page d'amour,* noting similarities in composition, subject matter and technique, inspired by innovations in contemporary painting. In "Roman de l'art et art du roman: à propos des descriptions de Paris dans *Une Page d'amour*," in *Zola and the Craft of Fiction* 89-97, Jean-Pierre Leduc-Adine argues that Zola's descriptions are a literary version of the "panorama" and "diaporama," modes of representation in vogue in mid-century France (91); William Berg provides a meticulous and exhaustive analysis of Zola's use of impressionist effects in *The Visual Novel: Émile Zola and the Art of His times* (University Park, US: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992); and in *Émile Zola Revisited*, Noriko Yoshida notes that Zola's treatment of the relation between exteriority and interiority is inspired by Berthe Morisot, "De la toile au texte: Berthe Morisot et la genèse *d'Une page d'amour*," in *Zola à l'œuvre. Hommage à Auguste Dezalay*, ed. Gisèle Séginger (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2003). Pierre Citron, in *La Poésie de Paris dans la littérature française de Rousseau à Baudelaire* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1961), Nathan Kranowski, in *Paris dans les romans d'Émile Zola* (Paris: PUF, 1968) and Brady, while discussing Zola's fruitful rapport with vanguard artists, also situate the writer's descriptions of Paris within a literary tradition championed by Hugo, Balzac and Dumas. Conversely, Robert Lethbridge provides insight into the "competing artistic spaces" between Zola and the painters of his time in "Zola and Contemporary Painting," in *The Cambridge Companion to Émile Zola* 67-85, (73). Joy Newton explores the trope of the idealized rural landscape and its clash with the urban landscape in her article "Conscious Artistry and the Presentation of the Persistent Ideal," in *Zola and the Craft of Fiction* 67-79.

[27] Mitterand, in *Les Critiques de notre temps et Zola* 74.

notes in the retrospective preface to *À Rebours*, the *true* Zolian characters are the "décors."[28] In this case, the urban setting is elevated to the status of "chœur antique" and endowed with a significant role in the plot development.[29] In this very unstable description, Paris shifts from a passive, neutral and commonplace image – "immobile et indifférent" – to a dynamic, masculine presence, that of a "témoin muet" and "confident tragique" to the authorial persona's suffering, only to once again morph into a mystifying female figure. Paris is conceived as a female idol, with her gigantic dimensions ("l'immense ville"), her ubiquitous presence and *her* relentless scrutiny of human suffering ("ses yeux de pierre"). She is feared and revered by the narrative voice, a projection of the authorial agent, who disseminates (his) feelings of angst and desire onto "ces créatures," the characters within his plot who, according to Genette, are mere "effect[s] of the text."[30]

An analogous conceptualization of Paris surfaces in *L'Œuvre,* where the city is first the background of the plot and eventually an allegorical femme fatale that drives Claude to commit suicide.[31] The painter's rapport with the city develops from logical analysis into illogical adulation. Early in the novel the city is a mere decorum, the setting for modern life, a pretext for Claude's egalitarian and democratic penchants. The painter spends most of his time contemplating the Parisian metropolis, walking on the streets "[de] son pas de somnambule," (285) in a state of mental and physical exaltation (bordering on sexual arousal), frenetically absorbing the myriad of images, colors, sensations and sounds that are offered to his senses. As the plot progresses and Claude's canvasses, painted in his revolutionary "plein air" technique, are continuously rejected by the academically trained jury of the official Salon, the boundaries between inanimate panorama and animate being are gradually blurred, and Paris becomes a "confident tragique" of the character's inner turmoil.[32]

In chapter nine, Claude decides to paint a mundane episode of Parisian life, seen from the Pont des Saints-Pères, depicting on the left of the canvas the working class, "Paris qui travaille," and on the right the bourgeois, "Paris qui s'amuse," (453). In the center of the composition Claude places a boat, floating on the Seine, with the "Île de la Cité triomphale" in the background, illuminated by the afternoon sun (453-54). Yet the "somnambule" painter alters the initial project for his large format piece, deciding to place three female bathers in the boat. Upon visiting Claude in his studio, Pierre, the positivist writer, is disheartened by the painter's choice. Critics have noted that this moment marks a shift from likeness to idealization in the artist's

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[28] J.-K. Huysmans, *À Rebours: avec une préface de l'auteur écrite vingt ans après le roman* (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1921) v.

[29] Leduc-Adine argues that, in *Une Page d'amour*, Paris has "un véritable statut actantiel," while the human characters are absorbed by the self-sufficient "paysage pictural" (in *Zola and the Craft of Fiction* 95, 94). Berg remarks that the city scrutinizes Hélène's movements in *Une Page d'amour*, in *Émile Zola Revisited* 137.

[30] Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* 427.

Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, tr. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) 136. My analysis stems from Genette's notion of "authorial agent" (146).

[31] During Claude's funeral, Pierre exclaims, alluding to the allegorical depiction of Paris: "Ah! cette Femme, […], c'est elle qui l'a étranglé" (762).

[32] Although the subject matter of Claude's paintings bears resemblance to Manet's iconography inspired by contemporary life, the fictional painter's technique of the "plein air," and his use of a very vibrant palette, situates him closer to the Impressionist group of the 1870s. Carol Armstrong explores in great detail Zola's misapprehension of Manet's aesthetics in *Manet Manette* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), chapter two: "A New Manner in Painting: Émile Zola on Manet" (31-48). On the stylistic difference between the fictional painter Claude Lantier and Manet, see Brady (357) and Lethbridge, in *The Romanic Review* 450-53.

perception and execution of the *plein air* canvas of Paris.[33] This "immense ville à l'horizon, toujours présente, regardant avec ses yeux de pierre le tourment effroyable de ces créatures"[34] that Zola strived to bring to life through his writing in *Une page d'amour*, only to denounce it in "De la description" in view of preserving the illusory stability of his experimental method*,* is a more subdued version of "cette idole […] d'une religion inconnue faite de métaux, de marbres et de gemmes, épanouissant la rose mystique de son sexe, entre les colonnes précieuses des cuisses, sous la voûte sacrée du ventre"(39).[35] The textual materialization of the urban milieu in the guise of this allegorical and alluring entity is emblematic of the writer's indulgence in a subjective, psychological state, akin to the Goncourtian somnambulistic lucidity, enabling the self to access these "zones obscures de la conscience" where unavowed, yet perduring fantasies, desires, and memories reside.[36]

The pattern envisaged by Zola in *Une Page d'amour* is most obvious in Pierre's encounter with Claude's symbolic depiction of the city. In an elaborate game of doubling, the narrating voice in *L'Œuvre*, endowed with the eloquence and authority of an art critic, describes Claude's canvas through the eyes of Pierre. Claude's allegory of Paris is vexing to Pierre because it exacerbates the "gaps and perplexities" of his technique while making a travesty of the realistic pretention to render nature/reality as it is: [37]

> Seulement, la barque des femmes, au milieu, trouait le tableau d'un flamboiement de chairs qui n'étaient pas à leur place; et la grande figure nue surtout peinte dans la fièvre, avait un éclat, un grandissement d'hallucination d'une fausseté étrange et déconcertante, au milieu des réalités voisines. (546)

The fictional beholder's response to the painting, as seen in this passage, is that of uneasiness. Pierre, an extension of the authorial voice, clings to naturalist conventions and seeks to put things in order so as to decontaminate what he perceives as a fragment of reality, and separate it from the alluring "hallucination." This vision makes a symbolic hole ("trouait") in the painting and allows unconscious desires and idealized fantasies to surface in the hallucinatory image of radiant, flaming flesh ("un flamboiement de chairs") (546). The surprisingly vivid imagery generates a chain of associations, ranging from ritual sacrifice and Christian martyrdom to orgiastic decadence. Significantly, the textual voice of reason abruptly interrupts the reader's momentary reverie by pointing out that such a combination defies logic – "[ils] n'étaient pas à leur place" (546). The "grande figure nue," who appears to be a symbol of the metropolis, disrupts the prosaicness of the painting and undermines pretentions to reasonable interpretations, giving rise to a sensation of awkwardness and inconsistency, reminiscent of the Goncourtian

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[33] See Nicolas Valazza, *Crise de plume et souveraineté du pinceau: écrire la peinture de Diderot à Proust* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013) 213.

[34] Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* 427.

[35] D. G. Charlton is very critical of what he calls the "absurdities of *Le Roman expérimental*." He considers that Zola's positivist theory is an immodest alteration of Bernard's scientific method, since it claims to reveal absolute truth. See his *Positivist Thought in France During the Second Empire, 1852-1870* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959) 77.

[36] Edelman 53.

[37] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985) 10. Looking at Manet's style from a Marxist perspective, Clark argues that his paintings are so appealing because of their contradictory and paradoxical nature, refuting the traditional view that art's sole purpose is to reproduce likeness.

"livre hypothétique" that abandons documentary order and method and opts for this "lucidité de somnambule," an exuberant and artistic approach to the conceptualization of the world."[38] A lingering uneasiness, rooted in the prospect of transgressing the codes of verisimilitude, permeates Pierre's (and the authorial persona's) rapport with this female symbol of Paris. This uneasiness can be traced back to Zola's apologetic remarks from "De la description" regarding the somewhat gratuitous nature, within the narrative logic of *Une Page d'amour*, of his extensive lyrical rendition of the urban milieu, in which the authorial persona supplements, for the benefit of the readers, Hélène and Jeanne's ignorance of Parisian monuments and architecture.[39] Toward *L'Œuvre*'s denouement, Claude's contemplation of his work in a state of incredulity and his astonishment are rendered by a series of questions formulated in free indirect speech: "Qui donc venait de peindre cette idole […]?"; "qui l'avait faite […]?"; "Était-ce lui qui, sans le savoir, était l'ouvrier de ce symbole du désir […]?" (739). The use of the third-person personal pronoun "lui" marks a split in Claude's personality between rational ("le savoir") and irrational ("symbole du désir") impulses, this state of artistic trance, that the Goncourtian "lucidité de somnambule. "Malcolm Bowie would call this a Lacanian self "caught between delusional wholeness" and "infernal disintegration."[40]

In fact, Claude's canvas takes on the features of a literary exemplification of the psychoanalytic theory that the self's wholeness is an illusion, fueled by desire and fantasy. The fragmentation of the self is aggravated by the enigmatic source of the "désir," at the core of the work. Scholars have remarked that Claude's painting of the nude goddess points to a sexual obsession with the Woman on the part of both the fictional painter and of his creator, Zola the novelist: "l'un n'a de cesse de peindre le sexe de la femme, l'autre de l'écrire."[41] Bearing in mind, however, Zola's very personal exposition from "De la description," in light of the idea of somnambulistic lucidity, it seems more plausible that the novelist's object of desire is the city of Paris, allegorized as a femme fatale.

Undoubtedly, the allegory of Paris as "la ville nue et passionnée, resplendissante d'une beauté de femme" (497), juxtaposed against a background of modern scenes of urban life, remains one of the most gripping textual *tableaux* in *L'Œuvre*.[42] In the remainder of this paper I want to consider some determining factors behind Zola's opting for allegory as the most appealing and suitable way of rendering "le Paris de son rêve" (564). Zola's indictment of

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[38] Goncourt, *Journal* 16: 74. For a rich and nuanced interpretation of the novel's intricacy and its dramatization of a series of irreconcilable contradictions regarding the authorial persona see Lethbridge, in *The Romanic Review* 449-63.

[39] Berg, in *Émile Zola Revisited* 134.

[40] Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991) 28. In the chapter entitled "Inventing the I," Malcolm Bowie discusses Lacan's theory of the *corps morcellé* and *morcellement*, and notes that the ego wavers between two opposing tendencies: totality and disunity. "Whatever it is that gives the ego its normal buoyancy" writes Bowie, "and allows the individual to do such straight-forward things as formulate and then execute a plan, has been moved to the margins of the theoretical picture" (28). Lacan's concepts, discussed by Bowie, are instrumental in my exploration of Zola's decentered subjectivity.

[41] Valazza 209, 215. Robert Niess suggests that this allegorical image, tormenting the fictional painter, is a textual representation of Zola's "ideal woman." See Robert Niess, *Zola, Cézanne, and Manet: a Study of L'Œuvre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968) 161. Lethbridge provides a more nuanced reading, suggesting that the "feminine" represents "not merely the classic muse but also the seductions of fiction itself." See his article in *The Romanic Review* 458.

[42] Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or, the Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 278. For the purposes of this analysis I use the term *tableau* in its very broad sense of picture or image, as Zola utilizes it in his art criticism, and not in its evaluative sense of a finished, unified masterpiece, as Diderot envisages it, thus setting a precedent for the French critics of the 1850s.

allegory is consistent with the scientific and positivist principles of literary naturalism. Allegory is considered the apanage of the pernicious Romantic Movement, characterized in "Lettre à la jeunesse," by profuse sentimentality, debilitating lyricism, and irrational idealization.[43] An antiquated mode of representation, allegory clearly clashes with the modern, "forward-looking dynamic" of Zola's literary practices.[44] Hence, Zola's unkind review of Gustave Moreau's paintings from the 1876 Salon, where the use of pictorial symbolism, manifest in "formes archaïques ou primitives," exhibits a blatant "haine du réalisme."[45] In "L'École française de peinture à l'exposition de 1878," however, Zola is more indulgent in his critique of Moreau, admitting that his canvases from the 1870s are both irritating and seductive, a statement which implies that, as a beholder and an art lover, the novelist is fully aware of the persistent appeal of allegory and symbol.[46]

It is this type of irresolute sensation, moving swiftly from irritation to seduction, that Zola would like to recreate. His preparatory notes reveal a great deal of interest in the reception of his work, prescribing the overt provocation of readers: "Lui [au public] donner toujours, sinon des cauchemars, du moins des livres excessifs qui restent dans sa mémoire."[47] This allegorical indeterminacy provides an excellent vehicle the authorial persona employs for the expression of an array of subjective sensations triggered by his contemplation of the city. Claude's exuberant allegory of Paris, this nude bather, later transformed into a mythological goddess covered in precious stones, is also a textual provocation directed at the academically inclined bourgeois public.

In "The Structure of Allegorical Desire," Joel Fineman defines allegory as a "continued metaphor," both permitting and denying the identification of signifier and signified.[48] "Distanced at the beginning from its source," says Fineman, "allegory will set out on an increasingly futile search for a signifier with which to recuperate the fracture of and at its source, and with each successive signifier the fracture and the search begin again: a structure of continual yearning, the insatiable desire of allegory."[49] This "fracture" at the core of allegory enables a continual postponement of gratification that fuels "insatiable desire," thus making allegory very appealing. Edmond de Goncourt interprets the unexpected textual emergence of this "obscène" bejeweled goddess as a machination on Zola's part, aimed at enticing male readers into buying "quelques milliers d'exemplaires."[50] Edmond de Goncourt's unkind remark brings to light the intense pattern of desire in the novel for "la ville nue et passionnée"(497), followed by repression and "des bains de réalité violente" (762), then a subsequent relapse into desire, followed in turn by an even more strict repression.

Ultimately, if the "symbole du désir," Paris as "la ville nue et passionnée, resplendissante d'une beauté de femme" (497), is the product of the artist's most intimate feelings, emotions and fixations, unmitigated by the Lacanian "delusional wholeness," then the work that ensues should be interpreted not as a window onto external reality, but as a mirror reflecting the artist's temperament and exacerbated imagination: "Qu'importe la vérité!" exclaims Zola in his 1866

[43] Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* 366-70; also see Baguley 36.
[44] Lethbridge, in *The Cambridge Companion to Émile Zola* 72.
[45] *Émile Zola, Écrits sur l'art,* ed. Jean-Pierre Leduc-Adine (Paris: Gallimard, 1991) 343.
[46] Zola, *Écrits sur l'art* 391.
[47] Mitterand, *Les Manuscrits et les dessins de Zola* 2: 219.
[48] Joel Fineman, "The Structure of Allegorical Desire," *Allegory and Representation*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981) 45.
[49] Fineman 45.
[50] Goncourt, *Journal* 14: 109.

article "Les Réalistes du salon," "si le mensonge est commis par un tempérament particulier et puissant."[51] Claude's allegorical rendition of Paris in his painting is the work of such a "tempérament particulier." In spite of the surprise produced by the painting's iconography and fracture, and regardless of its castigation by the omniscient narrator, Claude's canvas of this implausible female figure is significant because it alludes to the limitations of mimetic representation. Rejecting the "restraints of genre," or rather dramatizing an "incongruous assemblage of […] genres," Claude's painting brings to light a pivotal notion that the artistic vanguards of the 1870s held in high esteem, namely that "perception and experience" are, in fact, "inescapably subjective."[52]

A construct of dissimilar tendencies, indicative of anxieties and preoccupations at the core of the Goncourtian relation to the scientific method, *L'Œuvre* marks an emblematic moment of dissonance in Zola's writing in which the fractures in his theory and practice of the naturalist novel are most apparent and reveal the heterogeneity of his thought. Here one can no longer speak of disparate instances in which brief lyrical moments are intentionally sprinkled into the narrative to delight the reader, only to converge into what Erich Auerbach, reflecting on *Germinal,* calls "a certain dryness," an "excessive clarity" and an "inhumanity" of the general style.[53]

Zola's puzzling choice of a female figure, designed to represent an abstract concept within Claude's painting, may be best understood as an emanation of the "lucidité de somnambule," a subjective psychological state, conducive to artistic innovation and experimentation and conceived of to coexist with the positivist paradigm, due to its appropriation of certain doctrines of the scientific discourse on somnambulism in vogue in the 1880s. The creation of a "somnambule" painter, the heterogeneous allegory of Paris, avails itself of an unlimited number of signifiers. This, in turn, becomes a metaphor for the fracture at the core of *L'Œuvre* itself, since although the novel proposes numerous *tableaux* of Paris, through artfully crafted painterly descriptions, none of them can perfectly render an exhaustive, all-encompassing image of Zola's beloved city.[54]

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[51] Zola, *Mes Haines* 303. See Bowie 28.

[52] Walker 40. Charles Harrison, "Impressionism, Modernism and Originality," in *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Francis Frascina (New Haven: Yale University Press, in association with the Open University, 1993) 144.

[53] Auerbach 510.

[54] Mitterand calls Zola "[un] grand romancier de l'espace," in his essay "Pour une poétique de l'espace romanesque: l'exemple de Zola," in *Zola and the Craft of Fiction* 81.