

The Allure of Disgust: Rural Decadence in Zola's *La Terre*

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RÉSUMÉ

Le roman La Terre, qualifié de "recueil de scatologie," même par les disciples de Zola, devient emblématique du naturalisme comme littérature ordurière dont les sujets putrides éveillent la curiosité des lecteurs. En dépit de l'indignation que suscite ce roman, ce n'est pas tout le monde qui est mécontent de l'effet de choc provoqué par une telle épopée rurale. Joris-Karl Huysmans en particulier, loue la brutalité des personnages de La Terre et la beauté mélancolique de ses paysages champêtres. De fait, la fascination dont témoigne Huysmans pour cette œuvre atteste du courant décadent qui imprègne l'enquête zolienne sur le monde rural.

Dans cette perspective, l'objectif de notre étude est d'offrir une réflexion sur l'affinité générique de La Terre avec la littérature fin-de-siècle. Cet article se concentre sur les figures antinomiques de Buteau et de Jean Macquart en particulier, afin de montrer l'ambiguïté du roman, qui se caractérise simultanément par la tentation décadente du dégoût et la spiritualité rédemptrice de moments sublimes. On se propose également de réfléchir sur l'horizon émotionnel de ce récit: la transgression des tabous humains y suscite en effet des sentiments négatifs, comme la colère et la répulsion, qui renforcent l'effet de réel de l'écriture zolienne en démasquant les inégalités sociales dans le milieu rural, et en créant un climat de passion et de suspense.

Samedi soir [vers le 15 novembre 1887]

Mon cher Zola,

Je viens de terminer La Terre que j'ai lue, à petits coups, savoureusement. L'impression qui se dégage pour moi avant tout, de cette première lecture, est celle d'une incontestable grandeur. Votre cadre de paysages est superbe; avec vous l'on voit une mélancolique Beauce, s'étendre, plate, à l'infini, d'un bout à l'autre du livre. L'on y est, pas dans une autre campagne, c'est vraiment fort; je trouve que la mer du blé où le petit clocher disparaît à la fin, est une des plus fermes pages que vous avez écrites. Quant à vos paysans ils sont tout bonnement terribles. La lente extermination du vieux Fouan par ses enfants est suivie, pas à pas et arrive, à la fin, avec les Buteau, à un bon effet d'horreur.

Joris-Karl Huysmans to Zola in 1887¹

The famous critical reactions provoked by the publication of Zola's *La Terre* (1887) resonate amongst the notes and echoes of attraction and repulsion which fill the historical soundbox of Zolian naturalism and the scandals it generates. *La Terre*, characterized as "un recueil de scatologie" even by Zola's disciples in *Le Manifeste des cinq*² became emblematic of

¹ Lettre LV (vers le 15 novembre 1887) in *Lettres inédites à Émile Zola*. J.-K. Huysmans, ed. Pierre Lambert, Introduction by Pierre Cogne (Geneva: Droz, 1953) 135.

² As an article, "Le manifeste des cinq" was published in *Le Figaro* on 18 August 1887, signed by Alphonse Daudet, Paul Bonnetain, Lucien Descaves, Paul Margueritte and Gustave Guiches. In the open letter Zola's

naturalism as a troublesome kind of literature, yet one that stimulates the reading public's quiet curiosity. However, not everyone was unhappy with Zola's epic of an agricultural family and its gamut of shock effects. In his private letter to Zola, Joris-Karl Huysmans acclaimed the brutality of Zola's protagonists, and praised the melancholic beauty of the Beauce landscape. The fin-de-siècle idol had recently finished *En Rade* (1887), Huysmans' mixture of provincial realism and decadent fantasy, and was excited about Zola's contribution to rural decadence.³

Huysmans' fascination with *La Terre* is indicative of the decadent allure of disgust which permeates the Zolian survey of the rural worlds and it also stimulates the pursuit of this essay, a reflection of the decadent aspects in *La Terre*. Previous research on Zola's novel – David Baguley's readings in particular – have illuminated the multi-generic nature of *La Terre*, including its grotesque and parodic elements which mock the bucolic tradition.⁴ In this article, I continue the discussion on Zola's hybrid novel and move on to explore *La Terre's* generic affiliation with decadent literature. The connection between naturalism and decadence has been long acknowledged, as Jean de Palacio reminds us: "Que le Naturalisme ait côtoyé la Décadence, est une évidence, depuis longtemps reconnue. *La Curée, La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret, Nana* en portent témoignage."⁵ Yet *La Terre* is not usually included amongst Zola's decadent works, and the rural decadence, in general, remains an underresearched area of study: from Baudelaire to Huysmans, Bourget and Wilde, decadence is generally associated with the urban or upper classes. However, while *La Terre's* mode of representation avoids symbolist fantasy and remains anchored in the realm of everyday realities, the novel's blending of the naturalist representation of rural life and decadent corruption contributes to creating pre-texts for elaborated and mature forms of fin-de-siècle decadence.

In my reading, I focus on the contrasting figures of Buteau and Jean Macquart in particular, in order to unveil the changing facets of Zola's ambiguous novel, from the allure of disgust to decadence's propensity for creating sublime moments. Buteau's demonic, Dionysian vitality, with its primitive energy, becomes a dynamo powering the novel's transgressions against nature. In contrast, Jean Macquart's sensitivity and contemplation reveal other affective atmospheres of the novel, that of melancholia and the sublime. *La Terre's* beatific views of rural landscapes unveil the redemptive potential of primordial nature, even leading into oceanic experiences of immersion. The multi-generic nature of *La Terre* – with its aspects of naturalism, decadence, grotesque, and the sublime – can itself be considered as a symptom of decadent aesthetics of transgression, which does not respect any conventional codes of representation: by regularly changing generic coloring, *La Terre* becomes a text-chameleon which refuses a certain ease in reading and generates a story-world which has no stable textual identity.

Moreover, while tracking *La Terre's* mixture of naturalism and decadence, this essay reflects on the ambivalent emotional horizon of naturalism's shock effects and the allure of

disciples turned against the father of naturalism, accusing Zola of abandoning his ideals. As David Baguley has noticed, the manifesto, ironically, repeats *La Terre's* theme of the parricide. See David Baguley, *Zola et les genres* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 1993) 101. Yet as Anatole France observed, not everyone in *Le Manifeste des cinq* was to cast the first stone for Zola, pointing to Paul Bonnetain in particular, the author of the scandalous novel *Charlot s'amuse* (1883). See Anatole France, "La Vie littéraire. *La Terre*," *Le Temps* 28 août 1887.

³ The term "décadence" appears also in *Le Manifeste des cinq*, but as a qualifier of Zola himself and his artistic talent: Les cinq referred to "la décadence même, son talent" and to Zola's "dégénérescence" as a naturalist author. See Émile Zola, *La Terre* (Paris: Pocket, 1999) 527. Henceforth, further reference to this work will be to this edition and page numbers only will appear in parentheses within the text.

⁴ See Baguley 94-101.

⁵ Jean de Palacio, *La Décadence. Le mot et la chose* (Paris: Les Belles lettres, 2011) 33–34.

disgust. *La Terre's* violent struggle for the Earth Mother moves into the realm of negative emotions and ugly feelings, such as anger and disgust, which enhance the novel's effects of reality and unmask acute inequalities in rural conditions, all the while thrilling and entertaining the reader and creating a spirit of suspense.

Vitality and Degeneration

The conflicting reactions to *La Terre* illustrate the very ambiguity inscribed in Zola's peasant figures. In *Les Rougon-Macquart* Zola envisioned an architecture of modern society, quatre mondes," including "le peuple, les commerçants, la bourgeoisie et le grand monde," plus "un monde à part – putain, meurtrier, prêtre, artiste."⁶ Yet the peasant world, as it is represented in such works as *La Terre* or *Fécondité* (1899)⁷ does not entirely fall into these categories; rather it creates its own class of outlaws, strongly controversial among Zola's crowd fictions.⁸ In Zola's novels, peasants are often negatively valorised: they are portrayed as the lowest class in society, even inferior to workers, and serve to symbolize the evils of modernity, from obsessive avarice to disrespect for nature. In *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), the coarse artist-murderer embodies the dangerous bestiality of rural origins and triggers effects of romantic horror. Laurent, "un vrai fils de paysan," manifests animal instincts, vulgarity and sanguine brutality, all of which engender in him a distorted artistic creativity and instigate a passionate desire for the cruel murder.⁹ In *Les Rougon-Macquart*, *fêlure* and degeneration emanate from the peasant: the hereditary taint has its origins in the rural populace. In *La Fortune des Rougon* (1871), tante Dide first marries Rougon, who is termed a "paysan mal dégrossi," a "pauvre diable, épais, lourd, commun, sachant à peine parler français"; she later enters into a romance with a savage smuggler and poacher of the forests, Macquart.¹⁰ At the same time, however, primitive nature generates transgressive vitality and life-forces, which transcend *fêlure* and degeneration and renew the cycle of generations. In this view, Zolian protagonists with provincial origins represent the life force, red-blooded sexual energy and success. For instance, in *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883), Octave Mouret, "un garçon tombé du Midi à Paris" displays drive and desire which result in success both in public and private life, in business and the bedroom.

La Terre's rural decadence encapsulates the ambiguous poetics of vitality and degeneration which are peculiar to Zola's peasant world. Through Jean Macquart, the narrator's delegate and the witnessing eye for the novel's increasing disorder, *La Terre* guides its reader into a *Heart of Darkness* in the French countryside. Instead of noble savages living in harmony with nature, the novel presents a gallery of grimly charismatic heroes, abject, yet capable of brutal actions. Incest, rapes, parricide – the series of transgressive immoralities in the village community drive the novel towards a decadent adoration of

⁶ See Henri Mitterand, *Zola et le naturalisme* (Paris: PUF, 1986) 39.

⁷ In *Fécondité*, the praise for agricultural society does not include the native peasants. In this novel, the rural heroes are newcomers from Paris, while the local farmers are described as rabble, who have let their farms go to wrack and ruin.

⁸ On Zola's crowd fictions, see Naomi Schor, *Zola's Crowds* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978).

⁹ "Laurent était un vrai fils de paysan, d'allure un peu lourde, le dos bombé, les mouvements lents et précis, l'air tranquille et entêté." "Ses premiers essais étaient restés au-dessous de la médiocrité; son œil de paysan voyait gauchement et salement la nature; ses toiles, boueuses, mal bâties, grimaçantes, défiaient toute critique." In *Thérèse Raquin* Laurent's ease of planning and committing Camille's murder is also explained in terms of his peasant origins: "Il risquait moins en tuant le mari: il ne soulevait aucun scandale, il poussait seulement un homme pour se mettre à sa place. Dans sa logique brutale de paysan, il trouvait ce moyen excellent et naturel." See Émile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1977) 45, 47, and 83.

¹⁰ Émile Zola, *La Fortune des Rougon* (Paris: Pocket, 1999) 65.

perversity.¹¹ The negation of innate, natural laws of family affection which manifests itself in Buteau's action suggests a turning away from nature. The novel, as a whole, is characterized by an ambiguous narrative drive which combines moral indignation through Jean's perspective, with the narrator's voyeuristic fascination for reporting the increasing corruption. According to Sylvie Thorel-Cailleteau, the move from naturalism to decadence is often revealed by the implied author's attitude towards the fictional world: "Le naturaliste devient décadent à partir du moment où il reconnaît dans la décadence non seulement une loi mais une tentation, où il aime."¹² A naturalist author becomes decadent the moment he turns into a necrophile, one who, instead of seriously examining his social defects, views degeneration as an ideal, and is excited by the allure of disgust.¹³

However, while *La Terre* manifests some of the decadent allure of degeneration and corruption, the novel avoids the kind of movement fantasy and internalisation which is peculiar to decadent literature.¹⁴ The novel's fictional world is located in the familiar realm of everyday realities, thereby incorporating such characteristics of the naturalist novel as the serious study of social defects and the hardships of rural living. By featuring the old Fouan as a victim of his children's greed, the novel unveils a tragic vision, which has been seen as a component of naturalism which distinguishes it from decadence.¹⁵ The tragic aspects are enhanced by the novel's indebtedness to Shakespearean tragedy: Old Fouan's destiny is reminiscent of that of *King Lear*.¹⁶ Fouan's decision to divide up his land, like Lear's decision to relinquish power, proves to be a fatal mistake – a tragic error – which ends in death and destruction.¹⁷ The cruel competition for inheritance results in the ruin of the family and, finally, in parricide. Like Shakespeare in *King Lear*, Zola examines the anxieties of ageing which lead into powerlessness and decline and, in the fin-de-siècle spirit, envisions a decadent view of the human lifecycle as one of constant degeneration. In spite of these tragic aspects, the character narration in *La Terre* remains ambivalent, creating positive and negative valorisations. Old Fouan does not appear simply as an innocent victim for whom the reader is supposed to feel only compassion; he also inspires a simultaneous refusal of empathy, along with feelings of disgust for an old tyrant who for decades had violently and

¹¹ In his review of *La Terre*, Anatole France was horrified by the novel's incestuous relationships: "Ce malheureux village est plein d'inceste." See France (1887). The motif of incest is indicative of the novel's decadent features, a symbol of transgressive immorality and perversity. As discussed by Richard Fabrizio, incest is a prevalent motif in romantic authors from Rousseau to Chateaubriand, who represent sibling incest, both pseudo and real, as pure, touching, invariably sympathetic. However, towards the end of the century only the decadents deal with incest. See Richard Fabrizio, "Incest," *Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs*, ed. Jean-Charles Seigneuret (New York and London: Greenwood Press 1988) 649–65.

¹² Sylvie Thorel-Cailleteau, *La Tentation du livre sur rien. Naturalisme et décadence* (Mont-de Marsan, France: Éditions universitaires, 1994) 417.

¹³ See Thorel-Cailleteau 417.

¹⁴ See Pirjo Lyytikäinen, "Decadence in the wilderness. Will to transgression or the strange bird of Finnish Decadence," *Nordlit* 28 (2011): 246.

¹⁵ Lyytikäinen 246.

¹⁶ See Baguley 97 and Sylvie Thorel-Cailleteau, "L'ombre du roi Lear: une lecture de *La Terre* de Zola," *Revue de littérature comparée* 44 (1990): 481–90.

¹⁷ The tragic vision of the naturalist novel has been delineated by David Baguley in *Naturalist Fiction. The Entropic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 97–119, but many previous studies have also discussed the tragic aspects of naturalist fiction. In his landmark work on *La Terre d'Émile Zola* (1952), Guy Robert, for instance, indicates the tragic elements in the figure of Fouan. Fouan's tragic destiny is emphasized in André Antoine's silent film *La Terre* of 1921, which ends in Fouan's natural death over the land. A tragic ethos is also portrayed in *L'Assommoir*, which focuses on the rise and fall of Gervaise, who, despite her efforts, is trapped by the misfortunes of hereditary degeneration and the uncontrollable forces of a tragedy which threaten the basis of human order. The fame and aesthetic value of *L'Assommoir*, duly acknowledged by the authors of *Le Manifeste des cinq*, was certainly connected to this tragic vision, which engaged readers' sympathy towards and compassion for the sufferings of an ordinary working-class woman.

brutally dominated his family, loving only his land, and who is now being punished for his past actions.

La Terre's blending of decadent vitality and degeneration is most discernible in Buteau, the human beast of Beauce. Instead of passively submitting to his inner instincts, Buteau is drawn to primitive nature to create vital forces of transgression against nature – *à rebours*.¹⁸ Buteau is most illustrative of the decadent strain of the novel: he is the obstinate, solitary, passionate hero, whose will and joy of transgression and violation of human taboos evoke fin-de-siècle narcissistic protagonists from Huysmans to Wilde. Arrogant, but charismatic and powerful, cunning and deceptive, Buteau shares numerous traits with sinister and diabolic fin-de-siècle figures. Buteau embodies transgressive energy typical of Byronic heroes, thus creating a version of the decadent and destructive *fatal man*.¹⁹ He is neither satisfied with mundane realities nor with the distribution of estate, but like the decadent Nietzschean heroes, he wants to have it all: “Pourquoi ne pas l’avoir toute?” (97). When the peasants gather together for the All Saints Day celebration, Jean’s reading of a popular propaganda story, *Les Malheurs et le Triomphe de Jacques Bonhomme*, does not inspire in Buteau any spirit of solidarity for the French peasant’s misery, sufferings, and victory in revolution. Rather it stimulates him to embark upon a personal revolution against others, a solitary struggle for life and the land, and triggers passionate emotions of anger and pride:

Buteau s’était levé, et il marchait d’un bout à l’autre de l’étable, la face dure, d’un pas inquiet et songeur. Il n’avait plus parlé depuis la lecture, comme possédé par ce que le livre disait, ces histoires de la terre si rudement conquise. Pourquoi ne pas l’avoir toute? Un partage lui devenait insupportable. Et c’étaient d’autres choses encore, des choses confuses, qui se battaient dans son crâne épais, de la colère, de l’orgueil, l’entêtement de ne pas revenir sur ce qu’il avait dit, le désir exaspéré du mâle voulant et ne voulant pas, dans la crainte d’être dupé. (97)

The decadent aesthetics of transgression engenders powerful emotions. For a transgressive, *fatal man* life has to be felt: pain and passion are elements of our existence, and sin is the normal state of nature.²⁰ Yet in terms of love, Buteau feels attachment and desire only for the material world; his passion of possession evolves into a fetishized desire for the Mother Earth. When Buteau finally accepts his part and marriage with Lise increases the fortune, he wallows in the pleasure of possession:

Depuis qu’il avait accepté, c’était une grande passion satisfaite, la joie brutale de la possession; et une chose la doublait, cette joie, l’idée que sa sœur et son frère étaient volés, que son lot valait davantage, à présent que le nouveau chemin bordait sa pièce. Il ne les rencontrait plus sans ricaner, en malin, disant avec des clins d’yeux:
– Tout de même, je les ai fichus dedans! (201)

A will to transgress and even a desire for decay distinguish decadent characters from naturalist tragic victims; the decadent protagonists frequently reflect on their own state of decadence, choosing transgression, pleasure and decay.²¹ The outspoken immorality – Buteau

¹⁸ On the representation of the primitive in Zola’s novel, see Riikka Rossi, “Transgression, Nostalgia, Order. Representation of the Primitive in Émile Zola’s *La Terre* and Knut Hamsun’s *Markens Grøde*,” *Nordlit* 28 (2011): 257–70.

¹⁹ See Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, tr. Angus Davidson (London and New York: Oxford University Press, [1952] 1979) 55–83.

²⁰ Praz 74, 148.

²¹ Lyytikäinen 246.

shows neither remorse nor compassion for the sufferings of his family – accentuates the impetus to contravene the laws of nature and culture, and suggests the decadent view of the world as a voluntary choice. In this view, Buteau is no longer a mere victim of social and biological conditions; his action cannot be explained only in terms of the inevitable forces of hereditary degeneration.²² In the context of *Les Rougon-Macquart*, Buteau can be compared to Nana, to the mythical *femme fatale*, whom Zola himself called *le diable*, a figure supposed to represent *l'état de vice*²³ and in whom the line between naturalism and decadence is, at best, blurred. Like Buteau, Nana does not passively slide into destruction. Conscious of her fatal beauty and irresistible attraction, she uses her body to transgress the social hierarchies, causing pain to all who are close to her and bringing anarchist revenge on behalf of the outcasts of her family.

The effects of disgust and horror triggered by Buteau are enhanced by the layers of metaphors and tropes in *La Terre's* narrative discourse. The novel builds up a metonymic enchainment between Buteau and unclean animality. Buteau is frequently compared with pigs: the narrative repeats the expression “cochonneries” when speaking of Buteau's misbehaviors and refers to him as the dark-featured “cochon.” When Buteau disappears in the market place, he is soon found in the company of pigs; “[sur] le ventre du marchand de cochons. Il venait d'avoir son petit cochon à vingt francs” (182). The horror stories told at the All Saints Day gathering, including the tales of the “Cochon noir” and the monstrous bat with the human face, “la bête d'Orléans,” provide allusive *mises en abyme* pointing to Buteau, and remind us of the presence of nature's fearful, destructive energies. An ethnocritic reading of *La Terre* would connect Buteau with the folkloric motif of evil spirits inherent in nature and the rural milieu: Zola's narrative configures him as a demonic spirit suddenly and unexpectedly appearing and disappearing, a spirit who keeps the others waiting and triggers fear. “Il ne manque que Buteau... Jamais à l'heure, jamais comme les autres, ce bougre-là!” (35), Old Fouan curses in the meeting with the notary. Françoise, afraid of Buteau's advances and harassment, is disturbed by uncomfortable memories of Buteau's presence and feels him haunting their house after Lise and Buteau have left it: “elle sentait bien que Buteau était toujours présent” (394).

Melancholia and Oceanic Redemption

Buteau's demonic transgressions and aggressive violations of human taboo form important elements in Zola's rural decadence, but *La Terre* also displays links with other kinds of fin-de-siècle styles and tones. *Taboo*, as Freud understood it, diverges in two contrary directions at once: the dangerous and forbidden, on the one hand, and the sacred, on the other.²⁴ In line with the oxymoronic “holy dread” that features the Freudian concept of taboo,²⁵ *La Terre's* decadent terror expands to spiritual experiences of the sacred. The novel's allure of disgust is contrasted with beatific experiences of primordial nature; the onslaught of visual representations of the landscape gives rise to melancholia, serenity, and even moments of the sublime. These important aspects were mostly ignored in contemporary readings of *La Terre*,

²² Despite Buteau's will of transgression, the novel however does not ignore the role of heredity. Old Fouan's brutality echoes in the son, Buteau, whose cruelty is partially explained by the hereditary taint: “[il] tenait de son père le désir brutal, l'entêtement dans la possession, aggravés par l'avarice étroite de sa mère” (Zola, *La Terre* 35).

²³ Cited in Roger Ripoll, *Réalité et mythe chez Zola*, vol. 1 (Lille, France: Atelier de reproduction des thèses, Université de Lille 3, 1981) 96.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo. Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, authorized translation by James Strachey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975) 18.

²⁵ “Our collocation ‘holy dread’ would often coincide in meaning with ‘taboo,’” Freud states in *Totem and Taboo*. Freud 18.

which merely addressed the novel's provocative poetics of repulsion, "immondice," "répugnance," and "ordures."²⁶

In particular, *La Terre's* heightened effects of horror, as well as the Dionysian, savage primitivity and chaotic vulgarity featured in the character Buteau, are contrasted and balanced by the Apollonian clarity and sensitivity of Jean Macquart.²⁷ Jean can be compared to Étienne Lantier in *Germinal*:²⁸ like Étienne, he is a newcomer, whose arrival in and departure from the rural community frame the novel's story-world and set the narrative drive in motion. However, while Étienne becomes a respected member of the mining community and even comes to lead the revolt, Jean remains more passive. His contemplation and immersive self-reflection becomes a catalyst for emotional paralysis and existential fatigue, *mal du siècle*, melancholia and *ennui*.²⁹ Jean, "cet étranger," "paraissait en visite, n'osant toucher à rien" (394) – to quote his wife Françoise – is reminiscent of melancholic male protagonists of nineteenth-century literature and their sense of boredom and alienation echoing of the philosophical currents of the age. The veteran of Solferino has been torn apart by the ferocities of war and now lives in voluntary exile from the modern world. Jean arrives at Beauce in the hope of finding some rest: "il songeait à sa campagne d'Italie, et un grand besoin de repos l'engourdissait, l'envie de s'allonger et de s'oublier dans l'herbe" (107). Nonetheless, his nostalgic search for the paradise lost turns into a travesty of the bucolic idyll. Jean finds himself among savages who are capable of more brutal violence than he saw during the war.³⁰

Jean, the narrator's delegate and the witness for the novel's dreadful events, provides an outstandingly visual perspective in *La Terre*. As a stranger, Jean sees the countryside otherwise than the local peasants, sensing the peaceful melancholia of the plain: "ce que les paysans ne voient pas, ne sentent pas, lui le voyait, le sentait, la grande paix triste de la plaine, le souffle puissant de la terre, sous le soleil et sous la pluie" (427). Starting from the opening lines of the novel, in which Jean ploughs the field, seeing the village ahead of him and then turning toward the vast plain of the Beauce, *La Terre's* landscapes are frequently registered through Jean's eyes. Moreover, the visual and sensory experiences represented and produced through Jean's view unveil the affective potential of "the melancholic Beauce," to which Huysmans referred in his letter to Zola. As discussed by Fredrick Jameson, the opening scene of *La Terre* offers a tangible and rich deployment of affect, a bodily feeling inspired by the visual, and creates a kind of cinematographic or three-dimensional experience, thus rupturing the linearity of the narrative and producing a new kind of scenic temporality, a scenic present.³¹ The novel's affective investments and moments of visual

²⁶ According to Anatole France, for instance, in *La Terre* Zola ignored both "the beauty of words and of things": "M. Zola ignore la beauté des mots comme il ignore la beauté des choses." France (1887).

²⁷ On the Apollonian and Dionysian dimension in literary decadence, see Pirjo Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja sfinksi. Minä ja toinen vuosisadanvaihteen kirjallisuudessa* (Helsinki: SKS, 1997).

²⁸ See also Gérard Gengembre, Préface to Émile Zola, *La Terre* (Paris: Pocket, 1999) 13.

²⁹ Paul Bourget, among others, considered increasing self-reflection as a source of suffering and melancholia: "Ce n'est que la réflexion individuelle qui amène plusieurs d'entre nous, et malgré l'optimisme héréditaire, à la négation suprême." Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine. Études littéraires* (Paris: Gallimard [1883]1993) 10.

³⁰ "Dire qu'il était si joyeux, le jour où il avait quitté le service, après la guerre d'Italie, à l'idée de n'être plus un traîneur de sabre, un tueur de monde! Et, depuis cette époque, il vivait dans de sales histoires, au milieu de sauvages. Dès son mariage, il en avait eu gros sur le cœur; mais les voilà qui volaient, qui assassinaient, maintenant! De vrais loups, lâchés au travers de la plaine, si grande, si calme! Non, non! c'était assez, ces bêtes dévorantes lui gâtaient la campagne! Pourquoi en faire traquer un couple, la femelle et le mâle, lorsqu'on aurait dû détruire la bande entière? Il préférerait partir" (Zola, *La Terre* 492).

³¹ Fredrick Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013) 47-38. In his recent study, Jameson considers Zola as the novelist who offers some of the richest deployments of affect in the nineteenth-century realism. On Zola's cinematographic and filmic potential, see Anna Gural-Migdal, *L'Écrit-Écran des Rougon-*

immersion manifest Zola's narrative striving towards a stylistic modernity, even producing effects of estrangement. As Susan Harrow observes, in spite of Zola's reputation as an author of readable classic narratives in terms of Barthes, the Zolian texture resists the linearity of realist narrative and anticipates a modernist aesthetic by producing a blurring of positions, a merging of perspectives, forms of dissolution, ellipsis and abstraction.³²

The complexity and transformative energy of Zola's metaphors are illustrated also by *La Terre's* leitmotif, "the wheat field," which is introduced through Jean's perspective in the opening scene of the novel. The oceanic images of the field, "cet océan de terre immobile" (21) evolve into a dynamic and animistic agency, which embodies the primordial forces of life and represents the mythical Mother Earth – the true heroine of the novel, as Zola explained in his preparatory notes.³³ While human life brings only in devastation, suffering and nausea, the melancholic beauty of the white fields offers Jean a source of consolation. Before leaving Rognes, Jean desires to bid farewell to his two loves: to visit Françoise's grave and to see the field, once again: "la plaine immense, la triste Beauce, qu'il avait fini par aimer, dans ses longues heures solitaires de travail" (493); the quiet plain, immense and soulless, also represents a projection of his own existential emptiness. Like the motif of the sea in *La Joie de vivre* (1884), *La Terre's* field accumulates metaphoric layers of meaning, standing for collective consciousness and echoing Schopenhauerian imagery. Like the ceaseless rolling of waves in *La Joie de Vivre*, the silent movement of the field simulates the eternal pulse of the German philosopher's *Die Welt als Wille* [the Will of the World]. The panoramic views over the fields open up a spatial experience of the infinite, both at the horizontal and the vertical level: the horizon which extends "à l'infini" in sight is expanded upwards to the wide open sky, the "ciel vaste." Through the cycle of seasons, *La Terre* renders tangible not only erosion and decay but also the revitalizing power of nature and victory over the morbidity of life: "C'était la poussée du printemps futur qui coulait avec cette fermentation des purins; la matière décomposée retournait à la matrice commune, la mort allait refaire de la vie" (397). It is in the field, in the lap of the white sea, that a peaceful serenity, "une grande sérénité" falls and silences the chaotic battle of life.³⁴ The consoling experiences of landscapes offer redemptive moments of fragile beauty, and create a regenerative mood in opposition to the novel's decadent spirit of degeneration. The enriching of the soil thereby opens the way to a merging with the sources of primal life, a feeling Romain Rolland later called the oceanic: the momentary dissolution of the sense of self in the cosmos, a liberation from the boundaries of self, the burden of the modern world or, in Schopenhauer's terms, from the grip of the eternal Will.³⁵

The oceanic sense of interdependence with the universe manifests itself also in the impressionistic descriptions of the novel which efface the contours of reality, emanating

Macquart. *Conceptions iconiques et filmiques du roman chez Zola* (Villeneuve d'Ascq, France: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2013).

³² Susan Harrow, *Zola. The Body Modern. Pressures and Prospects of Representation* (London: Legenda, 2010) 61.

³³ "La Terre. C'est l'héroïne de mon livre. La terre nourricière, la terre qui donne la vie, et qui la reprend, impassible." Cited in Gengembre, Préface to Émile Zola, *La Terre* 12.

³⁴ "[...] à l'infini, bossuant cette mer blonde, les meules moutonnaient, paraissaient grandir démesurément, flambantes d'un côté, déjà noires de l'autre, jetant des ombres qui s'allongeaient, jusqu'aux lointains perdus de la plaine. Une grande sérénité tomba, il n'y eut plus, très haut, qu'un chant d'alouette. Personne ne parlait, parmi les travailleurs harassés, qui suivaient avec une résignation de troupeau, la tête basse. Et l'on n'entendait qu'un petit bruit de l'échelle, sous le balancement de la morte, rapportée dans le blé mûr" (Zola, *La Terre* 252).

³⁵ Inspired by Eastern mysticism, Rolland coined the term in a letter to Sigmund Freud, who later elaborated it in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). Unlike Rolland, Freud saw the oceanic not as a momentary or transitory ecstatic experience but as a potentially permanent regression and a first step towards the fearful return to the inorganic that he called the death wish. See Marianna Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions. Men, Women and the Quest for Ecstasy* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) 41.

prismatic effects of light and generating sensory experiences. Jean's last visit to Françoise's grave – to the weed-choked, gothic, decadent cemetery – contrasts with the camera-eye panorama of Beauce spreading out behind the graves. The reader is led to perceive Beauce's awakening to early spring: the pale shades of the sun and its silken beauty; the golden dust of the germ and the vibration of light and sun – the promise of the future.³⁶ This illuminated, layered reality manifests the connections between primitive nature and spiritual emotions. The novel's decadent decay is contrasted with the vitality of nature, which even generates experiences of religious ecstasy, as we note in the scene in which the Fouan household and Jean view the blessed rain over the fields: "Et tous, en tas devant la fenêtre, épanouis, dans une sorte d'extase religieuse, regardaient ruisseler la pluie tiède, sans fin, comme s'ils avaient vu, sous cette eau bienfaisante, pousser les grands blés verts" (210). Despite the devastation, life goes on. In line with the cyclic vision of *Les Rougon-Macquart*, the novel's end suggests a revival of a new era after the violent struggle for life, when Jean Macquart leaves the village and the ruins of his existence there: "Il partait, lorsque, une dernière fois, il promena ses regards des deux fosses, vierges d'herbe, aux labours sans fin de la Beauce, que les semeurs emplissaient de leur geste continu. Des morts, des semences, et le pain poussait de la terre" (509).³⁷

Negative Emotions: Shock Effects and Critical Potential

The changing facets of *La Terre's* male protagonists exemplify the ambivalent affective atmosphere of Zola's novel, which oscillates between naturalist scenes of disgust, violence and ugliness; the poetic sensuality of melancholic landscapes and redemptive experiences of the oceanic and the sublime. The novel illustrates Zola's polymorphous use of varied stylistic registers³⁸ and generates a story-world which has no stable generic identity, thus manifesting and anticipating the disruptive aesthetics of stylistic modernism. In general, the oxymoronic crisscrossing of styles and themes is characteristic of the Zolian texture, which frequently captures contrasting representations of beauty and horror, power and collapse, energy and implosion.³⁹

The decadent exaggeration of the peasants' bestiality in *La Terre*, which attracted abundant moral indignation at the time of the novel's release, even achieves parodic, grotesque, Rabelaisian dimensions, manifested in the buffoonish figure of Jésus-Christ in particular.⁴⁰ The carnival-like aspects fuel the novel's transgressive energy, striving for the reorganisation of social hierarchies and pointing to the birth of a new society; *La Terre*, which constantly refers to the revolution of 1789, urges a negation of existing norms and

³⁶ "Un pâle soleil de mars blanchissait le ciel, voilé de vapeurs, d'une finesse de soie blanche, à peine avivée d'une pointe de bleu; et, sous cette lumière douce, la Beauce, engourdie des froids de l'hiver, semblait s'attarder au sommeil, comme ces dormeuses qui ne dorment plus tout à fait, mais qui évitent de remuer, pour jouir de leur paresse. Les lointains se noyaient, la plaine en semblait élargie, étalant les carrés déjà verts des blés, des avoines et des seigles d'automne; tandis que, dans les labours restés nus, on avait commencé les semailles de printemps. Partout, au milieu des mottes grasses, des hommes marchaient, avec le geste, l'envolée continue de la semence. On la voyait nettement, dorée, ainsi qu'une poussière vivante, s'échapper du poing des semeurs les plus proches. Puis, les semeurs se rapetissaient, se perdaient à l'infini, et elle les enveloppait d'une onde, elle ne semblait être, tout au loin, que la vibration même de la lumière. À des lieues, aux quatre points de l'étendue sans borne, la vie de l'été futur pleuvait dans le soleil" (Zola, *La Terre* 493).

³⁷ The ending of *La Terre* is reminiscent of the final paragraphs of *Germinal* and its promise for the future. At the same time, in *La Terre*, the revival of life is shadowed by the imminent Franco-Prussian war and its coming devastation.

³⁸ On multi-stylistic aspects in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, see Harrow 61.

³⁹ Harrow 48.

⁴⁰ See Baguley 98.

values and calls for revolt. Yet despite the novel's generically parodic aspects, *La Terre's* carnival remains bitter.⁴¹ Towards the end, the novel's emotional register becomes increasingly sullied. Buteau's joy of transgression turns into the bitterness, greed, and envy, which trigger the flood of cruelty and violence. When the marriage of Jean and Françoise compels Buteau and Lise to give up a part of their heritage, Buteau flies into a passionate fury and anger – "sa colère touchait à l'extravagance" (389) – leading up to Françoise's rape and Old Fouan's murder. A welling up of hate and spite despise take overcomes Lise as well, whose disgust for Françoise annihilates the vestiges of affection between the sisters. Old Fouan, abandoned and chased away by his own children, feels ashamed and distressed. The marriage of Jean and Françoise, a marriage "sans plaisir" is filled with sadness and anxiety. Regardless of the moments of sublime spirituality, also Jean's emotional experiences turn into the realm of unprestigious feelings. The series of scandalous events in Rognes, including Françoise's brutal murder and the death of their unborn baby, induces in Jean affects of anxiety and disgust; a wave of anger flows over him, which can only be unblocked by leaving the village community: "La souffrance, le dégoût des dix années passées à Rognes, lui remontaient de la poitrine en un flot de colère"; for this reason, "Il préférerait partir" (492). Jean is happy to switch from the battle of life to the fields of war; he is prepared to defend "La vieille terre de France" in the imminent war with Prussia, launching the story to be continued in *La Débâcle* (1892).

The poetics of negative emotions in *La Terre* augments an epistemological uncertainty about the ethics of storytelling in a novel which infringes on some fundamental taboos of human life, while creating aestheticized moments of beauty and the thrill of reading. The macabre attraction of disgust peculiar to *La Terre's* decadent vision carries both positive and negative dimensions. On one hand, disgust is humanizing, both natural and human; we experience disgust as particularly and categorically real, since it usually relates to concrete and organic things and is accompanied by sharp physiological coloring.⁴² In this view, naturalism's notorious poetics of disgust pertains to the ways in which naturalist literature channels our attention to the harsh realities represented, enhancing its effects of reality through rejection's powerful emotional charge. Moreover, as a strong, intense sensation, disgust disrupts the gloomy boredom of the banal everyday, and the great emotional amplitude may in itself be conducive to pleasure – to the allure of disgust.⁴³ At the same time, since disgust evaluates negatively whatever it touches, it proclaims the inferiority of its object; the type of disgust triggered by human beings involves a clear amoral dimension, which has throughout history been used to exclude people embodying the dominant group's fears.⁴⁴ Contemporary perspectives on *La Terre* reflect this very complex repulsion: the reader experiences amplified emotions and waves of shock, when exposed to the novel's disgusting effects of reality, feeling simultaneously attraction and pleasure, notably recorded by Huysmans, who gorges himself on Zolian decadence; but the reader also senses moral indignation at the dehumanizing representation of peasants.⁴⁵

⁴¹ With the expression "bitter carnival," I refer to Michel André Bernstein's interpretation of the dark sides of satire and carnival in modern literature. See Michel André Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival. Ressentiment and the Abject Hero* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁴² See Ian William Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust* (Harvard: Harvard University Press 1997) 11; Winfried Menninghaus *Disgust. The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, tr. Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (Albany, US: State University of New York Press, 2003) 17.

⁴³ Menninghaus 8.

⁴⁴ On the moral aspects of disgust, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) 14.

⁴⁵ In his review, Anatole France cites Louis Ulbach, who considered Zola's peasant representation as an unpatriotic denial of France.

The negative emotions represented in and triggered by *La Terre*, appear however not merely as unpleasant and degenerative feelings, but carry a cathartic and positive potential which tends even towards renewal and restoration. “L’étude sincère purifie tout, comme le feu,” as Zola explained in the preface to *Thérèse Raquin*.⁴⁶ In general, the naturalist representation and evocation of negative emotions seems to contribute to the Zolian/realist commitment to the unveiling and debating of social ills, and of the problems of modernity. For instance, since Aristotle’s time, anger has been seen as a moral emotion, a necessary response to social injustice. Even ugly and amoral feelings can be valuable in recognizing and polemically responding to social inequalities or even in providing transgressive experiences of identity formation.⁴⁷ Given this picture, the “scatological” aspect of naturalism, the “littérature ordurière,” can be seen in a new light. While *La Terre*’s passionate envy and greed may be ugly, they render visible certain conflicts and complexities of modernity and societal conditions which nurture the vicious cycle of decadent passions and violence.⁴⁸ In *La Terre*, the free markets of capitalist society and global commerce generate aggressive price competition, which has driven traditional agriculture into crisis, compelling the peasants to become avaricious. “C’est toujours pour le blé qu’on se révolte et qu’on se tue...” Lequeu, the schoolmaster, encapsulates the darkening situation (464). In the mid-nineteenth-century spirit of anarchism and revolution, *La Terre* is not devoid of socialist allusions. In some respect, *La Terre* illustrates how modern capitalism extends the practice of “primitive accumulation,” following Marx, driving the peasants away from the soil, self, and nature. Rural fictions often reflect primordial desires for a self born of the soil, born from the earth itself, the need for what the Greeks called *autochthony*.⁴⁹ *La Terre*’s decadent transgressions against fundamental taboos and family values violate and negate innate, natural laws of love and affection; but in the end, the envious drama of “le partage de la terre” also reveals violent needs of belonging and claims of the right to exist.

⁴⁶ Zola, *Thérèse Raquin* 11.

⁴⁷ On the critical potential of negative emotions, see Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, US: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁴⁸ Envy is often moralized and considered as an ugly, egocentric passive condition; but as Sianne Ngai has reminded us, it is the only agonistic emotion to take perceived inequality as its object. See Ngai 128.

⁴⁹ On the concept of autochthony, see Peter Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging. Autochthony, Citizenship and Exclusion in Africa and in Europe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).