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The Paris of Zola: Real Presences and Mythic Horizons

Karlheinz STIERLE

The "Tableaux parisiens" of Baudelaire evoke a city the modernity of which is indicated only by hidden hints and signals. Baudelaire's myth of Paris is in different ways a place of confrontation between moment and eternity, between the ridiculous and the sublime, experiences of the palimpsest memory of a *flâneur* in the city. Only once, the situation of the poem is given a precise historical and political reference. In "Le Cygne" ("The Swan") the crossing of the *nouveau Carrousel*, finished only recently as a place of manifestation for the imperial splendour of Napoleon III, is rich in political evocations, although the melancholy of the lyrical ego, who suddenly is assailed by his memories of the old city, is perhaps less a political melancholy than a sentiment of alienation which goes far beyond political consciousness. With Zola and his cycle of the *Rougon-Macquart*, this "natural and social history of a family under the Second Empire", the myth of Paris, the discourse of Paris, change profoundly. As well as Hugo, Balzac and Baudelaire, Zola is fascinated by the reality of Paris, and, once again, he transforms this reality into a myth.[1] To give a new shape to the discourse of Paris will be for him the greatest literary challenge. The myth of Paris becomes in Zola a myth with precise political and social contours. The Paris of Zola is the Paris of the Second Empire. It is true, Zola was quite far from wanting to write a myth, be it a myth of Paris or a myth of the Second Empire. His dream instead was to rival with the exact sciences by an analysis of hereditary and social laws and by the solidity of positive and impersonal facts, which the novel should synthesize to a homogeneous whole in opposition to the tradition of the sentimental and improbable fiction of the older tradition.

In his famous treatise on the experimental novel and the experimental method applied to the novel, Zola insists upon the affinity of his literary project to that pursued "with strength and wonderful clarity" by Claude Bernard in his *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*. Just as medicine has found through method a way from art to science, the novel should, at least in principle, arrive at a kind of new scientific validity. The thing is quite simple:

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[1] In his book *Paris dans les romans d'Émile Zola* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), Nathan Kranowski studies in detail the presence of Paris in the *Rougon-Macquart*. Henri Mitterand, in his splendidly illustrated *Le Paris de Zola* (Paris : Hazan, 2008), following the different aspects of Zola's Paris, gives a rich, commentated anthology of the whole range of Zola's Paris descriptions. My own approach to the myth of Paris in Zola follows the line of my previous work on the discourse of Paris as the very paradigm of urban discourse. See Karlheinz Stierle, *La Capitale des signes.Paris et son discours*, trad. Marianne Rocher-Jacquin, préface de Jean Starobinski, Paris : Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2001 (abridged version of the original *Der Mythos von Paris. Zeichen und Bewußtsein der Stadt*, München 1993).

> En somme, toute l'opération consiste à prendre les faits dans la nature, puis à étudier les mécanismes des faits, en agissant sur eux par les modifications des circonstances et des milieux, sans jamais s'écarter des lois de la nature. Au bout, il y a la connaissance de l'homme, la connaissance scientifique, dans son action individuelle et sociale.[2]

Determination by heredity and environment: here we have the great subject of the experimental novel which the cycle of the *Rougon-Macquart* will follow. This concept of the experimental novel, however, has only one mistake: incapable of falsifying the hypotheses which form its bases, it cannot give to them any truth value, which means, in the end, the revenge of the imaginary over its repression.

The experimental novel becomes a novel of experimentation: a novel of the determination by environment, but also a novel of determination by heredity. Zola indulges in a myth of scientificalness, but, perhaps, is he only serving a discourse of prestige in order to justify a form of novel the merits of which are quite different from those of an experimentation which should care for scientific respectability. Whereas in his theoretical reflections as well as in the global ideology of the *Rougon-Macquart* Zola proclaims a myth of positivity and scientific character, he is in his novels themselves the creator of a new literary myth of Paris. This myth, where visionary strength does not exclude a pronounced sense of the dynamics of the modern world in perpetual change, is far from the proclaimed programmatic aims of an experimental novel. We will see that he inscribes himself in a literary line with Balzac and, even more astonishingly, with Victor Hugo. For, far from being the great novelist of an epoch of triumphant experimental science, Zola never entirely frees himself from a visionary and rhetorical romanticism. His great descriptions, which in his novels often detach themselves as isolated blocks, get their maximum effect when they are moved by the great breath of an intensity, of a vision, instead of being the exact and naturalistic reproduction of social facts.[3]

The myth of Paris in the *Rougon-Macquart* is a myth of the pulsations of life where it arrives at a maximum of energy and intensity. Paris is the place where life comes to its greatest effervescence, running the risk of ruining itself by exhaustion. This life, by its very intensity, can be an object of aesthetic pleasure when it is rendered and intensified even more by a transposition into the imaginary. There are, in the great myth of Paris of the *Rougon-Macquart*, no individuals, no heroes memorable in themselves. Zola has nothing to oppose to the great heroes of modern life in Balzac's *Comedy* or, more precisely, he does not want to create heroes. Each person in Zola is only the personification of life itself in its energy, in its transpersonal logic. A phrase comparable to that of Rastignac at the end of *Père*

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[2] Emile Zola, *Le roman expérimental*, Paris : Garnier Flammarion, 1971 (1880), 64. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

[3] Henri Mitterand especially has repeatedly warned against taking Zola's naturalism for granted: "méfions-nous, défions-nous d'une conception platement scolaire du 'naturalisme' de Zola, pour employer un mot qu'il a affectionné. Il s'est absorbé dans le spectacle réel de Paris, mais il l'a tout aussitôt transfiguré : par le travail de son regard et de sa palette, mais aussi par son pouvoir extraordinaire de discerner, sous la surface du réel, les images, les symboles et les fragments de mythes qui lui donnent sens" (Mitterand 8).

Goriot: "A nous deux maintenant" ("Now to the two of us") would be unthinkable in the imaginary world of Zola. If the persons in Zola's novel are only the personifications of life itself, this means in the first place that they are the emanations of a certain environment or, even more, of a certain particular world in the interior of the global world of the city. There is a multitude of life-worlds in the sense of Husserl,[4] which establish themselves within the urban totality. Balzac's *Comédie humaine* was the great epos of social mobility. The heroes of the city pass the frontiers of a life-world in the city in order to venture out into a new life-world still unknown to them. Chance very often is the means of an electrifying contact between two worlds of the city. Thus Balzac alters the conceptual dichotomies we find in Mercier's *Tableau parisien*, by which the great discourse of Paris at the end of the 18th century begins. Each of Balzac's novels gives its whole potential of unpredictability to an urban drama. In Zola, on the contrary, each novel is the systematic exploitation of its premises. It is an ascension or a descent, an augmentation or a diminution of energies of life represented by a central person. Whereas Balzac brings to evidence the complexity of the city in the broken line of a destiny torn between the highest and the lowest level of society, Zola is looking for the most simple curve, the most visible and mediocre one, in order to illustrate the most massive and evident forces of life. To reproach Zola with this would be absurd. He looks for a simple frame of narration in order to give evidence to the great breath of life which sets it into motion. And the discourse incorporating this movement of the story is in itself a means of bringing to light the collective life itself incorporated in narration. There is a breath organizing the elements of the sentence and its rhythm continuing from phrase to phrase until the dynamism of discourse is exhausted. It has often been remarked that discourse in Zola is not just a function of its story. It detaches itself from the story in order to follow its own finality in description, where the breath of life finds its highest intensity, where its presence seems to manifest itself as such without the mediation of a narrative structure. It is in these blocks of description with their almost autonomous status that the myth of Paris gets its highest energies. If each Parisian novel of Zola tries to penetrate as authentically and as precisely as possible a certain well circumscribed aspect of the city, this fragment, however, refers to its totality in a twofold way: on the one hand by the constitutive importance of horizon as the imaginary presence of a whole resisting description and recalling nevertheless the totalizing and mythical dimension of the city; on the other hand bringing to mind the presence of this whole in a profusion of totalizing metaphors.

The following reflections will be particularly concerned with five novels in which the presence of Paris is of fundamental importance and which form, taken together, a kind of coherent myth of the Paris of the Second Empire, in spite of the fact that other novels of the *Rougon-Macquart* equally give to the city an important role. These novels are *Le Ventre de Paris* (*The Belly of Paris*, 1873), *Une Page*

[4] The concept of life-world, in German "Lebenswelt", has been introduced by Edmund Husserl in his work *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie*, Haag: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1954 (1936).

d'amour (*A Love Episode*, 1878), *Nana* (1880), *Au Bonheur des Dames* (*The Ladies' Paradise*, 1882) and finally *L'Œuvre* (*The Masterpiece*, 1886). These novels, written within a period of thirteen years, but all conceived under the influence of the fall of the Second Empire and of the constitution of the new republic and the German victory over France, have one common subject: Paris as the great burning center of life.[5]

The new Market Halls, constructed by Baltard, an eminent paradigm of that new architecture in cast iron which gives its *cachet* to the Paris of the Second Empire, are at the center of Zola's first great novel of Paris. It is a modern Paris, tremendous in its brutal colours of reality and hyperreality that Zola evokes, but it is a past modernity, since the Second Empire has already reached its end when Zola begins to describe this world of overwhelming positivity, a symbol of the jubilant, but brief positivity of a whole epoch. Yet Zola perceives clearly that during this epoch a new rhythm of life, a new mass civilization has been created which responds to the immense progress of science and industry.

The Paris of the Market Halls, such as we see it in a more and more complicated perspectivism at the beginning of the novel, is surely one of the great monuments of a new myth of Paris which Zola is about to create. The whole first chapter tells one day in the life of the Halls and a first day of return for Florent, a political prisoner escaped from Cayenne who has arrived almost starving in Paris. Madame François, a greengrocer selling her goods at the Halls, picks him up early in the morning on her usual way to the Market Halls. Thus Florent arrives at this modern complex of buildings which did not exist yet when he was deported from Paris. His first impression of these constructions illuminated by gas, intensified by his hunger and his physical weakness, is that of a fairy play of elegant lines and light. I quote first the original in order to give you an idea of Zola's baroque style in evoking the hyperreal presence of the new architecture in cast iron:

> Mais ce qui le surprenait, c'était, aux deux bords de la rue, de gigantesques pavillons, dont les toits superposés lui semblaient grandir, s'étendre, se perdre, au fond d'un poudroiement de lueurs. Il rêvait, l'esprit affaibli, à une suite de palais, énormes et réguliers, d'une légèreté de cristal, allumant sur leurs façades les mille raies de flammes de persiennes continues et sans fin. Entre les arêtes fines des piliers, ces minces barres jaunes mettaient des échelles de lumière, qui montaient jusqu'à la ligne sombre des premiers toits, qui gravissaient l'entassement des toits supérieurs, posant dans leur carrure les grandes carcasses à jour de salles immenses, où traînaient, sous le jaunissement du gaz, un pêle-mêle de formes grises, effacées et dormantes. Il tourna la tête, fâché d'ignorer où il était, inquiété par cette vision colossale et fragile; et, comme il levait les yeux, il aperçut le cadran lumineux de

[5] The quotations from *Les Rougon-Macquart* refer to Emile Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*, 4 volumes, Armand Lanoux et Henri Mitterand éds., Paris : Gallimard, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", 1960-1966. The second page number refers to an English translation indicated in footnote.

> Saint-Eustache, avec la masse grise de l'église. Cela l'étonna profondément. Il était à la pointe Saint-Eustache.[6]

Nobody has been able to render the profound and new charm of these great constructions of cast iron and all the potential of the imagination that they contain like Zola. To the imaginative expanse of these enormous spaces, to the audaciousness of their poetic rationality must be added the fantastic speed of their realization, able to change in a short time a whole aspect of the city. The nocturnal vision is the beginning of a series of visions which continue with the changing light of the first morning to the moment of full sunshine. While Florent is remembering the moment of his arrest, the traffic grows more intense, the first pavillons, those with the vegetables, open their doors. It is now that Florent and Madame François encounter Claude Lantier, a painter well-known to the market-women, who has come looking for inspiration at "this superb sunrise over heaps of cabbage". He takes Florent away in order to show him the Halls of the Great Market. While the day dawns, they enter the illuminated Halls which Florent once again beholds, struck by this city within the city which resembles a forest and a world:

> Florent levait les yeux, regardait la haute voûte, dont les boiseries intérieures luisaient, entre les dentelles noires des charpentes de fonte. Quand il déboucha dans la grande rue du milieu, il songea à quelque ville étrange, avec ses quartiers distincts, ses faubourgs, ses villages, ses promenades et ses routes, ses places et ses carrefours, mise tout entière sous un hangar, un jour de pluie, par quelque caprice gigantesque. L'ombre, sommeillant dans les creux des toitures, multipliait la forêt des piliers, élargissait à l'infini les nervures délicates, les galeries découpées, les persiennes transparentes ; et c'était, au-dessus de la ville, jusqu'au fond des ténèbres, toute une végétation, toute une floraison, monstrueux épanouissement de métal, dont les tiges qui montaient en fusée, les branches qui se tordaient et se nouaient, couvraient un monde avec les légèretés de feuillage d'une futaie séculaire. (Zola vol. I, 621 ; 20)

When the day has dawned and the gas lamps expire one after the other, the Market Halls show another aspect of themthelves, that of the rationality of a modern machine:

> Et Florent regardait les grandes Halles sortir de l'ombre, sortir du rêve, où il les avait vues, allongeant à l'infini leurs palais à jour. Elles se solidifiaient, d'un gris verdâtre, plus géantes encore, avec leur mâture prodigieuse, supportant les nappes sans fin de leurs toits. Elles entassaient leurs masses géométriques; et, quand toutes les clartés intérieures furent éteintes, qu'elles baignèrent dans le jour levant, carrées, uniformes, elles apparurent comme une machine moderne, hors de toute mesure, quelque machine à vapeur, quelque chaudière destinée à la digestion d'un peuple, gigantesque ventre de métal, boulonné, rivé, fait de bois, de verre et de fonte, d'une élégance et d'une puissance de moteur mécanique, fonctionnant là, avec la chaleur du chauffage, l'étourdissement, le branle furieux des roues. (Zola vol. I, 626 ; 24 *sq.*)

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[6] Zola vol. I, 1960, 609. English translation: Emile Zola, *The Belly of Paris*, trans. Brian Nelson, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2007, 8 *sq.*

But now, in the perspective of the painter Claude Lantier, a great admirer of gigantic still lifes, appears another supernatural or hyperreal scene, that of the day rising over the vegetables where the plenitude of coloured presences transforms itself into fantasmagoria. Here again, the pure presence transcends itself towards the imaginary or the beautiful, an experience that the eye of no scientific experimenter could have:

> A mesure que l'incendie du matin montait en jets de flammes au fond de la rue Rambuteau, les légumes s'éveillaient davantage, sortaient du grand bleuissement traînant à terre. Les salades, les laitues, les scaroles, les chicorées, ouvertes et grasses encore de terreau, montraient leurs cœurs éclatants; les paquets d'épinards, les paquets d'oseille, les bouquets d'artichauts, les entassement de haricots et de pois, les empilement de romaines, liées d'un brin de paille, chantaient toute la gamme du vert, de la laque verte des cosses au gros vert des feuilles; gamme soutenue qui allait se mourant, jusqu'aux panachures des pieds de céleris et des bottes de poireaux. Mais les notes aiguës, ce qui chantait plus haut, c'étaient toujours les taches vives des carottes, les taches pures des navets, semées en quantité prodigieuse le long du marché, l'éclairant du bariolage de leurs deux couleurs. (Zola vol. I, 627 ; 25)

When Claude goes away, Florent, meagre, dying with hunger, feels dizziness in front of the rising sea of food and vegetables, concentrated here in this central organ of the city in order to be distributed to the whole organism:

> Maintenant il entendait le long roulement qui partait des Halles. Paris mâchait les bouchées à ses deux millions d'habitants. C'était comme un grand organe central battant furieusement, jetant le sang de la vie dans toutes les veines. (Zola vol. I, 631 ; 29)

The Halls at that moment present themselves in full daylight:

> L'énorme charpente de fonte se noyait, bleuissait, n'était plus qu'un profil sombre sur les flammes d'incendie du levant. (Zola vol. I, 633 ; 31)

This is the moment of turmoil and of intensity of colours at their apex:

> Les cœurs élargis des salades brûlaient, la gamme du vert éclatait en vigueurs superbes, les carottes saignaient, les navets devenaient incandescents, dans ce brasier triomphal. (Zola vol. I, 633 ; 31)

One day, when Claude and Florent, who has become inspector of the fish department of the Market Halls, are invited by Madame François for an excursion to the countryside, Claude, lying on his back in the carriage, pursues a strange reflection inspired by the sudden aspect of the church of Saint-Eustache in the middle of the Halls:

> C'est une curieuse rencontre, disait-il, ce bout d'église encadré sous cette avenue de fonte. ... Ceci tuera cela, le fer tuera la pierre, et les temps sont proches .... (Zola vol. I, 799 ; 186)

Claude remembers the strange prophecy of Frollo in Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, which Hugo himself interprets as a change of paradigm from the book in stone to the printed book. For Claude, the change of paradigm between stone construction and construction in cast iron takes on another significance. It is the change of a world centered upon religion to a modern world where life itself is a supreme value:

> Saint-Eustache est là-bas avec sa rosace vide de son peuple dévot, tandis que les Halles s'élargissaient à côté toutes bourdonnantes de vie .... (Zola vol. I, 799 ; 186)

These reflections by Claude will not be answered by Florent. Could they, however, be identified with the reflections of Zola himself? It seems to be evident that Zola wants to replace the imaginary center of the city, which Hugo had created with *Notre-Dame de Paris*, by its real center which would be the modern construction in cast iron of the Market Halls, a symbol of the material life and its needs. It seems, however, that by the opposition of perspectives of Claude and Florent, Zola gives a profound ambiguity to this center of modern life. Whereas the Halls as environment are a center of "fat" (gras) positive and affirmative life, of the life of the stomach, but also of an absolute absence of political consciousness other than that of an affirmation without reserve, Claude, the painter, is the one that transforms this positivity into aesthetic affirmation. The world of nurture, of meat, of vegetables is a world of jubilant presence, even if no painter before him has ever dared to give to this presence of pathetic life all the sublimity which is due to it. But it is exactly this world of presence in itself, this jubilation of the stomach, which causes nausea to Florent, a man of consciousness having his place on the side of the meager ones (maigres). Before Sartre, it is Zola for whom the *en-soi* is the origin of a nausea of a political kind and, could one say, of a metaphysical kind. Florent is a new Jean Valjean who, however, is not capable of contributing to the progress of the world, nor of reconciling himself with it. Florent remains the man of negation, the man whose project is one of pure change. From the window of his attic he sees the horizon of the city as a living whole different from the false totalization of the stomach. This is the reason why he joins a group of pseudo-revolutionaries, of revolutionary lunatics like himself. He will be betrayed, arrested and condemned to a new deportation to Cayenne. If the position of Zola in this novel seems to be ambiguous, it is also necessary to take into consideration the myth of Marjolin and Cadine, a myth of a perverse and cruel paradise, of a degraded nature without consciousness. But it seems that neither the perverse world of Marjolin and Cadine nor the end of Florent are the last word of this novel of Paris in the Second Empire. Because if with the disappearence of Florent everything seems to have come back to order again, if the world in itself seems to be freed from any irritation, it is this very world whose days are counted. The real end of the novel is the end of the Second Empire.

Florent is the only person in this closed and thick world of the *Ventre de Paris* to have a sense of horizon. In the evening in his attic, leaning against the window, he contemplates for several minutes the horizon of the city. In *A Love Episode* (*Une Page d'amour*), the panorama of the city spreading to its remote horizons becomes the very subject of the novel. In an article on description which appeared in the journal *Le Voltaire* on 8 June 1880 and was taken up again in the same year in his *The Experimental Novel*, Zola explains his intentions about *A Love Episode* and in particular about his great descriptions of Paris ending its five parts like a kind of panoramic symphony:

> dès ma vingtième année, j'avais rêvé d'écrire ce 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 ses créatures. C'est cette vieille idée que j'ai tenté de réaliser dans *Une Page d'amour*. (Zola 1971, 235)

In this novel the mythic hero of which is life itself in Paris where it has its most intense manifestation, description takes a dominant role. But these descriptions of the whole city seen from the heights of Montmartre under the changing lights of seasons, moments of the day and states of the soul, with their great visionary movement inspired by the urban poetry of Victor Hugo are far from that definition that Zola is proposing for "the scientific use of description, its exact role in the modern novel": "un état du milieu qui determine et complète l'homme" (Zola 1971, 235). The great landscapes of the sky and of the city here are only emanations of life itself and of its impenetrable mystery. Hélène, come from a little provincial town, having become a widow in Paris and living with her frail daughter a calm and retired life on the heights of Montmartre, has only one distraction which is the great everchanging spectacle of the sky over the city:

> Hélène, depuis huit jours, avait cette distraction du grand Paris élargi devant les yeux. Jamais elle ne s'en lassait. Il était insondable et changeant comme un océan, candide le matin et incendié le soir, prenant les joies et les tristesses des cieux qu'il reflétait.[7]

This reflection between the sky and the city will be a mirror of the movements of the soul of the solitary woman spectator. The spectacle of life will make her dream of passion and of the great breath of life which she has not experienced:

> C'était la pleine mer, avec l'infini et l'inconnu de ses vagues. Paris se déployait, aussi grand que le ciel. Sous cette radieuse matinée, la ville, jaune de soleil, semblait un champ d'épis mûrs ; et l'immense tableau avait une simplicité, deux tons seulement, le bleu pâle de l'air et le reflet doré des toits. L'ondée de ces rayons printaniers donnait aux choses une grâce d'enfance. On distinguait nettement les

[7] Zola vol. 2, 1961, 846. English translation: Emile Zola, *A Love Episode*, trans. C.C. Starkweather (1905), New York: Mondial 2005, 47.

> plus petits détails, tant la lumière était pure. Paris, avec le chaos inextricable de ses pierres, luisait comme un cristal. De temps à autre pourtant, dans cette sérénité éclatante et immobile, un souffle passait ; et alors on voyait des quartiers dont les lignes mollissaient et tremblaient, comme si on les eût regardés à travers quelque flamme invisible. (Zola vol. II, 850 ; 51)

The great panoramic descriptions in Balzac, for instance in *La Femme de trente ans* or at the beginning of the *Père Goriot*, always have an allegorical frame where a whole system of conceptual oppositions is inscribed. In *A Page of Love* the totality of the city is present only in the mode of the unreadable. Hélène does not know the city. When Jeanne, her daughter, asks her, she has to confess her ignorance. It is the narrator who with his knowledge gives an orientation to the reader that the heroine of the novel doesn't have and doesn't want to have. The city remains a stranger to her, and it is exactly the spectacle of this unreadable strangeness which fascinates her:

> Alors, elles continuèrent à regarder Paris, sans chercher davantage à le connaître. Cela était très doux, de l'avoir là et de l'ignorer. Il restait l'infini et l'inconnu. C'était comme si elles se fussent arrêtées au seuil d'un monde dont elles avaient l'éternel spectacle, en refusant d'y descendre. Souvent, Paris les inquiétait, lorsqu'il leur envoyait des haleines chaudes et troublantes. Mais, ce matin-là, il avait une gaieté et une innocence d'enfant, son mystère ne leur soufflait que de la tendresse à la face. (Zola vol. II, 854 ; 54)

Paris and life are identical. Life transforms itself into a vision, but the real presence is that of breath. Right at the beginning, the narrator says of Helen living her calm and retired life that "she had a light breath", whereas her daughter suffers from "trouble in breathing". The city in its perpetual changes, in its energy, will bring to her its breath of life and make her feel her calmness as an absence of life. The life of the city becomes breath, and this breath seems to inspire the dynamism of discourse with its transposition of the principal accent from the end of the phrase to its verbal forms, and that is to the middle of phrase, which is unusual in French. This fascinating and strange breath of life gets its incarnation with the person of Doctor Henri Deberle who will become for Helen the object of a violent passion. The descriptions of the panorama of Paris following the moments of the day and of the seasons of the year will follow the line of intensity of this passion, from the moment of its awakening up to the moment when with the death of Jeanne it will find its end. Deberle is for Helen the life of Paris, the fascination of the unknown. He will become her lover, but he will remain a stranger to her, unknown like the city:

> Quel homme était-ce pour qu'elle lui eût cédé, elle qui serait plutôt morte que de céder à un autre ? Elle l'ignorait, il y avait là un vertige où chancelait sa raison. Au dernier comme au premier jour, il lui restait étranger. (Zola vol. II, 1090 ; 281)

She does not know Deberle as she does not know life. After the death of Jeanne, the narrator says: "[i]l lui semblait qu'une page de sa vie était arrachée" (Zola vol. II, 1083 ; 273). This page torn out of the book of life is also a page torn out of the book of

the city. The life of the city will continue, the life of Helen will continue far from Paris. And yet, what this torn-out page contains is the privileged moment of a perception of the city by a consciousness which opening itself to the city, discovers itself.

Une Page d'amour gives to the reader the pure spectacle of the city without any specification of a sociological or political kind. *Nana*, on the contrary, like *Le ventre de Paris*, is closely linked to the Paris of the Second Empire. This history of the ascendence and the fall of Nana, empress in the empire of senses, is at the same time the allegorical history of the Second Empire and its fall.

In his reflections on the experimental novel and its "sense of the real", Zola takes the example "of one of our naturalistic novel writers" who wants to write a novel about the world of the theatre. What will he do? "Son premier soin sera de rassembler dans des notes tout ce qu'il peut savoir sur ce monde qu'il veut peindre" (Zola 1971, 215). And then? "[U]ne fois les documents complétés, son roman, comme je l'ai dit, s'établira de lui-même. Le romancier n'aura qu'à distribuer logiquement les faits" (Zola 1971, 215). The story itself and its discourse have only one function; to serve as a support for the presentation of documents: "[l]'intérêt n'est plus dans l'étrangeté de cette histoire, plus elle sera banale et générale, plus elle deviendra typique. Faire mouvoir des personages réels dans un milieu réel, donner au lecteur un lambeau de la vie humaine, tout le roman naturaliste est là" (Zola 1971, 215). Supposing this definition to be pertinent, it might appear that Zola was no naturalist at all. It seems rather that he uses this programmatic naturalism as a screen behind which he follows a quite different program. Thus the world of theatre in *Nana* becomes that of the *demi-monde* which itself will become the incarnation of the social world under the sign of the Second Empire. The *demi-monde* with its heroine Nana is a world of ambiguity between theatre and prostitution, a world of appearance and promiscuity. It is here that the physiognomy of an epoch is made manifest. Far from being the novel of a closed world, that of the theatre, *Nana* is the novel of an epoch. The woman who brings decay to the social order or who is, even more, the catalyst of decay dies diseased with the pox at the very moment when the war against Prussian Germany is about to break out and when the cries "A Berlin, à Berlin" of an enthusiastic mass already announce the end of the regime. The *demi-monde*, as it appears in its loud colours under the brush of Zola, is a promise of happiness in the realm of the imaginary, that of the reconciliation of social classes which the revolution of 1848 had expected. Zola sees a long decay of the old social order, whereas, freed from the moral constraints which weaken it, it is sexuality, promiscuity, prostitution playing the grimacing comedy of a world between the closed worlds of society. In this world of appearances of pleasure and illusionary alliances, Nana, a goldfly and girl of the people, pursues her work of destruction, of moral dissolution, before she becomes the victim of physical destruction by illness. Twice the novel insists upon the ideological role of Nana. In an article of the *Figaro*, the journalist Fauchery gives an allegorical portrait of the goldfly, which is nobody else than Nana:

> Elle avait poussé dans un faubourg, sur le pavé parisien ; et grande, belle, de chair superbe, ainsi qu'une plante de plein fumier, elle vengeait les gueux et les abandonnés

> dont elle était le produit. Avec elle, la pourriture qu'on laissait fermenter dans le peuple, remontait et pourrissait l'aristocratie. (Zola vol. II, 1269 ; 221)[8]

Before Nana leaves Paris in order to come back surrounded by legends of her fortune made in the Orient, and before dying victim of the pox, it is the narrator who comes back to the prophetic article of Fauchery:

> Son œuvre de ruine et de mort était faite, la mouche envolée de l'ordure des faubourgs, apportant le ferment des pourritures sociales avait emprisonné ses hommes, rien qu'à se poser sur eux. C'était bien, c'était juste, elle avait vengé son monde, les gueux et les abandonnés. (Zola vol. II, 1470 ; 452)

The most eminent amongst her victims is the comte Muffat, son of an aristocratic family with severely religious convictions, who is ruining himself in a violent passion, ready to suffer with an almost religious obedience all the humiliations which Nana, who doesn't like him and who needs his money, inflicts upon him. Ruined, broken, he will return to the religion of his fathers, a vicious man who has neither been able to free himself from the chains of his degrading passion nor from the chains of his class and his religion. It is through the eyes of Muffat that we are introduced to the world of which Nana is about to become the uncontested and fatal queen. And it is through his eyes too that we perceive one of the great *tableaux de Paris* of this novel, that of the Passage des Panoramas, a symbolic place of the *demi-monde* and its promiscuity. Here, in this narrow space of the passage where, in a rainstorm the most diverse classes of society are pressed together, the comte Muffat is waiting for the end of the performance at the Théâtre des Variétés where Nana is playing the role of the blonde Venus. Muffat has come too early, full of suspicion, for Nana does not act in the new play, and yet she has gone to the theatre, as Muffat has been told by the concierge:

> Il y avait là une cohue, un défilé pénible et lent, resserré entre les boutiques. C'était, sous les vitres blanchies de reflets, un violent éclairage, une coulée de clartés, des globes blancs, des lanternes rouges, des transparents bleus, des rampes de gaz, des montres et des éventails géants en traits de flamme, brûlant en l'air; et le bariolage des étalages, l'or des bijoutiers, les cristaux des confiseurs, les soies claires des modistes, flambaient, derrière la pureté des glaces, dans le coup de lumière crue des réflecteurs; tandis que, parmi la débandade peinturlurée des enseignes, un énorme gant de pourpre, au loin, semblait une main saignante, coupée et attachée par une manchette jaune. (Zola vol. II, 1259 ; 209)

It is an anonymous proximity of curious glances, of continuous pressing from which Muffat withdraws by looking at the shop windows. Through this distracted gaze of an impatient man afraid of being seen and having to pass his time in waiting, we have the experience of a whole phenomenology of kitsch. We see "a display of

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[8] The second page number refers to the English translation: Emile Zola, *Nana*, trans. George Holden, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.

papers, of glass bowls with landscapes and flowers in them". It is a gaze without consciousness which presents to us the ordinary objects of a world, which the count despises as much as he is fascinated by its very vulgarity:

> Bousculé par un passant, le comte, sans en avoir conscience, quitta les presse-papiers et se trouva devant une vitrine de bimbeloterie, regardant de son air absorbé un étalage de carnets et de porte-cigares, qui tous, sur un coin, avaient la même hirondelle bleue. (Zola vol. II, 1259 *sq.* ; 210)

And from there, his thoughts, blue swallows themselves, fly towards Nana. Twice the Passage des Panoramas reappears in different lights. When finally the Count has found Nana, who wanted to avoid him, because that night she already had another arrangement, it is once again in the Passage des Panoramas that she stops Muffat in order to look at the display of a jeweller. The world of the passage is the world of Nana:

> Elle adorait le passage des Panoramas. C'était une passion qui lui restait de sa jeunesse pour le clinquant de l'article de Paris, les bijoux faux, le zinc doré, le carton jouant le cuir. Quand elle passait, elle ne pouvait s'arracher des étalages, comme à l'époque où elle traînait ses savates de gamine, s'oubliant devant les sucreries d'un chocolatier, écoutant jouer de l'orgue dans une boutique voisine, prise surtout par le goût criard des bibelots à bon marché, des nécessaires dans des coquilles de noix, des hottes de chiffonnier pour les cure-dents, des colonnes Vendôme et des obélisques portant des thermomètres. (Zola vol. II, 1264 ; 215)

The things themselves seem to be actors of the *demi-monde* in the uncertain light of the passage. Left alone by Nana, after a despairing march through the nocturnal streets of Paris, de Muffat arrives once again at the deserted and dark passage closed now by bars from which emanates the humidity of a cellar:

> Sans pouvoir expliquer comment, il se trouvait le visage collé à la grille du passage des Panoramas, tenant les barreaux des deux mains. Il ne les secouait pas, il tâchait simplement de voir dans le passage, pris d'une émotion dont tout son cœur était gonflé. Mais il ne distinguait rien, un flot de ténèbres coulait le long de la galerie déserte, le vent qui s'engouffrait par la rue Saint-Marc lui soufflait au visage une humidité de cave. (Zola vol. II, 1281 ; 235)

Never has the world of the passage, that non-place of the 19th century, been grasped with such sociological precision. It is not the look of the chronicler, however, it is an imaginary look with its complex conditions which gives a physionomy to this place. And it is here exactly that begins the myth of the passage which Aragon has detailed in his *Anicet ou le panorama* and especially in his *Paysan de Paris*, which will become in Walter Benjamin the origin of his great myth of the passage as the center of a myth of Paris. But only in Zola does the passage, being part of a Parisian myth of the *demi-monde* and of the Second Empire, take on its very sociological signification. The passage is the non-place *par excellence* of that non-place or place of an imaginary real which is the *demi-monde*. The myth of Nana, the idol of a society that consumes itself in the furies of pleasure, will be at its

point of culmination at the moment when Muffat is definitely ruined by Nana, who exposes him to the utmost humiliation. It is a scene where description, once again, takes on the energy of an imaginary vision:

> Dans son luxe royal, la nouvelle chambre resplendissait. Des capitons d'argent semaient d'étoiles vives le velours rose thé de la tenture, de ce rose de chair que le ciel prend par les beaux soirs, lorsque Vénus s'allume à l'horizon, sur le fond clair du jour qui se meurt ; tandis que les cordelières d'or tombant des angles, les dentelles d'or encadrant les panneaux, étaient comme des flammes légères, des chevelures rousses dénouées, couvrant à demi la grande nudité de la pièce, dont elles rehaussaient la pâleur voluptueuse. Puis, en face, c'était le lit d'or et d'argent qui rayonnait avec l'éclat neuf de ses ciselures, un trône assez large pour que Nana pût y étendre la royauté de ses membres nus, un autel d'une richesse byzantine, digne de la toute-puissance de son sexe, et où elle l'étalait à cette heure même, découvert, dans une religieuse impudeur d'idole redoutée. Et, près d'elle, sous le reflet de neige de sa gorge, au milieu de son triomphe de déesse, se vautrait une honte, une décrépitude, une ruine comique et lamentable, le marquis de Chouard en chemise. (Zola vol. II, 1462 ; 443 *sq*.)

"Nana", said Flaubert, "becomes a myth without ceasing to be a woman". This myth is at the same time a myth of Paris under the Second Empire.

Au Bonheur des Dames of 1883 approaches *Nana* in many ways and yet it is like the other face of the myth of Nana. Because here luxury and fashion, far from serving the appetite of a *demi-monde*, are the objects of desire of the honest world of the bourgeoisie and the lower bourgeoisie. It is for them that the great department store is intended, a department store of a new kind, which serves the desires of a new kind of woman customer whom it allows at reasonable prices to participate in a world of luxury inaccessible before. Nana, heroine of the *demi-monde*, is opposed to Denise, a young sales woman of fashionable items, niece of the old style cloth merchant Baudu, at whose home she arrives with her two young brothers. Denise becomes a sales woman in the department store "Au Bonheur des Dames", the devastating rival of Baudu, and in spite of some inevitable peripeties, she ascends from degree to degree in the almost military hierarchy of the establishment up to the supreme moment when she marries Mouret, the owner and director of the great firm. Soap opera seems to be an invention of Zola. When Denise enters the department store, her first impression is that of a machine:

> Si la bataille continuelle de l'argent n'avait effacé les sexes, il avait suffi pour tuer le désir, de la bousculade de chaque minute qui occupait la tête et rompait les membres. ... Tous n'étaient plus que des rouages, se trouvaient emportés par le trouble de la machine, abdiquant leur personnalité, additionnant simplement leurs forces, dans ce total banal et puissant de phalanstères.[9]

This machine finds its ideal place in the new construction in cast iron:

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[9] Zola vol. III, 1964, 516. English translation: Emile Zola, *The Ladies' Paradise*, trans. Brian Nelson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 134.

> On avait vitré les cours, transformé en halles ; et des escaliers de fer s'élevaient du rez-de-chaussée, des ponts de fer étaient jetés d'un bout à l'autre aux deux étages. L'architecte, par hasard intelligent, un jeune homme amoureux des tons nouveaux, ne s'était servi de la pierre que pour les sous-sols et les piles d'angle, puis avait monté toute l'ossature en fer des colonnes supportant l'assemblage des poutres et des solives. Les voûtins des planchers, les cloisons des distributions intérieures, étaient en brique. Partout on avait gagné de l'espace, l'air et la lumière entraient librement, le public circulait à l'aise sous le jet hardi des fermes à longue portée. C'était la cathédrale du commerce moderne, solide et légère, faite pour un peuple de clientes. (Zola vol. III, 611 *sq.* ; 233 *sq.*)

Zola is the Homer of cast-iron architecture.[10]

The reopening of the department store announced by a strategic publicity campain—is there, in the time of Zola, any specialist of the subject who would have understood the functioning of a great department store with such perspicuity?—brings a dense crowd of middle-class matrons and their servant maids, but at the same time also Madame de Boves and other ladies of good society. It is through the gazes of Madame Desforges, fascinated by the magic of the stage management, that we see the new construction and, even more, through the reminders of Piranesi and of Victor Hugo. The exact description gives way once again to a great vision:

> ... arrivée à la grande galerie, elle leva les yeux. C'était comme une nef de gare, entourée par les rampes des deux étages, coupée d'escaliers suspendus, traversée de ponts volants. Les escaliers de fer, à double révolution, développaient des courbes hardies, multipliaient les paliers ; les ponts de fer, jetés sur le vide, filaient droit, très haut; et tout ce fer mettait là, sous la lumière blanche des vitrages, une architecture légère, une dentelle compliquée où passait le jour, la réalisation moderne d'un palais du rêve, d'une Babel entassant des étages, élargissant des salles, ouvrant des échappées sur d'autres étages et d'autres salles, à l'infini. (Zola vol. III, 626 ; 249)

Just like les Halles, the market halls, Au Bonheur des Dames is a city within the city, almost the city itself. In front of the newly enlarged building,

> l'horizon tombait en poudre, n'était plus qu'un cadre dédaigné jusqu'aux hauteurs de Châtillon, jusqu'à la vaste campagne dont les lointains noyés indiquaient l'esclavage. (Zola vol. III, 763 ; 392)

Honest luxury gets its triumphant celebration on the occasion of the new opening of the store with its "fantastic spectacle of the great exposition in white", where Madame de Boves cannot resist her "passion for spending" which the store knows how to kindle. The Countess, ésous le coup de fouet du désir, dans le détraquement de la névrose que ses appétits du luxe inassouvis avaient développée

[10] For the role of cast iron architecture in Zola's work, see Karlheinz Stierle, "Imaginäre Räume. Eisenarchitektur in der Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts", Helmut Pfeiffer, Hans Robert Jauss, Françoise Gaillard eds., *Art social und art industriel. Funktionen der Kunst im Zeitalter des Industrialismus*, München: W. Fink, 1987, 281-308, especially 297-304.

en elle, autrefois, à travers l'énorme et brutale tentation des grands magasins" (Zola vol. III, 793 ; 422), has become a thief and is caught when she is about to steal some precious laces. The exposition in white with a whole landscape of white clothes is the white and bourgeois dream of innocent luxury:

> On aurait dit un grand lit blanc, dont l'énormité virginale attendait, comme dans les légendes, la princesse blanche, celle qui devait venir un jour, toute-puissante, avec le voile blanc des épousées. (Zola vol. III. 767 ; 398)

It will be the bed of Denise opposed to the bed of Nana. Doesn't it seem that in *Au Bonheur des Dames* Zola conceives a modernity within the society of the Second Empire which will survive the end of this epoch?

Let us conclude with the last great novel of Zola, where the presence of a world within the city is situated in front of a mythic horizon. *L'Œuvre*, *The Masterpiece*, which appeared in 1893, is once again a novel of a Parisian world, that of art, of its production and commercial exploitation, but also a novel of the city as horizon and as totality, a supreme challenge to the artist and to the writer. Here we find Claude Lantier once again, the friend of Florent in *Le Ventre de Paris*, now in a desperate fight with his impossible conception of painting, which finally will destroy him. Amongst the great number of titles that Zola had taken into consideration for his novel, let us underline especially "Market of Life" ("Foire de la vie"), "Of Life" ("De la vie"), "Living Flesh" ("Chair vivante"), "The Universal Life" ("La Vie universelle"). It is the great fight between life and art which this novel treats. Art ruins the life of Claude Lantier who is not able to transpose his artistic ideas into a great and final work. During one of his crises, Claude, walking through Paris with his artist friends, seems to find again his certainty looking at a magnificent *tableau de Paris* seen in front of the "Corps législatif":

> Il était quatre heures, la belle journée s'achevait dans un poudroiement glorieux de soleil. A droite et à gauche, vers la Madeleine et vers le Corps législatif, des lignes d'édifices filaient en lointaines perspectives, se découpaient nettement au ras du ciel ; tandis que le jardin des Tuileries étageait les cimes rondes de ses grands marronniers. Et, entre les deux bordures vertes des contre-allées, l'avenue des Champs Élysées montait tout là-haut, à perte de vue, terminée par la porte colossale de l'Arc de Triomphe, béante sur l'infini. Un double courant de foule, un double fleuve y roulait, avec les remous vivants des attelages, les vagues fuyantes des voitures, que le reflet d'un panneau, l'étincelle d'une vitre de lanterne semblaient blanchir d'une écume. En bas, la place, aux trottoirs immenses, aux chaussées larges comme des lacs, s'emplissait de ce flot continuel, traversée en tous sens du rayonnement des roues, peuplée de points noirs qui étaient des hommes ; et les deux fontaines ruisselaient, exhalaient une fraîcheur dans cette vie ardente. Claude frémissait, cria: Ah! ce Paris... Il est à nous, il n'y a qu'à le prendre.[11]

[11] Zola vol. IV, 1966, 74 *sq*.. English translation: Emile Zola, *The Masterpiece*, trans. Thomas Walton, revised trans. Roger Pearson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 66.

Life, burning life, is the life of Paris. It seems easy to transpose it into art, but in reality it will be an impossible project. During his walks with Christine, who will be his mistress, his model and his wife, Claude discovers at the Pont Neuf the ideal place for a supreme project: to paint the heart of the city, to paint the city, to paint Paris, an emanation of the myth of life itself. He will ruin himself in this work, he will forget his wife, he will forget his child, and he will never reach the realization of his vision. Claude works in blind obsession. But is it possible to force life, to force so many different cities, to force so many perspectives into one vision? It is now that imperceptibly through his sketches the whole of the city transforms itself, with its thousand horizons, its inexhaustible life, into a female allegory. Sandoz, the architect, his friend, looking at the painting in progress, discovers a change:

> Il demeura stupéfait en apercevant à la place de la barque conduite par un marinier, une autre barque, très grande, tenant tout le milieu de la composition, et que trois femmes occupaient : une en costume de bain, ramant ; une autre, assise au bord, les jambes dans l'eau, son corsage à demi arraché, montrant l'épaule ; la troisième, toute droite, toute nue, à la proue, d'une nudité si éclatante, qu'elle rayonnait comme le soleil. (Zola vol. IV, 235 ; 230)

Questioned by Sandoz, Claude himself discovers the obscure fundament of his research:

> ... il ne voulait pas avouer la vraie raison, une idée à lui, si peu claire, qu'il n'aurait pu la dire avec netteté, le tourment d'un symbolisme secret, ce vieux regain du romantisme qui lui faisait incarner dans cette nudité la chair même de Paris, la ville nue et passionnée, resplendissante d'une beauté de femme. (Zola vol. IV, 236 ; 231)

It is in front of this woman-Paris, allegorical and concrete, presence and absence, synthesis of philosophical art and pure art, as Baudelaire would say, that Claude fails. The imaginary woman, who took the place of his real wife and who gets hold of all his life, cannot become real as a work of art. Before hanging himself, Claude is looking once more at his failed painting:

> Qui donc venait de peindre cette idole d'une religion inconnue ? Qui l'avait 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 ? Était-ce lui qui, sans le savoir, était l'ouvrier de ce symbole du désir insatiable, de cette image extra-humaine de la chair, devenue de l'or et du diamant entre ses doigts, dans son vain effort d'en faire de la vie ? (Zola vol. IV, 347 ; 346)

Claude like Hélène fails in view of the powerful, superhuman breath of life in the city. Zola, with his program of the experimental novel, fails equally. But this failure, instead of ruining his project, makes it possible. Zola has written the myth of Paris under the Second Empire.