

**Naturalism *in extremis*: Zola's *Le Rêve***

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In planning his 1888 *Le Rêve*, Zola envisaged a novel that would be distinctly out of character: ‘je voudrais faire un livre qu’on n’attende pas de moi’. The present article explores what is at stake in Zola’s desire to break with his own image at this juncture in the history of naturalism’s reception. While *Le Rêve* can be understood as a demonstration of the author’s versatility in the face of new strains of aesthetic experimentation in the aftermath of the ‘Manifeste des Cinq’, it also responds to a more longstanding negotiation with the language of idealism. The article focuses on Zola’s harnessing, and critique, of the idealist imagination in *Le Rêve*. It first proposes a psychoanalytical reading of the Zolian heroine’s fantasy life through the lens of Freud’s 1908 ‘Family Romances’. The child’s power to redraw reality through day-dream – to enact what Freud terms ‘a correction of actual life’ – is connected, in turn, to the wager that frames Zola’s narrative: that of rendering ‘la vie telle qu’elle n’est pas’. Zola’s experiment with idealism thus involves rehearsing the terms and suspicions at work in his earlier biographical writing on George Sand – the idealist writer Zola had assimilated to the ‘dream’ of the novel’s title.

Keywords: Émile Zola, *Le Rêve*, idealism, naturalism, dream, George Sand, psychology

‘Il est bien vrai que je traverse une crise, la crise de la cinquantaine sans doute’, Zola confided in a letter to Jacques Van Santen Kolff on 6 March 1889. ‘Il est des semaines, des mois, où il y a tempête dans mon être, tempête de désirs et de regrets’ (1987: 376). The signs of an impending midlife crisis had begun to emerge the previous autumn, when Zola went on a diet, restricting his intake of wine and starchy foods with surprising determination. By March the following year – just before his mistress, the linen maid Jeanne Rozerot, entered his life – he had already lost 14 kilos; and by late spring, Jeanne was pregnant with their daughter Denise. That the planning and composition of *Le Rêve* coincide with this period of corporeal self-restraint and emotional abandon certainly invites speculation on the circulation between personal fantasy and professional reinvention, not least given the author’s intention of writing a novel that would be distinctly out of character: ‘je voudrais faire un livre qu’on n’attende pas de moi’ (1966, 4: 1624).<sup>1</sup> The idea that, as Robert Ziegler puts it, *Le Rêve* ‘confessionally transposed [Zola’s] frustrated wishes’ (71), not least a need for affection outside of his ailing marriage to Alexandrine, is compelling, particularly given that the author’s original intention was to cast as its hero a lovelorn forty-year old man ‘qui se prend d’une passion pour une enfant de seize ans’ (1966, 4: 1625). Readers would have to wait for the final novel of the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, *Le Docteur Pascal* (1893), for that fantasy of the middle-aged man’s powers of attraction to be played out. But what Ziegler terms Zola’s ‘Naturalism-free diet’ (71) – alluding to the slenderness of the novel as well as to its anorexic, ultimately disembodied, heroine – allows readers to think imaginatively about the sorts of condensations Zola’s own dream life might have undergone in the narrative, as well as about the writer’s apparent flirtation with a new aesthetic *régime*.

The self-conscious refashioning of both naturalist novel and novelist is the focus of this article, which sets out to explore what is at stake in Zola’s deliberate subversion of the expectations attached to his project. It does so by focusing on Zola’s harnessing, and critique,

of the idealist imagination in *Le Rêve*, which it reads, first, through the lens of Freud's analysis of the day-dream in his 1908 'Family Romances'. This account of the child's power to redraw reality through the imagination provides a way of reviewing not only the Zolian heroine's psychological narrative, but also the authorial fantasies at work in the writing of the idealist novel. Zola's experiment with idealism in *Le Rêve* is then read alongside his earlier biographical writing on George Sand – the idealist writer Zola had repeatedly assimilated to the 'dream' of the novel's title. If Zola can be seen to return to Sand, and the idealism he has her embody, at this moment in his fictional project, it is, as we shall see, a manoeuvre that is also rooted in more immediate concerns about a changing literary field. *Le Rêve* appeared at a critical juncture in the history of naturalism's reception, namely, in the aftermath of the 'Manifeste des Cinq' of 1887 – the open letter, signed by five young writers in protest at the vulgarity of his latest novel *La Terre* (1887). This revolt in Zola's ranks signalled the burgeoning of a broader antinaturalist reaction, intent on declaring naturalism well and truly spent – or, as Ferdinand Brunetière put it, 'bankrupt' (1887).

*Le Rêve* was, Zola declared, to incorporate 'la réaction contre le naturalisme' (1966, 4: 1626); and this involved challenging his readers' expectations. According to Henri Mitterand, *Le Rêve* acts as 'un roman-pause' (2001: 869) in the series – its serenity all the more pronounced for being lodged between *La Terre* and *La Bête humaine* (1890), the latter 'un drame violent à donner le cauchemar à tout Paris' (1966, 4: 1717). While *Le Rêve* has generic connections to other Zolian texts, not least his early fairytales,<sup>2</sup> there is a particular provocation at stake in the novelist's endeavour to break with his own image at this particular moment in the series. Indeed, what was widely seen as Zola's departure from the recognisable coordinates of naturalist fiction brought with it charges of writerly schizophrenia. In dismissive mode, Anatole France evoked *Le Rêve* and *La Terre* to identify just such a personality disorder: 's'il fallait absolument choisir, à M. Zola ailé je préférerais

encore M. Zola à quatre pattes' (1888: 2). Zola's deliberate cross-fertilisation of genres left readers divided in their opinions. For some, this was to be acclaimed as – at long last – a suitable novel for *jeunes filles*, as Zola intended (see 1966, 4: 1624-25). For others, his new-found propriety bore the trace of writerly duplicity. In an article of 27 October 1888, Jules Lemaître characterised *Le Rêve* in self-consciously oxymoronic terms as a 'conte bleu naturaliste' (286); behind this self-styled fairytale lay a naturalist novel in disguise. With a sense of indignation that it is hard not to find amusing, Lemaître posed as the guardian of the reader's – and the fictional heroine's – innocence: 'Qu'il laisse les vierges tranquilles!' (289). For others, this tale of virginity *à tout prix* appeared to have Zola's grubby hands all over it, still soiled from the 'immondice' of *La Terre* (Bonnetain: 1). In an interview with *Le Figaro*, Zola ventriloquised such critical reactions to *Le Rêve* by declaring self-parodically: 'mon âme flétrie ne saurait se refaire une virginité.' (1888: 1). If the 'Manifeste des Cinq' sought to bind *l'homme et l'œuvre* together in crudely physiological ways, the scatological preoccupations of *La Terre* connected to 'une maladie des bas organes' (Bonnetain: 1), Zola's insistence on *Le Rêve*'s naivety, however contested, encouraged his readers to entertain the possibility of his own restored chastity.

A double reading of *Le Rêve* was thus mapped out in contemporary responses, whereby it appeared as proof of the writer's (redemptive) capacity for innocent storytelling, and as an altogether 'naturalist' satire of the fairytale genre.<sup>3</sup> This indeterminacy may explain why critics still tend to find *Le Rêve* disorientating, or 'irritant', as both Colette Becker and Éléonore Reverzy put it.<sup>4</sup> Such frustration stems, Reverzy explains, from the author's coquettishness: Zola 'donne au lecteur cette impression qu'on lui cache quelque chose, que tout n'est pas si simple' (2004a: para. 22). (He refers in a letter to Van Santen Kolff to the novel's 'philosophie cachée', 1987: 258). For Sophie Guermès, the true intentions of Zola's 'roman du secret' emerge only from the reader's encounter with the *avant-texte*: 'comme s'il

fallait franchir la clôture du texte pour découvrir dans ses replis génétiques ce que l'écrivain n'avait pas cru devoir affirmer trop brutalement' (64). Within the narrative itself, Zola intended to keep both straight and satirical readings in play, noting in his *Ébauche*: 'Et alors, sans ironie trop, il faudrait y mettre la vie telle qu'elle n'est pas, telle qu'on la rêve: tous bons, tous honnêtes, tous heureux. Une vie idéale, telle qu'on la désire' (cited by Reverzy, 2004a: para. 6). Zola restrains his irony in a way which precludes the reader from dismissing outright the idealism in which the novel deals. In fact, this statement of intent recasts precisely those terms Anatole France had employed to condemn *La Terre*: 'Jamais homme n'avait fait un pareil effort pour [...] nier tout ce qui est bon et tout ce qui est bien. Jamais homme n'avait à ce point méconnu l'idéal des hommes' (1887: 3).

In claiming to capture the antinaturalist reaction in *Le Rêve*, Zola surely had Anatole France's onslaught in mind. Indeed, Zola's experiment with idealism can be understood as a strategic marker of his versatility at a moment when the naturalist novel – which, according to its detractors, had exhausted its own possibilities – seemed to provide an obvious foil for new strains of aesthetic experimentation. For the prevailing Symbolist movement, in particular, naturalism had become, as Elizabeth Emery puts it, 'the aesthetic against which [Symbolist artists] defined their own projects' (93); and with his foregrounding of saints, mysticism, and medieval artefacts in *Le Rêve* – all objects of Symbolist fascination – Zola gave another nod to his usurpers.<sup>5</sup> Such citations of a distinctly antinaturalist aesthetic determine *Le Rêve*'s incongruity, or what we might think of as Zola's endeavour to stage the naturalist novel *in extremis* – taken to its limits in a performance of the very demise declared by his detractors.<sup>6</sup> In measuring the importance of this gesture, this article focuses on Zola's harnessing of the language of idealism invoked by Anatole France and rearticulated in his own plans for *Le Rêve*. It was a language which characterised contemporary antinaturalist discourse as part of an emerging 'réaction idéaliste'.<sup>7</sup> But it was also rooted in the

posthumous reCanonization of Sand in the 1880s, not least by antinaturalists, as the century's arch-idealist, or, in France's words, 'un grand artisan de l'idéal'.<sup>8</sup> Zola's engagement with idealism in *Le Rêve* is thus filtered, I argue, through these dual concerns. In exploring, first, via Freud, the fantasy life of the Zolian heroine, we shall see how the author's account of idealism was bound up with his desire to prove that he could turn his hand to one of the major concerns of the idealist novel: psychology.<sup>9</sup>

### **Family Romances**

*Le Rêve* opens with its abandoned heroine, Angélique, taking refuge from the driving snow against the Sainte-Agnès door of the fictional Beaumont cathedral. On the brink of death, her petrified form resembles the virginal sculptures that adorn the cathedral's façade. Above her, the scene of the thirteen year-old saint's ascension to heaven is played out: 'dans une gloire, Agnès est enfin reçue au ciel, où son fiancé Jésus l'épouse, [...] en lui donnant le baiser des éternelles délices' (1966, 4: 816). On the threshold of the story, the reader thus encounters in miniature the fantasy of the virgin martyr that Angélique will set out to imitate, artistically, in reproducing the image of Sainte Agnès in the tapestries she embroiders, and psychologically, in her own life, and death, narrative. Angélique is rescued by the Huberts – a childless couple of embroiderers; and her hermetic childhood in the shadow of the cathedral becomes the breeding ground for her fantasies. At its lyrical climax, the novel returns Zola's rescued heroine to exactly the same spot; and it is through the cathedral door that she, and readers, exit the story. When the 'mariage impossible' (1966, 4: 948) between Angélique and the illustrious Félicien d'Hauteceœur at last receives the blessing of the bishop, Félicien's father, the condition of the novel's triumphant *dénouement* is in place. But as the amorous pair *tie*

the knot with a conjugal kiss, the saintly virgin dies on the cathedral threshold, ‘emportée dans la réalisation de son rêve’ (1966, 4: 994).

In his plans for *Le Rêve*, Zola insisted that he would prove himself capable of writing a psychological novel – ‘je voudrais forcer les gens à confesser que je suis un psychologue. De la psychologie donc, ou ce qu’on appelle ainsi(!)’ (1966, 4: 1625). This ‘psychological’ study plays out through Angélique’s imaginative development as Zola focuses on his heroine’s gradual mastery of her rebellious nature, and on the simultaneous burgeoning of her fantasy life, which coincides with her first formative reading encounter. At the age of twelve, Angélique devours Jacques de Voragine’s *La Légende dorée*, an illustrated volume of saints’ lives; and it is from this text that she draws the material for her own compensatory fantasy of an illustrious life-narrative. Left to gestate in the credulous air of the Hubert household, the embroiderer’s subliminal wishes develop in conjunction with her needlework, which is freighted with an overdetermined sexual symbolism (later, the needles will draw blood from her fingers without causing pain; 1966, 4: 951). Indeed, it is to the rhythm of this activity that Angélique comes first to articulate her fantasy, to herself and to her adoptive parents. Circling around the incantatory refrain, ‘Oh! moi, ce que je voudrais, ce que je voudrais...’ (1966, 4: 853), she gradually pins ‘le vague de son désir’ (1966, 4: 853) to an imaginary object: at first, a prince whom she is to marry, and then, as the chain of association unfolds, the Messiah himself: ‘Mais c’est Jésus que je veux!’ (1966, 4: 858).

At this moment of her development, preceding the ‘fièvre anxieuse de sa puberté’ (1966, 4: 869), Angélique’s imaginative life speaks evocatively to Freud’s account in ‘Family Romances’ of the play of fantasy in early childhood life. Children, particularly the highly gifted, are, Freud writes, prone to ‘peculiarly marked imaginative activity’:



A characteristic example of this [...] is to be seen in the familiar day-dreaming which persists far beyond puberty. If these day-dreams are carefully examined, they are found to serve as the fulfilment of wishes and as a correction of actual life. They have two principal aims, an erotic and an ambitious one – though an erotic aim is usually concealed behind the latter too. (2001, 9: 238)

Freud's description of the child's power to redraw reality through day-dream – to enact 'a correction of actual life' – maps, of course, onto Angélique's imaginative activity, just as it describes Zola's intention of representing in *Le Rêve* 'la vie telle qu'elle n'est pas'. At the level of narrative, it is Angélique's adoptive mother, the 'raisonnable' Hubertine (1966, 4: 857), who confronts the young girl's fantasies with a reminder of the reality principle: 'tu verras plus tard, tu connaîtras la vie' (1966, 4: 855). But Angélique's firm insistence on the viability of the miraculous, performed and fulfilled through her rêverie, bears an unassailable conviction that no reasoning can temper. If we follow Freud's argument in 'Family Romances', moreover, then this wish-fulfilment in fact performs another fundamental task: the idea that dominates the child's imagination at this point in his development is that 'of getting free from the parents of whom he now has a low opinion and of replacing them by others, who, as a rule, are of higher social standing' (2001, 9: 239).

If Zola allows an analogous process of parental substitution in *Le Rêve* to unfold uncontested, it is because he has reduced his heroine's past to a few details in the administrative booklet with which she is found: 'père et mère inconnus, pas de nom, rien qu'une date et un numéro!' (1966, 4: 956) All connections with Angélique's former life are severed when Hubert tracks down, but decides not to contact, her morally-suspect birth mother Sidonie, 'tranch[ant] [...] le lien' (1966, 4: 844) between daughter and her 'mauvaise mère' (cited by Ziegler, 72). The latter's symbolic death – 'Mon enfant, ta mère est morte'

(1966, 4: 844), pronounces Hubert – allows the sterile couple to adopt Angélique. But the child's revolt against 'la bassesse de sa naissance' (1966, 4: 956) will be played out on different ground, through her identification with the 'mortes heureuses' – the young virginal saints, whose lives and deaths are recounted in *La Légende* – as well as through her projected amorous narrative: the poor girl's fantasy of social mobility involves meeting a (wealthy) 'prince charmant' (1966, 4: 1628). The suitor who appears on Angélique's horizon is Félicien d'Hauteœur: a descendant of the surviving younger branch of the line of tenth-century noblemen, and his father the Bishop of Beaumont cathedral. To employ Lacan's famous formulation quite literally, we might say that what Angélique covets is the 'nom du père' that she lacks; as part of her attempt to convince Félicien's father of the legitimacy of her romantic union with his son, she declares, with frank naivety, 'ce n'est pas seulement lui que j'aime, j'aime encore la noblesse de son nom, l'éclat de sa royale fortune' (1966, 4: 946). In an admission of the childish wish-fulfilment underpinning her dream, she implores: 'Monseigneur, est-ce donc vilain, de l'aimer davantage, parce qu'il comblera tous mes souhaits d'enfant?' (1966, 4: 946)

Unsurprisingly, Angélique fails to convince; and Monseigneur's emphatic injunction – 'Jamais!' (1966, 4: 948) – imposes the other sense of Lacan's expression, the father's 'non'. (As if to reinforce Monseigneur's Lacanian credentials as the embodiment of the law of the father, the Zolian narrator aligns him with 'Dieu le Père, terrible, maître absolu de sa destinée', 1966, 4: 945). Moreover, Monseigneur's 'no' is, like that Lacan describes, associated with the prohibition of incest. As the young girl kneels before him in the seclusion of the cathedral chapel, the Bishop is struck by Angélique's uncanny physical resemblance to Félicien's dead mother: 'il retrouvait les petits cheveux blonds, si follement baisés autrefois' (1966, 4: 946).<sup>10</sup> The wife, who died after giving birth to Félicien, was (in a foreshadowing of the novel's finale) found lying next to her son's cot, 'foudroyée par la joie de l'embrasser'

(1966, 4: 866). From beyond the grave, she continues to defend ‘les droits de la passion’ (1966, 4: 975), entreating Monseigneur to be lenient. But in refusing to lift his injunction, the Father precipitates the young lover’s death and, in an elision that suggests the deceased mother’s reincarnation in Angélique, punishes his wife once more: ‘il la tuait de nouveau’ (1966, 4: 975). It is only at the moment of his visit to Angélique’s deathbed that Monseigneur, ‘vaincu par son charme dans la mort’ (1966, 4: 983) – an association of death and desirability on which the novel insists – utters the miraculously curative Hauteœur motto, ‘Si Dieu veut, je veux’ (1966, 4: 983), kissing Angélique on the lips in another strange prefiguration of the novel’s final conjugal embrace. Only now, with Angélique as good as dead, can Monseigneur grant permission in the certainty that the *passage à l’acte* – crossing the thresholds between cathedral and marital bedchamber – will not take place. For both he and Angélique share the knowledge that she has been brought back from the dead only to die once more, at the height of her scene of wish-fulfilment.

What Angélique demonstrates by her submission to Monseigneur’s authority, and by her readiness for self-sacrifice, is that her rebellious streak is fully extinguished. When Félicien begs her to elope with him and escape the yoke of parental authority, she finds herself unable to leave her all-white bedchamber: ‘c’est comme si, tout d’un coup, la porte se soit murée et que je ne puisse sortir’ (1966, 4: 968). The narrative of illegitimate romance is closed off, as Angélique refuses to reproduce the same ‘faute’ as her adoptive parents (1966, 4: 934), whose own disobedient love affair left them unable to conceive – their sterility a punishment exacted by Hubertine’s deceased mother. ‘La lutte éternelle de la passion et du devoir’ (1966, 4: 1625) – Zola’s definition of psychology in the *Ébauche* – is thus played out between generations; and it is Angélique’s self-abnegation that will prove to be the condition of the Huberts’ absolution, the overturning of the maternal ‘no’, and the longed-for ‘enfant du pardon’ (1966, 4: 989) that is granted on the adopted daughter’s wedding day. With

Angélique's refusal to acquiesce to the rebellious plot Félicien proposes, Zola stages the triumph of milieu over the forces of heredity. A cloistered environment, parental discipline, and regular work have corrected the seemingly incorrigible, turning this ill-tempered foundling into a 'fille sage' (1966, 4: 955). Angélique's transformation by the end of the narrative – 'mais on m'a changée, je ne me retrouve plus...' (1966, 4: 970) – signals her internalisation of formative pressures: 'le milieu était entré en elle' (1966, 4: 969), explains the narrator, employing the vocabulary of the naturalist diagnostician. Put differently, if we follow Zola's insistence on the novel as proof of his credentials as a psychologist, Angélique has fully internalised the (idealised) father's law. To return to Freud, her 'ego ideal' – the image of the perfect self to which the ego aspires – demands the internalisation of the father's prohibition; and so it is that, even when the paternal interdiction is lifted, Angélique continues to desire the renunciation of instinctual gratification.<sup>11</sup> Zola establishes an internal struggle in which – and this is the condition of the novel's subversion of naturalist logic – the 'ego ideal' wins out, allowing Angélique to declare: 'Désormais, c'est fini, je me suis vaincue' (1966, 4: 970).

### **The Idealist Imagination**

At the end of the novel, Angélique stands 'corrected', but the psychic struggle on which her reform has turned leaves her diminished; disembodied, she is likened to a 'flamme pure' (1966, 4: 962). Angélique's struggle to become her own perfect image, through a process of aspirational identification, is rooted in a desire to rewrite her family narrative. Indeed, to reprise the terms of Marthe Robert in her classic study of the family romance in literature, Angélique is 'l'Enfant trouvé' *par excellence*, 'captif de l'univers pré-œdipien dont la seule loi est encore la toute-puissance de la pensée' (73). The Zolian heroine's determination to

create for herself an illustrious lineage develops in line with her idealist imagination, that is, her efforts to bring about through thought, as Freud puts it, ‘a correction of actual life’ – and this in precisely a way that Zola echoes in his intentions to render in the novel ‘la vie telle qu’elle n’est pas’, life not as it is, but as it might be. In her canonical *George Sand and Idealism*, Naomi Schor identifies just such a connection between family romance and authorial fantasy; it is Freud’s emphasis on ‘the power to reshape reality through that prestigious faculty, the imagination’ that ‘Family Romances’ shares with his essay ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’, written in the same year (169).<sup>12</sup> Schor’s observation frames her account of Sand’s idealist tendencies, which she reads through the dynamic of parental relations at work in the autobiographical *Histoire de ma vie* (1854). In Zola’s biographical writing on Sand, namely his extended obituary, first published in June 1877, the naturalist author elaborated, as we shall see, his own investigation into the conditions of the idealist ‘tempérament’ (1968: 734). Underpinned by a suspicion of the idealist imagination, Zola’s account of Sand’s authorial character provides a lens through which we can review *Le Rêve* as a fictional incursion into Sand’s territory, effectively giving another inflection to his negotiations with the contemporaneous ‘réaction idéaliste’.

Zola’s obituary of Sand promotes his agendas by framing her life and works in terms of his own grand narrative of the history of the nineteenth-century novel as a Darwinian struggle between realism and idealism, Balzac and Sand: ‘De leurs poitrines ouvertes coulent deux fleuves, le fleuve du vrai, le fleuve du rêve [...]. Depuis bientôt un demi-siècle, le réel et le rêve se battent’ (1968: 728-29). While Zola claims to give Sand her due – her place in the evolution of the novel – her passing also allows him to ring idealism’s death knell: ‘À cette heure, dans la lutte du vrai et du rêve, c’est le vrai qui l’emporte’ (1968: 747). Zola drives a nail into Sand’s coffin and seeks to bury the idealist novel along with her, proclaiming in no uncertain terms realism, and its naturalist offshoot, to be the enduring

literary lineage. The question of Zola's own self-aggrandisement aside, his assimilation of Sand, and of her aesthetic, to 'dream' provides an important reference-point – though one curiously left uncommented by critics – for *Le Rêve*.<sup>13</sup> 'George Sand est donc le rêve', Zola clarifies, 'une peinture de la vie humaine, non pas telle que l'auteur l'a observée, mais telle qu'il voudrait avoir la puissance de la créer' (1968: 728). Sand *is* dream, or synonymously in Zola's account, the ideal; and by this, Zola implies both that she produces the ideal in art and that she aspires to put her (political and social) idealism into practice:

George Sand, toute sa vie, a souhaité d'être un guérisseur, un ouvrier du progrès, l'apôtre d'une existence de béatitude. Elle était de nature poétique, ne pouvant marcher longtemps à terre, s'envolait au moindre souffle de l'inspiration. De là, l'étrange humanité qu'elle a rêvée. (1968: 728)

Unlike Balzac, with his big, earthbound limbs (his 'gros membres', 1968: 729), Sand is easily airborne, her curative vision likened to the unharnessed, unanchored dream.

Sand the writer's attachment to the life of the imagination is figured by Zola as an excessive childishness: 'ce continuel besoin d'idéalisme aboutit en somme à une débauche d'imagination enfantine' (1968: 740). But the development of this imagination is also firmly rooted in the experiences of her childhood. Tellingly, it is, Zola surmises, the formative period of Sand's (or Aurore's) adolescence that produced in her a life-long 'besoin de se dépenser par le travail ou par la rêverie' (1968: 731). Of the thirteen year-old Aurore's admission to a convent in Paris, newly separated from her mother and grandmother, Zola recounts:

D'abord, elle se montre indisciplinée, elle menace de révolutionner la maison. Puis, brusquement, agenouillée un matin dans la chapelle, elle se croit touchée par la grâce, elle éprouve une telle crise de dévotion, qu'elle parle de se faire

religieuse. C'est le roman de cette époque de sa vie; Corambé était oublié, Jésus le remplaçait. (1968: 731)

It is tempting to see in this miniature narrative of reform and self-discipline the seeds of *Le Rêve*: Angélique's own impulsive 'crise de dévotion'; the effects of a cloistered environment; her belief in divine grace; and the dual investment in (creative) work and daydream, which dominate Angélique's hermetic existence.

Without wishing to push the association of these adolescent narratives too far – after all, the religious fervour to which Aurore succumbs is short-lived – what I will venture is that Zola rehearses in *Le Rêve* the suspect conditions in which the capacity for idealisation emerges, and in a way which could not but recall his earlier diagnosis of Sand as an impressionable *jeune fille*. Indeed, Zola's insistence on his embroiderer's 'passion d'artiste' (1966, 4: 897) further aligns the psychological and creative impulses he determines in both biography and fiction. Prefiguring Clotilde's fantastical drawings of plant life in *Le Docteur Pascal*, Angélique's needlework betrays an inspired disregard for verisimilitude: 'elle avait le don du dessin, un vrai miracle qui, sans professeur [...] lui permettait souvent de *corriger ses modèles*, de s'en écarter, d'aller à sa fantaisie, créant de la pointe de son aiguille' (1966, 4: 847; my italics).<sup>14</sup> The embroiderer's corrective aesthetic is aligned with the author's own declared intentions for the novel, just as it rehearses the mania Zola had determined in Sand – 'son besoin de corriger et de voir l'humanité en beau' (1968: 740). If we choose to read *Le Rêve* as another *roman d'artiste* in the series, it is, I would suggest, on these terms, as the acculturation of the idealist, whose ostensible kinship with the author can be better understood when triangulated with the Sand of Zola's imagination.

In Zola's hands, Angélique's privileging – in art and in life – of 'le mensonge continu du rêve' (1966, 4: 933) can have only one logical consequence: her willing renunciation of existence. Zola determines in the heroine's idealism a perverse, even pathological, need to

perpetuate her dislocation from the world of the referent. Indeed, it is precisely in this spirit that he corrects Sand's self-diagnosis, which she is reported to have uttered shortly before her death: 'j'ai trop bu la vie'. Zola objects, 'je me l'imagine plutôt, à la dernière heure, ouvrant les yeux sur la réalité des choses de ce monde, et s'écriant dans cette découverte de la vérité: "J'ai trop bu le rêve"' (1968: 737). This wishful rewriting of Sand's deathbed realisation seeks, retroactively, to stigmatise her idealism as a form of delusion; Zola has Sand see the light. Such a rude awakening was, in any case, precisely the fate Zola anticipated for Sand's readers, whose own excessive consumption of the ideal could only culminate in a dangerous, disabusing return to the real:

Mettez les romans de George Sand dans les mains d'un jeune homme ou d'une femme: ceux-ci en sortiront frissonnants, en garderont tout éveillés le souvenir d'un rêve charmant. [...] Ces livres ouvrent le pays des chimères, au bout duquel il y a une culbute fatale dans la réalité. (1968: 746)

Zola would later stage the prolonged charm of Sand's fiction on its readers, of course, in *Pot-Bouille* (1883), giving full play to the erotic, or rather sordid, overtones of the disenchanting 'culbute'.<sup>15</sup> There, Sand's novel *André* appears complicit in Marie Pichon's 'chute' (1964, 3: 76) at the hands of Octave, functioning, in Nicholas White's words, as 'an accessory to adultery' (33). The after-effects of Marie's reading leave her semi-conscious, her 'rêveries confuses' (1964, 3: 75) obscuring the impending scene of entrapment.

If both the stakes and the reading material are different in *Le Rêve*, Zola nonetheless replays the fate of the impressionable reader who has fully imbibed the fantasies to which she is exposed; and the closing scene of the novel brings its heroine – in the manner of Sand's readers – to the point of awakening. As the 'noces du miracle' (1966, 4: 992) conclude, and Angélique and Félicien make their triumphant exit towards crowds of well-wishers, the cathedral doors are flung open, piercing 'le mur sombre d'une nappe de plein jour' (1966, 4:



993). The virgin bride advances towards the light: ‘elle sortait du rêve, elle marchait là-bas, pour entrer dans la réalité’ (1966, 4: 993). But on the threshold of the door against which the nine-year-old Angélique had been found and brought back from the dead, the procession finds itself aborted:

Alors, au seuil de la grand’porte, en haut des marches qui descendaient sur la place, elle chancela. N’était-elle pas allée jusqu’au bout du bonheur? N’était-ce pas là que la joie d’être finissait? Elle se haussa d’un dernier effort, elle mit sa bouche sur la bouche de Félicien. Et, dans ce baiser, elle mourut. (1966, 4: 993)

In taking Angélique’s fantasy to the limit, ‘jusqu’au bout’, Zola brings the novel to the brink of self-implosion; the heroine’s triumphant kiss, ‘au sommet de son bonheur’, cedes to nothingness: ‘Félicien ne tenait plus qu’un rien très doux et très tendre, [...] la poignée de plumes légères, tièdes encore, d’un oiseau’ (1966, 4: 994). The residual feathers appear at once as an authorial wink, a self-referential allusion to the inky traces of the fantasy described, and as another metonymy for the airborne idealist writer.<sup>16</sup> On this self-consciously overdrawn threshold between dream and reality, Zola stages the fulfilment of a (death) wish in a way which appears to further complicate the terms with which, as we have seen, he had articulated Sand’s death, along with that of the idealist novel altogether: ‘c’est le vrai qui l’emporte’. For the concluding, and conclusive, declaration that ‘Tout n’est que rêve’ (1966, 4: 994) – according to Anatole France, ‘la seule réflexion philosophique qu[e Zola] n’ait jamais faite’ (1888: 2) – leaves the question ‘Qui parle?’ hanging in the air, the distance between narrator and author ostensibly at its widest. Ultimately, the novel remains, along with its heroine, suspended on the point of the threshold, *l’entre-deux*. Angélique disappears, we might say, in a reimagining of the ‘culbute fatale’ that Zola sees awaiting the reader of Sand, into the gap *between* idealist and realist plot. In a reversal of the latter’s punishment of the fallen woman, Angélique has to die so as not to fall. ‘Oui, sa mort, plutôt qu’une vie

mauvaise’, affirms Hubertine (1966, 4: 961). Whether or not the heroine’s death provides a way *through* the idealist fantasy, it is, Zola seems to suggest, the only, inevitable, way *out*. And so, we might read Hubertine’s warning to Angélique as Zola’s own counsel to his reader: ‘Mais, malheureuse, attends la fin!’ (1966, 4: 933).

### **‘Formule morte’**

For all it is possible to read between the lines of Angélique’s final apotheosis, supplying in full the irony that the Zolian narrator, disarmingly, chooses to withhold, readers are also bound to acknowledge that Zola does leave his virginal heroine, and her fantasy, fully *in tact*. Or rather, to borrow Lemaître’s terms: ‘il faut reconnaître que M. Zola s’est appliqué à écrire chastement’ (285). The redemptive experiment that Zola undertakes in *Le Rêve* – ostensibly attenuating the forces of heredity that determine the naturalist cycle, and allowing his triumphant heroine to atone for the sins of her elders – speaks in no small part to his own playful self-portraiture as the reformed novelist. Of course, if *Le Rêve* knowingly poses one of the greatest challenges to certain *idées reçues* about Zola, it is precisely because it demonstrates his tendency to ‘jou[er] avec un public qui “attent” que Zola fasse du Zola’ (Lumbroso, 179).<sup>17</sup>

In staging naturalism *in extremis* in *Le Rêve* – both taken to its limits, and to the brink of death – Zola seemingly provides a response to those charges brought against the novel, and precisely the novelist’s disregard for, and abuses of, the ideal. But the naturalist’s engagement with idealism in *Le Rêve* also involved, as I have suggested, a renewed engagement with Sand, and the Sandian aesthetic, which Zola had, eleven years earlier, declared to represent a ‘formule morte’ (1968: 748). Zola’s obituary of the idealist writer can be read, to borrow Slavoj Žižek’s terms in his commentary on Lacan, as a sort of ‘settling of

accounts' (135); in keeping with Lacan's distinction between the 'real (biological) death and its symbolization', Zola's Sand also has to 'die twice' (134-5), and her brand of the novel along with her. But ultimately, for all Zola's insistence that Sand's form of idealism was defunct, his return to this terrain in *Le Rêve* implies an encounter with the aesthetic that was both ongoing and less straightforward than he might suggest. To return to Freud, the scene of the child's struggle with parental authority, via daydream, cannot but speak to the author's own version of the 'family romance'. In overstating their differences, Zola not only plays down his own literary inheritance – just as he would seek to do with other Romantic writers, not least Hugo –, but also the shared imperatives that underpin their projects, and which would register more acutely in his late utopian fiction.<sup>18</sup> It is, as we have seen, possible to read *Le Rêve* as a rehearsal of Zola's suspicions of the idealist imagination, precisely at a moment when idealism – to which Sand was being wholly assimilated – had become a prime stake in the prevailing reaction against naturalism. By this reckoning, the naturalist author produces only a counterfeit idealist novel, granting Angélique her wish only to stage once more its fatal consequences. At this point in his career, Zola's experiment with idealism – or, to recall those anxieties about his self-image, his aesthetic 'diet' – can be taken as evidence of just what, conversely, his omnivorous brand of naturalism could *consume*. But if such a conclusion seems equally hard to swallow, it is perhaps because Zola's novel seems to sustain the very contradictions, or – to recall Lemaître, oxymorons – it sets up. In staging the scene of naturalism's self-reinvention, Zola calls into question just what its assimilable opposite might be.

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<sup>1</sup> Zola began planning *Le Rêve* in November 1887, and it was published serially in *La Revue illustrée* between 1 April and 15 October 1888.

<sup>2</sup> See Mitterand on the links with *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* (1875) (1990: 159); and David Baguley on the fairytale genre in Zola's fiction (19-40).

<sup>3</sup> Susan Harrow identifies in Lemaître's response an emblematic 'splitting of the narrative into [...] first- and second-degree levels', or the oscillation between an innocent reading and an equivocal one (12).

<sup>4</sup> For Becker, *Le Rêve* is 'une œuvre où le sens ne se fige jamais', its indeterminate status in the series rendering it 'étonnant, déroutant, irritant' (23). Reverzy, too, remarks on the novel's concealment of its own agendas: 'Oui, *Le Rêve* est irritant, non à cause de la mièvrerie qu'il brasse, que parce que le secret qu'il dissimule ne se laisse pas saisir' (2004a: para. 22 of 24).

<sup>5</sup> The novel did, though, as Emery shows, appeal to Symbolist circles (94), and this reception owed a great deal to Alfred Bruneau's operatic adaption, which opened in 1891.

<sup>6</sup> Mitterand invokes the staging of the 'death' of naturalism in *Le Rêve*, Zola's allusions to Pre-Raphaelite art a self-conscious gesture to a rival aesthetic: 'C'est au moins une manière pour le naturalisme de ne pas mourir sans un clin d'œil, tout de même, aux dévots et aux esthètes' (1991: 115).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Benjamin Guinaudeau's investigation into 'La Réaction idéaliste', which appeared in *La Justice* between March and June 1892.

<sup>8</sup> France, 'La Vie littéraire', *Le Temps*, 6 November, p. 2. See also Elme-Marie Caro, *George Sand* (Paris: Hachette, 1887).

<sup>9</sup> In Jean-Marie Seillan's words, 'L'âme, la vie intérieure constituent en effet le terrain de manœuvres favori du roman idéaliste' (231). The idealist novel's investment in psychology was framed as a counterpoint to what was often perceived to be naturalism's exclusive fascination with the physiological.

<sup>10</sup> 'C'est dans le *nom du père*', writes Lacan, 'qu'il nous faut reconnaître le support de la fonction symbolique qui, depuis l'orée des temps historiques, identifie sa personne à la figure de la loi' (157-58). The symbolic father serves a prohibitive function, intervening in the relationship between mother and child, and substituting the desire for the mother with his own paternal law.

<sup>11</sup> Freud makes the link between the 'ego ideal' and paternal identification in the third chapter of 'The Ego and the Id' (1923): 'behind it [the ego ideal] there lies hidden an individual's

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first and most important identification, his identification with the father in his own personal prehistory' (2001, 19: 31).

<sup>12</sup> For Robert, the family romance is also fundamental to the authorial imagination. Her 'enfant trouvé' is the archetypal idealist novelist (73).

<sup>13</sup> See Reverzy (2004b) for a wider discussion of Zola's writing on Sand. Reverzy notes that 'le mot qui vient toujours sous la plume de Zola pour qualifier Sand est "le rêve"' (108), but she does not make the connection to Zola's *Le Rêve*.

<sup>14</sup> Clotilde intersperses accurate reproductions destined for Pascal's use with works of pure imagination: 'toute une grappe de fleurs imaginaires, des fleurs de rêve' (1967, 5: 920).

<sup>15</sup> Zola has M. Hennebeau employ the term in this sense in *Germinal* (1885), as he fantasises about imitating the worker's sexual licentiousness: 'Que ne pouvait-il [...] culbuter des filles, en se moquant de ceux qui les avaient culbutées avant lui!' (1964, 3: 1440).

<sup>16</sup> Roger Ripoll similarly describes the ending of *Le Rêve* as a form of self-implosion: 'Le roman reste une expérience limite qui aboutit à sa propre mise en question en affirmant sa totale irréalité' (821).

<sup>17</sup> Lumbroso effectively echoes Chantal Pierre-Gnassounou's remark: 'il s'agit là encore de rénover l'horizon d'attente du lecteur zolien, en lui signalant la rupture (momentanée) du contrat de lecture régissant la série' (132).

<sup>18</sup> Reverzy identifies a circularity in Zola's attitudes towards the idealist writer: in his utopian novels, Zola 'sera [...] retombé dans ce rêve que sa jeunesse admirait chez George Sand' (2004b: 116). In a letter to Octave Mirbeau, written 29 November 1899, Zola famously defended his idealist aesthetic by objecting that 'voici quarante ans que je dissèque, il faut bien permettre à mes vieux jours de rêver un peu' (1995: 101).