

ZOLA, MANET, AND THE IMPRESSIONISTS (1875–80)

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NO MAJOR French writer in the nineteenth century, with the questionable exception of Baudelaire, had closer and more enduring personal relations with painters than Zola. At the bottom of this was an element of luck: the good fortune that gave him Paul Cézanne as school-fellow at Aix. Cézanne is commonly credited with having first tutored Zola in the appreciation of modern art by conducting him round the Salon des Refusés in 1863. It was mainly through Cézanne that Zola first came into direct contact with painters: with Pissarro, who had been a fellow student of Cézanne when the latter was attending the Académie Suisse in 1861; and subsequently with Bazille and Monet who in 1865 were sharing a studio which Cézanne and Pissarro would occasionally visit. Pissarro and Bazille were regular guests at the Thursday evening gatherings that Zola inaugurated when he set up house with his future wife in 1866. A series of staccato, memory-laden notes, put on paper twenty years later, recall the atmosphere of those days: "A Paris. Nouveaux amis. . . Arrivée de Baille et de Cézanne. Nos réunions du jeudi.—Paris à conquérir, promenades, dédain. Les musées . . . les cafés."¹ Of the cafés Zola had here in mind, history has preserved the name of one only, the Guerbois, in the Batignolles district. His wife, long after his death, contested the tradition that makes Zola a one-time pillar of this establishment ("a-t-on assez parlé de ce café Guerbois où mon cher mari n'allait presque jamais"),² but we are not obliged to see in this declaration more than a misguided attempt to censor what accorded ill with the cherished image of her husband as the respectable, home-loving citizen. Rather, it was the bohemian but unsociable Cézanne whose appearances at the Café Guerbois were infrequent. Zola would have listened here to critics such as Duranty (whom he had seen before, during business hours, at Hachette's) and Philippe Burty, and to a number of painters totally unknown at that time to the wider public—Bazille and Fantin-Latour, Degas, a formidable debater, Monet, rather shy in argument, Renoir, sceptical and amused at Zola's downrightness, Pissarro, the eldest of them all, the father of a family lodging outside Paris, the Belgian Alfred Stevens, the American Whistler. One of the "regulars" was

Antoine Guillemet, a young landscape painter who in 1866 took Zola to visit Manet at his studio. Here the debutant author of *La confession de Claude* heard from the master the story of his artistic apprenticeship and was able to study the canvases on which he was working. The seeds of a lifelong friendship were sown, the first fruits of which were the special article on Manet which Zola inserted as part of his first *Salon* in *L'Événement* (7 May 1866), and the later study written for the *Revue du XIX^e Siècle* and re-published separately as a brochure in 1867.³ Manet's gratitude for these "remarkable" articles was expressed in two cordial letters⁴ and, possibly, in the offer to illustrate a de luxe edition of the *Contes à Ninon*.⁵ This particular project went adrift, but later in the year Zola began sitting for his portrait, which Manet completed in time for the 1868 Salon. Thanks largely to Daubigny's intervention, the group of painters later to be known as the Impressionists were well represented in that year's exhibition. Zola reviewed their work in a further series of articles, this time in *L'Événement illustré*. Though his expressions were a little more sedate than those he had used in 1866, there was no perceptible slackening in his fervour for Manet (discussed 10 May) or for Pissarro and Monet (19 and 24 May). Cézanne's submissions were, that year as formerly, rejected, so that Zola lacked a pretext to give him critical encouragement even had he wished to. Further proof of Zola's popularity among the so-called Batignolles school is provided by the evidence of two large canvases painted early in 1870, in both of which he features: Bazille's picture of his studio, where Zola is seen chatting to Renoir, and the more formally grouped "Atelier aux Batignolles" by Fantin-Latour.

¹ Dossier of *L'œuvre*, B.N. MS. 10316, fol. 316 (Nouvelles acquisitions françaises).

² Reported by F. Doucet, *L'esthétique de Zola* (The Hague, 1923), p. 114.

³ "Une nouvelle manière en peinture—Edouard Manet," *Revue du XIX^e Siècle*, iv, x (1 Jan. 1867), 43–64; *Edouard Manet, étude biographique et critique* (Paris: Dentu, 1867).

⁴ Printed in P. Jamot and G. Wildenstein, *Manet* (Paris, 1932), pp. 81–82.

⁵ Letter from Zola to Lacroix dated 8 May 1867. See A. Brisson, *L'envers de la gloire, enquêtes et documents inédits* (Paris, 1904), p. 79.

The foregoing outline of Zola's associations with the *avant-garde* painters of his day, Manet in particular, contains very little that is not well known or discoverable in such standard modern histories of Impressionism as those of Wilenski, Rewald, and Germain Bazin, or in monographs on Manet such as Moreau-Nélaton's or Tabarant's, or in the one or two special studies that have been made of Zola's relations with Manet.⁶ After 1870 the picture becomes obscure, until around 1879–80 we are confronted with a Zola not exactly at loggerheads with the group of painters he had championed in his twenties, but aloof, censorious, in short far less committed to their art. This apparent withdrawal, moreover, took place over a period when the new movement was finding it as least as difficult to make headway as during the last years of the Empire, and when the need for advocates in the popular press was therefore more crying than ever. The conservative young Republic was suspicious of all hot-headed innovators: had it not hounded to his death Courbet who, if not aesthetically a direct ancestor of Impressionism, could be justly regarded as the heroic prototype of the independent, venturesome artist? The early Impressionist exhibitions (the first was held in 1874) were attended by crowds who came to scoff and left outraged; a sale held at the Hôtel Drouot in 1875 occasioned scenes of such violence that the auctioneer was obliged to call in the police, while the canvases (seventy-two of them, signed by Monet, Renoir, Sisley, and Berthe Morisot) went for trifling sums, the total takings being little more than ten thousand francs. Those painters who had no private resources were on occasion reduced to begging from the now affluent author of *L'assommoir*: two at least of Monet's unpublished letters to Zola contain urgent requests for small loans,⁷ while Cézanne, running into temporary difficulties in 1878, found a willing banker in his old school friend.⁸

Art historians of the period have wondered why Zola, so doughty a champion of the movement in the sixties, should have shrunk from publicly supporting it in the seventies. Other old habitués of the Café Guerbois were not deterred by the incomprehension of the general public from writing sympathetic accounts of the First and Second Impressionist exhibitions: Philippe Burty in *La République française*, Armand Silvestre in *L'Opinion nationale*. The Café Guerbois was, of course, no longer the rallying point: the new rendezvous for critics and artists was the Café de la Nouvelle-Athènes, frequented

by Manet, Degas, and Renoir. Zola never came here; George Moore, in the seventies a familiar figure at the Nouvelle-Athènes, had to wait till he received an invitation to the Bal de l'Assommoir before he could meet Zola; Manet then introduced him.⁹ Zola, now a householder and a married man of settled habits, was unthinkable planted in front of a *bock* in a café off the Place Pigalle. The house at which he most often met Manet, and also Renoir, was that of his publisher Georges Charpentier;¹⁰ the company included certain more fashionable and successful painters, Manet's old friend Carolus Duran, Henner, and De Nittis, the latter a somewhat incongruous exhibitor at the First Impressionist exhibition. Charpentier was a valuable patron of the Impressionists; the weekly *Vie moderne*, which he founded, supported the movement and lent its offices to various one-man shows of the work of Renoir, Manet, and Monet in 1879 and 1880.

Were these Zola's only contacts with painters during the period under discussion? Was his interest in pictorial art on the wane or was he so wedded to novel writing that he could spare no time to visit exhibitions and report on them? The latter is the most charitable construction put on what has been called by Bazin "the abdication of a mission." Bazin offers an additional and more ungracious explanation: that Zola was loth to disoblige the influential Albert Wolff, who in one and the same year (1876) used his column in *Le Figaro* to praise *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon* and to damn the Impressionist exhibition. "Sans doute l'écrivain se souciait peu de s'aliéner le milieu intellectuel qu'il sentait lui devenir favorable et qui précisément était celui-là même qui vomissait des injures sur les Impressionnistes."¹¹ But this slur supposes in Zola snobbery of the sort that, say, Maupassant might have practised, but that hardly accords with the toughness of the future defender of Dreyfus; moreover

⁶ Ima N. Ebin, "Manet and Zola," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, xxvii (1945), 357–378; George H. Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics* (New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 1945).

⁷ They have been published in translation by Rewald, *The History of Impressionism* (New York, 1946), pp. 291–292.

⁸ Cézanne, *Letters*, ed. Rewald (Oxford, 1941), pp. 109 ff.

⁹ Moore, "My Impressions of Zola," *English Illustrated Magazine*, xi (1894), 477. Cf. also a letter Moore wrote Zola in 1882: "Mais peut-être vous ne souvenez pas de moi. . . . M. Manet un de mes grands amis, m'a présenté à vous au bal de l'Assommoir. . . ." Textual quotation by Auriant, "Un disciple anglais d'Emile Zola: George Moore," *Mercur de France*, ccxcvii (1940), 312–313.

¹⁰ See Michel Robida, "Le Salon Charpentier," *Revue de Paris*, lxii (1955), 42–60.

¹¹ G. Bazin, *L'époque impressionniste* (Paris, 1953), p. 37.

the terms in which he attacked Wolff a little later, in *Une campagne*, should clear Zola of the suspicion of sycophancy.¹² Another curious hypothesis, put forward in Hamilton's book, is that Zola changed his mind about Manet when he saw what an unfavourable impression Manet's portrait of himself, exhibited at the 1868 Salon, made on competent critics.¹³ Yet at least two *salonniers* whose opinions Zola would have respected had spoken in its favour: Gautier who observed somewhat tartly that "le portrait de M. Emile Zola . . . rentre dans la sphère de l'art d'où les autres productions de l'artiste sortent violemment," and Castagnary who called it "un des meilleurs portraits du Salon."¹⁴ Hamilton, it is true, makes other and more plausible suggestions to account for Zola's alleged "disappointment with the development of Impressionist painting" in the seventies; they are all more speculative than they need be, because of his mistaken assumption that "after 1868 [Zola's] name is missing from the criticism of Manet until . . . 1879."¹⁵ The writer, in common with every other historian of the Impressionist movement down to this day, is overlooking one invaluable source of information on the evolution of Zola's taste in art at this period; and the primary purpose of the present paper is to draw attention to this source and suggest how it may help us understand Zola's development and determine his ultimate status as an art critic.

II

If Zola published no *salons* in France between that contributed to *L'Événement illustré* in 1868 and that which appeared in *Le Voltaire* in 1880, the short explanation is that no paper would contract with him to write one. In the immediate postwar years he joined *La Cloche*—as a parliamentary reporter, though in 1872 he did succeed in placing a series of brief sketches of a non-political character of which at least one, an article on Jongkind's studies of Paris,¹⁶ qualifies for inclusion in the corpus of Zola's art criticism. At the end of 1872 he transferred briefly to *Le Corsaire*, then in 1873 he wrote a number of articles, chiefly dramatic criticism, for *L'Avenir national*. The impression one has is that, for one reason or another, newspaper editors were reluctant to entrust to Zola the reviewing of the annual art exhibitions: his prewar reputation as a firebrand in this field would not have commended him to the wary; we notice that in 1873, while Zola was working for *L'Avenir national*, the job of writing the *salon* was given to his young disciple Alexis.¹⁷ During the latter half of 1873

and throughout 1874, as far as I have been able to discover, Zola was unable to place copy with any newspaper except provincial ones like *Le Sémaphore de Marseille*. In 1875 he began writing for *Le Bien public*, but he had been signed on as a theatre critic; and when he joined *Le Voltaire* in July 1878, although admittedly his position was strong enough to allow him to publish more or less what he wanted in its columns, a gentleman's agreement among the Médanistes gave the writing of the *salon* to Huysmans (that is, in 1879).¹⁸

The fortunes of a free-lance journalist in those early years of the Third Republic when the government kept the press under strict surveillance were precarious particularly for one of Zola's notoriety. The theory that his silence betokened a disinclination to commit himself in print about the new movement in art can clearly not be accepted unreservedly.

However, in 1875 Zola had been fortunate enough to secure outside France an important opening for his journalism. With Turgenev acting as a friendly agent he had been able to sell, at the end of 1874, the serial publication rights of *La faute de l'abbé Mouret* to the St. Petersburg monthly magazine *Vestnik Evropy* (*Le Messager de l'Europe*). Then, on 18 January 1875, Turgenev asked Stasyulevitch, the Russian editor: "Would you not like to receive from Zola a Paris survey (unsigned)? . . . Zola would be able to devote his attention principally to literary, artistic, and social matters."¹⁹ Stasyulevitch acquiesced, and the first of Zola's "Letters from Paris," of which there were to be sixty-four in all, appeared in the issue of *Vestnik Evropy* for March 1875. The third, in June, was a full-length *salon*.

Unlike the *salons* Zola published in France, those he wrote for his foreign public took full account not merely of painters he personally

¹² "Pro Domo Mea," pp. 269–274 in the Bernouard edition of *Une campagne*, originally in *Le Figaro*, 18 July 1881.

¹³ *Manet and His Critics*, p. 126.

¹⁴ *Le Moniteur* (11 May 1868) and *Le Siècle* (26 June 1868), both quoted in A. Tabarant, *Manet et ses œuvres* (Paris, 1947), pp. 148, 149.

¹⁵ *Manet and His Critics*, pp. 217, 126.

¹⁶ *La Cloche* (24 Jan. 1872), reprinted by M. Le Blond in the volume *Mélanges de Zola's works* (Bernouard ed.).

¹⁷ 19 May 1873 and succeeding issues.

¹⁸ *Le Voltaire* was started too late to carry a review of the 1878 exhibition, and in 1880 Huysmans published his *salon* in *La Réforme*; in *Le Voltaire* that year the exhibition was covered by a hack reporter signing with a pseudonym, since Zola's series "Le naturalisme au salon" (discussed below) were not a *salon* in the accepted sense.

¹⁹ Letter (in Russian) published in M. K. Lemke, *M. M. Stasyulevitch i ego sovremenniki v ikh perepiske* (St. Petersburg, 1912), III, 48.

admired, but also of those whom he detested though they were well spoken of by orthodox critics. In treating these he did not mince his words. Few painters ranked higher in popular esteem than Alexandre Cabanel, whose fortune had been made when Napoleon III bought his "Naissance de Vénus," a lolling, billowy nude with a retinue of fluttering amoretti, the picture of the year in 1863. Some indication of his fame abroad is furnished by George Moore's admission that when he arrived at Paris to study art, his highest ambition was to be accepted by Cabanel as a pupil. Presumably, then, the readers of *Vestník Evropy* were not unaware of Cabanel's vogue, and Zola's acid comments on his Salon picture of 1875, "Thamar," must have provoked some raising of eyebrows. The subject was Biblical, but it was not the subject so much as the manner that Zola attacked, in a long, sardonic pasquinade of which we must be content to record merely the concluding sentence: "The picture has neither flaws nor merits; it breathes the most deadly mediocrity, an art created out of all the old formulae refurbished by the adroit hand of an apprentice craftsman."²⁰

Immediately after Cabanel Zola deals with Manet, establishing what he calls a "parallel" between the two, stressing the contrast between the honours that for years had been showered on Cabanel and the ridicule that had constantly dogged Manet. "Manet is a modern artist, a realist, a positivist"—but the significance of his achievement lies less in his choice of contemporary, everyday subjects, than in the circumstance

that the artist has created a new form for the new contents, and it is this new form that frightens everyone. Manet is principally concerned with the truthfulness of the general impression, and not with the finishing of details that cannot be perceived from a certain distance. He possesses in addition a native elegance; he is a little dry, but beautiful, the sense of modernity is very highly developed in him and his felicitous brushstrokes make him at times a match for the Spanish masters. Incidentally, his influence in our modern school is becoming more perceptible. If he is violently criticized, he is also imitated; he counts as a master of his craft. Thus he stands at the head of a whole group of artists, steadily expanding, to which the future clearly belongs. Painters, I refer even to his adversaries, cannot deny him qualities of the highest order. I repeat: the incomprehension of the public will be gradually dispelled, and Manet will stand revealed for what he is in reality, the most individual painter of our time, the only one after Courbet who is distinguished by those truly original features heralding that naturalist school of which I dream for the rejuvenation of art and the broadening of human creation.

This encomium admittedly contains much that Zola had said before: the remarks about Manet's "native elegance" and the comparison with the Spanish masters are to be found in the *Etude biographique et critique* of 1867. But at all events it is obvious that Zola has revoked no part of his earlier enthusiasm for Manet.

The artist had sent one canvas only to the exhibition—a river scene done at Argenteuil, which provoked comment among visitors chiefly for the startling blueness of the water. This sheet of blue was for many critics a red rag to a bull; even Castagnary jibbed: "tout serait parfait, sauf l'eau, bien entendu, qui est d'un bleu trop intense et que j'abandonne à qui veut la défendre."²¹ A few *salonniers* were bold enough to defend it even on the score of realism. "Il a peint l'eau bleue," wrote Ernest Chesneau in *Paris-Journal*, "voilà le grand grief. Cependant, si l'eau est bleue à de certains jours de grand soleil et de vent, fallait-il qu'il la peignît de la couleur vert d'eau traditionnelle?"; and Philippe Burty: "La Seine très bleue, d'un bleu très juste, disent les artistes qui sont allés peindre dans des jours analogues, à des places pareilles."²² Zola mentions the witticisms current about the excessive blueness of the river, and argues that it denotes neither defective vision nor crude technique, but simply the honest objectivity of the naturalist artist who uses his own eyes.

The artist saw this colour, I am convinced of it; his one mistake was not to tone it down; if he had made the water azure, everyone would have been delighted. . . . Here there is no perversion of the truth whatsoever. It is a corner of nature, reproduced on the canvas with no contriving of effects, no spurious embellishments. Manet's pictures give one the sensation of the freshness of spring and youth. Imagine that on the ruins of classical rules and romantic humbug, in the waste of tedium and the impenetrable fog of banality and mediocrity, a tiny flower has sprung up, a green shoot on the old, exhausted stump. Now, would you not be gladdened by the sight of a green bud, even though coated with some bitter resin? That is why I feel cheerful when I look at Manet's works amid those others, redolent of decay, that are hung alongside. I know that the crowd would stone me if they heard me, but I assert that Cabanel's pictures will turn pale and die of anaemia within some fifteen years, whereas Manet's pictures will blossom in years to come with the eternal youth of original works.

This tribute, and this prediction, call for no comment.

²⁰ *Vestník Evropy*, x (1875), t. iii, 886; succeeding quotations taken from the next two pages.

²¹ *Salons* (Paris, 1892), II, 179.

²² Quoted by Tabarant, p. 264.

III

The following year (1876) Zola despatched his fifteenth "Letter from Paris" which he entitled "Two Art-Exhibitions in May." In fact, he discusses three separate exhibitions: the official Salon from which that year even Manet had been excluded (the only remarkable picture on show was Gustave Moreau's "Salomé" which was not to Zola's taste); Manet's private showing of the two canvases that the jury had rejected; and finally, the Second Impressionist exhibition held in the Rue Le Peletier.

In an introductory section devoted to a plea for the complete abolition of the jury system, Zola makes much of the fact that Manet, "whose pictures have been accepted for ten successive years, has been unceremoniously ejected this year."²³ It is less an injustice than a piece of impertinence on the part of the judges. But Manet has turned the tables on them: more than ten thousand visitors have come to his studio to view the rejected canvases: "people have paid more attention to him than if he had exhibited his pictures in the Salon as in preceding years." Zola then explains briefly why the artist continues to excite the animosity of the pundits, adapting for the purpose a couple of pages from his 1867 brochure. Next, he describes in a few lines the two pictures: the portrait of Marcellin Desboutin ("Portrait d'un artiste") and "Le Linge," the latter an *œuvre de combat*.

It is understandable that its submission should have exasperated the jury. . . . The scene is set outdoors; the tones are vigorously defined, the outlines merge in the play of light. Certain cavilling critics will never forgive Manet for having barely indicated the details of his washerwoman's face. Two dark spots represent the eyes; the nose and lips are shown as mere pink strokes. I realize why such a picture should cause irritation, but for my own part I find it most curious and original.

What in particular vitiates critical opinion about Manet is that people will never consent to judge him simply as an artist. He paints pictures of people in a manner prescribed in the academies only for painting inanimate objects; what I mean is that he never devises, never composes, but is content to paint objects that he groups in a corner of his studio. Do not expect of him anything but a literally accurate rendering. He is a naturalist, an analyst. He cannot rhapsodize or philosophize. He can paint—that is all—and this is so rare an accomplishment that thanks to it he has become the most original artist of the last fifteen years.²⁴

¶ The interest of this passage lies not in the

novelty of the views expressed: even in his 1868 *Salon*, Zola had applied the term "naturalist" to Manet.²⁵ But the remarks are convincing proof of the persistence of Zola's loyalty to Manet and admiration for his work, ten years later than this loyalty and admiration are commonly supposed to have subsided.

Turning finally to the Impressionist exhibition, Zola observes that "there is no doubt we are witnessing the birth of a new school. In this group one observes a revolutionary ferment which will little by little infect the Academy of Fine Art itself and within twenty years or so will have transformed the look of the official Salon from which the innovators are at present banished." Another prediction destined to be amply fulfilled! He is careful to dissociate Manet from this group, saying merely that he "was the first to give the lead." Having designated Manet as a naturalist, he adopts the label "impressionist" for the remainder. The word was at the time a neologism.²⁶ "Qu'est-ce qu'un impressionniste?" asked Victor Cherbuliez in his review of the official art exhibition in 1876. "C'est un homme qui se fait fort de procurer à son prochain des impressions, bonnes ou mauvaises, agréables ou fâcheuses, et la morale de la religion nouvelle se résume dans ce précepte: mes enfants, impressionnez-vous les uns les autres."²⁷ Zola's definition, less witty, showed more understanding. "The artists I allude to have been called 'Impressionists' because the majority of them are evidently striving to communicate above all the exact impression wrought by living creatures and inanimate nature, to apprehend and transmit it directly, without descending to the minor details which rob a personal, lifelike

²³ *Vestnik Evropy*, XI (1876), t. iii, 878. Zola is guilty of slight exaggeration: Manet's entries in 1866 were not hung, and in 1867 he submitted nothing. In 1874 his "Chemin de fer" was accepted, but two other pictures, "Bal masqué à l'Opéra" and "Hirondelles," were thrown out.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 898.

²⁵ *Événement illustré* (10 May): "il est avant tout un naturaliste." E. P. Gauthier, ("Zola on Naturalism in Art and History," *MLN*, LXX [1955], 514–517) gives a rendering of the last three sentences of the passage just cited, with the quite erroneous comment: "None of his art criticisms published in French . . . use the term naturalism in connection with painting." It is in any case common knowledge that Castagnary and, before him, Baudelaire had used the term freely; Zola's only innovation was to apply it to literature.

²⁶ It had been coined by an obscure journalist, Louis Leroy, in a caustic review published in *Charivari* of the First (1874) Impressionist exhibition. The word had been suggested to him by the title of one of Monet's canvases, "Impression, soleil levant."

²⁷ *Revue des Deux Mondes*, XLVI (1876), 515–516.

vision of all freshness."²⁸ His general remarks are cordial, but he remains on his guard. His first sensation on entering the rooms was, he says, one of

youthfulness, noble convictions, and audacious and resolute faith. Even the errors, even the senseless and risky *boutades* had a special charm for visitors enamoured of freedom of expression in art. At last they had escaped from the frigid, prim, ill-lit rooms of the official exhibition. They were lending an ear to the hisping of the future, before them loomed the art of tomorrow.

All the important artists of the group were exhibiting, with the exception of Cézanne. Zola has a paragraph on each of them, and most of what he has to say shows discernment. Caillebotte, mentioned for his "Raboteurs du parquet" and "Jeune homme à la fenêtre," is criticized for "thoroughly anti-artistic painting, a painting as limpid as glass, bourgeois, thanks to the exactness of the rendering. The photographing of reality, when it is not distinguished by the original stamp of an artist's talent, is a sorry thing." The remark is pertinent and revealing. Zola never succeeded in reconciling intellectually his demand for submission to objective reality (naturalism) with his equally strongly held craving for "originality" which could manifest itself only by an aesthetic refashioning of reality or, in Baudelaire's phrase, by "a protest against Nature." But at least his system never clouded his judgement, and perhaps the most valuable aspect of these hitherto untranslated *salons* is the proof they afford of the fundamental sanity of his taste.

This is not to say that his judgement was unerring: his consistent undervaluation of Cézanne remains an outstanding instance of critical obtuseness, however extenuating the circumstances. Another blind spot was Degas. Zola writes of him in this article as "a searching intelligence, occasionally stumbling on something very original and true." He approved of one of his laundress pictures and one of dancers practising. "This painter is much in love with the contemporary scene, indoor life and ordinary types. The trouble is that he spoils everything when he adds the finishing touch. His best things are sketches. . . . His aesthetic views are unimpeachable, but I fear that his brush will never be creative." Zola never changed his mind about Degas and disagreed strongly later with Huysmans who had eulogized him in *L'art moderne*. "Plus je vais," he told Huysmans, "et plus je me détache des coins d'observation simplement curieux, plus j'ai l'amour des grands créateurs abondants qui

apportent un monde. Je connais beaucoup Degas, et depuis longtemps. Ce n'est qu'un constipé du plus joli talent."²⁹ The vagaries of a personal taste sometimes defy rational explanation, and we must admit to being at a loss to follow Zola here, for Degas was, as has been justly observed, "celui auquel conviendrait le mieux l'idéal de 'peintre de la vie moderne' cher à Baudelaire, puis à Zola et à Huysmans; il y a dans les scènes réalistes de son œuvre entre 1872 et 1880 une atmosphère qui n'est pas éloignée de celle des romans naturalistes."³⁰ No work could have been more "realist" in this sense than "Portraits dans un bureau," the picture of his uncle's cotton office in New Orleans executed during Degas' visit to America in 1872-73. Yet Zola dismisses it as "midway between a seascape and the polytype of an illustrated newspaper." The famous "Absinthe," first shown at this exhibition, steeped, it seems, in the very atmosphere of *L'assommoir*, is not vouchsafed a single word.

To the remaining artists Zola distributed measured praise. Monet, "undoubtedly the leader of the group," is complimented for his "Japonerie" and for various portraits and landscapes. Berthe Morisot's seascapes are "extremely truthful and delicate." Pissarro is "an even fiercer revolutionary than Monet. His brushwork is still more simplified and more naïve. The sight of his tender, variegated landscapes may startle the uninitiated, those who do not realize precisely what the artist is aiming at and the conventions in art against which he is striving to react." The outstanding feature of Renoir's art is "a bright scale of tonalities, melting one into the other with wondrous harmony. He impresses you as a Rubens irradiated by the brilliant sun of Velasquez"—a definition later clarified as Zola describes the girl in one of his portraits as "resembling some Spanish infanta." Sisley is mentioned for his snow scenes and his "Inondation à Pont-Marly"; he is "a very talented landscape painter, with a greater equilibrium of resources than Pissarro." Zola concludes his article by repeating the prophecy that the Impressionist movement will transform the French school of painting inside twenty years.

That is why I feel a great fondness for the innovators, for those who press forward valiantly, careless of compromising their artistic careers. Only one thing can be asked of them: to continue unwaveringly the task they have embarked on and to find in their midst one

²⁸ *Vestnik Evropy*, XI (1876), t. iii, 901; succeeding quotations up to p. 903.

²⁹ Letter dated 10 May 1883 (*Correspondance*, p. 595).

³⁰ Bazin, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

or more painters sufficiently talented to reinforce with masterpieces the new artistic formula.

The critic's viewpoint could scarcely have been made more unambiguous: Impressionism will prove the salvation of French art; but it has yet to win its spurs, no artist has so far appeared who promises to be a "master" in the traditional sense of the word, one of the "grands créateurs abondants qui apportent un monde."

IV

In 1877, his purse swollen with the royalties of *L'assommoir*, Zola treated himself to a long holiday away from Paris, at L'Estaque, leaving the capital towards the end of May. This absence is not sufficient to explain why he wrote nothing on the Third Impressionist exhibition which opened early in April and was over at the end of the month. The exhibitors included all the principal artists who had contributed the previous year, with the addition of Cézanne. It might not be unreasonable to conjecture that a certain reluctance to discuss Cézanne's work was one of Zola's motives for preserving silence.

The following year (1878) was marked by the Exposition Universelle. Zola devoted his June article to the opening of the Exhibition, and his July article to the French school of painting as represented in the Champ de Mars galleries; he has nothing to say about the annual Salon that year in which figured Renoir's "Tasse de chocolat" but no other work by the group. Manet was represented neither here nor at the Champ de Mars, where the only concession to unorthodoxy was the inclusion of a single canvas by Courbet (as against ten by Gérôme, twelve by Bouguereau). Zola was therefore obliged, in the greater part of his article, to comment either on the major painters of the past—Courbet, Corot, Daubigny—or, often with extreme causticity, on the popular painters of the present—Cabanel, Gérôme, Carolus Duran, Meissonier. At the very end of his study, however, he permits himself a glance into the future. He quotes a couple of pages from Duret's recently published pamphlet, *Les peintres impressionnistes*, dealing particularly with the Impressionists' observation of natural colour, and in conclusion repeats the warning he had issued in 1876, emphasizing a little its urgency: "If the upheaval provoked by the Impressionists is an excellent thing, nevertheless we need not await the painter of genius who will put the new formula into practice. It goes without saying that the future of our French school is there; let the genius arise, and then a new age will open in art!"³¹

In 1879 the Impressionists were suffering from divided counsels. When, five years previously, the "Société anonyme des artistes peintres" had been established, it was understood among the constituent members (Monet, Degas, Renoir, Cézanne, Pissarro, Sisley, and Berthe Morisot) that they should withhold their works from the official Salons; this was the impetus behind the early independent exhibitions, and explains why Manet stood aloof from them. But in 1878 Renoir defected and, as we have noted, successfully entered a picture at the Salon; in 1879 he had two portraits accepted, and both Cézanne and Sisley submitted canvases which were, however, rejected. This left, among the leading painters, only Monet, Degas, and Pissarro to provide the staple of the Impressionist exhibition that year.

Zola decided against sending Stasyulevitch a full-length report on the two exhibitions, official and independent. Heading his article "Artistic and Literary Novelties" he devoted only the first quarter of it to art,³² explaining that "exhibitions follow too hard on each other's heels and resemble one another too closely for it to be of interest to study them in detail every year." He registers the fact that the influence of Impressionism is becoming steadily more noticeable among Salon exhibitors, and that visitors flock to the independent exhibitions, "admittedly out of curiosity only and without understanding a thing. Thus we are witnessing the following astonishing spectacle: a small group of artists, persecuted, ridiculed in the press, never spoken of without side-splitting mirth, none the less function as the real inspirers of official pictures in the Salons from which they are excluded." He names the three principal exhibitors at the galleries in the Avenue de l'Opéra and briefly characterizes their work; but his chief concern on this occasion is with their general achievement.

The Impressionists have introduced open-air painting, the study of the shifting effects in nature according to the innumerable variations of weather and the time of the day. They reckon that the superb technical methods of Courbet can only produce magnificent pictures painted in the studio. They are pushing the analysis of nature still farther, to the decomposing of light, the study of air in motion, of the interplay of colours, of

³¹ *Vestnik Evropy*, XIII (1878), t. iv, 398.

³² *Ibid.*, XIV (1879), t. iv, 399–406. A second section was devoted to Paul Foucher's stage version of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, the remainder to a discussion of Gautier, prompted by Bergerat's recent book on him: this part of the article was reprinted in *Le Bien public* (29 July 1879), and ultimately in *Documents littéraires*.

chance modulations of light and shadow, of all the optical phenomena which make a panorama so mutable and so difficult to render. It is hard to realize what an upheaval is involved in the simple fact of painting in the open, when one has to reckon with air in motion instead of shutting oneself up in a studio with a cold, correct light entering a big window facing north. This is the *coup de grâce* for classical and romantic painting and, what is more, this is the realist movement launched by Courbet and now released from the bondage of technique, broadened by analysis, pursuing the truth in the countless effects of light.

A passage like this invites reconsideration of Rewald's assertions that Zola had a "literary approach to art" and that his "ideas were obviously in complete opposition to the very basis of the Impressionist movement."³³ On the other hand, it lends striking support to Jean Fréville's statement: "à l'origine de l'impressionnisme se rencontrent les thèses mêmes du naturalisme: individualisme, influence de la science sur la technique picturale, dissection de la lumière et du mouvement, objectivité, peinture en surface, répudiation de l'idée, de l'imagination romantique et de la littérature qui persistent encore dans le réalisme de Courbet. . . ."³⁴

After these general observations Zola goes on to make certain particular comments on Manet into which, for the first time in his criticism of this artist, he introduces definite reservations. Manet

has carried on the movement after Courbet thanks to his accurate vision, so apt at discerning the exact tones. The reason why he has had to struggle so long for public recognition is that he does not easily accomplish what he sets out to do—I mean that his hand is not comparable with his eye. He has not been able to work out for himself ways and means; he has remained the excited student always distinctly aware of what is happening in nature but never sure of being able to transmit his impressions fully and definitively. Consequently, when he starts off along a path you are never sure how he will reach the end and, generally speaking, whether he will reach it at all. He proceeds by guess-work. When he brings off a picture, then it is really first-class: absolutely truthful and uncommonly clever; but sometimes he makes mistakes, and then his pictures are unfinished and uneven. In short, during the last fifteen years no more subjective an artist has made his appearance. If the technical side of the business equalled the accuracy of his impressions, he would be the great painter of the second half of the nineteenth century.

If Stasyulevitch in St. Petersburg had a literary correspondent at Paris, Parisian editors had, some of them, literary correspondents at

St. Petersburg. The then Professor of French at the School of Law there, a certain Jean Fleury, used to sign an occasional contribution during these years in the *Revue politique et littéraire*. One may conjecture that it was he who, reading Zola's article, translated not the passage have just quoted, but the paragraph immediately following, and sent it to his editor. It was published on 26 July 1879 (xvii, 95–96), with a brief explanatory note (Zola's article was dated 26 June).

Du reste, tous les impressionnistes pêchent par la technique. Dans les arts comme dans la littérature, la forme seule soutient les idées nouvelles et les méthodes nouvelles. Pour être un homme de talent, il faut qu'un homme réalise ce qui vit en lui; autrement, il n'est qu'un pionnier. Les impressionnistes sont précisément, selon moi, des pionniers. Un instant ils avaient mis de grandes espérances en Manet; mais Manet paraît épuisé par la production hâtive; il se contente d'à peu près; il n'étudie pas la nature avec la passion des vrais créateurs. Tous ces artistes-là sont trop facilement satisfaits. Ils dédaignent à tort la solidité des œuvres longuement méditées; c'est pourquoi on peut craindre qu'ils ne fassent qu'indiquer le chemin au grand artiste de l'avenir, attendu par le monde.

Squeezed into one corner of the page in this rather intellectual review, the dangerous words might still have passed relatively unnoticed; but unfortunately they were fastened on by a mischief-maker on the staff of *Le Figaro*, Adolphe Racot, who published them forthwith in his paper with the sensational gloss: "M. Zola vient de rompre avec M. Manet."³⁵ Zola wrote to Manet (27 July): "La traduction du passage cité n'est pas exacte; on force d'ailleurs le sens du morceau. J'ai parlé de vous en Russie, comme j'en parle en France, depuis treize ans, avec une solide sympathie pour votre talent et pour votre personne." Manet answered briefly, telling Zola he was forwarding his letter to *Le Figaro*, and adding: "Je vous avoue que j'avais éprouvé une forte désillusion à la lecture de cet article et que j'en avais été très peiné." Racot duly printed Zola's disavowal in *Le Figaro* (30 July) and there the matter rested.

³³ *The Ordeal of Paul Cézanne* (London, 1950), p. 119. Rewald's remarks occur in an analysis of *L'œuvre*, and provide a good illustration of the dangers inherent in basing conclusions about an author's ideas on an interpretation of his fiction.

³⁴ *Zola semeur d'orages* (Paris, 1952), p. 23.

³⁵ This article, and the ensuing exchange of letters between Zola, Manet, and Racot, were reprinted by E. Moreau-Nélaton, *Manet raconté par lui-même* (Paris, 1926), II, 58–63, and by Jamot and Wildenstein, *Manet*, pp. 96–97. They have been copied extensively since by biographers of Manet and historians of Impressionism.

There too it has rested for all Manet's biographers, who have, as might be expected, drawn various unkind conclusions regarding Zola's notions of friendship and loyalty. Their mistake has been to take on trust the translation provided by the *Revue politique et littéraire*. In fact, there are the best of reasons for thinking that Zola never wrote Manet's name into this passage at all.

Reference to the Russian text shows that the name transliterated here is unquestionably *Monet* (Mohè).³⁶ It is true that at the beginning of the preceding paragraph, of which we have given an English rendering above, the Russian translator wrote *Monet* also, where the first name (Edouard), being included, shows that *Manet* was intended. On the face of it, *Manet* might have been intended on the second occasion too (that is how Fleury—if it was he—construed it); equally, the Russian translator may have read Zola's handwriting correctly on this second occasion, in which case *Monet* would be the proper reading.

The question can be solved only on the basis of contextual evidence. This points overwhelmingly to the reading *Monet*. It is to begin with altogether unlikely that Zola would have asserted that the Impressionists "avaient mis de grandes espérances en Manet," when to his knowledge Manet was endeavouring, in these postwar years, to dispel the impression that he was the senior member of the group; he had consistently declined to partake in their exhibitions and had no voice in their counsels. Monet, on the other hand, was commonly regarded as their leader and will be so described by Zola himself in 1880 ("... M. Claude Monet, que l'on regarde avec raison comme le chef des impressionnistes..."). In the second place, the accusation of overproduction ("Manet/Monet paraît épuisé par la production hâtive...") is far more likely to have been levelled at Claude than at Edouard; here again, it is sufficient to quote from Zola's 1880 *salon*:

... M. Monet a trop cédé à sa facilité de production. Bien des ébauches sont sorties de son atelier, dans des heures difficiles, et cela ne vaut rien, cela pousse un peintre sur la pente de la pacotille. Quand on se satisfait trop aisément, quand on livre une esquisse à peine sèche, on perd le goût des morceaux longuement étudiés; c'est l'étude qui fait les oeuvres solides. M. Monet porte aujourd'hui la peine de sa hâte, de son besoin de vendre...³⁷

If it be granted that Zola had fallen victim here to the carelessness of his translator or the drawbacks of an era that did not yet know the type-

writer, we still have to explain why he should not have informed the world exactly what had happened. But if he had done this, he would only have mollified Manet at the expense of irritating Monet, who was no stranger to him. It was better to let the whole affair simmer down, all the more since, as we have seen, his article had contained one criticism of Manet: that "his hand is not comparable with his eye," or in other words that his execution did not match his pictorial ambitions. This opinion, which Zola had reached slowly and no doubt reluctantly, he never relinquished thereafter; in the preface that he wrote to the catalogue of the posthumous exhibition of Manet's works, he spoke of the painter's later period in terms broadly similar to those used in 1879: "Il n'était pas toujours maître de sa main, ayant gardé une naïveté fraîche d'écolier devant la nature. En commençant un tableau, jamais il n'aurait pu dire comment ce tableau viendrait. Si le génie est fait d'inconscience et du don naturel de la vérité, il avait certainement du génie."³⁸ The concession, in the final sentence, is more apparent than real. As far as genius went, Zola was more likely, one feels, to subscribe to Carlyle's famous definition—of which none of our readers needs reminding.

V

The one remaining piece of art criticism to be considered here is the article series, "Le Naturalisme au Salon," published in *Le Voltaire*, 18–22 June 1880.³⁹ Essentially it shows no modification in views already expressed concerning Manet, though more stress is laid on the artist's positive achievements, and what Zola saw as failings are glossed over. He recalls that he first defended Manet fourteen years previously.

Depuis ce temps il a beaucoup travaillé, luttant toujours, s'imposant aux hommes d'intelligence par ses rares qualités d'artiste et la sincérité de ses efforts, l'originalité si claire et si distinguée de sa couleur. Un jour, l'on reconnaîtra quelle place il a tenue dans l'époque de transition que traverse en ce moment notre Ecole française. Il en demeurera comme la caractéristique la plus aiguë, la plus intéressante et la plus personnelle.

The tribute to Manet is offset by the much more critical treatment of the Impressionist school

³⁶ *Vestnik Evropy*, xiv (1879), t. iv, p. 402.

³⁷ *Le Voltaire*, No. 19, 22 June 1880.

³⁸ This preface has been reprinted as an appendix to *Mes haines*, Bernouard ed. I quote from p. 306.

³⁹ And simultaneously in *Vestnik Evropy*, xv (1880) t. iii, 858–882.

proper, to whom he delivered a homily similar to those of foregoing years, though perhaps a shade more sharply worded.

Le grand malheur, c'est que pas un artiste de ce groupe n'a réalisé puissamment et définitivement la formule nouvelle qu'ils apportent tous, éparse dans leurs œuvres. La formule est là, divisée à l'infini; mais nulle part, dans aucun d'eux, on ne la trouve appliquée par un maître. Ce sont tous des précurseurs, l'homme de génie n'est pas né. On voit bien ce qu'ils veulent, on leur donne raison; mais on cherche en vain le chef-d'œuvre qui doit imposer la formule et faire courber toutes les têtes. Voilà pourquoi la lutte des impressionnistes n'a pas encore abouti: ils restent inférieurs à l'œuvre qu'ils tentent, ils bégayent sans pouvoir trouver le mot.

But notwithstanding these strange misgivings, Zola cannot truly be said to have renounced the hopes he placed in Impressionism. His general conclusion is optimistic, however narrow his program for French painting may appear in retrospect:

Il ne reste plus, si l'on veut avancer encore, qu'à se remettre à l'étude des réalités et à tâcher de les voir dans des conditions de vérité plus grandes. Toutes les recherches doivent porter sur la lumière, sur ce jour où baignent les êtres et les choses. Tous les efforts doivent tendre à rendre les œuvres plus fortes, plus vivantes, en donnant l'impression complète des figures et des milieux, dans les mille conditions d'existence où ils peuvent se présenter.

The chronological limits imposed on this study forbid further pursuit of the subject; besides, sufficient material has been brought together to permit certain general conclusions. Zola's four *salons* of the seventies, of which the originals are lost and of which the Russian versions have never been translated, are a mine of information for students of Zola and of Impressionism. If one takes them into account Zola is seen to have been a far more prolific writer on the art of his time than is commonly supposed: in the fifteen years between 1866 and 1880 he published no fewer than eight reviews of the current art exhibitions, official, private, and independent, of which one only (the first) was ever reprinted in its entirety.⁴⁰ A knowledge of them enables us to describe and assess Zola's attitude through the years to Manet and the first-generation Impressionists, with a greater degree of confidence than has heretofore been possible. They show in particular that he retained his enthusiasm for the group (a little diluted, perhaps, compared with the crusading fervour of his younger days) for much longer than has usually been thought—in

fact, until the group itself began to disintegrate under the pressure of rivalries, jealousies, and sheer ill humour. For one by whom the painter's problems could only have been intuitively grasped, Zola exhibits an admittedly imperfect but commendably sympathetic understanding of what the Impressionists were trying to do and what difficulties they had to overcome. His acid reflections on the then popular and now forgotten academic artists of his day should acquit him of the charge of philistinism; his taste, if unadventurous, was pure enough, and his likes and dislikes solidly based as well as firmly held. The narrowness of his culture limits the intrinsic interest of his art criticism, as, too, of his literary criticism. As for the influence of these articles, written as they were for foreign consumption, this was of necessity nonexistent inside France; but it must not be forgotten that eventually the Impressionists found amateurs the world over, and that the Russians were keen competitors for their works down to 1917; the fine array of Impressionist canvases in the Museum of Modern Western Art, Moscow, was originally formed from confiscated private collections in Russia. It would seem only fair to give Zola a little credit for helping to orientate Russian art collectors towards Impressionist painting.

Perhaps none of these points is of first importance; their total effect may be no more than to modify in a small degree our over-all picture of the climate in which Impressionism developed and of the give-and-take between the writer's world and the painter's in that era. A scrupulously impartial study of Zola's art criticism is, however, a necessary preliminary to a fascinating and virtually unexplored approach to his literary masterpieces. When a writer spends much time in front of pictures and in the company of painters discussing their work, it will go hard but his writing will be affected to the point, perhaps, of being transfigured by the experience. The record of an interview given by Zola a little before his death is, in this respect, decisive. Zola is reported to have declared: "Je n'ai pas seulement soutenu les impressionnistes. Je les ai traduits en littérature, par les touches, notes, colorations, par la palette de beaucoup de mes descriptions. Dans tous mes livres . . . j'ai été en contact et échange avec les peintres. . . . Les peintres m'ont aidé à peindre d'une manière

⁴⁰ This deficiency will, it is hoped, be remedied shortly. Robert J. Niess, of the Univ. of Michigan, and I are at present engaged in preparing an edition of Zola's art criticism which will include all the *salons* mentioned.

neuve, 'littérairement'."⁴¹ One or two critics have ventured a short distance along this inviting path, not necessarily linking Zola with the Impressionists. Erich Auerbach has an interesting passage on the affinities between Zola's sense of the comic, evidenced in the *Bal du Bon-Joyeux* in *Germinal*, and that of certain sixteenth-century Dutch painters, Rubens, Jordaens, Brouwer, Ostade;⁴² Jared Wenger, in the course of a few pregnant though all too cursory observations, refers to "a type of vision peculiar to the late nineteenth century, seen in such Zolaesque phrases as 'poussière d'or du soleil' or 'poudroïement de lueurs'—phrases which show that Zola . . . like the Impressionist painters . . . was trying to render the feel of the atmosphere, to give substance to the quality of light and sight . . ."⁴³ These are mere hints, but suggest that the topic could be as fruitful as Jean Prévost's discussion of

pictorial influences on *Les fleurs du mal*. Where Zola is concerned the whole subject requires to be taken up afresh from the start, and the start must inevitably be a comprehensive and objective analysis of Zola's personal view of Impressionism as it can be gleaned from his art criticism.

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⁴¹ H. Hertz, "Emile Zola témoin de la vérité," *Europe*, xxx (1952), 32–33.

⁴² *Mimesis: dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern, 1946), pp. 451–452.

⁴³ "The Art of the Flashback," *PMLA*, lvii (Dec. 1942) 1158. Mention too should be made of articles by Jean Adhémar, "De quelques sources iconographiques des romans de Zola," in the *Catalogue de l'Exposition Emile Zola à la Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris, 1952), and by Hélène and Jean Adhémar, "Zola et la peinture," *Arts*, No. 389, 12–18 Dec. 1952, p. 10.