

Amoss on Piton-Foucault and Mitterrand, eds. (2015)

Piton-Foucault, Émilie, and Henri Mitterrand, editors. *Lectures de Zola: La Fortune des Rougon*. PU de Rennes, Didact français, 2015, pp. 229, ISBN 978-2-7535-4195-5

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This collection of fourteen cogent and perceptive essays grouped into five sections seeks to do justice to the singular poetry and poetics of *La Fortune des Rougon*, looking beyond its vaunted role as the initial volume of Émile Zola's Rougon-Macquart series.

Beginning with the first section, "L'Histoire reconfigurée," Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin's "*Storytelling: fictions de l'histoire*" analyzes the text as a radical critique of the epic dreams and romantic grandeur that tempt the players on both sides of the history the novel recounts; she shows it upholding instead a rationalist defense of republican virtues. In "*La Fortune des Rougon ou la scène primitive de la modernité*," Françoise Gaillard reads Zola's novel as an allegory of the birth of modern society, wherein fathers will return to haunt their offspring in the "modern" guise of heredity. Adeline Wrona's "La Bataille des journaux de Plassans: l'effet-retard" describes the interplay between the novel itself and the events taking place during the years of its publication, when, in reverse order to that of the text, the Second Empire collapsed and was followed by a republic threatened by conservative reaction.

Three articles also explore "Le Comique sinistre." Éléonore Reverzy details Zola's transposition of caricatural techniques—zoomorphic description, contrasting scenes, reduction to a significant detail, and the revealing shadow—in "Zola caricaturiste." These techniques bear moral, scientific, and political weight in addition to their role as comic satire. A bracing contribution by Marie-Ange Fougère considers "*La Fortune des Rougon, roman de la connivence*," wherein knowing and not knowing is the distinction between those who obtain power and those who do not: those in the know signal their complicity by a smile, in the case of the novel's characters, or by indications of irony, in the case of the author and his readers. In "Médissances et Commérages: les usages de la rumeur," François-Marie Mourad uncovers sophisticated sociolinguistics at work in the novel, where Zola shows the purveyors of various forms of rumor exploiting all the resources language makes available.

"Héros et Misérables" comprises two articles that draw on anthropology and ethnocriticism. Recalling the similar structures that underlie both a rite of passage and a literary narrative, Véronique Cnockaert's "Silvère ou le corps déserté" analyzes Silvère's incomplete passage into manhood. His troubled "incarnation" forecloses the possibility of physical union with Miette and symbolically enacts the difficulty of giving form to a new political reality, the foreclosed republic. Viewing Miette through a similar critical frame leads Marie Scarpa, in her ironically titled "Le vert paradis des amours enfantines..." to a broader discussion of the *redoublement du même* in the novel, but the doubling of a *même ensauvagé*, that is, a same marked by otherness.

Silvère and Miette remain the focus of "La Part du mythe." Clélia Anfray, in her "Lecture politique du mythe de Pyrame et Thisbé," identifies the elements of Ovid's fable that the relationship between Zola's characters echoes. In the novel, they carry political import. Somewhat reductionist, Olivier Got's essay on "La Transgression spatiale" analyzes three elements—wall, well, and door—that fantasmatically hold out to Silvère and Miette the promise of physical union that the narrative itself denies them. In "L'Eau dans *La Fortune des Rougon*," Émilie Piton-Foucault concludes this section by reviewing two intertextual models for Miette: Longus's Chloé and Shakespeare's Ophelia. She shows through meticulous analysis of language how Zola associates images of water with death.

Three articles grouped together under the rubric "Dispositifs et Écriture" conclude the volume. The last word of Zola's preface—*origine*—presides over Philippe Hamon's review of the importance of a novel's incipit, which (im)poses the topographical, generic, and historical frame essential to establishing readers' expectations. His "Note sur un incipit" likens the first pages of *La Fortune des Rougon*, which lead to the appearance of Silvère and Miette, to two models: a playwright's stage directions (decor, props, time, atmosphere, and lighting) and a chessboard, on which the various figures will soon take their places. In "Le Hasard et la Nécessité," Sophie Gourmès offers a demonstration of the structural subtleties by which Zola traces causality at work in a series of "*coups*" that leads to the realization of the novel's title—"je veux expliquer," he wrote in the preface. At the same time, he holds readers in suspense by illusorily suggesting that chance may play a role, since unexpected details exceed the predictable effects of any particular cause. Finally, Patricia Carles and Béatrice Desgranges build on Zola's contention from his 1864 correspondence that, if art is a window onto creation, there is always a transparent screen through

which one perceives more or less deformed images. Their “*La Fortune des Rougon* et ses ‘écrans’” inventories the Realist, Neoclassic, and Naturalist screens through which pass his characters’ perceptions, screens formed by their temperament, milieu, and education.

On the whole, it is hard to imagine a collection of better informed and more persuasive essays by writers reading through different lenses. Less successful are the dozen critical snapshots—designated as “*En marge*”—that serve as closing supplements to each section, but are generally unrelated to the articles themselves.

Volume: 45.1-2

Year:

- 2016