

Woodson on Zola, Ed. and Trans. Nelson (2012)

Zola, Émile. *The Fortune of the Rougons*. Translated, with introduction and notes by Brian Nelson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. 301. ISBN 978-0-19-956099-8

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Brian Nelson's translation of *The Fortune of the Rougons* (1871) updates the "alpha" *Rougon-Macquart* novel in a handsome addition to the Oxford World's Classics series. The volume lends itself perfectly to undergraduate or graduate courses as well as to the literary critic working across disciplines. Its critical apparatus (introduction, translator's note, bibliography, chronology of Émile Zola, family tree of the Rougon-Macquart, and explanatory notes) orients readers to the major thematic questions in Zola's work, introduces them to important critical debates and provides historical context for the complexities of the text. The bibliography does not include a list of the entire *Rougon-Macquart* series with publication dates, which would be useful to those reading the novels in order. In sum, however, the supplements provided were more than adequate.

Nelson's translation of *The Fortune of the Rougons* is an important contribution to Zola studies; it will no doubt foster new scholarship in English. "*The Fortune of the Rougons*," writes Nelson in his introduction, "is not only the inaugural novel of *Les Rougon-Macquarts*, but also, in every sense, its founding text" (viii). Indeed, Zola's story traces the origins of the Rougon-Macquart family to its matriarch, Adélaïde Fouque (Aunt Dide). Dide's hysterical fits reflect the mounting political unrest of the inhabitants of the fictional town of Plassans. Plassans is modeled on Aix-en-Provence, where, as a child, Zola witnessed first-hand the unscrupulousness of the upwardly-mobile. The Rougons' ravenous appetites for power and fortune issue forth from this bastion of bourgeois pettiness. The book's central tragedy, however, is the love affair between the adolescents, Silvère and Miette, which repeats the "eternal cycle" of love linking Dide and the smuggler Macquart, forty years prior (175). Just as his grandmother's lover Macquart dies prematurely, so, too, Silvère will see his sweetheart shot down in the 1851 *coup d'état*, before he, too, feels "the cold pistol on his temple" (292). As Nelson points out, the fate of these two young revolutionaries metonymically maps the socio-political future of the Second Empire regime (1852-70), which would end in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), depicted in *The Debacle* (1892). Eros and Thanatos are interwoven not only on the level of narrative, however, but also, through Zola's metaphorical description of the abandoned cemetery, the Aire Saint-Mittre. Here, fertility engenders death and vice versa, in a cyclical pattern that foreshadows similar extended metaphors throughout the *Rougon-Macquart*, such as the overgrown garden in *Abbe Mouret's Transgression* (1875) and the fertile soil atop the mine in *Germinal* (1885). The former cemetery, with its pears the size of human skulls, provides a provocative blueprint for the remaining nineteen *Rougon-Macquart* novels: "The trees and vegetation, with their rampant growth, had soon devoured all that remained of the dead in the old cemetery of Saint-Mittre; the human remains that lay rotting there were eaten up by flowers and fruit. . ." (6). The interplay of life and death is ubiquitous as the novel concludes: "rank odours and dark vegetation had filled their young hearts with desire, spreading out its alluring bed of wild grass without throwing them into each other's arms, now longed to drink Silvère's warm blood" (290-91). Nelson's rendering of Zola's descriptive passages is eminently readable, even where Zola himself is a bit overblown.

In his translation, Nelson revitalizes the *Fortune of the Rougons* for English readers, limited for over a century to E. A. Vizetelly's somewhat plodding prose. Unlike its 1898 predecessor, Nelson's translation was not threatened by censorship and therefore perhaps distinguishes itself most in its description of the idyll of Miette and Silvère. Conspicuously, in the love scene between the two adolescents, Vizetelly elided the critical details of "veil" ("voile") and "virgin" ("vierge"), essential to Miette's sacrifice, so that she first kisses her lover and then promptly falls asleep without risking her virginity ("voile"): "She tasted those kisses slowly, seeking their meaning, their hidden sweetness. As she felt them course through her veins, she interrogated them, asking if they were all love, all passion. But languor at last overcame her, and she fell into gentle slumber" (Vizetelly 132). Nelson's version, however, remains faithful to Zola's original: "Beyond their kisses she divined something else which alarmed and attracted her, in the dizziness of her tingling senses. She let herself go; she would have begged Silvère, with the innocent shamelessness of a virgin, to tear down the veil. He, maddened by her caresses, transported, seemed unable even to imagine any greater pleasure"(156).

Another improvement on Vizetelly's text is found in Nelson's account of Miette's figural apotheosis into Lady Liberty, a *moment-clef*: "Miette seemed to [Silvère] so lovely, so grand and saintly! . . . glorious in her scarlet cloak. She was now identified in his mind with his other adored mistress, the Republic" (32). Nelson captures the play of Zola's imagery with Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), where Vizetelly altered the "scarlet" of Miette's cloak to "purple."

One might quibble with a few words, here and there, in Nelson's translation. For instance, his, "Miette *regretted* her virginity"

("regrettait"), is perhaps a bit too literal; "lamented" or "was grieved by" might better convey the context of the maid's imminent death (200). Yet, overall, Nelson's attention to detail is admirable, if not surprising, from the author of *Zola and the Bourgeoisie* (1982), editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Zola* (2007), and translator of multiple *Rougon-Macquart* novels. Nelson has noted in *The Cambridge Companion to Zola* that it takes a poet to "[transfigure] reality into a theater of archetypal forces. Poetic language then is Zola's strength" (7). And, I would argue, Nelson's. Nelson's simple but powerful words portray Zola's intention here as elsewhere with the integrity of a poet.

Volume: 42.1-2

Year:

- 2013