

Nineteenth-Century French Studies

A scholarly journal devoted to the study of French literature and related fields

For articles: ncfsarticles@gmail.com

For reviews: ncfsreviews@gmail.com

www.ncfs-journal.org

Harrow, Susan. *Zola, The Body Modern: Pressures and Prospects of Representation*. Oxford: Legenda, 2010. Pp. x + 230. ISBN: 978-1-906540-76-0

Jessica Tanner, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

“Mapping Zola *forward* is a necessary project,” Susan Harrow declares at the outset of *Zola, The Body Modern* (7). In this vibrant and innovative study, Harrow takes up the self-set challenge of reading Zola prospectively, thereby redressing what she sees as a pervasive tendency among the novelist’s critics to deny his aesthetic modernity. Showcasing a profound and comprehensive familiarity with the Zolian corpus, Harrow adeptly engages the critical insights of thinkers such as Barthes, Certeau, and Deleuze in order to “mak[e] the case for Zola’s modernism,” identifying literary tropes and tactics more commonly associated with Flaubert or Mallarmé—indeterminacy, split subjectivities, self-reflexivity, non-representational poetics—at work throughout the twenty novels of the *Rougon-Macquart* series (7). As the book’s title suggests, the nexus of Harrow’s concern (and the structuring device of her analysis, which develops in three parts) is the body: the human *corps* at the center of so many of Zola’s novels, the textual *corpus* that contains them, and the notion of writing itself as an embodied, muscular process.

In Part I, Harrow sets out to dislodge canonical perceptions of Zola’s stylistic conservatism through sustained attention to the surface of his novels, arguing that his sensibility and aesthetics are no less constitutive of his “modernity” than his thematics. Drawing upon Zola’s nonfictional writings (notably his essays on Manet’s vanguard aesthetics) in addition to well-chosen examples from the novels, Harrow convincingly demonstrates the modern(ist) plurality and provisionality that subtend the *Rougon-Macquart*: the oneiric figuration of Les Halles in *Le Ventre de Paris* as a “protean” urban and textual space (41), the disjunctive selves of characters such as Lazare Chanteau (*La Joie de vivre*) and Denise Baudu (*Au Bonheur des dames*), the “material metaphoric” that reveal a deep ambivalence toward a modernity thematically embraced yet discursively resisted (47). Harrow proposes that we occlude the sophisticated (and distinctly modern) equivocations Zola’s literary artistry engenders by uncritically reading his fiction as a product of the dogmatic Naturalist mimeticism delineated in his theoretical works.

Part II attends more directly to what Mallarmé identified as the characteristic “folds and fractures” (“plis et [...] cassures”) of Zola’s prose. Locating the “swellings” and “pressure points” of Zola’s “corporeal” writing, Harrow argues for a dynamic reading that recognizes and sustains the tensions (between totality and failure, overflow and ellipsis, accumulation and attenuation, dilation and rupture, synecdoche and asyndeton, and metonymy and metaphor) that Mallarmé’s expression so economically evokes (86-87). Harrow is at her strongest here, deploying an array of sensitive, perspicuous close readings that draw connections across the novels of the *Rougon-Macquart* (for instance, on the folds of laundered fabric and the recursive thickening of textual labyrinths in *L’Assommoir*). These will offer new insight even to Zola’s most seasoned readers. By calling attention to the practices of narrative “enfolding” and repetition that divert the linear unfolding of Zola’s proleptic symbolism and the poignant elisions that “problematiz[e] the criteria of Naturalism,” Harrow decisively restores the often neglected multivalence of Zola’s work (94).

In Part III, Harrow turns from Zola’s “body of representation” to his representation of the body—a shift motivated, she maintains, by more than “mere playful chiasmus” (72). Harrow focuses here on the ways in which the social body is visualized and verbalized, and on the individual characters who seek to “negotiate” the *corps social* and actualize themselves as subjects through the (provisional) appropriation of language (205). Though the readings Harrow proposes here are articulate and persuasive—a section devoted to the rhetorical posturing of Étienne Lantier and

Pluchart in *Germinal* is particularly compelling—parts of this section feel out of joint with respect to preceding chapters; reversing the order of Parts II and III might have allowed for a more natural progression of the argument toward the “Summations and Speculations” offered by way of conclusion.

Overall, this is a brilliant and path-breaking work, one that largely succeeds in remediating the oversights of much previous criticism and in demonstrating how (and why) to read Zola today. There are nonetheless a few “blind spots,” to borrow Harrow’s term, some of which she addresses in her conclusion (e.g., the omission of the erotic or desiring body, and of the physical body more generally). In taking aim at the domestication of Zola’s work practiced by “traditional” critics Harrow elides the contributions of scholars—for instance, David Baguley in *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision* (1990) and Colette Becker in *Zola, le saut dans les étoiles* (2002)—who have called into question the monolithic reading of Zola as a flatly mimetic *greffier*. In her consideration of the ways in which Zola’s writing might “resist Naturalism and make progress towards the modern or modernist aesthetic” (61), moreover, Harrow too readily “tames” Naturalism itself, implicitly reproducing the Barthesian readerly/writerly dichotomy she elsewhere works to destabilize (82). Despite these minor issues, this is an important and stimulating book that should be compulsory reading not only for Zola specialists, but indeed for anyone interested in nineteenth-century France and the writing of modernity.