

Online Reviews

**Mitterand, Henri. *Autodictionnaire Zola*. Paris: Omnibus, 2012. Pp. lxxvi + 769. ISBN: 978-2-258-08922-8**

*Jessica Tanner, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

In 2009, Omnibus published *Autodictionnaire Simenon*, the first of a series of unconventional, non-narrative literary biographies produced under the direction of Pierre Assouline. Like this and other volumes in the series devoted to Proust and most recently Voltaire, eminent Zola scholar Henri Mitterand's *Autodictionnaire Zola* endeavors to sketch a portrait of the author in his own words, through a compendium of excerpted citations organized in alphabetically arranged entries ranging from "Assommoir" to "Dreyfus" to "Utopie." Mitterand culls his material from Zola's fiction, theater, journalism, interviews, correspondence, dossiers, and theoretical texts, juxtaposing sources as eclectic as the terms, people, and places they are selected to represent. This diversity is among the work's chief strengths; the entry "Bête (nom)," for example, pairs an excerpt from *Germinal* with an 1896 speech before the Société protectrice des animaux and an 1897 chronicle from *Le Figaro*, allowing the reader to draw connections across time and genre. Mitterand generally privileges Zola's non-fiction over his fiction, a choice that makes this "double autoportrait" (iv) of the author and his oeuvre somewhat unidirectional—the man illuminates the work more than the work illuminates the man—but also recognizes that the novels are more readily accessible and searchable for most readers.

In his expansive and appropriately exhaustive introductory essay, "Épuiser la vie," Mitterand characterizes the autodictionary as a puzzle, one whose discrete pieces may be shaped into a whole through countless paths. The metaphor is apt; gleaning meaning from the *Autodictionnaire*'s alphabetical field of fragments is an aleatory process. Reading alphabetically, thematically, or arbitrarily across the volume's pages yields new and occasionally surprising insight into familiar material. As Mitterand writes in the introduction, reading sequentially through "Abomination" to "Accuse (J)" to "Accusation" to "Affaire" to "Amnistie" paints a casually coherent portrait of Zola, *Dreyfusard* (iv). While many of the nearly 1500 entries contain precisely what one would expect—"Vénus" is devoted to *Nana*; "Train," to *La Bête humaine*—others draw upon little-known or unexpected texts, showcasing Mitterand's immense erudition and familiarity with the Zolian corpus to the reader's benefit. A minor quibble is that the terms chosen are of uneven interest ("Dédicace," for one, seems to earn its place by virtue of allowing for the inclusion of a famous dedication to Flaubert, while the seemingly pertinent "Courtisane" is not included).

The diverse appendices to this volume filled with Zola's words include a compendium of some of his most famous—the first and last words of the twenty novels of the *Rougon-Macquart*—and a series of twelve suggested thematic axes, each with a list of relevant entries from the *Autodictionnaire*. The itineraries Mitterand proposes here (and, more informally, in his introduction) for the reader seeking cohesion among the citational fragments are not only useful, but also give a glimpse into the rationale behind the selection of the words chosen for the volume; topics such as "Idées et genres littéraires, réception," "Affaire Dreyfus," and "Guerres" align with the central concerns of Mitterand's introductory essay. Though nominally a dictionary, the *Autodictionnaire*'s usual reliance on a single citation per entry (a few, such as "Balzac," "Hugo," and "Impressionnisme," get more) limits its use as a work of scholarly reference—a contradiction Mitterand addresses early in his introduction, referring

to the ambitious title as a “trompe-l’œil” (iii). Scholars pursuing a comprehensive vision of Zola’s engagement of and with key terms will likely be better served by searching the author’s corpus on ARTFL or other digital archives, while Zola enthusiasts desiring synthetic information about the author’s life, works, and context might turn to Colette Becker’s more traditional *Dictionnaire d’Émile Zola* (1993) or Mitterand’s own magisterial, three-volume biography *Zola* (1999-2002). This is nonetheless a gratifying and infinitely renewable resource for those working on Zola or nineteenth-century France more generally, one that will inspire scholars to rethink the ways in which Zola is, and is not, a man of his words.

*Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 42, Nos. 3 & 4 Spring-Summer 2014  
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