

Emile Zola: Improbable Defender of Life

Mary Shivanandan

ABSTRACT

The subject of this paper is a novel by one of France's most esteemed novelists, Emile Zola. It was written and published in the last two years of the nineteenth century and never re-published. The novel bears the title *Fécondité*, in English *Fertility*. It is extraordinary because of who the author was, on the one hand, and his radical endorsement of a pro-life philosophy on the other, at a time when fellow novelists and social reformers accepted as inevitable or actively promoted small families, contraception, and population control. The paper will proceed by first giving some background on Emile Zola, especially his views on the Catholic Church and science. It will then take up his notion of "salvation through love" and its relation to the family and procreation. These set the stage for a discussion of his ideas on life, love, and the population question in the novel *Fécondité* or *Fruitfulness*.

WHO WAS EMILE ZOLA?

Born in 1840, Emile Zola spent his early life in and around Aix-en-Provence. His father, an Italian engineer, died when he was seven, leaving him and his mother in difficult circumstances. At the age of eighteen he went to Paris, initially working in a Customs House. After enduring a period of great poverty, a benefactor secured for him a position at the bookstore Hachettes. It gave him the opportunity to begin the literary career he craved. There are two aspects of his character to which I particularly want to draw attention, his ambivalent attitudes toward Catholicism and toward contemporary science. Baptized a Catholic, Zola grew up to be an enemy of the Catholic Church. Yet his opposition was not total. One might say that it was more of a love/hate relationship, with hate predominating at the end of his life.

In his trilogy *Lourdes*, *Rome*, and *Paris* Zola came to grips with his

attitude toward Catholicism.¹ His visits to Lourdes were the turning point, for he declared himself disgusted with what he saw as the financial greed of the clerics in charge, but it was in his novel *Rome* that his ambivalence toward the Church became most evident. His own views are expressed mainly through the character Abbé Pierre Fremont:

We Frenchmen whose education is so full of the Catholic spirit, even in these days of universal doubt, we can never think of Rome otherwise than as the old Rome of the Popes.²

France is the only great Catholic country which has yet remained erect and sovereign, the only one on which the papacy can some day lean.... Apart from France there can be no salvation for the Church.³

Abbé Fremont speaks of his “dream of resuscitating a Christian and evangelical Rome, which should assure the happiness of the world.” His visit to Rome to gain acceptance for his book on a “new religion” (which the Abbé envisioned as a return to primitive Christianity) ended in disillusion when it was put on the index of forbidden books. In real life, Zola did seek an audience with Pope Leo XIII, with whom he shared many concerns for the new industrial poor, but the request was denied since his own books were already on the index.⁴

¹ Vizetelly remarks that although Zola eventually lost his faith in the dogmas of the Catholic Church, he continued to be impressed by its pomp and cult. He kept on his desk an ivory crucifix, a chalice, a pyx, and a small case with the picture of the Madonna. Emile Zola, *Rome*, trans. Ernest Alfred Vizetelly (New York NY: Macmillan, 1896), p. 40.

² *Ibid.*, p. 226.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 383. The Church is called “an immense moral force” (p. 384).

⁴ Ernest Alfred Vitzelly, *Emile Zola, Novelist and Reformer: An Account of His Life & Work* (Freeport NY: Books for Libraries, 1904; reprinted 1971), p. 411. Zola concluded that the papacy was impotent, not only in clinging to temporal power but by being chained to dogma and tradition. He also rejected Catholicism as incompatible with democracy. Yet in *Rome* he has a character criticize Pope Leo XIII for making concessions to the republic. He has Abbé Pierre “ask the decisive question: Could Catholicism be renewed? Could it revert to the spirit of primitive Christianity, become the religion of democracy, the faith which the distracted modern world, in danger of death, awaits in order that it may be pacified and live?” He answered in the negative. Zola, *Rome*, p. 447.

The Dreyfus Affair finally tipped the balance to his total rejection of Christianity, and especially of Roman Catholicism. The failure of a Catholic bank aroused anti-Semitic feeling, particularly among Catholic royalists, and a Jewish officer in the army was falsely accused of betraying military secrets. When Zola learned the truth, he wrote a now famous letter (*J'accuse*) to expose the scandal. Zola had to flee to England to escape prosecution. From then on he was an implacable enemy of the Catholic Church.⁵

Zola's hatred of the Church as well as his atheism endeared him to the secular intellectual elite, who have continued to claim him as one of their own, even today. His atheism was part and parcel of his commitment to contemporary faith in science and evolution as *the* explanation for things and *the* path to freedom and well-being for the human race. Yet here too he expressed great ambivalence. On reading Pascal's *Pensées*, he wrote:

I have been frightened by my own lack of beliefs; [Pascal] has given me cold sweats when he has shown me the horrors of doubt and yet I would not have traded my shivers for the shivers of his faith. Pascal proves my own misery to me without convincing me that I should share his. I remain myself although my soul bleeds."⁶

Zola's biographer Marc Bernard conjectures that his supreme confidence concealed great doubt.⁷ Vizetelly notes that he had an "unreasoning fear of death." He would wake up at night, spring out of bed and "remain for a moment in a state of indescribable fright."⁸ Rejecting the supernatural, he was a thorough-going materialist. In 1885 he outlined his philosophy of life:

⁵ Vizetelly comments that Zola "desired the suppression of all noxious agents, and it was because he regarded the Church of Rome as such that he assailed it so fiercely." Vizetelly, *Emile Zola*, p. 538.

⁶ Marc Bernard, *Emile Zola*, trans. Jean M. Leblon (New York NY: Grove Press, 1960), p. 157.

⁷ Bernard, p. 162. Zola regarded it as the greatest misfortune to be in doubt about anything. Vizetelly, *Emile Zola*, p. 398.

⁸ Vizetelly, *Emile Zola*, p. 211.

My role has been to put man back in his place in the world, like a product of the earth still subject to all the influences of the milieu; and in man himself, I have put the brain back in its proper place among the organs, for I do not believe that thought is anything other than a function of matter.⁹

Both these strands of Zola's character, the Catholic and secular humanist, are important in assessing the contribution of his book *Fécondité* to the ongoing debate on sexuality and procreation.

Zola's commitment to reason must also be taken into account, especially in his contrast between faith and reason. In *Lourdes*, Abbé Pierre acknowledges that the multitude need faith, but that he prefers to take the "heroic path of reason." He repeats this affirmation in *Rome*: "Having lost his faith, and even his hope of utilizing old Catholicism for social and moral salvation, there only remained reason that held him up."¹⁰ "Ah! Reason, ...he would now always seek to satisfy her, even if in doing so he should lose his happiness."¹¹ In the novel *Lourdes* Zola, speaking through the character of Abbé Pierre, finally rejects what he calls "simple childlike faith" for reason:

It was reason...whose continual revolt at the Grotto, at the Basilica, throughout entire Lourdes had prevented him from believing. He had been unable to kill reason and humiliate himself. Reason remained his sovereign mistress, and she it was who buoyed him up even amidst the obscurities and failures of science.¹²

⁹ Cited in Bernard, *Zola*, p. 114.

¹⁰ Zola, *Rome*, p. 462. He goes on to say: "It was his mother, so to say, who had wept in his heart, who had filled him with an irresistible desire to relieve the wretched and prevent massacres which seemed near at hand; and his passion for charity had thus swept aside the scruples of his intelligence. But it was his father's voice that he now heard, lofty and bitter reason which, though it had fled, at present came back in all its sovereignty."

¹¹ Ibid. "Pierre amidst his anguish—having on one hand that need of the divine which tortures man, and on the other sovereignty of reason which enables man to remain erect—was only sure of one thing, that he would keep his vows, continue a priest, watching over the belief of others though he himself could not believe, and would thus chastely and honestly follow his profession, amidst haughty sadness at having been unable to renounce his intelligence in the same way as he had renounced his flesh and his dream of saving the nations."

¹² Émile Zola, *Lourdes* (Stroud, Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton, 1993), p. 485.

SCIENCE

Initially Zola had an almost religious faith in science, particularly the science of heredity. He has Dr. Pascal, his alter ego, confess that he was “determined, at any cost...to wring from science an absolute assurance that mankind could be made over in a better finer mould.”¹³ Zola dreamed of integrating literature and science. He reserved a special place for poets in the advancement of science: “They often discover virgin territory and point the way to future investigations,” he wrote. He sought in the novel a precision equal to that of scientists since he saw the novelist pursuing the same goal as the scientist, to grasp reality.¹⁴ Drawn to large subjects, caught up in the excitement of the day for science and scientific theories, he aspired to remake humanity on scientific principles.¹⁵ The passion for truth that he discerned at the heart of the scientific endeavor led him to write what he called the “experimental” novel.¹⁶ His major series, the *Rougon-Macquart*, which relates the fortunes of five generations of a French family at the time of the Second Empire, affords him the opportunity to examine every aspect of contemporary society.¹⁷ He exposes in

¹³ Émile Zola *Doctor Pascal*, trans. Vladimir Kean (London UK: Elek Books, 1957), p. 113.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁵ Zola was inspired by Claude Bernard’s *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* (first published in 1865), Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution in the *Origin of Species* (1859), Hypollite Taine’s *Philosophy of Art* (1867), and Prosper Lucas’s *Philosophical and Physiological Treatise on Natural Heredity* in two volumes (1847, 1850). Appearing about the same time when Zola was in his twenties, they had a determining influence on his art.

¹⁶ So enamored with science and its products were novelists and artists that they often referred to their works as “machines.” Emile Zola, *His Masterpiece* (Stroud Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton, 1991), p. 33n.

¹⁷ Vizetelly recounts that the germ for the series originated in his first youthful planned poetic trilogy, *Genèse*, which was to have covered the “advent, development and destiny of mankind.” The first poem was to chronicle “The Birth of the World” according to modern science, the second called “Mankind” would be a synthesis of the whole of history, and the third, “The Man of the Future” was to reveal man mastering every force of nature, rising higher and higher to a god-like status. Vizetelly, *Emile Zola*, pp. 111, 58. The poem was

graphic detail all the evils, including addiction, adultery in the middle class, and the appalling conditions of the new industrial proletariat.¹⁸ Frequently accused of pornography, he tries to expose all in order to heal all.¹⁹ He refers to his method as naturalism or realism.²⁰ For our purposes, his adoption of the experimental novel is important because the facts that he presents in his novels are based on personal observation, extensive research of written documents, lengthy conversations with those familiar with his subject, and liberal use of the notes written at the time.²¹ This culminates in an exhaustive phenomenological approach to all that presents itself to him.

Initially Zola's faith in the science of heredity took the place of

never written. Instead Zola transposed his ideas into the form of the novel.

¹⁸ *L'Assommoir*, (*The Dram Shop*) published in 1877, on alcohol addiction took Paris by storm. *Pot-Bouille* (*The Restless House*, 1882) probed adultery in the middle class and *Germinal* (1885) exposed the appalling conditions of miners. Vizetelly, *Emile Zola*, pp. 161, 207, 227.

¹⁹ His biographer Vizetelly writes that in his novels Zola "made it his purpose to inquire into all social sores, all the imperfections and lapses of collective and individual life that seemed to require remedying. That everything should be made manifest in order that everything might be healed, such was the motto he adopted." Vizetelly, *Emile Zola*, p. 184. A contemporary biographer notes that he was frequently accused of obscenity. Bernard, *Zola*, p. 43. In the preface to the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin* Zola defends himself against the charge by comparing his work to that of a painter before a nude. He describes himself as "simply an analyst who may have become engrossed in human corruption, but who has done so as a surgeon might in an operating theatre.... I wrote every scene, even the most impassioned, with scientific curiosity alone." Emile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, trans. with introduction by Leonard Tancock (London UK: Penguin Books, 1962), pp. 23, 24.

²⁰ Zola acknowledged that "the realist screen has all my sympathy; it satisfies my reason, and I sense in it immense beauties of strength and truth. He goes on to say that it is not a perfect reproduction. "I fully accept the method which consists of standing squarely in front of nature and reproducing it in its entirety without omission." Bernard, *Zola*, p. 22. Zola further stated, "By naturalism I mean analytical and experimental methods based on facts and human documents. There must be agreement on the social movement which is the cause, and literature which is the effect." Vizetelly, *Zola*, p. 174.

²¹ Vizetelly gives a detailed account of Zola's research methods in his biography, Vizetelly, *Zola*, pp. 414-15.

religion as an explanation for the origin of man and for the nature of good and evil.²² Through Dr. Pascal he exclaims: “What an immense fresco to paint, what masterpieces of human comedy and tragedy to write, on the subject of heredity, which is the very genesis of families, society and the world.”²³ Until his writing of Dr. Pascal (loosely based on his own life) Zola maintained an absolute belief in the all-encompassing efficacy of the science of heredity to explain all in order to cure all, but then a significant event occurred in his personal life.

Zola had a huge appetite for life, but until the age of 48 he lived in a strictly monogamous but childless marriage.²⁴ He passionately desired children. Becoming infatuated with a young seamstress, he fathered two children by her.²⁵ Recounted fictionally in *Doctor Pascal*, this event was instrumental in changing the focus of his work from the simple exposure of evil in the human condition to the proposal of remedies. The last novel of the Rolugon–Macquarts series is generally recognized as a turning point from the phenomenologically descriptive novel to the “prophetic.” It is also a turning point in another critical aspect. He began to express ambivalence on the efficacy of the theory of atavism as a way to explain everything and to have science alone produce happiness.²⁶ At the end of the novel, Dr. Pascal explains why he has given up his medical practice:

²² He believed that the family tree reveals mathematically the laws of heredity and environment and that they explain all passion, virtue, and vice.

²³ Zola, *Doctor Pascal*, pp. 93, 236.

²⁴ “I come to live life aloud.” Zola wrote in *Mes Haines* 1866. Bernard, *Zola*, p. 157.

²⁵ According to his biographer, Ernest Alfred Vizetelly, this was his one lapse from the moral life.

²⁶ Zola writes: “Innumerable questions clamoured for an answer. Had there in fact been any physical and intellectual progress through the ages? ... Was it legitimate to hope that, in the long run, human conduct would become more reasonable and that the sum total of human happiness would increase?” Zola, *Doctor Pascal*, pp. 33, 34, 74. In *Germinal*, which recounts a strike of coal miners, his protagonist Etienne (again his own mouthpiece) reflects: “Was Darwin right...was this world nothing but a struggle in which the strong devoured the weak so that the species might advance in strength and beauty? The question disturbed him although as a self-styled scientist, he could only settle it one way.” *Germinal*, trans. Leonard Tancock (New York NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), p. 496.

He abhorred empiricism.... Methods of treatment and remedies varied according to the theories of the moment; how many people must have been killed by methods which were now discredited? His clinical instinct was all that a doctor had to rely on; if he cured his patients it was because he had a gift of intuitive diagnosis, but he was merely groping and his successes were due as much to luck as to his own ability.²⁷

Nevertheless he continued to believe that, although theories may change every twenty years, “the acquired truths remained unshakeable, the foundation on which science continued to build.”²⁸ That foundation was evolution, but he began to see man’s relationship to evolution and nature in a different light—not as matter and process to be manipulated, but as something to be respected and nurtured. He also recognized the limits of science and he found a place for the unknown beyond. Dr. Pascal confesses to Clotilde, the niece with whom he falls in love in the novel:

I am full of doubts, I tremble at the idea of my twentieth-century alchemy. I am beginning to think that it would be better and far wiser to allow evolution to go its own way.²⁹

Don’t you understand that to want to cure everything, regenerate everything, is a false ambition, inspired by our own egoism, a rebellion against life, which we declare to be evil, because our judgment is falsified by self-interest? I am convinced that I am more serene, that my vision covers a wider field, that my brain works better, since I have learned to respect evolution.³⁰

For Zola, respecting evolution was equivalent to respecting nature as a given. He was a firm believer that the only knowledge of the world comes

²⁷ Zola, *Doctor Pascal*, p. 170.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 253, 73. At the end of the novel *Rome*, there are sweeping denunciations of the Catholic Church and a panegyric of science as sovereign and sweeping all before it. Zola, *Rome*, pp. 455, 456-57, 459.

²⁹ Zola, *Doctor Pascal*, pp. 166, 167.

³⁰ *Ibid.* Earlier in the passage, Dr. Pascal says, “Correct nature, interfere, modify and venture to disturb its balance, can one justify such an objective? ... Perhaps it is right and we who are on the wrong track. Perhaps we are running the risk of killing love, genius, life itself” (p. 166). “His faith in life had become intensified, so much so that he now believed that life was omniscient as well as all-powerful, that it alone, unaided, was able to ensure health and strength” (p. 170).

through the senses. Our senses are indeed fallible. So, while it is possible that the world does not exist, this would be the “way of madness,” which he utterly rejects. “Can’t you see,” he asks Clotilde, “if you abolish nature, any form of order becomes impossible, that the only reason for living is to love life, to love it, to concentrate all the forces of our intelligence on arriving at a better understanding of it?”³¹

It is not coincidental that the last word in the novel is given to Clotilde after Pascal’s death. Dr. Pascal had cured her of the “delusion of religion,”³² but not of a belief in “the eternal question of the beyond.” Zola sees everything fused in her. He writes:

At this turning point in history, super-saturated with science, distressed at the havoc it had wrought, apprehensive at the approach of the new century, terrified of advancing further and intent on retreating into the past, she represented a happy mean, a passion for truth complemented by a concern for the unknown. Whilst the sectarian scientist, solely preoccupied with phenomena, barred the horizon, it was given to a simple creature like herself to strike an even balance between what she did not know and what she would never know.³³

SALVATION THROUGH LOVE

When Clotilde leaves him, Pascal tries to drown his pain in work but fails. He cries out: “Was he whose existence had been devoured by incessant scientific labors, who considered work the mainspring of life, to be forced to come to the conclusion that to love and to be loved was more important than anything else in the world?”³⁴ From now on Zola’s novels will be taken up with the theme of salvation through human love as well as with his perennial interest in the nature of truth and work. The two major and final series of novels that he composed after *Doctor Pascal* are occupied with these themes. Love of life and love as he understood it became the

³¹ Ibid., p. 71.

³² Ibid., p. 145.

³³ Ibid., p. 286.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 236.

supreme value in his work.³⁵ Curiously his biographers only allude to this in passing, dismissively characterizing these works as “prophetic.”³⁶

Pascal refers to his “boundless faith in life.”³⁷ He speaks of the five branches of the Rougon-Macquart family tree as “filled with life, eternal life.”³⁸ Life with all its evil is to be celebrated:

Those who believe in God should say to themselves that, if God does not strike down the wicked, it is because he sees creation as a whole, and does not descend to the particular.... It is impossible to avoid admiring the courage and indefatigability of mankind; and the love of life is stronger than anything.³⁹

Essentially, Doctor Pascal’s only faith was his faith in life. Life was the unique manifestation of the divine. Life was God, the great motive power, the soul of the universe.⁴⁰

Salvation through life and love was to be the core of the “new religion.” When in the novel *Rome* Abbé Pierre’s book is rejected, he exclaims: “Oh! I cannot resign myself, my hope of salvation by the practice of love cannot die, and I shall answer my denouncers in a new book, in which I shall tell in what new soil the new religion will grow up.”⁴¹ It seems that the love that he intends is of two kinds, a universal love for the poor and the passionate love between husband and wife. The first is referred to in the novel *Rome* where Abbé speaks of “a Christian love for the lowly and

³⁵ Love had not been absent in his previous work. After *L'Assommoir* he wrote a gentle love story, *Le Page d'Amour* (A Love Episode), but it did not meet with the success of his more brutal novels. Bernard, *Zola*, p. 65.

³⁶ Vizetelly places the beginning of his role of reformer after *L'Assommoir* (1877), Vizetelly, *Zola*, p. 182.

³⁷ Zola, *Doctor Pascal*, p. 86.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34. Dr. Pascal loses faith in the physicians’ power to heal, but “he was so in love with life that he was left with unlimited faith in life alone, convinced that life was the only source of health and strength” (p. 253).

⁴¹ Zola, *Rome*, p. 236 Again at the end of the novel: “He [Abbé Pierre] would never submit, would never be able to resign himself and kill his hope in salvation by love, but would rather reply by a fresh book, in which he would say in what new soil the new religion would spring up” (p. 453).

the wretched.”⁴² It is the second that concerns us and relates particularly to the novel *Fécondité*.

THE FAMILY AND PROCREATION

Placing his faith in the science of heredity meant that family, both the nuclear and extended family, was central to Zola’s concerns. Procreation was a given. Where other romantic novelists immersed themselves in the drama of love or the lack of it in a married couple, fidelity and procreation were at the forefront of Zola’s understanding of conjugal relations. He himself, apart from the one lapse, was faithful to his wife. In fact, he prided himself on his chastity.⁴³ Through his alter ego Sandoz he explained to the artist Claude (reputedly modeled on his childhood friend, the artist Cezanne) his “middle class ideas” on marriage:

He considered [marriage] an indispensable condition for good work, substantial orderly labor among great modern producers. The theory of woman being a destructive creature—one who killed an artist, pounded his heart and fed upon his brain—was a romantic idea against which facts protested.⁴⁴

In this regard he differed from many nineteenth-century novelists, most of whom the historian Rudolf Binion characterizes as anti-family.⁴⁵ In his exhaustive survey of this anti-family literature, Binion ascribes a major cause of it to contraception.⁴⁶

⁴² Zola, *Rome*, p. 250.

⁴³ Bernard, *Zola*, p. 71.

⁴⁴ Emile Zola, *His Masterpiece* (Dover NH: The Alan Sutton Publishing Co., 1986), pp. 147-48. Zola’s first successful novel, *Thérèse Raquin*, is a chilling indictment of adultery ending in murder and suicide.

⁴⁵ Rudolf Binion, *Past Impersonal: Group Process in Human History* (DeKalb IL: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 2005), p. 26. Binion includes Zola’s novel *The Earth* among these anti-family novels because of his exposition of degeneration resulting from heredity (p. 21), but he acknowledges that the heroine acts out of “a deep family sentiment stronger than hatred or the need for revenge” (p. 23).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26: “The first place to look for an answer [to this anti-family literature] is in the family itself, to see whether something did not change radically in those same years. And something there did change radically. For those were the years when conjugal birth control first spread throughout the European population as

Zola, on the contrary, considered procreation an essential component of the conjugal act. In *Doctor Pascal*, when Clotilde becomes pregnant, he exclaims: “What bliss! A new life was the only thing really worth creating!”⁴⁷ Clotilde says that she is well aware of his ideas that “if a child is not wanted, the act of love is useless and ignoble.” She knows that Pascal throws away novels that consider the child an interference in love.⁴⁸

She [Clotilde herself] was continually astonished and indignant when she found that stories and novels about love were never concerned with the child. No provision was made for the child and when, by chance, he came along and complicated the love interest, it was a catastrophe, a cause for dismay and considerable embarrassment. It never seemed to lovers when they possessed each other, that they were vehicles for life and that a child might be born.⁴⁹

She goes on to say that from her studies in natural history she had learned that nature was solely concerned with the fruit and took “every precaution” to ensure the preservation of the seed and the mother giving birth:

Man, on the contrary, had discarded the very thought of the fruit. The hero’s sex drive in refined novels was merely a lust-machine. They worshiped each other, took each other, left each other, endured a thousand deaths, embraced, unleashed a tempest of social evils, all just for a few moments of pleasure, violating all natural laws, without even seeming to realize that making love was preliminary to begetting children. It was indecent and utterly stupid.⁵⁰

This paragraph has been quoted extensively because it epitomizes well Zola’s attitude towards life, love, and procreation that he will expound more fully in the first of his four “gospels,” *Fécondite* or *Fruitfulness*.

FÉCONDITE (FRUITFULNESS)

Zola’s novels *Lourdes*, *Rome*, and *Paris* (usually referred to as “the three

a whole.”

⁴⁷ Zola, *Doctor Pascal*, p. 245.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 168-69.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

cities”⁵¹) and later the “four gospels” (*Fruitfulness, Work, Truth and Justice*, which was never finished) enshrine his proposal of a “new religion” designed first to reform and then to replace Christianity. *Fécondité* is the first of the four gospels, and in it he proclaims the absolute primacy of life as the fruit of conjugal love, condemning contraception, abortion, and Malthus’s theory of overpopulation. Fertility for Zola also encompasses the mother nursing her own child. The novel was written during his enforced exile in England in 1898 due to the Dreyfus Affair.

The novel contrasts a couple who welcome a large family in which the mother nurses each child with several Parisian couples who restrict the size of their families through various means, including contraception and abortion, and who refuse to nurse the one or two children who are born. Vizetelly, Zola’s biographer, friend and publisher in English, writes that the subject of fruitfulness had “long haunted him.” He was deeply concerned about the depopulation of France and deplored the “whole tendency of the times...to transform matrimony into legalized prostitution, in accordance with certain specious neo-Malthusian theories.”⁵² He believed that without reform there could be no social regeneration. Vizetelly summed up Zola’s view:

Fruitfulness...created the home, whence sprang the city, and from the idea of citizenship that of the fatherland proceeded. There could be no nation unless there were fruitfulness, which became then a first national duty.⁵³

Writing the novel Zola considered part of his own national duty.⁵⁴

Among the several themes that *Fécondité* takes up, in this paper I want to focus especially on Zola’s treatment of the population question, which he refers to as neo-malthusianism, morality, feminine beauty, nursing, and wet-nursing.

⁵¹ These took up the three theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity, all of which Zola found wanting, necessitating in his view four new virtues for the salvation of mankind.

⁵² Vizetelly, *Emile Zola*, p. 495.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 496.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 498.

To the hero of *Fécondité*, Matthew Fremont, “this question of the birthrate seemed to him a frightful one, to be the foremost of all questions deciding the destiny of mankind and the world.” He felt somewhat ashamed of his own four children (eventually he had twelve), but within him was “his faith in life, his belief that the greatest possible sum of life must bring about the greatest sum of happiness.”⁵⁵ He believed that the nation that “no longer had faith in life must be dangerously ill.” And he noted the endorsement of neo-malthusian views by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.⁵⁶ He declared:

In France...we are going backward, we are marching towards annihilation. The population of France was once a fourth of the population of Europe, but now it is only one-eighth. In a century or two Paris will be dead like ancient Athens and ancient Rome, and we shall have fallen to the rank Greece now occupies. Paris seems determined to die.⁵⁷

Zola puts in the mouth of Seguin towards the end of the novel all the neo-malthusian arguments. Seguin, who was angry with his wife for bearing a third child and who wrecked his home by gambling away his fortune, stands in contrast to Matthew who had bought up Seguin’s hereditary estate in order to support his wife and large family.⁵⁸ The ruined lives of the characters in the novel, who had resorted to various stratagems to avoid another birth, from condoning the husband’s sexual infidelity to contraception, abortion, and even infanticide, are the main arguments that the novelist uses to make the case against Malthus’s theories.

As a novelist, Zola’s primary concern is not with morality except insofar as it destroys life and love.⁵⁹ For example, Beauchene’s affair with one of his factory workers results in the destruction of his marriage, the

⁵⁵ Emile Zola, *Fruitfulness*, trans. and ed. Ernest Alfred Vizetelly (New York NY: Doubleday Page & Co. 1900), p. 15.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 350-51.

⁵⁹ Zola does not ignore the immorality of bringing children into the world without taking care of them. Not to do so is to be “guilty of criminal improvidence.” *Ibid.*, p. 112.

abandonment of his child, a life of prostitution for the girl, and ultimately murder. As an artist Zola has a much greater concern for the perversion of feminine beauty that these anti-values bring about. Seraphine, a Parisian sophisticate, believes that “maternity poisoned love, aged woman, and made her a horror in the eyes of man.”⁶⁰ Valentine, Seguin’s wife, consciously adopted masculine ways.⁶¹ The writer Santerre has a theory that all physical beauty belongs to virgins only. Matthew considers such views “thoroughly imbecile.” He points out that the contemporary standard of French beauty is a slim, almost angular figure, whereas Rubens, Titian, and Rafael painted robust figures and their madonnas have a motherly air.⁶² Matthew later passes a theater with a poster of “a carroty wench with a long flat figure destitute of all womanliness, and seemingly symbolical of perversity.”⁶³ He concludes: “manners and customs, our notions of what is moral and what is not, our very conception of what is beautiful in life—all must be changed.”⁶⁴ He proposes that if the idea of feminine beauty changed, it might affect depopulation.⁶⁵ He puts forth his own idea of feminine maternal beauty:

A mother, is she not the symbol of all grandeur, all beauty? She represents the eternity of life. She deserves a social culture, she should be religiously venerated. When we know how to worship motherhood, our country will be saved.... I should like a mother feeding her babe to be adopted as the highest expression of feminine beauty.... Wherever that fashion prevails, we shall be the sovereign nation, the masters of the world.⁶⁶

There is no more glorious blossoming, no more sacred symbol of living eternity than an infant at his mother’s breast. It is like a prolongation of maternity’s travail, when the mother continues giving herself to her babe, offering him the

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 45.

⁶² Ibid., p. 42.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 53.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 42.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 148.

fountain of life that shall make him a man.⁶⁷

When Norine decides to keep her second out of wedlock baby after she begins to nurse it, Matthew tells her, “You have saved him and now he saves you.”

The novel itself is an indictment of the contemporary widespread practice of wet-nursing. Either a wet nurse was brought into the home or the infant was sent to a wet nurse in the country for one or two years. If the desire was to get rid of it completely, the euphemism was used “until the first communion.” The latter was a virtual death sentence for the child. Boutan, the doctor in the novel, seeks to end the practice of farming out the infants to wet-nurses at the same time that he acts as a go-between. He says that to send a child away is almost certain death and that bringing a wet-nurse into the house is a cause of many evils that are graphically depicted in the novel.⁶⁸ This theme allows Zola to expose the wet-nursing business in Paris and its role in an anti-life, anti-family mentality. Unfortunately in France certain ecclesiastical circles fostered the wet-nursing business as a way to “protect” the marriage bed. Vizetelly himself reviewed many of the documents on which the novel is based and declared: “Far from *Fécondité* being an exaggerated picture, it did not represent more than two-thirds of the actual truth.”⁶⁹

The practice of wet-nursing goes back to the Middle Ages in France where it was much more widespread than in other European countries, extending throughout the social scale in cities such as Paris and Lyons. The increase in births, brought about by the absence of the period of amenorrhea occasioned by breast-feeding, stimulated a greater interest in contraception, especially after the French Revolution. Questions were posed to Rome by French clergy on the licitness of *coitus interruptus* or withdrawal. Later in 1853 a new question arose, namely, the use of a

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 104.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 147, 148.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

condom.⁷⁰ The whole issue of the wet nursing business in France is one that warrants treatment in another paper. Suffice it to say that the link between contraception, abortion, and the abandonment of maternal nursing is clear and not necessarily solved by recourse to artificial bottle feeding.

Zola seeks to present the greatest possible contrast between the anti-life mentality of his Parisian characters and Matthew and his wife, Marianne. Zola compares the “death, darkness, shame and crime” of the former with Marianne’s maternity:

Here was holy suffering that led to joy and pride, hope and trustfulness in the coming future. One single being born, a poor wee bare creature, raising the faint cry of a fledgling, and life’s immense treasure was increased and eternity insured.⁷¹

Matthew comments on the lack of true love in both Beauchene and Seguin:

They have never glowed with the supreme desire, the divine desire which is the world’s very soul, the brazier of eternal life. And that explains everything. Without desire there is no love, no courage, no hope. By love alone can one create. And if love be restricted in its mission there is but failure.... It is desire and love that save. Whoever loves and creates is the revolutionary savior, the maker of men for the new world which will shortly dawn.⁷²

CONCLUSION

What do Zola and his novel tell us for today? Zola’s atheism vitiates his understanding of the gift of life and love and his total rejection of

⁷⁰ John T. Noonan, Jr. *Contraception: A History of its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 396-400.

⁷¹ Zola, *Fécondité*, p. 104.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 189. The omissions were intentional to protect the novel from obscenity charges in England.

consecrated celibacy.⁷³ Nevertheless, his novels are a testimony to natural law and the goodness of life and love. Chaste feminine, especially maternal, beauty aroused his awe and reverence. "Salvation through love" became a watchword for him. Ultimately his "new religion" and philosophy of life and love are bankrupt because they are not grounded in God as Creator and in Jesus Christ as redeemer.⁷⁴ Zola denied any truth beyond the experimentally verifiable. Faith for him was simply an illusion, yet necessary to sustain the multitude.⁷⁵ As a secular saint—his remains were finally removed to the Pantheon in 1908—he is lauded for his early novels and castigated for his later works, which are derisively referred to as belonging to his "prophetic" period.⁷⁶ Atavism, which is a form of

⁷³ He expresses harsh criticism of consecrated celibacy in his account of the death of Bernadette in *Lourdes*. "It was life which menaced her, and it was life which she cast out, in the same way as she denied life when she reserved to the Celestial Bridegroom her tortured crucified womanhood. That dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which her dream had come to strengthen, was a blow dealt by the Church to woman, both wife and mother. To decree that woman is only worthy of worship on condition that she be a virgin, to imagine this virgin to be herself born without sin, is this not an insult to Nature, the condemnation of life, the denial of womanhood, whose true greatness consists in perpetuating life?"

⁷⁴ Zola seemed to have an intuitive understanding of the value of suffering. In *Doctor Pascal*, he has the protagonist, who desperately desired a child, say: "The more he suffered, the more consoling it would have been, in the light of his boundless faith in life, to have been able to hand down that suffering" (p. 86). Zola recognized the role of pain in redemption. In *Lourdes*, when discussing the suffering of Bernadette, he exclaims, "Jesus died in three days, but a longer agony fell to her, who again brought redemption by pain, who died to give others life." Yet he revolts against it. "How absurd that in the eternal evolution of worlds, it should be necessary for this poor being to be tortured! ... Where is the reason in this useless cruelty, in this revolting glorification of suffering, when from the whole of humanity there ascends but one desperate longing for health and happiness? Zola, *Lourdes*, pp. 478, 479.

⁷⁵ Again in *Lourdes* he writes: "Where was the man hard enough, cruel enough, to prevent the lowly from believing, to rob them of the consolation of the supernatural, the hope that God troubled Himself about them, that He held a better life in His paradise for them?" Zola, *Lourdes*, p. 484.

⁷⁶ In a certain sense, Zola is a tragic figure. He was unable to find a home either in faith or science. In this he represents the drama of his age. He finally sought refuge in a new kind of paganism that worshiped youth, health, and physical

Darwinism, informed his early novels. In other words, they also have an ideological foundation, but one that is acceptable to the modern secular mentality. His commitment to truth as he saw it—he took a heroic stand in opposing anti-semitism in the Dreyfus case—led him to write the truly prophetic but unpopular novel on population, love, and procreation *Fécundité*.

beauty.

