

Naturalism Redressed

Identity and Clothing in the Novels of Emile Zola

Hannah Thompson



LEGENDA

European Humanities Research Centre
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NOTE ON THE TEXT



References to Emile Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* novels are to *Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*, ed. Henri Mitterand, 5 vols. (Paris: Pléiade/NRF, 1960–7), abbreviated as *RM*. References to his complete works are to *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. Henri Mitterand, 15 vols. (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1966–70), abbreviated as *OC*.

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INTRODUCTION



Miette écarta sa pelisse, qui était piquée à petits losanges, et doublée d'une indienne rouge sang; puis elle jeta un pan de ce chaud et large manteau sur les épaules de Silvère, l'enveloppant ainsi tout entier, le mettant avec elle, serré contre elle, dans le même vêtement. Ils passèrent mutuellement un bras autour de leur taille pour ne faire qu'un. Quand ils furent ainsi confondus en un seul être, quand ils se trouvèrent enfouis dans les plis de la pelisse au point de perdre toute forme humaine, ils se mirent à marcher à petits pas, se dirigeant vers la route, traversant sans crainte les espaces nus du chantier, blancs de lune. Miette avait enveloppé Silvère, et celui-ci s'était prêté à cette opération, d'une façon toute naturelle comme si la pelisse leur eût, chaque soir, rendu le même service. (RM, i. 17)

La Fortune des Rougon (1871) is the first volume of Emile Zola's epic twenty-volume novel series, *Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*. As such it tells the story of the origins of Zola's famous family. It is a story of love, of greed, of revolution, of betrayal, of death. It is the story of the difference between the legitimate Rougon branch and the illegitimate Macquart branch of the family, a story which both explains and announces the fate, much later on in the series, of such well-known protagonists as Gervaise Macquart (*L'Assommoir*), Etienne Lantier (*Germinal*) and the eponymous Nana. As the first novel in the series, it has rightly been read as the cornerstone of Zola's fictional universe, as it holds the seeds of the family saga which will unfold over the next twenty or so years.¹ Yet beyond this familiar late nineteenth-century fascination with the drama of the family (a fascination recently charted by Nicholas White)² it is also the beginning of the story of the role assigned to items of clothing in the playing out of this drama.

The extraordinary scene of concealment and disguise with which this book (and the series) begins is found in the first chapter of *La Fortune des Rougon* and announces the importance of clothing in the *Rougon-Macquart* novels. As Miette envelops Silvère in her cloak, the

reader is asked to adopt a way of reading which privileges the significance of references to clothes, costume and dress throughout the series.³ At first, we are presented with little more than a faithful reconstruction of the quaint Provençal custom whereby unmarried couples wrapped themselves up in a large *pelisse* in order that their courting proceed undetected.⁴ According to the strict moral codes upheld in Miette's and Silvère's home town, Plassans (Zola's fictionalized version of Aix-en-Provence), young couples could not be seen exchanging any kind of physical affection prior to their marriage. Hiding beneath the voluminous *pelisse* was one way of spending time together whilst avoiding the prying eyes and wagging tongues of the town gossips. Zola's nostalgic discussion of this widespread local custom reads like an extract from a history book which informs the uninitiated reader of the lives and loves of 'les garçons et les filles du peuple' (*RM*, i. 18). However, the text's insistence on this seemingly unimportant vestimentary detail is out of proportion to its apparent insignificance and cannot, therefore, simply be explained by the author's nostalgic evocation of regional tradition. As the young lovers cover themselves in Miette's cloak, it becomes more than a practical means of ensuring their privacy. Their dependence on the *pelisse* elevates it to a necessary part of their relationship, the means by which their mutual desire is both aroused and sustained:

Et ce qu'il y a d'exquis, ce qui donne une volupté pénétrante aux baisers échangés, ce doit être la certitude de pouvoir s'embrasser impunément devant le monde, de rester des soirées en public aux bras l'un de l'autre, sans courir le danger d'être reconnus et montrés au doigt. (*RM*, i. 18)

The illicit—because pre-marital—encounter between Miette and Silvère is both enabled and rendered exciting through its transgression of societal dictates. Given that such transgression is only made possible by their innovative use of the *pelisse*, this particular item of clothing plays an integral part in their relationship. From its first evocation in *La Fortune des Rougon*, the *pelisse* is invested with a subversive erotic significance through its association with moments of transgressive desire: it is transformed into the site (and sight) of desire by Miette's unexpected use of it. Miette's *pelisse* is the first of many items of extraordinary, unexpected, or what I will refer to as 'excessive' clothing found throughout the *Rougon-Macquart*. In subsequent chapters of this study, the association between excessive clothing and

transgressive desire announced by Miette's *pelisse*, and the far-reaching implications of such an association for the Zolian text, will be examined in detail.

Miette's and Silvère's private transgression of societal norms is paralleled by an act of political transgression which also depends on their deployment of the *pelisse*. The episode with which *La Fortune des Rougon* opens takes place on the evening of Sunday, 7 December 1851, five days after Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's *coup d'état*, which will eventually lead to his proclamation as Emperor Napoléon III on 2 December 1852. As Silvère prepares to leave Miette in order to follow a band of republican insurgents, the *pelisse* is invested with a layer of symbolic, even mythic value. In a gesture whose historical associations are understood by protagonists and reader alike, Miette transforms her cloak into a symbol of revolution as she pledges to follow her beloved:

Elle retira vivement sa pelisse, qu'elle remit ensuite, après l'avoir tournée du côté de la doublure rouge. Alors elle apparut, dans la blanche clarté de la lune, drapée d'un large manteau de pourpre qui lui tombait jusqu'aux pieds. [...] A ce moment, elle fut la vierge Liberté. (*RM*, i. 35)

Miette's action elevates her to the status of allegory, reminding the reader of Delacroix's image of revolution in his 1830 painting 'Le 28 juillet 1830: La liberté guidant le peuple'. Although, unlike Miette, Delacroix's Liberty is not dressed in red, they are both framed by the red of the *tricolore*.⁵ Zola's deployment of the same item of clothing in apparently unrelated scenes of private desire and public revolution inextricably links these very different scenes in the mind of the reader. As subsequent chapters of this study will show, the scenes of transgressive desire depicted in the *Rougon-Macquart* novels cannot be dissociated either from the politically and morally degenerate Second Empire in which they occur or from Zola's retrospective commentary on this regime.

These two striking scenes show that Miette's *pelisse* has the ability to signify differently as it is worn differently. Just as the *pelisse* itself is made up of different layers of material—an outer material, 'piquée de petits losanges', and an inner lining, 'une indienne rouge sang'—so textual references to it operate on a number of levels. Several layers of meaning are carried in the folds of Miette's *pelisse*, demonstrating that the items of clothing found within the Zolian narrative function as a necessarily multi-layered system of signs, and that the *pelisse* itself can be read as the emblem of this process.

Yet if the *pelisse* at once arouses the desire of the protagonists and stimulates the interpretative skills of the reader, it simultaneously frustrates the desire to 'tout voir, tout savoir, tout dire' (OC, ix. 351) which is the dream of the writer (and reader) of the Naturalist text. When Miette and Silvère are wrapped up in their *pelisse* their identity is hidden from the gaze of the inquisitive observer. Their innovative use of costume transforms them into an unidentifiable mass, the ultimate assault on the all-seeing narrator and a troubling presence within a text purportedly so concerned with transparency and insight. Underneath the *pelisse* the identities of Miette and Silvère remain intact, yet although the knowledge of their identity exists, any visual evidence of it is suppressed. Their reality beneath the *pelisse* does not wholly coincide with their appearance. In this episode, the *pelisse* simultaneously functions as a sign to be read and interpreted, and as a mask which clouds the vision of both narrator and reader. For the reader, evoked in *La Fortune des Rougon* in the figure of 'le promeneur attardé' (RM, i. 18–19), the desire to know and recognize is simultaneously aroused and frustrated by the presence of the *pelisse*. In a challenge to the expected 'fonction classificatoire' of clothing (that is, to delineate difference and to reveal particular characteristics of the wearer) the *pelisse* complicates the reading process by blurring the very differences upon which readerly understanding traditionally relies.⁶ The *pelisse* is emblematic of a system of signs which denies simple interpretation whilst encouraging multi-layered extrapolation. As well as introducing the reader to the *Rougon-Macquart* novels, *La Fortune des Rougon* therefore also alerts the careful reader to the complex functions which items of clothing fulfil within the Zolian text. In the chapters which follow, the implications of such items of clothing—of which the *pelisse* is the emblematic example—for the kind of Naturalism traditionally associated with the *Rougon-Macquart* will be examined at length.

Zolian Naturalism is traditionally defined as a scientific method of investigation which is based on the objective observation of external reality and which takes as its object of study the often negative impact of the natural and social environment on the lives of men and women.⁷ Such definitions, which are often based on Zola's theoretical writings on Naturalism, notably the essay *Le Roman expérimental* (OC, x. 1143–1203), may remain useful as a means of identifying and differentiating certain aspects of late nineteenth-century fiction, but

can no longer be used to characterize Zola's fiction. No overarching set of defining characteristics can do justice to the breadth and depth of Zola's writing as exemplified in the *Rougon-Macquart* novels. Indeed, recent accounts of Zolian Naturalism have largely discredited those definitions of Naturalism which make no distinction between Zola's theoretical justifications of his approach to fiction and the kind of novelistic Naturalism exemplified in the *Rougon-Macquart*. Henri Mitterand has persuasively shown that there are in fact 'trois naturalismes différents' within the Zolian œuvre: Zola's theoretical treatises, the intertext created by the literary and scientific sources which Zola refers to in 1868 and 1869 when composing the plans for the *Rougon-Macquart*, and the novels themselves. For Mitterand these three aspects of Zola's work must be considered separately in order to avoid what he refers to as 'les contre-sens qui se sont installés dans la tradition pédagogique et dans le langage de la critique au jour le jour'.⁸ Thus although *Le Roman expérimental*, along with Zola's other theoretical writings on Naturalism, can provide a useful theoretical comparison to the *Rougon-Macquart* novels it should be read with care. The theoretical approach it expresses—described by Mitterand as 'une excroissance momentanée'—cannot be considered a faithful representation of Zola's novelistic approach: as commentators have shown, Zola's theoretical writings on Naturalism sit extremely uneasily alongside the reality of his fiction.⁹ Indeed, in recent years, critics have tended to agree that the impossibility of establishing a Naturalist poetics renders any rigid delineation of the characteristics of Naturalist fiction both difficult and undesirable.¹⁰ Rather than attempting an all-encompassing discussion of Naturalism, modern scholars choose to concentrate on a number of its more interesting and illuminating aspects and this is the approach I shall be adopting in the present volume. Thus René-Pierre Colin divides his discussion into sections dealing with 'l'objectivité', 'l'hérédité' and 'le pessimisme', and, in her readings of *L'Assommoir* and *Germinal*, Halina Suwala privileges 'le principe de l'impersonnalité', the drive to render the narrator not absent but invisible which she sees as one of the defining features of Zola's Naturalism.¹¹ In Chapter 2 we shall see how Zola's use of metaphors of clothing belies the apparent impartiality of the Naturalist narrator.

These approaches suggest that far from exhibiting a set of homogenous characteristics, Zola's writing can be characterized by its diversity, even by its contradictions. As Mitterand forcefully argues:

il faudrait enfin admettre la multiplicité féconde de ses pentes et ses codes: réaliste et onirique, documentaire et mythique, rationaliste et mystique, tragique et carnavalesque, optimiste et désespéré, cohérent et inconséquent, et même, tout à la fois, classique, moderne... et postmoderne.

One of the principal aims of this study is to offer a timely re-evaluation of the nature of Zola's novelistic universe and the parameters of his artistic vision. In the same work, Mitterand defines Zolian Naturalism as a reflection on the relationship between art and reality: clothes in the Zolian text are one of the means by which this relationship is explored and negotiated.¹²

Zola's investment in the signifying power of clothes, costume and dress reveals that his writing combines a fascination with some of Naturalism's more traditional elements with a problematization, even a refutation, of them. One such element is the privileging of vision over the other senses in the Naturalist's depiction of the world. For Philippe Hamon, the Zolian narrator is not content with surface appearance and can be characterized by his desire to see (and say) everything:

la volonté d'aller *sous* le réel, derrière le réel, arracher une vérité derrière des masques ou apparences trompeuses. La métaphore du 'déshabillage' du personnage apparaîtra fréquemment chez Zola, nous le verrons, notamment en accompagnement de la thématique du commérage et du cancan.¹³

Hamon implies that layers of clothing offer no resistance to the novelist's desire to see and know all. Yet this trust placed in the power of vision by both Zola and Hamon is paradoxically denied by Miette's *pelisse*. As we have seen, the *pelisse* is an instrument of dissimulation as well as revelation. In the course of the present volume, it will become clear that clothes, costume and dress all play a central part in the negation of the inquiring gaze of the figure, associated with both reader and novelist, of the *regardeur-voyeur*.¹⁴

The piercing gaze of the *regardeur-voyeur* is frequently deployed in order to distinguish between the sexes: for gender difference is another element which is traditionally considered central to Zola's novelistic universe. Hamon has convincingly shown that the *Rougon-Macquart* series is predicated on a logically structured system of characters who are clearly differentiated by gender.¹⁵ However, when Miette and Silvère are wearing the *pelisse*, their genders can no longer be clearly differentiated by the external observer. Not only does the *pelisse* legitimize a forbidden, because premarital, non-fertile liaison

between Miette and Silvère, it also blurs the identities—particularly the gender identities—of its wearers, thus providing an important link between instable gender identities and ‘perverse’ sexualities.¹⁶ Indeed, according to Hamon’s account, the presence of the *pelisse* would run counter to the very systems which structure the novel series.

For Zola, the Rougon-Macquart family, and the series of novels charting this family, can only multiply through a series of heterosexual, procreative relationships which guarantee the five generations of the Rougon-Macquart family tree. In addition, Zola’s well-documented celebration of fertility, which reaches its height in the 1899 novel *Fécondité*, demonstrates that procreation should be listed among the characteristics of a sexually normal relationship.¹⁷ Much work within the field of Zola studies has already been devoted to manifestations of various forms of ‘perverse sexuality’ within the *Rougon-Macquart*.¹⁸ Despite the widespread interest in this aspect of Zola’s work, little or no attempt has been made to explore the association between manifestations of ‘perverse sexuality’ and a thematics of clothing and then between these two elements and a wider re-evaluation of Zolian Naturalism. In the present study I offer a sustained investigation of the role which representations of clothes, costume and dress play in the articulation of alternative economies of desire and in the construction of gender identities and sexualities. Although I will not be focusing primarily on the moral implications of Zola’s position, it is important nonetheless to note that his depictions of sexuality and gender identity are not without a certain procreational bias. Any challenge found within the novel series to the gender binaries upon which sexual normality depends can thus be read either as a knowing condemnation of certain sexual mores (as Robert Lethbridge has shown is the case in *La Curée*, for example),¹⁹ or, more interestingly, as an intriguing inconsistency within Zola’s fiction. Such an example can be seen in the opening pages of the cycle. Although the text insists on the differentiated gender identities of Miette and Silvère (indeed this is the reason why they need to hide under the cloak in the first place), it simultaneously allows their differences to be erased under the folds of the *pelisse*.

This blurring of gender identities, seemingly unthinkable within Zola’s investment in heterosexual reproductive relationships, finds an initially surprising point of comparison in late twentieth-century Queer Theory. In a recent overview of gay and lesbian studies in French, Queer Theory is defined as ‘a mode of thinking and reading

that destabilizes identities and categories by inverting perceived sexual and gender hierarchies', offering 'a way of understanding gender less as a function of knowledge than as a perpetually reinvented form of cultural performance'.²⁰ For reasons which will become apparent in the course of this book, it is the deconstructive elements of Queer Theory, its investment in the inversion of previously accepted structures, that I find most fruitful in the context of a re-reading of the Zolian œuvre. In the present study I will draw on the work of leading Queer Theorists, primarily Judith Butler, to suggest how certain items of clothing can function in the Zolian text to undermine the investment in fixed gender binaries which appears to structure the novel series. As I discuss in Chapter 4, for Zola, in the *Rougon-Macquart* series (as well as in late nineteenth-century France more generally) the referents 'man', 'male' and 'masculine', as well as the entities to which they refer, must remain clearly delineated from their binary opposites 'woman', 'female' and 'feminine'. As Butler points out, within compulsory heterosexuality 'gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealisation of the heterosexual bond'.²¹ Any confusion of these gendered opposites within the text thus poses a challenge to the heterosexual reproductive economy on which the series (and the French nation) depends. By questioning the stability of binary gender identities, evocations of 'excessive' costume such as the *pelisse* suggest that binary gender identities, the apparent foundation of the naturalist novel, are merely naturalized, normalized impersonations. In other words, what is presented as natural by the Zolian text can, in fact, be shown to be nothing more than what Butler refers to in *Bodies that Matter* as a compulsory 'set of social imperatives' (p. 231). This is not to say, however, that clothes always change the gender of the wearer, nor that gender can be changed at will as one changes clothes. As Butler goes on to point out: 'I never did think that gender was like clothes or that clothes make the woman' (p. 231). Nonetheless in the wake of Butler's notion of gender performativity a number of studies have appeared which make simplistic and potentially problematic links between the clothes one wears and one's gender identity.²² Assertions such as 'if, as Judith Butler says, gender is performative, something we do, then it is certainly something that we do in the way that we dress', fail to take account of the complex relationship between clothing, specifically costume, and gender performativity, articulated both by

Butler, and, as the present study will suggest, by the Zolian text.²³ As Butler points out, 'in no sense can it be concluded that the part of gender that is performed is therefore the "truth" of gender' (p. 234). Clothing does not function in the *Rougon-Macquart* as a set of props revealing the truth of performed genders. It functions instead to highlight the gaps between various layers of appearance, between interconnecting surfaces, which point to the ultimate instability and uncertainty of all genders, and the consequent denormalization of sexuality and gender identity. Although certain readers of the *Rougon-Macquart*, such as Naomi Schor and Michel Berta, have begun to identify moments within the series where clothes can occasion gender confusion, such readings, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, do not necessarily situate this troubling of gender binaries within a more widespread deconstructive reading of the presentation of gender identity and sexuality within the series and the impact of such deconstructive practices on both traditional notions of Zola's Naturalism and his appraisal of the Second Empire. In contrast, the present study aims to reveal, through a reading of certain privileged moments of gender instability and sexual deviation, the author's fascination with those elements which are necessarily disruptive of the fixed social order.

Whilst the male/female binary is undoubtedly central to Zola's project, other binary pairs also structure the novel series. As my discussion of the *pelisse* has shown, the reader can only operate successfully when distinctions between surface and essence, nature and artifice, illusion and reality, revelation and disguise are clearly delineated. However, the presence of 'excessive' clothing can work to blur the binary oppositions outlined above. In an attempt to develop a reading strategy which allows access to those details of clothing responsible for the deconstruction of the Naturalist's binary structure, whilst at the same time maintaining a critical distance from the corpus, I draw on a number of different approaches to the detail in the text which mediate and supplement the deconstructive mechanisms of Queer Theory. Naomi Schor elaborates two ways of reading the detail in the text. For her, the process of reading for details (that is, looking closely at small but significant references to clothing) cannot be dissociated from the deconstructionist practice of reading in detail, that is, using these references to read against the overt message of the text.²⁴ For Schor, following Derrida, the detail in the text can provide the means of reading the text against itself, and can highlight

the gaps between what the text claims to be saying, and what is in fact being said. In the course of this study I will show how apparently insignificant details of clothing contain the possibility of deconstructing the Zolian text from within, revealing hitherto unsuspected layers of meaning which lead to a reappraisal of traditional definitions of Zolian Naturalism.

The potentially deconstructive power which Schor ascribes to certain details is apparently refuted by Roland Barthes's important article 'L'effet de réel'.²⁵ Rather than allowing for the disruptive potential of descriptive detail, Barthes suggests that apparently insignificant details function to assert the realism (or, in the case of Zola, the Naturalism) of the text in which they occur. He identifies the presence in 'tout récit occidental de type courant' of what he refers to as 'détails inutiles' (p. 81). These descriptive details, such as Mme Aubain's barometer in Flaubert's short story 'Un cœur simple', have, according to Barthes, traditionally been left unnoticed or unexplained by structuralist analysis. Despite his initial acknowledgement that certain of these 'détails inutiles' can fall outside the parameters of structuralist signification, Barthes's structuralist approach ultimately assumes that even the most apparently insignificant details cannot fail to signify. He wonders: 'tout, dans le récit, est-il signifiant, et sinon, s'il subsiste dans le syntagme narratif quelques pages insignifiantes, quelle est en définitive, si l'on peut dire, la signification de cette insignifiance?' (p. 83). Barthes takes Flaubert's description of Rouen in *Madame Bovary* as an example, arguing that this description, though having no structural or narrative function in the text, makes sense within the context of literary representation: 'son "sens" existe: il dépend de la conformité, non au modèle, mais aux règles culturelles de la représentation' (p. 85). Barthes goes on to suggest that in realist texts, these passages of pure description do not need to have any function of their own, or, rather, their only function is to simulate reality:

Tout cela dit que le 'réel' est réputé se suffire à lui-même, qu'il est assez fort pour démentir toute idée de 'fonction', que son énonciation n'a nul besoin d'être intégrée dans une structure et que l'*avoir-été-là* des choses est un principe suffisant de la parole. (p. 87)

Barthes's conclusion is that 'la carence même du signifié au profit du seul référent devient le signifiant même du réalisme: il se produit un *effet de réel*, fondement de ce vraisemblable inavoué qui forme

l'esthétique de toutes les œuvres courantes de la modernité' (p. 89). In other words, the apparently incidental descriptive detail functions to guarantee the realism of the text in which it appears.

Although Barthes does not refer explicitly to clothing in his article, the ornamental status of much of the clothing worn throughout the *Rougon-Macquart* aligns it with decorative items such as Mme Aubain's barometer. In the light of Barthes's influential article it is tempting, therefore, to read Zola's descriptions of those items of clothing which do not appear to fulfil any structural function within the *Rougon-Macquart* as nothing more than simple notations of the text's mimetic authenticity. However, Barthes's discussion of the 'effet de réel' is not as straightforward as it first appears. According to Barthes, the resistance of descriptive details to inclusion in a structuralist account of a text renders them 'scandaleuses' as they come to represent 'une sorte de *luxé* de la narration' (p. 82). Barthes's use of the imagery of transgression here is revealing: whilst reminding us of the 'excessive' potential of Miette's *pelisse*, it also suggests that any detail which exceeds the structuralist interpretative framework in some way is exciting, pleasurable, alluring. In *Le Plaisir du texte*, Barthes elaborates on the appeal of the excessive implied in 'L'effet de réel'. For Barthes, words gain a highly 'erotic' value by virtue of their excessive existence in the text:

Le mot peut être érotique à deux conditions opposées, toutes deux excessives: s'il est répété à outrance, ou au contraire s'il est inattendu, succulent par sa nouveauté (dans certains textes, des mots *brillent*, ce sont des apparitions distractives, incongrues—il importe peu qu'elles soient pédantes [...]). Dans les deux cas c'est la même physique de jouissance, le sillon, l'inscription, la syncope: ce qui est creusé, pilonné ou ce qui éclate, détonne.²⁶

Barthes's use of the notion of the *érotique* is specific to *Le Plaisir du texte*. In his treatise on textual pleasure, Barthes locates the *érotique*, that is the desire of the reader for the text, and of the text for the reader, in the mobile, fragile, almost indefinable *coupure* which exists at the meeting or intersection of opposites: 'la culture ni sa destruction ne sont érotiques; c'est la faille de l'une et de l'autre qui le devient' (p. 15). Following Barthes, my reading of Zola's novels situates their Barthesian 'erotic' identity, namely that which intrigues, fascinates, teases, in those words related to clothes, costumes and dress, and which are present to excess in the text. Rather than being read simply as a guarantee of the text's 'effet de réel', these words operate an