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Paradoxes of Self-Creation and Narrativity in the Symbolist Novel

The novel can only survive if it becomes something else than what is still called a novel.
(Huysmans 1905, p. 17)

Abstract: When the Symbolists and Decadents undertook to “break the Naturalist machine for novels”, they faced a major technical problem: how to continue to write novels without falling into the old Naturalist recipes? In their struggle against determinism, the new novelists first attacked traditional narrativity, then they deconstructed the characters and the logical background of their stories. Nevertheless, can we still talk about “novel” when a “single man in a tower surrounded by swamps” meditates on his states of mind and the best way to furnish his house, without ever going outside? The solution proposed by the Symbolists consisted in the elaboration of a “novel of the extreme conscience”, a philosophic-ontological genre that allows the grasping of the inner life of a subject that self-analyses and builds himself progressively. The purpose of this contribution is to demonstrate that the Symbolist novel has ended up engendering some new forms of modern self-reflection.

Keywords: self-creation; narrativity; Symbolist novel; Naturalism; Determinism; Édouard Dujardin; Remy de Gourmont; André Gide

In the last third of the nineteenth century, at the height of his glory, Émile Zola was a veritable “machine for novels”, publishing a new book of several hundred pages each year and gradually setting up the enormous construction of the *Rougon-Macquart. Natural and Social History of a Family under the Second Empire* (1871–93). His “experimental novel technique” (definition of a problem → working hypothesis → observation of the facts → experimentation → confirmation or reversal of the hypothesis → interpretation of the results and conclusion), as well as his legendary work ethic allowed him to reign over French letters, imposing on them a strict determinism, an unshakeable faith in progress and the use of “realistic” narrative forms, the most likely ones to “illustrate accurately mechanisms of human and social phenomena” (Zola 1880, p. 29).

In an interview published in 1891, Zola predicted that the future of literature would undoubtedly belong to the novel:¹

1 Translations of French literature are – unless stated otherwise – my own.

Wanting to do without the novel is a madness that only childish Symbolists can develop [...] The novel is the broadest, the strongest and the most convenient form of modern rhetoric. It has replaced the epic poem, and, for the moment, no genre can dethrone it. The one who wants to become popular, the one who wants to make money, the one who wants to spread a social propaganda, the one who wants to leave a lasting fame, they must all resort to the novel. (Gourcq 1891, p. 3)²

In his review of *Germinie Lacerteux*, a famous novel by the Goncourt brothers, Zola deepened this reflection when he linked the golden age of the novel to the development of the modern European subject:

This literature is one of the products of our society, which a nervous etherism constantly shakes. We are sick of progress, of industry, of science; we live in a fever, and we like to search the wounds, to descend always lower, eager to dissect the corpse of the human heart. Everything suffers, everything complains in the works of our time; nature is associated with our pain, the being tears itself apart and shows itself in its nakedness. The Goncourt brothers wrote for men today; their *Germinie* could not have lived in any other time than ours; she is the daughter of the century. (Zola 1906, p. 28)³

Although Zola basically accepted in his critical articles the traditional theory of Hippolyte Taine concerning the triad of factors that determine the nature of a literary work (“race – moment – environment”), the writer later added the author’s subject and his “sensitivity, his passions, his genius”. To some extent, he softened the black-and-white notion of “realistic writing” as an imprint of the external world, and admitted that the author’s self shapes and distorts the perceived reality:

the artist places himself in front of nature, [...] he copies it by interpreting it, [...] he is more or less real according to his eyes; in short, his mission is to return objects to us as he sees them, pressing on such and such a detail, creating anew. I will express all my thoughts by

2 “Vouloir se passer du roman, c’est une folie que seuls peuvent avoir les bambins du symbolisme [...] Le roman est la forme la plus ample, la plus forte et la plus commode de la rhétorique moderne. Il a remplacé le poème épique, et pour le moment aucun genre ne pourra le détrôner. Celui qui veut devenir populaire, celui qui veut gagner de l’argent, celui qui veut faire une propagande sociale, celui qui veut laisser une renommée durable, tous doivent recourir au roman.”

3 “Cette littérature est un des produits de notre société, qu’un éthérisme nerveux secoue sans cesse. Nous sommes malades de progrès, d’industrie, de science ; nous vivons dans la fièvre, et nous nous plaignons à fouiller les plaies, à descendre toujours plus bas, avides de disséquer le cadavre du cœur humain. Tout souffre, tout se plaint dans les ouvrages du temps ; la nature est associée à nos douleurs, l’être se déchire lui-même et se montre dans sa nudité. MM. de Goncourt ont écrit pour les hommes de nos jours ; leur *Germinie* n’aurait pu vivre à aucune autre époque que la nôtre ; elle est fille du siècle.”

saying that a work of art is a corner of creation seen through a temperament. (Zola 1906, p. 68)⁴

It is interesting to emphasise Zola's lifelong fluctuations in relation to modern subjectivity: At the beginning of his work (see previous quotations), the writer was still subject to the romantic notion of a creative genius who instils his own order and rules in the surrounding world. The greatest French novelist appeared to him to be Saint-Simon (1675–1755), a classicist memorialist to whom he would not dare to refer in the later stages of his thinking.

Towards the end of his life, Zola turned again to a certain “multiplication of perspectives” and, in addition to his own view of art (which he compared in a strange way to Wagner's), he began to admit completely different aesthetics, including the Decadent:

My books are labyrinths where you would find, looking closely, halls and sanctuaries, open places, secret places, dark corridors, lighted rooms. They are monuments: in a word, they are “composed”. But it's not for the sake of beauty. It's all about making life come alive, and I know that life is always a mystery. This is the mystery that serves as my leitmotif. I proceeded like Wagner, without knowing him much at first, and I think, like him, it was the feeling of life that led me to this process. I also use the harmonies obtained by returning phrases, and isn't that the best way to give sound to the silent meaning of things? Symbolist? I think I am. (Mitterand 1999, pp. 140–141)⁵

The moral of all this? Let's work, work. I am not yet old and soft enough to foolishly convince myself that nothing is true that I don't think. The best benefit of old age is enlightened indulgence, it is hope in a future which is no longer mine, but which still interests me, because I intend to live again among those whom I will never know, thanks to the love I al-

4 “l'artiste se place devant la nature, [...] il la copie en l'interprétant, [...] il est plus ou moins réel selon ses yeux ; en un mot il a pour mission de nous rendre les objets tels qu'il les voit, appuyant sur tel détail, créant à nouveau. J'exprimerai toute ma pensée en disant qu'une œuvre d'art est un coin de la création vu à travers un tempérament.”

5 “Mes livres sont des labyrinthes où vous trouveriez, en y regardant de près, des vestibules et des sanctuaires, des lieux ouverts, des lieux secrets, des corridors sombres, des salles éclairées. Ce sont des monuments : en un mot, ils sont “composés”. Mais ce n'est pas dans une vue de beauté. Il ne s'agit pour moi que de faire vivant, et je sais bien que la vie recèle toujours un mystère. C'est le mystère qui me sert de leitmotiv. J'ai procédé comme Wagner, sans beaucoup le connaître, au début, et je pense que, comme lui, c'est le sentiment de la vie qui m'a conduit à ce procédé. J'utilise aussi les harmonies obtenues par le retour des phrases, et n'est-ce pas le meilleur moyen de donner un son à la signification muette des choses ? Symboliste ? Je crois bien que je le suis.”

ways had for life, for youth, and thanks to my work. Do something that my comrades and I could never have done: I will be the first to applaud you. (Mitterand 1999, p. 149)⁶

However, at the height of his literary and critical career, which dates from about 1879 (the official formulation of the “experimental novel” theory) to 1885, Zola deliberately abandoned any glorification of an independent subject and reduced the writer to a scientist in the laboratory or even a measuring instrument. In Naturalism, characters in novels become – at least in theory – guinea pigs, which the writer marks with a certain genetic burden (alcoholism or ancestral madness) and then symbolically throws into social events to capture the vicissitudes of their life (as in some pseudo-laboratory “test”) and deduces from them the exact mechanism of a person’s passions. During the experiment, the novelist is supposed to “observe” the actions of the selected character and, occasionally, slightly alter or dramatically overturn the surrounding context to “provoke” the subject’s reaction. The ideal result of the experiment should not be “only” a successful literary work, but mainly progress in human knowledge in general:

We have the tool, the experimental method, and our goal is very clear: to know the determinism of the phenomena and to make us masters of these phenomena [...] One day, physiology will undoubtedly explain to us the mechanism of thought and passions; we will know how the individual machine of man works, how he thinks, how he loves, how he goes from reason to passion and to madness [...] And this is what constitutes the experimental novel: to possess the mechanism of phenomena in man, to show the workings of intellectual and sensual manifestations such as physiology will explain them to us, under the influences of heredity and ambient circumstances, and then to show man living in the social environment which he has produced himself, which he modifies every day, and within which he experiences in turn a continuous transformation. (Zola 1880, pp. 18–19)⁷

6 “La morale de tout ceci ? Travaillons, travaillez. Je ne suis pas encore assez vieux et ramolli pour me convaincre sottement que rien n’est vrai de ce que je ne pense pas. Le meilleur bénéfice de la vieillesse venante, c’est l’indulgence éclairée, c’est l’espoir dans un avenir qui n’est plus le mien, mais qui m’intéresse encore, parce que je compte revivre parmi ceux que je ne connaîtrai jamais, grâce à l’amour que j’eus toujours pour la vie, pour la jeunesse, et grâce à mon œuvre. Faites quelque chose que, mes camarades et moi, nous n’eussions jamais pu faire : je serai le premier à vous applaudir.”

7 “Nous avons l’outil, la méthode expérimentale, et notre but est très net : connaître le déterminisme des phénomènes et nous rendre maîtres de ces phénomènes [...] Un jour, la physiologie nous expliquera sans doute le mécanisme de la pensée et des passions ; nous saurons comment fonctionne la machine individuelle de l’homme, comment il pense, comment il aime, comment il va de la raison à la passion et à la folie [...] Et c’est là ce qui constitue le roman expérimental : posséder le mécanisme des phénomènes chez l’homme, montrer les rouages des manifestations intellectuelles et sensuelles telles que la physiologie nous les expliquera, sous les influences de l’hérédité et des circonstances ambiantes, puis montrer l’homme vivant dans le milieu social

Tool, mechanism, gears, machine... Literature, the novel at least, seems to be here to illuminate the determinism on which human life is based. Naturalist writers deny free will and conceive the characters of their works as animal machines, acting under the double dictates of heredity and environment. The aim is to “know the truth” about real human motivations and, by revealing all the laws of determinism, to expand our possibilities in the future:

We show the mechanism of the useful and the harmful, we release the determinism of the human and social phenomena, so that one day we can dominate and direct these phenomena. In a word, we work with the whole century to the great work which is the conquest of the nature, the power of the man multiplied tenfold. (Zola 1880, p. 29)⁸

Zola’s historical optimism reached its imaginary peak at that time, and in some texts it degenerated into a kind of aggressive Messianism of science, the only religion worthy of men of the late nineteenth century. The tone became irreconcilably preaching, the logic was reminiscent of Marxist schemes of “progress” in art, which, as a superstructure, copy political-material progress: The rigidly academic classicism of the *Ancien Régime* was overcome by a tumultuous romanticism, which, although it put on a Phrygian cap in the dictionary, remained imprisoned in a vague deistic heresy in the area of values. With the final victory of the Republic, the time of science and of Naturalist-experimenters would gradually prevail. The latter would deny any absolute, and the ideal for them would correspond “only to the unknown, which they have a duty to study and know” (Zola 1880, p. 302).⁹

It was in opposition to Zola’s theses from the period of the “experimental novel” that the aesthetics of new generations of poets and novelists were established in France. (I leave aside the question of whether the Symbolists and the Decadents took the writer’s theoretical articles too seriously. After all, Zola himself did not really adhere to the principles of the experimental novel in his own fictional texts. Many of today’s readers also appreciate a certain baroque, visionary, sometimes apocalyptic vigour in his works. Some even prefer their esoteric interpretations.)

qu’il a produit lui-même, qu’il modifie tous les jours, et au sein duquel il éprouve à son tour une transformation continue.”

8 “Nous montrons le mécanisme de l’utile et du nuisible, nous dégageons le déterminisme des phénomènes humains et sociaux, pour qu’on puisse un jour dominer et diriger ces phénomènes. En un mot, nous travaillons avec tout le siècle à la grande œuvre qui est la conquête de la nature, la puissance de l’homme décuplée.”

9 “que l’inconnu qu’ils ont le devoir d’étudier et de connaître”.

Either way, from the 1880s, the Symbolists and Decadents undertook to “break the Zolean machine” in the name of free will, self-creation, scepticism in the face of History and the “right to dream”. At first, they did not protest against narrativity as such, but against a sort of “machinal determinism”, which the Naturalistic narrative served perfectly. Their declared goal was to prove the unrestricted freedom of the author’s subject and the modern individual in general. On the contrary, Zola’s materialist determinism seemed to them to contradict the complexity of the modern psyche, and his novel experiments were considered by them to be too crude tools to understand the inconsistencies of the world at the end of the nineteenth century.

Some French Symbolists (Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, René Ghil, André Gide, paradoxically even Stéphane Mallarmé and Barbey d’Aurevilly) studied Hegel in depth, but most of them referred rather to the works of Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche or Emanuel Swedenborg. After all, their “fight against Zola” was not particularly philosophically based, but rather stemmed from an intuitive rejection of the Materialist and Positivist perception of the world as well as from a very syncretic reading of some modern thinkers.

As Jean-Pierre Bertrand mentioned, the main concern of the Symbolists was “how to break free from the determinist gears”¹⁰ (Bertrand 1996, p. 224) in favour of independent (to some extent even random) creativity that would better suit their idea of a fragmented subject and the inconsistency of the modern world. With a degree of exaggeration, we could consider Symbolist and Decadent ideas as a sort of “first wave of the avant-garde”, followed a few decades later by the Dada movement and Surrealism:

In 1884 Joris-Karl Huysmans published his *À rebours* (translated into English as *Against Nature*), a very provocative, surprisingly static and fragmented text depicting, almost in the form of a catalogue, how a young single, afflicted by numerous neuroses, is arranging his house and what curious aesthetic experiments he is undertaking in it. There was no action, no classic characters, and no plot respecting the slightest chronology in this parody reaction to Naturalism. In the same way, in *Paludes* (or *Morasses*, in the new English translation), André Gide symbolically responded to Zola’s gigantic saga of the *Rougon-Macquart* by “a story of a young single person living in a tower surrounded by swamps” (Gide 2002, p. 9). As we can see, the major technical problem the Symbolists and Decadents faced was how to continue to write novels (required by the public, that even the most fortunate among them could not snub completely) without falling into the old Naturalist recipes; how to get rid of the traditional narrativity (which

10 “comment sortir de l’engrenage déterministe”.

means chronological accounts of events linked by cause-and-effect relationships), replacing it with the exposition of their subtle thoughts and refined feelings, and all this in a prosaic text, while poetry would suit them much better.

First of all, let us have a look at the generic hesitations that accompanied the literature of the late nineteenth century. As Jules Renard remarked in his *Journal*, after the end of Naturalism, “the new formula of the novel, [would be] not to make novel” (Renard 1990, p. 70).¹¹ Indeed, as long as this genre was closely linked to Zolean Realism and Determinism, the Symbolists wanted to avoid it or, at least, to attenuate its narrative essence by special prefaces, forewords or didactic subtitles: *Very Woman – Sixtine* (1890) by Remy de Gourmont was thus defined as a “cerebral novel”. *Dream of a Woman* (1899) was referred to as a “familiar novel”, which means a type of text consisting in too heterogeneous elements (pieces of correspondence, pages of diaries, stories constantly interrupted) to be considered as a traditional novel. *The Phantom* (1893), by the same author, was defined as a “tale” when it appeared in volume, but it was presented to the readers of the *Mercure de France* revue in 1892 as a “study of passion”, while *A Night in The Luxembourg* (1906) was inspired by a “manuscript found”, a very popular paradigm in the eighteenth century, which allowed Remy de Gourmont to “make a novel without seeming to do so”. André Gide also desired in his *Counterfeiters* the advent of a new “novel of the being” (Marty 1987, p. 31) which would be governed by an “aesthetics of the essential” (Raimond 1989, p. 71).

Nevertheless, to avoid losing their audience, the Symbolists sometimes practised a more narrative logic and launched some curious advertising strategies, such as the one Georges Rodenbach used to broadcast his masterpiece *The Dead City of Bruges* (1998). The book was first published in the form of ten episodes in *Le Figaro*. At the request of the publisher Flammarion, it was modified by its author who added 35 photographs and two chapters (VI and XI), which allowed the book to be published as part of a series of “novels illustrated by photography” (Caraion 2003, p. 211). This very popular and very commercial genre was however regularly denounced in the *Mercure de France*, official tribune of the Symbolists, which emphasised the incompatibility of photographs with their aesthetics (Ibels 1898, p. 97). Indeed, if photographs were accepted as a narrative support in travel diaries, realistic biographies and novels that “were to provide an ideal description of human life and human being” (Ibels 1898, p. 109), they were not acceptable to evoke all these subtle landscapes of soul that the Symbolists intended to suggest to the reader.

11 “la formule nouvelle du roman, c’est de ne pas faire du roman”.

Rodenbach's strategy consisted therefore of a double generic trick: the public was reassured by obtaining a beautiful book accompanied by 35 photos of the city of Bruges (with legends telling a kind of little story) and perfectly corresponding to the bourgeois category of "illustrated novel". At the same time, Rodenbach replied to an inquiry launched by his Symbolist colleagues:

The idea of illustrating a novel by photography is certainly ingenious, but a subtle reader will always prefer to imagine himself the characters, since a book is only a point of departure, a pretext and a canvas to dream. [...] As for me, nothing interests me but the text. (Ibels 1898, pp. 97–113)

Thus, if the Symbolists seemed to be ashamed of narrativity in general, they were less reluctant to use it (or, at least, to simulate it) when they needed to sell their productions to the public.

In general, to continue producing prosaic texts without resorting to traditional narrativity, character system and plot, the Symbolists and Decadents elaborated their "novels of extreme consciousness" (Michelet-Jacquod 2008), a philosophical-ontological genre that allowed the grasping of the inner life of a subject who self-analyses and builds himself progressively. At this stage, self-creativity seemed to oppose and exclude narrativity, since the authors mixed their novels with such genres as lyric poems, prose poems or diaries and such figures as ekphrases, enumerations, catalogues, etc.

However, despite the experimental richness of such a "creative laboratory" (Bertrand 1996) of new novelistic forms, anticipating to a large extent Surrealism (Tadié 1978), the Nouveau Roman (Steffes Blake 1974) or "the stream of consciousness" (Cohn 1981), the results were not always convincing on the artistic level, without taking into account the public, who became quickly tired of stories that "told nothing". In the long run, a certain return to narrativity seemed inevitable. So, let us look to some brief examples of these new non-Naturalistic narrativities, which are likely to engender modern self-reflection and self-creativity. We will mention several works by Remy de Gourmont (1858–1915), Édouard Jurdard (1861–1949) and André Gide (1869–1951) to illustrate our thesis.

Sixtine (1890) by Remy de Gourmont tells the unfortunate love of a fictional French writer (Hubert d'Entragues) for a young widow (Sixtine Magne). As a narrator, Hubert writes his own "cerebral novel", which is interrupted by numerous secondary stories, including *L'Adorant* (*The Worshipper*), a novel in the novel. The six chapters of *The Worshipper* contain a story of Guido della Preda, Count of Santa Maria, and the woman of his dreams, Madonna Novella, both symbolic doubles of d'Entragues and Sixtine. The narrator confirms this *mise en abyme* by explaining his intention to make the inserted novel "a transposition

[...], on a mode of logical extravagance, of the drama he played naively with Sixtine” (Gourmont 1890, p. 287).¹² In fact, Hubert, who is supposed to write the two texts, immediately transposes the episodes of his love affair into the first novel (*Sixtine*), then into a second one (*The Worshipper*), which becomes a sort of platonic, idealised and refined translation of the two young people’s love, through Guido’s relationship to his Madonna.

The *Worshipper* gradually became a sort of manifesto of Symbolist idealism, based on three requirements: the independence of the work from any form of socio-cultural interpretation, the independence of the artist (not only in relation to society, but also vis-à-vis his own psychological determinisms) and the autonomy of language. At the same time, the failures of the two heroes – Hubert and Guido – illustrated the difficulties that Remy de Gourmont encountered in his desire to apply these Symbolist ideals to writing. The public did not seem ready to assume an empty book which “would stand by itself, by the inner strength of its style” (Flaubert 1980, p. 31)¹³ and whose philosophical and moral message would concentrate entirely on aesthetics.

Despite the unhappy love of the two couples, narrativity – admittedly fragmentary and constantly accompanied by meta-literary parentheses – was rehabilitated and the writing of novels proposed as an alternative to ambient pessimism. Even though he was a supporter of Symbolist idealism, Remy de Gourmont finally rejected this type of literature, completely detached from the world and resulting in insurmountable internal contradictions. His self-knowledge would no longer be able to do without a fully assumed narrativity.

The Bays Are Sere (*Les Lauriers sont coupés*, 2001) by Édouard Dujardin takes place almost entirely in the head of the protagonist, Daniel Prince, a mediocre young man attracted by an actress whom he would like to seduce without deciding to act. The plot – almost non-existent, since nothing really happens in the book – is eclipsed by the movement of writing: it only matters in the stream of Daniel’s thought, transcribed directly in the narrative and replacing the story.

However, the current reading of *The Bays*, namely its interpretation as a pure psychological novel prefiguring Joyce’s “stream of consciousness”, hides the irony or even comic aspects of the text. In fact, Daniel Prince is a kind of inverted Voltaire’s *Candide* who looks naively for an amorous Eldorado, never understanding to what extent he is fooled, exploited and ridiculed by his beloved Lea. The narrator does not miss a single opportunity to highlight the gap existing

12 “transposition [...] sur un mode d'extravagance logique, du drame qu'il jou[e] naïvement avec *Sixtine*”.

13 “se tiendrait de lui-même par la force interne de son style”.

between real life on the one hand and the ideals of the young dandy on the other. Six hours of simulations and dissimulations finally lead to no awareness and the hero, just as cheated as at the beginning of the story, makes the next appointment “on Wednesday, for three hours” restarting the cat-and-mouse game with a woman who despises and torments him.

Anticipating French minimalist writers, Édouard Dujardin practices in his novel a narration that seems at first glance banal, but that turns out to be subtly undermined from within by irony. His hero acts and observes himself acting, he thinks and analyses his thoughts, but such an intellectual duplication does not serve him at all, since a relatively simple woman manages to deceive him at every opportunity. Moreover, most of Daniel’s intimate convictions – whether it is the superiority of Platonism over carnal love or that of art over life – are gradually being reversed by experience. The irony of the narration seems to prevail over self-knowledge and self-conscience.

Finally, it is in the work of André Gide that the novel definitely leaves the Symbolist aesthetics. In 1895, the writer published *Paludes (Morasses)*, a typically Symbolist text, built on the protagonist’s hesitations about literature. The narrator would like to write a novel called *Paludes* – “a story of a young single living in a tower surrounded by swamps”, as we already know – but he is not able to do so, since his life is too scattered between literary salons and other different activities that prevent him from concentrating on writing. *Paludes* is a satire, sometimes cruel, sometimes very amusing, of literary Paris of the late nineteenth century. It describes the progressive exhaustion of Symbolist themes and humorously illustrates the limits of a literature completely devoid of characters and narrativity.

Four years later, Gide continues with *Prometheus Illbound* (1899), a little story often considered (Michelet-Jacquod 2008, p. 455) as the final episode of the Symbolist series, as the text that, together with *The Fruits of the Earth*, definitively closes the *fin-de-siècle* adventure. In *Prometheus Illbound* Gide re-evaluated his previous novels and drew a rather unflattering review of them. Indeed, the novel ended with a banquet scene in which the hero devours the eagle, a clear symbol of extreme consciousness. The novelist’s self was finally reconciled with itself, it swept away Decadent anxieties with humour and finally opened itself to the outside world.

Gide definitively abandoned the utopia of a “novel of being”, written by a pretentious artist-demiurge, in favour of the “sotie”, a “derisory work” driven by folly or the subconscious, and at the same time very joyful, since it freed the self from its conditioning and recognised its right to express itself according to its particular inclinations.

As we can see, each of the three writers set up his own version of new narrativity linked to self-creation: Remy de Gourmont by inserting a reflective novel into another reflective novel, Édouard Dujardin by practising the stream of consciousness *avant la lettre* and André Gide by pushing the Symbolist tendencies to their extreme and undermining them with irony.

After having rejected Zolean aesthetics and experienced the impasses of a self-centred literature, they all returned to forms of narrativity that seemed to them more suitable for the expression of modern interiority and self-creation. In doing so, they were preparing the arrival of another literary giant, Marcel Proust, who in the years 1910–1920 would synthesise their efforts and deepen their reflections in order to build this amazing monument of new narrativity, that would be called *In Search of Lost Time*.

Interestingly, this development of Symbolist works confirms to some extent the general literary dialectic that Zola sketched towards the end of his life: if, after more than 20 years of “realistic” tendencies (Naturalism), the historical pendulum is to tilt in favour of “idealism” (Symbolism and Decadence), it should happen in some valuable way. Will the “new” writers be as consistent and as industrious in their enthusiasm as Zola himself? Will they write something truly admirable? The old man seemed to be excited, waiting for his own work to be “denied” and swept out of the bookstores by someone just as brilliant, but with views that were the opposite of Zola’s. He hoped to be surprised, amazed, overcome. However, the Symbolists took their time.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Jules Huret called on several dozen contemporary writers to express their ideas about the direction of French literature after the end of Zolean Naturalism. Zola, who had just published *Money* (the eighteenth volume of the Rougon-Macquart saga), received Huret with humour (“Did you come to see if I had snuffed it?”) and willingly shared his criticisms and hopes with him. The comprehensive text of the interview was published on 31 March 1891 in *Écho de Paris*. The writer confirmed that Naturalism was in his eyes an important, but not final, step towards greater “truthfulness” in depicting life in literature. This movement broadened the readers’ interest in new topics and enriched the novel with new approaches and methods borrowed from the exact sciences. It did not deceive anyone, and never promised to be more than an honest effort to discover new things:

But what is offered to replace us? To counterbalance the immense Positivist work of these last fifty years, we are shown a vague “Symbolist” label, covering some junk verses. [...] I have been following them for ten years with a lot of sympathy and interest; they are very nice, I like them a lot, especially since there is no one who can dislodge us! I receive their volumes, when they appear, I read their little magazines as long as they live, but I am still wondering where the ball and chain is that should crush us. [...] They have nothing under

them, but a gigantic and empty pretension! At a time when production should be so great, so lively, they only find to serve us literature growing in bocks; one cannot even call it literature, it is attempts, trials, stammerings, but nothing else! And notice that I am sorry [...] I would gladly see my old age brightened by masterpieces. But where is the beautiful book? (Mitterand 1999, pp. 140 – 141)¹⁴

Despite the obvious malice with which the author of dozens of successful novels commented on the first timid steps of his Symbolist challengers (whose magazines on average did not last as long as a year), Zola expressed a profound truth: Naturalism was historically successful as a perfect expression of Positivist philosophy and the French society of the second half of the nineteenth century. And the following literary movements will also be successful as long as they are able to find an adequate expression of the subject and the world of the twentieth century. After hundreds of unsuccessful attempts launched by the Symbolist “laboratory”, Marcel Proust succeeded in this regard. I dare say that his novels – although very different from the Naturalistic ones – would undoubtedly be recognised as “beautiful” by Zola.

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14 “Mais que vient-on offrir pour nous remplacer ? Pour faire contrepois à l’immense labeur positiviste de ces cinquante dernières années, on nous montre une vague étiquette “symboliste”, recouvrant quelques vers de pacotille. [...] Je les suis depuis dix ans avec beaucoup de sympathie et d’intérêt ; ils sont très gentils, je les aime beaucoup, d’autant plus qu’il n’y en a pas un qui puisse nous déloger ! Je reçois leurs volumes, quand il en paraît, je lis leurs petites revues tant qu’elles vivent, mais j’en suis encore à me demander où se fond le boulet qui doit nous écrabouiller. [...] Ils n’ont rien sous eux, qu’une prétention gigantesque et vide ! À une époque où la production doit être si grande, si vivante, ils ne trouvent à nous servir que de la littérature poussant dans des bocks ; on ne peut même pas appeler cela de la littérature, ce sont des tentatives, des essais, des balbutiements, mais rien autre chose ! Et remarquez que j’en suis navré [...] je verrais volontiers ma vieillesse égayée par des chefs-d’œuvre. Mais où est-il, le beau livre ?”

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