Writing Disgust, Writing Realities

The Complexity of Negative Emotions in Émile Zola's *Nana*

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The writings of literary realism and naturalism[1] are generally known as an epistemological project in pursuit of knowledge and truth. The positivist vocabulary of interpreting reality through empirical facts, reason, and logic reverberated in the nineteenth-century realist programme and inspired authors such as Honoré de Balzac and Émile Zola to combine literature with the natural sciences, in order to document social species and even conduct experimental research within the frames of fiction.[2] Zola's provocative theory of the novel, *Le Roman expérimental* (1880), proposed an aesthetics of disinterested observation and objective truth, which resists romantic sentimentality and avoids an author's own emotional intervention in the narrative.[3] The emphasis on rationally oriented elements in

1 Realism is understood here as a transhistorical style of representation, aimed at producing an effect of reality in fiction. In this sense realism could be combined with various historical genres, including the naturalist novel with its techniques of realistic style but which is thematically embedded in the nineteenth-century scientific worldview and problems of modernity. As implied in Auerbach's (2002) analysis of Zola, critical naturalism features important elements of modern realism.

2 See the preface of *La Comédie humaine* (1842): Balzac explains his project of studying "social species" in the way a biologist would analyse "zoological species" and refers to specific biologists. Zola's *Le Roman expérimental* (1880) was inspired by Claude Bernard's experimental medicine.

3 As Zola argues in an essay on Flaubert, a naturalist author is distinctively "disinterested", invisible and avoids open intervention in the narrative. As Zola stated, an author should not show his own emotions, "one does not hear him laugh or cry with his characters." Translator R.R. unless stated otherwise. Zola 1881: 129.

writing realities has extended to theories of realism, which illustrate how realist texts use practices of detailed description, *doxa,* and authority to create the effects of reality while holding a pedagogical desire to transmit information,[4] and which demonstrate how realist fiction renders individual experience that cognitively and epistemically relies on real-world knowledge.[5] Realism, in this view, features an epistemological project framed and staged in aesthetic terms.[6]

Yet recent studies on emotions provide new insights that stimulate a reconsideration of realism's epistemological project in terms of affectivity. Linguists have shown that affect is a fundamental and all-encompassing element of language: the affective function overlaps even the referential function that is characteristic of realist literature.[7] Proponents of the philosophy of emotion have demonstrated the great intuitive power of emotions, which tend to influence people's views of the world, as well as their values and goals.[8] Emotions thus add plausibility, and even enhance the effect of the truth at which realism aims. The overlapping of the epistemological and the emotional is consistent with the enactivist approaches that emphasise the intersecting of the affective and the cognitive in human thought. As Giovanna Colombetti argues, what is cognitive is fundamentally affective: the mind, as embodied, is intrinsically or constitutively affective.[9]

These views resonate in the background of this chapter, which reflects on the complex question of writing emotions and writing realities in nineteenth-century literature by means of a case study exploring the poetics of disgust in Émile Zola's novel *Nana* (1880). By outlining the various aspects of disgust – natural, aesthetic and moral – and their overlapping categories in Zola's novel, I illustrate how emotion effects[10] contribute to the ideological and epistemological aspects in the Zolian project, which aimed at transforming reality by depicting "life as it is".[11] Through reading Zola's *Nana* I consider the ways in which evoking and triggering disgust pertains to strategies of creating reality effects, and how the effects of disgust stimulate the moral imagination of readers and solicit critical

4 Cf. for instance Barthes 1982, 2000, Hamon 1982.

5 Cf. Fludernik 1996: 28.

6 Jameson 2013: 5-6. However, in *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013) Jameson considers affect to be an important narrative impulse for realism, related to its visually rich descriptions that engender sensory experiences.

7 Besnier 1990: 420; cf. also Wetherell 2012.

8 Cf. for instance Damasio 1996, Nussbaum 2001.

9 Colombetti 2014: xvii.

10 On the concept of the emotion effect, cf. Lyytikäinen's article in this volume.

11 On these aspects see Zola 1880: 24, 208.

views on the reality under discussion. By building on previous research on Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart* as "crowd fiction",[12] I illuminate how Zola's *Nana* invites its authorial audience[13] to join the story-world community and to feel the complexity of emotion effects depicted and produced in this novel, from the ambivalent allure of disgust and the nauseating effects of excess to feelings of collective responsibility that open up the story-world's transformative potential.

In this chapter, the "writing of emotions" is used as a metaphor of style which refers to the poetic practices of producing emotion effects in texts. Yet this view is not limited to generic features or questions of structure alone but expands to concern the text-based emotional communication as a whole, in a specific historical context. The investigation of emotion effects targeted to the novel's hypothetical audience invites reflection on the authorial point of view, including the aesthetic and ideological premises of writing emotions.

NANA OR THE ALLURE OF DISGUST

Un rire avait couru. Les messieurs très bien répétèrent: "Nana, ohé! Nana!" On s'écrasait, une querelle éclairait au contrôle, une clameur grandissait, faite du bourdonnement des voix appelant Nana, exigeant Nana, dans un des coups d'esprit bête et brutale sensualité qui passent sur les foules.[14]

12 Cf. Naomi Schor 1978.

13 I use the notion of authorial audience with reference to a concept deriving from the rhetorical tradition: the hypothetical audience or the hypothetical reader for whom the text is written and composed (cf. Rabinowitz 1977). The authorial audience differs from the actual audience, although the study of empirical readers' reactions may be helpful in reconstructing and analysing a novel's hypothetical audience – for instance, in Zola's case, the contemporary actual audience overlaps with the hypothetical audience of the novel. The concept of authorial audience, as used in this article, creates a position the empirical reader can adopt in order to understand the writing of emotions from the authorial point of view, in a specific historical context. What kind of emotional effects were meant to be triggered and why? What kinds of emotional messages were sent?

14 Zola 1996: 11. "People laughed, and several well-dressed gentlemen repeated, "Nana! Oh, my! Nana!" The crush was tremendous. A quarrel broke out at the box-office, the cries for Nana increased; one of those stupid fits of brutal excitement common to crowds had taken possession of this mass of people." Zola 1922: 7-8.

Despite the alleged rationality and dispassionate objectivity of realist discourse, realist works frequently witness strong emotional responses from reading audiences, often with negative valence. Starting with Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), a novel that led to a real-life trial for obscenity, blasphemy and indecency, the history of realism has been fraught with a series of scandals, polemics, censorship and aggression. As Erich Auerbach remarks, many of the century's significant authors encountered vexation and even hostility from the public, and achieved general recognition only at the price of violent struggle.[15] The naturalist novel in particular attacked bourgeois culture and its favourite genre, using the novel form to shock, disturb and defy the bourgeois myths of order, decency and permanence.[16] Zolian aesthetics generated a scandalous, importunate kind of writing rather than objective documentation, which nevertheless stimulated the reading public's curiosity and fascination with the disgusting ravages of life.

The publication of Zola's *Nana* is emblematic of this allure of disgust. The novel evoked public outrage all over Europe, with accusations of immorality and pornography. Zola's programme became the object of mockery and moral indignation, inciting accusations of writing "ordurous" and "putrid" literature and provoking a series of caricatures in the 1880s: Zola the scavenger; Zola the director of a theatre of disgust; Zola cooking a soup of disgusting waste.[17] However, despite the vexation of conservative critics, *Nana* proved to be an immediate success. *Le Voltaire*, the French newspaper that first published the novel as a serial, launched a gigantic advertising campaign, raising the curiosity of the reading public. When Charpentier finally published *Nana* in book form in February 1880, the first edition of 55,000 copies sold out in one day.

Interestingly, the ambivalent combination of rejection and attraction featuring real-life responses to Zola's *Nana* extend to the novel's poetics of collective repulsion and desire. *Nana* is, of course, a novel about fatal sexuality and prostitution, incarnating a familiar *fin de siècle* stereotype, *La femme fatale*, the embodiment of male fantasies and fears over the female body. However, although depicting sexual obsession and illustrating contemporary fears of catastrophic sexuality, *Nana* is also a novel about fascination in terms of public interest and curiosity. Like the majority of novels in the *Les Rougon-Macquart* series, *Nana* pertains to Zola's crowd fictions, which depict communities and represent individuals by combining features of collectives. From the very beginning, *Nana* focuses on the crowd's collective perspective, capturing its voyeuristic fascina-

15 Cf. Auerbach 2002: 500.

16 On the scandal of naturalism, cf. Baguley 1990.

17 On the reception of *Nana* cf., for instance, Mitterand 2001: 510-513 and Reverzy 2008: 190-193.

tion with the woman who has driven Paris into a frenzy. The crowd, *la foule,* with its changing fears and attractions forms a collective protagonist of a kind, the social mind of the novel,[18] depicting strata of urban society in the process of modernization, from the working-class to the rising bourgeoisie and aristocratic old power.

The crowd view is highly visible in the opening and closing scenes of the novel, for instance, which frame the story-world and map *Nana's* ambivalent power of persuasion and rejection. The opening focuses on her spectator audience, gathered in the Théâtre des Variétés, feverishly waiting for her appearance.

> Paris était là, le Paris des lettres, de la finance et du plaisir, beaucoup de journalistes, quelques écrivains, des hommes de Bourse, plus de filles que de femmes honnêtes; monde singulièrement mêlé, fait de tous les génies, gâté par tous les vices, où la même fatigue et la même fièvre passaient sur les visages.[19]

The opening has been featured as a prolonged narrative of striptease, gradually approaching Nana's figure, unveiling her body piece by piece.[20] Nana's entrance triggers a set of mixed emotions, however. Charismatic and powerful but singing off-key and acting badly, she evokes simultaneous feelings of curiosity, excitement and embarrassment. The allure of the female body finally converges into effects of shock and rejection: Nana uncovered silences the audience, even imbues a sense of terror: "Il n'y eut pas d'applaudissements. Personne ne riait plus, les faces des hommes, sérieuses, se tendaient, avec le nez aminci, la bouche irritée et sans salive. Un vent semblait avoir passé, très doux, chargé d'une sourde menace."[21] If the feeling of eroticism depends on detachment and delayed vision, the sudden proximity of Nana's naked body interrupts distanced seduction and solicits a shock effect.[22] In a sense, the opening exemplifies the natural-

18 On the concept of the social mind, cf. Palmer 2010.

19 Zola 1996: 13. "All Paris was there – the Paris of letters, of finance, and of pleasure, many journalists, some few authors, and several speculators, more kept girls than respectable women – a company, in short, that was a most singular mixture, composed of every kind of genius, tainted with every description of vice, where the same weariness and the same fever seemed inscribed on every face." Zola 1922: 9.

20 Cf. Reverzy 2008: 104-111.

21 "There was no applause. No one laughed now. The grave faces of the men were bent forward, their nostrils contracted, their mouths parched and irritated. A gentle breath, laden with an unknown menace, seemed to have passed over all." Zola 1922: 25.

22 On the erotic and pornographic in *Nana*, cf. Gural-Migdal 2012: 199-219.

ist unveiling of the uncomfortable truth: what triggers curiosity turns out to be disgusting.

The opening focus on the audience's emotional responses is illustrative of the novel's overall emotional disposition, which keeps a certain distance from Nana as a protagonist and draws the crowd's collective mind to the foreground. In some respects, the external view feeds the novel's topic of female objectification. Moreover, the emotion effects created at the beginning modify and adjust the reader's premises of interpretation by shaping perception and the organization of information in the text continuum. The beginning orients the reader to be aware of the collective's emotions and reactions, the morals and manners of the crowds concerned.

Nana's famous ending, depicting a decomposing prostitute, concludes the novel's ambiguous allure of disgust. This closing scene and the beginning scene are symmetrical, the former rendering again the crowd's feverish curiosity about Nana. It describes her lovers and friends gathered around the Grand Hôtel and her mortuary chamber. It illustrates the crowd's mixed fears and attractions: despite the risk of infection, Nana's comrades and rivals desire to see her dead body, disfigured by smallpox.[23] The novel ends with an eyewitness view projected by the narrator:

Nana restait seule, la face en l'air, dans la clarté de la bougie. C'était un charnier, un tas d'humeur et de sang, une pelletée de chair corrompue, jetée là, sur un coussin. Les pustules avaient envahi la figure entière, un bouton touchant l'autre; et, flétries, affaissées, d'un aspect grisâtre de boue, elles semblaient déjà une moisissure de la terre, sur cette bouillie informe, où l'on ne retrouvait plus les traits. Un œil, celui de gauche, avait complètement sombré dans le bouillonnement de la purulence; l'autre, à demi ouvert, s'enfonçait, comme un trou noir et gâté. Le nez suppurait encore. Toute une croûte rougeâtre partait d'une joue, envahissait la bouche, qu'elle tirait dans un rire abominable. Et, sur ce masque horrible et grotesque du néant, les cheveux, les beaux cheveux, gardant leur flambée de soleil, coulaient en un ruissellement d'or. Vénus se décomposait. Il semblait que le virus pris par elle dans les ruisseaux, sur les charognes tolérées, ce ferment dont elle avait empoisonné un peuple, venait de lui remonter au visage et l'avait pourri.

La chambre était vide. Un grand souffle désespéré monta du boulevard et gonfla le rideau.

– A Berlin! à Berlin! à Berlin![24]

23 "Smallpox" has been described as syphilis in disguise, alluding to the fin-de-siècle fear of venereal diseases. Cf. Reverzy 2008, 56.

24 Zola 1996: 411-412. "She went off and closed the door. Nana was left alone, her face turned upwards in the candle-light. It was a charnel-house, a mass of matter and blood, a shovelful of putrid flesh, thrown there on the cushion. The pustules had in-

Nana's features, deformed by infection, evoke the risk of pollution and disease contamination. This accurate portrayal of lethal illness is meant to generate an unpleasant mood of rejection in the reader. However, as has been shown in previous readings, the ending scene is highly allegorical. Nana, born in 1851 and dead in 1870, lives with the Empire. The female body serves as a metaphor for the nation, embodying the end game of the Second Empire, thereby anticipating the collapse of the nation: France on its way to the Franco-Prussian war, to a war to be lost.[25] Focusing on the dead body of a prostitute, the scene is pregnant with the collective gaze fixed on her, mirroring the allure of disgust amongst the crowd and their own state of corruption. The effect of disgust thus unveils moral judgement of Nana's sexual behaviour, and illustrates contemporary fears of the female body, the ambient society's hypocrisy, misogyny and contempt for the lower classes.

POETICS OF DISGUST: EXCESS AND REJECTION

The ambivalent poetics of rejection and attraction inscribed in Zola's *Nana* is consistent with the very nature of the disgusting, which as an emotional state is productive of multiple meanings, contradictory valorizations and reactions.[26] Artistic representations employ the disgusting not only to trigger revulsion and rejection but also to elicit curiosity and suspense in audiences. The cultural history of disgust, extending from Antiquity to Kafka and contemporary horror films,

vaded the entire face, one touching the other; and, faded, sunk in, with the greyish aspect of mud, they already seemed like a mouldiness of the earth on that shapeless pulp, in which the features were no longer recognisable. One of the eyes, the left one, had completely disappeared amidst the eruption of the purulence; the other, half open, looked like a black and tainted hole. The nose still continued to suppurate. A reddish crust starting from one of the cheeks, invaded the mouth, which it distorted in an abominable laugh; and on this horrible and grotesque mask of nothingness, the hair, that beautiful hair, retaining its sun-like fire, fell in a stream of gold. Venus was decomposing. It seemed as if the virus gathered by her in the gutters, from the tolerated carrion – that ferment with which she had poisoned a people – had ascended to her face and rotted it. The room was deserted. A strong breath of despair mounted from the Boulevard, and swelled the curtain. 'To Berlin! to Berlin! to Berlin!'" Zola 1922: 408.

25 Cf. Reverzy 2008: 112.

26 On the history and theory of disgust, cf. Menninghaus 2003.

demonstrates the ambiguous nature of this forceful emotion. Yet the naturalist poetics of ordure, with its decadent attraction to the macabre, foregrounds disgust, using and elaborating the different aspects of the disgusting, thus making disgust a central part of itself. Inspiration from the natural sciences brought a new kind of disgusting world under scrutiny. The naturalist focus on the instinctive and the primitive in us benefits from the natural and biological basis of the disgusting, fostering and favouring themes of sickness, decay and entropic degeneration that remind us of our own mortality and vulnerability.[27] Disgust pertains to the ways in which naturalist literature channels the readers' attention to the harsh realities represented, enhancing their effects through the disgusting's powerful emotional charge. Most people experience disgust as particularly and categorically real, often relating to concrete and organic things and accompanied by sharp physiological colouring.[28]

The central metaphor of Zola's *Nana*, the golden blowfly ("la mouche d'or") illustrates the multiple aspects of the disgusting. A bitter lampoon written by Fauchery, a journalist fallen for Nana, compares the prostitute to a golden blowfly, which flies in from the outskirts of Paris to contaminate high society. The metaphor builds on universal disgust triggered by references to animals, which are seen as contaminants due to their contact with rotten bodies.[29] However, while the blowfly affiliates with "natural" aspects of disgust and solicits effects of reality, the metaphoric blending with the prostitute expands into a series of abstract meanings. They project contemporary thought such as preoccupation with hygiene, disease control and connections between moral and physical cleanliness, parallels between the female body and social order.[30]

On the other hand, whereas naturalism leans on the disgusting's biological basis to trigger the effects of shock and confusion, its provocative poetics of ordure challenge existing conceptions of taste and beauty, defying the classical ideals of harmony and beauty and testing the very limits of the aesthetic.[31] As

27 Cf. Rozin et al. 1993: 576.

28 Psychological research has featured disgust as an especially visceral emotion, which involves strong bodily reactions to stimuli that tend to have marked bodily characteristics. The classic stimulants are waste products, vile odours, offensive contaminants and other objects whose very appearance seems loathsome, nauseating and causes revulsion. Cf., for instance, ibid.

29 Cf. ibid.: 582.

30 On the theme of hygiene in Zola, cf. Gogröf 2013.

31 Naturalism's transgressions against the classical ideals of style include a stylistic transgression in terms of language: the naturalness of naturalist writing "contami-

discussed by Winfried Menninghaus, disgust has occupied a central role in aesthetics since the emergence of the discipline. It has served to articulate the difference between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic; the "aesthetic" is the field of a particular "pleasure" whose absolute other is disgust.[32] What is more, in this view the domain of the disgusting is not limited to contamination alone, in that pure sweetness and pure beauty can also prevent pleasure and solicit rejection: what is merely pleasant and beautiful becomes vomitive, *Ekel*. The "no" of the disgusting thus embraces the outer limits of human life in terms of both corruption and exaggeration.

The varied layers of the disgusting in Zola's *Nana* extend to satiation-induced distaste and an aesthetics of excess which turns into bad taste and nausea. The novel's motifs of sexual desire for and obsession with Nana are coupled with her obsession with objects and materiality. Nana is driven by her desire for luxury, a desire that turns into a decadent adoration of artificiality and kitsch. Her apartment is filled with sugary scents and perfumes; she loves sweets, imitation jewels and cheap bric-a-brac, which end up as waste.[33] As Nana achieves fame and fortune, the material obsession evolves into blind wastage. What is new, chic and delicate becomes repulsive. It is as if her life was contaminated by the overwhelming presence of objects: the wastage and food leftovers disgust her servants, sugar "poisons" the glasses, and jewels are lost.[34] Rampant living turns

nates" classic, elevated style by incorporating vernacular expressions and l'argot into literary language. Cf. Dubois 1993, Reverzy 2008: 35.

32 As Menninghaus (cf. 2003: 26) points out, the eighteenth century's foundation of modern aesthetics can be described negatively as a foundation based on the prohibition of what is disgusting.

33 The objects of "bibelot" inspire her even though she could afford more than junk: she feels nostalgic for the kitsch that represented luxury in her childhood, adoring vulgar objects behind the display windows: "les bijoux faux, le zinc doré"; "les sucreries d'un chocolatier, écoutant jouer de l'orgue dans une boutique voisine, prise surtout par le goût criard des bibelots à bon marché, des nécessaires dans des coquilles de noix, des hottes de chiffonnier pour les cure-dents, des colonnes Vendôme et des obélisques portant des thermomètres". Cf. Zola 1996: 182-183; Zola 1922: 178-179.

34 "Mais ce qu'on perdait était pis encore, la nourriture de la veille jetée à la borne, un encombrement de provisions dont les domestiques se dégoûtaient, le sucre empoissant les verres, le gaz brûlant à pleins becs, jusqu'à faire sauter les murs; et des négligences, et des méchancetés, et des accidents, tout ce qui peut hâter la ruine, dans une maison dévorée par tant de bouches." Zola 1996: 359. "But what was wasted was still worse – the food of the previous day thrown in the gutter, an incumbrance of victuals at which the servants turned up their noses, the glasses all sticky with sugar, gas-jets

into the sickening experience of nausea. The wastage saturates Nana's apartment on Rue Villiers, with its grotesquely decorated bedroom. Her "temple", with its handcrafted bed of gold and silver and a byzantine imitation altar, provocatively mixes objects of sexuality and religion, triggering effects of fear in her lovers.

The excess of life then results in overheating. Zola's crowds, living the splendour of Paris, succumb to feelings of dullness and stupor, experiencing a lethargic disgust-type of resignation and weariness, an existential nausea and disgust for life. Continuous satisfaction solicits feelings of boredom: "Ennui" and "s'ennuyer" are frequently used in *Nana,* referring to feelings of apathy and even invoking the disease of the century, *mal-du-siècle*. Nana herself achieves everything she desires but the constant satisfaction results in feelings of emptiness:

> Cependant, dans son luxe, au milieu de cette cour, Nana s'ennuyait à crever. Elle avait des hommes pour toutes les minutes de la nuit, et de l'argent jusque dans les tiroirs de sa toilette, mêlé aux peignes et aux brosses; mais ça ne la contentait plus, elle sentait comme un vide quelque part, un trou qui la faisait bâiller.[35]

Zola thus discovers the protagonist's moods of tiredness: "la monotonie bruyante de son existence"; "la solitude", "le vide" and "l'ennui".

The disgust-triggering aesthetics of excess illustrates the tendency towards amplification that characterizes Zola's oeuvre in general and is particularly salient in *Nana,* the work David Baguley (1993) termed a baroque novel. Baroque grandeur and décor inspire Nana's frenetic story-world, building a metonymic continuity between life, theatre and the theatricality of life.[36] Stylistic choices further foster the themes of excess and extravagance. The narrative favours hyperbole and asyndeton as rhetorical devices, comprising repeated catalogue-

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blazing away, turned on recklessly, sufficient to blow up the place, and negligences, and spitefulness, and accidents, all that can hasten ruin in an establishment devoured by so many mouths." Zola 1922: 355.

35 Zola 1996: 280. "Yet, in the midst of her luxury, in the midst of that court, Nana was bored to death. She had men with every minute of the night, and money everywhere, even in the drawers of her dressing-table amongst her combs and brushes; but that no longer satisfied her, she felt a void somewhere, a vacancy that made her yawn. Her life rolled on unoccupied, bringing each day the same monotonous hours." Zola 1922: 276.

36 "Life as theatre" has been considered a central metaphor of the baroque period. Cf. Baguley 1993: 70.

like descriptive sections and lists.[37] In contrast, expansion of the descriptive elicits bewilderment in the reader, as revealed in Flaubert's letter to Zola written in February 1880: Flaubert, struck by "stupor", praised Nana's "Michelangelo-like" and "Babylonian"[38] character.

DISGUST AND MORALITY

Le sujet philosophique est celui-ci; Toute une société se ruant sur le cul. Une meute derrière une chienne, qui n'est pas en chaleur et qui se moque des chiens qui la suivent. *Le poème des désirs du mâle*, le grand levier qui remue le monde. Il n'y a que le cul et la religion.[39]

The poetics of repugnance in Zola's novel ranges from contamination to overindulgence and excessive beauty, thus exemplifying the multiple layers of disgust, including natural and aesthetic categories of aversion. *Nana* circulates around disgust-related bodily topics from sexuality to degeneration, lethal illness and death, which have frequently been considered cross-cultural disgust elicitors.[40] However, although their biological basis can hardly be denied, emotions are also social and cultural, and the line between these categories is blurred and porous. Although disgust is humanizing, both natural and human, and is often manifested as an automatized reaction of rejection with regard to objects considered unpleasant, contaminated or distasteful, even spontaneous disgust has a complex

37 Ibid.

38 Cf. Flaubert's letter to Zola, 15 February 1880. "J'ai passé hier toute la journée jusqu'à 11 heures et demie du soir à lire *Nana*. Je n'en ai pas dormi cette nuit et 'j'en demeure stupide'. […] Nana est *Michelangelesque!* […] Nana tourne au mythe, sans cesser d'être réelle. Cette création est babylonienne. *Dixi!*". "Yesterday I spent all the day until half past eleven in the evening by reading Nana. I didn't sleep that night and I am stupid with it. […] Nana is Michelangelo-like! […] Nana turns into a myth, without ceasing to be real. This creation is Babylonian. *Dixi!*" Cf. Flaubert (1926-1939).

39 *Zola* on *Nana* in his preparatory notes, quoted in Reverzy 2008: 165. "The philosophical issue is as follows; a whole society chasing arse; a pack after a she-dog, who is not in heat and who makes fun of the dogs who pursue her. *A poem of male desires*, the great lever which keeps the world moving on. There is only arse and religion."

40 Rozin et al. 1993: 584.

cognitive content involving learned habits and values.[41] In a sense, disgust always prompts moral appraisal in that it evaluates negatively what it touches, and thus proclaims the inferiority of its object. Everything disgusting, from crawling worms to rotten bodies, implies "no", thereby turning the objects of disgust away from our presence.[42] As Martha Nussbaum (2006) argues, disgust is an emotion that has been used throughout history to exclude vulnerable people who embody the dominant group's fears.[43] As the feeling of disgust moves easily from concrete objects to abstract entities, it easily leads to psychological contamination, meaning that pollution starts to circulate and transmit to neutral and harmless entities as well.[44]

For these reasons, disgust has been considered an ugly feeling – or as a morally suspect emotion *per se* – which blocks compassion and other ethical feelings.[45] On the contrary, if disgust intrinsically solicits moral judgement, it has the power to acknowledge injustice by eliciting the rejection of unacceptable actions and behaviour. The evocation and representation of disgust in literary contexts tend to reveal morally problematic attitudes, strategies of discrimination and structures of power. This partly explains how its evocation contributes to the ideological objectives of realism, even enhancing its critical and emancipatory politics of transforming and reforming reality.[46] *Nana*, for instance, is indicative of society's complex emotional disposition, which combines disgust and attraction with regard to female sexuality, prostitution and the lower classes. The novel's authorial audience is invited to recognize the disgust evoked and to acknowledge the moral dilemma the emotion indicates. Given that "transparent" realist discourse tends to avoid open intervention and moral judgements by an external narrator, the construal of morals is delegated to the reader.

The transformative power of disgust stimulates reflection on the shock effects of naturalism and realism in general, and reactions of aggression and indignation among reading audiences. As much as the scandal of naturalism affiliates with topics considered vulgar or indecent, such as sexuality and prostitution, the novelistic portrait of the bourgeoisie and upper classes forms an integral part of

41 As discussed by Miller (1997: 15): "It is culture, not nature that draws the lines between defilement and purity, clean and filthy".

42 Menninghaus 2003: 2.

43 Cf. Nussbaum 2006: 14.

44 On psychological contamination, cf. Rozin 1993: 582-583.

45 Cf. Nussbaum 2001: 453-454; Ngai 2005: 340.

46 Zola, for instance, refuted accusations concerning the immorality of naturalism, insisting on its moral purpose: the somewhat oxymoronic blending of the harsh realities of pessimism and optimism.

literary shock effects intended to "épater les bourgeois". The upper-class corruption and male weakness featuring in novels about adultery and prostitution seem to scandalize the contemporary readers as much as the female sexual transgression depicted. The case against Flaubert's *Madame Bovary,* for instance, unveils the irritation caused by the novel's violation of patriarchal masculinity. "The ridiculous" and "grotesque" portrayal of male persons who, in addition, are dominated by a woman, Emma Bovary, was listed among the novel's transgressions against decent manners.[47]

The shaming of the powerful also contributes to the shock strategies in Zola's *Nana*, which is essentially a novel of a society driven by sex, "la société se ruant sur le cul", to quote Zola, mocking the male characters in particular. Male humiliation is encapsulated in the figure of Count Muffat: the Emperor's chamberlain represents the highest stratum of society among Nana's lovers, yet he is prepared to descend lower than anyone else to retain his dignity, fortune and aristocratic values. Nonetheless, while Muffat is torn by his obsessions and Nana's capriciousness, he is also a victim of his own class, ruined by the hypocrisy of aristocracy and the austerity of a repressive religious culture. He becomes a nuisance at Court, even ending up as the object of the Empress's disgust: "Il est trop dégoûtant." Disgust circulates, and Nana, imitating the upper classes, adopts the Empress's contempt for Muffat: "Tiens! tu me dégoûtes!" As a scapegoat for society's failures, Muffat, in a sense, becomes Nana's double, whose degeneration is symptomatic of the corruption and hollow values of the Empire.

Zola nevertheless avoids tendentiousness and simple juxtaposition in his account of gender, and ideological and moral views. His narrative generally favours ambivalence in characterization, mobility and the blending of positive and negative valorizations that result in complex characters. The figure of Nana is a prime example of this blurring of positions.[48] From the point of view of her lovers, she is a man-eater, even a devil in disguise as Muffat sees her; she is comparable with Rabelais' gluttonous giant, Gargantua, and devours materials, men, everything she confronts. Standard readings of *Nana* frequently share this perspective, although to quote Zola: Nana, "une bonne fille", "ne faisant jamais mal pour le mal", is a poor girl who grew up on the outskirts of Paris, shaped by

47 In listing the weaknesses of Flaubert's novel, M. Ernest Pinard's summons refers to the ways in which male characters are humiliated; Charles is cheated by Emma, Homais and the priest are described as "grotesque figures", and all of them are dominated by Emma. "Le seul personnage qui y domine, c'est Mme Bovary", Cit. in Flaubert 1998: 427-430.

48 On Nana's instability and ambiguity, cf. Reverzy 2008, 78-79 and Gural-Migdal 2003.

the society in which she lived, the wretched environments, her future determined by the fatality of the *félûre*, the hereditary degeneration of the *Rougon-Macquart* family.

While the figure of Nana lacks the self-reflection typical of tragic heroes, Zola's novel features tragic power in the sense that it unveils cathartic potential.[49] Nana's transgressions against the alleged decency of bourgeois society turn into purgative actions, paving the way for a sense of collective responsibility and self-reflection that could even offer tools for promoting social change. Just as the blowfly can contaminate, spread disease or be used as a cure for infections, Nana-the-blowfly becomes a "Nana-pharmakos", capable of both poisoning and curing society.[50] The transformative power of Nana is also illustrated by the emotional resistance of the figure. She refuses to accept the shame and contempt that the ambient society attempts to impose on her; rather than feeling ashamed, she is flattered by Fauchery's lampoon, considering it as a mark of distinction. In the final scene Nana seems to be laughing at the society that is gazing at her, drawing attention to the allure of disgust amongst the crowd. The terrible bitterness of the deformed grimace on her dead face, "le rire abominable", is illustrative of the power of *Nana*, which is, to quote Roland Barthes, despite all its vulgarity, a civic book.[51]

WRITING EMOTIONS, WRITING REALITY

Zola equated naturalist writing with experimental science in *Le Roman expérimental*. Nevertheless, the aesthetics of documentation should be understood as a gesture of provocation, a quintessential element of the naturalist programme. Far from simplistically mirroring reality in *Les Rougon-Macquart,* Zola generates complex and multi-layered story-worlds, blending narrative registers, styles, genres and intertextualities.[52] On the other hand, analogies with the work of scientists expand to include the poetics of representing and evoking emotions:

49 On the tragic scheme in naturalism, see Baguley 1990. Barthes (1982: 90-91) considers *Nana* as an epic rather than a tragic novel, since the figure of Nana has no power of understanding like tragic heroes, remaining a pure instrument of decay.

50 On the "homeopathic" aspect of disgust, see Menninghaus 2003: 9.

51 Barthes 1982: 93.

52 Zolian texture even anticipates modernist aesthetics by producing a blurring of positions, a merging of perspectives, and forms of dissolution, ellipsis and abstraction. Cf. Harrow 2010: 61.

from the Goncourt brothers to Zola, metaphors such as "clinic of love" or "anatomy of passions" are deployed to illustrate the scientific study of emotions. Instead of renouncing emotions, realist and naturalist writing strives to move beyond romantic sentimentality and passion in terms of humoral composition to embrace the emerging understanding of emotions as complex neuropsychological conditions.[53]

As shown in the above reading of Zola's *Nana*, naturalist writing generates an ambivalent poetics of negative emotions that deploys strategies of shock and disgust to enhance its critical potential. The great emotional amplitude of disgust effects contributes to the novel's reality effect by drawing attention to and disrupting the banality of everyday experience; the effects of thrill, on the other hand, add to the reader's engagement with and immersion in the story-world in question. The evocation and representation of disgust are further used to orient the reader's moral judgement concerning the problems of the society depicted. However, instead of offering simplistic solutions to these social and moral dilemmas, realist and naturalist narratives tend to create contradictory story-worlds with changing ideological facets and ambivalent characters, evoking mixed emotional reactions and producing overlapping moral valorizations. This, on the other hand, is consistent with the poetics of representing realities: if reality as we experience it is multi-layered, rich and contradictory, artistic representations of it tend to be the same. In fact, the very complexity and ambivalence activate the reader to consider the world represented, thus enhancing the power of the text. It also seems that the critical potential of realism stems from its disturbing legacy and the impact of negative emotions rather than from a cathartic release or purification, as in Aristotle's theory of tragedy. The authorial audience is challenged to encounter feelings of collective responsibility for the shared reality depicted. Zolian crowd fictions illustrate the way in which the community-building functions of fiction become entangled with emotions. Literature is communication. It uses affectivity to influence and transform reality, shaping our cultural imagination and inspiring collective emotions.

53 However, although contemporary emotion theories promoted by Ribot and Charcot evidently influenced Zola, he was simultaneously fascinated with the old theory of passions, as shown in the preface to *Thérèse Raquin* (1867). Balzac also hovered between realism and romanticism. Cf. also Hamon 2015: 95-96.

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