Muelsch on Ménard (2014)

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In La Volonté de savoir Foucault argues that in western societies man has become a bête d’aveu; confessions serve as a means of finding the truth, and western societies have implemented elaborate religious, legal, and medical rituals to solicit or extract them. However, do these confessions really bring forth the truth? Building on the tenets of the history of knowledge and ideas, Ménard embarks on a thoughtful study of bodily confessions—confessions of the flesh—in the writings of Émile Zola. Ménard’s book not only illustrates her great familiarity with the work of this prolific writer, but also provides us with a well-documented overview of the social and medical readings of the human body that prevailed in nineteenth-century France and that clearly impacted both the Naturalist doctrine and novel.

Ménard begins her reading of Zola with an analysis of his prefatory remarks to Édouard Toulouse’s Enquête médico-psychologique, a study in which Zola had voluntarily participated and in which he had given, so he claims, the doctor full access to his brain (“mon cerveau est comme dans un crane de verre”) and his body (his ”guenille humaine”), in an effort to make the most complete confession, exemplifying the Naturalist postulate of tout dire. Ménard underscores the hierarchical dichotomy that Zola establishes between brain/thought and body/flesh, which is slightly surprising for a Naturalist writer who assumes a strong correlation between psychological experiences and physiological processes, yet for Ménard this also reveals Zola’s belief that the body cannot be entirely controlled through rational, cognitive processes. In Zola’s work, the body is like a vessel, hiding man’s dark side, the instinctual, the sexual, the pathological, which often emerges violently, against one’s will; only by paying close attention to these physical confessions can we know the entire truth.

Ménard reminds us that the history of confessions is closely linked to that of case studies. Religious, medical, and criminal case studies invent and classify sins, crimes, and pathological behavior, focusing on singular cases, in which the abnormal is differentiated from the normal. Singular case studies are also an important structural element of Naturalist fiction; thus, Zola focuses on people he positions on the margins of society such as the criminal, the artist, the priest, the madman or the hysteric because these allow him to illustrate the origins of societal and human ailments; for him anomalies reveal the truth. Ménard carefully analyzes the history of religious confessions and Zola’s portrayal of priests, devout women, and hysterics. She demonstrates that in Zola’s novels religious confessions do not entice the confessor to divulge the truth in an effort to clear the soul; instead they become perverted acts. Priests such as Serge Mouret or sinners such as Madame de Rieu confess as a way to rekindle and prolong the pleasure of their transgressions. For Zola, the Catholic confession creates dysfunctional women; in La Conquête de Plassans, for example, the experiences in the confessional translate into erotic feelings, whose suppression contributes to Marthe Mouret’s hysteric behavior. Hystera, and here Zola follows Charcot and Briquet, functions as a bodily confession, one that conveys the truth about a woman’s repressed sexual desire.

Bodily confessions in Zola’s novels often emerge during in-between states such as ecstasy, daydreaming, or intermittent madness, which allow the bête humaine in (wo)man to surface turning (wo)man into a bête d’aveu who reveals “the phantoms of the past” (474), either those acquired through heredity or those brought on by individual behavior or circumstances. In the chapter entitled “Pathologies de la parole dans Thérèse Raquin,” Ménard illustrates how the protagonists’ confession of the crime is brought on by nightmares and bouts of madness. In this pivotal novel, which Zola initially conceptualized as a physiological study, the committed crime transpires not only in the protagonists’ speech acts, but it also impacts the narrative process.

Ménard adroitly demonstrates that physiologists’, physiognomists’, and criminologists’ theories of assumed correlations between physical appearance and inner self provided ample material for Zola’s novels; however, Zola rethought many of these theories, designing more complex characters who carry permanent as well as fleeting traces and who do not fit into rigid, physiological classifications and readings. In Zola’s novels, nineteenth-century institutions often overlook or misread these fleeting confessions of the flesh; only the Naturalist writer can decipher and understand them. Hence, Zola saw the novel as a device more successful in producing the truth than any scientific, legal, or religious discourse because the novel could, in his opinion, combine all the different discourses and embrace a global view of the nineteenth century.

Ménard’s book, divided into four major sections, each of which can easily stand by itself, concludes as it started: with a focus on Zola himself, who, like his characters, makes involuntary confessions, and whose voluntary confessions were scrutinized by
contemporary critics. Ménard’s research makes a valuable contribution to Zola studies, analyzing the breadth of bodily confessions in the writings of this author for whom truthful language is essentially physiological.

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