

Zola and the Physical Geography of War

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Émile Zola's account of the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune, *La Débâcle* (1892), provides the basis for an account of the way in which the literary language of war speaks to the physical geography of mimetic fiction as broadly conceived, and in particular its precise concern for mud, earth, soil, and its wider concern for land and its borders.

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In perhaps the best recent historical account of the period 1848–71, tellingly titled *Le Crépuscule des révolutions*, Quentin Deluermoz describes thus the fall of the Second Empire in September 1870:

Le choc de la défaite fut terrible. Il entraîna un changement de régime: le 3, Jules Favre organisa une révolution légale à la Chambre, vite débordée par d'importants mouvements de rue le 4. Puis un gouvernement dit 'de la Défense nationale' fut acclamé à l'Hôtel de Ville. Malgré son manque de légitimité, il était chargé de proclamer la République et de poursuivre la guerre 'à outrance'. (2012: 311–12)

This article focuses on that revolutionary turn from Empire to Republic in Émile Zola's account of 1870–71, *La Débâcle* (1892), and the way in which the literary language of war speaks to the physical geography of mimetic fiction as broadly conceived, in particular its precise concern for mud, earth, soil, and its wider concern for land and its borders. It does so in the context of a special number which has at its core Robert Ziegler's notion of 'a matter pool where forms constantly melt and flow together' (2015: 109). Indeed, it is in the aqueous matter of mud that a defeated French army will slosh around on the peninsula at Iges outside Sedan in part 3 chapter 2 of the novel, at precisely the same historical moment as the capital confers regime change upon the country. If the notion of 'matter pools' evokes the generally transparent materials comprising the seemingly impervious containers scattered across the decadent imaginary and the fluid movement that occurs through the walls of glass aquariums, hot houses, and the like, as we see elsewhere in this special number, then in Zola's account of the fall of the decadent Second Empire the eastern frontier of the nation is itself seen to become porous as German troops pour into the geo-political vessel that is France and amputate the limbs of Alsace and Lorraine.

Eugen Weber's classic account of *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* gives us a historical model with which to understand the language and geography of Zola's novel, making a republican virtue of the failure of the imperial army to fight the war outside France on foreign soil. As contemporaries observed, in focussing almost exclusively on France and its army rather than Germany and hers, Zola emphasized the diagnostic function of his fiction, associating defeat with the decadence of the Second Empire. As we shall see below in our references to history in Robert Ziegler's account of the supposedly (but not simply) anti-naturalist fiction of the Decadence, Zola and his cultural combatants shared similar fascinations, if not analyses and methods.¹ In his very stress on France, and on the French language (to the exclusion not only of German, but of Alsatian), Zola enacts in language the very process of national homogenization about which the Third Republic dreamt and Weber later wrote. In such linguistic consistency and legibility, and in spite of the fluid borders of the Hexagon, Zola finds an internal commonality and coherence. Though the edges frayed, the texture of the Third Republic, unlike the first two versions of French republicanism, held firm. In the face of such ideological compromise, the decadents would seek out, in both language and history, hidden corners of authenticity, more concerned with being truthful than being realist. Given the challenges of its historical imperative, however, in *La Débâcle* Zola sought to be both real and true.

In *Les Rougon-Macquart*, the Franco-Prussian War begins three times before we reach *La Débâcle*: at the end of *Nana* (1880), *La Terre* (1887) and *La Bête humaine* (1890). *La Terre* shows the former soldier Jean Macquart, the son of Antoine Macquart and the brother of Gervaise, settling down in the farming community of the Beauce, where he marries Françoise Mouche, the daughter of Père Fouan and the

sister of Lise. Buteau, Lise's husband, kills Françoise and Fouan in his greed for more land. The widowed Jean leaves the Beauce to enlist in the war against Prussia. Zola returns to the land, and to Jean Macquart in the nineteenth and penultimate novel of the series, published five years later in 1892, *La Débâcle*. Through Jean's friendship with the intellectual Maurice Levasseur and their experience of warfare, Zola recounts the disastrous military defeat of France at Sedan, the Emperor's fall from power, and the ensuing civil strife. After imprisonment and escape, the two are separated, Maurice joining the insurrectionists of the Commune and Jean joining the government troops. By chance, during the 'semaine sanglante' which saw the Commune crushed, Jean shoots and kills Maurice across a barricade.

This article argues that the way in which Zola conceptualizes his novel of the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune as a pendant to his rural tale of land lost and gained allows him to frame, in not dissimilar terms, his own account of the formation of modern France (of 'toute une France à refaire') (1960–67, V: 912). The twinning of two novels which turn on the capacity, or otherwise, of French people to possess territory, is played out through the figure of Jean Macquart, whose heroism can be understood as a particular amorous relationship to the land he farms on and fights for. It is not by chance that in the twentieth and last novel of the series Doctor Pascal's reflection on his own family history stresses this connection, as it is these very plots (of land as well as narrative) which are withheld until the final sentence-long paragraphs of Pascal's considerable retrospection on the preceding 19 novels of Second Empire life.

What I would like to suggest is that the connection between *La Terre* and *La Débâcle* goes beyond a mere Balzacian *retour des personnages* in the reappearance of Jean to a veritable concern in both novels for the status of land ownership. Who, *La*

Terre considers, has the right to bequeath farmland? And as *La Débâcle* muses, who precisely owns an entire country, and what happens to that sense of ownership (imperial, republican or communard) when land is lost (and the toing and froing of land temporarily gained and yielded in battle is solidified into fixed political settlements at the end of war, as in the case of Alsace and Lorraine)? If both novels are concerned with the struggle for land, then so too do farming and fighting speak to each other on such terrain in some more general sense – indeed, perhaps a fundamentally anthropological one, so much so that the renowned military historian John Keegan goes so far as to muse: ‘Is it true that the zone of organised warfare coincides with what geographers call “the lands of first choice”, those easiest to clear of forest and yielding the richest crops when brought under cultivation? Does warfare, in short, appear cartographically as nothing more than a quarrel between farmers?’ (2004: 73).

Andrew Counter has demonstrated in chapter 6 of his book on *Inheritance in Nineteenth-Century French Culture*, entitled ‘*Donner et retenir ne vaut*: Gift and Discourse in Zola’s *La Terre*’, that *La Terre*, the fifteenth novel of the *Rougon-Macquart* series, raises through its focus on ‘the *donation entre vifs* as a successional practice’, a set of key issues: gift-giving, generosity, community, property, patrilinearity and collateralism; all of which speak to the broad question of who owns the land (2010: 159). Indeed, that rhyming dictum ‘*Qui terre a, guerre a*’ is defined by the *Petit Robert* dictionary as meaning ‘*qui a des terres est sujet à avoir des procès*’. All of this is to be read against a particularly nineteenth-century literary tradition for, as Counter writes, ‘sharing is not permitted in the *roman d’éducation*: only absolute renunciation will do, the total transferral of wealth from one person to another’ – and in military fiction, one might add, from one country to another (158).

If through time societies have fought over land in part so that they could live off the land, then it is also true that as these novels show, when taken together, war threatens to disaggregate agriculture by turning earth into that mixture of water with some combination of soil, silt, and clay which we call mud. This sense of opposition (as well as connection) between earth and mud is highlighted by the etymology of the word ‘terre’, which passed via Middle and Old French, from the Latin *terra*, itself coming ultimately from the Proto-Indo-European *ters- which means ‘dry’. As Keegan notes arrestingly, ‘most of the globe’s dry land has no military history [for] it is either too high, too cold, or too waterless for the conduct of military operations’ (68). Mud becomes, therefore, emblematic for what is at stake in a war. The ownership of land by a specific nation becomes unstable, shifting in battle sometimes on a daily basis, as its status awaits determination by the definitive outcome of the war.

Mud and war no doubt have a long history together. Trying to inspire his men to attack the bridge at the Battle of Arcole, southeast of Verona, in November 1796 during the War of the First Coalition, legend has it that Bonaparte grabbed a flag and stood in the open about 55 paces from the bridge – a heroic gesture captured by Horace Vernet’s 1826 painting of *La Bataille du Pont d’Arcole*.² Bonaparte remained miraculously untouched, but several members of his staff were shot. When an unknown officer dragged Bonaparte out of the intense line of fire, however, Napoleon slipped and ended up in a muddy ditch. The military virtue in keeping things out of the mud (and avoiding the geographical and artistic blurring mud can bring) is made particularly clear in the most famous late nineteenth-century French military painting, Édouard Detaille’s *Le Rêve* of 1888, in which Third Republic recruits dream of the Bonapartist triumphs held *en gloire* in the clouds. By the careful manner in which the

line of rifles recede into the distance and demarcate the earth as distinctly as any border, they are propped up in tent formation so as to keep the action of the guns safe from dampness in the ground.

In fact, the term *terre*, or earth, suggests a constructive solidity, defined by *Le Petit Robert* as an ‘élément solide qui supporte les êtres vivants et leurs ouvrages, et où poussent les végétaux’. In contrast with Maurice, Zola’s narrator iteratively describes Jean and his actions in the lexicon of the ‘solide’ (1960–67, V: 402, 475, 689, 758, 796, 854, 907), and idiomatically the earth is of course associated with the *terre-à-terre* and *avoir les pieds sur terre*, rather than with Maurice’s head-in-the-clouds Communard politics, as Zola would have it. The dissolute quality of mud on the other hand is echoed in the figurative meaning of ‘fange’ as an ‘état d’avilissement d’une personne qui vit dans la débauche’.³ Indeed, one dictionary of synonyms provides us with a keen sense of the aqueous variation and social, material, and moral connotations that the lexis of mud conveys, under the heading ‘Limon, fange, boue, bourbe, crotte’:

Ces termes désignent également une terre imbibée d’eau, mais non de la même manière. [...] La fange est une terre très-délayée, presque liquide, plus étalée que profonde, et assez claire. [...] L’homme d’une très-basse origine est né dans la fange: l’homme vil par ses mœurs est une âme de boue. En fait de bassesse, il n’y a rien au-dessous de la boue. [...] La boue ne devient crotte, que lorsqu’elle a taché ou gâté vos vêtements [*sic*]. (Girard, 1801, II: 381–83)

Susan Harrow has expertly shown that part 3 chapter 2 of *La Débâcle* captures in the drowning language of mud the absolute horror of the imprisonment after the defeat at Sedan of 80 000 Frenchmen on the Iges peninsula, known as the Camp de la Misère:

Immeasurably worse [than Sedan] is the pestilential hell of the Iges peninsula [...] This starkest site of human wretchedness and material abomination is figured in an ocean of pure contingency where mud dissolves into the terrifying abstraction that is ‘une maladie noire’ (773), a miasmatic contagion that folds within it despair, starvation, and acts of (barely readable) depravity.

Mud and mess, those universals of war, would appear, then, irredeemably aversive. (57)

Muddy indistinction was confronted in the nineteenth century by the ennobling, chromatic sharpness of traditional military uniforms, most notably in the *garance* red of French trousers, which would only finally be jettisoned in the face of the realities of the First World War. The very term *khaki* had entered English via Hindi, its Persian etymon meaning soil. Its effects are often completed, we should recall, by the effects of camouflage and mimicry, in which humans copy the illusionist manoeuvres of natural selection and survival (thus imitating imitation). Animals sometimes protect themselves, so zoologists tell us, either by making themselves difficult to see (i.e. camouflage), or by disguising them as something else (known, we might note, as mimesis). In scientific terminology, both methods render the animal ‘cryptic’.⁴

Indeed, it was the First World War which heightened the collective sense of the muddiness of conflict with the advent of trench warfare, in particular the infamous Battle of Passchendaele of 1917, known as the Battle of Mud, captured by the mimesis of mud in Alfred Bastien, *Canadian Gunners in the Mud, Passchendaele* (1917), but transmuted in the nightmarish vision of Douglas W. Culham, *Mud Road to Passchendaele* (1917).⁵ The greatest French narrative prose on the war, Henri Barbusse’s *Le Feu* of 1916, opens in its feuilleton version with a 50-page chapter ‘Dans la terre’, which would become chapter 2 in the book-length version. As the term ‘remuer la terre’ implies, before the first bomb lands, trenches already involve an unsettling of the earth. But the trench itself becomes a psychological as well as literal burial ground: ‘Depuis plus de quinze mois, depuis cinq cents jours, en ce lieu du monde où nous sommes, la fusillade et le bombardement ne se sont pas arrêtés du matin au soir et du soir au matin. On est enterré au fond d’un éternel champ de

bataille' (55). In such situations, the earth (where the living might hope to receive honourable burial when dead) consumes and confuses distinctions between the living and the dead.

Indeed, as the entry for *enterrer* in *Le Petit Robert* reminds us, the earth is also the 'sol où l'on inhume les morts', and any account of the earth in Zola's writing must surely recall, if only *en passant*, that founding patch of earth in the entire cycle, the aire Saint-Mittre evoked in the opening pages of *La Fortune des Rougon*, which anticipates the novel's muddy mix of love, death, loss, and civil war executions (notably of Silvère who, in the series' own circular psychodrama, represents a return of the repressed in the imaginings of Tante Dide in *Le Docteur Pascal*). This 'terrain vague', as Zola calls it at the beginning of this first novel, is the site of a cemetery which has been replaced by a new one on the other side of Plassans because 'la terre, que l'on gorgeait de cadavres depuis plus d'un siècle, suait la mort' (1960–67, I: 5). By 1851, when the novel begins, this succulent 'terreau humide qui bouillait et suintait la sève' has become the locus of 'une végétation noire et drue', of 'une fertilité formidable,' and the location of Silvère and Miette's trysts (5). *Le Docteur Pascal* articulates, in the symbolically reflexive form of its hero's archiving of the family tree, Zola's own attempt to translate corpses into a corpus, and to transpose these cadavers from earth to paper.

Mud itself presents severe challenges to cultural representations in general, as witnessed by Barbara Hurd's set of essays, *Stirring the Mud*.⁶ More particularly, nineteenth-century fiction often conceives of its own issues in muddy terms, be it in Stendhal or Flaubert. Mud becomes the vehicle for dissolving in the reader's mind Fabrice's illusions of war at the Waterloo of *La Chartreuse de Parme*:

Tout à coup on partit au grand galop. Quelques instants après, Fabrice vit, à vingt pas en avant, *une terre labourée* qui était remuée d'une façon singulière. Le fond des sillons était plein d'eau, et *la terre fort humide*, qui formait la crête de ces sillons, volait en petits fragments noirs lancés à trois ou quatre pieds de haut. Fabrice remarqua en passant cet effet singulier; puis sa pensée se remit à songer à la gloire du maréchal. Il entendit un cri sec auprès de lui; c'étaient deux hussards qui tombaient atteints par des boulets; et, lorsqu'il les regarda, ils étaient déjà à vingt pas de l'escorte. Ce qui lui sembla horrible, ce fut *un cheval tout sanglant qui se débattait sur la terre labourée*, en engageant ses pieds dans ses propres entrailles; il voulait suivre les autres: *le sang coulait dans la boue.*

Ah! m'y voilà donc enfin au feu! se dit-il. J'ai vu le feu! se répétait-il avec satisfaction. Me voici un vrai militaire. À ce moment, l'escorte allait *ventre à terre*, et notre héros comprit que c'étaient des boulets qui faisaient *voler la terre* de toutes parts. (1948: 64. Our emphasis)

In *Le Rouge et le Noir*, we famously read: 'Un roman est un miroir qui se promène sur une grande route. Tantôt il reflète à vos yeux l'azur des cieux, tantôt la fange des bourniers de la route. Et l'homme qui porte le miroir dans sa hotte sera par vous accusé, d'être immoral! Son miroir montre la fange, et vous accusez le miroir! Accusez bien plutôt le grand chemin où est le bournier, et plus encore l'inspecteur des routes qui laisse l'eau croupir et le bournier se former' (1964: 361).⁷

In this famous metacommentary on the text as mirror, which deconstructs in its very reflexivity the literary illusionism it glosses, mimesis becomes a matter of mud. In such landscapes the carefully plotted and seemingly solid strata of Zola's genealogical charts/maps – fictional layers of births, deaths, and struggles – become porous as the murky dramas he creates run through them, dissolving their seemingly solid conception much as the mud of Sedan obscures then liquefies the Franco-German borders in *La Débâcle*.

Peter Brooks begins his classic *Reading for the Plot* by making a useful connection between land and fiction when he cites four dictionary definitions of the English word plot: 1) a ground plan, as for a building; 2) a secret plan, or as we might say in French *complot*; 3) an outline of the action of a narrative or drama; and 4) a

measured area of land. As Brooks observes: 'Common to the original sense of the word is the idea of boundedness, demarcation, the drawing of lines to mark off and order. [...] From the organized space, plot becomes the organizing line, demarcating and diagramming that which was previously undifferentiated' (1992: 12).

Let us for a moment flesh out the tangential reference Brooks makes to Rousseau and 'the creation of possession and differentiation where previously there had been none' (300). In typical Rousseauist fashion, the opening lines of the second part of the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* accelerate back through time to some imagined origin so as to make a political and philosophical point about the ownership of land:

Le premier qui, ayant enclos un terrain, s'avisa de dire : *Ceci est à moi*, et trouva des gens assez simples pour le croire, fut le vrai fondateur de la société civile. Que de crimes, de guerres, de meurtres, que de misères et d'horreurs n'eût point épargnés au genre humain celui qui, arrachant les pieux ou comblant le fossé, eût crié à ses semblables: 'Gardez-vous d'écouter cet imposteur; vous êtes perdus, si vous oubliez que les fruits sont à tous, et que la terre n'est à personne'. (1960: 66)

Such comments are certainly true of 'l'impasse Saint-Mittre', the original site of French genocide evoked obliquely in *La Fortune des Rougon* through the bourgeois familial suppression (and then repression) of Silvère Mouret's republican revolt, only to return literally in *La Terre* and *La Débâcle*, with overt discussion of struggles over land ownership and the Commune (and in *Le Docteur Pascal* with the ghost of Silvère).

La Débâcle, Zola's farewell to the Second Empire, and perhaps the only truly historical novel of this deeply historicist 20-novel endeavour, anticipates the Pascalian resurrection of Zola's intellectual energies, beyond the death of the Second Empire, as he limps over the *Rougon-Macquart* finishing line with an interrogation on land ownership and liberty seemingly inspired by Communard writings, particularly the

radically human geography of the anarchist Communard Élisée Reclus.⁸ Zola, we know, did read Reclus in his preparations for *La Terre*. Reclus concludes the late Second Empire preface to his two-volume *La Terre*, by referencing the Norse goddess Freyja: ‘pour garder la netteté de ma vue et la probité de ma pensée, j’ai parcouru le monde en homme libre, j’ai contemplé la nature d’un regard à la fois candide et fier, me souvenant que l’antique Freya était en même temps la déesse de la Terre et celle de la Liberté’ (1868, I: III). Freyja thus allows us to see that rather than receding into some supra-historical bucolic sense of the earth, the study of the earth can, and perhaps should, be deeply political.

Zola’s own account of war is amongst other things a matter of frontiers – geographical frontiers between countries, and between regions (much of Alsace and Lorraine moving between countries in the peace treaty at the end of the war); and historical frontiers between regimes and between versions of regimes (the liberalizing of the Empire not stopping its demise in September 1870 after the Battle of Sedan, and the triumph of republicanism not preventing the Versailles-Communard civil war of the spring of 1871). Spatial and temporal frontiers, it seems, are less solid, less implacable than we might presume them to be, and this smudging of maps and calendars bespeaks the impulse to dissolution in the language of mud in the battlefields of eastern France at the very moment when news of defeat at Sedan reached Paris and triggered the displacement of the Second Empire on 4 September 1870 by the Third Republic. In one of the most vital paradoxes of Zola’s project, it is in the high resolution of mimesis (in its very claim to unsimplified detail) that this impulse to dissolution (metaphorical and material) is best conveyed.

Robert Ziegler’s work reminds us of how to read the psychodramas of decadent fiction in the context of historical experience, and thus to think of such

fiction in a way that speaks not only to Zola but to the messiness of mimesis more generally. The focus on loss in the subtitle of his *Beauty Raises the Dead (Literature and Loss in the Fin de Siècle)* allows Ziegler to fuse the historical experience of military defeat and mourning with what his opening chapter terms ‘the Psychology of Loss’ associated with decadent fiction:

Decadent stories of loss go beyond fantastic tales of death transcended. Indeed, Freud broadens his definition of mourning to include a ‘reaction to the loss of . . . some abstraction which has taken the place of [the loved one], such as the fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on.’ Historians of the fin de siècle have remarked on the sense of futility underlying the superficial splendor of the Second Empire, explaining the Decadents’ need to mourn lost feelings of idealism and national purpose. (2002: 36)

As Ziegler understands, the loss of Alsace and Lorraine can be understood in psychological terms as object loss. In his close reading of *Sébastien Roch* (1890) by Octave Mirbeau in chapter 3 of *The Nothing Machine*, he offers a bravura interpretation of that novel’s impassioned conclusion in the Franco-Prussian War.

This allows us, by contrast, to perceive the compromise between critique and patriotism in *La Débâcle*, whose preparation began the following year:

The outbreak of war ushers in a spurious new democracy, as the sons of hardware merchants, doctors, and aristocrats are conscripted indiscriminately. Yet with the abolition of the civilian hierarchy of social class and history comes the establishment of the military order of authority, rank, and grade. In place of shabby nobles with their dilapidated castles, there are officers dispatching rich and poor indiscriminately to the slaughter. The battlefield narrative with which the novel closes illustrates Mirbeau’s impatience with bellicose patriotism. The profligate waste of life justified by xenophobia and nationalism, an unromanticised view of war depicting chaos, fear, and butchery, the practical subordination of ideological concerns to the violence of combat: this is the reality Mirbeau shows, one stripped of sentimentality and glory. (2007: 72)

Indeed, Ziegler reminds us in *Asymptote* that the critical doxa of the literary manual only tells us part of the story of the Decadence:

Paradoxically, Decadent writing turns into a successful quest for health. Having rejected the regressive impulses that he works through in his characters, the Decadent is able to escape the shell of stifling subjectivism. Free to move out into the world of material reality, he experiences again the inexhaustible richness of other people. (2009: 12)

In his account of the paradoxes of the Decadence, he goes on to explain the way in which their work is stimulated by the historical process in the years following the publication of Zola's novel:

Despite the Decadents' disposition toward eschatological paranoia, despite their reputation for indulging in aesthetic introversion, the aftermath of the Dreyfus Affair witnessed a reigniting of political passion – from the anti-democratic arguments made by Catholic reactionaries to Remy de Gourmont's excoriation of hyper-patriotism and xenophobia. The conventional view of the fin de siècle was one of ideological disengagement, Olympian detachment from the sordidness of quotidian affairs. [...] Yet [...] the fin de siècle was also riven by political discord: anarchist bombings, the assassination of President Sadi Carnot, the violent polarizing of political sentiment following the sentencing of Dreyfus. (16)

If J.-K. Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884) represented a challenge to Naturalism from within, as would the *Manifeste des cinq* of 1887, then Zola subsequently responded by a wilful assimilation (not least in *Le Rêve*) of the very terms of his philosophical antitheses. The methodological politics of this assimilation, as Naturalism looked ever less avant-garde through the 1880s and 1890s, became clear in Pascal's intellectual seduction of Clotilde in *Le Docteur Pascal* (1893), set in the early years of the new Republic, which brings the series to a close in Zola's autofictional association with Pascal, the plotter of family lineage, and yet points beyond the shared Pascal-Zola epistemology to the idealist strains of *Trois Villes* and *Quatre Évangiles*. Though Zola might at times dismiss the esoteric nature of the Decadence, it nevertheless stood insistently as an authentic reminder to Naturalism of the dangers of ideological glibness in Zola's role as a critical friend of the new Republic, all too legible to its expanding reading public, and too close for comfort, in

spite of his avowed policy of critique. If Zola is the enemy within, the decadents were the friends without.

To understand the politics of Zola's *lisibilité*, we shall conclude by reflecting on Eugen Weber's historical interpretation of the politics of educational and cultural homogenization to which we referred at the start of this essay. In the context of *La Débâcle*, such a will to homogeneity bespeaks a desire for national unity in this paradoxically patriotic tale. The novel captures, in its future-oriented final sentence about the need to reform France ('toute une France à refaire', (912)), a vision of nation-building whose very emblem is the sharing of a common language in which even the borderlands of eastern France seem culturally recognizable to Zola's contemporary readership.

In *Peasants into Frenchmen* Weber stresses the lack of congruence between the cartographical limits of France as nation-state and the geo-linguistic dominion of the French language, even into the twentieth century. Zola's very project, however, sets out to impose (in almost military fashion) that very congruence. It is telling that Weber's hugely influential interpretation of this unsteady process of 'modernization' and homogenization was translated into French as *La Fin des terroirs*, as the nation asserted its own identity. His eighth chapter, 'The Working of the Land', reminds historians of modernization of the persistence throughout the nineteenth century of the rural life from which Jean comes and to which he shall return. 'All through the nineteenth century', Weber writes, 'and into the first decades of the twentieth the rural and agricultural populations were a majority in France. On that everyone agrees' (1977: 115). Weber understands that our desire to track historical change can lead us to distort the historical picture. As he continues, 'All this is by way of saying, if it needs to be said, that we are talking about a great many souls' (115-16). Indeed, so

much of the Zola we canonize and teach quite naturally lays such an emphasis on industrialization (in *Germinal* and *La Bête humaine*) and urbanization (*L'Assommoir* and *Nana*) that here too it is possible to overlook Zola's account of those 'great many souls' to whom Weber alludes. Yet rather remarkably, Weber's 615-page book makes only four passing references to Zola: first, throwing Zola in with Balzac as the sources of stereotypical urban descriptions of the peasant as 'a dark, mysterious, hostile, and menacing figure' (12); then to *La Fortune des Rougon*, where Jean first appears, then to *Germinal* (the politicized twin of *L'Assommoir*), and finally one solitary reference to *La Terre* (in particular to the school teacher – and thus the conduit of the cultural centralization of the Republic – who criticizes the farming community's resistance to technical novelty). Had Weber read Henry James more carefully, he might well have made much of *La Débâcle*, which James ranked in his top trio alongside *Germinal* and *L'Assommoir*, whose tales of proletarian production and consumption fared better in the twentieth century.

By its very Frenchness, *La Débâcle* wilfully simplifies both the war and the land over which it is fought. Zola was criticized at the time (rightly, but perhaps for the wrong motives) for focussing on the French experience and not tending to the German one. The very failure of the French army in 1870 to advance beyond its borders in combat allowed Zola, two decades later, to turn his account of the war into an account of land and language, which is largely a matter of Frenchness, France, and indeed the French language – in the singular, rather than the heteroglossia Weber describes. Verbal forms, it seems, must flow into a single vessel. For in this novel, other languages and dialects are excluded in a popular literature which marries the national politics of the lingua franca (spurred on by Third Republic educational reforms) to the cultural politics of *lisibilité* (and the widening of Zola's reading

public). Although a considerable part of the novel takes place in Alsace, the Alsatian language is nowhere to be heard (nor, for that matter, German). One is tempted to conclude that the most foreign language in *Les Rougon-Macquart* is to be found in the novel of Jean's sister, Gervaise Macquart, namely in the *langue verte* of the urban proletariat in *L'Assommoir*, in the very capital of France, rather than at its eastern periphery. Indeed, in the drama of centre and periphery that characterizes *La Débâcle* nothing seems more foreign to Zola and to a good number of his early reviewers such as Émile Faguet and Eugene-Melchior de Vogüé (Zola, 1960–67, V: 1434, 1441) than the Paris Commune of part 3, that marginalized centre, which flips between utopia and dystopia in its critique of the here and now, not unlike Decadent fiction itself.

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¹ The intellectual elasticity of Robert Ziegler's outstanding critical contribution to the scholarly field of late nineteenth-century French fiction – and particularly his penchants for psychoanalysis and for Decadence – have inspired this largely historicist reading of *La Débâcle*.

² Maurice and his twin sister Henriette are weaned on the Bonapartist mythology, each sitting as children on the knee of their grandfather, a soldier from the Grande Armée who recounted for them endless Homeric tales of battles won by 'le dieu Napoléon' (1960–67, V: 447).

³ If the defeat at Sedan incarnates the *débâcle* of the Second Empire, then the semantically and phonically proximate *débauche* is repeated in the final chapter of the novel in association with the urban degeneracy which precedes the purificatory zeal of the Commune. In the free indirect discourse emanating from Otto Gunther, cousin of Maurice and Henriette, Paris is said to burn 'en punition de ses siècles de vie mauvaise, du long amas de ses crimes et de ses débauches' (1960–67, V: 887). A delirious Maurice will then attach this plural to the specific sins of the Second Empire: 'il évoquait les galas de Gomorrhe et de Sodome, [...] les palais crevant de telles débauches' (894). The battle of Sedan served to unify Germany of course, as celebrated in the subsequent annual Sedanstag, reflecting the powerful contrast of a country that underwent fragmentation after this battle (France) against that of a country that became 'whole' (Germany), and this thanks to the unstable status of the earth: dry (as ink on the map) in France, then wet in that indecisive stage of battle, then dry again as it solidifies within the new frontiers of another territory, Germany. The association of battle and mud is articulated in the very title of Gary Cox's, *The Halt in the Mud*.

⁴ For instance, Gullan and Cranston: 'Visual deception may reduce the probability of being found by a natural enemy. A well-concealed cryptic insect that either resembles its general background or an inedible (neutral) object may be said to "mimic" its surroundings. [...]' (2010: 366–67).

⁵ Mud is itself is, in fact, also an art historical term, either an insult as in Zola's analysis of Cabanel's 1880 salon painting *Phèdre* – 'd'une tonalité morne où les couleurs vives s'attristent elles-mêmes et tournent à la boue' (1969: 1025) – or a Baudelairean challenge to be met, as in the claim attributed by Signac to Delacroix: 'Une phrase attribuée à Delacroix formule bien ses efforts: "Donnez-moi la boue des rues, déclarait-il, et j'en ferai de la chair de femme d'une teinte délicieuse", voulant dire que, par le contraste d'autres couleurs intenses, il modifierait cette boue et la colorerait à son gré.' (1911: 47).

⁶ In her nine essays, Hurd explores the seductive allure of bogs, swamps, and wetlands. Her forays into the land of carnivorous plants, swamp gas, and bog men provide fertile ground for reflections on mythology, literature, Eastern spirituality, and human longing. In her observations of these muddy environments, she finds ample metaphor for human creativity, imagination, and fear.

⁷ Maria Scott argues for the specificity of Stendhalian mud within the French realist project: 'mud tends to be presented in Realist texts as a transparent symbol, but, as the example of Stendhal suggests, Realist mud can also occasionally reveal glitches in the symbolization process and, consequently, glimpses of the Real. It can do this by resisting straightforward metaphorical transformation, as in the novel mirror passage from *Le Rouge et le Noir*, or by being perceived in a confused way before being interpreted, as in the Waterloo section of *La Chartreuse de Parme*. In *Lucien Leuwen*, and most schematically in the aftermath of the Blois episode, mud is thematically associated with a failure of symbolization, of narcissism and of idealization, and with that anxiety and compulsion to repeat that, for Lacan, point to the excessive proximity of the Real' (2012: 24).

⁸ Amidst all the interdisciplinary connections privileged by nineteenth-century French studies, geography often stands underprivileged in spite of our shared fascination for place. An important exception to this lacuna lies in Kristin Ross's work on Arthur Rimbaud and the Commune, which foregrounds the work of Reclus. She has tracked better than most the alignment of literary and geographical discourses of the period. As she teaches us, geography as a university discipline in France was essentially created in the 1870s by the likes of Émile Levasseur and Paul Vidal de la Blache.