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Representation, Narrative, and “Truth”: Literary and Historical Epistemology in 19th-Century France

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Submitted Spring 2021

Table of Contents

Preface and Acknowledgements	2
Introduction	4
Chapter 1: Jules Michelet and the Poetics of History	19
Chapter 2: Honoré de Balzac, <i>The Human Comedy</i> , and the Social Real	34
Chapter 3: Émile Zola, Positivist Realism, and the Novel as Science	53
Conclusion	70
Bibliography	75

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Introduction

History and Literature in 19th-Century France: From Poetics to Positivism

History held a prominent place in French intellectual life across the 19th century, but in a form that would be unrecognizable to the contemporary historian. French historian Gérard Noiriel observes that “until the 1880s, history was a discipline without real autonomy, dominated by literature and philosophy, subordinated to the concerns of political struggle.”¹ Nevertheless, interpreting and understanding the past was an urgent task: Historian Zrinka Stahuljak notes that “in the wake of the social upheavals and political revolutions that ended the eighteenth century, the past imposed itself as the object of study that would reveal the internal logic”² of what French historian Ernest Renan (1823–1892) called the “interplay and laws of human revolutions.”³ The first steps toward establishing a broad institutional and national understanding of the past took place in the 1830s, when historian François Guizot, the Minister of the Interior under the July Monarchy, which lasted from 1830–1848, expanded primary education significantly in the country.⁴ But the professional academic practice of capital-H “History” as we currently understand it did not emerge in France until the century’s end. This thesis examines the shifts in epistemological frameworks that precipitated the development of the historical discipline as we understand it today, and how those shifts manifested at the formal, discursive level, providing a new way to think about the past, represent it, and ultimately make a claim as to its meaning and relevance to the present.

¹ Gérard Noiriel, “Naissance du Métier d’Historien” [“Birth of the Profession of Historian”], *Genèses* 1 (1990): 59. All translations of this work are my own.

² Zrinka Stahuljak, “History as a Medical Category: Heredity, Positivism, and the Study of the Past in Nineteenth-Century France,” *History of the Present* 3:2 (2013): 141.

³ Ernest Renan, as quoted in Stahuljak, 141.

⁴ Stahuljak, 141.

The study of the past lacked a standard methodology even by mid-century—historians were often rhetoricians as much as researchers of the past. For example, the influential French historian Jules Michelet applied in 1836 for a position at the elite Collège de France in *any* available chair in classical languages, history, or philosophy—and ended up as chair in both of the latter two positions.⁵ What’s more, history was hardly institutionalized at all before the last decades of the century. Of over 150,000 pages of “history” published each year as late as the start of the French Third Republic in 1870, only two percent were penned by academics.⁶ In this fluid period, history had few, if any, standards for research methodology, the use of primary sources, or rhetorical form. The historical work, which was largely the purview of liberal and “romantic” historians, such as Michelet, occupied a somewhat indeterminate position between that of a contemporary factual account and a literary, even poetic, narrative of the past.

By the century’s end, French historians, influenced by the positivist scientific philosophy of French intellectual August Comte (1798–1857) as well as the source-based methodology of German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886),⁷ had made the discipline into an academic profession. Noiriel writes that “history could begin to aspire to the status of science thanks to its professionalization.”⁸ At the heart of this new professional history was “a massive claim of *objectivity*... an epistemological principle more or less inspired by Comtism.”⁹ Positivist historians “identified their [historical] ‘realism’ with the kind of comprehension of natural processes which the physical sciences provided.”¹⁰ This commitment to objectivity was the

⁵ Arthur Mitzman, *Michelet, Historian: Rebirth and Romanticism in 19th-Century France* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1990), 13.

⁶ Noiriel, 60.

⁷ Noiriel notes that Germany professionalized history about half a century before French institutions began a similar process (66).

⁸ Stahuljak, 141.

⁹ Noiriel, 70, italics Noiriel’s.

¹⁰ Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 46.

method by which historians standardized their practice and separated it from the rhetorical and literary traditions with which it had previously been associated. Noiriel notes that post-professionalization, “the value of a historian now rests on a group of criteria specific to the [historian’s] milieu.”¹¹ In addition to being an institutionally motivated shift, Stahuljak notes that history’s positivist turn was the result of a disciplinary “quest for influence in matters of social and public policy.”¹² In short, the evolution of the historical discipline in France is at least partially the product of the relationship between methodology and politics.

Indeed, history’s methodological shift took place alongside sea changes in French politics and political ideology. During the July Monarchy (1830–1848), the dominant political cadre were bourgeois liberals, who believed in a French people unified by a common French national identity and served by the French state. This state, however, was not one of mass democracy, but rather ruled by the bourgeois themselves. Murray-Miller notes that during this era, “Education, wealth, and social distinction demonstrated one’s ability to make judicious political decisions and conceptualize the greater social good outside personal interest, and these qualities formed the basis of an open aristocracy.”¹³ This belief was grounded in an idealistic conception of inherent French social coherence, which would be dealt a death blow in 1848.

In the second half of the century, French liberalism underwent a substantial shift in its animating ideology. Stahuljak argues that “the fading of idealism, after the failure of the revolutions of 1848 and the proclamation of the Second Empire by Napoleon III... gave a real impetus to positivism and scientism.”¹⁴ At the founding of the French Third Republic in 1870,

¹¹ Noiriel, 70.

¹² Stahuljak, 140.

¹³ Gavin Murray-Miller, “Neither Reformers nor ‘Réformés’: The Construction of French Modernity in the Nineteenth Century,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 40:3 (2014): 49

¹⁴ Stahuljak, 141-142.

the class conflict and fierce intra-national political animosity of 1848 was far from past. Romantic, liberal ideologies like Michelet's, which posited history as a near-metaphysical narrative of nationalist triumph, were tossed out by the French ruling class. In their place emerged rationalist principles that could ostensibly explain (or at least conceal) social *disharmony* in addition to social harmony, which earlier historians sought to enshrine as the precondition for historical progress.

Instead of idealizing a universal national identity, French elites identified their liberal political program with “modernity” and “progress,” which were themselves identified with rapid innovation in the sciences and scientific ways of knowing and representing reality. By seizing upon these new ideas and grafting them onto principles of government and social behavior, French elites adopted a “logic of a universalized modernity... with a profound sense of moral authority and purpose.”¹⁵ This universalized modernity, predicated on science, was ostensibly free of any prior political commitment. Noiriel notes that in history, specifically, the shift towards a putatively ideologically uncommitted objectivity was an “illustration of the profound desire for emancipation from the philosophical or political norms to which the discipline had been subordinated previously.”¹⁶ In other words, while history's shift to an objective epistemological framework was reflective of a larger shift in academia and the social sciences towards positivism, it was also a response to history's specifically political status, and an attempt to liberate it from that status, which was perceived as limiting history's potential to generate unbiased knowledge.

I argue that this shift is not only reflected in history's methodological practices, but also in its form: as the historical work took on a different understanding of how the past is to be

¹⁵ Murray-Miller, “Neither Reformers nor ‘Réformés,’” 57.

¹⁶ Noiriel, 70.

depicted and interpreted, its discursive practices changed, too. Further, I argue that this shift in the idea of what constitutes the practice of “history” is reflected in historical thinking more broadly, including in the historically aware fiction that was popular in 19th-century France. The manner in which history is analyzed and discussed discursively is revealing of how historical thinkers and writers conceived of the purpose of history and the best way to disclose that purpose via a narrative, even a fictional one.

Concomitant with a renewed, refocused interest in history in early-19th-century France¹⁷ was the rise of a new form of fiction: the realist novel. Often identified with French writer Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850), French realists of note include Stendhal (1743–1842), Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880), Alphonse Daudet (1840–1897), and Émile Zola (1840–1902). Broadly speaking, French realism is a genre of social specificity: its writers drew heavily from their own real-world experiences in describing contemporary life with the goal of, as the movement’s name implies, accurately representing reality. Put differently, the goal of the realist novel is a fictitious spin on one of the goals of history: depicting a moment with accuracy.

Literary scholar and historian Sandy Petrey argues that the realist movement began in 1830, when Stendhal’s novel *Le Rouge et le Noir* [*The Red and the Black*] was published.¹⁸ 1830 was also the year of the July Revolution, when bourgeois opponents of the reactionary Bourbon Regime, which had come to power after Napoleon’s defeat in 1814, deposed King Charles X and installed in his place King Louis Phillippe I, a much more liberal monarch. The replacement of a

¹⁷ French historians including Prosper de Barante, Augustin Thierry, Jules Michelet, and François Guizot showed particular interest in the history of the French Revolution and the 18th century in France, although some works, such as Michelet’s *Histoire de France*, attempted to cover time spans from the present to as long ago as the first century CE.

¹⁸ Sandy Petrey, *In the Court of the Pear King: French Culture and the Rise of Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 119. Petrey maintains that although Stendhal’s work marks “the first novel to configure the realist aesthetic” (*Pear King*, 119), Honoré de Balzac “stands supreme among realist literature’s originators and most accomplished practitioners” (*Pear King*, 49).

conservative monarchy with a more liberal one brought liberal historians, including Michelet, into orthodox institutional positions in the French government and academy. Petrey also argues that the paradox of a “revolution” replacing one monarchy with another is demonstrative of one of the fundamental concerns of literary realism: “exploring the mechanisms through which reality goes away or comes thundering out of nowhere.”¹⁹ Thus, the birth of the realist novel takes place within, and is a result of, the same set of political and cultural crises that created a renewed interest in history. In both (as yet unprofessionalized) history and the realist novel, thinkers were attempting to write their way through fundamental questions about the nature and organization of societies in transformation.

In many ways, realist novels²⁰ have a similar goal to history: telling a compelling and plausible story that represents something about the way that the world *really* is. Balzac wrote that he hoped his novels would “[comprehend] at the same time the history and the critique of Society.”²¹ And Zola, writing decades later from a drastically more positivist standpoint, wrote that the novelist should ideally represent the “absolute determinism in the conditions of existence.”²²

Notably, both authors set their novels in the recent past. Peter Brooks notes that most of Balzac’s work was written in the 1830s and 1840s, but is largely set in the 1820s, during the Bourbon Restoration, and that “this retrospective view of society allowed him to become the first

¹⁹ Petrey, *Pear King*, 48.

²⁰ A term I use here to refer to both the culturally specific genre known as “realism” and the practice of creating a fictional prosaic narrative that corresponds to some extra-textual reality.

²¹ Honoré de Balzac, *L’avant-propos de la Comédie Humaine [foreword to the Human Comedy]* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 12-13. All translations mine.

²² Émile Zola, *Le Roman Experimental [The Experimental Novel]*, 5th edition, Gallica, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k113130k.r=le%20roman%20experimental?rk=21459;2> (October 23, 2007), 1. All translations mine. [Original Source: Émile Zola, *Le Roman Experimental*, 5th edition (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1881)].

writer truly to seize the meaning of the emergent modern world.”²³ And Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart* cycle of novels, subtitled a “natural and social history of a family under the Second Empire,” chronicles the lives of the Rougon-Macquart family during the reign of Napoleon III, whose empire had collapsed less than a year before the first book in the series was published. In the preface to the first *Rougon-Macquart* novel, Zola wrote that his characters “recount the Second Empire, with the help of their individual dramas, from the trap of the coup d’État to treachery of Sedan.”^{24/25} In both cases, setting their work in the recent past was one method by which Balzac and Zola attempted to use the benefit of hindsight to explain more fully what was *really* going on at the time—to interpret the world from a historical perspective.

The obvious point of difference between the quasi-historical novel and history is that a novelist is permitted to invent all manner of things that the historian is not.²⁶ Nevertheless, the quasi-documentary²⁷ realist novel, which was quite popular in 19th-century France, must be taken seriously as a perspective on one of the fundamental concerns of historians: the relationship between an isolated historical “fact” and a broader historical “truth,” and how the two might be tied together and given form through narrative. This question was unsettled in 19th-century French institutions. At a time when a discipline-specific way of looking at the world

²³ Peter Brooks, *Balzac’s Lives* (New York: New York Review Books, 2020), 4.

²⁴ Émile Zola, Preface to *La Fortune des Rougon*, Bibliothèque électronique du Québec, <https://beq.ebooksgratuits.com/vents/zola-01.pdf>, 5. All translations are my own. [Original Source: Émile Zola, *La Fortune des Rougon* (Paris : Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1906)].

²⁵ The “coup d’État” refers to French president Napoleon III’s self-coup in 1851, when he dissolved the National Assembly before declaring the Second French Empire in 1852. “Sedan” refers to Napoleon III’s defeat at the Battle of Sedan in September of 1870, which resulted in his capture and effectively marked the end of the Second Empire.

²⁶ However, realist novelists may choose to impose requirements on themselves in this respect, as Zola did when he wrote *Germinal*. Zola worked as a journalist and critic before he became well-known for his novels, and travelled to coal mines in the north of France to conduct research for *Germinal*, which is set in such a mine. He was known to defend the factual accuracy of his descriptions of mining life against accusations of sensationalism. For more information about Zola’s research and its role in the planning and execution of *Germinal*, see: Richard H. Zakarian, *Zola’s “Germinal”; a critical study of its primary sources* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1972).

²⁷ As my second and third thesis chapters demonstrate, realist novels have historically been read to gain insight into past social attitudes, understandings, and configurations.

“historically” had yet to be fully elaborated, realism’s generic goal was to record “humanity as it is,” to use Leopold von Ranke’s phrase—to reveal the social conditions under which people live or lived.²⁸ Interrogating the methods by which the world can be narratively represented “as it is” is the subject of this thesis.

Positivist Epistemology and the Politics of Historical Consciousness

My thesis examines the fluid boundaries between French historical and literary writing in the 19th century, and the shifts in “historical consciousness” that occurred in both fields as the century progressed.²⁹ I examine three exemplary French writers—Michelet, a historian, and Balzac and Zola, novelists—considering each primarily as a historical thinker. Ultimately, what this analysis shows is that as the 19th century progressed, the broad shift in French institutions towards positivist epistemological and explanatory frameworks is reflected in literature as well as history. Both disciplines were subject to similar discursive standards, and those standards shifted in comparable ways as positivism and scientism became dominant conceptual frameworks. As positivism infiltrated the practice of history, pushing it farther into the realm of science, a similar effect is observable in the historical thinking of the novelists I examine.

This shift can be understood as evidence of positivistic thought’s growing influence as the 19th century progressed in France. Additionally, the shift in historical consciousness away from integrative and synthetic frameworks, which presuppose broad social harmony, to causal ones, which do not, reflects broader social fragmentation as the country vacillated between various forms of government and their ideologies across the century. As political regimes and

²⁸ Leopold von Ranke, as quoted in Felix Gilbert, “Historiography: What Ranke Meant,” *The American Scholar* 56:3 (1987): 394.

²⁹ Following the work of historian Hayden White, I use this term to mean the ways in which one thinks about history, addressing questions like: how is history conceptualized and/or constructed? What are the primary forces that create and drive historical events? What is the purpose of history to the contemporary observer?

ideologies came and went, novelists, like historians, turned to rationalist frameworks and discourses, rather than idealistic or metaphysical ones, to explain their rapidly evolving political, social, and cultural moments. In addition to analyzing the impact these shifts had on historical consciousness in France, my thesis attempts to understand how historical thinking changes in response to shifts in political authority and ideology. Examining how realist and/or historical narratives shifted at the formal, rhetorical level as rationalism became the dominant intellectual and political framework provides one possible way to consider how changes in discursive practices reflect and even create changes in the political, ideological, and philosophical implications of works created within that discourse.

Petrey writes that “Society produces the world in which its members live [and] history determines what society is. Realism’s constitutive purpose is to assert that proposition.”³⁰ Realist literature, as a narrative representation of reality, is well-equipped to interrogate how social discourse is a key part of constructing “reality.” If history determines what society is, then the discursive form that a realist historical narrative takes, be it scholarly or novelistic, has major implications for the society that that history produces, and by extension the reality that that society creates.

Methods

My main sources are a combination of writing about the past and writing *about* writing about the past. By the former, I mean a mix of stories that claim to represent the real world by recounting either actual events that happened or fictional narratives that are instructive as to what *could* or *might* happen. And by writing *about* this documentary writing, I mean criticism and

³⁰ Petrey, *Pear King*, 143.

explanation from both contemporary scholars and historical writers discussing how and why that documentary writing is useful.

For the former, my sources include some of the most critically celebrated and commercially successful novels of 19th-century France, namely Honoré de Balzac's series *The Human Comedy* and *Germinal* from Émile Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* series. They also include the historical work of Jules Michelet, a prominent figure in the early-19th-century French historical canon. For the latter, my sources are largely scholarly or literary criticism, or reflexive commentary from the historical writers themselves. These writings are a useful window into how their authors conceived of the shape and process of history in their works, and whether these self-expressed views cohere with the implicit historical ideas that I examine in those works.

I analyze these sources in two ways. First, I close-read documentary sources from Michelet, Balzac, and Zola to identify how they present the relationship between the past (e.g. the “what” of history) and historical narrative (the “why”)—what do these stories have to say about *why* and *how* history happens? Second, I zoom-out by borrowing analytical techniques from the historian Hayden White to understand how these works use formal and rhetorical techniques to turn contingent historical events into a coherent historical narrative. How are the “why” and “how” of history given life and form through narrative and language—particularly through metaphorical, figurative language?

The Players

The three writers I examine have each been the subject of a vast amount of historical scholarship. Jules Michelet was the historian *par excellence* of the July Monarchy. His nationalist philosophy of history represents a dominant strain in early-19th-century French historiography, just as his poetic style represents the literary qualities of early-19th-century

historians. Although criticized for his subjectivity, Michelet has also been recognized as a methodological innovator, consulting primary sources at the National Archives in Paris even before Ranke's source-based methodology was adopted by French historians. His place in historiography and the historiographical canon has been established and evaluated by many French thinkers, including the influential 20th-century critic Roland Barthes as well as modern historians of the *Annales* school, particularly Lucien Febvre. In the main, Michelet is considered the apotheosis of the literary style of early-19th-century French history, as well as the theoretical predecessor of the *Annales* school, due to his methodological emphasis on excavating the past in its totality, "a predecessor to the kind of microcosmic and popular *histoire des mentalités* with which the *Annales* was associated."³¹

Likewise, historical researchers and historicist literary critics have produced a vast body of research on Balzac and Zola. Balzac, the foremost realist novelist, pursued an unsuccessful career in law, among other failed enterprises, before finding commercial success as a fiction writer in 1830s Paris. He has been lauded by 20th-century Marxist critic György Lukács, among others, as an "inexorable observer of the social history of France."³² Zola, for his part, was born a generation after Balzac, and worked as a journalist and critic in Paris during Napoleon III's Second French Empire (1852–1870) before finding recognition as a novelist. He was notable not just for his dedication to primary sources in writing his realist novels, but for his popularity: one anglophone critic noted in 1923 that his "name and influence have loomed larger in America, England and Germany than those of any of his predecessors or contemporaries in the Realistic Movement."³³

³¹ Bettina R. Lerner, "Michelet, Mythologue," *Yale French Studies* 111 (2007): 61.

³² György Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964), 38.

³³ Ernest Boyd, "Realism in France," *The New Republic*, March 21, 1923.

(<https://newrepublic.com/article/114374/french-realism-balzac-flaubert-zola-and-romanticisms-remains>)

Much attention has been given by past and present authors and critics to the ways in which Balzac's and Zola's realist fiction represents and/or responds to the real world. French realism was, in its time, treated as an accurate recording of the world as it was. Victor Hugo noted at Balzac's funeral in 1850 that in his works, "one sees all our contemporary civilization coming and going and marching and moving with all manner of the bewildering and terrible, mixed with the real."³⁴ However, in the latter half of the 20th century, literary theorists including Barthes turned on the genre, accusing the novel, as a purely verbal construction, of being unable to faithfully represent anything about the world beyond the page. Writing about Balzac's novella *Sarrasine*, Barthes claims that "the classic text has nothing more to say than what it says," meaning that the text cannot by nature truly correspond to anything in the real world.³⁵ Responding to this school of criticism, Sandy Petrey has argued that realism presents a much more nuanced understanding of its own relationship to reality than Barthes and his contemporaries assumed. Petrey identifies as the genre's fundamental concern "reality's dependence on the sociopolitical ecosystem certifying it as real."³⁶ Realism is thought to function as a self-conscious model (rather than a reflection, per Barthes) of how "reality" is made.

However, while Balzac's and Zola's presentations of history and its function have been thoroughly theorized, and their novels thoroughly contextualized as part of the historical archive, less attention has been paid to the broad, structural conceptions of history implied by their writing, be it fictive or theoretical. Much has been written, for example, about the wealth of historical information and implicit historical analysis on display in the writers' works. But such

³⁴ Victor Hugo, *Victor Hugo, 29 août 1850, sur Honoré de Balzac* [*Victor Hugo, August 29 1850, on Honoré de Balzac*], Contreligne, <http://www.contreligne.eu/2015/11/victor-hugo-29-aout-1850-sur-honore-de-balzac/> (November 2015). [Original Source: Victor Hugo, "On Honoré de Balzac" (eulogy, funeral of Honoré de Balzac, Paris, August 29, 1850)].

³⁵ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1990), 216.

³⁶ Petrey, *Pear King*, 119.

analyses generally attend to specific historical details, rather than considering how formal decisions about narrative plot, figurative language, and other discursive elements imply their own understanding of history.³⁷ In other words, historical analyses of Balzac and Zola often emphasize their writing's content at the expense of its form. By extension, these analyses have not fully investigated how Balzac's and Zola's chosen discursive forms demonstrate specific positions vis-à-vis how to represent real-world or historical "truth" in the form of prosaic discourse.

To fill in this analytical gap and excavate a broader understanding of the historical consciousness of these two writers, I borrow much of my analytic methodology from historian Hayden White and his schema for the formal, structural analyses of historical narratives. My intention is not to examine how questions or philosophies of history manifest in certain Balzac and Zola novels, as others have done, but rather to examine, through their works, their personal historical consciousnesses, which I see as emblematic of their respective milieus due to their well-documented cultural influence. I believe that understanding these historical consciousnesses provides a novel way to consider how literary writers—historians as well as novelists—respond to their epistemological contexts, attempting to depict "reality" through various formal strategies. A White-ian analysis permits such an understanding because it attends to the content implied by a writer's chosen rhetorical form.

Hayden White and Metahistory

Much of the theoretical framework of this thesis is indebted to the work of American historian Hayden White and his 1973 book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-century Europe*. The work remains his most comprehensive elaboration of a technique for the

³⁷ For an example of one such analysis, see: David L. Schalk, "Zola and History: The Historian and Zola," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 20:1 (1994): 77-93.

formal analysis of historical writing. In *Metahistory*, White develops a “formal theory of the historical work” as a form of narrative writing.³⁸ This theory classifies works of history according to a schema based on mode of emplotment, formal argument, and ideological implication. White argues that these three properties of a historical work constitute a “historiographical ‘style’”³⁹ and serve to “prefigure as a possible object of knowledge”⁴⁰ the historical documents and sources under consideration. The apprehension of a structure for narrative plot, historical argument, and implied ideology comes before any historical events are put in relation to one another.

Comparing history to language, White writes that this act of selecting a useable field of historical events allows the historian to “construct a linguistic protocol, complete with lexical, grammatical, syntactical, and semantic dimensions, by which to characterize the field and its elements *in his own terms*... and thus prepare them for the explanation and representation he will subsequently offer of them in his narrative.”⁴¹ Put differently: because their work is ultimately narrative, historians must select, often unconsciously, plot structures and modes of argument before the vast information contained in the historical archive can be distilled into a narrative that contains a clear beginning and end, in addition to a clear historical and historiographical argument.

Significant to this process is White’s idea that “we understand *why* a particular story has ‘turned out’ as it has when we have identified the archetypal myth, or pregeneric plot structure, of which the story is an exemplification.”⁴² What makes a particular history an effective

³⁸ White, *Metahistory*, xxix.

³⁹ *Ibid*, xxx.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 30.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 30.

⁴² Hayden V. White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in Vincent B. Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 83.

narrative, in White's thinking, has very little to do with the content of the story and everything to do with the nature of the story *qua* story: "There is something in a historical masterpiece that cannot be negated, and this nonnegatable element is its form, the form which is its fiction."⁴³ A thorough understanding of the historical work requires attention not just to its historical qualities, but its formal literary qualities, as well.

White's work applies techniques of literary analysis to works of history. I begin in the same vein, analyzing Michelet's works as literary objects before buttressing my analysis with White's own assessment of Michelet. I then bring these techniques of literary analysis to literature and novelists, however these techniques remain mediated by White's specifically historical understanding. Rather than a strict analysis of language and literary technique, I apply these methods with an eye to their historical nature. I use White to ask: how do Balzac's and Zola's choices of plot structure rhetorical devices reveal what they think about the nature of a "true" historical story? After considering Balzac and Zola within a White-ian schema, I explicate how their literary choices amount to an implicit philosophy of history. What is important is not whether Balzac or Zola had an explicit understanding of their work's orientation towards the past or its study, but rather what their implicit philosophies of history reveal about broader shifts in epistemological and explanatory frameworks in 19th-century France. Namely, their historical consciousnesses reveal a sharp turn away from an understanding of history as contingent and socially determined, and towards an understanding of history as a predetermined, mechanistic process—an evolution that reflects the rise of positivism across the sciences, as well as the decline of idealistic French liberalism, which informed that rise as it abandoned the fiction of a French polity unified by national identity.

⁴³ White, "Historical Text as Literary Artifact," 90.

Chapter 1: Jules Michelet and the Poetics of History

“My first pages after the July Revolution, written on the burning cobblestones, were a vision of the world, of World History, as freedom’s struggle.”

—Michelet, *Preface to the History of France*, 1869⁴⁴

Lionel Gossman notes that at the beginning of the 19th century, historical writing was a “recognized literary [genre].”⁴⁵ To compare the era’s realist literature and realist historical writing,⁴⁶ then, requires an understanding of how history was different than it is today, and specifically how it was literary, in addition to an understanding of how realist literature might be labeled historical. Enter Jules Michelet (1798-1874), one of the most widely known historians of France and of the 19th century more broadly. White notes that he “dominated” academic historiography in France during the July Monarchy.⁴⁷

Born under the First French Republic (which governed the nation during the five years between the Reign of Terror and Napoleon Bonaparte’s 1799 coup), Michelet, like many of his contemporaries, was a fiercely patriotic historian who attributed all great French historical events to the ever-indomitable spirit of the French people. He is frequently taken as an exceptionally lyrical representative of early-19th-century romantic historiography, which, Gossman notes, is “intimately associated with the moderately liberal and nationalist aspirations of the period immediately following the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars.”⁴⁸ His best-known

⁴⁴ Jules Michelet, *Preface to the History of France (1869)*, trans. Edward K. Kaplan, in Lionel Gossman, ed., *Jules Michelet On History* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2013), 144.

⁴⁵ Lionel Gossman, “Michelet and Natural History: The Alibi of Nature,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 145:3 (2001): 291.

⁴⁶ I use “realist historical writing” in place of simply “history” or “historical writing” to emphasize that in this thesis I am considering history as a form of writing that lays claim to representing extratextual reality, rather than as a form of writing whose representational veracity is intrinsic.

⁴⁷ White, *Metahistory*, 152.

⁴⁸ Lionel Gossman, “Jules Michelet and Romantic Historiography,” in Jacques Barzun and George Stade, eds., *Scribner’s European Writers* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1985), 2.

works include his 1831 *Introduction to World History*, his seven-volume *History of the French Revolution* (1847–1853), and his 17-volume, decades-spanning *History of France* (1833–1844, 1885–1863, 1866–1867), where he is credited with cementing, if not inventing, the term “renaissance.”⁴⁹ In these works, Michelet took full use of history’s then-fluid generic and rhetorical standards to write aphoristic and sometimes programmatic histories noted for their poetic prose in addition to their historical value. He was immensely popular and successful as an academic and lectured as the Chair of History and Ethics at the prestigious Collège de France from 1838 until his dismissal for political reasons in 1851.

To understand how Michelet conceived of history, I proceed in two steps. First, I examine several of Michelet’s prefaces to his historical works, as well as his *Introduction to World History*. These texts, along with analyses from Gossman, Barthes, and others, display Michelet’s own sense of his work’s ideological bent and political salience, as well as his conception of the relationship between rhetoric and history. Second, I summarize White’s writing on Michelet in *Metahistory*, in which he lays out how Michelet emplotted history as a romance and described historical events using the figurative descriptive mode of metaphor. From these analyses, I arrive at two conclusions which will guide my readings of Balzac and Zola. One: historical writing was a much more flexible genre in 19th-century France than it is now. And two: romantic historians of the early-to-mid 19th century, of which Michelet might be taken as representative, if idiosyncratic, exhibited an important awareness of the political implications of history, both related to and apart from its function as accurate or documentary—in short, that history’s understanding of “true” or “accurate” as meaning purely “factual” has not, historically, been taken for granted. These understandings, which are symptomatic of history’s status as a

⁴⁹ Jo Tollebeek, “‘Renaissance’ and ‘fossilization’: Michelet, Burckhardt, and Huizinga,” *Renaissance Studies* 15:3 (2001): 354

rhetorical tradition at the century's beginning, will be echoed by Balzac, and ultimately abandoned by Zola in favor of a positivist identification of objective "truth" with the historical, social, and existential "real."

Michelet and Poetic Prose in 19th-century History

Michelet's histories—which, as Barthes notes, "[have] actually become a philosophy of history"⁵⁰—exhibit two apparent contradictions, especially when considered alongside the many prefaces he included with his works.⁵¹ First, Michelet insists that his work is simultaneously totally factually true and nakedly ideologically active. And second, Michelet insists that his histories are entirely grounded in prose, and never approach the imaginative, poetic heights that led Victor Hugo to remark in a letter to Michelet, "[W]hat a painter you are!"⁵² By understanding how these contradictions appear in Michelet's work, and why Michelet did not see them as contradictions, we can better understand Michelet's complex historical methodology as well as his idea of history's utility. Considering Michelet as simultaneously a source-based historian and an ideologue, and as a poetic writer who scorned the label of "poet," demonstrates a discourse of historical writing that was eschewed as the discipline became professionalized and standardized in the decades after Michelet: the blending of factual research with a self-consciously ideological interpretation of those facts, expressed via figurative writing, intended to frame that interpretation as all but inevitable.

From the beginning of his prolific career, Michelet had a clear idea of the arc of history: "With the world began a fight which must finish with the world, and not before; that of man against nature; of mind against matter; of liberty against fatality. History is nothing but the tale

⁵⁰ Roland Barthes, *Michelet* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), 25.

⁵¹ Barthes writes in *Michelet* that "recurrent glances of Michelet's into his work are frequent" (24).

⁵² Hugo to Michelet, 1860, writing about the eighth volume of *Histoire de France*, as quoted in Barthes, *Michelet*, 213.

of this interminable fight.”⁵³ Such an all-encompassing view of history necessarily subsumes all historical events, no matter how trivial, into its implied narrative of more-or-less linear progress. In *Introduction à l’Histoire Universelle* [*Introduction to World History*], Michelet presents a totalizing (and nakedly Eurocentric) narrative of world history. Temporal progress, he lays out, roughly aligns with civilization’s progression westward. At first “overwhelmed by nature” in early societies in India,⁵⁴ human civilization traveled farther west to Persia, where “begins the long voyage and progressive emancipation of human liberty,”⁵⁵ culminating in France and the French people, who are henceforth to be the guiding liberatory force in human history, “destined to elevate the entire world of intelligence to equality.”⁵⁶

This view, in which the French Revolution is a culminating and exemplary moment in human history, implies a clear ideological position, which Barthes identifies as “the classic credo of the liberal petit-bourgeois around 1840.”⁵⁷ This ideology, which found expression in the July Revolution and the subsequent July Monarchy of the “bourgeois monarch,” Louis Phillippe I, sought to “reestablish the European polities on a new, broader basis, national rather than dynastic or ethnic.”⁵⁸ To this effect, Louis Phillippe famously proclaimed himself “King of the French” rather than “King of France” to emphasize his popular mandate. The bourgeois political cadre who administered the July Monarchy clung to a unifying republican vision that they believed to be capable of including all French citizens, and consequently refused to consider class as an axis of intra-national political opposition. Michelet shared this belief; he was horrified and

⁵³ Jules Michelet, Preface to *Introduction à l’Histoire Universelle* [*Introduction to World History*], Gallica, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8626729v.r=introduction%20a%20l%27histoire%20universelle%20michelet?k=21459:2> (June 13, 2012). All translations of this work are my own. [Original Source: Jules Michelet, Preface to *Introduction à l’Histoire Universelle* (Paris: L. Hachette, 1831)].

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 56.

⁵⁷ Barthes, *Michelet*, 11.

⁵⁸ Gossman, “Jules Michelet and Romantic Historiography,” 2.

disillusioned by the class antagonism of the revolutions of 1848, which deposed Louis-Phillipe and replaced him with the first French president, Charles-Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (later known as Napoleon III), who would stage a self-coup at the end of 1851 and establish the Second French Empire in 1852. Gossman writes that Michelet saw history emerge from the barricades of 1848 “wounded and bleeding,” because of how the revolution had polarized the French nation.⁵⁹

Michelet himself, rather than trying to claim some sort of political or ideological neutrality or objectivity in his work, was aware of his own subjective orientation: in his 1869 preface to the *History of France*, he asked, “Is not the work colored with the feelings, the times, of the person who produced it?”⁶⁰ His answer: “That is what always happens. No portrait is so exact, none so conforms to the model, that the artist has not added to it a little of himself. Our masters in history have not escaped from this law.”⁶¹ Rather than seeking to avoid the question or appeal to some sort of professional competency that prevented biases, Michelet simply accepted the possibility of bias, and in the process emerges as a defender of history based at least partially upon moral or ideological grounds, not purely on facts. This goes to the very core of Michelet’s understanding of history: as he wrote in the conclusion to the tenth volume of his *Histoire de France*, history “does not maintain a discreet and prudent equilibrium between good and evil. On the contrary, it is partial, frankly and vigorously so, in [sic] behalf of what is true and right.”⁶²

Such a view of history was not wholly unique in Michelet’s time, particularly among liberal romantic historians. Gossman notes that “Writing history in that literate age was a way of

⁵⁹ Gossman, “Michelet and Natural History: the Alibi of Nature,” 286.

⁶⁰ Michelet, *Preface to the History of France (1869)*, 143.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 143.

⁶² Jules Michelet, as quoted in Barthes, *Michelet*, 100.

practicing politics.”⁶³ History had yet to become a concrete discipline with a methodological orientation towards objectivity, and was still intimately connected with rhetoric and politics, particularly before 1848 threw many liberal historians’ basic assumptions about nationality and class into doubt.⁶⁴ Gossman points out that the work of many early-19th-century French historians, including Prosper de Barante, “was written consciously as part of the liberal campaign against the reactionary regimes of the 1820s.”⁶⁵

That said, Michelet was also intensely preoccupied with recreating the past accurately. He was incredibly attentive to the modes of historical representation that he employed. And while those modes often included soaring rhetoric and now-incredible generalizations, Michelet never saw them as a departure from an assiduous dedication to historical fidelity. He served from 1830 to 1852 as Director of the Historical Section of the National Archives, and Edward Kaplan writes that Michelet was “among the first to use original sources—such as manuscripts—to correct contemporary chronicles upon which most historical writing was then based.”⁶⁶ Michelet, it would seem, saw little contradiction in combining primary source research with a self-acknowledged subjectivity. To him and many of his romantic colleagues, combining historical fact with a properly elaborated moral, philosophical, and political worldview was part and parcel of being an engaged citizen.⁶⁷ While his work was regarded by later 19th-century positivistic historians as “sloppy and sourceless,”⁶⁸ it seems that this critique of partiality stemmed not purely from his research, but also from his self-aware but subjective style, which Barthes notes

⁶³ Gossman, “Jules Michelet and Romantic Historiography,” 3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁶ Edward K. Kaplan, Introduction to *Preface to the History of France (1869)*, by Jules Michelet, in Lionel Gossman, ed., *Jules Michelet On History* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2013), 135-136.

⁶⁷ Gossman, “Michelet and Romantic Historiography,” 17.

⁶⁸ Lerner, 61.

“is precisely that kind of concerted navigation which brings side by side, like a shark and its prey, History and its narrator.”⁶⁹

This understanding of the historian’s obligation to consult primary documents was not yet ubiquitous, although it would quickly become so as newer schools of historical thought emerged, namely the source-based methodology of Ranke, who himself had an amicable professional relationship with Michelet.⁷⁰ Indeed, despite his dedication to seeking out primary sources, Michelet was sometimes critiqued by rivals for inadequate use or presentation of his materials. The socialist journalist Louis Blanc, who sparred with Michelet in the 1840s over the proper historical interpretation of the French Revolution,⁷¹ critiqued Michelet for sloppy sourcing. Gossman recounts that, in a note to his readers intended as a dig at his rival’s methodology, Blanc insisted that “the historian cite all his authorities and discuss and compare their testimonies before the reader, who must in the end judge them”⁷²—a practice that Michelet evidently neglected.

Methodological scruples aside, Michelet often took pains to distinguish his history as factual, separate from literature or poetry. However, he often employed literary and poetic rhetorical tactics to communicate this very separation. Indeed, he went as far as to respond directly to critiques of his work as overly literary by establishing a stark divide between literature and history, and taking pains to place himself on the historical side of that dichotomy. “I should observe how much my history, so glibly accused of being ‘poetry,’ of being ‘passion,’ has on the contrary retained its solidity and lucidity, even in emotional areas,” he wrote in the 1869 preface

⁶⁹ Barthes, *Michelet*, 23.

⁷⁰ Mitzman, *Michelet, Historian*, 70.

⁷¹ In brief, Blanc insisted on a class analysis that Michelet refused to acknowledge.

⁷² Gossman, “Michelet and Romantic Historiography,” 17.

to the *History of France*.⁷³ He went on to say that “it is the fact that *the historical method* is often the opposite of *specifically literary art*.”⁷⁴ This is, he explains, is because “the writer... almost always likes to surprise... is happy if the natural event appears miraculous.”⁷⁵ This depiction of literary work as foregrounding the miraculous nature of historical events is diametrically opposed to the work of the historian, whose “special mission is to explain whatever appears miraculous, to surround it with the precedents and circumstances leading up to it, to bring it back to nature.”⁷⁶

Michelet’s divide is clear: literature works to sensationalize events, while history works to show how those events occur in their temporal context. Such a divide, however, becomes less clear in Michelet’s writing itself—Barthes claims that “it is not excessive to speak of a veritable hermeneutics of the Micheletist text.”⁷⁷ His 1831 *Introduction to World History* is rich with metaphorical language and grandiose declarations. For example, when discussing European society in the middle ages, he wrote: “All around roars the fatal world of paganism, grimacing in a thousand equivocal figures of hideous beasts, while at foot barbarian warriors stay petrified in the attitude which surprised them, the enchantment of the Christian word; eternity will not suffice to bring them back.”⁷⁸ This is typical of Michelet’s rhetorical style, which only becomes more elevated as he progresses to discussing France and the French people’s unique role in history: “France acts and reasons; decrees and fights; she moves the world; she makes history and tells it.”⁷⁹ Even in his choice of primary texts and authors, Michelet veers toward the literary. He mentions the English romantic poet Lord Byron nearly a half-dozen times in *World History*,

⁷³ Michelet, *Preface to the History of France (1869)*, 156.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 156, italics Michelet’s.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 156-157.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 157.

⁷⁷ Barthes, *Michelet*, 206.

⁷⁸ Michelet, *Introduction to World History*, 26.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 54.

quoting him on multiple occasions. Invoking John Milton, (and perhaps hinting at the staunch anticlericalism he would express later in his career), he likens liberty, the attainment of which constitutes his primary goal and telos of history, to Satan's famous declaration in *Paradise Lost*: "Evil, be my good!"⁸⁰

Critics after Michelet seized upon the opposition between substance and the style in his histories—that is, when they examined his work at all. The 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, for example, noted that Michelet "has not received much recent attention from critics and monographers,"⁸¹ and mentioned "The idiosyncrasy and literary power of the writer... but also... the peculiar visionary qualities which made Michelet the most stimulating, but the most untrustworthy (not in fact, which he never consciously falsifies, but in suggestion) of all historians."⁸² To future professional historians, Michelet's dedication to sources could not eclipse the way he used literary techniques to fashion out of those sources a suggestive and subjective historical narrative.

In his own time, Michelet himself offered a response to (unnamed) critics of this embellished writing style in his 1869 *Preface*, writing that "At that time [of *Introduction to World History*] I was an artist and a writer, much more than an historian."⁸³ Even here, however, he could not resist a rhetorical flourish: "My first pages after the July Revolution, written on the burning cobblestones, were a vision of the world, of World History, as freedom's struggle."⁸⁴ This self-criticism does little to explain or defend his florid, lucid style.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 61.

⁸¹ George Saintsbury, s.v. "Michelet, Jules," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th edition, Volume XVIII (New York: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1911), 369.

⁸² Ibid, 370.

⁸³ Michelet, *Preface to the History of France*, 146.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 144.

Indeed, the conflict between prosaic description and poetic meaning-making is the central tension of Michelet's conception of history. How is one to balance dedication to the facts with the goal of depicting the past vividly? Michelet offered his own answer: "Prose is the final form of thought, that which is the most estranged from vague and inactive reverie, which is closer to action. The passage from mute symbolism to poetry, from poetry to prose, is a progress towards the equality of enlightenment; it's an intellectual leveling."⁸⁵ In Michelet's view, poetry must bow to prose, as it did in his later works. The process of "intellectual leveling" that he described also speaks to an idea that, per historian Arthur Mitzman, Michelet held for much of his life: education (via prose) could function as a sort of secular religion, instilling in all citizens of France a love of country and its liberal values.⁸⁶ Mitzman writes that "he and his contemporaries saw his educational missions—via his chair at the Collège de France and his widely read books—more as that of a prophet than a pedagogue."⁸⁷

This conception of prose as ideological-educational echoes the role Michelet and his contemporaries envisioned for France on the world stage. Prose was clearly the form best-suited for Michelet's history, especially as it was intended to express the libertarian fervor of the French Revolution, which was the model for future expansions of liberty. Michelet said as much directly: "The democratic genius of our nation appears nowhere better than in its eminently prosaic character, and it is further by that that she is destined to elevate the entire world of intelligence to equality."⁸⁸ Ultimately, the use of prose, as opposed to poetry, emerges as a nationalistic moral imperative.

⁸⁵ Michelet, *Introduction to World History*, 56.

⁸⁶ Mitzman, *Michelet, Historian*, XV.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, XV.

⁸⁸ Michelet, *Introduction to World History*, 56.

How is it that Michelet, whose own discursive style stretches any contemporary definition of prosaic, defended his writing as not only documentary but indeed as anti-poetic? Hayden White offers an answer to this question in his analysis of Michelet's historical consciousness, which posits history as possessing a "romantic" plot, which is represented via metaphorical comparisons of historical events to one another. White's analysis allows us to consider Michelet's own historical explanations as prosaic in the sense that they seek to present historical fact, but poetic in how they present that fact as part of a broader historiographical narrative, which might be termed history's "plot."

While Michelet's literary writing style brought him into disfavor⁸⁹ among the "scientific" historians who were emerging by the end of his life,⁹⁰ his writing nevertheless displays a vivid sense of the possibilities of history and historical writing, even if it lacks, to the present-day reader, a serious sense of its own position within history. Famous 20th-century literary critic Edmund Wilson, for one, "came to admire Michelet as a historian to whom the writing of history had been a way of acting on history."⁹¹ As the following summary of White's work on Michelet shows, it is this self-awareness of the nature of his historical writing that makes Michelet's work all but useless to modern European historiography in its substance, but fascinating to modern historiography in its style and methodology.

White on Michelet: History as Romance, Represented via Metaphor

In *Metahistory*, White focuses on Michelet's historical consciousness in a chapter subtitled "Historical Realism as Romance."⁹² In recapitulating White's analysis here, I intend to

⁸⁹ Lionel Gossman, Foreword to *Jules Michelet on History*, Lionel Gossman, ed. (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2013), 10.

⁹⁰ Mitzman, *Michelet, Historian*, XV.

⁹¹ Gossman, Foreword to *Jules Michelet on History*, 16.

⁹² White, *Metahistory*, 135.

outline how Michelet's presentation of history, taken on its own terms, is entirely specious by modern disciplinary standards, even though it went on to influence a whole school of modern historical thought and historiographical criticism in the *Annales* school. This analysis will also provide a concrete, history-focused model for the sort of historiographical and tropological critical analysis that I will apply to novelists and novels in the following two chapters.

White first establishes Michelet as one of the “undisputed masters of nineteenth-century [European] historiography”⁹³ and lays out a list of 19th-century historical works which “still serve as the models of modern historical accomplishment,” over one-third of which are by Michelet.⁹⁴ White proceeds to explain what it means to possess a “Romantic” historical consciousness. Namely, the Romanticist historian “repudiated all formal systems of explanation and tried to gain an explanatory effect by utilizing the Metaphorical mode to describe the historical field and the *mythos* of Romance to represent its processes.”⁹⁵

Key in this explanation is White's invocation of the “mythos” of romance. It is this appeal to mythos that replaces all formal systems of explanation; in place of a causal or positivist explanatory framework for history, Michelet grafted historical events onto a pre-apprehended romantic plot structure. As a narrative form, romance is “symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it.”⁹⁶ Michelet viewed history *a priori* as the story of liberation from the circumstances of history, the arrival of human civilization at a kind of presupposed social unity that, to Michelet, was best epitomized by the

⁹³ The other “masters” being Leopold von Ranke, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Jacob Burckhardt.

⁹⁴ White, *Metahistory*, 140.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 143, emphasis White's.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 8.

French *peuple*'s struggle to realize the republican dream of the early years of the French Revolution.⁹⁷ This constitutes Michelet's "plot" of history.

Historical events are put within this narrative framework via the mode of metaphor, or the characterization of phenomena "in terms of their similarity to, and difference from, one another."⁹⁸ Michelet saw historical events as unique on their own terms, but ultimately as "identifications of the one essence which is both the substance of history and the cause in whose name Michelet worked as a historian"⁹⁹—that substance being the romantic, revolutionary plot structure of human history.

Additionally, White notes that "For him [Michelet], a poetic sensibility, critically self-conscious, provided the accesses to a specifically 'realistic' apprehension of the world."¹⁰⁰ This poetic sensibility was what enabled for Michelet the metaphorical "*symbolic fusion* of the different entities occupying the historical field."¹⁰¹ Of note here is White's claim that Michelet's Metaphorical mode of describing historical events necessitated a self-consciously *poetic* sensibility; in other words, explaining history in a self-consciously "realistic" way required a literary, rather than scientific or purely mimetic, mode of representation.

Despite this self-conscious use of what might be termed subjective explanatory and descriptive techniques, White maintains that Michelet possessed a "frank and vigorous partiality for the right and the truth."¹⁰² As the head of the historical section of the National Archives under the July Monarchy, Michelet was no stranger to, nor enemy of, source-based history. Yet, as the

⁹⁷ It is for this reason that Marxist critics saw little reason to engage with Michelet, as opposed to Balzac and Zola: an assumed ur-social harmony is incompatible with a historical materialist conception of history in terms of class war.

⁹⁸ White, *Metahistory*, 31.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 157.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 149.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 150.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 159.

identification of the “right” with the “truth” implies, Michelet’s historical accuracy is not what makes his work problematic to contemporary historians; that is instead due to his nakedly ideological—and consequently quickly anachronistic—historical narratives. Cultural and literary historian Bettina Lerner notes that “Indeed, the transformation of the historical and contingent into the natural and necessary is undeniably one of the processes that shape Michelet’s *Histoire de France*.”¹⁰³ What a historian makes of the facts, rather than the apprehension of the facts themselves, is what renders their story more or less true. Or, as White puts it, “Michelet recognized that the historian must take up a position pro or contra the forces at play in different acts of the historical drama.”¹⁰⁴

The combination of Michelet’s devotion to the facts and his insistence on marshaling those facts towards an often un-rigorous and transparently motivated historiographical narrative exhibits a sophisticated understanding that history is at the same time a project for excavating fact and a project for creating a narrative, with all its attendant ideological and political stances. Indeed, it is precisely this understanding that engendered a critical reevaluation of Michelet’s philosophy of history in the 20th century, rehabilitating him as the “model and inspiration for the founders of the influential *Annales* school of historians in France.”¹⁰⁵ As with the novelists examined in the following two chapters, it is precisely Michelet’s poetic sensibility that creates, rather than precludes, the possibility of a vivid history with clear uses and implications for the present.

¹⁰³ Lerner, 63.

¹⁰⁴ White, *Metahistory*, 161.

¹⁰⁵ Gossman, Foreword to *Jules Michelet On History*, 5.

Conclusion

Gossman offers a clear summation of Michelet's position vis-à-vis the then-burgeoning practice of history:

Michelet's approach to history was not and could not be that of the modern professional. The social and institutional basis of the discipline of history as we know it today—large numbers of students and immense universities, tens of thousands of professionally trained specialists, innumerable scholarly journals—did not yet exist, and the writer of history was still, as Michelet's reading and formation indicate, a man of letters in the old eighteenth-century sense of the term.¹⁰⁶

Michelet possessed an understanding of history which, although it included a then-novel dedication to primary source analysis, had a very different point of departure than present-day history.¹⁰⁷

Nevertheless, an examination of Michelet's writing and professional trajectory provides two important insights into the relationship between historical "fact" and historical "truth" in his lifetime. First, Michelet's literary sensibility, and his self-awareness of this sensibility, demonstrate that before the professionalization of history began in earnest, historians were quite attentive to questions of rhetoric and style; Michelet even felt the need to stake a clear position on these questions. Second, Michelet demonstrates a clear awareness that historical "truth" is, in the last analysis, a subjective idea, one that is made and remade by every historian in every historical work. This nuanced understanding of history's social function and socio-cultural origin is an understanding that we will see echoed by realist writer Honoré de Balzac, and then all but abandoned by Émile Zola, the last prominent realist.

¹⁰⁶ Gossman, "Jules Michelet and Romantic Historiography," 14.

¹⁰⁷ Eugen Weber, "Great Man at Work: Michelet Reconsidered," *The American Scholar* 60:1 (1991): 57.

Chapter 2: Honoré de Balzac, *The Human Comedy*, and the Social Real

“So the fact is no longer anything in itself, it is wholly in the idea others form of it”

—Balzac, *Lost Illusions*^{108/109}

Honoré de Balzac died in 1850, too early to bear witness to the debate over what his work represented for the development of the realist novel. Best known for his fiction cycle “*La Comédie Humaine*” (“*The Human Comedy*”), which includes some 90-odd works of fiction, Balzac has emerged posthumously as the consensus representative of French realism. His works were derived from the observation and representation of the daily lives of French elites and non-elites, in contrast to the melodramatic works of contemporary French romanticists such as François-René de Chateaubriand and Victor Hugo, the latter of whom admired Balzac and eulogized him at his funeral. Consequently, his writing has been taken by some as accurately representative of the past, especially before realism was attacked by Barthes and other critics. Friedrich Engels, for one, “claimed to have learned more about French society and its history from Balzac ‘than from all the professed historians, economists and statisticians of the period together.’”¹¹⁰

That Balzac is hailed as a capable documentarian by a Marxist, despite being publicly committed to reactionary royalist politics, is a testament to his perceived ability to accurately present French society in a way even more real than, per Engels, any kind of academic research. Consequently, it is clear that Balzac possessed a specific historical consciousness, a specific way of looking at and depicting the post-Revolution “past” in which many of his works were set,

¹⁰⁸ Honoré de Balzac, *Lost Illusions* (Paris 1977), 700, translated by Sandy Petrey and quoted in Sandy Petrey, “The Reality of Representation: Between Marx and Balzac,” *Critical Inquiry* 14:3 (Spring 1988): 453.

¹⁰⁹ Lukács has identified *Lost Illusions* as one of Balzac’s most significant works, representative of “a new type of novel which was destined to influence... the literary development of the nineteenth century” (Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 47).

¹¹⁰ Sandy Petrey, “The Reality of Representation: Between Marx and Balzac,” *Critical Inquiry* 14:3 (Spring 1988): 448.

which merits examination; the ways in which Balzac thought about the past, and represented it on the page, provide significant insight into the interplay between subjective narrative stories and “factual” history in the early-to-mid 19th century.

As Engels’s preoccupation with Balzac indicates, his work has been hailed by Marxists as a damning indictment of bourgeois culture and modes of production (a critique that came from Balzac’s monarchist conservatism rather than from any progressive impulse). His work has also been claimed by Sandy Petrey as an illustration of the wholly constructed nature of social reality. These analyses each present a different sort of Balzac, with a different conception of what, exactly, he was communicating in his works—is Balzac a social critic, or perhaps even a historical materialist or dialectician? How has Balzac’s corpus been interpreted in so many disparate ways? Balzac, unlike Zola, did not write about his writing, or about the theory of the novel; the closest he comes to any self-criticism is his foreword to *The Human Comedy*, which I will examine later. Consequently, I believe that the best way to arrive at a coherent understanding of Balzac’s implicit theoretical stance towards the novel and towards history is through a comparison of these divergent critical analyses.

In this chapter, I argue that various critics’ disparate and sometimes conflicting analyses of Balzac’s work as succeeding or failing to be accurately “representational” are reconcilable through an examination of Balzac’s historical consciousness as “integrationist,” which White defines as using narrative “in such a way as to depict the consolidation or crystallization, out of a set of apparently dispersed events, of some integrated entity whose importance is greater than that of any of the individual entities analyzed or described in the course of the narrative.”¹¹¹ To Balzac, historical forces existed in a coherent and definite whole as *social* forces. The role of the

¹¹¹ White, *Metahistory*, 15.

novelist, as Balzac saw it, was to record those forces via fictive works, and use that fiction to uncover and perhaps critique them. Ultimately, the particular representation of historical forces in the novel could accurately capture and reflect those forces in the real world, both cataloguing and explaining them, even though this is done through fiction. The novel, in other words, models the historical field in creating “a wide space within which hundreds of accidents may intersect each other and yet in their aggregate produce fateful necessities.”¹¹² While events are imagined, they take as their inspiration the same social forces that exist in the real world, and are thus accurately representative of these social historical forces.¹¹³ What critics have done in interpreting Balzac’s works is explicate various aspects of Balzac’s thinking about history: Lukács, for example, highlights Balzac’s holistic view of history, while Petrey highlights his attention to its constative social nature, and Émile Zola, claiming Balzac as his literary predecessor, focused on his use of real-world observation in creating compelling characters.¹¹⁴

Just as various critics have attended to distinct aesthetic and ideological aspects of Balzac’s work, all of which are parts of Balzac’s larger conception of history and social “reality,” I argue that Balzac’s work is itself rooted in an integrationist consciousness: each part of the social and historical whole exists in and for itself, but is most important to what White calls “uncovering the *integrative* structures and processes which... represent the fundamental modes of history.”¹¹⁵ I make this argument in two ways. First, I survey and compare secondary writing on Balzac from various theorists, critics, and historians of literature, and demonstrate

¹¹² Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 56-57.

¹¹³ Social and historical forces might best be understood as the reasons that any narrative lays out, explicitly or implicitly, for why a particular set of events unfolded in the way that it did.

¹¹⁴ Lukács is an important presence in scholarship on Balzac and his works’ relationship to history, historical materialism, and the “real” world. In addition to his enthusiasm for Balzac, Lukács wrote at length about the historical development of the realist novel and the historical novel, focusing particularly on their historical and ideological causes and effects.

¹¹⁵ White, *Metahistory*, 27.

how an integrationist historical consciousness can reconcile the various critical “Balzacs” that emerge. And second, I analyze the foreword to *The Human Comedy* as a formal expression of integrationist thinking in Balzac’s own words. What these works show is that Balzac’s primary intervention in the history of the novel insofar as it applies to the practice of history is the realization that, as he writes in *Lost Illusions*, history, like all narrative, exists in the last analysis as “wholly in the idea others form of it”—but that is not any less of a real and urgent task as a result. Indeed, it is the translation from concrete, formal manifestation to general idea that, to Balzac, constitutes the practice of history.

The Many Balzacs

As the preeminent French realist, Balzac and his corpus have been the subject of a vast amount of past and contemporary scholarship. More specifically, critics from myriad schools of thought have examined Balzac’s practice of literary “realism” and its connection to extra-textual reality. Many of these critiques, although convincing in their analyses and forcefully argued on their own terms, are all but incompatible in their assumptions, analyses, and ultimate implications regarding Balzac’s historical consciousness.

Roland Barthes, for example, uses Balzac’s novella *Sarrasine* as the primary evidence for his condemnation of literary realism in his 1970 essay *S/Z. Sarrasine*, published in 1830, can be read as story of gender panic: after encountering a decrepit stranger at a Parisian ball, the narrator writes that this mysterious figure “was simply an old man.”¹¹⁶ The tale then becomes a story-within-a-story, with the narrator recounting this old man’s life to a companion: at an unspecified point in the past, this “man” had gone by the woman’s name “la Zambinella,” and was a glamorous opera singer—later revealed to be a castrato—in Rome prior to their arrival in

¹¹⁶ Honoré de Balzac, *Sarrasine* (Paris: Éditions du Boucher, 2002), 8. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

Paris; this character is introduced in the text as “la *prima donna*” and referred to exclusively using feminine pronouns.¹¹⁷ In the story-within-the-story, la Zambinella is only referred to with feminine pronouns, while in the present narration, the old “man” is described with masculine ones.

Barthes takes these two naming references, which lack an unequivocal objective referent since the person they describe is not truly defined by either possible signifier, as proof of the impossibility of objective representation in realist prose. “Here, the discourse is misleading the reader,”¹¹⁸ he writes of the character’s introduction as an old man. Consequently, he argues, *Sarrasine*’s failure to name this main character in an ontologically consistent manner “makes it impossible to assume that realist prose actually allows readers to see through it to the world beyond.”¹¹⁹ Balzac, then, is the unwitting agent of realism’s destruction; his prose subtly undoes its capacity to represent any extra-textual “real.” By extension, one may argue, Balzac’s conception of history, regardless of what it is, may be similarly self-defeating: how can any written narrative be considered a “true story” when representational prose can only ever draw attention to the fact that “representation can never depict anything except its own artifices”?¹²⁰

Sandy Petrey, by contrast, has argued that the old man’s/la Zambinella’s fluctuation between two gendered social roles amounts to an “insistence that language is at one and the same time independent of objective reality and inextricable from social reality”¹²¹—that Balzac’s prose in fact works by “denying language’s connection to objective truth and affirming its

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 20, italics Balzac’s. Notable here is the use of the feminine article “la.”

¹¹⁸ Barthes, *S/Z*, 41.

¹¹⁹ Sandy Petrey, *Realism and Revolution: Balzac, Stendhal, Zola, and the Performances of History* (Ithaca, New York and London, England: Cornell University Press, 1988), 57.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 55.

¹²¹ Ibid, 49.

expression of social truth.”^{122/123} In short, the shifts in gender presentation that the main character undergoes throughout the book demonstrate an understanding that gender signifiers—or any signifiers, for that matter—derive their referential power solely from their social, intersubjective function. It is true, as Barthes claims, that Balzac’s prose cannot be taken as representative of an objective world outside of language. But such an analysis, per Petrey, still permits a reading of Balzac’s prose as representative, not because it gets to the world beyond language, but because social reality is created in and through language; what is considered “real” is the function and product, not the precondition, of referential language.

It is not a stretch to connect such an analysis to a consideration of historical consciousness, and Petrey does so explicitly. Rather than emphasizing the significance of historical events *qua* actual events, Petrey claims, “the significant point of Balzac’s prose is how a collectivity *represents* what happened.”¹²⁴ Balzac’s conception of history’s purpose, then, is not rooted in any vision of the historical record as actually documentary, but rather of history as a sort of signifier: historical allusions become “constituents of a precise social environment most succinctly designated through chronological coordinates that are themselves ideologically active.”¹²⁵ Balzac does not deny or negate history, as Barthes’s position seems to imply, but instead assigns history a socio-ideological function. Historical events matter not because they

¹²² Ibid, 53.

¹²³ Petrey’s analysis is based on an interpretation of J.L. Austin’s theory of speech acts. In short, speech-act theory holds that language has real-world power because linguistic statements create or perform what they communicate; social relations are constative, and so communicative acts have deep real-world implications vis-à-vis the construction and perception of power. Petrey identifies the genesis of French literary realism’s awareness of the constative nature of speech in the French Revolution: the non-elite Third Estate seized political power not through a shift in material power, but by verbally granting itself power which was then legitimated by the populace at large. Claiming oneself to hold power, then, is an act of social communication subject to social validation of the same kind that might otherwise be created through coercive force. Petrey argues that the constative construction of power and reality, on vivid display in the Revolution, is what is really reflected in “realist” prose like Balzac’s.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 79, italics Petrey’s.

¹²⁵ Petrey, *Realism and Revolution*, 80, italics mine.

happened, but because the very notion of a common definition of a “historical event” is significant. Such an understanding implies a common social and ideological understanding of “history,” which is the constative base upon which historical narratives claim real-world relevance. Historical events are given meaning in and through the linguistic and social context in which they are represented—this context determines how history is received, how it functions ideologically, and what it ultimately “means.” *Sarrasine* is, in Petrey’s final analysis, “a readerly narrative of how meaning functions in history despite its wholly spurious grounds for doing so.”¹²⁶

Whereas Barthes has attacked Balzac’s realism as self-negating, and Petrey has attempted to rehabilitate Balzac’s realism as a depiction of the contingent, constative nature of “reality,” the Marxist critic György Lukács offers a more straightforward appreciation of Balzac’s realism. Lukács, whose broad sensitivity to the phenomenology of history and its ideological implications makes him uniquely insightful in this context, does not analyze Balzac’s system of verbal representation, but instead claims Balzac to be a trenchant critic of the bourgeois milieu he inhabited, as well as its social-economic base. Balzac’s *Lost Illusions*, to Lukács, “shows how the conception of life of those living in a bourgeois society—a conception which although false, is yet necessarily what it is¹²⁷—is shattered by the brute forces of capitalism.”¹²⁸ Lukács’s Balzac is not amenable to structural or speech-act analytical lenses. Rather, he is a direct chronicler of social life whose unique intelligence and literary faculty allowed him to “[depict] man and

¹²⁶ Ibid, 81.

¹²⁷ This qualification that the bourgeoisie conception of life, “although false, is yet necessarily what it is,” might be taken as Lukács’s tacit acknowledgement that social conceptions of the “real world”—including history—are constructed. Ultimately, however, Lukács stops short of claiming, as Petrey does, that *all* reality presented on the page is intrinsically specious—what Lukács’s “Balzac” does is use prose to expose, not mirror, the constructed nature of social reality.

¹²⁸ Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 47.

society as complete entities, instead of showing merely one or other of their aspects.”¹²⁹

Ultimately, Lukács’s Balzac fulfills what the critic identifies as the aesthetic and ideological goal of literary realism: “the adequate presentation of the complete human personality.”¹³⁰ Whereas the French romantic authors’ protagonists were singular in their individual feats, Balzac’s realist characters become exceptional through their social lives; the shift towards this new goal and style, which was epitomized if not singlehandedly precipitated by Balzac, is what Lukács sees as his primary intervention in the history of the novel.

Lukács’s Balzac is, in the main, “the historian of private life under the restoration and the July monarchy.”¹³¹ Such a claim, like Petrey’s, is not wanting for a corresponding conception of Balzac’s historical consciousness. But whereas Petrey identifies Balzac’s historical consciousness in the author’s textual invocation of the constative nature of social relations, Lukács locates it in “the inexorable veracity with which he depicted reality even if that reality ran counter to his own personal opinions, hopes and wishes.”¹³² It is because Balzac is able to accurately represent social forces in literary form—problems of representation notwithstanding—that he arrives in his fiction at what Lukács identifies as ontologically accurate conclusions (which, given Lukács’s Marxist bent, are always the identification of the fundamental dialectical contradictions driving the development and eventual end of capitalism).

Lukács makes this point in a passage worth quoting in full:

“It is this quality of Balzacian realism, the fact that it is solidly based on a correctly interpreted social existence, that makes Balzac an unsurpassed master in depicting the great intellectual and spiritual forces which form all human ideologies. He does so by

¹²⁹ Ibid, 6.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 7.

¹³¹ Ibid, 85.

¹³² Ibid, 22.

tracing them back to their social origins and making them function in the direction determined by those social origins.”¹³³

Balzac’s authorial genius lies in his ability to accurately identify and trace the roots of social existence in their historical continuity—in other words, in his ability to conceive of and represent the world around him in terms of change over time, showing how the social present emerged from the social past. In short, my survey of Balzac criticism has found that whereas Barthes’s Balzac is essentially naïve, and Petrey’s Balzac is a social constructivist, Lukács’s Balzac is more-or-less a Marxist historian.

The three “Balzacs” we have met are very different: Lukács celebrates Balzac for what Barthes claims Balzac can never truly accomplish (representing the *true* nature of reality on the page), and what Petrey claims is anathema to what Balzac is actually doing (representing the *constative* nature of reality). These very different “Balzacs” are not so opposed as they initially seem if considered not as opposed critical stances, but as different expressions of a single “Balzac” whose unique representational techniques are notable precisely because they are sympathetic to such a wide array of analyses. That so many different Balzacs exist in criticism is no accident; Balzac’s work was always conceived of as functioning within a part-whole network: just as his novels are parts of a cycle of fictional works, each aspect of his novels might be analyzed on its own terms. Such an isolated analysis neglects that works in *The Human Comedy* were not truly intended to be standalone; what each work individually addresses is only part of the social and historical truths expressed by the broader project. Accordingly, understanding Balzac’s theory of history requires us to think as he did: in terms of parts and wholes, in terms of integrating separate ideas, narratives, and viewpoints into a single conceptual framework.

¹³³ Ibid, 44.

Balzac as Integrationist

The way we might assimilate these different “Balzacs” into a single, coherent “Balzac” with a single, coherent historical consciousness is via the same framework that I argue Balzac himself writes within: an integrationist, synecdochical one. I borrow this idea from White, who terms such a framework an “Organicist”¹³⁴ mode of explanation. White identifies Ranke as the 19th-century historian who wrote in such a framework, and his description of Ranke’s conception of history might consequently be used to summarize Balzac’s: “Ranke dealt not in ‘laws’ but in the discovery of ‘Ideas’ of the agents and agencies which he viewed as inhabitants of the historical field.” These ‘Ideas’ are presupposed to ‘exist in a kind of harmonious condition’ as a “*completed* structure,”¹³⁵ a coherent set of historical forces. This is the conception from which White derives the “Organicist” label: the coherent set of historical forces, conceptualized as ideas, forms an organically “real,” or essential, set of historical processes, one which is to be elaborated, not constructed, through the responsible disciplinary practice of history.

Let us consider, then, each of the foregoing critical presentations of Balzac as separate “Ideas” about Balzac that exist in a “harmonious condition,” to use White’s term. Barthes’s treatment of Balzac amounts to a critique of Balzac’s inability to represent the real world in prose. This critique might be assimilated into an integrated understanding of a single “Balzac” by understanding it as part of Balzac’s conception of history as a necessarily narrative form: like Ranke, Balzac’s view of history was not that of the “naïve empiricist,”¹³⁶ as Barthes assumes, but rather the view that “the highest kind of explanation to which history might aspire was that of a *narrative description* of the historical process.”¹³⁷ Balzac’s work does not even attempt to do

¹³⁴ White, *Metahistory*, 27.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 27.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 164.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 167.

what Barthes accuses it of doing, because Balzac, in *Sarrasine* or any other work, did not strive for a true elaboration of concrete history but rather the elaboration of an “Idea,” of a real, but abstract, historical force. His realist prose did not attempt to explicate a “true” reality via a “true” story, but rather to expose, via coherent narrative, the coherent “Ideas” that create reality by particularizing them in a plausible, realistic (as opposed to real) way. These particular stories do not have to represent the world beyond the text, but rather to show history as “a field of formal coherences, the ultimate or final unity of which could be suggested by analogy to the nature of the parts.”¹³⁸ The important takeaway from Barthes’s critique, then, is that these parts function allegorically, rather than referentially—but are nonetheless useful in identifying of the laws of history. Indeed, one could argue that the narrative coherence of the novelistic form is itself a model of the organicist, integrationist view of history as “an achieved *system* of relationships which itself is no longer conceived to change.”¹³⁹

This analysis of Barthes’s contribution to our understanding of Balzac’s historical consciousness expresses essentially the same view as Petrey’s, albeit from a diametrically opposed starting point. Whereas Barthes starts from a critique of Balzac as unable to get at anything “real,” and arrives at an understanding of Balzac’s prose as tacitly allegorical, Petrey starts from an understanding of Balzac as getting at the only true “real”—the social real—to arrive at the same.

Lukács, for his part, would seem to contradict the above contributions to our understanding of Balzac, since he assumes Balzac to be getting at the objectively “true” nature of reality (this truth being the dialectical development of human society). However, Lukács’s analysis of this critical efficacy does not actually conflict with the view that Balzac’s work, like

¹³⁸ Ibid, 167.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 178.

Balzac himself, takes history as a fundamentally ideological and allegorical pursuit. Lukács writes that an “overall conception of the process of capitalist evolution enabled Balzac to uncover the great social and economic forces which govern historical development, although he never does so in direct fashion.”¹⁴⁰ The fictive, narrative character of Balzac’s prose is what prevents it from being “direct.” But it is precisely the constructed, coherent narrative arcs of his characters that reveal these “great social and economic forces” which Lukács believed to be themselves coherent in a dialectical fashion.

This same idea can also be understood via Lukács’s claim that “Balzac dissolves all social relationships into a network of personal clashes of interests, objective conflicts between individuals, webs of intrigue, etc.”¹⁴¹ These social relationships, which Lukács might consider “organic” and real, find their representation in the personal, “objective” conflicts that Balzac represents. Once again, although these putatively “objective” conflicts are fictive, they nevertheless represent the dissolution, or perhaps the distillation, of real systems of relations. Additionally, the dissolution of these macro social relations into intensely personal conflicts buttresses our understanding of Balzac as writing via synecdoche, using social parts to stand in for social wholes.

Lukács, philosopher of history that he was, comes the closest to expressing the formally integrationist nature of Balzac’s consciousness. He observes that Balzac “can demonstrate concretely, in any detached episode of the social process, the great forces that govern its course.”¹⁴² Put otherwise, Balzac’s concrete-yet-fictional social tableaux are ultimately expressions of real-world social processes. It is, Lukács claims, “precisely by stripping the social

¹⁴⁰ Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 41.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 45.

institutions of their apparent objectivity and seemingly dissolving them into personal relationships, [that] the author contrives to express what is truly objective in them.”¹⁴³ This trenchant analysis gets to the very core of Balzac’s conception of history: broad, coherent social forces (even if they are not the Marxian material forces that Lukács identifies) exist. The responsibility and potential of the novel, then, lies in showing or modeling how these general forces might be particularized, in the service of helping the reader to understand them as social-historical forces. Lukács, like Barthes and Petrey, ultimately arrives at the conclusion that it is precisely because of the constructed nature of Balzac’s narratives that they so insightfully identify the driving forces behind real-world events.

Considering Barthes, Petrey, and Lukács as consonant, rather than dissonant, reveals that all three critiques can be accepted simultaneously if one assumes that Balzac’s true historical consciousness—his sense of the relationship between narrative and truth—lies in his identification of *generally true* laws (or what Balzac, at least, assumed to be true laws) via *particularly untrue* stories. Ultimately, Balzac might best be positioned as a historical objectivist and constructivist at the same time: he believes that definitive historical laws and processes exist, even as he demonstrates that their manifestation, like all historical events, is constructed intersubjectively; that is to say that “history” is performed and interpreted between individuals whose actions and their effects occur within subjective networks.

White writes that Balzac “saw history as educating men to the fact that their own present world had once existed in the minds of men as an unknown and frightening future, but how, as a consequence of specific human decisions, this future had been transformed into a present.”¹⁴⁴ In other words, and as the critics have shown, Balzac saw history as a broad field with social (e.g.,

¹⁴³ Ibid, 41.

¹⁴⁴ Hayden White, “The Burden of History,” *History and Theory* 5:2 (1966): 132-133.

presentist) implications. By showing how the future is constructed socially, Balzac implicitly demonstrates that the past was (and is) also constructed socially. It is precisely the process of this social construction which is the coherent set of historical “Ideas” that might be elaborated via narrative. And this is why Balzac can be considered a “creative historian”¹⁴⁵ without that term being self-contradictory: his made-up stories are models of the social construction of meaning, models of how storytelling constructs the present and the future in an ideologically active manner. It is this act of construction that is the true, narrative, and organically “real” process of history.

Integrationist Realism in The Human Comedy

Much of Balzac’s historical consciousness, his conception of history as an integrated field of constructed coherences that can be described via narrative, finds expression in his foreword to *The Human Comedy*, and indeed in the structure of *The Human Comedy* itself. As Victor Hugo said of the massive work at Balzac’s funeral: “All his books form but one book, a living, luminous, profound book, where one sees all our contemporary civilization coming and going and marching and moving with all manner of the bewildering and terrible, mixed with the real. A marvelous book which the poet entitled comedy and which he could have entitled history.”¹⁴⁶ Balzac himself would likely have agreed with such a description: he wrote in his foreword to the work that his “favorable system” for the project was to “relate his compositions to one another in such a manner to coordinate a complete history, where each chapter was a novel, and each novel an epoch.”¹⁴⁷ Just as Hugo described, Balzac sees his *œuvre* as one that should be read as a single work, in which every novel is a part to be integrated into the larger,

¹⁴⁵ Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 37.

¹⁴⁶ Victor Hugo, eulogy for Balzac, August 29, 1850.

¹⁴⁷ Balzac, *Foreword to the Human Comedy*, 12-13.

formally coherent whole. His works model a system of relationships similar to that which he sees in history: a coherent and complete structure which in its totality “comprehends at the same time the history and the critique of Society,”¹⁴⁸ even though it is, on its face, a set of imagined stories.

There is a certain formal unity achieved here: to present a history of capital-S “Society,” which he understands as a coherent network of social-historical forces, Balzac creates a coherent network of stories populated by unique and memorable characters. Peter Brooks notes that “every time one of these characters enters one of the many tales that make up *The Human Comedy*, he or she is given a biography, sometimes a few lines, in the case of the minor figures, but often several paragraphs or even pages.”¹⁴⁹ *The Human Comedy* is a web of individual stories colliding with one another with sometimes predictable and sometimes wildly unexpected results. But, as Balzac holds, “Thus depicted, Society should carry within it the reasoning of its actions.”¹⁵⁰ By understanding society as a matrix of individual narratives, Balzac claims to hold the key to understanding the historical metanarrative of “Society” itself. This is why, as Brooks observes, “Balzac needs to situate his people; showing how their personal histories are related to the history of the nation at a given moment is crucial.”¹⁵¹ The coherent, macro-level forces of history, of social life, can only be understood by recourse to the individuals who collectively act out the events that constitute the historical field, and who later construct a consensus narrative of those events which is termed “history.” Or, as Balzac wrote, “French society was going to be the historian, I should be nothing but the secretary.”¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 33.

¹⁴⁹ Brooks, *Balzac's Lives*, 2.

¹⁵⁰ Balzac, *Foreword*, 15.

¹⁵¹ Brooks, 2.

¹⁵² Balzac, *Foreword*, 13.

Therein lies the core of Balzac's philosophy of history. By understanding how a vast cast of characters interacts to create compelling fictive narratives, Balzac arrives at an organic, holistic construction of a moment in time, in this case Restoration-era France. One could even argue that he models how real-world actors collectively construct historical narratives which come to be understood as objectively true. And, having depicted this society accurately, Balzac is able to furnish insight into the broader "Ideas" that drive it—to, as Hugo said, mix his fiction with the real, so that the reader of *The Human Comedy* is given a comprehensive overview of contemporary French social life, along with the forces that drive it.

Also notable is that the foreword to *The Human Comedy* was published in 1842, some thirteen years after the project had begun, by Balzac's own admission.¹⁵³ (Works published before this date were retconned into the project). The act of entitling *The Human Comedy* over a decade after its quasi-official start can itself be taken as a historical act, wrangling previous works—previous events, if one takes Balzac's fictional universe seriously—into an officially coherent narrative *ex post facto*. Such a recontextualization should be methodologically familiar to any historian. It also shows again how Balzac conceives of narrative in historical terms, or rather of history in narrative terms: events can be put into formally coherent groups because history and the social world are prefigured as formally coherent; constructing and revealing the "Ideas" guiding history are essentially identical actions.

Balzac's conception of history as a social practice, one of description-via-storytelling that is more important for its intersubjective function than its documentary potential, is shown again the end of his foreword: "I... give to my work the title under which it appears today: *The Human Comedy*. Is this ambitious? Is it not fair? That is what, when the work is finished, the public will

¹⁵³ Ibid, 5.

decide.”¹⁵⁴ As always, in Balzac’s view of history, the meaning and worth of a story is not established by its narrator or author, but rather by its listeners. History, like any story, is important not for what it is but for the understandings it engenders and the outcomes it precipitates.

Conclusion

Balzac’s integrationist historical consciousness ultimately positions the task of the novelist not as mimetic or objective but rather as representative of subjective social reality, which, to Balzac, is the appropriate container for all forms of knowledge, from historical to scientific. The novelist then, retains a role that has traditionally been reserved for literature in the form of a social critic, while simultaneously reaching beyond the silo of literature to present social reality as *reality*. In the process, Balzac ascribes the writer—and reader—a certain historical agency. This historical agency has been interpreted in different ways by different thinkers: for Petrey, Balzac’s work uncovers the historical agency of ordinary people by uncovering the horizontal social nature of reality and its constructed-ness. for Lukács, Balzac’s works are sympathetic to a Marxist reading and functional as “signposts in the ideological battle fought for the restoration of the unbroken human personality,”¹⁵⁵ and as such are useful in understanding and ultimately combatting the ways in which, in bourgeois capitalist culture, “the spirit becomes a commodity.”¹⁵⁶ For Zola, as we will see in the following chapter, Balzac’s methods approach the “experimental” in their verisimilitude, rendering his work useful to the human endeavor in the same way as scientific knowledge.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 33.

¹⁵⁵ Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 5.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 59.

These various conceptions of Balzacian realism as a tool for agency and action are all defensible on their own terms, but they find their most concise historical articulation in Petrey: rather than what actually happened, “the significant point of Balzac’s prose is how a collectivity *represents* what happened.” Writing early in the 19th century, Balzac presented a view of history’s social origins and social function, and a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between fictional events and historical “truth.” Balzac, who lived through an era of incredible political turmoil and constant crises of authority, understood history—both the process and the discipline—as the expression of definite forces; he also understood history as an ideologically charged narrative. It is the creation and operation of social associations that constitute Balzac’s formally coherent historical “truth.”

While Balzac’s view of history is much less programmatic than Michelet’s, they share the understanding that narratives of the past, and their impact, are subjective constructions. For both of them, the past’s importance to the present lies in the social possibilities that it represents and creates. And while Balzac, skeptical of the emerging modern world, was much more pessimistic than Michelet, both viewed the study of the past as synthetic: telling and re-telling history is a creative process that defines and represents a distinct social group: French society. This notion of history was dominant among the pre-1848 liberal bourgeois ruling class, and cohered well with the belief that the French people might be constituted as a unified polity based on a common subjective orientation towards their country’s history. However, this optimistic view would be all but abandoned after 1848, as the French ruling class was forced to confront social fissures that emerged and consequently became enamored of positivism and rational approaches to knowledge as well as to governing.

Balzac's conception of history as a form of coherent social truth, and of realism as the formal expression of that social truth, was not shared by the man widely recognized as the last great French realist, Émile Zola. Where Balzac emphasized the social real, which he saw as governed by fundamentally human social forces, Zola attempted to apply similar observational, memetic, and narrative techniques to a wholly objective positivism. This shift, the following chapter argues, is accompanied by a markedly different historical consciousness. Along with the discipline of history, French realism evolved across the 19th century, and its idea of what history is and is for evolved as well.

Chapter 3: Émile Zola, Positivist Realism, and the Novel as Science

“No one doubts, in the public, the science and the patience that certain authors make use of nowadays.”

—Zola, *The Naturalist Novelists*¹⁵⁷

Building on, and in some ways responding directly to, Balzac’s realist style, Émile Zola took French literary realism to its positivist extreme. By the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th, Zola had emerged as the best-known writer of a specific variant of realism termed “naturalism.” He was popular both domestically and internationally, and one 1923 survey of French realist literature published in *The New Republic* observed that “Everything tended to constitute Zola the leader and spokesman of what was now known as Naturalism.”¹⁵⁸

In addition to being its best-known novelist, Zola was the theoretician of naturalism’s form, which he dubbed the “experimental novel.” Such a novel, Zola argued, applies scientific techniques of experimentation to fiction, so that fiction might be used to gain objective insights into the human condition. Zola saw this new function of the novel as a natural progression in the field of literature, a part of the inevitable shift of all art towards the scientific method. Accordingly, his new formal conception of the novel was a natural outgrowth of, as well as a necessary intervention in, both science and art. Zola based his scientific conception of experimentation on French physiologist Claude Bernard’s landmark 1865 work *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*. However, at the same time, he identified elements of his experimental method in Balzac’s writing, and identified him as one of the seminal “Romanciers

¹⁵⁷ Émile Zola, *Les Romanciers Naturalistes* [*The Naturalist Novelists*], 2nd edition, Gallica, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k215334g.r=les%20romanciers%20naturalistes?rk=21459;2> (October 15, 2007), 372. [Original Source: Émile Zola, *Les Romanciers Naturalistes*, 2nd edition (Paris: G Charpentier, 1881)].

¹⁵⁸ Boyd, “Realism in France.”

Naturalistes” [naturalist novelists] along with Stendhal and Gustave Flaubert.¹⁵⁹ Zola’s intention was that the naturalist novel, building on the innovations of previous novelists, might ultimately elide the science-art gap, marrying vivid literary prose with a scientist’s eye for impartial observation and description to arrive at an artistic-yet-mechanistic understanding of human nature.

Zola’s fiction cycle, *Les Rougon Macquart*, enjoyed great commercial success during the final decades of the 19th century. In it, he intended to use hereditary science to trace common behaviors across several generations of the Rougon-Macquart family. “Heredity has its laws, like gravity,” he wrote in the series’s preface. “Physiologically, they [the Rougon-Macquarts] are the slow succession of accidents of nerves and blood... which determine, according to the milieu, among each individual of this race, the feelings, desires, passions, all the natural and instinctive human manifestations whose products take the names agreed upon as virtues or vices.”¹⁶⁰ But Zola’s conception of the novel as a formal scientific-literary hybrid, which was laid out explicitly in the preface to the first *Rougon Macquart* novel, failed to find lasting purchase in the French literary scene: Maya Balakirsky-Katz notes that “The reception of Zola’s *L’Assommoir*, the seventh *Rougon-Macquart* novel, published in 1877, set a pattern for the torrent of critical hostility from the literary establishment,”¹⁶¹ much of it accusations of sensationalism or of aesthetic bankruptcy.

Nevertheless, Zola’s idea of the experimental, naturalist novel has deep implications for his historical consciousness. Rather than defending his work on the grounds that the

¹⁵⁹ These are most prominent of the authors Zola identifies as practitioners of the naturalist novel, along with the sibling-team of Edmond and Jules de Goncourt and Alphonse Daudet, in his series of “études” [“studies”] published in 1881 as *Les Romanciers Naturalistes*.

¹⁶⁰ Zola, Preface to *The Fortune of the Rougons*, 6.

¹⁶¹ Maya Balakirsky-Katz, “Émile Zola, the Cochonerie of Naturalist Literature, and the Judensau,” *Jewish Social Studies* 13:1 (2006): 113.

experimental novel is partially a work of science and partially a work of art, Zola fuses the two entirely: art is in service of science and simultaneously a unique part of science. The novelist is not only an artist but a scientist—and, in a sense, a historian, acting upon the recent past as the field for experimentation. Zola wrote in the preface to the *Rougon Macquart* series that “When I hold every thread, when I have in my hands an entire social group, I will show this group at work, as an actor of a historical epoch.”¹⁶² While Zola’s claim to hold a social milieu “in my hands” is perhaps too forceful a claim for a historian to make, his intention of using this understanding to illuminate the past is a recognizably historical goal. As a result, I consider Zola’s conception of history to be twofold. First, history is a set of identifiable events that happened in recognizable chronological sequence. Here, the novelist’s duty is straightforward: research historical events so that they might be represented as closely as possible to the way they might have plausibly occurred.

Second, seizing upon Zola’s idea that he might “hold every thread,” I argue that he saw history as a set of immutable laws waiting to be identified via controlled experimentation in and with history. The novelist-as-experimenter must observe and faithfully represent historical events such that their inner logic might be ascertained and put to use in the present. Naturalist fiction presents events that, although fictive, should be considered by the reader as equally “true” to history because of their plausibility and applicability to rational science. However, as Zola explained, this task requires making specific alterations to the historical field, intentionally placing characters in various settings and scenarios such that the novelist may have something resembling an experimental control group and a variable group. The historical field is prefigured as inherently subject to a certain amount of variability; it is in this variability, this ability to

¹⁶² Zola, Preface to *The Fortune of the Rougons*, 5.

construct alternative (fictional) historical contexts and observe how these alterations might play out in the lives of fictional characters, that the experimental novel finds its positivistic explanatory utility. I argue that this sense of history as contingent in its particularity, yet fixed in its outcome, marks the central tension of Zola's historical consciousness.

Zola's application of scientific methodology and discourses to the theory of the novel and its implicit view of history mirrors the broader adoption of rationalist beliefs by French elites. As political actors "claimed their authority in the name of 'modern society' and progress,"¹⁶³ the self-professed explanatory power of Zola's own work rested on the application of distinctly "modern" methods. Writing in an age of political divisions, Zola's work attempted to transcend those divisions by using them, and their fictional representation, as a way of rationally identifying and representing universal, deterministic social laws. Gone was the notion of historical or epistemological subjectivity, and in its place was an insistence on the possibility—indeed the necessity—of an objective view of social relations, the past, and "reality."

The chapter proceeds as follows: first, I discuss Zola's essay *The Experimental Novel*, in which Zola lays out his theory of literature as a hard science. In this essay lies the basis of Zola's literary-historical epistemology, his view of history as a field upon and within which one can both observe and experiment in the service of discovering the true nature of human society. Second, I concretize this theory by analyzing Zola's novel *Germinal* as a demonstration of Zola's mechanistic, positivistic historical consciousness and authorial method, arguing that the book's narrative structure and representational methods are symptomatic of this approach.

¹⁶³ Murray-Miller, "Neither Reformers nor 'Réformés,'" 56.

The “Experimental” Novel

Before becoming a prolific novelist, Zola had worked as a journalist, and was no stranger to primary-source research. Indeed, *Germinal* is notable for the sizeable documentary archive that Zola amassed before writing it. In *The Experimental Novel*, first published in 1880, he laid out his conception of the novel as both the communication of objective knowledge and the site of knowledge-generating experimentation itself, implicitly revealing his twofold conception of history. Zola’s relentlessly positivistic views on history and the world, made clear in the essay, demanded a suitably positivistic formal container where such knowledge could be elaborated and communicated. This conception of the novel as both documentary and critical means that the novelist is both embedded within and able to act upon history, which is itself conceived of as both the source of social knowledge and its experimental proving ground.

Zola starts from the blanket assumption that “the naturalist evolution that the century carries [out] drives, little by little, all manifestations of human intelligence onto an identical scientific path.”¹⁶⁴ Literature, to Zola, must be raised to the level of experimental science, so that it might exist in a continuum of disciplines which are all generating the same type of knowledge. “It’s but a question of degrees on the same path, from chemistry to physiology, then from physiology to anthropology and sociology. The experimental novel is at the end [of that path],” he writes.¹⁶⁵ The novel is not the terminus of experimental science, but it is another tool for the generation of objective human knowledge, one with its own specific area of utility. Such a reimagining of the function of the novel, of course, requires a reimagining of *how* literature operates, and of how the novel is to be written as “experimental.”

¹⁶⁴ Zola, *The Experimental Novel*, 1.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

Zola's authorial method begins to answer this question, claiming that the author must be a poet-experimenter, blending scientific rigor with an artist's intuition in order to understand "the reciprocal work of society of the individual and the individual on society."¹⁶⁶ His idea of the author's role hinged on the sharp distinction he drew between an "observer," whom he dismisses as uncritical, and an "experimenter" who goes beyond what is observed to record the "absolute determinism in the conditions of existence of natural phenomena."¹⁶⁷ Here, Zola quotes liberally from Bernard's *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, a medical philosophy text credited with establishing the modern practice of physiology:

One gives the name 'observer' to one who applies the processes of simple or complex investigations to the study of phenomena which he does not vary and which he records, by consequence, as nature offers to him. One gives the name 'experimenter' to one who applies processes of simple or complex investigations to vary or modify, for some goal, the natural phenomena and make them appear in circumstances or conditions *in which nature does not present them*.¹⁶⁸

More than simply recording and presenting real-world occurrences with maximum verisimilitude, the author must vary or modify the conditions in which events occur, so as to ascertain their true nature as (presupposed) objective laws governing human behavior.

Here is where we see the first component of Zola's conception of history, and how this conception pushes the novelist towards the historian: for Zola, the accurate representation of the world "as it is" is not the ultimate goal of the experimental novel, but rather a precondition for experimentation. Before varying or modifying events beyond the conditions in which they

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 19.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 3.

¹⁶⁸ George Bernard, as quoted in Zola, *The Experimental Novel*, 5, italics mine.

appear in “nature,” the novelist must play the role of observer, in order represent those events as they actually occurred: “the observer in [the novelist] gives the facts as he as observed them, poses the point of departure, establishes the solid terrain on which his characters with walk and on which phenomena develop.”¹⁶⁹ Real occurrences, e.g. historical events, are the field within which the novelist exercises their critical, artistic, and scientific faculties.

When acting *within* this historical field, the novelist is like a historian. The writer’s task, at the outset, is to arrive at a concrete, factual account of events as they happened, before intervening as an experimenter and departing from the natural circumstances under which the observed events occurred. The novelist takes on the role of historical researcher, gathering objective knowledge about the way that events happen or happened in order to recreate those events accurately on the page.

The novelist’s role as a historical researcher shifts as they proceed from “taking facts in nature” to “studying the mechanism of the facts.”¹⁷⁰ Here, the novelist acts as an interpreter, forming hypotheses about the underlying laws governing social conduct. The form which this revelation takes is narrative: in ascribing causality to a sequence of events, the novelist is playing the part of interpretive historian by arguing not just the “what” but the “why” and “how” of actual events. Zola’s critical point of departure from contemporary history here is that he presupposed this causality, expressed through literary narrative, as an objective “mechanism.” In doing so, Zola masked the interpretive work necessary to present a constructed narrative as a simple observation, which is the preliminary step of his proposed experimental method. Through this assumption, Zola’s initial conception of history becomes clear: it is an impartial and objective source of knowledge, which the novelist obtains through simple observation. The

¹⁶⁹ Zola, *The Experimental Novel*, 7, italics mine.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 8.

novelist begins by acting within the concrete historical field and explicating events as they occurred, much as a historian would.

As the experimental novel proceeds, the second part of Zola's historical consciousness is revealed: that of history as a flexible grounds for experimentation. For after studying the "mechanism of facts," which Zola takes as given, the novelist must then "act on [the facts] through modifications of circumstance and of milieu."¹⁷¹ After having observed and constructed the historical field, the novelist shifts their focus and begins to act upon, rather than within, history. Zola's justification for this move is that although the novel cannot yet "prove that the social milieu is not, itself, anything but chemical and physical... it is that, certainly, or rather it is the variable product of a group of living beings who are themselves absolutely submitted to physical and chemical laws which govern living and dead bodies alike."¹⁷² Since events proceed according to ascertainable physical laws, the novelist must prove those laws experimentally by subjecting real or (at least plausible) events to variable circumstances of the author's making, in order to separate the determinate from the contingent.

This second phase of experimentation renders the novelist as an agent upon history, constructing a narrative in order to alter it rather than to interpret or explicate it. Since Zola requires that the novelist, even in their experimentation, must "never diverge from the laws of nature," the variable circumstances that the novelist constructs independently must themselves be accordance with those laws, just as real, observable events are. To make such a feat possible, it's implicitly necessary that the novelist is able to play with history as representative of "real" life. In other words, the novelist is as capable of representing "real" social laws using circumstances of their own construction as they are capable of representing those laws in the form of concrete

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 8.

¹⁷² Ibid, 19.

past events. The historical field, then, is not just an immutable source of knowledge, but is also necessarily subject to an amount of flexibility and contingency: events happened as they happened, but the novelist must figure out the “why” by altering the historical “who,” “what,” “when,” and “how.” By assuming that observed events, so altered, contain the same amount of explanatory power, Zola implicitly states that constructed history is of equal validity to actual history, provided that the constructed history adheres to “natural laws.” (Zola never provides a working definition of what those laws are, or how they might be concretely defined.) Thus, the novelist supersedes the abilities of the historian, and is able to actually alter history to express a more fundamental, “natural” truth than history *qua* history ever could.

The Experimental Novel in Practice: Reality as Mechanistic in *Germinal*

Zola does not explain in *The Experimental Novel* how a writer might formally accomplish their positivistic task. He elides the question entirely, stating that “Not only does genius, for the writer, find itself in feeling, in the idea *a priori*, but it is also in the form, in the style. The question of method and the question of rhetoric are distinct.”¹⁷³ What he doesn’t answer in theory, however, is answered in practice. Zola’s novel *Germinal* shows how the author’s mechanistic view of history is reflected in his literary choices.

This is not to say that Zola’s corpus is a series of truly “experimental” works as the author might define them. Indeed, Henri Mitterand, a preeminent French scholar of Zola, has argued that “The naturalist novel... and naturalist discourse aren’t counterparts. Naturalist discourse theorizes a novel which has not been written, or which has been written differently. *Germinal* isn’t the application of the experimental novel.”¹⁷⁴ Nevertheless, Mitterand cautions at

¹⁷³ Ibid, 46.

¹⁷⁴ Henri Mitterand, *Zola et le Naturalisme [Zola and Naturalism]* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), 27. All translations mine.

the same time against “committing the inverse error which denies any relation between the theory of the experimental novel and the Rougon-Macquart.”¹⁷⁵ Consequently, my analysis is predicated on the acknowledgement that although Zola is not necessarily conducting “experiments” in *Germinal*, the literary choices made throughout the novel are nonetheless symptomatic of the same positivistic historical consciousness, and the same conception of the use of fiction to disclose “truth,” that informs the experimental novel. Zola’s literary choices in *Germinal* are less important for their scientific validity or adherence to a recognizable scientific method than they are as displays of Zola’s conception of the deterministic relationship between the historical part and whole, and his belief that a fictional truth, responsibly constructed, is equal in stature to that of an observed truth.

The first and most important choice that Zola makes is the narrative form of *Germinal*. What kind of story best expresses the “natural” truths that Zola is searching for as a novelist? What metanarrative structure best contains and discloses knowledge as Zola conceives of it? In *Germinal*, Zola chooses the plot structure of a tragedy. This choice is fitting: as Hayden White argues, one possible macro view of history is the conception of human events as unalterable, if not predestined, and therefore as tragedy.¹⁷⁶ Such a view is predicated on the conception of historical events and people as related to one another through metonymy, a literary trope in which a name or attribute of a certain thing is used to refer to that thing in its entirety (for example, “the Oval Office” for the U.S. Presidency). The metonymical view of historical events implies a mechanistic view of historical continuity: events exist in a part-whole relationship, with each event, however distinct, representing some aspect of a larger historical force. The nature of this “force” can be variously identified—Marx, for example, ascribed historical events to

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 28.

¹⁷⁶ White, *Metahistory*, 8-9.

relations of production in order to arrive at his mechanistic theory of dialectical materialism.

What is important to note here is that in such a conception of history, events are identified less in their particularity or contingency than in their status as demonstrative elements of a larger process. Here, that larger process is the socially determinate laws which Zola presupposes.

The narrative corollary to a mechanistic view of history is tragedy. Tragedy functions as a collective catharsis: the revelation, and often the critique, of societal laws and taboos, through the tragic hero's failure. In history, then, tragic narratives serve to reveal to the historical observer the nature of things *as they are*.

In *Germinal*, tragic emplotment serves as a device to reveal to the reader the nature of things *as they are*, at least in Zola's view. The novel follows a group of lifelong coal miners in northern France who, tired of their dangerous working conditions and low pay, strike. This strike is met by the mine's owners with overwhelming force, and after a violent confrontation and the deaths of several protagonists, the strike fails. The novel's main character, Étienne Lantier, is defeated in his quest to secure a better standard of living for himself and his comrades. This tragic ending reveals the nature of power and labor relations, and the inevitability of conflict between capitalists and the proletariat.

Here, analyses of Zola's relation to Marxist thinking become fruitful avenues for understanding the author's metonymic historical consciousness. N.R. Cirillo has argued that Zola "transforms historic dialectic into historic myth"¹⁷⁷ in order to give formal structure to the novel. The events of *Germinal*, in other words, are to be understood as parts of a larger process of inevitable, predetermined conflict. Representing these events within a tragic narrative arc is one way to underscore their inevitability even further. By rendering Marxism, a materialist rather

¹⁷⁷ N. R. Cirillo, "Marxism as Myth in Zola's 'Germinal'," *Comparative Literature Studies* 14:3 (1977), 244.

than metaphysical lens, as “myth”—as a prefiguring narrative—Zola gives *Germinal* its power to disclose objective and determinate truths in the guise of fiction. Tragedy underscores the societal tensions that create interpersonal conflict; a Marxist tragedy, then, reveals those tensions to be the result of historically determined class conflict, and Zola’s use of a tragic plot informed by Marxism shows his “adherence to the principal of the historic necessity of the revolution.”¹⁷⁸ Thus, at the novel’s end, Cirillo remarks, “Étienne’s personal resurrection is measurable only by the collective resurrection of that exploited nation of workers.”¹⁷⁹

American literary critic Irving Howe has made similar observations of Zola’s use of ordering myth and metanarrative, writing that Zola presents a “schematized vision of historical reality, or at least a perspective on historical reality.”¹⁸⁰ He explicitly connects Zola’s Marxist schema to plot, writing that “Marxism speak[s] of a historical choice: freedom or barbarism. It is a choice allowing for and perhaps forming the substance of tragedy.”¹⁸¹ Determinate laws, ordered in *Germinal* as something closely approaching a Marxian analysis, do not exist in any tension with an author’s ability to use their own creative skills to analyze and disclose objective truth. Rather, as Howe observes, they inform how an author applies those skills in giving form to a narrative. Consequently, Zola’s authorial genius “comes through in the mythic-historical sweep of the narrative as a whole.”¹⁸²

In connecting Zola to Marxism, I do not intend to argue that Zola was himself a Marxist—indeed, that is far from the case.¹⁸³ Rather, I want to emphasize that Zola’s choice of certain metanarrative forms can be taken as symptomatic of Zola’s mechanistic historical

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 251.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 251.

¹⁸⁰ Irving Howe, Afterword to *Germinal*, by Émile Zola, trans. Stanley and Eleanor Hochman (New York: New American Library, 1970), 439.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 437.

¹⁸² Ibid, 440.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 434.

consciousness. And, further, Zola's use of mythical and metanarrative constructions to communicate historically "real" truths of the type revealed by Marxian theory is only defensible from the viewpoint that such ordering principles are objectively valid analytical lenses. To consider Zola's theory of history is arguably to consider that the historian, in creating history within a metanarrative structure and only then analyzing what "truth" that narrative may hold, is closer to the naturalist novelist than they may care to admit.

Lukács, offering a Marxist appreciation of Balzac's realism, wrote that its power was due to "the fact that it is solidly based on a correctly interpreted social existence." It might seem that Zola's naturalism is attempting a similarly "correct" interpretation of social existence, however Zola's own physiology-inspired method replaced interpretation with scientific experimentation. Whereas Balzac, per Lukács, presented organic social relationships as "objective conflicts" in order to represent and interpret them, it could be said that Zola did the opposite: distilling universal objective laws into social conflicts. Balzac's constative view of reality positioned history and its telling as the driving force behind future historical events; in Zola's objective view, on the other hand, history is merely the rational output of social inputs. The goal is not to arrive at a subjectively correct "interpretation" of social existence, but rather to divine, through "objective" organizing principles, the casual operations of social existence.

Mechanism Expressed Through Representational Technique

In addition to his tragic story structure, Zola's line-level literary choices further construct reality as "schematized," as the field in which careful observation will disclose certain laws, which can then be formally communicated to the reader. Attending to these micro details is crucial to understanding Zola's historical consciousness, since any narrative construction of historical reality ultimately takes place at a basic verbal level.

Zola's mechanistic view of history as governed by identifiable, immutable forces is reflected in his careful selection of certain words to create a metonymic relationship between the mine and its workers. For example, Zola uses the French "bête" frequently in the novel's opening section. This French word can mean "beast," and Zola uses the term to refer to horses and other beasts of burden in the mine.¹⁸⁴ However, the word can also be used as a pejorative adjective to mean "stupid," "idiotic," or "foolish," and this meaning is frequently used by the miners. When Étienne does not express interest in his crush, Catherine, after the two find themselves alone in the mine, he is described as feeling "bête".¹⁸⁵ These individual conceptions of bête are joined together in Zola's description of the Maheus, a coal mining family, as the "bétail humain," or "human livestock."¹⁸⁶

This common term, used to refer to both people and animals, renders the two alike, both sub-human in relation to the mine, which is described at one point as "having, day and night, human insects digging into the rock."¹⁸⁷ Zola uses "bête" to assign the miners a pejorative part-whole relationship to the mine, which is itself a stand-in for capitalist modes of production. In using diction as a technique to communicate this "reality," Zola simultaneously determines and communicates to the reader that this is the historically "realistic" situation: the mine rendering the people within it as subhuman cogs in a massive machine may as well be literal, in addition to literary. While the "human insects" are not actually sprouting extra limbs and antennae, their social reality is revealed to be essentially analogous to drones in a hive.

Zola's choice of term for the novel's primary setting, the Voreux mine, is similarly indicative of his use of diction to disclose broader truths. The mine is introduced in the book's

¹⁸⁴ Émile Zola, *Germinal* (Jefferson Publication, 2015), 20. All translations my own.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

first paragraphs with the sentence “Then, the man recognized a pit.”¹⁸⁸ The French word Zola uses here is “fosse,” a term which is commonly translated as “pit” or “grave”¹⁸⁹ rather than “mine”—indeed, the French term “mine” is more-or-less a direct analogue to its English cognate. Cirillo makes the point forcefully: “What the man recognizes... is the *truth*: it is a ‘fosse,’ not just a phenomenon identified by the neutral and technical word ‘mine’.”¹⁹⁰

Zola’s use of such a term is without a doubt deliberate, and its function is clear: the mine is misery, if not hell itself. It is a sight of capitalist abuse and exploitation, not just a hole in the ground but a site imbued with the mythical importance of a final resting place. And it is because of this that the miners will inevitably (literally) rise up to fight against the bourgeoisie who own and operate the mine. In ascribing macro moral and political significance to Voreux, Zola is once again analyzing and disclosing broad social laws through their manifestation in the particular, using the mine as shorthand for the types of abuse that workers suffer under the capitalist mode of production. Zola applies metonymical techniques not just to people and their various relations, but to the inanimate objects that determine social relations, in particular relations of production. This apparently moral judgement, rendering the mine as a hellish pit, can be taken as “truth” through the application of the novelist’s unique ability, per Zola, to use their individual faculties to construct pictures of reality that are as “true” as the historical past itself.

Conclusion: Truer than Truth?

Henri Mitterand states that Zola’s corpus, and particularly the *Rougon Macquart* cycle, constitutes a series of “historical tableaux, somewhat in the fashion of engravings and

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 4.

¹⁸⁹ *Collins French-English Dictionary*, s.v. “fosse” <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/french-english/fosse>.

¹⁹⁰ Cirillo, 246, italics mine.

photographs.”¹⁹¹ These “tableaus,” I have argued, constitute the first part of Zola’s historical consciousness: history exists as a set of recognizable and analyzable events that reveal, through close examination, broader determinate social laws. Mitterand continues: “More deeply, they come to punctuate and illustrate a global interpretation of contemporary political history.”¹⁹² This “global interpretation” constitutes the second part of Zola’s historical consciousness. By using rigorously researched but ultimately fictional events to illustrate the nature of universal social laws, the novelist constructs a compelling case for the universality of those social laws: no fiction that makes any claim to realism can escape them. Indeed, fiction might be thought of as the final proving ground for such laws: if a novelist’s invented characters come to life as compelling and realistic characters, could it not be that their very relatability comes from their existence within the social laws that the novelist has discovered through observation and experimentation and is now performing for the reader through narrative?

Through such a lens, both narrative structure and line-level choices become crucial tools by which novelists might communicate these “scientific” truths to their readers: metanarrative structure provides the method by which the book’s events (its parts) are shown to culminate in a social truth (its whole). Micro literary choices do the inverse: they provide the novelist with a way to show how a story’s broader truth can manifest in its parts.

Zola, in his quest to understand how literature might be raised to the same “truth” as science, arrives at a conception of history that places a premium on construction rather than explication. The novelist’s work is useful precisely because of the novelist’s unique skill in both observing and “experimenting.” Through his faith in literary acts of construction, Zola allows the novelist to surpass and even negate the role of the historian and of history *qua* history itself.

¹⁹¹ Mitterand, *Zola et le Naturalisme*, 46.

¹⁹² *Ibid*, 46.

History is important to knowledge insofar as it fuels the analytic and creative fires of the literary imagination, which has itself been subordinated to positivistic ends.

Conclusion

Germinal presents a paradox: the book was ostensibly written as an objective, experimental study into human social laws. And yet the novel's afterlife was political and cultural, not scientific: at Zola's funeral procession seventeen years after *Germinal*'s publication, "Fifty thousand people followed... among them a delegation of miners from the Denain coalfield [in northern France] rhythmically chanted, 'Germinal! Germinal!' through the streets of Paris. Even today, the novel has a special place in the folklore of the mining communities of France."¹⁹³ The novel that Zola understood to be unbiased, part of a project intended to expose a broad social "determinism," took on a subjective life, not an objective one. And even the most generous reading of *Germinal* as documentary does not deny that the work is a triumph of literature, not of science or historical scholarship. The most putatively detached, source-oriented, and "scientific" of the realist novelists is also the one whose work is considered most nakedly political.

Germinal might be taken, then, as an example of the limits of positivist narrative thinking, even as positivism reached a dominant methodological position in disciplines ranging from the sciences to sociology and, of course, history. Although Zola presents *Germinal* as a mechanistic, deterministic narrative, there is no getting around the fact that narrative forms cannot be objective—or, as White once remarked in an interview, "There is no narrative that ever displays the consistency of a logical deduction."¹⁹⁴ Zola never attempted to deny that his work possessed political salience, but it is still notable that his realist, "naturalist" work, which

¹⁹³ Robert Lethbridge, Introduction to *Germinal*, by Émile Zola, trans. Peter Collier (Oxford World's Classics, 1993), vii.

¹⁹⁴ Ewa Domanska, Hans Kellner, and Hayden White, "Interview: Hayden White: The Image of Self Presentation," *Diacritics* 24:1 (1994): 95.

attempted to depict real life as transparently as possible, is nevertheless a political, social, and cultural polemic. Zola might speak the language of positivism literally in his *Experimental Novel*, and figuratively in *Germinal*, but its reception reveals a formal limit: a narrative form, like the novel or the traditional history, cannot help being an ideological statement, if not in its author's mind, then in its social life post-publication. As Balzac wrote, "the fact is no longer anything in itself, it is wholly the idea others form of it."

This thesis has argued that across the 19th century, the rise of positivism in the sciences and the social, political, and cultural crises that informed that rise have been reflected in the shift in historical thinking of French historians, represented by Michelet, and novelists, represented by Balzac and Zola. Both Michelet and Balzac, writing before history's positivist turn, display a great deal of historical subjectivity. Michelet narrated poetic histories from a clear ideological position and with an ideal historical telos in mind, and Balzac wrote from an understanding that the act of telling a story, and the social realities that that storytelling creates, is the fundamental concern of history. These subjective positions were unproblematic for Michelet and Balzac, because they understood a subtle but crucial distinction between a historical "fact" and a historical "truth."

Zola did not live or work in the same context as Michelet or Balzac. His mature works were published in an increasingly rationalist republican age, rather than one of monarchy and reaction. Zola's positivist thinking reflects a broader turn to rationalist epistemological principles rather than subjective or ideological ones, which had failed to create political or social stability. Between 1800 and 1870, six different governments assumed control of the French state. Subjective history, like that of Michelet and Balzac, had failed to fully anticipate or comprehend the social disharmony created by the rapid shift from Napoleon's empire to two different

monarchies, then to a short-lived republic, then a second empire, and finally to the Third Republic. Absent a compelling or useable concept of national social coherence or an ideological position that could account for the forces behind these rapid, extreme historical shifts, liberalism adopted an ostensibly value-neutral positivism.

Balzac, writing about the period directly following the First Empire, had “[devoted] novels, essays, and sketches to the semiotics of the city [of Paris] and its inhabitants,” depicting characters who sought to answer the social question, “How do you pin down the meaning of a world in constant transformation?”¹⁹⁵ Zola, following Claude Bernard’s physiological science, attempted to “pin down” this meaning outside of social codes: “I will try to find and follow, by solving the double question of temperaments and milieus, the thread that leads *mathematically* from one man to another,”¹⁹⁶ he announced in the preface to the first *Rougon-Macquart* novel. Between Michelet and Balzac and Zola loom four governments, several major military campaigns,¹⁹⁷ and the world-historic revolutions of 1848 and their aftermath. Confronting these developments, which took place within four decades, Zola, along with the new “objective” academic historians, sought out the empirical, objective “constants” that could explain the nature of constant transformation.

Both novelists and historians were attempting to modulate their work into this new discourse of objectivity, perhaps in order to defend the value of their work as the Third Republic increasingly emphasized objective knowledge as the cornerstone of its liberal political program. In 1871, the first year of the Third Republic, Gustave Flaubert wrote to fellow novelist George Sand that “It will be the first time that we have lived under a government without principles. The

¹⁹⁵ Brooks, 19.

¹⁹⁶ Zola, Preface to *The Fortune of the Rougons*, 5, italics mine.

¹⁹⁷ Including the French conquest of Algeria in 1830, the 1854–1856 Crimean War, and the 1870 Franco-Prussian war, which lead to the collapse of the Second Empire.

era of positivism in politics is about to begin.”¹⁹⁸ The Third Republic’s project was to emphasize industrial development and create a “new type of society”¹⁹⁹ which could withstand the class divisions that had rent the social fabric of previous French governments. Such a society was necessarily predicated on an identification of science with progress. Gavin Murray-Miller writes that “No longer could action be guided by strict ideology or idealism; experimentation, analysis, and flexibility... were perceived to be the new principles needed in bringing forth the republic and promoting social order and progress.”²⁰⁰ With this in mind, it is not difficult to understand how Zola arrived at the conviction that his realist novel must somehow be scientific, even if he could never fully articulate how it could be so. For society to progress, knowledge needed to proceed along, to recall Zola’s words, an “an identical scientific path.” His experimental novel was guided by the precepts of experimentation and analysis, through the novelist’s depiction of realistic social scenarios, as well as by the aesthetic flexibility that constituted their unique contribution to the objective study of human societies.

Throughout this thesis, I have been discussing literature in the traditional tone of contemporary historical writing—analytic, if not dry, and somewhat detached, if not disengaged. My discussion of historical consciousness in the realist novel has been from the perspective of a historian, and not that of a literary writer. But this is not how novels are met by the popular imagination. Balzac and Zola are not remembered for their historical minds, nor are they even remembered for their technical facility with language; they are remembered because people read their books and felt something. This subjective reception, I have learned, is not so different from

¹⁹⁸ Flaubert to Sand, 1871, as quoted in Gavin Murray-Miller, “Defining Modernity: mentality and ideology under the French Second Empire,” Master’s diss., Louisiana State University, 2005, 157.

¹⁹⁹ Gavin Murray-Miller, “Defining Modernity: mentality and ideology under the French Second Empire,” Master’s diss., Louisiana State University, 2005, 158.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 117.

alternative understandings of history like Michelet's that have since been eschewed. My research into the deeply historical character of both history and literature has shown me that the line between the two is contingent and flexible, if not entirely imposed. Asked once what he considered his profession to be, Hayden White, University of Michigan-trained medievalist, responded that "I am a writer."²⁰¹ It's taken me a deep dive into White, along with a bunch of long-dead Frenchmen, to understand that history, like the novel, is a narrative of, by, and for the present.

²⁰¹ Domanska, Kellner, and White, "Interview: Hayden White: The Image of Self Presentation," 92.

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