

Zola in England:
Controversy and Change in the 1890s

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In September 1893, the famous French author Émile Zola arrived in London to speak at the annual conference of the English Institute of Journalists.¹ He was warmly received by London society as his English translator and biographer Ernest Alfred Vizetelly recalled: “there was a great dinner at the Crystal Palace, a reception at the Imperial Institute, and another, which was given to the journalists by the Lord Mayor, at the Guildhall.”² The *Times* reported that the final reception was even concluded with a fireworks display, “the feature of which was a set piece presenting a portrait of M. Zola.”³ The city's literary and cultural elite welcomed Zola, while his speech on “Anonymity in Journalism” was regarded as the highlight of the journalists' conference.⁴ All of this ceremony for a literary celebrity would be very unremarkable, except for the fact that, until this moment, the English response to Zola and his fiction had been overwhelmingly and virulently negative. The sense of disapproval was so intense that five years previously Ernest Vizetelly's father, Henry Vizetelly, had been tried and found guilty twice on charges of obscenity for publishing translations of Zola's novels.

Although Vizetelly & Co was not the first English publisher to print Zola's works, it was certainly the most prolific, publishing translations of seventeen of his novels between 1884 and 1888.⁵ In 1888, these translations attracted the attention of the National Vigilance Association (NVA), a recently-established, anti-vice society which began a campaign against the publication

¹ Useful introductions to Zola's life and works include David Baguley, ed, *Critical Essays on Émile Zola* (Boston, Mass: G.K. Hall, 1986); F. W. J. Hemmings, *Émile Zola* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1966); Graham King, *Garden of Zola: Émile Zola and His Novels for English Readers* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1978) and Brian Nelson, ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Zola* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

² Ernest Alfred Vizetelly, *Émile Zola, Novelist and Reformer; an Account of His Life & Work* (Freeport, N.Y: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 332.

³ “Institute of Journalists,” *Times* (London), September 25, 1893, 9.

⁴ Zola's arrival in London and attendance at various functions were the most widely reported aspects of the conference. Although there were other speakers involved, Zola's address was the only one reprinted in the press. “M. Zola on Anonymity in Journalism,” *Times* (London), September 23, 1893, 6.

⁵ David Baguley, “Bibliographie: Les oeuvres de Zola traduites en anglais (1878-1968),” *Les cahiers naturalistes* 41 (1970): 195-204.

of “obscene literature,” using Vizetelly's Zola novels as their primary target. In November of that year, the NVA succeeded in bringing Vizetelly to trial, and after a short session, he was found guilty and fined a hefty £100.⁶ Six months later, Vizetelly was back in the courtroom for not halting his publication of Zola. He was again found guilty and received a three-month prison sentence, despite his old age and ailing health.⁷ Throughout the NVA's campaign and Vizetelly's trials, the press and the public were largely aligned against Vizetelly and on the side of censorship. The sensational mood at the time was aptly captured by a triumphal pamphlet on “Pernicious Literature” printed by the NVA in 1889. This pamphlet included transcripts of a debate in the House of Commons in which the popularity of Zola's novels was described by Samuel Smith, the MP for Flintshire, as “a gigantic national danger” that “corroded the human character” and “sapped the vitality of the nation.”⁸ The MP then asked if the government was content “to wait till this deadly poison spread itself over English soil and killed the life of this great and noble people.”⁹ Such rhetoric was only a slight exaggeration of the widely held opinion that Zola's work was worthless and immoral filth, inappropriate for the majority of the reading public. This vast contradiction between Zola's purulent reputation in England and the hospitable welcome he received in 1893 was much commented upon in the press at the time of Zola's visit. For instance, an (unanswered) letter to the *Times* asked “is this inconsistency or what?” while the *Bookman* wondered whether the crowds gathering to see Zola were motivated by “curiosity or

⁶ National Vigilance Association, “Pernicious Literature,” in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, ed. George Joseph Becker (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), 372.

⁷ Vizetelly, 293. Henry Vizetelly's son claims that his father was under the impression that only the three novels used as evidence in the trial (*Nana*, *La Terre* and *Pot-Bouille*) were now prohibited, and not the entirety of Zola's works. Whether this confusion was genuine or not, Vizetelly had so much capital tied up in his Zola translations that he could not halt their publication completely without facing financial ruin. Vizetelly, 281-5.

⁸ NVA, “Pernicious Literature,” 335.

⁹ *Ibid.*

admiration?”¹⁰

Several researchers have recognized and attempted to explain the shifting and often contradictory English response to Zola in the late nineteenth century. Clarence Decker and William Frierson were two of the first to do so, writing initially in the 1920s and 30s. Both authors analyzed the contours of the English debate over naturalism and proposed that by the mid-1890s Zola's work was tolerated by critics and the public, if not enthusiastically embraced.¹¹ Decker places the debates about Zola in the context of other Victorian controversies over foreign writers such as Balzac and Ibsen, arguing that the gradual acceptance of these authors after periods of intense disapproval shows change in English literary criticism and morality. Thus he explains that while “the fervor of the moralists in the nineties was no less than in the thirties, . . . the objects of their concern, and consequently their standards of judgment had undergone radical modification.”¹² Despite the fact that Decker stresses change and discontinuity in the Victorian era, his narrative in both his articles and his 1952 book *Victorian Conscience* often gives the opposite impression. The series of controversies he traces seem to follow the same pattern from Balzac, to Baudelaire, to Zola, to Ibsen. Although Decker shows that Victorian tastes changed to the extent that the public came to accept previously unacceptable novels, the standards they used for judging literature seemingly remain the same—based on the idea that novels should always “teach and delight” their readers. He also does not attempt any explanation for *why* Victorians first objected to Zola and other foreign authors but then eventually came to tolerate them and even include them as classics in the “tradition of letters.”¹³

¹⁰ “M. Zola,” *Times* (London), September 27, 1893, 3; “News Notes,” *Bookman* 5, no. 25 (October 1893), 6.

¹¹ Clarence R Decker, “Zola's Literary Reputation in England,” *PMLA* 49, no. 4 (December 1934): 1140-53; Clarence Decker, *The Victorian Conscience* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1952); and William C. Frierson, “The English Controversy over Realism in Fiction 1885-1895,” *PMLA* 43, no. 2 (June 1928): 533-50.

¹² Decker, “Zola's Literary Reputation,” 1140

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1150.

Frierson's analysis of the Victorian realism controversy is very similar to Decker's, although he is more cautious than Decker about proclaiming the triumph of realism and naturalism, stating that "it would be unwise to suggest the case for Zola had ever been won in England. Nevertheless active hostility was replaced in some quarters by tolerance, in others by curiosity, and in others by sympathetic understanding."¹⁴ Frierson cites 1893 as a "pivotal year" when Victorian tastes came to accept realistic fiction, as evidenced by the successful publication of several naturalist-influenced English books, mainly short-story collections by minor authors like Hubert Crackanthorpe, Henry Harland and George Egerton.¹⁵ He, like Decker, does not attempt to explain why this change in taste came about or why the objection to realism and naturalism was so strong in the first place.

In a much more recent article, Robert Lethbridge proposes some reasons for the English response to Zola in general and in 1893 specifically. Lethbridge sees the controversies centering on Zola as part of a wider struggle between traditional literary controls and the development of consumer-centered mass production.¹⁶ He briefly sketches a number of connections between Zola and English struggles in this area, such as the rise of populist New Journalism in the 1880s and the challenges raised to the monopoly of circulating libraries in the 1890s. Through direct access to a mass readership, he argues, journalists and authors could challenge the conservative Victorian mindset. Therefore, in Lethbridge's opinion, the controversies over Zola represent only

the most visible superimposition of a certain artistic generation's attack on the conventions of retailing strategy, literary censorship and novelistic practice. While Moore and Vizetelly remain those most explicitly associated with Zola, they form part of a heterogeneous spectrum which extends from Henry James to Oscar Wilde, linked by a common dissatisfaction with the state of English culture.¹⁷

¹⁴ Frierson, 548.

¹⁵ Ibid., 545.

¹⁶ Robert Lethbridge, "Zola and England," *Bulletin of the Émile Zola Society*, no. 10 (April 1995): 6.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7.

In this way, Lethbridge suggests that Zola's supporters and detractors can be read, respectively, as supporters and detractors of changes in English culture and reading patterns. This suggests in turn that Zola's popularity (or at least his potential popularity) with a lower-class, mass reading public was more of a concern to critics than the actual moral content of his work. Lethbridge thus places Zola in a wider social and cultural context than either Decker or Frierson in an effort to explain the often contradictory English response to him. I've used Lethbridge's suggestions as a starting point for my own exploration of Victorian publishing practices and literary culture in order to better understand the significance of the English response to Zola at the end of the nineteenth century.

The original, intense Victorian disapproval of Zola can be somewhat mystifying when considering the actual content of his literary theories. In his own essays, Zola represented himself as the end of a long line of nineteenth-century writers who favored realism in their fiction, the latest link in a chain leading from Stendhal to Balzac to Flaubert and beyond.¹⁸ The “realist” label, in its most general terms, signaled an author's intent to accurately depict the world in writing, or, at least, to present characters and events which could plausibly occur in reality.¹⁹ Zola tended to be most closely associated with the realism of the earlier French author, Honoré de Balzac, in part because both men spent the majority of their careers producing one long and interconnected cycle of novels. Zola's Rougon-Macquart novels attempted to thoroughly document the social milieu of the Second Empire, just as a half-century earlier Balzac's *Comédie humaine* had recorded the transformations of the French Restoration and July Monarchy. Zola's

¹⁸ Émile Zola, “The Novel” in *The Experimental Novel: And Other Essays*, tran. Belle M. Sherman (The Cassell publishing, 1893), 209.

¹⁹ David Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 47.

theories went further than Balzac's realism, though, by adding a heavy dose of positivism. This is evident in Zola's adoption of the term “naturalism” for his literary methods, a word originally used only in a scientific context to refer to the study of the natural sciences.²⁰ Zola's novels thus explicitly incorporated scientific ideas such as heredity and environmental determinism. As Zola's biographer Fredrick W. J. Hemmings explains, “the innovation intended in Rougon-Macquart was to show the successive flowering of three, four, even five interlinked generations, to construct vertically down a genealogical line, not simply horizontally over social superficialities.”²¹ Therefore, each novel in the cycle tends to focus on one or two members of the “Rougon-Macquart” family tree, depicting their social status and struggles as well as the influence of their hereditary inheritance. In novels featuring the Rougon half of the family, Zola usually showcased bourgeois and elite life under the Second Empire, while the illegitimate Macquart line represented the experiences of the working class and rural poor.

In England, although objection was often raised to Zola's literary program – the feeling being that much of reality was too indecent to be accurately depicted – critics more often balked at his choice of subject matter. As one characteristic review complained, Zola “paints but one side of human nature, and that the very worst. He draws us minute pictures of the most repulsive descriptions of social and moral decrepitude.”²² The gist of such complaints was that Zola was depressing, as his novels tended to focus on the tragic and degrading aspects of nineteenth-century life. Even worse was the fact that he often depicted *lower-class* tragedy, drawing his unsavory characters from among the urban poor, the peasantry and the industrial workforce. Such subject matter was at odds with the English literary tradition which expected a novel to

²⁰ F. W. J. Hemmings, *Émile Zola* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 154.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

²² W. H. Gleadell, “Zola and His Work,” *Westminster Review* 140, no. 6 (December 1893): 624.

fulfill two basic requirements, “to teach and delight,” that is, to moralize while also amusing.²³ Zola's naturalist novels regularly failed to delight, often breaking two of the most common conventions of the Victorian novel, the need to be of an “agreeable' character” and to finish with “the happy ending.”²⁴ Zola's characters and incidents were more often distressing and pitiable than agreeable, and he usually favored the tragic ending to the uplifting one. Zola also failed to moralize, or at least to provide the conspicuous didacticism which was expected by most English critics.

The underlying themes of Zola's novels are also significant for understanding the English disapprove of them. David Baguley has argued in his analysis of naturalism as a movement that the defining themes of the genre in general and Zola's work in specific were entropy and degeneration.²⁵ These themes directly challenged the assumptions of their readers in purposefully unsettling ways. Naturalists in effect “appropriated [bourgeois] culture's favourite genre, the novel, the genre of moral, social, political and intellectual consolidation and distraction in order to shock with it, disturb with it and defy the bourgeois myths of order, decency and permanence.”²⁶ Furthermore, Zola's use of a supposedly objective and scientific style enhanced his works' disturbing effects. He claimed to be presenting not a subjective opinion or a melodramatic story but rather the *truth* in all its disturbing implications. Thus to accept Zola's work as legitimate literature was, to a certain degree, to accept his diagnosis of modern society as rotten and degraded, and the effects of progress as illusory. This distressing social commentary was somewhat mitigated for English readers since Zola wrote on French society. Yet generalization was still disturbingly possible. He wrote after all about familiar trends which were

²³ Decker, *Victorian Conscience*, 34

²⁴ Kenneth Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel, 1865-1900* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 31.

²⁵ Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

evident in England as well as in France, such as rural decay, urban decadence, technological change and social conflict. Although Zola's novels were extremely particular, each one focused on a very specific and historical location, the larger transformations he documented were evident throughout Europe. Thus in order to undermine his often gloomy critique, English critics and readers rejected his methods and theories, refusing to acknowledge Zola as a legitimate writer whose social commentary was worthy of consideration.

Zola's defenders often attempted to counter this dismissal of Zola by arguing that his works were significant and highly moral—after all, he only depicted vice with the intention of combatting it. Yet these critics also willingly admitted that Zola's novels contained a lot of unpleasantness that did not lend itself to light amusement.²⁷ Moreover, the defense of Zola as a moralist stood on shaky ground since it was commonly accepted at the time that reading about vice would lead impressionable readers to imitation, rather than avoidance.²⁸ This was a significant concern during the nineteenth century, as the reading public was expanding due to the spread of literacy among the lower classes as well as the increasing availability of cheap reading material. As Richard D. Altick explains, such concerns continued well into the twentieth century as “more people were reading than ever before; but in the opinion of most commentators, they were reading the wrong things, for the wrong reasons, and in the wrong way.”²⁹ Zola's novels exemplified in many ways “the wrong things,” with their frank depictions of sexuality, class conflict, and moral decay. Also worrying was Zola's potential female readership, who risked

²⁷ Vernon Lee, for instance, concedes that whatever their potential benefits, “It is universally admitted that Zola's books are full of horrors and indecencies, that the reading thereof must be attended with much disgust and perhaps some danger.” Vernon Lee, “The Moral Teaching of Zola,” *Contemporary Review* 63, no. 326 (February 1893): 196.

²⁸ Guinevere L. Griest, *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 132.

²⁹ Richard Daniel Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 368.

serious demoralization from perusing the French author's works. As Lynn Pykett explains, underlying the debate about Zola's fiction was the assumption that “educated men” could safely read his novels, but that “the social fabric [was] only threatened when the young, the ill-educated, and women [had] easy access to naturalist fiction and other pernicious literature.”³⁰ Zola's potential female readership thus threatened to destabilize gender roles just as his potential lower-class audience threatened social stability. The underly assumption here was that readers needed a certain degree of education and literary knowledge in order to read a text from a safe, critical distance. Without this education, readers were impressionable, prone to blindly imitating immoral activities depicted in fiction without understanding the subtler messages and lessons intended by the author.

These pervasive fears about the potentially subversive influence of literature help to explain why censorship was common throughout the Victorian period. Although literary restrictions were intense, they were mainly enacted through informal, non-legal means, such as through the long-standing monopoly of circulating libraries such as Mudie's Select Library and W. H. Smith's. From the 1830s onward, new fiction in England was overwhelmingly published in the expensive “three-decker” or three-volume novel form. The high price of three-deckers meant that the reading public for new fiction was mainly a “borrowing public” which depended upon circulating libraries for its supply of books.³¹ Mudie's was the largest such library and had an essential monopoly on the purchase and circulation of new novels, thanks to its close relationship with publishers. Mudie's was also known for its strict moral standards: if a novel did not appear appropriate for family reading it would not be purchased, and if the library received complaints

³⁰ Altick, 175.

³¹ Griest, 78-9.

about any of its collection the offending volumes were quickly pulled from its shelves.³² This situation had a significant effect on the introduction of Zola's novels to England. In 1883, the Tinsley Brothers were the first English publishers to issue a translation of Zola, a three-volume version of *Au Bonheur des Dames* or *The Ladies' Paradise*. Unfortunately, despite significant bowdlerization, the circulating libraries refused to purchase the novel as “the very name 'Zola' frightened them off and sales were disastrous.”³³ Henry Vizetelly solved this problem by issuing his own Zola translations in cheap, one-volume form, thus appealing directly to the public and circumventing the censorship exercised by Mudie's Select Library. Notably, Vizetelly was also involved in George Moore's 1885 campaign against the circulating library system. George Moore had been strongly influenced by Zola, and his naturalistic first novel, *A Modern Lover*, did badly in part because Mudie had it removed from his shelves for immorality. In response to this censorship, Moore published a pamphlet attacking the circulating libraries and also convinced Vizetelly to issue his second novel in one-volume form.³⁴

The three-decker-based circulating system continued for nearly another decade after Moore's attacks, yet the literary market was ripe for a transformation. When it finally did occur, the shift from the three-decker to the one-volume novel was quite abrupt. While in 1894 English publishers released 184 three-deckers, by 1897 only 4 were released and the three-volume formate was essentially dead.³⁵ Although George Moore liked to give himself a great deal of

³² Griest, 137-55. Griest also notes that Mudie's censorship was considered a positive characteristic by most Victorian subscribers: “Rather than a dictatorship, of which he was often accused, Mudie had set up a protectorate over books. He looked on his subscribers as his responsibilities, and they, in turn, placed their confidence in him.” Griest, 215.

³³ Andrew King, *The London Journal 1845-83: Periodicals, Production, and Gender* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2004), 168.

³⁴ George Moore, *Literature at Nurse: Or, Circulating Morals: A Polemic on Victorian Censorship*, ed. Pierre Coustillas (Atlantic Highlands, N.J: Humanities Press, 1976), 3-4.

³⁵ Griest, 208.

credit for the demise of the three-decker, changes in the marketplace which made the three-volume formate less profitable for both publishers and Mudie's itself had as much to do with the collapse.³⁶ Nonetheless, Moore's campaign against circulating library censorship helped associate the change in novel formate with an expected improvement in literary freedom. Charles Decker, for instance, suggests that the break down of the circulating library system can be seen as having “greatly hastened the day of publishing and reading on a democratic basis.”³⁷ Mudie's Circulating Library continued to exist well into the twentieth century, offering one-volume novels now instead of three-deckers, but it no longer possessed a near monopoly over new fiction nor the ability to act as the de facto censor for the English market.

Victorian censorship was also enacted through the activities of anti-vice societies like the National Vigilance Association. The NVA acted as a pressure group, urging the police to take action against sellers of pornography, petitioning parliament for improved obscenity legislation, and occasionally initiating private prosecutions against objectionable works. The 1888 and 1889 convictions of Henry Vizetelly were something of a coup for the NVA, as they set a significant precedent for the prosecution of serious literature for obscene libel. The Obscene Publications Act of 1857, under which Vizetelly was charged, had not originally been intended for such prosecutions. As Donald Thomas explains, Lord Campbell, who introduced the act in 1857, “made clear that it was targeting pornography and not serious works of literature, citing *La Dame Aux Camelias* by Dumas as a book he disapproved of but which would not be banned by the new law.”³⁸ From the legal perspective then, Donald Thomas argues that censorship was

³⁶ As Griest notes, Mudie himself issued an ultimatum to publishers in 1894 requiring them to switch to one-volume formate. His request was prompted by the fact that circulating libraries depended upon the re-sale of used copies of their three-deckers in order to recoup costs. As publishers released cheap reprints of new books faster, and free public libraries became more prevalent, the market for these used three-deckers dried up. Griest, 166-75.

³⁷ Decker, *Victorian Conscience*, 82.

³⁸ Donald Serrell Thomas, *A Long Time Burning; the History of Literary Censorship in England* (New York:

becoming more intense at the end of the century as literature which was not comfortably respectable was put at risk of legal prosecution.³⁹ Understandably, publishers were less willing to release unconventional works in such a legal climate, even though more and more authors found themselves in rebellion against these restrictive moral standards. Although obscenity prosecutions against serious literature were relatively rare, several books were successfully banned in the first half of the twentieth-century, including D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* in 1915 and Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness* in 1928.⁴⁰ Yet as the twentieth century progressed, the NVA and similar pressure organizations were fighting a losing battle against changing social mores. Edward Bristow notes that these groups began to lose their public appeal as “after the war social-purity institutions could no longer generate mass movements as they had in 1885 and 1912.”⁴¹ By mid-century, public opinion had shifted against censorship to the extent that the 1959 revision of the Obscene Publications Act included a clause to protect works with “literary, artistic, scientific or other merits.”⁴² Thus over a century later, the unintended consequences of the 1857 Act were finally corrected and serious literature was given legal protection.

The National Vigilantes: Protecting Public Morality

The National Vigilance Association's persecution of Henry Vizetelly was primarily motivated by the association's fears about Zola's demoralizing influence on the behavior of the public. The NVA was only the latest in a long line of anti-vice societies which periodically

Praeger, 1969), 262-3.

³⁹ Ibid., 244-269.

⁴⁰ Edward J Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain Since 1700* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1977), 222.

⁴¹ Ibid., 222, 224.

⁴² “Obscene Publications Act 1959,” in The UK Statute Law Database (accessed April 13, 2008) <http://www.statutelaw.gov.uk/content.aspx?activeTextDocId=1128038>; See also J. E. Hall Williams, “The Obscene Publications Act, 1959,” *The Modern Law Review* 23, no. 3 (May 1960): 285-290.

developed in England from moral panics and increased concerns about “social purity.” In the 1880s, one such panic was set off by the publication of W. T. Stead's 1885 exposé of child prostitution in London, “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon.” As Edward Bristow explains, Stead himself “conceived of the NVA, wrote its statutes, made the obscure but capable William Coote its secretary and in the early days paid his salary.”⁴³ The association was extremely active during the late 1880s, organizing local committees throughout England, founding rescue homes for “friendless” girls, and instigating legal proceedings against various sexual offenders. The association even published a monthly periodical, the *Vigilance Record*, to raise awareness and inform its donors of its activities. Judith Walkowitz argues that the moral fervor ignited by Stead's “Maiden Tribune” and exploited by the NVA was motivated in large-part by middle-class fears of “a degenerate and unsupervised urban popular culture” which was represented by cheap editions of pornography and other obscene publications.⁴⁴ By acting as censors, the NVA was thus attempting to supervise this dangerous popular culture and protect the lower-classes from these immoral influences.

The NVA's interest in obscene publications was directly related to the association's primary goal of combating prostitution and preventing the exploitation of women and girls. This connection is apparent from discussions in the NVA's publications which often directly link the association's fight against pornography with its efforts to reduce prostitution and other sexual crimes. For instance, during 1888 controversy over Zola's translation and publication in England, the NVA-connected Lord Mount-Temple raised the issue of obscene literature in the House of Lords and described at length the use of such publications as “a ready means to decoy young

⁴³Bristow, 112.

⁴⁴ Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 125.

women into a life of shame.”⁴⁵ “The method which was now found most successful,” Mount-Temple explained, “was the gratuitous distribution of leaflets and photographs to excite in pure-minded young women of the lower classes, who had to earn their livelihood, the hope that they might have pleasant living without labor.”⁴⁶ Presumably, Mount-Temple was also worried that such publications would “excite” other feelings in young women besides materialist desires. Obscene publications needed to be repressed not simply because they caused an abstract “demoralization,” but because they led directly to immoral sexual behavior. Curiously, female degradation and misbehavior were often more of a concern than male. Thus the intervention of the law was based on the defense of “weak and helpless girls,” rather than the rescue or punishment of the men who made up the majority of the pornography industry's clientele.

The perceived direct link between reading and behavior is apparent in all of the NVA's discussions on obscene literature. Although the negative influence of immoral literature was widely accepted by the Victorian public, it was often difficult to find direct evidence to justify the NVA's self-designated role as England's censor. Not that this stopped NVA members from making sweeping declarations, such as MP Samuel Smith's 1888 assertion that an open novel of Zola's shown in a shop window displayed an excerpt “of such a leprous character that it would be impossible for any young man who had not learned the Divine secret of self-control to have read it without committing some form of outward sin within twenty-four hours after.”⁴⁷ Occasionally, though, a useful anecdote could be found to illustrate this causal relationship between sin and reading material. For instance, one 1889 column in the *Vigilance Record*, appropriately titled “The Evils of Sensational Literature: Cause and Effect,” re-printed a story from the *Leeds*

⁴⁵ “Indecent Literature and the House of Lords,” *Vigilance Record* 2, no. 7 (August 15, 1888), 78.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ NVA, “Pernicious Literature,” 355.

Mercury about a young boy who had accidentally killed himself by copying a test of strength he'd read in a sensational story.⁴⁸ The book involved was not a Zola novel, but presumably the mechanism of reading and imitation was similar. The same column also reported on a seventeen-year-old burglar who had started on his life of crime after “read[ing] thrilling stories about highwaymen, burglars and other rascals.” Impressionable youth were thus led to destructive behavior and crime through the influence of fiction.

This discourse of paternal concern often also featured the lower classes, due in part to the 1870 Education Act which was believed to have greatly improved literacy rates in England. This act had made parishes and boroughs responsible for the provision of education for all children between the ages of five and twelve. Although Robert Altick notes that this Act “did not significantly hasten the spread of literacy,” he argues that it was important for its role as a “mopping up operation,” which finished educating the last illiterate sections of the public, “the very poor children, living in slums or in remote country regions.”⁴⁹ The effects of this education act and later legislation—such as the 1880 provision to make education compulsory—were keenly felt. The English upper and middle classes were highly sensitive to the fact that more and more formerly illiterate social groups were becoming readers. The need to protect and control these newly literate members of society was frequently apparent in the *Vigilance Record*. For example, at the Annual NVA meeting of 1888, one speaker observed that “the Education Act had opened quite a new industry to purveyors of this indecent literature. There were thousands and thousands of readers now, who did not exist years ago, and the Evil One was taking advantage of the education of the people to spread indecent literature.”⁵⁰ Like children, the newly literate did

⁴⁸ “The Evils of Sensational Literature: Cause and Effect,” *Vigilance Record* 3, no. 2 (March 15, 1889): 16

⁴⁹ Altick, 171-72.

⁵⁰ Comments of Mr. R. C. Morgan, “The Third Annual Meeting of the National Vigilance Association,”

not have the skills and experience necessary to safely peruse immoral or obscene publications, even if the publications in question were actually serious-minded literature like Zola's novels. Indeed, from the NVA's perspective, Vizetelly's translations were dangerous mainly because "the books were intended *not* for a select literary class, but for the common market" (emphasis mine).⁵¹ Serious students of a "select literary class" might be able to safely read Zola, but the vast majority of the reading public could not.

Ironically, anti-vice crusaders like the National Vigilance Association often ran afoul of obscenity laws themselves. For instance, Stead's "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon," which galvanized the public against prostitution in 1885, was accused of being overly lurid to the point of obscenity.⁵² Walkowitz notes that Stead's critics suggested his exposé had unintentionally "democratized' pornography: for a mere one penny he had put into circulation lurid images and narratives that were usually restricted to readers of three-guinea volumes."⁵³ Critics and victims of the NVA such as Ernest Vizetelly often brought up "Maiden Tribute's" near-pornographic nature to point out the hypocrisy of the association's obscenity crusades. Vizetelly, for instance, observed sarcastically that from Stead's history one might have expected that the NVA "favoured the doctrine of outspokenness or publicity to which Zola gave effect in his novels."⁵⁴ Other anti-vice reformers had similar difficulties, as they were constantly forced to walk the line between necessary publicity and sensationalism. In the 1888 House of Commons debate on pernicious literature, for example, one of the obscene publications brought up by the MPs were pamphlets produced by the opponents of the Contagious Disease Acts. This literature described the colonial

Vigilance Record II, no. 11 (December 15, 1888), 130

⁵¹ "The Vizetelly Case" *Vigilance Record* 3, no. 5 (June 15, 1889), 56.

⁵² Walkowitz, 122.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵⁴ Vizetelly, 257-8.

government's involvement in regulating brothels in India in shocking detail, accusing the administration of promoting prostitution under the guise of preventing the spread of disease.⁵⁵ In the Commons debate, one MP asked these campaigners to be more careful that “while thus zealous for the purity of Indian women, not to violate the sanctity of English homes” with their overly explicit literature.⁵⁶ Reformers were constantly caught in a conundrum as, on the one hand, public awareness and agitation were necessary for a successful legal prosecution or legislative campaign; yet, on the other hand, overly sensational reporting of vice threatened to actually *increase* immorality in the public and discredit the reformers who participated in such lurid campaigns. Readers were prone to imitation, after all, and publicizing the widespread nature of prostitution and sexual vice might inadvertently encourage some of the public to seek out such activities themselves.

The NVA was highly aware of the potentially dangerous nature of publicity, as it made clear in an 1887 article on the subject in the *Vigilance Record*. Here, the NVA defended its tactics of publicizing sexual vice by arguing that the preventive benefits of such campaigns outweighed the dangers. Although the anonymous author admitted that “it is very natural that everyone should shrink from publishing on the housetops the things of which it is a shame even to speak in secret,” he argued that in many instances,

open publication is admittedly the only means of preventing the doing of these abominations, or of securing the punishment of the perpetrators. . . those who keep silent are themselves responsible for the continuance of the crimes, and the impunity enjoyed by the criminals. The eye of man, and still more the eye of woman, is almost as effective

⁵⁵ The campaign against the Indian C.D. Acts began shortly after the 1886 repeal of the Acts in England. Likely the MPs were alluding to pamphlets published by Alfred Dreyer and the Ladies' National Association in the late 1880s, such as Dreyer's *Black Hand of Authority in India*. See Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 95; and Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1994), 127-40.

⁵⁶ NVA, “Pernicious Literature,” 363.

a deterrent in the case of certain sins as the fear of God.⁵⁷

Publicity, the article argued further, helped warn young women of sexual dangers, prevented crime by “rousing public opinion to energetic action,” and also helped punish criminals by making their crimes public knowledge, even if they were eventually acquitted. Thus, as Earnest Vizetelly noted, although the NVA was strongly aligned against Zola's “outspokenness,” there was a certain amount of slippage between their own doctrine of careful publicity and Zola's realistic (and often moralistic) depictions of vice. Yet while it made use of publicity, the NVA was always alert to both the press's potential benefits and dangers. As Samuel Smith explained during the Vizetelly prosecutions, the NVA recognized that “the power of the Press in modern life is enormous; it may be the guardian of justice and morality, or it may be the chief engine of national corruption.”⁵⁸ The NVA was highly aware that in pursuing obscenity prosecutions it risked publicizing the works in question and, in the event of an acquittal, simply increasing these works' readership rather than effecting suppression. Careful ethical calculations were thus necessary before beginning legal prosecutions, as is apparent from the NVA's discussions of such issues in the pages of the *Vigilance Record*.

In 1890, the NVA found itself involved in a minor obscenity scandal of its own making prompted by its connection with the publisher John Kensit. The publisher of the *Vigilance Record*, Kensit was also involved in the publication of lurid anti-Catholic pamphlets such as *The Awful Discourses of Maria Monk*.⁵⁹ *Truth*, a periodical hostile to the NVA and its recent persecution of Henry Vizetelly publicized this connection in 1890 and accused the association of hypocrisy for condoning obscenity in some instances and condemning it in others.⁶⁰ To their

⁵⁷ “The Uses of Publicity,” *Vigilance Record* 1, no. 8 (September 15, 1887), 57.

⁵⁸ “Indecent Literature and the House of Lords,” *Vigilance Record* 2, no. 7 (August 15, 1888), 80

⁵⁹ Bristow, 208.

⁶⁰ “Occasional Notes,” *Vigilance Record* 3, no. 9 (October 15, 1889), 97.

credit, the NVA quickly broke its association with Kensit and openly discussed the controversy in the *Vigilance Record*, explaining that it had been unaware of the more sensational pamphlets in its publisher's catalogue. Yet it declined to prosecute Kensit as, “in cases of this kind, an unsuccessful prosecution is positively mischievous, because it advertises the book far and wide, and the Association have declined to risk a prosecution, but have referred the matter to the Public Prosecutor.”⁶¹ Two months later, the NVA published a letter from one of its readers questioning the association's decision to cut ties with Kensit. J. Forbes Moncrieff wondered why the NVA had threatened Kensit with prosecution when “where there is a noble purpose and a courageous effort made to bring immorality to light, surely it ill becomes a journal such as yours to speak of 'prosecution.’”⁶² In response, the editors asserted that although they would not class Vizetelly and Kensit together in terms of their crimes, the association did not believe in the “doctrine that 'the end justifies the means, ’” and so could not excuse its former publisher's actions. Indeed, the editors went so far as to suggest that other reformers such as those involved in the campaign against the CD Acts had, like Kensit, erred on the side of obscenity in their zeal for publicity. The NVA was constantly forced to negotiate the difference between sensationalism and proper publicity and did its best to keep its activities firmly on the side of propriety. Its possible that part of the reason the association chose to persecute Vizetelly's translations was because Zola helped further muddy the distinction between these two poles. Zola's defenders, as discussed earlier, often argued that he only described vice in his novels in order to bring attention to the moral failings of modern life and to advise his readers against following the example of his characters. Yet by writing fiction, Zola clearly tended more toward sensationalism than toward sober

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Letter from J. Forbes Moncrieff, “Occasional Notes,” *Vigilance Record* 3, no. 11 (December 15, 1889), 128.

publicity in the name of moral reform. The NVA rejected the notion that Zola's novels were an appropriate form of literary expression, maintaining that the link between literary example and social behavior was too strong to allow for such explicit discussions of vice. The NVA would go on to prosecute other authors on similar terms for decades to come, defending literary restrictions even as public opinion began to turn away from the older Victorian moral standards.

Critics and Authors: Changing Literary Standards

The National Vigilance Association's influence waned in the early 1890s, and—although the association continued to exist in some form until the mid-twentieth century—in 1893 the NVA was too concerned with its own internal financial crises to register much protest at Zola's arrival in London.⁶³ As the NVA was floundering, shifts in literary opinion threatened to upend classic Victorian standards of literature, standards which had strictly excluded Zola from acceptance for decades. Many young writers were drawn to the realistic and adult-oriented literature which Zola exemplified, and while some critics dreaded these changes, others embraced them. This transformation among elite literary circles is apparent from discussions in highbrow periodicals such as the *Yellow Book*, which, despite its short run, came to represent the front line of new trends in English literature. Seen as the vanguard of decadence and the idea of “art for art's sake,” when it first appeared in 1894, the *Yellow Book* was attacked by critics almost as vehemently as Zola had been years earlier.⁶⁴ Indeed, the French author and the new periodical

⁶³ The *Vigilance Record's* publishing schedule was seriously interrupted due to lack of funds in the summer and fall of 1893, and the sporadic issues which appeared through the rest of the decade often featured urgent requests for financial support. One particularly honest notice admitted that “The association never has been popular and probably never will be. We need the continuous assistance of those who know its merits to enable us to carry on the work.” *Vigilance Record* (April 15, 1896), 46. Despite these difficulties, the association survived and continued to exist until 1953, when it merged with a related organization and was reorganized as the British Vigilance Association. Bristow, 231.

⁶⁴ Beckson, Karl E. *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 242-8;

had much in common—if not in style, then certainly in their disregard for the limitations of conventional moral and literary standards. The *Yellow Book* mainly contained stories, poems and art, only occasionally including non-fiction essays or criticism. Significantly, the only piece of literary criticism included in the first number of the *Yellow Book* (aside, perhaps, from a highly metaphoric defense of artifice by Max Beerbohm) was an article by Arthur Waugh on the issue of “Reticence in Literature.”⁶⁵ Waugh was a rising young author in 1894, on his way to establishing a career as a reviewer and literary critic. Perhaps surprisingly, he argued that it was necessary to reject the very avant-garde excesses which would soon become strongly associated with the *Yellow Book*.

In his essay, Waugh defines art by polarities of prudish silence and shocking frankness, and strongly recommends an Aristotelean search for the golden mean, the moderate center between opposing poles where existed “the pivot of good taste, the centre-point of art.”⁶⁶ Karl Beckson suggests that *Yellow Book's* editors, Henry Harland and Aubrey Beardsley, included Waugh's essay in an attempt to prevent conservative backlash against the daring new publication. Waugh's essay “was clearly designed to emphasize the balance between avant-garde and traditional views,” showing that the *Yellow Book* would include conventional contributions alongside more provocative ones.⁶⁷ Yet this mollifying attempt was unsuccessful as the first number was met with overwhelming hostility in the press, which “would forever after brand the periodical unjustifiably as decadent and set the stage for Beardsley's firing at the time of the Wilde trials.”⁶⁸ It was perhaps in response to this hostility that Hubert Crackanthorpe, another

Margaret D Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner, *The Yellow Book: A Centenary Exhibition* (Cambridge, Mass: The Houghton Library, 1994).

⁶⁵ Waugh, Arthur. “Reticence in Literature .” *Yellow Book* 1 (April 1894): 201-219.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁶⁷ Beckson, 244.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 243-44.

young author, was asked to write a rebuttal to “Reticence in Literature” in the second number of the *Yellow Book*. Unlike Waugh, Crackanthorpe was influenced by Zola's naturalism and, significantly, he is one of the authors Frierson uses as evidence of the increasing acceptance of realism in England.⁶⁹ Together, Waugh and Crackanthorpe's essays represent opposing responses to the move toward “frankness” and realism in English literature, with Waugh cautiously suggesting a retreat from these developments and Crackanthorpe enthusiastically embracing them.

In the first essay, Waugh openly disapproves of realism and naturalism, discussing these recent trends with clear concern. He begins by admitting that frankness is a particular virtue and “national characteristic” of Englishmen, but fears that:

[d]uring the last quarter of a century, more particularly, the English man-of-letters has been indulging, with an entirely new freedom, his national birthright of outspokenness., and during the last twelve months there have been no uncertain indications that this freedom of speech is degenerating into license which some as cannot but view with regret and apprehension. The writers and the critics of contemporary literature have, it would seem, alike lost their heads.⁷⁰

Rather creatively, Waugh blames this increase in explicitness on the boredom of the current era. He argues that the last quarter of the nineteenth century has lacked the healthy stimulation to artistic output which comes from “important improvements,” such as the “inspiring acquisitions to territory or to knowledge.”⁷¹ The result for literature has been a combination of unwholesome introspection and interest in sensational subjects such as adultery and sexual awakenings. Waugh is concerned because, although Englishmen are naturally frank, this outspokenness has usually been kept within certain bounds, always keeping silent about certain taboo topics. He argues that true literature must be attuned to the mood and social mores of its time and place. Authors must

⁶⁹ Frierson, 545.

⁷⁰ Waugh, 212.

⁷¹ Ibid., 212.

continually remain aware of these boundaries and always conform to “the standard of contemporary taste.”⁷² Thus, in Waugh's opinion, true art falls on the median point between the spectrum of reticence and frankness, as “the modesty that hesitates to align itself with that standard is a shortcoming, [and] the audacity that rushes beyond is a violence to the unchanging law of literature.”⁷³ Waugh therefore leaves no room for literature which is “ahead of its time” or even purposefully “against its time,” dismissing from the category of art any work that offended current sensibilities of public morality. Thus, for Waugh, literature is only capable of reacting, it does not initiate changes in society or stand at their vanguard. True art has value only if it accurately captures the mood and morality of its specific moment in time. Evidently artistic genius revolved around an innate ability to discover this golden mean, though presumably one could tell if one had missed the mark through the resulting negative reviews.

Perhaps uncomfortable with the extreme relativity of this standard of artistic merit (moral sensibilities, Waugh admitted, changed a great deal from age to age), Waugh also argued that there was a “fixed unit of judgment that never varies,” that is, a vaguely defined commitment to the “moral idea.”⁷⁴ In a somewhat confused paragraph, Waugh concluded that this eternal moral idea was apparent in writing which was “sane, equable, and well spoken,” that is, texts which were wholesome and rational, that encouraged “the life best calculated to promote individual and general good,” and were inoffensive in language and subject matter.⁷⁵ Here Waugh makes clear that besides the two poles of reticence and frankness, there also existed in literature a gendered polarity that must be carefully navigated: “By its sanity [moral literature] eludes the risk of effeminate demonstration; by its choice of language it avoids brutality; and between these two

⁷² Waugh, 205.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 211.

poles, it may be affirmed without fear of question, true taste will and must be found to lie.”⁷⁶ The female end of this spectrum of excessive frankness featured unrestrained emotion and passionate indulgence, while the male side featured brutal explicitness and coarse language. In Waugh's opinion, realistic or naturalistic literature contained both of these unhealthy expressions of gender. As Lyn Pykett notes, this was not an unusual argument, as “opponents of naturalism habitually associate[d] the naturalist project with either the limited feminine or a debased masculinity – coarse and brutal virility.”⁷⁷

Although this gendered polarity and the search for the golden mean seems to suggest that moral literature was unavoidably androgynous, Waugh makes clear that true art—and the true artist—was always masculine: “The man lives by ideas; the woman by sensations; and while the man remains an artist so long as he hold true to his own view of life, the woman becomes one as soon as she throws off the habit of her sex, and learns to rely upon her judgment, and not upon her senses.”⁷⁸ Moreover, as Pykett notes, Waugh reserves his greatest disgust over realism for the female writers of contemporary “New Fiction,” novels which featured frank discussion of the repressive nature of marriage and motherhood, and questioned the double-standard that restricted female desire. Waugh makes clear that, in his opinion, detailed discussion of female bodies and female sexuality was not art, but rather a degradation of femininity which “permeated marriage with the ardours of promiscuous intercourse” and “debased the beauty of maternity by analysis of the process of gestation.”⁷⁹ Thus female experience was inherently inartistic, and the feminine tendencies of realism (as well as its overly virile masculine traits) inevitably prevented it from

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Pykett, Lynn. “Representing the Real: The English Debate About Naturalism, 1884-1900.” In *Naturalism in the European Novel: A New Critical Perspective*, edited by Brian Nelson (New York: Berg Publishers, 1992), 181

⁷⁸ Waugh, 210.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 217-18.

rising to the level of true art.

In his response essay, Hubert Crackanthorpe manages to twist Waugh's arguments against him and defend realistic authors and frankness in literature, while still sharing a number of Waugh's basic assumptions. Crackanthorpe argues, albeit implicitly, that Waugh has misjudged the tenor of the times and failed to recognize how realist works perfectly reflect the mood of the moment. He argues that the novel itself is an inherently scientific form which had naturally become the favored literary type of the modern age: "facile and flexible in its conventions, with its endless opportunities for accurate delineation of reality, [the novel] becomes supreme in a time of democracy and of science."⁸⁰ Crackanthorpe thus sees realism as heralding a dramatic change within society itself, rather than an unnatural deviation from the standards of contemporary taste and morality. Furthermore, in his opinion, opposition to realism by literary critics and the public at large has been steadily decreasing. He notes, alluding to Henry Vizetelly and Zola, that

It is not so long since a publisher was sent to prison for issuing English translations of celebrated specimens of French realism; yet, only the other day, we vied with each other in doing honour to the chief figure-head of that tendency across the Channel, and there was heard but the belated protest of a few worthy individuals, inadequately equipped with the jaunty courage of ignorance, or the insufferable confidence of second-hand knowledge.⁸¹

Crackanthorpe argues that Waugh's complaints are too little, too late, as realism and naturalism have already triumphed. Referring to comments by the critics Robert Buchanan and Edmund Gosse, Crackanthorpe confidently states that "before long the battle for literary freedom will be won," for "a new public has been created" which prefers realistic novels and frank discussions of

⁸⁰ Crackanthorpe, Hubert. "Reticence in Literature: Some Roundabout Remarks." *Yellow Book* 2 (July 1894): 259

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 262.

even the most delicate subject matter.⁸²

Crackanthorpe also further developed Waugh's concept of literary polarities, subsuming the categories of reticence and frankness and masculinity and femininity into broader categories of idealism and realism. Crackanthorpe sees a constant movement back and forth between these two tendencies as “the pendulum of production is continually swinging from degenerate idealism to degenerate realism, from effete vapidness to slavish sordidity.”⁸³ Crackanthorpe admits that pure idealism and pure realism are absurd categories which are impossible to achieve completely in practice, but suggests that individual authors tend toward one or the other end of the spectrum as do eras and literary movements in general. He also provides a definition of art which is almost a direct quotation from Zola, art as “a corner of Nature, seen through the temperament of a single man.”⁸⁴

Although Waugh and Crackanthorpe disagreed fundamentally on the significance of realistic literature and its suitability for their current time, they did share many assumptions about the nature of artistic production and the significance of gender in art. Although Crackanthorpe passed over Waugh's critique of realism's unhealthy and disordered gender without comment, he clearly shared Waugh's conviction that the true artist was always male. In his essay, Crackanthorpe offhandedly denigrated female literary output as amateurish, whether produced by “the society lady, dazzled by the brilliancy of her own conversation” or “the serious-minded spinster, bitten by some sociological theory.”⁸⁵ In his conclusion, he further defines the greatest form of artistic production as the “frank, fearless acceptance by every man of

⁸² Ibid., 268.

⁸³ Ibid., 260.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 262. Compare Zola's statement that “any piece of work will always be only a corner of nature as seen through a certain temperament.” Émile Zola, “Naturalism on the Stage,” in *The Experimental Novel: And Other Essays*, trans. by Belle M. Sherman (New York: Cassell Publishing, 1893), 111.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 268.

his entire artistic temperament, with its qualities and its flaws.”⁸⁶ Evidently women have no inherent “artistic temperament” to tap into and guide their writing. Although Crackanthorpe's call for literary freedom foreshadowed the increased frankness of twentieth-century literary movements, the inclusion of Waugh's essay in the first issue of the *Yellow Book* makes clear that his defense of frankness was by no means a majority opinion in the 1890s. Transformations were underway, yet critics were still divided on whether to embrace or reject the increased candor of English authors. The assumptions Waugh and Crackanthorpe shared were just as significant as their disagreements. Even authors like Crackanthorpe who welcomed changes in literary standards still considered the educated male to be the proper artistic producer and subject, adhering to the gendered assumptions which also underly the NVA's prosecution of Zola. Thus although these changes in literary standards were significant, and potentially created more freedom for England's writers, they were not as revolutionary as they might appear on the surface.

Controversy in the Press: Promoting the “Liberties of Literature”

The abstract and highbrow discussions of the *Yellow Book* had little in common with the more immediate discussions of Zola held in London's newspaper press. Yet similar concerns about changing literary standards were also apparent in discussions held in more popular venues. One such debate occurred in the weekly *Speaker* in the fall of 1893, sparked off by one of the few complaints voiced about Zola's visit to London. Shortly after the journalists' conference concluded, the Church of England was holding its own annual congress in Birmingham. A number of contemporary issues were discussed at the Church Congress, including a section

⁸⁶ Ibid., 269.

meeting on the last day which considered “the relations between the Church and the Press.”⁸⁷

This discussion, which mainly concentrated on the need to improve press coverage of Church issues and on the importance of using the press to promote Christian society, would have likely passed unnoticed if it had not been for some incendiary comments made at its conclusion. The Rev. J. E. C. Welldon, who was then the headmaster of the prestigious Harrow School, took the opportunity presented by the discussion to chastise the press for promoting immorality. Although the bulk of his complaints were directed against newspapers which published betting odds and unnecessarily explicit divorce proceedings, more relevantly, he also complained about the recent visit by Émile Zola to London. Welldon was incensed by the warm welcome given to the French author and its implicit celebration of Zola's literary work. He was deeply concerned by the possible effects of “pernicious literature” upon society, and went so far as to suggest that “the efforts and aims of Churchmen might well be enlisted in behalf of a society such as the National Vigilance Association, which laboured ceaselessly to put down whatever was indecent in novels, pictures in the shop windows, and upon the hoardings.” Interestingly, one of the founders of the Institute of Journalists, the newspaper proprietor Sir Hugh Gilzean Reid, was in the audience as a representative of the press. Gilzean Reid attempted to defend the Institute's actions and the journalists' conference he had attended the previous week by explaining that Zola had been invited “not as a novel-writer but as a journalist.” This argument apparently did not convince the clergymen at the meeting, and the discussion was concluded with a harsh condemnation of Zola and his immoral influence from the Congress's president, Bishop Perowne.⁸⁸

This short controversy then caught the attention of Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch (or “A.

⁸⁷ “Church Congress,” *Times* (London), October 6, 1893, 4.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

T. Q. C.” as he signed himself in the press), a minor author and literary columnist for the *Speaker*. Quiller-Couch devoted several of his columns from mid-October to early November to attacking Rev. Welldon, arguing back and forth with various letters to the editor, including one from the distinguished headmaster himself. Throughout the controversy, Quiller-Couch vehemently defended Zola's right to be published in England and denounced any attempts to persecute and prohibit literature, no matter whether they originated from the Church hierarchy or from private associations like the NVA. In his first column which opened the debate, Quiller-Couch attempted to carve out space for serious literature aimed at an adult audience, explaining that “Zola is not pernicious except when read in the wrong manner or by the wrong people.”⁸⁹ Quiller-Couch thus made use of the NVA's own arguments to defend Zola, arguing that even if a portion of the public might be harmed by his work, this did not justify government action to completely prevent access to his novels.

Quiller-Couch's comments echoed a similar defense of Zola made by Vernon Lee earlier that year. In a overview of the French author's work, Lee had argued that Zola was an influential literary voice and a significant commentator on contemporary society, and therefore “we are bound, mature and thoughtful men and women, to read and meditate his works.”⁹⁰ Like Lee, Quiller-Couch conceded that Zola was not appropriate reading material for “young boys and maidens,” but he argued that “the duty of restraining these young folk from paths unmeet for them rested on their parents and guardians, spiritual pastors and masters—among them, on the Headmaster of Harrow School.”⁹¹ He thus drew a line between private censorship and public

⁸⁹ A. T. Q. C., “A Literary Causerie – The Rev. J. E. C. Welldon on M. Zola,” *Speaker* (London), October 14, 1893, 411.

⁹⁰ Lee, Vernon, “The Moral Teaching of Zola,” *Contemporary Review* 63 (February 1893): 196.

⁹¹ A. T. Q. C., “A Literary Causerie – The Rev. J. E. C. Welldon on M. Zola,” *Speaker* (London), October 14, 1893, 412.

persecution through the state and judicial system. While it was acceptable to ban novels from the school library or to forbid one's children from reading them, it was quite another matter to halt their publication all together or imprison their publishers. This distinction granted the right of figures like Welldon to make moral judgements about literature (albeit reluctantly and with a good deal of sarcasm), while at the same time refusing to confer legitimacy on literary persecution.

Significantly, both sides of the debate dismissed Gilzean Reid and the Institute's attempt to draw a distinction between Zola the novelist and Zola the journalist. Like Bishop Perowne, Quiller-Couch argued that the distinction was spurious, stating that “it was very certain that the enthusiastic welcome was given, not to the journalist, but to the novelist.”⁹² A correspondent in the letters to the editor column did attempt to clarify the Institute of Journalists' position, but his explanation does not seem to have been particularly convincing. In his letter to the editor, “C. L. F.” explained that “M. Zola was invited for a plain and simple reason—that he is the President of the Société des Gens de Lettres (SDGL). He came to our shores as the official representative of seven hundred of the most eminent journalists of France.”⁹³ This was a somewhat strange defense though, as despite the SGDL's involvement in issues of journalism, it was primarily concerned with defending the professional and legal rights of authors.⁹⁴ While it was true that Zola would not have been invited if he had he not been the current president of the Société, the Institute of Journalists was clearly pleased to have such a famous guest, and made the most of his presence to promote their conference in the press and among the city's elite. As one unconvinced

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ C. L. F., “Letters to the Editor: The Church Congress and M. Zola,” *Speaker* (London), October 21, 1893, 438.

⁹⁴ For instance, in December of the same year, Zola, in his capacity as president of the SDGL, encouraged the creation of a duty on French books exported to Russia in order to better recompense French authors. *Times* (London), December 25, 1893, 3.

opponent of Zola bluntly put it, “When the President of the Société des Gens de Lettres was enjoying the Lord Mayor's hospitality, where at that particular moment was the writer of the dirty novels?”⁹⁵ Thus, it was somewhat ironic when C. L. F. complained that the press had “ignored the meetings of the Congress as such, but thrust into undue prominence the presence of M. Zola.”⁹⁶ The novelist's prestige, he implied, had inadvertently and unexpectedly overshadowed the rest of the conference, as well as its other distinguished French guests such as M. Magnard, the editor of *Le Figaro*. It seems unlikely, though, that the experienced journalists of the Institute would have naively invited Zola to their conference without considering the controversy and discussion he would provoke.⁹⁷ Zola did not simply come as a delegate, after all, but was asked by the Institute to prepare a speech on the topic of anonymity in journalism, despite the fact that he had no personal knowledge of the English press and, furthermore, did not actual speak English.⁹⁸ The Institute's leaders were all experienced journalists and newspaper proprietors, well aware of the uses of publicity, and in all likelihood they relished the attention Zola brought to their professional organization and its otherwise unremarkable conference.

With the conclusion of the Church Congress, the debate over Zola moved out of the sphere of speeches and meetings and into the pages of the city's newspapers. One of the main points of contention in the *Speaker* was the question of whether one first had to read Zola in order to condemn him. Quiller-Couch was clearly convinced that Welldon and the National

⁹⁵ W. P., “Letters to the Editor: M. Zola and M. Zola,” *Speaker* (London), October 28, 1893, 467.

⁹⁶ C. L. F., “Letters to the Editor: The Church Congress and M. Zola,” *Speaker* (London), October 21, 1893, 438.

⁹⁷ Mark Hampton notes that large newspaper owners and employers like Gilzean Reid, played a prominent role in the Institute, in spite of its claim to represent the interests of all working journalists. “Critics of the Institute constantly insisted that the organization benefited only proprietors and (perhaps) editors, largely by providing social opportunities for them.” Mark Hampton, “Journalists and the 'Professional Ideal' in Britain: the Institute of Journalists, 1884-1907,” *Historical Research; the Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 72 (1999): 195.

⁹⁸ Vizetelly, 326-7. Zola had to ask Ernest Vizetelly to send him an overview of English journalism before he could prepare his remarks. At the conference itself, an English summary of Zola's speech was passed out to the largely anglophone crowd. “M. Zola on Anonymity in Journalism,” *Times* (London), September 23, 1893, 6.

Vigilance Association were puritanical philistines who never bothered to peruse the literature they persecuted. He repeatedly badgered Welldon through his column to explain how many volumes of Zola he had actually read, arguing that condemning an author's entire oeuvre based upon one or two disliked volumes was unfair, as for instance a critic who only read “Venus and Adonis” and “Lucretia” might decide that “Shakespeare was a distinguished but infamous author, from whom the 'maiden fancies' must be protected by the National Vigilance Association.”⁹⁹ In response, Welldon and his defenders argued that one immoral book was indeed enough evidence on which to burn a whole catalogue, as “if only one single volume of an author disseminate [sic] moral poison and a hundred volumes preach virtue, and the author allows the poison to circulate with the virtue, that author deserves to be stigmatized as 'infamous'” (it was unclear where this left Shakespeare).¹⁰⁰ Welldon himself explained that his denunciations were based on a reading of three unnamed Zola novels, two of which were “such as deserve to be called infamous,” as well the *Times* report on the trials of Henry Vizetelly.¹⁰¹ Running throughout Welldon and his defenders' letters was a firm belief that Zola's work was nothing but irredeemable “moral sewage” which was not worthy of any prolonged study.¹⁰² Moreover, the NVA's conviction that reading Zola would lead directly to immoral behavior on the part of impressional readers was apparent throughout. As evidence of this connection, the familiar sort of anecdotal evidence was brought up at the Church Congress by one delegate, who recalled an incident in which a “boy read an article describing how bicycles were stolen, and, thus instructed, succeeded in stealing

⁹⁹ A. T. Q. C., “A Literary Causerie – The Rev. J. E. C. Welldon on M. Zola,” *Speaker* (London), October 14, 1893, 411.

¹⁰⁰ Malcolm MacColl, “Letters to the Editor: The Zola Controversy,” *Speaker* (London), November 18, 1893, 553.

¹⁰¹ J. E. C. Welldon, “Letters to the Editor: Mr. Welldon and M. Zola,” *Speaker* (London), November 4, 1893, 496.

¹⁰² Brooke Herford, “Letters to the Editor: Mr. Welldon and M. Zola,” *Speaker* (London), November 4, 1893, 497.

several.”¹⁰³ Thus, despite certain reevaluations and shifts in literary opinion made apparent from Quiller-Couch's defense of Zola, the old characterization of his novels as demoralizing and socially dangerous trash still held force.

Yet despite this reiteration of old assumptions and prejudices, there were signs of change evident in the exchange in the *Speaker*. What was unusual about Quiller-Couch's attack on Welldon was that unlike other defenders of Zola, such as George Moore and the Vizetellys, he did not have any apparent personal stake in the debate. Quiller-Couch's own writings, as many responders noted, were not apparently influenced by either naturalism or realism, nor were they controversial or in danger of being censored themselves. Quiller-Couch himself explained that he was “no worshipper of M. Zola, but a cold and inimical admirer,” and seemed to be mainly motivated by a general desire to defend the “liberties of literature,” as well as a strong dislike for religious men who interfered in literary matters.¹⁰⁴ In summing up the controversy, another writer for the *Speaker* noted that Quiller-Couch's defense of Zola was echoed by other young writers, and represented “something of the nature of a phenomenon,” a new tendency in the younger generation “towards a more old-fashioned frankness and honesty, a more robust confidence in the treatment of certain subjects than now prevails in our society.”¹⁰⁵ This was the same shift in literary tendencies which Waugh and Crackanthorpe debated in the pages of the *Yellow Book* and which William Frierson described in 1928 when he noted a large increase in realistic stories published by English authors in 1893.¹⁰⁶ In the literary world, at least, there was a growing willingness to tolerate naturalist and realistic writers, as well as to take Zola seriously as an

¹⁰³ “Church Congress,” *Times* (London), October 6, 1893, 4.

¹⁰⁴ A. T. Q. C., “A Literary Causerie: On the Behavior of the Rev. J. E. C. Welldon,” *Speaker* (London), October 28, 1893, 468.

¹⁰⁵ “M. Zola Again,” November 11, 1893, 522.

¹⁰⁶ Frierson, 545.

influential contemporary author.

In his initial column, Quiller-Couch was confident enough that the opinions expressed at the Church Congress were in the minority to declare that “one thing. . . was settled by the warm welcome given to M. Zola—that the public conscience will not permit a repetition of the Vizetelly trial.”¹⁰⁷ He maintained this view, despite the dissent registered in the letters to the editor as well as a pessimistic personal letter from Henry Vizetelly himself.¹⁰⁸ The fact that there was never another attempted obscenity trial against Zola's novels—even though Chatto & Windus had already taken over where Vizetelly had left off and resumed printing translations in 1892—seems to confirm Quiller-Couch's views. In *The Haunted Study*, Peter Keating offers an explanation for why Zola's work was targeted in the first place by explaining that “the fiction attacked by the NVA tended to be vulnerable because it dealt with controversial topics without the safeguard of a large public interest.”¹⁰⁹ As discussed above, the NVA only undertook legal prosecution when it was certain it could secure conviction, not wishing to give publicity to works in the event of failure. Although Keating argues differently, this does suggest that Zola's work had developed a “large public interest” by the 1890s, or at least enough reluctant appreciation from literary critics to protect it against the NVA's persecutions. Indeed, the first Zola work openly published in England after Vizetelly's imprisonment, *The Downfall* (*La Débâcle*), was very well received in 1892 and apparently widely read. *La Débâcle* had been carefully chosen by Ernest Vizetelly as an appropriate work to reintroduce the English public to Zola, and he

¹⁰⁷ A. T. Q. C., “A Literary Causerie – The Rev. J. E. C. Welldon on M. Zola,” *Speaker* (London), October 14, 1893, 412.

¹⁰⁸ Vizetelly's letter was not printed in the *Speaker* itself, although Quiller-Couch discussed its content in his October 28 column. A. T. Q. C., “A Literary Causerie: On the Behavior of the Rev. J. E. C. Welldon,” *Speaker* (London), October 28, 1893, 469.

¹⁰⁹ Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel, 1875-1914* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989), 248.

correctly calculated that Zola's description of the collapse of the Second Empire would be appreciated by English audiences.¹¹⁰ Critics and readers could more easily accept the epic scale of the tragedy presented in *La Débâcle* than they could the squalid domestic tragedy and social vice which featured in others of Zola's novels like *La Terre*, *L'Assommoir* and *Nana*. Chatto & Windus, which had uncertainly accepted Vizetelly's translation of *La Débâcle* in 1892, would go on to publish and reissue many of Zola's novels over the next few decades. Yet despite this successful republication, the status of Zola's novels remained legally ambiguous, especially for those explicitly declared obscene in the Vizetelly trials. Even as late as 1900, a bookseller was arrested on charges of selling obscene works which included one of Vizetelly's translations of Zola.¹¹¹

It is unsurprising then that English publishers generally avoided Zola's more objectionable novels during the 1890s and released relatively 'safe' titles that would not attract the attention of anti-vice reformers.¹¹² Furthermore, throughout the 1890s, Zola's translators continued to bowdlerize his works and tone down the explicitness of his language in order to make his novels more palatable to the English public.¹¹³ The Vizetelly trials were still too recent for publishers to risk otherwise, despite the increasing acceptance of Zola among literary circles.

¹¹⁰ Vizetelly, 315.

¹¹¹ The defense argued that the book in question, *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*, was not clearly judged obscene in the original Vizetelly trial, and, in any event, "whatever might be said as to certain of the other translations of Zola's works, this book was certainly not either immoral or suggestive." The charges relating to the Zola translation were dropped and the bookseller was eventually acquitted. "Police," *Times* (London), May 31, 1900, 15; *Times* (London), June 30, 1900, 11.

¹¹² For example, reviews of the short story collection *Attack on the Mill* and *The Dream (Le Rêve)*, both released in 1893, commonly mentioned their lack of offensive scenes or language. Thus, the *Spectator* observed that *Attack on the Mill* was "without any of the drawbacks which have given [Zola's] name an evil savour in the nostrils of decent people," while the *Bookman* noted that *The Dream* was a novel "to which in the most prudish circles no exception could be taken." "Current Literature," *Spectator* 71, no. 3398 (August 12, 1893): 217; and "Novel Notes," *Bookman* 3, no. 18 (February 1892): 191.

¹¹³ William E. Colburn, "Victorian Translations of Zola," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 1, no. 2 (October 1968): 30-32.

Only one group dared release complete and accurate translations of Zola's novels during this decade, but they did so in carefully controlled, private circumstances. A small, still somewhat mysterious literary club calling itself the “Lutetian Society” released high-quality translations of Zola's most controversial novels between 1894 and 1895, including *L'Assommoir*, *Nana*, *La Curée*, *Germinal*, *Pot-Bouille* and *La Terre*.¹¹⁴ As Chantal Morel explains in an article on the group, the Lutetian Society was able to avoid prosecution despite publishing works clearly deemed obscene during the Vizetelly trials because “the books were being produced in an expensive edition, limited to a print run of three hundred, and distributed to members of a book club only. They were not 'popular' editions which the general public could obtain or even afford.”¹¹⁵ By releasing these volumes privately and without publicity, the Lutetian Society managed to escape the scrutiny of the NVA. It is unlikely, though, that the National Vigilantes would have been greatly concerned by these translations, since they were intended only for well-educated men and students of serious literature.

The participants in the *Speaker* debate were well aware of the potentially hypocritical distinction drawn between works safe for public consumption and those safe only for private, elite consumption. Many commentators therefore pointed out the inconsistencies of English censorship. One clergyman, the politically involved and influential Malcolm MacColl, mentioned that “the worst of Zola's novels are less corrupting than some English novels which are seen on drawing-room tables, praised by moral and orthodox reviewers, and read eagerly by young ladies in their teens.”¹¹⁶ This was a familiar argument, one also used by George Moore in

¹¹⁴ See Chantal Morel, “Did you say. . . the Lutetian Society?” *Bulletin of the Emile Zola Society*, no. 16 (September 1997): 6-15; and Denise Merkle, “The Lutetian Society,” *TTR: Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction* 16, no. 2 (2003): 73-101.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹⁶ Malcolm MacColl, “Letters to the Editor: The Zola Controversy,” *Speaker* (London), November 18, 1893, 553.

defense of naturalist novels, which suggested that “frivolous” novels were more morally dangerous than serious literature.¹¹⁷ This argument had misogynistic overtones, as it was also used to dismiss novels aimed at a female readership as lightweight fluff with sensational plots and unrealistic situations. Although critics often expounded on the importance of writing with “young maidens” in mind, if too many young women enjoyed an author's books, he or she risked being dismissed as a trivial and frivolous writer.

Zola was similarly excluded from the realms of serious literature, although on very different grounds. MacColl, for instance, refused to recognize Zola as an artist, as he did not feel that his novels filled the “true mission of art” to “elevate and ennoble human nature.”¹¹⁸ This exclusion was significant because canonical literature usually received a certain leeway from the censors, as Quiller-Couch noted when he brought up Shakespeare's more vulgar works. Another anonymous writer from the *Speaker* also observed that “Mr. Welldon, who is so shocked at M. Zola, has no hesitation in putting in the hands of his boys at Harrow, Ovid, Horace, Juvenal, [and] Anacreon.”¹¹⁹ These authors were all protected by their “classical” status, considered edifying overall despite their occasional crude digressions. Zola's defenders usually attempted to place his works in this context as significant contemporary novels which deserved the benefit of artistic freedom. It seems they were somewhat successful by 1893, because while some of the anti-Zola commentators in the *Speaker* debate still dismissed him as a “pornographer,” one willingly conceded that he was “an influence upon his age, and, in one way or another, chiefly upon the youth of his age; and even from the head-master's outlook he is a factor calling for

¹¹⁷ Moore, 5.

¹¹⁸ Malcolm MacColl, “Letters to the Editor: The Zola Controversy,” *Speaker* (London), November 18, 1893, 553.

¹¹⁹ “M. Zola Again,” *Speaker* (London), November 11, 1893, 522.

more than a cursory consideration.”¹²⁰ It is suggestive that even dismissive critics in 1893 were willing to concede Zola's artistic significance, and also that Quiller-Couch was willing to defend Zola despite the fact that he had no personal investment in his work or literary theories. Quiller-Couch defended Zola because he believed in the “liberties of literature” and disapproved of the formal, legal censorship enforced by the National Vigilance Society. In this debate in the *Speaker* then, Quiller-Couch represented changing literary standards in action, defending controversial novels against formal censorship and legal prosecution.

Reviewing Zola: Contrary Opinions

While Quiller-Couch was arguing with Rev. Welldon in the pages of the *Speaker*, other literary critics and authors were also beginning to voice positive opinions regarding Zola in the rest of the English press. In part, the reassessment of Zola's work which occurred in England in the early 1890s was spurred by Zola's publication of *Le docteur Pascal* in the summer of 1893. This was the concluding volume of his life's work, the Rougon-Macquart series, and its publication encouraged reviewers to consider Zola's novels as a part of a whole, rather than as isolated stories. Even the most disapproving critics admitted a certain amount of admiration for Zola's dedication and careful execution of his plan. An anonymous critic of the traditionalist *Athenaeum*, for instance, admitted that Zola's focus and “fixity in carrying a theory to its logical end” gave his work “immense force” but unfortunately also “uncouthness and rigidity.”¹²¹ Along with many short reviews such as this, 1893 also brought two lengthy, signed reviews of Zola's oeuvre as a whole. In these reviews, W. H. Gleadell and Vernon Lee expressed very similar

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Review of *Le docteur Pascal*, by Émile Zola, *Athenaeum*, no. 3432 (August 5, 1893): 181.

views of Zola's faults, yet they drew opposing conclusions about his literary value and his work's appropriateness for the reading public.¹²²

Although Gleadell ultimately disapproves of Zola and quite harshly criticizes his literary theories, he opens his review with a surprisingly positive and triumphal description of the author, stating:

. . .differ from him as we may in our conception of life and the novelist's mission to his fellow-men, we cannot but concede that the renown he has at length achieved has been gallantly and loyally won in the face of obstacles which to one of a less robust temperament would have proved simply insuperable. Zola! Why the very name sounds like a challenge, a cry of attack, a shout of victory—clear and resonant like the notes of a clarion.¹²³

There is a certain degree of satire evident in this bombastic praise, and possibly Gleadell is facetiously alluding to Robert H. Sherard's often grandiose English biography of Zola published several months earlier.¹²⁴ Many reviewers had mocked Sherard, for instance, for suggesting that *Germinal* was an epic which would one day be “taught to children as is to-day the 'Iliad' or the 'Odyssey.'”¹²⁵ Yet underneath this layer of potential mockery, Gleadell seems to genuinely admire Zola's intensity and drive, as when he describes one of his early works, *La curée* as “bold, energetic, vigorous, immoderate, written in that tone of passionate enthusiasm peculiar to the originator of any new movement, it was as it were, the first cannon-shot fired by Zola. . .”¹²⁶ Yet, in Gleadell's opinion, any of the author's positive qualities were clearly outweighed by his flaws. Although he approved of some of Zola's works, Gleadell, like most English critics,

¹²² Gleadell, W. H., “Zola and His Work,” *Westminster Review* 140, no. 6 (December 1893): 614-626; and Lee, Vernon. “The Moral Teaching of Zola,” *Contemporary Review* 63, no. 326 (February 1893): 196-212.

¹²³ Gleadell, 615.

¹²⁴ Sherard, Robert Harborough, *Emile Zola; a Biographical and Critical Study* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1893).

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 210. Negative and mocking reviews of Sherard's biography include “A 'Life' of M. Zola,” *Spectator* 71, no. 3417 (December 23, 1893): 918-19; “Literature,” *Athenaeum*, no. 2447 (November 18, 1893): 689; and “New Books and Reprints,” *Saturday Review* 76 (November 25, 1893): 609.

¹²⁶ Gleadell, 617.

disliked the French author's descriptions of the sordid lives of wretched characters, whether they be the drunken working class of *L'Assommoir*, or the prostitutes and bourgeois clients of *Nana*, or the degraded peasants of *La Terre*. Echoing conventional opinion, he wonders in his article “what good purpose is served by raising the curtain on such pictures, or instructing the world in all their abominable details.”¹²⁷ Gleadell further argues that Zola's novels were not only pernicious, but false. By focusing only on the negative, Zola has overlooked all of the beauty and wonder in the world which far outweighed vice and wickedness. Gleadell blames this on Zola's fixed literary theories and the jeremiad-like purpose of the Rougon-Macquart novels. Zola had been “led in his zeal to create his own worlds to suit his own purposes and to serve his own ends, whilst he chooses the most unusual subjects and clothes them in the most unbridled language.”¹²⁸

Much of Gleadell's complaints about Zola's inaccuracy and focus on the dark side of life were also voiced by Vernon Lee in her own overview of Zola's life work. Lee, though, was considerably more forgiving than Gleadell. Although Zola was, in her opinion, “the last novelist in the world from whom we should expect an objectively faithful picture of life,” Lee argues that his tendency to mix a realistic style with metaphorical flourishes only enhanced the power of his work.¹²⁹ Unlike Gleadell, Lee argues that although Zola's depiction of the world was distorted, it was still an insightful and even beneficial representation of life, albeit one that focused on the tragic to the exclusion of all else. Lee actually suggests that Zola's work, seen as a whole, teaches important lessons about the nature of vice and its origins, not in purposeful evil, but in egotism and careless pleasure-seeking. As mentioned earlier, she goes so far as to suggest that reading Zola was a sort of social duty, stating that, “despite all drawbacks, real and imaginary, Zola has

¹²⁷ Ibid., 619.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 624.

¹²⁹ Lee, 198.

had to be accepted. We may not enjoy and we may not approve; but unless we would forego much knowledge of contemporary thought and feeling, and much practical benefit in consequence, we are bound, mature and thoughtful men and women, to read and meditate his works.”¹³⁰ Although Lee agrees with the commonly held notion that Zola's novels could influence readers to behave immorally themselves, she did not feel that this was reason enough to dismiss Zola outright and in her article rhetorically asks “is a book immoral because it would help to demoralise those who should read it in an immoral spirit?”¹³¹ Tentatively Lee implies that no, this does not make a book immoral, although because of these dangers she can only recommend Zola to “such readers as face horrors and indecencies in a book only because they would hope for the courage to face them in reality.”¹³²

Vernon Lee's defense of Zola likely comes in part from empathy, as she was a somewhat controversial author herself. Born Violet Paget, Lee had taken on a masculine pseudonym when she began her writing career in the early 1880s. Although her literary output tended to be romantic rather than realistic, she ran into similar trouble as Zola for her frank discussions of sexuality. She quickly became frustrated by the conservative literary climate in England, as is apparent from her bold declaration in her diaries after the publication of her first novel, *Miss Brown*, that “I will show, fight, argue, prove that I am in the right, that the restrictions placed upon the novel in England are absurd, that my novel is legitimate and praiseworthy.”¹³³ Lee's defense of Zola was thus in part a defense of herself, and although she might not favor naturalism as a movement, she approved of Zola's efforts to make literary standards more

¹³⁰ Ibid., 196.

¹³¹ Ibid., 207.

¹³² Ibid., 197.

¹³³ Vernon Lee, diary fragment, 1884, Vernon Lee Papers, quoted in Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 209.

permissible. Perhaps Lee is even one of the authors Gleadell was thinking of when he complained at the conclusion of his review that England's literary taste was changing and “questions are now being boldly handled, both by author and playwright, which were formerly left severely alone. Moral complications have become the leading 'ground motive,' and the young lady of seventeen has ceased to be the ideal auditor.”¹³⁴ As Clarence Decker argues, Lee and other later Victorian defenders of Zola “express the more tolerant and scholarly criticism of the nineties and their opinions point the way to the broader judgement of the twentieth century.”¹³⁵ Acceptance of Zola represented not simply a growing interest in realist works— indeed Zola's naturalism had, at best, only limited and short-lived influence on English literature—but rather represented a shift in English literary culture as both critics and the public became increasingly accepting of serious novels written for an adult audience. As Gleadell complained, the old “teach and delight” standard which took young women as the “ideal auditor” was steadily being overturned by a new generation of writers.

Conclusions

The controversy surrounding Zola's publication in England illuminates the basis of Victorian literary conventions and moral standards. Zola was dangerous because his explicit depictions of sexuality and vice could easily influence suggestible and immature readers such as the lower class, women, and youth. As the National Vigilance Association made clear in its propaganda, this danger was heightened by the fact that Vizetelly's translations were relatively cheap and therefore widely available to these impressionable new readers. Although anti-vice

¹³⁴ Gleadell, 626.

¹³⁵ Decker, 106.

societies had existed in some form in England since the late-seventeenth century,¹³⁶ the NVA's successful prosecution of Vizetelly set a new precedent for the censorship of serious works of literature. Thus, at the end of the Victorian era, literary censorship shifted away from informal modes such as the selective monopoly of the circulating libraries, and toward more formal legal actions such as those instigated by the NVA.

At the same moment, in literary circles Victorian restrictions seemed to be lessening, as more and more authors were rejecting the literary conventions which had characterized the previous century. Zola's defenders welcomed this increased liberty of literature, whether they were directly influenced by naturalism, as in the case of George Moore and Hubert Crankanthorpe, or they simply approved of the candor and openness Zola represented, as in the case of Arthur Quiller-Couch and Vernon Lee. Thus the short five year period between Vizetelly's conviction in 1888 and Zola's visit to London in 1893 was a moment of continued contradiction and division. On one hand, there were signs that literature in the coming century would be freer and less morally restrained. On the other hand, old assumptions about the dangers of immoral literature and the need for repression still held force. For every critic or writer who defended Zola and literary freedom in the early 1890s, another voice was raised in opposition, whether it originated with societies like the NVA, conservative critics like Arthur Waugh, or clergymen like the Rev. Welldon. Furthermore, even critics like Crackanthorpe and Quiller-Couch who defended the growing literary frankness still held onto old Victorian assumptions that the true artist was male and that only certain well-educated individuals could safely read adult-oriented novels. Although Zola's reputation would be greatly improved by the end of the 1890s, later authors would have to face the same legal restrictions which jailed his English publisher in

¹³⁶ Bristow, 2.

1889. While Zola's acceptance was in some sense a turning point for literary freedom in England, such battles were not won overnight and the vestiges of Victorianism would continue to be evident until at least the middle of the twentieth century.

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