

Beauty, the Artist and the Scientist: Aesthetic Education in Zola's *Le Docteur Pascal*

TUO LIU

Harvard University

Abstract. This paper investigates the role of beauty in the last work of Émile Zola's Rougon-Macquart cycle of novels, *Le Docteur Pascal*. As a writer, Zola professed an interest in representing the truth in all its forms, which includes subjects previously perceived as unworthy of representation, such as the lowly and the ugly. Zola also claimed to be inspired by the scientific method, as he believed that the writer should adopt the observing gaze of the experimenter. I show how *Le Docteur Pascal* allows for a more nuanced understanding of Zola's naturalist project. Through the character of Clotilde, Zola integrates beauty into his worldview, as the scientist Pascal receives an aesthetic education. Though this education is not without dangers, beauty ultimately serves an ethical function alongside science and progress, and Zola acknowledges the limits of an exclusively detached scientific gaze.

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It has become a commonplace to associate nineteenth-century naturalism, as articulated by writers such as Émile Zola and the Goncourt brothers, with the representation of ugliness. Indeed, the critic Gabriel Trarieux once claimed that 'La notion de beauté est absente [de l']épopée matérielle [de Zola]'.¹ The last novel of the cycle of the Rougon-Macquart novels tells the story of the doctor Pascal and his niece Clotilde, whom he raises in the countryside. The two fall in love, and faced with the repercussions of this scandalous love affair, Pascal finally sends Clotilde away. Pascal eventually dies of a heart attack before his niece can return to him. The novel ends with Clotilde holding Pascal's baby in her arms as she muses on the future of the Rougon-Macquart family. While this novel has been criticized for its lack of coherence, I argue that its very logic can be located in aesthetic elements that have often been neglected by critics.² Beauty's presence in the novel is, however, not without risk: the act of reifying beauty in the form of Clotilde's youthful body is associated with a desire for ornamentation that eventually leads to idolatry. In doing so, Pascal destroys the

¹ Gabriel Trarieux, 'Émile Zola, homme d'action', *Pages libres*, 18 October 1902. 'The notion of beauty is missing from Zola's material saga.' All translations my own unless otherwise stated.

² See Pascale Krumm, 'Le Docteur Pascal: un (dangereux) supplément? La problématique féminine dans le cycle zolien', *Cahiers naturalistes*, 73 (1999), 227–40 (p. 228).

legibility of Clotilde's body, and by extension, that of the naturalist text. Despite this danger, Zola ultimately embraces, through the figure of Clotilde, a form of seeing that adds to the detached gaze of the scientist the potential for feeling and sensing. In this manner, art and beauty take their rightful place alongside science as part of humanity's march towards progress.

The first scene of the novel puts forth the importance of beauty, as Clotilde meticulously draws the bouquet of roses placed in front of her while Pascal looks on. The process is initially described in utilitarian terms because the doctor uses these drawings for scientific recording purposes, and Clotilde is praised for her 'minutie, [une] exactitude de dessin et de couleur extraordinaire',³ as she works in accordance with the rules of the naturalist paradigm by faithfully reproducing the reality she perceives. Pascal's satisfaction with the reproductions vanishes when he notices some 'pastels aussi étranges [...] toute une grappe de fleurs imaginaires, des fleurs de rêve, extravagantes et superbes'.⁴ In response to her uncle's question as to what exactly the drawing is meant to represent, Clotilde simply answers: 'Je n'en sais rien, c'est beau'.⁵ Clotilde thus embodies the possibility of a pure aesthetic experience separated from utility: beautiful art can become a true act of imagination, a liberation of the individual as she creates art that does not represent anything directly observable. This artistic creation exceeds reality, far from being inferior to it. On the other hand, Pascal's criticism of the drawing situates him as the figure of reason, and an opponent to Clotilde's pursuit of beauty. As he reads the newspapers and finds a surprising piece of news, he exclaims wryly: '— Ma parole! on inventerait les choses, qu'elles seraient moins belles'.⁶ For Pascal, invention is inferior to reality, which echoes Zola's own views:

L'imagination n'a plus d'emploi [...]. On part de ce point que la nature suffit; il faut l'accepter telle qu'elle est, sans la modifier ni la rogner en rien; elle est assez belle, assez grande, pour apporter avec elle un commencement, un milieu et une fin.⁷

While Zola states here the importance of not 'modifying' nature, this objective and detached gaze is complicated in this novel by Clotilde's view, which becomes incorporated into Zola's.

³ Émile Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1975), p. 56. 'She was able to reproduce both shapes and colours with extraordinary precision', Émile Zola, *Doctor Pascal*, trans. by Vladimir Kean (London: Elek Books, 1957), p. 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57. '[E]qually fantastic pastels [...] a cluster of imaginary flowers; dream flowers, extravagant and superb creations', *Doctor Pascal*, p. 10.

⁵ *Ibid.* '[M]y word! If one were to invent things, they would be less beautiful'.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55. 'If I were to try and invent news, it would be less interesting', *Doctor Pascal*, p. 8.

⁷ Émile Zola, 'Le naturalisme au théâtre', in *Le roman expérimental* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1971), pp. 139–73 (p. 149). 'The imagination no longer has a function [...]. We begin with the idea that nature is all we need; it is necessary to accept her as she is, without modifying her or diminishing her in any respect; she is sufficiently beautiful and great to provide a beginning, a middle, an end.' Émile Zola, 'Naturalism in the Theatre', in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, ed. by George J. Becker (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 197–229 (p. 207).

For the scientist, then, beauty is to be found in the victory of life in all its forms. As a healer, Pascal dreams of finding a way to gain control of heredity, and to create a race of healthy men and women. In his eyes, physical health is often synonymous with beauty: 'le docteur [...] était simplement venu chercher ce beau spectacle de santé.'⁸ A typical description of beauty in the novel emphasizes the fullness and richness of the previously diseased body now turned healthy: 'il semblait qu'elle eût pris de la chair, d'aplomb sur ses fortes jambes, les joues remplies, les cheveux abondants'.⁹ Pascal further confuses the aesthetic and utilitarian functions of beauty: when he views the healthy body as beautiful, it is because he believes the healthy body (especially female) is most likely to produce healthy offspring, and thereby achieve what he views as the ultimate goal of mankind: endless healthy generations of individuals.

These reductive ideas about the interchangeability of health and beauty are, however, countered in the novel, through the aesthetic education Pascal eventually receives. To use Edmund Burke's analysis, there is a difference between the removal of pain and positive pleasure;¹⁰ can the removal of the ugliness caused by disease be situated on the same plane as that of the beauty of health? Pascal's aesthetic education over the course of the novel suggests that the answer is no.

Using these criteria of beauty on himself leads Pascal to the conclusion that he is not beautiful, as he believes he will leave no children to the world: all he can leave are documents and papers. The scientist's quest for creating beautiful bodies has destroyed his own, but art comes to Pascal's rescue. Pascal turns to various engravings of the Bible for inspiration, and especially one that involves the King David and the young girl Abisaïg. Faced with the sterility of science and its very limitations, Pascal finds that the artistic representations of the pseudo-historical couple and these 'naïve' engravings of biblical material actually fulfill the dream that he envisions in reality for mankind: 'C'était toute cette poussée libre d'un peuple fort et vivace [...] ces hommes à la virilité jamais éteinte, ces femmes toujours fécondes'.¹¹ This aesthetic awakening leads Pascal to dream of recovering youth, which he comes to understand as the 'seule beauté',¹² a time in his life when he himself was healthy and beautiful. Pascal's aesthetic education begins when the scientist has to change his way of thinking.

In *Le roman expérimental*, Zola praises the fact that medicine, once considered by many to be an art, has begun its transformation into a full-blown science, yet his desire for the writer-artist to appropriate scientific discourse

⁸ Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, p. 95. 'The doctor [...] had come simply to feast his eyes on a picture of bucolic health', *Doctor Pascal*, p. 44.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 95. '[I]t seemed she had grown healthier; her legs seemed strong, her cheeks were full, and her hair lush and abundant'.

¹⁰ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 31.

¹¹ Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, p. 198. 'There was this astonishing, untrammelled growth of a strong and vital race [...] these men with their inexhaustible virility, women for ever fertile', *Doctor Pascal*, p. 132.

¹² *Ibid.* '[T]he essence of perfect beauty', *Doctor Pascal*, p. 133.

and ways of thinking does not preclude the potentially liberating effect of the scientist using art as source of inspiration.¹³ Friedrich Schiller has argued that art and science share fundamental similarities in that both are 'absolved from all positive constraint and from all conventions introduced by man; both rejoice in absolute immunity from human arbitrariness'.¹⁴ Neither can be reduced to an arbitrary social institution. The feeling of the artist and the reason of the scientist are thus joined together. The difference for Schiller is that what reason can accomplish is limited for it has no true will to action of its own: that has to come from feeling, which Zola embraces through Clotilde.

The strength of art is undeniable, here and elsewhere, as Zola uses visual works in his literary descriptions. The story of David and Abisaïg does indeed become reality as Clotilde and Pascal enjoy months of loving bliss, with Clotilde repeatedly being compared to the Sunamite maiden and Pascal acting as the master and king. The image reappears under Clotilde's pastel strokes as she attempts to make her own representation of the biblical scene, and it is here that Zola includes the only extended ekphrasis of the novel:

Vers ce temps, Clotilde s'amusa plusieurs jours à un grand pastel, où elle évoquait la scène tendre du vieux roi David et d'Abisaïg, la jeune Sunamite. Et c'était une évocation de rêve, une de ces compositions envolées où l'autre elle-même, la chimérique, mettait son goût du mystère. Sur un fond de fleurs jetées, des fleurs en pluie d'étoiles, d'un luxe barbare, le vieux roi se présentait de face, la main posée sur l'épaule nue d'Abisaïg; et l'enfant, très blanche, était nue jusqu'à la ceinture [...]. Il régnait, il s'appuyait en maître puissant et aimé, sur cette sujette élue entre toutes, si orgueilleuse d'avoir été choisie, si ravie de donner à son roi le sang réparateur de sa jeunesse. Toute sa nudité limpide et triomphante exprimait la sérénité de sa soumission, le don tranquille, absolu, qu'elle faisait de sa personne, devant le peuple assemblé, à la pleine lumière du jour. Et il était très grand, et elle était très pure, et il sortait d'eux comme un rayonnement d'astre.¹⁵

In this ekphrasis Zola weaves together divine beauty with the backdrop provided by the flowers to complement the beauty of both Clotilde and Pascal, woman

¹³ Émile Zola, *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*, trans. by Belle M. Sherman (New York: Haskell House, 1964), p. 2.

¹⁴ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: in a Series of Letters*, trans. and ed. by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 55.

¹⁵ Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, p. 228. 'At about this time, Clotilde had been busily occupied for some days with a large pastel, in which she evoked the scene of the idyll between the old king David and Abishag, the young Shunammite. It was the evocation of a dream, one of those inspired compositions into which her other self, fantastically imaginative, expressed its yearning towards the mystery. Against a background of flowers falling like a shower of stars luxuriantly barbarous, the old king was standing, full-face, with his hand on Abishag's bare shoulder, and the child, dazzlingly white, was naked to the waist [...]. He was the great lord, he, the powerful and beloved master, leaning on his subject, chosen and uplifted, so proud to be selected, so anxious to give the king the revivifying blood of her youth. Her limpid and triumphant nudity expressed the serenity of her submission, the tranquil, absolute surrender of her person, before the assembled populace, in the full light of day. He was the emblem of grandeur, she of purity, and both of them irradiated a sort of astral effulgence', *Doctor Pascal*, pp. 160–61.

and man, young and old in a true tour de force. Underlying these paragraphs is an elegantly lyrical language that can be traced to Clotilde herself.

As an artist, Clotilde can rival Zola. When Pascal notes that the flowers Clotilde draws are too beautiful, Clotilde answers with her own aesthetic theory: 'Je t'assure, c'est ainsi que je nous sens, que je nous vois, et c'est ainsi que nous sommes [...]. Tiens! regarde, si ce n'est pas la réalité pure.'¹⁶ Feeling, seeing and being become synonymous for Clotilde, who reproduces this experience in her drawing. Her aesthetic is not that of Zola the naturalist theoretician, focused on detached observation; instead, it points to a Zola who is capable of simultaneously embracing scientific rigor and feeling. Clotilde is then the figure who 'dares to be wise', to use Schiller's terms: a figure both gifted with reason and feeling, and thus able to find the truth in art.¹⁷ Though Clotilde's aesthetic cannot become the object of the novel, which would destroy its naturalist fabric, it is precisely by accepting Clotilde's vision, with its feelings and imagination, that Zola can write the ekphrasis above. The observer of the drawing cannot remain a coolly detached observer: he must accept the mystery of the representation and participate in it in order to appreciate its beauty. There is no need to fully embrace Clotilde's aesthetic, yet there has to be some suspension of the scientist's rigid desire for observable truth. Zola acknowledges the beauty of visual images, as he appropriates the artist Clotilde's feelings and transposes them into words.

Clotilde's role in Pascal's aesthetic education is also intimately linked to her own beauty. Her youthful attractiveness is highlighted through an opposition with that of the hemophiliac Charles, the son of Clotilde's cousin Maxime: 'sa beauté inquiétante avait une ombre de mort'.¹⁸ Charles is of a dying race, tainted by heredity, and indeed bleeds to death later in the novel. The child, who spends much of his time cutting out pictures of a king, reminds us of the engraving of the king that captivates Pascal. By juxtaposing this dying child's beauty to Clotilde's, Zola shows two completely different types of beings and implies a changing of the guard, between the child who is imbecilic and lifeless, the last member of a dying lineage, and the young girl about to turn woman, filled with the promise of love and the power of reason and imagination. The last of the 'kings', Charles, is then replaced by a female figure who is compared through the painting to the servant of the king. In this manner beauty is democratized, and displaced from the higher to the lower classes.

And yet, the relationship between Clotilde and Pascal, as inspired by the engraving of the young servant girl Abisaïg and the elderly King David, illustrates the dangers of the pursuit of another specific type of beauty. The idyllic relationship between the two begins to disintegrate because of Pascal's

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 229. 'I assure you that is how I feel and see us, how we really are [...]. You see, it is an exact likeness', *Doctor Pascal*, p. 161.

¹⁷ Schiller, p. 51.

¹⁸ Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, p. 104. '[T]here was the shadow of death over his uncanny and disquieting beauty', *Doctor Pascal*, p. 50.

expenses as he transforms Clotilde into a lavishly adorned beautiful body. The original gift of a beautiful corsage from Pascal to Clotilde is quickly followed by an endless barrage of ornaments: 'Ce furent, successivement, des bagues, des bracelets, un collier, un diadème mince [...]. Elle était comme une idole'.¹⁹ Here Clotilde has become entirely Pascal's object as he feasts on her beauty. Revealingly, the same townspeople who had turned a benevolently tolerant eye on the couple, even when suspecting their incestuous relationship, begin frowning upon this display of lavishness and idolatry. Pascal comes to regret the way he has brought public opprobrium upon Clotilde: 'Il la pervertissait, en faisait une idole, au milieu des huées du scandale'.²⁰

Idolatry is the act of worshipping idols, in other words, the worship of 'false' images or representations of God, the true object of worship. The concept of idolatry thus runs counter to Zola's naturalist project, which he claims to be the only 'true' representation: '[L]es naturalistes affirment qu'on ne saurait être moral en dehors du vrai'.²¹ Janet Beizer has noted that at the end of the novel, there is a figurative displacement of authorship from Pascal to Clotilde, such that when his documents are burned at the end and Clotilde is left with the genealogical tree, it is Clotilde who becomes the storyteller.²² The Rougon-Macquart then becomes 'her story'. One can go a step further and argue that, as Pascal achieves this process of idolization through his ornamentation of Clotilde, the body of Clotilde becomes an allegory for the naturalist text itself. The fact that Pascal's wish for ornaments ultimately leads to the demise of the couple reveals how, for Zola, the infusion of the naturalist text with embellishments (feelings of the author, judgments on characters, adding theatrical effects to the reality as it is observed) marks its destruction. As Rae Beth Gordon argues, 'there is reason to believe that decadent refinement of taste — for ornament in particular — leads logically to narcissism, perversion and madness'.²³ In the case of Pascal, these traits become entwined with this obsession for adorning Clotilde's body. Ornamentation is thus Pascal's great sin, and he is finally expunged from the text as punishment, even though he originally represents Zola's double. Clotilde is saved as her body, after it loses its adornments, comes to embody a different kind of naturalist text.

It is true that Clotilde's drawing, which divinized the couple and thus arguably constituted a form of idolatry, is treated kindly by the text. A few differences between the two cases can be noted, however. Though Pascal can appreciate the beauty of Clotilde's drawing, in the face of Clotilde's own beauty, idolization

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 221. 'He brought her, in succession, rings, bracelets, a necklace, a slender diadem [...] she was like an idol', *Doctor Pascal*, p. 154.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 293. '[H]e was perverting her by making her his idol.', *Doctor Pascal*, p. 213.

²¹ Zola, 'Théâtre', p. 152. '[T]he naturalists affirm that it is not possible to be moral outside the truth.', 'Naturalism in the Theatre', p. 209.

²² Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 173.

²³ Rae Beth Gordon, *Ornament, Fantasy and Desire in Nineteenth-century French Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 229.

leads to his wish to 'se dépouiller, ne rien garder de son argent, sa chair, sa vie'.²⁴ Pascal's desire for complete self-annihilation in the beautiful object of love is dangerous and antithetic to Zola's project, unlike Clotilde's aesthetic theory of feeling,²⁵ which Zola incorporates into his worldview. The former is a selfish desire to cut off the outside world to pursue one particular beauty; the second fosters the desire to create other objects of beauty. Clotilde's drawing suggests that artistic creation is a pathway for agency; Pascal's idolization of the object of beauty, however, turns her into a passive object within the relationship: idols, after all, are mute.

Pascal's aesthetic education was ultimately a failure: from one end of detachment and conflation of utility and beauty, he has moved to extreme ornamentation and devotion to one object of beauty. Strangely, Pascal's approach to beauty follows to some extent the chain of the quest for beauty that Diotima describes in Plato's *Symposium*, but inversely: in Diotima's theory, people are first drawn to the beauty of one body, before moving on to loving many bodies, and then understanding that beauty of souls was more important.²⁶ Afterwards, they turn to beauty in different kinds of knowledge and finally the production of beautiful thought and philosophy. For Pascal, there is an *a priori* 'scientific' thought on beauty and appreciation for the beauty of knowledge which then leads to the appreciation of multiple bodies before he finally settles on one particular body. This inversion of Diotima's paradigm constitutes a perversion that is ultimately punished.

The last chapter reaffirms the importance of beauty through the family tree. Though Pascal's scientific notes are ultimately destroyed, the genealogical tree remains. The word 'beauty' had been used earlier to describe the tree: 'Le pis était, pour la beauté de son Arbre, que ces gamins et ces gamines étaient si petits encore, qu'il ne pouvait les classer.'²⁷ For Pascal the beauty of the tree lies in its completion, as he hopes to classify all of the Rougon-Macquart descendants. Earlier he had explicitly articulated the idea of total knowledge as an ideal of beauty: 'N'est-ce pas beau, un pareil ensemble, un document si définitif et si total, où il n'y a pas un trou?'.²⁸ In the case of Clotilde, however, what inspires her awe is not the sense of completion or minutiae of the notes; it is precisely what is left unsaid, the mystery of the unidentified and unclassified descendants. Clotilde, with her 'leaky' head, asserts the importance of feeling and imagination as sources of beauty: the beautiful is what actually leaves room

²⁴ Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, p. 222. 'beggar himself, to keep nothing, to squander his money, his very flesh, his life', *Doctor Pascal*, pp. 154–55.

²⁵ Pascal's expunging from the text might also be linked to the problematic connotations of how the older man derives his strength from the younger woman.

²⁶ Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. by Christopher Gill and Desmond Lee (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), pp. 92–93.

²⁷ Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, p. 161. 'The worst of it, for the beauty of his tree, was that these boys and girls were so young he could not classify them.'

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 149. 'Isn't such a unit beautiful, this definitive and totalizing document without a single gap?'

for the imagination and, more importantly, hope.²⁹

Le Docteur Pascal thus allows Zola to express a more nuanced naturalist approach to the world surrounding him, as he critiques the detached scientific gaze. The novel shows that Zola is interested in other modes of seeing. A more accurate term for Clotilde would be that of witness. The witness sees, hears and experiences an event first hand, but the act of witnessing does not entail the erasure of the witness' own feelings and imagination: as the witness tries to recount the act to which she was witness, she tells a story that is inevitably tinged with her own subjectivity. In a letter of 1864 to his friend Antony Valabrègue, a young Émile Zola had written about his theory of screens: '[L]écran réaliste, c'est un simple verre à vitre, très mince, très clair [...]. Pourtant, si clair, si mince qu'il soit, il n'en a pas moins une couleur propre, une épaisseur quelconque, il teint les objets, il les réfracte tout comme un autre.'³⁰ Here, Zola acknowledges the impossibility of a perfect objectivity, as even the realist screen is tinted with its own colour. This also reminds us of Zola's claim that 'une œuvre d'art est un coin de la création vu à travers un tempérament'³¹ This 'temperament' emerges fully in *Le Docteur Pascal* in the form of Clotilde, who embodies the ability of feeling which counteracts the potentially stultifying effect of science and opens the door towards an appreciation of beauty. Beauty becomes an extension of the scientific endeavor.

Though naturalism is easily associated with ugliness, in *Le Docteur Pascal* beauty appears as a worthy component of the naturalist project. In many novels of the Rougon-Macquarts, Zola has dissected and analyzed the ugly body at length, but in this last novel, the need to penetrate its secrets takes a back seat to an affirmation of the redeeming power of beauty. As Clotilde's voice replaces Pascal's after his death, Zola expresses a different way of seeing, effacing ugliness and comprehending beauty. While beauty comes to be seen as potentially complementary to the scientist's pursuit, indeed, even an extension of it, it remains a potential threat as well. Pascal's reckless pursuit of beauty is ethically and aesthetically unacceptable, and Zola ultimately expunges this textual double from the text. In doing so, however, Zola is hardly relinquishing his own authorial mastery. After all, Clotilde bears the stamp of Pascal's work. Zola's authority remains mostly intact.

²⁹ Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, pp. 381–83.

³⁰ Émile Zola, 'Lettre à Antony Valabrègue, 18 août 1864', in *Lire le réalisme et le naturalisme*, ed. by Colette Becker (Paris: Dunod, 2000), p. 156. '[T]he realist screen is a simple pane of glass, very thin and very clear [...]. Nonetheless, as clear and thin as it is, it still has its own color, a certain thickness, as it dyes the objects, and refracts them like any other screen.'

³¹ Émile Zola, 'Mes haines, causeries littéraires et artistiques' in *Écrits sur l'art*, ed. by Jean-Pierre Leduc-Adine (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 44. 'a work of art is a corner of creation seen though a temperament'.