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Illness, Aesthetics, and Body Politics: Forging the Third Republic in Émile Zola's *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret*

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This article examines the political role of illness in Émile Zola's *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* (*The Sin of Father Mouret*, 1875) in articulating the difference between a religious and a secular body. Published in the early French Third Republic (1870–1940), this novel shows the Zolian body as the nexus upon which religious and republican discourses compete. Using Paul Ricœur's theory on Christianity's original sin, this article compares Mouret's sickness with physical evil and illustrates how Zola redeploys the traditional religious symbols of the heart, the blood, and the Word to the secular realm. It will show that original sin is a Christian myth inscribed on the body, and that Zola's reformulation of a core religious doctrine dismantles its supporting framework for the fledgling secular Third Republic. Through an exploration of Zola's attempt to forge a republican self, this article offers a new perspective on the nature of the Zolian body which merits further study under the field of Medical Humanities. Through the construction of the religious body, the essay also contributes to the wider critical discussion on mythology in Zola's work.



This article will re-examine Naturalism through a Medical Humanities framework by analysing the important role of illness in Émile Zola's novel *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* (1875). Tracking the eponymous priest's multiple transitions between a religious and secular identity, this essay proposes the body as the locus of competing religious and republican discourses in the early French Third Republic (1870–1940). Illness is a liminal state in the novel, through which it is possible to see the reification of religious and secular power, and the ebb and flow of both within the body. In isolating the body experiencing sickness, I suggest that Zola's novel presents a somatic nexus of national and political cross-currents. Politics are shown to be riven through the body and the rendering of illness becomes a generative epistemology from which Zola forges the possibility of a new republican self.

To understand the complexity of the Zolian body in *La Faute*, this essay treats it as an entity enmeshed within different matrices—the linguistic, the discursive, the mythological—which are overlapping categories interlocking with the body's materiality. The first section discusses why Mouret's illness should be understood as original sin and why this religious construct—a product of mythology for some—is an important element of his illness. The second section focuses on the text of *La Faute*, where I shall examine the mobility of Mouret's body between religious and secular states and Zola's reworking of the traditional religious symbols of the heart, blood, and the Word. Zola disassembles these concepts so that the body may be consciously rebuilt in the secular mode. This act of disarticulation would consign religion to the past for the new secular French Republic, a period which began only five years before the book's publication. Releasing the body from its religious shackles, for Zola, would institute a healthier constitution for the individual and the French nation.

The expansive role of illness in the novel means that it is not merely a bodily event for Zola. The conception of the body and illness within Critical Medical Humanities understands human health to be part of a web of 'political-economic formations, discourses and affects', and it sees the life and death of any organism as 'entangled' within 'bio-psycho-social-physical' events (Viney, Callard and Woods, 2015: 3). It is this 'entanglement' of the biological and the social through Mouret's illness that is of interest to us with *La Faute*, and which is recognisable in other Zola novels.

Mouret's illness is not described as a physical state whose symptoms signal an identifiable malady. Instead, it is marked by fever and delirium, and the words used to describe it are generic: we read that Mouret suffers an 'illness', feels 'weak' and suffers 'fatigue', and there are injunctions to be 'cured' and for 'health' and 'strength' to be restored in the future. Despite the lack of medical specificity, it is still useful for us to distinguish between illness and disease: both terms are often used interchangeably but

some scholars and health practitioners distinguish between them. Illness is considered the lived experience of poor health, whereas disease is the pathology designated by medical practitioners that views illness in terms of theories of disorder (Arthur Kleinman, as quoted by Thornber, 2020: n. 10, 5). While there are many instances of Mouret's suffering, I propose that his illness also signifies a state of disorder in the French national body. The clash between the religious and the secular constitutes a social destabilisation, such that it should be considered as having the disruptive effects of a disease sowing disorder. As Mouret's sickness is both an individual experience and of wider national consequence, this article will harness the full spectrum of meaning relating to illness and disease. Incorporating original sin into the Critical Medical Humanities framework, I suggest that Zola's interpretation of Mouret's body is constructed through a mytho-bio-political matrix.

As early as 1860, 15 years prior to the publication of *La Faute*, Zola had joined the republican campaigns against the Church, which supported the Second Empire. Zola considered the institution to be an oppressive force preventing the moral, intellectual and physical development of people, especially that of women (Becker, 1980: 13–14). The Third Republic aimed to break the network of power between throne and altar, to put an end to ancient beliefs and to concentrate on scientific progress. Yet despite the republican will, 1870s France resembled the Second Empire in its adherence to religion (Guermès, 1998: 16). Zola's support for the Third Republic could not have been needed more at the time of his writing *La Faute*. From its proclamation on 4 September 1870—five years before the publication of *La Faute*—the Third Republic struggled to make itself viable. The National Assembly, elected in February 1871, comprised 400 monarchists and only 150 republicans (Jean-Michel Gaillard, as quoted by Hawkins, 2005: 124). While monarchical and Catholic culture was regarded as synonymous with the nation's history, republicanism, in contrast, was seen as a threat because its democratic equalising and anti-clericalism threatened to sever France from its history (131). Before he was driven from power in May 1873, Adolphe Thiers (the conservative head of the provisional government during the Paris Commune) and the National Assembly were ready to reinstate a monarchy (Merriman, 2014: 38): he insisted that the strength of France was inseparable from 'a nation that believes' in God (248). This was supported by the subsequent Mac-Mahon administration, which quickly established the rule of moral order where the wealthy and privileged—in alliance with the Church—have both the right and duty to protect France from falling into anarchy. In response, the Church organised large-scale demonstrations to support the campaign for moral order (Harvey, 1979: 376–77).

If secular republicanism constituted a break from tradition, then the new Naturalist approach would effect that change on an aesthetic level. The first Naturalist texts

appeared in 1864–69 and the most significant novels did not appear until 1879–80 (Yves Chevrel, as quoted by Baguley, 1990: n. 39, 24), therefore *La Faute* appeared before the aesthetic had gained ground. Naturalism's method of fictional representation came out of a time which was powerfully dominated by the 'biological episteme' (60) when science, in the second half of the 19th century, was in the ascendancy. Corresponding with science's new focus on the human body, the Naturalist text was a 'drama of the material imagination' (202), where society and biology are entwined in the fate of a novel's characters. The forces running through the body in Naturalist texts were presented as pathological. The writers who were in favour of the Naturalist method positioned themselves as revolutionary. In aligning themselves with the scientific movement, it was identified with the future and characterised by a return to nature and reality; Romantic literature, which was idealistic, belonged to the past (67). Naturalism's stand against traditional principles in literature demanded an 'aesthetic gamble' (Pagès, 2013: 7) in its appeal for renewed forms of expression.¹

There was never an agreed definition of Naturalism between Zola and his small band of instigators of this new movement. The divergence in style between these writers would make it more accurate to speak of 'naturalisms' ('naturalismes') as those who practised it did so in their individual way (Becker and Dufief, 2018). Even so, at this early stage of his novelistic career, Zola's long-term focus on illness and the body as subjects through which it is possible to figure national regeneration is already crystallising in this novel. They would be continuous, twin themes through the remaining 15 volumes of the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, in which *La Faute* is the fifth volume. While Zola's early work had undoubtedly caused a moral panic with some vocal critics in its emphasis on the body, I suggest that *La Faute*, in its exploration of the clash between the religious and the secular, is a novel which aims to be consciously world-building in the early Third Republic.

When Zola was sketching out *La Faute* and its characters in the *dossier préparatoire* for the novel, he wrote that Mouret and Blanche (subsequently Albine in the novel, Mouret's Naturalist love interest) would be 'physiological studies'.² He added, defiantly, that 'fault is finished' (Émile Zola, as quoted by Gaillard, 1980: n. 18, 30).³ With this latter comment, Zola was pressing his republican agenda as it was a flat denial of the religious concept of sinfulness. Zola's renunciation of Mouret's original sin is, then, a contribution to forging the way ahead for the nation on republican terms. It is a break from tradition, as the monarchists and Catholics would see it, but it

¹ '... un pari esthétique'. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

² '... des études physiologiques'.

³ 'La faute est au bout'.

should be viewed as a radical new beginning instead of a dangerous turning away from the safety of convention. I hope to show that using Mouret's illness as the driver of change is a way to see the deeper and wider significance of Zola's preoccupation with illness in *La Faute* and his *Rougon-Macquart* cycle. Zola's reconstruction of myth is not innocent and evoking it in a literary text has 'a political function' (Ripoll, 1981: 18).⁴ The specific invocation of religious original sin in *La Faute*, published so early in the Third Republic, is a political statement from Zola and acts as a 'moral barometer' of significant intellectual and social change (Catani, 2013: 30).

I: Original Sin as Illness

The body of abbé Mouret is, I suggest, the living embodiment of early Third Republic politics as his illness harbours the clash between the religious and the secular. The nature of his sickness is very particular: in this essay it is treated as both a physical and a religious malady. By examining Mouret's illness through its physiological aspect, I will show that the vocabulary Zola uses can be transferred from the religious to the secular sphere. Mouret's illness particularly affects his heart and blood, and I will analyse Zola's secularising treatment of these parts of the body, which, as the novel reminds us, are fundamental religious symbols. To address the religious dimension of the illness, I will interpret it as Christianity's original sin and as a physical evil which appropriates the human constitution. I draw on the philosopher Paul Ricœur's analysis of original sin, which provides a framework with which it is possible to conceive how physical evil can transmute into secular illness in *La Faute*. By converting—thereby neutralising—Mouret's religious evil into illness, Zola is reclaiming the body for a secular Third Republic.

It is important that Mouret's illness is considered as both real and mythological in figuring the contemporaneous hostility between the Church and Republic. Sinfulness is a central focus of *La Faute*, and understanding Mouret's illness as sin goes to the heart of the enmity between the religious and the secular. Although Mouret is horrified that he has committed a sin with Albine, I will focus less on his actions than on the nature of sin as physical evil. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives two definitions of 'sin': 'actual sin' is committed through a person's actions but 'original sin' is a state of corruption or sinfulness. It is the second definition which is of interest, as it denotes Christianity's dominance over the human body. According to the biblical story of Genesis, original sin came from Adam and Eve as a consequence of the Fall and becomes inherent in all human beings. Considering how *mal* (evil) becomes *maladie* (illness)—or how original

⁴ '... une fonction politique.'

sin becomes sickness—is fundamental in perceiving the shift from the religious to the secular sphere. This would revoke the Church’s claim upon the human to allow the emergence of a newly cleansed republican body.

For believers, original sin is a tangible entity and not a theological abstraction. Scott Rae connects the entrance of sin into the world with disease and death, so sin itself—represented as disease—is an earthly reality (2006: 152). As Charles Taylor acknowledges, it is difficult to comprehend original sin in the modern world: ‘what was formerly sin is often now seen as sickness’ (as quoted by McDonough, 2012: 39). This article traces Zola’s attempt to place original sin within modernity, and his endeavour to dislodge it from a secular society. This essay’s focus on original sin defining the religious body sees Zola’s use of biblical narrative as more overtly political than previous scholarship has treated it. Earlier critics concentrated on other aspects of the Garden of Eden myth, such as the reflexivity of *La Faute* with its stories within stories (Minogue, 2017: xxv), le Paradou garden as a phantasm (Anfray, 2005: 53), the reconfiguration of Adam and Eve (56) and the irony, even sarcasm, in Zola’s repetition of the biblical story (Walker, 1959: 445).

While it is important to acknowledge Zola’s intertextuality in *La Faute*, I want to emphasise his active political use of the biblical account more than the retelling of it. Emphasising the literariness of the Garden of Eden, as previous critics have done, confines religion to the artistic realm. As the novel was published in the first years of the Third Republic, it is a text reacting to its time in charting the clash between Church and Republic. In the novel, Mouret’s rebirth into his alter ego Serge marks a shift from the religious to the secular and is a rallying cry for the new republic. My approach has more in common with Susan Harrow’s in aiming to broaden the meaning of the Zolian body and the representation of corporeality itself. While Harrow is interested in different states of the body (2010), I will focus on what it is that constitutes a body. My approach is close to Steven Wilson’s, who views disease as ‘a way of describing a relation between a body and language’ (2020: 5). While Wilson focuses on syphilis, which is a ‘real’ disease, my focus is on the instability and fluidity of Mouret’s illness as both ‘real’ and metaphorical, and even mythological. I contend that illness as metaphor-myth has as much significance on selfhood and identity as ‘real’ disease, which this article makes apparent by focusing on the manifestation of original sin as illness.

The novel’s previous critical engagement with sin has largely treated it as metaphorical or in general terms: the fault is intellectual (Guermès: 15), or the corruption lies in humanity’s remembrance of the Fall (Minogue, 1978: 226). Others interpret sin as an individual failing: Mouret’s sin is his effeminacy (Edwards, 2005–06: 80), or it lies in his renouncing his own humanity (Pasco, 1979: 240). The ‘fault’ (‘faute’) is even

Zola's own for the arbitrary selection of the biblical story (Grant, 1959: 288). To build on these analyses of sin as a fault of personal character or as a part of cultural memory, this article treats sin as an active religious marker of bodies. This will highlight the power and totalising effect of original sin and, for Zola, this must be made explicit in order to show that religious embodiment is irreconcilable with a secular republic.

II: The Word Made Flesh

This section offers a reading of *La Faute*, which will show Zola's transposition of the religious framework of sin to a secular context. We will see his challenging of the religious symbols of the heart, blood, and the Word, and the Church's appropriation of the human body. It is through the lens of abbé Mouret's illness that it is possible to identify the emergence of a secular body when the domination of religious power is diminished in the construction of the devout body.

At the beginning of the novel, Mouret is conducting Mass. Throughout the narration of this Catholic sacrament, Zola includes many instances in which he undermines religious custom. The ceremony itself commemorates Christ's crucifixion, which redeemed humanity from its sins:

The priest, after having made the sign of the cross on the prayer book, crossed himself, on the forehead, to mean that he would never blush from the divine word; on the mouth, to show that he was always ready to confess his faith; on his heart, to indicate that his heart belonged to God alone. (Émile Zola, [1875] 1998: 65–66)⁵

Mouret touches his forehead, his mouth, then his heart, and in doing so acknowledges that God is his only saviour from evil. Each of these three actions symbolises God's omnipotence and authority: the 'divine word' is God's and this is reflected in St John's Gospel, which proclaims 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1); touching the mouth indicates the importance of confessing sin, as only God can absolve the individual of sin; and touching the heart signifies that the individual belongs to God.

At this point in the novel, Mouret's world is one that has been wholly conceived by religion. 'Logos'—or the Word of God—represents divine reason and is the principle of order and knowledge in the universe for Christians (Leeming, 2005). Language itself—the Word—belongs to religion and is God Himself. In French, the Word (Le

⁵ 'Le prêtre, après avoir fait un signe de croix sur le Missel, s'était signé lui-même au front, pour dire qu'il ne rougirait jamais de la parole divine; sur la bouche, pour montrer qu'il était toujours prêt à confesser sa foi; sur son cœur, pour indiquer que son cœur appartenait à Dieu seul.'

Verbe) assumes an added dimension: not only is God language, but He is also its grammatical organising structure as the Word is also the verb. God as Verb, indicating the performance of an action or the existence of a state (*OED*), gives Him both agency and an essence: He is powerful in having the capability to act and is an entity, so He is a not a theological abstraction.

Sin itself is shown to be almost material when Mouret pours water onto each hand ‘in order to purify himself from the smallest marks of sin’ (66).⁶ The Protestant philosopher Paul Ricœur describes original sin as the ‘fault-line’ in man, where the juxtaposition of the soul and the body creates the possibility of moral evil (Simms, 2003: 15–16). The ‘curing’ of natural evil, for Ricœur, would seem to be an impossibility; he believes in the existence of original sin as it is formulated by Christianity, as a fault running through humans. This fracturing that occurs between the willing soul and the involuntary passions is due to the constitutional weakness of the soul and body as a totality. The fallible nature of this existence is, for Ricœur, what allows the possibility of moral evil. Fallibility, or the possibility of fault, of rupture between the soul and the passions, means the possibility of succumbing to the temptations which the passions present (Simms, 2003: 16). There is no possibility of breaking the vicious circle because ‘fault makes man guilty’ (Ricœur, 2004: 23), so the human constitution is inherently sinful according to Christianity.⁷

The construction of the religious body as fractured by fault may be compared to the Foucauldian body where power relations ‘invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs’ (Michel Foucault, as quoted by Mellamphy and Biswas Mellamphy: 2005, 38). In its pursuit of sovereignty of the body, the Church would ensure that ‘([u]ndisciplined) “flesh” becomes (disciplined) “word” and is made to “work” (discursively) or follow the script of its systemic inscription’ (40). The religious body as ‘word’ is significant as this intersects with God Himself as the ‘Word’, so Mouret’s body is literally permeated with God. In contrast, the Foucauldian ‘agrammatical’ body slips beyond the disciplinary apparatus (45), and this is what Zola seeks in his secular dismantling of the religious framework. Zola’s task in *La Faute* is to reorient language itself; to de-discipline the religious body in order to liberate the secular body.

After Mass has taken place, God’s grace falls on the congregation: ‘The great mystery of Redemption had just been repeated, the sacred Blood flowed once more’ (68).⁸ The conducting of Mass has moved the congregation from a state of sinfulness

⁶ ‘... afin de se purifier des moindres taches du péché.’

⁷ ‘... la faute fait l’homme coupable.’

⁸ ‘Le grand mystère de la Rédemption venait d’être renouvelé, le Sang adorable coulait une fois de plus.’

to one of redemption and ‘the sacred Blood’ (Christ’s sacrificial blood) is consequently worthy of being worshipped. Redemption is the saving from original sin (Parrinder, 1998: 203) and this has been enacted by the ingestion of the symbolic body and blood of Christ. At this point, it is important to consider the special theological significance of the heart and blood: the heart is the ‘principle both of virtues and vices [and] the special organ of the love of God’ (Cross and Livingstone, 1978: 623), while blood represents ‘the life principle, the soul, and rejuvenation’ (Cooper, 1996: 32). These are definitions by which Mouret lives his life as a priest, yet when he transforms into his alter ego Serge in *le Paradou*, these meanings are inverted within the secular Garden of Eden. Zola has shown that Catholics believe the ritual of Mass holds original sin as an indisputable fact and God’s grace is the only thing which can lead to redemption.

As a young seminarist, it is towards the spiritual life and its purity that Mouret aspired because he abhorred his sinful body. After a particularly febrile evening of despairing of his physical form, Mouret begins to feel ill when paying devotion to his beloved Virgin Mary. He feels ‘his temples shattering’ and heat spreading ‘from his heart to his brain’ (162).⁹ He simultaneously feels a surge of blood of such ferocity that ‘it scalded his veins’ (174).¹⁰ This scene marks the beginning of Mouret’s secularisation, and is the start of Zola’s emphasis on the symbolism of the heart. We realise that Mouret’s disequilibrium reaches beyond the purely physical as it also permeates his moral being: the heat between his heart and his brain institutes a confrontation between the religious and the secular for later exploration in the novel. By isolating the heart and blood in Mouret’s infirmity, Zola is making an explicit connection to important Christian symbols. The physical symptoms represent the beginning of Zola’s dismantling of the religious apparatus of sin.

After his collapse, Mouret is transported to *le Paradou* to convalesce. He has moved away from his religious environment to the overtly secular milieu of a Naturalist Eden. It holds particular textual significance as it is Part Two (of three) of the novel, so Mouret’s transformation is the central focus of the book. To emphasise the secularisation of Mouret, Albine (Zola’s secular Eve) calls him by the name of Serge, as if he were a different person. Albine’s healing role is vital for Mouret as she is presented as the child of Nature and her own physical vitality is the antithesis of Mouret’s sick body. From his bed, he speaks of Albine’s healing hand reaching inside him to remove the pain from his limbs, which is ‘a relief, a cure’ (194).¹¹ At this stage, Mouret’s body has a spectral and permeable quality that exhibits the waning power of the religious against the secular.

⁹ ‘... ses tempes éclataient’; ‘de son cœur à son cerveau’.

¹⁰ ‘... il lui brûlait les veines’.

¹¹ ‘... un soulagement, une guérison’.

Serge—as he has become—is seemingly unaware of the secular transition of his body when he describes the removal of his pain: ‘I was so ill! It’s as if they changed my body, removing everything, repairing me like a broken machine’ (196).¹² The experience of illness has the potential of being transformative for Serge: ‘I’m going to be completely new. It has really restored me, being ill’ (196).¹³

Mouret’s transformation into the secular Serge culminates when Albine enters the room and opens the curtains. The letting in of light has a dramatic physical effect on Mouret-Serge:

He got up, knelt on his bed, gasping, shaking, hands clasped against his chest to prevent his heart from bursting. In front of him was the immense sky, nothing but blue, an infinite blue; his suffering washed away ... He was born. He released little involuntary cries, drowned in light, tossed upon currents of hot air, feeling within himself a cascading flood of life. (200, 200–01)¹⁴

This is a scene of secular rebirth. Mouret is transmuted into Serge; the priest preoccupied and tainted with original sin is transformed into someone who is no longer affected by deathly, physical evil but is, instead, suffused with ‘life’. Zola, continuing to undermine Christian symbols, writes that Serge’s heart bursts with joy at the sight of the blue sky. Mouret’s allegiance to God through the symbol of the heart has been overtaken by Serge’s devotion to nature. Zola conceptually reframes the heart as the human organ that pumps blood around the body; the body itself is a newly privileged entity with life streaming through it. Serge’s rebirth is as if he were a newborn baby. In the secular context, this means that the ‘baby’ Serge would be the first in the human race to be born without original sin. He is Zola’s secular Adam as his suffering is ‘washed away’, leaving him with a ‘perfect’ body; one that is without physical evil or Ricœur’s deathly fault-line of original sin running through it. The supplanting of God and Heaven by nature seems to be final as Serge stares at the great sky, the ‘grand ciel’. As ‘ciel’ may be translated into English as either ‘sky’ or ‘Heaven’, Serge’s commitment is now only towards the natural sky. Zola’s free indirect discourse proclaims that Serge ‘had been born, he was cured’ (219), so his secular rebirth is synonymous with healing.¹⁵

¹² ‘... j’étais bien mal! Il me semblait qu’on me changeait le corps, qu’on m’enlevait tout, qu’on me raccommo-dait comme une mécanique cassée.’

¹³ ‘Je vais être tout neuf. Ça m’a joliment nettoyé, d’être malade.’

¹⁴ ‘Lui se leva, se mit à genoux sur son lit, suffoquant, défaillant, les mains serrées contre sa poitrine, pour empêcher son cœur de se briser. En face de lui, il avait le grand ciel, rien que du bleu, un infini bleu; il s’y lavait de la souffrance ... Il nais-sait. Il poussait de petits cris involontaires, noyé de clarté, battu par des vagues d’air chaud, sentant couler en lui tout un engouffrement de vie.’

¹⁵ ‘... il achevait de naître, il guérissait.’

Serge's newly revitalised body is the secular version of how Mouret had wanted his body to be when he was a young seminarist dreaming of a purely spiritual constitution without sin. Mouret had desired the eradication of his material body and for it to be filled with 'soul' (175–76).¹⁶ He would plead with the Virgin Mary to remove his material nature so he would be 'incapable of evil' (185).¹⁷ Now without sin, Serge's new constitution achieves his desire and simultaneously sheds religious signifiers.

The switch from the religious to the secular continues when the 'Word' is steadily decoupled from its association with God and becomes secularised. Crucially, however, it is not shorn of its twin importance as language and bodily essence. The 'Word' becomes the 'word' in Zola's secular Eden so that language and attitude towards the body are both inverted accordingly. The born-again Serge, with his revitalised, secular body, needs to relearn his grasp of language. Now that his body is no longer linked with God because it is no longer a religiously constructed body, the very act of speaking must be reassessed: 'he babbled ... unable to pronounce any words clearly' (209–10).¹⁸

Serge's journey from the religious to the secular realm continues along the related lines of language and body after he and Albine declare their love for one another. Zola writes that 'they lived by this *word* love ... They looked for it, used it in their sentences, said it ... for the sole joy of saying it' (273; my emphasis).¹⁹ Their fixation on 'love' eventually moves from the linguistic to the physical and initiates the start of a long sequence of searching for the tree of life in le Paradou, which corresponds to the biblical tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Zola is leading the reader to the mythical site of the origin of sin and death, where Eve ate fruit from the biblical tree. Serge and Albine's search is not only for the source of good and evil but for the *knowledge* of good and evil; it is the knowledge which is important for Zola if he is to successfully invalidate this religious framework.

Mouret is no longer in his religious environment where the Word links language and the body as God. His new secular environment similarly exerts its influence over him, as le Paradou has a bewitching power as an 'enchanted' garden (179; 'enchanté') that makes 'demands' (303; 'exigences'). The compulsion in these new surroundings, however, is to honour the physical nature of the body, which was not possible for Mouret in a religious milieu. There are still remnants of religious influence that affect Mouret–Serge: he and Albine avoid discussing their first kiss because of a fear they cannot explain; it reaches

¹⁶ '... s'emplir d'âme'.

¹⁷ '... incapable du mal'.

¹⁸ 'Il n'avait qu'un balbutiement ... ne prononçant aucun mot avec netteté'.

¹⁹ '... ils vécurent de ce mot aimer ... Ils le cherchaient, le ramenaient dans leurs phrases, le prononçaient ... pour la seule joie de le prononcer'.

such an intensity that it gives them a high fever (274).²⁰ This is compounded by le Paradou ‘chatting’ (274) to them in its pursuit of assimilating them into the secular garden.²¹

The struggle between the religious and the secular assertion of power is palpable in Serge and Albine’s bodies. Both speak of their discomfort as they would of an illness, wondering if a ‘remedy’ (‘remède’; 278) could be found. Their physical distress is not merely illness as it has religious connotations as ‘this unknown evil’ (278).²² It is unsurprising that changing from being a priest to a secular subject affects Serge more than Albine. The fever he suffers is so intense that he tells Albine ‘I would burn you’ (278) if he were to approach her.²³ In its strong encouragement to Serge to do exactly this, all the wildlife and natural features of le Paradou, Zola’s secular Eden, ‘talk out loud’ in their issuing in the ‘first days of the world’ (285).²⁴ This is Zola’s direct undermining of the Genesis narrative as an origin story to void the religious account of original sin being part of humanity’s heritage. It is why Mouret-Serge, still inhabiting his priestly identity, is so reluctant to listen to le Paradou’s ‘chatter’ and tries his utmost to prevent this secular force ‘entering him’ (285–86).²⁵

Mouret-Serge’s struggle to retain his religious identity crosses the divide between illness and mythological sin. He knows he is ill; Zola writes that Serge’s health needed to be re-established to the level of the ‘highest plenitude’ (290).²⁶ Such completeness of health, I suggest, requires the shedding of the corruption of original sin from his body, which is the presence of death. Serge’s holding onto his religious identity necessitates keeping Albine at a distance—the child of nature and life—as this defends against the ‘slow possession of his being’ (292).²⁷ In contrast, Albine is keen to find the tree of life as it would make them ‘healthier, more perfect’ (295).²⁸ ‘Health’ and ‘perfection’ for the couple would signify the expulsion of original sin.

Serge and Albine eventually find the tree of life and standing beneath it is sufficient to ‘cure’ their anxiety (299).²⁹ Zola maintains religion as a shadowy presence against secularism, as he writes that Serge’s and Albine’s physical distress was caused by their

²⁰ ‘... une grosse fièvre.’

²¹ ‘Le parc leur causait.’

²² ‘... ce mal inconnu.’

²³ ‘... je te brûlerais.’

²⁴ ‘... parlant tout haut ... des premiers jours du monde.’

²⁵ ‘... pour l’empêcher d’entrer chez lui.’

²⁶ ‘... une plénitude suprême.’

²⁷ ‘... cette lente possession de son être.’

²⁸ ‘... plus sains, plus parfaits.’

²⁹ ‘... ils se sentirent guéris de l’anxiété.’

‘not knowing the enemy they were resisting’ (299).³⁰ They are both receptive to the secular as they wait for the tree to ‘speak’ to them (299).³¹

The turning point of Serge’s recovery happens after he and Albine physically couple with one another: Albine represents the natural and the secular, and Serge is willing to be ‘absorbed into her being’ (300).³² Serge now considers Albine a replacement for God as he recognises her ‘grace’ (300), a gift usually bestowed only by God and which manifests in the salvation of sinners.³³ Redemption (or liberation from sin) is now within the power of le Paradou, Zola’s secular site of nature. Albine is Zola’s Naturalist Eve and she is an extension of le Paradou, and therefore nature. Serge’s shift away from religion accelerates as he looks to Albine to help him ‘know’ nature (300), whose ‘word’ still escapes him (300–01).³⁴

The secular garden of le Paradou makes more explicit demands of Serge and Albine as it ‘wanted the ‘fault’ (301), which signifies the seam of original sin that arises from Adam and Eve’s loss of innocence.³⁵ Within the biblical narrative, the ‘fault’ has negative connotations and Zola is actively steering the reader to this very concept in order to dismantle it. The various natural features of le Paradou combine in constructing a secular language (their ‘Word’) by raising their ‘voices’, ranging from ‘whispers’ and ‘sighs’ to ‘grumbling’ (301).³⁶ As the voices become more distinct in their attempt to influence Serge and Albine, Zola describes this clamour as ‘a mysterious passion’ (302), which is reminiscent of the religious Passion or the suffering and death of Jesus.³⁷ It was through His death that humanity would be saved; this redemption will now be enacted by Zola’s natural garden.

Finally, Serge and Albine ‘heard’ (‘entendirent’; 303) the garden; the voices of le Paradou have triumphed. Serge goes on to ‘possess’ Albine and this act is acknowledged by le Paradou, and even by ‘the sky’ (303).³⁸ This is a notable moment as Zola’s use of the motif ‘le ciel’ suggests that Heaven itself has conceded to nature. Serge and Albine’s physical union allows them into the ‘eternity of life’ (303).³⁹ In their access to immortality, Zola compounds the transfer of power from religion to the secular. From this point, the

³⁰ ‘... sans savoir contre quel ennemi ils résistaient.’

³¹ ‘... ils attendaient ... que l’arbre leur parlât.’

³² ‘... daigne permettre que je disparaisse, que je m’absorbe dans ton être.’

³³ ‘... j’ai vu ta grâce.’

³⁴ ‘... connaître’; ‘le mot suprême m’échappe encore.’

³⁵ ‘... le jardin ... avait voulu la faute.’

³⁶ ‘... les voix’; ‘un long chuchotement’; ‘des soupirs’; ‘plainte’.

³⁷ ‘... toute une passion mystérieuse.’

³⁸ ‘Serge la posséda’; ‘le ciel lui-même.’

³⁹ ‘... l’éternité de la vie.’

secular overtakes the religious in Zola's text. Serge and Albine feel 'an absolute perfection in their being', and 'the joy of creation' makes them comparable to 'the very forces of the earth' (304).⁴⁰ This creation of a new beginning within secular nature has been transposed from the Genesis narrative, where the beginning is brought into existence by God. The 'perfection' they experience in their 'being' can be regarded as the elimination of the seam of physical evil from their constitutions. Serge perceives his newly perfect body as being 'cured', and the exchange of power between the religious and the secular is once again emphasised when he acknowledges that Albine has 'given him her health' (305).⁴¹ They both undergo a fullness of being or 'plenitude' ('Une plénitude'; 305), which one could consider a wholeness that would only be possible without the tarnish of original sin. Serge's new-found health, his 'feeling complete' (305), is a secular process and is reinforced by 'the courage of his heart' (305), hitherto a core religious symbol.⁴²

Serge's idyllic time with Albine in the secular Eden ends abruptly when they discover a gaping hole in the perimeter wall surrounding le Paradou. He acknowledges that he may have committed a sin with Albine as he is freshly exposed to the outside world:

He fell down, felt the three strikes of the Angelus on his nape echoing to his heart. The bell rang with a louder voice ... It evoked his past life, his devout childhood, his elation in the seminary, his first services of Mass, ... this church voice, which rang endlessly in his ears. (311)⁴³

Serge's former life comes flooding back upon hearing the church's bell. Christianity reasserts its grip on him as the tolling bell strikes him 'to his heart'. Hearing the 'voice' of both the clock and the church, it is almost inevitable that he will hear God's voice and believe again in the Word of God. The ringing of the Angelus bell observes the Incarnation of Jesus and Serge's secular embodiment is at risk of being replaced by Mouret's religious constitution.

After leaving le Paradou, it is the memory of having been Serge that is tortuous to Mouret when Albine tries to persuade him to return: 'each word from Albine called to him: his heart went to her, all his blood rose up in him' (370).⁴⁴ This is a supreme fight between religion and secularism through the contested symbols of the Word, the heart,

⁴⁰ '... une perfection absolue de leur être'; 'La joie de la création'; 'les égalait aux ... forces mêmes de la terre'.

⁴¹ 'Vois, je suis guéri'; 'tu m'as donné toute ta santé'.

⁴² '... il se sentait complet'; 'le courage de son cœur'.

⁴³ 'Il se prosternait, il sentait les trois coups de l'Angelus lui passer sur la nuque, lui retentir jusqu'au cœur. La cloche prenait une voix plus haute ... Elle évoquait toute sa vie passée, son enfance pieuse, ses joies du séminaire, ses premières messes ... cette voix de l'église, qui sans cesse s'était élevée à ses oreilles'.

⁴⁴ '... chaque mot d'Albine l'appelait: son cœur allait vers elle, tout son sang se soulevait'.

and the blood. For Mouret, trying to resist Albine becomes a battle of discourses as he says to her '[i]t's war between us, secular, implacable' (382).⁴⁵ Albine compares Mouret's fleshless, dematerialised appearance to that of a ghost (372), indicative of the spectral power of religion reasserting its grip on him.⁴⁶

For three weeks, Mouret's blood courses through his body after falling ill again. Once more, his body is 'cleaned [and] renewed' ('nettoyé, renouvelé'; 392), and in his delirium he thinks he hears 'workers's hammers riveting his bones' (392).⁴⁷ Mouret is reborn a second time into a secular body. Zola impels the necessity of consciously building the secular human when Mouret is defiant about turning his back on religion. In his hallucinatory state, 'hammers of evil' (398) beat at his temples.⁴⁸ We can imagine these religious hammers as being those of the workers building the Sacré-Cœur basilica, whose first stone was laid in the year of *La Faute*'s publication. The monument was built through the alliance of monarchists and ultramontane Catholics, and was a part of the larger 1870s political project of 'moral order'. Its construction would restore the spiritual union of France with God which had been broken by the French Revolution (Jonas, 1993: 489).

Mouret's defiance against the Church peaks in his desire to inhabit a secular body: 'No, he no longer believed in the divinity of Jesus, he no longer believed in the Holy Trinity, he only believed in himself, in his muscles, in the appetites of his organs. He wanted to live. He had the need to be a man' (398–99).⁴⁹ This emphasis on the materiality of the human body, on its constituent parts, and Zola's repetition of 'belief' in the body establishes it as something of immanent value and truth-bearing, which is equal to the belief in divinity for Christians. This insistence on the body as the wellspring of vitality and potential concurs with the constant republican refrain of remaking France after the Franco-Prussian War in the 1870s, and is crystallised in Léon Gambetta's speech of 26 June 1871: 'It is a question of remaking the blood, the bones, the bone marrow of France' (Reffait, 2006: 43).⁵⁰

Despite Mouret's brief rebellion, his transition to a secular life cannot be completed: 'I have incense even in the smallest crease of my organs. It is this embalming that creates my serenity, the quiet death of my flesh, the peace that I savour in not living' (422).⁵¹

⁴⁵ 'C'est la guerre entre nous, séculaire, implacable'.

⁴⁶ '... la vue du fantôme sombre de son amour'.

⁴⁷ '... les marteaux des ouvriers reclouant ses os'.

⁴⁸ '... les marteaux du mal'.

⁴⁹ 'Non, il ne croyait plus à la divinité de Jésus, il ne croyait plus à la sainte Trinité, il ne croyait qu'à lui, qu'à ses muscles, qu'aux appétits de ses organes. Il voulait vivre. Il avait le besoin d'être un homme'.

⁵⁰ 'Il s'agit de refaire le sang, les os, la moelle de la France'.

⁵¹ 'J'ai de l'encens jusque dans le dernier pli de mes organes. C'est cet embaumement qui fait ma sérénité, la mort tranquille de ma chair, la paix que je goûte à ne pas vivre'.

The Church finally reclaims Mouret through his body; his description of himself as 'embalmed' suggests he is no better than a corpse: a lifeless body that is in no condition to be a productive part of a modern secular republic.

Conclusion

This article brings together French literary studies, religion, and the Medical Humanities to provide a new framework with which to analyse Zola's novel *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret*. Illness, as a state of physical disorder, is the condition that reveals the fragile passage from the religious to the secular body, which is a microcosm of the power struggle between the Church and the secular Third Republic. The alignment of Mouret's illness with original sin is necessary in order to witness the 'de-disciplining' of the religious body and the dismantling of Catholic frameworks to create a newly forged republican body. Mouret's episodic instances of illness show that the exchange of power between the religious and the secular is not straightforward: it is a tenuous oscillation that requires a conscious remodelling of the body, of language and, therefore, of identity and subjectivity. As the Medical Humanities framework shows, Mouret's body is 'entangled' within the political, biological, and the psychological: these are discursive forces acting upon him in the same way as Zola's Naturalist concept of the 'milieu' acts as a force on the individual throughout his *Rougon-Macquart* novels. The potential erasure of original sin in *La Faute* constitutes a secular political manifesto for the Third Republic reader, who is conscious of the struggle between the Church and the new administration. The novel's use of illness as political marker offers a way to articulate the Zolian body and the society in which it resides. Through illness, it is possible to see society's fluctuating discourses acting on the body, shaping and reshaping subjectivity and identity. Regarding the 'entanglement' of illness and the body with all aspects of the social and cultural sphere, a Medical Humanities approach could be further explored in Zola's other novels. This would be especially beneficial in the *Rougon-Macquart* novels, where illness is a distinct thread running through the cycle. Finally, Zola's focus on religious myth as being inscribed on the body also provides a new perspective for the critical debate on mythology in his novels.

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