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# REVIEWS

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Kristof H. Haavik. *In Mortal Combat: The Conflict of Life and Death in Zola's Rougon-Macquart*. Birmingham, AL: Summa, 2000. 178p.

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Kristof Haavik's thesis may be stated simply: contrary to what many critics allege, life and death in Émile Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* cycle are not mutually dependent but rather violently opposing forces, and this epic struggle is the central, unifying thread of the series. Although Haavik draws from various works of Zola, including those extraneous to the *Rougon-Macquart*, six novels form the basis for his thesis: *La Fortune des Rougon*, *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret*, *L'Assommoir*, *Une Page d'amour*, *Germinal*, and *Le Docteur Pascal*. However, using *L'Assommoir* and *Germinal* to buttress his argument is not conducive to subtlety, and Haavik would have been well advised to concentrate on those *Rougon-Macquart* novels in which the battle between life and death is not so obvious. He has produced a work that is little more than a catalog of events and themes that hit even a casual reader in the face. Moreover, in Haavik's discussions of both *L'Assommoir* and *Germinal*, water predominates as the theme of the chapter.

Haavik, like many critics of Zola, suffers from the fact that Zola, a writer of enormous power, clubs his reader over the head with symbolism and with echoes of mythology both religious and secular. The fact that Haavik's book consists primarily of statements of the obvious is occasioned by the fact that Zola is not a subtle writer, and saying anything about him that he does not himself make abundantly clear to the reader is a very difficult task. For instance, Haavik goes to great lengths to present the visit to the Louvre as a *mise en abyme*; this would be obvious to anyone with any training in literary criticism. René Clément felt that the visit was important enough to include it in his film *Gervaise*, despite the fact that so much of the novel had to be omitted from the film. That said, Haavik has produced a readable book, free of jargon and very useful to students, both graduate and undergraduate. I doubt that seasoned scholars of literature will find anything new or startling in what is essentially a catalog of themes and images.

Haavik's "Introduction" offers an overview of scientific theories that permeated intellectual life in 19th-century France and underpinned Zola's depictions of what is perhaps literature's most famous dysfunctional family. For Zola, designated a

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“militant agnostic” by Haavik, a term whose meaning is unclear, traditional religion was replaced by science, which, in the end, proved to be as much of a deterrent to personal fulfillment and happiness as had been the Church. He seemed to have been convinced that biology, particularly what we would call one’s genetic code, is destiny.

In 2001, at AIZEN’s Tenth International Conference: Émile Zola and Naturalism, Haavik presented a paper, “Zola and Teilhard de Chardin: Unexpected Parallels.” So we may assume that Haavik is conversant with some aspects of the Catholic religion. This is not so obvious in *In Mortal Combat*. In the chapter devoted to *La Faute de l’abbé Mouret*, particular care must be taken by the critic because of Zola’s virulent bias against the Catholic Church, a bias whose foundation is ignorance of everything Catholic except the most basic, and largely misunderstood, fundamentals. Haavik’s claim, if indeed it is his and not that of Zola, that Albine’s suicide is not her fault but rather that of a Church requiring clerical celibacy is nonsense. Authors who wish to rail against Rome, and critics who wish to defend them, need to know what they are talking about. In this novel and in this chapter, Zola and Haavik respectively do not measure up to the task. Furthermore, there are religious, particularly Augustinian, elements in the series, elements which seem to fly over Haavik’s head: the abundance and importance of gardens, noted but not discussed in any religious sense as the very locus of the beginning of life in the Judaeo-Christian tradition; and the opening of the whole series with a theft of pears from a garden in *La Fortune des Rougon*. In his chapter on *L’Assommoir*, with its insistence on water as an engine of death, Haavik refers to Eulalie Bijard as a “saint” and a “martyr,” while missing the fact that Saint Eulalie is the patroness of sailors. He instead links her name with alcohol.

Of all the novels chosen for this study, *Une Page d’amour* fits the least well into Haavik’s book. In fact, the novel receives cursory treatment, only tangentially involving the themes of life and death and their combat. One may wonder why it was chosen rather than, say, *Nana* in which the daughter of Gervaise and Coupeau dies a horrible disfiguring death and her identity as a *gamine vicieuse* is affirmed. Like Étienne and Catherine in *Germinal*, Nana also lives under a death threat that stretches far back into the past, begun in *L’Assommoir*. Of the novels singled out by Haavik, *Germinal* is the one in which the struggle to survive is most pronounced and his central thesis has the least need to be spelled out.

Haavik’s strongest chapter is the last, “*Le Docteur Pascal: The Triumph of Life*,” in which his central argument is clearly and lucidly presented. As he demonstrates, the victory that lies at the center of *Pascal* is not merely that of life but of the life

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of the spirit; light and heavenly bodies, especially stars, abound. But as is rather often the case in this work, Haavik misses a chance to point out the significance of a name, in this case “Pascal.” The decision by a designated “militant agnostic” to evoke the Paschal mystery in the closing novel of the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle cannot be fortuitous; in a discussion of the triumph of life over death, this is a singularly serious omission. ✱