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Pace and Space in Naturalist and Realist  
Novel: the case of *Germinal*

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**Abstract** – This study examines the temporal and spatial qualities associated with realist and naturalist novels in general and with Émile Zola's *Germinal* in particular. It is based on the assumption that the spatial-temporal qualities of both realist and naturalist genres are fundamentally determined by the pragmatic aspects of literary realism and naturalism, as outlined by early realist thinkers and writers such as Guy de Maupassant, George Eliot, Gustav Flaubert, the de Goncourt brothers, Henry James, Émile Zola, and others. The study aims to provide an insight into spatial-temporal qualities and the ways in which they contribute to the genre's distinctive style and impact. By examining these qualities in detail, the paper sheds light on the vital role that naturalist novels play in reflecting and shaping our understanding of the world. The study uses Émile Zola's *Germinal* (1885) as a primary referential framework to exemplify the theoretical findings.

**Keywords** – Realism; Naturalism; *Germinal*; Novel; Émile Zola.

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# Pace and Space in Naturalist and Realist Novel: the case of *Germinal*

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## 1. Early Demarcations of Realism and Naturalism

It is a matter of fact that the pre-theoretical insights into realism and naturalism are as old as the phenomena of realist and naturalist novels themselves. These insights are primarily governed by the proposed purposes of realist and naturalist novels as articulated by early thinkers and writers in these fields. Not surprisingly, they vary in many ways regarding the thinking of their originators; however, at the same time, they display essential similarities. Let us now examine to what extent these pre-theoretical insights help us uncover the main structural and narrative preconditions based on the relationship between the theoretical and practical aspects present in the naturalist discussions regarding the spatial-temporal layout of naturalist novels.

## 2. Émile Zola's Experiments

Émile Zola, in his seminal manifesto *Le Roman Expérimental* (1880), compares a naturalistic novelist to an experimental doctor. He suggests that they use similar strategies to achieve their goals in the examination of human bodies (doctors) and souls (novelists): "Now, to return to the novel, we can easily see that the novelist is equally an observer and an experimentalist. The observer in him gives the facts as he has observed them, suggests the point of departure, displays the solid earth on which his characters are to tread and the phenomena to develop" (*The Experimental Novel* 8). Then, according to Zola, "the experimentalist appears and introduces an experiment, that is to say, sets his characters going in a certain story so as to show that the succession of facts will be such as the requirements of the determinism of the phenomena under examination call for" (8).

In the above quotation, Zola considers fictional narratives direct counterparts of real life, as a space in which experiments (about real people and their lives) can be (and must be) conducted. At the same time, it should be admitted, his description of the narrative setting is to an extent in concord with the view of the notion provided by modern narrative theory.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the causality of composed events required by the theory as one of the most important qualities of narrative is in Zola's view related purely to the "phenomenon under examination". This general narrative causality leads us to the very structure of a naturalist narrative. The question then arises: "Does the specific determinism of the phenomena under naturalistic examination influence the structure of the novel, and if so, to what extent?" Regarding the role of a naturalistic novel, Zola claims that the leading characteristic of the naturalist novel is the exact reproduction of life. Therefore, if we want to deliver this exact reproduction, "we start, indeed, from the true facts, which are our indestructible basis; but to show the mechanism of these facts it is necessary for us to produce and direct the phenomena," and our main aim is to "modify nature, without departing from nature" (*The Experimental Novel* 11).

<sup>1</sup> See especially Ronen; Zoran.

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As can be seen, narrative, according to Zola, is determined purely by the method and the purpose of the respective experiment conducted. In other words, the French writer not being a theoretician of narrative, leaves the representative essence and therefore that of possible reference of narrative untouched. On the other hand, Zola as an author cannot discuss the naturalistic novel without mentioning the stylistic devices available to naturalistic novelists: “We are actually rotten with lyricism; we are very much mistaken when we think that the characteristic of a good style is a sublime confusion with just a dash of madness added; in reality, the excellence of a style depends upon its logic and clearness” (*The Experimental Novel* 28).

Not surprisingly, the style of the naturalistic novel, like the narrative itself, is fully determined by the method and the purpose of the conducted experiment. Therefore, the question of method and the question of rhetoric are distinct from each other:

And by naturalism, I say again, is meant the experimental method, the introduction of observation and experiment into literature. Rhetoric, for the moment, has no place here. Let us first fix upon the method, on which there should be agreement, and after that accept all the different styles in letters which may be produced, looking upon them as the expressions of the literary temperament of the writers. (*The Experimental Novel* 48)

As witnessed, for Zola, narrative primarily represents a vehicle and a space for conducting his human experiments; yet, narrative as such stays aside from his theoretical attention. However, it will be seen that other thinkers of this initial phase of thinking about the phenomenon of the naturalist novel, in their various views of the novel and their focus on various aspects of it, are more aware of the representative dimension of fictional narrative.

### 3. Guy de Maupassant's Illusion

Guy de Maupassant, when describing the idea of “the realist or naturalist school,” claims that its members “sought to show as the truth, nothing but the truth and the whole truth” (Maupassant). Nevertheless, coming from a sceptical position regarding the possibility of one shared truth for all people, he asserts that “each of us, then, has simply his own illusion of the world – poetical, sentimental, cheerful, melancholy, foul, or gloomy, according to his nature. And the writer has no other mission than faithfully to reproduce this illusion, with all the elaborations of art which he may have learnt and have at his command,” and defines that “all the great artists are those who can make other men see their own particular illusion” (Maupassant). Due to the impossibility of the human realization of the truth, the novelist provides the reader with an illusion that he disguises as the truth. Therefore, de Maupassant's focus, resigning on the possible description of reality, shifts to the process of literary aesthetic communication. “The novelist who transforms the constant, brutal, disagreeable truth to make of it an exceptional and seductive adventure must, without exaggerated care for verisimilitude, manipulate happenings according to his wishes, prepare and arrange them to please, move, or touch his readership”, since the plan of his novel is “merely a series of ingenious combinations leading adroitly to the dénouement” (Maupassant).

As can be noticed here, the representational essence of the narrative is emphasized to the extent that the representation itself becomes the focus of reasoning. De Maupassant claims that for the artist “to achieve the effects he aims at – that is to say, the sense of simple reality, and to point the artistic lesson he endeavours to draw from it – that is to say, a revelation of what his contemporary man is before his very eyes, he must bring forward no facts that are not irrefragable and invariable,” and connects this achieved effect to a special kind of truth: “Truth” in such work “consists in producing a complete illusion by following the common

logic of facts and not by transcribing them pell-mell, as they succeed each other. Whence I conclude that the higher order of Realists should rather call themselves Illusionists” (Maupassant). Clearly, the narrative here does not represent a space for conducting experiments that can teach us about the real state of affairs. On the contrary, it embodies a tool for creating an illusion – a substitution for reality. Despite the antagonistic views of Zola and de Maupassant, the phenomenon of narrative plays a crucial role in both concepts. Yet in the case of the latter thinker, it must be admitted that he tells us a bit more about the phenomenon itself when he states that “to do the true consists therefore of giving the complete illusion of the true,<sup>2</sup> following the ordinary logic of facts,<sup>3</sup> and not in servilely transcribing them in the confusion of their successive appearance,” and concludes from this that “the talented realists ought rather to call themselves illusionists” (Maupassant).<sup>4</sup> Maupassant’s essential claim connects his view with both ancient and modern perspectives on fictional narratives, combining a traditional view of narrative as a rigidly built structure with a semiotic view of narrative as a form of representation.

#### 4. Henry James’s “Air of Reality”

As we have seen, for de Maupassant, the notion of truth was a starting point on his path to the key concept of illusion. Nevertheless, for Henry James, whose early discussions of realism are associated with the notion of “effect of reality,” this illusion is intended to compete with reality itself. “It is still expected, though perhaps people are ashamed to say it, that a production which is after all only a ‘make believe’ (for what else is a ‘story?’) shall be in some degree apologetic – shall renounce the pretension of attempting really to compete with life. This, of course, any sensible wide-awake story declines to do, for it quickly perceives that the tolerance granted to it on such a condition is only an attempt to stifle it, disguised in the form of generosity;” on the contrary, the purpose of the novel is seen somewhere else: “The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does compete with life” (James). The powerfulness of the “air of reality” to compete with life, according to James, depends on the novel imitating reality: “The characters, the situation, which strike one as real will be those that touch and interest one most;” however, at the same time he admits that “the measure of reality is very difficult to fix”.

#### 5. Other Suggestions

The true representation of reality embodies one of the most valid commonly shared axioms of the early thought of narrative. In this respect, George Eliot calls for “faithful representing of commonplace things” (Eliot), Edmund Duranty considers “truthfulness, as the distinguishing features of realism” (qtd. in Grant 3), Georg Henry Lewes believed that “literature is the expression of the form and order of human life” (46) and William Sharp defines realism as such “as the science of exact presentment of many complexities, abstract and concrete, in one

<sup>2</sup> As can be detected here, de Maupassant both goes against the views of truth held by other early thinkers (see especially Henry James) and anticipates future constructivist views of reality (see Barthes).

<sup>3</sup> This “ordinary logic of facts” binds narratives to worlds and determines their coherence and comprehensibility, as claimed by Aristotle in his definition of tragedy. It also allows us to analyze these narratives as stories, as claimed by Tzvetan Todorov with his “logic of actions.”

<sup>4</sup> In a more modern context, Alison Byerly asserts that “realism is a tool that serves to reflect reality and create a substitute for it, providing a strong impression of totality. It can function as either a powerful diagnostic tool or as a placebo” (2).

truthful, because absolutely reasonable and apparently inevitable, synthesis” (qtd. in Graham 56).

Nevertheless, for the purpose of this study, let us let aside the complex analysis of the relationship between realist and naturalist novels, truth, and truthfulness, and instead focus on the realist and naturalist narrative. So far, we have encountered more or less random notes referring to the narrative and its construction; however, I believe that some of these observations are implicit and can be inferred from the general statements presented. In this respect, the most significant idea is that naturalist literature serves as an illusion of or a substitute for reality. This substitution of reality with fiction imposes substantial conditions on the structure of fiction. Specifically, Zola’s work prompts Arthur Symons to make the following judgment: “And so powerful is his [Zola’s] imagination that he has created a whole world which has no existence anywhere but in his own brain, and he has placed there imaginary beings, so much more logical than life, in the midst of surroundings which are themselves so real as to lend almost a semblance of reality to the *embodied formulas who inhabit them*” (Symons). So, what is the specificity of Zola’s narrative built that enables him to design a fictional world that is so close to the real world that can be considered its substitution?

## 6. Modern View of Realism

Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) states that “the concept of realistic particularity in literature is itself somewhat too general to be capable of concrete demonstration” and claims that “for such demonstration to be possible the relationship of realistic particularity to some specific aspects of narrative technique must first be established.” If so, then “two such aspects suggest themselves as of special importance in the novel – characterisation, and presentation of background: the novel is surely distinguished from other genres and from previous forms of fiction by the amount of attention in habitually accords both to the individualisation of its characters and to the detailed presentation of their environment” (Watt 94). These brief characteristics of the realist (and also naturalist) novel perfectly apply to the work of Zola in general and to his *Germinal* in particular, as we will see soon.

If a general narrative can provide us with a substitution of reality by representing it, then a fictional narrative that fulfils this purpose must either resemble this general narrative or be conventionally considered as resembling it. Undoubtedly, a detailed presentation of the environment and the individualization of characters are essential narrative qualities of the novel. James’s claim of “the characters, the situation, which strike one as real” (quoted above) seems to contain another dimension as well—the dimension of thematics. In this respect, naturalist worlds must not violate any actual world’s structure and must be maximally probable, with their fictional worlds free of ‘visible’ gaps. Additionally, they must be conveyed in a discourse that we perceive as accurate, exact, and objective, to remain concise for the reader. The discourse level of a naturalist novel is thus commonly described using terms such as detailed descriptions of settings and characters, a backgrounding narrator, and objectivity of narration (‘no-frills’ discourse).<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the very construction of narrative – i.e., narrative environment (space and time), character, and plot – of this kind of fictional narrative is associated with a strong logical structure. The specific causality of the naturalist novel is governed by proclaimed determinism. This determinism influences not only the inner logic of a naturalist novel but also the construction of its narrative structure: space, time, characters, and plots.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Morris; Byerly.

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The first general term that, I believe, is associated with the construction of a naturalist novel is consistence. This applies to all the previously mentioned parts of the narrative structure, including space and time. Consistency helps both the author and the reader to assemble the fictional world as a cohesive totality, where all parts are fully integrated. On a less general level, totality is also strongly connected to the arrangement of space in naturalist novels. The temporal qualities of the naturalist novel are linked to continuity. Generally speaking, the spatial-temporal structure of the naturalist novel is not 'visibly' complex. In this respect, realist and naturalist novels fit into the category of so-called natural narratives.<sup>6</sup>

As such, they exhibit a high degree of coherence, which is essential for their comprehension. This coherence is undoubtedly determined by the continuity and consistency of the novels' textual and narrative dimensions.

Whereas from a general literary perspective, naturalist novels are associated with specific qualities, in narrative studies, the natural narrative is often considered a realist narrative: for example, detailed descriptions of the setting, including specific locations and a focus on the physical environment, along with the use of a linear narrative structure where events unfold chronologically in time, are common characteristics of realist and naturalist novels. This suggests, I believe, that realist narratives share some qualities with naturalist novels. The purpose of this study is not to analyze these two types of narratives in detail; therefore, I will focus on the relationship between the natural and the naturalist. It is a matter of fact that Émile Zola, in *Le Roman Expérimental* defines naturalist literature as being "governed by science," with the embodiment of this science in the novel being the experiment. Let us now examine his experiment in practice.

### 7. *Germinal*

Based on what has been said about Zola and his purpose of writing naturalistic novels as experiments, let us now focus on how the structure of one of his novels is determined by this purpose. I believe that *Germinal* will best serve this goal. As noted, Zola refers to the structure of the naturalistic novel rather occasionally and without special depth. Nevertheless, I claim that it is possible to identify and reveal the determinism of the spatial-temporal (and also causal) qualities of his novel through the general experimental claim.

Both space and time in Zola's novels can be viewed as empirical, natural, and human. Empirical in the sense that the processes and objects described are equivalent to a possible witness's observation – processes and objects are proportionate, continuous, and consistent as if they were observed and described in the actual world. The main tool for temporal continuity is the temporal linearity of narration, and the main means for spatial coherence is description. Both time and space are also natural in the sense that they are fully determined by the natural setting of the fictional world, which seems, in this respect, to be a plausible equivalent to the settings of the actual world. Nevertheless, they are also essentially human – being populated and experienced but also determined by humans.

Nevertheless, before we examine the construction of time and space in Zola's novel in more detail, let us ask a fundamental question that connects theory with practice: is it possible to identify and reveal the ways in which Zola's general experimental claim determines the spatial-temporal (and also causal) qualities of particular novels?

I believe the answer to this question can be affirmative. However, my hypothesis, which is slightly broader than a simple 'yes', is: yes, it is possible, when we accept the specific dialectical design of the base ('story', 'surroundings') into which "the characters are moved" for the

<sup>6</sup> For an introduction to the discussions about natural and unnatural narratives, see especially Alber.

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experiment to be conducted. The impact on the spatial-temporal structure of the introduced world is thus fundamental.

Most generally, following the omnipresence of the dialectical principle in the entire motivic-thematic structure of the novel, the world presented is built upon two opposite axes: vertical and horizontal. These axes structure not only the spatial design of the world but also its temporal design, both being fundamentally tied to the human presence in the world. Both are significantly distorted by human activity, with a new center of fire and gravity (metaphorically and literally) – the coal mine. The change in verticality caused by the existence of this fundamental feature of the fictional world is, at the same time, the core of Zola's experimental effort.

From the very beginning, the classical natural (and human, or in human perception) verticality of the actual world (earth – sky) is not only replaced by the verticality of the high structures belonging to the mining industry (chimneys and engine towers) but also gains an essential dimension – down into the mine. The unnaturalness of this verticality is immediately apparent, being firmly tied to the distortion of human perception. The mine serves as an artificial dimension added to the fictional world of a primarily realistic design: vertical movement in this structure is possible only due to complex engine-lift devices, human movement remains horizontal and human-powered. This spatial distribution has crucial consequences for the temporal distribution of this dimension: while the pace of vertical movement is fully controlled by machines and their rhythm, horizontal movement is determined by the pace of human walking and physical labour.

Social determination. Whereas on the surface – in the colony, on roads, in fields, pubs, and the town – space and time are fully determined by the physical movements of their inhabitants, the space and time of manual workers are fully determined by their occupation. Predominantly, they walk the paths they walk and at the times they walk them because of the mine and its rhythm. Additionally, they inhabit spaces that exist due to the mine (the colony exists only because of the mine), and their inner pace is fully determined by their working shifts. This contrasts sharply with the private time and space of the wealthy, who, thanks to their distance from the mine and its poor, are influenced by the mine's rhythm only partially or not at all. This visible contrast represents one of the most powerful sources of dialectic tension in the semantic construction of the novel, as can be seen in following passages:

Shivering in the currents of air, he watched the movement of the cages, his ears deafened by the rumblings of the trams. Near the shaft the signal was working, a heavy-levered hammer drawn by a cord from below and allowed to strike against a block. One blow to stop, two to go down, three to go up; it was unceasing, like blows of a club dominating the tumult, accompanied by the clear sound of the bell; while the lander, directing the work, increased the noise still more by shouting orders to the engine-man through a trumpet. The cages in the middle of the clear space appeared and disappeared, were filled and emptied, without Étienne being at all able to understand the complicated proceeding.

...

Cécile questioned him about Jeanne and Lucie, his daughters. They were perfectly well, the first was always at her painting, while the other, the elder, was training her voice at the piano from morning till night. And there was a slight quiver in his voice, a disquiet which he concealed beneath bursts of gaiety. (*Germinal*)

But one can go even further beyond the shared spatial-temporality of the colony – to the biological space and time of its inhabitants. Their biological (in Zola's deterministic point of view) time of private emotional and physical needs is also governed by the dictatorship of the general space and time ruled by the mine and its 'life'.

Biological determination. It is not only the space and time of the world in the novel that are determined and distorted by the existence of the mine. Similar to the way in which the

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mine takes over the horizontal-vertical natural structure of the world, it also takes over its natural light-darkness structure, which is ultimately a result of the distortion of the natural temporal structure based on the never-ending pace of the mine and its engines. The natural 'light' structure is determined by the existence of the mine and its facilities: night darkness is replaced by fires (engines, coke ovens, and fires kept in some of the mine's facilities), whereas daylight is turned into the blackness of the mine's depths, with minor illumination from the miners' lamps. Of course, most of these distortions are embodied in the short time spent outside the mine and its power – during Sundays, holidays, and later the strike:

Sunday upset the hours for rising, even among the Maheus. While the father, after five o'clock, grew weary of his bed and dressed himself, the children lay in bed until nine. On this day Maheu went to smoke a pipe in the garden, and then came back to eat his bread and butter alone, while waiting. He thus passed the morning in a random manner; he mended the tub, which leaked; stuck up beneath the clock a portrait of the prince imperial which had been given to the little ones. However, the others came down one by one. Father Bonnemort had taken a chair outside, to sit in the sun, while the mother and Alzire had at once set about cooking. (*Germinal*)

Nevertheless, it must be stated that the impact of the mine's presence weakens in proportion to the 'distance/dependence' from it. While the miners, representing one pole of the scale, are impacted almost fully and unconditionally, the lives of its distant owners, the opposite pole of the scale, in 'normal' times are not determined by it at all. The higher one is in the hierarchy, the less they are determined by the mine. Therefore, the further from the mine, the less distorted the space and pace of life.

Until now, we have devoted a fair amount of our reasoning about the essential patterns of Zola's novel to the regularities that govern its global structure. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the world of the novel also contains crucial irregularities that distort these patterns. Let us briefly name some of them and describe their function in the global semantic structure of the novel. Distortions in the world of *Germinal* can be caused by a variety of reasons and to varying degrees allow the characters to withdraw from the dialectical regularities imposed by the existence of the mine and its influence. Moments of passion and intimacy represent temporary withdrawals from the system, while living secretly inside an old and inactive mine as an outlaw represents an absolute ex-communication from a society determined by the power of the living mine. This separation can be achieved only through an act of unthinkable sabotage, representing the ultimate possibility of liberation from the oppressive determinism. Nevertheless, these acts have a specific effect on our comprehension of the fictional world: they serve to amplify the dialectical essence of the experiment, making it "more logical than life".

To sum up, *Germinal*, although it seems to follow the author's theoretically explicated methodology prescribed for naturalist novels and the essential premises of the biological and social determination of its characters, represents a practical application of the experimental method to such an extent that it should not be regarded merely as an application of the theory, but rather as its complement. Zola's *Le Roman Expérimental* and *Germinal* together create a unique whole, and only through their combined power do they deliver essential insights into the phenomenon of the naturalist novel. As we have seen, the temporal and spatial qualities of *Germinal* play a crucial role not only in shaping the novel's setting but also, and more importantly, in defining the global meaning structure of its world. These qualities, therefore, represent an essential semantic principle of the novel.



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