A study of the literary theories and art criticism of Emile Zola and Joris-Karl Huysmans


Abstract

An examination is made in this dissertation, of the art criticism of Zola and Huysmans. Chapter One provides a biographical framework; this is based mainly on correspondence between Zola and Huysmans. Chapter Two contains an expose of Zola's literary theory, with especial reference to Le Roman experimental, and includes a discussion of realism and Naturalism making reference to the writings of Balzac, Flaubert and Goncourt. The particular characteristics of Zola's literary theory are pointed out: his insistence upon truth and the author's individuality; this is paralleled in his art criticism, as Chapter Four illustrates. Chapter Three examines Huysmans' literary theory with reference to his novels and the differences between Huysmans' Naturalism and Zola's. The increasing importance of the spiritual element, yet continued adherence to Naturalist practice is illustrated. Chapter Four begins with a description of the world of the arts in Paris when Zola wrote his "Salons". This is followed by an account of Zola's relationships with Independent painters of his time. Finally an examination of Zola's writings on art is made, and the formula by which he expressed his art theory is discussed: "Une ceuvre d'art est un coin de la creation vu a travers un temperament. The qualities Zola admired in a painter (and which reflected characteristics of his own writing) are observed: the vigour and solidity of Courbet, the sincerity of Manet and the Impressionists. It is further observed that the avant-garde realist painters appealed to a democratic sense in Zola, although his views on the technique of painting, essentially conservative, could not fully embrace the Impressionists' avant-garde technique. Chapter Five follows a similar pattern to the previous chapter and contains a discussion of Huysmans' writings on art, commenting on his acumen and objectivity as critic in appreciating the work of Impressionists, Cezanne, Gauguin and others. The increasing subjectivity, however, and preoccupation with spiritual rather than artistic matters parallels the development in his novel-writing, as illustrated in Chapter Three. In conclusion, an assessment is attempted of the critical writings on art of Zola and Huysmans.
1889 by Otto Brahm to present plays dealing with the new themes of naturalism in a naturalistic style with naturalistic staging. A parallel development occurred in the visual arts. Despite their claim to complete objectivity, the literary naturalists were handicapped by certain biases inherent in their deterministic theories. Though they faithfully reflected nature, it was always a nature “red in tooth and claw.”