The Public and the Private on the Construction of a Celebrity: The Case of Émile Zola

Célia VIEIRA & Inês GUERRA SANTOS

Instituto Universitário da Maia
CITEI/CIAC
Personal e-mail: cvieira@ismai.pt; iguerra@ismai.pt

THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF A CELEBRITY: THE CASE OF ÉMILE ZOLA

Abstract: In this article, it is intended to reflect about the concept of celebrity, mainly in the end of the XIX century, departing from Émile Zola. In this context, the main goals are both the understanding of the construction of the concept "celebrity", and how and if it may fit to a literary figure as Zola as a public person, based on the analysis of a specific medium, the letter, as a means of communication situated between the public and private spheres. We propose to analyse a corpus of letters, available on the Eman platform, sent from the Ibero-American area to Zola at the end of the 19th century. This corpus does not constitute a uniform object of analysis, given the diversity of letter writers who take the liberty of writing to Zola during this period when the novelist and his work are already well known and had been the target of numerous polemics on art and literature in the decade preceding the writing of these texts. From a theoretical point of view, we place ourselves in the perspective of studies concerning the history and culture of celebrity, as well as studies concerning comparative literature. In the light of these achievements, we will seek to study this corpus as an expression of an audience that reflects the image of Zola as a public figure and, at the same time, achieves a literary and cultural self-reflection. The methodologies used will be a qualitative analysis applied to the content of the letters, in order to show that, although correspondence have traditionally been allocated a secondary status, in fact the correspondence method, as a primary data-gathering technique, may present unique advantages circumventing the embarrassment that participants may face otherwise.
Keywords: Celebrity studies, Zola, Content analysis, Letter.

Citation suggestion: VIeira, Célia; Guerra Santos, Inês . "The Public and the Private on the Construction of a Celebrity: The Case of Émile Zola". *Transilvania*, no. 6 (2021): 60-64. https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2021.06.07.

Introduction

The emergence of performance studies in the 1970s and 1980s of the XXth century, curiously mainly in the departments of literature, made celebrity a central subject of study. However, a closer look on the history of western culture reveals that the discussion about this concept is much older. The basis of this social phenomena drives us to the roots of romanticism, of a popular and industrial culture and was reinforced by the assumption that the expression of individualism, originality and subjectivity were the main ingredients to become recognized.

During all the XIXth century the concept of celebrity suffered significant changes: near its etymological core, (referring to those to be celebrated), in the beginning, till the professionalization of the artists that converted in celebrities those that have the skills to a better adaptation to the commercialization of their professions. Is also in this century that the line between popularity and celebrity become more complex, moving away from the notoriety and the merit. This justifies, as underlines Fawcett (2015) why scholars persisted defining the terms "literature" and "celebrity" in opposition to each other, arguing that literary fame is based on true greatness that immortalizes its authors, whereas celebrity is superficial and ephemeral. Overcoming this question, the same author argues that it is far more useful to understand celebrity studies crisscrossed with literary studies to understand their mutual influence and interaction.

These changes lead to an important debate that would persist for decades concerned the difference between being a celebrity or being famous or known. In this sense, the distinction made by Antoine Lilti (2014) between glory,

reputation and celebrity allows us to consider, within the scope of this article, that the concept of celebrated person implies that the public develops an affection involvement in relation to her, to the point of wanting to access his private life. This willingness to participate in celebrity life even justifies a whole celebrity economy based, for example, on the trade of iconography or in the press spreading news about his private life. It is necessary also to take into account that de concept of celebrity, according to the analysis of T. Mole (2007, 2012) about Byron, as a romantic celebrity, is based on the interaction of three pillars: the industry (journals, editors, iconographic supports and booksellers), the individual (reflected in his articles, books, photos or speeches) and the audience (critical arguments, biographies or correspondences). These three branches (interdependent) may be considered *a sine qua non* condition to understand the real conception and history of all the process that culminates on the construction of a celebrity.

Based on this theoretical assumption, this research takes as a starting point the audience study supported by the analysis of a group of letters sent to Zola from the Ibero-american space, in order to understand the way they reflect his image beyond or in concordance with the configuration constructed by the individual and the industry.

Émile Zola as a celebrity

The reception of the Zola's literary production is inseparable of the construction of a Zola´s image as a man and a writer world famous, a public figure. The singularity of this figure leads to place the study of this *corpus* not only under the perspective of the Comparative Literature, Imagology or Reception Studies but also to appeal to the concepts spread by what is called Celebrity Studies.

In this century that has created the basis for mass communication, it is obvious that the name of Zola as a famous figure was first made through the press, media par excellence to build a reputation. The thousands of articles on Zola and Naturalism that circulated in the press on a global scale, highlighting the close relationship between literature and the press, have converted him, especially since the 80s, into a figure literary known on a global scale. This image was promoted to his contemporaries, certainly, by the disclosure of his work and his articles, but also by the development of a biographical criticism that, in the Iberian Peninsula and in the Ibero-american area, at the beginning of the 80s, fed fundamentally comments to his novels, published in French magazines of great diffusion, like the *Revue des Deux Mondes*; or the information contained in reference works such as the *Dictionnaire Universel des Contemporains*, of Vapereau, or the volume *Célébrités Contemporaines*, by Maupassant; or two works from 1882 that functioned as a privileged source in the configuration of Zola's international image as a famous person: the volume of one of the writers of the Soirées de Médan, Paul Alexis, *Emile Zola. Notes d'un ami* or the travel writings of Edmundo de Amicis, *Portraits littéraires*, which publicized the daily writing process of the naturalism master, and also revealed the biographical backstage of the production of the naturalistic novel. Thus, in the early 1880s, the name of Zola already corresponded to that of a consecrated author and naturalism was no longer a literary novelty, but a movement that was recognized in literary criticism and in the creation of naturalistic works, after a decade of battles and controversy in the world press. From the publication of *J'Accuse*, and his commitment to the Dreyfus Affair, this image goes beyond the artistic domain to become universally a moral and political symbol of the spirit of humanism and the essence of Human Rights.

The letters included in the analysis *corpus* document a concept of a famous figure, a globally recognized name, associated with certain values, and attracting the enthusiasm of people all over the world. Knowing that this enthusiasm for illustrious figures has borrowed different forms, over the centuries, depending on the socio-cultural context in which it manifests itself, the question that arises is to identify the traits that are recognized by this public as being likely to justify the fame of a public figure in the late nineteenth century (Craig, 2012).

***Corpus* of analysis and methodology**

This article is part of an international research project that aims to study a corpus of about 2400 letters sent from all parts of the globe to Zola between around 1880 and the end of the writer's life. All this epistolary material has already been digitised and coded on the *E-man platform*[1], now lending to multiple approaches taking into account the sociological, historical, linguistic and cultural richness to which these letters are a testimony.

For the present study, we have delimited as a *corpus* only the letters sent from what can be called the Hispanic area, taking into account the linguistic and cultural links that give unity to this area. The selected corpus consists of 178 letters, sent from the following countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Spain, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Portugal, Uruguay and Venezuela. The letters are mostly written in French, which attests to the linguistic hegemony of France in this period, but there is also a considerable part of the letters written in Spanish and Portuguese, the mother tongue of the letter writers.

As for the identity of the letter writers, the vast majority of them are now unknown citizens, even if some of them have held important positions in the communities in which they were inserted, such as journalists, librarians, editors, translators, politicians or writers. From an intellectual point of view, the *corpus* reflects the affirmation of a republican, progressive and anti-Catholic mentality, as forces of political, social and scientific modernity. This *corpus* is also representative of the role that women writers are beginning to assume in society and of their progressive autonomy, since there are several letters subscribed by women, many of them defining themselves as writers and collaborators with journals. It is as a world-renowned writer that Zola also becomes the recipient of young writers who see in him the image of a modern and revolutionary writer and therefore with whom they could share their doubts and ambitions regarding

the role they should play in a changing world. This is why a significant number of young people write to him asking for moral guidance in this context. As far as the training of letter writers is concerned, it is meaningful the fact that some of them have a technical background, especially if we recognise that the affirmation of scientific and positivist thought in these countries was transmitted through the generation that came out of the polytechnic academies.

With regard to the methodology used, we carried out a qualitative analysis after a close reading of all the documents under consideration, seeking to identify the characters that define Zola's image and the reasons why these letter-writers address the writer. After the analysis of the letters, three predominant themes were identified: the request for autographs, photographs, texts for publication; the sending of literary works for appreciation and the Dreyfus Affair.

Results

The qualitative analysis of the corpus allows to identify some indicators of a desire to participate in the private life of the writer, for example by asking for autographs, photographs or even by asking for a personal advice. Indeed, it is the image of world-famous writer that justifies a type of correspondence that aims to ask for objects that would allow the admirer to participate in this *aura* of notoriety. This is the case of the author's request for portraits, such as, for example, a letter in which the signer, Alice Moderno, asks for a photograph of Zola for her office, and also sends her own photograph. Photo sharing, as a physical substitute of the body, underlines the desire to establish a real connection: the presence of the celebrity photo would be a way to make celebrity present in the admirer's life and to establish a private relationship even in absence. This is also the case with the request for autographs, which is very common in these letters. Sometimes, the letter writer requests for a specific type of autograph, the signature of albums, such as a letter where a woman, Sophie Zaffradry, writes to Mrs. Zola to request the signature of her husband for an autograph album whose page is send attached to the letter. This letter reflects a cultural tradition, that of *album amicorum*, very fashionable to Romanticism, which consisted in asking a guest to leave on these pages a register: an autograph, a thought, a drawing, the transcription of a poem. These testimonials highlight the way the album establishes a network of communication and social recognition, because, by asking for Zola's tribute, the owner of the album knows that every contributor will read the previous registers and that it will be read by future contributors, and thus its status and image will be shared, given the public nature of this medium as well as its circulation (Craig, 2012).

It is as a world-renowned writer that Zola becomes the recipient of young writers who see him as a modern and revolutionary writer and so with whom they could share their doubts and ambitions about the role that they should play in a world in upheaval. It seems that Zola paid special attention to these contacts, if only because the answer to their sincere desire to receive advice or a word of encouragement would have a pedagogical value in the education of a new generation of citizens. That's the case of Zola's correspondence with the young Portuguese, João Barreira. In the epistolary *corpus*, we find a letter from this young man, probably written around 1889, in which the letter-writer, beginning with a reference to Zola's answer to a letter written four years ago, which had given him much comfort, writes to the master, describing a state of mind that equates to a spiritual death and ask him again for moral support. Other letters have the goal of sending to Zola works, in order to receive an appreciation or a preface that can validate their literary quality. Such is the case of the letter of Óscar Leal, a Luso-Brazilian dentist, who wrote to Emile Zola on October 2, 1896 to solicit Zola's appreciation of the naturalist novel *O parteiro* (The Midwife). Another example is that of Archer de Cima, an unknown letter writer, who wrote in early 1898 three times to ask for a few words or a preface letter for the publication of a book on humanity and democracy. In this type of letter, the goal for the letter writer is always to ask someone who represents the literary canon a testimony about the quality of his work and to help him at the beginning of the literature career.

But the most part of this letters confirm the construction of an image of gratitude and admiration for the author, not only for his work but especially for his courage during the Dreyffus Affair, a process that had an extraordinary worldwide impact. From the publication of the famous article "J'accuse", by Émile Zola, in *L'Aurore* on 13 January 1898, a courageous act to denounce the injustice committed against Captain Dreyfus, to the subsequent condemnation and exile of the naturalist writer, all the vicissitudes of the process were accompanied by the international press, almost in real time, unleashing a vivid emotion at the possibility that France, the beacon of civilisation and of the defence of human rights, may finally be a nation mined by corruption, injustice and moral decadence. The national process becomes a worldwide process, in which it is France that is judged, destroying herself in an ignoble internal struggle that opposes the "dreyfusards" to the "anti-dreyfusards", making the hypothesis of an anti-Semitic and anti-republican France more and more obvious. The *corpus* therefore establishes a comparative and geocritical reflection, by reflecting the values of an entire foreign community which observes France and needs to speak in order to take part in this judgement, and thereby defines Zola as a reference for the construction of a cultural identity based on the values that France had traditionally represented.

Zola, according to one of the letter writers, «n'est pas le défenseur de la France – il n'est pas le défenseur de l'Europe – il n'est pas le défenseur du monde – il est plus que ça – il est le défenseur d'un évangile - Evangile qui, bien qu'il soit athée – embrasse celui du Christ»[2]. He's the «étendard de la liberté et de la justice[3], and that's why «tout ce qui est inhumain trouve en vous un défenseur»[4]. A collective subscriber, the Associação Luso-Americana Financial Beneficente[5], praises in Zola «o Salvador, o Redemptor, o restaurador dos valores das novas gerações, devotado apóstolo do Cristianismo» ("the Saviour, the Redeemer, the restorer of the values of the new

generations, devoted apostle of Christianity"). In this letter of 1898, the subscribers see in Zola's attitude a sociological thesis: it embodies the defence of Human Rights and Progress, against the medieval and clerical ghost; it corresponds to the foundation of a social state that must be based on the force of law and not on the law of force. Those who blame him have not understood the significance of *Germinal*, *Rome* or *Lourdes* either. As he became the «Citoyen du monde, compatriote de tous les déshérités, qui souffrent faim et soif de Justice» the future will fulfil a duty of gratitude to the «prisonnier sublime» who will cross the «Capitole de l'Histoire». He is acclaimed by those who describe themselves as «Les exploités du Portugal, révoltés dans ce milieu qui écrase les faibles», the «victimes du bourreau du Capital»[6]. For them, the essential thing would be to be part of the universal voice that rises up in support of the «admirable apôtre»: «Qu'on ne dise que vous êtes seul à parler au nom de la Justice. De tous les coins du monde mille voix vous répondent». That's why Zola is systematically designated as the "Maître", a title corresponding to the admiration due to someone who has become a model as a writer and as a citizen, which is also corroborated by the use of qualifying adjectives such as "great", "glorious", "noble". Content analysis indicates that Zola's name often relates to words belonging to positive instances of a domain of meaning that has to do with human rights and with a critical reflection on contemporaneity.

Final reflexions

Based on an assumption of universal inclusion and equality of opportunity and participation, the establishment, from the 18th century onwards, of a bourgeois public sphere in England, France or Germany translated a process of legitimisation both in relation to state power and society itself. This bourgeois public sphere (in which a bourgeois intellectual layer stands out) is the heir to the confluence between aristocratic and humanist society and is assumed above all as a literary public sphere. It is in this sense that Habermas (1962) argues that this new public space was formed by private individuals who, together, publicly debated matters of general interest, functioning as an instance of control and legitimisation of the political power exercised by the state. This intervening role of the intellectual is consolidated by Zola, especially after the Dreyfus case, "through rhetorical arguments, in favour of violated rights and repressed truths, in favour of necessary innovations and dulled progress" (Habermas 2005, 39). With his manifesto, "J'accuse," Zola does not fail also to raise the writer and literature to another level, giving rise simultaneously to a new social figure: that of the public intellectual. It is understandable, therefore, that Bourdieu (1997, 65) refers to Zola as "the inaugural achetype of intellectual engagement".

But these letters also bear witness to the sunset of an ideal and reflect the imminence of a turning point in History. The moment of the Dreyfus Affair can then be designated as "the end of the disillusionment of reason"[8]. From that moment on,

> "il est devenu impossible de se référer à la raison, au peuple, à un ensemble de valeurs établies, reconnues ou fondées, au Bien, au Juste ou au Vrai. Historiquement on est effectivement non pas "par delà le Bien et le Mal" comme le dit Nietzsche mais simplement en dehors du Bien et du Mal. Nous ne sommes pas dans un monde postmoderne mais dans ce que Baudelaire nomme "la modernité": la société moderne a révélé son vrai visage. La mutation est irréversible et crée des conditions nouvelles, inédites et qu'on sait, rétrospectivement, infiniment dangereuses. L'affaire Dreyfus aura donc finalement permis la pleine reconnaissance des intellectuels comme un groupe social à part entière, disposant d'un pouvoir. Mais elle aura en même temps montré que ce groupe est divisé en deux camps irréductibles : les dreyfusards pour la justice et la vérité, les antidreyfusards pour la raison d'Etat et l'unité de la patrie qui transcende les destins individus."[9]

In the letter addressed to President Loubet after the amnesty, while closing the case for good, Zola states that his mission is over: "I have fulfilled my role as honestly as I could. (...) I have no merit. The cause was so beautiful, so human. I walked for sure, which diminishes my courage". These are neither victorious nor falsely modest words, but rather the words of a man who recognises that a new stage of humanity has just begun, in which those who fight for just and universal ideas will find it difficult to make themselves heard.

In this way, the words of this anonymous letter writers in the Ibero-American space that supports Zola and calls on France not to disdain the values of its democratic and revolutionary identity already sounds like a nostalgia for a lost time and space. Soon, the consolidation of industrial capitalism, the outbreak of the First World War and the rise of the United States of America as a new area of symbolic and cultural hegemony will confirm the end of the romantic role of the intellectual and the writer in the leadership of peoples.

Conclusion

This study, focused on the reaction of the audience and on how this reaction contributes to understanding the image of the famous figure, was based on a type of support, the letter, which, although being in a rather private and personal register, could reveal the features of an image spread in the public space. These letters document a concept of a famous figure who, when the *Dreyfus Affaire* breaks out, goes beyond Zola's role as a writer. Zola is a globally recognized name, associated with certain values and attracting the enthusiasm of people all over the world. Knowing that this enthusiasm for famous figures has taken different forms, over the centuries, the content analysis of this *corpus* of letters has allowed us to conclude that traits such as justice, morality, consciousness or honor were fundamental to justify the fame of a public figure at the end of the nineteenth century.

Notes:

1. http://eman-archives.org/CorrespondanceZola/ Lettre de Jayme da Costa Tavares, Julio César ***** de Araujo, Manuel ***** ****** et ***** António Domingues à Émile Zola, du 5 septembre 1899, http://eman-archives.org/CorrespondanceZola/items/show/6452.
2. Lettre de Fortunato Munoz Posse à Émile Zola du 28 janvier 1898, http://eman-archives.org/CorrespondanceZola/items/show/1068.
3. Lettre de Jayme da Costa Tavares, Julio César ***** de Araujo, Manuel ***** ****** et ***** António Domingues à Émile Zola, du 5 septembre 1899, http://eman-archives.org/CorrespondanceZola/items/show/6452.
4. Lettre de G. Verdier à Émile Zola du 31 juin 1901, http://eman-archives.org/CorrespondanceZola/items/show/411.
5. Lettre de J. A. Guimaraes à Émile Zola du 9 avril 1898, http://eman-archives.org/CorrespondanceZola/items/show/1056.
6. Lettre de La Union Communiste-Anarchiste de la Région du Sud à Émile Zola du 9 mars 1898, http://eman-archives.org/CorrespondanceZola/items/show/6454
7. Alain-Marc Rieu, "La fin en France du pacte "intellectuel/société"". In Jean-Max Gieu. *Intolérance et préjudice. L'affaire Dreyfus aujourd'hui*, Fischbacher, pp.135-152, 1999.
8. Alain-Marc Rieu, 7.
9. Ibid., 7.

Bibliography:

Craig, E.H. "The Album Amicorum & the London of Shakespeare's Time" (review). *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 43 (2012).

Driessens, O. "The Celebritization of Society and Culture: Understanding the Structural Dynamics of Celebrity Culture," *International Journal for Cultural Studies* 16, no. 6 (2013): 641–57.

Fawcett, J.H. *Literature and Celebrity: Eighteenth Century and Beyond*. Oxford: Oxford Handbooks Online, 2015.

Lilti, A. *Figures publiques. L'invention de la célébrité (1750-1850)*. Paris: Fayard, 2014.

Minois, G. *Histoire de la célébrité. Les trompettes de la renommée*. Librairie Académique Perrin, 2012.

Mole, T. *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy*. Springer, 2007.

Mole, T. *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Mole, Tom (Editor). *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750-1850*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Rieu, Alain-Marc. "La fin en France du pacte 'intellectuel/société'". In *Jean-Max Gieu. Intolérance et préjudice. L'affaire Dreyfus aujourd'hui*, 135-152. Fischbacher, 1999.

Samara, Maria Alice. *Operárias e Burguesas: As Mulheres no Tempo da República*. Lisboa: A Esfera dos Livros, 2007.

Turner, G. *Understanding Celebrity*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2004.