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THE GRAND *AFFAIRE* (1898)

The Dreyfus Affair is now a religion, the religion of justice and truth.¹

There have been moments when one individual has reshaped destiny's patterns. In mid-January 1898 the case of the *bordereau* was over. Dreyfus had been convicted and Esterhazy acquitted. Picquart was arrested, Scheurer-Kestner defeated. Then Zola – that deeply flawed egotist with his novelist's sense of the dramatic – transformed the landscape. 'Mr President', he wrote to Faure in *L'Aurore* on 13 January,

I accuse Lieutenant-Colonel du Paty de Clam of having been the diabolical agent of a judicial error...

I accuse General Mercier of having made himself an accomplice...

I accuse General Billot of having had in his hands absolute proof that Dreyfus was innocent and of having suppressed it...

I accuse General Boisdeffre and General Gonse of making themselves accomplices to the same crime...

I accuse General de Pellieux and Commandant Ravary of having conducted a villainous inquiry...

I accuse the Ministry of War of having led an abominable press campaign...

I accuse, finally, the first court martial of having violated the law by condemning a suspect on the basis of a document unknown to him, and I accuse the second court of having covered up this illegality under orders by committing in its turn the judicial crime of knowingly acquitting a guilty man.

This article was perhaps the most sensational media event of the newspaper age in France. Within hours *J'accuse* sold 200,000 copies; within days riots and demonstrations broke out in dozens of cities and towns; within months Colonel Henry's edifice of forgeries collapsed in the blood of his self-inflicted wounds; within a year France suffered from a fever of rage and hate; but in two years Alfred Dreyfus walked freely in the land that he loved. And it was Zola who had unleashed the avalanche.

From the beginning of the Esterhazy trial Zola had believed that the army would arrange for an acquittal. When the verdict was announced he had already decided that a direct and impassioned appeal to public opinion was the only remaining path to revision of the 1894 court martial. But Scheurer-Kestner and some others disagreed, fearing that the ensuing upheaval might endanger the Republic that was his life's work. Zola calculated that if he could force the government to prosecute him for libel he could bring out facts in a civil court that the army had been able to suppress in the two courts martial. Thus, in addition to recounting the entire history of the case of the *bordereau*, *J'accuse* also taunted the government and General Staff, 'Let them dare to summon me before a court of law! Let the inquiry be held in the light of day! I await.' Bernard Lazare had played the same gambit when he first published *A Judicial Error* in November 1896, but the government had not risen to the bait. Now, with the 'veiled lady', and spurious telegrams filling the press there was indeed no choice. On 13 January Prime Minister Méline, who had so audaciously proclaimed that there was no Dreyfus Affair, found himself repeatedly questioned before an indignant Chamber about whether Zola's outrageous insults aimed at the highest officers of the army would go unpunished. With only months before parliamentary elections the radicals in particular sensed an opportunity to overthrow the cabinet, which they castigated as too timid in defending the army. Méline explained to the assembly that Zola sought prosecution only in order to continue the struggle for Dreyfus, but then he capitulated, announcing from the podium that the author of 'these abominable attacks' would be brought to justice. Zola thus used the very passion of the anti-revisionists to compel continued action in the case, when their calm enjoyment of victory would have buried Dreyfus for ever on Devil's Island.

Yet even Zola had not foreseen the violence of the popular reaction to his *coup d'audace*. Riots and demonstrations immediately broke out