

“J'ACCUSE ...!” EMILE ZOLA, L'AURORE AND THE DREYFUS AFFAIR

This famous article, by Emile Zola, the great French novelist, appeared in a Paris literary newspaper, *L'Aurore* (The Dawn) on Thursday, Jan. 13, 1898, “an essential date in the history of journalism,” according to historian Jean-Denis Bredin. Written in the form of an open letter to the President of France, the 4,000 word article, entitled *J'Accuse!* (I Accuse!), has been judged a “masterpiece” of polemics and a literary achievement “of imperishable beauty.” No other newspaper article has ever provoked such public debate and controversy or had such an impact on law, justice, and society.

Emile Zola (1840-1902) spent his youth in Aix en Provence where he befriended Paul Cezanne. He began his literary career as a journalist writing theater and art criticism while working on short stories. After publishing his novel *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), he elaborated the theory of the modern novel that he called Naturalism. Inspired by Flaubert, he advocated a scientific and realistic approach to plot and character development. His multi-volume saga, *Les Rougon-Macquart* (1870-1893), illustrated these principles, giving vivid descriptions of milieus usually ignored by the Romantics, and addressing social issues, in novels such as *L'Assommoir* (1877), *Nana* (1880) or *Germinal* (1885). Zola's books were often considered scandalous, since they touched on taboo topics such as sexuality, but this also accounted for their success. In 1892, his novel *La Débâcle*, which dealt in antimilitarist fashion with the French defeat in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, created yet another uproar.

At the time of “J'accuse,” Zola was working on the concluding novel, *Paris* (1898), of his new series *Les Trois Villes* [*Lourdes* (1894), *Rome* (1896)], in which he examined socialist, anarchist and anticlerical themes.

Like many other people, Zola was at first hardly interested in the story of a traitor convicted by a court martial. He learned about Dreyfus' military degradation, in January 1895, during a dinner at the Daudets': their son Léon had witnessed it and described what had happened. Léon Daudet was to become one of Zola's most ardent opponents in the Dreyfus Case.

Not until 1897 was Zola approached by the writer Bernard-Lazare and was convinced by Louis Leblois and Scheurer-Kestner of Dreyfus' innocence. He immediately joined the group of people who were seeking a re-trial.

One of the most famous, although controversial, writers of his time, Zola could have chosen simply to lend moral support to the Dreyfus cause rather than expose himself to the trauma of a libel trial. He surely knew the power of the press on public opinion but, as demonstrated by his private correspondence, far from being a publicity stunt, his involvement reflected his genuine outrage over the unfair treatment of an innocent man.

The appearance of Zola's article was the greatest day of the Dreyfus Affair, which tormented France for twelve years. The Affair, “one of the great commotions of history,” in the words of historian Barbara W. Tuchman, arose out of the 1894 arrest and conviction for treason of Capt. Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish artillery officer in the French army. Dreyfus, who was completely innocent, received an unfair trial at his court martial; the prosecution's case had no substance, and the conviction was based on false, supposedly incriminating documents, not introduced into evidence or disclosed to Dreyfus, which were secretly delivered to the trial judges after they had retired to

consider their verdict. Dreyfus was sentenced to life imprisonment and expelled from the army. He was imprisoned off the coast of South America on Devil's Island from 1895 until 1899.

At the time of the arrest and trial the army officers responsible for the prosecution truly believed Dreyfus was guilty of the crime charged. By 1896, however, they knew they had made a catastrophic mistake. Nevertheless, high-ranking officers on the army's General Staff and officers in military intelligence, fearful that public exposure of the injustice done Dreyfus would embarrass the army, engaged in a gigantic coverup which featured perjury, forgery, and obstruction of justice. The conspirators, including at least eight generals, even protected and assisted Commandant Ferdinand Esterhazy, the army infantry officer who, as they knew by 1896, had actually committed the crime for which Dreyfus had been wrongfully convicted.

Zola's J'Accuse! article was published two days after another court martial had, as part of the coverup, acquitted Esterhazy of the treasonous offense of which Esterhazy was clearly guilty and for which Dreyfus was being unjustly punished.

The article gave a detailed explanation of how it had happened that Dreyfus had been convicted of a crime he never committed; showed that the real culprit was Esterhazy and blasted his acquittal; revealed the immensity of the coverup; named the officers known by Zola to have been involved in perpetrating the coverup, and accused them of “one of the greatest iniquities of the century;” accused the tribunal that convicted Dreyfus of “condemning an accused person on the strength of a secret document”; and accused the tribunal which had found Esterhazy not guilty of having, “in obedience to orders, ... knowingly acquitt[ed] a guilty man.”

Written in sparkling prose and imbued with a tone of outrage, the article contains many beautiful sentences and phrases. The most memorable: “la verite est en marche et rien ne l'arretera” (truth is on the march and nothing can stop it).

Zola had two purposes in mind when he wrote his article. First, he hoped to provide the public with a succinct overview of the facts of the Dreyfus case and thereby mobilize public opinion in Dreyfus's favor. Second, he hoped to provoke authorities into criminally prosecuting him for having written the article, so that at his trial new evidence could be produced and made public concerning Dreyfus's innocence and Esterhazy's guilt.

Zola succeeded in both his objectives. As one historian puts it, “Zola ... achieved a miracle.”

The J'Accuse! article was an instant sensation, electrifying France and stimulating a gradual but inexorable shift in public opinion in favor of Dreyfus. It also brought the Dreyfus case worldwide attention; a respected writer of international renown had accused the French military of enormous wrongs. From then on, the entire civilized world marveled at the French spectacle, with very few people outside France believing that Dreyfus was guilty.

Less than three weeks after his article was published Zola was put on trial on a charge of criminal libel. The accusatory instrument filed by prosecutors focused on only one sentence of Zola's article, wherein he had asserted that the tribunal that found Esterhazy

not guilty had known he was guilty and had acquitted him on command. The charges plainly were an attempt by the government, spurred on by the military, to silence a heroic man who was bravely laboring to undo a hideous miscarriage of justice. As the amazed London Times noted: “Zola's true crime has been in daring to rise to defend the truth and civil liberty ... [and] for that courageous defense of the primordial rights of the citizen, he will be honored wherever men have souls that are free ...”

Hundreds of reporters from all over the world covered Zola's criminal trial, which lasted two weeks and occurred in a circus-like atmosphere. The trial judges treated Zola and his attorney shabbily; confusion and disorder reigned in the courtroom; howling crowds jeered Zola in court and tried to attack him as he left the courthouse under police protection; and at night antisemitic mobs carrying signs saying “Death to Zola” or “Down with the Jews” would smash the windows of Jewish-owned shops in Paris.

Even though the evidence introduced at the trial by the defense made it obvious that Esterhazy, not Dreyfus, was the traitor, and that the military was covering up the truth, Zola was convicted and sentenced to the maximum penalty of a year in jail. To avoid prison, Zola fled to England and lived in exile near London for almost a year. He returned to France in June 1899, shortly after an appellate court reversed Dreyfus' conviction and ordered Dreyfus retried. By then public opinion in France had swung decisively in favor of Dreyfus, and the libel charge against Zola was dismissed. Zola was no longer in jeopardy of confinement for writing history's greatest newspaper article, but his support of Dreyfus had left him financially ruined.

Dreyfus's 1899 retrial, also covered by numerous reporters and watched by the whole Western World, resulted, absurdly, in Dreyfus being reconvicted. Dreyfus was, however, quickly pardoned and released from custody. In 1906 Dreyfus's 1899 conviction was reversed by the highest court in France and he was formally adjudged innocent, whereupon he was reinstated in the army, promoted, and awarded the Legion of Honor. None of the coverup conspirators was ever criminally punished.

The Dreyfus Affair officially concluded on July 21, 1906 when Dreyfus was honored by a dress parade military ceremony. Zola was absent. He had died in 1902 in his Paris home, asphyxiated by fumes from a fireplace. Many historians believe he was murdered by right-wing extremists who, hating him for defending Dreyfus, stopped up his chimney.

Dreyfus attended Zola's burial services at Paris's Montmartre Cemetery where Anatole France delivered a famous eulogy:

“Given the obligation which befalls me to recall the struggle waged by Zola on behalf of truth and justice, is it possible for me to remain silent concerning those men so passionately bent on destroying an innocent man? ... How might I remove them from your sight when it is mine to show you Zola rising up, weak and unarmed, before them?
...

“Let us envy [Zola]: he has honored his country and the world with an immense body of work and a great deed ... [H]is destiny and his courage combined to endow him with the greatest of fates. He was a moment in the conscience of humanity.”

On June 4, 1908 Zola's remains were transferred to the Pantheon, where France's greatest

citizens are interred. Dreyfus attended the solemn ceremony. During the proceedings a right-wing journalist named Gregori pulled out a revolver and fired two shots at Dreyfus, slightly wounding him in the arm. Right-wing newspapers praised the attempted murder as a “gesture for France”! Put on trial for shooting Dreyfus, Gregori was acquitted.

Echos of the Dreyfus Affair had a lasting impact on modern Jewish history, proving to many securely-assimilated Jews the latent power of anti-Semitic hatred, even in a democratic country. It drove Theodor Herzl from a complacent European liberalism to his conviction of the need for an independent Jewish State. And J'Accuse was the turning point of "l'Affaire"—written and published by non-Jews, it was a landmark in modern Jewish history, signifying the eventual triumph of truth, justice and political freedom over the mostly deeply-rooted anti-Semitic prejudice.

*L'Aurore*¹

13 January 1898

“I ACCUSE...!”²

Open Letter to the President of the French Republic

By Emile Zola

Letter to Félix Faure³

Mr. President,

Would you allow me, grateful as I am for the kind reception⁴ you once extended to me, to show my concern about maintaining your well-deserved prestige and to point out that your star which, until now, has shone so brightly, risks being dimmed by the most shameful and indelible of stains.

Unscathed by the vilest slander,⁵ you have won over the hearts of all. You are radiant in the patriotic glory of our country's alliance with Russia,⁶ you are about to preside over

¹ The newspaper *L'Aurore* had been founded just three months earlier, in October 1897, by Ernest Vaughan. *L'Aurore* had agreed to publish a series of articles by Emile Zola concerning the Dreyfus Case, after the novelist's first series, started in November for *Le Figaro*, had been cut short following hostile reactions from its subscribers.

² It took Zola just two days to write his “Letter to the President of the Republic.” According to tradition, its catchy title, “J'accuse...!”, inspired by the conclusion, was coined by Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929), then political editor of *L'Aurore*.

³ Félix Faure (1841-1899) was elected President of the Republic in 1895, succeeding President Jean Casimir-Périer (1847-1907), under whose mandate Dreyfus had been tried in December 1894 and who had resigned on January 15, 1895, after only 6 months in office. In his position as President of the Republic, Faure was not constitutionally allowed to intervene directly, as Zola acknowledges here, but he obviously also avoided taking sides.

⁴ A year earlier, President Faure had granted an interview to Zola who was then actively involved in obtaining the Légion of Honor for his friend, publisher Georges Charpentier.

⁵ In 1895, Edouard Drumont (1844-1917) the author of the best-seller *La France juive* (1886) and the founder and director of *La Libre Parole*, an anti-Semitic newspaper, launched a campaign against President Faure, revealing that his father-in-law had been tried for embezzlement twenty years earlier. In the same “yellow press” vein, *La Libre Parole*, thanks to a friendly leak from the War Office, published in October 1894 the juicy news that a Jewish officer had been arrested for treason a week earlier; then, on November 1st, it publicly identified Cpt. Dreyfus. For the rest of the Affair, *La Libre Parole* would bring the most violent and outrageous support to the anti-Dreyfus cause.

⁶ The Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871, unwisely started by Emperor Napoleon III, and concluded by a hastily established new Republican regime, ended with a defeat and a humiliating treaty. For the next few years, in a world in which other democratic regimes were few and far between, France found itself very isolated: Germany, Austria and Italy had formed a menacing Triple Alliance, and Victorian Great Britain was not yet ready for the Edwardian Cordial Entente (1904). Thus, in 1897, the only ally that Republican France could find was Czarist Russia. The celebrated Franco-Russian Alliance was considered a political and diplomatic achievement, especially for President Faure and General de Boisdeffre, Chief of Staff, who, as former ambassador to Russia, had been instrumental in the agreement.

the solemn triumph of our World Fair,⁷ the jewel that crowns this great century of Labor, Truth, and Liberty. But what filth this wretched Dreyfus affair⁸ has cast on your name, or, might I say, your reign. A court martial, under orders, has just dared to acquit that character, Esterhazy, the supreme insult to all truth and all justice.⁹ And now the image of France is sullied by this filth, and History shall record that it was under your presidency that this crime against society was committed.

As they have dared, so shall I dare. Dare to tell the truth, as I have pledged to tell it, in full, since the normal channels of justice have failed to do so. My duty is to speak out, not to become an accomplice in this travesty. My nights would otherwise be haunted by the specter of an innocent man, far away, suffering the most horrible of tortures for a crime he did not commit.

And it is to you, Mr. President, that I shall proclaim this truth, with all the revulsion that an honest man can summon. Knowing your integrity, I am convinced that you do not know the truth. But to whom if not to you, the first magistrate of the country, shall I reveal the vile baseness of those who truly are guilty?

The truth, first of all, about the trial and conviction of Dreyfus.

⁷ In preparation since 1892, the Paris World Fair was supposed to open in the Spring of 1900. Besides countless delays which would prevent its full operation on time, the embarrassing repercussions of the Dreyfus Affair could also lead to an international boycott. Dreyfus' eventual pardon by President Loubet in September 1899 ensured for the public opinion worldwide that a page had indeed been turned. The 1900 Paris World Fair, the most expensive ever, displayed 80.000 exhibitors spread on more than a square mile and eventually recorded more than 60 millions admissions.

⁸ In October 1894, Captain Alfred Dreyfus (1859-1935), who had been assigned to the General Staff, was arrested (15 October 1894) and charged with treason for delivering classified French military information to the German embassy in Paris. Dreyfus was found guilty by a court-martial (December 22, 1894), stripped of his rank in a degrading public display (January 5, 1895) and deported to Devil's Island, where he was condemned to remain in solitary confinement for the rest of his life. In March 1896, Lt. Col. Georges Picquart, then Head of Military Intelligence, uncovered evidence indicating that an infantry officer, Maj. Marie-Charles Walsin-Esterhazy (1847-1923), was actually the traitor. To prevent an embarrassing admission of error, Picquart's superiors tried to silence the whistle blower: he was dismissed from his position, and then sent later in a dangerous mission in Tunisia in December while his file was peppered with forged incriminating documents and innuendos. But, at about the same time, Cpt. Dreyfus's brother, Matthieu Dreyfus (1857-1930), also uncovered evidence implicating Esterhazy and he started a suit against him. The War Office, in order to save face, staged a court-martial for Esterzhazy and then acquitted him of all charges on January 11, 1898.

⁹ The highly publicized court martial of Major Esterhazy was planned to defuse and refute definitively any accusations against him and prevent a retrial for Dreyfus. The expected verdict by unanimous vote of acquittal on 11 January 1898 outraged supporters of the innocent Dreyfus such as Zola, whose “J'accuse” two days later reflected his own indignation. In the following days, a petition was signed by many concerned intellectuals, French luminaries in the sciences, literature and the arts, incensed by such a travesty of justice. Actually, in spite of the verdict of innocence, Major Charles-Ferdinand Walsin-Esterhazy, a womanizer, gambler and crook, was the real author of the “bordereau,” as he would finally admit on July 18, 1899 to *Le Matin*. For dubious reasons, he had been protected all along by some members of the General Staff, including Maj. Henry, Picquart's successor as Head of Military Intelligence. His nefarious role, from the beginning of the case, could not have been known to Zola at the time of “J'accuse...!”.

At the root of it all is one evil man, Lt. Colonel du Paty de Clam,¹⁰ who was at the time a mere Major. He is the entire Dreyfus case, and it can only be understood through an honest and thorough examination that reveals his actions and responsibilities. He appears to be the shadiest and most complex of creatures, spinning outlandish intrigues, stooping to the deceits of dime novels, complete with stolen documents, anonymous letters, meetings in deserted spots, mysterious women scurrying around at night, peddling damning evidence. He was the one who came up with the scheme of dictating the text of the *bordereau*¹¹ to Dreyfus; he was the one who had the idea of observing him in a mirror-lined room. And he was the one that Major Forzinetti¹² caught carrying a shuttered lantern that he planned to throw open on the accused man while he slept, hoping that, jolted awake by the sudden flash of light, Dreyfus would blurt out his guilt.

I need say no more: let us seek and we shall find. I am stating simply that Major du Paty de Clam, as the officer of justice charged with the preliminary investigation of the Dreyfus case, is the first and the most grievous offender in the ghastly miscarriage of justice that has been committed.

The *bordereau* had already been for some time in the hands of Colonel Sandherr,¹³ Head of the Intelligence Office,¹⁴ who has since died of a paralytic stroke. Information was leaked, papers were disappearing, then as they continue to do to this day; and, as the search for the author of the *bordereau* progressed, little by little, an *a priori* assumption developed that it could only have come from an officer of the General Staff, and furthermore, an artillery officer.¹⁵ This interpretation, wrong on both counts, shows how superficially the *bordereau* was analyzed, for a logical examination shows that it could only have come from an infantry officer.

¹⁰ Major Armand Mercier du Paty de Clam (1853-1916), had been in charge of the preliminary investigation in 1894: his relentless and vicious harassment of Dreyfus continued after the conviction and prevented any chance for a re-trial.

¹¹ The word *bordereau* refers to a sort of memorandum, listing a series of attached documents that a mysterious traitor [Esterhazy] was peddling to Maximilian Von Schwartzkoppen, the German military attaché. Having been discarded in a paper basket, the *bordereau* found its way, through a channel of various French agents, to the War Office, and more precisely to its Intelligence Office.

¹² Major Ferdinand Forzinetti (1839-1909) was Director of the military prison of Le Cherche-Midi to which Dreyfus was consigned in the Fall of 1894, awaiting his December trial. Impressed by the dignified behavior of his prisoner, even under all the stress caused by Du Paty de Clam's harassment, Forzinetti became one of his stauncher supporters, a stand that did not help his career.

¹³ Colonel Jean Sandherr (1846-1897), was Head of the Military Intelligence from 1891 to 1895. His partisan anti-Semitism certainly influenced the preliminary investigations.

¹⁴ The name of the Military Intelligence Office, part of the War Office, was in fact veiled under the cover of “Statistical Section.” The French were especially watching the German Embassy where a charwoman, Mme Bastian, worked. She would regularly bring papers picked out of trash cans to other French agents. It was by this route that the *bordereau*, as well as the *petit bleu*, arrived at the Military Intelligence Office.

¹⁵ The *bordereau* addressed to Schwartzkoppen listed five potential bits of “interesting information” to be procured on demand by the traitor. One concerned Madagascar, another one the plan for covering troops; but three listed items solely related to artillery: “the provisional *Firing Manual for Field Artillery*, a note on the modification of the artillery formations and a note on the hydraulic recoil brake for the canon of 120,” a highly classified leak which the Chiefs of Staff erroneously thought could not come from anywhere but the General Staff itself and, furthermore, from an artillery specialist.

So an internal search was conducted. Handwriting samples were compared, as if this were some family affair, a traitor to be sniffed out and expelled from within the War Office. And, although I have no desire to dwell on a story that is only partly known, Major du Paty de Clam entered on the scene at the first whiff of suspicion of Dreyfus. From that moment on, he was the one who “invented” Dreyfus the traitor, the one who orchestrated the whole affair and made it his own. He boasted that he would confound him and make him confess all. Oh, yes, there was of course the Minister of War, General Mercier,¹⁶ a man of apparently mediocre intellect; and there were also the Chief of Staff, General de Boisdeffre,¹⁷ who appears to have yielded to his own religious bigotry, and the Deputy Chief of Staff, General Gonse,¹⁸ whose conscience allowed for many accommodations. But, at bottom, it all started with Major du Paty de Clam, who led them on, hypnotized them, for, as an adept of spiritualism and the occult, he could converse with spirits. No one would ever believe the experiments to which he subjected the unfortunate Dreyfus, the traps he set for him, the wild investigations, the monstrous fantasies, the whole demented torture.

Ah, that first trial! What a nightmare it is for all who know it in its true details. Major du Paty de Clam had Dreyfus arrested and placed in solitary confinement. He ran to Mme Dreyfus,¹⁹ terrorized her, telling her that if she talked her husband would be ruined. Meanwhile, the unfortunate Dreyfus was tearing at his flesh and proclaiming his innocence. And this is how the case proceeded, like some fifteenth century chronicle, shrouded in mystery, swamped in all manner of nasty twists and turns, all stemming from one trumped-up charge, that idiot *bordereau*. This was not only a bit of cheap trickery but also the most outrageous fraud imaginable, for almost all of these notorious secrets turned out in fact to be worthless. I dwell on this, because this is the germ of it all, whence the true crime would emerge, that horrifying miscarriage of justice that has blighted France. I would like to point out how this travesty was made possible, how it sprang out of the machinations of Major du Paty de Clam, how Generals Mercier, de Boisdeffre and Gonse became so ensnared in this falsehood that they would later feel compelled to impose it as holy and indisputable truth. Having set it all in motion merely by carelessness and lack of intelligence, they seem at worst to have given in to the religious bias of their milieu and the prejudices of their class. In the end, they allowed stupidity to prevail.

But now we see Dreyfus appearing before the court martial. Behind the closed doors,

¹⁶ General Auguste Mercier (Arras 1838-Paris 1921). Minister of War 1893-1894 in the Casimir-Périer's cabinet and the two Dupuy's cabinets (1894; 1894-1895). As with General Sandherr, his own prejudice, as well as General Sandherr's during the preliminary investigation, played a fateful part in Dreyfus' conviction in 1894. In 1900, his staunch anti-Dreyfusist attitude got him get elected as a nationalist Senator.

¹⁷ General Charles Le Mouton de Boisdeffre (1839-1919). The former ambassador to Russia, he was Chief of Staff from May 1894 to September 1898: the whole Dreyfus episode took place under his mandate.

¹⁸ General Arthur Gonse (1838-1917) Second in command in the General Staff. Gonse was instrumental in dismissing Lt. Colonel Picquart as Head of the Military Intelligence as soon he realized the cover up was going to be revealed.

¹⁹ Lucie Dreyfus (1870-1945), née Hadamard. She had married Alfred Dreyfus in 1890 and was the mother of his two children Pierre, (b. 1891) and Jeanne (b. 1893). She had last seen her husband in February 1895 and wouldn't see him again until July 1899. While protecting the privacy of her children, the young woman tirelessly worked for her husband's retrial. In 1901, Alfred Dreyfus published their almost daily inspirational correspondence (*Cinq années de ma vie*).

the utmost secrecy is demanded. Had a traitor opened the border to the enemy and driven the German Emperor straight to Notre-Dame the measures of secrecy and silence could not have been more stringent. The public was astounded; rumors flew of the most horrible acts, the most monstrous deceptions, lies that were an affront to our history. The public, naturally, was taken in. No punishment could be too harsh. The people clamored for the traitor to be publicly stripped of his rank and demanded to see him writhing with remorse on his rock of infamy. Could these things be true, these unspeakable acts, these deeds so dangerous that they must be carefully hidden behind closed doors to keep Europe from going up in flames? No! They were nothing but the demented fabrications of Major du Paty de Clam, a cover-up of the most preposterous fantasies imaginable. To be convinced of this one need only read carefully the accusation as it was presented before the court martial.²⁰

How flimsy it is! The fact that someone could have been convicted on this charge is the ultimate iniquity. I defy decent men to read it without a stir of indignation in their hearts and a cry of revulsion, at the thought of the undeserved punishment being meted out there on Devil's Island. He knew several languages. A crime! He carried no compromising papers. A crime! He would occasionally visit his birthplace.²¹ A crime! He was hard-working, and strove to be well informed. A crime! He did not become confused. A crime! He became confused. A crime! And how childish the language is, how groundless the accusation! We also heard talk of fourteen charges but we found only one, the one about the *bordereau*, and we learn that even there the handwriting experts could not agree. One of them, Mr. Gobert, faced military pressure when he dared to come to a conclusion other than the desired one.²² We were told also that twenty-three officers had testified against Dreyfus. We still do not know what questions they were asked, but it is certain that not all of them implicated him. It should be noted, furthermore, that all of them came from the War Office. The whole case had been handled as an internal affair, among insiders. And we must not forget this: members of the General Staff had sought this trial to begin with and had passed judgment. And now they were passing judgment once again.

So all that remained of the case was the *bordereau*, on which the experts had not been able to agree. It is said that within the council chamber the judges were naturally leaning

²⁰ The very questionable charges for the 1894 Dreyfus trial had just been made public on January 7, 1898 in *Le Siècle*, the paper run by Dreyfusist Yves-Guyot.

²¹ After the Treaty of Versailles, which concluded the Franco Prussian War in 1871, France had been forced to accept numerous humiliating conditions. Among them were a considerable amount of money to be paid as war compensation, and the loss of her eastern provinces of Alsace and Lorraine on the pretext that the language still spoken by the population was Germanic. In Lorraine, such cities as Metz, or in Alsace, cities like Strasbourg, Colmar or Mulhouse (Dreyfus' birthplace) had to switch into a German Empire administrative overhaul. Many of their educated inhabitants chose to expatriate themselves if they could or at least send their young away. As Dreyfus' eldest brothers had remained in Mulhouse to take care of the family textile factory, the French-educated young officer had traveled a few times to visit them in Alsace, now part of Germany. His “travels to Germany” and his knowledge of German obviously played a part in his conviction. Among the other Alsatians involved in the Affair were Lt. Colonel Picquart, his lawyer Leblois and Senator Scheurer-Kestner.

²² In 1894, the handwriting expert from the Banque de France Alfred Gobert had concluded that, in his opinion, anyone could have been the author of the *bordereau* attributed to Dreyfus. Mercier had him immediately replaced by another expert from the Parisian Police Headquarters, Alphonse Bertillon, well known for his up-to-date technique of criminal identification, anthropometry.

toward acquittal. It becomes clear why, at that point, as justification for the verdict, it became vitally important to turn up some damning evidence, a secret document that, like God, could not be shown, but which explained everything, and was invisible, unknowable, and incontrovertible.²³ I deny the existence of that document. With all my strength, I deny it! Some trivial note, maybe, about some easy women, wherein a certain D... was becoming too insistent, no doubt some demanding husband who felt he wasn't getting a good enough price for the use of his wife. But a document concerning national defense that could not be produced without sparking an immediate declaration of war tomorrow? No! No! It is a lie, all the more odious and cynical in that its perpetrators are getting off free without even admitting it. They stirred up all of France, they hid behind the understandable commotion they had set off, they sealed their lips while troubling our hearts and perverting our spirit. I know of no greater crime against the state.

These, Mr. President, are the facts that explain how this miscarriage of justice came about; The evidence of Dreyfus's character, his affluence, the lack of motive and his continued affirmation of innocence combine to show that he is the victim of the lurid imagination of Major du Paty de Clam, the religious circles surrounding him, and the “dirty Jew” obsession that is the scourge of our time.²⁴

And now we come to the Esterhazy case. Three years have passed, many consciences remain profoundly troubled, become anxious, investigate, and wind up convinced that Dreyfus is innocent.

I shall not chronicle these doubts and the subsequent conclusion reached by Mr. Scheurer-Kestner. But, while he was conducting his own investigation, major events were occurring at headquarters. Colonel Sandherr had died and Lt. Colonel Picquart²⁵ had succeeded him as Head of the Intelligence Office. It was in this capacity, in the exercise of his office, that Lt. Colonel Picquart came into possession of a telegram²⁶ addressed to Major Esterhazy by an agent of a foreign power. His express duty was to open an inquiry. What is certain is that he never once acted against the will of his

²³ Zola is alluding to a document mentioned, but never produced, by the General Staff. The reason the document was damning evidence was that Dreyfus' name appeared in it. The reason why the General Staff would not show it was that they knew the document was a forgery, among others, done by Major Henry. The document would be known later on as the “faux Henry.”

²⁴ Zola had not waited until the Dreyfus Case to express his concern when confronted with increasingly virulent anti-Semitism fueled by papers such as *La Libre Parole* or *La Croix*. See, for instance, his article “Pour les Juifs,” published in *Le Figaro* in May 1896.

²⁵ Lt. Colonel Georges Picquart (1854-1914). Head of the Military Intelligence Services in 1895. As Sandherr's deputy, Picquart had attended Dreyfus' trial and public degradation in 1894 and was, like many others, convinced at the time that justice had been done. But, as Zola mentions it, Picquart realized that the leaks to the German Embassy continued after Dreyfus had been sent to Devil's Island and that the wrong man had therefore been convicted. He soon was able to identify Esterhazy. Picquart tried in vain to convince his superiors to admit the judicial error and grant Dreyfus a retrial. Fearing for his life when he was sent away to Tunisia in January 1897, Picquart was able to reveal the whole cover-up and the name of the traitor Esterhazy to his lawyer Louis Leblois (1854-1928), during a brief leave in June 1897, asking him to keep the secret. Following Esterhazy's court martial, he was arrested and then dismissed from the Army; he was again incarcerated from July 1898 to June 1899, supposedly for having revealed military information to a civilian.

²⁶ That *lettre-télégramme*, also known as “le petit bleu,” had been sent by the German military Attaché to Esterhazy. It reached the Military Intelligence Office through the same channels as the *bordereau*.

superiors. He thus submitted his suspicions to his hierarchical senior officers, first General Gonse, then General de Boisdeffre, and finally General Billot²⁷ who had succeeded General Mercier as Minister of War. That famous much discussed Picquart file was none other than the Billot file, by which I mean the file created by a subordinate for his minister, which can still probably be found at the War Office. The investigation lasted from May to September 1896, and what must be said loud and clear is that General Gonse was at that time convinced that Esterhazy was guilty and that Generals de Boisdeffre and Billot had no doubt that the handwriting on the famous bordereau was Esterhazy's. This was the definitive conclusion of Lt. Colonel Picquart's investigation. But feelings were running high, for the conviction of Esterhazy would inevitably lead to a retrial of Dreyfus, an eventuality that the General Staff wanted at all cost to avoid.

This must have led to a brief moment of psychological anguish. Note that, so far, General Billot was in no way compromised. Newly appointed to his position, he had the authority to bring out the truth. He did not dare, no doubt in terror of public opinion, certainly for fear of implicating the whole General Staff, General de Boisdeffre, and General Gonse, not to mention the subordinates. So he hesitated for a brief moment of struggle between his conscience and what he believed to be the interest of the military. Once that moment passed, it was already too late. He had committed himself and he was compromised. From that point on, his responsibility only grew, he took on the crimes of others, he became as guilty as they, if not more so, for he was in a position to bring about justice and did nothing. Can you understand this: for the last year General Billot, Generals Gonse and de Boisdeffre have known that Dreyfus is innocent, and they have kept this terrible knowledge to themselves? And these people sleep at night, and have wives and children they love!

Lt. Colonel Picquart had carried out his duty as an honest man. He kept insisting to his superiors in the name of justice. He even begged them, telling them how impolitic it was to temporize in the face of the terrible storm that was brewing and that would break when the truth became known. This was the language that Mr. Scheurer-Kestner later used with General Billot as well, appealing to his patriotism to take charge of the case so that it would not degenerate into a public disaster. But no! The crime had been committed and the General Staff could no longer admit to it. And so Lt. Colonel Picquart was sent away on official duty. He got sent further and further away until he landed in Tunisia, where they tried eventually to reward his courage with an assignment that would certainly have gotten him massacred, in the very same area where the Marquis de Morès²⁸ had been killed. He was not in disgrace, indeed: General Gonse even maintained

²⁷ General Jean-Baptiste Billot (1828-1907), Senator and Minister of War in the Freycinet's (1882) and the Duclerc's cabinets (1882-1883) as well as the current Méline's cabinet (April 1895- June 1898).

²⁸ Marquis Antoine de Morès (1859-1896). Although a graduate of Saint-Cyr Military Academy, he decided to pursue a business career. Married in 1882 to an American heiress, he founded in North Dakota her namesake town of Medora, where he started an ambitious cattle venture. Involved in many a gunfight in the tradition of the Old West, he almost has a duel with Theodore Roosevelt in the Dakota Badlands. When his meat packing plant failed in 1886, he returned to France and started a series of other unsuccessful projects. Convinced that his failures were due to a Jewish plot, he rallied the anti-Semite campaign with all the rousing energy of a modern day condottiere. In 1892, in a duel caused by an antisemitic affront, he had killed Cpt. Mayer, an Alsatian and a Jew like Dreyfus, whose funeral turned into a patriotic demonstration of national unity and support for the military. Morès' last venture was an expedition to North Africa, where he was assassinated by Tuaregs in El-Ouatia in June 1896. Notre-Dame was packed for the funeral and Drumont and Maurice Barrès spoke at his burial. His assassins were finally found and arrested in January 1898, which explains Zola's reference to the dangers of the area to which Picquart had been sent.

a friendly correspondence with him. It is just that there are certain secrets that are better left alone.

Meanwhile, in Paris, truth was marching on, inevitably, and we know how the long-awaited storm broke. Mr. Mathieu Dreyfus²⁹ denounced Major Esterhazy as the real author of the *bordereau* just as Mr. Scheurer-Kestner³⁰ was handing over to the Minister of Justice a request for the revision of the trial. This is where Major Esterhazy comes in. Witnesses say that he was at first in a panic, on the verge of suicide or running away. Then all of a sudden, emboldened, he amazed Paris by the violence of his attitude. Rescue had come, in the form of an anonymous letter warning of enemy actions, and a mysterious woman had even gone to the trouble one night of slipping him a paper, stolen from headquarters, that would save him.³¹ Here I cannot help seeing the handiwork of Lt. Colonel du Paty de Clam, with the trademark fruits of his fertile imagination. His achievement, Dreyfus's conviction, was in danger, and he surely was determined to protect it. A retrial would mean that this whole extraordinary saga, so extravagant, so tragic, with its denouement on Devil's Island, would fall apart! This he could not allow to happen. From then on, it became a duel between Lt. Colonel Picquart and Lt. Colonel du Paty de Clam, one with his face visible, the other masked. The next step would take them both to civil court. It came down, once again, to the General Staff protecting itself, not wanting to admit its crime, an abomination that has been growing by the minute.

In disbelief, people wondered who Commander Esterhazy's protectors were. First of all, behind the scenes, Lt. Colonel du Paty de Clam was the one who had concocted the whole story, who kept it going, tipping his hand with his outrageous methods. Next General de Boisdeffre, then General Gonse, and finally, General Billot himself were all pulled into the effort to get the Major acquitted, for acknowledging Dreyfus's innocence would make the War Office collapse under the weight of public contempt. And the astounding outcome of this appalling situation was that the one decent man involved, Lt. Colonel Picquart who, alone, had done his duty, was to become the victim, the one who got ridiculed and punished. O justice, what horrible despair grips our hearts? It was even claimed that he himself was the forger, that he had fabricated the letter-telegram in order to destroy Esterhazy. But, good God, why? To what end? Find me a motive. Was he, too,

²⁹ Matthieu Dreyfus (1857-1930). As soon as he learned about his younger brother's arrest, Matthieu Dreyfus left Alsace and the family textile mill he was running. With all his determination, he toiled to obtain a retrial for his beloved brother. For instance, in September 1896, he let the *Daily Chronicle* spread the false news of an escape in order to keep the memory of the prisoner of Devil's Island alive. He helped Bernard-Lazare publish the first book of the Dreyfus Case, *La Vérité sur l'Affaire Dreyfus* (1897). In November 1897, M. Castro, a stockbroker who had recognized the handwriting of his client Esterhazy from a copy of the *bordereau* reproduced in *Le Matin*, contacted him directly. Matthieu could finally have Esterhazy brought to trial in January 1898. This was the trial whose scandalous verdict of innocence prompted Zola to write “J'accuse.”

³⁰ Auguste Scheurer-Kestner (1833-1899), an Alsatian chemist and industrialist, was Vice-President of the Senate. In July 1897, Picquart's lawyer, Louis Leblois, told him about the military cover-up, asking him to act without revealing his sources. Scheurer-Kestner, in the fall of 1897, tried in vain to convince President Faure, Premier Jules Méline, Minister of Justice Darlan and Minister of War General Billot (who already knew the truth).

³¹ Esterhazy told the scandal hungry press (*L'Echo de Paris*, 18 November 1897) that he had received messages, including a letter signed “Espérance” [Hope], from a mysterious veiled lady who was trying to save him from his enemies. Among the cloak and dagger details that he mentioned were secret documents charging Picquart and definite proofs of Dreyfus' treason, which he obviously never produced.

being paid off by the Jews? The best part of it is that Picquart was himself an anti-Semite. Yes! We have before us the ignoble spectacle of men who are sunken in debts and crimes being hailed as innocent, whereas the honor of a man whose life is spotless is being vilely attacked: A society that sinks to that level has fallen into decay.

The Esterhazy affair, thus, Mr. President, comes down to this: a guilty man is being passed off as innocent. For almost two months we have been following this nasty business hour by hour. I am being brief, for this is but the abridged version of a story whose sordid pages will some day be written out in full. And so we have seen General de Pellieux³² and then Major Ravary³³ conduct an outrageous inquiry from which criminals emerge glorified and honest people sullied. And then a court martial was convened.

How could anyone expect a court martial to undo what another court martial had done?

I am not even talking about the way the judges were hand-picked. Doesn't the overriding idea of discipline, which is the lifeblood of these soldiers, itself undercut their capacity for fairness? Discipline means obedience. When the Minister of War, the commander in chief, proclaims, in public and to the acclamation of the nation's representatives, the absolute authority of a previous verdict, how can you expect a court martial to rule against him? It is a hierarchical impossibility. General Billot directed the judges in his preliminary remarks, and they proceeded to judgment as they would to battle, unquestioningly. The preconceived opinion they brought to the bench was obviously the following: “Dreyfus was found guilty for the crime of treason by a court martial; he therefore is guilty and we, a court martial, cannot declare him innocent. On the other hand, we know that acknowledging Esterhazy's guilt would be tantamount to proclaiming Dreyfus innocent.” There was no way for them to escape this rationale.

So they rendered an iniquitous verdict that will forever weigh upon our courts martial and will henceforth cast a shadow of suspicion on all their decrees. The first court martial was perhaps unintelligent; the second one is inescapably criminal. Their excuse, I repeat, is that the supreme chief had spoken, declaring the previous judgment incontrovertible, holy and above mere mortals. How, then, could subordinates contradict it? We are told of the honor of the army; we are supposed to love and respect it. Ah, yes, of course, an army that would rise to the first threat, that would defend French soil, that army is the nation itself, and for that army we have nothing but devotion and respect. But this is not about that army, whose dignity we are seeking, in our cry for justice. What is at stake is the sword, the master that will one day, perhaps, be forced upon us. Bow and scrape before that sword, that god? No!

³² General Georges-Gabriel de Pellieux (1842-1900). As Deputy Military Governor of Paris under General Saussier, he had been in charge of the preliminary investigation for the Esterhazy Case. During Zola's libel trial - the result of “J'accuse” - in February 1898, General de Pellieux inadvertently made a damaging gaffe by referring to a document (the one forged by Major Henry) presented as key evidence in Dreyfus' conviction in 1894. This mention on the witness stand of new evidence in the Dreyfus case allowed the possibility of a mistrial in spite of the opposition and additional fumbling cover-ups by the military.

³³ Major Alexandre-Alfred Ravary, the *rapporteur* for the staged Esterhazy trial, concluded in his pre-trial report stating the Esterhazy case that allegations against Esterhazy were proven irrelevant and that the case should be dismissed. On the other hand, as Zola keeps mentioning, the report charged that Esterhazy had been in fact the victim of Lt. Col. Picquart, who was then paradoxically accused of having forged the “petit bleu” (actually the work of Maj. Henry) and who was arrested following the trial.

As I have shown, the Dreyfus case was a matter internal to the War Office: an officer of the General Staff, denounced by his co-officers of the General Staff, sentenced under pressure by the Chiefs of Staff. Once again, he could not be found innocent without the entire General Staff being guilty. And so, by all means imaginable, by press campaigns, by official communications, by influence, the War Office covered up for Esterhazy only to condemn Dreyfus once again. Ah, what a good sweeping out the government of this Republic should give to that Jesuit-lair, as General Billot himself calls it. Where is that truly strong, judiciously patriotic administration that will dare to clean house and start afresh? How many people I know who, faced with the possibility of war, tremble in anguish knowing to what hands we are entrusting our nation's defense! And what a nest of vile intrigues, gossip, and destruction that sacred sanctuary that decides the nation's fate has become! We are horrified by the terrible light the Dreyfus affair has cast upon it all, this human sacrifice of an unfortunate man, a “dirty Jew.” Ah, what a cesspool of folly and foolishness, what preposterous fantasies, what corrupt police tactics, what inquisitorial, tyrannical practices! What petty whims of a few higher-ups trampling the nation under their boots, ramming back down their throats the people's cries for truth and justice, with the travesty of state security as a pretext.

Indeed, it is a crime to have relied on the most squalid elements of the press, and to have entrusted Esterhazy's defense to the vermin of Paris, who are now gloating over the defeat of justice and plain truth. It is a crime that those people who wish to see a generous France take her place as leader of all the free and just nations are being accused of fomenting turmoil in the country, denounced by the very plotters who are conniving so shamelessly to foist this miscarriage of justice on the entire world. It is a crime to lie to the public, to twist public opinion to insane lengths in the service of the vilest death-dealing machinations. It is a crime to poison the minds of the meek and the humble, to stoke the passions of reactionism and intolerance, by appealing to that odious anti-Semitism that, unchecked, will destroy the freedom-loving France of the Rights of Man.³⁴ It is a crime to exploit patriotism in the service of hatred, and it is, finally, a crime to ensconce the sword as the modern god, whereas all science is toiling to achieve the coming era of truth and justice.

Truth and justice, so ardently longed for! How terrible it is to see them trampled, unrecognized and ignored! I can feel Mr. Scheurer-Kestner's soul withering and I believe that one day he will even feel sorry for having failed, when questioned by the Senate, to spill all and lay out the whole mess.³⁵ A man of honor, as he had been all his life, he

³⁴ The *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* (Declaration of Human and Civil Rights) was proclaimed on August 26, 1789, one of the first decrees of the newly formed French National Assembly. Its first article states: “All men are born and remain free and equal in rights”. Inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment, it is very similar to the American Declaration of Independence (minus “the pursuit of happiness”). Following “J'accuse,” Senator Ludovic Trarieux (1840-1904), who had been Minister of Justice in the Ribot Cabinet (1895), founded the *Ligue française pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*, with Director of the Pasteur Institute Edouard Grimaux (1835-1900) and Francis de Pressencé (1853-1914). The United Nations' *Déclaration Universelle des Droits de l'Homme* is a modern version dated December 10, 1948.

³⁵ As Vice-President of the Senate, Scheurer-kestner had requested a discussion of the Affair on the Senate floor in December 1897. But, unable to substantiate his allegations because of the secrecy requested by his source Leblois, he failed to raise the interest of his peers. Ridiculed by the anti-Dreyfusists as senile (when he was actually gravely ill from cancer), Scheurer-Kestner was soon voted out of office and retired from public life. He died in September 1899, the very same day that Dreyfus was granted a presidential pardon by Emile Loubet.

believed that the truth would speak for itself, especially since it appeared to him plain as day. Why stir up trouble, especially since the sun would soon shine? It is for this serene trust that he is now being so cruelly punished. The same goes for Lt. Colonel Picquart, who, guided by the highest sentiment of dignity, did not wish to publish General Gonse's correspondence. These scruples are all the more honorable since he remained mindful of discipline, while his superiors were dragging his name through the mud and casting suspicion on him, in the most astounding and outrageous ways. There are two victims, two decent men, two simple hearts, who left their fates to God, while the devil was taking charge. Regarding Lt. Col. Picquart, even this despicable deed was perpetrated: a French tribunal allowed the statement of the case to become a public indictment of one of the witnesses [Picquart], accusing him of all sorts of wrongdoing. It then chose to prosecute the case behind closed doors as soon as that witness was brought in to defend himself. I say this is yet another crime, and this crime will stir consciences everywhere. These military tribunals have, decidedly, a most singular idea of justice.

This is the plain truth, Mr. President, and it is terrifying. It will leave an indelible stain on your presidency. I realize that you have no power over this case, that you are limited by the Constitution and your entourage. You have, nonetheless, your duty as a man, which you will recognize and fulfill. As for myself, I have not despaired in the least, of the triumph of right. I repeat with the most vehement conviction: truth is on the march, and nothing will stop it. Today is only the beginning, for it is only today that the positions have become clear: on one side, those who are guilty, who do not want the light to shine forth, on the other, those who seek justice and who will give their lives to attain it. I said it before and I repeat it now: when truth is buried underground, it grows and it builds up so much force that the day it explodes it blasts everything with it. We shall see whether we have been setting ourselves up for the most resounding of disasters, yet to come.

But this letter is long, Mr. President, and it is time for me to conclude it.

I accuse Lt. Col. du Paty de Clam of being the diabolical creator of this miscarriage of justice-- unknowingly, I am willing to believe-- and of defending this sorry deed, over the last three years, by all manner of bizarre and evil machinations.

I accuse General Mercier of complicity, at least by mental weakness, in one of the greatest inequities of the century.

I accuse General Billot of having held in his hands absolute proof of Dreyfus's innocence and concealing it, thereby making himself guilty of crimes against mankind and justice, as a political expedient and a way for the compromised General Staff to save face.

I accuse General de Boisdeffre and General Gonse of complicity in the same crime, the former, no doubt, out of religious prejudice, the latter perhaps out of that esprit de corps that has transformed the War Office into an unassailable holy ark.

I accuse General de Pellieux and Major Ravary of conducting a fraudulent inquiry, by which I mean a monstrously biased one, as attested by the latter in a report that is an imperishable monument to naïve insolence.

I accuse the three handwriting experts, Messrs. Belhomme, Varinard and Couard, of

having submitted reports that were deceitful and fraudulent, unless a medical examination finds them to be suffering from a disease that impairs their eyesight and judgment.³⁶

I accuse the offices of the War Office of having used the press, particularly *L'Eclair* and *L'Echo de Paris*,³⁷ to conduct an abominable campaign to mislead public opinion and cover up their own wrongdoing

Finally, I accuse the first court martial of violating the law by convicting the accused on the basis of evidence that was kept secret, and I accuse the second court martial of covering up this illegality, on orders, by committing the judicial crime of acquitting a guilty man with full knowledge of his guilt.³⁸

In making these accusations I am aware that I am making myself liable to articles 30 and 31 of the July 29 1881 law on the press making libel a punishable offense. I expose myself to that risk voluntarily.

As for the people I am accusing, I do not know them, I have never seen them, and I bear them neither ill will nor hatred. To me they are mere entities, agents of harm to society. The action I am taking is no more than a radical measure to hasten the explosion of truth and justice.

I have but one passion, the search for light, in the name of humanity which has suffered so much and is entitled to happiness. My fiery protest is simply the cry of my very soul.

Let them dare, then, to bring me before a court of law and investigate in the full light of day!

I am waiting.³⁹

³⁶ On January 21, 1898, the handwriting experts sue Zola for libel.

³⁷ *L'Echo de Paris* (founded in 1844) and *L'Eclair* (founded in 1888) were both violently anti-Dreyfusard and the General Staff willingly leaked to them partisan information: for instance, in September 1896, *L'Eclair* was able to reveal to its readers that some incriminating - but secret - evidence had been presented by the prosecution during Dreyfus' trial in 1894. That charging "classified" file, hastily communicated to the military judges, had not even been mentioned to Dreyfus' defense lawyer, Edgar Demange, a civilian. The documents had, in fact, been forged to ensure a fast guilty verdict.

³⁸ On January 18, 1898, the Minister of War, General Billot, charged Zola and *L'Aurore* for libel. However, in spite of all Zola's bold accusations, the War Office astutely chose to consider only as diffamatory the last item specifically concerning the Esterhazy's court martial: that way, any direct mention of the Dreyfus case would be avoided .

³⁹ Epilogue: In February 1898, Emile Zola was sued for "J'accuse" by both the War Office and the handwriting experts. The trial received an enormous amount of publicity in France and abroad. Zola was found guilty of libel. He appealed the judgment but, in July, the verdict was reconfirmed with a one-year jail term and a very stiff financial penalty. Clemenceau advised Zola to leave the country in order to avoid being served notification of the sentence while continuing the fight. On July 18, 1898, Zola left secretly for England, where he lived incognito until his return on June 3, 1899. In August 1898, however, Maj. Hubert Joseph Henry (1846-1898) was forced to confess to Prime Minister Cavaignac that he was the one who had forged some of the early documents implicating Dreyfus: he was arrested, but committed suicide in his cell.

Esterhazy left France as soon as Maj. Henry, who had been covering up for him, was exposed. In the few

With my deepest respect, Mr. President

EMILE ZOLA

interviews he gave, he admitted that he had passed confidential documents to the Germans, but tried to present himself as a triple agent. He eventually settled in England, where he kept a low profile.

Félix Faure's sudden death in office in 1899 gave impetus to the Dreyfus Affair: during his state funeral, a few right-wingers led by ultra-nationalist writer Paul Déroulède tried unsuccessfully to stage a coup. In 1899 the Dreyfus case was brought before the Supreme Court of Appeal, which ordered a re-trial. However, this second court-martial, held in Rennes (Brittany) for security reasons, again pronounced Dreyfus guilty. Ten days after the verdict which caused a public uproar, a new, more progressive cabinet, with Premier Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau and President Émile Loubet (1838-1929), nullified that judgment and pardoned Capt. Dreyfus. It was only seven years later, in 1906, that Alfred Dreyfus was fully rehabilitated, restored to the army with the rank of Major, and decorated with the Legion of Honor. Although he soon retired, he re-enlisted in World War I.

Lt. Col. Picquart was also reinstated in 1906 and promoted to the rank of General. He served as Minister of War (1906-1909) in the cabinet of Premier Georges Clemenceau. His accidental death in 1914 was followed by a State funeral.

Zola's total involvement with the Dreyfus case cost him heavily: his extra-marital affair, for instance, was exposed, his estate was put up for auction in order to pay the fines, sales of his books suffered considerably, and he also became the target of vast amounts of hate mail and death threats. However, Zola felt genuinely that it was his duty as a human being - and as a Frenchman - to defend the innocent against well-connected bullies, and protect the values, such as Truth, Justice and Liberty, of the country he loved. His next series of novels, *Fécondité* (1899), *Travail* (1901) and *Vérité* (1903), dealt with these ideals. The last one, *Justice*, was never to be completed for, on September 29 1902, Zola was found dead at his home, victim of a highly suspicious accidental carbon monoxide poisoning.

His ashes were transferred in 1908 to the Pantheon in Paris. Even at this time, six years after Zola's death, the passions he had stirred by his “J'accuse” were not yet extinguished: during the ceremony, a disgruntled journalist shot Dreyfus in the arm. The definitive eulogy for Zola, however, had been given at his burial in 1902, when writer Anatole France declared: “He was a moment in the conscience of man.”

Ce texte est très exactement celui qui a été publié dans L'Aurore, le jeudi 13 janvier 1898. Il diffère sur quelques points de détail de la version qui sera ensuite publiée en librairie, en 1901, dans La Vérité en marche.

J'Accuse... !

LETTRE AU PRESIDENT DE LA REPUBLIQUE

Par EMILE ZOLA

LETTRE A M. FELIX FAURE

Président de la République

Monsieur le Président,

Me permettez-vous, dans ma gratitude pour le bienveillant accueil que vous m'avez fait un jour, d'avoir le souci de votre juste gloire et de vous dire que votre étoile, si heureuse jusqu'ici, est menacée de la plus honteuse, de la plus ineffaçable des taches ?

Vous êtes sorti sain et sauf des basses calomnies, vous avez conquis les coeurs. Vous apparaissez rayonnant dans l'apothéose de cette fête patriotique que l'alliance russe a été pour la France, et vous vous préparez à présider au solennel triomphe de notre Exposition universelle, qui couronnera notre grand siècle de travail, de vérité et de liberté. Mais quelle tache de boue sur votre nom - j'allais dire sur votre règne - que cette abominable affaire Dreyfus ! Un conseil de guerre vient, par ordre, d'oser acquitter un Esterhazy, soufflet suprême à toute vérité, à toute justice. Et c'est fini, la France a sur la joue cette souillure, l'histoire écrira que c'est sous votre présidence qu'un tel crime social a pu être commis.

Puisqu'ils ont osé, j'oserai aussi, moi. La vérité, je la dirai, car j'ai promis de la dire, si la justice, régulièrement saisie, ne la faisait pas, pleine et entière. Mon devoir est de parler, je ne veux pas être complice. Mes nuits seraient hantées par le spectre de l'innocent qui expie là-bas, dans la plus affreuse des tortures, un crime qu'il n'a pas commis.

Et c'est à vous, monsieur le Président, que je la crierai, cette vérité, de toute la force de ma révolte d'honnête homme. Pour votre honneur, je suis convaincu que vous l'ignorez. Et à qui donc dénoncerai-je la tourbe malfaisante des vrais coupables, si ce n'est à vous, le premier magistrat du pays ?

La vérité d'abord sur le procès et sur la condamnation de Dreyfus.

Un homme néfaste a tout mené, a tout fait, c'est le colonel du Paty de Clam, alors simple commandant. Il est l'affaire Dreyfus tout entière, on ne la connaîtra que lorsqu'une enquête loyale aura établi nettement ses actes et ses responsabilités. Il apparaît comme l'esprit le plus fumeux, le plus compliqué, hanté d'intrigues romanesques, se complaisant aux moyens des romans-feuilletons, les papiers volés, les lettres anonymes, les rendez-vous dans les endroits déserts, les femmes mystérieuses qui colportent, de nuit, des preuves accablantes. C'est lui qui imagina de dicter le bordereau à Dreyfus ; c'est lui qui rêva de l'étudier dans une pièce entièrement revêtue de glaces ; c'est lui que le commandant Forzinetti nous représente armé d'une lanterne sourde, voulant se faire

introduire près de l'accusé endormi, pour projeter sur son visage un brusque flot de lumière et surprendre ainsi son crime, dans l'émoi du réveil. Et je n'ai pas à tout dire, qu'on cherche, on trouvera. Je déclare simplement que le commandant du Paty de Clam, chargé d'instruire l'affaire Dreyfus, comme officier judiciaire, est, dans l'ordre des dates et des responsabilités, le premier coupable de l'effroyable erreur judiciaire qui a été commise.

Le bordereau était depuis quelque temps déjà entre les mains du colonel Sandherr, directeur du bureau des renseignements, mort depuis de paralysie générale. Des "fuites" avaient lieu, des papiers disparaissaient, comme il en disparaît aujourd'hui encore ; et l'auteur du bordereau était recherché, lorsqu'un a priori se fit peu à peu que cet auteur ne pouvait être qu'un officier de l'état-major, et un officier d'artillerie : double erreur manifeste, qui montre avec quel esprit superficiel on avait étudié ce bordereau, car un examen raisonné démontre qu'il ne pouvait s'agir que d'un officier de troupe. On cherchait donc dans la maison, on examinait les écritures, c'était comme une affaire de famille, un traître à surprendre dans les bureaux mêmes, pour l'en expulser. Et, sans que je veuille refaire ici une histoire connue en partie, le commandant du Paty de Clam entre en scène, dès qu'un premier soupçon tombe sur Dreyfus. A partir de ce moment, c'est lui qui a inventé Dreyfus, l'affaire devient son affaire, il se fait fort de confondre le traître, de l'amener à des aveux complets. Il y a bien le ministre de la guerre, le général Mercier, dont l'intelligence semble médiocre ; il y a bien le chef de l'état-major, le général de Boisdeffre, qui paraît avoir cédé à sa passion cléricale, et le sous-chef de l'état-major, le général Gonse, dont la conscience a pu s'accommoder de beaucoup de choses. Mais, au fond, il n'y a d'abord que le commandant du Paty de Clam, qui les mène tous, qui les hypnotise, car il s'occupe aussi de spiritisme, d'occultisme, il converse avec les esprits. On ne croira jamais les expériences auxquelles il a soumis le malheureux Dreyfus, les pièges dans lesquels il a voulu le faire tomber, les enquêtes folles, les imaginations monstrueuses, toute une démence torturante.

Ah ! cette première affaire, elle est un cauchemar, pour qui la connaît dans ses détails vrais ! Le commandant du Paty de Clam arrête Dreyfus, le met au secret. Il court chez madame Dreyfus, la terrorise, lui dit que, si elle parle, son mari est perdu. Pendant ce temps, le malheureux s'arrachait la chair, hurlait son innocence. Et l'instruction a été faite ainsi, comme dans une chronique du quinzième siècle, au milieu du mystère, avec une complication d'expédients farouches, tout cela basé sur une seule charge enfantine, ce bordereau imbécile, qui n'était pas seulement une trahison vulgaire, qui était aussi la plus impudente des escroqueries, car les fameux secrets livrés se trouvaient presque tous sans valeur. Si j'insiste, c'est que l'oeuf est ici, d'où va sortir plus tard le vrai crime, l'épouvantable déni de justice dont la France est malade. Je voudrais faire toucher du doigt comment l'erreur judiciaire a pu être possible, comment elle est née des machinations du commandant du Paty de Clam, comment le général Mercier, les généraux de Boisdeffre et Gonse ont pu s'y laisser prendre, engager peu à peu leur responsabilité dans cette erreur, qu'ils ont cru devoir, plus tard, imposer comme la vérité sainte, une vérité qui ne se discute même pas. Au début, il n'y a donc, de leur part, que de l'incurie et de l'inintelligence. Tout au plus, les sent-on céder aux passions religieuses du milieu et aux préjugés de l'esprit de corps. Ils ont laissé faire la sottise.

Mais voici Dreyfus devant le conseil de guerre. Le huis clos le plus absolu est exigé. Un traître aurait ouvert la frontière à l'ennemi, pour conduire l'empereur allemand jusqu'à Notre-Dame, qu'on ne prendrait pas des mesures de silence et de mystère plus étroites. La nation est frappée de stupeur, on chuchote des faits terribles, de ces trahisons

monstrueuses qui indignent l'Histoire, et naturellement la nation s'incline. Il n'y a pas de châtement assez sévère, elle applaudira à la dégradation publique, elle voudra que le coupable reste sur son rocher d'infamie, dévoré par le remords. Est-ce donc vrai, les choses indicibles, les choses dangereuses, capables de mettre l'Europe en flammes, qu'on a dû enterrer soigneusement derrière ce huis clos ? Non ! il n'y a eu, derrière, que les imaginations romanesques et démentes du commandant du Paty de Clam. Tout cela n'a été fait que pour cacher le plus saugrenu des romans-feuilletons. Et il suffit, pour s'en assurer, d'étudier attentivement l'acte d'accusation, lu devant le conseil de guerre.

Ah ! le néant de cet acte d'accusation ! Qu'un homme ait pu être condamné sur cet acte, c'est un prodige d'iniquité. Je défie les honnêtes gens de le lire, sans que leur cœur bondisse d'indignation et crie leur révolte, en pensant à l'expiation démesurée, là-bas, à l'île du Diable. Dreyfus sait plusieurs langues, crime ; on n'a trouvé chez lui aucun papier compromettant, crime ; il va parfois dans son pays d'origine, crime ; il est laborieux, il a le souci de tout savoir, crime ; il ne se trouble pas, crime ; il se trouble, crime. Et les naïvetés de rédaction, les formelles assertions dans le vide ! On nous avait parlé de quatorze chefs d'accusation : nous n'en trouvons qu'une seule en fin de compte, celle du bordereau ; et nous apprenons même que, les experts n'étaient pas d'accord, qu'un d'eux, M. Gobert, a été bousculé militairement, parce qu'il se permettait de ne pas conclure dans le sens désiré. On parlait aussi de vingt-trois officiers qui étaient venus accabler Dreyfus de leurs témoignages. Nous ignorons encore leurs interrogatoires, mais il est certain que tous ne l'avaient pas chargé ; et il est à remarquer, en outre, que tous appartenaient aux bureaux de la guerre. C'est un procès de famille, on est là entre soi, et il faut s'en souvenir : l'état-major a voulu le procès, l'a jugé, et il vient de le juger une seconde fois.

Donc, il ne restait que le bordereau, sur lequel les experts ne s'étaient pas entendus. On raconte que, dans la chambre du conseil, les juges allaient naturellement acquitter. Et, dès lors, comme l'on comprend l'obstination désespérée avec laquelle, pour justifier la condamnation, on affirme aujourd'hui l'existence d'une pièce secrète, accablante, la pièce qu'on ne peut montrer, qui légitime tout, devant laquelle nous devons nous incliner, le bon dieu invisible et inconnaissable. Je la nie, cette pièce, je la nie de toute ma puissance ! Une pièce ridicule, oui, peut-être la pièce où il est question de petites femmes, et où il est parlé d'un certain D... qui devient trop exigeant, quelque mari sans doute trouvant qu'on ne lui payait pas sa femme assez cher. Mais une pièce intéressant la défense nationale, qu'on ne saurait produire sans que la guerre fût déclarée demain, non, non ! C'est un mensonge ; et cela est d'autant plus odieux et cynique qu'ils mentent impunément sans qu'on puisse les en convaincre. Ils ameutent la France, ils se cachent derrière sa légitime émotion, ils ferment les bouches en troublant les cœurs, en pervertissant les esprits. Je ne connais pas de plus grand crime civique.

Voilà donc, monsieur le Président, les faits qui expliquent comment une erreur judiciaire a pu être commise ; et les preuves morales, la situation de fortune de Dreyfus, l'absence de motifs, son continuel cri d'innocence, achèvent de le montrer comme une victime des extraordinaires imaginations du commandant du Paty de Clam, du milieu clérical où il se trouvait, de la chasse aux "sales juifs", qui déshonore notre époque.

Et nous arrivons à l'affaire Esterhazy. Trois ans se sont passés, beaucoup de consciences restent troublées profondément, s'inquiètent, cherchent, finissent par se convaincre de l'innocence de Dreyfus.

Je ne ferai pas l'historique des doutes, puis de la conviction de M. Scheuter-Kestner. Mais, pendant qu'il fouillait de son côté, il se passait des faits graves à l'état-major même. Le colonel Sandherr était mort, et le lieutenant-colonel Picquart lui avait succédé comme chef du bureau des renseignements. Et c'est à ce titre, dans l'exercice de ses fonctions, que ce dernier eut un jour entre les mains une lettre-télégramme, adressée au commandant Esterhazy, par un agent d'une puissance étrangère. Son devoir strict était d'ouvrir une enquête. La certitude est qu'il n'a jamais agi en dehors de la volonté de ses supérieurs. Il soumit donc ses soupçons à ses supérieurs hiérarchiques, le général Gonse, puis le général de Boisdeffre, puis le général Billot, qui avait succédé au général Mercier comme ministre de la guerre. Le fameux dossier Picquart, dont il a été tant parlé, n'a jamais été que le dossier Billot, j'entends le dossier fait par un subordonné pour son ministre, le dossier qui doit exister encore au ministère de la guerre. Les recherches durèrent de mai à septembre 1896, et ce qu'il faut affirmer bien haut, c'est que le général Gonse était convaincu de la culpabilité d'Esterhazy, c'est que le général de Boisdeffre et le général Billot ne mettaient pas en doute que le fameux bordereau fût de l'écriture d'Esterhazy. L'enquête du lieutenant-colonel Picquart avait abouti à cette constatation certaine. Mais l'émoi était grand, car la condamnation d'Esterhazy entraînait inévitablement la révision du procès Dreyfus ; et c'était ce que l'état-major ne voulait à aucun prix.

Il dut y avoir là une minute psychologique pleine d'angoisse. Remarquez que le général Billot n'était compromis dans rien, il arrivait tout frais, il pouvait faire la vérité. Il n'osa pas, dans la terreur sans doute de l'opinion publique, certainement aussi dans la crainte de livrer tout l'état-major, le général de Boisdeffre, le général Gonse, sans compter les sous-ordres. Puis, ce ne fut là qu'une minute de combat entre sa conscience et ce qu'il croyait être l'intérêt militaire. Quand cette minute fut passée, il était déjà trop tard. Il s'était engagé, il était compromis. Et, depuis lors, sa responsabilité n'a fait que grandir, il a pris à sa charge le crime des autres, il est aussi coupable que les autres, il est plus coupable gueux, car il a été le maître de faire justice, et il n'a rien fait. Comprenez-vous cela ! voici un an que le général Billot, que les généraux de Boisdeffre et Gonse savent que Dreyfus est innocent, et ils ont gardé pour eux cette effroyable chose ! Et ces gens-là dorment, et ils ont des femmes et des enfants qu'ils aiment !

Le colonel Picquart avait rempli son devoir d'honnête homme. Il insistait auprès de ses supérieurs, au nom de la justice. Il les suppliait même, il leur disait combien leurs délais étaient impolitiques, devant le terrible orage qui s'amoncelait, qui devait éclater, lorsque la vérité serait connue. Ce fut, plus tard, le langage que M. Scheurer-Kestner tint également au général Billot, l'adjurant par patriotisme de prendre en main l'affaire, de ne pas la laisser s'aggraver, au point de devenir un désastre public. Non ! le crime était commis, l'état-major ne pouvait plus avouer son crime. Et le lieutenant-colonel Picquart fut envoyé en mission, on l'éloigna de plus loin en plus loin, jusqu'en Tunisie, où l'on voulut même un jour honorer sa bravoure en le chargeant d'une mission qui l'aurait sûrement fait massacrer, dans les parages où le marquis de Morès a trouvé la mort. Il n'était pas en disgrâce, le général Gonse entretenait avec lui une correspondance amicale. Seulement, il est des secrets qu'il ne fait pas bon d'avoir surpris.

A Paris, la vérité marchait, irrésistible, et l'on sait de quelle façon l'orage attendu éclata. M. Mathieu Dreyfus dénonça le commandant Esterhazy comme le véritable auteur du bordereau, au moment où M. Scheurer-Kestner allait déposer, entre les mains du garde des sceaux, une demande en révision du procès. Et c'est ici que le commandant

Esterhazy paraît. Des témoignages le montrent d'abord affolé, prêt au suicide ou à la fuite. Puis, tout d'un coup, il paye d'audace, il étonne Paris par la violence de son attitude. C'est que du secours lui était venu, il avait reçu une lettre anonyme l'avertissant des menées de ses ennemis, une dame mystérieuse s'était même dérangée de nuit pour lui remettre une pièce volée à l'état-major, qui devait le sauver. Et je ne puis m'empêcher de retrouver là le lieutenant-colonel du Paty de Clam en reconnaissant les expédients de son imagination fertile. Son oeuvre, la culpabilité de Dreyfus était en péril, et il a voulu sûrement défendre son oeuvre. La révision du procès, mais c'était l'écroulement du roman-feuilleton si extravagant, si tragique, dont le dénouement abominable a lieu à l'île du Diable ! C'est ce qu'il ne pouvait permettre. Dès lors, le duel va avoir lieu entre le lieutenant-colonel Picquart et le lieutenant-colonel du Paty de Clam, l'un le visage découvert, l'autre masqué. On les retrouvera prochainement tous deux devant la justice civile. Au fond, c'est toujours l'état-major qui se défend, qui ne veut pas avouer son crime, dont l'abomination grandit d'heure en heure.

On s'est demandé avec stupeur quels étaient les protecteurs du commandant Esterhazy. C'est d'abord, dans l'ombre, le lieutenant-colonel du Paty de Clam qui a tout machiné, qui a tout conduit. Sa main se trahit aux moyens saugrenus. Puis, c'est le général de Boisdeffre, c'est le général Gonse, c'est le général Billot lui-même, qui sont bien obligés de faire acquitter le commandant, puisqu'ils ne peuvent laisser reconnaître l'innocence de Dreyfus, sans que les bureaux de la guerre croulent dans le mépris public. Et le beau résultat de cette situation prodigieuse est que l'honnête homme, là-dedans, le lieutenant-colonel Picquart, qui seul a fait son devoir, va être la victime, celui qu'on bafouera et qu'on punira. O justice, quelle affreuse désespérance serre le coeur ! On va jusqu'à dire que c'est lui le faussaire, qu'il a fabriqué la carte-télégramme pour perdre Esterhazy. Mais, grand Dieu ! pourquoi ? dans quel but ? Donnez un motif. Est-ce que celui-là aussi est payé par les juifs ? Le joli de l'histoire est qu'il était justement antisémite. Oui ! nous assistons à ce spectacle infâme, des hommes perdus de dettes et de crimes dont on proclame l'innocence, tandis qu'on frappe l'honneur même, un homme à la vie sans tache ! Quand une société en est là, elle tombe en décomposition.

Voilà donc, monsieur le Président, l'affaire Esterhazy : un coupable qu'il s'agissait d'innocenter. Depuis bientôt deux mois, nous pouvons suivre heure par heure la belle besogne. J'abrège, car ce n'est ici, en gros, que le résumé de l'histoire dont les brûlantes pages seront un jour écrites tout au long. Et nous avons donc vu le général de Pellieux, puis le commandant Ravary, conduire une enquête scélérate d'où les coquins sortent transfigurés et les honnêtes gens salis. Puis, on a convoqué le conseil de guerre.

Comment a-t-on pu espérer qu'un conseil de guerre déferait ce qu'un conseil de guerre avait fait ?

Je ne parle même pas du choix toujours possible des juges. L'idée supérieure de discipline, qui est dans le sang de ces soldats, ne suffit-elle à infirmer leur pouvoir même d'équité ? Qui dit discipline dit obéissance. Lorsque le ministre de la guerre, le grand chef a établi publiquement, aux acclamations de la représentation nationale, l'autorité absolue de la chose jugée, vous voulez qu'un conseil de guerre lui donne un formel démenti ? Hiérarchiquement, cela est impossible. Le général Billot a suggestionné les juges par sa déclaration, et ils ont jugé comme ils doivent aller au feu, sans raisonner. L'opinion préconçue qu'ils ont apportée sur leur siège, est évidemment celle-ci : "Dreyfus a été condamné pour crime de trahison par un conseil de guerre ; il est donc coupable, et nous, conseil de guerre, nous ne pouvons le déclarer innocent : or nous savons que

reconnaître la culpabilité d'Esterhazy, ce serait proclamer l'innocence de Dreyfus. " Rien ne pouvait les faire sortir de là.

Ils ont rendu une sentence inique, qui à jamais pèsera sur nos conseils de guerre, qui entachera désormais de suspicion tous leurs arrêts. Le premier conseil de guerre a pu être inintelligent, le second est forcément criminel. Son excuse, je le répète, est que le chef suprême avait parlé, déclarant la chose jugée inattaquable, sainte et supérieure aux hommes, de sorte que des inférieurs ne pouvaient dire le contraire. On nous parle de l'honneur de l'armée, on veut que nous l'aimions, que nous la respections. Ah ! certes, oui, l'armée qui se lèverait à la première menace, qui défendrait la terre française, elle est tout le peuple et nous n'avons pour elle que tendresse et respect. Mais il ne s'agit pas d'elle, dont nous voulons justement la dignité, dans notre besoin de justice. Il s'agit du sabre, le maître qu'on nous donnera demain peut-être. Et baiser dévotement la poignée du sabre, le dieu, non !

Je l'ai démontré d'autre part : l'affaire Dreyfus était l'affaire des bureaux de la guerre, un officier de l'état-major, dénoncé par ses camarades de l'état-major, condamné sous la pression des chefs de l'état-major. Encore une fois, il ne peut revenir innocent sans que tout l'état-major soit coupable. Aussi les bureaux, par tous les moyens imaginables, par des campagnes de presse, par des communications, par des influences, n'ont-ils couvert Esterhazy que pour perdre une seconde fois Dreyfus. Quel coup de balai le gouvernement républicain devrait donner dans cette jésuitière, ainsi que les appelle le général Billot lui-même ! Où est-il, le ministère vraiment fort et d'un patriotisme sage, qui osera tout y refondre et tout y renouveler ? Que de gens je connais qui, devant une guerre possible, tremblent d'angoisse, en sachant dans quelles mains est la défense nationale ! et quel nid de basses intrigues, de commérages et de dilapidations, est devenu cet asile sacré, où se décide le sort de la patrie ! On s'épouvante devant le jour terrible que vient d'y jeter l'affaire Dreyfus, ce sacrifice humain d'un malheureux, d'un "sale juif" ! Ah ! tout ce qui s'est agité là de démente et de sottise, des imaginations folles, des pratiques de basse police, des moeurs d'inquisition et de tyrannies, le bon plaisir de quelques galonnés mettant leurs bottes sur la nation, lui rentrant dans la gorge son cri de vérité et de justice, sous le prétexte menteur et sacrilège de la raison d'Etat !

Et c'est un crime encore que de s'être appuyé sur la presse immonde, que de s'être laissé défendre par toute la fripouille de Paris, de sorte que voilà la fripouille qui triomphe insolentement, dans la défaite du droit et de la simple probité. C'est un crime d'avoir accusé de troubler la France ceux qui la veulent généreuse, à la tête des nations libres et justes, lorsqu'on ourdit soi-même l'impudent complot d'imposer l'erreur, devant le monde entier. C'est un crime d'égarer l'opinion, d'utiliser pour une besogne de mort cette opinion qu'on a pervertie jusqu'à la faire délirer. C'est un crime d'empoisonner les petits et les humbles, d'exaspérer les passions de réaction et d'intolérance, en s'abritant derrière l'odieux antisémitisme, dont la grande France libérale des droits de l'homme mourra, si elle n'en est pas guérie. C'est un crime que d'exploiter le patriotisme pour des oeuvres de haine, et c'est un crime, enfin, que de faire du sabre le dieu moderne, lorsque toute la science humaine est au travail pour l'oeuvre prochaine de vérité et de justice.

Cette vérité, cette justice, que nous avons si passionnément voulues, quelle détresse à les voir ainsi souffletées, plus méconnues et plus obscurcies ! Je me doute de l'écroulement qui doit avoir lieu dans l'âme de M. Scheurer-Kestner, et je crois bien qu'il finira par éprouver un remords, celui de n'avoir pas agi révolutionnairement, le jour de

l'interpellation au Sénat, en lâchant tout le paquet, pour tout jeter à bas. Il a été le grand honnête homme, l'homme de sa vie loyale, il a cru que la vérité se suffisait à elle-même, surtout lorsqu'elle lui apparaissait éclatante comme le plein jour. A quoi bon tout bouleverser, puisque bientôt le soleil allait luire ? Et c'est de cette sérénité confiante dont il est si cruellement puni. De même pour le lieutenant-colonel Picquart, qui, par un sentiment de haute dignité, n'a pas voulu publier les lettres du général Gonse. Ces scrupules l'honorent d'autant plus que, pendant qu'il restait respectueux de la discipline, ses supérieurs le faisaient couvrir de boue, instruisaient eux-mêmes son procès, de la façon la plus inattendue et la plus outrageante. Il y a deux victimes, deux braves gens, deux coeurs simples, qui ont laissé faire Dieu, tandis que le diable agissait. Et l'on a même vu, pour le lieutenant colonel Picquart, cette chose ignoble : un tribunal français, après avoir laissé le rapporteur charger publiquement un témoin, l'accuser de toutes les fautes, a fait le huis clos, lorsque ce témoin a été introduit pour s'expliquer et se défendre. Je dis que cela est un crime de plus et que ce crime soulèvera la conscience universelle. Décidément, les tribunaux militaires se font une singulière idée de la justice.

Telle est donc la simple vérité, monsieur le Président, et elle est effroyable, elle restera pour votre présidence une souillure. Je me doute bien que vous n'avez aucun pouvoir en cette affaire, que vous êtes le prisonnier de la Constitution et de votre entourage. Vous n'en avez pas moins un devoir d'homme, auquel vous songerez, et que vous remplirez. Ce n'est pas, d'ailleurs, que je désespère le moins du monde du triomphe. Je le répète avec une certitude plus véhémement : la vérité est en marche et rien ne l'arrêtera. C'est aujourd'hui seulement que l'affaire commence, puisque aujourd'hui seulement les positions sont nettes : d'une part, les coupables qui ne veulent pas que la lumière se fasse ; de l'autre, les justiciers qui donneront leur vie pour qu'elle soit faite. Quand on enferme la vérité sous terre, elle s'y amasse, elle y prend une force telle d'explosion que, le jour où elle éclate, elle fait tout sauter avec elle. On verra bien si l'on ne vient pas de préparer, pour plus tard, le plus retentissant des désastres.

Mais cette lettre est longue, monsieur le Président, et il est temps de conclure.

J'accuse le lieutenant-colonel du Paty de Clam d'avoir été l'ouvrier diabolique de l'erreur judiciaire, en inconscient, je veux le croire, et d'avoir ensuite défendu son oeuvre néfaste, depuis trois ans, par les machinations les plus saugrenues et les plus coupables.

J'accuse le général Mercier de s'être rendu complice, tout au moins par faiblesse d'esprit, d'une des plus grandes iniquités du siècle.

J'accuse le général Billot d'avoir eu entre les mains les preuves certaines de l'innocence de Dreyfus et de les avoir étouffées, de s'être rendu coupable de ce crime de lèse-humanité et de lèse-justice, dans un but politique, et pour sauver l'état-major compromis.

J'accuse le général de Boisdeffre et le général Gonse de s'être rendus complices du même crime, l'un sans doute par passion cléricale, l'autre peut-être par cet esprit de corps qui fait des bureaux de la guerre l'arche sainte, inattaquable.

J'accuse le général de Pellieux et le commandant Ravary d'avoir fait une enquête scélérate, j'entends par là une enquête de la plus monstrueuse partialité, dont nous avons, dans le rapport du second, un impérissable monument de naïve audace.

J'accuse les trois experts en écritures, les sieurs Belhomme, Varinard et Couard, d'avoir

fait des rapports mensongers et frauduleux, à moins qu'un examen médical ne les déclare atteints d'une maladie de la vue et du jugement.

J'accuse les bureaux de la guerre d'avoir mené dans la presse, particulièrement dans L'Eclair et dans L'Echo de Paris, une campagne abominable, pour égarer l'opinion et couvrir leur faute.

J'accuse enfin le premier conseil de guerre d'avoir violé le droit, en condamnant un accusé sur une pièce restée secrète, et j'accuse le second conseil de guerre d'avoir couvert cette illégalité, par ordre, en commettant à son tour le crime juridique d'acquitter sciemment un coupable.

En portant ces accusations, je n'ignore pas que je me mets sous le coup des articles 30 et 31 de la loi sur la presse du 29 juillet 1881, qui punit les délits de diffamation. Et c'est volontairement que je m'expose.

Quant aux gens que j'accuse, je ne les connais pas, je ne les ai jamais vus, je n'ai contre eux ni rancune ni haine. Ils ne sont pour moi que des entités, des esprits de malveillance sociale. Et l'acte que j'accomplis ici n'est qu'un moyen révolutionnaire pour hâter l'explosion de la vérité et de la justice.

Je n'ai qu'une passion, celle de la lumière, au nom de l'humanité qui a tant souffert et qui a droit au bonheur. Ma protestation enflammée n'est que le cri de mon âme. Qu'on ose donc me traduire en cour d'assises et que l'enquête ait lieu au grand jour !

J'attends.

Veuillez agréer, Monsieur le Président, l'assurance de mon profond respect.

EMILE ZOLA

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Emile Zola". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and somewhat stylized, with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.