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THE WORKING-CLASS.
AS PORTRAYED IN
THE ROUGON-MACQUART SERIES
BY EMILE ZOLA

by
Ian Kim Hallaran, B.A.

A Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the Master of Arts degree

WATERLOO LUTHERAN UNIVERSITY

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F O R E W O R D

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the portrayal of the working-class by Emile Zola in his Rougon-Macquart and to present the working-class as Zola saw it. For this study, all twenty novels of Les Rougon-Macquart were examined, although they have not all been dealt with in detail here because many of them do not focus on the working-class.

I would like to express here my appreciation to Dr. Dawson for his helpful suggestions and for the time he spent reading and correcting this thesis.

LIST OF THE NOVELS IN ZOLA'S ROUGON-MACQUART.

- LA FORTUNE DES ROUGON, published in 1870
LA CUREE, published in 1871
LE VENTRE DE PARIS, published in 1873
LA CONQUETE DE PLASSANS, published in 1874
LA FAUTE DE L'ABBE MOURET, published in 1875
SON EXCELLENCE EUGENE ROUGON, published in 1876
L'ASSOMMOIR, published in 1877
UNE PAGE D'AMOUR, published in 1877
NANA, published in 1880
POT-BOUILLE, published in 1882
AU BONHEUR DES DAMES, published in 1883
LA JOIE DE VIVRE, published in 1884
GERMINAL, published in 1885
L'OEUVRE, published in 1886
LA TERRE, published in 1887
LE REVE, published in 1888
LA BETE HUMAINE, published in 1890
L'ARGENT, published in 1891
LA DEBACLE, published in 1892
LE DOCTEUR PASCAL, published in 1893

NOTE: E.P. in the notes refers to the Pléiade edition
of LES ROUGON-MACQUART

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INTRODUCTION

Zola's Rougon-Macquart has as its setting the French Second Empire, beginning with the last days of the Second Republic of 1848 and finishing with the years immediately following the collapse of the French nation in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. In December 1851, Louis Napoleon seizes power. He immediately institutes repressive measures and carries out many arrests. He does initiate some good works - Mutual Benefit Societies, free burial, orphanages, asylums, workmen's dwellings, agricultural banks, bath and wash-houses, hospitals, pawn-shops and Labour Exchanges. Yet, it is the kindness of a despot.¹ Extensive properties of Louis Philippe are confiscated. Press censorship is tightened. All officials have to swear an oath of allegiance. The prefects and mayors are appointed by and are responsible to the central government. All that is possible is done to insure the election of the official candidates, those named by the government, and all power of any importance is in Louis' hands. Louis Napoleon becomes dictator. But economic conditions improve and people are optimistic. A plebiscite in the autumn of 1852 gives overwhelming support to the Empire.

Although it is often said that the Empire is changing in character all of the time, it is divided into two phases. The Authoritarian Empire lasts from 1852 until 1859, and the

Liberal Empire lasts from 1860 until 1869.² During the first phase, Louis Napoleon tries to make his authority acceptable in several ways - foreign adventures, the garrisoning of Rome, industrialization and the reduction of tariffs, clearing some of the slums and creating new buildings, international expositions and court functions. He tries to keep every class contented and co-operative.³

The Second Empire is marked by the expansion of credit, industry, trade, railways, roads and communications, but Louis is most interested in the rebuilding of Paris. He seeks to improve the living conditions of the workers and to make Paris the most attractive city in the world. Under the direction of Baron Haussmann, Paris is given new streets and boulevards, new gardens, new bridges, new buildings and new shops. There are many squares and open spaces, a race track is constructed and the sewer system is improved. Napoleon himself is responsible for the construction of the Halles, the great central market in Paris, and Haussmann's greatest achievement is the construction of the new Paris Opera. However, this is primarily an age of materialism and the creation of financial empires; many of Haussmann's builders merely replace poor, old buildings with poor, new ones.

Throughout the Second Empire the French Church enjoys official favour and outward prosperity. It is rich and powerful, but interest in religion is declining and, as the

Empire progresses, there are strong feelings of anti-clericalism developing. Opposition to Louis is mounting too and after 1860 he is forced to make concessions. Parliamentary reform is effected and the press laws are relaxed. There are commercial treaties with Britain and attempts at agricultural reform. Louis tries to help the workers with old age pensions, accident insurance, co-operative mining, poor men's lawyers and priests, the abolition of the worker's identity card, and the equality of employer and employee before the law. He initiates educational reform, grants more freedom of speech, and provides more publicity of government policy.

But, in spite of all his efforts and good intentions, the workers remain comparatively poor and he is unable to wipe out poverty. The Second Empire sees the rise of the French Labour Movement and the First International. The workers start demanding unions and the right to strike. Economic progress stagnates during the sixties. The cotton-textile industry suffers due to the American Civil War, a disease of the silk worm hurts the silk industry and disease strikes the vineyards. There are many financial and agricultural crises. There are floods and famines. The great hopes that were born with the Empire are dying.

However, through concessions, promises and careful manipulating, Louis Napoleon manages to keep the support of the masses until the very end, and, at no time, is there ever

any danger of a revolution.⁴ Most people still retain some confidence. But when the war begins in 1870, the whole society caves in. It is a shallow society, one built on false strength, false values and false hope. Most people in the middle and upper-classes are weak and corrupt - they lead a soft life which has little real meaning. The working-class is suffering. It is very poor, miserable, wracked by alcoholism and sexual promiscuity, and it works too hard for too little. When the war with Prussia comes, everything falls flat and the French are crushed. Such is the historical setting for Zola's Rougon-Macquart.

The Rougon-Macquart is the history of a family which has its origins in the working-class and spreads to all levels. It is also the picture of a society, that of the Second Empire, with many kinds of people - financiers, professionals, merchants, lawyers, priests, doctors, artists, politicians, actors, prostitutes and many types of workers. Zola's series of novels deals with all of the social classes - the comfortable, wealthy aristocrats who surround themselves with hordes of servants; the bourgeois who chase after money, power and women; and the workers who have built most of the new wonders of France, but who are gaining no benefits really from the results of their efforts. These people are of all characters and personalities - some good and some not. They are both from the city and from the country. In short, Zola's

Rougon-Macquart is a sort of Comédie Humaine in miniature.

Something must also be said about Zola's theory of the novel. He has researched the areas of physiology and experimental medicine where he was influenced by Claude Bernard.⁵ Indeed, it is on his scientific, experimental approach to medicine that Zola bases his scientific, experimental novel, merely transferring the experimental method in a scientific field to literature. Claude Bernard is the greatest influence in the development of Zola's theory of the novel. Zola has studied the theory of evolution by Charles Darwin.⁶ Influenced by Dr. Lucas⁷ and Taine⁸, he has come to the conclusion that the sole motivating factors in the life of any individual are his heredity and his environment. Further, an individual with a particular heredity and a particular environment will have to be a particular type of person - in other words, he is speaking of determinism. It is often said, however, that Zola could have researched the question of heredity more thoroughly, and it is generally accepted today that the factors of heredity and environment are not as important as Zola came to believe.

In the Rougon-Macquart, Zola applies what he has learned from his research. He seeks to create the "experimental novel"⁹, a scientific novel of observation in which the novelist is merely an impartial observer and a recorder of facts. It is the scientific study of a given milieu which

seeks to reproduce reality as accurately as possible, to give a photographic picture of what is there, and to explain it - after the fashion of a scientific experiment. Before writing his novels, he conducts a lengthy documentation. He visits the areas about which he is going to write - the Paris market, the department store, the mine, hospitals, factories, suburbs, farms, goes for a ride on a locomotive, etc. He speaks with witnesses, reads old magazine and newspaper accounts of the Empire, collecting information wherever he can find it, taking copious notes on everything. Although the first novel of the Rougon-Macquart is not published until after the Franco-Prussian War, the documentation is extensive and in large part accurate. It must not be forgotten either that Zola grew up during the Second Empire and observed first-hand much about which he later writes.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the portrayal of the working-class by Emile Zola in his Rougon-Macquart and to present the working-class as Zola saw it. This will be done by choosing representative examples, categories of people if you wish, with the aim of bringing out the dominant characteristics of working-class life. The groups which Zola presents in any reasonable detail, and those which I am going to look at here, are - the people of the Paris market, the city worker, the department store worker, the fisherman, the miner, the farmer, the servant, the railway worker and the

soldier. These nine groups represent a good cross-section of the working-class and they allow one to generalize accurately about all of the workers of the period. Although varied in occupation and scattered in location, their lives are strikingly similar. The overall picture shows that most of them are over-worked, under-paid, poorly clothed, under-nourished, poor, wretched, miserable and resigned to their condition. And their living conditions are horrible! These people are the products of an environment which has given rise to violence, crime, sexual promiscuity and alcoholism. They are basically cut off from the rest of society and from the wealth they help to create, and although upward social mobility is possible, it is very rare. Most are born, live and die in misery.

- 1 Thompson, James Matthew, Louis Napoleon and the Second Empire, p. 132.
- 2 Ibid., p. 225.
- 3 Ibid., p. 227.
- 4 Cobban, Alfred, A History of Modern France, v.II, p. 196.
- 5 see: Bernard, Claude, Introduction à la Médecine Expérimentale (1865).
- 6 see: Darwin, Charles, The Origin of the Species (1859).
- 7 see: Lucas, Dr. Prosper, Traité de l'Hérédité Naturelle (1847-50).
- 8 see: Taine, H., L'Introduction à L'Histoire de la Littérature Anglaise (1863).
- 9 see: Zola, Emile, Le Roman Expérimental (1880).

I THE PEOPLE OF THE BIG MARKET

Although this section of Paris has now disappeared, it is very much alive during the Second Empire. The Halles is a gigantic market in Paris which is crawling with people - the farmers who bring their produce to sell, the wholesalers, the merchants and, of course, the buyers, mainly lower or lower middle-class men and women who come here to shop. This is a world apart, a self-contained unit, generally severed from the rest of Paris, which is looked upon by many of the inhabitants of the Halles as the outside world, a far-away city to be scorned and despised:

Quand Mme François parlait de Paris, elle était pleine d'ironie et de dédain; elle le traitait en ville très éloignée, tout à fait ridicule et méprisable, dans laquelle elle ne consentait à mettre les pieds que la nuit.¹

Most of the inhabitants of the Halles never leave - this is their entire existence. They are born, grow up, marry, have children, live out their days, and die, all right here. Of course, there are a few who leave the Halles to seek a better life on the outside, and those who enter from elsewhere, but, in general, this is a world apart, self-perpetuating and unique.

There are many aspects of life here which can be examined. Indeed, one could easily limit himself to descriptions of food alone. I want to present a general picture of life as it is lived by the people of the Halles - the market filled with food, the daily battle for existence, the struggle of the

"lean" and the "fat", the attitudes, the rules - those details which combine to present the best picture of life here.

The day begins for many before sunrise. It is at this time that the farmers bring their produce into market. They are still asleep, riding in their wagons full of food, holding the horses' reins in their hands. The horses, accustomed to this so-often travelled route, move slowly along on their own. These men and women, riding through the darkness toward Paris, are coarse, rough, often vulgar, but able workers who must fight for their existence, getting up before dawn to do battle in the market-place where they will try to sell their produce for the highest possible price to those who want to take it from them for a fraction of its worth. Some will sell it quickly to one of the merchants there and then go home, others will remain to sell it bit by bit to the throngs of people that will surge all around during the morning hours.

On entering the city they pass through customs. At the market they unload their wagons and set up shop. Each has his own little spot where he will neatly arrange his produce for sale. At this hour of the morning the market is still quiet:

Et, au ras du trottoir, il n'y avait encore de bien éveillé que les lanternes dansant au bout de bras invisibles, enjambant d'un saut le sommeil qui traînait là, gens et légumes en tas, attendant le jour.²

All around him, Florent can see the stalls and booths of those who have come to sell their products:

Mais ce qui le surprenait, c'était, aux deux bords de la rue, de gigantesques pavillons, dont les toits superposés lui semblaient grandir, s'étendre, se perdre, au fond d'un poudroisement de lueurs. Il rêvait, l'esprit affaibli, à une suite de palais, énormes et réguliers, d'une légèreté de cristal, allumant sur leurs façades les milles raies de flammes de persiennes continues et sans fin. Entre les arêtes fines des piliers, ces minces barres jaunes mettaient des échelles de lumière, qui montaient jusqu'à la ligne sombre des premiers toits, qui gravissaient l'entassement des toits supérieurs, posant dans leur carrure les grandes carcasses à jour de salles immenses, où traînaient, sous le jaunissement du gaz, un pêle-mêle de formes grises, effacées et dormantes. }

What is sold at the market - fruit, flowers, fish, vegetables, cheese, butter, meat, fowl, etc. - is located according to type. More and more peasants are arriving in their wagons full of produce. The market is becoming cluttered and business has begun. There is a good deal of haggling back and forth as buyers quarrel at length over prices they feel are too high. The rest of Paris is only just starting to awaken, but the market is already overflowing with activity. Florent and his guide take a trip through the market-place:

Mais, dans les grandes rues couvertes, la vie affluait. Le long des trottoirs, aux deux bords, des maraîchers étaient encore là, de petits cultivateurs, venus des environs de Paris, étalant sur des paniers leur récolte de la veille au soir, bottes de légumes, poignées de fruits. Au milieu du va-et-vient incessant de la foule, des voitures entraient sous les voûtes, en ralentissant le trot sonnante de leurs chevaux. À tous les pas, maintenant, ils devaient s'arrêter. La marée arrivait, les camions se succédaient, charriant les hautes cages de bois pleines de bourriches, que les chemins de fer apportent toutes chargées de l'Océan. Et, pour se garer des camions de la marée de plus en plus pressés et inquiétants, ils se jetaient sous les roues des camions du beurre, des oeufs et des fromages, de grands

chariots jaunes, à quatre chevaux, à lanternes de couleur; des forts enlevaient des caisses d'oeufs, les paniers de fromages et de beurre, qu'ils portaient dans le pavillon de la criée, où des employés en casquette écrivaient sur des calepins, à la lueur du gaz.⁴

What then spreads out before them becomes a veritable sea of food and colour:

Mais Claude était monté sur le banc, d'enthousiasme. Il força son compagnon à admirer le jour se levant sur les légumes. C'était une mer. Elle s'étendait de la pointe Saint-Eustache à la rue des Halles, entre les deux groupes de pavillons. Et, aux deux bouts, dans les deux carrefours, le flot grandissait encore, les légumes submergeaient les pavés... Ces tas moutonnants comme des flots pressés, ce fleuve de verdure qui semblait couler dans l'encaissement de la chaussée, pareil à la débâcle des pluies d'automne, prenaient des ombres délicates et perlées, des violets attendris, des roses teintés de lait, des verts noyés dans des jaunes, toutes les pâleurs qui font du ciel une soie changeante au lever du soleil; et, à mesure que l'incendie du matin montait en jets de flamme... les légumes s'éveillaient davantage, sortaient du grand bleuissement traînant à terre. Les salades, les laitues, les scaroles, les chicorées, ouvertes et grasses encore de terreau, montraient leurs coeurs éclatants; les paquets d'épinards, les paquets d'oseille, les bouquets d'artichauts, les entassements de haricots et de pois, les empilements de romaines, liées d'un brin de paille, chantaient toute la gamme du vert, de la laque verte des cosses au gros vert des feuilles; gamme soutenue qui allait en se mourant, jusqu'aux panachures des pieds de céleris et des bottes de poireaux. Mais les notes aiguës, ce qui chantait plus haut, c'étaient toujours les taches vives des carottes, les taches pures des navets, semées en quantité prodigieuse le long du marché... Les choux faisaient des montagnes; les énormes choux blancs... les choux frisés, dont les grandes feuilles ressemblaient à des vasques de bronze; les choux rouges, que l'aube changeait en des floraisons superbes, lie de vin, avec des meurtrissures de carmin et de pourpre sombre. À l'autre bout... l'ouverture de la rue Rambuteau était barrée par une barricade de potirons orangés, sur deux rangs, s'étalant, élargissant leurs ventres. Et le vernis mordoré d'un panier d'oignons, le rouge saignant d'un tas de tomates, l'effacement jaunâtre d'un lot de concombres, le violet sombre d'une

grappe d'aubergines, çà et là, s'allumaient; pendant que de gros radis noirs, rangés en nappes de deuil, laissaient encore quelques trous de ténèbres au milieu des joies vibrantes du réveil.⁵

Later on, Florent, having lost his guide, cannot find his way out of the Halles:

Il n'eut plus qu'une pensée, qu'un besoin, s'éloigner des Halles... Les trois rues du carrefour... étaient encombrées de voitures de toutes sortes; des légumes couvraient les trottoirs... Les Halles débordaient. Il essaya de sortir de ce flot qui l'atteignait dans sa fuite... Et il s'arrêta, découragé, effaré, ne pouvant se dégager de cette infernale ronde d'herbes qui finissaient par tourner autour de lui en le liant aux jambes de leurs minces verdure.⁶

The market is a monster of a place - a huge pulsating heart, pumping food into the veins of Paris:

C'était comme un grand organe central battant furieusement, jetant le sang de la vie dans toutes les veines.⁷

Florent still cannot escape:

C'était l'agonie... Il marcha devant lui, entra dans les légumes. Il s'y perdit... Florent se heurtait à mille obstacles... il glissait... il étouffait... Alors, stupide, il s'arrêta, il s'abandonna aux poussées des uns, aux injures des autres; il ne fut plus qu'une chose battue, roulée, au fond de la mer montante.⁸

The real business is conducted in the morning; in the afternoon, things quiet down considerably:

Puis, l'après-midi, les Halles se calmaient, s'endormaient... Ce n'était plus l'écrasement, les poussées, le brouhaha de dix heures.⁹

It would perhaps be reasonable to assume that such a place, overflowing with activity, is one of almost total chaos, not organized in the slightest way, but such is not the case. Not only does everyone have a particular area from which to

sell, he also has a fairly regular clientele. What is more, the Halles is organized from the outside:

- Il y a deux contrôles... celui de la préfecture de la Seine et celui de la préfecture de police. Cette dernière, qui nomme les facteurs, prétend avoir la charge de les surveiller. L'administration de la Ville, de son côté, entend assister à des transactions qu'elle frappe d'une taxe.

Il continua de sa petite voix froide, racontant tout au long la querelle des deux préfectures.¹⁰

The area under such strict control is the one in which the sea-foods are sold. Agents are appointed by the police to keep track of all business, and records are kept on people and the produce they sell. The city has placed a tax on sales. Both the city and the police are keeping an eye on what happens, and both would like to have sole jurisdiction in the area. This causes a quarrel. In addition to these two controls, there is also an inspector:

Lorsque M. Verlaque acheva de mettre Florent au courant de ses nouvelles occupations, il lui recommanda de ménager certaines marchandes, s'il ne voulait se rendre la vie impossible; il poussa même la sympathie jusqu'à lui apprendre les petits secrets du métier, les tolérances nécessaires, les sévérités de comédie, les cadeaux acceptables. Un inspecteur est à la fois un commissaire de police, et un juge de paix, veillant à la bonne tenue du marché, conciliant les différends entre l'acheteur et le vendeur.¹¹

The life of an inspector is not an easy one. The people can make things very difficult for him, and the smell of the fish is horrible.

This serves very well to set the scene, but more is needed, for the real key to understanding life here is the

central theme of the novel:

Its central theme is the struggle of the "lean" against the "fat", the lucky at the trough of the Second Empire against the politically disenfranchised.¹²

Another puts it this way:

It is a split between "fat" and "thin", between the complacent, overfed bourgeois and the underfed outcast who is tormented by dreams of political and social regeneration.¹³

He goes on:

It is the story of the timid, shrinking "thin" man, with his "black" trousers, "black" coat and "black" cap, pursued by the "fat" with their "pink and white" complexions, their "white" aprons, their "overflowing" bellies and their "prodigious" breasts. In the final stage, the division into "fat" and "thin" becomes a division into "fat" informers and "thin" conspirators.¹⁴

Such is life in the Halles, the struggle of the "haves" against the "have-nots", to put it another way.

The "fat" are the owners of the shops and stores, the merchants, who live in relative comfort vis-à-vis the "thin". They are led by Lisa, the owner of a delicatessen shop. She is an honest woman who keeps very careful accounts of her business transactions. She and her group are prosperous, and many have been able to set some money aside. They are, however, narrow-minded - the system works very well and any who seek to change it are treated as public enemies. Their ambitions are limited to making their fortunes and to expanding their businesses, thus enabling them to prolong their comfortable living and the little concern they show for others. They are for order and stability because this is good for business.

They support the Empire because the Empire provides this.¹⁵

Michel Euvrard sums them up in the following manner:

Dans ce petit monde, les préoccupations sont d'abord matérielles: l'argent, la tranquillité sociale et la stabilité politique et économique qui font qu'il garde sa valeur et que les clients le dépensent sans inquiétude; le bon aspect de la boutique et de la marchandise; puis, l'amour-propre, la réputation, le "standing": on est honnête, propre, travailleur; on fait bon poids, on rend exactement la monnaie; on ne fait pas scandale, on est digne époux, respectable père, bon citoyen. Moyennant quoi on est quitte avec la morale et son prochain.¹⁶

But what about the "thin"? As the term suggests, they are, by virtue of comparison, much worse off than the "fat". They are the occupants of the numerous booths and stalls in the market where they sell the food, etc. that is common to it. They operate on a small scale, usually selling only one or two items, and they are dependent on others for the rest. Many of these people, men and women alike, seated on benches or stools in front of their stalls, are rather friendly with one another, but this is really only a friendship caused by a common misery. They are all trying to make a living and rivalry among them is very keen. The children receive no education and many of them have to work. It can even happen that the occasional one sets up on his own. Life is routine and monotonous. Pleasures are few and they are enjoyed whenever possible. Life is especially bad in winter because of the cold, the lack of adequate shelter, and the decline in business. In the spring, the rains change the ground into a

2

sea of mud and increase the smells, making the environment all the more difficult to endure. Not all of the smells are bad - it is a matter of degree, a progression from the nice-smelling flowers, through the fruits, vegetables and cheeses, to the meats and, finally, to the horrible smelling fish. Still, despite this bleak picture, there is very little slum life here.

Most of these people go about the business of daily living without much care for the outside world. They live from day to day, do not make any long range plans, and are more or less resigned to the fact that the power to influence society is not theirs-it is beyond them. They do not like the well-to-do merchants like Lisa, and they often spread wicked gossip behind her back.

Some, however, do not accept things as they are. Florent, the escaped political prisoner, is their leader. Since the establishment of the Empire, the situation of the working-class has not improved. Life is generally miserable, especially when business is bad, and for the "thin" this can happen often. Some of them want their share of the prosperity. Florent becomes the leader of a political conspiracy, intending to destroy the world of the "fat". Lisa, however, denounces him because he threatens to upset the status quo. He is a direct threat to her world and this cannot be tolerated.

But where is Zola in all of this? He sought to "dépeindre

la vie des Halles, avec ses remous, ses intérêts et son accumulation de nourriture"¹⁷ This he does, but he also has his own opinion on what he is describing. The accumulation of facts is almost an accusation in itself. This book is tame, especially when compared with some of his later novels, but even here one can see that the working-class is more or less at the mercy of the rest. Here, within the Halles, the "thin" are put in opposition to the "fat". And just who are the "fat"? They are selfish, smug materialists:

Voilà donc ce que deviennent des personnages issus du peuple lorsque la carrière est ouverte à leur appétit d'aisance et de respectabilité: des petits bourgeois conformistes... par dessus tout égoïstes. Or, l'égoïsme est ce que Zola hait sans doute le plus au monde. Aussi le portrait n'est-il pas tendre.¹⁸

The real villains are the "fat" - they are complacent and unconcerned for any but themselves.

Zola's picture of the Halles shows that the workers, the "thin", are impoverished and miserable, and, what is worse, resigned to their fate. They can do nothing and most do not even care. What is shown here is also, in part, the degeneration of society under the Second Empire. "The fat", says Turnell, "are free to pursue their business in peace until the moral corruption which had lead to the denunciation of Florent brings the Empire down and them with it"¹⁹ Lisa tries to excuse herself by saying: "C'est la politique des honnêtes gens". Jacques Lantier, in the final sentence of the novel, answers: "Quels gredins que les honnêtes gens!"²⁰ Zola gets in his licks, and "le portrait n'est pas tendre".

- 1 Zola, Emile, Le Ventre de Paris, v.I of Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire Naturelle et Sociale d'une Famille sous le Second Empire, E.P., p. 616.
- 2 Ibid., p. 609.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid., p. 622.
- 5 Ibid., pp. 626-627.
- 6 Ibid., p. 630.
- 7 Ibid., p. 631.
- 8 Ibid., p. 632.
- 9 Ibid., p. 729.
- 10 Ibid., p. 700.
- 11 Ibid., pp. 715-716.
- 12 Engler,, Winfried, The French Novel, p. 82.
- 13 Turnell,. Martin, The Art of French Fiction, p. 140.
- 14 Ibid., p..146.
- 15 Euvrard,. Michel, Emile Zola, p. 47.
- 16 Ibid...
- 17 Beuchat, Charles, Histoire du Naturalisme Français, p. 60.
- 18 Euvrard,. Emile Zola, p..48.
- 19 Turnell,. The Art of French Fiction, p. 147.
- 20 Ibid...

II THE CITY WORKER

Throughout the greater part of the nineteenth century there was a gradual shift from agriculture to industry in France.¹ Industrialization, although still quite slow, was increasing under Louis Philippe, and the wage earners faced miserable factory conditions, foul overcrowded housing, the labour of small children and women for long hours at wages even lower than those of the men, and widespread poverty.² Improvements were very slow in coming and laws were not well enforced.³ Industrialization is faster during the Second Empire which sees an increase in factory conditions and urban life.⁴ Suburbs are developing around the city, and it is in these suburbs that most of the city workers live, suburbs which are, in large part, just huge industrial slums where it is cheap to live and where most of the people are poverty stricken.⁵ The setting of Zola's novel L'Assommoir is the period surrounding the "coup d'état" of Louis Napoleon in 1851. It reflects the conditions that are developing in the suburbs of Paris at the start of the Second Empire and presents a fairly accurate picture of working-class life:

Montrer le milieu peuple et expliquer par ce milieu les moeurs du peuple, comme quoi, à Paris, la soulerie, la débandade de la famille, les coups, l'acceptation de toutes les hontes et de toutes les misères viennent des conditions mêmes de l'existence ouvrière, des travaux durs, des promiscuités, des laisser-aller, etc. En un mot, un tableau très exact de la vie du

peuple, avec ses ordures, sa vie lâchée, son langage grossier, et ce tableau ayant comme dessous - sans thèse cependant - le sol particulier dans lequel poussent toutes ces choses.⁶

In the novel, we find many types of workers common to Paris around 1850 - painters, bricklayers, plumbers, carpenters, butchers, book-binders, dye-workers, zinc workers, blacksmiths, tin-smiths, locksmiths, silversmiths, tailors, cabinet-makers, barrel and cask-makers, clock and watchmakers, tool-makers, nail-makers and street-cleaners; washerwomen, ironers, dressmakers, florists, artificial-flower-makers, lace-makers, seamstresses, embroiderers and cleaning-women.

Although the living conditions of most of these people are very poor, it is important to note that this is not the case for all of them. Some are paid a living wage. They certainly do not live in any kind of luxury, but they have enough to eat and an acceptable place in which to live. Goujet, who represents the "honnête ouvrier", has a model home. It is clean and neat, not dirty like most of the others, and the family gets along well together. Some of the women are very careful housekeepers and good managers. Money is used first for necessities and only afterwards for other things. Gervaise, who washes clothes, dreams of having a place of her own and of someday retiring to the country. She and her husband Coupeau are able to save, and, when she does get a small cleaning-establishment of her own, business goes well for a while.

However, life is just plain miserable for most who inhabit these industrial slums. They live in very dirty, depressing apartment buildings which are full of gossipy, spiteful and wretched people like themselves who are usually one another's enemies, who like to spread wicked rumours about their neighbours, and who hate the concierges. There is very little privacy from one apartment to the next, it is too hot in the summer and often too cold in the winter, you can find yourself out in the street if you do not pay your rent and hunger itself seems to stalk the corridors:

Ce coin de la maison était le coin des pouilleux, où trois ou quatre ménages semblaient s'être donné le mot pour ne pas avoir du pain tous les jours. Les portes avaient beau s'ouvrir, elles ne lâchaient guère souvent des odeurs de cuisine. Le long du corridor, il y avait un silence de crevaison, et les murs sonnaient creux, comme des ventres vides. Par moments, des danses s'élevaient, des larmes de femmes, des plaintes de mioches affamés, des familles qui se mangeaient pour tromper leur estomac. On était là dans une crampe au gosier générale, bâillant par toutes ces bouches tendues; et les poitrines se creusaient, rien qu'à respirer cet air, où les moucheron eux-mêmes n'auraient pas pu vivre, faute de nourriture.⁷

Every day, hordes of people pour into Paris from the suburbs on their way to work in the early morning hours:

Quand elle levait les yeux, au-delà de cette muraille grise et interminable qui entourait la ville d'une bande de désert, elle apercevait une grande lueur, une poussière de soleil, pleine déjà du grondement matinal de Paris. Mais c'était toujours à la barrière Poissonnière qu'elle revenait, le cou tendu, s'étourdissant à voir couler, entre les deux pavillons trapus de l'octroi, le flot ininterrompu d'hommes, de bêtes, de charrettes, qui descendait des hauteurs de Montmartre et de la Chapelle. Il y avait là un piétinement de troupeau, une foule que de brusques arrêts étalaient en mares sur la

chaussée, un défilé sans fin d'ouvriers allant au travail, leurs outils sur le dos, leur pain sous le bras; et la cohue s'engouffrait dans Paris où elle se noyait, continuellement.⁸

Most of them began working when they were still children. Their hours are long and their pay is low. The work wears them out and it makes them old before their time. There is little time for rest, and, even when having babies, the women will take very few days off work. People work themselves almost to death for very little return, finishing their lives in utter poverty, unwanted and uncared for, when their working days are done:

Le père Bru est le vieil ouvrier qui couche sous l'escalier de la maison de la Goutte d'or, comme un chien... voilà ce qui attend les vieux ouvriers qui ne peuvent plus travailler, s'ils ont le malheur de ne pas avoir mis de l'argent de côté - et combien le peuvent? - Ils ne touchent pas de retraite, ne peuvent attendre aucun secours... D'ailleurs, il est résigné, il lui semble logique qu'on ne l'emploie plus et il ne lui viendrait pas l'idée qu'on puisse le payer à ne rien faire, qu'on lui doive encore quelque chose.⁹

Working conditions are generally very poor. The lavoir, where some of the women work, is an example:

C'était un immense hangar, à plafond plat, à poutres apparentes, monté sur des piliers de fonte, fermé par de larges fenêtres claires. Un plein jour blafard passait librement dans la buée chaude suspendue comme un brouillard laiteux. Des fumées montaient de certains coins, s'étalant, noyant les fonds d'un voile bleuâtre. Il pleuvait une humidité lourde, chargée d'une odeur savonneuse, une odeur fade, moite, continue; et, par moments, des souffles plus forts d'eau de Javel dominaient. Le long des batteries, aux deux côtés de l'allée centrale, il y avait des files de femmes, les bras nus jusqu'aux épaules, le cou nu, les jupes raccourcies montrant des bas de couleur et de gros souliers lacés. Elles tapaient furieusement, riaient, se renversaient

pour crier un mot dans le vacarme, se penchaient au fond de leurs baquets, ordurières, brutales, dégingandées, trempées comme par une averse, les chairs rougies et fumantes. Autour d'elles, sous elles, coulait un grand ruissellement, les seaux d'eau chaude promenés et vidés d'un trait, les robinets d'eau froide ouverts, pissant de haut, les éclaboussements des battoirs, les égouttures des linges rincés, les mares où elles pataugeaient s'en allant par petits ruisseaux sur les dalles en pente. Et, au milieu des cris, des coups cadencés, du bruit murmurant de pluie, de cette clameur d'orage s'étouffant sous le plafond mouillé, la machine à vapeur, à droite, toute blanche d'une rosée fine, hale-tait et ronflait sans relâche, avec la trépidation dansante de son volant qui semblait régler l'énormité du tapage.¹⁰

Washing clothes for more than eight hours a day is extremely hard work. The humidity is high, it is hot, it smells, especially in the summer, and water runs on the floor.

Some of the jobs are dangerous, but people must earn a living somehow. Coupeau, a zinc worker, always works high up where falls are a constant menace. One day, he does fall and is seriously injured. Off work for four months, all of the family savings are eaten up as there is no compensation whatsoever for the disabled worker in 1850:

Un ouvrier accidenté ou malade ne touchait alors aucune indemnité, aucune pension d'invalidité s'il ne pouvait plus exercer de métier, aucune allocation s'il était réduit au chômage; il ne lui était offert aucune possibilité d'apprendre un autre métier et de se reclasser s'il était devenu inapte à celui qu'il exerçait avant son accident, ou si le métier disparaissait, remplacé par le progrès.¹¹

Coupeau wishes that he had learned a less dangerous job, but only too often one is forced to follow in his father's footsteps, and there is no opportunity for retraining. He becomes

very bitter, hates his work, and is especially angry with the bourgeois who he claims send men to their death. He now falls in with the fairly large group who work only occasionally. They are not at all conscientious with respect to their work which they feel can wait until they have had time to enjoy themselves. They are fed up with slaving for next to nothing, preferring simply to take it easy, loafing around and having fun:

Lui et ses compagnons battent le pavé et les sentiers de la banlieue; comme eux, il renonce bientôt à tout emploi fixe et ne fait plus que s'engager de temps à autre sur un chantier qu'il quitte le plus souvent avant la fin des travaux sur une querelle avec le "singe", ou parce qu'un matin il a trop mal aux cheveux... ils ont la forfanterie de l'oisiveté et prennent leur goguette pour un défi aux patrons et l'affirmation de leur liberté.¹²

We see here the beginnings of socialism among the Parisian workers as a number of them are now talking about the "patron" as an "exploiter".

The majority, however, do not care anymore. Louis Napoleon's seizure of power in December 1851 is hardly noticed by most of them. They do not even show much enthusiasm when the vote is extended to several hundred thousand of them:

Les événements sanglants de décembre 1851 ne les entameront guère, très peu à Paris, un peu plus en province... Ils ne réagiront même pas lorsqu'ils apprendront que le dictateur avait décrété... l'abrogation de la loi du 31 mai 1850, décision qui rendait leur plein statut politique à des centaines de mille d'entre eux.¹³

Some are Republicans, some favour Napoleon, but most are altogether indifferent to politics..

Industrialization brings the machine which is starting to replace men or causing them to earn less money. Although some look upon the machine as a tool for future happiness, others see it as an enemy, and Zola himself does not overlook the mention of a very serious social and economic problem:

Le problème économique et social que le développement machiniste rendit si aigu sous le régime impérial, sur-travail, grèves, salaires abaissés, n'a pas échappé à Zola... Les machines exécutent le même travail, plus vite. Zola a soulevé la controverse, depuis longtemps ouverte, sur l'influence technique et morale de la machine: fera-t-elle périr l'artisan, l'artiste...¹⁴

Another problem of the working-class is that of having too many children:

... la venue de nombreux enfants dans une famille ouvrière est une catastrophe; pourtant les ouvriers, privés d'autres plaisirs, ont une propension à faire beaucoup d'enfants. Ceux-ci, chargés d'une hérédité d'alcoolisme, de misère, de conditions de vie anti-hygiéniques, de malnutrition, diminuent encore par leur venue les ressources familiales et sont donc eux-mêmes mal élevés, mal nourris; l'hérédité leur donne de mauvais instincts et une mauvaise santé que le milieu ne fait qu'aggraver... Pour les ouvriers, les enfants sont de petites bêtes qui coûtent cher à nourrir et à habiller, prennent trop de place dans le logement déjà trop petit et dont il faut encore s'occuper après le travail, pour n'en tirer bien souvent que des ennuis quand ils tournent mal et..., comme Nana, tombent au ruisseau et vous déconsidèrent aux yeux des voisins.¹⁵

The workers cannot afford to feed and clothe their children properly. They take up too much space. They are neither well cared for nor well brought up, end up in all sorts of trouble, and inherit all of their parents' vices. The children do not receive much schooling, many have to work full-time,

discipline is harsh, and many just leave home when they are old enough, having very little chance of ever climbing out of their class. Most families have debts, money is only too often wasted on non-essentials, and possessions must sometimes be sold to buy food. There are numerous desertions, broken homes, and just plain unhappy marriages, all of which do not argue in favour of large families and well-adjusted children. Zola himself seems to be torn between the need to have fewer children and his own personal beliefs, for while he might see the aggravation of all kinds of problems caused by large families he does not believe in taking any steps to reduce the number of children:

Pour Zola, la maternité est sacrée, le but de l'amour est de faire des enfants, détourné de ce but il n'est plus qu'une "débauche"... La limitation volontaire des naissances est à ses yeux une perversion, un vice, et il croit en constater les effets, corruption, névroses, dégénérescence chez les enfants des bourgeois qui la pratiquent. Surnatalité et dénatalité sont les deux aspects d'un même problème.¹⁶

He has a paradox which he does not resolve, due in part, perhaps, to the fact that he had two illegitimate children himself.

The two principal pleasures of the working-class, alcohol and sex, are very widely enjoyed in the Paris slum. These people take their pleasures when and where they can, caring not at all about the possible results:

Cet esclavage du travail est le leitmotiv de la condition ouvrière: il faut travailler du matin au soir pour gagner juste de quoi ne pas mourir de faim, alors: autant saisir le plaisir quand il se présente, et si on doit en crever, tant mieux, la vie n'est pas

si drôle. Le vice est la revanche du travail et les travailleurs en ont la forfanterie. Il prend deux formes principales, dans le monde ouvrier, la boisson pour tout le monde, et le sexe principalement pour les femmes.¹⁷

People tend to escape their troubles either in overindulgence in alcohol or in overindulgence in sex. It has been claimed that the better paid workers drank more heavily than the rest.¹⁸ Many stop to drink on the way to work and again on the way home, with some even going out to drink at noon. A large portion of their pay is spent on alcohol, and the women drink just as much and just as often, in many cases, as do the men. L'Assommoir, the name of the establishment where many of these people go to drink, is aptly chosen. "Le vin est nécessaire à l'ouvrier" is a very common line, and alcohol is in the background all the way through the novel. Many drink as if alcohol is soon to pass out of existence, getting drunk regularly and missing days of work because of it. Some are just ordinary alcoholics. Indeed, it is so bad that alcohol seems to be in the air:

On ne se doute pas combien ça désaltère les pochards de quitter l'air de Paris, où il y a dans les rues une vraie fumée d'eau-de-vie et de vin.¹⁹

The other dominant pleasure, sex, is no less indulged in. As already indicated, they have too many children. It is also common-place for married men and women to spend the night in someone else's bed with someone else's husband or wife. Many people live together who are not married and prostitution

is a booming business. The children are initiated young, and Nana, the daughter of Gervaise, is, by the end of the novel, showing signs of becoming the later well-to-do "courtisane".

Violence is also common-place. Fights, beatings, suicides and murders are daily occurrences. Near the beginning of the novel, Gervaise and Virginie fight in the wash hut:

Virginie venait de sauter à la gorge de Gervaise. Elle la serrait au cou, tâchait de l'étrangler. Alors, celle-ci, d'une violente secousse, se dégagea, se pendit à la queue de son chignon, comme si elle avait voulu lui arracher la tête. La bataille recommença, muette, sans un cri, sans une injure. Elles... s'attaquaient à la figure, les mains ouvertes et crochues, pinçant, griffant ce qu'elles empoignaient. Le ruban rouge et le filet en chenille bleue de la grande brune furent arrachés; son corsage, craqué au cou, montra sa peau, tout un bout d'épaule; tandis que la blonde, déshabillée, une manche de sa camisole blanche ôtée sans qu'elle sût comment, avait un accroc à sa chemise qui découvrait le pli nu de sa taille. Des lambeaux d'étoffe volaient. D'abord, ce fut sur Gervaise que le sang parut, trois longues égratignures descendant de la bouche sous le menton... Virginie ne saignait pas encore. Gervaise visait ses oreilles..., saisit enfin l'une des boucles, une poire de verre jaune; elle tira, fendit l'oreille; le sang coula... Gervaise, vivement, allongea la main, prit également un battoir... Alors, mises en train, elles se tapèrent comme les laveuses tapent leur linge, rudement, en cadence. Quand elles se touchaient, le coup s'amortissait, on aurait dit une claque dans un baquet d'eau.²⁰

The other women just stand around, enjoying it all thoroughly.. A boy kills his father to steal some money, an unwed mother kills her baby, a man kills his wife. The same man beats his daughter almost daily. He even ties her up when he goes out, leaving her for hours at a time. He works her like a slave, and one day he brings home a whip to use on her. He eventually

kills her, too. She is only eight. Drink and violence often go hand in hand. This man is just one of many who have had their minds totally deranged by the constant consumption of alcohol.

The final degeneration of Coupeau and Gervaise is not an isolated example. They both reach the point at which they no longer care about anything. They waste away, subsisting on little but alcohol. Coupeau is in and out of the hospital several times. He has hallucinations - sees rats and spiders all around him -, yells and screams in violent fits, and, finally, shaking and trembling, goes to bed to die. Gervaise dies in her turn, saturated with alcohol, but only after she has been reduced to street-walking and then a final state of despair and resignation, longing for death to put an end to her misery.

Zola's novel is strongly attacked by the critics. Among other things, it is claimed that his book is written to prove the perversity of the working-class. Zola denies this:

Mon oeuvre me défendra. C'est une oeuvre de vérité, le premier roman sur le peuple, qui ne mente pas et qui ait l'odeur du peuple. Et il ne faut point conclure que le peuple tout entier est mauvais, car mes personnages ne sont pas mauvais, ils ne sont qu'ignorants et gâtés par le milieu de rude besogne et de misère où ils vivent.²¹

Even good intentions are often ruined by the conditions in which the city workers must live.

The word "assommoir", while it is the name of a drinking establishment, has been given a broader meaning by Zola - it is symbolic of the entire milieu and of all the miserable

conditions which those who live in it endure:

J'ai étendu la signification du mot à tout le milieu ouvrier, aux conditions d'ignorance, de vice, et de misère, qui, dans nos quartiers populeux, transforment peu à peu les travailleurs en un troupeau d'ivrognes déguenillés. Voilà la bête humaine assommée, conduite à notre abattoir social, par la faute des autres et par sa propre faute.²²

These people are partly to blame for their own misery, but bourgeois society is to blame as well. "Le peuple est ainsi", says Zola, "mais parce que la société le veut bien".²³ Zola expects something to be done about changing things and he seeks to give those in a position to act a few things to think about. He suggests the following:

Fermez les cabarets, ouvrez les écoles... Assainissez les faubourgs et augmentez les salaires. La question du logement est capitale; les puanteurs de la rue, l'escalier sordide, l'étroite chambre où dorment pêle-mêle les pères et les filles, les frères et les soeurs, sont la grande cause de la dépravation des faubourgs. Le travail écrasant qui rapproche l'homme de la brute, le salaire insuffisant qui décourage et fait chercher l'oubli, achèvent d'emplir les cabarets et les maisons de tolérance.²⁴

However, although Zola would like to see these horrible conditions improve, he does not follow up on any of his ideas. It is with L'Assommoir that Zola starts to make money from his writing. He sympathizes with these inhabitants of the industrial slum because he has known some of their misery. As his own material comfort improves, it will be even easier for him to decry vice and corruption, yet he will remain much more passively sympathetic than anything else.

- 1 Lorwin, Val Rogin, The French Labour Movement, p. 7.
- 2 Ibid..
- 3 Ibid..
- 4 Ibid, p. 10.
- 5 Cobban, Alfred, A History of Modern France, v.II, p. 167.
- 6 Dumesnil, René, Le Réalisme et Le Naturalisme, p. 327.
- 7 Zola, Emile, L'Assommoir, éd. Livre de Poche, pp. 368-369.
- 8 Ibid, p. 11.
- 9 Euvrard, Michel, Emile Zola, p. 56.
- 10 Zola, L'Assommoir, pp. 21-22.
- 11 Euvrard, Emile Zola, p. 50.
- 12 Ibid, p. 52.
- 13 Leroy, Maxime, Histoire des Idées Sociales en France, v.III, p. 253.
- 14 Ibid, p. 255.
- 15 Euvrard, Emile Zola, p. 60.
- 16 Ibid, pp. 59, 62.
- 17 Ibid, p. 54.
- 18 Leroy, Histoire des Idées Sociales en France, p. 247.
- 19 Zola, L'Assommoir, p. 355.
- 20 Ibid, pp. 35-36.
- 21 Euvrard, Emile Zola, p. 63.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Guillemin, Henri, Présentation des Rougon-Macquart, p. 135.
- 24 Le Blond-Zola, Mme D., Emile Zola, raconté par sa fille, p. 108.

III THE DEPARTMENT STORE WORKER

Zola presents the department store worker in his novel Au Bonheur des Dames, and the title of the novel is also the name of a large department store in downtown Paris, owned and operated by Octave Mouret during the Second Empire. This store is peopled by large numbers of employees and customers, and it tends to form a world apart. At its height the store employs some three thousand men and women and comprises fifty departments. Operations are conducted on an extremely large scale with the annual gross income exceeding one hundred million francs. This is a very unfeeling sort of an enterprise whose sole purpose is to make money. Mouret has been able to expand very rapidly, and, because of the scale on which he is operating, he is underselling the small merchant and ruining him in a constant war of falling prices. Mouret defends his large scale operations by saying that the trend is in this direction. It marks an end to the old kind of commerce, the many small merchants with their own little shops, specializing usually in a very limited number of items. Indeed, Zola himself defends the trend:

Les victimes du progrès? Ils ne sont plus de leur temps. Tant pis! Ils sont écrasés par le colosse...
Je ne pleurerai pas sur eux.¹

Mouret's entire future rests on a series of monthly sales. He buys very large quantities of goods - he must then sell to pay

for them. He will usually sell one item at a very low price to get the women into his store. Once there, they are encouraged to spend wildly, often for things that they do not really need. His aim is to exploit the women for everything he can get:

Mouret avait l'unique passion de vaincre la femme. Il la voulait reine dans sa maison, il lui avait bâti ce temple pour l'y tenir à sa merci. C'était toute sa tactique, la griser d'attentions galantes et trafiquer de ses désirs, exploiter sa fièvre.²

What I would like to do in this chapter is to examine the picture Zola gives us of the department store workers. Their situation is not one to be envied - long hours and low pay; the work is also both physically and mentally taxing. The workers are engaged in a constant battle for survival with the partial suppression of human relationships being the price they have to pay to earn their daily bread.

Before dealing with the workers themselves, it is necessary to examine the physical, interior layout of this huge store. The building is six stories high. On each floor there is a large central hall in which articles for sale are displayed on counters, the exact number of counters depending on the size of the particular department. Around the outside of the floor are offices for the head sales people and the inspectors. It is here that most of the paper work is done. Each individual department is furnished with its own cashier to handle the business of making sales. The store also has a main cashier who eventually handles all receipts for sales,

pays the employees and for the goods. All receipts are kept here until the end of the day, at which time they are turned over to Mouret. There are many rooms, such as the "oriental room", which cater to the special tastes of the customers. The store has a huge dining-room where all of the employees eat. Because of their large number, they are forced to eat in shifts, each worker receiving two meals per day for about one and one half francs. The men and women do not eat together, and the meals are of poor quality.

There are a number of special services which handle all of the merchandise. The "service de la réception", located in the basement, receives all of the in-coming merchandise. The goods are sorted, recorded, and placed to be sold. The "service d'expédition" handles all orders coming from out of town and from abroad. It receives letters and sends out the orders. The "service de départ" looks after the delivery of all articles bought in the store, but not carried away by the purchaser. The store has a fleet of about 75 "voitures" and 150 horses for this purpose. There is also a publicity service as Mouret believes in the use of advertising to encourage sales. Use is made of signs, posters and newspapers. More than four hundred thousand catalogues are sent out annually, many thousands of them abroad, translated into foreign languages. The store provides about sixty rooms on the top floor for some of the women who have no family or friends in Paris.

The price range of the goods is designed so that there is something for everyone, varying from articles costing only a few francs to very expensive ones. The store's merchandise includes cloth of all kinds (silk and velvet being among the great favourites), all types of woollen goods, ribbons, thread, needles, lace, skirts, blouses, dresses of all kinds, hosiery, lingerie, purses, handbags, gloves, scarves, hats, shawls, umbrellas, coats, furs, jewellery, cosmetics, table cloths, linen, shoes, rugs, and furniture of all kinds. In short, Mouret places in his store almost anything that women might want to buy, anything he can think of to which they might be attracted.

This general picture is intended to set the scene and to give some idea of the scale on which operations are conducted. This store is similar to one of our large, modern department stores. Of course, the hours are shorter, the pay is better, and the working conditions are superior today; also, there is now a greater diversification of products. Still, the interior layout is about the same, and the Au Bonheur des Dames is more diversified than any other store of the time. The general concept of the big department store as seen and described by Zola is not too very different from Eatons or Simpsons of today. It is in this milieu that those I intend to study work and, in fact, live.

The ones who actually concern me here are the ones who

sell the goods and those who supervise them. They are more than fifteen hundred in number. Theirs is a life of very hard work from early morning until night, under the most uninspiring conditions.

As a general rule, Mouret received more applications than he had jobs. Although it sometimes appears that jobs are given to just about anyone, people are preferred who have good recommendations and at least one year's experience in some kind of a smaller store. This personnel is organized into a kind of a hierarchy. At the bottom are the ordinary salesmen and women (the "vendeurs" and the "vendeuses"). They work for a fixed salary, plus a commission on what they sell. Those just starting receive about 2,000 francs a year. This is not enough money to live on, but with time the average worker will earn between 3,000 and 4,000 francs. Next up on the scale are the "seconds", those who are second in charge of their departments. They earn a little more money and are more influential. Above them are the "chefs", those who are in charge of a whole department. They can easily make 6,000 or 7,000 francs, but most of them are closer to 10,000. Mme Aurélie, for example, earns in excess of 12,000 francs. The "chefs" are very powerful with respect to those beneath them. They are generally in charge of their own hiring - just how well, or how poorly, one does in the beginning depends entirely upon how well one gets along with the "chef". The

real key to understanding what conditions are like lies in the commission which is the cause of a daily struggle among the workers. Above all of these people in the hierarchy are the inspectors. They are about forty in number and they aid Mouret in the governing of the store. They can earn in excess of 15,000 francs, and the top inspector receives 30,000. The top man on the scale is Mouret himself. He owns, manages and directs the store. All important decisions are his. He decides what is to be sold, fixes prices, sets dates for the sales, and makes all of the rules. Everyone is ultimately responsible to him. There are more than a thousand "other" employees - such as those who run the various services. They are on the same level as the sales personnel and earn about the same amount of money. The reason for which I am giving them such short treatment here is that I feel the real focus of attention of the novel to be on the individuals who are involved in the over-the-counter sale of merchandise and in its supervision.

The organization which Mouret has imposed goes still further. The books very carefully note all of the transactions and the bookkeepers are paid for errors they uncover. All of the employees' names have been recorded in a large register and they are checked present when they arrive at work. The names of those who are late are kept, and those who are late repeatedly are rewarded with dismissal. The money earned in

commission by each employee is carefully noted down daily. Not a cent in the whole store is left unaccounted for. The inspectors keep a very close eye on things and those who are caught out of line risk being fired. Mistakes are frowned upon and can result in dismissal. The employees are supposed to be polite to the customers and one man is fired for insolence. There are very strict rules to the effect that employees are not supposed to waste time talking to each other, gossiping, while on duty. The employees steal regularly from the store, and those who are caught are fired. The workers are not supposed to take other jobs under penalty of dismissal. Married women are not encouraged as employees because of the time-off required when they have babies. Replacements must be found for this period and this upsets the routine. Inventories are taken at regular intervals and, at this time, the employees have to work on Sunday. They have even been convinced by Mouret to invest some of their money in the store's expansion. It can be readily seen that his store is centrally organized and highly regimented, and that Mouret himself pulls all of the strings. However, this control and influence of the top men over the other employees can be extended a little farther still. Jouve, one of the inspectors, "protects" some of the girls for "favours". He abuses his position of power. Mouret does the same thing. He has the habit of choosing his women friends from among his employees. He invites them to dinner,

then tries to seduce them. He uses them, then forgets about them when he is finished. News of this has spread all over the store.

Let us now look at some of the typical events in an average day in the lives of these workers. In the early morning, the men are arriving for work:

La plupart filaient seuls et s'engouffraient au fond du magasin, sans adresser ni une parole ni même un regard à leurs collègues... d'autres allaient par deux ou trois, parlant vite...et tous, du même geste, avant d'entrer, jetaient leur cigarette ou leur cigare.³

Some of the workers, however, have spent the night right in the store, the new men sleeping on cots in the central hall in their departments, the women in their rooms. Before the arrival of the customers, the employees must be sure that all the merchandise is neatly arranged and that all is in readiness for the day's activities. The morning is generally quiet, but today there is to be a sale and the ladies will be arriving early. The girls in the store are dressed alike with each department having its own dress. The only room for competition is their hair:

Ces demoiselles complétaient la ressemblance, vêtues de leur soie réglementaire... Toutes avaient entre deux boutons du corsage, comme piqué dans la poitrine, un grand crayon qui se dressait, la pointe en l'air; et l'on apercevait, sortant à demi d'une poche, la tache blanche du cahier de notes de débit. Plusieurs risquaient des bijoux, des bagues, des broches, des chaînes; mais leur coquetterie, le luxe dont elles luttèrent, dans l'uniformité de leur toilette, étaient leurs cheveux nus, des cheveux débordants, augmentés de nattes et de chignons quand ils ne suffisaient pas, peignés, frisés, étalés.⁴

Denise, one of the new girls, is all alone, lost in this huge place:

Elle se sentait perdue, toute petite dans le monstre, dans la machine encore au repos, tremblant d'être prise par le branle dont les murs frémissaient déjà.⁵

Not only is she all alone, but one also receives here his first impression of the store as some kind of large machine, one which engulfs the individual personalities.

Within each department there is an order which the men and women are going to follow as they wait on the customers. It is in part based on seniority, in part on the personal whims of the head of the department who sees to it that it is followed. Denise, the new girl, is not on the right side of her department head, and she thus does not get many sales in the beginning. All of the others are always very hard on beginners. There are all kinds of petty rivalries among them, cliques too, and acceptance comes only with considerable time. When the ladies finally start arriving, Denise is reduced to the task of folding up the materials which the customers leave in great disarray.

As the day progresses, more and more shoppers arrive, and it is in the afternoon that the crowds are the heaviest. The real struggle for profit has begun and the workers show one another no mercy:

... un même besoin d'argent les fouettait, ils ne songeaient qu'à l'argent, ils se battaient pour l'argent du lundi au samedi. Au magasin, c'était là leur préoccupation tyrannique, une lutte sans trêve ni pitié.⁶

Their battle is waged on two levels, the first being among the different departments, the second, and more important, among the individual employees themselves. The struggle among the departments gives one a feeling of group solidarity and group loyalty - the workers dare not break it:

D'ailleurs, un soulèvement général se produisit contre Denise. Le comptoir avait fini par découvrir son amitié avec Pauline, et il voyait une bravade dans cette affection donnée à une vendeuse d'un comptoir ennemi. Ces demoiselles parlaient de trahison, l'accusaient d'aller répéter à côté leurs moindres paroles. La guerre de la lingerie et des confections en prit une violence nouvelle, jamais elle n'avait soufflé si rudement: des mots furent échangés, raides comme des balles, et il y eut même une gifle, un soir, derrière les cartons des chemises...⁷

In the big crowd, the sales people forget about the business of taking turns. There are just too many customers to be looked after. It is at this moment that the individual war reaches its height:

...en lutte continuelle, se disputant des clientes, se volant leur tant pour cent et leur quette...⁸

Et, au milieu de ce vide, Hutin et Favier feuilletaient leurs cahiers de débit, calculaient leur tant pour cent, essoufflés de la lutte. Favier s'était fait quinze francs, Hutin n'avait pu arriver qu'à treize, battu ce jour-là, enragé de sa mauvaise chance. Leurs yeux s'allumaient de la passion du gain, tout le magasin autour d'eux alignait également des chiffres et flambait d'une même fièvre, dans la gaieté brutale des soirs du carnage.⁹

...et, partout, les commis..., les jambes mortes, donnaient un coup de force, arrachaient des victoires à la fièvre dernière des clientes...¹⁰

The battle continues until the last customers have left the store at the end of the day. The clerks get angry when the customers do not buy, when they lose a sale or must spend a

lot of time for very little profit. They try to pressure the women into buying and sometimes they succeed.

One very important point to be emphasized is that of the huge crowds that have been swarming all over the store during the afternoon. It is toward the end of the day that the crowd is at its worst:

Ce n'était plus chose facile que de gagner l'escalier. Une houle compacte de têtes roulait sous les galeries, s'élargissant en fleuve débordé au milieu du hall. Toute une bataille du négoce montait, les vendeurs tenaient à merci ce peuple de femmes, qu'ils se passaient des uns aux autres, en luttant de hâte. L'heure était venue du branle formidable de l'après-midi, quand la machine surchauffée menait la danse des clientes et leur tirait l'argent de la chair. À la soie surtout, une foule soufflait, le Paris-Bonheur ameutait une foule telle que pendant plusieurs minutes Hutin ne put faire un pas... la trépidation intérieure étouffait les bruits du dehors...¹¹

Superimposing the image of the ladies swarming over the store on that of the battle of the workers for money gives a very good picture of what working in this store can be like. By the end of the day, the women reign supreme, and the employees are at their mercy:

Et, à cette heure dernière, au milieu de cet air surchauffé, les femmes régnaient. Elles avaient pris d'assaut les magasins, elles y campaient comme en pays conquis, ainsi qu'une horde envahissante, installée dans la débâcle des marchandises. Les vendeurs, assourdis, brisés, n'étaient plus que leurs choses, dont elles disposaient avec une tyrannie de souveraines. Toutes, la tête haute, les gestes brusques, étaient chez elles, sans politesse les unes pour les autres, usant de la maison tant qu'elles pouvaient, jusqu'à en emporter la poussière des murs.¹²

The employees have had to stay on their feet most of the day,

doing the sort of work that is very hard to get used to. Their feet hurt, indeed, their bodies ache all over. On top of all the physical discomfort, Denise has had everyone against her. And, if that is not enough, she and some of the other girls have only a small room to go home to. They are only allowed to return to their rooms at night. They are not supposed to visit each other, but to go right to bed. The rules are enforced, but Denise stays up late to wash and sew because she has very few clothes. Days such as this one are common in the life of a department store worker.

The individual personalities and relationships between the sexes are suppressed in doing this type of work. People are just cogs in a wheel, the parts of a great machine:

Dans le magasin, sous l'écrasement des heures de besogne, on ne pensait guère à des tendresses, entre vendeurs et vendeuses. Si la bataille continuelle de l'argent n'avait pas effacé les sexes, il aurait suffi, pour tuer le désir, de la bousculade de chaque minute, qui occupait la tête et rompait les membres... Tous n'étaient plus que des rouages, se trouvaient emportés par le branle de la machine, abdiquant leur personnalité, additionnant simplement leurs forces, dans ce total banal et puissant de phalanstère.¹³

In such a daily battle, the people would seem almost to lose their quality of humanity - they are fighting like animals for survival; like the parts of a mechanism, they have no appreciation for human qualities.

The work is less hectic in the slack seasons, but it is during this period that many of the workers are laid off - there is no such thing as job security. They generally accept

this as a fact of life because there is nothing they can do about it. At this time, everyone feels as if he, or she, is living under the axe:

Maintenant, les rayons ne causaient plus d'autre chose. Chaque jour, de nouvelles histoires circulaient. On nommait les vendeurs congédiés, comme, en temps d'épidémie, on compte les morts... La direction se montrait impitoyable, devant la moindre plainte des clientes; aucune excuse n'était admise, l'employé avait toujours tort, devait disparaître ainsi qu'un instrument défectueux, nuisant au bon mécanisme de la vente; et les camarades baissaient la tête, ne tentaient même pas de le défendre. Dans la panique qui soufflait, chacun tremblait pour soi.¹⁴

It does not take much imagination to guess that the department store workers are only too glad to get off work at the end of each day and that they especially look forward to Sunday, their only day off. It is on the outside that they can start feeling like human beings again. Most of the workers do not know each other outside the store, but some of them are good friends. The men drink, play cards, go to the races together, and tell tall tales about the women in their lives. Most of the women have "lovers" and are engaged in some form of prostitution. Some of them have had children. They do this for two reasons: firstly, they are forced to this means of earning extra money because they are not paid well and because they are unable to take a second job; secondly, they do it for pleasure, something enjoyable after the long hours of bitter combat. All of the employees, men and women alike, seek enjoyment and pleasure of some kind away from the job, and they

are unable to save any of the money they earn.

The working conditions are improved in the end. Denise, the only woman ever to resist Mouret successfully, triumphs. He has fallen in love with her, and the following changes occur:

Le sort des vendeurs était amélioré peu à peu, on remplaçait les renvois en masse par un système de congés accordés aux mortes-saisons, enfin on allait créer une caisse de secours mutuels, qui mettrait les employés à l'abri des chômages forcés, et leur assurerait une retraite. C'était l'embryon des vastes sociétés ouvrières du vingtième siècle.¹⁵

And that is not all: there is to be a music room, a games room, a library, a doctor, and all kinds of courses will be given in the evening. There will be baths, buffets, and a barber shop. A prediction? Zola seems not only to foresee the eventual improvement of the lot of the average worker in the twentieth century, he also seems to be saying that it is high time something was done about it, that these changes should be put into general commercial life.

Ironically, it will be with the improvement of the conditions that the Au Bonheur des Dames truly becomes a total environment, severed from the rest of society:

Toute la vie était là, on avait tout sans sortir, l'étude, la table, le lit, le vêtement. Le Bonheur des Dames se suffisait, plaisirs et besoins, au milieu du grand Paris, occupé de ce tintamarre, de cette cité du travail qui poussait si largement dans le fumier des vieilles rues, ouvertes enfin au plein soleil.¹⁶

Denise finishes by being respected by the other workers who come to look upon her as a champion of their rights against

the "patron". Such a rise as hers is, however, uncommon. Most of these workers remain just ordinary "vendeurs" and "vendeuses", leading a depressing and miserable sort of a life, seeking pleasure whenever, and wherever, they can find it.

- 1 Guillemin, Henri, Présentation des Rougon-Macquart, p. 206.
- 2 Zola, Emile, Au Bonheur des Dames, éd. Livre de Poche, p. 275.
- 3 Ibid, p. 37.
- 4 Ibid, p. 107.
- 5 Ibid, p. 60.
- 6 Ibid, p. 115.
- 7 Ibid, p. 163.
- 8 Ibid, p. 133.
- 9 Ibid, p. 140.
- 10 Ibid, p. 313.
- 11 Ibid, p. 129.
- 12 Ibid, p. 311.
- 13 Ibid, p. 159.
- 14 Ibid, p. 182.
- 15 Ibid, p. 414.
- 16 Ibid, p. 415.

IV THE FISHERMEN

Of all the misery portrayed by Zola in the Rougon-Macquart, that of the fishermen of Bonneville (La Joie de Vivre) is, perhaps, the worst. Bonneville is a small seaside town of less than two hundred inhabitants who rely on the sea for a living, one which the sea does not yield in great abundance. The fishermen go out each day only to return with a catch which is never very large, and, because of this, it is not uncommon for a fisher to make a night trip.

A description of life here reveals horrible suffering and poverty. Many of these people live in shacks with very little in the way of food and clothing. The parents often send their children to the homes of those who are comfortable to beg for food and money. Sometimes they are successful, others not. The children do not attend school. They will merely learn from their parents a life of degradation and vice.

Family life as such is non-existent. One of the fathers is a smuggler and many of the other parents are thieves. The children follow suit. The parents drink - in fact, most of whatever money they are able to lay their hands on is spent on alcohol - and some are just plain drunkards. When they get drunk, they beat their children. They take out their own frustrations on them as if they were somehow to blame for the conditions in which all of them are living.

Le fils Houtelard, un maigre garçon de quinze ans poussé trop vite, à la mine triste et peureuse, s'était mis à pleurer.

- Ils me battent, quand je ne viens pas... La femme a pris la corde et papa m'a poussé dehors.

Et il retroussait sa manche, pour montrer la meurtrissure violette d'un coup de corde à noeuds. La femme était l'ancienne servante épousée par son père, et qui le tuait de coups. Depuis leur ruine, la dureté et l'ordure de leur avarice avaient augmenté. Maintenant, ils vivaient dans un cloaque, en se vengeant sur le petit.¹

The children themselves learn to drink from an early age, and one young girl even gets drunk regularly with her parents. . Sexual promiscuity is the final lesson to be learned. One woman in the town is a prostitute - a girl of thirteen gives birth to a child. The whole picture is of the lowest of human miseries. The following is a good summary:

Ces gens étaient si malheureux! Depuis la marée qui avait emporté la maison des Houtelard, la plus solide de toutes, et trois autres, des masures des pauvres, la misère augmentait encore. Houtelard, autrefois le riche du pays, s'était bien installé dans une vieille grange, vingt mètres en arrière; mais les autres pêcheurs, ne sachant où s'abriter, campaient maintenant sous des sortes de huttes, construites avec des carcasses de vieux bateaux. C'était un dénuement pitoyable, une promiscuité de sauvages, où femmes et enfants grouillaient dans la vermine et le vice. Les aumônes de la contrée s'en allaient en eau-de-vie. Ces misérables vendaient les dons en nature, les vêtements, les ustensiles de cuisine, les meubles, afin d'acheter des litres du terrible calvados, qui les assommait, comme morts, en travers des portes. Seule, Pauline plaidait toujours pour eux; le curé les abandonnait, Chanteau parlait de donner sa démission, ne voulant plus être le maire d'une bande de pourceaux. Et Lazare, quand sa cousine tâchait de l'apitoyer sur ce petit peuple de souïards, battu par le gros temps, répétait l'éternel argument de son père.

- Qui les force à rester? Ils n'ont qu'à bâtir ailleurs...²

The attitude of the more fortunate toward the less fortunate is most unsympathetic; in large measure, as can be seen from the last line of the preceding quotation.

Life here is dangerous, but the people can go nowhere else. Often one of the fishermen is hurt, cut by a hook or the like, and one man has his fingers crushed under a boat. But the real danger is the sea itself, and the sea is unmerciful. During the frequent storms, high waves batter the town, destroying the houses one by one. Over the years, the town is literally being washed away. Needed sea-walls are built for protection, but the high seas destroy them, and the men come to steal the wood. Money is needed to construct better walls, but the town is horribly poor. No aid is given when an appeal is made to a local council. Eventually, the sea destroys everything, necessitating the building of a new town on higher ground:

D'ailleurs, jamais tant de misère ne s'était abattu sur Bonneville. Pendant les tempêtes de mai, les trois dernières maisons venaient d'être écrasées contre la falaise. C'était fini, les grandes marées avaient achevé de balayer le village, après des siècles d'assaut, dans l'envahissement continu de la mer, qui chaque année mangeait un coin du pays. Il n'y avait plus, sur les galets, que les vagues conquérantes, effaçant jusqu'aux traces des décombres. Les pêcheurs, chassés du trou où des générations s'étaient obstinées sous l'éternelle menace, avaient bien été forcés de monter plus haut, dans le ravin, et ils campaient en tas, les plus riches bâtissaient, les autres s'abritaient sous des roches, tous fondaient un autre Bonneville, en attendant que le flot les délogeât encore, après de nouveaux siècles de bataille.3

This sort of life seems destined to continue as long

as there are people. They are stubborn and will not leave. They are unintelligent, ignorant, and most are lazy. They are more or less resigned to carrying on in poverty, vice and corruption until they draw their final breath, and their children will follow in their footsteps. "Ils souffrent par leur faute."⁴ They are mainly to blame for the situation in which they find themselves. They are the victims of nature in part, but really more of their own indifference. "C'est la perversité de l'homme dans son infortune."⁵

Even the priest, who has struggled with them for years, is ready to give them up:

Cette "poignée de pêcheurs, rongés de maux", rongés de vices, il a tâché, "pendant quinze ans", de les éclairer, au moins un peu, de "les effrayer", s'il ne pouvait mieux, en leur montrant le malheur dans lequel ils s'enfonçaient et toutes les catastrophes, si distinctement prévisibles, où aboutiraient leurs errements. Les bras lui sont retombés; il ne tente plus rien; ah! tant pis pour eux!⁶

They will always remain just as they are:

Les pêcheurs de Bonneville attendent, résignés, leur mort et celle de leur village; ce sont des brutes qui ne comprennent rien, qui pourrissent dans la misère et dans le vice.⁷

The picture is pessimistic. Indeed, they seem to be a lost cause.

- 1 Zola, Emile, La Joie de Vivre, v.III of Les Rougon-Macquart, E.P., p. 1003.
- 2 Ibid, p. 1001.
- 3 Ibid, p. 1112.
- 4 Guillemin, Henri, Présentation des Rougon-Macquart, p. 223.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid, p. 233.
- 7 Martino, P., Le Naturalisme Français, p. 95.

V THE COAL MINER

In his novel Germinal, Zola presents a study of the miners who live and work in northern France, a very depressing, dirty-looking region in which layers of black soot cover everything in and around the mines. The atmosphere is one of desolation, the mining community living in the middle of a treeless, windswept desert separated from the rest of the world.¹

The company for which the miners work is huge, having some ten thousand employees and a large number of mines which operate almost twenty-four hours a day. Those who work the early shift are forced to get up at four in the morning. They dress and eat in semi-darkness before heading off to the mine where work will begin shortly after five. The hour of the descent of each miner into the mine is carefully noted to be sure that he comes out and all the lamps are closed to guard against fires or explosions due to the large amount of coal dust and gas in the air. The men are loaded by groups into the elevator, then plunged hundreds of metres beneath the surface in a very rapid fall. The tunnels down in the mine are many in number, and some of the miners are forced to travel over two kilometres underground before reaching the place in which they work. To reach different levels down in the mine they must climb and descend ladders,

often covering vertical distances of more than one hundred metres. Space down below is extremely limited, thus forcing the miners to walk bent over or even to crawl on their hands and knees. Just getting to the job is exhausting, and the miners are not paid for the time it requires to get there.

As there is very little in the way of mechanization, the coal must be extracted from the earth with just plain human sweat and muscle-power. The work in itself is hard enough, but conditions in the mine make it veritably unbearable. To begin with, the temperature changes from one level to the next. In some parts of the mine it is only thirty-five degrees centigrade, increasing to over fifty near the middle of the lower level where the miners become extremely hot. The humidity is very high and there is almost no air circulation. To make matters worse, water seeps into the tunnels in some places, forcing the miners to work in the mud. Because of these conditions, most of the men work with very little clothing and some with none at all. Questions of morality and hygiene are not considered worthy of much attention. Men and women work together under such conditions, a miner's job being hard physical labour for men and women alike:

C'était à sept cent huit mètres, au nord, dans la première voie de la veine Désirée, que trois kilomètres séparaient de l'accrochage. Lorsqu'ils parlaient de cette région de la fosse, les mineurs du pays pâlissaient et baissaient la voix, comme s'ils avaient parlé de l'enfer... Les tailles, au point où l'on en était arrivé, avaient une température moyenne de

quarante-cinq degrés. On s'y trouvait en pleine cité maudite, au milieu des flammes que les passants de la plaine voyaient par les fissures, crachant du soufre et des vapeurs abominables...

Péniblement, Catherine s'était décidée à emplir sa berline; puis, elle la poussa. La galerie était trop large pour qu'elle pût s'arc-bouter aux deux côtés des bois, ses pieds nus se tordaient dans les rails, où ils cherchaient un point d'appui, pendant qu'elle filait avec lenteur, les bras raidis en avant, la taille cassée. Et, dès qu'elle longeait le corroi, le supplice du feu recommençait, la sueur tombait aussitôt de tout son corps, en gouttes énormes, comme une pluie d'orage.

À peine au tiers du relais, elle ruissela, aveuglée, souillée elle aussi d'une boue noire. Sa chemise étroite, comme trempée d'encre, collait à sa peau, lui remontait jusqu'aux reins dans le mouvement des cuisses; et elle était si douloureusement bridée, qu'il lui fallut lâcher encore la besogne.

... L'aérage ne se faisait pas, au fond de cette voie éloignée. On y respirait toutes sortes de vapeurs qui sortaient du charbon avec un petit bruit bouillonnant de source, si abondantes parfois, que les lampes refusaient de brûler... Elle le connaissait bien, ce mauvais air, cet air mort comme disent les mineurs, en bas de lourds gaz d'asphyxie, en haut des gaz légers qui s'allument et foudroient tous les chantiers d'une fosse, des centaines d'hommes, dans un seul coup de tonnerre. Depuis son enfance, elle en avait tellement avalé, qu'elle s'étonnait de le supporter si mal, les oreilles bourdonnantes, la gorge en feu.

N'en pouvant plus, elle éprouva un besoin d'ôter sa chemise. Cela tournait à la torture, ce linge dont les moindres plis la coupaient, la brûlaient. Elle résista, voulut rouler encore, fut forcée de se remettre debout. Alors, vivement, en se disant qu'elle se couvrirait au relais, elle enleva tout, la corde, la chemise, si fiévreuse, qu'elle aurait arraché la peau, si elle avait pu. Et, nue maintenant, pitoyable, ravalée au trot de la femelle quêtant sa vie par la boue des chemins, elle besognait, la croupe barbouillée de suie, avec de la crotte jusqu'au ventre, ainsi qu'une jument de fiacre. À quatre pattes, elle poussait

Mais un désespoir lui vint, elle n'était pas soulagée, d'être nue. Quoi ôter encore? Le bourdonnement de ses oreilles l'assourdissait, il lui semblait sentir un étai la serrer aux tempes. Elle tomba sur

les genoux... Brusquement, la lampe s'éteignit. Alors, tout roula au fond des ténèbres, une meule tournait dans sa tête, son coeur défaillait, s'arrêtait de battre, engourdi à son tour par la fatigue immense qui endormait ses membres. Elle s'était renversée, elle agonisait dans l'air d'asphyxie, au ras du sol.²

Despite conditions, the routine of daily operations is fairly smooth. The coal is dug, loaded, pushed to the elevator, and raised to the surface in a complicated, but orderly, manner. The foremen down below see that things function well and they have a status of their own. Coming up from the mine after a day's work, the miners are dirty, wet and shivering. They return their lamps and warm themselves by the stove as the three o'clock shift is descending. The company has a stable underground where it keeps horses, and, in some parts of the mine, they are used to pull the carts full of coal to the elevators. The company also owns its own railroad to haul coal away from the mine.

The miner's whole life is centred around the mine and its coal:

L'ouvrier est dévoré par la mine dans laquelle il s'enfonce, le charbon s'enfonce en lui et le dévore de l'intérieur; il vit dans le charbon, le charbon pénètre en lui, il EST charbon. On ne saurait mieux dire que tout, hommes, femmes, enfants, habitations, installations, n'est là, n'existe qu'en fonction du charbon, au service du charbon, et du capital qui y est investi.³

The miners often begin working at the age of eight and stay in the mine until they are no longer able to work. Some men will put in as many as fifty years service. Working for so

long underground, however, has adverse affects on health. Most of those who work underground for any length of time will develop some kind of permanent chest infection or some sort of lung disease from having breathed the bad air for so long:

Quand il eut toussé, la gorge arrachée par un raclement profond, il cracha au pied de la corbeille, et la terre noircit.⁴

On top of everything else, their work is extremely dangerous. The cables that hold the elevators have been known to break, sending a carload of miners plunging to their death. Engineering techniques and safety features are not well-developed, thus cave-ins are a constant threat. When they occur, the miners band together to rescue the trapped men, but often nothing can be done - deaths and crippling injuries are very common. Most of the miners cannot even read and write. They are really prisoners of the mine.

The salient feature of the miner's life is exploitation. The miners live in a company town in run-down, uniform houses which are rented at a low price. Every month the company gives each family a small amount of coal for heating. It also provides a doctor. The miners are given small pensions when they retire. If a man dies in the mine, the wife must be paid a pension, and if a miner is injured so that he cannot work anymore, the company must pay him some compensation. As money is scarce, some families have

the company's permission to sell biscuits and candy. Still, these concessions on the part of the company do not amount to very much.

Various companies are in constant competition and an industrial crisis is affecting all sorts of industries. Workers are being laid-off and salaries are being reduced. The miners do not earn enough money to feed themselves as it is, and the lay-offs and cuts in salary only add to their problems. Those who labour under extremely poor conditions to dig the coal out of the ground are well removed from the profits. The owners manipulate hundreds of thousands of francs while the miners slave for next to nothing, making rich the absentee owners whom they never see, prisoners of the company with no chance to escape.

The miners often appear reckless, not caring much for their own personal safety, but this is only because they are not paid well. They choose to dig more coal in order to earn more money because they are paid for what they produce and because they are paid next to nothing for the extra time they must spend shoring up with wood the areas they dig out. The company tries to appear respectable and the owners pretend to be concerned for the safety of the miners, but the company seeks to force the men to spend more time on safety precautions because the miners will earn less money that way and because the company will not have to pay

as much for costly repairs and injuries. All concern is of purely materialistic motivation. Many of the miners are bitter and they mock the owners behind their superiors' backs, afraid of being caught doing it because of the fines given for any insubordination among the workers.

The life of the miners and their families outside the mine is not at all pleasant either. Nearly everyone has to work long hours in the mine and they come home too tired for much else. They live in crowded conditions with almost no privacy, not even from house to house because the walls are thin and because people are very curious about other peoples' business. Many families have a large number of children, a lot of extra mouths to feed. Any money earned by the children is needed and they are expected to turn over what they make. When there is meat, the father gets it because he has to work the hardest. With so little to eat the children steal what they can, and they even fight one another for scraps. A good meal is rare - almost a feast. Discipline is harsh. The children are more burdens on their parents than anything else.

Most of what the miners buy from the company store is purchased on credit. When the storekeeper refuses to extend their credit any further, the miners have only to send him their wives or their daughters for the night to change his mind:

41

C'était un fait connu: quand un mineur voulait une prolongation de crédit, il n'avait qu'à envoyer sa fille ou sa femme, laides ou belles, pourvu qu'elles fussent complaisantes.⁵

A good number of the miners' wives are out on the street looking for charity, literally begging at the homes of the rich bourgeois who are high up in the company. They are almost always given clothes or food instead of money, for it is believed that the poor will spend any money for alcohol. The owners accuse the miners of not being very smart. Instead of spending their money for necessities, the miners drink and pile up debts. They believe they are paying the miners enough money and that they are wasting it. They do, in fact, waste money, but the point is that they are not given enough to begin with.

Pleasures are few, and they provide an escape from this hell on earth. Overindulgence in sex is one of them. The children are exposed to the facts of life from an early age. The result is a sort of "free love" philosophy. They see everything and "make love" like their parents:

... il se roulait avec elle sur le terri. C'était sa petite femme, ils essayaient ensemble, dans les coins noirs, l'amour qu'ils entendaient et qu'ils voyaient chez eux, derrière les cloisons, par les fentes des portes. Ils savaient tout, mais ils ne pouvaient guère, trop jeunes, tâtonnant, jouant, pendant des heures, à des jeux de petits chiens vicieux. Lui appelait ça "faire papa et maman"; et, quand il l'emmenait, elle galopait, elle se laissait prendre avec le tremblement délicieux de l'instinct, souvent fâchée, mais cédant toujours dans l'attente de quelque chose qui ne venait point.⁶

The parents, for their part, finish by having too many children, and just plain sexual promiscuity is common - some men take mistresses and some women become prostitutes. The other dominant pleasure is alcohol. Many of the miners stop at the inn to drink on the way home from the mine and others over-indulge at home. Either way, money needed for food and clothing is wasted. Then, there is violence - parents beat their children, men drink and beat their wives, the children fight almost constantly with one another. One child even commits a murder:

La sentinelle ne pouvait l'apercevoir, ce brigand d'enfant préparait à coup sûr une farce, car il ne décolerait pas contre les soldats, il demandait quand on serait débarrassé de ces assassins, qu'on envoyait avec des fusils pour tuer le monde. 2 4

Un instant, Etienne hésita à l'appeler, pour l'empêcher de faire quelque bêtise. La lune s'était cachée, il l'avait vu se ramasser sur lui-même, prêt à bondir; mais la lune reparaisait, et l'enfant restait accroupi. À chaque tour, la sentinelle s'avavançait jusqu'à la cabane, puis tournait le dos et repartait. Et, brusquement, comme un nuage jetait ses ténèbres, Jeanlin sauta sur les épaules du soldat, d'un bond énorme de chat sauvage, s'y agrippa de ses griffes, lui enfonça dans la gorge son couteau grand ouvert... Souvent, il avait saigné des poulets, qu'il surprenait derrière les fermes. Cela fut si rapide, qu'il y eut seulement dans la nuit un cri étouffé, pendant que le fusil tombait avec un bruit de ferraille. Déjà, la lune, très blanche, luisait.?

As the industrial crisis progresses, the living conditions of the miners worsen. The company is now laying men off at the slightest provocation in a desperate attempt to save money. It is demanding that the miners spend more time on boarding the tunnels up with wood, thus reducing their

salaries even more. The fines are multiplied. The miners are becoming more and more bitter. Some are beginning to speak of equality, justice, and freedom from oppression. They are after a fair share of the profits and improvements in the working conditions. As matters build to a showdown, many of the miners are turning to socialism.

The right to strike is granted in 1864 and workers' organizations are permitted in 1868, but there is no formal legislation and the "Liberal Empire" does not fully respect these rights.⁸ After the "coup d'état" of Louis Napoleon in 1851, most of the workers' associations disappeared, harassed by the police.⁹ For a long time, the workers are not allowed to form associations or even to have meetings.¹⁰ And, even after the granting of the right to strike, laws prevent the strikes' having any kind of a collective life:

Donc, chaque ouvrier en grève se trouvait "ipso facto" en état de délinquance.¹¹

After 1868 the workers are allowed to have meetings and the right to strike is more easily exercisable, but the courts still continue to put down harshly all measures which might serve to put order in the ranks of the strikers and all forms of physical violence.¹² All kinds of meetings and discussions start taking place, and, by the end of the Empire, a predominantly antibonapartist ideology exists:

Une idéologie ouvrière n'a cessé de s'élaborer pendant tout le Second Empire, idéologie tourmentée,

instable, qui, à la fin du règne de Napoléon III, avait comme principal caractère d'être antibonapartiste.¹³

By the end of the Second Empire, most of the Parisian workers have become socialists or communists, at least after a fashion.¹⁴ The idea of the trade union is emerging and unions are starting to be tolerated.¹⁵ Still, trade unions are not finally legalized until 1884.¹⁶ Child labour in the mines is abolished in 1874.¹⁷

The end of the Second Empire is plagued by several bloody strikes¹⁸, and the strike in Germinal is an example of one of them. The company, convinced that the strike will not last long, is determined to wait the miners out. As the strike continues, the miners' strike fund runs out, the company loses money because no coal is being mined, and the mines themselves start deteriorating because they are not being maintained. Cave-ins and flooding increase. The miners, when their credit finally runs out, begin selling their possessions in order to buy food. Soon, they have nothing left:

C'était, maintenant, l'agonie dernière, la maison vidée, tombée au dénuement final. Les toiles des matelas avaient suivi la laine chez la brocanteuse; puis, les draps étaient partis, le linge, tout ce qui pouvait se vendre. Un soir, on avait vendu deux sous un mouchoir du grand-père. Des larmes coulaient, à chaque objet du pauvre ménage dont il fallait se séparer, et la mère se lamentait encore d'avoir emporté un jour, dans sa jupe, la boîte de carton rose, l'ancien cadeau de son homme, comme on emporterait un enfant, pour s'en débarrasser sous une porte. Ils étaient nus, ils n'avaient plus à vendre que leur peau, si entamée, si

compromise, que personne n'en aurait donné un liard. Aussi ne prenaient-ils même pas la peine de chercher, ils savaient qu'il n'y avait rien, que c'était la fin de tout, qu'ils ne devaient espérer ni une chandelle, ni un morceau de charbon, ni une pomme de terre; et ils attendaient d'en mourir...19

Most of the miners have joined the Communist International by this time. When the company brings in outsiders to work the mines, angry mobs form. They loot, terrorize, and destroy mines, and several people are beaten, the women taking as active a part in the violence and destruction as the men. The company fires many of those who took part in the destruction and calls in soldiers to protect the mines. The soldiers are harassed, insulted and cut by flying bricks. Pushed too hard, they fire on the mob, killing fourteen and wounding twenty-five:

Trois fois, le capitaine fut sur le point de commander le feu. Une angoisse l'étranglait, une lutte interminable de quelques secondes heurta en lui des idées, des devoirs, toutes ses croyances d'homme et de soldat. La pluie des briques redoublait, et il ouvrait la bouche, il allait crier: Feu! lorsque les fusils partirent d'eux-mêmes, trois coups d'abord, puis cinq, puis un roulement de peloton... balayait le terrain, fauchait à cent pas les groupes de curieux qui riaient de la bataille. Une balle entra dans la bouche de Mouquet, le renversa, fracassé, aux pieds de Zacharie et de Philomène, dont les deux mioches furent couverts de gouttes rouges. Au même instant, la Mouquette recevait deux balles dans le ventre. Elle avait vu les soldats épauler, elle s'était jetée, d'un mouvement de bonne fille, devant Catherine, en lui criant de prendre garde; et elle poussa un grand cri, elle s'étala sur les reins, culbutée par la secousse... Les blessés hurlaient, les morts se refroidissaient dans des postures cassées, boueux de la boue liquide du dégel, çà et là envasés parmi les taches d'encre du charbon, qui reparaissaient sous les lambeaux salis de la neige. Et, au milieu de ces cadavres d'hommes, tout petits, l'air pauvre avec leur maigreur

de misère, gisait le cadavre de Trompette, un tas de chair morte, monstrueux et lamentable.²⁰

In Paris, the government tries to keep the affair as quiet as possible. The company tries to do likewise and starts accepting the miners back to work. The miners have no choice. After two and one half months on strike, the men, women and children return to the mines, resigned to work under the same miserable conditions as before, hoping for a future in which the injustice will be ended and the miners will no longer be oppressed...

Zola himself hates laziness, and he is not too concerned about just rewards for work done, except in Germinal:

Zola ne se demande pas à qui le travail profite et si c'est à celui qui le fait; il n'excuse jamais un ouvrier d'être dégoûté d'un travail dont la rémunération ne suffit pas à le nourrir avec sa famille, sauf dans Germinal. Sauf dans Germinal, et très curieusement à propos de Goujet dans L'Assommoir, la question de la juste rémunération du travail ouvrier n'est pas posée.²¹

For Zola, work is both intrinsically and morally good, an outlook which makes some of his social attitudes ambiguous:

Cette étrange lacune provient du fait que Zola considère le travail comme un bien, une valeur en soi, comme un absolu; lorsqu'il se trouve amené à parler du travail social, du travail de l'ouvrier, il accueille assez facilement l'accusation des bourgeois que les ouvriers sont tous paresseux; il ne se pose pas de questions sur la nature du travail ouvrier, ne se demande pas si leur travail peut procurer aux ouvriers la même satisfaction qu'à lui le sien; ainsi la croyance "a priori" que le travail est bon en soi, que tout travail est de la même nature moralement bon, limite-t-elle la portée de la critique sociale de Zola; elle est à la racine de l'ambiguïté de son attitude vis-à-vis du problème social.²²

Is Zola some kind of a social activist? He is opposed to oppression and injustice, and he would like to see the conditions in the mines improve. However, he is writing more to sell his books than for any other reason. Any social activism is read into Zola and one must guard against this tendency. Still, it may be said that the bourgeois who exploit the miners are largely responsible for the misery in which they live.

Another problem raised by the reading of Germinal is that of Zola's position on socialism. Since Germinal is far more concerned with socialism than any of the other novels of the Rougon-Macquart, this is a good place to set the record straight. Many people see more socialism in Germinal than is really there, or, to speak more correctly, more socialism in Zola than is there at this time. While it is true that Zola turns to socialism in later life, this influence is predominant only after the Rougon-Macquart. The socialist doctrine in Germinal is not well developed. It is obscure - "rêve, songe, enfantillage".²³ Etienne Lantier, one of the socialists in Germinal, is a dreamer. Others are anarchists. Their plans for the reorganization of society are not well mapped out at all.

Zola does have a purpose in writing Germinal which extends beyond that of the objective, impersonal study of a given milieu. He says about Germinal in his notes:

Je le veux prédisant l'avenir, posant la question qui sera la question la plus importante du XX^e siècle.²⁴

It is the struggle of capital against labour. The impression given is that the misery of the miners in Germinal cannot last for long and that they will someday rise up. Again in his notes, Zola says:

Il faut que le lecteur bourgeois ait un frisson de terreur.²⁵

He is definitely sympathetic. Someday, there will be justice. Zola is, however, not the apostle of a socialist revolution. Like the miners in Germinal, he hopes for improvement in the future and the book ends on an optimistic note:

Germinal s'achève sur l'image d'un homme qui marche; Lantier qui s'en va... le coeur gonflé d'espoir.²⁶

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- 1 Turnell, Martin, The Art of French Fiction, p. 165.
 - 2 Zola, Emile, Germinal, éd. Rencontre Lausanne, pp. 348-352.
 - 3 Euvrard, Michel, Emile Zola, p. 70.
 - 4 Zola, Germinal, p. 43.
 - 5 Ibid, p. 125.
 - 6 Ibid, p. 160.
 - 7 Ibid, p. 457.
 - 8 Lorwin, Val Rogin, The French Labour Movement, p. 11.
 - 9 Leroy, Maxime, Histoire des Idées Sociales en France, v.III, p. 272.
 - 10 Ibid, p. 273.

- 11 Ibid, p. 275.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid, p. 276.
- 14 Ibid, p. 317.
- 15 Ibid, p. 318.
- 16 Cobban, Alfred, A History of Modern France, v.II, p. 214.
- 17 Le Blond-Zola, Mme D., Emile Zola, raconté par sa fille, p. 138.
- 18 Leroy, Histoire des Idées Sociales en France, p. 319.
- 19 Zola, Germinal, p. 434.
- 20 Ibid, pp. 477-479.
- 21 Euvrard, Emile Zola, p. 94.
- 22 Ibid, pp. 94-95.
- 23 Guillemin, Henri, Préface à Germinal, p. 24.
- 24 Ibid, p. 13.
- 25 Ibid, p. 27.
- 26 Ibid, p. 28.

VI THE FARMER

In his novel La Terre Zola seeks to document the life of the farmer:

Zola veut... montrer l'homme attaché à la glèbe, l'aimant, la fécondant de son travail. Il rêvait d'écrire un poème vivant de la terre, les saisons, les travaux des champs, les gens, les bêtes, la campagne entière.¹

The region of the Beauce, south of Paris, is one of large open prairies, streams and trees in which people live a long way from one another. Villages are small, well spread-out and contain only a few stores. They usually have a mayor and some kind of a municipal council to look after local matters. The farmer lives his life in a series of succeeding cycles:

L'entrepreneur agricole qui calcule souvent la prospérité de son entreprise à l'échelle d'une génération humaine doit tenir compte d'un cycle animal de trois à cinq ans et d'un cycle végétal annuel (sans parler des décades nécessaires à la croissance d'un arbre)... Chaque opération n'a pour lui de valeur que par référence à ce cycle et à son résultat économique.²

Life is routine and it changes very little from one year to the next. The pace of life is slow and people never rush things. They are fairly isolated from the outside world and prefer to keep it so.

Important in the life of every farmer are his animals:

Il existait entre l'homme et l'animal tout un tissu de relations affectives basées sur un soin quotidien et parfois même sur une longue histoire d'élevage et de dressage qui donnait à l'homme un rôle "paternel" vis-à-vis de l'animal.³

He keeps cows, horses, chickens, pigs, etc. which are used both to produce milk, eggs, butter, cheese and meat and for labour. They represent a capital investment which the farmer can ill afford to lose. In addition to the animals, the farmers have small gardens where they grow peas, carrots and beans, and orchards with apricot and plum trees. On market day they take their products into town. People arrive from the surrounding countryside to both buy and sell on a sort of barter system. The seller names his price, the buyer offers a lower one, then they argue and curse back and forth until an agreement is reached. After business, they eat, drink and play games at the inn before going home. Every family also has its own vines and makes its own wine. The grape harvest takes place in October - the grapes are collected during long days of work in the field before being pressed into wine. This time of the "vendanges" is, perhaps, the happiest time of the year - there is always plenty of drinking and feasting.

But the most important product of the Beauce is wheat. It is planted in the spring and harvested in the very late summer, the harvest beginning at the end of August and lasting through September. Nearly everyone is working from dawn to dusk in the fields. They rise at four in the morning, work until midday, then rest during the hottest part of the day after the noon meal before working on until evening. The work

is hard and the fields are alive with harvesters. Following the harvest the fields are fertilized and the smell is terrible. Then, during the winter, the pace of life slows to a crawl as there is not nearly as much work to do. There are just the animals to be looked after and the occasional wood to be chopped. The men sit around smoking, telling tall tales and playing cards while the women knit and gossip between preparing the meals and washing the clothes. In general, however, the life of a farmer is a very difficult one. He has to work long and hard to win a living from an ungrateful soil. He works from dawn to dusk six or seven days a week. He begins working when still a child, and the women must work just as long and just as hard as the men. It is a lifetime occupation with very little return.

The farmers are influenced both by external forces about which they can do nothing and by internal ones about which they could do something if they only would. Externally, they are often the passive victims of nature's whims:

Le paysan de tradition se soumettait aux lois naturelles avec fatalisme et se sentait conditionné par elles.⁴

The rain and the cold can cause them to lose part of their harvest, and hail-storms occur periodically causing considerable damage:

Ah! quel ravage désolait ce coin de terre! quelle lamentation montait du désastre, entrevu aux lueurs vacillantes des lanternes!... les haricots et les pois

rasés au pied, les salades tranchées, hachées, sans qu'on pût songer seulement à en utiliser les feuilles. Mais les arbres surtout avaient souffert: les menues branches, les fruits, en étaient coupés comme avec des couteaux; les troncs eux-mêmes, meurtris, perdaient leur sève par les trous de l'écorce. Et plus loin, dans les vignes, c'était pis, les lanternes pullulaient, sautaient, s'enrageaient, au milieu de gémissements et de jurons... Non seulement la récolte de l'année était perdue, mais les souches, dépouillées, allaient végéter et mourir. Personne ne sentait la pluie, un chien hurlait à la mort, des femmes éclataient en larmes, comme au bord d'une fosse... Peu à peu, tous s'emportaient: était-ce possible de perdre, en un quart d'heure, le fruit d'un an de travail? Qu'avaient-ils fait pour être punis de la sorte? Ni sécurité ni justice, dans ces fléaux sans raison, ces caprices qui tuaient le monde. Brusquement, la Grande, furibonde, ramassa des cailloux, les lança en l'air pour crever le ciel, qu'on ne distinguait pas. Et elle gueulait:

- Sacré cochon, là-haut! Tu ne peux donc pas nous foutre la paix?⁵

This storm brought the farmers out in the middle of the night to examine their fields. All they can do is replant. The army and wars also have a harmful effect on agriculture. The army often takes away the most able men, leaving few to do the farming. The young men usually return from war with little desire left for farming; in fact, many of the older farmers see war as bringing the death of agriculture. When war with Germany seems likely, more recruits are chosen for the army. One man cuts off a finger so that he will be rejected, and the night of the lottery many of the new conscripts get drunk.

The problems of French agriculture are further complicated by the fact that the price of grain has been falling steadily for some time. Soon the grain will not even sell for as much as it costs to grow. The French farmers are not

being protected from foreign competition. Grain is flowing in from places like America, flooding the market and causing the price to fall. The situation is paradoxical and complicated. Either the city worker or the farmer must suffer. The farmer desires protective tariffs against the foreign competition to avert ruin. The city worker wants none, for if the price of grain rises he will have to pay higher prices for bread, etc. and he will have to be paid higher wages. Costs will then rise, pushing up the prices for the tools, clothes, etc. that are needed by the farmer. One side wants to force the farmer to feed the city worker, the other wants the farmer to eat first. To make matters worse, the Industrial Revolution is having an effect in France. As is common to countries passing through this period, there is a shift of population from the rural to the urban centres. The children are leaving the farms for the cities. Due to the decline in farm income and the very difficult life led by most farmers, this trend is likely to continue with more and more leaving the farms for the cities in search of better-paying jobs.

The farmers, however, are not entirely the victims of outside forces. It is during the Second Empire that the struggle develops between the newer, scientific methods of farming and the older, more traditional ones. Most are small farmers. The peasant is very stubborn and set in his ways. He is

superstitious and anything new and different is automatically suspect. He will not use the newer methods of science which are developing to help him:

Une culture nouvelle, pour être adoptée, doit, à première vue et dans une première phase, trouver sa place dans le système de culture en vigueur, le compléter et le renforcer au lieu de le briser, même si, à la longue échéance, son introduction doit logiquement conduire à l'établissement d'un nouveau système.⁶

The newer methods just do not fit into his system. He prefers to go on doing things by chance as he has always done and he is exhausting the land, bit by bit. The big farmers are turning to the newer methods. They operate on a very large scale, have huge sums invested in the new methods and machinery, and are becoming powerful and influential. They realize that the trend lies in this direction, and they are better able to survive the current economic crisis. Beyond the control of the small farmer there is need for lower taxes, less foreign competition, higher prices for grain, keeping the children on the farms, and more money which has to be attracted away from the developing financial and industrial circles. The small farmer needs agricultural schools; he needs better methods of production; for, indeed, agriculture on a small scale does seem to be dying. However, the stubborn, traditional and superstitious peasant is partly to blame for his own misery by his refusal to accept change. The situation is desperate for many:

Voulez-vous la stricte vérité? Aujourd'hui, un cultivateur qui tient le coup, mange son argent ou celui des autres... j'en connais qui empruntent à six, lorsque leur terre ne donne pas seulement le trois! La culbute est fatalement au bout. Un paysan qui emprunte est un homme fichu, il doit y laisser jusqu'à sa chemise. L'autre semaine encore, on a expulsé un de mes voisins, le père, la mère et quatre enfants jetés dans la rue, après que les hommes de loi ont eu mangé le bétail, la terre et la maison... Pourtant, voici des années qu'on nous promet la création d'un crédit agricole à des taux raisonnables. Oui! va-t'en voir s'ils viennent!... Et ça dégoûte même les bons travailleurs, ils en arrivent à se tâter, avant de faire un enfant à leurs femmes. Merci! une bouche de plus, un meurt-la-faim qui serait désespéré de naître! Quand il n'y a pas de pain pour tous, on ne fait plus d'enfants, et la nation crève!?

There are other characteristics of life which are worth noting. To begin with, the father is the despotic head of the family and the wife and children tremble under him. This authority is retained until he is too old or too weak to assert it. Both parents have a good deal to say about whom their children marry, and marriages are very big affairs with much feasting and drinking. Parents do not tend to show much warmth or affection for their children. The very young are good for helping around the farm, but they are generally looked upon as burdens, extra mouths to feed. Family solidarity, the good name of the family and family honour are all important and they are carefully protected. Life is lived on a very unelevated plane - language is common and very often vulgar, as are many of the pranks and practical jokes that are played from time to time. Many are thieves and poachers

who steal whatever they can lay their hands on.

In the life of the farmer sex, alcohol and violence are predominant. A good number of the young are involved in some kind of sexual relationship. The number of young girls deserted pregnant is enough to cause a scandal in the region, and more girls are already pregnant when they get married than not. And it is not only the young that practice such sexual activity, for while family solidarity may be important there is a considerable amount of adultery. Even the odd abortion is not uncommon. Indeed, some of these people have all but sunk to the level of animals, and in their miserable lives even incest is possible:

- Et quand ce serait vrai, qu'est-ce que ça vous fiche?... Le pauvre petit n'a déjà pas tant de plaisir. Je suis sa soeur, je pourrais bien être sa femme, puisque toutes les filles le rebutent.

Deux larmes coulèrent sur ses joues à cet aveu, dans le déchirement de sa maternité pour l'infirme, qui allait jusqu'à l'inceste. Après lui avoir gagné du pain, elle pouvait encore, le soir, lui donner ça, ce que les autres lui refusaient, un régal qui ne leur coûtait rien; et, au fond de leur intelligence obscure d'êtres près de la terre, de parias dont l'amour n'avait point voulu, ils n'auraient su dire comment la chose s'était faite: une approche instinctive sans consentement réfléchi, lui tourmenté et bestial, elle passive et bonne à tout, cédant ensuite l'un et l'autre au plaisir d'avoir plus chaud, dans cette mesure où ils grelottaient.⁸

While it would be unfair to say that the farmers are all alcoholics, they do consume a large quantity of wine and the occasional one does finish as a lazy drunk. When over-indulgence in sex and alcohol are common to a group of people

in Zola, it would almost seem to follow as a matter of course that violence is too. Parents often beat their children, and one man, who seems to live by a double standard, whips his daughter whenever he catches her having sexual relations:

Jésus-Christ n'était sévère que sur un point, la morale... Il était rentré chez lui, pour décrocher, derrière la porte, à gauche, le grand fouet de roulier dont il ne se servait que dans ces occasions; et il partit, le fouet sous le bras, se courbant, filant le long des buissons, comme à la chasse, afin de tomber sur les amoureux sans être vu...

Elle, empêtrée, la jupe en l'air, ne pouvait nier. D'un coup, qui cingla les cuisses, il la mit debout, la tira hors du fossé. Et la chasse commença...

Un coup de fouet, qui l'enveloppa aux aisselles, la fit virer comme une toupie; un autre la culbuta, en lui arrachant une mèche de cheveux. Dès lors, ramenée dans le bon chemin, elle n'eut plus que l'idée de rentrer au terrier, le plus vivement possible... Mais ses petites jambes ne pouvaient lutter, les coups pleuvaient sur ses épaules rondes, sur ses reins encore frémissants, sur toute cette chair de fillette précoce, qui s'en moquait d'ailleurs, qui finissait par trouver ça drôle, d'être chatouillée si fort. Ce fut en riant d'un rire nerveux qu'elle rentra d'un bond et qu'elle se réfugia dans un coin, où le grand fouet ne l'atteignait plus.⁹

He does the same thing whenever he gets the chance, taking whatever woman happens to be available. Buteau kills his mother in a fit of anger when he learns that she has given some of his money to his brother. Lise kills her sister Françoise by pushing her on a fork during an argument. Yes, violence is a part of their lives, from the beating of children to murder.

The farmers do not care much for doctors. They will not send for the vet when their animals give birth unless it seems likely that one of them might die because they prefer

to do things themselves. They will only send for a doctor when people are sick at the very last possible moment and they often wait too long. This is, in part, a result of their suspicion and dislike of outsiders, but it is also something else. Lise says on the eve of having her baby when it is suggested that they call the doctor: "On n'a pas d'argent à jeter par les fenêtres." They do not have much money to begin with, but they have become extremely miserly and possessive, and to the point of endangering human life.

Religion is scarcely more than a form. The church is in disrepair and the young girls are always getting pregnant. The priest is generous with the poor, but they really cannot be bothered about religion. Any talk of their going to hell after they die to pay for their sins does not mean a thing to them because most of them are already in hell - right here on earth. When the priest of a small village explodes and threatens to leave one day, the inhabitants are indifferent:

- Vous allez vivre sans prêtre, comme des bêtes...
Ils l'écoutaient tous, curieusement, avec la parfaite indifférence, au fond, de gens pratiques qui ne craignaient plus son Dieu de colère et de châtement. À quoi bon trembler et s'aplatir, acheter le pardon, puisque l'idée du diable les faisait rire désormais, et qu'ils avaient cessé de croire le vent, la grêle, le tonnerre, aux mains d'un maître vengeur? C'était bien sûr du temps perdu, valait mieux garder son respect pour les gendarmes du gouvernement, qui étaient les plus forts.¹⁰

They respect the government because they see it as being stronger than the church and as having a real influence in

their lives, but they are resentful of, and even hate, the bourgeois who run the country because they feel exploited by them. They dislike the administrators of the law and they distrust authority of any kind. They do not like to pay any kind of taxes because they feel they are being robbed. The harder they work, the more they pay. The more traditional do not value learning. Thus, their children receive very little education. Any who do will probably leave for the city. The rest are fairly ignorant. They totally misunderstand government and its operation. They are either Republicans in politics, or else they just do not care. There are very few who differ from these two tendencies. If they care at all, the country's leaders are probably their enemies.

I have purposely left one aspect of the life of the farmer to the end, for by far the most important thing in his life is the land he owns. It is central and essential to his existence:

Pour le paysan de tradition, les travaux de la terre sont une raison de vivre.¹¹

And he is extremely possessive of it. He grows up on the land and his greatest ambition is to own and cultivate his own. The children inherit from their parents when they die, although the old may sometimes surrender their land when they are no longer able to work it. The farmer would rather give his land to his children than leave it uncultivated, or worse, sell it to strangers. As long as their parents are alive

the children must rent the land from them. They veritabily compete amongst themselves for the best pieces of land, and the quarrels over how to divide it and over who gets what are interminable. When everything has been settled concerning the division of the land, the children draw lots to decide who is to receive which land. Some of the old refuse to give up their land as long as they are alive, others try to obtain more after they have surrendered it to their children because they are bored with nothing to do. The true farmer leads a life in which the soil is more important than even his family and in which the soil holds the place of honour and worship:

Mais ce qu'il ne disait pas, ce qui sortait de l'émotion refoulée dans sa gorge, c'était la tristesse infinie, la rancune sourde, le déchirement de tout son corps, à se séparer de ses biens si chaudement convoités avant la mort de son père, cultivés plus tard avec un acharnement de rut, augmentés ensuite lopin à lopin, au prix de la plus sordide avarice. Telle parcelle représentait des mois de pain et de fromage, des hivers sans feu, des étés de travaux brûlants, sans autre soutien que quelques gorgées d'eau. Il avait aimé la terre en femme qui tue et pour qui on assassine. Ni épouse, ni enfants, ni personne, rien d'humain: la terre! Et voilà qu'il avait vieilli, qu'il devait céder cette maîtresse à ses fils, comme son père la lui avait cédée à lui-même, enragé de son impuissance.¹²

This is a picture of the old man and his attachment to the soil, his extreme sadness, and even rage, at having to give up what he had loved and coveted so much. The farmer will endure a life of misery just to hold on to a bit of land which he then loves far more than anything else, and which he loves with a sexual passion. For most of us today, this

kind of feeling can only be stated and accepted, for how do we - who do not feel such attraction toward the soil and who might tend to look upon this passion as one which passes all bounds of reason, condemning the peasant to a life of misery as a near prisoner of the earth - understand and appreciate? And, in the final analysis, where does this lead the farmer? People and things come and go. Man fights for survival and he very often loses, but the land endures forever and does not care. The farmer's love for his land is unrequited:

Seulement, est-ce qu'on sait? De même que la gelée qui brûle les moissons, la grêle qui les hache, la foudre qui les verse, sont nécessaires peut-être, il est possible qu'il faille du sang et des larmes pour que le monde marche. Qu'est-ce que notre malheur pèse, dans la grande mécanique des étoiles et du soleil? Il se moque de nous, le bon Dieu! Nous n'avons notre pain que par un duel terrible et de chaque jour. Et la terre seule demeure l'immortelle, la mère d'où nous sortons et où nous retournons, elle qu'on aime jusqu'au crime, qui refait continuellement de la vie pour son but ignoré, même avec nos abominations et nos misères.¹³

Zola has shown that the farmer, like other members of the working-class, leads a very difficult life, working extremely hard for very little return. It is true that he is in part to blame for his own misery, but Zola does not condemn him. He is also, in part, the victim of nature's whims, and the real burden of responsibility lies with the corrupt middle-class which is guiding France to ruin.

- 1 Dumesnil, René, Le Réalisme et Le Naturalisme, p. 330.
- 2 Mendras, Henri, La Sociologie de la Campagne Française, p. 59.
- 3 Ibid, p. 51.
- 4 Ibid, p. 50.
- 5 Zola, Emile, La Terre, p. 112.
- 6 Mendras, La Sociologie de la Campagne Française, p. 43.
- 7 Zola, La Terre, p. 147-148.
- 8 Ibid, p. 137.
- 9 Ibid, p. 213-215.
- 10 Ibid, p. 264.
- 11 Mendras, La Sociologie de la Campagne Française, p. 50.
- 12 Zola, La Terre, p. 24.
- 13 Ibid, p. 501.

VII THE SERVANT

There are many different types of servants in French society during the Second Empire and the richer the employer the more servants he can afford. It is those in the upper-class who surround themselves with servants - butlers, grooms, coachmen, cooks, maids, etc. A family with a long tradition of nobility behind it and plenty of money is likely to have several dozen servants to look after the house, prepare and serve the meals, care for the grounds, clean the stables and care for the horses, drive the carriages, and attend to the person of their masters and mistresses. As one descends the social ladder, position and money are diminished - thus, fewer servants. Still, it is common for even the not-too-prosperous bourgeois household to have at least one servant if he or she can possibly be afforded.

These servants generally come from the working-class, from the bottom of the social ladder, and they go to work for those who are more fortunate than themselves. Some servants are extremely loyal to their employers, others are not. Some are really very self-sacrificing, working always in the best interests of their masters with very little care for personal gain. Others are ambitious, greedy, self-seeking and cunning, seeking only their own best interests and caring only about personal gain. Some may devote the better part of

their lives to one family or to one master or mistress. Others flit about from place to place, going to wherever it appears that their ambitions can best be satisfied.

The society of the Second Empire is weak, corrupt and decadent, as many of the concerned writers of the period point out.¹ Now, in any society, the dominant social attitudes are usually those of the middle-class, largely because its members control the institutions and the media which transmit to others the values they respect. During the Second Empire, the majority of this group is neither honest nor virtuous, and with the passage of time more and more people are corrupted by those around them, realizing that the best way to survive is to go along with the crowd. Most of the servants of these people are paid very little, not even enough to survive on, yet they are only too often surrounded by wealth. What is likely to happen to people who work for corrupt and wealthy employers who do not pay them enough money to live on? They adapt to the new world in which they live. They must become like those around them in order to survive and they try to profit from every opportunity. Most of the servants are dishonest; they are as corrupt as the rest of society.

In this chapter, I would like to take a look at four different servants presented by Zola - one the servant of an aristocrat, one of a prostitute, and two of bourgeois masters.

Céleste is the maid and lady-in-waiting of Renée Saccard (La Curée), a wealthy member of the upper-class. Céleste does almost everything for her. She cleans her room, looks after all of her clothes, dresses and undresses her, and does her hair. She prepares light meals when Renée does not care to eat with the rest of the family, lights a fire in her room when necessary, and looks after her when she is ill. She is an excellent worker. She is submissive, respectful, and very proper - the ideal servant. She answers the door, announces Renée's visitors, brings in those her mistress wishes to see, and sends the rest away. In addition, she is someone with whom Renée can talk, a sort of confidante. She keeps quiet about the affair Renée is having with Maxime. She acts as a lookout for them, warning them if someone is coming, and she pays very little attention to them otherwise. They do not even have to pay her to keep silent. She is thrifty, not interested in men, and has no lover. She is extremely loyal and Renée comes to have a sort of maternal affection for her.

Then, one day, after eight years of service, she informs her mistress that she is leaving. Why the loyalty and faithful service? To get what she wanted. From the very first day, she was resolved to leave as soon as she had saved 5,000 francs. The only reason she was there was to save enough money to enable her to retire. She put up with things to

get it. Hers is a very common pattern. Many servants come to Paris from the country, work until they are able to save enough money, then return to the country to live, probably buying a piece of land or going into a small business. C

Zoé is the maid of Nana (Nana), the prostitute. She cleans Nana's apartment and does the cooking, often helps her dress and undress, delivers letters, runs errands, answers the door, and handles Nana's creditors as best she can when they come to collect. She announces people, brings them in, and can either get rid of or make wait a very long time those whom her mistress does not wish to see. She helps Nana arrange her "visits", although Nana often changes her days without prior warning. She flatters her mistress and generally treats her with respect. Nana tells her nearly everything and often takes her advice. For the moment, she has more experience in the world than her mistress, and she tries to keep Nana from making mistakes, making sure that Nana sees the people she should, doing her best to see to it that Nana does not let anyone rich slip away. At times she is vulgar and she sometimes chides her mistress, but she knows when to keep quiet and let Nana have her way. She is fairly well known, quite proud, and says that she could get another job if she wanted one. She stays with Nana because she believes in Nana's future - in other words, she is ambitious.

When Nana moves into a huge mansion, paid for by an admirer, Zoé becomes head-servant and organizes everything. Her mistress has become very rich and Zoé is always picking up money here and there when Nana gets into difficulties. She and Nana quarrel often, Zoé always pretending to be very hurt afterwards so that Nana will give her some kind of a present to make up - an expensive dress or some kind of jewelry, or even some money. Zoé and the other servants steal Nana blind. Zoé takes dresses worth thousands of francs, a lot of jewelry, and a good deal of money.

She remains with Nana until she is able to steal enough to set up on her own. Tired of looking after other people, she wants others to look after her and she wants to have a circle of friends meet "chez elle". Like Céleste in a way, hers is a selfish devotion to get what she wants.

Véronique presents a different picture. She is the family servant of the Chanteaus, one of the more prosperous families of Bonneville (La Joie de Vivre). She has been with the family for a long time, and, although often scolding and bad-tempered, she is very devoted to the mistress of the house. She treats her mistress with respect and is almost like one of the family. She looks after the cooking and likes people to be on time for meals. She does all of the housework, tends a small garden and helps take care of old Chanteau who is dying of

inherited gout, although the wife and servant are losing patience with this illness which has lasted for fifteen years. She is not paid much for her work, but she really does not care.

When a niece, Pauline, comes to live with the family, Véronique is jealous of the division of her mistress's affection. She is very cold with the young girl. However, over the years, she comes to take Pauline's side. She is angry because the family is wasting Pauline's money. She and her mistress often quarrel about this, but otherwise she is the loyal family servant. When Madame falls ill, she cares for her. After her death, Véronique turns against Pauline. Then, one day, she hangs herself. We are given to understand that Véronique never got over the death of her mistress.

She is the good worker who is not paid very much, but who still is devoted to her mistress and unable to survive her.

Rose is the old servant of the Mourets in Plassans (La Conquête de Plassans). She cleans the house, looks after the clothes, prepares and serves the meals. People must eat at her convenience and she is angry if they are not there to eat when the meal is ready. She does a large part of the heavy work, locks the doors and windows at night after the others go to bed, and, above all, she is absolute master of the kitchen.

New boarders, a priest and his mother, arrive one day.

She is religious to begin with and is soon won over by the priest. She eventually turns against Mouret. She lets her work go - she does not get her mending done, dinner is often late and the house is not cleaned as often as it should be. She more or less becomes the master of the house, no longer taking any orders from Mouret. Rose starts taking better care of the priest than of Mouret. She is constantly pointing out his faults. Mouret, who still controls the money, becomes a real miser, counting everything in the house and putting as much as possible under lock and key. He never gives enough money for household expenses, thus the wife and Rose are forced to start selling possessions in the house that they consider to be non-essential. Rose, who had previously run the house almost entirely as she wished, gradually is forced to yield control to Madame Faujas, the priest's mother, and all comes to be run as she and her son wish.

Rose makes life miserable for Mouret. Faujas is always given the best food and the most attention. She and Madame Faujas start to spy on Mouret. When Marthe, his wife, goes mad and starts mutilating herself, everyone in the house thinks that Mouret is beating her. Rose spreads the news all over town. Thinking he is crazy, Rose and company get him put away. Rose cares for Marthe, but is really not the devoted servant type. Rose resents her and she is not very upset by her death..

Rose is the type of servant who is bad-tempered, spiteful and domineering. She likes to have things her own way and she persecutes those whom she does not like. She is a good worker, she works hard, but only for those who please her.

The servants presented to us by Zola in the Rougon-Macquart are of many different types, temperaments and personalities, and they accurately depict the servant of this period in history. Most are not very devoted to their employers, and, if they are, it is probably for purely selfish reasons. A very large number of them are just plain dishonest, stealing and making money crookedly if the occasions can be found. They prey on a sick society. Unselfish devotion, such as that of Véronique, is rare.

¹ see: Flaubert, G., Mme Bovary.

de Goncourt, Edmond et Jules, Germinie Lacerteux.

de Goncourt, Edmond, La Fille Elisa.

Augier, Emile, Les Lionnes Pauvres.
Le Mariage d'Olympe.
La Contagion.

Dumas fils, A., Une Visite de Noces.
Le Demi-Monde.
La Femme de Claude.

VIII THE RAILWAY WORKER

During the Second Empire, there is an ever-increasing amount of public investment with new banks being opened in many centres, and much of the new capital and effort is being concentrated on the construction of railways.¹ This is a time of great railway expansion with the railroads coming to be used by more and more people. Zola, in his novel La Bête Humaine, seeks to depict "la vie entière des chemins de fer".² He situates his story near the end of the Second Empire along the route between Paris and Le Havre.

The railway company in this area is headed by a president and several other administrators. They are rich and powerful, and the president is feared by all beneath him. He and the other administrators decide company policy and they have their own special car whenever they ride the train. The station at Le Havre, the one studied by Zola, is run by a station-master and two assistants who perform largely administrative and managerial duties, earning about 6,000 francs per year. Under them are two supervisors, one for the day-shift and one for the night, who see to it that operations within the station are smooth, earning only 2,000 francs a year for their trouble. Beneath them are all of the other employees of the station - those who sell the tickets, look after the baggage, clean and prepare the trains, etc. Out in

the yard are the mechanics who service and repair the engines and cars, those who work the switches and signals, and those who work coupling and uncoupling cars, assembling and disassembling trains. A few independent operators sell newspapers within the station. Working on the train itself are the engineer, fireman and conductors who earn about 3,000 francs, the first-class workers making a little more. Completing the railway personnel is a fleet of inspectors who inspect the stations and ride the trains from place to place to see that people are doing their jobs correctly. Discipline is fairly harsh and the employees must be especially careful not to insult the passengers and, above all, the important officials who often ride the train. Such mistakes can result in a reprimand, demotion, or even in dismissal.

The station at Le Havre, one of the first to be constructed, is old, but quite large, having several waiting-rooms. Still, a new station is needed to handle the increased volume of passengers. The yard around the station is full of sheds and garages where cars and engines can be stored and repaired. The rest of the yard is covered by tracks with long lines of railway cars strung out all around.

The station personnel works in two twelve-hour shifts - five to five, with the hour between ten and eleven off for a meal. When the supervisor arrives at five in the morning to begin his duties, there are very few people in the station,

but activity soon increases. He has to see trains in and out and just generally keep everything moving. When the station-master appears at eight he is given a report on the activities of the previous night and of the early morning. He looks at his mail and reads his telegrams, but he is more interested in freight than in people. By this time, more and more travellers are arriving, getting on and off trains which continue to pour in and out of the station, keeping everyone busy:

Les petites machines de manoeuvre allaient et venaient sans repos; et on les entendait à peine s'activer, comme des ménagères vives et prudentes, les roues assourdies, le sifflet discret... Celle-ci s'était arrêtée, demandant de deux coups brefs la voie à l'aiguilleur, qui, presque immédiatement, l'envoya sur son train, tout formé, à quai sous la marquise des grandes lignes. C'était le train pour Dieppe. Un flot de voyageurs se pressait, on entendait le roulement des chariots chargés de bagages, des hommes poussaient une à une les bouillottes dans les voitures. Mais la machine et son tender avaient abordé le fourgon de tête, d'un choc sourd, et l'on vit le chef d'équipe serrer lui-même la vis de la barre d'attelage... tandis que, dans cet effacement, au lointain, se croisaient sans cesse les départs et les arrivées de la banlieue...³

The trains are of two main types, passenger and freight. The passenger trains are either express or local and have first, second and third-class rates. They must be cleaned after each trip in preparation for the next. The work is hectic most of the day and there is very little time to rest. There being less to do at night, there are fewer men around the station, and even these men spend most of their time after nine o'clock sleeping.

It is, perhaps, the engineers and firemen that work the

hardest. The trips are exhausting and they tend to wear a man out in time. Some of the engineers take good care of their machines. Others do not, constantly having to send them in for repairs because they are either too drunk or too lazy to care for them properly. The work done by all the railroad men is routine and monotonous, hours are long, some of the work is very exhausting, there is little time-off, the pay is low, and few can afford to eat well. Even when they are off work, some are too worn out to be able to enjoy it.

The country station is a kind of extension of the city station. The growth of railways is serving, to a certain degree, to break down some of the traditional rural isolation.⁴ Still, the country station remains isolated, having only two links with the outside world - the telegraph line which follows the railroad tracks and the trains which pass by daily. The station is run by people who live there and it is part of their job to service the trains when they stop to take on water. The trains come and go all day long and through most of the night, shaking the station as they pass, but the people are used to it. While it is true that thousands of people pass by every day, it is also true, perhaps ironically so, that those who live in the country are essentially alone:

Bien sûr que la terre entière passait là, pas des Français seulement, des étrangers aussi, des gens venus des contrées les plus lointaines, puisque personne maintenant ne pouvait rester chez soi, et que tous les peuples, comme on disait, n'en feraient bientôt plus qu'un seul. Ça, c'était le progrès, tous frères,

roulant tous ensemble, là-bas, vers un pays de cocagne. Elle essayait de les compter, en moyenne, à tant par wagon: il y en avait trop, elle n'y parvenait pas... l'éclair les emportait, elle n'était pas bien sûr de les avoir vus, toutes les faces se noyaient, se confondaient, comme semblables, disparaissant les unes dans les autres. Le torrent coulait, en ne laissant rien de lui. Et ce qui la rendait triste, c'était, sous ce roulement continu, sous tant de bien-être et tant d'argent promenés, de sentir que cette foule toujours si haletante ignorait qu'elle fût là, en danger de mort, à ce point que, si son homme l'achevait un soir, les trains continueraient à se croiser près de son cadavre, sans se douter seulement du crime, au fond de la maison solitaire.⁵

The winter poses problems for the railways of northern France. Snow on the tracks makes it difficult for a single engine to pull the trains and it is not always possible to get a second one. It is very hard to see in the storms, especially at night, and one must proceed with extreme caution to avoid missing a signal and perhaps causing an accident. The snow causes the entire system to function more slowly with trains always leaving and arriving behind schedule. Sometimes a train will get caught in heavy snow somewhere along the line, leaving the passengers stranded for several hours until the train can be freed. When it is cold, ice sometimes freezes on the wheels of the engine, locking them, and rendering the engine useless. The passengers reach their destination hours late, cold, hungry and exhausted.

Accidents occur from time to time. In the yard, one engine can bang into another or smash up some cars on a siding. Every once in a while, one will run off the tracks and roll

over, ruined. People have been killed or injured in crashes and derailments - rare occurrences - which have been known to happen. Some people have been killed as they attempted to cross the tracks in front of a train and, out in the country, even a few animals have been killed as they strolled over or along the tracks.

Many of the employees who work at the station in Le Havre live upstairs in small rooms where life is generally dull and depressing. The best rooms are on the side of the hall which permits a view of the scenery in front of the station, the others having only a partial view of the railway yard in back. There is a rivalry, involving almost everyone, which centres on who has the rooms with the better view. The wives of the men who live here have nothing to do. They spend a good part of their day gossiping about other families, and it is generally believed that one of the women is having an affair with the station-master, but no one can prove it. The company also lodges some of its employees in second-rate buildings in the area around the station. In addition to this, it has rented a run-down building at each end of the Paris-Le Havre line where the engineers, firemen and conductors can sleep overnight if they have to be away from home.

There are not very many happy marriages among the railroad people. Pecqueux and his wife are an example. They earn nearly 4,000 francs between them, but Pecqueux, a big drinker

and woman chaser, wastes most of what he earns. He has a woman at each end of the line and a few along the way. He arrives for work drunk two times out of three. Still, the wife is protected by the president of the company for favours granted sometimes in the past, before her marriage. Most marriages are somewhat similar - men and women who more or less live together, who do not have enough money or the right sort of a job to make life enjoyable, and who find extra money and certainly some pleasure on the side, either in alcohol, in sex, or in both. Those who do not seem somehow more miserable than the rest.

In the working-class, people are often reduced to just their instincts, to living and acting like animals. Roubaud, the supervisor at the Le Havre station, after three years of marriage, learns that his wife Séverine had been the mistress, more or less, of the president of the company before they got married. In a blind rage, like a wild animal, he beats the whole truth out of her, learning that she would not even have married him had it not been for the president. Roubaud decides that the president must die. Forcing his wife Séverine to help, he murders the president on the train. Together, they throw his body off somewhere in the country. Roubaud then degenerates into a compulsive gambler, piling up all kinds of debts, no longer the conscientious worker of before. His wife takes up with Jacques Lantier, a first-class engineer, who, although

intelligent and very capable at his job, is the real "human animal" in the novel. He is the descendant of a long line of alcoholics, but does not drink himself because only a few drops will make him wild. He has inherited some kind of insanity and is what we would probably today call criminally insane. He has a need to kill women and will start to kill very soon for the sheer pleasure of doing it. He only finds peace when driving his engine, an engine he is very fond of, looks upon as a woman, loves as a woman, and treats very well:

Et, c'était vrai, il l'aimait d'amour, sa machine, depuis quatre ans qu'il la conduisait... Il l'aimait donc en mâle reconnaissant, la Lison, qui partait et s'arrêtait vite, ainsi qu'une cavale vigoureuse et docile; il l'aimait parce que, en dehors des appointements fixes, elle lui gagnait des sous, grâce aux primes de chauffage. Elle vaporisait si bien, qu'elle faisait en effet de grosses économies de charbon. Et il n'avait qu'un reproche à lui adresser, un trop grand besoin de graissage... Vainement, il avait tâché de la modérer. Mais elle s'essoufflait aussitôt, il fallait ça à son tempérament. Il s'était résigné à lui tolérer cette passion gloutonne, de même qu'on ferme les yeux sur un vice, chez les personnes qui sont, d'autre part, pétries de qualités; et il se contentait de dire, avec son chauffeur, en manière de plaisanterie, qu'elle avait, à l'exemple des belles femmes, le besoin d'être graissée trop souvent.⁶

Jacques looks up to Séverine because she has been able to commit a murder, something he has not yet been able to do. Soon, reduced to their barest instincts, and like two animals, Jacques and Séverine make love. They decide to murder her husband so that they can be happy together, but killing for Jacques is instinctive, not premeditated:

Le raisonnement ne ferait jamais le meurtre, il fallait l'instinct de mordre, le saut qui jette sur la proie, la faim ou la passion qui la déchire.⁷

Flore, a country girl who hates all men except Jacques, a near animal herself, decides to kill the lovers so that no one else can have him. Obeying a savage instinct to destroy, she derails the train on which they are riding, not even thinking about the other people on it:

Alors, à vingt mètres d'eux, du bord de la voie où l'épouvante les clouait, Misard et Cabuche les bras en l'air, Flore les yeux béants, virent cette chose effrayante: le train se dresser debout, sept wagons monter les uns sur les autres, puis retomber avec un abominable craquement, en une débâcle informe de débris. Les trois premiers étaient réduits en miettes, les quatre autres ne faisaient plus qu'une montagne, un enchevêtrement de toitures défoncées, de roues brisées, de portières, de chaînes, de tampons, au milieu de morceaux de vitre. Et, surtout, l'on avait entendu le broiement de la machine contre les pierres, un écrasement sourd terminé en un cri d'agonie. La Lison, éventrée, culbutait à gauche, par-dessus le fardier; tandis que les pierres, fendues, volaient en éclats, comme sous un coup de mine, et que, des cinq⁸ chevaux, quatre, roulés, traînés, étaient tués net...

But her victims survive. Flore, realizing that she has killed and injured many innocent people for nothing, throws herself in front of a train... The murder of Roubaud is again planned by Jacques and Séverine, but Jacques, seeing her naked, his "soif héréditaire du meurtre" aroused, kills her instead to satisfy his need:

Il venait d'être emporté par l'hérédité de violence, par ce besoin de meurtre qui, dans les forêts premières, jetait la bête sur la bête. Est-ce qu'on tue par raisonnement? On ne tue que sous l'impulsion du sang et des nerfs, un reste des anciennes luttes, la nécessité de vivre et la joie d'être fort.⁹

Yes, these people often act like animals guided only by their instincts, satisfying needs without thinking. A beating, a train derailment, a suicide and a murder - the satisfactions of the animal urges of the "bête humaine".

The investigations of the murders of the president and Séverine show overtones of self-interest and political meddling. The murder of the president is smoothed over to protect the good name of the company in an attempt to avert a possible scandal and loss of business, to protect the good name of the bourgeois class, and for certain political reasons, the authorities not wishing to compromise any important people who might be involved. The second murder results in two innocent people being given a life sentence at hard labour. Jacques remains free, his need to kill not yet fully satisfied. Roubaud's sentence is a kind of just retribution for his other crime, but he is found guilty, ironically, of one which he did not commit. An innocent man is condemned with him. The authorities are incompetents. Again, a desire to protect the good name of those involved keeps justice from being served - just one example of corruption to be found in the Rougon-Macquart.

When war with Prussia breaks out, normal rail service is interrupted as the trains are used to transport soldiers and supplies. Jacques has to take a train with eighteen cars full of soldiers to the front. His fireman, Pecqueux, mad with

jealousy because Jacques saw his woman and out of his mind with alcohol, puts far too much coal into the fire. He and Jacques fight in the cab of the engine. They fall out together and are cut to ribbons under the wheels of the train which races wildly on through the night at top speed with no engineer:

Qu'importaient les victimes que la machine écrasait en chemin: N'allait-elle pas quand même à l'avenir, insoucieuse du sang répandu? Sans conducteur, au milieu des ténèbres, en bête aveugle et sourde qu'on aurait lâchée parmi la mort, elle roulait, chargée de cette chair à canon, de ces soldats, déjà hébétés de fatigue, et ivres, qui chantaient.¹⁰

This is a good symbol of France on the way to ruin - decadent, corrupt, led by incompetents, and about to be crushed in a war for which she is little prepared and even less capable. A train full of drunken, singing soldiers who are totally unaware of what is happening, charging out of control through the night - a country rushing blindly and stupidly to disaster.

- 1 Thompson, James Matthew, Louis Napoleon and the Second Empire, p. 234.
- 2 Des Granges, Charles Marc, Morceaux Choisis des Auteurs Français, p. 1205.
- 3 Zola, Emile, La Bête Humaine, v.IV of Les Rougon-Macquart, E.P., p. 1010, 1024.
- 4 Cobban, Alfred, A History of Modern France, v.II, p. 164.
- 5 Zola, La Bête Humaine, p. 1032.
- 6 Ibid, p. 1128.
- 7 Ibid, p. 1241.
- 8 Ibid, p. 1260.
- 9 Ibid, p. 1299.
- 10 Ibid, p. 1331.

IX THE SOLDIER

Among other things, the era of the Second Empire is one of colonial expansion and foreign wars. Although the majority of the French desires peace, wars are frequent. France gets involved in the Russo-Turkish, the Crimean, the Italian wars, the Mexican fiasco, has problems in both the Near and Far East, not to mention the final disaster with Prussia. In the latter years of Empire, most of Europe is preparing for war, but Louis Napoleon, between 1863 and 1867, succeeds in alienating almost every important state in Europe.¹ As France isolates herself, Prussia emerges as the dominant power in Europe.

The purpose of this chapter is to see how Zola portrays the life of a soldier in the French army at the end of the Second Empire, during the Franco-Prussian War. True, not all of the soldiers are of working-class origin, but the large majority is, and the life of an ordinary soldier can hardly be called bourgeois. In order to appreciate thoroughly the position in which these men find themselves, it is necessary to broaden our perspective to view the French army overall and to see the role it played in the "downfall". Zola's novel La Débâcle, whose dominant theme is war, deals with the final disaster and the collapse of the Empire.

One of Zola's aims in writing the novel is to "faire

connaître les vraies souffrances du soldat".² The life of a soldier is often reputed to be one of fun and adventure, but this is far from being true. In time of peace, soldiers lead the dull, boring and routine life of the garrison. Many of them have joined up out of sheer desperation, but the life of a garrison soldier, especially in a provincial town, is most unexciting. Weeks, indeed months, are spent just sitting around, isolated, to a certain degree, from family and friends. Food is poor and pay is low. The peasants and workers do not rise through the ranks to those of command, and those who do rise do not go far.

But, it is the period of the Franco-Prussian War that is really portrayed by Zola, and:

Zola démontre que l'"incompétence des chefs et le désordre furent les causes principales de la défaite."³

If the French army has one salient characteristic, it has to be incompetence, and this often results in poor planning:

Le 7^e corps, chargé de surveiller la trouée de la Forêt-Noire, y était arrivé dans une confusion inexprimable, incomplet, manquant de tout... trois batteries s'étaient égarées, on ne savait où. Puis, c'était un dénuement extraordinaire, les magasins de Belfort qui devaient tout fournir, étaient vides: ni tentes, ni marmites, ni ceintures de flanelle, ni cantines médicales, ni forges, ni entraves à chevaux. Pas un infirmier et pas un ouvrier d'administration. Au dernier moment, on venait de s'apercevoir que trente mille pièces de rechange manquaient, indispensables au service des fusils...⁴

The entire picture is one of a total lack of organization, of gross ineptness and inefficiency. Discipline is lax and

there is no punishment for those who leave their posts or disobey orders. The superior officers do not inspire confidence in themselves or command the respect of their men who often curse them. Many of the soldiers do not even know exactly whom they are fighting or even what they are fighting for. Many would just rather return to the farms or factories from which they have come. Many are thieves or drunkards. This is, in short, a real bunch of disorganized rabble:

Enfin, après une heure encore d'attente, le 106^e reçut l'ordre d'avancer. Seulement, le pont était toujours si encombré par la queue de la division, que le plus fâcheux désordre se produisit. Plusieurs régiments se mêlèrent, des compagnies filèrent quand même, emportées; tandis que d'autres, rejetées au bord de la route, durent marquer le pas. Et, pour mettre le comble à la confusion, un escadron de cavalerie s'entêta à passer, refoulant dans les champs voisins les traînards que l'infanterie semait déjà. Au bout de la première heure de marche, toute une débandade traînait le pied, s'allongeait, attardée comme à plaisir.⁵

They are poorly equipped and poorly trained. Indeed, they cannot even retreat properly. Rumours abound about victories and defeats, but no one really knows for sure how the war is going in other areas because communications are very bad. The soldiers in the French army are full of false confidence. Old legends are dying hard. This unorganized mass is thrown up against Prussia, militarily superior in every possible way:

Maurice, alors, comprit. Après la surprise imbécile de Wissembourg, l'écrasement de Froeschwiller était le coup de foudre, dont la lueur sinistre venait d'éclairer nettement la terrible vérité. Nous étions mal préparés, une artillerie médiocre, des effectifs menteurs, des

généraux incapables; et l'ennemi, tant dédaigné, apparaissait fort et solide, innombrable, avec une discipline et une tactique parfaites.⁶

The soldiers must sleep at night on the hard ground, under very poor conditions, and very little care is taken for security. They are usually tired from too little sleep and too much changing of position. They are constantly camping, then moving, then camping again, marching all over the place carrying all of their equipment with them, having no real plan of battle. Added to all of this are some antagonisms between peasants and bourgeois, especially when one of the former is placed in command of one of the latter. Jean, a corporal and a peasant, is disliked by Maurice, a private and a bourgeois, until Jean helps him take care of his foot which has been badly cut by shoes that do not fit well. Because of the constant moving around, the army often does not get food and other supplies which are sent to the wrong place or just simply lost somewhere. The men are exhausted and very hungry:

On arrive, et puis on refout le camp, sans avoir seulement le temps d'avalier sa soupe!... Les hommes, exténués, tombaient de faim et de fatigue.⁷

Often a single biscuit seems like a lot - woe to the man who is caught hoarding food. The French and the Prussians alike pillage farms around the countryside - the farmers hide food to keep them from taking it. Some farmers even burn their fields to keep them from falling into enemy hands. The French

soldiers are angered, despairing and, finally, totally demoralized by the war.

They live in a constant state of terror - the fear of the unknown - never knowing when they are going to fight, when they might be killed or injured. The senior officers make numerous tactical errors, never managing to get into the best tactical positions. The French can fight well when they are desperate, and they sell themselves very dearly in the battles which are, at times, very fierce. The fighting produces high casualties on both sides. Time is not taken to treat the bad wounds - surgeons simply amputate:

Cette fois, il s'agissait de la désarticulation d'une épaule, d'après la méthode de Lisfranc, ce que les chirurgiens appelaient une jolie opération, quelque chose d'élégant et de prompt, en tout quarante secondes à peine. Déjà, on chloroformait le patient, pendant qu'un aide lui saisissait l'épaule à deux mains, les quatre doigts sous l'aisselle, le pouce en dessus. Alors, Bouroche, armé du grand couteau long, après avoir crié: "Asseyez-le!" empoigna le deltoïde, transperça le bras, trancha le muscle; puis, revenant en arrière, il détacha la jointure d'un seul coup; le bras était tombé, abattu en trois mouvements. L'aide avait fait glisser ses pouces, pour boucher l'artère humérale. "Recouchez-le!" Bouroche eut un rire involontaire en procédant à la ligature, car il n'avait mis que trente-cinq secondes. Il ne restait plus qu'à rabattre le lambeau de chair sur la plaie, ainsi qu'une épaulette à plat. Cela était joli, à cause du danger, un homme pouvant se vider de tout son sang en trois minutes par l'artère humérale, sans compter qu'il y a péril de mort, chaque fois qu'on assoit un blessé, sous l'action de chloroforme.⁸

Zola presents horrible descriptions of the suffering caused by war, and he destroys, once and for all, any romantic

notions about its glories:

Des pieds s'allongeaient, chaussés encore, broyés et saignants. Des genoux et des coudes, comme rompus à coups de marteau, laissaient pendre des membres inertes. Il y avait des mains cassées, des doigts qui tombaient, retenus à peine par un fil de peau. Les jambes et les bras fracturés semblaient les plus nombreux, raidis de douleur, d'une pesanteur de plomb. Mais, surtout, les inquiétantes blessures étaient celles qui avaient troué le ventre, la poitrine ou la tête. Des flancs saignaient par des déchirures affreuses, des noeuds d'entrailles s'étaient faits sous la peau soulevée, des reins entamés, hachés, tordaient les attitudes en des contorsions frénétiques. De part en part, des poumons étaient traversés, les uns d'un trou si mince, qu'il ne saignait pas, les autres d'une fente béante, d'où la vie coulait en un flot rouge; les hémorragies internes, celles qu'on ne voyait point, foudroyaient les hommes, tout d'un coup délirants et noirs. Enfin, les têtes avaient souffert plus encore: mâchoires fracassées, bouillie sanglante des dents et de la langue; orbites défoncées, l'oeil à moitié sorti; crânes ouverts, laissant voir la cervelle. Tous ceux dont les balles avaient touché la moelle ou le cerveau, étaient comme des cadavres, dans l'anéantissement du coma; tandis que les autres, les fracturés, les fiévreux, s'agitaient, demandaient à boire, d'une voix basse et suppliante.⁹

It is worthy of note that the officers enjoyed a relative comfort through all of this. They have beds to sleep in, get all of the best food and drink, and are better cared for when wounded; but, the end comes for all and the Emperor is forced to surrender at Sedan; and, "avec lui finissait une légende".¹⁰ Conditions fail to improve, for the army is made prisoner. The French have very little to eat; a group of men, forced by hunger, kill and eat a horse. Very little food is obtained from the Prussians, thus the French resort to taking food from each other. The situation becomes so critical that a man is knifed for a piece of bread! They suffer from exhaustion

too. Many are ill, having contracted dysentery, and others have badly infected wounds. Many die on the march to Germany. Some try to escape, but those who are caught are shot. Still, others do manage to escape by buying clothes from the civilian population along the way. This is the end of the Second Empire. France is ruined and many thousands have been massacred. The country must now be rebuilt.

Zola believes that the true facts of this disaster should be brought out into the open and that a lesson might be learned from what has happened:

Il n'y a plus à cacher ni à excuser nos défaites.
Il faut les expliquer et en accepter la terrible leçon.¹¹

Most of the leaders of the army are good representatives of the decadent ruling classes:

Tous les officiers de La Débâcle sont courageux, mais ils sont atteints par la contagion générale des classes dirigeantes auxquelles ils appartiennent.¹²

Although Zola does not tell it all, he greatly upsets a lot of people:

Tout modéré et prudent que Zola l'ait voulu, le livre est fort mal reçu par l'armée et les milieux de droite...¹³

Not only does Zola find fault with the French army in 1870, he also says that there is something wrong under the Third Republic. It is not very long after 1892, the date of the publication of La Débâcle, that the Dreyfus affair breaks and the entire French general staff is exposed as corrupt. The leaders of the army do not like Zola's book because of

the picture of complete incompetence it portrays, because of the exposure of all their faults, and because of the very plain slight on the honour of the army, even if such honour is undeserved. Zola shows war as it is and the French army for what it is. The great tradition is built on lies. The army has to cover this up.

One must not fall into the trap of believing that what Zola portrays is inconsistent with reality. Here is part of the picture of the French army from the historian's point of view:

A commission, appointed after Sadowa in 1866, revealed the weakness of the army - the exemption, in practice, of the sons of the better-off classes from military service; the reliance mainly on professional soldiers and only such as were attracted by the meagre pay and not worried by the dullness of life in barracks; the slowness to adopt the new weapon, the chassepot, which only began to be introduced in 1866. But when, early in 1867, the commission produced its proposals which would have made military service less easy to avoid and created an effective reserve, there was an almost universal outcry.¹⁴

France is not well-off financially in the latter years of the Empire. And, although something is attempted, no effective result is achieved:

Eventually, a few relics of the proposed reforms were passed in the Army Law of January 1868, amid demonstrations of protest from the republicans in the cities, and even these were not put into practice effectively.¹⁵

Recruiting is: part voluntary, part conscription. Another author refers to the army in these terms:

It was a closed corporation of poor men with an increasingly professional spirit; most of its officers risen from the ranks, with a minority of those who could afford to purchase commissions, and a few aristocrats who entered it no longer as a calling but as a career. Owing to the expenses of a Military College training the highest commands were barred to those without means, and the majority of the lower commands were filled by men of the N.C.O. type, without education, initiative or ideas. The dullness and dissipation of garrison duty in provincial towns increased the inner degeneration of the service. These faults were to be... fatal in 1870.

... (The) army is rotten to the core... there is not a general who knows as much as a mere captain in the Austrian and Prussian armies.¹⁶

The working-class is thus barred from the higher commands.

There are not very many workers who rise very far at all through the ranks. Such is the French army in 1870. When the war starts, the French are forced to face Prussia unprepared; their situation is hopeless:

Yet from the beginning the French army was outnumbered, out-gunned, and out-maneuvred. The mobilization was so muddled that the Prussians, unexpectedly even to themselves, were able to take the offensive at once. The French, nominally under the supreme command of the Emperor, who was suffering cruelly from his illness and could only sit his horse in agony, experienced a series of defeats... in the first week of August... After these initial defeats the Emperor was coolly pushed out of his nominal supreme command by the generals, who were more responsible for them than he was.¹⁷

The Prussians beat the French easily and the Empire is gone.

The downfall of the French army reflects all of France. The whole society caves in. Turmoil and chaos in the midst of war - a fitting end for a decadent society.

- 1 Cobban, Alfred, A History of Modern France, v.II, p. 180.
- 2 Guillemin, Henri, Présentation des Rougon-Macquart, p. 373.
- 3 Beuchat, Charles, Histoire du Naturalisme Français, p. 71.
- 4 Zola, Emile, La Débâcle, v.V of Les Rougon-Macquart, E.P., p. 409.
- 5 Ibid, p. 424.
- 6 Ibid, p. 453.
- 7 Ibid, p. 423,429.
- 8 Ibid, p. 674.
- 9 Ibid, p. 671.
- 10 Ibid, p. 704.
- 11 Zola, Préface à Les Rougon-Macquart, v.I, E.P., p. lii.
- 12 Martino, P., Le Naturalisme Français, p. 84.
- 13 Euvrard, Michel, Emile Zola, p. 77.
- 14 Cobban, A History of Modern France, p. 193.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Thompson, James Matthew, Louis Napoleon and the Second Empire, p. 228.
- 17 Cobban, A History of Modern France, p. 199.

X CONCLUSION

Emile Zola's attempt to write the impersonal novel in which the novelist is a mere observer, a recorder of facts, with no right to judge or form conclusions, is not a complete success. Any writer, any individual for that matter, is likely to have personal opinions about what he sees around him; Zola cannot help letting his own feelings show through.¹

To begin with, Zola detests the Empire and he tends to hold the regime responsible for all of the social evils:

Zola, explicitement, de volume en volume, rend le régime responsable des vices et de la corruption des possédants et de la misère des pauvres, bref, de l'horreur de la réalité sociale.²

The middle-class is no longer setting a good example for the working-class to follow.³ Zola's opposition to the Empire is that of a moralist:

Son opposition à l'Empire n'est pas une opposition politique; elle est la réaction d'un moraliste, d'un homme bon et généreux qu'indignent la corruption des milieux dirigeants, l'égoïsme des possédants; d'un homme bouleversé par le sort et le nombre des victimes de cet égoïsme.⁴

He has seen first-hand the misery in which the workers live and he tends to sympathize with them, although he never flatters, glorifies or idealizes them. It is, in large measure, not their fault that they are living the way they are. He portrays the working-class at a time when social legislation is almost non-existent and at a time when many tend to look down

upon the members of the working-class as something less than human.

This leads again to the question of social activism which was mentioned earlier, but which deserves another look. Throughout the Rougon-Macquart Zola exposes a whole list of social evils - the treatment of political prisoners, who are often shipped off to Devil's Island and almost certain death (Le Ventre de Paris); the poor care given orphans and illegitimate children due to poor facilities and backward social attitudes (Le Rêve); the corruption and political manoeuvring in high government circles (Son Excellence Eugène Rougon); the electoral management (La Conquête de Plassans); the mad quest for wealth (La Curée, L'Argent); the extreme level of hypocrisy, degeneration and corruption in the middle and upper-classes (Nana, Pot-Bouille). In fact, he touches on nearly every vice and injustice imaginable. And this does not take into account horrible living and working conditions of the working-class already dealt with. Zola certainly sees it all and he condemns what he does not like, in other words most of it. Is he a social activist? The answer to this question depends on your definition of the term. By social activist I mean someone who is working to bring about specific changes in social conditions. This, Zola is not, at least not directly or intentionally. One must accept the fact that he is largely the experimentalist, the impartial observer of the

social milieu, and the student of the laws of heredity and environment, even if he does not entirely succeed. Emile Zola is essentially a bourgeois, fond of comfort and good living, who believes that work is both intrinsically and morally beneficial, who works hard himself and who wants to make money. Some believe Zola to be the novelist of the proletariat and of a socialist world reform. This is reading into the Rougon-Macquart something which is not there to begin with, finding Zola's much later socialist ideas in the novels written at a time when he is really quite indifferent to socialism and any great plans for reorganizing society. Certainly, he has a great deal to say about elements of his society which he despises and he has a few things to say about correcting them, which were noted in an earlier chapter, but he does not elaborate a program for social reform in the Rougon-Macquart. Any naturalistic study of the segments of society viewed by Zola is going to bring out the same evils, more or less, and its author could be called a social activist. And he might well be, but Zola is not. He is not a social reformer and his books are not written to encourage social legislation. Whatever social activism there might be is indirect and the indirect effect these novels may have had on social legislation is impossible to assess. There is more of the social activist in the reader who sees social activism in Zola's Rougon-Macquart than

there is in the Rougon-Macquart.⁵

Zola paints a very pessimistic picture in his Rougon-Macquart, one of lust, passion, greed, selfishness, corruption, hypocrisy, poverty, suffering, misery and death - the society he portrays is evil and it is not without value that he shows it collapse. In the working-class, the very bottom layer of French society, the suffering is horrible; indeed, some people live and act like animals. The whole picture seems utterly hopeless. Yet, here and there along the way, there are bright spots - Silvère, the young, romantic revolutionary, uncorrupted by his environment, killed opposing the "coup d'état" of 1851 (La Fortune des Rougon); Serge, the poor, hard-working country priest (La Faute de L'Abbé Mouret); Pauline, unselfish and self-sacrificing, losing her money to others without complaint and sacrificing even the man she loves (La Joie de Vivre); Denise, intelligent, ambitious, industrious, restrained, helping her fellow department store workers improve their living and working conditions (Au Bonheur des Dames); Jean Macquart, a hope for the regeneration of the family, who settles down on a farm and marries a country girl after the war (La Débâcle); and, finally, Pascal Rougon, a scientist and a believer in the eventual regeneration of humanity - the Rougon-Macquart ends on an optimistic note with the birth of a child to Clotilde, the child of Pascal and the hope for the future

(Le Docteur Pascal).⁶ And Zola does hope for something better in the future. In later life, he will even dream of a utopian world...

¹ Matthews, J.H., Les Deux Zola: Science et Personnalité dans L'Expression, p. 38.

² Euvrard, Michel, Emile Zola, p. 21.

³ Ibid., p. 25.

⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

⁵ For a full discussion of Zola's theory of the novel see: Zola, Emile, Le Roman Expérimental (1880).

⁶ Guillemin, Henri, Présentation des Rougon-Macquart, p. 401.

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