

ASPECTS OF ZOLA'S L'ASSOMMOIR

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: Genesis and background of L'Assommoir and a study of various techniques employed by Zola in the novel. Particular emphasis on his evocation of the physical environment (including people) and its relationship to, and effects upon, the character of Gervaise.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER I - GENESIS AND BACKGROUND OF <u>L'ASSOMMOIR</u>	I
CHAPTER II - PLACES AND MACHINES	22
CHAPTER III - THE CHARACTERS	50
CHAPTER IV - ZOLA'S ART IN <u>L'ASSOMMOIR</u>	83
BIBLIOGRAPHY	103

I

GENESIS AND BACKGROUND OF L'ASSOMMOIR

At the end of 1868, after the composition of Thérèse Raquin, Zola drew up the first plan of his Rougon-Macquart series, which he took to his publisher, Lacroix. The series was largely inspired by Balzac's Comédie Humaine. What Zola wanted to accomplish was a picture of the Second Empire in all its aspects, just as Balzac had undertaken to portray life under the July Monarchy. Zola's determination and single-mindedness in carrying out this project are incredible: he devoted a quarter of a century of untiring effort to the completion of his task. Unlike Balzac, whose Comédie Humaine was not preconceived as a single project, Zola, in writing Les Rougon-Macquart, followed a very definite plan. As he put it in the preface to L'Assommoir: "C'est ce qui fait ma force. J'ai un but auquel je vais."^I Zola's plan was to write the history of a single family under the Second Empire. The régime had begun in violence and the various stages through which

^I L'Assommoir, vol. 8 of Les Oeuvres Complètes, texte de l'édition Eugène Fasquelle, Paris: Bernouard, 1927-29, p. v. (All future notes will refer to this edition unless otherwise stated.)

it had passed would give him ample background material for his novels.

In May, 1869, Zola started work on the first novel of the series, La Fortune des Rougon. In 1871 he stated his aims in a letter to Louis Ulbach:

Je veux écrire l' "Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le second Empire." Le premier épisode, La Fortune des Rougon, qui vient de paraître en volume, raconte le coup d'Etat, le viol brutal de la France. Les autres épisodes seront des tableaux de mœurs pris dans tous les mondes, racontant la politique du règne, ses finances, ses tribunaux, ses casernes, ses églises, ses institutions de corruption publique. 2

La Fortune des Rougon describes the origin of the Rougon-Macquart family and the Rougons' first ignoble rise to position with the help of Louis Napoleon's coup d'état. In the preface Zola says: "Les Rougon-Macquart, le groupe, la famille que je me propose d'étudier, a pour caractéristique le débordement des appétits, le large soulèvement de notre âge, qui se rue aux jouissances." This excessiveness in the Rougon-Macquarts can be traced back to their common ancestress, Adélaïde Fouque, known as Tante Dide, a rather hysterical woman who eventually goes mad. Tante Dide has married a gardener called Rougon, and on his death lives with a drunken smuggler by the name of Macquart. She

²Zola, Correspondance (1858-1871), pp. 383-4. Letter dated November 6th, 1871.

bears three children, Pierre Rougon and Antoine and Ursule Macquart. Ursule marries a hatter called Mouret, and the second generation of the family is thus divided into three branches. In La Fortune des Rougon, situated at Plassans (Aix-en-Provence), we see Adélaïde Fouque, her children and some of her grandchildren, all poor and striving for wealth.

Zola's literary débuts came at a time when the influence of scientific thought was expanding daily, and when scientific theories were becoming less and less esoteric. In 1859 Darwin's controversial Origin of Species made it possible to conceive of man as purely and simply a product of natural history. The scientific atmosphere of the period left its mark on Zola and it is not surprising that his literary objective was to associate art and science, to make of the novel a kind of scientific enquiry into the nature of man. His view of human behaviour is, in Hemmings' words, that it is "a complex of responses to physiological stimuli."³ As his model, Zola used Claude Bernard's treatise entitled Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale, which appeared in 1865. It would seem fairly obvious to a modern observer that the contents

³F. W. J. Hemmings, Emile Zola (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 33.

of a medical treatise must be largely irrelevant to the art of a novelist, but this was not apparent to Zola, such was the prevailing enthusiasm for all things connected with science. In Le Roman expérimental (published in 1880, after nine volumes of the Rougon-Macquart series had already appeared), Zola declares that Naturalism is a "formule de la science moderne appliquée à la littérature."⁴ He had no desire to moralise or philosophise in his work, but merely to observe as a scientist, to describe life as he saw it and to look for the underlying reasons for the existing state of affairs. Naturalism, he says, is simply "l'étude des êtres et des choses soumis à l'observation et à l'analyse, en dehors de toute idée préconçue d'absolu".⁵

The conditioning factors which Zola professed to observe in his novels were heredity and environment, and the whole of his work is based largely on these two factors. He therefore spent several months studying everything he could find on the subject of heredity, and he has often been ridiculed for what appears to be a blind acceptance of unproven hypotheses on this sub-

⁴Zola, Le Roman expérimental, p. 270.

⁵Ibid., p. 79.

ject. In fact Zola did not insist on the truth of these theories; he admits them not only through enthusiasm for scientific thought, but also because they serve his literary purpose. His daughter, Denise Le Blond-Zola, writes; "Il se convainquit que les théories nouvelles de la biologie, qui révolutionnaient les sciences naturelles, pouvaient doter la littérature d'un apport inédit et original, notamment l'influence du milieu sur l'individu, déjà soumis aux forces mystérieuses de l'hérédité, et il comprit la poésie insoupçonnée qu'un artiste créateur pouvait tirer d'un pareil thème."⁶

Apart from the "poésie" that the theory of inherited characteristics could contribute to literature, it served other useful purposes: it established the continuity of the Rougon-Macquart family and imposed a limitation upon a project which might otherwise have become too vast, by giving him a framework within which to work.

The laws of heredity, then, serve as a base to Zola's work, the fate of his characters depending to some extent on traits inherited from their progenitors. Of the Rougon-Macquarts Zola says: "Physiologiquement, ils sont la lente succession des accidents nerveux et

⁶Denise Le Blond-Zola, Emile Zola raconté par sa fille (Paris: Fasquelle, 1930), p. 54.

sanguins qui se déclarent dans une race, à la suite d'une première lésion organique, et qui déterminent, selon les milieux, chez chacun des individus de cette race, les sentiments, les désirs, les passions, toutes les manifestations humaines, naturelles et instinctives, dont les produits prennent les noms convenus de vertus et de vices."⁷

L'Assommoir, then, is linked to the rest of the series by this framework of heredity. Gervaise, the heroine, comes from the illegitimate branch: she is the daughter of Antoine Macquart and Joséphine Gavaudan and the sister of Lisa Quenu, the charcutière of Le Ventre de Paris, and of Jean Macquart, nicknamed Caporal in La Terre, La Débâcle, and Le Docteur Pascal. Lisa dies of a decomposition of the blood in La Joie de Vivre, while Jean is an exception who shows none of the characteristics of his relations. Gervaise, conceived in drunkenness, is born at Plassans in 1828 with a deviation of the right thigh, the result of her father's brutality, which will cause her to limp throughout her life and earns her the malicious nickname of "la Banban" in L'Assommoir. Gervaise bears four children: Anna Cou-

⁷Zola, preface to La Fortune des Rougon (Paris: Fasquelle éditeurs, 1955), p. 1.

peau, called Nana, and Claude, Jacques⁸ and Etienne Lantier. Nana's background leads her to promiscuity and perversion, and she dies eaten away by smallpox. Claude is a painter who commits suicide in L'Oeuvre.⁹ Jacques physically resembles his father and his alcoholic heredity pushes him towards crime. Etienne is the strike-leader in Germinal. His heredity is almost totally irrelevant to the action of the novel; he avoids alcohol because he is aware of his hereditary weakness and knows that it has a bad effect on him.

While heredity does supply a framework for the series, its rôle must not be over-emphasized. A complete ignorance of the genealogical tree would detract very little from such books as L'Assommoir and Nana, while heredity exerts no influence at all in Germinal and La Terre. In L'Assommoir, in fact, if heredity can be said to play a part, it is Coupeau's heredity, not that of Gervaise (Coupeau's father fell, drunk, from a rooftop and killed himself). In short, the histoire naturelle of the family is less important than the his-

⁸ Jacques does not figure in the original genealogical tree, nor does he appear in L'Assommoir. He is a later addition.

⁹ Zola did not follow strict chronological sequence in his novels. Claude had already played an important part in Le Ventre de Paris before L'Assommoir was written.

toire sociale, and heredity is less important than environment. This is particularly true of L'Assommoir, which was the first novel to really explore the working-class milieu.

During the last ten years of the Second Empire and the beginning of the Third Republic, France was becoming a great capitalist power, second, in fact, only to England. As a result the working-class population of Paris became more and more dense. In addition to this, the works of the préfet, Baron Haussmann, which completely transformed Paris, tended to isolate the proletariat, to separate the working class from the bourgeoisie. In the 1840s, and even at the beginning of the Second Empire, members of both classes often lived in the same building. Says Georges Duveau: "Se nouent aux Champs-Élysées et aux abords mêmes du Palais-Royal, dans l'immeuble parisien, des rapports tendant à diminuer le fossé qui se creuse entre les classes sociales et qui, étant donnée l'évolution économique, menace toujours de s'élargir."¹⁰ Haussmann's reforms destroyed these "rapports" by forcing the proletariat out to the periphery of the city, to the faubourgs. Wor-

¹⁰ Georges Duveau, Histoire du Peuple français de 1848 à nos jours (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie de France, 1964), p. 106.

kers no longer lived in the centre of Paris mainly because the rents were too high but also because "ces quartiers, de ligne ostentatoirement bourgeoise, de ligne cossue, ne parlent pas à son coeur."^{II} Duveau goes on:

Ne pouvant plus se familiariser directement, concrètement avec l'exigence (sic) bourgeoise, l'ouvrier redessinera cette existence d'une façon mythique à la fois artificielle et haineuse. Même élaboration mythique chez le bourgeois: l'ouvrier avec lequel tout contact direct aura cessé deviendra un bambocheur, un viveur, un conspirateur en quête d'un mauvais coup. Le bourgeois, dit énergiquement Michelet, ne connaît le peuple que par la Gazette des Tribunaux. La création de la ceinture rouge est en grande partie l'oeuvre du baron Haussmann. I2

Zola was the first novelist to depict in detail the milieu and moeurs of this mass of men and women, "ce monde sous un monde", as Jules and Edmond de Goncourt call them,^{I3} of whom the bourgeoisie knew so little, and whose political demands had become so alarming to them.

Zola's original plan for the Rougon-Macquarts consisted of a list of ten novels, one of which was to be a "roman qui aura pour cadre le monde ouvrier".^{I4}

^{II} Ibid.

^{I2} Ibid., p. 108.

^{I3} Preface to Germinie Lacerteux (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane), p. 1

^{I4} Notes to L'Assommoir, p. 461.

Later, according to Grant, he made another list of seventeen novels including a "roman populaire --- Ger- vaise Ledoux et ses enfants" and "un deuxième roman ouvrier", described as "particulièrement politique".¹⁵ This second novel is, of course, Germinal.

The Goncourt brothers had already written a novel about a working-class woman, and had expressed their belief in the rights of the working classes to a place in serious literature, but for all that Germinie Lacerteux can hardly be classified as a study of the proletariat, since the heroine is a domestic servant and does not live in a typical lower-class environment. There are also numerous peasants and servants in the Comédie Humaine, but in all of Balzac's novels, the genuine "proletarian" is missing. In L'Assommoir Zola is, in fact, describing a world which none of his predecessors had described in any depth. Eugène Sue's Les Mystères de Paris, Victor Hugo's Les Misérables, and the works of Alphonse Daudet and George Sand do indeed contain some representatives of "le peuple", but none of these authors could claim to have written a novel about the proletariat.

¹⁵Elliott M. Grant, Zola's "Germinal". A Critical and Historical Study (Leicester University Press, 1962), p. 3.

The fact is that Zola's predecessors were too far removed from the working classes to be able to portray them realistically. Zola, in L'Assommoir, was attempting something completely new in literature: since he had set out to depict the whole of contemporary society in all its aspects, he would write a book which contained only working-class characters; the proletariat would be the subject of a detailed study, not just a literary curiosity as it had been for the Goncourt brothers, Daudet, and other authors. It is interesting that Zola's best novels tend to be about the Macquarts, the lower-class branch of the family, while probably his two chefs-d'oeuvre, L'Assommoir and Germinal, are specifically about the proletariat, the area in which he was really breaking new ground. His Rougons, on the other hand, contained little that could not be found in Balzac, or even in some of Zola's contemporaries.

Although L'Assommoir does not show us a picture of the contemporary factory worker, it does give us a very accurate description of the living conditions of the Parisian working classes, which undoubtedly resulted in drunkenness and ruin in many families, just as they do in that of Gervaise. On February 13th, 1877, after the publication of L'Assommoir, Zola wrote the following letter to Le Bien Public as a reply to criti-

cism of his novel:

J'affirme donc que j'ai fait une oeuvre utile en analysant un certain coin du peuple, dans L'Assommoir. J'y ai étudié la déchéance d'une famille ouvrière, le père et la mère tournant mal, la fille se gâtant par le mauvais exemple, par l'influence fatale de l'éducation et du milieu. J'ai fait ce qu'il y avait à faire: j'ai montré des plaies, j'ai éclairé violemment des souffrances et des vices, que l'on peut guérir. Les politiques idéalistes jouent d'un médecin qui jetterait des fleurs sur l'agonie de ses clients. J'ai préféré étaler cette agonie. Voilà comment on vit et comment on meurt. Je ne suis qu'un greffier qui me défends de conclure. Mais je laisse aux moralistes et aux législateurs le soin de réfléchir et de trouver les remèdes.

Si l'on voulait me forcer absolument à conclure, je dirais que tout L'Assommoir peut se résumer dans cette phrase: Fermez les cabarets, ouvrez les écoles. L'ivrognerie dévore le peuple. Consultez les statistiques, allez dans les hôpitaux, faites une enquête, vous verrez si je mens. L'homme qui tuerait l'ivrognerie ferait plus pour la France que Charlemagne et Napoléon. J'ajouterai encore: 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. Oui, le peuple est ainsi, mais parce que la société le veut bien. I6

Workers' salaries were, in fact, just as inadequate as Zola affirms. Georges Duveau gives us the figures: "Le métallo parisien a un salaire assez élevé: il dispose de I.600 ou I.700 frs dans l'année, ce qui suffit, pen-

^{I6} Zola, Correspondance (1872-1902), p. 467.

dant le Second Empire à faire vivre une famille de quatre personnes. En règle générale l'ouvrier parisien ne gagne que 1.250 frs. Proudhon disait que la question sociale était une affaire de 450 frs. --- Le métallo épouse souvent une blanchisseuse; celle-ci, qui compte parmi les ouvrières les mieux payées dans la capitale, gagne 700 frs."¹⁷ The insufficiency of their incomes put many families under a terrific strain. The women especially suffered because of the immense difficulty of making ends meet and the considerable sacrifices required to do so. Many women were pushed by the wretchedness of their condition into prostitution, just as Gervaise is in L'Assommoir. In places like Lille and Reims, says Duveau, "l'expression faire son cinquième quart, synonyme de faire le trottoir, est courante."¹⁸ Some families, finding it impossible to balance the budget with their grossly inadequate incomes, sink into apathy and inertia and succumb to the temptation of the assommoir, which allows them to forget for a while the misery of their lives and the daily monotony of their work. "Les soirs d'ivresse", says Duveau, "mettent au monde des enfants par milliers."¹⁹ While official eco-

¹⁷Duveau, op. cit., p. 100.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 166.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 144.

nomists spoke of the harmony between economic growth and the increasing happiness of man, liberals like Adolphe Blanqui and socialists like Louis Blanc were horrified by the pitiful standard of living of workers in the industrial age.

When Zola claims that "le peuple est ainsi (...) parce que la société le veut bien", there is a great deal of truth in his words, for the education system was designed to keep the working classes "in their place". The bourgeoisie had no desire to present them with the sort of education and culture which might tend to deprive it of its privileges. Duveau relates the following illustration: "Lorsqu'il dépose devant la Commission de 1849, le Frère Philippe, Supérieur général des Frères de la Doctrine Chrétienne, insiste sur le caractère très modeste de l'enseignement donné aux ouvriers. Déclaration chaleureusement accueillie par les commissaires: des ouvriers connaissant l'anglais ou l'allemand risqueraient d'avoir des contacts internationaux dangereux."²⁰

Zola's sources of documentation for L'Assommoir were many and varied. One of the most important was a work by Denis Poulot on working-class moeurs at the end

²⁰ Ibid., p. 250.

of the Second Empire, entitled Le Sublime, ou le Travailleur comme il est en 1870 et ce qu'il peut être (published by A. Lacroix in 1870). Zola borrowed so widely from this book that he was even accused by one critic of plagiarism, and he found in it most of his nicknames: Bec-Salé, Mes-Bottes, Bibi-la-Grillade, la Gueule-d'Or etc.,²¹ as well as many examples of colloquialisms and argot parisien. Most of the workers in L'Assommoir owe some of their characteristics to traits found in Le Sublime. Zola studied other, less influential works on working-class conditions, among them L'Ouvrière by Jules Simon (1861) and De l'état intellectuel et moral des populations ouvrières by Paul Leroy-Beaulieu (1868).²² He also studied the roofer's and chafniste's trades in the Manuels Roret, and the clinical and social manifestations of alcoholism in De l'alcoolisme, des diverses formes du délire alcoolique et de leur traitement, by Doctor Valentin Magnan (1874).²³ It was from this treatise that he borrowed his description of Coupeau's delirium tremens. The title, L'Assommoir, was found in the Dictionnaire de la langue

²¹Notes to L'Assommoir, p. 462.

²²Henri Mitterand, Notice to L'Assommoir (Cercle du Livre Précieux), p. 947.

²³Ibid.

verte by Alfred Delvau (1866), from which Zola also borrowed about four hundred slang words.²⁴

One of the reasons why Zola was able to portray the working-class milieux more successfully than other authors was because of his personal experiences and background. His mother came from a family of small artisans, and his wife, Gabrielle-Alexandrine Meley, was also of very modest means. He was also able to obtain several details from his uncle, Adolphe Aubert, who was a concierge, and Mme. Aubert, who was a dress-maker.²⁵ During his youth he had lived in working-class districts and was perfectly familiar with poverty and hardship. Hemmings relates the following:

In the spring of 1860 he filled an ill-paid clerical vacancy: he stuck it for two months only; after that, until he found employment at Hachette's bookshop, there intervened eighteen months of heartache and poverty. Zola would need no "documents" to evoke, in L'Assommoir, the wails of distress with which the house in the Rue de la Goutte-d'Or re-echoes during the winter season of unemployment, or to describe how a room is steadily stripped of everything portable, down to the very bed, while the pawn-tickets pile up, until in their turn they are sold. 26

Ernest Vizetelly, Zola's friend and English translator, tells how, when Zola fell on hard times after Lacroix

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., p. 945.

²⁶Hemmings, op. cit., p. 8.

had been ruined by the war, the wool of his and his wife's bedding had to be sold to buy bread,²⁷ an experience which is without doubt directly responsible for the following passage in Chapter XII of L'Assommoir:

Gervaise appelait ça la paillasse; mais, à la vérité, ça n'était qu'un tas de paille dans un coin. Peu à peu, le dodo avait filé chez les revendeurs du quartier. D'abord, les jours de débîne, on avait décousu le matelas, où elle prenait des poignées de laine, qu'elle sortait dans son tablier et vendait dix sous la livre, rue Belhomme. Ensuite, le matelas vidé, elle s'était fait trente sous de la toile, un matin, pour se payer du café. Les oreillers avaient suivi, puis le traversin. 28

Zola's newspaper articles show that he had long been aware of the injustice of the social system. On June 28th, 1869, for example, he wrote in La Tribune: "Chez nous, il y a des riches et des pauvres, des misérables qui meurent de fatigue pour nourrir les heureux de ce monde."²⁹ The research he carried out for his working-class novels increased this awareness, and as a result his work gradually became less "scientific" and more humanitarian. This humanitarianism is what makes Gervaise surely one of the most pathetic creatures in the literature of any language, and is even more appa-

²⁷ Ernest A. Vizetelly, Emile Zola, Novelist and Reformer. An Account of his Life and Work (New York: J. Lane, 1904), p. 134.

²⁸ L'Assommoir, p. 408.

²⁹ Quoted by Mitterand, Notice to L'Assommoir (Cercle du Livre Précieux), p. 945.

rent in some of his later works such as La Terre and, especially, Germinal, in which Zola shows himself clearly as an opponent of the social system.

In the plan he gave to his publisher, Lacroix, in 1869, Zola said that his "roman ouvrier" would be about the consequences of alcoholism in the working classes. It will be, he says, "la peinture d'un ménage d'ouvriers à notre époque, drame intime et profond de la déchéance du travailleur parisien sous la déplorable influence du milieu des barrières et du cabaret."³⁰ He finally began to write L'Assommoir at Saint-Aubin-sur-Mer, where he spent the summer of 1875. Originally the action was to take place in Les Batignolles, where Zola had been living since 1868, but this was later changed to the Rue de la Goutte-d'Or, which was more typically working-class.

Zola began his novels with an ébauche or rough model. He first of all chose the Rougon or Macquart who was to figure in the novel, together with his or her environment. Then he pictured the secondary characters, suggested by the milieu, and such facts and incidents as might ensue from these characters and their surroundings. In his ébauche of L'Assommoir he

³⁰Notes to L'Assommoir, p. 461.

says:

Le roman doit être ceci: Montrer le milieu peuple et expliquer par ce milieu les mœurs du peuple; comme quoi, à Paris, la saoulerie, 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. Ne pas flatter l'ouvrier et ne pas le noircir. Une réalité absolument exacte. Au bout, la morale se dégageant elle-même. 31

Zola never envisaged L'Assommoir as a political novel; it was to be a tableau de mœurs, a portrayal of the working-class environment and character. After the Commune, having realised the immense political potential of the proletariat, Zola envisaged a second working-class novel, one with a more political theme. Germinal, therefore, in a way, complements L'Assommoir: together they give an almost complete account of all aspects of working-class life.

At the time when Zola wrote L'Assommoir, there existed a group of young men which called itself L'Autopsie Mutuelle. The members of this group, under the influence of the scientific enthusiasm which prevailed at the time, had agreed to bequeath their brains to

³¹Ibid., p. 469.

their colleagues for the purpose of scientific study. Among the members of the association was Yves Guyot, director of Le Bien Public, of which Zola was the drama critic. Zola presented his new novel to this group; they were enthused by it and Guyot agreed to publish it, in serial form, in Le Bien Public.³² The first installment appeared on April 13th, 1876 with the subtitle Etude de moeurs parisiennes. There was an immediate outcry on the part of critics and public alike, both of whom were scandalised by its crudity. So great was the hostility that the publication was suspended after the sixth chapter, after numerous readers had already cancelled their subscriptions.³³ Its publication was continued in La République des Lettres, directed by Catulle Mendès (Mendès had done the same thing for La Curée, whose publication had ceased, after a warning from the public prosecutor, because of the "immoral" scene at the Café Riche), and Chapters VII to XIII appeared from July to early January, 1877. In September, 1876, Albert Millaud wrote a violent criticism of the book in Le Figaro, passing such excessive judgments as: "Ce n'est

³²Ibid., p. 462.

³³L'Assommoir was not the first of Zola's works whose publication had had to be ceased: the same thing had happened to Madeleine Féral and La Curée.

plus du réalisme, c'est de la malpropreté; ce n'est plus de la crudité, c'est de la pornographie."³⁴ Such virulent reactions to the book were by no means rare, even in France, where literature was never as prudish as in Victorian England, but they could do nothing but good to the sales of the book. L'Assommoir was published in book form in 1877 and, even if its readers never found any pornography in it, it made Zola famous overnight. In the words of Zola's son-in-law, Maurice Le Blond: "Au milieu des injures et des cris de haine, des facéties ignobles, des caricatures outrageantes, Zola acquérait du jour au lendemain une popularité étrange qu'aucun homme de lettres n'avait jamais connue, une renommée charivaresque qui allait être, pour lui, la préface de la gloire."³⁵

³⁴Notes to L'Assommoir, p. 463.

³⁵Ibid., p. 464.

II

PLACES AND MACHINES

In his Introduction to L'Assommoir Jacques Dubois expresses his opinion that "plus peut-être que par leurs héros, les Rougon-Macquart vivent en nous par les lieux de travail, d'habitation et de plaisir qu'ils mettent en scène."^I Whether or not one agrees with this view, one cannot fail to recognize that the physical setting, the milieu in which the story unfolds, plays a very prominent part in Zola's novels. I propose, therefore, to examine Zola's treatment of the various places in which the action of L'Assommoir occurs, with a view to discerning their respective rôles in the novel, and, in particular, their "relationship", if I may use the term, with Gervaise.

Zola's main objective in L'Assommoir was to show "le milieu peuple" in order to explain "les mœurs du peuple".² He therefore spent many hours in the neighbourhood of the rue de la Goutte-d'Or observing

^IJacques Dubois, Introduction to L'Assommoir (Garnier-Flammarion edition, 1969), p. II

²Notes to L'Assommoir, p. 461.

the shops, houses, bars etc. in the minutest detail. For example, when Gervaise is at the window waiting for Lantier to come home, Zola is obviously describing a scene that he has observed very carefully:

A la barrière, le piétinement de troupeau continuait, dans le froid du matin. On reconnaissait les serruriers à leurs bourgerons bleus, les maçons à leurs cottes blanches, les peintres à leurs pale-tots, sous lesquels de longues blouses passaient. Cette foule, de loin, gardait un effacement plâtreux, un ton neutre, où dominaient le bleu déteint et le gris sale. Par moments, un ouvrier s'arrêtait, rallumait sa pipe, tandis qu'autour de lui les autres marchaient toujours, sans un rire, sans une parole dite à un camarade, les joues terreuses, la face tendue vers Paris, qui, un à un, les dévorait, par la rue béante du Faubourg-Poissonnière. 3

In this passage, mainly through his choice of adjectives (effacement plâtreux, ton neutre, bleu déteint, gris sale, joues terreuses), Zola captures perfectly the depressing drabness of the scene as the grim-faced crowd of workers makes its way along the street, the individual colours of their clothes all seeming to merge into a dirty grey. The scene is now set, for Gervaise's fears that her whole life will be spent here, "entre un abattoir et un hôpital",⁴ will prove to be justified.

Jean Borie has remarked on the importance of

³L'Assommoir, p. 6.

⁴Ibid., p. 32.

the image of mud in Zola's work, explaining that "l'imagination bourgeoise associe très étroitement rue et crime, rue et boue."⁵ The presence of mud is, indeed, very noticeable in the street scenes of L'Assommoir. Zola speaks of "la chaussée poissée d'une boue noire, même par les beaux temps, dans le piétinement de la foule en marche",⁶ and, later on, "la chaussée, changée par l'orage en une mare de boue coulante".⁷ Even the mouvements of people and traffic take on the aspect of the viscous flow of mud: "le flot ininterrompu d'hommes, de bêtes, de charrettes";⁸ "une foule que de brusques arrêts étalaient en mares sur la chaussée";⁹ "le flot des voitures";¹⁰ "un flot paresseux coulant des portes ouvertes"¹¹ etc. Borie has an interesting theory about this association of "rue" and "boue": "La rue, par sa promiscuité, mais aussi par son humidité boueuse, est un lieu où le désir s'éveille avec une ur-

⁵ Jean Borie, Zola et les Mythes (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971), pp. 156-7.

⁶ L'Assommoir, p. 36.

⁷ Ibid., p. 76.

⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 76.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 39.

gence irrésistible. On peut dire en ce sens que dans la rue, comme dans les marécages, la boue fermente et produit des gaz infiniment inflammables: elle 'allume' le désir."¹² Thus, Satin, in Nana, knows that on humid nights clients will be plentiful. In the case of Gervaise it is her desire for food that is awakened:

Il avait plu le matin, le temps était très doux, une odeur s'exhalait du pavé gras; et la blanchisseuse, embarrassée de son grand panier, étouffait un peu, la marche ralentie, le corps abandonné, remon-
tant la rue avec la vague préoccupation d'un désir sensuel, grandi dans sa lassitude. Elle aurait volontiers mangé quelque chose de bon. ¹³

A few pages later: "Au crépuscule, avant d'entrer, elle avait eu, le long des trottoirs humides, un désir vague, un besoin de manger un bon morceau."¹⁴ The same humidity is characteristic of the wash-house, scene of the fight between Gervaise and Virginie: "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..."¹⁵ So, too, the steamy, humid atmosphere of the restaurant

¹² Borie, op. cit., p. 158.

¹³ L'Assommoir, p. 167.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 176.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

seems to heighten the appetites of the wedding guests, and, as the humidity increases, their tempers become worse until finally the whole evening is ruined.

In general, then, the streets of Paris, and the neighbourhood of la Goutte-d'Or in particular, are seen as hostile towards Gervaise, and, indeed, towards the population as a whole. We have already seen Paris likened to a huge beast swallowing the workers one by one. In another passage the idea is expressed in different terms --- "la cohue s'engouffrait dans Paris où elle se noyait, continuellement"^{I6} --- but both images bring to mind the mythical "character" of Le Voreux in Germinal, though the latter is treated more elaborately and at greater length.

"L'Assommoir", says Dubois, "peut être regardé comme le roman des demeures successives de Gervaise."^{I7} Let us, then, examine these various dwelling-places and see how they fit into the framework of the novel. For the first three chapters Gervaise lives in a "misérable chambre garnie"^{I8} in the Hôtel Boncoeur, which seems to

^{I6} Ibid., p. 5.

^{I7} Jacques Dubois, "Les Refuges de Gervaise: Pour un décor symbolique de L'Assommoir", Les Cahiers Naturalistes, no. 30, 1965, p. 106.

^{I8} L'Assommoir, p. 4.

be slowly rotting away: "C'était une mesure de deux étages, peinte en rouge lie de vin jusqu'au second, avec des persiennes pourries par la pluie. Au-dessus d'une lanterne aux vitres étoilées, on parvenait à lire entre les deux fenêtres: Hôtel Boncoeur, tenu par Marsoullier, en grandes lettres jaunes, dont la moisissure du plâtre avait emporté des morceaux."¹⁹ The decay of the hotel seems to parallel the deterioration of Gervaise's life with Lantier as their money and possessions are gradually eaten away.

However, after this wretched beginning, Gervaise's fortunes improve when she marries Coupeau and moves into a nice little apartment in the rue Neuve de la Goutte-d'Or. This is the first of what Dubois calls her refuges,²⁰ "un coin de tranquillité qui lui rappelait une ruelle de Plassans".²¹ It is also the first step in Gervaise's quest for embourgeoisement, for they have bought their own furniture: "C'était pour eux comme une entrée sérieuse et définitive dans la vie, quelque chose qui, en les faisant propriétaires, leur donnait de l'importance au milieu des gens bien posés

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Dubois, op. cit.

²¹L'Assommoir, p. 101.

du quartier."²² To be sure, the apartment is modest enough --- "une grande chambre, avec un cabinet et une cuisine"²³ --- but Gervaise's pride is none the less great, especially her pride in the furniture: "Elle eut une religion pour ces meubles, les essuyant avec des soins maternelles, le coeur crevé à la vue de la moindre égratignure. Elle s'arrêtait saisie, comme si elle se fût tapée elle-même, quand elle les cognait en balayant."²⁴ At this moment Gervaise has but one dream: to buy a clock to put on top of the commode. Three years later she has bought it, to be payed for in twelve weekly payments, and it becomes her pride and joy: "Elle se fâchait, lorsque Coupeau parlait de la monter; elle seule enlevait le globe, essuyait les colonnes avec religion, comme si le marbre de sa commode se fût transformé en chapelle."²⁵ The words "religion" and "chapelle" are significant. One of Gervaise's ideals, expressed to Coupeau, was "un trou un peu propre pour dormir".²⁶ The importance of this "trou" in the psy-

²²Ibid., p. 100.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., p. 101.

²⁵Ibid., p. 113.

²⁶Ibid., p. 41.

chological motivation of Gervaise has been discussed at some length by Dubois,²⁷ and is confirmed by her attitude towards the apartment and, especially, the care with which she treats the clock, a care amounting almost to religious devotion.

This apartment, however, represents only a step in the rise of Gervaise's fortunes, which reach their apex in the shop in the grand immeuble. Already, in Chapter IV, Gervaise is dreaming of establishing herself in her own shop, and has even made plans to rent one, but Coupeau's accident, and the expense of nursing him, puts an end to her dream, at any rate temporarily. Later, when Coupeau is on the road to recovery, she begins to yearn once more for her shop, and Goujet, having seen her gazing at it longingly, offers to lend her the money to rent it. Thus Gervaise moves into the blanchisserie which she will inhabit for the central five chapters of the novel. Even though we have already seen indications that Coupeau's character is changing for the worse, and that her happiness will not last, the fact of moving into the shop represents for Gervaise the fulfillment of all her hopes. Her optimism seems to be shared even by the building itself, and is

²⁷Dubois, op. cit.

symbolised by the colour of the waste water flowing beneath the door of the dyer's shop: "les eaux de la teinturerie coulant sous le porche étaient d'un vert pomme très tendre. Elle les enjamba, en souriant; elle voyait dans cette couleur un heureux présage."²⁸

Just as the central position had been occupied by the clock in the previous apartment, it is now occupied by the stove, which is the object of the same religious attention: "son premier regard allait toujours à sa mécanique, un poêle de fonte, où dix fers pouvaient chauffer à la fois, rangés autour du foyer, sur des plaques obliques. Elle venait se mettre à genoux, regardait avec la continuelle peur que sa petite bête d'apprentie ne fît éclater la fonte, en fourrant trop de coke."²⁹ The blanchisserie becomes the centre of Gervaise's universe, from where she takes possession of the neighbourhood around her: "La rue de la Goutte-d'Or lui appartenait, et les rues voisines, et le quartier tout entier."³⁰ When she goes out into the street she feels quite at home: "elle restait là chez elle, les rues voisines étaient comme les dépendances naturelles

²⁸L'Assommoir, p. 132.

²⁹Ibid., p. 136.

³⁰Ibid., p. 139.

de son logement, ouvert de plain-pied sur le trottoir."³¹ Gervaise has finally found her "trou" and it has brought with it such a great sense of security and confidence that she is able, as it were, to extend her domain to encompass the entire neighbourhood. However, the principal rôle of the blanchisserie in Gervaise's life is none the less that of a refuge. Jacques Dubois, as I have mentioned, has commented on this theme in detail, and his opinions are confirmed, I think, by an examination of the novel. It is only after she has settled in her new home that the world outside ceases to be hostile and becomes part of her "espace intime".³² The primary function of each successive home is to serve as a "trou", a "nid" where Gervaise can "s'isoler du reste du monde, se replier sur son intimité et en jouir, quitte à la faire partager par certains amis."³³ Thus, when winter comes, and all the doors are closed to keep in the heat, she derives great pleasure from the fact that outside noises are muffled by the snow and she is, as it were, cut off from the external world: "l'on était bien, les portes fermées, ayant chaud partout,

³¹Ibid., p. 165.

³²Dubois, op. cit., p. 110.

³³Ibid., p. 108.

tellement chaud, qu'on aurait fini par dormir, les yeux ouverts. Gervaise disait en riant qu'elle s'imaginait être à la campagne. En effet, les voitures ne faisaient plus de bruit en roulant sur la neige; c'était à peine si l'on entendait le piétinement des passants."³⁴ The shop now becomes "le refuge des gens frileux",³⁵ and women from all over the neighbourhood come in to chat and enjoy the heat from the stove. It is also as a refuge that the blanchisserie attracts Lantier, a refuge where he can be at his ease, surrounded by women:

C'était son milieu, il crevait d'aise parmi les jupes, se fourrait au plus épais des femmes, adorant leurs gros mots, les poussant à en dire, tout en gardant lui-même un langage choisi; et ça expliquait pourquoi il aimait tant à se frotter aux blanchisseuses, des filles pas bégueules. Lorsque Clémence lui dévidait son chapelet, il demeurait tendre et souriant, en tordant ses minces moustaches. L'odeur de l'atelier, ces ouvrières en sueur qui tapaient les fers de leurs bras nus, tout ce coin pareil à une alcôve où traînait le déballage des dames du quartier, semblait être pour lui le trou rêvé, un refuge longtemps cherché de paresse et de jouissance. ³⁶

The shop will continue to serve as a refuge to Lantier, even after it has changed ownership, to such an extent that it will be "eaten" by him (in the case of Virginia's sweet-shop, almost literally).

³⁴ L'Assommoir, pp. 185-6.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 194.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 254-5.

It is the shop, too, as well as the presence of Gervaise, that attracts Goujet: "Il y avait un coin dans la boutique, au fond, où il aimait à rester des heures, assis sans bouger, fumant sa courte pipe."³⁷ Here, amid the heat from the stove and the odour of linen, he reaches a kind of trance-like oblivion: "il glissait à un léger étourdissement, la pensée ralentie, les yeux occupés de ces femmes qui se hâtaient, balançant leurs bras nus, passant la nuit à endimancher le quartier."³⁸

Gervaise's "trou un peu propre" is not to last. Overwhelmed by her husband's drunkenness and the added financial burden of Lantier, she loses courage and the shop slowly becomes filthy and dilapidated:

On n'aurait pas reconnu cette belle boutique, couleur du ciel, qui était jadis l'orgueil de Gervaise. Les boiseries et les carreaux de la vitrine, qu'on oubliait de laver, restaient du haut en bas éclaboussés par la crotte des voitures. Sur les planches, à la tringle de laiton, s'étaient étalées trois guenilles grises, laissées par des clientes mortes à l'hôpital. Et c'était plus minable encore à l'intérieur: l'humidité des linges séchant au plafond avait décollé le papier; la perse pompadour étalait des lambeaux qui pendaient pareils à des toiles d'araignée lourdes de poussière; la mécanique cassée, trouée à coups de tisonnier, mettait dans son coin les débris de la vieille fonte d'un marchand de bric-à-brac; l'établi semblait avoir

³⁷Ibid., p. 156.

³⁸Ibid., p. 157.

servi de table à toute une garnison, taché de café et de vin, emplâtré de confiture, gras des lichades du lundi. 39

Gervaise, however, still needs a "trou", and now she forms one from the filth itself. She has long been used to dirtiness, being a laundress, and even seemed to take a voluptuous pleasure in sorting her customers' dirty linen. In fact, Zola sees in this the beginning of her weakness:

Elle n'avait aucun dégoût, habituée à l'ordure; elle enfouissait ses bras nus et roses au milieu des chemises jaunes de crasse, des torchons raidis par la graisse des eaux de vaisselle, des chaussettes mangées et pourries de sueur. Pourtant, dans l'odeur forte qui battait son visage penché au-dessus des tas, une nonchalance la prenait. Elle s'était assise au bord d'un tabouret, se courbant en deux, allongeant les mains à droite, à gauche, avec des gestes ralentis, comme si elle se grisait de cette puanteur humaine, vaguement souriante, les yeux noyés. Et il semblait que ses premières paresse vinssent de là, de l'asphyxie des vieux linges empoisonnant l'air autour d'elle. 40

But this is no more than a preview of what is to come. Gervaise makes no effort to clean up the shop, indeed she has not even noticed its becoming dirty, so comfortable does she feel in the warm nest of dirt which has accumulated and which serves almost as a protective covering around her. She experiences a genuine voluptuousness, amounting almost to intoxication, in wallowing

³⁹Ibid., p. 292.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 145.

in the tranquillity of her "trou":

Mais Gervaise se trouvait très bien là dedans. Elle n'avait pas vu la boutique se salir; elle s'y abandonnait et s'habituaît au papier déchiré, aux boiseries graisseuses, comme elle en arrivait à porter des jupes fendues et à ne plus se laver les oreilles. Même la saleté était un nid chaud où elle jouissait de s'accroupir. Laisser les choses à la débandade, attendre que la poussière bouchât les trous et mît un velours partout, sentir la maison s'alourdir autour de soi dans un engourdissement de fainéantise, cela était une vraie volupté dont elle se grisait. ⁴¹

From this point Gervaise's life continues to deteriorate. Her next lodging is a tiny apartment, "large comme la main", ⁴² on the sixth floor, "le coin des pouilleux". ⁴³ As well as being small, the apartment is also dark and gloomy since it is situated on the shady side of the courtyard and also because one of the shutters is stuck. Gervaise has refused to part with her commode, which encumbers the room and blocks off half the window, adding to the gloominess. For the first few days she does nothing but sit and cry in her despair at being so cooped up after having had so much room. Finally, however, she gets used to it, and when her few pitiful sticks of furniture have been sold and she is sleeping on a filthy pile of straw in the cor-

⁴¹Ibid., p. 292.

⁴²Ibid., p. 323.

⁴³Ibid., p. 338.

ner, she gets used to that too: "Elle se moquait d'être la dernière des dernières, au fin fond du ruisseau, et de voir les gens s'essuyer, quand elle passait près d'eux. Les mauvaises manières ne la gênaient plus..."⁴⁴

The story of Gervaise's life is reflected in the gradually worsening condition of her lodgings and her resigned acceptance, through weakness and lassitude, of each successive deterioration, until finally she dies like a dog on a filthy pile of straw in Père Bru's niche, so totally neglected that no-one even knows she is dead until her body begins to smell.

In a letter to Le Bien Public, dated February 13th 1877, Zola wrote: "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."⁴⁵ The assommoir, then, is both the cause and the effect of the degradation of the working classes. The accuracy of Zola's observation is confirmed by Georges Duveau:

Même quand il doit faire face à une grave insuffisance de revenus, l'ouvrier ne réagit pas de la même façon: dans certaines familles on assiste à de tragiques effondrements. D'autres familles mènent, comme l'épave au fil de l'eau, des existences mor-

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 410.

⁴⁵Zola, Correspondance (1872-1902), p. 467.

nes et passives: et c'est alors que se fait pressante la tentation de l'assommoir: le cabaret devient le Palais des Mille et une Nuits, le grand dispensateur des illusions: la femme endort artificiellement l'enfant en lui administrant de la thériaque, et elle va s'enivrer avec son homme. 46

Therefore Zola, the realist, sets out to paint a picture of the assommoir, describing its physical details and showing its disastrous effects on its clientèle. The first description occurs at the beginning of Chapter II:

L'Assommoir du père Colombe se trouvait au coin de la rue des Poissonniers et du boulevard de Rochechouart. L'enseigne portait, en longues lettres bleues, le seul mot: Distillation, d'un bout à l'autre. Il y avait à la porte, dans deux moitiés de futaille, des lauriers-roses poussiéreux. Le comptoir énorme, avec ses files de verres, sa fontaine et ses mesures d'étain, s'allongeait à gauche en entrant: et la vaste salle, tout autour, était ornée de gros tonneaux peints en jaune clair, miroitants de vernis, dont les cercles et les cannelures de cuivre luisaient. Plus haut, sur des étagères, des bouteilles de liqueur, des bocaux de fruits, toutes sortes de fioles en bon ordre, cachaient les murs, reflétaient dans la glace, derrière le comptoir, leurs taches vives, vert-pomme, or pâle, laque tendre. Mais la curiosité de la maison était, au fond, de l'autre côté d'une barrière de chêne, dans une cour vitrée, l'appareil à distiller que les consommateurs voyaient fonctionner, des alambics aux longs cols, des serpentins descendant sous terre, une cuisine du diable devant laquelle venaient rêver les ouvriers soullards. 47

The main impression is one of bright colours, which, combined with the sparkling glass and the glint of metal and varnish, provide a striking contrast with the

⁴⁶Duveau, op. cit., p. 166.

⁴⁷L'Assommoir, pp. 33-4.

squalor and gloom outside. But even here, behind the accumulation of mundane physical details, we feel the presence of something sinister, something infernal: the distilling apparatus, that "cuisine du diable" which lures men with its promise of release from the cares and worries of life. For Zola's powers as an epic poet, upon which Elliott M. Grant has commented extensively in relation to Germinal, carry him beyond the bounds of pure realism and into the realm of symbolism, causing him to transform the assommoir, or, more specifically, the machine à souler, into a mythical "character", a symbolisation of the evil of drink, as voracious in its way as the Mine in Germinal: "L'alambic, avec ses récipi-
 pients de forme étrange, ses enroulements sans fin de tuyaux, gardait une mine sombre; pas une fumée ne s'échappait; à peine entendait-on un souffle intérieur, un ronflement souterrain; c'était comme une besogne de nuit faite en plein jour, par un travailleur morne, puissant et muet."⁴⁸ Zola's description, in particular his choice of terms which would normally apply to a living being (mine sombre, souffle, ronflement) evokes a sinister, diabolical spirit emanating from the apparatus. The image is continued a few lines later: "L'alam-

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 41.

bic, sourdement, sans une flamme, sans une gaîté dans les reflets éteints de ses cuivres, continuait, laissait couler sa sueur d'alcool, pareil à une source lente et entêtée, qui à la longue devait envahir la salle, se répandre sur les boulevards extérieurs, inonder le trou immense de Paris."⁴⁹ Again we see the machine with the same gloomy aspect, the same "mine sombre", and its working is again seen in terms of a human bodily function (sa sueur d'alcool). And again the reader is made aware of the insidious but inexorable power of the machine and its disastrous effects on the people.

In the first chapter, when Gervaise is waiting for Lantier to come home, the anguish and despair cause her to feel suffocated: "Alors, Gervaise se sentit étouffer, saisie d'une vertige d'angoisse, à bout d'espoir."⁵⁰ It is perhaps significant that her first reaction to the assommoir is also a feeling of suffocation: "La fumée des pipes, l'odeur forte de tous ces hommes, montaient dans l'air chargé d'alcool; et elle étouffait, prise d'une petite toux."⁵¹ Already, however, she is somewhat fascinated by the still and asks

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 42.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 8.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 40.

Coupeau to explain its workings to her. But when she sees it, it makes her shudder, murmuring: "C'est bête, ça me fait froid, cette machine... la boisson me fait froid..."⁵² Thus, very early in the novel, the reader is aware of Gervaise's feeling, a mixture of fascination and fear, towards the machine, so that when she eventually succumbs to its temptation it comes as no surprise, one feels that it was inevitable. On this occasion the machine still has the same gloomy appearance and its shadow, projected onto the rear wall, makes grotesque figures, producing a fantasmagoric, almost hallucinatory effect: "Elle se tourna, elle aperçut l'alambic, la machine à soûler, fonctionnant sous le vitrage de l'étroite cour, avec la trépidation profonde de sa cuisine d'enfer. Le soir, les cuivres étaient plus mornes, allumés seulement sur leur rondeur d'une large étoile rouge; et l'ombre de l'appareil, contre la muraille du fond, dessinait des abominations, des figures avec des queues, des monstres ouvrant leurs mâchoires comme pour avaler le monde."⁵³ The symbolism is obvious: the shadows cast upon the wall reflect the true "character" of the machine: it is a monster whose gaping jaws will de-

⁵²Ibid., p. 42.

⁵³Ibid., p. 357.

vour the world. A few pages later, the still is likened to the belly of a fat woman, an evil witch whose spell Gervaise is helpless to break, for in spite of her fear of it, Gervaise is drawn to the machine by the same fascination, now become irresistible:

Cette sacrée marmite, ronde comme un ventre de chaudronnière grasse, avec son nez qui s'allongeait et se tortillait, lui soufflait un frisson dans les épaules, une peur mêlée d'un désir. Oui, on aurait dit la fressure de métal d'une grande gueuse, de quelque sorcière qui lâchait goutte à goutte le feu de ses entrailles. Une jolie source de poison, une opération qu'on aurait dû enterrer dans une cave, tant elle était effrontée et abominable! Mais ça n'empêchait pas, elle aurait voulu mettre son nez là-dedans, renifler l'odeur, goûter à la cochonnerie, quand même sa langue brûlée aurait dû en peler du coup comme une orange. 54

The machine has triumphed and the curse of drink has finally materialised for Gervaise. She is no longer ill at ease in the place, she breathes "sans étouffement",⁵⁵ savouring the pleasure of the drowsiness produced by the alcohol.

Like the assommoir, the huge tenement building * seems to be alive, to have a character of its own: "Et Gervaise lentement promenait son regard, l'abaissait du sixième étage au pavé, remontait, surprise de cette énormité, se sentant au milieu d'un organe vivant, au

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 359.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 360.

coeur même d'une ville, intéressée par la maison, comme si elle avait eu devant elle une personne géante."⁵⁶

The building is described in great detail:

Sur la rue la maison avait cinq étages, alignant à la file quinze fenêtres, dont les persiennes noires, aux lames cassées, donnaient un air de ruine à cet immense pan de muraille. En bas, quatre boutiques occupaient le rez-de-chaussée: à droite de la porte, une vaste salle de gargote graisseuse; à gauche, un charbonnier, un mercier et une marchande de parapluies. La maison paraissait d'autant plus colossale qu'elle s'élevait entre deux petites constructions basses, chétives, collées contre elle; et, carrée, pareille à un bloc de mortier gâché grossièrement, se pourrissant et s'émiettant sous la pluie, elle profilait sur le ciel clair, au-dessus des toits voisins, son énorme cube brut, ses flancs non crépis, couleur de boue, d'une nudité interminable de murs de prison, où des rangées de pierres d'attente semblaient des mâchoires caduques, bâillant dans le vide. Mais Gervaise regardait surtout la porte, une immense porte ronde, s'élevant jusqu'au deuxième étage, creusant un porche profond, à l'autre bout duquel on voyait le coup de jour blafard d'une grande cour. Au milieu de ce porche, pavé comme la rue, un ruisseau coulait, roulant une eau rose très tendre. 57

Gervaise is fascinated by the building and cannot keep from going in. The interior is described with the same wealth of detail:

A l'intérieur, les façades avaient six étages, quatre façades régulières enfermant le (vaste) carré de la cour. C'étaient des murailles grises, mangées d'une lèpre jaune, rayées de bavures par l'égouttement des toits, qui montaient toutes plates du pavé aux ardoises, sans une moulure; seuls les tuyaux de descente se coudaient aux étages, où les caisses

⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 45-6.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 44.

béantes des plombs mettaient la tache de leur fonte rouillée. Les fenêtres sans persienne montraient des vitres nues, d'un vert glauque d'eau trouble. Certaines, ouvertes, laissaient pendre des matelas à carreaux bleus, qui prenaient l'air; devant d'autres, sur des cordes tendues, des linges séchaient, toute la lessive d'un ménage, les chemises de l'homme, les camisoles de la femme, les culottes des gamins; il y en avait une, au troisième, où s'établait une couche d'enfant, emplâtrée d'ordure. De haut en bas, les logements trop petits crevaient en dehors, lâchaient des bouts de leur misère par toutes les fentes. En bas, desservant chaque façade, une porte haute et étroite, sans boiserie, taillée dans le nu du plâtre, creusait un vestibule lézardé, au fond duquel tournaient les marches boueuses d'un escalier à rampe de fer; et l'on comptait ainsi quatre escaliers, indiqués par les quatre premières lettres de l'alphabet, peintes sur le mur. Les rez-de-chaussée étaient aménagés en (immenses) ateliers, fermés par des vitrages noirs de poussière: la forge d'un serrurier y flambait; on entendait plus loin les coups de rabot d'un menuisier; tandis que, près de la loge, un laboratoire de teinturerie lâchait à gros bouillons ce ruisseau d'un rose tendre coulant sous le porche. Salie de flaques d'eau teintée, de copeaux, d'escarbilles de charbon, plantée d'herbe sur ses bords, entre ses pavés disjoints, la cour s'éclairait d'une clarté crue, comme coupée en deux par la ligne où le soleil s'arrêtait. Du côté de l'ombre, autour de la fontaine dont le robinet entretenait là une continuelle humidité, trois petites poules piquaient le sol, cherchaient des vers de terre, les pattes crottées. 58

The overall effect of the description is one of vastness (cet immense pan de muraille, une vaste salle de gargote, la maison paraissait... colossale, son énorme cube brut, une immense porte ronde, le vaste carré de la cour, immenses ateliers), but, more important, of dismal drabness, filth and decay, and wretched poverty (lames

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 45.

cassées, air de ruine, salle de gargote graisseuse, se pourrissant et s'émiettant, couleur de boue, nudité interminable, murailles grises, mangées d'une lèpre jaune, rayées de bavures, la tache de leur fonte rouillée, vitres nues, emplâtrée d'ordure, misère, le nu du plâtre, un vestibule lézardé, les marches boueuses, des vitrages noirs de poussière, salie de flaques d'eau teintée, les pattes crottées). For Zola, obviously, the building is a rather depressing sight. Gervaise, however, is fascinated by it and sees it differently: "elle revint, attirée, regardant encore, la maison ne lui semblait pas laide."⁵⁹ Among the dingy rags hanging from the windows she sees "des coins de gaîté",⁶⁰ a flower in a pot, a cage of canaries, the sparkle of shaving mirrors. Downstairs she hears a carpenter singing and the "grosse sonnerie argentine"⁶¹ of the locksmith's hammer, and at the windows, contrasting with the background of poverty, she sees the laughing faces of children. Gervaise is, indeed, so attracted to the building that she even picks out a window for herself.

But the building also inspires fear, the same

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 46.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

"peur mêlée d'un désir" as does the assommoir: "Mais Gervaise, en descendant l'escalier, se sentait toujours le coeur gros, tourmentée d'une bête de peur, qui lui faisait fouiller avec inquiétude les ombres grandes de la rampe."⁶² At night the tenement seems to have grown larger and its presence takes on a threatening aspect: "Alors, il sembla à Gervaise que la maison était sur elle, écrasante, glaciale à ses épaules. C'était toujours sa bête de peur, un enfantillage dont elle souriait ensuite."⁶³ But it is not an enfantillage, for the building is a microcosm of the Parisian working classes; it typifies working-class living conditions and, therefore, the whole of Gervaise's milieu. In the words of Guy Robert: "L'intérêt des Rougon-Macquart réside beaucoup moins dans l'humanité qu'ils présentent que dans l'évocation des forces qui la façonnent et l'oppriment."⁶⁴ The foremost of these "forces" is the environment and it is to the environment, exemplified by the grand immeuble, that Zola attributes Gervaise's eventual downfall.

⁶²Ibid., p. 62.

⁶³Ibid., p. 63.

⁶⁴Guy Robert, Emile Zola; principes et caractères généraux de son oeuvre (Paris: Société d'Édition Les Belles Lettres, 1952), p. 43.

The "hostility" of the grand immeuble as a whole towards Gervaise is shared by individual apartments within it, particularly the Lorilleuxs': "Elle n'avait jamais mis les pieds chez eux sans éprouver un malaise."⁶⁵ We have already seen that when Gervaise feels threatened by her environment she experiences a feeling of suffocation, of étouffement. Waiting for Lantier's return in their miserable little apartment "Gervaise se sentit étouffer, saisie d'un vertige d'angoisse, à bout d'espoir."⁶⁶ Later, in the wash-house, when she discovers he has abandoned her: "Gervaise ne pouvait pleurer. Elle étouffait..."⁶⁷ She has the same experience in the assommoir: "La fumée des pipes, l'odeur forte de tous ces hommes, montaient dans l'air chargé d'alcool; et elle étouffait, prise d'une petite toux."⁶⁸ It is significant that Gervaise is affected in the same way by the heat in the Lorilleuxs' apartment: "Mais Gervaise se sentait à bout de courage. La chaleur, de plus en plus forte, la suffoquait."⁶⁹ But Gervaise is also fascina-

⁶⁵ L'Assommoir, p. 163.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 23.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 40.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 59.

ted by the décor at the Lorilleuxs', and, at the same time, troubled by it because of the gold it contains, hidden by the filth. It is the same mixture of fascination and anxiety that possesses her in the presence of the machine à souler.

The one ray of brightness in Gervaise's life comes from Goujet and this fact is naturally reflected by the cleanliness of his apartment, contrasting with the squalor and drabness of the neighbourhood just as Goujet is in contrast with the other, more or less squalid characters: "Quand elle pénétra la première fois chez eux, elle resta émerveillée de la propreté du logis. Il n'y avait pas à dire, on pouvait souffler partout, pas un grain de poussière ne s'envolait. Et le carreau luisait, d'une clarté de glace."⁷⁰ Goujet's room typifies the goodness, purity and innocence of the blacksmith: "C'était gentil et blanc comme dans la chambre d'une jeune fille."⁷¹

When Gervaise feels threatened by events, when she no longer feels secure in her own "trou", she seeks refuge with Goujet at the forge. At first the forge has a rather frightening appearance: "une étrange forêt de

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 110.

⁷¹Ibid.

vieilles charrettes renversées les brancards en l'air, de masures en ruine, dont les carcasses de poutres restaient debout."⁷² Inside: "De larges ombres flottaient. Et il y avait par moments des masses noires passant devant le feu, bouchant cette dernière tache de clarté, des hommes démesurément grandis dont on devinait les gros membres."⁷³ In the presence of Goujet, however, Gervaise becomes accustomed to the huge shadows and the startling flashes of flames and sparks against the dark background: "Leurs grandes ombres dansaient dans la clarté, les éclairs rouges du fer sortant du brasier traversaient les fonds noirs, des éclaboussements d'étincelles partaient sous les marteaux, rayonnaient comme des soleils, au ras des enclumes. Et Gervaise se sentait prise dans le branle de la forge, contente, ne s'en allant pas."⁷⁴ So, with Goujet, Gervaise makes of the forge her "trou", a refuge from the world outside: "Et le forgeron et la blanchisseuse éprouvaient une douceur en sentant cette nuit les envelopper, dans ce hangar noir de suie et de limaille, où des odeurs de vieux fers montaient; ils ne se seraient pas crus plus

⁷²Ibid., p. 168.

⁷³Ibid., p. 169.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 171.

seuls dans le bois de Vincennes, s'ils s'étaient donné un rendez-vous au fond d'un trou d'herbe."⁷⁵ Later, when Gervaise becomes obsessed by thoughts of Lantier, it is to the forge that she goes for refuge: "Alors, dès que ces peur la prenaient, la forge était son seul asile; elle y redevenait tranquille et souriante, sous la protection de Goujet, dont le marteau sonore mettait en fuite ses mauvais rêves."⁷⁶

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 176.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 196.

III

THE CHARACTERS

The main idea contained in Zola's theory of the naturalist novel is that men are fashioned by two factors: environment and heredity. His characters have certain psychological traits, inherited from their progenitors, and their personalities and actions are the result of the operation of environment upon these traits. Environment is the more important factor in L'Assommoir: even though the intemperance of Gervaise's parents may have left her with an innate disposition towards alcoholism, her genetic traits are of far less concern to Zola than are her environment and the example of her husband.

Most of the characters of L'Assommoir are already present as preliminary sketches in the ébauche, and the rôles of the principal protagonists --- Gervaise, Coupeau and Lantier --- are already well defined. Zola gives the age, physical appearance, personal history, personality, habits and associations of each character and in most cases, though not all, the final version of the character is consistent with the sketch in the ébauche. I shall examine each character indivi-

dually, beginning with the most important.

Gervaise

According to the genealogical tree of the Rougon-Macquarts, Gervaise was born in 1828. She is thus twenty-two years of age in 1850, at the start of L'Assommoir. She is "grande, un peu mince, avec des traits fins, déjà tirés par les rudesses de sa vie",^I and has a permanent limp, caused, before her birth, by the brutality of her father. At the start of the novel she already has two children, and has come to Paris with her lover Lantier, who has inherited a small sum of money. After three months all the money has disappeared and Lantier abandons Gervaise and the children. She shows great courage at first, and when she marries Coupeau, a zinc-worker, and starts her own laundry business, her future seems full of hope. However, her husband takes to drink and the return of Lantier completes her misfortune. Finally she dies of starvation at the age of forty-one, having sunk to the lowest depths of degradation.

The portrait of Gervaise in the final text is essentially the same as the one in the ébauche:

Je fais donc de Gervaise une grande jeune femme de

^IL'Assommoir, p. 10.

vingt-deux ans, non pas jolie (si, jolie), mais intéressante de figure. Je l'excuse d'avoir bu de l'anisette avec sa mère et de s'être livrée à Lantier à quatorze ans. Une bonne nature, en somme; la reproduction de Fine. Elle aime ses enfants et elle voit sérieusement la vie. Son idéal, ne pas être battue et manger. Une nature moyenne, qui pourrait faire une excellente femme selon le milieu. L'étude du milieu sur une femme ni bonne ni mauvaise, qui a déjà eu de tristes exemples sous les yeux, mais prête par sa nature à réagir et à travailler: un peu la bête de somme qui songe à la niche et à la pâtée. Des faiblesses naturelles; un être lancé au hasard et qui tombera pile ou face.

Comme hérédité, la fille de sa mère, une mule dévouée, dure au travail; elle finira par grossir comme Fine. En somme, très sympathique. 2

Gervaise, then, is essentially a product of her environment; the most that could be said about the rôle played by her heredity is that it prevents her, in spite of her good qualities, from rising above the misfortunes that beset her. But Gervaise is more than a sociological case-history: her psychology is delved into more deeply than that of any other character in the novel, perhaps in all of Zola's work. Her main psychological motivation ---her desire for a refuge --- has been discussed in the last chapter and I shall not dwell on it further, except to note that the refuges she sought were not exclusively places. For L'Assommoir is not solely a study of alcoholism: a considerable portion of the novel is devoted to descriptions of people eating. The

²Notes to L'Assommoir, pp. 474-5.

centre of the novel is Gervaise's birthday feast which, for Gervaise, is a respite, a refuge from the hostility of her environment. Her gourmandise is the first step in her downward path towards alcoholism. Gervaise's déchéance is a series of compromises: after each respite she gives herself, her weakness prevents her from climbing back up, causes her instead to yield to the oppressive forces of her environment and to sink, inexorably, still lower. It comes as no surprise, then, when she eventually comes to seek refuge in alcohol, and when, finally, after all else has failed, she yearns for the ultimate refuge, death.

Another important factor in Gervaise's downfall is her sexual weakness, especially towards Lantier. Indeed Zola invented Lantier's return simply because he did not think that Coupeau's drunkenness was a strong enough factor to account for this downfall. When Virginie brings up the subject of Lantier's life with Adèle it is revealed that, in spite of everything, Gervaise has never forgotten her first lover: "Jamais elle n'aurait cru que le nom de Lantier, ainsi murmuré à son oreille, lui causerait une pareille chaleur au creux de l'estomac."³ Later, when Virginie remarks that she has

³L'Assommoir, p. 192.

just met him: "Le nom de Lantier lui causait toujours une brûlure au creux de l'estomac comme si cet homme eût laissé là, sous la peau, quelque chose de lui."⁴ Finally she becomes so obsessed with the thought of him that she is unable to let her mind wander without immediately thinking of him. She even begins to be afraid that he is following her in the street: "il tomberait sur elle une après-midi, et cette idée lui donnait des sueurs froides, parce qu'il l'embrasserait certainement dans l'oreille, comme il le faisait par taquinerie, autrefois. C'était ce baiser qui l'épouvantait; à l'avance il la rendait sourde, il l'emplissait d'un bourdonnement, dans lequel elle ne distinguait plus que le bruit de son coeur battant à grands coups."⁵ Her fear increases when Lantier moves in as a lodger: "Sa grande peur venait de ce qu'elle redoutait d'être sans force, s'il la surprenait un soir toute seule et s'il s'avisait de l'embrasser. Elle pensait trop à lui, elle restait trop pleine de lui."⁶ The theory is that a woman is eternally bound to her first lover and is helpless to free herself. That the supposed bond is not

⁴Ibid., p. 195.

⁵Ibid., p. 196.

⁶Ibid., p. 245.

purely psychological is shown by the following passage from Madeleine Féral:

Lorsque Madeleine s'était oubliée dans les bras de Jacques, sa chair vierge avait pris l'empreinte ineffaçable du jeune homme. Il y eut alors mariage intime, indestructible... On eût dit que Jacques, en la serrant contre sa poitrine, la moulait à son image, lui donnait de ses muscles et de ses os, la faisait sienne pour la vie. Un hasard l'avait jetée à cet homme, un hasard la retenait dans son étreinte, et, pendant qu'elle était là, par aventure, toujours sur le point de devenir veuve, des fatalités physiologiques la liaient étroitement à lui, l'emplissaient de lui. Lorsque, après une année de ce travail secret du sang et des nerfs, le chirurgien s'éloigna, il laissa la jeune femme éternellement frappée à la marque de ses baisers, possédée à ce point qu'elle n'était plus seule maîtresse de son corps; elle avait en elle un autre être, des éléments virils qui la complétaient et l'asseyaient dans sa force. C'était là un phénomène purement physique. 7

Surprising as it may be that Zola, the naturalist, should take seriously such an unscientific notion, it is clear that the same bond exists between Gervaise and Lantier (although Zola is less explicit in this case) and serves to explain her acceptance of his return and of the ménage à trois which ensues.

Gervaise's sexual weakness, then, can be regarded as a major cause of her ultimate "avachissement", together with the curse of alcoholism. Angus Wilson even goes so far as to say that drink really has no-

⁷Madeleine Féral, vol. I of les Oeuvres Complètes (Cercle du Livre Précieux), p. 312.

thing to do with her ruin:

The false turnings, which Zola clearly marks in the roads that lead Coupeau to the strait-jacket and Gervaise to die in filth and rags, are sexual. It is weakness and desire that make Gervaise forgive Coupeau when he returns drunk to the laundry in mid-afternoon. It is the kiss 'à pleine bouche' that he gives her and her easy acceptance of fuddled love-making that spell squalor and ruin. It is Coupeau's 'bon copain' acceptance of his wife's ex-lover as lodger that complete the process. 8

This may be partly true but I think Wilson is exaggerating the importance of sexuality by placing too much emphasis on isolated episodes. I think it is quite clear, from Zola's correspondence as well as from the novel itself, that the author himself intended drink, and not sexuality, to be the main cause of Gervaise's déchéance. If he had intended it to be otherwise he would certainly have said so. It is Coupeau's fall from the roof and subsequent deterioration that are the first signs of doom and the direct causes of it. There are hints that her happiness will not last even before we see any sign of sexual weakness, as for example in the passage already quoted⁹ where Gervaise is counting out soiled garments to Mme Bijard. When the kiss "à pleine bouche" takes place, Coupeau is already drunk, and when he in-

⁸Angus Wilson, Emile Zola. An Introductory Study of his Novels (London: Secker and Warburg, 1964), pp. 56-57.

⁹See p. 34.

vites Lantier to be their lodger he is already on the way to becoming an alcoholic. Zola makes it quite clear, too, that Gervaise, in spite of her preoccupation with Lantier, finally agrees to sleep with him only because of the state in which she finds her husband, drunk and sleeping in his own vomit, and barring her way to her own bed.

There is a terrible pathos in Zola's portrayal of Gervaise. Even though she becomes rather repulsive towards the end, she never loses the reader's compassion throughout the painful transition from the happy, well-liked laundress to the physical and mental wreck standing in the snow murmuring: "Monsieur, écoutez donc..." Gervaise never loses her kindness in spite of the hardships of her life and her own inability to cope with them. Her behaviour towards Maman Coupeau, even after her mother-in-law's death, is exemplary, even though the latter has not always been as kind to her as one might have wished; and she tries to save crusts for old Bru, when no-one else cares, even though she is hungry herself. She is, in short, just as Zola intended her to be, "très sympathique" and her story is, in my opinion, one of the most moving in literature.

Coupeau

Zola originally thought of making Coupeau a friend of Lantier's but evidently decided against it. He is twenty-six years old at the start of the novel. Physically, Zola describes him thus: "La mâchoire inférieure saillante, le nez légèrement écrasé, il avait de beaux yeux marron, la face d'un chien joyeux et bon enfant. Sa grosse chevelure frisée se tenait tout debout."^{IO} At first he is a rather pleasant character, gay, carefree, kind to Gervaise, and a good worker who never misses a day. Then comes his accident, which changes the course of their lives. As Martin Turnell puts it: "The physical fall from the roof is not merely the prelude to the moral fall of both of them: it is the direct cause."^{II} Coupeau acquires a taste for laziness during his convalescence and becomes attracted to the marchands de vin, in spite of his previous horror of strong drink.

In the ébauche Zola sketches Coupeau's character thus:

Tout ce type est celui-ci: une existence d'ouvrier (dix-neuf ans, de 1850 à 1869), roulant à l'ivresse, peu à peu perdu par le milieu, descendant en com-

^{IO} L'Assommoir, p. 34.

^{II} Martin Turnell, The Art of French Fiction (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1959), p. 150.

pagnie de Gervaise, ou plutôt entraînant celle-ci. Une décadence d'homme: le montrer gentil, généreux, bon ouvrier dès le début; puis, en dix-neuf ans, en faire un monstre au physique et au moral par une pente à expliquer. Etudier l'effet du milieu sur lui. Comme caractère, je dois faire le pendant de Gervaise mais avec des lâchetés en plus; c'est toujours lui qui descend un degré avant elle et qui la pousse; plus vicieux, moins fort, ébranlé par toute une descendance de parents alcoolisés... I2

At first Coupeau drinks only wine and does not lose his good humour. At the end of Chapter VI, however, he gets drunk on spirits and comes home in a foul temper; the reader knows immediately, as does Gervaise, that the end is near: "Elle voulait rire, le coucher, comme elle faisait les jours où il avait le vin bon enfant. Mais il la bouscula, sans desserrer les lèvres; et, en passant, en gagnant de lui-même son lit, il leva le poing sur elle... Alors, elle resta toute froide, elle pensait aux hommes, à son mari, à Goujet, à Lantier, le coeur coupé, désespérant d'être jamais heureuse."^{I3} From this time on things gradually get worse, beginning with Coupeau's invitation to Lantier to lodge with him and Gervaise. He stops working altogether and lives, with Lantier, off Gervaise's earnings. Gradually he comes to depend more and more on his daily consumption of alcohol, almost to the exclusion of food, and

^{I2}Notes to L'Assommoir, p. 476.

^{I3}L'Assommoir, p. 200.

finally is taken to hospital. When he is released he abstains for a short while but soon falls back into his old habits despite himself, and the situation continues to deteriorate. Within a period of three years he is admitted to the Sainte Anne hospital a total of seven times; each time he comes out he immediately starts drinking again until he has to return for more treatment. At the end he is devoid of any good qualities at all; he refuses to give Gervaise money for food and she is reduced to prostitution. Physically, he bears no resemblance to the young man described at the beginning of the book:

Son corps imbibé d'alcool se ratatinait comme les foetus qui sont dans des bocaux, chez les pharmaciens. Quand il se mettait devant une fenêtre, on apercevait le jour au travers de ses côtes, tant il était maigre. Les joues creuses, les yeux dégouttants, pleurant assez de cire pour fournir une cathédrale, il ne gardait que sa truffe de fleurie, belle et rouge, pareil à un oeillet au milieu de sa trogne dévastée. Ceux qui savaient son âge, quarante ans sonnés, avaient un petit frisson, lorsqu'il passait, courbé, vacillant, vieux comme les rues. ¹⁴

On February 13th 1877, Zola wrote a letter to Le Bien Public in reply to the accusation that all his characters are "ignobles, qu'ils se vautrent tous dans la paresse et dans l'ivrognerie."¹⁵ Lantier, he says,

¹⁴Ibid., p. 401.

¹⁵Zola, Correspondance (1872-1902), p. 468.

is the only complete scoundrel in the book; the others are all victims. Coupeau, says Zola, "dans l'effrayante maladie qui s'empare peu à peu de lui, garde le côté bon enfant de sa nature."¹⁶ I think Zola is being rather more than fair to Coupeau, for he appears in L'Assommoir as anything but a victim, and it is very difficult to feel any sympathy for him. The fact is that, if Zola intended to portray Coupeau as being no more than a product of the working-class environment, he was not completely successful, since the only part of the environment which contributes to Coupeau's fate is the assommoir. Poverty comes into the Coupeau household not as a result of low wages but as a result of vice: because the husband no longer works and takes to drink, and the wife subsequently becomes lazy. Coupeau had abstained from strong drink all his life, and one cannot help but feel that his accident is not really a sufficient reason for his change of habits. Indeed, it is somewhat surprising that Zola does not place more emphasis on the fact that Coupeau had an alcoholic father, since this, according to Zola's ideas on heredity, would explain things far more adequately. I think, too, that it is psychologically improbable that Coupeau should

¹⁶Ibid.

invite Lantier to move in with his wife and himself, especially since he was not too far advanced on the road to alcoholism at this time.

In short, environment does not exert as powerful an influence in L'Assommoir as Zola claims. Gervaise's déchéance is due almost entirely to Coupeau's laziness and lack of will power, and the reader is far more likely to blame him than he is to blame the milieu. This is in contrast to Germinal, in which the workers are completely controlled by the conditions in which they live. As Guy Robert puts it: "Le premier roman ouvrier réserve à la liberté humaine une place qui n'existe plus dans le second."¹⁷

Lantier

At the beginning of the novel, Lantier is twenty-six years old, the same age as Coupeau, having begun his liaison with Gervaise when he was eighteen and she fourteen years old. He is a Provençal and is described as "petit, très brun, d'une jolie figure, avec des minces moustaches, qu'il frisait toujours d'un mouvement machinal de la main."¹⁸ When he returns to Gervaise nine years later he has gained a little weight, but is

¹⁷Robert, op. cit., p. 86.

¹⁸L'Assommoir, p. 8.

otherwise unchanged. According to the ébauche, Zola had originally intended to make him an "ouvrier tanneur"¹⁹ and to give details of the tanner's trade as part of his background material. He finally decided, however, to make him a hatter, but gives no such details since Lantier never works: having squandered his small inheritance he abandons Gervaise and later, when he returns, lives off the profits of her shop and, when these are exhausted, of Virginie's.

Zola decided to have Lantier move in with the Coupeaus because he felt that her husband's drunkenness might not completely explain Gervaise's downfall. This development is perhaps somewhat lacking in probability, and certainly did not suggest itself to Zola through any concern for realism. Indeed, it is rather surprising that Zola did not make Coupeau and Lantier old friends, as he had originally thought of doing, since this would have gone far towards explaining the ménage à trois.

Be this as it may, Lantier does return and, together with Coupeau, ruins Gervaise. He is, of course, the villain of the piece; he is a complete scoundrel, a parasite and a hypocrite, totally devoid of redeeming qualities. He sings the praises of the working man and

¹⁹Notes to L'Assommoir, p. 469.

boasts about his skill at his trade; yet he never does a stroke of work, but lives entirely off the women he seduces. He is completely selfish and utterly indifferent to the pain and suffering he inflicts on others. He owes his prosperity to the extraordinary influence he exerts on women, and his knack of ingratiating himself with people who can be of use to him. This is very well illustrated by the following passage:

Lantier apporta galamment des bouquets de violettes qu'il distribuait à Gervaise, et aux deux ouvrières. Peu à peu, il multipliait ses visites, il vint presque tous les jours. Il paraissait vouloir faire la conquête de la maison, du quartier entier; et il commença par séduire Clémence et Mme Putois, auxquelles il témoignait sans distinction d'âge, les attentions les plus empressées. Au bout d'un mois, les deux ouvrières l'adoraient. Les Boche, qu'il flattait beaucoup en allant les saluer dans leur loge, s'extasiaient sur sa politesse. 20

The Lorilleuxs even wonder how "un homme si distingué avait pu vivre avec la Banban."²¹

During his absence, Lantier has been an employer for a short time and now puts on airs, making a big show of reading newspapers and talking politics, but doing no work whatsoever. Zola insists on this in his letter to Le Bien Public²² in which he replies to the criticism

²⁰ L'Assommoir, p. 245.

²¹ Ibid.

²² See p. 60.

that all his workers are "ignobles". He admits that Lantier is "malpropre" but says: "Seulement, celui-là n'est pas un ouvrier. Il a été chapelier en province, et il n'a plus touché un outil depuis qu'il est à Paris. Il porte un paletot, il affecte des allures de monsieur. Certes, je n'insulte pas en lui la classe ouvrière, car il s'est placé de lui-même en dehors de cette classe."²³

Gervaise's weakness towards Lantier, as we have seen, is one of the major causes of her downfall; it is interesting to note, in passing, that Zola had originally intended to make his influence over her even more profound, leading almost directly to her death, as we can see from this rather melodramatic passage in the ébauche:

Lantier a pour maîtresse la Poisson, la femme du sergent de ville. Il mange la petite boutique d'épicerie. Alors, tous les personnages, les Lorilleux, les Boche, pour des raisons multiples à trouver, poussent Gervaise contre la grande Adèle (Virginie). Gervaise est alors grosse de Lantier. Coupeau ne compte plus. On ménage à Gervaise l'occasion de trouver la Poisson et Lantier, en flagrant délit. Elle les trouve et leur casse une bouteille de vitriol sur leur corps, dans leur lit. Alors Lantier, rendu fou par la douleur, la prend et la traîne par les cheveux dans la cour, devant les Boche. C'est là que Goujet peut arriver et engager un duel formidable avec Lantier dans la cour, les portes fermées; (disposer la maison pour cela). L'attitude de Coupeau et des autres personnages. Un détail épouvantable: Lorilleux peut s'approcher de

²³Zola, Correspondance (1872-1902), p. 468.

Gervaise, étendue sur le sol et râlant, et lui donner un coup de pied sournois: "Tiens, garce!" C'est de ce coup de pied dont elle meurt. ²⁴

Zola wisely decided to omit this episode from the final text; it is not only far too melodramatic but would depend on Lantier's having an almost unbelievably profound influence over Gervaise, for it is scarcely credible that she should feel anything but relief at finally being rid of him. In the finished novel, their relationship is far more probable: Gervaise submits to him and allows him to live off her earnings through weakness, but by the time he begins his affair with Virginie, she has suffered too much to have retained any feeling for him and views his behaviour with complete indifference.

By this time the damage has been done and Lantier has fulfilled his rôle in the drama --- to provide the extra momentum needed to accelerate Gervaise's fall.

The minor characters

Gervaise has three children: Claude and Etienne, by Lantier, and Anna, or Nana, as everyone calls her, by Coupeau. At the beginning of the novel Claude is eight years old and Etienne four. Neither plays an important rôle in L'Assommoir. After Gervaise marries Coupeau, Claude goes to Plassans where an old gentleman, impres-

²⁴Notes to L'Assommoir, p. 473.

sed by his knack for sketching, has offered to pay for his schooling (in the ébauche Zola speaks of sending him to his uncle, Pascal Rougon, but there is no mention of this in the final version), Etienne starts an apprenticeship with Goujet at the age of twelve, and later goes to Lille as an apprentice to Goujet's former employer. Zola had decided that Etienne would leave home as early as the ébauche, where he says: "Dès que la débâcle arrive, je le fais disparaître, je l'envoie sur une ligne de chemin de fer ou autre chose."²⁵ We hear no more of him except for a brief mention at the beginning of Chapter XIII, where we learn that he is a mechanic on a railroad and that he sends Gervaise "des pièces de cent sous de temps à autre sachant qu'il n'y avait pas gras à la maison."²⁶

Anna Coupeau is born in 1852, shortly after her parents' marriage. Zola wrote later: "J'ai voulu mon drame complet. Il fallait une enfant perdue dans le ménage. Elle est fille d'alcoolisés, elle subit la fatalité de la misère et du vice."²⁷ Nana is, in effect, the victim of her bad upbringing: "lorsque le père ta-

²⁵Notes to L'Assommoir, p. 475.

²⁶L'Assommoir, p. 441.

²⁷Zola, Correspondance (1872-1902), p. 470.

pait dessus, la mère soutenait la gamine, et lorsque la mère à son tour cognait, le père faisait une scène."²⁸

She inevitably becomes corrupted by her father's filthy talk, which she hears continuously, and by the atmosphere at the atelier where she works and where she is, says Zola, "dans le vice comme un poisson dans l'eau."²⁹ Finally, one Saturday evening, when she is fifteen years old, Nana comes home to find both her parents blind drunk; Gervaise has forgotten to warm up the dinner and is slumped in a chair. A single candle lights up the squalor of the room. Nana leaves and does not return. Her parents eventually find her in a dance-hall and drag her back with them, but after this she begins to leave home frequently, sometimes for weeks at a time. When the first frosts arrive, rather than remain in the freezing hovel that is their home, she leaves for good.

Nana is a perfect example of a product of environment: her career as a whore in the novel Nana is explained by her background, including her mother's relationship with Lantier, described in L'Assommoir, and by the evil social system in which she is brought up. In Nana, appropriately enough, she rises to poison and

²⁸L'Assommoir, p. 256.

²⁹Ibid., p. 375.

corrupt the aristocracy and bourgeoisie who are responsible for that system.

Apart from the three principal protagonists, the most important single character is Goujet, the blacksmith (nick-named "la Gueule-d'Or" because of his yellow beard). He is also the only factory-worker, as opposed to the petits artisans like the Lorilleuxs, and through him we catch a glimpse of another social problem: the growth of unemployment occasioned by increased mechanization. One of his main functions seems to be to serve, as Hemmings puts it, as "a concession to philanthropists who believed in the 'deserving poor'." ³⁰ As such, he is a not altogether credible character, being completely without fault. Zola himself seems to have been aware of this when he wrote:

Goujet, dans mon plan, est l'ouvrier parfait, l'ouvrier modèle, propre, économe, honnête, adorant sa mère, ne manquant pas une journée, restant grand et pur jusqu'au bout. N'est-ce pas assez d'une pareille figure, pour que tout le monde comprenne que je rends pleine justice à l'honneur du peuple? Il y a dans le peuple des natures d'élite, je le sais et je le dis, puisque j'en ai mis une dans mon livre. Et l'avouerai-je même? Je crains bien d'avoir un peu menti avec Goujet, car je lui ai prêté parfois des sentiments qui ne sont pas de son milieu. ³¹

Goujet serves as a foil for the other, less virtuous,

³⁰Hemmings, op. cit., p. 99.

³¹Zola, Correspondance (1872-1902), p. 469.

characters, but he emerges rather as the exception which confirms the rule; he seems somewhat out of place in such a milieu, and is the most unlikely character, with the possible exception of little Lalie, in the entire novel.

Physically, Goujet is "un colosse de vingt-trois ans, superbe, le visage rose, les yeux bleus, d'une force herculéenne."³² He is polite and shy and is devoted to his mother. He never drinks to excess, largely because of the memory of his father, who, having committed an assault while drunk, had strangled himself in prison (once, when he comes in tipsy, his mother shows him a photograph of his father, and that is enough to cure him). His childlike innocence is reflected even in the décor of his bedroom: "C'était gentil et blanc comme dans la chambre d'une fille: un petit lit de fer garni de rideaux de mousseline, une table, une toilette, une étroite bibliothèque pendue au mur; puis des images de haut en bas, des bonshommes découpés, des gravures colorées fixées à l'aide de quatre clous, des portraits de toutes sortes de personnages, détachés des journaux illustrés."³³

³²L'Assommoir, p. 110.

³³Ibid.

Goujet's love of Gervaise provides a romantic element to the novel, and prevents her moreover from sinking too low: "Sa tendresse pour le forgeron", says Zola, "lui restait comme un coin de son honneur."³⁴ . Thus he prevents her from actually becoming a prostitute. He loves her to the very end, even during the squalid ménage à trois with Coupeau and Lantier, and even when he finds her, a pathetic creature, soliciting on the pavement in the snow. One cannot help but feel, however, that there is something unhealthy, almost masochistic, about this platonic worship of Gervaise; when she refuses to go away with him he does not insist, nor does he ever mention the idea again, though one feels that a stronger character might well have succeeded. In spite of his great physical strength Goujet emerges as a somewhat weak, almost effeminate character.

Of the remaining characters, the most important are the three families, the Lorilleuxs, the Boches and the Poissons (or at least Virginie). In the ébauche Zola sketches Lorilleux, who, he has decided, will be married to Coupeau's sister, in the following words: "ouvrier parisien occupé à de petits travaux minutieux,

³⁴Ibid., p. 287.

toute la journée assis. Méchant."³⁵ The description could be just as easily applied to Mme Lorilleux. The two are, in fact, remarkably alike in personality; both are extremely miserly, a fact which is evident from their first appearance in the novel, when Coupeau takes Gervaise to visit them. They are also incorrigible gossip-mongers and are terribly envious of the good fortune of others. Mme Lorilleux is outraged when she hears that Gervaise intends to open up a shop of her own, she does her best to ruin Gervaise's moment of happiness with her constant complaints during the wedding party, she makes sly insinuations, and even tells outright lies about Gervaise's relationship with Goujet, she feels nothing but jealousy when Gervaise throws her birthday party, is delighted when Coupeau's convalescence consumes all of Gervaise's savings and prevents her from buying her shop, and generally does everything in her power to cast a shadow on Gervaise's happiness. The Lorilleuxs, in fact, are the only people Gervaise dislikes during her brief spell of prosperity. And when prosperity has passed, what a joy it is to them: "La dégringolade de la Banban surtout les faisait ronronner

³⁵Notes to L'Assommoir, p. 471.

la journée entière, comme des matous qu'on caresse."³⁶ Even the nickname she invents for Gervaise (la Banban) is an indication of Mme Lorilleux's spitefulness and vindictiveness. The Lorilleuxs are, in short, the most unsavoury characters, with the exception of Lantier, in the whole book. For all that, Zola had originally intended them to be even more vicious, judging by the dénouement he had planned in his ébauche, in which Gervaise was to die after being kicked in the stomach by Lorilleux.

The Lorilleuxs, apart from forming a part of the milieu in which Gervaise lives, are also, according to Zola, intended to represent "les esclaves et les victimes de la petite fabrication en chambre."³⁷ They do, indeed, thrive in this horrible environment, to which their mean, envious personalities seem far better adapted than does the tender, easy-going nature of Gervaise. In this respect, they have a certain amount in common with Mme Goujet, whose life is just as austere, and who is also dedicated to work, respectability and the saving of money. Mme Goujet still has a heart, it is true; the austerity of her life has not reduced her to the level

³⁶L'Assommoir, p. 353.

³⁷Zola, Correspondance (1872-1902), p. 468.

of the Lorilleuxs. But it is precisely because she lacks, like them, the easy-going joie de vivre of Gervaise's nature that she is able to thrive in this environment; and it is largely because Gervaise does possess this quality that she is unable to adapt to the misfortunes that beset her.

Mme Boche's rôle in the novel is more substantial than the one Zola had at first intended to give her. Mme Fauconnier, Gervaise's employer, was to have a bigger part, but since all the details of work in a laundry could be described in relation to Gervaise's shop, he decided to suppress Mme Fauconnier's rôle "en transportant le caractère sur Mme Boche."³⁸ The Boches, like the Lorilleuxs, are on the whole rather unattractive characters. In his letter to Le Bien Public Zola says in their defence: "Ils ne commettent pas dans le livre une seule mauvaise action."³⁹ It would, however, be just as true to say that they do not commit a single good action. Their generosity is about on a level with that of the Lorilleuxs: as long as Gervaise is prosperous and can give them a gift of food or wine from time to time, they get along very well, but afterwards, when

³⁸Notes to L'Assommoir, p. 473.

³⁹Zola, Correspondance (1872-1902), p. 468.

her luck has changed, they quickly turn against her. They disapprove of Gervaise's relationship with Lantier, but condone Virginie's adultery: "Les Boche, eux aussi, laissaient entendre que jamais ils n'avaient vu un plus beau couple. Le drôle, dans tout ça, c'était que la rue de la Goutte-d'Or ne semblait pas se formaliser du nouveau ménage à trois; non, la morale, dure pour Gervaise, se montrait douce pour Virginie."⁴⁰ And few characters in the whole book are more heartless than Boche when he calls to his wife, who is trying to stop Bijard from beating his wife to death: "Descends, laisse-les se tuer, ça fera de la canaille de moins."⁴¹

Virginie's rôle in L'Assommoir shows several minor departures from the ébauche. In the latter it is Lantier's mistress herself (called Augustine), and not her sister, who comes to scoff at Gervaise in the wash-house, and in the proposed drame, in which Gervaise finds her in bed with Lantier, she is called Adèle, a name which belongs to her sister in the finished version. Virginie, with her hypocrisy and desire for vengeance, is scarcely more sympathique than the Lorilleuxs and the Boches. When Lantier leaves Gervaise for Adèle

⁴⁰L'Assommoir, p. 327.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 199.

she is maliciously and cruelly delighted. She becomes quite amiable later on, but her cruelty returns as soon as she finds herself in a position of superiority. In the passage in which she and Lantier are watching Gervaise scrubbing the floor, it is clear that she has never forgiven Gervaise for the spanking in the wash-house: "Gervaise se traînait à leurs pieds, dans la boue noire. Virginie devait jouir, car ses yeux de chat s'éclairèrent un instant d'étincelles jaunes, et elle regarda Lantier avec un sourire mince. Enfin, ça la vengeait donc de l'ancienne fessée du lavoir, qu'elle avait toujours gardée sur la conscience."⁴² Later, when Lantier says he has seen Nana in the street, Virginie's hypocrisy, as well as her malice, is evident as she says with obvious satisfaction: "Eh bien! moi, je puis la voir, je passerai de l'autre côté de la rue... Oui, le rouge me monterait au front, d'être saluée en public par une de ces filles... Ce n'est pas parce que vous êtes là, madame Coupeau, mais votre fille est une jolie pourriture. Poisson en ramasse tous les jours qui valent davantage."⁴³

The other characters are little more than rough

⁴²Ibid., p. 387.

⁴³Ibid., p. 389.

sketches, forming part of Zola's tableau social, with the possible exception of Eulalie Bijard. Mes-Bottes, Bec-Salé, dit Boit-sans-Soif and Bibi-la-Grillade are not basically wicked but are adversely affected by alcohol. They find it amusing to corrupt "Cadet-Cassis" and thus help to explain and accelerate his downfall. Coupeau's other sister, Mme Lerat, is a dry, joyless woman imprisoned by a daily routine of hard work. Though she has had no relations with a man since the death of her husband, she is obsessed with sex and has a mania for double meanings and smutty jokes, some of which are so deep that no-one but she can understand them. Old Bru is the worker who has ceased to be useful and whom society has left to starve. Bazouge, the drunken old undertaker's assistant, plays a largely symbolic rôle in the novel. Gervaise first sees him the day of her wedding and when he sees that she is afraid of him he says: "Ça ne vous empêchera pas d'y passer, ma petite... Vous serez peut-être bien contente d'y passer un jour..."⁴⁴ The novel ends with Bazouge carrying her body away after his prediction has been fulfilled. Bijard is merely a drunken brute, maddened by alcohol, who compulsively beats his wife and children. Lalie is a

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 97.

saint, devoted to the younger children and even to her father, who treats her abominably and finally kills her. According to Zola, "elle complète Nana. Les filles, dans les mauvais ménages ouvriers, crèvent sous les coups ou tournent mal."⁴⁵ Lalie, in a way, is very similar to Alzire, the little hump-backed girl in Germinal, whose life (and death) is just as filled with pathos.

Conclusion

Frederick Green argues that the fatal defect of Zola's novels is that: "None of his characters possess the evocative quality which stamp the creations of the great novelists."⁴⁶ It is true that, according to Zola, men are products of their environment and heredity, and that much of the interest of the Rougon-Macquart novels lies in the evocation of these two forces (especially the influence of environment on people's lives), rather than in descriptions of individual characters. I think it rather unfair, however, to say that there are no great characters in Zola's novels; in L'Assommoir, all the characters are very well portrayed and, with the

⁴⁵Zola, Correspondance (1872-1902), p. 470.

⁴⁶Frederick C. Green, French Novelists from the Revolution to Proust (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1964), p. 278.

possible exceptions of Goujet, Lalie and Bazouge, are extremely real to the reader, even though they are essentially "types". It is by accentuating their principal characteristics that Zola imbues them with life: Lantier, selfish and lazy, and Coupeau, a hopeless drunk, are very strikingly portrayed, the impact of their portrayal being due to the fact that they are entirely absorbed by their one main trait. Just as père Grandet is consumed by his miserliness and père Goriot by his love for his daughters, so Lantier's character is totally dominated by his laziness and selfishness, Coupeau's by his need for alcohol, and Goujet's by his platonic worship of Gervaise. And it is a mark of Zola's great skill as a novelist that, in his characterisation of Gervaise, he compels the reader to retain his affection for her even when she has become a derelict, drunken slut. In fact, since economic and social changes have eliminated many of the milieux that Zola described, his novels would not have retained such great interest for modern readers had their characters not been of sufficient depth and appeal to keep us engrossed.

The characters of L'Assommoir are depicted, just as in melodrama, in terms of "bad" and "good". We are on Gervaise's side right from the beginning, just as we

are against Lantier. The characters, in fact, are defined as "good" or "bad" in accordance with their relationship with, and attitude towards Gervaise. Thus Coupeau changes from "good" to "bad". It is interesting that, in L'Assommoir, most of the characters, and all of the most convincing ones (with the exception of Gervaise) are "bad".⁴⁷ This led many critics to condemn the novel as being a vilification of the working classes, a view which reveals a singular lack of understanding, for Zola never believed that men were wicked by nature, he attributed their flaws to their evil social systems. He showed quite clearly, in fact, in the early descriptions of Coupeau and Gervaise, and of their modest desires, that working people, too, were capable of goodness and decency. L'Assommoir, in spite of its many unsavoury characters, shows Zola's deep sympathy for the working classes.

The portrayal of his characters may seem rather simplistic to readers accustomed to more modern authors such as Sartre and Gide. He saw the world not as the subjective experiences of an individual, but as an objective reality, in which he placed his characters so

⁴⁷Despite this note in the ébauche: "Diviser mes personnages en bons et en méchants; le plus de bons possible." (Notes to L'Assommoir, p. 473.)

that he could observe their reactions as determined by their heredity. The modern novel, on the other hand, contains, to quote Albérès, "des personnages qui se pensent: Des personnages cérébraux, dont les problèmes ne touchent pas les réalités fondamentales de l'existence."⁴⁸ It is true, however, that Zola's "philosophie biologique", his view of man as a product of heredity and environment, is not altogether outmoded (even if the details are inexact), in spite of the existentialists' contention that man is what he makes of himself by his acts. Bertrand Russell wrote in 1936: "Those who have a scientific outlook on human behaviour (...) find it impossible to label any action as 'sin'; they realise that what we do has its origin in our heredity, our education, and our environment, and that it is by control of these causes, rather than by denunciation, that conduct injurious to society is to be prevented."⁴⁹ It is true, too, that in spite of their relative simplicity and lack of subtlety, Zola's characters are never dull; they may arouse our compassion or admiration, or they may elicit our disgust, but they always succeed in hol-

⁴⁸ Introduction to L'Assommoir (Cercle du Livre Précieux), p. 596.

⁴⁹ Bertrand Russell, "Our Sexual Ethics", Why I am not a Christian (London: Unwin Books, 1967), p. 125.

ding our interest.

IV

ZOLA'S ART IN L'ASSOMMOIR

Ernest Vizetelly relates how the Goncourt brothers had become famous after their play Henriette Maréchal had been hissed off the stage. "Their novels," he says, "like their historical works, had secured no large sales, whereas now all was altered, and the change, and the circumstances which wrought it, produced a deep impression on Emile Zola, confirmed him in the view which he had already begun to entertain, that fame in the modern literary world depended largely on a resounding coup-de-pistolet."¹ It is very likely that this view was at least partly responsible for Zola's use, in L'Assommoir, of the style indirect libre, or, as Turnell puts it, "the introduction of slang in order to create the impression that we are listening to the unspoken thoughts of the proletariat."² Here is a typical example (Nana is leaving home for the second time):

Ca ne pouvait pas durer; le douzième jour, la garce fila, emportant pour tout bagage sa robe modeste à son derrière et son bonnichon sur l'oreille. Les

¹Vizetelly, op. cit., p. 76.

²Turnell, op. cit., p. 155.

Lorilleux, que le retour et le repentir de la petite laissaient pincés, faillirent s'étaler les quatre fers en l'air, tant ils crevèrent de rire. Deuxième représentation, éclipse second numéro, les demoiselles pour Saint-Lazare, en voiture! Non, c'était trop comique. Nana avait un chic pour se tirer les pattes! Ah bien! si les Coupeau voulaient la garder maintenant, ils n'avaient plus qu'à lui coudre son affaire et à la mettre en cage!" 3

Passages like this shocked many contemporary readers and critics, who simply could not understand why descriptions and character analyses were written in the same vulgar language as that employed by the characters themselves. It was all the more difficult for them to tolerate because of the immense difference in French between the standard literary language and substandard colloquial usage. As Levin puts it: "The gap between academic canons and the norms of la langue parlée has been wider in French than in many other languages, certainly much wider than in our own."⁴ The truth of this statement is evident to anyone who has tried to translate L'Assommoir into English, or has compared the original with an English edition; many of the slang expressions have no equivalent in English and the translator often has to make do with approximations such as

³L'Assommoir, p. 398.

⁴Harry Levin, The Gates of Horn. A Study of Five French Realists (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 348.

"to act like fools" for "faire les dindes" and "a drinking den" for "un assommoir" (this last word having both a literal and figurative meaning which cannot be combined into one English word).

While it is quite probable that the crudeness of the language in L'Assommoir is in part a deliberate attempt to shock the readers (and thus promote sales), the critics who condemned the style indirect libre seem remarkably unaware that it is also a serious literary experiment (it is surprising, in view of its success, that Zola never repeated the experiment). Zola's own reply to the critics, in a letter to the Figaro which, however, was not published, was that reasons of balance and general harmony had led him to adopt a uniform style.⁵ He writes, as it were, from the point of view of his characters rather than from that of an onlooker, a device which, more often than not, is extremely effective. Consider, for example, the following two paragraphs:

Coupeau tira une bordée, cette nuit-là. Le lendemain, Gervaise reçut dix francs de son fils Etienne, qui était mécanicien dans un chemin de fer; le petit lui envoyait des pièces de cent sous de temps à autre sachant qu'il n'y avait pas gras à la maison. Elle mit un pot-au-feu et le mangea toute seule, car cette rosse de Coupeau ne rentra pas davantage le

⁵Léon Deffoux, La Publication de L'Assommoir (Paris: Société Française d'Éditions Littéraires et Techniques, 1931), p. 63.

lendemain. Le lundi personne, le mardi personne encore. Toute la semaine se passa. Ah! nom d'un chien! si une dame l'avait enlevé, c'est ça qui aurait pu s'appeler une chance. Mais, juste le dimanche, Gervaise reçut un papier imprimé, qui lui fit peur d'abord, parce qu'on aurait dit une lettre du commissaire de police. Puis, elle se rassura, c'était simplement pour lui apprendre que son cochon était en train de crever à Sainte-Anne. Le papier disait ça plus poliment, seulement ça revenait au même. Oui, c'était bien une dame qui avait enlevé Coupeau, et cette dame s'appelait Sophie Tourne-de-l'oeil, la dernière bonne amie des pochards.

Ma foi, Gervaise ne se dérangea pas. Il connaissait le chemin, il reviendrait bien tout seul de l'asile; on l'y avait tant de fois guéri, qu'on lui ferait une fois de plus la mauvaise farce de le remettre sur ses pattes. Est-ce qu'elle ne venait pas d'apprendre le matin même que, pendant huit jours, on avait aperçu Coupeau, rond comme une balle, roulant les marchands de vin de Belleville, en compagnie de Mes-Bottes! Parfaitement, c'était même Mes-Bottes qui finançait; il avait dû jeter le grappin sur le magot de sa bourgeoise, des économies gagnées au joli jeu que vous savez. Ah! ils buvaient là du propre argent, capable de flanquer toutes les mauvaises maladies! Tant mieux, si Coupeau en avait empoigné des coliques. Et Gervaise était surtout furieuse, en songeant que ces deux bougres d'égoïstes n'auraient seulement pas songé à venir la prendre pour lui payer une goutte. A-t-on jamais vu! une noce de huit jours, et pas une galanterie aux dames! Quand on boit seul on crève seul, voilà! 6

It is difficult to imagine how this gradual unfolding of Gervaise's train of thought, her complete contempt for her husband and indifference to his fate, her fearful reaction on receiving the official document, her rather pathetic (and, as it will turn out, ironic) indignation

⁶L'Assommoir, pp. 441-2.

towards Mes-Bottes' wife, and, finally her anger at not having been invited to drink with them --- it is difficult to imagine how all this could have been achieved in any other manner without losing much of its effectiveness. In this passage, which is typical, we feel that it is not the author objectively describing Gervaise's thoughts and feelings; Gervaise herself is speaking. In fact, if the passage were to be rewritten in the first person, we would have her very words.

A novel written in the first person would have been by no means innovative (although the exclusive use of argot parisien would have been something new); it is the usual method of treating the narrative from the point of view of a specific character. What Zola achieved by his use of the style indirect libre was a far greater flexibility: he was not restricted to the subjective viewpoint of a single character; he could let any of his characters "speak" whenever the occasion required it, and, in the words of Anatole France: "Vous ne pouvez traduire fidèlement les pensées et les sensations d'un être que dans sa langue."⁷ Zola also managed to create an impression of objectivity, of scientific detachment, since he never passes judgment on his charac-

⁷Quoted by Deffoux, op. cit., p. 97.

ters but simply reports the judgments passed by the characters themselves.

In a letter to Zola, Paul Bourget wrote: "Réellement le style du début est moins carré que celui du milieu et de la fin. On sent que vous vous êtes enflammé à l'oeuvre, que vous avez inventé en créant. Mais cette disproportion ne déplaît pas parce que le style s'encaillie avec les héros et l'illusion en est plus forte."⁸ The language does indeed become more vigorous as the novel progresses, so much so that one sometimes gets the impression that Zola has become a little carried away --- colloquialisms become more and more frequent and the expressions more and more crude. If there is a fault in Zola's use of argot parisien, it is perhaps that he overdoes it at times, creating the impression that he has gone to great pains to collect these expressions and is determined to use them at all costs. For example: "Que d'embêtements! A quoi bon se mettre dans tous ses états et se turlupiner la cervelle? Si elle avait pu pioncer au moins! Mais sa pétaudière de cambuse lui trottait par la tête." Four lines later: "Voyez-vous ce sagouin avec son pardessus et ses gants de laine, qui montait leur parler des termes, comme

⁸Ibid., p. II2.

s'ils avaient eu un boursicot caché quelque part! Nom d'un chien! au lieu de se serrer le gaviot, elle aurait commencé par se coller quelque chose dans les badi-
goinces! Vrai, elle le trouvait trop rossard, cet entripaillé, elle l'avait où vous savez, et profondément encore!"⁹ Such masses of colloquialisms can be a little overpowering; on the whole, however, Zola's style in L'Assommoir suits his purpose admirably and in view of this any slight excess of zeal can no doubt be forgiven.

Zola wanted, above all, to write a simple novel --- indeed, according to the ébauche, he even thought of entitling it La simple vie de Gervaise Macquart.¹⁰ Consequently the novel contains very little in the way of a plot (Zola deliberately avoided some of the more melodramatic episodes that occurred to him, deciding they would serve only to complicate the narrative¹¹). The only events, in fact, which have any element of intrigue are Coupeau's accident and the return of Lantier. What, then, holds the reader's interest and attention in L'Assommoir? Above all, I think, it is a feeling of what Albérès calls fatalité, "cette manière qu'a Zola de

⁹L'Assommoir, p. 409.

¹⁰Notes to L'Assommoir, p. 471.

¹¹For example, see the passage from the ébauche quoted on pp. 65-6.

nous faire pressentir, dès les premières pages, que la destinée d'un être est fixée par les dieux --- même si ces dieux sont des lois biologiques ou sociales."^{I2} The reader is never in any doubt but that Gervaise's fate will not be a happy one, that all her modest desires --- to eat well, not to be beaten, to die in her bed --- will be denied her, for even in the midst of her happiness there are carefully placed hints that it is not to last.^{I3} When we first see Gervaise in the company of Coupeau, for instance, she shudders at the sight of the still in the assommoir, and murmurs: "C'est bête, ça me fait froid, cette machine... la boisson me fait froid."^{I4} Even before the wedding feast, when the future at last seems to hold some promise for Gervaise, there is a sour note as she observes her husband's demeanour in front of the Lorilleuxs:

Gervaise avait gardé sa tranquillité souriante de la matinée. Depuis la promenade pourtant, elle devenait par moments toute triste, elle regardait son mari et les Lorilleux de son air pensif et raisonnable. Elle trouvait Coupeau lâche devant sa soeur. La veille encore, il criait fort, il jurait de les remettre à leur place, ces langues de vipères, s'ils lui manquaient. Mais, en face d'eux, elle le voyait bien, il faisait le chien couchant, guettait sortir

^{I2}Quoted by Mitterand, Notice to L'Assommoir (Cercle du Livre Précieux), p. 592.

^{I3}For example, see passage quoted on p. 34.

^{I4}L'Assommoir, p. 42.

leurs paroles, était aux cent coups quand il les croyaient fâchés. Et cela, simplement, inquiétait la jeune femme pour l'avenir. ^{I5}

After the wedding party, at the sight of Bazouge, she is "prise d'une grosse envie de pleurer, qui lui gâtait toute sa journée de joie raisonnable", ^{I6} and the reader senses that the prophetic words of the old croque-mort will be fulfilled: "Ca ne vous empêchera pas d'y passer, ma petite... Vous serez peut-être bien contente d'y passer un jour... Oui, j'en connais des femmes, qui diraient, merci, si on les emportait." ^{I6}

Chapter IV is the turning point. Even before she buys her shop, Gervaise's simple hopes are doomed by Coupeau's accident and the lazy habits he forms during his convalescence. The rot has already set in when, in Chapter V, Coupeau comes in tight and insists on kissing Gervaise in front of Mme Bijard, Augustine and the others in the shop: "Et le gros baiser qu'ils échangeaient à pleine bouche, au milieu des saletés du métier, était comme une première chute, dans le lent avachissement de leur vie." ^{I7} The chapter ends on a happy note, but the happiness is short-lived. At the end of Chapter

^{I5} Ibid., p. 84.

^{I6} Ibid., p. 97.

^{I7} Ibid., p. 149.

VI Coupeau comes home drunk again, but this time not in such a good mood:

Il avait une ivresse blanche, les dents serrées, le nez pincé. Et Gervaise reconnut tout de suite le vitriol de l'Assommoir, dans le sang empoisonné qui lui blémissait la peau. Elle voulut rire, le coucher, comme elle faisait les jours où il avait le vin bon enfant. Mais il la bouscula, sans desserrer les lèvres; et, en passant, en gagnant de lui-même son lit, il leva le poing sur elle. Il ressemblait à l'autre, au soûlard qui ronflait là-haut, las d'avoir tapé. Alors, elle resta toute froide, elle pensait aux hommes, à son mari, à Goujet, à Lantier, le coeur coupé, désespérant d'être jamais heureuse.¹⁸

From now on the fall is swift, but even in the midst of this avachissement we are given hints that worse is yet to come. When Gervaise tells Coupeau that she has seen Nana and would like to be as well off as her, he replies: "Dis donc, ma biche, je ne te retiens pas... T'es pas encore trop mal, quand tu te débarbouilles. Tu sais, comme on dit, il n'y a pas si vieille marmite qui ne trouve son couvercle... Dame! si ça devait mettre du beurre dans les épinards!"¹⁹ Thus, when Gervaise is finally reduced to prostitution, it comes as no shock.

Zola thus paints a compelling picture of the inexorable process by which Gervaise is driven, through her environment and the unbending laws of heredity, to

¹⁸Ibid., p. 200.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 405.

her final tragic end. All she ever wanted was to work quietly, to have bread to eat and somewhere to sleep, to bring her children up well, not to be beaten, and to die in bed. At the end of the novel not one of these dreams has come true: she is unable to find work, she either goes hungry or eats scraps, she sleeps on filthy straw, her daughter turns to prostitution, her husband beats her, and she dies in poverty and neglect. The effect of Zola's careful construction, his intermingling of accounts of the present with remarks and events which serve as dire prophecies of the future, is to make this outcome appear utterly inevitable.

As we have seen, Zola's main objective in L'Assommoir was to show "le milieu peuple" with a view to explaining "les mœurs du peuple".²⁰ Description, therefore, as in all of Zola's work, plays a very large part in the novel. Often the description consists of no more than a mass of accumulated details, as in the description of the apartment building. Nothing is left out; the building, we are told, has five storeys on the street side, each with fifteen windows, which have black shutters and broken slats. The ground floor is occupied by four shops: a cheap eating-house, a coal dealer, a

²⁰See p. 22.

haberdasher, and an umbrella merchant. The entrance is a high, round-arched portal rising to the second floor and opening onto a long entrance-way at the end of which is a wide courtyard.. The interior of the building is described in even greater detail.

Apart from the descriptions of physical objects, L'Assommoir is full of details on every aspect of the Parisian worker's life. For example we are given all the figures pertaining to his budget: his wages, which are tending to drop because of increased mechanisation, his rent, the price of heating, clothing, laundering, furniture, doctors' and midwives' fees etc. Zola always takes great pains to make sure that the details are absolutely accurate. For instance, according to A. Ducamp, a professor of pathology, his description of Coupeau's delirium tremens is extremely accurate: Coupeau undergoes the délire professionnel, thinking he is on a roof placing sheets of zinc (objects pertaining to one's profession are, says Ducamp, often evoked during the delirium tremens), and he is shown as having a temperature of 40 degrees (when delirium tremens is accompanied by a temperature of more than 39 degrees the situation is extremely serious).²¹

²¹A. Ducamp, L'Idée Médical dans le Roman Naturaliste, quoted in Notes to L'Assommoir, p. 488.

While it is important to be as accurate as possible in such cases as this, where correct observations are essential to the credibility of the account, one sometimes feels that the great wealth of physical detail is not strictly necessary. It is because of this wealth of detail that L'Assommoir tends at times to be somewhat heavy, requiring a determined effort on the part of the reader. For example it is difficult to see what the minute description of the goldsmith's work achieves, other than to slow down the narrative. (It does have some bearing on the character of the Lorilleux, it is true, but it is surely unnecessarily tiresome to subject the reader to the goldsmith's technical jargon.) In Zola's mind realism apparently consisted of the systematic accumulation of very precise and accurate data; if the slightest detail was missing, the picture was not complete. It is this tendency which has caused him to be denied a place, by certain critics, among the ranks of the truly great novelists. This point of view is expressed very succinctly by Green when he says of Zola: "He reports everything, whereas the true artist selects."²²

In spite of this defect, however, L'Assommoir,

²²Green, op. cit., p. 278.

as a tableau de mœurs of the working class, is extremely successful. Nor is the picture totally black: several episodes serve to provide relief as well as contributing to the tableau de mœurs. The first of these is Gervaise's wedding, from the first a rather comical affair. Zola starts with a description of the rather incongruous-looking wedding party, with Monsieur Madinier, the only one in dress suit and tails, attracting the stares of passers-by, and Coupeau feeling uncomfortable under the hot sun in his shiny new clothes. They reach the town hall a half-hour early, and one can easily picture them sitting there, staring at the walls and ceilings, talking in awed whispers. Next, the ceremony is performed at top speed leaving Gervaise dazed and confused, Maman Coupeau crying all the while, and then they all sign their names in the register "en grosses lettres boiteuses",²³ with the exception of the bridegroom, who signs with a cross. Later, at the church, the priest, angry at being late for lunch, performs mass with the same undignified haste, "mangeant les phrases latines, se tournant, se baissant, élargissant les bras, en hâte, avec des regards obliques sur

²³L'Assommoir, p. 69.

les mariés et sur les témoins."²⁴ Meanwhile Coupeau and Gervaise are in a state of bewilderment, not knowing whether to stand up, sit down or kneel, and Maman Coupeau is crying into her prayerbook. To cap it all, before the end of the ceremony, mass finishes at the high altar and in the little chapel the wedding mass is almost drowned out by the shuffling of feet and the clatter of chairs from the church, together with the hammering of some decorators who are putting up drapery. Finally the wedding party finds itself outside in the sun "ahurie, essoufflée d'avoir été menée au galop."²⁵ The impression of rapid movement that Zola conveys in this episode, notably, in the passage already quoted, by the staccato-like effect of a series of short, sharp participial phrases, is very effective. The whole description reminds one of a movie in which the film has been speeded up. Even here, however, the humour is tinged with pathos --- one feels especially sorry for Coupeau, in his embarrassment trying to laugh off this farcical ceremony which seems to have been conducted "au milieu d'un déménagement, pendant une absence du bon

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., p. 70.

Dieu, entre deux messes sérieuses".²⁶ And the bad start to the marriage is perhaps relevant in that it hints at what is to come.

There is humour, too, in the account of the visit to the Louvre, especially in the rather ridiculous appearance of the wedding party walking in procession in the rain. Here Zola paints a picture of a rather unexpected splash of colour against the dull background of the wet, grey streets --- "la robe gros bleu de Gervaise, la robe écrue à fleurs imprimées de Mme Fauconnier, le pantalon jaune canari de Boche."²⁷ The styles of apparel, too, are so absurd that they catch the eye of the people in the street, particularly the men's hats "ternis de l'obscurité de l'armoire, avec des formes pleines de comique, hautes, évasées, en pointe, des ailes extraordinaires, retroussées, plates, trop larges ou trop étroites."²⁸ Bringing up the rear is Mme Gaudron "dans sa robe d'un violet cru, avec son ventre de femme enceinte, qu'elle portait énorme, très en avant"²⁹ completing the appearance of some grotesque carnival

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., p. 76.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid., p. 77.

parade. The whole passage is a caricature of poor people trying to be elegant in their hand-me-down clothes.

The tour of the Louvre is no less comical, with Madinier, acting as guide, trying hard to impress the others with his culture and imparting erroneous information, refusing to admit he is lost, then explaining it away by angrily accusing the administration of having moved the doors around. In the Assyrian Gallery they look in disbelief at an inscription in Phoenician characters (*Ce n'était pas possible. Personne n'avait jamais lu ce grimoire.*³⁰); in the Apollo Gallery they are chiefly impressed by the gleaming, polished floor; in the Salon Carré Boche and Bibi-la-Grillade snicker and leer at the nudes. And so it goes on. When the tour is over and everyone is thoroughly bored, they all pretend to have enjoyed it. In fact they have understood nothing: "*Des siècles d'art passaient devant leur ignorance ahurie.*"³¹ Limited as they are by their lack of education, this is a world they will never be part of. One always feels, however, that Zola, although he makes them appear ridiculous, is by no means contemptuous of them. On the contrary, he is profoundly compassionate

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., p. 79.

towards them, aware as he is that the narrow lives they lead are not of their own making. For this reason the visit to the Louvre, like the wedding ceremony, is rather pathetic in spite of the humorous treatment of it.

The episode of the wedding feast is a noteworthy example of Zola's descriptive powers. The principal elements in the description of the physical setting are colour and smell --- the grease-stained jackets, the dirty aprons of the waiters, the smoky room tinged green by the sunlight reflected from the trees outside, the large fly-spotted mirrors, yellowing crockery and scratched, grimy cutlery together with the vague odour of dampness and mildew mingled with the pungent smell of burnt fat all combine to produce the drab and dismal effect of a cheap eating-house. But the main impression one gets of the feast is one of noise and confusion, with everyone laughing and talking at the same time. They marvel at the eating exploits of Mes-Bottes and are amused by the worried look of the café proprietor; they laugh at Coupeau's imitation of a cat when the rabbit stew is brought in and then begin to discuss the merits of the various dishes. Next the conversation turns to the different professions, every-one talking and no-one listening. Monsieur Madinier sings the praises of the cardboard business and Lorilleux those of working with

gold, Coupeau tells of a weather-vane, a real masterpiece made by one of his fellow-workers, Mme Lerat shows Bibi-la-Grillade how to make a rose stem, Mme Fauconnier complains about the girls who work for her, and Mlle Remanjou explains to Mes-Bottes how she makes her dolls. Amid all this hubbub there is a constant clatter of dishes, the waiters are continually coming and going, bringing in new dishes and stacking the dirty crockery and empty bottles against the wall. The room becomes so hot and steamy that the men have to take off their jackets and eat in their shirt sleeves. Then the discussion turns to politics and the argument starts to get ugly, obliging Coupeau to intervene. Mme Lorilleux curses at a waiter who, in removing a dish, has spilled something down her neck. Then when Mes-Bottes and a few others want to buy some more drink, there is an argument that almost turns into a fight and finally, when the proprietor presents the bill, there is a violent dispute: "Toute la société, serrée autour de lui, l'entourait d'une rage de gestes, d'un glapisement de voix que la colère étranglait."³² The general confusion is increased when Mme Boche sees her husband squeezing Mme Lerat's waist and throws a carafe at him. The effect of

³²Ibid., p. 93.

this whole passage is that of a crescendo, the heat and noise building up gradually until tempers begin to fray and the whole party gets out of hand and is ruined. The slow deterioration of the wedding feast is a prelude to the more tragic deterioration of Gervaise's married life.

The internal structure of L'Assommoir is very carefully and painstakingly worked out. It is, as I have mentioned, extremely simple, but its very simplicity is most effective. The line of the narrative can be imagined as a curve on a graph, the curve corresponding to Gervaise's life. After she has been deserted by Lantier it rises slowly to its apex when she buys her shop, begins to decline gradually when Coupeau starts to drink, then plunges sharply to her ultimate degradation and death. This simplicity in the plot, its almost complete freedom from extraneous complications, is essential to the effectiveness of L'Assommoir since it leaves the author free to concentrate on what he considers really important --- the detailed description of slum life with all its poverty, hardship and despair. In this he is eminently successful; through the accuracy of his observations and the power of his descriptions, Zola has painted a picture of life among the poor surpassed, perhaps, only by his later novel, Germinal.

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