ZOLA'S LA CONQUÊTE DE PLASSANS

AN ANALYSIS OF ZOLA'S LA CONQUÊTE DE PLASSANS

by

WILLIAM ROSS MANTLE, B.A.

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AUTHOR: William Ross Mantle, B.A. (McMaster).

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T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

La Conquête de Plassans, the fourth volume of Emile Zola's series of novels called Les Rougon-Macquart, is one of the least popular of the series with modern readers.[1] F.W.J. Hemmings theorizes that the novel's lack of appeal stems from the fact that "except in the concluding chapters, Zola is hardly being himself in La Conquête de Plassans".[2] It is true that Zola restricts himself to a serious, naturalistic point of view, and the result is a restrained social and political study quite unlike works such as Germinal and L'Assommoir. Because the novel depends a great deal upon the topical questions of the Second Empire and is integrally related to other novels of the series, it does not have the timelessness and universality of Zola's more successful works. However, it is far from being a complete failure, and at times it is animated by the striking realism and

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[1] In 1967, only 6.5 printings of La Conquête de Plassans had been published in the Livre de Poche edition, compared with 27.5 for Germinal. See Jacques Dubois, "Représentations de Zola chez un public d'aujourd'hui", Europe, CCCCLXVIII-CCCCLXIX (1968), p. 260.

[2] F.W.J. Hemmings, Emile Zola (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 104.

dramatic scenes that characterize his most famous masterpieces. The plot of La Conquête de Plassans is extremely well organized, and the reader is kept in suspense until the spectacular conclusion which shows Zola at his best and most typical. Other aspects of the novel are also interesting, such as the gradual psychological changes that transform Marthe Mouret from a quiet housewife to a hysterical religious fanatic. Also worthy of note are the convincing social and political descriptions of life in a small provincial town and the clever analogy which allows us to picture on a reduced scale the rise and fall of the Second Empire itself.

As Henri Guillemin writes in respect to the novel: "Gardons-nous, devant un tel livre, de rester à sa surface".[3] La Conquête de Plassans is an extremely complex work, in that it has many different levels of meaning. On the individual or psychological level, it is a study of the slow disintegration of a family and the insanity of two of its members. The novel also has a sociological perspective, since it is a description of the social and political system in a small town under the Second Empire. This social study may be taken as an analogy to the entire period of the Second Empire in France, for

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[3]Henri Guillemin, Présentation des "Rougon-Macquart" (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 65.

the events at Plassans are a microcosmic parallel to the historical situation throughout the whole country at this time. Finally, the novel is an illustration of the principles which lie behind the whole Rougon-Macquart series, for many of the themes that unite the cycle into a complete world view are implicit in La Conquête de Plassans.

The novel, then, may be seen as a complex system of concentric circles of increasingly wider scope, ranging from the individual, psychological dimension to the social, political and historical levels, and finally it contributes to the overall world view developed in the Rougon-Macquart. This analysis is an attempt to examine each of these different levels of the novel, in order to demonstrate how both sides of Zola, the artist and the social scientist, are represented in La Conquête de Plassans. The novel may be seen as a miniature version of the Rougon-Macquart, since the characterization, the political and social commentary, the stylistic devices and the principle themes are typical of those used throughout the whole Rougon-Macquart. However, before discussing the place of La Conquête de Plassans within the context of the series, it will be helpful to outline briefly the circumstances under which the novel was written.

1. Genesis and Composition

In Zola's first proposed list of novels which were to make up the Rougon-Macquart, there appears the notation "un roman sur les prêtres (Province)" (V, 1735).[4] Although this note does not refer to the ambitious, chaste priest of La Conquête de Plassans, it can still be seen that Zola had in mind some sort of novel on priests in a provincial setting even before he started writing the series.

It is well-known that Zola always tried to follow a novel by another which served as its opposite or complement. The third volume of the series, Le Ventre de Paris (1873), is a very descriptive and poetic look at the great market-place of Paris and those who work there. La Faute de l'abbé Mouret (1875), which follows La Conquête de Plassans, is perhaps the most poetic and non-historical novel of the series, since it takes place in a dream world outside of time and space. F.W.J. Hemmings describes these novels as "two gorgeously rom-

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[4]Page references within the text are to Les Rougon-Macquart (Paris: Fasquelle and Gallimard, 1960), hereafter referred to as "Pléiade"; unless otherwise specified, quotations are from Volume I. Much of the information in this section is from Henri Mitterand's "Etude" of La Conquête de Plassans, Pléiade, I, 1641-1654.

antic rhapsodies".[5] La Conquête de Plassans, which comes between them in the series, is a complete contrast, since it is written in a controlled, realistic manner.

Zola began writing La Conquête de Plassans in 1873. As was his custom with the other novels of the Rougon-Macquart, he made detailed plans and notes before the actual composition began. These notes are still extant, and are to be found in the Bibliothèque Nationale,[6] along with the manuscript of the novel. In the sixty-three pages of notes there are a plan by chapters, a preliminary study or "Ebauche", a set of notes on the characters, drawings of Plassans and of the Mourets' house, and various other documents, all of which are valuable in studying the novel, especially in seeing the various stages that Zola went through while writing it, and the additions and changes that he made as he worked on the plan. The novel was serialized in Le Siècle between February 24 and April 25, 1874, and was first published in book form by Charpentier a month later.

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[5]Hemmings, Emile Zola, p. 103.

[6]Some of these notes are reprinted in Les Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Bernouard, 1927-1929), V, La Conquête de Plassans, 372-384. This edition is hereafter referred to as "Bernouard". The more accurately reproduced excerpts from these preliminary notes in Pléiade, I, 1655-1673 are used whenever possible.

In writing La Conquête de Plassans, Zola relied on a great variety of source materials, including his own personal recollections, scientific treatises, his earlier works and those of other writers, and historical facts.

The town of Plassans is modelled after Aix-en-Provence, in southern France. It was here that Zola spent his boyhood, and the geography of the fictional town is faithful to the real-life model, in respect to the placement of the quartiers, the churches, the ancient walls and so on, except that the names have been changed. As well as this, some of the characters are based on people that Zola actually knew; for example, he mentions in the "Ebauche" that François Mouret is "le type du père de C...goguenard, républicain, bourgeois, froid, méticuleux, avare",[7] probably referring to Cézanne's father. Delangre, the mayor in the novel, is based on Rigaud, who was mayor of Aix from 1852 to 1863.

Zola was always very careful to document his novels by reading reference materials. For La Conquête de Plassans he studied several works dealing with mental disorders in order to depict faithfully the insanity of Mouret and his wife's hysteria. Among these works were Dr. Moreau's La Psychologie morbide (1859), in which the

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[7]Bernouard, V, 372.

thin line between genius and madness was emphasized, and a theory of heredity was proposed in which insanity was thought to result in other defects, such as crime or sexual perversion as well as religious fanaticism, mysticism and genius. Other works on abnormal psychology consulted by Zola include B.H. Morel's Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine (1857) and his De la formation du type dans les variétés dégénérées (1864), as well as Dr. Ulysse Trélat's La folie lucide (1861).

As well as using these scientific reference materials Zola also related La Conquête de Plassans to his own previous works. As we shall see, the novel is integrally related to the first volume of the series, La Fortune des Rougon; in addition to this, Zola touched on some of the aspects of La Conquête de Plassans in several newspaper articles. For instance, one article, published in L'Evénement illustré on June 8, 1868,[8] deals with a wife who has an affair with another man, pretending that her husband is beating her in order to have him put away in a mental home. Struck with remorse, she later visits her husband, only to find that he has truly gone mad. This plot is remarkably similar to the first "Ebauche" of

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[8]Reproduced in Pléiade, I, 1643-1645.

the novel. In another article in La Tribune of January 9, 1869,[9] Zola mentions various types of devout women, and indicates that this subject is worthy of consideration as the theme for a play. An article in La Cloche on March 29, 1870,[10] describes the sudden religious devotion of a woman who is conquered by her handsome confessor. Thus it can be seen that Zola had in mind many aspects of the novel well before he actually wrote it, and needed only to combine them to form the foundations of La Conquête de Plassans.

There were many works of fiction available to Zola which may have given him inspiration in writing the novel. He was most certainly familiar with Madame Gervaisais, written by his friends the Goncourt brothers in 1869. This novel describes the psychology of a woman who is converted, experiences mystical trances and finally dies of tuberculosis. There are many similarities with Marthe Mouret's situation, even down to the fact that they both have retarded children, both die of the same disease, both neglect their family for religion, and both experience a psychological shock during Holy Week. However, it is impossible to tell whether Zola actually did borrow these

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[9] Extract in Pléiade, I, 1646.

[10] Reproduced in Martin Kanes (ed.), L'Atelier de Zola. Textes de journaux 1865-1870 (Geneva: Droz, 1963), pp. 226-230.

details from the earlier work, although we do know that he was favourable to it, since he published a note praising Madame Gervaisais in Le Gaulois of January 18, 1869,[11] and a more detailed analysis of the novel in the same newspaper on March 9, 1869.[12]

In the "Ebauche" Zola mentions Hector Malot, presumably referring to his Un curé de province, followed by Un miracle, both published in 1872. Henri Mitterand suggests that this work may have influenced Zola in his portrayal of Abbé Faujas and some minor characters of the novel, such as Abbé Fenil and the bishop, but he feels that this influence is slight.[13]

One might also consider as possible influences Balzac's Le curé de Tours (1832), in which an ambitious priest uses his friend cruelly and takes possession of his home, and Stendhal's Le rouge et le noir (1830), which deals with an ambitious seminarist.

Another fertile source of material for Zola was to be found in contemporary social and political events.

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[11] Ibid., pp. 111-114.

[12] Ibid., pp. 125-130.

[13] Henri Mitterand, "Etude" of La Conquête de Plassans, Pléiade, I, 1649.

For example, the elections referred to in the text actually did occur in 1863; the great influence of the clergy in political matters is factual; the conflict between the Legitimists, Bonapartists and Republicans conforms to the historical struggles between these parties; and a multitude of other details all combine to give the work an aura of authenticity as well as providing Zola with a ready-made background setting for the novel.

In 1868, before the collapse of the Second Empire, Zola had the idea of depicting this period through a series of novels which would follow the lives of the members of a family. The weaknesses or defects of this family would serve as an analogy to the corruption and decadence that in Zola's mind characterized the whole Second Empire period. Also central to his plan was the idea of the struggle between environment and heredity. He wanted to study various members of a family to show how characteristics could be inherited, and also how they could be modified by one's environment, using the sometimes far-fetched psychological theories of contemporary doctors.

To carry out these aims, Zola had to create a large family and set the scene for the succeeding novels. The first volume of the series, La Fortune des Rougon, provides the background material for the whole Rougon-Macquart cycle. It takes place in 1851, just after the coup d'état

establishing the Empire, in a small provincial town called Plassans. Adélaïde Fouque, the ancient matriarch of the family, is married to Rougon, a level-headed gardener, by whom she has one son, Pierre. She also has an alliance with a drunken smuggler, Macquart, and from this relationship two children result: Ursule and Antoine. Each of her three children marries and has a family, resulting in the Rougon, Mouret, and Macquart branches of the family tree. However, Adélaïde, known as Tante Dide to her family, is a very nervous and unstable woman, and she becomes so unbalanced that she has to put in a mental asylum. Her insanity is passed on in some way to almost all of her descendents, in accordance with the psychological theories of Zola's contemporaries. On the Macquart side, Antoine's alcohol-drenched blood results in a family of alcoholics, prostitutes, murderers, suicides and other undesirable characters. Because of their good-for-nothing ancestor and their illegitimate status, the members of this branch are condemned to live in complete poverty, or at best on the low wages of the working class.

On the Mouret side of the family, Tante Dide's traits are again transmitted, but in a different way. Instead of a tendency towards vice, the Mourets inherit a desire for excesses of heroism, religion, and respectability. The Mouret family attains a higher degree of

respect in the community, and may be generally regarded as the middle class branch of the Rougon-Macquart family.

The Rougons seem to inherit most of their traits from Pierre Rougon's wife, Félicité, an intelligent and ambitious woman. This ambition, combined with the tendency to excess common to the whole family, is passed on to her children as an insatiable desire for money, political power, or a thirst for knowledge. The Rougons may be considered as the upper middle-class branch of the family, since among them there is a financier, a politician, a doctor and a fortune-seeker.

In La Conquête de Plassans, members of all three branches are present. François Mouret, the son of Ursule, has married his cousin on the legitimate side, Marthe Rougon. The double crossing of blood results in three children: Désirée, a mentally retarded but lovable girl; Serge, who later enters a seminary and becomes a religious fanatic; and Octave, who becomes the manager of a large department store.

Pierre Rougon and his wife Félicité also play a part in La Conquête de Plassans, as does Antoine Macquart, the good-for-nothing drunkard, who has now settled down on a farm. Thus La Conquête de Plassans is tightly linked with the other novels of the series through the interconnected bonds of kinship and inherited traits. In

fact, other later novels, such as Pot-Bouille, Au Bonheur des dames and La Faute de l'abbé Mouret continue the Mourets' story by recounting what happened to their three children.

As well as introducing many of the characters that will play a part in La Conquête de Plassans, La Fortune des Rougon also provided a great deal of historical information which is valuable in situating La Conquête de Plassans. In the earlier novel, Zola describes the events of the coup d'état of 1851 as experienced by a small town in the provinces. Also involved is the peasant insurrection of the same year in the Var, protesting against this take-over. Pierre Rougon, the main character of the novel, takes advantage of the insurrection to have himself proclaimed a hero, and he is given the post of receveur particulier after the revolt is quashed.

The political situation at this time is very important for the events of La Conquête de Plassans. The town is ruled by weak-willed officials, inclined towards Republicanism. They are opposed by a small group of influential Legitimists, Orleanists and Bonapartists, but the working class supports the Republican cause. Pierre Rougon is given advance warning of the coup d'état by his brother Eugène, who is helping Louis Napoleon plot his take-over of the government. Thus forewarned, Pierre

manipulates the members of the Reactionist group to lean favourably towards the idea of an Empire under the "Prince-Président". When Napoleon finally makes his move, Pierre and his group are prepared to confront the insurrection that they have been expecting on the part of the Republican masses, thus gaining the favour of the newly-established government. La Conquête de Plassans continues this story, returning to the town in 1858, at the height of the Empire. At this time Pierre and Félicité are rejoicing in their new-found power, and are scheming with Abbé Faujas, a political agent, to return the favour of the town to the Empire in the next election.

La Conquête de Plassans is also closely linked to another novel of the series, Son Excellence Eugène Rougon, which follows the political career of Pierre's brother Eugène. Called "le plus grand des Rougon", Eugène manages to have himself appointed minister to Louis Napoleon, after helping him to plan the coup d'état, as we have seen in La Fortune des Rougon. It is Eugène who sends Abbé Faujas to Plassans to win the town back to the Empire, and it is he who convinces the bishop that the Abbé has a great deal of influence in the government.

Although La Conquête de Plassans may be read independently of these other two novels as a work in its own right, it is nevertheless extremely helpful to

understand the personal background of the characters, the historical and political situation as described in La Fortune des Rougon and Son Excellence Eugène Rougon. By the same token, La Conquête de Plassans complements the other two works in such a way that it is necessary to read all three novels in order to fit them together into a unified whole.

2. "Le mythe d'épuisement"

These three novels, and most of the others in the series before L'Assommoir, are linked by more powerful bonds than those of simple plot structure or historical facts. Leaving aside La Faute de l'abbé Mouret, which takes place in its own peculiar dream-world outside the framework of history, all of the other early novels deal with a certain phase in the development of the Second Empire. Each one is concerned with the rise to power of a particular individual or group. Generally, the structure of these novels is one of progressing and ascending lines, since they deal with the successful efforts of various people to take advantage of their situation and carve out a niche for themselves in the edifice of the Second Empire. In La Fortune des Rougon, the rising action is concentrated on Pierre and Félicité Rougon, whom we see as hard-working shop-keepers at the beginning of the novel. At its conclusion, they have become masters of the town, which

they conquer because their compulsive ambition has pushed them into accepting even the most unscrupulous scheme, as long as it furthers their hunger for power. In La Curée, Saccard profits by taking advantage of the confusion in Paris, and he manages to amass a fortune through shady real estate dealings. Le Ventre de Paris is another novel in which ascending lines are dominant: the practical, business-minded Lisa, symbolic of the bourgeoisie who have fattened themselves in this period, triumphs over the idealistic Florent, who wastes his time in futile political scheming. In La Conquête de Plassans Zola shows how the Church has profited from the Second Empire, as he describes Abbé Faujas' conquest of the town of Plassans. Finally, Son Excellence Eugène Rougon presents the most successful member of the whole family, "le grand homme", who climbs to the top of the political ladder and becomes Napoleon III's personal minister.

Although the ascending movement predominates in these early novels of the series, there is always a hint of decomposition and catastrophe lurking behind the apparent prosperity and satisfied ambitions. For example, Félicité and Pierre Rougon's triumphant seizure of power is marred by the bloody massacre that brings it about; Eugène Rougon's power starts crumbling as he is devoured by the pack of wolves that feed on him; and La Curée is

tainted with an aura of sexual perversion. The sense of impending doom and gradual decay is very much present in La Conquête de Plassans as well. Although Faujas is successful in conquering the town, he suffers a terrible fate along with many of the other major characters.

From L'Assommoir on, the series seems more and more dominated by a feeling of catastrophe and by material, moral and social degeneracy. We witness the abject poverty and drunkenness of the working-class Parisians in L'Assommoir, and the horrors of the mine workers' existence in Germinal; we see a gradual sliding into sexual perversity and promiscuity in almost all the later novels, especially Nana and La Terre; La Bête humaine is a nightmarish excursion into the mind of a psychopathic killer; and finally, in La Débâcle the atrocities of war are portrayed, and the inevitable catastrophe, foreshadowed from the beginning of the series, explodes upon us as we view the holocaust that engulfs the corruption, decomposition and perversion of Paris in a purifying fire. After the debris of the decayed civilization is cleared away, Zola foresees a new and better world rising from the ruins, as expressed in Le Docteur Pascal and implied in many of the other novels.

In this perspective the series takes on epic dimensions. It is dominated by two great forces which are in

constant opposition. The ascendent forces of life, creation and progress are inevitably undermined by their negative counterparts, death, destruction and deterioration. However, Zola's vision is cyclical, for a new world is to be built on top of the old one. His optimistic hope for the future is nevertheless tempered by the fact that man will always be confronted by the tendency to decompose and degenerate.

A.E. Carter writes that "degeneracy is the very basis of the twenty novels which compose the Rougon-Macquart".[14] Zola is not alone in this emphasis on decadence. The whole nineteenth century in France, especially after 1848, seems to be influenced by the cult of artificiality, sexual perversion, neurosis, disease, drug-taking and spiritualism. Carter distinguishes three stages in the evolution of this decadent trend: first, the late Romantic period, in which the cult of artificiality was stressed; then the naturalist phase, emphasizing the psychopathological causes of abnormalities; and thirdly, the fin de siècle stage, in which the trend was once again towards the search for new experiences through artificial means, as in Huysmans' A Rebours.[15]

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[14] A.E. Carter, The Idea of Decadence in French Literature 1830-1900 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958), p. 71.

[15] Ibid., p. 27.

Zola, of course, belongs to the second or naturalistic phase. His interest in the pathological findings of his time concerning human mental abnormalities, perverted behaviour, mysticism, and so on, is mirrored in the whole Rougon-Macquart. Even in his "Préface" to the cycle, he writes in reference to the family he is studying:

> Physiologiquement, ils sont la lente succession des accidents nerveux et 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. (3)

In La Conquête de Plassans the influence of this decadent trend is quite evident. Both Marthe and her husband François have certain characteristics that are typical of the decadent hero. Both have inherited their mental disorders from their common grandmother, Adélaïde Fouque, who is afflicted with excessive nervousness. This is fundamental to the typical description of a decadent hero, as Carter indicates: "The true decadent . . .is neurotic. He is not suffering from some mysterious fatality, but from nervous disorders, usually inherited from a line of tainted ancestors."[16]

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[16] Ibid., p. 28.

Both Marthe and her husband suffer from a sort of ennui that characterizes many decadent heroes. Mouret withdraws within himself to try to escape from the life that has "gone bad" on him, whereas Marthe breaks out of her boring existence through mysticism, a common escape route for other decadent heroes. The shadow of the insane asylum at Les Tulettes, in which old Tante Dide is kept, looms over the whole novel and menaces all the members of the family. At one point Antoine jokingly remarks to his niece Marthe:

> Vois-tu, ma fille, la tête n'est pas plus solide chez les Rougon que chez les Macquart. Quand je m'assois à cette place, en face de cette grande coquine de maison, je me dis souvent que toute la clique y viendra peut-être, un jour, puisque la maman y est. (1100-1101)

In a later novel this remark proves to be prophetic, for Le Docteur Pascal contains a scene in which four generations of the Rougon-Macquart family are assembled in Adélaïde's cell (V, 1104-1107).

As Zola explains in the "Préface", he is interested in depicting the whole of French society under the Second Empire, not just one particular family. Decadence in the series is not limited only to the feeble-minded descendents of Tante Dide, since Zola considers the whole regime as "une étrange époque de folie et de honte" (4). In La Conquête de Plassans we catch a glimpse of this society.

Although far from the centre of government, we see Faujas, one of its political agents, threatening the clergy, manipulating the populace and destroying the Mourets in his insatiable thirst for power and influence. When Mouret returns to his house at the end of the novel, he recognizes that some corrupt force has taken over his property:

> Quelque ferment de décomposition introduit là, avait pourri les boiseries, rouillé le fer, fendu les murailles. Alors il entendit la maison s'émietter comme un morceau de sel jeté dans une eau tiède..
> (1068)

Even Faujas' relatives, the Trouches, with their compulsive greed, remind us of the degenerate hero who always craves more sensual pleasures. The townspeople themselves revel in Mouret's supposed madness with morbid fascination, and make up grotesque stories that circulate throughout the town.

In fact, an examination of the plot structure of the novel indicates that it is unified by the decomposition that gnaws away at every success or ascending line of action.

The first five chapters may be considered as an introduction, for in them Zola's main purpose is to present the principal and secondary characters to us. In Chapter I we become acquainted with the peaceful, warm family of Marthe and François Mouret, their children, Désirée, Serge and Octave, and their servant Rose.

Chapter II introduces Abbé Faujas, a mysterious priest, and Mme. Faujas, his doting mother. They have come to rent the upper floor of the Mourets' house. In Chapter III we learn more of the background of the Mouret family, including François' occupation: a dealer in wine, almonds and oil. In the next chapter Mouret explains the political situation of Plassans to Faujas, and points out the characters who will be important in the political plot. Mouret's house is situated between those of the leaders of the Legitimist and Bonapartist political parties. We soon find out that Faujas' mission is to win back the town to the Empire in the next election, since it had chosen an Opposition member in the previous one.

In Chapter V we meet Félicité, who is Marthe's mother. She is married to Pierre Rougon, now the receveur particulier of the town. Members of both political groups frequent her salon. In this chapter we also encounter François' Uncle Antoine, who belongs to the illegitimate Macquart side of the family. At this time almost all the major and minor characters of the novel have been introduced to us, and we have been supplied with all the background information necessary to follow the events of the rest of the story.

From this point on, the various sub-plots begin their development. The main plot of the Abbé's political

conquest of the town has a corresponding minor plot, the gradual take-over of the Mourets' house. After a disastrous appearance at Félicité's soirée, in which he makes a very bad impression on her guests, Faujas sets to work on Marthe, his landlady, instilling in her the idea of a home to keep the daughters of working-class parents out of mischief. Marthe sets up a committee of influential women to put this idea into effect, under the name of "L'OEuvre de la Vierge". By this strategy Faujas gains the favour of these women, for they soon find out that he was the real instigator of the undertaking. While he is gaining this triumph, Faujas begins to take over the Mourets' house. He has already made himself at home in their living room in the evenings, and now he begins to take possession of the terrace.

Because of the work she has been doing for "L'OEuvre de la Vierge", Marthe begins to neglect her family and becomes more and more caught up in religious fervour. Her meticulous husband complains of her neglect of the housework and their children, but soon he seems to become resigned to this fact, and he begins to retire within himself. Abbé Faujas' sister Olympe and her husband Honoré Trouche arrive on the scene. They share the Faujas' floor of the house, using two rooms that they were not occupying. Thus one more step has been completed in the

gradual take-over of the Mourets' house.

Mouret, seeing that his wife does not take care of her children any more, sends the oldest away to work in a business firm in Marseille. Later he will send his daughter Désirée away to her nursemaid in the country, and his second son Serge will enter a seminary, thus leaving the couple alone in the house except for their lodgers.

When Compan, the Curé of Saint-Saturnin, passes away, Faujas threatens the bishop with the anger of his friends in high places, and thus he manages to be appointed to replace the former Curé. Faujas now returns triumphantly to Félicité's salon, where he is well received this time. This victory has a corresponding increase in the Abbé's power over the Mourets' house, for he now takes possession of the garden, moves into their little-used salon and opens the gate at the end of the garden which leads to an alley. Faujas now breaks his silence in political matters and begins to speak to the members of both political groups. He proposes a plan to M. Maffre which involves setting up a café to keep the older boys of the town out of trouble. This café is set up in the basement of a church, and when it is completed, Faujas again comes out of the shadows and takes the credit for the idea. He gains another victory when he gets both political groups together in the neutral ground of Mouret's garden. The Trouches have also made themselves at

home, and they move into Serge's room after he leaves for the seminary. Serge's departure is a blow to François, and he becomes even more introverted and temperamental. He sits for hours in his study staring into space. When he refuses to give Marthe enough money for household expenses, she becomes desperate and has the servant sell some of their possessions. However, the crafty Trouches get her sympathy by telling her about their debts, and in the end Marthe gives the money to them. Marthe begins to go into a sort of ecstasy now every time she enters the Church, and she adores Faujas almost as if he were a god.

Meanwhile, Faujas continues to take over the house, helped by his mother and the Trouches. The Abbé and his mother have now taken to eating every day with the Mourets'. François is neglected while both Marthe and Mme. Faujas pamper the Abbé. The priest has now taken full possession of the garden, and his meetings with the two political groups there become a regular habit.

Shortly afterwards, Marthe's health begins to deteriorate and the doctor advises her to take long rides in the country to get some fresh air. While doing so one day, she comes across old Uncle Antoine on his farm, and he points out to her where Tante Dide, the ancient matriarch of the family, is kept in an insane asylum near

his property. We have already been told how Marthe feared in her youth that she might be mentally unbalanced, and now she is particularly distressed at seeing where her insane grandmother is kept. In the next important scene, Marthe vows her love to Faujas. From this day onwards she is under his complete control, and he uses her like a machine to carry out his plans. One night the whole house is awakened by screams, and Marthe is found on the floor of her room scratched and beaten, while her astonished husband looks on. After these fits have occurred several times, everyone in the house is sure that Mouret has gone mad and is beating his wife. Soon the whole town has heard rumours of his madness, and the gossips exaggerate the story even more. One day while taking a walk Mouret notices everyone is staring at him and laughing. He is chased by a band of children, and now the whole town is certain that he is mad. Finally, Honoré Trouche has the necessary papers drawn up, and Mouret is put away in the same asylum as his grandmother.

In the meantime, Faujas is busy winning over the town to his side, for the election is drawing near. After his conquest of the bishop, who is impressed when he finds out that Faujas really does have friends in high places, Faujas can be sure that the other churches of the region will follow suit and support him. He has

won over the sons of influential citizens through the café that he set up, and through the working class girls' home he has reached the hearts of the lower class. Now that he has improved his appearance and is more civil to the society ladies, he is in their favour and they are even eager to take confession with him. His most active supporter is Mme. de Condamin, who promises positions or decorations to various people if they support Faujas' favourite, whose name is kept secret up to the last moment, while the other candidates split the opinion of the town. When Faujas reveals that he supports Delangre, the mayor, a man who never takes sides, the voters show their approval of this non-partisan candidate by electing him with an overwhelming majority. Faujas is now at the height of his power, and he soon returns to his old, untidy clothes and disdainful attitude, and because of this he loses the favour of Félicité. Once again Marthe confesses her love for him, but since he does not need her any longer, he rejects her cruelly, saying that she represents the devil. Marthe also confesses that her husband never beat her; it was she herself who tore out her hair and banged her head against the floor in mad fits. Marthe goes to see her husband in the asylum, and she is overwhelmed with grief to see that he has really gone mad while in the institution.

Old Uncle Antoine now plays an important role near the conclusion of the novel. He wants revenge on Félicité and her husband Pierre Rougon because they refuse to sell him a piece of land. To retaliate against them he intends to destroy Faujas, their most powerful friend. Little does he know that they have broken off their relationship with Faujas. Faujas' arch enemy, Abbé Fenil, is also involved in Antoine's plot to leave Mouret's cell door open so that he will escape. This plan succeeds, and as they hoped, Mouret returns to his home. The climax of the novel is the scene in which he sets his own house on fire, burning to death Faujas, Mme. Faujas, Olympe and Honoré Trouche, and himself. Marthe is saved from this fate by Antoine, who takes her to the home of her mother Félicité. However, Marthe has received such a blow from being rejected by Faujas and seeing her husband mad that her illness overpowers her. She dies seeing her son Serge bathed in the eery light of the fire that is burning down her house.

The plot structure of the novel is extremely unified and tight-knit. Each element of the plot seems to irresistibly push the characters towards catastrophe as they ruin their lives by continuously striving to satisfy their strange appetites. In his "Notes générales sur la marche de l'oeuvre", Zola makes clear that this pattern is

fundamental to the Rougon-Macquart family:

> Fatigue et chute: la famille brûlera comme une matière se dévorant elle-même, elle s'épuise presque dans une génération parce qu'elle vivra trop vite.
>
> (V, 1741)

Marthe, a quiet housewife, suddenly becomes interested in religion, and soon we see her start disintegrating, consumed by the supernatural visions that haunt her in her attempt to escape her boring existence. She revels in a dream world in which her religious feelings are grotesquely perverted into a sexual craving for Abbé Faujas, a chaste priest, whom she sacrilegiously worships as if he were a god. Faujas himself, although not a member of the Rougon-Macquart family, moves inevitably towards a fatal end because of his satanical urge to dominate everyone in his path to power and influence. His hypnotic eyes force people to become machines and to carry out his Machiavellian schemes. He destroys the Mouret family by driving the parents insane and scattering the children; in his political activity he forces himself upon the townspeople in order to twist their minds, and he succeeds in manipulating the whole town for his own corrupt purposes. His sinister relatives, the Trouches, and his mother spread their poison throughout the Mouret household by invading every room. Not content with merely occupying the house, they cause it to fall

around them as they nibble away at its occupants' money, devour their food and possessions, and cause the very walls to shake with their drunkenness and sexual promiscuity, which was more shocking in Zola's less permissive age. Mouret, a meticulous, rational individual, turns into a raving beast when confronted by all this filth and decomposition. By setting the fire at the end of the novel, he purifies the atmosphere of all this degeneracy.

The whole plot, then, revolves about mental, moral and physical degeneracy, a principle which Henri Mitterand calls "un mythe d'épuisement".[17] Each character descends a path leading to his own personal Hell, and is controlled by bestial instincts so powerful that he cannot escape them. The only possibility of salvation is complete destruction and rebuilding from the foundations up. The same pattern pervades the whole Rougon-Macquart, for it symbolizes Zola's view of the Second Empire as a crumbling edifice, devoured from within by opportunists who try to satisfy their hunger for perversion, power and money. Zola's solution, as foreseen in La Conquête de Plassans, is to destroy the whole corrupt mess by fire. This is finally done in La Débâcle,

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[17]Henri Mitterand, "Discussion", Les Cahiers Naturalistes, XLII (1971), 113.

in which a holocaust purifies Paris of the political system that was causing the whole country to decay and cleanses the air for the new world to come.

CHAPTER II

CHARACTERIZATION

Zola's remarkable cosmic vision of the world is dominated by a desire to explain the mysteries of the universe in terms of the natural forces of growth and decay which are constantly engaged in a struggle of colossal proportions. Once decay and death have triumphed, as they inevitably do, the whole gigantic cycle begins a new revolution, like the grass which sprouts from the fertile soil of the Saint-Mittre cemetery in La Fortune des Rougon (5). But where is man in this system of epic dimensions? Tossed about in the midst of a gigantic battle that he cannot comprehend, trapped in an environment that he cannot escape, and his nature predetermined by the laws of heredity, he is eternally linked to the natural forces around him; but does he retain his identity? He must first understand these forces and their effects on him before he can begin to know himself. Thus, as Guy Robert writes:

> Il en résulte assez naturellement que la vie de l'esprit perd beaucoup de son autonomie; le vrai drame ne se déroule plus sur le plan humain; la psychologie cède le pas a l'épopée des forces naturelles.[1]

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[1]Guy Robert, Emile Zola. Principes et caractères généraux de son oeuvre (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1952), p. 113.

Many of the characters in the novels of the Rougon-Macquart are created to represent the interplay of these great natural forces, and others typify the epic struggle of one particular section of society to conquer these forces. Because of this they become divided into two groups, for, as Angus Wilson notes, "the central characters tend to be hardened into symbols, the others dissolve into 'humanity', crowds, groups".[2] However, this is not to say that the characters are completely unconvincing. Even Guy Robert admits that the characters of Zola "ne manquent pas de relief", and are in fact "présents avec les vêtements qui habillent leurs membres épais, avec l'odeur même de leur métier, de leurs misères, de leurs vices"; he refers to several characters of the Rougon-Macquart that he feels are treated with a good deal of psychological depth.[3]

In a letter to Henri Céard, Zola once made a revealing remark about his method of character portrayal, referring to Germinal in particular:

> La vérité est que ce roman est une grande fresque. Chaque chapitre, chaque compartiment de la composition s'est trouvé tellement resserré qu'il a fallu tout voir en raccourci. De là une simplification constante des personnages. Comme dans mes autres romans d'ailleurs, les

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[2]Angus Wilson, Emile Zola (London: Secker and Warburg, 1964), p. 76.

[3]Robert, op.cit., pp. 116-118.

> personnages de second plan ont été indiqués d'un trait unique: c'est mon procédé habituel....Mais regardez les personnages du premier plan: tous ont leur mouvement propre.[4]

This "simplification constante des personnages" is evident in La Conquête de Plassans. All of the secondary characters and even some more important figures in the novel become mere symbols or caricatures; however, other characters are given a psychological treatment. The method of characterization corresponds to their function and importance in the novel; for example, Abbé Faujas seems to be an exaggerated, one-sided character, for his role is mainly symbolic. Since he represents domination, both political and clerical, he is provided with a one-track mind and an image to correspond with this idea. Of course, his individuality and depth of character suffer from this restricted scope, but he still comes across to the reader as a living being, although a rather one-dimensional one. With Marthe Mouret, Zola creates a character of a different type. Because of her insanity, she has a certain symbolic value as the embodiment of the "époque de folie",[5] as Zola described the Second Empire, but she is mainly

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[4]Letter from Zola to Henry Céard, 22 March 1885. Quoted by John C. Lapp in "Zola et le trait descriptif", Les Cahiers Naturalistes, XLII (1971), 23.

[5]"Préface" to Les Rougon-Macquart, Pléiade, I, 4.

considered in a psychological manner, and for this reason she remains the most convincing character of the novel. Her husband, François Mouret, also represents the mental degeneracy of the age and is treated as a psychological study, but his development in the novel is less detailed. Outside of these main characters, the others, as Angus Wilson notes, "dissolve into 'humanity', crowds, groups". They fall into categories, such as priests, politicians, and so on, and although they each have an individual identity, they must of necessity be sketches rather than fully developed personalities. A detailed examination of some of the characters reveals how Zola treats them in keeping with their function in the structure of the novel.

1. Abbé Faujas

To Zola, Faujas is "ce grand diable taillé à coups de hache" (949); he is "trop grand, trop carré des épaules; il [a] la face trop dure, les mains trop grosses" (949). In fact, he seems to be a wooden figure, rough-hewn to Zola's specifications, whose unsmoothed edges appear exaggerated. He is a composite portrayal of all the qualities that Zola considers undesirable in a priest, and he acts in accordance with a set of pre-programmed instructions. He represents the threat of clerical domination with his fixed ideas of political

ambition, Machiavellian unscrupulousness, callousness and invincible willpower. In the first version of the "Ebauche", Faujas (called Bonnard in these preliminary notes) is described in the following manner, leaving no doubt in our minds that his whole existence is focussed on his desire to conquer and dominate:

> Dessiner Bonnard, un fort tempérament, un ambitieux, qui contient ses appétits sous un caractère. Il est fils de paysans. Sa mère est une paysanne, dégrossie, qui a foi en son fils, qui veut arriver quand même avec lui. Les montrer tous deux en bataille ouverte, prêts a dévorer la première proie, tombant chez les Mouret, comme dans un trou, où ils vont tout ronger.
>
> (1656)

As we shall see, "dévorer", "proie", and "ronger" are key words in Zola's description of the Abbé and his band of conspirators, who are repeatedly compared to beasts of prey who voraciously devour everything in sight.[6]

Faujas is constantly associated with the devil as well. The expression "ce diable d'homme" recurs so frequently that it fits Calvin S. Brown's definition of Zola's "tag", a short, repeated phrase which fixes a character in a stereotyped mould.[7] Only six pages after Zola categorizes Faujas with this expression, Mouret

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[6] Infra, pp. 127-136.

[7] Calvin S. Brown, Repetition in Zola's Novels (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1952), p. 5.

ironically says: "Notre jardin est un paradis fermé, ou je défie bien le diable de venir nous tenter" (932); and shortly after this he exclaims: "Ce diable d'homme! il ne demande rien et on lui dit tout!" (935) This tag seems to fit the character perfectly, for we first see Faujas surrounded by a devilish glimmer of light as he stands on the Mourets' terrace (911), and he is always described in terms of mystery, inhumanity and shadows.

The association with the devil is reinforced by Faujas' mysterious eyes which seem to cast a spell over everyone, especially Marthe, who is reduced to tears by his hypnotic stare (995). Faujas even stares down his most powerful enemy, Abbé Fenil, causing him to retreat hastily:

> Il venait d'apercevoir, derrière une véritable barricade de jupes, l'abbé Fenil, allongé dans un fauteuil, souriant discrètement. ~~Leurs yeux s'étant rencontrés, ils se~~ regardèrent pendant quelques secondes de l'air terrible de deux duellistes engageant un combat à mort. Puis, il se fit un bruit d'étoffe, et le grand vicaire disparut de nouveau dans les dentelles des dames.
> (959-60)

Many other physical traits of Faujas emphasize his great power and terrifying, monstrous nature. In the "Personnages", Faujas is described in the following way:

> Le portrait physique de Faujas: grand, fort, figure à larges traits, grande bouche, teint terreux, cheveux courts grisonnant déjà; un

> grande calme, et un sourire bon, quant il veut; il respire la force, avant tout. De grosses mains bien faites. (1656)

It is Faujas' powerful hands and arms that most often are used to represent symbolically his desire for domination and control. It is difficult to forget the picture of Faujas standing at his window, towering over the town like some sort of mythical giant, smothering it in his arms:

> L'abbé Faujas tendit les bras d'un air de défi ironique, comme s'il voulait prendre Plassans pour l'étouffer d'un effort contre sa poitrine robuste. (916)

When he finally succeeds in conquering the whole town, we see this dream of possession and control come true:

> Il était le maître, il n'avait plus besoin de mentir à ses instincts; il pouvait allonger la main, prendre la ville, la faire trembler. (1154)

The Abbé uses his large, strong hands to impose his will upon individuals as well as the town. He makes Marthe do anything he wants by manipulating her like "une cire molle" (1104), and his favourite technique to gain control of her is to squeeze her hands in his own:

> Elle s'exaltait de plus en plus. Le prêtre tenta de la calmer par un moyen qui lui avait souvent réussi.
>
> "Voyons, soyez raisonnable, chère dame, dit-il en cherchant à s'emparer de ses mains pour les tenir serrées entre les siennes.
>
> --Ne me touchez pas! cria-t-elle en reculant. Je ne veux pas....Quand vous me tenez, je suis faible comme un enfant. La chaleur de vos mains m'emplit de lâcheté. (1174)

More than once Faujas has to restrain himself from striking out at people with his fist, and when he finally has conquered the whole town and can act as he pleases,we find that "ses grosses mains se levaient, pleines de menaces et de châtiments" (1166). His hands, then, represent the terrifying power of the man, that satanical representative of the clergy.

Throughout the novel, Zola portrays the Abbé in a similar manner. He is a grotesque, caricaturized figure, a terrifying monster that embodies Zola's fear of the political power of the clergy. This is made clear as we see him gain the confidence of the bishop, conquer the society ladies who take confession with him, gain the favour of various social classes through his good works, and finally make his move in the political scene.

Through Faujas, Zola portrays the dangers of the alliance between the Church and the State. The Abbé's political power and ambition are emphasized by the many similarities that exist between him and other ambitious political figures in the Rougon-Macquart. In some ways he even resembles Louis Napoleon himself, as Zola describes him in the series.[8] Faujas is constantly associated with

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[8]For an analysis of Zola's treatment of the Emperor in the series, see Maurice Descotes, Le Personnage de Napoléon III dans "Les Rougon-Macquart" (Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1970).

shadows, and even at the end of the novel Mouret sees him and his fellow conspirators as grotesque silhouettes that menace the whole house:

> Il ne voyait que des ombres se glisser le long du corridor; deux ombres noires d'abord, pauvres, polies, s'effaçant; puis deux ombres grises et louches, qui ricanaient. Il leva la lampe dont la mèche s'effarait; les ombres grandissaient, s'allongeaient contre les murs, montaient dans la cage de l'escalier, emplissaient, dévoraient la maison entière. (1194)

In this and many other instances, Faujas is a shadowy phantom that flits about almost invisibly. In all of his machinations, he remains in the background while others prepare his triumphant entry into the spotlight. Throughout the Rougon-Macquart Napoleon III is seen as a similar ephemeral, shadowy profile. For example, in Son Excellence Eugène Rougon the Emperor is observed by Rougon through the window as a gigantic shadow surrounded by other equally monstrous dark shapes, in a description strikingly similar to Zola's portrayal of Faujas above:

> Il crut voir son ombre, une tête énorme, transversée par des bouts de moustache; puis deux autres ombres passèrent, l'une tres grêle, l'autre forte, si large, qu'elle bouchait toute la clarté. Il reconnut nettement, dans cette dernière, la colossale silhouette d'un agent de la police secrête. (II, 176)

In La Curée Renée sees the Emperor as a similar phantom-like shadow that vanishes before her eyes (440), and in many other instances Napoleon III flits briefly across

the scene, a ghost-like omen foreshadowing in his already spectral form, the end of his dynasty.

Both Faujas and the Emperor are cloaked in mystery; even their faces are inscrutable and give no hint of what they are thinking. For example, in Son Excellence Eugène Rougon Napoleon's face is "vague, impénétrable" (II, 184), and in La Débâcle we see "les yeux éteints" of the leader (V, 563), and his eye is "voilé de paupières lourdes" (V, 668). Faujas is similarly depicted as an indecipherable mystery. Even when he is extremely irritated and embarrassed at Mme. Rougon's soirée, he is still described as showing no signs of his emotion: "Il demeura là, le front haut, la face dure et muette comme une face de pierre" (959). In comparing the Abbé to his room, Mouret finds that, to his exasperation, "La pièce était comme ce diable d'homme, muette, froide, polie, impénétrable" (926-7).

Faujas also has many traits in common with another politician in the series, Eugène Rougon. Both are obsessed by the desire to gain as much power as they possibly can. The minister is described in the "Ebauche" of Son Excellence Eugène Rougon as the incarnation of "l'ambition dans un homme, l'amour du pouvoir pour le pouvoir lui-même, pour la domination".[9] When we see Faujas near the beginning of the

[9]Bernouard, Son Excellence Eugène Rougon, VII, 411.

novel longingly stretch his arms out to suffocate the town in his grasp, and follow his devious path to influence and domination, culminating in the scene where he delights in squeezing the whole town in his powerful grip, it becomes obvious that both he and Eugène Rougon are motivated by the same craving for political power. Their obsession is so strong that they will do anything, no matter how cruel or unscrupulous, to increase their domination of others. Abbé Faujas thinks nothing of deliberately involving Marthe in religion, in order to use her in his schemings; when her love becomes an obstacle to him, he pushes her aside in the most cruel manner imaginable (1176). When he is campaigning for his chosen candidate, Faujas stops at nothing, promising bribes and hand-outs to many members of the political salons in order to gain their support. Rougon likewise becomes entangled in even more sordid affairs, as when he deliberately keeps quiet about a bomb threat against the Emperor to further his own aims. Both opportunists, then, have an inhuman callousness and one-track, egotistical minds, and these qualities are matched by their superhuman strength and will-power. Both men are tempted by women, but they remain chaste. When he realizes Marthe's adoration of him, Faujas coldly states: "Les hommes chastes sont les seuls forts" (1079). It is only because of his

advisor Félicité's exhortation, "Plaisez aux femmes" (962), that the Abbé even deigns to recognize the influential society ladies. He reveals his true nature, however, when he becomes master of the town and returns to his disdain of all women. His absolute disgust with the female sex is made most clear when he brutally rejects Marthe, accusing her of being an evil creature:

> --Je vous ai déjà trop approchée....Si j'échoue, ce sera vous, femme, qui m'aurez ôté de ma force par votre seul désir. Retirez-vous, allez-vous-en, vous êtes Satan! Je vous battrai pour faire sortir le mauvais ange de votre corps. (1176)

For Eugène too, his temptress Clorinde is an evil force that distracts him from his work and contributes to his downfall. One is reminded of another mysogynist character, Frère Archiangas in La Faute de l'abbé Mouret. This priest has a similar hatred of all women that is made most clear when he viciously attacks the morals of the young girls of his village: "Elles ont la damnation dans leurs jupes. Des créatures bonnes à jeter au fumier, avec leurs saletés qui empoisonnent! Ça serait un fameux débarras, si l'on étranglait toutes les filles à leur naissance" (1239). All of these characters may possibly indicate that Zola is firmly rooted to traditional moral values, since he seems to admire dedicated men and despise those who are distracted by women, as Angus Wilson observes:

> The sexually promiscuous, in his books, are the indolent, the slipshod, the weak. The sexual act was a loss of energy, a further emphasis of the random futility of humanity in a determined, cruel world. Work -- regular hours of writing, regular numbers of words written -- was Zola's recipe for success and self-respect. Promiscuity was a sin against work.10

Throughout the Rougon-Macquart there are many characters who, representing the same natural forces or basic instincts, have similar personality traits and a one-sided driving force. Alfred C. Proulx emphasizes this one-sided nature of Zola's characters:

> L'important n'est pas la forme extérieure que prend le désir, mais plutôt la pression constante qui pousse à son accomplissement: que toute l'action entreprise par le héros soit tendue vers un seul but; que ses énergies ne soient pas gaspillées ou détraquées; que sa manie soit sa vie.11

Abbé Faujas is pictured solely in this arbitrary manner, as a ready-made symbol of the urge to dominate, a mechanical creature that all too obviously follows Zola's prearranged plans. Although Faujas does not have a convincing, well-rounded personality, his uncomplicated nature does provide us with a clear statement of one of the main themes of the novel, the threat of clerical domination.

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[10]Wilson, op.cit., p. 54.

[11]Alfred C. Proulx, Aspects Epiques des "Rougon-Macquart" de Zola (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), p. 98.

2. Marthe

In his portrayal of Marthe, Zola uses a completely different method of characterization. However, unlike Abbé Faujas, Marthe is not a rigid, unchanging character governed by one single principle; on the contrary, she undergoes a gradual development through the novel.

In the "Ebauche" Zola reminds himself that he must emphasize Marthe's heredity as a cause of her madness:

> Ne pas oublier que Marthe est la fille de Pierre Rougon et de Félicité. Elle est du sang des Rougon, tandis que Mouret est du sang des Macquart. Mon drame physiologique sera donc l'étude de la parenté qui rapproche les époux et qui plus tard les met en face l'un de l'autre. (1663)

In another section of the "Ebauche" he makes a note to treat her as a physiological study: "Quant à Marthe, il faut l'étudier au point de vue physiologique. C'est encore une femme détraquée".[12] Although he planned to study her as a case of physiological madness or "folie lucide" caused mainly by heredity, in fact Zola carefully explains her transformation in the novel by penetrating deep within her mind in a psychological manner. Many critics have singled out the character of Marthe from other more transparent, stylized figures in Zola's works. Guy Robert, for example, mentions Marthe as being one of

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[12] Bernouard, V, 372.

only half-dozen characters in the whole Rougon-Macquart in which Zola depicts successfully "la richesse et la complexité des âmes".[13] Flaubert also admired Zola's handling of the character: "Quant à elle (Marthe), je ne saurai vous dire combien elle me semble réussie, et l'art que je trouve au développement de son caractère".[14] Marthe undergoes a gradual change from a quiet housewife to a frustrated lover, desperately clinging to religion, and later disintegrating into hysteria, paranoia and delusions. Although this story is only one of a number of plot lines in the novel, it comes across to the reader as an extremely vivid psychological analysis.

Through a series of carefully-planned episodes places throughout the text, Zola is able to give us a penetrating view of her gradual mental changes. When one compares Zola's treatment of Marthe to a similar psychological study of a devout woman, one sees how Zola's technique excels in this character portrayal. In his comparison of the Goncourts' Madame Gervaisais with La Conquête de Plassans, Jacques Dubois studies the characterization of the two women, both of whom turn to

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[13] Robert, op.cit., p. 116.

[14] Letter by Gustave Flaubert to Zola, 3 June 1864. Quoted in Bernouard, V, 387.

religion as an escape, and he concludes that Zola's technique results in a more vivid, complex characterization:

> A travers l'histoire de Marthe et en opposition avec les Goncourt, Zola apparaît ici comme le romancier de l'unité dans la complexité, des effets nombreux mais nets, puissants et divergents.15

The most significant difference between the methods of Zola and the Goncourts is that Zola's description of Marthe is compiled in an almost psychoanalytical way. Although writing several decades before Freud,[16] Zola foresaw the Freudian notions of hysterical conversion and sublimation, and, as Jean Borie points out:

> Zola est certainement fasciné par l'hystérie qu'il interprète bien, semble-t-il, comme le résultat de la "conversion" de pulsions sexuelles refoulées: il faudrait pour ce problème étudier avec précision la création par Zola de personnages tels que Marthe Mouret.[17]

Zola carefully prepares the reader for Marthe's mental breakdown by explaining her feelings of boredom and frustration. Until her husband retired to Plassans, she worked long hours in his store in Marseilles, but

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[15]Jacques Dubois, "Madame Gervaisais et La Conquête de Plassans", Les Cahiers Naturalistes, XXIV-XXV (1963), 88-9.

[16]Freud's first important work, Studien über Hysterie, was published in 1895.

[17]Jean Borie, Zola et les mythes (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971), note to p. 210.

after moving to the small town she has nothing to do. Her children are growing up, yet her husband still insists that she stay at home to look after them. She becomes annoyed at Mouret's meticulous habits, his avarice and his neglect of her, as Zola outlines in the "Ebauche": "Première période, sa soumission et sa tendresse pour son mari. Puis révolte contre son avarice, sa froideur, etc....Ce qui la pousse à la dévotion, c'est une prédisposition naturelle et la vie que lui fait son mari".[18] Her repressed sexual instincts, the cause of her frustration, are converted into hysterical outbursts when she becomes devout, and she experiences mystic trances that are described almost as if they were the climax of physical passion.

The confusion between religion and sex in Marthe's mind is most evident in her love of Abbé Faujas, whom she adores almost as if he were a god. When she confesses her love to him, she uses terms reminiscent of a prayer:

> C'est vous qui avez voulu mon salut. C'est par vous que j'ai connu les seules joies de mon existence. Vous êtes mon sauveur et mon père. (1172)

This association is also shown in passages where Zola describes Marthe's trance-like state when she is in the

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[18]Bernouard, V, 372-3.

Church, expressing her blissful feeling in terms of sexual ecstasy through such words as "passion", "ravissement", "s'évanouir", and so on.

In Madame Gervaisais, however, the main character's background is not as carefully depicted. Although Mme. Gervaisais too is bored with life, and her unstable heredity is indicated by her retarded son, the sexual nature of her religiosity is not stressed. It is not a person that sets off her religious fervour; rather it is a place, the city of Rome with its beautiful churches and miraculous shrines. The de-humanized, non-dynamic emphasis on buildings and the lack of sexual motivation for her disorders make the Goncourts' character a disappointing failure as a psychological analysis.

Thus, although the Goncourts' novel deals in its entirety with the study of Mme. Gervaisais' religiousness and mysticism, it still seems pale in comparison with Zola's study of Marthe, which is only of secondary importance in La Conquête de Plassans. Part of Zola's skill in characterizing Marthe lies in the fact that he does not concentrate his full attention on her; instead, he inserts the Marthe episode into the framework of a larger story, the takeover of the town by Abbé Faujas, and his corresponding invasion of the Mourets' home. Faujas' triumph in winning her over to religion, combined

with these other victories, form a coherent whole, for all of these sub-plots deal in a sense with conquests.

In the Goncourts' novel, the reader's attention is constantly focussed upon the heroine, and the writers must constantly search for new ways to maintain his interest. They must try to represent every minute step in the development of Mme. Gervaisais' religious and mystic feelings. The result of this technique is that the reader is faced with a multitude of impressions differing only slightly, which makes it difficult to picture the overall development of the character. Since there is no other action or sub-plot to provide contrast or relief from this bombardment with minute details, the reader is distracted by these petty, clinical observations.

Zola solves this problem by relegating the psychological study of Marthe to a secondary position in the novel. This technique allows him to leave her at a critical stage in her development, and return to her later to show us a further stage. This means that the passage of time can be indicated through the intervening events of the other sub-plots, and thus it is not necessary to burden the reader with minutely detailed explanations of each slight development. Rather, Zola is able to concentrate on significant highlights of her psychological changes. For example, in Chapter IX we see Marthe's

religious fervour beginning to take hold, as she neglects her housework and children in order to organize the OEuvre de la Vierge, and the Church begins to attract her as a place to relax and refresh herself. In the next few chapters she falls into the background as we concentrate on Faujas' successes, Mouret's character changes, and so on. By the time we once more return to Marthe in Chapter XV, we are fully aware that a considerable period of time has gone by because of these numerous events, and thus we find it completely natural that Marthe has now entered a new stage in which the restfulness she experienced before in the Church has changed into "une jouissance active, un bonheur qu'elle évoquait, qu'elle touchait" (1065). Throughout the text Zola uses this same technique, and every time we see Marthe she has noticeably deteriorated. By leaving the intermediate details to our imagination and only describing her in various key stages, Zola makes it much easier to follow the transition in Marthe, because he concentrates on the essentials instead of the details.

One of the stylistic techniques that Zola uses to unite these widely-separated incidents throughout the novel is the repetition of words and phrases, especially those related to heat, light, fire and flames. Her increasing insanity is constantly described as a fire which gnaws at her mind and her body:

> Il y avait en elle une flamme intérieure qui brisait sa taille, lui bistrait la peau, lui meurtrissait les yeux. C'était comme un mal grandissant, un affolement de l'être entier, gagnant de proche en proche le cerveau et le coeur. (1075)

Even physically she begins to look as if there were a fire burning in her entrails:

> Marthe, plus mince, les joues rosées, les yeux superbes, ardents et noirs, eut alors pendant quelques mois une beauté singulière. La face rayonnait; une dépense extraordinaire de vie sortait de tout son être, l'enveloppait d'une vibration chaude. Il semblait que sa jeunesse oubliée brûlait en elle, à quarante ans, avec une splendeur d'incendie. (1102)

Because of the increasing frequency and intensity of these vivid images, we are led to believe that Marthe is literally being consumed by the forces within her. Thus these repeated patterns dramatize her psychological development by allowing us to visualize her gradual self-consumption.

Zola gives Marthe's trances an extraordinary atmosphere of horror through his continual use of concrete images, such as those of fire just mentioned, and other symbols of pain and suffering, such as the thorns, blood and whipping that obsess her in this memorable passage:

> Elle rêvait qu'on la battait de verges, que le sang coulait de ses membres; elle éprouvait à la tête de si intolérables douleurs qu'elle y portait les mains, comme pour arracher les épines dont elle sentait les pointes dans son crâne. Le soir, au dîner, elle fut singulière. L'ébranlement nerveux persistait; elle revoyait, en fermant les yeux, les âmes mourantes des cierges s'envolant dans le noir; elle examinait machinalement ses mains, cherchant les trous par lesquelles son sang avait coulé. (1107)

This penetrating description of a woman agonizing in her own nightmarish visions grasps the reader with its raw power, its tangible images of blood, thorns and fire, combined with the terrible suggestion of crucifixion. A passage in Madame Gervaisais dealing with a similar hallucination seems colorless in comparison, mainly because the Goncourts insist upon the clinical or impersonal nature of their study:

> Toute morte à ce qui est le moi pensant et actif d'une personne, sa sensitivité suspendue par une étonnante et miraculeuse paralysie, une véritable catalepsie sainte -- elle sembalit s'envoler, se transporter plus haut qu'ici-bas, en un lieu céleste ou, avec ses yeux de la terre, la femme voyait Jésus élargir, autour de sa tête pressée contre la sienne, sa déchirante couronne, approchant d'elle et lui faisant partager la moitié de ses épines et de ses clous![19]

Perhaps Zola was justified in saying that the Goncourts "stérilisent le document";[20] at any rate, Marthe certainly comes across to the reader as a much more convincing character than Mme. Gervaisais, for she has a more fully developed personality and a psychological perspective lacking in the Goncourts' character.

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[19] Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, Madame Gervaisais (Paris: Flammarion-Fasquelle, undated), pp. 238-9.

[20] Quoted by Jacques Dubois, "Madame Gervaisais et La Conquête de Plassans", p. 85.

3. François

François Mouret, Marthe's husband, undergoes a transformation from a contented bourgeois to an insane pyromaniac in the novel. This development, of course, parallels Marthe's mental degeneration, but it remains in the background, providing a faint, shadowy reflection of Marthe's anguish. However, Zola's depiction of François still convinces the reader, for many of the techniques which prove so successful with Marthe are used effectively to characterize François as well. For example, Zola makes us aware of the passage of time by cutting away from him and relating other intervening events. This allows him once again to show only the most important stages in François' decline into insanity.

Another device used to make the character more believable is the fact that François keeps many of his personality traits even after he has gone mad. Throughout the novel we are reminded of his neat, meticulous habits and his avarice. When he returns to his house like a wild beast crawling on all fours and foaming at the mouth, he becomes annoyed by the fact that he will have to spend money to repair his gate, which he has just smashed in a mad rage. Later he carefully sweeps away the debris from the stairs before setting fire to the house. Both of these

incidents make us sympathize with Mouret, since they remind us of the man that once was, a rational person with ordinary human foibles. Zola also takes us into the mind of the madman, and demonstrates that at times he reasons in a perfectly logical way; for instance, while walking into the town from the asylum, he imagines that he is coming back from a business appointment. He worries that he will be late for dinner, and that the rain will take the crease out of his suit.

Although François' madness is subordinated to his wife's disorders and to the political plot, and is thus not described in as much detail, there is one chapter[21] which is almost completely devoted to him. In it Zola describes François' daily walk through the town before he really becomes mad. Zola considered this chapter as an important part of the novel, as indicated by his notes in the "Ebauche":

> Un grand morceau d'analyse, mais d'analyse en action, pour montrer que rien n'a plus l'air d'un fou qu'un homme possédant tout son bon sens. Multiplier les petits faits. Prendre le cadre d'une journée, peut-être. Faire voir que la logique devient de la folie pour certains bourgeois de province. Cette partie, la plus originale, doit avoir du développement. Il faut la mêler intimement au récit, aux autres personnages. (1670)

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[21]Chapter XVIII, Pléiade, I, 1116-1136.

The scene is indeed extremely well planned and executed. As Mouret walks nonchalantly through the market-place, he suddenly realizes that everyone is staring at something near him. He looks around curiously, and stands on tiptoe to see what the commotion is about. The towns-people, having already heard untrue rumours about his strange behaviour, take these peculiar actions as positive proof of his madness. In similar incidents throughout the text Zola shows how perfectly innocent actions are distorted into incriminating evidence of Mouret's madness. Perhaps Zola the social reformer is trying to make a point here: his readers must realize that madness is not to be treated as it was in the Middle Ages, surrounded by ignorance and fear; modern medical knowledge should be applied to the detection and treatment of insanity, and the public should be educated in this matter.

Although not the most important character of the novel, François Mouret nevertheless strikes the reader as being a memorable figure in La Conquête de Plassans. His sarcastic humour, his human weaknesses of curiosity and avarice, his withdrawal within himself, and the fact that he is the innocent victim of circumstances make him the most sympathetic character of the novel.

4. Secondary Characters

Except for these three main characters, almost all the other figures in the novel are secondary to the plot development, and consequently one would expect them to be mere cardboard figures or vague masses. Although they do seem to form themselves into groups, such as the Mouret children, Faujas' fellow conspirators, the political cliques, and the clergy, they still retain enough individuality that we may identify with them. Zola accomplishes this by attributing a limited set of personality traits to each character and by always describing them in these terms. We have already seen Zola's admission to Céard that "les personnages de second plan ont été indiqués d'un trait unique".

The result of this method of characterization is similar to a caricature, since, like an artist drawing a sketch, Zola exaggerates one feature of his subject so that it is immediately recognizable and takes on a peculiar type of animation all its own. This "type casting" is aided by the use of tags, a technique which we have observed in Zola's characterization of Abbé Faujas.

The Paloques are the most clear-cut illustration of this type of character portrayal. They are described as "les monstres", a tag which is attached to them throughout

the novel. Their personality traits are extremely simple; they are obsessed with curiosity, and they are devoured by their desire to succeed. This sketch-like description is summed up in the list of "Personnages Secondaires":

> Paloque. Très laid, presque bossu. A épousé une femme jeune, mais laide. Le ménage ambitieux. La femme Adèle, très jalouse d'Eugénie. Ménage très laid, des Trouche de bonne compagnie. (1659)

To take another example, Abbé Surin is also caricaturized in a similar fashion. His dominant trait is his effeminacy, and Zola repeatedly describes his long blond hair, his girlish figure, his skirt-like cassock, and so on.

However, as with Abbé Faujas, the secondary characters still possess a certain feeling of life, mainly because their few personality traits are described in great detail. They gain in intensity what they lose in psychological depth. Instead of characters with a complete range of feelings and a full personality -- a virtual impossibility with so many minor characters -- Zola chooses to develop them in one direction alone, thus providing us with a rather lop-sided but powerful description of one particular dominant quality that animates the characters.

Reviewing the characters of La Conquête de Plassans, then, we find that each is portrayed in a manner befitting

his role in the novel. Central characters, such as Abbé Faujas, tend to become abstract symbols; however, this is not always the case: Marthe, one of the most important figures of the novel, is characterized in a profound, psychological manner. The minor characters are mere sketches, and align themselves into categories. Although Marthe and to some extent her husband are the only characters treated in a non-typified, psychological way, all the other characters, even though they lack depth, are impressed upon the reader's memory because of their pure, uncomplicated nature and the one compelling force that controls their every move.

CHAPTER III

SOCIO-POLITICAL ASPECTS

1. "Tableau d'une petite ville de province"

In the "Ebauche" of La Conquête de Plassans Zola begins by stating:

> Comme marche générale dans l'oeuvre, il est temps de revenir à Plassans, où, de longtemps ensuite, je ne pourrai remettre les pieds. Vers la fin seulement.
> Donc, dans ma série, ce roman est la province sous l'empire.[1]

Thus the novel is conceived from the outset to represent the situation in the provinces under the Second Empire; it will serve as a sequel to La Fortune des Rougon, in which Zola describes the effects of the violent birth of the Empire on the provinces. The third provincial novel is already foreseen as being near the end of the series -- in fact, it is the last novel, Le Docteur Pascal, which describes the provinces in the final period of Napoleon III's rule and looks forward to the new world of the future.

Zola goes on to make notes on what he calls the "social drama" of the novel:

> Quant au drame social, il est tout indiqué. Tableau d'une petite ville de province où l'empire trône en paix dans une bourgeoisie

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[1] Bernouard, V, 371.

> satisfaite, sous l'oeil paternel d'un petit peuple de fonctionnaires. Atonie des légitimistes. Une partie du clergé est même bonapartiste. Pas encore de protestation. L'effroi du coup d'état dure encore.[2]

Indeed, the novel does give a convincing picture of the social system, the political attitudes of different classes and the functioning of government in the middle period of the Second Empire. Zola concentrates on three sectors of society in the novel, as he indicates in the "Ebauche": the clergy, the middle class, and the public officials. The bourgeoisie, of course, is represented by the Mouret family. The novel provides us with a detailed description of their everyday life. François Mouret, a successful dealer in agricultural products, lives in semi-retirement with his wife and three children. Because of his contacts with the agricultural workers Mouret has Republican tendencies, but he is not very active in political life. Like his wife, he prefers to stay in the peaceful atmosphere of his home. The Mouret family, then, represents the "bourgeoisie satisfaite" that leads a quiet, contented life in the provinces, relatively unaffected by the turmoil of the Second Empire.

Zola also describes the internal government of the town in the novel. It is a sort of oligarchy, since

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[2] Ibid.

the power rests in the hands of a political elite. The controlling group is composed mainly of well-established upper middle-class professional people: lawyers, judges, doctors, and public officials. In Zola's conception of the workings of government, these people attach themselves to a strong leader, such as Pierre Rougon and later Abbé Faujas, in order to profit from their influence and successes. However, these hangers-on are loyal only as long as their leader remains in power and is able to infuse into them some of the strength that he possesses. As we shall see, the politicians in La Conquête de Plassans are repeatedly compared to wild animals that devour their prey and even each other. Throughout the novel there is evidence of the unscrupulousness and corruption of the politicians: Rastoil, the president of the Civil Court, wants to place his good-for-nothing son in a government post by exerting his influence; Delangre, the mayor, has an affair with Mme. de Condamin, an influential society lady who bribes people into supporting Faujas by promising them decorations or advancements; Pierre Rougon, the "receveur général", craftily helps Faujas in order to take over from him when he is ousted from power; De Bourdeu is described as "un ancien préfet décavé" so lacking in principles that he is "prêt à être de l'opinion qui l'emploiera. Légitimiste

pour l'instant";[3] not to mention Abbé Faujas, who uses his political influence to blackmail the bishop and forcibly changes the political opinions of the whole town. Thus Zola's politicians in La Conquête de Plassans are only interested in furthering their own personal ambitions, and are not really concerned with serving the people that they represent. It is for this reason that the working classes remain in the background in the novel; indeed, one of the characters says: "Voyez-vous, à Plassans, le peuple n'existe pas" (954). By deliberately de-emphasizing the role of the working class in political decision-making, Zola criticizes the municipal government system as being more a way of satisfying the corrupt and selfish interests of the local politicians than a responsible government body. As Ida-Marie Frandon observes:

> La politique que [Zola] condamne, c'est celle qui cesse d'être une réalité humaine, qui oublie que des hommes souffrent, attendent plus de justice et d'amour, et qui n'est qu'affaires d'argent, jeux d'influence, luttes d'individus ou de coteries, ou pis encore, moyen de satisfaire fantaisie ou vice.[4]

Zola expresses the same contempt for the political system of the Second Empire in La Fortune des Rougon

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[3]"Personnages Secondaires", Pléiade, I, 1659.

[4]Ida-Marie Frandon, La pensée politique d'Emile Zola (Paris: Champion, 1959), pp. 24-5.

and Son Excellence Eugène Rougon. In both novels an ambitious, dominating figure is surrounded by a group of weak parasites who eventually cause their leader to topple because of their persistent fighting among themselves. Politics for them is only a means to an end; they pay no attention to the needs of the people. Thus F.W.J. Hemmings' criticism of Zola's representation of the political system is justifiable to a certain degree. Claiming that Zola over-simplifies the art of government, he writes:

> Statecraft cannot be reduced to a game of beggar-my-neighbour, having no bearing on the lives of the millions who, in a modern state, eat or starve, are clothed or go ragged, are enlightened or remain locked in superstition, live content or die despairing, largely in consequence of decisions made at ministerial meetings and implemented in government offices. Zola's world of politics functions in a void. The millions whom it ought to affect provide merely a holiday crowd to gape at gay imperial processions.[5]

However, one must not assume that this simplified system is the result of Zola's political naïveté: he was well acquainted with politics, having served as a political journalist on the staff of La Tribune and La Cloche in the last two years of the Empire; he also had a chance to observe the parliamentary system while reporting the activities of the Constituent Assembly in 1871-2, and on more than one occasion he ran for public office, although

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[5]Hemmings, Emile Zola, pp. 84-5.

unsuccessfully. Zola's reduction of politics to an elitist game between irresponsible opportunists, completely divorced from the needs of the people, is not a result of an incomplete knowledge of the political system; it is a deliberate attempt to point out the deficiencies of the Second Empire. Richard B. Grant makes reference to Zola's over-statement of his case by making every politician always act in a corrupt and ruthless way. Although he was referring specifically to Son Excellence Eugène Rougon, Grant's conclusions apply equally well to La Conquête de Plassans:

> The novelist consciously limited the scope of his novel so that it did not include the daily lives of the average Frenchman. Any misdeed by any character would therefore do more than merely reflect adversely on an individual; it would immediately put blame on the government, for throughout the book, the characters are continually involved in official functions. They are either seeking office, or seeking to use their office for personal gain. Since every political character in the book is either stupid or grossly immoral, all of the action, all of the history, is seen in the light of the motivations and characters of these people, by whose very presence everything is made cheap, sordid, stupid or evil.[6]

But is Zola's view of the politics of the Second Empire so far removed from reality? Admittedly, it is exaggerated; but historians agree that the period of the

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[6]Richard B. Grant, Zola's "Son Excellence Eugène Rougon" (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1960), p. 117.

Second Empire was dominated by corrupt, opportunist politicians. For example, Alfred Cobban states that "the politics of a dictatorship, like that of an absolute monarchy, normally consists of mere court intrigue",[7] and he describes one group of Second Empire politicians in the following way:

> Whatever their views of him personally, many former Orleanists, unfettered by attachment to political principles but with a keen eye on the main chance, prepared to jump on the Bonapartist band-wagon.[8]

Another historian J.P.T. Bury, describes Napoleon's supporters in similar terms: "Such were the people about the new Emperor . . .political opponents who had hitched their wagon to the rising star, a motley collection".[9] Thus, although Zola admittedly over-states his case by making all his politicians ambitious and irresponsible, his criticism of the politicians of the Second Empire is nevertheless justified to a certain extent, since many historians agree that Napoleon was surrounded by a band of ambitious power-seekers.

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[7]Alfred Cobban, A History of Modern France (London: The Whitefriars Press, 1961), II, 182.

[8]Ibid., p. 149.

[9]J.P.T. Bury, Napoleon III and the Second Empire (London: English Universities Press, 1964), p. 47.

2. The Church and the State

Although La Conquête de Plassans deals with this question of corruption in politics, there is another controversial issue that Zola examines in the novel: the alliance between the Church and the State. In La Faute de l'abbé Mouret, Zola is concerned with the effects of religion upon an individual. This element is present in La Conquête de Plassans with Marthe's religious experiences; however, the novel is mainly concerned with the external threat of religion on society rather than its effects upon an individual.

The relationship between the State and the Church was a very topical and controversial problem in the France of the Second Empire.[10] These two powers were continually confronting each other in struggles over such questions as which of them was to control the educational system of the country; whether the bishops (appointed by the temporal authorities) or the Pope should have the ruling hand in the affairs of the Church; and the most burning question of the time, the Emperor's intervention in the Papal States, which started a long conflict between Napoleon III and Pope Pius IX.

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[10]For a detailed historical study of this question, see Jean Maurain, La Politique ecclésiastique du Second Empire de 1852 à 1869 (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1930).

Until about 1860, the Church and the State combined forces in order to combat the threat of Republican and Legitimist opposition to the Empire. During this period, the Church was given a great deal of freedom and support in a society that was otherwise strictly controlled. The government increased its financial aid to the Church; new congregations were authorized; the Loi Falloux of 1850 supported the Church by allowing it to continue its schools; and as a result of the Church's propaganda, religious zeal was high and the religious orders gained many new recruits. Because of these favourable circumstances, the Church gained a good deal of political influence. Jean Maurain notes that the government authorities found the Church "envahissant, intolérant, arrogant . . .de plus en plus exigeant".[11]

Thus the political plot of La Conquête de Plassans is based on a factual and topical controversy in Zola's time, the intrusion of the Church in temporal matters. Although Faujas is a priest, his main activity in the novel is political. He is sent to the town of Plassans by Eugène Rougon, an influential minister in Napoleon's government, in order to sway the opinions of the towns-people from the Legitimist to the Bonapartist party.

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[11] Ibid., p. 321.

Faujas is on the lowest level of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but he still manages to gain a great deal of power because of his political connections. For example, he wins over the bishop, Mgr. Rousselot, by threatening to halt his promotion to archbishop. This is possible because the bishops and other high Church officials were appointed by the State; in this way Faujas is able to control the bishop and have himself promoted up the ranks to Curé. Faujas' relationship with the temporal authorities opens other doors for him too. Félicité Rougon helps her son Eugène by instructing Faujas in the ways of high society, and Mme. de Condamin brings her influence to his aid. However, the priest has other ways to impose his will upon Plassans: his home for poor girls wins over the working class element of the town as well as the society ladies who organize the undertaking; his café for young men, established in a church basement, wins him the favour of many more townspeople; his strategic location between the houses of Péqueur de Saulaies and Rastoil allows him to easily unite the Bonapartists and the Legitimists into a powerful supporting group for M. Delangre, his candidate in the election. In this way a lowly priest manages to take control of a whole town and change its political opinion completely. When he announces his candidate, the people of Plassans, who are completely indoctrinated by his propaganda, give

their full support to Delangre:

> Ce fut une trainée de poudre. La mine était prête, une étincelle avait suffi. De toutes parts à la fois, des trois quartiers de la ville, dans chaque maison, dans chaque famille, le nom de M. Delangre monta au milieu d'un concert d'éloges. Il devenait le Messie attendu, le sauveur ignoré la veille, révélé le matin et adoré le soir. (1151)

It is this terrifying power that Zola criticizes, a clergy that at the same time has temporal and ecclesiastical authority and exerts a tremendous amount of influence over people.

Although Abbé Faujas is Zola's principle representative of this kind of clericalism, other priests in the novel are also involved in politics. Almost all of them are concerned with the thorny problem of Rome's influence in France. At one point in the "Ebauche" Zola makes a note of the beliefs of all the priests of the novel in regard to this question: "L'évêque est très indécis, -- Fenil est pour Rome, -- Faujas pour Paris, -- Bourette pour Dieu -- et Surin pour rien" (1666).

Fenil, who serves as a foil to Abbé Faujas, is an active supporter of the Legitimist cause. Throughout the novel he is seen as a sly conspirator trying to gain control of the bishop, and he is even implicated in murder because of his fanatical urge to dominate. He is never seen carrying out any clerical duties, and he seems to

consider the Church mainly as a means of gaining control over others. Abbé Surin, although not concerned with the political machinations of his associates, is still involved in temporal affairs. As Zola mentions in the "Personnages", Surin is "un profil pointu de prêtre ambitieux . . . [il] a sa mitre dans la poche" (1660), for his friends in high political circles virtually guarantee that he will be appointed bishop. Mgr. Rousselot is also affected by the control that the temporal authorities have over the nomination of the high Church officials. Faujas tells the bishop that he may be held responsible for the victory of a Legitimist representative in the last election, and the Abbé warns him that he will never be promoted to archbishop if he does not regain the favour of the government. This demonstrates how the clergy was forced to support the government even if it disagreed with some of its policies. The Empire could always hold the threat of dismissal over the heads of the bishops or prevent the promotion of those lower in the clerical ranks if they displeased the temporal authorities. Even Abbé Bourrette, who is portrayed in a sympathetic manner as a kindly, devoted priest not concerned with ambition or politics, is affected by the political machinations of the other priests. Because of the pressure that Faujas applies on the bishop, poor Abbé Bourrette is passed over and the prestigious position of

Curé of Saint-Saturnin is given to Faujas instead.

Thus all of the priests in the novel are in one way or another involved in politics. For some of them, such as Faujas and Fenil, the Church plays a secondary role to their political aspirations and is used merely as a stepping-stone to power and influence. In this way Zola expresses his mistrust of a system in which the alliance of the Church and the State gives a frightening amount of political control to the members of the clergy.

3. The House and the Empire

Although this threat of clerical domination is extremely important to the political commentary of the novel, there is still another perspective that Zola wished to explore in the political plot of the novel. Almost all of the events of this plot combine to form an analogy to the entire Second Empire period in France, for many details of the novel seem to have corresponding significance on the broader level of the country as a whole, as if the town of Plassans serves as a microcosmic picture of the events going on in all of France. Although these correspondences are not always exact or consistent, there are many elements of the novel that contribute to the analogy between Faujas' conquest of the town and his

ultimate failure and the rise and fall of Louis Napoleon himself. However, the novel is not "un roman à clefs", since the characters (except Abbé Faujas) do not represent any historical figures in the government of the Second Empire.

Zola sets up a similar comparison in La Fortune des Rougon, which describes the coup d'état through the events in Plassans at the time, closely mirroring the historical facts of Napoleon III's victory in Paris. Pierre Rougon, representing Napoleon, gathers a small group of conspirators around himself, whom he uses to take control of the city hall of the town. In this struggle there is some bloodshed between Republicans and Bonapartists. The comparison with the coup d'état in Paris is obvious: both invasions take place at the same time, and Zola makes clear his intentions in such statements as the following:

> [Rougon] saluait à gauche, à droite, avec des allures de prince prétendant dont un coup d'Etat va faire un empereur. (231)

> [Félicité] entrait dans ses Tuileries. (306)

> Comme il avait relevé la fortune des Bonaparte, le coup d'Etat fondait la fortune des Rougon. (314)

Like the beginnings of the Empire, Rougon's rise to power is marred by blood stains, death and massacres:

> Mais le chiffon de satin rose, passé à la boutonnière de Pierre, n'était pas la

> seule tache rouge dans le triomphe des Rougon....Le cierge qui brûlait auprès de M. Peirotte, de l'autre côté de la rue, saignait dans l'ombre comme une blessure ouverte. Et au loin, au fond de l'aire Saint-Mittre, sur la pierre tombale, une mare de sang se caillait. (315)

Since he wrote La Fortune des Rougon in 1869, Zola could not have included an analogy to the Empire's equally bloody conclusion, because it had not yet occurred at the time he was writing. In La Conquête de Plassans the same correspondence between the town and the nation is used, and Zola now describes the middle and final periods of the Empire through the events at Plassans. An analysis of the characters, the plot and the setting of the novel reveals a startling number of similarities between the situation of the whole country and the miniaturized version taking place in the town.

As we have already seen, Abbé Faujas has some striking physical similarities to Napoleon III as Zola describes him in the series. The relationship is even more remarkable when one looks at Faujas' actions, his background, his successes and his ultimate fate. Like Napoleon, Faujas is an outsider, mistrusted and without friends. When he first comes to Plassans, he knows no one, his only company is his mother, and he is regarded as a vulgar stranger with a dubious past. He is a secretive, mysterious figure, a rough untidily-dressed person who is soon mistrusted by everyone. Napoleon was a similar

outcast from society: exiled from France while still a boy, he was brought up in mainly German-speaking countries and spoke French with an accent. After two unsuccessful attempts to take over the country, he was imprisoned in the fortress of Ham. Any supporters that he did have in France gave up hope after his humiliating failures and imprisonment; thus he was in a similar situation to Abbé Faujas in that both were newly-arrived, friendless strangers with a questionable past.

Napoleon, of course, made his move in Paris, and after he had taken over the capital by force, the rest of the country quickly fell into his power. In the novel, the city of Paris is represented in miniature by François Mouret's house, and the Parisians by Mouret's family and neighbours. Just as Napoleon used Paris as a stepping-stone to the conquest of the whole country, so Faujas invades the Mourets' house and uses it as a "home base" in his take-over of the town of Plassans. Faujas' method thus closely resembles Napoleon's rise to power in Paris. Faujas rents part of Mouret's house as a quite legitimate lodger and even pays his rent six months in advance; however, it is not long before he begins to take advantage of his position and invades places where he has no legal right to be. Faujas moves into the Mourets' garden, finding it an ideal meeting place for his informal chats with the

local politicians; he uses the Mourets' salon for more serious discussions with the mayor; his fellow conspirators, the Trouches, take over three other rooms and they also use the garden; Faujas and his mother are soon using the Mourets' kitchen, eating in their dining room and relaxing in their living room. As well as physically taking over the rooms, Faujas and his gang conquer the members of the family. They quickly rid the house of the Mourets' three children, and Faujas turns his charms upon Marthe in order to use her to run errands and carry messages, as well as to introduce him into her mother's political salon. Mouret, being a Republican and anti-clerical, stands in Faujas' way, and although the priest becomes master of his house, his wife and his family, Mouret himself still remains an obstacle. Taking advantage of Mouret's eccentric habits, the Bonapartists have him placed in an asylum. In the final stages of the take-over, the Trouches waste Marthe's money on extravagant whims, they start pillaging the house, and they even redecorate some of the rooms and rearrange the garden.

Although it is never made explicit in the novel, this invasion of the Mourets' house forms a close parallel with Napoleon III's rise to power.[12] Like Faujas, the

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[12]After two unsuccessful bids for power in October 1836 and August 1840, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte ran in the by-elections of May 1848 and won in five

Emperor starts in a completely proper and legitimate way, since he is a duly elected representative of the people, and later becomes President of the Republic, following the procedure laid out in the new Constitution; however, he is not satisfied with this. His ambition drives him to possess even more power, and so, after establishing himself in a strategically-located place, Paris, he then spreads his influence gradually over the whole country. Faujas follows a similar step-by-step procedure in his take-over of Plassans: first he gains control of the Mourets' house, then he spreads to the clergy, the world of high society, the opposing politicians, the working class and the youth. Mouret's children, who form an obstacle to his plans, are quickly sent away and Mouret himself is sent to an asylum, just as Napoleon imprisoned or exiled his enemies at the beginning of his reign. Like Napoleon, Faujas has an effective political machine to back him up and organize his campaign. Because of this, both leaders are able to reconcile the opposition parties and win over the overwhelming majority of the voters to their side.

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constituencies, including two in Paris; he was elected President of the Second Republic on December 10, 1848; on December 2, 1851, the Coup d'état took place, and a year later Napoleon established himself as Emperor. The second Empire and Napoleon's rule lasted until September 4, 1870, three days after France's crushing defeat at Sedan during the Franco-Prussian War.

We have seen that both the priest and the Emperor were surrounded by a group of unscrupulous opportunists, ready to take advantage of any chance to make a profit. It is the Trouches and Mme. Faujas that represent this group of hangers-on, and they are obsessed with greed. Their remodelling of Mouret's house and garden may even be compared to the rebuilding of Paris under Haussman, as described in La Curée. At many points in the novel Faujas is surrounded by greedy accomplices who threaten to make the building fall around him, as in this passage:

> Il continuait à vivre, noir et rigide, dans cette maison livrée au pillage, sans s'apercevoir des dents féroces qui mangeaient les murs, de la ruine lente qui, peu à peu, faisait craquer les plafonds. (1165)

It is no mere coincidence that many historians attribute the downfall of the Empire to the effects of a group of ambitious and unscrupulous men who eventually pull down their leader.

As in the passage quoted above, Mouret's lodgers on several occasions threaten to bring the house crashing down upon them. Shortly after Faujas arrives, he complains of a crack in the wall of his room; near the end of the novel, Mouret notices that some sort of decomposition "avait pourri les boiseries, rouillé le fer, fendu les murailles" (1194). Even the garden walls are breached by the invaders: Faujas opens the gate at the end of the

garden, which had been nailed shut for years, and the Trouches remove all the carefully-pruned hedges which border Mouret's yard. In another sense the house is now opened up completely, in that there is no privacy left for the Mourets. The house almost becomes a public place, since Faujas holds political meetings in the garden, the Trouches bring in an army of tradesmen and caterers, as well as having wild parties lasting far into the night. With all the noise and confusion, Marthe begins to think she is living in a hotel:

> On eût dit le vacarme d'un hôtel garni, avec le bruit étouffé des querelles, les portes battantes, la vie sans gêne et personnelle de chaque locataire, la cuisine flambante, où Rose semblait avoir toute une table d'hôte à traiter. Puis, c'était une procession continuelle de fournisseurs. (1093)

Thus the frontier between the public and the private is also broken by the Mourets' lodgers, as well as the physical barriers of the house. A similar breakdown of the public and private occurs in La Curée, which also deals with the disintegration of a family. As in La Conquête de Plassans, the members of the Saccard family are compared to guests staying in "quelque royal hôtel garni" (438).

All of these intrusions, cracks and breaks in the wall foreshadow the eventual catastrophe in which the house, like the Empire itself, is completely destroyed.

Zola often uses the image of collapsing buildings to refer to the sense of catastrophe that pervades the whole Rougon-Macquart, as Jean Borie indicates:

> L'imagination du saccage et de la destruction, nous l'avons noté bien souvent, est, dans cette oeuvre, très riche ....Pour ces catastrophes, les images d'incendie, de fissure, de craquement, d'émiettement, de dissolution, d'inondation, d'absorption convergent et se mêlent.13

In Le Roman Expérimental Zola makes explicit the association of shaky timbers, cracked plaster and collapsing buildings with the fall of the Second Empire:

> C'est d'abord l'écroulement de l'Empire, amené par la pourriture et l'agencement imbécile des charpentes qui soutenaient le regime; imaginez toute une décoration de pourpre et d'or, élevée sur des piliers trop grêles, mal plantés, piqués de vers, et qu'une secousse doit réduire en poudre: la guerre de 1870 a été cette secousse et logiquement l'empire s'est écrasé à terre, au moment de toute sa pompe.14

La Conquête de Plassans is not the only novel of Les Rougon-Macquart in which an analogy is made between crumbling buildings and the catastrophic end of the Empire. For example, in Pot-Bouille an apartment building, constructed at the same time as the Empire, is described as an unstable framework hastily covered over in a façade of artificial marble and gilt. The inhabitants of the

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[13]Borie, op.cit., p. 185.

[14]"La République et la littérature" in Le Roman Expérimental, Bernouard, XLI, 301.

building make the walls shake with their vice, and cracks appear in the ceilings. The house and its tenants represent in miniature Zola's view of the Second Empire as a crumbling edifice, disguised by luxurious decorations and eventually destroyed from within by its own corruption. In Nana the theatre is a similar microcosmic picture of the destruction of the Empire and those that built it. This gaudy monument to the Second Empire now is cracked and decomposed by the wicked appetites for vice and money that characterize the age:

> Maintenant le fêlure augmentait; elle lézardait la maison, elle annonçait l'effondrement prochain....Ici sur l'écroulement de ces richesses entassées et allumées d'un coup, la valse sonnait le glas d'une vieille race pendant que Nana, invisible, épandue au-dessus du bal avec ses membres souples, décomposait ce monde, le pénétrant du ferment de son odeur flottant dans l'air chaud, sur le rhythme canaille de la musique.
> (II, 1429-30)

In L'Argent as well, a building serves as a warning of the catastrophe that is about to break upon France. The Banque Universelle is a symbol of the feverish speculation and extravance of the age. Although seemingly sound, the bank is undermined by cracks and fissures, as in this instance when Gundermann waits for it to crumble from within: "Il attendait froidement qu'elle se lézardât d'elle-même, pour la jeter par terre d'un coup

d'épaule" (V, 202).

It can easily be seen that the Mourets' house fits into this pattern which occurs so many times in Les Rougon-Macquart. Like all the other buildings that we have discussed, the house serves as a microcosmic picture of the Second Empire. It is undermined from within by Bonapartist inhabitants who cause it to collapse because of their insatiable appetites for luxury, vice and power. Faujas personifies the typical power-mad opportunist prevalent under the Empire, and his relatives illustrate the greed, sexual corruption and gluttony of the age, as Zola sees it.

The fact that the house is destroyed by fire is also very significant. As we shall see, the final scene of the novel is carefully prepared by a remarkable number of references to fire in the text. The fire which guts Mouret's house forms a parallel with the destruction of Paris by fire during the Commune and the catastrophic results of the Franco-Prussian war. Other fires in the series serve as similar forewarnings of the holocaust that signals the end of the epoch. To cite just one example, the burning house in La Terre is described in terms that leave no doubt about the comparison to the fate of the Second Empire:

> C'etait la guerre passant dans la fumée,
> avec ses chevaux, ses canons, sa clameur

> de massacre. Une émotion l'étranglait! Ah! bon sang! puisqu'il n'avait plus le coeur à la travailler, il la défendrait, la vieille terre de France! (V, 811)

The association thus becomes clear: Faujas, representing the Emperor, forcibly pushes his way into the Mouret household and from there spreads his influence over the town, just as Napoleon won over the entire country. Both Faujas and the Emperor are surrounded by a band of power-hungry adventurers whose greed and lust result in the fall from power of their leaders. Zola feels that Napoleon's failure was caused by the crumbling from within of the edifice that he built, and the many cracks and breaks in Mouret's house, caused by Faujas and his gang, symbolize this internal collapse. Just as Mouret's house is consumed by fire to eliminate the corruption that the Bonapartist lodgers introduce there, in a similar way Paris is engulfed in flames to rid the country of the vice and decomposition associated with the Second Empire.

Zola, then, creates more than a "tableau d'une petite ville de province"[15] in La Conquête de Plassans. Although the novel provides the reader with a good picture of middle class social and political life in a small town, it goes much farther than this, since it deals with questions that concern the whole country, such as the

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[15]"Ebauche", Bernouard, V, 371.

alliance between the Church and the State, and the rise and fall of the Second Empire itself.

CHAPTER IV

STYLISTIC PATTERNS

In comparison with stylistic perfectionists such as Flaubert or Gide, Zola seems to leave one with the impression that his works are rough-cast or lacking in polish stylistically. However, I feel that this rawness of style is part of Zola's genius as a writer. Instead of moving us intellectually by elegant phrases, he appeals to our basic instincts through an emphasis on concrete details, vivid sensory impressions and images which have deeply-rooted psychological meanings for us all. His prose delves right to the essentials of our existence, emphasizing the eternal cycle of life, death and rebirth which is linked together by heredity and sex. In a sense, the whole of the Rougon-Macquart is a hymn to life in all its varied and marvellous forms. Yet the forces of darkness, death and decay are always present, always in fierce combat with the will to live. It is this struggle for survival that animates the whole series, giving it a dynamism that strikes the reader by its raw power. Zola's works seem to be overflowing with life: the characters ooze with life from every pore, and even inanimate objects are bursting with vitality. Everything is painted in primary colours, appealing to our most basic emotions, and we are constantly

reminded of our animal nature. The natural world itself throbs with life, and is portrayed in terms of its fundamental elements.

Zola far transcends his original aim of portraying a family and a nation in a particular historical setting. His work encompasses a whole outlook on life, a cosmic vision in which determinism plays an important role. However, he tries to burst through these deterministic or scientistic restrictions at every opportunity. Elements of romanticism, spiritualism and poetic vision creep into even the most naturalistic of his novels. He also searches for a way to break out of the strict mold of the perceptual distinction between the subject and the object. Seeking a solution to the dilemma of appearances and reality, he at times seems on the brink of a discovery that would unite these distinctions into an all-encompassing cosmic vision.

Above all, we are impressed by the coherence of this immensely complex world. Almost every word, every sentence, every character and image contributes to the whole. Even the most trivial details exemplify one of the great principles on which the Rougon-Macquart is founded. Indeed, in the words of Roger Ripoll: "Il faut admettre que rien, dans cette oeuvre, n'est insignifiant et qu'il existe plusieurs niveaux de signification exigeant la convergence

de points du vue différents".[1] Even a cursory reading of La Conquête de Plassans reveals that many seemingly unimportant images recur with startling frequency. Especially evident are the references to fire, eyes, windows and animals. A close examination of these images shows that each one forms a purposeful pattern that makes a definite contribution to the thematic unity of Zola's universe.

1. Fire

References to fire in La Conquête de Plassans are so numerous that it may be said that Zola is obsessed with the idea. At any rate the uncountable references to fire in the novel point to the fact that their presence is no mere coincidence, and that a careful study of the occurrence of fire would yield positive results.

The fire set by Mouret at the end of the novel is the most obvious subject of study in this respect.[2] It plays an important role in the plot, providing as it does an appropriate way of sealing the fate of the main characters. From the beginning the Mourets, the Trouches and Abbé

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[1]Roger Ripoll, "Fascination et fatalité: Le Regard dans l'oeuvre de Zola", Les Cahiers Naturalistes, XXXII (1966), 116.

[2]Chapter XXII, pp. 1190-1200.

Faujas, as we shall see, are associated with a symbolic fire within themselves, which destroys them all in an inevitable catastrophe, despite their efforts to combat it.

Throughout the novel the spectacular blaze is cleverly foreshadowed, starting with vague references to catastrophe, as in Marthe's intuitive feeling of uneasiness at the arrival of Abbé Faujas (904). Soon the references become more specific, mentioning on several occasions that the house might fall down; for example, Mouret worries that "si tu ne te tiens pas chez toi, nous trouverons la maison par terre, un de ces jours" (992). As the novel progresses, we are given more clues about the final catastrophe. The bishop makes a prediction about Abbé Fenil which proves to be prophetic:

> Je connais Fenil, c'est le prêtre le plus haineux de mon diocèse. Il a peut-être abandonné la vanité de vous battre sur le terrain politique; mais soyez sur qu'il se vengera d'homme à homme . . .il doit vous guetter du fond de sa retraite.
> (1139)

Near the end of the novel, these foreshadowing incidents increase in frequency and become more specific. For example, Marthe is sure that her husband will come back from the asylum to rid the house of their lodgers: "François reviendra, François les mettra tous à la rue" (1177). Shortly afterwards, Rose makes a statement to

Marthe which becomes ironic, considering that all the characters she mentions are consumed by the fire at the conclusion of the novel:

> M. le curé, sa mère, sa soeur, jusqu'à M. Trouche, sont aux petits soins pour vous; ils se jetteraient dans le feu, ils sont debout à toute heure du jour et de la nuit. (1179)

Rose again is amazingly accurate when she expresses her fears about Mouret returning to the house and killing its occupants:

> Monsieur ferait un beau ravage, à la maison; il nous tuerait tous ....Tenez, c'est là ma grande peur. Je tremble toujours qu'il n'arrive une de ces nuits pour nous assassiner. Quand je songe à cela, dans mon lit, je ne puis m'endormir. Il me semble que je le vois entrer par la fenêtre, avec des cheveux hérissés et des yeux luisants comme des allumettes. (1185)

These foreshadowing passages keep the reader in suspense and feed him with increasingly specific details about the conclusion, so that by the end of the novel the alert reader will have put these clues together. However, the foreshadowing has another result as well, for it tends to make the fire something that is inevitable and predestined even from the beginning of the novel. Zola once wrote, "Mais il ne faut plus user du mot fatalité, qui serait ridicule dans dix volumes. Le fatalisme est un vieil outil...." (V, 1744)[3] Nevertheless, the sense of

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[3]"Notes générales sur la nature de l'oeuvre".

doom that pervades the whole novel shows that he did not strictly follow this precept. Of course, the idea of an inevitable catastrophe illustrates Zola's tendency towards a deterministic, pre-ordained universe in which the individual is a helpless victim of circumstances. The most overt statement of this sense of fatality occurs near the end of the novel, when Mouret, in his disordered mental state, has a terrifying hallucination:

> Il se serra les tempes entre ses mains brûlantes, la tête perdue, roulant dans un souvenir abominable, dans un cauchemar évanoui, où rien de net ne se formulait, où s'agitait, pour lui et les siens, la menace d'un péril ancien, grandi lentement, devenu terrible, au fond duquel la maison allait s'engloutir, s'il ne la sauvait.
> (1192)

Mouret seems compelled to purge his house of this terrible peril that threatens it. On another occasion, the danger is described as "quelque ordure mauvaise, quelque ferment de décomposition introduit là" (1194), and the fire is supposed to purify all traces of this malignant growth by completely eradicating the house. "Marthe n'y est plus", says Mouret using his insane logic, "la maison n'y est plus, rien n'y est plus . . .il faut qu'il n'y ait plus rien" (1198). For Mouret, then, the fire is an unavoidable necessity; its purpose is to purify by complete destruction all the filth and decay brought there by his lodgers.

Considered in another perspective, the fire seems to foreshadow the eventual collapse in flames of the Second Empire, as described in the final pages of La Débâcle. The holocaust that destroys Paris has a similar purpose of purification by complete destruction; Maurice Levasseur, in the latter novel, has a hallucinatory vision which recalls Mouret's revelation:

> Il continuait, dans une fièvre chaude, abondante en symboles, en images éclatantes . . .le bain de sang était nécessaire, et de sang français, l'abominable holocauste, le sacrifice vivant, au milieu du feu purificateur. Désormais, le calvaire était monté jusqu'à la plus terrifiante des agonies, la nation crucifiée expiait ses fautes et allait renaître. (V, 907)

Thus the two fires are analogous in many ways: both are seen as inevitable, necessary occurrences; both serve to purify or purge the environment of a cancerous type of growth, the Second Empire or its representative, Abbé Faujas. Like the many other fires throughout the Rougon-Macquart,[4] the fire at the conclusion of La Conquête de Plassans symbolizes the collapse of the Second Empire, which Zola considered as an unavoidable cleansing action, a necessary pre-condition to the new world which was to rise from the ashes.

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[4]For an analysis of other fires in the Rougon-Macquart, see F.W.J. Hemmings, "Fire in Zola's Fiction", Yale French Studies, XLII (1969), 26-37.

Because of the great symbolic importance of the fire in La Conquête de Plassans, Zola uses all his skill as a writer to emphasize it as much as possible. We have already seen how the reader is kept in suspense by foreshadowing, which becomes increasingly specific as the novel progresses. The fire scene also occupies a central position in the plot, since it links all the characters and sub-plots in a very satisfying dénouement. As we shall see, Zola pulls out all the stops in his vivid description of the actual fire. In fact, F.W.J. Hemmings feels that the only part of the novel in which Zola is really being himself is the concluding chapters.[5]

It is not surprising, then, that Zola's contemporaries admired the conclusion of the novel. Brunetière, for example, wrote:

> Nous aimons mieux nous souvenir qu'un souffle d'écrivain traverse de loin en loin ces pages, et qu'il y a tel tableau, celui de l'incendie par exemple et de la mort de Marthe, tracé avec une vérité saisissante et lugubre.
> (1652)

Flaubert also was pleased with the ending:

> Ce qui écrase tout, ce qui couronne l'oeuvre, c'est la fin! Je ne connais rien de plus empoignant que ce dénouement. La visite de Marthe chez son oncle -- le retour de Mouret et l'inspection qu'il fait de sa maison! La peur vous prend comme à la lecture d'un conte

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[5]Hemmings, Emile Zola, p. 104.

> fantastique, et vous arrivez à cet effet-là par l'excès de la réalité, par l'intensité du vrai! Le lecteur sent que la tête lui tourne comme à Mouret lui-même.[6]

Zola's description of the fire demonstrates his style at its best, and concludes the novel with a tour de force which strikes the reader by its larger than life realism. This stylistic excellence, as shown in the following extract, well merits careful study:

> En effet, l'incendie devenait superbe. Des fusées d'étincelles montaient dans de larges flammes bleues; des trous d'un rouge ardent se creusaient au fond de chaque fenêtre béante; tandis que la fumée roulait doucement, s'en allait en un gros nuage violâtre, pareille à la fumée des feux de Bengale, pendant les feux d'artifice. Ces dames et ces messieurs s'étaient pelotonnés dans les fauteuils; ils s'accoudaient, s'allongeaient, levaient le menton; puis, des silences se faisaient, coupés de remarques, lorsqu'un tourbillon de flammes plus violent s'élevait. Au loin, dans les clartés dansantes qui illuminaient brusquement des profondeurs de têtes moutonnantes, grossissaient un brouhaha de foule, un bruit d'eau courante, tout un tapage noyé. Et la pompe, à dix pas, gardait son haleine regulière, son crachement de gosier de métal écorché. (1208)

In one short paragraph Zola has captured the splendour of a fire, that mysterious force that at one time or another has fascinated us all. A good deal of the effect lies in the skilful use of sentence structure to

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[6]Letter to Zola from Gustave Flaubert, 3 June 1874. Quoted in Bernouard, V, 386-7.

create an impression on the reader. The first sentence is crisp and short, and sums up in a word all that follows; the second sentence ends with a cumulative effect to suggest the billowing of the smoke; the next sentence describes the reactions of the spectators, and their excitement and agitation is shown by three verbs piled on top of one another: "ils s'accoudaient, s'allongeaient, levaient le menton". The noises in the distance, portrayed in the next sentence, are placed in the emphatic final position after their verb, and are again expressed in a series of short parallel phrases, giving the idea of a confused cacophony: "un brouhaha de foule, un bruit d'eau courante, tout un tapage noyé". The final sentence of the paragraph, dealing with the pump, is split into many breath-groups on only three or four words each: "Et la pompe, / à dix pas, / gardait son haleine regulière, / son crachement de gosier / de métal écorché". This of course mimics the regular gasping for air of the pump. The whole passage, then, has a remarkable sense of rhythm, created by short bursts of words in rapid succession, and we feel a driving beat because of the parallelism of phrases and clauses.

The passage also appeals to the senses to give us an impression of the action and confusion that is taking place. The noisiness of the fire is expressed through

onomatopoeia in several instances: for example, the harsh r sounds in "des trous d'un rouge ardent se creusaient . . ." suggest the roar of the flames; in contrast, the soft vowel sounds of the [u] emphasize the gently rolling smoke: "la fumée roulait doucement...." The murmurings of the crowd, the gushing water and the panting pump all combine with these sound effects to impress upon us the deafening racket that adds to the chaos of the whole scene.

The passage also abounds in visual images. The colours of the fire are depicted in the primary hues of red, blue and violet; the sparks and flames rise like rockets, and the smoke is compared to that of a fireworks display; and we also see the dancing flames flickering on the faces of the spectators. The changing colours, quavering lights and shadows, sparks and smoke result in a kaleidoscopic jumble of sight impressions.

This effect is increased by the constantly changing point of view. First we gaze upwards at the sparks shooting out from the building and the cloud of smoke that rises in the air; then we move down to street level to catch a glimpse of the spectators; we look into the distance at the late-comers, and finally we approach the house again to observe the pump at work.

The language itself is direct, simple and concrete.

The only metaphorical devices used are the comparison with a fire-works display - a short, easily understandable simile -- and the personification of the pump, an imaginative figure of speech which adds an aura of fantasy to the picture. Zola makes great use of colourful action verbs to stress the animation of the scene; for example, "se creuser", "rouler", "s'accouder", "pelotonner", and "s'élever". Even nouns, such as "fusées", tourbillon", "brouhaha", "tapage", and "crachement" intensify this feeling of great activity.

The overall effect is of a fantastic, larger than life spectacle. Our senses are bombarded with impressions from all sides in rapid succession, so that we can smell the smoke, see the flames and hear the roaring of the inferno. Zola excelled in the portrayal of grotesque or terrifying scenes like this one, as Philip Walker points out: "Zola's novels contain numerous passages as nightmarish as anything in Kafka's fiction or Goya's paintings".[7] The nightmarish quality is produced mainly by piling up a series of small, sensory details, as we have just seen, until their combined effect overwhelms the reader by what Zola himself called "l'hypertrophie du détail vrai".[8]

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[7]Philip D. Walker, Emile Zola (New York: Humanities Press, 1969), p. 43.

[8]Letter to Henry Céard, 22 March 1885. In Bernouard, Correspondance II, 637.

The breath-taking realism of the passage is heightened by references all through the novel to fire and the closely-linked concepts of heat and light. Time after time we see characters with gleaming flames in their eyes, and everywhere we are confronted with candles, sunlight, lamps and so on. These images build up into a crescendo, preparing us for the pyrotechnics of the conclusion.

However, these passing references to fire have another more significant purpose in the novel. Fire is connected in our minds with life, sex and creation, but at the same time it may symbolize death and destruction, the inevitable forces of darkness from which there is no escape. This duality is fundamental to the psychological associations of fire,[9] and Zola is quite aware of this in La Conquête de Plassans. We shall see how almost every mention of fire or its related concepts of warmth and light illustrates the dominant themes that run through the whole Rougon-Macquart, and by contrasting these images with their opposites of darkness and coldness, Zola skilfully outlines the continual struggle between good and evil, life and death, creation and destruction.

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[9] "Fire is a tutelary and a terrible divinity, both good and bad. It can contradict itself; thus it is one of the principles of universal explanation." Gaston Bachelard, The Psychoanalysis of Fire, trans. Alan C. M. Ross (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 7.

Right from the beginning of the novel, the Mouret family is associated with warmth and light, and this connection continues throughout the text. Even on the first page we find Marthe and Desiré bathed in the light of the setting sun (899) and soon afterwards Zola writes, "Il y eut un silence recueilli, chaud d'une tendresse muette, dans la bonne lumière jaune qui pâlissait peu à peu sur la terrasse" (901). In this and other instances it seems that suddenly a shadow has come over their peaceful family life, for "la maison heureuse baign [ait] dans l'adieu du soleil le jardin, où l'ombre devenait plus grise" (903). This increasing darkness prepares us for the arrival of Abbé Faujas and his mother, whose sinister, mysterious character is always described in terms of shadowy, dark imagery and coldness. For example, when we first meet him, the Abbé is described in these terms: "La haute figure noire du prêtre faisait une tache de deuil sur la gaieté du mur blanchi à la chaux" (906). Thus immediately Zola sets up a contrast between the Abbé and the Mourets, one of blackness as opposed to whiteness, mourning contrasted with gaiety. Faujas' mother too is associated with darkness, for she follows her son in his shadow, wears a thin black shawl and has dark eyes.

However, Abbé Faujas is also portrayed as having a mysterious inner force which makes his eyes light up like

flames at times, usually when he is caught off his guard. It is as if the aura of darkness that surrounds him is only a façade to cover some strange desire or instinct lurking behind this mask: "Il semblait qu'au fond de l'oeil, d'un gris morne d'ordinaire, une flamme passait brusquement, comme ces lampes qu'on promène derrière les façades endormies des maisons" (912). In another striking image, Faujas seems to be momentarily surrounded by a diabolical red glow, after which he resumes his ordinary pose and becomes a black profile on the grey cinders of the sunset:

> L'abbé Faujas, qu'ils avaient oublié, restait assis sur la terrasse, immobile, en face du soleil couchant....Comme le soleil allait disparaître, il se découvrit, étouffant sans doute....Une dernière lueur rouge alluma ce crâne rude de soldat, où la tonsure était comme la cicatrice d'un coup de massue; puis la lueur s'éteignit, le prêtre, entrant dans l'ombre ne fut plus qu'un profil noir sur la cendre grise du crépuscule. (911)

Here as well the Abbé begins his association with coldness as he becomes uncomfortable in the warmth of the sun and is connected with the cold ashes and shadows of the sun. Shortly afterwards we see him shivering in the cold air of the terrace, and when he enters the house he seems to avoid the warmth of the Mourets' living room (911).

By this time, Zola has fixed in our minds the association of darkness, shadows and coldness with both the

Abbé Faujas and his mother. Our almost innate fear of the dark and shady side of things leads us to take the shadows describing the Abbé as some sort of evil omen, and our association of coldness with unfriendliness, lack of love, and insensitivity leads us to attribute these characteristics to the Abbé and his mother. At the same time, any image of fire or warmth in respect to the Mourets reminds us of their tranquil existence in the friendly atmosphere of their home before Faujas entered their lives. These associations remain with the characters throughout the novel. For instance, even at the end when Mouret comes to burn the house, Abbé Faujas is described in terms of coldness and darkness:

> La grande pièce nue était pleine d'ombre, une petite lampe posée au bord de la table laissait tomber sur le carreau un rond étroit de clarté: le prêtre, qui écrivait, ne faisait lui-même qu'une tache noire, au milieu de cette lueur jaune....Mais il [Mouret] vit le lit froid, aux draps bien tirés, qui ressemblait à une pierre tombale; il s'habituait à l'ombre. (1197)

Mouret as well remains associated with warmth and fire right up to the very end of the novel. His former enjoyment of the warm, bright family life has been grotesquely amplified into a wild, uncontrollable

urge to be surrounded with light and fire, caused of course by his madness. This is shown in the passage where Mouret lights all the lamps in the house: "Comme il était pris d'un besoin de grande clarté, il alla allumer dans la cuisine toutes les lampes, qu'il revint poser sur les tables des pièces, sur les paliers de l'escalier, le long des corridors" (1198).

With Marthe, the fire imagery also plays an important role in her increasing madness, and right up to her death her religious fervour and love for Abbé Faujas is illustrated by her feeling of becoming warmer and warmer until she is consumed in her own flaming passion. The Church is described as a dark, cold, shadowy place, and it provides her with a refreshing coolness to relieve her burning sensation. As the madness takes hold of her and her whole life seems to be concentrated on her inner fire, the Church begins to spark her to even higher frenzy with its candles, incense, light from the windows and so on. Near the end of the novel, Abbé Faujas' rejection of her leads to another period in which coldness seems to win out over the flames inside her, and it really triumphs when it drains all the warmth from her, causing her death. In her youth she was terrified by the same sort of "froid mortel" which she even then connected with insanity and death (1175). Thus, in terms of the fire imagery at least,

Marthe's whole life is dominated by her continual craving for fire and light. In the end her enemy, coldness, wins out by blocking out the fire that keeps her alive, thus eventually killing her.

A few examples should suffice to show Zola's consistency in the treatment of Marthe's relationship to fire and heat. When she first comes to the cathedral, we find that "le froid de l'église la calmait un peu . . .ce grand silence frissonnant qui l'enveloppait, cette ombre religieuse des vitraux, la jetaient dans une sorte de rêverie vague et très douce" (989). The refreshing coolness of the Church soon gives way to other sensations, for when we next see Marthe in the Church, it is described in this manner:

> Dans les bas-côtés déjà noirs, luisaient l'étoile d'une veilleuse, le pied doré d'un chandelier, la robe d'argent d'une Vierge; et, enfilant la grande nef, un rayon pâle se mourait sur le chêne poli des bancs et des stalles. (995)

The sight of the flickering candle, the shimmering gold and silver, and the light flowing through the window sends her into a pleasant ecstasy: "un évanouissement exquis la gagnait, au fond duquel elle sentait son être se fondre et mourir. Puis, tout s'éteignit autour d'elle. Elle fut parfaitement heureuse dans quelque chose d'innommé" (995). In Gaston Bachelard's study of fire, one of the psychological complexes he describes deals precisely with this sort of rêverie before a fire, which leads to contemplation of life

and death, for fire is at the same time vital and destructive:

> Fire is for the man who is contemplating it an example of a sudden change or development and an example of a circumstantial development . . .fire suggests the desire to change, to speed up the passage of time, to bring all of life to its conclusion, to its hereafter. In these circumstances the reverie becomes truly fascinating and dramatic; it magnifies human destiny; it links the small to the great, the hearth to the volcano, the life of a log to the life of a world. The fascinated individual hears the call of the funeral pyre. For him destruction is more than a change, it is a renewal.10

It is exactly this feeling which takes hold of Marthe. She uses the link of the fire and light to transport herself into a sort of Nirvana, a feeling of oneness with the universe, in which she feels her being melt into something greater -- the Absolute or the "Innommé" -- and yet she still experiences a profound happiness or bliss in a new life after death.

The Church, instead of being a cool, refreshing place where she could relieve the fever inside her, as when she pressed her burning forehead to the wood of the confessional (1075), now through its candles, lights and other illuminated objects adds fuel to her fiery passion, and she seems to thrive on it:

> Elle . . .se soulageait en face des ostensoirs rayonnants, des chapelles flambantes, des

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10 Ibid., p. 16.

> autels et des prêtres luisants avec des lueurs d'astres sur le fond noir de la nef. Il y avait, chez elle, une sorte d'appétit physique de ces gloires, un appétit qui la torturait, qui lui creusait la poitrine, lui vidait le crâne, lorsqu'elle ne le contentait pas.... Alors, elle ne sentait plus rien, son corps ne lui faisait plus mal. Elle était ravie à la terre, agonisant sans souffrance, devenant une pure flamme qui se consumait d'amour. (1102)

In her mind she has confused her love for Faujas with her love of God. Her ecstasy in the Church is described in such a way as to leave no doubt in our mind that it is like the climax of a physical passion. Here the sexual nature of the fire is clear: there is even the double connotation of "consummation" mentioned by Northrop Frye in the following passage, which also confirms the psychological validity of Zola's association of these two concepts:

> To the imagination, fire is not a separable datum of experience; it is already linked by analogy and identity with a dozen other aspects of experience. Its heat is analogous to the internal heat we feel as warm-blooded animals; its sparks are analogous to seeds, the units of life; its flickering movement is analogous to vitality; its flames are phallic symbols, providing a further analogy to the sexual act, as the ambiguity of the word indicates; its transforming power is analogous to purgation.[11]

In Marthe's mind the concepts of sexual desire, fire, death and rebirth are hopelessly confused. We are

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[11]Northrop Frye, Preface to Bachelard, op.cit., vi.

not surprised, then, to hear that one of her hallucinations is "une main de fer qui lui ouvrait le crâne avec une épée flamboyante" (1134), for here these elements are symbolized through psychological associations: death and rebirth through the splitting open of her head, opening her mind to a new universe; sex through the phallic symbols of the rigid iron hand and the thrusting sword which penetrates her body; and fire, of course, through the flaming sword. Here fire demonstrates its basic characteristic of having two contradictory implications at the same time. It is linked with sex and rebirth, and thus symbolizes creativity or life; but it is also connected with destruction and death. This corresponds exactly with the double meaning of fire for Marthe: she sees in it a way to achieve a renewed, blissful life, but at the same time she knows that it is eating away at her and will result in her eventual destruction. Fire provides the balance between the forces of life and death through its association with both of them. When all three elements of this triangle are present, she can escape into a world that transcends them, through a symbolic death and rebirth; without them, she is doomed.

This is why she has a terror of the absence of fire. Her whole being depends on fire so much that she feels her life is being blown out when the candles of the Church are

snuffed: "Il lui semblait que son souffle s'en allait avec ces lueurs. Quand le dernier cierge expira, que le mur d'ombre, en face d'elle, fut implacable et ferme, elle s'évanouit, les flancs serrés, la poitrine vide" (1107). For her, the shadows represent a closed and impenetrable system which threatens the feeling of absolute peace and happiness which is brought about by her fire worship.

In the next stage of her development, we again see how closely related are the elements of creation, sex, fire and death or destruction. When Marthe finally realizes that she will never physically possess Abbé Faujas, one corner of the triangle of life-fire-death begins to crumble, for her life here on earth loses its meaning when sex is absent. It further crumbles when she tries once more to lose herself in her ecstatic world of mysticism, which is also related to this corner of the triangle through its association with rebirth. With the creation corner of the triangle thus missing, the forces of darkness and death take over and invade the field of fire, closing in on her. No matter how hard she tries, all she can feel is pale light, shadows and coldness when she goes to the Church, and these forces wall her in, preventing her from reaching the fiery light beyond:

> Elle allait au but logique de toute passion, exigeait d'entrer plus avant à chaque heure dans la paix, dans l'extase, dans le néant

> parfait du bonheur divin. Et c'était en elle une angoisse mortelle d'être comme murée au fond de sa chair, de ne pouvoir se hausser à ce seuil de lumière, qu'elle croyait apercevoir, toujours plus loin, toujours plus haut. Maintenant, elle grelottait, à Saint-Saturnin, dans cette ombre froide où elle avait gouté des approches si pleines d'ardentes délices . . .les chapelles flambantes, les saints ciboires rayonnant comme des astres, les chasubles d'or et d'argent pâlissaient, se noyaient, sous ses regards obscurcis de larmes. Alors, ainsi qu'une damnée, brulée des feux du paradis, elle levait les bras désespérément, elle réclamait l'amant qui se refusait à elle.
>
> (1169)

As on a previous occasion, she feels walled in ("murée") by the darkness and coldness that surround her and prevent her from achieving the euphoric state. She herself in this passage realizes that it was the Abbé's refusal that brought about the collapse of her dream world. Without the incitement of her sexual desires the fire within her fizzles out, being replaced with its opposites, cold and dark shadows, which are of course associated with death, like the "froid mortel" which terrified her in her youth. With sex now hopeless and fire defeated by its enemies, the only corner of her triangle left is death and destruction, which eventually catch up with her.

From this point on, all the fire has left Marthe, and she is surrounded with coldness and dark shadows, as in this passage which occurs only a few pages after her futile attempt to inflame her passion:

> Elle s'était assise, regardant la chambre . . .le grand christ de bois noir, dont la brusque apparition sur la nudité du mur lui donna un court frisson. Une paix glaciale tombait du plafond. Le foyer de la cheminée était vide, sans une pincée de cendre. -- Vous allez prendre froid, dit le prêtre d'une voix calmée. (1172)

Right up to the end, Marthe is haunted by fire images. Although her hands are already cold and she is on the verge of death, the fire that destroyed her shows itself in the eery glow from the burning house which surrounds her son Serge, in the very last sentence of the novel: "Elle joignit les mains avec une épouvante indicible, elle expira, en apercevant, dans la clarté rouge, la soutane de Serge" (1212). Zola was in the habit of concluding his novels with statements that symbolically expressed something of great significance,[12] and so the question naturally arises, Why did Marthe experience "une épouvante indicible" at seeing her son's cassock bathed in the light of the fire ?: She probably has confused Serge with Abbé Faujas, the other cassocked figure in her life. In her dying moments she may have come to the horrible realization that it is her lover who actually set her on the path to self-destruction. When she sees him bathed in the red light from the fire, she must realize that there is no escape from the fiery passion and religious mania within her which, once kindled by Faujas, raged out of control and

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[12]See for example the final sentences of La Joie de Vivre, La Faute de l'abbé Mouret and Le Docteur Pascal.

and brought her to the brink of madness. The fire haunts her until the very moment of her death, and is an inescapable force. Could it not then represent the hereditary defect that controls the destiny of all the Rougon-Macquart family? Applying this theory to her husband, since he too is a member of the family, we see that Mouret is also doomed by the inherited defect of madness, and fire again symbolizes this flaw and causes his destruction. Zola hints at this relationship once more when he associates Serge, the next generation of the family, with the concept of fire at this crucial point in the novel. This would lead us to believe that other characters of the Rougon-Macquart family in other novels, and perhaps even characters not belonging to the family, might have an inner fire which, as Naomi Schor writes, represents "the concept of a great life-death-life cycle which underlies the whole of the Rougon-Macquart series . . .the cycle condemns each generation to repeat the actions of the preceding one".[13]

It would be fascinating to study this relationship in other works of Zola, but it is clear even through an examination of La Conquête de Plassans alone that fire symbolizes the essentially closed aspect of Zola's universe and its determinism through heredity. As we have seen, each major character and even some minor ones are characterized by a fire within themselves which controls their

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[13]Naomi Schor, "Zola: From Window to Window", Yale French Studies, XLII (1969), 50.

lives, leaving them little free will, for there is no way to escape this internal fire. Mouret does not even try to escape it, so the inherited fire of madness takes its inevitable course, appropriately killing him by fire in his own house. Even characters outside the Rougon-Macquart family have an inner fire from which they cannot escape. Abbé Faujas tries to hide his fire, probably his inherited quality of ambition, behind a façade of coldness and darkness. Although he is usually associated with these elements, he cannot prevent the fire from showing through when he is off guard, and it makes itself known in his eyes that gleam at anything that advances his political ambitions, his brightly-lit window as he plans his strategy, and the mysterious fiery glow that surrounds his head as he perhaps dreams of his future conquests. His actions to escape or hide the fire which symbolizes his heredity are as futile as those of the other characters, and he too is suitably engulfed in flames at the conclusion of the novel. The Trouches cannot escape this fate either, and throughout the book their weaknesses, greed and curiosity, are symbolized by their fiery, glinting eyes.

This principle of determinism through heredity, symbolized by fire, is made most clear in the case of Marthe, who tries to break out of the life-fire-death triangle that rules her life. She only partly succeeds,

and ends up aggravating the problem of her internal fire, which represents inherited madness, as in her husband's case. This fire finally consumes her, leaving nothing but a cold, burnt-out shell which soon is extinguished completely. Even death does not provide a satisfactory solution, for Zola hints that her son Serge has inherited the flaw of some sort of burning passion that almost every member of the family possessed. In La Faute de l'abbé Mouret, Serge's fire goes out of control, resulting in an excess of religious devotion similar to his mother's. In this way the defect has been passed on to the next generation, and one revolution of the life-death-life cycle has completed its inevitable course.

2. Optical Phenomena

It is difficult to overlook the extensive use that Zola makes of eyes, staring, spying, looking in and out of windows, peeping through keyholes and so on in La Conquête de Plassans, and indeed throughout the Rougon-Macquart series. In almost every scene of La Conquête de Plassans there is someone spying on someone else, and everywhere in the novel we encounter mysteriously glowing eyes, staring eyes, peering eyes, dreamy eyes, fiery eyes and so on. We come across incidents looked at from many different

points of view, people surveying a scene from a window or peering into a window, and characters whose whole personality is evident in their eyes. All this is an indication of what Philip Walker calls Zola's "obsession with the phenomena of optics and the psychology of perception".[14] I propose to study two of these optical or perceptual phenomena, the eye and the window, in La Conquête de Plassans, in order to discover the significant patterns that link these seemingly unimportant details to the general thematic structure of Zola's works.

The very frequent occurrence in La Conquête de Plassans of the eye itself, the mode of perception, would lead one to think that Zola's universe, as Walker notes, is "first and foremost a spectacular universe, a universe dominated by the eye. Everywhere we turn we are confronted by eyes, induced to follow the motions of eyes, informed as to the particular state of eyes at some precise moment or other, or told of the effects produced by eyes".[15]

One of the major activities of eyes in the novel is spying. Of course, the eye is the obvious symbol of spying, as Waldemar Deonna points out: "Doubles comme dans

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[14]Philip D. Walker, "The Mirror, the Window and the Eye in Zola's Fiction", Yale French Studies, XLII (1969), 52.

[15]Ibid.

la réalité normale, ou uniques, énormes ou multipliés, d'innombrables yeux surveillent, attentifs, tout ce qui se passe en ce monde, les actions et les pensées des mortels avec une vigilance à laquelle rien ne doit échapper, et dont ils sont les symboles".[16] This sort of eternal vigilance is present throughout La Conquête de Plassans. The words "épier", "surveiller", "guetter", "allonger le cou", "espionner", and so on occur with startling frequency in the novel. At almost every step the characters are watched by someone. There is actually a criss-crossing system in that everyone at one time or another spies on almost all the other major characters. Often there is a spy network, as when Rose, Olympe and Honoré Trouche and Mme. Faujas are all seen watching the Abbé's garden party from various parts of the Mourets' house. The spy conspiracy is especially evident during Mouret's supposed madness. The two political cliques agree to watch him to discover any unusual behaviour, and soon the conspiracy has increased to include the whole town. In Chapter XVIII Mouret's stroll turns into a real nightmare for him, because he senses that all eyes are upon him, watching his every move.

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[16]Waldemar Deonna, Le Symbolisme de l'oeil (Paris: Editions E. de Boccard, 1965), pp. 134-5.

Many characters are aware that they are being spied upon, and they cast furtive or guilty glances behind themselves to see if they are being observed. In Marthe's case this becomes a real persecution complex. Even before she goes mad, she thinks there is someone behind her back who is going to hit her (969). When she goes into the Church, "elle y venait avec une pudeur inquiète, une honte qui instinctivement lui faisait jeter un regard derrière elle, lorsqu'elle poussait la porte, pour voir si personne n'était là, à la regarder entrer" (1010). When she starts to go mad, this fear of being watched increases greatly. After one of her fits, Rose has to look under the bed to prove to her that no one was in the room watching her.

The omnipresent eyes of the characters and even these imagined ones represent, in effect, a kind of restriction or loss of freedom. There is no way to escape them, for the eyes peer at us, in Waldemar Deonna's words, "avec une vigilance à laquelle rien ne doit échapper".[17] This loss of freedom is most evident in the scene where Marthe and François are in their garden, and would like to embrace each other after the emotional crisis which they have just experienced; however, they feel an obstacle

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[17] Ibid., p. 134.

between them, for they know that the Trouches are spying at them from their window:

> "Essuie tes yeux, ma bonne; sois sûre qu'ils se régalent de nos querelles. Ce n'est pas une raison, parce qu'ils sont la cause du départ de l'enfant, pour leur montrer le mal que ce départ nous fait à tous les deux."
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> Sa voix s'attendrissait, il était près lui-même de sangloter. Marthe, navrée, touchée au coeur par ses dernières paroles, allait se jeter dans ses bras. Mais ils eurent peur d'être vus, ils sentirent comme un obstacle entre eux. Alors, ils se séparèrent; tandis que les yeux d'Olympe luisaient toujours, entre les deux rideaux rouges. (1012)

Thus each eye that watches us, and they are innumerable in La Conquête de Plassans, creates, as Naomi Schor observes, "an invisible wall which reinforces the visible ones. To be seen, to be spied on is to be imprisoned".[18] The eye, then, brings us to the realization that the universe of Zola is closed and deterministic, with no possibility of escape.

For Zola the eye also seems to be a sort of "window on the soul", through which we can catch a glimpse of the personality or mind of the individual characters. We have already seen how Zola penetrates the soul of Abbé Faujas by looking into his eyes and describing the fire of his ambition which is hidden behind them. Several characters in the novel comment upon the Abbé's extraordinary

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[18] Schor, op.cit., p. 50.

eyes after first meeting him; for example, Antoine mentions he has "un singulier oeil" (942) and Mouret ironically says, "Il a l'air de ne pas avoir froid aux yeux" (912). Other characteristics of the Abbé, as we have seen, are revealed through his eyes. His will-power and strength give his eyes a strange hypnotic power, especially over Marthe:

> Il la contemplait d'un air profond, les mains nouées sur son surplis, la dominant, baissant vers elle sa face grave....Elle avait baissé la tête, comme oppressée par le regard qu'elle sentait sur elle. Quand elle la releva et qu'elle rencontra les yeux du prêtre, elle joignit les mains avec le geste d'un enfant qui demande grace, elle éclata en sanglots. (995)

Thus Zola reveals Faujas' fundamental character traits to us through this "window of the soul", the eye.

Some characters of the novel, indeed, seem to be "all eyes". For instance, when Mme. Faujas makes her first appearance she does not say a word, but her eyes tell us almost everything we need to know about her. We find that "la dame agée regarda fixement [Mouret] de ses yeux noirs; puis, elle revint à la salle à manger, à la table servie, qu'elle examinait depuis qu'elle était là" (906-7). In the next few pages, her possessive nature is emphasized through expressions such as "inspecter", "prendre possession du jardin d'un regard", "dévisager", "pénétrer", "terminer son inspection", and so on. Throughout the novel she serves

as a silent watchdog over her son and Marthe. She never participates in the Abbé's triumphs directly, for she prefers to remain in the background, vicariously enjoying his conquests by watching his every move.

Since they are denied the pleasure of participating in the triumphs of the Abbé, the Trouches must also enjoy then from a distance through their eyes. Their greediness shines through their eyes which longingly contemplate the "forbidden fruit":

> . . .Faujas ne surveillant guère avec inquiétude que la fenêtre des Trouche, où luisaient à toute heure les yeux d'Olympe. Les Trouche se tenaient là en embuscade, derrière les rideaux rouges, rongés par une envie rageuse de descendre, eux aussi, de goûter aux fruits, de causer avec le beau monde. (1045)

Even inanimate objects seem to take on a character of their own by assuming the appearance of eyes. When Mouret returns to burn his house, he becomes enraged by the huge, flaming eye of Abbé Faujas' lamp-lit window which stares down at him:

> Il ramenait les yeux, lorsqu'il vit une lueur de lampe, au second étage, derrière les rideaux épais de l'abbé Faujas. Ce fut comme un oeil flamboyant, allumé au front de la façade, qui le brûlait. (1192)

In this way eyes provide Zola with a means of entering into the inner or subjective side of a character or even of a personified inanimate thing, while he still remains on the outside, objectively looking in.

In other novels Zola makes extensive use of mirrors and reflective surfaces, which are of course closely related to eyes and other visual phenomena. Philip Walker lists an amazing number of mirrors which occur in La Curée and in other works as well.[19] However, the mirror does not seem to play an important role in La Conquête de Plassans. In other novels, the mirror tends to show how reality can be distorted or broken up into different points of view through its multiple reflections. Walker feels that this distortion or fragmentation exemplifies a fundamental trait of Zola's fiction: "By degrees we are led from simple distortion and dematerialization to the most extreme synthesis of the real and the illusory, the real and the ideal, the photographic and the visionary, document and symbol".[20]

I feel that this element, which poses the almost insoluble question of the relationship between appearances and reality, is very much present in La Conquête de Plassans. However, instead of using mirrors Zola concentrates on the eye as a means of fragmenting what is considered objective reality into a multitude of subjective elements.

Many scenes in La Conquête de Plassans demonstrate

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[19]Walker, "The Mirror, the Window and the Eye", pp. 52-3.

[20]Ibid., p. 58.

the technique of multiplying points of view; for example, when Mouret goes for a walk about the town in Chapter XVIII, we see his startled but still completely rational reactions through his own eyes, but we also see how these reactions could be taken in a completely different light, making us think he is crazy, because we see his reactions as well through the eyes of the townspeople who are watching him.

Perhaps a better example is the final scene of the burning house, which is seen through the eyes of many different characters, and from different vantage points and angles. We first see the inside of the house through Mouret's and his victims' eyes; then we move away for an overall view from above, through Antoine's eyes as he watches from Félicité's window; then we return to the scene for Péqueur des Saulaies' first-hand account of how he saw the fire starting; we see the fire as well through the disinterested eyes of the neighbours, who think of it as a great fireworks display as they look up at it from their sofas ranged like theatre seats on the street, and then we shift to the Paloques, who look down from the vantage point of their dining-room window at the other spectators and the burning house. We catch a glimpse of Delangre as he runs around to the far side of the house, and finally we return to the viewpoint of Félicité's window once more to

watch the last glimmer of the fire through the eyes of Marthe.

In this way, the omnipresent eyes in La Conquête de Plassans, as well as symbolizing Zola's enclosed universe by means of the spying eyes from which there is no escape, have another double-sided function. Depending on whether we are situated inside or outside the eye, we have two completely different views. However, the two facets of subjectivity and objectivity are becoming blurred and melted together, for objectivity seems to be nothing more than a set of "compound eyes", or a collection of individual subjectivities.

This two-sided process is like a window, for the eye resembles a pane of glass which is placed between the two worlds of the inner and the outer, the subjective and the objective; yet both the window and the eye add their own peculiar distortion or blurriness to the picture on either side, depending on the position of the observer.

The comparison of eyes to windows and vice versa is quite common in literature, as Waldemar Deonna indicates:

> Comparison antique, et toujours reprise, que celle de l'oeil fenêtre du corps, et inversement de la fenêtre -- même d'une autre ouverture -- oeil de la maison, que la lampe allumée dans la nuit éclaire comme d'un regard brillant.21

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[21]Deonna, op.cit., pp. 9-10.

Using this analogy of the window and the eye, Zola transports us to the inner side of the window and has us look out, which has the effect of placing us inside the subjective mind, giving the observer all the peculiar characteristics that make up the character's individual point of view. In this position, the observer sees reality tinted by the individual's window which he looks through.

We have already seen Mouret looking into Abbé Faujas' window, although he cannot distinguish anything in the room. This is why he is so overjoyed to see finally the interior of his room and to look out of it. On entering the Abbé's room, the first thing Mouret notices is the curtains: "Les rideaux de coton pendus aux deux fenêtres étaient si épais, que la chambre avait une pâleur crayeuse, un demi-jour de cellule murée" (26). The reality streaming into the Abbé's window-eye, then, is filtered in a way peculiar to his point of view. Mouret, who has entered the Abbé's room, symbolic of the inner sanctum of his mind, begins to look out of Faujas' window, and sees the scene below in the peculiar tint that the Abbé gives it. Mouret, who is not usually politically-minded, gives a detailed political description of the important people below. This is exactly what Faujas wants to hear, so it is as if Mouret's mind had merged with Faujas' because they are looking out of the same window-eye.

There are many other windows in La Conquête de Plassans through which a character peers into "objective" reality, colouring it with his own viewpoint. In this way windows have the same effect as eyes, in that reality becomes split into a number of panes of glass or eyes, each representing a different subjective point of view. Jean Borie points out that Zola's window is a screen that the observer colours to his own personal preference, whether he looks in or out of the window:

> De quelque côté qu'on se place, la fenêtre encadre un écran et les mêmes significations peuvent se lire sur les fresques et sur le paysage. Tout au moins l'observateur a-t-il l'illusion de la découverte et, comme il conserve toujours le libre exercice des coloris, latitude lui est laissée de varier son tableau du rose au noir.[22]

When we look through a window, the image outside it seems to become unreal or theatrical. The frame of the window imposes itself upon us, cutting us off from what is taking place on the other side. We view the exterior events with disinterest, for we look out as if we were spectators passively watching a theatrical production. Indeed, the window resembles a miniature stage, even including the curtains. Both the stage and the window project a reality that has been molded or distorted to fit into a

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[22]Borie, op.cit., pp. 203-4.

square frame. Thus, as Naomi Schor observes, any scene, "viewed from the height of a window-balcony, turns into a spectacle, the balcony, into a theater-box".[23]

This is evident in Mouret's description of the characters assembled outside Faujas' window, which is used as a vantage point (928-935). Mouret categorizes each of them with a short description, such as "M. Maffre, le juge de paix, ce monsieur tout blanc, avec de gros yeux à fleur de tête" (930), or "M. Rastoil . . .un gros homme, un peu court, chauve, sans barbe, la tête ronde comme une boule" (929). The whole scene seems unreal, almost as if he were reciting a list of Dramatis Personae for a play. He also depicts the stage setting in great detail by indicating the size of the gardens, the number of trees, and so on.

Mouret's nocturnal wanderings are watched from a window-balcony, and they too have the appearance of a theatrical performance for the benefit of the spectators. This effect is heightened by the doctor's running commentary and the "after-theatre snack" of tea and biscuits that they calmly eat afterwards, in spite of the terrible things they have just seen. In the fire scene as well the spectators pretend they are witnessing a display of

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[23]Schor, op.cit., p. 23.

pyrotechnics as they sit in theatre-like rows on the sidewalk. In all of these cases, the window or theatre-balcony isolates the observers emotionally from what they are watching.

As with the eye, then, the window demonstrates Zola's fascination with the problem of appearances versus reality, subjective versus objective. Both the window and the eye lead us to confuse these concepts, for objectivity fragments into a number of equally valid subjective points of view.

Like the eye, the window can symbolize enclosure or the deterministic nature of Zola's universe. A closed, barred or curtained window indicated enclosure, whereas an open window represents freedom from confinement or escape.

The windows associated with Mouret show an interesting pattern in this respect. At the beginning of the novel, his preferred place at the dinner table was opposite the open window overlooking his garden (2087). Later, when Abbé Faujas takes over this chair, Mouret is very unhappy at being moved to a seat opposite a closed door, for he has lost the view of his garden. We next find him enclosing himself in his study, whose window-- if indeed it has a window -- is not described to us. This window, then, is deliberately de-emphasized, especially considering the lengthy descriptions of other windows of the

house, in order to illustrate Mouret's forced confinement. He is even more confined in the asylum, so he has correspondingly a barred and shuttered window: "Le jour pâlissait, le cabanon n'était éclairé que par une lueur de cave, tombant d'une fenêtre grillée, garnie d'un tablier de planches" (1181). On another occasion the windows of the same institution are described from the outside: "les étroites fenêtres, regulières, qui marquaient les façades de barres noires...." (1100) Thus the windows of Mouret's cell are completely impenetrable. He cannot see out of them, and they do not allow through enough light for him to see inside his cell. So for all practical purposes, he is completely blind.

The association in Zola's mind between madness and blindness is well-grounded, for these two concepts have always been related, as Deonna indicates:

> Manquer de raison, dit Ménandre, c'est être aveugle. C'est s'adonner sans réflection à ses instincts, ses passions, ses désirs.... Ceux qui ne savent pas les refréner sont atteints de [cette] cécité mentale, leur vision spirituelle est obscurcie comme par des ténèbres, des nuages, des brouillards, des fumées.24

Marthe too becomes symbolically blind as she goes mad. In the last stages of her insanity, all the bright things in the Church that once motivated her now become

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[24]Deonna, op.cit., p. 240.

pale; the smoke from the incense now only gets in her way; and her eyes become "obscurcis de larmes" (1169). Her eyes are now just as blind as her husband's, and both of these phenomena are caused by the inherited madness that closes in on them, offering no escape.

Before her madness becomes complete, the window represents a way for Marthe to break out of her personal problems, to escape into an unlimited, cosmic life, as seen in this revealing passage: "Quand elle était là, elle oubliait tout; c'etait comme une fenêtre immense ouverte sur une autre vie, une vie large, infinie, pleine d'une émotion qui l'emplissait et lui suffisait" (1010). Here Marthe is typical of many characters in the writings of Zola for whom "the open window serves over and over again as a means whereby the isolated subject can enter into communion with the totality of nature . . .letting himself be absorbed by the immensity of creation".[25] However, the fact that the window is shut in her face later on as we have seen, indicates that this goal cannot be achieved. We are forever rooted to this world, doomed by the determinism of heredity, which makes itself known through the closed windows and blindness associated with hereditary madness.

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[25]Walker, "The Mirror, the Window and the Eye", pp. 57-8.

Thus both windows and eyes have similar functions in La Conquête de Plassans. They both represent the closed, this-worldly nature of Zola's deterministic universe. At every step the characters are restricted by eyes spying at them and some of the characters are doomed to an existence behind closed and shuttered windows which they cannot escape. However, both of these optical phenomena also indicate another somewhat contradictory tendency of Zola's writings. The criss-crossing network of eyes and the multiple window frames break reality into a system of thousands of individual points of view. Although bound by the this-worldly limits of his deterministic philosophy, Zola is constantly trying to soar above these scientistic restrictions imposed upon his poetic genius, and he comes remarkably close to uniting these multiple points of view into an overall, god-like world vision, which Walker calls "the holistic, all-penetrating vision we associate with the eye of an angel or omniscient, all-seeing God".[26]

3. Animals

Throughout the Rougon-Macquart Zola demonstrates his

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[26] Ibid., p. 64.

love and understanding of the animal world. He indicates this in his "Résumé des Notes", in which he states: "Donner une importance aux animaux dans les romans. Créer quelques bêtes, chiens, chats, oiseaux" (V, 1723). In some novels, such as La Joie de Vivre, pets are treated with as much care as the human characters, and they have a personality and identity all their own. In Germinal another important animal character, the old horse Bataille, is treated in a similar sympathetic manner. Philippe Bonnefis emphasizes the great variety and persistency of Zola's allusions to animals throughout his literary career:

> Tout ce qui nage dans les eaux, ce qui vole dans les airs, ce qui marche et rampe sur la terre, avait été comme conjuré par lui, et laché en liberté dans le domaine littéraire dont il était le créateur et le gardien. Plusieurs milliers de métaphores animales viennent, en effet, doubler le récit romanesque, de ses origines à sa fin.27

We are hardly surprised, then, to find many comparisons between humans and animals in La Conquête de Plassans. Almost all the characters are related to animals through figures of speech, and sometimes these associations remain with them throughout the novel. A study of the occurrence of these animal images reveals some significant trends which once again show how even the smallest details

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27 Philippe Bonnefis, "Le Bestiaire d'Emile Zola", Europe, CCCCLXVIII-CCCCLXIX (1968), 97-8.

in Zola's universe conform to the principles that run through the Rougon-Macquart series.

One chapter in particular contains a whole menagerie of animals. It is Chapter VI, in which Abbé Faujas attends Félicité Rougon's soirée for the first time. Zola describes almost every guest by giving him or her a resemblance to some sort of wild beast. An examination of these figures of speech and the countless others in the novel referring to animals reveals that anyone connected with political scheming is compared to ferocious beasts of prey, such as dogs, wolves and weasels. For example, the Trouches, deeply involved in Faujas' scheming, are very often compared to wolves: Mouret remarks, "Ces Trouche, je les sens accroupis derrière leurs rideaux comme des loups a l'affût" (1012), and they stealthily creep about their room "à pas de loup" (1045). Madame Faujas is also compared to canines, since she is likened to a faithful watchdog keeping vigil over her son, "pareille à une de ces figures légendaires gardant un trésor avec la fidélité rogue d'une chienne accroupie" (998). Old Macquart is on several occasions referred to as "un loup rangé" (940, 1101, 1184). Even Abbé Faujas is compared to a fox (1139) and a wolf (1091). Félicité, Faujas' campaign manager, is compared to another sly animal, the weasel, as she sizes up the Abbé: "Elle l'examinait des pieds à la tête, d'un

oeil prompt, revenant au visage, lui fouillant les yeux de son regard de fouine" (949).

These images by no means exhaust Zola's zoological catalogue. Other characters in the political intrigue are compared to even more despicable creatures: Fenil is "malin comme un singe" (1100), and the Marquis de Lagrifoul is "un âne bâté" (956). Faujas' group often seems like a band of pack-rats as they pillage the Mourets' house, even going so far as to sew pouches in their clothing (1160), and they are compared to a swarm of rats at the end of the novel (1194). Even birds are not neglected in Zola's zoo: at times, Faujas is compared to large, sinister birds of prey such as the crow (1000) and the eagle (1166); the insect world is represented by the image of the whole town as a wasps' nest (954).

The overall effect of these comparisons is to suggest that for Zola the world of politics is a sort of Darwinian nightmare, a jungle full of wild beasts preying on each other. We have the impression of being surrounded by the gleaming eyes of hundreds of wild animals waiting to pounce, sniffing and eyeing their victims as they move in for the kill. Not content to merely stalk and hunt, they actually devour their prey, or even each other. Thus Fenil and Faujas are seen in a fight to the finish, in which the bishop jokingly wonders, "S'ils pouvaient se dévorer

l'un l'autre, comme les deux renards dont il ne resta que les deux queues?" (1139) Everywhere there are teeth and fangs, and the verbs "dévorer", "mordre", "manger", "ronger" and so on recur frequently. The Trouches especially are obsessed by the desire to devour everything around them. We see them at their window, drooling at Faujas' successes, "rongés par une envie rageuse de descendre, eux aussi, de goûter aux fruits...". (1045) By the end of the novel, they have nibbled at everything in the Mourets' cupboards:

> Au bord d'une planche, un sac de papier gris, crevé, laissait couler des morceaux de sucre jusque sur le plancher. Plus haut, il apercut une bouteille de cognac sans goulot . . .les bocaux de fruits à l'eau-de-vie tous entamés à la fois, les pots de confiture ouverts et sucés, les fruits mordus, les provisions de toutes sortes rongées, salies comme par le passage d'une armée de rats. (1194)

Faujas is surrounded by "des dents féroces qui mangeaient les murs" (1165); Mme Paloque is a viper coiled to strike at him and sink her fangs in his flesh (1050); and the Rougons, his chief allies, "avaient une rage d'appétits à jouer du couteau au coin d'un bois . . .quelle gloutonnerie, quelle indigestion de bonnes choses!" (951) Even Faujas' mother turns into a voracious monster as she attacks Mouret in the fire scene: "Mme Faujas, qui lui avait enfoncé les dents en pleine gorge, buvait son sang" (1200).

What is the significance of this astounding collection

of beasts who gorge themselves on any available foodstuff, including each other? They may simply represent Zola's hatred of the corrupt, backstabbing type of "politicking" prevalent under the Second Empire; this is supported by the fact that the images of vicious, wild animals devouring each other are strictly limited to characters taking part in the political plot of the novel. Those characters who are unconcerned with the political machinations of the Abbé are still described as animals, but they are usually compared to unintelligent, flaccid creatures. For instance, Aurélie Rastoil is said to "pouss [er] un cri d'hirondelle" (1052); her mother, appropriately enough, is described as a mother hen protecting her brood under her wing (959).

The metaphor of politicians as fierce animals devouring each other or preying on innocent victims is quite common in other novels of the Rougon-Macquart. In La Fortune des Rougon there is a scene which takes place, like Chapter VI of La Conquête de Plassans, at one of Félicité's soirées. In this scene Docteur Pascal Rougon examines the politicians around him, comparing each to an aggressive animal such as a crab, a hunting dog, a preying mantis, and so on (96). In another political novel, La Curée, even the title suggests a hunt and the division of spoils. Zola was very fond of the word "curée", using it to emphasize the voracious appetite and bestial gluttony

of those who stuff themselves on the spoils of the Empire, as in this excerpt from a newspaper article:

> Ah! Quelle curée que le Second Empire! Dès le lendemain du coup d'état . . .ils ont mis les mains aux plats, en plein dans la sauce, mangeant goulûment, s'arrachant les morceaux de la bouche. Ils se sont rués à la satisfaction de leurs appétits, avec un emportement de bête, et lorsqu'ils ont été gorgés, ils ont mangé encore. Ils mangent toujours.[28]

In Son Excellence Eugène Rougon the analogy of the hunt is continued in a piece of obvious symbolism, in which the remains of a stag are thrown to the pack of hunting dogs, who frantically push each other aside to snatch up the best morsels, while the members of the court look on with an air of satisfaction as they pick their teeth or smile "en serrant leurs dents blanches" (II, 184).

The occurrence of savage beasts gorging themselves on the remains of the Second Empire is so prevalent in the Rougon-Macquart that F.W.J. Hemmings considers it fundamental to an understanding of Zola's view of this historical period:

> In the very centre of his vision of the Second Empire was this image of ravening beasts, this eighteen-year-long orgy. The economic historian may talk of the great material prosperity of the era, of booming trade, rising incomes, the steady accumulation of capital wealth. Zola saw it all as a vast champing of tireless jaws, a stuffing

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[28] La Cloche, 13 February 1870, In Kanes, op.cit., p. 223.

> of infinitely capacious bellies, a disgusting and mannerless blow-out.[29]

As well as serving as an analogy to the decline of the Second Empire as it is eaten away by greedy power-seekers, the animal images demonstrate Zola's interest in the popular scientific theories of his time. His belief in the physiological nature of man is mirrored by his constant references to the similarities between man and beast. The brute instincts of procreation and self-preservation are central to his characters and are always to be found beneath the civilized surface appearance. Indeed, Zola is so fascinated by the beast in man that he devoted a whole novel, La Bête humaine, to the study of the fine line separating humanity and bestiality. In La Conquête de Plassans his description of François Mouret's descent into madness reveals a similar interest in this question, since the madman is repeatedly compared to all sorts of animals: cats, dogs, wolves, pigs, and even a worm writhing on the floor.

Zola's enthusiasm for the newly-discovered theories of heredity, environment and evolution may be observed as well in La Conquête de Plassans. The idea of the survival of the fittest in Darwin's Origin of Species (1859)[30] would

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[29]Hemmings, Emile Zola, p. 77.

[30]Translated into French by Clemençe Royer in 1862.

have provided Zola with a good model for his human jungle, in which the creatures face a hostile environment and are constantly engaged in fierce combat. Only the strongest and most callous individuals like Abbé Faujas manage to tame those around them, but even he is pulled down by the ferocious beasts snapping at his heels, who are anxiously awaiting a chance to dethrone the king of the jungle and devour him.

The references to animals are also an indication of Zola's concern for the eternal theme of the life force in its valiant but futile struggle against death. Throughout the Rougon-Macquart we see characters trying to conquer insurmountable odds in order to continue living, only to suffer defeat in the end, their only consolation being that their descendents will be able to carry on the struggle. In La Conquête de Plassans the terrifying imagery of beasts devouring each other forms a parallel to the nightmarish conclusion of the novel, in which death seems to triumph by consuming the main characters in the fire. However, on closer inspection it can be seen that the immense struggle continues: the political jungle carries on the fight with a new set of leaders, Pierre and Félicité Rougon; and the Mourets' children, especially Serge, follow in their parents' erratic footsteps, since they too must combat their excesses of inherited animal instincts. As always in Zola's

cyclical universe, there is no escaping from the treadmill of existence. The struggle for survival in the jungle that is life must continue, even after one generation of creatures has destroyed itself because of its instinct to devour, to control, to possess.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, La Conquête de Plassans is a complex and rich work. It illustrates the many sides of Zola: his interest in science, his social and political concern, and his poetic or visionary tendencies. The richness of La Conquête de Plassans is typical of the depth to be found in the whole Rougon-Macquart. We have seen how Zola's interest in the physiological and psychological theories of his time lead him to concentrate a good deal of his attention upon the depiction of the two mentally-disturbed characters of the novel; Zola shows a similar interest in environment, heredity and abnormal psychology in La Bête humaine, a whole novel devoted to the study of a psychopathic killer. Throughout the Rougon-Macquart Zola is concerned with evolution and the close relationship between man and beast; La Conquête de Plassans illustrates this concern, since it contains many metaphors which equate man's life with that of the animals in a jungle, in which there is a continual struggle for survival. Zola's scientific curiosity leads him to examine his own society, and La Conquête de Plassans, as we have seen, deals mainly with this sociological investigation. Abbé Faujas is essentially a personification of a sociological principle,

the threat of clerical domination. In the novel Zola touches upon the history of the Second Empire in France, and advances the theory that it was doomed to failure because of the greedy speculators that surrounded the Emperor. The novel also provides an accurate portrayal of a typical bourgeois family and the local political system in a small town under the Empire. Zola's concern for history and politics is seen in almost all the other novels of the Rougon-Macquart, notably La Fortune des Rougon and Son Excellence Eugène Rougon; many other volumes of the series, such as Le Ventre de Paris, Germinal and L'Assommoir, contain sociological descriptions of different groups in French society, similar to those in La Conquête de Plassans.

Despite this tendency to look at everything in rationalistic, scientific terms, La Conquête de Plassans also illustrates another contradictory side of Zola's fiction. A close examination of the imagery that Zola uses in the novel reveals that many metaphorical concepts recur over and over again, and significant patterns emerge that demonstrate the poetic or visionary qualities of Zola's works. The Rougon-Macquart is united by a network of epic themes, all of which are present under the surface of La Conquête de Plassans. The images of fire, eyes and windows illustrate the basically closed or

fatalistic nature of Zola's universe: fire indicates the deterministic forces of heredity and symbolizes the sense of catastrophe that looms over the whole Rougon-Macquart; eyes and windows also represent this inescapable closed system, since the characters constantly butt up against symbolic windows which prevent them from carrying out their wishes or ambitions, and a multitude of eyes restrict their freedom. Eyes and windows also demonstrate Zola's fascination with the phenomena of perception and his desire to become a god-like, all-seeing observer of the universe. Another extremely important principle in the series, the conflict between the forces of life, creation and sex with those of death and destruction, is evident in the images of fire as applied to Marthe Mouret, and also in the never-ending struggle for survival expressed by the animal metaphors. The whole novel illustrates the cyclical nature of Zola's universe, for the plot forms an ascending, descending and then re-ascending line, comparable to the life-death-rebirth cycle which underlies Zola's conception of the rise and fall of the Second Empire.

The conflict between these two opposing poles, realism and imaginative fancy, scientific fact and poetry, is thus evident throughout La Conquête de Plassans, as it is in the whole Rougon-Macquart. More than anything else, it is Zola's reconciliation of these diametrically opposed principles into a unified whole that shows his genius as a writer.

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