THE FALL OF THE SECOND EMPIRE IN THE WORK OF

EMILE ZOLA: HISTORY AND THE VISION OF THE ARTIST
THE FALL OF THE SECOND EMPIRE IN THE WORK OF EMILE ZOLA:
HISTORY AND THE VISION OF THE ARTIST

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Je plierai le cadre historique à ma fantaisie, mais tous les faits que je grouperai seront pris à l'histoire.

(Émile Zola)
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INTRODUCTION

While there have been few, if any, comprehensive studies on Emile Zola and history, general surveys of his work invariably devote a chapter to the tableau of the Second Empire presented in his novels. In their assessment of the historicity of Les Rougon-Macquart they mostly conclude, as Georges Lote did in 1918, that, in spite of a certain inexactitude of detail and chronology, the series remains a "miroir véridique d’une époque." ¹

But, as Hemmings has remarked, "the most balanced and informed verdict on the question of Zola’s fidelity to historical fact is that reached by Robert." ² For Robert, while broadly echoing Lote’s conclusions, stressed that "Zola n’a vu de plus en plus dans les faits historiques que leur sens symbolique." ³

For Zola, the fall of the Second Empire meant not only the régime’s disappearance on 4 September 1870. As we shall see, the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune were also inseparably linked to its fall. These three events are described in La Délivrance (1892), but

¹ Georges Lote, "Zola historien du Second Empire", Revue des Études Napoléoniennes, XIV (1918), 87.


this study is neither a critical analysis of that novel, nor an attempt to verify its accuracy as a historical document. It is rather an attempt to assess the literary importance of the fall of the Second Empire in the body of his work, and through a largely textual study of the novels of *Les Rougon Macquart* to see how its historical reality inserts itself into a fictional world. Such an analysis will reveal the true nature of Zola's interpretation of the fall of the Second Empire and its place within a larger poetic vision. "Laissant donc aux historiens," as Girard wrote, "le soin de démêler l'éternelle question (est-elle résoluble?) de la vérité du témoignage, qu'il soit permis de traiter cette œuvre comme une création de l'esprit, comme un poème!"4

I

HISTORY AND THE ARTIST

1. The Dimension of History

Having read Thérèse Raquin (1867), Taine qualified his approval for Zola's early novel by advising the young writer to widen his horizons and to take Balzac and Shakespeare as his masters. He suggested that, rather than being a study of private tragedies, "un livre doit être toujours, plus ou moins, un portrait de l'ensemble, un miroir de la société entière,"¹ and, in his preface² to the second edition of the same novel, Zola implicitly acknowledged Taine's criticism as a valid one and declared that henceforth the novelist must attempt to embrace society in his work: "Il faudrait, en somme, pour que l’écrivain fût maintenant un bon romancier, qu’il vît la société d’un coup d’œil plus large, qu’il la peignît sous ses aspects nombreux et variés" (I, 522).³

Yet Zola, in any case, was profoundly aware of the general trend of the novel since Vigny's call for "l'étude du destin général des sociétés,"⁴ an awareness focused in his immense admiration for


²Dated 15 April 1868.

³All page references incorporated into the text are from Emile Zola: Oeuvres Complètes, ed. Henri Mitterand, 12 vols. (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1966-).

Balzac. Having read the novelist for the first time in 1864, Zola formalized his tribute to Balzac in his paper, entitled "Deux Définitions du Roman", to the Congrès Scientifique of Aix-en-Provence in December 1866, acclaiming him as the creator of the modern novel.\(^5\)

In critical articles during the rest of his life, Zola would remain faithful to his dictum to Anthony Valabrège, in a letter of 29 May 1867. "Je le relis en ce moment," he wrote, "il écrase tout le siècle."\(^6\)

His influence while *Les Rougon-Macquart* was in the embryo-stage would be a formative one, and the self-conscious title of Zola's "Différences entre Balzac et Moi", written on the eve of embarking on the series, is an inadvertent revelation of his debt to the author of *La Comédie Humaine*.

In their *Journal* for 14 December 1868, the Goncourts recorded a visit by Zola, during which he had spoken to them of his plans for "L'Histoire d'une Famille, roman en dix volumes."\(^7\)

Soon afterwards he outlined his plan to his publisher, Lacroix, and defined the series as "l'histoire d'une famille au XIX\(^{\text{e}}\) siècle," thereby adding the dimension of history to his vast biography of a family; but, in crossing out the last three words to replace them by "sous le Second Empire,"\(^8\)

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\(^8\) See Aimé Dupuy, "Le Second Empire vu et jugé par Émile Zola", *L'Information Historique*, II (1953), 50.
history would impose its limits on his fictional world. His readings, his political and journalistic activities before the fall of the Second Empire, all widened the inspiration of Les Rougon-Macquart. His definitive sub-title — "L'Histoire Naturelle et Sociale d'une Famille sous le Second Empire" — points to the exploitation of a ready-made cadre, a framework which would contribute to its greatness.

This conscious insertion of the family into a definite historical context has its theoretical basis in the advocacy of Naturalism to study men in a given social milieu. A self-confessed "humble disciple de M. Taine", Zola would, almost thirty years later, declare:

C'est vers l'âge de vingt-cinq ans que j'ai lu [Taine] et, en le lisant, le théoricien, le positiviste qui est en moi, s'est développé. Je puis dire que j'ai utilisé dans mes livres sa théorie sur l'hérédité et sur les milieux et que je l'ai appliquée dans le roman. ¹⁰

With a few exceptions, heredity does not play a major part in his novels. Above all, for Zola, the importance lies in the simultaneous factors of milieu and moment which determine the lives of his characters. Zola might well have said, as Balzac did, that those characters were "conçus dans les entrailles de leur siècle," ¹¹ but

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whereas Balzac concluded with his famous "la Société française allait être l'historien, je ne devais être que le secrétaire", the author of Les Rougon-Macquart stated, in his "Différences entre Balzac et Moi", that it was not his intention to emulate the Balzacian aim of portraying a whole society:

Je ne veux pas peindre la société contemporaine, mais une seule famille, en montrant le jeu de la race modifiée par les milieux. Si j'accepte un cadre historique, c'est uniquement pour avoir un cadre qui réagisse.

(II, 278-279)

Nevertheless, as can be seen in his gradually changing conception of the novel-series, he tends to lose sight of his biography of a family and to reorientate his interest in the direction of the "cadre historique" itself. Justified on theoretical grounds, the choice of the Second Empire, as the particular historical moment in which his characters move, would also provide the literary historian with the oft-repeated (and only partly valid) remark that Zola would do for the reign of Napoleon III what Balzac had done for the July Monarchy. In spite of those declarations to the contrary, Zola, elsewhere, did not deny his historical ambitions. To Lacroix, he claimed: "Je fais de la haute analyse humaine et je fais de l'histoire" (II, 288).

In L'Oeuvre (1886), Sandoz, the young writer who is

12 Ibid., p. xxix.
13 See Albert Thibaudet's merciless variation on this theme: "Il semble cependant que ce roman du Second Empire ait été un peu à La Comédie Humaine ce que la monarchie du neveu fut à l'Empire de l'Oncle." "Réflexions sur Zola", Nouvelle Revue Française, XLV (1935), 908.
14 "Premier Plan remis à l'éditeur Lacroix".
modelled on Zola himself,15 tells his friend of a planned novel-series that would be "un morceau d'histoire" (V, 567). In the concluding novel of the series, the 1893 epilogue to the major portion of a life's work, Pascal's words are the novelist's own. His recapitulation of the family chronicle parallels Zola's own re-reading of the nineteen preceding novels, as he explains that, as well as being a family biography, "elle est aussi un document d'histoire, elle raconte le Second Empire, du coup d'Etat à Sedan" (VI, 1240).16

2. Zola and the Second Empire

In Le Roman Expérimental (1880), Zola urged the novelist to work with the objectivity of the scientist:

Le romancier n'est plus qu'un greffier qui se défend de juger et de conclure. Le rôle strict d'un savant est d'exposer les faits, d'aller jusqu'au bout de l'analyse, sans se risquer dans la synthèse.

(X, 1240)

Accordingly, the aesthetic doctrine of impartiality consecrated by Flaubert meant that L'Éducation Sentimentale would remain the archetyp of the naturalist novel.17 In Les Romanciers Naturalistes (1881), Zola considered it "le seul roman vraiment historique que je connaisse, le seul, véridique, exact, complet" (XI, 110). But Flaubert's impartiality had been achieved by insisting on the futility and


16 These terms echo the 1871 preface to the opening novel, La Fortune des Rougon.

17 Henri Gérard, Zola's friend and literary disciple, later recalled that it was the Bible of the generation of writers whose creed lay in the doctrines of Naturalism.
the stupidity of 1848 republicans and reactionaries alike. The nature of Zola's temperament would eliminate much of the cynicism and consequently much of the impartiality.

When, in a letter of 20 April 1875, Taine criticised the "parti-pris politique" of the opening novels of the Rougon-Macquart, sententiously declaring that "un artiste est au-dessus de cela, il ne plaide jamais pour un camp", Zola could not reproach him for insisting upon an objectivity that lay at the basis of Zola's own literary theory. But his review of the second volume of Taine's Origines de la France contemporaine (1871-1874) not only reveals his annoyance at being taken to task for his republicanism, by attacking Taine's reactionary interpretation of the French Revolution, but also underlines a contradiction first pointed out to Taine in 1866. Arguing that a reconciliation between the claims of absolute scientific investigation and the temperament of the writer was not possible, he made the point, in his article, that a republican historian would reach conclusions about the French Revolution which would entirely refute those of Taine. Zola was well aware of the logical conclusions of such an argument:

Je sens que j'arrive ainsi à nier la possibilité de parvenir à la vérité historique. Certainement je ne connais pas de livres

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18 Zola would call him "le peintre implacable de la bêtise et de la vilénie humaines." Les Romanciers Naturalistes, (XI, 104).
19 Lapp, "Taine et Zola", 324-325
20 Infra, p. 28
In his fine and sympathetic portrait of the hermit of Croiset, written in 1880 and published in Les Romanciers Naturalistes, Zola contrasted Flaubert's pessimism and bitter nostalgia for an old world to his own faith in the new:

A l'entendre, demain allait nous manquer, nous marchions à un abîme noir; et, quand j'affirmais mes croyances au XIXe siècle, quand je disais que notre vaste mouvement scientifique et social devait aboutir à un épanouissement de l'humanité, il me regardait de ses gros yeux bleus, puis haussait les épaules.

(XI, 137)

As opposed to Flaubert, Zola's liberal idealism, his "nebulous faith in the future," made it inevitable that he should come to take sides.

While seeing no merit in an "histoire-à-thèse", Zola refused to take from positivism the notion that history is a collection of facts. Criticizing Thiers' Histoire du Consulat et de l'Empire, he dismissed its author as being no more than "un compilateur." "L'histoire," he wrote, "vue sous cette angle, perd cette rigidité de syllogisme que nous trouvons, par exemple, chez Louis Blanc." Louis


23 "Thiers, fondateur de la Troisième République", Lettres de Paris, p. 46.
Blanc's partisanship meant, at least, that the conclusions of his Histoire de Dix Ans gave to his historical reconstruction a logic, a structure and a meaning. Zola's own historical tableau would have that same rigidity of construction and interpretation.

Zola's approach to history is nearer that of Hugo than that of Comte (who at least sought to develop causal connections in the objective analysis of history). Haunted by Chateaubriand's exhortation in the Mercure de France of July 1807 that the historian must take on the role of "témoin vengeur", Hugo adopts an entirely subjective vision of history. Thus he could write that "acteur, témoin et juge, je sais historien tout fait."\(^{24}\) In relating the French army's capitulation at Sedan in 1870, Hugo stressed that it was not enough to simply recount the course of events, for "le justicier est condamné à la justice."\(^{25}\) Thus his historical works are no less than merciless indictments. In Le Docteur Pascal (1893), the hero claims, on Zola's behalf, that "il y a de l'histoire pure" in the family chronicle, but he develops this summing-up in terms which leave us in no doubt as to Zola's attitude towards the Second Empire:

Il y a de l'histoire pure, l'Empire fondé dans le sang, d'abord jouisseur et durement autoritaire, conquérant les villes rebelles, puis glissant à une désorganisation lente, s'écroulant dans le sang, une telle mer de sang que la nation entière a failli être noyée.

(VI, 1240)

\(^{24}\)Quoted by Jean-Bertrand Barrère, Hugo: L'Homme et l'oeuvre (Paris: Boivin, 1952), p. 120.

In Zola's panoramic reconstruction of the years 1851-1870, the uneasy synthesis between the naturalist's scientific objectivity and a condemnation of the Second Empire seems to dissolve in the acid of polemic.

It is hardly surprising that this should be the case. Instinctively an opponent of a repressive régime, his antagonism received a political orientation through his journalistic activities in the last years of the Empire, an experience whose importance lies in its being simultaneous to the initial conception of *Les Rougon-Macquart*. In *Le Roman Expérimen- tal* he avowed his debt to his apprenticeship in journalism. He insisted that it was, for the young writer, a unique source of "une connaissance plus douloureuse, mais plus pénétrante du monde moderne" (X, 1272).

Stifled by the law of 17 February 1852, which restricted the freedom of the press to a greater degree than at any time since Napoleon I, the republican and liberal newspapers took their revenge as the Second Empire drew to its close. Denounced as a modern Tiberius or Nero, the nephew of the great Napoleon was subjected to ever-increasing personal attacks in the opposition press after 1866, especially at the hands of the legendary Henri Rochefort. By 1868-1869 the newly emancipated press had been forged into a direct and virulent polemical instrument pledged to the Empire's demise.²⁶ Taking

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²⁶ The founding of *La Marseillaise* by Rochefort on 19 December 1869 marked the climax of such a campaign. One of his principal collaborators, Paschal Grousset, would later recall how "notre programme était bref et nous n'en faisions pas mystère: il s'agissait de faire sauter l'Empire." *Le Rappel*, 17 July 1891. Quoted by Aimé Dupuy, *1870-1871; La Guerre, la Commune, et la presse* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1959), pp. 21-22.
up Gambetta's eloquent denunciation of the largely forgotten events of 1851, the left-wing papers would unceasingly call into question the legitimacy of the régime. An unforgiving and violently hostile democratic opposition recalled the bloodshed that had accompanied the strangling of the Republic in the Coup d'État. In his Fragments Historiques Napoleon III had declared that "the origin of a government influences the whole of its existence."27 After the repression following the seizing of power on 2 December 1851,28 he himself would always be known to his republican enemies as "l'Homme du Deux Décembre" or, as Hugo immortalized him, "Napoléon-le-Petit". His régime, never able to rid itself of the bloodstains of its birth, would live in the shadow of a menacing weapon of revenge which its opponents would hold ready for the moment it should appear to falter.

As part of the journalistic campaign against the imperial régime, Zola's provocative articles would eventually lead to a summons to appear in the courts on 9 August 1870. Only the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War would save him from certain prosecution. "Il juvénalise et il flagelle le gouvernement de la belle façon," wrote

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28 Elected President of the Second Republic on 10 December 1848, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte seized dictatorial powers on 2 December 1851. During the next two days between 200 and 300 were killed in Paris. An insurrection in the provinces was brutally put down. As a result of the Coup d'État there were 27,000 arrests and almost 10,000 people were deported. A year later he declared himself Napoleon III, Emperor of the French.
the Bonapartist journalist Albert Rogat. \textsuperscript{29} The appearance of \textit{La Tribune} on 14 June 1868 saw Zola contributing weekly articles to the paper, many of them of a political nature. \textsuperscript{30} If Zola, in these three newspapers, \textsuperscript{31} voiced his heavy irony for the policies of the régime both at home and abroad, his fundamental indictment remained the moral degeneration of imperial society.

His long article on Balzac in \textit{Le Raipel} of 13 May 1870 praised his masterly portrayal of an aristocracy "tombant en pourriture" (X, 927), and declared that "quinze ou vingt ans plus tard, le Second Empire a réalisé les mœurs de Balzac. L'imagination du Juvénal moderne a même été dépassé par la réalité" (X, 928). Reviewing Arsène Houssaye's \textit{Grande\:Dames}, in \textit{La Cloche} on 29 June 1870, he compared "cette débauche effrénée du Second Empire" to "une fleur malsaine" (X, 935), and reflected that the author's portrait-gallery of the great ladies of imperial high society was indeed a faithful mirror of what Zola called the "bêtise dorée, l'ordure insolente de ces femmes et de ces hommes qui ont besoin de la dictature de César pour bercer leurs nuits d'amour dans le grand silence de la France baillonnée" (X, 936).


\textsuperscript{30} See Martin Kanes, "Zola, Pelletan, and \textit{La Tribune}", \textit{PMLA} LXXIX (1964), 473-483.

\textsuperscript{31} Many of these articles have been collected in \textit{L'Atelier de Zola}. Fragments of these have been cited by Henri Mitterand in his \textit{Zola Journaliste}. Book reviews, including those with political overtones, can be found in the series of articles entitled "Livres d'Avjourd'hui et de Demain", \textit{Oeuvres Complètes}, vol. X.
In his article entitled "La Fin de l'Orgie", the cry "Ah! quelle curée que le Second Empire!" which would echo through his chronicle of the reign, but also a suggestion of the Yeatsian "the centre will not hold" and that the hour of reckoning was at hand:

Depuis dix-huit ans, nous assistons à cette ripaille. Et nous en sommes au dessert à l'heure où tout le monde-là est saoul et se jette les bouteilles vides à la tête. La table est rougie de vin et de sang.

The experience of the intense atmosphere of the last bitter campaigns of the Second Empire provided Zola with a political education. It also provided him with a sense of style, a language forceful in its intensity, emotionally-charged and apocalyptic. It was through La Tribune that he came across the historians who were to become the principal sources of Les Rougon-Macquart. He must have read Eugène Tenot and Noël Blache through their having been quoted in its pages. In January 1869 Taxile Delord's Histoire du Second Empire (1868-1875) was serialized in the paper. In the intellectual atmosphere of the dying Empire Zola would learn as much as he would contribute. Delord's history would provide Zola with a whole source-book of information.

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33 Ibid., p. 223.

34 See his tribute to journalism in his valedictory article in Le Figaro: "C'est encore là, au point de vue spécial du métier, qu'on peut forger son style sur la terrible enclume de l'article au jour le jour," in Une Campagne (1880-1881), LCC, p. 326. See also Kanes, "Zola, Pelletan, and La Tribune", MLA LXXIX (1964), 475-476.

35 Zola freely admitted his debt to Delord's book.
An ardent Republican, he was hardly the model of an impartial historian. Zola would be guided by the general spirit of the work, would make the same accusations as to the moral state of the country, and would adopt Delord's portrait of Napoleon III.

On August 29, 1869, Zola reviewed Blache's *Histoire de l'Insurrection du Var en décembre 1851* in *La Tribune*, and, while praising the historian for having assumed the role of "un juge qui a construit l'affaire sur le théâtre même du crime," he joined the author in refusing to bow to the wishes of those who wanted to forget 2 December 1851 and the guilty origins of the reign:

Cherchez plutôt à effacer la tache de sang qui souille, à la première page, l'histoire du Second Empire. Appelez vos fonctionnaires, appelez vos soldats, et qu'ils s'usent les doigts à vouloir enlever cette tache. Après vous, elle reparaira, elle grandira et coulera sur toutes les autres pages. Started in the winter of 1868-1869, and almost certainly entirely written by the end of that year, Zola's opening novel of the series, *La Fortune des Rougon* (1871), has its central idea in this article. Its serial publication in *Le Siècle* in the summer of 1870 added

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36 Mitterrand gives the date of this article as 20 August 1869. See Zola *Journaliste*, p. 96. As the text of the article has been cited from *L'Atelier de Zola* the date given by its editor has been used.

37 *L'Atelier de Zola*, p. 197. Note the Hugolian overtones.


39 *La Fortune des Rougon* was published in *Le Siècle* from 28 June to 10 August 1870. Interrupted by the Franco-Prussian War, serial-publication was resumed in 1871. The last chapters of the novel appeared between 18 and 21 March 1871. The first complete edition appeared on October 14, 1871. See Henri Mitterrand, "La Publication en Feuilleton de *La Fortune des Rougon*, *Mercure de France*, CCCXXXVII (1959), 531-536.
fuel to the polemical attack on the Empire which centered on the Coup d'État of 1851. The novel takes its events from Blache and from Eugène Tenot's *La Province en décembre 1851* (1868), and is the clearest proof of the extent to which Zola's journalistic activities at this time contributed to the satirical perspective of the early volumes of *Les Rougon-Macquart*.

In the novel a young couple are given a symbolic role. In his plan for *La Fortune des Rougon* Zola conceived Silvère as "l'âme même de la jeune République" (II, 289), and the young girl, Miette, is seen as "la vierge Liberté" (II, 46). Their idyllic courtship seals the relationship between the Republic and Liberty. Their deaths at the hands of the supporters of Louis Napoleon symbolise the crime that has been committed.

This crime is seen in terms of blood-imagery. As Pierre and Félicité Rougon, the bonapartist plotters, sleep, after having provoked and planned an uprising that will be followed by the brutal and dramatic repression necessary to fully secure their position as "les défenseurs de l'ordre," their guilt takes on hallucinatory forms:

> Au plafond, la tache de lumière s'arrondissait comme un oeil terrifié, ouvert et fixé sur le sommeil de ces bourgeois blêmes, suant le crime dans les draps, et qui voyaient en rêve tomber dans leur chambre une pluie de sang, dont les gouttes larges se changeaient en pièces d'or sur le carreau. (II, 239)

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40 For Zola's sources for this novel and the use he made of them, see Paul Raphaël, "Le Fortune des Rougon et la réalité historique", *Mercure de France*, CLXVII (1923), 104-118.

41 Law and Order was Louis Napoleon's political platform.
The next day Pierre accidently steps on a hand of one of the bodies left lying in the square for the worthy citizens' edification. The bloodstains on the sole of his shoe and on the pavement parallel the "tache de sang" in the article on Blache. The blood-symbolism of the novel is summed up in the final paragraph, for as Pierre, the new Receiver of Plassans, is decorated for his services with the red ribbon of the Légion d'Honneur, Zola recalls the deaths of his predecessor in that long-coveted position, and of Silvère, executed on the tombstone where he had courted his love:

Le chiffon de satin rose, passé à la boutonnière de Pierre, n'était pas la seule tache rouge dans le triomphe des Rougon. Oublié sous le lit de la pièce voisine, se trouvait encore un soulier au talon sanglant. 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-Mitre, sur la pierre tombale, une mare de sang se caillait.

(II, 274)

When he began Les Rougon-Macquart his novels were more or less topical material. Dealing with the period 1850-1870 at a distance of twenty years he was writing a historical novel. The fall of the Second Empire in 1870 inevitably decreased the polemical topicality of his fiction. Nevertheless, for all his claims, in his "Notes sur la marche de l'oeuvre", that he was aiming at a scientific and objective history, "que je mets à part la discussion de l'état politique" (II, 278), the 1871 preface to La Fortune des Rougon announced that his novels would be a chronicle of what he called "une étrange époque de folie et de honte" (II, 19). In his article on Blache he had said that the blood in the first page of the history of the Second Empire would colour all the following pages. Zola's open-
ing novel would also determine and define the direction of his historical reconstruction.

Its central thesis is that a society, riddled by moral and material corruption, must soon exhaust itself and meet its end in a terrible disaster. It is the thesis of republican polemics, to which Zola contributed in the journalistic world of 1868-1870. It is the thesis of the historians whom Zola would use as his sources. An examination by Martin Kanes of the section of the preparatory dossier of La Bête Humaine (1886) entitled "Histoire et Politique" revealed on the one hand that these notes, taken at random, seemed to bear no relation to the novel, but on the other that, even so long after the régime's disappearance, they were all energetically anti-bonapartist. 42 It must be understood that Delord, for instance, was not merely an "ardent Republican." He was also a sworn enemy of the Empire, violently campaigning against the régime in the newspapers before entering the political arena in 1871. Another source, 43 Louis-Ernest Hamel, the author of Histoire Illustrée du Second Empire (1874), was writing for popular consumption and political effect. Zola would take from these historians not only the facts, but also their interpretation of those facts. Zola's deliberate neglect of the greatness of the reign and his utter abandonment of the objectivity of naturalist theory would mean that the scope and value of Zola's tableau for the historian has

42 See his La Bête Humaine: A Study in Literary Creation, (Berkeley: California University Press, 1962), p. 3.
43 Particularly for Son Excellence Eugène Rougon (1876).
the severe limitations of any thesis based on republican polemics, whether that of the pamphleteer, the historian, the novelist or the poet.

In summing up Zola's activities as a journalist under the Empire, Henri Mitterrand wrote:

A relire Les Châtiments, et à travailler aux côtés des avocats de la démocratie radicale, Zola s'est pris au jeu, et est devenu un des journalistes les plus acharnés à la perte de l'Empire. A la manière hugolienne, il a conçu une interprétation épique de la naissance, de l'histoire et de la décadence du régime, dont il prévoit l'écroulement à brève échéance, dans la honte et le sang.44

The parallel with Hugo is surely a valid one. In a little-known article in Le Gaulois in August 1895, Zola fully admitted that, in the ignorance of his twenties, "en plein Empire," he had firmly believed Napoleon III to be as Hugo had described him:

Le bandit, le ruffian, le "voleur de nuit" qui, selon l'expression célèbre, avait allumé sa lanterne au soleil d'Austerlitz, Dame. J'avais grandi au roulement des foudres de Victor Hugo. Napoléon-le-Petit était pour moi un livre d'histoire d'une vérité absolue.45

He hastened to add that "j'en suis revenu depuis," but, in laying the foundations for, and in writing, Les Rougon-Maccuaut, his attitude towards the Second Empire retains more than a trace of the savage anger of the great poet in exile.

44 Zola Journaliste, p. 97.
45 Quoted by Aimé Dupuy, "Le Second Empire vu et jugé par Emile Zola", p. 54.
3. The Fifth Act

Zola's original "Liste des Romans", sent to Lacroix in 1868-1869, envisaged a novel on the Italian war of 1859 against Austria, describing the life of a soldier and the relationship of the Army to the Empire. Within three years, the events of that campaign paled into insignificance and such a book was never written. His study of the military circles of the Empire would eventually insert itself into a novel far greater in its scope and meaning. The fall of the Second Empire in 1870 meant that his novel-series would no longer be a contemporary chronicle and that he would be the historian of a vanished society. As Hemmings has suggested, he could have preserved the contemporaneity of his series by modifying his plan and extending the time-scale of *Les Rougon-Macquart* into the early years of the Third Republic. But he decided against this on artistic grounds, for "the crushing finality of the Franco-Prussian War was a fifth act which history itself seemed to be proposing to the dramatist."46

For Hugo too the fall of the Second Empire would add a classical dimension to his history of the Coup d'État, dramatically conceived in four acts.47 The war of 1870 would provide the dénouement of Act V — "La Chute". If the régime's fall was politically inevitable,48 then it was also aesthetically so to Zola's series. On the

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47 "Le Guet-Apens", "La Lutte", "Le Massacre", "La Victoire", in *Histoire d'un crime*.

48 Supra, p. 14
fictional level it provides a fine ending and, on 1 July 1871,\(^4\)
in the important preface to *La Fortune des Rougon*, Zola admitted that
it would give to his series a note of finality and completeness:

Depuis trois années, je rassemblais les documents de ce grand
ouvrage, et le présent volume était même écrit, lorsque la chute
des Bonaparte, dont j'avais besoin comme artiste, et que toujours
je trouvais fatallement au bout du drame, sans l'espérer si pro-
chaine, est venue me donner le dénouement terrible et nécessaire
de mon ouvrage. Celle-ci est, dès aujourd'hui, complète; elle
s'agit dans un cercle fini.

(II, 19)

Zola's claim that, in *La Curée* (1871), "c'est une nouvelle
Phèdre que je vais faire,"\(^5\) and his conscious modelling of the fate
of Rouan, in *La Terre* (1887), on that of Lear, bear witness to Guy
Robert's demonstration of Zola's affinities with the classics and his
feelings for classical tragedy.\(^6\)

Above all, he takes from the classics their rigidity of
structure. In *Les Trente-Six Situations Dramatiques*, not only does
Georges Polti list almost every Zola novel as illustrating a type of
dramatic situation, but Zola's titles frequently stand beside those
of the Greek tragedians. Wenger noted that "though Zola's novels
may often begin in Balzacian rhythm, his catastrophes are most often
classical."\(^7\) In *Le Roman Expérimental* Zola was to lay great stress

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\(^4\) Maurice Le Blond, in his earlier edition of *La Fortune des
Rougon*, gives the date of this preface as 11 July 1871.

\(^5\) See Appendix to *La Curée*, LOC, p. 330

\(^6\) See Guy Robert, "Zola et le Classicisme", Revue des Sciences

\(^7\) J. Wenger, "The Art of the Flashlight. Violent Technique in
on the capital importance of "l'enchaînement logique des faits" (X, 1240) within the novel. This internal logic of cause and effect allows us to apply to all Les Rougon-Macquart what Robert said of La Terre when he spoke of the tension of its truly tragic dimension.53 The series may be too long for us to grasp fully such a tension, but each individual novel has an inexorable quality about it, and, in some, an acceleration towards catastrophe that give to the series as a whole the general dramatic movement of a classical tragedy. In a review of L'Education Sentimentale, in Le Voltaire, on 9 December 1879, Zola, while comparing himself unfavourably to Flaubert's photographic exactitude of detail, admitted going "très souvent plus loin que les choses" in order to "enlever une finale à grand orchestre" (XII, 608). We shall see, later in this study, how Zola manipulates reality to reinforce the tragic progression of the novels and of the series towards a catastrophe that was not fictional but historical.

Writing to his admirer J. Van Santen Kolff, the Dutch critic, in a letter dated 14 November 1887, Zola explained that the novel that he had planned about war "ne sera que le dix-neuvième, l'avant-dernier."54 He was profoundly aware of the place it would have in the


series. Le Docteur Pascal would be his conclusion and his epilogue. Le Débâcle (1892) would relate the last episode of the history of the Second Empire. In his work, the rise and fall of Napoleon III would have the symmetry of a classical tragedy. Founded in blood, it had appropriately crumbled in blood. It would make of Zola’s cycle a closed circle.

The inexorability and the internal logic of Zola’s novels are justified by his determinism. In his preliminary notes to the series, he stressed the need for "la logique de la déduction" and revealed that he was under no illusions as to the scientific validity of Prosper Lucas’ theories of heredity. Nevertheless, the subordination of characters to physiological laws intensifies the drama of the action and the relentlessness of the sweep towards catastrophe. As they are also utterly at the mercy of circumstances and events, heredity, milieu, and history, together take on the dimension of the implaceable fates of the Greeks and Romans. "Il ne faut plus," wrote Zola,55 "user du mot 'fatalité', qui serait ridicule dans dix volumes."56

Placing Zola alongside Tolstoy and Roger Martin du Gard, Albérès makes explicit such a concept of Fate:

On trouve, en effet, chez les grands romanciers naturalistes, l'affrontement de l'homme et de son destin. Une forme "positiviste" de la tragédie et du pathétique, où les fatalités biologiques et historiques remplacent celles de la passion et du

55 "Notes générales sur la nature de l'oeuvre" (1868-1869), Appendix to La Fortune des Rougons, LOC, p. 356.

56 The original plan of Les Rougon-Macquart envisaged 10 vols. This was progressively increased to the final 20.
pêché, ou la malveillance des dieux. 57

Politically inevitable, and aesthetically necessary to Zola's series, the fall of the Second Empire was also "fatalement au bout du drame". Levin's truisms makes a valid point: "After we learn the destiny of anything, we can see it all as predetermined." 58 The cataclysm of history reinforces the internal fatality of all those novels of Les Rougon-Macquart written after 1870, and not only gives a unity and a meaning to what might otherwise have remained a series of superficially-linked episodes, but also allows Zola's reader to see the final catastrophe within a perspective of the "consummata est" of Destiny.

It is within such perspectives that we can apply to Zola's novels Albérès' general statement that, in the naturalist vision, "la destinée humaine y est entièrement replacée dans la destinée sociale et historique, drame collectif et drame individuel s'y équilibrent parfaitement." 59 The sub-title of Les Rougon-Macquart not only dates his "dramatis personae", it also hints at a link between the fortunes of the family and the Second Empire. Following Taine's advice, the tragedies of individuals are less "faits divers" than representative of the movement of historical events. The focus on a single family provides a synthesis of private and public destinies,


58 Levin, op. cit., p. 353.

59 Albérès, op. cit., p. 77.
as the Rougon-Macquart keep pace with the rising and falling cadence of two imperial decades.

In his preface to *La Fortune des Rougon* he stated that the family would recount the history of the Empire "à l'aide de leurs drames individuels" (II, 19). To Lacroix he disclosed his intention to "incarner dans des individus la société contemporaine" (II, 287), and went on to declare that "les Rougon-Macquart personnifieront l'époque, l'Empire lui-même" (II, 288).

It is, above all, the Rougon members of the family whose destiny walks hand in hand with that of the Empire. The opening novel describes how their fortune is born at Plassans simultaneously to that of Napoleon III in Paris. It is not merely a coincidence of dates. They are two adventures which mirror each other, and the events in Plassans are a microcosm of those in the capital. Zola insists that these are two dynasties founded in blood, that the triumph of the Rougons reflects the 1799 criminal origins of Bonapartist rule, now renewed by Louis-Napoleon. Thus Félicité is told that "on ne fonde une nouvelle dynastie que dans une bagarre. Le sang est un bon engrais. Il sera beau que les Rougon, comme certaines illustres familles, datent d'un massacre" (II, 93). When Pierre, having taken over the Hôtel de Ville, appears before the assembled townspeople in the role of the hero who has saved them from revolution and anarchy, he accepts their gratitude "avec des allures de prince prétendant dont un coup d'État va faire un empereur" (II, 206). Félicité, at the triumphal banquet, savours the prospective rush for the spoils and, in
her day-dreams, "elle entrait dans ses Tuileries" (II, 267). The novel's conclusion makes explicit both its title and such a synthesis of destinies: "Comme il avait relevé la fortune des Bonaparte le coup d'Etat fondait la fortune des Rougon" (II, 273).

The young Pascal's prophetic vision, in this same novel, of the family's future as "une meute d'appétits lâches et assouvis, dans un flamboiement d'or et de sang" (II, 263) is also that of the epoch. The lives of many of them are tied to the fortunes of the Second Empire. Both are marked by the triumph of greed. Eugène, who, in Son Excellence Eugène Rougon (1876), declares "Noi, j'ai poussé avec l'Empire; je l'ai fait et il m'a fait" (III, 342), watches over the family and the régime, two destinies which become one, in his continual re-appearance in the series to protect the interests of both.

Yet, in what was nothing less than an anticipation of history, he also told Lacroix, in 1868-1869, that as a result of their frenetic and vertiginous existences "les Rougon-Macquet brûleront comme une matière qui se dévore elle-même; ils épuisèrent leur corps et leur esprit en trois générations, parce qu'ils auront vécu trop vite" (II, 289).60 He was acutely aware, as he had shown in "La Fin de L'Orgie", 61 that the moral disintegration of the Second Empire could lead only to disaster. He would, after a disaster more terrible than

60 This was the version later authorised for publication. The original manuscript of the "Notes sur la marche générale de l'oeuvre" prefaced an almost identical passage by the dramatic "Fatigue et chute." See Appendix to La Fortune des Rougon, LOC, p. 354.

he could ever have conceived of, lead his characters to the same downfall. In almost direct contrast to Stendhal, who composed his novels without having pre-determined the fate of his heroes, Zola told his interviewer that in the case of his own characters all was foreseen at the outset:

Tout est prévu, déterminé, réglé. Je sais encore plus où ils iront que d'où ils partent. Ils ne traversent pas, au hasard, une époque ou une suite d'événements; ils sont le produit de cette époque, le résultat de ces événements, et ils vont fatalement à un but.  

In the closing novel of the series, an old Félicité Rougon comes to visit Pascal and tells him of her husband's death. After the 18-year long orgy of over-sated appetites, his death from indigestion is surely evidence of Zola's ironic humour:

Son mari, devenu si gros, qu'il ne se remuait plus, avait succombé, étouffé par une indigestion, le 3 septembre 1870 dans la nuit du jour où il avait appris la catastrophe de Sedan. L'écroulement du régime, dont il se flattait d'être un des fondateurs, semblait l'avoir foudroyé.

(VI, 1167)

Clearly, in this case, the synthesis of destinies is seen at its most elementary level. In other novels, however, such a technique is exploited for symbolic effect. Blood is at the dawn and at the sunset of both destinies. Linked in their triumphant élan, the Empire of Napoleon III and its incarnation in the Rougon-Macquart, disappear together, swept aside by the gods at the fall of the curtain.

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63 The Second Empire actually fell on 4 September 1870, two days after the French capitulation at Sedan.
4. The Artist

Zola's historical ambitions may be explicit, but as we discuss the place of the fall of the Second Empire in his work with reference to structure, character, and Fate, it becomes increasingly apparent that his approach to history is not only polemical but also artistic.

When he objected that Taine's method ignored the personality of the writer, the application of such a criterion was not to be restricted to the interpretation of historical fact. The criticism formulated in Zola's 1866 article on Taine in La Revue Contemporaine is already present in a letter of August 1864 to Anthony Valabrègue, written soon after discovering Taine and reading his Histoire de la littérature anglaise (1863) for the first time. Here, however, it is immediately followed by his own "Théorie des Ecrans", which defines art as reality refracted through the temperament of the artist. His oft-quoted "Une œuvre d'art est un coin de la création vu à travers un tempérament" (X, 38) must be insisted on in the sense that he meant it. "Le mot 'réaliste'," he wrote, "ne signifie rien pour moi, qui déclare subordonner le réel au tempérament" (XII, 797).

64 Supra, p. 8
65 "Je supplie seulement M. Taine de faire une part plus large à la personnalité." La Revue Contemporaine, 15 February 1866, reprinted in Mes Haines (1866), (X, 153).
66 Correspondance I, LOC, pp. 248-257
67 In his article entitled "Toudhon et Courbet", Le Salut Public, 26 and 31 July 1865. Reprinted in Mes Haines
68 In his article entitled "Le Moment Artistique", L'Événement, 4 May 1866. Reprinted in Mes Haines.
Zola is in no way a prisoner of the doctrines of Le Roman Experimental. In his 1882 preface to Une Campagne he explained the true nature of his relationship to his theoretical tracts of the preceding two years:

Sans doute, on a pu confondre le romancier et le critique; on a vu dans mes études un plaidoyer personnel, lorsque j'étais beaucoup plus modestement le porte-drapeau d'un groupe, ou mieux encore le greffier d'une période littéraire. Mais je le répète, avec le recul des années, tout se mettra en place. On séparera le critique du romancier.69

A comparison between his 1869 and 1879 reviews of L'Education Sentimentale serves to prove how propagandist in inspiration is the self-conscious article of the later period.70 It was in the first of these, in La Tribune of 28 November 1869, that he noted "une étonnante dualité" (X, 917) in Flaubert's genius, an alertness to the stresses within the novelist no doubt due to Zola's awareness of the conflict between his own artistic temperament and the demands of doctrinaire realism.

The divorce between Zola's creative work and his critical theories leads to a constant duality within his fiction, or "les deux Zola".71 His prodigious and legendary documentation is, on the theoretical level, an attempt to give a scientific value to the novel. But Zola also admitted the impossibility of his working in a poetic

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69 Une Campagne, LOC, p. ix.
While his documentation is a disciplinary force and a guarantee of authenticity, even historical sources become material for poetic elaboration. If the Zola novel mingles documentary truth and imaginative speculation, it is only with such a guarantee that he can achieve a dialectic between document and symbol. Grateful to Henri Céard for recognizing the poet within him, he proceeded to explain to him "le mécanisme de mon œil": "J'ai l'hypertrophie du détail vrai, le saut dans les étoiles sur le tremplin de l'observation exacte. La vérité monte d'un coup d'aile jusqu'au symbole." In a penetrating analysis of this "mécanisme", through examining Zola's preliminary work-notes, Mitterand has shown that the external world is seized at two levels not consecutively but simultaneously, those of reality and symbol, and that consequently all that is not significant is eliminated if it does not serve to illustrate the a priori conception of the novel.

This fundamentally contradicts his claim, in Le Roman Expérimental, that the naturalist writer "ne fabrique pas une charpente de..."


toutes pièces selon les besoins d'une idée conçue à l'avance. On part de ce point de vue que la nature suffit; il faut l'accepter telle qu'elle est, sans la modifier ni la rogner en rien" (X, 1239–1240). For Zola does indeed start from a pre-conceived idea and arranges reality accordingly. Lemaître noted that Zola observed reality "avec des idées préconçues".\textsuperscript{75} If the "ébauches" of the novels sketch the plan of the action only in general terms, they also reveal a symbolic intention that determines the direction of the work and that is clearly established prior to the documentation. In his remarkable study of \textit{La Terre} Robert demonstrates that Zola's conception of the peasantry was fixed long before the process of documentation had started.\textsuperscript{76} The myth that this process was basic to his method of composition was shattered by Zola himself in 1896, when he admitted that he never allowed any discovery that he might make in the course of his researches to interfere with what he conceived to be an artistic necessity to the novel he was working on:

Lorsque Flaubert, après de longs mois d'enragée poursuite, avait enfin réuni tous les documents d'une œuvre, il n'avait plus pour eux qu'un grand mépris. J'ai ce mépris complet, les notes ne sont que des moellons dont un artiste doit disposer à sa guise, le jour où il bâtit son monument. J'use, sans remords, de l'erreur volontaire, quand elle s'impose par une nécessité de construction.\textsuperscript{77}


\textsuperscript{76}"La Terre" d'Émile Zola, pp. 40–41.

Replying to Jules Huret's "Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire" in 1891, Mallarmé insisted that it was Zola's "merveilleuse organisation" that lay at the basis of what was nothing less than an "art évocatoire". Writing to Zola himself two years later, it was he who congratulated the novelist on becoming an Officier de la Légion d'Honneur on the occasion of the completion of his series, or of what Mallarmé called "votre prodigieux poème." 79

Reviewing Goncourt's Les Frères Zemganno (1879), Zola had considered it "de la réalité poétique, c'est-à-dire de la réalité acceptée, puis traitée en poème" (X, 1326). In the "ébauches" of his own novels Zola would go a step further. For if such notes indicate in what sense the author will tailor reality to his demands, they also often conceive the novel as a poem and frequently mean, therefore, that each novel can be seen as the working-out of an essentially poetic idea. La Terre would be "le poème vivant de la terre"; Le Ventre de Paris (1873) would be "le poème du ventre"; Nana (1880) would be "le poème des désirs du mâle"; Au Bonheur des Dames (1883) would be "le poème de l'activité moderne". 80 The same word is repeated again and again. Such a poetic conception of the Zola novel,

before the actual research, reveals the true nature of the temperament of the artist, of the lens, and of his vision of reality.

His theoretical standpoint is that of impersonality and of total objectivity within the limits of his own definition of a work of art, but there is little doubt that the reality he grasps is intensely subjective. Through repetition, exaggeration, and the accumulation of images, reality is not so much distorted through the artistic lens as given an epic and a poetic dimension. A merciless opponent of those who worshipped in the gothic cathedral of Romanticism, he would, nevertheless, never completely discipline his romantic temperament and would use many of their literary techniques.

Maupassant rightly identified his place in the Romantic tradition:

"Mais fils des romantiques, romantique lui-même dans tous ses procédés, il porte en lui une tendance au poème, un besoin de grandir, de grossir, de faire des symboles avec les êtres et les choses." 81

His use of myth is far from being a matter of literary embellishment. As Walker has shown, 82 it is woven into the fabric of reality to provide Zola with countless analogies, metaphors and symbols, with which to illustrate and explain his philosophy of history. At times the Zola metaphor breaks free from its object and myth takes over to express a private vision, while political

81 Guy de Maupassant, "Emile Zola", La Revue Bleue, XXXI (1883), 289-294. Quoted by Proulx, op. cit., p. 46. See also Flaubert's letter to Zola at the end of June 1879: "Et je maintiens que vous êtes un joli romantique. C'est même à cause de cela que je vous admire et vous aime". Correspondance VIII, 279.

82 See Phillip D. Walker's excellent article, "Prophetic Myths in Zola", PHIL, LXXIV (1959), 444-452.
and social analysis is relegated to a minor role. At others the contradictions of that analysis only find themselves reconciled in the world of myth. Thus in L'Argent (1891), for example, while he foresees the end of capitalism he also displays his admiration for the creative energy that accompanies the disasters. Money is seen as a life-force and financial speculation as the manure to fertilise the growth of the developments of the future. Under the influence of the poetic temperament of the artist, we go beyond the literal and sometimes lose contact with reality.

Such apparent contradictions in his social or political views can only be explained if we understand that the poet's world, or his vision, exists independently of any historical setting or of the dimension of history added to his work in 1868-1869. The myths of Catastrophe and Hope, of Sterility and Fecundity, hold a permanent place in the universe of the poet. In Les Rougon-Macquart the conflict of the two central forces at work, of Life against Death, is seen within the framework of history but remains essentially unchanged. If, a vast documentation gives a quasi-scientific value to the springboard of the poet, his pre-conceived interpretation of history has its basis in a poet's world. If, as Mitterand suggests, he seizes the external world at a poetic and symbolic level, he also organises and orders the reality of the Second Empire within these same

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perspectives. The most interesting assessment of Zola's historical achievement, from a literary standpoint, remains that of Guy Robert:

Les Rougon-Macquart... constitute dans l'ensemble un bon document d'histoire. Mais cette fidélité au réel est moins due à un examen minutieux des faits qu'à la sûreté et à l'am-pleur d'une sorte de vision qui habitait le romancier. Elle ne lui offrit pas seulement le spectacle d'une société; elle lui révéla surtout, et de mieux en mieux, la présence des forces de Vie et de Mort, l'action de la Pécondité, et des grands mythes de la Catastrophe et de l'Espérance. S'agit-il même d'une vision? Bien plutôt de l'acte d'un poète qui, d'un geste rude, parfois brutal, mais souverain, ordonne l'ensemble d'un monde.84

This "sorte de vision qui habitait le romancier" finds its earliest complete expression in Zola's "Les Quatre Journées de Jean Gourdon", a short story which appeared in several instalments between December 1866 and February 1867,85 and which was reprinted, in 1874, in Nouveaux Contes à Ninon. The narrative of the life of a peasant, in four periods, from adolescence to old age, parallel to the four seasons of the year, it exemplifies Zola's preference for a rigourously symmetrical construction and is both a realist and a symbolist tale. Composed three years before Les Rougon-Macquart, its main themes are those of the great novel-series. Here we have man and nature seen within a cyclical pattern, where violence and serenity, cataclysm and peace, destruction and fertility, are in perpetual conflict, forces which man is unable to control. Here we have Zola's themes in a primitive state, not strengthened or shaped by history, events which have

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85 In L'Illustration, 15, 29 December 1866; 5, 12, 26 January 1867; 2, 9, 16 February 1867.
no particular historical setting or precise dates. It is essentially what we might call the "pre-historic" Zola world, and later references to it will attempt to underline how, rather than determining the nature of the Zola world, it is history which inserts itself into the patterns of the poet's universe.

In his "Notes Sur la marche générale de l'oeuvre" Zola had immediately conceived of the series in terms of ascension and fall. These do not yet assume a symbolic value, but his awareness of the one inevitably preceding the other also means that contraries are already evident in the vague outline for Les Rougon-Macquart. Throughout the series the two forces, in the struggle of life and death, run side by side in alternating ascendency. As the Second Empire recedes into the past, and particularly after 1885, he is studying not so much a particular historical moment as the ever-present forces at work in society as a whole. Fascinated by the theme of world destruction and renewal, the documentary aspect becomes subordinated to symbolic intentions.

In Zola's portrayal of the Second Empire, as we have seen, the importance of the catastrophe of 1870 is structural and artistic rather than historical. In a letter thanking Frantz Jourdan for the information supplied for Au Bonheur des Dames, he regretted that he could not use the architect's sketch of a modern department store.

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86 Supra, p. 26
87 Supra, pp. 20-27
for fear of incensing the critics:

D'abord mes scènes se passent avant 1870, et je ne puis faire d'anachronisme sans ameuter toute la critique. Ah! quel beau décor je ferais avec votre bazar, si je n'étais pas tenu par mes scrupules d'historien.

Nevertheless such noble scruples would not restrain him from including in his novels those anachronisms dictated by dramatic needs. The artistic unity imposed on his series by the focus on 1870 would severely undermine the historian's integrity in the same way. The necessity of telescoping his time-scheme left him with all the problems of developing five successive generations within eighteen years, and of correlating characters' lives to historical events. He admitted, to Fernand Xau, after the appearance of Nana, that the timing of the fall of the Second Empire had caused him considerably more difficulties than he had cared to admit in his 1871 Preface to La Fortune des Rougon:

Je prévoyais 1870, mais, je l'ai déjà dit, la chute est venue plus tôt que je ne le supposais. J'avais établi l'âge de mes personnages, et je comptais, en quelque sorte, développer leur existence au prorata de la mienne. Mes personnages se sont cassé le nez contre 1870, je le reconnais bien volontiers. De même je concède que j'ai dû tricher et que Nana, par exemple, fait en trois ou quatre ans ce qu'elle devait faire en dix ans. La raison en est que je n'ai pas voulu déborder du Second Empire.

An examination of the preparatory dossier of La Curée (1871) revealed the liberty taken by Zola in the arrangement of the chronology to suit his purpose, and that he himself had noted that "il faudra

88 Letter of 18 May 1882, Correspondance II, LOC, pp. 585-586
89 Supra, p. 21.
90 Xau, op. cit., p. 51.
absolument mentir sur les dates". To Ludovic Halévy, who had complained "que les dates manquent dans votre livre", he gave a detailed explanation of the time-scheme in L'Oeuvre but concluded by admitting that "la seule vérité est que, pour des raisons trop longues à vous expliquer, j'ai dû, comme dans presque tous les romans de la série hélas! précipiter les événements et les entasser les unes sur les autres." The notes for Les Rougon-Macquart reveal an ever-increasing frustration at the complexities of the chronology of his novels. When he came to write Le Docteur Pascal (1893) it was necessary for him to check and revise the chronology of the series as a whole, and, in so doing, he unconsciously revealed his attitude to the whole problem of dating fictional events within a historical framework:

D'après l'Âge de Félicité et de Rougon, La Conquête de Flåssans doit se placer en 1858. Et Tante Dide n'est donc aux Tuilettes que depuis 7 ans. J'ai dit qu'elle y était depuis 12 ans. C'est donc un chiffre à corriger. D'ailleurs, tout remettre à l'année 1858. Non, toute Le Conquête de Flåssans doit se passer en 1864 (fin du roman) à cause des élections de 1863. La mort de Marthe est en '64. Corriger les Âges de Félicité et de Rougon.

In composing La Debâcle (1892) he had had to assess the duration of La Terre and, after calculating Jean Macquart's age, he concluded almost to his own surprise: "Donc La Terre dure environ dix ans." But La Terre seems without duration, only dated by its close. Its

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93 Ibid., p. 97.
94 Appendix to La Dæbacle, LOC, p. 625.
background is one complete cyclical year, and thus, in the same way as "Les Quatre Journées de Jean Gourdon" lasts a lifetime and describes only each of the four seasons of the year in turn, it is the artist and not the historian who controls the wheel of time.

The dates of many of the novels can only be adduced through calculating, as Zola was forced to himself, the ages of re-appearing characters. Nevertheless those fictional events which are consciously inserted into a definite historical context reveal that, at the basis of Zola's deliberate eclecticism in his exegesis of historical fact, lie motives which are less polemical than poetic. As Turnell writes, "the two fundamental facts about the Empire, from a novelist's point of view, are a convulsive rise followed by a sickening collapse." Thus, after the opening novel, Zola describes not the political

95 Into the category of novels whose action is totally divorced from history fell the following (and the periods they cover): La Fatale de l'Abbé Mouret (1866-1867); Une Page d'Amour (1853-1855); La Joie de Vivre (1860-1875); Le Rêve (1867-1868); Le Docteur Pascal (1872-1874). Of the other novels L'Oeuvre (1862-1876) describes the artistic movement under the Second Empire but, like La Joie de Vivre, extends past the régime's fall without even mentioning the war or the political upheaval of 1870-1871. Au Bonheur des Dames (1864-1869) describes a phenomenon as common after 1870 as before, and the story of the rise of the big department-store makes no reference to historical events in the period it covers. L'Assommoir (1850-1869) does briefly refer to the street-demonstrations of 1869 but is essentially a "roman de moeurs" of the proletariat and thus describes situations by no means unique to the Second Empire. Germinal (1866-1867) is its political counterpart but has a greater link with the rise of socialism in the 1880's than its superficial connection with mining-strikes at the end of the Empire. For the remaining novels, see below, n. 97.

history of the Empire, but its apogee and its fall. The years 1858–1862 and the year 1870 fulfil a dramatic function in the classical mould.97 His technique, even in those novels whose intention is to describe the reign at its most triumphant, is to date their action by interpolating references to historical events; but in most cases one tends to feel that they describe the atmosphere and the institutions of Second Empire society in general, rather than those of a particular moment, and some are as valid portraits of the society in the time in which Zola was writing as of the France of Napoleon III. Indeed it is only in the novel that describes the Empire's rise, *La Fortune des Rougon*, and in those books that converge towards 1870 that we are really aware of the force of the contribution of history to the novel.

Mallarmé wrote of Zola's achievement within the traditions of the historical novel in glowing terms:

\[ \text{Etonnant dosage d'invention et de réalité, qui inquiéterait le lecteur s'il ne le séduisait profondément; et permet à l'Histo- rien de ne plus conserver que les grands traits de l'Histoire, le Romancier en ayant, pour le Roman, prélevé les détails individuels et typiques.} \]

97 The Apogee: *La Curée* (1862–1864); *Le Ventre de Paris* (1858–1860); *La Conquete de Plasans* (1858–1863); *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon* (1856–1861); *Pot-Bouille* (1861–1863). The Fall: *Nana* (1867–1870); *La Terre* (1860–1870); *La Bête Humaine* (1869–1870); *L'Argent* (1864–1868); *La Déesse* (1870–1871).

As his polemical and satirical intentions fade and he leaves the "époque de folie et de honte" in the past, what interests Zola about the Second Empire is not the dynamic transformation of France achieved during its life, nor its triumphs, nor those aspects which historians have called its greatness. For him "les détails individuels et typiques" are the factors which brought about its fall. Almost uniquely his interest is focused in the rotten, the corrupt, on that which is about to disintegrate. As his intentions change, that disintegration also furnishes him with the pretext to attack the vices of the bourgeoisie of the Third Republic. Within the perspectives, however, of his purely historical intentions, his simplification of cause and effect lead to his not fully grasping the complexities of the reign, but rather to his exploiting the movement of history in order to satisfy the demands of the structure and the substance of his fictional world. His declaration that "je plierai le cadre historique à ma fantaisie, mais tous les faits que je grouperai seront pris à l'histoire" (II, 298) bears witness to such an ordering of reality and is, in a historical frame of reference, a parallel to his later remark to Céard on the dialectic between symbol and document in his work. It is not insignificant that it was Mallarmé, whose aesthetic standpoint would seem far removed from the doctrines of naturalism, who insisted on the poetic nature of Zola's temperament. It will become clear that Zola's vision of history is less that of the historian than that of the artist.

99Preparatory notes to La Fortune des Rougon.
II

THE PROPHECY OF HINDSIGHT

1. Prophecy, Decadence, and Hindsight

Inherent in the history of the Second Empire is a story of decline and fall and, after the "convulsive rise", such a movement is recorded in Les Rougon-Macquart. It remains broadly true to say that the dominant force of the opening novels is that of the élan. Reddened by orgies, murder and fire, they recount the triumphant rush to the spoils, the satisfied appetites and the consolidation of power of both the Rougon family and a ruthless bourgeoisie. However with L'Assommoir (1877), and particularly after Nana, the myth of catastrophe becomes increasingly evident. The action of the novels after Germinal (1885) witness an accumulation of disasters, murders and violent deaths as that myth imposes itself with merciless logic and assumes the proportions of the growing shadow of Fate. In 1886 Lemaître seemed to sense the direction of the series: "J'attends avec impatience son prochain cauchemar. S'il ne sort de Némi, il finira par des livres d'un naturalisme apocalyptique, qui pourront, d'ailleurs, être fort beaux!" The rhythm of the series not only fulfills structural needs in its progression towards the catastrophe recorded in La

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1. E.g. Le Fortuné des Rougon (1871); La Curé (1871), Le Ventre de Paris (1873), La Conquête de Plessans (1874), Son Excellence Eugène Rougon (1876).

2. Lemaître, Les Contemporains, IV, 278.
débâcle. It also reflects that of the Empire in the acceleration of its decomposition at its end.

If, in "La Fin de L’Orgie", Zola had hinted at the inevitable internal collapse to come, he was equally aware of the realities of the European situation. In his "Causerie" of 12 July 1868 in La Tribune, he had warned that "la guerre est possible. La Prusse regarde nos frontières avec des yeux luisants de gourmandise. L’automne prochain, nous aurons peut-être besoin de toutes nos forces," while despairing of the strength of France's moral fibre to face such a crisis: "Le symptôme le plus terrible, c’est l’inquiétude du pays, l’anxété pleine d’angoisse de toutes les classes."

From 1867 onwards, a large section of French public opinion lived under the shadow of what it felt to be an imminent disaster. While one can discuss the structure of Les Rougon-Macquart in terms of "the general dramatic movement of a classical tragedy", it is not simply a coincidence that the professional historian should describe the last years of the Second Empire in precisely those terms:

The last four years of the Second Empire have about them an air of classic tragedy and impending doom. They are overshadowed by the 'defeat' of Sadowa, the Mexican fiasco, the Roman complication, and the Prussian danger. They see the French dominated by the fear of war but loath to make the sacrifices necessary to avert it. They see its ruler sick and ageing, his grip enfeebled, his freedom of action increasingly restricted. They are clouded by economic recession and embittered by growing industrial unrest.

3 Supra, p. 14.
4 L’Atelier de Zola, p. 161
5 Ibid., p. 162.
6 Supra, p. 22.
and by the violent attacks of a truculent opposition and an unbridled press. 7

Firstly, one may therefore suggest, as Robert is no doubt right in doing, 8 that the series' acceleration towards catastrophe and the premonitions of disaster that contribute to his fine evocation of the last years of the Second Empire have part of their inspiration in Zola's lived experience in the atmosphere of the years 1866-1870. 9

Secondly, the fall of the Empire and the events of 1870-1871 were to throw a shadow over a whole generation. 10 In May 1875 those events were still much in Zola's mind, as he wrote of the "catastrophes politiques et sociales dont nous n'avons pu encore nous remettre." 11

In 1866 Rochefort had published a series of articles entitled "Les Français de la Décadence", as his own polemical contribution to a literature which would find in the Second Empire an inexhaustible study of contemporary decadence. Its spectacular downfall seemed

7 Bury, op. cit., p. 140

8 "L'angoisse qui pèse sur la plupart des Rougon-Macquart, le mythe de la Catastrophe qui se fait plus menaçante à leur horizon jusqu'à l'effondrement de La Désastre se sont certainement nourris de cet état d'esprit qui régna à la fin du Second Empire: l'orgie ne pouvait que finir dans le sang." Robert, Emile Zola, p. 24.

9 Although written with the benefit of hindsight, there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his declaration, in his Préface (1871) to La Fortune des Rougon, of his premonition that the fall was "fatalement au bout du drame" of history, as well as the logical conclusion of his historical reconstruction. Supra, p. 21.

10 Much of the information in this paragraph is taken from A. C. Carter, The Idea of Decadence in French Literature 1830-1900 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958).

like a fine example of historic logic after earlier pictures of the régime's social and political corruption. After 1870 the Decadent movement proper would emerge and take as its central political and literary idea the analogy between the decline and fall of two Empires, that of France and that of Rome. For them, the burning of Rome by Nero and the invasions of the barbarians from the North had found their parallel in the burning of Paris by the Communards and in the Franco-Prussian War. They ignored the fact that three and a half centuries had separated Nero from the coming of the Goths. The myth of Imperial Rome as the scene of unparalleled decadence and the catastrophe which swept it away were too dramatic to dismiss. By telescoping the historical perspective, Nero's orgies could be seen as the immediate prelude to the arrival of the barbarians. Now, in 1870, once again the invaders from the North had come and destroyed the corrupt civilization of a Latin city. This constant juxtaposition between French and Roman decadence found one form of expression in the lines from Verlaine's poem, Langue:  

Je suis l'Empire à la fin de la décadence  
Qui regarde passer les grands Barbares blancs.

In his terrible despair in the autumn of 1870 Flaubert for one was obsessed by the idea that the defeat at the hands of the Prussians meant the inevitable end of the Latin race and its civilization, convinced as he was that "nous entrons dans un monde hideux d'où les Latins seront exclus."  

"Les Latins sont finis!" he wrote


13Letter of 28 October 1870, Correspondance, VI, 178.
to his niece Caroline, "maintenant c'est au tour des Saxons, qui seront dévorés par les Slaves. Ainsi de suite." 14 In 1884 appeared the first volume of *La Décadence Latine* in which Barbey D'Aurévilly brought to the surface the fears and obsessions of the men of Flaubert's generation who had written and lived in the memory of 1870. Zola's later novels are written precisely in this period overshadowed by the idea of decadence, a phenomenon whose mood is described in the last chapter of Mario Praz' *The Romantic Agony*. 15

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14 Letter of 5 October 1870, *Correspondence*, VI, 163. See also his letter of 28 October 1870 to Claudius Popelin: "Je ne désespère pas de l'humanité mais je crois que notre race est finie", VI, 186.

15 Praz insists that Décadence was a literary rather than a real social phenomenon:

"The oft-repeated lament over the downfall of Latin civilization, the "Ohé!!! Ohé!!! les races latines" of Péladan, the conviction of d'Aurévilly that the race had arrived "à sa dernière heure", Verlaine's "Je sais l'Empire à la fin de la décadence" —— such things show not so much the terror, as the attraction of disaster. The very idea of Decadence, of imminent Divine punishment like the fire of Sodom, of the 'cupio dissolvi', are perhaps no more than the extreme sadistic refinements of a 'milieu' which was saturated to an excess with complications of perversion.

In process of time it has become possible to see that it was a question of mental attitude, of momentary dizziness on the brink of a precipice, which, epidemic as it was, soon wore itself out into a monotonous 'routine du gouffre' (to use Colette's expression), rather than a real decay of society; the year 1900 no more marked the date of a cataclysm than did the year 1000. The philosophy of Schopenhauer, the music of Götterdämmerung, the Russian novel, the plays of Maeterlinck—all of these were absorbed and digested, after doing no more than create an impression of a delicious death-agony.

From about 1880 till the beginning of the present century the idea of Decadence was the turning-point round which the literary world revolved!"
The 1880's see the apotheosis of the philosophy of Schopenhauer, the founding of the Revue Wagnerienne (1885) which, in Praz' words, "canonized the latest musical craze", and Émile Bourge's novel Le Crépuscule des Dieux (1884) which takes its title from Wagner's opera. The melodramatic scenes which close this novel take place while French troops, mobilizing against Prussia in the summer of 1870, are passing through the streets. Such a scene also forms the final backcloth to Zola's Nana. In Bourge's novel the debauched Duke attends a performance at Bayreuth of Wagner's Götterdämmerung and sees it as a symbol of the end of an entire world: "Tous les signes de destruction étaient visibles sur l'ancien monde comme des anges de colère, au-dessus d'une Comorrhé condamnée." If his approach to history differs from that of the decadents, it is nevertheless within such a perspective that Zola's novels of the time

16 The mood of boredom and doom in the age of Schopenhauer finds its fullest expression, in Zola's novels, in the character of Lazare in La Jeune de Vivre (1884). He reads the philosopher and plays Wagner as he composes his own "Symphonie de la Douleur". In his pessimism he is described as a victim of "la maladie de la fin du siècle" (IV, 124). For discussions on Zola and Wagner, see Calvin S. Brown, "Music in Zola's Fiction, Especially Wagner's Music", PMLA, LXXII (1956), 84-96, and Brown and Robert J. Hies, "Wagner and Zola again", PMLA, LXXIII (1958), 448-452.

17 Quoted by Praz, Op. cit., p. 328. Within the same historical frame, Zola would use the same myths of Sodom and Comorrhé in La Désaète. Intr, p. 167.
reflect the wide-spread mood of cosmic catastrophe. 18

If the atmosphere of the end of the Empire and the mood of
the 1880's both contribute to the acceleration towards catastrophe
in the later novels, the third factor which accounts for the feeling
of impending doom present throughout the series is, as it was for
the Decadents, that of the wisdom and the justification of hindsight.

It was not true that, as he told Xau, "dès 1868, c'est-à-dire
avant la chute de l'Empire, tout le plan des Rougon-Macquart était
préréparé, arrêté." 19 The series would undergo modifications in size
and in direction after 1870. The reviewer of Hugo's Les Châtiments
could say in 1870 that "l'événement a justifié la prétention du
poète." 20 Zola's task would be much easier. The knowledge of hind-
sight would give not only a structural unity to the whole but a themas-
tic direction to each novel within the series. "Cet ensemble," he
wrote in 1877, "a un sens général qu'on ne vera bien nettement que
lorsque je serai arrivé au bout de ma lourde tâche." 21

18 The theme of catastrophe in Zola's later novels is not
only partly inspired by literary mood of the time. Those novels
also contribute towards it. See Gustave Kahn's remarks on Decadence:
"Il y avait aussi l'idée que les Prussiens de '70 avaient été
les barbares, que Paris c'était Rome ou Byzance: Les romans de
Zola, Nana, avaient souligné la métaphore" in Symbolistes et
p. 108.

19 Xau, op. cit., p. 45.
20 P. de Lagenevais, "Ulrix Poesis", Revue des Deux Mondes,
XC (1870), 155.
21 Letter of 13 February 1877, Correspondance II, LC,
p. 470.
Commenting on Zola's 1871 Preface and his declaration that the fall had given him the "dénouement terrible et nécessaire", Thibaudet remarked that insofar as "le procès-verbal d'une décomposition" is a characteristic of the Naturalist school, "les Rougon, les Macquart, n'avaient presque pas besoin de la guerre de 1870 pour aboutir à La DÉbâcle." He suggested that Les Rougon-Macquart were "le tableau d'une famille, d'une société, d'une humanité qui se défont, se détraquent, se vicent, s'empoisonnent," and that the forces of corruption in the cycle lead inevitably, "fatalement", to a final disintegration. Certainly Zola's conception of the family's destiny in terms of "Fatigue et Chute" point to an awareness of the underlying febrility in the élan. If the forces of death are in evidence from the beginning it seems nevertheless that it is only after 1870 that their presence within those of life in terms of corruption are also a definite presage of catastrophe.

Looking back to the disasters of 1870 two years later, Zola could interpret December 2, 1851, not merely as a crime but as "la nuit fatale où la France reçut une première blessure au flanc." Retracing the main events of history in "La République et la littérature", in April, 1879, he described the causes of the catastrophe in terms which we will find in the portrayal of the Second Empire in his novels:

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24 In Le Roman Expérimental.
C'est d'abord l'écroulement de l'Empire, améné par la pourriture et l'agencement imbécile des charpentes qui soutenaient le régime; 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.

(x, 1380).

As he was writing _Nana_ at precisely this time it is hardly surprising that the novel reflects such a statement, but the imagery of fragile pillars and of a gilded facade crumbling away is to found again and again in his portrayals of Second Empire society.

While his preparatory notes foresaw that moral and material corruption must lead inevitably to disaster and that the seeds of the Empire's weakness were to be found within its birth, his novels after _La Fortune des Rougon_ show the Second Empire embarked on a course of certain destruction. In the synthesis of destinies not only do private calamities occur on the brink of public disaster but in Levin's words, "everyone is dancing on a volcano, everything is headed for the abyss." 25

Well might he say to Van Santen Kolff in 1892 that the title of _La Dédale_ "n'a pas d'histoire. Voici longtemps que je l'ai choisi," 26 for the idea of the _dédale_, of the crushing catastrophe awaiting the Empire is ever-present in his mind and vision. Satisfying his demands for "l'enchaînement des faits," his novels proceed in logical sequence towards the fall of the Second Empire. It is foreseen

25 Levin, _op. cit._, p. 353.
26 Letter of 26 January 1892, Niess Collection, p. 45
throughout the series, so that when catastrophe comes there is not the gratuitousness of a malignant destiny but rather the mathematical conclusion, the logical consequence of an eighteen-year-long orgy which must necessarily end in an expiatory cataclysm. Only in La Débâcle do we have a description of the events of 1870 but so insistent is the portrayal of the fragility and vulnerability of this society that it takes on the perspective of an inevitable epilogue. "Dans toute la série des Rougon-Macquart," writes Dupuy, "on la devine, on la pres­sent, latente, cette débâcle."27

Jules Lemaître termed Zola's vision as apocalyptic.28 The historical apocalypse towards which it tends are the events of 1870-1871. It is they which give a meaning to all of Zola's accusations and exposures. One can thus understand that the fall of the Second Empire occupies a larger place in his work than merely within the confines of La Débâcle. If La Fortune des Rougon described the "première blessure," the novels of the Rougon-Macquart, taken as a whole, are a record of the Empire's destruction. The penultimate volume would be the result of those combined actions shown in his previous studies, not only chronologically but also thematically. The war of 1870 is the culminating point towards which his series converges. Georges Lete correctly analysed how the fall of the Second Empire explains his work, when he wrote that "c'est La Débâcle qui donne leur unité

27Dupuy, "Le Second Empire vu et jugé par Émile Zola", p. 52.

28Les Contemporains, IV, 278.
aux Rougon-Macquart et qui les groupe derrière elle. C'est à ce livre que renvoient historiquement tous les épisodes de la série; c'est par lui qu'ils prennent un sens."29 "He looks back, as he writes, during the Third Republic; but his writing looks ahead to the disintegration of the Empire."30 In examining to what extent such a prophecy of hindsight is explicit in his work we shall attempt to justify Levin's perceptive comment that although only La Débâcle treats it directly "the darkening cloud of national catastrophe hangs over Les Rougon-Macquart from first to last. Its collective theme is the fall of France."31

2. Apotheosis

Le Fortune des Rougon is the only novel of Les Rougon-Macquart completed before 1870 and there is no real hint of a prospective downfall, save perhaps in the analogies evoked between Austerlitz and Waterloo in the moments of Félicité's triumphs and humiliations.33

Yet in the novels after 1870 the idea of collapse is always in Zola's mind. Even in those cases where the fall of the Second

29Georges Lote, op. cit., p. 73.
30Levin, op. cit., p. 353.
31Ibid., p. 352
32For the dates of the action of the novels, see above, p. 40
33These two poles of Napoleonic fortune are exploited to fuller effect in L'Argent. See below p. 110.
Empire is not directly referred to in the text, his work-notes reveal an acute awareness of the irony underlying his historical reconstruction of the Empire in its most triumphant years.

The key to Le Ventre de Paris lies in a detailed examination of the "ébauche". In its conception the novel goes beyond documentary intentions, and moves from a study of reality to political myth:

L'idée générale est: Le ventre—le ventre de Paris, les Halles, où la nourriture afflue, pour rayonner sur les quartiers divers; le ventre de l'humanité, et par extension la bourgeoisie digérant, ruminant, courant en paix ses joies et ses honnêtés moyennes;—enfin le ventre, dans l'Empire, non pas l'éréthisme fou de Saccard lancé à la chasse des millions, les voluptés cuisantes de l'agio, de la danse formidable des écus, mais le contentement large et solide de la faim, la bête broyant le foin au râtelier, la bourgeoisie appuyant sordemment l'Empire, parce que l'Empire lui donne la pâtée matin et soir, la bedaine pleine et heureuse se ballonnant au soleil et roulant jusqu'au charnier de Sedan.34

Such a period of consolidation was to be "le côté philosophique et historique de l'œuvre." Yet here, twenty years before he was to describe it, is evidence of his preoccupation with the fatalistic irony of the "charnier de Sedan" waiting in the wings of history.

The sated appetites of the great Paris markets of les Halles symbolise the Empire in the tranquility of its most prosperous years, yet Florent, the revolutionary outsider constantly overcome by nausea in their midst, can see them from the distance of the suburbs not as a store-house of goodness but as "un vaste ossuaire, un lieu de mort où ne trainait que le cadavre des êtres, un charnier de puanteur et de décomposition" (II, 736). "Au fond," wrote Zola in his notes, "mêmes

34 Appendix to Le Ventre de Paris, LOC, p. 335.
décomposition morale et sociale." If the novel closes with a vision of the "belle digestion tranquille" of a self-satisfied bourgeoisie still wallowing in triumph, nevertheless Claude's declaration that "tout agonisait aux Halles" (II, 736) is Zola's own.

In the case of *Le Conquête de Plassans* nothing is made explicit, but one may justifiably read the novel as a symbolic tale. L'Abbé Faujas, the government's political agent, arrives in Plassans with the mission to arrange the victory of the bonapartist candidate in the 1863 elections in this legitimist stronghold. He gradually makes himself master of Octave Mouret's house, whose garden holds a strategic position between the rival political camps, and then of the city. He is joined there by his sister and her husband, a couple both grotesque and sinister but above all the personification of greed. Our image of them remains that of their hidden presence "acculpied derrière leurs rideaux comme des loups à l'affût" (II, 922). Their parasitic and insatiable rapacity leads them to physically take possession of the house and finally to drive out the entire Mouret family, as they move from room to room like a conquering army.

Faujas' gang thus become a danger to himself. Such a theme is developed in *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*, where Eugène, the shadow Emperor, is devoured by the wolves around him. It is hardly


36 Ibid.

37 Of this novel, Zola wrote: "C'est l'histoire des gouvernements. Un gouvernement n'est pas un roi, mais les créatures qui entourent ce roi et qui ont intéret à ce qu'il garde le trône." Appendix to *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*, LOC, p. 412.
a coincidence that some historians should attribute the downfall of Napoleon III to the unscrupulous nature of the men who had helped him to power in 1851 and who were to surround him during his reign.

In *La Conquête de Plassans* Faujas' position is gradually undermined by his accomplices: "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." (II, 1045). When the insane Mouret escapes from the asylum to which he has been driven, and revisits his house, he is aware of the decomposition around him:

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

(II, 1068)

At the end of the novel, Faujas, his relations, and Mouret all die in the fire which sends the house, already gutted of its substance, crashing to the ground. One may therefore suggest that the house, gradually conquered and then decomposed by the greed, the brutality, and the corruption of its bonapartist lodgers, is, in some way, an image of France under the Second Empire, and that its collapse as the novel closes, consuming those within it (the leader, his gang, and the innocent victim), is nothing less than a symbolic presage.

In *La Curée* we have both explicit statement and symbolic intentions, and it holds a unique position among Zola's novels in any attempt to assess the importance and the influence of the fall of the Second Empire in his work. It merits such a distinction because, unlike the opening novel of the series, the events of 1870
interrupted not its publication but its composition. In 1931 Denise Le Blond-Zola stated that the novel was virtually complete at the time of the outbreak of hostilities with Prussia. More recent studies of the original manuscript suggest that a full quarter of the novel remained to be written when composition was resumed in 1871. The genesis of La Curee assumes considerable importance when one tries to determine in what way hindsight modifies a novel that had been planned since 1867, and originally conceived as a satire focusing the themes of his polemical articles between 1868 and 1870. It appears that Zola worked on the novel throughout the spring of 1870 but was forced to abandon it in the turmoil of the events of the summer. During the war Zola remained in Marseilles and in Bordeaux and was unable to return to Paris until the spring of 1871. While away from the capital he was too busy earning his living in the newspaper columns to get down to the more serious business of novel-writing, and, even on his return, the daily trip to Versailles to report on the sessions of the National Assembly for his parliamentary chronicles in La Cloche precluded the novel’s resumption. The serial-publication of La Curee began in this same paper on 29 September 1871 and ceased on 5 November when Zola withdrew the novel rather than have La Cloche


40 Supra, pp. 13-14.
risk seizure by the authorities on grounds of printing obscene material. It was only during that autumn that the last quarter of the book was finally completed.

Only a hand-writing analysis of the manuscript can determine where exactly the novel was resumed but, according to E. M. Grant, the most important modification to the novel after the interlude is the substitution of the name Saccard for that of Rougon, a change decided upon even after serialization had begun. The effect of this is to heighten the element of risk incarnate in the name itself, in an epoch finely balanced between fortune and, as it turned out, collapse and ruin. Aristide Rougon explains that he adopts the name because for him its sound is that of gold coins falling into a sack. His brother qualifies his enthusiasm by calling it "un nom à aller au bagne ou à gagner des millions" (II, 351), thus making explicit the duality of the play on the name.

Such a change however is also justified on the grounds that it underlines the risk in the capitalist élan incarnated in Saccard's speculative ventures, and it is elsewhere that we must look for evidence of the benefit of hindsight. Added to the novel in 1871 was the "cotillon" at the ball, in which the dancers enact scenes which represent the Empire. These three scenes are, in hindsight, ironic pointers to the future, and, without making any authorial intervention, Zola is able to convey the total blindness of this society so utterly condemned to destruction. The first of these scenes is "les points noirs" and it is explained to the ladies that this is an allusion to the fact that "l'empereur venait de prononcer un discours qui
constatait, à l'horizon politique, la présence de certains 'points noirs'" (II, 512). In the novel the ball takes place in 1863, at a time when the political skies of the Empire had no trace of cloud on their horizons. It was not until 27 August 1867 that Napoleon III made his speech at Lille in which he declared, and with cause, that "des points noirs assombrissent notre horizon." This anachronism fulfils dramatic intentions made doubly ironic through the assembled guests' merriment at the seemingly impossible idea of any threat to the existence of their society. Secondly the dancers play out their roles as the pillars of the imperial régime in a scene entitled "les colonnes" and, as they dance, Zola underlines the Empire's fragility for "les 'colonnes', ébranlées, chancelaient, s'entrechoquaient, s'appuyaient les unes sur les autres, pour ne pas tomber" (II, 515).

The third scene they gaily enact is "la guerre de Mexique", an ironic allusion to perhaps the most disastrous of all Napoleon's overseas enterprises. The novel takes place amidst the enthusiasm at the start of the Mexican adventure. Little did the dancers know that by 1866-1867 and with Maximilian's execution by the nationalists, what was then to be known as the Mexican fiasco would deal an irreparable blow to his prestige and cast a deep shadow over the remaining years of the Second Empire.

In the light of the significant interlude in the composition of the novel an interesting comparison can be made between the two descriptions of Louis Napoleon himself, the one written while he was...

41 Immortalized by Manet's painting.
Emperor, the other after his defeat and his escape into exile. In the first half of the novel (in Chapter II) Renée, the heroine, sees him at the Tuileries and the red sash he wears takes on symbolic associations with the infamous "tache" of "l'Homme du Deux Décembre": "Il était en habit avec l'écharpe rouge du grand cordon. Renée, reprise par l'émotion, distinguait mal, et cette tache saignante lui semblait éclabousser toute la poitrine du prince" (II, 412). This scene takes place in 1862, yet the whole description of Napoleon is very much that of the Emperor post-1865 and especially of the years 1867-1870 during which he suffered increasingly from 'stones' and intestinal disorders. Throughout Les Rougon-Macquart he is a vague and vacillating figure seen in fleeting glimpses as he passes silently across the backcloth of the Second Empire. Yet, at the risk of historical inaccuracy, he is above all a symbol of disintegration, whose physical deterioration represents the moral collapse of his régime.42 In this scene in La Curée he slowly shuffles in on the arm of an old general "d'un pas pénible et vacillant" (II, 412). His appearance is that of a man both sick and weary, "sa face dissoute", and "des lueurs fauves dans l'hésitation grise de ses yeux brouillés (II, 412). As this spectre-like "apparition" (II, 413) passes before her, Renée lowers her eyes in reverence and significationally only sees his shadow on the ground.

Towards the end of the novel (in Chapter VII) Renée sees him:

42 See for example in L'Assommoir. Lantier says to Poisson: "J'ai vu votre patron hier, rue de Rivoli. Il est diablement ravagé, il n'en a pas pour six mois dans le corps... Ah! dame! avec la vie qu'il fait! Il parlait de l'empereur." (III, 891)
again, in a scene written in 1871. This time he seems older and more alone, an abandoned and melancholy figure in his carriage:

Renée trouva l'empereur vieilli. Sous les grosses moustaches, la bouche s'ouvrait plus mollement, les paupières s'alourdisaient au point de couvrir à demi l'œil éteint, dont le gris jaune se brouillait davantage. Et le nez seul gardait toujours son arête sèche, dans le visage vague.

(II, 540)

Once again he is merely glimpsed for a second, caught driving past at speed in the setting sun. Renée has hardly seen him, "l'empereur parut" (II, 540), before he is lost from sight, "et tout disparut dans le soleil" (II, 541). Yet only one year has passed between the two descriptions of him in the novel, and if such a portrait of Napoleon is perhaps not a faithful reflection of him during the middle years of the Empire, one may nevertheless suggest that the change that comes over him is due, consciously or unconsciously, to his fall during the novel's preparation.

In dating the two periods of the novel's composition, critics do not seem to have fully noted the significance of two articles, written in 1870 and 1871, whose themes are those of La Curée and whose dates clearly indicate the times at which Zola was preoccupied with his novel. The first of these, "les Epaules de la Marquise", appeared in La Cloche on 21 February 1870,⁴³ and is linked to the novel not merely thematically and by its simultaneous conception in the spring of 1870 but also by textual parallels.

Such is the case in the description of the skating-scenes in

⁴³Reprinted in Nouveaux Contes à Ninon (1874).
both "Les Epaules de la Marquise" and in La Curée. In the former the Marquise goes out "vêtu d'une délicieuse toilette polonaise" (IX, 376). In the latter Renée goes skating dressed in "un costume complet de Polonaise" (II, 456). In the article Zola evokes the scene of the frozen lake in the Bois de Boulogne in terms which have their unmistakeable parallel in the novel. The following is the description in "Les Epaules de la Marquise":

Il faisait, au Bois, un froid de loup, une bise qui piquait le nez et les lèvres de ces dames, comme si le vent leur eût soufflé du sable fin au visage. La marquise riait, cela l'amusait d'avoir froid. Elle allait, de temps à autre, chauffer ses pieds aux brasiers allumés sur les bords du petit lac. Puis elle rentrait dans l'air glacé, filant comme une hirondelle qui rase le sol. (IX, 376)

In the novel the same scene is re-enacted as Renée and her stepson, Maxime, go out to skate:

Ils arrivaient au Bois, par des froids de loup qui leur piquaient le nez et les lèvres, comme si le vent leur eût soufflé du sable fin au visage. Cela les amusait d'avoir froid.

Ils filaient tous deux dans l'air glacé, du vol rapide des hirondelles qui rasant le sol... Parfois ils venaient se chauffer aux brasiers allumés sur le bord du lac. (II, 456-458)

If such evidence of what amounts to textual reproduction leaves us in no doubt about a link on at least one level between article and novel, of more importance is their expression of the same polemical idea.

Central to "Les Epaules de la Marquise" is the idea that the Marquise is a mainstay of the Empire and that her bare shoulders "ont porté un monde, sans qu'une ride vint en fêler le marbre blanc" (IX, 376).

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44 This scene is re-evoked with nostalgia later in the novel, in the same terms, (II, 538).
Similarly, in the novel, the men bow to Renée as she enters, resplendent in her semi-nudity, and pay their respects to her marble-like throat and breasts, "rendant hommage à ces belles épaules, si communs du tout Paris officiel et qui étaient les fermes colonnes de l'Empire" (II, 440). Eugène, the minister, looks at her and understands her power, "sentait cette gorge nue plus éloquente encore que sa parole à la Chambre, plus douce et plus persuasive pour faire goûter les charmes du règne et convaincre les sceptiques" (II, 440). The Marquise's shoulders exercise this same political power, "plus persuasifs que des arguments d'orateur, plus décisifs que des épées de soldats, et menaçant, pour enlever un vote, de rogner ses chemisettes jusqu'à ce que les plus farouches membres de l'opposition se déclarent convaincus" (IX, 376). She becomes the incarnation of a pleasure-loving society, "l'enseigne vivante des charmes du Second Empire" (IX, 375). At the ball Renée sees bared shoulders rather than people, and the élite of imperial society are seen as a "cohue d'habits noirs et d'épaules blanches" (II, 412). Recalling those days of triumph in later years Renée would retain in the mind's eye a permanent image of the figure of the Emperor walking slowly through the room "entre les deux rangées d'épaules" (II, 413). The link between moral and political decadence is explicit.

In his parliamentary chronicle in _La Cloche_ of 2 October 1871, Zola recalled how "autrefois, dans le bon temps, je vous ai parlé de ces épaules fameuses, les plus solides soutiens du Second
Empire." He called this article "Les Regrets de la Marquise" and, as the title suggests, it describes the Marquise's grief at the disappearance of the Empire. At the same time Zola warned the new Republic to beware of the threat of a return of imperial moral standards, and to guard against a bonapartist revival and "la conspiration des épcaules." Appearing as it did only three days after serialization of La Curée had begun, the article is evidence of his renewed preoccupation with the novel. Its content suggests a re-reading of those parts of the book already completed in 1870. Its title reveals an awareness of the dramatically modified perspectives of any study of a pillar of the Second Empire.

There can be little doubt that this second article, like the first, is closely linked to the novel. At the ministerial ball in La Curée, Napoleon does not address Renée directly but makes a flattering aside to his companion. Yet, we are told, on another occasion "elle eut même l'honneur d'être complimenté à voix haute par Sa Majesté" (II, 413). In "Les Regrets de la Marquise" a similar glittering evening at the Tuileries is nostalgically evoked. In the Marquise's recollections however, real or imagined, Napoleon stops before her and compliments her to her face. 46


46 This article is to be found in La République en Marche, II, 14-17. For a comparison of the dresses worn by Renée and by the Marquise see also II, 412 and IX, 377. Napoleon addresses the Marquise with "Ah! Madame, vous êtes Vénus en personne!" It may be noted that the theme of Venus' birth from the waves, developed later in this passage, is fully developed in Nana, a novel which has many links with La Curée.
The two short pieces therefore reflect, on the one hand, the course of the novel's composition and, on the other, the fortunes of the Empire, Napoleon III and Renée. As the novel opens Maxime insists that Renée admits she is "une des colonnes du Second Empire" (II, 318). Both articles describe the Marquise in similar terms and, in the novel, the idea of the "pillars of the Empire" is dramatically focused into a presage of catastrophe in the collapse of the "colonnes" at the ball. Almost a decade later Zola would evoke the history of the Second Empire's collapse in terms of rotting foundations,"des piliers trop grêles", and a disintegrating structure finally swept aside in 1870.47 As Renée is a pillar of the Empire so too her own moral deterioration is a reflection of the larger social disintegration around her.

Such a decline is largely seen within an imaginative pattern of drowning. She leads a frenetic existence in the midst of the speculative ventures of her husband which are described in terms of a rain of gold, a rising flood and the sea:

Aristide Saccard, depuis les premiers jours, sentait venir ce flot montant de la spéculatıon, dont l'écume allait couvrir Paris entier. Il en suivit le progrès avec une attention profonde. Il se trouvait au beau milieu de la pluie chaude d'écus tombant dru sur les toits de la cité.

(In, 353)48

In a moment of lucidity Renée has a vision of herself in the future

47 Supra, p. 50.

48 For the imagery of rain and gold, see also II, 368, 369, 371
"folle, salie, par une des spéculations de son mari, dans laquelle il se noierait lui-même" (II, 326). As the pace of their lives gathers momentum and the movement of the novel accelerates towards the climax, the sea becomes an ocean into which Saccard plunges like a rash and intrepid swimmer:

Saccard s'affamait, sentait ses désirs s'accroître, à voir ce ruisselement d'or qui lui glissait entre les mains. Il lui semblait qu'une mer de pièces de vingt francs s'étalissait autour de lui, de lac devenait océan, emplissait l'immense horizon avec un bruit de vagues étranges, une musique métallique qui lui chatouillait le cœur: et il s'aventurait, nageur plus hardi chaque jour, plongeant, reparaissant, tantôt sur le dos, tantôt sur le ventre, traversant cette immensité par les temps clairs et par les orages, comptant sur ses forces et son adresse pour ne jamais aller au fond. (II, 392)

As his speculative fury increases he threatens "d'inonder Paris comme une mer montante" (II, 396). When the Saccards move to a larger and more grandiously luxurious house, the tempo of life becomes that of "un véritable Ouragan qui menaçait d'emporter les cloisons" (II, 410), and, as the bulkheads give way, Renée begins to feel overcome by the forces around her. First of all her private fortune disappears in the flood of financial speculation: "Dans cette fortune qui avait les claveurs et le débordement d'un torrent d'hiver, la dot de Renée se trouvait secouée, emportée, noyée" (II, 409). Nevertheless she continues to lead a meaningless existence, over which she seems to have no control, "sans chercher à pénétrer le néant de ce fleuve d'or qui lui passait sous les yeux et dans lequel elle se jetait chaque matin" (II, 410). As she totally loses her grip on herself she turns to incest, and vice and water become
associated as she looks down upon the Seine for, literally and metaphorically, the débris of the city's debauchery finally falls into the river: "Le vice, venu de haut, coulait dans les ruisseaux, s'étalait dans les bassins, remontait dans les jets d'eau des jardins, pour retomber sur les toits, en pluie fine et pénétrante" (II, 408).

As the novel draws to a close Renée begins to completely disintegrate: "On commençait à entendre un râle, le détraquement de cette adorable et étonnante machine qui se cassait" (II, 473). When her husband, like a modern Theseus, discovers her incest with his son, and leaves arm in arm with Maxime after having exploited the situation to his financial advantage, Renée is left to contemplate the ruins of her life spread out before her. It is at this point that the sea of vice and speculation is seen rising to drown her:

Sa vie se déroulait devant elle. Elle assistait à son long effarement, à ce tapage de l'or et de la chair qui était monté en elle, dont elle avait eu jusqu'aux genoux, jusqu'au ventre, puis jusqu'aux lèvres, et dont elle sentait maintenant le flot passer sur sa tête, en lui battant le crâne à coups pressés.

(II, 520)

At the end she dies bored, alone, and abandoned, "livrée à ce flot mondain qui l'emportait" (II, 534).

She is also consumed in a brasier of lust, passion, and greed. Her incestuous relationship with her stepson largely takes place in the hothouse described as "ce jardin de feu" (II, 345), and their love-making in its midst is seen in terms of the imagery of fire. Renée herself is like an exotic plant constantly in need of heat.

See also Renée describing her stepson as a creature "où le vice coulait avec la douceur d'une eau tiède" (II, 521).
The opening scene of the novel repeatedly sees her drawing a bear-skin around her and running her fingers through the fur in her desire for warmth, and she always has to have a huge fire burning in her room. Her vision of Saccard in the drive and energy of his financial ventures is that of him "dans la forge, dans les éclats du métal rougi, la chair brûlée, haletant, tapant toujours, soulevant des marteaux vingt fois trop lourds pour ses bras, au risque de s'écraser lui-même" (II, 521).

The "air tiède" that envelops the Saccard residence is contrasted to that of Renée's ancestral home on the "île Saint-Louis", austere, monastic and cold. Two centuries old, its firmness, stability and its "gravité noire" (II, 326) are contrasted with the febrile glitter of the Second Empire. Renée's father, "un de ces républicains de Sparte rêvant un gouvernement d'entière justice et de sage liberté" (II, 326) lives in retreat in "cette maison calme et douce comme un cloître" (II, 367). On his first visit there after his marriage "Saccard, que rien jusque là n'avait décontenancé, fut glacé par la froideur et le demi-jour de l'appartement, par la sévérité triste de ce grand vieillard dont l'œil perçant lui sembla fouiller sa conscience jusqu'au fond" (II, 367). The opposition is a conscious one, for Renée and Saccard are "deux fièvres chaudes" who pierce the icy shrouds of the hôtel Béraud like travellers to a foreign land: "Parfois, le mari et la femme, ces deux fièvres chaudes de l'argent et du plaisir, allaient dans les brouillards glacés de l'île Saint-Louis. Il leur semblait qu'ils entraient dans une ville morte" (II, 377). A pale white light filters into its cloistered courtyard, a fountain spews out an icy stream of
water, and the whole building is cool, dark, silent, and dank as opposed to the flaming heat and the noise of Paris: "Là, au fond de cette cour fraîche et muette comme un puits, éclairée d'un jour blanc d'hiver, on se serait cru à mille lieues de ce nouveau Paris où flamblaient toutes les chaudes jouissances, dans le vacarme des millions" (II, 378). Only one place has warmth and light and is open to the sun, and that is the children's room, where Renée's sensuality had awoken as she watched the naked torsos of the bargemen from a window overlooking the city.

The heat of an erotic and neo-pagan Second Empire is contrasted to the wintry austerity of the puritan values and the self-denial of a stricter age, and Renée's father's house stands like a citadel of republicanism, "admiralement conservé" (II, 378) since the seventeenth century, high above a crumbling society whose vice swirls beneath its walls. It is within such a fire that Renée is consumed. While Saccard's fortune "semblait à son apogée . . . brûlait en plein Paris comme un feu de joie colossal" (II, 408), only to crumble to ashes in a later novel, Renée's physical disintegration parallels her moral one. Her apogee and fall are linked to that of Napoleon, for when she sees him for the second time his decline mirrors her own.

His article "La Fin de L'Orgie" had compared the last years of the Second Empire to the decadence of Rome: "Voilà que nos hommes deviennent des femmes. Lorsque Rome pourrissait dans sa grandeur, elle n'a pas accompli d'autres miracles. Les belles nuits de l'orgie antique sont revenues, les nuits ardentes où les créatures n'avaient
plus de sexe."50 In the figure of Maxime, "une de ces débauches de décadence" (II, 450), he realised his intention of portraying "l'épuisement prématuré d'une race qui a vécu trop vite et qui aboutit à l'homme-femme des sociétés pourries" (II, 311).51

"N'est-ce-pas que la curée dure depuis d'assez longues années et qu'il est temps d'y mettre fin?" he had cried in 1870. His novel ends with Saccard still active, but his fate is merely postponed for, as he wrote in his work-notes, "plus tard La Débâcle aura lieu."52 Once again using the metaphor of drowning, he told Louis Ulbach that he had tried "de donner une idée de l'effroyable bourbier dans lequel la France se noyait."53 In a preface to the first edition of the novel he explained that La Curée was a "peinture vraie de la débâcle d'une société" (II, 311).54 Before 1870 his novel was already pointing to the dissolution to come. The fall of the Second Empire confirmed his analysis of a society in decomposition and underlined the direction in which reality was to be ordered in deliberate structural and poetic aims.

The movement of decomposition is again portrayed in Pot-Bouille (1882), a novel which focuses on that bourgeoisie seen growing fat in Le Ventre de Paris. In La Curée and in Nana the themes of

50 L'Atelier de Zola, p. 224.
51 Preface, First Edition of La Curée, 15 November 1871.
52 Quoted by Lote, op. cit., p. 74.
53 Letter of 6 November 1871, Correspondance I, LOC, p. 384
54 This phrase does not appear in the original manuscript of the preface. See Appendix to La Curée, LOC, p. 317. It is also reproduced II, 310.
corruption and catastrophe are incorporated into a structure of symbols. In *Pot-Bouille* the presage of the final disaster is given symbolic representation but is also made explicit at the novel's close.

Its central imaginative pattern is expressed through the very structure of the house in which the action of the novel takes place. Behind a façade of respectability and strict morality, a hypocritical bourgeoisie sits reading the socially-acceptable newspapers, compromising its integrity in support of the régime to which its destiny is tied, and decomposing in its own corruption. The building itself is invested with these forces of destruction and rots beneath its irreproachable exterior.

Only one apartment building is portrayed in the novel and the one group of families who live within it, but when the maids agree that "toutes les baraques se ressemblent. Au jour d'aujourd'hui, qui a fait l'une a fait l'autre" (VI, 683) its inhabitants can be seen as a microcosm of the bourgeoisie under the Second Empire. The novel opens in 1861 and Campardon informs Octave that the building, appropriately enough, is less than twelve years old! The bourgeoisie and the Empire have their destinies mirrored in its physical structure.

As in *La Curée* the imagery of fire assumes a symbolic role. Inside the building there reigns "une chaleur de serre" (IV, 375) and its interior is contrasted to the "propreté froide" (IV, 374) of the courtyard. When Octave seduces one of the many consenting wives "la volupté chaude de la chambre" is described as a "brasier"
(IV, 574), and Berthe, who has been brought up in the house, displays towards her lover "une indifférence de fille grandie en serre chaude" (IV, 581). As the concierge goes on his rounds spying on the activities of the tenants, "guettant les choses déshonnêtes dont frissonnaient les murs" (IV, 583), the fetid heat of their vice seems to unsettle the building: "La moralité de la maison le préoccupait; il y sentait comme un souffle de choses déshonnêtes qui troublait la nudité froide de la cour" (IV, 573). When an apparently single girl takes a room in the building and she becomes pregnant, the shadow of her bloated stomach seems to threaten the façade of respectability maintained by the other tenants, and the house itself seems to shake:

Le ventre, maintenant, lui semblait jeter son ombre sur la propreté froide de la cour et jusque sur les faux marbres et les zins dorés du vestibule. C'était lui qui s'enflait, qui emplissait l'immeuble d'une chose déshonnête, dont les murs gardaient un malaise. À mesure qu'il avait poussé, il s'était produit comme une perturbation dans la moralité des étages.

(IV, 579)

The rich and luxurious interior of the house, with its red carpets, its fake marble, and gold-plated zinc, and of Campardon's dining-room "toute en faux bois, avec une complication extraordinaire de baguettes et de caissons" (IV, 379) is very much the decorative, extravagant and gilded façade of the Second Empire itself. Yet already the cracks beneath it are apparent. On the ceiling "deux grandes fentes coupaient les caissons, et, dans un coin, la peinture qui s'était écailleée, montrait le plâtre" (IV, 379). Campardon explains that while the brilliant veneer of the exterior "inspire de la considération", nevertheless, "il ne faudrait pas trop fouiller les murs. Ça n'a pas douze ans et ça part déja" (IV, 379), and that
one push would mean its collapse.55 The house, built somewhere between 1848 and 1851 takes on nothing less than an allegorical dimension, as the novelist probes the fragility behind the frontal gilt of both the building and the Empire.

The immorality of the house is the ferment of its own decomposition. While emptying the refuse into the courtyard the servants take the opportunity of discussing the behaviour of their masters, so that the "ordures" become the putrefaction of a class and of things, of "toutes les décompositions cachées des étages" (IV, 682). Reassuring himself, Campardon had explained to Octave on his arrival at the opening of the novel that, in spite of the cracks, "c'est encore solide, ça durera toujours autant que nous" (IV, 379), thus once more underlining the synthesis of destinies. Yet during the course of the novel two of the tenants die, and no sooner has Campardon echoed his earlier remark by praying "que la maison ne soit pas décimée davantage" (IV, 657) than another, M. Duveyrier, tries to commit suicide.

It is Duveyrier who warns that those who vote for the opposition candidates in the elections will thereby be responsible for their own destruction. "Le triomphe de votre liste," he tells them, "c'est le premier ébranlement de l'édifice. Prenez garde qu'il ne vous écrase" (IV, 674). He understands that to undermine the Empire is to sabotage the position of the bourgeoisie.

As "things fall apart" the Abbé Mauduit tries to use religion

55Cf. above, p. 50
"pour retarder la décomposition finale" (IV, 680-681) and to throw a mantle over a cancerous society, yet both he and le docteur Juillerat, because the nature of their jobs allows them to see behind the façade, explicitly state the apocalypse to come. The doctor talks of the "barbares" who will come in herds to sweep away the corruption, and the abbé lives in "la certitude d'une débâcle finale" (IV, 451).

Son Excellence Eugène Rougon is Zola's study of the corruption of the political circles of the Second Empire, and once again the wisdom of hindsight adds a powerful dimension of irony to the novel. Consciously set at a given date, Zola planned that its action should start in the years "56 à 57, apogée de l'empire."56

Rougon's opening statement from the ministerial rostrum echoes Napoleon's Bordeaux speech of 1852 in which he declared that "l'Empire, c'est la paix." During his reign the campaigns of the Crimea and Italy, and the military disasters of Mexico and finally of 1870, were to point mockingly at such a promise. As the novel opens, the spectacle of the procession of the Imperial Prince's baptism marks "la gloire de l'Empire à son apogée" (III, 364), the immense cost of which had been justified on the grounds that it would assure "la sécurité pour l'avenir" (III, 299). "En perpetuant la dynastie que nous avons tous acclamée," proclaims the Speaker, "il assure la prospérité du pays, son repos dans la stabilité, et, par là même, celui du reste de l'Europe" (III, 299). As the gathered

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deputies drink in the nectar of "l'assurance d'une paix éternelle" (III, 300) their cheers reverberate through history with the same emptiness and irony as the shared gaiety of the Empress and the German ambassador at the imperial banquet (III, 412), and as the spectacle of the army marching past in the procession. Surely Zola's "c'était la force de l'Empire qui passait, dans la poussière de la chaussée" (III, 366) is loaded with such retrospective irony.

Once again Zola's portrait of Napoleon in 1856-1858 is that of the Emperor at the end of the Empire, a suffering figure in pain. There are other presages too of what is to come. When five opposition deputies are elected for the first time in 1857 it causes one of Rougon's gang, Du Poizat, to remark that "dans cinq ans d'ici, l'Empire ébranlé menacera ruine" (III, 390). After the opposition gains in Paris "une grosse inquiétude dominait toute cette victoire. Paris venait de voter un monstre d'ingratitude" (III, 396). Rougon's "Bah! on musellera Paris" could hardly foresee the Commune!

But above all this presage is underlined by a deliberate rearrangement of the dating of historical speeches. In the last chapter of the novel one of the five deputies refuses to withdraw a statement which causes an uproar in the Chamber. "J'ai dit que le 2 Décembre était un crime," he cries out, and the opposition movement gains momentum, thus fulfilling Du Poizat's prophetic warning: "Ils étaient cinq maintenant à attaquer l'Empire. Ils l'ébranlaient d'une secousse continue, le niaient, lui refusaient leur vote, avec un entêtement de protestation, dont l'effet devait peu à peu soulever le pays entier" (III, 565). Zola was perfectly aware that Ernest Picard, the
unidentified orator of the Left, did not make such a speech until 1865. His original and unrealised intention had been to follow up his political study of the authoritarian period by a second novel portraying the Liberal Empire of Ollivier, which came into being on 2 January 1870. His conception of such a close to Son Excellence Eugène Rougon is evidence of his manipulating the "cadre historique" to his "fantaisie". It is on the one hand inspired by his trying to link the planned two novels, while on the other the sinister cry reinforces the artistic unity of the series by pointing to the future, in both historical and fictional terms. In his work notes he made explicit such a purpose: "L'Empire libéral est rejeté à quelques années. Mais dès lors, je veux faire dire à mon ministre un mot qui annonce la catastrophe. L'Empire est ébranlé, le 2 décembre compromis. Plus tard, j'aurais la débâcle dans un autre roman."57

Historians are unanimous in their agreement that 1858-1862 were the prosperous years of the Empire. In the first decade of the régime there had been a prodigious and dynamic economic expansion in every field, and Paris had become the financial centre of Europe. Haussman had begun his work in 1855 and Paris was transformed into a capital of the imperial splendour described in La Curée.58 Palmerston, visiting Paris in 1858, wrote that Louis Napoleon was "following the career of Augustus' and would do much more for the prosperity of

57 Appendix to Son Excellence Eugène Rougon, LOC, p. 415.
58 Zola shared the poet's regret in Baudelaire's Le Cygne that "le vieux Paris n'est plus."
France than the Roman Emperor did for the Roman Empire. 59 Twelve years later the Decadents would exploit such analogies in their own way, but the armistice with Austria at the end of the Italian War of 1859 and Napoleon's triumphant return to Paris marked the apogee of the Second Empire.

While Zola faithfully reflects the atmosphere of the time, he is careful to underline the fate awaiting this society. The wisdom of hindsight and the fall of the Second Empire are responsible for that ordering of reality which contributes to the irony, the portrayal of the crumbling of the edifice, and to that note of doom unmistakably present amidst the fanfare of the trumpets.

3. Decline and Fall

With few exceptions Zola's novels between 1880 and 1892 move in falling cadence towards disaster. *Nana, Germinal, La Terre, La Bête Humaine* and *L'Argent* reflect the shadow weighing over a régime about to topple.

*Nana* shares many of the themes of those novels which portray the Empire at its apogee. If he conceived the novel as "le poème des désirs du mâle", Zola more bluntly stated that he would depict "toute une société se ruant sur le cul." 60 By his creating "les désirs du mâle" in terms of an external force which possesses a whole

59 Quoted by Bury, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
60 Appendix to *Nana*, LOC, p. 447.
society, Nana herself moves into the realm of political symbolism.

The novel is an analysis of the corruption of the Second Empire, of that same gilded facade to a moral putrefaction that he had portrayed in La Curée. Yet in this novel it is a mask which dissolves, for Nana becomes a demoniac force, "une force de la nature," an angel of destruction — enters the world of allegory to become a symbol. The key to such a symbolism is to be found in Fauchery's fictional article entitled "La Mouche d'Or":

Elle avait poussé dans un faubourg, sur le pavé parisien; et grande, belle, de chair superbe ainsi qu'une plante en plein fumier, elle vengeait les gueux et les abandonnés dont elle était le produit. Avec elle, la pourriture qu'on laissait fermenter dans le peuple remontait et pourrissait l'aristocratie. Elle devenait une force de la nature, un ferment de destruction, sans le vouloir elle-même, corrompant et désorganisant Paris entre ses cuisses de neige, le faisant tourner comme des femmes, chaque mois, font tourner le lit. Et c'était à la fin de l'article que se trouvait la comparaison de la mouche couleur de soleil, envelopée de l'ordure, une mouche qui prenait la mort sur les charognes tolérées le long des chemins, et qui, bourdonnante, dansante, jetant un éclat de pierres, empoisonnaient les hommes rien qu'à poser sur eux, dans les palais où elle entrait par les fenêtres."

(IV, 171)

The mission of social vengeance is underplayed, but not the theme of destruction. Pointing to the link between moral and political decadence in an article in La Tribune of 6 December 1868 Zola reported having read in a newspaper that a lady of imperial high society "en était à son sixième jeune homme: elle en avait dévoré cinq en moins de trois ans; le sixième se trouvait aux trois quarts mangé."61 Nana too becomes "une mangeuse d'hommes" (IV, 41), swallowing their fortunes and consuming men "d'une bouchée." (IV, 238): "Nana en

61 L'Atelier de Zola, p. 185.
Some months went by, and they gorged on one another. The increasing needs of her luxury enraged her appetites, so she cleaned out a man with a single tooth. (IV, 321) When she breaks a flask, she is seized by "le rire bête et méchant d'un enfant que la destruction amuse" (IV, 306). She then breaks everything in sight in "le régul d'un massacre" (IV, 307), destroying men with the same ease as she smashes a vase.62 "Elle cassait un chambellan comme elle cassait un flacon ou un drageoir, et elle faisait une ordure, un tas de boue au coin d'une borne" (IV, 326). At the end of the novel her work of destruction is complete, described in terms which provide the epilogue to Fauchery's article (IV, 335), and confirming Alexis' remark that Zola had intended to portray "un peuple d'hommes, prosternés, ruinés, vidés ou abêtis."63

In this novel Zola realised his long-lived conception of pre-1870 that the social decay spreading through the body of the Empire could only bring eventual dissolution. With the added force of hindsight Nana becomes a picture of a whole society in decomposition.

62 Although a symbolic breaking of the Republic, the destructive nature of corruption had been expressed in "Les Regrets de la Marquise" in much the same terms: "Chaque matin, la marquise se donne une joie; elle se fait apporter un buste en plâtre de la République, elle le casse sur le parquet, en piétine les réduits en poudre." La République en Marche, II, 15.

63 Émile Zola, Notes d'un ami, p. 113. In "La Saignée", Céard had tried to incarnate the destructive nature of Second Empire corruption in Lise, de Pahamôn and her "jupons déordonnés dont les dentelles, autour d'eux apportaient invinciblement une menace de désastre." Les Soirées de Médan (Paris: Pasquelle, 1880) p. 180. Written at approximately the same time as the novel, see p. 216 for other parallels with Nana.
The society that Nana destroys is incarnated in the figure of Muffat, the cold, haughty, and stern courtier gradually eaten away by Nana's sensuality. As so often in Zola's work the surroundings reflect the moral climate. At the beginning of the novel we enter the monastic frigidity of the Muffat salon, "dans une dignité froide, dans des mœurs anciennes, un âge disparu, exhalant une odeur de dévotion" (IV, 63). But already there is a sinister note of things to come, for Muffat's wife, Sabine, sits in "une chaise profonde dont la soie rouge capitonnée avait une mélasse d'édredon. C'était le seul meuble moderne, un coin de fantaisie introduit dans cette sévérité, et qui jurait" (IV, 63). Like Renée's father's house in La Curée, the Muffats' aged walls stand like those of a grim citadel, "un vaste bâtiment carré, habité par les Muffat depuis plus de cent ans; sur la rue, la façade dormait, haute et noire, d'une mélancolie de couvent" (IV, 63). Yet as Fauchery notes the chair in which Sabine sits he is suddenly struck by the brittle laughter of the guests, announcing the cracks in a crystalline society. The "fêlure" points to the final catastrophe: "Ils sonnaient le cristal qui se brise. Certainement, il y avait là un commencement de fêlure" (IV, 73).

Muffat is first seduced by Nana and then destroyed. In Nana's presence he is overcome by the odour of her nudity and aware of his own disintegration. Analysing Balzac's La Cousine Bette, Zola had written that "un membre, Hulot, se gangrène et aussitôt tout se gâte autour de lui, le circulus vital se détraque, la santé de la société se trouve compromise" (X, 1190). The austerity of Muffat's home dissolves in the fire of lust and passion. In Nana's apartments,
As in Renée's, there reigns "une chaleur lourde et enfermée de sorre" (IV, 58). After Muffat spends a night watching Sabine and her lover from the street he is appalled at the idea of returning to his own home, yet once inside Nana's door the pain of his emotional and moral suffering is anaesthetised: "Il souriait, pénétré déjà par la chaleur molle de cette niche" (IV, 183). Towards the end of the novel when Muffat's ruin is complete, the red chair is used to further effect to symbolise the change that has taken place in the Muffat household, now invaded and possessed by a sensuality whose hidden presence had earlier only been hinted at:

On est dit que la chaise longue de Sabine, ce siège unique de soie rouge, dont la mollesse antérieure détonnait, s'était multiplié, élargie jusqu'à emplir l'hôtel entier d'une voluptueuse paresse, d'une jouissance aiguë qui brûlait avec la violence des feux tardifs.

(IV, 293)

A whole society seems to crumble in the red hue of sensuality and the fires of corruption, as the guests walk in the garden at the wedding of Muffat's daughter:

Dans le jardin, une lueur de braise, tombée des lanternes vénitiennes éclairait d'un lointain reflet d'incendie les ombres noires des promeneurs, cherchant un peu d'air au fond des allées. Et ce tressaillement des murs, cette nuée rouge étaient comme la flambée dernière, où craquait l'antique honneur brûlant aux quatre coins du logis.

(IV, 301)

Muffat's destruction reaches its climax in the scenes where Nana makes him parade on all fours on the ground, dressed up in full court-uniform. Zola had mentioned such a scene in La Tribune of 6 December 1868, and in that article are to be found the origins of both his 1879
Quand les vers se mettent à une société, cette société tombe bientôt en poussière, comme une vieille charpente criblée de trous imperceptibles. La secousse de '89 a suivi les hontes de la Régence et de Louis XV. Je ne sais ce qui suivra notre époque. Je constate simplement que de nos jours les comtes envoient à des créatures des chevaux de vingt-cinq mille francs la paire.65

Muffat is such a "comte", the shadow of Balzac's Hulot, and when he reads Fauchery's article he becomes aware of his fate and foresees the disintegration of the society around him: "Tout allait pourrir en lui, à cette heure. Il eut un instant conscience des accidents du mal, il vit la désorganisation apportée par ce ferment, lui empoisonné, sa famille détruite, un coin de société qui craquait et s'effondrait" (IV, 172).

As the end of her career approaches, Nana's mission of destruction gathers momentum and she passes like a whirlwind, a monolithic creature ransacking Paris at its will, shaking the foundations of a whole society. She becomes a legend, is sought by the courts of Europe (IV, 318), and, in Flaubert's words, "tourne au mythe sans cesser d'être réelle."66 For she assumes mythical proportions. She takes on the stature of a goddess, the Venus of the play of the first chapter. Paris worships at her altar. The novel opens with her legendary birth from the waves (IV, 40); it closes as she dies:

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64 Supra, p. 50
65 Zola Journaliste, p. 95.
66 Flaubert, Correspondance, VIII, 388.
"Vénus se décomposait." A woman in her mortality, a perennial symbol of the female sex, she is an Olympian figure in her power to control the destinies of men.

The theatre is at the centre of an imaginative pattern which runs through the novel. A collective sensuality creates a fever of desire which sweeps through the audience at Nana's nudity, and the obscenity on the stage excites the élite of Paris: "Ce carnaval des dieux, l'Olympe traîné dans la boue, toute une religion, toute une poésie bafouées, semblèrent un régai exquis (IV, 35). The behaviour of the gods, however, parallels and reflects their own. Bordenave, the owner, insists on calling it a brothel and the theatre becomes a microcosm of society, where bodies are bought and sold, exchanged and bargained for. Behind the facade of sophistication, as behind the scenes, in the corridors and dressing-rooms, lie corruption, lust and jealousy. Buffet is overcome, suffocated by the odour of this world, "fuyant presque, en emportant à fleur de peau le frisson de cette trouée ardente sur un monde qu'il ignorait" (IV, 118). The Prince steps into Nana's dressing-room and another "comédie" is played out as the real world and that of the theatre overlap:

On ne plaisantait plus, on était à la cour. Ce monde du théâtre prolongeait le monde réel dans une farce grave, sous la buée ardente du gaz; et personne ne souriait de cet étrange mélange de ce vrai prince, héritier d'un trône, qui buvait le champagne d'un cabotin, trèès à l'aise dans ce carnaval des dieux, dans cette masquarade de la royauté au milieu d'un peuple d'habilleurs et de filles.

(IV, 121-122)

The quarrels, the liaisons, and the adultery of the artificial society of "La Blonde Vénus", are played out through the novel with
the same compromises: "Ils aimaient mieux être trompés et contents, ce qui était la morale de la comédie" (IV, 42).

The actual theatre-building's parallel with the structure of Second Empire society gives an added dimension to the theme of destruction. In the theatre, as in the house in Pot-Bouille, "des lézardes montraient le plâtre sous la dorure" (IV, 27) and, as Fauchery had noticed "un commencement de férule" in the brittle laughter chez Nuffat, the cracks in the gilt of the theatre become those of a society in decomposition. Fauchery and Nuffat seal a pact of shame, granting the former free access to Sabine's bed, to the appropriate background of theme—music from "La Blonde Vénus":

Maintenant la férule augmentait; elle lézardait la maison, elle amorçait l'effondrement prochain. ... Ici sur l'écroulement de ces richesses entassées et allumées d'un coup, la valse semblait le glas d'une vieille race pendant que Nana, invisible, éparquie 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 rythme canaille de la musique. (IV, 301)

Like the "mouche d'or", the waltz from the play becomes a symbol of Nana, now heard in the highest circles of Parisian society, symbolic of her own ascent and of the corruption that has come with her. The music becomes not so much a background as a ferment itself of destruction:

Cette valse, justement la valse canaille de la Blonde Vénus, qui avait le rire d'une polissonnerie, pénétrait le vieil hôtel d'une onde sonore, d'un frisson chevauchant les murs. Il semblait que ce fût quelque vent de la chair, venant de la rue, balayant tout un âge mort dans la hauteaine demeure, emportant le passé des Nuffat, un siècle d'honneur et de foi endormi sous le plafond. (IV, 293)

As Leonard has remarked, it is from the theatre that Nana derives its
controlling form and its motifs of decadent mythology, social comedy, and moral perversion. 67

As in all the later novels a society's decline takes place to the background of the approaching shadows of 1870. It must surely be allegorically significant that, in the play, Mars, the god of war, becomes enmeshed with Venus. As he appears, dressed up as a general: "empaesché d'un plume géant, traînant un sabre qui lui arrivait à l'épaule" (IV, 30), the audience erupts with mirth. Through him the army is mocked and treated as "une rigolade" (IV, 36). A society intent on its carnal pleasures had no time for serious thoughts about preparing for war.

At the same time the shadow of Bismarck now begins to loom larger in the series as that of Napoleon wavers. His name comes up again and again throughout the novel as an interesting but frivolous topic of conversation. French society contents itself with relating fictional anecdotes about him rather than taking heed of the threat he represents. As it dismisses him as a nonentity Zola's irony is total. Mme. de Joncquoy discounts the importance of a man she considers a stupid boor and whose success she cannot understand: "Voilà un homme dont je ne comprends guère les derniers succès... Moi, je le trouve stupide" (IV, 65). Even a mere suggestion of war is greeted with mirth: "Comment! Comment! reprendit Mme. de Joncquoy, vous supposz que M. de Bismarck nous fera la guerre et nous battra... Oh! celle-là dépasse tout" (IV, 61). Throughout his description in

Chapter III of salon-society, Zola breaks in at intervals on conversations about Bismarck while the men of high society are seen more concerned with planning a riotous banquet. Through such a technique the bacchic pipes alternate with the drums of doom in a dissonant crescendo.

In his article, "La Tête de Bismarck", in October 1870, Zola, while demanding his assassination, had recognized the man's brutal genius and that Bismarck "À cette heure, est l'intelligence de la Prusse." A decade later, after a complete revelation of Bismarck's part in the Franco-Prussian War, its origins and its dénouement, Zola could look back with irony and depict a France totally blind to the menace implicit in his name.

In the horse-racing scene the synthesis of woman and beast receives its fullest expression, and Nana goes so far as to identify herself with the horse that bears her name. As Nana wins and Spirit is vanquished by flesh, she feels the crowd applauding her "et l'on ne savait plus si c'était la bête ou la femme qui emplissait les coeurs" (IV, 282). The day becomes her greatest moment of triumph and it is she who somehow carries off "Le Grand Prix de Paris".

It has been demonstrated that the genesis of the Longchamp scene in Nana is to be found in a description of the running of the "Grand Prix de Paris" which Zola recorded for the Russian press in 1875. He also announced to Fleubert, in a letter of 4 June 1879,  

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his intention of going to see the same race run for the documentation of Nana. Yet at the same time, particularly if we bear in mind that Ludovic Halévy provided Zola with a considerable amount of information for the novel, it is interesting to note that June 14, 1870, took place what Halévy called "une grande lutte internationale". The victory of Sornette, the French mare, at the races for the prize of 100,000 francs, was acclaimed to the cries of "la revanche de Waterloo" and "Vive l'Empereur!" Duncan says that the victory of the French mare over the British horse in the race is designed much less to represent a defeat for the Union Jack than it is to represent the apogee of the sensual attraction which the courtesan held for the beau monde of the capital. Nevertheless the scene in the novel catches the patriotic fervour: "Cette année ce serait un désastre si la France était battue de nouveau. Aussi toutes ces dames se passionnaient-elles, par orgueil national" (IV, 265).

The scene does not take place in 1870 but the novel's acceleration at the end eliminates the sense of the duration of time in its final chapters to such a degree that we are left with the impression that it does immediately precede the climax. Granted also that there is always a certain amount of national partisanship at a big race, one can, nevertheless, not entirely discount the possibility of a link which critics do not seem to have noted. It represents Nana's last

70 Correspondance II, LOC, p. 529
and greatest moment of triumph before the disaster to come, and as Halleys's notebooks revealed that only a month before war a whole society could compensate for its lack of political, diplomatic or military victories by concentrating its interest on a horse-race, so too in the novel the same frivolous mood is caught, patriotic and chauvinistic, but grotesquely blind.

"Vive Nana, Vive la France!" they had cried at the race (IV, 281) for she who had come to represent "la gloire même et la jouissance d'une nation" (IV, 319). Her end parallels the death agonies of the Second Empire going to war. To Van Santen Kolff Zola wrote: "C'est peut-être aider un peu trop au symbole en disant que le corps pourri de Nana est la France agonisante du Second Empire. Mais évidemment, j'ai dû vouloir quelque chose d'approchant."72

The destinies of individuals and the nation are linked. Born in 1851 and dying in 1870, Nana is not only a child of the Empire but a symbol of it. Her earlier "Ah! que Dieu nous conserve l'empereur le plus longtemps possible" is echoed by the courtesans at Nana's deathbed as they pray for the survival of a régime whose fall would mean their own undoing. Muffat's disintegration is that of the society he represents, and Nana's invisible presence at the ball is as significant as her death amidst the cries of those sweeping France to her defeat. For if the novel is an analysis of the moral

72 Letter of 5 March 1888, Niess Collection, p. 22. In a letter of February 1888 Kolff had written to Zola in the hope of having the symbolic intentions of the novel's close confirmed by the author: "J'ai lu un peu partout dans les critiques du livre: le cadavre pourri de Nana serait tout simplement un symbole du Second Empire pourri et agonisant, à la veille de la guerre de 1870. J'aimerais beaucoup savoir si ce prétendu symbole est réel, c'est-à-dire intentionné, voulu." Quoted by Niess, loc. cit., p. 22, n. 74.
corruption lying at the heart of the Second Empire, she herself becomes
the symbolic focal-point of that corruption, the incarnation of the
aspirations of a society riddled by greed, dishonesty and a lust
for pleasure, and the breeding-ground of its own destruction. We
watch the "débâcle" (IV, 304, 319, 322) of Nana's palace, the private
reflection of the catastrophe towards which the nation rushes headlong
in the mass.

As Nana dies there is again talk of Bismarck, and the presence
of the Austrian family next to Nana's room in the Grand Hotel with
their "bruit de voix broyant des syllabes barbares" (IV, 344)73 only
underscores the future of the Empire. The courtésans prayer of
"Conserves-nous l'Empire" (IV, 346) and the laughter which drowns
the words of those who dare prophecy France's defeat are full of
irony.

Zola's vision of Paris crying for war is repeated in La
Dénouement (VI, 692, 708), and, in the recapitulation of Le Docteur
Pascal, the telling of the story of Nana ends with an evocation of
the sight of the French capital "ivre, frappé de la folie de la
guerre, se ruant à l'écroulement de tout" (VI, 1239). In July 1870
Zola had been appalled by the chauvinistic frenzy, "transi," as Lanoux
wrote, "devant une telle stupidité."74 In "Les Nerfs de la France",

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73 For a similar description of the German language, see the
soldiers in "L'Attaque du Moulin" who pin Dominique to the ground and
"vociféraient autour de lui dans une langue effroyable" (IX, 1044).

74 Armand Lanoux, Bonjour, Monsieur Zola (Paris: Amiot-Dumont,
1954), p. 112.
in *La Cloche* of 17 August 1870, he reproached the country for its "enthusiasme fou": "Tu cries aux armes! tu chantes la Marseillaise; tu vas au combat comme tu serais allée aux eaux, en riant, en 'blaguant' les Prussiens." Recalling this "fanfaronnade patriotique et dangereuse" (IX, 1026) in later years Zola wrote that "si Napoleon III jeta la France dans cette guerre, par un intérêt dynastique, il faut ajouter que la nation entière répondit à son appel" (IX, 1026). Thus in the novel the chauvinistic emotion is not merely restricted to high society. Fontan, the variety-theatre actor, "prenait une pose de Bonaparte à Austerlitz" (IV, 339) in his enthusiasm, and Zola's picture is that of a whole people crying for war. In *Nana* the reminiscences of the end of an era are punctuated by the crowds shouting "A Berlin! à Berlin! à Berlin!" and this cry concludes the novel. Yet the disaster to come is also foretold, for their cry is "un grand souffle désespéré"(IV, 348).

*Nana* ends in blood and flames, the dominant imagery of *La Désastre*. *Nana* dies to a sun setting "derrière un nuage sanglant,

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75 *L'Atelier de Zola*, p. 247.
76 It is repeated eight times, IV, 338, 339, 340, 342, 344, 345, 347, 348.
77 Of the end of *Nana*, Matthew Josephson in 1928 wrote: "In the long summer evenings of 1870 the skies were flushed with strange lights. The low-lying clouds which furled thickly above Paris turned blood-red (as is not infrequently the case), and in the tense silence with which the capital attended developments there were many to say that their hue seemed catastrophic." *Zola and his Time* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1969) p. 159. Such literary criticism raises the proverbial question of the "chicken and the egg"! One wonders whether Mr. Josephson's over-active imagination conceived of the summer of 1870 before or after he had read *Nana*. 
dont le reflet d'incendie faisait flamber les fenêtres hautes" (IV, 337) and the light catches the crowd: "Une lueur rouge venait de la Madeleine, coupaît la cohue d'une trainée de feu, s'étalait au loin sur les têtes comme une nappe d'incendie" (IV, 342). In this "heure lourde et mélancolique" (IV, 337), they cry for Berlin, crying for war and a "bêtise sanglante" (IV, 345), unconsciously headed for the "massacres futurs" which lie beyond the unknown horizon, baying for blood yet themselves "pareilles à des troupeaux menés de nuit à l'abattoir" (IV, 344), a society and a nation heading towards "le charnier de Sedan".78

The play remains the archetype of the action of the novel. The Venus of the play had been advertised in a "salle dont une maigre décoration Empire faisait un péristyle de temple en carton" (IV, 22), and the first act is set "dans l'Olympe, un Olympe de carton" (IV, 29). Paris moves from the imaginary to the real and worships in Nana's hotel at the bed which she conceived of as "un trône, un autel, où Paris viendrait adorer sa nudité souveraine" (IV, 304). "La Fin," wrote Flaubert, "est épique."79 As the cardboard Olympus of the Second Empire crumbles, Nana dies as the symbol of that society decomposed by its own corruption: "Le ferment dont elle avait empoisonné un peuple, venait de lui remonter au visage et l'avait pourri" (IV, 348). The goddess is killed by the poison. The worshippers are crushed to

78 Supra, p. 53.
death in the final collapse of the temple.

The action of Germinal is based primarily on the Anzin strike of 1884, but it also reflects the events of La Ricamarie and Aubin in 1869 whose tragic outcomes were fuel to liberal and republican opposition to the Empire. Zola wrote that he had "pris et résumé toutes les grèves qui ont ensanglanté la fin de l'Empire." Within the novel the shootings at Hontsou are seen as having repercussions in Paris where "l'Empire, atteint en plein chair par ces quelques balles, affectait le calme de la toute-puissance, sans se rendre compte de la gravité de sa blessure" (V, 339). At the end of the novel, as the miners are forced to return to work, Zola warns that "Paris n'oublierait pas les coups de feu du Voreux, le sang de l'Empire lui aussi coulerait par cette blessure inguérissable" (V, 339). Yet it remains clear that the novel's links with the Empire are tenuous and that, while reflecting the industrial unrest of 1866-1867 and contributing to the note of doom that can be heard towards the end of Les Rougon-Macquart, its importance and meaning are beyond the fictional or historical limits of the Second Empire. Zola himself, as he noted in his "ébauche", was well aware of the real significance of the novel:

Le roman est le soulèvement des salariés, le coup d'épaule donné à la société qui chaque un instant: en un mot la lutte du capital et du travail. C'est là qu'est l'importance du livre. Je le veux prédissant l'avenir, pour la question la plus importante du XXe siècle.

80 Letter of 4 April 1885, Correspondence II, LOC, p. 636.
81 Infra, pp. 160-161.
82 Appendix to Germinal, LOC, p. 557.
The shadow of catastrophe also looms large over *La Terre*. Zola consciously rearranged his time-span to close the novel in 1870. He declared to Louis Deprez that "mon cycle est clos à Sedan, si bien que . . . je dois me reporter de dix ans en arrière. Je suis en perpétuel danger d'anachronisme."\(^\text{83}\) Anatole France was but one of the many critics who pointed out to Zola that the agricultural crisis provoked by the influx of American wheat, and described in *La Terre*, did not occur until after 1880. Their accusations were irrefutable but by having its action and the worsening crisis take place between 1860 and 1870, Zola was once again asserting his prerogative to deliberately rearrange history in order to satisfy aesthetic demands and reinforce the catastrophic pattern of the novel.

As *La Terre* draws to a close the presages of war cross the plain: "La menace de la guerre prochaine vole par la Beauce, dans la grande tristesse du ciel de cendre" (V, 1081). In his work notes Zola stressed that "la fin il faut la débâcle de tout."\(^\text{84}\) Thus the news of the approaching conflict is immediately followed by Françoise's rape and murder. She dies to the roll of drums assembling the recruits for war. They are a constant rumble in the background, heard again and again as the novel reaches its tragic climax. To their muffled but incessant beat, Lequeu prophesies certain disaster in the agricultural crisis, Hourdequin is murdered, and Fouan is burnt alive by his children. Leaving to enlist in the army, Jean

\(^\text{83}\) Quoted by Guy Robert, *"La Terre" d'Émile Zola*, p. 289.

\(^\text{84}\) Ibid., p. 163.
Macquart contemplates Hourdequin's burning farm and, in the fire itself, sees the spectre of war hanging over the landscape: "C'était la guerre passant dans la fumée, avec ses chevaux, ses canons, sa clameur de massacre" (IV, 1142).

Many of these same romantic devices contribute to the mood of approaching doom which also hangs over La Bête Humaine. The leaden skies and the sadness of the landscape reflect the mood of 1869-1870. His plan reveals his search to tie his plot into the history of the Second Empire. His historical notes were only minimally used but he did underline the importance of the elections of 1869 which were followed by disorders and what Zola characterised as the "accent de doute et de tristesse, prochains et terribles événements." 85

If history plays only a minor role in La Bête Humaine there is nevertheless a conscious attempt to insert the novel's action into a definite historical context and to link it to the presages of disaster on the political horizons. On the one hand this action takes place against a background of the events leading to war. A passing reference to the Hohenzollern candidature stands out like a beacon on the road to catastrophe. 86 The "angoisse" of the summer of 1870 is evoked:

85 Quoted by Kanes, "La Bête Humaine". A Study in Literary Creation, p.125.

86 The Hohenzollern question provided the pretext for, and the diplomatic origins of, the Franco-Prussian War. On 1 July 1870, Leopold, Prince of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, at Bismarck's instigation, accepted the offer of the Spanish throne, vacant since September 1868. Unwilling to tolerate Prussian influence on its southern border, France made it clear that war would be declared unless Leopold immediately withdrew this acceptance. After the Prince's father and King William had bowed to international pressure by complying with French demands on July 12, Paris overstepped the rules of the diplomatic game by asking (Cont...
Depuis le succès bruyant du plébiscite,87 une fièvre ne cessait d'agiter le pays, parce que ce vertige qui prélude et qui annonce les grandes catastrophes. C'était, dans la société de cette fin d'Empire, dans la politique, dans la presse surtout, une continue inquiétude, une exaltation où la joie elle-même prenait une violence maladive.

(VI, 283)

On the other hand there is an attempt to make the action of the novel itself contribute to the acceleration of the Empire's decline. The railway-system central to the action of the novel is thus seen as the vertebral column of France:

C'était comme un grand corps, un être géant couché en travers de la terre, la tête à Paris, les vertèbres tout le long de la ligne, les membres s'élargissant avec les embranchements, les pieds et les mains au Havre et dans les autres villes d'arrivée.

(VI, 55)

Once again Zola's picture is that of a society utterly corrupt. In Zola's plans the link between history and the novel was to be provided by the murder of a government official whose debauched existence obliged the authorities to hide the real truth of the circumstances in the hope of stifling the scandal and arresting the fall of a tottering régime. As the murder was to take place in a train and be committed

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87 The constitution of the new liberal Empire was approved by plebiscite on 8 May 1870.

for an official disassociation from the whole question. Furious at William's withdrawal, and well aware of what he was doing, Bismarck took advantage of the critical situation by sending a short statement to the press - the so-called Ems Telegram - reporting the King's refusal of July 13 to discuss anew the question of his making "guarantees" to France. This read like a brusque rebuff from William to Benedetti, the French ambassador to Berlin, and gave the impression that diplomatic relations had been broken off. Published in France, the telegram unleashed a wave of chauvinistic emotion. The Council of Ministers voted for war on July 15, and war was officially declared on 19 July 1870.
by a station employee, and thus be interwoven into Zola's study of the railways, he could use this vertebral-column image to show how the State itself would be rocked by the moral disintegration of those who made up its structure: "L'Affaire remontant et ébranlant jusqu'au conseil d'administration parce que tout craque du haut en bas, pour cette aventure d'un petit chef de gare, qui va découvrir des choses désagréables, jusqu'à l'état." This phrase appears in its entirety no less than five times in Zola's preparatory notes for the novel. In the "ébauche" he made it clear that it was the focal-point of his interweaving of history and fiction: "Tout l'Etat ébranlé par le crime, car l'Empire traverse une crise, et cette histoire arrivée à un ancien magistrat pourrait hâter l'écroulement (donc dernières années de l'Empire). C'est par là que le volume tient à l'histoire du Second Empire: insister, développer." In its final form in the novel, Roubaud murders Grandmorin for having seduced his wife and debauched her as a young girl, and the crime shakes the railway company, its administration, and finally the "tête" of Paris, the state itself, sick and feverish in 1869 in the final agony of the Second Empire:

Le crime présumé d'un petit sous-chef de gare, quelque histoire louche, basse et malpropre, remontait au travers de rouages compliqués, ébranlait cette machine énorme d'une voie ferrée en détraquant jusqu'à l'administration supérieure. La secousse allait même plus haut, gagnait le ministère, menaçait l'État, dans le malaise politique du moment: heure critique, grand corps social dont la moindre fièvre hâtait la décomposition.

(VI, 285)

88 Quoted by Kanes, "Le Bête Humaine", A Study in Literary Creation, p. 95.

89 Appendix to La Bête Humaine, LOC, p. 389.
As the government tries to suppress the scandal the railroad becomes representative of a social body already crumbling and whose end is imminent. The manipulations of justice to prop up the régime are a vain remedy: "Il valait mieux être sage, étayer d'un coup d'épaule cette société finissante qui menaçait ruine" (VI, 284). As Camy-Lamotte, the Attorney-General, burns the proof that would necessitate a trial he is suddenly struck by a presentiment of catastrophe and the futility of his efforts:

Et comme il approchait la lettre de la bougie et qu'elle flambait, il fut pris d'une grande tristesse, d'un pressentiment de malheur; à quoi bon détruire cette preuve, charger sa conscience de cette action, si le destin était que l'Empire fut balayé, ainsi que la pincée de cendre noire, tombée de ses doigts.

(VI, 285)

His own decline is linked to that of the Empire. After the plebiscite of 1870 and as the novel draws to a close, the faithful government servant "déclinait, envahi d'une grande tristesse dans son scepticisme, comme s'il eût pressenti, sous cet éclat d'apothéose, l'écroulement du régime qu'il servait (VI, 283).

After the declaration of war (VI, 294), the mood of the novel's final chapter is apocalyptic. The troops departing for the front are loaded into cattle-trucks "comme des moutons dans des wagons à bestiaux" (VI, 295). The scenes of drunkenness and wild enthusiasm faithfully reflect those of July 1870, and evoke "ces wagons à bestiaux emplis de troupiers qui hurlaient des refrains patriotiques. Ils allaient à la guerre, c'était pour être plus vite là-bas, sur les bords du Rhin" (VI, 297). The soldiers do not know, as we do, that they are bound for the crushing defeats, the humiliation, and the
suffering of the battles of the Franco-Prussian War.

With true dramatic irony Zola makes it clear that they are unknowingly bound for the future carnage: "Les dix-huits wagons, chargés, bondés de bétail humain traversaient la campagné noire, dans un grondement continu. Et ces hommes, qu'on cherrrais au massacre, chantaient, chantaient à tue-tête, d'une clameur si haute, qu'elle dominait le bruit des roues" (VI, 296). Departing with the docility and the stupidity of sheep led to the slaughter-house it is clear that the "human cattle" are the cannon-fodder of tomorrow. Their singing closes the novel (its final word is "chantaient") and has been called, by Levin, "a token of Zola's compassion," Yet it is also heavy with irony. Less than fifty years later, in Send-Off, Wilfred Owen would express similar reactions to the enthusiastic departures for another and more terrible war, with the deep compassion and the sad anger that characterizes his poetry:

Shall they return to beating of great bells In wild train-loads? A few, a few, too few for drums and yells May creep back, silent, to village wells Up half-known roads.

90 Cf. Huysmans' similar description of the departure to the front in "Sac à Dos". "Un vacarme d'ouragan souffla au loin, s'approcha, hurlant et crechant des flammes, et un interminable train d'artillerie passa à toute vapeur, charriant des chevaux, des hommes, des canons dont les coups de bronze étincelaient dans un tumulte de lumières." Les Soirées de Médan (Paris: Fasquelle, 1880), p. 112. See also an evocation of such scenes in La Désââcle, VI, 716.

91 As in Nana, IV, 344. Supra, p. 90.

92 Levin, op. cit., p. 328.

In the novel the driver and the mechanic of the troop-train fight and fall off their platform to be crushed under the wheels, leaving the train driverless and speeding on into the night. It is glimpsed "dans un vertige de fumée et de flammes" (VI, 297), and in this last page of the novel this vertiginous movement assumes the inexorability of blind power. The train, seen as a beast throughout the novel, is now seen as a stampeding monster. The movement becomes increasingly dizzy, intense and dynamic through the repetition of "roulait, roulait" underlining the acceleration of the race of the train across the land. The soldiers are not aware of what is happening or of where it must end. As "chair à canon" and "hébétés" they are already the inert victims of the coming slaughter. The earlier train-crash which had ended "en une débâcle informe de débris" (VI, 239) supplies the imagination with a vision of the disaster we do not actually see.

The myth of Catastrophe looms large in La Bête Humaine and the railroad and the locomotive are transformed into powerful poetic symbols. Zola's scientific scruples, his "hypertrophie du détail vrai," lead him to find out whether in fact a steam-engine could run by itself. "En tout cas," he concluded, "on peut avoir une demi-heure de course folle dans la nuit." But with that authenticity behind him he could freely realise his earlier conception of a symbolic dénouement.

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94 Four times in pairs. See VI, 297. For an analysis of the stylistic devices used in this passage see Antoinette Jagnotti, "La Bête Humaine" d'Émile Zola, étude de stylistique critique (Genève: Droz, 1955), pp. 77-78.

95 Quoted by Matthews, op. cit., p. 57.
In the dialectic between fact and fantasy, the abandoned train and the destruction of the locomotive were to be a symbol of France. "La vérité monte d'un coup d'aile jusqu'au symbole" as we are left not so much with the impression of the thirty minutes as that of a world ending not with a whisper but with a bang. "Le train," he wrote in his "ébauche", "est alors l'image de la France." The driverless train speeding blindly through the night becomes an historical allegory of France under the Empire in 1870, relentlessly driving towards its downfall.

Zola's intentions in *L'Argent* were to link finance and politics. Modelling the novel's action on the crash of the Union Générale in 1882, he searched the annals of the Second Empire for some similar event at its close: "Il me faudrait vers la fin de l'Empire, quelque chose de correspondant, allant avec le mouvement politique." Above all he wanted to express the movement of disintegration in the political situation:

Mêler l'affaire d'argent à la politique, faire que la débâcle soit au bout... une peinture de société de décadence pendant tout le livre: les personnages pris pour cela. Il faut qu'on sente dans tout le livre le craquement d'une société, le prochain effondrement.

To express such a feeling of imminent collapse *L'Argent* makes many allusions to events which marked the end of the Empire, and which act as a sombre background to the action of the novel. Early

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96 Appendix to *La Bête Humaine*, LOC, p. 289.
97 Appendix to *L'Argent*, LOC, p. 439.
in the book, which begins at the end of 1864, Saccard goes to see his brother in the Corps Législatif where trouble is in the air, particularly over Mexico. By having Saccard, the financier, move in the corridors of power, Zola provides a bridge between the two worlds and an informed observer over the machinations of politics. As it had in Son Excellence Eugène Rougon, "l'opposition devenait de plus en plus redoutable, le vent de catastrophe commençait à souffler, qui devait grandir et tout abattre" (VI, 412), and, in a scene in May 1865, Huret, the deputy, is already thinking of the estates to which he might retreat "après la débâcle" (VI, 412). As in his earlier political novel Picard's cry "le 2 Décembre est un crime" (VI, 467) echoes again, heavy with portents of revenge, although in L'Argent it is within its true historical context of 1865.99

The Paris Exhibition of 1867 is seen as Napoleon's glorious triumph, but as he distributes the prizes, "on maître d'Europe," to the exhibitors, there sounds a sinister note of doom. The news of Maximilian's execution is the awaited epilogue to the cotillon-figure of La Curée:100

Le jour même, on apprenait aux Tuileries l'effroyable catastrophe du Mexique, l'exécution de Maximilien, le sang et l'or français versés en pure perte; et l'on cachait la nouvelle, pour ne pas attirer les fêtes. Un premier coup de glas, dans cette fin de jour superbe, éblouissante de soleil.

(VI, 540)

The Exhibition itself is but another manifestation of the brilliant facade of the reign "tandis que, dessous, sonnait le vide, le réel

99 Supra, pp. 74-75.
100 Supra, p. 58.
épuisement d'un règne. ... Au premier craquement, dans ce vertige, c'était la débâcle" (VI, 545). There is surely a large measure of ironic hindsight in the description of the immense popular success of the Krupp guns exhibited by Germany and once again Bismarck's shadow looms large. As he watches Saccard pass with his latest female acquisition, he stops a moment "pour les regarder curieusement passer" (VI, 544), reflecting on the spectacle of this society's inverted values. But he himself is an ominous presence and, already a "conquérant", his own achievements put Saccard's "triumph" in an ironic and crushingly lucid perspective:

Un colosse, vêtu d'un uniforme de cuirassier blanc, éclatant et superbe. C'était le comte de Bismarck, dont la grande taille dominait toutes les têtes, riant d'un rire large, les yeux gros, le nez fort, avec une mâchoire puissante que barraient des moustaches de conquérant. Après Sadowa, il venait de donner l'Allemagne à la Prusse; les traités d'alliance, longtemps niées, étaient depuis des mois signés contre la France; et la guerre, qui avait failli éclater en mai, à propos du Luxembourg, était désormais fatale. (VI, 544)

While the Exhibition was "la splendour finale, la menteuse apothéose de fée" (VI, 470), 1867 signalled the crumbling of the gilt. That year saw the collapse of the financial empire of the Péreire brothers and the liquidation of the Crédit Mobilier. Amidst the rejoicing of the political opposition, Jules Ferry declared that "the year 1867 has begun the liquidation of all the faults of the Second Empire." It was the collapse of the Crédit Mobilier that gave Zola his "quelque chose de correspondant." Although he was to use the tête of the Union Générale as his main source, and the records

101 Quoted by Bury, op. cit., p. 152.
of its director, Bontoux, he could thus avoid outrageous anachronism in his transposition of Third Republic history into that of the Second Empire. In any case it reinforced the tragic progression towards catastrophe, and, thus favoured by events, he could write in his preparatory notes that "je ne crois pas qu'il sera très difficile de transporter l'affaire de l'Union vers 1867. Il y avait déjà eu l'écroulement du Crédit Mobilier. ... C'est la dernière flambée de l'Empire, une danse sur le volcan classique."102

The "dernière flambée de l'Empire" is expressed through the imagery of fire, which provides a coherent poetic framework to the action of the novel. As in La Curée, it is again Saccard who moves in a brasier of gold. The Bourse, possessed by the speculative fury of those within it, is seen as a huge machine "dans un vacillement de flammes" (VI, 354), and when Saccard racks his brain for a name for his new company, it suddenly appears before him like a burning torch: "Les mots: La Banque Universelle, avaient brusquement flambé devant lui, comme en caractères de feu, dans la chambre encore noire" (VI, 395).

For Saccard, the very element of risk at the heart of his venture is "la flamme de cette géante mécanique que je rêve" (VI, 424). As investment gets under way, the Banque Universelle's capital is soon doubled and the company becomes like some gigantic steam-engine: "L'Universelle se mettait en marche, en puissante machine destinée à tout affoler, à tout broyer, et que des mains violentes chauffaient sans mesure, jusqu'à l'explosion" (VI, 470). In July 1866, before

102 Quoted by Jean Bouvier, "L'Argent: Roman et Réalité", Europe, CCCCLXVIII-CCCCLXIX (1968), 58.
his great coup, Saccard watches the Bourse before opening-time, and the heat of the sun becomes the flames of speculation dancing before his eyes (VI, 491); and at the end of the day, in the chaos caused by the news of the end of the Austro-Prussian War, the Bourse is again seen "dans un flamboiement d'incendie" (VI, 493).

Saccard takes advantage of a leak, privately informing him of the Austrian defeat at Sadova and of Napoleon's future role as mediator, by investing while his rivals sell their shares in the apparent uncertainty of the European situation. He later goes out into a rejoicing Paris, on a night on which the Emperor's diplomatic success is paralleled by his own financial triumph. Saccard is blinded by a capital which is a maze of lights and which "flambait par toutes ses avenues" (VI, 494). He sees a "gigantesque croix de feu, bris­­sillant dans le ciel noir" (VI, 495), and walks back savouring his triumph "au travers de Paris en flammes" (VI, 495).

As success comes, he leaves the cloistered darkness of the hôtel d'Olvido for a new gilded palace. Once again the surroundings reflect their inhabitants, for Saccard throws his initial prudence to the winds and moves in rash and impatient ways, "chauffant, surchauf­­fant le sol, au risque de brûler la récolte" (VI, 495). Mme. Caro­­line, his friend and mistress, lives in the same atmosphere, "allait vivre dans un brasier, dans la forge halétante de la spéculation, sous l'incessante menace d'une catastrophe finale" (VI, 516). Her instincts warn her of the danger inherent in this inflammable world of speculative fire, overheated imaginations and machines, of "le milieu surchauffé où elle vivait" (VI, 544). When the Universelle
collapses at the end, Hamelin, her brother, returns from abroad where he has been supervising the company's colonial developments, only to find that "la société était par terre, en poudre, il n'y avait plus rien qu'un trou noir, où le feu semblait avoir passé" (VI, 606). At the novel's close, after the company's liquidation, Mme. Caroline sees the Bourse at the end of a winter's day against a backdrop of the dying sunset. The sky is "comme une fumée d'incendie, une nuée d'un rouge sombre, qu'on aurait crue faite des flammes et des poussières d'une ville prise d'assaut" (VI, 628). As she looks out at the red sky and the flames of destruction the myth of Catastrophe, as it had in Nana, looms large on the horizon: "Derrière cette fumée rousse de l'horizon, dans les lointains troubles de la ville, il y avait comme un grand craquement sourd, la fin prochaine d'un monde" (VI, 628).

In La Curée, Renée had had a presentiment that Saccard would eventually drown, like herself, in the ocean of his own making. In L'Argent this same imaginative pattern reappears. The Bourse is seen as a "mer de créanciers" (VI, 356) and a "mer de dossiers" (VI, 357), and the brokers streaming in are "un flot ininterrompu de gens" (VI, 368) while Saccard hears the tumult of the Bourse like that of the ocean: "Derrière son dos, la clameur de la Bourse, le bruit de marée lointaine continuait, l'obsédait ainsi qu'une menace d'engloutissement qui allait le rejoindre" (VI, 347). He is constantly aware of the presence of "la voix haute de la Bourse, qui déferlait avec l'entêtement du flux à son retour" (VI, 354). As activity increases, the noise made by the brokers takes on "la violence débridée d'une marée haute" (VI, 366).
Once again, speculation is seen as "la pluie d'or qui allait plouvoir sur lui et autour de lui" (VI, 432), and he envisages a "miraculeuse pluie d'argent" from the silver-mine his company exploits at Carmel. Gundermann, Saccard's rival, has a fortune so immense that "tous les fleuves d'or allaient à cette mer" (VI, 402), while Daigremont's millions are "une fortune sans cesse mouvante, qui semblait infinie comme la mer, mais qui en avait le flux et le reflux, des différences de deux et trois cent mille francs, à chaque liquidation de la quinzaine" (VI, 409). The sudden news of the end of the Austro-Prussian War causes "une clameur, qui grossissait avec la voix haute d'une marée d'équinoxe" (VI, 492). As the novel comes to a climax, the hush at the closing-bell leaves only "le grondement sourd du public, pareil à la voix continue d'un torrent rentré dans son lit, qui s'achève de s'écouler" (VI, 586).

The novel had opened with Saccard's comeback "du fond trouble où il s'était noyé un instant" (VI, 424). After his final defeat he collapses on a bench, sinking beneath the waves: "La cohue refluait toujours, menaçait de l'étouffer. Il leva la tête dans un besoin d'air" (VI, 604). In the company's collapse, the Countess, her equally impoverished daughter, and those of Saccard's associates who are flies on the wall as the dam breaks, are all victims of a "naufrage" (VI, 613, 619). The flood-image, like that of fire, takes on catastrophic dimensions as Mme. Caroline foresees the end of the Banque Universelle: "Dans une brève lucidité, elle vit l'Universelle suer l'argent de toutes parts, un lac, un océan d'argent au milieu duquel, avec un craquement effroyable, tout d'un coup, la maison coulait à pic" (VI, 511).
Zola’s intentions of linking politics and finance at the end of the Empire are realized in different ways. On the one hand we see the influence of international events on the Bourse, as Prussia’s defeat of Austria on 30 June 1866 is responsible for "un effondrement de toutes les valeurs" (VI, 487). On the other, the financial prosperity of the Second Empire takes place to the presages of doom on its political horizons. Of more importance is the fact that the novel is so organized that on the fictional level the destinies of Saccard and Napoleon III are linked.

The opening of Chapter VII describes the inauguration of the 1867 Exhibition and is a spectacle of a reign "à son apogée." It is also Saccard’s: "Et ce fut à la même époque, quinze jours plus tard, que Saccard inaugura l’hôtel monumental qu’il avait voulu pour y loger royalemment l’Universelle" (VI, 517). While it is Napoleon’s triumph, "il sembla, au milieu de cette gloire que l’astre de Saccard, lui aussi montât encore, à son éclat le plus grand" (VI, 540). Both Napoleon and Saccard gain from the Prussian victory at Sadowa. The latter reflects that the celebrations are not the Emperor’s alone: "Il pouvait croire qu’on illuminait pour le fêter: n’était-il pas, lui aussi, le vainqueur inattendu, celui qui s’élevait au milieu des désastres?" (VI, 495).

Nevertheless, Saccard’s greatest triumphs seldom pass without some observer in the background forecasting the political débâcle of the régime. Thus at the end of Saccard’s greatest day, Moser speaks in sinister tones of "la carte de l’Hexique à payer, les affaires de Rome qui s’embrrient encore depuis Mentana, l’Allemagne qui va tom­ber sur nous un de ces quatre matins," and derides "ces imbéciles qui
moment encore, pour culbuter de plus haut" (VI, 536). Exploiting a timeless principle of tragedy, what Zola portrays in L'Argent is a last moment of triumph before the fall.

Saccard's fortunes parallel not only those of Napoleon but of the Second Empire itself. In his destitution at the novel's opening, Saccard listens to the bankers discussing the political troubles of the times:

Et Saccard qui les avait écoutés, ramenait aux difficultés de sa situation personnelle cette crise où l'empire semblait entrer. Lui, une fois encore, était par terre; est-ce que cet empire, qui l'avait fait, allait comme lui culbuter, exécutant tout d'un coup de la destinée la plus haute à la plus misérable? (VI, 338-339)

In his reflections, should his own fortunes not revive, he maliciously hopes "que tout fût donc emporté, dans la grande débâcle finale des nuits de fête" (VI, 339).

Sadou gives both to him and to Napoleon renewed prestige and a new lease of life. Yet while this crushing victory, which established Prussia as the new military master of Europe, should have been heeded as the direst of warnings, so in the midst of the rising fortunes of the Universelle, ironic hindsight is focused on the French refusal to re-arm: "On riait beaucoup d'un autre député qui lors de la discussion sur l'armée, avait eu l'extraordinaire fantaisie de proposer d'établir en France le système de recrutement de la Prusse. La Chambre s'en était amusée" (VI, 468). The same irony is poured on the diplomatic success gained at Sadou, a paltry consolation for France's relegation in the new European balance of power. Seemingly oblivious of the shadows on the horizon, Napoleon and Saccard sun themselves in
the glory of their respective triumphs, but the bright lights of Paris are contrasted to the future blackness of the siege of the winter of 1870-1871:

Ce premier triomphe sembla être comme une floraison de l'empire à son apogée. Il entrait dans l'éclat du règne, il en était un des reflets glorieux. Le soir même où il grandissait parmi les fortunes écoulées, à l'heure où la Bourse n'était plus qu'un champ morne de décombres, Paris entier se pavoisait, s'illuminait, ainsi que pour une grande victoire; et des fêtes aux Tuileries, des réjouissances dans les rues, célébraient Napoléon III maître de l'Europe, si haut, si grand que les empereurs et les rois le choisissaient comme arbitre dans leurs querelles et lui remettaient des provinces pour qu'il en disposât entre eux. À la Chambre, des voix avaient bien protesté, des prophètes de malheur annonçaient confusément le terrible avenir, la Prusse grandie de tout ce que la France avait toléré, l'Autriche battue, l'Italie ingrate. Mais des rires, des cris de colère étouffaient ces voix inquiètes, et Paris, centre du monde, flambait par toutes ses avenues et tous ses monuments, au lendemain de Sadowa, en attendant les nuits noires et glacées, les nuits sans gaz, traversées par la mâche rouge des obus.

(VI, 494)

In his fall, Saccard's destiny remains linked to that of the Empire, as he is aware that his role is to "faire expier la folie de tous, les crimes des autres affaires moins en vue, de ce pullulement d'entreprises louches, surchauffées de réclames, grandies comme des champignons monstrueux dans le terreau décomposé du règne" (VI, 590).

In their synthesis of destinies the presages of disaster for the Banque Universelle are also those for the Second Empire itself. Once again, the imminent collapse is seen largely in terms of crumbling buildings. Mme. Caroline is always fearful that, any moment, will occur "la lézarde dont périrait l'édifice" (VI, 520). In the midst of the company's prosperity "elle avait conscience d'un malaise, quelque chose qui déjà minait l'édifice" (VI, 545), and she is aware of the "légères secousses d'ébranlement qui annoncent les catastrophes" (VI, 545).
As the crisis approaches, the fall of values begins: "Déjà, des écroulements partiels s'étaient produits, le marché exténué, trop chargé, lézardait de toutes parts" (VI, 605). Throughout the novel, Gundermann, planning his revenge, merely waits for the Universelle to crumble of its own accord: "Il attendait froidement qu'elle se lézardât d'elle-même, pour la jeter par terre d'un coup d'épaule" (VI, 497). In its final disintegration, Mme. Caroline sees the Universelle as certainly fated to disaster as the train of the Empire in La Bête Humaine. Her vision of the company is that of it "pareille à une machine bourrée de charbon, lancée sur des rails diaboliques, jusqu'à ce que tout crevât et sautât, sous un dernier choc" (VI, 507).

A society gutted of its moral fibre is on the same road to disaster. For in the final analysis the Banque Universelle becomes a microcosm of the Empire, a society built on speculation, money, and rotten foundations. The "charnier de valeurs dépréciées" (VI, 347) is the depreciation of the values of a whole society, not merely of the Bourse, and the financial crash, a symbolic deflation of over-inflated values, foreshadows the political doom.

Maurice LeBlond wrote that L'Argent necessarily preceded La Débâcle: "Il était logique que L'Argent précédât La Débâcle. Le thème de l'or devait préluder aux plaintes funèbres de la grande catastrophe."103 Yet it would not have seemed illogical had La Bête Humaine, the novel which ended with the declaration of war and closed with a vision of troops departing for the front, immediately preceded La Débâcle. Writing to Van Santen Kolff on 9 July 1890, Zola told him that

103 Notes et Commentaires, L'Argent, LOC, p. 431.
his novel would end with an "écroulement dans la boue et dans le sang."\textsuperscript{104} Yet mud and blood are hardly the images we normally associate with financial disasters. In this perspective, perhaps nothing is more revealing than Huysmans' letter to Zola of 26 March 1891. Thanking him for a copy of \textit{L'Argent}, he commented that "ça crouille, et votre champ de bataille du krack final flamboie et tonitrue comme un Sedan."\textsuperscript{105} For \textit{L'Argent} can be seen not merely as a book whose horizons are dark with the shadow of catastrophe, but also as one already linked to \textit{La Désolation} (which may explain its place in the novel-series) as an allegory of war.

Throughout the novel, Saccard models himself on the great Bonaparte and is described in Napoleonic terms. Pascal later recalls him "gagnant et perdant des batailles en Bourse, comme Napoléon à Austerlitz et à Waterloo" (VI, 1236). As Saccard dreams of the Middle East, he is entranced by legend and the tales of the crusades but "la haute figure de Napoléon le frappa davantage, allant guerroyer là-bas, dans un but grandiose et mystérieux" (VI, 392). As he plans his comeback he evokes Napoleon's return from Elba. When he defeats Gundermann in their first encounter, "ce fut sa grande journée, celle dont on parle encore, comme on parle d'Austerlitz" (VI, 586). And thus the day of his defeat is seen as his Waterloo. When Daigremont fails to appear at the moment of crisis to reinforce his funds, Zola comments that "comme à Waterloo, Grouchy n'arrivait pas, et c'était la trahison qui achevait la déroute" (VI, 601). Saccard himself reflects on

\textsuperscript{104}Niess Collection, p. 36.
his demise in the same terms: "Si Napoléon, le jour de Waterloo, avait eu cent mille hommes encore à faire tuer, il l'emportait, la face du monde était changée. Moi, si j'avais eu à jeter au gouffre les quelques centaines de millions nécessaires, je serais le maître du monde" (VI, 646).

Gundermann, the banker who finally defeats Saccard, is logically paralleled with Wellington, but of far greater significance is the fact that he is a Prussian. While he is undoubtedly modelled on Rothschild, Zola struck on the idea that by making him of Prussian origin he could once again link money and politics:

La banque juive. Je voudrais l'intéresser au mouvement politique. Je crois que le plus simple serait de faire de mon banquier juif, un juif d'origine prussienne qui fait des voeux pour le triomphe de l'Allemagne. . . . A la fin . . . le juif donc triomphant d'autant plus qu'il prévoit 1870. A la fin quelques mots de lui annoncent la grandeur future de l'Allemagne. Je fais donc de mon juif, un Prussien simplement.106

Thus not only does Gundermann prophesy the Prussian triumph of 1870 (VI, 480, 647), but a Prussian defeats Saccard, whose fortunes reflect the destiny of the Bonapartes.

The battle of the Bourse is seen in terms of military strategy, and the action of the novel in an extended metaphor of war. Before opening-time, the chairs on the terrace of the Bourse are "l'armée de chaises en bon ordre" (VI, 335), and Saccard watches the building from across the street "avec le regard aigu d'un chef d'armée examinant sous toutes ses faces la place dont il veut tenter l'assaut" (VI, 350).

Over the battles of "la dure guerre de la spéculation" (VI, 374),

106 Appendix to L'Argent, LOC, p. 447.
La Méchain is a carrion-crow figure ever present:

Dans les batailles meurtrières de la finance, la Méchain était le corbeau qui suivait les armées en marche. . . . Elle savait bien que la déroute était fatale, que le jour de massacre viendrait, où il y aurait des morts à manger, des titres à ramasser dans la boue et dans le sang. 

(VI, 347)\(^{107}\)

When Saccard makes his plans for the development and the exploitation of the Eastern Mediterranean, "il en flairait le trésor, il hennissait comme un cheval de guerre, à l'odeur de la bataille" (VI, 389). The Banque Universelle then becomes an army of the Crusades, conquering the Middle East (VI, 539). Its four hundred employees are "cette armée que Saccard commandait avec un faste de tyran adoré et obéi" (VI, 518).

When the prices on the stock-exchange begin to rise at the rumours of Napoleon's mediatory role in the Austro-Prussian conflict, the sudden outburst of share-buying are like isolated shots ringing out before the general encounter: "Des achats brusques, isolés, comme des coups de feu de tirailleurs avant que la bataille s'engage, étonnèrent" (VI, 492). When the rumours are confirmed, chaos strikes and all is let loose: "Ce fut une mêlée inexprimable, une de ces batailles confuses où tous se ruent, soldats et capitaines, pour sauver leur peau, assourdis, aveuglés, n'ayant plus la conscience nette de la situation (VI, 493). For some it means disaster: "Et à la liquidation lorsqu'on put évaluer le désastre, il apparut immense. Le champ de bataille restait jonché de blessés et de ruines" (VI, 493).

\(^{107}\)See also VI, 441. Cf. the description in La Débâcle of the "détrouseurs de cadavres, toute une basse juiverie de proie, venue à la suite de l'invasion" (VI, 979).
Gundermann, the victim of "un vrai massacre" (VI, 494), lives for the day of revenge.

After his earlier successes, Saccard, "plein d'une forfan-terie batailleuse," plans his campaign to take on Gundermann: "Son audace croissant avec ses victoires, il ne cachait plus son plan de s'attaquer à la haute banque juive, dans la personne de Gundermann, dont il s'agissait de battre en brèche le milliard, jusqu'à l'assaut et à la capture finale" (VI, 541). His hatred for Gundermann is surely paralleled to the Franco-Prussian diplomatic rivalry of the late 1860's, in which France was continually out-maneuvered in her attempts to gain the mastery of the European political arena:

Et tout de suite repartit sa haine de Gundermann, son effréné besoin de revanche: abattre Gundermann, cela le hantait d'un désir chimérique, chaque fois qu'il était par terre, vaincu. S'il sentait l'enfantillage d'une pareille tentative ne pourrait-il du moins l'entamer, se faire une place en face de lui, le forcer au partage, comme ces monarques de contrées voisines et d'égale puissance, qui se traitent de cousins?" (VI, 375)

Thus, to a background of rumours of approaching war with Germany, Gundermann and Saccard prepare for their own showdown, "un de ces batailles sans merci où l'une des deux armées reste par terre détruite" (VI, 573).

The battle begins and "jamais guerre pourtant n'avait eu cette féroceité muette, un égorgement de chaque heure, le guet-apens embusqué partout" (VI, 590). As the battle turns against him, Saccard "vivait dans l'hallucination de la victoire toujours possible" (VI, 560). and only gives ground inch by inch: "En chef d'armée convaincu de l'excellence de son plan, il ne cédait le terrain que pas à pas, sacrifiant
... dernier soldats, vidant les caisses de la société de leurs derniers sacs d'écus pour barrer la route aux assaillants" (VI, 560).

On the vital day, in his plan to "guerroyer, en attendant l'armée de renfort" (VI, 598), Daigremont sees him as "un grand homme de guerre" (VI, 594). When Saccard's reinforcements do not materialize, however, Gundermann senses victory and brings up his reserves, after Baronne Sandorff, his spy, has brought him news of the true state of the enemy's strength: "Il allait faire avancer la réserve formidable de son milliard, en général qui veut en finir et que ses espions ont renseigné sur le point faible de l'ennemi" (VI, 594). For while his own bags of money disappear "pareils à des rangées de soldats que les boulets emportent" (VI, 583), he has, nevertheless, in his cellars "son milliard d'inséparables troupes qu'il envoyait au massacre, si longue et meurtrière que fût la campagne" (VI, 583). At the end we have the spectacle of Saccard's defeat. The word "désastre" is used again and again.108 The Bourse in chaos is the scene of a military disaster and, as "la plaine restait rase, jonchée de cadavres" (VI, 601), the figure of Le Méchain is seen watching from the gallery: "Elle guettait les morts, telle que le corbeau vorace qui suit les armées jusqu'au jour des massacres" (VI, 604).

Thus, the destiny of Saccard, as the embodiment of the Empire, is seen within a poetic framework, as he crumbles in the flames and sinks beneath the tumultuous ocean of gold and vice already evoked

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108 See VI, 583, 589-590, 591, 605.
in La Curée. In the battle of the Bourse the link between finance and politics receives its most powerful dimension. It was fitting that the last of the novels of the prophecy of hindsight should present not only the shadow, but also an allegory of the war which would sweep away the empire of Napoleon III.
III

DOWNFALL

1. War

Zola took no part himself in the war that brought about the fall of the Second Empire, a fact which later critics were to throw in his face with scorn. Although a naturalized French citizen, Zola, as the only son of a widow, was exempted from military service and, on the outbreak of hostilities, his myopia prevented his being admitted to serve in the Garde Nationale.

On September 7, 1870, Zola wrote to Edmond de Goncourt announcing his impending departure from Paris, giving as his reason that his wife was "tellement effrayée que je me décide à l'éloigner." In Marseilles he founded the strongly Republican but short-lived La Marseillaise with Marius Roux before moving to Bordeaux, the seat of provisional government, in December. Having made several vain attempts to obtain a "sous-préfecture" for himself, he at last solved his financial problems by becoming secretary to Claus-Bizoin, a member of Gambetta's government of National Defence. Shortly afterwards he was joined by his wife and mother who had accompanied him to Provence in

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1 Of an Italian father, Zola became a naturalized French citizen on 31 October 1862.

2 Correspondence I, LOC, p. 361.
September. He remained in his new position until 8 February 1871, and almost a week later Ulbach accepted Zola's immediate offer of a parliamentary chronicle for La Cloche. On March 14, 1871, he returned to Paris following the National Assembly's decision to resume its sessions in Versailles. Arrested briefly by both sides during the Commune, the duration of which he left Paris for Bennecourt, he continued to send his reports to the paper until 1 May 1872, infinitely bored by the parliamentary proceedings he was forced to witness yet having no other means of support.

In his private correspondence there are few references to the war. In June 1870 the serial-publication of Le Fortune des Rougon in Le Siècle had been suspended "à cause de la gravité des circonstances." Forced to abandon his literary efforts a discontented Zola wrote to Edmond de Goncourt that "cette affreuse guerre m'a fait tomber la plume des mains. Je suis comme une âme en peine. Je bats les rues." Two days later, on August 25, another letter followed in the same rest-less mood: "Je suis froissé dans tous mes nerfs par cet affreux tapage. Il vaudrait mieux avoir un fusil au poing et en finir une bonne fois." Nevertheless Goncourt could report in his Journal that on August 27 Zola had entertained him with details of his planned series,

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4 He was arrested by the Communards, in Paris, on 21 March 1871, and by the Versaillais, at Versailles, two days later.
5 Correspondance I, LOC, p. 360.
6 Ibid., p. 361.
his mind teeming with novels. Zola might well curse the war as an "épouvantable chose", but from Bordeaux he seemed to look forward to its end mainly as the opportunity to get back to work. In February he complained that "les temps sont bien mauvais pour les arts. Mais il faut espérer que tout cela va finir," and on the acceptance of the Peace Treaty he triumphantly wrote to Alexis that "notre règne arrive. La paix est faite. Nous sommes les écrivains de demain." In the newspaper columns he expressed a rather greater concern. Ulbach's editorial in La Cloche of 9 July 1870 read "L'Empire, c'est la guerre" as the left-wing press displayed its opposition to Napoleon's foreign policy. For the Opposition the outbreak of the conflict was proof once again that the Empire had led France to disaster. In his article entitled simply "La Guerre", in La Cloche of 11 July 1870, Zola recalled the campaigns of 1854 and 1859 and aligned himself with the anti-militarist camp. "Ah! guerre maudite qui fait pleurer la France," he cried, "je n'ai connu de toi que le tapage du départ et les larmes de retour, mais c'est assez pour t'exécrer." On July 18,

8 Correspondance I, LOC, p. 361.
9 Letter to P. Solari, 12 February 1871, Correspondance I, p. 374.
10 Letter of 2 March 1871, Correspondance I, p. 378. This confirmed his earlier prognostic to Alexis on 17 February 1871: "Je sens une renaissance. Nous sommes les hommes de demain, notre jour arrive."
11 Kanes gives the date of this article as 14 July 1870, L'Atelier de Zola, p. 239.
12 Zola Journaliste, p. 119.
in the same paper, his portrait of "Chauvin" brutally stripped away
the facade of patriotic glory and called for a voice of reason to
recount "l'horreur de la tuerie folle."\(^{13}\) After the Empire had gone
to war with a lightness of heart and in a chauvinistic frenzy encou-
raged by a notable section of the press, Zola continued to declaim
against the folly of war. In "Le Petit Village", on 25 July 1870, he
contrasted a visual evocation of an anonymous village in peace and in
war. The village is a "terre vierge que la guerre va violer" (IX, 404),
and Zola suggested that when its pastoral calm had been ripped aside
by the claws of war the village would at last achieve fame,"vivra
éternellement dans les siècles, comme un coupe-gorge, un endroit louche
où deux nations se seront égorgées" (IX, 404).\(^{14}\) Two days later,
again in La Cloche, he recalled how, as a boy, he had watched the smart-
ly-uniformed soldiers marching to war only to see them eventually
return "éclopés, saignants, se traînant sur les routes" (IX, 442).

Yet already in 1862 he had written an anti-militarist tale,
"Le Sang", \(^{15}\) whose Goyaesque tableaux of a battlefield attempted to
evoke horror through the hallucinatory devices of the Gothic novel.
At its close the four soldiers ignore the call of duty and walk off

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\(^{13}\) Ibid.

\(^{14}\) Many of these imaginative articles of the summer of 1870
were later reprinted in Nouveaux Contes à Ninon, though, as in this case,
largely stripped of their specifically polemical content. In its
original version, the last sentence of "Le Petit Village" read ". . .
un endroit louche où deux nations se seront égorgées pour le bon

\(^{15}\) Reprinted in Contes à Ninon.
arm in arm in search of peace, leaving behind them the blood of their
nightmares and agreeing that "c'est un laid métier que le nôtre"
(IX, 74). In his last article in La Cloche of 17 August 1870, en-
titled "Les Herfs de la France", he affirmed his confidence in French
ability to resist the Prussian advance. "Une voix me dit," he wrote,
"que la victoire est prochaine."16 In La Marseillaise his "Aux Armes"
was a call to fight the invader to the death.17 If such violent
efforts to rouse the nation revealed that Zola was by no means un-
patriotic, nevertheless, "Le Sang" points to the fact that in the fu-
ture author of La Désâe the events of 1870 provoked a deeply-held
revulsion to the horrors of war.

After 1870 the literature of the Franco-Prussian War alternated
between moods of lamentation and revenge. By 1880, as Barbusse
wrote, "la littérature de la guerre ne consistait jusque-là qu'en
jérémiaades sur la défaite."18 Written at such a time Les Soirées de
Médan (1880) is consciously aimed at undermining the conventional
patriotism of the literature of war and at destroying the mystique
of military glory. All its short stories reveal a profound distaste

16 L'Atelier de Zola, p. 248.
17 Reprinted in Le Messager de Provence, 4-5 October 1870.
Quoted by Roger Ripoll, "Quelques Articles retrouvés de La Marseillaise",
In his review of Hector Malot's Souvenirs d'un Blessé, in La Cloche of
23 May 1872, Zola himself had thankfully announced that "le flot mon-
tant des publications sur la dernière guerre s'arrête." He declared
that it was too early to write a novel about the Franco-Prussian War:
"J'ai lu déjà un grand nombre de volumes sur la guerre, et n'y ai
(cont...)
for the grotesque comedies of war. Zola's "L'Attaque du Moulin" shares its contributors' utterly negative view of war and of the massacres committed and justified in the name of patriotism and honour. This tale ends as Dominique is shot by the Prussians under the eyes of Françoise, his fiancée, for having defended his future father-in-law's mill. After the French counter-attack has driven out the enemy, the Captain's final victory cry underlines the stupidity and the blind brutality of men. As her father is killed by a stray bullet Françoise is left "imbécile, entre les cadavres de son mari et de son père, au milieu des ruines fumantes du moulin" (IX, 1058).

"L'Attaque du Moulin" is bathed in a sympathy not found in La Débâcle. Although it originally appeared under the title of "Un Episode de l'Invasion de 1870", Zola stressed that it was "une nouvelle de pure imagination" and that it had no link with the later

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19 Alexis' "Après la Bataille", Céard's "La Saignée", Hennique's "L'Affaire du Grand Sept", Huysmans' "Sac à Dos", Maupassant's "Boule de Suif", and Zola's "L'Attaque du Moulin". Maupassant wrote to Flaubert that these tales were an attempt to provide a veracious document on war: "Nous avons voulu seulement tâcher de donner à nos récits une note juste sur la guerre, de la dépouiller du chauvinisme à la Débâlède, de l'enthusiasme faux jugé jusqu'ici nécessaire dans toute narration où se trouvent une culotte rouge et un fusil... Ce ne sera pas antipatriotique, mais simplement vrai." Quoted by Mitterand, IX, 1175.

20 In Le Messager de l'Europe, July 1877.

trouvé que la matière peu digérée de tous les faits qu'on trouve dans les journaux du moment. C'est un fouillis d'épisodes, un bavardage sans fin sur les cancans qui ont couru, des vanteries et des mensonges intéressés, le solde de Rocambole vendu pour le compte de M. de Bismarck. Tout cela sera bon à être trié dans dix ans" (X, 948).
novel. He continued his letter to Van Santen Kolff by declaring that he had conceived it "sans songer le moins du monde à mon roman futur. Il me fallait un sujet, j'ai simplement choisi celui-là parce que les sujets sur la guerre étaient très en faveur alors." Both in tone and conception Zola's tale and his articles of 1870 stand significantly apart from the vision of the Franco-Prussian War expressed in La Désastre.

Whereas "L'Attaque du Moulin" had no prior documentation and was not modelled on any particular historical incident, Zola was to read over a hundred books on the war in preparing La Désastre, consult military historians, and follow what he called his "éternelle méthode": "Des promenades sur les lieux que j'aurai à décrire; la lecture de tous les documents écrits, qui sont extraordinairement nombreux; enfin de longues conversations avec les acteurs des drames que j'ai pu approcher." The result of this careful research and his visit to the battlefields in April 1891 was the most documented of all the novels of Les Rougon-Macquart. Countless witnesses would testify to the validity of the novel's historical reconstruction.

21 Letter of 26 January 1892, Niess Collection, pp. 43-44.
23 Particularly Alfred Duquet.
24 Letter to Kolff, 4 September 1891, Niess Collection, p. 41.
25 See Charles Lerier's "Les Sources de Le Désastre", in Gil Blas, 25 and 31 July 1892. "Ce n'est pas du roman, La Désastre c'est de l'Histoire... Pas un détail n'est apocryphe, pas une date n'est inexacte." Quoted by Denise Le Blond-Zola, op. cit., p. 193.
Yet one questions the importance of efforts to analyse the exact contribution of this immense documentation or assess the historicity of the novel. For, as we have seen, the catastrophe of 1870 holds a permanent place in his vision, and one may therefore suggest that his interpretation of the event was largely preconceived years prior to the actual research. The primary motive for writing *La Débâcle* might almost be said to be literary, as the novel closes the historical frame of Zola's series and traces the final movement in the cyclical pattern of Destiny. Huysmans wondered whether the novel "ne serait pas encore plus énorme et plus puissant, s'il était dispensé d'une affabulation même légère," yet, as we shall see, it is precisely the presence of the artist and the dialectic achieved between document and symbol that underline the true meaning of the novel.

Although it was in war that the Second Empire fell, a discussion of Zola's picture of war, of how he faced up to the "test-case for realistic fiction," is only meaningful to the extent to which it

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27 Letter to Zola, end of June, 1892, Lettres inédites à Émile Zola, pp. 143-144. Eugène Melchior de Vogüé, who easily recognized the regiment to which he himself had belonged and whose story Zola tells, was one of the first to praise the historical interest of the novel while pointing to the synthesis of history and fiction: "Le roman et l'histoire s'y confondent dans une création imaginaire, faîte toute entière de menus détails exacts." *"La Débâcle", Revue des Deux Mondes*, CXII (1892), 447.

28 "War is the test-case for realistic fiction. No other subject can be so obscured by the ivy of tradition, the crystallisation of legend, the conventions of epic and romance." Levin, op. cit., p. 137.
contributes towards an understanding of his interpretation of the event.

While admiring Malot's authentic portrayal of the war and "l'écrantage de tout un monde" (X, 949) in his Souvenirs d'un Blessé (1872), Zola saw the danger inherent in the author's attempt to "renouveler la tentative de Stendhal" (X, 948), for Malot's hero is made to range all over France in an attempt to simultaneously be faithful to the Stendhalian technique of approaching reality solely through the conscience of the protagonist, and yet give a complete picture of the invasion. Confronted by the complex totality of the Franco-Prussian War, Zola avoided Malot's error and chose to focus on Sedan.

Such a choice was a deliberate one. His "Liste des Romans" of 1872-1873 envisaged nineteen novels including "Le roman sur la guerre d'Italie", "Le roman sur la débâcle", and "Le roman sur la guerre, le siège et la Commune". He told Xau that although his original military novel had planned to be a study of the Italian campaign of 1859 "j'ai choisi Sedan. Sedan ferme le cycle dans lequel se meuvent mes personnages." By Zola's choosing Sedan the one novel not only closed his cycle but would fulfill many of the intentions of the planned three distinct works. La Débâcle falls into three parts, each of eight chapters. The first of these describes the march of the Seventh Corps from Rheims to Sedan, the second the catastrophe of Sedan, and the last is a brief recapitulation of the campaigns of the winter of 1870-1871

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29 Reproduced II, 815.

followed by a description of the Commune and the burning of Paris.

Standing at the centre of the novel, Sedan symbolises the military fiasco of 1870, the fall of an empire and the end of an era. After the news of the early defeats reached Paris and the disappearance of Ollivier's government, it had become clear to everyone that only a military victory could save the Second Empire. The French capitulation at Sedan on 2 September 1870 surrendering 80,000 prisoners, among them the Emperor himself, "testified to the most complete and dramatic of German victories. Though not as important as the battles round Metz, Sedan was the crowning glory of Prussian arms and the end of the French Empire." News of this crushing disaster was followed by the overthrow of Napoleon III on September 4, in a bloodless revolution, thus fulfilling de Tocqueville's prophecy that "in war the Second Empire will assuredly find its destruction, but perhaps its destruction will cost us very dear." As Zola told Van Santen Kolff in a letter of 26 January 1892, it was this dramatic moment in the history of France that his novel was to express: "Le titre La Débâcle n'a pas d'histoire. Voilà très longtemps que je l'ai choisi. Lui seul dit très bien ce que veut être mon œuvre. Ce n'est pas la guerre seulement, c'est l'écroulement d'une dynastie, c'est l'effondrement d'une èpoque."  

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31 Stupification greeted the French defeats at Wissembourg (August 4), Fröschwiller (August 6), and the investure of Strasbourg.
33 Quoted by Bury, op. cit., p. 185.
34 Niess Collection, p. 45.
The presage of the inevitable disaster to come dominates Zola's history of the Second Empire. Central to his vision of the Franco-Prussian War therefore, is the absolute certainty of the defeat and of the downfall of the régime. Tragedy requires the intervention of the author to eliminate episodes not necessary to the intrigue or which do not help to explain it. It requires the organisation of situations to bring out the tragic intensity to the full, and the merciless concentration of events converging towards the final catastrophe. The inexorable logic imposed upon reality by the author means that nothing is fortuitous and that the final act emerges from the initial situation, as he had done for the series as a whole the structure and substance of Zola's fifth act are ordered within such classical perspectives.

"I had to show ... France," he stressed, "irrevocably fated to disaster." 35

His choice of regiment was thus by no means fortuitous. Even before he went to Sedan he had decided to recount "the unhappy adventures of the luckless Seventh Corps," 36 of which La Gorce, the historian, would write: "Dans l'histoire de ce corps on trouverait l'image abrégée des imprévoyances grandes et petites où toutes choses s'abîmaient." 37 By telling the story of the Seventh Corps, and by

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35 Quoted by Ernest A. Vizetelly, in his 1892 Preface to The Downfall (London: Chatto and Windus, 1899), p. vi. This preface records Zola's interview with Mr. Robert N. Sherard, editor of The Weekly Times and Echo of London, in which the translation of Le Diable Bleu was originally serialized, "whom he favoured with some interesting particulars concerning the scope and purport of his narrative."

36 Ibid., p. v.

placing his fictional characters in its 106th regiment, Zola focused
the novel on a microcosm of the confusion, the irresolution, and the
errors of the French offensive of 1870. 38

To underline the certainty of defeat Zola had to tell a tale of
chaos. He explained to Robert Sherard that the march from Rheims to
Sedan, described in the opening section of the novel, "is an epic
event, pregnant with the irony of fate." For "the reader follows the
movements of this ill-fated corps," he told him, "knowing what a ter-
rible shadow of defeat, disaster and death overhangs it."39 As the
novel begins, the lack of supplies, rifle-parts, doctors and administra-
tors, and "l'ignorance absolue" (VI, 748) of the commanding officer,
contribute to a general state characterised by "la plus effroyable
imprévoyance" (VI, 693); and, in the incoherence of military operations
preceding the fiasco of Sedan, the army becomes a bewildered mass, seem-
ingsly without guide or direction, gradually overcome by "la paralysie
lente enfin, partie du haut, de l'empereur malade, incapable d'une
résolution prompte et qui allait envahir l'armée entière, la désorganiser,
l'annihiler, la jeter aux pires désastres, sans qu'elle pût se défendre"
(VI, 693). In Chapter II a growing and helpless panic was to be, as
he wrote in his work-notes, "le lien, le renflement qui va jusqu'à la
fin du chapitre,"40 and the army disintegrates into "une bande sans

38 The story of the Seventh Corps was well-known (Zola read it
himself) through Georges Bibesco's book Campagne de 1870. Belfort,

39 Vizetelly, Preface, p. ix.

40 Quoted by Matthews, op. cit., p. 77.
lien aucun, démoralisée, mère pour toutes les catastrophes" (VI, 715).

When the regiment is loaded into cattle-trucks we witness scenes which repeat those of the last pages of La Bête Humaine, and in which the idea of the herd being led to the slaughter-house is made equally explicit. The peasants in the fields are aware only of "le hurlement de toute cette chair à canon, charriée à grande vitesse" (VI, 716), and soldiers passing in the direction of Metz cry "A la boucherie! A la boucherie! A la boucherie!" as the grotesquely distorted echo of the chauvinistic cries for Berlin of the end of Nana. As they pass,"il sembla qu'un grand froid, un vent glacial de charnier passait" (VI, 717). For so long foreseen throughout the series, the shadow of "le charnier de Sedan" now looms in its reality on the landscape of North Eastern France. When the army reaches the fated city, like a promised land, after a day of terrible marching, with the triumphant cry of "Voilà Sedan!" (VI, 792), the tragic irony of the name signals the opening of the final roll of drums of Les Rougon-Macquart.

Concerned above all with reinforcing the tragic intensity of the novel, and the inexorable pattern of events, Zola declared that only "each movement of troops that contributed to the final dénouement is exposed." The novel opens with the arrival of General Douay in the camp of the Seventh Corps outside Mulhouse. Following his...

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41 This is also made explicit in the sight of the cattle at the rear of the army column which become indistinguishable from the men. The "débandade de grands bœufs pistinant dans un flot de poussière, la viande encore sur pied" is seen as "une peuplade guerrière en migration." (VI, 739).

42 Vizetelly, Preface, p. ix.
decision the army retraces its steps and struggles back to Belfort. Taken back to Paris by rail, the men are immediately dispatched to Rheims, where they learn they will be joined by the whole army of Châlons which has been retreating since morning. Through the technique of having a character read a newspaper we learn of the chaos and disagreement in high places. One article reveals the official decision to retreat towards Paris. A Republican article states that the Empress, having forbidden her husband to return to the capital for fear of a revolution, has ordered the army of Châlons to advance to meet Bazaine at Metz. Having wasted the invaluable advantage of the time to effect a quick mobilization and advance across the Rhine, the French army finally sets off for the unknown on 23 August. Three days later comes word of the decision to retreat. Awakened by the passage of troops through Le Chêne, Zola's character learns that the retreat has been abandoned and that, after a message from Paris, the Emperor and MacMahon had made the fateful decision, senseless and unjustifiable from a military point of view, and based on political considerations, to advance, eventually to Remilly and thence to Sedan. The first part of *La Débâcle* thus relates how the vision of a triumphal entry into Berlin is gradually shattered by events.

To underline the inescapable defeat to come and darken the shadow of Fate hanging over the army, Zola uses certain Romantic elements within his novel. As so often in his work, nature becomes

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43 De Vogüé was to define *La Débâcle* as "l'épopée romantique d'un philosophe naturaliste." *Op. cit.*, p. 450.
a portent of disaster and weather and landscape denote the general mood. "Le Malheur" was to be the leitmotif of the opening chapters and Zola arranges reality accordingly. To express "l'anxiété croissante" and "l'effroyable attente qui est dans l'air" the novel opens under troubled skies weighed down with cloud, and the oppressive atmosphere and the wind are full of the anguish of the moment. As the soldiers await the news of Frœschwiller the portents of catastrophe are in the sky: "Cela était dans le ciel anxieux et accablant, de grands frissons passaient, de brusques souffles de vent, chargés d'angoisse" (VI, 685). During the second day of the retreat to Belfort "la panique soufflait plus affolée à chaque heure" (VI, 711) across the countryside. Jean Macquart, the central figure of the book, sleeps under "l'approhension d'un immense malheur, dont il croyait entendre le galop, là-bas, au fond de l'inconnu" (VI, 700), and the whole camp senses the strange power of fate lying over the threatened land, "semblait s'anéantir sous l'oppression de la vaste nuit mauvaise, où pesait quelque chose d'effroyable, sans nom encore" (VI, 700). As the army straggles on to Châlons across the barren plain, their eyes fixed on an abandoned camp, the smoke which fills the sky "d'un irréparable deuil" becomes "la nuée de désastre" which seems to follow them as they march (VI, 741). As they reach Sedan and the army is forced "au fond de l'impasse où

44. These work-notes are all quoted by Matthews, op. cit., p. 77.

45. This same technique is used in "L'Attaque du Moulin". The happy sunlight of the opening is gradually replaced by the clouds of doom which pile up on the horizon and the valley assumes a sinister air "dans la panique de la campagne" (IX, 1058). As the story reaches its tragic climax: "De grands nuages noirs avaient lentement ombré le ciel, la queue de quelque orage voisin. Le ciel jaune, ces haillons cuivrés changeaient la vallée de Rocreuse, si gaie au soleil, en un coupe-gorge plein d'une ombre louche" (IX, 1056).
elle devait périr" (VI, 809), the soldiers see in the mists of the sad grey dawn "un Sedan de cauchemar et de deuil" (VI, 809).

Presages of disaster are consciously inserted by the novelist. "Un grand cri douloureux" rings out in the night to interrupt Rochas' enumeration of the great French victories of the past, and Maurice Levasseur's intoxicating evocation of the triumphs of Napoleon I (VI, 727–728) is immediately followed by his coming across two soldiers who in turn recount the defeats of Fraschwiller and Wissembourg. 46

Much as he admired Stendhal and had recognized the greatness of the Waterloo scene in La Chartreuse de Parme Zola, in La Désâncle, adopts an entirely different aesthetic standpoint. There are instances when Zola's characters experience the bewildered blindness felt by Fabrice on the battlefield, 48 but whereas Stendhal is primarily interested in the psychology of the individual soldier, Zola takes up the "Romantic vantage-point" and the character himself achieves an

46 Supra, p. 125, n. 31.

47 See his study of Stendhal in Les Romanciers Naturalistes and his comments on "cet épisode si remarquable de la bataille de Waterloo, qui ne tient en rien au roman" (XI, 87).

48 See Stendhal's description of the only battle he had ever witnessed: "Nous voyons fort bien, de midi à trois heures, tout ce qu'on peut voir d'une bataille, c'est-à-dire rien." In La Désâncle Maurice reflects during the battle: "On ne voyait toujours rien, on ne savait rien. Impossible d’avoir la moindre idée de la bataille; était-ce même une vraie, une grande bataille?" (VI, 854) Cf. Fabrice at Waterloo: "Ce qu'il avait vu, était-ce une bataille? Et en second lieu, cette bataille était-elle Waterloo?" La Chartreuse de Parme (Paris: Gallimard et Librairie Générale de France, Livre de Poche, 1952), p. 86.
all-embracing view and is master of all he surveys. The certainty of defeat is reinforced by a perhaps slightly artificial technique whereby the soldiers repeatedly overhear the plan of action decided upon by their superiors, and can not only judge these decisions but also follow the fateful course of events. The coherence in the narrative of the battle is often assured by Delaherche who, being a civilian, has the freedom of movement necessary to witness key events and decisions in its course. Whereas in *Le Chartreuse de Parme* Waterloo is seen through the hero's restricted range of focus at the level of chaos, Zola's wide-angle lens embraces the whole.

Weiss, the Alsatian thoroughly familiar with the terrain around Sedan, serves Zola as a military strategist and as a voice prophesying the disasters to come. Having watched the developing situation for days and the progress of the two armies, he understands that Sedan is a death-trap surrounded on all sides by hills. La Garce wrote that "si jamais l'ennemi occupait ces hauteurs, il serait maître de Sedan, maître de l'armée; en un mot maître de toutes choses, et notamment d'intercepter toute retraite. Le lieu où MacMahon venait de rallier son armée était donc le dernier à choisir." Weiss warns the unheeding French generals in precisely these terms, and, when the army is within the walls of Sedan, his earlier "affreuse prédiction" (VI, 223) is realized as he points out to Jean the German armies making their encircling movement on the high ground.

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In expressing the certainty of defeat, Zola took full advantage of the Prussian king's presence on the heights of La Marfée overlooking the battlefield. He is seen on three occasions between dawn and sunset on the day of the battle. As he watches the troop movements below him in the morning sun he patiently awaits "l'inévitable résultat de la bataille" (VI, 845). At noon he is still there watching, in the knowledge that "la machine à broyer était en branle et acheverait sa course" (VI, 876):

Le roi constatait la marche mathématique inexorable de ses armées depuis neuf heures. Elles allaient, elles allaient toujours selon les chemins tracés, complétant le cercle, refermant pas à pas, autour de Sedan, leur muraille d'hommes et de canons. (VI, 876)

As the battle progresses "le terrible cercle de fer et de flammes se resserrait" (VI, 895); and as the iron circle and "l'infranchissable ceinture de flammes" (VI, 929) close around the French, the images are those of a crushing finality:

Maintenant, l'enveloppement mathématique, inexorable, se terminait, les mâchoires de l'état s'étaient rejointes, il pouvait embrasser d'un coup d'oeil l'immense muraille d'hommes et de canons qui

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50 This was no mere aesthetic technicality. See La Gorce's account of the battle: "Le Roi, ayant quitté son quartier général de Vendresse venait de s'installer sur le coteau de la Marfée tandis que le Prince Royal s'établissait sur un mamelon voisin, appelé le mamelon de la Croix-Piot. De là le monarque pourrait, sinon du côté de l'est, au moins du côté de l'ouest, suivre tous les progrès de la manoeuvre enveloppante. De là, comme d'une observatoire, lui apparaîtraient Sedan, le plateau de l'Algérie, Floing, les hauteurs d'Ily, les collines de Saint Henges, la bouche de la Meuse: en un mot, tout le champ de bataille qui le soir serait à lui." Op. cit., VII, 315-316.

51 See La Gorce: "Pendant tout le jour, le Roi s'était tenu sur le coteau de la Marfée. De là il avait vu le cercle s'étendre, se refermer, puis la masse de ses troupes se rapprocher de la ville et l'enserrer." Ibid., VII, 354.
enveloppait l'armée vaincue. (VI, 929)

In his article in Le Figaro of 10 October 1892, entitled "Retour de Voyage", Zola called the army of Châlons "l'unique, le grand et douloureux personnage de mon livre"\(^{52}\) and the emotions of fear, heroism, suffering and humiliation, are those of the mass. The stages of its disintegration are as marked as those of an individual like Gervaise in L'Assommoir. But, as he had chosen Sedan because it symbolized the errors, the defeats, and the sufferings of the rest of the war, so in choosing his characters within that army Zola attempted to make each of them representative of a larger group. His desire to portray all of the Franco-Prussian War in the one episode of Sedan, his "désir de l'énorme et de la totalité"\(^{53}\) meant, as he told Sherard, that "each character represents one 'état d'âme psychologique' of the day"\(^{54}\). Thus his characters are not chosen to be studied like Fabrice at Waterloo and they can never achieve the stature of the figures of War and Peace.

The ignorant general, Bourgain-Desfeuilles, incarnates the incompetence responsible for France's defeat. Similarly, the veteran Napoleonic sergeant, Rochas, incarnates the legend of French military invincibility born at Marengo and Austerlitz: "Toute la vieille gêné militaire française sonnait dans son ride de triomphe. C'était la légende, le troupier français parcourant le monde, entre sa belle

\(^{52}\)Appendix to La Désâclée, LOC, p. 609.
\(^{53}\)Letter to Kolff, 4 September 1891, Niess Collection, pp. 41-42.
\(^{54}\)Vizetelly, Preface, p. xi.
et une bouteille de bon vin, la conquête de la terre faite en chantant des refrains de goguette" (VI, 698). In his work-notes for the novel, Zola conceived Gunther Otto as the incarnation of the Prussian mentality: "Je lui fais personifier la Prusse dans cette guerre: "l'esprit allemand, prudent et dur. Très discipliné."55 During the retreat to Belfort the peasant woman who stands accusingly at her door, and whose presence chills the passing soldiers, is a symbol of the French national conscience and becomes a figure larger than life:

Brusquement elle parut grandir. Elle se soulevait d'une maigreur tragique, dans son lambeau de robe, promenant son long bras de l'ouest à l'est d'un tel geste immense, qu'il semblait emplier le ciel: "Lâches, le Rhin n'est pas là... Le Rhin c'est là-bas, lâches, lâches!"

(VI, 714)56

In his picture of war, Zola to some extent realized his original intention of 1869 to portray the real sufferings of war, "montrer de vrais champs de bataille, sans chauvinisme, et faire connaître les vrais souffrances du soldat" (II, 296). As in Stendhal, war is stripped of the great traditional aura of romanticism.57 La Désâcle shows the hollowness of the tales of military glory, of "the old Lie" ("Dulce et decorum est/ Pro Patria mori").58 The splendid cavalry-charge of the Margueritte division is only magnificent in its useless courage.

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55 Appendix to La Désâcle, LOC, p. 631.
57 See Fabrice's lesson at Waterloo: "La guerre n'était donc plus ce noble et commun élán d'âmes amantes de la gloire qu'il s'était figuré d'après les proclamations de Napoléon!" La Chartreuse de Parme, p. 61.
58 Dulce et Decorum Est, The Poems of Wilfred Owen, p. 66.
His description of the fortress of Sedan, "la ville immonde," encumbered with cannon and horses, filled by the stench of excrement and decaying bodies, is revolting in its detail and prefigures Picasso's Guernica: "Les carcasses des chevaux, abattus et dépéchés en plein carrefours, empoisonnaient l'air, les entrailles se pourrissaient au soleil. les têtes, les os traînaienst sur le pavé, grouillants de mouches" (VI, 983-984). Silvine searches for her fiancée's body on the "charnier sans fin" (VI, 977-983), and in her mournful trek amongst the dead she passes many of the spots the reader saw during the battle itself, though the rotting corpses have now lain for three days in the sun. Zola's descriptions have more than a touch of that lamentable realism offered by reality and captured in Goya's Disasters of War. After the capitulation, Zola relates the house-to-house hunt for French prisoners and the brutality of war as they are driven like cattle to the peninsula of Iges, the "Camp de la Misère", to await transportation into captivity. He displays an epic compassion in his description of the column of prisoners-of-war, "ce troupeau de soldats déchus, pareils aux vagabonds et aux mendians des grandes routes" (VI, 985). On their march to Germany they are given crutches by their barbarous captors as the army of Châlons reaches the final stage in its disintegration: "Ce n'était plus qu'une débandade de gueux, couverts de plaies, hâves et sans souffle" (VI, 1008).

Central to Zola's portrayal of the Second Empire had been the inevitable catastrophe awaiting France. In La Débâcle, the most documented of all the novels, reality is ordered and arranged. The shadow of Fate hangs over the landscape, and the battle itself is seen from
a viewpoint consciously chosen to underline the mathematical and inexorable quality of France's defeat. The subordination of character to symbolic intentions would help explain the meaning of the novel. In his picture of the battle and the immense sadness of certain passages, Zola does sometimes approach Owen's "the pity of war, the pity war distilled," yet without asking more profound questions at the spectacle of suffering and death, and without the angry revulsion of his polemical articles of 1870. We shall see that the fact that Zola was not himself a combattant is only one of the essential reasons why La Désâcle presents more a fresco than the experience of war.

2. The End of a Dynasty

In a letter in the novel to his convalescing friend, Maurice recounts the fall of the Second Empire on 4 September 1870: "C'était le 4 septembre, l'effondrement d'un monde, le second Empire emporté dans la débâcle de ses vices et de ses fautes" (VI, 1025). But it is clear that La Désâcle as a whole, as he told Van Santen Kolff, tells the story of the fall of the reign. It was not insignificant that Vizetelly should have translated Zola's title simply as "The Downfall". Unlike Stendhal in the case of Waterloo and although for him the Napoleonic defeat was an almost personal bereavement, Zola makes full dramatic and artistic use of Sedan as the end of an era.

Seldom was a man more aware of his destiny than the nephew

60 Suura, p. 125
of Napoleon Bonaparte and no man exploited more skillfully his kinship with a man of genius. Zola's work—notes for *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon* described Napoleon III as the "héritier naïf d'une légende." The chapter in this novel describing the baptism of the Imperial Prince is opened and closed by the focus on a picture of a man's overcoat painted on a wall, at the sight of which one of the crowd shouts "Tiens! l'oncle, là-bas": "C'était, à l'horizon, sur la muraille grise géante, pointée à fresque, de profil, avec sa manche gauche pliée au coude comme si le vêtement était gardé l'attitude et le gonfllement d'un corps, à cette heure disparu" (III, 349). For the shadow of Napoleon I hangs over the régime. It had long been Louis-Napoleon's dream to restore the imperial throne and, on his election as President of the Second Republic in June 1848, there was much truth in Hugo's comment in *L'Événement* that "his candidature dates from Austerlitz".

In *La Fortune des Rougon* Felicité's salon is decorated with prints commemorating the great battles of Napoleon I, and, on her surveying its débris on the morning of her "prise de pouvoir", "la plaine d'Austerlitz ne lui eût pas causé une émotion aussi profonde" (II, 215). In his skilfully prepared Coup d'État of 1851, Napoleon had chosen December 2 because it was the anniversary of Austerlitz. Hugo's accusations of his exploiting the Napoleonic legend were merciless:

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61 Appendix to *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*, LOC, p. 442.

62 See also III, 358, 367.

63 Quoted by Bury, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
Alors il vint, cassé de débauches, l'œil terne,
Furtif, les traits pâlis,
Et ce voleur de nuit alluma sa lanterne
Au soleil d'Austerlitz.64

Already in 1853 Hugo's *Expiation* stressed that Napoleon I's real
punishment lay neither at Waterloo nor at St. Helena, but in the parody
of the Empire by his nephew. Later he described Sedan as "l'effroyable
fin du coup d'État".65 In *L'Argent Saccard*, as an embodiment of the
Empire, moves in Napoleonic ways to his eventual downfall. Within
Hugolian perspectives *La Débâcle* traces the fate of the Bonapartist
dynasty and expresses the theme of Sedan being the long-awaited re-
tribution for the crime of 2 December 1851. "Toute la destinée des
Napoléon," wrote Zola in his work-notes for the novel, "le châtiment."66

Again and again Louis-Napoléon is seen being driven by the
"impitoyable voix" of the Empress in Paris to send the army marching
to certain disaster, "pour le salut d'une dynastie" (VI, 774). He
becomes a pawn in a sinister game of dynastic interests: "L'Impé-
trice n'avait-elle pas souhaité la mort du père, pour que le fils
rég奈t?" (VI, 770). He is seen too as the guilty one, a figure in-
carnating regret and paying for all his faults in the débâcle of 1870.
For Hugo Sedan was "un syllogisme qui s'achève," the inexorable punish-
ment, and the necessary dénouement to a "drame inouï à cinq actes,
tellement farouches qu'Eschyle lui-même n'eat pas osé les

64 Hœx III, Les Châtiments, Oeuvres Complètes, XXIII, 26.
65 Histoire d'un crime, p. 549.
66 Appendix to *La Débâcle*, LOC, p. 626.
Il n'y a eu, dans ce désastre de Sedan, qu'un seul et fatal général, l'empereur. Ce qui s'est noué le 2 décembre 1851 s'est dénoué le 2 septembre 1870. Le carnage du boulevard Montmartre et la capitulation de Sedan sont, nous y insistons, les deux parties d'un syllogisme; la logique et la justice ont la même balance; il était dans cette destinée funeste de commencer par un drapeau noir, le massacre, et de finir par un drapeau blanc, le déshonneur.

In La Désââcle, as Napoleon flees after Sedan, he is pictured alone and abandoned in an inn in Belgium. Two engravings meet his weary eyes, "l'une représentant Rouget de Lisle chantant la Marseillaise" and the other the Last Judgement: "Un appel furieux des trompettes des archanges qui faisait sortir de la terre tous les morts, la résurrection du charnier des batailles montant témoin devant Dieu" (VI, 964).

The first of these is a perennial symbol of the people's revenge on despotic seizure of power from Dix-Huit Brumaire to 1851. The second points to the criminal sacrifice of French soldiers in dynastic interests and is the just epilogue to the crime of 2 December 1851.

For Zola too the syllogism is complete. In La Désââcle, La Fortune des Rougon finds its true conclusion and the wheel of Fate comes full

67Histoire d'un crime, p. 551. Cf. the reviewer of La Désââcle in Le Journal de Genève: "Cette désââcle devait venir, l'implacable Némésis la préparait de longue main et la faisait violent, horrible, plein de fange, de larmes et de sang, de l'ordre des choses crée en France par l'attentat de 1852. Eschyle, quand on y réfléchit, n'a pas de drame plus formidable que cette tragédie de dix-huit ans." Quoted in the Appendix to La Désââcle, LOC, p. 658.

68Histoire d'un crime, p. 545. See also Hugo's poem Sedan in L'Année Terrible, Œuvres Complètes, XCI, p. 35:

Toulon c'est peu; Sedan c'est mieux
L'homme tragique
Saisi par le destin qui n'est que la logique.
circle.

Throughout *Les Rougon-Macquart*, Napoleon III is a silent and shadowy individual. Although the most acceptable way of introducing historical figures into fiction, this also corresponds to the portrait of the Emperor found by Zola in Delord. In *La Débâcle*, the essentials of Napoleon's character are sketched with the same brief repeated strokes found in the earlier novels. The watery eyes suggest his weakness and vacillation. He is "une apparition de face cadavreuse, les yeux étendus, les traits décomposés, les moustaches blêmies, dans cette angoisse dernière" (VI, 326). Throughout the campaign Zola portrays him as he was, in excruciating pain, unfit physically and militarily to take the field, physically and mentally incapable of dominating the situation. The soldiers' diagnosis is a brutal "foutu" (VI, 736), and this useless, bewildered and doll-like figure symbolizes the end of an era. The glory of the reign is embodied in the shiny ambulatory kitchen which accompanies him when he moves and which, like himself, clutters the roads. In sharp contrast to William, a symbol of German confidence as he quietly watches the mathematical encirclement of the French, Napoleon is seen as a man sick, helpless, and vulnerable.

In his 1865 article on Eckermann-Chatrian and their novel, *Waterloo* (1865), Zola had admired the technique whereby "parmi les morts dans la plaine rouge et navrante, passe par instants une rapide apparition, Napoléon, gris et froid, pâle au milieu de la pourpre du combat."[^69] Zola was to use precisely such a technique in his own

[^69]: This article appeared in *Le Salut Public* 29 April and 1 May 1865. See Ken Haines, LOE, pp. 141-156.
treatment of Napoleon III. The recurring appearances of the phantom-like figure of the Emperor give a unity to the novel by constantly suggesting the crash of the Empire, or, as Faguet wrote, "ramenant l'esprit à l'idée essentielle du poème: un empire qui coule." 70

In La Débâcle historical authenticity is sometimes subordinated to artistic purpose. To Van Santen Kolff Zola thus explained how he had used the legend of the episode in which Napoleon was jeered by his troops as they were driven into captivity. Appealing to Zola's sense of tragedy, the forlorn figure of the Emperor, thrown down from the pinacles of power to be abused by the rabble, was too dramatic a scene to dismiss. Not concerned with its historical authenticity, Zola included the anecdote in his novel:

Je ne sais pas ce que vous voulez me dire en parlant d'une idée de Flaubert, à propos de l'Empereur en calèche, rencontré et insulté par des prisonniers français, après le désastre de Sedan. Jamais je n'ai entendu Flaubert parler de cela. Il y a une légende sur l'épisode. J'ai fait une enquête, la rencontre a pu avoir lieu, je m'en servirai même, bien que le fait ne me soit pas absolument prouvé. 71

In Zola's portrayal of Napoleon III, one incident in particular provoked intense controversy after the publication of the novel. Critics were quick to question the authenticity of the reports of the


71 Letter to Kolff, 26 January 1892, Niess Collection, p. 44.
Emperor's having put rouge on his cheeks to keep up the appearance of courage. He is seen by Delaherche after the latter's escape from the furious fighting at the heart of Bazeilles:

C'était bien Napoléon III, qui lui apparaissait plus grand, à cheval, et les moustaches si fortement cirées, les joues si colorées, qu'il jugea tout de suite rajeuni, farde comme un acteur. Sûrement il s'était fait peindre, pour ne pas promener, parmi son armée, l'effroi de son masque blême, décomposé par la souffrance, au nez aminci, aux yeux troubles. Et, averti dès cinq heures qu'on ne battait à Bazeilles, il était venu, de son air silencieux et morne de fantôme, aux chairs ravivées de vermillon.

(VI, 840)

It has never actually been determined whether or not Louis-Napoléon really wore rouge to conceal his pallor when he appeared before the troops at Sedan. It was poetically right, nevertheless, as Walker has suggested, that the man who personified the decadent Second Empire with all its theatrical sham should go to defeat made up as an actor. Zola found this incident in Gabriel Monod's Allemands et Français, but, in any case, exercises the novelist's prerogative to sacrifice absolute veracity and details of historical authenticity in the interests of dramatic effect. Zola himself made this point in his reply to his critics, in Le Figaro of 10 October 1892. "Sur ces petits détails de l'histoire," he wrote, "quand les témoignages sont partagés, quand il y a doute, le poète a le droit de choisir la version dont il a besoin pour la grandeur de son oeuvre."73

In this article in Le Figaro, Zola denied having degraded the

73 Appendix to La Désâcle, LOC, p. 605.
Emperor by including this episode. "Moi," he insisted, "je le trouve superbe, ce fond digne d'un des grands héros de Shakespeare, haussant la figure de Napoléon III à une mélancolie tragique d'une infinie grandeur." Hugo had described Louis-Napoléon at Sedan as "un nain qui fait la chute d'un géant." Echoing Hugo, Zola had written, in September 1870, that "Napoléon-le-Petit a glissé dans le sang et la boue." But in La Débâcle Zola displayed a far greater sympathy, thus revealing the sincerity of his 1895 statement that he had modified his conception of Napoleon since the embittered 1860's. Although we are never allowed to forget that his inadequacy is responsible for the chaos around him, we are left above all with the impression of a victim of Fate.

He is the victim of those in Paris dictating senseless military moves "pour tenter le suprême sauvetage de la dynastie" (VI, 737), and, left among the débris of his empire, he becomes a spectacle of undeniable pathos:

Et cet empereur misérable, ce pauvre homme qui n'avait plus de place dans son empire, allait être emporté comme un paquet inutile et encombrant, parmi les bagages de ses troupes, condamné à traîner derrière lui l'ironie de sa maison impériale, ses cent-gardes, ses voitures, ses chevaux, ses cuisiniers, ses fourgons de casseroles d'argent et de vin de Champagne, toute la pompe de son manteau de cour, semé d'abeilles, balayant le sang et la boue des grandes routes de la défaite.

(VI, 737) 78

74Ibid.
75L'Année Terrible, p. 40. Whereas the fall of Napoleon I, in Les Misérables, is truly that of a colossus.
76In La Marseillaise, reprinted in Le Messager de Provence 29-30 September 1870. Quoted by Ripoll, "Quelques Articles Retrouvés de La Marseillaise", p. 153.
77Supra, p. 19.
78This passage is repeated in almost identical terms, VI, 792.
De Vogüé, for one, was relieved at Zola's treatment of "le souverain de 36 millions de Rougon-Macquart." No longer the brilliant sovereign of the Tuileries or of Compiègne, with no real command, rejected by the capital, the sinister bandit of Napoléon-le-Petit becomes, in Zola's novel, a figure of intense suffering and distress invested with pity. He advances to Sedan aware of the certainty of defeat, of "l'effroyable désastre qu'il prévoyait et qu'il était venu chercher" (VI, 826), and his resignation leads him to search for death among the hail of bullets, "allant à son destin" (VI, 840), awaiting the working out of an irresistible and impersonal fatality: "silencieux dans la morne attente de la destinée" (VI, 826). As the battle is lost, he bours beneath the weight of Fate and the crumbling of a world: "le dos semblait se courber davantage, comme sous l'écoulement d'un monde; tandis que l'oeil mort, voilé des paupières lourdes, disait la résignation du fataliste qui avait joué et perdu contre le destin la partie dernière" (VI, 913).

By having Maurice see Napoleon through a window after the Emperor's meeting with MacMahon at Le Chêne, Zola was to reinforce the full meaning of the fateful decision made there to advance to meet Bazaine. "Faire la scène historique telle qu'elle a dû passer par les impressions de Maurice," Zola wrote in his notes, "ce qui me permet de l'élargir, de l'interpréter, de lui donner tout le sens et l'émotion que je veux lui donner." Maurice retains an image of the

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79 Vogüé, op. cit., p. 59.
80 Quoted by Matthews, op. cit., p. 59.
The shadow on the ground seen by Renée at the ball becomes the shadow against the window-pane, symbolic of the Emperor who, now stripped of power and authority, "n'était plus absolument rien, une ombre d'empereur, indéfinie et vague, une inutilité sans nom et encombrante, dont on ne savait quoi faire" (VI, 723).

Throughout Les Rougon-Macquart the sated appetites of the Second Empire were symbolic of its prosperity. "Ce règne de mangeailles et de soulieres" (II, 744) is described in images of eating. Appétite becomes a symbol of political fortune. When the city turned against Pierre and Félicité, in Le Fortuné du Rougon, "ils différent découragés, sans faim, laissant les morceaux sur leur assiette" (II, 229). Saccard's frugal meal at the opening of L'argent matches his plight. Later in the novel, after success has come, the "bordeaux ordinaires" (VI, 338) are replaced by "des caprices de vins" (VI, 443), to accompany meals on the scale of the banquet which triumphantly closes La Fortune des Rougon. In La Désillusion Maurice witnesses the Emperor's

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82 See also the terms of his polemical article, in La Cloche of 13 February 1870, describing the "curée" of the Second Empire: "Ils ont mis les mains aux plats, en pleine dans la sauce, mangeant goulûment, s'arrêtant les morceaux de la bouche. Ils se sont rûs à la satisfaction de leurs appétits, avec un emportement de bête, et lorsqu'ils ont été gorgés, ils ont mangé encore. Ils mangent toujours." L'Atelier de Zola, p. 223.
lonely dinner. His paltry appetite is yet another sign that the
eighteen-year long feast is truly at an end:

L'empereur était là, au fond de la pièce bourgeoise et froide,
assis devant une petite table, sur laquelle son couvert était
mis, éclairée à chaque bout d'un flambeau. Dans le fond, deux
aides de camp se tenaient silencieux. Un maître d'hôtel, debout
près de la table, attendant. Et le verre n'avait pas servi, le
pain n'avait pas été touché, un blanc de poulet refroidissait au
milieu de l'assiette. L'empereur, immobile, regardait la nappe,
de ces yeux vacillants, troubles et pleins d'eau, qu'il avait
déjà à Reims. Mais il semblait plus las, et, lorsque, se décident,
d'un air d'immense effort, il eut porté à ses lèvres deux
bouchées, il repoussa tout le reste de la main. Il avait dîné.

(VI, 768)

In La Cloche of 18 February 1872, Zola had vigorously denounced
a brochure attempting to rehabilitate Napoleon's memory and give him
credit, as historians now do, for his humanity at Sedan in capitulating
rather than continue the useless slaughter: 83

Bonaparte y est présenté comme un martyr. Sedan devient un sacrifice
solemnel, où il offrit sa liberté en holocauste pour le salut de
son peuple. De pareilles choses sont tout bonnement des traits
de génie. Ce prince imbécile qui va se heurter contre les cadavres
et qui tombe d'effroi, montré plus tard aux paysans avec
une palme à la main et une auréole au front, souriant du sourire
tristement résigné des martyrs, est un de ces mensonges dont
l'énormité suffisait autrefois à fonder une religion. Nous au-
rions eu saint Napoléon III et ses os auraient guéri les ramollis-
sements de cerveau. 84

83 See Louis-Napoleon's letter to the Empress, 2 September 1870:
"My dear Eugénie," he wrote, "I cannot tell you what I have suffered
and am suffering. We made a march contrary to all the rules and to
common sense; it was bound to lead to a catastrophe, and that is com-
plete. I would rather have died than have witnessed such a disastrous
capitulation; and yet, things being as they are, it was the only way of
avoiding the slaughter of 60,000 men." Quoted by J. H. Thompson, Louis-

84 La République en Marche, II, 171.
Twenty years later, after reading the historical document and approaching the question at a rational distance, Zola could leave behind such polemical invective. Napoleon's efforts to stop the massacre by ordering the hoisting of the white flag are accordingly portrayed in the novel (VI, 914-915). "Je désirais," wrote Zola in his work-notes, "avoir l'empereur ne retrouvant son autorité dans la confusion que pour céder à son humanité en se rendant." 85

In 1870 Napoleon was universally found guilty. In 1877 the National Assembly at Bordeaux declared that he alone was responsible for all of France's misfortunes. Nevertheless Goncourt was one of a minority who thought it perhaps not fair to attribute the disasters solely to the emperor:

Il est agaçant d'entendre toujours: c'est la faute à l'Empereur! Si les généraux ont été incapables, si les officiers sont ignares, si les soldats ont eu leurs heures de lâcheté, ce n'est pas la faute de l'Empereur. Du reste, un homme n'a pas cette influence sur une nation, et si la nation française n'était pas en dissolution, la médiocrité extraordinaire de l'Empereur n'eût pas empêché la victoire. 86

Since then, it has become possible to say that "had Napoleon III died in the autumn of 1859 or the early summer of 1860, historians might well have accounted him the most successful of all France's rulers in the nineteenth century." 87 Certainly critics might have been less harsh had Napoleon succeeded. Had he faced a weaker opponent in 1870 and carried off a victory, many would have kept silent. But,

85 Quoted by Rufener, op. cit., p. 36.
86 Goncourt, Journal, 8 September 1870, IX, 37.
87 Bury, op. cit., p. 97.
in defeat, eighteen years of pent-up hate flew like vultures to a corpse. It is to Zola's credit that, while seeing Napoleon's downfall as the logical epilogue of 2 December 1851, his treatment of Napoleon III at Sedan is a noble one. There had been far worse princes and régimes, and the Third Republic itself would have its birth in shootings far more terrible than those of the Coup d'État.

Yet the wisdom and experience of age are not the only reasons for Zola's abandoning the polemical stance of earlier years. His treatment of Napoleon is at least in part dictated by aesthetic needs, when he cited Shakespeare, Zola underlined his own aspirations for La Dédale. Tragedy requires that even the merited fall of a tyrant should evoke our pity. Thus, while retaining Hugo's epic conception of history, Zola intentionally avoids the poet's sinister portrait of the Emperor. In the fifth act of the Second Empire, Napoleon III becomes the tragic victim of that Fate whose shadow hangs over the novel. It is not for us to judge whether the nature of his tragedy lay simply in W. H. Auden's perennial epitaph for fallen rulers:

History to the defeated
May say Alas, but cannot help or pardon.

3. Meaning

To understand Zola's vision of history and his interpretation of the fall of the Second Empire within its perspectives, one must consider his work taken as a whole. It is necessary to examine briefly his view of the historical process, to study his attitude to politics and revolution, and to analyse the poetically idealistic nature of the thought and work into which La Dédale inserts itself.
Although politically orientated towards the left, regardless of the government in power, Zola displays an absolute disgust for "cette chose laide et sale qui se nomme la politique." Fifteen stupefying months of direct contact with the mechanism of parliamentary life led to the scenes in Son Excellence Eugène Rougon and to a perpetual mistrust of the traditional parliamentary system. The novel itself ends with complete cynicism at the compromises made in the interests of political power. In La Fortune des Rougon the intrigues of the political circle of the Salon Jaune are those of a grotesque menagerie (II, 97). When the Bonapartists only have to change a few words in the Republican proclamation for it to serve their own purpose (II, 206), what is evident is not so much Zola's attack against the régime as a disgust with party-politics in general. In 1871 he attacked those who had come to Bordeaux "pour assister à la curée de la république," now that the spoils of the Empire had been had. Emerging into the cold January night from a session of the National Assembly at Versailles he wrote that "il me semblait que je sortais de quelque chaudière diabolique. Que les hommes sont donc bavards, et comme ils se dévorent entre eux pour faire un peu de bien à leur pays." "La République," he wrote in "Adieux" in 1881, "n'a jamais été en cause, dans mes discussions. Je la crois le seul gouvernement juste et possible. Ce qui

88 Une Campagne, LOC, p. 258.
90 La Cloche, 21 January 1872, La République en Marche, II, 110.
a toujours soulevé mon cœur c'est la bassesse et la bêtise des hommes." Throughout his work, Zola displays an undeniable political pessimism. He has no belief in political action or argument.

Commenting on revolutionary activity in 1871 Zola wrote that "agir révolutionnairement, c'est un monsieur qui assommerait toute sa rue pour y être le seul maître, et pour y avoir seul raison." After 1871 Zola's novels reveal a tendency to assimilate proletarian movements with that of the Commune, the only revolution he had ever witnessed. While the mass of workers streaming across the land, in Germinal, is a terrifying and whirlwind force, revolution in Zola's novels takes on the quality of a hallucinatory vision and a dream.

In a very fine article on Zola's revolutionaries, Aimé Caudy has convincingly shown that each of them is a utopian, exalted, and fanatical dreamer, whose superficial erudition goes to his head. The interminable discussions and gesticulations of the plotters of Le Ventre de Paris, preoccupied with building the future without understanding the present, are inspired by Zola's knowledge of the Commune. The ideal vision of the city of justice and happiness is

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91 *La Compagnie*, LOC, p. 320.
the obsession of all the revolutionaries of Zola's novels. Zola has an immense sympathy for their impossible dream, but this thirst for a new religion is seen as a pathetic and vain protest against the order of things. Towards his revolutionary characters he mingles a tenderness for their innocence, a pity for their weakness, and a scorn for their inability to change the world or alter the cyclical pattern of "l'éternel recommencement de la misère" (VI, 146). In Le Ventre de Paris, revolution is so ineffective that the government snuffs it out at its whim and uses it to reinforce the reactionary movement. Repression inevitably follows revolution in all of Zola's political novels. Determinism condemns Zola's characters to a life in which they are powerless to bring about change. Convinced of the futility of politics, Zola's position is that of seeing revolution as necessary without being able to reconcile the contradictions between reality and the dream.

Zola's attitude to politics is that of Pascal in La Fortune des Rougon, in his vague humanitarian idealism: "On m'accuse d'être républicain, dites-vous?" says Pascal, "Et bien! je ne m'en trouve nullement blessé. Je le suis sans doute, si l'on entend par ce mot un homme qui souhaite le bonheur de tout le monde" (II, 97). For Zola refuses to conclude with pessimism. In 1864 he had proclaimed that "c'est une idée grandiose et belle que celle de l'humanité en marche

94See Sigismond's death in L'Argent, VI, 654-655.
vers une cité idéale, cité de justice et de liberté."

At the basis of his idealistic vision of the future and his faith in progress lie a belief in work and in the power of science. The latter was "la seule révolutionnaire véritable."

He summed up this immense faith in the movement of his century in "La Démocratie" :

"On constate toujours dans l'histoire," he concluded, "un pas de plus en avant, malgré les erreurs de route. Marchons donc, mettons notre certitude dans l'avenir. Quand même, demain aura raison."

In 1884-1885 Lemaître could write of Zola that "jamais peut-être le parti pris pessimiste ne s'était porté à de pareils excès." But Zola rejects Hennebeau's "l'inutilité de tout, l'éternelle douleur de l'existence" (V, 279) in Germinal, or Lazare's "négation du progrès, l'inutilité finale de la science" (IV, 1128). Zola's work, as a whole, rejects Decadent values. In his work-notes for Hourdequin in La Terre, he noted his intention to "à la fin le montrer absolument désespéré et faisant presque un retour à la routine, lui aussi décadent, la fin du siècle, manque de confiance dans la science."

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95 In "Du Progrès dans la Science et dans la Poésie", in the Journal Populaire of Lille on 16 April 1864, X, 310. This sentence is repeated in identical terms in his "Causerie" in La Tribune of 25 October 1868, L'Atelier de Zola, p. 177.

96 In the work-notes for his unwritten "La France en Marche". Quoted by Maurice le Blond, "Les Projets littéraires d'Émile Zola au moment de sa mort", Mercure de France, CXCIX (1927), 23.

97 Une Campagne, LOC, p. 303.

98 Les Contemporains, I, 264.

99 Quoted by Robert "La Terre" d'Émile Zola, p. 227. "Décadent" is italicized in the original
His despair at the end of the novel, his "que tout craque, que nous crevions tous, que les ronces poussent partout, puisque la race est finie et la terre épuisée" (V, 1110) is that of the Decadent movement of the post-1870 period. His death is thus symbolically rather than realistically necessary. Similarly, while Wagner's music was seen as a prelude to world-destruction, for Zola it was the overture to the future. Gagnière's praise of the Tannhäuser overture in L'Oeuvre is mostly taken from Liszt's "Lohengrin" and "Tannhäuser" de Richard Wagner (Leipzig, 1851), but textual comparisons and an examination of Zola's work-notes reveal that it was the novelist alone who wrote that "l'ouverture de Tannhäuser, ah! c'est l'alléluia sublime du nouveau siècle" (V, 599).

Critics have tried to attribute the final optimism of Zola's work to his liaison with the young Jeanne Rozerot after 1888. While the novel was officially dedicated to his mother, he inscribed Jeanne's own copy of Le Docteur Pascal with words which can leave no doubt as to its autobiographical importance: "A ma bien-aimée Jeanne," he wrote, "À ma Clotilde qui m'a donné le royal festin de sa jeunesse et qui m'a rendu mes trente ans." After his barren marriage, the children that she bore him, and her youth, contributed greatly to the happiness of Zola's later years and renewed his faith in love and the forces of life.

100 Supra, pp. 44-48
101 Reproduced, VI, 1402. Clotilde is the heroine of the novel.
Planning Les Quatres Evangiles, the latent dreamer emerged:

"Je voudrais un optimisme éclatant," he wrote. "C'est la conclusion naturelle de toute mon oeuvre; après la longue constatation de la réalité, une prolongation dans demain, et d'une façon logique, mon amour de la force et de la santé, de la fécondité et du travail, mon besoin latent de justice éclatant enfin" (VIII, 13). But there is an essential unity to the body of his work, and if he gives them full liberty in Les Quatres Evangiles, the final triumph of the forces of Life and Hope over Despair and Death is to be found throughout his work. If anything, Jean Rozérot merely accentuated the emphasis on the positive forces. For even prior to 1883 Zola's work is orientated towards the dawn. The "ébouche" of Au Bonheur des Dames revealed that, in 1883, his faith in life was absolute and that he had had enough of expressing "les médiocrités et les avortements de l'existence":

Je veux dans Au Bonheur des Dames faire le poème de l'activité moderne. Donc, changement complet de philosophie: plus de pessimisme d'abord, ne pas conclure à la bêtise et à la mélancolie de la vie, conclure au contraire à son continuel labour, à la puissance et à la gaiété de son enfantement. En un mot aller avec le siècle, exprimer le siècle, qui est un siècle d'action et de conquête.102

Violence, corruption, catastrophe and death, fill the pages of Zola's novels, but rarely do they conclude on a note of unrelieved doom. His particular poetic world sees the triumph of the forces of life, and is one, therefore, in which the theme of rebirth holds a dominant place. Of all Zola's novels only the course of Nana is linear towards destruction. The others are cyclical in their movement,

102 Appendix to Au Bonheur des Dames, LOC, p. 467.
and this pattern is reflected in incident, imagery, and symbolism. It is within this quasi-constant vision that La Débâcle and the fall of the Second Empire must be seen.

Even in 1865, in La Confession de Claude, such a renewal of hope is expressed, as Claude watches the sun rising on the horizon after Marie's death and the end of his affair with Laurence. The whole final passage hints at the luminous endings of the later novels, for his despair disappears with the darkness and his heart is filled with "une force jeune, invincible, un espoir immense" (I, 112).

After the funeral that closes Une Page d'Amour (1878), the blue sky above the snow and the vision of Paris beyond are symbol of hope. The great city is an incarnation of the eternal force of life: "Il se déroulait: il était la vie" (III, 1208). In L'Argent, Mme. Caroline represents that same invincible hope. "L'amour de la vie quand même," wrote Zola, "malgré le pessimisme; tout croule mais l'invincible espoir en la vie qui est sans cesse en travail."103 After the grim disasters of winter, the novel ends with her going out in the spring, "cet avril, si charmant d'une nouvelle jeunesse" (VI, 656). In spite of its ironic title, La Joie de Vivre also symbolizes a real faith in the miracle of life's enduring and self-perpetuating quality. Pauline Quenu, like Mme. Caroline, represents the forces of life pitted against the ugliness, the pain, and the death around her. Her message of hope is that of the whole series. Her kindness, her self-sacrifices

103 Appendix to L'Argent, LOC, p. 441.
and her goodness remain intact at the end. "Il faut la montrer," wrote Zola in his "ébauche", "elle, avec la joie de vivre, par-dessus toutes les catastrophes." Germinal closes with the sunrise, with images of growing wheat, of buds bursting into leaf. The vernal associations are suggestive of its title. The dark world of the novel, its misery and suffering, is left behind as Etienne strides out amidst the rebirth of nature in the April sun. A great burst of sunlight bathes the concluding visionary prophecy of a black army rising out of the ground in the cause of justice.

The forces of life remain triumphant at the end of La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret (1875) as the birth of a calf immediately follows the funeral. As in La Joie de Vivre, it is a child who is the symbol of hope which closes Le Docteur Pascal. In his work-notes, Zola underlined that in this novel he wished to "expliquer toute ma série, conclure par une large confidence en la vie," and the final tableau of Clotilde feeding her child ends the series on a note of hope. No doubt such an optimism becomes more explicit after 1888, but over twenty-five years before, the close of this novel had already been suggested in the ending of "Les Quatre Journées de Jean Gourdon", in the old man's certainty that his daughter will carry on the eternal round of life (IX, 485). The last vision of Le Docteur Pascal is that of the child, "son petit bras en l'air, tout droit, dressé comme un drapeau d'appel à la vie" (VI, 1401). To Van Santen Kolff, Zola explained

104 Appendix to La Joie de Vivre, LOC, p. 368.
105 Quoted by Mattheus, op. cit., p. 88.
that here was the true conclusion of *Les Rougon-Macquart*:

La vérité est que je conclurai par le recommencement éternel de la vie, par l'espoir en l'avenir, en l'effort constant de l'humanité laborieuse. Il m'a semblé brave, en terminant cette histoire de la terrible famille des Rougon-Macquart, de faire naître d'elle un dernier enfant, l'enfant inconnu, le Messie de demain peut-être. Et une mère allaitant un enfant, n'est-ce pas l'image du monde continué et sauvé. 106

Pascal's "credo" is Zola's own. His faith in the indestructibility of life receives its fullest expression in *La Terre*. In *La Fortune des Rougon* the cemetery had incorporated the idea of growth, death and rebirth, in the rich green vegetation produced by the rotting corpses. In *La Terre* we find this same theme of life emerging from the corruption and the dead, in the manure spread on the earth:

"La matière décomposée retournait à la matrice commune, la mort allait refaire de la vie" (V, 1057). As Fouan's body is lowered into the earth its pale-wood makes it indistinguishable, seen at a distance, from the seeds that, like his body, will produce the wheat of the future. Jean sees merely "une tache pâle comme une poignée de ce blé que les camarades, là-bas, jetaient aux sillons" (V, 1137-1138).

The myth of fecundity holds a dominant place in *La Terre* but the fertility symbolism of the novel reveals above all the myth of rebirth, of the themes of the endless cycle of life and death in nature. The cyclical pattern of human existence is analogous to Nietzsche's myth of eternal return. 107 The structure of the novel is fashioned according to its great circle. Chapter I ends with the

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106. Letter of 22 February 1892, Niess Collection, p. 50.

107. Nothing indicates that Zola knew of Nietzsche in 1887.
image with which it had begun. The book itself opens with a description of Jean sowing the grain and its last image is that of the sower's arm. While the themes of death and fecundity run parallel throughout the novel, the cycle always ends with the triumph of the forces of life. At the novel's close the white dust of the seeds shines more brightly than the reflections from the burning farm and Jean sets off to war in the midst of death and defeat, but accompanied by the sowing of the grain and the beginning of a new cycle. Although France did not mobilize until summer, the novel ends in the spring, and the paragraph which closes the book asserts the indestructibility of life and hope.

It is facile to see in the dawn of the end of his novels an expression of his faith in socialism. While observations of social injustice lead inevitably to consideration of socialism as a remedy, Zola never gets beyond a paler version of Fourier's utopian socialism. Its ideals satisfy Zola's humanitarian aspirations. "Leur poésie," as Martino wrote, "comme celle de tous les rêves paradisiaques, était une perpétuelle suggestion lyrique." There is never a true attachment to the doctrine. Socialism remains a floating idea which attaches itself to his thought and work, especially after the ground gained by socialism in the 1880's. Its promises of happiness and justice gave, at the very most, a quasi-historical perspective to his radiant vision of the future. Objecting to Guillemin's criticism

of Zola's conception of money as a life-force in *L'Argent*, Ternois concluded that "le socialisme, Zola n'y croit pas. Il paraît croire aux forces de la vie, menant le monde vers un but inconnu."  

Similarly, while the historical apocalypse towards which his series tends is the war of 1870, it is clear that, as he leaves the Second Empire behind, Zola's apocalyptic vision more generally also points to the destruction of an old order and the imposition of a new and better world. Again and again, in the novels whose action takes place in the 1860's, he evokes "la fin du siècle", acutely aware, as he was writing, of the dawn of the twentieth century to come.

The synthesis of destinies in *Les Rougon-Macquart* is between family and state, but their destiny is also that of the bourgeoisie. As a symbol of nineteenth century middle-class society, the Second Empire's rush to destruction is, on one level, the bourgeoisie relentlessly driving to disaster. His analysis of adultery in "L'Adultere dans la bourgeoisie" in *Le Figaro* of 28 February 1880, expanded in *Pot-Bouille*, makes it clear that his satire of imperial society is an attack on the bourgeoisie of his own day. Thus Juillerat's presage of catastrophe points not only to the fall of the Second Empire: "Selon ce dernier, la bourgeoisie avait fait son temps" (IV, 551). In his prophetic warnings "sonnait le glas entêté d'une classe et l'écroulement de la bourgeoisie, dont les états pourris craquaient d'eux-mêmes" (IV, 664). Zola's vision, however, is not politically

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orientated towards the destruction of a class, but rather poetically focused on the destruction of a world and a society on a whole. In *Le Roman Expérimental* he declared that "le circulus social est identique au circulus vital; dans la société comme dans le corps humain il existe un solidarité qui lie les différents membres, les différents organes entre eux, de telle sorte que, si un organe se pourrit, beaucoups d'autres sont atteints" (X, 1189). In his work-notes for *Nana* he stressed the essential unity of a society in decomposition. "La désorganisation d'en haut par Nana, Sabine et Kuffat," he wrote, "comme *L'Assommoir* est la désorganisation en bas."\(^{110}\)

Obsessed as he is with the themes of world destruction and rebirth, the concept of the life-death-life cycle which underlines the whole of *Les Rougon-Macquart* sets up the basic schema of Zola's historical world view. As the harvest grows in the midst of decomposition so a new humanity is to be born from the rottenness of the old. In "*La République et la Littérature*", in April 1879, he declared that "l'effroyable secousse donnée par la Révolution à l'ancienne société française [a] été nécessaire pour retourner le champ où allait pousser la société nouvelle" (X, 1384). He conceived of history as a series of catastrophes followed by rebirth. Even in 1866, in the preface to *Mé Mains*, he had registered his awareness of living in a period of transition, and declared that, both in literature and society, the cobwebs of the past were to be swept away to make room for the new order: "Nous en sommes à l'heure de la démolition, lorsqu'une poussière de

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\(^{110}\) Quoted by Matthews, *op. cit.*, p. 79.
plâtre emplit l'air et que les décombres tombent avec fracas. Demain l'édifice sera reconstruit" (X, 27). Souvarine's cry of anarchy in Germinal and his conclusion that "quand il ne restera plus rien de ce monde pourri, peut-être en repoussera-t-il un meilleur" (V, 127), is echoed in La Terre by Lequeu's view that complete destruction is necessary for regeneration (V, 1109). Etienne's final vision of the cataclysm "d'où l'incendie embraserait la fin du siècle" evokes the "attente d'un envahissement des barbares régénérant les vieilles sociétés caduques" (V, 403), but, like that of Juillerat in Pot-Bouille his evocation of the barbarians loses contact with historical reality and takes its place within a wider apocalyptic vision. And while the destinies of the bourgeoisie and the Empire are linked, there is no historical or political basis for Zola's presage of doom for the "fin du siècle". The prophecies that close Zola's novels thus look forward, in hindsight, to 1870, but while the fall of the Second Empire provides the authentic document of a world swept away, those novels, as they lose contact with the history of the Second Empire, move into the realm of myth.

An analysis of Zola's treatment of the Commune, in the last pages of La Débâcle (VI, 1087-1122) is vital for an understanding of the meaning he gave to the fall of the Second Empire. In his letter to Van Santen Kolff, of 26 January 1892, Zola explained how the two events were inseparably linked:

Vous me demandez si cela ne m'a pas ennuyé de dépasser 1870, en poussant le récit jusqu'à la Commune. Mais mon plan a toujours été d'allier jusqu'à la Commune, car je considère la Commune comme
His treatment of the Commune has always received severe criticism. It is not enough, however, to see his unfavourable view of it merely inspired by a desire, at the time he was writing La Délégation, to enter the Academy. His position was fixed long before 1892. In 1871 he had been appalled at the absurdity of the Commune massacres, but moved from a refusal to take sides to a position of increasing hostility. Severely critical of the Versaillais repression, the summary court-martial s and the firing squads, which left 35,000 dead on the streets, the Commune was for Zola a collective madness and a demented nightmare. His portraits of the members of the Commune, in Le Sémaphore de Marseille, saw them characterized by their insanity, their mediocrity and their impotence: "Ce sont des idéalistes révolutionnaires, des moralistes de doctrine nuageuse, qui glissent dans le sang, et qui tomberont en criminels, en s'imaginant tomber en martyrs."

In August 1880, "Jacques Damour", while relegating history and politics to psychology, revealed the same attitude towards the Commune, in the topical tale of the return of a Communard from exile. The character is considered with a mixture of pity and irony: pity for the unfortunate soul crushed by events, but irony at the end as Damour regains his revolutionary fervour and dreams "en bonheur universel

111 Niess Collection, p. 44

obtenu par une extermination générale" (IX, 853).

The professional revolutionary of La Débâcle, Chouteau, was envisaged as "un type à créer, des lambeaux de théorie excellente, dans le plus effroyable mélange d'éraries et de mensonges." In the novel, the Commune leaders are once again seen as mediocre and self-destructive in their internecine strife, and Chouteau, like Derru in "Jacques Danour", as a swaggering demagogue who disappears when the bullets fly and the arrests are made.

Zola's view of the Commune as a whole is that of the mass as an unleashed monster, and while showing a certain compassion for individuals swept blindly along in the violence of the storm, he shows no real understanding of its historical significance. His treatment of the Commune points to precisely the limitations of the extent to which Zola's characters achieve a true historical consciousness. In spite of their being inserted into a definite historical context, they remain within it only at the physiological level. The Commune therefore is seen almost as a pathological phenomenon of debilitated brains and overstrained nerves, brought on by enforced idleness and frustrated patriotism. His advice to Alexis, in a letter of 4 July 1871, who was planning a novel based on the two sieges he had witnessed, points to such a failure of historical awareness: "Faire l'histoire physiologique de la folie humaine," he wrote, "traversant toutes les douleurs et toutes les épouvantes pour aboutir à

113 Appendix to La Débâcle, loc. p. 631
l'affondrement d'une ville." 114

While his view of the Commune in Le Désespoir is entirely that of earlier years, in 1891-1892 he gave to it a symbolic significance. His failure to explain the Commune in rational terms, as he had done in the case of Napoleon after the interlude of twenty years, is due to the fact that in his novels we find a world subjected to an irrational dominance of the elementary forces at work. For Zola's conception of the Commune at a symbolic level remains reconceived throughout the series. It is the explosion towards which the fuses of the end of his novels lead. If his reconstruction of the Second Empire was that of a society in the throes of decomposition, the Commune is seen as "la décomposition finale, la flaque de boue et de sang où allait s'effondrer un monde" (VI, 1033). One needs only read Vallès' L'Insurgé to understand how little Zola says about the Commune, but the criticism of his handling of it as hasty and obscure ignores the fact that the only reason he describes it all is to bring out the "idée-maîtresse" of his novel.

To a critical Alexis, Zola explains that the last chapters of the book "sont logiquement ce qu'ils devaient être, une toile de fond brossée largement, sur laquelle j'ai détaché le dénouement fatal." 115

After the corruption of the Second Empire, Zola's vision of the Commune is that of the final purification, after which France was to

114 Correspondance I, LOC, p. 380.
115 Letter of 21 June 1892, Correspondance II, LOC, p. 748
be rebuilt beyond the destruction. In his "Liste des Romans" of 1872-1873, the "Roman sur la DÉbâcle" planned to "faire revenir Aristide, Eugène, et les autres" to show their downfall and in the "Roman sur la guerre, le siège et la Commune" to "Faire revenir Maxime et les enfants" (II, 815). His notes for the end of La Curée stressed that Maxime and Saccard "auront leur compte dans un autre volume" and in those for Germinal, while indicating that it was towards the Commune that Etienne departed at the end of the novel, he also wrote that "le roman sur la Commune s'annonce comme une résultante, un dénouement où je ferai passer plusieurs des personnages des Rougon-Maccuart." 117 Although such projects were never realised and Jean Maccuart remains the only member of the family to take the stage in La DÉbâcle, Zola's original plans reveal that even within his fictional world the Commune was to be the final expiation.

The themes of punishment, expiation and rebirth hold a central place in La DÉbâcle. The idea of the Last Judgement is not restricted to the figure of the Emperor alone. Zola borrows from Decadent mythology the vision of Gunther Otto, the Prussian watching a burning Paris from the heights of Montmartre, as the Hun from the North, "le justicier, envoyé par le Dieu des armées pour châtier un peuple pervers: Paris brûlait en punition de ses siècles de vie mauvaise, du long ans de ses crimes et de ses débauches. De nouveau, les Germains sauveraient le monde, balayaient les dernières poussière de la corruption

116 Appendix to La Curée, LOC, p. 331.

117 Appendix to Germinal, LOC, p. 561.
latine" (VI, 1110). And Maurice has a hallucination of a ball going on in the burning Tuileries as he evokes "les galas de Gommorrhe et de Sodome" (VI, 1106).

After the Commune Zola wrote of Paris that "le bain de sang qu'il vient de prendre était peut-être d'une horrible nécessité pour calmer certaines de ses fièvres. Vous le verrez maintenant grandir en sagesse et en splendeur". 118 Twenty years later Zola incorporates the idea of a bloodletting into the novel (VI, 1114), that a France sick and feverish under the Second Empire had to endure the blood and suffering of 1870-1871 to recover its health, "cette saignée à nos veines pour nous refaire une santé". 119

The idea of ridding France of her impurities is reinforced through the purification of fire. The last thirty pages of the novel take place to a background of the disasters of Paris and the constant reiteration of "Paris brûle". The river becomes a ribbon of fire and the horizon a veritable sea of flames. But the impact of the poetic vision strikes us not so much by individual images through which it is expressed as in their gradual accumulation and combined effect. The whole novel leads up to such a climax. As he told Sherard, the last section of La Débâcle was to end with the "dénouement of the burning of Paris, the flames of which clear away not only an old régime, but a whole psychological state, and prepares a fresh field for a new and regenerated people." 120 "La fin d'un monde," he wrote

118 Le Sémaphore de Marseille, 3 June 1871. Quoted by Ripoll "Zola et les Communards", p. 17.
119 Le Figaro, 1 September 1891, Appendix to La Débâcle, LOC, p. 594.
120 Vizetelly, Preface, p. x.
in his work-notes, "l'incendie de Paris dominant tout."  

His monumental vision of Paris in flames closes the novel, and as it burns like a cursed city, the degenerate society of the Second Empire is symbolically consumed. Maurice is Zola's mouthpiece as he recognizes the cauterizing and purgatorial fire of the Commune itself: "La Commune lui apparaissait comme une vengeresse des hontes endurées, comme une libératrice apportant le fer qui ampute, le feu qui purifie" (VI, 1088).

Zola informed Kolff that he would end his novel "dans un ciel sanglant" and the red sky of the final tableau is that of blood and flames. Yet fire is also a positive element. "Through fire," wrote Bachelard, "everything changes. When we want everything to be changed we call on fire."  

For beyond the destruction is renewal, and the red sky is also that of the dawn."  

"Absolument jeter le cri d'éternelle espérance au dessus du sang et des flammes," wrote Zola in his notes.  

Thus in the midst of the sunset of destruction Jean experiences the sensation of a dawn and he is aware of the final triumph of the forces of life: "La vie grandait encore, au milieu du flamboiement de ce royal coucher d'astre, dans lequel Paris acheverait de se consumer en brise" (VI, 1121).

For in keeping with the pattern of the Zola world, the book

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121 Appendix to La Dégâste, LOC, p. 614.


123 See the bleeding sky of the end of Germinal. See also the lines from Zola's 1859 poem: "0! courage, mon siècle, avance, avance encore/ Cueil jour nous promet donc cette sanglante aurore." Mélanges, Prophètes et Discours, LOC, p. 341.

124 quoted by Matthews, on cit., p. 74.
ends not with destruction and chaos, but with an insistence on the undying hope in the future which is the essence of his vision of history: "Par delà la fournaise, hurlante encore, la vivace espérance renaissait, au fond du grand ciel calme d'une limpidité souveraine. C'était le rajeunissement certain de l'éternelle nature" (VI, 1121).

For in the final conflagration of its lust and greed, the Second Empire is razed to the ground, but as surely as the burning of the farm in La Terre, it is to make room for the future. Writing of the victims of the war Zola wrote of "la grande moisson d'espérances qui germe aujourd'hui de leur sang."125 For in the decomposition, the corruption, and the death of the old France, the eternal cycle guarantees the birth of the new.

The theme of rebirth in La Dédale is expressed through the imagery of crucifixion. The army of Châlons becomes "le troupeau expiatoire" (VI, 337) and in its suicidal move to join Bazaine "la miserable armée commençait à monter son calvaire" (VI, 777). As it expiates the sins of the Second Empire, its supreme hour of suffering at Iges, "sans gloire, couverte de crachats," (VI, 1004) is that of the Cross. For the cross is evoked as a paganized symbol of the agony of France. Going beyond the traditional analogy of war as the cross on which a country crucifies itself, Zola exploits Christian myth to

125 Le Figaro, 1 September 1891, Appendix to La Dédale, LOC, p. 599. Cf. his original title for Germinal, "Le Sang qui Germe".
also suggest France's rebirth. 126 Maurice explains that with the
Commune "désormais le calvaire était monté jusqu'à la plus terrifiante
des agonies, la nation crucifiée expiait ses fautes et allait re-
naître" (VI, 1118).127

This expression of France's expiation and rebirth is also
achieved through again subordinating character to symbolic intentions.
As in the case of the individuals portrayed on the battlefield, the
two central characters of the novel assume strictly functional roles.
When Jean, serving with the army of National Defence, kills Maurice,
the Communard, at the barricades, without realising his identity, the
the murder of his former comrade-in-arms is seen as "ce fratricide
monstrueux et imbécile" (VI, 1102). But their relationship is also
seen at a higher level. Each represents one part of France, and as
their friendship symbolises the country's unity faced with the Prussian
invasion, so when they break apart at the Commune, their hatred is that

126 In his "Prophetic Myths in Zola", Walker insists on the
originality of the analogy's implications without, however, pointing
out that the imagery of the Crucifixion appears elsewhere in Zola's
work. See for example Zola's description of a Paris street during the
Commune: "On dirait une voie de douleur, le calvaire maudit de la guerre
civile" (IX, 448). See also his article, "Le Deuil de Strasbourg", in
La Marseillaise, reprinted in Le Messager de Provence 4-5 October 1870.
After describing Strasbourg's description he foresees its rebirth:
"Vous verrez comme elle sortira joyeusement de son cercueil... Tôt ou
tard nous retrouverons sa tombe et comme le Christ nous la tirerons de
sa mort." Quoted by Ripoll, "Quelque Articles retrouvés de La Marseil-
laise", pp. 157-158. See also Palmyre's death in La Terre: "Elle était
allongée, la face au ciel, les bras en croix, comme crucifiée sur cette
terre" (V, 942).

127 In his plans for the final chapter, Zola wrote that "L'ef-
froyable passion est terminée, le Calvaire est monté jusqu'à la souf-
france suprême, et maintenant la résurrection est proche. Une nation
crucifiée, expiait ses fautes, prête à sortir rajeunie et forte du
bain de sang." Quoted by Matthews, op. cit., p. 74.
of a France divided within itself in the internal conflict of civil war.

Maurice, who joins the army after a debauched existence in Paris, is the decadent element of the nation. While Zola never realized his original intention of bringing Maxime into his novel on the Commune, he re-incarnated in Maurice the "éréthisme nerveux" of that "jeunesse dorée" attacked in 1868. For Maurice is characterized by "une nervosité de femme, ébranlé par la maladie de l'époque, subissant la crise historique et social de la race." (VI, 822). Zola explained to Sherard that Maurice was "the type of the France of the Empire, embodying her grace and her faults. He is the type of the France that, sated with pleasure, rushed to disaster." With his chauvinistic frenzy and his vague liberal idealism he embodies the Second Empire. "Il est aussi républicain. Napoléon III l'étant lui aussi," wrote Zola. "On du moins la république en lui à l'état théorique tandis que l'empire est dans son sang." It was through the moral collapse of the Empire symbolized in Maurice, "le petit-fils d'un héros de la Grande Armée," that Zola intended to try to explain how France, victorious under Napoleon I, had crumbled to defeat under Napoleon III (VI, 954). For, headed towards their end with a clinical fatality, both he and France suffer from "une maladie de famille, lentement aggravée, aboutissant à la destruction fatale, quand l'heure avait sonné" (VI, 954).

129 Vizetelly, Preface, pp. viii-ix.
130 Appendix to *La Désolé*, LOC, p. 626.
As the disease from which France was suffering reaches its climax, "la crise aiguë du mal à son paroxysme" (VI, 1083), in the Commune, so the fever of the wounded Maurice follows the course of its fires, as he is possessed by the "coup de démesure qui emportait Paris entier, ce mal venu de loin, des ferment mauvais du dernier règne" (VI, 1086). For while the Commune was for Zola the logical prolongation and the last convulsion of the Empire, it was through Maurice that he could dramatically link Commune and Second Empire. Zola made it clear in his work notes that through Maurice’s death could be symbolized the expiation of the faults of the Second Empire. "Avec ça, des fautes à expier," he wrote, "En faire un peu le type du Français, en 1870, portant historiquement la poing du Second Empire." 131

Maurice explains to Jean that he himself represents "l’épuisement de la race", and he recognizes the necessity of his death, to make way for "le flot nécessaire d’un sang nouveau" (VI, 955). In his death agonies Maurice sees himself as the gangrenous limb that must be amputated from the social body so that the nation will not die. 132

When Maurice is killed by Jean the symbolism is complete. "Le symbole à la fin est tout entier là," wrote Zola, "c’est la mauvaise partie de la France, Maurice, qui est supprimée accidentellement par la bonne, Jean; la France s’amputant elle-même de sa légereté et

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131 Ibid., p. 626.

132 Although he did not mention it when he came to write Le Désastre, Zola had already found such a symbolism in his article on Halot’s Souvenirs d’un Blessé, in La Cloche of 23 May 1872. Talking of the young "vaincu de la haute vie parisienne" who escapes from a train-load of prisoners after Sedan and loses an arm, he wrote: "Ne serait-ce pas un symbole de la France bête jusqu’à se battre pour l’Empire, perdue par lui, murie par les désastres, amputée de deux provinces?" (X, 949).
Jean, as a symbol, represents the soul of a France more eternal than an ephemeral régime. "Comme symbole," wrote Zola, "il est le personnage central, l'âme même de la France, équilibrée et brave." While Maurice, for whom "la France était morte" (VI, 954) represents despair, Jean is an incarnation of hope who gets up from the ground where a wounded Maurice lies, to look to the horizons where France must be rebuilt: "Il se redressa, dans un besoin vivace de vivre, de reprendre l'outil ou la charrue, pour rebâtir la maison, selon sa parole. Il était du vieux sol obstiné et sage du pays de la raison, du travail et de l'épargne" (VI, 955).

It is he who, not concerned with ideology or politics (VI, 719), pauses to reflect on Maurice's delirious vision of the Commune as a cosmic catastrophe:

Le pauvre être s'en était allé, affamé de justice, dans la suprême convulsion du grand rêve noir qu'il avait fait, cette grandiose et monstrueuse conception de la vieille société détruite, de Paris brûlé, du champ retourné et purifié pour qu'il y pousse l'idylle d'un nouvel âge d'or.

(VI, 1121)

Zola's sympathy for a vision that is his own is mingled with irony, but Jean's remains a more practical commitment to the future. For the final vision of the novel is that not of an idyll but of a task: "Le champ ravagé était en friche, la maison brûlée était par terre; et Jean, le plus humble et le plus douloureux, s'en alla, marchant à l'avenir, à la grande et rude besogne de tout une France à refaire"

133Appendix to La Désâgle, LOC, p. 625.

134Ibid.
(VI, 1122). In Le Docteur Pascal, the fertility of the new age is made explicit as Jean is seen ploughing and sowing the land near Plas-sans. After his barren marriage during the Second Empire, his new wife gives him two children, and it is they who are Pascal's hope for "le renouveau, la sève jeune des races qui vont se retremper dans la terre" (VI, 1242).

Zola told Sherard that Jean was "emblematic of the France of the future." After his savage portrayal of the mean and backward-looking peasants of La Terre there were many to question the conclusions of Zola's novel and such an apparently irrational faith in the peasantry. But it is essential to understand that such a faith is more poetic than political. It is not even enough to suggest that a return to the peasantry symbolized a Rousseauistic return to the purity of nature after the decadent values of the Second Empire.

In Zola's work, the pastoral is always contrasted to the destruction of war. The four soldiers who depart at the end of "Le Sans" go off to plough (IX, 75) and on his return from war Jean Gourdon becomes a peasant. But such an antithesis does not explain why, in Les Rougon-Macquart, the novel of the greatest fecundity is linked to that of the greatest destruction. Answering Kolff's question as to when the idea of La Terre was originally conceived, Zola wrote that "dans le principe, si ma mémoire est fidèle, la terre et la guerre devraient être contenus dans le même épisode." In fact his memory

135 Vizetelly, Preface, p. ix.
136 Letter of 5 March 1888, Niess Collection, p. 22.
plays him false here, for his "Liste de Romans" of 1868-1869 contained no reference to a novel on the peasant class and gave no hint that "la terre et la guerre" were to be incorporated in the same episode. Nevertheless his remarks point to the significant relationship between _La Terre_ and _La Débâcle_. In 1880 Zola confided to Xau that Jean Macquart was to be the hero of both novels. In his notes for _La Débâcle_ he made a résumé of Jean's career in _La Terre_, in the course of which he quoted several of his characteristic speeches and reinforced the bridge between the two novels by repeating passages from _La Terre_ at the beginning of the later book. Thus Jean, the sower of seeds in _La Terre_, moves to sow death and destruction. But the closing vision of _La Débâcle_ completes the eternal cycle with the triumph of the forces of life.

His faith in the peasantry has its basis in the fact that it is the peasant who is nearest to the forces of nature, itself a symbol of order and eternity. In his work-notes for _La Terre_ Zola wrote that he intended to portray "la grandeur chez ce paysan, cet homme qui est resté le plus près de la terre." In _La Débâcle_ Maurice sees in Jean "la partie saine de la France, la raisonnable, la pondérée, la paysanne celle qui était restée le plus près de la terre" (VI, 1117). For the lesson of the earth is a significant one. If Zola's philosophy of history is analogous to Nietzsche's myth of Eternal Return, the source of such a circular movement remains the earth itself. After

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137 See V, 1142-1143, and VI, 687.

138 Quoted by Robert, "La Terre" d'Emile Zola, p. 159.
outlining his planned series to Claude, Sandoz addresses the earth and concludes: "C'est toi seule qui seras dans mon œuvre comme la force première, le moyen et le but" (V, 567). Similarly, Zola's own faith in the future is incarnated in the spectacle of nature as an indestructible giver of life, and the themes of world destruction and renewal, of death and regeneration, are all patterned on its movement. Thus we must learn from its tranquil perenniality. In "Les Quatre Journées de Jean Gourdon", Lazare tells Jean that "l'homme, mon enfant, a été crée à l'image de la terre. Et comme la mère commune, nous sommes éternels" (IX, 471). In La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret Zola described the peasant-village as "un peuple à part, une race née du sol, une humanité de trois cents têtes qui recommençaient les temps" (III, 33). For it is the peasant who, while exemplifying Zola's belief in the daily task, need never despair, patiently secure in the certainty of the cyclical movement of existence and the eternal quality of life.

In Zola's vision, man has only a tiny part in a scheme of things far greater than himself, eternal laws which make the battle of Sedan or the fall of an Empire a minor episode. Thus, in La Débâcle, the fields are seen beyond the battle in a shift of focus from the mortality of man to the perenniality of the earth. Before the battle Maurice sees the peasant in the distance, calmly following his plough:

Et, comme il tournait la tête, il fut très surpris d'apercevoir, au fond d'un vallon écarté, protégé par des pentes rude, un paysan qui labourait sans hâte, poussant sa charrue attelée d'un grand cheval blanc. Pourquoi perdre un jour? Ce n'était pas parce qu'on se battait, que le blé cesserait de croître et le monde de vivre. (VI, 854-855)
At evening he sees him again, and this passage is repeated in identical terms (VI, 910). Coming at the beginning and at the end of the day, the vision of peace beyond the carnage frames the battle in its proper perspective, and suggests the eternal activity of birth and death in the larger scale of an impersonal nature. 139

In all Zola's novels, nature is an impassive and indifferent observer of the sufferings of men, and against its immensity man is reduced to an insignificant dot on the landscape. In _La Désâsée_, men are repeatedly seen from a distance or a height, and the lines of troops become no more than "ces coulées intarrissables de fourmilière géante" (VI, 739). 140 As the Prussian king watches the battle from the heights of _La Marfée_, he sees it as a spectacle from a theatre-lodge, "comme du trône réservé de cette gigantesque loge de gala" (VI, 824), while the soldiers fight in the vast amphitheatre of nature. 141 They become figures on the chess-board of the battlefield laid out before him. And again Zola drives home the point that the beauty and serenity of nature persist while men struggle and die in suicidal folly, for the king watches the battle "les yeux sur l'échiquier géant, occupé à mener cette poussière d'hommes, l'enragement de ces quelques points noirs, perdus au milieu de l'éternelle et souriante nature" (VI, 845). At the end of the battle he feels no remorse "devant ces cadavres si petits, ces milliers d'hommes qui tenaient moins

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139 This same idea is also expressed VI, 1018.

140 See also VI, 803, 821, 823, 832, 833, 844, 894.

141 For a similar technique, see "L'Attaque du Moulin", IX, 1508; _Nouveaux Contes à Linon_, IX, 449-450; _La Désâsée_, VI, 928.
de place que la poussière des routes," and the panorama of the scenes of destruction "n'empêchaient pas l'impassible nature d'être belle, à cette fin sereine d'un beau jour" (VI, 929).

Of *L'Education Sentimentale* Zola wrote that it was "un livre formidable où la platitud est épique, où l'humanité prend une impor-
tance de fourmilière" (XI, 111). In his own novels it is not merely in war that man is reduced to an insect. 142 For throughout the body of his work, man is seen as an insignificant thing, insect-like in his total inability to change the course of events.

After Renan's death, De Vogüé resumed what he called the philosopher's "credo" in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* of 16 November 1892. In preparing *Le Docteur Pascal*, Zola copied out the page of the article and concluded that Renan's ideas "suffisent même au résumé philosophi-
que de toute ma série et je n'aurai qu'à les distribuer." 143 In his own "Examen de conscience philosophique", Renan had conceived of the historical process in precisely those terms with which Zola conceived

142 For insect images, see "Les Quatre Journées de Jean Gourdon", IX, 461; *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*, III, 349; *Une Fâche d'Amour*, III, 1010, 1057; *Nana*, IV, 277; *La Joie de Vivre*, IV, 1169; *Séminal*, V, 71; *La Terre*, VI, 770, 933, 935, 939; *L'Argent*, VI, 343, 345, 363, 364, 376, 391. See also a long analogy between insect and man in "Les Quatre Journées de Jean Gourdon" (IX, 452), textually reproduced in his "Causerie" on Michelet's "L'Insecte", in *La Tribune* of 28 June 1863, *L'Atelier de Zola*, pp. 157-158.

of the part of men:

L'Humanité est dans le monde ce qu'une fourmilière est dans une forêt. Les révolutions intérieures d'une fourmilière, sa décadence, sa ruine, sont choses secondaires pour l'histoire d'une forêt... La nature n'est pas obligée de se plier à nos petites convenances.

Zola himself wrote that "l'histoire est faite de forces naturelles invincibles" (XII, 660). Utterly a prisoner of determinism, Zola cannot conceive of the conscious intervention of men in his own history. In "La République et la littérature" he saw man as almost a hindrance to the evolutionary process (X, 1384). Thus his rejection of politics and his suggestion to replace the ideological conflicts of "l'abominable cuisine des partis" by an a-political party which would simply aid "l'évolution naturelle des sociétés, sans vouloir les plier violemment à un idéal quelconque." Alexis concluded his analysis of Zola's political ideas by calling him "un républicain théorique, croyant à des lois, ne croyant guère aux hommes qui prétendent les déterminer." Zola's own conclusion was that "ce sont les seules forces de la nature qui mènent l'humanité." The train of the last

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144 Ernest Renan, "Examen de conscience philosophique", Revue des Deux Mondes, XCIV (1889), 735.

145 Le Figaro, 4 November 1891.

146 Thus those of Zola's characters who succeed are not those who try to influence events so much as foresee them and are "prêts à détourner les événements" (II, 77). See also, II, 87, and XIII, 386.

147 Une Campagne, LOC, p. 183.

148 Alexis, Emile Zola, Notes d'un ami, p. 171.

149 Une Campagne, LOC, p. 20.
pages of La Bête Humaine with its "force prodigieuse et irresistible que rien ne pouvait plus arrêter" (VI, 297), is therefore not only an image of France rushing to disaster. It also becomes a symbol of the movement of history itself.

The influence of Darwin's Origin of the Species (1859)\textsuperscript{150} is evident in Zola's work. It finds its elementary expression in Le Ventre de Paris in "la bataille des Gras et des Maigres," representative, as Claude explains to Florent, of "tout le drame humain" (II, 737). In L'Argent, it is the strong who rule at the Bourse: "C'est l'atroce loi des forts, ceux qui mangent pour ne pas être mangés" (VI, 590).

The train in La Bête Humaine is rushing on to progress in spite of the death and destruction which are an inevitable part of its movement: "N'allait-elle pas quand même à l'avenir, insoucieuse du sang répandu?" (VI, 297).

In La Désâalle the impression of fatality is thus given a new dimension, seen within this Darwinian perspective. For war is seen as part of the evolutionary process. The inevitability and the necessity of this evolutionary destruction explains why, in Zola's picture of war, the horror is described with no deeper questioning, why courage and bravery are to no avail, and why man's gestures are all pitifully insignificant. While Tolstoy's heroes revolt against the absurdity of the carnage, Zola's soldiers accept death on the battlefield merely as their share in the terrible necessity of the struggle which is part of the great evolutionary scheme. "Je fais se dresser la vision

\textsuperscript{150} Translated into French by Clémence Royer in 1862.
vraie de la guerre, abominable," wrote Zola in his notes, "la nécessité de la lutte vitale, toute l'idée haute et navrante de Darwin dominant le pauvre petit, un insecte écrasé dans les nécessités de l'énorme et sombre nature." 151

We find therefore a totally different conception of war from that of his polemical articles of 1870. Even in "Trois Guerres", in 1877, 152 he spoke of war as a biological fatality, and in terms of the Darwinian idea of violence as a law of nature. "C'est que la guerre est une sombre nécessité, comme la mort," he wrote. "Peut-être faut-il du fumier pour que la civilisation fleurisse" (IX, 1013). Once again we have the idea of life emerging from the decomposition of the old, and war thus becomes the source of national rebirth. In his article of 1891, entitled "Sedan", he reiterated such a view. "La guerre, mais c'est la vie même," Zola insisted. "Rien n'existe dans la nature, ne naît, ne grandit, ne se multiplie que par un combat. Il faut manger et être mangé pour que le monde vive," 153 and, in the novel, he makes Maurice his exponent of the necessity of war, again using these terms to express his view (VI, 691).

It is within such perspectives too, that can be explained his insistence on the certainty of France's defeat. Maurice understands that "la défaite, malgré tout, était fatale, comme la loi des forces qui mènent le monde" (VI, 731). In Le Figaro of 1 September 1891,

151 Appendix to La Désâcle, LOC, p. 614.

152 His reminiscences of the Crimean, Italian, and Franco-Prussian campaigns, which appeared in Le Messager de l'Europe, July, 1877.

153 Appendix to La Désâcle, LOC, p. 598.
Zola wrote that "cela a été, parce que cela ne pouvait être autrement."\textsuperscript{154} "Montrer là," he wrote in his notes, "que notre écrasement était fatal, une nécessité historique, le va-et-vient de l'évolution, et pourquoi."\textsuperscript{155}

On the one hand, therefore, as it was a "loi fatale" that one nation must devour the other and that the weak must be devoured by the strong, so France was fated to defeat. On the other, Zola conceived history as a battle between the forces of the past and those of the future. Prussia, the "vaste empire en formation, rajeuni" (VI, 696), was thus certain to conquer because it represented the young and the new. He correctly analysed the reasons for the Prussian victory, in its application of modern technology to the science of war. He also implied that France had to prepare itself for a new conflict, and in his advocacy to accept the harsh lessons of 1870 and "soyons prêts à vaincre,"\textsuperscript{156} there is more than a hint of the "revanchard" cry. But above all, Zola insisted that "à mes yeux, l'Allemagne n'a été que l'accident fatal, et son triomphe n'a été dû qu'à la maladie intérieure dont nous étions entrain de mourir."\textsuperscript{157} And thus, in the novel, as the French are destroyed by a superior artillery out of sight, the German army remains an invisible presence, a remorseless "force logique et invincible" (VI, 809).

\textsuperscript{154}Ibid., p. 594.
\textsuperscript{155}Ibid., p. 614
\textsuperscript{156}Ibid., p. 608.
\textsuperscript{157}Letter to A. Loewenstein, 9 April 1900, Correspondance II, LOC, p. 863.
If the Second Empire's downfall was inevitable it was because, in Zola's view, it represented the past, and the final triumph of the forces of progress was irresistible. "L'Evolution démocratique s'impose," he wrote, "il serait fou de prétendre arrêter l'histoire." Yet, in the figure of Napoleon III, he saw "un arrêt dans la marche de l'humanité" (X, 162). Reviewing L'Histoire de Jules César (1865), Zola easily recognized its anonymous author as Louis-Napoleon and subtly established a parallel between France and ancient Rome by concluding that "ce n'est pas du progrès que d'aller de la république romaine à l'empire romain" (X, 165). For Zola saw Napoleon III's renewal of imperial power as a retrogressive step in humanity's march towards the ideal vision of democracy and justice that lay on the distant and misty horizons of the evolutionary process.

France too had to be defeated because it had ignored the tools of the scientific future, because it had lived in the memories of the invincibility of the French army, in the glory of the past victories of Napoleon I, and in the outworn chauvinistic tradition incarnated in Rochas. In his death, wrote Zola in the novel, "finissait une légende" (VI, 944). But above all, France, under the Empire, had grown old (VI, 697), and it was a new and a young France that would emerge, phoenix-like, from the ashes of the past.

In La Cloche of 21 November 1871, Zola had expressed political

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158 Une Campagne, LOC, p. 320.
forces in terms of those of life and death:

Et par la mort j'entends toutes les misères et toutes les hontes d'hier, l'éternel duel du peuple et du roi, les secousses périodiques qui ébranlent la France, la satisfaction des appétits d'un petit nombre amenant la misère de tous, le mensonge d'une majorité factice qui met entre les mains d'un millier d'individus les volontés de trente-huit millions d'hommes.

Et par la vie j'entends le libre fonctionnement d'une société qui est assez grande fille pour se conduire toute seule, l'organisation nationale d'un pays décidé à vivre en paix, à travailler sainement, à montrer au monde comment un peuple se relève du bourgeois où l'a jeté un empereur.159

As a further dimension to its historical necessity, the fall of the Second Empire thus symbolizes the victory of the forces of life.

Delord's history had ended on the same note, with the same optimism. "L'Empire finit dans l'abandon le plus complet," he had written. "La France se sentit soulagée de sa disparition et sa chute lui apparut comme le commencement du salut."160 Hemmings hazarded "the guess that the themes of rebirth, rejuvenation and renewal, would not have been worked into the story of the events of 1870 and 1871 but for the heightened sense of value and joy of life that Zola owed to Jeanne Rozerot."161 Yet, in 1871, Zola had looked forward to peace after the hardships of winter, and seen in the spring "la protestation de la vie contre la mort."162 And, on leaving Bordeaux on 12 March 1871, his final article declared: "La France est morte, vive la France! Je laisse la morte ici, dans sa grande tombe de pierre, et je vais à Versailles, en quête du berceau d'où la patrie doit se

159 La République en Marche, II, 32.
160 Quoted by Lotte, op. cit., p. 84.
161 Hemmings, Émile Zola, p. 257.
162 La Cloche, 25 February 1871, La République en Marche, I, 40.
Thus, on the one hand, an immense faith in the future lead him at the time to reject the nihilism of Flaubert. And, on the other, it is simply not valid to suggest that La Débâcle is divorced from the rest of the series on the fictional level. For it must be seen within a vision born long before 1888, a vision imposed on the fall of the Second Empire.

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164 Talking of Flaubert, Zola wrote that "la chute de l'Empire lui semblait la fin du monde" (XI, 129). Flaubert, in his disgust and bitterness, saw war as a negation of all progress and, in 1870, saw mankind on the threshold of a new dark age. "Les phrases toutes faites," Flaubert wrote to George Sand, "ne manquent pas: — 'La France se relèvera! Il ne faut pas désespérer! C'est le châtiment salutaire! Nous étions vraiment trop immoraux! etc. ' Oh! éternelle blague! Non, on ne se relève pas d'un coup pareil." Letter of 30 October 1870, Correspondance, VI, 184.

165 See Gaston Bouthoul: "La Débâcle est un livre isolé dans l'œuvre de Zola (le lien qui rattache quelques personnages avec les Rougon-Macquard est vraiment gratuit et de pure forme)." Actualité de La Débâcle, Présence de Zola, p. 165.
CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, one is forced to ask the hypothetical question: would the perspectives of the novels of *Les Rougon-Macquart* have been different had the Second Empire not fallen in 1870, had its fortunes recovered, had it gradually made the transition from liberal Empire to Republic, or had it been overthrown in a manner less dramatic?

Coming as it did, however, immediately after his embarking on the series, the fall of the Second Empire not only closes Zola's historical frame but also provides him with a fifth act of classical proportions. His portrayal of it in *La Déraciné* is therefore not only Nogolian in conception but also invested with a tragic grandeur and a sense of Fate.

But all the novels after 1870 that focus on the society of the Second Empire thus receive, in hindsight, a powerful dimension of fatalistic irony. Reality is ordered and arranged in deliberate poetic aims. The destinies of individuals and the nation are linked, and character is subordinated to the dominant theme of the novel sketched in the "Ébauche". Historical sources become material for poetic elaboration, and historical events are taken out of their true context. Such techniques are exploited to reinforce the acceleration towards disaster of the individual novels, and the unity of the series as a whole in its convergence towards the catastrophe of 1870.
In the evolutionary pattern of history there is a mathematical certainty to the Empire's fall. In *La Débâcle*, Zola suggests that the Second Empire was a monstrous growth which had to be swept away, a decomposing edifice which had to be razed to the ground, before there could be any hope of regeneration. His interpretation of the fires of the Commune is highly personal and has little to recommend it from a historical point of view. But his vision of the Commune is not that of an opportunist who subjects it to the artistic needs of the time. For while Sedan and the Commune are transformed into symbols of national expiation and resurrection, the fall of the Second Empire inserts itself into a quasi-constant vision, into the pattern of the Zola world — that of death and rebirth, and of the final triumph of the forces of life.

In wider perspectives, Zola has an immense, and even irrational, faith in progress and in the inexorable movement of history towards the ideal vision of the city of justice and happiness. Yet, entrenched in his determinism, he sees man utterly powerless to control his own destiny. If the fall of the Second Empire is seen as an historical necessity, it is because history is a phenomenon subjected to the eternal laws of nature. Unable to conceive of the practical means of working towards the radiant future other than through a philosophy of "travail" while history runs its course, his vision of history moves into the realm of myth to reconcile the contradictions between a faith in the future and the disillusion with the political present. The fall of the Second Empire therefore becomes itself, in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, the springboard for an
apocalyptic vision of world destruction and renewal.

The fall of the Second Empire thus assumes a position of considerable importance in his work. His interpretation of it is less that of the historian than that of the artist who imposes his poetic vision on the fabric of history. Three years after the completion of Les Rougon-Macquart, Émile Zola himself put his historical ambitions in their true perspective. "Je ne suis pas savant, je ne suis pas historien," he concluded, "je suis romancier."¹

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III

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IV

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