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978-0-521-38426-1 - Emile Zola: *L'Assommoir*
David Baguley
Excerpt
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Introduction

To consider Zola's novel about a washerwoman, Gervaise Macquart, who falls on hard times, takes to drink and dies in abject poverty, a landmark of world literature may seem at first to be an extravagant claim, requiring at least some preliminary justification. Though *L'Assommoir* did not by any means receive universal acclaim from contemporary critics when it first appeared nor for many years thereafter, its exceptional merits have come to be recognised in modern times and there are eloquent testimonies to its importance. Writing for predominantly English readers, one critic, Graham King, has hailed it as 'one of the greatest masterpieces of literature, a work which heralded a new era in the craft of fiction' (*Garden of Zola*, p. 124), whilst the eminent Zola scholar, F. W. J. Hemmings, has described it as an 'indisputable masterpiece', approaching 'sheer artistic perfection', proof alone of all of Zola's works 'against the acid of purely formal criticism' (*Emile Zola*, pp. 113–14). The Belgian critic, Jacques Dubois, who has done most to apply such acid tests, considers it to be 'one of the great events of French literature', a work that has earned its place 'amongst the masterpieces of the modern novel' (Introduction to the Garnier-Flammarion edition, 1969, p. 28). One could go on quoting similar statements, but perhaps the most telling recommendations have come, not just from critics, but from other writers, who, whatever their own artistic tendencies, have admired the artistry of the novel and been moved by its vivid, gripping representations. In Angus Wilson's view, for example, by the mere creation of Gervaise Macquart, '*L'Assommoir* should be judged a great novel' (*Diversity and Depth in Fiction*, p. 102).

One of the most remarkable facts about *L'Assommoir* is that Zola achieved these effects with the simplest of plots.

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It was, of course, a fundamental tenet of realist and naturalist writers that complicated plots were to be avoided as contrary to a true picture of life. This was especially true at the time of *L'Assommoir* amongst Zola and his naturalist associates. Flaubert, for example, published his famous story 'A Simple Heart' (in his *Trois contes*), the uneventful life of a domestic servant, the same year as *L'Assommoir* (1877), and his chief disciple, Maupassant, would soon follow suit with his first novel, entitled plainly *Une vie*, the simple life of Jeanne Le Perthuis des Vauds, a socially more privileged existence, but no more fulfilling than that of her humble predecessor. In a similar vein Zola planned to call his novel *The Simple Life of Gervaise Macquart* before he hit upon the far more suggestive title that it now bears. Like the adoption of *The Red and the Black* instead of *Julien* by Stendhal, the change is significant. The dictionary gives 'club' or 'bludgeon', as well as 'grogshop' or 'bar', for *l'assommoir*, but as we shall see, Zola's title can mean much more. The novelist thereby substituted a cryptic title redolent with symbolic meaning that invites a pluralistic reading of the novel for a more patent generic indicator of the biographical model to which the text conforms, one which merely suggested a realistic and literal approach to the work and emphasised the uncomplicated outline of its plot. In his preliminary plans for the novel, in the 'sketch' (*ébauche*) of the work, Zola wrote: 'If I take the title: *La Simple Vie de Gervaise Macquart*, the nature of the book will precisely have to be its simplicity; a story of magnificent starkness, of day-to-day reality, just as it is, without any complications, with very few scenes and the most ordinary ones at that, absolutely nothing that is novelistic or affected.' The novel would be, he added, 'facts strung together, but giving me the *complete life of the people*'.

The novel of Gervaise Macquart's misfortunes is divided appropriately into thirteen chapters. (1) It opens with Gervaise waiting early in the morning in their miserable hotel room, situated in the Goutte-d'Or district of Paris, for her wayward lover, Lantier, who eventually returns, quarrels with the anxious woman and then, whilst she is away doing the laundry in the

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public washhouse (and fighting with Virginie, the sister of his new mistress, in a famous scene) abandons her with their two children, Claude and Etienne. (2) With typical courage and hard work, at this stage in her life, the laundress recovers from this setback and is nicely making ends meet when she yields to the blandishments of Coupeau, a (temporarily) upstanding roofer from the neighbourhood, whom she agrees to marry despite certain misgivings. (3) The wedding takes place, with lively scenes of popular celebration; (4) Nana is born and the household prospers for some four years until Coupeau, one day, falls off a roof and, (5) losing his taste for work, acquires a taste for strong drink. (6) Gervaise, nevertheless, with the help of a loan from an admirer, the metalworker Goujet, has opened her own laundry, and, despite her husband's lapses, is making it into a going concern, winning the respect of the neighbourhood and Goujet's chaste love. (7) But, in the middle of her birthday feast, rumours of Lantier's return prove to be true; he is invited in to join the party by none other than Coupeau, in the general permissiveness of the celebrations, and, in the following chapter (8), wheedles his way not only into the household, but, if not into her affections, back into Gervaise's favours, for she is repelled by her drunken husband and incapable of repulsing her former lover's advances. (9) Dragged down into destitution by her idle, spendthrift husband and lover, and having lost the respect of Goujet, Gervaise is now forced to yield her shop to her arch-enemy, Virginie, and the latter's husband, Poisson, whilst the conniving Lantier stays on at the shop. (10) In despair at the calamity of her existence, Gervaise herself, despite her earlier resolution, turns to drink and (11) her daughter, Nana, embarks upon an illustrious career as a courtesan. (12) On the verge of starvation, Gervaise wanders the streets begging and vainly trying, in total desperation, to sell her pathetic body. (13) Finally, Coupeau, driven mad by drink, dies in a padded cell in the throes of *delirium tremens*, leaving Gervaise to perish, like a dog, of starvation, filth and exhaustion in a hovel under the stairs of the dilapidated building they occupy.

Such a bald outline of the plot may have a certain usefulness

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as a guide to new readers of *L'Assommoir*, but it also has certain disadvantages. It does not, to begin with, do justice at all to the powerful realist impact of the novel, to its extraordinary evocative potency. Criticism of late has tended to disregard, even to disparage, the representational aims of realist literature, dwelling upon the arbitrariness of its signs and the artifice of its strategies, questioning its referentiality and its implicit ideology, in short preferring the play of *semiosis* to the constraints of *mimesis*. But the fact remains, and must be emphasised before we embark upon the analytical exercise of criticism and upon the dispersive procedures involved in exploring the different levels, discourses, meanings, of the text, that *L'Assommoir* is a masterly mimetic achievement which grips its readers and holds them in its sway by the intensity of its evocative effects, by its descriptive skills, by the pathos of its characters' plight, by its vivid representation of human foibles and of the brief joys and terrible suffering of its characters, by the sense of doom that hangs over their lives, and by the spells of hope and the defiant intemperance of language and action of these people as they seek to escape the cruel grip of circumstances – indeed by all that contributes in the novel to move all but the most insensate. The French writer Edmonde Charles-Roux has written of the vertiginous, hallucinatory effect that *L'Assommoir* exercises over the reader (*Les Cahiers naturalistes*, 52 (1978), p.9). The novel itself, in a sense, becomes like an *assommoir*, overwhelming the reader with its stunning effects.

A mere outline of the plot also seems to confirm the narrow view of a certain (classical, conservative, elitist, aesthetist) tradition that rejects Zola's novel, along with other naturalist works, as but a gross form of realism, dwelling upon the repulsive aspects of life and written for scandalous effect. In point of fact, no one was more surprised than Zola himself at the *succès de scandale* of his novel, which rapidly brought him fame and fortune after many years of rather indifferent recognition. Yet, whilst Zola no longer had to suffer the killing indifference that he feared, he was immediately faced with a

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different dilemma, for, as Borges remarked, 'fame is a form of incomprehension, perhaps the worst'.

One final danger consists of failing to recognise that the apparent clarity of design of *L'Assommoir* is thoroughly deceptive. One can emphasise too much the 'classic simplicity' of the work and suggest, like Martin Turnell, that *L'Assommoir* approaches 'the economy and the linear simplicity of the French novels of the classic period' (*The Art of French Fiction*, p. 147), as if the distastefulness and dreariness of much of the novel's content are redeemed by its formal qualities. But, like a landmark, *L'Assommoir* points in several directions and should be viewed from a number of vantage points. Like a landmark too, it both demarcates and is itself set within several boundaries. Since, almost twenty years ago, Jacques Dubois argued that the 'plurality' of Zola's text requires a plurality of approaches (*L'Assommoir de Zola*, p. 8), it has been opened up to a variety of perspectives, of which this introductory study will seek to take account and which, in some cases, it will seek to develop. As we explore in turn the social and political significance of the novel, its status as a 'naturalist' work, its particular themes and techniques, and the fascinating story of its reception, we shall attempt to answer, in relation to Zola's novel, the fundamental questions of criticism: what type of text can it be said to be and what can it be said to mean? The answers will inevitably be provisional, but we shall inevitably see also that, with its complexities and its ambiguities, *L'Assommoir* is much more than the picture of a simple life.

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Chapter 1

The social and political novel

The setting

Though *L'Assommoir* may be read, enjoyed and studied perfectly well as an independent work, it must also be considered, as Zola insisted in his preface, as part of the twenty-volume series of novels, *Les Rougon-Macquart* (1871–93), the creation of which occupied the better part of his life as a writer. As the series subtitle suggests, *The Natural and Social History of a Family under the Second Empire*, it has a double design: on the one hand, the depiction of contemporary society in its various aspects, a kind of Second Empire *Human Comedy*; on the other hand, a representation (or exemplification) of the workings of the laws of heredity in the lives of members of a single family as they move in that society. In his preliminary notes for the series, Zola tended to emphasise the latter aim. In a page or two of jottings entitled significantly 'Differences between Balzac and myself', for example, he writes: 'My work will be less social than scientific.' But, as the series unfolded during the early years of the Third Republic, the social and historical aims tended to predominate. One essential difference between Balzac's and Zola's series is that, unlike the former's immense fresco of life in the society of the Restoration and the July Monarchy, *The Rougon-Macquart*, notably in *L'Assommoir* and *Germinal*, portray working-class life. In his preliminary notes for the series, Zola, the future novelist-ethnographer, had divided society into four sectors: what he called the 'worlds' of the people (the worker and the soldier), of business (the speculator and the industrialist), of the bourgeoisie ('sons of the parvenus') and high society, along with a disparate class, a 'separate world', to which he consigned the prostitute, the murderer, the priest and the artist. Earlier novelists would have unhesitatingly placed the workers in this last category.

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Like the action of a number of *Rougon-Macquart* novels, the events of *L'Assommoir* are roughly contemporaneous with the history of the Second Empire, and the plight of its characters is an implicit indictment of the extravagances of the imperial regime that are depicted directly in other works of the series such as *La Curée* and *Nana*. However, as is the case in most other naturalist novels of the period, there are very few precise indications of the dates of the events of the plot in the text itself, let alone any commentary on the social or historical significance of the action. We can deduce from the allusion by Coupeau to the recent election of Eugène Sue to parliament (28 April 1850) that the opening scene of the novel takes place in May. By following the sometimes vague chronological indications (and with the help of Zola's plans, which are much more informative than the final text), we can establish that Gervaise's wedding takes place at the end of July 1850, that her four years of toil in chapter 4 take us to 1854 and that her birthday feast in chapter 7 occurs on 19 June 1858. By the beginning of chapter 10, she looks back, in 1863, over the thirteen years that have led to her misfortune as she moves into the hovel on staircase B of the tenement-house. In her agony of hunger and desperation at the opening of chapter 12, where she herself begins to lose all sense of time ('It must have been the Saturday after the rent was due, something like the 12th or 13th of January', p. 749), we are, no doubt, in 1869, the year in which she later dies, the year before the fall of the Second Empire. Clearly, in this novel, existential time, time as biological process and a thematised time of fatality and disintegration are far more important than historical events. But the context of Louis Napoleon's regime is by no means irrelevant to the study of *L'Assommoir*, particularly as it affected the conditions of working-class life.

The Second Empire (1852–70) and the curiously elusive figure of Napoleon III have frequently been represented as an almost bizarre parody of the glories of the first Empire. Victor Hugo in exile mercilessly pilloried 'Napoléon le Petit' and it was with reference to the Second Empire that Marx, echoing Hegel, remarked (in the opening sentence of *The Eighteenth*

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Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte) that the significant facts of history occur twice, 'the first time as tragedy, the second as farce'. Louis Napoleon's was in many ways an inglorious reign, one of opportunism, repressive political institutions, authoritarianism, police state methods, corruption, hollow pageantry and, in the 1860s, disastrous foreign adventures, a regime designed both to stifle opposition and to cull public favour, thoroughly deserving of the calumnies that writers such as Zola heaped upon it. But, in many respects also, it was a 'progressive' regime, a time of frenzied speculation, investment and economic expansion, which favoured free trade, industrial production, the establishment of large corporations, new banks and a booming stock exchange, the construction of miles of railways and a vast programme of public works, with many of the trappings of a modern capitalist state. Whilst Marx was advocating the dictatorship of the proletariat, Louis Napoleon was claiming to embody the sovereignty of the people. He is said to have held certain socialist views and to have had considerable sympathy for the lot of the workers. In his earlier years he even wrote a pamphlet on the extinction of pauperism. But, as *L'Assommoir* attests, little was done in that direction when he came to power.

The vast programme of public works in the capital that Louis Napoleon instituted under the direction of his protégé, the energetic Alsatian Georges Eugène Haussmann, made 'préfet de la Seine' for the purpose and baron for his troubles, was typical of the régime. The demolition and reconstruction of large areas of Paris were undertaken on the grand scale and precipitated a frenzy of real estate speculation. This reconstruction was good publicity for the régime, recalling earlier transformations during the First Empire. It provided employment for Parisian workers like Coupeau, and for a swelling tide of workers drawn to the city from the provinces like Goujet. But, as contemporary commentators were quick to point out, these public works were not solely in the public interest. The miles of new streets, the long straight avenues, the wide boulevards, had a decidedly strategic practicality for moving troops and repressing insurrection. Furthermore, when the

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dust had settled on the vast building site that Paris had become, it became clear that, behind the tree-lined avenues and the elegant façades, the sumptuous shops and spacious squares, the long stretches of imposing residences built in the flashy and uniform style so characteristic of the age, there remained, particularly in the outer districts of the city, crowded slums where the deplorable living conditions were made worse by the influx of a whole population displaced from the demolished and renovated districts of the city. Whilst Haussmann could boast of the splendid vistas of the new Paris and his sewage system, his Cloaca Maxima, became a tourist attraction, vast numbers of working-class people, who had contributed their labour to the realisation of his grandiose schemes, were condemned to live in stinking, airless slums.

All this upheaval provides the background to Zola's novel, which is set in the very heart of one such Paris slum. In the opening scene Gervaise watches a vast 'herd' of workers, masons, locksmiths, painters, men of all trades, descending with their tools from the outlying northern districts of the city for their day's work in Paris, an anonymous mass of compliant workers swallowed up menacingly by the city: 'and the crowd surged down into Paris where it was engulfed, continually' (p.377). In an equivalent scene later in the novel, as she witnesses the return of the troops of exhausted workers near the junction of the boulevard de Magenta and what is now the boulevard Barbès, Gervaise takes stock of the changes that have taken place in her adopted neighbourhood with a significant sense of shame. She sees the dilapidated hovels behind the brand-new houses, the dingy alleys between the sculptured façades: 'Beneath the mounting luxury of Paris was the seething misery of the suburban slums, defiling this huge construction site of a new city, so hastily erected' (p.764).

The particular slum in which almost all the action of *L'Assommoir* unfolds is the district (or, more appropriately, the neighbourhood, since it covers such a small area) that occupies, on the map, an egg-shaped zone between the Sacré-Cœur and the Gare du Nord, bounded by the rue Polonceau, the boulevard de la Chapelle and the boulevard Barbès (then the

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rue des Poissonniers), with the rue de la Goutte d'Or running right through the middle. After achieving a certain grim respectability earlier this century (if the photographs give the true picture), the Goutte d'Or has now become once again a bustling neighbourhood of the underprivileged. But the caftan has replaced the cloth cap and the bazaar the 'boozer', as North African immigrants have taken over the streets abandoned by Zola's working-class population. The probable model for the Hôtel Boncœur is now next door to 'Le Maghreb' and the site of old Colombe's establishment is a somewhat less exotic place, a Tati department store. Yet the dilapidated tenements of Zola's day are still largely intact, though they may well finally be coming down in the next phase of modernisation planned for the area.

Apart from its appropriateness as a typical working-class neighbourhood, the Goutte d'Or had certain distinct advantages as a setting for Zola's novel. To begin with, its name (the 'Drop of Gold') had appealing ironic connotations, evoking a rural past when the area was a vineyard and produced prize-winning, health-giving wines, fit for the kings of medieval France, in contrast with the poison concocted in old Colombe's still. The name is also in harmony with the metaphoric and ironic language of the novel, with the elemental imagery of substances and liquids that, as we shall later see, forms much of the thematic texture of the work. The district was also suitably transitional, both subject to change, yet confining its inhabitants, part of the new Paris but also of the undifferentiated *banlieue*, affected by Haussmann's demolitions and a thoroughfare for his mobile armies of workers. The railway, a sign of progress, of escape, or perhaps of further industrial oppressions, ran close by and there were, to the north, both satanic industrial landscapes and the edenic countryside beyond, of which the mean stretch of wasteground, with its withered grass and dead tree (p. 614), the site of the brief courting scene between Gervaise and Goujet ('Gueule d'Or', the 'Man from the North'), gives but a tantalising hint. A prison without walls, the Goutte d'Or was the perfect site to illustrate the conditions of Zola's characters' oppression.