

# Zola

## *The Genius of "Germinal" — By IRVING HOWE*

EACH LITERARY GENERATION fashions its own blinkers, and then insists that they allow unimpeded vision. My generation grew up with a mild scorn for the writers of naturalistic fiction who flourished in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Some of them we took to be estimable and others talented: we did not mean to be unfair. Many naturalists had a strong feeling for social justice, and if irrelevant to their stature as writers, this seemed to their credit as men. Zola's great cry during the Dreyfus Affair could still rouse us to admiration. His great cry could stir even those of us who had reached the peak of sophistication where Flaubert was judged superior to Balzac, Stendhal to Flaubert, and all three, it need hardly be said, to Zola. For Zola was tendentious, Zola was rhetorical, Zola was coarse, Zola knew little about the new psychology. With such wisdom, we entered the world.

Everyone had of course read Zola earlier, in those years of adolescence when all that matters in our encounter with a novel is eagerly to soak up its experience. Then *Germinal* had stirred us to the bone. But later we learned that literary judgment must not be defiled by political ideas, and Zola, that damp and clumsy bear of a novelist, became an object of condescension.

IT WAS WRONG, hopelessly wrong—like those literary fashions of our own moment which two or three decades from now will also seem all wrong. Reading *Germinal* again, and reading it with that emotional readiness which middle age can sometimes grant, I have been overwhelmed by its magnitude of structure, its fertility of imagination, its re-enactment of a central experience in modern life.

<sup>1</sup> Angus Wilson, *Emile Zola: a Critical Study* (1952).

Still, it should be admitted that if we have been unjust to Zola these last few decades, some of the blame must fall on his own shoulders. He talked too much, he pontificated too much about Literature and Science, he advertised himself too much. We are accustomed in America to bemoaning the redskin dumbness that overcomes so many of our writers when confronted with a need to theorise about their craft, and behind this complaint of ours there is often a naïve assumption that European writers have commonly possessed the range of culture we associate with, say, a Thomas Mann. It is not true, of course. What had Dickens or Balzac to say about the art of the novel? As for Zola, there can hardly have been a modern writer so repeatedly confused about the work he was doing.

Consider the mechanical scientism to which he clung with the credulousness of a peasant in a cathedral; the ill-conceived effort to show forces of heredity determining the lives of his characters (so that a reader of *Germinal* unaware of the other volumes in the Rougon-Macquart series could hardly understand why Etienne Lantier should suddenly, without preparation or consequence, be called "a final degenerate offshoot of a wretched race"); the wilful absurdity of such declarations as "the same determinism should regulate paving-stones and human brains"; the turgid mimicry with which Zola transposed the physiological theories of Dr. Claude Bernard into his *Le Roman expérimental*. About this side of Zola, the journalist preening himself as scientist-philosopher, Angus Wilson has remarked:

...he must present his artistic method as though it were a solid intellectual scheme, lend that air of culture and education—of which in reality he knew himself to be deficient—to present as a logical theory what was in fact the form in which his individual genius expressed itself.<sup>1</sup>

Yet we ought not to be too hasty in dismissing Zola's intellectual claims. If his physiological determinism now seems crude, his sense of the crushing weight which the world can lower upon men remains only too faithful to modern experience, perhaps to all experience. If his theories about the naturalistic novel now seem mainly of historical interest, this does not mean that the naturalistic novel itself can simply be brushed aside. What remains vital in the naturalistic novel as Zola wrote it in France and Dreiser in America is not the theoretic gropings towards an assured causality; what remains vital is the massed detail of the fictional worlds they establish, the patience—itsself a form of artistic scruple—with which they record the suffering of their time.

IN LOOKING BACK UPON the philosophical improvisations of those late 19th-century writers who were driven by conscience to surrender their Christian faith and then to improvise versions of rigid mechanism and spiritualised secularism, we like to suppose that their "ideas," once so earnestly studied by literary scholars, were little more than impediments they had to put aside, dead weight on the tissue of their work. You ignore Dreiser's pronouncements about "chemisms"; you agree with Huysman's remark about Zola, "Thank God he has not carried out in his novels the theories of his articles, which extol the infusion of positivism in art. . . ." There is of course something to be said for this view of the matter, but less than we commonly suppose. For the announced ideas behind a novel, even those thrust forward by the author as direct statement, ought not to be confused with the actual play of his intelligence. We may judge these announced ideas as tiresome or inert or a mere reflex of fashion; we may be irritated by their occasional appearance, like a mound of fossil, along the path of the narrative; yet in the novel itself the writer may be engaged in a play of intelligence far more supple than his formal claims lead us to suppose. A reductive determinism is what Zola flaunts, as when he places Taine's not very brilliant remark, "vice and virtue are products like sugar and vitriol," on the title page of *Thérèse Raquin*; but a reductive determinism is by no means what controls *Germinal* and *L'Assomoir*. When we say that a work of literature "takes on a life of its own," we mean in part that the process of composition has brought

textural surprises, perhaps fundamental shifts in perspective, which could not have been foreseen by studying the author's original intention.

Even among ideas we regard as mistaken, sharp discriminations must be made when trying to judge their literary consequences. A writer infatuated with one or another kind of psychic charlatanism is hard to take seriously. A writer drawn to the brutalities of fascism rouses a hostility that no creed of aesthetic detachment can keep from spilling over into our feeling about his work. But when writers like Zola and Hardy and Dreiser were attracted to the thought of Darwin and Huxley, or to popular versions of their thought, they were struggling with serious and urgent problems. They may have succumbed too easily to the "advanced ideas" of the moment, precisely the kind that date most quickly. Still, they were grappling with questions that gave them no rest, just as a half-century later Sartre and Camus would be grappling with the questions raised by existentialism, a school of philosophy that may not last much longer than deterministic scientism but which has nevertheless helped to liberate valuable creative powers. As Harry Levin<sup>2</sup> has said in partial defence of Zola:

Surely no comparable man of letters, with the exception of Poe, had tried so hard to grasp the scientific imagination. His contemporary, Jules Verne, led the way for writers of science fiction to tinker with imaginary gadgets. Science for them has been an Aladdin's lamp, a magical fulfilment, an easy trick. . . . For Zola it was much tougher than that; it was behaviour under pressure; and the literary experimenter was both the witness of the behaviour and the gauge of the pressure.

IN SO FAR AS A WRITER'S IDEAS enter his literary work, they matter less for their rightness or wrongness than for their seriousness. And at least with some writers, it is their seriousness which determines whether the ideas will release or block the flow of creative energies. Zola shared with many late 19th- and early 20th-century writers what I have elsewhere called a "lust for metaphysics." Christianity might be rejected, Christianity might be remembered, but its force remained. Among those who abandoned it there was still a hunger for doctrine, a need for the assuagements of system. They wished to settle, or continuously to worry, the problem of their relation to the cosmos. To us this may seem a curious need, since we are more likely to be troubled by our relation to ourselves; but in the last half of the 19th cen-

<sup>2</sup>In Professor Levin's scholarly study of French 19th-century fiction, *The Gates of Horn* (1963).

ture the lust for metaphysics was experienced by people whose moral and intellectual seriousness cannot be questioned.

ONE LARGE TENDENCY in 19th-century literature, coursing through but not confined to romanticism, is an impulse to spiritualise the world, to distribute the godhead among numberless grains of matter, so that in a new if less tidy way, purpose can be restored to the cosmos and the sequence of creation and recreation be made to replace the promise of immortality. Towards the end of the 19th century men like Zola could no longer accept transcendental or pantheist derivatives from Christianity, yet they wanted some principle of order by means of which to locate themselves in the universe; whereupon they proceeded to shift the mystery of the creation on to the lawfulness of the determined. What then frightened reflective people was something that we, in our benumbed age, seem to accept rather easily: the thought of a world without intrinsic plan or point.

The transfer from *telos* to causality, in so far as it preserved a premise of meaning, enabled writers like Zola and Dreiser to make their lives into an heroic discipline, heroic because radically at variance with the ideas they expounded. It was almost as if they were reenacting in secular charade the paradox of Calvinism: that a belief in the utter worthlessness of man, living in a world blinded by God's grace, could yet drive the faithful to zeal and virtue.

Zola went still further than those writers who transferred the dynamic of faith into a fixity of law. Like Balzac before him, he yielded to the brilliant impiety of transforming himself into a kind of god, a god of tireless fecundity creating his universe over and over again. The 19th-century novelist—Dickens or Balzac, Hardy or Zola—enacts in his own career the vitalism about which the thought of his age drives him to a growing scepticism.

Zola's three or four great novels are anything but inert or foredoomed. He may start with notions of inevitability, but the current of his narrative boils with energy and novelty. *Germinial* ends with the gloom of defeat, but not a gloom predestined. There is simply too much appetite for experience in Zola, too much sympathy and solidarity with the struggles by which men try to declare themselves, too much hope for the generations always on the horizon and always promising to undo the wrongs of the past, for *Germinial* to become a mere reflex of a system of causality. Somehow—we have every reason to believe—Zola's gropings into the philosophy of determinism freed him to become a writer of energy, rebellion, and creation.

*GERMINAL* releases one of the central myths of the modern era: the story of how the dumb acquire speech. All those at the bottom of history, for centuries objects of manipulation and control, begin to transform themselves into active subjects, determined to create their own history.

Now we cannot say that this myth has gained universal acceptance in our culture, nor that those of us who register its moral claims can do so with the unquestioning credence and mounting awe we suppose characteristic of men in ancient cultures. Still, we might remember that in so far as we know Greek myth through Greek drama, we know it mediated by individual artists, and with the passage of time, mediated in directions increasingly sceptical. The myth in *Germinial*—if we agree, however hesitantly, to call it a myth—is one that may have some parallels in earlier cultures, but it takes its formative energies from the French Revolution. It is the myth of the People and more particularly, of the Proletariat. They who had merely suffered and at times erupted into blind rebellion; they who had been prey to but not part of society; they who had found no voice in the cultures of the past—they now emerge from the sleep of history and begin the task of a collective self-formation. This, of course, is a schematised version of historical reality, or at least a perspective on historical reality—which may indeed be the distinctiveness of whatever modern myths we have. Where traditional myth appears to us as trans-historical, a frieze of symbolic representation, our own take their very substance from the materials of history, magnifying and rendering heroic the actions of men in time. Some idea of this kind may have led Thomas Mann to write that “in Zola's epic,” made up as it is of events taken from everyday life, “the characters themselves are raised up to a plane above that of everyday life.”

The myth of *Germinial* as I have been sketching it is close to the Marxist view of the dynamics of capitalism, but to yield ourselves to Zola's story is not necessarily to accept the Marxist system. Zola himself does not accept it. At crucial points he remains a sceptic, as we may imagine Euripides to have been, about the myth that forms the soul of his action. His scepticism concerns not so much the recuperative powers of the miners, for it is his instinctive way of looking at things that he should see the generations crowding one another, pushing for life space, thrusting their clamour on to the world. His scepticism runs deeper. Zola sees the possibility that in the very emergence of solidarity—that great and terrible word for which so many have gone smiling to their death!—there would be formed, by a ghastly

dialectic of history, new rulers and oppressors: the Rasseneurs, the Plucharts, and even the Lantiers of tomorrow, raised to the status of leaders and bureaucrats, who would impose their will on the proletariat. Zola does not insist that this must happen for he is a novelist, not a political theoretician. What he does is to show in the experience of the Montsou workers the germ of such a possibility. As it celebrates the greatest event of modern history, the myth of emergence contains within itself the negation of that greatness.<sup>3</sup>

AT THE CENTRE of the novel is the mine. Dramatic embodiment of exploitation, the mine nevertheless makes possible the discipline through which to overcome exploitation. But for the moment, man's nature still bows to his history, personal need to the workings of the market. The mine has a "natural" awesomeness, with its crevices and alleys, depths and darkness: its symbolic power arises organically, spontaneously, and not as a willed imposition of the writer. And then, in a stroke that does bear the mark of will, Zola creates an astonishing parallel to the miners. The mine-horses share the misery of the men, but without the potential for motivated rebellion; the mine-horses represent, as a gruesome foreshadowing and with an expressionist grossness that defeats critical scruples, what the men may yet accept or sink to.

The mine is voracious and unappeasable, a physical emblem of the impersonality of commodity production. It "seemed evil-looking, a hungry beast crouched and ready to devour the world." It "kept devouring men... always ravenous, its giant bowels capable of digesting an entire nation." But this suggestion of a force bursting out of the control of its creators gains its strength not merely from the intrinsic properties of the mine. Here Zola does come close to the Marxist notion that men must be-

<sup>3</sup>Is it not this note of prescience, this intuition all too painfully confirmed by recent history, which explains why Georg Lukács—the East European Marxist critic who always starts with heterodox insights and ends with orthodox dogmas—should attack Zola's work as mechanistic and passive, lacking in revolutionary dynamism? We have here a confrontation between a writer's honesty and an ideologue's tendentiousness, between Zola's myth of a collective entry into consciousness and Lukács's pseudo-myth of "socialist realism." The true myth is a story arising from the depths of common experience, the pseudo-myth a manipulation of that story in behalf of the false collective declaring itself the "vanguard of the proletariat."

<sup>4</sup>William Troy, "The Symbolism of Zola," in *Partisan Review*, December 1937.

ware of fetishising their predicaments, they must recognise that not in mines or factories lie the sources of their misery but in the historically determined relations between contending classes. And here surely historical associations come into play which even the least literate reader is likely to have with mining—a major industry of early industrialism, notorious for its high rate of exhaustion and accident. As always in *Germinal*, the mythic and symbolic are of the very substance of the historical. And thereby Zola can fill out his myth with the evidence of circumstantiality. The more he piles up descriptions of the mine's tunnels, shafts, timbering, airlessness and dampness, the more are we prepared to see it as the setting for the apocalypse with which the book reaches its climax.

IN A FINE ESSAY some years ago William Troy remarked that the great scene in which Etienne and Catherine are trapped in the mine

brings us back to an atmosphere and a meaning at least as old as the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. For what is the mine itself but a re-integration of the Hades-Hell symbol? The immediate and particular social pattern is contained within the larger pattern of a universal recrudescence... Etienne emerges from his journey underground to *la vita nuova* of his own and of social experience.<sup>4</sup>

The Orpheus-Eurydice motif is there, Etienne experiences a recrudescence, though of a somewhat ambiguous kind, and the mine is surely the symbolic centre of the book. Yet we should be clear as to how Zola achieves these effects. Zola controls his narrative with one overriding end in mind, and that is to show not the way men are swallowed by their work (surely not new) nor how a hero can emerge healed from the depths (also not new) but the gradual formation of a collective consciousness. When Maheu, that superbly drawn worker, begins to speak to the manager, "the words were coming of themselves, and at moments he listened to himself in surprise, as though some stranger within him were speaking." The stranger is his long-buried self, and this transfiguration of Maheu is at least as morally significant as that of the individual protagonist gaining access to self-knowledge in the earlier 19th-century novel.

Etienne reads, Maheu speaks, La Maheude cries out: everything is changed. Gathering their strength and for a time delirious with fantasies of freedom, almost child-like in the pleasures of their assertiveness, the workers become what Marx called a class for themselves.

And then, with his uncanny gift for achieving mass effects through individual strokes, Zola begins to individualise his characters. He does this not to approximate that fragmented psychology we associate with 19th-century fiction but towards the end of preparing the characters for their new roles: Etienne in the pride and exposure of leadership, Maheu in the conquest of manhood, La Maheude as the voice of ancient grievance, and even the children, led by the devilish Jeanlin, who in their debauchery release the spontaneous zest that the over-disciplined life of the miners has suppressed.

THE STRIKE becomes the central action: thereby the myth of emergence takes on the sharp edge of conflict. The workers are shown in their rise to a noble solidarity and their fall to a brutal mob—better yet, in the ways the two, under intolerable stress, become all but indistinguishable. (“Do not flatter the working class nor blacken it,” Zola told himself in notes for *L'Assomoir*.) And nothing is more brilliant than Zola's intuition—it speaks for his powers of insinuating himself beneath the skin of the miners—that after the horrible riot with which Book V closes, he sees the men continuing their strike, digging in with a mute fatalism, “a great sombre peacefulness,” which rests far less on expectations of victory than a common yielding to the pathos of standing and starving together. Defeat comes, and demoralisation too, but only after Zola has charted with a precise objectivity the rhythms of struggle, rhythms as intrinsically absorbing for the novelist (and at least as difficult to apprehend) as those of the individual psyche in turmoil.

Again, it should be stressed that the myth Zola employs is not the vulgar-Marxist notion of an inevitable victory or of a victory-in-defeat ending with noble resolves for the future. True, he shows as no other European novelist before him, the emergence of a new historical force and he reveals the conflict that must follow; but its outcome remains uncertain, shadowy, ambiguous. The more serious versions of Marxism speak of historical choice: freedom or barbarism. It is a choice allowing for and perhaps forming the substance of tragedy. *Germinal* shares that view.

WORK OF MODERN LITERATURE may employ a myth and perhaps even create one, as I think *Germinal* does, but it cannot satisfy its audience with a composed recapitulation of a known, archetypal story. With theme it must offer richness of variation, often of a radical kind, so as slyly to bring into question the theme itself. The hieratic does not

seem a mode easily accessible to modern literature. We want, perversely, our myths to have a stamp of the individual, our eternal stories to bear a quiver of nervous temporality.

The picture Zola draws of Montsou as a whole, and of Montsou as a microcosm of industrial society, depends for its effectiveness mainly on the authority with which he depicts the position of the miners. Just as the novel is a genre that gains its most solid effects through accumulation and development of narrative, so the action of Zola's book depends on his command of an arc of modern history. If he can persuade us that he sees this experience with coherence and depth, then we will not be excessively troubled by whatever intellectual disagreements we may have with him or by our judgment that in particular sections of the novel he fails through heavy exaggeration and lapses of taste. Two lines out of tune in a sonnet can spoil our pleasure, since a short lyric depends for its success on verbal unity; but in a novel whole episodes can be out of tune without necessarily spoiling our pleasure, since an extended prose fiction depends mainly on such large-scale effects as narrative thrust and character development.

Again we reach an interpenetration of commanding myth and historical material, what I take to be Zola's great achievement in *Germinal*. A stranger arrives, slightly removed from the workers because of his superior intellect, yet required to enter their lives and ready to share their troubles. So far, the pattern of the story is not very different from that of much fiction composed earlier in the 19th century. But then comes a radical shift: the stranger, now on the way to being a leader, remains at the centre of the book but his desires and reflections do not constitute its central matter. What engages us primarily is the collective experience of the miners, the myth of their emergence. In Book V of *Germinal*, both the most original and exciting portion of the novel, this entry into consciousness is shown in its two-sidedness, and with a complexity of tone that unites passionate involvement and dispassionate removal. In his notes for the book Zola understood that he must remain faithful to his story as archetype:

To get a broad effect I must have my two sides as clearly contrasted as possible and carried to the very extreme of intensity. So that I must start with all the woes and fatalities which weigh down the miners. Facts, not emotional pleas. The miner must be shown crushed, starving, a victim of ignorance, suffering with his children in a hell on earth—but not persecuted, for the bosses are not deliberately vindictive—he is simply overwhelmed by the social situation as it exists. On

the contrary I must make the bosses humane so long as their direct interests are not threatened; no point in foolish tub-thumping. The worker is the victim of the facts of existence—capital, competition, industrial crises.

For this perception to be transformed into a dramatic action, Zola relies mainly on the narrative increment that follows from his myth of the speechless and the symbolic suggestiveness of the mine.

IN SAYING THIS I don't mean to imply that everything which occurs in the novel is necessary or appropriate. The narrative is frequently flawed by cheap and lurid effects. Zola, as a critic has remarked, had an overwhelming imagination but only an uncertain—and sometimes a corrupted—taste. That the riot of the miners should be a terrifying event seems entirely right; that it should end with the ghastly *frisson* invented by Zola is a sign of his weakness for sensationalism. Zola tries hard to present his middle-class characters, the Hennebeaus and Gregoires, with some objectivity and even sympathy, but he usually fails. Not, I think, for the reason William Troy gives, "the inherent unsuitability of naturalism, a system of causality based on quasi-scientific principles, to the practice of literature." I doubt that local failures in a novel are ever to be traced so directly to philosophical conceptions. Zola fails because in this novel he is not interested in such people at all. They are there because his overall scheme demands it, because he feels an obligation to "fill out the picture." Sensing as much, we read these inferior portions with a certain tolerance, assuaged by the likelihood that further great scenes with the miners lie ahead. The mediocre intervals come to serve as "rests" helping Zola create or re-gather suspense. M. Hennebeau, the mine manager, is a partial exception, if only because he is a figure of power and power is always fascinating for Zola. Still, the sub-plot of Hennebeau's personal unhappiness and his envy of what he takes to be the miners' unsoiled virility is obviously weak—just how weak one can see by comparing it to D. H. Lawrence's treatment of similar material. And again, the immersion of Etienne and Catherine in the mine, once the strike has been lost, is a scene of considerable power but also marred by Zola's lack of discipline in having the body of Chaval, the girl's former lover, float horribly up to them in the darkness. Zola does not know when to stop.

TO NOTICE such flaws can be damaging, and to write as if *Germinal* were no more than the sum of local incidents could be a strategy for dismissing the book entirely. But this seems a

poor way of dealing with a novel. *Germinal*, like many works of fiction, depends upon effects that are larger, more gross, and less open to isolated inspection than picking out scenes of weakness would suggest; it depends upon the large-muscled rhythms of the narrative as a whole. We are dealing here with a writer of genius who, in both the quality of his imagination and the occasional wantonness of his prose, can sometimes be described as decadent. One remembers T. S. Eliot's remark that Dickens was "a decadent genius," a remark accurate enough if the noun is stressed at least as much as the modifier. The decadence of Zola, which has points of similarity to that of Dickens, comes through in the excesses of local episodes, the vulgarities of particular paragraphs, the flushed rhetoric with which Zola seeks to "reinforce" material that has already been presented with more than enough dramatic vitality. The genius comes through in the mythic-historical sweep of the narrative as a whole. And at least this once, Zola himself knew exactly what he was doing:

Everyone in the world [Zola wrote] analyses in detail nowadays, I must react against this through the solid reaction of masses, of chapters, through the logic, the thrust of the chapters, succeeding each other like superimposed blocks; by the breath of passion, animating all, flowing from one end to another of the work.

IF WHAT I HAVE been saying has validity, it follows that there will also be frequent episodes of brilliance—else, how could the novelist achieve his large rhythms of narration? And there are, of course, such episodes. Two kinds may be distinguished: those persuading us of Zola's authority as imaginative historian (substantiating detail) and those persuading us of his psychological penetration into a given moment of the action (illuminating detail).

The first kind is to be found mainly in his treatment of the miners at the peak of crisis. Etienne reading a Belgian socialist weekly, hastily and poorly absorbing its contents, seeking to make up for years of waste as he is "gripped by the uneducated man's methodless passion for study" and then overcome by "the dull dread that he had shown himself unequal to the task"—all this bears the thick circumstantiality of the actual. Zola knew the kind of men who were drawn to socialist politics, not merely learned bourgeois intellectuals like Marx and Kautsky, but self-educated workers like Bebel, straining with ambition and stumbling into knowledge. This command of his material is shown even more subtly in the portrayal of the inner relationships among his

three radicals: Rasseneur, the most cautious and experienced, clearly on the way to becoming a classical Social Democrat; Souvarine, also a classical figure, though of the anarchist-terrorist kind who declares the need "to destroy everything... no more nations, no more governments, no more property, no more God or religion" and then to return to "the primitive and formless community";<sup>5</sup> and Etienne, the sincere unformed worker, open to a wide range of possibilities but determined—his aspiring intellectuality prods his ambition—to make a place for himself on the stage of history.

The second and more striking kind of detail shows Zola's imagination at work somewhat more freely, releasing incidents which do not depend directly on the overall design of the novel. On the simplest level there is the pathos of the mine girl Mouquette, hopelessly generous with all she has (her body to the men, her affection to almost anyone, her bared bottom to the strike-breakers), who offers Etienne a dozen cold potatoes to still the hunger of the Maheu household. It is a trifle, but from such trifles affecting novels are made. On a level hard to apprehend in strictly rational terms, there is Etienne finding himself a place to hide, after the riot, in one of the hated mines. (A little bitterly, one remembers Fabrice's chestnut tree, emblem of innocence, in *The Charterhouse of Parma*.) But the greatest of such imaginative strokes concerns the strange old Bonnemort, introduced at the outset as a ghost of a man embodying the exhaustion of the workers' lives. He has nothing to say, he is barely alive, until at the strike meeting, amid the predictably rousing speeches,

everybody was surprised to see Bonnemort standing on the tree trunk and trying to make himself heard. . . . No doubt he was giving way to one of those sudden fits of babbling that would sometimes stir up the past so violently that old memories would rise from his depths and flow from his lips for hours. It had become very quiet, and everybody listened to the old man, so ghostly pale in the moonlight; as he was talking about things that had no obvious connection with the discussion, long stories that nobody

could understand, their astonishment increased. He spoke of his youth, told of his two uncles who had been crushed to death at Le Voreaux, then went on to the pneumonia that had carried off his wife. Through it all, however, he never lost hold of his one idea: things had never been right and they never would be right.

Without rhetorical strain, this passage summons the losses of the past, the whole unreckoned waste that forms our history. The mode is grotesque, but for readers with a measure of historical imagination, Zola achieves something far beyond the limits of what that description usually suggests.

ZOLA IS NOT a fine writer. His style aspires towards a rich and heavy impasto rather than a lucid line-drawing, and often it is marred by excess. In *Germinal* the writing is nevertheless effective at two points: first, the passages describing the mine with that wary respect for the power of the actual a novelist must have, and second, the episodes in which he evokes the surge of conflict and the passions of enraged men. In these episodes the prose can be extremely effective, combining mass and speed—effective as long as Zola stays with his central purpose, which is to depict the sensations of men who have thrown off the discipline of society but not yet discovered the discipline of self. Nor need we succumb to any version of "the imitative fallacy"—that in its internal qualities a style must reflect the matter it is trying to convey—in order to recognise at least some correspondences as proper to the relation between style and subject. One does not write about the collapse of a mine in the style of Henry James analysing an exquisite heroine.

Zola achieves the effect of speed, but not the light or nervous speed of a Stephen Crane or an Isaac Babel. Especially in Part V of the novel, his style is that of a rumbling and heavy speed—a leaden speed. The writing is rarely nimble or graceful; the sentences are weighted with qualifiers and prepositional phrases, as well as with accumulating clauses which repeat and magnify the matter of their predecessors. Admittedly, this prose is highly rhetorical: it employs organic metaphors of anger, release and cataclysm ("nature," says Zola, "is associated with our griefs"), and it depends heavily on Zola's hoarse and rasping voice. For what he is trying to do seems decidedly risky, even from the vantage-point of 85 years later: he is giving dramatic embodiment to a collective as it disintegrates into a mob, and since he must keep his attention mainly on the group, which has of course no individuality of consciousness or will, he finds himself forced to speak in his

<sup>5</sup> The reader of *Germinal* may be tempted to see Souvarine as a remarkable anticipation of certain contemporary figures, and indeed he does talk as if he belonged to an esoteric New Left faction. But it should be remembered that by the late 19th century the Anarchist-Terrorist, often as popular stereotype, had become a familiar presence in European culture. Zola was here drawing upon a fund of common material, and what is notable about Souvarine is not the conception behind him but the detachment, even the ironic coolness, with which he is presented.

own voice. That, in the actuality of composition, is the paradox the novelist must face when he tries to dramatise the conduct of a group. His effort to create an action of extreme objectivity, a plot of collective behaviour, leads the novelist to a style of extreme subjectivity in which he finds himself driven to "impersonate" the group. At its worst, this kind of writing can seem willed, an effort to do for the action through rhetoric what film-makers try to do for their stories through music. At its best, the writing has a coarse strength and even splendour, what might be called the poetry of naturalism.

STILL, IT WOULD BE FOOLISH to claim for Zola that his prose can yield the kind of sentence-by-sentence pleasure that can be had from the prose of a writer like James or Flaubert. Zola is often careless as a stylist, sometimes wanton, occasionally cheap. His trouble, however, is not that his prose lacks nicety of phrasing or epigrammatic neatness; it is that he does not content himself with a utilitarian plainness but must reach out for the ornamental and exalted, seeking through rhetorical fancy-work to establish his credentials as a literary man. Like other half-educated novelists and journalists of the 19th century, Zola was painfully susceptible to those charms of the "literary" which he claimed to dismiss.

His style, like almost everything else in *Germinal*, is interesting mainly when considered in the large. One then encounters a phenomenon I do not pretend to understand, and which seems to be an essential mystery of literature. For long portions of the novel Zola yields himself entirely to the passions of the miners, and his prose becomes strongly, even exorbitantly, passionate. We are swept along, as we are meant to be, by the surge of men in revolt; we are with them, the starving and the hunted, and the language heaves and breaks, sweeping across us with torrents of rhetoric. But let us not be frightened by that word "rhetoric": it bears the strength, not only the weakness, of Zola's novel. Here is a passage in which Zola describes (he is always strong in parallel effects, grotesque doublings) the behaviour of the miners' children during the strike:

The scamps had become the terror of the countryside, which they had invaded, little by little, like a savage horde. At first they had been satisfied with the yard at Le Voreux, where they rolled around in the piles of coal, becoming

black as Negroes, and played hide-and-seek through the stacks of timber among which they wandered as though in a virgin forest. Then they had taken over the slag heap, where they would slide on their behinds down the bare parts, still hot with interior fires, and dart among the brambles of the older parts—hidden all day and as busy as mischievous mice with their quiet little games. Enlarging their territory still further, they fought among the piles of bricks until blood flowed; raced through the fields, eating all sorts of juicy herbs without bothering about bread, searched the banks of the canal for mudfish, which they swallowed raw, and roamed ever further afield, travelling as far as the forest of Vandame, where they would stuff themselves with strawberries in the spring and hazelnuts and huckleberries in the summer. Soon the whole immense plain belonged to them.

Rhetoric, yes; but a rhetoric which accompanies and sustains a remarkably strong evocation. The passion Zola pours out finds its match, its justification in the incident he imagines. Yet, as we read into the depths of the book, we grow aware that there is another side of Zola, one who draws back a little, seeing the whole tragedy as part of an eternal rhythm of struggle and decision. This Zola is finally dispassionate, withdrawn from his own commitments, as if writing from some timeless perch, and capable of a measure of irony towards the whole human enterprise. Zola the partisan and Zola the artist: for those who like their "commitment" straight, in the duped formulas of "socialist realism" such ambivalence is detestable. But I take it to be a sign of Zola's achievement. If there has ever been a novel concerning which one might forgive a writer his unmodulated passions it is *Germinal*; yet precisely here Zola's "scientism" proves to be an unexpected advantage, enabling him to achieve an aesthetic distance that gives the book its ultimate austerity.

THERE IS STILL ANOTHER doubleness of response in *Germinal*. Hardly a Zola critic has failed to note the frequency with which images of fecundity occur in the book, repeated scenes in which, along and beyond the margin of his central narrative, Zola displays the unplanned and purposeless creativity of existence. Henry James, in his essay on Zola, remarks:

To make his characters swarm, and to make the great central thing they swarm about "as large as life," portentously, heroically big, that was the task he set himself very nearly from the first, that was the secret he triumphantly mastered.<sup>6</sup>

Now this "swarming," for many 19th-century novelists, can be a source not merely of narra-

<sup>6</sup> Henry James, "Zola" (1903), in *Selected Literary Criticism* (ed. Shapira, 1964).

tive energy but also of a mindless and pseudo-religious sentimentalism. Everyone has encountered it as a special kind of fictional cant: the generations come, the generations go, etc. Asserted without irony, such declamations often constitute a kind of psychic swindle, convenient enough for novelists who fear the depressing logic of their own work or who need some unearned lilt in their final pages. That Zola does approach this kind of sentimentalism seems beyond doubt, but again and again he draws back into a baffled stoicism, evading the trap his romantic heritage has set for him. "A black avenging army" is "germinating in the furrows; soon this germination would . . . sun-

der the earth." But even as such sentiments fill Zola's final pages there is no simple assurance, indeed, no assurance of any kind. Despite the sense of a swarming procreation which keeps the race alive, Zola ends on a note of anguish; he does not propose an easy harmony between the replenishments of nature and the desires of men. Etienne, clumsily balancing his idealism and ambition, goes out into the world.

To one reader at least, he enters neither upon personal triumph nor the "final conflict" promised by the dialectic of history, but upon a journey into those treacherous regions of the unknown where sooner or later all men find themselves.

## Orpheus

Sometimes women in Greece  
In a let-go-the-lot  
Bacchic frenzy of drink  
Tore men to bits.  
Late from Greek offices  
You may be sure the men  
Were only partly aware  
Of their shortcomings  
Or these holy necessities  
Before their partly living  
Was ripped out.

Sometimes they got things wrong.  
They tore up Orpheus  
Then tossed his head  
Into the river Hebros  
And it trundled down, still singing,  
"Eurydice!" "Eurydice!"  
Singing, the emptying skull  
Like a storm-chivvied stone.  
Did they weep to hear  
His silence making  
Upstream to the springs?

*Patric Dickinson*