Émile Zola

The Conquest of Plassans

A new translation by Helen Constantine

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THE CONQUEST OF PLASSANS

ÉMILE ZOLA was born in Paris in 1840, the son of a Venetian engineer and his French wife. He grew up in Aix-en-Provence where he made friends with Paul Cézanne. After an undistinguished school career and a brief period of dire poverty in Paris, Zola joined the newly founded publishing firm of Hachette which he left in 1866 to live by his pen. He had already published a novel and his first collection of short stories. Other novels and stories followed until in 1871 Zola published the first volume of his Rougon-Macquart series with the subtitle *Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*, in which he sets out to illustrate the influence of heredity and environment on a wide range of characters and milieus. However, it was not until 1877 that his novel *L'Assommoir*, a study of alcoholism in the working classes, brought him wealth and fame. The last of the Rougon-Macquart series appeared in 1893 and his subsequent writing was far less successful, although he achieved fame of a different sort in his vigorous and influential intervention in the Dreyfus case. His marriage in 1870 had remained childless but his extremely happy liaison in later life with Jeanne Rozerot, initially one of his domestic servants, gave him a son and a daughter. He died in 1902.

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ÉMILE ZOLA

The Conquest of Plassans

Translated by

HELEN CONSTANTINE

With an Introduction and Notes by

PATRICK McGUINNESS

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Readers who do not wish to learn details of the plot will prefer to read the Introduction as an Afterword.

Émile Zola aspired to being more than a novelist: he wanted to be a world-maker in fiction, and his twenty-novel Rougon-Macquart cycle sought, in his words, to be 'the natural and social history of a family under the Second Empire'.[1] That Zola believed in making his fiction reflect the real does not mean that he aimed only to copy the real, but rather that he understood how much artistry and imagination were needed to do justice to it. Like Balzac but not (or not often) Flaubert, Zola paid the world the compliment of being amazed by it. He knew, also like Balzac, that conveying reality was not a matter of mere transcription, however much research it required, but of translation: to translate the real into the language of fiction so that the real might find new ways of being itself. The novelist, even the 'naturalist' or 'realist' one, does not simply lift reality up and carry it wholesale across the border into fiction. There needs to be a change of currency first: art and reality may share the same truths, but they express these in different languages. As Balzac, Zola's inspiration for the huge Rougon-Macquart tableau of novels, wrote in his preface to *The Gallery of Antiquities* (1839): 'the real in literature cannot be the real in nature'. Zola himself, in his 1880 essay on the theory and practice of the novel, 'The Experimental Novel', wrote that the work of art was 'a corner of nature seen through a temperament'. The key word there is *temperament*.

It is important to insist on this from the start, because of Zola's reputation as a novelist of documentary fact, full of social and historical detail, and with characters driven (or dragged) by an inescapable mix of heredity, habitat, and historical-biological time—the famous 'race, moment, milieu' of Hippolyte Taine, the hugely influential nineteenth-century positivist thinker, literary critic, and cultural historian. It has been too easy to categorize Zola as a slave to documentary reality, and to focus on his belief in the scientific and positivist

[1] For the full text of Zola's preface, see *The Fortune of the Rougons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

underpinning of his fiction to the detriment of his skill as a storyteller, an inventor of people, dramas, and situations, and the creator of some of the most powerfully poetic descriptions in nineteenth-century prose. All these qualities are to be found in *The Conquest of Plassans*, and whatever we may learn in terms of 'social and natural history', we must not forget that this, like all of Zola's fiction, is also a novel of human truth told with drama, symbolism, lyricism, and imaginative power. Oriane de Guermantes, a perceptive and witty literary critic, when asked about Zola at a dinner party in Proust's *The Guermantes Way*, pronounces: 'But Zola is not a realist, Madame, he's a poet! . . . He magnifies everything he touches.' Zola himself, in a letter of 1885 to Henri Céard, puts it this way: 'We all lie one way or another [. . .] I think that for my part I lie in the direction of the truth. I have hypertrophy when it comes to realist detail, I spring towards the stars from the trampoline of exact observation. Truth rises on a wingbeat towards the symbol.'

Part of the problem has been a tendency among critics and students to read Zola's 'theory' as an explanation of the novels themselves, and to treat the famous preface he wrote to the Rougon-Macquart series as more than a manifesto: a manifesto outlines what a writer or artist (or politician) *wishes* to do, but does not necessarily explain what they have done, let alone what happens (to them, to the work itself) while they are writing it. The tendency to slide back from the complex, difficult, and often rewardingly inconsistent work of art to a piece of explanatory theory that makes it easier to categorize, is understandable. It is important, of course, to consult what an author thinks, or claims to think, he is doing in order to clarify what he has actually done. But it must also be remembered that good art is always in excess of the theory that produces or supports it: if this were not the case, the theory would suffice, and the art would be mere illustration of principles and ideas better expressed elsewhere. This is never the case with Zola, even when his fiction appears most narrowly to obey the theory he brings to bear upon his project.

People, Place, and Politics

The Conquest of Plassans, which appeared in 1874 though is set more than a decade earlier, is the fourth novel in the Rougon-Macquart series. It follows on from the first novel, *The Fortune of the Rougons*

(1871), in which Zola lays the foundations for his cycle by introducing the two branches of the family—the Rougons and the Macquarts—in a work that follows parallel but also intertwined family 'fortunes' (Zola puns on financial fortune and fortune as fate). Zola also spends an important portion of that novel delving into pre-Revolutionary France in order to explore the historical, social, and even medical backgrounds of the characters who will people the cycle as it ramifies, like a family tree, down and along the byways of nineteenth-century France. He embeds Rougons and Macquarts into the very fabric of French history, and works them into every level of French society. We have, on the one hand, high-powered politicians, ministers, and businessmen, and, on the other, factory workers, miners, shopkeepers. As well as these, Zola also gives us Rougon-Macquarts whose professions lie outside the conventional social hierarchies, but allow them to move up and down the social ladder: the doctor, the priest, and, memorably in *Nana*, the prostitute.

The Conquest of Plassans traces the gradual but unstoppable ascent of Abbé Faujas, sent by his political masters in Paris to conquer the town of Plassans for the Bonapartist side. The abbé manipulates his way to political power through religious influence, especially over the town's women, and the mix of politics and religion makes this Zola's most overtly anticlerical novel. These political masters are kept, as in many Zola novels, shadowy and out of the narrative picture: they are alluded to, suggested, mentioned in whispers, but never shown, though we know one of their leaders is Eugène Rougon, a cynical and ambitious schemer first encountered in *The Fortune of the Rougons*. Nor is the recent malfeasance of Faujas in Besançon explained, though it too is referred to on several occasions. It is part of his dark aura, and we note that when Zola describes Faujas he emphasizes the darkness of his clothes, the shadowy unreadability of his expression, and his looming, watchful silences. The town of Plassans, which seems to be the whole world of many of the characters, is merely a pawn in a larger game. Plassans, we know from *The Fortune of the Rougons*, had already been won for the Bonapartist side by Pierre Rougon, whose son Eugène (who has his own novel, the 1876 *His Excellency Eugène Rougon*), a politician loyal to Napoleon III, helps his father and his mother, the devious and manipulative Félicité, to gain control of Plassans in the aftermath of the 1851 *coup d'état*. It is a bloody victory, full of betrayal and double-dealing, in

which the Rougons are responsible even for the murder of their own flesh and blood.

By the beginning of this novel, however, political control has slipped to the Legitimists, in other words, to the royalists, who support the succession of the Bourbon dynasty against both the Orléanist dynasty that had ruled France from 1830 to 1848, and the Imperial regime of Napoleon III. This grand and complex political drama might seem foreign to us, but to Zola's readers these contexts were alive and relevant: *The Conquest of Plassans* was published in 1874 and, though it describes events that took place more than a decade before, Zola gave his readers an insight into their near past; a near past, moreover, whose consequences didn't just affect their present but defined and even explained it. The novel appeared three years after the Paris Commune and four years after the defeat by Prussian forces of Napoleon III at Sedan, a symbol of French national humiliation—two crucial dates in French history. It depicts a triumphant Imperial regime, but was published when that regime was in tatters and Napoleon III in exile. Today's reader does not need any special knowledge of the historical and political contexts to enjoy the book, however, because Zola makes sure that his scheming politicians and their parasitical, cowardly, and self-interested followers are sufficiently universal to be recognizable regardless of time, place, or political system. Nonetheless, the novel's political background is worth establishing, since the plot moves so fast that there is little chance for the reader to stop and pick apart the threads.

The story takes place between 1858 and 1864, and Zola immerses us in the ongoing consequences of *coup d'état* of 2 December 1851, in which Napoleon III, nephew of Napoleon I, came to power through intrigue, deceit, demagoguery, and brute violence. He further embedded his rule through two plebiscites, in which he overwhelmingly won approval for his dissolution of the National Assembly, and, on 2 December 1852, the restoration of the Empire, which lasted until Napoleon III's ignominious defeat in 1870, dramatized by Zola in the penultimate Rougon-Macquart novel, *La Débâcle* (*The Debacle*, 1892). In *The Fortune of the Rougons*, we had seen Pierre Rougon receive the *Légion d'honneur* for his own efforts, backed by Eugène and Félicité, to conquer Plassans for the Emperor. Opposition dogged the Empire, however, in the form of the two royalist parties: the Legitimists, united behind the Bourbon Comte de Chambord, and the divided

Orléanists, a branch of which supported the Empire until 1860. The other opposition group, the Republicans, played an important role in the politics of the period, but is less prominent in *The Conquest of Plassans* itself. Plassans is a bourgeois and reactionary town, and the power struggle will be between supporters of the Emperor and Legitimists. Moreover, as we see, these struggles are not ideological or even political, if by politics we mean driven by questions of principle and belief, but purely pursued in self-interest. Personal advancement and self-preservation are the only 'politics' we see in this novel which, on the surface, appears to be all 'about' politics.

In the days before what we now understand by democracy, let alone universal suffrage, politics was a matter of back-room deals, of buying and selling allegiances, and, as here, of buying and selling entire constituencies. Though later Zola novels, such as *Germinal* and *Paris*, explore the radical politics of socialism and anarchism against a background of working-class struggle, this novel is about the closed politics of a corrupt and divided establishment. Though corruption is the same everywhere, there are always particular hues and special varieties of rot that the novelist can bring to light, and here Zola traces the rise to power of a man who is as darkly subtle as he is devastatingly brutal. Faujas, a small-town Machiavellian schemer, knows how to turn the cowardice and self-interest that already exists in Plassans to his own political ends. But Faujas, for all his cunning, is also just a cog in a larger machine, and he too, as we discover, is expendable. Félicité is the power behind the Rougon throne, ready to sacrifice her family to regain control of Plassans. It is she who arranges for Faujas to lodge with her daughter and son-in-law, Marthe Rougon and François Mouret, and she who takes him in hand as he extends his influence across town. She is doing the bidding of the Bonapartist faction in Paris, but she is also trying to regain her own lost position in the town. She tells Faujas that she has already conquered Plassans once and will do it again, with or without him. Zola shifts the balance of power in the novel quite unexpectedly: where, to start with, Faujas is inscrutable and efficient and Félicité appears to be falling in line with his schemes, the tables are turned. Faujas is the instrument of the downfall of the Mouret family, but he becomes the instrument of his own. It is Félicité who is still standing at the end: the town is hers, though at a cost she could not anticipate.

Plassans is a fictional town closely based on Aix-en-Provence,

where Zola lived for fifteen years as a child and young man.[2] It is the cradle of the Rougon-Macquarts, their power base. The Rougon-Macquart dynasty begins with Adélaïde Fouque, the woman we know, in *The Conquest of Plassans*, as Aunt Dide, now resident of the lunatic asylum in Les Tulettes. Though Dide does not appear in person in this book, she looms over it, a figure from the family's history but also an omen of what is to come: madness, alienation, internment. Zola has Adélaïde live from 1768 to 1873, spanning a hundred years of history and all twenty of the Rougon-Macquart novels, dying in the last novel in the series, *Doctor Pascal*, at the age of 105. It is with Adélaïde Fouque that the Rougon-Macquarts begin, both the legitimate strand she produces from her marriage to Rougon, with whom she has a child, Pierre Rougon, in 1787, and the illegitimate strand she engenders with her lover, the drunkard and smuggler Macquart, which produces two children, Antoine and Ursule.

The Conquest of Plassans follows the lives of Aunt Dide's children and grandchildren and their families: Félicité and Pierre Rougon, their daughter Marthe, her husband François Mouret (son of Ursule Macquart and thus also Marthe's cousin), and Antoine Macquart, a wily drunkard who lives comfortably near Les Tulettes on a pension granted to him by Pierre Rougon for having betrayed his Republican comrades in the *coup d'état*. While Zola may be fascinated by the Rougons' and the Macquarts' energy and resourcefulness, it is clear that they are not a sympathetic crew. We admire them as we might admire rats or cockroaches: for being ruthless, tenacious, parasitical, tough, and indestructible. But however efficient the Rougon-Macquarts are as a collective, the individuals within that collective carry, to a greater or lesser extent, the hereditary defects that will determine their lives here and in the novels to come. As Zola writes in his preface to *The Fortune of the Rougons*:

The great characteristic of the Rougon-Macquarts, the group or family I propose to study, is their ravenous appetites, the great upsurge of our age as it rushes to satisfy those appetites. Physiologically the Rougon-Macquarts illustrate the gradual sequence of nervous and sanguine accidents that

[2] Zola was born in Paris in 1840, the son of an Italian civil engineer and his French wife. The family moved to Aix-en-Provence when Zola was 3, and he lived there until he moved back to Paris in 1858. Among his school friends was the painter Paul Cézanne, whose work he would later passionately advocate in his art criticism.

befall a race after a first organic lesion and, according to environment, determine in each individual member of the race those feelings, desires, and passions—in sum, all the natural and instinctive manifestations of humanity—whose outcomes are conventionally described in terms of 'virtue' or 'vice'.

Zola is being deliberately clinical here, treating his human protagonists as biological organisms to be described medically, while the provocative placing of 'virtue' and 'vice' in quotation marks further adds to the image of the experimental scientist objectively noting and classifying his data. The comment echoes Taine's famous assertion:

> It matters not what the facts may be, whether physical or moral, they always spring from causes; there are causes for ambition, for courage, for veracity, as well as for digestion, for muscular action, and for animal heat. Vice and virtue are products like vitriol and sugar; every complex fact grows out of the simple facts with which it is affiliated and on which it depends.[3]

These are, from both Zola and Taine, controversial statements: to demystify the vague but religiously, morally, and ideologically charged notions of vice and virtue is to invite opprobrium from a variety of sources, as well as to risk accusations of reducing human complexity to a series of equations and formulae. Zola certainly was attacked from all quarters: by conservatives for his republicanism and opposition both to the royalists and the Imperial regime, but also by Republicans for presenting the working class as animalistic and self-destructive. Writers and critics of varying temperaments—classical, romantic, symbolist, idealist—condemned his 'putrid' literature for what they saw as its ugliness, squalor, and amorality, and the little room it left for humanity's so-called higher or more spiritual aspirations.

'The Experimental Novel' and the Poetry of Naturalism

Zola's fiction is in part an 'experiment' in which the scientist-novelist places particular characters in particular places and with particular circumstantial dramas, and observes how, given their temperaments, medical histories, and emotional inclinations, they react. Sometimes he will add or subtract elements—a change of scene, a new person, a love interest or an enemy, an accident or a bankruptcy or an

[3] Taine, *A History of English Literature* (1863), vol. i, p. xv.

illness—and observe how this alters the course of events. In this respect, he is like all novelists, creating characters and then letting them loose. While novels such as *The Conquest of Plassans* and *The Fortune of the Rougons* have unambiguously 'straight' titles, novels like *Germinal*, *La Bête humaine*, *Le Ventre de Paris* are more evocative and lyrical, and hardly seem to fit with the 'Naturalist' label of plain or scientific factuality. Zola always allows room in his writing for a 'poetic' or mythical interpretation of his human characters and the events that befall them. We might consider, in this context, the great descriptive set-piece in *Germinal*, where Zola likens the mine swallowing up the miners to some great beast of the underworld gorging itself on the blood of the living; or the 'bête humaine' of the eponymous novel, the murderous inner beast which Zola links, symbolically, with the driverless train hurtling into the darkness. Closer to *The Conquest of Plassans*, there is the symbolic space of Plassans cemetery described in *The Fortune of the Rougons*, so full of bodies that the earth seems to push them back up to the surface. It is a powerful metaphor for the way in which the living are haunted by the dead, and for how the old ailments and defects resurface in the here and now. When the old cemetery is cleared and a new one designated, the bones are carted across town, scattering human remains along the streets.

Aunt Dide is given a mythical grandeur in chapter 7 of *The Fortune of the Rougons*, just before her children commit her to the lunatic asylum. She foretells the death of her nephew Silvère (François Mouret's brother), the young Republican idealist who is betrayed by his own family and murdered with their connivance:

> I brought nothing but wolves into the world . . . a whole family . . . a whole litter of wolves . . . There was just one poor lad, and they've eaten him up; they each had a bite at him, and their lips are covered with blood . . . Damn them! They are thieves and murderers. And they live like gentlemen. Damn them! Damn them!

Like some ancient prophetess, whose madness is also her lucidity and whose foresight goes unheeded, Dide curses the whole pack of Rougon-Macquart wolves. That curse too is a metaphor, just like the animal metaphors that run through Zola's fiction and Naturalist writing generally, and a further endorsement of those who viewed his fiction as humanly diminishing. It is in keeping, of course, with

the 'natural history' dimension of Zola's plan to treat his characters with the detachment of the scientist observing animals in their habitats, but it also provides, paradoxically, an opportunity for him to use the imagery of a nature red in tooth and claw for poetic ends. The Rougon-Macquarts themselves are described as predators and opportunists, cunning and watchful as wolves. Antoine Macquart for instance is frequently called a wolf, while Félicité is described, in *The Fortune of the Rougons*, as having 'the keenest scent in the whole family'. While their machinations might be subtle and complex, we are never far, with the Rougon-Macquarts, from animal instinct and the law of the jungle.

Marthe and François Mouret and their children are the only characters we feel sympathy for. Perhaps in the case of Mouret, who tries, albeit half-heartedly, to stand up for his principles and set himself against the town's hypocritical bourgeois, we even feel something like affection, and are moved by his helpless descent into humiliation and insanity. Mouret has Republican sympathies, and Zola takes care to depict him as harmless but weak, well-meaning but changeable and compulsive. As with his wife and cousin, Marthe Rougon, we are given from the start small proleptic indications of the mental decline to come: Mouret is rash then apathetic, indecisive and then decisive in the wrong direction; he wavers, changes his mind, punishes his wife, and sends his children away but fails to notice the way in which he himself is being sidelined, manipulated, humiliated, and finally destroyed. Marthe is presented as weak-minded, yearning, passive, and unfulfilled. She is, as Faujas rightly surmises, ready to be lured into religion, a focal point for her hysterical tendencies and thwarted sexuality. Marthe's faith is obsessive and erotic, and she becomes Faujas's creature in ways that alienate her from her husband and children and help further the schemes of Faujas and Félicité.

Faujas conquers the town through religion, and he conquers it through the women, first by encouraging them to donate to a project, a religious centre, the 'Work of the Virgin', for the protection of working-class young girls, and then by using his hold over the women to attain power over their husbands, who are, by a symmetrical process, encouraged to start up a youth club. One of the great literary figures Zola evokes in *The Conquest of Plassans* is Molière's classic figure of Tartuffe, a religious hypocrite who poses as a man of faith in order to win over the gullible Orgon and gain his daughter's hand

and her inheritance. Tartuffe, like Faujas, is a lodger who gradually gains control over the household, though unlike Faujas, Tartuffe only fools Orgon and his devout mother. *Tartuffe* is a comedy that ends well, whereas *The Conquest of Plassans* is a tragedy that ends in melodramatic catastrophe. At one point in this novel, Mouret even calls Faujas 'le tartuffe', and the name is still used in French to designate a religious fraud with ulterior motives that are in fact worldly, materialistic, and wholly unspiritual.[4]

The secondary characters in *Plassans*, a small-town bourgeois society and its minor aristocracy, are presented as hypocritical, sour, vain, and greedy, riddled with snobbery, poisoned by rivalry, two-faced and weak. While they are capable of low cunning, they too become instruments in Félicité's and Faujas's game. Zola held Napoleon III and those who served him in contempt, and his own politics were Republican. He never hid his disgust, in fiction or in journalism, for the Imperial regime, and much like Marx (who in *Eighteenth Brumaire* excoriated the corruption and dictatorialism of Napoleon III), saw it not just as a reactionary low point in post-Revolutionary France but also as a masquerade of pomp and sleaze, aping the lost grandeur of Napoleon. *The Conquest of Plassans* shows the regime, as it were, from the margins and from the ground: while Paris might be the centre of national politics, the towns and provinces have their own branchlines of corruption and power. Much as Balzac divided his novels between Parisian centre and provincial edges, so Zola reveals the connections between the different levels of national life, which seem so far apart but are in fact intimately linked. We may also think of the Russian novelists Gogol and Dostoevsky, who paint the banal dramas of provincial life in all their cut-throat absurdity and ruthlessness, with their political functionaries and their rival families, ugly microcosms of the country itself. We have the reprobate Monsieur de Condamin and his flighty but scheming wife; the ugly and resentful, but easily-bought, Paloque couple; and the cynical Doctor Porquier who allows Mouret to be committed to the asylum. There is Monsieur de Rastoil and his family, Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, and the town's mayor, Monsieur Delangre. Some are Bonapartists, some Legitimists, and,

[4] Zola often addresses the theme of religious hypocrisy in Second Empire France, and had written three short stories on the subject for the Republican newspaper *La Cloche* in the early 1870s, at roughly the same time as he was writing *The Conquest of Plassans.*

as Mouret explains to the newly arrived Faujas: 'on my right, I have at the Rastoils' the flower of the Legitimists, and on my left, at the sub-prefect's, the bigwigs of the Empire' (p. 36). With a dramatic irony Zola is fond of, Mouret warns Faujas not to get involved in politics . . . Amid this melee we also have rival priests and a lazy, ineffectual bishop, a docile layer of bourgeois and business interests, and a marginalized working and peasant population outside town and beyond the narrative's parameters.

Zola is a skilful novelist of foreboding: from the moment we see the Mourets, we know that their peace is fragile, and when we meet the sinister, silent Abbé Faujas himself, arriving early and inopportunely to take up his room in their household, we sense a darkness we cannot quite define. While nothing can prepare us for the novel's violent ending, the signs accumulate from the start: the house and garden, the family unit that is fraught with imprecise unease, the distracted, languid Marthe and her unstable husband, the mention of the asylum in the first few pages, the unwelcome intrusion of the inscrutable priest and his looming mother . . . all of these factors are choreographed by Zola with a skill that is the hallmark of a novelist and not a mere recorder of facts. For a writer who rarely stinted on description and documentation, Zola was also able to make it all count on the narrative, the symbolic, or the psychological levels too. In his own way, Zola is a novelist of economy: he makes the apparent excess of information and description germane to the reader's experience, a skill he shares with Balzac. Sometimes doing less with more—catching the world's overspill and channelling it towards a coherent but unreductive end—is just as good as the more conventionally admired skill of doing more with less. Zola does not always economize on words; his novels are voraciously inclusive—of data, facts and figures, descriptions and details—but he rarely repeats himself. While it is true that *The Conquest of Plassans* is, by Zola's standards, a lean and plot-driven novel, it is also full of lyrical description and recurring symbolic motifs.

Faujas, whose name contains the French for 'false', *faux*, is a strict and unmaterialistic priest who installs himself in the Mouret house and makes it his centre of operations. Faujas is the cuckoo in the nest, and the Mourets' house and garden are chosen because they lie between two opposing political camps that Faujas must reconcile in order to put forward his masters' candidate for election. This

candidate, revealed towards the end of the book, is to be a yes-man who, when elected, votes with the majority and thus helps maintain the status quo. But there is no status quo for the novel itself, which powers towards its terrible ending. The Mourets lose their reputation, their children, their sanity, and finally their property, which has become the symbolic battleground on which the human and political drama is played out. To understand how Zola merges the symbolic and mythic dimension with the naturalistic and documentary, we need only think of the Mourets' garden, the place Mouret calls, again with dramatic irony, his 'little corner of paradise' (p. 36). On the one hand, Zola is so precise in his preparation for the scenes he paints that he drew detailed diagrams of the house and garden, right down to the vegetable patches and paths; and on the other, he makes the fate of the house and garden into the symbolic marker of Faujas's rise and the Mourets' fall. Partway through the book, Faujas's greedy and deceitful sister and brother-in-law, the Trouches, arrive and join him in the Mourets' house. Gradually, they take it over, stealing food, money, and objects, using the kitchen, and even, at the end, sleeping in the Mourets' bed. They are truly repellent characters, and the reader follows helplessly as they thieve and lie their way to dominance of Mouret's realm. They are also, with the help of the doctor and the connivance of Faujas, instrumental in having Mouret declared insane, using a law—that Zola researched fully—which allowed people to be committed to asylums with frighteningly little evidence of madness. By the end of the book, Mouret really is mad, something else that Zola researched: the way in which people who suffered from depression or melancholy, or who simply became inconvenient to their families, finally succumbed to clinical madness in the very institutions which were supposed to care for them. In his short story, 'Histoire d'un fou' ('Story of a Madman'—first published in 1868), Zola told the tale of a husband, Maurin, who is committed to an insane asylum by his wife and her lover, a doctor, in order to get him out of the way. The wife pretends her husband has been attacking her while the townspeople tell increasingly incriminating stories about the poor man, until, like Mouret, he is taken away in the dead of night and thrown into the asylum. Zola had originally intended to make Marthe fake her attacks the way Maurin's wife does, but he changed his mind because he felt that such planning and deceit were inconsistent with her character as he had created it. There was even a very early plan to make her

Faujas's lover, but this too, and for the same reasons, was abandoned. Zola instead prefers to trace, as a sort of parallel narrative to her husband's, Marthe's own descent into insanity in ways that chimed with his own interest in female hysteria.

Meanwhile, Faujas colonizes the garden, and even the Mourets' housekeeper, Rose, is suborned by the Faujas clan. As the Mourets' home is invaded and its inhabitants manipulated and turned against each other, so Plassans too is 'conquered'. The two spaces reflect each other: public life and domestic life are infiltrated and undermined by the same forces and in a sort of symmetrical movement. This symmetry is designed not just to show the close collaboration, a collaboration seen by Zola as born of self-serving and based on hypocrisy, between the Imperial regime and the religious establishment, but also to emphasize the link between the characters' inner life and the world which they both shape and are shaped by. It also, on the more practical level, helps to hold together the various plots and subplots of the story. Zola was often called, by admirers and critics alike, a 'constructeur de romans', a 'builder of novels', and in a book with so much intrigue, so many characters, and so many different parts, Zola's deep understanding of how to structure complex narratives is impressive. This sturdiness of plotting complements something else too: a profound understanding of how to deploy a symbolic structure and a poetic, not to say lyrical, style. Zola choreographs symbolically charged scenes in which, for instance, a game of shuttlecock between children becomes an opportunity for Faujas to bring the (self-)interests of the two opposing factions into line with his own plan. Later in the novel, Mouret's insanity and fall is symbolized by the way he returns to find his beloved vegetable garden has been pulled up and turned by Trouche, Faujas's brother-in-law, into a vulgar and showy flower garden. Though Zola relied on documentation and textbooks to plot the different madnesses of Marthe and François Mouret, and even uses examples from contemporary medicine when he has Doctor Porquier cite case files of insane people, there is a powerful symbolic meaning to the couple's fates. Mouret dies in the fire he starts which destroys his house, the place he loves, and has, in his insane way, reclaimed by killing the Faujas clan, while Marthe dies in her mother's house, catching sight of her son Serge's soutane in the red light of the flames as they flicker across the room. These are tragic homecomings, but they are homecomings nonetheless: they

fit together, and we might even say they 'rhymed'. Even the novel's ending casts ahead: Serge himself, drawn to religion by Faujas and his mother's favourite child, will return with his own tragedy in the novel that immediately follows this one: *The Sin of Abbé Mouret* (1875). Like many of Zola's books, this one thus ends on the cusp of the next instalment: people beget people, novels beget novels.

The Scientific Novel

'Heredity, like gravity, has its laws,' wrote Zola in the preface to *The Fortune of the Rougons*, for which he proposed, revealingly, an alternative 'scientific title' with a deliberately Darwinian flavour: 'Origins'.[5] Zola believed that art had a responsibility to understand its period and to show solidarity with its times. Later, Zola's solidarity would become overtly political, with his famous 'J'Accuse' pamphlet during the Dreyfus case, in which he showed that political idealism was by no means incompatible with a deep and often pessimistic understanding of reality. Zola was also a materialist in the specific sense that he believed that what happened in the world was explicable by means of that world. This does not, as we have seen, prevent him from bringing his novels to melodramatic and symbolic climaxes—on the contrary, it suggests that these great melodramatic denouements, for all their excess, are firmly fixed in causes and effects that are rooted in sturdy plotting.

Zola had, as a young writer, written poetry of a romantic and idealistic bent, but quickly turned his back on it in favour of a more documentary and socially committed literature. This commitment was never, in the novels at least, jeopardized by sentimentality, and this in part is what caused many of his critics to impute a bleak and amoral vision to his Rougon-Macquart series. Zola could be doctrinaire about his method and his subjects, and gathered around him a group of disciples who took him as leader of the 'Naturalist school' and met at his house in Médan. In 1880, Zola and a handful of fellow Naturalists produced the volume *Médan Nights* (*Les Soirées de Médan*), showcasing short stories by six writers: Zola himself, J.-K. Huysmans, Maupassant, Henri Céard, Léon Hennique, and Paul Alexis. The book's great success was Maupassant's 'Boule de

[5] Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) had appeared in French in 1865.

Suif', and it is revealing that, of the writers represented, Maupassant quickly moved away from the group and refused to be circumscribed by an '–ism', Huysmans was leaning in the direction that would lead, four years later, to the decadent mystical masterpiece *Against Nature*, and Céard, Hennique, and Alexis, who stayed true to the Naturalist ethos, are now forgotten. If there is a moral to this story, it is that writers must either create their own movements, their own '–isms', or write their way beyond them. Zola defined the Naturalist style, but was not confined by it.

As well as Taine, who straddled the border between literature and social sciences, Zola was deeply influenced by more specialized scientific and medical theory, especially in his earliest work, such as *Thérèse Raquin* and the first Rougon-Macquart novels. He claimed to have based his writing method on Claude Bernard's *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* (1865), and the idea of an 'experiment', in which the novelist arranges his materials and equipment like a scientist and observes the results of the experiment objectively in order to discover a principle or a set of laws from it, is key to Zola's method.

Theories of heredity provide ways of talking about history and tradition, as well as medical or biological questions. The nineteenth century was a period obsessed with narratives of heredity in the widest sense: the relationship of the present to the past, the extent to which, politically, socially, intellectually, we are condemned by or chained to our pasts, able to build on them, or escape them altogether. It is not only individuals and families who must contend with what they inherit, but whole societies with their political and economic systems, their sense of nationhood, their literature, and their science. But it does not take long for a new scientific explanation to become, in its turn, another myth, and the upsurge in late nineteenth-century writing of literature that drew on medicine is evidence of this: it was not just Zola and the Naturalists who turned to medicine, but Decadent and Symbolist poets, who begin peppering their verses with words like 'hysteria', 'neurosis', 'neurasthenia', and other terms from medical glossaries, often improperly understood or used only for their shock value. The extent to which apparently opposing schools of literature shared—admittedly with different aims and results—a fascination with the language and models of heredity, biology, medicine, and pathology, is something that has not been sufficiently explored, but

which Zola himself was fully aware of. These are not overarching theories which explain Zola's beliefs or contain his fiction but simply ideas of his time, to which he turned, in which he delved, which he selected and shaped and fictionalized. Does Zola submit his fiction to these 'scientific' principles, or does he submit the science to the principles of fiction? Every reader will have their opinion, but the fact that his novels can be read and felt and understood without any reference to the theories that went into them suggests the latter.

Biological heredity gives Zola not just the material with which to create and propel characters but the framework with which to plan a cycle of novels, to think on a scale few novelists manage. It is worth casting ahead to the last novel in Zola's Rougon-Macquart cycle, *Doctor Pascal*, where the grandson of Adelaïde Fouque, Pascal Rougon (brother of Marthe and Eugène Rougon) a doctor in Plassans for thirty years, catalogues his own family's heredity in order to develop a serum that will cure nervous and hereditary diseases. In this novel, Dr Pascal may be seen as analogous to the novelist himself: a fearless researcher into the ills of the family (and by extension, society), but also part of it, caught up in and also the product of that family (and, also by extension, that society). Zola writes that, of all Félicité's children, he is the one who 'did not seem to belong to the family', and adds, in such a way as to leave the character some leeway to escape the Rougons' fate, that he is 'one of those frequent exceptions to the laws of heredity'. Pascal, whom we first meet in *The Fortune of the Rougons*, is devoted not to money or power (much to his mother's bafflement and his brothers' consternation) but to science: 'He had a particular passion for physiology. It was known in the town that he often bought dead bodies from the hospice gravedigger, which made him an object of horror to delicate ladies and certain timid gentlemen. [. . .] For two or three years, he had been studying the great problem of heredity, comparing the human and animal species with each other' (ch. 2). Pascal's methods are scientific, but his aim is idealistic: to free himself and them through knowledge and understanding. In this, he perhaps resembles Zola himself. The serum, which is a piece of almost Balzacian supernaturalism, and so clearly unbelievable that we must take it symbolically, is best interpreted as truth itself. Zola's style has changed a great deal in the nearly twenty-five years between the first Rougon-Macquart novel and *Doctor Pascal*—it has become softer and more optimistic, more overtly symbolic and idealistic—but the cycle

has returned to Plassans, where, despite the novel's own tragedy, the ending is a hopeful one. Pascal is the novelist's envoy into his own fictional world, and he is there both to represent a hopeful escape from the generations-long curse of heredity and to underline the novelist's own belief that the truth, however bad, is also a kind of freedom.

Heredity, and the vast family tree Zola creates, is necessary for the kind of cycle he has in mind: it offers both a series of stories—a roadmap of narrative, we might say—and an opportunity to think on a wider canvas than the single novel. It ensures continuity, but also contiguity, letting the novelist choose which path he will follow, which characters he will focus on, and enabling him to write not just in a linear way, with one novel following from the other, but also in a parallel way, with novels unfolding side by side in time. Every novel in the cycle connects up to the others, but each is also independent, and can be read alone. Characters or branches of the family can be promoted from walk-on parts in one book to full-blown centrality in another; they can fade into the background, be mentioned only in passing, or not appear at all, and then they and their offspring can suddenly emerge as the focal point of a novel of their own. Rather in the manner of soap operas, which must both depict an ongoing series of intertwined stories and be accessible for viewers to join with each and every episode, so Zola's novels are designed as part of a tableau of interconnected narratives, projecting ahead to new storylines or back-projecting to past dramas, and made to be read on their own terms.

The Conquest of Plassans works on all these fronts: it is a novel about a particular place and time, which encompasses characters and dramas that can be found in any place and time; it is part of a whole but it is also a whole in and of itself. Like all of Zola's novels in the Rougon-Macquart series, it gives the reader a starting point from which to go backwards or forwards in time, and the scale and spread of Zola's total twenty-novel conception adds to, rather than detracts from, the novel's ability to stand alone. However much the project as a totality is underpinned by research, by observation, by notes and references and data, what drives it, book by book and page by page, is the human drama, the tightness of the plotting, and the dynamic variety of the writing.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

La Conquête de Plassans, from the Rougon-Macquart family saga, is not one of Zola's best-known novels. This is because, although its narrative force is almost unsurpassed, it has only twice been translated into English. The first translation, *The Conquest of Plassans or The Priest in the House*, was by the remarkable Ernest Vizetelly, who, with others, translated Zola's novels during the 1880s. In his preface (1887) he refers mysteriously to 'late disclosures' in London about 'the priest in the house', implying that the novel and his translation are very topical. The second translation was by Brian Rhys (Elek Books, 1957) who called it simply *A Priest in the House*. The novel is in many ways a sequel to the first of the Rougon-Macquart series, *La Fortune des Rougon*, translated by Brian Nelson for Oxford World's Classics, which has filled a large gap in the Englishing of Zola. I hope this book will do the same for Zola's many fans among English readers.

I started my translation at the Centre for Literary Translation in Arles, where the staff were, as usual, unfailingly kind and helpful. I am grateful to them, as well as to the Institut Français in London and the director of the Centre National du Livre who gave me a generous grant to finish translating the book in Paris. I should also like to thank my friend Béatrice Roudet-Marçu, who clarified some of the trickier idiomatic expressions for me and encouraged me along the way. And I am most of all grateful to my husband, David Constantine, who has read it all with immense patience and, as ever, offered his invaluable suggestions and comments.

The text I have used is the Classiques de Poche edition of 1999 with an introduction and notes by Colette Becker. Included in that edition are four stories and three critical articles by Zola which have some bearing on the novel.

H. C.

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The Conquest of Plassans was first published in 1874 and, like *The Fortune of the Rougons*, serialized in the Republican newspaper *Le Siècle* between February and April 1874 before being published by Charpentier the same year. It is the fourth volume of the Rougon-Macquart cycle, and is included in the first volume of A. Lanoux and H. Mitterand's Pléiade edition of *Les Rougon-Macquart* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960–7). There exist also the following notable paperback editions: *La Conquête de Plassans*, ed. E. Carassus (Garnier-Flammarion); *La Conquête de Plassans*, ed. M. B. de Launay and H. Mitterand (Gallimard Folio); and *La Conquête de Plassans*, ed. Colette Becker (Livre de Poche). The first English translation, by Ernest Vizetelly, appeared in 1887 (London: Vizetelly and Co.).

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—— *Germinal*, trans. Peter Collier, ed. Robert Lethbridge.
—— *The Kill*, trans. Brian Nelson.
—— *The Ladies' Paradise*, trans. Brian Nelson.
—— *The Masterpiece*, trans. Thomas Walton, revised by Roger Pearson.
—— *Money*, trans. Valerie Minogue.
—— *Nana*, trans. Douglas Parmée.
—— *Pot Luck*, trans. Brian Nelson.
—— *Thérèse Raquin*, trans. Andrew Rothwell.

A CHRONOLOGY OF ÉMILE ZOLA

1840 (2 April) Born in Paris, the only child of Francesco Zola (b. 1795), an Italian engineer, and Émilie, née Aubert (b. 1819), the daughter of a glazier. The naturalist novelist was later proud that 'zolla' in Italian means 'clod of earth'.

1843 Family moves to Aix-en-Provence.

1847 (27 March) Death of father from pneumonia following a chill caught while supervising work on his scheme to supply Aix-en-Provence with drinking water.

1852–8 Boarder at the Collège Bourbon at Aix. Friendship with Baptistin Baille and Paul Cézanne. Zola, not Cézanne, wins the school prize for drawing.

1858 (February) Leaves Aix to settle in Paris with his mother (who had preceded him in December). Offered a place and bursary at the Lycée Saint-Louis. (November) Falls ill with 'brain fever' (typhoid) and convalescence is slow.

1859 Fails his *baccalauréat* twice.

1860 (Spring) Is found employment as a copy-clerk but abandons it after two months, preferring to eke out an existence as an impecunious writer in the Latin Quarter of Paris.

1861 Cézanne follows Zola to Paris, where he meets Camille Pissarro, fails the entrance examination to the École des Beaux-Arts, and returns to Aix in September.

1862 (February) Taken on by Hachette, the well-known publishing house, at first in the dispatch office and subsequently as head of the publicity department. (31 October) Naturalized as a French citizen. Cézanne returns to Paris and stays with Zola.

1863 (31 January) First literary article published. (1 May) Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* exhibited at the Salon des Refusés, which Zola visits with Cézanne.

1864 (October) *Tales for Ninon.*

1865 *Claude's Confession.* A *succès de scandale* thanks to its bedroom scenes. Meets future wife Alexandrine-Gabrielle Meley (b. 1839), the illegitimate daughter of teenage parents who soon separated, and whose mother died in September 1849.

1866 Resigns his position at Hachette (salary: 200 francs a month) and

becomes a literary critic on the recently launched daily *L'Événement* (salary: 500 francs a month). Self-styled 'humble disciple' of Hippolyte Taine. Writes a series of provocative articles condemning the official Salon Selection Committee, expressing reservations about Courbet, and praising Manet and Monet. Begins to frequent the Café Guerbois in the Batignolles quarter of Paris, the meeting-place of the future Impressionists. Antoine Guillemet takes Zola to meet Manet. Summer months spent with Cézanne at Bennecourt on the Seine. (15 November) *L'Événement* suppressed by the authorities.

1867 (November) *Thérèse Raquin*.

1868 (April) Preface to second edition of *Thérèse Raquin*. (May) Manet's portrait of Zola exhibited at the Salon. (December) *Madeleine Férat*. Begins to plan for the Rougon-Macquart series of novels.

1868–70 Working as journalist for a number of different newspapers.

1870 (31 May) Marries Alexandrine in a registry office. (September) Moves temporarily to Marseilles because of the Franco-Prussian War.

1871 Political reporter for *La Cloche* (in Paris) and *Le Sémaphore de Marseille*. (March) Returns to Paris. (October) Publishes *The Fortune of the Rougons*, the first of the twenty novels making up the Rougon-Macquart series.

1872 *The Kill*.

1873 (April) *The Belly of Paris*.

1874 (May) *The Conquest of Plassans*. First independent Impressionist exhibition. (November) *Further Tales for Ninon*.

1875 Begins to contribute articles to the Russian newspaper *Vestnik Evropy* (*European Herald*). (April) *The Sin of Father Mouret*.

1876 (February) *His Excellency Eugène Rougon*. Second Impressionist exhibition.

1877 (February) *L'Assommoir*.

1878 Buys a house at Médan on the Seine, 40 kilometres west of Paris. (June) *A Page of Love*.

1880 (March) *Nana*. (May) *Les Soirées de Médan* (an anthology of short stories by Zola and some of his naturalist 'disciples', including Maupassant). (8 May) Death of Flaubert. (September) First of a series of articles for *Le Figaro*. (17 October) Death of his mother. (December) *The Experimental Novel*.

1882 (April) *Pot Luck* (*Pot-Bouille*). (3 September) Death of Turgenev.

1883 (13 February) Death of Wagner. (March) *The Ladies' Paradise* (*Au Bonheur des Dames*). (30 April) Death of Manet.

1884 (March) *La Joie de vivre*. Preface to catalogue of Manet exhibition.

1885 (March) *Germinal*. (12 May) Begins writing *The Masterpiece* (*L'Œuvre*). (22 May) Death of Victor Hugo. (23 December) First instalment of *The Masterpiece* appears in *Le Gil Blas*.

1886 (27 March) Final instalment of *The Masterpiece*, which is published in book form in April.

1887 (18 August) Denounced as an onanistic pornographer in the *Manifesto of the Five* in *Le Figaro*. (November) *Earth*.

1888 (October) *The Dream*. Jeanne Rozerot becomes his mistress.

1889 (20 September) Birth of Denise, daughter of Zola and Jeanne.

1890 (March) *The Beast in Man*.

1891 (March) *Money*. (April) Elected President of the Société des Gens de Lettres. (25 September) Birth of Jacques, son of Zola and Jeanne.

1892 (June) *La Débâcle*.

1893 (July) *Doctor Pascal*, the last of the Rougon-Macquart novels. Fêted on visit to London.

1894 (August) *Lourdes*, the first novel of the trilogy *Three Cities*. (22 December) Dreyfus found guilty by a court martial.

1896 (May) *Rome.*

1898 (13 January) 'J'accuse', his article in defence of Dreyfus, published in *L'Aurore*. (21 February) Found guilty of libelling the Minister of War and given the maximum sentence of one year's imprisonment and a fine of 3,000 francs. Appeal for retrial granted on a technicality. (March) *Paris*. (23 May) Retrial delayed. (18 July) Leaves for England instead of attending court.

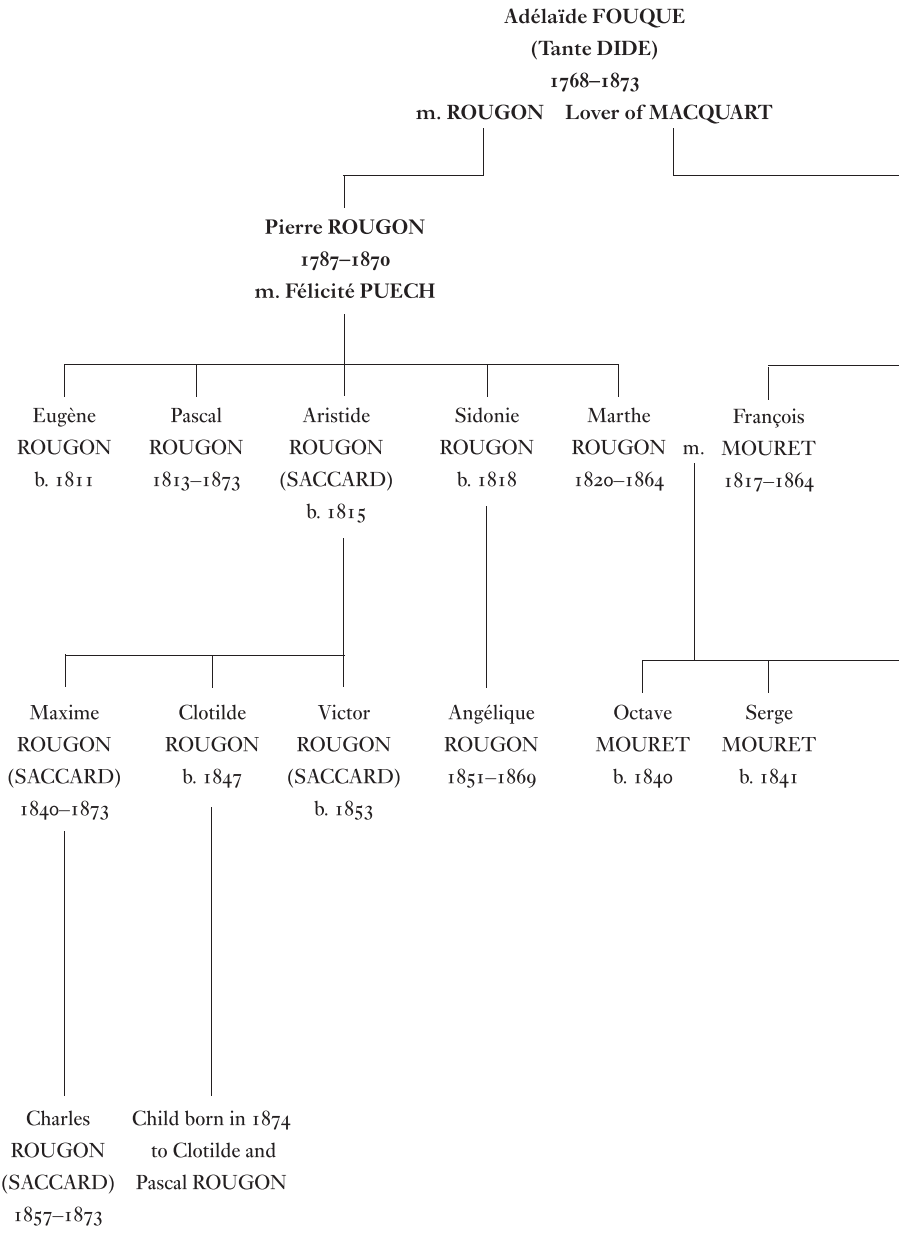
1899 (4 June) Returns to France. (October) *Fecundity*, the first of his *Four Gospels*.

1901 (May) *Toil*, the second 'Gospel'.

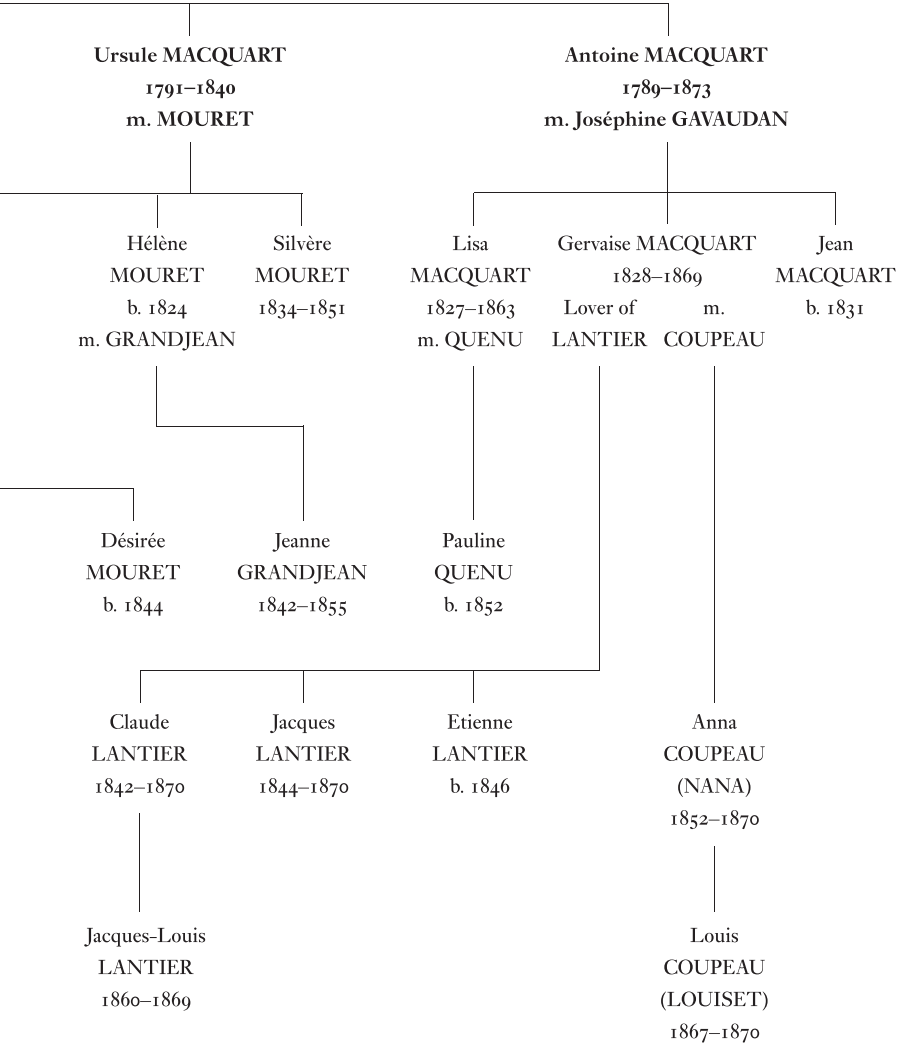
1902 (29 September) Dies of fumes from his bedroom fire, the chimney having been capped either by accident or anti-Dreyfusard design. Wife survives. (5 October) Public funeral.

1903 (March) *Truth*, the third 'Gospel', published posthumously. *Justice* was to be the fourth.

1908 (4 June) Remains transferred to the Panthéon.


Adélaïde FOUQUE
(Tante DIDE)
1768–1873
m. ROUGON
Lover of MACQUART
Pierre ROUGON
1787–1870
m. Félicité PUECH
Eugène ROUGON b. 1811
Pascal ROUGON 1813–1873
Aristide ROUGON (SACCARD) b. 1815
Sidonie ROUGON b. 1818
Marthe ROUGON 1820–1864
m.
François MOURET 1817–1864
Maxime ROUGON (SACCARD) 1840–1873
Clotilde ROUGON b. 1847
Victor ROUGON (SACCARD) b. 1853
Angélique ROUGON 1851–1869
Octave MOURET b. 1840
Serge MOURET b. 1841
Charles ROUGON (SACCARD) 1857–1873
Child born in 1874 to Clotilde and Pascal ROUGON

FAMILY TREE OF THE ROUGON-MACQUART



THE CONQUEST OF PLASSANS

CHAPTER 1

Désirée clapped her hands. She was a girl of fourteen, big for her age, with a laugh like a five-year-old.

'Maman, Maman!' she cried. 'Look at my doll!'

She had got a piece of cloth from her mother and for the last quarter of an hour had been trying to make it into a doll, wrapping it round and round and tying the end tightly with a piece of thread. Marthe looked up from the stocking which she was darning with exquisite skill, as though embroidering. She smiled at Désirée.

'That's a little boy-doll!' she said. 'Why not make a girl-doll? You should give her a skirt, you know, like a lady.'

She gave her a scrap of printed calico she found in her work table; then she applied herself to her stocking again. The two of them were seated at one end of the narrow terrace, the daughter on a stool at her mother's feet. The setting sun, a September sun, still warm, bathed them in a peaceful glow; the garden below, already in grey shadow, was making ready for the night. Not a sound came from elsewhere in this deserted corner of the town.

And so they went on working for a good ten minutes without speaking. Désirée took infinite pains with the skirt for her doll. Now and again Marthe looked at the child, tenderly and a little sadly. Since she could see that she was struggling, she said:

'Wait. Let me do her arms.'

She took the doll just as two big lads of seventeen and eighteen descended the steps. They came over and gave Marthe a kiss.

'Don't scold us, Maman,' said the cheerful Octave. 'I took Serge to hear the band… There was a crowd on the Cours Sauvaire!'*

'I thought you'd been kept behind at school,' his mother answered quietly, 'or I should have been very worried.'

But Désirée, with no more thought for the doll, had flung herself at Serge, crying:

'One of my birds, the blue one, has flown away, the one you gave me for a present.'

She was on the verge of tears. Her mother, who had supposed this woe forgotten, tried unsuccessfully to draw her attention back to the