

THE MASTERPIECE

THE MASTERPIECE

THE MASTERPIECE

ÉMILE ZOLA

Translated from the French by

THOMAS WALTON

LONDON

ELEK BOOKS

The Masterpiece *was first published in 1886.*
This new translation first published in 1950 and
reprinted in 1956, and is copyright by Elek Books
Ltd., 14 Great James Street, London, W.C.1

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
THE GARDEN CITY PRESS LIMITED,
LETCHEWORTH, HERTFORDSHIRE

INTRODUCTION

"Has it ever struck *you*", says one character in *L'Œuvre*, a writer, to another, a painter, "that posterity may not be the fair, impartial judge we think it is? . . . What a sell for us all, to have lived like slaves, noses to the grindstone, all to no purpose! . . . That's the sort of thing that brings me out in a cold sweat." Supposing that writer to have been Zola himself, it is surely safe to say, forty-seven years after his death (1902) and sixty-three after the publication of *L'Œuvre* (1886), that his doubts have been unfounded. An inquiry at any public library will show that his works, in French or in translation, are by no means neglected by the general reader, while a glimpse at modern French literature will make it clear that the *romanfleuve*—the saga novel in an indefinite number of volumes—has by no means run itself dry. It was only in 1946 that Jules Romains, one of Zola's most fervent admirers, published the twenty-seventh and final volume of that magnificent *romandelta*, if one may call it so, *Les Hommes de Bonne Volonté*.

Of the twenty novels that make up the "natural and social history" of the Rougon-Macquart family, *L'Œuvre*, the fourteenth, is a novel for the connoisseur. Its appeal is less immediate than that of any of the novels usually regarded as typical of the author. It has not the epic sweep of *La Débâcle* or *Germinal*, the unrestrained violence of *L'Assommoir* or *La Bête Humaine*, the rollicking gluttony of *Le Ventre de Paris* or the animal vulgarity of *La Terre*. Yet, even including *Le Docteur Pascal*, in which he sums up the ideas on science and heredity on which he based his series, as well as depicting his Indian summer love affair with Jeanne Rozerot, the mother of his children, *L'Œuvre* is probably closer than any of them to Zola himself.

When it first appeared, one critic announced that in it the word *ventre* was used forty-five times and the word *cuisse* forty-eight, thereby labelling it as coarse and vulgar. He would have done the book more justice by pointing out how often, and in what varied contexts, the word *passion* appears. *L'Œuvre* is a saga of passion—passion in

friendship, passion in love, passion in work. To prepare it, Zola did not have to go round, notebook in hand, collecting material, interviewing famous *cocottes*, market-porters, coal-miners or engine-drivers or, to recall a well-known caricature, having himself run down by a carriage and pair in order to record his reactions. The story of Claude Lantier, artist, Pierre Sandoz, author, and their literary and artistic friends is based on the story of Emile Zola and the friends of his youth, their struggles, successes and failures in the literary and artistic world of Paris.

It had been Zola's intention from the start to devote one novel of his series to artists and writers, and he had already introduced Claude Lantier to his readers in one episode of *Le Ventre de Paris* (1873), showing him as an artist with an eye for the beauties of modern architecture and the herald of a new art which he felt was on the way but which he himself was incapable of expressing. By 1882 Zola was already planning to make him the central figure of a novel, the incomplete genius, the gifted son of illiterate parents—Gervaise Macquart, washer-woman, and her lover Auguste Lantier (two of the principal characters in *L'Assommoir*), who are also the parents of Etienne Lantier, who figures in *Germinal*, and Jacques Lantier, the homicidal maniac of *La Bête Humaine*. He made it known, too, that he intended to model both his principal and subsidiary characters, to some extent, on his own friends and acquaintances, and indeed, his notes for the novel, now available for consultation in the Bibliothèque Nationale, show that his intention was carried out. He himself is represented, in part at least, by Pierre Sandoz; Dubuche is based on his old school friend Baptistin Baille, engineer; Jory owes something to the writer Paul Alexis and Mahoudeau to the sculptor Philippe Solari. Bongrand is noted as "*un Manet très chic, un Flaubert plutôt*" and Claude Lantier as "*un Manet, un Cézanne dramatisé, plus près de Cézanne.*"

This, and other references to Cézanne who, with Baille and Zola, formed three "inseparables" at the Collège Bourbon at Aix-en-Provence, combined with the fact that about the time of the publication of *L'Œuvre* Cézanne's friendship with Zola came to an end, has led some biographers (e.g., John Rewald, *Cézanne, Sa vie, son oeuvre, son amitié pour Zola*, p. 6, Paris, Albin-Michel, 1939) to conclude that the reason for the break was Zola's alleged portrayal of him as Claude Lantier. Gerstle Mack (*Paul Cézanne*, p. 300, London, Cape, 1936) is probably nearer to the truth when he concludes that "*L'Œuvre* had little connection with the cooling of the friendship

between Zola and Cézanne. That the intimacy came to an end just about the time that *L'Œuvre* was published was probably a mere coincidence." To this we might add that the themes of Zola's novel: the failure of the pseudo-genius, the "conquest" of Paris by the younger generation, the fatal attraction of the Capital, the rivalry between Woman and Art, had been part of the stock-in-trade of French novelists at least since Balzac.

Claude Lantier springs not only from the tainted Rougon-Macquart stock, his inherent weakness places him in the same spiritual family as Balzac's Lucien de Rubempré, Flaubert's Frédéric Moreau and many of the artists of Murger's *Bohemia*—duds, *ratés*, withering in the unpropitious air of the Capital. Chaîne, Jory, Mahoudeau and the rest may bear some resemblance to Zola's friends from Aix, but they, too, like the pipe-and-tabor player in Alphonse Daudet's *Numa Roumestan*, or the collection of literary and artistic failures in his *Jack*, are familiar figures, provincials squandering their talents in Paris, precursors of the *déracinés* of Barrès.

L'Œuvre is no more a romanticised biography of Cézanne than it is an historian's account of the development of Impressionism. True, to fit in with Zola's general scheme, Claude Lantier had got to be an artist of the generation that followed Delacroix and Courbet; it was inevitable that, if he was to represent the current movement in painting, he should at least be tinged with the Impressionists' theories and that his work should be exhibited at the "Salon des Refusés" (1863). But there was no call for his story to be, as Renoir would have had it, either an "historical reconstruction of a very original movement in art" or a "human document", a straightforward relation of what Zola had "seen and heard in our [the Impressionists'] studios". No, Zola was writing a novel, a work of art, and art, according to his own dictum, is "nature seen through a temperament", so if *L'Œuvre* is to be looked upon as a *roman à clef*, the key it provides, as we shall see, is primarily the key to the character of the author himself and to the rest of his work.

It is the story of a man who could find no satisfactory solution to what Clive Bell has since called "the artistic problem", that is, "the problem of making a match between an emotional experience and a form that has been conceived but **not** created". It is also an illustration of Zola solving his own "artistic problem". This is how he expressed it in his preparatory sketch:

"With Claude Lantier I want to depict the struggle of the artist

with nature, the effort of creation in a work of art, the blood and tears involved in giving one's own flesh to create something living, the perpetual battling with truth, the endless failures, the ceaseless wrestling with the Angel. *In a word, I shall recount my own intimate life as a creative artist, the everlasting pains of childbirth.* But I shall expand the subject by the addition of a dramatic plot, by Claude being never satisfied, distracted because he can never give birth to the genius within him, and killing himself in front of his unfinished masterpiece. . . . He shall not be merely impotent, but a creative artist with too wide an ambition, the desire to put all nature into one canvas. . . . I shall also give him the wish to execute huge modern decorative works, frescoes giving a complete survey of our day and age. . . . The whole artistic drama will lie in the struggle of the painter with nature." Then, later, dealing with Claude as a painter, he adds significantly: "*At bottom, he is a Romantic, a constructor.* Hence the struggle; he wants to clip the whole of nature in a single embrace and she escapes him." The difference between Claude Lantier and Emile Zola is that Zola refused to let nature escape him.

In *L'Œuvre*, according to his own admission, his personal ideas are expressed by Pierre Sandoz. Now Sandoz dreams of writing a series of novels depicting all humanity *in petto*; Claude Lantier, in his desire to decorate the walls of all the public buildings that represent the progress of modern life, dreams of painting "life as it is lived in the streets . . . in market-places, on race-courses, along the boulevards and down back streets in the slums; work of every kind in full swing . . . the peasants, the farmyards and the countryside! . . . Modern life in all its aspects. Frescoes as big as the Panthéon. A series of paintings that'll shatter the Louvre!"—which seems to be an adequate description of Zola's fresco-like story of the Rougon-Macquarts. Claude Lantier wants to introduce the pure light of day into painting; Pierre Sandoz, like Emile Zola, wants to bring the pure light of science to bear on his study of humanity. Where, according to their own standards, both fail, is in their inability to wash themselves clean of their clinging Romanticism. Sandoz regrets that he was "born at the confluence of Hugo and Balzac" just as much as Claude regrets the influence of Delacroix and Courbet. In this both are typical of their generation. Their expressions are strikingly similar to those used by an artist in another contemporary novel, *En Ménage* (1881), by Zola's disciple Joris-Karl Huysmans, whose Cyprien, like them, complains of feeling "soaked and saturated by a lot of mushy commonplaces and formulas" and

tries hard to revolt against them. "Oh, what unsufferable bores they are," he cries, "the people who sing the praises of the apse of Notre-Dame and the rood-screen at St. Etienne du Mont!" And in his exasperation he retorts: "Very well, but what about the Gare du Nord and the new Hippodrome? Surely *they* exist as well, don't they?" Cyprien might have been one of Lantier's "gang".

Since 1830, social and artistic fashions had changed. In life, as in literature, the modern young man was no longer the *beau ténébreux*, the misunderstood, the escapist who shut himself up in his ivory tower or sought communion with nature in some Alpine solitude, avoiding all manifestations of modern life and retreating into the past. Balzac, and after him Baudelaire, had shown the younger generation that genuine beauty was to be found in modernity in general and in city life in particular. The new hero was to be a man of action, so the gesture of Eugène de Rastignac looking defiantly over Paris from the heights of Père Lachaise, shaking his fist at the city and declaring: "*A nous deux maintenant!*" was a call to many a young provincial to abandon his native heath and start out on the conquest of the city. In their admiration of the externals of modern life, the beauty of a new railway terminus, an iron and glass market-hall, the colouring of a poster, Claude Lantier and his friends were up to date enough; so were Zola and his friends from Aix. They were up to date, too, in their determination to conquer the Capital. But they had not quite forgotten their enthusiasm for Hugo and Musset; they could still, in spite of themselves, appreciate the picturesque beauty of a narrow, mediæval street.

For Claude Lantier to set about his conquest of Paris by storming the citadel of the Salon—as Zola was to bombard the Académie Française—was the gesture of a modern man of action. For him to choose as his subject a city landscape was modern enough too; but to choose, of all the views in the Capital, the Ile de la Cité, the heart of mediæval Paris, was a fatal concession to Romanticism, the first step towards his final undoing. It led first to his making the naked central figure in his picture the symbol of the soul of Paris, as well as to his attempt to "put all nature on one canvas", and finally, to the fatal contest between his spiritual love for Art and his carnal love for Christine.

One feels that, in depicting Claude Lantier's final struggle, Zola has purged his own mind of a number of besetting nightmares: the fear (hypothetical in his own case) of being unable to solve his "artistic problem", the fear of being swept off his feet by his

Romantic tendencies, the fear of a clash between his literary and his domestic life.

To take the last point first. Sandoz speaks for Zola himself when he explains to Claude that marriage is “the essential condition for the good, solid, regular work required of anyone who means to produce anything worth while today” and that “Woman seeking whom she may devour, Woman who kills the artist, grinds down his heart and eats out his brain is a Romantic idea and not in accordance with facts.” Sandoz’s happy domestic life with Henriette is a reflection of Zola’s own early married life, just as his amazing house in the Rue de Londres is a replica of Zola’s own, the furnishing of which “meant satisfying the desires of his youth, realising all the Romantic ambitions he had gleaned from his early reading”, with the result that “this notoriously modern writer lived in the now old-fashioned mediæval setting which had been his ideal at fifteen”. The fatal woman, as typified by Alphonse Daudet’s Sapho or the Goncourts’ Manette Salomon, he neither knew nor believed in. Christine throughout the novel is a pathetic and sympathetic figure, doomed to be the loser in her struggle against Art, yet for one moment he turned her into the serpent-woman and, in the person of Claude, allowed himself to succumb to her wiles, say Art is a fool’s game and spit on the beauty he had created. Having done that, Zola must have somehow felt safer, though in reality he had nothing to fear from her or, for that matter, from the likes of Titian-haired Irma or peppermint-flavoured Mathilde.

What, in theory at least, he had more reason to fear, as a self-styled “experimental” novelist, dealing scientifically, as he thought, with theories of heredity and environment, was the unquenchable flame of poetry within him. In *L’Œuvre*, however, it is part of his subject-matter, and writing about it seems to have helped him both to indulge it and keep it in check—except, perhaps, at the very end of the final chapter, the funeral, with the pale blue and white mass of children’s graves for a background, the shrieking of the railway engine as an obligato to the burial service, the cemetery veiled in the smoke from the burning coffins. Even there, one gathers, there was a basis of reality—the scene was inspired by the funeral of the novelist Edouard Duranty—just as there was a misadventure of Philippe Solari’s behind the extraordinary account of Mahoudeau’s crumbling statue. Yet, in each case, to use Zola’s own phrase, “What temperament!” What temperament, too, in the opening chapter—temperament enough to pass off a distinctly novelettish

situation in a sweeping Romantic exposition, stating the key for the whole of the novel and bringing together in its violent thunderstorm the three main figures in the drama: Claude, Christine and—Paris.

All nature was Zola's "motif", and in it the city of Paris loomed large. His novels provide a remarkable anthology of Parisian landscapes and aspects of Parisian life, all of them treated in more or less lyrical mood, from the working-class districts in *L'Assommoir*, through the city markets in *Le Ventre de Paris* and the big department stores in *Au Bonheur des Dames* to the avowedly sentimental, sympathetic vistas which reflect the lovers' moods in *Une Page d'Amour* and the fearful, apocalyptic visions of the Paris of *Les Trois Villes*. With Balzac, Victor Hugo and Baudelaire, Zola is one of the greatest poets of Paris; less subtle, certainly, than Baudelaire and Balzac, more varied and colourful than Hugo. His vast pictures of Parisian life are the sort of pictures Claude Lantier wanted to paint and could not. Expressed in terms of paint, they would certainly have been vastly different in texture, but in scope and in treatment of episodic detail they would be in many ways reminiscent of the work of W. P. Frith. There is the same pleasure to be derived from the general effect of, say "Derby Day" and Zola's accounts of the "Salon des Refusés" and the official Salon and from such details as the two old gentlemen engaged in incongruous conversation in front of Claude's picture and the sales-resisting grandmamma in "Ramsgate Sands".

The antithetical pictures of the "Salon des Refusés", mounting to its deafening climax with the crowd's laughing at "Open Air", and the official Salon, with the public passing by Claude's "Dead Child" in silence are yet another illustration of Zola's Romantic temperament. To them may be added his lyrical recollections of his youthful escapades in and around Aix, the happiness of Claude and Christine at Bennecourt, the vigour and enthusiasm of the "gang" bent on the conquest of the Capital and their happy gatherings at Sandoz's flat or at the Café Guerbois, each balanced by its antithesis—his fellow Aixois turned completely Parisian, Bennecourt deserted and neglected while Claude and Christine, back in Paris, sink into icy indifference, the gradual disintegration of the "gang", its comradeship replaced by bitter enmity. For, much more than Claude Lantier, Zola was a "constructor", and *L'Œuvre* is an excellent example of his constructive powers, just as the series of which it forms a part is proof of his qualities as a master builder.

Although, in Sandoz and Bongrand, as well as in Claude Lantier,

he described, clearly from his own experiences, the throes of artistic production, he knew his own strength and his ability to "make a match between an emotional experience and a form that has been conceived but not created". Although with Bongrand, he confessed that what was even more difficult than scaling the heights of success was keeping oneself at the top, and, with Sandoz, he was disturbed by the thought that "the artist's paradise might turn out to be as non-existent as the Catholic's", he never lost his faith in work. Posterity has not failed him. It admires him as a constructor; it appreciates him more as a Romantic than a scientist; it knows nothing more characteristic of him than Sandoz's final words in *L'Œuvre*, the novel "into which", he said in a letter to his friend Henri Céard, "my memories and my heart have overflowed."

THOMAS WALTON.

CHAPTER ONE

CLAUDE was passing the Hôtel de Ville and the clock was just striking two when the storm broke. He was an artist and liked to ramble around Paris till the small hours, but wandering about the Halles on that hot July evening he had lost all sense of time. Suddenly the rain began to fall so heavily and in such enormous drops that he took to his heels and careered madly along the Quai del a Grève, then, at the Pont Louis-Philippe, furious at finding himself out of breath, he stopped. He was a fool, he thought, to be afraid of getting wet, so he made his way through the darkness—the violence of the rain was extinguishing the gas-lamps—and crossed the bridge at a more leisurely pace.

Besides, he had not very far to go. As he turned along the Quai de Bourbon, on the Ile Saint-Louis, a flash of lightning lit up the long straight line of big, old houses and the narrow roadway that runs along the bank of the Seine. It was reflected in the panes of their tall, shutterless windows and revealed for a moment their ancient, melancholy-looking façades, bringing out some of their details—a stone balcony, a balustrade, a festoon carved on a pediment—with amazing clarity. It was there Claude had his studio, in the attics of the old Hôtel du Martoy, on the corner of the Rue de la Femmesans-Tête. The embankment, lighted for a second, was plunged again into darkness and a mighty clap of thunder shook the whole neighbourhood from sleep.

When he reached his door, a low, old-fashioned, round-topped door encased in iron, Claude, blinded by the driving rain, groped for the bell-pull, but recoiled in amazement when he felt, huddled up in the corner, against the woodwork, a human body. Then, as the lightning flashed a second time, he caught sight of a girl, dressed in black, soaking wet and trembling with fright. The thunder made both of them start, then Claude cried:

"Well, I must say, I never expected. . . . Who are you? What do you want?"

He could not see her now, he could only hear her sobbing and stammering an answer to his question.

"Oh, monsieur! Please, please leave me alone! . . . It's the cabman I hired at the station . . . he left me here, near this doorway . . . he turned me out of the cab. . . . You see, there'd been a train derailed, near Nevers, monsieur, and we . . . we got in four hours late, so I . . . I didn't . . . find the person who . . . who should have been waiting for me at the station. . . . I don't know what I'm going to do . . . I . . . I've never been to Paris before, monsieur. . . . I don't know . . . where I am. . . ."

She stopped as the lightning flashed again and, wide-eyed with terror, glimpsed for a moment this corner of the town she did not know, a purple-white vision of a nightmare city. The rain had ceased. On the far bank of the Seine the irregular roofs of the row of little grey houses on the Quai des Ormes stood out against the sky, while their doors and the shutters of the little shops made their lower half a patchwork of bright colours. On the left a wider horizon opened up as far as the blue slate gables of the Hôtel de Ville, and on the right to the lead-covered dome of Saint Paul's church. What really took her breath away though, was the Seine, the way it was built-in, and flowed so darkly through its narrow bed, between the solid piers of the Pont-Marie and the lighter arches of the new Pont Louis-Philippe, its surface peopled by a mass of extraordinary shapes—a dormant flotilla of skiffs and dinghies, a laundry-boat and a dredger moored at the wharf and, over against the other bank, barges loaded with coal, lighters full of millstone grit and, towering over them all, the iron jib of a gigantic crane. A flash, and all was gone.

"Humbug," thought Claude. "It's obvious what she is—a trollop, shoved into the gutter and looking out for a man."

He instinctively distrusted women. The story of the railway accident, late arrival, bullying cabman, sounded to him like a ridiculous fabrication. When it thundered again, the girl had huddled farther into the corner, terrified.

"But you can't spend the night there," said Claud, aloud this time. The girl started to cry again, and stammered:

"I beg you, monsieur, take me to Passy. That's where I'm going . . . Passy."

He shrugged his shoulders. Did she really take him for a fool? Automatically, he turned towards the Quai des Célestins, where he

knew there was a cab-rank. There was not the faintest glimmer of a lamp to be seen.

"Passy, my dear? Why not Versailles? . . . And where the deuce do you think we're going to pick up a cab at this hour, on a night like this?"

She gave a little shriek of terror, dazzled as the lightning flashed again revealing the city once more, lurid this time, baleful and spattered with blood. It was one enormous trench hacked through the glowing embers of a fire, with the river flowing along it from end to end, as far as the eye could see. The minutest details were clearly visible. You could pick out the little window-shutters on the Quai des Ormes and the narrow slits of the Rue de la Masure and the Rue du Paon-Blanc breaking the line of the houses; near the Pont-Marie, where those huge plane-trees provided such a magnificent patch of greenery, you might have counted every single leaf. In the other direction, under the Pont Louis-Philippe, the flat river barges moored four deep along the Mail, piled high with yellow apples, were a blaze of gold. It was an amazing conglomeration, a whole world, in fact, besides the milling of the water—the tall chimney of the laundry-boat, the static chain of the dredger, the heaps of sand on the opposite wharf—that filled the enormous trough cut out from one horizon to the other. Then, with the sky blotted out again, the river was once more a stream of darkness amid the rattle of the thunder.

"I can't bear it! I can't bear it! Oh, what am I going to do?"

It began to rain again, hard. Driven by the gale, the rain swept along the embankment as if a flood-gate had been opened.

"Come along now, let me get indoors," said Claude. "I've had enough of this!"

Both of them were rapidly getting soaked to the skin. By the pale glimmer of the gas-lamp on the corner of the Rue de la Femmesans-Tête, he could see the rain streaming off her clothes, her wet garments clinging to her body, as the rain beat against the door. He began to feel sorry for her. After all, he had once taken pity on a stray dog on a night like this! But he was annoyed with himself for letting himself be moved. He never took women to his room. He treated them all as if he neither knew nor cared about them, hiding his painful timidity behind an exterior of bluster and off-handedness. And this girl must have thought him unutterably stupid to try to waylay him with such a ridiculous, unconvincing tale. However, he ended up by saying:

"We've both had enough of this. Come on in. . . . You can sleep in my studio."

This only increased her dismay and she made a move to get out of the doorway.

"Your studio! Oh no! No, I couldn't, really I couldn't. . . . I must get to Passy somehow. Won't you please, please take me to Passy?"

At this he really lost his temper. Why the devil was she making all this fuss? Wasn't he offering her shelter for the night? He had rung the bell twice already, and now the door swung open and he pushed the girl inside.

"But I can't, I tell you, I . . ."

The flash of the lightning startled her and when the thunder roared again she leaped inside, hardly realising she was doing so. The heavy door swung to behind her and she found herself in total darkness in an enormous porch.

"It's me, Madame Joseph," Claude called to the concierge. Then he whispered to the girl: "Take hold of my hand. We've got to get across the courtyard."

She offered no more resistance, but, worn out, bewildered, she gave him her hand and, side by side, they dashed out through the driving rain. It was a spacious baronial courtyard, with stone arcades faintly visible through the darkness. When they reached cover again, at a kind of narrow vestibule without a door, he let go her hand and she heard him swearing as he tried to strike match after match. As they were all damp, it meant groping their way upstairs in the dark.

"Keep hold of the rail, and go carefully. The steps are pretty steep."

Wearily, and with many a stumble, she clambered up three inordinately long flights of narrow back stairs, and then, he told her, they had to go down a long corridor. He led the way and she followed, feeling her way along the wall, on and on, back towards the part of the house overlooking the river. At the end, there were more stairs, up to the attic this time, one steep flight of rough wooden steps without a handrail which creaked and swayed like a ladder. The landing at the top was so tiny that the girl collided with Claude as he tried to find his key. At last he opened his door.

"Don't go in," he said. "Wait, or you're sure to bump into something or other."

So she stayed where she was, panting for breath, her heart