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GERMINAL



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EMILE ZOLA

GERMINAL

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY LEONARD TANCOCK

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GERMINAL

ÉMILE ZOLA, born in Paris in 1840, was brought up at Aix-en-Provence in an atmosphere of struggling poverty after the death of his father in 1847. He was educated at the Collège Bourbon at Aix and then at the Lycée Saint-Louis in Paris. He was obliged to exist in poorly paid clerical jobs after failing his *baccalauréat* in 1859, but early in 1865 he decided to support himself by literature alone. Despite his scientific pretensions Zola was really an emotional writer with rare gifts for evoking vast crowd scenes and for giving life to such great symbols of modern civilizations as factories and mines. When not overloaded with detail, his work has tragic grandeur, but he is also capable of a coarse, 'Cockney' type of humour. *L'Assommoir*, arguably his masterpiece, has both in full measure. From his earliest days Zola had contributed critical articles to various newspapers, but his first important novel, *Thérèse Raquin*, was published in 1867, and *Madeleine Féral* in the following year. That same year he began to work on a series of novels intended to follow out scientifically the effects of heredity and environment on one family: *Les Rougon-Macquart*. The work contains twenty novels which appeared between 1871 and 1893, and is the chief monument of the French Naturalist Movement. On completion of this series he began a new cycle of novels, *Les Trois Villes: Lourdes, Rome, Paris* (1894-6-8), a violent attack on the Church of Rome, which led to another cycle, *Les Quatre Evangiles*. He died in 1902 while working on the fourth of these.

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LEONARD TANCOCK spent most of his life in or near London, exceptions being a year as a student in Paris, most of the 1939-45 war in Wales, and three periods in American universities as visiting professor. Until his death in 1986, he was a Fellow of University College, London, and was formerly Reader in French at the university. Since preparing his first Penguin Classic in 1949 he was intensely interested in problems of translation, about which he wrote, lectured and broadcast, and which he believed to be an art rather than a science. His numerous translations for the Penguin Classics include Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, *The Debacle* and *L'Assommoir*; Diderot's *The Nun*, Rameau's *Nephew* and D'Alembert's *Dream*; Maupassant's *Pierre and Jean*; Marivaux's *Up from the Country*; Constant's *Adolphe*; La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims*; Voltaire's *Letters on England*; Madame de Sévigné's *Selected Letters*; and de Goncourt's *Germaine Lacerteux*.

Introduction

ON 10 August 1932 André Gide wrote in his *Journal*: 'Germinal, which I am reading for the third (or fourth) time, seems more admirable than ever.' He chose it as one of the ten best novels in the French language.

On the other hand it has frequently been pointed out that this novel (and indeed many others of Zola) is unsubtle and crude, oversimplified and melodramatic, psychologically rudimentary and improbable . . . and many other equally unpleasant-sounding things. The picture it draws, we are told, is bestial and insulting to our dignity as human beings, its language coarse and obscene, its style repetitive and emphatic. Nor have the psycho-analysts failed to find in the violent sexual matter clues to Zola's own spiritual and bodily condition.

It is a pity that so many professional critics devote their ingenuity to explaining how an artist could have done something quite different much better, how he could have improved his work out of all recognition by doing what he never intended to do. Such critics tend to forget that the critic's job is not to indulge in irrelevant smartness at the artist's expense, but to try by patience and insight to find out what the artist meant to do, and then to estimate how well he has succeeded in doing it. To accuse *Germinal* of indelicacy of matter and coarseness of form is as irrelevant as to blame *Alice in Wonderland* for avoiding the harsh facts of life in nineteenth-century industrial England.

Fortunately Zola's own notes and preliminary sketches set out his intentions unmistakably:

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 on the miners.