

# EARTH

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ÉMILE ZOLA

*Preface by*  
•ANGUS WILSON

LONDON ELEK NEW YORK

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THE setting is La Beauce, rich wheat-growing plainland of France, on the eve of the 1870 war. The theme is the land, and the peasants' passion for it; their obsessing greed destroys all humanity in them. Fouan, a peasant-proprietor grown too old to farm, divides his property—like Lear, with no Cordelia—among his three children. He lives with each in turn, and is victimised by each—finally, horribly martyred by his youngest son. Interwoven with the Fouan story is that of Jean Macquart, decent artisan turned countryman, whose patient wooing of young Françoise Fouan involves him in the tragedy. Zola's story is realism at its starkest, redeemed by deep social significance and imaginative power.

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## PREFACE

THE publication of Zola's *La Terre* in a good and complete English translation available to the general reading public is a literary event of first rate importance. There may be question about the exact place of Emile Zola among the great novelists of the nineteenth century; there can be no question about his being among them. *La Terre* is the culmination of his genius. It seems almost incredible that so tremendous a work, the final and overwhelming confluence of the two great nineteenth century rivers of romanticism and social realism, should have been withheld from the main body of English readers for nearly seventy years. The answer is at once very simple and very English. *La Terre* was the victim of one of those periodic and distasteful exhibitions of moral indignation which still unfortunately besmirch the good sense and rational decency of this country.

Since the publication of this new translation is a satisfactory if belated vindication of those, not least Zola himself, who were the victims of that unsavoury demonstration of Anglo Saxon self-righteousness, it may not be amiss to mention shortly the circumstances which attended the original attempt to publish *La Terre* in translation. The episode may perhaps illustrate the absurdities which inevitably attend the judgment of great works of art by an irrelevant censorship based upon an uninstructed and purely fragmentary reading of them. What makes the incident so instructive, perhaps, is the fact that the first reactions to *La Terre* in France and in England were largely the same, the results of those reactions so dismally different.

*La Terre* first appeared in serial form in France in 1886. Zola had already placed most of the idols of French *bourgeois* society under the strange magnifying glass of his personal vision. He had, like all great geniuses, a diseased vision which somehow saw a greater truth than all the healthy, ordinary people around him. Everything that came beneath his gaze was at once more detailed, more logical, blacker and fiercer than it appeared to other men. It was patently distorted and yet it was also monstrously and frighteningly true. Family life in the middle class world was not, of course, all adultery. The poor were not wholly sunk in a deadening round of drunkenness and fornication. Not all cocottes were like Nana possessed with greed for money, not all financiers swept along by insane schemes of

speculation like Aristide Saccard. Yet there was in all these pictures a truth that gave the lie to the rosy legends on which nineteenth century society fed its ease and self satisfaction. In turn, his books exposed the myths of the 'sanctity of the home', 'the happy thrift of the very poor', the 'good heartedness of tarts', and the 'integrity of finance'. Now with *La Terre* he hit and hit with all his force at the most cherished of all French *bourgeois* illusions—'the simple goodness of the peasants'. It was not surprising that there was a great outcry. Five younger and ambitious authors, almost certainly with the complicity of Zola's jealous contemporary lions Alphonse Dauder and Edmond de Goncourt, published a manifesto in the daily press against the new novel and hinted that Zola's preoccupation with sex was due to personal impotence. Even Anatole France, usually so admiring of Zola's work, condemned it roundly. Not a little of this outcry was due as Maupassant pointed out to Zola, to the serial method of publication which did not allow the work to be judged as a whole. It was just this piecemeal method that the English jury were to use in condemning the work two years later, but they had the whole book before them to read. Despite much indignation, however, *La Terre* was soon recognised in France as one of the master's most important novels. So dissimilar a writer as Mallarmé praised it highly. It was read by thousands and has continued to be so ever since.

Very different was the fate that attended the English translation which appeared in 1888. Published by the original and enterprising firm of Vizetelly, father and son, it was soon attacked by W. T. Stead, the watchdog of public morality, in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. The National Vigilance Association took up the cry. Although a motion was put forward in the House of Commons, the Government was unwilling to pursue the matter; a private prosecution, however, followed. Sir Edward Clarke had only to read the passage about the mating of the bull, for the horrified jury to request to hear no more. Vizetelly was fined £100 and *La Terre* in other than mangled form was removed from the gaze of almost all readers of the English language until 1954. Almost but not quite all, for in the last decade of the nineteenth century the Lutetian Society issued translations of Zola's major works for strictly limited circulation. Those critics, and there are still many cultivated people among them, who still regard Zola as a writer of dead social realism, of blue books in fictional form, should note that the translator of *La Terre* was the poet Ernest Dowson.

Enough, however, has been said by way of cautionary tale about the sensational views taken of *La Terre*. Zola was a sensualist and a puritan. It is not really surprising that so many Englishmen should have found such a combination so difficult to accept, for it is pre-eminently our national character, though it is seldom admitted so. What sort of a book was this novel which so deeply disturbed many of its readers?

*La Terre*, as its title implies, is the epic of land hunger and land lust. The Fouans, the peasant family in the plain of the Beauce around Chartres, live, think and love only in terms of the land they possess. For it they marry and cheat and murder, and in its back-breaking cultivation they are themselves worn down and destroyed. They crawl and labour over the plain like ants, and in a single night a hailstorm can make nonsense of all their self-denials and cruelties and dedication. With few exceptions, they are obstinate, cunning and brutal, yet there is not one, not even that most perfectly 'wicked' of nineteenth century fictional characters Buteau, who has not some strange quality of humanity, of potential 'goodness' that makes them the object of pity as well as of horror.

The plot of the book is a simple one—the Lear theme of a father who divides his inheritance and is hounded to death by his children for the small savings that his peasant cunning has urged him to keep upon his person. But the very simplicity of theme allowed Zola as in no other of his works to develop all his gifts to the full. In no other novel are there so many over-life-sized, utterly convincing characters; the Fouan father, dogged, suspicious, worn out by work, still occasionally bursting forth with a parody of his once terrible patriarchal rage, receiving from his children only the treatment he had given to his father, yet like all men not really believing it could happen to *him*; La Grande, his sister, the ninety year old woman with her stick and her look that alone secures obedience, far too hard and fierce to make her brother's mistake of believing in the mercy of her kin; Hyacinthe, the eldest son, called Jésus-Christ, the *Je m'en foutiste*, ex-soldier tramp, who alone cares more for what money can buy than for gold, hated by the village for his blasphemous attitude to possession, yet somehow respected like a holy clown for his mockery of all that is sacred; Buteau, the youngest son, with so much that is easy-going and so much that more imaginative turning eventually out of fear and distrust into the most brutal and insane of all the land worshippers—these are all masterpieces of horror. But, perhaps, the greatest triumph of all lies in



Françoise, the young heroine. From the moment in the first chapter when, at fourteen years, she helps the bull to mate, she remains, unlike any nineteenth century heroine, simple, dignified, gentle, yet never for one minute taken out of the context of the coarseness and lustfulness of her background.

There is, indeed, in this novel as in few of Zola's other works a blending of violence and lyricism that is masterly. The drama, the imagery, the evocation of atmospheres one expects to be good, for they were Zola's stock-in-trade, but in *La Terre* we find excellence in a quality not usually associated with his work. Dr. Hemmings in his recent excellent study has rightly emphasised the importance of humour in *La Terre*. In *L'Assomoir* he had already proved his powers in that irony of the grotesque more usually associated with Dickens or Flaubert. In *La Terre* his irony excels—the peasants gathered around listening to a reading of a Napoleonic propaganda leaflet about the nobility of peasant life and wondering where this Utopia exists—'*si tu as la paix du coeur*' say the pamphlets, '*ta fortune est faite*', '*l'argent seul est bon*', their hearts reply; the whole story of the *petit propriétaire* M. Charles with his wealth derived from the brothel in Chartres and his genteel, convent trained, bon-bon fed granddaughter only too ready to run the family business on more modern lines—these are Zola at his funniest. But there is another vein of humour in *La Terre* which I do not think can be found in any nineteenth century writer. Rabelaisian humour is often too self-conscious, too self-satisfiedly earthy to please, but the famous farting scene in which Jésus-Christ drives away the inspector from his hovel is as successful as it is unique.

The reputation of Zola so long at an ebb in England cannot but profit from this excellent translation of his greatest, his most 'Zolaesque' novel.

ANGUS WILSON

## FIRST PART

### I

THAT morning, Jean was in the fields, holding open with his left hand a blue canvas seedbag knotted round his waist; with his right he brought out a fistful of corn and scattered it broadcast with a single flick of the wrist, every three steps. As he swung rhythmically along, his heavy clogs sank in the rich soil and came away thickly-caked. And at each throw, through the ceaselessly flying golden grain, gleamed the two red stripes on the sleeve of the army jacket he was wearing out. He strode on in solitary grandeur; and a harrow slowly followed, burying the seeds. Two horses, whom the waggoner urged on with long regular whipcracks over the ears, were harnessed to the harrow.

The strip of land, scarcely an acre and a quarter in size, lay at the spot known as Les Cornailles, and was so insignificant that M. Hourdequin, proprietor of La Borderie, had not bothered to send down the drill, which anyway was busy elsewhere. Jean, travelling over the field due north, was directly facing towards the farm-buildings about a mile and a quarter away. At the end of the furrow, he raised his eyes and stared blankly, pausing to recover his breath.

In front were the low farm-walls, a brown patch of old slates, stranded on the edge of the plain of La Beauce which stretched as far as Chartres. Under the enormous sky, an overcast sky of late October, the ten leagues of arable land at this time of the year were broken into great ploughed squares of bare rich yellow earth alternating with green expanses of lucerne and clover—the whole scene, without a single hillock, without a single tree, blurring away and sinking down to a horizon-line as clear and rounded as at sea. Only towards the west a little wood fringed the sky with a reddish band. In the centre the road from Châteaudun to Orléans, white as chalk, ran straight on for four leagues, stringing out along its course the geometric progression of telegraph poles. And that was all, except for three or four wooden mills on log bases with unmoving sails. Villages formed little islands of stone, a steeple stuck up out of a dip in the earth some way off, with the church itself out of sight among the gentle undulations of this land of corn.

Jean turned round, and went swinging off again due south, holding the seedbag in his left hand and slashing out an unceasing scatter of grain from his right. Facing him, quite close, he had the narrow valley of the Aigre, which cut like a ditch across the plain; beyond it La Beauce stretched in its vastness right to Orléans. The only sign of meadows and shady spots was a row of tall poplars whose yellowish tips lifted up out of the hollow, just clearing its rim and looking like low bushes. Of the village of Rognes, built on the slope, only a few housetops were visible beside the church, which raised high its steeple of grey stone, the home of ancient families of crows. And eastward, past the valley of the Loir, where two leagues away nestled Cloyes, the canton's chief town, the distant hills of Le Perche were etched violet-tinged under the slate-grey light. Between Le Perche and La Beauce, on the very edge of La Beauce, in the area where the less fertile soil has won the name of Beauce the Lousy, stands the ancient Dunois, nowadays the District of Châteaudun. When Jean reached the field's end he stopped again, glanced down along the stream of the Aigre, glistening and rippling through the meadow-grasses and running alongside the Cloyes road which, that Saturday, was streaked with the tracks of peasants' carts on their way to market. Then he turned up and back.

And all the while, at the same pace with the same gesture, he went northward and then back southward, wrapped in the living dust-cloud of grain; while, behind him, the harrow, under the crack of the whip, buried the seeds with the same gentle, seemingly meditative movement. Constant rains had held up the autumn sowing; manuring had only been finished in August, and the plough-lands had long been ready, dug deep and cleared of clinging weeds, good for a fresh yield of corn after the clover and oats of the three-year crop rotation. And so the farmers were hurried on by fear of the frosts which threatened after the long rains. The weather had suddenly turned cold with sooty-coloured skies and not a breath of wind, with a drab level light spreading over the motionless sea of earth. On every side men were sowing. On the left, three hundred yards away, a second sower was at work; further along on the right, a third; and more and more, one opposite the other, were lost in the receding vista of flat fields. They showed up as little black silhouettes, mere strokes that dwindled till they faded out in the leagues of distance. Each man made the same gesture, the swing of broadcast grain, which seemed an enveloping wave of life. The plain itself took up the tremulous motion, right away into the

drowned distance, where the scattered sowers disappeared from sight.

Jean was going down for the last time when he noticed a big red-and-white cow coming from Rognes. A young girl, scarcely more than a child, was leading it by a halter. The small peasant girl and the animal were following the path that bordered the valley at the plateau edge; and Jean had turned his back, gone up the field and completed his last furrow, when a noise of running, mingled with stifled cries, made him lift his head again at the moment of taking up his seedbag ready to leave. The cow was galloping head-long over a field of lucerne, with the exhausted girl behind her desperately trying to stop her. Afraid that there'd be an accident, he shouted, 'Hey there! Let go!'

The girl took no notice. She panted and abused the cow in tones of anger and fear. 'La Coliche! Stop it, will you? La Coliche! You dirty brute! You damned bitch!'

So far, running and jumping as well as her short legs would let her, she had managed to keep up. But now she tripped, fell once, got to her feet, and fell again a little further on. Then, as the beast grew more frenzied, she was dragged along and began screaming. Her body left a furrow through the lucerne.

'Let go, damn it all!' Jean kept shouting. 'Let go, I say!'

He was shouting mechanically in his fear; for he too was running, realising at last what was wrong: the halter was knotted round the girl's wrist, tightening with every fresh pull. Fortunately, cutting across a ploughed field, he arrived so abruptly in front of the cow that the stupid creature, terrified, stopped dead. He at once untied the halter and sat the girl up on the grass.

'Anything broken?'

But she hadn't even fainted. She rose to her feet, felt herself, calmly lifted her skirt up to her thighs, to have a look at her smarting knees, still so breathless that she couldn't speak.

'There, that's where it stings, there . . . All the same, I can move, there's nothing serious. Oh, I was so scared! I was getting cut to pieces on the road!'

And, examining her strained wrist, encircled with red, she wet it with her spit and put her lips hard against it; then, quite relieved and recovered, she added with a deep sigh, 'La Coliche isn't vicious, you know, but ever since this morning she's had us all on edge—she's on heat. I'm taking her to the bull at La Borderie.'

'La Borderie?' repeated Jean. 'That's fine. I'm going back there, so I'll go with you.'

He went on addressing her familiarly, treating her like a bit of a girl, she was so slight for all her fourteen years. And she, with her chin in the air, was gravely considering this big nutbrown lad with his cropped hair, full-faced with regular features, whose twenty-nine years made him an old man in her eyes.

'Ah, yes, I know you, you're Corporal, the carpenter who stayed on as farm-hand at Monsieur Hourdequin's.'

Hearing the nickname the peasants had given him, the young man smiled; and in his turn he looked at her, surprised to find her almost a woman with her small firm breasts, oval-faced with deep black eyes and full lips as fresh and rosy as ripening fruit. She was dressed in a grey skirt and a black woollen bodice, with a round cap on her head, and her skin was very brown, tanned and gilded by the sun.

'And you're Old Mouche's youngest girl,' he cried, 'I didn't recognise you. That so, isn't it? Your sister was Buteau's sweetheart last spring, when he was working with me at La Borderie.'

She replied simply, 'Yes, I'm Françoise. My sister Lise went round with cousin Buteau, and now she's six months gone. . . . He skipped off, he's down Orgères way now, at La Chamade farm.'

'That's it,' Jean agreed. 'I've seen them together.'

And they stood there silent a moment, face to face, he smiling at what he'd seen when he surprised the two lovers behind a rick, she still licking her bruised wrist as if the moisture of her lips soothed the smart away. Meanwhile, in a neighbouring field, the cow was quietly tearing up tufts of lucerne. The waggoner with the harrow had gone off by a roundabout way to the road. The cawing of the two crows wheeling round and round the church-steeple could be heard, and the three strokes of the Angelus clanged through the lifeless air.

'What! Midday already!' exclaimed Jean. 'We'd better get a move on.'

Then, noticing La Coliche in the field, he said, 'Look, your cow's doing some damage. If anyone saw her . . . . Just wait, you old bitch, I'll give you lucerne.'

'No, let her alone,' Françoise interrupted him. 'That belongs to us, that plot. The trollop, she brought me down on my bottom in our own land. Our family owns the whole side as far as Rognes. We

reach right from here to over there. The next lot belongs to Uncle Fouan. Then, beyond that, the land belongs to my aunt, La Grande.'

While she was pointing out the lots, she led the cow back to the pathway. And it was only then, as she once more held the halter in her hand, that she thought of thanking the young man.

'Anyway, I ought to be very grateful to you. And I do thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart.'

They had begun walking, taking the narrow road that skirted the valley before losing itself in the fields. The last peal of the Angelus had just died away, and only the cawing of the crows was heard. And behind the cow, which tugged at the halter, the pair moved on without further conversation, sunk back into the silence of peasants who can tramp on together, league after league, without exchanging a word. They glanced at the drill drawn by horses, that passed close by on the right; the ploughman shouted 'Good-day!' and they answered 'Good-day', in the same solemn tone. Down the hill on their left, traps went driving in a continual line along the road to Cloyes; the market didn't open till one o'clock. They jolted heavily on their two wheels, looking like grasshoppers, so dwarfed by distance that only the white specks of the women's caps stood separately out.

'Uncle Fouan and Aunt Rose are down there, they're going to see the notary,' said Françoise, her eyes fixed on a vehicle the size of a nutshell, racing along about a mile away. She had a sailor's long sight, as is common among plains-folk trained to catch details and recognise man or beast in the tiny hurrying spot of a silhouette.

'Ah, yes, I heard about that,' Jean answered. 'So it's decided, eh? The old man is dividing his property up between his daughter and his two sons?'

'Yes, it's decided, they're all meeting to-day at Monsieur Baillehache's place.'

She kept her eyes on the speeding trap.

'As for the rest of us, we don't give a rap, none of us will get any fatter or thinner through it. . . . Except for that Buteau. My sister thinks he might marry her when he gets his share.'

Jean began laughing. 'That fellow Buteau! Used to be a friend of mine. He gets away with it, telling tales to the girls. But he can't do without them, though. He treats 'em rough if he can't get 'em by kindness.'

'He's a swine, that's all there is to it,' declared Françoise in a decided voice. 'It's not right to play such a dirty trick on your

cousin and leave her in the family way.' And then sharply, in a fit of anger, she called, 'La Coliche! You wait, I'll make you skip. There she is, at it again. She's crazy, she is, when she gets this way.'

With a furious jerk, she pulled the cow back. At this point the road ceased skirting the plateau. The traps disappeared, and the two of them went walking along flat ground, with nothing visible right or left but an endless stretch of cultivated fields. Between the ploughlands and the artificial meadows, the path went on dead flat, without a single bush, to end at the farm which looked near enough to be touched, yet kept receding under the ashen sky. The pair relapsed into silence, never once opening their lips, as if overwhelmed by the contemplative gravity of La Beauce, so mournful and so fecund.

On arrival they found that La Borderie's big square yard, closed in on three sides by cowshed, sheepcotes and barns, was deserted. But straightaway at the kitchen door appeared a young woman, short in stature, with a bold attractive look.

'What's up, Jean—not eating this morning?'

'I'm just going to, Madame Jacqueline.'

Since the daughter of Cognet, road-mender of Rognes, who used to be called La Cognette when she was dishwasher at the farm at the age of twelve, had risen to the rank of her master's mistress, she had turned despotic and insisted on being treated like a lady.

'Ah, it's you, Françoise,' she went on. 'Come for the bull. . . Well, you'll have to wait. The cowman's at Cloyes with Monsieur Hourdequin. But he'll be back, he ought to be here now.' Then, as Jean turned to enter the kitchen, she caught him round the waist, pressing herself up against him with a laughing air, without bothering about being seen, greedy for love and not satisfied with the master.

Françoise, left alone, patiently waited, sitting on a stone bench facing the manure pit which took up a third of the yard. Without a thought in her head she watched a band of fowls pecking away and warming their feet on the broad low bed of manure which was steaming in the cool air with a thin bluish vapour. An hour and a half later, when Jean came out again, finishing off a slice of bread and butter, she hadn't stirred an inch. He sat down beside her, and as the cow fidgetted, swinging her tail and lowing, he said at last, 'It's a nuisance the cowman isn't back.'

The young girl shrugged her shoulders. She wasn't in a hurry. Then, after another silence, she remarked, 'So, Corporal, you're called Jean, just Jean, eh?'

'Why, no. I'm Jean Macquart.'

'And you don't come from these parts?'

'No, I'm a Provençal, from Plassans, a town down south.'

She raised her eyes to study him, surprised that people could come from so far away.

'After Solférino,' he went on, 'eighteen months ago, I came back from Italy, discharged, and another soldier brought me along this way. Then, the way it worked out, my old trade of carpentering didn't suit me any longer, and one thing and another led me to stay on at the farm.'

'Ah,' she said simply, without taking her big black eyes from his face.

But at that moment La Coliche sent out a long despairing low of desire, and a hoarse snort replied from the cowshed, through the closed door.

'There now,' cried Jean. 'César, the old devil, heard her. Listen, he's talking away in there. Oh, he knows his business all right, you can't bring one of 'em into the yard without him knowing what he's wanted for. . . .' Then, interrupting himself, he went on, 'The cowman must have stayed with Monsieur Hourdequin. I'll bring out the bull for you, if you like. We could manage the job between us.'

'Oh, yes, that's a good idea,' said Françoise, rising.

As he opened the cowshed door, he asked her, 'Does your beast have to be tied up?'

'Tied up? Oh, no, it's not worth the trouble. She's quite ready. She won't budge.'

As the door opened, the thirty farm cows could be seen in two rows with a path along the middle separating them. Some were lying down in their litter, others were crunching the beets in their mangers; and one of the bulls, a black Friesian with white patches, stretched out his neck, in anticipation of his task, from the corner where he was tied.

As soon as he was loose, César came slowly out. But he suddenly stopped as if taken aback by the fresh air and daylight, and stayed a moment motionless, bracing himself on his legs, with his tail nervously flicking, his neck swollen, his muzzle outstretched to sniff. La Coliche, without moving, turned her large blank eyes towards him, lowing more gently. Then he came on, rubbed against her, laid his head on her rump with an abrupt rough pressure; his tongue was lolling out, and he pushed her tail aside with it and licked her



down to the thighs. The cow, letting him have his way, still made no movement, except that her skin wrinkled all over with a quick quivering. Jean and Françoise watched with serious faces, their hands hanging loosely at their sides.

And when he was ready, César mounted La Coliche, in a sudden jump, with such heavy force that he shook the ground. She didn't give and he gripped her flanks with his forelegs. But she, a well-built creature from the Cotentin, was so tall and broad that he, of a smaller breed, couldn't manage. He knew what was wrong, tried to get further up, and failed.

'He's too small,' said Françoise.

'A bit,' replied Jean, 'doesn't matter, he'll get in all the same.'

She shook her head; and seeing that César was still fumbling about and getting exhausted, she made up her mind. 'No, he'll have to be helped. If he doesn't get properly in, it'll be sheer loss. She won't hold it.'

With a calm and watchful expression, as if undertaking an important task, she had drawn nearer. Her intense concentration deepened the black of her eyes and parted the red lips in her immobile face. There was nothing for it: she lifted her hand in a sweeping gesture, grasped the bull's member full in her hand and raised it up. And the bull, feeling himself on the edge of achievement, with vigour restored, went right in with a single lunge of his loins, deep. Then he withdrew. The job was done; the thrust of the dibble that buries the seed. Stolid, with the empressive fertility of earth which is sown with seed, the cow had absorbed the fecundating jet of the male without a stir. She had not even trembled at the shock. And he was already down, shaking the ground under him once more.

Françoise, after letting go, kept her arm lifted. But now at last she let it drop, and said, 'Well, that's that.'

'A good job,' Jean answered with an air of conviction, with the good worker's satisfaction at work well and speedily completed. He never thought of making one of the lewd jokes that the farm boys bandied about with the girls who brought their cows to be served by the bull. This bit of a girl seemed to find it all so simple and necessary that in all honesty there was nothing to laugh about. It was nature.

But during the last few moments Jacqueline had come out again on the doorstep, and with a characteristic gurgle, she cried out gaily, 'Ah, you're a handy girl for a tight corner. Got a lover that doesn't know his way about?'