

ZOLA: THE HONOR OF FRANCE

In him they prosecuted the artist's right to judge, to proclaim the truth — a right which is assailed when the writer is warned: "No politics!"

By **LOUIS ARAGON**

Paris, by mail.

AFTER the storm, men usually go out to see what has remained standing in their orchards. And when the storm of war has passed, we people of France are in the habit of taking stock of our glories, of rearranging a little the history of our loftiest ideas in line with history itself. Thus our literature seems to have seasons separated by the thunder of cannon. The War of 1870 was a watershed date in the century which really began in 1815, when Napoleon fell; and 1914 also seems to have closed a long chapter of novels and poems. Today we speak of a literature between wars; and as I write, there is much talk of the beginning of a new era in writing.

Nothing, however, explains these classifications which are based on new or different works. It would not be difficult to show how artificial these cleavages are. Yet the human mind seems to find it necessary to think in such terms. Apparently the very ones who think that literature, art and thought are independent of events, detached from everyday life, acknowledge, by the chronological approach they generally use, that history takes precedence over literary history, that in reality nothing written, sung, thought or painted is unaffected by the brutal history common to all men.

That is why, in the orchard of France, in the midst of ravages such as it has never known, we feel more than ever duty-bound to point out that the great French figures remain standing. Their staunchness in the face of the most violent winds is a pledge of our future. That is why the almost ritual regularity of the pilgrimage to

Medan, to the spot where Emile Zola lived and died, takes on the character of a precious testimonial, a national testimonial. It attests to the vitality of both Zola's works and those ideas which found in him their most striking interpreter at a moment in world history and in the history of our country when those forces which we have just swept away, together with the foreign invader, raised their heads in France.

So we must not be surprised if that great conspiracy of stupidity and hatred which surrounded the life of Emile Zola has not disarmed. Nor that the name of Zola is still, after almost half a century and in quite a special way, the object of passion, injustice, insults and curses, as though the man were still alive. In this country there is a caste of madmen who go about foaming at the mouth, uttering big words that belong to everybody yet which they claim as their exclusive monopoly. We saw this caste, when the Germans invaded our land, mouth the same usurped words—"honor," "traditions" and "fatherland"—as they became the vile accomplices of the foreign looters and hangmen. This caste, hard put to hide behind a purely verbal nationalism the defense of interests that know no boundaries save those of their bank accounts, this caste whose threats and clamor were unable to silence Emile Zola, this caste today—believe me—writhes at the very mention of the great man's name.

IN A recent book devoted to the master of Medan, the author, with the best intentions in the world, asserts that he means to deal with Zola with-

out pausing to consider "subdued passions which are now nothing but dead passions." No doubt he has rarely had occasion to talk to members of the caste I have mentioned. Had he done so, he would have found out that the same passions provoked by the notorious Esterhazy *bordereau* (memorandum) are far from dead.

Of course, we must understand this in a somewhat broader sense: we will never speak in a valid way of Zola if we seek to separate him from what constitutes his greatness, linking him with the history of our people. The illusion that it is possible to consider Zola apart from politics is frankly an illusion which profits only those who were and have remained enemies of Zola. It is an illusion that aids the very caste which, from General de Pellieux down to Marshal Petain, has always denounced the policies of the nation in order to impose its own dictatorship. How like our contemporary fascists—members of the French Legion of Volunteers and Darnand's S.S. men—were all those creatures of high society involved in the Dreyfus Case, the veiled woman and the forgers on the General Staff, all of them curious figures like Major Esterhazy himself! The resemblance of that world with the world of Vichy should be enough to show that it is in the interests of that caste, but not in the interests of France, to have people forget the circumstances surrounding Zola's works, glossing over them as regrettable passions now happily dead, as political dross. We, the



Louis Aragon.

French people, are the heirs of Zola, of all of Zola, and we mean to read, study, and understand him without emasculating him.

On Feb. 12, 1898, testifying at the trial of the author of the Rougon-Macquart series instituted by the War Ministry, Jean Jaures declared: "In him they indict the man who has insisted on a rational and scientific interpretation of miracles; in him they indict the man who, in *Germinal*, foresaw the unfolding of a new humanity, the blossoming of the wretched proletariat rising from the depths of suffering toward the sun; in him they indict the man who has just shaken the dangerous and arrogant General Staff out of its irresponsibility in which all the disasters of our fatherland were unconsciously being prepared. . . ." Oh, what a fine frenzy, what strident protests these words evoked! Jaures, the Jaures they were to assassinate sixteen years later (just as not so long ago they assassinated the Dreyfusard, Victor Basch), Jaures dared to say that the disasters of the fatherland were being prepared in the little offices of those incompetent "brass hats!"

The history of France has shown that its disasters were not always unconsciously prepared, as the generous-hearted Jaures asserted. But Jaures was right: it was not only because of his *P'Accuse* that Zola was placed on trial; it was because *P'Accuse* was the crown, the logical culmination, the natural evolution of all his work. Yes, they prosecuted him for *Germinal*, for *Lourdes* and for *La Debacle*, that book which still fills the men of the 1940 debacle with virtuous indignation!

Jaures was right. Technically, Zola was on trial for having made charges against Casimir Perier, President of the French Republic. But in reality he was on trial because he had accused an entire caste—and with all the authority of his great writings which are an indictment of that caste. By prosecuting Emile Zola, the writer, they prosecuted realism in literature. In him they prosecuted the writer's right to judge, to proclaim the truth, to call things by their right names. And, consciously or not, it is this right that is called into question and assailed when one says to the writer: *no politics!* when one wishes to extract from his works an Emile Zola in bronze or marble, whose muffled passions are now only dead passions.

There is an "appeasement" policy with regard to Zola's life, work and example. For fifty years our Republic has kept in the shadow certain things that are improper, "not nice"; thus our school-children find in their history textbooks three evasive lines on the Paris Commune and see the Dreyfus Case referred to as one of those regrettable episodes in which Frenchmen did not love one another. How absurd this ostrich-like policy of treating history is—this hyper-timidty of ignoramuses! We have just seen what it leads to: to Petain, Vichy, Darnand! For fifty years we have been blackmailed by the out-and-out reactionaries. The men like Charles Maurras who marked out Jaures for assassination in 1914 handed over all our patriots to the Gestapo from 1940 to 1944. They have terrorized our society, forbidding it to speak of the Dreyfus Case. But during this entire period they have not slackened, on the moral as well as the literary plane, the campaigns which saddened and darkened the last years of Zola's life. Those who dare to defend Zola, however, speak of him in a spirit of "appeasement": they cast a veil over the man who cried out to the jury about to condemn him: "I have not wished my country to persist in a lie and an injustice. You can punish me here. One day France will thank me for having saved her honor." They think they are acting wisely by separating the political from the literary. So during this period, the documents of the trial having disappeared, the men of lies and injustices have had an easy job of winning, both literarily and politically.

DO NOT say that I exaggerate, and that in the France of 1946 Zola occupies the position he deserves. That is not true—far from it. At the end of his life, having already given to France the great works which bore the name of France together with his own throughout the world, Zola was twice unjustly condemned. He was expelled from the Legion of Honor, as if he had never written *La Terre*, *Nana*, *Pot-Bouille* and *Germinal*. He had to go as an exile to England. Read everything he wrote on his return to France: read his letters to successive presidents of the Republic, his appeals to France which are almost the last cries of the living Zola: "We have been promised, in compensation, the justice of history.

It's a little bit like the Catholic paradise, which teaches patience on this earth to the wretched dupes gripped by hunger. . . . As for myself, I wish and hope that history's revenge will be more serious than the delights of paradise. But a little justice would have given me pleasure. . . ."

The end of Zola's life was one of the saddest pages of our history. The man who represented the French people's love of justice did not receive justice. Convicted in February 1898, Zola was forced to leave France on the eighteenth of July of that same year. ("July 18, 1898 will remain the most terrible date of my life, the one on which I bled with all my blood.") Less than two months later, on August 31, Colonel Henry, after confessing that he was the author of the forgery with which Dreyfus had been charged, committed suicide in his cell at Mont-Valerien. In June 1899, when Zola returned to France, the technical convictions against him were not quashed nor was he readmitted to the Legion of Honor. Dreyfus also returned to France in August 1899, almost a year after Colonel Henry's confession. On September 9, a court-martial again convicted him and Zola wrote: "I am horror-stricken. It is no longer anger, avenging indignation, the need to expose the crime and demand punishment in the name of truth and justice; it is horror, the sacred terror of the man who sees the impossible happen, rivers flow back to their source, earth rush toward the sun. And what I cry out is distress for our generous and noble France, fright at the abyss into which she is plunging."

He could not foresee the monstrous subtlety with which the forgers and accomplices were to complete a parody of justice: the amnesty law passed fifteen months later which, with ignoble generosity, treated innocent men as pardoned guilty ones. Emile Zola was fated to live only two months more. "But a little justice would have given me pleasure. . . ." A tragic phrase which remained without an answer.

But we who have seen Hitler in Paris, and the lie proclaimed truth by a marshal of France, sublime patriotism a crime, and treason a virtue—are we then unable to understand Zola's horror in the summer of 1899? As we read the proceedings of Zola's trial, how can we fail to recognize in that vicious audience in the Paris courtroom, whose

murmurs, shouts and laughs at every word of Zola and his defenders were unspeakably shameful, that audience we saw but yesterday at the trial of Petain and the traitorous admirals freely expressing its solidarity with the man of Montoire* and the assassins of our fleet? When he spoke of fright at the abyss into which France was plunging, could Zola even imagine the depths of the abyss into which we hurtled? And like him, we ask for a little justice.

WELL, the dead Zola is still waiting. Certain people are ready to give him his literary due; others even refuse him that. But in the schools they do not teach truth, which is the only justice. And the truth is summed up in a few words: at the end of the

* Scene of Hitler-Petain meeting in 1940 at which French-German "collaboration" was pledged. (*Translator's note.*)

nineteenth century, a parasitic caste having seized upon our army and our honor, using forgeries, third-degree tortures and flagrant lies, compromised our dearest and purest possession, the image of France, in the eyes of the world. And a great writer named Emile Zola rose up: by his courage and self-sacrifice he saved France's honor.

About twenty years ago the first part of my book *Le Paysan de Paris* (*The Peasant of Paris*) appeared in a magazine. In that same issue a critic and bad novelist—he has since been elected to the French Academy—wrote an article in which he blasted Zola, accusing him with crushing disdain of being *vulgar*. In that same piece he covered me with bouquets. That made me write him a letter of such a nature that for years and years he no longer dared write my name. I am not bringing this up for my own sake but to point out that this gentle-

man who found Zola "vulgar" was in Switzerland while the Germans ruled France. And there—is it surprising?—for four years he collaborated with open agents, paid agents of Hitlerite Germany! Twenty years ago when his sallies at the expense of Zola won the applause of the fashionable drawing-rooms, things were not so clear. But in order to enter the Academy it was even then necessary to flatter the caste that hates Zola and hates the common people of France, no doubt finding them "vulgar."

I only mention this mediocre writer as a symbol. Today events have brought out in a thousand different ways the nature of the persistent struggle against a great writer, one of the glories of France. Has the hour of justice for Zola, which he never knew on this earth, finally sounded? We would like to think so. Nevertheless I repeat: to render justice to Zola does not mean to render him literary justice. What Zola waited for, what he is still waiting for, is the condemnation of those who condemned him, of those who came close to compromising the honor of France. And who cannot see how timely that is, how much living passion it demands, how much French conscience it represents, the will to continue the struggle which began with *J'Accuse* and which our French fighters for freedom continued on our invaded soil from 1940 to 1944 against Vichy, against the caste of the Darquiers de Pelle-Poix and the Mayols de Luppe?* This is the meaning I should like to give to the commemoration of Zola's death. The only true justice that can be done to Emile Zola, expelled from the French Legion of Honor by men whose very names are today forgotten, is to continue the task undertaken by Zola, to draw strength from his example, to learn the lesson of man's never-ending struggle against darkness.

Emile Zola told us, in his testimony in the courtroom on Feb. 8, 1898, how every day he was insulted in the streets, his window-panes shattered. The kept press bespattered him with mud and treated him like a criminal. Zola spoke thus in the court to General de Pellieux: "I ask General de Pellieux if there are not different ways of serving France? One may serve her with the

* Notorious French fascists and anti-Semites. (*Translator's note.*)



Leo Tanenbaum.

sword and with the pen. General de Pellieux has no doubt won great victories. I have mine! I bequeath to posterity the name of General de Pellieux and that of Emile Zola: it will choose!"

Zola's enemies called him an insulter of the army, a bad Frenchman. But as a professor of the *Ecole Polytechnique*, Edouard Grimaux, declared at his trial: "The insulters of the army are those who rush about the streets shouting: *Long live the Army!* without shouting: *Long live the Republic!*—two cries which cannot be separated. They are the ones who cry: *Long live the Army!* *Death to Zola!* *Death to the Jews!*"

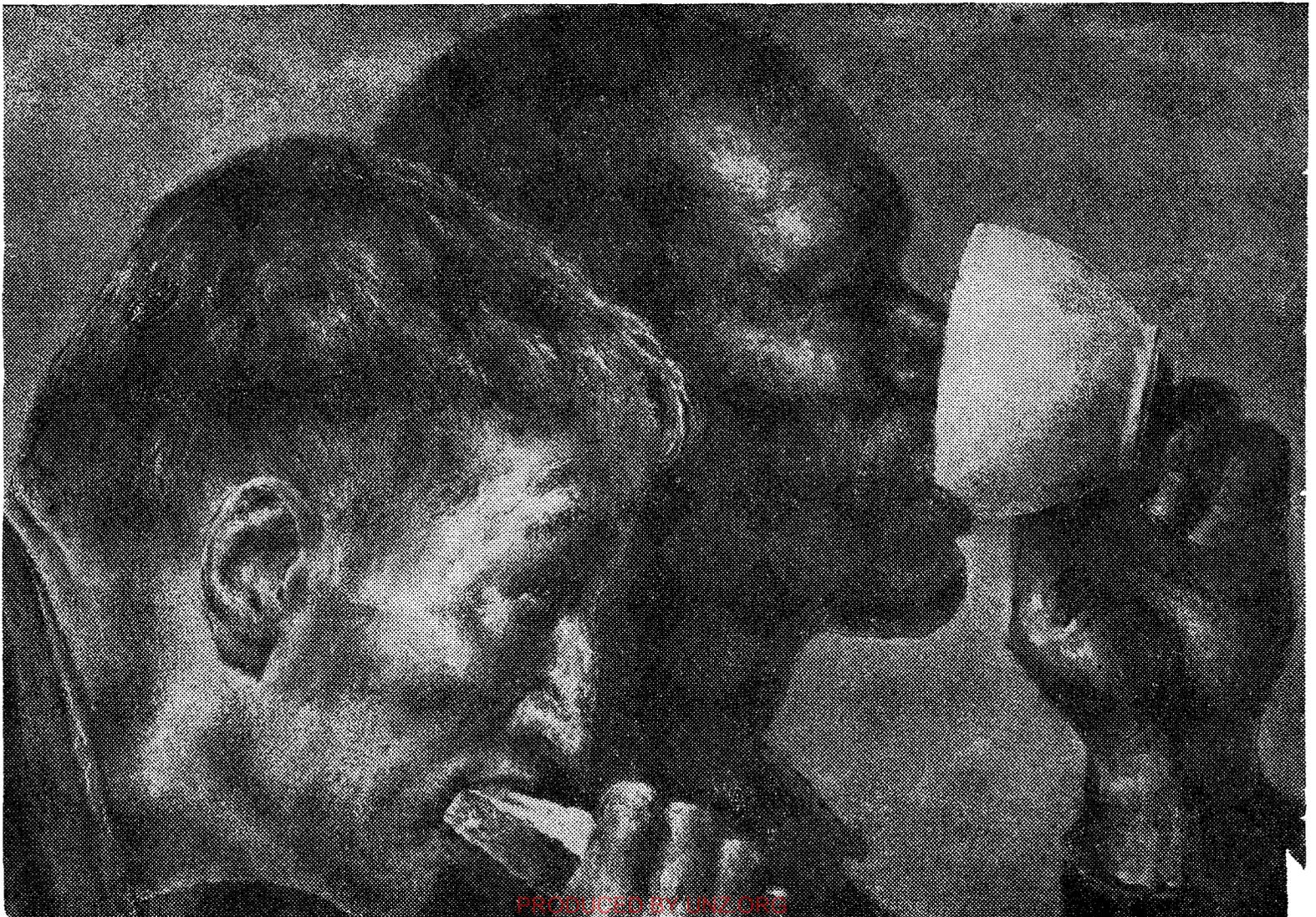
THOSE words are still as meaningful today. Those who today seek to build a Pretorian army, the army of their caste, in opposition to the Republic, are the enemies of the Republic and of the army. Of necessity they are aligned with those who would have shouted: *Death to Zola!* and who not so long ago yelled: *Death to the Jews!* Nor was it an empty slogan.

Those who seek to undermine the Republic, even though they may be the most glamorous military leaders, are of necessity enemies of our national army, the French army which proved its strength and worth by driving the invader from our soil in a bitter four-year struggle. Even though yesterday they were on the side of France, now they are of necessity allies of the anti-Semites, the Vichy caste and the enemies of France. Not all in their ranks realize it—but let them take heed of this fatal downward path to treason. Recent examples that have occurred should fill them with dismay. There are not three sides to the barricades. There are no other parties save that of France or that of its hangmen, who raise their heads again so soon after their defeat. There is no other choice before us: with Zola for France or with Esterhazy, with Maurras, with Petain against France.

Some people may object to my formula, "with Zola for France," as being disjointed. Those are the ones who always try to separate the literary

from the political and who now say: Zola is an esthete and France, even the Republic, has no esthetic. In the period of what he called "the experimental novel" Zola wrote: "There must be agreement between the social movement, which is the cause, and literary expression, which is the effect. If the Republic, blind to its own nature, not realizing that it exists by dint of a scientific formula, should ever persecute this scientific formula in literature, it would be a sign that the Republic is not ripe for the facts and that once again it must disappear before a single fact, dictatorship." Now as then we must stand with Zola, with realism—the right of the writer to judge, to tell the truth—if we wish to remain in the French camp against intellectual adventurism, against dictatorship. *There must be agreement between the social movement, which is the cause, and literary expression, which is the effect.* This is the striking truth which those who fish in troubled waters cannot tolerate. And they have redoubled their shouts these past months

"Banquet," lithograph by Joseph Hirsch. At the Associated American Artists Gallery through December 7.



because this truth has been reaffirmed somewhat forcefully in the land of socialism.

NO DOUBT it would have been pleasant to dwell on what is valuable and no longer valuable in the writings of Emile Zola. Perhaps I was expected to analyze the man's times and his personal genius; analyze the vocabulary of the Rougon-Macquart novels and the scientific concepts of their creator; oppose modern realism to naturalism; tell what we have learned and what Zola did not know; and so on down the line. Of course, Zola is the novelist of the second half of the nineteenth century and here we are almost midway in the twentieth. Of course, since he wrote his *Au Bonheur des Dames*, trusts have developed, just as airplanes came after the railroads. Of course, Zola has not said the last word in the field of the novel, any more than has Balzac.

Moreover, there is a left-wing criticism of Zola's novels which must not be confused with the squeals and insults of the reactionaries against this great writer. As I went along, I could

have examined Zola in that light, pointing out the inadequacies of naturalism, what is outmoded in the concept of the experimental novel. As early as 1891, Paul Lafargue, one of the most remarkable minds of French socialism, discussed Zola's *Money* in this light and initiated the kind of critical examination history forces us to make. But Lafargue wrote his critique several years before the inner logic of his work gave Zola the definitive stamp by which we identify him. Calling the naturalists armchair writers, Lafargue asserted: "Can anyone imagine that Dante would have written his *Divine Comedy* if, like a good Philistine, he had shut himself up within four walls, indifferent to public affairs, and had not passionately participated in the struggles of his epoch?" Without knowing it, Lafargue was here praising the Zola as we now can praise him.

Today I base this praise on what Paul Lafargue could not know of Emile Zola in 1891. And many will tell me that it is for the author of *J'Accuse* and not the author of *Nana* and the *Human Beast*. I will be told that first of all and above all, Emile

Zola is a great novelist, certainly the only French novelist whose name can be written down next to that of Balzac. I will be told that I should have spoken about Zola the writer. Those who say that have failed to understand me: for me, there is not the writer on the one hand and the political figure on the other. There is but one man—the man for whom I demand justice. To defend the Zola of the Dreyfus Case means to defend the entire evolution of his work, the whole development of his thought. Perhaps I might have limited myself to the stages of this development and dealt with Zola's novels one by one. But whether the enemies of enlightenment like it or not, are those novels not in the broad daylight of glory? What do they expect of me? What can I do for these books? They stand on their own. But to render justice, full justice, to Zola means not to discourse at length about his novels, not to analyze his books from a professor's podium. To do justice to Zola means to learn his lesson, to understand his example. It means to continue Zola, to continue France.

Translated by John Rossi.

DANGER ZONE IN GERMANY

Robert Penner is the pseudonym of an American Army officer recently returned from Germany.

AS I write the Council of Foreign Ministers may have begun its negotiations for a treaty with Germany. These talks are of direct and tremendous concern to me. They involve my whole future and the future of millions like me. For if the American government brings to these treaty discussions the same ideas it has been putting into practice in the American zone in Germany, my future is a shaky one indeed. It will not be a future of peace.

Since I have returned home I have continued reading the endless columns of print telling what the Americans are doing in Germany. I have read the stories in *Life*, *Time* and *Reader's Digest* on Military Government. To put it mildly these stories tell in a distorted way only a small part of what is going on. In such outfits as MG the easiest thing to detect are the incompe-

An eye-witness account of the failure of American MG "denazification" policy.

By ROBERT PENNER

tents and the corrupt. There are also honest men. But the fault does not lie with particular individuals. It lies in our policy. For in Germany we do have a policy, despite the talk that we have none. Our policy in essence is reactionary and part of the same world policy which alarms so many people in Europe and Asia.

Let me begin, nevertheless, by talking about MG's personnel. I agree that our personnel was and is inadequate both in numbers and ability. The men who enforce policy do not for the most part speak German. They know hardly anything of German history.

Even if the excuse of redeployment is accepted to explain the poor personnel it still does not account for the failures of American occupation. And here is where policy comes in. It was not until July 1945 that a directive on denazification was finally issued. Except for some minor changes it is still operative. That directive excluded from public office only those who were members of the Nazi party before May 1, 1937. But the fact is that the books of the Nazi party were closed from 1933 until May of 1937. And when the books were opened Germans were standing in long lines waiting to join. These Germans, therefore, cannot claim that they were misled into joining, for by 1937 Nazi policy was absolutely clear. Furthermore, there was no pressure on them to join. Yet MG mechanically set the date of May, 1937, and cleared all those who joined the Nazi party after that date.

This made matters "easy" for MG officers but it also cleared many Nazis, particularly industrialists and important