



Germinal

Emile Zola

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Germinal by Emile Zola - Translated and Introduced by Havelock Ellis 'GERMINAL' was published in 1885, after occupying Zola during the previous year. In accordance with his usual custom--but to a greater extent than with any other of his books except La Debacle--he accumulated material beforehand. For six months he travelled about the coal-mining district in northern France and Belgium, especially the Borinage around Mons, note-book in hand. 'He was inquisitive, was that gentleman', miner told Sherard who visited the neighbourhood at a later period and found that the miners in every village knew Germinal. That was a tribute of admiration the book deserved, but it was never one of Zola's most popular novels; it was neither amusing enough nor outrageous enough to attract the multitude. Yet Germinal occupies a place among Zola's works which is constantly becoming more assured, so that to some critics it even begins to seem the only book of his that in the end may survive. In his own time, as we know, the accredited critics of the day could find no condemnation severe enough for Zola. Brunetiere attacked him perpetually with a fury that seemed inexhaustible; Scherer could not even bear to hear his name mentioned; Anatole France, though he lived to relent, thought it would have been better if he had never been born. Even at that time, however, there were critics who inclined to view Germinal more favourably. Thus Faguet, who was the recognized academic critic of the end of the last century, while he held that posterity would be unable to understand how Zola could ever have been popular, yet recognized him as in Germinal the heroic representative of democracy, incomparable in his power of describing crowds, and he realized how marvellous is the conclusion of this book. To-day, when critics view Zola in the main with indifference rather than with horror, although he still retains his popular favour, the distinction of Germinal is yet more clearly recognized. Seilliere, while regarding the capitalistic conditions presented as now of an ancient and almost extinct type, yet sees Germinal standing out as 'the poem of social mysticism', while André Gide, a completely modern critic who has left a deep mark on the present generation, observes somewhere that it may nowadays cause surprise that he should refer with admiration to Germinal, but it is a masterly book that fills him with astonishment; he can hardly believe that it was written in French and still less that it should have been written in any other language; it seems that it should have been created in some international tongue. The high place thus claimed for Germinal will hardly seem exaggerated. The book was produced when Zola had at length achieved the full mastery of his art and before his hand had, as in his latest novels, begun to lose its firm grasp. The subject lent itself, moreover, to his special aptitude for presenting in vivid outline great human groups, and to his special sympathy with the collective emotions and social aspirations of such groups. We do not, as so often in Zola's work, become painfully conscious that he is seeking to reproduce aspects of life with which he is imperfectly acquainted, or fitting them into scientific formulas which he has imperfectly understood. He shows a masterly grip of each separate group, and each represents some essential element of the whole; they are harmoniously balanced, and their mutual action and reaction leads on inevitably to the splendid tragic dose, with yet its great promise for the future. I will not here discuss Zola's literary art (I have done so in my book of Affirmations); it is enough to say that, though he was not a great master of style, Zola never again wrote so finely as here. The title refers to the name of a month of the French Republican Calendar, a spring month. Germen is a Latin word which means "seed"; the novel describes the hope for a better future that seeds amongst the miners.

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