ETIENNE LANTIER AND FAMILY: TWO-TIMING IN
L'ASSOMMOIR AND GERMINAL

Besides the oft-commented upon alternation of linear and circular time in Zola, especially in the case of La Terre, there seems to be a combination of temporal rhythms at work in several of his novels "which alternates the orderly succession of linear [or modern] time, most often represented by the uninterrupted ticking of a clock, with the intermittent disruption of this smooth flow by violent and chaotic temporal eruptions, breaks, fissures [so-called psychological or primitive time]. At such break points, time slows down or stops or, conversely, speeds up recklessly." Circularity and linearity are not, in this scheme, conflicting temporal orders, but express rather harmony and predictability. The best example is the train schedule in La Bête humaine, which signifies exact, sequential temporal uniformity bolstered by the predictability of daily recurrence. The passing of the trains and the world of regularity it represents are transformed and eventually destroyed by passion, lafélure, murder and war, all characterized by unpredictability and temporal turmoil. Similarly, in La Faute de l'abbé Mouret, Serge's Christian life in the seminary and at the church in Les Artaud is disrupted by the temporal chaos of Le Paradou; in Une Page d'amour, the orderly chronometric time of Henriette's existence, spent for the most part in her room, is upset by the temporal vastness and anarchy of Paris.

L'Assommoir is a particularly clear example of such an alternation. It has been pointed out that Gervaise's strong desire for and temporary success at a methodical, bourgeois existence is represented by her clock, "cet indicateur du bon fonctionnement du foyer...[et d'] une vie de travail bien réglée": the clock's periodic ticking "encodes the even, constructive pace of her life." The pawning of the clock denotes in the clearest fashion Gervaise's life of drink and tardiness, "a final disorder in her tragic decline" (Duncan, 55).

However, Gervaise's lover, Auguste Lantier, is perhaps a better representative of chaos, at once political, spatial and temporal. His political tirades against the emperor and in favor of revolution - "Je veux la suppression du militarisme, la fraternité des peuples...Je veux l'abolition des privilèges, des titres et des monopoles...Je veux l'égalité des salaires, la répartition des bénéfices, la glorification du prolétariat...Toutes les libertés, entendez-vous! toutes!...Et le divorce" (2:606) - are frequent and problematical, even contradictory; Auguste is, after all, compared to an idle bourgeois and admits to having owned a hat factory (2:598), and is excluded by Zola himself from the working class. This chaotic political stance seems symbolized by the disorder of the newspapers he collects: "Il en avait un paquet énorme de toutes les dates et de tous les titres, empilés sans ordre aucun" (2:606). The point is not that he belongs to one class then another; rather, he seems to be nowhere, and everywhere, on the political spectrum,
all at the same time. And, quite literally, Auguste appears never to be anywhere; no one ever really knows where he lives, and he never tells: "Il ne voulait même pas dire où il demeurait. Non, il logeait chez un ami, là-bas, au diable...et il défendait aux gens de venir le voir, parce qu’il n’y était jamais" (2:598-99). The elder Lantier exerts a disruptive temporal influence throughout the novel: as it opens he is late returning home and on at least one occasion he keeps Coupeau from going to work, convincing him to stop at l’Assommoir where the roofer spends one more drunken, workless day and then disappears for another two (2:621-28). Auguste himself seems to escape sequential time altogether, for it is never clear how he spends his days: he never is, he is always, as he says, on the point of being, of working ("Il se disait sans cesse près de conclure une affaire superbe..."—2:598; "...il était sur le point de conclure une affaire superbe..."—2:649; "Il ne travaillait toujours pas, avait en vue des affaires de plus en plus considérables..."—2:730). Auguste Lantier’s revolutionary, temporally disruptive and chaotic existence contrasts sharply with Gervaise Macquart’s bourgeois ideal of orderly, clock-like precision.

Etienne Lantier, son of Gervaise and Auguste, inherits, in a more telling way than alcoholism, these contrasting attitudes towards time, and is pulled first one way, then another, unable to choose between the two. And in Germinal, he enters a world dominated precisely by these two opposing temporal orientations. He finds himself once again in the middle, caught not between his parents but this time between two competing temporal visions of the miners’ fate. At the crucial moment, Etienne is unable to choose between them, or rather, he refuses to choose, preferring to remain in the middle and have things both ways.

The miners’ lives are controlled by the clock; the Maheu family obeys the familial coucou as it signals the important parts of the work day. From the moment it strikes four o’clock and the beginning of yet another day (3:1143), "le coucou à cadran peinturluré, dont le gros tic-tac semblait remplir le vide du plafond" (3:1149) dominates the workers’ existence. In fact, in the first two parts of the novel, some 115 pages devoted to one twenty-four hour period, Zola gives us a detailed description of a typical day, with frequent, almost obsessive mention of the exact hour—we hear six and eight a.m. sound as well as three, five and seven p.m., all signaling another stage in the miners’ work schedule (3:1204, 1206, 1226, 1234). The clock-ruled existence is so deeply engrained in the workers that they seem no longer to need to be reminded of the hour; they have become efficient timepieces themselves: “Maheu avait une montre qu’il ne regarda même pas. Au fond de cette nuit sans astres, jamais il ne se trompait de cinq minutes” (3:1169).

Just as the workers are chained to this daily temporal routine at present, so have their fathers and mothers been and so will their children be. The Maheu family history is described by old Bonnemort in terms of its work in the mine, allegacy passed on from father to son, from generation to gener-