

Farm to Table: Appetites, Ambitions, and Migrations in Zola's Paris

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RÉSUMÉ

De l'arrivée de Florent sur une charrette de carottes en direction des Halles dans Le Ventre de Paris (1873), à l'ascension et à la chute carnivores de Gervaise dans L'Assommoir (1877), les œuvres d'Émile Zola détaillent les repas et les régimes alimentaires des personnages, fournissant de nouvelles cartographies du pouvoir qui dessinent un paysage politique, social et économique en pleine mutation. Cet article met en lumière l'exploration par Zola de la migration urbaine à travers les repas appréciés, recherchés ou refusés aux nouveaux citadins. En examinant l'économie du travail et de l'exploitation associée à la nourriture dans Le Ventre de Paris et surtout dans L'Assommoir, je montre comment l'auteur explore à plusieurs reprises la délocalisation urbaine à travers l'imagerie culinaire, des miroirs comestibles qui reflètent, déforment et préfigurent l'expérience qui attend les nouveaux arrivants dans la ville. Ce faisant, je souligne la pertinence de Zola dans le monde d'aujourd'hui, où les aliments et les boissons jouent un rôle de plus en plus symbolique, définissant à la fois les ambitions culinaires en constante évolution du citadin et la situation toujours précaire du migrant affamé et assoiffé.

ABSTRACT

From Florent's arrival atop a cart of carrots bound for Les Halles in Le Ventre de Paris (1873) to Gervaise's carnivorous rise and fall in L'Assommoir (1877), Émile Zola's works detail the meals of his characters, personal diets furnishing new cartographies of power that map a changing political, social, and economic landscape. This article highlights Zola's exploration of urban migration through the meals enjoyed or craved by his would-be city dwellers – or withheld from them. By examining the economy of labor and exploitation associated with food in Le Ventre de Paris and especially L'Assommoir, I show how the author repeatedly explores urban relocation through culinary imagery, edible mirrors that reflect, distort, and prefigure the experience that awaits new arrivals in the city. In so doing, I underline Zola's relevance in today's world, one where foods and beverages play an increasingly symbolic role, defining both the ever-evolving culinary ambitions of the city dweller and the ever-precarious plight of the hungry, thirsty migrant.

In 2021, the mayor of famously gastronomic Lyon incited outrage after he removed meat from the menu of local public schools. While the decision ostensibly stemmed from health concerns, the polemic quickly moved to arguments about the politics of school lunches and the values espoused by culinary selections. “Let's stop putting ideology on our children's plates,” tweeted Agriculture

Minister Julien Denormandie.¹ Similar outrage has surrounded the back-and-forth legal cases pertaining to pork-free alternative lunches in French schools,² a debate unearthing connections between French culinary identity and its principles of *laïcité* and highlighting that eating and diet have always been political, especially in their association with ethnicity and economic class. Beyond merely sustaining us, our food aligns us with a series of values and identities. This proves especially ubiquitous in the vocabulary surrounding a return to food that is “clean,” most notably the designation of “farm to table,” referencing the popular practice of eating local, fresh, farm-sourced food, though today that designation often ironically translates as expensive, elite, or inaccessible food.³ The vocabulary employed to describe this type of dining instantly codifies it as imparting a moral and hygienic goodness on those who can trace the shortest intermediary between their food production and consumption.

The culinary nationalism that led to bitter debates surrounding the school lunches of children originates in the nineteenth century, in a country that “places a specific and conscious set of values on food,” and this phenomenon permeates the literature of the era as well.⁴ The gastronomic explosion mid-century and onwards results in the codification of what remains a key component of French identity today. Yet it is not without casualties – those incapable of securing a seat at the table. Prolific naturalist Émile Zola repeatedly explores Parisian urban relocation of this period through culinary imagery, edible mirrors that reflect, distort, and prefigure the experience that awaits new arrivals in the city. His novels frequently intertwine narratives of migration with discourses on dining, where food plays a role both literal and symbolic, recording the reality of evolving Parisian appetites and forcing us to consider why the migrant, moving from *la province* to Paris, is never understood apart from hunger.⁵ In the works of Émile Zola the migrants themselves are what is sent from the farm and devoured at the table, keeping the city well-fed as they struggle to acclimate their diets. Zola's migrants find that urbanization demands a dietary conformity, an assumption of Parisian appetites and habits that frequently ends in a failure to assimilate – an indigestion of city life. His urban arrivals are ravenous, and from their quests for satiation we can extract an entire relationship of power between urban consumers and rural producers, residents and migrants, Parisians and *provinciaux*. The city feasts on the country's labor in a cycle whose meaning transcends the dietary particulars. By focusing on the relationship between sustenance and outsider in several of Zola's Parisian novels, I will explore the economy of labor and exploitation he places at the heart of nineteenth-century French migration. While this

¹Julien Denormandie, “French mayor's decision to serve meat-free school lunches sparks outrage,” *France24*, 21 Feb 2021. < <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20210221-french-lyon-mayor-s-decision-to-serve-meat-free-school-lunches-sparks-outrage>>.

² “Les menus sans porc à la cantine ne sont pas contraires à la laïcité, juge le Conseil d'Etat,” *Le Parisien*, 11 Dec. 2020. < <https://www.leparisien.fr/societe/les-menus-sans-porc-a-la-cantine-ne-sont-pas-contraires-a-la-laicite-juge-le-conseil-d-etat-11-12-2020-8413793.php>>.

³ For more on the inequality of diet in America and the sociological ramifications of food access and responsibility, see Priya Fielding-Singh's *How the Other Half Eats: The Untold Story of Food and Inequality in America* (New York: Hachette, 2021). Fielding-Singh focuses especially on the role of mothers in building and securing an identity for their children through the meals they serve.

⁴ Lawrence R. Schehr, “Deipnomachy, or Cooking with Zola,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 34 (2006): 338.

⁵ Jérôme Lucereau argues that being “affamé” defines many of Zola's characters, migrant or not, with hunger being identity as much as absence of food. See Jérôme Lucereau, “Les identités de l'affamé dans *Les Rougon-Macquart*” *Re-Reading Zola and Worldwide Naturalism: Miscellanies in Honour of Anna Gural-Migdal*, eds. Carolyn Snipes-Hoyt, Marie-Sophie Armstrong and Riikka Rossi (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013). Lucereau's text posits that hunger elicits a response of mysticism, revolt, regression, or submission, with the said response driving the character's actions.

discussion begins in the market stalls of Les Halles in *Le Ventre de Paris* and the kitchens of *L'Assommoir*, it finds completion in a liquidation of food and a migrant sacrifice demanded and devoured by urban space.

Le Ventre de Paris forces a consideration of the relationship between migration and diet from its onset, the escaped Florent literally entering the city borne atop a pile of carrots, a tasty morsel delivered on a platter only to be digested and expelled as so much waste at the end while the belly churns on. The opening chapter suffocates the reader in cabbages, lettuces, carrots, celery, and artichokes – a “veritable delirium of serialized listings.”⁶ Yet amid the produce, Florent starves, surrounded by a city described as superbly fat. Zola establishes the distinction between fed and famished through Claude who explains to Florent:

Les Gras, énormes à crever, préparant la goinfreterie du soir, tandis que les Maigres, pliés par le jeûne, regardent de la rue avec la mine d'échallas envieux; et encore les Gras, à table, les joues débordantes, chassant un Maigre qui a eu l'audace de s'introduire humblement, et qui ressemble à une quille au milieu d'un peuple de boules. Il voyait là tout le drame humain; il finit par classer les hommes en Maigres et en Gras, en deux groupes hostiles dont l'un dévore l'autre, s'arrondit le ventre et jouit.⁷

This “entire human drama” reduced to satiation or hunger serves a metonymic function to explore the opposition between rich and poor, bourgeois and *ouvrier*, or in my own analysis, Parisian and migrant.⁸

Florent’s hunger, and later revulsion, define and determine his experience in the city. His initial hunger gives way to nausea when, once settled with the Quenus, he is unable to eat. His work as a fish inspector falters before his aversion to the odor. Even his fascination with Lisa Quenu is sexuality coded in digestive terms.⁹ In spite of his proximity to nourishment, Florent remains unable to exchange his identity as starving outsider for well-fed Parisian. He is served up to the city and ultimately regurgitated at the end of the text when his immigration fails: “C’étaient les Halles crevant dans leur ceinture de fonte trop étroite, et chauffant du trop-plein de leur indigestion du soir le sommeil de la ville gorgée.”¹⁰ Florent does not learn to feast, or more precisely, is incapable of feasting and is devoured instead, condemned as a conspirator, regurgitated back to the countryside. Mathias affirms that this “disparity between the fat and the thin has been understood as socio-political: a complacent commitment to the second Empire regime versus political dissonance and a call for equality.”¹¹ While true, the contrast also furnishes a lens to understand the migrant experience further developed in *L'Assommoir*.

⁶ Albert Sonnenfeld, “Emile Zola: Food and Ideology,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 19 (1991): 607.

⁷ Émile Zola, *Le Ventre de Paris*, ed. Marc Baroli (Paris: Lettres Modernes Minard, 1969) 430. Henceforth, all references to this novel will be to this edition, indicated as Zola VP with page number.

⁸ For a detailed study of how food both puts into focus class conflicts and serves as temporal markers to advance narration, see Sonnenfeld, “Emile Zola: Food and Ideology.”

⁹ Manon Mathias, *Gut, Brain, and Environment in Nineteenth-Century French Literature and Medicine* (New York: Routledge, 2024) 139.

¹⁰ Zola VP, 566. For a lengthier discussion of the digestive and regurgitative aspects of Zola’s writing, see both Mathias and Sonnenfeld. Sonnenfeld affirms that the *ventre* of Paris is not a receiving vessel for food, but rather a digestive process (610), one unsatisfactorily completed in many cases. This focus on gut activity finds further exploration in Mathias’s work – focus not only on (in)digestion but on the larger ramifications of the gut-mind connection for both Zola’s characters, and his contemporary medical and popular audience.

¹¹ Mathias 138.

The image of the migrant arriving with food becomes even more understood as migrant as food in *L'Assommoir*. Published a few years after *Le Ventre de Paris*, *L'Assommoir* chronicles the rise and fall of the provincial Gervaise as she struggles to insert herself into the Parisian working class economy and provide for her family. Her life exhibits an unavoidable hereditary impulse towards addiction and forms a caution against other provincial hopefuls. Claude Grignon analyzes Gervaise's story arc through a socio-economic lens before concluding that her tragedy could have been averted "had she been a little more worthy and above all a little less unlucky, had she continued to be thrifty and hard-working, had Coupeau not had his accident, had he followed the example of Goujet, [...] etc."¹² In short, had everything about her predilections, predispositions, environment, and community been different, she could have avoided ending the novel as a malodorous and forgotten carcass. Joy Newton and Claude Schumacher describe her demise as follows:

Elle n'est ni absolument bonne, ni absolument méchante et son caractère contient l'ingrédient tragique par excellence, l'orgueil, qui lui permet d'abord de s'élever, pour ensuite causer sa ruine. L'orgueil qui pousse Œdipe à connaître la vérité coûte que coûte, qui incite Faust à s'élever contre Dieu, s'exprime chez Gervaise par son ambition, par un amour désordonné de la nourriture et une démangeaison d'écraser les gens qu'elle n'aime pas.¹³

Newton and Schumacher ascribe her downfall as intertwined with her diet, illustrating how Zola relies heavily on verbs of eating to relate Gervaise to the world around her: an obsession with *la nourriture* "qu'elle soit rare ou abondante, combinée avec l'emploi polysémique du verbe 'manger' et de ses nombreux synonymes, fournit donc un thème majeur du roman et le structure fortement."¹⁴ Gervaise's eating or feeling of being eaten dominate the discourse in *L'Assommoir*; Zola begins every chapter with a reference to food or dining,¹⁵ the plot mapping onto a culinary cartography from hunger to feasting and back to hunger. As an eater, an "affamée" as Lucereau notes, Gervaise participates in the hunger and indigestion that typifies Florent. Yet as a migrant, she is not expelled as is Florent, but rather devoured and left to fester. When looking at Gervaise as a migrant beyond merely as an eater, or one of Lucereau's "affamés," a system of exploitation can be extracted from the perverted chiasm that fails to deliver Gervaise back to the country.

The process of obtaining and preparing food consistently preoccupies Gervaise. Even in the immediate aftermath of childbirth, she does not shirk from preparing a meal.¹⁶ The text incessantly refers to the culinary responsibilities and actions of each character, as someone is always in the process of purchasing meat, such as Mme Boche who narrates Coupeau's fall between reminders that she was en route to "chercher un gigot."¹⁷ The details slip into the edges of the narration, filling the novel with edible errands. While food in general is omnipresent, meat features especially prominently. It appears early in the text, as Gervaise searches for Lantier from

¹² Claude Grignon, "Sociology of Taste and the Realist Novel: Representations of Popular Eating in E. Zola," *Food and Foodways* 1.1-2 (1985): 125.

¹³ Joy Newton and Claude Schumacher, "La grande bouffe dans *L'Assommoir* et dans le cycle Gervaise," *L'Esprit Créateur* 25 (1985): 26. Emphasis mine.

¹⁴ Newton and Schumacher 19.

¹⁵ Newton and Schumacher 25.

¹⁶ Émile Zola, *L'Assommoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978) 128. Henceforth all references to this novel will be taken from this edition and indicated as Zola *LA* with page number.

¹⁷ Zola *LA*, 147.

her window and instead sees “une boutique de charcutier, pleine de monde, d’où sortaient des enfants, tenant sur leur main, enveloppés d’un papier gras, une côtelette panée, une saucisse ou un bout de boudin tout chaud.”¹⁸ In her moment of despondency, she gazes longingly on urban dwellers circulating with meat in hand.

The prevalence of meat both highlights a major divide between the city and the country and points at the novel’s theme of exploitation. Whereas the standard city dweller in the late nineteenth century averaged between 60-80 kilograms of meat consumption each year, the average for a Frenchman in the country was closer to only 22 kilograms.¹⁹ A mid-century menu from the Parisian restaurant *Les Trois Frères Provençaux* boasts 46 beef dishes,²⁰ hinting at the urban love of meat in contrast to the rural diet that testifies to a sparser table and a simpler, plant-based fare accompanied by coarse bread. The language pertaining to food supports this idea, with Sunday clothes in some rural regions referred to as meat-eating garb, implying a weekly, rather than daily, consumption of meat.²¹ The daily quest for survival and food permeates the rural vocabulary and proverbs; lessons imparted between generations are wrapped in culinary metaphors such as: “À grasse cuisine, pauvreté voisine” and “Morceau avalé n’a plus de goût.”²² To be a rural nineteenth-century Frenchman or woman was to have a preoccupation with scarcity inscribed in your vocabulary as much as in your stomach. Most curious however is that such routine hunger dwelt in such proximity to plenty – peasants going without to feed the growing urban populace.

The diets of country versus city dwellers thus reveal the new relationships of exchange and power created by urbanization and the development of the railroad. While grains, cereals, and vegetables could always be grown close to the city, meat arrived in Paris from much further afield, in the form of cows that previously had to be fattened and walked to the city.²³ Paris had always imported meat from the surrounding countryside, but imports skyrocketed in the nineteenth century, reflecting the explosion of the urban population and easy transportation. Meat on the table became a symbol of urbanity and economic status, as can be seen through its presence in the diets of Zola’s urban poor. It is tempting to claim that the abundance of meat corresponds to a higher quality of diet and life in the city, but Lewis Mumford maintains: “[L]ife was worse in cities, something often obscured by mortality rates, and here we should give more credit than we do to the increased food supply and available fats (for soap) in the city.”²⁴ The varied diet obscures deeper truths about urban life.

¹⁸ Zola *LA*, 56.

¹⁹ Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1976) 142.

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, tr. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge US: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999) 423.

²¹ Weber 140.

²² Weber 130.

²³ G. Billen, S. Barles, P. Chatzimpiros, and J. Garnier, “Grain, Meat and Vegetables to Feed Paris: Where did and do they come from? Localising Paris food supply areas from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century,” *Regional Environmental Change* 12 (2012): 325–35.

²⁴ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, 1961) 468.

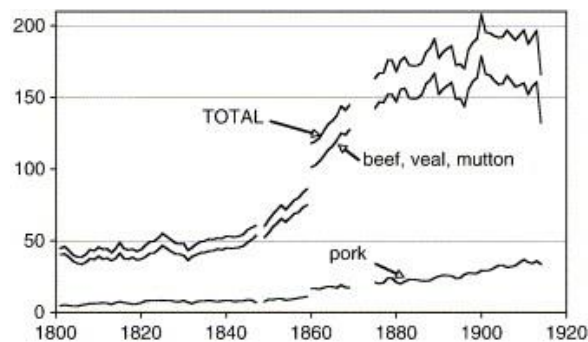


Fig. 1 – Meat inflows, Paris, 1801–1914, 10^3 tons/year.²⁵

The *Statistique Agricole Annuelle* records this meat as arriving from all over France, the countryside offering up its livestock to fatten the city (Fig. 1). The constant presence of meat in the novel never lets us forget this unequal economy between the city and the country, with the former feasting on the latter. In his process of creating a narrative of urbanization, of questioning the city's ability to perfect society and promote health, Zola composes a heroine who craves meat yet cannot always obtain it. Gervaise longs to gain urban success, to be among the meat-eaters.²⁶ Her hunger and exploitation weave themselves into the relationship between rural and urban economies. In the same way that he emphasized the violence of capitalism in *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883), Zola reminds us of the uncomfortable relationship between Paris and province through the constant presence of the slaughterhouse, where the spoils of the country meet their end. His representation aligns with the “unequal interaction between country and city” that Raymond Williams finds in Zola's British contemporaries, the “case of a capital city drawing the character of an economy and a society into its extraordinary center: order and chaos both.”²⁷ The culinary obsessions that fill *L'Assommoir* reflect this dietary urbanity and exploitative relationship, even if we find ourselves among the lower classes that are not typically associated with decadent feasting.²⁸

Gervaise's dietary evolution also draws her closer to gluttony, and her inability to moderate her eating can be considered a corollary to her husband Coupeau's alcoholism. It is also a reflection of her origins, a fear of hunger associated with the peasantry that she maintains in her urban life and nurtures with her increased income:

Elle devenait gourmande; ça, tout le monde le disait; mais ce n'était pas un vilain défaut, au contraire. Quand on gagne de quoi se payer de fins morceaux, n'est-ce

²⁵ Sabine Barles, “Feeding the City: Food Consumption and Flow of Nitrogen, Paris, 1801-1914,” *Science of the Total Environment* 375 (2007): 48-58.

²⁶ Interestingly, this desire for meat proves detrimental to the digestive tracts of many of Zola's poor. Schehr analyzes the indigestion which typifies the miners in *Germinal* before concluding: “Meat becomes an abject dish for those used to the cuisine du pauvre, one that can be eaten only when diluted by quantities of water that will make it pass. Whole and undiluted, it seems to provoke a reaction on the part of the eaters, who can no longer distinguish between what is edible (the meat, theoretically) and what is not edible (the bones)” (349).

²⁷ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973) 147. Williams mentions Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), for example.

²⁸ Zola frequently toys with the idea of human as consumed instead of consuming, notably the mine that consumes the workers in *Germinal*, the department store that devours the *quartier* in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, the city that devours the migrant in *L'Assommoir* and Paris itself as possessing a stomach and digestive potential in *Le Ventre de Paris*.

pas? on serait bien bête de manger des pelures de pommes de terre. D'autant plus qu'elle travaillait toujours dur, se mettant en quatre pour ses pratiques, passant elle-même les nuits, les volets fermés, lorsque la besogne était pressée. Comme on disait dans le quartier, elle avait la veine; tout lui prospérait.²⁹

Her expanding waistline increasingly dominates Zola's descriptions, reaching its zenith at the elaborate feast for Gervaise's *fête*, one of several meat-laden feasts and what Sonnenfeld terms the "most sustained icon of underclass eating."³⁰ Before that, at their post-marriage meal, Coupeau insists that they serve a dinner complete with lamb, chicken, pork, and other varieties of meat. Gervaise slips scraps of meat to the children as Coupeau imitates the animals to the delight of his guests, foreshadowing the lines Zola will blur between migrant human and consumable meat.³¹ Yet that dinner is merely an appetizer to the lavish feast that dominates a lengthy section in the middle of the novel.

Gervaise's feast is a decadent explosion of meat designed to leave the guests "ronds comme des balles, le ventre plein pour la semaine."³² The weeks leading up to the event are devoted to endless discussions about the menu, the highlight being "une oie grasse rôtie. On en causait avec des yeux gourmands. [...] [L]a bête parut énorme, avec sa peau rude, ballonnée de graisse jaune."³³ The meal expands to include other meat, but the goose remains the centerpiece.³⁴ Whereas Coupeau once entertained by imitating animals, Zola now erases the lines altogether between human and animal, consumer and consumed. The goose "rôtissait devant une coquille placée par terre, contre le mur, à côté de la fenêtre ouverte; et la bête était si grosse, qu'il avait fallu l'enfoncer de force dans la rôtissoire."³⁵ Its expansive body reflects Gervaise's own corpulence. Grease all but oozes from the pages of the text, inundating the reader with the carnage of the meal as the guests transform into animals themselves: "[Ils] piétinaient autour de la table. Tous avaient faim, bâillaient légèrement, l'air embêté."³⁶ Focusing on how food and drink are consumed allows Zola to "give expression to the social fantasy of popular animality."³⁷

This presentation of the goose marks the high point of Gervaise's success in the city:

Il y eut une rentrée triomphale: Gervaise portait l'oie, les bras raidis, la face suante, épanouie dans un large rire silencieux; les femmes marchaient derrière elle, riaient comme elle; tandis que Nana, tout au bout, les yeux démesurément ouverts, se haussait pour voir. Quand l'oie fut sur la table, énorme, dorée, ruisselante de jus, on ne l'attaqua pas tout de suite. C'était un étonnement, une surprise respectueuse,

²⁹ Zola *LA*, 169.

³⁰ Sonnenfeld 603.

³¹ Zola *LA*, 110.

³² Zola *LA*, 236.

³³ Zola *LA*, 237.

³⁴ Gervaise's *fête* with its goose can be compared to Catherine's *ducasse* in *Germinal* and corresponding rabbit. In the same way that Gervaise's lavish feast foreshadows her downfall, Catherine's guests leave, plagued with indigestion that prefigures their destruction. See Schehr 349.

³⁵ Zola *LA*, 245.

³⁶ Zola *LA*, 249.

³⁷ Grignon 141. Manon Mathias further explores the animality of consumption, considering food as an actant that unites human and non-human: "One of the reasons behind the human attempt to overcome the body and especially the gut is that it ties us to other living beings: like all other animals, we are bounded by our need to eat and to defecate. Thus, by highlighting the difficulty that scholars experience with the process of digestion, hygiene writers suggest a dichotomy between thinking (an elevated activity) and digesting (associated with the animal realm)" (131).

qui avait coupé la voix à la société. On se la montrait avec des clignements d'yeux et des hochements de menton. Sacré mâtin! quelle dame! quelles cuisses et quel ventre!³⁸

Gervaise reigns over the table, serving the magnificent goose to her family and friends, sheltered in her own business and home. Schehr describes Gervaise's feast as an "ironic last supper. [The] feast for the poor is illusory, the narrator / author seems to be saying; only true social action will solve the social, political, and economic injustices of nineteenth-century French society. Feast is only a temporary stop-gap measure within a continuity of famine."³⁹ He identifies a *cuisine du pauvre* in the works of Zola as being defined by hunger, a poetics of impoverishment. While this description is just, especially in Schehr's discussions of *Germinal*, viewing the eater as migrant forces the question: How does the memory of a full belly color the *cuisine du pauvre*?

When she first arrives in the city, Gervaise seeks only "de manger toujours du pain, d'avoir un trou un peu propre pour dormir, vous savez, un lit, une table et deux chaises, pas davantage,"⁴⁰ yet her feast shows how far her urban reality has exceeded her rural imagination. Around her meat-laden table gather many chairs and people, grease running off the goose and onto the floor. If this dinner marks Gervaise's gluttonous climax, it also changes the course of her culinary evolution, while marking Lantier's reentry into her life, as Coupeau invites him to the table. His invasion of her space, home, and eventually bed also entails requests that she return to cooking "à l'huile," or in the style of her Provençale origins.⁴¹ Lantier's presence and influence over her meals, coupled with his tie to her rural origins, help to further unite the melding of urbanizing trends to Gervaise's evolution of diet.

Following the dinner, Gervaise slips towards starvation, grasping at any scrap of meat she can find, craving "des côtelettes, des choses nourrissantes et légères."⁴² In contrast to her shrinking living quarters and diminished nourishment, Gervaise's body swells, becoming "ronde, une vraie boule."⁴³ The novel increasingly focuses on starvation, an all-consuming hunger and homelessness. The only glimmers of hope that the cycle can be broken come from the promise of the country, delivered unsurprisingly at a dinner party hosted by the Boches where Virginie waxes poetic about rural life, or when Coupeau briefly works outside of the city and finds sobriety and liquidity. Zola offers hope that the urbanizing arch of the novel will return Gervaise to the country and save her from the starvation and squalor of the city. The countryside functions outside the realm of the novel as a haven, a potential escape underlining Zola's belief that Parisians felt "deprived of greenery."⁴⁴ But these hopes are not realized. The chiasm is distorted, with Gervaise trapped in the final stages, her body swelling and her stomach empty. The novel progresses like a dinner party, beginning with Gervaise's hopes for bread, passing through the levels of feasting, and ending with dessert. Yet it is Lantier, not Gervaise, who completes the meal. While Gervaise dies of hunger, Lantier remains living in the boutique-turned-candy shop where he "ne vivait plus que de bonbons."⁴⁵

³⁸ Zola *LA*, 257.

³⁹ Schehr 340.

⁴⁰ Zola *LA*, 61.

⁴¹ Zola *LA*, 296.

⁴² Zola *LA*, 341.

⁴³ Zola *LA*, 342.

⁴⁴ Winston Hewitt, *Through Those Living Pillars: Man and Nature in the Works of Emile Zola* (Paris: Mouton, 1974) 29.

⁴⁵ Zola *LA*, 439.

Taking into consideration the changing diet between country and city, a study of food and gluttony in *L'Assommoir* fosters an understanding of Gervaise's inability to moderate her intake as tied to her failure to assimilate into the city life. Furthermore, this examination illustrates the economic relationships of power and exploitation undergirding urbanization; as the city grows fat at the expense of the country, Gervaise's own body reflects this exploitive union as it becomes obese all the while starving. The chiasitic structure, the subtext of a progressing meal, and the parallels between the beginning and end collapse, when we arrive at Gervaise's starvation contrasted with her obesity. Her body takes on the filth, grease, and corruption of the urban space she inhabits. Schehr finds in Zola's hungry masses the "the sites of radical politics and the boborygmic rumblings of empty stomachs are the *vox populi* crying out for change,"⁴⁶ yet when the hungry stomach belongs to a migrant such as Florent or Gervaise, I find not revolution, but quasi-religious sacrifice.

A focus on the liquid forms of nourishment will further contribute to an understanding of Gervaise's plight amidst the country versus city dynamics. In *L'Assommoir*, water joins wine on a spectrum of liquid that offers insights into Gervaise's progression from cleanliness to filth and sobriety to drunkenness. Like her dietary progression, this evolution is stunted, underscoring the problematic relationship between country and city. In the opening pages, Gervaise gazes out over the city through a veil of tears, and Zola uses water imagery to evoke the sense of drowning that Gervaise experiences in her urban life: "Elle revenait, le cou tendu, s'étourdissant à voir couler, entre les deux pavillons trapus de l'octroi, le flot ininterrompu des hommes, de bêtes, de charrettes, qui descendait des hauteurs de Montmartre et de la Chapelle.... Et la cohue s'engouffrait dans Paris où elle se noyait, continuellement."⁴⁷ Her profession is intimately associated with water and hygiene, and the pages that follow detail a literal saturation as the reader enters the *laverie* (her future place of employment) and is submerged in its dampness and humidity. The liquid vocabulary emphasizes the artifice of this water and its role in the industrial business of the *laverie*. The water is described as "joliment dure," reddening the hands of the women.⁴⁸ Conversely, Gervaise recounts her beginnings as a *blanchisseuse* in Plassans where, "Ça sentait meilleur qu'ici... Il fallait voir, il y avait un coin sous les arbres... avec de l'eau claire qui courait..."⁴⁹ Zola establishes the dichotomy of the countryside and its clean waters against a city of dank humidity and soiled streams. The water that comforted her in Plassans becomes a foreboding presence in the city. Moreover, as I will discuss shortly, the omnipresent water of the first half of the book indicates the future impossibility of Gervaise finding nourishment and a sense of belonging in the city.

As Gervaise's prospects improve, the ubiquitous water that served a professional and practical function is replaced with free-flowing wine, returning the reader to the table. Gervaise and other characters frequently note that "le vin est nécessaire à l'ouvrier,"⁵⁰ but the most striking moment of this liquid focus comes at Gervaise's triumphant *fête*, arguably the high point of her life, where "[le vin] coulait autour de la table comme l'eau coule à la Seine."⁵¹ The city hitherto understood in terms of water, henceforth runs with wine. For in drinking, "Paris vous appartenait."⁵² While various characters emphasize a distinction between wine and hard liquor,

⁴⁶ Schehr 341.

⁴⁷ Zola *LA*, 21.

⁴⁸ Zola *LA*, 35.

⁴⁹ Zola *LA*, 34.

⁵⁰ Zola *LA*, 136.

⁵¹ Zola *LA*, 261.

⁵² Zola *LA*, 261.

one elides into the other as alcoholism overtakes Gervaise. She ceases to work, turning instead to drinking alongside Coupeau, and concludes that they might as well “boir[e] la monnaie ensemble.”⁵³ Her *fête* can be understood as an ironic Last Supper, where Gervaise stands in as Christ turning the water of her working hours into the wine that flows to her guests. She will be a failed Christ figure, a wasted martyr to poverty; and her messianic failure is foreshadowed by her attempts to keep the guest number to an apostolic twelve but being forced instead to submit to the politics of the building and have fourteen *à table*. The wine is both sacred and nefarious, representing sacrifice and ultimately causing her demise.

The feast ends in vomit for several guests, the bile a significant intermingling of Gervaise's precious labors, the “miraculous wine,” and prefiguring the dirty water that will come to surround her. Zola evokes a distinct liquification of food from this point forward in the novel and the “liquification of food corresponds to the liquidation of the Coupeau household, which is ‘cleaned out,’ and to the deliquescence of their guests.”⁵⁴ Water, flowing through the first half of the book and sustaining Gervaise's livelihood, now laps at her table and dissolves her feast. Schehr emphasizes that water in the context of hunger stands in opposition to food and “is a wet world that pretends to be food, but that is truly only non-nourishing ersatz.... a way of not remembering hunger and of believing that the pangs are not there.”⁵⁵ He cites the peasant tendency to add water to soup, extending the quantity but diminishing the nutrients, a *cuisine de pauvres* that finds roots in an unfulfilled *cuisine paysanne*.⁵⁶

Gervaise's position as a washerwoman naturally associates her with water and its ability to clean, purify, and wash away. Zola carefully underscores this whitening and cleansing aspect of Gervaise's persona throughout the novel.⁵⁷ Zola ties Gervaise's ability to impart cleanliness and purity to her customers with memories of the country. At the peak of her success, she happily works in her laundry boutique where, she “disait en riant qu'elle s'imaginait être à la campagne.”⁵⁸ Surrounded by the water, the city noises muffled by snow, she imagines herself far from the city and its filth and, in the work of washing, she returns some of the rural purity she misses to the *quartier*. Regarding Zola's works, Hewitt notes: “[I]n his return to nature, man trusts that nature will exorcise and purify him [...]. Purification is sought on physical, psychological, and spiritual planes.”⁵⁹ This idea that a rural setting can wipe clean the evils of the city briefly proves true for Coupeau, who leaves his antipathy for work and drinking in Paris to spend several months working in the country: “[I]l fit près de trois mois, sans se soûler, guéri un moment par l'air de la campagne. On ne se doute pas combien ça désaltère les pochards, de quitter l'air de Paris, où il y a dans les rues une vraie fumée d'eau-de-vie et de vin.”⁶⁰ The city streets are characterized by liquor and wine, whereas the countryside cures and cleans him, mimicking the actions that country-born Gervaise performs in her daily work. Yet once in the city, the cleanliness, sobriety, industry, and hope offered in the country are suffocated and corroded. Coupeau resumes drinking, and

⁵³ Zola *LA*, 409.

⁵⁴ Grignon 123.

⁵⁵ Schehr 346 and 347. Schehr focuses most closely on this phenomenon of liquification in *Germinal* and the *cuisine de pauvres* that he finds among the miners, yet he also identifies in *L'Assommoir* the diets of the poor to be “already drowned in an attenuation of the solid into the infinitely dissolvable” (340).

⁵⁶ Schehr 345.

⁵⁷ Zola *LA*, 129.

⁵⁸ Zola *LA*, 218.

⁵⁹ Hewitt 47.

⁶⁰ Zola *LA*, 373.

Gervaise's finds herself incapable of her profession, becoming "sans soin, malpropre, perdant la tête jusqu'à oublier son métier."⁶¹

Her descent from cleanliness to filth occurs literally and symbolically, as she moves further from the country and becomes both dirtier herself, and less capable of removing dirt from others. She spends her days surrounded by piles of clothing, a "débâcle de malpropreté [...] cette mare grandissante."⁶² The anecdotes, personalities, and experiences inscribed in each article of clothing become Gervaise's responsibility, and she the keeper of "les secrets de la propreté de chacun [...]. Dans la boutique, à chaque triage, on déshabillait ainsi tout le quartier de la Goutte-d'Or."⁶³ Gervaise's work is not merely to wash the clothes of the *quartier*, but to expunge symbolically the city of its filth. She receives piles of garments soiled by the lives of their wearers and returns them clean – absolved of former sins and erased of previous stories. She dirties herself so that they may become clean, and it is as if "elle se grisait de cette puanteur humaine [...]. Et il semblait que ses premières paresse vinssent de là, de l'asphyxie des vieux linges empoisonnant l'air autour d'elle."⁶⁴ Mary Donaldson-Evans situates this representation of Gervaise's task within the moralizing discourse of hygiene prevalent in the nineteenth century wherein "cleanliness has become a cardinal virtue," and physical insalubriousness elides into moral filth.⁶⁵ This narrative proved an impetus for Baron Haussmann's renovations of the city, as his desire for wide boulevards, parks, and open spaces sought to make Paris a place of "space, air, light, verdure and flowers, in a word, with all that dispenses health."⁶⁶ Haussmann is notable for his transformation of the Paris sewer system, motivated in part by the cholera epidemics⁶⁷ of the first half of the nineteenth century. His recognition that a city must have a network of waterways to continually cleanse and sustain it, understanding Paris less as inanimate architecture, and more as living organism. In his *Mémoire sur les eaux de Paris*, Haussmann explains:

Les galeries souterraines, organes de la grande cité, fonctionneraient comme ceux du corps humain, sans se montrer au jour; l'eau pure et fraîche, la lumière et la chaleur y circuleraient comme les fluides divers dont le mouvement et l'entretien servent à la vie. Les sécrétions s'y exécuteraient mystérieusement, et maintiendraient la santé publique sans troubler la bonne ordonnance de la ville et sans gêner sa beauté extérieure.⁶⁸

Gervaise participates in this hygienic discourse. She is the secular priestess of this new urban space, scrubbing and toiling to preserve the appearance of cleanliness. Whereas Gervaise's *fête* solidified her messianic role as miracle worker transforming water to wine, the second half of the

⁶¹ Zola *LA*, 436.

⁶² Zola *LA*, 177.

⁶³ Zola *LA*, 176.

⁶⁴ Zola *LA*, 174.

⁶⁵ Mary Donaldson-Evans, "Miasmatic Effluvia: *L'Assommoir* and the Discourse of Hygiene," *Medical Examinations: Dissecting the Doctor in French Narrative Prose, 1875-1894* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2000) 87.

⁶⁶ James Donald, *Imagining the Modern City* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999) 57.

⁶⁷ The cause of cholera remained a debate for much of the nineteenth century, with scientists challenging the hitherto assumed miasma theory of contamination. Slowly, in the second half of the century, scientists like Filippo Pacini and John Snow convinced the scientific and medical community of water contagion.

⁶⁸ Georges-Eugène Haussmann, *Mémoire sur les eaux de Paris*, présenté à la commission municipale par m. le préfet (Paris: Vinchou, 1854) 53.

novel positions nourishment in opposition to both water and wine, the former dissolving all possibility of satiety and the latter erasing her livelihood.

Lewis Mumford claims access to clean water as an essential limiting factor in a city's survival,⁶⁹ and Gervaise administers this water while struggling to sustain the city. In studying the networks available to poor women in nineteenth-century Paris, Leslie Page Moch and Rachel Fuchs write of the concierge, the midwife, and the laundress as powerful "nodes" of exchange, capable of directing and informing lower-class society. The laundress "garnered power by virtue of the fact that her workplace gave her access to local information and her work gave her access to intimate details such as soiled sheets."⁷⁰ With this access came a social responsibility, as laundresses were frequently called upon to testify in cases of infanticide, pregnancy, and abortion.⁷¹ The women charged with cleansing the city's laundry become the keepers of its secrets, the witnesses of its crimes and, in Zola's text, the sacrifice for its sins.

The early descriptions of Gervaise's work prefigure the failure that awaits her. Her ability to impart cleanliness erodes as alcohol eclipses water as the dominant narrative liquid, the two often intermingling in the form of the persistent bile that coats her living quarters: "Peu à peu, elle s'abandonnait à un grand désordre,"⁷² and Gervaise's personal filth translates into a decline in her professional skills. She leaves grease spots on shirts and loses stockings, her shop falling into squalor and disrepair, with Gervaise blind to its state. Water reclaims the building, seeping into the walls and peeling back the wallpaper, nurturing mold and its accompanying odor. While no longer characterized by water that bestows cleanliness, Gervaise's life remains drenched. The clean waters that she brought from the country through her early descriptions of washing, the purity she imparted to the quartier through the cleansing of their garments and erasing of their stories – these powers disappear and Gervaise cannot even recognize her failure. First, unable to perform her duties for the clothing of others, she can now no longer even clean herself.

Donaldson-Evans astutely studies the osmosis that characterizes numerous inhabitants of the *quartier de la Goutte-d'or*, each blending into his or her profession until it is no surprise that "Gervaise's body self-destructs after being permeated by the filth of others."⁷³ In Gervaise's transition from absolver of the *quartier's* sins through washing and restored cleanliness, to assumption of their filth in her own body, her functional symbolism moves from priest to scapegoat, from savior to sacrifice, as she assumes increasing levels of filth, impurity, and moral sin.

A less graphic assumption of guilt is found in Zola's short story "Le Grand Michu," which recounts the uprising of students protesting deplorable conditions and food at their boarding school. Their rebellion is led by a student known as le Grand Michu, a poor boy from the country. The students strike against the pitiful meals provided, ultimately barricading the dining hall. When the school threatens intervention from the authorities, the children begin to abandon their plan and escape through the window until only the Grand Michu remains. He alone is punished for the rebellion, willingly sacrificed by his classmates and exiled back to the country so that order might return to the school. Zola's works repeatedly return to this sort of secular quotidian Christology, the idea of one individual assuming the collective guilt and cleansing the community. Notably,

⁶⁹ Mumford 549.

⁷⁰ Leslie Page Moch and Rachel G. Fuchs, "Getting Along: Poor Women's Networks in Nineteenth-Century Paris," *French Historical Studies* 18 (1993): 40.

⁷¹ Moch and Fuchs 47.

⁷² Zola *LA*, 332.

⁷³ Donaldson-Evans 90.

this imagery frequently centers around food and an outsider: the migrant Gervaise setting a lavish feast; the country bumpkin of le Grand Michu fighting to be fed; or the twice-exiled Florent starving in the belly of the city. In noting the spiritual dimensions inherent in the meals of Zola's poor, Schehr affirms it "poetically borders on the inedible, the non-eaten, and the marginal. It borders on chaos, with disorder and liquidity replacing sustenance, solidity, and a metaphysical pneuma that is the secular translation of the Eucharist."⁷⁴

Gervaise's urbanization takes on the form of a redemptive circulus wherein her pure rural body becomes a space for alleviating urban filth. In this respect she unites elements of Eucharist and scapegoat. The only element remaining in her quest to purify is to abandon the city, to be cast out and take the dirtiness with her as *bouc émissaire*, or to be fully consumed and expunged, leaving the city washed fresh and its sins forgotten, as human Eucharist. In the final stage of her deurbanizing, Gervaise should return to the country, both cleansing the city and completing her own urbanizing and deurbanizing cycle. But she does not. Her body succumbs to poverty, consumption, and ultimately starvation, yet her stench refuses to dissipate.

In *L'Assommoir*, Zola destroys the dream of finding a new life in the city, a situation revealed especially through his attention to the diet of his migrants. While Gervaise's own environment and predispositions offer some satisfactory explanations for her decline, a reading attuned to the urbanizing arc of her development highlights a relationship of exploitation and unequal exchange between the country, the city, and those who embody these geographic realities. Despite Gervaise's willingness to insert herself into the economy of the city, her identity as a rural migrant prevents her success and demands that she sacrifice her body to absolve the sins of the urban populace. In depicting her failure as a scapegoat, Zola not only exposes the exploitation of urbanization, but also renders problematic the very goal of the new urban spaces themselves. He calls into question the idealism of Haussmann and other nineteenth-century planners to create cities capable of reordering society and effacing its ills, revealing the urban space as one imperfectible and inhospitable to those seeking a better life. Alain Corbin describes Haussmannization as "a social dichotomy of purification [that] strove to create in certain neighborhoods ennobled, well-lit, cleared, and purified public spaces."⁷⁵ The new city is above all to be one that is nourished, clean and effective. Zola's tale of a doomed and hungry washerwoman problematizes this goal of salubrity and satiety. If Gervaise fails to cleanse the city and find satisfaction therein, it is because purification is impossible, and any illusion of it exists at the cost of rural sacrifice. *L'Assommoir* forces a confrontation of the human rot absorbed into the foundations of the new cities, a rot that colors the dream of urbanization with the stains of reality.

By showing the impossibility of those like Florent and Gervaise to succeed in the new urban space, Zola problematizes the entire promise of nineteenth-century urbanization and its ability to enrich rural migrants. His provincial workers arrive in the city insatiable and from their preoccupation with food an entire relationship of power between urban consumers and rural producers can be extracted. The feast becomes a microcosm for France. The country slaughters its livestock and uproots its gardens to feed urban appetites, and the city feasts on the country's labor. The clean waters of the country flow filthy in the city and are powerless to purify, washing away any semblance of sustenance. By constantly returning to the table in his novels devoted to capitalism and workers in urban settings, Zola emphasizes an economy of labor and exploitation undergirding French migration from the *province*. Why does the culinary identity and assimilation

⁷⁴ Schehr 341.

⁷⁵ Alain Corbin, "Commercial Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century France: A System of Images and Regulations," *Representations* 14 (1986): 211.

of Zola's Parisian would-be's matter to the modern reader? Food and drink have provided fodder for numerous writings on Zola's *œuvre*, but situating both within the context of migration brings a timely importance to his work. Zola invites us to feast upon the human condition and challenges us to welcome outsiders to the table.