THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE MANTELPIECE: SUBVERSIVE ORNAMENTS IN THE NOVELS OF GUY DE MAUPASSANT

In the second part of Guy de Maupassant's *Bel-Ami* (1885), the protagonist Georges Duroy becomes involved with a financial speculation on the French government's possible expansion in North Africa. In the political debate which surrounds this question, a right-wing deputy, Lambert-Sazzarin, wagers that 'le nouveau cabinet ne se pourrait tenir [. . .] d'envoyer une armée à Tanger, en pendant à celle de Tunis, par amour de la symétrie, comme on met deux vases sur une cheminée'.[1] The image employed by Lambert is clearly intended to underline the apparently wasteful frivolity of the government's colonial ambitions—France's African territories are 'une cheminée [. . .] qu'on allume avec le papier de la Banque' (p. 405)—but the slightly odd choice of simile has other implications as well. The disparity between an ornamental vase and a colonial holding suggests the government's apparent indifference to the human and material costs of its colonial policy; according to this callous world-view, Lambert implies, the geopolitical ornaments tastefully arranged on France's mantelpiece are, like everyday decorative vases, objects assumed to be without significance, whose cost is not to be enquired after, whose history is irrelevant, and of whose origin the ministerial lover of symmetry is content to remain ignorant.

In this article I shall examine a number of similar moments in Maupassant's longer fiction where the play of inconvenient knowledge and of strategic ignorance—disavowal—comes to the fore, and where objects which are apparently ornamental take on a new significance. These objects are situated with some frequency on mantelpieces or 'cheminées', doubtless because the nineteenth-century hearth had 'a practical and symbolic centrality and thus was a site at which both functional and ornamental objects were concentrated'; such ornaments ostensibly '[did] not have obvious use-value, but rather participate[d] in a decorative, semiotic economy'.[2] Maupassant, I shall argue, takes that decorative, domestic semiosis (in which ornaments are signs merely of comfort, of 'home') and turns it into a symptomatology, one which can be read productively alongside Freud and Lacan, and which anticipates some of the epistemological implications of psychoanalytic theory. In this respect, my argument represents an extension of Pierre Bayard's *Maupassant, juste avant Freud*.[3] Yet while Bayard centres his study on Maupassant's evocation of psychopathologies (as exemplified in texts such as 'Le Horla' and 'Qui sait?'), my aim in situating Maupassant *bien avant Lacan* (as it were) will be rather dif-

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[1] Guy de Maupassant, *Romans*, ed. by Louis Forestier (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 405; subsequent references to this edition will be given in parentheses in the text.

[2] Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 113, 26.

[3] (Paris: Minuit, 1994).

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ferent. I want to show that Maupassant's non-fantastical, 'naturalistic' fiction (and primarily his novels) shares Lacan's interest in interrogating precisely normative psychical and epistemological processes, or what we might call the conditions of possibility of intersubjective life.

The suggestion that the ornament might be subversive is hardly new. Rae Beth Gordon writes that 'one of the primary functions of the ornament is to carry meaning and intent that have been suppressed or excluded from the central field'.[4] While Gordon configures this subversion as a residual opposition to a kind of censorious moral hygiene which evacuates the libidinal to the periphery (a conception which, while no doubt accurate in many cases, is arguably marked by what Foucault has famously called 'l'hypothèse répressive'),[5] the subversion of Maupassant's ornaments is rather different. Firstly, while Gordon concentrates on aesthetic works which exhibit textual ornamentation (be it stylistic or even visual) to the reader or viewer, Maupassant's interest is more narrative and thematic, offering a series of scenes of viewing: the ornament is observed, appreciated, by a viewer within the narrative frame whose reaction is reported. Moreover, if the ornament in Maupassant is an object of desire, that desire is often of the order of epistemophilia: the viewer's desire is not for the ornament, nor for what is represented mimetically in it, but for the knowledge or significance the ornament presents.[6] The subversion comes from the fact that this knowledge, once obtained, may in fact be contrary to the protagonist's desires; it may indeed represent a direct challenge to the viewer's identity, to his own self-image—for the viewer is, incidentally, always male. In Maupassant's novels, far from indulging fantasies, certain ornaments have the power to question the role of mastery which the heroes implicitly or explicitly fantasize for themselves. At stake in the exclusion of such ornaments from the 'central field' is thus the preservation, rather than the tyrannical purification, of the viewing subject.

Through readings of three of Maupassant's novels (*Notre cœur*, *Pierre et Jean*, and *Bel-Ami*), I shall identify three basic possibilities: firstly, that the ornament's knowledge is simply missed; secondly, that it is understood all too well and painfully; and thirdly, that it is briefly glimpsed before being disavowed by the male protagonist in an attempt to protect himself and preserve his existing understanding of the world.

Knowledge Overlooked: 'Notre cœur'

Notre cœur (1890) is an example of the first of these scenarios. Maupassant's last completed novel depicts a modern love affair between André Mariolle, a man of no particular occupation, and Michèle de Burne, a young widow who, released from her late husband's tyranny, has emerged as 'une des femmes les

[4] *Ornament, Fantasy, and Desire in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 4.

[5] See Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I: la volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), Chapter 2.

[6] See Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. xiii.

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plus intéressantes du nouveau Paris' (p. 1031). Mme de Burne's salon is marked out by its tasteful proliferation of *objets d'art*:

> C'était d'abord un second salon [. . .] garni d'objets et de meubles exceptionnellement rares et simples, d'un goût pur et sobre et d'une grande valeur. Les sièges, les tables, les mignonnes armoires ou étagères, les tableaux, les éventails et les figurines de porcelaine sous une vitrine, les vases, les statuettes, le cartel énorme au milieu d'un panneau, tout le décor de cet appartement de jeune femme attirait ou retenait l'œil par sa forme, sa date ou son élégance. (p. 1033)

The detailed description of Mme de Burne's salon before Mme de Burne herself, followed in the second chapter by an equally exhaustive inventory of her private rooms, perhaps implies a Balzacian connection between the lady of the house and its decor. Yet while in Balzac's symbolic world such connections are assumed to arise naturally, inevitably, it is in fact Mme de Burne's own intention that such a link should be made; the apartment is decorated strategically, according to her theory that 'les appartements sympathiques ou antipathiques [. . .] attirent, retiennent ou repoussent comme les êtres qui les habitent' (p. 1034).

Mariolle's affair with Mme de Burne represents a significant conquest, for while all of her many male hangers-on have tried to seduce her, she has thus far proved unattainable. Yet Mariolle will be constantly disappointed by the relationship: Mme de Burne is inconstant and distracted in her affection, vacillating between infatuation and indifference. At the end of the novel, Mariolle will come to a painful conclusion: 'D'autres n'ont pas le don de plaire; vous, vous n'avez pas le don d'aimer' (p. 1176). In making this belated accusation, it almost seems as if Mariolle has failed to understand the significance of Mme de Burne's decorative interior, so heavily emphasized in the exposition. Firstly, as Lambert-Sazzarin implied in *Bel-Ami*, the apparently insignificant objects which surround us must not simply be considered passively in their ornamental immediacy, but must instead be understood as having origins:

> Pour se créer cet intérieur [. . .] elle avait mis à contribution le savoir, l'amitié, la complaisance et l'instinct fureteur de tous les artistes qu'elle connaissait. Ils avaient trouvé pour elle, qui était riche et payait bien, toutes choses animées de ce caractère original que ne distingue point l'amateur vulgaire, et elle s'était fait, par eux, un logis célèbre. (pp. 1033–34)

The origins of Mme de Burne's salon go some way towards explaining that aloofness which she retains even at the height of the affair with Mariolle. Inscribed in those very things that make her attractive (according to her own theory) is a kind of homosocial overdetermination. She has been created but, equally, sexually relinquished by the entire community of men who designed her apartment: 'tous avaient essayé de la séduire; aucun, disait-on, n'avait réussi. Ils se le confessaient, se l'avouaient entre eux' (p. 1036). The decor means that, even when Mariolle is alone with Mme de Burne, these competitors remain as a ghostly presence. Transgression of the *noli me tangere* (the sterile, sexless law of the museum) that they have constructed around her comes to represent a betrayal of that homosociality, which may well have unforeseen consequences. Moreover, this very constructedness of Mme de Burne's salon reflects on her

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own character, seemingly implying that she is somehow artificial and empty (her baroque 'intérieur' being thus contrasted with an apparent lack of interiority). The continuity established between Mme de Burne and her apartment by her theory of interior design now suggests that she is herself a mere decorative object; perhaps the cause of Mariolle's romantic anguish is his failure to understand this correlation, for, if he had, his expectations would presumably not have been so high.

Yet there must be more to Mariolle's unhappiness than he admits, since it is clear at the beginning of the novel at least that Mariolle has indeed understood this aspect of Mme de Burne's personality: 'il goûtait en elle la saveur d'une créature factice, façonnée et entraînée pour charmer. C'était un objet de luxe rare, attrayant, exquis et délicat' (p. 1059). To begin with at least, Mme de Burne is one of those many female figures who, in Emily Apter's words, were 'fetishized as an erotic commodity within the fin-de-siècle Imaginary'.[7] Later on, having obtained Mme de Burne's grudging consent to lease a *petite maison* in a secluded part of the city where the pair may meet without fear of interruption, Mariolle attempts to create a space which he hopes will suit her decorative character, and persuade her to spend as much time there as possible:

> Mariolle fut joyeux comme s'il venait de remporter un nouveau succès auprès d'elle, et [. . .] il s'en alla, par divers magasins, acheter des bibelots pour fleurir aussi le dedans de cette demeure. Il choisit pour les murs ces admirables photographies qu'on fait aujourd'hui des tableaux célèbres, pour les cheminées et les tables des faïences de Deck et quelques-uns de ces objets familiers que les femmes toujours aiment à trouver sous leur main. (p. 1093)

In this passage, Mariolle builds a doll's-house in which to enjoy the 'créature factice' that is Mme de Burne. His purchases are, it seems, governed by his innate understanding of the general feminine taste ('quelques-uns de ces objets que *les femmes toujours* aiment à trouver sous leur main'). It seems at the very least, however, that Mariolle has underestimated his doll, for while the objects he has chosen are expensive, they are not, strictly speaking, rare: indeed, the fine-art prints he buys represent precisely the end of rarity, the beginning of the mass distribution of previously unique images; in them, the sublime is rendered kitsch. So while there was perhaps some continuity between Mme de Burne, that 'objet de luxe *rare*', and her own apartment, she is rather out of place in the *petite maison* Mariolle creates to house her.

So perhaps the phrase 'ces objets familiers que les femmes toujours aiment à trouver sous leur main' is in fact a piece of free indirect discourse (in the sense of a thought of Mariolle's) in nakedly bad faith. Is it not in fact Mariolle who is at home in this twee interior? Are the objects he buys, whose arrangement is campily described as 'la chose la plus amusante, la plus délicieuse qu'il eût jamais faite' (p. 1094), not objects that *he* 'likes to have around'? The *petite maison* is no less a doll's-house: the doll has simply changed. And sure enough, Mariolle will become the semi-permanent resident of the space he had originally created for the regular fulfilment of his desires; here he will wait as Mme de Burne arrives first later and later than announced, then sporadically, and finally

[7] *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 43.

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not at all. When we are told of Mme de Burne's own understanding of the initial period in the *petite maison*, this effect is confirmed: 'Elle prenait goût à cette vie intime qu'il lui révélait, à ce contact incessant avec un esprit agréable, éclairé, instruit, et qui lui appartenait, dont elle était aussi bien la maîtresse que des petits bibelots qui traînaient sur sa table' (p. 1116). So while Apter observes that the male fetishization of the female figure as object can itself '[possess] and [infect] with erotomania the very master collector whose aloofness and control were believed to be impregnable',[8] Mariolle's fate is more than a mere psychosexual pathology: he has unwittingly been integrated into his lover's own fantasy of ownership and ornamentation. He has become just another object, if a cherished one, and this is a position which he is able neither to understand nor, crucially, to recognize. It is the inversion of his own, apparently masculine sexual utilitarianism, whereby the erotically useful woman harmonizes with the aesthetically pleasing objects which surround her, as 'un objet d'utilité' and 'd'agrément relatif' (p. 1057). In this inversion, Mariolle comes to occupy a position that he has hitherto designated as 'feminine'. The homosocial coalition which he had betrayed in beginning his liaison with Mme de Burne is thus avenged by this potential emasculation.

If *Notre cœur* retains a certain strangeness, it is perhaps because this inversion is only ever implied. To the last, Mariolle himself remains entirely ignorant of the cause of his discomfort, attributing it instead to the frustration of an unabashedly romantic fantasy of the 'passionate affair' which, as we have observed above, jars with his initial awareness of Mme de Burne's ornamental character. Finally, he takes a servant girl (whose class presumably leaves her with different tastes from Mme de Burne's, or frankly less taste than her) as his adoring lover, revealing that what he seeks is not some spiritual connection, but an object who will inhabit his doll's-house in the way he intended: 'il promettait [. . .] de lui donner [. . .] un joli logis de dame, avec des meubles fort gentils' (p. 1181). In the same movement, he restores himself to that creative masculine position (the one enjoyed by the homosocial alliance which designed Mme de Burne's salon, only now without the competition) which the unacknowledged reciprocity of his relationship with Mme de Burne—not strictly ended, but merely put in abeyance—had called into question. This is perhaps how the phenomenon known as 'disavowal' works in real life: the fact which is to be disavowed can clearly not be named if the process is to have any efficacy. Yet this verisimilitude can ultimately be rather confusing for the reader (as is the case with *Notre cœur*); the creation of a successful narrative of disavowal which the reader might recognize as such perhaps requires a moment of ridiculousness, a self-contradictory performative: 'I disavow'.

'I disavow': 'Bel-Ami'

Such a moment occurs in *Bel-Ami*, and consideration of this earlier novel will allow us to get a better idea of what disavowal might entail. Let us begin by considering a first episode, which gestures towards but stops short of such a

[8] *Feminizing the Fetish*, p. 43.

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performative moment. Protagonist Georges Duroy returns home for a romantic dinner with his wife Madeleine. They have only recently been married, and their union retains sufficient passion for the gallant Duroy to have brought home with him a bouquet of roses:

> Mais en traversant la salle il demeura fort surpris d'apercevoir trois couverts; et, la portière du salon étant soulevée, il vit Madeleine qui disposait dans un vase de la cheminée une botte de roses toute pareille à la sienne. Il fut contrarié, mécontent, comme si on lui eût volé son idée. (p. 363)

The third place-setting and the flowers are in honour of Madeleine's 'friend' Vaudrec, who will shortly be arriving to join the couple for dinner. While the disconcerted Duroy initially feels the urge to 'cacher, [. . .] jeter' (p. 364) the bouquet, he nevertheless hands over the gift. Madeleine is genuinely delighted: 'Elle prit les fleurs, les respira, et, avec une vivacité d'enfant ravie, les plaça dans le vase resté vide en face du premier. Puis elle murmura en regardant l'effet: "Que je suis contente! Voilà ma cheminée garnie maintenant"' (p. 364).

This scene is comically very effective, and even rather touching; Duroy's crestfallen greeting, 'Tiens, je t'ai apporté des roses!' (p. 364), is sweetly pathetic. Yet the deep structure of the episode is characteristically significant. This scene of decoration echoes Slavoj Žižek's description of the 'location' of the Freudian unconscious: 'The Truth Is Out There'. 'The Unconscious is outside,' Žižek writes, 'not hidden in any unfathomable depths.'[9] The logic of the symptom is that what is concealed is never really concealed, but is always available to us, visible yet consistently unseen in the things we experience every day. The bouquet episode in *Bel-Ami* seems to demonstrate this perfectly. The Truth is out there: the floral manifestation of Madeleine's concealed adultery and Duroy's status as a cuckold is effectively *on the mantelpiece*, potentially visible to all. The roses, which are of course the privileged symbol of romance, become even more symbolically overdetermined when they are positioned (like the colonies of Tunis and Tangiers) *en pendant*: placed side by side on the mantelpiece, the two vases evoke the cuckold's horns. In this symbol, Duroy's masculinity is threatened, and this gender trouble is well rendered by Nicholas White, who connects the two occurrences of the 'vase' metaphor:

> Within the logic of this metaphor, paradoxically, the decorative/invasive function of 'on' [Lambert's 'comme on met deux vases sur une cheminée'] is executed not only by colonialist France but also by Madeleine. [. . .] The image of male sexual invasion [. . .] is inverted as Madeleine arranges the vases to her own liking.[10]

This inversion of sexual positions is in fact a running theme of the novel, but while Duroy considers it perfectly normal that his wife should ghost-write the articles he contributes to the newspaper *La Vie française*, he appears in this scene to become briefly aware that something is amiss in the gender politics of his household. There is then something about this moment of seeing which allows Duroy to glimpse *just now* that which escapes him at all other times. Maupassant's curious indication of precisely how Duroy sees Madeleine ('la

[9] *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 3.

[10] *The Family in Crisis in Late Nineteenth-Century French Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 89.

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portière du salon étant soulevée, il vit Madeleine') is interesting in this respect. Duroy has not somehow caught Madeleine in the act of exposing something she would otherwise have concealed (this is clearly not the case—she means to display first one and then both bouquets). What matters is rather that, in looking into the parlour through this temporary aperture (the 'portière [. . .] soulevée'), Duroy sees from a new angle, looking not from the intended spectatorial position (an easy chair by the fireplace?), but 'perversely' from the side. This is what Žižek calls 'looking awry': the uncanny moment occurs when we move away from the place we habitually occupy (Duroy's surprise comes '*en traversant* la salle'), to a fortuitous new vantage-point from which the crack in the fantasy of reality is visible.[11] On a psychoanalytic showing, that 'crack' is the sign of castration; and by an astounding coincidence, this is also much the case for Duroy.[12] The second bouquet is the sign of cuckoldry, and the role of the cuckold always implies castration, as is suggested by the horns which are traditionally attributed to him. The cuckold's horns are an ironic embarrassment of protuberances which cannot make up for what is missing; metonymically phallic like the two vases of flowers placed *en pendant* (and after all, what are flowers but particularly gaudy sex organs?), they advertise themselves as adornments on the forehead like ornaments on a mantelpiece, mocking the modesty of the original, business-like organ, whose very concealment guaranteed its potency.

Unlike André Mariolle, however, Duroy does exhibit some sensitivity to the uncomfortable hidden meanings within his *intérieur*. That sensitivity is manifested in his feeling 'surpris', 'contrarié', 'mécontent', a lexicon whose brilliance lies in its ability to suggest at once Duroy's uncertainty as to what exactly is going on, and at the same time precisely the opposite: his absolute certainty which is obfuscated by the experiencing and naming of these apparently vague sensations. For as I have suggested, this episode of *Bel-Ami* gestures towards a narrative of disavowal. It only gestures, however, because the vision afforded by the 'portière soulevée' turns out to be momentary (perhaps anticipating the exposure of an instant camera). Duroy's mind is thus easily put to rest: having received the flowers, Madeleine kisses her husband 'avec un élan de plaisir si vrai qu'il se sentit consolé' (p. 364). Duroy's anxiety seems finally to have evaporated from the moment Madeleine observes 'voilà ma cheminée garnie maintenant', as if the completion of Madeleine's arrangement and her oddly ceremonial verbal acknowledgement of its purely ornamental status have reintegrated him into that intended spectatorial position from which the obscene detail is no longer visible. Yet while this scene is comically obvious, Duroy's peculiar psychological movement over these two pages remains playfully implicit; certainly, this is not that potentially ridiculous 'I disavow' referred to

[11] See Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1991).

[12] Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XI: les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 102. Lacan's discussion of this phenomenon emphasizes the importance of movement from a privileged central position through the concept of anamorphosis, referring us to Holbein's *The Ambassadors*: 'Commencez à sortir de la pièce où sans doute [ce tableau] vous a longuement captivé. C'est alors que, vous retournant en partant [. . .] vous saisissez [. . .] une tête de mort. [. . .] Holbein nous rend ici visible quelque chose qui n'est rien d'autre que le sujet comme néantisé, l'incarnation imagée [. . .] de la castration' (p. 102).

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above. For that, we will have to wait for another episode in the novel, which arises from the same situation (Madeleine's supposed infidelity with Vaudrec).

Before considering this episode, however, we should take time to consider more carefully what 'disavowal' might imply. Pierre Bayard sees disavowal or *déni* as being central to Maupassant's psychological model in a way that sets him apart from Freud:

> Telle est bien la distinction majeure entre la problématique du déni et celle, dominante chez Freud, du *refoulement*. Dans le refoulement, il s'agit d'empêcher une idée constituée de revenir à la conscience. Le conflit se fait entre deux instances intérieures. Dans le déni, l'idée ne s'est jamais constituée. Le problème n'est pas de l'avoir, il serait plutôt d'empêcher les autres de l'avoir à sa place.[13]

Broadly speaking, Freud does emphasize repression over disavowal, so Bayard's point is well taken, but he perhaps overstates the case. Above all, the insistence on Freud's and Maupassant's differing epistemologies dismisses as coincidental a very striking ressemblance between Maupassant's *déni* and Freud's disavowal in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940):

> The childish ego, under the domination of the real world, gets rid of undesirable instinctual demands by what are called repressions. [. . .] During the same period of life, the ego often finds itself in the position of fending off some demand from the external world which it feels distressing and [. . .] this is effected by means of a *disavowal* of the perceptions which bring to knowledge this demand from reality.[14]

Elsewhere, Freud explains more specifically his idea of the origin of disavowal: the term serves to describe the reactions of little boys confronted with the anatomical difference between the sexes. Unable to accept the implicit threat to his own penis posed by the little girl's lack of one, the boy 'disavows' the knowledge he has gained.[15] So in the light of the potentially emasculating symbolism of the two bouquets in the first episode, we can see that for Freud and Maupassant disavowal is not only similar in structure, but also similarly motivated.

The structural and motivational connections become even clearer in our second episode. Some time after the bouquet incident, Vaudrec dies, making Madeleine his sole heir. The inheritance serves to bring about a kind of return of what was repressed in the two vases of roses; returning home from the consultation with Vaudrec's solicitor, where the couple have learnt of Madeleine's expectations, Duroy wastes no time in confronting his wife with his interpretation of what they have heard: 'Dès qu'ils furent rentrés chez eux, Du Roy ferma brusquement la porte, et, jetant son chapeau sur le lit: "Tu as été la maîtresse de Vaudrec?"' (p. 426).[16] Duroy is torn between concern for his reputation and his own cupidity; if at all possible, he would prefer to accept the bequest. At

[13] *Maupassant, juste avant Freud*, pp. 95–96.

[14] In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953–74), XXIII (1964), 141–207 (pp. 203–04).

[15] See 'The Infantile Genital Organization: An Interpolation into the Theory of Sexuality', in Freud, *The Standard Edition*, XIX (1961), 139–45.

[16] The spelling of Georges Duroy's name changes to 'Du Roy' approximately half-way through the novel. I shall retain the original spelling in my own text.

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one level, Duroy behaves as the quintessential bourgeois hypocrite, concerned only with *le qu'en dira-t-on*:

> Oui . . . il pouvait me laisser quelque chose, à moi . . . à moi . . ., ton mari . . . à moi, son ami . . . entends-tu . . . mais pas à toi . . . à toi, son amie . . . à toi, ma femme . . . La distinction est capitale, essentielle, au point de vue des convenances . . . et de l'opinion publique. (p. 426)

And Duroy's eventual solution, a *donation entre vifs* whereby the couple will share the inheritance, appears to reinforce this impression: its primary attraction seems to be that 'de cette façon, on fermerait la bouche à la malignité publique' (p. 429).

Yet things are not so simple. Duroy's behaviour cannot be understood merely as a cynical exercise in keeping up appearances, for in the hatching of his plan, something odd happens:

> Oui, c'est clair comme le jour cet arrangement de la séparation par moitié. Nous héritons d'un ami qui n'a pas voulu établir de différence entre nous, qui n'a pas voulu faire de distinction, qui n'a pas voulu avoir l'air de dire: 'Je préfère l'un ou l'autre après ma mort comme je l'ai préféré pendant ma vie'. [. . .] Et sois certaine que, s'il y avait songé, c'est ce qu'il aurait fait. Il n'a pas réfléchi, il n'a pas prévu les conséquences. (p. 430)

Duroy begins in the manner of any conspirator, rehearsing the details of his story in the present tense, in order to test and prove to himself their verisimilitude. Yet from 'Et sois certaine', it becomes clear that Duroy has, extraordinarily, convinced himself. Here is the moment of ridiculousness, the declaration: 'I disavow'. Duroy even goes so far as to invent excuses for his wife's late lover—oversight or naivety ('il n'a pas réfléchi, il n'a pas prévu les conséquences'). Now it seems unnecessary that this much bad faith should be mobilized to purely venal ends. Indeed, once the 'solution' to Duroy's pecuniary dilemma has been found, there is no compelling reason for him to believe the story himself, so we must look elsewhere for the origin of his psychological turnaround. Psychoanalytically, that motivation is castration anxiety: the knowledge contained in Vaudrec's will represents a threat to the husband's manhood (since, as we have seen, the role of the cuckold implies emasculation) and must therefore be denied. Duroy's hilarious rationalization ('s'il y avait songé, c'est ce qu'il aurait fait') recalls that of little boys, who 'gloss over the contradiction between observation and preconception by telling themselves that the [girl's] penis is still small and will grow bigger presently'.[17]

Yet, in a sense, Maupassant goes further than Freud in his narrative of disavowal. In *Bel-Ami*, as in *Notre cœur*, the male protagonist's fantasy has without warning been replaced by its inversion. Duroy has recently created for himself a fictional dynastic name, 'Du Roy de Cantel', and had perhaps fancied himself a surrogate son to the noble Vaudrec; he arguably feels slighted, even disinherited, by Vaudrec, for whom he has developed a certain affection. Worse than this snub, however, is the threat posed to Duroy's masculinity by the fact that it is his wife who inherits. His anxiety in this respect is amply illustrated when Madeleine alone receives an invitation to attend the offices of

[17] Freud, 'The Infantile Genital Organisation', p. 144.

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Vaudrec's solicitor: 'C'est drôle que ce soit toi qu'il appelle, et non moi qui suis légalement le chef de famille', he remarks (p. 424). This phrase expresses perfectly the fantasy of quasi-paternal authority in which Duroy has been indulging, as well as the fragility of any fantasy which is so easily ruffled—in making this observation, we are told, 'Georges avait rougi' (p. 424). Madeleine's inheritance threatens to destroy this delusion once and for all, just as the sight of the little girl's 'missing penis' threatens the little boy's notion of his own penis as invulnerable. But Duroy's situation is really rather worse than that of the Freudian little boy: after all, while the latter confronts and disavows only the threat of castration, Duroy's symbolic castration has already come to pass. He is emasculated by the very fact of Madeleine's inheritance, regardless of the adultery it may or may not signify. For Duroy is not, like the little boy, seeing the other who lacks what he has. He is rather seeing another (Madeleine) who has what he lacks (an inheritance), who is, as it were, better endowed. In an unthinkable slippage, Duroy has come to occupy that most alien and denigrated of all subjectivities: he is the little girl.

Ignorance is Bliss: 'Pierre et Jean'

In the light of this horrifying shift, and with the psychological stakes so high, it is perhaps less surprising that Duroy should prefer to believe his own half-baked story, and to effect his performative disavowal. After the brutal accusation which opened the conversation, Duroy bids a fond farewell to his wife—'A tout à l'heure, ma petite Made' (p. 430)—before returning to the solicitor to make the necessary arrangements. The 'air [. . .] roide' (p. 426) he had exhibited after the reading of the will has given way to a more sprightly disposition, with just a touch of hysteria: 'Il riait, heureux de tout' (p. 430). Ignorance, of course, is bliss, and the proving of this cliché is to an extent the essence of the plot of *Pierre et Jean* (1888). The novel introduces the eponymous brothers, whose peaceful lives in Le Havre are suddenly altered when the younger of the two, Jean, inherits the fortune of Maréchal, an old family friend, while Pierre receives nothing. In a similar development to that in *Bel-Ami*, Pierre will become convinced that his mother Mme Roland has had an affair with Maréchal when the young family lived in Paris, and that Jean is the product of that adulterous liaison.

In his efforts to confirm his suspicions, Pierre's attention will be drawn to a previously unnoticed ornament, which now acquires great significance. Before the family relocated to Le Havre, Pierre recalls, a portrait of the dead Maréchal had stood in the parlour: where is it now?

> Le portrait, portrait d'ami, portrait d'amant, était resté dans le salon bien en vue, jusqu'au jour où la femme, où la mère s'était aperçue, la première, avant tout le monde, que ce portrait ressemblait à son fils. Sans doute, depuis longtemps, elle épiait cette ressemblance; puis, l'ayant découverte [. . .] et comprenant que chacun pourrait [. . .] l'apercevoir aussi, elle avait enlevé [. . .] la petite peinture redoutable et l'avait cachée. (p. 775)

Yet Mme Roland's 'understanding' (that 'chacun pourrait [. . .] apercevoir cette ressemblance') and her temporary abstraction of the portrait are, in fact, red

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herrings: this is no more an episode of concealment than it was Madeleine's intention to hide the first bouquet of roses. Later in the novel, a confrontation occurs between Pierre and Mme Roland, as Pierre insists that his mother produce the absent portrait, intending to compare the likeness to his younger brother's physiognomy. And while Pierre does indeed spot 'un air de famille, une parenté de physionomies' (p. 780), his father and brother fail entirely to see the resemblance. Mme Roland triumphantly replaces the portrait in its position on the mantelpiece: 'elle posa la miniature sur la cheminée [. . .] où elle était autrefois' (p. 781).

This episode finally makes explicit the power of disavowal, and illustrates the usefulness of the concept; only disavowal can explain the apparent paradox whereby, despite the obvious correctness of Rajeshwari Vallury's observation that 'the portrait is dangerous because it signifies too much',[18] the portrait nevertheless ultimately seems to *under*-signify (in so far as neither family nor, presumably, friends have spotted the resemblance). Disavowal means that, regardless of the image's signifying potential, there is ultimately no need for concealment: the truth may indeed be out there, but this is exactly what guarantees that it will never be seen. The scene equally helps us to understand what is at stake in the placing of the portrait (as well as Madeleine's bouquets and Mariolle's *bibelots*) specifically on the mantelpiece: the mantelpiece is in a sense the location par excellence of 'out there' truth and disavowed knowledge, since it is at once internal, as the etymological essence of the *foyer domestique*, and external, as the focal point of the home's public rooms, a focal point which is, as *Pierre et Jean* reveals, a strategic blind spot.[19] For this reason, perhaps, Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Purloined Letter' (1845) and Lacan's seminar on the same text have made of the mantelpiece the locus of a disturbing oscillation between visibility and invisibility, and between knowledge and ignorance. In Poe's story, a compromising letter is stolen from the Queen by a wicked Minister, before the very eyes of the King, who notices nothing amiss. The Prefect of Police and his men search the Minister's home secretly, at the Queen's behest, for a period of eighteen months, but are unable to find the letter. Finally the Prefect enlists the help of amateur detective Dupin, who visits the Minister and spots the letter immediately, disguised as another letter and placed in full view—in a letter-holder hanging on the mantelpiece.

The essence of the story lies, as Dupin tells us, in the policy of placing the subversive object 'immediately beneath the nose of the whole world, by way of best preventing any portion of that world from perceiving it'.[20] This art is to be understood over and against what Lacan calls 'l'imbécillité réaliste qui ne s'arrête pas de se dire [. . .] que ce qui est caché n'est jamais que ce qui manque à sa place'.[21] In *Pierre et Jean*, the realist imbecile is not Maupassant, but (temporarily at least) Mme Roland, whose 'understanding' complements

[18] '*Pierre et Jean*; or, The Erring of Oedipus', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 71 (2005), 39–51 (p. 47).

[19] Logan notes for instance that the nineteenth-century parlour was 'the most public space in the house [. . .] yet [. . .] also an inner sanctum' (*The Victorian Parlour*, p. 27).

[20] Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Purloined Letter', in *'The Fall of the House of Usher' and Other Writings*, ed. by David Galloway (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp. 330–49 (p. 345).

[21] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits I* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), p. 25.

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that of Poe's Prefect of Police. While the police search for the purloined letter in hiding-places, assuming that it is 'not in its place', Mme Roland removes the portrait from its place and stows it in a hiding-place: neither she nor the Prefect understands that to be hidden is not necessarily to be concealed, and that to be visible is not necessarily to be seen. The incriminating portrait, whose absence is disruptive (provoking the scene with Pierre), reverts to its previous harmlessness when returned to the very centre of the Rolands' parlour.

Vincent Engel has already brought together *Pierre et Jean* and Lacan's seminar, assigning the role of Poe's wicked Minister to Pierre, that of the Queen to Mme Roland, and that of the King to Roland and, more generally, 'la société bourgeoise du XIX^e^, qui ne voit pas l'adultère et ne veut pas le voir'.[22] This judgement risks ignoring what is in fact most useful about a reading of *Pierre et Jean* with Lacan. What Engel evokes here remains fairly close to a critical orthodoxy, dating from Brunetière but present in many contemporary critical works, which sees in Maupassant's novels nothing more than a denunciation of the mediocrity and hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie;[23] this becomes even clearer when Engel refers to Roland as a 'mari clairvoyant',[24] a phrase drawn from Maupassant's own taxonomy of deceived husbands. 'Les maris clairvoyants', as we are told in 'La porte' (1887), are 'ceux qui ont intérêt, un intérêt d'argent, d'ambition, ou autre, à ce que leur femme ait un amant, ou des amants'; such men 'demandent seulement de sauvegarder, à peu près, les apparences'.[25] Such a comparison tends to demonize as cynical or pathologize as delusional the character who sees nothing, yet I doubt this is the main point of Maupassant's novel, any more than it is the purpose of Lacan's seminar.

'Le séminaire sur "La lettre volée"' is, perhaps unsurprisingly for a text so interested in deception and trickery, somewhat misleading. While the seminar pays close attention to the brilliance of the devious Minister and the master-sleuth Dupin, in particular as the latter serves as a kind of allegory of psychoanalysis, the charisma of these two characters draws our attention away from the fundamentally pathological character of their feats of seeing. Lacan's references to 'l'imbécillité réaliste' and Dupin's ironic denigration of the Prefect's abilities substitute the notion of 'stupidity' for 'normality', or rather, superimpose those two qualities: a certain kind of stupidity is the norm. The title of Poe's story could have been 'Le roi s'amuse', for of all the characters, only the King maintains a tranquil mind and goes about his royal business unmolested. The King is at once the figure of social order and of the ordered subject, since his knowledge is restricted in such a way as to protect him from the threat of the truth: 'le Roi ici est investi [. . .] de l'imbécillité qui tient justement au Sujet'.[26]

[22] 'Qui voit quoi? Lecture de *Pierre et Jean* de Maupassant', *Lettres Romanes*, 48 (1994), 237–57 (p. 238).

[23] See Ferdinand Brunetière, 'Le pessimisme dans le roman', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 70.4 (July–August 1885), 214–26. For a contemporary discussion of Maupassant's pessimism, see Gérard Delaisement, *La Modernité de Maupassant* (Paris: Rive Droite, 1995), Chapter 2, 'Un pessimisme fondamental'.

[24] 'Qui voit quoi?', pp. 250–51.

[25] Maupassant, *Contes et nouvelles*, ed. by Louis Forestier, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1974–79), II, 902.

[26] Lacan, *Écrits I*, p. 38.

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He maintains his own coherence and position even as the positions of those around him change (Minister to Queen, Dupin to Minister, and so on). The King represents the limit of knowledge, a point of absolute resistance beyond which enlightenment cannot progress, and is in this way the very condition of the knowledge game that goes on around him, and this is perhaps precisely the royal business: the guaranteeing of the intersubjective order.

Pierre et Jean, too, takes the figure of the seer as its focus, but uses that figure in the opposite way. Pierre's family life is, essentially, destroyed by what he learns from Maréchal's inheritance:

> Depuis deux jours, une main inconnue et malfaisante, la main d'un mort, avait arraché et cassé, un à un, tous les liens qui tenaient l'un à l'autre ces quatre êtres. C'était fini, c'était brisé. Plus de mère, car il ne pouvait plus la chérir, ne la pouvant vénérer avec ce respect absolu, tendre et pieux, dont a besoin le cœur des fils; plus de frère, puisque ce frère était le fils d'un étranger. (p. 778)

This devastating passage ought to make us wary of the excessive perspicacity which so becomes Dupin. Unlike Duroy, Pierre is unable to disavow the knowledge he has gained as a result of his 'looking awry' at the family mantelpiece. 'L'éclatante vérité' (p. 763) has, finally, exploded, and in that explosion, the destruction of Pierre's intersubjective world is complete. Maupassant strips away the charisma of lucidity and exposes instead that the accession to forbidden knowledge ought properly to be considered a psychological disturbance in its own right. We might even make the daring move of 'diagnosing' Pierre's condition in Lacanian terms. The famous normative moral of Lacan's story is the oblique indication that 'une lettre arrive toujours à destination'.[27] In a sense at least, the 'letter' in question is that fantasy image created by Madeleine Duroy and her incantation: 'Voilà ma cheminée garnie maintenant.' The intersubjective world we live in addresses to each of us such a fantasy, and we are produced as healthy subjects in the act of accepting delivery of that fantasy, of taking up our centralized subjective position and appreciating statically the view this affords us as subjects integrated into the scene. In indulging his epistemophilic impulses, encapsulated in his mantra-like 'Il faut savoir. Mon dieu, il faut savoir' (p. 765), Pierre has presumed to reject that fantasy and to locate himself outside of the frame which circumscribes it (a frame which we should imagine as containing an image of the Roland family, gathered in the parlour, smiling stupidly at the portrait of Maréchal). Armed with his 'favoris noirs coupés comme ceux des magistrats' (p. 718), he behaves as an impartial detective investigating a mystery, when he is on the contrary 'directement intéressé, en tant que fils, à la solution du problème'.[28] In making this separation, however, Pierre gets more than he has bargained for: he is now too radically other to reinsert himself into the picture, and is thus excluded from that 'cohesive social group to which the individual is subordinate', the Roland family.[29] The

[27] Lacan, *Écrits I*, p. 41.
[28] Bernard Pingaud, introduction to *Pierre et Jean* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), p. 17.
[29] Robert Lethbridge, *Maupassant: 'Pierre et Jean'*, Critical Guides to French Texts, 39 (London: Grant and Cutler, 1984), p. 32.

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novel famously ends with Pierre's vanishing into exile as a ship's doctor on the steamer *La Lorraine* while his relatives prepare to celebrate Jean's marriage.[30]

Conclusion

Pierre's case is of course less an actual psychopathology, and more an allegorical representation of a hypothetical epistemological disaster: the danger of 'knowing too much'. In the light of his fate, we ought to reconsider judgements of Roland which would reduce him to a mere figure of bourgeois hypocrisy. In his mediocrity and coarseness, he represents a Maupassantian jab at the dominant class of the age, to be sure; but he is no more dishonest than Poe's thoroughbred King. Failure to see the truth on the mantelpiece or disavowal of that truth (the distinction is possibly moot) are not class-politically or historically contingent; the accession of different groups to social dominance is on a Lacanian showing synonymous with that group's coming to occupy a position of necessary ignorance vis-à-vis certain facts. These facts will of course differ depending upon the dominant group, which is precisely why Lacan stresses both the mystery and the basic irrelevance of the purloined letter's contents. The letter could portend treason (the aristocrat's obsession) or adultery (the bourgeois fixation par excellence); the content of the letter is entirely subordinate to the fact that it must for the sake of the entire community remain undiscovered. Disavowal is thus not the product of some decadent bourgeois inauthenticity, but rather a transhistorical social imperative.

It is then Georges Du*roy*, the nimble disavower, who will emerge as 'king' from these crises of knowledge, going from success to success by remaining ignorant of failure. He is the model of the well-adjusted subject, and equally the allegorical figure of the historical shifts to which the social taboo is susceptible: thus while he begins by disavowing Madeleine's adultery, he coolly lays plans to surprise her *in flagrante delicto* later on in the novel, when divorce has become more useful than continuing marriage. Duroy's behaviour reflects the basic non-moral pragmatism of disavowal. True enlightenment would leave us socially crippled, much like the old Tiresias of *Bel-Ami* Norbert de Varenne, the curmudgeonly and impotent observer who is able only to 'look awry', and

[30] The Lacanian parallel can be strengthened through reference to another thematic concern of *Pierre et Jean*. The message written by Dupin inside his forged version of the purloined letter, with which the Minister will be confronted if he finally attempts to make use of the document, reads: 'Un dessein si funeste | S'il n'est digne d'Atrée est digne de Thyeste' (Poe, 'The Purloined Letter', p. 349). The reference to Atreus' grisly revenge upon Thyestes (Thyestes is tricked into eating the flesh of his own sons) is primarily a reminder that 'revenge is a dish best served up cold', but Lacan picks up the culinary allusion and gives the following laconic gloss of Dupin's message: 'Mange ton Dasein' (*Écrits I*, p. 41). The Minister, that is, has attempted to set himself outside of the intersubjective network; Dupin's action violently reinscribes him within it, as a part of the *Dasein*. Much critical attention has been paid to the significance of eating within *Pierre et Jean*, and Robert Lethbridge (among others) has brought out how the Roland family 'partake of meals' which integrate them into a 'collective structure'; Pierre's inability, refusal, or reluctance to take part in these meals—what we might call, in our 'Lacano-Heideggerian' terminology, his refusal to eat his *Dasein*—'is adjudged harmful' by the family and comes to 'determine his expulsion' (Lethbridge, pp. 32–33). For more on this theme, see Louis Forestier, 'La nourriture dans *Pierre et Jean*', in *Maupassant conteur et romancier*, ed. by Christopher Lloyd and Robert Lethbridge (Durham: Durham University Press, 1994), pp. 149–59, and Claudine Giachetti, 'Déficits métaboliques: sommeil et nutrition dans *Pierre et Jean* de Maupassant', *French Review*, 67 (1994), 767–75.

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whose use of the cliché 'dans le royaume des aveugles les borgnes sont rois' (p. 298) is either ironic or totally mistaken: in the kingdom of the blind, the most blind is king—Duroy—while those who have some vision are, like Norbert de Varenne himself, thoroughly miserable.

While it is a critical commonplace that Maupassant's fiction offers a pessimistic lampooning of the bourgeoisie and of their hypocrisy, my aim in this epistemological analysis has been to show how the novels also suggest the kind of non-moral attitude to disavowal which will become so central to Lacanian psychoanalysis. Maupassant's novels evoke an intersubjective world whose functioning depends upon a series of failures of knowledge, and in which the worst imaginable failure would be to know everything. It is certainly possible to see in Pierre Roland the tragic victim of a hypocritical bourgeois sociality, and in Georges Duroy a figure of loathsome *fin de siècle* inauthenticity. But we should resist any critical practice which circumscribes the ethical, epistemological, and identificatory possibilities of texts as a function of its own preferred aesthetic paradigm of social critique (a paradigm which, while well-intentioned, has arguably attained such a monologic and even doxal status that it no longer contains within itself any significant oppositionality). It really is possible that Maupassant's novels offer us, like Lacan, a handbook of successful intersubjective life; that, instead of inviting us to critique and question, they rather exhort us to take up our seat by the fireplace, and admire the rather pleasing view.

Christ's College, Cambridge Andrew J. Counter

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