UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
FACULTY OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

TARA ISABELLA BURTON

"Narrative Dandyism":

The Theology of Creation in the French Decadent-Dandyist Novel 1845-1907

TRINITY COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

D. PHIL. THESIS AND ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT:

This thesis explores how selected "decadent-dandyist" writers of late 19th century France at once exemplify and subvert the self's act of shaping and imprinting its own selfhood upon the world: a model in which an autonomous, discrete artist-self freely creates, and in which both reader/audience and artistic "subjects" are treated as raw canvas and denied agency of their own. Storytellers like Barbey D'Aurevilly, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, J. K. Huysmans, and Remy de Gourmont create not only hyper-artificial, cloistered, "auto-telic" (to use Charles Taylor's term) textual worlds (e.g. Huysmans' *theïbade raffinée*) but also hyper-artificial *selves*: presenting themselves and their often autobiographical protagonists as dandy-artists for whom artistic creation is an extension of self-creation.

Central to this thesis is the 19th century figure of the dandy – he who, to quote D'Aurevilly, "[causes] surprise in others, and [has] the proud satisfaction of never showing any oneself." Appropriating the divine power of self-fashioning, the dandy transforms the chaos of existence into a clear narrative over which he alone exerts control, denying that he himself is subject to the control of the world.

In my thesis, I first explore the cultural and economic roots of this understanding of the autonomous dandyist-artist in the light of wider tensions in 19th century Paris. I then explore selected "decadent-dandyist" texts through close reading, focusing on the theological implications of our authors' treatment of narrative, character, setting, and language: showing how our writers cast doubt on both the possibility and morality "autonomous" creation on theological grounds. Finally, I ask how constructive theologians might learn from our authors' condemnation of "dandyist" storytelling to create a new Christian aesthetics for the novel: proposing elements of an alternate, "kenotic" novel, in which self-projection gives way to "self-giving", a model based not on power and ego but rather on love.

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Introduction

i. "Miniature Gods": A Brief Note on the Theology of Dandyism

"Enfin, [Beau Brummell] inventa la devise même du dandysme, le Nil mirari de ces hommes *dieux au petit pied* qui veulent toujours produire la surprise en gardant l'impassibilité."[1]

Thus does novelist and short-story writer Barbey D'Aurevilly (1808-1899), in his 1845 biography of English sartorialist Beau Brummell, set out the central principle of dandyism: a phenomenon D'Aurevilly links not merely to a certain style of dress or a set of manners, but rather – like his contemporaries, Charles Baudelaire and occultist Joséphin Péladan – to a quasi-religious "culte de soi-meme [cult of oneself]"[2] (to use Baudelaire's term): a double creation of the social self such that it is both curated object of the public gaze and, more importantly, its architect. The dandy-self Barbey D'Aurevilly describes is a work of art, yet one which maintains its total subjectivity. It has a (planned, designed) effect on others; it is, however, consistently impermeable, impassible. It is ever subject; never object, even when it is an *objet d'art*.

It may be fairly asked what an 1845 theory of "the dandy" – as a figure of sartorial excellence *or* as a nineteenth-century cultural construct – is doing in a thesis ostensibly in the field of theology.

But the phenomenon of "dandyism" – as enumerated more narrowly as a personal code of conduct by Barbey D'Aurevilly, Charles Baudelaire, and, under the name *kaloprosopia*, Joséphin Péladan, and as reflected – as will be discussed at far greater length in subsequent chapters – more broadly as a subsequent literary and stylistic approach to the

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[1] Barbey D'Aurevilly. *Du Dandysme et de George Brummell* (Lemerre: Paris, 1887), p. 39 "Finally, (Beau Brummell) invented the very motto of Dandyism, the *nil mirari* of those miniature Gods, who always try to create surprise by remaining impassive." Translations for this text from Ainslie (Dent: London, 1897).

[2] Charles Baudelaire. *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*. (Calmann Levy: Paris, 1885), p. 93.

narrative act and to language itself – is at its core a *theological* crisis: one born out of a reactionary set of concerns deeply rooted in the myriad social, political, and cultural problems of the post-Kantian, post-Schopenhauerian nineteenth-century, and one which in turn prefigure the twentieth-century crises of language and meaning we come to collectively associate with "post-modernity."

D'Aurevilly's reference to "dieux au petits pied" may be arch, but its significance is profound. The question of creation and its divine (or quasi-divine, or meta-divine) provenance (or lack thereof) is inextricable from a dandy's identity as a self-creator, and by extension a creator of others. To be a dandy, for D'Aurevilly, and for his novelistic successors – Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Rémy de Gourmont, and above all Joris-Karl Huysmans, whose oeuvre displays perhaps the more explicit approach to these problems in the *fin de siècle* Francophone canon – was not simply to be a "miniature god" (as the passage is commonly translated) but also to respond, in some sense, to the question of what God is, was, or should be.

To create one's self, as does a dandy, requires the creation of one's world. Yet, as we shall see, to create either a self, an other, or a world, is for these authors, implicitly a theological act: an engagement with what it means to create, and – as we shall see in the following chapters – with the very concept of *meaning* itself.

Is the act of artistic creation a sinful appropriation of the divine act, as it is, at least initially, for Joris-Karl Huysmans' Des Esseintes, of the 1884 novel *À Rebours*, one of the most iconic dandies of French literature? Is it, as it is for Barbey D'Aurevilly's loquacious dinner-party storytellers in *Les Diaboliques*, or for the fictionalized Thomas Edison, maker of a robot bride in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Ève Future,* a toxic exertion of psychosexual control: a means by which the self projects itself unilaterally into a passive listener? Is language to be understood as "closed" – no less hermetically sealed against a potential

ontological referent than the linguistically and narratively sealed chambers of Huysmans' Des Esseintes, whose attempts at autophagy via peptone enema is perhaps the movements' most iconic image of total creative autonomy, or of his Jacques Marlès, or Georges Rodenbach's bell-ringer Joris Borluut in *Le Carillonneur* – or open: in dialogue with the equally meaning-rich "text" of the (divinely) created world?

In his *Dialogic Imagination* (1975), Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin writes: "when an aesthete undertakes to write a novel, his aestheticism is not revealed in the novel's formal construction, but exclusively in the fact that in the novel there is represented a speaking person who happens to be an ideologue for aestheticism, who exposes convictions that then are subject in the novel to contest."[3]

I seek to counter that claim. The "dandyist" novels of the *fin de siècle* Francophone world, I argue, should be categorized together on stylistic and structural grounds, on subject matter and theme: a kind of "narrative dandyism" that is inextricable from the question of response to divine creation. The predatory relationship of narrator to implied listener, the creation of "hermetic" spaces within the text designed as fortresses against the presence of the real, the intentionally obscurantist use of what critic K. Humphreys calls "lapidary" language,[4] rejecting the organic in favor of the petrified and still – all these, I will argue, double as theological statements about the presence (or absence) of the divine in the narrative text and the text of the world alike.

Such a religious reading of the writers of D'Aurevilly and his dandyist successors, particularly Huysmans, is not unprecedented. The ambiguous relationships each of these writers had to the Catholic faith – and their near unanimous conversions – have been well-

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[3] Mikhail Bakhtin. "Discourse in the Novel." in *The Dialogic Imagination*: Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. (Austin: U of Texas Press, 1994), p. 333.

[4] Karen Humphreys. "Dandyism, Gems, and Epigrams: Lapidary Style and Genre Transformation in Barbey's Les Diaboliques." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 31, no. 3 (2003): pp. 259ff.

documented by biographers. Novelist Léon Bloy – variously friend, mentor, mentee, and enemy of several of the authors covered here – famously posed this question about the challenge of "sadism" – narrative depictions of sexualized monstrosity – in D'Aurevilly's grim short story collection *Les Diaboliques*: "Ce qu'on entend par sadisme estil autre chose qu'une famine enragée d'absolu transférée dans l'ordre passionnel et demandant aux pratiques de la cruauté le condiment des pratiques de la debauche?"[5] Should we identify, in the atrocities and disturbing images we will come to find in the dandyist novels of the period: a narrative "craving" for the Absolute?

I argue yes. While it would be a profound understatement to say that none of the texts covered in this thesis are *apologetic* – indeed, some border on the blasphemous; Huysmans' 1891 *Là-Bas* is filled with depictions of Black Masses and medieval child rape – they are, nevertheless *religious* texts: texts that almost without exception set up a "dandyist" textual world of radical autonomy (with, as will be discussed, an implied atheism: the self is the only subject or creator in its world) only to subvert it.

In some texts – many of D'Aurevilly's stories, for example – the dandyist dynamic is treated explicitly as morally and spiritually toxic. The mode of the Gothic – murder, incest, mutilation, rape – serves to heighten the toll the exertion of narrative control takes on those whose subjectivity is sacrificed (D'Aurevilly himself prefigures such a treatment when he notes of Brummell that: "comme tous les dandys, il aimait encore mieux étonner que plaire: préférence très humaine, mais qui mène loin les hommes; car le plus beau des étonnements, c'est l'épouvante. Sur cette pente, où s'arrêter?"[6]) In others, the dynamic is likewise

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[5] Leon Bloy. *Belluaires et porchers*. (Paris: Stock, 1905), pp.130-1 "Is sadism, as we understand it, anything else but the starved craving for the Absolute, transferred to the order of the passions and seeking in the practices of cruelty spice for the practices of debauch?".

[6] D'Aurevilly, *Dandyisme*, p. 62; "Like all dandies, (Brummell) preferred astonishing to pleasing, a very human preference, but one that leads a long way; for terror is the supreme form of astonishment, and where is one to stop on such a decline".

condemned as impossible: the "absolute" of dandyist narrative control collapses – a robot-bride is lost at sea, a doctor fails to explain the symptoms of a seemingly wicked patient, a chateau-retreat becomes overgrown with weeds – opening up a space for the Absolute within the text.

This question not only challenges us to define the limits of the autonomous creating subject – how "free" must a creator be, and to what extent such freedom necessarily involves limiting the subjectivity of the Other, in the Levinasian sense – but also, perhaps more radically, challenges us to question whether total creative autonomy is indeed desirable or good: not merely in man, but, indeed, in our understanding of God?

Such a challenge is not altogether new. In his *Spirit and the Letter*, Paul Fiddes writes: "The problem with 'spirit' is that of domination and anthropo-centrism. Above all, in Western metaphysics, God as Spirit, as supreme Self or super-rational Subject has been invoked to validate human subjectivity. As the ultimate 'transcendental signified' God has been envisaged as existing outside time and space, independent of all signifiers and sanctioning a hierarchy for domination."[7]

What is, after all, the radical autonomy of the divine but Barbey D'Aurevilly's maxim of the dandy – the unaffected affector – writ upon a cosmic scale: the ultimate artist regarding his work *sub specie aeternae?* Might a theological reading of the dandyist meditations on the role of the creator, and the theological as well as ethical implications for the act of creation, lead us to a more nuanced, even balanced understanding of subject-object relations in the artistic encounter, and with it, a view of God as artist outside the disinterested dandyist mode?

Where – in other words – is there room for love?

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[7] Paul Fiddes. *The Spirit and the Letter: A Tradition and a Reversal*. London: A&C Black: London, 2013, p. 106.

This thesis consists of three parts:

The first section explores the sociological and intellectual roots of dandyism as a literary and cultural phenomenon – from the readings (and misreadings) of Kant and Schopenhauer favored by the dandyist writers to the influential transformation of the Parisian urban landscape into a world in which the twinned acts of spectacle of *flanerie* and dandyism became part of all-pervading cultural discourse to the countervailing influence of Zola and Charcot-inspired positivism.

The second consists of a close reading of several major nineteenth-century dandyist texts, spread over four chapters: each deconstructing a different element of the novel: narrative itself (with special reference to Barbey D'Aurevilly's *Les Diaboliques* and Villiers' *Claire Lenoir*), character (and the creation of the "other") with special reference to Villiers' *L'Ève Future,* de Gourmont's *Sixtine,* and Huysmans' *Là-Bas*, setting (and the creation of the "world") in Huysmans' *À Rebours* and *En Rade*, and – finally – language, with special reference to the final three books in Huysmans' Durtal quartet, exploring how and why our authors use the dandyist mode to explore questions of power, faith, and presence or absence of ontological meaning as a statement about the nature of God.

Finally, I will explore what value these insights may offer a contemporary theologian: ultimately arguing that the model of the disengaged, autonomous, rational "dandy-artist" is not merely toxic as a model for human action, but is, in fact, a no less toxic approach to the fact of divine creation: embracing, instead, a Christian aesthetic, and Christian view of the divine-artist, that is kenotic, incarnational, and – I will argue – grounded in Huysmans' reading of the Eucharist as the ultimate locus of both meaning-making and meaning-transmission.

In so doing, I plan to build upon Paul Fiddes's assertion that "God, we may say, is not a stifling transcendental signified, because God has committed God's own self to the text of the world and this commitment is itself the movement of spirit,"[8] envisioning the twofold presence of Christ in the world (as incarnate body and as Eucharistic flesh) as, as Word made flesh, the fundamental underpinning of meaning itself.

I will explore, furthermore, examples of what narrative textual art made in this mode might look or sound like.

I propose that the "spiritual naturalism" for which Huysmans' characters explicitly – and his contemporaries' characters implicitly – search is one that at once values the specific, the given, and the authentic reality of the Other and infuses its textual world with both ontologically-driven meaning and a linguistic and structural openness to being broken-apart: a text that does not preclude or reject the text of the world but exists in genuine dialogue with it. It is an approach to art that values and valorizes bodily reality, even as it rejects the positivist, medicalized paradigms of narrative, so closely associated with the writings of Huysmans' onetime mentor Émile Zola, that would, like Villiers' Edison or D'Aurevilly's Dr. Torty or Huysmans' Jacques Marlès, seek to impose a single all-encompassing version of events (a proto-meta-narrative) on a polyphonic unity-in-difference that surpasses them.

Durtal, Huysmans' most enduring protagonist, finds such an experience only in the Eucharist. I propose that such art – something we might even call Eucharistic art, – has the capacity to exist: and with it to provide reader and author alike with a moment of connection that not merely values the Other, but indeed demands engagement with that Other: a Ricoeurian vision of text that envisions hermeneutics as "self-understanding by means of understanding others" – and with that other, perhaps, "the living God."[9]

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[8] Ibid, p. 138.

[9] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Chicago: Chicago University Press: Chicago, 1992, p. 4.

ii. A Question of Methodology

One of the greatest challenges in this thesis is one of method. The questions my authors raise are those which will come to be worked out, with varying approaches and varying degrees of success, throughout the twentieth century. It is difficult to discuss narrative in these authors, after all, without resorting to Ricoeur, or the problem of text and referent without Derrida. At the same time, however, to "read back" critical theories or hermeneutical structures obviously unfamiliar to these authors would be to pass up the chance to read these authors on their own terms.

No less challenging is the question of authorial intent. D'Aurevilly, Huysmans, de Gourmont, and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, all were or, more usually, became Catholic. Nearly all dabbled in the occult, often in tandem with one another (Huysmans and de Gourmont, for example, shared an occultist mistress, Berthe Courrière, an associate too of the magician and novelist Joséphin Péladan). That information is useful insofar as it legitimizes an authentic, engaged theological reading of these texts – these are the texts of individuals for whom the question of God was indeed a profound and present one, and it stands to reason that many of the novel's images or allusions that seem to be theological in nature were probably written to be taken seriously as such – but it cannot be the only basis on which such a reading is to be made.

Complicating such a biographical reading, in any case, is the authors' role as public figures in what might be considered the first "celebrity age": how seriously (or cynically) are we to take, for example, Huysmans telling a reporter for *L'Écho de Paris* that he is under spiritual warfare from rival occultists,[10] coincidentally timed to the release of his novel set in

[10] See discussion of Huysmans' interviews in Robert Baldick, *The Life of J.K. Huysmans*. (Sawtry: Dedalus,, 2006), pp. 238ff.

the *demimonde* of the Parisian occult? In an era of dandyist self-creation, biographical texts – letters, newspaper interviews, diaries – must automatically be regarded as no less suspect than overtly fictional one (themselves, likewise historically read – and, I shall argue with critics like George Ross Ridge and Robert Ziegler *against* this wider critical grain in the field of Decadent studies – as strictly [auto]-"biographical")[11] .

Should we then take a structuralist approach – which the texts, with their intense inward focus and ostensible denial of any reference point outside the cloistered textual world created (Charles Taylor, in describing the work of the Symbolist poet Mallarmé, whose verse bears stylistic resemblance to the novels that will be discussed in this thesis, uses the term "auto-telic" – verse "purified of any personal thoughts and feelings of its creator….[taken] to glacial heights"[12]) seem to invite?

Yet these novels, we shall see, are ultimately about *restituting* meaning: a working-out in narrative form of the tensions between auto-telic narrative autonomy and a mode of being that requires dynamic exchange with otherness, and no less dynamic a profession of faith in the integrity of meaning.

In his "The Death of the Author," postmodern critic Roland Barthes writes of the rejection of a single "outside" meaning as a theological as well as a semiotic statement: "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message of the Author-God') but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash…Literature…by refusing to assign a 'secret,' an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text) liberates what may be called an anti-

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[11] See Robert Ziegler's argument in Robert Ziegler. *Asymptote: An Approach to Decadent Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009, pp. 12ff.

[12] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 442.

theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is in the end to refuse God and his hypostasis — reason, science, law."[13]

The dandyist novelists both share and depart from elements of this reading of meaning. Narrative, as construed in the D'Aurevillian (and Zolan) sense as a hierarchical means of domination, is rejected, and with it a certain positivist, post-Cartesian, post-Kantian approach comparable to Barthes' "reason, science, law."

But ultimately, the relationship of signifier to signified, of word to meaning, of story to the Scriptural accounts of redemption-in-narrative-time, is one that these authors restitute as part of (one might even say: the first step of) faith. The "redemption" of language, in late Huysmans in particular, rejects the lapidary, the enclosed, and the obscure or intentionally obstreperous, embracing fundamental meaningfulness as well as dynamic fluidity: it is a vehicle of communication and thus, for Huysmans, of communion. It is, in fixing meaning (though, perhaps, a more complex and polyphonic definition of "meaning" than Barthes would allow above), actively *accepting* God.

Ultimately, my approach to these texts is as a constructive theologian, first, and a literary critic second. I take as my methodological starting point the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, as channeled through such theological readers of his work as James Fodor, who engages meaningfully with the structuralist willingness to challenge (to borrow Fodor's terminology) "the autonomous, self-sufficient, transparent ego of Enlightenment rationality… [willing instead to] 'dissolve' the secure self of transparent consciousness"[14] even as he preserves a fundamental faith in the reliability and power of language to point towards something that is, in some sense (though, we shall see, not fully) outside or beyond itself:

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[13] Roland Barthes, "The death of the author" in *Image, Music, Text* (trans Steven Heath). New York: Hill & Wang: 1977,, p. 147.

[14] James Fodor. *Christian Hermeneutics: Paul Ricœur and the Refiguring of Theology*. (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995), p. 14.

what Fodor calls, in Christian terms, the unity of "The reliability of the world (truthful reference), the trustworthiness of others (unfeigned trust), and the faithfulness of God (trustworthy witness)."[15] I disagree with Derrida and his postmodern contemporaries (or at least, the popular understanding thereof – the question of whether or not such a reading is accurate deserves a whole other thesis) in the suspicion of logocentrism and choose to affirm a metaphysics of presence.

That is not to imply that language in some sense "bars" us from the truth of referent – we should avoid here any implication that language serves as an epistemological bridge *between* the mind and phenomena – but rather to argue that *within* language – and within the triune relationship of writer, reader, and text – we find a textual world *already divinized* by God's self necessarily present within the linguistic act of communication: language as self-giving that is also grounded in an incarnational understanding of the Word made flesh.

D'Aurevilly's stories, which explore by both typifying and subverting the toxic power of one-sided narrative, give way to images, in the late, post-conversion Huysmans, of language as a dynamic and indeed Eucharistic field in which all, including the *foules* – the masses – are invited to participate

A theological-Ricoeurian approach to these texts must be grounded in an understanding of both their implied refigurative power within the textual-world (how characters within these stories – many of which are stories-within-stories utilizing the literary device of *mis-en-abîme* – are affected by dandyist or anti-dandyist narrative) and in the power they can exert extra-textually: how a theologian, encountering these texts in twenty-first century Oxford, might find within them insight – whether intentional or not (with Ricoeur, I will contend up to a point with our authors' intentions without limiting my interpretations to them) – to refigure, in turn, a Christian understanding of storytelling. To quote Fodor on

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[15] Ibid, p. 338.

Ricoeur again, "this shift to refiguration or transformation emphasizes the actual context of communion and exchange within which all Christian discourse takes place and in which all claims to truth are advanced. Apart from a situation of face-to-face intercourse, a back-and-forth movement between address and response, attentive listening, and appropriate reply, all notions of reference make little or no sense**."**[16] This critical junction is the moment which, in Ricoeur's own words, finds the "intersection of the world of the text and the world of the… reader; the intersection, therefore, of the world configured by the poem and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality."[17]

My hermeneutical approach is threefold. In part I, I will to trace not simply the biographical or social background of the works I will cover in Part II, but, more importantly, the discourse to which our dandyist writers were responding: the field of signs and symbols from which our writers drew in their texts. The bulk of the thesis, Part II, will consist of a close reading of the texts and their explorations of narrative, character, setting, and language.

Finally, in Part III, I will explore the refigurative power of a theological reading of these texts to transform contemporary theological discourse of artistic creation, looking at the dandyists alongside contemporary theological accounts of creation by Paul Fiddes, Graham Ward, John Polkinghorne, and others: using the tradition of process thought to challenge the figure of the "unaffected" God – with His similarities to D'Aurevilly's dandy – exploring, with Polkinghorne, how: "Emphasis on divine power seems to lie behind Classic Theology's picture of a God who, through primary causality, is in total control whose invulnerability is such that there is no reciprocal effect of creatures upon the divine nature, of the kind that a truly loving relationship would seem to imply. The scheme…is intellectually impressive, but

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16 Fodor, *Ricoeur*, p. 15.

17 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, (trans. Kathleen McLaughlin & David Pellauer) (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1990) p. 70.

it is open to question whether its picture of the divine nature is not so remote and insulated from creation as to put in question the fundamental Christian conviction that 'God is love'"[18]

A few more methodological notes:

Critical discourse on these authors – and specifically on theological interpreations – has been in short supply. The one major text on Decadence and Catholicism, Ellis Hanson's unimaginatively titled *Decadence and Catholicism,* treats religious imagery in Decadent texts as a pure camp: winking blasphemy on the part of literary *enfants terribles*.[19]

Only Huysmans has been the subject what might be considered a wider body of critical discourse. While "traditional" Huysmans scholarship from Mario Praz and Robert Baldick onwards has largely consisted of dividing his novels into "naturalist," "Decadent" and "post-conversion" periods, and treating Huysmans' protagonists as authorial self-inserts: autobiographical figures to be treated interchangeably with the author himself: an approach critic Christopher Lloyd terms a "somewhat facile and ingenuous identification between biographical and fictional,"[20] more recent scholarship has been more nuanced in both distinguishing Huysmans' characters from Huysmans himself, and in looking at Huysmans' *oeuvre* as a unified whole, in which naturalist, Decadent, and Catholic perspectives and approaches are to be understood as mixed (Marc Smeets, Ruth Antosh, and Pierre Glaudes take this view, and are the rare critics who give Huysmans' post-conversion writings serious critical attention.) I am indebted, too, to the scholarship of Charles Maignon, whose research in the "medicalization" of Huysmans – his subversive fascination with the language of illness

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[18] JC Polkinghorne, "Kenotic Creation and Divine Action" in Polkinghorne, (ed). *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*. (W.B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2001), p. 92.

[19] Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1997)

[20] Christopher Lloyd, *J.-K. Huysmans and the Fin-De-Siècle Novel*, (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 1997), p. 3.

and pathology – has been invaluable in my treatment of Huysmans *vis à vis* his onetime mentor Zola.[21].

I am most indebted, however, to the work of Robert Ziegler. While I do not fully share his Lacanian, psychoanalytical approach to Huysmans and his contemporaries, I nevertheless seek to build upon what Ziegler identifies as the "asymptote": the view that

> for the Decadents, authorship is a transformative process. By projecting into fiction unwanted traits, destructive tendencies, the writer dissociates himself from a character who embodies an obsolete identity. Creative work does not illustrate a narcissistic entanglement of authors and characters. It does not show, as critics have long maintained, that Decadence is sterile self-reproduction. By allowing the playful fashioning of multiple identities, writing exorcised harmful features, enabled an experimentation with adaptive strategies, so that art became a dynamic act of creative regeneration. Paradoxically, Decadent writing turns into a successful quest for health. Having rejected the regressive impulses that he works through in his characters, the Decadent is able to escape the shell of stifling subjectivism. Free to move out into the world of material reality, he experiences again the inexhaustible richness of other people... The immeasurable distance separating Huysmans from des Esseintes – the sedate novelist from an incarnation of fetishist aestheticism

[21] Cf: Charles Maingon, *La Médecine dans l'Oeuvre de J.K. Huysmans* (Paris: Librairie A.G. Nizet, 1994),

> – is like the asymptotic curve that nears but never meets the line. Creating fictional projections of their most damaging traits, these authors approach their characters as their own seductive tendencies.[22]

Without making the same robust psychological claims as Ziegler, I nevertheless share with him the hypothesis that the creation of the hyper-decadent, dandyist *character* (from Villiers' Thomas Edison to Huysmans' Des Esseintes) is often subversive, and subverted, by what I would call not a "quest for health" but a countervailing, critical, and Christian tension within the very structure of the novelistic work. The "sterile self-reproduction" and "stifling subjectivism" I would argue are very much features of the dandyist mode, which also – for these writers – contains seeds of its own decay, so that the very same text can be read as both the exemplification and critique of the dandyist mode.

In the ironic interplay of the various self-created "selves" in dandyist fiction, and in the intertextuality of the novels covered here, we find the seeds of a wider and less cloistered narrative world: one that engages both with other texts and with the world-as-text, one that cast doubts on the idea of autonomous artistic selfhood and leaves room for the text as the site not of self-projection but of self-giving.

In drawing on these doubts, and their implications, we may find ourselves challenged to adopt a view of creation, and of world-as-text, predicated on love rather than power, one outlined by George F.R. Ellis thus: "the fundamental aim of loving action shapes the nature of creation and of transcendence in practice, setting their meaning, implications, and limitations. Thus we take seriously the concept that the purpose of the universe is precisely to make this kind of sacrificial response possible."[23]

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[22] Ziegler, *Asymptote*, p. 12

[23] George F.R. Ellis, "Kenosis as a Unifying Theme for Life and Cosmology" in *Works of Love*, p. 111

What that sacrificial response looks like will be discussed anon.

iii. Symbolists, Decadents, and Genre

Before we begin our discussion of these authors proper, we must discuss briefly the problem of genre when it comes to categorizing the authors – Barbey D'Aurevilly, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Remy de Gourmont, and Joris-Karl Huysmans – I have heretofore referred to for simplicity's sake as "dandyist" and will refer to, henceforth, as "decadent-dandyist" for reasons outlined below.

Such a designation is not a common one. Many of these authors and their ideological contemporaries are more commonly in the critical literature referred to, varyingly, as Decadent or Symbolist, two terms that are themselves difficult to separate or categorize.

At first glance, these terms prove tricky to read alongside my theory of theological dandyism, which – as I have said – is predicated on an assumption of such radical subjectivity that meaning on the semiotic level, too, is determined by the authoring individual rather than by any reference to the ontological real.

The designation Symbolist denotes a loose umbrella movement of late nineteenth-century French writers and artists who, with Mallarmé, sought a version of art that rejected mimesis proper in favor of a revelation of an extant, unspeakable Ideal. A few extant manifestos from the period give us a sense of the movement at large.

In 1886, for example, the Greek poet and critic Jean Moréas writes in his essay "Symbolisme", published in the supplement to the *Figaro* on September 18, that "la poésie symbolique cherche à vêtir l'Idée d'une forme sensible qui, néanmoins, ne serait pas son but à elle-même, mais qui, tout en servant à exprimer l'Idée, demeurerait sujette. L'Idée, à son tour, ne doit point se laisser voir privée des somptueuses simarres des analogies extérieures; car le caractère essentiel de l'art symbolique consiste à ne jamais aller jusqu'à la concentration de

l'Idée en soi. Ainsi, dans cet art, les tableaux de la nature, les actions des humains, tous les phénomènes concrets ne sauraient se manifester eux-mêmes; ce sont là des apparences sensibles destinées à représenter leurs affinités ésotériques avec des Idées primordiales."[24]

Such an approach – the attempt to reach a primordial Idea that exists outside the text and outside language itself –might seem to contradict a vision of a "dandyist" text so hermetically self-enclosed that it rejects the possibility of anything outside its enclosure. But , the Symbolist movement with which so many of these authors (particularly Villiers) are associated, and with which they were without exception loosely socially affiliated, contained already within the germ of this idea the profound disconnect between word and meaning, sign and signified, that we find reaches its apex in the dandyist mode.

Moréas himself, in that same text, already recognizes that language, for the Symbolists, should be understood as hermetic, rather than communicative: accessible only select initiates capable of comprehension: "il faut en Symbolisme," he writes, "un style archétype et complexe; d'impollués vocables, la période qui s'arc-boute alternant avec la période aux défaillances ondulées, les pléonasmes significatifs, les mystérieuses ellipses, l'anacoluthe en suspens, tout trop hardi et multiforme ; enfin la bonne langue – instaurée et modernisée –, la bonne et luxuriante et fringante langue…de tant d'autres écrivains libres et dardant le terme acut du langage, tels des Toxotes de Thrace leurs flèches sinueuses.…"[25]

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[24] Jean Moreas, (18 September 1886) "Symbolisme" *Le Figaro – supplement littéraire*, pp.1-2 ; "Symbolist poetry endeavors to clothe the Idea in a form perceptible to the senses that nevertheless does not constitute an ultimate goal in itself, but, while helping to convey the Idea, remains subordinate. The Idea, in turn, must now allow itself to be deprived of the sumptuous trappings of external analogies; for the essential character of symbolic art is never to reach the Idea itself. Accordingly, in this art, the depictions of nature…all the concrete phenomena, would not manifest themselves; these are but appearances perceptible to the senses destined to represent their esoteric affinities with primordial ideals"

[25] Ibid, "requires an archetypal and complex style: pure sounds, densely convoluted sentences alternating with gentler rhythms, significant redundancies, mysteries ellipses, suspended anacolutha, any mold and multiform trope, and finally good language, restored and modernized — the good, luxuriant, and lively French…[of] so many writers who were free and took aim with the sharpest words like the archers of Thrace"

(The violent imagery of language-as-weapon here is an association we will find repeatedly in the dandyist text.)

Insofar as Symbolism functions as an Idealistic movement (it's worth noting that some designated Symbolists, Rémy de Gourmont among them, specifically rejected the term in favor of "Idealist")[26] it is an exclusionary one, "dandyist" because aristocratic. The relationship between symbol and sign, mediated by these "densely convoluted sentences", is one that locates that sign *outside* the world: beyond language. Language is fundamentally broken in its capacity to express anything at all *fully* – if "the essential character of symbolic art is never to reach the Idea itself", language hits its limits. The Idea is located specifically *outside* the world: whether or not the Idea is to be linked with some divine figure or experience of the spiritual, such divinity does not infuse the *world*. The world, like language itself, is *only* meaning-rich insofar as it points *outside* itself: once such a perspective is combined with the atheistic (or anti-theistic) pessimism explored by Huysmans, say, such "pointing" turns instead inward, leading to the creation of the "hermetic" text outlined earlier.

Consider, for example, the Ur-text of the Symbolist movement, Baudelaire's poem "Correspondences."

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

II est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
— Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

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[26] Henri Dorra. *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*. (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1994), p. 151

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.[27]

Baudelaire sets up an instability of meaning here. There is *something* here – some "correspondence" between the visible and invisible – but it is "confused". Binaries collapse: this "forest of symbols" is both "vast as night" and "as the light of day." The similes are sometimes senseless – how might a perfume be "sweet as oboes?" – sometimes (the following phrase: "green as meadows") not. The network of association may not be as radically subjective, say, as the "mouth organ" Huysmans' Des Esseintes creates, deciding arbitrary associations between liquors and instrumental sounds, the textual world of the poem is nonetheless unstable.

Charles Taylor, contrasting Baudelaire's version of "correspondences" with the Neo-Platonic world of allegory to which it is indebted, in the service of drawing a wider cultural distinction, highlights Baudelaire's *subjectivity* as the distinguishing factor:

> Where subjectivism enters in is in the view of nature as a source… the idea that an indispensable route of access to the world or nature or being we want to articulate is the impulse of nature or the intimations of the spirit within…his is what makes a clear distinction between writers like Schelling, Novalis, Baudelaire, on one hand, and the great thinkers of Renaissance neo-Platonism and magical thought, like Bruno, on the other, despite all the debt which the first owed to the second….[unlike Baudelaire] Bruno and Paracelsus, for instance, though they may have thought of their knowledge as esoteric, saw themselves as grasping the unmediated spiritual order of things. It may take secret and not widely available lore to uncover it, but it doesn't have to be revealed through an articulation of what

[27] Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs de Mal,* (Godine: Boston, 1983) p. 193: "Nature is a temple in which living pillars Sometimes give voice to confused words; Man passes there through forests of symbols Which look at him with understanding eyes. Like prolonged echoes mingling in the distance In a deep and tenebrous unity, Vast as the dark of night and as the light of day, Perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond. There are perfumes as cool as the flesh of children, Sweet as oboes, green as meadows — And others are corrupt, and rich, triumphant, With power to expand into infinity, Like amber and incense, musk, benzoin, That sing the ecstasy of the soul and senses.".

> is in us. It is in this sense a public order that it is available unmediated by our powers of creative articulation.[28]

For Baudelaire, by contrast, that "spiritual order" is personally mediated by the self.

The image of the symbols themselves as gazing, rather than gazed-upon – the restrictions, in other words, on man's subjective organizing power – is one the dandyist mode does *not* take from Symbolism (I would contend that Baudelaire, despite his influence on his successors, and his critical studies on dandyism, should *not* be categorized with the dandies for this reason), but his aesthetics nonetheless pave the way for a Huysmans or even D'Aurevilly. As Claudia Lacoeur puts it, in her analysis of the poem, "The equation of nature with a temple is a poetic act defying semiotic comprehension. The book of the world, written by divinity, is meant to be read sequentially by experience, but the godless temple that is nature emits "confuses paroles" in no narrative order, merely 'parfois'."[29]

Such an assessment of Symbolism more broadly is borne out by Lawrence Porter, in his study *The Crisis of French Symbolism*, perhaps the most complete study of the movement's epistemological undercurrents: "Instead of challenging the audience's preconceptions regarding what poetry should say, and how, Symbolism disrupted the very communicative axis linking sender to message to receiver, thus calling in question the possibility of any communication whatsoever. The French Symbolist movement, then, was neither a coterie nor a system but a crisis."[30]

I motion that the "decadent-dandyist" writers covered in this thesis should be considered Symbolist-adjacent. They share common ground with the Symbolists in their fascination with obscure language and the "crisis" of an unstable, "godless" world. They,

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[28] Taylor, *Sources,* p. 428.

[29] Claudia Brodsky Lacoeur, "'Terrible Novelty': Baudelaire's Vision of Building' in Keith Busby (ed) *Correspondences* (Rodopi: Amsterdam, 1992), p. 46.

[30] Lawrence Porter, *The Crisis of French Symbolism* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1990), p. 20

however, depart from (or, one might say take to its natural conclusion) the Symbolist fascination with the Ideal as something ontologically real, but outside the created order. The Ideal becomes, for these writers, a function not of ontological reality but of radical subjectivity; to quote the simplistic, but widely-shared reading of Schopenhauer and Kant by Rémy de Gourmont, "I do not see what is; what is, is what I see. So many thinking men, so many diverse and perhaps different worlds."[31]

The term "Decadent," by contrast, I use as a cultural or social designator: a reactionary marker against certain aspects of perceived "modernity" (in particular the positivist turn, expressed in literature through Zolan naturalism). Thus, some Symbolists are Decadents, some Decadents are Symbolists, but not all writers who fit in one category must necessarily fit the other.

The wider critical terminology of decadence is no less tricky to unpack. Making matters of genre more difficult is the polemic manner in which the term was historically used; often, the embracing of Symbolist and related authors of the term "decadent" was a reaction to, or reclamation of, a slur. German critic Max Nordau, for example, in his 1892 text *Decadence,* criticizes decadents thus: "[Fin de siècle] means a practical emancipation from traditional discipline, which theoretically is still in force…it means the end of an established order which for thousands of years has satisfied logic, fettered depravity, and in every art matured something of beautiful."[32]

The English critic Arthur Symons, likewise, used the term in in 1908's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* to denote a moral, rather than aesthetic, trend (and an undesirable one at that) in *fin de siècle* French literature; "It pleased some young men in various countries to

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[31] Quoted in Andrew Mangravite (ed) *An Anthology of French Symbolist & Decadent Writing Based Upon The Book of Masks by Remy de Gourmont* (Atlas: New York, 1994), p. 14.

[32] Max Nordau, *Degeneration,* (William Henneman: London, 1892), p. 5

call themselves Decadents, with all the thrill of unsatisfied virtue masquerading as uncomprehended vice…no doubt perversity of form and perversity of matter are often found together…nothing, not even conventional virtue, is so provincial as conventional vice, and the desire to 'bewilder the middle classes' is itself middle class."[33] Symons identifies certain linguistic traits – obscurity, self-enclosure – that we have also associated with Symbolism, but adds accusations of grotesque or decadent content: "some of them have carried style to a point beyond which the style that says, rather than suggests, cannot go…that ingenious deformation of the language...No doubt perversity of form and perversity of matter are often found together."[34]

Elsewhere – as in Paul Bourget – we find "decadence" used as to denote the shadow-side (which is to say, the obscure(r) side) of Symbolistic linguistic theory: "Fifty years from now, the style of the Goncourt brothers — I name men who have deliberately chosen the path of decadence — will be understood only by specialists. The theoreticians of decadence would retort: what does it matter? Is the writer's purpose to set himself up as a perpetual candidate before the universal suffrage of centuries to come? We delight in our so-called corruptions of style as well as in the refined beings of our race and our time It remains to be determined whether the exceptional group we constitute is not in fact an aristocracy…it is as childish to believe in the writer's immortality — soon the memory of men will be so overloaded by the prodigious quantity of books that any notion of glory will necessarily be bankrupt — as it is deceitful to lack the courage to sustain one's intellectual pleasure. Let us take pleasure, therefore, in the peculiarities of our ideals and forms, even if they imprison us in a solitude unbroken by visitors."[35]

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[33] Arthur Symons, *Collected Works,* v. 9 (Martin Seckler: London, 1924), p. 102

[34] Ibid

[35] Quoted in Dorra, *Symbolist*, p. 130

On the other hand, poet Paul Verlaine embraced the term specifically as a slur with reactionary import. In an 1891 interview with journalist Jules Hurret, Verlaine took up the term as a war cry: "C'est bien simple. On nous l'avait jetée comme une insulte, cette épithète; je l'ai ramassée comme cri de guerre; mais elle ne signifiet rien de spécial, que je sache. Décadent! Est-ce que le crépuscule d'un beau jour ne vaut pas toutes les aurores! Et puis, le soleil qui a l'air de se coucher, ne se lèvera-t-il pas demain? Décadent, au fond ne voulait rien dire du tout. Je vous le répète, c'æetait plutot un cri et un drapeu sans rien autor. Pour se battre, y a-t-il besoin de phrases."[36]

Perhaps the most iconic statement of decadence, the *decadisme* espoused in the manifest of poet Anatole Baju, in *Le Décadent*, likewise manifests itself as a reactionary one. Writes Baju: "We are representatives of the society of the future, strayed into your world; we despise your social Darwinism, your Laws, your Morality and your false Aesthetics."[37]

Leaving aside the question of which Decadent can "legitimately" claim Decadent self-definition – a point made by Luca Somiglia, who notes that the writers most associated with "Decadent" manifestos are not necessarily those remembered a century later as its most successful literary practitioners[38] -- it is Baju's latter definition, Decadents as despisers of "social Darwinism" and "false Aesthetics", that I wish to focus on in the remainder of this chapter.

In using the term "decadent-dandyist," I wish to identify a particular "dandyist mode that, though in dialogue with elements of Symbolism (particularly the Symbolist destabilization of meaning), is nevertheless its own distinct phenomenon: a narrative

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[36] Quoted in Somiglia, Luca. *Legitimizing the Artist: Manifesto Writing and European Modernism, 1885-1915*. (University of Toronto Press, 2003). p. 57

[37] Quoted in Jennifer Birkett, *Sins of the Fathers: Decadence in France 1874-1914* (Quartet: London, 1986), p. 10

[38] Somiglia, *Legitimizing,* pp. 57ff.

approach that can be traced back to the novels, short stories, and Dandyist manifestos of Barbey D'Aurevilly. In supplementing "dandyist" with "decadent," I wish to clearly link these texts to a wider social and cultural movements that reached its apex at the *fin de siècle,* and which was a fundamentally reactionary movement against that era which Symons describes – though uncharitably than our Decadents would perhaps like – as "the age of Science, the age of material things; and words, with that facile elasticity which there is in them, did miracles in the exact representation of everything that visibly existed, exactly as it existed."[39]

I am not alone in using this "decadent-dandyist" designator. I use it much in the same manner (and as a designator for largely the writers) as does feminist critic of dandyism Rhonda Garelick in her *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siecle,* though my reasoning is my own.[40]

It is a functional if not exhaustive designator that, I hope, highlights the relevant literary qualities of the texts as well as their place in wider historical and cultural discourse.

iv. What is a Dandy? Three Visions of the Autopoetic Self

Before we enter the discursive world of 19th century Paris to better understand the cultural and intellectual roots of dandyist and Decadent culture, we must pin down what, precisely, we mean by the term "dandy" and "dandyist" – and my own contribution to the vocabulary of this thesis, the "dandyist mode".

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[39] Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, (Dutton: London, 1919), p. 4

[40] See discussion in Rhoda Garelick. *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siecle*. (Princeton University Press: Princeton 1999), pp. 6ff

We would do well to begin with the 1876 short story "Deshoulières," by Jean Richepin. The title character, the "dandy de l'imprévu (dandy of the unpredictable),"[41] is brilliant and bored; he lives in terror of being pigeonholed by others. "Après avoir touché un peu à tout, aux arts, aux lettres, aux plaisirs; il en était arrive à se créer un ideal qui consistait à chercher en tout l'*imprévu*."[42] Deshoulières lives by the maxim that one should never look like oneself; he applies false hair and makeup to alter his appearance and confound his peers. He has the potential to be a great artist or writer, but he cannot bear the "vulgarity" involved in committing to a single activity, and hence becoming "predictable" to the common man. Instead, he decides on a whim to be a great criminal, hoping to alleviate his ennui that way. He proceeds to dispassionately murder his mistress, have her embalmed, and live quite happily (if disturbingly) as her lover until he is finally caught, at which point, fearing that working on a defense would be far too ordinary, he spends his time in jail "ne s'occupa ni de sa défense, ni de sa popularité malsaine, mais de réduire en corps de doctrine les mystères du magnétisme animal, et de traduire ce traité de philosophie ardue en sonnets monosyllabiques."[43]

Despite this, Deshoulières is almost acquitted. Not content with that victory, however, he stands up in the courtroom and condemns the poor arguments of the prosecutor. Even his final execution, Richepin tells us, is original: he leans back so that the guillotine can slice his head rather than his neck.[44]

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[41] Jean Richepin, *Les Morts Bizarres* v. 2 (Paris: Decaux, 1876); p. 281; translations from Stephen Romer (ed, tran) *French Decadent Texts* (OUP: Oxford, 2013)

[42] Ibid, "Having dabbled in nearly everything—arts, letters, pleasures—he had forged for himself an ideal, that consisted in being unpredictable in everything";

[43] Ibid, pp. 284-5: classifying and codifying the mysteries of animal magnetism, and of transforming this dense philosophical treatise into a sequence of monosyllabic sonnets."

[44] I adapt this passage from my previous discussion of Richepin in my piece for *The Paris Review*

The story is somewhat satirical[45], of course, but Richepin captures several elements of dandyist existence: the desire for artifice rooted in a desire for freedom, a burning need for originality that transcends the physical dictates of the body, an all-consuming need to product an effect, an inability to relate to others, a desire for artistic autonomy that comes necessarily and inexorably at the expense – here, literalized as murder – at the others in his life.

Christopher Lane, in his essay on *fin de siècle* dandyism, sees the dandyist mode at the heart of urban, modern life ('modernity' to be understood in the Baudelairean/ Benjaminian sense). "[D]andyism,' he writes "transformed a relatively simple model of cultural duplication into a complex form of mimicry that haunted and revised the very meaning of modernity at the end of the last century."[46]

If there is an Ur-text of dandyism, it is Barbey D'Aurevilly's 1845 biography of Beau Brummell, which we quoted in the very first page of this thesis. *Du dandyisme et Beau Brummell* is, in form as well as content, the ultimate dandyist text. Purporting to be a biography of the sartorially-inclined eighteenth-century English aristocrat, the book quickly spirals away from conveying any sort of meaningful factual information to the reader; rather, the narrative voice intrudes and disgresses, until the book is little more than a collection of epigrams: meditation on dandyisms.

D'Aurevilly is quick to critique those who think of dandyism as "heureuse et audacieuse dictature en fait de toilette et d'élégance extérieure."[47] He notes that "On peut être

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[45] The qualifier "somewhat" may seem like comic understatement here, but let us not forget that poet Gerard de Nerval used to take walks around Paris with his pet lobster on a leash.

[46] Christopher Lane "The Drama of the Impostor: Dandyism and Its Double." *Cultural Critique*, no. 28 (October 1, 1994), p. 30.

[47] D'Aurevilly, *Dandyism*, p. 12; "a bold and felicitous dictatorship in the matter of clothes and exterior elegance".

dandy dans un habit chiffonné."[48] To be a dandy, rather, is to create oneself and one's surroundings so perfectly that the dandyist self is virtually immune to all aspects of contingency, of being-in-the-world. He notes, for example, the desire of some dandies (he is historically vague about precisely who these are) to "voulaient marcher dans leur nuée, ces dieux! L'opération était très délicate et très longue, et on se servait, pour l'accomplir, d'un morceau de verre aiguisé."[49] Dandies, in other words, create the world around them and yet are immune to it – they use sharp glass to fix their posture, and yet do not seem to experience or suffer pain the way other, "ordinary" people do.

This utter "glacial" –even auto-telic, to quote the word used by Charles Taylor to denote the hermetic style of Symbolist poetry[50] – quality is what makes the dandy: they are pure, rational acting agents, whose agency is never threatened. D'Aurevilly praises Brummell for his "glacer d'indifférence sans mépris, comme il convient à un dandy consommé, à un homme qui porte en lui quelque chose de supérieur au monde visible."[51]

D'Aurevilly repeatedly uses the motif and image of being "godlike" to bolster his argument. Describing the power of assimilation as a "gift of God", he characterizes it as inferior to "cet autre don, cette autre puissance; le pouvoir d'être soi."[52] We have cited already his characterization of dandies as "dieux aux petits pied" and "marcher…ces dieux" earlier.

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[48] Ibid, p. 25; "one may be a dandy in creased clothes".

[49] Ibid; "wanted to walk like Gods in their clouds. The operation was difficult and tedious of execution ; a piece of pointed glass was employed for the purpose".

[50] Taylor, *Sources*, p. 442.

[51] D'Aurevilly, *Dandyisme,* p. 57; "glacial indifference without contempt, as becomes a consummate Dandy, a man who bears within him something superior to the visible world".

[52] Ibid, p. 5; "that other gift – the power of being oneself".

This comparison is grounded in an understanding of dandyist sovereignty: dandy as affector and agent, but never object. It's an agency that transcends even order or natural law (if such a thing exists); D'Aurevilly writes: "Ainsi, une des conséquences du dandysme, un des ses principaux caractères pour mieux parler, son caractère le plus général, est-il de produire toujours de l'imprévu, ce à quoi l'esprit accoutumé au joug des règles ne peut pas s'attendre en bonne logique."[53] This control is not merely verbal – at times, D'Aurevilly notes, the dandy might make silence his ally: "Cet homme, trop superficiellement jugé, fut une puissance si intellectuelle qu'il régna encore plus par les airs que par les mots. Son action sur les autres était plus immédiate que celle qui s'exerce uniquement par le langage. Il la produisait par l'intonation, le regard, le geste, l'intention transparente, le silence même."[54] (Yet silence, D'Aurevilly is careful to emphasize, is a ploy: an exercise of power by denying discourse: "Le silence de Brummell était un moyen de plus de faire effet, la coquetterie taquine des êtres sûrs de plaire et qui savent par quel bout s'allume le désir."[55]) In other words, both narrative mastery and silence are what might be called "power moves" – deliberate satisfaction of or withholding of narrative expectation. A dandy may tell a story; he may pause – to excite the sympathies and passions of his listeners – but in both cases, his mode in storytelling is to exert complete mastery over his listener.

This mastery, however, precludes the chance of any emotional response on the part of the dandy himself. Elsewhere in the text, D'Aurevilly makes this dynamic even more explicit:

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[53] Ibid, p. 14; "Accordingly, one of the consequences and principal characteristics —or rather the most general characteristic—of Dandyism, is always to produce the unexpected, that which could not logically be anticipated by those accustomed to the yoke of rules".

[54] Ibid, p. 67; "So intellectual a power was this man, too superficially judged, that he ruled, even more by what he looked than by what he said. His action upon others was more direct than the action of speech. He influenced by an intonation, a look, a gesture, by obvious intention, by silence itself".

[55] Ibid, p. 66; "Brummell's silence was another way of producing an effect, it was the tantalizing coquetry of one who is sure of pleasing and knows at which end desire takes fire".

> [Brummel est] avant tout un dandy, et il ne s'agit que de sa puissance. Singulière tyrannie qui ne révoltait pas! Comme tous les dandys, il aimait encore mieux étonner que plaire: préférence très humaine, mais qui mène loin les hommes; car le plus beau des étonnements, c'est l'épouvante. Sur cette pente, où s'arrêter? Brummell le savait seul. Il versait à doser parfaitement égales la terreur et la sympathie, et il en composait le filtre magique de son influence. Son indolence ne lui permettait pas d'avoir de la verve, parce qu'avoir de la verve c'est se passioner, c'est tenir à quelque chose, et tenir à quelque chose, c'est se montrer inférieur; mais de sang-froid il avait du trait, comme nous disons en France.[56]

What this means in practice, D'Aurevilly implies, is that the true dandy is incapable of love, because love demands the sacrifice of agency. "Aimer," D'Aurevilly writes, "même dans le sens le moins élevé de ce mot, désirer, c'est toujours dépendre, c'est être esclave de son désir. Les bras le plus tendrement fermés sur vous sont encore une chaîne, et si l'on est Richelieu et serait-on don Juan lui-même quand on les brise, ces bras si tendres, de la chaîne qu'on porte on ne brise jamais qu'un anneau."[57] Dandies, in other words, cannot love.

D'Aurevilly is not the only writer of the French nineteenth century to treat the dandy in this philosophical way. In his 1863 *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne,* Charles Baudelaire – whose work on the cityscape and the *flâneur* also heavily informs this section – echoes D'Aurevilly's treatment of the dandy, although he is far more socially conscious than his predecessor. For Baudelaire, too "Le dandy est blasé, ou il feint de l'être, par politique et raison de caste."[58]

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[56] Ibid, p. 62-3; "never to forget that he was above all things a Dandy, and the debate centres on his power as such. A singular tyranny, it was, that did not disgust. Like all Dandies he preferred astonishing to pleasing, a very human preference, but one that leads a long way; for terror is the supreme form of astonishment, and where is one to stop on such a decline? Brunmell alone knew and poured out exactly equal doses of terror and of sympathy, composing thereof the magic philtre of his influence. His indolence forbad his being lively, for to be lively is to be excited; to be excited is to care about something, and to care about anything is to shew oneself inferior ; but he was always cool and said just the right thing".

[57] Ibid, p. 41; "to desire -- is always to depend, to be the slave of one's desire. The arms that clasp you the most tenderly are still a chain, and were one Richelieu or Don Juan himself, in breaking free, one breaks but a single link".

[58] Baudelaire, *Peintre,* p. 64; "The dandy is blasé, or pretends to be, for reasons of policy and caste".

This idea of *caste* – dandy as class-specific – is more pronounced in Baudelaire than in D'Aurevilly (though it is at least implicit in both): Baudelaire casts the dandy as "L'homme riche, oisif, et qui, même blasé, n'a pas d'autre occupation que de courir à la piste du bonheur; l'homme élevé dans le luxe et accoutumé dès sa jeunesse à l'obéissance des autres hommes, celui enfin qui n'a pas d'autre profession que l'élégance, jouira toujours, dans tous les temps, d'une physionomie distincte, tout à fait à part."[59] His obligations to the world more generally – to what we might term the *given* – are minimal: "Ces êtres n'ont pas d'autre état que de cultiver l'idée du beau dans leur personne, de satisfaire leurs passions, de sentir et de penser. Ils possèdent ainsi, à leur gré et dans une vaste mesure, le temps et l'argent, sans lesquels la fantaisie, réduite à l'état de rêverie passagère, ne peut guère se traduire en action."[60] This is, after all, a social movement – dandyism is a fundamentally reactionary tendency against the burgeoning onslaught of bourgeois populism, or, as Baudelaire puts it, "Le dandyisme apparaît surtout aux époques transitoires où la démocratie n'est pas encore toute-puissante, où l'aristocratie n'est que partiellement chancelante et avilie."[61]

Though fine clothes and an immaculate *toilette* may indicate a dandy, they are not central to his being. Rather, "à ses yeux, épris avant tout de distinction, la perfection de la

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[59] Ibid, p. 91; "is rich and idle and who, even if blasé, has no other occupation than the perpetual pursuit of happiness; the man who has been brought up amid luxury and has been accustomed from his earliest days to the obedience of others — he in short whose solitary profession is elegance, will always and at all times possess a distinct type of physiognomy, one entirely sui generis".

[60] Ibid, p. 92; "These beings have no other calling but to cultivate the idea of beauty in their personas, to satisfy their passions, to feel and think. They thus possess a vast abundance both of time and money which without fantasy reduced to a state of passing reverie can hardly be translated into access".

[61] Ibid, p. 94; "Dandyism appears above all in periods of transition, when democracy is not yet all-powerful and aristocracy is only just beginning to totter and fall".

toilette consiste-t-elle dans la simplicité absolue, qui est, en effet, la meilleure manière de se distinguer."[62]

The dandy is, therefore, both simple and distinct – he is, in this way, profoundly *unlike* the category of *la foule*: characterized both by the uniformity of its members and by their inability – due to their reliance on circumstance and the field of the given – to be truly simple, pure, willed, in the way that the dandy is.

Baudelaire echoes, almost to the word, D'Aurevilly's definition of the dandy as an agent of astonishment: speaking of dandyism as "le plaisir d'étonner et la satisfaction orgueilleuse de ne jamais être étonné. Un dandy peut être un homme blasé, peut être un homme souffrant; mais, dans ce dernier cas, il sourira comme le Lacédémonien sous la morsure du renard."[63] Love, as in D'Aurevilly, is absent: "Le caractère de beauté du dandy consiste surtout dans l'air froid qui vient de l'inébranlable résolution de ne pas être ému ; on dirait un feu latent qui se fait deviner, qui pourrait mais qui ne veut pas rayonne."[64] The dandy, in other words, not only impresses but *withholds*: the affection and consummation he does not grant is as important, narratively, as that which is given or enacted.

Baudelaire, like D'Aurevilly, hints at a shadow-side of the dandyist mode – something if not evil, then at least toxic. He talks of the rigidity inherent in its move towards freedom – how "une institution en dehors des lois, a des lois rigoureuses auxquelles sont

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[62] Ibid, p. 93; "For the perfect dandy these things are no more than symbols of aristocratic superiority of mind. Furthermore to his eyes which are in love with distinction above all things, the perfection of his toilet will consist in absolute simplicity, which is the best way in fact of achieving the desired quality".

[63] Ibid; "the joy of astonishing others and the proud satisfaction of never oneself being astonished. A dandy may be blasé, he may even suffer, but in this case he will smile like the Spartan boy under the fox".

[64] Ibid, p. 96; "Above all in an air of coldness, which comes from an unshakeable determination not to be moved; you might call it a latent fire which hints at itself and which could, but chooses not to, burst into flame".

strictement soumis tous ses sujets"[65] The pretense of impassibility itself may become exhausting.

Baudelaire, like D'Aurevilly, sees the dandyist mode as reflected on a linguistic level as well as the level of perspective. He, too, uses the language of the lapidary to highlight the self-contained quality of the ideal aesthetic word; for Baudelaire, in the words of critic Debarai Sanyal: "Poetry is an *alchemie verbale* that sculpts and chisels resistant metals and minerals, forging a verbal artifact that is 'belle come un reve de pierre'"[66] In her study of Baudelaire and modernity, Sanyal highlights the implicit impassibility of the lapidary mode: it is language not mimetic nor even expressive but auto-telic, rejecting the organic and with it the whole created order: "The ideal of beauty as a shimmering, metallic body forged and polished poetry is invoked…precisely this alchemical transfiguration, which changes mud into gold….the savage female body undergoes just such a transfiguration: she is fashioned and struck to embody a hyperbolical naturalness, a 'surnaturalisme' that turns her into a specia of art."[67]

A less inorganic treatment of the idea of self-creation can be found in a lesser-known work of the period: the treatise "Kaloprosopia" in novelist and occultist Joséphin Péladan's *L'Art Idéaliste et Mystique* (1894).[68] Unlike D'Aurevilly and Baudelaire, Péladan does not deal with a dandy, nor is his autopoetic subject impassible. Rather, he envisions the auto-creating self – engaged in the *kaloprosopiac* act of creating himself as a literal "beautiful persona" as a kind of quasi-mystical act of faith in the power of the self to be a divine artist.

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[65] Ibid, p. 91; "Dandyism an institution beyond the laws itself has rigorous laws which all its subjects must strictly obey".

[66] Debarati Sanyal, *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form*. (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2006.), p. 11.

[67] Ibid.

[68] I am indebted here to the work of what may be the world's only Péladan scholar, Sasha Chaitow of Exeter.

Péladan critiques the charlatans of the time – occultist who claim spellcraft among their powers – saying that "Les prétendus sorciers sont simplement des voleurs et des assassins, les magnétiseurs de coupables inconscients et les spirites, des variétés d'aliénisme."[69] Rather, he exhorts his reader, in language reminiscent to that of Baudelaire and D'Aurevilly: ""Il faut que tu crées ta magie: non pas par l'effort vanieux mais semblable à la recherche de l'originalité d'une oeuvre."[70]

Péladan hints less at a desacralized world than do D'Aurevilly or Baudelaire: if self-creation *is* an appropriation of the divine act, it is a pretense of artistic mastery that is nevertheless done with the tacit approval of the creator: an ascendancy to a kind of demiurgal status granted only to those who follow Péladan's precepts (it's not for nothing that one of his texts is the how-to guide *Comment on deviant mage*). "L'homme," he writes, "a le devoir et le pouvoir de se créer une seconde fois: selon le bien. On demande quel est le but de la vie: il ne peut être, pour 'homme qui pense, que l'occasion et le moyen de fair un chef-d'oeuvre de ce bloc d'âme que Dieu lui a donné à travailler; et comme la plupart ne songent pas à accomplir cete seule oeuvre commandée.".[71] To perform, to exteriorize, one's best self is ultimately to make that self manifest inwardly. In a sense, Péladan's stance is the exception that proves the rule when it comes to dandyist texts of self-creation. The act of self-creation is for Péladan, no less than for D'Aurevilly or Baudelaire, ultimately a religious one: raised from a Baudelairean "cult of the self" to a metaphysical opportunity to create not merely one's self but also one's world: to perform, as it were, true *magic:* "Artiste, tu es prêtre: l'Art

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[69] Josephin Péladan, *Comment on deviant mage*; (Paris: Chamuel, 1892) p. 81; "Those claiming to be sorcerers are simply thieves and murderers, magnetizers of people unaware of their own guilt, spiritualists, all of whom suffer from a form of mental alienation".

[70] Ibid, p. 155; "You must create your own magic, not because your efforts are motivated by vanity, but because you are seeking in yourself the originality of a work of art.".

[71] Ibid, p. 23; man has the power and the obligation to create himself anew, in accordance with what is good. One asks what the object of life is. For a man who thinks, it can only be the occasion and the means to remake the soul that God has given him: to sculpt it into a work of art".

est le grand mystère et, lorsque ton effort aboutit au chef-d'oeuvre, un rayond du divin descend comme sur un autel…Artiste, tu es roi…artiste, tu es mage; l'Art est le grand miracle, il prouve seul nore immortalité."[72]

The assumptions Péladan makes about exteriorization, and the relationship between the inner and the outer (conceived broadly) are themselves vital for our understanding of how the Decadent-dandyist movement (via the Symbolists) grounded their "implicit theology of language. In his essay "Kaloprosopie", Péladan writes: ""la loi de Kaloprosopie et telle...réaliser en exériorité le caractère qu'on s'attribue**."[73]** (We will explore the concept of language and exteriorization in more detail in Ch. 4 of Part II: "Language")

The exteriorization of a form takes its shape from an inner inhabiting power, which is in turn the function of an individual *will* (as opposed to an inherent, ontological state). The meaning of a word, of a body; the symbolic association of, say, a smell or a flower or a religious symbol, is thus ultimately – for Péladan, via the Decadents, via the Symbolists – to be found in the appropriated divinity of the deciding self (a motif *countered* in the post-conversion texts of Huysmans, particularly *La Cathédrale*). The act of exteriorization, furthermore, is an act that *defines* the artistic production: to be an artist, for Péladan, is to create meaning: "Paraître ce qu'on est demande une grande force d'extérisation; paraître ce qu'on voudrait êre confine déjà à l'oeuvre d'art."**[74]**

In Péladan, therefore, we can build on Baudelaire and D'Aurevilly's "narrative dandyism" and explore to a greater extent the concept of "linguistic dandyism": how Péladan

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[72] Joséphin Péladan, *L'Art Idealiste,* pp. 17-8, trans. Sasha Chaitow, "Artist, you are a priest: Art is the great mystery and, if your effort results in a masterpiece, a ray of divinity will descend as on an altar. Artist, you are a king…Artist, you are a mage: Art is the great mystery, it only proves our immortality.".

[73] Ibid, p. 62; "the law of Kaloprosopia is to realize the exteriorization of the character one chooses for oneself".

[74] Ibid, p. 87; "" To appear what one is requires a great force of exteriorization, to appear what one would like to be confirms already that one is a work of art".

links the subjectivity of meaning, at the semiotic as at the corporeal level, to the self's claims to minor divinity.

In his study of *fin de siècle* occultism, scholar Jean Pierrot reads Péladan's work within both the Symbolist and occultist tradition. The Peladanian magus (no less than the D'Aurevilliean dandy) is a "microprosope", a "creator of the smaller world."[75] Self-creation does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, the process of exteriorization, dependent as it is on meaning-making more generally, necessitates *autopoesis* as an external-pointing vector as well as an inward transformational process: the self can only be created with reference to its world. Péladan makes much use of the Hermetic Principle – popular in occultist circles of the time – the idea of "as above, so below" – the material world as manifestation of the celestial or spiritual world.

The meaning of the material world, therefore, is sanctified – rendered godly – not by its inherent qualities but rather by the artist-created structure of its ontological sense. Something being symbolically meaningful, in other words, renders it also theologically meaningful: pointing to the existence of a wider sanctifying structure which, in Pierrot's words "through the interplay of vertical correspondences, makes each object in the visible world the material sign of an invisible reality."[76]

This is important for two reasons. The first is that – more explicitly in Péladan than either in D'Aurevilly or Baudelaire – the self-creator is understood as a divinizing world creator: D'Aurevilly's ironic "miniature gods" become, here, literal godly mages. The second is that Péladan *defines* meaningfulness explicitly – rather than implicitly as we'll find in our other writers discussed in this thesis – as a *correspondence* between the interior and the

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[75] Quoted in Robert Ziegler, *Satanism, Magic and Mysticism in Fin-de-siècle France* (London: Palgrave, 2012), p. 89.

[76] Quoted in Ibid, p. 52.

exterior: a kind of marriage between the phenomenological and the essential. That *man* (rather than, say, God) has the capacity to make this meaning is vital; more vital still is the extent to which man's autonomous selfhood is defined *by the ability to make that meaning*. Radically autonomous self-creation (and the world-creation it y entails) is the constitutive part of the enlightened or awakened man: that which makes him like a god, and which makes him himself.

This raises a question, of couse: about all those people – men, but also more prominently *women* (so little mentioned!) who do *not* create themselves, who do *not* become magi or miniature gods? If being a self-creator is to attain the heights of human possibility, is one less human by virtue of not seizing (or by being denied) that agency? The act of self- and world-creation only works if there is an implicit collective body of other people (observers, listeners, audience) to appreciate the *kaloprosopon*.

We will see throughout this chapter how the valorization of the self-creating self expressed here comes, in turn, of a terror of being that *other*, non-autonomous self: categorized as *la foule* (or the "mass"). Pretense at godliness, and the establishment of such godliness through creation, arises from a countervailing sense of the non-creating-self as merely material, reproducible: something that in turns arises as much from the economic and industrial realities of 19th century Paris as from its religious and/or philosophical discourse.

But for that, we must turn to the next section:

v. The Cultural, Political, and Intellectual Roots of the Decadent-Dandy

In order to better understand and define both the dandyist and Decadent elements of this designation, we turn now to the psychological and cultural landscape of nineteenth-century Paris. We have spoken already of the "Decadent-," part of the "dandyist-Decadent" descriptor of being reactionary. But what, precisely, were our authors reacting against?

A perhaps bizarre anecdote from the diaries of the Goncourt brothers may serve as a useful starting point to the portrait of nineteenth-century Paris I wish to draw. On May 6, 1858, the brothers wrote of a visit to a local brothel where they heard rumours of another brothel with "imitation women, complete in every detail", indistinguishable from real human prostitutes.[77]

Such an encounter (which, were the rumours as widespread as the Goncourts hint they were, may have served as discursive background for the titular android courtesan in the Goncourts' acquaintance Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Ève Future*), is a telling one, insofar as it points to the defining theological, ontological, and epistemological crisis of the Parisian late nineteenth century, something I will define for the purpose of this argument as a cultural "crisis of nonbeing".

This "crisis" has several elements.

a) That decadent-dandist authors shared and participated in a wider *fin de siècle* cultural crisis of "nonbeing", predicated on the existentialist terror of being a "created thing" in the most mechanistic sense: without any ontological significance to distinguish their embodied self from any other self, the vision of humanity that Des Esseintes, in Huysmans' *À Rebours*, outlines in his depiction of women as "des automates remontés à la fois par la même clef [so many automata wound up at the same time with the same key]."[78]

b) That this terror, furthermore, was itself predicated on a number of sociological, cultural, and religious factors specific to the mid-to-late 19th century, including – most notably:

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[77] Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Pages from the Goncour Journals* (trans Robert Baldick), (New York Review of Books Classics: New York, 2007), p. 38

[78] J. K. Husymans; *À Rebours*, (Paris: Stock & Tress, 1884), *p*. 170; "automatons wound up with the same key"

a. The rise of a bourgeois consumerist culture in which mass-produced goods were readily available (Here, of course, I am deeply indebted to the work of Walter Benjamin and his *Arcades Project,* which elucidates the crisis of commodification in nineteenth-century Paris in far more detail than could ever be captured in this thesis)."[79] The presence of consumable uniformity led, in turn, to a fascination – evident in dandyist life and work alike – with originality (and hence irreducibility and irreproducibility) as a foundational category for self-definition (see, for example, Barbey D'Aurevilly's famous collection of hand-crafted walking sticks, to which he referred to as "ma femme"[80], or Joséphin Péladan's proclivity for Orientalist costume).[81]

b. The rise of *la foule* – the crowd – as a culturally and politically-loaded term, concurrent with the rise more generally of both the bourgeoisie and of late-nineteenth-century populist movements, as reflected in such phenomena as the rise of General Boulanger, whose ascension in Huysmans' *Là-Bas* is treated as the death knell of the once-aristocratic age!"[82]

c. The simultaneous "bourgeois" rise of positivist discourse in both science and art, as exemplified in particular by the scientific discourse of Jean-Marie Charcot and in the naturalistic novels of Émile Zola, which tended towards a treatment of narrative as a totalizing force of control and an medicalized approach to characters that might well be called "dissective", rife with the

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[79] See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1889), p. 43: ""For the first time in history, with the establishment of department stores, consumers begin to consider themselves a mass. … Hence, the circus-like and theatrical element of commerce is quite extraordinarily heightened"

[80] Charles Buet, *Barbey D'Aurevilly: impressions & souvenirs,* (Paris: Savine, 1891), p. 24

[81] See Ziegler, *Satanism,* p. 19

[82] J. K. Huysmans, *Là-Bas* (Paris, Stock & Tresse, 1895), p. 440

language of pathology and explanation-as-diagnosis.

d. A concurrent trend towards secularism within 19th century France more generally which, in tandem with the positivist turn described in part c), created the conditions necessary for a collective cultural desacralized understanding of the world (and, in particular, Nature) with which our authors contended (and which they resisted).

e. The rise of the popular press, and with it a version of celebrity culture that demanded a form of self-creation (i.e., proto-"personal branding") from our writers as economic necessity, and furthered the notion of self-creation as a necessary element of public discourse.

f. The physical transformation of Parisian urban space throughout the nineteenth century, particularly during the Second Empire, under the twinned ministrations of Emperor Napoleon III and his chief architect Georges-Eugène Haussmann, from a labyrinthine warren to an orderly arrangement of boulevards and department stores, in which urban space was conceived of as (ideally) orderly and navigable, reflects a wider cultural propensity towards physical and psychological colonization of the unknown as well as, in the *boulevard,* a new cultural space for self-creation. We should furthermore read this attempt at mastery, as Christopher Predergast does, as symptomatic of anxiety about its absence:

> We have come…to see the history of the nineteenth-century city as a story of imposed surveillance and attempted mastery… this was indeed a powerful impulse. Haussmann's way with both Paris Overground and Paris underground would seem the exemplary illustration of that enterprise…Yet arguably [Haussman] in fact presided over its opposite: the city as a place of increasing illegibility, in which 'surprise' seemed to be the order of the day and in which 'identity,' psychic and

social, would come to be perceived as uncertain and problematical.[83]

c) that the "crisis of non-being" was countered by a specific and extreme cultural form of dandyism – self-creation as a specific and calculated means to distinguish the self-as-creator from the self-as-object or self-as-part-of-the-*foule* – that found its expression not merely in social and cultural life but also in a specific approach to textual creative authorship that took the ideas of autonomy, subjectivity, and implied narrative atheism to the extreme.

I will now consider each of the points raised above in part b), in greater detail.

a) A Portrait of Paris in the Late Nineteenth Century

What can we make of the city that Walter Benjamin called "the capital of the nineteenth century?"[84] Certainly, the changes Paris underwent in that decade might be seen as the paradigmatic example of such changes across Europe: not least in terms of scale. In 1801, the city had a population of half a million inhabitants; by 1890, that number had risen to 2.5 million.[85]

19th century Paris was a time of frequent social and political crisis. Briefly: the city was shuttled between absolute monarch (until 1789), post-revolutionary Republic, Napoleonic Empire, an attempted restoration of the monarchy under Louis XVIII from 1814 to 1830, another revolution – the July Revolution of 1830 – that resulted in the July Monarchy of Bourbon Louis-Philippe d'Orleans, the "bourgeois" king. In the wake of the 1848 riots, the July Monarchy ceded to the Second Republic, then, four years later, to the

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[83] Christopher Predergast, *Paris in the nineteenth century,* (Wiley: Hoboken, 1992), p. 10.

[84] Walter Benjamin, *Arcades,* p. 14.

[85] Franisek Deak, *Symbolist Theater*, (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1993), p. 14.

Second Empire under Napoleon III, which concluded in 1870 with the bloody catastrophe of the Franco-Prussian War, before ceding in its turn to the Third Republic whose increasingly populist (or at least *bourgeois*) stance came to define *fin de siècle* discourse. Ecclesiastical history follows similar broad patterns, as the power, influence, and cultural potency of the Catholic Church – so closely linked to the monarchy, and moreover to the pre-1789 *ancien régime* – ebbed and flowed along these contours.

Though Barbey D'Aurevilly and Baudelaire began to write of the figures of the dandy and the *flâneur* in the 1840's and 50's – already, in both cases, describing the phenomenon as rooted in the *ancien régime*'s decline[86] – the figure's import became – like the Catholic Church with which it existed in dynamic tension, increasingly prominent against the background of these reactionary waves. The dandy, his values, his way of life, existed in opposition to, for example, the populist cabinet of Jules Ferry (1880-1; 1883-5), with its institution of a network of secular public schools and the general liberalization of press laws, which – along with the rise to power of Boulanger, came to represent a kind of political manifestation of positivism D'Aurevilly's successors despised.[87]

It may be tempting to set up (as critics like Hanson Ellis and Robert Irwin do[88]) an easy dichotomy: a story of scandalous *écrivains terribles* who defined themselves in opposition to Christianity and to the Catholic Church, a story that pits the religious and the decadent against one another as ideological opposites. This view is false.

While it is certainly true that individual Decadent writers had their own problems with elements of Catholic doctrine – Rémy de Gourmont, in particular, criticized the dangers of

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[86] cf Baudelaire, *Peintre,* p. 94,

[87] A useful discussion on Jules Ferry and populism's influence more generally on Decadent writers can be found in Robert Ziegler, *Satanism*, pp. 75ff.

[88] See Irwin's introduction to Barbey D'Aurevilly (trans Ernest Boyd) *Les Diaboliques* (Dedalus: Sawtry, 1996).

what he saw as a repressive Catholic approach to sexuality – ultimately, I wish to argue, Catholic (particularly ultramontane-leaning and fringe) groups and the decadent-dandyists, whether before or after conversions, had more in common than not.

On a purely personal level, for example, one might even find crossover. The fringe mystic Eugène Vintras, who certainly would not have considered himself anything but Catholic, became the mentor of the Abbé Boullan (who took over from Vintras's followers and attempted to institute his own occultist order in Lyons, and who inspired the figure of occultist Dr. Johannes in Huysmans' *Là-Bas*), who in turn was a close associate of Berthe Courrière, mistress to both de Gourmont and Huysmans and one of the inspirations for the Satanic Madame Chantelouve – who initiates Durtal into the Black Mass – in Huysmans' *Là-Bas*. Meanwhile, the character of Monsieur Chantelouve was based in turn on Charles Buet (at whose salon Barbey D'Aurevilly and Léon Bloy were frequent visitors), a ferociously Catholic historian closely aligned with the Naundorffist movement (also propagated by Vintras), which sought to crown as king first the German watchmaker Karl Naundorff, who claimed to be the long-lost offspring of Louis XIV and Marie Antoinette, then later his descendants.[89]

A typical dinner-party at, say, the Rue Rousselet, where Barbey D'Aurevilly and Léon Bloy both lived in the 1860's, would be far more likely to include a Naundorffist, a Catholic Fringe mystic, and an occult-fascinated "dandy" like the sartorially excessive Joséphin Péladan than, for example, an ordinary *bourgeois* Parisian or a reader of the popular presses so despised by (and yet necessary to the cultural survival of) Péladan, who described a

[89] An extended discussion of all these relationships can be found in the relevant chapters of Robert Baldick, *Huysmans*.

journalist as one who "smokes and drinks and sees lots of people and [whose job] would resemble prostitution if only it were held in higher regard".[90]

Tellingly, in his letters, Huysmans described the process of writing *Là-Bas*, his "Satanist" novel, as following an initial attempt to write about the "Catholic fringe" of Paris: one led, he implies, inexorably to the other.[91]

Even famous occultists, like Éliphas Levi, linked their practice – explicitly or implicitly – to a kind of Christian nostalgia, a desire to recapture a more immersive faith of an imagined (usually Medieval) past. In his memoirs, for example, Levi writes how "'One can easily imagine how, under the guidance of such a master [i.e., his priest], I was able to dream of the Catholicism of ancient times and to feel myself as exalted as though I were living in those early ages."[92] He characterizes his journey towards occultic practice as specifically grounded in a desire to attain an idealized form of specifically Christian religiosity.

What, then, did the Catholics and our Decadent-dandyists share?

One obvious linking feature is a profound distrust of populism as a political and social movement (and with it, a reactionary tendency towards pro-aristocratic or pro-monarchial perspectives). Thus does one of the main decadent theorists, Anatole Baju, decry the political legitimacy of General Boulanger as one "come to power with the help of pimps cheapjacks and bookmakers,"[93] while in his occultist treatise *Comment on devient mage,* Joséphin Péladan writes how: "Le gouvernement d'un peuple doit être l'office d'un seul: Royauté"[94]

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[90] Quoted in Ziegler, *Satanism,* p. 75

[91] cf Baldick, *Huysmans,* p. 204

[92] Quoted in Christopher McIntosh, *Eliphas Levi and the French Occult Revival* (Oneonta: SUNY Press, 2011), p.63

[93] Quoted in Birkett, p. 9

[94] Péladan, *Mage,* p. 143; "governing a people must be the duty of one man: Royalty"

The tendency towards a kind of creative insularity –through autonomy – is a recurring motif in these texts: the dandy-artist is always in opposition to *la foule* (the crowd), a dynamic that we ultimately find very specifically subverted in the late works of Huysmans (his post-conversation account of pilgrimage at Lourdes is indeed titled *Les Foules De Lourdes*), but which we find reflected throughout these texts.

Yet what remains of dandyist insularity in these texts arises not simply from *la foule* as a political entity, but rather – perhaps more strikingly – as a *commercial* one: the problematic phenomenon of mass production and (re-production) as the root of a "crisis of [non]-being" I identified earlier as at the root of the decadent-dandyist problem. In the absence of a clear social order (and a cultural understanding of the self as a *theological* self), more radical forms of self-definition were necessary for the self that wished to preserve its autonomy.

Christopher Lane, in his article "The Drama of the Impostor: Dandyism and Its Double," shines some light on the dandyist relationship to the problem of democracy. "[the] "democratization" of mass-produced commodities may have assisted the economic and definitional power of the bourgeoisie. The rapid expansion of bourgeois wealth may also have softened or dismantled the conditions of entry into upper class membership…"[95]

I motion that the dandy exists in direct relation to a politically and commercially-loaded distinction between the aristocratic and the bourgeois, and in turn that between the original work of art and that which could be purchased and/or reproduced easily (the mass-produced object, which Walter Benjamin, that theorist of 19th century Paris, describes as art in the age of mechanical reproduction "designed for reproducibility" – we will return to Benjamin shortly).[96]

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[95] Lane, "Dandyism," p. 37

[96] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* (Penguin: London, 2008), p. 127

The self's self-creation *as* a dandy is an implicit statement about its state in a shifting urban commercial enterprise that culminates in the Goncourts' urban legend of the robot-prostitute: the ultimate consumer good; the ultimate reproduced self, what Walter Benjamin calls the "commodity-soul."[97]

b) The City and the Flâneur

We can, furthermore, map the concept of this "reproduced self" onto two cultural phenomena specific – in degree if not in kind – to Paris of the nineteenth century. That the Parisian self of the nineteenth-century is "constructed" and consumable as spectacle is something of an academic cliché at this point (at least to readers of Benjamin), but it's necessary to touch briefly on the question of physical and psychological space and the role of the *flâneur* here (a more extended discussion of this can be found in Christopher Predergast's discussion of gaze, glance, and discourse of spectacle in his *Paris in the Nineteenth Century*).

The influence of the physical transformation of Paris from a labyrinthine warren of narrow alleys to a carefully-constructed series of *grands boulevards* under the urban planning schemes of Georges-Eugene Haussmann between 1853 and 1870 on our authors cannot be overestimated. The experience of being bourgeois and in urban space became, necessarily, a public one: a question of space-as-spectacle (we cannot underestimate, too, the significance of the introduction of gas-light; the 1850's saw a full 3000 gas lamps illuminate the Parisian streets, and thereby its denizens: to be out in public was to be both safe and visible). [98] Medieval streets and alleyways were bulldozed and destroyed in favor of wide promenades with plenty of sidewalk space for the café *terrasse*. The development and proliferation of

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[97] Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1938-1940,* (Harvard University Press; Cambridge, 2003), p. 30

[98] Prendergast, *Paris,* p. 32

liminal spaces as destinations of choice among the burgeoning middle classes – "public" indoor spaces such as arcades, cafés, bookstores, theatres and more – only intensified the degree to which public space became culturally personalized: a denizen of a café was both observer and observed, both at leisure (as in the domestic sphere) and on show.

Writer Jules Vallès describes his own Paris of the *fin de siècle* as, essentially, a stage-writ-large:

> pas une ville au monde n'offre le spectacle de ces boulevards parisiens, surtout à certaines heures. Le soir, quand le gaz s'allume, quand théatres, cafés-concerts, grands bazars, estaminets dorés ou pauvres, allument leurs enseignes et leurs candélabres, quand les fenetres des grands cercles flambent, quand sur le pavé les trainées d'électricité font comme des rivières d'argent, qui parlera des *a giorno* de Venise et des illuminations de l'Orient.[99]

The extent to which Haussmann's urban planning schemes were effective in practice – i.e., as a political project – is debatable; nonetheless, we can agree with historian Christopher Prendergast that the ideology underpinning these renovations was a fantasy of control: "The vision of a modern city as unified, centred, and fully legible, opened up as a safe and regulate space of leisure and pleasure to all its citizens"[100]

A number of writers of the day discuss the idea that the presence of the middle-classes in public spaces gives rise, in turn, to a cult of performance: public space is a theatre. Philippe Jullien, for example, in his meditation on the Symbolists of the day, writes how audience members at a given theatrical production: "lived as if they were imitating the characters described by their favorite poets…women dressed in long shifts with their hair tied in a headband or allowed to flow freely down their back, women who wished to imitate the maidens of Chelsea…the foolish virgins borrowed their jewels from Moreau's Salome. Some

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[99] Jules Valles, *Oeuvres Complets* (Livre club Diderot: Paris, 1969), p. 747.

[100] Prendergast, *Paris,* p. 8.

of them dressed in hessian [sic] archaic, and lily-like, provincial maidens who moved through the poems of Francis Jammes and the paintings of Aman-Jean"[101] In his study of Péladan's "Kaloprosopia", likewise, F. Deak describes the cultural *milieu* of 19th century Paris thus:

> The symbolist actor, devoid of all traces of individuality and personality, ideally a depersonalized sign, was gazed upon by individuals with an overabundance of personality: an audience that dressed and behaved very much like fictional dramatic characters…Just as the symbolist actor in his role aspired to be a sign, many in the audience, especially those called aesthetes, aspired to be artistic signs as well, in fact, works of art, with the same clarity and purity as the actors on stage. It was not merely by their dress that the aesthetes demonstrated their artfulness, but also by a more fundamental commitment: by the application of art concepts to themselves and to their manners, life-styles, and personalities, thus turning themselves not only into virtual, but also literal, walking works of art.[102]

Such an understanding of city-as-spectacle gave rise to the figure of the *flâneur* –the dandy's incognito cousin.

The *flâneur* is a demi-dandy: he does not produce an effect, but nevertheless exerts a similarly glacial narrative effect by remaining impassive, and by determining the narrative, if not of himself (because he resists spectacle), then at least of those he sees. He is the wanderer of urban space who takes in passersby with his gaze, and whose "people-watching" becomes a kind of act of creation: like the dandy, the paradigmatic *flâneur* maintains narrative control, avoiding the gaze of others, ultimately reaching "the logical terminus of literary *flanerie* , the construction of the city as aesthetic object."[103]

He is the figure whom Baudelaire praises in "Painter of Modern Life" thus:

> La foule est son domaine, comme l'air est celui de l'oiseau, comme l'eau celui du poisson. Sa passion et sa profession, c'est d'épouser la foule. Pour le parfait flâneur, pour l'observateur passionné, c'est une immense jouissance que d'élire domicile

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[101] Quoted in Deak, *Symbolist Theatre,* p. 250.

[102] Ibid, p. 251.

[103] Prendergast, *Paris in the Nineteenth Century,* p. 4.

> dans le nombre, dans l'ondoyant, dans le mouvement, dans le fugitif et l'infini. Être hors de chez soi, et pourtant se sentir partout chez soi ; voir le monde, être au centre du monde et rester caché au monde, tels sont quelques-uns des moindres plaisirs de ces esprits indépendants, passionnés, impartiaux, que la langue ne peut que maladroitement définir. L'observateur est un prince qui jouit partout de son incognito.[104]

Like the dandy, the *flâneur* is an aristocrat: in but not of *la foule*. The crowd mingles together: indistinct; the *flâneur* is singular: any commingling or becoming of "one flesh" is, in a sense, ironic: an act of being *incognito* made possible by implicit deception. The *flâneur* (like the dandy) is defined by his ability to render himself singular – as observer – against the crowd that collectively serves as the object of his gaze. So too Victor Brombert, who in his *The Romantic Prison* highlights Baudelaire's treatment of "the elegant, even haughty, pleasure of the disenchanted protagonist, who, in a reclining position, contemplates without any ambition or even curiosity the movements of 'those who leave', of those who have the will to leave: the *others*."[105]

Baudelaire goes on to write of the *flâneur* that: "On peut aussi le comparer, lui, à un miroir aussi immense que cette foule; à un kaléidoscope doué de conscience, qui, à chacun de ses mouvements, représente la vie multiple et la grâce mouvante de tous les éléments de la vie…"[106] Elsewhere, in "La Foule," we learn that the poet-flâneur: "jouit de cet incomparable privilege, qu'il peut à sa guise être lui-même et autrui. Comme ces âmes errantes qui

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[104] Baudelaire, *Peintre,* p. 65; "The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world - impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito".

[105] Victor Brombert, *The Romantic Prison,* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2015) p. 148.

[106] Baudelaire, *Peintre,* p. 65l"we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life".

cherchent un corps, il entre, quand il veut, dans le personage de chacun"[107] (Here, too, we find echoes of the vampire- or possession-imagery that will become a feature of decadent-dandyist fiction.) To quote Prendergast's analysis: "The discourse of flanerie aims at a perspective of mastery."[108]

To be a *flâneur* is to "read" *la foule sub specie aeternae*: a narrative perspective that, like that of the Zolan "doctor-artist" to be discussed in the next section, highlights the impassibility of the thinking subject. (So too Christopher Lane, writing on the dandy and flâneur as twinned figures in Baudelaire, sees impassibility in both as a narrative power-grab: "Baudelaire…advanced a fantasy of mastery and invisible ubiquity that brought widespread confusion to the role and function of this 'anachronistic' male subject. The imperialist maxim to secure power "at the center of the world," while appearing "hidden ... incognito," may also coalesce with Foucault's analysis of sites of power/knowledge.")[109]

However, this impassibility and self-creation come at a cost. The "collapsing" of the crowd –a collective Other – necessitates a negation of the individual humanity of any individual object of the *flâneur's* gaze. The "artistic mastery" of the *flâneur* and the narrative unifying control he exerts in his gaze comes at the price of an ability to realize its landscape of details. (One might be bold enough to say that it is impossible to create a "naturalistic" textual world as a *flâneur* on a linguistic level, despite the fact that the *sub specie aeternae* perspective is shared by the *flâneur-dandies* and naturalists). Charles Taylor likewise highlights the necessity of disengagement for the flâneur: "Baudelaire's descriptions of Paris, as a kind of infernal city of mists and suffering, sometimes attain a terrible beauty, but which is closer to what Kant understood as the sublime, because the beauty is inseparable from this sense of our own power to stand and contemplate the full meaning of the forsaken world. This is one with our power to disengage from the organic, the merely natural…we surmount it by artifice."[110] Prendergast, too, highlights the degree to which *la foule* merges into a single undifferentiated entity:

> Intensely present to the eye, the bright and mobile forms of the city finally produce a 'blur' in the consciousness of the

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[107] Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Poems* (ed Carol Clark), (Penguin: London, 2005), "enjoys the incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else as he sees fit. Like a roving soul in search of a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes".

[108] Prendergast, *Paris,* p. 134.

[109] Lane, p. 35.

[110] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* p. 438.

> observer, merge into the condition of the indistinct, and the undifferentiated, the further reaches of the avenue appear as 'tumulteux et confus' the crowd of pedestrians becomes an anonymous swirl, a black swarm….a crowd without identity-distinctions….and then, in the gathering of people at the omnibus station, a collection of mechanical dolls….If this is Paris as 'spectacle'; it is also Paris effectively de-realized, seen as a dream, resistant to sense. In the sequent, there is no point of purchase from which the eye might construct a meaningful whole."[111]

Consider, for example, the literalization of this phenomenon: in the language of artistic control used in Baudelaire's 1857 poem "Rêve Parisien" – a literal dream that doubles as a meditation on the *flâneur's* experience:

Et, peintre fier de mon génie,
Je savourais dans mon tableau
L'enivrante monotonie
Du métal, du marbre et de l'eau[112]

Paris is cast here as "monotonous", its *foule*-like characteristics indistinguishable from one another. Materials – metal, marble, water – nevertheless do not take on a specific form or shape: indeed, they even induce a soporific, intoxicating effect on the narrator. It is only once the narrator has assumed the role of "architect" (with its connotations of both art and urbanity) that a shape appears: Baudelaire (as D'Aurevilly and Huysmans would come to do after him) contrasts the vision of uniformity (itself characterized tellingly as "dompté") with the lapidary specificity with which he describes his urban aesthetic output: structures of stone, iterations of the color black that themselves resemble gemstones: clear, hard, and light:

Architecte de mes féeries,
Je faisais, à ma volonté,
Sous un tunnel de pierreries
Passer un océan dompté;
Et tout, même la couleur noire,
Semblait fourbi, clair, irisé;

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[111] Predergast, p. 42.

[112] Baudelaire, *Selected Poems;* "And, painter proud of his genius, I savored in my picture The delightful monotony Of water, marble, and metal".

Le liquide enchâssait sa gloire
Dans le rayon cristallisé.

Nul astre d'ailleurs, nuls vestiges
De soleil, même au bas du ciel,
Pour illuminer ces prodiges,

Qui brillaient d'un feu personnel![113]

The city, for Baudelaire, takes on a twofold role. Insofar as it represents the opportunity for a "feu personnel" – insofar as it is a stage in which the self can create itself, rather than existing contingently or burning with a mere ontological frame – it takes on positive characteristics; it is a physical and psychic field of opportunities. Even *la foule* has the power to be *enivrante*, to induce a degree of "passion" in the otherwise largely unaffected *flâneur.* At the same time, however, the *flâneur* necessarily engages with, and against, the idea of the commodity-soul (at least insofar as it applies to his own), an engagement that demands hierarchy as well as a profound ambiguity about the self's own status. (Thus Benjamin: "If [Baudelaire] succumbed to the force by which he was drawn to them and, as a flâneur, was made one of them, he was nevertheless unable to rid himself of a sense of their essentially inhuman make-up. He becomes their accomplice even as he dissociates himself from them. He becomes deeply involved with them, only to relegate them to oblivion with a single glance of contempt.")[114]

Benjamin writes of the Baudelaireian *flâneur* as engaging in a space of commodities: self-creation as a kind of proto-personal branding. As Esther Leslie, writing on the relationship between *flanerie* and consumption in Benjamin, puts it:

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[113] Baudelaire, Ibid; "Architect of my fairyland, Whenever it pleased me I made A vanquished ocean flow Into a tunnel of jewels; And all, even the color black, Seemed polished, bright, iridescent, Liquid enchased its own glory In the crystallized rays of light. Moreover, no star, no glimmer Of sun, even at the sky's rim, Illuminated these marvels That burned with a personal fire!".

[114] Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2006) p. 128.

> [T]he flâneur is an observer – of the market. To that extent he is a consumer…but importantly he is also a supplier for the market. He gazes, he observes, but he is also gazed upon, observed. In fact to have the gaze turned back on him is what he wants but also shuns. Or if he is overly visible, exposed, then he is a 'true suspect' and so subjected to the mechanics of power and law. But if he is 'completely undiscoverable, concealed' then he is overlooked and ignored. He has to be visible to sell his wares and yet the battle to grab customers' attention is fierce and there is much competition. The flâneur enacts, as part of his make-up the circuit of consumption and production, two unseverable parts of a whole process…his labour-power…becomes a commodity.[115]

Yet the singularity of the *flâneur*, in resisting his own reproducibility, doubles as resistance to his own pure commodification: insofar as he is *incognito*, not subject to, say, the gaze of another *flâneur*, he is also free. His perambulations through an increasingly frenetic urban space are, in some sense, wasteful, indulgent, something raised by Chris Jenks in his own discussion of flânerie:

> [I]t is an alternative 'vision', though one more optimistic than that founded on 'power-knowledge'. The wry and sardonic potential built reflexively into the flâneur enables resistance to the commodity form and also penetration into its mode of justification, precisely through its unerring scrutiny…The march of modernity is checked by the Nietzschean dance of the flâneur. In addition, the sedentary mannerism of the flâneur: the 'retracing'; the 'rubbernecking'; and the 'taking a turtle for a walk'; are essentially critical rebuffs to the late-modern politics of speed, he is persistently ungainly[116]

Flanerie, therefore, is both cultural and countercultural: as a mode, it reflects and prefigures the related tensions in the figure of the dandy. (One might well say, reading the above accounts, that the "dandyist" mode, with its intense focus on controlling the gaze of the other, is the natural culmination of the former account: *flanerie* taken to its extreme: embracing the commodification of the soul in the Benjaminian sense).

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[115] Esther Leslie, "Ruin and Rubble in the Arcades" in Beatrice Hanssen (ed), *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project,* (A&C Black: London, 2006), pp. 96-7.

[116] Chris Jenks. "Watching your Step: The History and Practice of the Flâneur." In Chris Jenks (ed) *Visual Culture*. (Routledge: New York, 1995), p. 149.

It would be remiss not to note, as well, the sense in which the physical transformation of Paris, and the *accessibility* engendered by new spheres of public urban space, intensified that sensation. Let us return to the 1861 poetry of Baudelaire – whose treatment of urban space has grounded this chapter, for a particularly telling glimpse into the mindset that came to be associated with Baudelaire's dandyist-Decadent followers:

Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville
Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d'un mortel)…
Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie
N'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,
Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie
Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs.[117]

The poem is called *le cygne* – "the swan" – but, as with so many discussions of *cygnes* in nineteenth century France (we shall find the motif throughout this thesis in discussions of Villiers and Huysmans; Victor Hugo – to whom the poem is dedicated – also made use of it.[118]), it is impossible to avoid the implicit pun: to separate the *cygne* from the *signe* (see extended discussion in Ch. 1). In his vision of a "cygne" – adrift and unmoored in a city in which it does not belong – Baudelaire points to a phenomenon that, we shall see, becomes vital to our understanding of the dandyist-Decadent understanding of language.

The new Parisian city – stripped of its past, divorced from its Medieval (and, implicitly Catholic) past (elsewhere in the poem, Baudelaire describes the swan as behaving "comme s'il adressait des reproches à Dieu!") – is where signs lose their meaning.

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[117] Baudelaire, *Selected Poes; "Old Paris is no more (the form of a city Changes more quickly, alas! than the human heart);… Paris changes! but naught in my melancholy Has stirred! New palaces, scaffolding, blocks of stone, Old quarters, all become for me an allegory, And my dear memories are heavier than rocks"*

[118] "Victor Hugo. *Les miserables* v. 5. (Lassalle: Paris 1862), p. 29; les cygnes comprennent les signes".

c) Self-Creation in the Press

On the 15th of January, 1893, the reputable Parisian newspaper *Gil Blas* published a letter to the editor by one Stanislas de Guaita, in which he seeks to deny that he performs murderous black magic. He references the death of one Abbé Boullan who died the previous week – and rumours that he is responsible. He denies – vociferously – that he murdered Boullan with magic, citing his book, *The Serpent of Genesis*, as proof that the Rosicrucians (to whom he belongs) are not a Satanic cult. He accuses two writers: Jules Bois and Joris-Karl Huysmans, of spreading rumours about his role in Boullan's death – and publishing them in newspapers. By writing to *Gil Blas,* he says, he is merely exercising his right of response.[119]

Below it, *Gil Blas* publishes another letter: this one by Jules Bois. In a scathing rebuttal, Bois accuses Guaita of using the controversy to hawk his book, of lacking the intellectual rigor to discuss occultism in any depth, and of protesting suspiciously vociferously against accusations of Satanism. [120]

They challenged one another to a duel (Huysmans was one of the seconds), which was ultimately called off.

Such a story illustrates the growing role of the press – and particularly, the burgeoning of what we might call "celebrity culture", in public life.

A few numbers, likewise, illustrate the medium's prevalence. Circulation for major dailies went from 1 million in 1875 to five times that by 1910; the development of high-speed rotary presses in the 1870's onward made the physical creation of the newspaper a far easier task. The passing of the *Loi sur la liberté de la presse du 29 juillet 1881* solidified the

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[119] De Guaita, Stanislas, "Lettre" (*Gil Blas* Paris, 15 January 1893): 2. Retrived from Gallica: Bibliothéque National De France. http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb344298410/date.

[120] Bois, Jules, "Lettre" *Gil Blas* Paris, 15 January 1893: 2. Retrived from Gallica: Bibliothéque National De France. http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb344298410/date.

freedom of the press. To write for the newspapers was profitable: in 1867, Emile Zola was earning 10,000 francs a year from his journalism work alone; sensation journalist Léo Lespes was said to make four times that (for contrast, a successful middle-class artisan might make 1,000 francs in a year).[121]

The world of the newspaper was also a world in which journalist and subject alike were increasingly conscious of the power of advertising: discourse as commerce and, at times, corruption. Arthur Meyer, editor of the *Figaro*, reportedly settled a bill to his florist worth 4,000 francs by arranging to have her mentioned in the paper's reports of society parties.[122] Some corruption could be more serious: in 1878, Soubeyran, the Bonapartist Governor of the Crédit Foncier, launched his Discount Bank, distributing 10,000 of its shares to journalists. (The gamble worked: by 1880, Soubeyran had control over the financial pages of a full 64 newspapers.)[123] Indeed, by 1903 the Catholic writer Fonserieve felt the need to write a book entitled *How to read a Newspaper*, claims "one is never sure…that one is not reading an advertisement, a piece of advocacy for which the paper has been paid and often for which both the author and the paper have been paid."[124]

In this light, therefore, the works of the Decadent-dandyists take on a very particular color. The act of "self-creation" is not simply an aristocratic phenomenon, as a D'Aurevilly might posit. It is also a *bourgeois* one: the self-creating self uses the most middle-class sphere of all to define that selfhood in commercial as well as aesthetic terms: to sell books (as Stanislas de Guiata seems to do: hawking the title of his book in the *Gil Blas* letter), to bolster public awareness, to perform a character.

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[121] This data is all taken from: Theodore Zeldin. *A History of French Passions 1848-1945: Intellect, Taste, and Anxiety*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 501ff.

[122] Ibid, p. 520.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Ibid.

D'Aurevilly, for all his aristocratic pretensions, gave plenty of newspaper interviews in which he seemed to enjoy the public presentation of his own eccentricity: his relationship with journalist Octave Uzanne, who interviewed him repeatedly throughout his life, culminated in the latter publishing a book of reminiscences about the aged dandy, recalling how D'Aurevilly used to stroll along the *boulevards,* nattily dressed, with his ridiculous costume evoking typically dandyist astonishment from passersby:

> Soies, satins, dentelles, velours vert et pourpre, manchettes de guipures extravagantes, rhingrave passemantée, ajustée sur corset, pantalon-maillot à bandes d'or formaient, au dire de ces plaisantins, la garde-robe ordinaire de l'insolite biographe de George Brummel. Le ridicule outré de ces assertions harponnait au bon coin la bouche bée des lecteurs, avides de divertissements, de charges drôlatiques et qui, dès lors, ne considéraient plus chez ce gentilhomme écrivain que le dernier portemanteau des défroques romantiques[125]

Thus does Joris-Karl Huysmans, likewise, writing to Abbé Boullan some years before the incident described above, seek out his counsel in helping him research his book on the occult, *Là-Bas,* in exchange for what is essentially free advertising, offering "excellent publicity" and to set him up as the "Superman", the greatest Satanist of all[126] So too does Huysmans play up his own occult connections to journalist Huret, of the *Écho de Paris*, during an 1891 interview about *Là-Bas:* "— Voulez-vous sentir de la pâte à exorcisme ?... un mélange de myrrhe, d'encens, de camphre et de clou de girofle… c'est béni de toutes sortes de façons. Cela m'a été envoyé de Lyon: 'Comme ce roman va susciter autour de vous une

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[125] Octave Uzanne, *Barbey D'Aurevilly,* (Paris: La Cité des Livres,1927), p. 25; "Silks, satins, lace, green and purple velvet, cuffs of extravagant guipures, rhingrave, ruffled, fitted on a corset, trousers with a golden band, formed, according to these jokers, the ordinary wardrobe of the unusual biographer of George Brummel. The outrageous ridicule of these assertions harpooned at the right corner the mouths of the readers, eager for amusements and funny charges, and who from that time no longer considered in this gentleman a writer anything but the last hanger of romanticism".

[126] Quoted in Baldick, *Life,* p. 225.

foule de mauvais esprits, je vous envoie ceci pour vous en débarrasser'"[127] (The ploy seems to work, Huret goes on to say: "Un silence se fit. Je compris des Esseintes et Gilles de Retz, et, dans les rayons rouges du couchant qui venaient se briser sur les vitres illuminées, je cherchai vaguement la fuite de formes tordues et tourmentées par l'exorcisme…"[128])

Ellen Moers, writing on decadence and dandyism in the nineteenth century, treats it as a necessarily *commercial* phenomenon: a tragic irony. ""The dominant note of the decade," she writes, "appears to be its commercialism: the *tragic* spectacle of literature and personality thrown upon the marketplace, the great *experiment* of selling talent by advertising, publicity, and showmanship"[129]

Even the esoteric could be put on show. The sealed could be sold.

The occult, in particular, was a great source of newspaper inches: few scandals shook the press like the Léo Taxil affair, where – over the course of a decade – a local hoaxer inventing (under several pseudonyms, and with the unwitting help of the Catholic Church) a whole host of facts against a purported Masonic sect, achieved great notoriety: only to admit to his fabrication in a press conference recounted in minute detail by paper *La Frondeur*.[130] before concluding that "[t]he public made me what I am; the arch-liar of the period."[131]

What does this mean for our reading of the Decadent-dandyist authors?

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[127] Jules Huret, Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire, (Paris: Charpentier, 1891), p. 182; "Would you like to smell some exorcistic paste?..it's a mixture of myrrh, incense, camphor and cloves….it's been blessed in all sorts of ways. It was sent to me from Lyons by someone who told me 'as this novel of yours is going to stir up a host of evil spirits about you, I am sending you this to get rid of them'".

[128] Ibid, "there was a long silence. I began to understand [Huysmans' characters] Des Esseintes and Gilles de Retz, and in the red rays of the setting sun which came slanting in through the fierce window-panes I almost expected to see twisted forms fleeing form the torments of exorcism".

[129] Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: From Brummel to Beerbohm* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 1960), p. 272.

[130] For an in-depth discussion of the Taxil affair, see Robert Ziegler, *Satanism,* pp. 65ff.

[131] Story given in Joe Mitchell Chappell, "A Halt on the Muck Rakes", *National Magazine,* v. 24 (1906), p. 140.

It certainly complicates any attempt to read any texts, including those that, like Huysmans' Durtal series, are traditionally read autobiographically, as "strict" autobiographies, something which thus challenges any critical hermeneutic based in authorial intent.

We must also allow for a reading of nineteenth-century Parisian cultural discourse that highlights "self-creation" as a far more democratic and widespread phenomenon than dandyist manuals like D'Aurevilly's would allow. This harkens back to a more general theme of this chapter: that the dandyist-Decadents are certainly reactionary, but they are also utterly of their time: made possible by the cultural tensions *between* the reactionary mode and the hyper-capitalist Benjaminian arcade-world they claim to despise.

In her book *Sins of the Fathers,* Jennifer Birkett, expanding on such an ironic dynamic, notes Decadent authors' financial and cultural reliance on the printing-presses, exhibitions, salons, and patronage of the hated *bourgeoisie:* "it is ultimately a form of demagoguery, in which an elite competes for the mass market it despises."[132]

The morbidity of the Decadent text, says Birkett, lies in its impotence: a vision of an aristocracy in a post-aristocratic age. "Economically and politically, this was a generation conscious of its dependence, and it is this dependence that fills its work with those morbid, vengeful images of frustrated adolescent eroticism. Decadents, Symbolists, Rosicruicians, Occultists shuffle the same motifs, with the same motives. Part of the desire for change, they are also part of a tenacious establishment, whose traditions they ransack for forms to contain their vitality."[133] The resistance to commodification – a recurrent strain in these texts – is itself, of course, a commodity.

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[132] Birkett, *Sins,* p. 3.

[133] Birkett, *Sins*, p. 15.

No less interestingly, however, the presence of our authors as "celebrity" figures, known to the public and capitalizing on that presentation in the public sphere, complicates and heightens the double-consciousness of the "dandy" we find in the dandyist text. When we read about, say, one of D'Aurevilly's dandies in *Les Diaboliques* or Huysmans' Durtal, we – like their nineteenth-century Parisian audience – *must* engage with, if not take for granted, the fact that these characters do indeed riff on our authors' public personae. "Self-creation" is not merely a function *of* characters that seek power *within* the text, but also an ironic doubling of the authorial figure: a *play* at self-giving. This both challenges the hermetic nature of the text through irony (*is* the "autobiographical" Durtal Huysmans? *Is* Barbey the "narrator" of *Les Diaboliques*?) and intensifies the sense of authorial disengagement inherent in the dandyist mode: the author, by playing at presence within the text, only highlights a fundamental absence.

The text is a function of will, not love. The author is not *incarnate* in the text.

d) The Shadow of Positivism

"Catholic" and "decadent-Dandyist" movements in late 19th century France share more than just political leanings. They also share an aversion to the less overtly political form of populism: in the bourgeois "absolute positivism" popularized in science by neurologist and pathologist Jean-Marie Charcot (1825-1893) and in literature by Émile Zola (1840-1902). Positivism, in this worldview, takes on a more "diabolical" role (which is to say, is set up by these authors in opposition to any form of positive spirituality) than the (fictionalized) devil himself: something we find expressed in the Christian-occult writings of the magician Papus: "On earth, the Adversary's true priest is the atheist-materialist, for whom all spiritual forces manifest a mental weakness tending toward mysticism. The ascendancy of these people, who believe in nothing but the need to satisfy their appetites in any way possible, will be

characterized by a cult of force and violence considered as the only law, by a love of money considered as the only good."[134] Positivism here is construed not merely as a cultural (and distinctively bourgeois) force, but indeed as the ultimate goal of the "Adversary" (imagery we find reflected as well in texts of the period like Jules Bois' 1892 *Satanisme et la Magie* and Joris-Karl Huysmans' 1891 *Là-Bas*, both of whom contrast Medieval or folkloric images of the devil with its bloodless, bourgeoisie contemporary equivalent.)

We might usefully define this positivism as a faith not merely in "science" but, more specifically, in "diagnostics": as the ability of an autonomous, rational, thinking agent to extrapolate from existing physical and factual data a full and accurate account of a situation. It is a perspective both deeply rooted in materialism, and an understanding of the self as a purely biological organism (Charcot in particular decried the work of his Decadent opposition as treating the phenomenon of hysteria as "une perversion de l'âme due à la présence du démon [as a perversion of the soul due to the presence of the demon]"[135] rather than a purely medical problem.)

If I limit my remarks to Charcot and Zola here, it is not because they were the only proponents of such an approach. In the medical/scientific field, one might point also to Cesare Lombroso with his passion for phrenology – personality embedded in cranial structure, or even to the "vulgarized application" – to quote scientific historian Aasi Hustvedt[136] – of Charles Darwin among his disciples; in the literary world one might point to the Goncourt brothers or the philosophy and sociology of Hippolyte Taine, whose critical use of the hermeneutic of ""race, milieu, et moment" reduced the literary to its particular place in time

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[134] Quoted in Ziegler, *Satanism,* p. 35.

[135] Quoted in Jean-Martin Charcot & Paul Richer, Ls Demoniaques dans l'art (Delahaye & Lecrosnier: Paris, 1887) p. v.

[136] Hustvedt, "The Pathology of Eve", in John Anzalone (ed), *Jeering Dreamers: Jeering Dreamers: Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's L'Ève Future at Our Fin de Siècle : a Collection of Essays*, (Rodopi: Leuven, 1996), p. 31

and history, and who argued that "Le vice et la vertu ne sont que des produits comme le vitriol et le sucre."[137]). But Charcot and Zola are, nevertheless, the best-known examples of their respective brands of positivism, and those to which those in the Decadent movement most directly referred.

Both doctor and novelist treated the human condition as something diagnosable, if not always treatable. Both valorized the figure of the diagnostician – a disembodied rational agent possessed of the totalizing diagnostic power of narrative – in contrast to the deeply embodied (often female, often sexualized) experimental subject or case study: a dynamic in which the Decadent-dandyist treatment of narrative erotics is perpetually in dialogue. It's telling that in the writings of Joris-Karl Huysmans the two strands of positivism discussed above are linked to one another. In a letter to the Abbé Boullan, he writes of his weariness and disgust with the "absolute positivism" of Zola and that of Charcot, "who has tried to convince me that demonianism was just an old wives' tale and that by applying pressure to the ovaries he could check or develop at will the satanic impulses of the women under his care at La Salpêtrière…I want to show Zola, Charcot…and the rest that nothing of the mysteries which surround has been explained."[138]

In the medical approach of Charcot (whose work on female hysteria – grounding psychological disturbances in certain malfunctions of the reproductive organs – Huysmans explicitly references in *En Rade,* and Villiers less explicitly in *L'Ève Future*) we find frequent subtext of diagnosis-as-sexual-control: Charcot's experiments, which were usually performed publicly on a medical-theatrical "stage" for audiences, were largely on young women, and included not only treatment for hysteria but also hypnotism: another kind of exerted power

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[137] H. Taine, *Histoire de la littérature anglaise,* (Hachette: Paris, 1866), p. xv; "Vice and virtue are only products like vitriol or sugar"

[138] Quoted in McIntosh, p. 183.

based in narrative. In her "Pathology of Eve", Villiers scholar Aasi Hustvedt describes a typical scene at La Salpêtrière: "these experiments were highly theatrical, performed before large audiences that included novelists, artists and actors. With the sound of a gong or the wave of a hand, the physician could create a cataleptic woman and pierce her body with needles and pins; a lethargic woman, capable of being "petrified" into gravity defying postures, and for the grand finale, the somnabulic woman, open to any and all suggestion. She would flap her 'wings' like a bird, bark like a dog, or scream in fear at a hallucinated snake. Whether in the scientific amphitheater of the Salpetrière or the pages of a novel, the hypnotized hysteric created an amazing spectacle."[139] (Interestingly, Huysmans' mistress, Satanist and Chantelouve inspiration Berthe Courrière – herself institutionalized twice for perceived insanity, published her own attack on Charcot, "Neron: Prince de la Science", in the *Mercure de France* in 1893, describing the scientist in language strikingly reminiscent of Barbey D'Aurevilly's depiction of the dandy, as a torturer, who "avait inventé le Sadisme scientifique"…[and] soutint son personnage avec tant d'art que personne ne put le pénétrer, et connaître que la fascination qu'il exerçait sur ses malades était le résultat même de l'intensité même de sa maladie: il avait le délire de la torture."[140])

Such an approach often led critics to suspect Charcot of staging his cures; in an 1892 article for the *British Medical Journal,* visiting English doctor Ernest Hart writes that "I believe that [now that] journalists and the public are…excluded from these performances; the grande hystèrie, with all its stages, is much more rarely seen, and there is reason to hope that it will die out."[141]

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[139] Hustvedt, "The Pathology of Eve", in Anzalone, *Jeering Dreamers*, p. 48.

[140] Courrière, Berthe, Mercure de France, n° 46, octobre 1893, pp. 144-146; "invented scientific sadism… maintained his character with such art that no one could enter it, and know that the fascination he exercised over his patients was the result of even the very intensity of his illness: he had the delusion of torture".

[141] Ernest Hart, "The New Mesmerism", *The British Medical Journal,* Vol. 1, No. 1676 (1893), pp. 301-303.

The novels of Émile Zola, for their part, were no less characterized by the fantasy of diagnosis as control. I have quoted earlier in this section Zola's medicalized approach to literature. In both his 1867 *Thérèse Raquin* and his subsequent Rougon-Macquart novel cycle – the chronicle of the moral and social decay of a family over several generations – Zola treated characters as case studies, character traits as hereditary. His faith in his ability to produce "la copie exacte et minutieuse de la vie"[142] – a vision of reality that corresponded exactly to the world as it was – was ultimately a positivistic faith in both the ability of language to reflect reality, and the ability of narrative to scientifically capture the ultimately predictable, and even biological, roots of human motivation. Zola's world is deterministic – young Nana, whose parents are destroyed by alcoholism in *L'Assimoir*, inevitably becomes a syphilitic prostitute and addict by the time the narrative reaches the novel bearing her own name. Murderous impulses, mental instability, alcohol addiction, all these were not elements of individual human beings, but rather hereditary traits common to certain types. By "diagnosing" their problems, using his novels as diagnostic theaters not unlike Charcot's Salpetrière, Zola established and popularized a particular vision of aesthetic mastery (one echoed in his own quasi-authorial avatar: Doctor Pascal, protagonist of the final Rougon-Macquart novel, whose geneaological study of his relatives and their degeneration functions as a meta-gloss on Zola's own work). Zola puts it, "J'ai choisi des personnages souverainment dominés par leurs nerfs et leur sang, dépourvu de libre arbiter, entrainés à chaque acte de leur vie par les fatalités de leur chiar….l'ame est parfaitment absente." His characters are "des brutes humains, rien de plus."[143]

Indeed, in his 1881 *Le Roman experimental*, Zola – invoking the work of doctor Charles Bernard and his *Introduction a l'étude de la medicine experimentale*, argues that one

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[142] Émile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin,* (Paris:Librairie international, 1868), p. iv.

[143] Ibid, p. ii.

might just as easily substitute the word "novelist" for "doctor" in Bernard's own text, so similar are the two vocations.[144] This approach, Zola argues in the introduction to *Thérèse Raquin*, is a specifically modern one, made possible by the technological (and presumably, secularizing) forces of the nineteenth century: a "méthode modern, l'outil d'enquête universelle dont le siècle se sert avec tant de fièvre pour trouer l'avenir."[145] So too does Zola, in defending the often scandalous content of his work, invoke clinical detachment. "cet écrivain est un simple analyst, qui a pu s'oblier dans la purriture humain, mais qui s'y est oublié comme un medicine s'oublie dans un amphithéatre."[146] Such detachment, we shall see, finds a very particular manifestation in the dandyist mode with which it is in constant dialogue. The disinterest it demands, certainly, echoes Barbey D'Aurevilly's statements about the dandy as unaffected entity; so too does the distance it implies – characters as experimental subjects – also evoke the quasi-sexualized dynamic we find in Charcot's theatre.

There is, after all, a specific kind of duality in Zola's pretenses at intellectual mastery. By reducing his characters (usually working-class or poor, often female and sexualized) to case studies, to "animals" or "flesh", Zola also implicitly distances himself from them: *they* are reduced to their biology, but he, capable (as they are not) of detachment, is not. (We will discuss Zola at greater length in the following chapter and throughout this thesis, as I motion that a number of decadent-dandyist texts, among them D'Aurevilly's "Happiness in Crime" and Huysmans' *En Rade*, serve as, in part, specific and conscious response-pieces or reworkings of Zola's oeuvre.)

The response to this dynamic – the way our dandy-authors both exemplify and subvert this concept of authorial and artistic control – cannot be overstated. The autonomous

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[144] Émile Zola, *Le roman experimental,* (Paris: Charpentier, 1902), p. 2.

[145] Zola, *Thérèse* p. vii .

[146] Quoted in in Lillian Furst, *Idioms of Distress: Psychosomatic Disorders in Medical and Imaginative Literature* (SUNY Press: Oneonta, 2012) p. 97.

position of the doctor-narrator, the explanatory and diagnostic function of narrative (with its subtext of psychosexual control), and the firm rooting of both in a philosophy of literature that is both mimetic and materialistic – all these elements recur, converge, and are challenged, repeatedly, in the texts we are about to explore.

e) The Shadow of Pessimism

The figures of Kant and Schopenhauer loom large in the decadent-dandyist imagination, and our writers often describe themselves as deeply indebted to them. However, that does not mean we should speak of, say, Huymans or Gourmont as post-Kantian or post-Schopenhauerian without one major qualification, which is that their knowledge was almost invariably incomplete or second-hand (any Decadent knowledge of Schopenhauer owes far, far more to Théodule Ribot's translation-summary of Schopenhauer's work than the original, and even then, the degree to which our authors knew that text, rather than *of* that text, is debatable: as Shehira Doss-Davezac puts it in her studying of Schopenhauer's reception history: "Every literary critic and art historian writing on the period today associates the Symbolists with Schopenhauer. Yet is difficult to assess exactly – since no hard evidence is ever offered…to what extent they read him, what they read of his work, and in any detail, which ideas they borrowed."[147]) The same might be said of Kant. (The first French translation of *The Critique of Pure Reason,* by C.J. Tissot, appeared in 1835, but it is unclear whether our authors ever read it).

When I speak of a watered-down post-Kantianism in decadent thought, therefore, I mean less the work of Kant himself than the general subjective trend Charles Taylor describes

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[147] Sherira Doss-Davezac, "Schopenhauer according to the Symbolists: the philosophical roots of late nineteenth-century French aethetic theory" in Dale Jacquette (ed), *Schopenhauer, Philosophy and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2007) p. 249.

in his *Sources of the Self*: defined by its focus on subjectivity, a "radical definition of freedom, which rebels against nature as what is merely given, and demands that we find freedom in a life whose normative shape is somehow generated by rational activity...a powerful, it is not overstated to say revolutionary, force in modern civilization. It seems to offer a prospect of pure self-activity, where my action is determined not by the merely given, the facts of nature (including inner nature), but ultimately by my own agency as a formulator of rational law."[148]

Perhaps no finer encapsulation of what it means, to and for a decadent-dandyist to be "post-Kantian" culturally and philosophically can be found in Rémy de Gourmont:

> Une vérité nouvelle, il y en a une, pourtant, qui est entrée récemment dans la littérature et dans l'art, c'est une vérité toute métaphysique et toute d'a priori (en apparence), toute jeune, puisqu'elle n'a qu'un siècle et vraiment neuve, puisqu'elle n'avait pas encore servi dans l'ordre esthétique. Cette vérité… c'est le principe de l'idéalité du monde. Par rapport à l'homme, sujet pensant, le monde, tout ce qui est extérieur au moi, n'existe que selon l'idée qu'il s'en fait. Nous ne connaissons que des phénomènes, nous ne raisonnons que sur des apparences; toute vérité en soi nous échappe ; l'essence est inattaquable. C'est ce que Schopenhauer a vulgarisé sous cette formule si simple et si claire: Le monde est ma représentation. Je ne vois pas ce qui est; ce qui est, c'est ce que je vois. Autant d'hommes pensants, autant de mondes divers et peut-être différents. Cette doctrine, que Kant laissa en chemin pour se jeter au secours de la morale naufragée, est si belle et si souple qu'on la transpose sans en froisser la libre logique de la théorie

[148] Taylor, *Sources* p. 364

> à la pratique, même la plus exigeante, principe universel d'émancipation de tout homme capable de comprendre.[149]

Elsewhere, he writes of the Symbolists more generally that their Schopenhauer is that of "M. Burdeau [sic] et M. Ribot."[150]

Let us unpack Gourmont's reading:

Gourmont understands Kant's notion of "ideality" to mean the created world's subordination to the organizing and categorizing power of the human mind. The mind's cognitive organizing powers take on a quasi-Godlike role: cognition becomes divinized, as each man creates through experience his own "world." The thinking self is "emancipated" from any form of contingent existence: selfhood means radical autonomy. That noumenal truth is "unassailable" seems here to matter little to Gourmont's overall argument: Gourmont's divorce of the noumenal and the phenomenological here prefigures the general Symbolist trend towards conceiving of the Ideal as something hidden and removed from existence within the world (which, I have already argued, in turn leads to dispensing with the Ideal altogether in favor of an ultimately ontologically meaningless phenomenological landscape.) Likewise, de Gourmont treats Schopenhauer as a more intense Kant: one not limited by his concerns for morality (and thus constraints on the self's autonomy).

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[149] Remy de Gourmont, *Le Livre des Masques,* (Mercure de France: Paris 1921), p. 12; "A new truth and such a one has recently come into our literature and art is entirely metaphysical and *a priori* in appearance, it is quite young since it has come about in this century and truly new since it has not yet served in any aesthetic order. This truth…is the principle of the ideality of the world. In relation to man, the thinking subject, the world, everything that is exterior to the ego exists only according to the idea that it has become. We know only the phenomena, we reason only about appearances; all truth in itself escapes us; the essence is unassailable. This is what Schopenhauer has popularized in that formula, so simple and so clear; the world is my representation. I do not see what is; what is, is what I see. So many thinking men, so many diverse and perhaps different worlds. This doctrine, which Kant left unfinished to rush to the rescue of a shipwrecked ethics, is so beautiful and so supple that we can transpose it without offense from the general logic of theory to the most exacting practice, a universal principle of emancipation for all men capable of understanding it" Translation from Terry Hale (ed, trans), *The Book of Masks: French Symbolist and Decadent Writing of the 1890's* (Atlas: New York, 1997)

[150] Quoted in Doss-Davezac, p. 254

De Gourmont's account of Kant's philosophy is, arguably, representative not only of the attitudes of French decadent novelists (rather than, say, French academic philosophers) of the era, but also more generally of French nineteenth-century Kant reception as a whole. In a relevant portion of his *Rethinking Durkheim and his Tradition,* Warren Schmaus provides a useful summary of the state of Kant reception in France throughout the 19th century: philosophers like the influential "eclecticist" Victor Cousins – one of the first to popularize the teaching of Kant in Paris – tended to understand Kant's philosophy, in Schmaus's words, as "entail[ing] a kind of subjective idealism that led to skepticism about the existence of the external world independent of our perception of it."[151]

Cousins' critiques of Kant, furthermore, seems to confirm this reading: he criticizes Kant's purported hyper-subjectivity by arguing that "when we speak the truth of these universal and necessary principles, we do not believe that they may be true only for us: we believe them to be true in themselves, and still true if our mind were not there to conceive them."[152] In other words, Cousins' understanding of Kant's idealism as a suspicion of all phenomenological reality immediately prefigures de Gourmont's own (and lends credence to the idea that de Gourmont may have been working to a then "common" cultural understanding of Kant). While speaking in more detail about Kant reception history is beyond the scope of this thesis, let it suffice to argue that de Gourmont's reading of Kant – and, indeed, the Decadent reading more widely – should be understood as representative of a particular French reading (or misreading) of Kant's thoughts prevalent at least from the 1830's onwards.

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[151] Warren Schmaus, *Rethinking Durkheim and his Tradition,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2004), p. 63.

[152] Quoted in Schmaus, p. 63.

So too Schopenhauer. As should be evident from the de Gourmont quote cited above, the prevailing "Schopenhauerianism" in French Symbolist and decadent thought should be understood quite broadly. While we may well agree with a number of scholars, among them Stepan Meštrović, that Schopenhauer "symbolized and articulated the *fin de siècle spirit"*[153], such a dissemination of Schopenhauer's ideas (or, perhaps more accurately, his aesthetic) was hardly programmatic. While mentions of Schopenhauer are ubiquitous – Anatole Baju's 1890 manifesto of *décadisme* references the "surblaséisme d'une civilization schopenhaueriesque" as the foundation of the movement.[154] Joris-Karl Huysmans has his protagonist of his 1884 *À Rebours,* the neurasthenic aesthete Des Esseintes, praise Schopenhauer's sense of pessimism,[155] In 1903, the painter Maurice Denis describes the Symbolists of his generation, himself included, as making a "un singulier mélange de Plotin. d'Edgar Poe, de Baudelaire et de Schopenhauer."[156]

But elements of Schopenhauer's thoughts were hardly systematically applied or discussed with philosophical rigor; rather, they were part of the wider *fin de siècle* cultural discourse (what we might, using contemporary terminology, call a meme): a discourse that existed parallel to, but ultimately independently of, the world of academic theology or philosophy, and which responded to Schopenhauer's ideas largely in pursuit of their relevance for artistic creation, rather than philosophical discussion.

Doss-Dazevac encapsulates the Decadent sense of Schopenhauer thus:

> The evocation of the Platonic Idea was to become for these artists the essence of art, the salvation of man's psyche, and

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[153] Stjepan Gabriel Meštrović. *Durkheim and Postmodern Culture*. (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 1992), p. 29.

[154] Quoted in Roland Bietry, *Les théories poétiques à l'époque symboliste (1883-1896)* (Paris: Slatkine, 2001), p; 78.

[155] J. K. Huysmans, *À Rebours,* (George Crès: Paris 1922), p. 289.

[156] Quoted in Henrik Rookmaaker, *Art, Artists, and Gauguin,* (Piqant: Port Perry, 2002), p. 413.

> their own redemption from a cruel, relentlessly driven world. They called for a new religion – symbolist art – an art of Idea in which they could function as high priests, distilling the eternal from the transitory, and infusing their personal representations of the world with ethical and artistic meaning. It was to be an art not of mimesis but of expression, an art akin to music, that highest of all the arts according to Schopenhauer, and they reiterated Edgar Allan Poe's statement, quoted by Baudelaire, that "it is in music perhaps that the soul most nearly attains ... the creation of supernal beauty"[157]

It is this element of Schopenhauer's thought I wish to highlight.

What the Decadents of this thesis preserve from Schopenhauer (via Kant) is a fundamental awareness of the insufficiency of the created order, along with a radically subjectivist sense of the possibility of meaning-creation on the part of the self. Mimesis, with its connotations of both positivism and naturalism, was rejected (at least, we shall see, in part) in favor of a mode of creation that granted the self the power to ascribe meaning, as well as an understanding of the Idea – as something not inherent in the structure of the created world as such – that would come to both desacralize the world and sacralize the self's powers of cognition. It is an understanding, furthermore, that divorces the individual, the irreducible, and the specific from the general: if the Idea *is* held in any high regard, that which is seen, visible, and specific is treated as essentially worthless. As Schopenhauer himself puts it: "the Idea proper is not this special form which appears before me but its expression, its pure significance, its inner being."[158]

What is theologically vital about the Decadent reception of Schopenhauer and Kant's ideas, combined with their response to positivsm, is this:

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[157] Doss-Dazevac in Jacquette, p. 256

[158] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea,* (trans RB Haldane and J Kemp) (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Company,1907), p. 271.

Our writers confront with a world of discourse that valorizes the organizing power of the autonomous, rational self on two, at times culturally opposing, fronts: the artistic power of the Idealist-visionary and the diagnostic power of the scientist (or doctor-author): both of which we can attribute to a general post-Kantian (or, post-Cousins-reading-of-Kant) cultural tendency in nineteenth-century Paris.

The "positivist" view sees the world as fundamentally explicable – with the right scientific and hermeneutic tools, the diagnostician can, say, uncover the source of Thérèse Raquin's hysteria; the artistic mode of the positivist is a kind of mimetic naturalism, in which language serves only to exert power through explanation. Individual words convey meaning; the creation of character and narrative is necessarily hierarchical: the dynamic structured along the lines of a doctor-patient relationship. The world is not *inherently* meaningful; however, the presence of an organizing consciousness can tease out cause-effect relations within it (the Zola approach).

The Idealism our authors also inherit, via the discourse of Symbolism, is more similar to the positivist approach than it might appear. While the Symbolist Idealist conceives of meaning in a general sense – there is absolute truth *somewhere, out there*, in a shadowy and nebulous world of forms – the material and phenomenological world around us (the created order) is *not* infused with meaning. Language – Baudelaire's sense of correspondences – can hint indirectly at something *out there*, but things-in-themselves have no ontological value. (To quote Moréas in one of his Symbolist manifestos: "Ainsi, dans cet art, les tableaux de la nature, les actions des humains, tous les phénomènes concrets ne sauraient se manifester eux-mêmes; ce sont là des apparences sensibles destinées à représenter leurs affinités ésotériques avec des Idées primordiales."[159]) Language is, if anything, a bridge between a meaningless,

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[159] Quoted in Bietry, p. 101; "Thus, in this art, the pictures of nature, the actions of humans, all concrete phenomena can not manifest themselves; These are sensible appearances intended to represent their esoteric affinities with primordial Ideas".

formless world and a slightly more meaningful one "beyond": a relationship of reference complicated by the artist's subjective power to assign and shape meaning.

What I am most concerned with, here, is the general sense of the *self* (prior to any act of self-creation) both ideologies share. Whether the self is nothing more than a biological entity (as per Zola or Charcot) or the self's status as a "phenomène concrete" is irrelevant (as in Moréas), there is nothing intrinsic to the self that makes it *valuable* as such. We might say that there is no theological anthropology of the self.

In our treatment of *la foule,* of the middle-class as a cultural category, of the rise of the press and of the cult of consumerism in 19th century Paris, we have seen how cultural and economic factors might intensify that lack of a stable understanding of selfhood.

If, say, a prostitute might be replaced with a female robot, if the self might become no less a reproducible and consumable *thing* than the mechanically-reproduced items on sale in a department-store window, and *if there is no culturally-pervasive (say, Christian) discourse that treats the "soul" as a foundational element of the irreproducible, irreducible self*, on what grounds can the self establish its selfhood *except* by a) self-creation and b) a self-creation that specifically *distinguishes the self from the non-creator-self*: a self-creation that dichotomizes a powerful, rational artist and his subject/audience/material? When Baudelaire writes of "le besoin ardent de se faire une originalité, contenu dans les limites extérieures des convenances. C'est une espèce de culte de soi-même"[160] we must understand that this "burning need" arises with particular intensity in this specific place, and in this specific time, for the reasons this chapter has already outlined.

Charles Bernheimer, in his imagining of a "typical" Decadent mentality, makes this dynamic explicit:

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[160] Baudelaire, *Peintre,* p. 93; "the burning need to create for oneself a personal orginality, bounded only by the limits of the proprieties, a kind of cult of oneself".

> So many of them, and always more coming, and only one of me! Insofar as I am like these creatures, insofar as I am continuous with nature, I am not unique. I am like a worm under a rock, part of the endless, sickening process of generation. To cure my nausea, I need to insist on what differentiates me from the natural world. I can begin by invoking the prohibitions that found the order of human society, since they all work against nature: the taboo against incest, the restraint placed on sexual freedom, the law against murder, the rites of burial that veil the horror of a decomposing corpse. But these interdictions are too generally applicable to mankind to serve as a defense against my demeaning naturalization. I need more radical medicine. I fantasize removing myself entirely from the sexual function. I fantasize refusing the nutritional needs of my organism so that, at my death, I will offer ravenous nature a fIeshless corpse that will feed no new life. But these alternatives, castration and suicide, are not real solutions to my problem. They fail to give my individuality what I most desire, the experience of my death as a duration in life.[161]

We shall explore the failure of the self-creating project in subsequent chapters. But for now, let us leave our introduction with that question asked by Jacques Lacan: "How can we be sure that we are not impostors?"[162]

For the decadent-dandyists, there is only one answer:

If "hunt or be hunted" is the implicit mantra of Huysmans' onetime mentor Emile Zola's 1872 *La Curée* (*The Kill*)— a cutting indictment of the hypocrisy of nineteenth-century Parisian society, then the decadent-dandyists have no less cynical an imperative: "Create or be created."

As we turn to the body of this thesis, we will discover how.

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[161] Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe* (JHU Press: Baltimore, 2003), p. 57.

[162] Quoted in Lane, p. 29.

Chapter One

"The Swan-Killers":

The Theology of Narrative

i. Introduction

"Les cygnes comprennent les signes."[163]

Thus, with a somewhat silly pun, does Victor Hugo toy with one of the major epistemological, literary, and even theological problems of the late nineteenth century: what can (or cannot) be conveyed by a *cygne*. That theme of the problem of meaning will recur throughout this thesis, finding its culmination in Chapter IV, on language and sin.

Yet few examinations of the problem of *cygnes* (and *signes*) are quite so chilling as a short story by Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (whom we will meet more than a few times in this thesis), which opens with a sly and explicit epigrammic wink to Hugo's famous line, and which will commence our examination of the theological contours of decadent-dandyism as it pertains to narrative distancing and alienation.

One of a handful of short pieces featuring the unstable, potentially-dangerous, positivist nightmare Tribulat Bonhomet, an unbalanced Edgar Allan Poe murderer by way of Dr. Charcot, "Le Tueur des Cygnes" ("The Swan Killer" – first published in the June 26 1886 edition of *Le Chat Noir*),[164] "The Swan Killer" is a psychosexual study in the power of the alienating effect of narrative: to aestheticize is to distance, and ultimately to destroy.

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[163] Victor Hugo. *Les Misérables,* v. 5 (Paris: Lasalle,, 1862), p. 29; "swans understand signs.".

[164] Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Tribulat Bonhomet,* (Paris: PV Stock, 1908) p. 726.

Bonhomet is an educated man, one who has learned – by “"compulser des tomes d'Histoire naturelle"[165] that swans sing at their most beautiful pitch before dying. An implicit Schopenhauerian (Bonhomet feels that “musique seule...l'aidait à supporter les déceptions de la vie”[166]), Bonhomet decides that only the sound of that fatal music can sustain him. He creeps to a pond in a park, keeping his distance in diagnostic terms of observation that echo the language – discussed earlier in our Introduction – of a medicalized-observer like the Zolan narrator: he “étudié soigneusement les abords, médité le distances”[167]

He fixes upon a swan, terrifying it, enjoying the aesthetic and erotic pleasure he gets from its gradual cognizance of its own increasing danger: “Et il grattait avec une douceur telle que celui-ci, bien qu’étonné, ne pouvait juger cette vague alarme comme d’une importance digne que la pierre fût jetée. Il écoutait. À la longue, son instinct, se pénétrant obscurément de l’*idée* du danger, son cœur, oh! son pauvre cœur ingénu se mettait à battre affreusement.”[168] The experience gets more and more erotic for Bonhomet, as he appreciates aesthetically (and sexually) the fear he has produced, transmuting it into the realm of the artistic: “Mais, en leur délicatesse infinie, ils souffraient en silence, comme le veilleur, —ne pouvant s’enfuir, *puisque la pierre n’était pas jetée!* Et tous les cœurs de ces blancs exilés se mettaient à battre des coups de sourde agonie— *intelligibles* et distincts pour l’oreille ravie de l’excellent docteur qui—sachant bien, lui, ce que leur causait, *moralement*, sa seule

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[165] Ibid, p. 3; “perusing volumes of natural history”, translations from Brian Stableford, *The Vampire Soul* (Tarzana: Black Coat Press, 2004).

[166] Ibid, p. 4; “music alone helped…him to support the deceptions of life”.

[167] Ibid; “carefully studied the surroundings and measured the relevant distances for a while”.

[168] Ibid, p. 8; “And he tossed it so gently, that the [swan] although surprised, could not judge this vague alarm as worthy of note as the stone was thrown away. He listened. Eventually, his instinct, obscurely penetrated by the idea of danger, his heart, oh! His poor ingenuous heart began to beat frightfully”.

proximitése délectait, en des prurits incomparables, de la terrifique sensation que son immobilité leur faisait subir." [169]

He exults in the "art" he has made: "Qu'il est doux d'encourager les artistes!"[170] (Yet they are not the *artists*, at least in the dandyist sense; their music is an organic and unchosen part of their nature, rather than controlled through any force of will).

Bonhomet murders the swans in orgasmic ecstasy: "Bonhomet, avec un grand cri horrible, où semblait se démasquer son sirupeux sourire, se précipitait, griffes levées, bras étendus, à travers les rangs des oiseaux sacrés! — Et rapides étaient les étreintes des doigts de fer de ce preux moderne: et les purs cols de neige de deux ou trois chanteurs étaient traversés ou brisés avant l'envolée radieuse des autres oiseaux-poètes."[171]

He savors his handiwork: "[l]e rationnel docteur souriait de cette sentimentalité, dont il ne daignait savourer, en connaisseur sérieux, qu'une chose—le timbre—Il ne prisait, musicalement, que la douceur singulière du timbre de ces symboliques voix, qui vocalisaient la Mort comme une mélodie."[172]

We have explored already the use of the "rationnel" doctor to represent a certain philosophical and literary approach to text, rooted in the literary theory of Zola and the scientific positivism of Charcot. In this chapter, we will explore how and why the figures of

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[169] Ibid, p. 9; "But, in their infinite delicacy, they suffered in silence, like the watchman, - not able to escape, since the stone was not thrown away! And all the hearts of these exiled white souls began to beat with muffled agony, intelligible and distinct to the delighted ear of the excellent doctor, who knowing well what, morally, *caused* this proximity, was delighted, in incomparable pruritas, of the terrifying sensation which his immobility made them undergo".

[170] Ibid; "It is sweet to encourage artists".

[171] Ibid; pp. 9-10; "Bonhomet, with a great horrible cry, in which seemed to unmask his syrupy smile, rushed, claws lifted, arms outstretched, through the ranks of the sacred birds! - And the rapids were the embraces of the iron fingers of this modern man: and the pure snow-collars of two or three singers were crossed or broken before the radiant flight of the other birds-poets".

[172] Ibid, p. 10; ""The rational doctor smiled at this sentimentality, of which he deigned to savor, as a serious connoisseur, only one thing-the timbre. - Musically, he took only the singular sweetness of the timbre of these symbolic voices, which vocalized Death as a melody".

the dandy-artists and the doctor-artists overlap, and how aesthetic distance – in the works of several theorists of dandyism – is used to set up and critique a dynamic of psychosexual control.

Who is the true artist, in "The Swan Killer?" Villiers uses the language of the "bird-poets", and Bonhomet makes several ironic references to the birds being *artists*, but he is the one orchestrating their (literal) swan song. They have no agency, no control; the beauty they create is part of who they are, emanating *from* them (this kind of uncontrolled, even emanistic model for art, incidentally, we shall see held up as a paragon of "Christian" artistic expression by the later, post-conversion, Huysmans in Chapter 4 of this thesis, though Villiers' treatment here is more ambiguous).

. Yet the sexualized distance of Bonhomet – who experiences aesthetic pleasure and pain by proxy, who orchestrates and navigates the experience, who "savors a sublimity" that, Villiers ironically suggests, places him outside the fashionable bounds of his own century (Bonhomet, conversely, is a thoroughly late nineteenth-century creation, and Villiers knows it) – presents us with a far more intentional, and chilling, account of artistic creation.

If Zola is the doctor diagnosing his patients and performing autopsies on their narrative selves, then Bonhomet is Docteur Pascal's dark mirror, the mad scientist: fatally experimenting on patients, coming to conclusions from their corpses. Birds cannot be poets because they are objects; Bonhomet, the eternal subject, triumphs.

Reading writers as ambiguous as D'Aurevilly or Villiers – unlike, say, Zola or a Goncourt – can be confusing. Should we be seduced – like the (usually female) in-story listeners to our various dandy-narrators, or appalled? Is the disengaged, rational control that the dandy-narrators exert over their implied and explicit audience to be desired, feared, or both? Are we being drawn into complicity with the murders, the rapes, the grotesque but

glimmering sexual tortures that come to define these texts, or are we challenged repudiate them?

"The Swan Killers," is paradigmatic for our understanding of decadent-Dandyist treatment of narrative and storytelling as a whole.

I wish to focus here on our authors' treatment of *dandyist narrative*

By this I mean the following: a controlled storytelling, in which actions are explicable and diagnosable, in which characters' and persons' behavior can be fairly and predictably mapped out from a comprehensive understanding of their existing qualities; along with the preservation of aesthetic distance from the visceral reality of what is being told as a function of the narrative voice, through which certain grim contours of the plot are intentionally withheld, suspended, and lingered over in a manner implicitly and explicitly evocative of sexual desire and fulfillment.

My argument in this section is fivefold:

1. That our authors – here, Barbey D'Aurevillly and Villiers de l'Isle Adam – are engaging in dialogue with a version of narrative deeply rooted in Zola's medicalized approach to character: these texts are often response-texts or response-imaginings to Zola's work (D'Aurevilly's "Happiness in Crime", for example, is a *direct* response piece to Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*).

2. That our authors use the persona of the dandy-artist – a more refined and aristocratic version of the doctor-artist we see exemplified in Zola – to take certain elements of the Zolan approach to literary extremes so as to critique them, using narrative seduction (glimmering and beautiful language, a slow, methodical, and erotic approach to the unveiling plot) to reveal structurally and linguistically what these stories often unveil in content (i.e.: the effects of toxic artists as storytellers).

3. That storytelling is, for these authors, implicitly linked to post-Gothic imagery of vampirism and rape. The parallel relationships between the storyteller and his audience and the self-narrating dandy-protagonist and the supporting characters who prop up his work are coded as both erotic and toxic.

4. That our authors identify, albeit non-programmatically, something theologically *problematic* about this phenomenon. That is to say that these authors' imagery of Satan, diabolism, the language of sin, does not merely function (as many surface scholars of decadence would have it) to shock, provoke, or conversely to excuse the sexual or violent content we find here (the religion-as-fig-leaf-argument we find made by Robert Irwin, inter alia[173]), but rather a response to major philosophical and theological nineteenth-century movements we have already discussed in the introduction: it is a theological-anthropological riposte to positivism (self-as-explicable-being).

5. That we as constructive theologians can find in the tensions present (intentionally or unintentionally) between religious imagery and narrative function as a significant *theological* problem. This problem is primarily rooted in faith (or the lack thereof) in God (more specifically: in as God-as-creator), and secondarily rooted in understandings of what, essentially, makes God God. How should we understand, for example, the *sub specie aeternae* perspective so integral to nineteenth-century models of narrative *except* with reference to the historic understanding of a God who occupies that role in that particular way?

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[173] cf Robert Irwin, introduction to Barbey D'Aurevilly, *Les Diaboliques* (trans. E Boyd), (Sawtry: Dedalus, 1996), p. iff

The dandies that populate the "decadent-dandyist" novel or story – masters of the *sub specie ironiae* perspective – use storytelling as self-propagation – an appropriation of the divine act of creation as well as a means of asserting dominance over the figure of the listener, an imagined "other." Aestheticized distance – the provenance of irony – becomes the means by which horrors are glossed over, eroticized, excused.

This aestheticization is, of course, not limited to the authors who treat that phenomenon either subversively or theologically. The trope of the alienating aestheticization of horror is ubiquitous in decadent literature more broadly. In Jean Lorrain's 1897 *Monsieur le Bougrelon,* for example, the rape of a female character – told secondhand by the titular aging, self-described dandy – is both eroticized and aestheticized: the woman in question quite literally wears fifteen rubies sewn into her flesh to recall the fifteen participants in her gang-rape that left her bloodied. In Octave Mirbeau's 1899 *Le Jardin de Supplices* – a book-length exploration of this trope – a dinner party of society luminaries turns into an extended flashback of one character's voyeurism of the worst tortures imaginable.

But in D'Aurevilly and Villiers, this problem is treated theologically as well as artistically.

Some words about sex: the eroticized violence we find in these books might casually be termed "sadistic" (certainly this word is frequently used in criticism of D'Aurevilly: eg, Hannah Thompson on D'Aurevilly and Mirbeau[174]). However, *masochism*, in the Deleuzian sense, is a far more accurate rendition of the dynamic on display: a term that refers as much to the implicit relationship between the narrator and the textual world than to any clinical interpretation of the word. In his essay "Coldness and Cruelty," Deleuze treats sadism (i.e.,

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[174] Hannah Thompson. "Savage Poetry: Torture and Cruelty in Mirbeau and Barbey d'Aurevilly." *French Studies* 64, no. 4 (2010): pp. 410–22.

through an analysis of de Sade himself) and masochism (through analyzing Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*) as separate entities. Literary masochism, he argues, is ultimately about a fantasy of *control*: it is the illusion of submission under very specific circumstances that double as metaphor for the reader's own experience. (Thus the protagonist of *Venus in Furs,* Severin, is – despite ostensibly being under the control of his dominatrix Wanda – actually achieving sexual satisfaction from his ability to stage the scene of his sexual fantasies.) The act of creating or being complicit in the creation of (i.e., by reading) a scene – including fetishizing and lingering over certain non-explicitly-erotic images (a gemstone made of blood, a coughing consumptive woman, a fur stole) –is the act of navigating *control*: reader and teller alike seduced and tantalized even as they exert final control over their respective experiences of submission.

There is a philosophical, even theological, underpinning to this approach: a rejection of the world as-it-is in favor of the fetishized, constructed world of the ideal (what is fetish, after all, but a replacement of the biological with the artificially and often inexplicably symbolic?) As Deleuze puts it: "[the literary masochist] questions the validity of existing reality in order to create a pure ideal reality, an operation which is perfectly in line with the judicial spirit of masochism. It is not surprising that this process should lead straight into fetishism."[175] The sheer act of displacement that we find in the "masochistic" text – sexual or violent detail replaced or displaced by fetishistic description (of, say, the lush gardens in Mirbeau's *Jardins*, or the "blood jewels" in Lorrain's *Bougrelon*) limit the immediacy of our experience of the extreme, presenting us with a "safe" and controlled environment in which to react to horror and sex alike: we're not looking at a body, but something that is symbolic *of* a body in a way that feels arbitrary rather than necessary (fetishes after all make little ontological sense): an erotic "stand-in".

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[175] Gilles Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty" (trans Jean McNeal) in *Masochism,* (New York: Zone, 1991) p. 33,

Says Deleuze: "The function of the descriptions subsists, but any potential obscenity is disavowed or suspended, by displacing the descriptions either from the object itself to the fetish, or from one part of the object to another part, or again from one aspect of the subject to another."[176] Even the way that stories work – withholding valuable information, delaying a climax, shaping consummation of narrative promise – is, in Deleuze's framework, inherently erotic: "Waiting and suspense are essential characteristics of the masochistic experience."[177] As readers, as writers, our relationship with story is – at least in part – one of erotic play.

We can apply this understanding of literary masochism to the texts discussed here: D'Aurevilly's *Les Diaboliques* and Villiers' *Claire Lenoir*. Each plays with the tropes of waiting and suspense – narrators withhold in order to seduce; each fetishizes objects (in D'Aurevilly's "A Dinner of Atheists", for example, we find a particularly graphic treatment of sealing wax) at the expense of engagement with suffering characters.

Each text, fundamentally, questions the *sub specie aeternae* (and *sub specie ironiae*) perspective on interpersonal grounds that are implicitly and rhetorically theological: does the distance engendered by aestheticizing an experience ultimately destroy our ability to love?

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[176] Ibid, p. 34.

[177] Ibid, p. 70.

ii. Barbey D'Aurevilly's *Les Diaboliques* (1874)

a) Introduction: the Devil in the Details

"Des histoires réelles de ce temps de progrès et d'une civilisation si délicieuse et si divine, que, quand on s'avise de les écrire, il semble toujours que ce soit le Diable qui ait dicté!"[178]

So reads the epigram preceding Barbey D'Aurevilly's "Happiness in Crime", one of the six stories comprising his 1871 collection *Les Diaboliques*. At first glance a throwaway quip – and a winking nod to D'Aurevilly's own skepticism that his age is "de progrès," the epigram is but one of many hints that Barbey treats storytelling, as not merely morally problematic but indeed central to what we might call his understanding of sin: his conception of what *le diable* is.

For D'Aurevilly, the narrative act simultaneously demands the prideful assumption of the divinized right of narrative freedom and the seduction, even objectification, of the listener. Through narrative dandyism, D'Aurevilly shocks and seduces his readers into complicity with the text – a complicity that, as in the Deleuzian reading, draws the reader into active masochistic complicity – before challenging us with the work of the *diable* himself: our seeming *diaboliques,* denied their own narrative voice, become mere mouthpieces for dandyist desire. Irony suppresses agency.

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[178] Barbey D'Aurevilly, *Les Diaboliques*, (Lemerre: Paris, 1883), p. 3; "In these pleasant days, when a man relates a true story it is to be supposed that the Devil dictated it." translations from E Boyd (Dedalus: Sawtry: 1996).

This reading of D'Aurevilly runs against the critical grain. Most critics, such as Allen Pascoe, read *Les Diaboliques* literally: seven accounts of the *femme fatales* so common in French Decadent literature.[179]

To do so, however, simplifies the narrative complexity of these works, and overlooks the "ironic dandyism" so central to Barbey's life, work, and theology. The seductions perpetrated by women like Alberte in "La Rideau Cramoisi"or the Comtesse du Tremblay in "Le Dessous de cartes d'une partie de whist" come second to more powerful seductions: of the narrator on the reader. Each of Barbey's "she-devil" accounts comes framed within a second (or even third or fourth) account: of a dandy-storyteller recounting the tale of a diabolical woman to an enraptured audience (and, by extension, to us).

To be fair, more recent critical literature has begun to touch on the importance of the *mis-en-abîme* for contextualizing Barbey's seeming *femmes fatales*. Suzanne Rossbach, in her study of the role of the dandy in Barbey's fiction, acknowledges that "[Barbey] made dandyism not only the thematic focus but also the narrative principles of his novels and short stories."[180] So too Joyce Lowrie, for whom "The question of Barbey's demonism is related to his ideas on dandyism,"[181] or Suzanne Rossbach, who writes on how "[Barbey]'s stories and duplicitous narrative strategies have erotic appeal. The arousal of desire, tied to the narrative's deviation from tradition and norm, constitutes an important principle of Barbey's literary production."[182]

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[179] Allan Pasco, "A Study of Allusion: Barbey's Stendhal in 'Le Rideau Cramoisi.'" *PMLA* 88, no. 3 (May 1, 1973): pp. 461ff

[180] Susanne Rossbach, "(Un)Veiling the Self and the Story: Dandyism, Desire, and Narrative Duplicity in Barbey d'Aurevilly's Les Diaboliques." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 37, no. 3–4 (2009): p. 277

[181] Joyce O Lowrie. *The Violent Mystique: Thematics of Retribution and Expiation in Balzac, Barbey D'Aurevilly, Bloy and Huysmans*. (Librairie Droz: Geneva, 1974). p. 18

[182] Rossbach, p. 277.

But they do not go far enough. None of the critics above question whether what we learn of the dandies who tell stories of Barbey's eponymous she-devils can or should change how we view the "she-devils" themselves, or how the textual world (and hence the "theology" of the world Barbey has created) is rendered ontologically unstable by the layers of dandyism through which the purported *diaboliques* must pass.

As we enter the world of these stories, we must remember that the relationship of author, frame-narrator, dandy-narrator, character, frame-listener, and reader is complex. Barbey D'Aurevilly *as narrator* rarely comes into frame, although one of the characters – Ravila in "Don Juan", shares his legal first name, Jules-Amédée. Various other narrators (who may or may not be the same person) start off each story, presenting their accounts as flirtatious anecdotes in social settings (at least two address implied *female* listeners), self-identifying implicitly if not explicitly as dandies, although in each case the central "dandy" of the story (e.g. Ravila, Brassard in "Rideau") is another character entirely: the protagonist of a story-within-a-story. Only then do we *cherchez la femme*: the subject of a story told by *that* dandy. (This is only marginally less confusing within the text itself). What's *real,* what's "fake," what's a true recounting of another person's lie, what's mere titillation, is never clear; every layer of the narrative functions as a power play: an unverifiable (and fruitless) claim to the status of "author". To use a term popular in current discourse, Barbey's is a *post-truth* world.

b) Behind the Crimson Curtain: Le Rideau Cramoisi

Let's start with the opening story: "Le Rideau Cramoisi": ostensibly, a simple ghostly tale. The unnamed, initially-loquacious narrator, embarking upon a coach journey, meets the "dandy" Vicomte de Brassard. Brassard satisfies the narrator's curiosity about a mysterious crimson curtain they spy in a nearby house, recounting his own adventures there years earlier,

when Brassard was seduced by the daughter of the house, Mademoiselle Albertine, also known as Alberte[183]. They begin an affair – one abruptly cut short when Alberte dies in the middle of a bout of lovemaking (in typical Decadent fashion, Brassard remains unaware of this long enough to engage in a bit of requisite necrophilia). Overcome with terror, Brassard flees – only to remain convinced that Alberte's ghost can still be seen behind that curtain.

We can read the story accordingly to the prevailing critical narrative – that, as Allan Pasco suggests, Alberte's aggressive sexual appetites and sudden death are indicative of Satanic power.[184] Yet to do so overlooks a far more important element of the story: the relationship between Brassard and the narrator.

Our narrator begins his tale a confident, if overly verbose, voice – playing with his readers, mockingly asking "je vous demanderai la permission d'appeler [the stranger as] le vicomte de Brassard"[185] to protect his anonymity, promising the reader a gripping tale and explicitly making clear that the death that is to come has value primarily *as* sensation: "Si le capitaine vicomte de Brassard n'avait pas été tout ce que je viens d'avoir l'honneur de vous dire, mon histoire serait moins piquante, et probablement n'eussé-je pas pensé à vous la conter."[186] The very complexity of the phrase makes us doubt: can we even trust this narrator not to embellish facts as he does words? He frequently interrupts Brassard with his own meandering asides – rendering the various narrative frames of Alberte's story a kind of battle between opposing would-be subjects, each seeking to wrest narrative control from the other.

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[184] Pasco, "Allusion", p. 466.

[185] Barbey D'Aurevilly, *Les Diaboliques,* p. 8; "your permission to introduce him as the Victomte de Brassard".

[186] Ibid, p. 19; "If Captain Vicomte de Brassard had not been all that I have the honour to tell you, my story would have been less sensational and I should not have thought it worth while to relate it to you".

Yet Alberte proves a narrative trump card: the marker of dandyist victory (though *whose* is debatable). The Vicomte – speaking from a corner of the carriage, where he is so shrouded in darkness that his facial expressions cannot be ascertained – preserves the impassibility of the dandy, a fact the narrator makes explicit: "Le calme était déjà revenu dans ce dandy, le plus carré et le plus majestueux des dandys, lesquels —vous le savez!— méprisent toute émotion, comme inférieure, et ne croient pas...que l'étonnement puisse jamais être une position honorable pour l'esprit humain."[187] (The "vous le savez!" further destabilizes the "world" of the text: readers would know this only if they were familiar with Barbey D'Aurevilly's own theories of dandyism, including his quite specific depiction of a dandy as essentially emotionless, as published in his 1845 biography of Beau Brummell.[188])

As a dandy, Brassard does not express emotions but evokes them in others; his emotional conquest is rendered in quasi-sexual terms: his eyes are described as "deux yeux étincelants…comme deux saphirs... Ces yeux-là ne se donnaient pas la peine de scruter, et ils pénétraient."[189]

Worth noting is the use of lapidary imagery here –a contrast between the object-organic and the subject-inorganic we find in D'Aurevilly and in decadent-dandyist fiction more generally[190] As Karen Humphreys puts it, remarking on this phenomenon throughout D'Aurevilly: "[these examples] are part of a greater configuration of precious stones and human jewels, and more importantly their presence signifies the storytelling *process*…

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[187] D'Aurevilly, *Diaboliques*, p. 27; Calmness had again resumed its sway over this dandy, the most stolid and majestic of all dandies, who – as you know – scorn all emotions as being beneath them, and do not believe… that astonishment can ever be a proper feeling for the human mind.".

[188] One could make the case that a reader might have also gotten a similar sense of the dandy from Baudelaire, whose *Painter of Modern Life* came out in 1863, but it seems more likely here that Barbey, fond of the in-joke, is referencing his own work.

[189] Ibid, p. 18; "his eyes never glanced; they penetrated"

[190] See Humphreys, "Gems", pp. 259ff,

Barbey's story is the result of labour, nervous anticipation, erotic desire; ultimately it is the material jewel of his imagination."[191]

It is the twofold *penetration* of Brassard's gaze that is most vital to note here. The recounting of sex with Alberte – itself interrupted (eventually) by Alberte's death – becomes the means by which Bressard delays, too, the narrative climax of the story: a doubling that only intensifies the erotic subtext of the action.

"Et après (And after?)" our narrator asks, only to be met with disdain: "il n'y a pas d'après (There was no after)".[192] As Rossbach puts it in "(Un)Veiling the Self and the Story": "Brassard's listener asks for a story with a traditional ending, one in which the climax is followed by a denouement. Yet such an ending is made impossible by Alberte's sudden death. Alberte dies during an orgasm, which means that neither Brassard's desire nor his listener's curiosity are satisfied. Like Alberte who suddenly dies at the height of lust, the dandy's story abruptly ends when it reaches its climax."[193]

Ultimately, Alberte's story silences the narrator; his dwindling attempts at interruption ignored, or met with sneering derision). Not just Brassard but the narrator ends up affected – indeed *infected* – by the tale (only for the narrator, in turn, to pass on the infection – like a virus – to the reader: each re-telling, from Brassard onwards, a re-appropriation of control over the story's effects). At the story's close Brassard ironically suggests to the narrator that the shadow they see flitting across the curtain is Alberte. Whether he is serious or not is a debatable, but the narrator who haunts us with his final line "je [le] vois toujours dans mes

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[191] Ibid, p. 260.

[192] D'Aurevilly, *Diaboliques,* p. 88.

[193] Rossbach, p. 285.

rêves [But I still continue to see it in my dreams]."[194] If Alberte has seduced Brassard physically, Brassard has seduced the narrator psychologically. The "chasseur (hunter) of histoires", as the narrator has termed himself, becomes its prey.[195]

But *has* Alberte seduced Brassard? The facts of the story (if, indeed, they are true at all) are ambiguous. A man flees after sleeping with a woman, leaving her mutilated corpse (Brassard tells the narrator he cut her arm with a dagger to test if she was alive – a somewhat perverse response to the sudden death of a *paramour*) behind. Without Brassard's narrative justification for his actions, these facts are certainly suspicious. (The fact that Brassard constantly punctuates his tale with "would you believe it?" – even the epigram preceding the story is a short, sharp (English-language) "*Really*", only adds to our overall sense of instability).

Even within Brassard's narrative, we find phrases –-hints, however subtle–-that Alberte is not the unqualified aggressor than Brassard's account would have her appear: "sur sa bouche aux lèvres légèrement bombées errait je ne sais quel égarement, qui n'était pas celui de la passion heureuse…que, pour ne pas le voir, je plantai sur ces belles lèvres rouges et érectiles le robuste et foudroyant baiser du désir triomphant et roi!"[196] Alberte herself has no voice in this narrative, after all; she is unable to convey to the reader her own perspective. Brassard, in telling Alberte's story for her, has "implanted" on her his own ideas of her sexual appetite.

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[194] D'Aurevilly, *Diaboliques,* p. 91.

[195] Ibid, p. 28.

[196] Ibid, p. 69; "Only on (Alberte's) slightly pouting lips there hovered an expression of I know not what, unless it was passion satisfied, or soon to be satisfied…in order not to see it, I impressed on her beautiful pink and pouting lips the kiss of triumphant desire".

And why trust Brassard's words at all? Brassard is a dandy, not bound to anything so prosaic as truth. Whether we are to understand that he has killed Alberte with the dagger, or whether his seduction of Alberte was *de facto* fatal, a sexual analogue to his silencing of the narrator in the frame story, we must call into question the facts of the case as presented to us (lest we think the latter explanation implausible, we must remember that in Barbey's earlier "Lea," a young admirer, overwhelming his consumptive and weak-hearted beloved, does precisely that). Brassard, in such a reading, is no longer the victim of unrestrained female desire but an emotional vampire, passing the burden of his story onto the narrator even as he silences, literally and figuratively, the characters whom he seduces. Disengaged from his tale by virtue of his control over it, Brassard becomes the ultimate ironist: able to fashion himself and Alberte as characters in his own image. (Here, too, we might recall Kierkegaard's famous description of his own dandyish ironist as "the vampire who has sucked the blood of the lover"[197]) The temptations of the female body are secondary to the manner in which the "raw material" of that body is shaped by varying levels of narrative discourse: by the male voices who control how we, as readers, see and interpret Alberte's actions.

Like the narrator, we are drawn in and seduced by Brassard's story (unless, of course, Brassard is a fiction, the dandyist *effect* he produces passed onto the reader through the narrator); like him, we long for the consummation of the narrative desire that, with Alberte's death, never comes. We too treat Alberte as mere "raw material" out of which a story can be fashioned: aestheticizing (and fetishizing) her death. A woman's death, once subsumed into Brassard's narrative, becomes nothing more than source of sexual and narrative titillation; we, no less than Brassard, become complicit in her killing.

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[197] Søren, Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, (trans E and H Hong) in *Kierkegaard's Writings,* v. 2, (Princeton: Princeton University Press,2013), p. 49.

The story doubles, therefore, as a critique of the dandy as the archetypical organizing-subject, the "I" who, by means of narrative discourse, shapes and controls the world around him, reducing all others in his orbit to mere vessels for his own being. By the story's end, Alberte is dead – seduced to death, and unable to speak for herself – and the narrator, convinced of the reality of Alberte's ghost, becomes for us a mere mouthpiece for Brassard: repeating Brassard's story and metaphorically ensuring Brassard's textual immortality. The facts of the case, after all, are hardly exonerating.

But our relationship to these facts is complicated. If we were doctors, diagnosticians, or detectives – i.e., contemporary Zolas – we might construct a different narrative of what has happened in that house, something Brassard himself highlights. In one telling line, Brassard says he isn't responsible for knowing why exactly Albertine died because "Je n'étais pas médecin. [I was not a doctor]"[198] He worries about assumptions by doctors or law enforcement made from the state of the corpse; he is perfectly conscious of the story the facts assemble. One *version* of this story (which underpins the emotional reality of the text whether or not it's literally true) is that Brassard has killed Aberte: the "truth" diagnosed from the presented facts might have it so. But in creating an unstable textual world, in which we cannot trust the narrator, let alone Brassard, D'Aurevilly rejects any possibility of totalizing diagnosis.

What, therefore, are we to make of the textual *world* of "Rideau" (a *world* that is shared by the other stories in this collection)? What – if any – is its *theology*?

Before we continue, I wish to make explicit an assertion I have already made elsewhere in this thesis. Any textual "world" – which is to say, the sum total of narrative, characters, setting, and language – must necessarily have a *theological stance*. By this I am

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[198] D'Aurevilly, *Diaboliques,* p. 82.

not referring to the author's religious beliefs (as I have said in the introduction, for the purposes of this thesis they are relevant only insofar they us to understand how a work exists in dialogue with wider cultural forces, but not in terms of the ultimately constructive work of a text's refigurative power on us) but rather in the implicit assumptions made within a text about the meaningfulness of language, the interrelation of persons with varying degrees of subjectivity, the governing forces behind plot. A postmodern novel like *Finnegan's Wake,* poking fun at the dizzying meaningless of language through verbal roleplay, might be an example of an atheistic textual world; Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, with its medicalized diagnoses, its reduction of the human condition to the physical, its biological fatalism, is atheistic and positivist. (What a *Christian* novelistic "world" might look like is a subject for the conclusion of this thesis).

So what of the world of these *Diaboliques*?

Theologically speaking, this world is complex. Certainly, it is not the purely materialist, medicalized world of Zola. Deduction, *detection* fail here, and with them a purely biological, "atheist-materialist" (to use a favourite decadent phrase) account of human experience.

When real evil (which for D'Aurevilly means theological, *diabolical* evil) enters the world, it does so through the "cracks" in each story: the unsettling and unnatural instability of this textual hall of mirrors. This world has no clear anchor, no ontological referent. It rejects naturalism and with it engagement within the created order outside its boundaries, whose dissolution is strictly internal. As Angela Moger notes: **"**Any story presupposes itself as a mimesis, but a framed story, having at its heart the process of telling about telling, is borrowing from the very imitation of life which it offers, the elements which will invalidate that mimetic system. What starts out as mimesis ends up in a loop. There is the self-conscious

conversion of the natural, or rather, the life-like, into the artificial. [Barbey] is replete with thematic and rhetorical examples of this narrative 'dandyism'"[199]

Thus, do we find the "devil" in the details of this story – sexualized as they are for our consummate and unconsummated reading pleasure – but also in the chaos of uncertainty surrounding its telling. The slipstream contours of narrative instability, combined with the constantly shifting power vectors within the text, convey a world of profound if inexplicable *evil*. D'Aurevilly's world may repudiate that of the "atheist-materialist" bourgeois Satan that later occultists like Papus (and Jules Bois) would come to treat as the true bugbear of the nineteenth century, but remains nevertheless in thrall to an evil that operates in and through Word.

This textual world, in other words, is neither atheistic (as in a straight Zolan textual world) nor Christian (as we will find in the late work of Husymans, whom D'Aurevilly and Zola both influenced, with whom I will end my thesis) but what we might call as a stopgap measure "Satanic": a station on the cross on the way to the late decadents' fuller expression of faith in text.

c) A Ravishment: "Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan"

That same diabolical sense permeates the second story in the collection, "Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan," which goes further than "Rideau" in explicitly severing D'Aurevilly's conception of evil from the purely biological: it is the mind, and not the body, which is at the root of diabolism (something D'Aurevilly renders explicit).

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[199] Angela Moger. "Gödel's 'Incompleteness Theorem' and Barbey: Raising Story to a Higher Power." *SubStance* 12, no. 4 (January 1, 1983), p. 28.

Moger, 28

We generally link sin to sexual desire. But D'Aurevilly hints that sin lies just as much in the disengagement inherent in that desire's absence. *Impenetrability,* after all, is a defining dandyist characteristic: in *Dandyism*, Barbey writes: "Aimer…désirer, c'est toujours dépendre, c'est être esclave de son désir Les bras le plus tendrement fermés sur vous sont encore une chaîne."[200]

The "Don Juan" of this story, Comte Ravila de Raviles, bears little resemblance to the sensual, gluttonous reprobrate of the Molière and Mozart accounts. If anything, this "Juan" bears a striking resemblance to another aestheticized Don Giovanni – the figure of Johannes the Seducer in Kierkegaard's "The Seducer's Diary", less interested in pleasures of the flesh than in the power of the mind; his "greatest love of all" is his platonic seduction of his mistress's teenage daughter.

Like "Rideau," "Don Juan" is a story within a story (indeed: a story within a story within a story), mirroring the narrative's central act of seduction as each set of audience members responds, erotically fashion, to Don Juan's tale. The story's primary narrator – an anonymous dandy like that in "Rideau" – implies to a Marquise at a dinner party that he knows the story of a *second* gathering: hosted by Ravila's ex-lovers for the Comte, a story he proceeds to recount *as if* he himself had attended it.

The story of Ravila's dinner party makes up the bulk of the text. When challenged by his competing former mistresses to describe his greatest love of all, Ravila recounts an incident that occurred at the home of a former mistress, who is absent. This mistress had a daughter –who seemed to hate and fear her mother's paramour. Yet Ravila ensnares his prey with a single look:

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[200] D'Aurevilly, *Dandyisme*, p. 41; "to desire -- is always to depend, to be the slave of one's desire. The arms that clasp you the most tenderly are still a chain, and were one Richelieu or Don Juan himself, in breaking free, one breaks but a single link".

> J'étais debout à la cheminée, et je la regardais obliquement. Elle avait le dos tourné de mon côté, et il n'y avait pas de glace devant elle dans laquelle elle pût voir que je la regardais… Tout à coup son dos…se redressa, comme si je lui avais cassé l'épine dorsale avec mon regard comme avec une balle; et abattant violemment le couvercle du piano, qui fit un bruit effroyable, en tombant, elle se sauva du salon… On alla la chercher; mais ce soir-là, on ne put jamais l'y faire revenir.[201]

The power of Ravila's gaze is so strong that his victim does not even need to *see* it to be affected by it. Ravila is the ultimate subject: his actions, his decisions, his choices shape the scene. The girl is the ultimate *objet d'art* – raw material for Ravila to shape into a character in the story he tells" an affirmation of his own created selfhood as "Don Juan." (He is, after all, only Don Juan *because* he has his Zerlina). She cannot gaze back at Ravila; she does not even have the opportunity to reply.

Yet this is only the beginning of Ravila's psychological ensnarement of the girl (who remains unnamed). Ravila induces in the girl a hysterical pregnancy after she sits upon a chair in which he has previously sat: "Oh! maman!… c'est comme si j'étais tombée dans du feu. Je voulais me lever, je ne pus pas… le cœur me manqua! et je sentis…que ce que j'avais… c'était un enfant!"[202]

Transcending the physical nature of the sexual encounter, Ravila – like Huysmans' Des Esseintes, who fashions an enema so that he can avoid eating food like normal mortals – has demonstrated his mastery over nature: the "child" engendered by his erotic act is not a human infant but rather the artistic creation of the narrative of his greatest conquest (and,

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[201] D'Aurevilly, *Diaboliques*,p. 125; "I was standing by the fireplace, and enfiladed her with my gaze. Her back was towards me, and there was no mirror in front of her in which she could see I was looking at her….all of a sudden her back…straightened as if my look had broken her spine like a bullet; and, slamming down the lid of the piano with a resounding crash, she rushed out of the room".

[202] Ibid, p. 132; "O! mamma…it was just as if I had fallen into a flame of fire. I wanted to get up, but I could no….for my heart stopped beating! And I felt….oh! mamma, mamma, I felt…that what hurt me so…was a baby!...".

implicitly, his legacy). Ravila projects onto the body of the girl (who, thus used, dies offstage) his selfhood: their metaphorical child is entirely *his*. In this textual world, the inorganic (and, as we have said, the lapidary) and the ideal supersede the biological: both linguistically and narratively, the world of D'Aurevilly's text exists in *opposition to* the "created" (i.e., natural) world.

Ravila's act of seduction is twofold. Certainly, he seduces the child into believing that he has impregnated her. But no less important is the effect his story has on the women to whom he tells it – each of whom hoped to be revealed as his "plus bel amour." Here, too, the effect is erotic:

> Oui — firent-elles toutes. 'Dites-nous cela, comte!' ajoutèrent-elles passionnément, suppliantes déjà, avec les frémissements de la curiosité jusque dans les frisons de leurs cous, par derrière; se tassant, épaule contre épaule ; les unes la joue dans la main, le coude sur la table ; les autres, renversées au dossier des chaises, L'éventail déplié sur la bouche ; le fusillant toutes de leurs yeux émerillonnés et inquisiteurs. "Si vous le voulez absolument…" dit le comte, avec la nonchalance d'un homme qui sait que l'attente exaspère le désir.[203]

Just as his mistress's child manifests Ravila's effect physically, so too do these women display the "marks" of Ravila's power.

But of course, this story, too, is suspect. It is told not by Ravila himself but by a second narrator, a dandy no less concerned with image than the Don Juan of whom he speaks. (Indeed, the Marquise to whom he tells the story of Don Juan accuses him of using the story

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[203] Ibid, pp. 110-1; "Yes, yes,' They clamoured with one voice. 'Tell us, Comte!' They urged in tones already vibrating with a passionate supplication, curiosity quivering in the very curls that fringed the back of their necks. They drew together, shoulder to shoulder; some with cheek on hand and elbow on the board, some leaning back in their chairs, with open fans before their mouths, all challenging him with wide, inquisitive eyes. 'If you are bent on hearing the story,' said the Comte with the nonchalance of a man well aware how much procrastination adds to the keenness of desire".

as an excuse to brag about his own promiscuity: “et je vous prie de m’épargner le détail des soupers de vos coquines, si c’est une manière inventée par vous de m’en donner des nouvelles que de me parler, ce soir de Don Juan.”)[204]

The narrator tells us he learned of Ravila’s dinner from Ravila; however, the detailed description and psychological insight he displays seems less the straightforward recounting of gossip than the work of a master dandy-storyteller, his witticisms an attempt to co-opt Ravila’s story for his own. The narrator’s attempts to “assure” the reader, assuming familiarity, become far more suspect when we remember that he never attended Ravila’s dinner – both the seduction of the “girl” and the seduction of the “hosts” are given second-hand. We have no reason to trust that either is “true,” within the confines of the narrative; they could easily be fictions told by Ravila to the narrator, or by the narrator to us.

Like “Rideau,” “Don Juan” is a story about the relationship between the author, narrator reader, between storyteller(s) and their audience – who become simultaneously themselves, at every level including that of reader, a kind of text: seduced by the story’s effects, we become examples of the storyteller’s narrative control.

Barbey is more explicit in his theological imagery here than in “Rideau.” The narrator frequently hints at supernatural, dimensions of Ravila’s power. Early on in the narrative, a mishearing of a common proverb leads the Marquise to confuse the Comte and Satan; later, the narrator tells us that “avait-il fait un pacte avec le diable (he [may have] made an unholy bargain with the Devil)” as a way of ensuring his attractiveness to women.[205] Yet what is diabolical about the Comte is not his sexual appetite but rather his quest for erotic power. He

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[204] Ibid, p. 97; “I suppose this is a new way of telling me about your disreputable lady friends, this harping on Don Juan and his doings tonight”.

[205] Ibid, p. 103.

is “un rude spiritualiste que Don Juan! Il l’est comme le démon lui-même, qui aime les âmes encore plus que les corps, et qui fait même cette traite-là de préférence à l’autre, le négrier infernal!”[206] and “ne peu comme ce fameux moine d’Arnaud de Brescia qui, racontent les Chroniques, ne vivait que du sang des âmes.”[207]

Cognition, rather than concupiscence, forms the basis of Barbey’s understanding of sin. Ravila, even more than Brassard, is diabolical not because of his sexual prowess or urges but rather because he *initiates* desire in *another*, and in so doing claims his own freedom from a (textual) world of contingency. Ravila needs nothing; even his propagation is anti-biological, self-directed, masturbatory. Desires of the flesh, as manifested in Albertine, the nameless girl, and the attendants at Ravila’s feast, are not the origin of evil power but only its symptoms – physiological manifestations of spiritual control. For Barbey, the dandyist narrative act (which is, essentially, the narrative act taken to extremes) involves an anti-theistic appropriation of power on several counts. It is a denial of *contingency*: a creation of a textual world (or worlds within worlds) predicated on having neither biological referent (this is a symbolic world of stones and ideas, not living things) nor ontological truth. It’s also a denial of *agency:* the erotic nature of the various storytelling(s) in the text necessitate the even objectification, of the listener, who is denied her own subjectivity, transformed into a mere projection of the teller’s self.

What of the reader: the final “listener” in Barbey’s narrative chain? On the one hand, we are the ultimate “victim”: to whom the metaphorical infection passes last, refracted through so many narrative lenses. It is we who are “silenced,” like the narrator of “Rideau.” In us the mental progeny of Ravila lives. And yet (as Deleuze might have it) we are also in

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[206] Ibid, p. 105; “Don Juan is an ardent idealist! He is like the devil, his master, who loves men’s souls better than their bodies, and actually traffics in the former by choice, the hellish slave-driver”.

[207] Ibid, p. 97; “.a bit like Arnold of Brescia’s famous monk who…lived only on the blood of souls”.

control. As readers, the horror our literary masochism inflicts upon us is ultimately a controlled one. If Deleuze is right to say that "[the literary masochist] questions the validity of existing reality in order to create a pure ideal reality"[208], this is too true of the reader of the masochistic text. We can put down the book at any time (unlike the listeners at the various parties we find throughout *Les Diaboliques,* who are forced by the social setting to remain attentive); we can reject the unreal dandy. But, by turning the page, we instead submit willingly to this narrative conquest, and become complicit in its variously rendered denouements: rape, torture, death. Our seduction is also an invitation to corruption: we, too, reject the outside world in favor of the unsettlingly "Satanic" world of D'Aurevilly, even as its very unsettling qualities serve to self-subvert and self-critique. We enter the inorganic Eden of D'Aurevilly's text – all lapidary language and cold "ideality" – and participate in the fetishistic alienation that leaves each of its *diaboliques* dead.

d) Dissecting a Murder: "Le Bonheur dans le Crime"

But it is not until the third story, "Le Bonheur dans le Crime," that Barbey's voyeuristic sense of alienation is *explicitly* linked with responsibility for the deaths at hand. Perhaps the most unsettling of *Les Diaboliques'* tales, "Le Bonheur dans le Crime" is also the one that deals most directly with the Zolan figure of the "doctor-artist": it is impossible not to read "Bonheur" as a *direct* response piece to Zola's *Thérese Raquin,* released in 1870, only four years before *Les Diaboliques'* publication.

Thérese's plot is straightforward: an unhappily married woman and her lover conspire to kill her husband, then find that the psychosomatic symptoms of guilt make their new life

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[208] Deleuze, *Masochism,* p. 33.

together impossible to bear (or consummate). Exhausted after many sleepless, nervous nights, the lovers commit suicide.

To return to the concept elucidated earlier of the *underpinning theology* of the text, *Thérese* is positivism at its most brutal. The novel is certainly fatalistic – its events are treated as inevitable – but the fate in question is biologically-determined: every single decision made by the novels' central characters is a function of their particular neurological or physiological condition, or that of their parents before them. Anatomy supersedes autonomy. Zola's narrator – implicitly Zola himself – diagnoses. In one telling passage:

> La nature sèche et nerveuse de Thérèse avait agi d'une façon bizarre sur la nature épaisse et sanguine de Laurent. Jadis, aux jours de passion, leur différence de tempérament avait fait de cet homme et de cette femme un couple puissamment lié, en établissant entre eux une sorte d'équilibre, en complétant pour ainsi dire leur organisme. L'amant donnait de son sang, l'amante de ses nerfs, et ils vivaient l'un dans l'autre, ayant besoin de leurs baisers pour régulariser le mécanisme de leur être. Mais un détraquement venait de se produire ; les nerfs surexcités de Thérèse avaient dominé…Il serait curieux d'étudier les changements qui se produisent parfois dans certains organismes, à la suite de circonstances déterminées. Ces changements, qui partent de la chair, ne tardent pas à se communiquer au cerveau, à tout l'individu.[209]

D'Aurevilly's "Bonheur" is *Therèse's* dark mirror. The story of an adulterous murder funneled through the perspective of the ferociously positivist doctor Torty – whose *bourgeois* doctor-artistry exists in constant dialogue with *dandyisme* proper – "Bonheur" implicates Torty himself in the murder, even as the "facts of the case", as in "Rideau", resist diagnosis.

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[209] Zola, *Thérèse,* pp. 195-6; "Thérèse's dry, nervous character had reacted in an odd way with the stolid, sanguine character of Laurent. Previously, in the days of their passion, this contrast in temperament had made this man and woman into a powerfully linked couple by establishing a sort of balance between them and, so to speak, complementing their organisms. The lover contributed his blood and the mistress her nerves, and so they lived in one another, each needing the other's kisses to regulate the mechanism of their being. But the equilibrium had been disturbed and Thérèse's over-excited nerves had taken control… It would be interesting to study the changes that are sometimes produced in certain organisms as a result of particular circumstances. These changes, which derive from the flesh, are rapidly communicated to the brain and to the entire being" Trans from Robin Buss (London: Penguin, 2004).

Like the other stories in the collection, "Bonheur" seems to be the story of another *diabolique*. When the narrator and his friend, the hyper-rational, loquacious Dr. Torty, spy a preternaturally beautiful couple walking in the Jardin des Plantes, Torty tells the narrator their story. She is one Hauteclaire de Stassin. After falling in love with the Comte de Savigny, who returns her affections, she joins the Comte's household in disguise as a maid, Eulalie, so that the two can carry on their affair undisturbed. Hauteclaire's devotion to her lover prompts her to murder the Comte's wife, poisoning her by replacing her regular medicine with a bottle of ink. Now, says Torty, the Comte and Eulalie are married and live together quite happily, having suffered no consequences for their misdeeds. No biological, no neurological, no psychosomatic symptoms have intruded on the lovers as a result of their guilt.

Yet Barbey weaves through this tale of jealousy and desire a second narrative thread: that of the relationship between Torty, the "ultimate *voyeur*"[210], to quote D'Aurevilly scholar Michele Respaut, and the viewed. Family doctor to the Comte, Torty is a parody of the Zolan doctor if there ever was one, a committed phrenologist, diagnosing Hauteclaire/Eulalie's personality and fate from her physiology: "elle me fit l'effet d'être mise au monde et créée pour être victime. Seulement, cette idée…était contrariée par un menton qui se relevait, à l'extrémité de ce mince visage, un menton de Fulvie sur les médailles romaines."[211]

Although Torty recognizes Hauteclaire in the household, he keeps her identity a secret (she's in disguise as her lover's wife's maid Eulalie), out of the "impénétrable discretion… l'intérêt de l'observateur, qui ne voulait pas qu'on lui fermât la porte d'une maison où il y

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[210] Respaut, Michèle M. "The Doctor's Discourse: Emblems of Science, Sexual Fantasy, and Myth in Barbey d'Aurevilly's 'Le Bonheur Dans Le Crime'." *The French Review* 73, no. 1 (October 1, 1999), p. 75.

[211] D'Aurevilly, *Diaboliques*, p. 182.

avait…de pareilles choses à observer."[212] (Tellingly Torty uses that familiar dandyist epithet *impénetrable* to describe his interest).

Torty's *interest* – a word that implicitly mirrors our own narrative hunger in reading – is more than professional. He is drawn in by voyeuristic curiosity: a desire to understand, to *know,* the emotional underpinnings of the affair. He characterizes it in language that evokes the Baudelairean *flâneur*, that "prince of the incognito":[213] "Ah! les plaisirs de l'observateur! Ces plaisirs impersonnels et solitaires"[214]

D'Aurevilly makes explicit the Zolan connection between narrative and diagnosis. Torty discusses how "[j]e pourrais donc étudier, avec autant d'intérêt et de suite qu'une maladie, le mystère d'une situation qui, racontée à n'importe qui, aurait semblé impossible… Et comme déjà, dès le premier jour que je l'entrevis, ce mystère excita en moi la faculté ratiocinante, qui est le bâton d'aveugle du savant et surtout du médecin, dans la curiosité acharnée de leurs recherches, je commençai immédiatement de raisonner cette situation pour l'éclairer."[215]

Even the very word *ratiocinante,* a somewhat archaic Latinism, serves to create a sense of cognitive distance from the situation. D'Aurevilly is explicit in coding Torty as a specifically atheistic, indeed antitheistic, figure both in terms of his own religious views and his function in the text: we learn that he considers himself an "enemy" of the Catholic

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[212] Ibid, p. 176; "the impenetrable discretion, the…interest I took as an observer, who did not want the doors of a house where such interesting events were going on to be closed against him."

[213] Baudelaire, *Peintre,* p. 65

[214] D'Aurevilly, *Diaboliques,* p. 176; "Ah, what pleasure it is to be an observer, what impersonal and solitary pleasures one enjoys!"

[215] Ibid, p. 177; "I could study with as much interest as though it had been a disease, the mystery of a situation which no one would have deemed credible if they had been informed of it. And, as from the very first day, this mystery had aroused my ratiocinative facultie…I began immediately to reason out the situation I order that I might understand it"

religion, and presents himself to the narrator as the secular successor to the ecclesiastical confessor, saying too of his patients that "qu'ils choisissent entre moi et l'Extrême-Onction, et, tout dévots qu'ils étaient, ils me prenaient encore de préférence aux Saintes Huiles."[216]. He specifically presents his study as a kind of proof of the absence of the soul, a quest for reduction:

> je n'avais tenu à étudier microscopiquement leur incroyable bonheur, et à y surprendre, pour mon édification personnelle, le grain de sable d'une lassitude, d'une souffrance, et, disons le grand mot : d'un remords. Mais rien! Rien! L'amour prenait tout, emplissait tout, bouchait tout en eux, le sens moral et la conscience…j'ai compris le sérieux de la plaisanterie de mon vieux camarade Broussais, quand il disait de la conscience: "Voilà trente ans que je dissèque, et je n'ai pas seulement découvert une oreille de ce petit animal-là."[217]

As his obsession with the mystery grows. Torty's quest to *understand* becomes a quest to sublimate and conquer the desire he is made to experience: a sexualized need for control.

This is made explicit in one of the story's most memorable scenes, when Torty spies through a window upon Savigny and Hauteclaire embracing. Torty recounts the incident to his listener: "ils formèrent, à eux deux…dura bien soixante pulsations comptées à ce pouls qui allait plus vite qu'à présent, et que ce spectacle fit aller plus vite encore… 'Oh! Oh' — fis-je…Il faudra bien qu'un de ces matins ils se confient à moi."[218] (The reference here is to pregnancy – hinting once more at the diagnostician's cognitive control over biological facts).

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[216] Ibid, p. 139; "They had…to choose between me and Extreme Unction, and, devout as they were, they preferred me to the sacramental oil".

[217] Ibid, p. 217; "As a doctor…I…wanted to study microscopically their incredible happiness, and to discover for my personal edification, the grain of weariness, of suffering….of remorse…I understood the seriousness of the joke of my old comrade Broussais when he said about conscience 'I have been dissecting for thirty years and have never found a trace of that little piece.".

[218] Ibid, pp. 195-6; "They remained mouth to mouth….for quite sixty beats of my pulse, which went faster than at present, and which this sight caused to beat faster still…Oh! Oh!...one of these days they will have to confide in me".

Hauteclaire's relationship with Savigny is seen only through the "prism" of Torty's narration; their embrace is medicalized, and thus circumscribed, by Torty's description of it lasting "quite sixty beats of my pulse," even as the subtext is of masturbatory voyeurism: these characters exist, in a sense, *for* Torty's heart-beating pleasure: culminating in the "Oh! Oh!" that hints at climax. Torty has transformed Hauteclaire into an object: he has reduced her to a mere occasion for his erotic pleasure. His understanding of her is a form of control.

So too does Dr. Torty attempt to exert control over another member of the household: the Countess of Savigny, using his status as a doctor to attempt to find out – for his own edification and amusement – how much she suspects about her husband's affair. His ostensible medical examination having been transformed into a psychoanalytic one, Torty insinuates himself into his employers' story, attempting (although he hardly admits as much) to sow seeds of doubt in the Countess's mind for seemingly no purpose other than to see what will happen next: ("un de ces jours, on vous l'enlèvera" he tells her "...peut-être, un homme comme il faut et de votre monde."[219]), transforming his role from that of passive observer into active accomplice.

Such a transformation reaches its climax in the murder of the Countess, in which Torty plays an integral role. Indeed, in the build-up to the murder, he serves as a dark mirror to Hauteclaire: it is she who brings him pen and ink to write a prescription for the Countess's medicine; she then fills this prescription by replacing the medication with copying-ink, which poisons and kills the Countess. Torty presents himself as an unwitting accomplice: after all, he says, he had no way of knowing what Hauteclaire intended to do with the prescription. Yet it is difficult not to see the event as anything but what Respaut calls a "cooperation between

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[219] Ibid, p. 185; "one of these days you will have someone run away with (Eulalie)," he tells her, "…and perhaps it will be a man of your own station".

Hauteclaire and Torty."[220]

It is a literal murder-by-word: narrative itself is the murder weapon. Thus Respaut: "She *almost* writes; she provides the bodily support for writing. But she also poisons with the substance of writing."[221]

Yet Torty's quest fails. Just as in "Rideau," the textual world proves not a positivist one but "Satanic" in its layers of untruth and uncertainty. Admits Torty: "le bonheur n'a pas d'histoire. Il n'a pas plus de description. On ne peint pas plus le bonheur, cette infusion d'une vie supérieure dans la vie, qu'on ne saurait peindre la circulation du sang dans les veines."[222] Hauteclaire emerges from the tale a cipher, a mystery; she cannot be circumscribed or explained by Torty's narrative. Only the couple's infertility remains as potential evidence to their crime – a suggestion not of, as in *Thérese,* biological retribution but biological transcendence; they have entered a realm of pure inorganic ideality, even as they transcend naturalistic narrative confines of the "histoire".

It is telling here that the least successful storyteller is not a *dandy* but a *doctor.* The two are, as I have said, closely linked, though their political perspectives differ. They share a sense of narrative command, the *sub specie ironiae* perspective, and a degree of moral implication in their crimes. But the doctor is still *contingent* – searching for meaning in facts. Only the dandy that ascends to the next step: creating his own. It is the control exercised by the *true* dandy (which a bourgeois doctor like Torty cannot be – indeed Torty does not get that) alone.

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[220] Respaut, p. 111.

[221] Ibid.

[222] D'Aurevilly, *Diaboliques*, p. 218; "there is no theory here…in my twenty years I have never gotten over my amazement…no description is possible. You can no more paint happiness – that infusion of a higher life into ordinary life – than you can paint the circulation of blood in the veins".

And indeed, in "Bonheur," too, it is the storyteller who *meets* Torty that shapes the story of his failure. The "Crime" is not merely a story-within-a-story, but a story-within-a-story-within-a-story, told by the narrator to an unnamed "Madame." Karen Humphreys has made much of this device, which tricks the reader into complicity with the unnamed narrator by pretending at familiarity ("L'avez-vous quelquefois rencontré, le docteur Torty?"[223]). Yet three pages later, as Humphrey notes, "the reader is suddenly excluded from the discussion when he learns that the narrator is actually talking to a 'Madame'. The narrator's duplicitous act of engaging the reader and at the same time separating himself from others is a narrative manifestation of the dandy paradox."[224] Torty's story is incomplete in itself, its narrative lacunae hinting at the impossibility of subsuming fact into comprehensive narrative, and yet it becomes complete insofar as it is revealed to be a "complete" story told by the narrator to 'Madame', and indeed by Barbey to the reader. This dynamic – blending trickery with subversion – highlights the ultimate power gradient between the (male) speaker and the (implied female) listener (as well as that of Barbey over his readership): Whether Hauteclaire or Torty has triumphed within their power-play, the dandy-storyteller triumphs over us all. It is this narrative tension – is the story *finished* or *unfinished*? – that renders "Bonheur" perhaps the most intriguingly complex story in *Les Diaboliques,* the one whose textual world is least resolved.

d) Rounding Out the Dandies:

"Au-dessous de cartes d'une partie de whist", "Un diner des Athées" and "Le Vengéance d'Une Femme"

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[223] Ibid, p. 138; "Have you even met Dr Torty?".

[224] Humphreys, "Dandyism," pp. 68-9.

The next three stories in the collection – which we will discuss more briefly – only intensify the dynamics seen above.

In "Au-dessous de cartes d'une partie de whist," Barbey creates another textual world of dandyist uncertainty: the irreconcilable "*facts of the case*" in this example – a dead infant whose corpse nurtures a potted plant, whose origins are hinted at but never decisively known – even more gruesome than those of "Rideau" or "Bonheur." In telling the story the bizarre love triangle between the inscrutable Comtesse de Stasseville, the dandyish card shark Marmor de Karkoel, and the Comtesse's innocent daughter Herminie, Barbey makes even more explicit than in "Rideau" the fundamental divide between the *inner* and the *outer*, so central to dandyist and decadent ideology, that underpins his textual world.

Barbey's world is one of performances; behavior is *willed* rather than organic (recall the contrast between the emanistic "poetry" of Villiers' murdered swans and the fatal orchestrations of Tribulat Bonhomet). Thus we learn of Karkorel that "Les cartes, qui semblaient sa passion, étaient-elles sa passion réelle ou une passion qu'il s'était donnée? Car on se donne des passions comme des maladies. Étaient-elles une espèce d'écran qu'il semblait déplier pour cacher son âme?"[225] The *real soul* is, in Barbey, nonexistent or irrelevant: only pure *will* separates dandies from animals (human beings who are *not* dandies aren't so far off).

As the typically D'Aurevilliean dandy-narrator puts it of his fatal trio, in terms that could apply to the narrator himself: "Il y a une effroyable, mais enivrante félicité dans l'idée qu'on ment et qu'on trompe; dans la pensée qu'on se sait seul soi-même, et qu'on joue à la société une comédie dont elle est la dupe, et dont on se rembourse les frais de mise en scène

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[225] D'Aurevilly, Ibid, pp. 263-4; "Card-playing certainly seemed a passion with him; but it is open to question whether this was genuine or only assumed, for a passion like a disease may be brought on artificially. Was it only a kind of screen which he set up to hide his real soul behind"

par toutes les voluptés du mépris."[226] Such anti-corporeal voluptuousness extends to every D'Aurevillean narrator in every layer of the text: all, in assuming such overwhelming *sub specie* perspective, escape the contingency of being *known*.

Here, too, the language is religiously-charged: "Les natures au cœur sur la main ne se font pas l'idée des jouissances solitaires de l'hypocrisie, de ceux qui vivent et peuvent respirer la tête lacée dans un masque…Le mot diabolique ou divin, appliqué à l'intensité des jouissances, exprime la même chose, c'est-à-dire des sensations qui vont jusqu'au surnaturel."[227] Dandyism – whether Satanic or "divine" is ultimately about the rejection of and victory over nature, and so from anything outside the text (Barbey's stories are, to once more refer to Charles Taylor, definitively *auto-telic*).[228]

By removing their *true selves* from the equation, these dandies are able to exist in a one-sided relationship with the world, acting upon it only from the *sub specie ironiae* perspective: a perspective that, the *raconteur* and Barbey alike suggest, can only be from a position of disdain and contempt. If Schleiermacher's vision of immediate unity with the divine – that of the self and its world as one – is to be understood as the Romantic ideal,[229] then Barbey presents us with a textual world structured on the opposite: modes of being in which the world and self are divided on the level of both cognition and emotion: The dandyist self appropriates power insofar as it produces that dandyist *effect,* but refuses the

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[226] Ibid, p. 272; "These find a hateful- but intoxicating, bliss in the very notion of falsehood and deceit, in the thought that *they alone know their true selves*, and they are playing off a Comedy of Eros upon society, reimbursing themselves for the expense of representation with all the fine contempt they feel for their poor dupes"

[227] Ibid, p. 273; "People who wear their hearts on their sleeve, as people say, can form no notion of the furtive joys…the solitary gratifications of such as live and breathe without difficulty under the confinement of a mask…the two words, *devilish (sic) and divine*, when applied to extremes of enjoyment, express one and the same idea, *viz*, sensations that overpass the bounds of nature and reach the supernatural"

[228] See discussion of Charles Taylor in the introduction.

[229] Friedrich Schleiermacher. *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (trans. Richard Crouter) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; , 1996), p. 39.

contingency of being affected itself: even to the point of binding its behavior-in-the-world to any fixed form of personality. That *effect* is the locus of evil: in the instability of truth in Barbey's world, only the pleasure we as readers receive from "creating" another (i.e., the controlled masochism of aestheticizing the cruelest – and most titillating – explanation for an act) is "true," even as the outcomes result in death and destruction: in "Cartes," the implication of incest and infanticide.

Just as the writing-ink-murder of "Bonheur" proves an unsettlingly apt symbol of such a double-murder, the worst excesses of "À un Dîner d'athées," a *de facto* competition among the "atheists" of the title to provide the most gruesome dinner-party anecdotes, make explicit the link between textual and sexual control, and the violent alienation engendered in the dandyist model of storytelling.

"Dîner" traces the dandy Mesnildgrand's relationship with the *demi-mondaine* Rosalba, who is the mistress of (among other men) the jealous Ydow. Upon discovering that their now-dead child may not be his, Ydow violently attacks Rosalba (her nickname, in another example of the unstable relation between inner and outer, refers to her habit of virginal blushing despite her promiscuity), throwing the mummified heart of their child at her before sealing up her sexual organs with sealing-wax:

> Cette table à écrire, la bougie allumée, la cire à côté, toutes ces circonstances avaient donné au major une idée infernale, — l'idée de cacheter cette femme, comme elle avait cacheté sa lettre — et il était dans l'acharnement de ce monstrueux cachetage, de cette effroyable vengeance d'amant perversement jaloux!... Il était penché sur sa victime, qui ne criait plus, et c'était le pommeau de son sabre qu'il enfonçait dans la cire bouillante et qui lui servait de cachet![230]

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[230] D'Aurevilly, *Diaboliques,* p. 398; "This writing-table, the lighted candle, the wax beside it, all these circumstances had given the Major an infernal idea-the idea of sealing this woman, as she had sealed his letter-and he was in the fury of this monstrous sealing, of that frightful vengeance of a perverse jealous lover! ... He leaned over his victim, who no longer cried, and it was the pommel of his saber that he sank into boiling wax and which served him stamp"

The "sealing" of Rosalba, which immediately follows her sealing of a letter intended for one of her other lovers, is the perfect expression of her role in the text: i.e., *as* text. As feminist D'Aurevilly scholar Eileen Sivert puts it, "Rosalba's body in "Diner" is a text to be read, consumed, devoured, and finally disfigured."[231]

Rosalba's assault functions as the climax of the narrative – a narrative that, is left unresolved: we never learn her final fate. Thus the erotic potential of the scene is twofold: it both reveals (literally: Rosalba is naked) and hides: the effect it produces heightened by the refusal to consummate the reader's desire to know the ending. Writes Hannah Thompson:

> [Dîner] refuses to satisfy…readerly desire …The sexually violent act inflicted on the female character is transformed into and transposed on to the reader's experience of the story. By refusing to satisfy the reader with the end of the tale, Barbey sadistically punishes the reader by inflicting a pain analogous to…that experienced by the protagonist. Paradoxically, then, the experience of reading ["Dîner"] is fulfilling not because of what the reader learns, but through what he or she experiences: through his or her frustration at the story's unsatisfactory ending, the reader is able to empathize with the story's violated protagonist. If La Pudica can be read as an image of the reader, she simultaneously represents the Aurevillian text: by turning La Pudica into a letter waiting to be sealed, Barbey reflexively turns her into an image of language itself. As such, her punishment becomes a vivid image of the violence done to the text by the sadistic writer.[232]

While D'Aurevilly may be better classed as a *masochistic,* rather than *sadistic* writer, Thompson's argument here is otherwise apt. D'Aurevilly's texts, in reflecting the "Satanic" dandyist mode in both form and content, highlight how narrative consummation, narrative control, and cognitive alienation are inextricably linked. Even as they critique the Zolan "naturalist" perspective by demonstrating its failure, they critique the dandyist "Satanic" perspective in which it exists in such close dialogue by taking them to extremes.

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[231] Eileen Sivert. "Text, Body, and Reader in Barbey d'Aurevilly's' Les Diaboliques." In *Symposium Syracuse, NY*, 31:151–64, 1977, p. 155.

[232] Thompson, "Savage", p. 41.

Again, we need not *necessarily* read this critique as a binding statement on Barbey's own religious views, nor *as* conscious Christian writing (though it's worth noting that Barbey himself, in his preface, does hint at this in a way that, as ever with Barbey, may or may not be ironic: "Elles ont pourtant été écrites par un moraliste chrétien, mais qui se pique d'observation vraie, quoique très hardie, et qui croit — c'est sa poétique, à lui — que les peintres puissants peuvent tout peindre et que leur peinture est toujours assez morale quand elle est tragique et qu'elle donne l'horreur des choses qu'elle retrace. Il n'y a d'immoral que les Impassibles et les Ricaneurs.")[233] Nevertheless, we can by a close reading of all six stories in *Les Diaboliques* identify the tensions – themselves in dialogue with (one might say, after Ricoeur, *configured by*) the cultural, philosophical, and – yes – biographical discourse of heir time – between narrative and faith, diabolism and alienation, in the work, and investigate constructively their refigurative power on a (theologically savvy) reader: after all, is the "effect" on the listener/reader not at the *heart* of dandyist discourse?

The final story in the collection, "La Vengeance d'Un Femme," is the "exception that proves the rule" in our study of gender, erotics, and narrative. Its place at the end of the collection echoes a popular trope in dandyist discourse, having the whole power structure of the text upended by final female agency (as Rémy de Gourmont does with *Sixtine,* discussed in Ch. 2).

In "Vengeance", our narrator regales us with the story of the young dandy Tressignies: who follows a mysterious prostitute into the hellish labyrinth of Paris. After following her into her bedchamber – that of a common prostitute – and having sex with her, he learns her tale: she is a wronged Spanish noblewoman, whose much-hated husband has murdered the

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[233] D'Aurevilly, *Diaboliques,* p. 1; "They have, however, been written by a Christian moralist, but who prides himself on true, though very bold, observation, and who believes-and this is his poetics-that powerful painters can paint everything and that their painting is always enough Morality when it is tragic and gives the horror of the things it traces. There is only immorality in the indifferent and the mockers.".

man with whom she had been chastely in love; to revenge herself upon him she has chosen to make herself a prostitute, freely admitting her identity in order to sully his family name. Eventually, we learn, she dies of venereal disease: her vengeance – the destruction of her reputation – obtained.

Nowhere is the use of storytelling as an act of narrative control more evident than in this story, where the Duchess uses her story as a weapon. At first it is Tressignes with the power – like any good dandy, as Bernheimer notes, he "follows an attractive prostitute not as much out of desire as out of curiosity."[234] He is too disengaged for bodily desire: "un libertin déjà froidi et très compliqué de cette époque positive, un libertin fortement intellectualisé, qui avait assez réfléchi sur ses sensations pour ne plus pouvoir en être dupe, et qui n'avait peur ni horreur d'aucune."[235] Even Tressignes's lust is mediated through intellectual understanding – he wonders if the prostitute has read various eighteenth-century memoirs to inspire her in the arts of "voluptueuses coquetteries (voluptuous coquetries)".[236]

Yet the prostitute tells *her own* story. Their sexual congress – in which she plays an active rather than passive role – is sufficiently intense to quiet his mental narration – "il oublia tout, — et ce qu'elle était, et ce pour quoi il était venu, et cette maison … Elle lui enivra jusqu'au délire, des sens difficiles à griser."[237] Tressignies fails in the principal requirement of the dandy: he has *been affected* rather than producing an effect.

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[234] Charles Bernheimer. "Female Sexuality and Narrative Closure: Barbey's 'La Vengeance D'une Femme' and 'A Un Dîner D'athées',." *The Romanic Review* 74, no. 3 (May 1983), pp. 338-9

[235] D'Aurevilly, *Diaboliques,* p. 412; "libertine of the cold and calculating sort of that positive age - an intellectual libertine who had thought about those feelings of which he was no longer the dupe, and was neither afraid nor ashamed of any of them"

[236] Ibid, p. 419

[237] Ibid, pp. 426-7; "He forgot everything - both what she was and why he had come into that house…she had positively drawn his soul into her own body. She rendered him delirious, though his senses were not easily intoxicated".

After this physical conquest, the prostitute goes on to conquer him narratively: “j’ai voulu bien des fois déjà la raconter à ceux qui montent ici ; mais ils n’y montent pas, disent-ils, pour écouter des histoires."[238] (Given this story’s placement as the final story in the text, one wonders if we are meant to count Brassard, Ravila, and Karkorel among that “ils”).

Tressignies’ response is ambiguous:

> “Dites-la” — fit Tressignies, crocheté par une curiosité et un intérêt qu’il n’avait jamais ressentis à ce degré, ni dans la vie, ni dans les romans, ni au théâtre. Il lui semblait bien que cette femme allait lui raconter de ces choses comme il n’en avait pas entendu encore. Il ne pensait plus à sa beauté. Il la regardait comme s’il avait désiré assister à l’autopsie de son cadavre. Allait-elle le faire revivre pour lui?[239]

Here, the struggles for narrative control converge. On one hand, the prostitute has succeeded in transforming him into a *listener*. On the other hand, Tressignies’ feeling “as though he were about to assist at the autopsy on her dead body” recalls the experiences of both Brassard and Torty. Tressignies’ quest to know, like that of Brassard and Torty, is also to constrain, confine: ultimately, to kill.

Yet in answer to Barbey’s final question – “was she about to revive it for him?” – we learn that it is the prostitute who emerges victorious, a self-created self: "Est-ce que je ne jouis pas, à chaque minute, de la pensée de ce que je suis? [Do I not rejoice every minute at the thought of what I am]?"[240]

The prostitute tells her tale: recounting the story of her chaste love for her husband’s cousin. The very chastity of her love allows her to transcend the biological determinism with which D’Aurevilly normally associates the female body: she, as much if not more so than

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[238] Ibid, p. 435; “I have often wished to relate my history…but they say they didn't come here to hear stories”.

[239] Ibid, pp. 434-5; “"'Tell me!' said Tressignies, moved by a curiosity and interest such as he had never felt to a like degree, neither in his life, nor in novels, nor at the theatre, for it seemed to him that she must needs relate the story as he had never heard. He thought no more of her beauty. He looked at her as though he were about to assist at the autopsy on her dead body. Was she about to revive it or him?”.

[240] Ibid, p. 450.

Tressignies, creates and controls. Thus, for example, can she conjure a chimeric Esteban (as later decadent *femmes fatales,* like Huysmans' Mme Chantelouve, do): "je n'ai pas le portrait d'Esteban. Je ne le vois que dans mon âme [I have no portrait of Esteban. I only see him in my mind's eye]"[241] She is free from constraints of fact to twist the story as she sees fit (a brief mention of her desire to eat her dead lover's heart, though grotesque, serves as a counterpoint to the corporeal horror in previous stories: here the *male body* is consumed).

Barbey's typical use of the female body is here subverted. Her body, insofar as it is the vehicle for her prostitution, is the text on which her story is written; yet here (unlike in the case of Rosalba or Ravila's virgin) she is its author: in control of her body and narrative alike, capitalizing on the desire she evokes. (So too Bernheimer: "By using her body as a common place of male desire, the Duchess is turning the possessive privilege inherent in the father's name against the patriarchal order that name sustains."[242])

Tressignies is beaten: "Malgré le scepticisme de son époque et l'habitude de se regarder faire et de se moquer de ce qu'il faisait, Robert de Tressignies ne se sentit point ridicule d'embrasser la main de cette femme perdue..il gardait un silence plus pesant pour lui que pour elle."[243] The traditional roles Barbey has established throughout *Les Diaboliques* have been reversed: we have a male listener, a female speaker.

This story lingers with Tressignies, just as the fear of Alberte's ghost lingers with the cast of "Rideau": "Elle m'a dépravé le gout. [She has spoiled my taste]."[244] He loses weight, loses interest in women, and loses his "dandyist" position in society: "Mais ce que Mme de

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[241] Ibid, p. 453

[242] Bernheimer, "Vengéance," p. 332

[243] Barbey, p. 453;" Despite the skepticism of the period, and his habit of watching the world only that he might laugh at it, Robert de Tressignies did not feel it absurd for him to kiss the hand of this fallen woman, but he did not know what to say to her…he preserved a silence that was more embarrassing to him that to her".

[244] Barbey, *Diaboliques,* p. 462.

Staël, qui les connaissait, appelle quelque part les pensées du Démon, était plus fort que l'homme et que le dandy."[245]

The Duchess is singular in her victory. Earlier in the text, Tressignies has elaborated on his theories of beauty: that which is universal, essential, is beautiful – that which is *itself* is ugly: "La beauté est une. Seule, la laideur est multiple, et encore sa multiplicité est bien vite épuisée. Dieu a voulu qu'il n'y eût d'infini que la physionomie, …de l'âme à travers les lignes…du visage**.**"[246] Such a philosophy justifies his dandyism: he need not respect any Other, but can rather treat all women as examples of Woman. Yet when it is Tressignies' turn to be *one of many* – of a parade of lovers – he is horrified and clings to his own individuality.

Yet Tressignies' refusal to retell the Duchess's story (which she asks him to do to further humiliate her husband) renders the tale even more ambiguous, particularly when read alongside the narrator's fetishistic attention to her gradual syphilitic decay (more than one eye melts). Should we read his silence as denial – the reassertion of the male narrative power even as the female body submits to degradation?

Or is this dynamic, in typically D'Aurevillian style, subverted once more by the frame device: by the unidentified narrator who tells us the tale of Tressignies and the Duchess, purports to know Tressignies' inner thoughts despite having no way of so doing, and invites us to become complicit in the grotesque spectacle of the Duchess's putrefying body? Are we to see both Tressignies and the Duchess as trapped by yet another storyteller: both unable to escape the boundaries of the D'Aurevillian text?

Ultimately, *Les Diaboliques* offers us a profoundly ambiguous, rather than programmatic, religious indictment of the narrative act, even as it exults on a line-by-line

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[245] Ibid; "But what Madame de Stael…calls somewhere or other 'The Devil's thoughts' were stronger than the man or the dandy".

[246] Ibid, p. 414; "Beauty is single. Only ugliness is multiple, and even then its multiplicity is soon exhausted. God has decreed that infinite variety should exist only in the physiognomy…the reflection of the soul across the lines…of the face".

level in its seductive power, inviting us into complicity (*close the book,* we are dared) even as we find ourselves, as readers, occupying the role of the dandies' final victim. *Les Diaboliques* shows us, as readers, the *limits* of the diagnostic mode: each individual would-be storyteller's layer of narrative, despite D'Aurevillys dandies' best efforts, is never enough to full encompass any account of luridity conveyed by the story as a unified whole. Likewise, the collection explores the moral and spiritual costs of storytelling: by casting stories as diseases, which each teller passes on (as in "Rideau"), D'Aurevilly treats the very act of the exertion of narrative control as a potential erotic-toxic conquest: to project the self is to limit the autonomy of the listener, something cast as impregnation in "Don Juan" and as murder/ mutilation in "Bonheur" and "Athées." Yet, no less importantly, it is in the lacunae each level of narrative (the cause of a death, the impetus of a murder) engenders through the various levels of framing device in each story –the creation of an utterly unreliable "Satanic" textual world–that we are left with a profoundly unsettling atmosphere of evil, one that explicitly links the lack of ontological surety at both the linguistic and plot level inherent in dandyist artifice with the entrance of the diabolical into the world of the text.

Narrative is both incomplete and, insofar as it is incomplete, leaves room for evil. Despite the various sensual appetites of Barbey's characters, their sins are primarily those of the mind. If there is a sexual bent here, it is in the ideality of Deleuzian masochism, which seeks to create a fetishistic dark mirror of the created world it rejects.

For Barbey, the hunger to *explain* is the hunger to control; the hunger to *know,* and to exert power through the linguistic application of that knowledge, is at the heart of Barbey's conception of original sin.

iii: The Dandy-Doctor: *Claire Lenoir*

The splendidly-named Jean-Marie-Mathias Philippe-Auguste, Comte de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam had many things in common with his contemporary, Barbey D'Aurevilly. Both were self-creating eccentrics, fond of sitting at the *café terasses* of Paris in over-the-top and anachronistic clothing, regaling friends and enemies with tales of their (largely invented) aristocratic connections and proclivities for the occult. Both wrote extensively on the figures of the dandy-storyteller and the Zolan doctor, two figures whose differences in class background and style mask a fundamental if counterintuitive similarity of perspective. But in his acerbic treatment of Tribulat Bonhomet – our "sign-killer" –Villiers takes a far more explicitly theological approach.

Indeed, much of *Claire Lenoir* – the main novel, written first in 1867 then republished in 1887, in which the character of Bonhomet appears (he appears in a handful of other short stories, all of which were published alongside *Lenoir* in the 1887 compendium) – consists of a series of (dull) philosophical debates between Bonhomet, an avowed positivist, and his married friends the Lenoirs: Césaire the Hegelian and Claire the Christian.[247] But the fundamental *story* of *Claire Lenoir* is to be found in the tensions between the Gothic and the rational: like "Bonheur," *Claire Lenoir* shows us the limits of a philosophy of explicability even as it subtly casts the doctor-figure as a kind of murderer, his very quest to know the locus by which evil enters the world of the text.

What Bonhomet *knows* is the adultery of his friend Claire – he has encountered her former lover, Henry Clifton, at sea in the first chapter; he keeps this knowledge from both Claire and her husband, Césaire. And yet this power of knowledge that Bonhomet – an even

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[247] The 1887 edition of the text highlights these distinctions more than the 1867, however, with Brian Stableford in his introduction to the English-translation, I agree that these distinctions do not matter to the overall substance of the novel, and indeed, that when it comes to the finer points of theology and philosophy alike,

more unreliable narrator than *either* the dandies or the doctors of D'Aurevilly – is atmospherically, if not explicitly, linked to the deaths of both Claire and her husband.

Bonhomet is, like Torty, coded as the ultimate Zolan naturalist, one who – while rejecting the supernatural – nevertheless sees *meaning* in the biological insofar as the material can tell us about the mental: from the outset, he applies (quite flattering) phrenology to himself in a manner so extreme that the parallels to divination undercut Torty's pretense of scientific rationality: "Physiquement, je suis ce que, dans le vocabulaire scientifique, on appelle: 'un Saturnien de la seconde époque'…Ma main est stérile ; la Lune et Mercure s'en disputent les bas-fonds."[248] In his meandering debates with the Lenoirs, he adopts the positivist position, scoffing at both the husband's Hegelianism and the wife's Christianity (or at least, Villiers' somewhat muddy understandings thereof).[249] He reduces himself and those around him to biological mechanisms – upon dining, he remarks that "je songeai vivement qu'il était à propos de donner du jeu à l'héroïque appareil de muscles masséters et crotaphytes, dont la Nature, en mère prévoyante, m'a départi la propriété."[250]

Yet for all his positivism, Bonhomet is relatively unwilling to turn the medicalized glare upon himself (or rather: uses his studies of phrenonology to establish his own brilliance and superiority to others: "Mon nez est grand, — d'une dimension même considerable… Voici pourquoi: le Nez, c'est l'expression des facultés du raisonnement chez l'homme; c'est l'organe qui précède, qui éclaire, qui annonce, qui sent et qui indique"[251]): in knowledge, like

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[248] Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Tribulat Bonhomet,* (Paris: Stock, 1908), pp. 45-7; "My hand is sterile: the Moon and Mercury dispute the lines in its palm…Physically I am what might be described as a second epoch Saturnian." Translations taken from Stableford, *Vampire Soul,* (Tarzana: Black Coat, 2004)

[249] See extended discussion of this point in the Introduction to this thesis.

[250] Villiers, *Tribulat,* p. 120; "It was about time I brought into play the heroic apparatus of the masticatory and crotaphitic musculature, with which Mother Nature, in her foresight, had provided me".

[251] Ibid, p. 46; "My nose is considerable in dimension – large, even. . . . The nose, you see, is the expression of the human capacity for reason; it is the organ that goes before, which enlightens, which proclaims one's presence, which scents trouble and which points the way.".

Dr. Pascal and Torty alike, Bonhomet transcends the biological. He establishes himself in opposition to *la foule*, decrying Lenoir's sympathy for the poor: "la place des misérables ne saurait demeurer vacante en ce monde [the position of the poor cannot remain vacant in this world]"[252] he says with a shrug – another will only ever take is place. He is hardly more sympathetic towards that alternate Other, woman: describing Claire Lenoir thus: "L'os frontal était malheureusement assez large, et décelait une capacité cérébrale inutile et nuisible chez une femme."[253]

Villiers is clearer even than D'Aurevilly in *linking* the figure of the doctor to that of the dandy. Like the D'Aurevilliean dandy, Bonhomet pays great attention to his person, seeing his manner of dress as a kind of outward performance of his inner willed self: "Depuis que je me connais j'ai toujours porté le même genre de vêtements, approprié à ma personne et à ma demarche… un feutre noir… une vieille canne à pomme de vermeil ; un volumineux solitaire, — diamant de famille."[254] The chosen items: a gem signifying familial status (and thus singularity), a walking stick (an item so beloved by D'Aurevilly himself that he famous referred to his collection as his "wives"[255]) certainly evoke, if not dandyism proper, then at least dandyist pretensions. Indeed, as Brian Stableford points out, Villiers himself had created the character of Bonhomet first as a kind of satiricial performance character he liked to trot out in cafés: Bonhomet's mannerisms are in part, at least, influenced by the dandy Villiers' own.[256] Unlike Césaire Lenoir, who dabbles in the occult, Bonhomet is a thorough

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[252] Ibid, p. 161.

[253] Ibid, p. 78; "The frontal region of her skull was, unfortunately, rather large, disclosing a useless cerebral capacity which could only be reckoned detrimental in a woman".

[254] Ibid, p. 49; "Ever since I first became aware of who I was, I have warn the same kind of clothes, appropriate to my personality and gait… a wide-brimmed felt hat…an old walking-stick with a red knob, a large diamond solitaire – a family heirloom".

[255] Charles Buet, *Barbey D'Aurevilly: impressions & souvenirs,* (Paris: Savine, 1891), p. 24.

[256] Brian Stableford, "Introduction," in Villiers, (trans Brian Stableford) *The Vampire Soul* (Black Coat Press: Tarzana, 2004).

materialist: one who, in one telling passage, says "je suis peu superstitieux; je ne donne pas dans les insignifiantes balivernes des *intersignes*."[257]

He's referring specifically to the occult, but *intersignes*, of course, has a double meaning (and let us not forget that Villiers used liberal puns about signes/*cygnes* with regard to Bonhomet in "Le Tueur des Cygnes.") For Bonhomet, the world has meaning and significance at the linguistic and narrative level *only* in the realms of biological determinism (he subscribes to phrenology, for example). Signs – ontological meaning in the world with the potential to point beyond it – mean nothing to Bonhomet. The world is nothing more or less than his representation.

Bonhomet's lack of self-awareness is comically dizzying: "Ma voix est tantôt suraiguë, tantôt (spécialement avec les dames) grasse et profonde: le tout sans transition, ce qui doit plaire."[258]

Yet, despite his ridiculousness, Bonhomet proves dangerous. As the evening's conversation with the Lenoirs takes varying twists and turns, Bonhomet's desire for cognitive control turns first discomfiting, then dangerous. His interpretation of "the facts of the case" becomes more obviously skewed: after making an off-color remark: he talks about taking near-erotic pleasure in his own sympathy for the suffering poor, itself another instance of Bonhomet's tendency towards fetishistic objectification: "À la seule idée qu'on pourrait me priver de cette satisfaction, il me semble que mes veines charrient de la bile au lieu de sang, mon pauvre ami!"[259] He first describes the Lenoirs as laughing along with him. Only after a closer look is an alternate, less complimentary, account of what occurred given:

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[257] Villiers, *Tribulat,* p. 53; "I'm not at all superstitious. I give no credence to insignificant twaddle about signs.".

[258] Ibid, p. 49; "My voice is sometimes shrill and sometimes (especially when I speak to women) rich and profound – and it can go from one to the other seamlessly, as I please".

[259] Ibid, p. 162; "at the mere idea that I might be deprived of that satisfaction, my dear friend, it seems to me that my veins are flooded with bile instead of blood".

> Je remplis donc le salon d'un de ces éclats de rire qui, répétés par les échos nocturnes, faisaient jadis, — je m'en souviens,— hurler les chiens sur mon passage… Toutefois, je ne tardai pas à m'apercevoir que ce que j'avais pris pour un sourire, chez Mme Lenoir, était simplement un effet d'ombre — que la lampe avait projeté sur son visage. Je dus reconnaître, également, que le Docteur m'avait induit en erreur par un certain tic nerveux… Il avait aspiré de travers la fumée de son cigare, en m'écoutant. Et je compris que j'avais été le seul bon vivant de nous trois, avec mon accès de gaieté.[260]

Bonhomet's unreliability – his *misdiagnosis* – puts the entire narrative universe of *Claire Lenoir* in doubt. If there are multiple possible – competing – narratives, then (as in Barbey) truth itself is relative; diagnosis becomes, therefore, a means of choosing the most convenient truth; narration itself, through Bonhomet's voice, a way of exercising control. Throughout, Villiers has Bonhomet link, implicitly and explicitly, this voice with a more general storytelling mode: we begin the main Lenoir section of the novel, for example, with Bonhomet boasting for several pages how:

"je racontai, rapidement et à grands traits, mes voyages dans les cinq parties du monde…Je tins le dé; je renvoyai la balle; j'agitai les grelots de la plaisanterie; — je racontai avec aplomb toutes ces fadeurs…c'était assez bon pour eux...Bref, je fus charmant!"[261] Whether or not we doubt Bonhomet's assessment of his own storytelling abilities (we probably should), we nevertheless see how Bonhomet sees storytelling, regardless of the desires of those forced to listen to him, as one of the privileges of his established autonomous selfhood.

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[260] Ibid, pp. 163-4; ""I filled the room with one of those bursts of laughter whose repetition by nocturnal echoes, as I remember it, used to make dogs howl as I passed by…it didn't take me long to perceive that what I had taken for a smile of Madame Lenoir's face was simply a trick of the light: a shadow that the lamp had thrown across her face. I recognized, too, that a certain nervous tic of the Doctor's….had caused me to make a similar mistake. He had merely breathed in the smoke of his cigar while listening to me. And I realized that I had been the only one out of the three of us with sufficient party spirits to produce a fit of jollity".

[261] Ibid, pp. 99-100; "I offered them a sketchy account of my journeys through the five continents, my explorations of mountain peaks and the bowels of the earth…I held the dice; I threw the ball back; I rang the bells of pleasasntry; I narrated all these traveler's tales with great aplomb….it was, after all, quite a treat for them. In brief, I was charming".

By the deaths of the Lenoirs, therefore, we no more trust Bonhomet than we did D'Aurevilly's Brassard. Lenoir's death is not formally explained, but Bonhomet hints that yet another misdiagnosis might have something to do with it: concerned that Lenoir is taking too much snuff, Bonhomet has taken to filling his snuff-box with noxious substances: "j'avais essayé de substituer dans sa boîte d'or, du nitrate d'argent, du sucre de réglisse, du chloroborate de 'mercure', du charbon de terre, du phosphure de calcium, de la raclure de vieux souliers, de la soude caustique, de la poudre à canon et mille autres drogues inoffensives."[262]

This image works on two levels. It is at once a potential narrative explanation for Lenoir's sudden death and an image of instability that, we will see, comes to define decadent-dandyist fiction more generally: that of disconnect between the external and the internal. Bonhomet, the ultimate sign/*cygne*-"killer", takes pleasure in creating semiotic instability: the box (labeled "snuff") now holds anything but: the textual world is rendered as unreliable as its narrator. If something as simple and straightforward a box of snuff does not have snuff in it, how can we trust *anything* about the language Bonhomet uses to construct his world?

This sense of instability permeates the aftermath of Lenoir's death, as the "facts of the case" Bonhomet uses to tell us one story suggest, through their narrative lacunae, its opposite. Bonhomet describes himself as horrified by a strange, chilling sense that Lenoir might rise from the dead (Lenoir is coded earlier in the text as a "vampire vélu (hairy vampire)"[263]; his interest in the occult – in authors like Eliphas Lévi as well as Swedenborg – in vampires and demons"[264] linked to an atavistic sense of demonic evil): one which makes Bonhomet cry

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[262] Ibid, p. 211; "I had tried filling his snuff box with various substitutes: silver nitrate, mercuric chloroborate, charcoal, calcium phosphate, the scrapings of old shoes, caustic soda, gunpowder, and a thousand other inoffensive substances".

[263] Ibid, p. 123.

[264] Ibid, p. 126.

out: " Et je me mis, sans bouger autrement, toujours à genoux dans le coin obscur, à pousser de grands, lents et prolongés hurlements…je sentis ma propre frayeur friser le délire."[265]

The story Bonhomet tells (an account, lest we forget, he repeatedly describes as "ramenés à leurs justes proportions, les faits"[266]) is one in which Bonhomet is afraid of something unknown outside himself. But assemble the facts with which Bonhomet presents us another way and (as in D'Aurevilly's "Rideau") we find that the storyteller himself seems to be the source of horror. A man crawling on the floor like a beast, the mysterious howling of a man-wolf – these are, in the world of Gothic tropes, the very trappings of supernatural evil. Claire's response only heightens the casting of Tribulat Bonhomet as a diabolical figure: his laughter has "eut pour effet immédiat de combler la terreur de la jeune femme à ce point qu'elle courut vers la porte, prise d'une panique, et enfila les escalier."[267]

This sense of uncertainty permeates the novel's denouement. The way Tribulat Bonhomet describes it, he is horrified by a sense of evil the night of Lenoir's death, finds Claire herself lying ill sometime later, and witnesses her death – a death she is convinced (and he suggests) is caused by the vengeful ghost of Lenoir, determined to take revenge on her for her adultery: when Bonhomet examines her eyes, post-modern, he finds an imprint of a demon upon them. Yet a closer reading of the text implicates Bonhomet himself in Claire's death.

The idea of the imprint upon the eye has been seeded earlier in the text. Bonhomet reads a scientific article in which he learns that: "les animaux destinés à notre nourriture, tels que moutons, bœufs, agneaux, chevaux et chats, conservent dans leurs yeux, après le coup de

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[265] Ibid, p. 220; "I began without otherwise moving still on my knees in that obscure corner to emit long slow and loud howls....I felt my fright shading into delirium".

[266] Ibid, p. 272; "a succinct statement of the facts as they presented and represented themselves".

[267] Ibid, pp. 219-20; ""the immediate effect of increasing the terror of the young woman to the point that she ran towards the door, seized it in panic, and ran down the stairs".

masse ou de coutelas du boucher, l'empreinte des objets qui se sont trouvés sous leur dernier regard."[268] From the first, Bonhomet treats the permeability of the gaze, site of both penetration and reception, as the battleground of power. The *animal* (with that objectifying appositive: *destined for our nourishment*) is one who is affected by what it sees: an *audience* whose selfhood is defined by the violent determinations of others.

Villiers contrasts this vector of the gaze with his initial treatment of Claire Lenoir's eyes, which are, as is typical in the dandyist mode, penetrating rather than penetrable (here, too, language of the lapidary and inorganic): They have "d'un éclat si vitreux, si interne, que le regard avait le froid de la pierre; ils faisaient mal. C'étaient deux aigue-marines."[269] They are so strong, Bonhomet notices, early in the text, that Claire wears glasses to avoid discomfiting others. Bonhomet, Villiers implies, resents Claire's power: the first thing he says to her, upon her looking upon him without spectacles, is to order her to "Baissez-eux!... un coup d'air trop subit serait dangereux."[270]

Yet, by the end of the text, Claire is dead, and Bonhomet has complete control over her gaze. This is made literal – and medicalized. First, Claire is possessed of a nervous terror at the thought of Lenoir's vampiric return, something that Bonhomet takes control over by once again describing her in diagnostic terms: "Elle tremblait; mais plutôt, je dois le dire, à cause de certain dépérissement nerveux que par frayeur de la mort imminente dont elle avait évidemment conscience."[271] By reducing Claire to a biological mechanism, rather than a

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[268] Ibid, pp. 85-6; "Animals destined for our nourishment, such as sheep, cattle, lambs, horses, and cats, retain in their eyes after the fatal stroke of the butcher's sledge-hammer, the imprint of the objects of their last gaze"

[269] Ibid, p. 93; "a brilliance so vitreous, so pure, that her gaze was as cold as a gemstone; they hurt me. They were two emeralds"

[270] Ibid, "put (your glasses) back.. Sudden draught might be dangerous."

[271] Ibid, p. 238; "She shivered – more, I ought to say, because of a certain nervous wastage than fear of the imminent death of which she was evidently conscious"

spiritual, thinking being, Bonhomet serves as a sort of narrative "spectacle": limiting the degree to which she can turn her *gaze* onto the reader.

Claire describes her fear to Bonhomet, who replaces the priest (as did Torty in "Bonheur") at her bedside. Yet, when she describes the nervous terror of her final night beside her dead husband, the *facts* seem to point to Bonhomet as her torturer. She describes how, with both her and Bonhomet's heads bowed reverentially, she heard "j'entendis un rire très sourd — un glapissement qui sortait de ces lèvres furieuses [i.e., Lenoir's]"[272] But we the readers know that it was not necessarily Lenoir laughing, in the night, but Bonhomet – making strange, unearthly yelps (we recall, too, how Bonhomet has earlier in the story described the "echoes nocturnes"[273] of his dog-howling laughter as a habit of his). It is ambiguous how much of what Claire sees is evoked by the atmosphere of dread Bonhomet himself has created with his uncanny response to Lenoir's death. (Claire later says she sees Lenoir sit up from his deathbed, but this takes place in a later vision; she did not see it at the time; her penetrating vision now unreliable).

Likewise, when Claire describes her vision of Lenoir in a mirror in a dream – as a vampire, on a far-off-island, murdering her lover Henry Clifton, her deathbed language likewise will come to implicate Bonhomet: "Ah!…Le voilà! Regardez! Là! là … Pour qui aiguise-t-il si longtemps, — si froidement… Ah! vampire! démon!...Laisse mes pauvres yeux!"[274]

Yet the person who interferes with Claire's eyes, after her death, is not a demon but Bonhomet himself. In a serious of chilling passages, Bonhomet mutilates and degrades Claire's body in order to examine her eyes under his microscope: "Une curiosité entra dans

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[272] Ibid, p. 244; "a dull laugh – a yelp which emerged from those furious lips".

[273] Ibid, p. 163.

[274] Ibid, pp. 253-4;" Ah!...There he is! Look! There! There!...why has he been sharperning that life for so long and so coldly…vampire, demon…let my poor eyes be!".

mon cœur et en balaya toute appréhension. Je me raidis, quelque peu frissonnant; je voulais examiner la taie qui recouvrait ces ténébreuses prunelles et plonger sous ce crêpe! Un Démon me saisit donc le bras…me vociféra dans l'oreille…'Regarde.'…les pupilles…à des piqûres d'ombres."[275]

To *look* – to gaze actively to know, rather than receptively to receive another – is a privilege that now only Bonhomet (and no Claire) has. The language of the medical and scientific (and the technological, with the reference to the *piqûre*, blends with that of the theological: shifting the associations of *intersignes* in the text: as in D'Aurevilly, the splintering of linguistic and thematic "worlds" (the scientific, the Hegelian, the Christian, the occult) both casts doubt on the veracity of the naturalist account even as the sense of instability evokes a more insidious, if less explicable, atmosphere of evil. His repetition as he mutilates her – "il faut que je voie! (I have to see!)"[276] – casts doubt on his explanatory powers even as it subtly condemns their inevitable outcome: a bloodied, degraded, female corpse.

Bonhomet's operation upon Claire – the control of her gaze – reveals (he says) an imprint on her eye of her husband as a demon, something that shakes his own certainty in science. But, as in Barbey's "Rideau" the uncertainty that surrounds the final "facts" (a man mutilating a female corpse whose death is (he says) wholly supernatural) leaves the locus of responsibility for Claire's death less clear. The *diable* is within the dandy even as the possibility diabolism challenges the dandy's rational, narrative control: a logical tension that both Barbey and Villiers use to chilling effect.

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[275] Ibid, pp. 255-6; "Curiosity entered into my heart and swept all apprehension therefrom. I braced myself, shivering slightly. I wanted to examine the irises that had recovered each of those dark pupils and plunge into the depths of the remaining disc! A demon took hold of my arms…a whisper…"Look!,"…the cavity behind the iris forming a camera obscura".

[276] Ibid, p. 262.

Indeed, one of the last – seemingly inexplicable – things Bonhomet asks Claire before her death is: "Comment avez-vous pu me reconnaître, moi, dans le reflet de ce miroir?"[277] But in fact Claire *hasn't* spoken of Bonhomet in her vision – just of a demon and of Lenoir. The presence of this line – all but hidden within another self-praising ekphrasis of Bonhomet's about "à la beauté morale…que vous avez cru me reconnaître"[278]

A note of caution here. I do not wish to suggest that Villiers is suggesting (no more than D'Aurevilly is suggesting of Brassard in "Rideau") that there is some sort of hidden reading of the text in which Bonhomet has outright *murdered* either Lenoir. While this is certainly a plausible interpretation, Villiers is doing something far more complicated – and more theologically rich – in his treatment of ambiguity. In breaking down narrative certainty, Villiers is also breaking down the idea – so central to any kind of diagnostic – of *cause* and *effect* as easily determinable or quantifiable qualities. The influence that Bonhomet has on the atmosphere of the text, his possession of this world he has created, goes beyond mere technical causality. It is, rather, a kind of divinized world-shaping: Bonhomet's storytelling gives his world its implicit theology, and with it the narrative structures (or lack thereof) that convey characters to their fate. Bonhomet, in other words, doesn't have to close his hands around Claire Lenoir's throat to kill her. He simply has to look at her, and Claire's gaze is extinguished – the image of a man imprinted on her eyes; an image interpreted by another man with a microscope: an image that Bonhomet himself converts "sinon des prosopopées, du moins de très 'poétiques' solennités d'idées et de phrases."[279] Claire's eyes begin as gemstones, are transformed into organic *animal* matter (linking her thematically to those animals who exist, like cows and sheep, for consumption of "real" humans like, Bonhomet

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[277] Ibid, p. 263; "how did you recognize *me* in your mirror's reflection".

[278] Ibid, p. 264; ""the moral beauty…by which you recognized me".

[279] Ibid, p. 216; "if not to epic prose, at least to poetic ideas and phrases".

implies, Bonhomet), and then are transmogrified by the dandy-doctor's gaze into inorganic material (i.e., gem-like words) once again: on his terms, rather than hers.

The implications of this kind of toxic gaze are themselves coded as, and rooted in, images of the diabolical – one might fairly say that the "vampire" of *Claire Lenoir* is not the "hairy vampire" Césaire resembles but the Kierkegaardian ironist: "the vampire who has sucked the blood of the lover".[280]

We can of course understand these tensions as theological in nature *by themselves*; however, it's worth noting that Villiers himself seems to ground the question of *Claire Lenoir* in theology: among the discussions that Claire, Césaire, and Bonhomet share, the most lengthy – and notable – is about the nature of God, and God's relationship to the idea. Césaire's fear is that even God becomes one's own creation; the creative power of the mind is so strong and so absolute that we cannot help creating God in our image:

> Je ne demande précisément que d'adorer Dieu, mais je ne me soucie pas de m'adorer moi-même sous ce nom, à mon insu...Quand je pense Dieu, je projette mon esprit devant moi aussi loin que possible, en le parant de toutes les vertus de ma conscience humaine, que je tâche vainement d'infiniser; mais ce n'est jamais que mon esprit, et non Dieu. Je ne sors pas de moi-même. C'est l'histoire de Narcisse.[281]

L'histoire de Narcisse would be a fitting title for the Bonhomet stories, or indeed the decadent-dandy stories more generally. They – no less than D'Aurevilly's *Diaboliques* – rest thematically on world-creation via the self-aggrandizing self-projection of dandy narrators. The pretense of rational disengagement, the *sub specie aeternae* perspective inherent in Zolan

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[280] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, p. 49.

[281] Viliers, *Tribulat*, pp. 133-4; "I could ask for nothing better than to kneel down before my Creator on condition that it is actually Him before whom I am kneeling and not merely the idea of Him that I have formed. To admire God is exactly what I am asking for, but I am anxious to avoid admiring myself under that name, without knowing it….when I think of God I project my mind as far in front of me as I can, embellishing Him with all the virtues of my human conscience, laboring in vain to extrapolate them infinitely, but it always remains my mind, not God. I cannot get out of my own being. It's the story of Narcissus.

diagnostic, becomes, even more explicitly in Villiers than in D'Aurevilly, a means by which to exercise arbitrary control in a world where truth is terrifyingly unfixed: worlds coded as evil precisely because their "creator-gods" are as diabolical as the demons lurking at their margins.

These stories of *dieux aux petits pieds* function as imagined projections of the divinized self: narrative becomes the means by which godhood is established and maintained.

But, as we see in the fates of those women whose bodies are fetishistically displayed (and displaced) as the centerpieces of each murder (metaphorical and not), that godhood comes at a price: to imprint oneself on a world, or even on a pair of eyes, is – for D'Aurevilly and Villiers alike – to destroy it.

iv. Some Concluding Questions

Neither D'Aurevilly nor Villiers was a particularly programmatic thinker. Indeed, as we have said (after Brian Stableford[282]), Villiers had probably never even read the Hegel he had his characters espouse. To read any of these texts as straightforward examinations of theological problems would be excessively bold. The tensions in each case between the chilling "narrative" evil of control exerted by our doctors, dandies, and diagnosticians and the implicit diabolical evil both Villiers and D'Aurevilly code into the epistemic uncertainty of their texts is never fully resolved. These stories are at once auto-telic – in the sense used by Charles Taylor, which is to say that their mannered language and heightened sense of artifice seems to negate engagement with a world *outside* the text – and dramatically internally unstable, both in terms of the unreliability of various levels of narrators (in D'Aurevilly) and in terms of the inconsistent philosophical hermeneutics structuring the text (in Villiers). They reject the idea of a stable, meaningful created world that serves as referent (we will elaborate

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[282] Stableford, "Introduction", pp. 2ff.

on the theological significance of this in Chapter 4, which focuses on the theology of language).

But what these stories share is a fascination with, and repudiation of, the way in which storytelling doubles as self-projection: in which the status of storyteller allows for a kind of divinization of the self in which the self infuses all aspects of its textual world. What they share, too, is an understanding of the contour of its risks: to put into words is to aestheticize; to aestheticize – especially from the position of disengagement – is to reduce the human to the *animal,* the individual to *la foule*, the subject to the object. The *sub specie aeternae* (or, to use Kierkegaard's word for it, *sub specie ironiae*) perspective necessarily draws a distinction of kind, not just degree, between storyteller and listener, between narrator and character in a narration. One is (or seeks to be, at least; both Villiers and D'Aurevilly render this project unstable) fully autonomous; the others exist as raw material to be formed, or indeed imprinted upon.

The dandies of D'Aurevilly and Villiers. – no less than Kierkegaard's aesthetes – suffer from the need to convert the paradigmatic other into an "Other-I": Alberte, Madame de Stasseville, and Claire Lenoir alike are all transformed into occasions for the *raconteurs* of these tales to show off their verbal dexterity, to establish themselves *as narrators* within the frame-setting – be it carriage, dinner-party, or salon; they are denied their own selfhood, their own gaze. In their silence, they never become the fully autonomous, respected Thou; the dandyist *raconteur'*s relationship with listener and story-subject alike becomes one of power, rather than that of the love which, to quote Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*, "seeks not its own. For the true lover does not love his own individuality. He rather loves each human being according to the other's individuality. But for the other person 'his own personality' is precisely 'his own', and consequently the lover does not seek his own; quite the opposite, in

others he loves 'their own'" [283]

But is the narrative toxicity these writers reveal inherent to narrative [fiction] as a whole? Sure, dandies and doctors might be the worst offenders in this medium, but, an examination of these texts suggests, the structure of storytelling – a teller who knows things, who structures from *the facts of the case* a plausible narrative of interconnection, who imbues his world with significance that both is and is not in dialogue with what we might term objective reality – may *necessitate* this dynamic. How can we have storytelling that is not self-projection? How can we have narrative that is not also erasure? How do we produce the dandyist *effect* without leaving a murderous imprint of ourselves on the eyes of those who see us, without murdering those of whom we speak?

How do we perform the acts of *miniature gods* without participating in that appropriation at the heart of original sin: *you will be like god*? – an appropriation rooted in the very cognitive distancing (cleaving "good" from "evil", cleaving subject from object) inherent in the quest *to know?*

The question raised by these texts for constructive theology is not merely *are these theological works* (although, as we have seen, questions of God suffuse the text)? They are also: *how can we create without being Doctor Torty, or Tribulat Bonhomet?* and *if God operates from the sub specie aeternae perspective, what does that say about God? How is our own autonomy – as human beings – not limited by the nature of divine creation, and how can we avoid stifling that autonomy in others?*

I will continue to explore these questions as we go on.

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[283] Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (trans H Hong), (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 251.

Chapter II

A New *Pygmalionisme*:

The Theology of Character

i. Introduction

About halfway through Joris-Karl Huysmans' 1901 novel *Là-Bas*, the novel's protagonist — the reclusive, neurasthenic writer Durtal — engages in a conversation with his femme fatale lover, Hyacinthe Chantelouve, regarding the nature of sin. Seeking to impress Hyacinthe, Durtal pronounces that he has discovered a new sin — the most serious of all: the artist that engages in sexual congress with his creation. "Le Pygmalionisme," as he terms it, is a combination of "'onanisme cérébral" and "l'inceste". He invites Mme Chantelouve to imagine "un artiste tombant amoureux de son enfant, de son œuvre, d'une Hérodiade…d'une Jeanne d'Arc, qu'il aurait ou décrite ou peinte, et l'évoquant et finissant par la posséder en songe."[284]

In a normal act of incest, Durtal tells us, a father's child is at least in part not his own — she bears half her identity from her mother, and so is in some sense "other" than he is. There is, as Durtal puts it, "un côté quasi-naturel, une part étrangère, presque licite."[285] Yet in *Pygmalionisme* the artist's creation possesses no external identity; she is not progeny but projection. The act of copulating with her is, for the artist, an act Durtal characterizes as both masturbation and, more strikingly, as "viole" — rape.

It is the creation of a closed circle of creative existence, the exclusion of any divine creator, or indeed creation-at-large. In *pygmalionisme*, "le délit est donc entier et complet.

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[284] Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, (Paris: Tresse & Stock, 1895), p. 258 "Imagine an artist falling in love with his child, his creation: with an Hérodiade, a Judith, a Helen, a Jeanne d'Arc, whom he has either described or painted, and evoking her, and finally possessing her in dream."; translations adapted from Keene Wallace, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001)

[285] Ibid; "A quasi-natural side, a foreign part, practically licit.";.

Puis, n'y a-t-il pas aussi mépris de la nature, c'est-à-dire de l'œuvre divine, puisque le sujet du péché n'est plus...un être créé par une projection du talent qu'on souille, un être presque céleste, puisqu'on le rend souvent immortel, et cela par le génie, par l'artifice?"[286]

So: what is it about l*e pygmalionisme* that renders it not merely a sin – but indeed the *worst possible sin?*

We have already introduced the concept of a *theology of narrative* – the idea that how a narrative is constructed, the relationship of narrator to reader (or other narrator) might have theological significance, might tell us something about the implicit theology of a narrative work of prose fiction. We will apply here the same hermeneutic to creating a *theology of character.* How does the way in which characters (especially, in these texts, which use gender as a metaphorical through which to examine the binary of creator/creation more generally, *female* characters) are treated in a given text illuminate the relationship of creator to creation of that text? Can we speak of a theological anthropology, in other words, on the level of fictional character?

In the preceding chapter, we discussed how, in the works of Barbey D'Aurevilly and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, storytelling itself doubles as dandyist self-projection: the storyteller, at safe remove from the emotional content of his tale, transfigures the suffering of others into erotic power over his listeners. Literary creation is, in these works, primarily a creation of the *self*: the primary relationship is between storyteller and listener, the subjective self and the captive audience he renders mere objects by the power of his tale.

In the works discussed in this chapter — Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's 1886 novel *L'Ève Future*, Remy de Gourmont's 1890 novel *Sixtine*, and Joris-Karl Huysmans' 1901 *Là-Bas* —

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[286] Ibid; "The offense is, then, entire and complete. Now, is there not also disdain of nature, of the work of God, since the subjectof the sin is no longer — as even in bestiality — a palpable and living creature, but an unreal being created by a projection of the desecrated talent, a being almost celestial, since, by genius, by artifice, it often becomes immortal?".

the dandified artist-protagonists of these works not only create themselves: they go one step further, creating *others* in their image: expanding the sphere of their selfhood by creating proxy-selves.

Villiers' Edison, de Gourmont's Entragues, and Huysmans' Durtal alike – creating robots, characters, and chimeras – appropriate, as Durtal has done above, "the work of God." The act of character-creation, in these novels, is portrayed as a theological repudiation of createdness outside the bounds of text.

In each case, dandy-artists create characters for their own gratification, not fully-realized, autonomous beings (at least, at first), but rather self-projections: auto-telic iterations of the self that derive their selfhood not from any agency or desire within the world of the text (or indeed, with the exception of the historic Gilles de Rais whose biography Durtal writes, any relation to the world outside the text) but rather from the purpose they serve for their creators (who are themselves, of course, characters, adding another layer of irony). Self-creation demands a literalization and exteriorization of the autopoetic project. Just as the dandy on the boulevard needs *la foule* – that politicized "mass" – to establish his selfhood, so too does that dandy on (or behind) the page need *l'Andrëide*.

Their purpose is twofold. On the one hand, they serve as incestuous masturbatory concubines: they are both progeny/children and mistresses/wives, existing to prop up their creators' sexual fantasies. On the other, to reduce their function to the purely sexual is to ignore the division between the sexual and the erotic in these works, a distinction central to our understanding of decadent-dandyism as a whole.

At first glance, the texts covered in this chapter seem, like *Les Diaboliques*, to be about sex, and furthermore about *sinful* sex; an understanding of sin grounded in ideas of sin-as-succumbing to the desires of the flesh; sin-as-wrong-action (murder, rape – essentially,

anything Gilles de Rais does in *La-Bas*); sin-as-sexual-need. Durtal suffers from longing for base prostitutes and for the married Mme Chantelouve alike; Hubert d'Entragues in de Gourmont's *Sixtine* desires a beautiful widow so ardently that she takes over his entire life; Lord Ewald in Villiers' *Tomorrow's Eve* is besotted to the point of madness with a quasi-courtesan. The desire for a beautiful woman is the impetus for each character's journey *là-bas*.

But sex is only a smokescreen. Our authors ultimately envision the greatest act of sin not as excessive love for the world, but hatred for it: hatred manifest in the enacting of an auto-telic "closed loop" of creation: the artist who creates a proxy-self in his "beloved" *objet d'art:* an act of reproduction that results not in new life but in an imitation of the old. What is eroticized is not sensuality – itself demanding engaging with another – but the onanistic relation of self to self: what Graham Ward refers to in his *Cities of God* the most technically literal sense as true *homosexuality*: that which collapses alterity.[287]

The creation of character in these novels, therefore, functions not just as a reductionist flattening of the created self (i.e., the denial of agency on the part of a character), although that is certainly part of the dynamic the works all share. It is also a rejection of otherness (and thus, creation) more generally; a referendum on the world outside the boundaries of text. The character created through *pygmalionisme* serves as a dark mirror to human beings outside the world of the text: she is a rejection of all that is biological, all that is organic, all that is created (or, in an implicitly godless world, simply spawned). Our dandy-artists create their character-projects as a refusal to contend with the biological world.

The attempt to purify the spirit by removing it from the reaches of the created world proves more diabolical than a night or two in a Paris brothel – more diabolical even, Huysmans suggests, than the murderous excesses of Gilles de Rais. It is precisely the

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[287] Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 201ff.

disembodiment of characters like Durtal, Ewald, and Entragues – characters who cannot engage authentically with givenness, but must create false "others" that prove their own selves in disguise – that causes their spiritual torment.

Like D'Aurevilly, Villiers, Gourmont, and Huysmans all explore this within an implicitly theological context: like D'Aurevilly, too, they often subvert the very narrative systems they have set up (Villiers' and Gourmont's novels end with the failure of the chimeric project and the re-assertion of autonomy on the part of the created woman, a narrative technique we will also see modified in Chapter 4 in Huysmans' *La Cathédrale*). Alhough of these writers only Huysmans – the most consciously theological of all the writers explored here – explicitly uses the word *sin,* they all treat the act of character-creation as a twofold refusal: a refusal to allow their creations autonomy (something we have seen already in our chapter on narrative) and a refusal to engage with the created order more generally.

Implicit in these novels, too, is the demand for a theological account of the self. In creating a character, our dandy-artists also make suppositions about what it means to create a human being, and thus, what a human being *is*. In the absence of a concept of soul, there is nothing *except* the violence inherent in this vision of creative power to grant a dandy-artist autonomy even as the created self, by virtue of its createdness, lacks dignity (or seems to – as we shall see, final plot developments subvert this in *Sixtine* and L'*Ève* alike). Here, too, is engagement with the positivism of Zola – after all, the real conflict in these novels — even in Huysmans' *Là-Bas*, at first glance deceptively dualistic in its treatment of Satanism— is not between good and evil, between God and the devil, but rather between a rational, positivist, but ultimately meaningless world of the urban bourgeoisie (i.e. Jules Bois's Satan) and a world where meaning and power — divine and diabolical — are subsistent in all aspects of existence.

To read these novels too programmatically would be a mistake. Like the "Satanic" textual worlds of the stories of *Les Diaboliques,* these texts are likewise unstable; tensions between coherent narrative and post-truth pastiche never fully resolved. Although they may critique other-creation as a function of plot (all efforts do fail), these texts are of course themselves acts of metatextual "other-creation": the autobiographical Durtal, Huysmans' frequent avatar and self-insert, can be read as no less an "other-I" to Huysmans than Gilles de Rais, the subject of Durtal's biography-in-progress, is to Durtal (Robert Ziegler makes this point extentensively in *Asymptote*[288]). That which these novels' dandy-artists fear most — being "mere" creations — is *de facto* true by the nature of the mediums. The very nature of these texts *as texts* subverts and often complicates their meaning — an interplay of form and content our authors use to great effect. The genre play at work in *L'Ève Future*, which melds the language of the scientific with the utterly fantastical; the sudden shift of centres of narrative consciousness in *Sixtine*; the biography-within-a-story of *Là-Bas* — all these, as we shall see, serve to heighten the thematic ambiguity of these works: they, like *Les Diaboliques* or *Claire Lenoir*, resist the totalization of the naturalist mode. Yet unlike in *Les Diaboliques,* the narrative multiplicity in *L'Ève* and *Sixtine* (*Là-Bas* as we shall see is slightly more complicated a case) does not serve to intensify an atmosphere of spiritual evil in the work (the "Satanic" mode described earlier), but rather to present a more nuanced (and *femininized*) account of influence that transcends diagnostic causality – one Catherine Bordeau, writing on *L'Ève,* terms the *milieu* – the suggestion of the triumph of creation/ Nature/atmosphere over the autonomous will of a single individual – one that will tie into our understanding of the theology of fictional creation as a whole.[289]

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[288] Ziegler, *Asymptote*, pp. 1ff.

[289] Catherine Bordeau, "The Gendering of the Creator", in John Anzalone, ed. *Jeering Dreamers: Villiers de l"Isle-Adam's* L'Ève Future *at Our Fin de Siecle* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), p. 181.

It is impossible to discuss the texts explored in this chapter without first calling attention to those: which have been left out. Rachilde's 1884 *Monsieur Venus* — a rare gender-swapped example of this trope — portrays a capricious cross-dressing noblewoman's attempts to exert control over and emasculate a penniless male flower-maker, transforming him into her "wife." The protagonist of Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte* — as in Villiers's "Véra," another short story in which an aristocratic widower attempts to evoke the ghost of his late beloved by fetishistic attention to her boudoir — is obsessed with his deceased wife; when he meets a dancer who strongly resembles his lost beloved, he begins to manipulate her into dressing and behaving more like the woman he has lost in a manner that prefigures the famous Alfred Hitchcock film *Vertigo*. These texts, more or less, deal with the decadent phenomenon of artifice played, as it were, "straight"; the texts are brief, linear and, in their treatment of the power and limitations of other-creation, relatively superficial.

By contrast, the three novels treated at greatest length here — *L'Ève Future, Sixtine*, and *Là-Bas* — are more obviously theological; it is only here that pygmalionism is explored as Durtal's *pygmalionisme*: as a sin that by its very nature defines its enactor's relationship to God. The acts of creation described are subverted not merely by the stories' ends — after all, *Monsieur Venus* and *Bruges-la-Morte* both end, like the books discussed here, with "failed" acts of creations — but by the way in which such subversions suffuse these texts' structure as well as content.

The novels capture more prominently and completely than their *fin de siècle* peers the existential terror of meaninglessness, of reproducibility, that leads its characters to so desperately seek to establish their own irreducible and irreplaceable selfhood through this kind of one-sided artistic creation, a "viole" of Nature that is also an ultimately fruitless attempt, to escape the modern cult of artifice our dandy-artist protagonists claim to love.

Love it they may, but, as we shall see, they fear it even more. That Durtal feels the need not merely to sin, but to sin originally, to "[chercher] à inventer de nouveaux péchés [try to invent new sins]"[290], tells us as much about his anxieties as it does about his desires. Even in the realm of the explicitly theological, Durtal feels compelled to compete against God.

He loses.

ii) The Perfect Woman: *L'Ève Future*

Few novels in the decadent-dandyist canon offer us as straightforward a *pygmalionisme* as Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Ève Future*. The story of a mad scientist — a fictionalized version of Thomas Edison — a callow, dandyish youth, and the female android they both have a hand in creating, Villiers' novel is to the *fin de siècle* what Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was to the Romantic era: using the artificial body of the titular Eve as a locus of his era's anxieties, neuroses, and desires, even as the textual body — the structure and interplay of the book itself — serves as meta-textual double.

Of the works discussed in this chapter, *L'Ève Future* is in many ways the most overtly philosophical, as well as the most maddening. The conversations Lord Ewald and Edison about life, art, and artifice during the lengthy construction of the robot Hadaly are by turns theologically illuminating and frustratingly tangential (though more coherent than those in *Claire Lenoir*); the plot's surprise resolution, when it does come, makes at first (or even second) glance very little narrative sense. A story that begins with robots and phonographs ends with spirits and telepaths.

Yet for all this, Villiers' novel, of all the texts discussed here, is the one that deals most directly with the problem whose misguided solution, for the dandy-artists of these texts, is to create a proxy-self, even as its perspective is the most difficult to pin down.

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[290] Huysmans, *Là-Bas,* p. 257.

Villiers' vision of a new Eve, a perfect woman, is, as feminist scholar Marie Lathers puts it, "at once an idealist's vision of the creation of a new Eve and a biting criticism of his positivist society, a society on the road to believing that modern inventions can cure all ills."[291] It is a celebration of the pseudo-Fichtean subjective Idealism which Villiers, like so many of his contemporaries, so fervently embraced, a celebration of the self's power to posit itself even into the body of another, of the creative, rational, and mental power of man against a Nature which, like the flawed female Alicia Clary, is depicted as inexorably in bondage to a material universe of sickness, mortality, and decay. It is the ultimate masterwork of the man Arthur Symons called "The Don Quixote of idealism"[292] — a thoroughly Idealist work in which man can at last bid, as Edison and Ewald do, "Adieu donc à la prétendue Réalité, l'antique dupeuse!"[293] It is also is the deeply misogynistic panegyric to masculine science author Leon Bloy described as revolving around "The central preoccupation…[Villiers'] really unheard-of need for a restitution of Woman...he endeavored resolutely to create her, as a God would have, with mud and saliva."[294] In such a reading, Villiers' text is relatively straightforward: it is a celebration of man to perform the acts of God better still than God — if indeed He exists at all — could possible do, to "restitute" by human effort a world that is like the female body: fundamentally sick. The creation of character – both on the part of Villiers and on the par of Ewald and Edison – is fundamentally a statement about the superiority of the Ideal to the natural.

But, as Lathers notes, *L'Ève Future* is *also* a deeply religious indictment of a society, and a world, where in the absence of divine grace, man and machine are virtually

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[291] Marie Lathers. *The Aesthetics of Artifice: Villiers's L'Ève Future*. (Chapel Hill: U.N.C. Press 1996), p. 19

[292] Arthur Symons, *The Decadent Movement in Literature*, (London: Dutton, 1919), p. 134.

[293] Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *L'Ève Future* (Charpentier: Paris, 1909), p. 115; "Farewell to that so-called Reality, slut that she was from the start".

[294] Quoted in Lathers, p. 19.

indistinguishable, or else distinguishable only by the exercise of a masculine will. It is a world in which the scientific gaze of Edison and, to a lesser extent, Ewald, is revealed — much like that of "Happiness in Crime"'s Doctor Torty in the previous chapter — as ultimately flawed; what emerges triumphant from Villiers' narrative is not a world of fact and science but rather a divinized, feminized, decentred world of nature — not a single controlling mind but a collection of related tropes, from the smell of dried flowers to the rolling of the ocean tide — that drive the story's progression.

These contradictions may not be entirely intentional. It would be remiss to discuss the novel without calling attention to the fact that the novel underwent at least six different drafts, with early editions of the text being much more explicit about the diabolical nature of Edison's need for control[295], a writing process that mirrored the vissicitudes of Villiers' own labored progression with his Catholic faith.

As it stands, however, the novel's treatment of man, woman, and robot is profoundly ambiguous: revealing to us a world in which God's creation, and man's imitation thereof, are constantly in dynamic shift. The textual body, like the literal body of Hadaly the robot, is many contradictory things at once.

At the novel's opening, Thomas Edison is working on a mysterious invention, hints regarding which are provided in vague conversation with an equally mysterious laboratory assistant, Sowana, who is — in a mechanism left vague — communicating with him either with telephony or telepathy.

Edison bemoans his inability to use technology to capture and reproduce various historical scenes, most of which are taken directly from the Biblical account. He begins by

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[295] Kristine Butler. "The Man of Heightened Faculties: Aurality, Female Voice and Artistic Identity in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's 'L Eve Future'." *Modern Language Studies* 36, no. 2 (January 1, 2007), p. 68.

considering the phonograph. Had it been invented earlier, there is so much he might have heard.

""Comme j'arrive tard dans l'Humanité!" he cries "Que ne suis-je l'un des premiers-nés de notre espèce!... Bon nombre de grandes paroles seraient incrustées, aujourd'hui, ne varietur [sic]--textuelles, enfin, sur les feuilles de mon cylindre… Sans prétendre au cliché galvanoplastique du "Fiat Lux!" exclamation proférée, paraît-il, voici tantôt soixante-douze siècles (et qui, d'ailleurs, à titre de précédent immémorial, controuvée ou non, eût échappé à toute phonographie)."[296] He waxes nostalgic for "[v]oix mortes, sons perdus, bruits oubliés, vibrations en marche dans l'abîme et désormais trop distantes pour être ressaisies…les vibrations initiales de tout l'énoncé de la Bonne-Nouvelle! Le timbre archangélique de la Salutation…le bruit du baiser de l'Is-Karioth."[297] So too photography, for Edison is equally aggrieved he cannot capture visually: "tableaux, portraits, vues et paysages qu'elle eût recueillis jadis et dont le spectacle est à jamais détruit pour nous…Josué arrêtant le soleil, par exemple? de quelques Vues du Paradis terrestre prises de l'Entrée aux épées flamboyantes; de l'Arbre de la Science; du Serpent…de quelques vues du Déluge, prises dusommet de l'Ararat?"[298] Edison imagines the possibility of technology to reproduce God Himself — a task he declares himself to undertake humbly with a tone of subservience which, given his characterization elsewhere, can only be described as deeply ironic: "Il daignait nous laisser

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[296] Villiers, *L'Ève,* pp. 5-6; What a latecomer I am in the ranks of humanity!" , "Why wasn't I one of the first-born of the species?...Plenty of great words would be recorded now, ne varietur – (sic) – word for word, that is, on the surface of my cylinders...we needn't pretend to that life-creating cliché, Fiat lux!, a phrase coined approximately seventy-two centuries ago (and which besides...perhaps invented, perhaps not-- could never have been picked up by any recording museum." All translations adapted from Robert Martin Adams

[297] Ibid, pp. 7-8; "He waxes nostalgic for "dead voices, lost sounds, forgotten noises, vibrations lockstepping into the abyss, and now too distance to ever be recaptured…the first vibrations of the good tidings brought to Mary! The resonance of the Archangel saying Hail, the Sermon on the Mount!....the sound of the kiss of Iscariot!".

[298] Ibid, pp. 28-9; ""all the pictures, portraits, scenes, and landscapes that (the camera) could have recorded once, and which are now forever lost to us?"…*Joshua Bidding the Sun Stand Still, The Earthly Paradise The Deluge, Taken from the Top of Mount Ararat"*.

prendre la moindre, la plus humble photographie de Lui, voire me permettre, à moi, Thomas Alva Edison, ingénieur américain, sa créature, de clicher une simple épreuve phonographique de Sa vraie Voix (car le tonnerre a bien mué, depuis Franklin), dès le lendemain il n'y aurait plus un seul athée sur la terre!"[299]

From the first, we are primed to see the events of *L'Ève* as a kind of Biblical doubling; the accounts of Genesis, under the aegis of the God-Edison, mapped onto the story that follows.

Edison receives a visit from an old friend, the English Lord Ewald, who in his youthful romanticism and callow desperation serves as a slightly more emotional — even insipid — take on the "beautiful youth" we see so often in the Decadent novel. Ewald is suffering from a deep existential despair, brought on by his relationship with singer Alicia Clary.

Alicia is dull and bourgeois: perfectly willing to idly accept Ewald's affections without ever returning them with any real passion. In form, she resembles the singular Venus Venetrix sculpture on display in the Louvre; her soul, however, remains indistinguishable from that of any other dull *Parisienne* ("une Déesse bourgeoise," as Edison calls her[300]) among *la foule*.

This disparity between Alicia's looks and her personality has caused in Ewald a distress so extreme he resolves to commit suicide. Alicia's personality may be generic, but his love is singular — "j'ai dans l'être de n'aimer qu'une fois."[301] — and so he might as well die.

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[299] Ibid, p. 3; "isn't it painful to think that if He would just allow me the slightest, most humble phonograph of Himself – or just permit me, Thomas Alva Edison, American engineer, His creature, to make a simple phonographic record of His True Voice (for thunder has lost most of its prestige since Franklin), *the day after that event, there wouldn't be a single atheist left on the earth?"*.

[300] Ibid, p. 55; "a bourgeois goddess".

[301] Ibid, p. 75; "according to my nature I can love only once".

Edison offers him a different solution. He is working on a robot, he says: a robot that will be for Ewald the ideal woman. She will look like Alicia, but her personality, as well as her looks, will be perfect. He promises Ewald that "Miss Alicia Clary vous apparaîtra, non seulement transfigure…mais revêtue d'une sorte d'immortalité…Enfin, cette sotte éblouissante sera non plus une femme, mais un ange; non plus une maîtresse, mais une amante; non plus la Réalité, mais l'IDÉAL."[302] He promises Ewald "un Être fait à notre image, et qui nous sera, par conséquent, CE QUE NOUS SOMMES A DIEU."[303]

Ewald agrees. A series of conversations, lectures, and discourses on the construction of the robot Hadaly follow — lengthy descriptions of each of Hadaly's attributes (chapter titles include "Flesh", "Aromatic," "Eyes of the Spirit", "Physical Eyes", "Urania", "Hair", "Epidermis", strengthening the connection between Hadaly's physical body and the textual body Villiers is creating before us), as well as philosophical meditations on the nature of female artifice.

Things go according to plan. Alicia Clary is invited to Menlo Park under false pretenses, so that Edison might record her voice. A few weeks later, Alicia and Ewald are reunited at dinner. As Ewald converses with Alicia, he realizes that he loves her after all, that in her perfect humanity she has more to offer him than any robot could.

Now Ewald's beloved reveals herself: she is not Alicia at all, but Hadaly: or, rather, the true Alicia.

She informs Ewald that she is more than a mere robot. She has, in a manner Villiers leaves obscure, subsumed the soul of the bodiless laboratory assistant Sowana (who is actually an abandoned wife on whom Thomas Edison has been experimenting with various

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[302] Ibid, p. 83; "Miss Alicia Clary will appear before you, not simply transfigured, … but actually endowed with a sort of immortality. In a word, the present gorgeous little fool will no longer be a woman, but an angel; no longer a mistress but a lover; no longer reality but the IDEAL.".

[303] Ibid, p. 103; "A being made in our image, and who, accordingly, will be to us what we are to God".

acts of astral projection). What has begun as science fiction veers sharply into fantasy, as Hadaly offers Ewald a different kind of godhood: one deeply imbued with Villiers' rather specific reading of subjectivity. Hadaly's existence is contingent on Ewald's love for her — coded, with the reference to penetration — as phallic indeed: "Mon être, ici-bas, pour toi du moins, ne dépend que de ta libre volonté. Attribue-moi l'être, affirme-toi que je suis! Renforce-moi de toi-même. Et soudain, je serai tout animée, à tes yeux, du degré de réalité dont m'aura pénétrée ton Bon-Vouloir créateur."[304] One reading of the text could interpret this revelation as classic Villiersian Idealism: by inventing Hadaly, Ewald has made her real; he is in the world of subjectivity already a god, without need for the science of a Zola or Charcot.

Yet a straightforward Idealistic reading of Hadaly's status is confounded by the fact that she also seems to express autonomy heretofore unknown — she claims responsibility for having influenced *Edison's* work — and even Edison seems to admit her soul is an unintentional development: "si j'ai fourni physiquement ce qu'elle a de terrestre et d'illusoire, une Ame qui m'est inconnue s'est superposée à mon oeuvre et, s'y incorporant à jamais, a réglé, croyez-moi, les moindres détails de ces scènes effrayantes et douces avec un art si subtil qu'il passe, en vérité, l'imagination de l'homme. Un être d'outre-Humanité s'est suggéré en cette nouvelle oeuvre d'art où se centralise, irrévocable, un mystère inimaginé jusqu'à nous."[305]

Before we can get a real sense of who or what Hadaly is, however, she and Ewald are both destroyed by a shipwreck en route to England. Edison contemplates the news, for the

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[304] Ibid, p. 335; "My being in this low world depends, for you at least, only on your free will. Attribute a being to me, affirm that I am! Reinforce me with your self. And then suddenly I will come to life under your eyes, to precisely the extent that your creative Good Will had penetrated me."

[305] Ibid, p. 368; "I have physically furnished Hadaly with everything terrestrial and illusionary she possesses. But a Soul unknown to me has added itself to my work, incorporating itself in it forever. It has regulated, believe me, the smallest details of these frightening and charming scenes with an art so subtle that it truly escapes man's imagination. A being from beyond humanity has suggested itself to us in this new work of art, where an unimagined mystery is irrevocably centered.".

first time unable to use the language of science or knowledge to exert any form of control over the situation: “puis son regard s'étant levé, enfin, vers les vieilles sphères lumineuses qui brûlaient, impassibles, entre les lourds nuages et sillonnaient, à l'infini, l'inconcevable mystère des cieux, il frissonna—de froid, sans doute—en silence.”[306]

The plot shifts from the relatively straightforward — a simple Frankenstein story about a scientist and his creation — into something altogether more nebulous. Identity becomes not something static, fixed, and subject to rational control, but rather something dynamic and ever-changing: Hadaly both is and is not Alicia, is and is not Sowana, is controller and controlled. As in *Les Diaboliques,* the narrative world implodes upon itself. The textual body offers as many contradictory outcomes for the story as Hadaly/Sowana offers for herself.

To better understand such a seemingly senseless plot, it is necessary to first answer another question — the significance of which ripples through the entire corpus of decadent-dandyist literature: What, exactly, is wrong with Alicia Clary in the first place?

Alicia is not, after all, a *femme fatale*. She is not unfaithful, nor cruel; she is pleasant enough to Ewald. What, then, could possibly be serious enough to trigger what can only be described as an existential crisis?

Ewald himself provides the answer, in a chapter entitled “Shadows”: “Or, entre le corps et l'âme de miss Alicia, ce n'était pas une disproportion qui déconcertait et inquiétait mon entendement: c'était un disparite…les lignes de sa beauté divine semblaient lui être étrangères; ses paroles paraissaient dépaysées et gênées dans sa voix. Son être intime s'accusait comme en contradiction avec sa forme. On eût dit que non seulement son genre de personnalité était privé de ce que les philosophes appellent, je crois, le médiateur plastique,

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[306] Ibid, p. 374; “raising his eyes even higher toward the ancient luminous spheres which still shone, unmoved, through the gaps in the heavy clouds, and sent their glints forever through the infinite, inconceivable mystery of the heavens, [Edison] shivered – no doubt, from the cold – in utter silence.”.

mais qu'elle était enfermée, par une sorte de châtiment occulte, dans le démenti perpétuel de son corps idéal…parfois, il m'arrivait d'imaginer, très sérieusement, que, dans les limbes du Devenir, cette femme s'était égarée en ce corps—et qu'il ne lui appartenait pas.[307]

This "disparité", therefore, is our answer. The problem is not that Alicia is beautiful, nor mediocre, but that there is a fundamental disconnect between Alicia Clary's inner and outer form: Alicia's beauty does not signify or mean anything substantial about her personality. The relation between her body and her "soul" is arbitrary.

In a following chapter, "Hypothesis" — the very title of which (along with nearby chapters "Analysis" and "Diagnosis") suggest the treatment of a medical problem — Ewald again asserts this disconnect that lies at the heart of his despair.

> Avec une personne très belle, mais de perfections ordinaires… un rien, un éclair,--la qualité des lignes…un mouvement, tout m'eût averti du naturel caché!--mille indices insensibles!--et j'eusse... reconnu son identité avec elle-même… Mais ici…la non-correspondance du physique et de l'intellectuel s'accusait constamment et dans des proportions Paradoxales….A l'extérieur--et du front aux pieds--une sorte de Vénus Anadyomène: au dedans, une personnalité tout à fait ÉTRANGÈRE à ce corps[308]

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[307] Ibid, pp. 45-6; "And between the body and the soul of Miss Alicia, it wasn't just a disproportion which distressed and upset my understanding. It was an absolute disparity...it amounted to this...the traits of her divine beauty seemed to be foreign to her self; her words seemed constrained and out of place in her mouth. Her intimate being was in flat contradiction with the form it inhabited. You would have thought, not only tha he personality was deprived of what I think philosophers called plastic mediation, but that she had been shut up, by a kind of magical punishment, in the perpetual contradiction of her beautiful body....on occasion I was tempted to think, quite seriously, that in the dark spaces of Becoming this woman had somehow strayed by accident into this body, which did not belong to her at all."

[308] Ibid, p. 55; "With some other person, a trifle, a mere glance...might have reminded me of her hidden nature. A thousand imperceptible signs! And I would have...recognized her identity within herself! But here... the non-correspondence of the physical and the intellectual made itself felt constantly and in the proportion of a paradox....From the outside, and from the brow to the feet, a sort of Venus Anadyomene within, a personality absolutely FOREIGN to this body."

As Asti Hustvedt puts it in her essay "The Pathology of Eve", "Alicia's pathology then is located in the cleft between appearance and reality."[309]

It is this cleft we must understand as not merely at the root of Lord Ewald's dilemma, but indeed at the spiritual heart of all decadent-dandyist fiction: something we touched on already in our Introduction. What is expressed by this fundamental non-correspondence of body and soul is not merely the absence of beauty within a beautiful woman, but rather the absence of meaning in the world itself. The world that our decadents are operating within is a world in which ontologically true *correspondences* do not exist.

If the Romantic trend towards expressivism saw not only language, but indeed all manner of thought or expression – as fundamental to the self's nature — a radically anti-dualistic paradigm in which the true self is not, for example, an entity or language outside of itself only to communicate, but rather defined as a "language-user", in which that which is expressed in language or thought is not alien to language or thought, but rather part and parcel of man's self-expression[310] — then the world that sends Ewald into a panic here is its opposite: a world in which the self and that expressed by the self bear no necessary relation to one another.

In a Chapter 4, we will discuss at greater length the idea of "correspondences" and their relationship to language itself. For the purposes of this discussion, however, it is worth noting simply that in the texts covered here, the great existential terror faced by the stories' protagonists is revealed, through the relation of language to meaning, as the possibility of a world without ontological significance.

Alicia's pathology, therefore, is a theological as well as medical problem.

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[309] Aasi Hustvedt, "The Pathology of Eve" in Anzalone, John. *Jeering Dreamers: Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's L'Ève Future at Our Fin de Siècle: A Collection of Essays*. (Rodopi, 1996.), p. 30

[310] Charles Taylor. *Hegel and Modern Society*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.), p. 18.

The "problem of Alicia", however, has an additional element. The great paradox of Alicia, after all, is that the very things Edison and Ewald so abhor in her—a lack of correspondence between inner and outer, an embrace of artificiality—are the very things the dandy actively seeks to promote in himself. After all, how are we to consider Ewald's terror of "non-correspondence" alongside the dandyist dictum that the true dandy evince no inner-outer correspondence of his own.[311] How are we to read the dandy's horror of the very world of man-made artifice he seems to exemplify?

As Marie Lathers puts it, "The artifice that preoccupied the aristocratic dandy … set the parameters for two of his major paradoxes: while emulating the feminine, he rejected woman; while fetishizing the artifice of machines, he rejected the industrial age. These paradoxes are, *L'Ève Future*, symbiotic. The artificial in the nineteenth century is indeed an ambivalent notion, combining as it did the age-old ability of art to imitate nature and the newly-discovered, or at least newly imagined, ability of industry and technology to replace nature. And since 'nature' had been aligned with 'woman' at least since the beginning of the Romantic era, the artificial replacement of nature naturally entailed a replacement of woman."[312]

But is the root of this dandyist double standard transcends the question of gender specifically. We must look not merely at Ewald and Edison's relationship with the Nature they seek to supplant, but with the world of artifice that they simultaneously exemplify and strive against. The question of reproducing the feminine body in the form of Hadaly is itself rooted in a far more complex exploration of reproducibility and irreducibility. Alicia, Hadaly, womankind — in particular *bourgeois* womankind — is reproducible, yet Ewald is not (let us

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[311] cf: Baudelaire, *Peintre,* p. 92, "A dandy may be blasé, he may even suffer, but in this case he will smile like the Spartan boy under the fox".

[312] Lathers, pp. 27-8

not forget that the plot's driving force is Ewald's insistence that he can love but once: itself a claim to distinctiveness). In a world in which nothing weds soul to body, content to form, signified to sign, what is there to defend the human self against being nothing more than mere machine: mere external form, *except* an irreproducibility contingent on the reproducibility of *everybody else*? What makes, in other words, a character a *person?*

At first the creation of Hadaly serves as the worship of the artificial played straight. When Edison introduces Ewald to the first "piece" of Hadaly he has created — a robotic arm described in loving, fetishistic terms — he is direct in casting his act of creation as a willful act of defiance against the mediocrity of the natural world.

> Oh! c'est mieux [que la chair]…. La chair se fane et vieillit: ceci est un composé de substances exquises, élaborées par la chimie, de manière à confondre la suffisance de la 'Nature'.--(Et, entre nous, la Nature est une grande dame à laquelle je voudrais bien être présenté, car tout le monde en parle et personne ne l'a jamais vue!)--Cette copie, disons-nous, de la Nature,--pour me servir de ce mot empirique,--enterrera l'original sans cesser de paraître vivante et Jeune…et je puis vous expliquer comment on la produit[313]

What Edison is doing — or thinks he is doing — is precisely what he has longed to do in the novel's opening: re-playing sacred history in the Eden of Menlo Park. He is not merely reproducing, but creating his own "copy" from scratch: an auto-telic microcosm defined by its disengagement.

As Kristine Butler puts it, "Presented in the garb and pose of the philosopher, Edison's control over his realm is nearly total. Isolated from contact with others through

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[313] Villiers, *L'Ève Future,* p. 95; "Oh, it's better than real!...flesh fades and grows old. This is a combination of various exquisite substances, elaborated by chemistry; it's a direct rebuke to the complacency of "Nature" (and by the way, I'd like to be introduced to that great lady 'Nature' some day, because everybody talks about her and nobody has ever seen her." This *copy*, let's say, of Nature – if I may use this empirical word, will bury the original without itself ceasing to appear alive and young...and I think I'm the only one who can make it!"

mastery of technological devices for transmitting – or more importantly, for shutting out – unwanted voices from the outside, he achieves omniscience in his microcosm."[314]

In so doing, Edison achieves a degree of mastery over identity. In proving that nothing is unrepeatable — not even, the spiritual of history of mankind — he emerges victorious: if he is a double, he is the double of God alone. That his interest is in a reproduction of identity is made explicit in how he characterizes making Hadaly.

> Une Imitation-Humaine, si vous voulez. L'écueil désormais à éviter, c'est que le fac-similé ne surpasse, physiquement, le modèle. Vous rappelez-vous, mon cher lord, ces mécaniciens d'autrefois qui ont essayé de forger des simulacres humains?…Ces ouvrages, sycophantes informes, au lieu de donner à l'Homme le sentiment de sa puissance, ne peuvent que l'induire à baisser la tête devant le dieu Chaos….L'on dirait de ces manitous des archipels australiens, de ces fétiches des peuplades de l'Afrique équatoriale…Mais aujourd'hui, reprit-il, le temps a passé!... La Science a multiplié ses découvertes! Les conceptions métaphysiques se sont affinées. Les instruments de décalque, d'identité, sont devenus d'une précision parfaite… Il nous est permis de RÉALISER, désormais, de puissants fantômes.[315]

Yet if the "is" of identity is rendered initially unstable by Edison's project, it is quickly – if artificially – restored. When Edison creates Hadaly, he builds her a series of rings. Pressing each different gem — a willful burlesque of Medieval alchemy — induces a different response in Hadaly; amethyst for this, pearl for that: "vous frôlez la sympathique améthyste de la bague de l'index, en lui disant: "Venez, Hadaly", Elle viendra, mieux que la

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[314] Butler, "Faculties," p. 69

[315] Villiers, *L'Ève Future,* pp. 97-8; "An Imitation Human Being, if you prefer. The mistake to be avoided, now, is that the facsimile may surpass the original. Do you recall, my lord, those artisans of former days who tried to create artificial human beings?....Degraded works of that sort give man no sense of power; instead, they only force him to bow his head before the great god, Chaos....they look like the idols of the Australian archipelago, fetishes from the jungles of equatorial Africa...but today, that period is past. Science has multiplied her discoveries; metaphysical conceptions have been refined. The techniques of reproduction, of *identification* have been rendered more precise and perfect, so that the resources available to man for new ventures...are now different....henceforth we shall be able to realize – that is, to make real – potent phantoms."

vivante. L'impression sur la bague doit être vague et naturelle,--comme lorsque vous pressez doucement et d'un peu de votre âme la main du modèle."[316]

Non-correspondence is here supplanted by artificial correspondence. In the meaningless world of chaos, Edison has created an internally consistent microcosm, a semiotic network he has programmed himself. Insofar as Hadaly responds to them, her personhood is defined by her relationship to that network; she exists fully under the created law of specific cause and specific effect, her personhood reduced to mechanism within this arbitrary semiotic tapestry, demonstrated on the textual level by the linguistic control her creators have in describing her.

Indeed, as Warren Johnson notes in his essay "Edison's Cosmic Dualism", Edison's control of language and his ability to maintain an ironic distance from it are essential to his power. When he tells Ewald that Hadaly's automated, recorded answers are as good as "real" speech, because conversation is itself essentially meaningless: "Edison can have the last laugh and so screen himself from the troubling suspicions of the Other because of his conception of the nature of language as not only imprecise but intrinstically narcissistic. His radical devaluing of the reliability of language is apparent…any utterance can more ore less be taken as a response to any other, and thus Ewald need not fear any incongruity in Hadaly's answers despite their being (apparently) selected at random from the golden cylinders.[317]

There is, of course, a sense of Deleuzian displacement here: as a symbol of womanhood, Hadaly replaces *actual* womanhood: she *stands in* for real humanity the way,

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[316]Ibid, p. 135; "if you simply take her right hand, rub softly the amethyst on the ring of her index finger, and say to her, "Come, Hadaly", she will come to you, better than the living woman....besides all these rings, she has a necklace, every pearl of which has a specific correspondence. A completely explicit Manuscript (a magician's formula book in which you can't go astray) – something absolutely unique under the heavens".

[317] Warren Johnson, "Edison's Cosmic Dualism", in Anzalone, p. 175/

say, a foot or a glove might for a fetishist without ever being quite human herself.[318] The poetics of *L'Ève* is therefore also a poetics of absence: the eroticization of a desire that can never quite be fulfilled, and with it another kind of disengagement: the Deleuzian desire to replace reality with a "frozen, arrested, two-dimensional image, a photograph to which one returns repeatedly to exorcise the dangerous consequences of movement, the harmful discoveries that result from exploration."[319] The creation of character is a rejection of personhood.

This, of course, has its effects on *L'Ève*'s novelistic world more broadly. To continue with Deleuze:"[O]n the one hand the [masochistic] subject is aware of reality but suspends this awareness; on the other the subject clings to his ideal […] The Masochistic process of disavowal is so extensive that it affects sexual pleasure itself; pleasure is postponed for as long as possible and is thus disavowed. The Masochist is therefore able to deny the reality of pleasure at the very point of experiencing it, in order to identify with the "new sexless man."[320] This denial of the reality of pleasure (which is to say, the vulnerability of biological consummation) takes the form of rational disengagement: a conscious (in all senses) self-sequestering on the part of the dandy that relocates sin not in bodily desire but in its willed refusal.

Nevertheless, the erotics of this Eve are structured, as in D'Aurevilly, in and through the hermeneutics of rape. Consider, for example, one of Edison's earliest speeches to Ewald, which couches the language of creation in that of insemination and rape.

> Eh bien! puisque cette femme vous est si chère... JE VAIS LUI RAVIR SA PROPRE PRÉSENCE…la senteur de sa chair, du timbre de sa voix, du ployé de sa taille, de la lumière de ses

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[318] See discussion of Deleuzian fetishism in Keith Faulkner, *Deleuze and the Three Syntheses of Time,* (Bern: Peter Lang,, 2006) pp. 86ff.

[319] Deleuze, *Masochism* p. 33.

[320] Ibid.

> yeux… Je serai le meurtrier de sa sottise, l'assassin de son animalité Triomphante. Je vais, d'abord, réincarner toute cette extériorité...à la place de cette âme, qui vous rebute dans la vivante, j'insufflerai une autre sorte d'âme, moins consciente d'elle-même, peut-être (--et encore, qu'en savons-nous? Et qu'importe!--) mais suggestive d'impressions mille fois plus belles, plus nobles, plus élevées…je tirerai la vivante à un second exemplaire, et transfigurée selon vos voeux[321]

The "fullness of her body", the "fragrance of her flesh" —terms that not merely describe but titillate. The erotic here is the erotics of distance, of control: the act of describing becomes an act of circumscribing. The female body is verbally bound; by describing it, metaphorically dismembering it to savor each "turn of her waist" and "light of her eyes." Language fetishizes – eroticizing the part at the expensive of a soul-having whole – and to control. He who takes control of language and its meaning takes control of all of nature — and with it, its sexual spoils.

Thus, a scene like that in which Hadaly's arm is introduced is structured as something between a dissection and a striptease. Light falls from a phonograph onto an object — a chapter break creates suspense — and then the object is revealed, inch by inch, as a luscious feminine form: disconnected from the reality of a woman herself: "C'était le bras et la main gauche d'une jeune femme. Autour du poignet délicat s'enroulait une vipère d'or émaillé: à l'annulaire de la pâle main étincelait une bague de saphirs…Les chairs étaient d'un ton

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[321] Ibid, pp. 101-2' The Adams translation renders "ravir" as "steal", making the implications of "ravish"/"rape" less clear; "Since this woman is precious to you – I am going to steal her own existence away from her…the grace of her gesture, the fullness of her body, the fragrance of her flesh, the resonance of her voice, the turn of her waist, the light of her eyes, the quality of her movements and gestures, the individuality of her glance, all her traits and characteristics, down to the shadow she casts on the ground: her complete identity, in a world. I shall be the murderer of her foolishness, the assassin of her triumphant animal nature. In the first place I will reincarnate her entire external appearance.....in the place of this soul which repels you in the living woman, I shall infuse another sort of soul, less aware of itself perhaps (but about this sort of thing, who can tell? And what does it matter?)....I will duplicate the living woman in a second copy, transfigured according to your deepest desires."

demeuré si vivant, le derme si pur et si satiné que l'aspect en était aussi cruel que fantastique."[322]

But the disengaged spectator, the *sub specie aeternae* perspective of the stripper's john, is hardly victorious here. By the novel's end straightforward paths of narrative begin to curve and shift back upon themselves.

The world we are left with is far from a world of easy dichotomies. When Hadaly reveals herself to Ewald, she provides Ewald with a multiplicity of "truths" and identities, which prove that she is beyond both categorization and reproduction. She is, as Sowana refers to her: "imbue de nos deux volontés s'unifiant en elle: c'est *une* dualité. Ce n'est pas une conscience, c'est un esprit,"[323] a fully autonomous being, one who "m'appelais en la pensée de qui me créait, de sorte qu'en croyant seulement agir de lui-même il m'obéissait aussi obscurément. Ainsi, me suggérant, par son entremise, dans le monde sensible, je me suis saisie de tous les objets qui m'ont semblés les mieux appropriés au dessein de te ravir." [324] The power of *ravir* now belongs to her, along with the implied power of to "m'appeler" — not merely to self-call but also to self-name.

But she is also the child, not of Edison's science, but of Ewald's Idealistic and subjectivist faith; she deifies *him*, rather than Edison, in offering him the power to make her real through his belief: "qu'il n'est, pour l'Homme, d'autre vérité que celle qu'il accepte de

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[322] Ibid, pp. 21-2: 'It was the arm and right hand of a young woman. The delicate wrist was encircled by a viper of enameled gold, on the ring finger of the pale hand glittered a circlet of sapphires...The flesh still retained an appearance so vital, the surface of the kin was so pure and satiny, that its appearance was cruel as it was fantastic."

[323] Ibid, p. 11; "imbued with our two wills, united in her; she is a *single* duality. She is not a consciousness, she is a spirit!".

[324] Ibid, p. 334;"[I] called myself into existence in the thought of him who created me, so that while he thought he was acting of his own accord, he was also deeply, darkly obedient to me. Thus, making use of his craft to introduce myself into this world of sense, I made use of every last object that seemed to me capable in any way of drawing you out of it.".

croire entre toutes les autres,--aussi douteuses que celle qu'il choisit: choisis donc celle qui te rend un dieu."[325]

She collapses the distinction between Nature and reason — identifying the two as synonymous, united in their desire to snare man away from his status as master-namer of all he surveys: "Tout à coup l'actuelle Nature, alarmée de ces approches ennemies, accourt, bondit et te rentre dans le coeur, en vertu de ses droits formels non encore prescrits— Secouant, pour t'étourdir, les logiques et sonores anneaux de ta Raison, comme on secoue le hochet d'un enfant pour le distraire, elle se rappelle en toi. Ton angoisse?... va, c'est elle!… Ton 'Sens-Commun?' Mais c'est le filet de rétiaire dont elle t'enveloppe pour paralyser ton essor lumineux."[326]

Yet not even Ewald's subjectivity can forestall an objective end — both he and his beloved Hadaly are swept away in a shipwreck, victims of Nature's revenge.

What are we to make of such a jumble, one that subverts the novel's form as well as its plot? As in *Claire Lenoir, t*he mechanistic world of Edison's laboratory — and the science-driven narrative world of the text — is transformed into a world of Gothic fantasy. *L'Ève*'s textual world has changed as radically, as confoundingly, as Hadaly herself.

Certainly, Villiers prefigures such a tangle of "genre" early in the novel. When Ewald and Edison are discussing the possibility of Hadaly's creation, Edison promises "Je m'engage…pour peu que vous le désiriez, la démonstration la plus positive, point par point et d'avance, non pas de la possibilité du fait, mais de sa mathématique certitude." In shock,

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[325] Ibid, p. 335; ""There is no other truth for Man than that which he chooses for his own out of many thousands – all of them just as doubtful as the one he chooses: choose then the one that makes you a god.".

[326] Ibid, p. 331ff; "Suddenly everyday Nature...rushes up, leaps forward, and reenters the heart, by virtue of her formal title, not yet abridged. Rattling the loud logical rings of reason in order to frighten you, as one shakes a baby's rattle to distract him, she reasserts herself within you. Your anguish? She causes it....Your "Common sense?" Why that's nothing but the spiderweb in which she catches and holds you while she paralyzes your luminous will to flight?"..

Ewald asks, "[Mais]…Vous pouvez reproduire l'IDENTITÉ d'une femme? Vous, né d'une femme?…il me semble que ce serait tenter…Dieu."[327]

Here, two "languages" — that of science, "proof positive", and that of the archaically Biblical — meld; already, we see hints that our textual world is more complex and varied than Edison, perceived master of his scientific demesne, would have us think.

One reading of the novel's ending is that we are to take Hadaly's offer of godhood to Ewald literally. Science may have failed in the exact reproduction of Hadaly, but artistic imagination has succeeded: the "artist" Ewald has improved upon the work of the (Zolan) scientist Edison; artistic power transcends the vulgar positivism of the merely scientific. Such an approach would fall within the prevailing critical reading of decadence as unambiguously rooted in Idealism: As Lacanian Robert Ziegler summarizes such a view in his *Asymptote*: "Idealisme…fit perfectly with prevailing Decadent ideas regarding the status of the artist and the dubious relevance of the outside world. Magnifying the cerebrality, the elitist intellectualism, the anti-democratic prejudices and anti-naturalist aesthetic propounded by many…thinkers, *Idealisme* stressed the Schopenhauerian tenet that reality was indistinguishable from individual perception."[328]

But another reading is that of Catherine Bordeau, who sees in Hadaly's final existence a valorization of the "*milieu*" — a feminine, meaning-rich force not easily encompassed or circumscribed by "masculine" notions of singular truth — over Edison's would-be deity.[329] Noting how Hadaly influences Edison's thoughts not through words but through the smell of

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[327] Ibid, pp. 104ff; to furnish you immediately, however little you want it, proof positive, point by point, and in advance, not that the thing is possible, but that it is mathematically certain."/ "You can reproduce the identity of a woman? You, a man born of women?…But to undertake the making of such a creature would be, I should think, like tempting...God.".

[328] Ziegler. *Asymptote,* p. 218.

[329] Bordeau, "Gendering" in Anzalone, p. 194ff.

dried flowers and other non-rational means — as we have seen in the opening paragraphs of the novel

> sous l'action subtile de cette atmosphère, la pensée, habituellement forte et vivace, du songeur – se detendait et se laissaint insensiblement séduire par les attirances de la reverie et du crepuscule."[330]

Bordeau sees this mode of influence—already depicted as feminine by Edison himself when he decries the atmospheric influence of the femme fatale on hapless men like Thomas Anderson—as moving away from "a simple assertion of man's godlike rule, [towards] the influence of the milieu as the dominant model of authority."[331] Hadaly's power becomes greater even than that of Ewald. If Hadaly has suffused the atmosphere of the laboratory in such a way that the scent of flowers takes on a greater meaning than a mere physiological phenomenon, she has also managed to transform it into a place where objects have subsistent meaning: where non-correspondence gives way to correspondence.

We are in a world greater than that which Edison can understand. On a narrative and structural level, the text denies one simply, easily encompassed, narratable reality — producing as Bordeau puts it, "its own disruptive 'atmosphere', its own unexpected 'play of shadows', the novel itself engages in a 'feminine' seduction through which the reader is invited to diverge from patriarchal reason."[332] As Jutta Fortin puts it in *Method in Madness: Control Methods in the French Fantastic*: "[For Villiers], mechanization fails as an effective means of control in fantastic narrative."[333]

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[330] Villiers, *L'Ève Future,* pp. 3-4.

[331] Bordeau, "Gendering", p. 194.

[332] Ibid p. 203.

[333] Jutta Emma Fortin. *Method in Madness: Control Mechanisms in the French Fantastic*. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), p. 95.

The concept of this *milieu*, furthermore, ties into our discussion of influence (with regard to *Claire Lenoir* and *Les Diaboliques*) in the preceding chapter. We have already discussed the tensions in these works between a critique of secularized and naturalist narrative certainty (a kind of bourgeois positivist-Satanism, in effect) and the presence of supernatural evil ("true Satanism") allowed by the instability of truth when diffused among multiple self-interested tellers. A theology of the *milieu*, however, takes us further still. It allows us for a mechanism of transcendent influence – something that affects our characters and also allows them to affect each other – while transcending the vulgar biological certainty of pure narrative cause and effect. A world that operates meaningfully on its characters *while allowing them to preserve a degree of autonomy* is a different world from one in which characters are condemned by biology *or* manipulated by the stories of others. The instability of truth here is a function of multiplicity and transcendence, rather than power-driven contradictions: not post-truth but truth-*plus*.

To clarify: there is some sense of correspondence at the symbolic level – all our symbols of power (dried flowers, water, and so forth) might be said to fit generally within cultural images of the feminine – but the sense is that their meaningfulness transcends the specific. Even if we are to read Ewald as "becoming a god," accepting the task Hadaly offers him, the seemingly "autonomous" godhood Edison claims to possess has given way, as Bordeau notes, to a more relational view of deity: Hadaly encourages Ewald to believe in her "truth" (that is, the reality of her existence and the concepts she advances) by promising that it will make him a god: a kind of intersubjectivity of relations we have not seen before: a proto-Ricoeurian vision of dynamic rather than static selfhood that demands constant refiguration as a result of relations to others and to their narratives.[334] Truth and divinity are

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[334] Cf. discussion of Ricoeur in James Fodor, *Christian Hermeneutics: Paul Ricœur and the Refiguring of Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 14ff

not hierarchical or disengaged, but fluid and relational states. The *sub specie ironiae* perspective is replaced by imagery of ontologically significant influence transcending causality. (We will build on these ideas more in Chapters 3 and, especially, 4, in dialogue with Paul Ricoeur's theology of meaning.)[335].

We can see in Villiers the beginnings of a theological anthropology (and thus a theology of character) that, through the novel's development, rejects on one level the objectification rendered by disengagement and diagnosis – Hadaly is no longer reduced to her body (in terms of plot-content) nor reduced to the words that explicate her being (on a textual level); she has dignity and agency and even the opportunity of affecting Ewald himself. The very instability of truth on the level of language and text, furthermore, serves to break away from the auto-telic model of creation (of Hadaly, of the novel itself); the multiplicity of genres, the sanctification of a natural world in dialogue with systems of symbolic correspondences and facticity that takes place *outside* the boundaries of the text, only furthers the degree to which Villiers collapses the boundaries between subject and object, "real self" and *la foule*. Personhood is found not merely in a disengaged action of creation (that is also division); the victory of *milieu* over direct narrative *causality* (with its implications of explication): the very complications inherent at the narrative level (in genre and meaning) are what renders personhood irreducible and thus transcendent of the fetishistic creation-model Edison has attempted. A part can never stand for the whole.

For constructive theologians, Villiers' novel highlights a vital element of the theological aesthetics that will come to inform the conclusions of my thesis: creation of character, no less than narrative, must – in a Christian understanding of creation – preserve each individual character's autonomy and relationality even as they are defined at the level of

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[335] Ibid.

milieu, rather than limiting diagnostic *or* authorial whim (irony, camp) as being fully in, and in refigurative dialogue with, the world of the text.

A return to the "Danse Macabre" chapter highlights Villiers' theological reading of this more explicitly. When Ewald admires the beautiful singing of a bird, Hadaly (not yet Alicia) tells him not to search too deeply its nature. His desire to know, to encompass the phenomenon with his knowledge, will prove harmful: "admirez-la: mais ne cherchez pas à savoir comment elle se produit...Dieu se retirerait du chant!"[336] Ewald does not listen, and discovers that the bird is dead, its chirping a result of the phonograph. Ewald is horrified as God "withdraws" from the song.

As Betrand Vibert puts it, in one of the few explicitly theological readings of *L'Ève* in critical discourse, "Si Dieu s'est retiré du monde, ou si l'homme ne croit plus en lui…alors la tentation a laquelle le personnage d'Edison-Mephistopheles soumet une sorte de Faust — en la personne de Lord Ewald — n'a plus rien d'une transgression diabolique, a moins que la mort suppossee de Dieu ne représente une supreme tetantion satantique. Car ou est le diable, si Dieu n'est plus? De fait, la fabrication de l'Andreide serait justifiable d'une interpretation positive, car reparatrice d'une nature dechue."[337] In other words, we cannot have a referendum (inside or outside the text) on the meaning of Hadaly's creation *without* making a statement on the presence (or absence) of God within the text. In his treatment of narrative breakdown, his valorization of the power extra-textual created order, and his utilization of the motif of the *milieu*, Villiers not only suggests a sacralized world beyond the understanding of his characters, but also – in moving against a model of disengaged and auto-telic creation – hints at the contours of what that sanctity might be.

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[336]Villiers, *L'Ève Future*, p. 158; "You must admire it, but don't try to understand how it is produced....God would withdraw from the song."

[337] Bertrand Vibert, "L'Ève future ou l'ambiguïté. Contribution à une poétique du satanisme moderne." In Anzalone, p. 178-9

The extra-generic shipwreck, that *deus ab machina* that concludes the novel and with it breaks apart a single narrative or generic account of Hadaly's existence, confirms the ultimate failure of artistic subjectivity, and suggests that intersubjectivity, rather than the unilateral "ravir" of subject-object relations, is the basis of the true creation of the human.

iii) The Fictional Woman: *Sixtine*

The decadent-dandyist fascination with the triumph of intersubjectivity becomes even more apparent in the 1890 novel *Sixtine*, by Remy de Gourmont. Like *L'Ève Future, Sixtine* revolves around the love for a man for an ideal woman and his attempts to create her *imago sui*. Yet, unlike the scientific creation that underpins the plot of *L'Ève Future*, the creation of Sixtine is an act of aesthetic, rather than technological, genius. Frustrated by his inability to possess the coy, enigmatic Sixtine Magne, the novel's protagonist, the dandy Hubert d'Entragues, writes her into his novel as a means of exerting control over her. It is only through her guise as the voiceless statue "The New Madonna" that he can possess her.

The plot of *Sixtine* is more straightforward than that of *L'Ève Future*. One afternoon, two party-guests have a conversation: the young dandy-writer Hubert d'Entragues and the widow Madame Sixtine Magne, a beautiful woman with whom Entragues has become obsessed.

His obsession is two-fold. Entragues' erotic desire for Sixtine is strong. But stronger still is his need to *know* her (in the dandy-doctor sense): inexorably linked to Entragues' interest in Sixtine is his interest in two stories she refuses to tell him. When he asks her in jest whether she has committed a crime, and Sixtine answers only "Peut-être!", Sixtine becomes "tout à fait intéressante" for the young man, who wishes to discover the genesis of her

crime.[338] Shortly thereafter, Entragues sees Sixtine's face in a mirror, which transforms into a portrait when he looks at it: "d'obscures et ophidiennes visions."[339] From the first, then, she is coded as another-I, the Sixtine Entragues sees is not a person but a self-projection: her story exists only to sate his desire once he is the one to cognitively control it.

Sixtine intimates that she knows the "secret" of this magic portrait-chamber in which Entragues has seen her face; it is her promise to tell him this story, as well as, implicitly, the story of her onetime crime, that gives their interactions their erotic *frisson*. "Vous me donnerez votre secret" — Entragues insists, again and again.[340] Each time they meet,Sixtine starts the story only to break it off abruptly, hinting that next time, all will be revealed.

Throughout the novel, Entragues pursues Sixtine, demanding both the conclusion of her unfinished stories and the more literal climax she can offer him. Such a pursuit, however, is hardly that of a straightforward would-be lover. Entragues is a confirmed Idealist — loath to grant the material world any victory over him, even by inducing his sexual desire, Entragues practices a radical subjectivity within the world he creates with his imagination: as de Gourmont puts it, "Dans la sphère où il évoluait, tout lui appartenait: sous l'œil delà logique, il était le maître absolu d'une réalité transcendante doit la domination pleine de joies ne lui laissait pas le loisir d'une vulgaire vie et de préoccupations humaines."[341] He mocks those who "s'imaginent que le monde extérieur s'agite en dehors d'eux, c'est une transcendante sottise, mais dont ne s'engendre pas nécessairement leur esthétique spéciale."

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[338] Remy de Gourmont, *Sixtine; roman de la vie cérébrale*. (Paris: Mercure de France, 1923), p. 16; "suddenly pale"; "perhaps"; "suddenly interesting". Translations in footnotes based on the JL Barrets *The Very Woman (Sixtine): A Cerebral Novel*. (New York: Brown, 1922.).

[339] Ibid, pp. 38-9; "obscure and ophidian visions".

[340] cf. Ibid, p. 131. "You will give me your secret".

[341] Ibid, pp. 186-7; "Everything belonged to him in the sphere where he revolved: under logic's eye, he was the absolute master of a transcendent reality whose joyous domination did not give him leisure for a vulgar life and human preoccupations.".

Instead, he remains sure that: “Le monde, c'est l'idée que que j'en ai, et cette idée, les spéciales modulations de mon cerveau la détermine.”[342] His desire for Sixtine troubles him insofar as it threatens his emotional and psychological autonomy: he likens his attraction to her to the bite of a serpent, resentful of “l’image de Sixtine, le monde extérieur dédaigné et presque nié s'évoqua. Il fallut l’avouer: il avait des intérêts dans cette partie de l'univers sensible.”[343] His sexual desire is sublimated in narrative desire; a longing to at once possess her and maintain the creative autonomy that will not allow for any admission of the “not-I” into its world, an autonomy characterized with reference to a specific metaphysic:

> Le Verbe seul existe. L’evangéliste saint Jean le sayait et le raja Ramoliun Roy le savait et d'autres : Om et Logos [a theologian may wish to question Entragues reading of John here] c'est la seule science; quand on lésait on sait tout. Je me réaliserai donc selon le Verbe... Et toi? Que ferai-je de loi et de ton âme! Ah! Sixtine, ton âme, peu à peu, en de nocturnes et quotidiennes célébrations', je laborai, diluée dans la salive de tes baisers, — ainsi que de saintes parcelles: tu n'auras d'existence qu'en moi, et tu me fortifieras ainsi qu'une élixir spirituel. Nous serons hermaphrodites. Ainsi l'unité renaîtra: et j'aurai renoncé, sans renoncer à toi, à la chimérique poursuite d'un amour extérieur à moi-même. Ah! l'unité ne sera pas ternaire, — péché contre les rites! — car je ne veux pas de postérité charnelle. Que ma chair soit stérile et que mon esprit soit fécond! Nous engendrerons des rêves et nous peuplerons de nos pensées la nuit des espaces. Nous parlerons et nos paroles propagées jusqu'au delà des étoiles feront éternellement vibrer l'éternité morne des éthers. Nous aurons desgestes d'amouret les signes de notre amour se

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[342] Ibid, p. 76; “imagine that the external world acts outside of them; this is a transcendental stupidity, but which is not necessarily produced by their special esthetics.”; “The world is the idea I have of it, and the special modulations of my brain determine this idea.”.

[343] Ibid, p. 137; “the external, disdained and almost disowned world (that) was evoked in the image of Sixtine. It was necessary to admit it : he had interests in this part of the perceptible world”

> répercuteront dans les miroirs sans nombre des molécules delà lumière.[344]

What this means, in practical terms, is that Entragues spends a great deal of time philosophizing at Sixtine, and very little time actually attempting to sleep with her.

That Sixtine herself is irked by this is revealed in a striking perspective-shift — the book (until its conclusion, which we will discuss shortly) is told entirely from d'Entragues' perspective (whether in first or third person, or from the perspective of one of his characters: all forms of the "I"). But in one of their meetings, de Gourmont gives Sixtine *herself* a voice, casting an ironic glance back at Entragues. If Entragues had the courage to simply take her in his arms, she might be won, but his indecision only worsens hers:

> Ah! Le sot, disait en même temps Sixtine, à elle-même, dans l'intervalle des points de suspension. Mais je ne la reprends pas, ma main, je fais semblant... Emue aussi, je ne voudrais pas en convenir, cela a été délicieux...Non, c'est un aveu... Imprévu? Je m'y attendais et c'est du contraire que j'aurais été bien surprise et bien peinée... A mes genoux, il est là, à mes genoux, oh! reste ainsi...Si je l'étais, sincère, je parlerais bien différemment, mais ces doutes, ces supplications, c'est si bon. Il va me sup-plier encore, encore, encore...Est-ce que je l'aime? Je puis l'aimer, du moins je n'en suis pas loin, je sens que tel mot,

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[344] Ibid, pp. 257-8; ""As well say that the Word alone exists. Saint John, the evangelist, knew it, and the Rajah Ramohun Roy knew it, and others : Om and Logos : it is the only science; when that is known everything is known. I will realize myself, accordingly, through the Word . . . And you ? What shall I do with you and your soul! Ah! Sixtine, your soul I shall drink, little by little, in nightly and daily celebrations, diluted in the saliva of your kisses, — like holy portions: you will have no existence save in me, and you will fortify me like a spiritual elixir. We shall be hermaphrodites. Thus will unity be brought about : and I shall have renounced, without renouncing you, the chimerical pursuit of a love external to myself. Ah! unity will not be ternary — sin against the rites ! For I do not want carnal posterity. May my flesh be sterile and my mind fruitful ! We shall beget dreams and with our thoughts we shall people the night of space. We shall talk, and our speech, diffused beyond the stars, will make the gloomy eternity of the ether vibrate eternally. We shall have gestures of love, and the signs of our love will be reflected in the innumerable mirrors of the molecules of light."

> tel geste... et je serais dans ses bras, mais le dira-t-il, le mot? Le fera-t-il, le geste?...Oh![345]

Sixtine wants proof of his ability to exist *with* her, rather than *at* her: from the safe vantage point of subjectivity. "Qui veut faire pleurer doit pleurer le premier,"[346] she tells him — subverting the famous dandyist maxim that the dandy must astonish others without ever being astonished oneself.

But Entragues *is* a dandy. As the ultimate ironist, his position of detachment, can imagine anything and experience it freely, rather than contingently upon some condition of actuality. He casts this in specifically divinizing terms, asking at one point "Et puis, ne les ai-je pas, à mon gré, goûlés, les mystiques bon- heurs et les célestes angoisses de l'épiscopat?... [d]e quoi donc me servirait la réalité, quand j'ai le rêve et la faculté de me proléiser, de posséder successivement toutes les formes de la vie, tous les états d'âme où l'homme se diversifie?"[347]

As the storyteller, the external observer, the passer of judgment, Entragues is able to maintain his pride of place in the world. Thus does he wonder of himself: "se croyait-il, par exemple, au- dessus ou seulement à côté de l'humanité?"[348] The answer is relatively clear: "Juger, c'est l'universel et le particulier, c'est tout, c'est la vie. Le tribunal fameux, le tribunal de la conscience, avec l'égoïsme pour président et les vices pour assesseurs, n'est-ce pas? Et

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[345] Ibid, p. 114; "Ah! I am a fool," Sixtine was saying to herself during the pauses of her speech. "But I do not withdraw my hand, I only seem to ... So stirred, I would not wish to admit how delicious it has been . . . No, it is an avowal . . . Unexpected? I was waiting for it and would have been pained and surprised had it not come ... He is there, at my knees, at my knees: Oh! remain thus ... If I were he I should speak quite differently, but I like these doubts, these supplications. He is going to implore me again, again, again ... Do I love him ? I am able to love him, at least I am not far from it, I feel that a certain word, a certain gesture . . . and I would be in his arms, but will he say the word? Will he make the gesture? ... Oh! yes!".

[346] Ibid, p. 116; Whoever wishes to make others weep must be the first to weep".

[347] Ibid, p. 27; How I would have loved to be a bishop in some less modern Rome"; "And then, have I not of my own accord tasted the mystic happiness and the celestial anguishes of episcopacy… What then would reality serve me, when I have the dream and the faculty of changing myself like Proteus, the faculty of successively possessing all forms of life, all states of soul which man diversifies himself?"

[348] Ibid, p. 102; "But did he himself, for example, consider himself above or only on a level with humanity?"

[Entragues] aussi jugeait: au mépris de toute raison, il pesait l'impondérable et sondait l'impénétrable, c'est-à-dire la pensée d'autrui, sans réfléchir que l'on ne peut rien connaître en dehors de soi, et que juger les hommes, en somme, c'est juger l'idée qu'on a des hommes."[349] His selfhood, too, is defined by separation.

Thus does de Gourmont allow us insight into the significance of storytelling to Entragues. It is a tool for the subjugation of the "not-I", the division of mankind into the sheep and the goats of aesthetic existence. The ironic gaze — that which underpins his entire creative exercise — is potent, tantalizing in its wickedness: "Il y a certainement une certaine façon de regarder les choses qui les fait trembler comme des conquêtes sous l'œil du vainqueur. Le livre de l'universelle magie doit enseigner cela. Satan lésait. Mais Faust est en enfer"[350]

From the first, Entragues uses language as his mechanism of control: to name is to command. When listening to the flapping of a crow's wings, Entragues muses on how best to describe this element of nature. "Vlouement, c'est ça, vlouement d'ailes, avec bien le v v v. Est-ce le v v v ou le f f f ? Le filement d'ailes ? Non, vlouement est mieux. Fais-le encore, corbeau !" (The exhortation to "encore" only strengthens the implication of command. "'Ces diables de bruit d'ailes, on ne peut pas les attraper!... Oh le succès! Est-ce que le pom-mier mendie des applaudissements pour avoir bien fleuri, d'abord, enfin bien fructifié? On en ferait de quasi évangéliques paraboles. Si je ne suis pas mon propre juge, qui méjugera, et si je me déplais à moi-même…Y a-t-il un monde de vie extérieure à moi-même? C'est possible, mais

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[349] Ibid, p. 102-3; "Judging is the universal and the particular, it is everything, it is life. Is not the famous tribunal, the tribunal of consciousness, with egoism for presiding judge and vices for assessors? And [Entragues] judged too : in defiance of all reason, he weighed the imponderable and fathomed the impenetrable, that is to say, the thoughts of others, without reflecting that one can know nothing outside of oneself and that to judge men, in short, is to judge the idea we have of men."..

[350] Ibid, p. 234; "There certainly is a certain way of looking at things which makes them tremble like conquests under the conqueror's eyes. The book of universal magic should teach this. Satan knows it. But Faust is in hell.".

je ne le connais pas. Le monde, c'est moi, il me doit l'existence, je l'ai créé avec mes sens, il est mon esclave et nul sur lui n'a de pouvoir."[351]

Unable to sacrifice his *pouvoir* for Sixtine, Entragues resorts to other methods of possession to capture her. He "conjures" her: first by writing up travel notes of his voyage to the Chateau, then imagining her presence *with* him: in one scene, in the chapter "Dream Figure," Entragues even passes a Parisian afternoon in the company of this created chimera: "Toute l'après-midi il garda l'illusion de se promener en sa compagnie. Elle apparaissait dans une robe aux couleurs changeantes…cependant, mais une seule fois, il entenditpositivement le son de sa voix: 'Si vous voulez je vais vous la raconter, l'histoire de la chambre au portrait."[352]

Like Hadaly (at least before *L'Ève's* reveal), she has no voice of her own; anything she says is a function of Entragues' desire. She can offer him the narrative fulfillment he craves: telling him the story he longs for, but only on his terms.

Yet this soon proves insufficient. As Entragues gets more and more frustrated with his relationship with Sixtine, he attempts to aestheticize his own experience in order to make sense of it— adopting a perspective of artistic and ironic distance.

> La femme qu'il aimait ne l'aimait pas et ne l'aimerait jamais. Il avait beau se mépriser, s'accuser de sentimentaire impuissance, tout au fond de lui-même, l'homme protestait et redisait encore : J'aime, puisque je souffre. Mais, chez Entragues, l'homme ne prononçait jamais le définitif aphorisme. Après les tumultuaires divagations de l'amoureux, le romancier venait, artiste ou fossoyeur, qui les recueillait, les attifTait de la verbalité, comme

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[351] Ibid, p. 13; ""Vlouement, that's it, vlouement of wings, with the v v v. Is it the v v v or the f f f? The filement of wings? No, vlouement is better. Once more, crow!…"; "Those damned crow wings — one cannot describe them! Oh! Success! Does the apple tree solicit applause for having borne fruit? From this one could construct quasi-evangelical parables. If I am not my own judge, and if I displease myself….is there in the world an existence out of myself? Possibly there is, but I am not aware of it. The world is myself, it owes me its existence. I have created it with my senses; it is my slave and no one else has any power over it.""

[352] Ibid, pp. 41-2; All afternoon he preserved the illusion of walking in her company. She suddenly appeared in a dress of changing colors… only once, he positively heard the sound of her voice. "So you would like me to tell you the history of the portrait chamber?

> d'un linceul aux plis chattoyants et avec des soins, du respect, de la tendresse, les couchait dans le caveau sur la porte duquel des lettres d'or disaient: Littérature.[353]

Entragues begins his new project: a novel, titled *L'Adorant*, set in fifteenth-century Naples. Its protagonists are Guido Della Preda, a prisoner, typifying "l'idée de l'âme confinée dans sa geôle de chair" and his beloved, "une madone, une statue que l'amour du prisonnier a douée de la vie, de la sensibilité, et qu' devient pour lui aussi réellement existante qu'une créature de Dieu."[354]

The "New Madonna" of Entragues novel takes her narrative entirely from Entragues' will. Gourmont codes her explicitly at divinizing Entragues: she is not a "créature de Dieu" but his own; her selfhood is entirely predicated on his desire for her. Like "the New Eve", this "New Madonna" is not even a woman but a statue, the form of a woman, with the borrowed soul of the man who is obsessed with her.

From this point, we mostly read two intertwining narratives —Entragues' repeated efforts to win Sixtine's love (and hear the end of her stories), and Guido Della Preda's adoration of the Madonna. The movements of the former govern the latter, so that when Entragues is particularly suspicious of Sixtine's affections for a rugged Russian playwright, he sublimates this into his work, boasting that "je ne suis point jaloux... de la jalousie mon chapitre de ce matin m'en a guéri, j'ai torturé Délia Preda et le bourreau a laissé tomber les

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[353] Ibid, p. 87. "The woman he loved did not love him and would never love him. In vain he scorned himself, in vain he accused himself of emotional impotence, the man deep in him protested and repeated: "I must love, since I suffer." But, with Entragues, the man never pronounced the final aphorism. After the troubled divagations of the lover came the romancer, an artist or ditch-digger who gathered impressions together, clothed them in words as with a shroud of chatoyant folds, and laid them to rest, with care, respect, and tenderness, in the vault whose portal bears the words written in letters of gold: "Literature."/

[354] Ibid, p. 88. "the idea of the soul imprisoned in the jail of the flesh", "The Woman, a madonna…a statue which the prisoner's love, endowed with life and feeling, becoming as really existent to him as a creature of God.".

tenailles qui mordaient ma chair... jaloux, non, mais inquiet : en somme, c'est de moi qu'il s'agit."[355]

What Entragues cannot control about his beloved, he can at least control about her double. In one telling scene from *L'Adorant*, Della Preda chastises his beloved for having changed (or, rather, having had changed) her seasonal garments.

> Est-ce qu'il y a des saisons pour mon amour ? Est-ce qu'il y a des jours, est-ce qu'il y a des heures? J'aimais la robe couleur de ciel que tu avais revêtue pour notre rencontre première. Pourquoi donc l'as-tu laisée?...Est-ce à mon intention, du moins? As-tu voulu me faire la surprise…Tu étais bleue comme le ciel et comme la mer, bleue comme le rêve, bleue comme l'amour, pourquoi ce pourpre sanglant? Dans quel fleuve de sang as-tu trempé ta grâce? Ne t'avais-je pas offert le torrent de mes veines? Reine, tu m'as trahi![356]

Even the statue must, we learn, appear as the adorer desires it – must be *static* in its selfhood; any change or movement limits the fetishistic functioning in the text of woman-as-idol-as-object. As Karl Uitti puts it, "Progeniture et alter ego d'Entragues, Guido jouit sexuellement de la beauté d'une statue de la Madone devenue humaine, a ses yeux, il n'existe que grâce a la litterature, mais, par la vision esthetique de son creature, il demeure plus pur que son créateur, et par un joli tour de force, se rêvèle physiquement plus puissant."[357]

Central to the development of the creation of character (as woman, as chimera, as idol) is the degree of insularity of the textual world as a whole. Disengagement from the world of the real suffuses every page of *Sixtine*; Entragues' treatment of Nature and his

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[355] Ibid, p. 203; ""I am not at all jealous . . . my chapter cured me of jealousy this morning. I have tortured Della Preda and the tormentor has let fall the pincers which tortured my flesh . . . not jealous, but uneasy. In short, it is a question of myself."

[356] Ibid, pp. 95-6; "Are there seasons for my love? Are there days, are there hours? I loved the sky-colored robe which you had put on for our first meeting? Why then have you doffed it ? Was it intended for me, …You were blue like the sky and the sea, blue like the dream, blue like love — why this bleeding purple? In what stream of blood have you dipped your grace? Had I not offered you the torrent of my veins? Queen, you have betrayed me!"

[357] Karl D. Uitti, "Le Problème de Sixtine: Rhétorique et Structure." *MLN* 82, no. 3 (May 1, 1967), p. 356

treatment of the female body are one and the same. Entragues looks out upon the "voyait des jardins froids, des arbres dépouillés de leurs illusions" and wonders "pouvait-il, d'un regard, réchauffer la terre, et vétir les arbres?"[358] He, not God or any divine force, suffuses Nature with potency.

We have spoken already in our Introduction of the theological problems underlying Symbolism: the forest of seemingly arbitrary correspondences. Certainly Symbolism is, for de Gourmont at least, inextricable from Idealist throught and radical autonomy of the assignation of meaning. Says Gourmont: "L'Idéalisme signifie libre et personnel développement de l'individu intellectuel dans la série intellectuelle; le Symbolisme pourra (et même devra) être considéré par nous comme le libre et personnel développement de l'individu esthétique dans la série esthétique— et les symboles qu'il imaginera ou qu'il expliquera seront imaginés ou expliqués selon la conception spéciale du monde morphologiquement possible à chaque cerveau symbolisateur."[359]

As in *L'Ève* – with Hadaly's rings – an arbitrary allegorical network doubles as an erotic device: to seduce Sixtine, Entragues uses the color of Sixtine's hair toexplain her to herself, using his "knowledge" of the (invented) correspondences between hair color and personality trait to predict (inaccurately) her ultimate succumbing to him:

> Ne serait-il pas amusant d'ordonner une classification des caractères de femmes sous le vocable des nuances de leurs cheveux? Il suffirait de déterminer le ton exact pour se prononcer sur le caractère, les facultés passionnelles, le penchant à l'amitié ou à l'amour, le sentiment du devoir, !a tendresse maternelle, etc. Les somnambules, qui se servent de ce principe sans méthode et sans préambles études, arrivent

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[358] de Gourmont, *Sixtine*, p. 234; "the cold gardens, the trees despoiled of their illusions" "could he, with a glance, warm the earth again and bedeck the trees?"

[359] Quoted in Bietry, p. 338; "Idealism signifies the free and personal development of the intellectual individual in the intellectual series: Symbolism can (and even must) be considered by us as the free and personal development of the esthetic individual in the esthetic series, and the symbols which he will imagine or explicate will be imagined or explicated accoridng to the special conception of the world morphologically possible to each symbolizing brain"

> parfois à de curieuses révélations. Dans cinq ou six cents ans, cette science sera faite et ceux qui la posséderont en perfection, au vu d'une mèche de cheveux, détermineront le caractière de l'homme, et sauront comment il faut le prendre pour le dompter. Mais les sots, les ignorants, échappent toujours au pouvoir de l'intelligence; ils acquerront la facile ruse de se faire raser le crane, et prouveront ainsi une fois de plus l'inutilité de toute science et la vanité de l'esprit…Blond changeant, blond flamme, ou, si vous voulez, en décomposant la nuance, fauve, cendre et or. Fauve c'est la sauvagerie, cendre, le nonchaloir, or, la passion.Votre horoscope viendrait ainsi : Femme partagée entre le désir de s'enchaîner à une tendresse el son amour de l'indépendance, mais qui se résignera à un choix, que les circonstances feront pour elle ; comme l'indolence est un mauvais garde du corps, il est vraisemblable quelle sera conquise…[360]

Entragues attempts to "create" not only Sixtine, but her entire *world*, in his image (one is reminded here too of Kierkegaard's "Seducer," poeticizing himself into the hapless Cordelia): shaping it according to his purposes and desires. Sixtine's autonomy is denied her; the color of her hair, its meaning chosen by Entragues, determines her fate.

Yet, as Karl Uitti notes, on the rare occasions when Sixtine herself is in control of Entragues (as, for example, when he dreams of her), de Gourmont abandons his usual stylistic virtuosity to instead present cliché, even banal symbolic associations: woman, the moon, water, the snake — associations that are collective rather than individual.[361] As in the

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[360] de Gourmont, *Sixtine,* pp. 65ff; "Would it not be amusing to make a classification of feminine characters according to the terms of the nuances of their hair? It would suffice to determine the exact tone as to be able to pronounce upon the character, the passional faculties, the inclination towards friendship or love, the sentiment of duty, the maternal tenderness, and the like. Those somnambulists who make use of this principle without method and without preliminary studies, occasionally reach curious revelations. In five or six years, this science will be perfected, and those who possess it to perfection will be able to determine a man's character through a lock of hair, and will know what to do in order to take advantage of him. But fools and the ignorant always escape the power of intelligence; they will acquire the facile ruse of shaving their skulls, and this will once more prove the futility of all knowledge and the vanity of mind…Tawny is savagery, ash is nonchalance, gold is passion. Your horoscope will be like this: a woman fluctuating between the desire to be enchained to tenderness and her love of independence, but who will resign herself to the choice which circumstances make for her; as indolence is a bad body guard, it is probable that she will be won….".

[361] Ziegler, *Asymptote,* p. 222.

milieu in *L'Ève*, an appeal to collectivity and allegorical/established meanings serves as a counterpoint to masculinized individualism.

Entragues' efforts to woo Sixtine prove unsuccessful. *L'Adorant* ends with Della Preda's ecstatic death, after the Madonna at last reveals herself to him in a series of meaning-rich allegorical symbols that, as is the case in *L'Ève Future*, link female power with allegory and the *milieu* as a rejoinder to a narrower hierarchical impression of causality:

> Tu as douté, Guido, regarde et meurs d'amour! » Alors elle s'épanouit en une Rose mystique d'où s'exhalait un adorable parfum. Et le cœur de Guido était rempli de suavité. Puis elle devint un pur Miroir où flamboyait un glaive. Et le cœur de Guido était rempli de justice. Puis elle devint un Trône tout en cèdre où se lisaient gravées des sentences. Et le cœur de Guido était rempli de sagesse. Puis un Vase apparut qui fut de bronze» puis d'argent, puis d'or ; il en sortit des fumées d'encens, de cinname et de myrrhe. Et le cœur de Guido était rempli d'adorations.[362]

Of course, this is Guido's book, and it's possible even within his treatment of the *milieu* to read the ending – which allows Entragues/Guido something of a climax – as the rendering of the New Madonna at least in part a mirror, like that in which Sixtine's face first appeared — her purpose only to develop Guido's character by endowing him with sweetness, justice, and wisdom.

But Villiers reflects the triumph of the subjectivity of the created other in *Sixtine's* frame-plot as well. In a stunning upheaval of the entire novel's narrative thread, the book ends not with Entragues' voice but with Sixtine's, as she leaves him a letter after running off with the Russian playwright Sabas. She eviscerates Entragues' inability to love authentically, or to exist authentically with others in the world. Their story will be "un roman sans

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[362] De Gourmont, *Sixtine*, p. 279; "Guido, you have doubted, look and die of love !" She blossomed into a mystic rose that exhaled an adorable perfume. And Guido's heart was filled with sweetness. Then she became a pure mirror in which flamed a sword. And Guido's heart was filled with justice. Then she became a throne of cedar where graven sentences could be read. And Guido's heart was filled with wisdom. Then a vase appeared which was of bronze, then of silver, then of gold; from it issued clouds of incense of cinnamon and of myrrh. And Guido's heart was filled with adorations.".

conclusion, à la moderne, — car vous l'écrirez, n'est-ce pas? Si non à quoi bon? Et ainsi l'ombre fugitive s'arrêtera un instant et les passances vaines se réaliseront — oht bien relativement — au souffle créateur de l'Art."[363]

Sixtine maintains her right to live outside the bounds of *l'Art*.

> Vous l'écrirez, n'est-ce pas, votre roman? "Eh bien," je refuse de le lire, parce qu'il sera plein de naïvetés pénibles. Naturellement, vous glorifierez votre intelligence, votre sensibilité et votre connaissance des âmes, et puis de la négation, le détachement...Pourquoi m'avez-vous désirée, alors? Si rien n'existe en dehors de vos imaginations, quel fantôme poursuiviez-vous? Il faudrait pourtant s'entendre et se renseigner sur la qualité des mensonges que l'on affronte. Quel réveil au harem des ombres, parmi les formes que vous avez assassinées, barbe-bleue de l'idéal! Les avez-vous comptées? Je suis la septième, à n'en pas douter, celle qui ouvre l'armoire aux se- crets... Et ils lui passèrent leur épée au travers du corps. Ainsi la Vie a tué le Rêve, Adieu.[364]

Just as Hadaly reveals herself in the final chapters of *L'Ève*, so too does Sixtine reveal herself as an autonomous being: with her own wants, needs, and desires. Entragues is left alone with the challenge of living authentically in a world he cannot control. His thoughts turn to God, and it is at the brink of religious faith that the novel leaves him. He congratulates himself on the ending of *L'Adorant*, then wonders:

> En te perdant, Sixtine, je me suis retrouvé, — mais, je l'avoue, madame, ce n'est pas une compensation digne d'être notée. Bien que vous me jugiez égoïste et que j'admette ce jugement, je n'ai pour moi nul amour. Un peu de haine plutôt, quand je franchis indifférérence, car je sens que je ne suis qu'un mauvais instrument aux mains d'un Maître inconnu et transcendant, —

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[363] Ibid, p. 306; "a novel without an end, after the modern fashion, for you surely will write it? If not, what is the use? And thus the fugitive shadow will pause an instant and our vain intercourse will have a realization — oh! very relatively — through the creative breath of Art."**.**

[364] Ibid, p. 305; "Of course, you will write your novel. Well, I refuse to read it, for it will be full of painful naïvetés. You will naturally glorify your intelligence, your sensibility and your understanding of souls, and also negation, detachment . . . Why, then, did you desire me? What phantom did you pursue, if nothing exists outside of your imagination? Yet one should be informed regarding the quality of illusions which one faces. What an alarm in the harem of shadows, among the forms you murdered, bluebeard of the ideal! Have you counted them? I am the seventh, without a doubt, the one who opens the locked room . . . "And they passed their swords through his body/' Thus Life has killed the Dream. Adieu.".

> celui qui me raille si à propos, quand je mésuse de mon âme... Destiné à quelle besogne ? Ah ! il le sait, lui !... Dis-le-moi, Maître! Songe que l'invincible dégoût que m'ont suggéré mes frères et mes sœurs! Songe que j'ai besoin de distractions !.. Seigneur des mornes prés bleus où les Chimères broutent des étoiles, dis- moi mon secret et je serai capable d'un certain dévouement... J'aime déjà beaucoup la grâce de tes saints, car ils furent seuls, délicieusement seuls : a ... Souvent, ô mon Seigneur, je considère que si quelque chose peut faire supporter la vie cil Tonne vous possède pas, c'est la solitude, parce que l'âme s'y repose en celui qui est son repos.[365]

Is solitude the answer? Or has Entragues failed to grasp the fundamental truth of Sixtine's argument — that it is his incapacity to exist outside him that has caused her to spurn him? In either case, we see breaking in here moments of realization — that Entragues is not merely an autonomous creator but a character in a story authored by another (a moment that doubles as an ironic nod at Entragues' own status as character).

Sixtine may be read as a spiritual Bildungsroman, the account of Entragues' journey from a world of pure abstraction and simplified *fin de siècle* Idealism to an acknowledgment of alterity. When Sixtine's voice enters the narrative, as it does at the end, it — and her refusal to read Entragues' completed novel — serves as proof that Sixtine and the New Madonna are two distinct beings, that Sixtine is — like Alicia Clary — not truly reproducible, but individual within herself: a hapax of being. By giving Sixtine her own voice in the narrative, allowing her story and her selfhood equal weight, by revealing Entragues as one of many voices, each with their own "idiosyncratic vision", de Gourmont uses the form of the novel to cast doubt on a strictly subjectivist worldview, offering up instead the

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[365] de Gourmont, *Sixtine*, pp. 310-11; "In losing you, Sixtine, I have found myself again. But I confess, Madame, that it is not a compensation worth considering. Although you judged me an egoist and although I admit this charge, I bear myself no love. A little hate, rather, when I surmount indifference, for I feel that I am only a bad instrument in the hands of an unknown and transcendental Master, — a Master who laughs so apropos when I abuse my soul . . . Destined to what labor? Ah! he knows! . . ."Tell me, Master! Think of the invincible disgust with which my brothers and sisters fill me! Consider that I need distractions ! . . . O Lord of the gloomy blue meadows where Chimerae browse among the stars, tell me my secret and I shall be capable of true devotion . . . Already I love the grace of your saints, for they were alone, deliriously alone: . . . Often, O Lord, I consider that if anything could sustain life without thee, it is solitude, for there the soul rests in its peace".

possibility of intersubjectivity, where each centre of consicousness — to use Karl Uitti's terminology — is given dignity and weight.[366] As Robert Ziegler puts it, "Gourmont shows how love instructs the hero in the existence of competing subjectivities."[367]

The Christian creation of character demands not just subjectivity but contingency, the dynamism that allows for change in perspective as well as as a function of plot divice.

Entragues begins *Sixtine,* "bien persuadé d'avance que rien de nouveau ne se peut produire au choc des individus entre eux ou contre les choses, puisque les cervelles élaboratrices sont éternellement d'une fondamentale identité et leurs visibles différences seulement l'envers et l'endroit d'une indéchirable étoffe brodée d'une inusable broderie, conscient de l'inutilité de sortir de sa maison pour entrer dans une autre maison, toute pareille."[368]

Yet, in his love for Sixtine, Entragues learns the opposite. His encounter "against" Sixtine's profound otherness — the stories he cannot write, because they are *her* stories, the narrative he *cannot* subsume into his own, for the first time jolt him into realization of the existence of a world outside himself.

iv) The Chimera: *Là-Bas*

If *Sixtine* deals implicitly with the creation of a proxy-self in the supposed person of another, Joris-Karl Huysmans' 1901 novel *Là-Bas* makes the connection between self and proxy-self more explicit still. In writing his biography of Medieval mass-murderer and rapist

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[366] Uitti, "Problème," p. 353.

[367] Ziegler, *Asymptote*, p. 215.

[368] De Gourmont, *Sixtine,* p. 57; "thoroughly persuaded in advance that nothing new can be produced by the encounters of individuals with one another or against things, since the elaborating brains partake eternally of a fundamental identity and their visible differences are but the right and reverse sides of an untearable material embroidered with a durable and everlasting embroidery; conscious of the uselessness of leaving his house to enter another house which is just the same".

Gilles de Rais, the novel's protagonist Durtal — whose journey toward redemption and Christian faith continues over four subsequent novels (*En Route, La Cathédrale, and L'Oblat* will be discussed in Chapter 4) —sublimates his sexual and Satanic urges into his character's actions, becoming implicitly responsible for the grotesque crimes he depicts.

Là-Bas too is the story of a dandy-artist, contemptuous of Nature, and his attempt to escape the actual world by living in that his imagination. It is too the story of the spiritual destruction within artistic creation — linked here with acts of black magic. The novel's enigmatic *femme fatale*, Mme de Chantelouve, is a more diabolical take on Sixtine Magne (both characters were based, at least in part, on the Occultist Berthe de Courrières, de Gourmont's lover and, for a time, Huysmans' guide into the occult world during his period of research).

The novel's storyline consists of two connected plots. The first is Durtal's attempt to research write a biography of Gilles de Rais — a narrative that allows him to – in the words of Robert Ziegler – "[project] inadmissible desires into his archival research…[identifying with]…the pedophilic satanist and necromancer…making him an outlet for his unacknowledged violent impulses."[369] The second is his adulterous relationship with the enigmatic Madame Chantelouve, who appears first as an anonymous writer of love-letters to Durtal. Unfettered by actuality, Durtal conceives of her chimerically: "Et il se la figurait telle qu'il l'eût voulue, blonde et dure de chairs, féline et ténue, enragée et triste; et il la voyait, arrivait à une telle tension de nerfs que ses dents craquaient."[370] Like Entragues' "New Madonna", Durtal's chimera exists exclusively, statically, in relation to him – "il ne put

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[369] Robert Ziegler, "From Prostitution to Prayer: The Writer and His Public in J.-K. Huysmans", *The French Review*, 67 (1993), p. 41.

[370] Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, p. 138; "And he imagined her as he would have her, blonde, firm of flesh, lithe, feline, melancholy, capable of frenzies; and the picture of her brought on such a tension of nerves that his teeth rattled." Translations from Keene Wallace, *Down There* (privately printed: Paris, 1928).

s'imaginer son inconnue, en quête de bismuth ou de linge; elle n'apparaissait que mélancolique et cabrée, éperdue de désirs, le fourgonnant avec ses yeux…"[371]

But Mme Chantelouve turns Durtal's onanism back upon itself, revealing her own capacity for active desire, more explicitly than either Hadaly or Sixtine. She is a fully autonomous being, announcing with glee how in her dreams, "je vous possède quand et comment il me plaît, de même que j'ai longtemps possédé Byron, Baudelaire, Gérard De Nerval, ceux que j'aime…Et vous seriez inférieur à ma chimère, au Durtal que j'adore et dont les caresses rendent mes nuits folles."[372]

For the first time, we see what happens when a "dandy-artist" meets a being no less self-aware, no less adept at the act of self-creation, than he is. Warning him that – "Vous aimiez une inconnue, une chimère"[373] and that "la réalité tuera le rêve"[374] Mme Chantelouve at once assumes the male role of pursuer, transcending her own (perceived) biology, and subverts Durtal's attempts at transforming her into a mere sexual object: if she is a chimera, then so is he.

The two find common ground in their twinned autopoeisis – muses Durtal: "c'est peut-être bien une comédie qu'elle jouait; — comme lui, alors"[375] – but their destructive relationship leads inevitably to the diabolical, as Mme Chantelouve plunges Durtal deeper

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[371] Ibid, p. 139; He somehow could not imagine his unknown in quest of bismuth or of linen. He could not see her otherwise than rebellious, melancholy, dizzy with desire, kindling him with her eyes, inflaming him with her pale hands.

[372] Ibid, p. 228; "possess you when and how I please, just as, for a long time, I have possessed Byron, Baudelaire, Gérard de Nerval, those I love—" "You mean ...?" "That I have only to desire them, to desire you, before I go to sleep....And you would be inferior to my chimera, to the Durtal I adore, whose caresses make my nights delirious!".

[373] Ibid, p. 178; "You love an unknown, a chimera".

[374] Ibid, p. 182; "reality kills the dream".

[375] Ibid, p. 308; "perhaps she was playing a comedy — just as he was".

into Paris's Satanist underbelly, until their relationship falls apart at a Black Mass, and Durtal aches for Christian redemption.

Durtal's problem is like Entragues'. He is an aestheticizer, unable to inhabit the real world or contend with his own embodied self. Perhaps reflecting his relatively late place in the Decadent canon, however, Durtal is all too aware of his position. Unlike the oblivious Entragues, Durtal suffers from a keen self-consciousness; he knows just how much toll his "cerebral erethism" has taken on his soul. He laments how "Il était usé de corps, élimé d'âme, inapte à aimer…quelle maladie que celle-là: se souiller d'avance par la réflexion tous les plaisirs, se salir tout idéal dès qu'on l'atteint! Il ne pouvait plus toucher à rien, sans le gâter. Dans cette misère d'âme, tout, sauf l'art, n'était plus qu'une récréation plus ou moins fastidieuse, qu'une diversion plus ou moins vaine."[376]

Durtal"writes" his own story before he lives it; language, thought, consciousness, cleave him from any pretense of oneness with the world. Life pales alongside art, because — for the previsualizer — life is always a poor reproduction of the ideal that has gone before. The self is not merely *reproducible*, but already reproduction. Durtal, a "reproduction" of earlier Decadent protagonists, is all too aware of this unoriginality. He begins where Entragues ends: spiritually exhausted, emotionally spent. He despises the flesh but accepts how violently his erotic need controls him. He is aware of the calling of the Christian life — which he knows has the opportunity to save him from himself — but is unwilling to commit to it, unable to get out of himself. Unlike Entragues, he *achieves* the possession he so desires

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[376] Ibid, p. 272-3; "He was used up in body, filed away in soul, inept at love, weary of tendernesses even before he received them and disgusted when he had. His heart was dead and could not be revived. And his mania for thinking, thinking! previsualizing an incident so vividly that actual enactment was an anticlimax--but probably would not be if his mind would leave him alone and not be always jeering at his efforts. For a man in his state of spiritual impoverishment all, save art, was but a recreation more or less boring, a diversion more or less vain.".

— sleeping with Mme de Chantelouve— only to discover this, too, brings him no joy. How much better it would have been to:

> apprendre, deux, trois ans après, alors que la femme est inaccessible, honnête et mariée, hors de Paris, hors de France, loin [d']aimer de loin et sans espoir, ne jamais s'ap- partenir, rêver chastement à de pâles appas, à d'impossibles baisers, à des caresses éteintes sur des fronts oubliés de mortes, ah ! c'est quelque chose comme un égarement délicieux et sans retour ! Tout le reste est ignoble ou vide. Mais aussi, faut-il que l'existence soit abominable pour que ce soit là le seul bonheur vraiment altier, vraiment pur que le ciel concède, ici-bas, aux âmes incrédules que l'éternelle abjection de la vie effare.[377]

Huysmans, no less than D'Aurevilly, Villiers, or Gourmont, codes the creative imagination as lethal: Durtal must *kill* his beloved in his imagination, create a chimerical projection of her as dead, in order to be satisfied with the nature of their erotic relationship.

Once Durtal and Chantelouve sleep together, both find it mediocre; Durtal is only able to resurrect his desire for her by transplanting their encounter into the world of art:

> il se la remémorait, serrée dans sa robe noire, sous son manteau de founures dont le collet tiède l'avait caressé, alors qu'il l'embrassait le long du cou;, sans bijoux, mais les oreilles piquées de flammèches bleues par des saphirs, un chapeau loutre et vert sombre sur ses cheveux blonds, un peu fous, ses hauts gants de suède fauves, embaumant ainsi que sa voilette, une odeur bizarre où il semblait rester un peu de cannelle perdue dans des parfums plus forts, une odeur lointaine et douce que ses mains gardaient encore alors qu'il les approchait du nez ; et il revoyait ses yeux confus, leur eau grise et sourde subitement égratignée de lueurs, ses dents mouillées et

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[377] Ibid, pp. 273-4; "To learn, three years later, when the woman is inaccessible, chaste and married, dead, perhaps, or out of France…To love at a distance and without hope; never to possess; to dream chastely of pale charms and impossible kisses extinguished on the waxen brow of death: ah, that is something like it. A delicious straying away from the world, and never the return. As only the unreal is not ignoble and empty existence must be admitted to be abominable. Yes, imagination is the only good thing which heaven vouchsafes to the skeptic and pessimist, alarmed by the eternal abjectness of life.".

> grignotantes, sa bouche maladive et mordue. — Oh! après demain, se dit-il, ce sera vraiment bon de baiser tout cela![378]

But Mme de Chantelouve has no such distinctiveness when the two of them are together. When she is a real person, she loses all individuality for him. She becomes — moments before he possesses her —

> [ne] plus qu'une femme se dévêtant comme une autre, chez un homme. Des souvenirs de scènes semblables [Durtal] accablèrent; il se rappela des filles qui, elles aussi, glissaient sur le tapis pour ne pas être entendues, demeuraient immobiles, honteuses, pendant une seconde, alors qu'elles cognaient le pot à l'eau et la cuvette. Et puis, à quoi bon cela? Maintenant qu'elle se livrait, il ne la désirait plus! la désillusion lui vint avant même qu'il ne fût assouvi et non plus après, comme de coutume.[379]

The aestheticizing gaze transforms them both into ridiculous creatures. Durtal is all too conscious of their *cliché*: He frets: "Et puis, j'ai l'air de quoi ? d'un jeune marié qui attend, d'un béjaune! Mon Dieu, que c'est donc bête!"[380]

Sex thus aestheticized becomes an occasion not for life but death: a denial of the fecundity that embraces both alterity and generation. When Durtal embraces Chantelouve: "Il serrait une morte, un corps si froid qu'il glaçait le sien; mais les lèvres de la femme brûlaient et lui mangeaient silencieusement la face. Il demeura abasourdi, étreint par ce corps enroulé

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[378] Ibid, pp. 179-80; "He remembered her tight black dress, her fur cloak, the warm collar of which had caressed him as he was covering her neck with kisses. He remembered that she wore no jewellery, except sparkling blue sapphire eardrops. He remembered the wayward blonde hair escaping from under the dark green otter hat. Holding his hands to his nostrils he sniffed again the sweet and distant odour, cinnamon lost among stronger perfumes, which he had caught from the contact of her long, fawn-coloured suède gloves, and he saw again her moist, rodent teeth, her thin, bitten lips, and her troubled eyes, of a grey and opaque lustre which could suddenly be transfigured with radiance. "Oh, night after next it will be great to kiss all that!"

[379] Ibid, p. 264; "nothing but a woman, like any other, undressing in a man's room. Memories of similar scenes overwhelmed (Durtal). He remembered girls who like her had crept about on the carpet so as not to be heard, and who had stopped short, ashamed, for a whole second, if they bumped against the water pitcher. And then, what good was this going to do him? Now that she was yielding he no longer desired her! Disillusion had come even before possession, not waiting, as usual, till afterward."

[380] Ibid, p. 266; "And what do I look like"; "A young bridegroom waiting--or a green country boy?""

autour du sien, et souple comme une liane et dur!"[381] Durtal despairs: "la réalité ne pardonne pas qu'on la méprise; elle se venge en effondrant le rêve, en le piétinant, en le jetant en loques dans un tas de boue!"[382]

The chimera, literal and figurative, is explicitly coded as *diabolical*. Durtal and his friends often discuss incubi and succubi as spiritual realities: "Si cette femme n'est pas maléficiée, si c'est elle qui a voule s'accoler volontairement à un esprit de vice impur, elle est toujours éveillée lorsque l'acte charnel a lieu. Si, au contraire, cette femme est victime d'un sortilège, le péché se commet, soit pendant qu'elle sommeille, soit lorsqu'elle est parfaitement éveillée, mais alors elle est dans un état cataleptique qui l'empêche de se défendre."[383]

Likewise, Mme de Chantelouve boasts of being able to summon at will any imaginary lover from Baudelaire to de Nerval — informing Durtal that he too "seriez inférieur à ma chimère, au Durtal que j'adore et dont les caresses rendent mes nuits folles"[384] it is the first of Durtal's inklings that she may be connected to the Satanic world. (Durtal is a bit on the nose, here: "Puis reste cette question de l'incubât qui vient se enter là-dessous ; elle avoue, et cela si placidement, qu'elle cohabite à volonté, en songe, avec des êtres vivants ou morts ? est-elle satanisante et le chanoine Docre.")[385]

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[381] Ibid, p. 267; He clasped a corpse; a body so cold that it froze him, but the woman's lips were burning as she silently gnawed his features. He lay stupefied in the grip of this body wound around his own, supple ... and hard!"

[382] Ibid, p. 269; Reality does not pardon him who despises her; she avenges herself by shattering the dream and trampling it and casting the fragments into a cesspool.

[383] Ibid, p. 205; If the woman is not the victim of a spell, if she voluntarily consorts with the impure spirit, she is always awake when the carnal act takes place. If, on the other hand, the woman is the victim of sorcery, the sin is committed either while she is asleep or while she is awake, but in the latter case she is in a cataleptic state which prevents her from defending herself."

[384] Ibid, p. 228; "possess you when and how I please, just as, for a long time, I have possessed Byron, Baudelaire, Gérard de Nerval, those I love—" "You mean ...?" "That I have only to desire them, to desire you, before I go to sleep...And you would be inferior to my chimera, to the Durtal I adore, whose caresses make my nights delirious!",

[385] Ibid, p. 227; Incubacy enters into this. She admits--so placidly!--that in dream she cohabits at will with dead or living beings. Is she Satanizing, and is this some of the work of Canon Docre?",

The act of creation becomes Black art. When the proxy-self is preferred to the "not-I", sex becomes *pygmalionisme*, a violation of the self by self: a self-enclosed loop that admits no otherness, and so exists in conscious opposition to the world at large. (Consider, on this point, the example given to Durtal as one of the most vile practices performed by the Satanist Canon Docre — he feeds fish, which he notes is one of the representations of Christ, on consecrated Hosts: feeding the body of Christ to the symbol of Christ: the creation of a pescine ourobouros, a self-consuming loop that also echoes Des Esseintes' peptone enema in Huysmans' 1884 *À Rebours*.[386])

So too, Durtal's distaste for even (unlike the dandy-storytellers of old) sharing his novel — his offspring — with the world once it is completed: he notes that whenever "lorsqu'un de mes livres paraît, je le délaisse avec horreur"[387] Here, too, we find in the relationship of artist-to-creation a similarly auto-telic "closed loop."

Durtal's inability to act in the world leads him to project himself into the killer de Rais. Huysmans characterizes Durtal's act of writing as a retreat into a tower of the imagination; he is "se cloîtra mentalement, pour tout dire, dans le château de Tiffauges auprès de Barbe-Bleu et il vécut en parfait accord, presque en coquetterie, avec ce monstre."[388]

But, as de Rais, Durtal can transcend the world spatially and temporally (Tellingly, the de Rais sections are written in the present tense). He projects himself into an intensity he cannot experience: "Ah! s'écrouer dans le passé, revivre au loin, ne plus même lire un journal, ne pas savoir si des théâtres existent, quel rêve !...Et ce que Barbe-Bleue m'intéresse plus que l'épicier du coin, que tous ces comparses d'une époque qu'allégorise si parfaitement

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[386] Ibid, p. 293,

[387] Ibid, p. 324; "Whenever one of my my books appears, I let go of it with horror..".

[388] Ibid, pp. 24-5; "mentally cloistering himself, far from the furore of contemporary letters, in the château de Tiffauges with the monster Bluebeard, with whom he lived in perfect accord, even in mischievous amity."

le garçon de café qui, pour s'enrichir en de justes noces, viole la fille de son patron, la bécasse comme il la nomme!"[389]

Gilles de Rais is simultaneously the ultimate Decadent and its subversion. Certainly, he is coded — in a wry bit of meta-textuality — as "Des Esseintes du XVième siècle"[390] (The reference to Huysmans' other famous protagonist only heightens the sense of the artificial in this novel). Durtal describes the rapes and tortures of De Rais in fetishistic, even D'Aurevillean detail — lingering over how de Rais "sciait lentement la gorge, les dépeçait, et l'on plaçait le cadavre, les linges, les robes, dans le brasier de l'âtre bourré de bois et de feuilles sèches, et l'on jetait les cendres, partie dans les latrines, partie, au vent, en haut d'une tour, partie dans les fossés et les douves."[391]

But what de Rais does — and Durtal doesn't — is exist *in the world*. His evil is the evil of actuality, not of possibility: "loin des passions médiocres, il s'exalte, tour à tour, dans le bien comme dans le mal et il plonge, tète baissée, dans les gouffres opposés de l'âme. Il meurt à l'âge de trente-six ans, mais il avait tari le flux des joies désordonnées, le reflux des douleurs que rien n'apaise. Il avait adoré la mort, aimé en vampire, baisé d'inimitables expressions de souffrance et d'effroi et il avait également été pressuré par d'infrangibles remords, par d'insa- tiables peurs. Il n'avait plus, ici-bas, rien à tenter, rien à apprendre."[392]

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[389] Ibid, p. 20; "Ah, to live in another age, never read a newspaper, not even know that the theatres exist--ah, what a dream! To dwell with Bluebeard and forget the grocer on the corner and all the other petty little criminals of an age perfectly typified by the café waiter who ravishes the boss's daughter--the goose who lays the golden egg, as he calls her--so that she will have to marry him!".

[390] Ibid, p. 68; "Des Esseintes of the fifteenth century.".

[391] Ibid, p. 239; ""slowly saws their throats, cuts them to pieces, and the corpses, the linen and the clothing, are put in the fireplace, where a smudge fire of logs and leaves is burning, and the ashes are thrown into the latrine, or scattered to the winds from the top of a tower, or buried in the moats and mounds".

[392] Ibid, p. 314; "Unresponsive to mediocre passions, he is carried away alternately by good as well as evil, and he bounds from spiritual pole to spiritual pole. He dies at the age of thirty-six, but he has completely exhausted the possibilities of joy and grief. He has adored death, loved as a vampire, kissed inimitable expressions of suffering and terror, and has, himself, been racked by implacable remorse, insatiable fear. He has nothing more to try, nothing more to learn, here below.".

Ultimately, Gilles de Rais experiences intense remorse — the full gamut of human experience — willingly confessing his crimes and choosing to die in the hope of redemption: "Gilles envisageait maintenant le supplice sans aucun effroi. Il espérait, humblement, avidement, en la miséricorde du Sauveur l'expiation terrestre, le bûcher, il l'appelait de toutes ses forces, pour se rédimer des flammes éternelles, après sa mort."[393]

The acts de Rais performs are horrific, yet in Durtal's identification with them we see not horror but tragedy. Durtal is so disengaged, he must constantly raise the stakes: imagining more and more gruesome fantasies in order to feel *something*. In longing for the excesses of human experience — the good and the evil, the suffering and the glory — Durtal longs for the opposite of the dandyist maxim: he *wants* to be "astonished."

Here, too, the power of astonishing belongs to the *milieu*: to an extra-individual force that here, too, is coded as Nature. Gilles de Rais' repentance, when it at last comes, is a hermaphroditic *natura victrix*: rendering Gilles (and thus Durtal) object – not the twin chimera Chantelouve sees in him, but a truly affected being:

> Ici, l'arbre lui apparaît comme un être vivant…le fût lui semble être un phallus qui monte et disparaît sous une jupe de feuilles ou bien, il sort au contraire, d'une toison verte et plonge dans le ventre velouté du sol… les nuages se gonflent en mamelons, se fendent en croupes, s'arrondissent en des outres fécondes…ce ne sont plus qu'images de cuisses géantes ou naines, que triangles féminins, que grands v, que bouches de Sodome, que cicatrices qui s'ébrasent, qu'issues humides…[394]

Victorious nature does what the individual mind cannot. De Rais repents:

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[393] Ibid, p. 356; "Gilles now faced death without fear. He hoped, humbly, avidly, in the mercy of the Saviour. He cried out fervently for the terrestrial expiation, the stake, to redeem him from the eternal flames after his death.".

[394] Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, p. 247; ""Here a tree appears to him as a living being...it seems the trunk is a phallus which mounts and disappears into a skirt of leaves or which, on the contrary, issues from a green clout and plunges into the glossy belly of the earth…The clouds swell into breasts, divide into buttocks, bulge as if with fecundity…here are only images of giant or dwarf hips, feminine triangles, great V's, mouths of Sodom, glowing cicatrices, humid vents.".

> Les corps qu'il a massacrés et dont il a fait jetté les cendres dans les douves ressuscitent à l'état de larves et l'attaquent aux parties basses... Il se débat, clapote dans le sang, se dresse en sursaut, et accroupi, il se traîne à quatre pattes, tel qu'un loup, jusqu'au crucifix dont il mord les pieds, en rugissant. Puis un revirement soudain le bouleverse. Il tremble devant ce Christ dont la face convulsée le regarde. Il l'adjure d'avoir pitié, le supplie de l'épargner, sanglote, pleure, et lorsque «il'en pouvant plus, il gémit tout bas, il entend, terrifié, pleurer dans sa propre voix, les larmes des enfants qui appelaient leurs mères et criaient grâce!"[395]

This Huysmanian triumph of Nature (which we will explore in greater detail in the next chapter) is not *just* a triumph of the feminine, or of the biological, or of the physiological over and against the rational, in the Zolan sense. Rather, Huysmans – even more prominently than D'Aurevilly, Villiers, or Gourmont – uses Nature as metonymy not just for the female body, but for the implicit world outside the boundaries of *text*: alterity, but also createdness. Only when creation is suffused with power – the power of the *milieu*, of ontological and atavistic meaningfulness – can a character exist meaningfully: the double-"character" of de Rais is more real, in that sense, than the dessicated "author/character" Durtal *because* he exists in dialogue with reality (both historically and implicitly through his interactions with the *milieu*); he is *not* disengaged either in action or in passivity. His repentance, his death, and the degree to which Durtal, through the vulnerability that ultimately comes to characterize this projection, becomes himself aware of the *bourgeois* mediocrity of the *fin de siècle* Satanists, all provide us with avenues to understanding character-creation from the vantage point of theological aesthetics. Personhood requires engagement, contingency, as well as intersubjective communication.

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[395] Ibid, pp. 245-6; "The corpses of his victims, reduced to ashes and scattered, return to the larva state and attack his lower parts. He writhes, with the blood bursting his veins. He rebounds in a somersault, then he crawls to the crucifix, like a wolf, on all fours, and howling, strains his lips to the feet of the Christ. A sudden reaction overwhelms him. He trembles before the image whose convulsed face looks down on him. He adjures Christ to have pity, supplicates Him to spare a sinner, and sobs and weeps, and when,incapable of further effort, he whimpers, he hears, terrified, in his own voice, the lamentations of the children crying for their mothers and pleading for mercy.".

This communication is, for Huysmans, also a *communion*. In *Là-Bas,* we find the beginnings of Huysmans' obsession with the Eucharist, which becomes central to his theology – and particularly his theology of languge and art. The most telling passage of all lies in Huysmans' depiction of the Black Mass Durtal attends.

Much of the critical scholarship surrounding the novel treats this sequence as climactic. Such a reading, however, seems based on a rather cursory reading of the text. The Satanists of the nineteenth-century — *unlike* de Rais — do not commit murders or rapes. The Black Mass Durtal attends is little more than an orgy: hardly shocking by the standards the novel has previously set. While de Rais both kills violently and repents violently, confessing his crimes although he knows he will be executed for them, the upper-middle-class "Satanists" of Durtal's acquaintance commit not murder but sacrilege: "le crime des lâches, car la justice humaine ne le poursuit plus."[396] Durtal's friend Des Hermies remarks that "ce n'est pas facile de se procurer des enfants que l'on puisse impunément égorger, sans que des parents chiaillent et sans que la police ne s'en mêle!"[397] We discover that "mais le côté sanglant et incestueux des vieux sabbats fait défaut. Docre est, au demeurant, fort au-dessous de Gilles de Rais."[398] Satanists – just as in Jules Bois's *Satanisme et la Magie*[399] – lack the conviction toe even be Satanists *properly.*

Consider the longing in the celebrants' Satanic exhortation:

> Toi, toi, qu'en ma qualité de prêtre, je force, que tu le veuilles ou non, à descendre dans cette hostie, à t'incarner dans ce pain, Jésus, Artisan de supercheries, Larron d'hommages. Voleur d'affection, écoute ! Depuis le jour où tu sortis des entrailles

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[396] Ibid, p. 337; "the coward's crime, for human justice does not prosecute it.".

[397] Ibid, pp. 384-5; You know it isn't easy to procure children whom one may disembowel with impunity. The parents would raise a row and the police would interfere.".

[398] Ibid, p. 384; "But the bloody and investuous side of the old sabbats is wanting. Docre is, we must admit, greatly inferior to Gilles de Rais..".

[399] Jules Bois, *Satanisme et la Magie* (Paris: Chailley, 1895), p. 181ff.

> ambassadrices d'une Vierge, tu as failli à tes engagements, menti à tes promesses ; des siècles ont sangloté, en t'attendant, Dieu fuyard, Dieu muet ! Tu devais rédimer les hommes et tu n'as rien racheté ; tu devais apparaître dans ta gloire et tu t'endors ! Va, mens, dis au misérable qui t'appelle : « Espère, patiente, souffre, l'hôpital « des âmes te recevra, les anges t'assisteront, le « Ciel s'ouvre. » — Imposteur ! tu sais bien que les atjges dégoûtés de ton inertie s'éloignent! — Tu devais être le Truchement de nos plaintes, le Chambellan de nos pleurs tu devais les introduire près du Père et tu ne l'as point fait, parce que sans doute cette intercession dérangeait ton sommeil d'Éternité béate et repue![400]

Within the context of the ontological crisis described in this chapter, that which both weds meaning to word (and Word to wafer) and weds the "form" to the "content" of a character, we can read this chant as a tragic, rather than horrific one: the celebrants, in their despair, are summoning Christ into the host: it is Christ's implicit *absence* from that Host, rather than a diabolical presence, that gives the world its ontological chaos, and allows a robot, a woman, and *la foule* to all be indistinguishable from one another: in a world utterly without an organizing *milieu* of symbols.

For Huysmans, as we shall see, the *milieu* (as Nature, and then later refined into the idea of allegory: meaning-rich *milieu* that weds Nature to its theological meaning) and the Eucharist, serve as twin metaphors through which his characters (and Durtal in particular) transcend their literary prisons and find their way from the crisis of meaning in *Là-Bas* to the "white" texts of his post-conversion novels.

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[400] Ibid, pp. 375-6; "And thou, thou whom, in my quality of priest, I force, whether thou wilt or no, to descend into this host, to incarnate thyself in this bread, Jesus, Artisan of Hoaxes, Bandit of Homage, Robber of Affection, hear! Since the day when thou didst issue from the complaisant bowels of a Virgin, thou hast failed all thine engagements, belied all thy promises. Centuries have wept, awaiting thee, fugitive God, mute God! Thou wast to redeem man and thou hast not, thou wast to appear in thy glory, and thou sleepest. Go, lie, say to the wretch who appeals to thee, 'Hope, be patient, suffer; the hospital of souls will receive thee; the angels will assist thee; Heaven opens to thee.' Impostor! thou knowest well that the angels, disgusted at thine inertness, abandon thee! Thou wast to be the Interpreter of our plaints, the Chamberlain of our tears; thou wast to convey them to the Father and thou hast not done so, for this intercession would disturb thine eternal sleep of happy satiety.".

But that is a subject for subsequent chapters, and for coverage of *Là-Bas*'s three sequels.

v. Concluding Questions

Last year, at Calvin College's Festival of Faith and Writing, I attended a panel about theological aesthetics and creative writing. The crime novelist Samuel Martin spoke at length about the treatment of *the dead body* – an integral part of any crime novel. He critiqued the conventional *noir* for its gory and fetishistic depictions of wounds and mutilations (particularly when the corpse was that of a young or beautiful woman). Could a Christian crime novel, he asked, focus instead on the body as the locus of the *tragedy* of murder rather than its titillating appeal: the life that was (and might have been) lived, those who loved and lost the victim, the marks of personhood rather than its destruction: "First aim to give your characters weight, and not just physical weight—dead body weight—but emotional, even spiritual, weight: the kind that when artfully conveyed inspires empathy. Bend your limbs to fit their body print, feel the circumstances and the violation of their death in your own flesh. In your writing, fill that empty "whodunit" space with a real, complex, fully imagined life."[401]

We might expand his argument to encompass the creation of a theological aesthetics of character as a whole. Can we move away from the creation of character-as-robot – as external form designed purely to titillate, to satisfy narrative urges, to propagate the selfhood of another character (or indeed the narrator – as in, for example, the "puppet-like" characters under the *sub specie ironiae* perspective of the narrator in Stendhal's *Le Rouge et Le Noir*)? Can we reject the fetishistic details of a character's "form" – Hadaly's dismembered arm, a mutilated female corpse – embracing instead an understanding of characters that both act in

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[401] Samuel Martin, panelist; "Rendering Dead Bodies in Crime Fiction"; April 15, 2016; Festival of Faith and Writing; Calvin College; text provided by the author via email.

the world and have agency, who are not static but dynamic, who change and grow and are affected both by their circumstances and by one another, an understanding which too necessitates a conception of text not as auto-telic but as in dialogue (with other texts, with history, with nature, with createdness as a whole)? Does such an understanding, too, rest on an assumptive more proper to theological anthropology than to theological aesthetics: personhood is sanctified, the relationship of soul to body rendered meaningful, in and through an incarnational, Christ-centered (and Eucharistic) understanding of creation? Does a theological *world* – in terms of the assumptions made about language and meaning and personhood itself – need to be "Christian," implicitly, on the linguistic level and on the level of the *milieu* to grant characters the autonomy, and dignity, to make them true persons in Christ?

Chapter III

"Artificial Paradises":

The Theology of Setting

i) Introduction

In one of the most famous scenes in Joris-Karl Huysmans' 1884 *À Rebours*, paradigmatic decadent-dandyist text, the neurasthenic dandy-protagonist Des Esseintes encrusts a tortoise with gemstones as part of an interior-decorating scheme.

First he buys the turtle, hoping its shell will set off the room in the colors of his liking. It does. Des Esseintes grows bored. He takes it to a jeweller, where he commissions modifications, encrusting a whole bouquet of flowers in gems on the turtle's back: "choisit dans une collection japonaise un dessin représentant un essaim de fleurs partant en fusées d'une mince tige, l'emporta chez un joaillier, esquissa une bordure qui enfermait ce bouquet dans un cadre ovale, et il fit savoir au lapidaire stupéfié que les feuilles, que les pétales de chacune de ces fleurs, seraient exécutés en pierreries et montés dans l'écaillé même de la bête."[402] He eschews stones he sees as bourgeois or mediocre, such as the amethyst and the diamond, instead choosing rich, very obviously artificial shades of green for the leaves: "pierreries d'un vert accentué et précis: de chrysobéryls vert asperge, de péridots vert poireau, d'olivines vert olive."[403] For the flowers: "un ivoire fossile imprégné de substances cuivreuses

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[402] Huysmans, *À Rebours*, pp. 43-4; "he chose a design representing a cluster of flowers emanating spindle-like, from a slender stalk. Taking it to a jeweler, he sketched a border to enclose this bouquet in an oval frame, and informed the amazed lapidary that every petal and every leaf was to be designed with jewels and mounted on the scales of the tortoise." Translation here from John Howard, *Against the Grain,* (New York: Lieber and Lewis, 1922).

[403] Ibid, pp. 44-5; "the leaves were set with jewels of a pronounced, distinct green; the chrysoberyls of asparagus green; the chrysolites of leek green; the olivines of olive green.".

et dont le bleu céladon est engorgé, opaque, sulfureux, comme jauni de bile... douloureusement arrachés du fond glacé de leur eau trouble."[404]

The tortoise, unaccustomed to such lapidary weight, dies almost immediately.

This sequence reveals much about how Huysmans treats the subject of creation: not only through the content of his novels, but also through their linguistic form. *À Rebours* is, after all, the story of one man's attempt to re-make the world: to fashion a univese in his own image. Overwhelmed and disgusted by the urban life of Paris, Des Esseintes seeks a "theibaide raffinée" – a "refined hermitage" – in which he can exist in splendid isolation, free of all dictates of a Nature he sees as irreparably flawed. Called a "breviary of Decadence" by Arthur Symons, *À Rebours* can be read as a kind of "alternate universe Genesis": an attempt at world-making that ultimately fails.

On the back of this tortoise, we find one of the most explicit examples of how Des Esseinte's "theibade" is more than just a desire for isolation, but in fact, a desire to re-fashion the world. After all, the "world-turtle": the myth that the world itself was formed upon a turtle's back, has antecedents in Native American, Chinese, and Indian folklore, and would have been easily accessible to Huysmans in any of the studies of comparative mythology so common across Europe at this time.[405] And what Des Esseintes seeks to fashion atop the turtle's back is indeed a world in miniature: not abstractions but plants and flowers in gem form. Des Esseintes' treatment of the turtle – as we shall see throughout this chapter – is meant to be read as his wider project in miniature: a desire not merely to escape Paris, but to escape God.

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[404] Ibid, pp. 44-5; "a fossil ivory impregnated with coppery substances whose sea blue is choked, opaque, sulphurous, as though yellowed by bile...painfully torn from the frozen depths of their troubled waters."

[405] Tylor, Sir Edward Burnett. *Researches Into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization*. J. Murray, 1870, pp. 343ff

In previous chapters, we have described Barbey D'Aurevilly's style as "lapidary".[406] So too the novels of early Huysmans. His language –as "accentué et précis" as the stones he describes in such loving detail – is sharp, specific, artificial. Des Esseintes' world is static, stagnant: the "water" Huysmans alludes to in this tortugan world-making is choked, yellowed, frozen: "engorgé, opaque, sulfureux, comme jauni de bile...du fond glacé de leur eau trouble."[407] Textual surfaces are hard; objects discrete.

Des Esseintes' project is fundamentally a theological one: rooted in an "anti-theology" of creation: in which the world is so irredeemably flawed, so lacking in any kind of divine grace, so empty of substantive meaning, that Nature itself can only ever be, to quote Des Esseintes, a "sempiternelle radoteuse"[408] If, in the previous chapter, the dandy-protagonists of *Sixtine* and *L'Ève Future* sought to establish their own selfhood by creating "another" – almost invariably a woman – then the artists (or "artist-embalmers", to use a phrase of Robert Ziegler's[409]) of Huysmans *À Rebours* and *En Rade* go one step forward: directing their efforts not at controlling a single woman, but rather at harnessing the collective feminine of the natural order.

We will also see how both writers treat the question of artistic creation as an explicitly theological one: as "artistic creation" is linked inexorably with the self's relationship towards a creator-god. To what extent can or should the self be a purely subjective self: one whose surroundings serve as a reflection of that subjectivity? How does the process of creating a linguistic "narrative world" – in each of these novels – serve as a meta-textual "world-

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406 Cf. Karen Humphreys. "Dandyism," pp. 259ff.

407 Huysmans, pp. 44-5; "a fossil ivory impregnated with coppery substances whose sea blue is choked, opaque, sulphurous, as though yellowed by bile...painfully torn from the frozen depths of their troubled waters.",

408 Huysmans, *À Rebours,* p. 25, "withered old crone",

409 Robert Ziegler, "Temporal Aesthetics and the Euphimization of Death in *Le Carillonneur*," in Philip Mosley, (ed), *Georges Rodenbach: Critical Essays*. (Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), p.65,

creation" on the part of the author, mirroring each protagonist's efforts? And how and why are these worlds revealed to be incomplete: in each case, an illusory failure into which "the world" – an order created by a higher entity than the artist-embalmer – must break.

Each of the characters we will discuss embodies, in his own way, Des Esseintes' famous repudiation of nature that:

> l'artifice paraissait...la marque distinctive du génie de l'homme....la nature a fait son temps; elle a définitivement lassé, par la dégoûtante uniformité de ses paysages et de ses ciels, l'attentive patience des raffinés...quel monotone magasin de prairies et d'arbres, quelle banale agence de montagnes et de mers! Il n'est, d'ailleurs, aucune de ses inventions réputée si subtile ou si grandiose que le génie humain ne puisse créer; aucune forêt de Fontainebleau, aucun clair de lune que des décors inondés de jets électriques ne produisent…cette sempiternelle radoteuse a maintenant usé la débonnaire admiration des vrais artistes, et le moment est venu où il s'agit de la remplacer, autant que faire se pourra, par l'artifice.[410]

For Huysmans, in *À Rebours* and *En Rade* alike, Nature exists in opposition not merely to artificiality but, more important, to the self's subjectivity; it is alterity writ large. The self-creating self who wishes to cloister himself in a hermetic world of his own making, or to create a textual "world" that does not meaningfully engage with the world (and *milieu,* as we have seen in the last chapter) outside the bounds of "text" (of the novel, of one's setting) makes two wagers on the theological reality of that outside world: one, that it is not

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[410] Huysmans, *À Rebours,* p. 59; "To tell the truth, artifice was in Des Esseintes' philosophy the distinctive mark of human genius. As he used to say, Nature has had her day; she has definitely and finally tired out by the sickening monotony of her landscapes and skyscapes the patience of refined temperaments. When all is said and done, what a narrow, vulgar affair it all is, like a petty shopkeeper selling one article of goods to the exclusion of all others; what a tiresome store of green fields and leafy trees, what a wearisome commonplace collection of mountains and seas! In fact, not one of her inventions, deemed so subtle and so wonderful, which the ingenuity of mankind cannot create; no Forest of Fontainebleau, no fairest moonlight landscape but can be reproduced by stage scenery illuminated by the electric light; no waterfall but can be imitated by the proper application of hydraulics, till there is no distinguishing the copy from the original; no mountain crag but painted pasteboard can adequately represent; no flower but well chosen silks and dainty shreds of paper can manufacture the like of! Yes, there is no denying it, she is in her dotage and has long ago exhausted the simple-minded admiration of the true artist; the time is undoubtedly come when her productions must be superseded by art."

itself meaningful (which is to say, that it is not God-created and God-sanctified), and two, that it *can* in fact be ignored by the virtue of the truly rational dandy-self's disengagement. Huysmans's novels, from *À Rebours* and *En Rade* to the Durtal quartet, constantly challenge these two assumptions.

For the rest of this thesis, we will confine ourselves to the work of Huysmans from 1887 onwards, who builds upon the problems of narrative and creation we have seen already in D'Aurevilly, Villiers, and Gourmont, and treats them even more explicitly through his theological explorations of the problem of auto-telic world and its implications for the creating self, and who – unlike the authors above – offers us glimpses of how a problem might be resolved into a Christian theological aesthetics through his development of "spiritual naturalism".

Huysmans' novels are the most fertile terrain through which we can explore the role of an artist in creating a textual world – whether a "lapidary" world of surfaces or the unstable triumph of the milieu that characterizes *En Rade* – and the spiritual implications of such an act if there is no God – or, as Huysmans suggest, if there is.

ii) *À Rebours:* Opening the Floodgates

Perhaps no text in the Decadent-Dandyist canon is as emblematic of the mood of the ages as Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours* (*Against Nature*). It is the "breviary of decadence" Arthur Symons so decried.[411] It is, too, the unidentified "yellow book" that Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray receives from Lord Henry: "a novel without a plot....[in] that curious jewelled stile, vivid and obscure at once, full of argot and archaisms...[with] metaphors as monstrous as orchids and as subtle in color."[412]

À Rebours first seems an celebration: of the triumph of man's creative power over nature, repeatedly condemned as " incapable"[413] at best, at worst a "sempiternelle radoteuse" – a withered old crone. Des Esseintes sets himself up in opposition to not merely Nature, but indeed all biological and temporal structures – the novel's near-plotlessness as Ruth Weinreb notes, challenges the constraints inherent in actuality in its structure as well content[414] – over the sixteen chapters of *À Rebours,* his experiments become more and more outlandish. Convinced that "l'imagination lui semblait pouvoir aisément suppléer à la vulgaire réalité des faits"[415], Des Esseintes encrusts a tortoise with gemstones, creates a symphonic "mouth-organ" in which different liqueurs are associated with different musical instruments, develop a series of distinctive perfumes to distill chosen memories, and, finally, subsist entirely on a "diet" of peptone enemas: doing away with food entirely.

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411 Quoted in Hanson, p. 5.

412 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2011), p. 184.

413 Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À Rebours,* . All translations except where otherwise noted from. Robert Baldick version, *Against Nature*, (Penguin: London, 2003),

414 Ruth Weinreb, "Structural Techniques in À Rebours", *The French Review*, 49 (1975), p. 232-3.

415 Huysmans, *À Rebours,* p. 28 ;"the imagination could provide a more-than-adequate substitute for the vulgar reality of actuality".

But Des Esseintes fails. Ultimately, he is wheeled out of Fontenay, his precious retreat, and forced to return to Paris and the world. His *failure* to detach himself completely from the constraints of actuality, as much as his need for such detachment, renders *À Rebours* a surprisingly complex work: less a "breviary of the decadence" than a constant negotiation between the twin forces of actuality and fantasy, reality and artifice, Des Esseintes' need for escape and the theological landscape that makes the path he has chosen impossible. *À Rebours* may be a story of decadence, but so too is it a story of its failure to address Des Esseintes' hunger for meaning. Des Esseintes can no more set himself "against nature" than he can against God: whose seeming absence underpins Des Esseintes' worldview.

Thus does Des Esseintes long for "une thébaïde raffinée, à un désert confortable, à une arche immobile et tiède où il se réfugierait loin de l'incessant déluge de la sottise humaine"[416] proves an illusory model. The Biblically-rooted dichotomy of the "arche" – an image common in Huysmans – and the "déluge" proves false, in Huysmans' theological worldview. A covenant with God comes not by *hiding* from the flood (which is coded similarly to the *milieu* in Villiers), but by embracing it: by, as Des Esseintes says towards the close of the narrative: "Il faudrait pouvoir s'empêcher de discuter avec soi-même...se laisser emporter par ce courant, oublier ces maudites découvertes qui ont détruit l'édifice religieux, du haut en bas, depuis deux siècles."[417]

In his poem, "Anywhere Out of the World" – one of the three texts Des Esseintes features in a quasi-religious triptych adorning his new *theïbade* – Baudelaire characterizes life as "un hôpital où chaque malade est possédé du désir de changer de lit. [a hospital, in which every patient is possessed by the desire to change his bed]" Each patient longs for

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[416] Huysmans, *À Rebours*, p. 9; "a refined Thebaid, a desert hermitage equipped with all modern conveniences, a snugly heated ark on dry land in which he might take refuge from the incessant deluge of human stupidity"

[417] Ibid p. 284; "to stop arguing with yourself...it ought to be possible to shut your eyes, let yourself drift along with the stream".

"Tornéo...à l'extrême bout de la Baltique...au Pole [Torneo…the last limits of the Baltic…the Pole]!" before realizing the inevitable: that solace is to be found only "N'importe où! n'importe où! pourvu que ce soit hors de ce monde! [Anywhere, anywhere, as long as it be out of this world]"[418]

For Des Esseintes, we come to realize, such a cry takes on a double meaning: as the most decadent of all our heroes realizes that no act of creation available to him on earth can sustain him, and that the only possibility going forward lies in his acceptance of the possibilities of existing as a created self, and with it grace.

It is difficult to discuss Des Esseintes in isolation from Huysmans' wider *oeuvre*. For Huysmans, characters are often fluid: Des Esseintes' ancestral Chateau de Lourps reappears as the failed theïbade of a later Huysmans protagonist – Jacques Marlès of *En Rade*; Des Esseintes is mentioned as a historical figure inspiring Durtal in *La-Bàs,* even as Marlès, like Durtal, often seems like an extension of the same character. Complicating matters further is the historic critical tendency[419] to read Decadent antiheroes – Des Esseintes and Durtal most notably – as authorial avatars: we assume all too easily that Huysmans maintains little authorial distance in his treatment of his so-called "alter ego[s]."

But such an identification of Huysmans and his characters denies us a real appreciation of the complexity of Huysmans' authorship: and of the ingenious way in which his treatment of Des Esseintes allows him to often subvert the act of "character-creation" – so central to the Decadent obsession with creation as a whole – that Des Esseintes himself wishes to master. Though Des Esseintes is obsessed with his singularity – his whole project,

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[418] Charles Baudelaire, *Pétit Poèmes en Prose,* (Paris: Levy, 1869), pp. 140ff.

[419] Cf. Max Nordau, Cesare Lombroso, Mario Praz. An extended discussion about the history of conflating author and subject in criticism of the Decadents can be found in Robert Ziegler, *Asymptote*), pp. 10ff.

we shall see, rests upon complete and total autonomy and self-sufficiency – we as readers know that the boundaries of his selfhood are anything but fixed. Although *En Rade* and the Durtal novels had yet to be written at the time of *À Rebours,* Des Esseintes has just enough in common with his author (as well as M. Folantin of Huysmans' 1882 short novel *À Vau-l'eau*) for us to know what he naturally cannot: Des Esseintes is not even one-of-a-kind.)

Des Esseintes takes the Decadent-dandyist obsession with narrative control and takes it to ridiculous, even comic, extremes. Gourmont's Entragues may write a book about his *Sixtine*, but Des Esseintes makes his physical surroundings into a text (literally: he binds the walls of Fontenay-aux-Roses "comme des livres, avec du maroquin"[420]) Des Esseintes sees himself as simultaneously: the ultimate artist, the ultimate *objet d'art*, and the ultimate spectator: for him, nobody else is "capable d'apprécier la délicatesse d'une phrase, le subtil d'une peinture, la quintessence d'une idée".[421] Unlike D'Aurevilly's dandies, who at least seek to establish their selfhood in relation to the marquises they impress; unlike the inventors of Villiers-Adam and de Gourmont, who must create *another* in order to solidify their status as creators, Des Esseintes aims to be *entirely* self-sufficient: a conviction that reaches its fullest (and most gruesome) expression in the insertions of several peptone enemas, as Des Esseintes attempts to quite literally become a "closed system" of consumption. His aesthetic projects are at first glance, carried out for himself alone.

Such a perspective renders Des Esseintes a kind of god in his own world: in a flashback to his life before Fontenay – back when Des Esseintes cared more about shocking others – we learn how Des Esseintes transformed his Paris flat into "une haute salle, destinée à la réception de ses fournisseurs ; ils entraient, s'asseyaient les uns à côté des autres, dans

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[420] Huysmans, *À Rebours*, p. 21; "like books in large-grained crushed morocco".

[421] Ibid, p. 281; "capable of appreciating the delicacy of a phrase, the subtlety of a painting, the quintessence of an idea".

des stalles d'église, et alors il montait dans une chaire magistrale et prêchait le sermon sur le dandysme,..les menaçant d'une excommunication pécuniaire s'ils ne suivaient pas, à la lettre, les instructions contenues dans ses monitoires et ses bulles."[422] *(*By the time he leaves for Fontenay, however, the idea of an audience bores him: "Il songeait simplement à se composer, pour son plaisir personnel et non plus pour l'étonnement des autres,"[423] As the "pontiff "of dandyism, Des Esseintes plays with the tropes of divinity (or at least divine-representative): pulpits, excommunication, bulls. The very irony of this only intensifies the implication of blasphemy: By "playing at" being a papal or ecclesiastical figure, Esseintes is essentially appropriating the *sub specie aeternae* perspective; he can assume or not assume a role, as he wills, because there are no constraints – be they moral or physical – upon his actions. The very act of treating the role of ecclesiastic as just one of many to be performed for a public audience is, by its nature, a theological statement: Esseintes is declaring himself free from any possibility of divine retribution, because none exists.

Yet, we come to realize, the idea of the "audience" and the idea of God, for Des Esseintes, start to converge. Let us return to the passage we quoted above: "Il songeait simplement...pour son plaisir personnel et non plus pour l'étonnement des autres,"[424] Such a perspective seems to be antithetical to the dictates of dandyism: the true dandy, we may recall, astonishes. But, as we dig deeper, a curious dynamic of spectatorship emerges. One of the first things Des Esseintes does after moving into his theïbade at Fontenay is to build in a circular *oeil-de-boeuf* ceiling in the window: "Cette salle à manger ressemblait à la cabine d'un navire avec son plafond voûté,...sa petite croisée ouverte dans la boiserie, de même

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[422] Ibid, p. 15; "a lofty hall in which to receive his tradesmen. They used to troop in and take their places side by side in a row of church stalls; then he would ascend an imposing pulpit and preach them a sermon on dandyism...and threatening them with pecuniary excommunication if they did not follow to the letter the instructions contained in his monitories and bulls.".

[423] Ibid, p. 17; "he was not planning, this time, for his own personal pleasure and not to astonish other people").

[424] Ibid, p. 17,

qu'un hublot dans un sabord."[425] As Emily Apter notes, the window shape recalls the prostitute's "peep-hole."[426] A window-ceiling, into which no ordinary person can peek, demands a *extraordinary* viewer. One reading might place us, the reader, in that voyeur position.[427] Yet another reading – one which, we will see, the text consistently supports – suggests that it is God himself whom Des Esseintes mockingly invites to "view": the celestial *flaneûr* whom Des Esseintes at once despises and denies.

Let us look more closely at the opening of *À Rebours:* when Des Esseintes begins to build his Fontenay. Des Esseintes begins by creating a false ocean – by means of an aquarium sandwiched between the "porthole" and a glass ceiling – outfitted with mechanical fish: "Il se figurait alors être dans l'entre-pont d'un brick, et curieusement il contemplait de merveilleux poissons mécaniques, montés comme des pièces d'horloger...Il se procurait ainsi, en ne bougeant point, les sensations rapides, presque instantanées, d'un voyage au long cours."[428] The imagery of separated waters recalls Genesis 1:6-8: this is not merely an act of *self-* or other-creation, but an act of world-creation that goes above and beyond anything we have seen in the Decadent corpus thus far: reimagining (and indeed re-appropriating) Genesis. It is impossible to see Des Esseintes' creative act in a vacuum: the *oeil-de-boeuf* window opens up the text to the possibility of the divine.

What Des Esseintes goes on to do, furthermore, is not merely to create a house, but to create a whole semiotic network: replete with meaning. In the previous chapter, in our section

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[425] Ibid*, p. 25*; "this dining-room resembled a ship's cabin, with its ceiling of arched beams...the little window-opening let into the wainscoting like a porthole".

[426] cf Emily Apter, "Cabinet Secrets: Fetishism, Prostitution, and the Fin De Siecle Interior", *Assemblage*, 9 (1989), p. 8.

[427] Ibid, p. 9.

[428] Huysmans, *À Rebours,* p. 27; "He could then imagine himself between-decks in a brig, and gazed inquisitively at some ingenious mechanical fishes driven by clockwork, which moved backwards and forwards behind the port-hole window and got entangled in artificial seaweed...he was able to enjoy quickly, almost simultaneously, all the sensations of along sea-voyage without ever leaving home.".

on *L'Ève Future,* we discussed the importance of "correspondences" in the Decadent worldview. Nowhere is that more evident than in *À Rebours*. Des Esseintes not only creates a self-sufficient universe but, more importantly, ascribes to it internally consistent *meaning*: granting each object the status of symbol in order to willfully wed meaning to it. As Charles Maingon puts it: "Des Esseintes, ne s'entoure que d'objets, que de décors choisis avec soin, pouvant preter à différentes interpétations."[429]

In one particularly famous passage, Des Esseintes constructs what he calls a "mouth-organ." Different liquors, he believes, produce different mental sounds: "Du reste, chaque liqueur correspondait, selon lui, comme goût, au son d'un instrument. Le curaçao sec, par exemple, à la clarinette dont le chant est aigrelet et velouté ; le kummel au hautbois dont le timbre sonore nasille ; la menthe et l'anisette, à la flûte, tout à la fois sucrée et poivrée, piaulante et douce ; tandis que, pour compléter l'orchestre, le kirsch sonne furieusement de la trompette ; le gin et le whisky emportent le palais avec leurs stridents éclats de pistons et de trombones, l'eau-de-vie de marc fulmine avec les assourdissants vacarmes des tubas, pendant que roulent les coups de tonnerre de la cymbale et de la caisse frappés à tour de bras, dans la peau de la bouche, par les rakis de Chio et les mastics !"[430] Style reflects substance as Huysmans' language reaches a crescendo of strangeness: in which language, as well as sounds, are "sucrée", "poivrée", and then "frappé": metaphors mix and merge in senseless synasthesia.

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[429] Charles Maingon, *L'Univers artistique de J.-K. Huysmans*, (Paris: Nizet, 1977) p. 59.

[430] Huysmans, *À Rebours,* pp. 60-1: "Indeed, each several liquor corresponded, so he held, in taste with the sound of a particular instrument. Dry curacao, for instance, was like the clarinet with its shrill, velvety note; kummel like the oboe, whose timbre is sonorous and nasal; creme de menthe and anisette like the flute, at one and the same time sweet and poignant, whining and soft. Then, to complete the orchestra, comes kirsch, blowing a wild trumpet blast; gin and whisky, deafening the palate with their harsh outbursts of comets and trombones; liqueur brandy, blaring with the overwhelming crash of the tubas, while the thunder peals of the cymbals and the big drum, beaten might and main, are reproduced in the mouth by the rakis of Chios and the mastics" .

Yet Des Esseintes emerges – at first – victorious: master of this mixture. Because he (and only he!) knows the correspondences in question, he can make use of them as an artist: creating "symphonies" in accord with his own semiotic understandings:

> il était parvenu, grâce à d'érudites expériences, à se jouer sur la langue de silencieuses mélodies, de muettes marches funèbres à grand spectacle, à entendre, dans sa bouche, des solis de menthe, des duos de vespétro et de rhum. Il arrivait même à transférer dans sa mâchoire de véritables morceaux de musique, suivant le compositeur, pas à pas, rendant sa pensée, ses effets, ses nuances, par des unions ou des contrastes voisins de liqueurs, par d'approximatifs et savants mélanges.[431]

These correspondences, like language itself, exist as "morceaux" for Des Esseintes to consume: existing only by and for him.

We must reiterate, as Paul Fox does, that this web of meanings is in no sense *normative* – it is Des Esseintes' own sensual perceptions, and these alone, that form this symbolic network.[432] Why *should*, after all, curaçao resemble a clarinet, or crème de menthe a flute? The world of Fontenay – indeed, the textual world of *À Rebours* – lacks a clear and objective referent: that which weds meaning to language. What seems at first glance like linguistic anarchy – how on earth does one "sucrée" a sound, anyhow? – is revealed to be an expression of our protagonist's semiotic tyranny: this is *his* world, we are reminded; as readers, we must acquiesce to his rules.

The world of the collector, we come to realize, is more complicated than mere acquisition of *objets d'art*. The true collector does not merely acquire, he organizes, creating a

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[431] Ibid, pp. 61-2; "These assumptions once granted, he had reached a stage, thanks to a long course of erudite experiments, when he could execute on his tongue a succession of voiceless melodies; noiseless funeral marches, solemn and stately; could hear in his mouth solos of crême de menthe, duets of vespetro and rum. He even succeeded in transferring to his palate selections of real music, following the composer's motif step by step, rendering his thought, his effects, his shades of expression, by combinations and contrasts of allied liquors, by approximations and cunning mixtures of beverages.".

[432] Paul Fox, "Dickens à La Carte: Aesthetic Victualism and the Invigoration of the Artist in Huysman's Against Nature" in Kelly Comfort, ed., A*rt and Life in Aestheticism: De-Humanizing and Re-Humanizing Art, the Artist, and the Artistic Receptor*: (Palgrave MacMillian, Hampshire, 2008), p. 65.

fully realized, cohesive world, one that does not merely exist *in opposition to* nature but replaces it.

In the end, Des Esseintes fails in this: as in all of the projects that comprise *À Rebours*. As with Edison and the *milieu* in *L'Ève Future,* Des Esseintes finds that the "fleur phéniqué, âcre, lui remémorait forcément l'identique senteur"[433] of his dentist's office, and Des Esseintes becomes involuntarily consumed by agonizing memories of having a tooth pulled: a gruesome (and appropriately Freudian) image of absence that reminds us that, for all his bravado, Des Esseintes may not be quite the master of his demesne he imagines himself to be. Actuality – both temporal (Des Esseintes' own past, taking place in the concrete and physical world) – and biological (Des Esseintes is no more able to escape his fate as a human animal than anyone else) reveals Des Esseintes' perceived autonomy as the illusion that it is. So too does the image of the gaping mouth, the absent tooth, prefigure the nightmare of the "savage Nidularium", *vagina dentata* intact – a phantasmagoric expression of *natura victrix* – that will soon cause Des Esseintes to wake up in a cold sweat.

At the margins of Des Esseintes' own story, there is an unsettling presence-in-absence: an *unknown* whose meaning is beyond Des Esseintes' control.

Before we talk about the theological concepts that underpin Des Esseintes' project, however, it's vital to explore another element to *À Rebours:* Des Esseintes' hatred not only of the natural, but of the man-made. He is, after all, moving *from* Paris to the countryside: and Paris – the bustling, bourgeois, boulevard-lined capital of the modern age – figures as prominently in *À Rebours* as does the natural world, strengthening an interpretation of "Nature" in this text to signify *alterity* as a whole, rather than merely the biological.

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[433] Huysmans, *À Rebours,* p. 62; "acrid, carbolic bouquet forcibly recalled the identical scent".

Des Esseintes after all despises the modern city, hating "de toutes ses forces, les générations nouvelles, ces couches d'affreux rustres qui éprouvent le besoin de parler et de rire haut dans les restaurants et dans les cafés, qui vous bousculent, sans demander pardon, sur les trottoirs, qui vous jettent, sans même s'excuser, sans même saluer, les roues d'une voiture d'enfant entre les jambes."[434] The world of Paris is, for Des Esseintes, as inherently chaotic and senseless as that of his "sempiternelle radoteuse": in one memorable scene, Des Esseintes remembers the plight of a friend who with his new bride took a new-built apartment "au coin d'un nouveau boulevard, dans l'un de ces modernes appartements tournés en rotonde" only to discover the impossibility of living "dans ce salon où les canapés et les consoles ne touchaient pas aux murs et branlaient aussitôt qu'on les frôlait, malgré leurs cales."[435]When viewed against the world of man-made "order" we find established at Fontenay through such devices as the mouth-organ, the ill-harmonized artificiality of a circular flat in which nothing will fit is all the more striking an indictment of modern Paris: something that is at once created and yet fails as a self-sufficient system.

The word of commerce, of the artificial, of the mass-produced at once thrills and repulses Des Esseintes. On the one hand, he uses imagery of the automaton to decry his female lovers: hinting that they lack any individuality, but are all "des automates remontés à la fois par la même clef."[436] Yet he is rapt in his erotic praise of railway cars: "a Crampton, une adorable blonde, à la voix aiguë, à la grande taille frêle, emprisonnée dans un étincelant corset de cuivre, au souple et nerveux allongement de chatte, une blonde pimpante et dorée...,

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[434] Huysmans, *À Rebours,* p. t64; "all the hatred that was in him the rising generation, the appalling boors who find it necessary to talk and laugh at the top of their voices in restaurants and cafés, who jostle you in the street without a word of apology and who, without expressing or even indicating regret, drive the wheels of a baby-carriage into your leg.".

[435] Ibid, pp. 88-9; "on the corner of a newly-constructed boulevard, in one of those modern flats built on a circular plan"; "the impossibility of living" in a sitting-room where sofas and consola-tables would not go against the walls and wobbled at the slightest touch";

[436] Ibid,. 170; "automatons wound up with the same key".

l'Engerth, une monumentale et sombre brune aux cris sourds et rauques."[437] He despises commerce – he laments how "Le négoce avait envahi les cloîtres où, en guise d'antiphonaires, les grands livres de commerce posaient sur des lutrins...Les monastères s'étaient métamorphosés en des usines d'apothicaires et de liquoristes."[438] Even the commercial seems to exert a strange thrill over Des Esseintes in some passages: upon making perfumes that recall memories of his former mistresses, he wonders if "Puis de ce fabuleux subterfuge d'une campagne, une médication intelligente peut sortir ...sous un faux climat, aidé par des bouches de poêles, les souvenirs libertins renaîtront, très doux...e médecin peut, par cette supercherie, substituer platoniquement, pour son malade, l'atmosphère des boudoirs de Paris, des filles."[439]

Des Esseintes longs for the Middle Ages, and yet he evinces a fascination with the power of *technology* to imitate and indeed replace Nature.

How are we to read this ambiguity?

On the one hand, Nature seems outmoded and useless: meaningless and God-forsaken. Modernity and technology have proven fine replacements for the crone; man's creative mastery has replaced that of God. Nature is not a complex work of art but a "uniformité": denied not merely the divine status it might have had as a *created* entity but indeed any kind of semiotic complexity.

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[437] Ibid, p. 31 "Crampton is an adorable blonde with a shrill voice, a long slender body imprisoned in a shiny brass corset and supple catlike movements, a smart golden blonde....Engerth by name, is a strapping saturnine brunette given to uttering raucous guttural cries.".

[438] Ibid, p. 283, "Commercialism had invaded the cloisters, where, in lieu of antiphonaries, fat account-books lay on the lecterns...the monasteries had been turned into factories or distilleries".

[439] Ibid, pp. 158-9; "out of this fabulous counterfeit of the countryside a sensible form of medical treatment could be developed...in an artificial climate maintained by open stoves, their lecherous memories would come back to them in a mild and harmless form...the physician could supply his patient platonically with the atmosphere of the boudoirs and brothels of Paris.".

Yet – the very nature of the modern: the mass-produced, the urban crowd that causes Des Esseintes such psychic torment by pressing up against him in the street, demands identity, the *uniformité* of *la foule*. After all, what is it that makes Des Esseintes' lovers mere "automates remontés" but allows him to be a fully-realized "personnage"? Yet, in the absence of any kind of theological anthropology – any theology of the soul that asserts the inherent dignity and irreducibility of the individual self – what answer does Des Esseintes have? (Des Esseintes is perhaps the perfect example of the "crisis of nonbeing" described in the Introduction).

In Des Esseintes' creative project, in his obsession with the singular, the collector's item, trare triptychs and Moreau paintings, we find our protagonist railing against neither "nature" nor "civilization" but rather against "sameness": against a loss of the self into the crowd. (The reason for his "crowning joy" over the administering of his peptone enema, after all, is that "on n'irait pas plus loin, la nourriture ainsi absorbée était, à coup sûr, la dernière déviation qu'on pût commettre."[440] – a prefiguring of the idea later developed in *Là-Bas* that pygmalionism is the greatest sin one can commit.") It is telling that the first image we see of Des Esseintes' ill-fated trip to the dentist's office, that which fills him which such dread, is "les larges crachats rouges"[441]: a river into which so many others have poured their oral effluvia. Is this the "déluge", the Christian stream Des Esseintes wonders if you "se laisser emporter par ce courant?" Certainly, Des Esseintes finds no "arche" against it; he, too, is struck down by an abcessed tooth, and by the chapter's close is "lançant, à son tour, des crachats sanglants sur les marches": a turn of phrase that highlights the inevitability of Des Esseintes' contribution to the whole.[442]

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[440] Ibid, p. 274; "No one...would ever go any farther, taking nourishment in this way was undoubtedly the ultimate deviation from the norm.".

[441] Ibid, p. 64; "the sight of great splashes of blood and spittle".

[442] Ibid, p. 66; "dding his contribution to the bloody spittle on the stairs".

It is that sense of "uniformité" – rather that Nature *naturans* or *de facto* modernity – that Des Esseintes despises. Nature is cyclical, its bounty repeatable, as is the provenance of the production line, but at Fontenay, every treasure is specific, irreproducible.

It is telling that Des Esseintes is obsessed with finding the *essence* of things – that which cannot be broken down, that which makes a thing a *thing*; he spends a great deal of time meditating on the power of his "Pearls of the Pyrenées" bonbons, une goutte de parfum de sarcanthus, une goutte d'essence féminine, cristallisée dans un morceau de sucre"[443] which has the power to conjure up a memory of a real live woman before him. Des Esseintes' maxim that "Le tout est de savoir s'y prendre, de savoir concentrer son esprit sur un seul point, de savoir s'abstraire suffisamment pour amener l'hallucination et pouvoir substituer le rêve de la réalité à la réalité même."[444] has more often than not been interpreted as a paean to the possibility of that "rêve" – and so it is, at least in part. But no less important in reading that passage is Des Esseintes' desire to find that "seul point": that element of irreducibility from which the vision of "reality" might spring.

From the standpoint of Christian theology, such an irreducible "essence" might be found in the concept of the soul. In its absence, Des Esseintes' "crisis of nonbeing" is doomed to fail.

We have earlier discussed Des Esseintes' autonomy: his conviction that he is at once creator, master, sole spectator, sole masterwork, and sole critic of the world of Fontenay-aux-Roses. Already we – and indeed Huysmans – have cast some doubt on that conviction. There are "others" in Des Esseintes' world, but Des Esseintes treats them not, as Entragues and

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[443] Ibid, p. 133*;* ""a drop of schoenanthus scent or female essence crystallized in pieces of sugar".

[444] Ibid, p. 29; "The main thing is to know how to set about it, to be able to concentrate your attention on a single detail, to forget yourself sufficiently to bring about the desired hallucination and so substitute the vision of a reality for the reality itself".

Ewald have done, as raw organic material to be molded into the appropriate artistic shape, but rather as necessary evils: his "creation" is to make them as invisible as possible.

Des Esseintes takes pains to ensure that his silent servants' presence never bothers him: his servants are "habitué à un emploi de garde-malade, à une régularité d'infirmiers distribuant, d'heure en heure, des cuillerées de potion et de tisane, à un rigide silence de moines claustrés, sans communication avec le dehors, dans des pièces aux fenêtres et aux portes closes...Il leur céda le premier étage de la maison, les obligea à porter d'épais chaussons de feutre, fit placer des tambours le long des portes bien huilées et matelasser leur plancher de profonds tapis de manière à ne jamais entendre le bruit de leurs pas, au-dessus de sa tête."[445] (What the servants make of this we can only speculate.) He has his housekeeper – whom he knows he cannot help but see from time to time – adopt the habit of a nun: "il voulut que son ombre, lorsqu'elle traversait les carreaux de ses fenêtres, ne fût pas hostile, et il lui fit fabriquer un costume en faille flamande, avec bonnet blanc et large capuchon, baissé, noir, tel qu'en portent encore, à Gand, les femmes du béguinage."[446] (Here, too, he despises her because she is "commonplace", repeatable; it is only by ascribing to her *uniformité* a quasi-sacralized meaning – she is one of many because she is a "nun" – that he can accept her presence.)

If we accept that Des Esseintes's fundamental terror of both modernity and nature lies in his fear of *sameness*, of being subsumed within the embrace of *identity*, a terror grounded in his inability to understand what might make an individual a "real" and irreplacable

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[445] Ibid, p. 23; "trained to administer spoonfuls of physic and medicinal brews at regular intervals and inured to the absolute silence of cloistered monks, barred from all communication with the outside world and confined to rooms were the doors and windows were always shut...he made them wear thick felt slippers, had the doors fitted with tambours and their hinges well-oiled and covered the floors with long-pile carpeting, to make sure that he never heard the sound of their footsteps overhead.".

[446] Ibid, p. 24; "he had no desire to see her commonplace silhouette through the window, he had a costume made for her of Flemish faille, with a white cap and a great black hood let down on the shoulders, such as the beguines still wear to this day at Ghent".

individual, Des Esseintes' treatment of other people: as, essentially, *objects*, makes even more sense. Des Esseintes' semiotic network, developed as it is when it comes to the correspondence of color, sound, and taste, offers little in the way of anthropology: he has ascribed "meaningfulness" to anisette, to the color orange, to the taste of crème de menthe, but there is no inherent (or even ascribed) meaning to those few characters Des Esseintes encounters.

Thus, in one telling passage, does Des Esseintes make his imaginary "trip to England": visiting an English pub in Paris. There, he does not even *see* the denizens of the pub itself: they are described not as beings-in-themselves but only relationally: in relation to the novels of Charles Dickens of which Des Esseintes is so fond: he imagines: "ici, les cheveux blancs et le teint enflammé de Monsieur Wickfield; là, la mine flegmatique et rusée et l'œil implacable de Monsieur Tulkinghorn, le funèbre avoué de Bleak-house. Positivement, tous se détachaient de sa mémoire, s'installaient, dans la Bodéga, avec leurs faits et leurs gestes; ses souvenirs, ravivés par de récentes lectures, atteignaient une précision inouïe. La ville du romancier, la maison bien éclairée, bien chauffée, bien servie, bien close, les bouteilles lentement versées par la petite Dorrit, par Dora Copperfield, par la sœur de Tom Pinch, lui apparurent naviguant ainsi qu'une arche tiède, dans un déluge de fange et de suie. Il s'acagnarda dans ce Londres fictif."[447] Des Esseintes' characters here are only real or valid *insofar as* they measure up to his idea of what they *ought to be*. Des Esseintes is, in other words, completely incapable of engaging with things as they are in reality. (Note here, too,

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[447] Ibid, p. 173 "imagining here Mr Wickfield's white hair and ruddy complexion, there the sharp, expressionless features and unfeeling eyes of Mr. Tulkinghorn, the grim lawyer of *Bleak House*. These characters stepped right out of his memory to take their places in the Bodega, complete with all their mannerisms and gestures, for his recollections, revived by a recent reading of the novels, were astonishingly precise and detailed. The Londoner's home as described by the novelist – well lighted, well heated, and well appointed with bottles being slowly emptied by Little Dorrit, Dora Copperfield, or Tom Pinch's sister Ruth – appeared to him in the guise of a cosy ark sailing through a deluge of soot and mire. He settled down comfortable in the London of the imagination",

the language of the "arche" – sacralized language that Des Esseintes repurposes to cast all the "soot and mire" as a single *déluge* characterized by its *uniformité*.)

There are a few instances in *À Rebours,* however, in which Des Esseintes *does* engage with another person in an act of "other-creation" similar to those we have discussed in the previous chapter. The most notable of these is Des Esseintes' attempt to "préparer un assassin"[448] out of the young boy Auguste Langlois, whom he encounters in one of his noctural Parisian peregrinations before leaving for Fontenay, and whose story is recounted in a flashback in Chapter VI. Des Esseintes takes the impoverished Langlois to a brothel and pays the madam in advance for a certain number of sessions: ensuring, he hopes, that Langlois will get 'hooked' on the services of prostitutes there and turn to murder or other crime to support his newfound habit. Here, too, Des Esseintes engages in an act of conscious, ironic self-divinization: he reminds Langlois to keep in mind that "cette parole quasi-évangélique : Fais aux autres ce que tu ne veux pas qu'ils te fassent"[449] – casting himself as a perverse Christ. So too does Des Esseintes exclaim – upon finding no evidence of a criminalized Langlois in the newspapers he reads – "le petit Judas!"[450] While we as readers may glean from Huysmans' treatment of the encounter that Des Esseintes is not quite as powerful an artist as he thinks he is – Langlois clearly is capable of autonomous thought and action – Des Esseintes can conceive of Langlois's failure to become a "murderer" only as a quasi-religious betrayal: a kind of blasphemous blasphemy in which Langlois refuses to play by the "rules" in which Des Esseintes, as Christ/God/creator of his own universe, has laid out.

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[448] Ibid, p. 92; "make a murderer",

[449] Ibid, p. 93; "almost evangelic dictum: Do unto others as you would not have them do unto you".

[450] Ibid, p. 94; "the little Judas!",

Tellingly, we see Langlois only in flashback: he is, *de facto*, a failed experiment; we have gleaned – by virtue of Des Esseintes' very need for a *theïbade* – that the act of "making" Langlois has proved an insufficient artistic exercise for Des Esseintes. By establishing that Des Esseintes has already tried (and failed) to take part in the act of other-creation, Huysmans makes Des Esseintes' act of world-creation all the more significant. While the "other" who is created in D'Aurevilly and Villiers (and suggested in the Des Esseintes-Langlois relationship) is both a physical and a psychological "canvas" – a blank slate on which the artist's narrative can be written on both fronts – by the time we reach Fontenay Des Esseintes denies "others" have any psychological "canvas" at all: he goes from making a "murderer" to simply adorning the physical flesh of a woman with a nun's habit, entirely unconcerned with whether or not she thinks or feels anything at all.

Thus, in *À Rebours*, the dichotomous power-struggles we find in D'Aurevilly, Villiers, and Gourmont are replaced by fanatic monism: the erotics of storyteller/listener, artist/subject, male/female, ceding to a world in which Des Esseintes encapsulates and embodies all existence: a textual landscape in which there can be no plot, no movement, no tension, because, for Des Esseintes, there is nothing outside the self.

This brings us to what it means to *create a world*: the project that so obsesses Des Esseintes, and, more importantly, what it means for Des Esseintes' stance (we might even call it a theology) on the world that exists outside Fontenay's walls (and, implicitly, what it means for the relationship between textual world and world-outside more generally). We have already discussed the semiotic component of Des Esseintes' project – how part of Des Esseintes' world-creation demands a creation of associations and meanings. But to understand why such a web is so vital to Des Esseintes, we must understand why Des Esseintes feels that the world outside Fontenay has failed to provide him with those such meanings.

Des Esseintes' attitude toward the natural world, we have said, is not entirely consistent. In some passages, Des Esseintes' response to the natural world seems to tell us more about his neurotic relationship with Paris – with the world of the commercial, the bourgeois, and the mass-produced – than it does with nature itself. Thus does Des Esseintes become obsessed with the artificial appearance of a certain landscape, which appears "poudrée de farine d'amidon et enduite de blanc cold-cream ; dans l'air tiède, éventant les herbes décolorées et distillant de bas parfums d'épices, les arbres frottés de craie par la lune, ébouriffaient de pâles feuillages"[451] Here, Des Esseintes' neuroses seem more tied to the language of makeup, with its attendant implications of commerce and middle-class consumption – "face-powder", "cold-cream", cheap perfumes, bleach. Such a perspective tells us less about *Nature*, as such, and more about Des Esseintes' perspective of the world as a whole: a place where things can be "made up", and are, therefore, not what they seem. This brings us back, once again, to the idea of inherent meaning, that things can be what they seem (or indeed, can be what they are). In the landscape that Des Esseintes presents to us, even the natural world appears false, untrustworthy, lacking any referent to the real.

Elsewhere, Nature is presented as merely impotent – raw material onto which artificial projection by a worthy artist is desirable, so long as Des Esseintes is himself that artist: ""a plupart du temps la nature est, à elle seule, incapable de procréer des espèces aussi malsaines et aussi perverses ; elle fournit la matière première, le germe et le sol, la matrice nourricière et les éléments de la plante que l'homme élève, modèle, peint, sculpte ensuite à sa guise."[452] Even those few natural plants Des Esseintes prizes – for looking like they are

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[451] Ibid, p. 32 "seemed as if it were sprinkled with face-powder and smeared with cold-cream. In the warm breeze that fanned the colourless grass and scented the air with cheap, spicy perfumes, the moon-bleached trees rustled their pale foliage".

[452] Ibid, p. 121; "it is true that most of the time Nature is incapable of producing such depraved unhealthy species alone and unaided; she supplies the raw materials, the seed and the soil, the nourishing womb and the elements of the plant, which man rears, shapes, paints, and carves afterward to suit his fancy.".

artificial – are cast as an anomaly: "l'étoffe, le papier, la porcelaine, le métal, paraissaient avoir été prêtés par l'homme à la nature pour lui permettre de créer ses monstres. Quand elle n'avait pu imiter l'œuvre humaine, elle avait été réduite à recopier les membranes intérieures des animaux, à emprunter les vivaces teintes de leurs chairs en pourriture, les magnifiques hideurs de leurs gangrènes."[453]

Other times, Des Esseintes' prevailing perspective is that Nature is simply dull, monotonous: the great sin of the natural world is, as we have discussed before, its uniformité: "le ciel était uniformément plat, couvert d'une taie saumâtre. Peu à peu, cette taie parut descendre, une brume d'eau enveloppa la campagne…délayant les allées, gâchant les routes, joignant avec ses fils innombrables la terre au ciel ; la lumière se brouilla ; un jour livide éclaira le village maintenant transformé en un lac de boue pointillé par les aiguilles de l'eau qui piquaient de gouttes de vif argent le liquide fangeux des flaques."[454] Here, we see Des Esseintes' fear of identity in action: "watery mist" – water here as elsewhere in Huysmans suggesting an erasure of borders – "heaven and earth" are joined as even that boundary is destroyed. Water and earth, too, converge in the presentation of the village as a "lake of mud": its diversity (and presumably the people within in it) collapsed into a single image of semi-liquidity.

But elsewhere, in Des Esseintes' nightmares, Nature appears in another form entirely – as *natura victrix* – the all-consuming Venus Fly-Trap, a syphilitic whore who threatens pox and castration in equal measure: a dream in which "Amorphophallus jaillirent de toutes parts,

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[453] Ibid, p. 120 "it was as if cloth, paper, porcelain, and metal had been lent by man to Nature to enable her to create these monstrosities. Where she had not found it possible to imitate the work of human hands, she had been reduced to copying the membranes of animals' organs, to borrowing the vivid tints of their rotting flesh, the hideous splendors of their gangrened skin.".

[454] Ibid, p. 162; ""This film seemed to be falling ever lower and at the same time the countryside was enveloped in a watery mist...swamping the lanes, submerging the roads, joining heaven and earth with its countless threads. Daylight in the village dimmed to a ghastly twilight, while the village itself looked like a lake of mud, speckled by the quicksilver needles of rain pricking the surface of the slimy puddle".

s'élancèrent vers ce ventre qui se soulevait et s'abaissait comme une mer. Il les avait écartés, repoussés, éprouvant un dégoût sans borne à voir grouiller entre ses doigts ces tiges tièdes et fermes ; puis subitement, les odieuses plantes avaient disparu et deux bras cherchaient à l'enlacer...les affreux yeux de la femme étaient devenus d'un bleu clair et froid, terribles. Il fit un effort surhumain pour se dégager de ses étreintes, mais d'un geste irrésistible, elle le retint, le saisit et, hagard, il vit s'épanouir sous les cuisses à l'air, le farouche Nidularium qui bâillait, en saignant, dans des lames de sabre."[455] Such a horrific nocturnal rendering ascribes to Nature the powers Des Esseintes denies her by daylight: autonomy and the potential for artistic creation hinted at by the phallic imagery of the "amorphophalli...hot, firm stems" that vanish and become the Nidularium's "enfolding arms." Here, all of Nature does not get subsumed into *uniformité* – the subject of a single identity – but rather is granted discrete personhood: Nature is not a uniform whole but a single woman, imbued with agency, defying Des Esseintes' insistence that externality lacks individuality.

What, then, unites all these disparate perspectives? How do we account for a view of the natural world that is at once accusatory – Nature is a liar and not to be trusted?; Nature is sickly and dangerous– and condescending – Nature lacks any agency at all and exists only to be shaped by man; it is a withered old woman; it is dull and monotonous?

Only a theological reading of *À Rebours* can fully encompass all these seemingly contradictory elements. Des Esseintes' response to nature is what it is because nature (or, to be more precise, the entire world that exists outside of his *theïbade*, be it the Haussmannian boulevards of Paris or the fields of Fontenay – the world of alterity) is essentially *godless*. It

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[455] Ibid, p. 127; " "Amorphophalli sprang up on every side and stabbed at her belly, which was rising and falling like a sea. He thrust them aside and pushed them back, utterly nauseated by the sight of these hot firm stems twisting and turning between his fingers. Then all of a sudden the odious plants had disappeared and two arms were trying to enfold him...the woman's awful eyes had turned a clear cold blue, quite terrible to see. he made a superhuman effort to free himself from her embrace but with an irresistible movement she clutched him and held him and pale with horror he saw the savage Nidularium blossoming between her uplifted thighs, with its swordplates gaping open to expose the bloody depths."

is uncreated (in a theological sense); because of this, it lacks order, structure, meaning. Des Esseintes may "separate the waters" as one of his first acts in Fontenay, but in the absence of the God of Genesis so to do, nobody can separate earth from sky.

In the absence of order, there is also no inherent meaningfulness to nature (a concept that, we shall see, Huysmans treats from the perspective of a man of faith in the Durtal novels, where the whole world is transformed into a Baudelairean, yet Church-approved, "forest of symbols"), and so nature is inherently artificial, even as the "crisis of nonbeing" reveals that human beings are themselves just like the automatons gaining cultural traction in the rhetoric and imagery Parisian urban discourse.

Because nothing means anything, there is no more moral or spiritual honesty in a landscape than in a heavily-made-up Parisian prostitute sporting cheap perfume, or one of the Goncourts' robot-whores. Everything is and is not artificial; truth – as in D'Aurevilly onwards – is thus unstable even without a moral account of the reliability of any given teller.

Yet the purely biological is doubly terrifying: for in Des Esseintes' model, there is no place for salvation or for an afterlife: Nature implies sickness (the rhetorical relationship of atheism-positivism-biological determinism-disease-death Huysmans takes from his mentor Zola); sickness leads to death; death by its very inevitability reveals Des Esseintes' godlike authorial-artistic autonomy as a lie.

The uncreated, objective world is governed by no laws except Darwinism: it is brutish and nasty; life is short. In one telling passage, Des Esseintes looks out his window at Fontenay to see two boys eating a local peasant food: "une miche, du fromage blanc, de la ciboule, prescrivit qu'on lui apprêtât une tartine."[456] and feels a "depraved longing" to taste it. Having been suffering from dietary problems, Des Esseintes demands that his servants make

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[456] Ibid, p. 218; "disgusting white mess – skim-milk cheese spread on a hunk of bread and sprinkled with chopped garlic"

him the same thing, only to find he cannot stomach this either. He has the food placed on the path and allows the boys to fight it out for an extra slice: reflecting "à la cruelle et abominable loi de la lutte pour l'existence, et bien que ces enfants fussent ignobles, il ne put s'empêcher de s'intéresser à leur sort et de croire que mieux eût valu pour eux que leur mère n'eût point mis bas....Quelle folie que de procréer des gosses!"[457] The primal desire for food, to engage with the natural world in this very basic way, is here linked to a whole animal form of existence that leads Des Esseintes to despair.

But what evidence that we have that this animal form is theological in nature? The next section of this chapter will discuss religious imagery in *À Rebours* in greater detail, but one image in particular seems particularly relevant to our discussion here: a painting beloved by Des Esseintes which he hangs on his wall – Rodolphe Bresdin's *Comedy of Death* – and which he describes early in the novel as

> une invraisemblable paysage, hérissé d'arbres, de taillis, de touffes, affectant des formes de démons et de fantômes, couverts d'oiseaux à têtes de rats, à queues de légumes, sur un terrain semé de vertèbres, de côtes, de crânes, des saules se dressent, noueux et crevassés, surmontés de squelettes agitant, les bras en l'air, un bouquet, entonnant un chant de victoire, tandis qu'un Christ s'enfuit dans un ciel pommelé,...qu'un misérable meurt, épuisé de privations, exténué de faim, étendu sur le dos, les pieds devant une mare.[458]

Here, the *Comedy of Death* holds up a dark mirror to the nature Des Esseintes has hitherto described. The landscape is "improbable" – things make no sense – birds have the heads of rats and the tails of plants: a phantasmagoria of disorder. Privation, hunger –

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[457] Ibid, p. 219; "on the cruel and abominable law of the struggle for life and contemptible though the children were, he could not help feeling sorry for them, and thinking it would have been better for them if their mothers had never borne them...what madness it was to beget children.""

[458] Ibid, p. 80; "an improbable landscape which bristles with trees...thickets in the shape of demons or phantoms and full of birds with rats' heads and vegetable tails. From the ground, which is littered with vertebrae, ribs and skulls, there spring gnarled and shaky willow-trees in which skeletons are perched, waving bouquets and chanting songs of victory, while a Christ flies away into a mackerel sky...and a beggar dies of privation and hunger, stretched out on his back, his feet pointing to a stagnant pool.".

presaging the village boys' squabble over a hunk of bread – abound. The inevitability of a meaningless death casts its shadow over everything. And Christ himself is powerfully absent, "flying away" from those who need him most.

But is Huysmans' view the same as Des Esseintes' own? At various points throughout *À Rebours,* Huysmans hints that Des Esseintes' view may not be all there is. One moment in particular stands out as a rare "positive" portrayal of the natural world within the text: a moment that, tellingly, comes just after Des Esseintes has encrusted his tortoise in gemstones (which, as we discussed in the introduction to this chapter, can be read as an act of world-making in miniature), immediately before the tortoise itself dies: making plain the implausibility of Des Esseintes' mission. Des Esseintes goes to the window, where he sees the following:

> Ainsi qu'une haute tenture de contre-hermine, le ciel se levait devant lui, noir et moucheté de blanc. Un vent glacial courut, accéléra le vol éperdu de la neige, intervertit l'ordre des couleurs. La tenture héraldique du ciel se retourna, devint une véritable hermine, blanche, mouchetée de noir, à son tour, par les points de nuit dispersés entre les flocons.[459]

Nowhere else in *À Rebours* is the natural world treated with this kind of reverence: it is treated not merely as "ermine" – i.e., the traditional clothing of a king – but indeed "heraldic": signifying identity: a device that foreshadows the use of established symbols in *La Cathédrale* to convey divine authority (However, Barbe Speckman, interpreting this passage, takes the opposite approach, arguing that the use of *"véritable*" rather than "*vrai*" destabilizes the real/false dichotomy, and renders the treatment of the sky here yet another example of Des Esseintes creating his own world of "heraldic" associations). But the singularity of Des Esseintes evincing a positive view of anything that happens outside his

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[459] Ibid, p. 59 "like a great canopy of counter-emine, the sky hung before him: a black curtain spattered with white. Suddenly an icy wind blew up which drove the dancing snowflakes before it and reversed this arrangement of colours. The sky's heraldic trappings were turned round to reveal a true ermine, white dotted with black where pinpricks of darkness showed through the curtain of falling snow"

window, combined with the placing in the text immediately before the tortoise's demise, and the traditional heraldic association of ermine with a "kingly" authority, renders this passage more convincing as a thematic lacuna in the text.[460]

The very nature of Des Esseintes' failure, furthermore, hints at the natural world's power to destabilize his aesthetic project; nearly every chapter features an instance of Des Esseintes' being "punished" for his belief that he can remake the world in his image. In the perfume-making chapter, for example, Des Esseintes is tormented by the smell of fragipane, the source of which he cannot identify. He begins to make perfumes: an attempt to control and exert a narrative shaping force upon his environment, and we begin to forget the frangipane as we are lost in a new network of scent-perfume associations.

At the end of the chapter, however, Des Esseintes' "closed circle" breaks open: fragipane makes a return that borders on parodic:

> Il ouvrit la croisée toute large, heureux de prendre un bain d'air; mais, soudain, il lui parut que la brise soufflait un vague montant d'essence de bergamot...et, à nouveau, la frangipane, dont son odorat avait perçu les éléments et préparé l'analyse, fusa de la vallée de Fontenay jusqu'au fort, assaillant ses narines excédées, ébranlant encore ses nerfs rompus, le jetant dans une telle prostration qu'il s'affaissa évanoui, presque mourant, sur la barre d'appui de la fenêtre.[461]

Des Esseintes is felled – nearly *killed* – by the realization that there is something that exists outside his self-enclosed universe. Here, far from being merely a set of raw materials with which Des Esseintes wishes to play, Nature takes an *active* role: *Des Esseintes* becomes the object.

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[460] Barbe Spackman, "Interversions" in Liz Constable (ed), *Perennial Decay: on the aesthetics and politics of decadence* (Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 42ff.

[461] Ibid, p. 161 "He threw he window wide open, delighted to take a bath of fresh air, but suddenly it struck him that the breeze was bringing with it a whiff of bergamot oil...and the familiar scent of frangipane, the elements of which his sense of smell had detected and recognized, spread from the valley of Fontenay all the way to the Fort, assailing his jaded nostrils, shaking anew his shattered nerves, and throwing him into such a state of prostration that he fell fainting, almost dying, across the window-sill".

That it is *smell* that breaks in in such a way is particularly interesting. For Des Esseintes – the collector, the self-storyteller, for whom language and control is everything – the fact that it is a *smell* he cannot control (and hence something that transcends language) hints at a power structure that transcends that of narrator/author/storyteller and canvas/blank text. (Here we can see echoes of our discussion of the *milieu* in our section on *L'Ève Future*.) Where language fails, something else – something powerful – exists.

This brings us to the fundamental question of *À Rebours*: what role does God – at once present and absent – play in the text? On the one hand, the world Des Esseintes sees is a godless one: Christ flying off into the mackerel sky as in the *Comedy of Death*. On the other hand, Des Esseintes is very much engaging in a kind of conscious, ironic blasphemy – the wink of the *oeuil-de-boeuf* window, his "evangelic dictas" to Langlois, the world-building on the back of that jewel-encrusted turtle – all reveal Des Esseintes as engaged in a degree of brinksmanship with that absent God.

Indeed, subversive religious imagery abounds in *À Rebours,* as we have already discussed. But Des Esseintes' relationship with the sacred goes beyond mere sacrilege. Throughout the text – long before that final semi-conversion – Des Esseintes finds himself engaged in theological debate with himself. *Language* (in a telling opposition to the olfactory effects of frangipane) takes on a fundamentally distancing quality, as Des Esseintes is able to use his mastery of words to talk himself into and out of various theological perspectives. Thus he begins to meditate: "Il savait pourtant bien, en descendant en lui, qu'il n'aurait jamais l'esprit d'humilité et de pénitence vraiment chrétien; il savait, à n'en pouvoir hésiter, que ce moment dont parle Lacordaire, ce moment de la grâce 'où le dernier trait de lumière pénètre dans l'âme et rattache à un centre commun les vérités qui y sont éparses' ne viendrait

jamais pour lui."[462] The "drawing together to a common centre" is a telling counterpart to the unordered and meaningless world with which Des Esseintes presents us. Yet such meditation knocks Des Esseintes off his comfortable pedestal – he is "mécontent de ne plus être maître absolu chez lui"[463] (here, too, the implied rivalry with God makes an appearance) and he uses that well-worn dandyist trick of clever narration to reconfigure the situation into a storyline that better fits his purpose: "il avait dû forcément se tourner du côté du sacerdoce, puisque l'Église a, seule, recueilli l'art, la forme perdue des siècles"[464]

He then "flips the script", so to speak, defending his project of world-making as fundamentally theologically sound: ""'Ainsi ses tendances vers l'artifice, ses besoins d'excentricité, n'étaient-ils pas, en somme, des résultats d'études spécieuses, de raffinements extraterrestres, de spéculations quasi-théologiques; c'étaient, au fond, des transports, des élans vers un idéal, vers un univers inconnu, vers une béatitude lointaine."[465] All this continues until "a cervelle, un grouillement de paradoxes, de subtilités, un vol de poils fendus en quatre, un écheveau de règles"[466] Grace escapes Des Esseintes precisely because his soul cannot be "entered"; it, like his *theïbade,* is resolutely closed off from outside interference. His pessimism cannot be solved by grace, but only bolstered by Schopenhaurian despair: indeed, he argues that Schopenhauer "était plus exact... 'C'est vraiment une misère que de

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[462] Ibid, p. 100; "He was well aware on looking into his heart that he could never feel the humility and contrition of a true Christian; he knew beyond all doubt that the moment of which Lacordaire speaks, that moment of grace 'when the last ray of light enters the soul and draws together to a common centre all the truths" that lie scatter therein' would never come for him".

[463] Ibid, p. 101; "annoyed at finding that he was no longer master in his own house".

[464] Ibid; "he told himself that he had been obliged to turn to the Church, in that the Church was the only body to have preserved the art of past centuries".

[465] Ibid, p. 103; "Thus his penchant for artificiality and his love of eccentricity could surely be explained as the results of sophistical studies, super-terrestrial subtleties, semi-theological speculations; fundamentally, they were ardent aspirations towards an ideal, towards an unknown universe, towards a distant beatitude".

[466] Ibid, p. 105; "his brain was a seething mass of paradoxes and sophisms, a tangle of split hairs, a maze of rules.".

vivre sur la terre!'"[467] calling the philosopher's Pessisism "la grande consolatrice des intelligences choisies, des âmes élevées"[468]

This dynamic is rendered explicit in a discussion about Des Esseintes' relationship with the Catholic liturgy. The experience, we learn, initially quells Des Esseintes' mental agony: "Là, il n'avait plus de raisonnement à se faire, plus de débats à supporter; c'était une indéfinissable impression de respect et de crainte ; le sens artiste était subjugué par les scènes si bien calculées des catholiques."[469] As in the case of the smell of fragipane, participation in ritual allows Des Esseintes a brief moment of respite from his need for verbal mastery (here also equated with "artistic sense"). Yet, no sooner does this occur than, in "une subite rébellion"[470] Des Esseintes' mind starts up again: distancing hims from the possibility of unmediated experience: " des idées de ces sacrilèges prévus par le manuel des confesseurs, des ignominieux et impurs abus de l'eau bénite et de l'huile sainte...; des folies de magie, de messe noire, de sabbat,"[471] All sinful, blasphemous acts, to be sure, but to look only at the *content* of Des Esseintes' runaway thoughts would be to overlook the importance of the fact they exist at all, and indeed exist as "revolt": the great "profanity" is not the Black Mass, but the mind that cannot submit to being "entered" (or, as in our discussion of *Les Diaboliques* and *Claire Lenoir*, "penetrated.")

Huysmans treats the act of speech, whether inner or expressed, as a way in which the destabilized self can regain control by pointing to the logistic and narrative cohesion of its

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[467] Ibid, pp. 107-8; "came nearer to the truth....'Verily it is a pitiful thing to live on earth'".

[468] Ibid, pp. 108-9; "the great comforter of superior minds and lofty souls".

[469] Ibid, p. 107; "Here there was no longer any room for argument or discussion; there was no denying that he had an indefinable feeling of veneration and fear, that his artistic sense was subjugated by the nicely calculated scenes of Catholic ceremonial".

[470] Ibid; " in a sudden mood of revolt".

[471] Ibid, "ideas of monstrous depravity came to him – thoughts of the profanities foreseen in the Confessors' Manual, of the impure and ignominious ways holy water and consecrated oil could be abused...mad rites of magical ceremonies, black masses and witches' sabbath".

experience. By telling the "right" story about himself, to himself, Des Esseintes can return to a place of psychic comfort, secure in the knowledge that he is the hero of his own story. Even towards the end of the novel, as Des Esseintes struggles with a longing for faith, narrative control forestalls real self-subjugating grace: "Il eût voulu que cet état de suspicion dans lequel il s'était vainement débattu, à Fontenay, prît fin ; maintenant qu'il devait faire peau neuve, il eût voulu se forcer à posséder la foi, à se l'incruster dès qu'il la tiendrait, à se la visser par des crampons dans l'âme, à la mettre enfin à l'abri de toutes ces réflexions qui l'ébranlent et qui la déracinent ; mais plus il la souhaitait et moins la vacance de son esprit se comblait, plus la visitation du Christ tardait à venir."[472]

Huysmans contrasts Des Esseintes' methods with Nature's own. Biological and physical imperatives are not on Des Esseintes' side, in the text, but on God's. Language may support Des Esseintes' self-projection, but the *milieu*: the smell of frangipane, the abscessing of a molar, the demands of an ulcered stomach, all undermine Des Esseintes' attempts at autonomy.

Whether he wants to be or not, he exists in the world of actuality. His body, his flesh, make him human: one of the despised many, perhaps, but nevertheless firmly withinthe created order.

It may seem strange to argue that abscessed molars are, within the theological structure of the text, to be considered divine. But Huysmans is explicit in drawing the link. He is clear that one of the doctrines that Des Esseintes has the most trouble subscribing to is the bodily reality of the incarnate Christ as *full* man: he spends hours pondering over how "Nestorius contestant à la Vierge le titre de mère de Dieu, parce que, dans le mystère de

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[472] Ibid, p. 284; "He would have dearly loved to escape from the state of doubt and suspicion against which he had struggled in vain at Fontenay; now that he was forced to turn over a new leaf he would have liked to force himself to possess the faith, to glue it down as soon as he had it, to fasten it with clamps to his soul, in short to protect it against all those reflections that tend to shake and dislodge it. But the more he longed for it, the less the void in his mind was filled and the longer the visitation of Christ was delayed.".

l'Incarnation, ce n'était pas le Dieu, mais bien la créature humaine qu'elle avait portée dans ses flancs ; là, Eutychès, déclarant que l'image du Christ ne pouvait ressembler à celle des autres hommes, puisque la Divinité avait élu domicile dans son corps et en avait, par conséquent, changé la forme du tout au tout ; là encore, d'autres ergoteurs soutenaient que le Rédempteur n'avait pas eu du tout de corps."[473]

These Christological references are far from incidental. Rather, they point to the heart of *À Rebours* itself, and a potential solution to Des Esseintes' predicament. In a worldview in which God not only exists but enters the world *as the incarnate Christ*: in which incarnation confers dignity on the whole of *embodied* existence, creation becomes not a "sempiternelle radoteuse" but rather twice-blessed: it is, in a theistic worldview, good because it is *created*; secondly, because of the Incarnation, in which Christ assumes full humanity as well as divinity:redeemed from the Fall. The individual self, the individual human being, is likewise redeemed *through* being "penetrated" by grace: that redemption gives the self what Des Esseintes so desperately longs: an irreducible, indestructible identity: that which makes the self a self, and not "automate."

In one telling meditation on religion late in the text, once Des Esseintes has realized that his project is impossible, he recalls with nostalgia the days when "Radegonde, reine de France, préparait elle-même le pain destiné aux autels, le temps où, d'après les coutumes de Cluny, trois prêtres ou trois diacres, à jeun, vêtus de l'aube et de l'amict, se lavaient le visage et les doigts, triaient le froment, grain à grain, l'écrasaient sous la meule, pétrissaient la pâte dans une eau froide et pure et la cuisaient eux-mêmes sur un feu clair, en chantant des

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[473] Ibid, p. 104 "Nestorius denying Mary's right to the title of Mother of God because in the mystery of the Incarnation it was not the God but the man she had carried in her womb...Eutyches maintaining that Christ could not have looked like other men since the Godhead had elected domicile in his body and had thereby changed his nature utterly and completely...some other quibblers asserting that the Redeemer had had no body at all.".

psaumes !"[474] – contrasting them with what he sees as a diseased modern existence, in which communion bread, for the sake of expediency and cheapness, is diluted: made with mass-produced potato flour: "Dieu se refusait à descendre dans la fécule, C'était un fait indéniable, sûr."[475]

There is much to unpack here. Certainly, Des Esseintes' horror of "potato-flour" can be read in the context of his general distaste for the world of commerce, of the mechanistic and the bourgeois: the existential source, as we have discussed, of his fear of losing his individual identity.

But more interesting is the language he uses to describe the process of making altar-bread. It's possible, of course, to chalk Des Esseintes' perspective up to his customary nostalgia for all things Medieval. But given that this passage, of course, occurs after several pages of Des Esseintes' agonizing stomach troubles resulting from his inability to eat, his treatment of the creation of the communion bread is all the more striking. Des Esseintes envisions physical, visceral activity: the mashing of dough, human hands touching that which is to be joyfully consumed. Water – so often the murky and muddy source of confusion in Des Esseintes' schema – beocmes "pure". Creation is here not a power-play but humble participation for the good of another (the Queen of France herself takes on the persona of a humble baker-woman) and religious fervor (the singing of psalms accompanies the creation): all prefiguring the existence of the incarnate Christ as a real transubstantianted presence in the dough.

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[474] Ibid, p. 286; "Radegonde, Queen of France, used to make the altar-bread with her own hands; the days when, according to the custom at Cluny, three fasting priests or deacons, clad in alb and amice, after washing face and fingers, sorted out the wheat grain by grain, crushed it under a millstone, kneaded the dough with pure, cold water, and baked it themselves over a bright fire, singing psalms all the while".

[475] Ibid; "Now God refused to come down to earth in the form of potato-flour; that was an undeniable, indisputable fact.".

It is a fantasy of edible food that is also a longing for *right* physicality and engaged embodiment, a spiritually sustainable way of existing in the world. It is the fantasy that Des Esseintes so longs for when he calls out, in the book's final lines: "Seigneur, prenez pitié du chrétien qui doute, de l'incrédule qui voudrait croire, du forçat de la vie qui s'embarque seul, dans la nuit, sous un firmament que n'éclairent plus les consolants fanaux du vieil espoir!"[476]

Although the sky is not yet a meaningfully lit "firmament" – a clear reference to Genesis, and with it an avowal of the world's status as divine *creation* – Des Esseintes is ready to take the first step towards grace. "Putting out to sea, alone" – not safely ensconced in an "arche" but rather experiencing the waters directly – Des Esseintes for the first time sacrifices his artistic desire for control. He even gives up his own name, his much-prized singularity, to become one of many at last: he is a "Christian", an "unbeliever", even as he addresses God for the first time as "Lord."

Huysmans' own conversion to Catholicism did not happen for a full decade after the novel's publication. But, as Huysmans himself says in the 1903 preface to a new edition of the text: "All the novels I have written since *Against Nature* are there in embryo in this book" – and speculates on what he sees as his latent Catholicism in the text: "Il me faut maintenant en parler au point de vue de la Grâce, montrer quelle part d'inconnu, quelle projection d'âme qui s'ignore, il peut y avoir souvent dans un livre. Cette orientation si claire, si nette d'À Rebours sur le catholicisme, elle me demeure, je l'avoue, incompréhensible…[rien]

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[476] Ibid, p. 290; "Lord, take pity on the Christian who doubts, on the unbeliever who would fain believe, on the galley-slave of life who puts out to sea, alone, in the night, beneath a firmament no longer lit by the consoling beacon-fires of the ancient hope!".

n'expliquera la parfaite inconscience du dernier cri, l'appel religieux de la dernière page d'À Rebours."[477]

Whether or not we believe him, that "last cry" is anything but surprising: rather, it is the natural culmination of every element of the text: that which transforms *À Rebours* from a plotless, anti-temporal monument to the self's triumph over God, Nature, and time, into a mythic story of redemption: a moment that "draws together to a common centre all the truths" scattered therein.

iii) *En Rade:* The Unsafe Harbour

If Huysmans' *À Rebours* explores a protagonist's vain attempt to create a world of his own making – a failed conquest of the external world – then his subsequent novel, *En Rade* (serialized in the *Revue Indépendente* between November 1886 and April 1887, published in 1887 by Tresse & Stock) presents us with the logical next step: a protagonist whose autonomous selfhood is destroyed by the demands and dictates of the external world: for he is 'soumis contre toute volonté à des impressions externes."[478]. Des Esseintes' project of active world-making becomes, for Jacques Marlès simply a desperate search for a "safe harbour": a *theïbade* that need not even be *raffinée,* as long as his sense of self is preserved.

But Jacques – a more pathetic and pitiable figure than Des Esseintes – is haunted at every turn by the specter of reality – as we shall see, Huysmans uses the Gothic motif of the haunted house to reveal the terrifying nature of the real – he lacks the money to make a Fontenay of his own; he's hounded by creditors; his wife is sick; his neighbors intrusive; he

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[477] Huysmans, *À Rebours,* pp. xx-xxi; "I must now discuss it from the point of view of Grace, and show how much of the unknown, what projections of a soul which does not know itself, can often be found in this book. I must admit that the clear and obvious Catholic direction *À Rebours* takes remains a mystery to me...nothing will explain the complete unconsciousness of that last cry, the religious call, on the last page of *À Rebours*".

[478] Joris-Karl Huysmans, *En Rade,* (Plon: Paris, 1928), p. 50; "submitting against his will to external impressions", translations based on Brendan King's (Dedalus: Sawtry, 2010) unless otherwise noted

suffers frequent stomachaches; he may be impotent. His theïbade is an imaginary mirror of Des Esseintes' he can never afford to realize.

Jacques may fantasize, as did Des Esseintes: about a retreat that is simultaneously cloister and blank *text;* about how

> Ici, son lit qu'il gardait et sa table de nuit en bois de violette et d'anis ; là, sa table de travail, deux fauteuils, trois chaises, une carpette et un devant de feu ; puis dans l'âtre, ses chenets en fer forgé, aux pieds en paraphes et aux têtes allongées en poires ; sur la cheminée enfin, le buste en bois peint et sculpté d'un pauvre homme de la fin du moyen âge, priant...ses deux flambeaux de cuivre rouge, à plates-formes, et ses deux pots de pharmacie, blasonnés aux armes d'un monastère...il disposerait ses livres sur de simples rayons de bois peint en noir, organisant de la sorte une salle à manger-bibliothèque."[479]

But in actuality, Jacques and his wife are hiding out from their avaricious creditors in the Château de Lourps in Jutigny – an ironic nod to Des Esseintes' ancestral home that only calls more attention to Jacques' plight: not only is he not an autonomous, contained self *vis à vis* his family and social obligations, he is also, as character, only half-formed; his textual world already intruded upon by that of the pre-existing Des Esseintes.

Nor does the physical world offer Jacques respite. If Nature has "had her day" in *À Rebours*, she is back with a vengeance in *En Rade*. The Château is overtaken by weeds, plants, Nature's detritus: "une vaste cour bouillonnée par des bulles de pissenlits s'époilant au-dessus de feuilles vertes qui rampaient sur de la caillasse, hérissées de cils durs"[480] dominate the landscape, as does "un jardin fou, une ascension d'arbres, montant en démence,

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[479] Ibid, p. 114; "Over here, his bed, which he would keep, and his bedside table of kingwood and *bois d'amis*; over there, his writing desk, two armchairs, three chairs, a regu, and a firescreen; then in the heart, his wrought iron firedogs with splayed feet and pear-shaped heads, finally, on the mantelpiece, a carved and painted wooden bust from the late Middle Ages of a peasant praying..,.on either side of this bust, two burnished copper candlestick holders, and two pharmacy jars decorated with the coat of arms of a monastery...he would arrange his books on simple wooden shelves, painted black, forming a kind of dining-room-cum-library.".

[480] Ibid, p. 40; ""vast courtyard[s] seething with dandelion heads, their bristling dried cilia moulting"

dans le ciel" in which "vieux rosiers apparaissaient, retournés à l'état sauvage ; semant ce fouillis de vert des rougeâtres olives des gratte-cul naissants"[481]

The dissolution of the self is made explicit. The decadent-dandyist model of artistic creation -- expressed most clearly in Jacques' erotic dreams here – is contrasted with the fecundity of natural creation: immediate, necessitating embodiment and engagement with otherness.

En Rade is a less linguistically unified work than its predecessor. But it is precisely Huysmans' use of competing "naturalist" and "decadent" styles alongside one another that makes *En Rade* such a fascinating work: one that calls into question the possibility of unity of the self not merely within Marlès himself, but also within the textual "body" of the book. Melding genres and registers, (Huysmans' "lapidary" style is all the more striking alongside passages of peasant dialect, as when Aunt Norine explains to a bewildered Marlès that her husband Antoine is "il fait le rain. — Il fait quoi ? — Le rain...Oui, le rain, c'est en quoi qu'il est le chaudron."[482]), even shifting tenses, *En Rade* defies any possibility of textual uniformity. Unlike the instability in D'Aurevilly's *Diaboliques,* however, *En Rade*'s instability suggests less a "post-truth" landscape of competing liars, and more the possibility of polyphony: a necessary breaking-open of Marlès perceived singularity.

As in D'Aurevilly's stories and Villiers' novels, however, *En Rade*'s refusal to operate along narrative "laws" also has ramifications for Huysmans' treatment of science – a treatment that, we shall see, exists like its predecessors in constant dialogue with the naturalism of Zola, Husymans' mentor. As we investigate the various "causes" of the mysterious goings-on at the Chateau – the unsettling sounds in this perhaps-haunted house,

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[481] Ibid, p. 42; " an insanely overgrown garden, a riot of trees, rising madly into the sky"; "old rosebushes could be made out, now reverted to their wild state, strewing this tangle of green with the reddish olives of buddish rosehips.".

[482] Ibid, p. 58; "doin' the coppa...doin' the coppa...why he's cleaning the dirty cauldron with sandstone!" Brendan King offers a non-literal translation here to preserve the aural confusion of *rain*/*airan*.

the sources of Louise's psychosomatic illness – Huysmans combines Zola-esque medical asides with Gothic hints of the supernatural to create a world in which effects may have a multiplicity of causes: a world that, as in D'Aurevilly or Villiers is itself not an scientifically explicable "closed circle" (an image which recalls Des Esseintes' autophagy) but rather a world still imbued with mystery, and with it, the potential for the divine

One of the most striking ways in which Huysmans plays with the concept of the real lies in his treatment of the Chateau itself. Huysmans frequently hints at the Gothic, tantalizing us with the suggestion that this decaying castle may, in fact, be a haunted house. Certainly, as a number of contemporary critics (among them Henry de Régier) note, the opening of *En Rade* parallels that of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (translated into the French by Huysmans' influence and forebear Charles Baudelaire).[483] Both tales open with the protagonist arriving at a mysterious house, where beloved lies waiting under the thrall of an equally mysterious illness (in the case of Poe's story, it is the narrator's friend, Roderick; in *En Rade*, Jacques' wife, Louise). In each case, a lengthy description of the illness casts a pall over our first impressions of the ruined house:

> Les nuées guerroyantes du ciel s'étaient enfuies : au solennel fracas du couchant en feu, avait succédé le morne silence d'un firmament de cendre : çà et là, pourtant, des braises mal consumées rougeoyaient dans la fumée des nuages et éclairaient le château par derrière...par le piétinement de tout le village de Jutigny qui courait au secours du château en flammes.[484]

Yet Marlès' experiences at the Chateau de Lourps often better resemble Catherine Morland's in *Northanger Abbey* than those of "Usher"'s narrator. Often, Marlès's feelings of

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[483] Quoted in commenary Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Stranded (En Rade), (*trans. Brendan King), (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2010), p. 225.

[484] Huysmans, *En Rade,* p. 7.

foreboding and terror turn out to have perfectly natural causes. The moment when Jacques arrives at the castle, he has trouble opening the door (one of many instances where Jacques has trouble with entering into or crossing liminal spaces): “The sight of this chateau that still seemed to be burning dully exarcerbated his state of nervous agitation...his shudders of apprehension – momentarily interrupted but now resumed – and his twitches of anxiety increased tenfold. He feverishly rang at a little door pierced into the wall...not a sound of life came from beyond the wall. Immediately his fears ran riot.” Yet his terror is greeted with a derisive snort from Uncle Antoine, who accompanies him: “Well push, then!” Elsewhere, Jacques hears “un vacarme de chaînes rouillées, de roues criant sans cambouis, un grincement de grincheuse poulie rompaient la nuit muette.”[485], only to be mockingly told that it's the sound of the water-well. As Jacques wanders through the castle grounds, he catches an eerie glimpse of Aunt Norine, looking as if she has been cut in two, in the moonlight – “d’une large estafilade de lumière la tante Norine, devenue immense, le corps plié en deux comme sur une charnière, les jambes couchées à plat sur l’herbe, le buste et la tête droits, en haut, dans une cime d’arbre.”[486]– only for Aunt Norine to turn her concern to heating the water in the most prosaic way imaginable: “Il a donc le cul gelé, ce poêlon?”[487]

The strongest example of this motif occurs shortly after the first of the three dream-sequences Jacques experiences at the Chateau: during Jacques' first night there. Jacques a terrifying sound: “une peur de l’inconnu, une terreur de nerfs exaspérés par des bruits inquiétants dans un désert noir. Il tenta de se raisonner, se moqua, sans y réussir, de cette

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[485] Ibid, p. 13-4; “ a cacophony of rusted chains, of screeching, ungreased wheels, a grating of complaining pullies shattered the silence of the night”.

[486] Ibid, p. 21; “a large gash of light cut across Aunt Norine, who became immense, her body bent in two as if it were hinged, her legs lying flat in the grass, her torso and head straight up in the treetops”.

[487] Ibid, p. 22; “It's got a frozen arse, this kettle.”.

défaillance, en s'imaginant le château hanté, allant du coup aux idées les plus impossibles, les plus romanesques, les plus folles."[488]

Even when Jacques first witnesses the source of the noise, it is monstrous, "deux rouelles de phosphore en flamme se jetaient sur lui."[489] Jacques strikes blindly with his cane, only for the more ordinary culprit to be revealed: "Il s'arrêta exténué enfin, regarda, stupide, le cadavre d'un énorme chat-huant dont les serres crispées rayaient le bois ensanglanté de gouttes. 'Ouf!' fit-il, en s'essuyant les mains tigrées de points rouges, heureusement que j'avais ma canne."[490]

We could read the Chateau de Lourps as a desacralized House of Usher: a naturalistic universe in which everything has a scientific, cause. But to do so would be to underestimate the interplay of the relationship of fantasy and reality in *En Rade*. Far from simply ascribing the horrors of the Chateau to natural causes, Huysmans shows how these "natural causes" are in fact horrors *in themselves:* particularly from the perspective of Jacques Marlès, for whom the very act of existing in the world, of losing even the tiniest shred of his subjective power, is a kind of castration. Nature, reality, the untamed and unarticulated world, is *itself* a kind of ghost: haunting and invading Marlès as well as the Chateau de Lourps.

Yet the reverse is true in *En Rade*'s treatment of Jacques' wife Louise. If the horrors of Lourps are explicable *despite* their outward appearance then Louise's medical problems are

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[488]Ibid, pp. 35-6; "fear of the unknown, a nervous terror provoked by the disturbing noises in this desert of blackness. He tried without success to be reasonable, to make light of this weakness in imagining that the chateau was haunted, his mind deliberately seizing on the most preposterous, the most fantastic, the most insane ideas..."; Cf Baudelaire's translation of "Usher": "C'était une glace au coeur, un abattement, un malaise, une irrémédiable tristesse de pensée qu'aucun aiguillon de l'imagination ne pouvait raviver ni pousser au grand. Qu'était donc - je m'arrêtai pour y penser - qu'était donc ce je ne sais quoi qui m'énervait ainsi en contemplant la Maison Usher? C'était un mystère tout à fait insoluble, et je ne pouvais pas lutter contre les pensées ténébreuses qui s'amoncelaient sur moi pendant que j'y réfléchissais.".

[489] Ibid, p. 37; "Like the roaring blast of a forge, two circles of flaming phosphorus plunged towards him"

[490] Ibid; "an enormous screech owl whose clenched talons had streaked the panelling with drops of blood. 'Phew', he said, wiping away the spots of red that speckled his hands. 'lucky I had my cane.'".

the opposite: *inexplicable* despite the efforts of the doctor-diagnosticians. What causes her illness? The peasants hint at a Gothic origin: the original Marquise who lived here in the Chateau was allegedly possessed or mad. Scientific methods of diagnosis have come to naught: Jacques remembers "des consultations de médecins parlant d'affection incurable, de métrite, avouant sa marche continue derrière une adynamie aggravée par le repos et par les drogues...les uns après les autres, attribuaient au malaise de l'organisme entier cette maladie dont les racines s'étendaient partout et n'étaient nulle part. Ils prescrivaient les fortifiants et les toniques, essayaient du bromure à forte dose, recouraient, pour terrasser les douleurs, à la morphine, attendant qu'un symptôme leur permît de se diriger, de ne plus tâtonner ainsi, dans le brouillard de maux inconnus et vagues.[491] The phrase "whose roots extended everywhere" links Louise's sick body with Nature at large – recalling Blaise Pascal's famous quote: "Nature is a sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference nowhere".[492] At times, Huysmans seems to conflate the disease and its treatment: in one spasmodic attack, Louise's gestures recall the electroshock therapy of Jean-Marie Charcot, whose work we discussed in our chapter on *L'Ève Future,* when she is described as "jaillissant comme des étincelles électriques dans les jambes."[493]

Sex, or rather lack of sex, is in some way involved: Louise's body is, for Marlès, a labyrinth into which doctors must give chase: "En plaquant une pièce de métal sur le point précis de la souffrance, celle-ci se déplaçait et il fallait la suivre, lui livrer la chasse, la

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[491] Ibid, p. 104; "the consultations with doctors who spoke of an incurable infection, of uterine metritis, who acknowledged its continuing progression in the wake of a spell of adynamia aggravated by rest and by sedatives..."one after another attributing the malaise of the entire organism to an illness whose roots extended everywhere, but were to be found nowhere. They prescribed stimulants and tonics, tried large doses of bromide, and resorted to morphine...so they'd no longer have to grope around like this in a fog of vague, unknown, illness.".

[492] Quoted in King's commentary in *Stranded,* p. 235.

[493] Huysmans, *En Rade*, p. 90; "pains like electric shocks ran down her legs.".

traquer, pour n'aboutir, en fin de compte, qu'à d'irréductibles acculs d'où elle bondissait à nouveau, comme lancée par un vibrant tremplin, dans le taillis des nerfs"[494] (the "taillis" in its turn recalls the gardens that are overtaking Chateau de Lourps).

Robert Ziegler suggests that the promise of "explicability" – whether medical or supernatural – serves an even more nefarious function: allowing Jacques to ignore or overlook his own role in Louise's sickness. After all, when Jacques married Louise, he – like every other Huysmans protagonist – was incapable of seeing her as a real, autonomous person: instead, he wanted her as the typical Huysmanian "arche": "Ce qu'il avait voulu..l'apaisement de l'office, le silence de la cuisine...dans une bienheureuse rade, l'arche capitonnée, à l'abri des vents, et puis c'était aussi la société de la femme, la jupe émouchant les inquiétudes des tracas futiles, le préservant, ainsi qu'une moustiquaire, de la piqûre des petits riens, tenant la chambre dans une température ordonnée, égale ; c'était le tout sous la main, sans attentes et sans courses, amour et bouillon, linges et livres."[495] (Note the use of "arche"-language here, as well as the irony of a woman as "mosquito-net", given the number of bites he suffers through later in the novel.) In Louise, he marries such an image, only to reject her when she does not prove satisfactory, something that may be inducing her psychosomatic illness.

Thus their mutual married unhappiness leads Louise (not to mention Jacques) towards a nervous breakdown: as Ziegler puts it, "Tormented by the fear that Louise's malady might be psychosomatic, Jacques is like the physicians chasing an elusive diagnosis through the

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[494] Ibid, p. 105; "pressing a metal plate on the precise point of pain caused it to move, and one then had to follow it, give it chase, track it down, only for it to wind up eventually in some irreducible dead end from which it bounced back again, as if launched by a pliant springboard into the tangled undergrowth of nerve".

[495] Ibid, p. 108; ""What he'd hoped for.. a silent kitchen, a cosy atmosphere, a quiet comfortable home life, a cushioned …a blissful haven, a well-furnished ark, sheltered from the winds, and what's more, he'd also wanted a woman's company, her skirts whisking away the irritation of trivial cares, protecting him, like a mosquito net, from the stings of life's minor concerns, keepnig the room at an even, regulated temperature; he wanted everything to hand, without having to wait or go to the shops: love and food, laundry and books.".

catacombs of her body."[496] He "occupies Louise, haunts Louise"[497] – at once the haunting ghost in her own body and the doctor who seeks to exert control over her jerking flesh (here too, the Gothic and the naturalistic start to merge), even as he is unable to enter her. As Ziegler puts it: "Explanatory systems affording an illusion of mastery and control compete with theories of supernatural causation that promise to release Jacques from feelings of responsibility and offer him a consoling sense of helpless victimization"[498]

We know, certainly, that Marlès' desire for narrative mastery comes at the cost of his wife's health: in one scene, occurring shortly before Marlès' dreamed "moon-journey": Louise starts to hallucinate planets in accordance with her husband's stated visions:

> aperçevant au hasard et à son gré, là où elles n'étaient pas, les constellations aux couleurs vives, les astres lilas et jaunes de Cassiopée, Vénus à la planète verte, les terres rouges de Mars, les soleils bleus et blancs de l'Orion. Guidée par son mari, elle s'imaginait, de son côté, les voir; et elle resta pantelante de cet effort, étourdie lorsqu'elle rappela ses yeux devant elle, éprouvant dans l'estomac comme une angoisse.[499]

Stomach-aches, physical exhaustion, breathlessness – all these are revealed (tellingly from Louise's perspective, not Jacques') as connected to Marlès' world-creation in envisioning the astrological terrain.

The replacement of a single cause with an atmosphere of causes (one might say: a surfeit of meaning) for which Marlès may or may not be in part responsible mirrors the idea of the *milieu* we have seen in both D'Aurevilly's stories and Villier's *L'Ève*. Cause-effect,

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[496] Ziegler, *The Mirror of Divinity: The World and Creation in J.-K. Huysmans*. (Dover: University of Delaware Press. 2004), p. 162.

[497] Ibid, p. 169.

[498] Ibid, p. 172.

[499] Ibid, p. 90; "perceiving brightly coloured constellations at random and at will, even when they weren't there: the lilac and yellow stars in Cassiopeia, Venus as a green planet, the red terrain of Mars, the blue and white suns of Orion. Guided by her husband, she fancied that she too saw them, and she was left breathless from the effort, dazed when she thought of what was before her eyes, feeling in her stomach a kind of anguish.".

like all totalizing narratives, break down in tandem with the destruction of the chateau itself, overrun with weeds from the outside.

This tension between "inexplicable" and "explicable", "natural" and "supernatural", and the possibility of synthesis between them comes to a head with Jacques' attempts to understand his increasingly strange dreams. He wonders to himself:

> Ces visions étaient-elles, ainsi que l'homme l'a longtemps cru, un voyage de l'âme hors du corps, un élan hors du monde, un vagabondage de l'esprit échappé de son hôtellerie charnelle et errant au hasard dans d'occultes régions, dans d'antérieures ou futures limbes? Dans leurs démences hermétiques les songes avaient-ils un sens?... du songe à un génie... Prédisaient-ils l'avenir et sommaient-ils les événements de naître?... Ou bien encore était-ce, selon les modernes théories de la science, une simple métamorphose des impressions de la vie réelle, une simple déformation de perceptions précédemment acquises ... avait-il, d'autre part, une nécessaire association des idées si ténue que son fil échappait à l'analyse, un fil souterrain fonctionnant dans l'obscurité de l'âme portant l'étincelle, éclairant tout d'un coup ses caves oubliées, reliant ses celliers inoccupés depuis l'enfance? Les phénomènes du rêve avaient-ils avec les phénomènes de l'existence vive une parenté plus fidèle qu'il n'était permis à l'homme de le concevoir? Était-ce tout bonnement une inconsciente et subite vibration des fibres de l'encéphale, un résidu d'activité spirituelle, une survie de cerveau créant des embryons de pensées, des larves d'images, passés par la trouble étamine d'une machine mal arrêtée, mâchant dans le sommeil à vide? Fallait-il enfin admettre des causes surnaturelles, croire aux desseins d'une Providence incitant les incohérents tourbillons des songes, et accepter du même coup les inévitables visites des incubes et des succubes...ou bien convenait-il de s'arrêter aux causes matérielles, de rapporter exclusivement à des leviers externes, à

> des troubles de l'estomac ou à d'involontaires mouvements du corps, ces divagations éperdues de l'âme?[500]

Here, lexicons merge. The language of daemons, incubi and succubi meld with that of encephalic tissues and embryonic thought, that of the "ticking mechanism" with that of "the designs of Providence?" Marlès wonders about the possibility of a "fundamental association of ideas" that recalls Des Esseintes' obsession with correspondences.

Huysmans combines these two linguistic modes so completely that they even "spill over" into one another: thoughts are "embryonic" but, a few words later, images are "spectral." In so doing, Huysmans destabilizes any attempt Jacques Marlès might make at coming up with a closed system, a schema (whether natural or supernatural) to explain what exactly is going on *vis à vis* his noctural visitations. Unlike in Barbey, where truth is conceived of as the result of different, opposing, power-vectors – each dandy in each "layer"of narrative is unreliable – truth in *En Rade* transcends causality: influence (as in *Claire Lenoir*) comes through multiplicity.

Such destablization occurs frequently in the text: particularly in Marlès' dream sequences. They are never presented as dreams; the narrative simply continues on: in one chapter, Marlès is looking at the sky, in the next, he is "au delà de toutes limites, dans une

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[500] Ibid, pp. 54-6; "Were these visions, as man had long believed, a voyage of the soul outside the body, a flight beyond the world, the wanderings of a spirit escaped from its carnal lodging and roaming at will in an occult region, in a past or future limbo? Within their self-contained madness, did dreams have a meaning?...a daemon warning us...do they predict the future and summon up events to come?...or was it, sa modern theories of science hold, a simple metamorphosis of real-life impressions, a simple distortion of previously acquired perceptions?...Was there, on the other hand, a fundamental association of ideas so tenuous that its connecting wire escaped analysis, a subterranean wire operating in the darkness of the soul, transmitting the spark, illuminating its neglected cellars in a sudden flash, linking chambers uninhabited since childhood? Did the phenomena of dreams have a closer relationship to the phenomena of real life than it was possible for man to conceive? Or was it simply just a sudden, unconscious vibration of encephalic tissues, a residue of mental activity, the hangover of processes in the brain creating embryonic thoughts and spectral images, passing through the murky sieve of a partially arrested mechanism ticking over as one slept? Ultimately did one have to acknowledge supernatural causes, to believe that the designs of Providence were inciting these incomprehensible vortices of dreams and in the same breath accept the inevitable visitations of incubi and succubi,...or was it better to stop at material causes, to ascribe exclusively to external triggers, to disorders of the stomach or involuntary movements of the body these wild ramblings of the soul?".

fuite indéfinie de l'œil, un immense désert de plâtre sec, un Sahara de lait de chaux figé"[501] Marlès' dreams are presented as no less *real*, narratively, than his daylight activities; we only "know" Marlès is not really on the moon because of knowledge we bring as readers to the text: for Marlès to travel to the moon is "impossible." Yet, Huysmans suggests, the world of the Chateau de Lourps is a world that transcends the boundaries of possibility.

Still, Marlès tries. He actively seeks out an explanation for the Gothic goings-on at Lourps. If he does not have quite the artistic temperament of Des Esseintes, he wishes at least to be the world-physician: able to diagnose, use (as we see in his moon-dream) his powers of speech to tame that which denies his mastery: Nature and his wife's body alike.

Thus does Marlès enter into what may or not be a fantasy about control that echoes Des Esseintes' own obsession about finding an "essence" – a reverie that is either inspired by a newspaper article Marlès has read or simply the result of a dream: Marlès (and the reader) is never sure. This "newspaper article" announces the discovery of "an alkaloid...in rotting corpses" which will allow "pour les familles riches, des extraits concentrés d'aïeuls, des essences d'enfants, des bouquets de pères."[502]

"Quelle belle chose,...la science!"[503] Marlès announces as he meditates on the implications of such an invention: imagined in *bourgeois,* commercial terms: "Ce serait ce qu'on appelle, dans le commerce, l'article fin; mais pour les besoins des classes laborieuses qu'il ne saurait être question de négliger, l'on adjoindrait à ces officines de luxe, de puissants laboratoires dans lesquels on préparerait la fabrication des parfums en gros; il serait, en effet, possible de les distiller avec les restes de la fosse commune que personne ne réclame ; ce

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[501] Ibid, p. 91; "Beyond all limits, in an indefinite flight from the eye, an immense desert of dry plaster, a Sahara of frozen lime".

[502] Ibid, p. 191; "for the families of the rich, concentrated extracts of their ancestors, essential oils of their dead children, bouquets of their late fathers.".

[503] Ibid, p. 190, " What a fine thing is science".

serait l'art de la parfumerie établi sur de nouvelles bases, mis à la portée de tous, ce serait l'article camelote, la parfumerie pour bazar, laissée à très bon prix, puisque la matière première serait abondante et ne coûterait, pour ainsi dire, que les frais de main-d'œuvre des exhumateurs et des chimistes."[504] Less of a snob than Des Esseintes, Marlès is amused rather than horrified at the "cut-price" nature of the discovery.

As in *À Rebours*, the idea of an "essence" – that which makes a thing what it *is* – is placed in dynamic tension with the idea of mass-production: a thing can be made or remade ten times over. But in *En Rade*, it becomes possible (at least in Marlès' fevered brain) to reproduce that singularity:

> il sera désormais permis de garder la femme qu'on adora, chez soi, dans sa poche même, à l'état volatil et spirituel, de transmuer sa bien-aimée en un flacon de sel, de la condenser à l'état de suc, de l'insérer comme une poudre dans un sachet brodé d'une douloureuse épitaphe, de la respirer, les jours de détresse....sur un mouchoir.[505]

As Marlès' fantasy reaches its climax, he imagines a spoiled, middle-class child consuming his grandparents in a dessert: "'Nan, nan, grand-père!' crie le gosse qui se barbouille de crème ancestrale les joues et le ne... 'Nan, nan aussi, grand'mère!;"[506]

As a fantasy, this passage points to Marlès' need for control and consumption (after all, he cannot consume his real wife). Yet, despite the ironic nature of the fantasy, it hints at,

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[504] Ibid, p. 192 "This would be what you'd call in the trade a deluxe item; but for the needs of the working class – which it would be out of the question to neglect – they could supplement these luxury dispensaries with industrial laboratories that would manufacture perfumes wholesale...within the reach of everyone, this would be a cut-price item, a perfume to be sold in cheap stores, since the raw materials would be abundant and the only cost, so to speak, would be the expense of a gravedigger and a chemist.".

[505] Ibid, p. 192; "it'll be possible from now on to keep the wife you adored in your own home, in your very pocket, in a volatile, spirituous form, to transmute your loved one into a bottle of smelling-salts, to condense her into a quintessence...to take a deep breath of her on sad days".

[506] Ibid, p. 195; "'yum, yum, grandfather,' cries the brat, ancestral cream smeared all over his cheeks and nose...'yum, yum, grandma too!'".

too, a need for an authentic *essence*: a stable referent in the Chateau's shifting world of chaos (that world "shifts" again from under us, however: after all, we never learn whether or not Marlès has only dreamt his article) in a world that seems inexplicable.

It is important, however, not to confuse "inexplicable" with "meaningless." In our discussion of *À Rebours*, we explored how Des Esseintes' theological understanding of the (un)created world as an inherently meaningless place provided the necessary mental groundwork on which he was able to construct the entire semiotic network of correspondences defining his *theîbade*. But Louise's disease, the prevalence of Marlès' dreams – these are all inexplicable *not* because of limitations of the created order (i.e., a lack of meaning there), but because of limitations on the human ability to diagnose, to name, to apply narrative and language. Indeed, Louise's illness and Marlès' dreams are all the more meaning*ful* for the way in which Huysmans implicitly ascribes to them *both* a supernatural and scientific cause: by weaving the two together, Huysmans at once casts doubt on the narrative project and hints at a textual world in which *naturalisme* and *spiritualisme* might both be valid pathways of interpretation.

Yet, in order to understand this fully, Marlès, like Des Esseintes before him, must engage with the great horror that haunts the Château de Lourps: Nature itself.

Nature is a far more powerful force in *En Rade* than in *À Rebours*. The phallic tower of the Château de Lourps –symbolic not merely of Jacques' virility, but also his mental and creative autonomy – is constantly assailed by a quasi-apocalyptic vision of Nature that stands in, throughout *En Rade*, for *externality* more broadly.

It is, a landscape Jacques cannot cross: his failure to master the world around him is physical as well as mental. Thus, when he attempts to walk in a patch of grass: les pieds enfonçaient et butaient contre des souches ensevelies et des chicots enterrés depuis des ans ;

il tenta de suivre une allée dont le dessin était visible encore ; les arbres, livrés à eux-mêmes, la barricadaient avec leurs branches."[507] Elsewhere, "a route devint impraticable ; des branches basses de pins barraient le sentier, couraient en se retroussant par terre, tuant toute végétation sous elles, semant le sol de milliers d'épingles brunes....Toutes les fleurs cultivées des parterres étaient mortes; c'était un inextricable écheveau de racines et de lianes, une invasion de chiendent, un assaut de plantes potagères aux graines portées par le vent, de légumes incomestibles, aux pulpes laineuses, aux chairs déformées et suries par la solitude dans une terre en friche."[508]

This image of alterity, for Marles, is linked closely with images of death and sex: the two liminal spaces bookending the experience of life. It is difficult to tell which unnerves Marlès more: he is horrified at the sight of a cow and bull mating in the field:

> quelque chose de rouge et de biscornu, de mince et de long qui frappait la vache. Et ce fut tout...Jacques commençait à croire qu'il en était de la grandeur épique du taureau comme de l'or des blés, un vieux lieu commun, une vieille panne romantique rapetassés par les rimailleurs et les romanciers de l'heure actuelle Non, là, vraiment, il n'y avait pas de quoi s'emballer...ce n'était ni imposant, ni altier. En fait de lyrisme, la saillie se composait d'un amas de deux sortes de viandes qu'on battait, qu'on empilait l'une sur l'autre, puis qu'on emportait, aussitôt qu'elles étaient touchées, en retapant dessus![509]

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[507] Ibid, p. 43; "his feet sank into it, snagging against hidden roots and stumps that had been buried for years; he tried to follow a path the line of which was still visible, but the trees, left unpruned, were barricading it with their branches.".

[508] Ibid, p. 44; "the way became impassable, the lower branches of the pine trees blocked the path, spreading out and curling over the ground, killing all the vegetation beneath them, strewing the earth with thousands of brown needles...all the cultivated flowers in the bed were dead; it was an inextricable skein of roots and creepers, an invasion of couch-grass, an onslaught of wild vegetables.".

[509] Ibid, pp. 226-7; "Something red and misshapen, long and thin shot out of the tuft of hairs underneath the bull, striking the cow. And that was it...Jacques was beginning to think that, like 'golden wheat', the epic grandeur of the bull was just an old commonplace of the Romantics, one of those hackneyed images endlessly touched up by the would-be poets and second-rate novelists of the day. No, really, there was nothing here to get carried away by...it was neither dignified nor elevating. As for lyricism, the coupling consisted of amassing two types of meat which they thrashed, piled on top of one another, and then dragged apart as soon as they'd touch.",

Here we have a quasi-reversal of Des Esseintes' obsession with a painting of Salomé in *À Rebours*. In that novel, Des Esseintes' affection to Moreau's Salomé exists in part because she conforms to his mental and aesthetic preconception of what she ought to look like.[510] Here, however, Marlès's aesthetic vision, the "epic grandeur of the bull", is challenged and contradicted by the reality of the situation, and therefore, reality must be in inferior. In Marlès' worldview, whenever the essential and the existential conflict, the existential is bound to lose.

Human sexuality does not fare much better. While Antoine and Norine are shameless about their bodily conjunctions (and indeed seem quite happily married overall), the idea of the two of them copulating fills Marlès with disgust: "il s'éprenait même d'un immense dégoût pour ces ridicules secousses qu'il ne pouvait plus s'imaginer sans qu'aussitôt l'abominable image se levât de ces deux vieillards s'agitant sous leur bonnet de coton, et dormant à la fin, repus dans leurs ordures." [511]

The human act of procreation – mutual, demanding a real fleshly engagement with "the other"– is contrasted with artistic and technological parthenogenesis. In one passage, Marlès explicitly contrasts the two: here, as above, finding reality wanting based on the degree to which it fails to confirm to his existing aesthetic and literary expectations: "'Et quelle blague que l'or des blés!' se dit-il, regardant au loin ces bottes couleur d'orange sale, réunies en tas. Il avait beau s'éperonner, il ne pouvait parvenir à trouver que ce tableau de la moisson si constamment célébré par les peintres et par les poètes, fût vraiment grand… qu'était la récolte claire, la ponte facile d'un bienveillant sol, l'accouchement indolore d'une

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[510] Cf. Huysmans, *À Rebours,* p. 71; "cette Salomé, surhumaine et étrange qu'il avait rêvée.".

[511] Ibid, p. 188; "he was even gripped by an immense disgust for those ridiculous contortions, which he could no longer think about without the abominable image immediately surging up of these two old people fumbling about in their nightcaps and going to sleep afterwards sated by their own filthiness.".

terre fécondée par la semence échappée des mains d'une brute, en comparaison de cet enfantement de la fonte copulée par l'homme!"[512]

That which demands mutuality, a degree of reliance on that which is outside the self (i.e., the benevolent sun) cannot live up to Marlès phallic fantasy of conquest. Yet, we are reminded, the fantasy is precisely that: it is Marlès' body that ironically becomes invaded, conquered, when, a moment later, he is in agony at the bites of numerous mites, his own body the locus of consumption by others: "Je suis dévoré et partout à la fois!"[513]

But is Marlès' disgust and horror at the body theological? One scene would certainly suggest so. Late in the book, Marlès visits an abandoned church in a scene that strikingly recalls the *Comedy of Death* Des Esseintes admired back at Fontenay:

> Le Christ barbarement taillé, enduit d'une couche de peinture rose, avait l'air d'un bandit barbouillé de sang pauvre...de longs filets de fiente le sillonnaient, s'accumulant près de la blessure de son flanc dont la couleur plus épaisse faisait rebord. Les chats-huants et les corbeaux entraient librement dans l'église par les trous des vitres, perchaient sur ce Christ et, battant de l'aile, le balançaient, en l'inondant de leurs jets digérés d'ammoniaque et de chaux! Sur le pavé du sanctuaire, sur les stalles pourries de bois, sur les bancs de l'autel même, c'était un amas de blanches immondices, une vidange d'oiseaux carnivores, ignoble....dont les planches à peine rabotées s'apercevaient sous les linges empesés par le guano et compissés par des éclats de pluie; il était surmonté d'un tabernacle constellé de même qu'une enveloppe de biscuits d'hospice, d'étoiles en argent sur un fond bleu, de flambeaux munis de faux cierges en carton et de vases égueulés, privés de fleurs…par terre, des restes de mulots et de souris, des

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[512] Ibid, pp. 205-6; "and as for golden wheat, what a joke that is, he said to himself, looking into the distance at the dirty orange bales piled up in a heap. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't come round to seeing this picture of the harvest, so endlessly celebrated by painters and poets, as truly noble. … What was an ordinary harvest, the natural fecundity of a benevolent earth, the painless birth of a soil fertilised by seed strewn from the hand of a brute, in comparison to the accouchement of cast iron inseminated by man"..

[513] Ibid, p. 163; "I'm being devoured all over!".

> carcasses sans têtes, des bouts de queues, des bourres de poils,
> tout le garde-manger des chats-huants.[514]

Here, as in *Comedy of Death*, we have the image of untrammeled Nature as that which fills the space once Christ has gone: leaving behind nothing but bones and excrement. The Christ who "flies away" in *Comedy of Death* is here present in a manner that only accentuates his spiritual absence: a neglected carving shrouded in shit. The meaninglessness of nature is explicitly connected to the failure of the creator-God or incarnate-Christ to sanctify it.

Another passage, too, hints at the existential and religious nature of Jacques' torment. When he looks not at the earth, but at the sky, he experiences a different kind of terror to his customary disgust with Nature:

> Enfin par-dessus l'église, le jardin, les bois, tout en haut, dans le ciel dur, sourdaient les froides eaux des astres. On eût dit de la plupart des sources lumineuses et glacées et de quelques-unes, qui ardaient plus actives, des geysers renversés, des sources retournées de lueurs chaudes. Il n'y avait pas une vague, pas une nue, pas un pli, dans ce firmament qui suggérait l'image d'une mer ferme parsemée d'îlots liquides. Jacques se sentait cette défaillance de tout le corps qu'entraîne le vertige des yeux perdus dans l'espace. L'immensité de ce taciturne océan aux archipels allumés de fébricitantes flammes le laissait presque tremblant, accablé par cette sensation

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[514] Ibid, pp. 215-7; "The crudely carved Christ, smeared with a layer of pink paint, had the air of a thief daubed with watery blood...he was streaked with long trickles of bird droppings that accumulated near the wound in his side, making its darker colour stand out more. Screech owls and crows would enter the church freely through the holes in the windows, perch on this Christ figure, and flapping their wings, swing him about as they inundated him with their digested jets of ammonia and lime. All over the sanctuary floor, over the rotten wooden pews, over the very altar itself, was a mass of white excrement, the filthy evacuations of carnivorous birds...on the ground, the remains of shrews and field mice, headless carcasses, bits of tails, lumps of fur, a screech owl's entire pantry was lying there.".

> d'inconnu, de vide, devant laquelle l'âme suffoquée, s'effare.[515]

As we saw in our discussion of gemstones in the introduction to this section, the imagery of frozen water, for Huysmans, is often associated with gemstones, lapidary hardness, masculine control: set in dichotomy against the untamed waters of the sea that play such a vital role in the imagery of *À Rebours*. This is "inverted" water that Marlès sees: a physical reflection – like the moonscape that haunts Marlès' dreams – of the perfect, organised, unwrinkled world Jacques longs for body and soul. Yet, instead of bringing him happiness, it only fills him with a quasi-Kierkegaardian terror: "accablé par cette sensation...de vide.".

Yet by the novel's close, Marlès – assailed by wild phantasmagorias and the bites of fleas alike – seems to have at last given up his struggle against facticity: as he prepares to leave the Château, we get our first and only "positive" view of the natural world in the book, a view that suggests that Marlès has the potential to one day engage authentically with actuality:

> Il faisait si bon sur cette pelouse... Le château, ranimé par un bain de soleil, se défublait de ses mines grognonnes, rajeunissait, s'affêtait, coquettait, pour son départ. Ces pigeons même, si sauvages qu'on ne pouvait réussir à les toucher, se pavanaient maintenant dans la cour et le regardaient…Il se sentit le cœur serré, en passant pour la dernière fois sous le berceau des allées désertes, en regardant les grelots des grappes

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[515] Ibid, p. 89 "Above the church, the garden, and the woods, high up in the harsh sky, welled the cold water of the stars. Most seemed like frozen springs of light and those that burned most fiercely were like inverted geysers or hot springs of glimmering water in reverse. There was not a shimmer, not a cloud, not a wrinkle in this firmament, which suggested the image of a solidified sea sprinkled with liquid islets. Jacques suddenly felt faint in his whole body, a dizziness induced by staring into the vastness of space. The immensity of the silent ocean...almost left him trembling, overwhelmed by a sensation of the unknown, of the void.".

> de vignes enroulées dans les pagodes à clochettes des vieux pins.[516]

For the first time, Marlès is able to see beauty in the world outside the cloister of his own body. Here, the "assault" of Nature onto the Chateau takes on a new meaning: it is not an attack but an aeration: an opening-up of the labyrinthine rooms of Marlès' interior castle to the light.

If the world outside the Chateau fills Marlès with disgust, the world inside does not fare much better. Marlès longs for a Des Esseintes-style *theïbade:* ultimate freedom from all external constraints. Yet the ruined castle reveals the very impossibility of that freedom. Appalled that the library has fallen into disrepair, Marlès laments:

> Qu'étaient devenus tous les veaux jaspés, tous les maroquins à gros grains, bleu gendarme ou vin de Bordeaux, tête de More ou myrte, les peaux du Levant, armoriées sur les plats et dorées sur les tranches; qu'était devenue l'indispensable mappemonde, avec ses têtes d'anges bouffis, soufflant de leurs joues gonflées, à chacun des points cardinaux; qu'étaient devenus la table en bois d'amarante et de rose, les meubles contournés aux sabots dorés à l'or moulu et aux pieds tors?[517]

Such concerns are telling. In longing for books, Jacques longs for a way of imposing linguistic order on this shadowy setting. After all, the thing he misses most here is a *map* – not just any map but one that hints at a kind of cosmic and spiritual unity, with "four angel heads", as in mythology, creating a theological as well as physical cartography of the space.

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[516] Ibid, p. 242; "it was so pleasant out on this lawn...the chateau, brought back to life by the sunlight, was casting off its surly aspect, looking younger, with a festive coquettish air, as if for his departure. Even the pigeons, so wild that one never succeeded in getting close to them, were now strutting about the courtyard and looking at him...he felt sad at heart, passing for the last time beneath the power of these deserted pathways, looking at bunches of grapes like sleighbells on vines coiled round pagoda of pines, their old cones hanging like cowbells.".

[517] Ibid, pp. 66-7; "What had become of all the marbled calfskin, all the coarse-grained morocco, cavalry blue or burgundy, edam red or myrtle green, the goatskin bindings adorned with heraldic bearings on the top boards and gilded along the edges? What had become of the indispensible map of the ancient world, with its four angel heads blowing swollen-cheeked at each of the cardinal points?".

Marlès tries to create a tower-within-a-tower: an imaginary chateau within these crumbling walls, complete with an imaginary *marquise*: a desirable counterpart for his own Louise. He has an erotic response to the marquise's boudoir, which in his mind still smells of her perfume, conjuring her up in a manner that recalls the evocation of Villiers' "Véra":

> un parfum très effacé d'éther...Tous ces détails se rappelaient, les uns les autres, se groupaient, puis se fondaient en une image poudrée de jeune femme, rêvant dans une bergère, et se chauffant les pieds et le dos, entre les deux cheminées,...Il lui semblait violer une sepulture.[518]

When this fantasy fizzles, he turns to one that does not demand even an imaginary other:

> Et ce n'était pas sans une certaine joie qu'il se livrait à cette sélection de bibelots et de livres ; son affection éparse sur des bibliothèques entières et sur des pièces, se concentrait, en se reportant sur les rares objets qu'il s'apprêtait à conserver ; il les aimait davantage et cette recrudescence d'amitié pour certains volumes, pour certains meubles lui faisait presque désirer, à ce moment, de se débarrasser sans tarder des autres auxquels il ne tenait tout à coup plus.[519]

As a would-be collector, Marlès imagines using objects to part the metaphorical waters.

But Marlès retreat is constantly under siege. He cannot get the doors to shut properly; his keys never turn in any of the locks. The walls of the Château prove as porous a membrane as Marlès own consciousness.[520]

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[518] Ibid, pp. 64-5 "All these details sprang into his mind, one after another, uniting to form the powdered image of a young woman daydreaming in a Bergère armchair, warming her feet and her back between the glowing hearths of the two fireplaces...it seemed to him that he was violating a sepulchre."

[519] Ibid, p.113; "he gave himself up to the selection of his books and his belongings; his predilections spread over entire bookshelves and rooms, began to focus themselves, turning to the rare objects he was preparing to keep; he desired them even more now, and this new burst of affection for certain volumes, for certain pieces of furniture, almost made him wish that today, and without delay, he could get rid of the others which he suddenly no longer cared for."

[520] Cf Ibid, p. 68.

It is only in his three dreams that Marlès can access freedom: although each dream, in turn, reveals a greater and greater encroachment of "real life" onto Jacques' mental terrain.

Only in the first dream, the dream of Esther taken from a prose-poem Huysmans published separately a year earlier in *La Vogue*), does Jacques attain full aesthetic mastery: he creates a palatial world the polar opposite of the fecund, rotting, porous landscape of the Chateau. The dream takes place moments after what appears to be a symbolic instance of Marlès' impotence: his wife is "étendue, décolorée, sur le grabat"[521] while "Il alla visiter les portes les pênes ne marchaient pas et, malgré ses efforts, les clefs s'entêtaient à ne point tourner; il finit par adosser une chaise contre la porte d'entrée pour empêcher le battant de s'ouvrir."[522] Not only can Jacques not push the bolts, he is feminized: forced to try and stop penetration of his space.

Staring at the wall as he tries to sleep, he slips into reverie: an erection not of his useless member, but of so many palatial spires:

> les bâtons verts des treilles ondulèrent, tandis que le fond saumâtre du lambris se ridait tel qu'un cours d'eau. Et ce friselis de la cloison jusqu'alors immobile s'accentua; le mur, devenu liquide, oscilla, mais sans s'épandre; bientôt, il s'exhaussa, creva le plafond, devint immense, puis ses moellons coulants s'écartèrent et une brèche énorme s'ouvrit, une arche formidable sous laquelle s'enfonçait une route...un palais surgit...montait dans les nuages avec ses empilements de terrasses, ses esplanades, ses lacs enclavés dans des rives d'airain, ses tours à collerettes de créneaux en fer ses dômes papelonnés d'écailles, ses gerbes d'obélisques aux pointes couvertes ainsi que des pics de montagne, d'une éternelle neige...et une gigantesque salle apparut pavée de porphyre,

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[521] Ibid, p. 24; "stretched out, pallid, on the mattress".

[522] Ibid; "He went to check the doors; the bolts didn't work and, in spite of his efforts, the keys stubbornly refused to turn; he ended up pushing a chair against the door to prevent it opening".

> supportée par de vastes piliers aux chapiteaux fleuronnés de coloquintes de bronze et de lis d'or.[523]

The "battlements of iron" – an alteration from the original published edition of "Esther" – makes the reference to the Château clearer.

This is the most lapidary of all Huysmans' textual worlds. Everything – including plants – is made of gemstones: "seuilles furent serties de pierreries d'un vert accentué et précis: de chrysobéryls vert asperge...,des vignes poussaient des raisins de rubis et d'améthystes, des grappes de grenats et d'amaldines, des chasselas de chrysoprases, des muscats gris d'olivines et de quartz"[524] Soft, tangled, Nature is replaced by glittering, hard surfaces: reflecting Marlès' desired sexual and mental prowess.

Thus does Marlès conjure Esther – from the Biblical narrative – in this version a fully submissive virgin offering herself up to her king's (and, by extension, Marlès') gaze:

> Reflété par le porphyre des dalles, son corps lui apparaissait tout nu; elle se voyait, telle qu'elle était, sans étamine, sans voile, sous le regard en arrêt d'un homme ...la faisait frémir devant le muet examen d'un Roi, la détaillant, la scrutant avec une savoureuse lenteur, pouvant, s'il la congédiait d'un geste, insulter à cette beauté que son orgueil de femme jugeait indéfectible et consommée, presque divine, se changeait en la

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[523] Ibid, p. 25; "The green lines of the trellis-work began to undulate, and the brackish background of the panelling started to ripple like flowing water. And this lapping motion of the previously immobile partition became more pronounced; the wall, now liquid, oscillated though without spreading; presently it expanded upwards, burst through the ceiling, and became colossal, then its flowing stonework parted and an enormous breach opened up, a tremendous arch through which plunged a road…a palace rose up…with its layers of terrace rising into the clouds, its esplanades, its lakes bounded by banks of bronze, its towers ringed with battlements of iron, its domes lamellated with scales, its sheafs of obelisks with their tips permanently capped by snow…a ginantic hall appeared, paved in porphyry and supported by vast pillars.".

[524] Ibid, pp. 25-6; "vine leaves cut from individual gems; a flame inferno of incombustible vines, an inferno fed by the mineral embers of leaves carved out of different glimmers of green: the light green glimmer of emerald, the grassy green of peridot, the sea-green of aquamarine, the yellow-green of ziroc and the greeny-blue of beryl…there were vines sprouting grapes of rubies and amethysts, bunches of garnets and almandines, chasselas-like clusters of chrysoprases, muscat sprigs of olivines and quartz".

> pudeur éperdue, en l'angoisse révoltée d'une vierge livrée aux mutilantes caresses du maître qu'elle ignore.[525]

She is not only physically naked, she is also – more importantly for Marlès' erotic purposes – *analysable*: she exists for judgment.

What happens next is unsubtle: "il étendit vers elle la tulipe en diamant de son sceptre, dont elle vint, défaillante, baiser le bout...le palais monta s'agrandissant encore, s'envolant, se perdant dans le ciel, éparpillant, pêle-mêle, sa semaille de pierreries dans le labour noir où scintillait, là-haut, la fabuleuse moisson des astres."[526] Jacques' impotence is transformed into creative and erotic power: his inutile penis contrasted with the king's diamond sceptre. What Marlès cannot achieve in the world of actuality, he can achieve in the world of his dreams.

So too Marlès second dream: the moon-journey: a fantasy of control all the more pronounced for its lack of explicitly erotic content. Just as Des Esseintes made the move from controlling an individual (e.g., Langlois) to controlling an environment, so too does Marlès move from his mastery of Esther to his mastery of the moon itself – the ultimate feminine symbol – rendered a masculine production of frozen water, parched landscapes: travaillée au repoussé, ballonnée d'énormes bosses, d'une colossale vague, écornée du bout, bouillie au feu d'innombrables fournaises et dont la globuleuse ébullition, soudain comprimée, était demeurée, en se congelant d'un coup, intacte."[527]

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[525] Ibid, p. 31; "Reflected in the porphyry tiles, she could see her naked body; she saw herself as she was… under the relentless gaze of a man….that made her tremble before the silent scrutiny of a king, analysing her, examining her with deliberate relish, able, if he chose to dismiss her with a gesture, to insult that beauty which her feminine pride considered indestructible…the shocked anguish of a virgin delivered up to the mutilating caresses of a master she didn't know.".

[526] Ibid, pp. 31-2; "He extended to her the diamond tulip of his scepter, which she came, fainting, kissing the end ... the palace rose up, enlarging, flying away, losing itself in the sky, scattering, pell-mell, her sowing of precious stones in the black plowing where, up above, lay the fabulous harvest of the stars".

[527] Ibid, p. 91; ""dented like repousséwork, swollen with enormous bumps, that it was a colossal wave, just breaking at the top, boiled in the fires of innumerable furnaces, whose bubbling turmoil, suddenly held in check and solidifying instantly, had been preserved intact.".

Jacques knows where everything is: he can *diagnose*, here: give everything a name and function in a way he cannot do in the real world: "Il est certain, pensa Jacques, que nous sommes en plein Océan des Tempêtes...Non, je ne me suis pas trompé de route, se dit-il, contemplant le lait glacé de cette surface presque plane, devenue renflée, toruleuse seulement alors qu'on approchait du pied d'un pic."[528] Several of the landmarks he proudly points out to his wife, furthermore, have names associated with disease – the Sea of Humours, for example – but they give off no affecting smell. And, unlike the gardens of Chateau, with their leaves and tendrils barricading his path, the moonscape is easy for Marlès to cross: "s'avançaient facilement, glissant plutôt qu'ils ne marchaient sur une sorte de glace givrée au-dessous de laquelle apparaissaient de vagues fougères cristallisées dont les nervures et les côtes brillaient ainsi que des sillons de vif-argent."[529]

The image of the harsh, cold, frozen sky discussed earlier – the sight of which prompted this fantasy – returns, expanded:

> car là-haut, le firmament était noir, d'un noir absolu, intense, parsemé d'astres qui brûlaient pour eux seuls, sur place, sans épandre aucune lueur...l'Aristille ressemblait à une ville gothique avec ses pics, les dents en l'air, coupant de leur scie le basalte étoilé du ciel; et, derrière et devant cette ville, deux autres cités se superposaient, mêlant au moyen âge d'une Heidelberg l'architecture moresque d'une Grenade, enchevêtrant, les uns dans les autres, dans un tohu-bohu de pays et de siècles, des minarets et des clochers, des aiguilles et des flèches, des meurtrières et des créneaux, des mâchicoulis et des dômes, trinité monstrueuse d'une métropole morte,

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[528] Ibid, pp. 91-2; "It's obvious, thought Jacques, that we're in the middle of the Ocean of Storms...no, I haven't lost my way, he thought, contemplating the frozen milk of this almost flat surface, which became swollen and torulous".

[529] Ibid, p. 93; "they processed easily, sliding rather than walking on a sort of frosted ice, beneath which seemed to be faint crystallised ferns whose veins and ribs gleamed like trails of quicksilver".

> autrefois taillée dans une montagne d'argent par les torrents en ignition d'un sol![530]

Even the stars, here, are autonomous: burning for themselves, rather than existing in and with others in a world produced by the necessity of sexual reproduction.

If Nature is sickness, this Moon is the cure: the vocabulary of its landscape that of the surgeon's tools:

> un amas d'instruments de chirurgie énormes, de scies colosses, de bistouris démesurés, de sondes hyperboliques, d'aiguilles monumentales, de clefs de trépan titanesques, de cloches à ventouses cyclopéennes, toute une trousse de chirurgie pour Atlas et Encelade, déchargée pêle-mêle sur une nappe blanche. Jacques et sa femme restaient stupides, doutaient de la lucidité de leur vue. Ils se frottèrent les yeux, mais, dès qu'ils les rouvrirent, la même vision les confondit d'une ville gouachée en argent sur un fond de nuit et projetant avec les dessins hérissés des ombres les exactes formes d'instruments ténébreux épars, avant une opération, sur un drap blanc... de quels cataclysmes ces ouragans s'étaient congelés, ces cratères s'étaient éteints? à la suite de quelle formidable compression d'ovaires avait été enrayé le mal sacré, l'épilepsie de ce monde, l'hystérie de cette planète...[531]

This is a positivist moon – a hysterical woman whose ovaries have been compressed (note the imagery of Charcot again here), whose body has been diagnosed and thus conquered, by the male, rational, scientific force. (Lest we be in doubt, Huysmans makes it even more explicit a few sentences later at the sight of a crater: "sexué comme une fille par

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[530] Ibid, p. 95; "High above the firmament was black, absolutely, intensely black, sprinkled with stars that burned solely for themselves, in one spot, without shedding a glimmer of light...Aristillus resembled a Gothic city, its jagged peaks cutting like a saw, teeth upwards, into the starring basalt of the sky, and in front of and behind this city, two other cities were superimposed...a confusion of countries and epochs, minarets and belfries, obelisks and steeples, loopholes and crenellations, domes and machiolations, a monstrous trinity forming this dead metropolis, sculpted eons ago in a crater of silver by molten torrents of lava.".

[531] Ibid, p. 95ff; "a mass of enormous surgical instruments, colossal saws, huge lancets, exaggerated probes, monumental needles, titanic trepanning tools, gigantic cupping classes, an entire surgical kit for an Atlas… that kind of cataclysm could have frozen these hurricanes and extinguished these craters; what fantastical ovary compresser could have arrested the *petit mal,* the epilepsy of this planet".

le grand V d'un golfe, fourché de deux jambes écartées"[532]) This is a landscape defined by masculine control.

But Jacques cannot escape from reality forever. Although for much of his dream, his wife Louise has been a quiescent, silent partner – content to follow Marlès around the moon and stand in raptured awe at his knowledge of it – suddenly the dream-Louise evinces her own autonomy and subjectivity: expressing her own opinion and, in so doing, negating Marlès complete control of his own dreamscape. "C'est plus beau, comme vue, que la terrasse de Saint-Germain," says Louise[533] – and this is enough to shatter Marlès' reverie and wake him.

But it is in his third, and final dream, that reality and fantasy begin to converge. This dream occurs in a strange Parisian city-scape: filled with witches. He first comes across one would-be sorcerer, and thinks himself quite clever for applying rational knowledge to counteract both magic and the feminine force: when the sorcerer announces that he scatters "les menstrues de la terre dans ce pot."[534] Jacques replies with knowledgeable disdain: "Parfaitement, dit Jacques, sans sourciller. J'ai lu les anciens livres de la Kabbale, et je n'ignore point que cette expression, les menstrues de la terre, désigne tout bonnement le gros sel…"[535] All seems well – Jacques' knowledge signals his control.

But things go wrong. Time, place, memories start to converge, to meld into one another: Jacques recalls he is meant to deliver a watch, but he has left it back at Lourps – he has, quite literally, lost control of time. He climbs a bell tower, only to find himself *above* that

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[532] Ibid, p. 99; "the contour of which resembled the belly of a pale figure, her navel represented by the Jansen crater, her girl's sex by the great V of a gult, and the fork of her two spread legs.".

[533] Ibid; "It's a more beautiful view than the one from the terrace at Saint-Germain-en-Laye.".

[534] Ibid;,p. 199; "the menstrua of the earth into this pot"

[535] Ibid; "Quite so,' said Jacques, without batting an eye, 'I've read the ancient books of the Kabbala and I'm well aware that the expression 'menstrua of the earth' simply refers to common salt."

night sky he has contemplated so many times before: “il plongea en dessous de lui; une cuve formidable de noir dans laquelle nageaient, ainsi que des pâtes d’Italie, des étoiles, des croissants, des losanges, des cœurs phosphorescents, tout un ciel souterrain, constellé d’astres comestibles, l’épouvanta.”[536] The totality of the night sky with its frozen waters is revealed to be an illusion: stars are no longer hard but soft, like *pasta*, and thus edible, consumable.

Things get worse. Jacques enters a world characterized with typical Huysmanian nautical reference to a “une sorte de puisard”[537] Jacques catches sight of a field of pumpkins; the sight sickens him:

> Jacques eut l’immédiate perception qu’il voyait un champ de fesses mongoles, un potager de derrières appartenant à la race jaune...les potirons s’ouvrirent, tombèrent, divisés en tranches, montrant leurs entrailles de pépins blancs disposés en grappes dans la jaune rotonde du ventre vide...Oh! ils étaient là derrière cette porte, tels qu’il les devinait sans les avoir jamais vus, les démons qu’implore, la nuit, l’aberration des filles qui se forment, les monstres en quête de cratères nubiles, les pâles et mystérieux incubes, au sperme froid!...Oui, ce champ de citrouilles était à n’en point douter un sabbat de sorciers, accroupis, enfoncés en terre et se démenant pour s’exhumer et la tête et le corps! Il recula; non, à aucun prix, il ne voulait assister aux dégoûtantes effusions de ces cultures animées et de ces larves![538]

There is much to unpack here. The connection of plants to sexual organs is hardly a new one for Huysmans: but while that savage Nidularium revealed Des Esseintes' fear of

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[536] Ibid, p. 201; “It plunged away beneath him, a formidable black vat in which swam shapes like Italian pasta – phosphorescent stars, crescents, diamonds and hearts – a whole subterranean night sky constellated with edible stars that terrified him”

[537] Ibid, p. 206, “what looked liked a ship's bilge”

[538] Ibid, p. 202-3; “Jacques' first impression was that he was looking at a field of Mongolian buttocks, a garden of backsides...the pumpkins fell open, divided into slices, revealing their entrails of white seeds, arrayed in clusters within the yellow rotunda of their empty bowels....Oh! They were there, behind that door, just as he'd imagined them without ever having seen them, those demons conjured up in the night by deviant young girls, monsters in search of nubile orifices, pallid, uncanny incubi with icy sperm...yes, that field of pumpkins was undoubtedly a sabbath or sorcerers, squatting, buried in the ground and wriggling about in order to try to disinter their heads and bodies. He recoiled; no, he didn't want to witness the disgusting ejaculations of these living fruits and those evil spirits at any price!”.

castration, of losing his individuality and becoming merely one in a crowd, the upturned buttocks represent a new psychological terror: that of being emasculated by penetration, of being forced into the role of artistic object rather than self-positing subject. The imagery of witchcraft – black sabbaths, sorcerers – moves us squarely away from the positivist world of the moonscape – all surgeons' tools and simple diagnoses – and into a schema in which science no longer has the last word.

Marlès' masculinity continues to come under threat. He loses his cane.When he makes it to the top of the tower, he is destablized by a beam that refuses to stay between his legs: he ventures out onto it, only to "sentit le bout fuir sous son ventre, poussa un cri, battit l'air de ses bras, s'abîma dans le gouffre."[539]

Then he sees a terrible vision: a woman tortured by mechanical devices – the female body under attack by the same masculine forces Marlès has praised earlier in the text: "une tête surgit dans l'eau, une tête renversée de femme qui monta, d'un mouvement saccadé, lent...Et en même temps qu'elle, s'élevaient, accrochés dans sa hanche, les becs en fer d'un formidable cric. Ces becs mordaient sa peau qui saignait."[540] Her eyes fall out of her head – she is denied even autonomous vision – but then they return to her skull, and the power dynamics shift. This female form begins to laugh at Marlès.

Only then does he uncover her identity:

> cette abominable gaupe, c'était la Vérité…la Vérité n'est-elle pas la grande Roulure de l'esprit, la Traînée de l'âme ? Dieu seul en effet sait si, depuis la genèse, celle-là s'est bruyamment galvanisée avec les premiers venus, artistes et papes, cambrousiers et rois, tous l'avaient possédée et chacun avait acquis l'assurance qu'il la détenait à soi seul et fournissait, au

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[539] Ibid, p. 205; "ventured out on a beam...the beam was sliding between his thighs, he saw it receding, he felt the end slip from under his belly, he cried out, beat the air with his arms, and fell into the abyss.".

[540] Ibid, pp. 206-7; "A woman's head tipped back, rising up in slow, jerky movements...the iron jaws of an enormous crane rose up with her, clamped onto her hips. These jaws her biting into her skin, which was bleeding...".

> moindre doute, des arguments sans réplique, des preuves irréfutables, décisives.[541]

Here, at last, do we see the ultimate subversion of Marlès' project. Truth, reason, diagnosis, narrative control – the masculine virtues of imposition, of "unanswerable arguments...irrefutable, conclusive proofs"– are reimagined in the person of a syphilitic whore for whom such proofs, though irrefutable, are lies: at once mistress of artifice, unreliable, not to be trusted, and, burlesqued in the female body, putting the lie to the notion that narrative control can serve as a worthwhile proof of masculine sexual prowess. Just as the weeds and plants of the Chateaus' "riotous" garden invade the tower, creeping within its crevices, so too does the external world invade Jacques' mental palace: the enclosure of his dreams. His mental world cannot exist in isolation from the world of actuality, of nature, of the flesh. Jacques cannot merely be a *personnage*: a character. He must learn to be a body, too.

We have discussed both the external and internal worlds of *En Rade*. But perhaps most intriguing of all are the liminal spaces that *En Rade* occupies, and that occupy *En Rade:* the places where the inner and the outer converge.

The most prosaic example in the text is Huysmans' (and by extension, Marlès') preoccupation with defecation. If in *À Rebours,* Des Esseintes' enema points to his desire to attain full self-sustaining autonomy, so too does Marlès' fear and shame about defecation point to his inability to contend with any other model of existence. Marlès is frequently "intoxicated" by the scent of manure: in one scene, "[Jacques] se leva, entr'ouvrit la porte, et

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[541] Ibid, pp. 209-10; "this loathsome slut was truth...the great Whore of the mind, the Streetwalker of the soul! Indeed, God only knows but ever since Genesis she's probably been noisily prostituting herself with the first man who comes along, artists and popes, yokels and kinds, all had her, and each one had acquired the assurance that he alone possessed her, and at the slightest doubt, furnished unanswerable arguments and irrefutable, conclusive proofs.".

aspira une bouffée d'air pur, une bouffée parfumée par la brusque odeur des bois mouillés à laquelle se mêlait la senteur tièdement ambrée des bouses"[542] that sends him into a stupor; elsewhere he ends up "s'endormir, grisé par l'odeur du fumier et des bouses."[543] The smell of urine and feces, in *En Rade*, is inextricably connected to Nature as a whole – the peasant Uncle Antoine exudes "dans une latrinière exhalaison de purin tiède."[544]; as Jacques walks through the Chateau's grounds, he experiences: "une odeur forte, âpre, quelque chose comme la senteur de l'urine des sangliers montait de la terre pourrie de feuilles, bousculée par les taupes, ébranlée par les racines, éboulée par l'eau."[545]

Yet for Jacques, defecation – of acknowledging the inherent liminality of the body – is horrifying. In a passage much-derided by critics for its seeming Puritanism, Jacques – seeking to relieve himself in the castle – is appalled that the castle seems to lack one of those "les confessionnaux du corps, les pièces aménagées pour déverser ses fuyants secrets".*[546]* (By contrast, Norine and Antoine are entirely at ease with their bodily functions: "C'est-il donc que tu voudrais chier, mon neveu, dit-[Norine[entre deux hoquets ; mais on se pose dehors, où qu'on est, comme nous!"[547]) One of his greatest challenges in sharing space with Louise

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[542] Ibid, p. 21; "got up, half opened the door, an inhaled a gust of fresh air, a gust perfumed with the sharp odour of damp wood to which was mixed the warm, ambergris-like fragrance of cow dung".

[543] Ibid, p. 61; "ended up falling asleep, intoxicated by the smell of manure and cow-pats".

[544] Ibid, p. 69; "the cloacal ordour of warm manure".

[545] Ibid, p. 47; "a pungent, acrid smell, something like the scent of boar's urine, rose from earth that was rotten with leaves, churned up by moles, undermined by roots and sodden with water.".

[546] Ibid, p. 85; "confessionals of the body...designed to carry away its secret evacuations": a euphemistic phrase that points to Jacques' discomfort with the idea"; Cf. " (CF *La Liberté on 19 August 1887:* "the author could have called the thing by its name...but all of a sudden he's in the grip of some scruple of decency".

[547] Ibid; "if you want to take a shit, nephew," [Norine] said between gulps of laugher, 'just find a spot outside wherever you want, like we do!"

in the castle is the necessity of sharing “la honte des soins caches [the shame of intimate ablutions]”[548]

But, for Jacques, defecation is an admission that he is not the impregnable fortress he would like to be.

The novel's liminal spaces are not, however, limited to the digestive system. Nearly all of Jacques' experiences outside the castle involve his body being rendered as porous as his mind. Mites plague him: “il s’arrachait des copeaux d’épiderme et ne pouvait se rassasier du douloureux plaisir de se pincer, de se racler, de se tenailler, de se raboter le corps et, à mesure qu’il se ravinait une place, d’intolérables cuissons renaissaient à une autre,...les ramenant aux cloques déjà mûres dont le sang partait.”[549]

Just as the invasion of the external world comes to transform Jacques' fantasies from dreams into nightmares, so too does the triumph of objectivity play out on Jacques body, as blood forces itself outward.

But Huysmans also uses liminality to explore the possibility of natural existence: of sexual procreation that serves as the ultimate contrast with Marlès' impotent self-projecting. In one scene, Antoine is forced to lubricate a pregnant cow's vaginal passage in order to ease the birth. The description of the calf's birth shines new light on the possibility of liminal space: that which in Marlès' worldview represents an assault on his mental autonomy is now revealed in unflinching and graphic specificity as the origin of *life*: “Et tout à coup une masse gluante, énorme, déboula dans des éclaboussures de lochies et de glaires, sur un tas préparé

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[548] Ibid, p. 85

[549] Ibid, p. 164; “he started ripping off flakes of skin and couldn't get enough of the painful pleasure of pinching himself of scraping, tearing, and grating his body, but as soon as he'd gouged one place, an intolerable burning sensation began again in another...forcing him to scratch all over with both hands, returning to old bites that were already bleeding.”

de paille, pendant que l'entaille rouge ouverte sous la croupe de la vache se refermait, comme mue par un ressort...dont la vulve saignait des stalactites de morves roses."[550]

There is nothing aesthetically pleasing about this birth: the aestheticized sexual encounter between Esther and the King, with its hard, glimmering surfaces, gives way to a vision of uniformité – the calf virtually lost in the "discharge", the mucus-membrane. But nevertheless, this use of the passage between the interior and exterior gives us a glimpse of a life beyond the autonomous and isolated: an existence defined by authentic engagement with otherness, a sexual congress that allows in turn for mutuality and self-giving, and that ultimately produces life. It is a sentiment echoed by Antoine, when he reminds Marlès that the cow's bounty – milk – can only be shared with those willing to engage: "Suppose que tu la traies, mon neveu, eh ben, elle te donnerait à peine du lait! elle s'abandonne qu'avec Norine; elle perd tout pour elle; ah dame! c'est point quand on aime, comme quand on aime point! et elle est, comme le monde, la Lizarde, elle aime ceux qui la soignent "[551]

As Julia Pryzbos puts it,"La création originale de l'artiste décadent s'oppose à la procréation de la nature adulée par les écrivains naturalists."[552]

Marlès' impotent aestheticizing is revealed as at once impossible and fundamentally *unloving*: by *En Rade's* close, however, Huysmans presents us with another alternative: a vision of life and the body that, in defying diagnosis, allows for real reproduction.

In our final discussion of Huysmans in the following chapter, "Language, Sin, and Salvation", we will return to the Durtal novels and explore how Huysmans takes the concepts

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[550] Ibid, p. 73-4; "An enormous, sticky mass tumbled out, amid the splatter of placental discharge and mucus-membrane, onto a prepared pile of straw, while the gaping red gash beneath the cow's rump closed up again, as if worked by a spring...her vulva bleeding stalactites of pink mucus.".

[551] Ibid, p. 71; "If you tried to milk 'er, nephew, well, she'd barely give you a drop. She only lets herself go with Norine; she'll give it all to her; aye, they don't love you unless you loves them. Lizarde's like everyone else, she loves those who take care of her.".

[552] Julia Pryzbos, "*En Rade:* ou Huysmans entre creation et procreation" in Marc Smeets (ed), *Joris-Karl Husymans,* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), p.55.

explored here and in *À Rebours* – of narrative control and semiotic meaning, artistic individuality and the unformité of nature – and shows us, via Durtal's slow conversion, an alternative. The need for complete autonomy, predicated on the assumption of a godless universe, and manifesting itself in a hierarchical and individualistic model of artistic creation, gives way to a theistic model for creation: in which creation is not an act of self-positing but rather self-giving: an expression not of the desire of control, but of the possibility of love.

iv) Concluding Questions

In his 1887 poem "Pied Beauty," Christian and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins creates a vision of religiously-infused nature: characterized not by uniformity but by uniqureness:

> Glory be to God for dappled things—
> For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
> For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim…
> All things counter, original, spare, strange;
> Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
> With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
> He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
> Praise Him.[553]

In this and other poems, Hopkins develops the concept of the "inscape": that dynamic and God-given force which renders each natural thing outside as well as within the self distinct and worthy of loving consideration. Alterity is conceived of in terms of specificity: a *milieu* not of either banal or arbitrary symbolic association but rather authentic engagement with otherness: a sky is the color of a cow not because it lacks meaning, but because a loving speaker identifies connectedness.

Hopkins' theology of setting, in other words, is the complete opposite of the theology of setting explored (and subverted) in these two novels of Huysmans, and in the decadent-

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[553] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *God's Grandeur and Other Poems,* (New York: Dover, 1995), p. 18.

dandyist canon more generally. We have seen how the decadent-dandyist novel treats setting and place twofold: first, as a fundamentally meaningless and threatening entity, whose *uniformité* is only granted any sort of theological order by virtue of the overweening autonomy of a rational, disengaged author-agent. The world is desacralized *unless* it is controlled; any divinity demands the *sub specie ironiae/aeternae* perspective. Nature is a canvas, nothing more.

We have seen, too, how the decadent-dandyist mode treats the "world" (i.e., setting) of the text (and, implicitly, the self) as something that exists in opposition to the "real" world (or the extra-textual) world: cloistered and self-sustaining *theïbades* in both form and content. Texts, for Des Esseintes and Marlès alike, are both auto-telic and hermetic, even as Huysmans subverts both protagonists' perspectives through clever intertextuality – the references in each book to other Huysmans texts (and other texts like "Usher") serve to highlight the interconnectivity of the textual project as a whole.[554]

The failure of each decadent-dandyist narrative project – from *Sixtine* to *Les Diaboliques* to the more literal cloisters in middle Huysmans – challenges us as theological readers to explore instead a Christian theological aesthetics rooted in engagement and "aeration" (a word that will figure prominently in next chapter's discussion of *En Route*): a treatment of both physical setting and (inter)-textual autonomy that highlights the necessity of engagement with alterity (other people, the natural world, other texts and stories, the text of the no less meaningful "real" world outside the borders of narrative). The Christian text, Huysmans hints in this and subsequent texts, is not a *theïbade* but something more akin to the

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[554] For an extended discussion of intertextuality in Huysmans, see Daniel Grojnowski, *Le Sujet d'A Rebours* (Paris: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion,, 1996)

city his protagonists so despise: a place where ideas and images are exchanges, and where intersubjectivity demands interpenetration of influence.[555]

Yet this perspective, as we shall see in our final section, demands not merely a theistic reading of the world but also, perhaps even more importantly, an *incarnational,* one, one that that does not merely sanctify the world as something made *by* an external creator-god, but rather seeks out the divinity *within* it: at the level not only of setting but also, more paramountly, in the "real presence" (to use George Steiner's term)[556] within language itself, a linguistic theology deeply rooted in Eucharistic understanding.

It is only in communion, Huysmans will suggest, that true communication can occur.

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[555] For more on this theological concept of the city, see Graham Ward's *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[556] see George Steiner, *Real Presences*, (London: Faber, 1989).

Chapter IV

Eating the Word:

Towards A New Theology of Language

i) Introduction

We have discussed in previous chapters the linguistic qualities of decadent-dandyism: "jeweled" language, images of hardness and discrete objects, an obsession with originality – Husymans' neologisms, for example. In our section on *À Rebours* we have discussed, too, the semiotic freedom that allows Des Esseintes to create his own sense of "correspondences": a mouth-organ in which associations between liquors and orchestral instruments, that doubles as a paradigm for the decadent-dandyist linguistic model: nothing *means* anything, ontologically speaking, so it falls to the self-creating creator to create, too, his linguistic world: his dizzying freedom *sub specie ironiae* extends to a command of language.

This paradigm is grounded, ultimately, in two theological assumptions about language. The first is that nothing (symbol or word) is inherently meaningful. The second is that there is little to no value even in socially ascribed meaning – which is to say, the meaning created in and by communities, in (as it were) communion. What has been true on the level of content in the decadent-dandyist novel – the self-creating self seeks an enclosed and auto-telic *theïbade* – is also true linguistically: language that is "common" is derided, rejected as the provenance of *la foule*.

In his *Real Presences,* George Steiner speaks to that first assumption of meaning from a Jewish perspective, grounding a fundamental faith in the meaningfulness of artistic language in the presence of a God who "is what he is," grounding identity, even as the very crisis of modernity constitutes an expression of that break: "'It is this break of the covenant between word and world which constitutes one of the very few genuine revolutions of spirit

in Western history and which defines modernity itself.'[557] A statement about the meaningfulness of language is a statement about the reality of God, and vice versa: "the intuition that where God's presence is no longer a tenable supposition and where His absence is no longer a felt, indeed overwhelming weight, certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable. And I would vary Yeats's axiom so as to say: no man can read fully, can answer answeringly to the aesthetic, whose "nerve and blood" are at peace in sceptical rationality, are now at home in immanence and verification. We must read *as if*."[558]

If Steiner is correct in his assessment of the crisis of modernity, few writers capture the linguistic-theological dimension of that crisis like Huysmans, who in his post-conversion-Durtal novels, *En Route, La Cathédrale,* and *L'Oblat,* build on and subvert the tensions of his earlier, decadent-dandyist work, exploring how the question of conversion and the question of the restitution of art from the disengaged irony of the decadent-dandyists are closely, inevitably intertwined. Grounding his theology of language and art – Huysmans does not programmatically separate the two – in a more Eucharistic reading of presence/incarnation than Steiner (writing from a Jewish perspective) might, Huysmans presents us with the blueprint for a restitution of Christian art, finding its locus between language, and liturgy: a Word that is both meaningful because it is immanent and incarnate *in itself,* but also because its re-inscription through the communal aspects of liturgy (much like language itself), grounds its truth not in isolation but in the dynamic intersubjectivity of love.

In previous chapters, we have raised the question as to whether all narrative is a kind of rape – which is to say, whether the power dynamics of the traditional "story" as told (and only exemplified by the dandy-storyteller) can ever result in anything but violation of the listener's autonomy. Huysmans, in his depictions of liturgical art, of language in communion,

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[557] George Steiner, *Real Presences,* (London: Faber, 1989), p. 229.

[558] Ibid.

of divine marriages that take the place of rapes, restitutes too the erotic: providing us with images of loving artistic encounter rather than violation: creation that is not self-projection but mutual fecundity.

ii) Choice Morsels: *En Route*

Huysmans' follow-up to *Là-Bas* (and first postconversion novel), the 1895 *En Route,* is not a scintillating book. There are no jewel-encrusted tortoises; there is no Black Mass. The nightmares our protagonist Durtal experiences are not visions of Syphilitic genitalia, exposed pumpkin arses, or grisly child-murder. The most narratively interesting thing that happens to Durtal in five hundred pages is a glimpse of an otter with a fish in its mouth.

However, *En Route* – and the two succeeding Durtal novels, *La Cathédrale* and *L'Oblat* – represent a pinnacle in the ambiguous decadent-dandyist relationship between author, text, and God. Dealing explicitly with the problem of narrative distancing and the theological underpinnings of any systematic understanding of the creative act, *En Route* and its successors explore how language itself variously serves both as vector of diabolic abuse by a single artist-subject and, once redeemed, as method of interpenetrating mutuality: a communication that mirrors the Eucharist whose consumption so vexes and terrifies Durtal.

En Route serves as a microcosm for Huysmans' post-conversion trilogy as a whole. Here we find not merely an expression of nature's savage potency and inherent agency – as in *À Rebours, En Rade,* and *Là-Bas* alike – but rather its *redemption*: one that both recognizes the subjective power of the viewer to sanctify it (i.e., using the power of language "for good"), and its inherent and immutable status as mirror of a divine benediction: not only *meaningful* nature, but a nature whose meaning is explicitly and optimistically *theological*.

We find, too, the beginnings of a resolution of the decadent-dandyist tension between exterior and interior, appearances and reality, that not only grounds Durtal's textual world

(and with it, text itself) in a semiotic that points beyond manufactured equivalencies of liquers with orchestral instruments, but also demands the penetrability of the previously autonomous artist-subject: it is in the crossing of physical, psychological, and spiritual liminal space, in the uncontrolled, even fecal, effusion of confession and in the intaking of the Body of Christ on the tongue, that the self is able to at last exist as *Christian* self. So too do we find in *En Route* the most explicit of Huysmans' abstract writings on theology and art: an examination of the written word in relation to the Word incarnate.

All that, of course, doesn't necessarily make *En Route* – a novel even Robert Ziegler dismisses as "wast[ing] away into holiness"[559] – the most exciting text in the decadent-dandyist canon. But the very lack of narrative propulsion in *En Route* and, to an even greater extent, its successors, is integral to its theological structure: it is only by dismantling his narrative expectations in all forms (and, through him, the reader's) that Durtal can arrive at genuine, unmediated religious understanding.

Huysmans – soon after his 1892 conversions – originally envisioned his follow-up to *Là-Bas* as the "white book" *Là-Haut*: a study of Notre Dame de Salette that contained several of the same elements of *En Route* – the characters of Florence and Mme Bavoil, the obsession with plain-chant, and soforth – but, from extant fragments, functioned even less conventionally as a novel than the current text. In analyzing Huysmans' journey from *Là-Haut* to *En Route,* Marc Smeets identifies a problem that would continue to dog Huysmans' writing process until his death – one with particular import to a theological reading of his texts: how can a writer be both a Christian and an artist?

Do the demands of self-abnegation Huysmans identified as the Christian imperative demand a total sacrifice of linguistic command and compelling, beautiful "jeweled" phrasing: a kind of artistic martyrdom? Must the writer enter "un état candide;...se purger...se

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[559] Ziegler, *Mirror,* p. 424.

confesser"[560] to create morally, if not aesthetically, *good* work? Certainly, Smeets sees in the abortive *Là-Haut* "un livre sec, médiocre, fastidieux, produit d'un pauvre *écrivant*"[561] – identifying in the novels that followed an awkward tension between Huymans' desire for a "white book" and the blackness of his literary sin: an amorphous "style gris."[562] (Certainly, Huysmans himself verbalized the problem; in an letter to his friend Arij Prins dated 3 October, 1894, he declares that "'en entrant dans cette voie, je sais avoir dit adieu à tout succès — mon parti en est pris.")[563]

Smeets raises a vital point here: one we shall return to throughout this chapter. Does the Christian writer have an obligation to alter his work not merely when it comes to content but also form? For Huysmans, it does: as Smeets puts it "Le problème du sujet se double donc d'un problème de la forme"[564] Indeed, the very theoretical underpinning of such an argument – the necessity of linking content and mode of expression – reveal a fundamental expressivist unity in Huysmans' thinking, one which *En Route* and its successors make clear. The wedding of form to content, a problem that has dogged decadent-dandyist writers since Villiers' exploration of the "problem" of Alicia Clary – becomes here a kind of Marriage at Cana: an expression of faith to transform and to reveal.

En Route and its successors – as much because of as in spite of their narrative flaws – radically reimagine what it is to create Christian art, in form as much as in content. As Alain Vircondolet puts it, "[ces texts, dont on ne peut plus dire qu'il sont exactement de romans, mais des ouvrages batards au regard du genre romanesque….sont néanmois des "romans

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[560] Marc Smeets, "Joris-Karl Huysmans et le style gris', in Smeets (ed), *Huysmans*, p. 73.

[561] Ibid, p. 77.

[562] Ibid.

[563] Ibid, p. 75.

[564] Ibid, p. 76.

d'une vie", un exceptionnel exemple de l'histoire ranconté d'une vie qui fut ce qu'elle fut: errante et vaste, misérable et solitaire, pauvre et glorieuse tout à la fois. C'est peut-etre à cela que tient l'actuelle présence de Huysmans dans l'histoire littéraire. À sa capacité à avoir transcendé les genres de son époque."[565]

Durtal must be one of the most frustrating protagonists in all of conversion literature. Bemoaning "ma sécheresse d'âme..mon défaut d'amour"[566], Durtal at once longs for spiritual ecstasy and fears the imbecility he believes it necessitates, falls into ecstasies at the sound of plain-chant and turns up his nose at insufficiently artistic churches and abbés' homes he dismisses as "sent l'hôtel et le logis de la vieille fille."[567] He is a solipsist, a snob, a pseudo-sensualist who never once in the course of *En Route* sleeps with the prostitute whom he blames as one of the causes of his spiritual degradation. He longs for sainthood, but fears going to the retreat of La Trappe – the stay in which constitutes the bulk of the novel – because he is worried he won't enjoy the food. Even when he takes what might be deemed a spiritual step forward – at last making the confession he so dreads – he falls two steps back: failing to take communion in the very same chapter (indeed the structure of the Trappe chapters highlights Durtal's spiritual inertia: a failed confession in Ch 2, a successful confession and a failed communion in Ch 3, a successful communion and a subsequent moment of panic in Ch. 4, and so forth). It is not for nothing that Pierre Glaudes terms *En Route* a "roman de l'inaccomplissement"[568]

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[565] Alain Vircondolet, "Huysmans et la trilogie" in Jerome Solale (ed), *Huysmans: écrivain catholique*, (Caen: La Revue Des Lettres Modernes, , 2012), p. 23.

[566]Huysmans, *En Route,* (Paris: Tresse & Stock,1895), p. 186; "my dryness of soul, my want of love"; translation from W Fleming (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2002),

[567] Ibid, p. 96; "like a hotel, an old maid's lodging".

[568] Pierre Glaudes, "La Conversion de Durtal", in Smeets (ed), p. 100,

Yet what is wrong with Durtal theologically is precisely what doubles as the reason for the circularity of Durtal's conversion journey: his obsession with narrative: an obsession that functions both on a macro-level – as a desire to be the hero of his own hagiography – and on a micro-level: as he seeks with Zolan precision to diagnose his own behavior. When he seeks advice from an abbé – hoping for some narratively fulfilling remedy – he is disappointed at the exhortation to: "prier chez vous, à l'église, le plus que vous pourrez, partout. Je ne vous prescris aucun remède religieux, je vous invite tout bonnement à mettre à profit quelques préceptes d'hygiène pieuse; nous verrons après."[569] Durtal "restait indécis, mécontent de même que ces malades qui en veulent aux médecins lorsque, pour les contenter, ceux-ci ne leur ordonnent que de pâles drogues."[570] The medicalization of language, here, combined with the aesthetic use of the word "pâles" – particularly in the context of Huysmans' wider obsession with color from *À Rebours* onwards – draws an immediate link between the Zolan search for causality and explicability and the more literary search for a colorful remedy: one spurred by what Robert Ziegler calls "fantasies of elevated sanctification"[571]

Durtal cannot do as the abbé advises – essentially "wait and see" – because his desire for conversion is rooted in a desire to master the outcome: "loin des foules, s'y trier en paix."[572] He cannot come to terms with the fact that "Il n'y a pas eu de chemin de Damas, pas

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[569] Huysmans, *En Route,* p. 101; "pray in your own house, in church, everywhere, as much as you can. I do not prescribe any religious remedy, I simply invite you to profit by some precepts of pious hygiene, afterwards we will see".

[570] Ibid, p. 102; "remained undecided, discontented, like those sick persons who find fault with doctors, who, to satisfy them, prescribe only colourless drug".

[571] Ziegler, *Mirror,* p. 251.

[572] Huysmans, *En Route,* p. 13; " examine himself at peace, apart from the crowd".

d'événements qui déterminent une crise ; il n'est rien survenu et l'on se réveille un beau matin, et sans que l'on sache ni comment, ni pourquoi, c'est fait."[573]

Indeed, Durtal's very conversion (the genesis of which tellingly takes place "off-stage" – between *Là-Bas* and *En Route*) is initially framed as a medical problem: ripe for diagnostic. "Comment était-il redevenu catholique, comment en était-il arrivé là?"[574], the novel's second chapter opens, and the following passages are dedicated to a "point-and-counterpoint" by which Durtal argues with himself (an argument prefiguring a more diabolical duality in his "dark night of the soul" towards the end of the text).

In the first few lines this "doubling" of Durtal is highlighted by the continuous use of reflexive verbs – he "se répondait", "se disait-il,", "se disait"[575] – as he argues with himself: "Non, la seule chose qui me semble sûre, c'est qu'il y a eu, dans mon cas, prémotion divine, grâce. Mais, fit-il, alors la psychologie de la conversion serait nulle?...Il est bien certain, reprit-il, après un silence de pensée, que c'est la Vierge qui agit...Par contre, si j'ignore la marche et les relais de ma conversion, je puis au moins deviner quels sont les motifs qui, après une vie d'indifférence, m'ont ramené dans les parages de l'Eglise,"[576] before at last identifying "three causes" – heredity, his disgust for life, and his love of art – he feels he can attribute his conversion to. He can point to potential causes, but cannot tell himself a story that would allow him to "relier ces fils, les grouper en faisceau."[577] (The language of a bundle

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[573] Ibid, p. 35; "There has been no road to Damascus, no events to bring about a crisis; nothing has happened, we awake some fine morning, and, without knowing how or why, the thing is done.".

[574] Ibid, p. 34; "How had he again become a Catholic?".

[575] Ibid, pp. 34ff.

[576] Ibid, pp. 35-6; "'No, the one thing which seems certain, in my case, is that there has been divine impulse, grace....But,' said he, 'in that case the psychology of conversion is worthless..It is certain,' he continued, after silent thought, 'that in these cases the Virgin acts upon us..."On the other hand, if I ignore the course and stages of my conversion, I can at least guess the motives which, after a life of indifference, have brought me into the harbours of the Church...'".

[577] Ibid, p. 35; "to gather these threads together, and group them in a beam." nb the official Fleming translation renders *fasceau* as "skein", which fails to evoke the building motif of the original French.

of sticks, a *fascis*, recalls too the building of a house: an image that recalls the failed *theïbades* of Des Esseintes and Marlès alike.)

Like a Dr. Torty, Durtal uses narrative as a distancing tool: he focuses not on God, but on himself: a self-creation less explicit, perhaps, than that of Des Esseintes, but no less insidious. By convincing himself that "je ne cherche pas le Seigneur, mais mon plaisir...Ce sont des postulations littéraires, des vibrations de nerfs, des échauffourées de pensées, des bagarres d'esprit, c'est tout ce que l'on voudra, sauf la Foi."[578], Durtal essentially talks himself "out" of his relationship with God.

Thus when asked to say a Rosary, Durtal upends the entire exercise through the same logorrhea that characterized his initial internal monologue about conversion, unable to decide whether his confessor meant ten beads or ten rosaries:

> Et l'idée qu'il se trompait revint, lancinante, à la charge. 'Il n'y a pas à barguigner, cependant; dans le langage ecclésiastique, une dizaine désigne dix grains; sans doute…mais je me rappelle fort bien qu'après avoir prononcé le mot chapelet, le père s'est exprimé ainsi: vous direz une dizaine, ce qui signifie une dizaine de chapelets, car autrement il eût spécifié une dizaine… d'un chapelet.' Et il se riposta aussitôt: — le père n'avait pas à mettre les points sur les i, puisqu'il employait un terme convenu, connu de tous. Cet ergotage sur la valeur d'un mot est ridicule.[579]

His self-doubt stops him from saying any Rosary at all. (Likewise, Durtal's question about the "valeur d'un mot" evokes one of the novel's wider themes: the instability of the meaning of a word is, as we shall see in subsequent sections, characteristic of the godless aestheto-linguistic paradigm.)

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[578] Ibid, p. 55; "I do not seek the Lord but my own pleasure….these are literary postulates, vibrations of the nerves, skirmishes of thought, spiritual brawls, whatever you please except Faith".

[579] Ibid, p. 306; "And the idea that he was deceiving himself came intermittently charging back. Still, there must be no haggling; in ecclesiastical language 'ten' means ten beads; no doubt ... but I remember very well that after he pronounced the word rosary, the father expressed himself thus: 'you will say ten,' that means ten rosaries, for otherwise he would have specified ten ... of a rosary. " And so he thrust and parried with himself —"The father had no need to put the dots on all the i's, if he were using an ordinary phrase, known to everyone. This cavalling about the value of a word is ridiculous." .

But there is ego in this self-doubt. Through these constant self-interruptions, Durtal casts himself as a modern Gilles de Rais: insistent that he is somehow worse than every other sinner: someone for whom "à la Trappe, le moine, révolté par l'outrage prolongé de mes fautes, me refuse l'absolution et m'empêche de communier?"[580] (the abbé's response highlights Durtal's foolishness: he bursts out laughing "Vous êtes fou ! Ah ça, mais quelle idée vous faites-vous du Christ ?"[581] Durtal's answer is telling: "Du Christ, non, mais de son médiateur, de l'être humain qui le remplace.")[582] Durtal's self-creation is always rooted in his difference from the "pécores pieuses"[583], *la foule*.

Likewise, as both doctor *and* patient in this scenario, Durtal becomes the narrative equivalent of Des Esseintes' peptone enema: a closed, self-perpetuating system. He is subject *and* object, creator and creation; the very insularity of this internal argument by its design leaves God, its ostensible subject, out. Durtal and his shadowy double form a closed rhetorical circle

Huysmans highlights this "closed" nature of Durtal throughout the novel – using the language of a shuttered house, one which must open up to the influence of God (language, we shall see in a later section in this chapter, with great intertextual import): the abbé urges Durtal to "Rendez-[le Dieu] grâce en déguerpissant le plus tôt possible de votre nature, en lui laissant le logis de votre conscience vide. Plus vous mourrez à vous-même, et mieux il vivra en vous."[584]; Durtal, for his own part, uses the locative in describing his soul as "un mauvais

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[580] Ibid, p. 197; "suppose at La Trappe, the monk revolted at the long outrage of my sins, refused me absolution, and forbade me to communicate".

[581] Ibid, "You are mad! What is your notion of Christ?".

[582] Ibid, " Not of Christ, but of His intermediary the human being who replaces Him".

[583] Ibid, p. 60; "pious geese".

[584] Ibid, p. 220; "Thank (God) in getting rid of your nature as soon as possible and leaving the house of your conscience empty for Him. The more you die to yourself the better will He live in you".

lieu ; elle est sordide et mal famée"[585] (In the most famous example of this trope, during Durtal's late-stage redemption, we learn how "le Christ ouvrit, peu à peu, ce logis fermé et l'aéra ; le jour entra à flots chez Durtal. Des fenêtres de ses sens qui plongeaient jusqu'alors sur il ne savait quel puisard, sur quel enclos humide et noyé d'ombre, il contempla subitement, dans une trouée de lumière, la fuite à perte de vue du ciel."[586]) The language of the house highlights the auto-telism of Durtal's existence: an emotional *theïbade* that by default denies God.

So, too, does it deny authentic engagement with another. In one telling passage, Durtal develops one of his few "friendships" in life from almost comical distance when he beholds another monk at La Trappe: Durtal thinks

> cet homme est pour moi un sincère ami ; quand je souffrais tant, avant de me confesser, il m'a tout exprimé dans un regard. Aujourd'hui qu'il me croit plus rasséréné, plus joyeux, il est content et il me le déclare dans un sourire ; et jamais je ne lui parlerai...En partant d'ici, je conserverai un ami pour lequel je sens, moi aussi, de l'affection ; et aucun de nous n'aura même échangé avec l'autre un geste ! Au fond, ruminait-il, cette réserve absolue ne rend-elle pas notre amitié plus parfaite ; elle s'estompe dans un éternel lointain, reste mystérieuse et inassouvie, plus sûre.[587]

(We may see a parallel to Entragues' treatment of his *Sixtine*.) Durtal's insistence on the "eternal distance", the "absolute reserve" leaves him utterly unable to connect with his fellow men: an impotence that will continue until the final pages of *L'Oblat*.

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[585] Ibid, p. 221; "an evil place, sordid and infamous.".

[586] Ibid, p. 386; "Christ opened, little by little, his closed house and gave it air, light entered into Durtal in a flood. From the windows of his senses which had looked till then into he knew not what cesspool, into what enclosure, dank, and steeped in shadow; he now looked suddenly, through a burst of light, on a vista which lost itself in heaven.".

[587] Ibid, p. 351; "This man is a true friend of mine; when I was suffering so much before my confession, he expressed all to me in a look. Today when he believes me serener, and more joyous, he is content, and shows it to me by a smile; and I shall never speak to him... In leaving this place, I shall keep a friend, for whom I too feel affection; yet neither of us has even exchanged a gesture with the other. "After all," he thought, "does not this absolute reserve make our friendship more perfect? it is stamped in the eternal distance, it remains mysterious and incomplete, and more certain.".

Durtal's self-fashioning, in addition, takes a more prosaic turn: his reluctance to embrace Christianity wholeheartedly is – like for so many other would-be Christians of the nineteenth century – stymied by his intellectual refusal to cross the Feueurbachian "ditch" of faith. For Durtal, however, this refusal is rooted in identity – Durtal wishes to be seen *by others* as an intellectual, and as in control of himself. To be rendered the object of another's observations, which he cannot control, is anathema. Huysmans tells us how Durtal "appréhendait de passer pour un sot; la perspective d'être aperçu, à genoux, dans une église, l'horripilait ; l'idée, si jamais il devait communier, de se lever, d'affronter les regards pour s'acheminer vers l'autel, lui était intolérable."[588]

Durtal acknowledges little of this. He rather attributes his inability to embrace Christianity to his sensuality: particularly an obsession with a prostitute called Florence. But Florence herself only appears indirectly in the text – in memories and discourses – she is, like Mme Chantelouve before her, a chimeric projection, a dark mirror (one of so many in the text) of Durtal himself. Durtal himself acknowledges that Florence-in-imagination is more terrible than Florence-in-flesh: "D'authentiques excès l'eussent moins abattu que cette fausse équipée, mais ce qui lui semblait surtout odieux, c'était l'inassouvissement que laissait le viol terminé de ces larves. Comparées à leurs avides manigances, les caresses de la femme n'épandaient qu'une volupté tempérée, n'aboutissaient qu'à un faible choc; seulement dans le succubat l'on restait enragé de n'avoir étreint que le vide, d'avoir été la dupe d'un mensonge, le jouet d'une apparence dont on ne se rappelait même plus les contours et les traits."[589]

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[588] Ibid, p. 60; "was afraid of being taken for a fool; the prospect of being seen on his knees, in church, made his hair stand on end; the idea, that, if he ever had to communicate, he would have to rise and go to the altar in the sight of all, was intolerable to him".

[589] Ibid, p. 261; "Real excesses would have exhausted him less than these sham freaks, but what seemed to him especially odious was the want of satisfaction left by the completed rape of these ghosts. Compared with their greedy tricks, the caresses of a woman only diffused a temperate pleasure, and ended in a feeble shock, but with this Succuba one remained in a fury at having clasped only the void, at having been the dupe of a lie, the plaything of an appearance, of which one could not remember the form or the features.".

Durtal's obsession with Florence, and his own physical degradation is a red herring. What Florence represents to Durtal is not physical desire (indeed, the ability to exist authentically and corporeally is one of the skills Durtal is challenged to learn at La Trappe: where he is even, to his great surprise, allowed to eat food that has been salted or oiled) but his final stab at other-creation: one last failed chimera. As Robert Ziegler puts it in "Silencing the Double": "In *En Route,* Durtal first perceives this opposition as one between his religious aspirations and his physical demands. It is only later that he realizes that his intellectual pride and his propensity for analysis have worked to counteract God's grace. Thus it is not the insistence of the body on its pleasures and its comforts, but Satan who suggests to him his doubts and reservations."[590] (The abbé, a seemingly wiser fellow, knows this, and warns Durtal against thinking in terms of narrative extremes: "[Le Diable] cherche à vous persuader que vous n'arriverez à rien, tant que vous ne vous livrerez pas aux plus répugnantes des débauches. Il tâche de vous convaincre que c'est la satiété et le dégoût seuls de ces actes qui vous ramèneront à Dieu; il vous incite à les commettre pour soi-disant hâter votre délivrance."[591])

Confession and communion – the two pillars of conversion – become methods of breaking apart Durtal's *theïbade*: what enters and exits his mouth – locus of the spoken word and the Word-as-Host alike – challenge our understanding of Durtal, like Des Esseintes or d'Entrague, as an auto-telic being: immune from otherness. Only by collapsing narrative does Durtal find a restitution of language itself.

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[590] Robert Ziegler. "Silencing the Double: The Search for God in Huysmans' 'En Route.'" *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 40, no. 4 (January 1, 1986), p. 203.

[591] Huysmans, *En Route,* p. 112; "He seeks to persuade you that you will never attain to anything unless you will give yourself up to the most repugnant excesses. He tries to convince you that satiety and disgust of these acts alone will bring you back to God; he incites you to commit them that they may, so to speak, bring about your deliverance".

All this comes to a head in the closest thing *En Route* has to a climax: his "Dark Night of the Soul", which like his other meditations begins with explicit self-doubt and reflexive negotiation: the double even more separated-out than before: Durtal hears "un vague ricanement qui montait en lui."[592] and at one point even goes so far as to say: "J'ai beau me crier : tais-toi! — l'autre parle!"[593]

He goes on: "Et si elle était dans cette pièce, retroussée, sur ce lit, là, devant toi, que ferais-tu?' l se balbutiait : — je tâcherais de ne pas céder ! — Tu mens, avoue donc que tu te jetterais sur elle, avoue que tu enverrais la conversion, le cloître, tout au diable !"[594]

This duality – marked as it is by Durtal's insistence on a narrative-through-line, and his doubles' subversion of Durtal's self-proclaimed conversion (by this point both Eucharist and confession have been completed) – leads to another frenzied nightmare, one with echoes of all the nightmares we have seen in the Huysmanian oeuvre up to now:

> l'âme sapée depuis le matin fit explosion. A genoux, désolé, il tentait encore d'invoquer un appui et rien ne venait; il étranglait, emmuré dans une fosse si profonde, sous une voûte si épaisse, que tout appel était étouffé, qu'aucun son ne vibrait...d'ignobles visions l'assaillirent. Des fluides lui passaient devant la face, peuplaient l'espace de priapées. Il ne les voyait pas avec les yeux de son corps qui n'étaient nullement hallucinés, mais il les percevait hors de lui et les sentait en lui; en un mot, le toucher était extérieur et la vision interne...ses yeux semblèrent se retourner, ne plus voir qu'en dedans et des croupes ouvertes les emplirent. Ce fut une mêlée d'apparitions aux contours indécis, aux couleurs confuses, qui ne se précisaient qu'aux endroits convoités par la séculaire infamie de l'homme. Et cela changea encore. Les formes humaines se fondirent. ne resta, dans d'invisibles paysages de chairs, que des marais rougis par les feux d'on ne sait quel couchant, que des marais frissonnant sous l'abri divisé des herbes. Puis le site sensuel se rétrécit encore, mais se maintint,

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[592] Huysmans, *En Route,* p. 366-7; "a vague laughter which arose in him".

[593] Ibid, p. 367; "Be silent, let the other speak!".

[594] Ibid; "'And if [Florence] were in this room, before you, what would you do? " He stammered to himself: "I would try not to yield." "You lie; admit then that you would send your conversion, the monastery, all, to the devil.".

> cette fois, et ne bougea plus; et ce fut la poussée d'une flore immonde, l'épanouissement de la pâquerette des ténèbres, l'éclosion du lotus des cavernes, enfoui au fond du val.[595]

But we have seen this before. Durtal's experience reflects the priapic trees, the rotting sexuality of nature, the vaginal divisions of mounds of earth that we have seen previously in *Là-Bas*. But then it was not Durtal experiencing such a vision but rather Gilles de Rais: Durtal's literary "double" and chimerical self-projection: the villain who acted upon the very urges that Durtal, in arguably his even greater sin, was too cowardly to acknowledge. Rather than living vicariously *through* Gilles de Rais, as he did in *Là-Bas*, Durtal is now forced to live out de Rais's experience in and through himself, *as* himself. In so doing, Huysmans highlights Durtal's "character" status in the text: Durtal is not the author of this grisly scene but rather the object on whom these visions act.

Like the scene in *Là-Bas* to which this harkens back, we have images of nature as deeply sexualized. But here, unlike in *Là-Bas*: we find fewer individual disturbing images – "mouths of Sodom" or "giant hips"[596] – but rather a single image of collectivity, in which we see only "contours indécis, aux couleurs confuses."

Nature takes on an even more powerful 'masculine' aspect as her fluidity – we have seen elsewhere how Huysmans uses the water-motif to express a mass of humanity as distinct from the autonomous, self-contained artistic-creation – is revealed to be the emanations of

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[595] Ibid, p. 373; the soul, sapped since the morning, exploded. On his knees, desolate, he tried again to invoke help, and nothing came; he choked, immured in so deep a trench, under a vault so thick, that every appeal was stifled, and no sound vibrate...ignoble visions assailed him. Fluids passed before his face, and peopled the space with priapisms. He did not see them with the eyes of his body, which were in no degree hallucinated, but perceived them outside him, and felt them within him; in a word, the touch was external, and the vision internal… his eyes seemed to revolve, to see only within, and were filled with indecencies. It was a medley of apparitions with undecided outlines, and confused colours, which gained precision only in those parts coveted by the secular infamy of man. And this changed again. The human forms vanished. There remained only, in invisible landscapes of flesh, marshes reddened by the fires of what sunset it was impossible to say, marshes shuddering under the divided shelter of the grasses. Then the sensual spot grew smaller still, but remained, and this time did not move; it was the growth of an unclean flood, the spreading of the daisy of darkness, the unfolding of the lotos of the caverns, hidden at the bottom of the valley.".

[596] Huysmans, *Là-Bas,* p. 247.

her "priapisms." This sense of fluidity and confusion harkens back to earlier passages of the text dealing more explicitly with religious ecstasy – when listening to plain-chant, for example, Durtal notes how "la tempête sévissait à nouveau, noyait de ses lames les plages entrevues du ciel, et les solos continuaient, découragés, coupés par les rentrées éplorées du chœur, incarnant tout à tour, avec la diversité des voix, les conditions spéciales des hontes, les états particuliers des transes, les âges différents des pleurs. À la fin, alors que mêlées encore et confondues, ces voix avaient charrié, sur les grandes eaux de l'orgue, toutes les épaves des douleurs humaines, toutes les bouées des prières et des larmes, elles retombaient exténuées, paralysées par l'épouvante."[597] The fluid, the liquid – anything, in other words, which defies the physical and narrative integrity of the individual body – is directly linked with the religious experience. Even in Durtal's "dark night," Huysmans suggests, what we are seeing is not some diabolical vision of hell (rather, more "diabolical" is the Karamazov-esque exchange that takes place immediately prior), but rather the agonizing truth of Durtal's own contingent existence. Huysmans highlights the crossing of the liminal boundary here – Durtal, in experiencing these horrors, finds that "le toucher était extérieur et la vision interne."[598] Art, narrative, power, are all overthrown, and Durtal is left speechless in the profoundest sense of the word.

It is telling that Huysmans highlights the corporeality of Durtal's response – not because the body is the source of Durtal's sin but because corporeality is integral to his overcoming it: "les rôles de la vie s'intervertirent ; le corps se dressa, tint bon, commanda

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[597]Huysmans, *En Route*, p. 24; "the tempest raged again, drowned with its waves the half-seen shores of heaven, and the solos continued, discouraged, interrupted by the recurrent weeping of the choir, giving, with the diversity of voices, a body to the special conditions of shame, the particular states of fear, the different ages of tears. At last, when still mixed and blended, these voices had borne away on the great waters of the organ all the wreckage of human sorrows, all the buoys of prayers and tears, they fell exhausted".

[598] Ibid, p. 375; "the touch was exterior, the vision internal".

l'âme affolée, réprima, dans une tension furieuse, cette panique."[599] Likewise, a few lines later: "Durtal perçut pour la première fois, la distinction, la séparation de l'âme et du corps, et pour la première fois aussi, il eut conscience de ce phénomène d'un corps qui avait tant torturé sa compagne par ses exigences et ses besoins, oublier dans le danger commun toutes les rancunes et empêcher celle qui lui résistait d'habitude de sombrer."[600] Durtal"s moment of "separation" brings with it a paradoxical unity: Durtal must resist his horrible imaginings *as a mind-body,* not a mind alone. The Christian self must be an embodied self: able to accept its selfhood as object.

Huysmans suggests that the Christian self must not only stop "making" itself, but indeed actively "unmake" itself: here too, Huysmans has his abbé use house-language that recalls the enclosures, failed and successful, of Des Esseintes and Marlès: (As in the passage quoted above: "Rendez-lui grâce en déguerpissant le plus tôt possible de votre nature, en lui laissant le logis de votre conscience vide. Plus vous mourrez à vous-même, et mieux il vivra en vous.")[601]

This need for radical decentring of our protagonist works its way into the book at a structural as well as substantive level. In order for Durtal as a character to be able to successfully escape the prison of his narrative-making mind, the book, too, must lack a narrative in a conventional sense (or, in layman's terms, must necessarily be a bit dull). Narrative time cannot pass in the ordinary, linear way.

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[599] Ibid, p. 374; "unlikely as it may appear, the parts of his life were inverted, the body was upright, and held its own, commanding the terrified soul, repressed this panic in a furious tension.".

[600] Ibid; "Durtal perceived very plainly and clearly for the first time the distinction, the separation of the soul from the body, and for the first time also, he was conscious of the phenomenon of a body, which had so tortured its companion by its needs and wants, to forget all its hatred in the common danger, and hinder her who resisted it, the habit of sinking.".

[601] Ibid, p. 220; " Him in getting rid of your nature as soon as possible, and leaving the house of your conscience empty for Him. The more you die to yourself the better will He live in you. Prayer is the most powerful ascetic means by which you can renounce yourself, empty yourself and render yourself humble".

Of course, in a monastery, it doesn't. As Millet-Gérard has noted, once the plot of *En Route* enters La Trappe, we as readers enter not "narrative time" but liturgical time: ever contemporary with Christ. Durtal's circular journey, frustrating though it may be for the reader, reflects the circularity of the Christian almanac: which passes from Christ's birth to His death to His resurrection and back again. This is established from Durtal's first moment in La Trappe, when the first thing he is given is his schedule – a reworking, in other terms, of time: "Lever à 2 heures, Prime et messe à 5 heures 1/4, Travail après le chapitre…"[602] (Another cyclical time, notes Millet-Gérard, is seeded here – she locates the restitution of nature in the text in part in "la temporalité liturgique qui s'y superpose, et enfine une poétique des saisons qui leur apporte un contrepoint psychologique et métaphorique").[603]

The use of liturgical time as a motif also sanctifies the narrative world as a whole. If the world of *À Rebours* was self-referential and diegetic, the world of *En Route* exists with referent to inherently meaningful structures. As Duran-Tournier notes "dans ses projects de romans, l'écrivain a rarement autant privilégié la structure celle-ci apparaît d'ailleurs sans aucun substrat narratif. La paratexte…vient renforces par une indication de régie initiale l'orginasion imposée par le cycle des saisons et les fêtes liturgiques[604] In other words, the *lack* of "organisation" we might expect to find in a traditional novel (e, plot) leaves us better-equipped to appreciate the divine organization of season and sacrament alike.

In analyzing *En Route*'s conversion, Pierre Glaudes notes that Huysmans is perhaps coming ever-closer to the "natural supernaturalism" the character of Durtal first floated in the

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[602] Ibid, p. 242; "Rise . 2. Prime and Mass. 5.15. Work after the Chapter. End of work and leisure time. 9. Sext. 11. Angelus and Dinner. 11.30. Siesta after Dinner. End of Siesta. 1.30. None and work, five minutes after waking... 8".

[603] Dominique Millet-Gérard, "Temps et Paysage Dans En Route: Le Miroir de l'Ecrivain" in Smeets (ed), p. 82.

[604] Sylvie Durand-Tournier, "Le 'Selam Pieux': Le Jardin Liturgique de Ligugé dans le 'Carnet Vert' et Dans Tous Ses États", in Solale (ed), p. 145.

opening pages of *Là-Bas*: a theological approach to the novel that maintains the idea of a novel as "mirror" – so central, as we shall see, to Huysmans' ultimate theology of the novel – and yet rejects the Zolan obsession with scientific causality: "Si *En Route* est bien un roman de la conversion, c'est encore, par certains aspects, l'oeuvre d'un naturaliste impénitent, qui se méfie des effets du romanesque et qui répugne à grandir outré."[605]

In form, no less than in content, *En Route* subverts the relationship between inner and outer, between what is implicit and what is made explicit: a unity of internal and external that will come to mirror Durtal himself: and the wedding of body to soul that underpins the meaning of Word itself.

Durtal does not exist in a vacuum. Huysmans frequently, ironically, challenges Durtal's authority as an autonomous textual entity, and as the "author" of his own story, by evaporating his borders as a discrete character. *En Route*, as we have already seen, is full of references to other, earlier Huysmans texts and characters. In the previous chapter, we saw how *En Rade* serves as a kind of naturalistic mirror of *À Rebours* – a failed attempt at self-sequestering that is stymied by such prosaic concerns as money, creditors, and the existence of smelly farm animals. Yet *En Route* serves the same purpose for *En Rade* (and by extension: *À Rebours*). Frequently in *En Route,* motifs and images we have seen before are taken up and reconfigured: often, realistic or naturalistic depictions of what Huysmans has characterized elsewhere with the language of artificiality.

For example, Durtal's bedroom at La Trappe recalls the pseudo-monk's room Des Esseintes creates in *À Rebours:* "un petit lit de fer et une table de nuit ronde…un prie-dieu en reps fané, surmonté d'une croix et d'une branche de sapin sec; en descendant, toujours le long de la même paroi, il trouva une table de bois blanc recouverte d'une serviette, sur

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[605] Glaudes in Smeets, p. 99.

laquelle étaient placés un pot à l'eau, une cuvette et un verre. La cloison opposée à ce mur était occupée par une armoire, puis par une cheminée sur le panneau de laquelle était plaqué un crucifix."[606] (C.f *À Rebours*: "meubla cette pièce d'un petit lit de fer, un faux lit de cénobite, fabriqué avec d'anciennes ferronneries forgées et polies…En guise de table de nuit, il installa un antique prie-Dieu dont l'intérieur pouvait contenir un vase et dont l'extérieur supportait un eucologe ; il apposa contre le mur, en face, un banc-d'œuvre, surmonté d'un grand dais à jour garni de miséricordes sculptées en plein bois."[607]) Items that were "sham" in the former novel – the prie-Dieu, the iron bed, here become real.

So too does the depiction of La Trappe echo and improve upon the Gothic horror of the estate in *En Rade* (which itself recalls Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher"). What is in Huysmans' prior novel treated as terrifying is here benevolent – whether or not Durtal initially experiences it that way. Thus does the opening to the La Trappe section of *En Route* recall *En Rade* (the titles, too, echo one another): "— Vous n'avez qu'à sonner, dit le paysan qui indiqua à Durtal une chaîne de fer pendant le long du mur...Durtal demeurait anéanti, la valise à ses pieds, devant cette porte; le cœur lui battait à grands coups; toute son assurance, tout son entrain s'effondraient; il balbutiait : qu'est-ce qui va m'arriver là-dedans ? En un galop de panique, passait devant lui la terrible vie des Trappes: le corps mal nourri, exténué de sommeil, prosterné pendant des heures sur les dalles ; l'âme, tremblante, pressée à pleines

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[606] Huysmans, *En Route*, pp. 240-1; "At the bottom, in a corner, near the casement, was a little iron bed, and a small round table in chestnut wood…prie-Dieu in faded rep, upon which was a crucifix, and a branch of dried fir below it; on the same side was a table of white wood covered with a towel, on which were placed an ewer, a basin, and a glass. On the opposite wall was a wardrobe, and by the fireplace, on the mantelpiece of which a crucifix was placed, was a table opposite the bed near the window; three straw chairs completed the furniture of this room".

[607] Huysmans, *À Rebours*, pp. 85-6; "This room he furnished with a little iron bedstead, a sham hermit's couch, constructed out of old pieces of wrought and polished iron, its plainness relieved at head and foot by a leaf and flower ornamentation,--tulips and vine-tendrils intertwined, once part of the balustrade of the great staircase of an old chateau. By way of night-table, he installed an antique prie-Dieu, the inside of which would hold a utensil, while the top supported a book of offices of the Church; he erected against the opposite wall a state pew, surmounted by an open-work canopy decorated with ornaments carved in the solid wood; he used candelabra that had come from a desecrated church.".

mains, menée militairement, sondée, fouillée jusque dans ses moindres replis ; et, planant sur cette déroute de son existence échouée, ainsi qu'une épave, le long de cette farouche berge, le mutisme de la prison, le silence affreux des tombes!"[608]

We may well be reminded of *En Rade*: down to the presence of the peasant/Antoine, the ringing at the door, and the "galloping" of fears:

> La vision de ce château qui paraissait brûler sourdement encore, exaspéra son état d'agitation nerveuse qui depuis le matin allait croissant. Ses sursauts d'appréhensions interrompues et reprises, ses saccades de transes se décuplèrent. Il sonna fébrilement à une petite porte, percée dans le mur; le bruit de la cloche qu'il avait tirée l'allégea. Il écoutait, l'oreille plaquée contre le bois de la porte; aucun bruit de vie derrière cette clôture. Ses frayeurs galopèrent aussitôt."[609]

Vague existential terror cedes to a concrete fear of self-abnegation in the wake of the divine.

Elsewhere, Durtal – just like Marlès– finds an abandoned chapel. But whereas Marlès' chapel served as a symbol of Christ's abandonment – covered only with bird-shit and bones – Huysmans codes Durtal's chapel with less malevolent naturalism:

> Il se rendit à la chapelle; elle était encore déserte; il profita de cette solitude pour l'examiner à son aise. Elle avait la forme d'une croix amputée, d'une croix sans pied, arrondie à son sommet et tendant deux bras carrés, percés d'une porte à chaque bout. La partie supérieure de la croix figurait, au-dessous d'une coupole peinte en azur, une petite rotonde autour de laquelle se tenait un cercle de stalles adossées aux murs ; au

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[608] Huysmans, *En Route*, p. 236-7; "You have only to ring," said the peasant, showing Durtal an iron chain along the wall;...Durtal remained as one crushed, his portmanteau at his feet, before the door; his heart beat violently; all his assurance, all his enthusiasm, had vanished, and he stammered: "What will happen to me within?" And with a swift feeling of dread, there passed before him the terrible life of the Trappists; the body ill-nourished, exhausted from want of sleep, prostrate for hours on the pavement; the soul trembling, squeezed like a sponge in the hand, drilled, examined, ransacked even to its smallest folds; and at the end of its failure of an existence, thrown like a wreck against this rude rock, into the silence of a prison, and the dreadful stillness of the tomb!".

[609] Huysmans, *En Rade*, pp. 7-8; "The sight of this chateau that still seemed to be burning dully exarcerbated his state of nervous agitation...his shudders of apprehension – momentarily interrupted but now resumed – and his twitches of anxiety increased tenfold. He feverishly rang at a little door pierced into the wall...not a sound of life came from beyond the wall. Immediately his fears ran riot.".

> milieu, se dressait un grand autel de marbre blanc, surmonté de chandeliers de bois, flanqué, à gauche et à droite, de candélabres également en bois, placés sur des fûts de marbre.[610]

This, too, is implicitly redeemed.

The ubiquity of the "house-cleaning" motif presents us with a narrative in which Huysmans is quite literally "scrubbing clean" his prior textual production: houses that were once cloistered or decrepit are in *En Route* envisaged as aired out.

Even structurally – as Robert Ziegler notes – *En Route* reflects its counterparts: beginning with an intensely introverted interior monologue expressing hatred of the exterior world. [611]

This lends an ironic note to Durtal's attempts to be the hero of his own story. Durtal is not only not an author but a character, but, we as readers know, he is not even an *original* character. The boundaries between Durtal, Marlès, and Des Esseintes blur, and with them the promise of an autonomous, self-enclosed textual world. The book – so often, in Huysmans, the locus of self-enclosure – here has borders no less porous than Des Esseintes's neurasthenic body, or the Chateau de Lourps. They are not a closed system, like Des Esseintes' peptone enema; nor, Huysmans suggests, should they be.

By denying both Durtal and the Durtal novels an entirely enclosed, self-sustaining existence, Huysmans further decenters Durtal-the-narrator in favor of Durtal-as-character and thus Durtal-as-created-thing (a process that will intensify in *La Cathédrale* and beyond). He casts doubt on the possibility of a systematic, self-referential worldview – exemplified by Des Esseintes' mouth-organ – that restricts semiotic meaning to the boundaries of text.

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[610] Huysmans, *En Route,* p. 251*; "*He went to the chapel, which was still empty; and he took occasion of the solitude to examine it at his ease. It was in the form of a truncated cross, a cross without a foot, rounded at the summit, holding out two square arms, with a door at either end. The upper part of the cross, below a cupola painted blue, formed a little circular apse, round which was a circle of stalls placed back against the wall; in the middle rose a great altar of white marble, surmounted by wooden chandeliers, flanked on the left and right by candelabra also of wood, placed on marble shafts".

[611] Ziegler, *Mirror,* p. 239.

We have explored the idea of correspondence between inner and outer elsewhere in this thesis. But in the Durtal novels, Huysmans for the first time treats this tension between appearance and reality, internal and external, signifier and signified, both explicitly and theologically. Durtal's journey towards conversion is one towards the acceptance of the fundamental meaningfulness of existence, the idea that the word (and Word) *is* that which it signifies: a journey which will fundamentally alter his vision of what art is or should be.

Alain Vircondolet calls *En Route* "une véritable dialectique de l'intérieur et de l'extérieur du clos et de l'ouvert, de l'excentricité et du centre structure l'avancée de la marche."[612] Imagery of exterior form imbued with internal meeting pervades *En Route*. The exteriors of churches are sanctified by the "effluvia" – a return of water-imagery – of the crowds within. Durtal recalls how "À Saint-Séverin, j'ai bien éprouvé déjà cette sensation d'une assistance s'épandant des piliers et coulant des voûtes, mais, tout bien considéré, ces secours étaient plus faibles. Peut-être que, depuis le Moyen Age, cette église use, à force de ne pas les renouveler, les célestes effluves dont elle est chargée ; tandis qu'à Notre-Dame, cette aide qui jaillit des dalles est continuellement vivifiée par la présence ininterrompue d'une ardente foule. Dans l'une, c'est la pierre imprégnée, c'est l'église même qui vous réconforte, dans l'autre c'est surtout la ferveur des multitudes qui l'emplissent."[613] We are no longer regarding, as we did in *En Rade* or *Là-Bas*, a ruin– in the former case, already destroyed; in the latter – in Durtal's vision at Tiffauges, revivified by the artist's imagination. Rather we see an exterior structure revivified by what is *within* it.

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[612] Vircondolet, in Solale (ed), p. 12.

[613] Huysmans, *En Route*, p. 99; "At St. Severin I have indeed experienced the sensation of a help spreading from the pillars and running through the arches, but, as I think, the aid is less strong. Perhaps since the Middle Ages that church makes use of, but cannot renew the celestial effluvia with which it is charged; while at Notre Dame the help which springs up from the very pavement is for ever vivified by the uninterrupted presence of an ardent crowd. In the one it is the impregnate stone, the church itself which brings consolation, in the other it is above all things the fervour of the crowds which fill it.".

Yet the relationship of inner to outer is not simply a case of form "housing" content. Rather, unlike among the Symbolists, the ideal – the primordial form – is expressed *through*, not independently of, its corporeal manifestation.

Thus does Durtal mediate on how the bodies of nuns, thus purified, alter the tenor of their voices – "Et cependant dans les couvents de femmes...il est certain que la prière, que la communion, que les abstinences, que les vœux, épurent le corps et l'âme et l'odeur vocale qui s'en dégage. Leurs effluves donnent à la voix des religieuses, si écrue, si mal équarrie qu'elle puisse être, ses chastes inflexions, ses naïves caresses d'amour pur ; ils la ramènent aux sons ingénus de l'enfance."[614]

Huysmans' language of "odour" in describing the nuns' voices is telling, here. *Odour* after all recalls the language of the *milieu*: an uncontrolled and uncontrollable emanation. In stark contrast with how Huysmans treats the voice/language with reference to Durtal, the voices of the nuns (like those of Villiers' *cygnes*) are not lovely as the result of their will to make them so: that which proceeds from them is not the self-positing seed of the decadent-dandyist artist. The inward voice, externally expressed through the body, exists rather in dynamic partnership with that body: prayer and communion sanctify the body; the voice, passing through those sanctified lips, cannot help but take on an aura of sanctity itself.

Nowhere is the imagery of dynamic interplay between internal and external, signifier and signified, more evident than in Huysmans' treatment of hagiography. The lives of the saints with which Durtal becomes obsessed are characterized not by asceticism as such, but by a fundamental unity between body and soul. For saints,

> sous l'épreinte céleste, il se transforme, supprime toute nourriture terrestre, consomme seulement les Espèces

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[614] Ibid, p. 87; "in convents of women... it is certain that prayer, communion, abstinence and vows purify the body and the soul, as well as the vocal odour which proceeds from them. The emanations from them give to the voices of the nuns, however crude, however ill-trained they may be, their chaste inflexions, their simple caresses of pure love, they recall to it the ingenuous sounds of childhood.".

> Saintes...Sous l'emprise divine, l'odorat, le goût ne présentent pas des métamorphoses moins étranges. Saint Philippe de Néri, sainte Angèle, sainte Marguerite de Cortone, reconnaissaient un goût spécial au pain azyme, alors qu'après la consécration, il n'était plus du froment, mais la chair même du Christ…. Saint Joseph de Cupertino secrète de telles fragrances qu'on peut le suivre à la piste ; et, quelquefois, c'est, pendant la maladie, que ces arômes se dégagent. Le pus de saint Jean de la croix et du bienheureux Didée fleurait les essences candides et décidées des lis.[615]

Just as the body of Christ in the Eucharist is literally transformed by the Sacrament, so to is the body of the Huysmanian saint transformed by the soul's sanctification: a kind of kenotic self-expansion. Unlike Durtal, who actively seeks to project himself into his writings on de Rais and others in a conscious manner divorced from his physical existence, the saints have no control over the intangible aspects of themselves which emanate from their physical being: the controller, implicitly, is not the self-expanding self but God.

We see echoes of *En Rade's* Jacques Marlès dream-fantasy of seeking the essence of a human being – transforming a human into a food or perfume. But that similarity only highlights their differences. Marlès, in his reverie, imagined acting upon a human corpse with medical precision: forcibly extracting their essence. Among the saints: it happens naturally. So too does it not exist for the consumption by others, as in the Marlès model, but rather for the glory of God.

Yet while Durtal's understanding of the church and Her saints is deeply rooted in these images of internal harmony and transubstantiation, he cannot integrate such unity into his own life. It is telling that the pillars of conversion with which Durtal struggles most are

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[615] Ibid, p. 336-7; "under the heavenly influence, the stomach becomes transformed, omits all earthly nourishment and consumes the Holy Species only. Saint Catherine of Siena and Angela of Foligno lived for years exclusively on the Sacrament...Under the divine impress the senses of smell and taste presented no less strange metamorphoses. Saint Philip Nevi, Saint Angela, Saint Margaret of Cortona recognized a special taste in unleavened bread, when after the consecration there was no longer any wheat, but the very flesh of Christ… Saint Joseph of Cupertino secreted such fragrant odours that his track could be followed; and sometimes it was during illness that these aromas were diffused. The pus of Saint John of the Cross and of the Blessed Didée gave forth strong and distinct scent of lilies.".

Communion – the taking-in of food – and Confession –expulsion of language. In each case, Durtal is challenged to think of himself enclosed and autonomous creature, imposing his subjectivity on the outside world, but as one whose mental borders are only ever liminal, one upon whom the world acts. In so doing, he also comes to understand himself not as a dualistic mind-body but as a being suffused and sanctified by a divinely ordained existence, such that he, too, experiences a unity of inner and outer: soul and body wedded in the same way that meaning is wedded to word.

Durtal's mouth – the locus of his sin of excessive narrativizing as well as the entrance into his body – becomes the locus of his redemption.

We recall from our analysis of *En Rade* the vital role excrement played in the text. While that which proceeds willingly from the Huysmanian body (i.e.: words) is desirable, that which proceeds necessarily (i.e., excrement) is not. One suggests the power of the autonomous mind. The other suggests conditionality, a body trapped in the created order. Emanation is the artistic opposite of expression.

It is telling that when it comes to Durtal's act of confession, verbiage that cannot be self-creation, Huysman characterizes the sacrament as a kind of diarrhea: Durtal laments that "Je sais bien que c'est fort d'oser vous supplier, alors que l'on n'est même pas résolu à retourner son âme, à la vider comme un seau d'ordures, à taper sur son fond, pour en faire couler la lie, pour en détacher le tartre, mais… mais… que voulez-vous, je me sens si débile, si peu sûr de moi, qu'en vérité, je recule!"[616] During another attempt at confession, Durtal finds "ll s'arrêta et sans même qu'il eût besoin de la sonder, sa vie bondit en des jets

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[616] Huysmans, *En Route,* p. 82; "I know well that I am over bold in daring to ask, since I am not even resolved to turn out my soul, to empty it like a bucket of filth, to strike it on the bottom, that the lees may trickle out and the scales fall off, but ... but ... thou knowest I am so weak, so little sure of myself, that in truth I shrink.".

d'ordures. Il recula, il y en avait tant, de toutes sortes, qu'il s'abîma dans le désespoir. Puis il eut un effort de volonté, se reprit, voulut canaliser ces sources, les endiguer, les répartir pour s'y reconnaître, mais un affluent refoulait les autres, finissait par tout absorber, devenait le fleuve même."[617] Later in this section, he repeats the motif saying: "je ne peux pourtant pas lui faire gicler à la face ces filets de pus!"[618]

What is striking is not the *content* of Durtal's sins but their form. After all, in *Là-Bas,* Durtal had no problem giving voice to the most horrific acts – rape and child-murder – when projecting himself into the person of Giles de Rais. Those words did not emanate in "jets of filth" but were rather carefully controlled incursions of language onto the page. Durtal himself notes the difference between the expressed language of the artist and the emanated language of the confessional:

> Est-ce étrange! — On parle aisément de ses fredaines, de ses turpitudes à des amis, voire même, dans la conversation, à un prêtre ; cela ne paraît pas tirer à conséquence et peut-être qu'un peu de vantardise se mêle aux aveux des péchés faciles, mais raconter la même chose à genoux, en s'accusant, après avoir prié, cela diffère; ce qui n'était qu'une amusette devient une humiliation vraiment pénible, car l'âme n'est pas dupe de ces faux semblants ; elle sait si bien, dans son for intérieur, que tout est changé, elle sent si bien la puissance terrible du sacrement, qu'elle, qui tout à l'heure souriait, tremble maintenant, dès qu'elle y pense.[619]

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[617] Ibid, p. 270; 'his life sprang out in jets of filth. He shrank from it, there was so much, of every kind, that he was overwhelmed with despair. Then by an effort of his will he pulled himself together, endeavoured to control and bank up these torrents, to separate them so as to understand them, but one affluent rolled back all the others, ended by overwhelming them, and became the river itself.".

[618] Ibid, p. 271; "I can by no means make him face these torrents of pus".

[619] Ibid, pp. 187-8; "Is this strange? We speak easily of our lapses, of our grosser actions, even, indeed, to a priest in conversation, that does not seem to lead to any consequences, and perhaps a little bragging enters into our admission of easy sins, but to tell the same thing on one's knees, accusing oneself, after prayer, is different, that which was only rather amusing becomes a very painful humiliation, for the soul is not the dupe of this false seeming, it knows so well in its inner tribunal that all is changed, it feels so well the terrible power of the Sacrament, that he who but now smiled, now trembles at the very thought".

The Sacrament changes the conversation. The role of the speaker-subject and his object-audience are reversed. No longer able to use language as a tool of self-propagation, Durtal discovers how to use language instead as a tool of self-abnegation. His self-identity as a sinner can no longer figure into the dandy category of the "amusing" – the D'Aurevilliean storyteller who narrates for effect on others. The Sacrament, instead, has an effect on him.

The most telling example of such a reversal comes during one of Durtal's attempts at confessing. When he expresses concern that his verbal outpourings will scandalize the priest listening to him, the priest replies thus, smiling: "Vous n'étonnerez jamais un moine."[620]

"Étonner" evokes the dandyist maxims we've discussed so often already. The act of astonishment, with its connotation of control, reaches its natural end in the confessional booth. Where speech *must* take place, the dandy-artist is impotent. After all, it is impossible to astonish God. In Durtal's failed confession, the master of narrative is rendered incapable of speech: "Le trappiste demeurait silencieux, ne l'assistait point. — J'ai commis toutes les débauches…, j'ai fait tout…, tout… Il s'étrangla et les larmes contenues partirent ; il pleura, le corps secoué, la figure cachée dans ses mains. Et comme le prieur, toujours penché sur lui, ne bronchait point. — Mais je ne peux pas, cria-t-il, je ne peux pas!"[621] (As Robert Ziegler notes: "Huysmans's fondness for rare and esoteric terms, a symptom of man's sinful usurptation of God's signifying prerogative, is the evil of which the convert prays to be purged"[622].)

Huysmans highlights the *de facto* silence of the confessional booth in his treatment of Durtal's eventual, long-awaited confession. Rather than allowing Durtal the textual space to

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[620] Ibid, p. 313; "you will never astonish a monk.".

[621] Ibid, p. 274; "I have committed every kind of debauch, I have done everything ... everything ..." He choked, and the tears he had repressed flowed, he wept, his body was shaken, his face hidden in his hands. And as the prior, still bending over him, did not move, "But I cannot," he cried; "I cannot."…".

[622] Ziegler, "Silencing," p. 251.

enumerate all those sins which we, as presumed readers of *Là-Bas,* already know, Huysmans ellides the experience: “je ne sais plus comment m’expliquer,"[623] Durtal confesses – a statement that evokes his failed attempts earlier in the book to present the reader (and himself) with a straightforward psychology of conversion. He asks the priest if he is required to go into the details of his sin – details as titillating (indeed, they gave us a novel: *Là-Bas*) as they are revolting. The priest rather tells him such a recounting would be useless – effectively silencing him. Durtal's penance is as much in what he cannot say as what he does.
In confessing his sins, furthermore, Durtal is confined largely to silence: the moment of conversation about his sexuality is likewise characterized by silence – and the giving of a meaningful *signe* that transcends verbal dexterity "— Vous avez déclaré, je crois, tout à l’heure, que, dans votre jeunesse vous aviez contracté des dettes; les avez-vous payées ? Et sur un signe affirmatif de Durtal…”[624] (Even the subsequent recounting of the incident of the sexualized Host with Mme Chantelouve in *Là-Bas*, Durtal's particular point of concern, is responded to with an unimpressed, “C’est tout?”[625].)

In his framing of Durtal's conversion around the confession sacrament Huysmans presents us with his most explicit example of language-as-sin: using the confessional booth as the locus of distinction between the alienating effect of language-as-expression – namely, narrative – and the redemptive properties language-as-emanation: the unintentional, shameful “jets of filth” that propel from Durtal in spite of himself. In so doing, Huysmans reveals the theological limitations of one and suggests the artistic and spiritual possibilities of the other.

Can “filth” – excrement – be transubstantiated into something holy? Can the emanating, uncontrolled self – the writer who emits his words just as putrefying saints emit

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[623] Huysmans, *En Route,* p. 291; “Here I do not know how to explain myself”.

[624] Ibid; “'Am I to understand that in your relations with women, you have committed every possible excess?' Durtal made an affirmative sign.”.

[625] Ibid, p. 292; “That is all?”.

their smells – serve as a better model of artistic creation than the autonomous verbalist Durtal once was?

But for Huysmans, the rhetoric of the mouth is twofold. In order for what comes out of the mouth to be sanctified, we must sanctify what goes in.

Huysmans is far from subtle in introducing the motif of oral intake early in *En Route*. From the first chapter, Huysmans characterizes words as food: something to be expelled from one set of lips and taken in by another. Durtal meditates on the language of the various priests he encounters – how

> les uns l'ont macéré dans le vinaigre et les autres l'ont mariné dans l'huile...ces médiocres-là que réclame la poignée de dévotes qui les écoute. Si ces gargotiers d'âmes avaient du talent, s'ils servaient à leurs pensionnaires des nourritures fines, des essences de théologie, des coulis de prières, des sucs concrets d'idées, ils végéteraient incompris des ouailles.[626]

So too does Durtal characterize his own inability to believe – and take in the words of priests – as a kind of sickness of appetite:

> une sorte de dyspepsie d'âme, ne digérant plus les sujets coutumiers, cherchant pour se nourrir des ravigotes de songeries, des salaisons d'idées ; ce serait donc cette inappétence des repas sains qui aurait engendré cette convoitise de mets baroques, cet idéal trouble, cette envie de s'échapper hors de moi, de franchir, ne fût-ce que pendant une seconde, les lisières tolérées des sens.[627]

Elsewhere he fears that the monks of La Trappe: "essaieront de me convaincre que l'art est un danger; ils me prôneront des lectures imbéciles ; ils me verseront à pleins bols leur

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[626] Ibid, p. 14; "some are bruised down in vinegar, others steeped in oil… the mediocrities, each puffed by the handful of devotees who listen to them. If those cooks of the soul had any skill, if they served their clients with delicate meats, theological essences, gravies of prayer, concentrated sauces of ideas, they would vegetate misunderstood by their flocks.".

[627] Ibid, p. 62; "It is a sort of dyspepsia of the soul, which cannot digest ordinary meats, and tries to feed on spiced dreams, highly seasoned thoughts; it is then want of appetite for wholesome meals which has begotten this greediness for strange dishes, this trouble of the mind, this wish to escape from myself, and jump were it but for a moment over the permitted limits of the senses.".

bouillon de veau pieux !"[628] while "Ainsi écrémé, le reste du clergé n'est évidemment plus que le lait allongé, que la lavasse des séminaires."[629] At Saint-Germain, Durtal finds that "la maîtrise y était vraiment infâme. C'était un ramas de gâte-sauces, d'enfants qui crachaient de la vinaigrette et de vieux chantres qui mitonnaient dans le fourneau de leur gorge une sorte de panade vocale, une vraie bouillie de sons."[630]

This desire for absolution has a literal cast too. One of Durtal's greatest fears about La Trappe is the food there. He fears that his body may "tombe en faiblesse quand il n'est pas réconforté par le sang des viandes et des névralgies surviennent, aussitôt que les heures des repas changent. Jamais je n'arriverai à tenir là-bas avec des légumes cuits dans de l'huile chaude ou dans du lait; d'abord, je déteste la cuisine à l'huile et j'exècre d'autant plus le lait que je le digère mal." [631]

The act of eating has a twofold significance. Primarily, it represents a break in Durtal's self-enclosure: if the words of others are food, so too is food implicitly the words of others: an encroachment of otherness on Durtal's perfect solitude. Yet the act of eating, in recalling Des Esseintes' attempt to do otherwise in *À Rebours*, is also a concession to literal corporeality (indeed, Nature itself). Durtal, as a created human in a created human body, cannot transcend his facticity.

Huysmans' is not a theology of asceticism. Although Durtal sees his sin as that of excessive sensuality, its remedy is not full abstinence. Indeed, the abbé reminds him he need

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[628] Ibid, p. 64; "will try to convince me that art is dangerous, will sermonize me with imbecile talk, and pour over me their flowing bowls of pious veal broth".

[629] Ibid, p. 65; "the rest of the clergy are plainly but skim milk, the scourings of the seminaries".

[630] Ibid, p. 74; "the choir was truly infamous. They were like a set of bad cooks, boys who spat vinegar, and elderly choir-men, who cooked in the furnace of their throats a sort of vocal broth, a thin gruel of sound".

[631] Ibid, p. 186; "frail and soft, accustomed to rise late; it becomes weak if not nourished by flesh meat, and is subject to neuralgia at any change of the hour of meals. I should never be able to hold out down there with vegetables cooked in warm oil or in milk; first I detest oily cookery, and I hate milk still more, which I cannot digest.".

not even adhere to the strict dietary rules of the rest of the brothers at La Trappe: when Durtal sarcastically notes that les légumes sont cuits à l'eau et au sel, sans assaisonnement…" he is promptly told that "Mais non, ils ne sont accommodés au sel et à l'eau que dans les temps de jeûne; les autres jours vous les aurez cuits dans un lait coupé d'eau ou d'huile."[632] Durtal is denied the chance of engaging in ascetic excess – something which would at least allow him to self-create as a saintly figure. Instead, he must accept his humanity: a humanity that means hunger, and means too the freedom to succumb to it in moderate amounts.

Ultimately it is the Eucharist: the consumption of Word, that all these instances presage. The Eucharist terrifies Durtal like little else (except confession). In describing it, he uses the language of defecation: "Quant à l'Eucharistie, elle me semble, elle aussi, terrible. Oser s'avancer, oser lui offrir comme un tabernacle son égout à peine clarifié par le repentir, son égout drainé par l'absolution, mais encore à peine sec, c'est monstrueux ! Je n'ai pas du tout le courage d'imposer au Christ cette dernière insulte."[633] Durtal's language here is telling. He envisions the taking-in of the Eucharist as a kind of self-emptying – the entrance of Christ, body and blood, into his own sphere. Although he tells himself he fears the Eucharist because he feels unclean – here, as in the case of the rosary noted above, essentially narrativizing himself away from God – his language of emptiness hints that what Durtal fears most is *unbecoming*: a contraction of the self within the enclosed "tabernacle" of the body.

Yet the contraction of self – and the entrance of Christ *into* self – is, after all, at the heart of the experience of communion (and communication). Christ in the bread transubstantiates it, changes its nature so that what it *is,* in the most fundamental sense, is not

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[632] Ibid, p. 179; "the vegetables, I suppose, are cooked with salt and water, and no seasoning?"; "No, they are dressed with salt and water only on fasting days; at other times you will have them cooked in milk and water, or in oil.".

[633] Ibid, p. 188; "The Eucharist also seems terrible. To dare to come forward, to offer Him as a tabernacle the sewer of self scarce purified by repentance, a sewer drained by absolution, but still hardly dry, is monstrous. I am quite without such courage as to offer Christ this last insult.".

bread at all but body. So too is Durtal, housing Christ, expected to change: to become like the church suffused with the ecstatic crowd. Durtal resists, finding the idea of transubstantiation – that a thing's form might transform to fit its content – appalling. "Ah çà, est-ce qu'il croyait que, parce qu'un prêtre avait proféré cinq mots latins sur un pain azyme, ce pain s'était transsubstantié en la chair du Christ? Qu' un enfant accueille de pareilles sornettes, passe encore! Mais avoir franchi la quarantaine et écouter d'aussi formidables bourdes, c'était excessif, presque inquiétant!"[634] Durtal's self-characterizing (he clings to his identity as a seemingly rational man: not an "enfant" but a fully grown adult, who therefore cannot accept the propositional "nonsense" he believes the priests are telling him), keeps him from the conversion experience.

But Durtal *does* take communion, it is not because he has logically overcome his objections to it, but rather because the intake of food overpowers his ability to produce mental output: "Durtal était dans un état de torpeur absolue ; le sacrement lui avait, en quelque sorte, anesthésié l'esprit ; il gisait, à genoux, sur son banc, incapable même de démêler ce qui pouvait se mouvoir au fond de lui, inapte à se rallier et à se ressaisir.."[635]

The language of anaesthesia recalls Durtal's medical imagery at the beginning of Ch. 2. The imagery here, as there, is twofold. On the one hand, the doctor has become the patient. No longer is Durtal able to play doctor or diagnostician: seeking to create a theoretical and unifying underpinning for his experiences. He cannot pick apart, as Marlès sought to do, varied symptoms for analysis, nor wield the scalpel of cognition. Yet the use of "démeler", to untangle, takes us even further. We have seen in the preceding chapter how for Huysmans,

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[634] Ibid, p. 355; "Ah! indeed, was he to believe that because a priest uttered five Latin words over a bit of unleavened bread, that bread was transubstantiated into the flesh of Christ? That a child should accept such nonsense, might be possible, but that a man past forty should listen to such formidable shams, was excessive; almost disquieting.".

[635] Ibid, p. 320; " Durtal was in a state of absolute torpor; the Sacrament had, in a manner, anæsthetized his mind; he fell on his knees at his bench, incapable even of unravelling what might be moving within him, unable to rally and pull himself together".

the language of the discrete, the autonomous, the hard-surfaced gemstone and the individual, irreplaceable thing, all points to alienation. To distinguish one thing from another is to set it apart. Language of dissolution – of water, of fog – Huysmans likewise associates with a fundamental unity: a unity that strikes fear into Durtal because, like Huysmans, he – lacking an incarnational theological anthropology – cannot posit his own discrete existence within it.

The Sacrament – the collapse of boundaries between bread and body, wafter and word – once ingested (the violation of another, oral boundary), stops Durtal from locating those boundaries within himself.

Durtal's language changes in the moment of communion. Throughout *En Route,* Durtal's internal monologue – in moments of extreme spiritual distress and need – take on an almost formulaic quality: his syntax and diction assuming the register of the common supplicant – echoing Psalm 21. "Seigneur, ne vous éloignez point. Que votre miséricorde réfrène votre équité; soyez injuste, pardonnez-moi; accueillez le mendiant de communion, le pauvre d'âme."[636] Durtal himself all but disappears from the statement, with the exception of the objective "moi", he identifies himself only indirectly as "le mendiant...le pauvre." Meanwhile, God, addressed formally (not a given: we recall how the Satanists *tutoyaient* God in *Là-Bas*: "Monstre, dont l'inconcevable férocité engendra la vie et l'infligea à des innocents que tu oses condamner, au nom d'on ne sait quel péché originel, que tu oses punir, en vertu d'on ne sait quelles clauses, nous voudrions pourtant bien te faire avouer enfin tes impudents mensonges, tes inexpiables crimes!")[637] is placed at the center of Durtal's speech: God is the actor of each verb.

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[636] Ibid; "Lord, go not far from me. Let Thy pity curb Thy justice; be unjust, forgive me; receive Thy poor bedesman for communion, the poor in spirit!".

[637] Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, p. 376.

Durtal himself draws attention to this phenomenon earlier in the text when he notes the lack of linguistic inventiveness or originality in prayer. “Je vous avouerai que ce moyen mécanique pour réciter des oraisons me gêne un peu; je ne sais pas, mais il me semble qu’au bout de quelques secondes, je ne pourrais plus penser à ce que je répète; je bafouillerais, je finirais certainement par balbutier des bêtises…"[638] Yet the prior who hears this admission admonishes him for confusing linguistic invention with purity of meaning. Why should the nature of the form matter when the content itself is pure?

> Vous avez connu, fit tranquillement le prieur, des pères de famille. Leurs enfants leur bredouillaient des caresses, leur racontaient n’importe quoi et ils étaient cependant ravis de les entendre ! Pourquoi voulez-vous que notre-Seigneur, qui est un bon père, n’aime pas à écouter ses enfants même lorsqu’ils ânonnent, même lorsqu’ils débitent des bêtises.[639]

The lack of originality in Durtal's communion exclamation likewise points to this view of language-as-transmission: it is a vector not of diegetic, self-referential cleverness, but of *meaning*. (Meaning, furthermore, that is not narrative or propositional as such, but rather transcendent: it is the vector by which *love of God*, which gives the phrases the quality of *signe*, is transmitted).

This meaning, reaches its full significance when it is shared with others: language is not a unidirectional act, but a means by which two people come to understand one another, something Huysmans highlights in his utopian depiction of the silent monks who have nevertheless created a functional language:

> Vous venez de le voir; ils correspondent avec des signes … Ainsi, le mot "lessive" est traduit par une main qui en tape une autre ; le mot "légume" par l’index gauche qu’on ratisse … Et

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[638] Huysmans, *En Route,* p. 294; "I admit that this mechanical manner of saying prayers wearies me a little,” he says. “ I do not know why, but it seems to me that at the end of some seconds I can no longer think of what I am saying; I should mock, and should certainly end by stammering out something stupid.”.

[639] Ibid; “You have known," quietly answered the prior, "some fathers of families. Their children stammer forth caresses, and tell them no matter what, and yet they are delighted to listen! Why should not our Lord, who is a good Father, love to hear His children when they drawl, or even when they talk nonsense?”.

> pour les termes dont le sens est plus spirituel, ils usent d'un moyen analogue. La confession se rend par un doigt que l'on pose, après l'avoir baisé, sur le cœur."[640]

As Robert Ziegler describes this transition: "No longer equated with lapidary style, neologistic density, or orthopedic syntax, genius is identified with clarity and accessibility"[641]

The Eucharist, therefore, represents a transformation of the linguistic vector for Durtal, taking Durtal's customary complex verbal formulations and transforming them into something simple and direct – formulations, which in their Biblical echoes, sacrifice originality for something greater: the ability not merely to *communer* but to *communiquer.*

Of course, as we have noted above, the lack of linear narrative in *En Route* prevents this moment of communion from being a "turning point" for Durtal (rather it prompts yet another moment of existential despair). But it is nonetheless revealing in how Huysmans uses the Eucharist as a both a means of denying Durtal his beloved power of speech and breaching the membrane of his existence. Soon, Huysmans hints, we will understand a sanctified Durtal as, like the bodies of the putrefying saints or the communion wafer itself (or the text of *En Route*), a unity between external form and interior force. But that interior force cannot come to full fruition until it is understood as Christ.

The dynamic interrelationship between communion and confession, food and excrement, reaches its zenith in the depiction of one of the most saintly characters in the Durtal cycle: Brother Simeon. Early in *En Route,* Durtal foreshadows his experience with Simeon, casting his sin in the language of swine: "Père, j'ai chassé les pourceaux de mon être, mais ils m' ont piétiné et couvert de purin et l'étable même est en ruine. Ayez pitié, je

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[640] Ibid, p. 399; "You have just seen; they correspond by signs; … Thus the word 'wash' is translated by one hand tapping on the other; the word 'vegetable' by scratching the left forefinger; …And for more spiritual expressions they employ a like method. Confession is translated by a finger kissed and laid upon the heart.".

[641] Ziegler, *Mirror,* p. 245.

reviens de si loin! Faites miséricorde, seigneur, au porcher sans place! Je suis entré chez vous, ne me chassez pas, soyez bon hôte lavez-moi"[642]

Yet when we see swine – as it were – in the flesh, they are depicted not as objects of sin, but rather catalysts of redemption. Durtal, when he sees Simeon among the pigs, is struck by Simeon's love for his creatures:

> Il les introduisit dans une étable et Durtal recula, assourdi par des cris affreux, suffoqué par l'ardeur pestilentielle des purins. Tous les porcs se dressaient debout, derrière leur barrière, hurlaient d'allégresse, à la vue du frère. — Paix, paix, fit le vieillard…Et le frère Siméon exhiba d'autres élèves, des cochons avec des oreilles en pavillon de trompe et des queues en tire-bouchons, des truies dont les ventres traînaient et dont les pattes semblaient à peine sorties du corps, des nouveau-nés qui pillaient goulûment la calebasse des pis, et d'autres plus grands qui jouaient à se poursuivre et se roulaient dans la boue, en reniflant.[643]

It is impossible to read this passage without thinking of the pastoral scenes in *En Rade,* particularly the sickening cow-birth (indeed, Durtal's "suffocation" in the presence of the pigs recalls Marlès' frequent inability to breathe under similar circumstances). But here, nature – and the liminality of the corporeal body – is treated not as disgusting but as desirable, even sanctified. The birth of a baby pig is not an occasion for horror, but rather, for Simeon, love. "Quand une truie va mettre bas, il sollicite la permission de passer la nuit

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[642] Huysmans, *En Route,* p. 258; "I have driven the swine from my being, but they have trampled on me, and covered me with mire, and the very stye is in ruins. Have pity on me, for I return from a distant land. Have mercy, O Lord, on the swine-herd without a house. I have entered into Thy house; do not send me away, be to me a kindly host, wash me."

[643] Ibid, p. 343; "He introduced them into a shed, and Durtal recoiled, deafened by horrible cries, suffocated by the pestilential heat of the liquid manure. All the pigs jumped up behind their barrier, and howled with joy at the sight of the brother. "Peace, peace," said the old man…And Brother Simeon showed off other pupils, pigs with ears like the mouth of a trumpet and corkscrew tails, sows whose stomachs trailed and whose feet seemed hardly outside their bodies, new-born pigs which sucked ravenously at the teats, larger ones, who delighted in chasing each other about and rolled in the mud, snorting.".

auprès d'elle, il l'accouche, la soigne comme son enfant, pleure lorsqu'on vend les gorets ou qu'on expédie ses cochons à l'abattoir."[644]

Robert Ziegler compares Brother Simeon's pigs to Des Esseintes peptone enema: "metaphysical equivalent of recycling waste as food"[645] But while Des Esseintes existed in isolation – a closed circle of input and output – the pigs exist in a wider context: they consume excrement and dirt and, through the act of eating, transmogrify it: they too in their turn become good food for humans to eat.

In this way, Huysmans presents us with what we hinted at earlier in this chapter – a redemption of excrement, and, by association, of the "jets of filth" of Durtal's confession. Just as excrement becomes food for the pigs, so too does Durtal's verbal diarrhea, once purged of its narrative qualities (which is to say, the story of Mme Chantelouve) provide us with a fresh theological model of linguistic transmission: one where language, like the scents of saints, emanates uncontrollably from the speaker.

The idea of a model of creation predicated on, if not emanation, then nevertheless *necessary* element of love, might be considered not merely *a* theological concept in the Christian tradition, but indeed *the* theological concept of creation: a Trinitarian understanding of the Godhead – dating back to Nicea itself – that prioritizes a loving God over a sovereign one. After all, it was the necessity of a God who, all-loving, could not do otherwise than bring into existence a Son, whose very Godhead was predicated upon the Son's existence, that led Athanasian to condemn what he saw as the Arian heresy: that "there was a time when the Son

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[644] Ibid, p. 341; "When a sow is going to bring forth, he asks permission to pass the night by her, and delivers her, looking after her like his child, weeps when they sell his little pigs or when the big ones are sent to the slaughter-house!".

[645] Ziegler, *Mirror,* p. 249.

was not." The first Word, after all, was not a creation – like all creation that followed – but an expansion of Godself.[646]

Such a comparison must not be taken too far. After all, the idea of creation-as-uncontrollable-emanation has its precedent, too, in several theologies commonly understood to be heretical – including the Gnostic theologies of Valentinius or Basilides. Yet the idea that the act of creation might be understood not as autonomous or willed sovereign act but as fundamental to the self's very existence in the world, that verbal expression exists in *imago dei* of the Son's relation to the Father, offers us a powerful model for understanding how language – so often, in Huysmans, the vector of cruelty – might be reconfigured as a vector of love.

Christ-as-Word (and Christ-as-food) is central to that reconfiguration. For it is the communion wafer that serves, in Huysmans' theological landscape, as the ultimate "text." That which passes Durtal's lips is both a vector of meaning (as wafer) and meaning itself (as Body). The incarnation of the Word in a physical body, which the Eucharistic wafer both signifies and *is*, serves as the model for all linguistic transmission. Meaning is wedded to and inseparable from content; the inner and the outer must necessarily be one, and be one because of Christ. Just as Christ suffuses the tabernacle of Durtal's body, sanctifying it along with his soul, so too does Christ suffuse – in a non-propositional form – Durtal's words. Christ gives artistic significance to the outmoded language of common prayer, rendering the prosaic and the quotidian sublime.

If there is a redemption of language in Huysmans' later novels, it is only because Christ himself has redeemed it. The meaning behind every symbol, Christ gathers together

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[646] Cf. Lewis Ayres' discussion in *Nicea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 43ff; cf Dionysius of Alexandria "being the brightness of light eternal, certainly (the Son) is himself eternal, for as the light exists always, it is evident that the brightness must exist always as well' (*Athanasius, Sent, 15*); cf Athanasius "it must follow that he who contemplates the creation rightly, is contemplating also the Word who framed it, and through Him begins to apprehend the Father."

the disparate images and associations from Husymans' earlier texts, and at last makes them one.

The redemption of language in *En Route* is inextricable from the redemption of nature. Many critics, among them Robert Ziegler, Pierre Glaudes, and Doinique Millet-Gérard, have commented on the phenomenon of nature's restitution in the novel, as Durtal is at last able to appreciate in his surroundings the world as a mirror of the divine creation. As Millet-Gérard puts it: "dans *En Route,* la nature n'est plus jamais ridiculisée, ni même en butte à un ironie légère; elle est un adjuvant spirituel, dans l'économie générale du roman, et s'oppose aussi en cela à la sécheresse minéraale et baudelairienne du decor parisien"[647]

If *En Rade* saw us presented with a vision of a vengeance-seeking nature, intruding upon the cloister of Marlès' consciousness, then *En Route* provides us with a more balanced perspective, one in which the retreat of La Trappe and its natural surroundings exist in harmony together: La Trappe is coded as a kind of Eden: "un clos plein de pommiers rabougris et perclus, argentés par des lichens et dorés par des mousses; puis au dehors du monastère, par-dessus les murs, grimpaient des champs de luzerne coupés par une grande route blanche qui disparaissait à l'horizon dentelé par des feuillages d'arbres."[648] Imagery of good fruit hints not just at fecundity but at the promise of consumption – the restitution not only of nature but also of Durtal's body. It is telling – and a telling counterpoint to the omnipresent smell of excrement Jacques Marlès suffers through in *En Rade* – that the monastery's pervasive smell is of chocolate: there is a chocolate factory on the premises. Just

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[647] Millet-Gérard, in Smeets (ed), p. 91.

[648] Huysmans, *En Route,* p. 239; "Below stretched the orchard through which Durtal had passed under the conduct of the brother porter. An enclosure full of apple trees stunted and clipped, silvered by lichens, and gilt by moss; then beyond the monastery, and above the walls, rose fields of clover intersected by a great white road, extending to the horizon, which was notched by the foliage of trees.".

as the saints Durtal studies emit delicious fragrances from their bodies, so too does the monastery itself emit an inviting scent.

In another passage, Durtal experiences the collectivity of nature with the same singularity of focus with which he once cherished individual gems:

> Il s'installa, en bas, près de l'étang dont les bords étaient ceinturés par des roseaux qu'entouraient des touffes d'osiers ; et il s'amusait à contempler les couleurs de ces arbustes, leurs feuilles d'un vert lisse, leurs tiges d'un jaune citron ou d'un rouge sang, à observer l'eau qui frisait, qui se mettait à bouillir sous un coup de vent. Et des martinets la rasaient, l'effleuraient du bout de leur aile, en détachaient des gouttes qui sautaient ainsi que des perles de vif argent. Et ces oiseaux remontaient, tournoyaient au-dessus, poussant les huit, huit, huit, de leurs cris, tandis que des libellules s'allumaient dans l'air qu'elles sabraient de flammes bleues...Durtal voyait jaillir les sauterelles vertes au ventre vermillon, ou, grimpant à l'assaut des chênes, des colonies de ces bizarres insectes qui ont sur le dos une tête de diable peinte au minium sur un fond noir.[649]

Adjectives are not lapidary but organic – *lemon* yellow, *blood* red – intensifying the dynamic sense of life.

But Durtal's relationship with nature is – like *En Route* – far from linear. Rather, it is a dialectic, as Durtal's continued walks around the natural landscape of La Trappe evoke in him a series of spiritual crises.

These crises center largely around Durtal's frequent sightings of a large, white swan in the monastery pond: a pond that seems to challenge a straightforward reading of Nature as divinized in *En Route*. It is stagnant, filled with filth.

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[649] Ibid, pp. 325-6; "He took his position below, near the pond whose banks were bordered by reeds surrounded by tufts of osiers; and he amused himself by examining the colours of these shrubs, with their smooth green leaves and stalks of citron yellow, or blood red, noticing the curling water which began to foam with a gust of wind. And the martins skimmed it, touching it with the tips of their wings from which drops of water fell like pearls of quicksilver. And the birds rose whirling above and giving out their cries of weet, weet, weet, while the dragon-flies shone brightly in the air which they slashed with blue flames…Durtal noticed jumping, green grasshoppers with vermilion bellies, or, scaling the oaks, colonies of queer insects on whose backs a devil's head was painted in red lead on a black ground. And above all that, if he raised his eyes, there was the silent upturned sea of heaven, a blue sea crested with surging white clouds like waves; and at the same time this firmament moved in the water where it billowed under a blueish gray glass.".

But the pond – and the swan it contains – are vital symbolic doubles for Durtal himself. Floating on the pond, removed from the world around it, this *cygne* is another *signe*: a self-enclosed sign pointing only to itself. (In one revealing moment, a priest comments on the swan's anger, wondering aloud if: "il veut peut-être être le seul qui soit blanc"[650]) The introductory imagery of the swan – "Il le regardait osciller dans sa blancheur sur les ténèbres qu'il déplaçait en clapotant, quand une cloche sonna des volées lente" [651]– already creates a sense of alienation: it is defined only in contrast to its surroundings.

The swan, as we have seen already in Ch. 1, occupies a very specific place in the network of Decadent tropes. Robert Ziegler identifies it specifically with Durtal's narrativizing soul: "Gleaming, haughty, solitary, aristocratic, preening, known for a death song that it actually never sings"[652] The aesthetic of the swan is the aesthetic of Durtal-as-dandy: building himself up at the expense of those around him. .

So too the pond on which the swan sits. A quite literal mirror – it reflects the cross of the church above it – it is stagnant. The waters of collectivity, an ever-present Huysmanian motif – are stilled.

Through Durtal's eyes, we see:

> l'immense crucifix de bois, dressé en l'air et qui se réverbérait dans cette glace noire. Il s'y enfonçait, vu de dos, tremblait dans les petites ondes que plissait le vent, paraissait descendre en tournoyant dans cette étendue d'encre. Et l'on n'apercevait de ce Christ de marbre dont le corps était caché par son bois, que les deux bras blancs qui dépassaient l'instrument de supplice et se tordaient dans la suie des eaux. Durtal regardait l'obscur miroir de cette croix couchée et, songeant à son âme qui était, ainsi que cet étang, tannée, salie, par un lit de feuilles mortes, par un fumier de fautes, il plaignait le sauveur qu'il allait convier à s'y baigner, car ce ne serait même plus le martyre du Golgotha, consommé, sur une éminence, la tête

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[650] Ibid, p. 423; "perhaps he wants to be the only one who is white here".

[651] Ibid, p. 251; " (he saw) its white plumage oscillate against the darkness which it displaced with a splash".

[652] Ziegler, *Mirror,* p. 251.

> haute, au jour, en plein air, au moins! Mais ce serait par un surcroît d'outrages, l'abominable plongeon du corps crucifié, la tête en bas, la nuit, dans un fond de boue!"[653]

Above it all, the swan glides – "en s'avançant, la lamentable image, blanchit de son reflet tranquille le deuil remué des eaux,"[654] unaffected by the mire. Durtal – like the swan, ever on the surface of experience – cannot conceive of a Christ who would descend into it.

This pond is the locus of Durtal's transformation of perspective. After his partaking of the Eucharist provokes anxiety – he worries that his experience of communion was insufficiently narratively satisfying, that the quotidian detracts from the holistic nature of his conversion – "il s'étonna de n'avoir pas ressenti un transport inconnu de joie; puis il s'attarda sur un souvenir gênant, sur tout le côté trop humain de la déglutition d'un Dieu ; il avait eu l'hostie, collée au palais, et il avait dû la chercher et la rouler, ainsi qu'une crêpe, avec la langue!"[655] – Durtal seeks refuge at the pond.

At that moment everything changes:

> Et il éprouva, comme la première fois qu'il s'était approché du pacifiant mystère, une sensation d'étouffement, de cœur gros, lorsqu'il fut retourné à sa place. Il quitta, aussitôt la messe terminée, la chapelle et s'échappa dans le parc…Alors, doucement, sans effets sensibles, le sacrement agit ; le Christ ouvrit, peu à peu, ce logis fermé et l'aéra ; le jour entra à flots chez Durtal. Des fenêtres de ses sens qui plongeaient

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[653] Huysmans, *En Route,* pp. 288-9; "the huge wooden crucifix reared in the air which was reflected in that black mirror. It sank down, seen from behind, trembling in the small waves stirred up by the breeze, and seemed to fall whirling round in that stretch of ink. And as the body of the marble Christ was hidden by the wood, only the two white arms which hung below the tree could be seen, twisted in the blackness of the water. Seated on the grass, Durtal gazed on the hazy image of the recumbent cross, and thinking of his soul, which, like the pond, was tanned and stained by a bed of dead leaves and a dunghill of sins, he pitied the Saviour whom he was about to invite to bathe Himself there, for it would no longer be the Martyr of Golgotha to whom at all events death came on a hill, His head high, by daylight, in the open air! but it would be by an increase of outrages, the abominable plunging of the crucified body, the head low, by night, into a depth of mud.".

[654] Ibid, p. 289; " swept over the lamentable image in advancing".

[655] Ibid, p. 321; "he was astonished that he had not felt an unknown transport of joy; then he dwelt on a troublesome recollection, on the all too human side of the deglutition of a God; the Host had stuck against his palate, and he had had to seek it with his tongue…!".

jusqu'alors sur il ne savait quel puisard, sur quel enclos humide et noyé d'ombre, il contempla subitement, dans une trouée de lumière, la fuite à perte de vue du ciel. Sa vision de la nature se modifia; les ambiances se transformèrent; ce brouillard de tristesse qui les voilait s'évanouit; l'éclairage soudain de son âme se répercuta sur les alentours. Il eut cette sensation de dilatement, de joie presque enfantine du malade qui opère sa première sortie, du convalescent qui, après avoir traîné dans une chambre met enfin le pied dehors; tout se rajeunit. Ces allées, ces bois qu'il avait tant parcourus, qu'il commençait à connaître, à tous leurs détours, dans tous leurs coins, lui apparurent sous un autre aspect. Une allégresse contenue, une douceur recueillie émanaient de ce site qui lui paraissait, au lieu de s'étendre ainsi qu'autrefois, se rapprocher, se rassembler autour du crucifix, se tourner, attentif, vers la liquide croix. Les arbres bruissaient, tremblants, dans un souffle de prières, s'inclinaient devant le Christ qui ne tordait plus ses bras douloureux dans le miroir de l'étang, mais qui étreignait ces eaux, les éployait contre lui, en les bénissant. Et elles-mêmes différaient; leur encre s'emplissait de visions monacales, de robes blanches qu'y laissait, en passant, le reflet des nuées ; et le cygne les éclaboussait, dans un clapotis de soleil, faisait, en nageant, courir devant lui de grands ronds d'huile. L'on eût dit de ces ondes dorées par l'huile des catéchumènes et le saint-chrême que l'église exorcise, le samedi de la semaine sainte; et, au-dessus d'elles, le ciel entr' ouvrit son tabernacle de nuages, en sortit un clair soleil semblable à une monstrance d'or en fusion, à un saint sacrement de flammes. C'était un Salut de la nature, une génuflexion d'arbres et de fleurs, chantant dans le

vent, encensant de leurs parfums le pain sacré qui resplendissait
Là-Haut, dans la custode embrasée de l'astre.[656]

Huysmans reworks several of the motifs we have seen both earlier in the Durtal novels and, more generally, throughout his authorship. The self-as-enclosed-house, a motif echoed is opened and inhabited by Christ; autonomy gives way to perichoresis. We have a vision, too, of health – "salut" in its most literal form – but a health, tellingly, without the language of diagnosis. This is not a cure supplied by the rationalism of a Docteur Pascal, injected into the self from without, but the recovery of a "convalescent" whose body is healed from within. In this new paradigm, Nature – like so much else in the novel –emanates from within (Huysmans is explicit: "émanaient") its benediction.

Tellingly, Huysmans places the Sacrament at the centre of this redemptive vision: not only because it immediately follows Durtal's consumption of the Eucharist, but also because the Host is coded as illuminating and suffusing the entire transformative experience – replacing the sun. In so doing, Huysmans highlights the incarnational nature of the Christian

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[656] Huysmans, *En Route,* p. 385ff; "And as the first time that he approached this peace-giving mystery, he experienced a sensation of stifling, as if his heart were too large when he returned to his place. As soon as the mass was over, he quitted the chapel and escaped into the park. Then gently, without sensible effects, the Sacrament worked; Christ opened, little by little, his closed house and gave it air, light entered into Durtal in a flood. From the windows of his senses which had looked till then into he knew not what cesspool, into what enclosure, dank, and steeped in shadow; he now looked suddenly, through a burst of light, on a vista which lost itself in heaven. His vision of nature was modified; the surroundings were transformed; the fog of sadness which visited them vanished; the sudden clearness of his soul was repeated in its surroundings. He had the sensation of expansion, the almost childlike joy of a sick man who takes his first outing, of the convalescent, who having long crawled in a chamber, sets foot without; all grew young again. These alleys, this wood, through which he had wandered so much, which he began to know in all their windings, and in every corner, began to appear to him in a new aspect. A restrained joy, a repressed gladness emanated from this site, which appeared to him, instead of extending as formerly, to draw near and gather round the crucifix, to turn, as it were, with attention towards the liquid cross. The trees rustled trembling, in a whisper of prayers, inclining towards the Christ, who no longer twisted His painful arms in the mirror of the pool, but He constrained these waters, and displayed them before Him, blessing them. They were themselves different; the dark fluid was covered with monastic visions, in white robes, which the reflections of clouds left there in passing, and the swan scattered them, in a splash of sunlight, making as he swam great oily circles round him. One might have said that these waves were gilt by the oil of the catechumens, and the sacred Chrism, which the Church exorcises on the Saturday of Holy Week, and above them heaven half-opened its tabernacle of clouds, out of which came a clear sun like a monstrance of molten gold in a Blessed Sacrament of flames. It was a Benediction of nature, a genuflection of trees and flowers, singing in the wind, incensing with their perfume the sacred Bread which shone on high, in the flaming custody of the planet.".

theology of creation (just as, elsewhere, he highlights the incarnational nature of the Christian theology of language in his understanding of the Logos-as-bread). Nature is redeemed in and through Christ's entrance into it. Nature is good because it is godly. (The swan remains, however, alienated: floating not in the water but in its opposite: the "oily" circles that separate out water.) The language of "tabernacling" – used earlier to describe Durtal's own soul – intensifies this paradigm. To quote Robert Ziegler, "In the monastery's mirror-pond, Christ is reflected in Creation."[657]

If the model of art suggested by the swan is one of alienation – a being who observes from a rational distance – the model suggested by Christ that one of immersion. (Huysmans contrasts the swan with the otter – an abbey folk legend – Durtal spots later in the text – "une tête minuscule de chien parut tenant un poisson dans la gueule; et la bête se haussa un peu hors de l'eau, montra un corps effilé et couvert d'une fourrure et, tranquillement, de ses petits yeux noirs"[658] – the otter in, rather than above, the water is fully engaged in the circle of life, like Simeon's pigs occupied with the act of consumption.

Let us draw an important distinction. Nature is not sanctified, here, but Durtal's vision of it. (Huysmans says as much: it is "*la vision de* la nature [which] se modifia"). It is nature *reflected* in the pond of Durtal's soul, rather than Nature-in-itself, that is changed. Context gives the same images new life. What once was the image of Christ's twisted, contorted arms is now Christ blessing his flock. The image of pumpkins resembling kneeling people which, in *En Rade,* was expressed vulgarly as men exposing their "fesses" now resembles prayerful genuflection. The narrative act of organizing takes on a prayerful cast. The instability of identity is grounded through love.

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[657] Ziegler, *Mirror,* p. 255.

[658] Huysmans, *En Route,* p. 421; " a small dog-like head appeared holding a fish in its mouth; the beast raised itself a little out of the water, showed a thin body covered with fur, and gazed on Durtal quietly with its little black eyes"

Durtal's experience heightens our understanding of Huysmans' theology of language: the marriage of meaning to symbol we have so often discussed in the course of this thesis is predicated on Christ's incarnation. Words are more than gemstones to arrange, their colors and shapes pointing to nothing but themselves. But this they are only because of Christ. Durtal's faithless worldview left him with exclusively diagetic language; that language which he saw and described to the reader was inherently meaningless: the content within the form subject to change, and with it the meaning of landscape and text alike. Only within a Christian paradigm is meaning made clear. As Pierre Glaudès puts it: "Huysmans s'essaie à une nouvelle poétique, dont on percoit les effets dans ses transpositions d'art…et plus encore, dans l'approfondissement du regard que le personnage, sous l'effet de la foi, pose sur le monde environnant."[659]

We have already discussed Huysmans' use of motifs and images from his prior novels as a means of decentering Durtal's discrete identity within the text. But this repetition serves another purpose. By taking previously empty or meaningless images or words and infusing them with Christ-centred significance, Huysmans – through Durtal – begins to adopt the prerogative of the Christian artist: expressing the unity manifest only when the word is made flesh.

But what *is* the prerogative of the Christian artist, anyway? We have seen how Durtal's conversion is rooted in a Word- and Eucharist-centric understanding of language. We have seen how Huysmans distinguishes between autonomous linguistic expression and uncontrolled artistic emanation. And we have seen, too, a version of authorial subjectivity (i.e., the entrance of the organizing power of love) that expresses the glory of God, not His

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[659] Glaudes in Smeets (ed), p. 110.

absence. But what does this mean practically? Can we develop a Huysmanian theology of art or literature?

That is precisely what Huysmans himself does here. With Durtal his ubiquitous, if not always trustworthy, mouthpiece Huysmans often explores explicitly, in Durtal's interior monologue, what he explores implicitly in the text itself.

We have discussed Huysmans' own ambiguous relationship to artistry in *En Route*: how his attempts at writing *Là-Haut* saw him caught between a desire for aesthetic mastery and a desire for pure faith. Durtal, too, discusses this problem explicitly with reference to the hagiographies he reads. He compares Flaubert and Hello, each the author of the life of a certain saint, and finds both lacking: "l'un [Flaubert], dans la légende de Saint Julien, parce que la foi lui faisait défaut et l'autre parce qu'il possédait une inextensible indigence d'art."[660] We note this tension – between craft and faith – throughout *En Route,* and in the novels that follow, as Huysmans works out a positive theology of artistic expression.

We can see the most explicit example of this theology in Durtal's views on Medieval plainchant, which he treats as the pinnacle of artistic expression:

> Durtal écoutait, saisi, cet admirable chant qui n'avait rien de commun avec celui que l'on beugle, à Paris, dans les églises… tout à la fois flébile et ardent, soulevé par de si suppliantes adorations, qu'il semblait concentrer, en lui seul, l'immémorial espoir de l'humanité et son éternelle plainte. Chanté sans accompagnement, sans soutien d'orgue, par des voix indifférentes à elles-mêmes et fondues en une seule, mâle et profonde, il montait en une tranquille audace, s'exhaussait en un irrésistible essor vers la Vierge, puis il faisait comme un retour sur lui-même et son assurance diminuait; il avançait plus tremblant, mais si déférent, si humble, qu'il se sentait pardonné et osait alors, dans des appels éperdus, réclamer les délices imméritées d'un ciel. Il était le triomphe avéré des neumes, de ces répétitions de notes sur la même syllabe, sur le même mot, que l'église inventa pour peindre l'excès de cette joie intérieure ou de cette détresse interne que les paroles ne peuvent rendre;

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[660] Huysmans, *En Route,* p. 41; "one [Flaubert] in the legend of St. Julian because faith was wanting, the other because his art was poor and narrow".

> et c'était une poussée, une sortie d'âme s'échappant dans les voix passionnées qu'exhalaient ces corps debout et frémissants de moines. Durtal suivait sur son paroissien cette œuvre au texte si court et au chant si long ; à l'écouter, à la lire avec recueillement, cette magnifique exoration paraissait se décomposer en son ensemble, représenter trois états différents d'âme, signifier la triple phase de l'humanité, pendant sa jeunesse, sa maturité et son déclin; elle était, en un mot, l'essentiel résumé de la prière à tous les âges.[661]

Plainchant for Durtal has two main qualities. Firstly, it is an act of supplication and offering, rather than self-expansion: the language Durtal uses to describe it is that of emanation ("breathing forth", "a going-forth of the soul") and of self-giving (elsewhere, plainchant "darder jusqu'au ciel le cri d'angoisse de l'âme désincarnée, jetée nue, en pleurs, devant son Dieu."[662]). It is not original – the texts used to accompany it, like those of Durtal's linguistically basic prayers, are short, prescribed. It is not self-conscious – but "indifferent to itself".

Nor is it individualistic. Rather, the main distinguishing quality of plainchant is that it is collective, anonymous. Indeed, Durtal notes how "Des artistes de génie s'étaient évertués à traduire les textes sacrés...Haendel, Bach, Haydn, avaient écrit de merveilleuses pages ; souvent même, ils avaient été soulevés par l'effluence mystique, par l'émanation même du

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[661] Ibid, p. 255; "Durtal was affected as he listened to this admirable chant, which had nothing in common with that which is bellowed at Paris in the churches. This was at once flexible and ardent, sustained by such suppliant adoration, that it seemed to concentrate in itself alone, the immemorial hope of humanity, and its eternal lamentation. Chanted without accompaniment, unsustained by the organ, by voices indifferent to themselves and blending in one only, masculine and deep, it rose with quiet boldness, sprang up with irresistible flight towards Our Lady, then made, as it were, a return upon itself, and its confidence was lessened; it advanced more tremblingly, but so different, so humble, that it felt itself forgiven, and dared then in passionate appeals to demand the undeserved pleasures of heaven. It was the absolute triumph of the neumes, those repetitions of notes on the same syllable, the same word, which the Church invented to paint the excess of that interior joy or sorrow which words cannot render; it was a rush, a going forth of the soul, escaping in the passionate voices, breathed forth by the bodies of the monks as they stood and trembled. Durtal followed in his prayer-book this work with so short a text, so long a chant; and as he listened to, and read it with recollection, this magnificent prayer seemed to decompose as a whole, and to represent three different states of the soul, to exhibit the triple phase of humanity, during its youth, its maturity, and its decline; it was, in a word, an essential summary of prayer for all ages."

[662] Ibid, p. 15; "fling(ing) to heaven the anguished cry of the disincarnate soul, cast naked, and in tears before God".

Moyen Age, à jamais perdue ; et leurs œuvres gardaient pourtant un certain apparat, demeuraient, malgré tout, orgueilleuses, en face de l'humble magnificence…l'artiste tenant à exhiber sa science, pensant à exalter sa gloire et par conséquent omettant Dieu…une explosion de tendresses surélevées et de joies pures ; c'était aussi l'idiome de l'Eglise, l'Evangile musical accessible comme l'Evangile même, aux plus raffinés et aux plus humbles.."[663]

Art, Durtal – and Huysmans – suggest, cannot be self-propagation; rather, it is only in the artist's sacrifice that the true relationship between God and creation can reveal itself: for, "le véritable créateur de la musique plane, l'auteur inconnu qui a jeté dans le cerveau de l'homme la semence du plain-chant, c'est le Saint-esprit."[664] Art, in this schema, is a dynamic interrelation between God, man who is both creation and creator, and man's creation. All art originates in the divine creative act: created beings are vessels, mediators (as in the sweet smells emitting from the bodies of suffering saints, or even Villiers'swans).

Art, here, is not just meaning-wedding but meaning-conveying: a vector of communication. It functions only insofar as it can be understood – a far cry from Durtal or Des Esseintes' willful linguistic and aesthetic esoterica. Durtal admires, for example, how one finds "dans le chant de la Noël…le rythme populacier des foules; elles se font petites et familières telles que les Evangiles, se soumettent aux humbles souhaits des pauvres, et leur

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[663] Ibid, pp. 14-5; "Artists of genius have set themselves to translate the sacred texts:...Handel, Bach, Haydn, have written wonderful pages; often indeed they have been uplifted by the mystic effluence, the very emanation of the Middle Ages, for ever lost; and yet their works have retained a certain pomp, and in spite of all are pretentious, as opposed to the humble magnificence … the artist determined to show his skill, thinking to exalt his own glory, and therefore leaving God out. … explosion of elevated tenderness and pure joy, it was also the idiom of the Church, a musical gospel appealing like the Gospel itself at once to the most refined and the most humble".

[664] Ibid, p. 253; "true creator of plain music, the unknown author who cast into the brain of man the seed of plain chant, was the Holy Ghost,""

prêtant un air de fête facile à retenir, un véhicule mélodique qui les emporte en de pures régions où ces âmes naïves s'ébattent aux pieds indulgents du Christ."[665]

In this schema, we move away from an understanding of art as a thing-in-itself: a self-enclosed paradigm, a closed house. Rather, art is a corridor: a locus of transmission of non-propositional and non-narrative truths about God: conveying a fundamental meaning which is, at its core, not a message *about* Christ but Christ made incarnate within the text.

It is only in the two subsequent Durtal novels, *La Cathédrale* and *L'Oblat,* that we get a clearer portrait of what good Christian art – beyond plainchant – might look or sound like.

Our only explicit reference to the theology of art in *En Route* links us back to the pond and the swan of La Trappe, and with it provides an opening for the "spiritual naturalism" Durtal so craved in *Là-Bas*:"Et tout cela se tenait, flambait en une seule gerbe, sur le même autel ; tout cela se conciliait en une touffe de pensées unique : révérer, adorer, servir le Dispensateur, en lui montrant, réverbéré dans l'âme de sa créature, ainsi qu'en un fidèle miroir, le prêt encore immaculé de ses dons."[666]

This theology of art-as-gift comes to shape Huysmans' understanding of art as a whole. Man's artistic creative power is itself conditional: it derives from man's status not just *imago dei*, but also a created thing that has been created *by God*. Man is not reappropriating God's creative power, usurping the right to use the Word, but rather exercising a facility free to him. The creative existence depends on God's continued love.

Thus does art discover a new function: As a "mirror" – like Durtal's pond – it can reflect not merely the dry, exterior form of the world around it (as we might find, say, in a

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[665] Ibid, p. 21; "the popular rhythm of the crowd… they become trivial and familiar like the Gospels, submitting themselves to the humble wishes of the poor, lending them a holiday tune easy to catch, a running melody which carries them into pure regions where these simple souls can cast themselves at the indulgent feet of Christ."

[666] Ibid, pp. 18-9; "And all this held together and blazed in one sheaf, on one and the same altar; all was reconciled in one unique cluster of thoughts: to revere, adore and serve the Dispenser, showing to Him reflected in the soul of His creature, as in a faithful mirror, the still immaculate treasure of His gifts.".

Zolan naturalism), but rather the dynamic force of its *interior*. It is subjective – to the extent that the ability to perceive this interiority depends on the artist's love – but objective to the extent that art *succeeds* only insofar as it successfully mirrors this extant sanctity. The creative process thus, as Robert Ziegler notes, moves from one of external adornment – encrusting the surface of the narrative turtle with gems – to one of internal reflection: "it had always been Huysmans's policy to cover the world with images, resurfacing a democratically true reality with esoteric, rare, and precious phrases. In the aftermath of *En Route*, however, Huysmans ceased to exercise his prerogative to assign meaning, preferring instead to uncover that inherent in the material text of Creation. At that point, he stopped using his textual mirror to reflect his clever language objects and tried instead to capture and glorify the magnificence of God's artistry."[667]

Here do we find "spiritual naturalism" in its fullest flower: a naturalism that reflects the inmost heart of things, predicated upon the assumption that there *is* an inmost heart to accurately reflect:, the presence of the incarnate Christ.

En Route, in content and form alike provides us with the most basic template of this mirror. Psychologically realistic to the point of tedium, yet infused – through Durtal's eyes – with the promise of sanctification, the novel – in the words of Pierre Glaudes, "reste une "étude" au sens naturaliste du terme, mais il propose désormais une clinique de l'âme, où l'écrivain tente de conjoindre 'l'art inouï de Flaubert' à l'ardeur spirituelle' de Hello."[668] Its Eucharistic aesthetics, if not at first glance apparent, nevertheless set the stage for a vision of the novel that at once rejects the pathologizing tradition of Zola and the anarchy of Jean Lorrain: a novel that, like the effluvia of Durtal's confession, has been redeemed by Christ's

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[667] Ziegler, *Mirror,* p. 260.

[668] Glaudes in Smeets (ed), p. 110.

immanance. Here begins, as Dominique Millet-Gérard puts it in her study of the novel*:* "Le projet... de restaurer un authentique art chrétien"[669]

iii) A Forest of Symbols: *La Cathédrale*

We will not linger too long on the final books in Huysmans' Durtal quartet, 1898's *La Cathédrale* and 1903's *L'Oblat*. Much of the ideological and theological tension we find in both books, the imagery, the structure, we have discussed already with reference to *En Route*: the most obviously "transformational" book in the quartet, and the one that best displays elements of Huysmans' pre- and post-conversion models of artistic experience. A few brief notes will suffice to paint a general portrait of the ways in which *La Cathédrale* and *L'Oblat* intensify certain thematic elements in *En Route*.

La Cathédrale, less a novel than an extended series of meditations-in-dialogue on Medieval art and allegory (and, in particular, the titular cathedral at Chartres, where Durtal stays) intensifies Huysmans' exploration of the relationship between language and meaning, and how the Christian text demands a semiotic "breaking-open": engagement with other (and sacred) texts outside the self's self-enclosure.

Huysmans does this in form as well as content. From the novel's opening, Huysmans de-centers Durtal – he whose overweening (self)consciousness has defined the first two novels in the quartet. The opening suggests a non-Durtal narrator, addressing the reader directly: "Chartres, au sortir de cette petite place que balaye…vous souffle au visage lorsqu'on pénètre dans les solennelles ténèbres de la forêt tiède.."[670] And throughout the

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669 Millet-Gérard in Smeets (ed), p. 89.

670 Huysmans, *La Cathédrale,* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit,1915), p. 7; "At Chartres, as you turn out of the little market-place…[wind)]puffs in your face on entering the solemn gloom of the sheltering forest". Translations from Clara Bell (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2010).

novel, Durtal is further de-centered by the presence of other, equally compelling characters, with whom he exists in authentic relationship: most notably among them the religious housekeeper Madame Bavoil, whose tart tongue and eye-rolling responses to some of Durtal's aesthetic excesses temper the effects of his soliloquizing. Most notably, there are whole passages of the text from which Durtal is absent – Madame Bavoil commenting on him while he is "offstage": both at the end of Chapter 8 (where she comments on the potential of his vocation with the abbé) and, more significantly, at the novel's close, when they express concern for Durtal's spiritual journey: "il est un peu notre enfant, cet ami-là ; mais ce que je serais tout de même heureuse, s'il devenait un vrai moine!.... Cela dépend de Vous, assistez-le dans sa pénurie, pensez qu'il ne peut rien sans votre aide, bonne Tentatrice, Notre-Dame du Pilier, Vierge de Sous-Terre!."[671] Durtal's consciousness recedes in favor of other, competing consciousnesses; the appeal to the Virgin (echoed in the end of *À Rebours* as well as *L'Oblat*) further intensifies our awareness as readers of Durtal's narrative limitations: he is but one character among other characters, a recipient of divine and human love rather than a disengaged actor.

La Cathédrale, likewise, intensifies the exploration of Christian art we have found already in the earlier Durtal novels, rendering Huysmans' aesthetic theology more programmatic and explicit. Much of the novel consists of extended dialogue between Durtal and his spiritual superiors about the allegorical nature of the cathedral. Every gemstone, every numerical choice, every position, has a religious value. This forest – and indeed, Huysmans uses the language of forest explicitly – is not a Baudelairean "forest of symbols,"

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[671] Ibid, pp. 486-7; "that friend is almost like a child of our own! At the same time I should be very, very happy to think of him as a true monk!...It depends on Thee! Help him in his poverty, remember that he can do nothing without Thine aid, Holy Temptress of men, Our Lady of the Pillar, Virgin of the Crypt".

confused and uncertain. Rather, the "art" of the church construction, through its reliance on a semiotic network of spiritual truth, reflects and intensifies the god-given glory of the created order. Rather than being treated as an outmoded crone, Nature is here restituted *through* art, given ontological significance through a Christian understanding of the world: sucah that "Jésus surgit de partout, s'attesta dans la faune, dans la flore, dans les contours des monuments, dans les parures, dans les teintes ; de quelque côté qu'il se tourna, rhomme le vit."[672] Christ is the true meaning of all signs.

Thus,

> Il est à peu près certain pour moi...que l'homme a trouvé dans les bois. l'aspect si discuté des nefs et de l'ogive. La plus étonnante cathédrale que la nature ait [at Jumieges]…mais ce que la nature ne pouvait donner c'était l'art prodigieux, la science symbolique profonde, la mystique éperdue et placide des croyants qui édifièrent les cathédrales. — Sans eux, l'église restée à l'état brut, telle que la nature la conçut, n'était qu'une ébauche sans âme, un rudiment; elle était l'embryon d'une basilique… L'homme, en son génie, recueillit ces lueurs éparses, les condensa dans des rosaces et dans des lames, les reversa dans les allées des futaies blanches; et même par les temps les plus sombres, les verrières resplendirent, emprisonnèrent jusqu'aux dernières clartés des couchants, habillèrent des plus fabuleuses splendeurs le Christ et la Vierge, réalisèrent presque sur cette terre la seule parure qui pût convenir aux corps glorieux, des robes variées de flames![673]

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[672] Ibid, p. 476; "Jesus was seen in everything—in the fauna, the flora, the structure of buildings, in every decoration, in the use of colour. Whichever way man could turn, he still saw Him".

[673] Ibid, pp. 63-5; "is almost certain that it was in the forest that man found the prototype of the nave and the pointed arch. The most amazing cathedral constructed by Nature herself…but what Nature could not give was the prodigious art, the deep symbolical knowledge, the over-strung but tranquil mysticism of the believers who erected cathedrals. But for them the church in its rough-hewn state, as Nature had formed it, was but a soulless thing, a sketch, rudimentary; the embryo only of a basilica…Man's genius collected the scattered gleams, condensed them in roses and broad blades, to pour it into his avenues of white shafts; and even in the darkest weather the glass was splendid, catching the very last rays of sunset, dressing Christ and the Virgin in the most fabulous magnificence, and almost realizing on earth the only attire that beseems the glorified Body, a robe of mingled flame".

Durtal presents us with a vision of Christian art that is collaborative: human beings in dialogue with nature, organizing it through faith into an art that transcends but does not reject the created order. Nature, that living temple, is meaningful *insofar* as it "points to" the truth of Christ; the faithful artists (or artisans) use their power of narrative organization to reflect that meaningfulness artistically.

In keeping with Husymans' recurring motif of the closed house, it is telling that it is the *stained glass window* – that which allows light to enter, even as it shapes and colors that light – that forms the basis of Durtal's experience of Christian art. In perhaps the novel's most telling passage, Durtal experiences a hybrid restitution of nature/moment of artistic transcendence, predicated on the double function of a stained glass cathedral window, as Durtal fixes his gaze on a black Madonna and child:

> Avec l'aube qui commençait à poindre, elle devenait vraiment incohérente la forêt de cette église sous les arbres de laquelle il était assis. Les formes parvenues à s'ébaucher se faussaient dans cette obscurité qui fondait toutes les lignes, en s'éteignant. en bas, dans une nuée qui se dissipait, jaillissaient, plantés comme en des puits les étreignant dans les cols serrés de leurs margelles, les troncs séculaires de fabuleux arbres blancs...Un quart d'heure se passa sans que rien se définît; puis les formes vraies s'avérèrent. Au centre des épées qui étaient, en réalité, des lames de verre, des personnages se levèrent dans le grand jour; partout, au mitan de chaque fenêtre allongée en ogive, des visages poilus flambèrent, immobiles, dans des brasiers et, ainsi que dans le buisson ardent de l'Horeb où Dieu resplendit devant Moïse, partout, dans les taillis de flammes, surgit, en une immuable attitude de douceur impérieuse et de grâce triste, la Vierge, muette et rigide, au chef couronné d'or. Elle se multipliait, descendait des empyrées, à des étages inférieurs, pour se rapprocher de ses ouailles, finissait par s'installer à un endroit où l'on pouvait presque lui baiser les pieds…Celle que tous invoquaient était là, enfin. Partout, sous la futaie de cette cathédrale, la Vierge était présente. Elle paraissait être arrivée de tous les points du monde, sous l'extérieur des diverses races connues du Moyen Age: noire, telle qu'une femme d'Afrique, jaune ainsi qu'une Mongole…blanche enfin de même qu'une Européenne, certifiant de la sorte que Médiatrice de l'humanité

> toute entière…La forêt tiède avait disparu avec la nuit; les troncs d'arbres subsistaient mais jaillissaient, vertigineux, du sol, s'élançaient d'un seul trait dans le ciel, se rejoignant à des hauteurs démesurées, sous la voûte des nefs ; la forêt était devenue une immense basilique, fleurie de roses en feu, trouée de verrières en ignition, foisonnant de Vierges et d'Apôtres, de Patriarches et de Saints….Enfin, dans l'abside, figurant le haut de la croix, il ruisselait de toutes parts, symbolisant la lumière qui inonde le monde, du sommet de l'arbre…d'un Enfant blanc qui bénissait, de ses doigts levés, la terre.[674]

Here, we find perhaps the most complex interplay of images of identity and instability in the novel, a vision of *correspondence* (indeed, the language of pillars, temple, and forest seems to be a specific echo of Baudelaire) that transcends both the easy descriptive diagnostic of naturalism and the post-truth chaos of the dandyist mode. The "real things" that "assert themselves"—itself language rooted in agency – have a double identity: they are both shards of glass and, at the same time, *are* flowers, trees, forests, consecrated with cosmic significance. We find not absence but rather a surfeit of meaning: a *both/and* (in this we might think of Paul Ricoeur's work on metaphor and the "completely new existential signification"

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[674] Ibid, pp. 30-5; "With dawn, now beginning to break, this forest of the church under whose shade he was sitting became absolutely unintelligible. The shapes, faintly sketched, were transformed in the gloom which blurred every outline as it slowly faded. Below, in the vanishing mist, rose the immemorial trunks of fabulous white trees…For a quarter of an hour nothing was clearly defined; then the real things asserted themselves. In the middle of the swords, which were in fact mosaic of glass, the figures stood out in broad daylight. In the field of each window with its pointed arch bearded faces took form, motionless in the midst of fire; and on all sides, in the thicket of flames, as it were the burning bush of Horeb where God showed His glory to Moses, the Virgin was seen in an unchangeable attitude of imperious sweetness and pensive grace, mute and still, and crowned with gold. She was, indeed, many; She came down from the empyrean to lower levels, to be closer to Her flock, and at last found a place where they might almost kiss Her feet. She to whom all appealed was there; everywhere under the forest roof of this cathedral the Virgin was present. She seemed to have come from all the ends of the earth, under the semblance of every race known in the Middle Ages: black as an African, tawny as a Mongolian…white as an European, thus declaring that, as mediator for the whole human race…The sheltering forest had vanished with the darkness; the tree-trunks remained, but rose with giddy flight from the ground, unbroken pillars to the sky, meeting at a vast height under the groined vault; the forest was seen as an immense church blossoming with roses of fire, pierced with glowing glass, crowded with Virgins and apostles, patriarchs and saints… At last, in the apse, forming the top of the cross, it poured in, symbolical of the light that flooded the world from the top of the Tree…a fairer Infant, blessing the earth with uplifted hand.".

that accompanies refigurative metaphor).[675] Light passes through the window even as we marvel at the image there.

So too the image of the multiple Madonnas. Each *is* the Madonna and yet, in her multiplicity, she is not the uniform women Des Esseintes decried as being automatons, but rather specific, irreducible entities – entities that, in their varying racial aspects and appearances, allow a variety of worshippers to find reflections of their own humanity in them – that are nevertheless all *her.*

This, too, intensifies the sense – already prevalent in *En Route* – that Christian art, for Huysmans, is fundamentally predicated on this surfeit of identity: itself rooted (as we have seen) in the Eucharist. The *both/and* of identity in the Host: as wafer and as Body, as incarnation *and* as symbol of a wider narrative, underpins the multiplicity of meaning that Durtal witnesses at Chartres.

Huysmans renders the centrality of this understanding of symbolism explicit throughout the text. Durtal muses how:

> l'époque où nous vécûmes le plus près de Dieu, le Moyen Age, devait suivre la tradition révélée du Christ et s'exprimer dans un idiome symbolique lorsqu'il s'agissait surtout de parler de cet Esprit, de cette Essence, de cet Être incompréhensible et sans nom qu'est notre Dieu. Il usait en même temps, par ce procédé, d'un moyen pratique pour se faire entendre. Il écrivait un livre accessible aux incapables, remplaçait le texte par l'image, instruisait de la sorte les ignorants. C'est, d'ailleurs, la pensée qu'émet le synode tenu à Arras en 1025: 'Ce que les illettrés ne

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675 Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred,* (trans. D. Pellauer), (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), p. 59, cf Paul Ricoeur. *The Rule of Metaphor*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993); Ibid, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Forth Worth: Texas Christian University Press,1976).

> peuvent saisir par l'écriture, doit leur être enseigné par la peinture.[676]

Symbols exist not to obfuscate – as in the cloistered Symbolist mode, with its focus on making truth accessible to a select and initiated few – but to allow for wider participation, and communication, in a truth that is likewise grounded in liturgy.

Likewise, language is not auto-telic – it points to something beyond itself – and yet it is not *merely* a conveyance, any more than the Host is merely a *symbol of* Christ's incarnation; there is a real presence, to refer back to Steiner, within it. Its purpose is to *communicate*, to foster intersubjectivity. Originality – that dandyist *sine qua non* – is not desirable; it is in repetition, in the melding of the new with the extant (and with it with other texts: the vast repository of tradition) that language, like art more generally, becomes dynamic. Thus, for example, Durtal is chided for his fear of prayer, which is grounded in his desire to be original in his approach of the Madonna: he is advised to "lui babille, ainsi qu'un enfant, un beau message et Elle est contente...Répétez avec la Vénérable Jeanne de Matel : 'Vierge sainte, l'abîme d'iniquité et de bassesse invoque l'abîme de force et de splendeur, pour parler de votre surémincnte gloire.'...Essayez, récitez cela à Notre-Dame et Elle vous déliera."[677] Christian discourse, here, involves not merely humility but *engagement*: a text that embraces the influence of other texts.

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[676] Huysmans, *La Cathédrale,* p. 121; "the period when human beings lived in closest intercourse with God—the Middle Ages—was certain to follow the revealed tradition of Christ, and express itself in symbolical language, especially in speaking of that Spirit, that essence, that incomprehensible and nameless Being who to us is God. At the same time it had at its command a practical means of making itself understood. It wrote a book, as it were, intelligible to the humblest, superseding the text by images, and so instructing the ignorant. This indeed was the idea put into words by the Synod of Arras in 1025: 'That which the illiterate cannot apprehend from writing shall be shown to them in pictures.".

[677] Ibid, pp.107-8; "simply chatter to Her like a child; some pretty speech .If you can invent nothing on your own part, borrow from another…Repeat after the Venerable Jeanne de Matel 'Holy Virgin, this abyss of iniquity and vileness invokes the abyss of strength and splendour to praise Thy preeminent Glory.'…Try; recite that to Our Lady and She will unbind you; then prayer will come of itself".

A final element of Huysmans' artistic theology distinctive to *La Cathédrale* (and later works: most notably *St. Lydwine of Schiedam*) is his exploration of emanation as a viable alternative to willed creation as a model of sacred self-expression. Like Villiers' swans, the saints with whom Durtal is most fascinated create themselves as works of sacred art. They emanate pleasing smells as a result of their goodness: "Saine Trévère exhalait un bouquet composé de rose, de lys, de baume et d'encens ; sainte Rose ce Viterbe fleurait la rose; saint Cajetan la fleur d'oranger; sainte Catherine de Ricci la violette ; sainte Térèse, tour à tour, le lys, le jasmin et l'iris ; saint Thomas d'Aquin l'encens; saint François de Paule le musc."[678] Durtal reflects on Mary Margaret of the Angels, whose body exuded a beautiful perfume as a result of her goodness, and who in death and putrefaction became, essentially, a candle to the glory of God:

> elle le supplié de lui permettre de se dissoudre, de se liquéfier en une huile qui pourra se consumer, devant le tabernacle, dans la lampe du sanctuaire. Et Jésus lui accorde ce privilège exorbitant, tel qu'il n'en est point dans les annales des vies de Saints; aussi, au moment d'expirer, exige-t-elle de ses filles que sa dépouille qui doit être exposée, selon l'usage, dans la chapelle ne sera pas enterrée avant plusieurs semaines…Près de trois semaines s'écouleaat; et des cloches se forment et crèvent; en rendant, du sang et de l'eau; puis l'épiderme se tigre de taches jaunes, le. suintement cesse et alors l'huile sort, blanche limpide, parfumée, puis se fonce et devient peu à peu couleur d'ambre. On put la répartir en plus de cent fioles.[679]

The transformation of the self happens not by will but by an expressivist manifestation of that self's very nature: there is a fundamental correspondence between the

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[678] Ibid, p. 430; "Saint Treverius exhaled a fragrance compounded of roses, lilies, balm, and incense; Saint Rose of Viterbo smelt of roses; Saint Cajetan of orange-blossom; Saint Catherine of Ricci of violets; Saint Theresa by turns of lily, jasmine and violet; Saint Thomas Aquinas of incense; Saint Francis of Paul of musk".

[679] Ibid, pp. 146-7; "she besought Him to suffer her to melt away, to liquefy into an oil which might be burnt before the tabernacle in the lamp of the sanctuary And Jesus vouchsafed to her this excessive privilege, such as the like is unknown in the history of the Saints; and at the moment when she died she enjoined her daughters to leave her body exposed in the chapel, and unburied for some weeks… Nearly three weeks elapsed; boils formed and broke, giving out blood and water for more than a month; then the skin showed patches of yellow; exudation ceased and oil came out, at first white, limpid, and fragrant, afterwards darker and of about the colour of amber. It filled more than a hundred phials".

internal/soul and the external/body that allows the saint to become art. It is the opposite of dandyism: a full submissive embodiment, an act of being-in-the-world that also denotes participation in the *milieu:* an interconnected and dynamic symbolic atmosphere.

Huysmans does not explore in great detail the implications of this for Christian artistic creation more generally. Can we practically distinguish between "willed" and "emanatory" creation – a writer whose works "pour out" of him versus one whose prose is finely crafted and disengaged? (Is Kerouac, say, who famously wrote *On the Road* in a feverish typewriter frenzy more "Christian" than Stendhal?) But by the end of *La Cathédrale,* Durtal has replaced his various sterile creative projects and self-projections with a practical one: a vision of a "liturgical garden" he will plant: "élevant une série de fleurs à cause de leurs relations avec les Ecritures et les hagiologes."[680] Durtal embraces the organic, even as he uses his narrative power to reveal extant – ontologically true but also socially determined insofar as they are a function of the repository of tradition – allegorical connections: affirming the divinity of the created order because of the *both/and*: each flower, each plant, has dignity, and irreducibility, *because* it also signifies the Christ who has become incarnate in the world.

iv) A Book of Hours: *L'Oblat*

The final book in the Durtal quartet, *L'Oblat* (1903) does for *time* what *La Cathédrale* does for place. While the novel largely recapitulates themes we have already discussed in the preceding sections, *L'Oblat* – in which Durtal becomes, briefly, an oblate at Val-de-Saints before finally returning to Paris – does more than its predecessors to sanctify temporality. We have discussed already how *À Rebours* – and the decadent-dandyist novel more generally – is characterized by a sense of claustrophobia that is temporal as well as special: whole sections

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[680] Ibid, p. 298; "where flowers may be grown in succession for the sake of their relations to the Scriptures and hagiology".

(Des Esseintes' fantasies of Salome, say) function as suspended *ekphrases*. Yet *L'Oblat,* governed by the cyclical rhythms of the liturgical calendar, adds a temporal dimension to Huysmans' wider exploration of intertextuality. As Durtal learns to live in accordance with the sacred rhythms of the liturgical year, he comes to see the world around him as imbued with sacred time: as Robert Ziegler puts it, "[if] *À Rebours* is a linear narrative moving from interconnectedness to autism…*L'Oblat* is a story structured by calendrical renewal."[681] Time, like place, is defined as meaningful in relation to Christ: "L'Avent est donc à la fois le Passé et le Futur; et il est aussi, dans une certaine mesure, le présent ; car cette saison liturgique est la seule qui doive subsister, immuable, en…nous devons toujours vivre en un éternel avent."[682]

This sanctity of time, for Durtal, is coded as being, like the "aeration" of his mental house, a kind of engagement with otherness: he is participating in another collective text: the liturgy, with its sanctification of both time and space, becomes the model for Durtal's being-in-the-world: "Jamais il n'avait si bien compris la nécessité de la prière en commun, de la prière liturgique, de cette prière dont l'église a déterminé le moment et arrêté le texte…tout est dans les psaumes, les allégresses et les contritions, les adorations et les transes ; que leurs versets s'adaptent à tous les états d'âme, répondent à tous les besoins. Il se rendait compte de la puissance de ces suppliques agissant par elles-mêmes, par la vertu de l'inspiration divine qu'elles recèlent, par ce fait qu'elles sont celles que le fils formula."[683] (Here, too, Huysmans

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[681] Ziegler, *Mirror,* p. 292.

[682] Joris-Karl, Huysmans, *L'Oblat,* (Stock: Paris, 1915), p. 122; "thus advent may be said to be of the Past and also of the Future; but it is likewise in some sort of the Present, for the spirit of Advent is the only one that remains within us always…it is our lot always to live in a everlasting advent" Translations from Edward Percival (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2006).

[683] Ibid, p. 8; "Never til then had he felt so intensely the need of praying in common with others, of liturgical prayer, prayer for which the Church has appointed the time and the text….everything is in the Psalms, words of gladness as of contrition, words of adoration as of ecstasy…inspired prayers, a power they owed to their being prayers formulated by the Son of God.

links collectivity, art, and a sense of divine authorship: through repetition of sacred texts Durtal finds not originality but truth.)

Huysmans thus treats liturgy-as-art – with its sense of divine meaning, its participatory possibilities, its sanctification of space and time, and its creativity-in-repetition – as the pinnacle of aesthetic religious experience: wedding the semiotic grounding of allegory with the collectivity and sense of surrender and emanation that characterized his approach to plainchant in earlier texts.

Thus does "self-creation" take on a different cast in his treatment of a female not-quite-dandy, the religious Mademoiselle de Garambois, whose clothing is a canvas for her faith, as she replaces dandyist originality with participation in allegory: Durtal respects

> de sa manie de porter sur sa toilette les couleurs liturgiques du jour ; elle est un ordo vivant, un calendrier qui marche ; elle est le fanion du regiment…malheureusement le nombre des teintes ecclésiales est restreint et elle le déplore assez pour qu'on la raille ; mais tout le monde est d'accord pour admirer sa candide belle humeur et son infatigable bonté..,[684]

Unlike the dandy, Mademoiselle de Garambois is not removed from the world around her; she receives the (good-natured) teasing of her colleagues; the very act of loving mockery denotes not irony but it engagement. It's telling that the woman is also a *gourmande*: who "vous l'ai raconté, lorsqu'il s'agit d'une savoureuse cuisine ; alors, elle est le cordon bleu conventuel"[685] Her self-creation allows for (even demands) consumption: she allows herself the *astonishment* of experience. Likewise, highlighting her as one of many colorful characters

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[684] Ibid, pp. 19-20; "her mania for wearing the liturgical colour of the day in her dress. She is an animated ordo, a walking character, the ensign of the regiment…unfortunately the number of church colors is limited and this she deplores so deeply that they tease her about it. Yet everybody admires her sheer good nature and her untiring kindness of heart"

[685] Ibid, p. 20; "holds forth jubilantly…about any tasty dish…the *cordon bleu* of the convent"

who people *L'Oblat* (along Madame Bavoil, who follows Durtal into this text), Huysmans continues his wider decentering of Durtal: for the first time, his protagonist exists *in relation* to others.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Durtal's final extended fantasy of the Persian ruler Chosroes, a fantasy that itself has deeply ironic intertextual import: it recalls Des Esseintes' fascination with Salomé and Marlès's with Esther. In Durtal's imagination, Chosroes is a Biblical Des Esseintes, almost a parody of a murderous decadent-dandyist ruler in his enclosed *theïbade* of language:

> *"en une étrange salle cloisonnée de métaux précieux et incrustée de gemmes ; puis il voulut, ainsi que le tout-puissant, avoir son firmament à lui et le plafond s'éleva à des hauteurs vertigineuses et s'éclaira, le jour, par un soleil savamment exercé, la nuit, par une habile lune autour de laquelle pétillèrent les feux colorés des étoiles feintes ; ce ne fut pas assez ; ce ciel immuable, machiné par des centaines d'esclaves…il se crut l'indiscutable sosie du père … il siégea, à demeure, sur un trône, à la droite duquel il planta la croix du sauveur*."[686]

Huysmans has made use of intertextual references in his own work before to cast ironic doubt on the true autonomy of his various would-be-original characters. But only in *L'Oblat* does Huysmans break apart the mental *theïbade* so explicitly *within* the text: the "*Gloria Patria et Flio et Spiritui Sancto*"[687] – recited by the brother-monks at Mass – literally "cuts" into Durtal's fantasy, bringing him back into a reality whose artistic power is defined

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[686] Ibid, pp. 26-7; "in a strange hall on the ground floor also covered with gold and precious stones he shut himself up. Then like the Almighty he wished to have his own firmament so a ceiling was constructed at a giddy height and lighted in the daytime by a cleverly manipulated sun and at night by an artificial moon around which twinkled the groups of sham stars. But this did not satisfy him. He grew tired of this fixed heaven he mechanism of which used up hundred of slaves…being himself to be in very truth the personification of God Almighty, he sat enthroned…on the right of his throne he set up the Cross of Our Savior"

[687] Ibid, p. 29

by unity, self-giving anonymity, not disengaged control. The power of the Mass turns Durtal's mind outward: away from his toxic enclosure. The spell of autopoetic creation – the Deshoulieresian drive to be "interesting" – is finally broken. As the monks chant "*Et in saecula saecolorum, Amen,*"[688] Durtal briefly engages not with his own fantasy but with history – a seemingly "truthful" text (or, in this context, at the very least a text he has not authored) – rejecting his jeweled narrative in favor of "l'histoire…Khosroës aurait donc été trucidé par son fils et sans qu'il soit question d'une tour machinée et d'un coq."[689]

The collectivist power of liturgy, likewise, "rewrites" yet another set of motifs from earlier texts of Huysmans: including Jacques Marlès' dream of Esther. Durtal marvels at the profession of a Benedictine nun he witnesses, saying:

> *"L'altitude absolue de la liturgie et de l'art est là. La profession des moniales de saint Benoît! Il y a des moments où, pendant l'extraordinaire cérémonie, le petit frisson de la splendeur divine vous fait trémuler l'âme… délicieux vraiment en cet épisode des fiançailles où la novice acclame le Christ, s'affirme 'fiancée…la petite Esther qui, regardant le chemin parcouru depuis la probation et songeant que le mariage est maintenant consommé, chante, au comble de ses vœux : 'Enfin, voici ce que j'ai tant désiré'*."[690]

Grounded in Christian meaning, the sanctification of time and space that take place in the participatory liturgy represent the transformation of art from rejection to embrace: Esther's "wedding" is no longer a rape but a loving expression of intersubjectivity. The violation of the decadent-dandyist narrative *sub specie ironiae* is replaced by a participatory

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[688] Ibid, p. 28;

[689] Ibid, p. 29; "the facts…Chosroes was accordingly killed by his son, and of the clockwork tower, and the cock, history knows nothing"

[690] Ibid, pp. 254; "There Liturgy and Art reach their zenith. There are moments during this exaotrdinary ceremony where the soul is thrilled as by some light divine…Delightful too is the episode of the betrothal, when the novice acclaims Christ and witnesses that she is plighted….the new Esther, looking back on her probation which has now reached its consummation, chants her paean of joy: 'Behold my desire fulfilled."

re-enactment of sacred truth: a story that only gains power from the immanence of the *both/and* in each retelling.

Huysmans continues to undercut the autotelic fantasy throughout *L'Oblat*. Durtal's meditations on artistic experience focus increasingly on his experience of reading texts: Durtal embraces his newfound role as *audience* as well as artist, with a vision of finding meaning in the Psalms that is as personal as it is intense: "s'imprégner assez de l'esprit des psaumes pour se persuader qu'ils avaient été écrits à votre intention personnelle, tant ils correspondaient à vos pensées ; les réciter, ainsi qu'une prière jaillie de ses aîtres, s'approprier, s'assimiler, en un mot, la parole du Psalmiste, user de la façon même de prier du Christ et de ses Préfigures."[691] Reading becomes the means by which the self *communes* with others as well as with God – not an onanistic self-projection but rather a self-*impregnation*--allowing itself to be shaped in loving surrender, not violation. The self is refigured (a kind of prototypical Ricoeurian *mimesis-3*) by its relationship to sacred narrative.[692]

So too does that breaking-open of the self through narrative refiguration foster *empathy*, the quality of situated vulnerability the dandy most lacks: Durtal finds, attending an Easter service, a sense of genuine worry for the plight of the Virgin he has previously idealized from a distance:

> *"La divine liturgie l'enlevait, planant si haut, loin de nos boues ! Et il embrassait d'un coup d'œil le panorama de la terrible semaine…certes, se disait-il, songeant à la Vierge sur laquelle, dans cette période de larmes…moment où elle se tint au pied du Calvaire fut atroce.. mais elle n'était pas déesse, elle n'était pas Dieu ; elle ne pouvait pas échapper à sa condition de*

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691 Ibid, p. 111; "You become so imbued with the spirit of the Psalms as to be persuaded that they were written for you personally so exactly do they correspond to your own thoughts..,appropriate and assimilate the language of the Psalmist and pray in the way that Christ and his forerunners prayed"

692 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* v.1, (trans. Kathleen McLaughlin & David Pellauer, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1992), pp. 59ff

créature humaine et, par conséquent, ne pouvait s'empêcher d'être torturée par les anxiétés de l'attente."[693]

The Madonna – unlike Villiers' Eve or the Madonna of d'Entragues in *Sixtine* – is a human being with her own emotions, her own subjectivity; her story allows Durtal to experience commonality with her on her own terms (in this, we may be reminded too of George Eliot's famous belief that if "art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally.")[694] This empathy, in turn, intensifies faith, as its reality is continuously reinscribed through sanctification of its images: "C'est [l'art] qui commentait les evangiles et embrasait les foules ; qui les jetait, riant en de joyeuses prières au pied des crèches, ou qui les secouait de sanglots devant les groupes en larmes des Calvaires."[695]

Indeed, Durtal experiences something like actual empathy for the first time in the final pages of *L'Oblat,* when he realizes his own disappointment at the oblature's closing is nothing compared to the sorrow of its long-term inhabitants: "Je geins et ce n'est cependant pas moi qui suis le plus à plaindre. Songeons aux autres, à ceux qui restent, à la pauvre Mlle de Garambois…M. Lampre" (the word *songeons* directly echoes the *songeait* of the suffering Madonna earlier)"[696] By the novel's close, art has fostered his ability to exist in communion.

Durtal closes *L'Oblat* with a prayer: "Ah! mon cher Seigneur, donnez-nous la grâce de ne pas nous marchander ainsi, de nous omettre une fois pour toutes, de vivre enfin,

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[693] Huysmans, *L'Oblat*, p. 282ff; "The divine Liturgy transported him, he soared far above the mire of this world, and the panorama of this awful Week unfolded itself before his eyes..Yes, indeed…those hours at the foot of Cavalry must have been terrible for her….she was no a goddess, she was not divine but remained a human being, and therefore could not but be tortured by this suspense"

[694] Quoted in Joan Bennet, *George Eliot: Her Mind and Art:* CUP (Cambridge, 1966), p. 177

[695] Huysmans, *L'Oblat,* p. 350; "It was Art that brought the Gospel home to the Masses and lit the flame of their enthusiasm; it was Art that made them kneel in joyful prayer at the foot of the crib or caused them to sob at the sight of the weeping groups of the Calvaries"

[696] Ibid, p. 448; "I grumble but am not the most to be pitied. Think of those who remain: of poor Mlle de Garambois…M Lambre"

n'importe où, pourvu que ce soit loin de nous-mêmes et près de Vous!"[697] At last, Durtal seems to be breaking out of his narrative and linguistic self-enclosure. But it is the refigurative power of art that has gotten him there.

v) Concluding Questions

Huysmans presents us with powerful images of liturgy-as-love, hinting at possibilities for language and storytelling that might foster connectedness rather than isolation. But how – outside the Eucharistic table – might we put these into practice? Are there linguistic trends that a constructive theologian might identify as central to a positive Christian aesthetics?

We ca identify a few initial elements of a "Christian" use of language in storytellings implicit in Huysmans' treatment of theological aesthetics. The Christian storyteller might, most obviously, choose language that is designed to communicate, rather than obfuscate: confusing and obscure words replaced by simpler and less mannered alternatives. So too might language be used *specificially:* rather than creating a sense of *uniformité* when dealing with the created order, language must be applied to recognize each discrete object in its singularity and irreducibiliy; in this, we might return again to the language of Gerald Manley Hopkins, whose distinctive kennings – original, to be sure, but constructed from relatively simple and understood words – highlight the distinctiviteness of each of God's creatures (as in "Pied Beauty": "Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings; Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;"[698]).

Yet, less obviously, Huysmans suggests too that the essence of a Christian use of language also demands an engagement with collectivity, with wider tradition: that which vouchsafes the incarnational presence of Christ not merely *within* the word-as-metaphorical-

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[697] Ibid; "O Dear Lord…Grant that we may forget self once and for all. Grant that we may live, no matter where, so long as it be far from ourselves, and close unto thee"

[698] Gerald Manley Hopkins, *Hopkins: The Mystic Poets,* (Skylight Paths: Nashville, 2004), p. 59

Host but also within the liturgical table of communication: language that takes up fragments of other stories, particularly Biblical accounts, that engages with the entirety of human textual experience. Practically, here, we might think of, for example, th richly allusive poems of T.S. Eliot, which often re-use passages and motifs ("Fragments against the ruin") from wider mythic and cultural traditions: "The Waste Land" contains quotes from and extended references to Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Wagner, Dante, Vedic tradition (and of course the Bible), and far more, woven seamlessly into the fabric of the text. Such an approach (at least in the theology we can extrapolate from Huysmans) decenters the individual narrator (and implicit author), instead presenting us with a vision of artist as both subject and object: refigured by his own textual experiences (and, through them, with alterity: and with the human other fully present in the text as the incarnate Christ): an author who is not *sub specie ironiae* (or *aeternae*) but rather presen and vulnerable: one who – unlike the dandy – embraces the astonishment so central to the human experience of love.

Conclusion:

Brief Notes on a "Christian Novel"

In their own ways, D'Aurevilly, Villiers, Gourmont, and Huysmans all reveal fundamental theological flaws in the act of storytelling: how we use self-creation as a means of other-control, how we reject otherness in the creation of cloistered and hermetic narrative worlds. But what might a novel or a short story look like that is not a *theïbade* but an open, aerated space, one whose boundaries are is – unlike the dandy – porous, permeable? Is the very act of narrative storytelling *de facto* a violation of the autonomy of the Lévinasian other – a violation that may vary only in degree but not in kind – or can we as constructive theologians develop ways in which we might approach narrative, character, setting, and language as "anti-dandies": storytellers who embrace our own embodiment, our own subjectivity.

This question is inextricably linked to another question: that of the tension between divine sovereignty and divine love in the act of creation. We have repeatedly explored in this thesis that the act of creation is necessarily an act *imago dei*. The dandies who sought to become "miniature gods" acted on the predicate understanding that to be divine is to be invulnerable: never astonished, never affected. Yet in all our authors, we see how the dandyist perspective – to be both *sub specie aeternae* and necessarily *sub specie ironiae* – limits the ability to love. If dandies are indeed "miniature gods," what does that say about our understanding of God overall?

These two concerns of the theologian and of the novelist are not so far apart as they might appear. In his *The World Made Strange,* radical orthodox theologian John Milbank writes: "It is not then wholly surprising that Christian thought should come to a renewed preoccupation with [language]. Just as, for structuralists, a novel is ultimately 'about' its self-

constitution as a novel, so theology has only ever really been 'about' its own possibility as theology, as 'divine language'."[699] In the decadent-dandyists – and in Huysmans in particular – we might well say that these novels (indeed, if we are bolder, *all novels,* if less explicitly) are about their self-constitution *as novels before God:* that no use of language, no telling of story-telling, is not both reflexive and theological: they are creations of worlds, wagers on meaningfulness (or lack thereof), statements about engagement with alterity. Questions of language and questions of God alike are fundamentally questions about the incarnate nature of Word. The postmodern crisis of language and meaning is a theological one.

To speak of the world-as-text, and particular of the world-as-text in relation to other texts (the text of the body, so prevalent in D'Aurevilly, the world-rejecting *theïbade* text) is to wager on a necessary and indeed *liturgical* intertextuality: a dynamic interplay of refigurations of the self, predicated on the *both/and* of the transfigurative Eucharistic word-presence, that renders the autonomous self-creating self, with his neo-Kantian pretense to disengagement, a fiction.

As Paul Fiddes puts it in his *Seeing the World and Knowing God*, "when we write a text we put ourselves into it as a kind of extension of our body. On the other hand, our body is also a kind of text, an unwritten text, which nevertheless carries the marks of the society in which we live; we bear the impressions of the pleasures and the dangers of our community... [I argue] for the textuality of the physical world, envisaging the whole world as a complex system of signs…This in turn, for the Christian theologian leads to the conviction that the world-text ('the Book of the World') should also be conceived as the body of the triune God."[700]

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[699] John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Hoboken: Wiley, 1997), p. 60

[700] Paul Fiddes, *Seeing the World and Knowing God,* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 324

We have spoken already in the introduction to this thesis about the relationship of the decadent-dandyists to the linguistic crises of postmodernity more generally: arguing that the Huysmanian restitution of meaning is a rejection of the radical subjectivity that would come to define later postmodern thinkers. But we must qualify such a statement with reference to some contemporary, more theologically-focused, understandings of that postmodernity. Fiddes' reading of Derrida – as, ultimately, affirming the intertextuality of the entire created world, such that nothing that *is* is outside text – is not so far off what we can identify in late Huysmans[701]: a dynamic approach to the relationship between sign and meaning that a Christian novel, in the Huysmansian sense, would necessarily incorporate, at least in part:

The surfeit of meaning that grounds the Eucharist: that bread is both the body of Christ even as it is bread, at once opens up meaningfulness to transcend possibilities beyond the simplicity of "A = A" (what Graham Ward calls the "ontological scandal")[702] here is coded not as a source of instability (as in Ward) but as surfeit: meaning as real presence that is not limited to 1:1 diagnostic (as in the Zolan narrative mode, where things are "explained" with reference to biological truths): things are both themselves *and* God.

The chaos of the "Satanic" textual world and the claustrophobic "order" of the naturalist mode are both transcended: in the *spiritual naturalism* that Huysmans himself has Durtal imagine in the opening pages of *Là-Bas,* in which:

> le roman… devrait se diviser de lui-même en deux parts, néanmoins soudées ou plutôt confondues, comme elles le sont dans la vie, celle de l'âme, celle du corps…Il faudrait...suivre la grande voie si profondément creusée par Zola, mais il serait nécessaire aussi de tracer en l'air un chemin parallèle, une autre route, d'atteindre les en deçà et les après, de faire, en un mot,

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[701] Ibid, p. 221.

[702] Graham Ward, *Cities of God,* (Oxford: Routledge, 2002), p. 83

> un naturalisme spiritualiste; ce serait autrement fier, autrement complet, autrement fort![703]

We have identified in previous chapters a few elements that might serve as a basis for a constructive Christian theological aesthetics: elements of *naturalisme spiritualiste* that both embrace the mimetic aspects of naturalism and participate in the spiritual dimension of refiguration: one that transcends the linearity of diagnostic in favor of the intersubjectivity (and intertextuality) of the *milieu*.

So, what might a "Christian novel" look like? Drawing on the various approaches to textual creation – failed and successful alike – we have discussed in this thesis, we can come to some preliminary conclusions.

We know that it would reject the kind of narrative dandyism we find in the dandyist stories (or at least the stories-within-the-stories) of D'Aurevilly: with their self-satisfied tale-tellers and their emphasis on titillation: fostering complicity through horror. It, too, might reject the disengaged *sub specie ironiae* perspective, by which a disengaged narrator down on his "puppet" characters (one such paradigmatic example of that particular mode is Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir,* in which the narrator mercilessly mocks his protagonists, addressing the reader straight-on in a pose of complicity, calling him *monsieur,* inviting him to join in laughing at, say, Mathilde de la Mole: coded as not a *person* but a character for his amusement: "Maintenant qu'il est bien convenu que le caractère de Mathilde est impossible dans notre siècle, non moins prudent que vertueux, je crains moins d'irriter en continuant le récit des folies de cette aimable fille."[704]

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[703] Huysmans, *Là-Bas,* p. 6; "If possible the novel ought to be compounded of two elements, that of the soul and that of the body, and these ought to be inextricably bound together as in life. Their interreactions, their conflicts, their reconciliation, ought to furnish the dramatic interest. In a word, we must follow the road laid out once and for all by Zola, but at the same time we must trace a parallel route in the air by which we may go above and beyond.... A spiritual naturalism! It must be complete, powerful, daring in a different way from anything that is being attempted at present."

[704] Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le Noir,* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1854), p. 354.

Rather, we might instead advocate for a narrative voice that allows for the embodiment and intersubjectivity of even a "disengaged" (or "god-like") narrator – a narrator that feels pain and sympathy for the characters of the tale he or she tells, and who is affected by them. Thus, for example, do we find the "kenotic" mode of such an incarnational approach in George Eliot's *Janet's Repentance,* in which the narrator – who has previously been an invisible and omniscient being – identifies herself not only as a member of the village community, but also as a fellow-sufferer with the much-maligned but virtuous preacher Edgar Tryan: "any one looking at [Tryan] with the bird's-eye glance of a critic might perhaps say that he made the mistake of identifying Christianity with a too narrow doctrinal system… making Mr. Tryan the text for a wise discourse on the characteristics of the Evangelical school in his day. But I am not poised at that lofty height. I am on the level and in the press with him, as he struggles his way along the stony road, through the crowd of unloving fellow-men. He is stumbling, perhaps; his heart now beats fast with dread, now heavily with anguish; his eyes are sometimes dim with tears, which he makes haste to dash away; he pushes manfully on, with fluctuating faith and courage, with a sensitive failing body; at last he falls, the struggle is ended, and the crowd closes over the space he has left."[705] The Christian novel is a space for engagement, one that allows for narrative vulnerability: a Christian narrator would descend from the "bird's-eye" to exist among the characters of whom he or she speaks.

This hypothetical "Christian novel," unlike those of Zola, would resist the mode we have identified as the "diagnostic" – no character would be reduced to the biological determinism of a Thérèse Raquin, or a Nana, denied agency over his or her own life, or used as a simplistic device to illustrate a wider authorial point (like, say, the virgin-victim of Ravila de Ravilès in D'Aurevilly's "Don Juan").

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[705] George Eliot, "Janet's Repentance," in *Scenes from Clerical Life,* (New York: Harper, 1858), p. 140.

Rather, each character in this novel would have his or her own story arc, own wants, needs, and desires – even minor characters would be granted the privilege of being "heroes" in their *own* stories: each one a center of consciousness. Such a novel might have much in common with the expansive novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, which allows for multiplicity of voices not only in terms of character but also in terms of genre – in *The Brothers Karamazov,* for example, each character seems to be the protagonist of a different *kind of* story. As Kate Holland notes in her essay "Novelizing Religious Experience", Dostoevsky "models [genres] as authentic worldviews, structuring their aesthetic and ethical differences and dialogic interactions into his novel"[706] Dmitri's plot seems to be taken from a Continental romantic novel, Alyosha's from the catalogue of hagiography. This plurality of voices and modes allows for a kind of intertextuality *within* the text: each character is *also* a text that is in and shapes other texts, even as each set of generic expectations is transcended by the rich tapestry of human experience: what Mikhail Bakhtin identifies in Dostoevsky's works as *polyphony*.[707]

A "Christian novel" might go still further: structuring itself, say, as an epistolary novel, or a mixed-media novel (comprising multiple narrative accounts, interviews, letters): decentering a single narratorial perspective in favor of the most polyphonic possible experience: an approach to differing media that, of course, we see most prominently in Scripture: where songs of praise and political histories, genaeologies and gospels, stand side by side, their polyphony the multiplicity of so many voices lifted in praise.

This Christian novel would, despite its rejection of the limitations of a certain form of constricting narrative, nevertheless embrace the textual mode we have described previously

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[706] Kate Holland, "Novelizing Religious Experience: The Generic Landscape of *The Brothers Karamazov*", *Slavic Review*, 66 (Spring 2007), p. 64.

[707] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 26

as the *milieu*. Instead of reducing a given story to a series of causes and effects (Thérèse Raquin kills her husband because she has a certain-sized cranium, Icarus flies too close to the sun *because* his tragic flaw is hubris), the Christian novel would explore the far more dynamic – and complex – interplay of influence: characters act upon one another and *are* acted upon, their own memories and experiences constantly in dialogue with the world around them (thus the narrator of Proust's *À la recherché de temps perdu,* who in smelling and tasting his famous lime tea and madeleines experiences a holistic encounter with the *milieu* that plunges him into a richly textured reconsideration of his past).

This Christian novel would also engage, fully and meaningfully, with the natural world and the created order more generally. It would take from the *naturalisme* of Huysmans' spiritual naturalism a faith in mimesis: in the ability of language to represent the natural order, but would sanctify that nature: regarding it lovingly, rather than coldly or dispassionately. Each specifically-chosen detail of a bird, a tree, a rock, would highlight its irreducibility, its *haecceity,* to use Duns Scotus's famous term: for examples of this, we might turn once more to the verse Manley Hopkins, whose quest for the *inscape* of each object marked his poetic approach to creation: in "God's Grandeur", Hopkins writes of how: "kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies dráw flame/As tumbled over rim in roundy wells/Stones ring; like each tucked string tells/each hung bell's Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name/Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: Deals out that being indoors each one dwells/Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells, Crying/Whát I do is me: for that I came" revealing each individual thing as both utterly itself, and *in that very irreducibility*, also (again: the *both/and*) Christ: "for Christ plays in ten thousand places/Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his/To the Father through the features of men's faces."[708] Language

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[708] Quoted in Philip Ballinger, *The Poem as Sacrament: The Theological Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins,* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), p. 219.

here *sanctifies:* it finds in the *uniformité* of *la foule* and the *sempiternelle radenteuse* alike the meaningful singularity of each created being.

This engagement would extend temporally as well as spatially: the Christian novel would engage with *history* and with received tradition more generally. It would be conscious of its dependence – rich with allusion to all of the other narratives that have influenced it (what Ricoeur might call the *mimesis1* stage). I have raised T.S. Eliot as a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon in verse; in prose fiction, we might also look to Joyce's *Ulysses* (though in other respects of course Joyce is hardly an example of the Huysmanian writer who writes *to communicate clearly*): a novel that on the level of sentence as well as plot is dense with references to the cultural titans that have shaped it: Joyce's permeable text is anything but a *theïbade*.

(I am not alone in advocating for a rich engagement with history and textual tradition as a cornerstone of Christian theological aesthetics; John Milbank, in *The Word Made Strange,* likewise advocates more broadly for for "a Christian ontology which does justice to culture and history as an *integral* element of Christian being alongside contemplation and ethical behaviour, rather than as a 'problem', external to faith")[709]

The language of this Christian novel would, as in Husymans' later texts, reject the decadent-dandyist obsession with *originality* as thoroughly as it would their obsession with autonomy. Language must be both communicative and meaningful in a way that transcends authorial whim – it must express a faith in the wager that George Steiner describes that "any coherent understanding of what language is and how language performs…[is] underwritten by the assumption of God's presence".[710]

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[709] Milbank, *Word,* p. 61.

[710] Steiner, *Real Presences,* p. 3.

Neologisms, jeweled sentences, language designed to be accessible only to the initiate, would give way to language that – while artful and careful – nevertheless serves primarily to convey meaning to another: the "Christian novel" is, like plain-chant or the stained glass windows at Chartres, *accessible*: it welcomes all to the liturgical table to be transformed in the act of refiguration: we as readers *should* be changed by this novel (no less than the narrator of D'Aurevilly's "Rideau Cramoisi" is changed by the Vicomte de Brassard's account of Albertine), but this change is not, as in those texts, a vampiric curse or a virus, but rather a positive transfiguration: an opening-up of our selves to the empathetic possibility of real love.

Such a transfiguration destabilizes the reader's sense of autonomous self. Through identification and communion wit characters (rendered, as Steiner reminds us, "characters" through the real presence of the divine in the text), the self becomes able to let go of the strictly delineated boundaries of autonomous selfhood (as Hans Urs von Balthasar writes: "the [artistic] transport of the soul must…be understood in a strictly theological way….as the movement of man's whole being away from himself and towards God through Christ.")[711] -- engaging relationally with the *other* presented in the text. It is this relationality that George Eliot longs for when she writes: "*opinions* are a poor cement between human souls; and the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring, human creatures."[712]

It is conceiving of this act of refiguration *as a writer* (rather than embracing its necessity as a reader) that may prove the most practical challenge in constructing this ideal

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711 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord Volume 1: Seeing the Form* (London: Black, 1982), p. 121

712 Quoted in Suzy Anger, "George Eliot and Philosophy" in George Levine (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot,* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), p. 82.

Christian novel. How can we, as writers, invite participation in our texts, create space for readers within our texts to be transformed without imposing our narrative selves *on them*. Other disciplines – most notably theatre – have done significant work in exploring the participatory dynamic: most famously British theatre company Punchdrunk, whose "immersive" productions (including New York City's *Macbeth*-inspired *Sleep No More* and London's *The Drowned Man*) allow audience members to wander expansive spaces, exploring drawers and hidden rooms, following the characters to whom they relate most, and – in rare cases – experience hidden "one on one" scenes with characters in which we are encouraged to comfort them in moments of vulnerability (one particularly affecting "one on one" scene invites an audience member to embrace a weeping Lady Macduff and share in her fears for her son)[713]

Such an authentic human encounter is underscored by the literal vulnerability of the moment: an actor, breaking the fourth wall, makes him- or herself open to an audience member's reaction. How might we make space for such moments within *text*, where the opportunity for such literal self-giving (and self-disclosing) is less clear? Experimental options present themselves – the literal "participatory" nature of those *choose your own adventure* books popular with children, or the intense intimacy hinted at by those novels and stories that utilize the close second-person to invite the reader to step into the "role" of a character beloved by the narrator (Stefan Zweig's "Letter from an Unknown Woman," a novella told entirely in the second person in which the narrator exhorts her lost beloved to remember her, is one obvious example) As John Wall puts it, writing on Ricoeur's understanding of textual power: "The plot of a narrative is not just the events related in the text itself, but also, and in the final analysis, an imaginative set of possibilities for the self-

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[713] I have written on vulnerability in Punchdrunk and *Sleep No More,* including at: Tara Isabella Burton "What Fourth Wall?" *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. July 31, 2013, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/what-fourth-wall/.

refiguration of the world of their reader. The true "event" of language is the event of its reader's interpretation. Hamlet's dilemma has "meaning" only insofar as it changes in some way the self-understanding of the play's audience."[714]

But of course, no text invites participation like Scripture itself: the very nature of its narrative predicated not simply on its content *as* content, but on the invitation it extends to its reader: an invitation to experience (or what Manley Hopkins might call *instress*) predicated on the reader's relationship with the text as with the relationship between the internal elements of the text itself (in this, the Bible may be said to be the least *theïbade*-like text of all).

A Christian novel may not – indeed, theologically likely *cannot* – attain that standard. But if we create *imago dei*, we as creators must embrace the refigurative power of text: not as a kind of moral exhortation ("I read a novel and was inspired to do XYZ") but as an embrace of the fundamental sanctitity of creation in its myriad and polyphonic possibility: as writers and readers alike, we are changed by stories, and retelling them we change others in turn (a liturgical reading of Ricoeur's belief that "hermeneutics is thus, explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others")[715]. It is this refiguration that Paul Fiddes writes about when characterizing this reading of Ricoeur: "As we have already seen, in his self-imposed role as a philosopher Ricoeur can only raise the *question* as whether the other he encounters is more than just another person whom he can look in the face, or whether finally the Other must be named as God, 'the living God, the absent God'.[48] While he can go further as a believer, as a philosopher he is faced with an impasse from which he cannot rule God

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[714] John Wall, *Moral Creativity: Paul Ricoeur and the Poetics of Possibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 33-4.

[715] Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations,* (London: A&C Black, 1995) p. 16.

out. He cannot deny that the reading through the eyes of another human being may become at any moment reading with 'the eyes of' an infinitely greater Other."[716]

As Milbank puts it: "one can best realize that the Christian texts allow a rebirth of the human imagination by remembering that the *mythos is* something which opens up reality. The completed work of art is itself like the process of art in so far as it supplements our faculties and enables us to see and to understand more."[717]

It may well be that this Christian novel is not only unrealised but unrealiseable: its demands too complex, too potentially contradictory, for any human author: as unachievable as Des Esseintes' *theïbade raffinée*. Yet if to create, and to tell stories, is part and parcel of what it means to be human – if our status as storytellers is central to our theological status *imago dei* – what other choice do we have than to try?

Yet in coming to preliminary conclusions about demands on a human author, we may wish to raise some final questions about how we conceive of *divine* authorship. Much work has been done in recent years – especially by feminist theologians Mary Daly to Pamela Anderson – to highlight how situated, how embodied, our understanding of God really is.[718] What we privilege as the highest good, how we balance our understanding of divine love and divine power, the stories we tell about God mediated through our understanding, are themselves necessarily mediated by our understanding of what love and power really mean.

The texts we have explored in this thesis suggest that true love and disengaged sovereignty might well be opposites. The *sub specie aeternae* perspective, the radical

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[716] Fiddes, *Seeing,* p. 338.

[717] Milbank, p. 141.

[718] Cf. "If God is male, then male is God"; Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation,* (Boston: Beacon, 1995) p. 19.

autonomy of the God the dandies long to be, may not be the only – or indeed the best – way to conceive of a divine Creator.

Thus, for example, might we re-explore the Jewish concept of *zimsum,* as first expressed by the sixteenth-century mystic Isaac Luria and re-appropriated in the twentieth century by Christian theologians like Jurgen Moltmann: the idea that God's glory is so great that any creation – necessarily inferior – necessitates a sacrifice and self-withdrawal on God's part: the presence of anything that is not God demands divine limitation.[719] Thus, for Moltmann, "If in his freedom God resolves to create a being who is not divine, who can co-exist with his own divine being, then this resolve does not affect the created being only; it touches God's own being too. He determines himself to be the Creator who lets a creation co-exist with himself. Logically speaking, God's self-determination to be the Creator precedes the act of creation. God determines himself before he determines the world. It is therefore correct to see God's self-determination to be the Creator of a non-divine world as already a self-limitation of God's part."[720]

More recently, Paul Fiddes in particular has done much to challenge classical metaphysical understandings of divine autonomy as a result of his commitment to the vulnerability of divine love. As he puts it in *The Spirit and the Letter,* "God…is not a stifling transcendental signified, because God has committed God's own self to the text of the world and this commitment is itself the movement of spirit."[721] He argues that we should reconsider the concept of divine suffering – what he calls the *creative suffering of God* – not as heresy but as necessity: a fundamental part of what it means to love. As he puts it in his essay, "Creation Out of Love", "Divine love takes all risk. It is real in that suffering *can* befall God

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[719] Cf. Fiddes, *Seeing,* p. 252.

[720] Ibid

[721] Paul Fiddes, *The Spirit and the Letter,* (London: T&T Clark, 2013), p. 138

and it is real in that it *does*. I use the word 'befall' deliberately, as a way of signifying that God experiences suffering in relation to the world in a way that is not entirely under divine control. It 'happens' to God…We have a more dynamic view of the act of divine willing or desiring as ultimate, then there is scope for God to allow created beings to contribute to the very *making* of possibilities. New possibilities will emerge out of the interaction between God and the world in a genuine co-creativity."[722]

Such questions of divine suffering – which borders or embraces the traditional heresy of patripassianism – belong to another a thesis. But the questions this thesis raises – about the desirability of ironic disengagement, about the potential incompatibilities between love and autonomy, and about what it means to be a loving and not a tyrannical creator (of art), cannot but refigure us as theologians – no less than do the Vicomte de Brassard's stories, no less than Durtal's beloved plain-song – and challenge us, in turn, to understand differently our own reality, and with it our understanding of God.

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[722] Ibid, "Creation Out of Love," in John Polkinghorne (ed) *The Work of Love*: *Creation as Kenosis* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2001)

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