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One Of Them: Homosexuality and Anarchism

in Wilde and Zola

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“Je ne sais pas trop qui il a invité. Monsieur de Charlus, est-ce que vous en êtes ?” Le baron, qui n’entendit que cette phrase et ne savait pas qu’on parlait d’une excursion à Arembouville, sursauta : “Étrange question,” murmura-t-il d’un ton narquois. (Proust 3: 359)

[“I’m not sure who’s invited. Monsieur de Charlus, are you one of them?” The baron, who heard this phrase alone and did not know that it referred to an excursion to Arembouville, started: “A strange question,” he muttered, in a mocking tone.]¹

The French construction en être is one designed to hint at a certain complicity, where it does not preserve a certain secrecy; its attendant ambiguity is exploited here by Marcel Proust in this awkward social moment. The phrase, which might be translated as “to be one of them,” implies belonging to a particular, typically stigmatized group, whose name, the speaker feels, it were better to leave implicit. Nevertheless, slang dictionaries inform us that in the argot of fin-de-siècle Paris, this elliptical phrase had two relatively stable meanings, arising from the slang of two distinct groups. Around 1900, as the Baron de Charlus knows all too well, the individual said to en être might well have been a homosexual, euphemistically labelled as such by another member of

that group; at the same time, and since at least 1830, criminals and, in particular, members of illegal political organisations might have used the same phrase to assert that one of their number was a mouchard – that is, a police informant (Timmermans 144). We can expand these two historically attested usages, which indicate the ability of this single locution to express complicity or hostility, with two related contexts in which the phrase (though not necessarily used for this purpose) remained conceptually or structurally applicable. Firstly, we might observe that homosexual men in late-nineteenth-century France had quite as much reason as political dissidents to avail themselves of this phrase in its second sense, surveillance and potential entrapment by undercover policemen being a banal fact of life for members of the homosexual subculture of the day (Revenin 156-66). Secondly, it can be noted that the phrase might just as well describe members of secret political societies themselves, as the traitors amongst them. There exists, in other words, a certain homology between the fin-de-siècle homosexual and, exemplarily, the anarchist (for it was undoubtedly the anarchist who best embodied underground political activity in fin-de-siècle Europe), members of supple and secret groups whose political and legal vulnerability seem to require not only a jargon marked by ellipsis, but a particularly elliptical designation for what is, from the point of view of the group, the most salient fact about any individual – namely, membership.²

This article explores the homology between the homosexual and the anarchist, and the ways in which fictional texts of the later nineteenth century might imagine these two figures as comparable, related, or representative of the same tendencies; it does so through a parallel reading of two texts in which such associations play an implicit but fundamental role. Émile Zola's Paris (1898), the third and final instalment

of his Les Trois Villes sequence, is in all senses a “political novel,” preoccupied both with party and parliamentary politics on the one hand, and with the broader cultural politics of turn-of-the-century France on the other. In pursuing the former interest, Zola creates a grandiose narrative of anarchism and anarchist violence which forms the meat of the plot; as part of the latter, he offers us his most unambiguous male homosexual character, the decadent aristocrat Hyacinthe Duvillard. In conjoining the two narratives, moreover, he creates a number of troubling and startling associations which have much to teach us about the nature and function of homophobia – an anachronistic word that I shall use precisely in the hope of reaching some sense of what it might mean historically – at the fin de siècle. The political plot of Oscar Wilde’s first play Vera, or the Nihilists (1880), on the other hand, makes no explicit reference to homosexuality. Yet the relevance of the topic is suggested not simply by the theoretically weak but probably inescapable biographical association to be found in the fact of Wilde’s authorship, but more importantly by the play’s constant interrogation of the themes of secrecy, mask-wearing, and the double life – all indissociable from male homosexuality to the late-nineteenth-century imagination. In their treatment, explicit or implicit, of anarchism and homosexuality, both texts will emerge as being preoccupied with a similar knot of ideological problems. One of these will be the simultaneous difficulty and compelling necessity of knowing reliably qui en est, that is, of spotting and understanding hidden identities. But this will in turn be seen to encroach on the questions of sincerity and authenticity; of the connections between intellectual, political and sexual dissidence; and of what political and personal possibilities may exist outside of those defined by the family – the latter

being for Zola necessary to the point of inevitability, and for Wilde's Nihilists the object of an ambiguous negation.

Homosexuality As Pose

In the first, "theoretical" section of Sodome et Gomorrhe (1921-22), Proust notes the existence of a type of homosexual quite unlike the secrecy-obsessed inverts who will form the principal preoccupation of this section of A la recherche du temps perdu. These men, full of a sense of their own superiority as homosexuals, evangelically preach the virtues of their so-called vice "moins à ceux qui leur semblent y être prédisposés [...] qu'à ceux qui leur en semblent dignes, [...] comme d'autres prêchent le sionisme, le refus du service militaire, le saint-simonisme, le végétarisme et l'anarchie" (3: 22; less to those who seem predisposed in that direction, than to those whom they consider worthy, as others preach Zionism, the refusal of military service, Saint-Simonianism, vegetarianism and anarchism). Proust's motivations in comparing this strain of homosexuality to a motley selection of the many political movements of his age are, one supposes, both humorous and self-interested: those hardly very numerous turn-of-the-century homosexuals who assumed their sexuality publicly, to whom Proust presumably refers here, are an inviting target for satire to a novelist so closely involved, both personally and esthetically, with the multiform discursive practices that make up what we would now call the closet. The aim of this sentence is, conversely, almost certainly not to suggest a genuine homology between homosexuality and the movements listed; the point, indeed, rather lies in the apparently obvious difference between movements to which one might adhere as a result of political conviction or conversion, and homosexuality, which Proust firmly

believes (or so it seems in this part of the Recherche, at least) to be the inescapable hereditary destiny of those cursed individuals who make up what a chapter heading of Contre Sainte-Beuve calls “la race maudite” – the accursed race.

This moment in Sodome et Gomorrhe provides a useful point of comparison with a passage occurring early on in Zola’s Paris, in which the character of Hyacinthe, the feckless scion of a decadent aristocratic line, is first introduced:

Écolier exécration, il avait décidé de ne rien faire, dans un mépris égal de toutes les professions ; et, gâté par son père, il s’intéressait à la poésie et à la musique, il vivait au milieu d’un monde extraordinaire d’artistes, de filles, de fous et de bandits, fanfaron lui-même de vices et de crimes, affectant l’horreur de la femme, professant les pires idées philosophiques et sociales, allant toujours aux plus extrêmes, tour à tour collectiviste, individualiste, anarchiste, pessimiste, symboliste, même sodomiste, sans cesser d’être catholique, par suprême bon ton. (73)

[An abysmal student, he had decided to do nothing in life, and was equally contemptuous of all the professions. Spoiled by his father, he busied himself with poetry and music, and spent his time among an extraordinary crowd of artists, tarts, lunatics and thieves, boasting emptily of his own vices and crimes, affecting to find women repugnant, professing the worst philosophical and social ideas, always going for the most extreme, by turns collectivist, individualist, anarchist, pessimist, symbolist, even sodomist, while remaining Catholic all the while, to be at the height of fashion.]

The differences here are worth spelling out, for they go to the heart of Zola’s particular understanding of homosexuality. While Proust’s list of fin-de-siècle movements was introduced as a simile (“comme d’autres”), and a wry one at that,

Zola's is clearly metonymically conceived: there is, the novel suggests, a broad continuity between the various notions evoked here. So while the aim of Proust's sentence was to underline a contrario the disparity between homosexual tastes and, say, vegetarianism, Zola's seems to make precisely the opposite claim. Homosexuality is, on this showing, merely one intellectual fad among many, an "idée" – albeit one of the worst – of a philosophical nature. The word "sodomiste" acquires special resonance in this connection, of course, for while turn-of-the-century French and English usage allowed "sodomist(e)" to be employed interchangeably with "invert(i)" – the word occurs, indeed, in the opening of Sodome et Gomorrhe (3: 32) – it is fairly obviously used here for the morphological analogy it offers with all those other "-isms" of late nineteenth-century France.

The successive taking up and dropping of these various intellectual bagatelles suggests, of course, that Hyacinthe is never a bona fide adherent of any, including "sodomism," and this is indeed only the first of numerous moments in which the reality of Hyacinthe's homosexuality will be called into question, with his apparent sexual deviance being dismissed as the affectation of a trivial young man. One character, for instance, observes that "ce petit-là [...] aurait grand besoin qu'une femme fît de lui un homme" (289; that kid just needs a woman to make a man out of him); another calls him "un grotesque", a word which implies play-acting as much as true monstrosity (234); the narrator similarly dubs him a "farceur" or "pretender" (233). Later in the novel, Rosemonde, Princesse de Harth, a sexually predatory anarchist sympathizer, sets her sights on the young man and attempts to seduce him, yet his lack of responsiveness soon proves frustrating. Hyacinthe is vocally

contemptuous of the heterosexual affairs that surround him, notably his father's with the actress and courtesan Silviane, and this attitude exasperates Rosemonde:

Ça ne l'intéressait pas, son père était idiot, il n'y avait qu'un gosse pour se toquer ainsi d'une fille. Et son mépris de la femme devint insultant.

“Vous m'agacez, mon cher,” dit Rosemonde [...]. “C'est vous le gosse, qui posez pour ne pas vouloir de nous...” (313)

[That kind of thing didn't interest him, and his father was an idiot; only a kid would fall for a tart like that. His contempt for women was becoming insulting.

“You're getting on my nerves, my dear,” said Rosemonde. “You're the kid, posing as if you didn't want us...”]

In this sniping remark, the Rosemonde perhaps does nothing more than state explicitly what the narrator and numerous other characters have suggested almost every time Hyacinthe has appeared: namely, that the young man's homosexuality is a sham. Yet in a novel published in 1898, the Rosemonde's choice of words – “vous [...] qui posez pour ne pas vouloir de nous” – is, of course, far from coincidental. This is, on the contrary, not merely an explicit reference to, but even a deliberate invocation of, perhaps the most famous homophobic insult in history, the hastily scribbled, barely legible visiting card left at the Albemarle Club on 18 February 1895 by the Marquess of Queensberry, and bearing the inscription: “For Oscar Wilde, posing [as a] sodomite [sic].” It is, indeed, clear that Zola had the Wilde affair in mind when creating Hyacinthe. Not only does the young man represent what the novel refers to at one point as “les pâles esthètes d'aujourd'hui” (240; the pale esthetes of today); in Zola's original crib sheet for the character, a description of him as “fanfaron de vice et surtout de pédérastie” (Ternois 632; boasting of vice and especially of pederasty) is

followed by the single word “Douglas,” an obvious reference to Lord Alfred Douglas. Hyacinthe’s name, moreover, clearly recalls that of Hyacinthus, the stripling object of Zeus’s affections to whom Wilde likened Douglas in an amatory letter that subsequently became infamous (see Ellmann 370-71). Yet if the reference is to Bosie, it clearly connotes much more than him alone: even the single name “Douglas” arguably evokes the entirety of the Wilde affair, while Hyacinthe’s status as a poseur owes everything to ambient perceptions of Wilde himself. Consideration of how this epithet might have been applied to Wilde at the time of his trials can, I think, shed useful light on Zola’s treatment of homosexuality in Paris.

In fact, the exact text of Queensberry’s card is famously difficult to decipher, though the full reading alleged in the libel trial to which it gave rise – “For Oscar Wilde, posing as a sodomite” – would hardly be anyone’s first guess. Moe Meyer proposes that the actual message was “posing sodomite,” further suggesting that “posing” in this context had the specific implication of “assuming the passive role in anal sex” (91). Meyer’s rich exploration of Wildean posing goes on to show how closely involved such terms were with Wilde’s own esthetic programme and with the notion of “self-fashioning,” thus locating Queensberry’s charge at an epochal moment in the history of the development of queer identity. Yet an opposite argument is also to be made, one which would instead locate this insult within a genealogy of homophobia. For even if the “posing as a sodomite” version was adopted as a legal strategy, on the basis that such a claim was easier to substantiate in court (Meyer 91; Kaplan 118), what fascinates in this shift is the extent to which such a convenient fall-back position proved homophobically productive, capturing and re-delineating pre-existing phobic anxieties about the inauthenticity of male homosexual identity –

precisely the anxieties, I would argue, that influence Zola's portrayal of Hyacinthe. Press responses even after the trials – when the notion of “posing as a sodomite” ought logically to have been superseded – continued to find Queensberry's original allegation fruitful: the Daily Telegraph of 27 May 1895 reprobated Wilde's “insufferable posing”; immediately following the libel trial on 5 April, the Echo urged its readers to “forget [...] his perpetual posings”; the Evening News, meanwhile, saw in Wilde's downfall a “salutary warning to the unhealthy boys who posed as sharers of his culture” (Hyde 12).

In France, similar views prevailed. Covering the opening of the trial on 5 April 1895, the London correspondent of Le Temps sketched Wilde's manner in the dock before editorializing to the effect that “le mot de « pose » écrit sur la carte du marquis s'applique on ne peut mieux à toute son attitude et ses réponses ne le démentent pas” (3; the word “pose” written on the Marquess's card could not be a more accurate description of his entire attitude, and his answers do nothing to disprove it). In Tares et poisons, a pseudo-medical treatise on perversion published in 1896 and graced with a prefatory letter from none other than Zola himself, the author “Dr Laupts” (pseudonym of Georges Saint-Paul) dedicates an entire chapter to the Wilde scandal in which the word “pose” occurs repeatedly without ever forming part of a quotation from the trial: Laupts indicts Wilde's “affectation de snobisme, de pose, de cynisme” (177; affected snobbism, posing, cynicism) and his “pose outrée” (187; outrageous pose) as much as the legally proven “perversion” which forms the ostensible basis of the chapter. Patrick Pollard, meanwhile, notes how a variety of other French commentators expressed comparable ideas, though they did not necessarily employ the word “pose”: Jean Lorrain considered Wilde a “puffiste” or self-promoter, while

the anonymous hatchet-job published on 9 July 1895 in Le Figaro twice described him as a “fumiste,” a fraud or joker; André Gide meanwhile notes that in 1895, people saw Wilde’s behaviour as a joke or “blague” (Pollard 21-2, 29 n. 19).

Members of Edmond de Goncourt’s Parisian literary circle were similarly keen to dispute more specifically the authenticity of Wilde’s sexual proclivities (or at least, Edmond was keen to report as much in his Journal). Informed in 1893 by Henri de Régnier – who got it from a scandalized Pierre Louÿs (Ellmann 371-72) – that Wilde was now openly a “pédéraste,” Edmond notes sniffily that “chez un homme aussi plagiaire que lui littérairement, la pédérastie doit être un plagiat de Verlaine” (3: 821; in such a literary plagiarist as him, even his pederasty must be plagiarized from Verlaine), a view he would reiterate at the time of the trials. “La pédérastie d’Oscar Wilde ne me semble pas de la pédérastie bien individuelle, mais de la pédérastie à l’imitation de Verlaine, de Swinburne” (3: 1114; Oscar Wilde’s pederasty doesn’t strike me as particularly individual, but rather as an imitation of Verlaine, of Swinburne), he noted on 7 April 1895. The reference to Swinburne is significant: in a journal entry of 21 April 1883, Edmond had alleged that Wilde himself had cast similar aspersions about the sincerity of Swinburne’s supposed perversions, an assertion that Wilde disputed when the entry eventually appeared in L’Écho de Paris in 1891 (Ellmann 331-32). Of interest in this otherwise gossipy exchange is the precise phrase attributed by Goncourt to Wilde and quoted by Wilde in his refutation: Swinburne, Wilde was alleged to have claimed, was “un fanfaron du vice” (Goncourt 2: 1002; Ellmann 332) – the very phrase used, or rather borrowed, by Zola to describe Hyacinthe Duvillard.

It is instructive to set these observations from the Journal alongside another, made in February 1888, where Edmond wonders: “Qu’est-ce qu’il y a [...] dans cette cervelle d’homme de talent ? Où commence chez cet être la comédie ? Qu’est-ce qui est vrai chez lui ? Cette pédérastie qu’il affiche est-elle vraiment sincère ?” (3: 102; What goes on in the head of this gifted man? Where does the play-acting begin with this person? What’s real in him? Is the pederasty that he flaunts really sincere?). Again, the sincerity of homosexuality is called into question. And yet the more respectful tone makes it clear that Edmond is not referring to Wilde here; in fact, the brazen pederast at issue is the novelist Pierre Loti who, unlike Wilde, concealed his homosexuality much more assiduously in his literary works than in his social life. Now Edmond may have been uniquely disinclined to lend credence to his acquaintances’ “pederasty” – in the case of Loti, it is difficult to know what might have sufficed to convince him, this entry having been made following a dinner at Alphonse Daudet’s home attended by an eyeliner-wearing Loti and his male lover of the moment. Yet in light of those press reactions to the Wilde trials, this position almost seems symptomatic of a peculiar and more general sort of fin-de-siècle homophobia. Before his chapter insisting on Wilde’s posiness, for example, Dr Laupts notes that inversion itself has become “une sorte de mode, [...] une pose particulière” (10; a sort of fashion, a particular pose); in introducing a memoir by a male prostitute in another monograph of 1896, Henri Legludic warns that the life-writing of homosexuals is scarcely to be trusted, since “là encore, la plume à la main, ils posent” (Grojnowski 153; even then, pen in hand, they are posing). The homophobia at work in moments such as this is, I would argue, one which accepts that there is such a thing as homosexuality only to deny or at least doubt its presence, extent or sincerity in real,

specific individuals. This refusal is, needless to say, pointedly rhetorical and strategic: contempt for the poser's pose is added to, rather than offered in place of, a more recognizable contempt for same-sex sexuality. For of course, the man who isn't really a homosexual, but has only pretended to be, is far from exonerated by that accusation. As Queensberry himself famously insisted, to pose as one of them was as bad as to be one of them (Kaplan 117) – for what decent man would stoop to such an imposture?

Implicitly, Zola makes just this sort of condemnation in introducing Hyacinthe. Even as the suffix “-iste” reduces the would-be “sodomiste” to the status of insincere adherent of an arbitrary fin-de-siècle fad, the text reveals an opposite impulse in its use of the word “même”: Hyacinthe is “tour à tour collectiviste, individualiste, anarchiste, pessimiste, symboliste, même sodomiste”. “Even sodomist”: although Hyacinthe's homosexuality is as much a pose as any of his other adherences, that is, it is nonetheless in the narrator's opinion evidently quite the worst, the most difficult to countenance for a respectable person. For if the assertion in this same passage that Hyacinthe espouses “les pires idées philosophiques et sociales” seems to apply to all of the movements that briefly capture the lad's fleeting interest, Zola's article of 7 February 1895 in Le Figaro (published as part of his self-proclaimed Nouvelle campagne – “new campaign” – against cultural decline) alleged that movements such as Decadence and Symbolism rather paved the way for “les pires perversions intellectuelles et morales” (Œuvres complètes 17: 391; the worst intellectual and moral perversions). The implicit reprobation of homosexuality to be found in this phrase might well seem rather more explicit should one briefly attempt to list some other perversions that might be so reprobated, Decadence and Symbolism having already been set aside. Underlying the denial of specific cases of

homosexuality and their reduction to intellectual posing, then, is an aversion – itself fundamentally non-intellectual – to what Zola in the same article euphemistically calls “l’amour qui ne fait pas d’enfants” (390; the love which produces no children), that is, the carnal reality of same-sex sexual activity, which this homophobic strategy seeks to disavow as a figment. The potential for contradiction in this pleonastic structure, which combines a rhetoric of aversion to homosexuality in general with the implacable denial of its existence locally, is finally realized in one character’s otherwise bizarre description of Hyacinthe as “un malade et un farceur” (233; a sick joker). Hyacinthe is, naturally, enough, a “farceur,” just as Wilde was a “fumiste”; but he is also – the conjunction is “et,” not “ou,” as one might expect – “un malade,” a sick man. For Zola, as quite possibly for his contemporaries in general, the pose and the pathology of homosexuality were far from mutually exclusive: the mincing gait or “dandinement des hanches” (233; swinging of the hips) that prompts this observation is thus at once a camp bodily performance à la Wilde, and the irrepressible symptom of an underlying corporeal reality. Sure enough, the response of the hero, Pierre Froment, to this remark is a pathologizing “terrible symptôme” (233); but the symptom in this case, and the symptom of nothing less than massive social degeneration, is Hyacinthe himself – “posing (as a) sodomite.”

Anarchist Sympathies

The character of Hyacinthe acts as a foil to the main plot of the novel, which traces the evolution of the political views of Pierre, a priest who has lost his faith, and his older brother Guillaume, a chemist of genius who has discovered a devastating new explosive and who has, not unrelatedly, anarchist leanings. As both characters search

for an intellectual harbour in the turbulent political waters of Third Republic Paris, we are confronted with a motley collection of figures representing the spectrum of fin-de-siècle left-wing political ideologies; as Zola made clear in his preliminary sketch for the novel, part of its aim was to “étudier toutes les sectes socialistes” (Ternois 641; study all the sects of socialism), while within the novel Pierre Froment will express a wish to “faire le bilan des idées du siècle” (623; weigh up the ideas of the century). This the novel does, in its slapdash way, through this proliferation of politically antagonistic characters, and the attention paid to the conflicts between the multiplicity of ideologies that they embody appears to further that sense of hopeless intellectual faddishness created in the first instance through the sexual and intellectual divagations of Hyacinthe.

Sure enough, circumstantial associations are to be made between the cultural movements denounced by Zola (notably Symbolism) and radical leftist politics. David Sweetman notes how an ill-defined, intellectualized anarchism became the de facto political position of many would-be avant-garde artists, including Oscar Wilde, after the defeat of the Paris Commune and throughout the early Third Republic (66-75); “I am,” Wilde went so far as to claim in an interview of 1894, “something of an anarchist” (Ellmann 310). It may be noted that Piotr Kropotkin, the only anarchist thinker whose work Zola consulted directly during the preparation of Paris (Kropotkin’s L’Anarchie having appeared shortly before, in 1896; see Ternois 640-41), had met and conversed with Wilde, probably in 1886. More interesting than Kropotkin’s hypothetical influence on Wilde’s own politics, however, is an association made by Wilde in De Profundis, composed during his imprisonment in 1897. There, Wilde observes that “two of the most perfect lives I have come across in

my own experience are the lives of Verlaine and Prince Kropotkin” (1038), uniting as the patron saints of a certain authenticity of the human spirit the anarchist exile and the Symbolist poet who was for Edmond de Goncourt, we remember, indicative of a non-“plagiaristic” sort of pederasty. I shall return to this important moment in Wilde’s valedictory text in due course, yet it already serves to illustrate that the association of the political with the sexual and esthetic dissident is neither a mere circumstantial fact of Wilde’s biography, nor the simple product of phobic fin-de-siècle cultural conservatism; it is also, at the very least, an element of Wilde’s own self-created mythology.

In Henry James’s The Princess Casamassima (1886), the aristocratic anarchist heroine feels obliged to justify her political allegiances in terms strangely reminiscent of the dismissive discourses on homosexuality already evoked: “You think me affected of course, and my behaviour a fearful pose,” she observes, adding perceptively, “Nothing is more annoying than when one’s sincerity is doubted” (466; emphasis original). And yet despite these apparent affinities between the esthete and the invert, Zola’s Paris deals at first glance rather more indulgently with its anarchist characters than with Hyacinthe. The working-class terrorist Salvat, the main figure of violent anarchism in the text, is depicted as a flawed but noble everyman gone awry: a former assistant of Guillaume Froment, Salvat steals a sample of his master’s new explosive and blows up the gracious residence of Hyacinthe Duvillard’s wealthy father, succeeding only in killing a passing shop-girl; he is pursued by the police throughout the first half of the novel, arrested in the third part, and goes stoically to the scaffold in the fifth. The sincerity of Salvat’s anarchist fervour is never called into question by the narrator, and he seems untouched by the intellectual and cultural

decadence that pervades the other characters. More specifically, despite the fact that, as Alan Sinfield points out, the anarchist “might be stigmatized as effeminate” in Victorian public discourse (76), it would not appear on the face of it to have been Zola’s overt intention to associate Salvat with enervated fin-de-siècle poseurs like Hyacinthe.

However, the combination of certain topological with certain lexical blurrings in the novel nevertheless serves to bind together anarchism, sexual deviance and emasculation in ways whose very implicitness allows for a more nuanced reading of the novel’s polemics. Is it significant that, twenty pages after the narrator snidely remarks upon Hyacinthe’s effeminate “dandinement des hanches,” Salvat, ill-at-ease among bourgeois anarchist sympathizers, should be seen to “se dandin[er] sur une jambe” (255; the phrase suggests an awkward shifting of the weight from one leg to the other)? Perhaps not. Yet in a subsequent chapter, we learn that the Princesse de Harth has finally had her wicked way with Hyacinthe, “le violentant presque comme on violente une femme” (365; almost forcing herself upon him as one forces oneself upon a woman); four pages later, Salvat is arrested by police officers and described as a “bête traquée, violentée et prise enfin” (369; an animal, hunted, assaulted and finally taken). The effeminate man and the anarchist are at least lexically connected, and that connection suggests moreover a shared physical vulnerability and victimhood. While the narrator offers the word “violenter/violentée” as feminizing in the case of Hyacinthe and more broadly dehumanizing in the case of Salvat, the choice of the noun “bête” for the latter purpose ensures a visually striking feminine agreement of the adjective all the same. Somewhat later in the novel, moreover, Hyacinthe’s sharp-

tongued sister Camille will assimilate the two: “tu n’es qu’une fille et qu’une bête” (552; you’re just a girl and a dumb beast), she will hiss.

This lexical rapprochement directs our attention to the broader associative work of this pivotal chapter. In a seemingly improbable chassé-croisé, Salvat is arrested in the Bois de Boulogne at just the same moment as Pierre and his brother Guillaume take a stroll there to discuss politics and terrorism; as Rosemonde and Hyacinthe take an apparently post-coital carriage ride there; and as Eve, Hyacinthe’s mother, and her younger lover Gérard meet there for a secret tryst: of this excursion, we might say, Mme Verdurin’s ambiguous question “est-ce que vous en êtes?” would be more appropriate and richly suggestive than ever before. For different reasons, all three couples will indeed end up in the same guesthouse, “réunis là par le plus imprévu des hasards” (368; gathered there by the most unexpected coincidence), and it is precisely here that Salvat is finally apprehended. The grimy hotel room, presumably rented by the hour, which has regularly played host to Eve’s and Gérard’s affair symbolizes the otherwise aristocratic Bois’s seedy underside, its status as a mauvais lieu – a place where all manner of illicit behavior might occur. The coming together of terrorists, political dissidents and sexually degenerate aristocrats in such a space is thus, the novel seems to imply, only “imprévu” to the naive. To the keen fin-de-siècle observer, these individuals form on the contrary yet another metonymic chain of pathology (one can imagine the narrator enumerating them: “anarchists, terrorists, adulteresses, nymphomaniacs, even sodomites”), if they do not indeed inhabit a single sleazy spectrum, with Rosemonde and Hyacinthe, sexual deviants and professed anarchists as they are, forming a kind of liaison between atrocities. Whether or not Zola knew that the Bois de Boulogne of the 1880s and ’90s was a notorious

spot for homosexual cruising and solicitation (Revenin 34), the pursuit of Salvat through the trees is nevertheless described using a vocabulary of the hunt that seems to evoke both sexual predation – as when Salvat, become a mere “bête,” is “violentée” – and, one suspects, the language used during the sorties of the vice squad (a police report of 1890 speaks of the need to “chasser” – the verb means at once “to oust” and “to hunt” – the gangs of homosexual prostitutes in the Bois; Revenin 34):

Ah ! Quel hallali de victoire, [...] après cette enragée battue qui avait essoufflé les poitrines et brisé les jambes ! La chasse à l’homme, la plus passionnante et la plus sauvage ! On tenait l’homme, on le poussait, on le traînait, on le bourrait de coups.
(369)

[Ah! What a halloo of victory, after a furious ride that had left chests heaving and legs strained! A manhunt: the most exciting and the wildest hunt of all! And now they had their hands on him, pushing him, dragging him, showering him with blows.]

The breathlessness of this passage is at the very least over-determined. As a scene of intense exertion and physical contact (notably between men), it appears to stand in for the acts of carnal excess in which the chapter’s other participants might well indulge in these surroundings, though on this occasion they do not. Yet as a scene of violence, the passage dramatizes precisely the repression of such deviance, and the text’s apparently enthusiastic participation in that repression (symbolized through its odd use of an elated free indirect discourse which scarcely seems attributable to any individual character) is hardly surprising given its willingness elsewhere to police the boundaries of the normal, and to imagine a reconstructed France in which “rien d’anormal” (253; nothing abnormal) would hinder social progress. Indeed, the logic of corrective violence implied by such a fantasy is not new

in the novel, and in fact originates in the sexual sphere, with the narrator's first use of the verb "violenter" to describe Rosemonde "violentant [Hyacinthe] comme on violente une femme." Despite its superficially gender-bending appearance, this phrase is doubly normative in sexual terms: first in its horrifyingly complacent near-assimilation of "normal" heterosexual sex with rape; but secondly, and more importantly for our purposes, in its effective enactment of that heteronormative prescription emitted earlier, when one character observed that Hyacinthe "aurait grand besoin qu'une femme fît de lui un homme." Salvat's rape-arrest may be said to translate this initial incitement to sexual-ideological violence (which recalls the vicious and all-too real phenomenon of "correctional rape") into the domain of legitimate police repression; it is, we might argue, a displaced moment of queer-bashing. The association made by Zola is thus in a sense the distorted echo of that made by Wilde in his prison cell, and conceivably at around the same time in 1897: in evoking, or indeed invoking, the Symbolist Verlaine and the anarchist Kropotkin, Wilde notes that "both [are] men who have passed years in prison" (1038). For Wilde, it seems, the spiritual grandeur that connects these two figures both explains and is best symbolized by their shared subjection to state-sponsored correction; sure enough, the writer will go on to associate both men with Christ. And while in Zola's novel complicity with such punitive violence seems to trump sympathy with the victim, the strange incoherence of ideology allows some measure of Wilde's Christological vision to glimmer through: in the sheer, spectacular excess of its abjection, the battered body of Salvat – whose name is doubtless a symbolic choice in this regard – becomes the sacrificial, Christ-like object both of symbolic phobic violence directed

at deviance in its widest interpretation, and, one suspects, of the erotic fascination that both haunts and impels such violence.

So in its own peculiar way, Zola's novel allows us to move beyond the circumstantial association of the homosexual and the anarchist – Wilde's sympathy for anarchist ideas, the strange conjunction of all those characters in the same hotel in the Bois de Boulogne – and cruder arguments asserting the effeminacy of anarchists in general, towards an understanding of the more nebulous yet arguably more significant ideological connections between them. Anarchism, the text suggests, finds its place in a maelstrom of ideological aversions which is at its most intense in the vicinity of sexual deviance, and notably of "l'amour qui ne fait pas d'enfants"; these aversions moreover often find their expression in a sexualized imagery of violence or, as is more often the case, of salvific heterosexual procreation – in short, in the image of the Family, the other great obsession of Zola's novel. This relationship between family, sexuality and radical politics stands, I think, to be elucidated in surprising ways by Wilde's first play, Vera, or the Nihilists.

Nihilist Recognitions

Vera, or the Nihilists was published in 1880, and produced, briefly and with little success, in New York in 1883 (see Elmann 115-19). Inspired by contemporaneous terrorist activity in Russia, culminating in the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, and by the notable involvement of women in such activity (Reed 167-71), the play takes as its eponymous heroine a young political dissident seeking to avenge her brother, a former agitator now exiled in Siberia. She and her group of Nihilists – the term, popularized in the character of Bazarov in Turgenev's Fathers and Sons (1862),

is a specifically Russian one, though its affinities with anarchist terrorism elsewhere in Europe were clear – are plotting to assassinate the fictional Czar Ivan, a half-mad tyrant bent on eradicating the Nihilist threat. The Czar’s repressive policies are dictated to him by his cynical minister Prince Paul, who represents the play’s wit, and contested by his son Alexis, the Czarevitch who is also, as the play melodramatically reveals in the first act, a Nihilist. When the Czar is assassinated in the second act, Alexis ascends the throne, immediately dismissing Paul – who, out of pique, subsequently becomes, or at least poses as, a Nihilist himself.

The origin of Vera’s Nihilism in her rage at her brother’s exile and the confrontation between the Czar and his Nihilist son are enough to make of Wilde’s play a family drama; but the family is more broadly implicated as a matter of ideological and practical concern for the various characters, as it was for their historical templates. “Un inverti est un désorganisateur de la famille” (4; the invert disorganizes the family), opined Zola in his prefatory letter to Dr Laupt’s Tares et poisons, yet he might just as well have been speaking – the accusation might, indeed, have seemed rather more justified – of the anarchist. At the very least, the path of the anarchist typically required the abjuration of family ties for practical reasons, as a distraction or a risk; the vow of celibacy undertaken by Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s “rigorist” Rakhmetov in What Is To Be Done? (1863), perhaps the most significant literary announcement of the Russian anarchists or “new people,” reflects similar oaths made by historical anarchist groups (Billington 396). More generally, however, some strains of anarchist thought aimed at the destruction of the family as an institution of bourgeois hegemony, and this split between the practical or personal and the ideological is reflected in a certain hesitation among the Nihilists who figure at the

center of Wilde's play. Article Five of their creed provides that "The family, as subversive of true socialistic and communal unity, is to be annihilated" (708), a move which garners confirmed bachelor Prince Paul's hearty approval during his brief adherence to the group in Act III. Yet the more regular oath made by the individual Nihilists, even as it aims "to set father against son, and husband against wife" (a clear reference to Luke 12. 53 – "The father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father" – and thus to the idiosyncratic vision of an "individualist" Christ that informs Wilde's fondness for Verlaine and Kropotkin) appears to demand a more personal suspension of the family: the Nihilist swears "neither to marry nor to be given in marriage, till the end is come" (687; the oath is an authentic one drawn from Bakunin, Ellmann 117). In making this vow, the Nihilist seems to renounce the family as a form of self-denial or a practical necessity, rather than denouncing it on ideological grounds, and it is indeed in this latter question, the difficult relation of the Nihilist to his or her own family life, that Wilde's prevailing interest seems to lie.

The perceived necessity and probable impossibility of concealing a proscribed secret identity from one's family offers, of course, another homology between the homosexual and the anarchist; thus one of Zola's secondary storylines in Paris follows the traumatic discovery of a doting mother who doesn't know that her son en est – that is, that he is an anarchist – until he is arrested and exposed to public shame (609-11). Wilde's play, however, promotes this scenario to the position of originary narrative. In the Prologue, the remote inn run by Vera's father is used as a relay by the soldiers escorting a chain-gang of condemned Nihilists to exile in Siberia; among the prisoners, desperately trying to conceal his face, is Vera's brother Dmitri. Recognizing his son as the group are about to depart and learning the nature of his

crime, the father bewails the shame of the latter as much as the severity of the sentence. Dmitri's family is, to say the least, "disorganized" by this discovery: we will subsequently learn that his father died from the shock, while Vera vows revenge and immediately leaves the family home to seek it. The narrative that follows might thus be said to grow out of this moment of disclosure and the familial disruption it causes. Indeed, the remainder of the play is essentially structured around two similar episodes in which a hidden identity is revealed, both of which implicate the family in different ways. Both, furthermore, concern Alexis, the Nihilist Czarevitch, and both are, crucially, moments of self-revelation. In Act I, when the Nihilists' headquarters are raided by imperial soldiers, Alexis must save his comrades by revealing the royal identity that he has been understandably keen to conceal from them. In Act II, learning in council that his paranoid father intends to impose martial law throughout Russia and summarily execute Nihilists, Alexis must make the opposite move, revealing to the Czar that his own son is one of the very Nihilists he so detests. I shall discuss the first episode shortly, but I wish to begin with Alexis's self-revelation to the Czar.

Firstly, it is worth spelling out that if the mode of Alexis's self-revelations is melodramatic, the fact of his double identity as Czarevitch and Nihilist cannot simply be attributed to the sensational demands of a melodramatic plot. On the contrary, the Nihilist meeting in Act One, attended as it is by university professors, disgruntled peasants, and the Crown Prince, makes reference – somewhat extravagantly, to be sure – to the transgression of class boundaries that is at once part of the ideological program of radical leftist politics, and which, thanks to the anonymous, masked nature of the Nihilist encounters fictionalized here, such a group may literally embody. For

Wilde, one suspects, it is the latter kind of performative class-transitivity that lends the Nihilist theme its subversive fascination, and it was of course this form of class-transitivity that was so closely associated with male homosexuality to the fin-de-siècle imagination – so closely, indeed, that the disparity of class between Wilde and some of his young male acquaintances was adduced during his trials as evidence of the immoral nature of their relations (Hyde 135-45). The Nihilists' meeting, with its improbably wide social range, is in this sense the corollary, with ideological polarities reversed, of Zola's "imprévu" gathering in the Bois de Boulogne. It similarly anticipates Proust's mock-anxious sociology of inversion, in which "le prince [...] en sortant de chez la duchesse va conférer avec l'apache" (3: 19; the prince, leaving the Duchess's house, heads off to fraternize with the gangster), and in which the homosexual "movement" has its "adhérents partout, dans le peuple, dans l'armée, dans le temple, au bain, sur le trône" (3 : 19; adherents everywhere, among the lower classes, in the army, in the cloth, in jail, on the throne). Yet Wilde's play may be said not only to prefigure this suggestive world of clandestine identities, but additionally to imagine the consequences if those identities were to be suddenly, voluntarily, revealed.

In revealing his Nihilist allegiances to the Czar in Act II, Alexis's hope seems to be that confronting his father with the presence of a Nihilist within his own family will somehow open his eyes to the blindness of his prejudice against them, that is, that the ideological will yield to the personal. This fantasy perhaps recalls the biblical story of Esther, whose revelation to her husband, King Ahasuerus, that she is a Jew compels him to abandon his hatred of her people and, more pressingly, the genocidal intentions he has been harbouring towards them. This narrative, whose Racinian

dramatization of 1689 fascinates Proust throughout Sodome et Gomorrhe, is in turn taken up by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as a model of political self-revelation through and against which to think the politics and possibilities of gay coming-out – the paradigmatic instance of which, of course, involves coming out to a parent. And yet while Sedgwick is keen to eschew the undue optimism that Esther’s success might inspire, noting that “we have every reason to know how limited a leverage any individual revelation can exercise over collectively-scaled and institutionally embodied oppressions” (78), Wilde’s version of the Esther narrative is even more sceptical about the political efficacy of such personal disclosures: from at least one point of view, Alexis’s “coming-out” is disastrous. The Czar is not reconciled to the Nihilists by the discovery that his son is one of them; on the contrary, he immediately gives the order for Alexis to be clapped in irons and taken to Siberia, insisting, like Dmitri’s father before him, on the horrid nature of the identity Alexis has revealed: “A Nihilist! a Nihilist! Viper whom I have nurtured” (704).

The failure of Alexis’s intervention is rather more than a matter of dramatic expediency, and Sedgwick’s reading of the Esther narrative can help us to understand why. In drawing out the vital differences between Esther’s self-disclosure and coming-out, Sedgwick notes how, among other things, “Esther’s avowal occurs within and perpetuates a coherent system of gender subordination”, with “her single moment of risk [...] given point by her customary pliancy” (81-2). While her Jewish identity contravenes current policy within Ahasuerus’s anti-Semitic kingdom, that is, Esther nevertheless remains fully compliant with its more fundamental ideology, namely, that of patriarchy. Moreover, somewhat differently from Sedgwick, we might note that Esther is compliant specifically with the ideology to which she makes her

political appeal: in revealing herself to her husband as a Jew, she solicits religious tolerance in the name of the spousal affection, the husbandly duty of protection, and (anachronistically for the Bible story, less so for Racine's play) the family sentiment on which she has every right to depend as a "good" wife. Now the same guarantees do not necessarily obtain in the case of gay coming-out. Would-be gay Esthers of the modern era must contend with the fact that more-or-less homophobic popular perception, mainstream political discourse and, in very different ways, some strands of queer thought itself, tend to situate the demands of gay identity politics in an at least problematic if not antagonistic relationship to so-called "family values." The parents of a gay child, however loving, may nevertheless experience the child's coming-out as occasioning damage to their idealized version of the family. Gay people who seek recognition by and ongoing membership in the family may, conversely, wish to reserve the right not to replicate or even minimally reflect the values and forms that their parents and siblings regard as constitutive of it; they may, indeed, be acutely aware that the family they appeal to in the moment of coming out is not the one they have grown up in, marked as it so often is by the memory of a certain discomfort, but one that doesn't yet exist, one that must be built from scratch if it is to be capacious enough to accommodate them.

There is, of course, every reason to find in these very complications opportunities to effect change of the most pressing sort. Yet in its own re-enactment of the Esther narrative, Wilde's play seems rather to represent family affection as being of no use whatsoever to a politics in which the nature of the family is itself implicated. The problematic status of appeals to family feeling by those whose relationship to the family is ambiguous is made far simpler and starker, of course, in

the narrative of the Nihilist who has vowed nothing less than the family's "annihilation" and yet pleads his comrades' case to his father as a son. Family bonds simply cannot withstand the pressure applied to them by such a revelation as Alexis's, it seems. Far from personal affection trumping ideological hatred, indeed, the Czar actually translates his loathing of his Nihilist son into another abstract ideological position: "A plague on all sons!", he cries. "There should be no more marriages in Russia when one can breed such Serpents as you are!" (704). Rhetorically at least, the Czar would actually prefer to indulge the hated Nihilists and destroy the Family in the abstract than tolerate the presence of a single Nihilist within his own family circle. Inevitably, then, this second episode of familial "disorganization," closely paralleling the first in the Prologue, ends with the same symbolic paternal death: reeling from the shock of his son's words, the Czar steps out onto the balcony for air, where he is promptly (indeed, instantly) despatched by a Nihilist assassin's bullet.

Yet as I have already noted, this scene is in fact the second station on Alexis's arduous journey of self-disclosure: his first revelation is made to his fellow Nihilists, and has different consequences for the play's treatment of family. In Act I, one of his comrades already suspects that Alexis *en est* – meaning, this time, that he is a police spy posing as a Nihilist, although the exact terms of the Nihilist's allegations allow for some suggestive ambiguity. Alexis has been seen creeping through dark streets late at night, hiding in archways and doubling back to cover his tracks, a behaviour which, like that of the anarchist Salvat in the Bois de Boulogne, allows of more than one construction (though in truth he was attempting to return to his father's palace unseen). "Oh, you are a spy – you are a spy!", his accuser pursues, before listing tell-tale signs upon which cliché might place another interpretation: "I never trusted you,

with your soft white hands, your curled hair, your pretty graces” (693). In this sense, then, Alexis’s first self-revelation, in which he literally “unmasks” himself (so that his father’s soldiers will withdraw, leaving the Nihilists unharmed), may be understood as another “coming-out,” in which he reveals to those who thought they knew him either his special identity as Czarevitch – in this context, of course, a stigmatized one – or his belonging to the minority group known as the Imperial family – again, an undesirable affiliation where his confreres are concerned.

Yet such a reading, by substituting the betrayed Nihilists for the heartbroken Czar, arguably allows the imagined subjectivity of the father, and thus of the family, to exert too much influence on our understanding of the play of identity in these episodes. In another important sense, this earlier self-revelation is much more fully an inversion of the more familiar scene that follows it. For subtending the melodramatic uniqueness of Alexis’s newly-revealed personal characteristics – son of the Czar, member of the ruling dynasty – is the foundational, banal and oppressively majoritarian ideology of identity in light of which they make sense. In naming his father, that is, Alexis identifies himself not just as the Czar’s son, but rather as a son; not as a member of a particular royal family, but rather as one whose identity is subject to the reign of the Family in general – a reign that Article Five of the Nihilists’ creed contests as vigorously as the notion of hereditary autocracy which is, of course, fully dependent upon it. And while the father who learns that his son or daughter is – let’s say – a Nihilist must face the prospect of learning to live with “a stranger in the family,” quite the opposite is true here: the identity revealed by Alexis is on the contrary spectacularly recognizable, grotesquely familiar – haven’t the Nihilists been talking about him all night? In removing his mask for his father’s soldiers, Alexis

simultaneously submits his face for recognition, and his person to a broader logic of recognition that is, one suspects, closely related to that of family resemblance: the Czarevitch is who he is because he looks at once like himself and like his father. Under such a logic, identity requires only minimal deciphering, being written on the face, and Alexis's submission can thus only appear as a most horrid betrayal to the identity-shunning Nihilists, certain historical examples of whom fantasized about escaping from just this bind by undergoing voluntary facial mutilation (Billington 396). Far from revealing some disturbing new identity to his comrades, then, Alexis discloses only his irremediable belonging to a normative sphere in which the question of identity may never be posed, save when it is barked – as it is, repeatedly – in the coercive interpellations of ideology.

Nihilism and “Negation”

This scene of recognition, and the moment preceding it in which one of the Nihilists decodes the signs of Alexis's body as being indicative of a suspect class identity, touches on the question of mutual recognition within clandestine groups, an important topic in the history both of homosexuality and of illegal political organizations. “Every revolutionist meets a number of spies and agents provocateurs in his path,” noted Piotr Kropotkin in his memoirs. “One who has some experience of life and men soon discovers that there is about these creatures something which puts him on his guard.” Kropotkin goes on to recall his circle's instinctive aversion to one such individual: “We knew nothing bad about him, but we felt that he was not ‘ours’” (318-19). Nihilists, Kropotkin assures his readers, have special means of

distinguishing their true brethren from those who are merely posing, however skilfully:

A spy might make common acquaintances; he might give the best accounts, sometimes correct, of his past in Russia; he might possess in perfection the Nihilist slang and manners, but he never could assimilate the particular kind of Nihilist ethics which had grown up amongst the Russian youth – and this alone kept him at a distance from our colony. Spies can imitate anything else but those ethics. (319)

Wilde seems to have been particularly taken with the manner of Nihilists' mutual recognition, eschewing Kropotkin's rather nebulous appeal to "ethics" in favour of a more spectacular call-and-answer routine, adapted as Ellmann notes from a Masonic ritual (117-18) and occurring in Acts I and III of Vera, in which the Nihilists exchange esoteric yet portentous-sounding passwords until the presiding member of the group proclaims: "There are none but Nihilists present. Let us see each other's faces!" (687).

A heightened and mysterious recognitional capacity, of course, also forms part of Proust's phantasmatic account of homosexual group behavior in the vital opening pages of Sodome et Gomorrhe. Consider the following, famous passage, in which Proust's narrator asserts that homosexuals form:

une franc-maçonnerie bien plus étendue, plus efficace et moins soupçonnée que celle des loges, car elle repose sur une identité de goûts, de besoins, d'habitudes, de dangers, d'apprentissage, de savoir, de trafic, de glossaire, et dans laquelle les membres mêmes qui souhaitent de ne pas se connaître, aussitôt se reconnaissent à des signes naturels ou de convention, involontaires ou voulus. (3: 18-19)

[a free-masonry that is much more widespread, more efficient and less suspected than that of the lodges, since it rests on shared tastes, needs, habits, dangers, experiences, knowledge, associations, and language, and in which even those members who have no desire to know each other, nevertheless immediately recognize each other by signs that may be natural or agreed, involuntary or deliberate.]

In fact, this inimitably Proustian passage only gives particularly elaborate expression to what may have already been a definitional outside perception of male homosexual interactions for some time before the composition of Sodome et Gomorrhe. In a survey of nineteenth-century sexological approaches to homosexuality, Vernon A. Rosario notes that the urgency with which various so-called experts attempted to describe and define the physiological identifying marks of homosexuality (such as Hyacinthe's mincing step, the "terrible symptôme" identified by Pierre Froment) was the counterweight of "a common fear that pederasts of all classes could recognize each other even more easily than they could be recognized by doctors thanks to secret signs" (151). The flamboyant use made by Wilde's Nihilists of their own secret signs arguably celebrates precisely the fascination and discomfiture that such phantasmatically alien modes of mutual identification may have occasioned in those whose less problematic identities adhered to the more normative pattern. The notion of an exceptionalist homosexual identity constituted outside of the normal protocols regulating social life and status arguably contributed to the reprobation of that identity by the diverse nineteenth-century representatives of order, and may also go some way to explaining the strategic dismissal of homosexuality as "pose": any identity refusing so completely to comply with prevailing epistemologies of persons must, or so the argument would run, be assumed, faked, a mask which might be put off as easily as

put on. Thus in the gloating hymn to the death of decadence which opens G.K. Chesterton's The Man Who Was Thursday (1908), a novel of anarchism depicting with fretful humor a world of perpetually unstable identities and near-universal disguise, Wilde's downfall is connoted only by reference to the withering of "the Green Carnation" (6) – that is, by an allusion to just the sort of factitious, consciously adopted sign that a certain homophobic imagination took (perhaps not wrongly) to be indicative of the homosexual's pose – or rather, of the pose of homosexuality.

The episode of Alexis's self-disclosure to his father's soldiers suggested, as we have seen, that the normative pattern of identity-constitution eschewed by such "posing" is closely related to the logic of family resemblance, and thus to the question of filiation. We might observe that those invisible ties binding homosexuals together in Proust's conception are invisible because such individuals present no obvious physical resemblance and do not share a patronymic – the readiest ways of understanding who is related to whom in Western culture. The apparent class-transitivity that figured so prominently in nineteenth-century imaginings of homosexuality, meanwhile, may equally be understood in opposition to the structures of the family: firstly because, in a century of limited social mobility, class remained to a considerable extent a hereditary phenomenon, in fact if not in theory; and secondly and more specifically, because the urge to preserve caste solidarity and exclusivity which animates so many of those imaginings was itself at bottom a strategy for protecting familial and especially patrimonial interests.

Like that of the homosexual, the Nihilist's strangest pose is his or her self-reinvention as a being without genealogy, claiming to appear, as it were, ex nihilo; the movement's wildest denial, meanwhile, is of course the proposed "annihilation" of the

family. And it is in the conjunction of their name, “Nihilists,” and their program, the denial of the family, that Wilde’s particular group of anarchists speak most intimately to the familialism of late nineteenth-century homophobia – speak, that is, to the very specific rhetoric of negativity and nothingness that recurs obsessively in fin-de-siècle descriptions of same-sex relations. The rhetoric I refer to here is, clearly, a subset of the centuries-old preference for “preterition,” or the use, in Sedgwick’s words, of “space-clearing negatives to void and at the same time to underline the possibility of male same-sex genitality” (202) – as in Lord Alfred Douglas’s famous “love that dare not speak its name.” The less allusive, and consequently less rhetorically charismatic, version of this pattern practised by Zola and many of his contemporaries may be exemplified by the following pronouncement made in 1887 by Félix Carlier, one time head of the Parisian vice-squad and indispensable source on the policing of homosexuality under the Second Empire:

Ce qui ennoblit l’amour, c’est qu’il est la conséquence d’une loi de la nature, [...] la loi de reproduction. Mais [...] si la reproduction est tellement impossible que les deux amants soient du même sexe, alors ce n’est plus l’amour, au contraire, c’est sa négation. C’est le néant. (286-87)

[What lends love its nobility is that it is a consequence of a law of nature, the law of reproduction. But if reproduction is impossible because the lovers are of the same sex, then it is no longer love; on the contrary, it is the negation of love. It is nothingness.]

It is arguably this sort of rhetoric that Wilde appropriates, consciously or not, when he has his Nihilists swear “neither to love nor to be loved, neither to pity nor to be pitied, neither to marry nor to be given in marriage” (687). What homosexuality negates more specifically, according to such a logic, is procreation, and in this light Zola’s

phrase “l’amour qui ne fait pas d’enfants” may well seem less like a euphemism or circumlocution, and more like a supremely economical distillation of this rhetoric into a single label wherein homosexuality is defined only by what it is so indicatively not.

Such a discourse may be said to be the very stuff of Paris, but a striking moment as the novel approaches its denouement brings the vocabulary of negativity to the fore, while situating it within the peculiarly expansive phobic nexus I have been evoking so far. Pierre Froment is jealous of his elder brother’s apparently idyllic family life with his three adult sons and comely young fiancée, and is plunged into despair by the loss of his Catholic faith and the muffled call of violent anarchism. Confronted with a tableau of domestic bliss on a particularly painful visit to his brother, Pierre descends into grim meditations which the narrator imparts to us in terms that are, like those describing Salvat’s arrest, nothing short of dizzyingly over-determined:

Il avait cherché la foi totale, il s’était jeté dans la négation totale. Et cette hautaine attitude qu’il avait gardée [...], cette réputation de saint prêtre qu’il s’était faite, lorsque le néant seul l’habitait, n’était-ce pas encore un désir mauvais de l’absolu, la simple pose romantique de son aveuglement et de son orgueil ? (410-11)

[He had been looking for an absolute faith, he had thrown himself into absolute negation. And the haughty attitude he had always had, the saintly reputation he had made for himself, when there was only nothingness within him – wasn’t that just the same unhealthy desire for the absolute, merely the romantic pose of his blindness and pride?]

Pierre has, it would seem, internalized and re-applied the hostile scepticism that characterizes the novel’s (if not the period’s) attitude towards same-sex sexuality: in

this passage, he voluntarily reduces his own ideological and political “négation” and inner “néant,” terms otherwise suggestive of “l’amour qui ne fait pas d’enfants,” to an esthetic (in this case “Romantic”) performance, the insincere posing of a Wildean puffiste or self-promoter keen to make a name for himself. Yet this is not simply the displacement of a heteronormative language from the domain of sexual enforcement to the sphere of party politics. For in a supplementary political twist, the additional object of Zola the secular Republican’s contempt here is clerical celibacy which – in a salutary reminder of just how late the homosexual became the figure of sexual abnormality – Zola takes to be roughly equivalent to homosexuality, or at least sufficiently cognate with it to require excision with the same rhetorical implements. “Je suis en dehors de la nature, je suis un monstre,” Pierre cries (405; I’m outside of nature, I’m a monster), in terms whose kinship with several centuries’ worth of proto-“homophobic” discourse scarcely needs underlining. For Zola, the non-reproductivity of Pierre’s identity locates him alongside the homosexual, beyond the pale of ideological toleration – in that strange space, perhaps, where Wilde’s Nihilists vow “to strangle whatever nature is in us” (687).

Pierre’s self-condemnation signals his increasing sexual and romantic attraction to Guillaume’s fiancée Marie, an attraction which the much older Guillaume recognizes as reciprocal and judges to be more appropriate than his own relationship with her. In a scene of mawkish homosocial intimacy (a favored mode in the novel, notably in scenes involving Guillaume’s sons, strapping lads repeatedly referred to by the narrator with barely suppressed eroticism as “les colosses”), Guillaume “gives” Marie to his brother as a gift. And it is in the consequences of this transferral of Marie and the procreative possibilities she represents from Guillaume to

Pierre that Zola's strange, metonymic circuit of deviant equivalences reaches its completion. As Pierre abjures the priesthood in favour of sexual normality, the newly celibate Guillaume resolves to become not a priest, nor a homosexual, but a suicide bomber. And while Guillaume will eventually be dissuaded from this project by his brother, the implication is clear: even the slightest loosening of family ties – let alone their outright undoing – can provoke a potentially catastrophic withering of the moral sense, plunging us into the depths of the protean “nothingness” whose diverse, deviant faces haunted fin-de-siècle nightmares.

Conclusion

Zola's famous “positivism,” at least as it is manifested in Paris, is thus revealed to be founded on a number of strategic yet contradictory negations: the denial of the sincerity both of homosexuality and of extreme political opinions (their dismissal as “pose”); the rhetorical creation of certain bodies as indicatively non-procreative, and their abjection as objects of utter “negation” by extension of that specific lack; and finally, in the appeal to a future world in which “rien d'anormal” would subsist, the implicit assertion of a more vulgar “negationist” fantasy involving the extirpation of elements which ought, if the original theory of “pose” had any validity, not to exist at all. The conceptually fragile ideology in evidence here is, of course, a foundational instance of what Lee Edelman in No Future has termed “reproductive futurism,” the politically all-consuming cult of the sacred child which demands the constant “ascription of negativity to the queer” (4), and which might be embodied in the final image of Paris, as Marie holds her newborn child aloft, offering him to the city of Paris as an “auguste cadeau” (636; august gift).

The reader unfamiliar with the plot of Vera might now expect me to argue that Wilde's Nihilists, in wearing "negation" as their badge and rejecting the family as they do, somehow respond proleptically to Edelman's demand that queer people "accep[t] and embrac[e]" this apparently ineluctable association of their bodies with sterile negativity (4). It is, sure enough, hard to repress a frisson when we hear the Nihilists swear to fight "without fear, without hope, without future" (687). Yet the play's plot makes this argument something of a hard sell, firstly because Vera's decision to become a Nihilist is made, as we have seen, in response to her brother's imprisonment, and can thus be read as a pursuit of family vengeance; and secondly because in the play's denouement Vera ultimately heeds the demands of the heterosexual affection forbidden to her by the Oath over those of her Nihilist faith – when sent to assassinate Alexis, now Czar, she chooses to commit suicide instead, and dies stagily in his arms. This need not lead us to conclude, however, that Wilde's play is uninformative for queer thought. There is, after all, no reason to expect Wilde to meet a challenge which is, in Edelman's own words, "surely impossible" (4). What does seem possible, moreover, is that Vera makes just that point: the point, that is, that it's not easy to get away from the family. In a familialist culture, "the family" will always be available as an etiological explanation of any rejection of family life which must, again in such a culture, appear pathological (hence Vera's Nihilism would be "just" the result of the traumatic experience in her father's inn). The teleological pull of our own desire, meanwhile, may well betray us by tending towards some or all of the trappings of family life, the very normative desiderata which our political commitments demand we shun. Moreover, the relationship between the young Czar and the Nihilist peasant tasked with his assassination arguably fits into a lineage of

cursed unions whose relation to the dominant moralities of the age merits further study: it seems possible that some of the many, many nineteenth-century narratives that take as their object a sexual relationship made impossible by an impediment of some sort – class, race, madness, impotence, consanguinity, political affiliations, vows of celibacy, not to mention marriage to someone else – express discontent with the existing sexual order, and especially with the demands of reproductive futurism. Sure enough, Vera’s suicide makes formal what was always clear about her affair with Alexis: it is hopeless, impossible, doomed to remain unconsummated. It, too, is without future.

Thus the shared heterosexuality of the two endings is rather differently configured in each case. While Zola’s novel ends on a hallucinatory vision of “le futur [...] dans son énormité” (635; the future in its enormity) in which all of Paris, even the humble rooftops, has somehow become fertile (636), Wilde’s denouement effectively complies with the late Czar’s insistence that there should be no more marriages and thus no more sons: no holy child will appear to guarantee the illusory prolongation of these characters and their story. And while both narratives end with an assertion of national salvation, this too is treated very differently in each. The apotheosis of Zola’s Paris, symbolic of a French Republic newly dedicated to “vérité et justice” (636; truth and justice), is promised after all in the unmarked language of the omniscient narrator. Vera’s death-cry, “I have saved Russia” (720), seems in contrast infinitely more fragile, the expression of a mere wish, and must contend with another, hostile sound: the murmuring offstage of the betrayed Nihilists. As the play closes, the rest of the group remains literally and symbolically outside, both excluded from and contemptuous of the ostensibly salvific courtship unfolding within the palace, a

political divergence which seems to demand that the audience choose a side – Vera, or the Nihilists? The Nihilists’ angry demands for Czarist blood increase in volume throughout the final love scene, repeatedly interrupting the grandiloquence of Vera and her young Czar, and seem almost to represent the inconvenient persistence of a “hard-line” ideological opposition to Vera’s compromise with a sexual order which has, in Zola’s text, drowned out all other voices: the only background noise of the closing pages of Paris is the ideologically affirmative “bruit de prodigieuse besogne” (635; noise of prodigious labor) produced by the city, and, implicitly, the thunderous pitter-patter of a million tiny feet. This massive ideological homogenization is, we are to understand, justified in Zola’s conclusion by the tranquil demonstration earlier on that even where voices of political or sexual dissidence are heard, they do not really mean what they say. Wilde’s play, on the other hand, makes it very clear that whatever failures may beset the Nihilists’ cause, their sincerity is not to be doubted.

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Notes

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1 All translations are my own.

2 In this article, I will take largely for granted the co-presence of the homosexual and the anarchist within the rogues' gallery assembled by the various fin-de-siècle theorists of degeneration. The writing of degeneration has, firstly, been well explored by literary critics and cultural historians (see Arata ch. 1, 3; Nye ch. 5; Pick ch. 2, 3, 6), and hardly needs further treatment here. Secondly and more importantly, however, I take the marshalling of these two intuitively very different figures within the same medicalized discourse to be part of the very problem I would like to elucidate: this article may be seen as a humble and partial attempt to suggest why it is that a sexual preference and a political adherence should have attracted the same pathologizing attention in this period.

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