WILDE, ZOLA, DREYFUS, CHRIST: FIN-DE-SIÈCLE PASSIONS

Abstract

Oscar Wilde and Émile Zola are conventionally opposed as the figureheads of, respectively, the aestheticist and the naturalist literary trends that dominated the fin-de-siècle literary field. Yet they also exhibit a number of uncanny similarities—not least the turn both made in their last years towards religious themes and imagery, and especially those of martyrdom and the Passion. This article explores such images in the later life, work, and public persona of both writers, and sets them within the context of the proliferation of references to Christ and martyrdom in fin-de-siècle literary culture, particularly at the time of the Dreyfus Affair. From Ernest Renan's sentimental account of Jesus' life and death, via the Decadent obsession with images of abjection and suffering, to the nascent homoerotic tradition recognizing in the figure of the martyr a confluence of the abject and the sublime that seemed to allegorize queer desire, the article traces the competing and conflicting influences acting on Wilde's and Zola's writing about Christ and martyrdom. It examines the "entailments"—the unexpected consequences, meanings, and echoes—that these overdetermined themes brought in their train from the wider literary field. It also shows how those entailments were exacerbated by the massive politicization of "martyr" discourse around the time of the Dreyfus Affair, when the theme acquired its fullest significance—before dissolving into an incoherence symptomatic of a crisis of moral discourse at the turn of the century.

WILDE, ZOLA, DREYFUS, CHRIST: FIN-DE-SIÈCLE PASSIONS

On 5 January 1895, the courtyard of the École Militaire in Paris witnessed a scene of ritualized public humiliation. Captain Alfred Dreyfus, convicted of treason against the French Republic by a military tribunal the previous month, was brought into the courtyard for his ceremonial degradation, in which the epaulettes, insignia and sleeves were torn from his uniform and his sword broken, all before a crowd of soldiers and, beyond them, a civilian mob shouting insults. A week later, on 13 January, Henri Meyer's famous drawing of the scene appeared on the cover of *Le Petit Journal*, expanding that crowd to include the rest of France, and the world. A The following month, Dreyfus would begin his journey to Devil's Island and his sentence of penal servitude for life.

Later that year, on 20 November, in another country, another public humiliation occurred. Oscar Wilde, already serving a sentence of two years' imprisonment with hard labor for acts of gross indecency, was transferred by train from Pentonville Prison in London to Reading Prison, a journey which necessitated a change at Clapham Junction station. As Wilde would later recall in the prison manuscript subsequently published as *De profundis*:

> On November 13th, 1895, I was brought down here from London. From two o'clock till half-past two on that day I had to stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress, and handcuffed, for the world to look at. [...] Of all possible objects I was the most grotesque. When people saw me they laughed. Each train as it came up swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was, of course, before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed they laughed still

more. For half an hour I stood there in the grey November rain surrounded by a jeering mob.[1]

Wilde's sometime friend Robert Sherard noted in 1916, some years after Wilde's death, that when Wilde first recounted this "outrage" to him during a visit to Reading Prison, he had suggested that it was "even worse than what Wilde relates" in *De profundis*: "I was told that the man who first recognized the prisoner shouted: 'By God, that is Oscar Wilde,' and spat on him."[2]

Back to Paris, and forward to early 1898, and what Pierre Birnbaum has dubbed "the anti-Semitic moment," when the city and France at large were in the grip of frenzied anti-Semitic hatred and frequent mob violence.[3] At the beginning of February, not quite a month after the publication of the open letter known as "J'accuse. . . !," Émile Zola stood trial for libel against the army General Staff and a military tribunal held the previous month, whom he had accused of knowingly obstructing justice by exonerating Ferdinand Walsin-Esterhazy (now widely suspected of being the true traitor) and reaffirming the 1894 conviction of Dreyfus. Leaving the Palais de Justice after the first few days of hearings, Zola was greeted by baying crowds shrieking "Down with Zola! Down with the Jews!" and threatening violence that was narrowly averted by police action. The scene is dramatically immortalized in Henry de Groux's painting of the same year, *Zola aux outrages*, in which a multitude of distorted, hate-filled faces surge menacingly towards the lonely novelist, whose frock coat appears symbolically white in the painting's muddy palette. Zola would subsequently be found guilty and his conviction upheld on appeal, forcing him into miserable exile in England in July 1898.[4]

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[1] Oscar Wilde, *De profundis*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, vol. 2: De profundis. Epistola: in carcere et vincula*, ed. by Ian Small, (Oxford, 2005), 187. All subsequent references to *De profundis* are given in the text, using the abbreviation *DP*.

[2] Robert Sherard, *The Real Oscar Wilde* (London, 1916), 279. The anecdote first appears in Sherard's *Oscar Wilde: The Story of an Unhappy Friendship* (London, 1905), 211-12.

[3] Pierre Birnbaum, *The Anti-Semitic Moment: A Tour of France in 1898*, trans. by Jane Marie Todd (New York, 2003), 1-45.

[4] For an exhaustive account of Zola's ordeal, see Henri Mitterand, *Zola: Tome III: L'Honneur, 1893-1902* (Paris, 2002), 399-463.

These episodes have some obvious commonalities. In all three cases, an individual is shamed and abused for a crime of which he is factually or, in Wilde's case, morally innocent. All three occur at a frightening threshold between the formal yet flawed procedures of state justice, and an undisciplined wellspring of negative communal affect that threatens to explode—one meaning of the "passions" of my title. And all three were spoken of at the time as "martyrdoms," or discussed through analogies with the Passion of Jesus Christ. As a number of scholars have shown, the Passion was one of the primary metaphorical languages of the discourse of the Dreyfus Affair, on both the Dreyfusard and Anti-Dreyfusard sides.[5] While Dreyfus's likening to a martyr or to Christ was among the more problematic instances of this language (though not, as we shall see, the *most* problematic), that association was certainly made—not least by Émile Zola himself. In an open letter to Mme Dreyfus after Dreyfus's acceptance of a presidential pardon in September 1899, Zola referred to her husband as a "crucified man" [crucifié] and of his plight as a "martyrdom," and rejoiced that he had now been "brought down from his cross."[6] Wilde's susceptibility to the theme, meanwhile, is well-known—"even before the misery of his own trial in 1895 [...], Wilde's early writings reveal a preoccupation with martyrdom," writes Jan-Melissa Schramm[7]—and the passage of *De profundis* describing the incident at Clapham Junction is explicitly prefaced in this direction: "It is said that all martyrdoms seemed mean to the looker on. The nineteenth century is no exception to the rule" (*DP* 187). And if Zola made a rhetorical martyr of Dreyfus, he himself received what Christopher Forth calls "the full Jesus treatment" in the works of others:[8] in its

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[5] See for instance John J. Cerullo, "Religion and the Psychology of Dreyfusard Intellectualism," *Historical Reflections*, 24 (1998), 93-114; Christopher E. Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (Baltimore, 2004), ch. 2; and Ruth Harris, *The Man on Devil's Island: Alfred Dreyfus and the Affair that Divided France* (London, 2010), ch. 11.

[6] Émile Zola, "Lettre à Mme Alfred Dreyfus," in *Œuvres complètes* (henceforth *OC*), ed. by Henri Mitterand, 21 vols (Paris, 2002-09), 18: 466, 469, 467. The letter was published in *L'Aurore* on 29 September 1899. Subsequent references to this edition of Zola's works are given in the text. All translations in this article are my own.

[7] Jan-Melissa Schramm, "Wilde and Christ," in *Oscar Wilde in Context*, ed. by Kerry Powell and Peter Raby (Cambridge, 2013), 253-60 (254).

[8] Forth, 92.

composition and title, for instance, Henry de Groux's painting of the scenes outside the Palais de Justice deliberately evoked his 1889 work *Le Christ aux outrages*, which had depicted Jesus taunted by a bloodthirsty crowd.

Despite moreover the copious gestures of support and encouragement that Zola received during this period (of which the painting is an example), this sort of rhetoric tended for strategic purposes towards self-erasure, presenting its protagonist as the friendless victim of unanimous condemnation and contempt. Indeed, Zola himself could not resist the temptation to reimagine his 1898 experiences in these terms, when he drew on them for a scene in his novel *Travail* (1901), the second in his planned series of *Quatre Évangiles*—"four gospels." In Book 2, the protagonist Luc Froment, a visionary socialist industrialist and Zola's proxy in the novel, having just been exonerated of causing the disappearance of a local stream through the improvement works he has undertaken at his factory for the future benefit of all, is hounded through town by a superstitious mob:

> Ah! That climb up the rue de Brias, the swelling crowd of enemies at his heels, beneath the ignominious stream of outrages and threats! [....] What had he done these last four years, for so much hate to have built up against him, to be hunted down like this by the crowd, howling like a pack of wolves for his death? What gall, what suffering there is in the shared Calvary every righteous man must ascend, as the blows of those he has tried to redeem rain down upon him! [....] Now they were stoning him. He made no gesture, but continued to climb his Calvary. (*OC* 19:159-60)

Though Luc, as is required by the titular logic of Zola's "gospels," takes his name from the Evangelist, his experience in these pages is obviously modelled on Christ's own: Luc's humiliation is a Calvary, and this *via dolorosa* tacitly endorses representations of Zola's own experience of public opprobrium as Christ-like.

These three episodes are positioned at a fin-de-siècle confluence in which references to Christ, the Passion, and the figure of the martyr more broadly proliferated. In the 1890s, images drawn from these instantly recognizable narratives were appropriated for aesthetic, political and personal purposes that might be of the most contradictory sorts. At once a favored topos of the Decadent imagination as well as of a nascent homosexual aesthetic sensibility; an evidently inevitable structuring metaphor for the sectarian confrontations of the Dreyfus Affair; and an inviting rhetoric for the utopian political ideologies of the fin de siècle, Christ- and martyr-imagery offered at once a seemingly very reliable mode of generating meaning, but also, I shall suggest, an oddly risky one given the overdetermination of such imagery occasioned by its very promiscuousness in these competing fin-de-siècle discourses. In this article, I explore such acts of appropriation and their attendant rhetorical risks in the later life, work, and public image of Oscar Wilde and Émile Zola, including as each of these intersected with the Dreyfus Affair, with a view to understanding, first, their purpose in adopting Christological or martyrological references and imagery, and second, the consequences—unintended and conceivably unconscious—of their doing so for the tone, style, and coherence of their work. These unintended consequences or risks are what I shall refer to as the "entailments" of the Christ-reference.

This essay is thus a contribution to a potentially very revealing literary comparison between Wilde and Zola.[9] I choose these two writers as figures who stood, as Wilde put it (of himself!), "in symbolic relations to the art and culture of [their] age" (*DP* 162), and first and foremost as handy metonymies, then and now, for what a traditional literary history has tended to regard as the two competing literary postulations of the fin-de-siècle: the naturalist versus the decadent, the hyper-mimetic versus the hyper-artificial. Yet both writers are also somehow

[9] See also Andrew J. Counter, "'One of Them:' Homosexuality and Anarchism in Wilde and Zola," *Comparative Literature*, 63 (2011), 345-65, for an attempt at this comparison.

quintessentially "fin-de-siècle," to the extent that Max Nordau in *Degeneration* (1892) denounces both as equally symptomatic of the social and cultural pathologies he associates with that phrase. In his recollections of Wilde, indeed, Vincent O'Sullivan recalls the playwright noting that "Great antipathy shews secret affinity;" when O'Sullivan waggishly enquired whether this meant that Wilde had an affinity to George Moore, the Irish naturalist who was a particular *bête noire* of Wilde's, he allegedly replied: "No; but perhaps to Zola. Still, I hope not."[10] I find this exchange plausible largely because it is so well-observed: for all their differences, as I shall show, these are indeed two writers who exhibit some uncanny similarities—not least in the shape of their own internal contradictions, contradictions that emerge most visibly in the "religious," which is not to say orthodox, turn of their later years. My hypothesis, indeed, is that between them, Wilde and Zola hold the keys to understanding the fin-de-siècle literary field, especially though not only in France.

In the first section, I consider the religious preoccupations of Wilde and Zola in some of their final published works, and examine the relationship of these works to later nineteenth-century quarrels about "idealism" and "sentimentalism." The second section takes up the image of martyrdom as it circulated in fin-de-siècle literature, as a site of convergence of abjection and sublimity, and explores the uses made by Zola and Wilde of that potent combination. The final section departs from an anecdote concerning Wilde's final years in Paris at the height of the Dreyfus Affair, and his encounters with the Affair's true traitor, Esterhazy, to confront the dizzying instability of meaning that emerges from the proliferation of martyrological references in fin-de-siècle culture, where religious iconography and language seem to stand in for, more than they articulate, moral beliefs and ideas.

[10] Vincent O'Sullivan, *Aspects of Wilde* (London, 1936), 216-17.

Religion and Sentimentalism: Sweet Jesus

Which of Oscar Wilde or Émile Zola loved stained-glass windows? Trick question: they both did. Yet while that fondness comports perfectly with what we know of Wilde the deathbed Catholic convert, and of his tastes and sensibilities (he mentions it explicitly in *De profundis* [*DP* 179]), we might be more surprised to learn of Zola's choice of stained glass for his bedroom in Paris: what use, we might ask, can this atheist and unusually belligerent secularist have had for the favored form of nineteenth-century nostalgic religiosity?[11] This unexpected affinity is emblematic of the parallels I wish to draw between the pair, and first and foremost of their paradoxical relationship to one particular matter of taste: the sentimental in literature. Both, after all, were famous castigators of the sentimental; and yet both, I want to suggest, were also perpetrators of it. When in her study of Wilde, Nietzsche, and sentimentalism, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes of Wilde that he embodied "at the same time [...] a modernist antisentimentality, and [...] a late-Victorian sentimentality," she identifies a crucial tension in his work.[12] To be sure, Wilde knew as well as anyone else that, again quoting Sedgwick, "most often, where the epithet 'sentimental' itself is brought onto the scene," the intended meaning is "a discreditable or devalued one—the sentimental as the *insincere*, the *manipulative*, the *vicarious*, the *morbid*, the *knowing*, the *kitschy*, the *arch*."[13] Wilde's famous observation on the impossibility of reading the death of Dickens's Little Nell without laughing is an example of this kind of awareness, of course, as is, more explicitly, his very articulate critique of charity in *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891). Charity, Wilde writes there, is "a ridiculously inadequate mode of partial restitution, or a sentimental dole, usually accompanied by some impertinent attempt on the part of the sentimentalist to tyrannize over [the] private lives" of the

[11] On Zola's unexpected tastes, as recounted by Maupassant, see Claire White, "Easy Reading: Zola's Kitsch," in *Lucidity: Essays in Honour of Alison Finch*, ed. by Ian James and Emma Wilson (Oxford, 2016), 72-85 (75).
[12] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, 2008 [1990]), 132.
[13] Sedgwick, 143.

poor.[14] The full version of the letter to Alfred Douglas that became *De profundis*, finally, offers one of the most succinct and compelling formulations of the perniciousness of sentimentality: "A sentimentalist is simply one who wants to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it. [....] And remember that the sentimentalist is always a cynic at heart. Indeed, sentimentality is merely the bank holiday of cynicism."[15] Yet it hardly seems necessary to make the case for the status of *De profundis* itself, and especially *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, as sentimental works: consider in the latter the faux-naive choice of a "popular" form, the vicarious use of a lower-class proxy for the narrator-author-reader's sense of shame and fear of death. Vincent O'Sullivan claims that "to write [the *Ballad*, Wilde] had to violate all his theories of art," among which we are presumably to count his longstanding embargo on the sentimental; and certainly, Wilde's letters indicate a didactic purpose (the poem was partly intended and largely read as a plea for prison reform: "I think I shall call the whole thing *Poésie et Propagande*," Wilde wrote to Robert Ross) that we might consider uncharacteristic to say the least.[16] But this idea of a Wilde swallowing an unpalatable approach for a political purpose misses an important nuance: namely, that the necessary and sufficient difference between the sentimental mode as abhorred or adopted by Wilde is, as Sedgwick observes, as simple as the replacement of female feeling (the mid-Victorian preference) with the suffering male body (the late-Victorian and protomodernist innovation) as the sentimental object par excellence.

Zola's case is arguably more remarkable. For the bulk of his career he belonged to a French realist current whose *raison d'être* was, precisely, the eradication of sentimentalism along with a group of loosely related terms, first among them "idealism," meaning literature that deviated from blunt mimetic reproduction in favor of the consoling, the speculative, or the

[14] Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, vol. 4*, 234. For the quip about Little Nell, see Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London, 1987), 441.
[15] Oscar Wilde, *Epistola: in carcere et vinculis*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, vol. 2*, 144.
[16] O'Sullivan, 97; Oscar Wilde, letter to Robert Ross, 19 October 1897, in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* (henceforth *CL*, references in text), ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London, 2000), 964.

utopian. This current, as Margaret Cohen has shown, was also responsible for the aggressive gendering of "serious" literature as masculine that was well in place by the 1860s when Zola's career as a novelist began, and which associated words such as "idealism," "romanticism" and "sentimentalism" with writing for and by women. The key figure in this anti-feminine, anti-idealist campaign was George Sand, who despite her enormous success and popularity came to embody what the serious novel should *not* be according to this school.[17] Yet Zola's final three novels, the completed volumes of the *Quatre Évangiles* series, with their rosy tableaux of smiling children, their utopian fantasies of formerly divided communities melting together in a "communal kiss" (*OC* 20: 360), and their repetitive vocabulary of tears and tenderness, sound every conceivable sentimental, not to mention Sandian, note.[18] Zola even acknowledged this shift himself, in a letter to Octave Mirbeau of 29 November 1899, thanking the latter for his review of *Fécondité*, the first of the *Évangiles*. There, Zola recognizes that his latest work exhibits many of the defects that the realist school invariably held against idealism, in particular its didactic reliance on "the banal truths of morality in action," and admits that "it's all very utopian," before concluding: "I've been dissecting for forty years now; I must be permitted to dream a little in my old age" (*OC* 18: 646). These characteristics account for the long critical neglect of those later novels, and the recent revival of interest in them owes much to the rehabilitation of "idealist" fiction by scholars of nineteenth-century French women's writing such as Cohen and Naomi Schor.[19]

I think it not coincidental, though I do not mean to imply any simple causality, that the sentimental turn in Wilde and Zola aligns with both authors' attempts to pursue a utopian line

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[17] See Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton, 1999); and Naomi Schor, *George Sand and Idealism* (New York, 1993), in general.

[18] For a fuller demonstration of these sentimental features, which is beyond the scope of this article, see Andrew J. Counter, "A Sentimental Affair: *Vérité*," *Romanic Review*, 102 (2011), 391-409; and Claire White, "Labour of Love: George Sand's *La Ville noire* and Émile Zola's *Travail*," *Modern Language Review*, 106 (2011), 697-708.

[19] On utopianism in Zola, see Béatrice Laville, "L'Écriture de l'utopie," in *Zola à l'œuvre: hommage à Auguste Dezalay*, ed. by Gisèle Séginger (Strasbourg, 2003), 233-44.

of thought through Christian language, themes, and imagery. In Wilde's *De profundis*, the sentimental image of Christ and the Passion is a more personalized continuation of the utopian socialist Christology of *The Soul of Man*; while in the *Quatre Évangiles*, Zola borrows biblical themes and language to create a set of secular utopian socialist "gospels." In their approach to their themes, the writers are ostensibly contrasting, but oddly convergent. To be sure, *De profundis* "superficially [...] reads like [Wilde] at his most conventionally Christian," as Jennifer Stevens puts it; while the atheist Zola embarks on his final project with the aim of, in Jean-Louis Bory's words, "ending God's monopoly on the Good News."[20] But on the other hand, the individualist Christology of *De profundis* entails an "outright rejection of anything approaching traditional Christianity and, most especially, the Christian ethos of humility,"[21] while Zola's atheist project takes as its fundamental gesture the substantial borrowing of a Christian vocabulary (beginning with the very notion of the "évangile," and the names of the novels' protagonists: Matthieu, Luc, and Marc), for reasons I shall discuss shortly. This precarious—or skillful—positioning of both writers between the conventional and the radical, the formally Christian and the substantively heterodox, seems to me to owe much to a single literary forerunner, and even a single text: Ernest Renan and his *Vie de Jésus* (1863). Considering the relationship of both writers to Renan's work can, I think, reveal a surprising amount about the late nineteenth-century literary field and its competing aesthetic prescriptions.

Renan's skeptical account of the life of Jesus treats its subject as a uniquely charismatic prophet whose primary distinction relative to his contemporaries was what Renan repeatedly calls his "idealism."[22] Contemptuous of the religious law of the Pharisees and indifferent to the temporal law of the Roman state, Renan's Jesus is also an antinomian, and at least in some

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[20] Jennifer Stevens, *The Historical Jesus and the Literary Imagination, 1860-1920* (Liverpool, 2010), 169; Jean-Louis Bory, quoted in Sophie Guermès, *La Religion de Zola: naturalisme et déchristianisation* (Paris, 2006), 489.
[21] Stevens, 170.
[22] See Ernest Renan, *Vie de Jésus*, ed. by Jean Gaulmier (Paris, 1974), 229, 230.

sense a protosocialist, given his praise of the poor and repeated denunciations of the rich; his life, Renan notes, was the first "victory of the popular sentiment."[23] Renan is famously equivocal on the question of Jesus's divinity—and, indeed, on the question of divinity in general: while the book certainly allows for a belief in a higher power, and even strictly speaking a belief that Jesus was inspired by that power, it promotes neither notion. Its ambiguity on these questions, as well as its outright contradiction of certain doctrinal truths (the first properly biographical sentence of the book, for instance, simply asserts: "Jesus was born in Nazareth"), provoked predictable ire in orthodox Catholic circles. Yet a more interesting type of response for our purposes is represented by Gustave Flaubert's, in a letter of 23 October 1863:

> I wasn't enthused by my friend Renan's latest book as the public was. I prefer such matters to be treated with a more scientific approach. But, precisely because of its easy form, the mass of women [le monde des femmes] and shallow readers [légers lecteurs] have fallen for it.[24]

Flaubert's sniffy critique of the work's *forme facile* refers to the linear, novelistic shape of Renan's book, but also to the seductively frictionless intimacy the reader enjoys with its charismatic protagonist.[25] The conspicuous gendering of his reaction suggests in addition that his disapproval is not merely structural, but stems from the realist/idealist literary quarrel, which invariably expressed itself with some metaphorical overlay of misogyny.

Moreover, Flaubert's apparently formal objection also implies through a kind of mise-en-abyme a critique of the book's content. Jesus as imagined by Renan is, precisely, a man who succeeds thanks to the enthusiasm and love he engenders in simple folks, and especially

[23] Renan, 488.
[24] Gustave Flaubert, letter to Marie-Sophie Leroyer de Chantepie, 23 October 1863, at https://flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/jet/public/correspondance/. Accessed 8 February 2019.
[25] On literary responses to Renan's book, see Robert D. Priest, *The Gospel According to Renan: Reading, Writing, and Religion in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 2015), 134-44.

in women, and whose teaching is nothing especially new, except that he delivers it, in Renan's hugely suggestive words, with an extra-special "balm":

> But he spoke in tones full of balm [onction], which made long-familiar aphorisms seem new. A moral teaching is not composed merely of more or less clearly articulated principles. The poetry of the precept, which is what makes it lovable, is more important than the precept itself.[26]

Onction: the word is as applicable to Renan's text as to the words of its hero. I highlight it here because it presages the metaphorical language (alongside the ever-present language of misogyny, that is) in which Renan's book would be denounced, and in which the sentimental in general is still often derided: the language of the near senses of taste, smell, and touch, as if the critic were recoiling from some unwelcome intimacy. At the extreme end of the phobic reactions provoked by such unctuousness, we find Nietzsche's scorn, in a moment also highlighted by Sedgwick, for the "'objective' armchair scholar, [...] with his perfume by Renan and his high falsetto applause."[27] But already in 1863, one self-proclaimed "rationalist deist" had objected to *Vie de Jésus* by denouncing it as a "perfumery" and as "sickly [écœurant]," good only for readers "with a sweet tooth [affriandés] for novels."[28] One is reminded of Sedgwick's evocation of a certain J. M. Cameron ("distinguished professor of religion") and his 1986 *New York Times* rant against "religious kitsch," that "nastily flavored religious jello, a fouling of the sources of religious feeling."[29] Where the sentimental is concerned, as these examples illustrate, the difference between the most sacred unction and the most abject pollution is only ever a matter of taste.

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[26] Renan, 193-4.
[27] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. by Douglas Smith (Oxford, 1996), 132; see Sedgwick, 151.
[28] P. Larroque, *Opinion des déistes rationalistes sur la vie de Jésus selon M. Renan* (Paris, 1863), 10, 27.
[29] Sedgwick, 141-3 (142).

Among the "légers lecteurs" upon whom Renan's unctuousness evidently worked its magic was, famously, Oscar Wilde, who included *Vie de Jésus* on the list of books he asked to be added to the Reading Prison library. (The request was granted, on condition that the book be supplied in French, thus shielding the prison's monoglot population—presumptively even more "léger" than Wilde—from corruption.)[30] In *De profundis*, Wilde describes it as "that gracious fifth gospel, the gospel according to St Thomas," and his remarks on Christ there closely mirror Renan's own sentimental image of Jesus, as well as Matthew Arnold's in *Literature and Dogma* (1873), in their focus on love as Jesus's primary innovation. More importantly, Wilde's discussion of Christ as a "poet," a key trope of his Christology, and "romantic," essentially substitutes these words for Renan's "idealist"—a shift arguably authorized by Renan's emphasis on Jesus's oral style ("the poetry of the precept"), as well as by his references to him as, for instance, an "incomparable artist."[31] In a startling passage of his reminiscences of Wilde, indeed, Vincent O'Sullivan argues for a strong "resemblance other than physical" (though physical too!) between Wilde and that very figurehead of idealism—yes, he really means George Sand—and identifies their relation to an all-too human Jesus as one aspect of that resemblance: "Both had a propensity to call down a sort of Nestorian Christ and to implicate him in their affairs. At times they identified themselves with this Christ."[32] This tendency of Wilde's was of long standing, and was already detectable in *The Soul of Man*. Still, one quite understands how, as the prisoner of Reading Gaol composed *De profundis* and reread Renan's *Jésus*, it became even more pronounced: Jesus, Renan explains, "informs his

[30] Ellmann, 477.
[31] Renan, 358.
[32] O'Sullivan, 156, 157.

disciples of all his troubles with the police, without ever thinking that this might be something to be ashamed of."[33] Idealist, poet, antinomian: an irresistible mixture for Wilde.[34]

Zola's relationship with Renan was more complicated. Certainly, as a journeyman journalist Zola had appeared to acknowledge how much he had learned from reading Renan's series of works on the history of Christianity (*Vie de Jésus* was followed by *Les Apôtres* in 1866 and *Saint Paul* in 1869). Both Guermès and Clélia Anfray observe how, in his review of *Saint Paul* in July 1869, Zola appears ingenuously to admit that the bowdlerized "religious history" he had been fed as a boy had stayed with him until corrected by Renan's research.[35] Yet Zola had long since lost his faith by this time, and, as Guermès shows, this had gone hand in hand with the evolution of his aesthetic attitudes. Zola's rejection of religion, Guermès explains, was synonymous with his fanatical adoption of the realist credo, expressed in his case through the repeated rejection of what he called "poésie," meaning on the one hand, excessive attention to form or style and *a fortiori*, the poetic form as such; and on the other, any sort of literary idealism or romanticism.[36]

This meant that, whatever Zola's appreciation of Renan's scholarship, he could never full-throatedly endorse his works in their entirety. Indeed, his judgement was rather of the Flaubertian cast, and his review of *Les Apôtres* tellingly adopts one of those near-sense metaphors that so often serve to express revulsion at the sentimental. The more serious religious histories of the German scholars would not do in France, a tongue-in-cheek Zola explains:

> These heavy, thick tomes would be unreadable in France, where we prefer our truths cut up small and rolled in sugar.

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[33] Renan, 229.

[34] A full account of Wilde's conceptual use of Christ is beyond my remit in this article, but see Schramm, in general, and Stevens, 139-74, as well as John Allen Quintus, "Christ, Christianity and Oscar Wilde," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 33 (1991), 514-27.

[35] See Guermès, 47-49; and Clélia Anfray, "Zola, lecteur de Renan," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 38 (2009-10), 199-210 (201).

[36] See Guermès, 25-55.

> M. Renan, who is as much a poet as a scholar, has understood his audience perfectly, and has served up its dish of choice, by clothing history in all the colors of the novel, and simplifying truths in a sweetened [adoucie] and engaging manner.[37]

As much that of a "poet" as of a scholar—not a compliment with Zola, for reasons we have just seen—Renan's work is not merely sweet, but sweetened, implicitly saccharine; a nineteenth-century stylistic Jell-O, perhaps. A decade later, in articles composed upon the election of Renan to the Académie Française in 1878, Zola's tone had become openly hostile, indeed almost Nietzschean in its metaphors of odor, liquidity, and effeminacy. Far from a victory for the liberalizing, secularizing left, Zola wrote in that same year, Renan's election was sadly consistent with the Académie's fondness for "castrated literature"; Renan, though talented, has the capital vice "of drowning his learning in a stream [flot] of sentimental religiosity," and this abject flow of consoling falsehood indulges at the level of form the very religious yearnings its content purported to challenge (*OC* 11: 857, 856). The following year, in an open letter addressed to the youth of France, whose subsequent inclusion in *Le Roman expérimental* (1880) grants it a sort of canonical status, Zola castigated Renan at even greater length, and reiterated his understanding of the ineluctable mutual entailments of idealism, poetry, and religious belief. Renan, Zola insisted, had never reconciled himself to the loss of his faith in early adulthood, remained an "idealist," and allowed his "repressed beliefs" to find expression in—that metaphor again—"a stream [flot] of tender poetry." Renan's was a nature "soaked in religiosity"; his work seduced women and the weak-minded with its "seductive odour" (*OC* 9: 355).

The sheer amount of ink Zola devoted to Renan suggests that the historian occupied an unusually important place in the development of his own self-image as a writer. Tellingly, moreover, these same metaphors persisted to the very end of his career, as part of the anti-

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[37] Émile Zola, "Livres d'aujourd'hui et de demain," *L'Événement*, 160 (13 April 1866), 3-4 (4).

religious rhetoric of the thesis novels of the late 1890s. In *Lourdes* (1894), for instance, the "stream" image is used to characterize the titular city's deluge of what Claire White calls "sacred kitsch," the sort of tacky religious art known in French as *bondieuserie*: the protagonists quail before "a stream [flot] of religious merchandise" (*OC* 16: 291).[38] And in the last book of Zola's final novel, the Dreyfus-allegory *Vérité* (1902), the novel's clerical villains plot to retain their power by appealing to the town's women, through the copious deployment of rhetorical "balm" [onction] (*OC* 20: 330). But consider the following:

> A delightful freshness rose from the grass, as if friendly nature had come along to share in their embraces. The laughter never stopped; even the old folks seemed like playful children again. Faces shone sweetly [c'était un doux éclat des visages], beneath grey hair, beneath dark hair and blond. A whole lineage of joy, ravishing with the beauty of health: radiant children, handsome young men, adorable young women, loving spouses, side by side. And what sturdy appetites they had! (*OC* 18: 388)

Sturdy appetites indeed. There is little point in highlighting the aesthetic shortcomings of this passage, given that, the best efforts of revisionist literary history notwithstanding, the strongest critical stomachs still turn at such sugary delights. (Even Naomi Schor, concluding her epoch-making book on George Sand, recalls having found one of her works "almost literally nauseating.")[39] The tone of this passage—which depicts a celebratory family gathering from the final chapter of *Fécondité* (1900)—is entirely characteristic of what we might loosely call the "positive" mood of Zola's final three novels, which becomes the only mood as each draws to its utopian close.

Clearly, such passages bespeak a reconciliation with much that Zola had once scorned: the idealized, the poetic, the sentimental to be sure, even, as White suggests, the "kitsch"—the

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[38] White, "Easy Reading," 76.
[39] Schor, 214.

very categories, that is, which Zola previously associated with Renan, and which between them Renan and Wilde associated with Jesus Christ.[40] In these final works, as Henry James so aptly observed shortly after the author's death, Zola displays "a queer idealism of his own."[41] In a sense, the tone and vocabulary of the passage just quoted are that of a banal sentimentalism, rather than indicative of some specific debt. But another from the final chapter of *Travail* might well put us in mind of Renan's Jesus, who, we remember, was surrounded by loving women. Such is the happy fate of Zola's Luc:

> Three women adored him, surrounded him always with their solicitude, with a religious affection and devotion, always attentive to his smallest need. And they were infinitely good, infinitely tender, their serene eyes filling him always with the joy of living, their gentle hands [mains de douceur] supporting him, even to the grave. (*OC* 19: 346)

This, surely, is just the kind of thing Zola meant in denouncing Renan's "stream of sentimental religiosity," for the sentimental here is put into the service of a consoling idealization of human relations and, especially, death, with the whole thing structured around the borrowed religious language that gives the final series its name.

In evaluating Zola's risky decision to adopt the language of the hated clerical enemy in his secular gospels, Guermès suggests that Zola has finally come around to Renan's own view that humans have an "ineradicable need to believe."[42] On this showing, both Renan and Zola adopt certain formal techniques that satisfy that need (through their superficial resemblance to preexisting belief systems), the better to convey new, secular alternatives to the old doctrines. Not for nothing, then, did Roland Barthes say of these didactic-sentimental works that their "ideology" was not only "flagrant" but *poisseuse*: "sticky," or perhaps even better for our

[40] White, "Easy Reading," 81.
[41] Henry James, "Émile Zola" (1903), in *French Writers. Other European Writers* [etc], ed. by Leon Edel (New York, 1984), 888.
[42] Guermès, 454.

purposes, "tacky."[43] White, meanwhile, associates Zola's late change in manner with his interest, at once theoretical and evidently performative, in a democratized art—which is, after all, so often what is really targeted by the pejorative labels "kitsch" and "sentimental."[44] I agree with both of these interpretations, as I do at least to some extent with the notion that Wilde adopts the sentimental mode in the *Ballad of Reading Gaol* the better to marry "*Poésie et Propagande*." "Everything to be true must become a religion. And agnosticism should have its ritual no less than faith," claimed Wilde in *De profundis* (*DP* 165). One suspects his meaning is something along these same lines; the forms of religious belief and the modes of its outward expression are not contingent upon the content of those beliefs, but rather reflect a deep need within human nature to *feel* truth as much as to understand it cognitively. New doctrines—including the redistributive socialism that, in a roundabout way, Wilde and Zola came to share—must accede to the status of religion through the formal modes of feeling. But as I have already suggested in the case of Wilde, purely intentionalist versions of these arguments overlook the possibility of an authentic change in aesthetic sensibility accompanying a shift in literary purpose; the possibility that an author, in conceiving the urge to teach, even to preach, might equally conceive a new delight in the unctuous modes that so lend themselves to those purposes. "I must be allowed to dream a little in my old age," as Zola wrote to Mirbeau. And so, like Wilde, he tried the sentimental—and acquired a taste for it.

The Martyr Complex

Yet as the scenes of public humiliation with which I began show, there is more at work in the Christian references of Wilde's and Zola's later works than the propounding of a new political gospel. Both writers also came to understand their own position in those final years of the

[43] Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris, 1973), 52.
[44] White, "Easy Reading," 81-84.

nineteenth century through reference to Christ and his Passion. In the case of Wilde, this self-understanding is very obvious: if *De profundis* never quite asserts that its author "is" Christ, his willing self-identification as a martyr and the long evocation of Christ as poet and individualist that follows encourage the reader to make that association. It is in part for this reason that Stevens identifies the "rejection of [...] the Christian ethos of humility" as the most heterodox aspect of Wilde's text.[45] And it happens that a very similar impulse of self-aggrandizement tempered by coyness is to be observed in Émile Zola's relation to the Christ-figure. Between the publication of "J'accuse . . .!" and his trial, Zola gave an interview to the journalist Ely Halpérine-Kaminsky in which he observed, according to Halpérine-Kaminsky's recollection:

> Sooner or later, the truth will out. I have just been sent an extract from a book by Renan, about Christ. Though I cannot and would not wish to compare myself to that sublime martyr, I can experience the same sentiments.[46]

Later, when Halpérine-Kaminsky asked Zola to confirm his remarks and identify the passage, the novelist graciously directed his interviewer to the relevant page in *Vie de Jésus*, yet appended a polite request: "But I beg you, please don't quote the sentence about Christ: it would make me look utterly ridiculous."[47] The later Zola was not, then, despite what that same Henry James might have thought, *entirely* "without a sense of the ridiculous."[48]

This ambivalence of humility and pride is moreover built into the Christ allusion itself, which glorifies the one who makes it only to the extent that he has suffered an especially humiliating public abasement. Wilde's evocation of his experience at Clapham Junction turns on his ridiculous, comical appearance as one of the "zanies of sorrow," a laughter-provoking

[45] Stevens, 170.
[46] Ely Halpérine-Kaminsky, citing Zola's own words back to him in a letter of 26 January 1898; quoted in Zola, *Correspondance*, ed. by B. H. Bakker, 10 vols (Montréal, 1978-1995), 9: 156-7.
[47] Zola, letter of 28 January 1898 to Ely Halpérine-Kaminsky, in *Correspondance*, 9: 156.
[48] Henry James, 888.

"grotesque" (*DP* 187). The "outrages" inflicted upon Christ, and which give their titles to de Groux's paintings, are most viscerally exemplified however by the "outrage so sanguinary" recorded by Sherard: the act of the man who, having revealed Wilde's identity, supposedly spat in his face.[49] While one might wonder about Wilde's reasons for omitting this incident if it truly occurred, it seems not only plausible, but *necessary*; it is as if, were it not true, one would have to invent it. That sense is confirmed when we reread Luc Froment's "Calvary" in *Travail*, in which Zola recalls his own experiences outside the Palais de Justice, but enhances them through the addition of the same repulsive detail. As the crowd pursues Luc along the rue de Brias, one man in particular has stood out:

> In front of them all ran frenetically one short, skinny worker, a redhead, with wide, addled eyes. With a final leap, he drew level with the man he had been hounding since the bottom of the street, and, with all the violence he could muster, in an inexplicable frenzy of loathing, spat in his face. (*OC* 19: 160)

In a description of an ordeal that is explicitly likened to a Calvary, this incident must of course be read as an allusion to the gospels of Matthew and Mark, both of whom record Jesus's having been spat upon by an anonymous crowd twice, first at the house of Caiaphas, later at the palace of Pontius Pilate (Matt. 26:67, 27:30; Mark 14:65, 15:19). But it is more than an incidental borrowing. The experience of being spat upon is emblematic of an indispensable feature of these, as of all fin-de-siècle passions: abjection, understood as yet another sort of unwelcome intimacy whose characteristic element often seems to be liquid. The worker's sputum follows the blood that trickles down Luc's forehead from a wound inflicted by a hurled rock, and mingles there with the tears Luc can no longer contain under the indignity; just as, in *De profundis*, Wilde's recollection of having "wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time" for a year after his humiliation at Clapham Junction, following so immediately

[49] Sherard, *Oscar Wilde*, 211.

his allusion to the unknown man who revealed his identity, seems to substitute one bodily fluid for the other that he has omitted (*DP* 187). In Zola, these bodily fluids only literalize a metaphorical field of liquid "outrages" that uncannily recalls the "stream" of cloying religiosity with which Zola reproached Renan: Luc advances beneath an "ignominious stream [flot] of outrages and threats," and weeps "in the supreme bitterness of the gall [fiel] that showered down upon him" (*OC* 19: 160).

At stake in this hyperbolic mode of self-representation is more than suffering alone, however intense Wilde's suffering might have been, and however much he focuses on that theme in *De profundis*. Equally essential to both writers' invocation of the martyrological model is, I would argue, the publicity of martyrdom. As a contributor to *La Revue blanche* put it, in an article on this very theme that appeared, curiously enough, mere weeks before Wilde's death:

> The martyr, called upon to confess Christ publicly, knows that the hostile pagan crowd is eagerly watching, that thousands of unbelieving eyes are fixed upon him, searching his face for a moment's weakness.[50]

The martyr as sublime cynosure: this is a good part of the appeal of the theme to Wilde and Zola. Both had long enjoyed not simply fame, but super-celebrity of a distinctly ambivalent kind, in which they had been denounced as self-promoting *puffistes* and, occasionally in Wilde's case, persistently in Zola's, purveyors of obscenity; only subsequently to encounter unprecedented levels of public opprobrium (or *fiel*, bile or gall, as Zola invariably puts it in another nod to the gospels) in their legal crises of 1895 and 1898 respectively. Wilde in *De profundis* insightfully explains the mechanism:

[50] Armand Dennery, "Les Martyrs chrétiens: étude de psychologie historique," *La Revue blanche*, 177 (1900), 241-51 (249).

I have come, not from obscurity into the momentary notoriety of crime, but from a sort of eternity of fame to a sort of eternity of infamy, and sometimes seem to myself to have shown, if indeed it required showing, that between the famous and the infamous there is but one step, if as much as one. (*DP* 167)

What Wilde articulates here is I think a historically specific phenomenon, an atavistic fin-de-siècle avatar of the older aristocratic suspicion of the polluting public sphere: the view, that is, that those who seek the limelight are, as it were, asking for it, and that those who court the mob are justly punished when the mob turns on them. It is at least in part to this conflation of fame and infamy that the martyrological reference responds: by substituting a pre-modern form of public spectacle for a characteristically modern one (the scandal), both writers can acknowledge their status as cynosures, while cannily shifting the ethical values assigned to the various actors in the scene.

For of course, both Zola and Wilde consider themselves "justified," and thus unjustly persecuted. This claim is unproblematic in Zola's case; and if the rhetorical top-notes of Wilde's *De profundis* speak of repentance and reform, there are nevertheless signs that Wilde too grasped, or grasped very soon thereafter, the self-justificatory power of martyr symbolism. In a letter to the early sexual-rights campaigner George Ives of March 1898, Wilde imagined the future abrogation of the Labouchère Amendment under which he had been convicted:

Yes: I have no doubt we shall win, but the road is long, and red with monstrous martyrdoms. Nothing but the reform of the Criminal Law Amendment Act would do any good. (*CL* 1044)

In short, what the martyr reference allows for is, as the contributor to *La Revue blanche* usefully continued, "a noble publicity"[51]—a rare commodity indeed in the late nineteenth century, and one harder to come by for writers of Wilde's and Zola's reputations than for most. The martyr's

[51] Dennery, 251.

sublime abjection provides a rhetorical means of imagining extreme public visibility while mitigating the charge of narcissism and exhibitionism that dogged both writers throughout their careers—though even this effect, as Zola's request to Halpérine-Kaminsky makes clear, had its limits.

Yet this explanation must be set against the ubiquity of images of martyrdom in the culture of the period, and the entailments of such imagery in Wilde's and Zola's work. French culture since 1860 had indeed seen a significant revival of interest in Christian-derived depictions of suffering, often of the most graphically abject kind, as an aesthetic device. Such depictions were to be found in the works of avowedly Catholic writers, such as Barbey d'Aurevilly and Joris-Karl Huysmans, whose *Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam* (1901) is perhaps the capstone of this gruesome trend; as well as in the work of figures whose relationship to dogma was rather different, from Gustave Moreau's vivid images of Salome with the levitating head of John the Baptist (1876) and his many androgynous Saint Sebastians (1869-76), to Gustave Flaubert's *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* (1874) and *Trois contes* (1877). A full consideration of these works is beyond the scope of this article. Yet all may be associated with the Symbolist-Decadent lineage of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), and formed a particularly rich seam of the "dark Romanticism" explored by Mario Praz. (The late twentieth-century preoccupation with Flaubert's mimetic techniques have partly, but not entirely, obscured those more aestheticist facets of his art that allowed the arch-Decadent Joseph Péladan, in 1885, to prize above all "Baudelaire in verse and Flaubert in prose.")[52]

It seems unnecessary to prove that this trend was a significant influence on Oscar Wilde. While it is salutary to recall with Stevens that Wilde's writings about Christ were often "lacking

[52] See Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1970 [1933]), esp. ch. 5 ("Byzantium"); Péladan cited in Praz, 154.

in the kind of religious aestheticism that typified the decadent Catholicism of the 1890s,"[53] his *Salomé* (1891) clearly was not, and some combination of Moreau's *Apparition* and "Hérodias" from Flaubert's *Trois contes*—which the undergraduate Wilde borrowed from Walter Pater upon their publication in 1877, and greatly admired—doubtless played a role in the piece's conception.[54] Superficially more surprising is Zola's flirtation with this aesthetic, in the very novel whose rabidly anticlerical and secularizing purpose would seem most to militate against it. The closing pages of *Lourdes* contain a miniature saint's life, recounting the final hours of Bernadette Soubirous, to whom the Virgin first appeared in the grotto outside the eponymous town. In one of the most powerful passages he ever wrote, one which seems at moments to prefigure (and even outdo) Huysmans's *Sainte Lydwine*, Zola allows his narrative voice to be absorbed into Bernadette's faith and share in the agony and ecstasy of her passion, from its most abject details (Bernadette's "abscess of the bone" and "necrotizing malady," for instance, which necessitate "endless dressings") to its most transcendent meanings: "Her passion was complete: she, like the Savior, had been nailed and crowned with thorns, had had her limbs flogged, her side split open" (*OC* 16: 331, 334). Full of bravura and provocation, this sequence suggests not only Zola's awareness of the Decadent-Catholic martyrological aesthetic, but even his appreciation of its literary power. It might thus be a read as a "borrowing" in anticipation of the outright appropriation of the last works.

Despite its brief indulgence of Bernadette's faith, however, the passage of *Lourdes* remains consistent with the novel's ideological commitments in that it presents her experience as a sexualized rapture (she imagines being crucified limb to limb, mouth to mouth with Christ); sure enough, one of Zola's bugbears in the 1890s was the notion that the Roman Catholic cult siphoned the libidinal energy of women away from reproductive work and into

[53] Stevens, 164. His theoretical writings favor ethical considerations and his short stories about Jesus (many of which were never recorded other than in secondhand versions, notably those by André Gide) are more ironic in tone, Stevens suggests.
[54] See Ellmann, 80-81, 354-55.

sterile devotion. The martyr topos makes sense—or rather, makes the sense Zola wants it to make—by virtue of its protagonist's sex: her abjection can thus be at once aesthetically powerful, and recuperable by a secular-Republican sexual ethics. Things were not so simple, however, around the time of the Dreyfus Affair. Christopher Forth has set the rhetorical "martyrings" of the Affair, and especially the "Jesus treatment" lavished on Zola, in the context of France's much discussed "crisis of masculinity" following the Franco-Prussian War. Forth argues that, since French Catholics had typically "emphasize[d] the 'feminine' qualities of Jesus in their devotional practices," the use of Christ as a figure for some male political actor required careful negotiation. For the representation to sit coherently within the narrative of national regeneration that was at the heart of the Dreyfusard engagement, it was necessary to substitute a virile, ideally masculine body for the more vulnerable and feminine body of the traditional French Christ. Forth points to images of Zola-as-Christ in which he appears improbably muscular or lean, and draws particular attention to the fine Zolian physique on display in Orens Denizard's famous postcard of 1899, depicting a loin-clothed Christ-Zola descended from his cross for the victory (fig. 1).

This panic of early Third Republic France can also be understood as an instance of a more general problem, what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the "scandal" of images of Jesus:

> Images of Jesus [...] have, indeed, a unique position in modern culture as images of the unclothed or unclothable male body, often in extremis and / or in ecstasy, prescriptively meant to be gazed at and adored. The scandal of such a figure within a homophobic economy of the male gaze doesn't seem to abate.[55]

It is, moreover, from this "scandal" of Jesus's exhibitionism that another intersecting tradition arises, one closely tied up with, though not reducible to, the Decadent-Symbolist thread: the tradition of queer (or gay, or gay male) martyrs, saints, and Christ figures. Such figures form a

[55] Sedgwick, 140.

leitmotiv of homoerotic culture: a rhetorical appropriation which, as Jason Hartford notes, need not perpetuate the control of the Church, the figure of the queer martyr, embodied most obviously in the transpierced Saint Sebastian, has at least Renaissance roots, but acquired its fullest articulation only with the advent of the sexological understanding of homosexuality.[56] On the one hand, that fact in itself gives a sense of how adjacent such figurations always were to Catholicism as such, since that eminently secular epistemic shift did not obviate, but rather intensified the queer-martyr association. And yet on the other, as Hartford points out, the queer martyr figure is equally perhaps the best demonstration of an under-appreciated insight of Jonathan Dollimore about the relationship between sexuality and religion:

> The indebtedness of sexual radicalism to religion remains apparent in the way it imagines sexuality as a powerful force. Only now it is the medium not of evil but of freedom. [...] The religious antecedents are also apparent in the sexual radical's idea of sexual desire being an identity, the source of an authentic selfhood for which we must be prepared to fight and suffer.[57]

A constitutive ingredient of this homoerotic tradition is, I would suggest, abjection. The abject is indeed a staple feature of saints' lives from the medieval period to Huysmans's *Saint Lydwine* (the bleeding wounds, the weeping sores, the leprotic afflictions), and functions there as a marker of the saint's ability to transcend the terrestrial and the bodily. In its queer or homoerotic iterations, however, the martyr figure's abjection takes on a very particular set of new meanings. The appeal of depictions of suffering male martyrs, these "beguiling outcasts recognized across the divide of centuries,"[58] to the male homosexual imagination comes not just from the accidentally subversive command to regard male nakedness, nor even male

[56] Jason James Hartford, *Sexuality, Iconography, and Fiction in French: Queering the Martyr* (London, 2018), 1, 36, 24. On Saint Sebastian, see Richard A. Kaye, "'Determined Raptures': St. Sebastian and the Victorian Discourse of Decadence," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27 (1999), 269-303.
[57] Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* (Oxford, 1991), 226; cited in Hartford, 23.
[58] Kaye, 271.

nakedness in ecstasy, but very precisely male nakedness ecstatic *in an experience of abjection*: the martyr glories, even finds pleasure, in what society takes to be humiliating, shameful, disgusting, degrading, and ultimately deadly. Such is the queer subject's relationship to its own desire.

It is clear that Oscar Wilde's interest in martyrdom was partly determined by these associations, and that his writings and life story did much to shape them for the future (just as they did "homosexual identity" more broadly, in Alan Sinfield's influential account).[59] References to Wilde as a "saint" or a "martyr" are too numerous to count, in French and English sources, and appeared from the moment of his conviction, but proliferated to the point of banality following his death. There is evidence, moreover, that Zola too intuited something of this symbolic nexus. In 1895-96, Zola embarked upon a series of polemical articles which, alongside his fiction of the period, represent interventions in those French culture wars of the late 1890s that would find such violent expression in the Dreyfus Affair. One such piece, from February 1896, is "Le Solitaire." The title should be understood to refer to an ascetic monk or anchorite, a sort of Saint Anthony figure, and indeed, Zola frequently uses it in this generic way in his later novels. In the 1896 article, however, it refers to the poet Paul Verlaine, who had died the previous month. Now in his remarks on Christ in *De profundis*, Wilde would dwell lovingly on Verlaine, "the one Christian poet since Dante," alongside the anarchist Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin, as "two of the most perfect lives I have come across"; both, he points out, are "men who have passed years in prison," and this degradation is, we understand, an intrinsic part of their claim to sublimity, as it is, implicitly, to Wilde's. But in his 1896 article, Zola ridicules this sort of canonization of Verlaine, anticipating with remarkable accuracy the terms of Wilde's later hagiography:

[59] See Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (London, 1994), in general.

> And now, the legend is written; our literary youth has a new cult. Verlaine becomes the martyr of the people's stupidity, the people by whom he didn't care to be understood, but who ought to have fed him anyway. His face is held up as the very banner of rebellious individualism. (*OC* 17: 384)

Though Verlaine's sexual unconventionality goes unmentioned in "Le Solitaire"—as, indeed, it does in *De profundis*—it is everywhere present. Zola decidedly had sex on the brain in this period, and his other interventions in *Le Figaro* in 1895-96 inveigh not only against the non-reproductive sexual practices that had led to France's low birth rate ("Dépopulation," May 1895), but also against French youth's taste for literary "idealism," which apparently leads to "the love that makes no children"—that is, homosexuality ("A la jeunesse," February 1895; *OC* 17: 390).[60] Zola's interventions of 1896 thus identify a nexus of associations that are almost exactly those at work in the queer martyrology of Wilde: suffering, sexuality, antinomianism, individualism, idealism, abjection, saintliness. What differs is their respective attitudes to this nexus.

With all this in mind, let us return to the unclothed Christ-Zola of the Orens postcard. Forth, we remember, presents this image as evidence of the Dreyfusards' efforts to imagine a more masculine Christ, not the feminized Christ of French Catholic practice, in the context of wider Third-Republic anxieties about masculinity. No doubt this is true; the question, though, is whether the strategy works. For as Sedgwick continues, having noted the "scandal" of the image of Jesus: "Efforts to disembody this body, for instance by attenuating, Europeanizing, or feminizing it, only entangle it the more compromisingly among various modern figurations of the homosexual."[61] That Sedgwick should include "feminizing" on her list of ineffective solutions underscores that it is the *masculinity* of Christ's body that makes this iconographic

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[60] On this, and its links to the Wilde case through the character of Hyacinthe in *Paris*, see Andrew J. Counter, "Zola's fin-de-siècle Reproductive Politics," *French Studies*, 68 (2014), 193-208 (206-07).
[61] Sedgwick, 140.

exhibitionism so problematic within that "homophobic economy of the male gaze." There is indeed every reason to suppose as Richard Kaye does that the passive role of the martyr, and of Christ himself, was *intrinsically* feminizing from the point of view of nineteenth-century gender norms.[62] The feminization alluded to by Sedgwick would thus minimize this troubling discrepancy between the depicted body and the sexual symbolism assigned to it, while the masculinization asserted by Forth would only increase it. Yet either normalizing tactic, as Sedgwick makes clear, is doomed to failure. For it is not ultimately the exposure of the body to the gaze alone that gives these scenes their unique volatility, but rather their exposure to the gaze in their state of ecstatic abjection.

Which is, finally, what makes the moment of Luc Froment's "Calvary" in *Travail* so very arresting. Luc, we recall, has been drenched in a metaphorical "stream of outrages," then wounded to blood by a hurled stone, then caught by the young worker, who spits in his face. The episode continues:

> With a final leap, [the worker] drew level with the man he had been hounding since the bottom of the street, and, with all the violence he could muster, in an inexplicable frenzy of loathing, spat in his face. [....] This time, [Luc] tottered, beneath such an abominable outrage. He appeared to blanch terribly, while, as he reared up involuntarily to his full height, his good hand rose, terrible, vengeful. He could have crushed the little man with one blow, as a miserable dwarf beside a glorious colossus [colosse]. But Luc, in his strength, in his beauty [en sa force, en sa beauté], had time to check himself. He did not bring down his fist. Instead, two heavy tears streamed down his cheeks, tears of infinite sorrow that he had so far managed to restrain, but which he was now unable to hide, in the supreme bitterness of the gall that showered down upon him. [...] There were some

[62] Kaye, 272-73.

sniggers, but they allowed him to return home, bloody and alone [solitaire]. (*OC* 19: 160)

As Luc suppresses the murderous blow, the narrator hits us with something even more striking: that “en sa force, en sa beauté.” Among the many remarkable things about Zola’s later writing are moments such as this, when he attempts to depict his vision of healthy male beauty—whereas in his earlier *Rougon-Macquart* series, male beauty *per se* is generally presented as effeminate and thus pathological. When Zola wants his reader to know that one of his later heroes is beautifully masculine, or masculinely beautiful, or beautiful because masculine, the word that recurs is, as here, “colosse”: we are invited to imagine many of Zola’s later heroes as strapping Herculeses, which demonstrates clearly enough Zola’s participation in that fin-de-siècle masculine anxiety. And yet Luc’s hunkiness hardly defuses, but rather exacerbates the homoerotic entailments of this modern Passion play: this is a scene in which a strapping paragon of masculinity weeps, is spat on, is humiliated, all while being offered to the gaze as an object of exquisite beauty. As a projection of Zola’s own experience of public humiliation and opprobrium, of the sentiments he has in common with that “sublime martyr” Jesus Christ, it thus replicates the precise tonal blend of Wilde’s *De profundis*—a heady mixture of narcissism and self-abasement. Such is, more or less, Zola’s purpose. Yet it also—or, *thus* it also—becomes the site of an uncanny homoeroticism.

The Legend of Saint Ferdinand

I began with three public humiliations: Dreyfus’s, Wilde’s and Zola’s. One of these things is not like the others, however. To be sure, neither Zola nor especially Wilde may be thought to have *wanted* to be prosecuted as they were, or to have literally sought out the judicial punishment that was the basis of their “martyr” narratives. Yet Zola certainly knew that prosecution was a risk of “J’accuse . . !,” much as Wilde famously seems to have courted

disaster in bringing his suit against Queensberry. Both, more importantly, adopted the peculiarly freighted rhetoric of martyrdom for their own strategic purposes. Not so Dreyfus. In railing against Zola and Dreyfusardism in his pamphlet *Je m'accuse* (1900), Léon Bloy complains that the meaning of the word *martyre* has been usurped and diluted in his contemporary discourse: to call Dreyfus a martyr is "the stupidest, most repugnant of clichés," he shrieks, since Dreyfus has not *voluntarily* undergone punishment on behalf of others.[63] In his cockeyed way, he has a point: the Dreyfus-as-Christ or Dreyfus-as-martyr metaphors were inapt in various ways, and brought with them many invidious entailments. While Zola and Orens Denizard (who also drew Dreyfus himself as Christ, and whose series of postcards was entitled "Le Calvaire Dreyfus") mean well, their depiction of Dreyfus's ordeal as a martyrdom prettifies the brutality of his fate, and locates it within a set of Franco-Christian associations that seem somehow to dispossess him, as a Jew, of his own suffering and its specificity. In Birnbaum's "anti-Semitic moment," to restage the Passion in the defense of a Jew was necessarily an overdetermined endeavor given the centrality of that narrative, even in its post-Renanian secular iterations, to anti-Semitic thought. Renan, indeed, only manages to be a "nuanced" anti-Semite in his treatment of Jesus's arrest and execution in *Vie de Jésus*. The Jewish "nation" and its pettifogging, smallminded character is indeed, Renan asserts true to his ethno-essentialist approach, the cause of Jesus's death, but we ought not to hate contemporary Jews for this reason, such has been the degree of dilution of Jewish blood through intermarriage over the intervening two millennia.[64] This argument—that there are no "true" Jews left to hate—is the precursor to that found in Zola's last *Évangile*, which promises a future in which the Jews will simply disappear, along with all other confessional distinctions, through secularization and, again, intermarriage. "There is no place for difference in Zola's utopian

[63] Léon Bloy, *Je m'accuse* (Paris, 1900), 121-22.
[64] Renan, 463-64.

vision," writes Maurice Samuels of this promise, "and no place for Jews."[65] In light of this less-than-philosemitic approach, the Dreyfusard and Zolian use of Christian imagery seems even more problematic. "No more Jews, since there'll soon be no more Catholics," comments one character in the final book of *Vérité* (*OC* 20: 356). Yet the very title of the series in which this sentence appears, *Les Quatre Évangiles*, makes clear the asymmetry at its heart: at the level of metaphor at least, the Christian triumphs. Only the Jew truly vanishes.

These troubling questions of metaphorical coherence and confessional politics may be illuminated by an anecdote drawn from Wilde's last years in Paris. Between them, the Dreyfusard and Anti-Dreyfusard camps managed to make many of the Affair's players into would-be Christs: Dreyfus and Zola, as we have seen, but also Picquart and others; Anti-Dreyfusards, meanwhile, found their Christ in Hubert-Joseph Henry, that dutiful forger and suicide, and, it goes without saying, a national Judas in Dreyfus. Our last example breaks the already strained coherence of these shifting metaphors. It seems somehow inevitable that when Oscar Wilde arrived in Paris in February 1898, he should have fallen into the company of none other than Ferdinand Walsin-Esterhazy, then already widely understood to be the true author of the *bordereau* that had sent Dreyfus to Devil's Island. Their first encounter appears to have taken place on the weekend of 26-27 March; and while the meeting was facilitated by the journalist Rowland Strong, Strong had himself encountered Esterhazy through Wilde's friend Robert Sherard, reinforcing our sense that their crossing paths was anything but contingent.[66] Wilde and Esterhazy saw a good deal of each other in the summer of 1898, and these meetings were recounted in a masterfully arch sketch by Ernest La Jeunesse, Wilde's close associate in

[65] Maurice Samuels, "Zola's Philosemitism: From *L'Argent* to *Verité*," *Romanic Review*, 102 (2011), 503-19 (518).
[66] On this period, and the Dreyfus Affair connection, see J. Robert Maguire, *Ceremonies of Bravery: Oscar Wilde, Carlos Blacker, and the Dreyfus Affair* (Oxford, 2013), ch. 7, and Jonathan Frankel, *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years* (Cambridge, 2017), 229-31.

his last days, in an article that appeared in the Dreyfusard *Revue blanche* shortly after Wilde's death in 1900:

> And, in his anti-Semitic dandyism, and with his reporter's nose for a story, Rowland Strong brought to [Wilde] that star, Count Walsin-Esterhazy.
>
> It would take the pen of a Voltaire [...] to sketch the dinners and symposia of M. Wilde and the man whom he called, with tender irony and a note of admiration, "The Commandant." The isolation of some Nogent or Montigny, a blushing springtime, the innocent babble of a stream suddenly broken, rent by the tones of the Count declaiming by heart, at the top of his lungs, Flaubert's *Trois contes*, lingering lovingly, egoistically over *La Légende de Saint-Julien l'Hospitalier*, then—in a devil's dialogue—Esterhazy saying to Wilde: "You and I are humanity's two greatest martyrs, but" (after a hesitation and a silence) "I have suffered more."[67]

Wilde's involvement with the Dreyfus Affair is simultaneously slight and murky. His anti-Dreyfusard connections—Strong and Esterhazy had been introduced to each other by Sherard at the offices of *La Libre Parole*, Édouard Drumont's anti-Semitic, anti-Dreyfus newspaper—are to be contrasted with Wilde's longstanding friendship with the Dreyfusard Carlos Blacker, and there is even an argument to be made that these meetings with Wilde, during which Esterhazy allegedly confessed to having written the *bordereau*, marked a decisive turn in the Affair.[68] Still, Wilde's insouciant paradoxes about Esterhazy, well attested by those who knew him during this period—"If Esterhazy had been innocent, I should have had nothing to do with him," he is supposed to have said[69]—do little to persuade one that he was on the right side of history where the Affair was concerned. We might suppose, charitably, that keeping company with the likes of Esterhazy was part of a deliberate *pursuit* of the disreputable, since this was

[67] Ernest La Jeunesse, 'Oscar Wilde', *La Revue blanche*, 181 (1900), 589-96 (593).
[68] For an explanation of this theory, via the faithlessness of Rowland Strong, see Maguire, ch. 9.
[69] Frankel, 230.

the role in which he had been cast. Yet one can only ponder La Jeunesse's phrase "anti-Semitic dandyism," which seems to allude to a hazily familiar sort of elegant, literary, Catholic, decadent, anti-Semitic rightism, that Wilde was (La Jeunesse implies) at least sufficiently susceptible to for Strong to think this particular guest list a viable one. Still, Strong arranged the meeting, La Jeunesse claims, not only "in his anti-Semitic dandyism," but also "with his reporter's nose for a story." The point, one senses, is that Strong expected sparks of one sort or another to fly when these two were introduced; and they did, apparently, in the form of Esterhazy's supposed confession.

But what of La Jeunesse's piquant anecdote, about Esterhazy's self-proclaimed martyrdom? This account of the Wilde-Esterhazy encounters is so precisely what one might wish it to be that its contents are frequently presented as straightforwardly true. In the martyrological madness of 1898, after all, why shouldn't Esterhazy have joined in the fun? Indeed, when Dreyfus, Zola, Henry, Picquart *et al* have all played the martyr's role, there is a strange kind of logic to his claim. That that logic is fundamentally the logic of paradox might well sound an alarm bell or two, however. Though the vividness of the evocation might suggest a first-hand account, I cannot find any evidence that La Jeunesse was present at these encounters, and as a Dreyfusard with Jewish heritage, he seems an unlikely companion for a bunch gathered under the sign of *La Libre Parole*. More importantly, the words attributed to Esterhazy here seem to match Oscar Wilde's preoccupations, not to mention his taste for paradox, too precisely to be Esterhazy's own, and ought I think to be considered a collaborative fictionalization by Wilde, in the telling, and La Jeunesse, in the writing. Certainly, there was a peculiar meeting of minds between these two, who were close associates in Paris in the final years of Wilde's life. During that time, recalls O'Sullivan, "the two figures [Wilde] was readiest to talk about, whom it seemed he could not help talking about, were Napoleon and

Christ."[70] It seems more than coincidental that one of the books Wilde had devoured upon leaving Reading Prison was the oddly entitled *L'Imitation de Notre Maître Napoléon*, an allusion to *L'Imitation de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ*, by. . . Ernest La Jeunesse. "I am greatly fascinated by the *Napoléon* of La Jeunesse," Wilde wrote to Bosie on 2 June 1897 (*CL* 874), and it is reasonable to suppose that the two shared their views on Christ, martyrs, and the grandeur of debasement in the ill-famed (that is, homosexual) Calisaya Bar in Paris the following year.

Martyrdom is, indeed, the very theme of La Jeunesse's pseudo-eulogy to Wilde (he had in fact been present at Wilde's funeral), which opens with the observation that Wilde's own martyrdom had, unusually, "preceded his conversion" to Roman Catholicism.[71] But it is surely also Wilde who speaks in the allusion to Flaubert. Could Esterhazy declaim *Trois contes* by heart? It seems implausible to say the least; and yet Wilde, as we know, held them in particular admiration. And what, precisely, makes Esterhazy, having supposedly declaimed *La Légende de Saint-Julien l'Hospitalier*, turn to the theme of martyrdom? Saint Julian, after all, is not a martyr, but rather a common-or-garden legendary saint; on the face of it, then, he does not belong in the weird fin-de-siècle crowd of Wilde, Zola, Dreyfus, Christ, Verlaine, Kropotkin, Picquart, Henry, and yes, even Esterhazy, all of whom could claim, some more plausibly than others, to have suffered at the hands of the law (Esterhazy had recently been court martialed, and convicted of conduct unbecoming). And yet no Wildean could fail to spot the link, which is, once again, abjection. Flaubert's tale—which, incidentally, the narrator claims to have taken from a stained-glass window—in presenting Christ in the guise of a leper, and Julian as one who achieves sanctity by lying with that leper as with a lover, offers that characteristic mixture of abjection, sublimity, and homoeroticism that the queer martyr aesthetic thrived on. To put it

[70] O'Sullivan, 46.
[71] La Jeunesse, 589.

simply, then: I do not believe that Esterhazy likened himself to a martyr. I think Wilde did it for him.

I dwell on Wilde's well-known affection for, and even romanticization of, Esterhazy not to blacken Wilde's name, but to underscore the incoherence and tangledness of the crisscrossing discourses I have been considering. Readers of Proust know only too well how tempting the analogy between "the Jew" and "the homosexual" was at the fin de siècle, and the close resemblance of the phobias they respectively engendered.[72] And yet analogy does not imply solidarity, as the case of Wilde (though perhaps especially Strong) appears to show here; by "anti-Semitic dandyism," indeed, we might suspect that La Jeunesse means to identify a *specifically* homosexual form of this otherwise widespread prejudice. Though *De profundis* and the "monstrous martyrdoms" letter to George Ives make Wilde's martyrological reference seem like part of a progressive narrative, the profligate use he makes of that same reference in relation to Esterhazy shows how little politically inheres in any given metaphor: they are, almost by definition, promiscuous, and therefore treacherous.

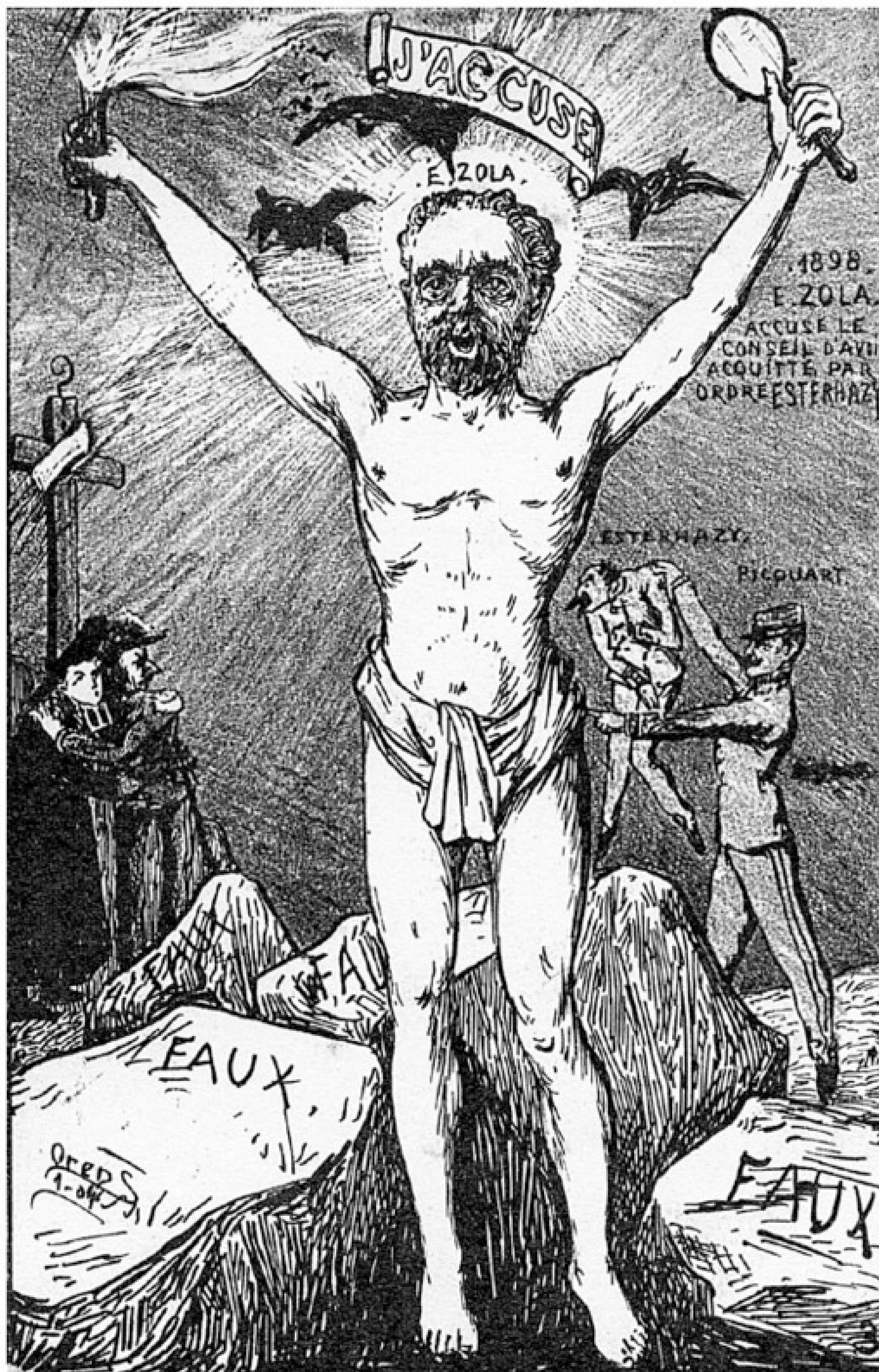
*

To conclude on the basis of such paradoxical evidence is a tall order. Wilde and Zola, I began by suggesting, stood "in symbolic relations to the art and culture of [their] age." Their contradictions reproduce in miniature those of the wider culture; their more dizzying rhetorical moments give the measure of a generalized vertigo. As I have attempted to show, the martyrological rhetoric of the fin de siècle was apt to compromise the ideological clarity of any given discourse, through the thematic, formal, and political entailments accumulated in its use

[72] See for instance Sedgwick, ch. 5; and Chantal Meyer-Plantureux, *Antisémitisme et homophobie: clichés en scène et à l'écran, XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris, 2019).

and re-use in wildly different contexts. Yet at the same time, what this parade of martyrs, saints, and Christs has equally pointed to is to an extraordinary crisis of values at the fin de siècle. In fin-de-siècle martyr rhetoric, we might say, a widely recognized Christian vocabulary and iconography masks—poorly—a fundamental axiological vacancy. The problem with these references is thus not, finally, their specifically Christian entailments, but rather their banality, their radical availability for all manner of contradictory and confused uses. In that kind of ideological cacophony, everyone is a martyr, and no one is.

Appendix: Fig. 1



Orens Denizard (“Orens”), “Zola accuse le Conseil [etc],” from *Le Calvaire Dreyfus*, 1899