Remy de Gourmont and the Crisis of Erotic Idealism

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Short Abstract

Robert Pruett, St Cross College, Submission for D. Phil. Medieval and Modern Languages, Michaelmas Term 2021

Remy de Gourmont and the Crisis of Erotic Idealism

This thesis explores the relationship between erotic desire and philosophical idealism in the work of Remy de Gourmont (1858-1915). Tracing a discourse of 'erotic idealism' through the chronological evolution of Gourmont's novels and theatre, it also incorporates essays as well as select short fiction and poetry.

Through close readings of fiction and drama, I examine how Gourmont pursued a double-sided question: how does erotic desire shape our experience in the world of phenomenal appearances, and how is the experience of erotic desire shaped in turn? In pursuing this question, two of Gourmont's most prominent concerns – idealism and erotic desire – continually transform one another in the course of his work, influencing his thought at large, yet constitute a distinct discourse from the critical and theoretical writings to which his intellectual development is most often attributed. I explore how Gourmont's erotic idealism underpinned the major aesthetic and intellectual manoeuvres of his career, particularly his negotiation with Symbolist values, mysticism and the occult and, later, with the idea of Nature and the philosophy of materialism.

Where previous scholarship has understood Gourmont's idealist worldview as essentially a tool of Symbolist aesthetic theory, I demonstrate how the riddle of erotic desire led Gourmont's philosophy into different, often contradictory, territory. I argue that the interplay of idealism and erotic desire was a source of productive tension key to the evolution and maturity of Gourmont's work.

Long Abstract

Robert Pruett, St Cross College, Submission for D. Phil. Medieval and Modern Languages, Michaelmas Term 2021

Remy de Gourmont and the Crisis of Erotic Idealism

This thesis explores the relationship between erotic desire and philosophical idealism in the work of Remy de Gourmont (1858-1915). The first major study of Gourmont in English since 1962, it charts the development of 'erotic idealism' though his novels, plays, and selected short fiction, placing special emphasis on material previously unknown to scholarship (*Le Désarroi*, 2006).

Influential co-founder of the *Mercure de France*, Gourmont used his platform to shape the intellectual heart of the Symbolist movement. In the preface to *Le Livre des masques* (1896), he famously adapted Arthur Schopenhauer's idealist precept that 'the world is my representation' into a concise theory of aesthetic production, grounding a subjectivist approach to art in a philosophy that considers 'reality' to be the projection of the individual mind. In *Sixtine* (1890), this idealist worldview is complicated by the question of erotic desire, the protagonist struggling to conceptualize a love object whose very existence is philosophically dubious. Here we have the basic conditions for a 'crisis of erotic idealism' which would occupy him throughout his career. Though visible enough on the surface of his most well-known novel, however, the length and breadth of Gourmont's erotic idealist discourse is occluded by a number of factors: to his contemporary readers, as Gourmont progressively established himself as a critic and theorist, such concerns soon overshadowed the heady eroticism of the novels, plays, and short stories which he nonetheless continued to write. Chief among his Anglo-American followers, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound solidified Gourmont's contribution to an emerging Modernism by championing his twentieth-century works on language and style but viewed his fiction as a mere extravagance carried over from a *fin de siècle* they sought to transcend. The refrain of 'idéalisme', though it never ceased to punctuate his work, seemed similarly old and out-of-place in the twentieth century once it no longer carried the inertia of the Symbolist movement, long-since expired for Gourmont and his contemporaries. With the publication of *Physique de l'amour* (1903), it is indeed difficult to imagine what place 'erotic idealism' continued to occupy for a writer so deeply concerned with the physical facts of animal sexuality.

Given the biases of Gourmont's reputation and the complexities of his career, critics have regularly compartmentalized Gourmont's work by viewing his idealist philosophy, on the one hand, as essentially a tool of Symbolist aesthetic theory (thus a passing phase) and his eroticism, and, on the other, as a mannerism of his fiction, considered of lesser importance than his criticism. I counter this view by revealing how Gourmont's philosophy and eroticism converge in a discourse that extends beyond the Symbolist era and its concerns, and which uses fiction as a distinct site of intellectual development. The crisis of erotic idealism, I aim to show, was a source of productive tension key to the evolution and maturity of Gourmont's work, underpinning the major aesthetic and intellectual manoeuvres of his career, particularly his conflicted negotiation with Symbolist tropes such as interiority, cerebrality, chastity, mysticism, the occult and, in the twentieth century, the post-Symbolist *esprit nouveau*, the idea of Nature, and the philosophy of materialism.

Through close readings of his fiction and drama, I examine how Gourmont pursued a double-sided question: how does erotic desire shape our experience in a world of phenomenal appearances, and how is the experience of erotic desire shaped in turn? Having inherited a flexuous and unsystematic version of idealism from predecessors like Villiers de l'Isle-Adam,

Gourmont allows the volatile dynamics of erotic desire to alter his understanding of idealist dichotomies such as interiority/exteriority, self/world, and subject/object, colouring his reception of key concepts such as Schopenhauer's 'will', and even informing an unusual compromise with the materialist worldview. Likewise, the ambiguous notion of 'the world as representation' saturates Gourmont's erotic discourse by calling the lover/beloved paradigm itself into question. The difficulty of erotic gratification is conflated with the philosophical dilemma of perceptual uncertainty, and the subjective nature of reality problematizes the conduct of the lover toward the dubious object of his love. By tracing the interplay of idealism and erotic desire through Gourmont's novels and plays, I aim to show how this corpus dealt with questions that his critical and theoretical writing did not. Often, I argue, Gourmont's imaginative discourse served to contradict or destabilize ideas which appear less problematic in his non-fiction.

Despite the inherent instability of Gourmont's crisis of erotic idealism, the relationship between idealism and erotic desire aids in understanding how these two vague concepts function in his work. In *The Sins of the Fathers*, Jennifer Birkett argues that the main subject of Gourmont's fiction is 'desire itself'. Emphasizing the self-analysing quality of Gourmont's eroticism, she explains that his fiction is ultimately concerned with the psychological and conceptual structure of erotic dynamics at a higher order than physical sexuality and the instinct for pleasure. My research develops this view by examining how Gourmont's eroticism interrogates itself within a shifting idealist framework. The result, after years of phenomenological scrutiny, is a conception of desire strikingly close to 'eros' according to later thinkers such as Georges Bataille and Anne Carson. Gourmont's idealism, likewise, is seen in a fuller context than the limited 'Symbolist' one in which *fin-de-siècle* literary scholarship generally considers it. The question of erotic desire carries Gourmont's idealism beyond the aesthetic and intellectual concerns of the early 1890s, and therefore offers a guiding thread for tracking its strange development.

This thesis is structured chronologically, each chapter focusing on an archetype that occupied Gourmont's work at a given period. As the crisis of erotic idealism was primarily an imaginative discourse, this approach allows for an adherence to the images and symbols in which Gourmont sought an alternative expression to his non-fiction writing.

The introduction provides background information on Gourmont's life and career before addressing the biases that shape his reputation, particularly in the Anglo-American world. I then discuss the terminological difficulties created by the reception of 'idealism' into *fin-de-siècle* artistic circles, and propose a flexible approach based in close reading. I conclude with an overview of how erotic desire and idealism interact in Gourmont's work.

Chapter 1 (The Phantom) discusses paradoxes and instabilities surrounding *Sixtine* and its famous credo of 'le monde, c'est moi'. Adapting his credo from Schopenhauer's neo-Kantian notion that 'the world is my representation', Gourmont transmutes this central principle of idealism into a basis for substituting the imagined love object for the real. I explore how the crisis of erotic idealism emerges out of several obstacles which Gourmont faced in this formative period: the demands of artistic creation versus those of life, the burden of influence and the cult of Schopenhauer, and the ambiguous meaning of 'the world as representation'.

Chapter 2 (The Mystic) examines how, in *Le Fantôme*, Gourmont turned to mystical experience as a way to dissolve the dichotomy of art and experience, as well as the phenomenological boundary between body and spirit (mind). In mysticism, I argue, Gourmont sought a way to combine the incorporeality of subjectivism with the corporeality of sex. I end by showing how Gourmont took a 'theodical' approach to the paradox of how disenchantment is possible in a world which, according to Gourmont's idealism, is the product of the omnipotent

subjective mind. Ultimately, Gourmont realizes that subjective thought, while still all-encompassing, is fundamentally 'mal'.

Chapter 3 (The Demon) explores Gourmont's fascination with the occult, particularly in the play *Lilith* and the short story 'Péhor'. After providing a detailed background on the sexual politics of demonology in the nineteenth century, I argue how Gourmont turned his disillusionment into a polemic against any system of thought which aims to 'improve' the conditions of sexuality and desire. Secondly, through a close reading of *Lilith*, I show how Gourmont for the first time develops an explicit theory of erotic desire based on the tensions of idealism. The lapsarian myth serves Gourmont as a timeless framework of the crisis of erotic idealism, and produces a notion of 'fallenness' which will be central to his understanding of disunity between lover / love object and self / world.

Chapter 4 (The Destroyer) conducts a close analysis of *Le Désarroi*, an unpublished novel discovered and published in 2006. It argues that this novel, long absent from Gourmont's corpus, represents the climax of Gourmont's Symbolist period by reversing *Sixtine*'s attitude of creative subjective power, ascribing both erotic desire and idealism to pure destruction. I show how Gourmont drew upon themes from Baudelaire and Nietzsche to eroticise his pessimism and use it to craft new, and even hopeful, theories of idealism. Gourmont's new destructive mode of erotic idealism, I illustrate, leads to a 'non-pensée' tantamount to death, hence his radical shift to materialism and sexual physiology in the final years of the nineteenth century.

Chapter 5 (The Organism) examines the shift in Gourmont's thought and aesthetics (around 1899) towards favourable conceptions of nature and materialism. I continue my discussion of *Le Désarroi* to show how the text is punctuated by several key images of nature which link Gourmont's last 'Symbolist' novel to the concerns of *Le Songe d'une femme*, *Physique de l'amour*, and *Un Cœur virginal*. I proceed to how this transition also occurs in the play *Le Vieux Roi* and how, in this play, Gourmont retrieves a positive version of Schopenhauer's idea of the 'will' by ascribing it to nature/woman, a trope which is now idealized. In *Le Songe d'une femme*, however, this ostensibly 'materialist' trope already shows signs of its own self-awareness as a subjective illusion, leading Gourmont back to idealism and the cerebral nature of erotic desire.

Chapter 6 (The Gods) shows how Gourmont's last two novels, *Une nuit au Luxembourg* and *Lettres d'un Satyre*, finally reconcile materialism and idealism by using erotic desire to assert the physicality as well as the subjectivity of human nature. I discuss how *Une nuit au Luxembourg* ends Gourmont's five-year hiatus from fiction by re-introducing the law of perceptual and epistemological uncertainty. I continue to show how this spirit of reconciliation led Gourmont to redraft an adolescent essay on Dante and Beatrice, and to use Stendhal's *De l'Amour* as a basis for the ironic 'realism' of *Un Cœur virginal*. In my reading of *Lettres d'un Satyre*, Gourmont's last novel, I conclude with the argument that the crisis of erotic idealism 'resolves' in a mature conceptualization of erotic desire characterized by the impossibility of resolution.

My conclusion provides an overview of how erotic desire and idealism interact in Gourmont's work, and also suggests how the notion of erotic idealism finds grounding later in the history of ideas among modern and present-day thinkers. Specifically, by relating it to more recent theories of 'eros', I encourage future scholarship to explore new areas of Gourmont's continued relevance and influence beyond the popularity of his non-fiction.

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Introduction

> ‘Ah! je te tiens, jolie bête!’ — ‘Non, non, tu ne me tiens pas. Ton pied nu s’est posé sur mon ombre.’[1]

In 1906, in the fifth volume of his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Havelock Ellis attempted to theorize the origin of all sexual perversions in human beings. ‘Erotic symbolism’, as he named it, is the phenomenon whereby desire is seen to stray from its normative channels, bestowing erotic value upon any act or object which lie beyond the procreative role of the opposite sex: the statue, the boot, the lock of hair, urination, exhibitionism, homosexuality, etc. All aberrant objects of desire are ‘symbols’, formed by individual psychology, that symbolize in some way the ‘normal’ object of sexual love. After detailing the forms that this erotic symbolism may take and why, Ellis leaves us with the following conclusion:

> Yet, regarded as a whole, and notwithstanding the frequency with which they witness to congenital morbidity, the phenomena of erotic symbolism can scarcely fail to be profoundly impressive to the patient and impartial student of the human soul. They often seem absurd, sometimes disgusting, occasionally criminal; they are always, when carried to an extreme degree, abnormal. But of all the manifestations of sexual psychology, normal and abnormal, they are the most specifically human. More than any others they involve the potently plastic force of the imagination. They bring before us the individual man, not only apart from his fellows, but in opposition, himself creating his own paradise. They constitute the supreme triumph of human idealism.[2]

Ellis, more famous today for his spirited intentions than his scientific deductions, ends by setting pathology aside in order to consider what is ‘most specifically human’ about this mechanism, this

[1] Remy de Gourmont, *Sixtine* (Paris: Savine, 1890), p. 244.
[2] Havelock Ellis, *Erotic Symbolism, Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, vol. V, pp. 113-14.

thing in the 'human soul' that drives the lover to pursue the objects of desire across realms of symbol and imagination. Ellis did not succeed in tracing every perverse symbol back to that symbolized baseline of sexual normativity, but this flaw is redeemed by the philosophical payoff we find above.

Whatever its specific relations to the 'reality' of procreative, physical sexuality, Ellis suggests that erotic symbolism testifies to the power of the individual mind to create its own world, a feat tantamount to the 'supreme triumph of human idealism'. At first, the reader may find some ambiguity in Ellis's use of 'idealism', a word whose two usual meanings seem to converge here: on the one hand, it could refer to the practice of striving after ideals, and, on the other, to the philosophical view (after Kant) of the subjective, mentally-constructed nature of reality. Is it the lover's formation and pursuit of erotic ideals which find gratification in this 'paradise', or is it rather the Schopenhauerian precept that 'the world is my representation' which has triumphed in these 'phenomena of erotic symbolism', affirming the degree to which our individual realities are constructed by subjective perception and thought? 'Erotic symbolism' is similarly evocative. 'The phrase was even better than neutral,' writes Paul Robinson, 'it resonated with the aesthetic preoccupations of the day. It was precisely this artistic analogy, I believe, that Ellis had in mind in concocting the term.'[3] If this is the case, Ellis seems to be speaking a double language in which symbolism does and does not refer to the French Symbolist movement whose artists he knew personally, and in which 'idealism' does and does not refer to the philosophical attitude which the Symbolists adopted from Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), introduced to French artistic circles in the 1870's and 80's by the popular abridged translations of Théodule Ribot and Jean Bourdeau.

It would be no surprise if the French poet, novelist, and influential literary critic Remy de

[3] Paul Robinson, *The Modernization of Sex* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 27.

Gourmont (1858-1915) was uppermost in Ellis' mind when he chose to encode his work of sexology with references to the Symbolist movement and the 'triumphant' idealism which it espoused. Where the philosophical backbone of the Symbolist movement is concerned, Gourmont offered the most substantial arguments of his time, distilling from the complex intellectual climate of *fin-de-siècle* Decadence and Symbolism a concise theory of individual expression based on Schopenhauer's theory of knowledge. Like Ellis, his claim finds its grandiosity in the 'specifically human' basis of the idealist (and consequently Symbolist) condition. 'L'histoire du symbolisme', writes Gourmont, 'ce serait l'histoire de l'homme même, puisque l'homme ne peut s'assimiler une idée que symbolisée'.[4]

> Par rapport à l'homme, sujet pensant, le monde, tout ce qui est extérieur au moi, n'existe que selon l'idée qu'il s'en fait. Nous ne connaissons que des phénomènes, nous ne raisonnons que sur des apparences; toute vérité en soi nous échappe; l'essence est inattaquable. C'est ce que Schopenhauer a vulgarisé sous cette formule si simple et si claire. Le monde est ma représentation. Je ne vois pas ce qui est; ce qui est, c'est ce que je vois. Autant d'hommes pensants, autant de mondes divers et peut-être différents.[5]

From this philosophical principle, Gourmont extrapolates what became an official justification for the aesthetic subjectivism which his generation embraced in opposition to the Naturalist mode of objective expression predicated on a positivist worldview. Basing his argument on Schopenhauer's phenomenology as vulgarized by Théodule-Armand Ribot's *La Philosophie de Schopenhauer* (1874), Gourmont distills an attitude which had already been lingering in the atmosphere: if it is true that the subject cannot apprehend reality directly, that he knows only the phenomena or 'representations' of his own mind and senses, then any reality beyond the subject is dubious or irrelevant. Hence, if 'the world is my idea', as Schopenhauer famously asserted, then subjectivity and imagination become not just the highest, but the *only* values which an artist can

[4] Remy de Gourmont, *Le Livre des masques* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1921), p. 10.
[5] *Le Livre des masques*, pp. 11-12.

admit. The cultivation of one's subjective reality, the pursuit of personal symbols and ideas, and the rejection of objective truth – ideals ascribed to Symbolism – gain transcendental justification through an out-of-context embrace of Schopenhauer's neo-Kantian dictum. Originality and genius, Gourmont argues, are functions of the artist's capacity to deepen and express the world as his mind uniquely apprehends and shapes it, the fruit of a tendency 'à ne prendre dans la vie que le détail caractéristique, à ne prêter attention qu'à l'acte par lequel un homme se distingue d'un autre homme, à ne vouloir réaliser que des résultats, que l'essentiel'.[6] This underlying spirit of freedom, individualism, and novelty is one which Gourmont would carry beyond the years of Symbolism and into the pregnant avant-garde energies of the new century. A friend whom Ellis considered 'the finest of living critics',[7] Gourmont was for many twentieth-century figures the most relevant and modern of Symbolism's surviving scions, at once a byword for the creative spirit of the *fin de siècle* and a living intellect who, 'plus que nul autre, a contribué à ce que l'esprit 'moderniste' se voie accorder droit de cité dans le royaume des arts'.[8] Revered editor of the *Mercure de France*, Gourmont's diverse and prolific output was matched by his wide-ranging and cosmopolitan sphere of influence. He was a fosterer of literary networks and cultural collaborations, an advocate of new voices such as that of Alfred Jarry, and a breaker of boundaries between science and letters in his influential *Physique de l'amour* (1903) and co-editorship, with biologist René Quinton, of *La Revue des Idées*.

While the direct influence of Gourmont's thought can be found in works by authors as diverse as Aldous Huxley and Georges Bataille, Ellis's text invokes a side of Gourmont which was, and remains, very rarely celebrated by subsequent generations of artists, thinkers, and scholars: of all the Symbolist seekers of strange and perverse interior paradises in 'opposition' to the external world, it is in the ill-reputed fictions of Gourmont that we discover a synthesis of

[6] *Le Livre des masques*, p. 8.
[7] Havelock Ellis, *Impressions and Comments* (London: Constable, 1920), p. 77.
[8] Karl Uitti, *La Passion littéraire de Remy de Gourmont* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 3-4.

idealism and eros redolent of Ellis's conclusion.

It is with the notion of a 'synthesis' of eros and idealism, as opposed to a dialectical or dual set of concerns, that we begin to approach the unique quality of Gourmont's imaginative work which is the central matter of this thesis. '[L]es écrivains Décadents adhérent tous, d'une façon plus ou moins raisonnée et explicite, à une attitude philosophique qu'ils désignaient eux-mêmes par le terme d'idéalisme',[9] and most of them traded just as extensively in eroticism. To speak of an 'erotic idealism' (which I do partly in homage to Ellis's neologistic term) in relation to a writer like Gourmont, therefore, is to be faced with a daunting composite of Symbolist and Decadent universals. Hence, by starting with the formulation 'erotic idealism' (rather than 'erotic desire *and* idealism'), I pose the following questions: how does the work of Gourmont attempt to establish not only a connection between, but a synthesis of, erotic dynamics and the idealist condition or worldview? To what extent do Gourmont's concerns of erotic desire and idealism overlap or even merge in mutual redefinition? Is the erotic theme anything more than a representational model for Gourmont's philosophical thought, or, conversely, does the notion of the world as representation simply provide him with a pretext for erotic fantasy? How are Gourmont's erotic and idealist tendencies singularized against related vogues of the *fin de siècle*, and what becomes of them thereafter? By concentrating on his imaginative work (primarily novels and plays), I explore the evolution of Gourmont's erotic idealism not only as a matrix of aesthetic images, but also as an intellectual discourse equal in sophistication to that of the critical and theoretical material for which he is best known. Like his critical and theoretical work, I argue, the erotic idealism of Gourmont's fiction evolves and matures beyond the cultural and chronological scope of Symbolism, and well beyond the threshold of a new century.

[9] Jean Pierrot, *L'Imaginaire décadent* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977), p. 84.

‘L’amour et les livres’: Gourmont’s Life and the Literature of Desire

Gourmont was born in 1858 to Auguste de Gourmont and Marie-Mathilde de Monfort in Bazoches-au-Houlme in the Orne region of Normandy. The family moved to Mesnil-Villeman manor, in the Manche, in 1866 following the birth of two siblings, Marie and André. Nearby, Gourmont was educated in Coutances before pursuing an abortive law degree in Caen in 1876, where most of his time was spent studying fiction and poetry in the library. During this time, Gourmont kept a journal in which he signaled his intention to become a writer. Already, ideas of art and imagination are intertwined with the amorous realm, considered interdependent: ‘L’amour et les livres’, he writes one October evening in 1877, ‘voilà ce qu’il me faut. L’amour pour la partie sensitive, les livres pour la partie intelligente. Tout l’homme est là et l’homme chez lequel l’une de ces deux grandes facultés est absente n’est pas un homme.’[10] Where Gourmont’s writerly (as opposed to readerly) ambitions are presented, however, the vital yin and yang of love and letters appears less dualistic, the artist and the lover beginning to lose their distinction, merging into a single entity:

> J’aimerais à créer des personnages, à les marquer du sceau de mon esprit, à les faire mouvoir selon ma volonté; je voudrais avoir des héroïnes à moi, qui me devraient tout, depuis la naissance jusqu’aux qualités qui font aimer une femme comme on aimerait un ange.[11]

Gourmont’s personal journal ends with the dissolution of a (seemingly unrequited) five-year love affair with an unknown young woman whom he calls ‘A. A’. Its final entry carries forward the trope of woman as a literary creation, prefiguring the Symbolist themes of Gourmont’s later novels by transposing the love object to the realm of dreams, visions, and artistry.

[10] Remy de Gourmont, *1874-1880: Journal Intime et inédit de feu* (Paris: Typographie François Bernouard, 1923), unpaginated.
[11] *Journal Intime*, 31 December 1874.

> Voici mon rêve: Je venais de m'endormir; la nuit n'était pas avancée. Je suis dans un jardin, le jardin de là-haut, vous savez, où nous nous sommes promenés si souvent ensemble. Je m'arrête car je vous aperçois, nous avançons l'un vers l'autre. Je vous salue cérémonieusement, mais votre main s'avance vers la mienne et, pleurant de tout le passé perdu ou méconnu, vous acceptez mon amour et vous me dites (ô cruel mensonge du rêve): Je t'aime!
>
> Et je me suis réveillé et il n'était que minuit, et j'ai pleuré et je n'ai plus dormi jusqu'au jour.
>
> Ainsi voilà cinq ans que je vous aime et je vous aime comme au premier jour. Vous êtes toujours vivante devant moi et je vous vois. Et plus je vais, plus l'amour de l'enfant se dégage pour faire place à celui de l'homme. Je n'espère plus et j'aime toujours, et puisque j'ai aimé trois ans sans encouragement, deux ans après un refus et une injure, pourquoi ne vous aimerais-je pas jusqu'à la fin. Qui sait?
>
> Oui je crois que vous reviendrez à chaque page de mes livres.
>
> Tantôt je vous maudirai, tantôt je vous adorerai, mais ce sera vous et toujours vous.
>
> Je crois qu'à la première page de mes livres il y aura toujours ces mots, mystère pour les autres, mystère pour vous, peut-être! Pour moi abîme de joies, de douleurs, de souvenirs, de rancunes, de malédictions, d'espérances, A. A***.[12]

Shortly after the heartbreak, Gourmont published his early essay on *Béatrice, Dante, et Platon* (1883) in which the embryonic conditions of his erotic idealism appear in sharper relief. Written years before his encounter with Schopenhauer and with Symbolism, Gourmont's piece registers an obsession with the subjective world, with the creation of the beloved as a cerebral creation of the lover ('les créations féminines écloses dans le cerveau'),[13] but also with the transcendental possibilities of eros and idealization – the more generous view of desire, proper to Plato and Dante, which would no doubt influence Gourmont's later reception of the German school and its pessimistic attitudes.

In his first years in Paris in the early 1880's, '[l]a première période de ma manie d'écrire',[14] as he considered it, Gourmont was employed as an assistant librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale, became involved with such journals as *La Vie Parisienne* and *Le Monde*, and published

[12] *Journal Intime*, 31 December 1874.
[13] Gourmont, 'Béatrice, Dante, et Platon', *L'Enseignement secondaire des jeunes filles*, February 1883, pp. 76-80 (p. 76).
[14] Remy de Gourmont, *Promenades littéraires*, vol. VI (Paris: Mercure de France, 1926), p. 8.

six educational books for children.[15] The year 1886, however, would prove a particularly eventful one where the nexus of 'l'amour et les livres' is concerned. Though Gourmont published his first novel *Merlette* at this time, this minor success is quickly overshadowed by a more consequential series of events. One afternoon in April, while strolling the galleries of the Odéon, Gourmont discovered Symbolism in the first issue of Léo d'Orfer and Gustave Kahn's *Le Vogue*. He recalls:

> A mesure, je sentais le petit frisson esthétique et cette impression exquise de nouveau, qui a tant de charme pour la jeunesse. Il me semble que je rêvai encore plus que je ne lus. Le Luxembourg était rose d'avril naissant, je le traversai vers la rue d'Assas, pensant beaucoup plus à la littérature nouvelle qui coïncidait pour moi avec le renouveau des choses qu'à l'affaire qui m'appelait de ce côté de Paris. Ce que j'avais écrit jusqu'alors m'inspira soudain un profond dégoût. Je pensai aussi avec amertume au petit journal où, baudelairien innocent, j'avais envoyé des vers, du fond d'un collège de province, et je me disais que, si j'avais persévéré, j'aurais pu écrire dans une de ces émouvantes petites revues et participer directement aux joies que je venais d'entrevoir.[16]

With this spontaneous new aesthetic direction came a new crop of literary connections, several of them revered by Gourmont as masters of his newly adopted idiom, namely J.-K. Huysmans (1848-1907) and Villiers de L'Isle-Adam (1838-1889). At least two years before these introductions were made, however, Gourmont met the woman who would become the fabled muse and subject of many of his works, Berthe de Courrière (1852-1916). Gourmont's Symbolist work has its beginnings neither in the novel *Sixtine* (1890) nor the earlier play *Théodat* (written 1888, published 1893), but in his passionate love letters to Courrière in 1887 [posthumously compiled

[15] *Un Volcan en éruption* (1882), *Une ville ressuscitée* (1882), *Bertrand du Guesclin* (1883), *Tempêtes et naufrages* (1883), *Les Derniers Jours de Pompéi* (1884), and *En ballon* (1884).
[16] Remy de Gourmont, 'Souvenirs du Symbolism', *Promenades littéraires*, vol. IV (Paris: Mercure de France, 1912), pp. 34-35.

and published as *Lettres à Sixtine* (1921)].[17] The distinction between literature and love fades further still as Gourmont's arcane, opulent verses dance among notes negotiating the time and place of a rendezvous, passages from Dante and Stendhal punctuating desperate profusions of sexual longing. Also significant is the fact that Gourmont's conflation of the aesthetic and the erotic would find its ideal companion in a woman who, herself, strove to live as a work of art. Former mistress and model of the sculptor Auguste Clésinger (1814-1883), she had already earned her reputation as the eccentric *grande dame* among Parisian occult circles by the time that she met Gourmont in 1887. Her performative exploits – too many to summarize here – included presenting herself as a countess (adopting the aristocratic particle '*de*'), feeding consecrated wafers to stray dogs, and seducing priests (possibly inspiring the plot of *Théodat*). Courrière was a master of flamboyant self-creation, and her home, where Gourmont visited her, was a feast for the Decadent imagination, a spectacle fit for the eyes of Henry de Groux:

> L'intérieur de Mme de Courrières [sic] est bien la chose la plus hétéroclite que j'eusse jamais pu imaginer dans le goût spécial de ce monde mi-païen, mi-catholique ou soi-disant tel. Ce ne sont que chasubles, nappes d'autel, objets du culte adaptés aux plus imprévues destinations, ostensoirs, corporaux, dalmatiques, candélabres aux cierges multicolores, mystérieusement allumés dans des coins d'ombre, près d'un lutrin superbe portant sur ses ailes des œuvres de Félicien Rops ou du marquis de Sade… Les effluves de benjoin, d'ambre, d'essence de rose alternent à dose suffocante avec ceux de l'encens…[18]

Courrière was, despite her eccentricities, a stabilizing and supportive presence in Gourmont's life,

[17] As *Lettres à Sixtine* was never intended as a novel, let alone a published work, I refrain from including it in the narrow scope of this study. 'Quelques critiques ont parlé des *Lettres à Sixtine* comme s'il s'agissait d'un roman par lettres, composé comme *le Songe d'une Femme*. Non, ces lettres sont de vraies lettres, dont les originaux portent le timbre et le cachet de la poste.' [Jean de Gourmont, *Souvenirs sur Remy* (Abbeville, 1924), p. 1.]
[18] Emile Baumann, *La Vie terrible d'Henry de Groux* (Paris: Grasset, 1936), p. 103.

supporting him financially after his scandalous article 'Le joujou patriotisme' cost him his post at the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1891, and caring for him when he subsequently contracted the illness which permanently disfigured his face and limited his ability to appear in public. Gourmont finally moved into the strange apartment on the rue de Varenne before relocating with Courrière to 71 rue des Saints-Pères, where they lived until Gourmont's death in 1915, followed by Courrière's in 1916.

To Alan Raitt, the fact of Gourmont's real-life relationship with Courrière does not only add context to the feverish eroticism of his prose, but seems to account for the difference between Gourmont's idealism and the writer from whom he inherited his philosophy, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam:

> si nous ne connaissons que notre propre esprit, l'amour que nous éprouvons pour une autre personne a-t-il un sens? En d'autres mots, existe-t-il une justification transcendante de l'amour dans un système d'idéalisme absolu?
>
> Théoriquement, c'est un problème qui aurait pu se poser à Villiers avec autant de force qu'a Gourmont. En fait, Villiers l'a éludé parce que, pour lui, l'amour n'a jamais été qu'une possibilité idéale. N'ayant jamais rencontré la femme de ses rêves, il n'a pas eu à s'interroger sur la réalité philosophique du sentiment amoureux. C'est même le subjectivisme qui, dans *L'Eve future*, permet à Lord Ewald d'échapper au désespoir en tombant amoureux d'une création de son propre esprit. Pour Gourmont, par contre, plus sensuel et moins obsédé de rêves impossibles, le problème devient pressant, quand, en pleine effervescence idéaliste, il tombe amoureux de Berthe Courrière.'[19]

While biographical explanations are always questionable, the tension between idealist 'effervescence' and the immediate 'reality' of the love object is certainly key to the problem raised by Gourmont, who did very little to conceal the influence of Courrière in his early Symbolist works. Raitt is correct in noting the persistence and sensuality which distinguishes Gourmont from similar writers enchanted by the spell of philosophical idealism. Characteristic of Gourmont's

[19] Raitt, *Villiers de l'Isle-Adam et le mouvement symboliste* (Paris: Corti, 1965), p. 324.

generation was an ironic attitude of renunciation adopted by many Decadents and Symbolists in their reception of Schopenhauer's notion of the tyrannical will. 'Nous avions déjà découvert', Gourmont recalls, 'et avec quelle ivresse, à la fois que le monde était mauvais et qu'il n'existait que relativement à nous-mêmes'.[20] Together with the notion of the world as representation, a bleak outlook on life drives, especially sexual desire, was typical of those who gravitated to Schopenhauer's pessimism in the aftermath of the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. According to Sandrine Schiano-Bennis: 'L'idée d'un monde condamné par la vanité et l'inanité de ses idoles et idéaux justifiait largement une mortelle fatigue de vivre et un désenchantement spéculatif. La désillusion de connaître se doublait de l'avortement de la jouissance, de l'inanité du "vouloir-vivre".'[21]

As a whole, Gourmont's work constitutes a fascinating counterweight to the sexual pessimism expressed by many of his generation towards the pitfalls of erotic desire and the opposite sex, not for lack of misogyny and bitterness, but for how it largely declines the ethical ultimatum of Will and renunciation in favor of a more ambivalent drama based on the riddle of the love object's phenomenological status. As we shall see, one of the most striking features of Gourmont's fiction, from *Sixtine* to his last *Lettres d'un Satyre* (1913), is their ultimate refutation of a 'way out' of the dilemmas that it reveals at the foundation of erotic desire, despite the tortured lamentations and strategies for enhancement on which much of it dwells.

On the surface, Gourmont's relative indifference to Schopenhauer's harrowing theory of the Will often seems more like a capitulation to the life-drives which it describes. As Entragues confesses in *Sixtine*,

> L'endosmose d'amour est irréelle et la tromperie du désir, seule, me fait croire à son possible accomplissement. Je sais que c'est un mensonge, je sais la déception qui m'attend: je serai puni par un effroyable désappointement d'avoir cherché l'oubli de

[20] *Promenades littéraires*, vol. IV, pp. 71-72.
[21] Sandrine Schiano-Bennis, *La Renaissance de l'idéalisme à la fin du XIXè siècle* (Paris: Champion, 1999), p. 96.

> moi-même en dehors de moi-même, d'avoir trahi l'idéalité, et pourtant il le fallait puisque les sens sont impératifs et que je n'ai pas mérité le surnaturel don de la grâce.[22]

While Entragues's language of deceit, futility, and asceticism is certainly Schopenhauerian, however, Gourmont's overarching discourse could not be less so. Rather than cast his protagonists as victims of desire, the *femme fatale* or the Will to Life, Gourmont casts erotic desire as the victim of its own phenomenology. As we will discover in his fictions, desire is not sinister because it is imperious, but tragic because its 'accomplissement' is philosophically improbable.

'From the very beginning', writes Brian Stableford, 'Gourmont was well aware of the mercuriality of sexual fulfillment, and the extreme difficulty of making the most of it. The magnitude of his disappointment was, however, unusual.'[23] Gourmont's writing in the first half of the 1890's, such as *Sixtine* and *Le Fantôme* (1893), Stableford notes, sets out to imagine 'intellectual strategies which might maximize the quasi-transcendental experience of sexual rapture'.[24] The effort to liberate erotic desire and sexual pleasure from repressive forces is a constant in Gourmont's work, though it often takes paradoxical forms. At first, Gourmont's erotic thought is strongly aligned to the values and theories of art which arose out of his new relationship with Symbolism. In *Sixtine*, Entragues holds the material, external world responsible for hindering his fantasy of the love object (just as, to Gourmont, the Symbolist artist devalues the external world in pursuit of subjective expression). In *Le Fantôme*, however, corporeality is deemed 'le moyen et l'obstacle, le moteur, et le frein des élévations surhumaines'.[25] In these early works, the combination of high perversity and obsessive cerebrality is not merely a product of Symbolist stylization, but of a frenetic struggle for transcendent pleasure in a labyrinth of solipsism, illusion, and perceptual uncertainty.

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[22] *Sixtine*, pp. 127-28.
[23] Brian Stableford, *Glorious Perversity* (Rockville: Wildside, 2006), p. 87.
[24] Stableford, *Glorious Perversity*, p. 87.
[25] Remy de Gourmont, *Le Fantôme* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1893), p. 109.

Catholic, mystical, and occult themes saturate this period of Gourmont's writing, lending a fitting vocabulary to the miraculous ideals to which his protagonists strive, as well as the mysteriousness of the world that they inhabit. Gourmont's encyclopedic knowledge of spiritual art and literature, however, was matched by a deep anticlericalism evident in the blasphemously polemical tropes of tales such as 'Péhor' (1894) and plays such as *Théodat* and *Lilith* (1892). The most famous example of his complex engagement with religion is *Le Latin mystique* (1892), an annotated anthology of 'decadent' Latin poets which was later championed by Georges Bataille, Henry Miller, and Blaise Cendrars for its violent eroticism and its assertive defense of 'lost' literature. Its curation of medieval source texts is, at the same time, a thoroughly *fin-de-siècle* statement on the inventive language of deliquescent style:

> Plus d'un trait de la figure caractéristique des poètes latins du christianisme se retrouve en la présente poésie française, – et deux sont frappants: la quête d'un idéal différent des postulations officiels de la nation résumés en une vociférations vers un paganisme scientifique et confortable […] et, pour ce qui est de normes prosodiques, un grand dédain. […] Décadents furent relativement les poètes qui sculptèrent en un bois vermineux; décadents par fatalité; le mot est de convention.[26]

Le Latin mystique also illustrates the tense relationship between Gourmont's erotic thought and his literary values. This is a characteristic paradox, the imaginative 'freedom' of the late Latin poets goes hand-in-hand with the turbulent sexual anxiety which was their subject. '[I]ls battent en vain les remparts de l'éternelle chair, et les pierres de frondes sacrées glissent sur les seins et sur les ventres, plus caressantes peut-être que blessantes.'[27] In Gourmont's work, the indispensable value of intellectual and artistic individualism – however confidently expounded in his essays – is always accompanied by problematic erotic consequences, a crisis which goes back to *Sixtine*: 'La vanité est le lien fictif qui nous annexe à une extériorité imaginaire: un petit effort le brise et nous sommes libres! Libres, mais seuls, seuls, dans l'effroyable solitude où nous

[26] Remy de Gourmont, *Le Latin mystique* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1892), p. 16.
[27] *Le Latin mystique*, p. 17.

naissons, où nous vivons, où nous mourrons.'[28]

Throughout the 1890s, the difficult compatibility of artistic and erotic ideals is central to the drama of Gourmont's creative work. His poetic experimentation [*Fleurs de jadis* (1893), *Hiéroglyphes* (1894), *Proses moroses* (1894)] seeks a symbolic language to aestheticize the 'mercurial' and volatile beauty of the love object as a phenomenon, the perceptual fluctuations of '[l]es désirs, s'envolant sur le dos des chimères'.[29] In his novels, however, Gourmont self-avowedly replaces 'dans la peinture de l'amour le sentiment par l'intelligence',[30] creating dramas of 'extrême conscience', to borrow Valérie Michelet Jacquod's term for '[l]a propension des symbolistes à théoriser et à gloser leurs expériences'.[31]

Meanwhile, a compelling pathos of Gourmont's *romans d'idées* emerges in how their intellectual, analytical conceit increasingly turns against itself. *Le Désarroi* (2006), Gourmont's great unfinished novel written from 1893 to 1899, exemplifies the circular and self-destructive limitations of a mind that cannot escape its own confining structures, its own greed for conscious apprehension. Like King Midas's fatal golden touch, Salèze understands that 'Il y a en moi une science maudite qui pulvérise les sphinx pour en faire le poison d'une drogue suprême: quand on l'a bue, on sait ce qu'est la vie, mais on ne vit plus.'[32]

This spirit of contradiction, used to tragic effect in his fictions, is also the vital aspect of his criticism. 'Philosophiquement,' he writes, 'je considère la contradiction comme nécessaire à l'équilibre intellectuel et passionnel. Sans elle, on tomberait dans la manie et de la manie dans la conviction, qui est le dernier degré de l'abêtissement.'[33] The essays of *La Dissociation des idées*

[28] *Sixtine*, p. 14.
[29] Remy de Gourmont, 'Symboles', *Divertissements*, p. 42.
[30] Remy de Gourmont, letter to Fernand Vanderem, 30 October 1897, *Correspondance*, ed. by Vincent Gogibu, vol. I (Paris: Sandre, 2010), p. 350.
[31] Valérie Michelet Jacquod, *Le Roman symboliste* (Geneva: Droz, 2008), p. 24. 'La structure auto-réfléchissante de ce type de romans', she continues, 'présente des personnages vivant sur le mode de la double conscience, agissant et jugeant leurs actes dans le même temps.'
[32] Remy de Gourmont, *Le Désarroi* (Paris: Le Clown Lyrique, 2006), p. 9.
[33] Remy de Gourmont, *Lettres à l'Amazone* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1919), p. 223.

(1900), as Glen Burne notes, are 'intentionally destructive,'[34] each intent on dismantling a particular concept as it exists in the popular mind, often to the point of reversing it entirely. One such essay, on 'Mallarmé et l'idée de décadence' famously redeems the idea of decadence from being 'identique à l'idée d'imitation',[35] revealing how it instead signifies 'l'idée même d'innovation',[36] only to conclude that 'il est mort'.[37]

As the nineteenth century came to a close, the destructive paradoxes and negations which increasingly occupied Gourmont as he 's'éloigne de sa position de défenseur de l'intégrité intellectuelle du symbolisme'[38] find balance with a new set of constructive ideals both intellectual and personal. Like many *fin-de-siècle* writers overburdened by the fatigue of interiority and subjectivism, Gourmont draws his curtains to breathe the fresh air of Nature, instinct, and that long-buried Decadent taboo, 'la vie'. With *Le Songe d'une femme* (1899), his fiction turns abruptly from the urbane to the pastoral, from an analytical attitude toward erotic desire to a limpid and intuitive surrender to physiological impulses. 'Après avoir traversé une période où [...] l'intelligence était en insurrection contre le cœur,' as Gourmont's contemporary Alfred Fouillé writes, 'nous entrons dans une autre où le cœur est en insurrection contre l'intelligence.'[39] While Gourmont's new idiom may be consistent with its time, it is also strikingly connected to events in his life: with the death of his mother in 1899, Gourmont was required to spend extended periods at his family estate in Normandy. On the first of these visits to the verdant landscape of his childhood, he developed a platonic romance with an estranged second cousin, Marthe Le Marié des Landelles, who inspired several poems including 'La Dame de l'été'[40] and an unpublished

[34] Glenn S. Burne, Introduction to *Selected Writings by Remy de Gourmont* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), p. 6.
[35] Remy de Gourmont, 'Stéphane Mallarmé et l'idée de décadence', *La Culture des idées* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1900), p. 120.
[36] *La Culture des idées*, p. 121.
[37] *La Culture des idées*, p. 132.
[38] Uitti, *La Passion littéraire de Remy de Gourmont*, p. 69.
[39] Alfred Fouillée, *Le Mouvement idéaliste et la réaction contre la science positive* (Paris: Alcan, 1896), p. v.
[40] Remy de Gourmont, 'La Dame de l'été', *Divertissements* (Paris: Crès, 1912, p. 108. 'Alors j'ai vu, assise près

play, *L'Ombre d'une femme* (1923).

Norman watersides and young provincial women furnish the décor of *Le Songe d'une femme* and *Un Cœur virginal* (1907), but Gourmont's new infatuation with the rhythms of nature also drew him away from fiction for a five-year period which he spent immersed in the study of entomology and natural sciences, co-founding the *Revue des Idées* with René Quinton and Edouard Dujardin. In what became his most influential work on sexuality and desire, *Physique de l'amour* (1903), Gourmont offers a pantheistic exploration into what he believes to be the infinite perversity of the natural world and its creatures, taking a stance against anthropocentric definitions of 'normal' sexual behavior which was as radical as it was graphic. In the words of Michael O'Driscoll, *Physique de l'amour* 'is an attempt to give humanity's "sexual life its place in the one plan of universal sexuality", and those philosophical conclusions militate against repressive moralists who would seek authority in any recourse to what is "Natural".'[41]

Physique de l'amour, however, is as much about the universal sexual instinct as the disunities of human erotic experience. Many of its conclusions return unequivocally to the phenomenological frustrations of Gourmont's earlier Symbolist novels, only now from a 'scientific' perspective. The human mind

> dépasse immensément ses organes; elle les submerge; elle leur demande l'impossibilité et l'absurde [...] Il a demandé aussi aux organes sexuels plus qu'ils ne pouvaient donner: et c'est pour les satisfaire que furent inventés ces gestes qui jettent sur le lit de l'amour tant de fleurs et tant de rêves.'[42]

When Gourmont returns to fiction with *Une nuit au Luxembourg* (1906), he does so with a more tempered enthusiasm for science and nature, having understood that these provide no 'solution' to the persistent problem of desire's mercuriality, no bridge between the mind and the objects of

d'une source, / Cueillant des joncs pour lier ses cheveux, / Une femme aux yeux clairs comme une source, / Qui me permit de baiser ses cheveux.'

[41] Michael O'Driscoll, 'Entoporn, Remy de Gourmont, and the Limits of Posthuman Sexuality', *Modernism/Modernity*, 20.4 (2013), 627–44 (p. 630).

[42] Remy de Gourmont, *Physique de l'amour* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1903), p. 269.

perception. A tranquil, almost optimistic, outlook on the uncertainty of knowledge and desire colors Gourmont's correspondence [collected in *Lettres à l'Amazone* (1914)] with Natalie Clifford Barney (1876-1972), the cosmopolitan queer American writer and *salonnière* with whom Gourmont became infatuated in 1910.

> Ah! mon amie, je veux expliquer l'insaisissable et encore je ne veux pas l'expliquer clairement, parce qu'il est des nuances dont le mystère ne doit être perçu que de ceux qui les portent en eux-mêmes. Qui sait si l'amitié dont je parle n'est pas un désir si profond qu'il en est obscur, comme ces puits où l'on ne voit pas, mais où l'on devine le ciel répercuté. Mais c'est un désir qui se laisse contempler avec sérénité; loin de troubler les eaux, il les clarifie et, loin de les faire bouillonner, il les apaise. C'est le ferment de la paix, de la joie, et de la sérénité.[43]

Dedicated to Barney, Gourmont's last novel *Lettres d'un Satyre* gives a fantastical expression to 'that detachment and serenity which had given his work its unique value'[44] in the last years of his life. The motif of the mask, a favourite from Gourmont's Symbolist years, makes a bittersweet return as the aged writer cautiously navigated the outside world to which Barney, in large part, beckoned him. Betrayed by his body, but moved by the sensuous vitality of the world, Gourmont's adopts the poetic avatar of the Satyr out of this contradictory necessity, a way for his sensibility to commune with that of the young poet, who in turn must wear the mask of the Amazon so that the impossible relationship can be realized on another layer of reality: 'le jeu est inextricable', Gourmont tells her, 'et nous sommes, au même moment, le Pygmalion d'une statue et la statue d'un Pygmalion'.[45] Always amenable to her friend's game of perception and idealization, Barney once convinced the reclusive Gourmont to attend one of her parties; a masked ball, after which Gourmont wrote:

> [U]n bal paré, entre personnes distinguées, n'est aucunement un plaisir médiocre. En se travestissant, les hommes se manifestent avec plus de vérité que sous

[43] *Lettres à l'Amazone*, p. 203.
[44] Glenn S. Burne, *Remy de Gourmont: His Ideas and Influence in England and America* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), p. 19.
[45] *Lettres à l'Amazone*, p. 112.

> l'uniforme habit moderne; les goûts se font voir ingénument, s'avouent avec bonheur. C'est peut-être dans la vie quotidienne que les hommes portent le loup le plus opaque et le déguisement le plus absolu. C'est bien ainsi. Remets ton masque de chair, amie, voici les autres.[46]

The Image of Gourmont in Scholarship and Culture

Posterity has not been kind to Gourmont's fiction, and various biases continue to inform how this œuvre is perceived. One such bias would have it that Gourmont's creative work acts as a kind of staging ground for his theoretical and philosophical ideas which, presumably, would only reach their ultimate expression in his non-fiction. In *Remy de Gourmont: His Ideas and Influence in England and America* (1963), Glenn Burne writes that Gourmont's 'artistry was destined ultimately to serve his ideas, a means of exploring and clarifying his thoughts and giving them concrete form'.[47] Ranking Gourmont's creative work below his non-fiction, Burne establishes his hierarchy by suggesting that Gourmont's thought somehow existed independently from his artistry, and, perhaps shockingly, that intellectual clarity and concreteness were among the primary aims of his creative work.

The well-justified characterization of Gourmont as a singular critic stems largely from his modernizing, post-Symbolist theories of language, which Burne considers (once again with hierarchizing zeal) 'Gourmont's later and more important writings' as opposed to the 'passing fancy' of the 'ultra-aesthetic'.[48] In my view, the perceived importance of these later works on language, chiefly *Le Problème du style* (1902), lies mainly in the cosmopolitan and proto-modernist status they grant to Gourmont who, it seems, can only be studied at length in English for his influence on Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot (apart from Burne, Richard Sieburth's 1978 *Instigations: Ezra Pound and Remy de Gourmont* is the only other major English study, other than

[46] Remy de Gourmont, *Petits crayons* (Paris: Crès, 1921), p. 126.
[47] Burne, *Remy de Gourmont*, pp. 16-17.
[48] Burne, *Remy de Gourmont*, p. 92.

a small handful of doctoral theses in the 1920's). *Le Problème du style* did indeed earn Gourmont his Anglo-American following (and financial patronage) when it fell into the hands of Pound in 1912. A far cry from the introspective subjectivity of *Le Livre des masques* (1896) – but still thoroughly based in many of its aspects, particularly individualism – Gourmont's text inspired Pound's nascent Imagism with an investigation of sense impressions, such as how 'La sensation se transforme en mots-images; ceux-ci en mots-idées; ceux-ci en mots-sentiments'.[49] Meanwhile, 'Eliot handsomely acknowledged his early debt [to Gourmont] in the preface to the 1928 edition of *The Sacred Wood*. Eliot's transfusion of Gourmont into English criticism has become an official episode in the history of Franco-American (and Franco-British) literary relations'.[50]

And yet, to view Gourmont through the lenses of Pound and Eliot is a bit like viewing Schopenhauer through the lens of Gourmont:[51] they took what they needed and discarded the rest along with the *fin de siècle* they sought to transcend. Leaving aside the question of taste, we can see how Gourmont's considerable role in shaping international Modernism has, at times, allowed the Modernists to shape him in return, effacing the novelist ('you could scarcely contend that he was a novelist', writes Pound),[52] poet, and dramatist in order to better establish him, for their own reasons, as 'the critical consciousness of a generation'.[53] The aura of erudition and enlightenment that the Anglo-American Modernists bestowed on Gourmont does not give the impression that his work contended with any 'crisis' other than his failure, as Richard Aldington puts it, to 'quash the poet in him for the benefit of his criticism, as Flaubert quashed the wild Romantic in himself for the benefit of his realism'.[54] Moreover, the dynamic changes and contradictions of Gourmont's

[49] Remy de Gourmont, *Le Problème du style* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1916), p. 81. See also Wallace Martin, 'The Sources of the Imagist Aesthetic', *PMLA*, 85.2 (1970), 196-204.
[50] Richard Sieburth, *Instigations: Ezra Pound and Remy de Gourmont* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 50.
[51] Case in point being Pound's afterword to his translation of *Physique de l'amour*, which O'Driscoll rightly calls 'one of the most ludicrous documents of literary modernism'.
[52] Sieburth, *Instigations*, p. 170.
[53] T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1928), p. 44.
[54] Richard Aldington, Introduction to *Selections from Remy de Gourmont* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1928), p. 18.

thought are explained away by statements such as Pound's: '[i]deas came to him as a series of fine wines to a delicate palate, and he was never inebriated. He never ran *amok*',[55] or, more amusingly, Aldington's: 'the mind of Gourmont is like [a billiard] ball carved by a Chinese artist into a nest of highly fretted spheres one within the other, made heaven knows how and quite useless for the practical game of life.'[56] In the anglophone world, we have inherited the curated portrait of a critic whose mind was never exasperated, who always handled contradiction with intellectual grace and disinterestedness – but only if the tumult of his creative writing is ignored.

In later years, Gourmont's creative work has been gradually reinstated along with the renewal of interest in Decadence and Symbolism. With Karl Uitti's *Passion littéraire de Remy de Gourmont* (1962), new questions are expertly raised about the whole range of Gourmont's work, not just his criticism. Without dismissing his weaknesses, Uitti honors Gourmont with the refreshing claim that 'cette division de Gourmont en 'philosophe' et 'artiste' est plutôt artificielle, car, toutes proportions gardées, l'œuvre de Gourmont présente une ensemble assez homogène.'[57] By looking more closely at some of its structures – its mythic dimensions, its psycho-sexual dynamics, and its handling of big existential questions – Uitti's study widened the horizon of Gourmont studies such that the present thesis is now possible. The only problem with Uitti's study (strictly in terms of Gourmont's fiction) is that its chapter on 'L'imagination créatrice', sandwiched between 'La conscience intellectuelle' and 'La pensée linguistique', is not afforded ample space for close reading, and tends to rely on a metaliterary interpretation of artistic work in order to make it fit the larger aim, which is to reinstate Gourmont's glory by showcasing his breadth of interests, forms, and genres, countering the overly narrow Modernist reception of Gourmont the critic with an ambitiously general defense of Gourmont the polymath. Uitti's book also succeeded in setting something of a tone for subsequent studies by championing the diversity

[55] Cited in *Instigations*, p. 3. Original italics.
[56] Aldington, Introduction to *Selections*, p. 15.
[57] Uitti, *La Passion littéraire de Remy de Gourmont*, p. 198.

and vastness of his work. Specifically, Uitti's emphasis on plurality is directly taken up by the two major works published since: Anne Boyer's *Remy de Gourmont: l'écriture et ses masques* (2002), which explores Gourmont's cultivation of multifarious writerly identities, primarily that of the critic, and Alexia Kalantzis' *Remy de Gourmont créateur de formes* (2012), which examines Gourmont's profusion of literary genres and their productive, experimental points of encounter.

Meanwhile, despite the decades-long delay in producing a full-length study, recent Gourmont criticism in English has carved a tentative yet potentially rich new path, one which this study seeks to continue. Whether it is due to a renewed interest in Decadent aesthetics, an increased focus on gender and sexuality topics, new psychoanalytical directions in *fin-de-siècle* literary studies, or a combination of these, the eroticism of Gourmont's fiction has started to achieve a more central place in the scholarly discourse. In *Asymptote* (1994), Robert Ziegler conducts a close reading of *Sixtine*, exploring Gourmont's idealism as it relates to his protagonist and the 'shimmering web of sexual desire'[58] in which he finds himself, shifting the usual focus refreshingly away from Gourmont's critical and aesthetic politics and towards the inner psycho-sexual world of his novels. Elsewhere, Gourmont's eroticism is central to Helen Craske's discussion of 'Desire and the *demi-vierge*: The Impenetrable Ideal in Decadent Fiction',[59] and is even brought into film studies and Deleuzian posthumanism (with unexpected clarity) in Michael O'Driscoll's 'Entoporn, Remy de Gourmont, and the Limits of Posthuman Sexuality'.[60]

'Desire itself': A Methodology for Gourmont's Eroticism

In *The Sins of the Fathers* (1986), Jennifer Birkett claims that '[s]exuality is in every sense the

[58] Robert Ziegler, *Asymptote: An Approach to Decadent Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. 214.
[59] Helen Craske, 'Desire and the Demi-Vierge: The Impenetrable Ideal in Decadent Fiction', *Dix-Neuf: Journal of the Society of Dix-Neuviémistes*, 22.1-2 (2018), 23-38.
[60] Michael O'Driscoll, 'Entoporn, Remy de Gourmont, and the Limits of Posthuman Sexuality', *Modernism/Modernity*, 20.4 (2013), 627-44.

matter of de Gourmont's writing', with the key addendum that '[t]he subject of his fictions is also desire itself'.[61] In her view, Gourmont's eroticism is fundamentally self-conscious and self-referential. In her introductory essay to Gourmont's selected writings, Birkett argues that '[h]is writing presents itself as a construction of male desire, the imaginative embodiment of much more than the instinct for sexual pleasure. What interests him are the aims and values – often inconsistent ones – caught up in the instinctual drive'.[62] This, according to Birkett, distinguishes him from other Decadent writers, particularly where cultural structures such as misogyny are concerned. 'Unlike most of his contemporaries, he writes of *and against* the female myths',[63] she argues. 'Gourmont's misogyny is one that is unusually conscious of itself and its status as an ideological construction.'[64] Birkett's ultimate claim is that Gourmont's obsessive philosophical probing made him uniquely fit to undermine the dominant sexual tropes of *fin-de-siècle* culture without abandoning them, drawing particular attention to Gourmont's self-subverting engagement with the anxieties, repressions, and objectifications of modern society (the repressive influence of Christianity above all). More interestingly, however, Birkett emphasizes Gourmont's consciousness of the various entrapments, limitations, and impossibilities that vex his desire to understand and liberate the erotic life of the individual. Being acutely sensitive to the phenomenal, linguistic, and aesthetic fabric of experience, writes Birkett, Gourmont knows that '[c]ontemporary sensuality resides in forms and language. In other words, he is aware that the modern body knows itself only *in culture*'.[65]

In navigating the vast thematics of love, sexuality, and desire in Gourmont's work, this study derives its methodology from Birkett's distinction between sexuality (the 'matter' of Gourmont's

[61] Jennifer Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers* (London: Quartet, 1986), p. 101.
[62] Jennifer Birkett, 'Images of an Egoist: The Politics of Style and Sensibility in the Work of Remy de Gourmont (1858-1915)', in *The Decadent Reader*, ed. by Asti Hustvedt (New York: Zone, 1998), pp. 925-38 (p. 930).
[63] Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers*, p. 102. Original italics.
[64] Birkett, 'Images of an Egoist', p. 930.
[65] Birkett, 'Images of an Egoist', p. 931.

writing) and 'desire itself' (its 'subject'). She posits this distinction to indicate that Gourmont's eroticism is concerned with its own construction, its own nature, and its own contingencies amounting to 'much more than the instinct for sexual pleasure'. In *Sixtine*, for instance, Gourmont takes the separation of sexuality and desire to a parodic extreme. Sexuality, reduced to the vulgar physical fulfilment of intercourse, is anathema to the protagonist's dream of a more voluptuous and controllable satisfaction afforded, Entragues thinks, by desire alone. Birkett's distinction can be taken a step further, for the *tension* between 'sexuality' and 'desire itself', especially in early works, saturates both matter and subject. During this period, Gourmont's characters regularly fall prey to the ivory tower allure of desiring from a position of sexual abstinence, or chastity, 'a clichéd subject of symbolist poetry', writes Benjamin Williams, 'and one that could serve as a figuration of, among other things, a poet's refusal to take part in the supposed prostitution of commercial literary enterprises.'[66] The 'pure', disinterested condition of art does indeed figure prominently in Gourmont's erotic ideal, which often seems to aspire to 'un rapport sexuel entre l'artiste et le beau absolu'.[67] Among the 'other things' that might be figured by the aversion to physical sexuality, we could certainly include the Symbolist and Decadent dichotomy of the material world and the 'Idée', the rejection of the 'real' and the championing of dreams, subjective representations, and interiority.

However, more than the analogic notion of sexuality and desire as a 'figuration' of the relationship between artist and art, it is the reciprocal quality that concerns me most in this study. In other words, I am interested in how Gourmont's erotic explorations – just as important as the question of art and the artist – are figured and informed *in turn*. As Birkett has shown, Gourmont's eroticism is not simply a representational tool, but a self-focused occupation all its own. Eroticism lends itself to the dramatization of other areas of thought and expression, but its own bias radiates

[66] Benjamin Williams, 'Sexual Freedom and Anarchist Individualism in French Symbolism's Ivory Tower', *French Cultural Studies*, 26.1 (2015), 17-31 (p. 18).
[67] Uitti, *La Passion littéraire de Remy de Gourmont*, p. 139.

throughout, acquiring new images while also asserting its own, following other trajectories while also setting them. Motivated by Birkett's notion of 'desire itself', this study seeks to reveal the role of idealist thought in the self-conceptualizing quality of Gourmont's eroticism.

Beyond 'Symbolist idealism': A Methodology for Gourmont's Philosophy

The development of erotic idealism in Gourmont's imaginative work, I argue, should be a key consideration in any attempt to understand the diversity, dynamism, and flexibility of the *fin de siècle*'s strange adaptation of German Idealist precepts. By revealing how Gourmont persistently applied his idealism to the question of erotic desire, another aim of this study will be to challenge the view of idealist phenomenology in *fin-de-siècle* literature as strictly a matter of Symbolist aesthetic theory – a view in which Gourmont is disproportionately implicated.

The term 'Symbolist idealism' has occasionally served as a qualifier for the creative imprecision with which a generation of artists deployed and refashioned particular principles developed by Kant and his successors. A. G. Lehmann, in *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France* (1968), adopts it as a subsection title in his discussion of 'The Starting-Point of an Aesthetic'. 'To the writer of 1880', writes Lehmann, 'Kant or Schopenhauer (almost indifferently) were simply "idealists": enormous figures, whose work, seen through a mist, appeared only in the vaguest outline.'[68] He continues:

> With such a lack of solid familiarity and in the absence of any perspective view, it was inevitable that the writings of the German philosophers, like massive lumps of authority to be thrown about, should be simple playthings invoked in arguments in no way resembling those which they had been developed out of and designed to deal with, and a shining example of their abuse is provided by that branch of knowledge with which we are here concerned: aesthetic.[69]

[68] A. G. Lehmann, *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), p. 38.
[69] Lehmann, *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France*, p. 39.

Citing Gourmont as a case study of the 'selective misinterpretation' of German philosophy by the Symbolists, Lehmann notes how Gourmont, 'in common with other popularizers of his time, says nothing of the pantheistic monism which, rather than his theory of knowledge, is the essential feature of Schopenhauer's philosophy'.[70] To Lehmann, however, it is precisely in the inadequacy of Schopenhauerian slogans like Gourmont's 'le monde, c'est moi' that we understand the nature of idealism's longevity and centrality in *fin-de-siècle* Symbolist circles; in amputating the German Idealist tradition, these artists extracted a 'solipsistic myth […] owing its retention to the notion that it was essential as a presupposition to any aesthetic whatever that *allowed a place to the individual choice and style of the artist*.'[71] With varying degrees of sympathy, scholarship has been able to suspend its disbelief concerning the loose philosophical criteria of the inconsistent 'idealisms' espoused by the Symbolists in their individual creative quests. The unmooring of German Idealist precepts from their original systematic and philosophical contexts, it recognizes, is a major aspect both of how individual *fin-de-siècle* artists developed their aesthetics, and in how they influenced one another through the sharing of common values by which they are grouped under the similarly inexact banner of 'Symbolism'. As the second-hand appropriation of German philosophy is a cornerstone of nearly every comprehensive study of Symbolism and its continuities, the term 'Symbolist idealism' suffices to disambiguate German Idealism from its *fin-de-siècle* reception.

With qualifying terms such as 'Symbolist idealism', scholarship has developed a more context-aware approach to the many imprecisions of *fin-de-siècle* 'idealist' discourses. On the other side of the coin, however, is a tendency to overcompensate for these imprecisions by narrowing the context of *fin-de-siècle* idealism to Symbolist aesthetic theory or at least its artistic

[70] Lehmann, *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France*, p. 40.
[71] Lehmann, *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France*, p. 41. Italics in original.

values, however those might be defined. This is not helped by idealism's etymological and conceptual entanglement with catchwords such as the 'Idée' of Jean Moréas's Symbolist manifesto or Albert Aurier's coinage 'idéiste',[72] both specifically employed to characterize Symbolist aesthetic practice.

Gourmont, above all, is responsible for popularizing the aesthetic-theoretical variant of *fin-de-siècle* idealism which claims the most critical attention today. In the preface to *Le Livre des masques*, Gourmont announces Schopenhauer's doctrine of the world as representation as a revelation, recently imported from German philosophy, that would ennoble artists to develop the creative expression of their own *idées*, their own subjective representations, under the provisional banner of Symbolism.

> Que veut dire *Symbolisme*? Si l'on s'en tient au sens étroit et étymologique, presque rien; si l'on passe outre, cela peut vouloir dire: individualisme en littérature, liberté de l'art, abandon des formules enseignées, tendances vers ce qui est nouveau, étrange et même bizarre; cela peut vouloir dire aussi: idéalisme [...]
> Une vérité nouvelle, il y en a une, pourtant qui est entrée récemment dans la littérature et dans l'art [...] Cette vérité, évangélique et merveilleuse, libératrice et rénovatrice, c'est le principe de l'idéalité du monde. Par rapport à l'homme, sujet pensant, le monde, tout ce qui est extérieur au moi, n'existe que selon l'idée qu'il s'en fait. Nous ne connaissons que des phénomènes, nous ne raisonnons que sur des apparences; toute vérité en soi nous échappe; l'essence est inattaquable. C'est ce que Schopenhauer a vulgarisé sous cette formule si simple et si claire. Le monde est ma représentation. Je ne vois pas ce qui est; ce qui est, c'est ce que je vois.[73]

> La littérature n'est pas en effet autre chose que le développement artistique de l'idée, que le développement artistique de l'idée, que la symbolisation de l'idée au moyen de héros imaginaires.[74]

In recent years, works such as Kalantzis' *Remy de Gourmont créateur de formes* and Valérie Jacquod's *Le Roman symboliste* (2008) have provided brilliant guides to Gourmont's theoretical

[72] Albert Aurier, 'Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin', *Mercure de France* (1 February 1891).
[73] *Le Livre des masques*, pp. 11-12.
[74] *Le Livre des masques*, p. 9.

use of the term 'idéalisme'. For reasons of their own, however, these newer studies have yet to venture beyond the aesthetic-theoretical and 'Symbolist' context for which Gourmont's idealist thought is best known. Faced with the extreme vagueness of 'idealism' in its *fin-de-siècle* usage, critics have tended to anchor themselves in Gourmont's aesthetic theories in which the uprooted philosophical term 'idealism' is resolved by being *re*-rooted in a relatively lucid conception of artistic creation. Likewise, in Kalantzis's study, Gourmont's theoretical discourse of idealism aids in grasping his interpretation of an equally difficult-to-define 'Symbolism'.[75] One reason for the stubborn attachment of 'Symbolism' and 'idealism', in other words, is the view that these independently vague terms become clearer by association. Others, in some cases, have been over-eager to read Gourmont as a sort of translation chart between German philosophy and *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic concerns. To René Wellek:

> [Gourmont's] philosophy cannot be taken seriously. It professes to be idealist, but idealism here means only a rejection of materialism. [...] The "idealism" is only an odd echo of Schopenhauer, which Gourmont probably received secondhand from Théodule-Armand Ribot's *La Philosophie de Schopenhauer* (1874). Representation to Gourmont means actually subjectivism: "The world is my representation" – a complete misunderstanding of Schopenhauer.[76]

In compensation for the tight philosophical structures which the Symbolist generation neglected in their poetic enthusiasm, commentators such as Wellek err in inferring a simplistic code of equivalencies (idealism 'means' anti-materialism, representation 'means' subjectivism, etc.) from Gourmont's theoretical discourse.

One of the difficulties in interpreting the diverse idealist themes of Gourmont's erotic fiction, however, is that no such compensation offers itself in exchange for the lost systematic roots – and this is precisely what makes them worthy of our attention. Particularly adept at

[75] See Alexia Kalantzis, *Remy de Gourmont créateur de formes* (Paris: Champion, 2012), pp. 35-39.
[76] René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950*, vol. VIII (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 24.

simplifying concepts only to reveal their vastness and flexibility (a practice which he himself called 'la dissociation des idées'), Gourmont reduces Schopenhauer's doctrine to justify Symbolist practices in *Le Livre des masques* only to deliberately set it adrift in the erotic turbulence of his fiction, where it is continually reshaped by new insights, passions, and disappointments, extending far beyond Symbolism and its aesthetic politics. In this thesis, close readings of fiction enable us to follow Gourmontian idealism along the tortuous journey which it travels unanchored from, and consequently unburdened by, the systematic weight of its German sources. Rather than attempt a stable definition, this study insists on tracing Gourmont's idealism along the process of destabilization and redefinition which it acquires in its connection to the erotic dynamics of his fiction.

The Crisis of Erotic Idealism: An Overview

In this thesis, we will see how Gourmont's fictions evolve along a unifying thread of interrogation: the question of erotic desire in a phenomenological world, and the question of idealism in the presence of erotic desire. If it is indeed the case that '[p]ar rapport à l'homme, sujet pensant, le monde, tout ce qui est extérieur au moi, n'existe que selon l'idée qu'il s'en fait',[77] Gourmont asks, what does it mean to feel desire for another person? Conversely, how does erotic desire shape our experience of a world which cannot be known to exist but in relation to the self? It is in this line of questioning, I argue, that Gourmont's fiction becomes a crucible – at once generative and destabilizing – of his thought at large, as well as a distinct discourse worthy of close study.

As a whole, Gourmont's imaginative work presents a striking paradox: as often as erotic desire and idealism appear to be at odds (the former implying the existence of an external love object, the latter admitting only the self), they are just as often seen to merge under a common

[77] *Le Livre des masques*, p. 12.

meaning or web of meanings.

The underlying theme of Gourmont's fictions, according to Birkett, is a 'craving for impossible transformations'.[78] As we shall see in this thesis, it is often the reconciliation of irreconcilable dichotomies that Gourmont's characters crave above all. Meta-erotic in their intellectual ambitions, they endlessly aspire to an impossible union of mutually exclusive ideas or realms. In *Le Fantôme*, Gourmont's protagonist, Damase, prays, 'et sois spiritualisée, beauté charnelle, et sois réalisé, intellectuel fantôme',[79] yearning to merge the transcendent infinity of divine love with the fleeting pleasure of physical sexuality. His predecessor, *Sixtine*'s Entragues, announces the wishful paradox that 'j'aurai renoncé, sans renoncer à toi [Sixtine], à la chimérique poursuite d'un amour extérieur à moi-même'.[80] To miraculously resolve these paradoxes, Gourmont's early protagonists try to exploit and harness the subjective relativity of the external world to conform reality to their erotic fantasies, hoping to extend the philosophical ideology of Symbolist art into other areas of experience, a quest which always ends in chaos and disillusionment. Entragues begins this metanarrative with a self-assured, almost political, assertion of solipsistic primacy:

> Le monde, c'est moi, il me doit l'existence, je l'ai créé avec mes sens, il est mon esclave et nul sur lui n'a de pouvoir. Si nous étions bien assurés de ceci, qu'il n'est rien en dehors de nous, comme la guérison de nos vanités serait prompte, comme promptement nos plaisirs en seraient purgés. La vanité est le lien fictif qui nous annexe à une extériorité imaginaire: un petit effort le brise et nous sommes libres![81]

If it is true that 'the world is my representation', as Entragues believes, then he is free to represent to himself whatever world he pleases, and, if this principle licenses the artist to manifest a wholly individual image of beauty derived from his subjective imagination, then what is there to prevent

[78] Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers*, p. 100.
[79] *Le Fantôme*, p. 25.
[80] *Sixtine*, p. 258
[81] *Sixtine*, pp. 13-14.

the lover from doing the same? Entragues and the later Damase take this wager to its limits, perversely seeking erotic gratification within the omni-creative, yet ultimately sterile, ethic of subjectivism. Contrary to what one might expect, however, the downfall of Gourmont's Symbolist hero does not entail a negation of his idealism, but a tragic confirmation of it. As the hero laments at the end of *Les Chevaux de Diomède* (1897): 'Sois maudite, Pensée, créatrice de tout, mais créatrice meurtrière, mère maladroite qui n'as jamais mis au monde que des êtres dont les épaules sont l'escabeau du hasard et les yeux, la risée de la vie.'[82] As Chapter 1 shows, it is not entirely the case that a novel such as *Sixtine* 'ends by invalidating the philosophy underpinning it'.[83] Rather, it is the protagonists' naïve pretenses of dominance and egoistic gratification which are ultimately vanquished by the very phenomenology they thought they could exploit. Overcome by a crisis of interpretation,[84] the Gourmontian protagonist becomes painfully aware that his palace is also a prison, that the mental fabric of his self-made reality is also a blindfold. 'Me voilà donc limité par mon hypothèse', Gourmont writes,

> c'est-à-dire par moi-même, et je reconnais, cette fois indubitablement, que je ne puis pas ne pas me limiter, car, dès que je pense, je pose l'hypothèse de la pensée. Me voilà donc limité par ma propre pensée, et plus je pense plus je me limite, plus je crée d'obstacles au développement de mon primordial absolutisme.[85]

Gourmont's pessimism is unique in how it tends to sidestep Schopenhauer's philosophy of the Will, finding ample explanation for suffering in the principle of the world as idea alone. Similarly, while deeply laden with misogyny, his protagonists' romantic bitterness does not so much implicate Woman as the vampiric embodiment of disastrous life drives, but as the endlessly-

[82] Remy de Gourmont, *Les Chevaux de Diomède* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1897) p. 249.
[83] Robert Ziegler, *Asymptote* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. 215.
[84] See Julien Schuh, '"La vieille maladie des noix vides": paranoïa herméneutique dans Sixtine', in *Modernité de Remy de Gourmont*, ed. by Jean-Claude Larrat and Gérard Poulouin (Caen: Presses Universitaires de Caen, 2010), pp. 217-27.
[85] Remy de Gourmont, 'Dernière consequence de l'idéalisme', *La Culture des idées*, p. 269.

receding object of the male's struggle for possession in a world of hallucinatory appearances. 'When [Gourmont] sadistically torments his fantasy to compel her to produce a better image of his desire', writes Birkett, 'he 'knows' she never will, because she is nothing but that desire, the projection of his own dream'.[86] Woman is not just the objectified image of the male's erotic desire, but also the object of his eroticized search for meaning. When she is systematically denied her own individuality, Woman's non-existent (or, more accurately, unknowable) essence reflects that of the phenomenological world which the male equally seeks to master and manipulate. To Julien Schuh:

> La femme fonctionne comme une image du monde privé d'essence; la relation amoureuse est le prototype de la situation de l'homme dans l'univers […] En étudiant les relations amoureuses, l'écrivain peut donc comprendre le fonctionnement de la vie de l'homme dans un monde sans transcendance; la psychologie de l'amour devient une métaphysique en action.[87]

Erotic desire is the penetrating motive force which drives the hero to the mysterious core of the world as idea, but it also *is* that mysterious core.

In his play *Lilith*, Gourmont's erotic idealism travels back in mythic time to speculate on the origins of the discordant fissures and paradoxes that afflict the heroes of his novels. In his strange retelling of Genesis and the Fall of Man – erotically inflated by virtue of the non-canonical Hebrew legend of Adam's lascivious first bride – Gourmont retrieves a primordial image of irreconcilability: the lapsarian moment which separates unity and disunity, paradise and banishment, is cognition itself, figured by the Tree of Knowledge and the advent of sexual awareness. The very moment that such things as sexuality or the object of desire enter into consciousness and language, Gourmont postulates, they are henceforth impossible to reclaim. The paradox, however, is that things have no discernible existence beyond the mind which thinks and

[86] Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers*, p. 101.
[87] Schuh, 'La Vieille maladie des noix vides', p. 218.

names its world into being. Even if it were possible, therefore, a proverbial return to Edenic unity would be useless.

At this juncture, the 'craving for impossible transformations' of Gourmont's protagonists is curbed by their pessimistic awareness of the fundamental disunity which *Lilith* uncovered at the taproot of human experience. Salèze presents the disabused reflection of 'le monde, c'est moi' when he concludes in *Le Désarroi* that 'Savoir, c'est nier'.[88]

Gourmont's idealist imagination enters a dark night of the soul as the project of Symbolism begins to lose its enthusiastic energy, and as pessimistic dead ends begin to suffocate the old ideals of subjective creation and beauty. 'Dans cette fatigue', Sandrine Schiano-Bennis observes, 'la conscience s'épuise de sa propre activité, et, à la limite, éprouve le désir de se libérer d'elle-même, dans quelque forme de non-conscience, fût-ce la mort, ou la simple volonté de détruire, pour se confondre enfin avec une possible objectivité'.[89] *Le Désarroi*, Gourmont's unpublished novel rediscovered in 2005, is a disquieting study in the heat-death of Symbolist values and the Sisyphean hopelessness of desire. Raging against its own deterioration, the subjectivist dream of boundless creation morphs into a jaded embrace of destruction. Eros, accordingly, reveals its murderous aspect. 'Oui', Salèze says of his love objects,

> je les ai tuées, toutes, et peut-être même celles que je ne touchai que de mon désir. Les fleurs se fanent entre mes doigts comme entre deux charbons ardents. Il y a en moi une science maudite qui pulvérise les sphinx pour en faire le poison d'une drogue suprême: quand on l'a bue, on sait ce qu'est la vie, mais on ne vit plus.[90]

If Entragues tried and failed to give life to the dream woman by liberating her from problematic reality, Salèze now stands on the opposite bank of the erotic paradox, where he is able to see his desire as a mechanism of negation and absence.

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[88] *Le Désarroi*, p. 9.
[89] Schiano-Bennis, *La Renaissance de l'idéalisme*, pp. 12-13.
[90] *Le Désarroi*, p. 9.

Eventually, to relieve the annihilating pressure of a hypersubjectivism turned against itself, Gourmont finds relief in what Uitti calls a 'nouveau contexte mythique',[91] a new set of values to revive eros and reframe an idealist worldview which all but reached its limit. As the nineteenth century ended, Gourmont joined his fatigued Symbolist brethren in a radical turn from *l'idée* to *la réalité*, from interiority to exteriority, from the morbidity of decadence to the vitality of *la vie*, and from the triumph of the subjective world to the triumph of Nature: glimmering catchwords of an emergent *esprit nouveau*. With *Le Songe d'une femme* (1899), Gourmont's paradigm shift is accompanied by a new literary style whose clarity and simplicity bears little relation to yesteryear's Symbolist experimentation. New linguistic and aesthetic theories are developed, and the highly influential *Physique de l'amour* marks the culmination of Gourmont's recent investment in physiology, natural science, and – most radically of all – a worldview which he defines as materialism.

However, after five years spent immersed in science, linguistics, and 'le débat des idées',[92] Gourmont breaks a hiatus from fiction not to showcase his new intellectual theories, but to self-consciously subordinate them to the bittersweet futility of human striving and understanding. In *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, an unnamed demigod speaks in riddles to mortal man, describing forms of knowledge and experience which lie beyond humanity's grasp.

> Je ne vous dirai donc pas la vérité, parce qu'il n'y a pas de concordance possible entre votre esprit servi par vos sens et ce qui est extérieur à vos sens. Il y a une représentation; elle est inexacte, parce qu'elle est fragmentaire et momentanée. Quelques petits cubes de la mosaïque sont tombés de la voûte, vous les mettez dans le creux de votre main, vous en assemblez les nuances et vous croyez avoir reconstitué le drame du monde. Je ne vous dirai pas la vérité; je vous dirai ce que vous désirez savoir. Quand vous le saurez, vous n'en saurez pas davantage, mais vous serez content.[93]

[91] Uitti, *La Passion littéraire de Remy de Gourmont*, p. 192.
[92] Anne Boyer, *Remy de Gourmont: l'écriture et ses masques* (Paris: Champion, 2004), p. 263.
[93] Remy de Gourmont, *Une nuit au Luxembourg* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1925), pp. 62-63.

With Gourmont's return to fiction, erotic idealism is rehabilitated as a form of wisdom (in deliberate contrast to 'knowledge') whereby Gourmont gently deflates his own epistemological pretensions. In his final novels, Gourmont is even more deliberate than before in his conflation of the limits of human understanding and the endlessly-receding object of erotic desire. In *Lettres d'un Satyre*, where the teaching relationship between man and the gods is reversed, the otherworldly satyr learns,

> Tu n'as connu que celles qui se jettent à la tête des hommes, mais il y a celles qu'il faut conquérir. C'est l'infini, Satyros. C'est notre infini à nous et généralement notre tombeau. Nous y descendons, en rêvant encore à l'énigme de leur sourire dont nul ne saura jamais s'il est une propriété naturelle ou une condescendance de leur visage. Tu ne peux pas comprendre cela, je le crains, Satyros, mais, ces femmes-là, on les aime en proportion de ce que l'on doute de leur amour, dont on n'est jamais sûr. Elles ne sont jamais tout à fait conquises, et c'est ce qui donne tant de prix à leurs moindres faveurs. […] Tu ne peux pas savoir. Ah! Satyros, malgré ta petite aventure avec Cydalise, tu es d'une belle ignorance sentimentale. Que d'échelons tu as encore à monter, ou peut-être à descendre, pour être au niveau de la belle humanité délicate![94]

What emerges out of the retreat into Symbolism's opposite ideals, therefore, is a highly inventive (if often strange) series of compromises. Even in full materialist zeal, Gourmont repeats the assertion that matter is 'parfaitement insaisissable en sa réalité; c'est un tissu idéal, une glaise dont chaque particule est un pur concept'. Paradoxically, he ends with the claim that 'idéalisme et matérialisme deviennent synonymes, et le matérialiste est celui pour qui la matière n'existe pas; pour qui la seule réalité est la pensée'.[95] Far from abandoning idealism, Gourmont searches for its scientific justification in the natural world.

In the last two chapters of this study, we will see how the unusual permanence of Gourmont's idealism through his materialist phase is due in large part to the persistent question of desire and its phenomenology. Despite the many paradigm shifts of Gourmont's later years, the

[94] Remy de Gourmont, *Lettres d'un satyre* (Paris: Crès, 1913), pp. 181-82.
[95] Remy de Gourmont 'La Vie et la mort', *Promenades philosophiques* (Paris : Mercure de France, 1913), p. 167.

self-conscious eroticism noted by Birkett remains an important constant. The post-Symbolist notions of *la vie*, *la nature*, and *la réalité* saturate Gourmont's later fictions not only as ideological positions, but as erotic objectives. Just like the old Symbolist values, Gourmont discovers, this *esprit nouveau* is both ideology and idealization, a dream which his protagonists project upon the women that they desire, and thus a fantasy of which Gourmont's fiction continues to be self-aware.

From the torrid perversities and miraculous ideals of the Symbolist years, to the accepting smile with which the mature writer bids farewell to the human condition, the stereoscopic image of idealism and erotic desire offers a rich view of Gourmont's intellectual and creative landscape.

Chapter 1: The Phantom[1]

> et j'aurai renoncé, sans renoncer à toi, à la chimérique poursuite d'un amour extérieur à moi-même.[2]

While not his first novel, *Sixtine, roman de la vie cérébrale* (1890) is generally recognized as the starting point of Gourmont's literary and intellectual career. This reason for this status, literary quality notwithstanding, lies in how the novel reflects two closely interrelated discoveries, more or less absent in *Merlette* (1886), which go on to define Gourmont's idiom: the discovery of Symbolism, and the discovery of philosophical idealism. As such, *Sixtine* is also regarded as a preemptive fictional adaptation of Gourmont's writings on Symbolist-idealist theory such as the texts of *L'Idéalisme* and the preface to *Le Livre des masques*, in which Gourmont famously concretized the previously mercurial link between the Symbolist aesthetic and doctrine of the world as idea.

My own reason for following tradition by beginning with *Sixtine*, however, has less to do with *Sixtine* as the ideological embryo of Gourmont's literary doctrine than it has with the instabilities which consequently arise out of a new mentality, instabilities often overshadowed by theoretical ideas and values later reproduced in Gourmont's critical work. Namely, the insoluble question of erotic desire in a phenomenological world provides not only the dramatic engine of

[1] Though counterintuitive, I reserve discussion of Gourmont's *Le Fantôme* for Chapter 2, where a close reading of that text is central to my discussion of mysticism and the mystic. As the archetype of the phantom is prevalent in much of Gourmont's writing (and popular in Symbolist writing at large), my intention in the present chapter is to establish the starting point of Gourmont's erotic idealism in *Sixtine* through the image of the phantom at the cost of a fuller account of the phantom motif in his work.
[2] *Sixtine*, p. 258.

the narrative, but a key site of tension and energy in Gourmont's nascent engagement with idealism as well as the values of Symbolism.

Strikingly simple in plot, *Sixtine* centers around the subjective world (the *vie cérébrale*) of Hubert d'Entragues, an aristocratic and solitary writer who becomes infatuated with the eponymous widow, Sixtine Magne. Applying a Huysmansian anti-hero framework to a scenario no doubt based on Gourmont's nascent relationship with Courrière, *Sixtine* sets its protagonist adrift in a world where introspective musings collide ambiguously with external reality. Written as Gourmont was first negotiating his embrace of the Symbolist aesthetic and the philosophy of idealism, *Sixtine* brings the conflicted enthusiasm of its author to the foreground, dramatizing the intellectual tensions, aspirations, and challenges that accompanied Gourmont's paradigm shift. Through Entragues, Gourmont explores the human limits of an artistic doctrine which preaches that reality is a product of individual aesthetic creation by testing it in the context of an erotic relationship.

Saturated by this paradox – in which Entragues's drive toward the external love object is belied by the principle of the world as idea, and vice versa – *Sixtine* harnesses its Symbolist imagery and style to represent the mysterious boundaries between presence and absence, object and subject, self and other, which the question of erotic idealism brings to bear. The figure of the phantom, popular among the Symbolists for its liminality between form and formlessness, reality and dream, becomes a main image through which Gourmont's discourse evolves.

The motif of the phantom recurs in Gourmont's writing and illustrates the obscure phenomenological realms which lie between the self and the external world. Himself a writer, Entragues questions whether the 'phantom' existence of external phenomena can truly be overcome by the subjective prowess of the artist, or whether the individual mind, too, is only capable of expressing phantom forms. At first glance, the phantom would seem to be a term of indifference or opprobrium towards a vulgar external world which Entragues rejects. However,

the motif recurs in contradictory contexts. True to its name, Gourmont's phantom floats between different meanings: sometimes a deplorable image of externality ('Dans la rue, Entragues ne sympathisait pas avec la sourde conscience éparse parmi le fluide humaine émané de la foule: les passants lui semblaient trop des fantômes'),[3] at others, a pleasing invention of inner experience ('Paris, ce n'était pour lui, ni la rue, ni le boulevard, ni le théâtre: Paris, pour Entragues, était confiné dans les bornes assez étroites du 'cabinet d'étude', peuplé des bons fantômes de son imagination.').[4] But the significance of Gourmont's phantom motif lies precisely in its ambiguity. As the narrative of *Sixtine* progresses, so does Entragues's confusion and panic over the relationship between interiority and exteriority. As he becomes more vulnerable in his desire for Sixtine, the mere thought of whom challenges his solitude, so does his neat hierarchy of self and the world begin to weaken. As a representational tactic, the image of the phantom brings the respective crises of erotic desire and idealism into deeper alignment, conflating the troubled pursuits of erotic gratification and phenomenological mastery by subsuming them under the same image of haunting intangibility:

> Incapable d'aimer, peut-être; très sûrement, incapable de faire partager son amour. Nul mirage de sensation ne pouvait donc le tromper avec persévérance, avec assez de certitude pour lui donner le courage d'emporter à travers le désert, vers l'oasis, un fantôme d'amour vivifié par le désir? Elle le raillait et il capitulait; elle fuyait, il la regardait fuir.[5]

Just as the artist vivifies the shapeless phantoms of externality by force of his imagination, the lover believes that it is only by externalizing his subjective desire that the phantom love object acquires substance. In his own chapter on Gourmont's 'création des fantômes', Uitti explains how 'l'amour n'existant que dans la mesure où l'amant le désire, la beauté, inspiratrice de l'amour, ne

[3] *Sixtine*, p. 57.
[4] *Sixtine*, p. 18
[5] *Sixtine*, p. 85.

peut exister que dans le cerveau de celui qui aime. L'amour devient donc une création esthétique, au même titre qu'un poème ou un tableau.'[6] This all-too-simple affinity between love and aesthetic creation is a theoretical axiom which the drama of Gourmont's fiction repeatedly casts into conflict and doubt. Though the exact terms of this idea will evolve in the course of Gourmont's work, for now, Uitti's statement is indeed the idealist wager that Entragues makes, assured that 'Je raisonne bien, décidément', but it is one which he consistently loses.

While the idealist conceit of *Sixtine* has been widely studied,[7] scholarship has generally interpreted the erotic drama as a Schopenhauerian conflict between Will and renunciation, manifested in the novel's tension between sexual desire and the chaste subjectivism of Symbolist art.[8] Without discounting the strong currents of pessimism and thematics of Schopenhauerian Will which run through *Sixtine*, I argue that the idealism implicit in Gourmont's erotic discourse is more concerned with the ambiguous, phenomenological structure of desire than with the tyrannical status ascribed to it by Schopenhauer.

The Splitting of Idealism

'*Sixtine*', notes Robert Ziegler, 'is widely considered the consummate novelistic adaptation of Gourmont's Idealist philosophy. Featuring an author who assigns material reality to his thoughts, *Sixtine*, however, ends by invalidating the philosophy underpinning it.'[9] As will soon be apparent in this thesis, all of Gourmont's novels follow roughly the same pattern in which the protagonist

[6] Uitti, *La Passion littéraire de Remy de Gourmont*, p. 149.
[7] See, for instance, Valérie Michelet Jacquod, *Le Roman symboliste: un art de l'extrême conscience* (Geneva: Droz, 2008), pp. 1 59-80; Wiesław Malinowski, 'Schopenhauer dans le roman: à propos de "Sixtine" de Remy de Gourmont', *Studia Romanica Posnaniensia*, 29 (2003), 5 5-67; André Karátson, 'Les Arcanes de l'idé alisme: réception esthétique de Schopenhauer dans "Sixtine" de Rémy de Gourmont', in *Schopenhauer et la création littéraire en Europe*, ed. by Christian Berg and Anne Henry (Paris: Méridiens Klinckseick, 1989); and Agata Sadkowska-Fidala, 'L'absence qui devient pré sence: la vie et l'Idée dans "Sixtine" de Remy de Gourmont', *Quêtes littéraires*, 1, 2011, 32-38.
[8] See Wiesław Malinowski, 'Schopenhauer dans le roman: à propos de "Sixtine" de Remy de Gourmont', *Studia Romanica Posnaniensia*, 29 (2003), 55-67.
[9] Ziegler, *Asymptote*, p. 215.

is ultimately uprooted from whatever precarious ideological position he has planted himself in. However, two things are to be said of this pattern in the case of *Sixtine*. Firstly, in view of the permanent role of philosophical idealism in Gourmont's intellectual development, it would be misleading to conclude that the philosophy itself is abandoned at the novel's conclusion. Ziegler's 'asymptotic' theory of Decadent fiction, after all, contends that the lines connecting Decadent writers to their protagonists are inherently flexuous.[10] Secondly, while all of Gourmont's novels base themselves on a 'credo' of some kind, *Sixtine*'s 'le monde, c'est moi' is uniquely framed by a discourse that establishes fluctuation from the very start.

> Y a-t-il un monde de vie extérieure à moi-même? C'est possible, mais je ne le connais pas. Le monde, c'est moi, il me doit l'existence, je l'ai créé avec mes sens, il est mon esclave et nul sur lui n'a de pouvoir. Si nous étions bien assurés de ceci, qu'il n'est rien en dehors de nous, comme la guérison de nos vanités serait prompte, comme promptement nos plaisirs en seraient purgés. La vanité est le lien fictif qui nous annexe à une extériorité imaginaire: un petit effort le brise et nous sommes libres! Libres, mais seuls, seuls, dans l'effroyable solitude où nous naissons, où nous vivons, où nous mourrons.[11]

Beyond its centrality to the narrative itself, the iconic status of this passage is reinforced by the countless times in which it is paraphrased and reproduced by Gourmont throughout his career. 'Le monde, c'est moi' is in every sense the matrix of Gourmont's idealist philosophy, and it is this philosophy which guides his aesthetic theories in the age of Symbolism. Specifically, the Schopenhauerian distillation of the opening lines of the passage is reflected in the preface of *Le Livre des masques*, itself famous for cementing idealism as Symbolism's justifying philosophy. The above quotation is one of many instances in which Entragues, himself a writer, muses upon

[10] Ziegler bases his model of the relationship between writer and character on the mathematical figure of the asymptote, which he defines as 'a straight line that is closely approached but never met by a curve [Greek asumptōtos not falling together].' He sees the straight line as the life of the author, the curve, the decadent excesses and follies of the fictional character. Ziegler, *Asymptote*, p. 9.
[11] *Sixtine*, pp. 13-14.

idealist principles which would eventually resurface in the aesthetic theory of his creator. In this sense, *Sixtine* does indeed qualify as a 'novelistic adaptation' (even though it predates *Le Livre des masques*) of Gourmont's idealist worldview. But how is it that Gourmont can dramatically negate the idealist philosophy in *Sixtine*, only to resurrect its ideas near-verbatim in his key document of Symbolist idealism? To answer this question, we wonder whether Ziegler's asymptote might apply not only to the novel's relationship to its author, but to its own aesthetic doctrines. The tragic blunder of the Decadent antihero attempting to live out his artistic values is, after all, a well-known trope solidified by Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884), the novel after which Gourmont's is clearly modelled. Ziegler would have it that both texts, rather than merely reproducing the intellectual and moral failings of their authors, serve to exorcise 'unwanted traits, destructive tendencies', and 'obsolete identit[ies]' in 'a dynamic act of creative regeneration'[12] which might prove necessary in the transference of ideas from fiction to theory. On the other hand, the apparent death and resurrection of Gourmont's idealism (in *Sixtine* and *Le Livre des masques*, respectively) could be a false paradigm, an illusion created by the fact that we are dealing with *two* strands of idealism disguised as a single discourse by their intertextual replication. The idealism thrown into turmoil by the erotic drama of *Sixtine* is deeply connected to the idealism which triumphs in the aesthetic manifesto of *Le Livre des masques*, but it is distinct. It has its own story to tell, and its arc does not always align with that of its twin.

The opening section of *Sixtine*, though usually remembered for the 'le monde, c'est moi' speech, begins in fact with a contrasting sentiment: a focus on the other and a concern for the objects of externality. It is the moment in which Entragues first encounters Sixtine under the fir trees at Rabodanges: 'Je veux savoir ce qu'il y a en elle', he yearns, 'je veux pénétrer froidement dans les obscures broussailles de ce bois sacré.'[13] His subsequent reflections are all variations on

[12] Ziegler, *Asymptote*, p. 12.
[13] *Sixtine*, p. 8.

this theme of looking behind the veil, beneath the perceptual surface of things. His desire to 'pénétr[er] l'essence'[14] of Sixtine presupposes that such an essence exists, or at least seems to exist, beyond the confines of his own subjectivity. He speaks of proverbial nuts he wishes to crack, of 'caisses du Trésor'[15] beckoning to be unlocked by 'les mains curieuses et voleuses'.[16] This attitude extends not only to the hidden treasures of the love object, but to the nature of language and truth. In Sixtine's words, and in her eyes, Entragues seeks to decipher some 'signifiance exacte'.[17] As he himself explains, appropriating an aphorism of Goethe, '[q]uand il entend des mots, Entragues croit toujours qu'il y a une pensée dedans'.[18] A later scene from the novel-within-a-novel *L'Adorant* describes the horror felt by Entragues's metafictional avatar Della Preda upon discovering that the clothes of his beloved Madonna statue have been changed, a tragedy intended to allegorize (and eroticize) the idealist principle that representation is the only truth. This, too, is preemptively contradicted in the opening pages when Entragues compares truth to a woman's body rather than her visible garments: 'sous le manteau royal comme sous les haillons, c'est toujours le même corps de femme'.[19]

In this opening section, in which Entragues's desire for Sixtine is born, the penetrative, veil-rending impulse of male erotic fascination saturates the text and presents us, however provisionally, with a world in which things-in-themselves seem to exist and beg to be uncovered, in which 'la vérité' is to be found under the superficial cloak of appearances, and in which the mind of the other is of equal interest as the mind of the subject. At the beginning of the text, therefore, we find Entragues in ardent communion with the 'lien fictif' of self/world relations that he proceeds to denounce. Thus, the interpretation that the narrative of *Sixtine* 'ends' with the defeat

[14] *Sixtine*, p. 10.
[15] *Sixtine*, p. 11.
[16] *Sixtine*, p. 12.
[17] *Sixtine*, p. 10.
[18] *Sixtine*, p. 11.
[19] *Sixtine*, p. 10.

of the hero's idealist philosophy at the hands of love, though not implausible, risks falsely insinuating that it begins in the plighted ivory tower of proud solipsism. The protagonist, 'un être doté de quelques âmes de rechange'[20] and therefore capable of contradictory truths, enters the arena not with his solipsistic cry of 'le monde, c'est moi', but as a lover immersed in the belief in things external, a libidinous desire for that which his own idealism denies.

Neither, by showing his protagonist in a moment of temptation towards the secrets of externality and the erotic treasures of the other, is Gourmont merely showcasing the horrors of the Schopenhauerian Will. Rather than simply place erotic desire and idealist enlightenment on opposite moral poles, Gourmont sets eros and idealism alongside each other like existential puzzle pieces: idealism liberates 'nos plaisirs' from their illusory reliance on external contingencies, but it negates pleasure in the process, leaving them and the individual '[l]ibre, mais seul, seuls, dans l'effroyable solitude où nous naissons, où nous vivons, où nous mourrons.'[21] Entragues is not recoiling from his earlier desire, but rather weighing the tragic coexistence of two layers of reality: one in which the subject inherently desires to reach beyond himself, another in which the external realm is solely knowable as a subjective creation. The pessimistic consequences of this entanglement may seem to lead the way to a Schopenhauerian privileging of asceticism, but a major difference emerges between Gourmont's attitude towards desirous drives and Schopenhauer's idea of the Will: for Entragues, the trouble lies not in the libidinous drive itself, but in the phenomenological quagmire that afflicts it by virtue of the subject's awareness of his own subjectivity. Gourmont's idealism, in other words, would rather find a way to accommodate desire than to transcend it.

The transition between the opening scene and the 'le monde, c'est moi' speech is meaningful. Sixtine responds to Entragues's probing by turning it back upon him, asking '[à] quel

[20] *Sixtine*, p. 8.
[21] *Sixtine*, pp. 13-14.

but prétendez-vous? L'amour est trop fuyant pour votre stabilité, admettons. En ce cas, où s'achemine votre vie? Ah! poète, au succès?',[22] Entragues attempts a pedantic reply about his preference for prose, but is distracted by a crow flying overhead:

> Un vlouement d'ailes de corbeau troubla l'air au-dessus des arbres. Hubert se tut, écoutant, puis:
> 'Vlouement, c'est ça, vlouement d'ailes, avec bien le *v v v*. Est-ce le *v v v* ou le *f f f*?
> Le filement d'ailes? Non, vlouement est mieux. Fais-le encore, corbeau!'
> Sixtine, un peu effarée, le fixait, la bouche épanouie.
> 'Ces diables de bruit d'ailes, on ne peut pas les attraper!'[23]

The incident of the crow comically defrauds Entragues's anti-poetic pretenses, but, more importantly, it occasions a spontaneous reversal of perspective: the animal becomes a construction of human language and thought, appearing to its observer as a purely aesthetic and verbal abstraction. Similarly, Gourmont blurs the lines between protagonist, narrator, and writer (Entragues's debate over 'vlouement' appears as if Gourmont's editorial voice is somehow speaking through him), calling into question the relationship between reality and representation, yet at the same time foreclosing that question by exposing the crafted illusion that is his fiction. Just as the reader is bluntly awakened to the artifice of the text, Entragues is jolted from the suspended disbelief which so recently enabled him to surrender to the illusion of externality. His consciousness of the world as idea snaps into focus, and the scene is now set for the 'le monde, c'est moi' speech. Before announcing his philosophy, however, Entragues is wistful at the crow's parting, as if the elusive creature contained the precious key to that vexatious boundary between the object-affirming experience of desire and the reality that 'le monde, c'est moi'.

Hence, while idealism may underpin the literary enterprise of *Sixtine* as a Symbolist text, its

[22] *Sixtine*, p. 13.
[23] *Sixtine*, p. 13.

relationship to erotic desire is explicitly and fundamentally unstable. The tension between outward-seeking desire and inward-seeking subjectivism is a predicament of which Entragues is conscious from the very start. While the value and significance of artistic production in an idealist world may be straight-forward (for 'l'art n'est que la faculté d'objectifier en un simulacre la representation individuelle du monde'),[24] the idealist approach to erotic desire is a great mystery.

Overcoming the Culture of Schopenhauer

Gourmont's motivation to assimilate erotic desire into his idealist worldview can also be seen as a response to the entrapments of his own Schopenhauerian culture. Like his forebear Des Esseintes, Entragues walks that characteristically Decadent line between intellectual sincerity and disabused self-parody, both embodying and decrying the tropes of his immediate milieu. In Entragues's case, however, the self-conscious critique is targeted at the very subculture of Decadent taste and Schopenhauerian pessimistic leanings which *À rebours* helped to consolidate. Entragues is in every way a member of his generation, but his painful awareness of kinship and tradition further fuels the hunger for individualism and subjective sovereignty so central to Gourmont's philosophy in the age of Symbolism. '*Sixtine* and its author sit uncomfortably on the shifting boundary between Decadence and Symbolism',[25] writes Ben Fisher, who also sees Entragues's erotic quest as containing both a parody of Decadent impotence and a will to innovation and relief which Fisher associates with second-wave Symbolism:

> The abortive affair with Sixtine represents an attempt by a Decadent hero to step outside the cerebral, aesthetic world in which he is commonly delineated, and his failure suggests a temporary exhaustion of the literary potential of his kind. In the Symbolist perspective Hubert d'Entragues is a dated character; we may see in him the effective demise of the Decadent hero as a potent force and a clear way ahead for the evolution of a new type, which would be created largely by writers personally

[24] *Sixtine*, pp. 75-76.
[25] Ben Fisher, *The Pataphysician's Library* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p. 178.

familiar with Gourmont, as well as with his work and artistic thought.[26]

The issue with this statement, however, is that Entragues's desire for Sixtine in no way presupposes a rejection of the 'cerebral, aesthetic world'. While the parody of Decadent incapacity is undeniable (Entragues squanders his ample opportunities to possess Sixtine, and she is quickly swept away by the virile and animalistic Moskowitch), it would be wrong to directly equate the cerebrality of Gourmont's hero with the incapacity that afflicts him. Quite the contrary: for Entragues, the world-creating powers of cognition and artistry are central to the structure of his desire for the new. Where the Decadent hero retreats within the confines of cerebrality and aesthetics, the tragedy of the Gourmontian Symbolist hero lies not so much in his being amorously lured away from these principles, but in his desire to expand and project them beyond the proverbial 'cabinet d'étude'[27] of Decadence and towards the new love object, convinced that desire, beauty, and pleasure are themselves functions of thought and aesthetics. It is precisely in this conception of the love object as a cerebral and aesthetic tissue that erotic desire reflects the modernizing impulse of Gourmont's artistic thought; Sixtine, like the great Symbolist artwork, demands of the lover (or artist) a novel harnessing of subjectivity, a feat of imagination drawn from inner resources.

Entragues's attempt to cultivate the living image of a woman does not merely constitute a rejection of the dubious external world, but also speaks his need to inject idealism with new life by marshalling the creative powers of both erotic desire and subjective imagination.

As Entragues himself repeatedly admits, however, the writings of his influences form an overwhelming part of his inner world. Just as Gourmont, at the time of *Sixtine*, was still establishing his individual voice from beneath the weight of Decadent influence, Entragues's idealized *moi*, despite its claims, struggles for definition and mastery, and is routinely thrown into

[26] Fisher, *The Pataphysician's Library*, p. 179.
[27] *Sixtine*, p. 18.

chaos by the potency of its governing literary and philosophical influences.[28]

Where Des Esseintes attempts to manufacture his artificial paradise primarily by material means, Entragues, devoted to the aesthetic realm in a different way, builds his ivory tower atop Schopenhauer's maxim that 'the world is my representation': 'Y a-t-il un monde de vie extérieure à moi-même? C'est possible, mais je ne le connais pas. Le monde, c'est moi, il me doit l'existence, je l'ai créé avec mes sens, il est mon esclave et nul sur lui n'a de pouvoir.'[29] Here, it is not nature, as in Huysmans, but the very notion of the external world which 'a fait son temps',[30] and Gourmont even invokes the famous phrase from *À rebours* in a discussion in which Entragues, joined by his peers, defines his idealist stance.

> 'La Nature a fait son temps!'
> 'C'est un livre.'
> 'Un livre désespérant, continua Entragues, et qui a confessé d'avance, et pour longtemps, nos goûts et nos dégoûts.'
> 'Oui', reprit Chrétien, 'mais je ne parle pas des autres, des naïfs, de ceux qui croient que dès qu'une chose remue elle existe. La nature! Mais c'est l'artiste qui la crée la nature, et l'art n'est que la faculté d'objectiver en un simulacre la représentation individuelle du monde.'
> 'Et,' fit Passavant, 'l'homme n'est lui-même que le simulacre de l'idée.'
> 'Soit', reprit Chrétien, 'mais loin de pouvoir atteindre à la vérité absolue, comme s'en targuent ces niais, l'art n'est donc qu'un ricochet, le simulacre d'un simulacre. Ce n'est plus la volonté qui agit directement, mais seulement une volonté déjà fixée dans l'individu, soumise à l'intelligence, affaiblie par le dédoublement, en somme limitée à des velléités.'
> 'Ces sortes d'écrivains,' remarqua Entragues, 'sont, ainsi avec la plupart des hommes, que l'humanité entière, ou à peu près, victimes d'une illusion d'optique. Ils s'imaginent que le monde extérieur s'agite en dehors d'eux, c'est une transcendante sottise, mais dont ne s'engendre pas nécessairement leur esthétique spéciale. Le monde, c'est l'idée que j'en ai, et cette idée, les spéciales modulations de mon cerveau la déterminent.'[31]

[28] For more on this theme in *fin-de-siècle* literature at large, see François Proulx, *Victims of the Book: Reading and Masculinity in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019).
[29] *Sixtine*, p. 13.
[30] *Sixtine*, p. 75.
[31] *Sixtine*, pp. 75-76.

In this scene, a discussion with colleagues at the *Revue Speculative* (a thinly-veiled *Mercure de France*),[32] we find Entragues surrounded by like minds, their discourse gravitating around a common text which has 'pour longtemps' expressed their shared sensibilities. Ironically unlike Des Esseintes, however, they have found themselves members of a subculture marked by attitudes canonized by the great work of a predecessor. Here, the Symbolist will to innovation struggles for novelty against the Decadent spirit which *À rebours* has already fully encompassed and exhausted. Even Entragues's idealist literary theory (identical to that of Gourmont's own in *Le Livre des masques*) is burdened by an anxiety of influence which borders on intellectual self-sabotage, threatening to diminish the individual (the very center of said theory) to aught but a 'simulacre de l'idée' – a simulacrum, perhaps, of Huysmans's novel.

Just like his eroticism according to Birkett, Gourmont's idealism in *Sixtine* is keenly aware of its own 'status as an ideological construction',[33] its own relationship to the idealist *culture* of Symbolism, Decadence, and the Schopenhauerian spirit of the age. As Julien Schuh has shown, Entragues even diagnoses himself according to the popular medical and psychological discourses of Max Nordau, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Ribot, admitting his place in a generational epidemic of 'interprètes obsessionels' and 'conscient de porter en lui les symptômes de cette maladie de l'interprétation qui tend à voir partout des signes d'une cohérence d'ordre supérieur, à faire de chaque objet du monde une allégorie'.[34] Yet at the same time, Entragues attempts to deny any relation to his literary milieu and their world-weary appropriations of German idealism, insisting upon the unique solidity of his own thought.

> 'Et ce même siècle, qui prétend n'admettre que la force mathématiquement éprouvée, s'éteindra dans l'idéalisme verbal. On ne croira plus aux choses, mais aux seules idées que nous en avons; et, comme l'obscurité de l'idée ne se clarifie que par

[32] Gourmont both co-founded the *Mercure de France* and met Huysmans in 1889.
[33] Birkett, 'Images of an Egoist', p. 930.
[34] Schuh, 'La Vieille maladie des noix vides', p. 221.

> la parole, rien n'existera plus des choses que les mots qui les dénomment et la définitive destruction de la matière s'achèvera dans le prononcé de cet axiome: L'univers est le signe du verbe…'
> 'Mais, songeait encore Hubert, en sortant du café, ceci, et mon mépris d'un réalisme dérisoire, d'un illusoire vérisme, n'implique dans l'art ni la paresse, ni la lâcheté, ni l'à peu près: l'idéalisme que je professe n'a rien de commun, non plus, avec les vagues intuitions de tels filateurs de ruban psychologique, – c'est un idéalisme documenté, solidement établi, comme le porche fleurancé d'une cathédrale, dans les fondations de l'exactitude.'[35]

Entragues self-consciously wrestles with the exhausted subculture of idealist dreamers of which he is a native; that 'tribu de désespérés', as Baju once called them, 'qui n'ont pas tout lu (Dieu soit loué!) les Allemands, […] qui n'en connaissent les principes qu'assez vaguement, *grosso modo* et de seconde main, mais qui en tirent intrépidement, avec une furie toute française, d'étranges conclusions'.[36] Despite his professed distinction from this group, Entragues spins conclusions every bit as strange when he prophesizes an idealist apocalypse in which words (the forms taken by ideas) will replace matter. Entragues remains indelibly tethered to his era and its Decadent prophets: the influence of Villiers, notably, is advertised in numerous chapter epigrams (a favorite practice of Villiers himself), and the novel is dedicated to Villiers's memory. If Entragues's Decadent sensibilities, like those of his peers, can all be traced to Huysmans's 'breviary of decadence', then his idealism is indebted to Villiers's work, which Alan Raitt has called the 'bréviaire de l'idéalisme philosophique'.[37] The idealist cult of the word, reflected in the first paragraph of the earlier quotation, is a clear inheritance. '[L]e monde n'a de signification que selon la puissance des mots qui le traduisent',[38] writes Villiers in *La Révolte* (1870), and Entragues's 'le monde, c'est moi' speech has countless antecedents in the idealist effusions of Villiers. '[Villiers] est toujours parmi nous et il est en nous', admits Gourmont in *Le Livre des*

[35] *Sixtine*, p. 261.
[36] Anatole Baju, quoted in Schiano-Bennis, *La Renaissance de l'idéalisme*, p. 92.
[37] Alan Raitt, quoted in Schiano-Bennis, p. 167.
[38] Quoted in Alan Raitt, *Villiers de L'Isle-Adam et le Mouvement Symboliste* (Paris: Corti, 1965), p. 145.

masques, 'par son œuvre et par l'influence de son œuvre, que subissent et avec joie les meilleurs d'entre les écrivains et les artistes de l'heure actuelle',[39] a rather paradoxical expression of continuity and kinship in an essay which famously argues that Symbolist writers are unified solely by their individuality. Part of what makes *Sixtine* a 'roman autocritique', to adopt Jacquod's description, lies in this tension between the aspiration to novelty and the gilded burden of kinship and influence. Moreover, the eschatological tone of Entragues's 'idéalisme verbal' commentary signals a certain finality, suggesting that the language and worldview passed down to his generation by figures such as Villiers is a *fait accompli* tantamount to the end of civilization. Paradoxically, while Gourmont is credited for breathing fresh philosophical life into the Symbolist movement with *Le Livre des masques*, Entragues labours under the fear that the idealist dream has been dreamt, that his world is already saturated to the breaking point with the cult of Symbolist idealism. In a later essay on Mallarmé, Gourmont echoes this with the meta-decadent notion that Decadence itself 'a fait son temps':

> L'œuvre de Mallarmé est le plus merveilleux prétexte à rêveries qui ait encore été offert aux hommes fatigués de tant d'affirmations lourdes et inutiles; une poésie pleine de doutes, de nuances changeantes et de parfums ambigus, c'est peut-être la seule où nous puissions désormais nous plaire; et si le mot décadence résumait vraiment tous ces charmes d'automne et de crépuscule, on pourrait l'accueillir et en faire même un des clefs de la viole: mais il est mort, le maître est mort, la pénultième est morte.[40]

These lines meditate on Mallarmé's death in 1898 in much the same way that *Sixtine* responds to Villiers's a decade earlier. In terms of the influence of Gourmont's masters, the relationship between past, present, and future is as ambiguous as Mallarmé's poetry; their legacy is paradoxically conclusive and penultimate, teeming with potential energy yet decidedly dead. The disorienting potency of the recently deceased denizens of Symbolism hits close to home in

[39] *Le Livre des masques*, pp. 90-91.
[40] *La Culture des idées*, p. 132.

Sixtine's case, with Villiers's death, the reformation of the *Mercure de France*, and Gourmont's discovery of Symbolism all having transpired in the four years leading to its publication. For Gourmont, the youthful, innovatory embrace of Symbolism and its idealist attitudes is sobered by an awareness of its dwindling vitality, a self-conscious regard for its dead masters and the potential ossification of their intellectual and aesthetic legacies. The anxiety of repetition, together with a sense of loss, is especially apparent in the chapter entitled 'Le rideau transparent du temps':

> Entragues aimait le voisinage des livres qui lui démontraient la probabilité de sa philosophie. Il ne se lassait pas d'admirer la courageuse persévérance des hommes à redire toujours la même chose. Tout ce qui avait été rédigé depuis l'Ecriture se pouvait résumer en trois mots; flambés en un fantastique creuset, la totalité des livres donnerait pour résidu chimique: COGITO, ERGO SUM: Descartes était le seul homme qui eût jamais écrit une parole nécessaire et treize lettres y suffisaient. Il aurait voulu les voir gravées au front des monuments.
> Hors de ces trois mots, rien n'existait, sans doute, que l'art parce que lui seul, doué de la faculté créatrice a le pouvoir d'évoquer la vie. Lui seul, sans pourtant refaire ni la trame ni la chaîne, peur varier la broderie de l'étoffe, parce qu'il brode à l'abri des contingences. […]
> Ayant mis l'art au-dessus et même à la place de la vie, Entragues doutait encore. L'art n'était-il pas, lui aussi, une illusion? Si le monde extérieur n'est que fantômes que peut-il recréer, sinon des fantômes, à moins de se borner à l'éternelle reproduction du moi éternel? Mais à son plus haut degré de personnalité, la conscience individuelle contient toutes les formes, et, de même que, par un nécessaire objectivité, elle en projette extérieurement les silhouettes sur le rideau transparent du temps, ce qui est la vie, elle peut les projeter hors du temps, ce qui est l'art.[41]

Entragues is burdened with calcified layers of convention and fixity. Despite championing 'la conscience individuelle', he voluntarily insulates himself within a literature of intellectual homogeneity. He proceeds to contradict himself with the opposing claims that art alone transcends the Cartesian principle, yet that all post-biblical literature is nothing but a repeated assertion of that principle. Confined to his solitary life of books which all say 'la même chose', Entragues appears far indeed from possessing that 'plus haut degré de personnalité' on which his Symbolist-

[41] *Sixtine*, pp. 58-59.

idealist theory relies. His entrapment in the literary corpus of his subjectivist philosophy ironically disqualifies him from embodying it himself, yet he manages to pacify this doubt by returning full circle to the comfort of an intellectual doctrine which offers some hope for originality. Gourmont describes his character in this moment as a 'fourmi angoissée' swimming 'fermement vers le dernier brin de paille, forte contre les flots durs',[42] emphasizing his smallness and undermining his alleged position of power over the world.

Entragues returns home to a letter from Sixtine asking him to postpone a scheduled rendezvous. He is distraught and spends the evening struggling to conjure an explanation. Finally, exhausted, 'il s'endormit en maudissant l'Espérance, tortionnaire plus subtile que le chevalet, les aiguilles et les araignées, aperçu illustré naguère par Villiers de l'Isle-Adam'.[43] The erotic quest which would have taken him outside of his limited sphere (represented by his library) fails, and thus Entragues is thrust back into the world of Decadent literature from whence he came, a world which welcomes his misfortune as justification for its own pessimistic worldview, strengthening its hold on the hero who attempted to venture beyond it. 'Il s'endormit', writes Gourmont, 'revivant dans un terrifiant cauchemar les pages du maître et sur le matin seulement atteignit le repos.'[44] Returned to the cyclical tortures of the Decadent antihero's journey, Entragues is doomed to relive what has already been written. If Villiers is the 'maître', then Entragues is a servant who painfully toils through the night, denied the symbolic 'matin' of his own individuality and the dawn of a new romance.

Paradoxes of Separateness and Union

Dejected after a failed encounter with Sixtine, Entragues observes himself in the mirror while

[42] *Sixtine*, p. 59.
[43] *Sixtine*, p. 60.
[44] *Sixtine*, p. 60.

mounting the stairs to his lonely apartment:

> Son reflet, entr'aperçu dans les glaces lui donnait l'horreur de l'inutilité agissante. Cette toilette soignée, quelle prétentieuse obéissance à la vanité! Comme il était laid avec ces joues pâles, ce regard vide! Ah! poussière comprimée en une forme humaine, quel amour-propre t'empêche donc de reprendre ton état naturel, de te mêler humblement, comme ce serait le devoir, au sable meurtri et méprisé qui crie sous tes fantômes de pieds?[45]

Entragues reproaches himself for breaking his own ban on that 'lien fictif qui nous annexe à une extériorité imaginaire' which he calls vanity. In the mirror's reflection, he is forced to see himself as an external object, no different from the vacant phantoms with whom he has foolishly embroiled himself. Attributing his erotic misadventure to subjective incapacity, Entragues discovers himself to be as ugly and insubstantial as the passersby he maligns, a phantom as ephemeral as lifeless dust. As a symbol, however, the mirror evokes the Narcissistic connotations of subjectivism more than the notion of external reality: the objects of perception are all 'mirrors' in which only the subject is discernable. Hence, it is not the external world per se which horrifies Entragues, but rather its indistinguishability from himself.

Entragues's previous isolation (to which he will shortly return) was not a celebration of the principle of the world as idea, but a secret compensation for it. According to the idealism he professes, so total is the phenomenological wall between interiority and exteriority that a distinction cannot even be known to exist. Therefore, a constructed one – hewn from the monastic spaces and chaste behavior of Decadence – must be established by the subject so that he can objectify an external world whose objects can be desired or disdained. Perhaps, as Schopenhauer said, 'it is also only as phenomenon that an individual is distinguished from the other things of the world'.[46] The 'moi' in 'le monde, c'est moi' is still psychologically required to distinguish himself. Only then can he maintain the 'illusion which separates his consciousness

[45] *Sixtine*, p. 80.
[46] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, vol. I, p. 364.

from that of the rest',[47] an illusion without which the love object has no objecthood, creative genius no standard against which it can be compared, and the self no external context for individuation.

However, the real paradox of Entragues's strategies of separation (his physical isolation, his egoism, and his Symbolist theories of individualism in art) lies in how they attempt to draw reality and idea into closer alignment by claiming false ownership of their difference. The infinite, unknowable gulf between noumena and phenomena which Kant and Schopenhauer proport is replaced with a consciously created one which Entragues claims to have delineated for himself. He therefore believes himself master of what lies both within and without it ('je me crois maître de moi, maître du monde extérieur, maître de cet univers').[48] By conflating the separation between noumena and phenomena with more manageable dichotomies such as art and life, thought and action, chastity and sexual relations, Gourmont's protagonist imagines that he himself engineers the relationship between reality and idea, where in fact this relationship is unknowable and ungovernable.

Entragues's disappointing encounter with Sixtine proves the equivalency of 'moi' and 'monde', but not in the hierarchical way he intended. If the world is his representation, then who can say where the 'vague and distant phantoms' of externality end and the 'bons fantômes de [l']imagination' begin? As Sixtine later asks him, '[s]i rien n'existe en dehors de vos imaginations, quel fantôme poursuiviez-vous?'[49] Questions like these, far from invalidating idealism, tragically affirm it by showing the hero's ambitions thwarted by the inherent perceptual and epistemological uncertainties which lay at the heart of the philosophy he wishes to exploit.

The irreconcilable dichotomies of idealism (noumena/phenomena, subject/object) are

[47] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, vol. I, p. 364.
[48] *Sixtine*, p. 253.
[49] *Sixtine*, p. 305.

reflected in the vital tension that necessarily operates between the lover and the beloved. In Anne Carson's view of eros (to which I will return in Chapter 6), the lover's desire for union is only possible in a state of disunity. Because '[l]ack is [desire's] animating, fundamental constituent',[50] the lover secretly employs 'tactics of incompleteness'[51] in order to 'face the beloved and yet not be destroyed',[52] for, however desirable it may seem, '[u]nion would be annihilating'.[53] In an earlier scene where he visits Valentine at the brothel, Entragues conflates this principle of erotic 'incompleteness' with that of the idealist gulf between reality and idea.

> Cette beauté qui me plaît, que je désire et qui est à moi, je ne l'aurai pas. Je la prendrai dans mes bras, je la serrerai contre ma chair, je pénétrerai en elle autant que la nature l'a permis, et je ne l'aurai pas. Quand je la baiserais d'autant de baisers que le mensonge a de langues, quand je la mordrais, quand je la déchirerais, quand je la mangerais, quand je boirais tout son sang en un sacrifice humain, je ne l'aurais pas encore. Et toutes les sortes de possessions dont je puis rêver sont vaines; quand je pourrais comme un flot, en une complète circonvolution, l'imprégner de ma vie par tous les points de son corps à la fois, je ne l'aurais pas encore. L'endosmose d'amour est irréelle et la tromperie du désir, seule, me fait croire à son possible accomplissement. Je sais que c'est un mensonge, je sais la déception qui m'attend: je serai puni par un effroyable désappointement d'avoir cherché l'oubli de moi-même en dehors de moi-même, d'avoir trahi l'idéalité, et pourtant il le fallait puisque les sens sont impératifs et que je n'ai pas mérité le surnaturel don de la grâce.[54]

Schopenhauer's claim that 'where the object begins the subject ends'[55] may as well describe the incompleteness on which Entragues's erotic desire depends. For him, lover and love object become cyphers for reality and idea, two entities which can never merge, and which can only be fathomed in terms of a subject/object dichotomy which remains, in the end, purely subjective. In other words, Entragues knows that the beauty and ecstasy he yearns to possess are already 'his' ('Cette beauté […] qui est à moi') to the extent that all objects of experience are his representation.

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[50] Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 93.
[51] Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 100.
[52] Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 92.
[53] Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 92.
[54] *Sixtine*, pp. 127-28.
[55] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, vol. I, p. 6.

But this, he understands, also means that the noumenal reality of the love object is infinitely inaccessible to him. The more he objectifies the woman, the stronger the illusion of her objecthood becomes, the more remote the annihilating 'oubli de moi-même' remains (for there is 'no object without a subject').[56] Entragues ends by acknowledging Schopenhauer's ascetic solution to the suffering that awaits him, but humbly declines, surrendering himself to the imperative passions. Caught up in the paradox of desire – which yearns for union yet perpetuates separateness – Entragues has no choice but to see the dynamics of lover and beloved reflected in the dichotomies that saturate his idealist mentality.

In the mirror, Entragues approaches the abyss to glimpse the union which would annihilate him were it not for the necessary illusion of separateness. He sees the dark truth of 'le monde, c'est moi': the mind does not control the external world, the world that it comprehends is limited to the illusion of phenomena. Without a subterfuge for dividing this illusion into categories of self and other, Entragues, like the Carsonian lover, would be consumed by the all-encompassing subjectivity that he idealizes, and which can only be idealized if the subject/object boundary remains intact.

L'Adorant and the Erotics of Symbolist Subjectivism

Entragues begins his novel, *L'Adorant*, in order to rebuild the damaged wall between 'moi' and 'monde'. The project is systematically conceived as a funeral for Entragues the lover after his fatal encounter with the external world which he once believed his slave; a funeral to be officiated by Entragues the novelist. The self thus divided into two figures, the artist euthanizes and embalms his other half, allowing it to perish so that it can be sublimated into the realm of pure aesthetics.

> Après les tumultuaires divagations de l'amoureux, le romancier venait, artiste ou fossoyeur, qui les recueillait, les attifait de la verbalité, comme d'un linceul aux plis chatoyants et avec des soins, du respect, de la tendresse, les couchait dans le caveau

[56] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, vol. I, p. 38.

> sur la porte duquel des lettres d'or disaient: LITTÉRATURE.

Entragues is only able to save his ego from ghostly nonexistence by severing the part of himself which is oriented towards the external love object, forcing a choice between love and artistic creation so that the self can survive within the latter. The lover has become yet another phantom for the artist to objectify, and thus Entragues attempts to re-forge the boundary between self and world by dissociating his artistic imagination from his worldly adventures.

By reinstating the wall between art and life, however, Entragues has only traded one form of annihilation for another. *L'Adorant* is another area in the text where what Fisher terms the 'shifting boundary between Decadence and Symbolism'[57] is at its most uncomfortable, and although the inclusion of a novel-within-a-novel would provide a perfect opportunity for him to trumpet his new Symbolist theories (similarly to how Huysmans announces his 'naturalisme spiritualiste' in *Là-bas* (1891)),[58] Gourmont instead emphasizes death, stasis, and artificiality. Rather than point in the direction of Symbolist innovation, the scene rather calls to mind Charles Bernheimer's illustration of the 'strategic problem' with Decadence's will to artificially recreate 'the spectacle of life in all its putrescent decomposition': 'One can appreciate the brilliance of an embalmer's work', as he puts it, 'but one would not want to be its object'.[59] *L'Adorant* is not merely a fictional simulation of Gourmont's forward-looking aesthetic values and theories, but also an enfeebled capitulation to the Decadent anxieties and pitfalls which remain unresolved and which continue to impede the modernizing spirit of Symbolism. As Ziegler echoes:

> Yet despite asserting the power of thought, the vitalistic property of art – its capacity to engender and animate forms – [Entragues] continues to regard writing as euthanasia and inhumation. […] In its denial of sexual engagement and interpersonal renewal, in its breeding of phantom surrogates and its murder of corporeal beings,

[57] Fisher, *The Pataphysician's Library*, p. 178.
[58] I return to this in Chapter 3, subsection 'Charcot, the Occult, and the Aesthetic Spectacle of Clinical Demonology'.
[59] Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 79.

art is relegated to the domain of quietism and death.[60]

L'Adorant is born of Entragues's inability to demonstrate the transcendent power of thought upon the object of his desire, a feat which would carry her 'à travers le désert'[61] and make known that unknowable gulf which lies between 'moi' and 'monde' or lover and beloved. Entragues has fallen through the cracks of his own audacious idealist reasoning in which the Schopenhauerian maxim 'le monde, c'est moi' is perverted to mean that 'il est mon esclave'.[62] In his tragic relapse back to the deathlike womb of Decadent artifice and withdrawal, Entragues signals how the master/slave dynamic has been reversed.

Entragues's fictional hero, Guido della Preda, is a fifteenth-century Italian nobleman imprisoned in a jail tower. Gazing from the window in his cell, he becomes infatuated with a statue of the Madonna which adorns the front of a neighboring church. Entragues thus symbolizes his tragic love for Sixtine as an idealist allegory in which the subject is a prisoner of its own thought and perception, capable of apprehending the love object only as an aesthetic phenomenon which it endows with its own version of reality:

> il transportait la scène à Naples, vers la fin du quinzième siècle et les personnages devenaient de purs symboles. L'Homme, un prisonnier, concrétant en lui l'idée de l'âme confinée dans sa geôle de chair, presque ignorante du monde extérieur dont elle refaçonne à son gré la vision vague apportée par les sens; la Femme, une madone, une statue que l'amour du prisonnier a douée de la vie, de la sensibilité et qui devient pour lui aussi réellement existante qu'une créature de Dieu. Et sur ce thème toutes les divagations de l'amour, du rêve et de la folie.[63]

However, in his Symbolist conception of art, Entragues invents the stone Madonna not as a realistic representation of Sixtine, but as a replacement for her, a symbol of the female archetype as it exists in his mind. Similarly, *L'Adorant* does not intend to represent the jilted romance as it

[60] Ziegler, *Asymptote*, p. 220.
[61] *Sixtine*, p. 85.
[62] *Sixtine*, p. 13.
[63] *Sixtine*, p. 88.

happened, but rather transfer it to the realm of the subjective imagination where it can be reformed, salvaged, and continued on what Entragues believes to be his own terms:

> Soit, j'en ferai de la littérature, je monterai comment ce peu de bruit intérieur, qui n'est rien, contient tout, comment avec l'appui bacillaire d'une seule sensation toujours la même et déformée dès son origine, un cerveau isolé du monde peut se créer un monde.[64]

L'Adorant is not an allegorical account of the recent past, but a symbolistic statement of new intentions: the prisoner does not represent the lover who dared to venture into the external world, but the isolated mind which is now idealized in compensation for the error. The Madonna is not a symbol of the world (or love object) as representation as Entragues has experienced it, but a wishful image of what the phenomenal realm *should* be. Paradoxically, the 'symbolism' and 'representation' of literature are iconoclastic weapons with which Entragues hopes to purge the volatile phantoms that dominate his perception, replacing them with their opposite. Such is the task of the Symbolist writer: to 's'enquérir de la signification permanente des faits passagers, et tâcher de la fixer'.[65] Where the phantom signifies the vaporous nature of Entragues's experience, the symbolic stone edifices of *L'Adorant* fulfil a longing for fixity, both of the love object as a blank slate for the lover/artist (the Madonna statue) and of the reassuring boundary between the two (the prison walls).

To Gourmont, artistic creation and aesthetic pleasure are frequently described in terms of a negation of sentiment. 'L'écrivain artiste n'est presque jamais un sentimental,' he writes in *Le problème du style*,

> est très rarement un sensitif; c'est-à-dire qu'il incorpore à son style toute sa sensibilité, et qu'il lui en reste très peu pour la vie et les passions profondes […] Celui qui goûte la beauté littéraire d'un sermon de Bossuet n'en peut pas être touché

[64] *Sixtine*, p. 161.
[65] 'Le Symbolisme', *L'Idéalisme*, p. 26.

religieusement, et celui qui pleure sur la mort d'Ophélie n'a pas le sens esthétique.[66]

After starting *L'Adorant*, Entragues attests to the siphoning of worldly passion into the aesthetic realm. At one point, Sixtine 'le remuait autant qu'un beau lever de soleil ou que de la belle prose, noblement imprimée. Il ne sentait plus, en ce moment, aucun amour pour elle; l'impression était toute littéraire'.[67] In another episode, sensing Moscowitch's designs on Sixtine, Entragues claims, 'je ne suis point jaloux… de la jalousie mon chapitre de ce matin m'en a guéri, j'ai torturé Della Preda et le bourreau a laissé tomber les tenailles qui mordaient ma chair'.[68] For Schopenhauer, the experience of aesthetic beauty offers 'the deliverance of knowledge from the service of the will, the forgetting of self as an individual, and the raising of the consciousness to the pure will-less, timeless, subject of knowledge, independent of all relations'.[69] This, however, is only Entragues's superficial intent in writing *L'Adorant*. Though Schopenhauer's promises of transcendence and release from suffering provide a glorified conception of art as an antidote to worldly striving, Entragues ends by conflating these promises with that of transcendent erotic unity and gratification, contradicting Schopenhauer entirely.

> Car la fin d'une vie intelligente ce n'est pas de coucher avec la princesse de Trébizonde, mais de s'expliquer soi-même en ses motifs d'action par des faits ou par des gestes. L'écriture est révélatrice de l'acte intérieur; il est bien moins important de sentir que de connaître l'ordonnance des sensations, et c'est la revanche de l'esprit sur le corps: rien n'existe que par le Verbe. Autant dire: le Verbe seul existe. L'évangéliste saint Jean le savait et le raja Ramohun Roy le savait et d'autres: Om et Logos: c'est la seule science; quand on le sait on sait tout. Je me réaliserai donc selon le Verbe… Et toi? que ferai-je de toi et de ton âme! Ah! Sixtine, ton âme, peu à peu, en de nocturnes et quotidiennes célébrations, je la boirai, diluée dans la salive de tes baisers, – ainsi que de saintes parcelles: tu n'auras d'existence qu'en moi, et tu me fortifieras ainsi qu'une élixir spirituel. Nous serons hermaphrodites. Ainsi l'utilité renaîtra: et j'aurai renoncé, sans renoncer à toi, à la chimérique poursuite d'un amour extérieur à moi-même.[70]

[66] *Le Problème du style*, p. 40.
[67] *Sixtine*, p. 182.
[68] *Sixtine*, p. 203.
[69] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, vol. I, p. 258.
[70] *Sixtine*, pp. 257-258.

For Gourmont, like most of his Symbolist-idealist contemporaries, the 'recherche élitiste d'une vision individuelle'[71] overshadows any ethical function of the Schopenhauerian renunciation from which it nevertheless draws energy and terminology. Altered beyond recognition by the Symbolist project, the ascetic refuge of art serves the opposite aims of what Schopenhauer originally intended: egoism, individuality, and the cultivation of fantasy become its allure, and what it seeks to mitigate is no longer the Will, but the limitations of material reality which stand in the way of artistic, as well as erotic, ambitions. Once again invoking Villiers, Entragues envisions his retreat from the world as a metaphysical communion with 'le Verbe', a Villierian metonym for the infinite power of creation afforded to the poet or writer. In Entragues's case, though, the Symbolist appropriation of idealist concepts serves mainly as a catalyst for erotic ideations that go even farther in abusing Schopenhauer's philosophy of renunciation. If incorporeality, inwardness, and the expurgation of worldly relations grant the artist the power to bring about transcendent forms, then what prevents this artist from manifesting the love object in the same manner?

In Gourmont's case, the theory of Symbolist production contains a ready-made erotic dimension: the effective artist is able to create unity from fragmentation, bringing about 'l'éternel dans la diversité momentanée des formes'.[72] He does so by apprehending the principle that 'on ne connaît que sa propre intelligence' as a pretext for intimate engagement with a 'monde spécial et unique que le moi détient, véhicule, déforme, exténue'.[73] His maneuvers, penetrative and transformative, are carried out in view of a creation that is appropriately phallic, a singular form 'tel qu'un arbre solide émergeant du fouillis des mouvantes broussailles'.[74] As Jacquod puts it, 'tout effort créateur dans sa quête du beau se confond avec le désir de possession'.[75] Galvanized

[71] Jean-David Jumeau-Lafond, preface to *Naissance du fantôme* (Paris: Éditions La Bibliothèque, 2002), p. 10.
[72] Gourmont, 'Le Symbolisme', *L'Idéalisme* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1893), p. 26.
[73] 'Le Symbolisme', p. 13.
[74] 'Le Symbolisme', p. 26.
[75] Jacquod, *Le Roman symboliste*, p. 195.

by a pre-eroticized ideology of aesthetic creation, Entragues envisions an incorporeal union with Sixtine which would reflect the eternal and transcendent condition of art:

> Ah! l'unité ne sera pas ternaire, – péché contre les rites! – car je ne veux pas de postérité charnelle. Que ma chair soit stérile et que mon esprit soit fécond! Nous engendrerons des rêves et nous peuplerons de nos pensées la nuit des espaces. Nous parlerons et nos paroles propagées jusqu'au-delà des étoiles feront éternellement vibrer l'éternité morne des éthers. Nous aurons des gestes d'amour et les signes de notre amour se répercuteront dans les miroirs sans nombre des molécules de la lumière. Oui, nous nous amuserons à cette illusion, en renversant les Lois, par notre fantaisie, car nous n'ignorons pas que le monde meurt de la caducité de la pensée qui le crée et que les étoiles, ainsi que l'ongle de notre petit doigt, périront quand la mort fermera les yeux du dernier homme.[76]

In his repeated allusion to the transgression of rites and laws, Entragues boasts of the 'impossible transformations'[77] of which he now imagines himself capable: his revolutionary transgression, on one level, is his drastic transformation of Schopenhauerian asceticism into a strategy of cerebral erotic possession. More specifically, however, it is the liberation of the mind and spirit (or *Verbe*, possibly) of the lover from their supposedly trinitarian codependence on the body which Entragues sees as his ultimate act of rebellion. The expansive portrait Entragues presents (the lovers' words and gestures vibrating eternally in infinite space) expresses his fantasy in which desire, in its boundless imaginative aspect, is finally and orgasmically released from the prison of physicality. Misleadingly eschatological, the final lines of the passage are in fact a re-affirmation of the creative, generative role of thought. As Entragues sees it, the idea that the world ends with the last man is merely another way of reiterating that the world is an immaterial product of the individual consciousness – the sacrilegious fact which justifies the lover's own heretical refusal of the body. Like Huysmans before him, Entragues's romantic disappointment compels him to reassert his ideological rejection of the physical body and quasi-spiritual championing of the imagination. Though he invokes Dante's courtly love for Beatrice as justification ('*Che sensa speme vivemo in*

[76] *Sixtine*, pp. 257-58.
[77] Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers*, p. 100.

disio. "Et sans espoir vivre dans le désir."'),[78] he may as well have quoted Durtal in *Là-bas*, who proclaims:

> S'aimer de loin et sans espoir, ne jamais s'appartenir, rêver chastement à de pâles appas, à d'impossibles baisers, à des caresses éteintes sur des fronts oubliés de mortes, ah! C'est quelque chose comme un égarement délicieux et sans retour![79]

If the Decadent posture of chaste desire is born of a will to reshape love in the image of art, then it is appropriate that the hero constantly compare himself to literature. For Entragues, though, it is mainly in his own fiction that he seeks guidance:

> Nous sommes dans les imaginaires, c'est-à-dire dans la réalité transcendante ou surnaturelle, pourquoi donc, alors, ne pas mettre les deux pieds sur le même plan? Ai-je besoin, pour rêver à des amours, d'avoir serré contre ma chair de la chair aimée? Naïveté. Est-ce que Guido a touché sa madone? Est-elle une femme avec qui il ait dormi dans un lit, ou seulement joué sur un canapé? Pourtant il y a une vraie joie d'amour à revêtir son illusoire charnalité pour aimer, en sa personne, l'intangible créature de ses songes![80]

And again later in the novel:

> Il fallait l'aimer de loin, comme Guido aime sa madone. Le contact est destructeur du rêve. Tu ne connaîtras pas le livre d'amour où je t'aurais béatifiée, car il s'évanouira avec le désir, brûlé par les flammes de ton premier baiser.[81]

Entragues's fictional hero is himself in love with a literary creation. As Marie Daouda has noted:

> La Novella est la vierge, celle qui est neuve; elle est aussi, par jeu de mots entre le français et l'espagnol, le roman, la matière même du récit comme ayant un début et une fin; une œuvre accomplie, en somme.[82]

The Virgin is thus a product of the chain of *mise en abime* and literary allusion that characterizes

[78] *Sixtine*, p. 165.
[79] J.-K. Huysmans, *Là-bas* (Paris: Tresse & Stock, 1895), p. 274.
[80] *Sixtine*, p. 236.
[81] *Sixtine*, p. 257.
[82] Marie Kawthar Daouda, *L'Anti-Salomé* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2020), p. 54.

Entragues's Decadent withdrawal, but she also heralds its terminus. In order to possess and unite with his beloved Novella, Guido is implored by her to commit suicide:

> 'Elle m'ouvre les bras! Ah! Dieu! est-ce possible? Oui, je savais bien. Ah! théurgie des mots, rien n'est fermé aux incantations verbales. A quoi tient le bonheur?
> Elle m'ouvre les bras, elle m'aime. Me voilà, me voilà. Comme je vais t'adorer, comme je vais te réciter de belles litanies et toutes les oraisons essentielles! Me voilà, me voilà. Rien ne me séparait de toi que ta volonté, et ta volonté m'accepte, enfin lavé des souillures humaines par le baptême du sang. Joie plus indéfinissable que l'immaculée conception, la Vierge des vierges ouvre au pécheur les portes d'ivoire de l'amour pur…'
> Songeant de telles choses, Guido enjamba la balustrade, précipité vers la madone qui, souriantes et les bras inclinés, attendait. – *Ave, Rosa speciosa!*[83]

Guido's Madonna, 'Mère du Verbe incarné',[84] is the subjective artistic image in its absolute form, and the final consequence of the voyage to the centre of 'la vie cérébrale'. The attainment of pure incorporeality, linked to erotic union both metaphorically and actually by Entragues, also has annihilation as its ultimate outcome. In contrast to the morbidity of Entragues's encounter with the mirror, however, Guido joyously meets death at the upper limit of an ideal rather than in the depths of futility and absence. Again emphasizing the symbolic role of Mary, Daouda writes:

> La Vierge est fatale, mais d'une fatalité heureuse puisqu'elle permet de sortir de l'ornière décadente et de passer dans une nouvelle ère. Celle que les litanies désignent comme la Porte du Ciel, la Source de Notre Joie, la Fontaine Scellée, suggère d'infinies rêveries érotiques mais représente un seuil, un passage, la mort non comme fin et comme corruption mais comme renaissance.[85]

What exactly this rebirth occasions is difficult to tell, yet an ironic sort of revolution does ensue when it is revealed that Sixtine has fled to Nice with Moskowitch. In her final letter to Entragues, she writes:

> Adieu. Cela vous fera un roman sans conclusion, à la moderne, – car vous l'écrirez, n'est pas? Sinon, à quoi bon? Et ainsi l'ombre fugitive s'arrêtera un instant et les passances vaines se réaliseront – oh! bien relativement – au souffle créateur de

[83] *Sixtine*, p. 292.
[84] Daouda, *L'Anti-Salomé*, p. 53.
[85] Daouda, *L'Anti-Salomé*, p. 54.

l'Art.[86]

Though mocking, Sixtine's words evoke the same paradox of life-giving death as seen in the figure of the Virgin. With the departure of Entragues's last connection to the external world, he himself leaps from Guido's proverbial tower, into 'la grande absence'[87] where, though simultaneously linked to death, the mind can commune with itself in the boundless 'souffle créateur' by which new forms are born.

> Les fruits où je mords sont des bulles sitôt évanouies, mais les bulles qui sortent de mes lèvres s'envolent, planent et demeurent: mes idées, comme des rayons, s'irisent en les transperçant et l'éternel vent qui arase le monde s'amuse et joue avec elles. En te perdant, Sixtine, je me suis retrouvé.[88]

But what does the physical departure of Sixtine truly constitute in a novel which calls itself a '*roman de la vie cérébrale*' and which holds as its primary conceit the philosophical principle of the world as idea? Where does the love object go if her reality is strictly relative to the lover's consciousness? Gourmont emphasizes this paradox in the form of twin conclusions – that of Entragues, and that of Guido. For the former, transcendence is achieved by the loss of the external love object ('[s]i la vie m'échappe, la transcendence m'appartient');[89] for the latter, the same transcendence is gained in an ultimate union with the subjective image of the beloved. If indeed the bounds between material reality and idea are still unknowable, then so is the difference between Guido's attainment and Entragues's rejection. Thus, when *Sixtine* ends, as *À rebours* does, with the hero's plea for mystical asceticism, the reader is given cause to wonder whether spiritual chastity and solitude are not antidotes, but catalysts, for eros in an idealist worldview which continues to regard the love object as a creation of subjectivity.

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[86] *Sixtine*, p. 300.
[87] *Sixtine*, p. 308.
[88] *Sixtine*, p. 310.
[89] *Sixtine*, p. 310.

Chapter 2: The Mystic

Like Huysmans's *À rebours*, Gourmont's *Sixtine* ends with a potent appeal to an ambiguous Christian spirituality. Rather than resolve the romantic misadventure with a compensatory promise of Christian conversion, however, Gourmont concludes his novel with two juxtaposed images which he leaves in a state of unresolved tension: where the story of Entragues ends in a prayer for isolated solitude ('Souvent ô mon Seigneur, je considère que si quelque chose peut faire supporter la vie où l'on ne vous possède pas, c'est la solitude, parce que l'âme s'y repose en celui qui est son repos…'),[1] Guido, the hero of his own novel, is consumed by his ultimate union with the beloved Novella, as 'true' erotic union is tantamount to death. In the opposition of these twin outcomes, Gourmont leaves the reader no satisfactory answer as to the relationship between reality and *la vie cérébrale*, no clear demarcation between the loss of the real woman and the possibility of erotic union with her subjective image. Through the rest of the 1890's, steeped in the language of Symbolism, Gourmont continues to draw upon supernatural themes to explore the dubiousness of material reality as well as the transcendent power of the imagination.

The following two chapters will focus on the religious and esoteric discourses in which Gourmont continued to fathom the nature of erotic desire in a phenomenological world. In this one, we will see how the paradox of *Sixtine*'s double conclusion – erotic union and hermetic isolation – is carried forward by Gourmont into the themes and images of Christian mysticism. Secular and even anticlerical, Gourmont's treatment of mysticism closely mirrors, and often overlaps with, the dual preoccupations of his idealist discourse: on the one hand, 'mysticism' is employed as a value in the theory and defense of Symbolist aesthetics, and, on the other, it manifests itself as a tumultuous ideal within Gourmont's erotic idealist drama. In the latter

[1] *Sixtine*, p. 310.

fictional context, mysticism emerges as another means by which Gourmont's protagonists strive to engineer the phenomenology of their erotic relationships. By aligning mysticism with idealism, Gourmont's protagonists hope to see their abstract philosophy concretized in a well-documented and aesthetically rich tradition of otherworldly ecstasies, enlightenments, and 'impossible transformations', using God as a cypher for the miraculous and omni-creative powers of the mind.

The Decadent and Symbolist engagement with Catholic mysticism and its occult offshoots has been the source of a great deal of speculation,[2] as has Gourmont's complex role within it.[3] Due in large part to Courrière's influence and affiliations, the atheist Gourmont is nonetheless woven into the literary history of the *fin-de-siècle* obsession with subversive spiritualities, his name regularly (and perhaps unwittingly) appearing in connection to the Black Masses rumored in Huysmans's *Là-bas*, leading some to the impression that the author of *Le Latin mystique* and *Lilith* dabbled in the various 'petites religions'[4] which attracted so many of Gourmont's contemporaries in their common disdain for materialism.[5] Far more than the occasional historical anecdote, however, it is in the highly ambiguous role of the supernatural in Gourmont's own fiction that critics continue to detect insinuations of a tentative spirituality: 'Before his disillusionment became complete,' writes Brian Stableford, 'Gourmont was sufficiently inspired by the possibilities of sexual experience to endeavor to rework theology and ritual so as to produce a more honest and more life-enhancing species of Christianity.'[6] While there is no evidence that

[2] See Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Richard Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution* (London: Constable, 1966); and Martin Lockerd, *Decadent Catholicism and the Making of Modernism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).
[3] For a collection of essays on Gourmont's religious and esoteric themes, see *Actualité de Remy de Gourmont*, ed. by Vincent Gogibu and Nicolas Malais (Paris: Le Clown Lyrique, 2008), especially Gaël Prigent, 'Gourmont et la religion', pp. 207-20; Patrizia d'Andrea, 'La face cachée d'un ésotérisme idéaliste', pp. 175-87; and Carine Roucan, 'Gourmont et Huysmans: deux mystiques fin-de-siècle', pp. 221-28.
[4] See Jules Bois, *Les Petites religions de Paris* (Paris: Chailley, 1894).
[5] It was previously believed, for instance, that Gourmont was the author of a treatise on *Les Incubes et les Succubes* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1897) under the pseudonym Jules Delassus. Research has recently disproven Gourmont's link to this text, which is more explicitly convinced of the supernatural than is typical in Gourmont's non-fiction. See Thierry Gillyboeuf, 'Alias Rémy de Gourmont', *Nouvelle imprimerie gourmontienne*, 3 (2012).
[6] Stableford, *Glorious Perversity*, p. 92.

Gourmont himself intended to pursue religion on a personal level, the erotic appropriation of Catholic theology in a work such as *Le Fantôme* does speak to an earnest desire for transformation. Stableford's claim is perhaps more accurate in reverse order: it is in the phenomena of mysticism that Gourmont took inspiration in reworking the possibilities of sexual relationships and erotic desire.

To Gourmont, the supernatural belonged neither to the category of false superstitions nor to that of religious certainties. Rather, from an idealist standpoint, in which the distinction between reality and representation is impossible to discern, encounters with the supernatural are treated as phenomena like any other. For example, when once asked by Jules Bois for a testimony on *L'Au-delà et les forces inconnues*, Gourmont said (of the 'miracle' of wireless communication): 'C'est miraculeux parce que tout est miraculeux, c'est-à-dire incompréhensible, à commencer par notre vie même et la conscience que nous en avons. Toutes les explications physiologiques ne font que reculer la question, sans la résoudre.'[7] To Gourmont, religion, the occult, and the supernatural retain their power in a purely phenomenological context; their mystery is the mystery of human apprehension, and the challenge they pose to the materialist worldview is but a vivid example of idealism's own.

Gourmont's rejection of certainty and dogmatism established, the intensity of his interest in the phenomena of Christian mysticism is rooted in two key concerns: on the one hand, Gourmont engaged with mysticism as a crucial term in the semantics of Symbolism, a loaded catchword which he was eager to define and 'dissociate' as part of an ongoing conceptualization of art and the artist, often at polemical odds with other attitudes of the day. On the other hand, mysticism enters the erotic quest of Gourmont's fiction where it stimulates a new valuation of the corporeal body: in fiction such as *Le Fantôme*, the corporeal and sexual dimension of mystical

[7] Jules Bois, *L'Au-delà et les forces inconnues* (Paris: Sociétié d'éditions littéraires et artistiques, 1902), p. 195.

union with God is idealized as a resolution to the duality of subjectivist isolation and the raptures of physical sexuality. In the texts we shall explore, mystical ecstasy constitutes a longed-for bridge between the incorporeality of thought and the corporeality of sexual pleasure; Gourmont's characters perversely appropriate the language, theology, and rituals of Christian mysticism in search of an impossible accord: the somatization of 'l'idée infinie' and, conversely, the intellectual sublimation of finite physicality.

Finally, I will discuss how the failed experiment of mystically-enhanced sexuality opens the door to the broader Judeo-Christian metaphorical structure which underpins the evolution of Gourmont's thought in the remainder of the 1890's: to account for the phenomenological tensions which stand in the way of erotic unity and transcendence, Gourmont arrives (most notably in *Lilith*) at the myth of the Fall. The theme of human fallenness becomes central to Gourmont's imaginative discourse as the enthusiasm for 'impossible transformations' is gradually supplanted by a sense of primordial futility. Formerly an assertion of cerebral power and control, the unstable symbolic equation of God and the subjective mind (established as early as *Sixtine*) spawns a pseudo-theological crisis which will ultimately overturn the salvific view of thought and subjectivity. Closely resembling the central problem of Christian theodicy (the attempt to reconcile the omnipotent goodness of God with the existence of evil inherent in creation), Gourmont's erotic idealism becomes a pessimistic cosmology which can no longer vindicate thought as a solution to the discordant world which it creates.

'Les joies de l'idéalisme' and the Mystical Artist

At the same time as Gourmont cites Schopenhauer as the progenitor of idealism, and hails the 'principe de l'idéalité du monde'[8] as an entirely new and revolutionary notion, Gourmont frequently projects his philosophy onto older concepts, and it is generally through discussions of

[8] *Le Livre des masques*, p. 11.

idealism that Gourmont launches his most detailed descriptions of the idea of mysticism. In his chapter on Maurice Maeterlinck from *Le Livre des masques*, mysticism is used as a critical byword for the individualism which Gourmont sees as the highest virtue of the artist in a world of phenomenal appearances.

> Mysticisme, ce mot a pris en ces dernières années tant de sens les plus divers et même divergents qu'il faudrait le définir à nouveau et expressément chaque fois qu'on va l'écrire. Certains lui donnent une signification qui le rapprocherait de cet autre mot qui semble clair, individualisme; et il est certain que cela se touche, puisque le mysticisme peut être dit l'état dans lequel une âme, laissant aller le monde physique et dédaigneuse des chocs et des accidents, ne s'adonne qu'à des relations et à des intimités directes avec l'infini; or, si l'infini est immuable et un, les âmes sont changeantes et plusieurs: une âme n'a pas avec Dieu les mêmes entretiens que ses sœurs, et Dieu, quoique immuable et un, se modifie selon le désir de chacune de ses créatures et il ne dit pas à l'une ce qu'il vient de dire à l'autre. Le privilège de l'âme élevée au mysticisme est la liberté; son corps même n'est pour elle qu'un voisin auquel elle donne à peine le conseil amical du silence, mais s'il parle elle ne l'entend qu'à travers un mur, et s'il agit elle ne le voit agir qu'à travers un voile.[9]

Rather than the pious poets of the Middle Ages, Gourmont couches his discussion of mysticism in the creative world of a secular contemporary writer. *Le Livre des masques* features chapters on other Symbolist and Decadent writers whose work is more outwardly religious than that of Maeterlinck – the *portraits* of Villiers, Paul Verlaine, Ernest Hello, and Huysmans, to name a few, would have been obvious candidates for a critical detour on the subject of mysticism – and yet Gourmont is prompted by Maeterlinck's 'littérature de douleur, de révolte contre le fardeau, de blasphèmes contre le Dieu muet.'[10] Over the literature of devotional profusion, he opts for the literature of silence and doubt to launch this commentary. Perhaps it is precisely because of Maeterlinck's remoteness from religious commitment that Gourmont seizes the opportunity to define mysticism, all the while acknowledging that definitions vary over time and context. He is able to freely dilate upon the nature of mysticism because, in the secular case of Maeterlinck, there is only an oblique Christian theological burden to bear.

[9] *Le Livre des masques*, pp. 23-24.
[10] *Le Livre des masques*, p. 20.

In Gourmont's analysis, the mystic's transcendence of the body and the material world correlates to the idealist's refutation of 'tout ce qui est extérieur au moi' as a realm to which any objectivity can be applied. Conversely, the mystic's relationship with an unknowable God is comparable to the idealist's relationship with an unknowable reality. In both cases, it is the realization that God or reality can only be perceived subjectively which paradoxically enables a closer connection with 'l'infini'. In the case of an artist enlightened to the principle of idealism, knowledge of the world's fundamental ideality is not a disappointment, but a liberation. With the notion of an independent 'essence' removed from consideration, the artist can now look to his imaginative mind as the generative organ of reality rather than one which struggles to accurately interpret it. It is this ontological individualism, and not just the ascetic individualism of worldly and material renunciation, which Gourmont seeks to associate with mysticism. This is evident in the statement which forms the second part of his description: the mystical (but fundamentally human) relation to 'l'infini' must be wholly subjective and individualistic if God is indeed singular, eternal, and unchanging. Gourmont thus uses a quasi-theological maneuver to bring the mystical 'Dieu' into closer alignment with the idealist 'monde' and (as) 'idée'. In placing God fully in the mind of the beholder, he suspends the essential contradiction of idealism and monotheism; that is, the conflict between God and the self as arbiters of reality. Gourmont appreciates the seriousness of this conflict, and thus treads conservatively towards his comparison. He avoids direct mention of idealism, settles carefully on individualism, and merely proposes that it and mysticism 'se touche[nt]' rather than deeply overlap. Despite his subtlety, however, the relation of mysticism to idealism is strongly implied by his fixation on the negative theological character of mysticism. Because 'Dieu [...] se modifie selon le désir de chacune de ses créatures et il ne dit pas à l'une ce qu'il vient de dire à l'autre',[11] the mystic, like the idealist, recognizes

[11] *Le Livre des masques*, p. 24.

only phenomena. Like the individualist, this recognition leads to a devaluation of the worldly and the external.

In the second volume of *Le Livre des masques*, published two years after the first, Gourmont once again uses a portrait of a contemporary writer as a basis for discussing the nature of mysticism. This time, rather than the secular Maeterlinck, he presents a chapter on Victor Charbonnel, a former Catholic priest and author of *Les Mystiques dans la littérature présente* (1897). In Gourmont's appraisal of Charbonnel, we find a number of sentiments that recall the characteristics of Maeterlinck: he is 'un esprit libre', and exhibits a mystical sensibility which embraces 'que les rapport directs entre l'âme et l'infini',[12] the latter phrase being an echo of the mystical adherence to 'des relations et à des intimités directes avec l'infini' associated earlier with Maeterlinck. The implication of this near-verbatim language is that Gourmont wants his reader to see both writers as mystical in the same essential way despite the fact that one is religious and one is not. He then proceeds to show how Charbonnel himself defined the difference between religion and mysticism:

> M. Charbonnel les a délimité lui-même en plusieurs passages de son essai sur les *Mystiques* d'aujourd'hui. Il a constaté que ce n'est plus que par exception que le mysticisme est réellement religieux, quoiqu'il adopte, presque toujours, des allures religieuses. La religion, c'est de croire en Dieu, en acceptant toutes les conséquences d'une croyance précise; le mysticisme, c'est de croire à l'échelle de Jacob. Où mène-t-elle nécessairement? Nulle part, qu'en haut. Où mena-t-elle Plotin, où mena-t-elle Spinoza? En joignant les deux termes on arrive à un troisième état d'esprit où les deux tendances se confondent, où l'échelle de Jacob, montée du cœur où elle s'appuie, ne s'arrête en son ascension qu'en ce point de l'infini où commence la certitude. Il y a un mysticisme divin; il y a un mysticisme sans Dieu et, entre ces deux extrêmes, plusieurs nuances où les intelligences jouent à sauter de branche en branche, comme les oiseaux d'une forêt.[13]

Mysticism thus emerges as an 'état d'esprit' which can be entirely dissociated from religion, which he defines as merely the belief in God and the adherence to certain precise doctrines.

[12] *Le II^e livre des masques*, p. 105.
[13] *Le II^e livre des masques*, pp. 106-07.

Although it can be distinguished from faith, Gourmont notes how mysticism invariably assumes 'des allures religieuses', such as the biblical image of Jacob's Ladder which he himself uses even in the context of 'un mysticisme sans Dieu'.

What is most telling about the above passage is how Gourmont does not appear to value one extreme of mysticism over the other. On the contrary, he paints an idealized picture of diverse minds which frolic 'de branche en branche, comme les oiseaux d'une forêt'. Immediately after, we see that it is the free transit between religious and secular mysticism, and not secular mysticism uniquely, which is most characteristic of the recent literature that Gourmont admires.

> Le mysticisme qui chanta récemment dans la littérature et dans l'art était le concert de tous ces oiseaux. M. Charbonnel s'en est fait le critique exact et ironique, et il a très bien senti courir et murmurer sous la mélancolie dominante, un peu affligée, un second air plus vif qui disait les joies de l'idéalisme, de la liberté retrouvée, de l'idée reconquise. Il ne lui a pas échappé que le mysticisme moderne se sert de la religion, mais ne la sert pas; que la théologie n'a plus de servantes, qu'elle balaie elle-même ses sanctuaires, et que, sans le vouloir expressément mais par son attitude, elle en défend l'entrée à tout ce qui est intelligence, originalité, poésie, art, libération.[14]

The mystical trajectory described here is one that is young, joyous, and emancipated from the unwelcoming Church on which it nevertheless feeds. It is important, however, to consider that institutional religion may not be what is meant by 'la mélancolie dominante', and that Gourmont may be making a three-part opposition between religion and two categories of literary mysticism, one new and one old. Indeed, after long meditations on major figures like Huysmans, Hello, and Verlaine, Charbonnel's essay ends with a chapter entitled 'Le jeune Idéalisme'. Here, he discusses emergent, lesser-known writers such as Maurice Pujo, Pierre Lasserre, and Gabriel Sarrazin. These figures (all of them poet-critics like Gourmont and Charbonnel) are characterized by Gourmont as a fresh breeze rising up to challenge a morose status quo with a youthful appeal to 'les joies de l'idéalisme'.

[14] *Le II^e Livre des masques*, p. 107.

This status quo of the 'mélancolie dominante' strongly suggests the reactionary form of mysticism espoused by Huysmans in his preface to *Le Latin mystique*. In it, Huysmans explicitly attacks the same admixture of idealism and mysticism which Charbonnel and Gourmont would later explicitly celebrate. He begins the preface with the observation that 'Il paraît que la jeunesse littéraire devient mystique',[15] but proceeds to list the ways in which 'l'idéalisme gai' has only given rise to a shallow, blasphemous imitation of the 'true' mysticism, the sole property of the Catholic Church:

> A cette question: l'art sera-t-il maintenant mystique? L'on peut répondre avec certitude: non!
>
> Et la raison en est bien simple.
>
> C'est que l'on ne fait pas de la mystique comme on fait du roman naturaliste, idéaliste ou psychologue. Il ne suffit point d'être instruit, d'être ingénieux, de s'assimiler plus ou moins bien les œuvres des autres; il ne suffirait même pas d'être un grand, d'être un initial artiste; il faut d'abord et avant tout, avoir la Foi; il faut ensuite la cultiver dans une vie propre.
>
> Sans user ici de définitions purement théologiques, l'on peut dire de la Mystique qu'elle est l'âme et qu'elle est l'art de l'Église même. Or, elle appartient au catholicisme et elle est à lui seul. Il ne faut pas, en effet, confondre le vague à l'âme, ou ce qu'on appelle l'idéalisme et le spiritualisme, ou même encore le déisme, c'est-à-dire de confuses postulations vers l'inconnu, vers un au-delà plus ou moins trouble, voire même vers une puissance plus ou moins occulte, avec la Mystique qui sait ce qu'elle veut et où elle va, qui cherche à étreindre un Dieu qu'elle connaît et qu'elle précise, qui veut s'abîmer en Lui, tandis que Lui-même s'épand en elle.[16]

It is easy to see why Gourmont removed Huysmans's preface from subsequent editions of *Le Latin mystique.* It is also interesting to note the impersonal manner in which this debate over mysticism takes place, with both authors combatting each other from behind the barricade of other writers. it begins with *Le Latin mystique* (a study of late Latin poets) to which Huysmans writes his preface (targeting various members of the 'jeunesse littéraire', but not Gourmont), and is carried over into both volumes of *Le Livre des masques* (where Gourmont's retaliatory passages on mysticism are shielded behind Maeterlinck and Charbonnel). Gourmont's critical embrace of mysticism in the

[15] *Le Latin mystique*, p. vii.
[16] *Le Latin mystique*, p. ix.

arts is diverse and generous, an attitude which the freshly converted Huysmans came to reject, and his appraisal of the term 'mysticisme' in writings after *Le Latin mystique* is no doubt colored by the incident of Huysmans's preface, a disagreement strong enough to end their formative literary friendship.

The 'Other' Mysticism: Divine Love and *la dissociation des idées*

As we have seen, Gourmont's discussion of mysticism as a term is almost always embedded in the larger discussion of other artists and evolving literary attitudes. Rather than delving deeply into theology, Gourmont instead focuses his thoughts on artistic sensibility. With the image of Jacob's Ladder, Gourmont suggests that this mystical sensibility is defined not by the specific terminus of God, but by a gesture of ascension in its own right. When dissociated from religion in this way, mysticism becomes a useful concept which can be fruitfully placed alongside terms such as idealism, individualism, and even Symbolism.

While this critical reshaping of mysticism was important to Gourmont's evaluation of recent literature, it arises in an altogether different context in *La Culture des idées.* One section of the essay 'La Dissociation des idées', for instance, consists of a series of observations on the idea of love and the historical changes it has undergone, across various societies and eras. According to his practice of *dissociation*, love is considered in terms of the ability or inability of the mind to recognize the contingencies which surround it, with the intention of severing these ties from the central notion to see it in its purity: many societies, Gourmont laments, are unable to dissociate pleasure and procreation. As a result, working class homes become infested with offspring. Classical Greece, on the other hand, was successful in dissociating the idea of woman from that of generation. However, the remaining association of carnal pleasure, he argues, gave rise to an age of prostitution. It is at the advent of Christian divine love that he finally arrives:

> La forme particulièrement chrétienne de l'amour chaste, dégagé de toute idée de plaisir physique, est l'amour divin, tel qu'on le voit s'épanouir dans l'exaltation mystique des contemplateurs; c'est vraiment l'amour pur, puisqu'il ne correspond à rien de définissable, c'est l'intelligence s'adorant soi-même dans l'idée infinie qu'elle se fait d'elle-même. [...] Cet état idéal des affections humaines est la première étape de l'ascétisme, et l'on pourrait définir l'ascétisme l'état d'esprit où toutes les idées sont dissociées.[17]

The exercise of divine love is given a central place in the essay. Perceived as a state of liberation, it appears as the point at which mankind was closest to transcending certain arbitrary impositions levied upon the idea of love. Gourmont is by no means praising Christianity as a whole, but rather this particular, forgotten sensibility which he discerns as something wholly separate from modern religious life. Like the Decadent writers of his time, especially Huysmans, he bemoans contemporary Christianity for forsaking its medieval past. 'Avec la décroissance de l'influence chrétienne', he continues,

> la première étape de l'ascétisme est devenue un gîte de moins en moins fréquenté et l'ascétisme, devenu également rare, est souvent atteint par une autre voie. De notre temps, l'idée d'amour s'est rejointe très étroitement à l'idée de plaisir physique et les moralistes s'emploient à réformer son association primitive avec l'idée de génération. C'est une régression assez curieuse.[18]

It is typical of the essays from *La Culture des idées* that the dissociation of an idea leads to the reversal of its values or preconceptions. In this case, chastity is characterized as radical while the historically newer bond between sex and love appears reactionary.

Amorous metaphors pervade Gourmont's theory of dissociation: two given ideas 'restent prêtes à divorcer; le divorce règne en permanence dans le monde des idées, qui est le monde de l'amour libre'.[19] If we apply this statement to the above passage on divine love, we find a striking kinship between two seemingly opposite figures: 'l'amour chaste' and 'l'amour libre'. In the first instance, Gourmont evokes the image of the modern lover, free to divorce and elope as he chooses,

[17] 'La Dissociation des idées', *La Culture des idées*, p. 87.
[18] 'La Dissociation des idées', p. 87.
[19] 'La Dissociation des idées', p. 75.

as an avatar of the singularity and independence to which all ideas can return. In the second instance, the chaste, divine love of the mystics is characterized as the crucible of the dissociative state of mind. This is less paradoxical, however, if we return to the reason why Gourmont claims that chastity is more advanced than carnal and procreative love. In the logic of 'le monde des idées', moral opposites are irrelevant: the liberal attitude of 'plaisir physique' and the traditional imperative of 'génération' are both normalized associations, and thus Gourmont considers them to be equally 'regressive', equally anathema to the enterprise of dissociation. Accordingly, two tropes as culturally opposed in the public imagination as chastity and divorce are united; they are kindred gestures of dissociation. In this unlikely pairing of opposite tropes, we see the very crux of 'la dissociation des idées': by dissociating ideas, 'de nouvelles associations'[20] become possible. If Gourmont's practice of dissociation is aimed at dismantling preconceived notions, then this would naturally entail the resolution of preconceived paradoxes.

We have seen how Gourmont relates his technique of dissociation with the erotics of mystical union. In both, purification is the means of transcendence. The dissociative thinker, like the mystic, opens himself to the infinite by abandoning the relations the world has offered him.

'Et sois réalisé': The Mystical Paradox of Cerebral Corporeality

In the passage on divine love from 'La Dissociation des idées', one line is especially suggestive: when the mystic directs his love to the divine, it is 'l'intelligence' which adores 'soi-même dans l'idée infinie qu'elle se fait d'elle-même'. In the critical works we have examined thus far, mysticism is used to indicate the transcendent potential of the immaterial and the cerebral. Gourmont focuses on the ascetic aspect of mysticism, which he aligns with the idealist devaluation of external reality as a means of ascension.

[20] 'La Dissociation des idées', p. 73.

Erotic implications are revealed when Gourmont cites the condition of divine love ('l'intelligence s'adorant soi-même') as the basis of his theory of dissociation. The mystic, in this instance, is the archetype of chastity, removed from all physicality and from the external world at large. Though this portrayal strongly reflects the isolated hero of *Sixtine*, it ironically contrasts with Gourmont's most mystically-oriented protagonist, *Le Fantôme*'s Damase.

In *Le Fantôme*, Gourmont does not only regard mysticism as a model of cerebral eroticism, but as a potential key to physical ecstasy. Gourmont, like many of his contemporaries, frequently explored the implicit corporeality of religious devotion. In stories like 'Péhor', which I discuss in the next chapter, Gourmont fixates upon the sanguinary, interpenetrating materiality of Christ's body and those of the worshipper, supplicant, or communicant. Central to Christian mysticism is the duality of Christ himself; his bridging of Heaven and Earth is the mystery to which such practices refer, the paradox to which their corporeality corresponds. The writings of mystics (particularly women mystics in the medieval and early modern periods) disclose a whole literature of violently felt corporeal pleasure associated with divine union. Consider, for instance, the well-known ecstasy of St Teresa of Avila:

> The Lord wanted me while in this state to see sometimes the following vision: I saw close to me toward my left side an angel in bodily form. […] I saw in his hands a large golden dart and at the end of the iron tip there appeared to be a little fire. It seemed to me this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me. When he drew it out, I thought he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with the great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan, and the sweetness this greatest pain caused me was so superabundant that there is no desire capable of taking it away; nor is the soul content with less than God. The pain is not bodily but spiritual, although the body doesn't fail to share in some of it, and even a great deal.[21]

St. Teresa's ecstasy is a notable example of Catholic mysticism's ability to blend or violate the categories of body and spirit. As Ellis Hanson claims, 'Catholicism is itself an elaborate paradox.

[21] *The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriquez (New York: One Spirit, 1995), p. 252.

The decadents merely emphasized the point within their own aesthetic of paradox'.[22] He shares the sentiment of Mario Praz, for whom Gourmont's *Le Fantôme* exemplifies, more than any work of the period, the 'employment of sacred and mystical texts for the purpose of adding a new flavour to erotic adventure'.[23] There is no denying Gourmont's cultivation of a paradoxical aesthetic; *Le Fantôme* is permeated by the scandal and exoticism of religious images set in the context of a sexual drama. However, in their focus on the 'aesthetic' and 'flavor' of decadent Catholicism, critics such as Mario Praz and Ellis Hanson overlook the philosophical significance of mysticism as a mediator of Decadent dichotomies. For Huysmans, especially in *Là-bas*, Catholicism was not just an aesthetic texture, but a way of reconciling a whole category of opposites: reality and dream, Naturalism and Symbolism, the worldly and the *au-delà*. After visiting Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, Huysmans (via his character Durtal) concocts his new literary theory of 'naturalisme spiritualiste':

> Il faudrait, en un mot, suivre la grande voie si profondément creusée par Zola, mais il serait nécessaire aussi de tracer en l'air un chemin parallèle, une autre route, d'atteindre les en deça et les après, de faire, en un mot, un naturalisme spiritualiste; ce serait autrement fier, autrement complet, autrement fort![24]

Durtal is struck by Grünewald's ability to portray the grotesque carnality of Christ in a way that also points to the heavens. Berthe de Courrière (or 'Hyacinthe') is not the only commonality between Huysmans's *Là-bas* and Gourmont's *Le Fantôme*. In the latter, we find a declaration which closely parallels the above, and which is also galvanized by the mystical blending of body and spirit: 'et sois spiritualisée, beauté charnelle, et sois réalisé, intellectuel fantôme'.[25] Damase idealizes the paradoxes and boundary-crossing of mystical experience as a way to redeem physical pleasure without betraying the mind or spirit. Where Durtal wished to recover the mystical

[22] Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*, p. 7.
[23] Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. by Angus Davidson (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 367.
[24] Huysmans, *Là-bas*, p. 6.
[25] *Le Fantôme*, p. 25.

dialectic of materiality and spirituality for literary-theoretical purposes, Damase's intentions are clearly to do with erotic fulfilment or, more accurately, a form of ecstasy like St. Teresa's which transcends sexuality while miraculously asserting it. These differences aside, both authors invoke mysticism to mediate the conflict between materiality and immateriality, and this constitutes a profound evolution from the cerebral, world-negating sensibilities of *À rebours* and *Sixtine*.

In Gourmont's case, we can contrast *Le Fantôme*'s equivocal embrace of the flesh to *Sixtine*'s chastisement of it; 'Que ma chair soit stérile', Entragues pleads, 'et que mon esprit soit fécond!'[26] Where Entragues fancied himself a stubborn hermit, a voluntary prisoner of the flesh, Damase gestures toward the opposite side of the mystical paradox: the throes of ecstasy, the frenetic corporeal phenomena of mysticism.

The last line of St. Teresa's ecstatic account ('not bodily but spiritual, although the body doesn't fail to share in some of it, and even a great deal')[27] would seem to encompass the mystery that Damase and Hyacinthe seek to unravel. Mysticism offers an anti-materialist framework for corporeal pleasure; in its miraculous paradox of bodily / not bodily, the pleasures of the flesh are presented in a way that is sympathetic to the world-negating idealist.

'Les dangers du mysticisme à deux'

Like her predecessor, Hyacinthe is a phantom, but the motives of her male desirer have shifted considerably. If she is to be truly 'realized', she must become a flesh-and-blood woman capable of her own experiences and desires.

> Je veux affermir l'ombre que je suis, dit Hyacinthe, je veux me vérifier et je veux m'exalter. Oh! Le moyen, qu'importe, les ailes de velours de la Chimère ou le dos rugueux du Dragon? Mais, je veux, – quoi?

[26] *Sixtine*, p. 258.
[27] *The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila*, p. 252.

> Abandonne-toi!
> Oui! Et pourtant je m'aime, – si rien!
> Tu es prédestinée.
> Ne fais pas violence à ma volonté.[28]

In *Sixtine*, material reality hindered the creation of a mental image; here, it is the mental image which impedes reification. Hyacinthe's self-identification as a shadow is a tragic reminder that one is forever trapped in the world of appearances. The lovers understand that desire, however mystically oriented, cannot penetrate the veil of phenomena, only beautify it. The medieval poetry of *Le Latin mystique* confirms this. Gourmont comments on a verse from Godeschalk, an eleventh-century 'poète de tendresse et de mysticisme',[29] about Christ's love for Mary Magdalene: '"Tu l'aimes afin qu'elle soit belle, – *Amas ut pulchram facias*," – ô noble cervelle si avancée en idéalisme!'[30]

There remains the question of mystical ecstasy and its corporeal effects. Gourmont (and Damase) only know mysticism by its image in art and literature. According to Caroline Walker Bynum, the mystical corpus poses its own representational biases:

> The tendency of women to somatize religious experience and to give positive significance to bodily occurrences is related to what is generally recognized to be a more experiential quality in their mystical writing. Male writers too, of course, use extremely physical and physiological language to speak of encounter with God. […] But men's writing often lacks the immediacy of women's; the male voice is impersonal. It is striking to note that, however fulsome or startling their imagery, men write of "*the* mystical experience," giving a general description that may be used as a theory or a yardstick, whereas women write of "*my* mystical experience," speaking directly of something that may have occurred to them alone.

These characteristics are certainly applicable to Damase and Hyacinthe. Except to indicate dialogue, Damase rarely speaks in the first-person singular. As the narrator, his attention is usually on *nous* or *elle*, thus avoiding the subjective voice despite the highly subjective style of the text.

[28] *Le Fantôme*, pp. 19-20.
[29] *Le Latin mystique*, p. 114.
[30] *Le Latin mystique*, p. 115.

Damase seems to be aware of this irony within himself:

> La forme est la formalité de l'essence: nous acquiesçâmes à cet aphorisme antiphonaire que les voix célestes n'avaient pas nié et nous nous apparûmes réels, c'est-à-dire équilibrés selon l'objectivité la plus commune, mais non la seule.[31]

Damase is a repository of grand assertions and prescriptions, but these assertions are self-consciously 'formal'. He resembles Bynum's male mystic who writes of '*the* mystical experience', only with a greater sense of his own affliction, a wistful awareness of the limitations of his objectifying mentality.

His counterpart is Hyacinthe, who embodies the subjectivity of Bynum's female mystic. She avoids claims to knowledge ('Damase, je ne comprends rien ni à vous, ni à la vie, ni à moi, ni à rien'),[32] dwelling instead on the cultivation of personal experiences. She is not concerned with the understanding, but rather the embodied sensation, of mystical experience. She regularly dreams of spiritual transports such as the following:

> J'ai rêvé d'une blessure qui tombait sur moi d'en haut, de très haut, et je remerciais la Douleur d'avoir pensé à mon cœur. Je fus touchée de ce choix accidentel, mais je vois bien que je ne suis pas élue.[33]

And yet Hyacinthe also feels the inadequacy of her nature. The eponymous phantom, she longs to be 'realized', given form by Damase's objectifying desire for her.

If Damase and Hyacinthe are characterized according to the literary styles particular to male and female mysticism, then Damase's desire is an erotically emphatic rendering of the gender dynamic of male and female mystics. The male mystic, because he writes of '*the* mystical experience', must necessarily merge the female experience with his own. Implicit in this is an artistic act of objectification by which the female is immortalized (yet ultimately denatured and abstracted) in the male's literary creation.

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[31] *Le Fantôme*, p. 15.
[32] *Le Fantôme*, p. 43.
[33] *Le Fantôme*, p. 17.

Les Saintes du paradis (1898), a sequence of poems in praise of female saints, is another example of how Gourmont uses spirituality as a domain in which to exalt particular virtues of femininity. Each poem ends with an invocation, like the following to Saint Angela: 'Angèle qui avez le pouvoir d'apaiser les orages, /Sainte Angèle, apaisez les orages de notre cœur.'[34] Like Hyacinthe, these saints are sensuous. Of Saint Matilda, he writes, 'Princesse dont les bras blancs portaient la peine des pauvres';[35] Saint Helena 'qui baisas la terre des douleurs';[36] Saint Ursula, 'flocon de neige bu par les lèvres de Jésus'.[37] Gourmont also fixates on their passivity. 'Suivez la voix qui vous appelle au ciel', he implores at the end of the opening poem. Gourmont glorifies the passivity of these saints, but also offers his own in the supplications that conclude each poem. Birkett notes that 'Entragues envies the passivity permitted to women, longing to hand over responsibility to some stronger force', a quality which she also sees in Damase.[38] The female mystic is the true target of Gourmont's envy, per Bynum's suggestion that the subjective experience of mystical corporeality is female in character. However, this envy is sublimated into prayer in the case of *Les Saintes du paradis*, and in *Le Fantôme* it is part of a desired erotic exchange. In Gourmont's view, the same passivity which characterizes woman's erotic nature also makes her especially prone to the phenomena of mystical experience.

Mystical intercourse, such as we've seen thus far, affirms traditional sexual and gender roles to an exaggerated degree. The female mystic experiences ecstasy from being penetrated; God 'takes' her, she 'gives' herself to Him, and she 'belongs' to him, etc. Hyacinthe is characterized accordingly. She is vulnerable and receptive, imploring Damase to lead and teach her, to take her in hand. She is child-like in her incessant ontological questioning ('Mais, je veux,

[34] 'Angèle', *Les Saintes du paradis, Divertissements* (Paris, Mercure de France: 1898), p. 53.
[35] 'Mathilde', *Les Saintes du paradis*, p. 60.
[36] 'Hélène', *Les Saintes du paradis*, p. 57.
[37] 'Ursule', *Les Saintes du paradis*, p. 62.
[38] Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers*, p. 106.

– quoi?',[39] 'Est-ce que je suis deux?'[40]). In one early scene, she makes Damase the redeemer of her sins, and swears her life to him:

> 'Damase,' me dit Hyacinthe, 'agenouillez-vous et soyez pénitent de mes fautes, puisque je dois vous appartenir: ayez soin de mes fins dernières et qu'elles s'achève en conformité avec les lois de la rédemption.'
> 'Hyacinthe, je vous chargerai sur mes épaules et je vous déposerai aux pieds de la Miséricorde.'[41]

Hyacinthe continues to imitate devotional submission, but also enacts dominance over Damase by commanding him to repent on her behalf. Though the gender dichotomy is only subtly challenged, this small disruption seems to portend a more fundamental one, insinuating that any attempt at mutual mysticism has already been degraded by the caprices of human love.

Throughout, it is often ambiguous as to whether Damase wishes to facilitate Hyacinthe's intercourse with the divine, or to replace divinity altogether. His behaviour toward her oscillates wildly between chaste prudery and uninhibited lust. One moment he chastises her with modesty ('va te vêtir, car tu confonds mon innocence'),[42] and the next he urges her to 'abandonne-toi!'.[43] His sexual desire and his spiritual stewardship dance around each other, changing position according to where he and Hyacinthe happen to find themselves in the wilderness of their esoteric disputation, but never harmonize. Damase's volatility makes him a false savior and a cruel one. He is the 'creator' of Hyacinthe, but his dominance over her is inept, all too human and incoherent to satisfactorily replace God as the transcendent spouse of the female mystic.

At one point, Damase seems to nearly achieve the condition of St. Teresa's angel. Like God sends his amorous messenger, Damase transforms into an avatar (a 'voyageur') who walks the margins of the worldly and the spiritual, inflaming Hyacinthe's body as well as her mind.

[39] *Le Fantôme*, p. 20.
[40] *Le Fantôme*, p. 24.
[41] *Le Fantôme*, p. 23.
[42] *Le Fantôme*, p. 10.
[43] *Le Fantôme*, p. 20.

Hardly angelic, however, Damase's figure is something closer to the mischievous perversity of a satyr or demon:

> [Hyacinthe's] virginité connut l'étonnement d'avoir admis en soi un voyageur complètement inconnu. Il avait des façons amicales de s'insinuer qui fleuraient l'impertinence, des gestes spéciaux et l'aplomb déconcertant de ces gens qui savent leurs forces, mesurent au juste les conséquences d'un coup d'audace.[44]

Unlike St. Teresa's ecstasy, the assertive force of this intercourse is muted by a certain calculated quality; the strength of this 'voyageur' is different from that of God's angel in the way it slinks and seduces. The contrasting phallic symbols are significant: God's spear is straight, perfect, and direct because God is all-powerful and all-knowing. By it, all opposites can be instantaneously reconciled: such as the mystic's pain and pleasure, and the shared experience of her body and spirit. Damase's 'voyageur', by contrast, has to gradually, cunningly negotiate these opposites by means of an all-too-human intelligence. Rather like Damase and Hyacinthe themselves, the 'voyageur' attempts to systematically coax the desired mystical upheaval. It is successful, but only for an instant:

> Comme tout était devenu clair! Des lumières rayonnaient sous ses paupières closes, et son intellect, libéré des doutes, planait, comme un oiseau d'aurore dans une atmosphère d'une limpidité éblouissante. Elle comprit que toutes les vérités, mêmes les plus immémoriales, convergeaient vers un point central de sa chair et que ses muqueuses, par un ineffable mystère, renfermaient dans leurs plis obscures toutes les richesses de l'infini. […] à son réveil, elle ne sentit plus rien qu'une grande lassitude et l'insupportable effarement d'avoir été dupée.[45]

This scene can be closely compared to one from *Sixtine*, in which Entragues manifests a sexual encounter with his ephemeral lover. Like the intercourse in *Le Fantôme*, it is conceived in spiritual language: 'Chère créature de mon désir, je me confie à ta magie […] Habitacle de ma volonté, réceptacle de mes illusions d'amour, évoque-toi et protège-moi!'[46] It builds to a climax, wrapped

[44] *Le Fantôme*, p. 29.
[45] *Le Fantôme*, p. 29-30.
[46] *Sixtine*, p. 251.

in metaphor:

> Douceurs de clair de lune, nuages, stridents éclats de précurseurs éclairs […] L'orage plane dans le velouté du ciel, les nuées passent turbulentes […] La foudre a sonné décidément. Cela gronde au loin, cela gronde! Encore un éclair! Ah! il éclaire longtemps! Encore![47]

Entragues then awakens, disappointed and ashamed: 'Hubert se réveilla secoué par l'épouvantable roulement. "Ah! Pollution! c'était Sixtine. Ah! misères des nerfs imbéciles!"'[48] With no small amount of humour on Gourmont's part, both Hyacinthe and Entragues mistake the fleeting sensation of orgasm for the promise of lasting transcendence. The tug-of-war relationship between orgasmic ecstasy and post-coital embarrassment perfectly encapsulates the tensions at the heart of their respective texts. There is, however, an important difference between these two episodes, marking a progression from one text to the next: where Entragues ideologically asserts the supremacy of the mind and its power to control, the lovers of *Le Fantôme* strive to balance this with a certain harnessing of the passivity associated with both mystical ecstasy and physical pleasure. This difference is expressed in several ways: Entragues's experience is nominally solitary, as can be presumed from the word 'pollution' (as in *pollution de nuit*). He conceives his fantasy in terms of cerebral control and creation – he *summons* Sixtine, and refers to her as the vessel of his will. Hyacinthe's intercourse, by contrast, is more explicitly physical and mutual (Damase refers to a shared 'satisfaction physique').[49] Hyacinthe, as a female archetype, is the receptive agent of this intercourse (admitting an unknown 'voyageur' past the threshold of her 'virginité'). Interestingly, though, Damase vicariously partakes in her passivity. After Hyacinthe admits that their sexual pleasure is 'pas bien supérieur à manger une pêche',[50] Damase muses:

> Comme le plaisir sexuel, hors les organismes de brutes, n'est que l'écho et la redondance du plaisir donné, ma joie diminua jusqu'à rien, jusqu'au rafraîchissement d'occasion, en une promenade, avec le fruit qui pend au-dessus du

[47] *Sixtine*, p. 252.
[48] *Sixtine*, p. 252.
[49] *Le Fantôme*, p. 32.
[50] *Le Fantôme*, p. 31.

mur – et je doutai de la légitimité d'une telle défloration.[51]

With *Le Fantôme*, the quest for the mystical unity of opposites fails, but its failure solidifies new themes of reciprocity and reversal in Gourmont's work. In the end, Damase muses, 'je vis tous les dangers du mysticisme à deux, et je me repentis d'avoir associé une femme à des imaginations aussi déconcertantes pour la raison et l'équilibre corporel.'[52] Like the reciprocal nature of sexual pleasure, this admission is reflexive: it condemns woman, but equally condemns the imagination which sought to implicate her. This destructive reciprocity, as we shall see, has its own theological character.

'Créatrice de tout, mais créatrice meurtrière': Gourmont as Mystical Theodicist

Theodicy, in the words of John Hick, is the 'attempt to reconcile the unlimited goodness of an all-powerful God with the reality of evil'.[53] As Michael Stoeber explains, theodicies 'are usually not associated with mysticism. […] In these instances mystics are denounced for becoming so enraptured in the isolated pursuit of their experiences that they do not recognize or care about the force or reality of evil.'[54] In his *Evil and the Mystics' God*, however, Stoeber makes the case that mysticism offers its own unique approach to the question of evil, and that certain mystics do 'provide a variety of responses to the challenge of evil, answers which are associated with their mystical experiences'.[55] At the same time, he stresses that 'mystical theodicy does not *solve* the challenge of evil', but rather 'resolves many of the issues in a manner more effective than that of non-mystical theodicy'.[56] Stoeber sees evil as divided into two distinct (and Augustinian)

[51] *Le Fantôme*, p. 31.
[52] *Le Fantôme*, p. 107.
[53] Quoted in Michael Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), p. 9.
[54] Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God*, p. 1.
[55] Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God*, p. 1.
[56] Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God*, p. 6. Italics in original.

categories where theodicy is concerned: the natural and the moral. 'Natural evils, that is the pain and suffering associated with the natural deficiencies common to this realm of non-paradise, are considered the consequence of the original fall. Moral evils arise through individual sin.'[57] The burden of the mystical theodicy, Stoeber suggests, is the way in which it seeks 'aesthetic wisdom' regarding natural sin. Where the non-mystical theodicist might be more concerned with the behavior of the individual sinner, the mystic is an explorer of sin's deeper, primordial origins, rendered visible in ecstatic experiences and perceptions.

Paul Ricœur argues that the myth of the Fall was not the beginning of theodicy, but an early product of it. In *La Symbolique du mal*, he speculates how the lapsarian myth was formed in response to an unstable paradox within penitential thought:

> Si la racine du péché est dans la 'nature', dans 'l'être' de l'homme, le péché révélé par la sainteté de Dieu se retourne contre Lui et accuse le Créateur d'avoir fait l'homme mauvais. Si je me repens de mon être, j'accuse Dieu dans le même moment qu'il m'accuse et l'esprit de pénitence explose sous la pression de ce paradoxe. Le mythe surgit ainsi à un point de haute tension de l'expérience pénitentielle: sa fonction est de poser un 'commencement' du mal, distinct du 'commencement' de la création, de poser un événement par lequel le péché est entré dans le monde et par le péché la mort.[58]

With 'le monde, c'est moi', Entragues introduces an almighty creator in the form of the thinking self, attributing to it the totality of goodness and virtue. Like the bond between creator and creation, seen by Ricœur as a negative feedback loop, 'le monde, c'est moi' establishes a snare in which any accusation against the world is also an accusation against the self, its preeminent creator. Thus begins the tragic philosophical narrative which runs the course of Gourmont's Symbolist-era novels. In *Sixtine* and *Le Fantôme*, the protagonist comes upon obstacles which challenge his various notions of cerebral dominance. Like the contradictory pressure of the penitential experience described by Ricœur, the salutary strategies of Gourmont's protagonists are

[57] Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God*, p. 14.
[58] Paul Ricœur, *La Symbolique du mal*, *Philosophie de la volonté*, vol. II, *Finitude et culpabilité* (Paris: Aubier, 1960), pp. 227-28.

marred by reflexivity. Consider, for example, an episode near the end of *Sixtine*:

> Y aurait-il donc une invincible nature humaine plus stable, en sa versatilité, que les architectures de la pensée? Invincible, non puisque d'altiers méprisants l'ont domptée. C'est que je manque de méthode. Des entraînements spirituels me sont nécessaires.
> […]
> Ah! je n'ai aucune lucidité et je m'ennuie. Nul remède, la crise nerveuse accomplira son cycle.[59]

Entragues's neurotic 'cycle' reflects the maddening circularity which Ricœur attributes to the early penitential experience. By accusing himself of lacking mental discipline, he contradicts the superiority of his mind, and thus spirals toward mental collapse.

Another instance of this can be seen in *Le Fantôme*, which continues the cosmology of 'le monde, c'est moi' in that it relies on the premise that Hyacinthe is still a creation of Damase's mind, thus perpetuating the paradox of the omnipotent creator and the volatile creation. When Damase finally admits defeat, Gourmont again employs the image of the circle to symbolize the consequence of this entanglement.

> [Hyacinthe] retomba dans la sécheresse: plus de désir physique, plus d'amour spirituel; plus de chair, indifférence totale. Je me trouvais sévèrement étreint dans ce cercle et forcé de renoncer à mes projets d'ascension mystique, la corporéité devenant à la fois, d'après mes expériences et mes observations, le moyen et l'obstacle, le moteur, et le frein des élévations surhumaines.[60]

Physical desire and spiritual love are lost simultaneously. In the case of *Le Fantôme*, the problematic relationship between 'monde' and 'moi' has its analog in the relation of 'corporéité' to '[les] élévations surhumaines'. Although Damase fails to 'ascend', he has gained special insight into the nature of these forces as a result of his mystical experiences. We are reminded of the Jacob's Ladder image, discussed earlier, which Gourmont used to describe mysticism as an upward journey with no concrete destination. In the same way that mystical theodicy provides

[59] *Sixtine,* pp. 296-97.
[60] *Le Fantôme*, p. 109.

responses to the question of evil without ever solving it, Damase's own mysticism has led him to a certain understanding of the fallen condition at the root of his demise. His new understanding centers around corporeality as both 'le moyen et l'obstacle […] des élévations surhumaines'. Beyond the sexual context of *Le Fantôme*, corporeality may be linked to the 'natural deficiencies', the 'pain and suffering' of natural evil as explained by Stoeber. Sexuality is one aspect of the corporeal, but this must also be held in relation to other qualities of corporeality such as mortality and pain. Considering this more general sense, Damase's double-sided regard to human corporeality closely mirrors Catholic theology, which both laments physical suffering as a consequence of the Fall and symbolically venerates it in the framework of Eucharistic devotion.

Like a theodicean, Damase wants to arrive at a harmonious justification of the earthly and the infinite; like a *mystical* theodicean, however, this is played out in the realm of experience. The mystic does not merely theorize the relationship between God and natural evil, but plunges headfirst into a full-bodied experience of this relationship, exposing him/herself to potential union with divinity, but also to potential encounters with the powers of evil. The controversy of mystical experience, according to Moshe Sluhovsky, stems from these risks inherent in the mystic's spiritual vulnerability. The mysticism of early modern Europe, she explains, was dogged by the notion that, by opening oneself to the direct experience of God, any number of malevolent influences might also be invited. In her words, 'demonic and divine possessions were two facets of the same religious experience, namely, embodied encounters with the supernatural.'[61] While we will save our discussion of demonic possession for the next chapter, this controversy is worth noting as an example of the high stakes involved in the search for divine experience. Gourmont's early work, too, is full of instances where the mystical experience turns out to be deceptive. Recall, for example, the moment in *Sixtine* in which Entragues manages to invoke his beloved through

[61] Moshe Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit: Possession, Mysticism, and Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. xvii.

prayer ('Chère créature de mon désir, je me confie à ta magie […] évoque-toi et protège-moi!'), undergoes a blissful 'embodied encounter' with her, but abruptly awakens, shocked and humiliated ('Ah! Pollution! c'était Sixtine. Ah! Misères des nerfs imbéciles!').[62] The more the Gourmontian mystic opens himself to the benevolent objects of his desire, the more he is made susceptible to the violation or corruption of his mind and senses.

Damase sees his failure as a function of corporeality's paradoxical nature; it is both the driving force and the obstacle of mystical ascension. By the end of *Les Chevaux de Diomède*, however, Gourmont has located a more primordial paradox, a more primordial evil:

> Le mal, c'est la pensée déformatrice avec toutes ses tentations, ses labyrinthes d'où nul n'est ressorti, sinon estropié par les luttes, enfiévré par les angoisses intellectuelles. […] Sois maudite, Pensée, créatrice de tout, mais créatrice meurtrière, mère maladroite qui n'as jamais mis au monde que des êtres dont les épaules sont l'escabeau du hasard et les yeux, la risée de la vie.[63]

It is appropriate that the cycle of fiction heralded by 'le monde, c'est moi' should end with these lines. As we have seen in *Sixtine* and *Le Fantôme*, Gourmont has been engaged in a theodical effort to justify the omnipotence of the subjective mind in the face of its many contradictions; his protagonists have struggled across these narratives to disentangle, identify, and perfect the complex structure of relations that underpin the pleasurable and the painful, the transcendent and the base, the infinite and the volatile – all personal attributions of good and evil. Here, Gourmont's theodicy has reached its ultimate conclusion, and also its ultimate failure. It is the first time that cosmological terms such as 'créatrice' and 'le mal' are explicitly used, and this unprecedented usage punctuates a sense of finality. In the end, the atheist Gourmont has embraced a notion which Christian theodicy was created to avoid: that of a wicked God (if only as a symbol). Gourmont has returned full circle to the dilemma of the accursed creator noted by Ricœur. Only rather than continuing to retrieve its infinite goodness, he has conceded to a pessimistic cosmology, thus

[62] *Sixtine*, p. 252.
[63] *Les Chevaux de Diomède*, p. 249.

cutting the strongest philosophical cord between the idealist ‘moi’ and the Christian God.

Chapter 3: The Demon

In a religious metaphorical framework, Gourmont's pursuit of a miraculous accord between corporeal sexuality and the 'idée infinie' of the imagination has led to a crisis of previously held values. The subjective mind, once tantamount to the omni-creative and salvific virtue of God, has been denuded of its benevolent status, revealing itself at the very source of human affliction and misadventure. In this chapter, we will see how Gourmont's pessimistic realization regarding the nature of thought finds a representational model in the inverse image of God and mysticism: the archetype of the demon and the phenomena of sexual possession by incubi and succubi. With *Lilith* (1892), a play which this chapter examines in detail, the attempt to reengineer erotic desire and relationships, a characteristic of Gourmont's novels of the Symbolist period, yields to an imaginative discourse of primordial origins. Set in a heretical vision of Genesis, *Lilith* reinterprets the creation of the world, the Fall of Man, and the advent of sin as an allegorical explanation for the erotic and phenomenological 'fallenness' experienced by the heroes of his novels. If idealism in *Sixtine* and *Le Fantôme* is approached chiefly as a pretext for elevating erotic relations to the condition of the Symbolist artist and the subjective world which he forms in his image, *Lilith* introduces a major shift in Gourmont's perspective on idealism, turning from the philosophical ideology of subjective creation to the negative aspect of the world as idea: the law of total perceptual and epistemological uncertainty; an idealism not of solipsistic ownership over the images of subjectivity, but of volatile illusions and insurmountable barriers between subject and object, lover and beloved. Where the archetype of the mystic originates in the exploitative spirit of Gourmont's erotic idealism (the quest for 'impossible transformations'), the archetype of the demon is employed to illustrate why such transformations are impossible.

At the same time as Gourmont's demonological fiction heralds the pessimistic negation of

idealism as a pretext for erotic enhancement, the philosophical attitude which emerges from it begins to align eros and idealism even more profoundly as concepts. In Gourmont's retelling of the Fall, eros and idealism conjoin at the mythic epicentre of the human condition, in the moment of Original Sin, finding a new context in the biblical advent of sexual knowledge. More focused on describing the nature of desire than improving it, in *Lilith*, Gourmont develops an explicit philosophy of erotic desire which engaged polemically with contemporary sexual and psychological discourses.

At various points in his work, Gourmont communicated the shifts in his intellectual perspective by utilizing other literary forms and styles. By turning to theatre with *Lilith*, Gourmont's increasing concern for the timeless conditions of human nature is well served by an ancient medium traditionally suited to the narrative enactment of mythic and cosmological events. Counterbalancing the myopic subjectivity of his novels, the plot structure of Gourmont's theatre usually takes the form of a power struggle between archetypal characters representing different ideas and values. His *dramatis personae* serve as embodiments of ideas and values which are juxtaposed in order to stimulate a meaningful combat between them, inviting a wider range of intellectual ambivalence than is often found in the philosophical convictions of his first-person protagonists. Gourmont's demon archetype has a special significance within this mythic and theatrical context. In *Lilith*, Satan and Lilith belong to a weave of equal and opposing forces which enact themselves upon humanity's contentious formation, as elemental to Genesis as Jehovah and his angels and thus part of a structure of contradictory tension which Gourmont wishes to expose in his ongoing understanding of how desire and phenomenology shape one another. Anticipating later psychoanalytic tendencies, Gourmont links the phenomena and mythology of demonic visitation to childhood sexual development, thus embracing the allegorical cliché of biblical paradise and banishment. While Gourmont does develop an important notion of repressed sexuality, however, his conception is as antithetical to Freudian

pathology as it is to materialist science. In *Lilith*, and in the later short story 'Péhor', Gourmont imaginatively refutes the existence of 'natural' or 'normal' forms of sexual behaviour and desire. Drawing upon idealist principles, Gourmont instead frames desire as an infinitely self-repressing and self-perverting function of 'la pensée […] créatrice meurtrière', condemned to inadequacy from the very moment that sexuality enters consciousness. As we shall soon explore in detail, the demon was a highly-charged image central to the cultural and scientific debate over sexuality in Gourmont's time, and thus a deliberately polemical image on Gourmont's part.

The Psycho-Sexual Demon in Literature

According to Hebrew folklore and medieval tradition, offspring of Lilith, the (male) incubus and (female) succubus were demons who preyed upon their victims by engaging in sexual activity with them. Gourmont's representations of incubi and succubi can be seen in the context of a pervasive literary interest in sexual demons which had begun to peak in the 1880's and -90's. Long before this, however, Jacques Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux* (1772), the first text to be known as a *roman fantastique*, set the tone for a tradition of writers who saw in this general template a means to explore the relation between sexual desire and horror. Of particular importance here is Théophile Gautier, whose 'La Morte amoureuse' (1836), while it recalls Cazotte's title, stands as an example of the nineteenth-century turn which preferred a more psychological than moral take on the figure of the demon, embracing it as a representative model of repressed, usually fatal, longings manifested in dreams. Where the hero of Cazotte's tale prevails through the strength of his moral fibre, the fantastical visitations of nineteenth-century fiction exposed the inherent vulnerability of the (typically male) psyche to a host of otherwise unspeakable influences. The 'desire for the dead', as Lisa Downing has shown, was one such influence to appear in sublimated and fantasized form through characters like Clarimonde. To

borrow Downing's description, demonic figures such as Gautier's vampire 'de-metaphorised and revealed' sexuality's association with death and the deadly by 're-metaphoris[ing]' it with the supernatural.[1] In a more morally ambivalent manner than Cazotte, Gautier and others explored themes of vampirism, incubacy, and succubacy not merely to reaffirm the moral temptation and wickedness of the demon, but the transcendent, death-defying power of eroticism. Alongside this revaluation of the demon came a number of new interpretations of the myths from which it derives. One way to redress the tired Christian connotations of demonic sexuality was to employ the legend of Lilith according to the Kabbalah, on which a number of reference texts had become available mid-century.[2] By the time Gourmont published his *Lilith*, the character had already caught the interest of Victor Hugo in his (unfinished) *La fin de Satan* (written between 1854-1862), and Gérard de Nerval in his collaboration with Bernard Lopez, *l'Imagier de Harlem* (1852). In England, she was captured by Dante Gabriel Rossetti both in verse, with 'Eden Bower' (1869), and on canvas a year earlier. While the retirement of the morally cautionary demon may have been due to a loss of belief in the supernatural dangers which arrive as a consequence of poor judgment, it was quickly adopted by an efflorescence of authors as deeply committed to the supernatural as 'Sâr' Joséphin Péladan, who made his flamboyant debut as a modern mage with *Le Vice suprême* in 1884. Because the demon had been morally released by the Romantic generation of Baudelaire, Hugo, and Gautier, a positive valuation of disembodied sexual spirits became common in the occult and its creative production. For the parodic protagonist of Anatole France's *La Rôtisserie de la reine Pédauque* (1893), such entities 's'approchent volontiers des hommes avec un esprit bienveillant et si affectueux'.[3] 'Ce sont des créatures infiniment aimables et belles'.[4]

[1] Lisa Downing, *Desire and Immobility* (D.Phil Thesis, University of Oxford, 1999), p. 212.
[2] See Pascale Auraix-Jonchière, *Lilith, avatars et métamorphoses d'un mythe entre romantisme et décadence* (Paris: Broché, 2011).
[3] Anatole France, *La Rôtisserie de la reine Pédauque* (Paris: Lévy, 1895), p. 270.
[4] France, *La Rôtisserie de la reine Pédauque*. p. 137.

Charcot, the Occult, and the Aesthetic Spectacle of Clinical Demonology

The psycho-sexual redefinition of the demon in the nineteenth-century cultural imagination was the product of a complex engagement between aesthetic politics, the occult, and contemporary science. By far the most notorious figure in this exchange was Jean-Martin Charcot and the new psychiatric methods which he was demonstrating in Paris, and the psychological turn in the *fantastique* coincided closely with his insight that hysteria developed out of mental rather than physical instability. His public lectures, frequented by Maupassant and Huysmans among countless others, employed the assistance of human subjects – always female – used in demonstrating how hypnotism could transform the symptoms of hysteria. Charcot was himself conscious of the sensational effect his performances had upon viewers, and that the scientific basis of his treatments could easily be eclipsed by their sheer performativity. Nonetheless, he (intentionally or unintentionally)[5] encouraged the occult associations of his scientific spectacle through his public persona alone. Journalists began to describe the morbid décor of his office, which was painted black and decorated with engravings depicting scenes of demonic possession.[6] Along with the Catholic neurologist Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre, whose compendious work on stigmatization[7] appeared in 1894, Charcot endeavored to explore the concept of *stigmata diaboli*, and helped to appropriate the term into the medical lexicon. His practice of piercing his patients with needles to find areas of insensitivity (*stigmata*) was used to detect concealed signs of hysteria in a manner almost identical to inquisition-era methods of

[5] Unintentionally, according to Charles Féré: '[Le docteur Charcot] n'a jamais cherché à étendre son influence en dehors du domaine scientifique.' [cited in Bertrand Marquer, *Les Romans de la Salpêtrière* (Paris : Droz, 2008), p. 23.]
[6] Georges Guillain, *J.-M. Charcot (1825-1893): Sa vie, son œuvre* (Paris: Masson, 1955), p. 52.
[7] Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre, *La Stigmatisation, l'extase divine et les miracles de Lourdes: Réponse aux libres penseurs* (Paris: Vic et Amat, 1894).

witch hunting. Moreover, Charcot fought to give scientific credibility to notions previously seen to be superstitious. The mysterious symptoms of medieval devil compacts, together with a continuation of the experiments of Franz Mesmer (the father of hypnotism), became the central predications of the field known as 'science psychique'. This act of reappraisal on which Charcot's theories of hysteria are based brought science and the occult into unprecedented contact with one another. As Sandrine Schiano-Bennis puts it, 'le magnétisme, le spiritisme et l'hypnose faisaient se rencontrer la foi et la raison, le merveilleux et l'expérimental, le mage, le prêtre et le savant'.[8]

When Charcot published *Les démoniaques dans l'art* (1887) with co-author Paul Richer, he did not only reveal a personal obsession with demonic imagery, but also a new application of 'médecine rétrospective'.[9] By retroactively diagnosing the aesthetics of demonic possession, he entered his ideas into connection with the arts, a proclivity later adopted by his acolyte, Sigmund Freud. Something of an amateur artist himself, Charcot saw paintings and illustrations of demonic possession and ecstatic mysticism as expressive documentary tools. His *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (1876-1900) could be considered an artistic contribution in its own right. A collection of photographs detailing female patients in diverse hysterical poses – some contorted and in pain, others lost in ecstatic displays of supplication – the *Iconographie* rendered the complex of female hysteria into a stimulating visual exhibition. While this collection may have damaged his scientific reputation, as Christopher Goetz has pointed out,[10] it served to invite much of the artistic engagement surrounding his work, which extends from the *Sataniques* of Felicien Rops and, indeed, through to Surrealism. A literary counterpart to the

[8] Sandrine Schiano-Bennis, 'Une tranche d'occultisme: Remy de Gourmont et Berthe de Courrière au pays des lys noirs', in *Actualité de Remy de Gourmont*, pp. 229-43 (p. 234).
[9] Jean Céard, 'Démonologie et Démonopathies au temps de Charcot', in *Histoire des sciences médicales*, 28.4 (1994), 337-43 (p. 337).
[10] Christopher G. Goetz, 'Visual Art in the Neurological Career of Jean-Martin Charcot', in *Archives of Neurology* 48.4 (1991), 421-25.

Iconographie would manifest itself in a series of historical texts published by Charcot and his students under the collective name of *La Bibliothèque diabolique*. Included in this project were titles such as *La possession de Jeanne Fery* and *Science et miracle: Louise Lateau ou la stigmatisée belge* (1878).

With regard to the tensions between spiritualism and materialism within literary culture itself, Charcot made himself a natural ally of Zola and the Naturalist school. Indeed, Zola attempted to consult Charcot in the preparation of *Lourdes* (1894), but failed to make contact with him before his death. In Charcot's 1886 preface to *Sœur Jeanne des Anges*, he claims that the nun's auto-biography 'se présente entre tout avec un caractère très particulier de sincérité et de véracité'.[11] With this sentiment, he expands to literature the standard of accuracy implemented in *Les démoniaques dans l'art*. Demonic possession, for Charcot, has not only an ideal treatment but an ideal aesthetic. The natural enemy of this compact between Charcot and Naturalism would, of course, come in the form of a compact between Symbolism, Decadence, and the supernatural. For a former Naturalist such as Huysmans, however, there was still much to reconcile. Reconciliation, in a sense, is the guiding theme of *Là-bas.* Attempting to resolve the dichotomy of matter and spirit, its first pages serve as a soap box upon which the authorial technique of 'naturalisme spiritualiste' is announced.[12] By absorbing the conflict into the project of literary creation itself, Huysmans could see himself as a mediating voice which would gather materialism and spiritualism together in a constructive (though always tenuous) debate. Durtal and Des Hermies (whom Richard Aldington believed to be based on Gourmont), his surrogate contenders, do not fail to raise the issue of Charcot:

> Oui, sans doute, Charcot détermine très bien les phases de l'accès, note les attitudes illogiques et passionnelles, les mouvements clowniques; il découvre les zones hystérogènes, peut, en maniant adroitement les ovaires, enrayer ou accélérer les

[11] Jean-Martin Charcot, preface to *Sœur Jeanne des Anges: autobiographie d'une hystérique possédée*, ed. by Gabriel Legué and Gilles de la Tourette (Paris: Charpentier, 1886), p. i.
[12] See Chapter 2 for details.

> crises, mais quant à les prévenir, quant à en connaître les sources et les motifs, quant à les guérir, c'est autre chose! Tout échoue sur cette maladie inexplicable, stupéfiante, qui comporte par conséquent les interprétations les plus diverses, sans qu'aucune d'elles puisse jamais être déclarée juste![13]

If Huysmans's passage is any indication, there was a sense even within the ultimately spiritual branch of the avant-garde that Charcot had indeed helped to elucidate phenomena such as demonic possession, lending it a brilliant taxonomy. The very act of scientific categorization, which drew distinctions between major and minor forms of hysteria, provided a diversified framework which the imagination could plunder regardless of any clinical significance. In Huysmans's discourse on the science of hysteria and possession, Charcot is a direct echo of Zola, a pioneer who established a rudimentary foundation, but who was over-eager to seize total control.

Là-bas's chief subject was, of course, occultism proper. Yet even here, among the ranks of *fin-de-siècle* spiritualist and Satanist groups which the novel exposed, modern science made itself felt in various ways. Gérard Encausse, known by his pseudonym Papus, was deeply active in both areas. Papus contributed to, and even helped to found, both the Ordre Martiniste and the Ordre Kabbalistique de la Rose+Croix, and played an active role in other groups such as O.T.O (Ordo Templi Orientis, an offshoot of Gnostic Catholicism later popularized by Aleister Crowley) and the Golden Dawn (whose English branch boasted the membership of W. B. Yeats and A. E. Waite). At the same time, however, he ran a successful medical clinic in Paris, and in the early years of the twentieth century made several trips to Russia to serve as physician and spiritual adviser to Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra. His published works frequently dealt with the points of contact between scientific discovery and the magical traditions they evoked. 'Lorsque l'on fut certain que la plupart des phénomènes produits par la force psychique étaient

[13] Huysmans, *Là-bas*, pp. 212-13.

réels,' he writes in the preface to the aptly-titled *Science des mages*, 'on se souvient qu'il existait une théorie particulière de ces phénomènes: la Magie'.[14] Like Huysmans, Papus was fascinated by (and active within) the aspects of contemporary science which sought to verify the existence of invisible forces which the occult had claimed all along.

Demons of Degeneration

This tense triangulation between art, science, and the occult lent itself not only to the blurring of the scientific and the spiritual, but also the demonic and the mystical. The aforementioned scientific appropriation of the *stigmata*, for example, unified both mystic and satanic stigmatics under a common clinical rubric. By replacing religious bias with scientific objectivity, the term 'hysteria' could be applied equally to the ecstatic martyr or the demonomaniac. The behavior which superstition had previously deemed either ecstatic or wicked had been bridged into a new and overarching *maladie du siècle*. When men of science such as Max Nordau took up the more ambitious task of diagnosing entire cultural movements, it was with a similar attitude. Where Charcot studied medieval and Renaissance engravings as part of his case studies of hysteria, Nordau took the near entirety of modern literature as one epidemiological unit in which mysticism and diabolism were merely two affectations of the same illness. Any eccentric form of spirituality among the Symbolist generation could be reduced to a kind of inherent mental deficiency. 'If this organic deficiency appears in a man of the lower classes,' he determined in *Degeneration*, 'he becomes a vagabond; in a woman of that class it leads to prostitution; in one belonging to the upper classes it takes the form of artistic and literary drivel'.[15] All Symbolists and Decadents were deemed 'neo-Catholic'. By using the term 'mysticism' in a pejorative and

[14] Papus, *La science des mages* (Paris: Chamuel, 1892), p. v.
[15] Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: Appleton, 1895), p. 102.

clinical sense, he was able to detect the aesthetic commonalities between the pious and the blasphemous, freely oscillating between such extremes as Verlaine's delicate appeals to the Virgin Mary and Maurice Rollinat's scatological verses in an attempt to identify 'this stormy outburst of superstition'.[16]

At the same time as *fin-de-siècle* scientific materialism unified the spiritual poles of supernatural belief, it aimed to draw new distinctions between aspects of sexuality. Treatments of hysteria tended to vent and at the same time cover up the sexuality of female patients – with methods ranging from the infamous 'massage treatment' to prescribed erotic fantasy. In order to achieve this, methods such as these needed to be categorized as non-erotic and purely therapeutic. Sexual release at the hands of a medical professional, for instance, was deemed 'hysterical paroxysm' as if to sever its relation to the orgasm, creating distance between the 'healthy' pleasure of procreative, marital sex and that of an illness leaving the body. The scientific categorization of sexual behavior was morally encoded at the semantic level.

Richard von Krafft-Ebing, in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, offered his own semantic and literary interpretation of degenerate sexuality:

> Love when weak is frequently turned away from its real object into different channels, such as voluptuous poetry, bizarre aesthetics, or religion. In the latter case it readily falls a prey to mysticism, fanaticism, sectarianism or religious mania. A smattering of all this can always be found in the immature love of early puberty. The poetical effusions of that period of life are only then worthy of perusal when emanating from the pen of the truly endowed genius.[17]

In a way that Nordau would have certainly endorsed, Krafft-Ebing links the straying of love from its familial objective to the straying of civilization from its ideal path. Once again, the Decadent artist (as opposed to the 'truly endowed genius') along with the mystic are employed as examples in a narrative of degeneration. *Psychopathia Sexualis* can only embark on its encyclopedic study

[16] Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 218.
[17] Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, trans. Franklin Klaff (New York: Arcade, 1965), p. 7.

of deviant sexuality after the ideal and normal conditions of sexual life have been asserted. Love is seen as possessing an optimal trajectory and a 'real object'. The individual who deviates from this course does so out of weakness, and thus falls as well from the acceptable currents of culture, spiritually deviating from mainstream religion to cult and superstition.

With the advent of hysteria theory and other scientific developments, women entered into the discourse of moral-physical degeneration. The *fin de siècle* saw a particular return to the notion of women as demonic vessels. The discoveries of Charcot and others put an end to the more tame, benign female identity of the ascendant middle-class family. Brendan King offers an historical explanation:

> The shift in economic power to the bourgeoisie and the fact that middle-class men had to compete in a capitalist workplace, led to a corresponding cultural emphasis on women's role as home-builders, and, so as not the threaten the stability of the patriarchal line, as completely sexless, or at least naturally sexually continent, beings. […] The 'rediscovery' of female sexuality, however, led to an equal, but opposite stereotype: woman as nymphomaniac.[18]

No longer the docile stewards of familial morality, women regained a modern version of their earlier significance as agents of chaos and evil. Instead of the meekness that contributed to women's virtue earlier in the nineteenth century, they were assigned the more condemned trait of lasciviousness. Rather than being seen as merely fragile, women were once again suspected of vulnerability to strange maladies, dangerous moral influences, and unhealthy superstitions. A kinship thus emerges between the degenerative theory of subversive art (as described in Nordau's text), and the degenerative theory of women according to other theorists.

The Christian commitment of many theorists adds another layer of complexity to the identity of the demon. Where secular approaches to psychology in the twentieth century were

[18] Brendan King, *Iconic representations of female sexuality in the work of J.-K. Huysmans* (Ph.D thesis, Birkbeck College, London, 2004), p. 131.

able to sequester the idea of the devil within the realm of dream, metaphor, or the patient's own delusions, religious moralists in numerous fields campaigned against malevolent influences still believed to be supernatural. To name one extreme, Nicholas Francis Cooke's *Satan in Society* (1871) incorporated a great deal of modern medical research (mainly French) into a manifesto of Christian social purity. For Cooke, the spirit of progress and belief in the devil were not only compatible, but mutually necessary as moral creeds: 'We believe in progress – none more firmly – but we believe only in that progress which is accomplished under the influence of religion, of Christianity.'[19] While his caution against the sort of progress which might 'conquer the future with new principles, new institutions, a new religion, and a new God'[20] may seem dated, Cooke's overall message as to the Christian basis of scientific and social progress resurfaces more or less unchanged in Krafft-Ebing's work. Where Cooke had written, '[w]e owe to the Christian religion all the grand ameliorations with which the human race has been endowed',[21] Krafft-Ebing echoes, '[i]n comparing the various stages of civilization it becomes evident that, despite periodical relapses, public morality has made steady progress, and that Christianity is the chief factor in this advance'.[22] The shift between Cooke and Krafft-Ebing has little to do with the superiority of Christianity morals. These, and the progress they beget, remain consistent. What occurs instead is a complete sexualization of Christian metaphysics.

> Sexual life no doubt is the one mighty factor in the individual and social relations of man which discloses his powers of activity, of acquiring property, of establishing a home, of awakening altruistic sentiments towards a person of the opposite sex, and towards his own issue as well as towards the whole human race. Sexual feeling is really the root of all ethics, and no doubt of aestheticism and religion. The sublimest virtues, even the sacrifice of the self, may spring from sexual life, which, however, on account of its sensual power, may easily degenerate into the lowest passion and the basest vice.[23]

[19] Nicholas Francis Cooke, *Satan in Society* (Chicago: Vent, 1890), p. 19.
[20] Cooke, *Satan in Society*, p. 18.
[21] Cooke, *Satan in Society*, p. 19.
[22] Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, p. 3.
[23] Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, p. 1.

While he may have agreed with Cooke that 'All forces which operate in this world are *resolved* into […] the powers of good and the powers of evil',[24] Krafft-Ebing, laying the groundwork for Freud, cites 'sexual feeling' as the ubiquitous, subterranean motive of all of virtue as well as vice. Insistent on preserving both the existing Christian framework as well as scientific reason, Krafft-Ebing's introduction to *Psychopathia Sexualis* presents a challenging double bind: science reveals that sexual feeling drives humanity, but Christian morality requires that humanity must control sexual feeling. What is striking about this is not how Krafft-Ebing perpetuates the association between sexuality and evil, but how Christian virtue is reduced to a certain handling of the sexual instinct. Through Christianity, man 'combines with the sexual functions ideas of morality, of the sublime, and the beautiful'.[25]

This growing idea of sexuality as a vast, transcendent force capable of both elevating man to a state of grace and dragging him down into evil was a strong cultural stimulus behind the *fin-de-siècle* fascination with incorporeal sexual experience. This notion had particularly eccentric manifestations on the periphery of Gourmont's literary network. Abbé Joseph-Antoine Boullan, Huysmans's one-time spiritual advisor and the original of Dr. Johannès in *Là-bas*, professed the spiritual omnipotence of sex through a secret doctrine upon which he founded his cult. Already expelled from the priesthood on account of his scatological practices and alleged satanism, he was further denounced by a jury consisting of Stanislas de Guaïta and other occultists due to a sexual dogma and initiation rite reserved for his elite followers. As several of these followers explained in a letter, 'Carmel veut dire chair élevée en Dieu, et la Lumière d'en haut vous a fait connaître comment on se célestifie ici-bas, *par l'acte même qui a été et qui est encore la cause de toutes les déchéances morales*'.[26] Richard Griffiths sheds light on this: 'For Boullan the act of love, being the act of matter, was thoroughly evil in itself even

[24] Cooke, *Satan in Society*, p. 17.
[25] Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, p. 1.
[26] Quoted in Richard Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution* (London: Constable, 1966), p. 135.

within marriage; but that same act, materially performed yet transformed by spiritual intention, could be the act of regeneration'.[27] Members of the Boullan cult were encouraged to elevate themselves through celestial intercourse with the saints and even with elemental spirits. It is this which attracted the negative attention of de Guaïta, who accused the sect of summoning incubi and succubi. The possibility of a theology such as Boullan's is perhaps due to the largely scientific discovery of sexuality as something at once more potent and more diffuse than previously realized. Research such as Krafft-Ebing's, while it would certainly classify Boullan's procedures as unhealthy perversions, paradoxically paved the way for the combination of sex and spiritual striving.

There are clear parallels between Boullan's doctrine and Gourmont's own experiments of ritually-enhanced sexuality (notably in *Le Fantôme*), but the more troubling parallel from Gourmont's perspective would have been between the Boullanists and the likes of Krafft-Ebing, and the ironic manner in which the occult disdain for the material world frequently resolved itself in the same decrying of 'déchéances morales' common to positivist ideology. Occultism may have provided a compelling aesthetic of blasphemy, but in practice it only repeated the moral absolutism of bourgeois culture and mainstream Christianity.

Lilith: Erotic Idealism as Cultural Critique

It is out of the demonologically-inflected cultural debate for sexual redefinition that Gourmont begins to develop a more universalizing conception of desire and sexuality in *Lilith* and, later, *Physique de l'amour*. With *Lilith*, Gourmont first enters the discussion by exploiting the demonic archetype which had come to represent a spectrum of anxieties surrounding the meaning and conduct of erotic desire and sexual behavior. The centrality of this archetype in the *fin-de-siècle*

[27] Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution*, p. 135.

debate over sexuality prompted Gourmont to engage with the complex tensions between factions of science, spirituality, and moral politics by presenting demonic themes of his own. As we have seen earlier, incubi, succubi, and sexual demons were vessels upon which such factions could impose their respective agendas. Because the demon is ethereal by nature, any claim to it was also a certain claim on the secrets of sexuality. These secrets could be understood either through 'scientifically' refuting the existence of demonic intercourse, as Charcot and Krafft-Ebing believed, or through the occult doctrines which claimed to channel it, such as that of Boullan. In both cases, this demonic theme had become interlaced with the general notion that desire and sexuality could be comprehended, improved, or altered. As such, these modern resurgences of the demonic motif encroached on the questions which Gourmont held at the centre of his work.

In *Lilith*, the crisis of erotic idealism is relocated from the private 'vie cérébrale' of Entragues to the controversial setting of Genesis. Gourmont's approach to the myth uses timeless archetypes in response to contemporary struggles for sexual definition. From the opening scene, this is evident in the characters of Jehovah and Satan. Jehovah has created the Earth, and now considers creating a being, Adam, who will be its king and steward. Rather than a glorious, biblical episode, Gourmont creates an atmosphere of comic discord. Basing his representation of Heaven on the ancient Hebrew tradition, he places Satan at Jehovah's left side, 'a sort of prosecuting attorney attached to the judgment seat of the Eternal'.[28] This does not, however, spell harmony or justice. Any dialogue between the two is overwhelmed by the angelic choruses of allegiance to Jehovah and his every dictate.

> LES SÉRAPHINS: Hosannah! Ton œuvre est bonne, Seigneur. Jusque dans l'espace extérieur où, hors de la sphère, nous évoluons en symbole de Souveraineté, l'odeur du monde nouveau a réjoui nos esprits. Enfante, enfante encore. Hosannah! Seigneur, ton œuvre est bonne! Hosannah!
>
> SATAN: Oui, mais restera-t-elle bonne? C'est là le point noir. Qu'en dites-vous, Seigneur, ne faudrait-il pas à ce monde un roi?

[28] Maximilian Rudwin, *The Devil in Legend and Literature* (La Salle: Open Court, 1931), p. 1.

JÉHOVAH: Le monde aura son roi.

LES CHÉRUBINS: Hosannah! Ton œuvre est bonne, Seigneur. L'intelligence des étoiles fixes l'a comprise et l'adore. Hosannah! Seigneur, ton œuvre est bonne! Hosannah!

SATAN: Et quel est ce roi, Seigneur? Votre Majesté l'a-t-elle déjà choisi?

JÉHOVAH: Tu verras. Patience!

SATAN: Excellent Seigneur! Il veut me faire une surprise.

LES TRÔNES: Hosannah! Ton œuvre est bonne, Seigneur. La Sagesse, qui est notre loi, loue ton absolue sagesse. Amen. Hosannah! Seigneur, ton œuvre est bonne! Hosannah!

JÉHOVAH: …Oui, je le formerai ainsi, de mes mains…

SATAN: Songeriez-vous, Seigneur, à une nouvelle création? Vous travaillez trop, Maître. Ne craignez-vous pas la fatigue?[29]

Gourmont presents a characteristic political scenario: the patriarch, Jehovah, is accompanied by his crowd of blind followers whose hosannas blockade and drown the voice of Satan, the doubtful outsider, critical of his authority figure and skeptical of the manner in which authority is transferred. His skepticism grows as Jehovah proceeds with his plan:

Gabriel, écoute-moi, je vais façonner de mes mains celui qui sera le roi du monde. Va trouver la Terre et demande-lui quelques poignées d'argile: de la blanche, de la noire, de la rouge, de la jaune et de la bleue. Avec cela je formerai le Prince Terrestre, le vrai fils de la Terre et son maître, l'Homme.[30]

Driven by a desire to transfer authority and dominion to an heir, Jehovah treats the earth as a subordinate bride and a maternal vessel. Even though Adam will be its 'vrai fils', he will still inherit the patriarchal license of his father. Anticipating the rape of its fertility, the earth initially refuses to yield its clay to the creation of an implicitly tyrannical child/master. To Gabriel, the

[29] Remy de Gourmont, *Lilith, suivi de Théodat* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1906), pp. 15-17.
[30] *Lilith*, pp. 20-21.

Earth speaks back: 'Tu ne prendras ni argile, ni poussière, ni pierre. Je ne veux pas que ma substance serve à former des créatures qui un jour m'abreuveront de sang.'[31] 'Il n'aura pas son argile!',[32] repeats an increasingly irate Satan, as indeed neither Gabriel nor Michael manage to strike a bargain with the unyielding Earth, until Azrael narrowly succeeds at last, by force.

Satan's natural allegiance to the Earth, resisting Jehovah's misguided project, reflects a particularly sympathetic view of the devil which had become popular in literary circles by the time of *Lilith*'s publication. Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière* (1862), a major source for authors ranging from Victor Hugo to Huysmans, was one of the first studies to portray the cult of Satan as a radical rejection of Feudalism and the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. At the centre of this protest is a characteristically Romantic identification of Satan with the oppressed outsider and an emphasis on women as emancipators. The Black Mass is imagined in *La Sorcière* to have been officiated by high priestesses, female officiators of a 'culte dénaturé du dieu nature'.[33] The women of this (largely fabricated) satanic movement are redeemers of the earth and its fertile power, opponents of the Christian and feudal overlords who desecrated the bond between the peasants and their land. It is suggested by Michelet that the politics of the 'natural' were as tempestuous in the days of medieval sorcery as they would become in Gourmont's time. The dominant worldview which satanic protest challenged was, in Michelet's words, 'l'*Anti-Nature*, faisant dans l'unité de l'être des distinctions, des castes, des classes hiérarchiques'.[34] As we will see in Chapter 5, the definition of Nature and the natural would became an important front on which Gourmont defended his sexual theories. Already, in *Lilith*, Gourmont creatively stages an ideological combat between the anarchic (Satan) and hierarchic (Jehovah) approaches to Nature. In the character of Jehovah, Gourmont suggests the worldview

[31] *Lilith*, p. 21.
[32] *Lilith*, p. 22.
[33] Jules Michelet, *La Sorcière* (Paris: Dentu, 1862), pp. 116-17.
[34] Michelet, *La Sorcière*, p. 121.

of Nordau and Krafft-Ebing which defines perversity, degeneracy, and aberrant behavior against cultural norms associated with a healthy, natural progression. Those who embodied these norms, guided by mainstream Christianity and a familial, procreative sexual ethic, belonged to a moral and social nobility. Like Adam, the ideal individual in this school of thought is both 'le vrai fils de la Terre et son maître'.

Later, Gourmont introduces several new figures: Le Soleil and La Nuit, the latter presiding over Les Ténèbres and Le Silence. These personified entities begin to assume a dichotomy which mirrors that of Jehovah and Satan: the diurnal and the nocturnal. As Jehovah works to mold the clay, there is a vivid scene which begins: 'L'approche des ténèbres excite son activité, et quand la nuit descend, la statue est complète'.[35] Jehovah's role as both a dictator and a creator of forms belongs symbolically to the diurnal realm. As he rushes to finish the statue before nightfall, he addresses the sun as a collaborator: 'Je suis content. Mais tout n'est pas fini. Soleil, tu consolideras ce simulacre et alors je reviendrai et je lui donnerai la vie.'[36] This concludes with a vivid stage direction where the sun gives one last brilliant flash of life-giving light before disappearing, and Jehovah disappears with it. The two characters are linked by an Apollonian quality: Jehovah, like the sun, is unable to supervise the statue of Adam when darkness approaches. He gathers his things, hastily caches the leftover clay beneath a tree, and retreats into the heavens. This is followed by a starkly contrasting nocturnal scene:

> LA NUIT: O Ténèbres charmantes, et toi, Silence archangélique, veillez sur le Simulacre qui repose au fond de cette vallée. Il vous est confié jusqu'à demain. Écartez de son lit les larmes de la rosée matinale et que le cri du réveil ne brise pas le tympan fragile de ses oreilles prédestinées.
>
> LES TÉNÈBRES: (*au-dessus de l'Homme, se recueillent dans leurs voiles – mais voici qu'elles pâlissent.*)
>
> LE SILENCE: (*marche, lent et méditatif, autour de la Statue couchée - mais voici*

[35] *Lilith*, p. 24.
[36] *Lilith*, p. 24.

qu'il s'arrête.)[37]

At night, Adam's form is soft and vulnerable. Rather than simply stand guard, Le Silence marches in a circular motion around the still-malleable statue. La Nuit asks for Adam to be protected, not from whatever may lurk in the darkness, but rather from the intrusive phenomena of daytime. The scene hints at an uncertain transformation occurring beneath the veils of Les Ténèbres, inaccessible to both the audience and Jehovah. Gourmont establishes an opposition to Jehovah's diurnal sphere through stylistic devices as well. In contrast to the repeated, exclamatory hosannas and decrees of earlier, the voice of La Nuit is without exclamation. It insists on silence, careful not to damage Adam's fragile ears. The name 'Lilith' has its root in the Hebrew word for night, and although she has not yet been introduced, Gourmont has already begun to define the significance of a nocturnal affiliation. Recalling Jehovah's forceful violation of the earth's fertility, suggested by the theft of its clay, as the diurnal realm becomes Jehovah's accomplice in this crime, night ('Lilith') emerges as an opposing force.

As the sun returns, so does the imperious, exclamatory language of Jehovah's diurnal energy. Entering with a flamboyant 'Me voilà!', the bright heat of the sun changes Adam's wet clay into 'un infrangible diamant'.[38] Here, with the final crystallization of the statue, is where Jehovah and Satan take their sides. Satan, not convinced that man has been 'perfected', complains: 'Cette créature n'est pas déplaisante, mais elle sent un peu la boue'.[39] Satan immediately detects that which is still damp and undesignated beneath the fixed, Apollonian surface which the sun has created on Jehovah's behalf. In other words, he is attuned to the aspect of man which still belongs to the nocturnal side. 'Vous êtes le jour', he says in farewell to Jéhovah, 'je serai la Nuit'.[40]

[37] *Lilith*, p. 25.
[38] *Lilith*, p. 28.
[39] *Lilith*, p. 31.
[40] *Lilith*, p. 32.

It is interesting to note that Gourmont utilizes the same metaphor in his famous portrayal of Mallarmé in *La Culture des idées.* Mallarmé's poetry is 'personnelle, repliée comme ces fleurs qui craignent le *soleil*; elle n'a de parfum que le *soir*'.[41] It is 'pleine de doutes, de nuances changeantes et de parfums ambigus'[42] in contrast to the 'affirmations lourdes'[43] of establishment literature. Thenocturnal/diurnal divide in *Lilith* is consistent with this later critical concept of the delicate subjectivity which evades the clear, democratic daylight of progress and convention. The nocturnal nature of Mallarmé's poetry represents for Gourmont a space of radical withdrawal, an idealized state of intellectual and artistic singularity. As an antecedent to the essay on Mallarmé, *Lilith*'s night/day dichotomy of Satan and Jehovah preemptively likens Satan to a great contrarian poet, and Jehovah to a guardian of classical literature. Satan is given nocturnal significance because he, like Mallarmé, refuses to aid in the perpetuation of the established order.

When Adam awakes, the question of language and poetics is evoked once more: he must be indoctrinated with the faculty to make meaning. Jehovah must transfer his power to name, categorize, and construct hierarchies to Adam so that he, too, can reign. Before Raziel is sent to begin Adam's instruction, however, Gourmont depicts the first man in his original state:

> ADAM: Quelle est donc cette voix qui parlait en moi et qui ne sortait pas de mes lèvres? Suis-je doué d'organes extérieurs à ma volonté? Ce bruit de paroles m'était doux et je ne peux le reproduire. Les sons que maintenant je profère sonnent selon un autre timbre... Mais, comme je suis beau, comme je suis vaste! L'immensité de mon être évolue à l'infini: tout cela, c'est moi. Je contiens le ciel et le soleil, et les animaux qui se meuvent et les oiseaux qui volent. Oh! je veux me connaitre, je veux marcher en moi... Le soleil d'abord me tente... Hé, si j'allais me brûler les doigts?... Non! Puis-je me faire du mal à moi-même?[44]

In a blissful moment of undifferentiated energy, Adam is stimulated by the supposed lack of

[41] *La Culture des idées*, p. 130.
[42] *La Culture des idées*, p. 132.
[43] *La Culture des idées*, p. 132.
[44] *Lilith*, p. 39.

boundaries between himself and all other phenomena, ignorant of the forbidden or harmful. There is an eroticism in his language which suggests a diffuse sexual stimulation associated with the sense of infinity. In fact, it is remarkably close to a scene from *Le Fantôme* describing an orgasm: an experience of 'toutes les richesses de l'infini' in which '[Hyacinthe's] propre essence avait absorbé et détenait à jamais l'essence de tout'.[45] As in most of Gourmont's descriptions of sexual rapture, however, the brief moment ends in humiliation as the self re-establishes, or, in Adam's case, establishes itself for the first time. He tries to touch the sun, to catch a flock of birds, and is puzzled by the distance which now appears between himself and other objects. The distinctions between his senses also begin to appear. Adam approaches a blossoming cherry tree and is surprised at the coarseness of its bark against his skin when it looked so soft from far away. This is when Raziel descends to begin his education. 'Raziel vient à son secours, cueille une branche fleurie, la lui fait respirer, cueille un bouquet de cerises et une à une les lui met dans la bouche'.[46]

Sensibility is being constructed here. Pleasure is becoming organized and therefore limited, initially perhaps through independent discovery but ultimately through indoctrination. Adam needs this training and sense of individuation to successfully navigate his environment, but it is at the expense of the earlier moment of oceanic ecstasy. As a symbolic child, Adam anticipates Freud's suspicion that the development of normal adult behavior comes at the cost of infantile forms of sexual pleasure. The angel, acting for Jehovah, the symbolic parent, tells Adam what his different body parts are for. This is compromised when, in a comedic moment, we discover that the sex organ was created with no clear aim in mind. Raziel explains: 'Ceci pour marcher, ceci pour prendre, ceci pour entendre, ceci pour voir, ceci pour manger, ceci pour... Je ne sais pas...'.[47] In a decidedly non-Freudian turn, the sexual faculty is seen to be

[45] *Le Fantôme*, p. 30.
[46] *Lilith*, p. 41.
[47] *Lilith*, pp. 41-42.

without directive or design.

It is from this oversight that Lilith is brought into being. Jehovah decides that 'il n'est pas bon que l'homme soit seul',[48] and creates a female from the leftover clay. Her first words are 'Donne-moi l'homme'.[49] She is designed in response to Adam's sexuality, but sexuality itself has not been given a purpose. Hence, she is sterile. In her first moments, Jehovah realizes that he has not provided an accountable meaning to the sexual impulse, but has rather exacerbated its chaotic uselessness. Naturally, this is unacceptable in Jehovah's vision of order, and thus he sends her to hell to become the companion of Satan.

> LILITH: (*la première, et d'une voix luxurieusement lasse qui, après chaque invocation meurt en une caresse*) Iod, ô mâle, Dieu et Phallus, axe du monde et axe de l'Esprit, je te révère, י, ô mâle!
>
> SATAN: (*répond*) Hé ô femelle, Matrice et Beauté, indolence spirituelle, lascivité, je te révère, ה, ô femelle!
>
> LILITH: Va, ô copulation, femelle et mâle, trompe et calice, obscurité du demain, je te révère, ר, ô copulation!
>
> SATAN: ה ô femelle!
>
> LILITH: Ne m'appelle pas Hé, appelle-moi Stérilité. Ne suis-je pas l'Inféconde?[50]

In these post-coital vows, Satan and Lilith pronounce the divine name of God (indicated by the Hebrew characters), the Ineffable Name which, in the traditional sources, was used by Lilith to escape from earth into the heavens following a feud with Adam.[51] The emphasis is on blasphemous, ecstatic ritual, sublimating the carnal act through forbidden language. Their genitalia are not reproductive organs but the aesthetic, ceremonial objects 'trompe et calice'.

[48] *Lilith*, p. 49.
[49] *Lilith*, p. 49.
[50] *Lilith*, p. 61.
[51] Namely *The Alphabet of Ben Sirach*. A partial English translation of this medieval text can be found in *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature*, ed. by David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky (Skokie: Varda, 2001), pp. 167-202.

This scene is again close to the action of *Le Fantôme*, where the protagonists experiment with imbuing their intercourse with perversions of Catholic ceremony and liturgical incantation. Where transcendent sexuality in *Le Fantôme* is impossible, however, Lilith and Satan seem to (momentarily) achieve a fulfillment of Damase and Hyacinthe's fantasy: 'Et sois spiritualisée, beauté charnelle, et sois réalisé, intellectuel fantôme'.[52] Rather than struggling to unite these opposites like their human counterparts, the infernal couple unite in the 'obscurité du demain', a space where diurnal and nocturnal realms combine. Lilith and Satan's encounter represents an experience of sexual gratification which, like Lilith, has been denied to mankind, an experience untroubled by phenomenological paralysis and dissociated from oppressive contingencies such as reproduction, shame, and mortality.

Gourmont has already deviated liberally from the traditional Lilith sources, and in so doing raises a number of philosophical points. The narratives of the *Zohar* and the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* describe a quarrel between Adam and Lilith. The latter refuses to be subservient, and specifically, to assume the submissive role in sexual intercourse. The reason for Gourmont's variation might be that the original suggests a built-in, objective sexual code on the part of Adam, complete with an innate system of taboos. According to the medieval Jewish texts, the cause of his revulsion is merely taken for granted. Gourmont, however, would rather portray Adam as an allegorical model for the gradual construction of individual experience, a blank slate which is being deliberately encoded according to the biases of a patriarchal order, a regime which also robs him of Lilith, the embodiment of a pure, forbidden experience of sexuality.

In lapsarian time as in the nineteenth century, attempts to govern the sexual instinct proved a comedy of errors. But the critique is not aimed solely at sexual moralists such as Nordau and Krafft-Ebing. Gourmont is largely concerned with the impasse of subjective perception inherent

[52] *Le Fantôme*, p. 25.

in sexual experience. Thus, while Jehovah's clumsy handling of the issue does parody the moraliser, it also mirrors the frustration common to Gourmont's protagonists of the period, namely their struggle to impose ideal forms and intellectual strategies upon the uncontrollable flux of their desires. Jehovah, then, exists somewhere in between the Gourmontian persona and the conservative society to which he is opposed; he represents the ironic closeness between the subjectivist notion of control over the perceived object of desire (as in *Sixtine*) and the positivist idea of control over sexual behavior and thought. Inaccessible to Adam and disobedient to Jehovah, Lilith foils both attempts simultaneously.

Jehovah creates Eve as an obedient, controllable substitute who is ultimately inadequate. In Adam's ennui, Lilith becomes the impossible object which desire seems to reach for, but which cannot be fathomed except in monstrous form, terrifying and unassimilable with the 'diurnal' reasoning self. Earlier, Satan vows to exploit the unformed, shadowy aspects of man, and he does exactly this when he and Lilith eventually take the form of incubus and succubus to seduce the vulnerable couple. Their visitation occurs to remind mankind that the case of sexuality is by no means closed, and just as soon escapes to assure that it never will be.

Phenomenology of the Fall: The Tragic Irony of Sexual Awareness

When Lilith and Satan decide to visit the garden as incubus and succubus, it is immediately after Jehovah has once again perpetuated his order through the creation of Eve from Adam's rib, finally providing a functional aim to the accidental phenomenon of sexuality. Carefully designed to be submissive, Eve is instructed by Adam (as he himself was instructed by Raziel) to conform to the received system. Still, the curiosity which will lead to banishment from paradise grows:

ÈVE: Je t'aime mieux que lui [Jéhovah].

ADAM: Tu dois l'aimer au-dessus de tout, au-dessus de moi.

ÈVE: Je ne le connais pas. Tu es mon Dieu. Mais pourquoi la Lune éclaire-t-elle moins que le Soleil?[53]

As innocent children, Adam and Eve can only ignorantly ponder or parrot the decrees of their father. Without the knowledge of sin, Eve questions why she must divert her affection to Jehovah rather than to Adam, an unknown hierarchy reflected by the sun's superiority to the moon. Quarrels such as the above hint at the tenuousness of Adam and Eve's freedom, but they are nonetheless content with the boundaries which have been set for them. Interestingly, the regulated nature of the garden affords them a limitless experience of sensual pleasure, a 'constante plénitude d'un amour inépuisé. Pas de réveil brutal et déconcertant'.[54] For Gourmont, disillusionment and liberty are often woven into the same fabric. Entragues experiences the adverse effects of intellectual freedom upon erotic and romantic gratification; Salèze from *Le Désarroi*, discussing his relationship to women, admits that 'Savoir, c'est nier'.[55] It is reasonable that this trope would have its counter-image in an intellectual prison which is also sensual paradise. By this logic, even Satan and Lilith, because they are free to exhaust the depths of sexual knowledge, become disillusioned:

LILITH: Tes baisers sont inefficaces, pourquoi? Ni les attouchements de ta main, ni les morsures de tes dents, ni les diaboliques inventions de nos imaginations damnées, rien ne gonfle le désir crevé. La jouissance fuit comme de l'eau par un trou, mes sens sont morts ainsi que des feuilles mortes, ma nature est plus insensible que la glaise dont Jéhovah l'a pétrie... Déchire-moi, que le sang coule sur mes cuisses... Faisons de sanglants repas d'amour... Et toi, rigide Satan de la première heure, toi qui surgissais comme un Dieu sous mes yeux ensorcelés, toi que je croyais pouvoir dévorer éternellement... où es-tu? Le fruit coriace tombe de ma bouche affamée... Ah! Si j'avais eu l'homme... Il m'appartenait... Je le veux...[56]

[53] *Lilith*, p. 72.
[54] *Lilith*, p. 70.
[55] *Le Désarroi*, p. 9.
[56] *Lilith*, pp. 83-84.

This scene recalls Charcot's re-appropriation of the medieval *stigmata diaboli*, which, as Cristina Mazzoni describes, were 'areas of insensitivity on the skin', and 'signs of intercourse with the devil'.[57] Lilith's carnal explorations with Satan have left her sensually calloused. Sterilised anew, she longs for a new sensation of which she is currently incapable: fecundity. The language she uses is indicative of a fertility envy, a vampiric longing for virgin life forces, a hunger for innocence that would renew her capacity for debauchery. As Lilith's 'désir gonflé', her delight which 'fuit comme de l'eau par un trou', suggests a metaphorical womb which has expired, her vain plea to Satan ('Déchire-moi, que le sang coule sur mes cuisses') endows her with a metaphorical broken hymen, a nostalgia for an irretrievable 'première heure'.

Satan and Lilith appear on earth to tempt Adam and Eve to taste the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Here, Gourmont relies heavily on his Rabbinical source texts for the important reason that they were the first to propose the double meaning of the Hebrew word 'yada' (ידע), a root indicating both knowledge and sex.[58] In so doing, Gourmont associates Satan and Lilith – who are already embodiments of sexual knowledge – with the fruit that they offer. When Adam eats, he declares 'Maintenant, je suis fort, je suis grand, je touche aisément le ciel', a reference to the 'orgasmic' description of his first moment on earth ('comme je suis beau, comme je suis vaste! L'immensité de mon être évolue à l'infini: tout cela, c'est moi. Je contiens le ciel et le soleil'). The allusion to this early scene goes further. We recall that Adam's first steps were toward a cherry tree, at which point Raziel intervened to administer the rules of pleasure. Though no direct mention of sexual intercourse is made, this moment of the Fall is the first act of incubacy and succubacy in Gourmont's view. Satan and Lilith have fulfilled their roles as ethereal tempers, at once desired and feared, exerting an invisible power upon their victims.

[57] Cristina Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 25.
[58] See *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis (Bereshit)*, trans. & ed. by H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver (New York: Menorah, 1988), p. 68.

ÈVE: (*Les mamelles gonflées, le ventre ondulant d'une haletante respiration, elle se cambre, fière de la beauté de son sexe, dont elle n'avait encore connu les attraits que voilés par l'innocence*.)

Grown tired of their own depleted pleasure, Satan and Lilith annex themselves to the ecstatic sexual awakening of the terrestrial couple. Gourmont, like many others, associates the Fall with the onset of puberty. His more original idea, however, is to link the biblical narrative of human development to the mythology (both ancient and modern) of incubus and succubus. Successful in his temptation, Satan introduces the seven sins as if counting down to moment of release: 'Gourmandise, paresse ou lâcheté, luxure... Quand nous serons à sept, je m'en irai tranquille.'[59] The conventional sins develop as Adam and Eve begin to quarrel in their new environment about the changes to their bodies and thus their regard for one another. However, Satan adds another crucial aspect to Man's suffering: 'Enfin, – et ceci sera très amusant, – je veillerai comme un ange sur leur enfance polluée, et quand la lignée de Lilith aura dévirilisé la puberté des mâles, je leur donnerai des vierges qui n'auront ouvert qu'en rêve et symboliquement leur jambes pures.'[60] Indeed, Adam and Eve have been 'symbolically' defiled. Satan's vow (as well as his actions) indicate that sexual awareness, rather than intercourse itself, is the Fall which humans will now be doomed to rehearse. Indeed, it is clear that Adam and Eve were far from chaste before his arrival: 'Comme une mer qui battrait son plein pendant toute une nuit, la volupté gonfle et roule dans leurs seins prédestinés les vagues infatigables de l'éternel amour.'[61] This (clearly carnal) 'volupté', then, is not what Adam and Eve have discovered. Gourmont sexualizes Adam and Eve's symbolic childhood not to be merely provocative, but to assert the point that the departure from innocence consists of an idea rather than an action, a framework through which the

[59] *Lilith*, p. 109.
[60] *Lilith*, p. 106.
[61] *Lilith*, p. 96.

untroubled unity of their pre-pubescent sensuality splinters into a series of new identities. In other words, this is the birth of sexual awareness, responsible for such phenomena as shame and envy, but also (and perhaps consequently) for erotic desire and imagination.

Gourmont would later elaborate on the brutality of sexual awareness in his short story 'Péhor', the first of the *Histoires magiques* (1894). This fantastical tragedy imagines the visitation of an incubus upon a young girl, Douceline, at the moment of her own pubescent transformation. Before the arrival of the eponymous demon, Gourmont establishes a similar pre-lapsarian sensual state to what we have seen in *Lilith*. Contained in this is a lack of the sense of shame, and a sensuality enjoyed under an abstract parental authority.

> Nerveuse et pauvre, imaginative et famélique, Douceline fut précocement caresseuse et embrasseuse, amusée de passer ses mains le long de la joue des garçonnets et dans le cou des fillettes qui se laissaient faire comme des chattes. Elle se mettait, à propos de rien, à baiser les mains tricotantes de sa mère, et quand on la reléguait en pénitence sur une chaise, elle jouait à faire claquer ses lèvres sur ses paumes, sur ses bras, sur ses genoux, qu'elle dressait nus l'un après l'autre.[62]

True to her typifying name, Douceline exhibits a diffuse, infantile sexuality characterized by a delight in the sensation of softness. This description also mirrors the early experiences of Adam, who was free to enjoy the voluptuous delights of the garden ('Ces arbres fleuris doivent être doux à l'épiderme!').[63] Unlike *Lilith*, however, concepts such as 'pudeur' and 'vice' figure into the narrator's vocabulary. Douceline does not exist in the mythic space of the earlier play, but rather in the framework of modern sexual norms. Nevertheless, she remains as ignorant of these as Adam and Eve were to the secrets of the Tree of Knowledge. The world of adult propriety, insistent upon administering this classification, is seen to be ironic and arbitrary, dealing out punishment and condemnation for transgressions of which a child is ignorant.

> Telle que les curieuses, elle n'avait aucune pudeur. Comme on la grondait en termes

[62] Remy de Gourmont, 'Péhor', *Histoires magiques* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1894), p. 7.
[63] *Lilith*, p. 40.

> grossièrement ironiques, elle se prit d'une tendresse de contradiction pour le coin méprisé et défendu; les mains suivirent les yeux. Elle garda ce vice toute sa vie, ne s'en confessa jamais, le dissimula avec une effrayante astuce jusque parmi ses crises d'inconscience.[64]

The use of the term 'crises d'inconscience' is suggestive on multiple levels. Her tendency is in the process of being banished to a universal blind spot, successfully hidden from adult supervision, yet opaque to herself as well. The term might also be held in connection to a passage from *Lilith* in which Adam 'finit par s'endormir, et, dans la demi-conscience du premier sommeil, il lui semble qu'une volonté supérieure annihile son cerveau et le replonge dans l'obscurité native'.[65] Gourmont is gesturing once again to that unconstructed territory which is vulnerable to possession. Though I do not intend to define Gourmont's use of the term 'inconscience' here, a point made by Jeremy Stubbs is worth bearing in mind. He argues how late nineteenth-century writers used the word to evoke 'unconsciousness (not being awake), but also lack of prudence, heedlessness, moral irresponsibility'.[66] This would naturally connect to the nocturnal realm explored earlier, being a place associated with sleep and moral subversion.

Douceline undergoes a major change on the day of her First Communion. Her religious initiation is not portrayed as an extension of parental control, but rather a sphere of sensual delight, a vast array of new sensations and images which can be enjoyed without immediate outside suspicion – an enjoyment which can be superficially recognized as piety. All of her newfound enthusiasm is directed at a framed image of Jesus, which she is allowed to select from a host of options.

> D'un Sacré-Cœur piqué par un poignard giclait du sang couleur d'encre rose, et la légende, avilissant une des plus belles métaphores de la théologie mystique, portait: 'Qu'est-ce que le Seigneur peut donner de meilleur à ses enfants que ce vin qui fait germer les vierges?' Le Jésus d'où fusait ce jet de carmin avait une face affectueuse

[64] 'Péhor', pp. 7-8.
[65] *Lilith*, p. 44.
[66] Jeremy Stubbs, 'Between Medicine and Hermeticism', in *Decadence, Symbolism, and the Fin-de-Siècle*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2000), pp. 144-72 (p. 149).

> et encourageante, une robe bleue, historiée de fleurettes d'or, de translucides mains très fines où s'écrasaient en étoile deux petites groseilles: Douceline l'adora tout de suite, lui fit un vœu, écrivit au dos de l'image: 'Je me donne au S.C. de Jésus, car il s'est donné à moi.'[67]

The devotional images appear to Douceline as sensuous rather than austere. As always with Gourmont, however, one is seldom sure where the scathing critique of the Church begins and the exploitation of its eroticism ends. The demon Péhor arrives after a series of sanguinary episodes which expand upon Douceline's affection for the blood of Christ. In the first, she begins to bleed from extended periods of kneeling before the portrait, thanking Jesus for an illness she has developed. By exaggerating the grotesqueness and carnality of Catholic piety, Gourmont underscores the essential perversity of innocence.

> Guérie, elle remercia Jésus des marques blanches qui lui trouaient le front, se livra à de longues éjaculations, à genoux, derrière un mur, sur des pierres aiguës. Ses genoux saignaient: elle baisait les blessures, suçait le sang, se disait: 'C'est le sang de Jésus, puisqu'il m'a donné son cœur.'
> Affaiblie par l'anémie de la fièvre, elle avait pendant des semaines, oublié son vice: les mouvements habituels se recomposèrent dans le sommeil.[68]

Gourmont expresses Douceline's nascent sexuality through the use of innuendo and possible double entendres.[69] Gourmont's tactic is to lay bare the implicit eroticism of Catholic worship as a way of exposing that of childhood, these being two spheres in which it is willfully ignored or obscured. What is important here is that perverse behaviors such as masochism and fetishistic idolatry all occur anterior to the knowledge of sex. Like in Adam and Eve's garden, this sensuality, however violent and perverse, is freely indulged in, untroubled by shame or guilt. This comes to an end when, while masturbating, Douceline retrieves a hand stained with

[67] 'Péhor', p. 9.
[68] 'Péhor', p. 11.
[69] One definition of 'éjaculation' from an 1873 dictionary reads: 'Terme de la vie devote. Nom donné a certaines prières *courtes*…' Thus, 'longues éjaculations' may be a suggestive oxymoron. Emile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (Paris: Hachette, 1873).

menstrual blood. To her, this is an unspeakable degradation which causes her to hide the portrait of Jesus out of embarrassment. Her mother, in response, assures her that it is perfectly normal, a claim of which Douceline is unconvinced. Through this scene, Gourmont emphasizes a challenge he is posing to sexual morality: the innocence of childhood is perverse, whereas the beginnings of normal sexuality are fraught with shame, confusion, and terror.

'Les démons sont des chiens obéissants',[70] Gourmont tells us upon Péhor's arrival, thus suggesting that they are summoned by certain clear conditions. For 'Péhor' as well as *Lilith*, these conditions gravitate around a spontaneous loss of innocence. When Péhor visits Douceline, he replaces her previously abstract love for Jesus' image with a more recognizable form of pleasure:

> Elle le sentait venir, et tout aussitôt des frissons commençaient à voyager le long de sa peau, faiblement, puis nettement localisés […] enfin, une explosion comme de feu d'artifice, un craquement exquis où fuselaient sa cervelle, son épine, ses moelles, ses muqueuses, les pointes de ses seins et toutes ses chairs dépidermées.[71]

Through a stylistic shift from the vague, polymorphous, and suggestive description of Douceline's earlier sensuality to the explicit mode seen here, Gourmont once again suggests that puberty (and the demon it invites) has more to do with a change of terms than of actions.

Where the characters of *Lilith* would be played by real actors, Gourmont takes the opportunity in 'Péhor' to clarify the incorporeal, imagined nature of the demon as he sees it. Péhor is 'invisible et intangible'.[72] Douceline's experience of the demon occurs as a cerebral phenomenon which now accompanies the sensual behavior she always exhibited. Because of the combination of Douceline's fever, her stern Catholic upbringing, and her seemingly oblivious parents, the cause of Péhor's illusory presence is open-ended. Robert Zeigler sees

[70] 'Péhor', p. 12.
[71] 'Péhor', p. 13.
[72] 'Péhor', p. 14.

Douceline's encounter to be 'described as pathology',[73] where Brian Stableford reads the hallucination as a result of repression.[74] What is important for Gourmont, however, is not the exact mental cause of the phenomenon, but rather the extent to which it constitutes a palpable subjective reality. So powerful is Péhor's visitation that Douceline is effectively deflowered. This point becomes exaggerated when she has her first human intercourse: a rape to which she is mentally, and miraculously, immune:

> Elle atteignait quinze ans, lorsque, dans le pâquis où elle gardait la vache de la famille, un colporteur abusa de son sommeil de fille énervée. Ne souffrant pas, amplement déflorée par Péhor dont les imaginations étaient audacieuses, elle laissa faire. Les grimaces de l'homme lui parurent ridicules, et comme il la regardait, redressé, avec des yeux amoureux, elle se leva, éclata de rire, s'éloigna en haussant les épaules.[75]

A scene such as this can be compared to the virgin martyrs of *Le Latin mystique*, who as well laughed in the faces of their abusers because they had already given themselves to an incorporeal spouse. Just as Douceline freely offers herself to her molester, Gourmont translates a fragment on Saint Agatha which reads: 'Mais celle-ci, plus forte que ses tourmenteurs, des hommes, livra ses membres aux flagellations; combien son cœur est valeureux, clairement le montre à tous sa mamelle suppliciée.'[76] Gourmont has simply reversed the religious designation: the Roman torturer has become a traveling bible peddler, and Douceline gives her virginity to Péhor instead of God. While Gourmont does take aim at the gross hypocrisy of the Church, the weapon he uses seems to be taken from its own mystical tradition. The incubus is thus (momentarily) redeemed from its evil connotations by providing a form of spiritual strength akin to that of the female martyrs whom Gourmont frequently celebrated.

As a figment of cerebral love, the demon, like the mystical spouse, represents an

[73] Ziegler, *Asymptote*, p. 216.
[74] Stableford, *Glorious Perversity*, p. 92.
[75] 'Péhor', p. 15.
[76] *Le Latin mystique*, p. 63.

emancipatory dissociation from the material world. As we have repeatedly seen, however, this dissociation is ultimately destructive. For Douceline, this destruction is fatal:

> Elle respira, évanouie presque, les yeux clos, les mains ramant parmi les vagues molles du naufrage, qui emportait la damnée aux abîmes... Un baiser d'excrémentielle purulence s'appliqua sur ses lèvres exactement, et l'âme de Douceline quitta ce monde, bue par les entrailles du démon Péhor.[77]

The cause of Douceline's 'revoltingly anal death',[78] as Birkett rightly calls it, is as mysterious as the demon who consumes her. Its significance, however, is vivid. In deciding that Douceline should perish at a young age, Gourmont exaggerates the annihilating quality of sexual awareness. Following her molestation, Douceline joins the ranks of Gourmont's sexually disenchanted heroes. Her increasingly morbid illness is mirrored by a weakening of her cerebral pleasure. By noticing a group of pregnant women at church, the consequences of carnal sexuality transform the once-blissful Péhor into a monster. Ernest Jones describes the conviction of Sinistrari that Incubi are essentially positive beings, yet who take on a demonic identity if the beholder believes there to be one. A proto-subjectivist interpretation that Gourmont would have likely gleaned, '[Sinistrari] is of the opinion that the essence of sin lay in the belief in the sinfulness of the act committed'.[79] Indeed, a similar change of identity is at work in Douceline's image of Péhor, which has mutated with the knowledge of sexuality's physical dangers.

While Douceline may serve a similar function as Adam in the scheme of Gourmont's demon narratives, her tragedy is also highly gendered. Though Péhor leads her into the same phenomenological quandary of Gourmont's male characters, he exploits the supposed passivity of the young girl to exaggerate its effects. The ruinous acquisition of sexual knowledge for

[77] 'Péhor', p. 19.
[78] Birkett, *Sins of the Fathers*, p. 114.
[79] Ernest Jones, *On the Nightmare* (London: Hogarth, 1931), p. 84.

Adam, like Damase and Entragues, brings with it an imagination which can be channeled into creative production. Setting to work on the *Sefer Yetzirah*,[80] the earliest Jewish mystical text purportedly written by Adam himself (like Entragues does with 'l'Adorant', *Sixtine*'s novel within a novel), Adam introduces the link between worldly estrangement and genius. Douceline, however, seems to anticipate the misogynistic views which Gourmont would develop more directly into the twentieth century. The story may in fact be read as a literal representation of one such statement from *Le Chemin de velours* (1902): 'hors de l'amour, il n'y a point de vie pour la femme.'[81] While a fuller analysis of Gourmont's views toward women will develop in the course of this thesis, this notion does come to bear on female characters as early as Douceline. Birkett, for instance, frequently notes the 'mirror-relationship of men and women' which pervades Gourmont's fiction, which could certainly be applied to 'Péhor'. Indeed, one might expand the metaphor to include a magnifying mirror, for the female trope of a singular, life-or-death sensitivity to love and sexuality is here used to redouble the sufferings of male characters elsewhere.

If the archetype of the demon allowed Gourmont to mobilize his sexual philosophy into contact with factions such as mainstream religion, occultism, and modern science, it also allowed him to retain a certain ambiguity as this philosophy continued to evolve and change. What we find in his demonological fictions is a fatalistic phenomenology of desire which deliberately challenges prescriptive modes of contemporary sexual thought while at the same time foreclosing his own quest for 'impossible transformations'. With the dramatic medium and biblical subject of *Lilith*, Gourmont manages to reenact the primordial conditions which he holds responsible for the Sisyphean frustrations of desire in a mentally-constructed world. By developing the paradox of 'la pensée […] créatrice meurtrière' into a demonic origin myth,

[80] See *Lilith*, p. 155.
[81] Remy de Gourmont, *Le Chemin de velours* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1902), p. 248.

Gourmont begins to come to terms with the destructive nature of the subjectivity which he previously championed as a pretext for ideal creation.

Chapter 4: The Destroyer

> Dans cette fatigue, la conscience s'épuise de sa propre activité, et, à la limite, éprouve le désir de se libérer d'elle-même, dans quelque forme de non-conscience, fût-ce la mort, ou la simple volonté de détruire, pour se confondre enfin avec une possible objectivité.[1]

By aligning phenomenology and demonology, Gourmont locates in the primordial conditions of human nature an incurable paradox at the root of his protagonists' failures: the mind which brings reality into being only does so by fragmenting, denaturing, and driving away that which it tries to grasp. Like Euridice under the gaze of Orpheus, the erotic unity of pre-lapsarian man is banished merely by virtue of entering into the intelligence which paradoxically furnishes our reality. Contrary to the ideals of Entragues and Damase, the thoughts and desires of subjectivity cannot be harnessed to recreate the unity of paradise because, according to Gourmont's idealism as it develops in *Lilith*, the only possible reality for an individual is that of a mind which differentiates, categorizes, names – and thereby negates – its objects into existence. Hence, erotic desire is self-repressing. As soon as desire takes form in the lover's mind as a weave of mental constructs and images, it can only continue to mutilate the unity that is its object, producing the very demons that antagonize it.

This dilemma, in which thought has devolved from salvific creative refuge to destructive fallenness and evil, is echoed in a poem by Jules Laforgue: 'délivrez-nous de la Pensée, /Lèpre originelle, ivresse insensée, /Radeau du Mal et de l'Exil; /Ainsi soit-il.'[2] But where Laforgue directs his desperate plea to the Unconscious, asking it to deliver him from the tyranny of thought,

[1] Schiano-Bennis, *La Renaissance de l'idéalisme*, pp. 12-13.
[2] Jules Laforgue, 'Complainte propitiatoire à l'inconscient', *Poésies complètes* (Paris: Vanier, 1894), p. 12.

Gourmont admits no such solution,[3] no possible return to the undifferentiated sexuality of Adam and Douceline.

In this chapter, we will see how the fatalistic erotic phenomenology developed in the play *Lilith* is imported back into the contemporary setting and first-person subjectivity of the Gourmontian novel. Saturated by *Lilith*'s disenchanting philosophical conclusions, together with its biblical themes of evil and fallenness, *Le Désarroi* introduces a new type of protagonist in response to the impossibility of favorable creation and transformation once espoused by Entragues and Damase: a protagonist who makes a virtue of destruction. If erotic desire *is* the negation of the Edenic unity that it ultimately seeks, *Le Désarroi* asks, then what choice does the lover have but to take cynical pleasure in his own futility? If thought only fragments and occludes the very world that it brings into being, what adventure remains for the thinking subject but to cathartically embrace the havoc he wreaks upon his creation, all the while courting his own annihilation?

Deep connections emerge between *Le Désarroi* and several important essays on idealism written by Gourmont during its conception. To an even greater degree than *Sixtine*, *Le Désarroi* partakes in an intense period of reflection on the meaning of idealism and the greater implications of the world as idea marked by *La Culture des idées* and particularly its essay on the 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme'. This stage in the evolution of Gourmont's thought is a fascinating one as his idealism begins to change shape, as Uitti puts it, 'au fur et à mesure que Gourmont s'éloigne de sa position de défenseur de l'intégrité intellectuelle du symbolisme'.[4] While we have seen how certain Symbolist values and biased appropriations of idealism (cerebral paradise, the subjective creation of beauty, mystical transcendence) have always been destabilized by the erotic drama of Gourmont's fiction, *Le Désarroi* coincides with a critical discourse in which the human

[3] Laforgue derived his positive view of the Unconscious from the philosophy of Hartmann, whereas Gourmont's psychological outlook owes more to Ribot, who viewed the layers of the human psyche as being fraught with instability. To Entragues, 'Ce précis dialecticien [Ribot] me prouve clair que ma personnalité est un accord fragile, qu'une seule fausse note dans tout le clavier peut détruire.' (*Sixtine*, p. 130.).
[4] Uitti, *La Passion littéraire de Remy de Gourmont*, p. 69.

and erotic paradoxes of idealism are addressed more earnestly (partly due, as Uitti suggests, to a looser obligation to aesthetic politics than at the time of *Le Livre des masques*).

Le Désarroi represents only a fragment of a longer project, now lost, which occupied Gourmont for a considerable part of his career. *Le Destructeur*, according to Nicolas Malais, was to be an epic novel of some thirty chapters, a 'sorte de *Divine Comédie* symboliste'. Despite dedicating six years to its creation (1893-1899), Gourmont makes no reference to it in his correspondence, and only a small fraction of its material was published elsewhere in other forms. Several short prose pieces from *D'un pays lointain* may have been adapted from *Le Destructeur*, and other fragments include 'Théâtre muet' from *Le Pèlerin du silence*. These publications, however, do not in themselves give any indication of an earlier provenence, and it was not until Noël Arnaud's 1992 republication of a text called 'Panorama de la Vieille Dame' (originally published in *L'Épreuve littéraire*, May 1895) that Gourmont researchers, namely Christian Buat[5] and Mikaël Lugan, began to investigate further into *Le Destructeur*, eventually unearthing seven additional sections published in *Le Journal* in 1894.

To the best of our knowledge, these serialized chapters are all that remain of *Le Destructeur*. As recently as 2006, however, Buat facilitated another discovery:[6] a short novel entitled *Le Désarroi*, into which Gourmont had condensed his ambitious *Destructeur*. The manuscript, which lay dormant at the Bibliothèque de Rouen, was quickly edited and published by Malais's own Editions du Clown Lyrique the same year.

Written from 1898-1899, *Le Désarroi* retains the central character of its parent novel, Salèze. Though a classic Gourmontian antihero by virtue of his idealist attitudes, Salèze's willful

[5] Founder of www.remydegourmont.org.
[6] According to Buat's own account, 'Gérard Poulouin l'avait découvert et m'en avait parlé, mais vaguement. Plus tard, sachant que des gourmontiens devaient se rendre à Rouen, je leur demandai de voir s'il n'y avait pas moyen de se procurer le texte d'une lettre de Gourmont parue dans le Journal de Rouen. Au passage je leur signalai l'existence de ce qui se révéla être *Le Désarroi*', http://www.remydegourmont.org/de_rg/oeuvres/desarroi/notice.htm [Accessed 27/10/2021].

estrangement from the world manifests itself in an altogether different way. In defiance of external reality, rather than embracing an attitude of subjective creation like Entragues, Salèze adopts a philosophy of destruction; a philosophy literalized by his financing of anarchist terrorist attacks, which culminate in the destruction of the Palais Bourbon and the violent death of 800 people inside. The central event of *Le Désarroi* is not an inward withdrawal, but an outward explosion.

In light of Gourmont's polemical *Joujou patriotisme* and the scandal it provoked, it is easy to imagine why *Le Désarroi* was never published, and perhaps why *Le Destructeur* was never completed on the scale Gourmont originally intended. This hesitance, as Patrick McGuinness describes, was no doubt compounded by the real-world climate of violent attacks in the 1890s, in which 'real anarchists were placing real bombs in real Parisian landmarks. [...] It is a bold move: the fictional presentation of the bombing, far more destructive and powerful than anything that had been carried out in reality by individual anarchists a few years earlier, is unsparing in its detail.'[7]

Though their terrorist narrative was hidden from the 1890s reader, these pieces do disclose a face of the destructive theme most pertinent to this study: the progression of Gourmont's erotic idealism into images of death and terminality. Even in these selective offerings to the public, the figure of the destroyer looms large – not as a bringer of physical destruction, but rather a mind which conceives the mutable nature of love and erotic experience in murderous terms and images. Take, for example, the first *Journal* publication, a piece entitled 'Avant l'amour', being an early version of the opening chapter of *Le Désarroi* (the following passage appears verbatim in both):

> Pour se reprendre et se rejeter dans la nuit, il recula vers le passé, courut après ses crimes et après ses haines, et les ayant saisis à la gorge, il les maintenait sous son regard à genoux devant lui, les yeux blancs, les cheveux troublés, la bouche cave et les dents tremblantes: il avait le pouvoir d'arrêter les larves et de suspendre leur fuite vers le fleuve d'horreur dont elles sont les nymphes. Il les dominait; elles lui

[7] Patrick McGuinness, *Poetry and Radical Politics in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 160.

> appartenaient: elles reconnaissaient leur père.
> Larves, elles avaient été femmes, jolies et vives, douces et gaies, agréables en la complication de leurs robes inventées pour plaire à des regards distraits, et des chevelures arrangées selon les peintures nouvelles et les plus récentes esthétiques. Il évoqua donc au-dessus des têtes épouvantées les faces souriantes des amoureuses, et de chaque morte, comme d'une tombe, surgit une image éternelle et incorruptible.[8]

Though literal violence may constitute the climax and the special intrigue of *Le Destructeur*/*Le Désarroi*, the text's main content, like most of Gourmont's fiction, is its erotic discourse. Salèze's relationship with Élise (originally named Elva in *Le Destructeur*) provides the central narrative, and the novel's erotic and perceptual themes of destruction, as in the above, are every bit as central to Salèze's destroyer persona as his terrorist plot.

In the above passage, we do not find the explosive imagery of the bomb, but of manual strangulation, a pseudonecrophiliac image of the light leaving a woman's eyes and mouth as she is brought to her knees by her lover/killer. In this imagined act of killing, Gourmont invokes the creator/creation paradigm of his earlier fictions – the theme of the love object as a product of the lover, for whom 'le monde, c'est moi' – only now the subjective creator of reality has discovered his equal and opposing capacity to kill that which he has created. But this murder is its own form of creation, giving rise to a tomb-like permanence and monumentality in the mind of the lover, a static 'image éternelle' of the beloved at her most ideal. Moreover, in order to preserve this beauty, Salèze must harvest it in a decadently unnatural fashion. In Salèze's biological analogy of larvae, the natural life-cycle of the love object must be interrupted, artificially suspended at the moment of metamorphosis.

In Greek mythology, nymphs and larvae are completely different creatures – the former being innocent nature spirits in the form of beautiful young girls, the latter being the corrupt ghosts of the restless dead – but Gourmont cleverly conflates these polar images by the mere suggestion

[8] Remy de Gourmont, 'Avant l'amour', *Le Journal*, 16 May 1894, p. 1.

of their entomological namesakes which share a much closer relation to one another. In this wordplay, Gourmont evokes two of his classic motifs: on the one hand, the malevolent spectre of a beautiful woman (a nymph/larva hybrid), and on the other, more subtly, the symbol of the mask (Latin: *larva*).

We have seen a similar image cluster before, notably in Gourmont's early discourse on artistic creation. In *Sixtine*, for instance, the end of love marked by the symbol of the tomb is invoked to describe the process by which life is transformed into, and immortalized by, art:

> Après les tumultuaires divagations de l'amoureux, le romancier venait, artiste ou fossoyeur, qui les recueillait, les attiffait [sic] de la verbalité, comme d'un linceul aux plis chatoyants et avec des soins, du respect, de la tendresse, le couchait dans le caveau sur la porte duquel des lettres d'or disaient: LITTÉRATURE.[9]

The image of the mask also belongs to this constellation of metaphors, as it is the prologue to *Le Livre des masques* that concentrated Entragues's words into a theoretical declaration. The titular mask is a morbid one, for the creation of art implies the 'death' of the real people or events which it exceeds. We recall Gourmont's statement from *Le Livre des masques* that literature is nothing but 'la symbolisation d'une idée au moyen de héros imaginaires'. Note the morbid exchange that makes this possible: 'Les héros, ou les hommes (car chaque homme est un héros, dans sa sphère) ne sont qu'ébauchés par la vie; c'est l'art qui les complète en leur donnant, en échange de leur pauvre âme malade, le trésor d'une immortelle idée'.[10] The aura of death is explicit here. The hero's real-life original passes on from a state of sickness to a state of transcendent eternity. Art, just as in *Sixtine*, is the crypt wherein this 'pauvre âme malade' is made beautiful and eternal.

What is unique, then, about the passage from 'Avant l'amour'/*Le Désarroi* is not the idea of life transformed into image, symbol, or idea, but the attitude in which it is conveyed. Like the literal violence described in the text (the bombing of the Palais Bourbon), the image of the

[9] *Sixtine*, p. 87.
[10] *Le Livre des masques*, p. 9.

strangled women is far more exaggerated in its cruelty than anything in Gourmont's work. Salèze strikes one as the evil twin of the classic Gourmontian protagonist, a dark composite of *Sixtine*'s Entragues, *Lilith*'s Satan, and, inevitably, Gourmont himself in *Le Joujou patriotisme* and other polemics.

Love after *Lilith*: The Cathartic Embrace of Fallenness

Unlike the entombment passage from *Sixtine*, there is little sense of 'tendresse' in Salèze's vision. Where Entragues ceremoniously lays to rest his 'tumultuaires divagations de l'amoureux' in gentle folds of artifice and poetry, Salèze's version is of a very different nature:

> Oui, je les ai tuées, toutes, et peut-être même celles que je ne touchai que de mon désir. Les fleurs se fanent entre mes doigts comme entre deux charbons ardents. Il y a en moi une science maudite qui pulvérise les sphinx pour en faire le poison d'une drogue suprême: quand on l'a bue, on sait ce qu'est la vie, mais on ne vit plus. Savoir, c'est nier. Toutes les roses au mortier! Combien faut-il de tours de poignet pour faire d'une rose un cataplasme? Combien d'heures d'alambic pour mettre en fourrés le jardin de la vie?[11]

Gourmont continues to evoke the aspect of lapsarian myth which frames the acquisition of (sexual) knowledge as a tragic event – one which is infinitely seductive, even inevitable, by virtue of the power it grants. Salèze's phrase 'savoir, c'est nier' is not only a syntactical echo of 'le monde, c'est moi', but a motto that could have just as easily been uttered by Adam reflecting on the nature of his Fall. As we recall from the previous chapter, Gourmont explored the paradoxical transition between states of perception through figures of paradise/banishment and childhood/maturity. In *Lilith*, he dilated upon the iconic, biblical representation of this transition not to assert the moral evils of temptation, but to emphasize the idealism which he sees at the heart of lapsarian myth: because sexual awareness (rather than sex itself) is the forbidden fruit, consciousness and

[11] *Le Désarroi*, p. 9.

perception is the true fulcrum of the human drama. We saw how this same principle is at work in the character of Douceline from 'Péhor', whose coming-of-age consists not in physical but perceptual change. Salèze's 'savoir' pertains to this developmental/lapsarian sense of perceptual knowledge. It is heavily laced with lapsarian language, implying a strong connection to *Lilith* and the myth of the Fall. References to forbidden knowledge ('science maudite'), a primordial garden ('jardin de la vie'), and ultimate temptation ('drogue suprême') accumulate toward the unambiguously biblical symbol of a red fruit:

> Une femme qu'on a aimée et qu'on n'aime plus, n'est-elle pas morte? Songez, ces heures, ces jours et ces nuits d'intimité et d'union, puis le vide ou le mur lorsqu'on étend le bras vers de l'amour, ou bien, ce qui est pire encore, une autre forme de femme qui vous vole vos souvenirs, et qui rit, parce qu'elle se croit chatouillée. N'avez-vous jamais, en rêve, étranglé une voleuse de souvenirs? C'est une grande volupté. Je fis ce rêve, après la mort de Valérie et il me sembla, le meurtre accompli, que je venais de manger un fruit rouge: il m'en restait aux doigts une tache violette.[12]

Gourmont furnishes *Le Désarroi* with the biblical décor of *Lilith* in order to reassert the primordial origins of 'savoir, c'est nier', connecting Salèze's credo to the fundamental acknowledgement that mankind is condemned to a state of phenomenological discordance, an acknowledgement which Gourmont originally expressed in his revised creation myth. Salèze's 'science maudite' is a direct reflection of Adam's original sin: by merely observing a phenomenon (namely, erotic desire), the phenomenon is denatured and fragmented by the construct of ideas and images which govern human perception. Salèze applies this insight not only to his erotic life, but to life itself ('on sait ce qu'est la vie, mais on ne vit plus').

If the quixotic confidence of Entragues's 'le monde, c'est moi' is ultimately extinguished by the pessimistic origin story of *Lilith*, *Le Désarroi* sees the Gourmontian hero reshaped and reborn out of the force of this pessimism; having fully integrating the morbid implications of the idealist insight, he now adopts an attitude of enthusiasm for a destructive ideology which might

[12] *Le Désarroi*, p. 14.

compensate for the lost creative ideology of Entragues. In this vein, Entragues' (attempted) cerebral creation of the love object finds its direct opposite in Salèze's cerebral murder. Just as in *Sixtine*, the protagonist's special power is nothing more than an internalization of the basic principle that the world is his representation (Salèze and Entragues both use vainglorious, prideful language to describe mental feats of which, ironically, every individual is theoretically capable). In short, *Sixtine*'s creation and *Le Désarroi*'s destruction are essentially two possible attitudes toward the same underlying idealist premise: either the subjective nature of the world can be usefully exploited and creatively shaped, or it is wholly ungovernable and treacherous. In *Le Désarroi*, Salèze's bloodlust comes as a form of catharsis in response to the latter interpretation. Where earlier Gourmontian characters delude themselves in a struggle to master the tensions and contradictions which plague erotic fulfilment, Salèze embraces the inevitability of failure by eroticizing it in an act of vengeance. What in earlier novels would have been the tragic loss of the desired woman is reconceptualized in *Le Désarroi* as an intentional, sadistic climax.

Salèze's ecstatic embrace of fallenness is reflected by his embrace of sin in general: his dream is not only lustful and murderous, but also vengeful (retribution against a 'voleuse de souvenirs') and even gluttonous (he begins the novel by comparing women to game birds: 'les oiseaux, on les dépouille, on les caresse, on les mange; les femmes, on les dépouille, on les caresse, on les mange'.)[13] This is further elaborated in a later passage:

> Salèze resta chez lui, afin que cette liaison gardât le charme et les allures d'une bonne fortune ou d'une accidentelle débauche.
> Ce dernier mot appliqué à l'amour lui plaisait particulièrement, car il n'était pas de ceux qui croient à l'innocence naturelle, une beauté naturelle, une intelligence naturelle. De bonnes lectures et de sérieuses méditations lui avaient appris que la tendance normale de l'homme va vers le mal; or l'homme étant fort incliné à l'amour charnel, cet amour ne pouvait être qu'une des formes du mal. Une telle conviction découplait ses plaisirs.
> Il bénissait l'Église catholique pour la sage intervention des docteurs de la foi en ces questions secrètes, jadis laissées au libre examen des poètes érotiques. La création du péché lui semblait le plus grand bienfait dont les hommes eussent jamais été

[13] *Le Désarroi*, p. 7.

> gratifiés.
> Ceux qui ont donné le péché au monde, disait-il à Élise, un soir de printemps, ont mérité du monde autant que ceux qui lui enseignèrent l'usage du sel.[14]

Salèze does not merely accept the concept of sin, but takes voluptuous pleasure in it. This passage contains an important contradiction: Salèze delights in the rhetorical conflation of, on the one hand, sin as an idea developed by Christian thinkers and, on the other, the act of Original Sin itself. This conflation speaks to his embrace of insoluble phenomenological dichotomies. The *awareness* of carnal pleasure (the words, categories, attitudes, and theories we apply to it) is what Salèze is really celebrating when he praises sin; hence, the crimes of Adam and Eve and the saintly writings of the Church doctors participate in the same 'bienfait', drawn together in the same breath of Salèze's admiration. Indeed, as we have already seen in *Lilith*, Adam is the first theologian precisely because his yielding to the temptation of knowledge produced a 'splitting off', an original cleavage creating dichotomies such as thing and concept, noumenon and phenomenon, the world as it is and the world as it should be. This is echoed when Salèze describes how his erotic pleasures are *découplés*, rather than simply extinguished or repressed, by his understanding of sin and evil. The word has an evocative double meaning which its English equivalent lacks: we can imagine that Salèze's pleasures are both 'decoupled' (fragmented according to the lost unity of the Fall) and 'unleashed' like dogs to the chase (*découpler les chiens*). The best response to the fragmented state of the lapsarian world is no longer to pine for lost wholeness, but to embrace the dithyrambic flurry in which pleasures, like hounds, riotously pursue their elusive objects.

Where the archetype of the mystic sought to miraculously reunite the fractured elements of human experience, the destroyer relishes and fosters their discordance. In contrast to many of Gourmont's passages in praise of religious thinkers, Salèze's statement does not aspire to some idealized condition (for instance, asceticism) which might transcend fallenness or at least alleviate

[14] *Le Désarroi*, pp. 38-39.

frustration. Here, the insight of the Church is not a model for self-cultivation or improvement, but rather a delicious paradox to enjoy, and thus Salèze likens it to the salt in his food. His 'débauche' is all the more savoury because of, rather than in spite of, the *pensée* that scrutinizes and vexes it.

Salèze's appraisal of evil is central here. As we have seen in *Les Chevaux de Diomède*, Gourmont describes 'le mal' as 'la pensée déformatrice avec toutes ses tentations, ses labyrinthes d'où nul n'est ressorti, sinon estropié par les luttes, enfiévré par les angoisses intellectuelles.'[15] Evil is that which tempts, but also that which fragments, confuses, and complicates. Evil is also thought itself, the inept creator of the world ('Pensée, créatrice de tout, mais créatrice meurtrière').[16] This lends an important context for interpreting Salèze's paradoxal praise of sin: as sin is merely a concept – an object of thought – it is categorically just as 'evil' as the lapsarian sexual knowledge to which it responds. But evil, as our reading of *Lilith, Les Chevaux de Diomède*, and the text at hand has shown, is used by Gourmont to mean the inherent nature of the world.

Gourmont's conflation of sin and evil may have some timeless theological precedent (in Augustine's definition of sin as 'moral evil', for example), but the totalizing fusion of sin, evil, thought, and genesis – together with an ironic taste both for debauchery and the religious precautions against it – places him in thoroughly modern literary territory.

Baudelairean Themes

(i) From Dualism to Monism

While Gourmont's larger engagement with the concept of sin and evil is diverse and often

[15] *Les Chevaux de Diomède*, p. 249.
[16] *Les Chevaux de Diomède*, p. 249.

enigmatic, the exaggerated impishness of *Le Désarroi*'s protagonist sets him apart and places him in a more identifiable tradition. Charles Baudelaire, no doubt, looms large over Gourmont's constant return to Original Sin as the foundation of all human experience. His influence upon *Le Désarroi*, however, is singular. Salèze, like Baudelaire, sees evil and Original Sin as an omnipresent backdrop, but his embrace of the doctrine excludes any belief in redemption and belies a penchant for wanton pleasures (such as beautiful dead women, a favorite motif of Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe before him).

Fallenness, for Baudelaire, has more to do with the structure of omnipresent evil than an incentive for good. For him, it is a way of understanding the world in terms of fragmentation, and does not shy away from implicating the creator.

> Qu'est-ce que la chûte? [sic]
> Si c'est l'unité devenue dualité, c'est Dieu qui a chûté.
> En d'autres termes, la création ne serait-elle pas la chûte de Dieu?[17]

Baudelaire was deeply influenced by the Catholic philosopher Joseph de Maistre, who adhered to the Augustinian premise that, with the Fall, humankind is essentially and ineluctably sinful. Some redemption, however, can be cultivated through prayer and the doctrine of reversibility. 'De Maistre's doctrine of Original Sin provided Baudelaire above all with a political tool against his century's obsession with progress',[18] writes Damian Catani, but it is just as important to note how the poetic distortions of Baudelaire's enthusiasm for de Maistre eclipsed *any* hope for redemption. 'In [the poem] "La vie antérieure"', Catani continues, 'the prospect of recapturing a harmonious divine unity is fleetingly suggested [...] only for this fragile optimism to be dashed by a deep-seated and unspecified suffering'; in 'Réversibilité', moreover, 'the doctrine of altruistic sacrifice is described, but in disabused, rather than hopeful terms'.[19]

[17] Charles Baudelaire, *Journaux intimes* (Paris: Crès, 1920), p. 67.
[18] Damian Catani, 'Notions of Evil in Baudelaire', *The Modern Language Review*, 102.4 (2007), 990–1007 (p. 994).
[19] Catani, 'Notions of Evil in Baudelaire', p. 994.

In a worldview devoid of the possibility of redemption, the idea that God himself has fallen is not inappropriate, nor is it merely predicated on glib blasphemy or occult exoticism. Like Gourmont, Baudelaire's formulation of a fallen God and a triumphant evil pertains to a philosophical obsession with dichotomies and dualities of all sorts. His famous 'double postulation' that every individual is torn between God and Satan, as Jacques Salvan has shown, is more a derivation of personal binaries (such as 'vaporization and concentration') than it is a basis for 'une sorte de religion invertie'.[20] On the contrary, Salvan outlines the circuitous route by which Baudelaire's dethroning of God leads him back to a fruitful form of acceptance, albeit a pessimistic one:

> Toutefois, si c'est à dieu et non à cher Satan qu'il faut attribuer la chute de l'Un dans le multiple, ce n'est plus la création, c'est dieu lui-même – sa dispersion dans le multiple – qui devient scandale. Ce scandale, il est pourtant dans l'intérêt de la conscience, qui en est le siège, de l'accepter: 'dieu est un scandale – un scandale qui rapporte.'[21] C'est à tort, nous semble-t-il qu'on a voulu voir en cette réflexion une boutade contre les religions établies.[22]

In *Le Désarroi*, Gourmont has completed a similar circuit, and we can profitably read Salèze's appraisal of Original Sin in light of Baudelaire's 'scandale qui rapporte' (the trope of God *as* fallenness). Gourmont still views the impossibility of redemption and wholeness as an invitation, rather than a deterrent, to participate in the ironies of an ill-conceived world.

Though not as Manichean as Baudelaire, Salèze offers his own quasi-theistic figure of the competing forces which govern humankind, similar to Diomède's 'créatrice meurtrière':

> La machine qui travaille là [on humanity] et qui remplit tout l'édifice est de forme humaine, mais si large, si haute, si épaisse, qu'elle semble absurde. Ses pieds écrasent une sanglante boue, du mucus coule de ses babines le long d'une barbe puissante comme une forêt et des éructations de tonnerre sortent d'une gueule qui mugit comme un fleuve. D'une main, elle saisit dans une cuve, nageant parmi la gelée primordiale, un enfantelet, et son autre main maniant un adroit couperet, elle taille la chair vive: des chiens, sous l'établit, boivent le ruisseau de sang. Cependant,

[20] Jacques Salvan, 'Le Sens de la chute dans l'œuvre de Baudelaire', *The French Review*, 34.2 (Dec., 1960), 127-39. (p. 132).
[21] Baudelaire*, Journaux intimes* (Paris: Crès, 1920), p. 27.
[22] Salvan, 'Le Sens de la chute dans l'œuvre de Baudelaire', p. 137.

> à mesure que l'homme taille, l'enfantelet grandit, l'homme lutte contre la croissance invincible; enfin d'un geste de colère il jette l'être sous une presse et une lueur jaillit: c'est l'âme. Alors, souriant, il desserre l'étau, libère l'enfantelet devenu un homme tout pareil à son bourreau et l'ayant chargé d'une chaîne de fer où pend un boulet de plomb, il le lâche dans la vie.[23]

This behemoth torturer god deviates considerably from the God and Satan of Baudelaire's binary, and yet it echoes the contradictory pressure of the poet's formula. As Baudelaire writes: 'Il y a dans tout homme, à toute heure, deux postulations simultanées, l'une vers Dieu, l'autre vers Satan. L'invocation à Dieu, ou spiritualité, est un désir de monter en grade; celle de Satan, ou animalité, est une joie de descendre.'[24] For Baudelaire, one does not oscillate between these two postulations, but holds them simultaneously 'à toute heure'. Gourmont imagines the tension of this bipolarity as that of a forge or a press from which the soul is born. Its operator reminds one of the stubborn Jehovah, his frantic carving redolent of the quarrel and chaos that is baked into Adam's clay. Gourmont rejoins the up/down directionality of Baudelaire's famous 'double postulation', only he emphasizes how the contradictory elements of man's nature resemble a pressure chamber rather than a forking path. There is nothing liberational about man's 'croissance invincible'; it is an uncontrollable phenomenon that only exacerbates his pain and provokes an equal and opposing reaction.

The duelling forces of *Le Désarroi*'s parable cannot be so easily categorized as 'animalité' versus 'spiritualité' (though this pairing is by no means foreign to Gourmont's work). As always in Gourmont, the essential tensions of existence are left open and variable; provisional dichotomies (such as body/mind, self/world, thought/action, even 'spiritualité'/'animalité') occupy the thoughts of his protagonists, only to be left insoluble and inconclusive.

However, if we revisit Baudelaire's binary as a game of multiplicity and unity (rather than up/down or 'spiritualité'/'animalité' as his original text suggests), as Salvan does, a Baudelairian

[23] *Le Désarroi*, p. 82.
[24] Baudelaire, *Journaux intimes*, p. 57.

antecedent to Gourmont's revised cosmology becomes clearer, and we can better contextualize his use of godlike images and the forces they represent. In Salvan's analysis of Baudelaire, the God/Satan binary dissolves just like any in Gourmont's work. As soon as Baudelaire claims that God has fallen 'de l'Un dans le multiple', he consequently blurs the distinction between God and Satan, who once represented unity and multiplicity, respectively. 'La chute du monde est devenue pour lui la chute de Dieu', says Salvan, hence Baudelaire's 'dualisme est en somme devenu un monisme'.[25] Yet this monism is, ironically, fragmentation itself.

Is this not precisely the saga of Gourmontian idealism? We have already seen in Chapter 2 how the image of an evil God arises from the failure of a 'theodical' quest – not for unity as such, but rather for a stable *binary* of the eternal and the transient; a binary capable of recognizing the power of the creative mind as something separate from the world, and thus from the disillusionment it routinely suffers. When Diomède finally curses thought itself as 'créatrice de tout, mais créatrice meurtrière', Gourmont's idealism is revealed to be the monism it always was (the world *is* my representation). *Le Désarroi* flows from this revelation (both theoretically and chronologically) of the tragic simplicity of 'le monde, c'est moi'. Entragues's credo is not negated, only reaffirmed in its strictest sense of the neo-Kantian principle that the world is solely knowable as phenomena. In no way, Diomède discovers, does this mean that 'le monde [...] est mon esclave', for thought and perception are the locus of *all* things, including every form of disenchantment and fragmentation. Like Baudelaire's God, Gourmont's cerebral *moi* can no longer be dissociated from the fragmented, fallen *monde*.

Art and symbol, we recall from Chapters 1 and 2, served as one such way for Gourmont to establish a hierarchical distinction between *moi* and *monde*.[26] Under the universal pessimism of *Le Désarroi*, in which that distinction is lost, even the products of the individual imagination

[25] Salvan, 'Le Sens de la chute dans l'œuvre de Baudelaire', p. 137.
[26] *Sixtine*, p. 58.

lose the transcendent status they once held.

> Salèze n'était ni poète, ni artiste; il n'avait jamais écrit, sinon de personnelles analyses, à peine transposées selon l'instinctif souci, pour un homme délicat, de fuir la grossièreté et le ridicule des aveux directs et des plaintes sincères. Écrivain de métier – et on n'est écrivain que de métier – il eût méprisé d'abord la sincérité, mérite des simples, gloire des miroirs; si, en effet, la littérature a une fonction, cette fonction est le mensonge et, pour bien mentir aux autres, il faut premièrement se mentir à soi-même.[27]

In the past, Gourmont based his Symbolist apologetics on the idea that the symbolic expression of the individual is the key to artistic vitality and variety. Salèze reasserts the old concept that art achieves this through a process of distortion conducted by the individual, but now, all sense of the noble link between art and the self has been sundered. The sentimental language of 'le symbole' as 'une âme rendue visible',[28] in the words of Entragues, has been abandoned if not contradicted entirely. 'Symbole' becomes 'mensonge', and the image of literature is no longer 'LITTÉRATURE', that eternal monument, but merely a disreputable 'métier'. Moreover, just as in Baudelaire, the monism of fragmentation is best expressed in the language of vice and wantonness, evil being synonymous with 'dispersion dans le multiple'. Lying to himself so that he can lie to his reader, even the Gourmontian artist falls from grace to join the debased fraternity of Baudelaire's 'Au lecteur' (Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon frère!).[29]

(ii) 'Une joie de descendre': The Destroyer and the Dandy

However, while the thinking, creative self is no longer eternal, some aristocratic superiority can still be salvaged. Baudelaire is once again invoked when Salèze circuitously reclaims his dignity;

[27] *Le Désarroi*, p. 56.
[28] *Sixtine*, p. 163.
[29] Charles Baudeliare, 'Au lecteur', *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: Lévy, 1868), p. 81.

Though 'artiste' and 'poète' have lost their sheen of the 'éternel', Salèze cannot help but take up the time-honored mantle of the Baudelarian dandy. While the dandy's iconic 'miroir' of vanity is shunned, major aspects of his philosophy are adopted; namely, the notion that a superior life is one that aspires to the disinterested, non-utilitarian condition of art:

> La pratique de la vie exige l'application des mêmes principes; seuls, pensait-il, les naïfs donnent leur opinion; les sages, c'est-à-dire les intelligents, donne une opinion, une de celles qui dorment, en attendant la fête, dans l'inépuisable cave de l'opulente logique. Car, s'il faut vivre, il faut vivre libre, – et quelle plus affreuse prison qu'une conviction, quel plus terrible bagne qu'une croyance?[30]

Now that the spirit of 'l'art primordial et éternel'[31] has ended, its 'symbolisation de l'idée'[32] revealed as mere 'mensonge', the 'moi éternel'[33] must also adopt a new and ironic guise. The individual conscience still 'contient toutes les formes'[34] of ideas, but as these ideas no longer serve the higher ('eternal') conception of art, they only constitute a decadent surplus. Salèze likens them to bottles in a well-stocked cellar, waiting to be selected by a scintillating host whose venue is not the sombre ceremony of 'LITTÉRATURE' but the more cynical realm of wit and intoxication.

An agent of experience rather than creation, Salèze is also the only one of Gourmont's heroes to disclose his own financial wealth (which, we are told, he uses to finance terrorists). Wealthy, blasé, and sardonically intellectual, Salèze replaces the sacred Gourmontian bond between art and the self with the cultivated contrarianism of the Baudelairean dandy, who uses the 'supériorité aristocratique de son esprit' as a means of provocatively engaging with the external world. Without a stable art/self axis to shelter them, aesthetic values (just like ideas and opinions) are redeployed as a social attitude or persona:

> J'ai des opinions esthétiques, c'est-à-dire des goûts: je n'ai pas d'opinions morales, si on appelle morale la soumission à des règles unanimes. Ne craignez rien et ne craignez pas mon jugement. Je vous dirai si votre aventure me paraît belle ou laide,

[30] *Le Désarroi*, pp. 56-57.
[31] *Le Livre des masques*, p. 9.
[32] *Le Livre des masques*, p. 9.
[33] *Sixtine*, p. 59
[34] *Sixtine*, p. 59.

blanche ou noire, verte ou rouge, et voilà tout.[35]

Even aesthetic theory has moved from the self, where once it harmoniously aided in artistic creation, to the exterior, relational world, where it mostly negates and destroys. Earlier, Salèze mentions a writer's duty to his readership (as Entragues never would), but that duty is simply to perpetuate corruption. The libertine association between destruction, pleasure, and freedom is continued when this principle is applied to 'la pratique de la vie', in which a 'fête' of lies is superior to a 'bagne' of sincerity. The pleasures of decadence and decline are as present in Salèze as they are in Baudelaire's dandy, but with one important difference: where Baudelaire's dandy embodies the decadent beauty of 'les débris de grandes civilisations disparues', the Gourmontian destroyer embodies the breakdown of the Symbolist-idealist myth of unbridled cerebral control. The *moi* of the Baudelairian dandy revolts and rejoices because it has been separated from an aristocratic age; the *moi* of the Gourmontian destroyer does so because it has been separated from the aristocracy of the 'moi éternel'.

For Baudelaire, as Françoise Meltzer claims, '[t]he joy of descent is often a kind of embrace-your-fate'.[36] This *amor fati* finds expression in *Le Désarroi*, and Gourmont does not fail to credit Baudelaire in the process: 'Les gens, après tout, ne doivent *se réaliser que selon leur nature*',[37] Salèze says to Élise before reaching the iconically Baudelairian conclusion (see 'Enivrez-vous') that '[o]n s'enivre de ce qu'on peut: Il faut s'enivrer, voilà l'essentiel.'[38] The joys of intoxication and degeneracy constitute a fulfilment of fate – one which varies according to an individual's nature (for Baudelaire as well, drunkenness is a matter of preference: 'De vin, de poésie ou de vertu, à votre guise'[39]) – but which nonetheless registers the decadent trajectory of

[35] *Le Désarroi*, p. 34.
[36] Françoise Meltzer, *Seeing Double: Baudelaire's Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 27.
[37] *Le Désarroi*, p. 46. Gourmont's emphasis.
[38] *Le Désarroi*, p. 46.
[39] Charles Baudelaire, 'Enivrez-vous', *Le Spleen de Paris* (Paris: Les Bibliophiles Franco-Suisses, 1940), p. 143.

humankind.

Towards a 'Vie de relation': 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme'

The atmosphere of *Le Désarroi*'s fatalism owes much to the decadent groundwork laid by Baudelaire. But for Gourmont, as I have suggested, its locus is not the decay of civilization or culture *per se*, but the degeneration of a certain idealist presupposition: that the *moi* who thinks the world into being is infinite and eternal. By what route does the idealist disabuse himself of this illusion? And secondly, what is the role of eros in this disillusionment?

Among Gourmont's essays, 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme' stands apart in relevance and intertextuality to *Le Désarroi*/*Le Destructeur*. Moreover, it is curious to note its publication history: it first appeared in the Mercure de France in 1894, a year after *Le Destructeur*'s conception, then reappeared in *La Culture des idées* (1900), a year after *Le Désarroi*'s completion. In it, Gourmont revisits his understanding of idealism in order to explore certain anti-social abuses of the theory, which he characterizes as 'néronisme', 'despotisme', and 'l'anarchie'.[40] At the root of these consequences, he explains, is the very same misconception of the infinite 'moi éternel'. Idealism becomes tyrannical when the subject chooses to deny a central irony: while 'le monde n'est pour moi qu'une représentation mentale' and 'l'objet n'est perçu par moi que comme partie de moi',[41] this *moi* is nevertheless limited by its mirror relationship with the external world, on which it is entirely dependent:

> L'arbre n'existe que parce que je le pense; pour la pensée hypothétique que je pressens et que je veux bien admettre, douloureusement, au-delà de mon domaine, je suis une sorte d'arbre et je n'existe qu'autant que cette pensée me pense.[42]

[40] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', p. 262.
[41] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', p. 266.
[42] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', p. 270.

The familiar Schopenhauerian tenets of idealism carry on unchanged: the subject thinks the object into being, he projects himself onto the world, and what he perceives is merely that self which is projected. But in 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', externality itself acquires an important reciprocal identity. The projected world-as-representation is no longer a slave (as Entragues believed), but rather a sort of 'homunculus', a 'brother' whom the self affirms, but who affirms the self in turn.

Gourmont adopts a new vocabulary of symbols for the self and the world. Among these are Castor and Pollux, the Gemini twins of Greek myth. When Castor is slain by Idas, Zeus gives his son Pollux the choice between remaining immortal while his mortal brother dies, or else share half of his immortality with his brother on the condition that he also share Castor's death by forever trading places with him between Olympus and Hades. He chooses the latter, a gesture which Gourmont interprets as an idealist allegory:

> 'Pour être pensé, il faut donc que je me nie moi-même, – mais je retrouverai dans l'autre pensée l'image de ma propre négation renversée et redevenue positive: je vis et je suis en celui qui me pense.' Voilà pourquoi Pollux partagea son immortalité avec son frère mortel.[43]

The self and the world create one another through a process of mutual negation and affirmation. The destructive qualities of idealism are paradoxical and twofold: firstly, there is the humbling recognition that one's self is a product of the external (or externalized) world which, though unknowable, includes the thoughts of others. Secondly, because the external world 'n'est rien que ma pensée, quand je le pense', the self's engagement with the world is always limited, always confined and tormented by the abstract mechanisms of one's own thought.

> Me voilà donc limité par mon hypothèse, c'est-à-dire par moi-même, et je reconnais, cette fois indubitablement, que je ne puis pas ne pas me limiter, car, dès que je pense, je pose l'hypothèse de la pensée. Me voilà donc limité par ma propre pensée, et plus je pense plus je me limite, plus je crée d'obstacles au développement de mon primordial absolutisme; devenue pareille à l'œil à facettes d'une mouche, ma pensée

[43] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', p. 270.

> multiplie les ennemis de son unité et j'ai devant moi la formidable armée des Autres. Mais que l'ennemi soit un ou multiple, il gêne également ma liberté, et, m'ayant forcé à le concevoir, il me force à 'entrer en pourparlers' avec lui.[44]

Gourmont captures the paradox of self/world relations by oscillating between wildly different metaphors: on the one hand, we are given the loving, fraternal story of Castor and Pollux, and on the other, the paranoid fly who sees the world as a kaleidoscope of predators (recalling Diomède's lament against thought: 'les yeux, la risée de la vie').[45] The effect, summarized by the last lines of the above, is a pessimistic one. The self has no choice but to contend with the world to which it is phenomenologically shackled.

In its second chapter, 'Vie de relation', Gourmont's essay poses a slightly different question: what if the proverbial Pollux were to deny his brother by selfishly guarding his immortality? What becomes of the mind that forsakes its relation to the world? To explore this question, Gourmont turns to a favorite myth among the Symbolists, that of Narcissus and Echo. Narcissus' water reflection is 'le lac de la pensée extérieure', '[l]a pensée d'autrui'[46] on which his existence depends – the externality which reflects and creates the self. Echo is the embodiment of this reflective, external landscape. Like the lake, she is 'la pensée en laquelle il peut vivre', the auditory equivalent of the visual reflection; hence, 'il la nie et il meurt'.[47] Without the reflection of the external world, 'l'image de ma propre négation' has no means of reversal to the positive.

The allegory of Narcissus and Echo is the most frequently cited section of Gourmont's essay probably for how it uses 'the favorite symbol of Valéry, Gide, and Mauclair'[48] to demonstrate the limitations of the pure subjectivism it emblematized at various points for such

[44] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', p. 269.
[45] *Les Chevaux de Diomède*, p. 249.
[46] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', pp. 271-72.
[47] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', p. 272.
[48] Steven Zalman Levine, *Monet, Narcissus, and Self-Reflection* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 170.

writers.[49] It does this by carrying Gourmont's argument from the general to the specific. More than merely embracing a vague 'external world', Gourmont's use of the myth stresses the need for a 'vie de relation', not just with the world, but with others. For Gide, in his *Traité du Narcisse* (1892), Narcissus is exalted for adoring his own image because it represents a Truth to be eternally sought via its symbolic form: '[Narcisse] se penche sur les symboles, et silencieux descend profondément au cœur des choses'.[50] For Gourmont, however, there is no Platonic noumena, no underlying 'Forme véritable'[51] to legitimize the eternal self-longing of Narcissus. Quite the contrary, if such a thing as 'primordial absolutisme' exists, thought only hinders it. The mirror of an external consciousness is needed: without 'une femme qui fait semblant d'écouter', Gourmont's Narcissus 's'épandrait moins s'il n'avait pour confidents que les arbres de la forêt, ou Mnémosyne [memory], plâtre pourtant indulgent'.[52]

But, if both are merely reflective, how is the nymph Echo any more vital to Narcissus than his tranquil pool? As the existence of other selves is only hypothetical, Gourmont cannot explain their importance empirically. In the first chapter of the essay, the logic of idealism enables him to make a general case for 'the externality of self-constitution'[53] (figured by Narcissus's lake), but the specific case for human relationship (symbolized by Echo) has no basis beyond the metaphor itself.

Gourmont forewarns the reader of this possible lapse in logic by placing his essay under the heading 'Ironies et Paradoxes', and spends much of its introduction discussing 'l'absurde besoin de logique qui nous tyrannise'.[54] The myth of Narcissus *symbolically* confirms for him that

[49] See, for instance, Jacquod's section on Gourmont's essay in *Le Roman Symboliste* (pp. 174- 76). Elsewhere, it is often studied alongside *fin-de-siècle* and modernist representations of Narcissus more generally. See Steven Zalman Levine, *Monet, Narcissus, and Self-Reflection* (Chapter 13).
[50] André Gide, *Le Traité du Narcisse*, ed. by Réjean Robidoux (Ottowa: University of Ottowa Press, 1978), p. 118.
[51] Gide, *Le Traité du Narcisse*, p. 118.
[52] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', p. 272.
[53] Levine, *Monet, Narcissus, and Self-Reflection*, p. 170.
[54] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', p. 263.

a certain 'vie de relation' can prevent idealism from devolving into 'despotisme' or 'l'anarchie',[55] but admits (in an almost Salèzian fashion) that '[o]n trouvera peut-être [...] que je me contredis; mais les jugements, quoique j'aie besoin, autant que nul autre, de la sympathie humaine, me troublent peu'.[56]

Declining to use straight logic to prove the idealist need for human relationship, Gourmont elects instead to paint his argument in the colours of eroticism, aided by myth and symbol, to pick up where logic leaves off:[57]

> Je me connais et je m'affirme; je suis, car je me pense, et le monde extérieur où je rencontre ce frère n'est autre chose, je le sais, que ma pensée même hypothétiquement extériorisée. Mais si ce frère gravite autour de mon désir, moi aussi, particule de *son* désir, je gravite autour de *son* aimant; le monde dont je fais partie n'existe qu'en lui, – et, relativement à sa pensée, je dépends de sa pensée: il me crée et il m'annihile, il me conçoit et il me nie, il m'écrit et il m'efface, il m'illumine et il m'enténèbre.[58]

Terms like 'désir' and the etymologically suggestive 'aimant' enable Gourmont to transpose his register and gradually advance the erotic theme (in lieu of a logical argument) – from the external world, then to fellowship ('frère' / Castor and Pollux), then, eventually, to erotic dynamics. After rhetorically establishing erotic desire's centrality, Echo is no longer just a spurned reflection, but a spurned lover with her own (hypothetical) will, and her own capacity to create and destroy the subject (Narcissus) because he is also her object. Thus, the destructive (as well as creative) aspects of idealism, like those of *Le Désarroi*, become entangled with the dynamics of the erotic life. The subject only exists in the 'désir' of the hypothetical object and, when desire ceases, so does the subject – an idea which echoes Salèze's statement that 'je les ai tuées, toutes, et peut-être même

[55] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', p. 262.
[56] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', p. 263.
[57] As Burne echoes, 'obvious facts are often spelled out, while the most complex ideas are left tantalizingly in midair, undeveloped, unexplained, or couched in an elusive bit of poetic imagery. This, according to Gourmont's view of things, is as it should be.' Introduction to *Selected Writings of Remy de Gourmont*, pp. 6-7.
[58] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', p. 268.

celles que je ne touchai que de mon *désir*'.[59]

From *Destructeur* to *Désarroi*

Gourmont's 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme' attempts to qualify an earlier essay on idealism: 'L'Idéalisme' (1893), published a year before 'Dernière conséquence' first appeared in 1894. It responds to one statement in particular:

> L'idéalisme est une doctrine immorale et désespérante; anti-sociale et anti-humaine, – et pour cela l'idéalisme est une doctrine très recommandable, en un temps où il s'agit non de conserver, mais de détruire.'[60]

While 'Dernière conséquence' seems at first to withdraw this sardonic celebration of immorality, adversity, and destruction by proposing a mediatory 'vie de relation', the interplay between the two essays cannot be reduced to this.

One reason why 'Dernière conséquence' was re-published in *La Culture des idées* (aside, perhaps, from its proximity to *Le Désarroi*) is that it hazards a 'dissociation' between idealism and such concepts as destruction, negation, and various forms of social immorality ('la dissociation des idées' providing the overarching method of *La Culture des idées*). In 'Dernière conséquence', Gourmont does not simply retract his praise of idealist destruction; he philosophically interrogates it. He takes the idea of 'détruire' from 'L'Idéalisme' and breaks it down into its myriad forms – usually, 'nier' is used as a more precise, less imposing term, but the descriptive variations 'annihiler', 'effacer', and 'enténébrer' are also used.

This theoretical movement from 'détruire' to 'nier' (and other variants) echoes the creative movement from the title *Le Destructeur* to *Le Désarroi*. As I will discuss momentarily, Gourmont even removes a direct mention of 'destructeur' and 'détruit' from the final text of *Le Désarroi*.

[59] My italics
[60] 'L'Idéalisme', p. 12.

The reason, I argue, is the same as in his essays on idealism: the best way for Gourmont to address idealism's relation to destruction is through the dissociation of ideas. His aim is not to abandon the term 'détruire', but to atomize and dissect it.

'Nier' is not interchangeable with 'détruire', but it does help to clarify what 'détruire' could possibly mean in a phenomenological context. I stated earlier that there are two interwoven sides to the negative/destructive discourse of 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme': firstly, the hypothesis that the subject's existence depends upon the mind of another ('il me conçoit et il me *nie*'), and secondly, that the subject's own mind is infinitely self-limiting ('plus je pense plus je me limite'). Gourmont seeks to mediate the latter by striking a compromise with the former. Just like how Pollux 'compromises' his immortality by agreeing to share his brother's sentence in Hades, Gourmont gives up the vain enticement of the 'moi éternel' in favor of the eroticized exchange of creation and negation which characterizes the 'vie de relation'. Without this relational element, the mind, like Narcissus, limits itself into oblivion:

> L'Intelligence absolue pense dans la solitude absolue de l'Infini, et sa pensée œuvre la tapisserie que nous sommes [...] Pour l'intelligence limitée, les conditions de la pensée sont toutes différentes; elle a besoin de l'excitation du choc extérieur. Réduite à soi, c'est le prisonnier au secret. Dans ce cas, la pensée se résorbe et, ne vivant plus qu'autosubstantiellement, se dévore elle-même et se résout en la non-pensée.[61]

This ultimate self-devouring is quite different from the necessary self-denial of Pollux and the 'vie de relation'. Rather, it is what happens when self-denial is flippantly refused. We recall Gourmont's statement (also from *La Culture des idées*) in which the divine love of the mystic 'c'est l'intelligence s'adorant soi-même dans l'idée infinie qu'elle se fait d'elle-même'.[62] But this mystical condition, as we have seen, is an impossible ideal (akin to '[l'i]ntelligence absolue'), and it is implied that 'l'intelligence limitée' is basic to the human condition. Gourmont provides a footnote with the vivid example of Ugolino della Gherardesca, the Italian nobleman famously

[61] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', p. 271.
[62] 'La dissociation des idées', p. 87.

portrayed in Dante's *Divine Comedy* and who indirectly features in *Sixtine* as the inspiration for Entragues's Guido della Preda character in 'L'Adorant'. 'Prisonnier, séparé de la source de l'activité mentale', Gourmont writes, 'il dévore ses enfants, – c'est-à-dire qu'il se dévore lui-même, qu'il dévore ses propres pensées'.[63] Assuming that he is cursed with an 'intelligence limitée', the fate of the narcissistic idealist is to consume himself. This metaphor of eating (and being eaten) surfaces time and again in Gourmont. Diomède, for example, is named after the mythological Diomedes, fed by Heracles to his own man-eating horses. In *Le Désarroi*, Salèze describes how the women he murders (with his mind) are devoured: 'les femmes, on les dépouille, on les caresse, *on les mange*.'[64] 'Avant l'amour', the aforementioned *Journal* passage from *Le Destructeur*, goes into greater detail than its corresponding chapter in *Le Désarroi*. After his 'les femmes [...] on les mange' statement, when Salèze meditates on a mysterious 'Valérie au nom de jadis', Gourmont writes:

> Du spectre [Valérie], un murmure de syllabes monta vers Salèze, perceptible pour lui seul; ou bien, il lut ceci sur les lèvres de la vision: 'Le destructeur sera détruit. Elva [Élise]…'[65]

The archetype of the destroyer, for whom 'savoir, c'est nier', understands to a prophetic and fatalistic degree that his idealism is not only destructive, but self-destructive. However, this destructive capacity remains cryptic – it is unclear whether Élise is the cause of Salèze's eventual destruction or the salvation of it. Salèze, like Gourmont in the idealism essays, can forever speculate with myths and metaphors, but in Valérie's silent words there looms an ambiguous threat of some ultimate destruction which will overcome the mind and expose the futility of its efforts to understand. Valérie's lips erotically symbolize the trap which the mind lays for itself simply by thinking. A cerebral vision, Valérie is the 'ennemie' thought in Gourmont's fly metaphor; a self-

[63] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', p. 271.
[64] *Le Désarroi*, p. 7. My italics.
[65] 'Avant l'amour', p. 1.

exacerbating struggle, a solution which is also the problem. She is evoked only to herald the destruction of the mind that summons her. At the same time, as an object of perception, she suggests the possibility of a 'vie de relation', the reflective exchange of self-denial for self-realization explored in 'Dernière conséquence'. The lover, as always, is Gourmont's figure for the thought-projection that asks to be reckoned with: 'il me force à "entrer en pourparlers" avec lui.'.[66] She is only a cerebral memory, but she intones the name of Elva [Élise], a flesh-and-blood woman, thus forcing Salèze to contend with the consciousness of another.

The words 'Le destructeur sera détruit' are a reminder that all roads lead to some form of destruction. The idealist either negates himself by accepting the 'vie de relation', or devours himself by rejecting it. But, I argue, there is a reason why these lines were omitted from the final text, and why the title of the novel changed from *Le Destructeur* to *Le Désarroi*: 'destruction' is too conclusive, too empirical a term to encapsulate the matrix of destructive qualities posed in the text and the thought that surrounds it. The erotic interplay of negation and affirmation ('vie de relation'), the notion that 'savoir, c'est nier', the self-consumption of the narcissistic mind, and, as we shall see, the physical destruction of the Palais Bourbon, cannot be unified and understood by a single verb like *détruire*. Rather, this ambiguous cluster of idealist 'consequences' is best defined in terms of chaos and confusion: as *désarroi*.

The Destroyer as Dionysian Pessimist

In addition to Baudelarian themes, there is a strong Nietzschean current to much of what we have already discussed. Gourmont's shift from the self-isolating 'moi éternel' to the more relational, world-engaging, and chaotic personality behind 'Dernière conséquence' and *Le Désarroi* strongly evokes Nietzsche's own reaction against the Schopenhauerian spirit of ascetic renunciation.

[66] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme'. p. 269.

Without refuting '[t]he animating principle of pessimism [...] that time is an unshakable burden for human beings because it leads to the ultimate destruction of all things – and that this fate belies any principle of order that may, on the surface, appear to guide the course of events',[67] Nietzsche famously reversed Schopenhauer's 'conclusion that pessimism must issue in resignation' into a conclusion that pessimism 'leads to spirited activity'.[68] Late in his life, Nietzsche adopted the term 'Dionysian pessimism' to describe his outlook, and the 'Dionysian' theme of his discourse offers an illuminating context for Gourmont's own rejection of the ascetic, renunciatory strain of idealism. Though a full look at Nietzsche's connection to Gourmont is beyond the scope of the present study,[69] a few observations will help in understanding how the developments in Gourmont's philosophy inform his themes of erotic desire and (as) destruction in *Le Désarroi.*

Nietzsche is mentioned by name in 'Dernière conséquence'. After suggesting the merits of the 'vie de relation', Gourmont uses Nietzsche (whom he considers an idealist) to personify its tyrannical manifestation:

> Nietzsche, le négrier de l'idéalisme, le prototype du néronisme mental, réserve, après toutes les destructions, une caste d'esclaves sur laquelle le moi du génie peut se prouver sa propre existence en exerçant d'ingénieuses cruautés. Lui aussi veut qu'on le connaisse et que l'on approuve sa gloire d'être Frédéric Nietzsche, – et Nietzsche a raison.[70]

But Nietzsche, he concludes, is justified in his cruelty. He is compared to a 'Narcisse raisonnable' who 'ne s'inquiéterait même pas des reflets qui dorment dans les sources',[71] who seeks neither equilibrium in the relational world, nor isolation in the interior world, but his own version of power and glory. Despite mentioning him at the end of 'Dernière conséquence', Gourmont's

[67] Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 168.
[68] Dienstag, *Pessimism*, p. 166.
[69] For an overview of Gourmont's considerable link to Nietzsche, see John McCormick, 'The Concept of Decadence: Remy de Gourmont, Nietzsche, and Some Others', in *Carrefour de Cultures*, ed. Antoine Régis (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1993), 17-22.
[70] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', p. 273.
[71] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', pp. 272-273.

intention here is not to present Nietzsche as the final consequence of a certain idealist mode, but as merely *one* of innumerable variations. After all:

> Pensé par les autres, le moi acquiert une conscience nouvelle et plus forte, et multipliée selon son identité essentielle [...] il n'y a pas deux individus identiques; les miroirs sont bons ou mauvais, – et encore le miroir n'absorbe et ne réfléchit qu'une manière d'être et non l'être en soi.[72]

With Nietzsche as its reference point, the 'vie de relation' is stripped of any moral or egalitarian overtones and presented merely as an organ of necessary change, strength, and variety. While Nietzsche's philosophy has little to say about an idealist 'vie de relation' as Gourmont conceives of it, Nietzsche's presence is strongly felt in the way that Gourmont finally arrives at an amoral and wholly individual form of self-transformation and self-actualization, like 'the Will to Power'. Nietzsche's 'Will to Power', like Gourmont's 'vie de relation', is predicated on the insight that 'there is no grand unity in which the individual could immerse himself'.[73] This concept is even weaponized against Gide when Gourmont writes that idealism, in its infinite variety of personal applications, 'ne va pas [...] à ratifier la baroque loi du nombre',[74] a rebuttal to Gide's *Traité du Narcisse* and its insistence upon some 'intime Nombre harmonieux',[75] a perfect inner self which lay just beneath the surface of Narcissus' reflection. To Nietzsche, ideals of selfhood are conceived in terms of constant becoming, variation, and flux rather than unity and harmony. Just as Gourmont rejects Gide's narcissistic mirror-gazing in 'Dernière conséquence', Nietzsche frames the Will to Power as a reaching *beyond* rather than *within*, 'for thy true being lies not deeply hidden in thee, but an infinite height above thee, or at least above that which thou dost commonly take to be thyself'.[76] Gourmont's new insistence upon the externality of selfhood could

[72] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', pp. 274-275.
[73] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, *Complete Works*, vol. XIV, ed. Oscar Levy, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (London: T. N. Foulis, 1914), p. 12.
[74] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', p. 274.
[75] Gide, *Le Traité du Narcisse*, p. 118.
[76] Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator, Complete Works*, vol. V, ed. Oscar Levy, trans. Adrian Collins (New York: Macmillan, 1911), p. 107.

have certainly been galvanized by Nietzsche's attitude in this regard.

The 'Dernière conséquence' was written early in Gourmont's familiarity with Nietzsche, as he admits in a footnote to the second publication,[77] but later writings, such as 'La mort de Nietzsche' in 1904 and innumerable references in his *Épilogues* (articles for the *Mercure de France* later compiled from 1903-1905), show a considerable engagement with Nietzsche's work by the start of the twentieth century. Thus, if 'Dernière conséquence' heralded the Nietzschean trajectory of Gourmont's idealism, *Le Destructeur/Le Désarroi* developed it.

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche addresses the role played by destruction in his own 'Dionysian' approach to the limitations of existence: 'the Dionysian God and man,' he writes, 'may not only allow himself the spectacle of the horrible and questionable, but even the fearful deed itself, and all the luxury of destruction, disorganisation and negation'.[78] The Dionysian pleasures of destruction and chaos are in fact a creative, life-affirming response to the limitations of existence; they are the 'consequence of the overflowing plentitude of procreative, fructifying power, which can convert every desert into a luxuriant orchard.'[79]

The link between Dionysus, destruction, and pessimism is one that originates in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where Nietzsche attributed the genius of pre-Socratic Greek philosophy and tragic theater to its dominant character, the suffering, dismembered god who embodies intoxication and flux out of 'an understanding of the primordial chaos of the world'.[80] Where Dionysus is concerned, destruction is 'healthy and recuperative',[81] and 'brings about an extraction of the most vital' (KGW 8:1:108). To Nietzsche, thought should be an affective domain; thus destruction – even the theoretical destruction of old ideas – is not only 'healthy', but spirited, comparable to the

[77] 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', pp. 273-274. 'L'auteur ne change rien à ce paragraphe où apparaît son ignorance d'alors touchant Nietzsche. Mais cette ignorance même est bonne à constater, à cause du parallélisme de certaines idées. Plus d'un esprit libre et logique de ce temps a relu dans Nietzsche telle de ses pensées.'
[78] Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, *Complete Works*, vol. X, ed. Oscar Levy, trans. Thomas Common (New York: Macmillan, 1924), p. 333.
[79] Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, p. 333.
[80] Dienstag, *Pessimism*, p. 172.
[81] Dienstag, *Pessimism*, p. 181.

emotional transports of the dithyramb.

Salèze's motif of 'savoir, c'est nier' takes on a richer meaning in this context: when one has known (as Dionysus knew) the 'primordial chaos of the world', one must respond with a spirit of joyful destructiveness, 'extracting' vitality from that which one destroys.

> C'est peu de jouir, si l'on n'a pas la conscience totale de sa jouissance. Il faut que la sensation soit intellectuelle; cela seul donne quelque fièvre à la vie en nous incitant vers de nouveaux plaisirs, car comprendre, c'est détruire. Ce que nous comprenons ne nous intéresse plus; nous le rejetons au tas des choses mortes. Comprendre, c'est tuer. L'intelligence se nourrit de bêtes vivantes qu'elle laisse tomber, dès qu'elle en a sucé le sang. Aimons tout, comprenons tout, détruisons tout.[82]

Salèze's prescription of 'la conscience totale' has less to do with *Sixtine*-esque cerebrality than it does with the dance of destruction and renewal that characterizes the orgiastic joy of Dionysian becoming. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche describes the central energy of his book as that of

> a 'God', if you will, but certainly only an altogether thoughtless and unmoral artist-God, who, in construction as in destruction, in good as in evil, desires to become conscious of his own equable joy [*Lust*] and sovereign glory; who, in creating worlds, frees himself from the anguish of fullness and overfullness.[83]

Like Salèze, Nietzsche's metaphorical god wants to become conscious of his joy in order to expend it. This consciousness, like Salèze's own 'connaissance', is destructive in that it continually purges itself of the old to make way for new 'overfullness'.

Though Gourmont would later criticize Nietzsche for his ignorance of women and love,[84] he could have easily extrapolated a broader erotic significance from Nietzsche's 'Dionysian' alternative to Schopenhauerian self-renunciation. Dionysian man reaches beyond himself, embracing both agony and ecstasy in a life-long process of striving. But, because nothing is eternal, the object of his embrace is not a fixed ideal, but rather an indeterminate series of thoughts,

[82] *Le Désarroi*, p. 66.
[83] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Complete Works*, vol. I, ed. Oscar Levy, trans. WM. A. Haussmann (New York: Macmillan: 1923), p. 8. Original italics removed.
[84] See Gourmont, 'Nietzsche et l'Amour', *Promenades littéraires*, vol I, pp. 89-95.

experiences, and objects to be repeatedly desired, consumed, and then replaced. Moreover, Gourmont's 'jouissance' (a word later adopted by Lacan to indicate a transgressive condition of pleasure exceeding the Freudean 'pleasure principle') echoes the ambiguous eroticism of Nietzsche's 'joy' (German: *Lust*).

By arming himself with Nietzschean *amor fati*, Salèze believes himself able to transfigure erotic disillusionment (the constant antagonist of Gourmont's fiction) into Dionysian vitality. The destructive, treacherous nature of consciousness can then be embraced as a self-recycling apparatus for the renewal of pleasure.

While there is a clear affinity for Nietzsche's 'Dionysian' pleasure in Salèze's words, much remains unresolved. In fact, Nietzsche himself did not attribute the destructive impulse strictly to Dionysus:

> The desire for *destruction*, change and becoming may be the expression of overflowing power, pregnant with futurity (my *terminus* for this is of course the word "Dionysian"); but it may also be the hatred for the ill-constituted, destitute and unfortunate, which destroys, and *must* destroy, because the enduring, yea, all that endures, in fact all being, excites and provokes it. To understand this emotion we have to look closely at our anarchists.[85]

Here, Nietzsche explores a distinction between, on the one hand, a desire for destruction which registers an affective attachment to life, and, on the other, one which drives the inevitability of destruction (as revealed by pessimism) through affective hatred.

Behind Nietzsche's distinction are two very different figures: one mythic (a Dionysian 'artist-god'), the other contemporary and topical ('our anarchists'). It is worth briefly noting the political context of the period between *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and the 'Attempt at Self-Criticism' (1886) that was later added to it (in which the above passage features). 1872 saw a fever pitch in anarchist activity in Nietzsche's Switzerland, whose laws were relatively lenient toward

[85] Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, p. 334. Original italics.

political agitators. Marxist/Bakuninist conflict in the wake of the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871 led anarchists to descend upon the Swiss Jura, Bakunin having been ousted from Marx's 1872 International Congress in the Hague. In the same year, Bakunin formed his own congress at St. Imier, and Switzerland remained a prominent center of anarchist activity throughout the 1870s. Nietzsche's views on anarchism, though ambiguous and generally disparaging, were developed close to the source. In the calls for violence and assassination which resounded in the anarchist notion of 'propaganda of the deed', he no doubt saw a formidable tendency toward destruction which his own Dionysian discourse needed to consider.

By including the example of 'our anarchists', Nietzsche's comparison seems less to do with a thought-out dichotomy of destructive modes, and more to do with a guarded awareness of vulgar social realities which threaten to undermine the abstract, intellectualized sensibility of Dionysian destruction. The contrast drawn between pleasure and hatred seems less convincing than the that which Nietzsche draws between the hazily mythic, metaphorical 'artist-god' and the contemporary anarchists plotting physical destruction not far from the University of Basel where *The Birth of Tragedy* was written.

The Fatal Intercourse of Thought and Action

The tension between Dionysus and terrorist – between destruction as intellectual ideal and destruction as earthly reality – is deeply reflected in *Le Désarroi*, both thematically and theoretically. However, as we have already seen in the 'Dernière conséquence', Gourmont's contemplation of idealism has led him to an impasse regarding the relationship between his philosophical notions and their worldly 'consequences'. Where Nietzsche is content to posit an assertive but ultimately unsatisfactory distinction, Gourmont continues to probe the mystery, all the while preserving the insoluble nature of self/world relations. Stylistically, he achieves this

sense of ambivalence by creating a push-and-pull effect between Salèze's Dionysian erotic philosophizing and his terrorist dealings. These two sides of the central character continually merge and separate, echoing each other's language only to contradict each other later. As McGuinness claims: 'It is as if Gourmont wishes to emphasize the mix of high anarchism, with its lyrical transports of poetic individualism, and the brutal carnage of a genuine *attentat*. But it is also likely that he intended to emphasize the distance between them.'[86]

Gourmont foreshadows this final play of proximity and distance (the *attentat* at the end of the novel) in a scene in which Salèze and Élise, after discussing the philosophical merits of Dionysian intoxication ('Les gens, après tout, ne doivent se réaliser que selon leur nature […] On s'enivre de ce qu'on peut: Il faut s'enivrer, voilà l'essentiel'),[87] encounter a half-conscious alcoholic in the street:

> Tout deux cependant s'arrêtèrent d'un commun accord: un homme couché barrait le trottoir.
> Élise s'amusa à répéter le mot proféré naguère par Salèze et qui avait clos leur causerie: 'Il faut s'enivrer, voilà l'essentiel.'[88]

The confrontation between high-minded philosophical sensibility and brutal reality finds darkly comic expression as Élise sarcastically repeats Salèze's aphorism back to him. Salèze listens closely to the man's lethargic groans, and is able to deduce that he is begging for a drink. 'Oui,' says Élise, 'il faut lui donner à boire, il faut le réaliser'.[89] She hurries to a nearby shop and returns with a bottle,

> puis, soulevant la tête de l'ivrogne, elle lui enfonça le goulot entre les lèvres.
> L'ivrogne, d'un coup, s'était ragaillardi, et il buvait avec des yeux d'amour, avec des yeux d'allégresse:
> Il but jusqu'au vomissement. Alors Élise, laissant tomber la bouteille, s'enfuit, en éclatant d'un terrible rire nerveux.
> 'Que lui avez-vous donc fait boire?' demanda Salèze en la rejoignant.
> 'De l'eau-de-vie. Avez-vous vu ses yeux d'amour, ses yeux d'allégresse? Je l'ai

[86] McGuinness, *Poetry and Radical Politics*, p. 160.
[87] *Le Désarroi*, p. 46.
[88] *Le Désarroi*, pp. 48-49.
[89] *Le Désarroi*, pp. 49-50.

réalisé selon sa nature.'[90]

The principle of destruction resurfaces when it is later insinuated that the drunkard was killed by the potent eau-de-vie. The first real instance of death, then, does not come from the anarchists on Salèze's payroll, but from the woman who partakes in his Dionysian philosophy of pleasure. Thus, while Gourmont foreshadows the *attentat* by portraying a blunt application of philosophy upon the social world, he also broadens and complicates the connection between the ideations of philosophy and the actuality of destruction. Ironically, despite Salèze's constant refrain of philosophical destruction, it is the seemingly innocuous philosophy of intoxication and individuality which causes the first death in the novel.

This scene recalls the last chapter of *Les Chevaux de Diomède*, in which the hero laments the transformation of thought into action. Woman, as the love object, is the unwitting vehicle of this conversion: 'je *réalise* tes discours par la beauté de mes attitudes',[91] Diomède's lover tells him. Diomède desired her, but the 'realization' of this desire – the conversion of thought into action – proves a disappointment.

> Je me suis trompé. On ne peut rien dire dans la vie qui ne tombe en des oreilles maladroites, et des êtres se hâtent de travestir en actes vos pensées. Les pensées sont faites pour être pensées et non pour être agies. Action, tu n'est pas la sœur, tu es la fille du rêve, sa fille ridicule et déformée. Action, abstiens-toi d'écouter aux portes de cerveaux; trouve en toi-même, si tu en es capable, ton motif et ta justification.
> Sois stérile, Pensée. Ne lâche que desséchées par l'ironie tes graines pestilentes. Sois un engrais et non une semence.[92]

A disenchanting gulf emerges between thought and action, a philosophical crisis somatized in the feeling of post-coital shame (and *vice versa*). Sexually personified, action becomes a woman bitterly rejected, cast away from the door of her spiteful lover. In his humiliation, thought (personified as male) regrets the spill of his 'semence' and seeks a return to the idealized fecundity

[90] *Le Désarroi*, p. 50.
[91] *Les Chevaux de Diomède*, p. 243. My italics.
[92] *Les Chevaux de Diomède*, p. 244.

of his internal fantasies. But, as we have seen, Gourmont cannot return to the familiar 'moi éternel' of *Sixtine*. Thought itself has become an unstable refuge, and thus there is nowhere for the Gourmontian hero to ground himself. In the pressure of Diomède's fugitive condition, we see a precursor of the morbid revolt of Salèze:

> Mais si le fumier fleurit, résigne-toi à empoisonner le monde. Ton odeur fera se coucher les femmes au milieu du cercle des mâles sanglants et ta beauté sourira dans les cheveux parés pour la luxure.[93]

If the power of thought cannot be controlled or positively channeled into action, then it must become like a poisonous flower, its hazardous odor radiating anarchically and for no other reason than to extract what pleasures it can from a world it cannot improve. Salèze's anarchism radiates in the same way. If thought cannot touch the world without getting blood on its hands, then it is useless to align oneself with any one cause or program for change; hence Salèze's indiscriminate financial support of terrorists whose ideologies do not interest him in the least.

> J'ignore d'ailleurs les projets de Führer et ne suis anarchiste que pour moi seul. L'argent que je donne à Führer, je lui dois. [...] J'avais envie d'une fort belle femme, j'en étais fou. Führer, par les moyens que je sais, me la procura; je le paie. Il fut fort délicat. La somme était forte; il accepta des mensualités; j'ai soldé aujourd'hui la douzième et dernière.[94]

Diomède's allusion to the male 'semence' of thought can be contrasted to the particular way in which Salèze spends his money. In *Idols of Perversity*, Dijkstra observes the *fin-de-siècle* representation of gold coins as 'the material symbol of [...] male potency' or 'male seminal power'.[95] But, like Diomède's 'semence', gold coins (such as those that rain down upon a languishing Danae) are symbolic of a 'spent manhood', suggestive of the male anxiety of sapped vitality and consequent spurning of woman for her 'inordinate lust for gold'.[96] If a dramatic shower

[93] *Les Chevaux de Diomède*, p. 244.
[94] *Le Désarroi*, p. 21.
[95] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 368.
[96] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p. 368.

of gold coins is like the spermatic mode of thought which Diomède regrets, then the circuitous, slightly banal flow of Salèze's finances is something else entirely. Salèze's money (which, after all, is *argent* and not *or*) moves like the odor of Diomède's flower. It represents the form of thought which only passively results in action, which 'poisons the world' (by funding terrorists), and whose seduction of women is indirect and distant.

With his disinterested, destructive, radiating wealth (symbolically linked to the 'poisonous' ideal of male potency and thought), Salèze has answered Diomède's call. Indeed, with his Dionysian philosophy, Salèze has successfully armored himself against the vicissitudes of amorous disenchantment routinely suffered by Diomède and other fictional forebears. Having surmounted (or merely dodged) the usual conflicts of the Gourmontian novel, the only crisis that remains for him is a confrontation with death.

'Une possible objectivité'

In her *Renaissance de l'idéalisme à la fin du XIX^e^ siècle*, Sandrine Schiano-Bennis offers an insightful reflection on the morbid trajectory of *fin-de-siècle* idealists and their fictional avatars:

> Les anatomistes de l'idée, les dissecteurs de concepts, les praticiens de la glose drainaient dans leur sillage un monstre théoricien, Hamlet ergoteur, triste produit d'une civilisation très intelligente et très meurtrière, fine fleur du 'surblaséisme d'une civilisation schopenhauéresque', retenons l'expression, n'ayant même plus à lutter contre la tentation d'exister. Dans cette fatigue, la conscience s'épuise de sa propre activité, et, à la limite, éprouve le désir de se libérer d'elle-même, dans quelque forme de non-conscience, fût-ce la mort, ou la simple volonté de détruire, pour se confondre enfin avec une possible objectivité.[97]

Schiano-Bennis's comment bears remarkable similarities to Gourmont's 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme': for Schiano-Bennis, 'la conscience s'épuise de sa propre activité', and for Gourmont, 'la pensée se résorbe [et] ne vi[t] plus qu'autosubstantiellement'. In the former,

[97] Schiano-Bennis, *La Renaissance de l'idéalisme*, pp. 12-13.

consciousness reaches its final limit 'dans quelque forme de *non-conscience*', and in the latter, thought 'se dévore elle-même et se résout en la *non-pensée*'. In both cases, the self-consuming cycle of the arch-idealist ends in the negation of the mind itself.

In Schiano-Bennis's formulation, though, the problem of idealist fatigue is bigger (and more cultural) than a strictly hermetic narcissism which can be easily remedied by 'l'excitation du choc extérieur' or a 'vie de relation'. Considering her description (and the century of hindsight on which it is based), Gourmont's version seems too optimistic, too easy to avoid.

Is the death of the drunkard a manifestation of the purifying 'possible objectivité', afforded by 'la mort, ou la simple volonté de détruire', which Schiano-Bennis sees as the final entanglement of the fatigued idealist dreamer? If so, it speaks of the extremes required to break the subjective cycle of the 'monstre théoricien', such as an objective event potent enough to annihilate theory, suspend thought, and give respite. Death and destruction, according to Schiano-Bennis, fulfil the exhausted idealist's 'désir de se libérer d'elle-même, dans quelque forme de non-conscience'. Accordingly, when Élise, nervously energized by the encounter, invites Salèze to accompany her back to her apartment to drink tea 'comme dans les romans psychologiques, en faisant notre examen de conscience', Salèze uncharacteristically declines. 'La nuit est fraîche,' he tells her, 'il ne fait aucun vent, notre promenade à pied nous a calmé l'imagination, nous sommes même un peu fatigués: nous dormirons fort bien.' Perhaps, in the vein of Schiano-Bennis, it is really the strange death of the drunkard that tranquilizes Salèze and allows him ('enfin') to forgo a sleepless, analytical evening. The wind ceases to blow, there is a pleasant chill in the air, and good sleep is guaranteed. Later, when Salèze begrudgingly agrees to return with Élise, his account of the incident is rhetorically 'objective', free of his usual cerebral arabesques. This does not escape his host:

> 'Vraiment,' demanda Salèze, 'vous lui avez fait boire de l'eau-de-vie?'
> 'Oui.'
> 'Vous l'avez tué?'

‘Salèze, je vous en prie, ornez votre interrogatoire de quelques métaphores.’[98]

For Salèze, the death of the drunkard occasions a departure from all things cerebral, theoretical, and metaphorical. Élise, on the other hand, still grasps for an abstract, metaphor-laden conception of what has just transpired. Their opposite attitudes continue to reflect the gulf between thought and action. But this time, the action is so decisive that Salèze can only respond with stupefied bewilderment, the ‘objectivity’ of death having shaken his mind from its incessant, subjective theorizing of destruction.

We see the second occurrence of death when, finally, the terrorist plot financed by Salèze bears fruit:

> Le palais Bourbon avait disparu.
> A sa place un amas de décombres fumait, non de feu, mais de poussière. Il n’y avait eu aucun incendie. Près de lui un jeune homme pâle à longs cheveux noirs disait à un apprenti vêtu de toile bleue:
> ‘C’est du *pix*, tu sais, la fameuse formule PiH^3C^2x. On ne dose pas l’x, parce que cela serait trop dangereux. Ça se fait au moment.’[99]

Smoke, rather than fire, engulfs the ruins. Per McGuinness’s comment about Gourmont’s double intention to ‘emphasize the distance’ as well as the proximity between ‘high anarchy’ and the *attentat*, between thought and deed, we recall that the last revolt of the Paris Commune consisted in setting nearly every major government building ablaze (but the Palais Bourbon was untouched). By omitting the fire, Gourmont distances his imagined bombing from the more ideological tradition of destruction at the hands of the Commune and relates it more closely to the technologically advanced (but less united) *attentats* of the 1890s and, by proxy, the ‘petits anarchistes de la petite littérature’[100] of *Le Désarroi*’s own time. But the omission of fire does not only situate the attack historically, it symbolizes pure terminality, a complete absence of energy,

[98] *Le Désarroi*, p. 53.
[99] *Le Désarroi*, p. 94.
[100] *Le Désarroi*, p. 25.

denying later growth. It is thus a form of destruction (*à la* Schiano-Bennis) which trumps philosophies of destruction (like Nietzsche's Dionysian pessimism) by denying them the prospect of fire and flux, the preconditions of renewal.[101]

Faced with this particular act, thought and language appear absurd. Looking upon the ruin, a man responds by reciting a nonsensical formula. The '*pix*' he mentions – fake scientific notation for the explosion (PiH^3C^2x) – evokes Mallarmé's 'Sonnet en X' and its enigmatic *ptyx*, a word famously devoid of clear meaning, but which appropriately suggests emptiness itself: 'Sur les crédences, au salon vide: nul ptyx / Aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore'.[102] It has been variously argued that Mallarmé's word has the sense of an empty conch shell (from its possible Greek origin), an inkwell, or even a distortion of *pyx* (sometimes spelt *pix*), a ceremonial box used in Catholicism to carry the eucharist wafer to the sick and dying: all vessels which are eventually emptied or vacated.[103] It is a howling abyss to be forever pondered. But at the same time, like Gourmont's *pix*, *ptyx* also belongs to a humble 'formula', the formula of poetic craft in Mallarmé's case (Mallarmé, after all, needed a word ending in '-ix'). With the disappearance of the Palais Bourbon, subjective thought seems to reach its ultimate conclusion, terminating in the infinite riddle of the Mallarméan nonsense word (*ptyx*) and, by the same token, to the cold, unedifying fact of the event itself, reduced to a formula (*pix*).[104]

As Salèze walks among the ruins, he finds a severed head and places it alongside others which are aligned on a table waiting to be photographed. A man brings a head wrapped in a bloody

[101] The symbolism of fire as destructive change and futurity is articulated beautifully by Gaston Bachelard: le feu suggère le désir de changer, de brusquer le temps, de porter toute la vie à son terme, à son au-delà'. *La Psychanalyse du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992) p. 39.
[102] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, eds. Henri Mondor & G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), pp. 68-69.
[103] See A. R. Chrisholm, 'Mallarmé and the Riddle of the Ptyx' Alfred G. Engstrom, *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association*, 40.1 (1973), 246-48; 'Mallarmé and the Death of God: The "Sonnet en -ix"', *Romance Notes* 22.3 (1982), 302-07; and E. Noulet, *L'Œuvre poétique de Stéphane Mallarmé* (Paris: Droz, 1940), p. 454.
[104] The literary anarchism of Mallarmé himself has been widely commented on. For a critical overview, see Carolin Kosuch, *Anarchism and the Avant-Garde* (Boston: Brill, 2019), p. 25.

sheet.

> Colas, tout tremblant, de sa besogne et du regard de Salèze, posa sur la table un objet enveloppé d'une serviette. Il avait les gestes d'un boucher qui porte à domicile. Ce fut une tête, en effet, la tête à l'œil sans paupière, à la bouche mince surlignée d'une ligne baveuse de poils.
> [...] Le boucher enveloppa la tête à l'œil sans paupière dans la serviette sanglante. Au moment de nouer les coins il chassait avec terreur une mouche bleue qui, de l'œil mort, volait vers l'œil vivant.[105]

Severed heads, as Doss-Davezac has noted, have a particularly Schopenhauerian resonance in *fin-de-siècle* art and literature. 'Freed from the wants and desires of the body and the blindness of physical passion, some heads are represented with eyes closed, the better to keep their inner world undisturbed; other heads are cushioned in a halo of light and flowers; or, in further reductive images, a single eye, like an enormous balloon, floats out into space towards infinity.'[106] The head in Gourmont's image may be separated from its body, even ceremoniously collected like that of Orpheus or John the Baptist, but it is contorted and absurd. Its eyes are not closed, but mutilated, infested by a fly reminiscent of the one from 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme', Gourmont's metaphor for the self-defeating futility of thought. With one eye 'mort' and the other horrifically 'vivant', Gourmont's gruesome image mocks the Schopenhauerian association of death/decapitation with restful transcendence, and even denies death its connection to erotic release. It is an image of death which attempts to extinguish its own connotations and meanings.

[105] *Le Désarroi*, p. 98.
[106] Shehira Doss-Davezac, 'Schopenhauer According to the Symbolists: The Philosophical Roots of Late Nineteenth-Century French Aesthetic Theory', in *Schopenhauer, Philosophy and the Arts*, ed. by Dale Jacquette (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 252.

Chapter 5: *The Organism*

> Après avoir traversé une période où [...] l'intelligence était en insurrection contre le cœur, nous entrons dans une autre où le cœur est en insurrection contre l'intelligence.[1]

The discovery in 2006 of *Le Désarroi* did not merely provide an interesting addition to Gourmont's already-prolific bibliography, nor did it simply unveil the hidden expression of an engagement with anarchist politics and acts of violence too vivid to publish. *Le Désarroi*, while being politically and stylistically important, also shows us the previously unseen denouement of a whole aesthetic and intellectual phase inaugurated by *Sixtine*.

Among the moments of Gourmont's writing which build toward the confounding climax of *Le Désarroi*, Diomède's condemnation of thought as 'créatrice meurtrière' is pivotal. With these words, the supposed power of the subjective mind and *moi* – the power to manipulate the world, to create transcendent forms, and thus to determine the course of erotic experience – is revealed to be false, not because it is not powerful (it is still 'créatrice de tout'), but because it has finally been recognized as ungovernable, if not fundamentally destructive. In the previous chapter, we saw how the gradual dethronement of the *moi éternel* (which, though decisively trumpeted by Diomède, is insinuated as early as *Sixtine*) begets a new dialogue with the limitations of thought and the increasing role of exteriority, finding its first expression in *Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme* (1893) but continuing (secretly) in *Le Désarroi*. But a problem emerges in *Le Désarroi*: the (paradoxically) world-affirming desire for

[1] Fouillée, *Le Mouvement idéaliste*, p. v.

destruction, though it would appear to have effectively transformed the typical Gourmontian anxieties of change, temporality, and disenchantment into strengths, remains limited by its own intellectuality. Unable to escape the 'labyrinths' of 'la pensée, créatrice meurtrière', Salèze's Dionysian attitude is still predicated on the primacy of thought, however aware of thought's limitations it may be, and however it may seek to harness its volatility into a Will to Power.

As long as individual thought remains 'créatrice de tout', the idealist subject is condemned to the infinite regress of 'thinking his way out of thought'. In *Le Désarroi*, Gourmont creates an encounter with the 'possible objectivité' of death and destruction noted by Schiano-Bennis, these representing the only terminus capable of breaking the cycle of subjective thought according to idealism as we have come to understand it in Gourmont's work in the 1890s. The anarchist bomb does not just destroy a government building and its occupants, but functions as an intellectual dead end, much like the Mallarméan nonsense word that it invokes.

In order to move beyond this explosive terminus, Gourmont will need to rebuild anew. The reconstruction will require a different sensibility, a different kind of protagonist, a new aesthetic, and above all, a complete revaluation of the relationship between eros and idealism.

This chapter will explore Gourmont's transition from the expiring subjectivism of *Le Désarroi* to the committed materialism of *Physique de l'amour*. This phase of Gourmont's work is usually associated with certain modernizing tendencies that attracted the likes of Pound, Eliot, and the Imagists. Gourmont's prose fiction makes a complete departure from the Symbolist mode, becomes less frequent, and yields somewhat to works on linguistics and style that appealed chiefly to cosmopolitan Modernist figures by synthesizing new notions of physiology and material reality with

the old Symbolist ethic of individualism. This dynamic influence upon Modernist literary networks looms large over this period of Gourmont's work, and the Anglo-American relevance of this subject lends itself as the main focus of both major studies on Gourmont published in English, *Remy de Gourmont, His Ideas and Influence in England and America* and *Instigations*. While Gourmont's aesthetic theory is central to his role in the English-speaking world, the erotic ethos of this period of his writing was equally attractive to his new admirers. The international reception of *Physique de l'amour* alone tells us something about the un-obvious kind of 'materialism' that Gourmont begins to cultivate in the wake of the dilemmas discussed in the last chapter. O'Driscoll, who explores the 'entopornography'[2] of Gourmont's treatise, puts it best:

> [Gourmont's] frank exploration of the insect world promised a challenge to what he understood to be Darwin's teleological and hierarchical description of human evolution, a revaluation of the relationship between instinct and intellect, a corrective infusion of poetic thought into the discourse of natural philosophy, and – perhaps most directly – a deliberate affront to the moralizing and anthropomorphic tendencies of Victorian biological science. In other words, graphic entomological copulation provided a thoroughly distasteful but nonetheless highly productive site for a reconsideration of human sexuality and a radical critique of the religious and social conventions that ideologically constrained, systematically essentialized, and ultimately threatened to de-sensualize the erotic practices of his contemporaries.[3]

As the words of one notable contemporary, James Huneker, confirm, we are very far indeed from 'the rigid old-fashioned materialism'[4] against which German Idealism first reacted, and far as well from the positivism which affronted Gourmont's generation of Symbolist idealists. Like the aesthetic theory that the Anglo-Americans admired in *Le problème du style*, Gourmont's materialist basis for exploring the nature of the sexual instinct is adopted with the intention of extending the possibilities of experience rather

[2] O'Driscoll, 'Entoporn', p. 628.
[3] O'Driscoll, 'Entoporn', p. 628.
[4] James Huneker, *Unicorns* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917), p. 28.

than narrowing the possibilities of knowledge – a reductive materialism which, perhaps paradoxically, serves the same ends of erotic and creative expansion originally sought in the metaphysics of subjective individualism. After publishing *Physique de l'amour*, in fact, Gourmont felt it necessary to make the shocking claim that materialism *means* idealism, and that idealism means materialism.

It is therefore important to define what exactly is being abandoned and embraced when navigating the 'endings' that we have been exploring (the rejection of the *moi éternel*, the twilight of Symbolism), and the 'beginnings' that start to fill the space (a movement towards such pregnant concepts as materialism and physiology). The erotic discourse of Gourmont's evolving materialism, and perhaps especially that of lesser-studied creative works such as *Le Désarroi*, *Le Vieux Roi*, and *Le Songe d'une femme*, exhibits a fundamentally affective, sensually-oriented response to the downfall of subjectivism. These texts, I argue, add a new dimension to the relationship between erotic desire and materialism in a major work such as *Physique de l'amour* as well as helping to clarify Gourmont's reconciliation with idealism in 'Les Racines de l'idéalisme'.

I define the archetype of this chapter as 'the organism' based on Gourmont's decisive reorientation of the human individual (roughly after *Le Désarroi*) from creator of reality to a co-participating particle in 'la série animale'.[5] In his representation of the erotic subject, Gourmont emphasises 'le plan unique de la sexualité universelle',[6] poetically exalting the web of nature to which the human animal is connected through his sexual instinct. Moreover, Gourmont's 'scientific' intentions – the rejection of the anthropocentric Darwinian hierarchy, the critique of the intelligence / instinct division – cannot be seen as separate from the crisis of erotic idealism which has evolved

[5] *Physique de l'amour*, p. 6.
[6] *Physique de l'amour*, p. 5.

through the course of his creative work, and which has arrived at a profound confrontation with the inadequacies of the (human) self and the intelligence as generative centers of erotic cultivation, fulfilment, and understanding.

In shifting his perspective to embrace the omnipotence of material reality, Gourmont creates compensatory images to reclaim the sense of limitlessness and freedom previously sought in the immateriality of thought and the primacy of the self. I offer that the archetype of the organism is constituted by such images: be they the characters of his fiction or the insect subjects of *Physique de l'amour*, Gourmont situates these figures in the universal realm of natural laws, dissolving the boundary between human and animal, but simultaneously pursuing the lawlessness and infinite diversity which the non-teleological view of material reality might afford. As *Physique de l'amour* asserts: 'L'homme n'est pas au sommet de la nature; il est dans la nature, l'une des unités de la vie, et rien de plus',[7] and yet '[l]a nature veut tout. Elle est complaisante à toutes les activités et ne refuse aucune analogie à aucune de nos imaginations.'[8]

Gourmont and the Post-Symbolist *esprit nouveau*[9]

Gourmont's moment of reckoning with the more 'Symbolist' values of idealism, however uniquely expressed in *Le Désarroi*, must be seen in greater context if we are to understand its aftermath, in which Gourmont adopts a nature aesthetic, replete with new catchwords such as 'la vie', 'la nature' and 'la réalité' common to many of his

[7] *Physique de l'amour*, p. 7.
[8] *Physique de l'amour*, p. 19.
[9] For thorough overviews of the post-Symbolist period in French literature, though few and focused mainly on poetry, see Michel Décaudin, *La Crise des valeurs symbolistes* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1981) and Kenneth Cornell, *The Post-Symbolist Period* (New Haven, Yale UP, 1958).

contemporaries. In the last years of the 1890s and the beginning of the 1900s, a plethora of new aesthetic movements emerged to either counter or re-direct the Symbolism of yesteryear, seeking to right all manner of wrongs associated with it. Against the stale cult of individualism, Fernand Gregh announced his 'Humanisme' movement, declaring that 'après l'école de la beauté pour la beauté, après l'école de la beauté pour le rêve, il est temps de constituer l'école de la beauté pour la vie'.[10] The vague concept of 'la vie' (which we will investigate later) came to represent the general antithesis of Symbolist interiority, artifice, and intellectuality, becoming synonymously linked to 'la nature' by the efforts of Maurice Le Blond, Saint-Georges de Bouhélier, and their short-lived yet influential poetic movement of *Naturisme*.[11] Alongside these more polemical tendencies was a broader philosophical reappraisal of Symbolist bearings such as the *moi* and the nature of consciousness, as well as an impulse to take stock of the idealist period now that it was perceived to be waning. One such account, by Alfred Fouillé, explicitly juxtaposes the idealist 'period' against a new spirit of sentiment: 'Après avoir traversé une période où [...] l'intelligence était en insurrection contre le cœur,' he announces, 'nous entrons dans une autre où le cœur est en insurrection contre l'intelligence'.[12] Gourmont reflects this attitude of 'cœur' over 'intelligence' when he introduces his second *Livre des masques* (1898). Its preface registers a significant evolution from the Symbolist apologetics of the first volume:

> Nous n'avons plus de principes et il n'y a plus de modèles; un écrivain crée son esthétique en créant son œuvre: nous en sommes réduits à faire appel à la sensation bien plus qu'au jugement.
> En littérature, comme en tout, il faut que cesse le règne des mots abstraits. Une œuvre d'art n'existe que par l'émotion qu'elle nous donne; il suffira de déterminer et de caractériser la nature de cette émotion; cela ira de la métaphysique à la sensualité, de l'idée pure au plaisir physique.
> Il y a tant de cordes à la lyre humaine! C'est déjà un travail considérable

[10] Gregh, 'L'Humanisme', *Le Figaro* p. 1.
[11] See Patrick Day, *An Anti-Symbolist Movement in Late Nineteenth-Century French Poetry*
[12] Fouillée, *Le Mouvement idéaliste*, p. v.

d'en faire le dénombrement.[13]

Though undoubtedly influenced by the various new 'principes' and 'modèles' of post-Symbolism (of which many circulated in the *Mercure*),[14] Gourmont's particular version of the *esprit nouveau* does not advertise a new aesthetic doctrine to replace Symbolism, but rather a loosening of the old Symbolist contract with cerebrality and abstraction. If there is a new embrace of materiality, nature, or the external world to be found here, it is too oblique to define as of yet. At the same time, one cannot help but read the movement from 'la métaphysique à la sensualité' and from 'l'idée pure à la plaisir physique' as a trajectory rather than a range, based on the works to come.

It is difficult to map exactly how or when Gourmont was influenced by the (already complex) post-Symbolist appeals to 'la réalité', 'la nature', etc., especially as the seduction of the physical and the real has always been present in his erotic discourse. Consider, for instance, the following line from *Le Pèlerin du silence* (1896):

> Là, les divines mamelles, dieux femelles, allégresse de mon humanité, *indéniables* plaisirs, *évidences formelles*, trésor de la sensualité *animale, négation du rêve, certitude manuelle*, ô beaux fruits, ô réconfort de ma bouche, chaleur de mon sang, fraîcheur de mon front, ô belles fleurs, fleurs ouvertes, parfum *vital*, roses![15]

Despite being contemporary with his Symbolist apologetics of the first *Livre des masques*, this passage displays a glossary of post-Symbolist rhetoric that would not be out of place in *Le Songe d'une femme* or *Un Cœur virginal*, let alone Le Blond's 'Essai de naturisme', published the same year.

Gourmont remained unaffiliated with official movements such as 'Naturisme', and his own entry into this new atmosphere of nature and reality would not be through

[13] *Le II^e Livre des masques* (Paris : Mercure de France, 1898), pp. 8-9.
[14] Notably Maurice Le Blond's *Essai sur le Naturisme* (Paris : Mercure de France, 1896).France*élerin du silence* (Paris: MercFrance France, 1896), p. 42. My italics.
France*élerin du silence* (Paris: MercFrance France, 1896), p. 42. My italics.

any membership in these small movements, but rather through a parallel interest in scientific evolution, the animal kingdom, and particularly the work of René Quinton and Jean-Henri Fabre. While Gourmont may have had a great deal to say about poetry and style during this poet-Symbolist period, it is important to note that his main influences (as well as his own main contributions) gravitated around questions of sexual reproduction and its relation to the mind.

Le Désarroi and the Cult of Nature: Images of Rupture

The blueprint for Gourmont's new enterprise is already visible in *Le Désarroi*. It is presented microcosmically when the first act of death (of the drunkard) leads Salèze to a state of mental passivity and peace, at odds with Élise's hunger for late-night philosophising: 'La nuit est fraîche [...] il ne fait aucun vent, notre promenade à pied nous a calmé l'imagination, nous sommes même un peu fatigués: nous dormirons fort bien.' It is the organic rhythms of the body, weather, and nature which seduce and soothe Salèze after his hyper-theorizing mind is finally bested by the brutality of its real-world literalization. This theme is developed soon after, when Salèze muses:

> Voyez, Élise, comme l'eau est bleue et comme elle ruisselle en transparentes perles sur les épaules des blanches naïades. Elle jouent; par tendresse innocente, elle se baisent sur la bouche, elle s'entrelacent; leurs seins purs s'écrasent les uns contre les autres, sans se faire plus de mal que deux lys que le vent du soir rapproche pour une furtive caresse. Nous pouvons les regarder et désirer leur amour; elles ne nous verront pas et elles ne nous aimeront pas, car elles vivent seules et fières dans le monde de beauté; la joie d'être belles fait toute leur joie, et leur chair idéale porte en soit [*sic*] le principe d'un perpétuel plaisir. Elles ne sont pas forcées de se donner pour se posséder; elle se gardent, jalouses d'intégrité, enchantées d'un amour sans commencement et sans fin, qui s'enroule sur lui-même comme un serpent dans son nid.[16]

[16] *Le Désarroi*, p. 59.

Erotic nature scenes such as this do foretell a major transformation in Gourmont's thought – which will depart from anything resembling Symbolism – but in the context of *Le Désarroi*, still far from the committed materialism of *Physique de l'amour*, they also constitute an important tension that will mostly resolve itself once natural imagery is given free reign beginning with *Le Songe d'une femme*.

It is not clear in the text that the water Salèze is referring to is real; on the contrary, this meditation is only prefaced with the words 'le rêve les a invités à une étrange partie de plaisir'.[17] In Salèze's dream-like vision, we find the erotic counter-image of the Dionysian carnival of passionate destruction whereby 'l'intelligence se nourrit de bêtes vivantes qu'elle laisse tomber, dès qu'elle en a sucé le sang. Aimons tout, comprenons tout, détruisons tout.'[18] The naturalistic tableau contrasts with Salèze's destructive idiom on all levels: the naiads in their native environment seem miles away from the discord and *désarroi* of Salèze's urban tumult, their harmonious coupling directly contradicting his intellectual sentiment, declaimed just moments earlier, that 'il n'arrivera jamais, à moins d'exceptionnelle bonne volonté, que deux opinions [...] s'accorde parfaitement et en absolue volupté comme lèvres et lèvres; cet accord est même inconcevable, car comprendre c'est détruire, c'est cueillir la fleur, c'est manger le fruit'.[19] Juxtaposed to the text's overarching motif of destruction, these organisms are incapable of hurting each other; their love is 'sans commencement et sans fin' as opposed to the frenetic, end-seeking eroticism of Salèze, who aspires to 'mourir riches d'idées'.[20]

In the image of the waterside, Gourmont invokes the time-honored Romantic trope of the natural landscape as a place where the intelligence is humbled by that which

[17] *Le Désarroi*, p. 59.
[18] *Le Désarroi*, p. 66.
[19] *Le Désarroi*, p. 58.
[20] *Le Désarroi*, p. 67.

is greater, purer, or anterior to it – countering Salèze's will to artificially overcome nature ('il avait le pouvoir d'arrêter les larves et de suspendre leur fuite vers le fleuve d'horreur dont elles sont les nymphes. Il les dominait; elles lui appartenaient: elles reconnaissaient leur père').[21] Indeed, Salèze's vision also challenges certain Symbolist tropes of natural representation (such as Gide's Narcissus). Though couched in hazy, allegorical revery, the amorous naiads do not reflect the rich complexity of the subject's interior world, but rather beguile him with their simplicity, engaging in a form of existence – a form of intercourse – inaccessibly external to the intellectual structures of Salèze's subjectivity. Thus, while the image is in keeping with *Le Désarroi*'s theme of engagement with externality, it also undermines Salèze's particular rules of engagement. Nature's unintellectual harmony escapes what Salèze can 'capter du monde extérieur', his Dionysian powers being limited to the repeated consumption of 'les sensations intellectuelles'[22] and therefore incapable of the 'perpétuel plaisir' of pure, natural instinct.

In *Le Désarroi*, depictions of nature suggest an idealized engagement with externality *beyond* the grasp of intellectuality, but they also occur *after* intellectuality expires. As *Le Songe d'une femme* was being written while *Le Désarroi* was still being finished, there is a potential deliberateness to this treatment, as if Gourmont wished to mark a trail to his newfound materialism (nature scenes appear *after* intellectuality) while keeping his discourse mysterious enough so to not spoil or derail the Symbolist climax that is *Le Désarroi* (nature is held mysteriously *beyond*).

In his works of criticism, Gourmont provides next to nothing in the way of an ideological justification for the sudden materialism of *Le Songe d'une femme* (he will only do so after the fact, in such writings as 'les racines de l'idéalisme'), but the subtle

[21] 'Avant l'amour', p. 1.
[22] *Le Désarroi*, p. 67.

suggestions in *Le Désarroi*, though perhaps muted for the sake of artistic flow, disclose certain key images of transition. Another example can be seen in the following:

> 'Mais c'est dans la violation des lois de l'instinct que l'on trouve la joie suprême, et, l'amour étant l'instinct le plus impérieux, si l'on veut qu'il soit le plaisir le plus grand, il faut le nier comme instinct et l'affirmer comme révolte.'
> 'Alors,' dit Élise, 'plus l'amour s'éloigne des façons naturelles, plus il doit être délicieux?'
> 'Mais, chère Élise, les péchés charnels ne se jugent pas d'après la complication ou l'inversion des gestes… Feriez-vous allusion au lac maudit?'
> 'Vous m'avez dit un jour que le lac maudit est fleuri d'admirables lotus et des plus jolis iris.'
> 'Sans doute. Les eaux pures sont stériles.'
> 'Ah! Salèze, Salèze, c'est parce que je vous aime que je vous écoute! Cher monstre, parlez, pourvu que je vous tienne et que je vous sente vivre sous mes mains!'
> Mais Salèze maintenant se taisait, heureux de ne plus penser et à demi-couché il regardait par la fenêtre ouverte la métamorphose du jour.[23]

A discussion of how erotic pleasure might be enhanced through the negation of instinct runs aground when Élise invokes a certain 'lac maudit', a metaphor with which Salèze seems to suggest the merits of sterility, a conclusion which innervates his lover. Once again, overwrought intellectuality languidly surrenders to *non-pensée* and the comforts of the natural world. Élise, the object of his intellectualized desire, is casually rejected in turn; Salèze ceases to speak to her, and moves his gaze to the natural world which beckons beyond the cultured confines of the room. In the above episode, Salèze's regard for nature is a product of listless mental exhaustion, as well as a resigned attitude toward the futile relationship between thought and action. If this dialogue had occurred in an earlier work, for instance *Le Fantôme* (in which it would not be out of place), it would have been indeterminate and passionate, but the struggle of the Gourmontian hero for

[23] *Le Désarroi*, p. 41.

some ideal erotic application of mind over matter, it seems, has now become so tediously insoluble that the hero himself has grown bored, subdued, and wistfully diverted by realms of experience far from the urbane cerebrality that is still his habit.

The passage also contains an obscure reference. While the explicit context of the 'lac maudit' could have been lost with the removed material of *Le Destructeur*, the mysterious lake likely pertains to a folk legend of the same name from Gourmont's native Normandy. Included in Amélie Bosquet's *Normandie romanesque et merveilleuse* (1845) is a transcription of 'Le Lac de Flers'. Locally referred to as 'Le Lac maudit',[24] the tale describes a real location in Flers, a village situated between Gourmont's birthplace of Bazoches-au-Houlme and Mesnil-Villeman, where he moved with his family at five years old. The legend describes a convent of monks who, in their popularity, had grown decadent and blasphemous until they ceased altogether to ring the bells calling the faithful to prayer. One Christmas Eve, as the monks immodestly drank and feasted in the refectory instead of preparing for Midnight Mass, the bells began to miraculously ring on their own. Then,

> [i]l y eut alors, dans le réfectoire, un moment de silence et de profonde stupeur. Mais un des moines les plus dissolus, essayant de secouer cette terreur glaçante, entoura d'un bras lascif une femme assise à ses côtés, prit un verre de l'autre main, et s'écria avec insolence: 'Entendez-vous la cloche, frères et sœurs? Christ est né, buvons rasade à sa santé!' Tous les moines firent raison à son toast, et répétèrent, avec acclamation: 'Christ est né, buvons à sa santé!' Mais aucun d'eux n'eut le temps de boire: un flamboyant éclair, comme l'épée de l'archange, entr'ouvrit la nue; et la foudre, lancée par la main du Très-Haut, frappa le couvent, qui oscilla sous le choc, et tout-à-coup s'abîma à une grande profondeur dans la terre. Les paysans, qui s'étaient empressés d'accourir à la messe, ne trouvèrent plus, à la place du monastère, qu'un petit lac, d'où l'on entendit le son des cloches jusqu'à ce que le coup de la première heure du jour eût retenti.[25]

[24] See folklorist Françoise Morvan in her interview with the regional newspaper France-*France*: Guilherme Ringuenet, 'Le 24 décembre à 0 h, le gouffre de Flers se réveFrance *Ouest-France*, 24 December, 2015 <https://www.ouest-france.fr/normandie/flers-61100/le-gouffre-de-flers-est-une-legende-chretienne-3943754> [accessed 25 October, 2021].

[25] Amélie Bosquet, *La Normandie romanesque et merveilleuse* (Rouen: Techener, 1845), p. 496. In 'Les Racines de l'idéalisme', *Promenades philosophiques*, Gourmont considers whether 'la forteresse de l'idéalisme' is 'comme ces villes englouties dont les cloches sonnent encore aux grandes fêtes, mais pour ceux-là seuls qui croient à leur mystérieuse vie.' (pp. 92-93).

Gourmont's brief allusion to a 'lac maudit' thus conceals a richly allegorical parallel to the explosive climax of *Le Désarroi* and its aftermath. The convent, like the Palais Bourbon, is levelled in a fantastical act of violence, and although it is God who punishes the monks for their blasphemy, nature is both the eschatological weapon (a lightning bolt) and the ascendent power which, like the Biblical flood, replaces and effaces a corrupt humanity (the lake). Though the allegory does not 'explain' the significance of the final bombing, there is a broader prescient quality to the use of this legend beyond the narrative scope of *Le Désarroi*, as Lower Norman watersides and wildernesses will soon saturate Gourmont's fiction in *Le Songe d'une femme* and *Un Cœur virginal*, spreading themselves, as it were, over the ruins of the intellectual architecture built atop the aptly-named *Sixtine*, the tradition of *la vie cérébrale* having grown sumptuous, decadent, and in need of levelling.

Gourmont's own guilty feeling of blasphemy is, of course, ironically irreligious: it is Salèze's refusal to heed the sexual instinct which makes him resemble the debauched monks of Flers, and his intellectualism which has caused him to stray, not from God, but from the almighty force of sexuality as asserted by nature. In this vein, nature intervenes to correct Salèze in the dramatic guise of divine providence:

> Sur le ciel doucement violet, un arbre de Judée[26] immense et rose se dressait plein d'une fierté innocente comme une protestation contre le blasphème et Salèze éprouva quelque regret d'avoir méprisé les joies naturelles de la vie.
> Le ciel se fit d'un mauve presque blanc et les guirlandes de l'arbre immense et rose devinrent noires comme des écritures hiératiques tracées dans l'infini. Salèze, l'espace d'un clin d'œil, comprit le sens de ces

[26] Likely inspired by the Judea tree in the courtyard of the Hôtel des Missions Étrangères, 120 rue du bac, where Chateaubriand died in 1840. Gourmont advised his friend Marcel Schwob, who lived at 122 with a view of the courtyard: 'Étiez-vous déjà rue du Bac au dernier printemps. Si non, vous aurez en avril un spectacle miraculeux: le grand arbre de Judée de la Cour des Missions tout fleuri de fleurs violettes, avant les feuilles, et quand rien encore n'est fleuri. Je regrette aussi les cloches et la perpétuelle sonnerie.' Remy de Gourmont, *Correspondance*, vol. I, ed. by Vincent Gogibu (Paris: Sandre, 2010), p. 345.

> écritures apparues sur le ciel mauve. Il en eut du plaisir, mais l'instant d'après, il avait oublié la cause de son plaisir.
> Sur le ciel assombri les écritures s'écrasèrent; le sommet dentelé des lettres et des fleurs se dessinait à peine. L'arbre devint un géant à la tête chevelue et au bras levé vers Dieu; mais la nuit lentement ensevelit sous son voile la révolte vue par des yeux mauvais, et des yeux d'or contemplèrent avec une ironie bienveillante les caresses passionnées dont Élise charmait son amant.
> Le ciel aux yeux d'or était doux comme un dieu. Élise se dévêtit pour se donner lumineuse aux baisers du ciel nocturne. Elle marcha vers la fenêtre et ses cheveux remuèrent un peu, comme des feuillages. Tournée vers un grand miroir qui gardait un peu de jour au fond de son âme obscure elle se vit si belle qu'elle se désira.
> Sur le ciel aux yeux d'or, des nuages passèrent, pareils à des mauvaises pensées. Élise voulut rire de son désir, car les nuages passaient sur son miroir et sa beauté n'était plus, mais le désir lui sauta à la gorge et la conduisit vers son amant qui fut doux comme une femme.
> Salèze en rentrant chez lui, troublé et un peu ivre, songeait confusément à la singulière vitalité du verbe, aux ruses de la parole, qui veut vivre dans l'homme, qui veut germer dans notre sang et fleurir dans nos gestes.[27]

Nature, no longer just an innocuous diversion, asserts itself with supernatural force, darkening the sky and writing its hieroglyphic law across the heavens for Salèze to behold. When Élise begins to seduce Salèze, nature is appeased by the sexual overture, and ends its judgemental 'révolte' by gazing down upon the lovers with the fond 'yeux d'or' of the stars. With woman as its vehicle, the forces of nature guide Élise, who, naked before a mirror, is aroused by the 'baisers du ciel nocturne'. The natural sky provides the light that produces her reflected image, and thus nature and female beauty are commingled, increasing their mutual power. The imagination (and its aesthetic products such as clothing), to which Gourmont formerly attributed female beauty, has conceded to nature as the true engine of erotic desire. Indeed, thought (embodied by 'des nuages [...] pareils à des mauvaises pensées') only interrupts this courtship dance by obscuring the light of Élise's nude reflection, but is ultimately powerless to stop nature from taking its course.

[27] *Le Désarroi*, pp. 42-43.

Though squinting, Salèze is able to clearly see nature's 'écritures hiératiques tracées dans l'infini' and though he understands their meaning, it cannot be verbally repeated or remembered. Nature's hieroglyphs are at the same time empirical and incomprehensible, a coded language which nonetheless conveys a precise message, albeit through affect rather than intellect. This is yet another image of transition: by introducing itself as a mystical language, nature makes a furtive appeal to the intellectuality that Salèze values so highly in matters of pleasure, but just as soon revokes its intellectual quality, leaving only affective pleasure in its wake (Salèze 'en eut du plaisir, mais l'instant d'après, il avait oublié la cause de son plaisir'). The message that nature conveys, however, seems clear enough: submission to instinctual sexuality and 'les joies naturelles de la vie.' [28]

The hieroglyphic language of nature, as Pierre Hadot has written, was a common trope in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century thinkers such as Goethe, Kant, Novalis, and Schelling. A passage he cites from Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plants* is particularly revealing: 'I would like to lose the habit of discourse and express myself only like Nature the artist in eloquent designs. This fig tree, this little snake, this cocoon, … all these are 'signatures', heavy with meaning.'[29] To Goethe, according to Hadot, 'Ce que nous révèlent les phénomènes naturels, ce ne sont pas des maximes ou des formules de la Nature, mais des configurations, des dessins, des emblèmes, qui demandent seulement à être perçus'.[30] For Schelling, '[w]hat we call Nature is a poem whose wondrous and mysterious writing remains indecipherable for us',[31] and his version of

[28] *Le Désarroi*, pp. 42-43.
[29] Quoted in Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis*, trans. by Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006) p. 203. (I refer to the English version for Hadot's quotations of German primary sources, and to the original for his own commentary).
[30] Hadot, *Le Voile d'Isis* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 212.
[31] Hadot, *The Veil of Isis*, p. 204.

nature is, in Hadot's words, 'inconscient de lui-même'.[32] While 'les philosophes qui ont employé cette métaphore n'ont pas tous conçu de la même manière le déchiffrement de cette écriture chiffrée',[33] these philosophers' common metaphor of hieroglyphs speaks to a decidedly pre-Decadent reverence for the superiority of nature over the abstractions of human thought, and yet its quality of a mysterious poem is perfectly suited to the Symbolist dream-image that Gourmont presents. Hence the transitional function of the scene: Gourmont's use of symbolism is employed against everything that *symbole* once meant to him (human art, individual thought, the transcendent *Idée*), its imposing hieroglyphs referring the reader back to an older, Romantic mentality which aspired to 'lose the habit' of anthropocentric forms of thought and expression, espousing a favourable view of nature as a superior designer whose genius stands in opposition to ideas such as consciousness, discourse, and interpretation.

Perhaps the reason why Gourmont invokes the Romantic trope of nature's hieroglyphs is to exalt an idea of nature overcoming subjectivism without giving the slightest suggestion of literary Naturalism or positivism (or even materialism, at this point). This opposition is also reflected stylistically, the Symbolist language of the episode being more reminiscent of *Sixtine* or *Le Fantôme* than the general clarity that characterizes most of *Le Désarroi*. This is a clever contradiction: Salèze's surrender to nature constitutes a profound departure from the ideological values of Gourmont's Symbolist period, but the awesome power of this moment finds expression in the exaggerated, hallucinatory images conventionally associated with Symbolist thought. Thus, we find Gourmont in the midst of an aesthetic negotiation towards his eventual materialism. The Symbolist style, Gourmont's traditional indicator of cerebral primacy, is invoked in order to *transfer* this primacy to an idea of nature.

[32] Hadot, *Le Voile d'Isis*, p. 213.
[33] Hadot, *Le Voile d'Isis*, p. 205.

Le Vieux Roi and the Siege of the Self

Gourmont's one-act play *Le Vieux Roi* (1897) is yet another site of transformation and upheaval from within the Symbolist mode; a short drama which literalizes the notion of a paradigm shift in the story of an aged king (Gildas) whose authority has diminished to mere symbolic status. Though a young invader (Yoland) prepares to take his castle and lands by force, the real transfer of power is determined by a conspiracy of intertwined erotic desires between Gildas's three daughters as well as his page. The king and his usurper both perish in the siege, and power is haphazardly claimed by a new king and queen: Gautier, the page, and Germaine, the king's illegitimate daughter who desires her own half-sister, the princess Guislaine. Though each character's romantic intentions are thwarted in the end, the sexual instinct is given a similar treatment, a similar cloak of overpowering natural imagery, as in *Le Désarroi*. Having not yet assumed the optimistic (even tranquil) ideological status that it will acquire in *Le Songe d'une femme*, the natural force of sexuality continues to be represented as a violent disruption.

The play begins when the young Gautier is sexually rejected by Floraine, one of the king's illegitimate daughters.

> GAUTIER: Pourquoi mes yeux lui font-ils peur? Mes yeux sont bleus, mon âme est bleue comme le baiser du ciel et de la mer, mes yeux sont doux, mon cœur est doux comme le sourire des premières feuilles du chêne. Je suis un chêne-enfant. Ma chevelure est une frondaison de désirs et de songes, où le vent de la vie se joue avec amour. Effeuille-moi, vent, et emporte mes feuilles vertes vers le sillage que des barques aux ailes blanches promènent sur la mer en fleurs! O mer épanouie, jardin tumultueux des vagues! Tu as peur d'un désir, Floraine, tu as peur d'un oiseau: moi, Floraine, j'ai peur de moi-même, car voici qu'à la place de l'enfant doux et bleu, je trouve un homme qui dit: J'aime et je veux. Tes lèvres ont eu la grâce et la puissance de deux soleils et d'un double printemps: l'arbre a toutes ses branches et son ombre est féconde. Viens dormir à mon ombre.[34]

[34] *Le Vieux Roi*, *Théâtre* (Paris: Crès, 1925), pp. 69-70.

As the intensity of these natural metaphors gradually increases, Gourmont evokes the image of a gathering storm, the soft blue of the sky giving way to the tempestuous image of a wild garden of waves, winds strong enough to strip the leaves from the tree – echoing the crescendoing dynamics of the sky in *Le Désarroi*. Just as nature imperiously asserts its sexual agenda upon Salèze and Élize, overpowering their mental hesitations, so does it answer the call of Gautier, penetrating the architectural interior of the castle just as it did with Élize's room:

> GAUTIER: (*se dresse, les bras écartes, et on le voit grandir et devenir homme. A ce moment, la fenêtre s'ouvre, un souffle de vent courbe la flamme vive des lampes, le tonnerre éclate, un éclair part dans la nuit. Gildas entre lentement, mais l'air inquiet et farouche.*)
>
> GILDAS: Le canon, les cloches, les torches…
>
> GAUTIER: Éclairs et tonnerre, Seigneur! Les éléments sont révoltés sous l'œil paternel de leur maître. Dans le temps qu'il fait pour ouvrir et fermer trois fois les yeux, la Nature a fait l'œuvre d'une longue et laborieuse année: alors Dieu a parlé.[35]

The king's mistaking the storm for cannon fire, bells, and torches amplifies the metaphor that has been unfolding, in which subjectivity is seen as a man-made edifice (be it a monastery, a castle, or a Parisian apartment) that cannot stand up to the inevitable intervention of nature, interpreted by the king as an invading military force.

The spontaneous puberty of Gautier's body tells a different story from similar instances we have explored in *Lilith* and 'Péhor'. Where Gourmont's earlier task was to highlight the phenomenological tensions at the base of sexual awareness and maturity, his aim here is to highlight the omnipotence of natural processes, only with a dramatic flair that certainly echoes the depiction of demons such as Lilith and Péhor. These

[35] *Le Vieux Roi*, pp. 70-71.

theatrics help to further illustrate the tension and uncertainty inherent in Gourmont's evolving shift from subjectivism to materialism.

Gourmont's declining subjectivism is vividly captured in the character of Gildas:

> Je suis le roi, je suis tout, toute la patrie, la forêt, la rivière, le château, la ville, la Tour, les hommes, les femmes et les enfants. Je suis tout et je ne suis rien: un vieux mot, un vieux mot, une torche qui va mourir. Ils ne veulent plus comprendre que les mots sont des coffrets pleins de gemmes, de médailles, de colliers… […] Vieux roi, vieux mot, vieux coffret vermoulu et rouillé! Vieux roi! […] Comme je suis vieux! C'est vrai que je suis très vieux. Je ne pense presque plus. Je pense toujours les mêmes choses…[36]

Much of the saga of Gourmontian interiority can be seen reflected in the king's lament, beginning with the echo of *Sixtine*'s 'le monde, c'est moi' (Gildas: 'je suis tout'). Furthermore, the king's omnipotence suffers from a similar contradictory structure to Diomède's 'pensée, créatrice de tout, mais créatrice meurtrière' in that it is both 'tout' and 'rien'. Gildas occupies the threshold, seen earlier in this thesis, in which the primacy of subjectivism is denounced rather than disproved – an unstable reality, but a reality nonetheless. However, the treatment here being less discursive than the language afforded to prose, Gildas's speech communicates a more affective side of the crisis of subjectivism: philosophical dilemmas aside, subjectivism (in the guise of Gildas) also suffers from the simple problem of old age. Thus, while the lines 'Je ne pense presque plus. Je pense toujours les même choses' can certainly be interpreted philosophically (as a reference to Ugolino, the personification of the insular, self-consuming mind in 'Dernière conséquence de l'idéalisme'),[37] they also disclose the artist's basic thirst for novelty, his aversion to repetition.

There is a tension between the immateriality of the 'vieux mot' that the king has become and the materiality of all that he claims to encompass (tower, town, river, the

[36] *Le Vieux Roi*, pp. 110-11.
[37] See Chapter 5.

contents of the coffer). This tension is mirrored and amplified by the theatrical form itself, Gildas being both physically embodied on stage and yet no more than a literary creation (a 'mot'). Gildas is not only a King in confrontation with a young invader (Yoland); he is also the locus of a confrontation between the cerebral and the physical, the interior and the external.

In the character of Gildas, we can see Gourmont self-consciously wrestling with certain paradoxes of his own doctrine of Symbolist aesthetics, particularly when it comes to the formal representation of subjectivity and the *Idée*, as well as the idea of the self more generally. Laurent Jenny, citing Jean-Marie Schaeffer, explores how the threat of the natural and the material is inherent in the theoretical inconsistencies of idealist art itself. Where Schiano-Bennis sees a '*possible* objectivité' in the embrace of death and destruction, Jenny and Schaeffer posit that the *inevitable* objectivity of representation contradicts Gourmont's own Symbolist notions of the 'forme transcendante d'une idée' as a vessel of subjectivity. Moreover, this objectivity is directly linked to nature and its laws:

> Ajoutons que si la reproduction artistique des Idées se borne à la représentation des forces et des espèces naturelles, toutes les œuvres qui représentent le même type d'objet ont en fait le même contenu: toute peinture de paysage a pour contenu la représentation des forces et lois de la nature inanimée et végétale, toute mimésis littéraire l'Idée de l'espèce humaine.[38]

This adds an aesthetic importance to the motif of the 'old word' in Gildas's soliloquy and its relation to the material and the organic. There is in fact no subjective content in Gildas's 'word'. Rather, like Symbolist artistic expression according to Schaeffer, it is an allegedly subjective representation (he claims to *be* the word) which turns out to be completely objective in that which it is actually capable of expressing (the forest, the

[38] Laurent Jenny, *La Fin de l'intériorité* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), pp. 20-21.

stream, etc.). Gildas's physical atrophy, symbolized by the *organic* decomposition of the coffer, further expresses the ascendency of natural laws over the ideals of subjectivism. It is also here where our two notions of objectivity – Schiano-Bennis's death and destruction; Jenny and Schaeffer's laws of nature – intersect. Gildas is a dying man facing the physical destruction of his kingdom (as in Schiano-Bennis's commentary discussed in the previous chapter), but he is also an artistic expression of subjectivity which has become aware of its objective content, the 'forest' and the 'stream' echoing Schaeffer's pastoral 'nature inanimée et végétale', as well as 'les hommes, les femmes et les enfants' constituting the 'espèce humaine'.

The question of words, style, and expression has always been intricately linked to the question of the self in Gourmont, but the monologue of Gildas reflects a key dilemma in this regard: the influence of Hippolyte Taine, whose materialist theory of the intelligence was a fundamental challenge to the notion of a transcendent, unified 'Moi' to which Gourmont's generation tended. The ideas put forth in Taine's *De l'Intelligence*, though only explicitly referenced by Gourmont after 1900, are deeply reflected in the anxieties of *Le Vieux Roi*. As early as the first lines of the first volume of *De l'Intelligence*, Taine narrows in on the verbal inaccuracies surrounding the ideas of selfhood and the intelligence, targeting words suggestive of power and control: 'Les mots *faculté*, *capacité*, *pouvoir*, qui ont joué un si grand rôle en psychologie, ne sont, comme on verra, que des noms commodes au moyen desquels nous mettons ensemble, dans un compartiment distinct, tous les faits d'une espèce distincte'.[39] Hence the tension within Gildas between an imperious-seeming word (such as 'Roi') and 'tous les faits' implied by it. Taine dissects the problem of overarching terms in a similar way to Gourmont's *Dissociation des idées*, only the terms he is interested in are the very names

[39] Hippolyte Taine, *De l'Intelligence*, vol. I. (Paris: Hachette, 1888) p. 1.

of the self: 'Je' and 'Moi' are 'des êtres métaphysiques, purs fantômes, engendrés par les mots, et qui s'évanouissent dès qu'on examine scrupuleusement le sens des mots'. Taine's descriptive figuration of the nominal self as a metaphysical, phantom-like being takes dramatic shape in the character of Gildas, a Gourmontian subject scrutinized and revealed to be only a word referring to a host of external phenomena. The title of king is an apt metaphor for the Tainian 'Moi' by nature of its mythic power, its pretensions of unity and omnipotence seemingly enshrined into consciousness by the word itself. This is reflected as well in *Les Chevaux de Diomède*:

> Ah! L'inquiétude de vivre, l'ignorance de tout, notre mutisme aux incessantes questions de l'être inconnu qui demeure, s'agite et chante en nous! [...] Quel est son nom? Son nom est Nous, son nom est Moi. J'ai des hommes et des femmes, des amis et des maîtresses, une vie libre et large, il me manque Moi.[40]

The anxiety here, as in *Le Vieux Roi*, centres on the plurality of external forces which constitute what is erroneously called 'Moi'. This leads us a step beyond the 'vie de relation' concept seen in the previous chapter, in which the 'Moi' exists so long as it is conceived of by a hypothetical other. In Diomède's words, the question of external environment and *milieu* is more pronounced. In this passage, it is the interior subject which has become 'inconnu' and hypothetical, while the external realm of objects is accepted as real.

'Le jeu de l'organisme': Redeeming the Will to Life

Though *Le Vieux Roi*, when it is mentioned at all, does not feature in the critical discussion of Gourmont's materialism, it contains possibly the strongest declaration of the new values and images that will culminate in *Physique de l'amour*. In a monologue

[40] *Les Chevaux de Diomède*, pp. 25-26.

spoken by Guislaine, we find a turning point at which the idea of Nature, previously portrayed as an ambiguous, intervening external force, begins to form a monistic cluster in which 'la vie' and 'l'amour' are also consolidated.

> GUISLAINE: Tais-toi, sotte créature, et songe à ton amour. Bien dit. Je songe à mon amour. L'amour est tout. Il est Dieu, il est le monde, il est la floraison universelle, les arbres gonflés comme les violes et les herbes mouvantes comme les flots. Il est les bêtes, il est les fleurs, il est les femmes. Je suis une femme. Je suis la femme. Que m'importent vos guerres, vos cités, vos patries, vos lois, vos rois et toutes les chaînes dont vous parez vos épaules esclaves! Je suis une femme. Je ne me soucie que de la joie d'être belle, joyeuse et féconde. Tout doit plier sous les pieds de ma joie: elle marchera en triomphe au-dessus de toutes les vanités et de toutes les tyrannies. Place, peuples, rois, sergents, nonnes, mendiants, et prêtres, place! C'est une femme qui passe! Agenouillez-vous. Elle s'en va vers son amant, génisse radieuse qui meugle à l'odeur du mâle. Allez-vous-en! La vue d'un animal libre et fier troublerait l'humilité de vos yeux. Écartez-vous! Laissez-moi marcher dans la gloire de ma résolution. Je suis la vie. Je suis celle qui s'épanouit sur les ruines et qui transforme en feuilles vertes le fumier sombre des feuilles mortes. Je suis poussée par Dieu. Je vais. Je suis tout. J'ai le droit d'être tout, puisque je suis. Je veux jouir de l'infinité des plaisirs. Je veux fleurir. Je veux que la fleur de ma hampe soit large comme le monde.[41]

Where Diomède and Gildas experience the (Tainian) disunity of the *Moi* as a tragic lack, Guislaine enthusiastically embraces the cosmic totality of external forces which act through her. On a rhetorical level, Guislaine's switching between first- and third-person pronouns serves to further dissolve the interiority / exteriority dichotomy, now eclipsed by an exuberant sense of oneness and universality based on the synonymous grouping of 'l'amour', 'la vie', and 'la femme'. The passage bristles with the biocentric image of the human organism. Guislaine's sexual love for Yoland connects her to the vital force of the world (the very 'instinct sexuel' of *Physique de l'amour*), the universal thrust of all terrestrial life, indifferent to the vain structures of human morality, power, and intellect.

[41] *Le Vieux Roi*, pp. 107-09.

In Schopenhauerian terms, while we have mainly focused on the shifting attitudes in Gourmont's work towards the notion of the world as representation, Guislaine's speech explicitly invokes the Will to Life[42] at a time when this idea was undergoing an important metamorphosis in the minds of Gourmont and his immediate contemporaries. Jenny, for instance, sees in Jules de Gaultier's 'Essai de physiologie poétique' a tacit appropriation of Schopenhauer's basic dichotomy of Will and representation, building a case for artistic spontaneity in which 'La "Volonté" est rebaptisée "la Vie" et perd ainsi son caractère métaphysique'.[43] Gaultier, a close affiliate of Gourmont,[44] begins his essay with a familiar sense of exhaustion with the cult of intelligence, bemoaning his (and Gourmont's) 'époque de complexité intellectuelle vouée, semble-t-il, aux lentes analyses et aux reconstitutions synthétiques'.[45] Although Verlaine's poetry is his nominal subject, Gaultier's essay is an impressionistic hymn to the 'instinctive spontanéité de l'âme humaine'[46] which Verlaine has recovered, and which ought to be seen not only as the wellspring of poetic expression, but as the vital centre of life itself.

> Verlaine s'est abandonné aux ondes révoltées de ce fleuve qui, fuyant les villes géométriques et les paysages aux lignes sèches des régions de la Connaissance, reflue impétueusement et s'épanche à pleins bords, – parmi de majestueuses végétations qu'animent et emplissent de cris et de soupirs, d'étranges et de puissantes faunes, – vers les sources mystérieuses de la vie, vers l'âme originelle de l'animalité.[47]

Gaultier's vision of Verlaine's poetics and Guislaine's hymn to love share a common image, a common mythology of 'la vie' and 'la nature': Verlaine's poetry, like Guislaine's love, rises above (or, rather, surges from beneath) the abstractions of human

[42] Gourmont himself uses the term 'volonté de vivre'. *Physique de l'amour*, p. 16.
[43] Jenny, *La Fin de l'intériorité*, p. 28.
[44] See Sandrine Schiano-Bennis, 'Remy de Gourmont et Jules de Gaultier, une esthétique de l'intelligence' in *Remy de Gourmont*, ed. by Thierry Gillybœuf and Bernard Bois (Paris: l'Herne, 2003), pp. 47-57. Gourmont comments extensively on Gaultier's reception of Schopenhauer in 'Un nouveau philosophe: Jules de Gaultier', *Promenades littéraires*, pp. 79-88.
[45] Jules de Gaultier, 'Essai de physiologie poétique', *La Revue blanche*, 7 (1894), 391-408 (p. 393).
[46] Gaultier, 'Essai de physiologie poétique', p. 393.
[47] Gaultier, 'Essai de physiologie poétique', pp. 393-94.

intellectuality (always symbolized by architecture), aligning itself to the natural world, the animal, and the instinctive physiology of the 'organisme humain'.[48] Per Jenny's suggestion, this sensibility is in many ways a positive revaluation of the very essence (the Will to Life) which Schopenhauer seeks to transcend. As Schopenhauer believed the instinctive sensations of the body (particularly those connected to sexual arousal and intercourse) to be the only perceptible manifestations of the Will to Life, it is the instinctive body that Gaultier glorifies in his poetic theory, and the sexual instinct that Guislaine champions in her speech. Both authors attempt to shake off the solipsistic and ossified *fin-de-siècle* legacy of Schopenhauerian metaphysics by recharacterizing the tyrannical Will to Life as its enlivening antidote. By reframing Schopenhauer's dichotomy in terms of physiology,[49] the machinations of the Will are made more approachable and assimilable. Though still 'blind' in so far as it is opposed to the rational intelligence, the howling abyss of Schopenhauerian Will becomes a domain that can be approached in terms of time, space, and causality (thanks to Darwinian science), all the while retaining its alluring qualities of oneness, universality, and primacy. Moreover, while the fantastical flourishes of God, fauns, and such terms as 'l'âme originale' certainly suggest a vision of cosmic wonder, they ultimately serve to glorify the liberatory *departure from* metaphysics, transferring the all-important sense of infinity to its new materialist home.

This physiological invocation of Schopenhauer's basic doctrine plays a major role in what Uitti calls the 'nouveau contexte mythique'[50] of Gourmont's materialist phase, and the 'nouvel avatar'[51] of his eroticism; 'il s'agit bien d'un mythe', writes

[48] Gaultier, 'Essai de physiologie poétique', p. 397.
[49] Jenny notes that the French tendency to transpose Schopenhauer's metaphysics into physical terms is evident even in Ribot's first translations. See Jenny, 'Physiologie du symbolisme'.
[50] Uitti, *La Passion littéraire de Remy de Gourmont*, p. 192.
[51] Uitti, *La Passion littéraire de Remy de Gourmont*, p. 193.

Uitti, 'car c'est grâce à ce "système" que Gourmont impose un ordre au chaos de l'amour'.[52] Guislaine's speech brings this 'mythic' quality into full view, not by imposing a 'système' in the scientific sense (that is not what Uitti necessarily means), but by relocating erotic desire in a modernized physiological fantasy of the Will to Life, however scientifically informed that fantasy may be. Though clearly galvanized by the poetic, scientific, and philosophical developments of its time, Guislaine's (Gourmont's) myth emphatically exploits the sexual nature of the same values that Gourmont and his contemporaries would elsewhere apply to linguistics and aesthetic theory. The same 'jeu de l'organisme'[53] that begins to reshape aesthetic thought, in other words, is for Gourmont a profound and lasting paradigm for the pursuit of erotic pleasure and its conceptualization. As we shall see, however, this new model leaves certain phenomenological tensions unresolved, and even exposes new ones. If the dilemma of 'le monde, c'est moi' was defined by the struggle for pure interiority, Gourmont's new model of the organism contends with the limits of externalization.

Le Songe d'une Femme: Feminizing the Vital

In Chapter 3, I discussed Gourmont's characterization of women as possessing greater access to the corporeal experience of mysticism than their male counterparts. In the Gourmontian gender dichotomy, women (even when they are merely 'projections' of the male mind) are regularly assigned the faculties of intuition and sensuality while the powers of creative thought rest in the hands of the male protagonist. As we have seen, Gourmont's cerebral male heroes often envy what they see as the female trait of passive

[52] Uitti, *La Passion littéraire de Remy de Gourmont*, p. 193.
[53] Gaultier, 'Essai de physiologie poétique', p. 404.

receptivity to 'some stronger force',[54] as Birkett puts it. This trope becomes increasingly significant as Gourmont's work begins to valorize a surrender to the sexual dictates of nature. As Gourmont would later write in his *Promenades littéraires*, 'La femme la plus compliquée est plus près de la nature que l'homme le plus simple.'[55]

In the dramatic context of *Le Vieux Roi*, there is a threat contained in Guislaine's words; calling upon the primitive forces allotted to Gourmont's women, she knowingly harnesses her intuitive, animalistic desire against the intellectually male structures that stand in her way. On one level, then, Guislaine is a mouthpiece for the transitional energies we have been discussing: in her threat to the 'kingdom' of old words and old ideas, she perpetuates the destructive theme explored in the previous chapter, triumphantly asserting the new values of nature introduced in the present one. On another level, however, while woman may be the 'vehicle' of Gourmont's new attitude, the trope of woman-as-nature ensures that the desired experience intended by this attitude remains other. As long as the feeling of accordance with nature is designated to woman, Gourmont's enterprise continues to rehearse the erotic dynamics of separateness and the desire for an impossible unity.

In *Le Songe d'une femme*, Gourmont attempts to reorient himself toward this idealized female other by formal and stylistic means. As the subjective intellect of the male mind has now become a hindrance to the pleasures of nature, the classic Gourmontian protagonist must be abandoned. This, of course, is no small task, and while theatre such as *Le Vieux Roi* may offer a momentary respite from the habitual perspective of his prose, for Gourmont to cleanse the novel of its male interiority will prove an ambitious experiment.

Deviating from the model of character and narrative that governs all his previous

[54] Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers*, p. 106.
[55] *Promenades littéraires*, vol. II, p. 147.

novels (the subjectivist male protagonist and his *vie cérébrale*), *Le Songe d'une femme* takes an epistolary form, mainly featuring the correspondence of four characters (Anna des Loges, Claude de la Tour, Pierre Bazan, and Paul Pélasge) and their romantic entanglements with one another. To relieve the congestion of subjectivity, Gourmont plots an escape from interiors both formal and thematic: from the subjective discursiveness of the male mind to the casual limpidity of letters and postcards; from the clutter of Paris to the pastoral tranquillity of Normandy. As letter writers, the characters of *Le Songe d'une femme* offer a form of virtual relief even from the interiority of Gourmont's own authorship, their handwritten signatures enhancing the illusion of objectivity and naturalness. According to Paul Escoube, Gourmont achieves this illusion beautifully in that 'l'effort de la composition, s'il y en a un, demeure caché':

> Avec le *Songe d'une femme*, la réalité entre en maîtresse dans l'œuvre de R. de Gourmont. Et la vie se fait aimer pour elle-même. [...] L'intrigue? Elle est quelconque. Elle est la grimace et le sourire du visage de la vie, et surtout le sourire. Voici de la vie pure; mais vue par un artiste. Dans l'arrangement des motifs fournis par la réalité, ce n'est plus le philosophe, mais l'artiste qui intervient le plus; c'est pourquoi la vie respire ici. [56]

Escoube's commentary gives an accurate picture of Gourmont's artistic intentions. In his unfailing affection, however, Escoube overlooks the way in which this 'vie pure' is manufactured. *Le Songe*, like most of Gourmont's novels, begins with a philosophical pronouncement, only now, as in *Le Vieux roi*, the pronouncer is female:

> Que de gens j'ai scandalisés par la naïveté de mes gestes, par ma docilité à répondre à tous les appels de la vie! Que m'importe, puisque je suis heureuse![57]

> Tu voudrais être heureuse, c'est-à-dire que tu voudrais vivre, et tu méconnais la vie! Tu secoues le rosier pour avoir des roses et tu es surprise de les voir s'effeuiller toutes sous tes doigts et s'en aller au gré du vent!

[56] Paul Delior (Paul Escoube), *Remy de Gourmont et son œuvre* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1909), p. 21.
[57] Remy de Gourmont, *Le Songe d'une Femme* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1900), p. 8.

> Ce n'est pas ainsi qu'il faut faire, chère Claude. Va et promène-toi le long de tes rosiers sans penser à rien qu'aux parfums qui peu à peu aviveront ton désir, et ta main toute seule ira, sans craindre les épines et sans les sentir, vers la seule rose; car il n'y en a qu'une qui ait ri pour toi ce matin.[58]

Rather than risk subjecting his new vision of 'la vie' to the introspection and scrutiny of the male mind, Gourmont shelters it in an idealized woman who, unlike any Gourmontian male, can be romanticised and ascribed perfect happiness and harmony. In rebelling against interiority and the treacherous 'Moi' to seek pleasure in the realm of nature and materiality, an inevitable artistic ambiguity arises between the external and the externalized, between objectivity and objectification.

By way of example, Pierre Bazan and Claude de la Tour begin their relationship as painter and model, Claude's husband permitting her to pose for Bazan's initial sketches of Leda and the Swan. Referred to only as Léda, Claude immediately captivates Bazan as the very image of natural sensuality, perfectly at home 'en plein air, dans le petit îlot de joncs et de saules, au milieu du grand étang'.[59] For Gourmont, who habitually uses the artist/muse dynamic to figure erotic relations, this Léda functions as the anti-Sixtine to Bazan's anti-Entragues. In his letter, Bazan delights in abandoning his intellectual intentions, fancying himself an unobtrusive observer of Claude's spontaneous gestures.

> La pose est des plus simples. J'avais d'abord songé à l'attitude classique des Lédas célèbres; je ne voulais que transposer en plein air celle de Michel-Ange, que la jouissance accable, ou celle de Chassériau, dont la volupté plus discrète a aussi quelque chose de plus lascif et dont la main gauche caresse si joliment un illusoire amant. Mais il faudrait un modèle docile et dressé; j'ai donc laissé ma Léda à son inspiration, ne lui imposant aucun geste, ni surtout l'immobilité.[60]

If Della Preda's immobile Madonna was intended as a symbol of Gourmont's artistic

[58] *Le Songe d'une Femme*, p. 11.
[59] *Le Songe d'une Femme*, p. 16.
[60] *Le Songe d'une Femme*, pp. 16-17.

theory at the time of *Sixtine*, then the flesh-and-blood Claude is her opposite.[61] This is even more true of the eroticism that she represents. When she inevitably becomes Bazan's lover, Gourmont exaggerates her contrast to previous women in his fiction.

> Me voyant ému et pâle, elle se jette à mon cou, me dévore, m'écrase [...] et me voilà redevenu pour un jour le cygne de la marquise de L… T [...] Nous avons joué comme des enfants et bu dans mon célèbre verre de Venise (celui dont le portrait a eu une troisième mention). C'était hier, et ce que j'aime en elle maintenant, ce n'est plus la beauté nu d'un corps parfait, c'est la femme tout entière: son sourire autant que ses reins, le son de sa voix, hélas! plus peut-être encore que son ventre en bouclier [...] Elle n'est plus l'impersonnel désir; elle n'est plus le beau morceau de nu qu'on veut toucher pour donner part aux mains de la fête esthétique des yeux; elle est une dame, qui a un nom, qui va aux eaux, qui se meut dans la vie réelle d'aujourd'hui; elle est une femme, et je l'aime!' Mais pourquoi? J'ai vu et j'ai eu les plus beaux modèles, sans aucune émotion: pendant trois semaines Léda a été ma maîtresse de hasard et de passage; je l'ai possédée froidement, c'est-à-dire avec un plaisir d'artiste et de jouisseur, mais non d'amant. Je la quitte, je me sauve, je l'oublie; je suis en train de trafiquer avec intelligence des études à quoi elle s'est prêtée parce qu'elle n'avait plus de pudeurs à feindre devant moi. Je l'oublie enfin et quinze jours y suffisent, et quand je la revois, je l'aime![62]

Here again, Gourmont attempts to chart an escape from the old, constricting sensibility which regarded female beauty as a projection or creation of the beholder (who, in Gourmont's work, is usually an artist). In Bazan's description, the tired tropes of artifice, 'impersonnel désir', and 'la fête esthétique des yeux' gradually dissolve in the heat of the 'réelle'. The habitual tendency to augment the love object with artifice and intelligence (symbolized here by the lovers drinking from Venetian stemware featured in one of Bazan's paintings) is placed in the recent past ('C'etait hier'), and Bazan contrasts his new love for Claude with the 'plaisir d'artiste' of his prior sexual encounters with models.

While this passage does convey the sincerity of Gourmont's shifting attitude

[61] On the subject of statues and physical bodies, see Guy Poitry, 'Chair et Marbre: Le Corps et La Statue Chez Remy de Gourmont', in *Actualité de Remy de Gourmont*, ed. by Vincent Gogibu and Nicolas Malais (Paris: Le Clown Lyrique, 2008), pp. 279-94.
[62] Poitry, 'Chair et Marbre', pp. 36-38.

toward the real, the 'reality' of Claude is deliberately undermined by her own letters to Anna, in which she presents herself as cold, intellectualizing, and fearful of her own sexual desires (and vice versa, as the self-avowedly libertine Anna is described as a bookish governess in Paul's letters). The novel's plot is largely driven by the secrets and misgivings of its numerous characters. The aesthetic of 'réalité', therefore, is countered by a narrative of unresolved deception. As Dominique Millet-Gérard reminds us in her essay on *Le Songe*, these mysteries 'fait du roman un puzzle compliqué dont il appartient au lecteur de rassembler les fragments en déjouant les mensonges.'[63] The games of deceit and duplicity played by the characters, though, have an importance beyond narrative intrigue, and certainly reflect the 'philosophe' which Escoube seems to discount. The inability of the characters to 'know' each other is a device which Gourmont uses to curb the epistemological implications of his 'réalité' and reconcile his nascent materialism with a world that continues to be dominated by deceptive appearances.

> Je sais fort bien que je suis dupe, mais je le suis dans le sens de la vie humaine; le souffle qui me pousse me pousse vers la maison que je désire. La vraie méthode pour dominer la vie est de lui obéir. Il faut bien que j'obéisse, puisque je veux être le maître. Présentons nos voiles au vent; orientons nos illusions sur le but commun à tous les désirs.[64]

The spontaneous context of this passage is also significant. Its epistolary author, Xavier de Maupertius, is only introduced near the end of the novel as a man who falls in love with the young Adelaïde Fairlie when they meet by chance on the beach. Gourmont explains that he and his addressee, the Comtesse de Trévire, are affiliated with Bazan and Pélasge, but very little beyond that. Thus, Gourmont reduces a character to a single amorous encounter just as that character reduces himself to a passive agent of the

[63] Dominique Millet-Gérard, 'Gourmont romancier épistolaire: "Le Songe d'une femme"', in *Modernité de Remy de Gourmont*, pp. 49-64 (p. 52).
[64] *Le Songe d'une femme*, p. 237.

common aim of all desires. The sudden episode of Maupertius serves as a kind of conclusion to the complex narratives of Bazan and Pélasges, synthesizing their circuitous enchantments and disenchantments with women into a single moment of clarity in which Gourmont's philosophical voice is most apparent.

In the end, the feeling of authentic reality experienced by Bazan toward his muse has proven to be an aesthetic phenomenon like any other. The law of the world as representation has not changed, nor have the 'illusions' of erotic desire given way to any direct experience of reality. 'Les femmes sont belles parce que nous les désirons', writes Pélasges in the tradition of Gourmont's Symbolist protagonists, despite the new insight that, 'si je suis ému au mouvement d'une gorge qui se gonfle sous les dentelles, c'est parce que le Dieu qui nous leurre m'impose le souci de perpétuer ce mouvement d'amour et l'organisme qui en est le moteur'.[65]

With this in mind, let us return to the issue of gender representation. For the men of *Le Songe*, this reclaimed image of the Will to Life offers an experience of enlivenment and adventure which fills them with a feeling of belonging to the universal order, but which acts upon them from outside. To his city-dwelling Comtesse, Maupertuis writes:

> Je ne suis pas devenu sentimental; ma sensibilité s'est exaspérée jusqu'à ne plus goûter que les nuances et les finesses de la vie, voilà la vérité. L'épilepsie n'est plus le but de mes promenades et je préfère un verre d'eau fraiche à un verre d'eau-de-vie.[66]

In Maupertius's language, 'la vie' is not an internal condition, but an external object to be appreciated from the outside. It is an object of sensibility, with its own unique aesthetic décor, in which the male can choose whether to partake (like water and eau-de-vie). Gourmont's women, however, do not choose this condition in the same way.

[65] *Le Songe d'une femme*, pp. 180-81.
[66] *Le Songe d'une femme*, p. 238.

As Adelaide writes to Annette, 'Chère enfant, il faut au moins garder son cœur, si on n'a pas la force de garder tout. Le cœur d'une femme, cela contient son âme et son intelligence. Nous comprenons en aimant, nous autres.'[67] For Gourmont's women, then, this life force (in which 'aimer' is synonymous with 'vivre') is not only internal, but infinitely more fundamental than the aesthetic delicacies enjoyed by men. Rather than a mere sensibility to be cultivated, it is the very basis of womanhood.

Having abandoned the onanism of 'le monde, c'est moi' and the notion of the superiority of thought, Gourmont has redeemed the Will to Life only to project it onto the opposite sex, thus situating the new values of 'la vie' 'l'amour', and 'la nature' in the unattainable object of desire – still erotically 'other' despite their supposed universality.

'La tyrannie du système nerveux'

The feminization of the amalgam formed by 'la nature', 'la vie', and 'l'amour' is just one of the ways in which Gourmont's male protagonists remain ironically removed from the vital basis of the world. To take things further, Gourmont increases his depictions of lesbian desire, beginning with the sisters of *Le Vieux Roi* (Germaine desires Guislaine), prototypes of Anna and Claude in *Le Songe d'une femme*, of whom homosexual desire is also indicated. In both works, female homosexuality bears a quality of mentorship whereby women instruct each other towards their true nature as amorous organisms (after all, 'nous comprenons en aimant, nous autres'):

> GERMAINE: Comme tu dis bien ton amour! Moi, je ne sais pas parler. Je songe à des caresses muettes, profondes et ténébreuses et j'ai peur de mon désir.
>
> FLORAINE: Tu veux être heureuse, tu veux vivre aux pieds de Guislaine,

[67] *Le Songe d'une femme*, p. 200.

et moi je veux ta joie. Laisse faire.[68]

The lesbian theme makes a vicarious fantasy of a naturalness which has been essentialized as feminine. When ascribed homosexual tendencies, women resemble a distinct species who fulfil their sexual destinies to the awe and aspiration of the over-intellectual male, who in turn represents the human race as it beholds the primitive majesty of animal lifeforms, such as the ants longingly described by Bazan:

> J'ai vu les noces des fourmis. Celles qui doivent s'accoupler ont des ailes et c'est dans l'air que les couples se joignent; mais sitôt que le mâle a étreint la femelle, leurs ailes se mêlent, leurs nerfs se troublent et les deux bestioles enlacées tournoient et tombent. Les noces que je vis s'étaient exaltées très haut, au-dessus des arbres, la pluie d'or rebondissait de feuilles en feuilles, avec un vrai bruit d'ondée, et à mesure qu'un couple touchait le sol, les deux amants aussitôt désunis rejaillissaient comme les gouttes d'une cascade et s'en allaient, d'un vol rapide et solitaire, vers le soleil et vers la mort. Singulière vision et presque effrayante! Je suis très fier d'en avoir eu le spectacle et j'ai pitié de moi, qui aime avec tant de précautions, de détours et de ruses, quand je songe aux fourmis qui donnent toute leur vie pour la vie et ne se disjoignent, les femelles que pour aller porter à la fourmilière le trésor fécond, et les mâles que pour mourir.[69]

Even here, the superiority of the female as an agent of nature is echoed in the post-coital death of the male ant as the female nobly carries forth her 'trésor'.

My aim in discussing the gender representations of *Le Songe* is to show how they face Gourmont's own post-Symbolist enthusiasm for vital universality with the continued problem of subjectivity and separateness in erotic desire. In other words, Gourmont's gender opposition in *Le Songe* is one of the ways in which the crisis of erotic idealism continues to unfold even under the seemingly contrary preoccupations of physical sexuality and 'la réelle'.

If the problem of erotic perceptual disunity cannot be solved by the naturalistic

[68] *Le Vieux Roi*, p. 90.
[69] *Le Songe d'une femme*, p. 94.

esprit nouveau, it can at least be fruitfully reframed. This is precisely what Gourmont attempts to do in *Physique de l'amour*. From the outset, Maupertius' discourse on the sexual 'sens de la vie humaine' becomes a scientific and philosophical premise: 'Quel est le but de la vie? Le maintien de la vie.'[70] But, like Maupertius, Gourmont defies any neat teleology of reproduction when he adds that 'l'idée même de but est une illusion humaine. Il n'y a ni commencement, ni milieu, ni fin dans la séries des causes. [...] Née de la vie, la vie engendrera éternellement la vie. Elle le doit et elle le veut. [...] Entre tous les actes possibles, dans la possibilité que nous pouvons connaître ou imaginer, l'acte sexuel est donc le plus important de tous les actes.'[71]

As mentioned earlier, Gourmont joins his contemporaries in demystifying the Will to Life through physiology (allowing him to reduce it to 'l'acte sexuel') in order to re-mystify it as a (positive) cosmic life force that defies human knowledge and perception.

> La révolte est inutile contre une nécessité si évidente. Nos délicatesses protestent vainement: l'homme et le plus dégoûtant de ses parasites sont des produits d'un identique mécanisme sexuel. Ce que nous avons jeté de fleurs sur l'amour peut le masquer comme un piège à fauves: toutes nos activités évoluent autour de ce précipice et y tombent les unes après les autres; le but de la vie humaine est le maintien de la vie humaine.[72]

Words like 'but', 'nécessité', 'évidente', and 'identique' are not to be taken prescriptively, but instead describe a drive that is so total that it cannot be understood as a whole. Gourmont devotes most of *Physique de l'amour* to detailing with taxonomical zeal the particular sexual behaviours of an array of species. However, in man's position in nature, there remains a contradictory pressure every bit as phenomenological as the crisis of 'le monde, c'est moi' – what Gourmont would call

[70] *Physique de l'amour*, p. 14.
[71] *Physique de l'amour*, pp. 14-15.
[72] *Physique de l'amour*, p. 15.

'La tyrannie du système nerveux'.[73] This concept, to which the last chapter of *Physique de l'amour* is dedicated, describes 'une imperfection, un désaccord entre l'ordre et l'accomplissement'[74] which makes the execution of nature's sole law (the perpetuation of the species) largely clumsy and imperfect. The body is mismatched to the mind; the intelligence sends precise orders (via the nervous system) to organs that are quite often unsuited to the task, and while Gourmont sees this to be the case in many different species, man disproportionately suffers this tyranny as a consequence of his vast, complex intellect, which

> dépasse immensément ses organes; elle les submerge; elle leur demande l'impossibilité et l'absurde [...] Il a demandé aussi aux organes sexuels plus qu'ils ne pouvaient donner: et c'est pour les satisfaire que furent inventés ces gestes qui jettent sur le lit de l'amour tant de fleurs et tant de rêves.[75]

Even though Gourmont by this time has dissociated the idea of the intelligence from the troublesome myths of cerebral mastery and primacy, re-associating it with instinct and the dictates of nature, the intelligence continues to manufacture its own realities in opposition to the realities of the physical body and the material world that it inhabits. Here, we may recognize an old idea from *Lilith*, in which the creation of Adam's sexual organ is portrayed as arbitrary and without clear intention, a fact which ultimately leads to the disunity of the Fall, but consequently the advent of the erotic imagination.[76] Here too, in *Physique de l'amour*, Gourmont locates a productive tension in the gulf between the human mind and the physical limitations of the sexual organ. 'La nature, qui veut fermement la perpétuité des espèces, n'en a pas encore trouvé le moyen unique et

[73] *Physique de l'amour*, p. 259.
[74] *Physique de l'amour*, p. 266.
[75] *Physique de l'amour*, p. 269.
[76] See Chapter 3, p. 120.: 'this is the birth of sexual awareness, responsible for such phenomena as shame and envy, but also (and perhaps consequently) for erotic desire and imagination.'

simple'.[77] In humans, Gourmont believes, this disunity amounts to a diversity of aptitudes, condemned by moralists as 'luxure', but which is no less than the root of all imagination and culture.

> Tout n'est que luxure. Luxure, la variété des nourritures, leur cuisson, leur assaisonnement, la culture des espèces alimentaires; luxure, les exercices de l'œil, la décoration, la toilette, la peinture; luxure, la musique; luxure, les exercices merveilleux de la main, si merveilleux que le produit direct de l'activité manuelle peut être singé par une machine, jamais égalé; luxure, les fleurs, les parfums; luxure, les voyages rapides, le goût des paysages; luxure tout art, toute science, toute civilisation; luxure aussi, la diversité des gestes humains, car l'animal, dans sa vertueuse sobriété, n'a qu'un geste pour chaque sens, toujours le même; et si ce geste change, ce qui est probable, mais lent et invisible, il n'y en a jamais qu'un. L'animal ignore la diversité, l'accumulation des aptitudes: l'homme seul est luxurieux.[78]

Herein lies the paradox: at the same time as Gourmont extols the uniqueness of human *luxure*, he famously declares: 'Nous sommes des animaux [...] Et quand nous faisons l'amour, c'est bien, selon l'expression des théologiens, *more bestiarum*. L'amour est profondément animal: c'est sa beauté.'[79] This uncertain contrast between animality and *luxure* is deepened even more by the use of the word 'beauté' to describe the former, a word which calls us back to the all-encompassing list of aesthetic aptitudes and beautiful things deemed 'luxurieux' and therefore strictly human. Furthermore, it is not explicit whether Gourmont means the sexual simplicity of the animal mind (compared to the complex *luxure* unique to humans) or the sexual diversity of the animal kingdom as a whole.

This ambiguity itself, I argue, is one of the ways in which Gourmont's work is still profoundly concerned with eros as distinct from physical sexuality. In the productive rift between the demands of the mind and the facts of the body, in the tension

[77] *Physique de l'amour*, p. 263.
[78] *Physique de l'amour*, p. 264.
[79] *Physique de l'amour*, p. 13.

between separateness (the animal versus the human) and unity (the human as the animal), the abstract dynamics of eros continue to undergird the materialism which Gourmont will continue to explore until his death in 1915.

Chapter 6: The Gods

For five years after the publication of *Le Songe d'une femme*, Gourmont committed himself almost exclusively to concerns outside of fiction: the essays of his *Epilogues* (vols. I-III, 1903-1905), *Promenades littéraires* (vols. I and II, 1904 and 1906), the first volume of *Promenades philosophiques* (1905), collaboration in journals such as *Revue des idées* (with Édouard Dujardin and biologist René Quinton), and the entomological studies of *Physique de l'amour*, among other activities. The novels which appear after this period do so with far less consistency than those of the previous century. *Une nuit au Luxembourg* is published in 1906, followed closely by *Un Cœur virginal* in 1907, but it was not until 1913 that Gourmont published his next and final novel, *Lettres d'un Satyre.* Despite their sporadic chronology, these three novels nonetheless constitute a unique (and poignantly final) phase of Gourmont's literary creation. After a long and reflective period of enthusiasm for materialist and post-Symbolist values, Gourmont's fiction begins to reinstate aspects of the fantastical and subjective ethos that characterized his writing in the 1890's, counterbalancing the realism which accompanied his fervent departure from Symbolist interiority in *Le Songe d'une femme*.

The last decade of Gourmont's life was marked by an almost serene spirit of reconciliation and acceptance toward the intellectual crises of the past, and this reconciliation is signaled by a certain return to the earliest themes of his career. In 1908, Gourmont published *Dante, Béatrice et la poésie amoureuse* with material retrieved from his 1883 essay on 'Béatrice, Dante et Platon'. His *Promenades littéraires* look

wistfully upon the nineteenth century with their 'Souvenirs du Symbolism'[1] and poetic reminiscences of idealism in its militant heyday ('il était bon de s'être baigné dans le lac fleuri de lotus', he writes. '[P]our ma part, je ne le regretterai jamais.')[2] In this retrospective turn, however, Gourmont presents something more than the nostalgia of an aging writer. During this period of retrieval, as we shall see, Gourmont produces some of his most nuanced, as well as his most peculiar, discourses on idealism, reconciling his twentieth-century materialism with the phenomenological quandaries against which it reacted. A resurgent embrace of mystery – above all, the mystery of erotic desire – underpins (and may have even motivated) Gourmont's return to fiction in 1906. With *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, a self-ironic admission of ignorance, futility, and human nature gently begins to mediate the scientific fervour that preceded its publication, culminating in a new attitude towards the material and cerebral dichotomy of experience in general and erotic desire in particular.

For Gourmont, as I have shown, the scientific reality of sexual love explored in *Physique de l'amour* also constitutes a fantasy. The embrace of the material world, the end of the omnipotent 'Moi', the pursuit of joy in the simpler riches of nature and instinct: Gourmont's final novels come to terms with the erotic (thus subjective and phenomenological) basis of these recent values and end by framing them in terms of an impossible 'Unité' which the lover feels himself approaching, but which will (and must) always slip from his grasp. Where there is desire (however natural or material its object), there is no avoiding the vain impulse to an infinitely-receding transcendence.

In this chapter, I argue that Gourmont's late-career conception of erotic desire, in looking back to the idealist principles of subjectivity and perceptual uncertainty, also looks ahead to a mature description of erotic desire characterized by lack and distance.

[1] Remy de Gourmont, 'Souvenirs du Symbolisme', *Promenades littéraires*, vol. IV, pp. 5-92.
[2] 'Souvenirs du Symbolisme', p. 71.

A Materialist 'pour qui la seule réalité est la pensée': Materialism and Idealism Reconciled

If *Le Songe d'une femme*, with its tentative appeals to *la vie, la nature*, and *la réalité*, furnished Gourmont with an enlivening antidote for the time-tarnished erotic pressures of 'le monde, c'est moi', *Physique de l'amour* attempts to venture beyond the multivalent catchwords of the *esprit nouveau* in order to locate a more fundamental truth. While the 'sens de la vie humaine'[3] was already insinuated in *Le Songe d'une femme*, *Le Vieux Roi*, and *Le Désarroi*, in *Physique de l'amour*, Gourmont emphasizes two essentials indicated by its title: the meaning of life is reducible to the sexual instinct, and the sexual instinct is reducible to physical processes. With *Physique de l'amour*, the refrains of 'la vie', 'la nature', and 'la réalité' are all subsumed into Gourmont's new philosophical monism. These concepts continue to function as signals of a naturalistic aesthetic sensibility, but the ambivalent theories behind them have been forcefully simplified and subordinated to a more specific agenda.

At the same time as Gourmont, like many post-Symbolists, is concerned with the liberation of instinct and animality, this attitude remains deeply grounded in the eternal problem of perceptual uncertainty. As we have seen in *Physique de l'amour*'s 'Tyrannie du système nerveux', the mind continues to manufacture its own realities beyond and at odds with that which is external to it. Gourmont's materialism is an erotic attitude as well as a philosophy. It offers no actual knowledge of 'reality', but rather constellates the ideals which are now desired: the physical mechanism that drives the sexual instincts of animals who copulate harmoniously like the dragonflies of *Physique de*

[3] *Le Songe d'une femme*, p. 237.

l'amour or the ants of *Le Songe d'une femme*, the same programming that Gourmont's women feel more acutely than his men, who are disproportionately clouded by intellect. Gourmont's materialism, as I have shown, also refashions elements of the Schopenhauerian paradigm: instead of the old dream of unbridled representation hindered by reality, Gourmont longs for communion with the Will to Life across the indestructible boundary of human perception.

Gourmont continues to uphold the basic condition of idealism, and human experience remains purely phenomenological even after subjectivity and the intelligence have been devalued and the material world admitted. Whether the world is a cerebral projection or a physical reality, it turns out, has little bearing on man's relation to reality. In the years after *Physique*, Gourmont frequently claims idealism and materialism to be interchangeable:

> La matière, telle qu'il faut la concevoir pour être véritablement matérialiste, n'est autre chose qu'un assemblage de forces, ou, selon la définition du P. Boscovich, 'un système de points indivisibles et inétendus'. Cette matière est parfaitement insaisissable en sa réalité; c'est un tissu idéal, une glaise dont chaque particule est un pur concept. Finalement, idéalisme et matérialisme deviennent synonymes, et le matérialiste est celui pour qui la matière n'existe pas; pour qui la seule réalité est la pensée.[4]

Idealism is stripped of its metaphysics in the same gesture as materialism is stripped of its positivism. In the same volume of *Promenades philosophiques*, in 'les racines de l'idéalisme', this point is further explored, and approached from the opposite direction. Gourmont begins by renewing his vows to 'l'idéalisme subjectif, auquel, en somme, je reste en grande partie fidèle',[5] restating that the simple formula of 'le monde est ma représentation'[6] is a fortress that remains invulnerable to every argument against it. But

[4] Remy de Gourmont, 'La Vie et la mort', *Promenades philosophiques*, pp. 166-67.
[5] 'Les Racines de l'idéalisme', p. 79.
[6] 'Les Racines de l'idéalisme', p. 80.

this does not prevent him from evoking Taine once more when he asks of the relationship between consciousness and the phenomenal world:

> Part-il des sens pour aboutir à l'esprit? Ou, par, hasard, ne serait-ce pas une de ces conceptions de l'esprit qui retombent sur les sens comme une avalanche et qui les glacent et les étouffent? Comment les sens se sont-ils formés? Telle est la question. Y a-t-il toujours eu opposition entre le moi et le non-moi? Il n'y a rien dans l'intelligence, qui n'ait d'abord été dans les sens.[7] [...] La conscience est un phénomène de second ordre et d'utilité toute sentimentale.[8]

The ideality of matter, according to the twentieth-century Gourmont, is conversely predicated on 'la matérialité de la pensée'.[9] However, when Gourmont extols the insights of materialism (as he does often after *Physique*), what really captures his attention is the nature of the senses, not as tools for the proper judgement of the material world ('or tout jugement est arbitraire'),[10] but as the channels which link mind and body not only to each other but to the 'vaste ondulation rythmique'[11] of terrestrial life and its continuation. All perceptible things must pass through the senses for thought to form, and, likewise, a thought can only be expressed as a sign which can be 'reçues matériellement par les sens'.[12] These senses themselves are the creations, however imperfect, of the environment and of evolution.

'Les raisons de l'idéalisme plongent dans la matière, profondément', Gourmont repeats: 'Idéalisme veut dire matérialisme; et, à l'inverse, matérialisme veut dire idéalisme'.[13] Though philosophically troubling, Gourmont's chain of reasoning is simple to follow as long as 'idéalisme' is provisionally reduced to the law of perceptual

[7] Gourmont invokes the Peripatetic axiom of Thomas Aquinas: 'Nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses.' *Questiones disputatae de veritate*, vol. I. trans. by Robert W. Mulligan (Chicago: Regnery, 1952), q. 2 a. 3 arg. 19.
[8] 'Les Racines de l'idéalisme', p. 93.
[9] 'Les Racines de l'idéalisme', p. 103.
[10] 'Les Racines de l'idéalisme', p. 104.
[11] 'Les Racines de l'idéalisme', 102.
[12] 'Les Racines de l'idéalisme', p. 100.
[13] 'Les Racines de l'idéalisme', p 105.

uncertainty. What is more interesting than the validity of his claim, however, is his overarching motive. There is a clear affinity between the attempt to align idealism with materialism (in this essay) and the attempt to align humanity with animality (in *Physique*), as they both participate in Gourmont's quest to reorient himself towards a primal anteriority (just as Maupertius asks us to 'orientons nos illusions sur le but commun à tous les désirs),[14] all the while accounting for the ironic beauty of the perceptual obstacles which live on in the 'forteresse de l'idéalisme', the unknowability of matter, and the 'tyrannie du système nerveux'.

Like 'la pensée' of his earlier work, the monism of Gourmontian materiality is a realm of creation in which dichotomies, concepts, and categories become infinitely plastic. Gourmont is enthusiastic in his use of materialism as a pretext for commonality and connectedness. Discussing the 'vitalism' of Claude Bernard, he writes:

> Claude Bernard est encore vitaliste, mais sous une forme très atténuée, puisqu'il n'admet plus une différence essentielle entre le fait vital et le fait physique; la vie et la chimie font également du sucre, mais leurs méthodes et leurs buts ne sont pas identiques.[15]

The refrain of materialism melting boundaries permeates Gourmont's work in the twentieth century. However, like in the above, this inclination toward unity still contains its own particular discourses of separateness. The erotic otherness of 'natural' women, for instance, continues to be a paradoxical model for the spirit of sameness:

> La femme dissocie mal l'émotion intellectuelle de l'émotion physique. C'est même sa plus évidente supériorité naturelle sur l'homme que toutes ses émotions, sans jamais se contrarier ni se contredire, se recueillent plus sûrement en un centre unique, d'où elles irradient dans toutes les directions. Les femmes sont la nature même, qui ignore si profondément la distinction du spirituel et du temporel.[16]

[14] *Le Songe d'une femme*, p. 237.
[15] 'La Vie et la mort', p. 166.
[16] *Lettres à l'Amazone*, p. 101.

A contradiction emerges between, on the one hand, a monistic, universal materiality that ignores distinctions and, on the other, the implication that there are distinct degrees of naturalness that bring women closer to this condition than men. How can something be closer to, or farther from, a materiality that accounts for all things?

Despite his desire to reconcile all concepts and phenomena under the umbrella of materiality, Gourmont is aware that his personal sensibility of materialism (with its ideals of nature and woman) is still confined to the sphere of individual representation, consistent with the notion that the materialist is one for whom matter does not exist. This is why, even though 'la physique seule existe',[17] the unnamed god of *Une nuit au Luxembourg* (a novel which I will discuss shortly) reminds the protagonist that 'Les femmes sont de la métaphysique [...] Les femmes sont des créations de la sensibilité, de l'intelligence, de la foi; cela dépend des moments, cela dépend des hommes'.[18] Gourmont's aim is not to overturn the idealist insight that human experience consists solely of phenomena, but rather to redress his previous attitude that held the self, 'l'intelligence', and 'la conscience' at the generative centre of the phenomenal world. Hence the actual meaning of the word 'racines' in 'Les racines de l'idéalisme': Gourmont wishes to relocate the 'racines' of idealism (the philosophical condition, not the tradition itself) in the vast reality of material, physical processes that we call nature, thus connecting it to the arguments of *Physique de l'amour*. As the essay itself stems from 'La Tyrannie du système nerveux' (Gourmont notes this at the beginning), we gather that Gourmont's revised understanding of the phenomenal world is couched not in materialism in general, but in the particular material flux of the senses and the sexual instinct.

The novels after *Le Songe d'une femme* each develop the strange truce between

[17] *Lettres à l'Amazone*, p. 36.
[18] *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, pp. 178-79.

materialism and idealism which Gourmont has reached by 1905, at the end of his excursion into non-literary studies of physiology and natural science. In *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, discussed below, Gourmont seeks to re-establish the limits of perception and the intellect by renewing the phenomenological mystery of erotic desire as his central theme.

'Du côté des roses': *Une nuit au Luxembourg* and the Dream of Erotic Anti-Philosophy

The metaphorical gods of Gourmont's later fiction (namely, the character solely known as 'Lui' in *Une nuit au Luxembourg* and the satyr Antiphilos of *Lettres d'un Satyre*) stand in stark opposition to the 'God' of his Symbolist period. Where mention of God previously referred to the infinite realm of immaterial thought – the locus of all creation, free of worldly contingencies[19] – the archetype who is introduced in *Une nuit au Luxembourg* transcends humanity through his association with the elemental, the sensual, and the instinctive.

Anne Boyer has noted the special place that *Une nuit au Luxembourg* holds in Gourmont's œuvre, calling attention to the fact that it marks a return to fiction writing after an unprecedented five years 'marquées pour Gourmont par une production nettement orienté vers le débat des idées'.[20] This period, of which *Physique de l'amour* is the half-way point, was, as we've already seen, one of profound philosophical reflection and reorientation. In the critical and scientific material we have explored from this time, Gourmont has done much to elaborate on the themes which appear in embryo in *Le Songe d'une femme*, deriving from them a new basis for exploring the primary

[19] See Chapter 2 of this thesis.
[20] Boyer, *Remy de Gourmont: l'écriture et ses masques*, p. 264.

role of physiology and the sensory realm in erotic relations (*Physique de l'amour*), poetic language (*Le Problème du style*) and human perception more generally ('Les Racines de l'idéalisme').

If Gourmont's novels are still 'gambits' in a 'war of ideas'[21] like the one that flourished in the early years of the new century, then *Une nuit au Luxembourg* has much to account for. Perhaps this is why the god figure of the novel appears to the protagonist as a sagacious repository of philosophical assertions which echo (if not directly restate) the recent key developments in Gourmont's own theories and sensibilities. As the protagonist walks alongside him in the garden, the quasi-immortal Lui unfolds the history of his 'visites terrestres'[22] how he mentored Pythagoras, Spinoza, and Epicurus, how he has been called Christ and Apollo, how he was the real object of St Teresa's ecstasy,[23] and so on. Lui proceeds to give a long account of the scientific, philosophical, and spiritual developments of human history, critiquing its errors and applauding its selective moments of grace. His pronouncements and biases span a whole range of Gourmont's twentieth-century concerns: from pantheistic sensuality to the question of intelligence and instinct, from anticlericalism to evolutionary biology (with references as specific as Quinton's theory of thermic constancy).[24]

Behind Lui's discourse, however, is an explicit opposition between the pursuit of truth and the fulfilment of life and happiness. Throughout the novel, Gourmont adds a smirk of self-consciousness to the very notion that the instinctive, natural attainment of pleasure can be communicated through language and processed by the intelligence.

[21] Burne, 'Remy de Gourmont and the Aesthetics of Symbolism', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 4.1/2 (1967), 161-75 (p. 165).
[22] *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, p. 54.
[23] See Chapter 2.
[24] Quinton was a major influence on Gourmont's intellectual development in the domain of science. The two eventually collaborated as editors of *La Revue des idées*, a journal of scientific 'haute vulgarization'.

'Maître' and teacher, Lui fictionalizes the paradox of using discursive ideas to access something which is anterior to language and thought. This is why Lui remains nameless, contradicts himself often, and faces the protagonist with 'des énigmes et des paraboles'.[25]

> Je ne vous dirai donc pas la vérité, parce qu'il n'y a pas de concordance possible entre votre esprit servi par vos sens et ce qui est extérieur à vos sens. Il y a une représentation; elle est inexacte, parce qu'elle est fragmentaire et momentanée. Quelques petits cubes de la mosaïque sont tombés de la voûte, vous les mettez dans le creux de votre main, vous en assemblez les nuances et vous croyez avoir reconstitué le drame du monde. Je ne vous dirai pas la vérité; je vous dirai ce que vous désirez savoir. Quand vous le saurez, vous n'en saurez pas davantage, mais vous serez content.[26]

The purposely enigmatic dialogue between Lui and the protagonist goes against Burne's appraisal that Gourmont's 'artistry was destined ultimately to serve his ideas, a means of exploring and clarifying his thoughts and giving them concrete form'.[27] While there is certainly no separating Gourmont's artistry from his ideas, *Une nuit au Luxembourg* confirms for us how Gourmont's artistry frequently serves to de-concretize and even subvert ideas which elsewhere appear established and formal. In this case, Gourmont has deliberately condensed six years of ideas into a fictional character who uses them mainly to demonstrate the vanity of human ideation. Through Lui, Gourmont lays down the mantle of his own intellectual discourse in order to regain the more essential (yet also more inexpressible) imperative of pleasure and happiness.

> Toute votre science jusqu'ici a été de donner des noms différents à des apparences différentes. Vous saurez peut-être un jour qu'il se passe toujours la même chose, c'est-à-dire rien, et, délaissant l'illisible roman de l'infini, vous vivrez votre propre vie. Elle en vaut la peine. Vous l'apprendrez un jour et vous serez bien étonnés d'avoir perdu tant et tant de siècles à scruter en vain des phénomènes dont vous ne percevez que les reflets prisés dans une mer agitée par les tempêtes de votre

[25] *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, p. 63.
[26] *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, pp. 62-63.
[27] Burne, *Remy de Gourmont*, pp. 16-17.

imagination.[28]

The metaphor of the 'illisible roman de l'infini' further deepens the quality of intellectual self-abnegation that *Une nuit au Luxembourg* presents, giving the ironic impression of a philosophical novel which challenges the very thinking that produces intellectual and literary forms. And yet, despite his riddles and contradictions, Lui on his own can add very little beyond ambivalence to the ideas that Gourmont has formed in recent years. Lui repeatedly admits that he, too, is limited in his powers and knowledge by natural laws. Therefore, faced with the limitations of discourse, he must summon forth the true object of his teachings: Woman. Three women appear after Lui ceremoniously leads the protagonist to the rose garden, which functions as a portal into the ideal realm of nature/woman.

> MOI: Du côté des rosiers.
>
> LUI: Du côté des roses.
>
> Comme nous avancions, un jour doux et pur naissait. Les arbres soudain feuillus et les marronniers, fleuris de hampes blanches et rouges, s'emplirent de chants d'oiseaux. Des merles, au plus haut des branches, lançaient leurs appels aigus. Des abeilles déjà passaient en murmurant; une mouche se posa sur ma main.
> Le grand parterre était tout épanoui. Un parfum m'enveloppa d'une précieuse douceur. Nous dérangeâmes un chat qui guettait deux pigeons roucoulant. Mon ami cueillit une rose rouge, puis une blanche, puis une jaune. A ce moment, il me parut qu'il était cinq heures du matin par une belle journée d'été.
>
> MOI: Je suis heureux! Je suis heureux![29]

Lui's insistence on 'roses' instead of 'rosiers' encapsulates his emphasis on the instinct of desire, but also on the plasticity of perception. This mere semantic difference symbolizes Lui (and Gourmont's) appeal, not to a different form of knowledge, but to

[28] *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, pp. 135-136.
[29] *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, pp. 38-39.

a different way of seeing and feeling the world which cannot be articulated verbally or mastered intellectually. *Roses* implies a certain attitude or intention toward the same plant called *rosiers*, one which ignores the greater structure of roots and branches (symbolizing the structures that science and philosophy strive to understand) in favour of the immediate, instinctual object of desire. The rose, with its colour and perfume, is that outgrowth of the rosebush which attracts the senses, and Gourmont takes full advantage of cliché by associating it with erotic woman when he places this episode at the heart of the text.[30]

These three women, like Lui himself, are elemental divinities intended to present the protagonist with what Gourmont sees as the pure, primordial dance of desire and sexual love in accordance with Lui's epicurean prescriptions. However, by today's standards as well as those of Gourmont's time, there is a cloying quality[31] to how Gourmont constructs his image of uninhibited love-play.

> Elles étaient vêtues de blanc. De légers chapeaux de fleurs ornaient leur chevelures légères couleur de blé. Elles marchaient lentement, se tenant par la main; leurs sourires faisaient une lumière dans la lumière. A la vue des roses nouvelles, elles crièrent toutes ensemble comme des enfants et demeurèrent les bras levés vers les rosiers, craintives et troublées par le désir.
> Je regardais, prisonnier du charme, mais, mon ami avec l'aisance d'un roi, fit quelques pas vers elles, et leur tendit les roses qu'il avait cueillies. Elles les prirent en rougissant et les passèrent dans leur ceinture.[32]

In all this perfume-enveloped swooning, it is possible that the stylistic tactlessness is intentional. Gourmont perhaps intends to convey an image of erotic sentimentality that is unapologetic and unselfconscious to better contrast it to the sophisticated world of ideas and discourse which, according to Lui, stifles the sensual objective of life by

[30] The motif of the rose is echoed in typifying character names such as James Sandy-Rose (the narrator of *Une nuit au Luxembourg*) and Rose Dubois (the young woman of *Un Cœur virginal*).
[31] See Cleveland Palmer's 1913 review of Arthur Ransome's translation: Cleveland Palmer, 'Rémy de Gourmont's "Une Nuit au Luxembourg", *The Bookman*, 1 January 1913.
[32] *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, pp. 40-41.

introducing inhibition and discernment. To represent the kind of ideal love that he is attempting to outline without recourse to over-intellectual language, it is in a sense appropriate to embrace a cliché for its unthinking immediacy. Where these erotic episodes are concerned, the text echoes Lui's attitude to life and love by surrendering itself to accessible and apparent objects of desire (like the rose, another cliché).Whatever the efficacy of his stylistic tactics, Gourmont is attempting to consider a form of pure instinct for pleasure that only the gods (metaphors of both the impossible and the elemental) have full access to, but which is nonetheless buried deep down beneath the calcified abstractions of the civilized mind. The divine damsels are not particular women, but the reductive archetype of mutually desired and desiring woman herself, whose arousal of the protagonist's delight is meant to self-evidently enlighten him to the 'sens de la vie humaine'. When he enquires into the identity of one, another answers, 'Elle? Mais c'est Elle, c'est la vie, c'est la jeunesse, c'est la beauté, c'est l'amour. Elle!'[33] Once again, Gourmont's quest for the essential regularly veers toward an essential*izing* attitude toward womankind, for whom love is the 'seule et vraie raison d'être'.[34] But, like before, this sexist reduction only intensifies the erotic paradox: as pure lovers, the damsels show the protagonist the all-too-tangible nature of pleasure and happiness, but are so alien in their essentialized amorousness that Gourmont sees them as hallucinatory deities who will just as soon vanish along with Lui and his omniscient powers. When the protagonist falls in love with one of the women, whom he calls Elise, she agrees to stay with him and live in the world of mortals. Though the paradisiac world created by Lui's presence has ended, they enjoy a day of ecstatic love and sensuality. Drunk with hope, the protagonist's voice is inadvertently full of portents that his immortal lover is not meant for this world: how elegant she looks in Parisian

[33] *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, p. 48.
[34] 'Le congrès des femmes', *Epilogues*, vol. II (Paris: Mercure de France, 1904), p. 192.

clothes, how the sadness of human desire makes her want to weep, until, most portentous of all:

> Amant d'une immortelle, je vois devant mon désir, jadis triste, s'ouvrir enfin les arcanes. L'Arcane! Car je sens que je vais entrer dans l'Unité.
> Mais il y a longtemps que j'écris, je suis las. Ma maîtresse m'attend. Elle dort, elle dort toujours. Peut-être que l'on ne dort pas, chez eux? Elle goûte pour la première fois le bonheur de ne pas vivre.
> […]
> On trouva M. James-Sandy Rose assis à sa table de travail, la tête appuyée sur son pupitre. Il semblait dormir, et il était mort. La plume, échappée à ses doigts, avait roulé à terre en laissant sur le papier une large tache d'encre. Après le mot *vivre* vient la première lettre d'un mot qui s'achève en un trait serpentin. Cette lettre est sans doute un V, et peut-être, ce qui est assez dans sa manière, allait-il recommencer une phrase avec ce même mot *Vivre*, quand la mort l'a terrassé.[35]

Through the figure of woman, Gourmont contends with an ideal of love so attainable as to be out of reach, so 'natural' as to become metaphysical all over again. Hence the thematic prominence of gods and the supernatural in a phase of Gourmont's career that recognizes only the material world and the physical reality of the human body. However material and bodily the fabric of existence may be, erotic desire still seems to push its object into the beyond.

Dante and Beatrice Revisited

The irony of *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, with its thematic return to the fantastical, is that it actually offers a sobering philosophical countercheck to the intoxicating dream of libidinal naturalness, materiality, and universality presented in the more realistic prose of *Le Songe d'une femme*, returning the perceptual questions of erotic desire to a central place in Gourmont's work. Though the relationship between desire and the imagination is touched upon in *Physique de l'amour*'s 'La Tyrannie du système nerveux' and philosophically connected to 'Les Racines de l'idéalisme', Gourmont's return to fiction

[35] *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, pp. 190-93.

in 1906 sees renewed focus on the psychological phenomena of erotic desire now that the notion of its underlying materiality has profoundly altered the landscape of his thought and sensibility. From *Une nuit au Luxembourg* onwards, when Gourmont speaks of materialism or physicality in relation to love, it often comes with a qualifying '*mais*' which recuperates love's complex, individual manifestations:

> L'amour est physique, tout amour a une base physique, parce que la physique seule existe et que l'âme est une invention de la Sorbonne, mais il se développe selon tant de modes corporels, spirituels et entremêlés, fougueux ou bien tempérés, qu'il faut des chapitres à part. Sans cela, les jardiniers eux-mêmes n'y comprennent plus rien.[36]

In this 'mais', we sense the lasting effects of *Une nuit au Luxembourg*'s inconclusive negotiation between the erotic pursuit of fundamentals (physicality, instinct, naturalness, woman-as-love, etc.) and the diversified sensibilities, illusions, and appetites that occlude whatever 'Unité' may exist at the basis of love.

In this spirit of balance, it is perhaps poignant that, after *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, Gourmont should return to an old essay from 1885 on 'l'idéal féminin' in Dante and alter it for republication in 1908. The adjustment to the title alone tells a story of rupture and reconciliation with the 'idéal' aspects of love: from the original *La Béatrice de Dante* (the possessive *de* revealing its origins in a bygone era that saw the beloved as the creation of the lover's mind) to the revised *Dante, Béatrice, et la poésie amoureuse* (Gourmont has evolved beyond the topos of woman as a product of the artist), but the 'idéal féminin' remains relevant, or rather, has become relevant once more under new circumstances arising from *Une nuit au Luxembourg*. For the first time, perhaps, Gourmont feels himself able to evenly judge the complex relationship between the flesh-and-blood woman and the imagined one, a question which, he claims, permeates

[36] *Lettres à l'Amazone*, pp. 35-36.

the *Vita Nuova* and its 'mélange [...] de possible et d'impossible, d'apparences véridiques et de rêveries, de vraisemblable et de fantastique'.[37]

Gourmont begins by comparing what he sees as the 'reality' of Francesca against the pure fiction of Beatrice. Of the former, 'il est question d'amour humain et vrai', and yet 'quelle femme, ayant lu la *Vita nuova*, à jamais envié Béatrice, cette statue auréolée?'[38] In the text, the conflict between the Symbolist dream woman and the *esprit nouveau* preference for reality only appears in a relaxed and impartial form, as if reconciled by time and reflection. Reminiscent of 'les racines de l'idéalisme', reality and illusion are seen to be mutually reinforcing, affixed to one another, in this case through the subtle connective tissue of art and love. Gourmont's interest, here, is in the diverse refinements and peculiarities with which Dante achieves his iconic image of female beauty, and how this image invites us to look deeper into 'la psychologie de cette illusion' and ask the open-ended question of how 'Il se serait produit dans l'esprit du poète une confusion entre le réel et le rêve, tout au profit du rêve.'[39] To explore this question, the perspectives of the poet, the philosopher, the theorist, and the scientist are all employed at once:

> Dante extatique, par moments, dans la fièvre de l'inspiration, ne me semblerait pas une conception montrueuse [sic], ni en rien offensante. Qu'il ait réellement entendu la voix de l'Amour lui dictant ses vers d'amour, je ne m'en étonnerais qu'à demi. L'inspiration, en sa réalité physiologique, a de ces effets; ce n'est qu'un des mystères de la sensation surexcitée.[40]

In his essay, Gourmont reproduces a long passage from his earliest work on Dante which describes the prominence of Plato's philosophy of transcendent beauty in the *Divine Comedy* and the figure of Beatrice. Gourmont repurposes the basic material, but

[37] Remy de Gourmont, *Dante, Béatrice et la poésie amoureuse* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1908), p. 9.
[38] *Dante, Béatrice et la poésie amoureuse*, p. 12.
[39] *Dante, Béatrice et la poésie amoureuse*, p. 76.
[40] *Dante, Béatrice et la poésie amoureuse*, pp. 76-77.

selectively omits his original conclusion that 'on se plaira toujours à suivre le grand poète dans son voyage vers l'infini, régions où nul autre que lui n'est monté si haut, où nul peut-être n'ira plus; qui oserait comme lui s'élever jusqu'aux étoiles?'[41] Instead, we find:

> Idéal de beauté, idéal de lumière, sainte du paradis, cette femme n'est vraiment pas de ce monde. Fut-elle jamais autre chose que le jeu de l'imagination la plus féconde et la plus exaltée?[42]

These lines would not be out of place in *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, just as the original conclusion about the poet-lover's 'voyage vers l'infini' would be perfectly at home in a Symbolist work like *Sixtine* or *Le Fantôme*. In returning to Dante, selectively reprinting or altering his earlier work on the subject, Gourmont shows us the cyclical progress of his own thought; from the reign of mind, to the reign of matter, and finally to a mature intersection of the two, where the dust of staunch ideals has settled and can now be sifted through.

'Les petites passions humaines': *Un Cœur virginal*, Stendhal, and the Experiment of Erotic Realism

Gourmont's intentions for *Un Cœur virginal*, published a year earlier, arise out of this same spirit of sifting and selection:

> L'auteur avait pensé à qualifier ce livre: Roman sans hypocrisie; mais il a réfléchi que ces mots paraîtraient malséants, l'hypocrisie étant de plus en plus à la mode.
> Il songea ensuite à: Roman physiologique; c'était encore pire, par ce temps de grands convertis, où la grâce d'en haut purifie si à propos les petites passions humaines.
> Ces deux sous-titres écartés, il ne restait rien; alors il n'a rien mis.
> Roman, c'est un roman. Et ce ne serait que cela, si l'on n'avait tenté, par

[41] Remy de Gourmont 'Béatrice, Dante et Platon', *L'Enseignement secondaire des jeunes filles* (February 1883), pp. 76-80 (p. 80).
[42] *Dante, Béatrice et la poésie amoureuse*, p. 67.

> une analyse sans scrupules, d'y dévoiler, si l'on peut dire, les dessous d'un 'cœur virginal', d'y montrer que l'innocence a ses instincts, ses besoins, ses obéissances physiologiques.
> Une jeune fille n'est pas seulement un jeune cœur, c'est un jeune corps humain tout entier.
> Tel est le sujet de ce roman, qu'il faut bien, tout de même, appeler 'physiologique'.[43]

In Gourmont's *Chronique stendhalienne*, published the same year, we find: 'On pourrait définir Stendhal: un génie sans hypocrisie',[44] echoing the opening statement of *Un cœur virginal*, punctuation and all. The influence of Stendhal, apparent in so much of Gourmont's twentieth-century work, clearly has a special place here. In 1929, Léautaud recalls having 'vu Remy de Gourmont écrire *Un Cœur virginal* ayant, ouvert à côté de lui, *De l'Amour*, de Stendhal, dans lequel il puisait les explications psychologiques des actions de ses personnages.'[45] In *Un Cœur virginal*, however, it is not just the psychological motives of Gourmont's characters that Stendhal helps to inform, but the philosophical approach of the text at large. This uncharacteristically confessional preface (prefaces being somewhat rare in Gourmont's fiction) is almost certainly indebted to *De l'Amour* (which famously has four). Though compact, Gourmont's note contains other parallels to Stendhal: a display of multiple attempts (at a subtitle for the former, at a preface for the latter), a defensive negotiation with current literary trends and readership, and a third-person 'auteur'. The duelling subtitles themselves ('Roman sans hypocrisie' vs. 'Roman physiologique') may even stem from Stendhal's procession of prefaces. The first line of the second preface reads:

> Je n'écris que pour cent lecteurs, et de ses êtres malheureux, aimables, charmants, point hypocrites, point *moraux*, auxquels je voudrais plaire; j'en connais à peine un ou deux.[46]

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[43] Remy de Gourmont, *Un Cœur virginal* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1920), pp. 7-8.
[44] Remy de Gourmont, *Chronique Stendhalienne* (Milan: Coffe, 1907), p. 24. In 'Le style et l'art de Stendhal' (1913) as well, Gourmont calls Stendhal 'incapable d'hypocrisie'. *Promenades littéraires*, vol. V, p. 111.
[45] Paul Léautaud, *Passe-temps* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1964), p. 154.
[46] Stendhal, *De l'amour* (Paris: Lévy, 1891), p. xv.

And the third:

> Je viens solliciter l'indulgence du lecteur pour la forme singulière de cette *Physiologie de l'Amour*.[47]

To Gourmont, Stendhal was not only a stylistic influence, but a philosopher of love whose intellectual techniques were a model for Gourmont's own reassessment of human desire. In 'La Philosophie de Stendhal' (*Promenades philosophiques*), Gourmont champions Stendhal as the unsung philosophical source of Taine, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. He writes at length of how Stendhal

> avoue une philosophie purement matérialiste et réaliste. Pour lui le but de la vie, c'est la recherche du bonheur. Aux définitions éthérées de la beauté, ce reflet divin, etc., il oppose ceci: 'une promesse de bonheur'. En rejoignant les deux idées, on voit que, pour Stendhal, le but de la vie, c'est la recherche de l'amour.'[48]

In Stendhal, Gourmont observes a philosophy based upon the same 'realistic' insight that he himself reaches in *Une nuit au Luxembourg*: that of erotic desire as the constant 'recherche' of the never-fulfilled 'promesse', a condition tantamount to the meaning of life.

To be 'sans hypocrisie' suggests a certain handling of the relation between love's physiological and psychological aspects. In *De l'Amour*, idealist and materialist conceptions of erotic desire are reconciled not so much by rational deduction as by narrative exploration. Though arranged like a taxonomical treatise, Stendhal's text famously meanders into personal, emotional, even comedic territory – a masterpiece in the tradition of self-subverting analysis to which Gourmont also belongs. Stendhal calls his work a '*Physiologie de l'Amour*' written with 'description exacte et scientifique.[49]

[47] Stendhal, *De l'amour*, p. xvii.
[48] 'La Philosophie de Stendhal', *Promenades philosophiques*, p. 179.
[49] Stendhal, *De l'amour*, p. v.

This is not true, but it is part of the intellectual game demanded by the contradictory nature of its subject. In the space of only a few paragraphs, Stendhal is able to oscillate between opposite attitudes towards desire's imaginative aspect. Commenting on why 'l'amour est la plus forte des passions', he writes, 'Dans les autres, les désirs doivent s'accommoder aux froides réalités; ici ce sont les réalités qui s'empressent de se modeler sur les désirs; c'est donc celle des passions où les désirs violents ont les plus grandes jouissances.'[50] Just afterwards, however, cold reality freezes over as love's transformative power is reframed as a delusion with 'une cause physique, un commencement de folie, une affluence du sang au cerveau, un désordre dans les nerfs et dans le centre cérébral.'[51] In *De l'Amour*, then, the tension (at once erratic, playful, and melancholic) between idealism and materialism functions as a meta-erotic drama in its own right, mirroring the wild emotional highs and lows of the lover, as well as his tendency to spontaneously change perspective whilst in the throes of desire. As Stendhal puts it: 'Une marque effrayante que la tête se perd, c'est qu'en pensant à quelque petit fait, difficile à observer, vous le voyez bleu, et vous l'interprétez en faveur de votre amour; un instant après vous vous apercevez qu'en effet il était noir, et vous le trouvez encore concluant en faveur de votre amour.'[52]

Like Stendhal's meta-erotic text, *Un Cœur virginal* aims to reproduce erotic desire in all its contradictory detail in order to better convey a reality that eludes abstract generalization. It sets itself the task of expressing the forensic depth of his physiological insights while at the same time reminding his readers that 'il n'y a pas de science de l'amour', only 'une série de faits particuliers [...] On est là dans l'inconnu et dans l'illusion.'[53] The narrative of *Un Cœur virginal* is concerned with these 'faits

[50] Stendhal, *De l'amour*, pp. 24-25
[51] Stendhal, *De l'amour*, p. 25.
[52] Stendhal, *De l'amour*, pp. 25-26
[53] *Lettres à l'Amazone*, p. 167.

particuliers', amorous thoughts and actions of a much more diminutive, quotidian texture than what we normally see in Gourmont's work. Seen as if through a microscope, the small, seemingly banal details of the novel are meant to reveal erotic dynamics in their true volatility and complexity. The novel in fact begins with Hervart, accompanied by Rose, studying two mating insects under his magnifying glass:

> Les yeux retombés sur sa loupe, M. Hervart continua d'examiner la fleur de marguerite, où deux lygées écarlates, étroitement unis, ne faisaient plus qu'un seul insecte. Endormis dans un amour profond, ils ne semblaient encore vivre que par le frémissement léger de leurs longues antennes. La femelle avait enfoncé sa trompe aiguë dans la fleur et le mâle, avec la sienne, semblait pomper de la volupté dans le col immobile de sa compagne. M. Hervart aurait bien voulu assister à la fin de cet entretien passionné, mais cela pouvait durer des heures encore; il se découragea. […] Après un mouvement de tête qui voulait dire, sans doute que les longues persévérances n'étaient pas son fait, il déposa doucement la fleur et les amoureux sur le rebord de la terrasse. C'est alors qu'il s'aperçut enfin que Rose n'était plus là.[54]

Love can only be realistically understood in its granular details, but a key aspect of the 'truth' contained in these details is the very impossibility of any satisfactory conclusion or whole. Hervart is unable to observe the final stages of the insect mating because eros – whether experienced or theorized – is itself without finality. As Hervart gazes at love through his magnifying glass, Rose, the real object of his curiosity, disappears from view.

Through Hervart's entomological hobby, Gourmont renews and reframes the concerns of *Physique de l'amour*. There is a quality of self-parody in Hervart's short attention span for field research, but also a sincere reflection on one of *Physique de l'amour*'s central ideas about love and the nature of life, that 'l'idée même de but est une illusion humaine. Il n'y a ni commencement, ni milieu, ni fin dans la série des causes.'[55] Even if Hervart had the patience to watch the insects until the end, Gourmont

[54] *Un Cœur virginal*, pp. 9-10.
[55] *Physique de l'amour*, pp. 14-15

seems to suggest, he would not find a conclusion in any real sense. Metaphorically, this notion of finality is all the more an illusion in how it only blinds Hervart to the real 'séries des causes' taking place between Rose and himself.

In *Un Cœur virginal*, more than any other novel, Gourmont's philosophical voice expresses itself through themes and narrative (episodes like the above) rather than character dialogue. This is not to say that the novel is devoid of the usual philosophical disputation; rather, the characters' theories and maxims feature among the illusions, idealizations, and misapprehensions that eros creates. The reader senses that they are not the makings of another Gourmontian 'novel of ideas', but instead belong to the human imperfection of fictional characters. The various philosophies expounded by his male characters are either tedious or misguided, intended to emphasize both the futility of theories that claim to encapsulate love as well as the state of confusion that desire creates. According to the character Léonor, for example:

> Chez les deux sexes, il y a deux crises successives: la crise sexuelle et la crise sensuelle. La première vient à dates fixes pour les individus d'une même race, d'un même milieu. La seconde coïncide généralement avec l'achèvement complet de la croissance, avec l'état de perfection physiologique. Parfois, quand commence le déclin, une troisième crise se manifeste, qui ressemble à la première en ce qu'elle comporte presque toujours un état sentimental. Hervart subit en ce moment cette crise, j'en suis presque certain; Hortense et moi-même, nous en sommes à la seconde; Rose éprouve la première.[56]

This is not Gourmont's philosophy, but a fictional one which purposely commits the sins of finality, fixity, and taxonomical thinking. It is the realistic portrayal of a character, himself in love, vainly seeking definition and synthesis. Moreover, the preface to *Un Cœur virginal* alone tells us that this diagnosis of the young Rose is false. As Leonor satisfies himself with the illusion of a teleological progression towards

[56] *Un Cœur virginal*, p. 171.

'perfection' and 'achèvement', we bear in mind Gourmont's own statement that 'Une jeune fille' is already 'un jeune corps humain tout entier'.[57] Rose's youth is the centre of the drama, a great mystery around which all manner of theorization and idealization circulates, but never hits the mark. Like Douceline from 'Péhor' (discussed in Chapter 3), whose precocious eroticism eludes the conceptualizing tendencies of the adult mind, Rose possesses a set of 'instincts', 'besoins' and 'obéissances physiologiques' which inform the reader against the thoughts and ideals projected upon her by other (mostly male) characters.

However, as we've already seen in our discussion in Chapter 3, these thoughts and ideals (epitomized by Jehovah's indoctrination of Adam) have great power. Rose may be 'un jeune corps humain tout entier', but human sexuality and desire (unlike that of the gods) remains deeply at the mercy of intellectual and cultural dynamics. I have discussed how the influence of these dynamics finds ultimate expression in the feeling of shame. In *Lilith*, it is through shame that paradise is lost, and in 'Péhor', it is shame that transforms the eponymous supernatural lover into a grotesque demon. Interestingly, while as stylistically different from 'Péhor' as a text can be, *Un cœur* makes a brief yet poignant return to the Symbolist-era demon/child trope to illustrate the phenomena of shame and self-awareness in its young heroine. When Rose marries Léonor, Gourmont describes the inner torture she feels in the face of her new conjugal life.

> C'était le soir, au moment qu'elle se dévêtait pour se coucher. A mesure que ses membres nus apparaissaient, elle se remémorait les privautés qu'elle avait permis. Aucun détail ne lui était épargné et son corps avait beau se révolter, elle sentait monter le long de ses nerfs vaincus le frisson, maintenant honteux, de ses anciennes voluptés.
> Elle se jetait dans son lit, et bientôt, parmi la chaleur, les contacts imaginaires se multipliaient et se précisaient. Alors, la tête perdue, elle cédait et s'endormait dans une volupté maudite.

[57] *Un Cœur virginal*, p. 8.

> [...] Les crises, certains soirs, étaient très vives. A peine était-elle entrée dans sa chambre qu'il lui semblait recevoir comme une injonction impérieuse de se mettre nue et d'aller se regarder dans la glace. Là, elle écrasait sous ses fébriles mains ses seins et ses hanches, elle flattait de hâtives caresses son ventre, ses membres, ses épaules. Puis, elle se sentait soulevée et portée dans son lit, à la merci du démon luxurieux.
> D'autres fois, l'obsession était plus bénigne, et elle pouvait essayer quelque résistance. La chute était lente, graduelle et quelquefois incomplète. Elle s'aperçut qu'elle avait plus de paix et plus de force les soirs où, par ses regards ou son attitude, elle avait encouragé Léonor à quelque discours plus doux, et cela lui causa une grande joie. Elle aima son exorciste; comme une malade pleine de confiance, elle aima son médecin.[58]

Rose has internalized the very illusion of innocence projected upon her by her suitors; in an agonizing process, it begins to change her, retroactively transfiguring the 'voluptés' of her past into demons to be banished by her 'exorcist' husband. Her growing love for Léonor is born out of the turbulent dissonance of 'la tyrannie du système nerveux', the human 'reality' which engenders both the affliction of 'douleur morale'[59] as well as the transports of *luxure*. At the novel's close, we read that '[Rose] avait trouvé dans le mariage les soins que comportait son état. Elle était heureuse'.[60] This kind of happiness is not to be confused with the idealized, untroubled pleasure of the gods in *Une nuit au Luxembourg*. Rather, Gourmont has explicitly abandoned the image of the goddess in favor of 'ces vrais jeunes femmes' who are the envy of Lui himself precisely for the tormented passion afforded to mortals ('toutes ces vraies jeunes femmes qui enchantent vos yeux et désespèrent vos rêves!).[61] Gourmont's discourse of happiness in love (originating in *Le Songe*) has, at this moment, suspended the speculative ideal of liberated naturalness (as experienced by the gods) to remind us that the old demons and 'anges pervers'[62] live on in that 'tyrannie du système nerveux'

[58] *Un Cœur virginal*, pp. 245-47.
[59] *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, p. 158.
[60] *Un Cœur virginal*, p. 250.
[61] *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, p. 39.
[62] 'Danaette', *Histoires magiques*, p. 219.

which both assails and enriches the human organism by ensuring the impossibility of erotic fulfilment (in other words, ensuring desire, which *is* its own impossibility). Rose's happiness does not result from some retrieval of animal instinct, nor from the manifestation of a fantasy, nor is it intended as an ultimate outcome of any kind. Like the insects under Hervart's magnifying glass, Rose's love story has no real conclusion, and while the novel must end somehow, we know that 'l'idée même de but est une illusion humaine'. Rather, in these last lines, we merely see Gourmont's own ironic smile at the volatile state of erotic affairs which played such an antagonistic role in his earlier work.

'Au niveau de la belle humanité': *Lettres d'un satyre*

When Gourmont returns to the archetype of the god in *Lettres d'un satyre*, it would seem on the surface that little has changed since *Une nuit au Luxembourg*. In Antiphilos, the titular satyr, we see a direct continuation of Lui's divine libidinous powers:

> Je suis la joie qui passe, la joie crispée par une délicieuse peur. Ma main a calmé bien des seins agités, ranimé bien des cœurs tremblants. Je passe, et quand je suis passé, les garçons trouvent les filles moins farouches. Je sème des baisers, et je n'attends pas la récolte. A d'autres. Je ne prends que la fleur, tant qu'il y a des fleurs. Les dieux sont ainsi. Les dieux sont des délicats.[63]

His domain, like Lui's, is that of nature, instinct, and, above all, an imperviousness to the elusive notion of finality that motivates human erotic striving. And yet, a reversal has taken place: where Lui descended upon the world of mortals in order to grace the protagonist with his teachings, Antiphilos is brought to human civilization as a naive

[63] *Lettres d'un Satyre*, p. 38.

student of humanity. He does not teach – he is taught, indoctrinated by the woman whom he follows into the realm of human affairs. His mortal mistress, Cydalise, rudely awakens him to the impatient bustle of her world, in which there is little time for divine sensuality.

> 'Adieu, grotte où j'ai été heureux parmi le vent et les feuilles, et vous, arbres, ruisseaux, houx, adieu. Nature, adieu' […] J'aurais bien voulu sacrifier une dernière fois à l'Aphrodite champêtre, mais Cydalise me dit que le train n'attendait pas et nous gagnâmes la voiture qui, elle, nous attendait à l'orée de la forêt de pins.[64]

As one might expect, the scenario of an outsider thrust into modern society provides ample opportunity for social parody. In the above image, in which the noble satyr must run to catch his train (that iconic cypher of modernity), Gourmont does indeed seem to target the frenetic distractions of modern culture for forsaking the primitive connection to nature and beauty. In his introduction (addressed to Barney), however, Gourmont writes: 'Ne croyez pas du reste que j'aie eu, en lui [Antiphilos] faisant conter le début de ses aventures humaines, de grandes intentions satiriques. Critiquer les mœurs des hommes! Il y faut plus de naïveté que je n'en possède.'[65] *Un Cœur virginal*'s spirit of ambivalence carries on in *Lettres d'un satyre*: the former avoids expounding the ideal of nature; the latter avoids decrying the abstractions of civilized culture. This ambivalence reflects the position of reconciliation that Gourmont has achieved regarding the (mis)adventure of humanity – its self-flagellating moral constructs, its tendencies of shame and disillusionment together with its capacity for passionate striving and imaginative desire – which has taken on a different flavour in Gourmont's work since *Physique de l'amour* and its seminal idea of 'luxure'.

[64] *Lettres d'un satyre*, pp. 78-9.
[65] *Lettres d'un satyre*, p. 10.

Like *Un Cœur virginal* before it, *Lettres d'un satyre* features the prosaic details and manners of humanity (albeit from a fantastical vantage point) not so much to militate against them, but rather to recognize them as part of the infinite tapestry of human excesses to which the concept of erotic desire is so intimately connected. The 'tyrannie du système nerveux' places phenomenal and physical barriers between the organism and the object of its desire, generating 'sur le lit de l'amour tant de fleurs et tant de rêves'[66] out of its tension. In *Lettres d'un satyre*, Gourmont once again associates desire with the *luxure* of human behavior by imagining the world through the innocent eyes of Antiphilos, for whom the complexities of human desire are mixed into the same category of strange, new things such as money, moral reservations, metaphysical philosophy, works of art, absinthe, and trains. Stricken from his paradisal grotto – the realm of the gods where pleasure flows freely – Antiphilos experiences for the first time the erotic barrier proper to mortals, and, like a seed, it is from this experience of human desire that all other forms of 'luxure' begin to grow within him.

> Des hommes, je possède déjà tout le jargon métaphysique. Je ne puis plus prendre la vie telle qu'elle s'offre à moi, bonne ou mauvaise, mais toujours adorable puisqu'elle est. Malgré ma divinité, je pense à ce qui sera, comme si je ne portais pas en moi à la fois le présent et le futur et comme si je n'étais pas destiné à ne jamais en sentir le poids à mes épaules. Dieux mystérieux, il me faut un effort pour ne pas penser douloureusement, moi dont la vie inconsciente exultait en de brefs moments de lumière! Est-ce que je deviendrais vraiment un homme pour avoir aimé vraiment une femme? J'aurais donc un âge, moi aussi? Combien d'années vivent les faunes amoureux?[67]

Even the awareness of death stems from desire, reversing the commonplace notion that it is the consciousness of mortality that sets humanity apart and stimulates the very activities that Gourmont groups under 'luxure'. Where Schopenhauer, for instance, considers the fear of death as the cause of all philosophy and religion, both the concern

[66] *Physique de l'amour*, p. 269.
[67] *Lettres d'un satyre*, pp. 89-90.

for death as well as the capacity for 'metaphysical jargon' arise in the immortal Satyr only as secondary phenomena created by his erotic awareness. The notion of a finite existence is only possible for Antiphilos once human desire has infected him with the impossible dream of finality, the human burden of unfulfillment.

Like Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*, Gourmont understands the blossoming of human culture in terms of subjugated sexuality. But unlike Freud, the idealism of Gourmont's 'Tyrannie du système nerveux' maintains that human sexuality is self-subjugating by virtue of the civilizing *luxure* that it must create in the discordant gulf between mind and matter. For Gourmont, the concept of desire need not be pitted against psychological forces such as Thanatos (the Freudian death drive) or traumatic repression because the reproductive sexual instinct is already pre-subjugated by a physical reality which cannot accommodate the demands of the mind. Gourmont – who is after all an artist and not a clinician – does not share Freud's diagnostic focus on how 'civilization is built upon a renunciation of instinct' and the manner in which this renunciation is 'compensated for economically'[68] (the formation of families, etc.). Gourmont does not look for compensation in the equilibrium and comfort of advanced society, but in the beautiful disequilibrium of desire as lack. Upon Antiphilos' departure, his mortal friend Diogène leaves him with these parting words:

> Tu n'as connu que celles qui se jettent à la tête des hommes, mais il y a celles qu'il faut conquérir. C'est l'infini, Satyros. C'est notre infini à nous et généralement notre tombeau. Nous y descendons, en rêvant encore à l'énigme de leur sourire dont nul ne saura jamais s'il est une propriété naturelle ou une condescendance de leur visage. Tu ne peux pas comprendre cela, je le crains, Satyros, mais, ces femmes-là, on les aime en proportion de ce que l'on doute de leur amour, dont on n'est jamais sûr. Elles ne sont jamais tout à fait conquises, et c'est ce qui donne tant de prix à leurs moindres faveurs. […] Tu ne peux pas savoir. Ah! Satyros, malgré ta petite aventure avec Cydalise, tu es d'une belle ignorance sentimentale. Que d'échelons tu as encore à monter, ou peut-être à

[68] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), pp. 51-52

descendre, pour être au niveau de la belle humanité délicate![69]

Woman, as always, is the sacrificial metaphor of Gourmont's intellectual intentions; intentions which, just as always, seek to form an equivalence between the nature of erotic desire and the nature of human experience more generally. The smile of the elusive woman can never be understood, and the woman who 'must be conquered' can never be: when Diogène speaks to Antiphilos of the charms of chasing fickle women, we understand that this is an analogy for the phenomenal world and the erotic disunity it necessarily imposes between man and the objects of his knowledge or desire. Erotic desire and idealism conjoin in this 'infinity' of separation and unattainability in which the lover seeks the beloved and ideation seeks reality.

With their immunity to striving, the feeling of absence, and the illusion of finality, the gods embody precisely what human desire *is not*. By negation, then, Gourmont for the first time directly defines what desire *is*. In the words of Lui:

> La vie des dieux, mon ami, diffère de la vôtre surtout en ceci qu'elle est pour eux sans finalité. Nos actes se suffisent à eux-mêmes et nous ne cherchons pas leur justification dans de proches ou lointaines conséquences. La misère de votre activité, c'est qu'elle prévoit le repos. Notre but est dans l'acte; votre but est dans les suites de l'acte. Mais comme le bonheur est dans l'acte, vous passez à côté et quand vous vous reposez, c'est dans la fatigue et dans l'ennui. Pour nous, vivre, c'est agir, et agir, c'est être heureux. Plutôt peut-être que des surhommes, nous sommes des animaux supérieurs: l'intuition nous sert d'instinct et si nous connaissons parfois le regret, nous ignorons toujours le remords. La passion, qui peut nous égarer un instant, nous laisse satisfaits, dès que nous lui avons obéi, et même quand notre désir n'a pu se réaliser entièrement, quand notre curiosité a dû s'arrêter à moitié chemin. Il nous reste alors d'avoir exercé contre un obstacle nos facultés d'activité; nous ne tenons pas rancune à l'obstacle. Tels des enfants qui ont perdu la partie et qui sont, tout de même, bien contents d'avoir joué.[70]

[69] Remy de Gourmont, *Lettres d'un satyre* (Paris: Crès, 1913), pp. 181-82
[70] *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, pp. 136-37.

Conclusion: Towards Eros

Gourmont's crisis of erotic idealism 'resolves' in a mature conceptualization of erotic desire characterized by the impossibility of resolution. Through close readings of Gourmont's imaginative writing, I have argued how this conceptualization was ultimately shaped by its changing connection to what Gourmont understood as idealism. Likewise, I have argued how Gourmont's idealism was shaped in turn by the mysterious concept and experience of erotic desire. By showing how this crisis of erotic idealism developed within the evolution of his novels and plays, this study has found a new context for the key upheavals in Gourmont's career in an overlooked area of his thought. In these final reflections, I would like to not only provide an overview of how erotic desire and idealism interact in Gourmont's work, but also show how the notion of erotic idealism finds grounding later in the history of ideas among modern and present-day thinkers. Specifically, by relating it to more recent theories of 'eros', I hope to encourage future scholarship to explore new areas of Gourmont's continued relevance and influence beyond the popularity of his non-fiction.

To Gourmont, erotic desire is conceptually distinguished from sexuality along a rift between mind and matter, thought and reality. Beyond the specialized meanings of the word 'eros' in the psychoanalytic tradition, definitions of eros from Plato to Anne Carson gravitate around notions of absence and impossibility: eros strives for what is absent, eros reaches for an impossible union, eros makes known the unbridgeable gulf between the fantasies of the lover and the reality of the beloved. 'The metaphysical

incommensurability between self and other',[1] as Roger Scruton notes, has been a point of consensus in western philosophy's characterization of desire. Sartre's belief that 'desire aims […] to hold as object that which can only exist as subject'[2] has roots as deep as Lucretius and as close to Gourmont as Schopenhauer and Hegel. Eros and idealism overlap on the principle of inescapable subjectivity, both emphasizing the unknowable and unattainable nature of external objects. It seems only natural that Gourmont, steeped as he was in 'l'amour et les livres', would find it difficult to disentangle the time-honored paradox of desire from a philosophy which, itself, preaches that 'l'essence est inattaquable',[3] which excludes from human experience any direct apprehension of the world beyond the subject.

While it may be easy enough to list the abstract commonalities between eros and idealism, however, to experience them consciously is an altogether different matter. The lover, however much eros philosophy he or she has read, still surrenders to the pursuit of an impossible union. The idealist, be it Schopenhauer himself, cannot shake the 'illusion which separates his consciousness from that of the rest.'[4] It is perhaps the affective, experiential nature of this dilemma which drove Gourmont to explore the crisis of erotic idealism primarily through the characters of his fiction.

In Chapter 1, with *Sixtine*, the 'real' object of desire, like the Kantian thing-in-itself or the Schopenhauerian Will, is abandoned as unknowable, and thus the pursuit of the loved one is replaced by the cultivation of her image in one's own thought and imagination. Here, as in all of Gourmont's fiction, it is exceedingly hard to separate the intellectual investigation of desire from the experience of it; for if idealism supposes

[1] Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation* (London: Phoenix, 2001), p. 95.
[2] Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire*, p. 95.
[3] *Le Livre des masques*, p. 11.
[4] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. by R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp, vol. I (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1909), p. 364.

that the perceived loved one is nothing more than a composite of mental phenomena, then thought itself becomes the object of desire, and there remains little conceptual difference between the pursuit of a woman and pursuit of the ideas and images which, in fact, constitute her. Gourmont's intellectual interrogation of 'desire itself' is thus interwoven with the very act of desiring. As Entragues learns by the end of *Sixtine*, however, the law of the world-as-representation (or idea) does not guarantee the creative omnipotence of the subject over his reality. Nor can the alleged cerebral purity of 'desire itself' be cleansed of the vulgar disappointments of physical sexuality by some ascetic (and aesthetic) practice of chastity.

The externality of Sixtine haunts the gaps of Entragues's overzealous idealist conceit. His attempts at cerebral possession backfire, and rather than a vivid reality forged by some ingenious subjective manipulation of the phenomenal realm, Sixtine only fades further from perception. A phantom, her vaporous aspect symbolizes the phenomenological complexities shirked by her delusional admirer.

In Chapter 2, we saw how the persistent question of the physical is more consciously raised in *Le Fantôme*, a novel named after the very problem its predecessor left it to solve. The transports of cerebral eroticism, its protagonist now believes, must be given physical form and substance. Likewise, the flesh (more explicitly desired here, but still essentially base) must be sublimated into the transcendent realm of immaterial thought. If '[t]he craving for impossible transformations is the theme of all of [Gourmont's] fictions',[5] then *Le Fantôme* voices its particular hunger in the form of a desperate prayer: 'et sois spiritualisée, beauté charnelle, et sois réalisé, intellectuel fantôme'.[6]

Here, Gourmont turns to Christian mysticism for inspiration. In the eroto-spiritual

[5] Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers*, p. 100.
[6] *Le Fantôme*, p. 25.

encounters of the mystics (like the ecstasy of St. Teresa), Gourmont's characters find an ideal model in which the opposition between treacherous corporeality and transcendent cerebrality is miraculously suspended. Mysticism entices the world-negating idealist with the fantasy that the pleasures of physical sexuality can be experienced not as a humiliating surrender to the deceptions of the external world, but as a somatic embodiment of the limitless power of the mind (synonymous with God). Where Schopenhauer saw the bodily phenomena of sexuality as a 'narrow door' through which the terrible Will is just barely perceptible, Gourmont's characters explore how their sexuality (particularly their orgasms, the thresholds of disillusionment) might be rescued from this blind tyranny by some infusion of mystical practices. The result, of course, is sheer perversity, but a perversity which is consciously deployed to divert the passions from their instinctual road to ruin, attempting to re-shape sexual relationships in the image of ascetic divine love (idealized as 'l'intelligence s'adorant soi-même dans l'idée infinie qu'elle se fait d'elle-même').[7]

This 'mysticisme à deux' is a perilous contradiction in terms, but its failure is instructive. In daring to descend from the ivory tower of detached celibacy to test the subjective idealism of *Sixtine* against the vulnerable appetites of the body and the enigmas of intersubjectivity, the ramparts of ideology begin to crumble, revealing greater ambivalence and complexity in the relationship between eros and idealism. Desire becomes self-avowedly paradoxical as Gourmont's protagonists gain awareness of the phenomenological tensions that govern it. Double binds emerge: the sexual body is revealed to be 'le moyen et l'obstacle, le moteur, et le frein des élévations surhumaines'[8] and thought itself becomes 'créatrice de tout, mais créatrice

[7] 'La Dissociation des idées', p. 87.
[8] *Le Fantôme*, p. 109.

meurtrière',[9] embittering the quixotic credo of 'le monde, c'est moi' as the master of idealist reality discovers that he is also its slave.

In Chapter 3, with *Lilith*, the biblical story of the Fall is appropriated as a framework for exploring this disunity and strife (*le mal*, even) seemingly inherent in the erotic life of the individual. If the principle of the world as representation has finally revealed itself as the fundamental tragedy of mankind, then Gourmont must now mediate his 'craving for impossible transformations' with an admission of the forces responsible for this impossibility, these incurable 'labyrinthes' of erotic and phenomenological discordance 'd'où nul n'est ressorti, sinon estropié par les luttes, enfiévré par les angoisses intellectuelles'.[10] For Gourmont, the lapsarian myth contains the quintessential, primordial crisis of erotic idealism in its very essence: the Fall of Man does not hinge upon sexuality as an act or instinct, but upon the *awareness* of sexuality as an object of knowledge. Gourmont's erotic conception of the world-as-idea lands on ancient ground, tracing the 'fallen' drama of erotic idealism to its archetypal origins.

The notion of a lapsarian moment – a mythic threshold between paradise and banishment – enables Gourmont to creatively pose certain 'causes' of erotic and phenomenological 'fallenness', as well as to entertain the question of what a *pre*lapsarian condition might entail in this context. To this end, Gourmont draws from Hebrew folklore the legend of Lilith, the unruly first wife of Adam and thus the product of an imperfect creator. In the play, original man is thrust into a world of patriarchal bluster and inept authority as a bumbling Jehovah attempts to groom his creation (Adam) and counteract the subversive influence of Satan, who conspires with exiled Lilith to retaliate by tempting Adam and Eve with the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

[9] *Les Chevaux de Diomède*, p. 249.
[10] *Les Chevaux de Diomède*, p. 249.

This chaotic vision of man's origins, I have argued, reflects an equally chaotic convergence of contemporary discourses: the sexually-inflected politics of the occult revival, the demonological mania of Charcot's theories of sexuality and hysteria, the voices of Christian moral prudery, and the pathologizing tendencies of popular thinkers like Nordau and Krafft-Ebing. Like these camps, the biblical dramatis personae compete to define (and thereby dominate) the still-unformed clay of Adam, representing the powerful influence of societal and familial forces upon the construction of subjectivity and sensuality. Adam's sexuality begins as an expansive, polymorphous faculty which, as in Freud, is undifferentiated in its original form; it is therefore both unstable and threatening. Unlike Freud, however, the sharpening of this sexuality into genital, procreative focus is only achieved through the tyranny of thought and language, which, again, are strongly informed by external influence and indoctrination. In its unadulterated form, sexuality cannot be assimilated into the ordering structures of the intelligence. Nor can it be obliterated. It can only be amputated, fragmented, driven into darkness like Lilith and her demon spawns, the incubi and succubi, remnants of a primordial, undifferentiated state only visible to the acculturated mind as a nightmarish representation of something too unruly for it to assimilate. Gourmont anticipates certain psychoanalytic ideas of sexual repression and demonology (in Ernest Jones' *On The Nightmare*, for instance), but his basis is fundamentally different: for Gourmont, sexual awareness is *its own* repression. There is no cure for the lapsarian paradox which forces the exchange of oceanic, naïve sexuality for the mature capacity to think and name the phenomenal world into being. Once named and thought, unity turns to fragmentation. 'Dans *Lilith*', writes Uitti, 'la fragile unité de *Sixtine* est brisée'.[11] Although Uitti is here referring to the 'unity' of

[11] Uitti, *La Passion littéraire de Remy de Gourmont*, p. 163.

Gourmont's commitment to the novel as a literary form (which he fractures by writing a play), his statement can also be applied to the way in which the ideological subjectivism and failed 'transformations' of Gourmont's earlier fiction arrive at a fundamental paradox in the human condition, thrown into relief by the image of the Fall: sensuality and thought are as irreconcilable as paradise and banishment. Thought creates the phenomenal world, but only by denaturing, suppressing, and artificially classifying the amorphous, fleeting unity into which we are born. 'Me voilà donc limité par ma propre pensée,' writes Gourmont in a later essay,

> et plus je pense plus je me limite, plus je crée d'obstacles au développement de mon primordial absolutisme; devenue pareille à l'œil à facettes d'une mouche, ma pensée multiplie les ennemis de son unité et j'ai devant moi la formidable armée des Autres. Mais que l'ennemi soit un ou multiple, il gêne également ma liberté, et, m'ayant forcé à le concevoir, il me force à 'entrer en pourparlers' avec lui.[12]

This intellectual distortion is necessary for navigating the world (the Fall of Man being a commonplace symbol of coming-of-age), but its price is an incurable longing for Edenic unity, a longing which Gourmont identifies in erotic desire and the imagination itself. Man must project forms (thought, language, art, etc.) upon the world. By forming these mental and perceptual distinctions, however, he only deepens the fissures which his desire seeks to close yet without which desire is impossible.

It is at this juncture in his work, I have argued, that Gourmont's idealism begins to merge more consciously with erotic desire, forming the foundation for explicit theories of desire such as 'La tyrannie du système nerveux'. Desire and its object; phenomenon and the thing-in-itself: these two dichotomies become one and the same hypothetical unity torn asunder by the lapsarian threshold of knowledge, sexual awareness, and perceptual constructs developed and received. Gourmont's protagonists

[12] Uitti, *La Passion littéraire de Remy de Gourmont*, p. 269.

begin to accept the futility of their desires and to treat this futility as something to be exploited because it cannot be solved. In other words, they become aware that erotic desire *is* the impossibility of erotic fulfilment, and that the subjective nature of reality constitutes a tantalian existence rather than a pretext for some subjective utopia (being the error of Entragues). Desire, fantasy, and imagination only exist by virtue of the phenomenological gulf across which they dream, the discontinuity of reality and idea whereby the lover, doomed to chase his proverbial shadow, is forever estranged from the beloved.

Here, Gourmont's evolving understanding of human desire deeply resembles Georges Bataille's erotic theories. Bataille, on whom Gourmont had a marked influence,[13] also defines erotic (as opposed to sexual) activity in terms of a fragmented being's nostalgic longing for unity ('Nous sommes des êtres discontinus, [...] mais nous avons la nostalgie de la continuité perdue'[14]). In *La Part maudite* and other writings, the categorizing, self-limiting nature of thought engenders in humanity an endless struggle to recapture the lost primordial continuity which the act of thinking only pushes further away. In *Lilith*, Adam's first act of thought is to distinguish himself from the world, rupturing the ecstatic continuity he briefly enjoys in his first moments of life ('comme je suis beau, comme je suis vaste! L'immensité de mon être évolue à l'infini: tout cela, c'est moi. Je contiens le ciel et le soleil, et les animaux qui se meuvent et les oiseaux qui volent.').[15] For Bataille as well, thought is part and parcel of the delineation (or discontinuity) of selfhood, and it is this which eros seeks to transgress by overflowing beyond the confines of discontinuity. Taking up Gourmont's lapsarian paradox, Bataille equates the birth of eros with the end of innocence (which,

[13] See Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: la mort à l'œuvre* (Paris: Séguier, 1987), pp. 41-43.
[14] Georges Bataille, *L'Érotisme*, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 10 (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 21.
[15] *Lilith*, p. 39.

importantly, both writers associate with animal sexuality rather than childhood virginity) and the knowledge of death; intelligent man leaves the proverbial Garden 'en comprenant qu'il mourait et en glissant de la sexualité sans honte à la sexualité honteuse, dont l'érotisme découla.'[16] Moreover, if 'ce qui différencie l'érotisme et l'activité simple [est] une recherche psychologique indépendante de la fin naturelle',[17] then eros is paradoxically dependent upon the same mental faculty which generates the distinctions, limits, and discontinuities that stand in its way. '[T]he dramatic paradox' of Bataillean eros, writes Philipp Tagirov,

> means that eroticism itself is possible only because of its own impossibility, more precisely, the impossibility of fulfil[ing] an erotic impulse. In the end, according to Bataille, Eros never allows a person to get what it promises, because it promises everything. A person either retreats at some point, or the drama of a transgression finds a solution in the death of its subject.'[18]

The only way for Bataille to fathom an erotic 'fulfilment' is through the concept of death, for it is only then that the confines of thought and subjecthood are finally shed. Eros, if death is indeed its ultimate aim, is thus inherently violent and destructive.

Chapter 4 explored how death and destruction are, according to Sandrine Schiano-Bennis, also the logical conclusion of *fin-de-siècle* idealism, and for strikingly similar reasons. The idealist, in her account, suffers from a crisis of discontinuity much like that of the Bataillian lover. 'Les anatomistes de l'idée, les dissecteurs de concepts' (i.e., those who only perpetuate discontinuity in their quest for some continuous 'Idée'), artists and thinkers of Gourmont's ilk find themselves trapped in the vicious cycle of cognition which Gourmont has already begun to describe explicitly ('plus je pense plus je me limite', etc.). 'Dans cette fatigue,' writes Schiano-Bennis, 'la conscience s'épuise

[16] Bataille, *L'Érotisme*, p. 35.
[17] Bataille, *L'Érotisme*, p. 17.
[18] Tagirov, 'Sexuality, Love and Eroticism: Methodology of Distinguishing', p. 831.

de sa propre activité, et, à la limite, éprouve le désir de se libérer d'elle-même, dans quelque forme de non-conscience, fût-ce la mort, ou la simple volonté de détruire, pour se confondre enfin avec une possible objectivité.'[19]

This destructiveness and morbidity, part of the connective tissue of eros and idealism, is the central theme of *Le Désarroi*. In a move that would have certainly pleased Bataille, Gourmont's protagonist finances a large-scale terrorist bombing on the Palais Bourbon, a gesture of violence and annihilation interwoven with his murderous philosophy of erotic desire. 'Oui, je les ai tuées, toutes', he says of his old flames, 'et peut-être même celles que je ne touchai que de mon désir. […] Il y a en moi une science maudite qui pulvérise les sphinx pour en faire le poison d'un drogue suprême: quand on l'a bue, on sait ce qu'est la vie, mais on ne vit plus.'[20] If *Sixtine* held the axiom 'le monde, c'est moi' as a pretext for the creation of erotic and phenomenological transformations, an ideal which gradually dissolves in subsequent fictions, then *Le Désarroi* concludes this failed quest by finally coming to terms with the omni-destructive essence of thought and desire. 'Savoir, c'est nier' becomes the new motto – a embittered echo of Entragues's 'le monde, c'est moi' – as the antihero Salèze plucks what fleeting pleasures he can along the path to obliteration to which eros and the idealist human condition both tend.

Now that the subjective mind has been denuded of any salvific or creative potential, the Schopenhauerian spirit of monastic world-renunciation, rid of its purpose, is replaced with a Nietzschean attitude of Dionysian pessimism. In this *amor fati*, to destroy is to rejoice in the futility of all things, to participate joyfully in the chaos and flux of the self, and to suck the marrow from a fleeting and meaningless external world. In *Le Désarroi*, Gourmont seeks to transform disillusionment into vitality. I have

[19] Schiano-Bennis, *La Rennaissance de l'idéalisme*, pp. 12-13.
[20] *Le Désarroi*, p. 9.

argued how the dissonant gulf common to erotic desire and idealism, previously seen as an impediment to lasting gratification, is reinterpreted as a vitalizing engine of decadent pleasures, intoxicating *because* of how they expire.

As we have seen in Chapter 5, this surrender to destruction is a fitting turning point in Gourmont's fiction, the destruction of the Palais Bourbon echoing the levelling of Gourmont's own intellectual architecture, clearing the way for a new idiom. The first step in this reconstruction is to replace the shattered dream of the 'moi éternel' (that Symbolist ideology of subjectivism and interiority) with a romanticized notion of externality. Like so many post-Symbolists seeking radical relief and change, Gourmont turns to the natural world. An epistolary novel, *Le Songe d'une femme* introduces a literary aesthetic vastly different from previous works. Its characters, no longer limited to the overintellectual male and his equivocal paramours, are a cast of earthy, intertwined lovers who appear to the reader as exhibitions in a study of animal mating habits, creatures who move and behave according to the engrained natural law of instinct. The thinking self no longer simply creates the world; it is now a creation of its environment. Gourmont's earlier protagonists, it seems, have been looking for unity in all the wrong places: *real* unity is not something that can be engineered by individual genius. Rather, it is a force which churns beneath the structures of the human intellect and despite them. It is nature itself – an imperious, amoral nature whose only law is its own perpetuation, inviting a renewed valuation of the sexual instinct.

That which binds the human individual to all living beings also binds the mind to the body, and Gourmont's thought takes a decisive turn towards physiology in *Physique de l'amour*. By approaching the sexual drive ('sens de la vie humaine') as a purely physical process, it would appear that Gourmont has discovered in materialism an overriding monism capable of eclipsing, and thereby resolving, the troublesome

dualities of mind/body, subject/object, and world/idea. This, however, comes with several caveats. Gourmont's newfound materialism may be an authentic intellectual position, but it is just as erotically motivated as any other in his work. The web of nature and the unity of matter remain an object of desire like any other, a mysterious 'other' with which the subject longs to merge. Nature has a pleasing female form – a cultural trope which Gourmont cannot resist – and contains an ever-receding promise of pleasure and unity. Though the post-Symbolist values of *la vie*, *la nature*, and *la réalité* have fostered a fruitful paradigm shift in Gourmont's thought and sensibility, the problems of eros and idealism have neither been solved nor forgotten. On the contrary, the phenomenological disunity that remains central to erotic experience leads Gourmont to several fascinating compromises. Firstly, in *Physique de l'amour*, Gourmont is forced to account for the uniqueness of human eros despite the text's main objective to 'situer la vie sexuelle de l'homme dans le plan unique de la sexualité universelle'.[21] He does this by putting forth the idea of 'la tyrannie du système nerveux', in which the human mind, with its size and complexity, sends sexual commands to a body which has not yet evolved to carry them out, 'et c'est pour les satisfaire que furent inventés ces gestes qui jettent sur le lit de l'amour tant de fleurs et tant de rêves'.[22] The phenomenology of eros's impossible object is therefore upheld, only stripped of its metaphysics (a step which Bataille also takes). What is more, this physical basis only tightens the link between erotic desire and idealism by directly tracing the dichotomy of reality and representation back to a fundamental rift between desire and fulfilment in the physiological makeup of human sexuality.

Secondly, a peculiar synthesis of materialism and idealism is manufactured in order to illustrate how Schopenhauer's maxim still prevails, and is even made more

[21] *Physique de l'amour*, p. 5.
[22] *Physique de l'amour*, p. 269.

profound, in the context of a purely physical world: matter, however omnipresent, remains 'parfaitement insaisissable en sa réalité; c'est un tissu idéal, une glaise dont chaque particule est un pur concept. Finalement,' Gourmont concludes more daringly, 'idéalisme et matérialisme deviennent synonymes, et le matérialiste est celui pour qui la matière n'existe pas; pour qui la seule réalité est la pensée.'[23]

In her chapter entitled 'What Does the Lover Want from Love?' in *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson describes an eros which, as in Bataille, is 'possible only because of its own impossibility' and in which '[u]nion would be annihilating'.[24] Differing from Bataille, however, she regards the experience of eros not so much as a dangerous encounter with the limits of the discontinuous self, but as an encounter with the 'triangulation' between the 'actual', the 'ideal', and 'the difference between them'.[25] The throes of eros do not bring the lover any closer to the annihilating unity for which he believes himself to strive; rather, they occur in the ecstatic and 'bittersweet' moment when the separateness between the real and the ideal – the space or 'lack' in which desire is felt – becomes somehow visible as a constituent part of the object of desire. Deep down, what the lover really wants is the disunity which makes his desire, his pleasurable and painful 'act of reaching',[26] possible. In Gourmont's case, the seeming paradox of materialist idealism reflects what Carson might call a 'tacti[c] of incompleteness', a self-subverting way to 'sustai[n] desire and desirability'[27] by 'defining one certain edge or difference: an edge between two images that cannot merge in a single focus because they do not derive from the same level of reality – one is actual, one is possible. To know both, keeping the difference visible, is the subterfuge

[23] 'La Vie et la mort', p. 167.
[24] Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 92.
[25] Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 92.
[26] Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 48.
[27] Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 100.

called eros'.[28] Gourmont's nominal 'merging' of idealism and materialism – itself a rhetorical subterfuge – is in fact an explicit claim to the *difference* between matter and idea. For eros to have an 'edge' at all, two forms of reality must be admitted. One way for the idealist lover to recognize this 'edge' is to fully admit the unknowable material world, making his idealism purely epistemological. Likewise, the materialist can accede to eros only if the subjective realm is granted an independent experience of reality which can neither fully grasp material truth nor be fully realized in it.

As I have explored in Chapter 6, by the time of *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, Gourmont knows all too well the folly of wielding intellectual doctrines against this erotic 'edge'. *Sixtine*'s 'le monde, c'est moi' was such a weapon which failed to destroy the separation between the actual beloved and the dream woman; hence the compensatory spirit of his materialism. But the mature Gourmont is careful not to repeat the same mistake endlessly. His materialism, enchanted by the vitalizing energy of the post-Symbolist *esprit nouveau*, is more quickly scrutinized for its pretence of union, that attractive promise of a sexuality liberated from the old prison of subjectivity, free to fulfil its libidinous destiny in the material and animal continuum where instinct reigns and where the bittersweet frustrations of eros are but civilized delusions.

In *Une nuit au Luxembourg*, Carson might have it that Gourmont explicitly reinstates the 'edge' of eros by restoring his erotic image of nature and materiality to its rightful place: the imagination. In the narrative, Gourmont's philosophy of nature and materiality is reproduced in the prophetic decrees of a hallucinatory being who visits the protagonist as in a dream, transforming the pedestrian environment (the Luxembourg gardens) into a golden paradise of perfect happiness and sensuality. He is the part of Gourmont's thought which has regained awareness of itself as an idealized

[28] Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 100-01.

image, a projective vision of the desirable. ‘Je ne vous dirai donc pas la vérité’, the god admits, ‘je vous dirai ce que vous désirez savoir.’[29] The fact that materialism, including the ‘reality’ of sexual physiology, has been revealed as a fantasy is an irony indeed, but one that proves that there is no form of knowledge (nor any strategy against knowledge)[30] which can cheat eros by dissolving, or fully understanding, the difference between the real and the ideal.

[29] Remy de Gourmont, *Une nuit au Luxembourg* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1925), pp. 62-63.
[30] See subsection ‘Du côté des roses’: *Une nuit au Luxembourg* and the anti-philosophy of sexual love, in Chapter 6.

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